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Abstract

This thesis concerns the autobiographical writing of Michel Leiris (1901-1980), Georges Perec (1936-1982), and Marcel Bénabou (1939 - ). The thesis interrogates the idea that identity is ‘in play’ for all three interrelated writers. Identity being ‘in play’ carries with it the suggestion from French of ‘en jeu’. I will demonstrate the ways in which identity is not only ‘in play’, but ‘at stake’ for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou.

My research offers the first study to bring together these writers to examine how they respond to the challenge of communicating ludically their identity in their autobiographical writing. Autobiography is for these writers beset with ludic possibilities that compound the task of self-enquiry: it is both risky and full of creative potential. Writing itself is, for these three, an exercise of identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.

The thesis has three principal research questions. These have allowed me to show how Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou’s autobiographical concerns overlap, inform, and influence each other, yet also how their individual contexts shape their responses to similar autobiographical tension points during this period of French literary history.

The first research question asks: in what ways do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou posit their self in their autobiographical writing? All three writers resist a totalized, unified self assumed to be found as a product of autobiographical writing. Instead, their texts posit a complex, composite, multipart self, inflected with provisionality and open-endedness. The second research question asks: how do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou each approach the difficulties of autobiographical writing? These writers have a common interest in the difficulties and limit points of autobiography, even to the point of suggesting its failure. I identify the techniques and mechanisms that Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou employ to contend with these difficulties. The final research question asks: what is the place of the reader in relation to Leiris, Perec and Bénabou’s texts? These writers demand an active reader, who is invited to participate in a relationship of reconstructive exchange with the author as a partner in the literary game, supplementing the writers’ lacunary self-knowledge.

The thesis’ methodology is guided by close reading of the chosen texts using extended commentary and a range of critical and theoretical insights woven into my analysis. The thesis is structured into three chapters, which examine Leiris, Perec and Bénabou in turn. It is thus possible to see how their autobiographical concerns overlap, inform, and influence each other, all whilst respecting the specific contexts of each writer and his response.

My thesis can inform discussion about how identity is constituted through the stories we construct and tell about our lives; in the case of these three writers, their identity is put not only ‘in play’ but ‘at stake’ in their autobiographical writing.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Teaching at the University of Manchester has provided me with an experience that has forever shaped my outlook on the purpose and aims of education: I was lucky to work with Dr Barbara Lebrun and Dr Cathy Gelbin in this respect.

I would have been unable to pursue the current research without the bequest made by Dr Fanni Bogdanow to the University of Manchester. It has remained a constant reminder throughout the writing of this thesis that Dr Bogdanow, like Georges Perec, avoided the horrors of the Holocaust as a child by escaping on a train; her parents, like Perec’s mother, experienced the camps at Auschwitz, along with those at Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. It appears fitting that Dr Bogdanow’s bequest live on in the current research.

I thank my friends from various walks of life – school, Merton, France, Manchester, and beyond – for their valuable support, humour, and perspective. My family have seen me through all the phases of my life and academic career: from the first day of school to graduation ceremonies, they have been there, unwavering. My final thanks go to James, whose steadfast presence, love, and intellect has imbued this thesis, and my life, with more than he shall ever know.
Introduction

‘[L]e jeu découle du je’; ‘le je découle du jeu’

This thesis concerns the autobiographical writing of Michel Leiris (1901 – 1980), Georges Perec (1936 – 1982), and Marcel Bénabou (1939 – ). I will interrogate the idea that identity is ‘in play’ for all three interrelated writers. Identity being ‘in play’ carries with it the suggestion from French of ‘en jeu’, inspired by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France’s 2014–2015 exhibition on the Ouvroir de la Littérature Potentielle (more commonly ‘Oulipo’), entitled ‘La Littérature en jeu(x)’.

I will demonstrate the ways in which identity is not only ‘in play’, but ‘at stake’ for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou. For all three writers, the homophonic interplay between ‘je’, ‘jeu’, ‘en jeu’ and ‘enjeu’ is highly evocative of the stakes of autobiography. The interplay between identity and gaming echoes and reflects in stimulating and idiosyncratic ways through their work. My research seeks to demonstrate that identity is ‘en je’, ‘en jeu’, ‘en jeux’, and implicates certain ‘enjeux’ for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou in their autobiographical writing: at stake, in play, and centred around the exploration of the ‘je’. My research offers the first study to bring together these writers in order to examine how each respond to the particular challenge of communicating ludically their identity in first-person autobiographical writing.

Autobiography is, for these writers, beset with ludic possibilities that compound the task of self-enquiry. Ludic game-playing, which is both risky and full of creative potential, is associated for all three writers with the idea that writing itself is an exercise of identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self. The sense that identity is continually at stake for these writers is reflected in the uncertainties of

2 The Oulipo, founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960, employ formal constraints such as mathematical rules, lipograms, anagrams, and palindromes in order to release the creative potential of literature. A list of popular constraints can be found here: http://oulipo.net/fr/contraintes (accessed 22/06/2018).
the period of French history itself: yet, beyond their personal circumstances, we can identify in all three writers an innovative approach to observing, interpreting, and communicating the self that is always beset with the risky, ludic nature of the game of literature, putting identity ‘in play’.

Figures of playing and gaming abound in the work of these three writers. For Leiris, experiments with surrealist wordplay early in his career developed into dangerous autobiographical arenas of play: the matador facing the bull in the *corrida*, or the tragic actor attempting to find the ‘règle du jeu’ for life. For Perec, writing is variously a game of ‘cache-cache’ (*W*, 18), chess, Go, or a jigsaw puzzle; simple optical illusions and crosswords warp into the dystopian sport of the island of ‘W’. Bénabou revels in Oulipian wordplay, modelled on Leiris’ innovations, but also sees writing as a game of ‘qui-perd-gagne’ (*PQ*, 191). Etymologically, the ‘ludic’ implies playing, but also practice, mocking, and deception.\(^4\) In this study, the ludic dimension of these writers’ autobiographical work entails their way of making a game of their self-referentiality, continually exhibiting the mechanisms of their narrative structures and making the implied reader an explicit rather than implicit gaming partner. Their ludic writing involves innovative combinations of Caillois’ typology of play: a mix of patience, strategy and skill with spontaneity, mimicry and exhilaration.\(^5\) Gaming for these writers is a continual exercise, a repeated practice that rejects totalization and monosemy, being instead unending, polysemic, and open to potentialities. It fundamentally underscores the open-endedness of identity which is continually at stake for all three writers: the ‘je’ and ‘jeu’ are in constant play.

Their lives illuminate the approach to autobiography that each has taken. Leiris – autobiographer, poet, art critic and ethnographer – is a figure somewhat on the margins of the seminal literary upheavals of the twentieth century. Yet his association with the surrealists and existentialists, his intimacy with major figures of the contemporary art world (Picasso, Bacon, Giacometti, and Miró, amongst others), and his 30-year tenure as ‘directeur de service au laboratoire d’ethnologie’ at the Musée de l’Homme means that he is a figure of interest for various academic fields. Leiris left the surrealists in 1929, a few years before embarking upon *L’Âge d’homme* (1939/1945), the main text of

\(^4\) ‘Ludo’~ere: ‘to play, sport’; ‘to play for stakes’; ‘to have fun’; ‘to take part in public entertainment or show, to represent (a character, play) on stage; ‘to speak […] on jest’; ‘to write, produce etc (poems or sim.) for mere amusement’; ‘to treat […] without due seriousness, to trick, deceive’. *Collins Latin Dictionary* (Glasgow : Harper Collins, 1997), p. 127.

his under consideration in this thesis. He later gravitated towards the existentialists around Sartre and Beauvoir, especially during the war, before writing a four-volume autobiography, *La Règle du jeu* (1948-1976), which demonstrates the enduring magnetism of autobiography throughout his life.

Perec was born in Paris to Polish Jewish parents in 1936. His father, who enlisted in the French army at the start of the Second World War, died in 1940, whilst his mother sent the young Perec to Grenoble on a Red Cross train before being deported to Auschwitz, to her death. Perec’s œuvre explores questions of absence and silence in response to his place in traumatic global history, what he terms the ‘Histoire avec sa grande hache’ (*W*, 17). Perec’s life was short: he died from lung cancer, aged 45. Despite this, he was extremely productive, writing texts that span sociology, the novel, autobiography, and beyond, alongside an interest in word games, crosswords, and puzzles that inflects his writing. He entered the Oulipo in 1967, and fast became central to the group’s formal innovations and experiments.

Bénabou, born in Morocco, left for Paris in 1956 aged 17, around the time that France relinquished its Protectorate. He attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the École normale supérieure, and has lived in Paris since this time. As the only surviving author of the three, I consider Bénabou as the surviving trace of an approach to autobiography that can be mapped through Leiris to Perec. He has been professor of Roman history (now emeritus) at the Université Paris VII since 1974, after spells at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (for whom Leiris worked as an ethnographer) and the Université d’Orléans. Bénabou, a great friend of Perec, was co-opted into the Oulipo in 1970, and made ‘secrétaire définitivement provisoire’ of the group in 1971. Bénabou was responsible for the inception of the Oulipo archive, now held at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal.6

During the period in which these authors were writing, France emerged from the Second World War into a complex political era that encompassed significant change, including a post-war boom and subsequent recession, difficult decolonization, war in Algeria, and the upheavals of May ’68. This period of French history encompassed an uneasy transition from post-war destruction and trauma not to long-lasting prosperity, but rather to an ‘age of uncertainty’.7 Parallel to these political and cultural upheavals,

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this period straddles several collisions in thought, criticism, and writing, including Sartre and Beauvoir’s existentialism, the *nouveau roman*, the growth of experimental theatre and francophone writing, and the contributions to *Tel Quel* by Derrida and Barthes. These changes, crucially, all impacted the genre of autobiography as it evolved. Leiris, Perec and Bénabou, who belonged to significant movements of twentieth-century literary history, were situated in a period of evolution in French intellectual history that sits against this backdrop of economic and social change.

With this context in mind, we can consider the work of these three writers as orbiting in the larger sphere of existential autobiography, which dominated the contemporary autobiographical scene.\(^8\) Not only did Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou occupy the same Parisian milieu, but each writer bore some relation to Sartre (or *Les Temps Modernes*), and their work shares overlapping concerns with some of the innovations of existentialist work.\(^9\) Sheringham has noted that the existential autobiographies of Sartre, Beauvoir, Genet and Leduc were used as ‘a testing-ground’ for existential theory.\(^10\) They allowed the writer to communicate his ‘secret individuel de son être au monde’: we can thus consider existential autobiography as a process or project, a particular way of exercising existential freedom.\(^11\) The ‘rapport originel à soi, au monde, et à l’Autre’ is central to existentialist autobiography, where the subject observes itself ‘in the way it engages with experience’.\(^12\) Sartre’s work exposes the recognition of the radical freedom of the other. In autobiography, this other is the reader: he notes that ‘l’écrivain en appelle à la liberté du lecteur pour qu’elle collabore à la production de son ouvrage’, such that the reader in his freedom collaborates with the writer to produce the text.\(^13\) The other – the ‘médiateur indispensable entre moi et moi-même’ – is understood in a relation of conflict governed by the communicatory faculty of literature, such that ‘[c]ommunication allows each consciousness to realise that the Other is another free

\(^8\) Genet’s *Journal du voleur* appeared in 1948, followed the next year by *Miracle de la rose*; Beauvoir’s autobiographical project began in 1958 with *Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée*; Sartre’s ludic *Les Mots* (1963) was in part inspired by Leiris’ autobiographical work.

\(^9\) Leiris was on the first editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, where Sartre published extracts from *La Règle du Jeu*; Perec was introduced to Sartre’s circle in 1956-1957; Bénabou wrote for *Les Temps Modernes* between 1964-1966 under the pseudonym ‘Burnachs’, borrowed from Perec.


\(^12\) Ibid, p. 650; M. Sheringham, *French Autobiography*, p. 207.

subject’.

Most importantly for my three writers, existential autobiography emphasised the ‘perpétuelle production de soi-même par le travail et la praxis [...] pas une substance stable qui se repose en elle-même mais un déséquilibre perpétuel’.

The subject is figured as a continual production, an unstable entity discovered through continual work. These central innovations of existentialist autobiography and theory were undoubtedly influential for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou.

Despite the importance of existentialist autobiography as part of the contemporary literary context, I do not wish to align Leiris, Perec, nor Bénabou wholly under the auspices of any one school of thought, not least existentialism. Sheringham is adamant that Leiris ‘does not belong in this network’, as the foundations for Leiris’ long-lasting autobiographical project were ‘laid much earlier on’: I, too, locate these in L’Âge d’homme rather than in Leiris’ later autobiographical texts, written when he was working more closely with Sartre.

This gravitation towards Sartre has been given as a justification for why Leiris’ prefatory essay to L’Âge d’homme, ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, published with the text’s second edition in 1945, allies him partly with Sartre’s ‘littérature engagée’. We see that Leiris seeks, after the War, ‘une littérature dans laquelle j’essayais de m’engager tout entier’ (ADH, 14, my emphasis). Hand calls this an ‘involved adjudication by Leiris of the emerging critical contest between Bataille and Sartre’, as Bataille had been the dedicatee of L’Âge d’homme in 1939.

However, like Perec and Bénabou after him, Leiris’ politics were personal, rather than part of any larger political ideology. Rather than a strict adherence to the political aims of the surrealists or existentialists, Leiris regarded these as a ‘network of aesthetic and ideological alliances within which he maintains a relative detachment’.

He hopes that the publication of L’Âge d’homme will aid the ‘affranchissement de tous les hommes’ (ADH, 22), the personal (rather than political) emancipation of others through his own painful, masochistic self-inquiry. We can therefore see Leiris as a writer on the margins of upheavals in contemporary literature and politics who maintained an individual focus in order that his fleeting attempts at self-understanding might inform the outlook of others.

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16 M. Sheringham, French Autobiography, p. 204.
17 S. Hand, Alter Ego, p. 66.
18 Ibid, p. 76.
Following this, Bénabou and Perec’s membership of the *Ligne générale* journal group in the early 1960s (along with others such as Kléman, Burgelin, and Getzler) suggests their distaste for the political ideologies of the Sartrean rut in which the novel was stuck. The journal aimed to create new theories that might unite politics and art, although its failure to be endorsed by the French Communist Party led to its rapid dissolution. James notes that the impulse for literary-political innovation with the *Ligne générale* came ‘when the question of individual agency in history seemed particularly urgent, and when debates about the moral and political function of literature were heated’.19 Perec noted that the type of literature envisaged by the *nouveaux romanciers* was too removed from the world, whilst the existentialists and experimental playwrights in the period suggested a vision of a world without meaning: none of these styles offered real alternatives to stagnation.20 Perec instead envisaged a new realism that, rather than cold detachment or the insertion of staid existentialist dogma into conventional narratives, would ‘plunge’ into reality and ‘give it form in order to bring to light the essence of the world: its movement and its history’.21 Political engagement therefore, for Perec, takes the form of literary engagement: an approach which, like Sartre’s, stresses the continual and unending exercise of writing to capture reality’s movement.22

Just as Leiris was uneasy with the publicly political demands of the surrealists and existentialists, preferring to focus on his own autobiographical and ethnographic projects, it is also possible to view Perec and Bénabou as figures not wholly inside the Oulipo. Perec noted that he was only ‘oulipien à 97%’.23 Indeed, his writing, while guided by Oulipian practices, surpasses pure formal innovation (what the Oulipo champion as ‘la signification étant abandonnée […] restant extérieure à toute préoccupation de structure’) to explore the consequences for meaning that formal experimentation can inspire.24 Similarly, although Bénabou has been secretary of the

21 Ibid, p. 32.
22 We can appreciate here the heredity of this idea in Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), and other Oulipian exercises such as the continually rewritten *Voyage d’hiver et ses suites* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).
group since 1971 and has attended more meetings than even the Oulipo’s founders Queneau and Le Lionnais, his solo literary output is notable, particularly in comparison to Pèrec’s, for its modesty. 25 Amongst the early members of the Oulipo, who were mostly white men, Bénabou also stands apart as the only non-white member: this perspective informs, in no small part, his *Epopée familiale*. 26 Despite his activity with the Oulipo, we see Bénabou’s desire to, like Perec, surpass its solely ludic aspects. He has stated that

‘j’ai essayé de […] mettre [les contraintes] au service d’un projet d’écriture qui va, ou qui au moins prétend aller, bien au-delà du ludique […] je ne considère pas mes livres comme de simples exercices ouliquiens’. 27

Bénabou notes that that ‘it is not only the virtualities of language that are revealed by constraint, but also the virtualities of [he] who accepts to submit himself to constraint’. 28 Like Perec, Bénabou attempts to go beyond pure linguistic virtuosity, exploring the potentialities of subjectivity that Oulipian constraint might reveal. Therefore, whilst it is important to appreciate Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou as members of hugely influential literary groups of this period, we can also identify a common ‘outsider’ status that unites them: they are figures immersed and influenced by the context in which they lived and wrote, but not solely assimilable to any single ideology, tradition, or literary movement. They extend their enquiries beyond the purely experimental, in order to suggest that experimentation is merely the basis for more wide-ranging autobiographical innovation.

The choice of Leiris, Pèrec, and Bénabou for examination here is based on further personal, literary and contextual connections. The Oulipo, Pèrec and Bénabou specifically, saw Leiris as an ‘older brother’ to the group. 29 Bénabou sees Leiris as a ‘plagiaire par anticipation’, the designation that the Oulipo confer on writers preceding

26 Michèle Métail was the first woman inducted, in 1975, remaining the sole woman until 1995.
27 ‘Entretien avec Marcel Bénabou’, in *Histoires Littéraires: revue trimestrielle consacrée à la littérature française des XIXe et XXe siècles*, no. 54, April-June 2013, 109-124 (p. 117), my emphasis.
29 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.
them who employed Oulipian techniques.\textsuperscript{30} Despite their temporal distance, the relationship between the surrealists and the Oulipo can be traced through Queneau: Bloomfield notes that Queneau often would meet with Leiris, Bataille, Sartre, and Beauvoir at the Deux Magots from the 1930s until after the end of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{31} Queneau was associated with the surrealists under Breton from 1924-1929, the same period as Leiris, but ‘was particularly suspicious of the surrealists’ ‘exaltation of subjectivity’.\textsuperscript{32} Leiris levelled the same objection at Breton (and later Bataille) when leaving the surrealists: he called their methods an ‘exploration hasardeuse de nos abîmes’.\textsuperscript{33} Ribièr suggests that ‘surrealism […] served as a countermodel for Oulipo’: Oulipo emphasised its collaborative dimension over any political ideology.\textsuperscript{34} Yet Bloomfield notes that ‘[s]i l’Ouvroir n’a de cessé de se distinguer du surréalisme, il en est évidemment très empreint’: the Oulipo’s working methods were influenced by the innovations of the surrealists, most importantly Leiris.\textsuperscript{35} If the surrealist movement emerged from the First World War, the Oulipo can be considered as an experimental group reacting to conditions in France after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{36} Whilst Breton’s surrealist manifesto emphasised that words are ‘tremplins à l’esprit de celui qui les écoute’, the Oulipian writer finds ‘dans le monde même le tremplin de son action’.\textsuperscript{37} Their re-deployment of the image of the springboard indicates that the surrealist emphasis on liberating language finds a continuum in the Oulipo, where the world surrounding the writer inspires his work. When Bénabou states that Leiris was an “older brother’ or ‘travelling companion’ to the Oulipo, we can appreciate the familial link that this suggests, connecting Leiris to Queneau, and thence to Perec and Bénabou.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{31} C. Bloomfield, \textit{Raconter l’Oulipo}, p. 88.
\textsuperscript{35} C. Bloomfield, \textit{Raconter l’Oulipo}, p. 339.
\textsuperscript{37} Oulipo, \textit{La littérature potentielle}, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{38} M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.
Bénabou notes that he and Perec found ‘de nouveaux pères et de nouveaux repères’ within the family of the Oulipo, but also in reading Leiris and Queneau.39

Perec and Bénabou shared a close friendship lasting from the late 1950s until Perec’s death. Before joining the Oulipo, the two would meet on Tuesday afternoons (in homage to Mallarmé’s ‘Mardistes’) to work and read together.40 They had worked collaboratively on two word-game projects, the ‘PALF’ (Production Automatique de Littérature Française) and ‘LSD’ (Littérature Semi-Définitionelle) before Perec was co-opted into the Oulipo. Bénabou was also involved, with Perec, in the journals La Ligne générée and Cause Commune.41 Perec proposed Bénabou as a new member of the Oulipo, and would feature him as the thinly-veiled character ‘Hassan Ibn Abbou’ in La Disparition. Bénabou has written academic articles concerning Perec and his autobiographical work.42 As Reig and Schaffner point out, Bénabou places his work ‘dans le compagnonnage’ of Perec’s.43 This reflects not only their personal affiliation but also the proximity of their literary concerns: Roubaud claims that Perec’s death compelled Bénabou to become a fully-fledged Oulipian author, implying the intertwining of their personal and literary lives.44

Beyond their personal links, Perec and Bénabou both make extensive use of Leiris as an intertext. Perec twice uses quotations from Leiris as epigraphs to his texts (in Le Condottière and Espèces d’espaces): Bénabou does the same in Epopée familaile. Leiris was the model for Perec’s unfinished project entitled ‘Lieux où j’ai dormi’: ‘un modèle, lointain, d’un tel livre pourrait etre fourni par Nuits sans nuits de Leiris’ (JSN, 61). He notes that a deeper re-reading of Leiris would help to jump-start another unfinished project entitled ‘L’Âge’ (JSN, 55). Perec sent a copy of VME to Leiris, with the following inscription:

‘Recevez-le, je vous prie, en témoignage de l’admiration que je porte depuis toujours à votre œuvre dont vous trouverez ici, dans LVME, dix traces

40 M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 182. See also ‘Entretien avec Marcel Bénabou’, Histoires Littéraires, no. 54, p. 121.

Perec uses Leiris not as a simple intertextual reference, but as a structuring axis borne of his admiration. Bénabou notes his own esteem for Leiris, stating that \textit{L’Âge d’homme} and \textit{La Règle du jeu} had both ‘already succeeded, by various routes, in effecting this reconciliation [between formal research and confession]’.\footnote{M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.} Leiris’ innovative poetic wordplay (for example, \textit{Glossaire j’y serre mes gloses}, 1939) inspired his short poetic work \textit{Voies de vieux temps} (1976).\footnote{M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in \textit{Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini}, p. 184: ‘C’est un moment où j’étais très influencé par Michel Leiris, par ses confidences sur la méthode qu’il utilisait pour composer ses poèmes’. He has recently discussed this aspect of Leiris’ work in a 2016 interview with M. Saad: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onhTRS5duT0} (accessed 25/04/18).} Bénabou writes of his joy at finding a first edition of \textit{L’Âge d’homme} at one of Paris’ \textit{bouquinistes} in \textit{Pourquoi\textperiodcentered}.\footnote{‘Paris regorgeait de marchands de vieux livres: ceux des quais bien sûr (chez qui j’ai eu la joie de trouver un exemplaire […] de la toute première édition de \textit{L’Âge d’homme}, \textit{Pourquoi}, 76.} We can consider Leiris therefore as central to the network of intertexts on which Perec and Bénabou would later draw.

My approach can allow scholars of autobiography, of these writers, and of this period of history to consider the lineage of twentieth century French autobiography as a meandering yet elliptical inheritance, responding to the individual circumstances of each writer as well as larger cultural and historical evolutions. It permits an appreciation of these writers’ specificity, yet identifies how their responses to shared questions concerning writing the self have mirrored political, cultural, and literary developments in the twentieth century. Leiris revises \textit{L’Âge d’homme} in light of the destruction of the Second World War, recontextualising his personal confessions yet maintaining a focus on his difficult emergence into adulthood. Perec, too, responds to the war and the Holocaust through his autobiographical writing, exploring the severing of links to his past and the machinations involved with recovering and interpreting memory. Bénabou responds obliquely to the end of the French protectorate over Morocco and to the decline of the country’s indigenous Jewish population, which itself was caused in part
by the creation of the state of Israel after the Second World War. Nonetheless, whilst we can attribute aspects of their autobiographical work to larger, distressing historical contexts, what remains most important for this thesis is their individual approach to the autobiographical genre.

The literary and historical context of the three writers is furthermore informed by an understanding of autobiographical practice more widely. Smith notes that ‘[t]he practice of writing autobiographically […] has a history extending back to, and perhaps before, the Greeks and Romans in antiquity and extending beyond Western culture’. Indeed, she undertakes in her study a wide-ranging overview of autobiography’s history, focussed through a Western, predominantly European lens, whilst acknowledging that a global history of autobiography would be possible and important, though gargantuan. For the purposes of both Smith’s study and my own, the history and criticism of European autobiography is most pertinent. Smith notes:

‘Life writing in its multiple genres has been foundational to the formation of Western subjects, Western cultures, and Western concepts of nation […] In the first decade of the twenty-first century, most prominently in the West, autobiographical discourse has become ubiquitous’.

Smith helpfully demonstrates that the history of autobiography can be traced across many European nations: forms of life-writing and written self-examination have emerged both organically and in processes of cultural exchange across Western Europe. This suggests that any smaller, cohesive, ‘national’ autobiography with defining characteristics is hard – even foolhardy – to delimit. Nonetheless, one can trace a path through several seminal extended prose studies of self-reflection in France specifically, through Montaigne in the Renaissance through Descartes to Rousseau during the Enlightenment and beyond to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where, as noted,

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51 Ibid, Chapter 4.

52 Ibid, p. 124.
writers such as Sartre and Beauvoir carved out a modern form of autobiography. Despite the wider reverberations of these texts beyond national borders, their lineage lends a certain weight to the specificity of a *French* autobiographical tradition, particularly if we consider their emphasis on the self reflecting on its own mental processes. Smith demonstrates that we can understand autobiography’s history either narrowly as a Western phenomenon stemming from an overarching ideology of individualism; or, more generously, as a global phenomenon that has many forms, where global ‘readers confront contemporary investigations in subjectivity […] that mine the discontinuities, mobility, and transcultural hybridity of subjects-in-process’. I find it more convincing and less reductive to appreciate the genre of autobiography in the more open sense: this allows us to appreciate the three authors under consideration in this study as individual writers responding to an open and fluctuating mode of writing, shaped and affected by their own personal circumstances and contexts.

Autobiographical criticism that examines the genre as a fully-fledged form of writing has been concentrated, in both Anglophone and Francophone contexts, in roughly the last fifty years, as the canon of literary autobiography has become more defined. In that time, it has been concerned with carving out the borders of the genre that demarcate it from other forms, whilst also appreciating the flourishing formal subdivisions which might be included under its umbrella (for instance autofiction, memoir, and diaries). Autobiographical criticism has demonstrated above all that the genre has no rigid borders or simple definitions, but is ridden with generic fluidity. Sheringham notes that French autobiography specifically developed in ‘fits and starts’, constituting ‘an evolving canon of texts, fluctuating concepts of the self, altered socio-cultural configurations’: it is a meandering and expansive literary tradition which has

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53 The breadth and quality of examples of the modern French autobiographical novel, encompassing writers such as Proust, Duras, and Céline amongst innumerable others, adds further clout to the idea of the specifically French modern autobiography. See E. M. Angelini, *Strategies of "Writing the Self" in the French Modern Novel: c’est moi, je crois* (Lampeter: E Mellen Press, 2002).
responded to changing historical, cultural, and political contexts.\textsuperscript{57} Both Sheringham and Lejeune’s critical work, pivotal in the field of modern French autobiography, has been predominantly reception-focussed: they sought to analyse the devices used by a range of modern French autobiographers to achieve certain effects on readers and their position.\textsuperscript{58} Sheringham’s emphasis on autobiography as ‘a process as well as a product’ will remain a touchstone for this thesis: I understand literary autobiography, in the manner practised by Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou, to be not only a process of introspection and retrospection, but a process by which this is transmitted to a reader who is invited to participate in the gaming, negotiated construction of the writer’s identity.\textsuperscript{59} This negotiation does not imply, however, a fixed, final endpoint, but rather again an unfinished ‘awareness in process’ which is open-ended and replete with ludic possibilities.\textsuperscript{60}

Recent work in autobiographical studies demonstrates that the genre remains highly dynamic and contentious. This is borne out by the trend in recent criticism to chart the chronological development of autobiographical analysis, in order to demonstrate the lacunae that remain unresolved for this area of study. Chansky and Hipchen’s \textit{The Routledge Auto/Biographical Studies Reader} takes a long view of historical criticism of autobiography, collecting insights beginning with landmark, reception-focussed contributions from Olney, Gusdorf, and Lejeune in the mid-twentieth century, through to contemporary criticism.\textsuperscript{61} These more recent critical insights aim to expand study of the genre beyond work predominantly written by white men, and look towards the future of autobiography (for instance in the realms of ecocriticism and online autobiographies). Smith and Watson’s \textit{Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives} also examines recent developments in autobiography.\textsuperscript{62} They see the genre as varied and multifaceted, spreading over different genres including the novel, biography, and history. They assert that autobiography ‘maintains its distinctive relationship to the referential world in its temporality’, an

\textsuperscript{62} S. Smith and J. Watson, \textit{Reading Autobiography}.
attempt at definition that nonetheless remains broad and inclusive. Their pragmatic study perpetuates the view of autobiography’s multivalence and generic fluidity that still holds sway.

More recent writerly-focussed criticism has expanded enquiry into more marginalised voices and concerns, including sexual difference, trauma, and colonial experience, demonstrating the inclusive, mutative and wide-ranging nature of the genre. Marcus indicates that critics have increasingly found autobiography ‘to be irrevocably tainted by its Eurocentric, masculinist, individualist assumptions’, taking issue with the notion that ‘autobiography expresses […] the pure consciousness or the ‘essence’ of Western humanity’. There is a shift in awareness in autobiographical criticism not only about its borderlines and definitions, but also its assumptions and values. Whilst being aware of these discussions, and the status of Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou as arguably part of this Eurocentric, masculinist tendency, their work nonetheless merits examination as innovative contributions to a nebulous and shifting genre, with and against which these writers themselves push.

The borderlines of autobiography concern not only the form of literary works, but also the autobiographical subject. Marcus has noted that some autobiographical critics of the last 50 years have been:

‘concerned to stabilize the category of autobiography […] whereas for others the unity of the writing subject is the agent of stability. Other critics deconstruct both genre and subject as coherent categories in a redefinition of autobiography itself.’

Whilst I do not claim to redefine autobiography here, I wish to demonstrate through my analysis of Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou that neither stable generic parameters nor a stable writing subject can be taken as a guarantee in their autobiographical writing. I will demonstrate, through their probing of the unstable writing subject, of the difficulties of the autobiographical genre, and their negotiation with the reading Other, that the idea of ‘coherent categories’ is destabilized and questioned. The fluid nature of the autobiographical subject appears to me inherently to destabilize the genre and

63 Ibid, p. 18.
66 Ibid, p. 179.
contributes in large part to the underlying instability of any formal definition. Beyond contentious definitions, autobiographical criticism (more than in other forms such as the novel or play) must also contend with the writing subject: autobiography implicates both the book and the writer. It is the nature of this writing subject that Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou all put in play, particularly in relation to their readers. In this sense, my work responds to Eakin’s call for autobiographical analysis which so far ‘has not yet fully addressed the extent to which the self is defined by […] its relations with others’.  

Critical work on all three writers specifically has previously been undertaken. Leiris has attracted broad critical attention in Anglophone and Francophone contexts, notably two studies by Lejeune in 1975 and Hand in 2002, though no large-scale study has recently been published. Sheringham’s French Autobiography, and Hand’s Michel Leiris: Writing the Self predominantly use Leiris’ La Règle du jeu to demonstrate the interweaving of Leiris’ critical, poetic, ethnographic, and autobiographical writing. Only Lejeune’s Lire Leiris comprises an in-depth study of Leiris’ L’Âge d’homme, and was published in the same year as Le Pacte autobiographique. Lejeune’s study employs psychoanalytic close reading: Lejeune’s procedure with this text set the standard for later critical work on Leiris, particularly with regard to the study of La Règle du jeu, by highlighting the richness and complexity of Leiris’ language. Hand’s monograph Alter Ego: The Critical Writings of Michel Leiris was the first contribution in the Anglophone context, establishing Leiris as a critic, autobiographer, and ethnographer. More recently, the Centre Pompidou in Metz held a retrospective exhibition entitled ‘Leiris & Co’ in 2015, examining the crossroads of literature, ethnography, and art in Leiris’ career and highlighting ‘the innovative aspect of his oeuvre and the pertinence of his ideas which […] have made him an essential contemporary reference’. There has been, therefore, lively recent interest in Leiris from a variety of fields, yet none which focuses on the origins of his early autobiographical writing, in particular L’Âge d’homme. I seek to illustrate how in L’Âge d’homme Leiris was concerned with questions of communicating his self that resonated through the twentieth century, specifically for Perec and Bénabou.

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68 S. Hand, Michel Leiris: Writing the Self (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
69 P. Lejeune, Lire Leiris.
Perec has, of the three, garnered the most critical attention. His entry into the Pléiade in 2017 marks the recent culmination of this critical interest, which, like the critical work on Leiris, spans many different disciplines.\textsuperscript{72} The boom in Perec criticism began in the years shortly following his death.\textsuperscript{73} In the last ten years, attention has centred on Perec’s status as an orphan of the Second World War and Holocaust.\textsuperscript{74} As such, he has increasingly been considered alongside writers such as Modiano.\textsuperscript{75} As an Oulipian, Perec has featured in two recent studies that consider the ludic nature of his work, but these did not sufficiently address the relationship between play and autobiography.\textsuperscript{76} The proceedings from the Colloque de Cerisy concerning Perec, published in 2016, demonstrate the continued contemporary interest in his work: this was reinforced in 2017 by Bloomfield’s history of the Oulipo, published to coincide with the launch of her digitization of the Oulipo archive at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.\textsuperscript{77} Interest has recently expanded beyond French studies into the fields of geography, architecture, and computing.\textsuperscript{78} Against this plethora of critical interest, I will consider some of his lesser known texts, considering these alongside Perec’s landmark autobiographical work \textit{Wou...}
le souvenir d’enfance (1975). Despite the recent re-discovery of two of Perec’s earliest texts, Le Condottière (written in 1959, published 2012) and L’Attentat de Sarajevo (written in 1957, published 2016), no critical work has been undertaken with regard to these discoveries. I will examine Le Condottière as a neglected comparative touchstone that provides useful insights into Perec’s autobiographical project.

Bénabou, by contrast, has attracted little critical attention. The relative modesty of his production is reflected in the paucity of critical interest in both Francophone and Anglophone critical contexts. Lejeune’s Brouillons de soi contains a brief subsection on Bénabou.79 In 1999, SubStance published a special section containing a few short articles presenting Bénabou as a marginal figure of the Oulipo.80 Bloomfield’s 2017 history of the Oulipo dedicates only a few pages to Bénabou. In 2015, the first critical work to focus solely on Bénabou, Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, was published in France: the collection of short essays and interviews represents the beginning of a tidal shift in interest in Bénabou, of which this thesis aims to be a part.81 Bénabou still regularly attends the hugely popular ‘jeudis de l’Oulipo’ at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and is one of the longest-serving, most collaborative members of the group. I will examine Bénabou as a neglected figure within the Oulipo, who is different in many respects from the other Oulipians, in particular as a Moroccan francophone Jew. I argue that he brings a different perspective to the ludic ways in which texts – and autobiographies in particular – can play with mutable and unfixed subjectivity.

This thesis has three principal research questions. These are not rigidly pursued in turn: rather, they have informed the direction of the research, allowing the idiolect of each author to remain paramount. These questions have allowed me to examine these authors in depth, in order to appreciate how their autobiographical concerns overlap, inform, and influence each other, yet also how their individual contexts shape their innovative and ludic responses to similar autobiographical tension points in French literary history.

The first research question asks: in what ways do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou posit their self in their autobiographical writing? I contend that it is possible to discern for all three writers a resistance to a totalized, unified self assumed to be found as a product of autobiographical writing.82 Instead, their texts posit a complex, composite,

81 Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, eds C. Reig and A. Schaffner.
82 Sheringham calls this the ‘old stable ego, the “sujet plein” discredited by Lacanian psychoanalysis’. M. Sheringham, French Autobiography, p. 328.
multipart self. The purpose of autobiographical writing for these writers is not absolute self-knowledge, but instead to explore how the very act of writing allows the autobiographer a limited window of insight into their self. As such, their work resists the idea of ‘compréhension à tout prix’ as the ideal result of autobiography.\(^{83}\) The self is perceived and communicated by Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou in perpetual flux: both self-perception and its communication in writing are inflected with provisionality and open-endedness.

The second research question asks: how do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou each approach the difficulties of autobiographical writing? These writers, in addition to their view of the self as open-ended, have a common interest in the difficulties and limit points of autobiography, even to the point of each suggesting the failure of their autobiographical enterprises. Boyle has characterized modern French autobiography ‘as a site of conflict, with the implicit promises held out by the genre clashing with the more limited version that individual texts present of their capacity to shed light on the author’s person’.\(^{84}\) I propose to pursue Boyle’s argument by focussing on the ideas of limitation and difficulty that the genre represents for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou, in contrast to the genre’s ‘implicit promises’, which for autobiographical scholarship contemporary to these writers included the notion that understanding one’s past informs one’s present, and that autobiography must reach ‘a concluding point at which […] self-understanding through reflection on past achievement takes place’.\(^{85}\) Blanchot, a commentator of Leiris, has noted that ‘[c]elui qui va jusqu’au bout de son livre est celui qui n’a pas été jusqu’au bout de lui-même’: this insight suggests the tension between completion and irresolution in both writing and self-insight that I argue characterizes the approach to autobiography that unifies these three writers.\(^{86}\) I will demonstrate in the subsequent chapters the individual difficulties that Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou each identify in autobiography, and the techniques and mechanisms that they employ to contend with these.

The third research question will ask: what is the place of the reader in relation to Leiris, Perec and Bénabou’s texts? Blanchot suggests, regarding Leiris, that

‘Ecrire n’est qu’un jeu sans valeur, si ce jeu ne devient pas une expérience aventureuse, où celui qui la poursuit, s’engageant dans une voie dont l’issue lui

\(^{85}\) S. Smith and J. Watson *Reading Autobiography*, p. 199.
échappe, peut apprendre ce qu’il ne sait pas et perdre ce qui l’empêche de savoir’.87

Writing can be considered as a game with an uncertain end-point for the writer, but who nonetheless engages with its difficulties to gain some degree of insight. These texts demand an active reader, who is invited to participate in a relationship of reconstructive exchange with the author as a partner in the literary game, supplementing the writers’ lacunary self-knowledge. Their autobiographical work strongly involves the reader in dynamic, playful, and at times hostile and complicit ways. Their identity being ‘in play’ involves a two-way relational exchange, where their composite and self-obscure identity is negotiated in collaboration with their readers. Perec commented on this, again employing the language of gaming and play:

‘Ultimately, my dream would be that the reader play with the book […] that they reconstruct […] that they grasp how it all moves about, how the puzzle is constructed.’88

The reader is encouraged to reconstruct the textual self as a puzzle, though it may remain incomplete. These three writers respond to Bakhtin’s view of language as social, collaborative, and relational, where ‘dialogical inter-orientation becomes […] an event of discourse itself’: their autobiographies strongly anticipate a reading other in a dialogue.89 Their approach can also be aligned with Barthes’ category of polysemic books which produce living readings, ‘lectures vivantes (produisant un texte intérieur, homogène à une écriture virtuelle du lecteur)’.90 Such works exist in a perpetual present, a continual, ongoing, and unfinished realm. Perec indeed advocated for such ‘open’ works, where readers would become co-producers of texts:

‘toutes les idées que j’ai quand je suis en train d’écrire un livre sont inutiles si je ne parviens pas à les transformer en mots, en phrases, qui vont frapper le lecteur’.91

87 M. Blanchot, La Part du feu, p. 247.
As such, the reader enters into the play of their texts. Ricœur notes that ‘[c]’est dans l’acte de lire que le destinataire joue avec les contraintes narratives […] le texte ne devient œuvre que dans l’interaction entre texte et recepteur’. Ricœur’s insight points to how these writers encourage their readers to play with the complex narrative constraints of autobiography. This is part of a larger trend in modern autobiography, highlighted by Arfuch, who notes that the nature of the modern autobiographical ‘subject’ is:

‘constitutively incomplete […] whose existential dimension is dialogic […] constructed by an Other […] speaking of subjectivity in this context amounts to speaking of intersubjectivity’.93

I see this intersubjective exchange as part of a larger contemporary trend in the post-war period, where ethical relation to others was a pressing concern. The existentialists’ notion of responsibility is also explored in the work of Levinas and Blanchot, who also highlighted humanity’s continual ethical responsibility towards others. Blanchot notes in his work addressing the Holocaust that:

‘Dans le rapport de moi […] à Autrui, Autrui est le lointain, l’étranger, mais si je renverse le rapport, Autrui se rapporte à moi comme si j’étais l’Autre et me fait alors sortir de mon identité’.94

The ‘I’ is mirrored in the relational ‘Other’, sharing in the communality of the relational exchange. If ‘autobiographical practice […] requires a listener, a listener capable of responding appropriately to the practice’, this listener or reader is the partner in the game of autobiography played by these writers. Identity is put into play as a mobile and unfixed entity, negotiated between the two partners in the game of literature.

These three guiding research questions have provided the foundations for the individual chapters on each author that follow, tailored to respect and explore the specific concerns of each writer. In the first chapter on Leiris, I will be using *L’Âge d’homme*, where Leiris first established the ethical and theoretical drive to his literary production. Leiris demonstrates a confrontation with the self in *L’Âge d’homme* that pushes his reader to question the construction of a self as a product of a written

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narrative. Hand has argued that *L’Âge d’homme* is a ‘self-critical portrait of irresolution’: I argue that the motif of failure becomes a way of demonstrating the difficulties and limit points of autobiographical writing.96 This irresolution extends to his difficulty in facing death: this is intertwined with a fear of written completion. The relationship with the reader is underscored by a moral compulsion to communicate, in order that the reader benefit from Leiris’ own painful negotiations with self-examination. Leiris saw writing as an ‘instrument de prise de conscience’ (*Biffures*, 240): I argue that Leiris first establishes writing as the means of a shared ‘prise de conscience’ between writer and reader in *L’Âge d’homme*. Leiris negotiates the personal stakes of autobiographical writing: the failure of his masculinity; the terrifying prospect of death that completing an autobiography might represent; and autobiography’s masochistic dimension. I identify certain narrative strategies that draw attention to the shaping and construction of Leiris’ text. He stylizes self-perception in *L’Âge d’homme* to suggest a complex sense of self that is difficult to apprehend through writing, encouraging his reader actively to engage in its reconstruction, such that the autobiographical self is negotiated through a process of mutual alterity between reader and autobiographer. Despite the pain of autobiography, he continually reasserts its usefulness for others. He states that the ‘affranchissement de tous les hommes’ (*ADH*, 22) is the aim of his own liberation through self-scrutiny. I will therefore relate the idiosyncrasies of his approach in *L’Âge d’homme* to the overall thesis questions: the multiple self, the difficulty of autobiographical writing, and how the reader is implicated in his text.

In the second chapter on Perec, I will address the research questions by examining his fascination with problems of representation, which he indicates through the use of art as an enduring motif in his writing to highlight the discrepancy between the real and its representation. He suggested in 1967 that:

‘la seule chose que je cherchais à décrire […] c’était le réel, mais je vous dis un réel que je ne savais pas comment maîtriser – entre le réel que je vise et le livre que je produis, il y a, il n’y a… il y a seulement l’écriture’.97

Perec wished in his writing to describe the real, but a discrepancy occurs between the observation and notation of reality. This failure of writing to capture lived reality stems from the instability of self central to his self-inquiry. Ribière has noted Perec’s

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attraction to art such as Klee’s, which ‘could be rooted in the real without necessarily being figurative in the traditional sense’, advocating for a realism which, rather than simply mirroring reality, ‘attempts to “enrich” the real and make it more significant’.\(^9^8\) I assert that Perec’s observation of his experience of self attempts to ‘enrich’ the real as Ribiére suggests by highlighting the mechanisms at work when the writer attempts to commit his self-experience to writing.\(^9^9\) I will demonstrate that Perec explores the ambiguous ‘possibilité de dire “je” dans un livre’, which is always in question.\(^1^0^0\) He uses autobiography to illustrate a larger concern regarding the representative dimension of writing and art. I assert that this finds its first expression in the recently discovered but largely neglected *Le Condottière*. I will extend this line of argument to *W*, alongside some other of Perec’s neglected texts that share motifs and techniques from visual art. Perec subversively exposes the mechanisms by which artistic representation operates. This subversion invites the reader to enter into a collaborative, relational exchange with Perec, founded on the ‘regard oblique’ that he encourages his readers to take (P/C, 115). I will show how he pushes his readers to scrutinize the complexity of written representation, and its successes and limitations in capturing the experiential flux of life. Writing, Perec suggests, has a particular deictic power to leave a trace of the author’s existence and the moment of his writing. Perec notes in *W* that writing is a way to commemorate the trace of his lost parents: ‘j’écris parce qu’ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l’écriture’(*W*, 63). This deictic quality figures first-person writing as a present-centred process through which Perec can explore his identity. This reinforces Perec’s suggestion that he can only find the source of his motivation for writing, his ‘pourquoi j’écris’ (P/C, 12), in the ludic and playful act of writing itself.

In the final chapter on Bénabou, I will address the research questions by firstly asking how and why Bénabou establishes both a hostile and complicit relationship with the reader. I argue that his texts encourage the reader to question the ‘bonne foi’ of the writer (Jette, 39). Like Perec, Bénabou indicates the importance of relational exchange:

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98 M. Ribiére, ‘Georges Perec’s Enduring Presence in the Visual Arts’, in *The Afterlives of Georges Perec*, pp. 25-26. Bellos notes that, in response to Klee, Perec sought a realism that was an ‘attempt not simply to represent reality but also to enrich and heighten it, an attempt to make reality denser, and to make it mean’, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, p. 212.

99 Observation was central to two further texts by Perec, *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (1975) and *Lieux* (unfinished).

100 G. Perec, interview with Viviane Forrester: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwMTvi3XdPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwMTvi3XdPU) (3:00), accessed 02/06/18.
he suggests that the reader enter into his texts in a constructive dynamic of recognition. I will examine how Bénabou also uses the notion of the ‘inabouti’ as a textual strategy and the very method of his writing. Like Leiris, irresolution and failure run through his work, most notably *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (1986) and *Jacob, Menahem et Mimoun: Une Épopée familiale* (1995). Laskowski-Caujolle deems this the ‘paradox bénapolien’, where the incapacity to write becomes the generator of the text. This demonstrates Bénabou’s engagement with the difficulties and limit points of autobiography, which like for Leiris and Perec, stems from necessarily lacunary self-knowledge. Bénabou’s writing stages a virtual encounter with an ideal ‘Book’ that he is condemned to pursue, on a course that is nonetheless doomed to remain ‘inabouti’. By stressing the abortive and reflexive irony of his texts, Bénabou underlines the provisionality of any attempt to discern self-knowledge in writing. I will finally examine Bénabou’s use of black humour and irony. Bénabou’s playful texts parody both postmodern specularity and the soul-searching dimension of autobiography. I will ask how this irony relates to his position as a multilingual autobiographer at the crossroads of Judeo-Franco-Maghrebi culture. His ‘lifelong love affair with language’ underscores this humorous irony, and betrays the foundation of his relation to himself, others, the world, and literature. His play between languages reveals an underlying unmooring between languages that emphasizes the instability and multiplicity of his identity, illuminated by a comparison with Derrida. He sees himself as ‘porteur […] d’une identité aux composantes multiples’. Bénabou builds on the work of Leiris and Perec to investigate the complexity, tentativeness and instability of his experience of self, and its difficult and playful communication in writing.

The corpus I have chosen reflects the individual concerns of each writer. For Leiris, I will concentrate on *L’Âge d’homme*, as the brevity of this text, in comparison to *La Règle du jeu*, mean that it is a concise case in point for the consideration of autobiography, particularly in relation to Perec and Bénabou, who themselves use constraints in their autobiographies. This condensation affects the encounter with the self in the text: within constraint, Leiris demonstrates his resistance to totalization, as

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103 M. Bénabou, ‘Entretien avec Marcel Bénabou’, in *Histoires Littéraires*, no. 54, April-June 2013, p. 112.
104 Sheringham comments on the ‘closure, the desire to corral, constrain’ in *L’Âge d’homme. French Autobiography*, p. 247.
L’Âge d’homme strains at the boundaries of autobiography’s limits. This text, furthermore, was the most influential for the later work of Perec and Bénabou, and thus provides a thematic continuity with regard to the self-enquiry explored by all three writers.

I will examine Perec’s recently rediscovered early novel Le Condottière, as well as several other of his lesser-known texts, including Un Cabinet d’amateur (the last work published within Perec’s lifetime) and L’Œil ébloui, to cast a new light on W. These texts have been chosen not only for their usefulness, but due to their critical neglect in comparison to texts such as VME, La Disparition, Les Choses or Un Homme qui dort. These lesser-known texts have significant ramifications for his approach to autobiography.

For Bénabou, I have selected Pourquoi, Jette ce livre avant qu’il soit trop tard (1992), and Une Épopée familiale. These texts are his most significant, due to the self-reflexivity and irony that governs them. He is clear that his texts are autobiographical, despite a certain disdain for the genre. Nonetheless these texts, particularly Pourquoi and Jette, are not overtly autobiographical in Lejeune’s sense: they do not simply recount the formation of the protagonist’s personality. Bénabou notes that they are not autobiographies ‘au sens habituel du mot’, but rather reflect a person ‘pris dans les mailles de l’écriture et de la lecture’. These texts enact an encounter with both the self and with their own materiality. By focusing on textual materiality (in Pourquoi), the struggles of reading (in Jette) and the abortive attempt to write the ideal Book (in Épopée), Bénabou wryly suggests that autobiography’s conventions of authenticity, honesty, and self-understanding can be easily turned on their head, all whilst remaining attractive and enigmatic concerns.

The thesis’ methodology is guided by close reading of the chosen texts. This approach is best suited to analysing the intricacy of each writers’ work, and allows me to emphasize specific use of language, theme, form, and structure that is essential to

105 Écrire sur Tamara (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), Bénabou’s fourth major work, is more novelistic than his others, despite containing some autofictional features. It is also the least metatextually complex of his major works.
106 ‘Je dois dire que je me défiais tout particulièrement de l’autobiographie. À cause de la dose de narcissisme, de complaisance à l’égard de soi-même à quoi elle mène presque immanquablement’, M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 187.
responding to the thesis research questions. It allows me to demonstrate their individual approach to autobiography in greater detail, how the self is communicated to the reader in each case, and the particular values each writer brings to first-person introspective writing. It accounts for my use of extended quotation and commentary, with a range of critical and theoretical insights woven into my analysis when appropriate, such that no overarching ideological or theoretical drive governs the thesis. Other autobiographical studies have often sought to measure texts against the parameters and borderlines of this mutating genre; I prefer to pay close attention to each individual text, allowing the idiolect of each writer to shine through and appreciating each text as a novel contribution to the genre, which I see as open, broad, and inclusive. Reader-response theory is used at appropriate junctures to illuminate my discussion. I advocate for an appreciation of the overlapping autobiographical enterprises of the three writers, whilst also valuing the originality and specificity of their individual contributions. In order to do so, the thesis is structured into three chapters, which examine Leiris, Perec and Bénabou respectively in turn. Using discrete chapters focused on each author, within which points of comparison are drawn, maintains a high level of analytic detail and allows the reader to remain steeped in the idiolect of each writer in turn. It is thus possible to see how their autobiographical concerns overlap, inform, and influence each other, all whilst respecting the specific contexts of each writer and his response. The conclusion of the thesis will provide further reflection on the points of communality and difference between the three writers and on the thesis itself.

My thesis aims to illustrate that examining literary contributions to questions of the self allows us to appreciate how communicating processes of introspection and retrospection, shaped into literary form, remains a vital and valuable enterprise. It can inform discussion about how our identity is constituted through the stories we construct and tell about our lives; in the case of these three writers, their identity is put not only ‘in play’ but ‘at stake’ – ‘en je’, ‘en jeu’, beset by ‘enjeux’. The work of Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou therefore illuminates how we as readers and critics view writing the self, by their emphasis on how autobiography is a mindful, ludic, and risky exercise of identity, an unfinished process through which the writer approaches greater insight into the self.
Introduction

Michel Leiris had an enduring relationship with autobiography that spanned his lifetime. Leiris’ first short autobiographical text, *L’Âge d’homme*, was ready for publication in 1935 but not published until 1939. Its definitive 1946 edition includes the appended prefatory essay ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’. The text marks the starting point of a lifelong autobiographical project: Leiris went on to write the four-volume autobiography *La Règle du jeu* (1948-1976). *L’Âge d’homme* covers the period of Leiris’ life from childhood to his early literary career, written at the age of 34 as the world began to descend into the chaos of the Second World War.

This chapter argues for a renewed consideration of his first autobiographical text, neglected in comparison to *La Règle du jeu*, in order to demonstrate the fundamental importance of *L’Âge d’homme* to Leiris’ literary approach. Furthermore, it aims to advance Leiris as one of the period’s most innovative and underestimated autobiographers, whose work would have an enduring influence on many others in both his immediate context and his successors, not least Perec and Bénabou. The chapter responds to the three main research questions of the thesis, demonstrating Leiris’ particular approach to the composite self, which he enquires into through probing the difficulties and limit points of autobiography and by implicating the reader strongly in his self-enquiry. Leiris’ work demonstrates how writing is figured as an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.

Leiris demonstrates a confrontation with the self in *L’Âge d’homme* that pushes his reader to question the construction of a self as a product of a written narrative. His commentators have not fully considered this perspective on his work, focusing on Leiris’ concern with language, yet not its larger implications. Sheringham notes that *L’Âge d’homme* is remarkable for its ‘shift in the centre of gravity […] from the reconstructed past to the reconstructing present’.¹ Sheringham’s analysis hints at how the present moment of writing is more important than the precise events recounted. I plan to drive Sheringham’s insights further by demonstrating that, beyond the seeming limits of an individually-focused, subjective autobiographical story, Leiris pioneers an

approach to autobiography that is underwritten by self-obscurity, fragmentation, and above all a desire for a collaborative relationship with his reader. Rather than seeking to ‘transmute the incoherences of a life into the regularities of a story’, which Sheringham identifies as a common thread of autobiographical texts, Leiris provides an essential counter-example to this trend. The result is a text with expansive implications for how we view the retrospective constitution of self in narrative. Although the text is about Leiris’ childhood, adolescence and maturation, my analysis will show how the work questions – in a highly idiosyncratic, tentative way – how we might make sense of our selves through the stories we tell of our lives, and above all the problems and complications that this involves.

My overarching aim in this chapter is to examine how Leiris demonstrates a resistance to a totalized, unified sense of self in L’Âge d’homme. He instead posits a complex, fragmented, and composite ‘je’ that is ‘in play’ rather than fixed. He emphasizes the difficulties of autobiographical writing to heighten this resistance. Leiris examines the risky dimension of the game of autobiography, where his identity is both ‘in play’ and ‘at stake’, particularly in this period of history. I will first examine the questions of reading broached by Leiris, as an introductory theoretical framework. The thematic concerns of the text will then be discussed in the light of this, followed by a consideration of its structural aspects, in response to two questions: how the thematic concerns of L’Âge d’homme demonstrate Leiris’ negotiation with autobiographical writing; and how Leiris deploys narrative strategies and to what end. The chapter will conclude by looking forward to Perec and Bénabou, whose work illustrates the reverberations of Leiris’ autobiographical innovations, with each writer building on Leiris’ achievements in L’Âge d’homme and addressing similar questions in their own idiosyncratic ways.

Part 1 – Reading in L’Âge d’homme

Writing for Leiris entails a moral compulsion to communicate with others that underscores L’Âge d’homme. The thematic and structural concerns of L’Âge d’homme stem from Leiris’ principal motivation for its writing: the desire to share collaboratively with his reader. Leiris indicates a desire to effect change in his readers, to inspire even a small degree of personal emancipation as a result of sharing his self-examination.3 His

2 Ibid, p. viii.
3 A. Schmitt notes that, if the appeal for writing autobiography is to become the master of our life on the imaginary plane, then the motivation for reading autobiography might
autobiographical project attempts to bring an ethnographic, objective attention to himself, expressing his desire to see himself with more lucidity for his own sake as much as for others'. The result of his self-examination reveals the complexity of the self, encouraging his readers to reflect on their own personal complexity.

*L’Âge d’homme* might be interpreted as an allegory for reading, with autobiography posited as a field involving self-reading. This can be appreciated in two ways: first, through Leiris’ commentary on psychoanalytic self-interpretation; second, through the text’s form, which invites the reader’s active participation in its (re)construction, and indicates the difficulties involved with apprehending the self as a product of narrative. The text thus implicates questions about the literary text as a communicative entity.

Leiris suggests a role for the reader that mirrors his endeavour to see himself as an other, creating a twofold alterity that reinforces his resistance to a totalized sense of self. Leiris sought a reader who would be ‘moins un juge qu’un complice’ (*ADH*, 13). Readerly complicity implies collaborative exchange, furthering the notion of the text as an allegory for reading by drawing attention to the question of its own communicability. Leiris demonstrates his awareness of the ethical questions concerning reading that are implicated once the text is delivered from his hands. These ethical considerations stem from Leiris’ position regarding the function of the literary text: he stresses that the justifying function of literature is individual reflection for the purposes of communication to others. The writer’s task is to ‘mettre en lumière certaines choses pour soi en même temps qu’on les rend communicables à autrui’ (*ADH*, 21), for his reader’s benefit and his own.

Reading as psychoanalytic self-interpretation

*L’Âge d’homme* can be interpreted as an allegory for reading by considering how Leiris posits autobiography as a hermeneutic instance of self-reading. Leiris draws on the Freudian psychoanalytic method in the form of *L’Âge d’homme*: the text is composed of individual framed episodes of memories from his childhood. In his analysis of the production of meaning in reading, Crosman suggests that ‘the very act of be ‘a way for the reader to improve his or her own self-story’. A. Schmitt, ‘The Case for Self-Narration’, in R. A. Chansky and E. Hipchen, *The Routledge Auto / Biographical Studies Reader*, p. 334.
writing includes reading’, indicating that the writing process involves interpretation.\textsuperscript{4} By textually putting himself on the psychoanalyst’s couch, returning to his childhood memories, Leiris becomes his own analyst and analysand, reading and interpreting in the ‘very act of writing’. Felman has noted that the analyst reads the ‘points of disagreement’ in the analysand’s discourse to uncover the workings of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{5} This is indeed a method that Leiris encourages, with the juxtaposed thematic episodes inviting the reader – in the first instance, Leiris himself – to identify the latent significations between episodes. This is a method that Perec would also later employ in \textit{W}, where the significations of the autobiographical narrative are drawn out in relation to the fictional narrative that alternates with it throughout the text.

Felman states that the unconscious of both the analyst and analysand are at work in psychoanalysis.\textsuperscript{6} Both are implicated in a process of simultaneous reading in the analytic situation. As his own analyst and analysand in \textit{L’Âge d’homme}, Leiris is arguably involved in a self-dialogue, reading himself to illuminate the workings of his unconscious; to ‘éluider […] certaines choses encore obscures’ (\textit{ADH}, 14). However, the personal and aesthetic limitations of psychoanalysis for Leiris suggest that if the text can thus be read as an allegory for reading, it is rather for reading’s impasses, with Leiris stressing the fragmentation and dispersal of his self-reading.

This is demonstrated thematically through Leiris’ insistence that communion of the subject and object – drawing parallels with the analyst and the analysand – risks death, as exemplified by the recurring figures of Cleopatra, Lucretia, and the \textit{torero}. The union of the subject and object involves an annihilation of consciousness for Leiris: this relationship cannot be therapeutic, as psychoanalysis aims to be. Therefore on one hand, it is possible to see \textit{L’Âge d’homme} as an allegory for psychoanalytic self-reading, particularly as Leiris employs psychoanalytic methods within the text. However, on the other hand, it is also convincing to read \textit{L’Âge d’homme} as an allegory for the difficulties of reading. Leiris communicates his resistance to the possibility of total communion with the self through the difficulty of apprehending the self as a product of self-narrative. The subject of the autobiography and its object, he suggests, can never fully apprehend each other. Leiris instead gestures towards the reader as a collaborative


\textsuperscript{5} S. Felman, ‘Renewing the Practice of Reading, or Freud’s Unprecedented Lesson’, in A. Bennett (ed), \textit{Readers and Reading} (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), p. 183.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid, p. 184.
partner in the interpretation and reconstruction of the text. If *L’Âge d’homme* can be considered as an allegory for reading, it does so by heightening the role of the reader in bringing the text into existence.

By doing so, Leiris suggests an indeterminacy of interpretation that illustrates the instability of any recoverable identity in autobiographical texts. Dramatizing the collaboration between autobiographer and reader, Leiris anticipates some of the post-structural and deconstructive thought on the interconnected roles of the writer and reader of the mid-to-late twentieth century. This emphasis on indeterminacy is neither nihilistic nor destructive, but rather a gesture of collaboration and mutual understanding in each subject’s alterity.

Reading as collaborative reconstruction

Iser, along with critics such as Blanchot and Barthes who have considered the constructive role of the reader of literary texts, suggests that the reader ‘sets the work in motion’, so that the reader becomes a producer of the text. A work is ‘concretized’ by the dyadic interaction between text and reader, which mirrors the pattern of interpersonal exchange in ‘real’ life. This idea is useful in considering the collaborative relationship that Leiris suggests in the preface to *L’Âge d’homme*. He states that in order for the text to be cathartic, it must take a certain form to allow him to be ‘entendu par les autres, autant qu’il serait possible’ (*ADH*, 12). This communicative desire is reinforced by his characterization of the work both as an ‘acte par rapport à autrui’ (*ADH*, 14), and an exposing ‘confession’ (*ADH*, 13). He hopes that his moral and emotional self-exposure will even allow his reader to ‘faire découvrir en lui-même quelque chose d’homophone à ce fond qui m’était découvert’ (*ADH*, 20), to experience a moment of self-insight (however fraught) similar to that which Leiris has experienced. Importantly, in Iser’s hypothesis, this interpersonal exchange functions as a negotiation

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of mutual opaqueness, with human communication conceptualized as a ‘filling-in’ of communicative gaps produced by interlocutors’ fundamental asymmetry. Iser argues that the same process occurs in literary texts, between the implied author and reader.

This exchange on the basis of opacity, with the reader negotiating the text’s communicative gaps, is at work in *L’Âge d’homme*. Its narrative strategies invite the readers’ engagement with the text’s indeterminacies. The episodic, thematic structure of juxtaposed events creates interstices between the episodes that are precisely the ‘gaps’ that Iser states must be ‘reassembled’ by the reader to establish a frame of reference for interpretation. The ‘photo-montage’ (*ADH*, 19) structure requires the readers’ reconstructive activity, relaying not only each episode’s relation to others, but also to the larger thematic groupings of each sub-section. This has the effect of deferring narrative synthesis, such that anecdotes gain their importance from a cumulative delay. This is a technique brought to bear in particular in Perec’s *W*. This is heightened by the relative lack of concurrent interpretation on Leiris’ part, with the writer juxtaposing episodes paratactically rather than explaining the inferences to be drawn between them: this is arguably the ‘interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment’ that Iser suggests is at the heart of literary communication. Leiris responds to his desire for the text to be communicative by employing narrative strategies that demand the reader’s active, reconstructive engagement, such that the textual object is ‘a product of interconnection’ between writer and reader.

From this, one could posit that *L’Âge d’homme* is a product of its reading, only coming into existence when reconstructed by the reader. However, Leiris is careful to suggest that the author ultimately directs the reader’s realization of the work, and thus ironically destabilizes the notion that the text – and the life contained within it – are produced in collaboration with the reader. This is, notably, a facet of Iser’s hypothesis. He indicates that the ‘guiding devices’ that control reading are ‘exercised by the text’, even if not explicitly stated within it. This suggestion clarifies the fact that Leiris’ fragmentary construction of the text controls its reading, even if it might seem that the reader must reconstruct it.

Leiris’ desire for a reader who would be ‘moins un juge qu’un complice’ is pertinent here (*ADH*, 13). Whilst it expresses a desire for a complicit reader, he is aware

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11 Ibid, p. 111.
12 Ibid, p. 119.
that this entails a ‘duplicité’, where such an accomplice also appreciates the artificial manipulation of L’Âge d’homme into its ‘forme esthétique’ (ADH, 13). This implies that Leiris will direct the attentions of this reader onto particular facets of his personality whilst eliding others. Reading is directed ‘by the text’, even whilst the text’s own narrative strategies create the impression that the reader is responsible for its reconstruction. This tension between the reader’s reconstruction of the text, and the fact that the text itself directs this reconstructive reading strategy through its form, is the matrix of Iser’s theory of reading, and underscores the indeterminacy of identity proposed by Leiris. The impossibility of totalized narrative synthesis thus suggests the impossibility of totalizing the subject. As Suleiman notes, the ‘internal difference and the continual deferring of presence [is] constitutive of the literary text’: as Leiris plays on the simultaneous workings of reconstruction and dispersal regarding how the text might be read, he suggests the difficulty of grasping a unified self. These complications of reading would later also be mined by Bénabou, particularly in Pourquoi, where the notion of readerly complicity becomes tinged with hostility. This indeterminacy, hovering between a desire for readerly synthesis on one hand, and Leiris’ resistance to totalization on the other, is offered as the locus of exchange with the reader. Leiris states that the writer, communicating with his reader to assure the ‘affranchissement de tous les hommes’, must take up his task positively (ADH, 22). The relation of the singular to the general, from the individual to the collective, is the primary role of literature for Leiris.

Nonetheless, Leiris offers not total self-understanding, but the ungraspable nature of his subjectivity. This is borne out in the reading strategy that the text invites, in both its solicitation of the reader’s reconstructive ability, and in its resistance to sense-making, which Bennett sees as the impossible bind of reading itself. He argues that ‘the action by which communication is produced – reading – is necessarily inhabited by its other, its own resistance’: language’s ambiguity resists its own comprehension. The literariness of L’Âge d’homme, as well as its fragmentary nature, resists the very communication that Leiris so desires, yet in doing so suggests the limit point of communicability. Not only is Leiris powerless to grasp his own identity, but he is further unable to pass this entirely on to his reader. Rather than being nihilistic, Leiris indicates that this continual Derridean deferral of understanding is both the unalterable nature of self-comprehension, and the nature of literary texts.

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15 A. Bennett, ‘Introduction’, A. Bennett, Readers and Reading, p. 11.
Leiris’ limited insight into his self therefore operates on his recognition of the self’s fundamental alterity, however unclear and ghostly this may be: his auto-ethnographic attempt to see himself as an other has ethical implications borne out in his desire for lucidity (although this may not be achieved). This attempt to see himself as an other has necessary implications for the reader. Ricœur has argued for the essential alterity that underpins reading, stating that the reader ‘is transformed: the becoming other in the act of reading is as important as the recognition of self’. It is possible to appreciate reading in *L’Âge d’homme* as a process which emphasizes the otherness of the reader. Ricœur’s observations about reading and psychoanalysis suggest that reading ‘necessarily passes through the Other, and in the Other, reads not just identity (other or same) but difference and self-difference’. This insight is valuable in relation to Ricœur’s, demonstrating the ‘becoming other’ implicated in the act of reading, which in Felman’s conception returns the reader to himself in a recognition of his difference from the text and from himself. Identity, Leiris therefore suggests, can be sought (without being necessarily found) in the twofold, negotiated mediation of alterity between writer and reader.

Leiris posits *L’Âge d’homme* as an encounter with an other that reflects back onto Felman’s ‘difference or self-difference’: firstly, Leiris’ own encounter with himself as an other, which reflects back to him the ungraspable nature of his identity, and secondly the reader’s encounter with the other (Leiris), which the author hopes will reflect back to the reader themselves. He states that authentic communication with an other is the ‘fil d’Ariane’ (*ADH*, 21) guiding *L’Âge d’homme*: this communication is based on a mutual recognition of alterity, of Leiris’ self-opacity which he wishes to

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16 The implication of ‘ghostly’ refers to Davis’ analysis of Derridean ‘hantologie’ (see C. Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007)). Bringing together Derrida and Levinas, Davis states that attending to a ghostly Other implicates our responsibility to preserve its alterity. Leiris attempts to achieve this operation on himself in his analysis of his unclear and spectral childhood.
17 Sheringham notes that autobiographical desire in Leiris’ case is ‘a desire to become other’, *French Autobiography*, p. 246.
19 S. Felman, ‘Renewing the Practice of Reading’, in A. Bennett, *Readers and Reading*, p. 185.
20 This underlines Iser’s conception of reading where interpretive blanks are negotiated between interlocutors.
communicate to his reader, that they might reflect on themselves.\(^{21}\) He states that ‘[m]on expérience est ce qu’elle est: réconfortante ou déprimante, je me dois avant tout de la rendre plus claire, plus perceptible pour moi-même en même temps que pour autrui’ (\textit{Brisées}, 113). The reflexive ‘je me dois’ suggests Leiris’ duty to himself to mine the depths of his experience, yet this responsibility is extended externally to others.

Jauss’ conception of the social function of literature is illuminating here. Jauss argues that the ‘social function of literature’ is made apparent where the literary text ‘has an effect on [the reader’s] social behaviour’, a record of experience that has the potential to ‘broaden[…] the limited space of social behaviour’.\(^{22}\) Jauss advocates for an appreciation of literature’s effects on broadening the reader’s perspective and inspiring change, so that ‘the relationship between literature and reader can actualize itself […] as an incitement to aesthetic perception as well as in the ethical realm as a summons to moral reflection’.\(^{23}\) It is persuasive to view \textit{L’Âge d’homme} as an invitation to Leiris’ reader for personal, moral reflection, which he terms an ‘accroissement d’ordre moral’ (\textit{ADH}, 13). His desire that his readers understand themselves a little better, to inspire even the smallest degree of general liberation through his individual self-examination, invokes the social function of literature that Jauss sees as central to powerful literary texts.

Leiris’ meticulous emphasis, crucially, is not on absolute understanding of the self, and he makes no particular claim to have ‘learnt’ anything about himself in writing \textit{L’Âge d’homme}. He does not state that he sought understanding, emphasizing instead: emptying (‘catharsis’, ‘liquidation’, \textit{ADH}, 10, ‘me débarasser’, \textit{ADH}, 12); showing (‘me dévoiler’, \textit{ADH}, 13); exposing (‘mettre à nu’, \textit{ADH}, 10); and expressing (‘m’exprimer’, \textit{ADH}, 19).\(^{24}\) The desired outcome is not self-understanding, but instead an outward gesture to the other – the reader – that he hopes will have tangible social results. As an experience of self, \textit{L’Âge d’homme} emphasizes Leiris’ ultimate self-opaqueness. He

\(^{21}\) This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s command to the readers of \textit{Ecce Homo} to go beyond their encounter with the text with a sense of liberation: ‘Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves’. F. W. Nietzsche, \textit{Ecce Homo} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992). p. 6.

\(^{22}\) H. R. Jauss, \textit{Toward an Aesthetic of Reception} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 41.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) See S. de Beauvoir, \textit{La Force de l’âge} (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 377: ‘cet exposé ne se présente aucunement comme explication […] je sais qu’on ne peut jamais se connaître mais seulement se raconter’.
encourages the reader towards a similar, reassessed experience of themselves, ‘pour partir sur de nouvelles bases’ (*ADH*, 14), a greater openness to others, if not any deepened sense of ‘understanding’.

**Part 2 – Negotiating autobiographical writing**

The questions of reading broached in *L’Âge d’homme* therefore suggest Leiris’ desire for his autobiography to have an effect on his readers, encouraging them to appreciate the difficulties of apprehending the self in narrative. To this end, *L’Âge d’homme* demonstrates the limit points and difficulties of the autobiographical exercise for Leiris. His negotiation of his personal failings is aligned in *L’Âge d’homme* with a wider failing of the autobiographer to apprehend and communicate a nebulous notion of the self in perpetual flux. I will demonstrate how the thematic failures of *L’Âge d’homme*, in particular the failure of masculinity, contribute to a veiled suggestion about the inherent impossibilities of autobiography and the possibility of formulating a self in discourse.

Leiris negotiates the difficulties of autobiographical writing stemming from this perspective, most significantly the problematic confrontation of death in such a text. Leiris highlights what he sees as the inherently irresolvable nature of autobiography, as it fails to apprehend and communicate the subject’s death. I will discuss how Leiris positions *L’Âge d’homme* as a written trace that can attempt to surpass autobiography’s failure to conclude.

Moreover, these negotiations take place in *L’Âge d’homme* on a projected autobiographical stage that is masochistic in nature, such that the autobiography becomes a theatre of thrilling self-punishment. This emphasis on the stylized, dramatized aspect of *L’Âge d’homme* illustrates the ambiguous duality of the ‘act’ of autobiography that Leiris sought to highlight: this is reflected too in the performative aspect of masculinity that Leiris explores.

The failures of masculinity

Krone has suggested that, to the question ‘What does it mean to be a man?’, Leiris answers with ‘tragic tales of loss and alienation’.25 Krone locates this alienation as specifically gendered for Leiris, suggesting that his autobiographical writing explores

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an inherent lack at the heart of a socially constructed (rather than biologically
determined) masculinity. This is made manifest in *L’Âge d’homme*.

Leiris expresses what Krone sees as his problematic awareness of socially
constructed gender by emphasizing the failures of his masculinity. Critical work in
men’s studies reveals that the early twentieth century in France was a particularly
fraught time for masculine identity.\(^\text{26}\) Aldrich suggests that, in light of France’s colonial
projects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, ‘normative sexual behaviour
was related to strategies of bourgeois reproduction […] and a culture of masculine
honour reigned’.\(^\text{27}\) The dominance of normative masculinity led, in Connell’s view, to
‘the emergence […] of subordinated and marginalized masculinities’, which he
attributes to the challenge put to masculinity by growing desire for women’s equality,
the rise of industrial capitalism, and the power relations of empire.\(^\text{28}\) Both these
viewpoints shed light onto the anxiety Leiris expresses around sex and reproduction in
*L’Âge d’homme*, being part of a more general unease about male sexual roles and their
relationship to wider society. Boulé indicates that, in the immediate post-war climate
when *L’Âge d’homme* was republished, ‘sexual performance is especially central
to French masculinities […] following the humiliation of the French defeat and subsequent
occupation’, noting that sexual impotence is a challenge to masculinity in light of
France’s wartime history.\(^\text{29}\)

If we acknowledge the relationship between contemporary troubled masculine
sexual roles and an equally unsettled national identity in this way, this provides a
helpful context within which to consider Leiris’ sexual confessions in *L’Âge d’homme*,
as his admission of impotence can be mapped onto a more general crisis in masculinity.
However, it is important to recognize that this crisis in French masculinity at the time of
the publication of *L’Âge d’homme* does not herald a ‘new’ masculinity to replace the

\(^{26}\) See C. E. Forth and B. Taithe, *French Masculinities: History, Culture and Politics*
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn, and R. Connell,
*Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage
Publications, 2005).

\(^{27}\) R. Aldrich, ‘Colonial Man’, in Forth and Taithe, *French Masculinities*, pp. 123-140,
p. 123. This position is reinforced by Nye in *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honour in
Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), where Nye sees France as the
country of Western Europe with the most entrenched normative sexual characteristics,
particularly amongst the bourgeois.


\(^{29}\) J-P. Boulé, ‘Virilité in Post-war France: Intellectual Masculinity, Jewishness, and
old, but rather indicates that hegemonic masculinity had become more loosely defined, uncertain, and mutable. As Boulé notes, masculinities at this time ‘are multiple rather than single […] not fixed but […] negotiated and unsettled’.30 Leiris communicates his problematic relationship with hegemonic masculinity with reference to his sexual misadventures, most strikingly by the repeated recourse to mythological figures to which Leiris assigns allegorical importance.

The figures of Judith, Lucretia, Holofernes, and the ambiguous Cleopatra serve as ciphers for Leiris’ sexual neuroses in L’Âge d’homme. Leiris suggests that women to whom he is attracted can be characterized as resembling either Lucretia (who kills herself after being raped by Sextus Tarquinius) or Judith (who lured Holofernes to bed before decapitating him). He posits himself as Holofernes ‘au chef tranché, je m’imagine couché aux pieds de cette idole’ (ADH, 143). The implication of masculinity torn from the body in the act of decapitation, a form of transferred castration, is clear: Leiris positions himself as a subservient, impotent figure in relation to Judith. This is no less true in relation to Lucretia, to whom Leiris responds with exasperated helplessness, stating that as a result of his fixation on her rape that ‘[j]e ne conçois guère l’amour autrement que dans le tourment et dans les larmes; rien ne m’émeut ni ne me sollicite autant qu’une femme qui pleure, si ce n’est une Judith avec des yeux à tout assassiner’ (ADH, 75). The symmetrical opposition of these two female figures in this phrase suggests the irresolvable polarity that they represent to Leiris.

Leiris describes the allegorical threat posed by these women with reference to a diptych by Lucas Cranach that held particular power in Leiris’ imagination. The two paintings are redolent of a violent sexuality for the writer that deeply troubles the status of the male subject in relation to the female object. Leiris underlines Lucretia’s attractive self-effacement in her dramatic sacrifice: she is the pinnacle of his fixation with ‘femmes blessées’ (ADH, 75). However, Lucretia’s former chastity is replaced by a horrifying sexual power in the painting:

‘Lucrèce, appuyant au centre de sa blanche poitrine […] la lame effilée d’un poignard au bout duquel perlent déjà, comme le don le plus intime pointe à l’extrémité d’un sexe, quelques gouttes de sang, et s’apprêtant à annuler l’effet du viol qu’elle a subi, par un geste pareil; celui qui enfoncera dans une chaude gaine de chair et pour une mort sanglante l’arme bandée au maximum, telle la virilité inexorable du violeur quand elle était entrée de force dans l’orifice béant.

déjà entre ses cuisses, douce plaie rose qui peu d’instants après restituirait la libation à pleines gorgées, exactement de même que la blessure – plus profonde, plus méchante aussi, mais peut-être encore plus enivrante – faite par le poignard laisserait jaillir, du fin fond de Lucrèce pâmée ou expirante, un flot de sang’ (ADH, 142).

The dagger at Lucretia’s breast is transformed by simile into a phallus at the point of climax. Leiris employs a disturbing disjunction between the treasured intimacy of semen (‘le don le plus intime’) and blood. The incongruity of these fluids is troubling: this is reinforced by the suggestion of self-violation in Lucretia’s suicidal act in a repetition of the ‘geste pareil’ of stabbing herself to expiate her rape. The sheath of flesh (‘gaine de chair’) of her chest mirrors the ‘orifice béant […] entre ses cuisses’: the wound with which she inflicts herself is confused with the vulval orifice, described as a ‘douce plaie rose’, where the softness of ‘douce’ jars against the horror of a wound. The syntax allows Leiris to suggest that the ‘plaie’ is both the stab wound and the vaginal opening: the continual run-on of images creates a building tension that heightens the horrifying and attractive (‘enivrante’) frenzy of his response to the figure of Lucretia. Imagery of bodily fluids surging forth abounds: ‘la libation à pleines gorgées’ confuses semen and blood, heightened later with the flood of blood issuing from the stab wound (‘un flot de sang’). This is mixed with ambiguous language suggesting Lucretia’s sexual pleasure in her self-violation (‘Lucrèce pâmée ou expirante’).

Leiris establishes a relationship with the image of Lucretia defined by simultaneous sexual horror and excitement at her suicidal act, an act that mirrors, in its penetrative force, the sexual power-struggle of her rape. The allegorical threat to Leiris is of the horrifying female anatomy itself. This passage reflects his observations, in reference to his dread of wounded eyes (‘œil crevé’), that, ‘j’ai courrament tendance de regarder l’organe féminin comme une chose sale ou comme une blessure, pas moins attirante en cela, mais dangereuse par elle-même comme tout ce qui est sanglant, muqueux, contaminé’ (ADH, 80). The Freudian idea of the female as inherently wounded (‘une blessure’) can be aligned with Leiris’ fear of the punctured eye, suggesting that this is fearful as a displacement of the dread of castration.\(^3\)

Yet Leiris indicates that this dread does not decrease his sexual fascination but makes the female more attractive for the danger she represents. In this passage, imagery of violence and sexual pleasure is aligned seamlessly to suggest that pleasure is

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heightened by the danger of a woman willing to violate herself in a sexual act of annihilation. Leiris’ horror and fascination with the ‘œil crevé’ stems from its relation to women (for example, the maid of the young Leiris’ parents, whose eye he injures playing with a toy rifle, ADH, 79), and specifically from the perceived similarity it bears to the vagina (‘sanglant, muqueux, contaminé’). Developing the Freudian conception, where a punctured eye underscores latent fears of castration, Leiris aligns this with a fear of the injured female, blurring the subject-object gender relations of the Freudian psychoanalytic model. The allegorical threat posed by Lucretia is therefore of a woman who claims the penetrative male sexual act for herself, in an act of self-annihilation.32

The vertiginous horror and desirability of this painting for Leiris is more disturbing for this fusion of male and female, and uproots the sense of his own masculinity: as Porter suggests, his obsession with an ‘imaginary hermaphrodite’ generates ‘a fantasy of self-generated sexuality immune from a fixed gender identity’.33 Returning to Krone’s suggestion of the male subject’s alienation, it is possible to identify here Leiris’ alienation from his masculinity faced with a woman able to claim both violent sexual femininity and masculinity.

The ekphrastic description of Cranach’s second portrait, of Judith holding Holofernes’ head, is equally revealing:

‘Judith, à la main droite une épée nue comme elle, dont la pointe meurtrit le sol à très peu de distance de ses orteils menus et dont la lame très large et très solide vient de trancher la tête de Holopherne, qui pend, débris sinistre, à la main gauche de l’héroïne, doigts et cheveux mêlés pour une atroce union […] Judith placide et ne paraissant déjà plus songer à la boule barbue qu’elle tient à la main comme une bourgeon phallique qu’elle aurait pu couper rien qu’en serrant ses basses lèvres au moment où les écluses d’Holopherne s’ouvraient ou encore que, ogresse en plein délire, elle aurait détaché du gros membre de l’homme aviné (et peut-être vomissant) d’un soudain coup de dents’ (ADH, 142).

The blurring of feminine and masculine, sexual and violent imagery is central, from the phallic sword that bruises the ground beneath Judith’s feet, to her nakedness that aligns her to the bare power of the sword. The horror of Judith’s fingers tangled in Holofernes’ hair (‘atroce union’), reinforced by the recurrence of the hair in the ‘boule barbue’,

32 This recalls Baudelaire’s ‘L’héautontimorouménos’: ‘Je suis la plaie et le couteau ! / Je suis le soufflet et la joue ! / Je suis les membres et la roue ! / Et la victime et le bourreau !’. In 1947, Leiris would write the prefatory note for Sartre’s essay Baudelaire (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

suggests the distortion of sexual passion into violent terror, to which Judith remains impassable (‘placide’). This indifference is carried through to the metaphor of Holofernes’ head as a phallic bud, vulnerable to excision at the moment of climax by a threatening *vagina dentata*. This horror is heightened by the image of Judith as an ‘ogresse en plein délire’, indicating the sexual frenzy that accompanies this emasculating violence, which is so great as to cause Holofernes to vomit. The muddling of oral and genital images is similar to the passage describing Lucretia: the fever of sexual violence from the earlier description is reinforced, with Judith posing a direct, emasculating threat in contrast to Lucretia’s sexual self-annihilation. He highlights that the murder is carried out with Holofernes’ own sword (*ADH*, 87): the suggestion that Leiris is emasculated with his own (phallic) weapon indicates the double power of these allegorical figures, as this castration is self-inflicted, much like Lucretia’s suicide.

This passage can thus be read as a masochistic allegory for Leiris’ troubled relationship to fixed gender identity. If the passage describing Lucretia reveals the latent sadistic tendencies in Leiris’ relationship to sex, the description of Judith suggests a self-directed masochism that results in a profound confusion of horror and attraction, underscoring his unsettled disaffiliation to the poles of femininity and masculinity. His ekphrastic relationship to these figures arguably finds its corollary in Perec’s later identification with Antonello da Messina’s portrait of ‘Le Condottière’ and other fetish artworks, as will be discussed in the chapter that follows.

Crucially, by describing this tension on the allegorical plane Leiris suggests the constructed, imaginary nature of his response. He implies that his socially constructed masculinity is established on an imagined level in response to allegorical figures. We can interpret Krone’s suggestion of gendered alienation therefore as alienation not only from sexual virility, but from the very notion of stable gender identity. By emphasizing his allegorical emasculation, Leiris suggests the instability of the foundations of his masculine identity. Describing his sexual incompetence and the ambiguous horror and pleasure he witnesses in viewing Cranach’s diptych, he mobilizes his personal failings – the inability to reconcile his position of submission or domination – to suggest the wider breakdown of seemingly distinct gender poles.

This is seen in Leiris’ mapping of his allegorical response to these fictive women onto his real-life sexual experiences. He states, referring to the fact that he can only successfully sexually conquer women by martyring them into Lucretia, that:
Leiris suggests that, at the price of moral rending, he compulsively resorts to the artificial (i.e. allegorical) to proceed with sex. This would indicate that the reality of sexual relations, and of the gender differences on which these are founded, is more confusing, ambiguous, and less resolved for Leiris than the imaginary plane of allegory. The result is that sexual relations are incongruous, a ‘jeu de forces contradictoires, selon un double mouvement’ (ADH, 151), encapsulated uncomfortably by Judith and Lucretia. The repeated encounters throughout L’Âge d’homme with women whom Leiris classifies as either resembling Judith or Lucretia suggests the irresolvable duality that these allegorical figures represent, between female and male sexual power: Leiris suggests that they reveal the slippery basis of sexual difference. Nonetheless, it is notable that Leiris’ response is profoundly anxious and uncertain. Neuman suggests that this anxiety surrounding masculinity might be explained by the context of L’Âge d’homme: in the aftermath of the Great War, and on the cusp of the Second World War, Neuman identifies ‘a masculinity already called into question by the “fathers” producing contemporary political and social events’.34 Leiris’ individual response to this general unmooring of masculinity uses autobiographical self-enquiry to explore the instability of masculine identity as captured in discourse.

Leiris’ individual crisis in masculine identity can be mapped onto the larger difficulties of capturing the self in writing explored in L’Âge d’homme. Leiris’ discussion of Cleopatra – aligned to Lucretia by suicide – provides an essential insight.

Much like in the ekphrastic description of Lucretia, Cleopatra’s suicide constitutes a terrible collision of female and male. Through suicide, she is able to ‘devenir à la fois soi et l’autre, mâle et femelle, sujet et objet, ce qui est tué et ce qui tue – seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même’ (ADH, 141). The suggestion that the only true possibility of unity with the self and other is through suicide can be aligned with Leiris’ comments in the preface to L’Âge d’homme. Leiris suggests that autobiographical writing should run the same, life-threatening risk as the matador facing the bull’s horn in the corrida, as the writer enters into truthful and authentic communion.

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with himself, as observed in Cleopatra’s suicide (‘introduire ne fût-ce que l’ombre d’une corne de taureau dans une œuvre littéraire’, ADH, 10).

The notions of the *torero*, the suicidal Cleopatra and the autobiographer regarding themselves as their own object (‘à la fois *soi* et l’autre […] sujet et objet’) underscores Leiris’ use of allegorical abstraction to describe the dangerous self-reflexive action of autobiography. In the *corrida*, however, the subject (the matador) and object (the bull) never fully converge in the mutual annihilation of subject and object represented in suicide. In a short work about bull fighting, entitled *Miroir de la tauromachie*, the battle is described as a struggle between the ‘JE avec le IL, du *torero* avec le *toro*’ (*Miroir*, 17). The symmetrical phrasing recalls the ‘*soi* et l’autre, mâle et femelle, sujet et objet’ (*ADH*, 141) of *L’Âge d’homme*. The *corrida* is a crossroads between union and separation, much like the suicides of Lucretia and Cleopatra, where the union with the self enacts separation from the world. However, for the bullfight to end, either the subject or the object must annihilate the other. Whilst suicide represents the possibility of total self-communion, the *corrida* can only yield imbalanced results. For autobiographical writing to be compared to both these self-reflexive activities suggests a disjuncture at the heart of autobiography for Leiris, where the subject can either only commune with himself in self-annihilation, or the writer will emerge successful, having defeated his object. If the object here were the autobiography itself, this logic would arguably imply the necessary failure of the autobiographical project (the object) if the autobiographer (the subject) is to succeed.

Blanchot’s insights on the struggle between the desire for truth and the unfaithful results of autobiography are illuminating here. He identifies in an essay on Leiris a self-imposed desire to speak of the self with rigor, which is a ‘lutte, opiniâtre, rusée, méthodique […] pour établir entre soi et soi un rapport de vérité’.35 Despite this will to truth, he states that the portrait in *L’Âge d’homme* is ‘nécessairement infidèle […] cette effigie même dont la fixe vérité ne pouvait que trahir la constante inexactitude de l’être vivant’.36 The success of the work is its failure to capture a faithful portrait of its writer, which Blanchot suggests is impossible to capture due to its constant state of flux.

The inadequacies of the *torero* and suicide analogies for writing stem from the same problem: the difficulty to ‘ramasser ma vie en un seul bloc solide’ (*ADH*, 19). *L’Âge d’homme* demonstrates that the attempt to gather the facts of a life into a solid

textual entity will, as Blanchot suggests, fail – just as the communion of subject and object can only end in failure in both suicide and the *corrida.* This deferral in the self’s apprehension of itself, posited as an ‘other’, is both dangerous and creative. Leiris states in *Miroir* that the *corrida,* aligned with creative production, is captivating for its ‘danger, tant pour le créateur (qui, à tout instant, doit risquer de se perdre) que pour l’œuvre (à chaque seconde compromis, et constamment faite et défaita)’ (*Miroir*, 34). This arguably finds its echo in Bénabou’s work, who emphasizes particularly in *Jette* and *Pourquoi* the risk of ‘losing oneself’ in the game of literature – what Pereg calls the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (*W*, 18) – that is precisely the generator of his texts. Whilst the artist risks his life, the creative work thrives on the encounter with its own undoing. Leiris’ accomplishment in *L’Âge d’homme* was to make his writing self the site of this discrepancy. Leiris would later characterize himself as ‘l’éternel séparé, telle est l’image de moi que je tendais à façonner’ (*Biffures*, 236). This suggests the perpetual separation between the self and its apprehension in writing, which Leiris first explores in *L’Âge d’homme.*

Leiris repeatedly emphasizes the failings of his masculinity and his sexual incompetence, stemming from the collision of violence and sexual frenzy, ‘l’érotisme et la peur, coïncidence par laquelle ma vie sexuelle a sans nul doute été dominée’ (*ADH*, 58). Analysis of his response to Cranach’s diptych demonstrates that this incompetence results from the blurring of the masculine and the feminine in the figures of Judith and Lucretia, which unsettles his unmoored and ambiguous masculine identity. Leiris suggests that fixed gender identity, particularly as defined by sexual roles, may be a constructed lure, although one with which he nonetheless struggles. The difficulty of constructing a masculine identity in discourse can be interpreted as a comment on the possibility of self-apprehension in autobiographical writing more widely. Leiris employs sustained metaphors for the autobiographical act (suicide; the *corrida*) to suggest ways in which he attempts to come into dangerous communion with himself in autobiography. These metaphors eventually reveal the failings, indeed the impossibilities, inherent in the writer’s endeavour to create a fixed portrait of his identity in writing.37

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37 Leiris is concerned in *Fibrilles* that the artificial fixity of a self-portrait cannot escape the ‘coulée toujours active du temps’ (*Fibrilles*, 228).
The ‘je’ and the ‘il’ – death in *L’Âge d’homme*

Blanchot’s insights above, I argue, reveal a crucial point of tension in Leiris’ negotiation with autobiographical writing: its uncertain end-point in death. He suggests, in an essay on Leiris entitled ‘Regards d’outre-tombe’, that *L’Âge d’homme* transforms the introspective ‘je’ into the impersonal ‘il’ of death.38 Blanchot’s comments highlight the dread of death that is a thematic obsession in *L’Âge d’homme*.39

Leiris describes how a childhood fascination with ageing transforms into a fear of death: he calls it ‘[c]ette espèce d’irréalité, d’absurdité de la mort’, and ‘radicalement terrible’ (*ADH*, 86). We have seen that several specific deaths – Lucretia, Cleopatra, and Holofernes – held particular dread and fascination. Continually returning to the motif of suicide and sexual passion, Leiris sees in these episodes a rehearsal of the real, final event of death. He compares death to sexual climax (‘la crise de la mort est en analogie avec le spasme […] dans l’aventure sexuelle comme dans la mort le point culminant de cette crise s’accompagne d’une perte de conscience’ (*ADH*, 86)). Leiris notes that, as rehearsed death, sexual ecstasy allows us to see beyond the ‘petite mort’ so that ‘nous savons au moins ce qui se passe après’ (*ADH*, 87). Sexual pleasure is a reassuring rehearsal that allows us to temporarily push away the dread of real death, where we will have no knowledge of what occurs after the event. Leiris sees this, too, in suicide, which allows one to assert control over death ‘en la réalisant nous-même’ (*ADH*, 87).

For Blanchot, this uneasy wrestling with ever-present death is a pivotal concern for literature. In his reading of *L’Âge d’homme*, the text itself becomes a way to overcome the dread of death. By asserting his fear of death alongside other personal confessions, Leiris, according to Blanchot, suggests that the loss of the self in death ‘puisse […] nous rassurer contre la mort et nous aider à la regarder en face’.40 Much like sex for Leiris, Blanchot suggests that confessing a fear of death allows the reader to see past the point of death to what happens afterwards, from a perspective that Blanchot terms the ‘regard d’outre-tombe’. This acknowledgement of death’s continual presence is a way of confronting the Heideggerian ‘Uneigentlichkeit’, the inauthentic denial of the reality of death. *L’Âge d’homme* is a practice run that responds to the readers’ desire to see themselves as dead (‘nous désirons pouvoir nous regarder mort’) in their search

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38 The title refers to Chateaubriand’s autobiographical *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (1849).
for comfort from the unknown.\textsuperscript{41} This is achieved by Leiris’ negotiation between the imagined possibility and the actuality of death.

As noted, suicide represents for Leiris the limit of self-comprehension (the ‘seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même’ (\textit{ADH}, 141)). As a child not fully understanding suicide, Leiris is fascinated by the sonority of the word itself, which reminds him of a \textit{fait divers} concerning the suicide of a Malaysian king. He relates the sibilance and form of the ‘s’ to the king’s twisted body; the ‘ui’ reminiscent of the fire that consumes the king; and the ‘cide’, which cuts off the word like a knife (\textit{ADH}, 29). This passage demonstrates Leiris’ operation on language, central to his poetic work stemming from his association with the surrealists in the late 1920s.\textsuperscript{42} It is an example of Leiris transforming aphasia into action. Although later Leiris would appreciate suicide as the limit point of communion with the self, his childhood view focused on the word itself without the underlying concept, mobilizing the word as a sonorous signifier without the signified.

In Blanchot’s analysis, this mobilization of aphasia (the ‘impossibilité de parler’) is an underlying theme for the whole work, as Leiris transforms the ‘«Je ne puis parler» qui par excès finit par lui ouvrir la bouche’: an admission of the difficulty of speaking which results in speech itself.\textsuperscript{43} The opening pages of \textit{L’Âge d’homme} illustrate this, as Leiris begins with the autobiographical trope of self-description (‘Au physique, je suis de taille moyenne, plutôt petit.’ (\textit{ADH}, 23)). After this exposition, Leiris can launch into the more concerning issues of the text, following immediately with the section ‘Vieillesse et mort’. As such, he mobilizes the ‘«Je ne puis parler»’ by quickly dispatching of autobiographical conventions, allowing Leiris to embark on his confessions.

On a larger scale, Leiris’ mobilization of aphasia demonstrates his approach to autobiography: Leiris mobilizes his snapshot memories without suggesting any underlying meaning, much like his childhood exploration of the word ‘suicide’ without fully grasping its real sense. By grouping his memories into loosely associated thematic groups, Leiris brings together episodes that have a certain relationship, without seeking to assign an overt meaning to these groupings, mobilizing the connections to make these episodes speak, seeing if there are ‘points de suture’ between them (\textit{ADH}, 130). These

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p. 256.
\textsuperscript{42} See Glossaire, j’y serre mes gloses in \textit{Mots sans mots} (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). The childhood alteration of words is central to the opening chapter of \textit{Biffures}, entitled ‘«…reusement! »’.
\textsuperscript{43} M. Blanchot, \textit{La Part du feu}, p. 251.
‘points de suture’ can be compared with the indistinct ‘points de suspension’ (W, prière d’insérer) that characterize the connections between Perec’s fragmented memories of his childhood. In *Biffures*, Leiris describes this capacity as a type of logorrhoea: ‘me fiant aux mots pour les faire se succéder, comme si je n’avais plus rien […] sinon une certaine capacité spécieuse de parler’ (*Biffures*, 126).44

Here, Blanchot’s observations on death in *L’Âge d’homme* become more germane. By yielding to a withdrawal of the writer, mobilizing aphasia into logorrhoea and deferring initiative to words when writing autobiographically, Leiris endeavours to view himself as an object. This can be related to Blanchot’s comments in a seminal essay ‘La littérature et le droit à la mort’.45 He states that in speaking or writing, the word, alongside signifying, effaces what it designates in an ‘assassinat différé’: the power to speak is therefore always connected to non-presence.46 Yet, Blanchot argues, by standing outside reality, language can transcend death. Literature therefore has the unique capacity of representing ‘ma conscience sans moi […] l’existence sans l’être […] la mort comme impossibilité de mourir’.47 Language contains death within it, yet lives on beyond death: the writer is therefore both affirmed and effaced in his work. Blanchot’s central principle is that ‘la mort aboutit à l’être’: death, which resides in every word, is an affirmation of being. This is the basis of all literature for Blanchot.

He states that a writer can justify their writing by focusing on ‘la simple operation d’écrire, rendue consciente à elle-même indépendamment de ses résultats’: the writer should simply write, thus contributing to ‘l’existence commune’.48 This is arguably what Leiris in part achieves in *L’Âge d’homme*. In attempting to make himself an object, he tries to ‘se reconnaître toujours autre’.49 As such, Blanchot argues, the writer becomes the ‘puissance de négation créatrice’, yielding to his text whilst effacing himself in the act of writing, such that the text is ‘moi-même devenu autre’.50 Whilst Blanchot suggests that all literature operates on this basis, I argue that this is particularly significant for Leiris’ notion of autobiography.

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44 One can identify here a Mallarmean ‘disparition élocutoire’ of the writer in the favour of words’ autonomy (‘me fiant aux mots’), seen in Leiris’ sonorous modification of the word ‘suicide’.


46 Ibid., p. 326. This relates again to Mallarmé’s ‘disparition élocutoire’: language contains within it a withdrawal from existence.

47 Ibid., p. 327.

48 Ibid., p. 311.

49 Ibid., p. 315.

50 Ibid., p. 311 and 318.
Blanchot states that the self-regarding ‘je’ in *L’Âge d’homme* is no longer the ‘I’ who structures and perceives the world, but the ‘Il de la Mort souveraine’.

In Blanchot’s sense, the text allows us to see ourselves as dead not only because of this continual presence of death in written language, but because by making himself the object of his own written analysis, Leiris transforms himself into a third-person. Leiris achieves this by stressing the impossibility of concluding autobiography: he will fail to write his death, the logical end-point of the story of a writer’s life. By stressing his fear of death, yet emphasizing the impossibility of his witnessing or communicating the event in writing, Leiris’ text becomes a testimony to its own failure: as Hollier notes, ‘l’œuvre autobiographique est là pour témoigner de son échec’.

The autobiographer, undertaking the impossible task of autobiography that is doomed to be incomplete from its inception, is therefore in a particular position of employing language, which contains within it the haunting presence of death. Leiris’ writing operates in a textual realm that uses written language to provide a reassuring trial-run of death’s eventual oblivion, deferring it whilst also suggesting that writing will be incapable of capturing the reality of the event. The imagined possibility and the actuality of death are fated to remain unreconciled, but the text of *L’Âge d’homme* can rehearse death in an imaginary domain. Its artificial conclusion permits its readers an encounter with an ending that takes the writer and reader beyond death.

This can be illustrated by analysis of the section entitled ‘Judith’:

‘Je ne puis dire à proprement parler que je meurs, puisque – mourant de mort violente ou non – je n’assiste qu’à une partie de l’événement. Et une grande partie de l’effroi que j’éprouve à l’idée de la mort tient peut-être à ceci: vertige de rester suspendu en plein milieu d’une crise dont ma disparition m’empêchera, au grand jamais, de connaître le dénouement. Cette espèce d’irréalité, d’*absurdité* de la mort est [...] son élément radicalement terrible et non, comme


d’aucuns peuvent le penser (« Après moi le déluge! » « Puisque après la mort il n’y a rien, pourquoi avez-vous peur? » « Qu’est-ce que cela peut vous faire, puisque vous n’y serez plus? » etc.), ce qui peut la faire accepter. ’ (ADH, 85).

Leiris explores the ontological contradiction of stating ‘I am dead’ (‘je ne puis dire à proprement parler que je meurs’). He stresses that we are only partially witness to the event of death. This partial consciousness of our own annihilation is what Leiris finds most offensive in death: a moment of absolute crisis during which we will remain forever arrested (‘suspendu [...] au grand jamais’) with no possibility of conscious knowledge of its result; a crisis that by its very nature occludes understanding. Leiris suggests that the supposed comfort to be derived from the lack of awareness at the moment of death (‘« Qu’est-ce que cela peut vous faire, puisque vous n’y serez plus?»’) is not in the least reassuring, as this terrifying ontological disjunction divorces us from ourselves and from language. Leiris states in Biffures that death is ‘ce dont je n’aurai pas souvenir, ce que je ne pourrai pas raconter’ (Biffures, 294): the limit point of what we can tell of ourselves in language. In Blanchot’s conception, language is life insofar as it always carries death: here, Leiris suggests that death itself is terrifying as it is the end of the capacity to speak.

However, writing’s particular power is to make language permanent. Derrida states that writing creates meaning ‘en le consignant, en le confiant à une gravure, à un sillon, à un relief, à une surface que l’on veut transmissible à l’infini’. Writing’s capacity to trace and transmit meaning is essential here. The idea of writing as a posthumous trace, affirming within it both life and death, is essential to what Blanchot identifies as the reassuring dimension of Leiris’ ‘regard d’outre-tombe’, contesting the actuality of death with the possibility of existing beyond it. When stating in L’Âge d’homme that it is impossible to say ‘je meurs’, Leiris therefore identifies the limits of language, whilst underscoring the potentialities offered by writing. By leaving the written trace, the phrase ‘je meurs’, Leiris enacts Blanchot’s tenet of ‘la mort aboutit à l’être’, affirming his existence in writing, even if this contains ever-present death within

54 Derrida discusses the same issue in ‘Demeure: Fiction and Testimony’, where he figures death as an ‘unexperienced experience’: ‘I should not be able to say: I died or I am dead’, M. Blanchot and J. Derrida, The Instant of My Death, p. 46
55 Hand’s analysis of ‘self-presence’ (rather than self-knowledge) in Leiris’ writing states that this is ‘constructed from repeated confirmation of the impossibility of knowing its own completion’: self-presence is the product of confronting the unknowable end-point of death. S. Hand, Michel Leiris: Writing the Self, p. 11.
It. This is an idea that will become central to Perec’s *W*, where rather than Leiris’ ‘je meurs’, the deictic power of the statement ‘j’ècris’ (*W*, 63) affirms not only Perec’s existence but stands as a testimony to his parents’ deaths.

Levinas states that the trace has the power to ‘signifier sans faire apparaître’: this allows the trace to signify the writer without his presence.\(^5^7\) In the final volume of *La Règle du jeu*, Leiris states that ‘je veux moi aussi procéder, essuyant – pour rendre la chose plus tolérable – d’imposer par la plume une ordonnance à ce qui est horreur sans nom’ (*Frêle bruit*, 398). Imposing the permanence of the pen, Leiris seeks to render death’s ‘horreur sans nom’ more acceptable. Writing holds back the real oblivion of death in its continual rehearsal. In Levinas’ conception of death, the self is constituted by both the living and the dead ‘Other’: death is a non-response from the Other who continues to signify in their absence.\(^5^8\) It is possible to interpret Blanchot’s view of the reassuring nature of *L’Âge d’homme* as stemming from the text’s ability to signify beyond death, providing assurance of ‘ce qui se passe après’ (*ADH*, 87). By highlighting both his dread of death and the limit point of language and consciousness to apprehend it, the written trace of Leiris’ text endures beyond death.\(^5^9\) Derrida approaches the idea in a comparable way, referring to autobiography as a surviving testimony of a witness, speaking beyond death: ‘this surviving speech must be as exemplarily irreplaceable as the instance of the instant from which it speaks, the instant of death’.\(^6^0\) Derrida suggests that autobiography offers itself to its readers as the inexistence of its subject: like Levinas, he suggests that the text is the permanent remnant of a disappeared subject, an artifact of survival over death. This gesture to the other (the reader), therefore, highlights the collaborative and communicative underpinning of autobiographical writing for Leiris.

In *Fibrilles*, Leiris underlines the implication of Blanchot’s shift from the ‘je’ to the ‘il’ as a relationship from the self to an other when using language, noting: ‘on ne parle pas tout seul (les même absents étant impliqués dans l’acte de parler puisque c’est


\(^{5^8}\) See C. Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, p. 117: ‘In Levinas’ account the self is constituted by the living other and by the dead other. And because the dead other continues to constitute me as its survivor, it serves as a source of meaning from beyond the grave’.

\(^{5^9}\) This resonates with Sartre’s view of death. Death is figured in *L’Être et le néant* as a relationship implicating others, a dispossession of the self to the Other: ‘death [for Sartre] is essentially inseparable from relating to others and understands it as the definitive victory, the triumph of the surviving for-itself over the dead for-itself, who is thus reduced to an in-itself, a thing devoid of self-consciousness’, B. N. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 102.

\(^{6^0}\) J. Derrida in M. Blanchot and J. Derrida, *The Instant of My Death*, p. 45.
leur mots qu’on emploie’’) (Fibrilles, 94). This echoes Levinas’ view of death, that the Other continues to exert influence beyond its disappearance: Leiris suggests that others are always implicated in our use of language. This resonates strongly with Levinas’ emphasis on the ‘Dire’, or ‘saying’, as a condition of life that encapsulates our responsibility and response to the Other: language is an embodiment of this inescapable ethical position. We can interpret Leiris’ view of writing as such a communication with Others.61 Leiris’ transformation of the ‘je’ in L’Âge d’homme into an impersonal ‘il’ is thus an opening to the other: the other of the reader and an ethical Other in Levinas’ terms. Leiris indicates that this Other constitutes him in his use of language. He signals the impossible limits of autobiography in showing that he is unable to say ‘je meurs’: yet by leaving this written trace, which in its ‘saying’ is an opening up to the other, his autobiography stands as a continuing communication that affirms and effaces him, enduring beyond his death.

I argue that Leiris’ confrontation with death in L’Âge d’homme implicates not only the reading other but the capacities of language and literature itself as an enduring trace of existence that remains open-ended and unresolved.

**Autobiography: a theatre of masochism**

Leiris further negotiates autobiography in L’Âge d’homme through its masochism.62 Autobiographical writing is presented as a performative combat with the self characterized by pain and degradation. Yet, it nonetheless offers Leiris access to a more privileged window of insight into his self. By stylizing and ritualizing his introspection, I argue that Leiris makes the process sacred and theatrical. As in the tauromachie, he emphasizes the painful, fleeting dimension of self-apprehension in autobiographical writing.

Masochistic enjoyment in pain runs through Leiris’ childhood memories, for instance the pleasurable pain of a nighttime cough, that resulted in his mother’s attention: the Oedipal dimension of this episode is associated with his voyeuristic

61 This recalls de Man’s view of autobiography as prosopopoeia, where the autobiographer is able to speak to an other beyond death: ‘The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution’. P. de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’, Modern Language Notes, Vol. 94, No. 5, 1979, 919-930 (p. 921).

62 Beauvoir notes his ‘mélange de masochisme, d’extrémisme et idéalisme’ in her personal contact with Leiris (La Force de l’âge, p. 574).
enjoyment of seeing his mother undressing through his communicating bedroom door (*ADH*, 64). His first erection is at seeing children climbing a tree, imagining the feeling at once ‘plaisant et douloureux’ of the bark against their feet (*ADH*, 38). He indicates, recounting a childhood ailment where his penis had become inflamed, that ‘le coït m’apparût comme un acte [...] éminemment dangereux’ (*ADH*, 106). Sex is dangerous for the bodily pain it promises. This recurs when the schoolboy Leiris cuts his head: his immediate reaction to pain is fear about his associated sexual ability, asking ‘Comment pourrais-je aimer?’ (*ADH*, 131).

This association of pain and sex is carried into his adult sexual experience. He twice recounts an episode in which, after sex, he takes scissors to his chest (‘je m’étais mis nu dans ma salle de bains et je m’étais griffé le corps entier à coups de ciseaux, avec une sorte d’enragée et voluptueuse application’ (*ADH*, 94); ‘enfermé dans la salle de bains, j’ai pris des ciseaux et me suis griffé pour me punir’ (*ADH*, 179)). The notion of self-punishment (‘pour me punir’) is a response to the shame of sex, as though the fear of pain that he associated with the act in his youth manifests in his self-mortification.

Leiris discusses this masochistic tendency and its relation to his psychoanalysis towards the end of *L’Âge d’homme*. After arriving at a friend’s house demanding a razor to ‘me châtrer’ (*ADH*, 196), he realizes that his desire to self-mutilate required psychoanalytic intervention. Notably, this realization is expressed in theatrical terms: ‘Je tournais plus au pitre qu’à l’acteur tragique. Je voulais me délivrer avant tout de cet atroce sentiment d’impuissance – tant génitale qu’intellectuelle – dont je souffre encore aujourd’hui’ (*ADH*, 196).

In the theatre of his life, Leiris is more the fool or jester (‘pitre’) than the tragic protagonist (‘acteur tragique’). He hopes that psychoanalytic treatment will resolve his psychological and physical impotence, characterized by his compulsion to self-castrate (*ADH*, 196). However, the psychoanalytic cure is unable to liberate him from ‘cette crainte chimérique d’un châtiment’, precisely because masochism allows access to ‘une plus intense réalité’ (*ADH*, 197).

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Leiris details how, even after a year of psychoanalytic treatment with Dr Adrien Borel from 1929, he still felt the desire to behave violently during sex (tearing the pearl necklace of an Englishwoman, *ADH*, 197) or to submit himself to humiliation (enduring beating by a prostitute, *ADH*, 198). During his participation in the Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic mission (1931-1933), he is fascinated by an Ethiopian woman who corresponds ‘à mon double idéal de Lucrèce et de Judith’, genitally mutilated (reminiscent of Lucretia) but devouring the blood of a ram (evoking the murderous Judith). Upon his return, psychoanalysis has proven an ineffective method of treatment for his neuroses: it has shown their radical permanence in his unconscious: ‘j’y ai appris surtout que […] l’on se retrouve toujours identique à soi-même’ (*ADH*, 200). He observes that he is fated to return to the same fantasies, the ‘petite constellation de choses qu’on tend à reproduire […] un nombre illimité de fois’ (*ADH*, 200). Leiris suggests that a person’s tendencies manifest themselves under unlimited different guises: this proves to be the case in the repeated reappearance of Judith and Lucretia, to whom Leiris ascribes all real-life sexual interactions.

Leiris therefore demonstrates skepticism towards psychoanalysis’ ability to change an individual’s behaviour. In the void left by psychoanalysis, writing becomes the substitute for this dizzying compulsion to self-punishment. He indicates that his desire for a combination of dangerous exposure and self-denigration finds its greatest expression in autobiography.

He indicates that his Catholic upbringing has ingrained in him an obsession with restriction and guilt: the rite of confession retains a powerful influence over his adult life in the management of his sexual guilt. Foucault indicates that sexual confession involves not only recounting the details of sexual acts, but also ‘les pensées qui l’ont doublé, les obsessions qui l’accompagnent, les images, les désirs, les modulations et la qualité du plaisir’: his suggestion that sexual confession entails wide-ranging, personal, psychological detail is striking in Leiris’ case. Leiris states that confession is particularly commanding for him due to its ‘côté humiliant, joint à ce qu’elle comporte simultanément de scandaleux et d’exhibitionniste’ (*ADH*, 201). We see that the masochistic element of confession is aligned with the thrill of exhibitionism that is elsewhere aligned with sex, dizzying for its danger and exposure. He sees himself as a

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64 The journey is recounted in *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934).
sinful ‘maudit’ (ADH, 201), which reinforces the religious dimension of his self-punishment: this is heightened by an unquenchable desire to push suffering to its limit (‘maudit […] qui ne souhaite rien tant que pousser à son comble cette malédiction’ (ADH, 201)). Leiris employs religious lexis to state that his violent erotic behaviour allows him to ‘regarder ma dîme comme payée’ (ADH, 202): his compensational tithe to the Church has been paid through his painful sexual encounters.

Furthermore, Leiris’ accounts of sexual incompetence are recounted in a sexually stimulating exercise of self-perception. He asserts that sexual love is the ‘seule possibilité de coïncidence entre le sujet et l’objet’ (ADH, 174) – despite stating elsewhere that this is only possible in suicide, encapsulated by Cleopatra. Sex is the means to access the sacred other; yet in Cleopatra’s (autoerotic) act, suicide is the way to be both self and other, the ‘seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même’ (ADH, 141). Thus, sex and suicide are ways for the subject to perceive itself: to constitute itself in relation to an other in sex; or to come into absolute communion with itself in suicide. Writing shares in this realm of self-perception in that it, like sex, and the tauromachie, is a ‘terrain de vérité’, an arena of combat, where ‘l’homme se découvre en face d’une réalité’ (ADH, 68). As in confession, where truth is revealed through ritualized exposure, autobiographical writing for Leiris is a performance of masochistic self-examination.

Leiris therefore indicates that writing L’Âge d’homme provides a masochistic thrill akin to the painful pleasure of both sex and confession. The masochistic enjoyment of pain could not be sublimated by psychoanalysis. In any case, Leiris suggests that he does not wish to put an end to these tendencies, as they allow him to get closer to the state in which the subject can perceive the object most clearly (as in suicide). Writing his confessions in L’Âge d’homme therefore represents the stage where he is able to play out his masochistic desires.

Leiris states that his parents exposed him to the theatre, taking advantage of well-located seats in the Paris Opéra lent to the family by business connections of Leiris’ father (ADH, 42). This early theatrical education created a habit of behaving...

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66 This connection was Marguerite Roussel, widowed mother of Raymond Roussel. Leiris’ father was the author’s homme d’affaires: Leiris would later attempt to write a biography of Roussel (unfinished, but published with notes and correspondence between Roussel and Leiris as Roussel & Co (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1998)). Bénabou’s Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres takes its title from Roussel’s Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres (1935).
‘comme si j’étais sur un théâtre’ (ADH, 42), tending to view life allegorically. This is certainly true for his sexual life, as discussed above. Yet it is also possible to interpret *L’Âge d’homme* itself as belonging to this theatrical model, such that the self explored in the texts is made theatrical or performed in order to be grasped.

Leiris suggests this in *Miroir de la tauromachie*. The bullfighting arena is one of the few places ‘*où l’on se sent tangent au monde et à soi-même*’ (*Miroir*, 25), where the self comes into proximity with itself through the spectacle of bullfighting. In *L’Âge d’homme*, Leiris suggests that he is searching for a similar way to dramatize the relationship between the world and his self: ‘l’objet et le sujet – nous nous tenions debout l’un devant l’autre […] comme devant le taureau se tient le matador’ (ADH, 201). I argue therefore that Leiris transposes this self-encounter from bullfighting to writing in *L’Âge d’homme*, with the autobiography as the textual stage for this confrontation.

The work’s preface indicates how masochistic confession occurs on the performing stage of autobiography. Leiris states that he aims for ‘*une catharsis, une liquidation*’ (ADH, 10), suggesting the Aristotelian cleansing of emotion in witnessing tragedy. He reinforces this by stating that he wants to bring a ‘lueur tragique’ to his text (ADH, 12). He desires ‘le maximum de lucidité et de sincérité’, emphasizing again the truthful basis of confession, which comes to bear on Leiris’ autobiographical exercise, reinforced by the language of admission, such as ‘confesser publiquement’, ‘lâchetés’, and ‘honte’ (ADH, 10). He admires the metaphorical arena of the *tauromachie* for the bodily danger that the bull’s horn represents to his writing: without this, the text would lapse into another, less dangerous theatrical arena, the disdained ‘grâces vaines’ of ballet. The affinity of the bullfighting arena and the autobiographical stage, therefore, indicates that the text becomes a performance of the encounter with the self, masochistic in its painful operations of introspection and self-exposure, mimicking Catholic confession.

In the preface, Leiris declares that he wishes to ‘*faire un livre qui soit un acte*’ (ADH, 14). This ‘acte’ is often interpreted as an explanation for rigorous of self-exposure: indeed, an act allowing Leiris to ‘élucider […] certaines choses encore obscures’ (ADH, 14). In this first sense, the ‘acte’ is an aesthetic act, with Leiris hoping to rigorously condense his life into a sculptural ‘seul bloc solide’ (ADH, 14, 19). Yet, the desire to write a book that performs an ‘acte’ can be aligned with the recurring motif of performance: the ‘acte’ of the text as a *performance* of a quest self-knowledge. Leiris indeed calls this ‘*un acte, un drame*’ (ADH, 22). Leiris plays on the duality of the word
'acte' to subtly underline the deforming performative tendencies at work in autobiographical introspection.

Leiris states that ‘ce n’est pas sans un peu de duplicité que je m’y suis aventuré’, aware that writing autobiographically involves both a certain narcissism and a desire ‘au fond de toute confession […] d’être absous’ (ADH, 13). The duality of autobiographical writing is therefore established: Leiris implies that the ‘act’ of autobiography, in the sense of ‘pretense’, plays on this dichotomy. He employs vocabulary suggestive of the pretense involved in presenting the self: he cites a diary entry stating ‘Comment oserais-je me regarder si je ne portais […] un masque’ (ADH, 153, my emphasis); in his early literary career, he notes that he chose his clothes like a costume (ADH, 183). Again, Leiris uses the image of a mask: he powders his face ‘comme s’il s’était agi de le dissimuler sous une espèce de masque et d’achever d’empreindre ma personne d’une impassibilité’, creating a mask that covers his ‘faiblesses interne’ (ADH, 183). Leiris had even published an article concerning the eroticism and mysticism of masks in Bataille’s review Documents in 1930.67

The dramatic mask is therefore a way for Leiris to distance himself from the reality of his personality; a false projection of a face protecting his own. This shift towards the artificial is an aspect of autobiography that concerns Leiris. He writes in Biffures that writing about the past entails a ‘glissement vers l’inauthentique’, suggesting again the duplicity that he knows to be a factor in L’Âge d’homme (Biffures, 272). In Fourbis, he states that the distance from a remembered event ‘mise sur papier’ means that temporal and material distances are falsified, or ‘téléscopées’ (Fourbis, 52). This implies the same conflict between the desire for exposure and self-preservation suggested L’Âge d’homme, which occurs when, in Benveniste’s terms, the ‘sujet de l’énonciation’ and the ‘sujet de l’énoncé’ are the same person, creating a fraught relationship between the ‘je raconteur’ and the ‘je raconté’, described in Fibrilles as ‘le moi que je suis et le moi que j’écris’ (Fibrilles, 220).68 The signification of the autobiographical ‘acte’ in this context, therefore, consists in highlighting the experience of the ‘je raconté’ in the text, all whilst the ‘je raconteur’ resists the pull towards the elaborations of the imagination and the performative dimension of autobiographical writing. Looking at the other side of the ‘acte’ that Leiris proposes in L’Âge d’homme

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68 This division is also discussed by Beauvoir: ‘Par cette œuvre, l’auteur lui-même se donne une constitution fictive […] Le je qui parle se tient distance du je vécu’, S. de Beauvoir, Tout compte fait (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 132.
therefore provides a valuable perspective on the operations of theatre and performance in the autobiographical act, which I suggest is an important further dimension to Leiris’ negotiation of autobiographical writing.

Leiris negotiates autobiographical writing by presenting the personal difficulties that it allows him to confront, as well as the difficulties that the form itself poses. He interrogates his uneasy relationship to masculinity, a concept undergoing broader change in the early twentieth century, to demonstrate that his masculine identity is underscored by anxiety and to suggest the brittle foundations of any construction of gendered identity in discourse. His sexual neuroses, encapsulated in his fearful, allegorical association with two paradigms of terrifying female sexuality (Judith and Lucretia), are at the origin of what Leiris sees as the profound fragility of the borders that define the self. His crisis of masculinity can be mapped onto a larger concern with how the subject is defined in relation to the Other, and how this confrontation takes place in writing. Leiris’ process of self-objectification underscores his approach to introspection.

Leiris’ efforts to objectify the ‘je’ in *L’Âge d’homme* implicate a shift from the ‘je’ to an ‘il’, which Blanchot sees as the shadow of death which pervades this text. Not only does Leiris communicate his horror of death, but he suggests that, as the uncertain end-point of autobiographical narrative, death is fated to remain unattainable. Yet, by writing within these impossible limits, he leaves a posthumous written trace in autobiography that continues to signify beyond death: the act of the ‘Dire’ (in Levinas’ conception) is more important than the ‘Dit’, in the performance of an autobiographical act that grapples with the ‘problème de la mort’ (*ADH*, 152). The notion of the deictic written trace that autobiography might represent would also be explored by Perec in *W*.

The autobiographical act takes on a further dimension of performance inherent to writing autobiographically for Leiris. The theatrical stylization of the ‘je raconté’ demonstrates the dualities of autobiography: the desire to tell the authentic truth without embellishment, against the wish to be absolved. Leiris argues this is integral to any confession. Making *L’Âge d’homme* the theatrical arena for this confrontation, Leiris suggests that the painful operation performed on the self is a way to access a more privileged window of insight into his interiority. Nonetheless, he is always aware of the ambiguous duality of the ‘acte’ that he wishes his text to be. We can see Perec’s exploration of the representative functions of art and literature, and Bénabou’s
examination of the virtual plane that autobiography might represent, as extensions of Leiris’ enquiry into the theatrical play involved in autobiography.

By highlighting these points of difficulty, failure and impossibility, Leiris troubles the heart of autobiography by implying that the self on which it is based is more nebulous and mutable than fixed. As a collaborative, communicative entity, L’Âge d’homme stresses its fragmentation and complexity, encouraging the reader to appreciate the complications involved in the attempt to apprehend a self through writing. The ludic game of autobiography reaches its full, risky, and dangerous potential on the autobiographical stage of L’Âge d’homme.

Part 3 - Narrative strategies in L’Âge d’homme

L’Âge d’homme posits a complex sense of self that is difficult to apprehend through writing, encouraging its reader actively to engage in its reconstruction, to suggest that the autobiographical self is negotiated through an ongoing process of mutual alterity between reader and autobiographer. The stylization of self-perception is achieved in L’Âge d’homme through narrative strategies that emphasize the forming, structuring and shaping of the retrospective account. Leiris’ concern for classification and indexing, central to his career as an ethnographer, is brought to bear on the text. This suggests an ‘auto-ethnographie’ that heightens the tension of objectification and assimilation in the subject-object relationship that is central to L’Âge d’homme.69 By classifying his memories thematically, rather than chronologically, Leiris suggests his attempts to shape his analysis.

This is reinforced by his use of framing. I argue that Leiris is highly attentive to the framing of episodes in the texts and the framing of the main text in relation to its preface, highlighting the tensions between ‘je raconté’ and ‘je raconteur’ at play in autobiography.

These strategies of authorial control emphasize the self’s discontinuity rather than its permanence, and its resulting instability that will thwart attempts to control it. Instead, the self is perceived at the limit points and interstices of episodic experience, with Leiris deploying narrative strategies that ask the reader to question the constructive mechanisms in the shaping of a retrospective life narrative.

Classifying and indexing: structuring principles

Leiris notes in the preface to *L’Âge d’homme* that the work is an ‘ensemble de faits et d’images’ (*ADH*, 14), or a ‘photo-montage’ (*ADH*, 19). He stated that the text could be viewed as a ‘mosaic’. These characterizations of *L’Âge d’homme* as a collection of disparate elements, selected and placed into a composition, suggest that the structure of the text is non-linear, non-teleological, and non-chronological. The chapters and sub-chapters are grouped into thematically linked sections. For instance, the chapter ‘Antiquités’ is divided into shorter anecdotes recounting the allegorical links that Leiris established between his childhood and images of antiquity: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the *Chanson de Roland*; Vercingetorix; Jeanne d’Arc; the Trojan War. This thematic grouping is further evident in the chapters ‘Lucrèce’ and ‘Judith’, where the snapshot sub-chapters are connected by either sacrifice, pain or threatening femininity. Leiris provides no interpretive suggestions for why the anecdotes are thus juxtaposed, beyond their grouping under a commonly related title. The short sketches are not related within a narrative, but rather within a cumulative structure under an umbrella theme.

Leiris reflects that this associative structural approach is central to the disruption of linear chronology that looses memory from the strictures of time, noting in *Biffures*: ‘[r]ompre le cours du temps pour revenir à la liberté de l’enfance’ (*Biffures*, 236). Disrupting chronology in favour of an associative, thematic structure attempts to capture the freedom of childhood experience. I see Leiris’ classification and indexing of his memories by thematic groupings as part of this unmooring of memory: the impression of free association is suggested by this narrative strategy. Whilst the resulting textual structure appears fragmentary, it is in fact underpinned by the structuring principle of classification and indexing, with episodes of memories classified into chapters according to theme.

Classification and indexing had become significant for Leiris through his role as ‘secrétaire-archiviste’ for the Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic mission. The manuscript for *L’Âge d’homme* was ready one year later, by 1935. His responsibilities on the mission had afforded him extensive experience in systematic note-card filing, recording the

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71 Leiris’ association with the surrealists before the schism in 1929-1930 separating the group into the followers of either Breton or Bataille (the dedicatee of *L’Âge d’homme*) is pertinent to this principle of ‘free association’.
discoveries of the voyage.\textsuperscript{72} He had previously attended Marcel Mauss’ classes at the Institut d’ethnologie (1929-1930). Leiris extended this indexing skill to his own life, establishing a system of note-cards to categorize diary excerpts, thoughts, and feelings, classified according to theme, to be shuffled and collated as required. Leiris noted that ‘I would never have succeeded in speaking of myself with such objectivity if I hadn’t acquired the powers of observation and notably for indexing’: this demonstrates that his methods of self-study owe much to his burgeoning ethnographic career.\textsuperscript{73} These skills are implemented in \textit{L’Âge d’homme}. Sheringham has observed that Leiris’ autobiographical writing ‘commencera par la constitution d’un stock’: by accumulating a personal archive, Leiris approached autobiography from the ethnographer’s more external, objective perspective.\textsuperscript{74} The attempt to view the self as other therefore finds its origins in Leiris’ ethnographic training. Undertaking \textit{L’Âge d’homme} after the mission, therefore, Leiris mobilises his newly-honed skills for classification and indexing in an attempt to get closer to the lived reality of his own childhood whilst obtaining a certain analytical distance. The narrative strategy of refusing chronology in favour of a thematic structure reinforces this desire for finding new windows of insight into his childhood.

Leiris noted in an initial draft \textit{prière d’insérer}, eventually incorporated into the main text, that what had begun as a narrative of straightforward sexual confession had transformed into ‘une sorte de vue panoramique sur tout un côté de ma vie’.\textsuperscript{75} Discussing the structuring principle of the text, Leiris states that his rejection of a chronology in favour of thematic classification of episodes highlighted latent significations between anecdotes that were seemingly disparate.\textsuperscript{76} The draft \textit{prière d’insérer} suggests that this creates both aesthetic and psychological effects. Whilst it illuminated latent connections in Leiris’ childhood, it also creates the poetic effect of a measured structural composition.\textsuperscript{77}

His method of stark juxtaposition in a cumulative structure reinforces the idea of the text as a microcosm, standing for the larger macrocosm of Leiris’ personal

\textsuperscript{73} M. Gobeil, ‘Interview with Michel Leiris’, p. 54.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
universe. By suggesting the displacement of his early sexual experiences onto images of antiquity, Leiris suggests the mechanisms of Freudian dream analysis, where condensation and displacement operate in the microcosm of the dream to indicate unconscious impulses that affect conscious life. The ordering of the text into condensed thematic groups can be interpreted as an attempt at a type of written self-analysis (as opposed to analysand testimony). Leiris had begun analysis under Borel in November 1929, which was interrupted by the Dakar-Djibouti mission in 1931, and abandoned on his return to France. He states that writing *L’Âge d’homme* represents the extended illumination of his unconscious life that psychoanalysis was able to stir, but not resolve. Writing comes to extend, even to replace psychoanalysis, through Leiris’ narrative strategies that strive to objectify him as the subject of his own analysis, structuring the text into thematic groupings.

The literary context of *L’Âge d’homme* further illuminates this collision of dream and reality. Although his rupture with Breton’s surrealism (February 1929) coincided with the year that Leiris began psychoanalysis, the central tenet from Breton’s 1924 ‘Manifeste de surréalisme’ – where reality and dreams meet in ‘surréalité’ – might yet be identified in the thematic structure of *L’Âge d’homme*. Leiris transcribes two dream diary passages as epigraphs to chapters in the text (the ‘Antiquités’ and ‘Lucrèce et Judith’ chapters). The ‘Antiquités’ chapter begins with a dream about vampiric prostitutes, before Leiris highlights his habit of thinking ‘par formules, analogies, images – technique mentale dont […] le présent écrit n’est qu’une application’ (*ADH*, 53). The fantasies described in the chapter – vampiric women, courtesans, and the talismanic triad of alcohol, tobacco, and masturbation – stand for Leiris’ nascent sexual anxiety. By grouping these memories together under the theme of ‘Antiquités’, Leiris on the surface suggests that the episodes are united by their relation to figures of history: yet, in reality, they are connected by underlying sexual unease. The ‘rêve’ and ‘réalité’ collide precisely because of Leiris’ thematic structuring principle, which produces a type of ‘surréalité’ that brings together both Freudian mechanisms of psychoanalysis and the poetic and aesthetic principles of early surrealism.

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78 Leiris notes his obsession with the fusion of macro- and microcosms (‘je rêvais de couvrir tout mon corps de tatouages astraux qui auraient illustré […] cet essai de fusion du microcosme avec le macrocosme’, *ADH*, 184).
79 ‘Acte par rapport à moi-même, puisque j’entendais bien, le rédigeant, élucider, grâce à cette formulation même, certaines choses encore obscures sur lesquelles la psychanalyse, sans les rendre tout à fait flaires, avait éveillé mon attention quand je l’avais expérimentée comme patient’, *ADH*, 14.
However, Leiris was careful to suggest the limitations of these fields of thought. His abandonment of psychoanalysis after his return from the Dakar-Djibouti mission, in favour of increased literary production and ethnographic study, suggests the limits of psychoanalysis’ personal usefulness. He furthermore stresses the limitations of the psychoanalytic method in *L’Âge d’homme* in the notes appended to the text in its second publication in 1946. Identifying his fear of Judith with his fear of castration, Leiris states, with ten years of distance from first writing the text, that ‘[a]ujourd’hui je n’exprimerais pas cela en termes psychanalytiques et parlant castration […] j’invoquerais la peur que j’ai de m’engager, de prendre mes responsabilités’ (*ADH*, 211). It is possible to view his rejection of an Oedipal explanation as a definitive move away from Freudian paradigms as an underlying explanation for all behaviour. One can identify this in Leiris’ desire to accept the anxiety ‘que j’adopte à l’égard de ma vie’ (*ADH*, 211), instead of explaining it away in psychoanalytical terms. He accepts – even embraces – his fearful impulse to recoil from responsibility, most importantly by accepting death as a condition of life (‘on ne peut vivre qu’à condition d’accepter de mourir’, *ADH*, 211).

Moreover, Leiris’ break with surrealism suggests its limits for Leiris, as he began *L’Âge d’homme* the following year.80 Some of the group’s aesthetic principles (themselves influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis) remain in the text, such as the emphasis on dream interpretation. Leiris notes that despite the break with Breton’s surrealism, he remained ‘imprégné’ (*ADH*, 15) by its innovations. It can be argued that both the aesthetic and political shortcomings of Breton’s surrealism are resolved in the writing of *L’Âge d’homme*, a text which Leiris states is not necessarily an example of *littérature engagée*, but at the very least ‘une littérature dans laquelle j’essayais de m’engager tout entier’ (*ADH*, 14). This reference draws Leiris closer to Sartre than the surrealists, without pledging himself fully to Sartrean *engagement*: indeed, Leiris demonstrates the fear of committing himself discussed in the notes to the text. Crucially, the acceptance of these hesitant tendencies is brought out by the juxtaposition and accumulation of episodes of memory, following a pseudo-psychoanalytic method of searching for unconscious signification through the episodes’ thematic links.

This classification by theme ultimately demonstrates that retrospection could plausibly lead to any number of associated memories; it suggests that any attempt to class and order them in order to draw out latent signification is haunted by failure, just

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80 The break from the surrealists was initiated by a squabble with Breton in 1927, before Leiris left the group definitively in 1929.
as Leiris’ real-life psychoanalysis failed. This is noted in the pivotal ‘La tête d’Holopherne’ chapter, which ought to have centred on the theme of injured men. However, this theme dissolves into confusion:

‘A mesure que j’écris, le plan que je m’étais tracé m’échappe et l’on dirait que plus je regarde en moi-même plus tout ce que je vois devient confus, les thèmes que j’avais cru primitivement distinguer se révèlant inconsistants et arbitraires, comme si ce classement n’était en fin de compte qu’une sorte de guide-âne abstrait, voire un simple procédé de composition esthétique’ (ADH, 127, my emphasis).

Themes that seemed to hold importance are shown to be arbitrary, as the proliferation of memory leads to a divergence from the theme, so that Leiris’ structuring principle risks becoming either an illogical rulebook, or worse a wholly artificial aesthetic composition devoid of meaning (reminiscent of the ‘grâces vaines’ of the ballerina disdained in the preface). Rather than finding self-continuity through thematic classification and indexing, Leiris instead suggests that seeking such continuity betrays the complexity of retrospection that is constantly shifting through the mediation of the present act of writing: indeed, that such continuity is a purely aesthetic outcome.

By using thematically grouped episodes, Leiris achieves an innovative, twofold commentary on autobiography. On one hand, these episodes adhere to a certain extent to a Freudian principle of condensation and substitution, whereby Leiris attempts to draw out the latent connections between snapshot episodes by their juxtaposition. This ‘photo-montage’ (ADH, 19) encourages a comparative, associative exercise for the reader, whereby it becomes apparent that the thematic classification of episodes suggested by the title of each chapter is only the surface-level reason for their grouping, with further significations being revealed through the collision of unrelated fragments of memory. As such, Leiris appears to suggest that there is a hidden self-continuity that can be retrospectively established in autobiographical writing.

On the other hand, however, he implies by the same token that this structuring methodology runs the risk of a falsification by arbitrarily grouping episodes that imply an associative relationship where none may exist. The limitations of this pseudo-analytic method are arguably borne out biographically in Leiris’ cessation of analysis in 1931, and textually in L’Âge d’homme through his interjecting concern about the purely aesthetic dimension of such a structuring method. Although in the preface Leiris states his desire to resist fabulation (‘la négation d’un roman’ (ADH, 15)), his structure creates a ‘collage surréaliste’ (ADH, 16), an aesthetically crafted text with sculptural properties.
(ADH, 19) that is ‘bien redigé et architecturé’ (ADH, 13). The structure of Leiris’ text thus encapsulates the tension between truth and fabulation in autobiography. His episodic structure is a means towards self-objectivity, yet which Leiris simultaneously suggests is illusory.

Framing autobiography

Leiris deploys the narrative strategy of framing to comment on the limits and possibilities of controlling autobiographical writing. The notion of the frame is explored in three related ways. First, the (macrocosmic) framing of the main text by its appended paratexts in its 1946 edition – the prefatory essay ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’, and the 11 notes added to the end of the text. Second, the (microcosmic) framing of the episodes in the main text demonstrates Leiris’ attention to the contextual apparatus afforded to each episode of memory within the larger framework of the autobiography.

Leiris probes thus the idea of a ‘life-story’ as a series of framed episodes, and the relation they bear to the author in the present. Leiris resists the notion that the present author can be apprehended as a product of the individual framed episodes of past experience. This is achieved by continually highlighting the points of conflict inherent to any attempt to pin down the self and commit it to writing.

Firstly, the addition of the preface and end-notes in the 1946 edition of L’Âge d’homme, now considered its definitive edition, lends a new perspective on the main text, originally published in 1939. The prefatory essay ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’ had originally appeared in Sartre’s Les Temps Modernes in May 1946. It establishes the motif used throughout L’Âge d’homme that compares the writer’s perilous self-scrutiny to the conflict between the matador and the bull. Leiris suggests that his self-exposure in L’Âge d’homme runs the same risks of pain and death as in the corrida.

The essay is a frame text that assigns certain programmatic limitations to the main text. Genette suggests that prefaces added after original publication, as is the case with ‘De la littérature’, are generally an opportunity for a more mature authorly reflection, usually bearing the hallmarks of prefatory ‘testament’ before the author’s
(often impending) death.\textsuperscript{81} Genette calls this feature the ‘préposthume’. Although this ‘pre-posthumous’ characteristic is not strictly the case for Leiris, who would continue his autobiographical enquiry in \textit{La Règle du jeu} (the first volume of which, \textit{Biffures}, was published in 1948, shortly after the second edition of \textit{L’Âge d’homme}), it is nonetheless striking that Leiris chose to append the essay to the beginning of the main text. I argue he did so to comment on this first autobiographical portrait before moving onto the longer-ranging \textit{La Règle du jeu}. The framing paratext therefore allows Leiris to propose a more advanced authorial position, marking an end-point to his progression into manhood.

Genette states that prefaces pointedly exert an instructive function on the reader: they aim to ‘1. \textit{obtenir une lecture} et 2. \textit{obtenir que cette lecture soit bonne}’\textsuperscript{82}. Prefaces situate and determine a reader: furthermore, they are the opportunity for an author’s ‘déclaration d’intention’.\textsuperscript{83} Genette’s insights are helpful in demonstrating that Leiris’ preface operates as an authorial interpretive intervention, and indeed Leiris emphatically expounds the aims of the text. He states that he sought: a confessional catharsis of sexual confession; to reveal himself to his peers in a well-ordered piece of writing; to create a text that was an ‘authentic’ act and the negation of a novel; and finally, to ‘mettre en lumière certaines choses pour soi en même temps qu’on les rend communicables à autrui’ (\textit{ADH}, 21).

By stating these aims, Leiris attempts to ensure the ‘correct’ reading of the text, whilst addressing the changing political and social circumstances that, with the intervention of the war, reframe the context of his work. Its status as a later-appended preface is also attended to, with Leiris admitting that defining these aims comes after the fact (‘je le formule très à posteriori, pour tâcher de définir au mieux le jeu que je menais’, \textit{ADH}, 20). Leiris notes that the establishment of the text’s main motives have become clearer with the passage of time. Genette suggests that, in such cases, writers almost become their own ordinary and impartial reader. The author has passed from a position of interior subjectivity to relative external objectivity. It is therefore convincing to read ‘De la littérature’ as a further attempt at self-objectification at work \textit{L’Âge d’homme}, much like the ethnographic self-scrutiny in operation in the thematic structuring of the text. This view of prefaces is shared by Forest, who notes that prefaces take an oblique step outside of a text, such that ‘la réflexion se place à l’égard

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 205.
de son objet dans la distance juste qui lui permet de poser sur l’œuvre un regard qui lui soit extérieur’: the preface is a complementary, objective exterior viewpoint on the text, reinforcing Leiris’ attempt at self-objectification.  

Masson suggests that Jakobson’s theory of the functions of language are a useful tool in evaluating literary prefaces, which he – like Genette – sees as essentially communicative acts. He states that in the twentieth century, prefaces have privileged the poetic function over the expressive or referential functions that were previously dominant. I contend however that in *L’Âge d’homme*, Leiris foregrounds the expressive, conative and referential functions of communication, thereby emphasizing his position as an addressee, the role and responsibilities of the reader as an addressee, and the literary and historical circumstances of *L’Âge d’homme*. Masson cites the examples of the *nouveaux romanciers* or autofiction writers, who emphasized the poetic function in their prefaces, resulting in a reader who is complacent and passive. Leiris by contrast uses his preface to gesture strongly toward his reader and to underline the wider sense of liberation he hopes to inspire.

Leiris thus attempts to enforce authorial control by prescribing an approach to the text. He seeks in his reader ‘moins un juge qu’un complice’ (*ADH*, 13), a collaborator who will engage in an exchange by which Leiris aims to communicate his self-scrutiny to others. With this aim stated, Leiris then leaves it to the reader to engage (or not) with this reading strategy. He attempts to enforce authorial control through this paratext and draws attention to both the structure of the text – the competing claims to authenticity between the paratext and the main text – and to the tensions inherent to self-analysis in autobiography. The metatextual aspect of the preface commenting on the main text, which Genette suggests is often marked out as distinct by discursive traits – here, by use of italic font and the present tense – suggests a dual register between the ‘je raconteur’ and the ‘je raconté’, which allows Leiris to imply the varying potentialities of the ‘je’ in autobiographical writing.

This is reinforced through the inclusion of the endnotes in the text’s 1946 edition, which, along with the preface, provide a book-ending of the main text. 11 notes were added in this edition, with a final further note in 1964. Genette observes that notes are frequently characterized by their function as: responses to criticism; corrections;

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86. Ibid, p. 23.
mature self-criticism; and what he terms ‘mise en perspective autobiographique’. These characteristics apply to Leiris’ brief notes, which stand as endnotes to the entire text and are not flagged in the récit by superscript numbers. For example, the third note is a factual correction of a mistake, where a scene from the fourth act of Faust is mistakenly attributed to the third act. The second note is an example of older self-criticism, with Leiris highlighting his fear of physical pain that was pertinent in his childhood but which is even truer in 1946 in the light of the horrors of the Occupation. Both notes 6 and 10 offer brief commentary on how he might have written passages differently.

Yet, Leiris also uses the notes to propose more enigmatic comments rather than mere clarification or elucidation. Note 11 appears to be an elaboration of a strange dream about his wife recounted in the final pages of the main text: yet in fact, the endnote instead complicates rather than simplifies Leiris’ relationship to his wife. He recounts feeling a tender poignancy when imagining that she was offered a banana as a treat as a young girl, before associating this with the solace of Sade’s Justine caressing herself after her father’s death, and with a film in which a husband offers his wife cake in compensation for his temptation to murder her. Leiris offers no interpretive commentary on these images, but juxtaposes them starkly, much like his strategy of juxtaposing thematically related anecdotes throughout the main text.

Therefore, whilst the notes mostly offer clarification of the main text, Leiris also uses them for poetic effect as a continuation of his associative narrative strategy, blurring the discursive distinction between the main text and paratext. This complicates further the split between the ‘je raconteur’ (the subject of the paratext) and ‘je raconté’ (the subject of the main text) that is stressed in the preface. Leiris suggests that blurred subjective and objective self-commentary spills over the strictures of the structural limits of the paratexts and main text, indicating that the site of self-insight is mutable. Perec would also use this strategy to great effect in W, employing endnotes within autobiographical chapters to directly contradict earlier statements and illustrate the vagaries of memory.

Leiris therefore uses the two framing paratexts of the preface and the endnotes to highlight the complications of autobiographical self-scrutiny, emphasizing that in neither the paratexts nor main text is the ‘je raconté’ not menaced by the distortions of the ‘je raconteur’. The appended paratexts demonstrate the competing tensions between

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87 G. Genette, Seuils, p. 302.
the conventions of different textual discourses that reinforce his commentary on autobiography’s points of tension in the 1946 edition, and which perhaps he thought to be lacking from the first edition without the paratexts.

Secondly, Leiris emphasizes the framing of the individual episodes of anecdote within the main text. If the framing paratexts can be considered as the macrocosmic frame of *L’Âge d’homme*, Leiris also focuses attention on the microcosmic framed episodes that make up the ‘photo-montage’ (*ADH*, 16) of the text. The individual anecdotes operate as standalone passages, which are each internally contextualized. Leiris creates a tension between memories separated into framed episodes that can be read almost as individual prose poems, but which comprise the larger framework. Crucially, he suggests that his memories are ‘le cadre – ou des fragments du cadre – dans lequel tout le reste s’est logé’ (*ADH*, 39). The metanoia in this phrase highlights the conflict between the suggested totality of the frame and the fragmentary nature of the short anecdotes that compose the frame. Stating that his memories are ‘des fragments de cadre’ emphasizes the shifting perspectives through which each anecdote might be considered, with no individual memory ever fully offering a totalized viewpoint on the self.

Each anecdote bears its own subtitle, reinforcing the sense that they can be read as prose poems. This is heightened by the variation in the episodes’ length, from the shorter passages of around 200-300 words to longer passages of several pages, in addition to Leiris’ intense preoccupation with image and language. These subtitles correspond allusively rather than explicitly to the larger thematic title of the chapter. For example, the ‘Antiquités’ chapter contains straightforward subtitles such as ‘Femmes antiques’ or ‘Femme de preux’, yet others such as ‘Lupanars et musées’, ‘La génie du foyer’, and ‘Don Juan et le commandeur’ which bear only a tangential relationship to the theme of antiquity. This reinforces the notion that each episode can be read as an independent entity, framed internally by its distinctive subtitle. Furthermore, most of the episodes in *L’Âge d’homme* begin with a phrase suggesting a particular situation in place or time. Although Leiris attempts to resist chronological teleology, we are presented with a semi-chronological movement, which begins with Leiris in the present place or time.

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88 For example: ‘Durant mes premières années […]’ (*ADH*, 36); ‘En 1927, au cours d’un voyage en Grèce […]’ (*ADH*, 57); ‘Vers la fin de 1927 ou le début de 1928, au retour de ce voyage en Grèce […]’ (*ADH*, 59); or ‘Agé de six ou sept ans […]’ (*ADH*, 79).
day of writing, aged 34, moving to his earliest childhood memories, then to memories of adolescence and early adulthood. This narrative progression advances to the mature Leiris, signaled by the signposting of place or time at the beginning of each episode. The individual episodes contribute to the text’s larger structural framework due to their own internal framing, whilst also operating as discrete entities. Leiris thus suggests the *emboîtement* of separate memories, which derive their contingency from an overall framework of narrative development that leads back to the present day of the writer.

This is encapsulated in the opening sequence of the main text, where Leiris alludes to Dante’s *Divina Commedia* in the statement ‘Je viens d’avoir trente-quatre ans, la moitié de la vie’ (*ADH*, 23), echoing Dante’s ‘In the midway of our life astray / I found myself within a dark wood’, where Dante writes at the age of 35.89 This allusion is reinforced by Leiris’ suggestion that ‘[c]omme beaucoup d’autres, j’ai fait ma descente aux enfers et, comme quelques-uns, j’en suis plus ou moins ressorti’ (*ADH*, 27), highlighting the movement of descent through Hell to ascendance to salvation that characterizes the *Commedia*, which Leiris arguably mirrors in his temporal framework. Rather than descending to Hell, Leiris moves in time to revisit his childhood, before ascending to manhood at the time of writing. The metaphorical, moral descent of Leiris’ life is the increasing ‘dégénérescence’ (*ADH*, 27) that he perceives to have unfolded as he grew up. This creates a complex movement of temporal regression to the past and return to the present that is contrasted by what Leiris sees as his personal decline from childhood happiness to adult despair. This movement operates within a framework created by the accumulation of the microcosmic framed episodes in the text.

If reaching the age of 34 provides Leiris with a perspective from which he can look back to his past, this is contrasted with his awareness of the frameless nature of autobiography and its unattainable endpoint. Hollier suggests that *L’Âge d’homme* is an ‘autobiographie attrapée par la queue: elle est, littéralement, entamée par ce qui l’entame […] par un « Tu ne toucheras pas à ta fin », « Tu ne diras pas tout »’.90 Hollier indicates that beginning *L’Âge d’homme* implicates its impossibility to end, its failure to commit everything to writing (‘Tu ne diras pas tout’). This self-consuming feature of autobiography is borne out in the structure of the work, where the regression from the

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present into the past and back again is mimetic of what Hollier sees as the circular nature of autobiography.

By framing the present point of writing temporally, therefore, Leiris contrasts this frame with that which escapes it. The physical self-description that follows the opening line is emblematic of this: despite his desire to describe his physical attributes, Leiris is aware that ‘il y a sans nul doute des choses qui m’échappent, et vraisemblamment parmi les plus apparentes’ (*ADH*, 24). Leiris crucially suggests that this is due to the difficulty, even impossibility, of the subject to perceive itself other than from within his subjective frame. Couching this in the language of the self-portrait, he states that:

‘la perspective est tout et qu’un tableau de moi, peint selon ma propre perspective, a de grandes chances de laisser dans l’ombre certains détails qui, pour les autres, doivent être les plus flagrants’ (*ADH*, 24).

Leiris indicates that autobiographical self-perception is necessarily limited, although he attempts to provide a frame within which it can operate. This is achieved by the macro- and microcosmic framing devices at work in the text. By contrasting the paratexts against the main text whilst also framing the individual episodes of memory within the main text, the reader is presented with a series of framed, and thereby necessarily limited, autobiographical snapshots. These operate both as discrete textual components and as cumulative entities that create the mosaic of the text.

The ludic and unending game of constituting identity in narration is Leiris’ central preoccupation, with the reader encouraged to be an active partner in the work’s reconstruction. Through stylizing his self-perception, Leiris suggests that the self’s continuity is illusory, but that the autobiographer’s task is to try to get towards self-objectivity within the limitations of this mode of writing.

His episodic structure, based on an auto-ethnographic method of classifying and indexing, demonstrates this. Although Leiris plays on the associative structure of the psychoanalytic method to suggest latent significations between the episodes of his childhood experience, he also stresses the arbitrary, even artificial nature of this retrospective process. This is arguably to imply the complications of autobiography: that seeking such meaningful self-continuity is a doomed exercise. The reader is encouraged to make connections between episodes, all whilst the episodic structure itself resists synthesis.
This is heightened by the stylization of self-perception in the diverse instances of framing in *L’Âge d’homme*. In attempting to frame his written self-portrait, there are unavoidable blind spots. Choosing what to include in his self-portrait, Leiris suggests the conflict between the desire to ‘dire […] rien que la vérité’ (*ADH*, 17) and the ultimate limitations of the autobiographical mode, as its inconclusive nature will be unable to capture the entire truth of his personality: as Hollier suggests, ‘Tu ne diras pas tout’. Leiris indicates through the frame motif that attempts to control his retrospective account thwart themselves in their very deployment. This thwarting is an aspect of autobiographical writing that both Perec and Bénabou explore in their own work, with Perec exploiting the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ in *W* and Bénabou using the ‘inabouti’ to create an ongoing sense of generative failure that relates to the incomplete and ludic exercise of identity that autobiography represents.

These complex narrative strategies illustrate Leiris’ outlook on writing the self. They emphasize the self’s discontinuity in time rather than its permanence, and its resulting instability that will hinder attempts to control it in writing: yet, writing remains an unending and provisional exercise of identity through which the writer can try to achieve greater insight into himself.

**Conclusions: from Leiris to Perec and Bénabou**

This chapter has addressed the three central research questions of the thesis, by examining how Leiris posits a composite self continually in flux in *L’Âge d’homme*, arrived at both through a creative engagement with the difficulties of autobiography and through his works’ strong gesture towards the reader as a partner in the understanding of his self.

I began by discussing the role of the reader in *L’Âge d’homme*, which establishes the theoretical underpinning for Leiris’ endeavors in the text. Leiris prioritizes the collaborative exchange with his reader, to imply an indeterminacy and instability of identity. He suggests that his unstable identity is to be negotiated between ‘others’ rather than easily recovered from a consolidated retro- and introspective narrative. Leiris casts his reader as a complicit confessor, bestowed with significant responsibilities. He asks them not only to reconstruct his fragmentary text, but hopes that the presentation of his inconclusive introspection will inspire his reader to a similar,

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liberating encounter with themselves. From this theoretical starting position, I demonstrated in the second part how Leiris tackles what he sees as the difficulties of autobiography. The failures of his masculinity, his confrontation with death, and the conceptualization of autobiography as a masochistic performance combine in L’Âge d’homme to demonstrate how Leiris challenges the idea that a totalized sense of self might be recovered as the product of a consolidated text. The third part of the chapter analyzed the specific narrative strategies of L’Âge d’homme that reinforce this viewpoint on the self. Examination of the work’s thematic structure, drawn from Leiris’ ethnographic skills, and the deployment of framing as a narrative device, has shown how Leiris tries to tackle the complications at the heart of autobiography. Despite attempts to order and control memories into a narrative, a totalized sense of selfhood remains elusive.

Identity is in play in L’Âge d’homme: constantly fleeting, with the exercise of writing an unfinished and ongoing ludic process towards greater insight into the self. By juxtaposing snapshots of memory, Leiris teasingly suggests that their accumulation might reveal a complete picture of the author to be totalized by the reader. This is not, however, the case. The ultimate consequence of this approach is to suggest that a totalized, unified identity is not recoverable from this narrative.

Perec, like Leiris, pushes his readers to scrutinize the complexity of written representation, and its successes and limitations in accurately capturing the experiential flux of life. As we will see in the next chapter, he too explores the power of the deictic written trace that writing represents, building on Leiris’ enquiry in L’Âge d’homme. Perec too would go on to question the capacities of literature as an enduring trace of existence that remains open-ended and unresolved, responding in his autobiographical work to high stakes questions of life and death that owes a debt to the riskiness of Leiris’ work. Continuing in the wake of Leiris, reading Perec’s autobiographical work is an active, oblique process where obscure and lacunary identity is negotiated between writer and reader. Leiris’ use of allegory, not only the allegories of Judith and Lucretia for the illumination of his sexual neuroses, but of autobiography itself as an overarching allegory for reading, indicates autobiography’s potential to operate on an allegorical plane where the writer can analyse his past and explore his identity through the exercise of writing. In W, Perec uses allegory to illuminate aspects of his life and identity, with the autobiographical strand of this text alternating with a fictional story that stands as an allegory for the Holocaust, which cast an ever-present shadow over Perec’s life. Leiris’ innovation in L’Âge d’homme to experiment with the accumulation of framed memories
of past experience will also be brought to bear on the structure of \( W \), which itself explores how this defers the reader’s synthesis of the life experience communicated in the text. Perec’s questioning of the risky yet ludic stakes involved in representation of the self, the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (\( W, 18 \)) demonstrably draw on Leiris’ work in \( L’Âge d’homme \), which continually asserts the importance of the autobiographer to expose himself to the dangers of the ‘corne de taureau’ (\( ADH, 10 \)) that writing represents.

For Bénabou, we will see that he extends Leiris’ innovations by transforming the complicit relationship between writer and reader central to \( L’Âge d’homme \) into one where the ‘bonne foi’ (\( Jette, 39 \)) of the writer cannot be guaranteed. It is possible to see this strategy as indebted to Leiris, even if Bénabou subverts the relationship between writer and reader in his works. If Leiris indicates that the exercise of writing and publishing \( L’Âge d’homme \) is an autobiographical ‘acte par rapport à autrui’ (\( ADH, 14 \)), we can see Perec and Bénabou’s emphasis on the relational dynamic with the reader in their works as drawing on Leiris’ relational autobiographical act, involving the reader in the continual ludic exercise of identity that autobiography represents for all three writers. Bénabou has spoken explicitly about the influence of Leiris’ ludic approach to language, for example that seen in \( Glossaire, j’y serre mes gloses \), in terms of Bénabou’s philosophy of literature. He notes that his approach to writing came as a direct result of Leiris’ influence, stating that ‘je n’aurais jamais osé ça si je ne l’avais pas trouvé chez Leiris’.

As an “older brother” or “travelling companion” to the Oulipo, and to Perec and Bénabou specifically, we can therefore appreciate the heredity of particular autobiographical innovations from Leiris, and thence to Perec and Bénabou. His questioning of the nature of the composite and unresolved self as the product of autobiographical writing, as well as his probing of the difficulties, parameters and

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92 M. Bénabou, interview with M. Saad, 2016: 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onhTRS5duT0 (accessed 25/04/18).

93 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.
limitations of this mode and his strong implication of his reader has reverberations that can be traced through Pèrec and Bénabou’s own autobiographical work. The performative game-playing of autobiographical reconstruction that Leiris examines in *L’Âge d’homme* finds its direct echo in both later writers, whilst the question of representing the self and the complications this involves will be highly pertinent to Pèrec in particular, as the following chapter will indicate.
Chapter 2 - Georges Perec: ‘J'écris pour vivre et je vis pour écrire’

**Introduction**

The renown of Georges Perec was confirmed in May 2017 when, 35 years after his death, his complete *Œuvres* were published in the Gallimard Pléiade series. The following day, *Libération* carried an article in which the journalist affirms the elevation in status that this publication represents: ‘[l]a Pléiade étant […] le panthéon réservé aux grands écrivains, il était naturel que Georges Perec y passe’.¹ The Pléiade publication confers the seal of canonical approval on an author who has provided readers from a wide variety of disciplines with a myriad of texts to pore over, to decipher, and to investigate. Whilst the autobiographical aspect of Perec’s work has garnered significant critical attention, I will approach his autobiographical writing from a new angle, examining the liaison between autobiography and the visual realm of art in Perec’s work.² This perspective will illustrate how identity is ‘in play’ in Perec’s autobiographical writing. Like Leiris before him, and Bénabou after him, Perec figures writing as an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.

I will first emphasise the importance of re-examining Perec’s autobiographical output from later in his career – most notably *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (1975) – in light of the recently rediscovered *Le Condottière*, written in 1959 but published in 2012. Critical commentary on this text has been paltry: the tale of its rediscovery, full of Perecquian fortuity, has eclipsed the work itself.³ I will demonstrate the important relation *Le Condottière* bears to the rest of Perec’s later writing, and what the consequences are for our understanding of his autobiographical practice. I will argue that this early text can be viewed as an embryonic text that is particularly notable for its enmeshing of autobiographical self-inquiry with the motif of visual art. As a *mode d’emploi* where many of the thematic, formal, and structural principles that Perec would

later develop can be identified, *Le Condottière* sheds crucial light on his autobiographical practice. By casting the protagonist of *Le Condottière* as an art forger, Perec indicates in this earliest work his interest in art’s violable nature, which he develops later in his examination of the divergence between lived experience and its communication in art.

The second part of this chapter will examine how Perec uses art to suggest this divergence. I see this as the basis of Perec’s written examination of self, and can be traced from the *Le Condottière* through to Perec’s final work published in his lifetime, *Un Cabinet d’amateur*. This allows for a re-examination of Perec’s seminal autobiographical text, *W*, through a new lens. Critics of Perec have not examined the visual dimension of *W*: I argue that its form owes a large debt to Perec’s interest in visual art. Perec translates artistic techniques such as *mise-en-abîme*, anamorphosis, and *trompe-l’œil* from art to writing. My analysis will illustrate how Perec’s response to visual artefacts has significant effects on his autobiographical practice.

This second part will consider the effects of this autobiographical approach for Perec’s readers. My enquiry will demonstrate the radically intersubjective emphasis in his autobiographical writing, which also runs through the work of Leiris and Bénabou. Perec posits reading as a dialogic exchange with a willing partner. This dialogic relationship is emphasized in *Cabinet*, in which Perec suggests that, when viewing a painting, the ‘regardé et regardant ne cessent de s’affronter et de se confondre’ (*CA*, 28). Perec encourages a similar relationship with his readers, where writer (the ‘regardé’) and reader (the ‘regardant’) exist in a relationship of exchange. Perec noted in his analysis of reading that an ‘art de la lecture […] pourrait consister à lire de côté, à porter sur le texte un regard oblique’ (*P/C*, 115). Perec suggests that reading as an exercise (or ‘acte’, *P/C*, 110) involves taking an oblique perspective on written texts, which resonates with Perec’s use of art as a recurrent motif. Combining an autobiographical practice that emphasizes its own problems of representation with an invitation to read his works in a critical and collaborative way allows Perec to challenge the idea that a totalized or fixed identity underwrites all of his works.

Perec pushes his readers to scrutinize the complexity of written representation, and its successes and limitations in capturing the experiential flux of life. Reading his autobiographical work, therefore, is an active, oblique process where obscure and

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4 The crossover between Perec’s ideal ‘act’ of reading with Leiris’ desire in *L’Âge d’homme* to ‘faire un livre qui soit un acte’ (*ADH*, 14) is notable: both imply an active agency or investment in a larger process.
lacunary identity is negotiated between writer and reader. The writer’s insight into his self (as opposed to his absolute self-knowledge) is predicated on this relationship. This chapter therefore addresses the three central research questions of the thesis, by examining how Perec posits a composite self continually in flux in his autobiographical writing, arrived at both through a creative engagement with the difficulties of autobiography and through his works’ strong gesture towards the reader as a partner in the understanding of his self. My analysis will illustrate how Perec’s identity is ‘in play’ in his autobiographical writing.

Critical contexts

Critical interest in the place of art in Perec’s œuvre has been varied. A 2017 publication advocates for the crossover between Perec and Andy Warhol, emphasizing how both were fascinated by copies, but does not consider how Perec’s interest in art influenced his autobiographical writing. Volume 10 of the Cahiers Georges Perec, the sporadic volume published by the Association Georges Perec, featured short enquiries into the influence of contemporary art on Perec’s work. These contributions, whilst insightful, do not consider at length the relationship between art and autobiography. Ørum likewise details, in a persuasive 2006 article, the potential influence of Perec’s artistic contemporaries on his work, citing a ‘common aesthetic framework of the 1960s’. Gascoigne most recently emphasised the importance of painting to Perec’s work, but relates this exclusively to VME. Ørum highlights the shared interest between Perec and his artistic contemporaries in ‘the general question of representation and artistic methods (including questions of meta-reflection and self-reference)’, although this is not fully explored. I will argue that Perec’s interest in the questions of representation, meta-reflection and self-reference find their fullest expression in his autobiographical work.

5 P. Wadhera, Original Copies in Georges Perec and Andy Warhol (Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2017). This study is useful for its consideration of Cabinet, but does not break new analytical ground: comparisons to Warhol are left to a concluding note despite their early promise.
6 Cahiers Georges Perec, vol 10 (Bordeaux: Le Castor Astral, 2010).
9 Ibid, p. 322.
The 6th volume of the *Cahiers Georges Perec* proposed to explore the link between Perec and painting, but is most notable for including short essays by Perec detailing his passionate interest for Paul Klee.\(^{10}\) Perec noted in 1981 that, although he was ‘absolument pas critique d’art’, he tried nonetheless to incorporate the methods of visual art into his writing practice:

‘ce que j’essaie de faire, c’est d’essayer de faire que ce que je ressens en voyant le travail d’un artiste, d’un peintre ou d’un photographe, se traduise dans quelque chose que je fais du point de vue de mon propre travail’.\(^{11}\)

This quotation underlines emphatically the crossover in method between visual art and writing, demonstrating its influence on Perec’s autobiographical writing that the critical attention on Perec has neglected. In the very first autobiographical chapter of *W*, Perec notes that, aged thirteen, ‘j’inventai, racontai, et dessinai une histoire’ (*W*, 17). This story is the allegorical island of ‘W’, which Perec interweaves into the unfolding autobiographical narrative.\(^{12}\) The interplay between writing and art, ‘racontai et dessinai’, suggests the contiguity of autobiographical writing and drawing even in Perec’s youth, which endures into his adulthood. This interplay becomes ‘le défi de trouver une forme littéraire d’écriture qui corresponde à ce qu’il y avait à l’intérieur d’un ensemble de dessins’: art is a creative constraint, inspiring Perec’s literary endeavours.\(^{13}\)

Molteni’s thesis ‘Perec me pinxit’ is the most useful study to advance the critical discussion concerning Perec and painting in the direction of autobiography, although stops short of interrogating this fruitful intersection.\(^{14}\) Her thesis examines key paintings that recur in Perec’s work: Molteni indicates that Klee saw the artist’s role as essential in ordering the real world, a world of ‘chaos sans signifié apparent’.\(^{15}\) Yet for Perec, the very notion of what constitutes the real was in constant flux, changing depending on the

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\(^{11}\) Ibid, p. 196.

\(^{12}\) See *Album Georges Perec* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), p. 137, for a reproduction of a drawing of two boxers by Perec, aged around 12, reminiscent of the ‘sportifs aux corps rigides, aux faciès inhumains’ (*W*, 221) that Perec describes drawing as a child in the final lines of *W*.


perceptual context: the real becomes a matter of ‘expérience personnelle’. The artist’s task is thus to shape his own reality and find his style through a search for self-knowledge: for Klee, this manifested in his adherence to the Ancient Greek aphorism ‘gnôthi seautòn’, or ‘know oneself’. Père parodied this in an essay entitled ‘Les gnocchis de l’automne ou réponse à quelques questions me concernant’ (1972). In this response to Klee, Perec explores the uncertain genesis of his vocation as a writer, and how the concept of self-knowledge has defined – or rather, has not defined – his approach to writing.

‘Les gnocchis de l’automne’ reinforces most strongly the grounds for analysing the crossover between art and autobiographical writing in Perec’s work. If self-knowledge is crucial to Klee for his artistic ordering of a chaotic world, for Perec it underscores his motivations for writing yet remains obscure to him. Klee’s artistic ordering becomes for Perec the difficulty of writerly sincerity. Leiris had previously commented on this problem in L’Âge d’homme, noting that ‘un tableau de moi, peint selon ma propre perspective, a de grandes chances de laisser dans l’ombre certains détails’ (ADH, 24). Perec, too, couches this problem in terms of self-portraiture:

‘Comment faire […] pour échapper à ces jeux de miroir à l’intérieur desquels un « autoportrait » ne sera plus que le nième reflet d’une conscience bien élaguée, d’un savoir bien poli, d’une écriture soigneusement docile ? Portrait de l’artiste en singe savant: puis-je dire « sincèrement » que je suis un clown?’ (JSN, 69).

This suggests that the creation of a (visual or written) self-portrait is riddled with difficulty, the threatening ‘jeux de miroir’ where attempted sincerity is reflected ad infinitum, thereby revealing its deceptiveness and insincerity. In Le Condottière, Perec’s protagonist Gaspard struggles with the same problem, expressed in the same lexis. Rather than painting an accurate self-portrait, he finds only ‘un clown déguisé’ (LC, 114). Truthful self-expression is at stake, with self-knowledge only the first hurdle: the writer is then faced with the difficulty of representing this knowledge, when representation is necessarily tormented by distortion.

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16 Ibid.
17 See P. Klee, The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898-1918 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 277: ‘He has found his style […] the way to style: gnothi seutòn (know thyself)’. Foucault discusses his wish to move away from ‘gnothi seutòn’ towards ‘epimeleia heuton’ (the ‘soi de soi-même’) with regards to questions of the subject in L’Herméneutique du sujet (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 4.
19 See Appendix, Figure 1.
Perec indicates, however, that writing itself provides some response to uncertainty: ‘J’écris pour vivre et je vis pour écrire, et je n’ai pas été loin d’imaginer que l’écriture et la vie pourraient entièrement se confondre’ (JSN, 71). Writing is the very force and purpose of Perec’s life. Life and writing are bound together for Perec in a way particular to writing, rather than painting, which nonetheless represented a plausible alternative: he noted that ‘[j]’ai longtemps voulu être peintre, pour les mêmes raisons je suppose, mais je suis devenu écrivain’ (JSN, 72).20 Perec’s response to Klee demonstrates the contiguity of life and writing, and looks towards an autobiographical project where words will allow Perec to reveal his individual reality: ‘il faudra bien […] que je commence à me servir des mots pour démasquer le réel, pour démasquer ma réalité’ (JSN, 73). Perec takes Klee’s idea of self-knowledge and its relation to individual style in visual art, and sees it as equally applicable to writing.

The essential difficulty Perec identifies in ‘Les gnocchis de l’automne’, which became a defining theme of his texts about art, is the distortion that might beleaguer the artist or writer’s attempts to communicate his relationship to the real world: the anxiety that writing is only a ‘palais de glaces où les mots […] se répercutent à l’infini’ (JSN, 73). Molteni argues that art is necessarily a ‘une falsification du réel’, with ‘la réalité et le moyen de représentation étant nécessairement divergents’.21 Her perspective relies on an essentially mimetic definition of art, assuming that its purpose is simply to imitate the real world. Although Perec’s approach to art does not operate on this purely mimetic basis, Molteni’s comment about the divergence of reality and its representation can be extended to highlight Perec’s imaginative representation of experience, in which I argue he probes the status of ‘the real’ itself and emphasizes the limits of perceptual reality. Ribière’s more convincingly suggests that Perec’s analysis of Klee establishes ‘a distinction between naturalism, which claims to mirror reality, and realism proper,'

21 G. Perec, Je suis né, p. 60
which attempts to “enrich” the real and make it more ‘significant’. Perec’s work questions the categories of ‘real’ and ‘fake’, ‘original’ and ‘copy’, and thus extends autobiographical debate beyond ‘truth’ versus ‘fiction’ as hermetically sealed categories. Instead, he makes possible in his autobiographical work a third avenue where truth and fiction inform each other, most notably in *W*.

Art and writing become for Perec realms for imaginative reinterpretation of the ‘real’. Perec makes art’s representative limitations a central textual strategy in his books about art. This serves, I argue, to flag up the all-pervasive problem of representation. This is most dramatically enacted in his autobiographical texts, where the relationship to lived reality is most at stake. Perec approaches autobiographical representation visually, and thus interrogates both artistic representation and the ‘reality’ it attempts to capture, pushing his readers to scrutinize the complex nature of written representation. Leiris and Bénabou, too, use their work to challenge assumptions about the functions and role of writing and autobiography, playing ludically with the boundaries and conventions of the genre. Perec suggests that for the autobiographer, this conflict between experience and representation is the inescapable state of autobiography with which the writer must contend, putting his own identity into play: this conflict is first explored in *Le Condottière*.

**Part 1 – *Le Condottière***

*Le Condottière* was Perec’s first completed work, written aged 23, and thought lost when Perec moved apartment in 1966. The text demonstrates the difficulties of a forger, Gaspard Winckler, in attempting to create genuine, original art. Whilst Perec mentions the work several times in correspondence with Jacques Lederer (its dedicatee), surviving manuscripts were lost until Bellos discovered a typescript in the 1990s. The

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work had gone through several metamorphoses to reach its current version. It started life as *La Nuit*, becoming *Gaspard*, refused by Seuil, and finally *Gaspard pas mort*, refused by Gallimard, before its current version was also rejected. Burgelin observes that these early rejections and the book’s three-year genesis was ‘un cheminement qui a connu pas mal de zigzags’ (*LC*, 13). After the final refusal, Perec was unsure whether to try to rework it, or to begin a different project. Only five years later, Perec would publish *Les Choses*, winning the Prix Renaudot and the success that he had wished for *Le Condottière*. It is therefore possible to see *Le Condottière* not only as a work lost from critical view, but also as an early work of a writer still honing his talents. In this way, *Le Condottière* is comparable in its importance to Perec as *L’Âge d’homme* for Leiris, whilst *Le Condottière* features, too, an allegorical, obsessional relationship to a painting much in the same way that Cranach’s diptych hold a fetishistic attraction for Leiris. This text, rejected for its youthful clumsiness, is extremely useful when viewed as an embryonic work for major ideas that grow in importance in Perec’s mature work.

A detailed examination of the *Le Condottière*, which centres around the eponymous painting ‘*Le Condottière*’ by Antonello da Messina, illustrates how, from his earliest serious writing, the young Perec was concerned with visual art and its corruptability. By seeing how this text can be considered as an embryonic exploration of themes and structures that would later be employed in mature works, I will demonstrate that art’s problematic relationship to reality is at the core of Perec’s autobiographical project. I argue that the resonances of *Le Condottière* are perceptible most importantly in *W*, and are central to Perec’s examination of his self in perpetual flux.

**The embryonic *Le Condottière*: recurring structures and forms**

*Le Condottière*, like *W*, is told in two parts. It begins shortly after the murder of Gaspard’s commissioner, Madera. The action opens *in medias res* as Winckler drags Madera’s body into his basement atelier. The incipit ‘Madera était lourd’ (*LC*, 35), was

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25 This is recounted in *W*, p. 146.
28 See Appendix, Figure 1. The italicized *Le Condottière* here refers to Perec’s book, while the roman script ‘*Le Condottière*’ refers to Antonello’s painting.
a component of the work that Perec maintained through its many metamorphoses. Bénabou, too, would later mine the power of the incipit in *Epopée*, detailing an obsessive phrase that followed him throughout his life as the future incipit of his perfect book. Perec was, even at young age, interested in using the incipit to bewilder the reader, and would do so to great effect in *W*. In both the autobiographical and fictional strands of *W*, the opening lines serve to highlight the dual ‘je’ at play in this text. The fictional strand begins ‘J’ai longtemps hésité avant d’entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à W’ (*W*, 13). It is possible to see this incipit as a pastiche of Proust’s famous opening of *À la recherche*, employing the same temporal confusion between the passé composé and ‘longtemps’, which suggests a repeated or extended action in the past.29 This veiled allusion connotes the confused state between sleeping and waking that characterizes Proust’s opening paragraphs, heightened by Perec’s use of the initial ‘W’, which is not explained or contextualised. Furthermore, the subsequent autobiographical strand, beginning ‘Je n’ai pas de souvenirs d’enfance’ (*W*, 17), employs a completely different first-person ‘je’ to the fictional narrative. Much like the doubly confusing incipits to *W*, ‘Madera était lourd’ in its starkness offers no contextualizing detail. Perec thus reemploys the bewildering potential of the unclear incipit, first used in *Le Condottière*, in his later work.

*Le Condottière’s* first part follows Gaspard barricading himself in his workshop with Madera’s body, as Madera’s butler Otto attempts to gain entry.30 The reader is told snatches of information about the events leading to the murder: Gaspard’s achievements as a forger and the role of Madera in his training. The narrative mode switches back and forth continually from a second-person ‘tu’ to a third-person ‘il’ address, having started with a ‘je’ that disappears after a few paragraphs. This heightens the sense of confusion of the first half, obfuscating contextualization for the reader in much the same way that the mixed-address of *W* operates. In *W*, the ‘je’ of the fictional strand of the narrative disappears abruptly after the ellipsis (‘(…)’, *W*, 89) that severs the two halves of the

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29 Perec published his ludic text ‘35 variations sur un thème de Marcel Proust’, a set of 35 Oulipian manipulations of the incipit of *Du Côté de Chez Swann*, in *Le Magazine littéraire* in 1974, the year before the publication of *W*; the title of *Un Homme qui dort* (1967) was chosen from the fifth paragraph of *À la recherche*.

The second part of *Le Condottière*, though not formally or structurally announced by any chapter or section break, begins with the interjection of a two-person exchange between Gaspard and an interviewer, Streten, who asks Gaspard what drove him to murder. These passages of dialogue alternate with chapters that continue in the confused, mixed address of the first half of the narrative. In the second part of the text, the dialogue allows more contextualizing detail to be teased out of Gaspard: principally, that he had been commissioned to paint a fake Antonello de Messina. Gaspard chooses to re-work ‘Le Condottière’, a portrait of an Italian knight. This brings about both total paralysis of the forgery process and Gaspard’s latent frustration with the two poles he sees within forgery: original creation and slavish copying. He is unable to finish the portrait satisfactorily, and only sees in the portrait he has achieved a reflection of his own face, rather than the enigmatic ‘Condottière’ he sought to copy (it becomes a ‘visage-miroir’, *LC*, 99).

This alternating structural pattern recurs in *W*, which alternates chapter-by-chapter between an autobiographical ‘souvenir’ narrative and the fictional ‘W’ narrative. These two strands in turn are disrupted by the intervention of Perec’s elliptical interstice ‘(…)’ (*W*, 89). This cleaves the text in two, marking the death of Perec’s mother in the autobiographical narrative, and the abandonment of the first-person story of Gaspard Winckler in the fictional narrative, which moves to a detached description of the fictional island of ‘W’. Perec uses this strategy of alternating chapters to defer the reader’s synthesis: their realization that the ‘W’ narrative is an allegory for the Holocaust and its catastrophic effects. This is inferred obliquely between the two alternating narrative strands and the two halves of the text. The use of an alternating structure in *Le Condottière* is comparable and prototypical for what will later be reformulated in *W*.

Perec saw his texts as part of a continual re-writing of the same book. The bipartite structure of *W* and *Le Condottière*, which contain further internal alternation, is certainly analogous. Even the seemingly disparate content of *Le Condottière* and *W*—

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31 This illustrates Perec’s self-borrowing across his œuvre; the ‘Gaspard Winckler’ of *W* has stolen this identity from a young deaf-mute boy, who himself has disappeared.


the bloody, individual violence of a frustrated artist on one hand, and Perec’s existential struggle with the the Shoah on the other – is not as incongruous as it first appears. The Gaspard of Le Condottière can find no rational explanation for his murder of Madera, other than to be liberated from the futility of perpetual copying. In trying to paint the ‘Condottière’, he was brought to an existential crisis that had to result in action, the ‘premier geste du démiurge’ (LC, 75) allowing him to reassert control over original artistic production, and his life. In W, Perec details how writing is a tool that he must use, a compulsion that is indelibly linked to his status as a survivor and his parents’ deaths: ‘j’écris parce qu’ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l’écriture’ (W, 64).

The violence of the two texts plays out entirely differently. Le Condottière relishes the torrents of pouring blood of Gaspard’s liberating act, as seen in ‘le rasoir, plongeait en avant et sabrait, dans un va-et-vient d’une rapidité folle […] et le sang jaillissait comme d’un abcès crevé’ (LC, 97). The sudden explosion of violence demonstrates the power of the single, vengeful, liberating act that the book hinges on. The violence of W, however, is more sinister by dint of its gradual and horrific revelation over the course of the text’s second half, with the forced labour and struggle for life on the island of ‘W’ shown to be an allegory for the concentration camps in which Perec’s mother died. The alternating structure serves to heighten this insidiousness as the reader’s synthesis of the allegory linking the fictional narrative and the autobiographical narrative is deferred. This use of a more gradual violence is arguably identifiable in VME, written three years after W, where yet another ‘Gaspard Winckler’, the puzzle-maker, plots his slow revenge on the puzzle-solver, Bartlebooth. This vengeful scheme unfurls over several years, despite the 99 chapters of VME occurring in the single moment of Bartlebooth’s death: conflated deferral and immediacy collide in VME. As such, the theme of revenge, explosively enacted in a single moment of violence in Le Condottière, returns in VME. Furthermore, Perec uses his gradual unfurling structure from W in VME, also found in nascent form in Le Condottière: Perec therefore honed this technique of simultaneous deferral and immediacy over the course of his career.

Perec noted in a letter to Lederer written at the time of Le Condottière’s protracted genesis (11/7/1958) that the idea of ‘clivage’ was central to his conception of his text. Perec’s splitting of the narrative teleology of W suggests the ‘clivage’ of history which separated him from his parents, but frustrates the reader’s final understanding of
the full picture of the interwoven texts.\textsuperscript{34} If we are to see \textit{Le Condottière} as an embryonic work in which the structure governing \textit{W} is first explored, I argue that the structural ‘clivage’ in this text operates in a similar way to defer understanding, but focalized through the character of Gaspard himself rather than Perec the writer. In \textit{W}, the structural split is mastered and operated by Perec, frustrating understanding at the end of each chapter to create a ‘roman d’aventures’ (\textit{W}, quatrième de couverture) full of dramatic suspense, and a contingent autobiographical narrative which edges nearer to adult understanding. This is finally confirmed in Perec’s quotation from Rousset’s \textit{L’Univers concentrationnaire} in the final chapter of \textit{W} which cements the significance of Perec’s analogical island of \textit{W}.\textsuperscript{35} The sole, lengthy, external citation at this crucial point of synthesis suggests an authorial hand that has ordered his text to serve his precise and tragic purposes.

However, in \textit{Le Condottière}, the meandering and elliptical nature of both the narrative following the murder and the dialogue sections with Streten suggests a tentative approach towards understanding that may never be reached. This approach is furthermore suggested by the work’s two epigraphs, which give valuable insight into how the structural splitting of the text contributes to obscured understanding. The first is, crucially, from Leiris’ \textit{L’Âge d’homme}, in whom Perec found a ‘parenté enfin retrouvée’ (\textit{W}, 195):

‘Comme beaucoup d’autres, j’ai fait ma descente aux enfers et, comme quelques-uns, j’en suis plus ou moins ressorti.’ (\textit{ADH}, 27).

This quotation suggests an Orphic personal journey from which the writer, a Dante-like figure, manages to resurface from self-imposed depths. This metaphor suggests the autobiographer’s descent into his own obscure, unconscious abyss: in Leiris’ text, this descent into himself permits his exposure to the potentially lethal ‘corne de taureau’ (\textit{ADH}, 10) of autobiography. In \textit{Le Condottière}, Perec suggests that Gaspard must descend into the abyss in order to emerge fully conscious of himself, enacting the ‘prise de conscience’ that he wished the text to represent.\textsuperscript{36} However, it is tellingly through the dialogue with Streten that Gaspard is shown to recognize the liberating force of the murder. The two parts of the narrative, as later for \textit{W}, are

\textsuperscript{36} C. Burgelin, Preface to \textit{Le Condottière}, p. 25: ‘Georges Perec voulait qu’on le lût comme l’histoire d’une <<prise de conscience>>’. 
mutually contingent for the full synthesis of understanding, although in Le Condottière this understanding is on the part of Gaspard, rather than the reader. At the beginning of his dialogue with Streten, we see his absolute dejection and confusion (‘Je suis perdu, Streten. Je ne comprends plus rien’, LC, 101), yet through Streten’s questioning (‘Que voulais-tu? Que cherchais-tu?’; LC, 101) he is led to triumphant acceptance of his actions (‘J’ai tué Madera et je m’en vante, et je le revendique’, LC, 176). This fulfils an observation made in the second half of the mixed-address strand of the text:

‘Il ne fallait peut-être pas que Madera meure, mais une fois mort, il fallait que son geste aille au-delà de lui-même, comme l’inévitable conclusion […] d’une vie insensée’ (LC, 165).

The precise object of the act is unimportant, even arbitrary, but nonetheless necessary in allowing Gaspard’s self-liberation.37 Gaspard goes to the depths of his own hell and resurfaces, having claimed full consciousness and responsibility for an act similar to the Gidean ‘acte gratuit’. Both Lafacadio’s murder of a man on a train in Gide’s Les Caves du Vatican and Gaspard’s act share an arbitrary object. In Gide’s conception, the ‘acte gratuit’ is ‘un acte dans lequel ce que l’individu a de plus particulier se révèle, se trahit.’38 Gaspard is able to tear away the masks of other artists behind whom he had hidden, resurfacing from his ‘descente aux enfers’. This first epigraph, therefore, suggests the text’s overall arc of descent and re-emergence.39

The second epigraph from Descartes’ Méditations reinforces this insight into the text’s structural dimension:

‘Et premièremenent je rappellerai en ma mémoire quelles sont les choses que j’ai ci-devant tenues pour vraies comme les ayant reçues par les sens, et sur quelles fondements ma créance était appuyé; et après, j’examinerai les raisons qui m’ont obligé depuis à les révoquer en doute, et enfin, je considérerai ce que j’en dois maintenant croire.’

We see from Descartes’ measured syntactical structure (‘premièremenent’ leading logically to ‘et après’ to ‘et enfin’) that he will first examine what he has hence believed, before examining the reasons for his current doubts, and thence projecting

37 This recalls the ‘affranchissement’ (ADH, 22) that Leiris sought from L’Âge d’homme: a personal liberation with wide-reaching consequences.
39 Gaspard emerges literally from his basement atelier, but this metaphor relates to Perec’s wider autobiographical enterprise. Perec states in his journal (26/12/1968), having finished La Disparition and looking towards W: ‘J’émerge. J’existe: je sors’ (quoted in P. Lejeune, La Mémoire et l’oblique, p. 25).
towards what his future beliefs ought to be. When aligned with the narrative arc of
descent and return suggested by the Leiris epigraph, we see that Perec blends self-
enquiry with an analytical, Cartesian procedure of self-exploration. The three-staged
Cartesian approach plays out in *Le Condottière*, as it examines what has lead Gaspard to
his climactic predicament (his enslavement by Madera) in the first part of the text.
Then, in the Streten dialogue text, Gaspard assesses the psychological motivations
behind his actions, before setting out a type of future project in the final coda chapter.
The two epigraphs chosen for *Le Condottière* therefore suggest the dual process by
which Perec stages Gaspard’s self-discovery: first, a Leirisian descent and return, which
governs the two halves of the text respectively; second, a Cartesian three-stage
analytical procedure towards self-knowledge.

The structural ‘clivage’ of the text into two parts is therefore not the only
structuring principle at work. The gradual movement towards Gaspard’s self-knowledge
is underpinned by several structural and formal ‘clivages’ blended together. Considering
*Le Condottière* as an embryonic *mode d’emploi* containing the seeds of Perec’s mature
texts, structural devices are of paramount importance in underscoring the existential
journey played out in different texts. In *W*, the ‘clivage’ is arguably more simple and
stark, as befits the nature of the text and the effects of this device: the frustration of
readerly synthesis heightens the final horror of their understanding. In *Le Condottière*,
the structuring principles of the text are less rigidly enforced: there is no abrupt
indication, such as *W*’s ‘(…)’, to mark the end of the first half, but rather the sudden
interjection of the dialogue narrative, signalling a shift in focus. Yet in both *W* and *Le
Condottière*, Perec defers the ‘prise de conscience’.

This deferral is arguably part of the game of hide-and-seek that Perec associates
with the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (*W*, 18): the author must decide how much to reveal or to
hide from the reader in a constant process of negotiation within which synthesis and
understanding are at stake. Indeed, Perec sees writing as a game of ‘cache-cache’ (*W*,
18), where the writer relishes the tension between the desire to be found or to remain
hidden. In the prototypical *Le Condottière*, Gaspard finally achieves synthesis (‘Je ne
regrette rien!’, *LC*, 177). *W* uses the same structural and formal techniques of *Le
Condottière* arguably to question the conventions of autobiographical understanding,
notably the readerly expectation of eventual synthesis. Molteni has suggested that
Gaspard aims to have control over his means of expression and over reality itself: so too
does Perec, achieving this mastery in form, ‘which constitutes the meeting point between the self and the world, the artist and the Other’.  

Recurring theme – Antonello da Messina’s ‘Le Condottière’

Like the Cranach diptych that features heavily throughout Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*, the importance of visual representations to Perec’s writing is undeniable: the same artworks recur throughout his oeuvre, not least Antonello’s ‘Le Condottière’. The repeated return to art denotes a type of fetishism that has been suggested by some critics (including Molteni) in relation to Perec, yet not properly investigated. Suleiman has gone furthest in flagging up the place of fetish for the ‘1.5 generation’. Her reading of Freud’s ‘Fetishism’ highlights that, in Freud’s view, the fetishistic defense mechanism is communicated or managed in an ‘artful’, creative way. Pursuing Suleiman’s observations further demonstrates how the operation of simultaneous disavowal and affection that Freud sees in fetishistic neuroses is suggested in Perec’s fetishistic attachment to certain paintings, most notably ‘Le Condottière’.

Freud states that, in boys whose fathers have died, a simultaneous belief and denial of the death caused a neurotic state in which ‘the attitude that fitted in with the wish and the attitude with fitted in with reality existed side by side’. This manifests in a concurrent attachment to, and repudiation of, a fetish object. In *Le Condottière*, I regard Perec’s textual double, Gaspard, as fetishistically attached to ‘Le Condottière’ in a way that mimics this simultaneous adoration and repudiation. This is suggested in the same manner that Freud identified in the case of the patient who developed a moderate obsessional neurosis, flitting between the poles of believing his father to be still alive – hindering his growth – and knowing his father to be dead and thereby ready to be succeeded by his son. The relationship to the fetish object in this case was characterized by this conflict.

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41 Suleiman identifies Perec as belonging to this ‘1.5 generation’ who survived the Second World War – specifically the Holocaust – as children, but whose memories of the war are indistinct, transmitted through others, or missing. S. R. Suleiman, *Crises of memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 154.
43 Molteni illustrates that these “fetish” artworks’ also include Antonello’s ‘St Jerôme’, Cranach’s ‘Melanchthon’, Giorgione’s ‘The Tempest’. P. Molteni, PhD thesis, p. 27.
Gaspard’s reverence of the painting is seen in his belief that this particular portrait is the sole way to elevate himself from the slavish position of forger to attaining original creation, to ‘faire moi-même, en partant du Condottière, un autre Condottière, différent, au même niveau’ (LC, 112). The portrait of the ‘Condottière’, in his serene majesty, becomes the desired ‘visage-miroir’ (LC, 99) that Gaspard fetishizes. However, Gaspard’s failed attempt to copy ‘Le Condottière’ is hindered by the uncontrollable urge to paint himself into the portrait, so that it ultimately becomes a self-portrait. It is thus a failed forgery, resulting in the repudiation of his model, as suggested by ‘[i]l resurgissait de ses centres, visage aboli, défiguré, l’homme démoli […] absurde et délirant’ (LC, 115). The painting has become a grotesque figure of mockery (‘absurde’, ‘défiguré’).

Following Suleiman’s statement that those of the ‘1.5 generation’ respond to their grief by the ‘artful’ communication of fetishes, we see that Perec demonstrates, through the figure of Gaspard, his own fetishistic relationship to ‘Le Condottière’. It is arguably a reaction to loss, a creative re-negotiating of the compulsions of affection and hostility left by trauma. Sociologist Jean Duvignaud, Perec’s teacher at Étampes and later friend, suggests that Perec identified with the painting because of the scar on the upper lip (caused by a ski-pole wielded by a classmate, as recounted in W, 145) that he shared with the Condottière: ‘n’est-ce pas, sur sa lèvre à lui, une marque qui lui appartient en propre? La persécution a effacé le souvenir de l’héritage familial […] Cette marque est sa part d’individualité’.45 The scar is the very mark and symbol of Perec’s individuality, a self-claimed identity that could not be based on familial links due to the loss of his parents. ‘Le Condottière’ thus became a familial connection, defined by the scar, in the absence of other models to which Perec could attach himself. This insight supports the view of the painting as fetishistic, in the sense that is a ‘substitute’, the object that Freud saw as providing a replacement to ‘triumph’ over loss.46 Freud’s patients’ loss of their fathers operates on the same basis of simultaneous avowal and disavowal.47

47 Ibid.
The importance of this painting in the formation of his identity is suggested in *W*, although the precise reasons for this remain ‘mal élucidées’ (*W*, 145). He notes that ‘cette cicatrice semble avoir eu pour moi une importance capitale: elle est devenue une marque personnelle, un signe distinctif’ (*W*, 145). The symbolic power of the scar has followed Perec throughout his childhood and into his adult life and work. The recurrence of the painting can be read as the ‘artful’ workings of fetishism that allow Perec to negotiate his loss and recover an ‘iconic family’ in visual art as a substitute for the family lost to him in the Second World War and Holocaust.⁴⁸ Importantly, Freud notes that a fetish is not necessarily problematic. Whilst a fetishistic tendency may be an ‘abnormality’, it is ‘seldom felt […] as the symptom of an ailment accompanied by suffering’.⁴⁹ Leiris’ response to the Cranach diptych in *L’Âge d’homme* is, too, fetishistic but problematic: it comes to dominate his psychosexual life and cause him complications in real-life interactions with women. In contrast, it is possible to see Perec’s repeated use of ‘Le Condottière’ as a helpful and stimulating touchstone in his negotiation of loss and his identity. Perec states in *W* that re-reading his favourite writers provided him with a ‘parenté enfin retrouvée’ (*W*, 195): his favourite paintings arguably provide a similar ‘familial’ link that was taken from him in the loss of his parents.

**Le Condottière as autobiographical**

With the thematic, formal, and structural reverberations of *Le Condottière* in relation to Perec’s later work – most importantly *W* – thus demonstrated, I will assess to what extent *Le Condottière* can be considered as autobiographical. I do not seek to suggest that *Le Condottière* is autofictional.⁵⁰ Perec never murdered, nor was he a professional painter or forger: yet, *Le Condottière*’s protagonist bears some striking metaphorical resemblances to the writer. I will consider how far Gaspard Winckler, in this first iteration in Perec’s œuvre, is his textual double. Perec makes the conflicts of forgery against originality, representation against reality, and the question of artistic

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⁵⁰ S. Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilee, 1977, quatrième de couverture): ‘fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement réels’. Autofictional texts often require that the protagonist shares the same name as the author; texts are often based around true biographical facts of the author’s life, artificially modified or elaborated to become fiction; and aspects of plot and character are sometimes dispensed with.
sincerity the undercurrent of the work by this use of a semi-autobiographical protagonist who is similar, but not identical, to Perec himself. Bellos’ biography suggests something of this crossover without elaborating upon it: I will therefore identify some telling points of communality.⁵¹

Burgelin states that ‘Le Gaspard Winckler du Condottière est un précurseur de l’écrivain Perec’ (LC, 17). Both are borrowers. Gaspard borrows details from others’ works in order to create a composite painting (he copies ‘des fragments du Condottière ou d’autres portraits d’Antonello’ and combines them with his own ‘propres détails’, LC, 135). Perec borrows material from other authors: we know from his mature works that he actively incorporated intertextual material from other writers’ works in his own. This voracious intertextuality has gained significant critical attention, with critics identifying Perec’s implicit invitation for us ‘to read suspiciously and track down the sources’.⁵² For example, the title of Un Homme qui dort is a direct borrowing from Proust’s ‘Combray’ section of A la recherche; Bellos has stated that Un Homme qui dort is more or less entirely made up from veiled quotations; intertextual references are part of the structuring constraints of VME; not to mention his own self-borrowing, such as recycling the name ‘Gaspard Winckler’ three times throughout his œuvre.⁵³ The recycling of material arguably starts in the first iteration of Gaspard.

Both Perec and Gaspard moved home to an alpine refuge ‘à cause de la guerre’ (LC, 120): Perec to Grenoble and Gaspard to Geneva. Bellos points out that the young Gaspard, like Perec, was adopted by a mentor (Duvignaud), and is cut off from his parents. Bellos suggests that these details align Gaspard to Perec, but do not equate them: he states that Gaspard is a ‘false image of Georges Perec’.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is precisely by making of Gaspard a false image of himself that Perec resists the lure of autofiction, which would suggest that the author and protagonist are directly relatable. Perec thus signals the problems of sincere representation that will pervade the rest of his work. This conflict arguably returns most strongly in W, as does another ‘Gaspard Winckler’. In the first half of W, as has been noted, the double ‘je’ highlights the interplay between fiction and autobiography precisely by the ambiguity of the speaking ‘je’. Perec employs the uncertain ‘je’ to demonstrate how writing allows subjectivity to be mobile, unfixed, and manipulable. We see in Le Condottière the first ‘Gaspard Winckler’, who

⁵¹ D. Bellos, A Life in Words, p. 230.
⁵³ D. Bellos, A Life in Words, p. 261.
will be reused in *W* (twice) and *La Vie*: however, it remains ambiguous whether the four Gaspards are the same ‘person’.

This underscores, like the mobile ‘je’ of *W*, the instability of identity that concerns Perec, as the signifier – the name – is shown to be no guarantee whatsoever of reality – the signified. Bénabou would later extend the ludic potential of the mobile ‘je’, stating that ‘*Je* après tout n’est qu’un mot comme un autre […] avec lequel il n’est pas interdit de jouer’ (*PQ*, 24). In Perec’s work, however, the four Gaspards attest to the motif of the unknown which runs through Perec’s biography. It is thus possible to see *Le Condottière* as autobiographical, as it stages Perec’s real-life concerns with authenticity: not only artistic authenticity, but the authenticity of identity.\(^{55}\) Perec details in *W* how his own family name, the vestige tying him to his parents, had undergone transliteration and transformation from Polish into French: he highlights that in Hebrew his family name would mean ‘trou’, a hole or absence (*W*, 56). Perec thus suggests the instability of the sign through the indeterminacy of the name ‘Gaspard Winckler’, a fictional signifier without a stable signified. It is thus significant that Gaspard’s attempt in *Le Condottière* to paint the ‘Condottiere’ portrait is an existential quest for self-knowledge and self-recognition (Gaspard desires to ‘*me connaître et connaître le monde*’, *LC*, 165). This quest undoubtedly underscores *W*.

Perec wrote that the first version of *Le Condottière* was a ‘*livre de la défilialité*’, stating that ‘*j’ai tant souffert d’être « le fils » que ma première œuvre ne peut être que la destruction totale de tout ce qui m’engendra (le bourreau, thème connu, automaïeutique)*’ (*LC*, 11). We see here a degree of iconoclasm in this early work. This violence would be a self-inflicted break with his heredity, allowing him to cut the threads tying him to his status as orphan.\(^{56}\) Perec’s use of ‘automaïetique’ is doubly redolent. It suggests firstly the notion of self-birth, a rupture with his heredity and a re-appropriation of his own self-creation that he hopes to explore in *Le Condottière*. Secondly, it implies the Socratic maieutic or dialectical approach to reasoning, whereby the implicit beliefs of one interlocutor are brought forth by the systematic questioning of another. The reflexive ‘automaïeutique’ suggests that Perec will be his own interlocutor, against whom he argues to access the basis of his beliefs. This self-analysis as a process

\(^{55}\) Perec would also explore this in his investigation of immigration into the USA through Ellis Island in *Récits d’Ellis Island* (Paris: Sorbier, 1980) and its accompanying documentary film, where immigrants’ previous identities were cast off or changed upon arrival in New York.

\(^{56}\) One notes the homographic play of ‘fils’ to mean both ‘son’ and ‘threads’ that Doubrovsky would employ in *Fils*. 98
of ‘défilialité’ indicates how writing *Le Condottière* allowed Perec to end his psychoanalysis, and to find a self-analytical method in writing itself.\(^5^7\) *Le Condottière* represents the textual dramatization of this break.

The dialogue sections dramatize Perec’s self-maieutic process of ‘défilialité’ textually, by using Streten as the interlocutor against whom Gaspard is encouraged to think through his beliefs and actions. Self-re-appropriation is enacted by this exchange. If Perec stated that he sought to efface his status as orphaned by ‘l’Histoire avec sa grande hache’ (*W*, 17), then Gaspard is shown equally to want to sever himself from a past over which he had no control. He states in his final, triumphant, extended soliloquy at the end of his dialogue with Streten that his life was, like Perec’s, without roots (‘Une vie sans racines, sans attaches’, *LC*, 175) other than to an immaterial wider history to which he does not feel connected (‘Sans autre passé que le passé du monde, abstrait et figé, comme un catalogue de musée’, *LC*, 175). Crucially, this history is precisely that which haunted the life of Perec: ‘l’univers mesquin. Le camp. Le ghetto. La prison.’ (*LC*, 175, my emphasis).

This can be compared with the opening autobiographical passage of *W*, where Perec tells of his dispossession over his personal history: ‘J’en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l’Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps’ (*W*, 17). The almost identical paratactical construction of these two phrases, and the emphasis on the spectral ‘camp’ in both (the place of Perec’s mother’s death), indicates strongly that Gaspard and Perec are inheritors of a history over which they feel powerless. Gaspard breaks with this immobility with Madera’s murder (‘Il fallait que tout explode, d’un seul coup’, *LC*, 176). The rupture with his situation is enacted through literal ‘défilialité’, the murder of the father-figure of the text (‘Je lui devais tout. Il m’avait pris en charge, il m’a fait vivre’, *LC*, 177). His final words (the exclamatory ‘Je ne regrette rien!’ 177) leave us with no uncertainty as to the emancipating force of his ‘premier geste du démiurge’ (*LC*, 75).\(^5^8\) Gaspard’s meandering speech is shown, in his final two empowered soliloquies, to gain a forcefulness that heightens this self-re-appropriation through his literal ‘défilialité’. His ‘prise de conscience’ is shown in the

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\(^{5^7}\) Perec writes in a letter that *Le Condottière* ‘me permet de rompre avec toute une tradition de psychanalyse, de la dépasser’, 56 lettres à un ami, p. 17.

\(^{5^8}\) Piaf’s recording of ‘Non, je ne regrette rien’ was released in the same year that *Le Condottière* was written. She dedicated it to the French Foreign Legion and it became the parade song of the ‘1er Régiment étranger de parachutistes’ during the Algerian War. Perec’s father belonged to the ‘12e Régiment étranger d’infanterie’ at his death: Perec, to the ‘18e Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes’.
text to be both enacted in relation to, and explained through, an ‘other’: his opposition to Madera and Streten allows Gaspard’s self-discovery to be brought about in his relations to others.

We can see the writing of *Le Condottière* as the site of Perec’s own self-re-appropriation. This is most evident in the final, coda-like section of the text. Throughout *Le Condottière*, Perec employs a mixed address that includes a fleeting ‘je’ (e.g. ‘Je l’ai saisi sous les aisselles, j’ai descendu’, *LC*, 35). This first-person disappears after the work’s opening page, to be replaced by a second-person familiar ‘tu’, which appears to be either Gaspard addressing himself (‘Tu vois, tu te disais peut-être que c’était facile’, *LC*, 36) or a familiar narrator addressing Gaspard.59 This is further complicated by the addition of a third-person address (‘Maintenant il se rappelait le moindre de ses gestes […] Il regardait le Condottière’, *LC*, 38). This confusion mirrors Gaspard’s emotional state in the aftermath of the murder. However, in the final chapter, the second-person ‘tu’ address takes on a new significance. Immediately following Gaspard’s disavowal of remorse (‘Je ne regrette rien!’), the ‘tu’ address returns in a more measured and self-assured guise. The ‘tu’ no longer shows any of the ellipses or self-questioning that characterize the previous second-person passages. Rather than an address to Gaspard, I argue that the ‘tu’ address here can be read as a self-address where Perec apostrophizes himself. This can be seen in passages such as:

‘Ce que tu atteindras se trouvera ailleurs, après des années et des années de recherche et de création […] repartant, pour la dixième, pour la vingtième, pour la centième fois, à la recherche de ta propre vérité, à la recherche de ta propre expérience, à la recherche de ta propre vie. La maîtrise du monde.’ (*LC*, 178).

The continual self-exploration described here prefigures the autobiographical concern of Perec’s mature work. The notion of the ‘maîtrise du monde’, which both Gaspard and Perec indentify in *Le Condottière* painting, was a principle that governed Perec’s writing, not only in his sociological texts which attempted to exhaust aspects of the world, but also in his desire to exhaust all possible modes of writing.60 He viewed his work as a continual process of re-writing that sought out different aspects of the writer’s life, indeed the very ‘propre vérité’ that the narrator of *Le Condottière* here suggests.

59 This uncertain ‘tu’ address would later be used in *Un Homme qui dort* to a similar destabilizing effect: the reader is uncertain whether this ‘tu’ is one of self-address, or whether the focalization is external.

60 See *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1975). He noted in ‘Notes sur ce que je cherche’ that he wanted to write ‘écrire tout ce qui est possible à un homme d’aujourd’hui d’écrire’ (*P/C*, p. 11).
The final lines of *Le Condottière* outline the myriad possibilities that Perec’s future writing would explore:


The anaphora of ‘peut-être’ suggests the provisional and exploratory nature of these potential enquiries. These projects pertain to both Gaspard and Perec. For Gaspard, he might seek to explore portraiture (‘les visages’), still life (‘les objets’), or landscape (‘les paysages’). For Perec, this passage suggests that he might seek to explore characters, objects, or spaces to examine the world. Thinking prospectively to his later work, it is clear that *Un Homme qui dort*, *Les Choses*, and *Espèces d’espaces* demonstrate (amongst others) how these topics would later be handled by the writer. This reinforces the view that Perec’s ‘tu’ address here is a self-address, where Perec outlines his future creative projects.

Most importantly, Perec points to autobiography in this coda section. The final lines suggests that future work will:


The shift from the repeated ‘peut-être’ to ‘sûrement’ suggest an emphatic assuredness to the future creative project, which will drill into the roots of the incomplete world (Perec’s own world, shattered by his parent’s deaths) towards the day when he will achieve a new clarity (‘lucidité’) of understanding. In light of the later publication of *W*, in which Perec most emphatically explores the unexplained and the incomplete, this coda section is an important anticipation of the mature writer’s later interests. *Le Condottière* stands as the very point of ‘défilialité’, being the point at which Perec launches into the writing project that spanned the rest of his career. If Gaspard’s ‘prise de conscience’ is enacted in relation to oppositional ‘others’ (Madera and Streten), Perec’s own creative realization is achieved through his mirrored textual ‘other’, Gaspard.

My analysis of Perec’s early writing demonstrates that critical thematic and structural principles of his mature work are found in embryonic form in *Le Condottière*. Here, he first experimented with the bipartite structure that would be crucial to *W*. *Le
Condottière stages a conflict where the frustrated artist claims his individuality: both intradiagnostically in Gaspard’s murderous revenge, and extradiagnostically as Perec used the theme of ‘défilialité’ to break with his own difficult childhood history. The collision of autobiography and fiction (brought to bear in W) in the use of Gaspard as Perec’s textual cipher, indicates the author’s very early interest in blurring generic boundaries. The work ends with a casting forward to the possibilities for further literary exploration, which played out in Perec’s wider œuvre. Bénabou would also later use the final section of Epopée to look forward to a new genre of abortive writing that he hopes to herald, although by contrast to Le Condottière, Epopée itself is the fulfilment of this wish. Perec instead would act on the future plans envisaged at the end of Le Condottière. I assert that Le Condottière, despite its undeniable juvenile status in relation to his later writing, is a vital, under-examined text for the appreciation of Perec.

Le Condottière is furthermore the first iteration of Perec’s interest in visual art and, crucially, its corruptibility. Casting an art forger as his protagonist and highlighting the existential struggle between genuine creation and forgery, Perec broaches the problems of artistic representation, where reality and its representation are in conflict. In his later work, this divergence between artistic representation and observed reality – particularly the reality of the self-perceiving subject in autobiography – would grow in importance, and is developed from a thematic motif to a defining principle of Perec’s writing.61 My examination of Le Condottière therefore responds to the central research questions of this thesis, namely how a composite and unstable sense of self is arrived at in writing through a creative engagement with the difficulties of autobiography.

Part 2 – Art, autobiography, and readers: Un Cabinet d’amateur to W ou le souvenir d’enfance

Perec’s later works concerning visual art, notably Un Cabinet d’amateur and L’Œil ébloui (1981), demonstrate his probing of the ideas of artistic creation, authenticity, and art’s corruptibility. Perec translates certain overlapping techniques from visual art – namely, mise-en-abîme, anamorphosis, and trompe-l’œil – into his literature. I assert that this has profound effects on his autobiographical method, which

61 An abandoned project, Lieux (started in 1969, abandoned in 1975), most notably sets up this conflict between observation and representation: Perec chose 12 locations in Paris to document twice, in situ and from memory, over the course of 12 years, in order to produce 288 texts which would demonstrate ‘un triple vieillissement: celui des lieux eux-mêmes, celui de mes souvenirs, et celui de mon écriture’ (Espèces, 77).
can be most readily identified in *W*, and further illustrates Perec’s engagement with the instability of his identity and its translation into writing.

Writing’s inability to truly represent or capture lived reality signals the illusion of the unified and comprehensible autobiographical subject for Perec. Perec calls into question the very possibility of achieving a ‘récit rétrospectif en prose’, not only because of the non-existence of a ‘personne réelle’ who possesses any degree of self-knowledge, but also because of the necessary limitations of writing. Nonetheless, Perec asserts the importance of writing to his project of self-insight: Perec sees writing as part of his existential situation, and essential to deictically marking his existence in the world. Perec thus exposes the divergence between reality and its artistic representation, employing instead an imaginative reinterpretation and representation of experience in which he probes the status of ‘the real’ itself and emphasizes the limits of perceptual reality. This is achieved by the adoption of these three artistic techniques in his writing.

Using *mise-en-abîme*, anamorphosis, and *trompe-l’œil* – themselves decisively ludic techniques – establishes a certain approach to reading that Perec desired from his audience. This has two important dimensions. Firstly, Perec sees the reader-writer relationship as a playful, gaming dialogue, characterized as a ludic process rather than a win or lose battle. Whilst Bénaïbou would later exploit this same playful relationship, tinging it with a degree of hostility and irony, Perec stresses a more egalitarian rapport. When asked in an interview how he situated himself to his readers, he responded that:

‘I represent myself as something like a chess player […] during the process of reading, I consider him like a chess mate – somebody who is playing a part with me’.

Perec thus emphasizes not only the ‘process of reading’, but the performative aspect of the role-playing involved. This collaborative gaming (‘playing a part with me’), however, has no end other than itself. Bohman-Kalaja attributes this to the fact that the ‘value’ of texts such as Perec’s is ‘non-cumulative’: meaning is created in the to-and-fro collaborative dialogue between playing pairs, rather than in the final completion of any textual game.

Indeed, Perec compares literature to the game of Go: the addictive quality of this game, as well as literature, is the paradoxical sense in which the gamer

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64 K. Bohman-Kalaja, *Reading Games*, p. 236.
gives himself over to ‘un jeu qu’on ne maîtrisera jamais […] parce que la subtilité du jeu ne se monnaie pas’.\(^{65}\) This dialogue has been shown to be central to Leiris’ relationship to his reader, where the collaborative confessor was bestowed with the shared responsibility of reconstructing Leiris’ mosaic text, weighing up along with the writer the significance of any connection between episodes. Much like Bartlebooth’s creative project in \(VME\), recreating and destroying his watercolour puzzles, Perec indicates that the games of reading are ‘un projet unique dont la nécessité arbitraire n’aurait d’autre fin qu’elle-même’ (\(VME\), 152). Perec’s perspective on reading is to a certain extent aligned with Barthes’, as the reader becomes ‘non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte’, who has the permission to ‘jouer’, rather than simply the function to ‘recevoir ou de rejeter le texte’.\(^{66}\) Rather than being the sole producer of the text, Perec invites his reader into a collaborative exchange where the reader becomes a co-producer of the work. This is suggested by his use of the three artistic techniques outlined above, and brought to bear most importantly in \(W\).

The second notable dimension of the reading approach encouraged by Perec is the challenge it represents to conventions and habits of reading. Perec notes in an essay entitled ‘Lire: esquisse socio-physiologique’, which examines the conditions and situations of reading, that an ‘art de la lecture […] pourrait consister à lire de côté, à porter sur le texte un regard oblique’ (\(P/C\), 115). Reading, according to Perec, is an act that demands the reader’s sideways, inquisitive, and active perspective on literary texts. Perec’s use of the three artistic techniques, transposed into his writing, emphasize a metatextual, oblique, reading process which exposes the artificial customs that have come to govern our perception of both meaning and reality, and how these are represented in the artistic sphere. Boyle notes that Perec’s texts demonstrate a desire to combat ‘the stupor which blinds us to the ideological assumptions behind systems’: whilst she attributes this specifically to Perec’s exploration of space in \(Espèces\), I argue that this can be extended to the realms of reading and self-perception.\(^{67}\) This, as will be shown in the next chapter, is also important for Bénabou, whose both hostile and complicit relationship with the reader challenges the expectations and assumptions behind the exercise of reading. The reading process encouraged by Perec and Bénabou exposes not only the ‘ideological assumptions’ behind reading systems governing

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\(^{67}\) C. Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies*, p. 81.
production of meaning, but also the assumptions underwriting the construction of self in literary texts.

*Un Cabinet d’amateur* and *W: mise-en-abîme* and anamorphosis

*Cabinet*, the final text published in Perec’s lifetime, demonstrates the author’s textual dramatization of the complications of visual representation, stemming from art’s vulnerability to forgery and distortion. Perec uses the motif of art’s corruptibility to demonstrate that all representation is plagued to some extent by falsehood, drawing the reader’s attention metatextually to the constructed and artificial nature of textual representation. Through the text’s sustained analogy, and the use of the related artistic techniques of anamorphosis and *mise-en-abîme*, Perec suggests that this corruptibility also applies to writing. The notion of the ‘faire-semblant’ underscores the entire text: Perec’s final assertion of the text’s falsity encourages the reader to question the nature of textual representation. *Cabinet* is thus the textual enactment of an interest in anamorphosis and optical illusion that fascinated Perec, transposed from art to writing. *Cabinet* becomes an anamorphic text employing several layers of *mise-en-abîme*, requiring the reader’s ‘regard oblique’ (*P/C*, 115), a sideways view on written texts that Perec also valued in the observation of art.68

The corruptible nature of art is explored in *Cabinet* through the motif of forgery that Perec had first visited in *Le Condottière*. The celebrated artworks collected by Hermann Raffke are fakes, forged by his nephew and authenticated by a complicit art critic: the titular *cabinet d’amateur* painting is the biggest swindle of the Raffke collection, reflecting ad infinitum its absolute falseness. Perec repeatedly employs devices that emphasize the authenticity of the narrative and of the paintings described in it by quoting an art critic, Nowak. Perec uses Nowak, in addition to various prosaic lists detailing Raffke’s collection, to affirm this logic of authenticity: for instance, references to real paintings are interspersed with bogus paintings, such that the reader might not recognise their fictitiousness.

Perec alternates between an impartial third-person narrative voice (‘Le matin du jeudi 2 avril 1914, Herman Raffke fut trouvé mort’, *CA*, 29) and a wall-text style of

plain ekphrastic description (‘Gaspard Ten Broek: *Paysage de Picardie*; Acheté à un antiquaire de la rue de Lille en 1875’, *CA*, 55). This style echoes the use of listing that Perec admired in Jules Verne: Perec uses a quotation from *Vingt lieues sous les mers* (1869) as his epigraph, where Aronnax lists the artworks found in Captain Nemo’s study, itself a *cabinet d’amateur*. This enumeration heightens the seeming impartiality of the text and the authenticity of the artworks described. The reader learns after 170 catalogue descriptions of paintings that the narrative is a double hoax: the majority of the paintings in Raffke’s collection are forgeries. Perec’s parting words, furthermore, put the whole text *en abîme*:

> ‘Des vérifications entreprises avec diligence ne tardèrent pas à démontrer qu’en effet la plupart des tableaux de la collection Raffke étaient faux, comme sont faux la plupart des détails de ce récit fictif, conçu pour le seul plaisir, et le seul frisson, du faire-semblant.’ (*CA*, 90).

In this final statement, Perec introduces a new, metaleptical narrative mode: this extradiegetic description is able to designate ‘ce récit fictif’ as fiction. As he also does in the final chapter of *W* in which he quotes Rousset’s *L’Univers concentrationnaire*, and in the final coda section of *Le Condottière*, Perec breaks with expectation to introduce a new oblique perspective on the text which has gone before. This authorial interjection asserts Perec’s control over the narrative: the anaphorical ‘le seul plaisir, le seul frisson’ suggests the playfulness of the author’s creation and consequent demolition of narrative suspension of disbelief. Perec indicates that the ruse of the text has not been the internal plot of forgery, but rather a larger deceit on the part of the author taking pleasure in leading the reader on a journey of ‘faire-semblant’. Author and reader collide in the bathetic subversion of the very text the reader has before them. Perec thus uses visual art’s *mise-en-abîme* not only on the level of content, but as a textual strategy that governs the structure of the work and its metatextual implications. The text’s final lines subvert the mimetic authenticity of the written text, signalling its artificial, fictional status. The referential illusion is disrupted in order to highlight writing’s representative illusion.

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69 See Appendix, Figure 2. Perec noted that ‘Quand, dans *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, Jules Verne énumère sur quatre pages tous les noms de poissons, j’ai l’impression de lire un poème’ (‘J’ai fait imposer les arts’, *Galerie des arts*, 184 (1978), p. 73).
Dällenbach has identified two different forms of mise-en-abîme. First, there is the Gidean, heraldic form, where ‘on retrouve ainsi transposé [à l’intérieur de l’œuvre] le sujet même de cette œuvre’. Secondly, there is mise-en-abîme employing mirrors to capture inside a painting that which is fictively outside it. In this form, we do not see the work reflected inside itself, but rather the exterior world beyond the limits of the painting’s frame. Van Eyck’s ‘The Arnolfini Portrait’, which Perec saw in London, or Velasquez’s ‘Las Meninas’ (referenced in Cabinet), both employ internal reflection through mirrors. Mise-en-abîme in Cabinet is both visual and textual. Raffke is put into the abîme of the vast artwork he commissions, showing him repeated ad infinitum at the centre of his collection. The internal repetition of the titular, intradiegetic cabinet d’amateur thus aligns with the Gidean form of mise-en-abîme. However, the mise-en-abîme of the text as a whole takes Dällenbach’s second form. Van Eyck and Velasquez’s paintings throw the viewer’s gaze outside the possible limits of the frame, as Dällenbach suggests: ‘aux confins du dedans et du dehors, [la réflexion] constitue [...] une manière de passage à la limite’. Similarly, Perec’s text refers outside itself to the exterior world: this is demonstrated by the sudden metatextual bathos at the end of Cabinet. Van Eyck and Velazquez’s mirrors suggest the inherent limitations for the artwork to contain a maximum of visual information: Perec, too, implies this, encouraging his readers to use a ‘regard oblique’ (P/C, 115) on his works. By putting his entire text en abîme in the final metaleptical intervention, Perec indicates the limit point of his text’s illusory capacity, abruptly sending the reader beyond the confines of this single work. Dällenbach observes that ‘en rendant intelligible le mode de fonctionnement du récit, la réflexion textuelle est toujours aussi mise en abîme du code’: textual mise-en-abîme operates by highlighting the text’s ‘code’ or mode of

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73 See Appendix, Figures 3 and 4. Perec notes in ‘Promenades dans Londres’ that he saw Holbein’s ‘The Ambassadors’, Van Eyck’s ‘The Arnolfini Portrait’ and Antonello da Messina’s ‘St Jerome in his Study’ in the National Gallery (L’Infra-ordinaire, Paris: Seuil, 1989, p. 84). Perec’s interest in Van Eyck is seen in Le Condottière: Perec cites Ziloty’s *La Découverte de Jean Van Eyck et l’évolution de la peinture à l’huile du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris: Librairie Floury, 1941), and borrows from it two quotes from Vasari. Antonello da Messina was said to have learnt under Van Eyck. In Le Condottière, Gaspard looks to Van Eyck as a figure of artistic and moral guidance, as shown in ‘Nul Van Eyck n’était là pour te montrer la route…’ (Le Condottière, 118). The influence of a Van Eyck-style mise en abîme is arguably present in *Un Cabinet.*

functioning.75 This is indeed what Perec achieves at the end of Cabinet, sending the reader back to the fictionality of the work before them, reinforcing its materiality as a fictional story where the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (W, 18) are skillfully manipulated by the author.

Perec noted that an art of reading ‘pourrait consister à lire de côté, à porter sur le texte un regard oblique’ (P/C, 115). The word ‘oblique’ suggests an ‘aslant’ view, but also ‘elliptical’ or ‘circuitous’: essentially, non-linear. Just as the writer plays a circuitous game, so should Perec’s reader. In Cabinet, oblique reading takes on a specifically visual dimension. As in Holbein’s anamorphic painting ‘The Ambassadors’, the viewer’s sideways perspective allows what the artist has encrypted in the painting or text to suddenly come into view.76 The anamorphic skull of ‘The Ambassadors’ is a visual puzzle, requiring the viewer to reposition themselves to decrypt it, and conferring new meaning on the rest of the painting. Cabinet can be considered as an anamorphic text, in that the sudden bathetic ending forces the reader to suddenly view the whole text in a new perspective. Through this repositioning in relation to the text, the reader is encouraged to see the artificial materiality of literary texts, to confront the mechanisms that allow the suspension of disbelief when reading.

Cabinet therefore employs the techniques of anamorphosis and mise-en-abîme from the visual arts, transposed into the textual realm. This suggests that texts are open to ludic – even capricious – manipulation by their author, who in a stroke can signal to his reader the artificial materiality of the text before him. We can thus consider Cabinet as an invocation to the reader to question the nature of artistic representation. Perec suggests that though the writer may wish to be sincere, the violability and artificiality of art and writing, stemming from their material and constructed status, will endure.77 The writer himself is shown to be party to the distorting ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (W, 18): Perec suggests that the battle between sincerity and writing’s distortions is the inevitable state of writing.

To understand the implications of this for Perec’s autobiographical project, it is helpful to return to Dällenbach, who examines a passage of Gide’s Journal where the writer watches himself writing in a mirror. Dällenbach notes that despite Gide’s desire

75 Ibid, p. 127.
76 See Appendix, Figure 5. Perec recounts seeing this painting in ‘Promenades dans Londres’, in L’Infra-ordinaire, p. 84. He refers to it 11 times in VME.
77 This theme is elsewhere communicated with relation to plagiarism and the confrontation between original and second-degree creation: Le Condottière, Cabinet, Le Voyage d’hiver, and VME all examine this conflict.
to restore the immediate relationship of ‘soi à soi’ through watching himself write, this is inevitably interrupted by ‘la discontinuité et [...] décalage introduits par l’exercice même de l’écriture!’.

The disjointing and deferring activity of writing will always intrude into attempts for the author to capture himself ‘tel qu’il veut se voir’, with the writer’s imaginative specularity mirrored in textual specularity. Dällenbach’s analysis of Gide demonstrates the conflict between the writer’s attempts to capture himself and the interruption of writing into self-portraiture, as writing’s vulnerability to distortion obscures sincerity.

Perec’s autobiographical texts demonstrate this conflict between distortion and sincerity. I argue that we can consider *W* as, like *Cabinet*, an anamorphic text. The synthesis of the two interwoven strands of narrative is deferred until the end of the text, where the quotation from Rousset’s *L’Univers concentrationnaire* brings the horrifying contingency of the two narratives into focus for the reader. This is, crucially, enacted through the interjection of a metaleptic narrative perspective, much like the bathetic subversion used later in *Cabinet*, and similar to the sudden emergence of Holbein’s anamorphic skull.

*W* repeatedly emphasizes the distorting processes of the ‘pièges de l’écriture’ (*W*, 18), suggesting that to write autobiographically runs the risk of an unavoidable self-distortion. Leiris notes this problem in *L’Âge d’homme*, stating that ‘un tableau de moi, peint selon ma propre perspective, a de grandes chances de laisser dans l’ombre certains détails’ (ADH, 24). The autobiographical text becomes anamorphically, and inescapably, warped, much as Gide’s attempt at self-scrutiny was thwarted by the interruptions of writing’s own mechanisms. In *W*, this distortion takes the form of self-corrections and misremembering, which indicate the difficulty of recovering memories and rendering these textual. This self-revision is seen, for instance, in the thrice-repeated episode of Perec’s separation from his mother at the Gare de Lyon, each time with small details, such as the sling he believes he wore, slightly distorted (*W*, 80-81).

A noteworthy example of this self-revision is his (mis)remembering of identifying the Hebrew ‘gammeth, ou gammel’ (*W*, 27) in a newspaper as a child of around 3 years in Chapter IV. Perec uses revisionary endnotes to revise statements made earlier in the chapter. Crucially, Perec employs the lexis of visual art, which reinforces the translation of visual art into his autobiographical writing. He notes that the memory ‘aurait pour cadre l’arrière-boutique de ma grand-mère’ (*W*, 26, my

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78 L. Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire*, p. 27.
79 Ibid.
emphasis): the suggestion that the memory is framed as a painted scene is notable, particularly in relation to Leiris’ use of framing in *L’Âge d’homme*. This visual emphasis is heightened by his inclusion of the misremembered graphic of the ‘gammeth, ou gammel’ (*W*, 27): as he remembers it, a rectangle with an open corner in the bottom-left (which, at best, passes for a warped ‘ד’ or ‘mem’). The shape of the letter included in *W* can thus be considered as a broken frame, indicating the first of many slippages in this passage. No letter called a ‘gammeth, ou gammel’ – which Perec liked to believe echoed with his first initial – exists in Hebrew: the ‘gimmel’ (ג) bears no similarity to the letter drawn by Perec. We see here the erosion of imaginary identification with his heritage in this misremembering: furthermore, his endnote revision suggests that he used to play this deciphering game not with Yiddish newspapers, but with French. Perec indicates the slippage in identity at play in his attempt to write his memories: in fact, writing itself (the graphic images of the Hebrew alphabet confused with the Roman script of French) is the locus of this confusion. Like Gide, frustrated with the interventions of writing’s caprices into his attempted self-examination, Perec implies that the instability of signifiers themselves is the source of autobiographical difficulty.

Perec notes that the scene ‘ressemble pour moi à un tableau, peut-être de Rembrandt ou peut-être inventé, qui se nommerait « Jésus en face des Docteurs »’ (*W*, 27): the framed memory is perceived as an artwork. Perec’s footnote to this statement indicates that, in this ‘souvenir ou pseudo-souvenir’, Jesus is a newborn surrounded by old men, whereas all the paintings Perec has seen representing the Biblical scene « Jesus au milieu des Docteurs » (variously called ‘The Finding in the Temple’, ‘Christ among the Doctors’, or ‘The Disputation’ in English) feature Christ as an adult. Perec therefore

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80 This foreshadows the structural principal of *VME* where the 100th chapter is ‘missing’: this chapter is the room missing in the bottom left corner of the building plan of 11, rue Simon-Crubellier.

81 The significance of names, initials, and personal identity is strong for Perec: from the transliteration of the name ‘Peretz’, meaning ‘hole’ in Hebrew, to ‘Perec’ via a mistake in copying the name between Russian and Polish (*W*, 56); to the recurrence of the name ‘Gaspard Winckler’ throughout his oeuvre; Bénabou notes that ‘In Perec’s works, names not only serve to identify characters, they also serve to highlight the identity problems that face them, and that face their creator also’ (M. Bénabou, ‘Perec’s Jewishness’, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol 13, 1993, 76-87 (p. 85)).

decides that ‘[l]e tableau auquel je me réfère, s’il existe, est beaucoup plus vraisemblablement une « Présentation au Temple »’ (W, 28). The influence of visual art on Perec’s autobiographical method is clear: his points of reference for this distorted memory are paintings. Yet furthermore, I argue that Perec suggests to his reader a further incongruity that heightens the significance of this motif. He stresses twice in this chapter that he was three years old at the time of this memory: he thus revises his comparison of the remembered scene to paintings of ‘The Finding in the Temple’ (where Christ is too old) to, instead, the ‘Presentation of Jesus at the Temple’. Yet in reality, paintings depicting ‘The Finding in the Temple’ (such as those by Rembrandt, Holman Hunt and Durer) show Jesus at around the age of 12: similarly, examples depicting ‘Presentation of Jesus at the Temple’ depict a new-born Jesus (such as those by Lorenzetti, Holbein the Elder, and Bellini). Neither category of painting accurately compares to the scene described in this chapter, of Perec aged 3. This discrepancy underlines the operations of revision and misremembering central to this passage: Perec problematizes both the graphic aspects of letters themselves, and particular artworks, to destabilize his apprehension of his past in the present act of writing. As such, he employs the ‘discontinuité’ and ‘décalage’ that Gide identified in the exercise of self-examination.

Autobiographical self-distortion is furthermore demonstrated in the Chapters VIII and X, where Perec ekphrastically describes photographs of his parents. Pictures pose both an epistemological and ontological problem for Perec that lies in the gap between reality and its means of representation. Barthes states in La Chambre claire that photography has a unique deictic quality (‘ce pur langage déictique’, LCC, 16) that permits it to designate a singular moment, repeatable to infinity and outside the trappings of time. A photograph exists as a signifier bound to its referent by real-world contiguity and by its place in time. Yet he indexical quality of photography rings the death knell of its subject: ‘en déportant ce réel vers le passé (‘ça-a-été’), elle suggère qu’il est déjà mort’ (LCC, 124). Photography’s fixity affirms the future death of the subject contained within it. The ekphrastic description of the photographs demonstrates

83 Van Meegeren, whose work Perec would have seen in the exhibition of forgeries at the Grand Palais in 1955, was asked to paint a ‘Finding in the Temple’ scene in the style of Vermeer during his trial, to prove that he had indeed painted the fake Vermeers sold to the Nazis. Van Meegeren’s example shows a juvenile Christ in the centre of the scene surrounded by older men, his hands resting on an open book, echoing Perec’s memory of this scene: ‘Je suis assis au centre de la pièce, au milieu des journaux Yiddish éparpillés’. Le cercle de la famille m’entoure complètement’ (W, 26). See Appendix, Figure 6.
this epistemological disjunction. Père describes the only photograph of his father in his possession in prosaic, almost childlike detail (‘Il est grand. Il a la tête nue, il tient son calot à la main. Sa capote descend très bas.’ *W*, 46). The passage’s bareness relates to his father’s death: its starkness becomes a symbol of his ultimate disappearance, ‘signe une fois pour toutes d’un anéantissement une fois pour toutes’ (*W*, 63). Père uses an imaginary ‘filling-in’ of biographical detail about his father that the photograph cannot provide. He extrapolates an imaginary life around his father, imagining his ‘plusieurs morts glorieuses’ (*W*, 48) despite his knowledge that his father’s death was needless, and slow. The departure from ekphrasis and the recourse to creatively imagined details (‘[j]e vois un homme qui sifflote’, *W*, 47) is suggestive of the ‘non-fiabilité ontologique’ of photographs in Père’s text which, Reggiani observes, allows Père precisely to write, responding creatively to this epistemological void by creating an imagined ontology around the figure of his father.84 This reveals an absence of what Kawakami calls photography’s ‘ontological realism’ that ties the photographic signifier directly to the referent in the photographs of Père’s parents.85 The photographs contain no promise of the recovered, stable identity that Barthes recognizes in his famous ‘Winter Garden’ photograph. Instead, Père’s ekphrasis demonstrates the ontological and epistemological void left by his parents’ deaths.

As in *Cabinet*, Père foregrounds the question of the writer’s authority over his own text. In *Cabinet*, the authority of the writer lies in his capacity to distort and subvert his own texts, much like the capricious narrator of Bénabou’s *Pourquoi*. The reader is aware of the ludic, indeed capricious workings of writing that are in play in *W*, which intervene into the autobiographer’s attempt to represent memory in written text: this leads to the game of ‘cache-cache’ (*W*, 18) with the reader that centres on the difficulties of sincerity and self-examination. Both *mise-en-abîme* and anamorphosis, therefore, involve effects of distortion that invite the participation of the viewer: Père adopts these principles in both *Cabinet* and *W*.

This emphasis on the specular, distorting artistic mechanisms of *mise-en-abîme* and anamorphosis, transposed thematically and formally into *Cabinet* and *W*, has the effect of strongly implying a reader who is invited to enter into a playful relationship with these texts and their ludic dimension. Bohman-Kalaja indicates that ‘playing […] metaphorically establishes a unique and unrepeatable dialogue between author and

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reader’.\textsuperscript{86} Perec’s use of \textit{mise-en-abîme} and anamorphosis establishes such a dialogue, in which reading ‘n’est plus consommation, mais \textit{jeu}’.\textsuperscript{87} The reader’s collaboration with Perec, in both synthesising meaning between the two seemingly unrelated strands of \textit{W} and in appreciating the humour of the final ruse of \textit{Cabinet}, creates a productive dynamic in which the reader ‘become[s] autonomous […] making their own links between an imaginative work and historical reality’.\textsuperscript{88} Whilst Boyle refers here specifically to the historical reality of the Holocaust inferred by the reader of \textit{W}, this statement can further be applied to a larger perceptual reality, to which Perec seeks to direct his readers’ attention. Perec asks his readers to question the mechanisms of representation by which meaning is created, such that both \textit{W} and \textit{Cabinet} become metaphorical of the act of reading itself. The reader of Perec’s anamorphic texts must ‘entrer dans le jeu de l’ilusion représentative’, if only ultimately to be encouraged to better appreciate the artifice of literature’s representative game.\textsuperscript{89} As we will see, Bénabou extends this facet of Perec’s work, particularly in \textit{Pourquoi} and \textit{Jette}, which ask their reader to confront the assumptions that they bring to reading a text with regard to the straightforward transmission of information. Both Perec and Bénabou in their respective ways reflexively probe the mechanisms of meaning’s production and transmission.

By emphasising the process of reading as a collaborative game or dialogue, Perec transforms reading his texts into what Barthes calls a ‘projet ludique’ concordant with his notion of ‘scriptible’ texts.\textsuperscript{90} In such texts, Barthes argues, the writer’s goal is to ‘multiplier les signifiants, non pour atteindre quelque dernier signifié’.\textsuperscript{91} I argue that Perec’s works, notably \textit{W}, is one such example, the effect of which is to expose the reader to a multidimensional network of signifiers rather than a rigid ‘structure de signifiés’ to be consumed passively. The lack of writerly synthesis and the emphasis on multivalent or ambiguous signifiers such as the ‘gammel’, the name ‘Gaspard’, and the elliptical ‘(…)’ dividing \textit{W} into two halves operate as pieces of a Perecquian puzzle that invites the reader’s participation in an open-ended ‘projet ludique’. Suleiman notes that

\textsuperscript{86} K. Bohman-Kalaja, \textit{Reading Games}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{87} R. Barthes, \textit{S/Z}, p. 23, my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{88} C. Boyle, \textit{Consuming Autobiographies}, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{90} R. Barthes, \textit{S/Z}, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, p. 171 and p. 12.
phenomenological critics of reading emphasize that ‘the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations’: by multiplying the galaxy of signifiers in his texts, Perec ensures that the opportunities for play with his reader remain open. The mechanisms by which meaning is produced by a representative form of art are thus called into question. The ultimate metaphor of $W$ – the horrors of the island of W standing for the Nazi concentration camps – is a prime example of this. Darrieusecq notes that the work of the reader of $W$ is to ‘entendre en lui-même l’impossibilité de la métaphore’, the incomprehensible impossibility that a fictional account of such terror could find its equivalent in reality. As a co-producer of the text, and yet also the figure who ultimately reconciles the two strands of $W$ to bring about this impossible metaphor, the reader is required to enact the representative moment which Perec suggests is beyond representation. Perec thus suggests, in line with Barthes, that there is no ‘dernier signifié’ to be delivered from author to reader, but that in the course of the reading process the reader will be left with only a network of signifiers which designate an ultimate absence – the absence of his parents, to which writing cannot attest nor represent.

Nonetheless, the absolute necessity of writing for Perec, its status as ‘l’affirmation de ma vie’ ($W$, 64), requires that Perec had to make the best use of writing’s distorting potential: not only this, but Perec made this potential for distortion the very yoke of his text and a unifying theme of his œuvre. From Cabinet to $W$, Perec’s use of art is not only on the level of content or motif, but as a structuring strategy (the use of mise en abîme and anamorphosis). In doing so, he signals to the reader the problematics of creative representation that are inherent to his writing project.

The trompe-l’œil

$L’Œil ébloui$ is Perec’s rarely-cited text that accompanies a collection of photographs of trompe-l’œil murals by Cuchi White. Excepting two brief articles, no extensive examination of this text has been undertaken. It gives valuable insight into

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the intersection between art and autobiography in Perec’s work, in particular the problems of (self-)representation.

Perec states that the most beautiful of the confusions that occur in viewing a trompe-l’œil is when ‘le peintre lui-même […] entre dans son tableau’ (L’Œil, unpaginated). This statement can be related to a further observation by Perec about artistic realism, where in response to the question ‘Pourquoi aimons-nous Klee?’ he observed ‘[l]e problème de la possibilité d’un monde cohérent exprimé directement par la peinture. Il faut inscrire le peintre dans l’œuvre comme élément à son tour contradictoire’. In both statements, we see Perec’s keenness to see the artist depicted autobiographically in his own works (much like Velasquez in ‘Las Meninas’). The second statement, however, asserts the importance of the artist as a contradictory presence. This is arguably played out in W where, as discussed, Perec contradicts himself repeatedly, acting as the ‘élément […] contradictoire’ in his own work. Perec suggests that this element of autobiographical self-contradiction combats against the difficulty of expressing coherent reality: the autobiographer thus becomes a destabilizing force within his own work in order to suggest that such coherence does not exist, or at least is not representable in art.

Perec offers a definition of the trompe-l’œil that underscores the play between imitation, forgery, and reality at stake in his autobiographical work: ‘c’est une peinture qui s’efforce d’imiter à s’y méprendre le réel’ (L’Œil). Trompe-l’œil paintings are those that push imitation or mimesis to its maximum capacity, to the point at which it appears to cross over into reality. They have the unique ability to force the viewer to question both reality itself and our perception of it: ‘La peinture, on peut supposer que l’on sait ce que c’est […] Mais le réel? Où commence-t-il? Où finit-il? Et comment pourra-t-on jamais vérifier la véracité du message transmis à nos centres visuels?’ (L’Œil). Perec suggests that whilst it is easy to define the limits of painting, delimiting reality is more difficult. The trompe-l’œil’s deceit is that the boundary between the real and the fake dissolves when momentary doubt is forced upon the viewer: ‘il n’y a plus de limite précise à la réalité’ (L’Œil).

The trompe-l’œil, therefore, sends the viewer back to themselves through its sudden emphasis on the circumstances of viewing and the onlooker’s perspective: not only are these paintings anamorphic and specular, but they also relate to the textual dynamics of both Cabinet and W. Cabinet blurs the limit between the real and the fake

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95 Quoted in D. Bellos, Georges Perec: A Life in Words, p. 295.
by allowing both real and fake paintings to co-exist within the work. As in a trompe-l’œil, the textual ruse of Cabinet centres on its illusory function – although this is playfully shattered by Père in its final lines. Père’s statement that ‘c’est à l’illusion seule que se réfère le trompe-l’œil et c’est l’illusion seule qui lui confère sa réalité’ (L’Œil) could equally apply textually to Cabinet, which succeeds only if the suspension of disbelief, its ‘illusion seule’, is effectively maintained until the final lines. Bénabou, for his part, plays with a similar technique particularly in Pourquoi, but rather than highlighting suddenly the circumstances of viewing or reading, he sustains a metatextual emphasis throughout the whole text, continually reasserting its mechanisms to the reader.

The trompe-l’œil’s relation to W is twofold. Firstly, Père states that, like crossword clues, the trompe-l’œil acts as a question ‘dont la réponse est tout entière contenue dans l’énoncé qui la formule’ (L’Œil). The use of the lexical field of writing (‘l’énoncé’) suggests that Père sees the trompe-l’œil as analogous to writing. The indication that trompe-l’œil are performative of themselves – that they contain their own answer in their visual (or verbal) expression – can be related to Père’s autobiographical enquiry, as Père claims to find his motivation for writing only in the very exercise of writing itself. He dubs this the ‘« pourquoi j’écris » auquel je ne peux répondre qu’en écrivant’ (P/C, 12). In W, Père’s writing project finds its inspiration, indeed its inevitability, in the loss and absence of his parents. In Chapter XIII, Père enacts a performative working-through of his ‘pourquoi j’écris’ in writing in his reflections on his parents’ deaths. The horror of their death and the infinite silence that this has enacted (‘le scandale de leur silence’ (W, 63)) is reflected in what would be the scandal of Père’s remaining silent (‘et de mon silence’ (W, 63)). His motivation for writing, the ‘pourquoi j’écris’, is claiming the duty to refuse silence, making the choice to write. The following passage enacts the performance of this motivation:

‘J’écris: j’écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble […] j’écris parce qu’ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l’écriture: leur souvenir est mort à l’écriture; l’écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l’affirmation de ma vie’ (W, 63).

Père writing ‘j’écris’ here is arguably a type of performative act tied to a performative utterance. It recalls Benveniste’s challenge to Cartesian disembodied dualism, in which he states that ‘est “ego” qui dit “ego”’, tying the subject to its enunciating, present
embodiment.\textsuperscript{96} The very fact of Perec writing, his existence as a present writing subject, is also the testament to his parents’ deaths: the simultaneous affirmation of their lives that engendered Perec’s own.\textsuperscript{97} Referring back to Perec’s observations about the \textit{trompe-l’œil}, it is arguable that \textit{W} poses a question whose response is entirely contained within its enunciation: Perec responds to his own question, ‘pourquoi j’écris’, in the very act of writing. Suleiman has suggested that Jewish children of the ‘1.5 generation’ like Perec share a common sense of authority over their experience, but that ‘the only true authority is ‘in his [of her] person’.\textsuperscript{98} This observation underlines the fact that authority and the plain fact of existence are particularly contingent in the ‘1.5 generation’. Perec’s performative ‘I write’ is the authoritative affirmation of his living, and writing, existence. Miller suggests that the ‘\textit{trompe-l’œil} est un simulacre de l’éternité, qui contient passé et futur’: indeed, the lasting deictic trace drawn by Perec in \textit{W} ensures the continuation of his parents interrupted lives into the future.\textsuperscript{99} This arguably draws on the notion of the trace discussed in relation to Leiris, who saw writing as a trace that simultaneously affirms and effaces the writer. As such, both Perec and Leiris emphasise what Levinas calls the ‘Dire’, the act of saying, over the ‘Dit’, such that writing endures beyond temporality.\textsuperscript{100} Perec’s emphasis on the present act of saying relates to the nature of experience that his writing attempts to capture: an embodied, present-focussed practice in which writing time attests to a tension in his relation to himself between the complete and the ‘in-process’. This is an idea that would later be echoed in Bénabou’s texts, in which he stresses the ‘inabouti’ which continually plagues the autobiographer’s work, an alienation from the self recorded in the present moment of writing that Perec’s ‘j’écris’ here also suggests. Perec’s motivation to write relates to a recording of time not as a utilitarian task with an aim to completion, but as a testament to the present writing self in its enduring provisionality.

\textsuperscript{97} Perec thus responds to Blanchot’s observation in \textit{L’écriture du désastre} (Paris: Gallimard, 1980, p. 135) that ‘[[l]’oubli effacerait ce qui ne fut jamais inscrit’: the deictic trace of Perec’s writing stands in the place of oblivion.
\textsuperscript{98} S. R. Suleiman, \textit{Crises of memory and the Second World War}, p. 213.
\textsuperscript{100} E. Levinas, \textit{Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence} (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), p. 188: ‘l’Infini se passe dans le Dire’.
Secondly, Perec’s analysis of the trompe-l’œil relates to *W* in his statement that the resolution of such paintings remains ‘énigmatique tant que l’on n’a pas opéré le minuscule glissement de sens qui la résout dans son évidence imparable’ (*L’Œil*). Perec indicates that a tiny shift in perspective allows the viewer to see the ruse of the trompe-l’œil, shattering its deceptive illusion in the moment the viewer becomes aware of its artificial construction. Barthes notes in *S/Z* that this moment of cognition in a written text is a ‘dévoilement, un déchiffrement’.\(^{101}\) This is arguably enacted in the very structure of *W* in Perec’s use of the two interwoven ‘textes simplement alternés’ (*W*, quatrième de couverture) that are finally explained at the end of the text as the reader sees the two strands of the narrative in their horrifying contingency. The anamorphosis of the text is finally brought into focus. The intervention of the metaleptic Rousset quotation is arguably this ‘minuscule glissement’ which irrefutably cements the analogy between the island of *W* and the concentration camp where Perec’s mother died. Perec’s use of this anamorphic, trompe-l’œil structure in *W* draws attention to the constructed nature of the whole work. Wadhera notes that the aim of trompe-l’œil paintings is ‘to call into question, to draw attention to the falsehood of the undertaking’.\(^{102}\) The alternating form and structure that Perec uses in *W* enacts a similar operation. Whilst to use Wadhera’s term of ‘falsehood’ might be reductive, the interaction of fiction and autobiography indicated through this structure and in the fragmented and distorted memories comprising *W* highlights the necessarily constructed, indeed artificial nature of Perec’s retrospective autobiographical practice.

The ‘minuscule glissement’ that brings about the sudden revelation of a text returns in *VME*, where Gaspard’s puzzle pieces contain – like crossword clues or the optical illusion of W.E. Hill mentioned in Chapter LXX – their own solution.\(^{103}\) Perec’s narrator notes that ‘on va chercher partout où ce n’est pas ce qui est très précisément énoncé dans la définition même, tout le travail consistant en fait à opérer ce déplacement qui donne à la pièce, à la définition, son sens’ (*VME*, 400, my emphasis). The ‘minuscule glissement’ required for seeing the ruse of trompe-l’œil paintings is suggested here as a ‘déplacement’: again, Perec’s use of the word ‘énoncé’ suggests the crossover of artistic techniques and their attendant aesthetic implications between the visual field (anamorphic trompe-l’œil; jigsaw puzzles) into the textual (crossword puzzles; autobiographical texts). This notion of textual anamorphosis runs

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\(^{103}\) See Appendix, Figure 7.
through many of Perec’s texts, suggesting that the ‘regard oblique’ (P/C, 115) that Perec saw as central to good reading practice is paramount to understanding. Darrieusecq notes that due to the anamorphic, trompe-l’œil form of W forces the reader to undertake a ‘prise de conscience particulièrement extrême: celle de la disparition’. I argue that this ‘prise de conscience’ in W is enacted through the ‘glissement de sens’ inherent to the trompe-l’œil, as it not only enacts an effacement of Perec’s parents, but also reveals the impossibility of representation that Perec encourages his readers to see. That Perec discusses this dimension of the trompe-l’œil in such depth in L’Œil ébloui indicates its importance to him, providing a central point of crossover between the practices of visual art and his own autobiographical writing.

The ‘disparition’ that Darrieusecq identifies at the end of W is not only the final confirmation of the deaths of Perec’s parents, allegorically depicted in the narrative of the island of W, but also the disappearance of the author himself, who absents himself from the text such that the reader must enact the synthesis of the text’s impossible metaphor. Lejeune highlights that Perec initially wrote a third strand to W which would be an ‘inter texte’ explaining the contiguity of the autobiographical and fictional strands, but that this was abandoned in redrafting. This decision suggests that Perec wished decisively to give over the work of the ‘prise de conscience’ to the reader. As discussed, Perec encourages a dialogic reading process with the reader invited to take an active role in the co-production of his texts. This serves to encourage the reader to question the conventions and habits of their reading, which in turn heightens the metatextual dimensions of Perec’s texts and emphasises their constructed nature, much like trompe-l’œil paintings. This idea is made explicit in Le Condottière and La Vie: Perec suggests that Gaspard is in this sense a ‘bad reader’, as the habits of forgery have become so conventional to him that his self-perception and his artistic work becomes entirely clouded; Bartlebooth’s blindness allows him to be outwitted by another Gaspard.

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106 Lejeune notes that ‘la vérité se présente plutôt comme un problème que le lecteur doit prendre en charge’ (P. Lejeune, La Mémoire et l’oblique, p. 73, my emphasis).
Perec states in *Espèces d’espaces* that he wishes to interrogate our use of space, ‘ou, plus simplement encore, de le lire; car ce que nous appelons quotidienneté n’est pas évidence, mais opacité: une forme de cécité’ (*Espèces*, quatrième de couverture, my emphasis).108 Boyle sees this statement as exemplary of Perec’s desire to fight ‘against the stupor which blinds us to the ideological assumptions behind systems’.109 This also extends to systems of reading, and Perec’s use of vocabulary of reading and blindness in this quotation confirms that he sought to confront the short-sightedness or laziness of conventional reading habits. Bohman-Kalaja notes that Perec wanted ‘to make readers conscious of the structures on which their competence is founded’: Perec emphasizes a dynamic of concealment and revelation in the playfulness of his texts, most notably in the revelatory structure of *W* that puts the onus on the reader to ‘see’ the overall allegory.110 This has the ultimate effect of destabilizing the reader’s reliance on the text, becoming an active agent in its recomposition and appreciating the artifice of its construction, as Bénabou would also do particularly in his capricious *Pourquoi* and *Jette*. Lejeune thus calls the work the reader of *W* must perform a ‘gymnastique pénible’ which nonetheless ‘contrarie nos habitudes de lecture’.111 I argue that *W* qualifies to a certain extent as a ‘scriptible’ text in Barthes’ conception, as it challenges these ‘préjugés’ of reading.112 Barthes asserts that in such texts ‘seul parle le lecteur’, and that ‘l’écriture n’est pas la communication d’un message qui partirait de l’auteur et irait au lecteur’: in Barthes’ view, the ultimate signified does not exist to be transmitted from author to reader.113 However, although their challenge to reading conventions is considerable, Perec’s texts demonstrate an investment in reading as a communicative, collaborative process with the reader. Barthes suggests that writers can circumvent this communicative function of writing that would debar their text from being ‘scriptible’ if the author makes himself into a material, textual ‘être en papier’, transforming their life into an ‘écriture sans référent, matière d’une connexion et non d’une filiation’.114 Barthes here only in part refutes the idea of communicative connection, preferring there to be no direct line of heredity between author and his appearance in writing. As such, we can appreciate Perec’s interweaving of fiction into the autobiographical narrative of

108 Perec also notes that the *trompe-l’œil* paintings challenge ‘notre cécité quotidienne’ in *L’Œil ébloui*.
109 C. Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies*, p. 81.
113 Ibid.
as exemplary of such a circumvention, with Perec transforming himself into a ‘paper being’: the referential dimension of the island of W must be inferred by the reader, and thus provides the ‘connexion’ that Barthes identifies. The ‘disparition du narrateur’ in W encourages the active participation of the reader, such that Perec invites the reader to synthesise what cannot be represented in writing: the loss and absence that defines his life.

This active, aware, and metatexual reading method encouraged by Perec through the use of *mise-en-abîme*, anamorphosis, and effects of *trompe-l’œil* in W in turn has effects on the self at the heart of the autobiographical work. Culler has observed that ‘an awareness of the assumptions on which one proceeds […] makes it easier to make sense of it and how, by its refusal to comply with one’s expectations, it leads to that questioning of self and of ordinary social modes of understanding which has always been the result of the greatest literature’.115

The challenge to reading conventions that Perec’s texts encourages, most of all in W, exposes the habits which govern the production of meaning in literary texts: the ‘questioning of self’ that Culler mentions applies to both Perec himself and to the reader in turn. This operation is arguably already initiated by Leiris, whose inconclusive, mosaic *L’Âge d’homme* asked its reader to be actively involved in its unfinished reconstruction. This is therefore elaborated and extended in both Perec and Bénabou’s literary enterprises, with both writers influenced by Leiris in the questioning of self that autobiographical writing can inspire in the reader. Bohman-Kalaja suggests that texts such as Perec’s have the potential to ‘expose the tools with which both consciousness and the unconscious have been constructed’.116 The *trompe-l’œil* of W encourages the reader to participate in the co-production of Perec’s autobiographical narrative, exposing the metatexual artificiality of the constructed autobiographical text: as such, the foundations upon which ‘consciousness and the unconscious’ are represented in writing are subject to the same exposure. The emphasis on deciphering and synthesis culminating in a final ‘glissement de sens’ which exposes an ultimate absence in W, all centred around the reader, indicates a dialogic exchange in alterity into which the reader is invited to play. Ultimately, this effect is produced in part by Perec’s use of the technique of a written *trompe-l’œil* transposed from visual art into his autobiographical work.

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116 K. Bohman-Kalaja, *Reading Games*, p. 239.
Finally, Perec states in *L’Œil ébloui* that what touches and troubles him most in Cuchi White’s photographs is the working of time on the paintings, which at first seem suspended in time. They are not immune to:

‘le retour du temps, l’usure, l’effacement […] la reprise en main, par le temps réel, par l’espace réel, de cette illusion spéculaire qui se serait voulu impérissable: la réalité reprend ses droits.’ (*L’Œil*)

The trompe-l’œil of *L’Œil* relate to *W* and Perec’s autobiographical project, as the paintings are subject to the effacing power of reality. In *W*, it is precisely the reality of History, ‘l’Histoire avec sa grande hache’ (*W*, 17), that has cut the ties that connected Perec to his parents. The final section of *L’Œil ébloui* contains an encrypted reminder of the effacement that history has enacted on Perec. He refers to ‘le mur vandalisé du trompe-l’œil de l’hôtel “Balestra” à San Remo’, which has been defaced with graffiti including ‘la croix gammée’. The appearance of the ‘croix gammée’ is, for readers of *W*, particularly significant. It is the reappearance of the ‘X’ which, through the workings and associations of Perec’s memory, is transformed from a wood-cutting bench, to a swastika (‘croix gammée’, *W*, 110), to the sign of the SS, to the Star of David. Its transformation traces ‘les symboles majeurs de mon enfance’ (*W*, 110), and its reappearance in *L’Œil* underscores the interaction between art and autobiography that is here presented obliquely. All the more so, as this trompe-l’œil of the Hotel Balestra does not appear amongst White’s photographs that follow – it has been invented by Perec and inserted as an incongruity or absence in the text precisely to signal the link between art and his personal history. Perec thus becomes the ‘élément à son tour contradictoire’ within his text.

As such, the intersection between art and autobiography is certainly evident in *L’Œil ébloui*. Yet, crucially, Perec requires the effort of reading obliquely, drawing the connections across the author’s seemingly disparate texts, to bring forth the fruitful interplay between the two.

**Conclusions: from Leiris to Perec and Bénabou**

I have argued that Perec puts his identity ‘in play’ in his autobiographical writing. This chapter has illustrated how Perec used art to reveal the metatextual and artificial nature of attempts to capture reality in writing. In doing so, he questions – and encourages his reader to question – the constitutive elements of that very perceptual reality, namely how our perceptions of the world, our selves, art and literature are
necessarily mediated through constructions. Perec highlights the divergence of reality and its representation, and imaginatively reinterprets and represents experience, probing the status of ‘the real’ itself. His use of art as a recurrent motif and thematic touchstone is central to this.

From the beginning of his writing career in the embryonic *Le Condottière*, Perec emphasizes the fruitful transfer between art and autobiography, where questions of artistic sincerity, representation, and self-representation were at stake. I have argued that this early text can be viewed as more than mere juvenilia. Like Leiris’ *L’Âge d’homme*, which set out his ethical and conceptual autobiographical programme that endured through his later career, *Le Condottière* is a *mode d’emploi* in which many of the thematic, formal, and structural principles that Perec would develop in his later autobiographical work can be identified. This is most notably seen in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, where Perec’s textual double from *Le Condottière* returns. Gaspard, the art forger paralysed and driven to violence by the distortions of (self-)representation, reinforces my view of this text as critically important to an overall understanding of Perec’s later approach to autobiography.

This extends through his oeuvre, even to the final work published in his lifetime (*Cabinet*). Perec demonstrates an interest in art’s vulnerability to and potential for distortion, and uses this as a thematic and structuring principal of his work. This is identifiable even in those texts that are not overtly ‘about’ art, and most importantly in *W*. This landmark autobiographical text shows that Perec’s fascination with mechanisms of *trompe-l’œil*, anamorphosis, and *mise en abîme* – central to artworks that particularly captivated him – are transposed from the visual to the textual realm in *W*, such that Perec demonstrates a visual approach to autobiography. By his insistence on art’s corruptibility, therefore, Perec also suggest the constructed, violable nature of writing and its limitations in capturing the world and the self-regarding writing subject of autobiography. Perec suggests that the perpetual flux of life essentially escapes representation.

Perec insists that his existential situation requires that he write, and so does so in a way that highlights writing’s limitations – to trace, to make a mark upon the world, to deictically point out his existence as a writing subject.\(^\text{117}\) This is an aspect of

\[\text{117} \quad \text{Derrida notes in ‘Force et signification’ that ‘l’écriture […] crée le sens en le consignant, en le confiant à une gravure, à un sillon, à un relief, à une surface que l’on veut transmissible à l’infini’, *L’Ecriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 24, my emphasis. This can be compared to the closing lines of *Espèces*, where Perec notes: ‘Écrire: essayer méticuleusement de retenir quelque chose: arracher quelques} \]
autobiography stressed by Leiris, who in *L’Âge d’homme* in particular emphasises the importance of speaking and writing for the purposes of helping others, tracing the writer’s passage in the world and his incomplete inquiry into the self so that others might benefit. In the face of the onto-epistemological void left by the death of his parents, Perec’s autobiographical project, too, is one that does not seek ultimate self-knowledge or total self-comprehension: indeed, totalizing systems are for Perec an ‘illusion de l’achevé’ (*P/C*, 42). By suggesting that knowledge of one’s own identity is only ever partial, lacunary, and experienced moment by moment, Perec invites the participation of his reader by disavowing himself of any claim to complete self-understanding. This allies Perec with the liberating dimension of autobiography that Leiris also indicates: both writers arguably suggest to their reader the importance of a sense of mindful self-awareness that can be achieved by the exercise of writing and reading.

Identity in Perec’s writing implies both sides of the word’s definition.\(^{118}\) He notes that identity involves sameness, identity to the same – what Ricœur deems ‘mêmeté’ – and identity to the self, selfhood, or ‘ipséité’: identity is that which makes us ‘à la fois lui et identique à l’autre’ (*Récits d’Ellis Island*, 45), our shared sameness and our own individual identity. The type of reading encouraged by the implicit and explicit demands of Perec’s texts results in an approach to autobiography that reaffirms Ricœur’s philosophical rehabilitation of this latter category – ‘ipséité’ – in terms of narrative identity, which Gratton argues highlights the ‘principle of otherness, or relationality to the other, as internally and not just externally constitutive of the subject’.\(^{119}\) We can regard Perec’s emphasis on a reading process which is dialogic and active in nature, and which strongly invites the reader’s participation in the co-production of *W*, as an example of such a ‘principle of otherness’. This, too, resonates with Leiris’ autobiographical project, where he attempted to take an ethnographic view of his self, making himself ‘other’ whilst also soliciting the reader as an active partner in the reconstruction of the self communicated in *L’Âge d’homme*. For both Leiris and

\(^{118}\) *identity*, n. (OED Online, Oxford University Press, [http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91004?redirectedFrom=identity](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/91004?redirectedFrom=identity)) (accessed 24/01/2018): ‘The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties; the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition of being a single individual’.

Perec, the ‘other’ of the reader is a central part of the constitution of the subject. Whilst Perec as a playful author takes pleasure in sowing the rules of his reading game throughout his texts, the reader brings the work into being: in the case of autobiography, the very ‘ipséité’ of the author is brought into being in the dialogic interaction between text and reader, between author and his chess-opponent reader. Ricœur’s assertion that ‘l’identité narrative, constitutive de l’ipséité, peut inclure le changement, la mutabilité, dans la cohésion d’une vie’ allows for an openness to change. As such, narrative identity is shown to be an ‘essentially unstable, problematic realization of selfhood’. It is this instability that Perec invites the reader to participate in, and which Bénabou would further exploit in his capricious and playful work.

Perec’s work is a searing example of writing that illustrates this instability of selfhood, a self that gestures strongly towards his reader for its own narrative reconstitution, emphasising the alterity that informs ipseity. This recalls Lacan’s observation that ‘[l]’Autre est donc le lieu où se constitue le je qui parle avec celui qui entend’. Lacan’s emphasis here on the relational, locutionary dimension to self-constitution is particularly applicable to Perec’s work that implicates a game of ‘cache-cache’ (W, 18) with the reader in the hopes of reinvigorating their reading conventions and accessing an insight into the self formed through this interaction. The self in Perec’s work is thus shown to be formed within ludic ‘webs of interlocution’ which are ‘in open dialogue’ with the reading other rather than ‘monological’. Indeed, Perec’s subject is a ‘subject in play, a subject in practice […] a subject in process’, attempting to gain an insight – however provisional or fragmentary – into his own self. This chapter has responded to the three central research questions of the thesis by showing how Perec posits a composite self continually in flux in his autobiographical writing. This sense of self is arrived at both through a creative engagement with the difficulties of autobiography and through his works’ strong gesture towards the reader as a partner in the understanding of his self.

As for Leiris, Perec’s identity is therefore ‘in play’ in his autobiographical writing. For Bénabou, too, the ludic game-playing of reading and writing puts identity

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121 P. Ricœur, Temps et Récit III, p. 355.
125 J. Gratton, Subject Matters, p. 15.
in play, as an ongoing and unfinished exercise. As the following chapter will
demonstrate, Bénabou takes up the mantle of Perec’s innovations after his death,
extending his enquiry into the ludic play of literature but adapted to Bénabou’s personal
context. Bénabou’s major works were all written after Perec’s early death: Roubaud has
noted that this event inspired Bénabou to become a fully-fledged Oulipian writer in his
own right.126 We can therefore consider Bénabou’s work as a direct response to Perec’s.
Not only does he challenge conventions of writing (in Pourquoi) and reading (in Jette),
as Perec had achieved throughout his work that questions mechanisms of literary
representation, but Bénabou’s most explicitly autobiographical work, Epopée, is
indebted to Perec through its challenge to the reader’s understanding of the
autobiographical genre and the materiality of such a text. As such, both writers, drawing
on Leiris, probe the capacities of first-person writing to attest to the subject it purports
to examine, stressing above all the ludic potential of such enquiries and the ongoing,
unfinished exercise they represent.

126 J. Roubaud and R. Lapidus, 'Deductions Concerning Marcel Bénabou, Oulipian
Author', p. 38.
Chapter 3 - Marcel Bénabou: ‘tu cours, comme moi, le risque de t’y perdre’

Introduction

Marcel Bénabou found his ‘famille d’adoption’ within the Oulipo.¹ Nonetheless, unlike other members – not least Perec, who in a short lifetime was extremely prodigious – Bénabou’s literary output remains modest. Reig and Schaffner suggest that despite his important role as the ‘secrétaire définitivement provisoire’ of the Oulipo, his independent work remains ‘à l’écart du grand orchestre oulipien’.²

This chapter will make the case for Bénabou as an underappreciated figure with the Oulipo, and as a major autobiographical writer in recent French literary history. As a Judeo-Francophone Moroccan writer with a professional academic career outside the Oulipo, his difference from the other predominantly white men in the group is brought to bear on his writing.³ This is achieved by his emphasis on the ‘gymnastique linguistique’ that his multilingual heritage afforded him (EF, 117): this heritage informs his relationship to literature and language in a radically different way to the other Oulipians. His status as a ‘judéo-franco-maghrébin’ distinguishes Bénabou as a figure at the crossroads of various aspects of French culture emerging uneasily from its recent colonial past. His desire to restore the importance of the mellah of his childhood – the longstanding yet forgotten Jewish community in Morocco – to the French collective consciousness lends a vital dimension to his autobiographical work that has significant implications for history, commemoration, and cultural understanding in the postcolonial age. His autobiographical writing, therefore, can be viewed as an important contribution to the decolonization of France’s history, and to the rehabilitation of a particular community who have suffered ‘une ignorance et une méconnaissance également coupables et également attentatoires’ (EF, 44).⁴ This process of rehabilitation comes up

³ The Oulipo can hardly be defended on its record of diversity: 5 out of 50 members are women, a fact reproached by the feminist Oulipo or ‘Foulipo’ (see L. Elkin and S. Esposito, The End of Oulipo? An Attempt at Exhausting a Movement (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013)).
⁴ Bénabou notes in Épopée that the population of Moroccan Jews – around 240,000 just before World War Two – was in rapid decline after the end of the Protectorate. It now stands at fewer than 3000 (in 2016). The majority of Moroccan Jews left for Israel. See A. Boum, Memories of Absence.
against the ‘universal splitting of the self [and] general existential dislocations’ that de
Courtivron sees as a specific concern for multilingual autobiographers such as
Bénabou.⁵ Bénabou advocates strongly for the crossover between Oulipian principles
and autobiography, stating that ‘the Oulipian entreprise doubly opens up the way for
autobiographical writing, since it facilitates its practice and legitimates its use’.⁶
Through its formal innovation, Bénabou suggests that the Oulipian approach frees up
autobiography from complacency.

Leiris and Perec tackled autobiography as a mode of writing which questions the
construction of self in narrative, and which is always provisional, tentative, and
necessarily incomplete. Bénabou’s highly metatextual, reflexive texts parody the notion
of autobiography’s difficulty, whilst nonetheless engaging with its problems and
conventions.⁷ This is achieved by Bénabou’s pervasive black humour and irony. This
element of parody in his examination of the self as a textual entity nuances the
innovations made to the genre by Leiris and Perec. His small number of texts in relation
to the vast œuvres of Leiris and Perec indicates his preference for a retreat into silence
that has become a running joke within the Oulipo.⁸ This retreat marks Bénabou’s
engagement with autobiography’s limit points, as he plays with the idea of a virtual,
potential ‘Book’ that forever lies waiting to be written.⁹ Like Perec, Bénabou
emphasizes the provisional nature of his work. Whilst Perec sees every new text as a
reformulation along an unending continuum of autobiographies, Bénabou sees each text

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Routledge Auto / Biographical Studies Reader, p. 191.
⁶ M. Bénabou, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 34.
⁷ Bénabou has noted his incapacity to write about himself without reflexivity: ‘le
premier degré m’a toujours paralysé, et je n’ai pu sortir de cette paralysie que grâce au
passage par l’Oulipo. C’est ce passage qui m’a donné à l’égard de moi-même la
distance nécessaire’, ‘Entretien avec Marcel Bénabou’, Histoires Littéraires, no. 54,
Butler notes that the ‘refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene
of address’: Bénabou’s choice not to write is an abdication from the relationship
between writer and reader, the ‘scene of address’. J. Butler, Giving an Account of
⁹ Bénabou states that each Oulipien seeks ‘une exploration de virtualités’ in their
linguistic experimentation (‘Entretien avec Marcel Bénabou’, Histoires Littéraires, no.
54, p. 123).
he produces as a failed attempt to write this ‘Book’. The retreat into non-production, therefore, represents a withdrawal caused by autobiography’s apparent impossibility.\textsuperscript{10}

The first part of the chapter will consider the position of the reader in Bénabou’s texts. I will argue that Bénabou uses a combination of hostility and complicity with his reader. His texts challenge reading conventions to which the reader may be accustomed, encouraging the reader to question the ‘bonne foi’ (\textit{Jette}, 39) of the writer. He questions in \textit{Jette} whether reading is an act of allegiance to the writer, or of rebellion. I will ask how this both hostile and complicit relationship is established, and for what purpose.

The second part will examine how Bénabou uses the ‘inabouti’ – the incomplete, the unresolved – not only as a theme of his work but as a textual strategy. As noted regarding Leiris and Perec, autobiography’s sense of incompleteness and tentativeness is a concern for other autobiographers. Yet, in Bénabou’s case, this motif is transformed into the very method of his writing, with the ‘inabouti’ threatening and paralysing autobiography from the outset. Laskowski-Caujolle has deemed this the ‘paradox bénabolien’, where the incapacity to write becomes the generator of the text.\textsuperscript{11} I will examine the mechanisms by which this operates, namely how the idea of the ‘virtual’ text contributes to this paradox.\textsuperscript{12}

The third part will look at Bénabou’s use of black humour and irony. Bénabou’s humorous, playful texts mobilise the Oulipo’s ludic methods to parody both postmodern specularity and the soul-searching dimension of autobiography. I will examine what role this ironic black humour plays, and how it relates to his specific position as a multilingual autobiographer at the crossroads of Judeo-Franco-Maghrebi culture. His ‘lifelong love affair with language’ is at the heart of this humorous irony, and betrays

\textsuperscript{10} Beyond his four major works, Bénabou has published several shorter texts and collaborative works with the Oulipo: he has withdrawn from larger sole-authored works.


\textsuperscript{12} It should be noted that the sense of the ‘virtual’ text here is used in the sense of ‘potential’, of not physically existing, rather than in the computational, digital, or mechanical sense. See the use of this term in R. Elbaz, ‘Bénabou’s Family Epic: A Story in Perpetual Labor’, \textit{SubStance}, Vol. 28, 47-61, or M. Bénabou, ‘Genèse d’une épopée absente’, \textit{Études Littéraires}, Vol. 29. See Oxford English Dictionary entry for ‘virtual’: ‘That is such in essence, potentiality, or effect, although not in form or actuality’ (http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/223829?redirectedFrom=virtual#eid, accessed 31/5/2017, my emphasis).
the foundation of his relation to himself, others, the world, and literature itself as a Moroccan francophone Jew.\textsuperscript{13}

I will thus show how Bénabou’s work responds to the three overarching questions of the thesis, putting identity ‘in play’ by strongly engaging the reader and examining the limit points of autobiography in order to posit a complex self in perpetual flux. Whilst some recent scholarship has finally put the spotlight onto Bénabou’s achievements, particularly as the tireless ‘secrétaire’ of the Oulipo, I believe that his innovations are foremost firmly located in his literary work. His work offers a highly reflexive and complex contribution to the field of autobiography, challenging its conventions and generic limitations. His addition of parody into his examination of the self as a textual entity nuances the enquiry made into the genre by Leiris and Perec, with Bénabou playing more ironically and subversively with the capacities of autobiography. His texts suggest the potentialities of fleeting and incomplete subjectivity rather than its rootedness in a single, consolidated autobiographical narrative, and emphasise the role of writing itself is an exercise of identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.

\textbf{Part 1 – The relationship to the reader: hostility and complicity}

\textit{Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres} and \textit{Jette ce livre avant qu’il soit trop tard}

From the reader’s very first encounter with Bénabou’s books, from their titles and opening lines, it is immediately clear that his texts do not allow for imaginary immersion of the novelistic sort, nor for the expository tropes of the autobiographical genre.\textsuperscript{14} Bénabou instead initiates a type of confrontation with the reader, which is extended over the course of his works, most notably \textit{Pourquoi} and \textit{Jette}.

\textit{Pourquoi} is, briefly, a book discussing how to write a book, ironically and performatively elaborating the difficulties that an author encounters when constructing a text. The structure of \textit{Pourquoi} indicates how the text operates. It opens with a section entitled ‘Au Lecteur’, continuing with sections such as ‘Titre’, ‘Première page’, ‘Moment de pause numéro un’, through to the ‘Dernier mot’ and the ‘Adieu au lecteur’,

\textsuperscript{13} M. Bénabou, ‘A Lifelong Love Affair with Language’, translated by R. Lapidus, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{14} This is a convention used and then promptly dispatched with in Leiris’ \textit{L’Âge d’homme}. 

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at each stage describing the ideal composition and content of such sections in a model text, and the narrator’s own difficulties in producing this. The reader is continually apostrophized as the narrator leads his addressee through the frustrating and abortive stages of an ideal textual project that remains out of reach for the writer, all whilst trailing the reader along with him.

Jette stages the opposite dilemma. It describes the narrator’s encounter with a book that, much like Pourquoi, is designed to frustrate its reader. The narrator of Jette happens upon a mysterious, unidentified text on his desk which demands him to ‘pose ce livre. Ou plutôt jette-le loin de toi. Tout de suite. Avant qu’il soit trop tard’ (Jette, 9). Both the narrator and the readers of Jette are therefore led on a hunt to decipher this enigmatic text. Whilst Pourquoi stages the difficulties involved with writing, Jette stages the complications of reading: or, as Bénabou himself notes, ‘[a]près le paradoxe du livre qui ne se laisse pas écrire, il me fallait traiter d’un autre paradoxe, celui du livre qui ne se laisse pas lire’.15

Bénabou is acutely aware of the conventions, roles, and expectations of readers (including himself) and the effect of these on his status as a writer. He notes in an interview that his principal works depict the same enduring concern, what he calls the ‘rapport au livre’.16 This statement suggests the relational emphasis of his works, which stresses the connections between the reader and writer, which formed a central part of Leiris and Perec’s approach to autobiography. He notes in Pourquoi that ‘j’ai un irrepressible besoin de lire pour pouvoir éventuellement écrire’ (PQ, 74): this suggests the inextricability of reading and writing to him personally, and the importance of reading as a springboard for creative writing. In both Pourquoi and Jette, Bénabou plays with the hazards of reading and its ludic possibilities. The stakes of reading – its potentialities and vulnerabilities, the basis of the ‘rapport au livre’ – are a primary concern for Bénabou. His texts stage a confrontation with these stakes, by establishing both a hostile and complicit relationship with his reader. As a deeply intertextual writer, drawing directly on Leiris and Perec (who themselves employed a vast array of intertexts in their work) amongst a host of other writers, Bénabou emphasises the interweaving of reading into the exercise of writing.

For the earliest readers of his works, namely his fellow Oulipians, this combative yet collaborative stance toward the reader might not have been out of the

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15 M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 186.
16 Ibid, p. 190.
ordinary. Earlier Oulipian postmodern works, notably Calvino’s *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), had employed the self-referential book-within-a-book narrative that features in *Jette*, and had addressed the reader directly for ironic effect, as Bénabou would do in both *Jette* and *Pourquoi*. These works are therefore allied with a contemporary trend for capricious and unreliable texts in which the reader is dramatically implicated. Playing with the position of the reader is thus a tenet of Oulipian writing, and would have been familiar to the other members of the Oulipo encountering Bénabou’s texts.

For readers beyond the Oulipo, too, Bénabou indicates the playfulness of his texts from the offset. The titles of both *Pourquoi* and *Jette* both emphasize their ludic dimension. Whilst *Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres* is an ironic reworking of Roussel’s *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres* (1935), the metatextuality of *Jette ce livre avant qu’il soit trop tard* indicates that the text will not be straightforward. Indeed, *Pourquoi*, *Jette*, and *Épopée familiale* all contain a reference within their title to a material book (‘livre’ or ‘épopée’), emphasizing their reflexive nature even before the reader has opened them. These paratextual indications suggest to all readers, not only those wise to the interests of the Oulipo, that there is a certain level of caprice at play. A moderated form of Jauss’ ‘horizon of expectation’ or *Erwartungshorizont* is therefore established early for the reader, calling attention to the reflexivity of the work in their hands.

Bénabou further suggests that the readership of his work is particular. He seeks in *Épopée* to reinscribe the history of Moroccan Jews into the landscape of French literature, in order to counteract the ‘injustice’ (*EF*, 44) of the neglect of this community in the French cultural consciousness, particularly after the end of the French protectorate in Morocco. He wishes therefore to follow ‘le modèle sartrien de l’engagement’ (*EF*, 45) in order to save as many vestiges of possible of his Moroccan Jewish community that is under threat, and which must be ‘traduite dans les mots du français’ (*EF*, 45) to be appreciated. He therefore aims his work – above all, *Épopée* – at a French intellectual audience, who may be ignorant of the place of Jews within colonial Morocco, whom he hopes to educate about his community in a relationship of

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17 Bénabou suggests, in the epigraphs to the chapters of *Pourquoi*, that this is a tradition that extends back to many writers, including Borges, Novalis, Benjamin, Renard, Lichtenberg, and many more. See Le Lionnais’ short text entitled ‘Les Structures du roman policier: Qui est le coupable?’, proposes a future constraint that an Oulipian writer might attempt: writing a detective novel in which the reader is revealed to be the murderer (in *La Littérature potentielle*, p. 62).
engagement and exchange. In *Pourquoi* and *Jette*, written before *Épopée* (with its more prominent political-cultural-historical agenda), we see the beginnings of this dynamic and dyadic relational emphasis.

Bénabou has suggested that:

‘[f]rom the beginning, I began dreaming of a strange book […] that would be both multiple and unique, where numerous and diverse texts would cross, and upon which only the eye and spirit of the reader could, after patient decoding and recomposition, confer sense, coherence, and unity’.  

This statement suggests the considerable power and responsibility that Bénabou confers on the reader to be able to not only identify references, but also to decode, interpret and synthesize his texts. This statement demonstrates the position of the reader that Bénabou would ideally like to establish: they are invited into a collaborative game in which ‘sense, coherence, and unity’ are negotiated between writer and reader. Whilst Leiris’ reader in *L’Âge d’homme* is posited as a complicit confessor, and Perec’s reader is figured as his chess opponent, Bénabou too emphasises the ludic aspect of his relationship to the reader. Bénabou presents his coded game to the reader and invites them to play, in the hope that they, the sense-maker, will decode it for both Bénabou and the reader’s benefit. Nonetheless, this way of proceeding has limitations and implications, emphasized by his texts’ abortiveness and incompleteness.

Bénabou stages an encounter with himself that is inextricable from the playful and unending processes of reading and writing. Bénabou suggests, through his emphasis on the negotiations and gaming involved in reading, that any attempts to get closer to a sense of self slips away the more the writer tries to grasp it. This is due to the very nature of both writing and reading for Bénabou, ‘ces deux activités devenues jumelles’ (*PQ*, 82). Reading and writing’s incomplete nature mirrors the elusiveness of any notion of a stable self.

Lejeune notes with regard to *Pourquoi* that ‘c’est la lecture qui est la création’: Bénabou’s relational emphasis on the exchange between reader and writer is crucial to the creation of the text and to the uncovering of its meaning. This relational exchange in *Pourquoi* and *Jette* is based on a hostility towards, and complicity with, the

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18 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, 'Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession', p. 34.
reader that is blended in Bénabou’s texts.\textsuperscript{20} The narrators of his texts both desire the reader’s involvement in the creation of meaning, and repudiate it.

In \textit{Pourquoi}, Bénabou first establishes a hostility towards the reader. The narrator of this text, a playful – even mocking – cipher of Bénabou himself, engages with the reader through apostrophe.\textsuperscript{21} The tone of the address is notable for its sarcasm. The opening of \textit{Pourquoi} is useful here. It follows a discussion of how the opening of a book is often the most difficult part:

‘C’est ce cap dangereux que vous venez à l’instant de franchir, lecteur. Puisque je ne pourrai désormais feindre d’ignorer votre présence, qu’il me soit permis de saluer votre courage, votre esprit d’aventure […] vous vous lancez dans la lecture d’un ouvrage inconnu. Il y a là une forme d’audace que l’on pouvait croire tombée en désuétude. Il est vrai […] qu’en l’occasion les risques pris ne semblent pas énormes: l’ouvrage est de dimensions modestes, et pour peu que vous ayez l’occasion de fréquenter les productions oulipiennes, le nom figurant sur la couverture pourrait ne pas vous être inconnu. Mais c’est peut-être là aussi bien que réside pour vous le danger. Qui sait dans quelle expédition on peut vouloir vous entraîner?’ (\textit{PQ}, 11).

The apostrophe to the individual ‘lecteur’ denotes a direct appeal to a singular reader, who is addressed in the ‘vous’ form, suggesting formality and deference. This second-person address contrasts with the use of the ‘je’ form in which the narrator speaks, emphasizing the relational exchange that characterizes the book. However, this deference is contrasted by the sarcasm created by the apparent praise heaped on the reader for achieving a seemingly easy act – reading the opening lines of a book. The repetition of ‘votre courage, votre esprit d’aventure’ highlights this bathetic sarcasm: the narrator classifying the act of opening and reading a book as a ‘forme d’audace’ reinforces this. It is heightened by the narrator’s consequent suggestion that the reader’s actions, formerly heralded as courageous, are in fact ‘pas énormes’. The narrator refers

\textsuperscript{20} Lejeune calls this a ‘demi-complicité pleine de suspense’, ibid, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{21} Diderot uses this technique in \textit{Jacques le fataliste} (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1983): the narrator addresses and implicates the reader directly, such as in ‘Je vous entends, lecteur, vous me dites: ̀Et les amours de Jacques?... » Croyez-vous que je n’en sois pas aussi curieux de vous?’ (p. 201). Bénabou dramatizes the reader-narrator relationship through this established exclamatory device. This device arguably derives from his familiarity with classical antiquity, with apostrophe being an ‘inherited conventional element of the ode’ (J. Culler, ‘L’Hyperbole et l’apostrophe: Baudelaire and the Theory of the Lyric’, \textit{Yale French Studies}, No. 125/126, 2014, 85-104 (p. 87)). Culler argues that apostrophe turns the addressee into ‘a subject capable of hearing […] of acting and responding’. Bénabou’s apostrophe involves the reader in a relational exchange.
to playful Oulipian narratives: Bénabou signals that his work belongs alongside these complex works, anticipating the unexpected reading conventions that these texts bring. He wryly suggests that this sort of text might lead the reader by pressure or movement (‘entraîner’) in any hazardous direction (‘quelle expedition’).

This feigned obsequiousness establishes an apostrophe that invites the reader’s active engagement and creates the impression that they are being spoken to directly. The strategy of complimenting the reader, however, is hyperbolic, if not downright patronizing. Bénabou’s narrator is established as a capricious figure, able to drag the reader by force through the text, yet also to flatter them to ensure their compliance. Bénabou extends this apostrophe throughout the text. In the sections entitled ‘Moments de pause’, he modulates this apostrophe to speak in the place of the reader, demarcated through the use of italic text:

‘Le lecteur, qu’on se plaît à remercier pour sa patience, serait en droit d’interpeller ici l’auteur pour le sommer de s’expliquer. - Vous sembliez parti, lui dirait-il, avec l’intention de vous livrer à un exercice plaisant, propre à nous divertir […] Éternel débutant, vous confirmez ainsi le soupçon qui pèse sur tous vos pareils: vous n’avez pu rédiger trente pages sans tomber dans la confession. Et maintenant bien sûr vous allez vous y vautrer sans vergogne ! À quoi l’auteur répliquerait sûrement que c’est bien mal le connaître.’ (PQ, 67).

The congratulation of the reader is repeated (‘on se plaît à remercier pour sa patience’). Bénabou suggests that the reader has the power to summon the writer to account for his actions. However, in the imagined dialogue with the reader, depicted in the conditional tense (‘lui dirait-il’), the narrator speaks in the place of the implied reader. The suggestion that the reader is plural (‘nous divertir’; ‘vous nous engagez’) indicates that Bénabou’s narrator is addressing a community of readers rather than a single reader, despite addressing them as ‘le lecteur’ in the singular. This creates both a direct individual address, whilst suggesting that the author is held to account by several readers at once. The supposed reader’s voice, ventriloquized by the narrator, is critical and accusatory: this is seen in the disparaging ‘éternel débutant’, or the suggestion that the author is wallowing in the glory of his own confessions. This is repeated later in the passage, where the reader is said to accuse the author of navel-gazing (‘Nous y voilà! le nombril, le nombril vous dis-je!’, 68). This ‘moment de pause’ establishes an imagined confrontation between the reader(s), the author, and the narrator: the narrator intervenes in this confrontation in an attempt to clarify the author’s intentions (‘Lecteur, lecteur, ne vous hâtez pas de triompher’, 68). By assuming the reader’s voice and implicating this
assumed voice in an argument with the author and narrator (where one party might win ('triompher') over another), Bénabou establishes a combative relationship with the implied reader, who is spoken for by the narrator himself.

This recurs in the second ‘Moment de pause’, which states ‘[i]l n’est que temps, lecteur, de vous donner à nouveau la parole’ (PQ, 151). This statement is entirely ironic, as the narrator again assumes the reader’s voice, predicting in the conditional tense the staged confrontation between writer and reader. In these ‘moments de pause’, we see Bénabou’s use of lexis that suggests that the reader is endowed with a certain agency to respond (‘le lecteur […] serait en droit’; ‘vous donner à nouveau la parole’). Speaking in their place and apostrophizing the reader in an imagined dialogue between reader, narrator, and author, Bénabou seemingly purports to give the reader a voice, when in fact he divests the reader from this voice. By guiding, even dictating the reader’s response in this way, Bénabou creates a sense of complicity through direct apostrophe, which is mixed with a disorientating sense in which the reader is spoken for. Bénabou notes how he cannot resist the temptation to either seduce or hurt his reader, desperate for their complicity (‘sans cesse attentif à séduire ou à heurter, cherchant à tout moment la complicité d’un lecteur par définition inexistant’, PQ, 165, my emphasis).

The opening of Jette demonstrates further how Bénabou establishes a sense of hostility towards the reader yet mixes this with a certain complicity. The ‘Ouverture’ of the text functions as a perplexing series of instructions to head the reader off. It is the beginning of a mysterious, anonymous book, whose origin the narrator of Jette will attempt to discern:


The second-person imperative form immediately indicates a sense of antagonism, with the narrator ordering the reader to perform certain actions (‘pose’; ‘lève’; ‘propose’), which is heightened by the violence of ‘jette-le’. The paratactical sentences reinforce the drama of the address, whilst the implied threat of ‘[a]vant qu’il soit trop tard’ suggests that a mysterious fate awaits the reader should they not heed the narrator’s advice. This is further suggested by the implication that there is no exit for the reader (‘[p]as d’autre issue’): this threat of claustrophobic entrapment indicates that obeying
the narrator is the only avenue for escape, or ‘résolution’. The implication that the text is deviant (‘ces lignes perverses’) heightens this threat. The more informal use of the second person here, in contrast to the formal ‘vous’ apostrophic address of Pourquoi, further heightens the affront on the reader. This is amplified by the rhetorical questioning (‘qu’en attends-tu?’). Indeed, the narrator suggests that if the reader is looking to find an amiable narrator, they are better off reading elsewhere (‘va chercher ailleurs qui t’écoute ou te console’). The final proclamation of this overture is that the reader risks losing themselves entirely in the text (‘tu cours, comme moi, le risque de t’y perdre’, Jette, 11). The use of ‘se perdre’ indicates not only the idea of ‘losing oneself’ in the imaginary world of literature, but the more menacing possibility that the reader might lose their bearings, disappear, or waste their time in continuing the read this text.22

This hostile affront that opens Jette is, however, a mise-en-abîme, as Bénabou subsequently introduces the protagonist of Jette, who has discovered the anonymous volume on his desk, and has been quoting this passage from the beginning of the unidentified work (which bears the enigmatic title Livre). The ensuing ‘Premier mouvement’ explains the circumstances of this discovery: however, it too apostrophizes the reader. It begins with the statement that ‘Lecteur, je n’aime guère (je le dis tout net) qu’en tête d’un livre on s’adresse directement à moi’ (Jette, 15). Bénabou performs an ironic and paradoxical strategy: as in the opening lines of Pourquoi, which expressed the difficulty of writing the opening lines of a book, in Jette the reader encounters a contradictory device, an example of accismus and apophasis. This preterition indicates the narrator’s instability.

Beyond this bewildering opening, however, Bénabou situates the protagonist-narrator in complicity with the reader, as he too is dumbfounded by the unfriendly demands of the ‘Ouverture’: he asks ‘Quel sens donner à une semblable adresse?’ (Jette, 16). He too reads the overture as an ‘interdiction’ (Jette, 20), and feels patronized by the writer who contemptuously infantilizes him (‘me traitait comme un enfant’, ibid). By dramatizing the protagonist-narrator’s reading of the overture, Bénabou establishes an affinity with the real reader of Jette: as a reader himself, he is just as affronted and confused. The narrator abandons the book, only to be seduced back to it. He later notes

that this initial affront could be read as ‘un rite de bienvenue, un signe de complicité […] une invite’ (PQ, 151, my emphasis). The original disrespect of the opening passage is read as an invitation to continue reading.

Yet, Bénabou ironically ensures that the narrator himself employs similar devices to those that infuriate him in the anonymous book, namely an exasperating strategy of narrative deferral. This narrative deferral becomes a metaphor for the reader-writer relationship. It is the dominant structural strategy of Pourquoi, where the reader is led through a series of deferrals with the narrator explaining the model content and form of each part of the ‘ideal’ book, but never actually attaining this. In Jette, this deferral forms the plot as the narrator attempts to decipher the book: Sophie, his lover, finally leaves the protagonist for good, taking the mysterious text with her.

The end of the ‘premier mouvement’ demonstrates this. The narrator justifies his abandonment of the anonymous text by remembering an aphorism from his childhood: ‘si quelqu’un me tient à distance […] ma consolation est qu’il s’y tient aussi’ (Jette, 24). The resurgence of this aphorism from his memory is triggered by his encounter with the hostile book, but is deferred in the text. The narrator describes at length, across many long sentences with several embedded subordinate clauses and parentheses, the importance of aphorisms to his childhood, and of one in particular. However, he does not reveal the aphorism itself until the very end of the chapter, and it is split over several clauses. This deferral reinforces the ludic relationship with the reader that both the récit and the histoire of Jette recount.

Jette describes the protagonist being drawn along by the mystery of the book en abîme: this is paralleled by a frustrated love story with Sophie. The emphasis, Bénabou suggests, is on reading and interpreting, not only of the mysterious text but also of Sophie’s motives for leaving. The deferral – and eventual thwarting – of reading and interpretation in the text reinforces the negotiation between reader and writer. In so doing, Bénabou metatextually draws the reader’s attention to their own experience of reading the text before them. Bénabou blends hostility and complicity with the reader, appealing to their shared position as dumbfounded readers in Jette, and playing on a sense of ironic ‘mauvaise foi’ (Pourquoi, 162) in Pourquoi: the difficult yet playful relational exchange between writer and reader is foregrounded.

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23 One of Bénabou’s main preoccupations within the Oulipo is with aphorisms: Bénabou’s contributes a section entitled ‘Un aphorisme peut en cacher un autre’ in the Bibliothèque Oulipienne (Geneva: Slatkine, 1981, pp. 280-297), which is a humorous engagement with this concise form.
The reasons for this relational exchange with the reader are several. A primary purpose is to shift the responsibility for sense-making onto the reader, rather than the writer. As noted, Bénabou states that he sought to write a book ‘upon which only the eye and spirit of the reader could, after patient decoding and recomposition, confer sense, coherence, and unity’ (my emphasis). This demonstrates the privilege that he bestows on the reader regarding interpretation: in *Pourquoi* and *Jette*, the implied reader is a powerful presence, apostrophized, affronted, questioned by the narrators. By foregrounding the role of the reader, Bénabou indicates their enhanced function.²⁴ The mechanisms of textual reception are pored over in both texts: in *Pourquoi*, the narrator considers the future reception of the work as it unfolds, whilst *Jette* is a story of a hermeneutic crisis. Reig notes in his analysis of *Jette* that Bénabou explores two types of interpretation, one that is overt and foregrounded – the protagonist’s attempt to decipher the text – and a second that is concealed. Reig states that ‘[s]i l’auteur est d’autant moins le garant de sens de son texte, de son œuvre, c’est au lecteur qu’il revient de l’établir’.²⁵ This suggests that the concealed interpretation Reig identifies in *Jette* is the interpretation of meaning in literary texts more generally, which Bénabou indicates is in the hands of the reader rather than the writer, who cannot guarantee sense or meaning.

This is an idea reinforced in *Pourquoi*. In a passage where the narrator discusses whether he would prefer to write fiction or autobiography, Bénabou tells himself that:

‘[q]uand tu décideras à donner à lire quelques-unes de tes pages […] souviens-toi qu’elles ne t’appartiendront plus. Tes lecteurs ne chercheront pas seulement ce que tu auras tenté de dire, mais ce que tu auras voulu dérober à leur regard. Ils sauront être plus perspicaces que tu n’auras été retors; ils verront tes ruses, tes déguisements, tes mystères.’ (*PQ*, 169)

This suggests the narrator’s awareness that the reader ultimately controls interpretation more than the writer, and will see through the obfuscatory devices that the writer sows in his work. Once the writer lets go of the work, he has no power over its interpretation:

²⁴ Bénabou emphasizes the reader’s role through apostrophe which implies ‘son lecteur et l’ensemble des réactions possibles du lecteur au texte’ (M. Riffaterre, *La Production du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979, p. 10). Riffaterre advocates for strong participation by readers in literary texts, as the reader must reconstitute the linguistic code, context, and encoder from the text they are faced with, necessitating an ‘exécution active de la partition que représente le texte’, such that communication ‘est un jeu’.

as such, the responsibility for interpretation lies with the reader. In Jette, Bénabou’s protagonist, a rapacious reader, states that interpreting meaning is of utmost importance to him (‘l’espoir de se réléver de nouveau […] le sens des choses’, Jette, 42, my emphasis). Reig’s suggestion that the writer is no more the ‘garant de sens’ than any other party involved in reading indicates that Bénabou views his reader as a negotiator of meaning, which from the start may be absent from the text in any case. The epigraph to Jette indicates as much: Bénabou quotes Lichtenberg’s statement that books centre around non-understanding on all parts, ‘vendus par des gens qui ne les comprennent pas; reliés, censurés, et lus par des gens qui ne les comprennent pas; bien mieux, écrits par des gens qui ne les comprennent pas’ (Jette, 7). By putting a question mark over the possibility of interpretation that he nonetheless invites his readers to engage in, Bénabou establishes the active, relational exchange between writer, text and reader as a game of negotiation. Leiris had highlighted this question in L’Âge d’homme, through the stylisation of his introspection that emphasised the work of interpretation and reconstruction in which he encourages his reader to be involved as part of the liberating dimension of the text. For Perec, the structure and form of W stressed the work required of the reader in synthesising the autobiographical and allegorical strands of the text. In Bénabou’s case, the metatextual, ludic and destabilizing game of Jette and Pourquoi emphasises to an even greater extent the role required of the reader.

Yet, Bénabou notes that the reader can choose to engage or not in this game. In Jette, he states that if the writer is free to explore any avenue, ‘le lecteur sensé n’a pas pour autant le devoir de l’y suivre’ (Jette, 196). This collaborative gesture may or may not be taken up by the real readers – the ‘lecteur sensé’ – of Pourquoi and Jette, but is demonstrative of how Bénabou attempts to implicate his readers in a dyadic exchange.26

A further effect of this dyadic and dynamic relationship with the reader is that Bénabou calls into question what the reader wants or expects from the practice of reading. This questioning applies as much to Bénabou as to the real readers of his texts. By depicting the drives and frustrations of reading in Jette, both from the position of the writer and reader of the mysterious Livre, Bénabou asks the following questions of his real readers: ‘Car enfin, qu’en attends-tu? Que peux-tu en attendre?’ (Jette, 10). Through these two direct rhetorical questions, he demands both what the reader expects from a book (‘qu’en attends-tu?’) and, further, what they can hope to expect (‘Que

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peux-tu en attendre?’). Being both the originator of these questions and attempting to respond to them in *Jette* through the portrayal of his protagonist’s struggle, Bénabou does not delineate an answer to these questions, but leaves them unresolved for his reader. This is reflected in the one-sided love story interwoven in the text: the relationship with Sophie becomes a metaphor for the unresolved dimension of textual interpretation. The protagonist expects to be able to discern Sophie’s intentions. Her final departure, with the cutting note left for him asking ‘*Pourquoi attendre encore?*’ (*Jette*, 255), demonstrates his interpretive mistake. This reflects his inability to read the mysterious text, yet also the metaphorical thwarting of expectation. As such, Bénabou extends the challenge made to conventions of reading broached by Perec, never allowing them to rest on predictable reading outcomes.

His capricious narrators and the mix of hostility and complicity they inspire in the reader demand that the reader question the ‘mauvaise foi’ (*PQ*, 162) of the writer, whose goodwill cannot be guaranteed. The protagonist of *Jette* notes that ‘le secret de la lecture, s’il est quelque part, est dans la rébellion, non dans l’allégeance!’ (*Jette*, 40). Reading is staged as a combat against the writer and his text, where the need to second-guess the writer and text to decipher meaning is emphasized. As a counter to this, however, *Pourquoi* stresses that it may not be possible to derive meaning from writing at all. The narrator states that over the course of writing the book, he has understood that ‘un livre n’a pas besoin d’être le reflet ou la transcription de quelque chose qui lui pré-éxiste. Il est, tout simplement.’ (*PQ*, 172). Here, Bénabou suggests that a book can exist simply on its own: it does not need necessarily to reflect, describe, or mean anything beyond itself. Bénabou puts reading, interpretation, and meaning into question within his works, encouraging his readers to probe what they expect from an encounter with a literary text. Indeed, in the ‘Lacune’ section of *Pourquoi*, a chapter which flags up (through *praeteritio*) material that was almost left out of the book, Bénabou notes that disrupting convention was one of the book’s aims. He states that ‘ce qu’il [the writer] souhaitait, c’était de susciter un trouble, un malaise […] chez ceux qui jusqu’ici se livraient en toute quiétude à l’activité littéraire’ (*PQ*, 178).

Reig suggests that Bénabou plays with a ‘digression infinie’ with regard to meaning in his texts: by introducing an element of discord or unease (‘trouble’);

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27 The echo of ‘attendre’, with its double suggestion of ‘waiting’ and ‘expectation’, is significant.

28 This recalls the implications of Perec’s ‘flow-chart’ text, *L'Art et la manière d'aborder son chef de service pour lui demander une augmentation* (Paris: Hachette, 2009), where the reader is able to choose their own path through the text.
‘malaise’) into reading, this infinite digression might constitute a playful deferral of meaning, to the extent of suggesting that there is no meaning to be found.\textsuperscript{29} Shifting the responsibility for the quest for meaning onto the reader, Bénabou leads his readers on a ludic goose chase. This is not entirely at their own expense, nor to ridicule them: he is suggesting that readers, including himself, should question what constitutes literature and the nature of our relational interaction with books as material objects that appear to promise to reveal meaning. In \textit{Jette}, his narrator questions whether ‘ce que je lisais était bien de la littérature’ (\textit{Jette}, 215, my emphasis). The continual suggestion in \textit{Pourquoi} that his inability to write until he has read all literature that has preceded him, stresses the contingency of the activities of reading and writing. By challenging what we expect as readers when encountering texts, Bénabou also draws into question how this affects him as a writer.

This relationship with the reader, which shifts the responsibility for finding meaning away from the writer and yet troubles the very possibility of finding meaning in literary texts, has profound consequences for Bénabou as a writer.

Reig suggests that ‘[I]a littérature, selon Bénabou, en récusant l’intériorité du moi tout comme l’extériorité de l’œuvre, s’affiche ainsi comme forme de vie et de lucidité’.\textsuperscript{30} This statement illuminates how literature as conceived by Bénabou becomes a form of life independent of the author, through refusing an internalized ‘moi’ to be found easily within the text.

Both \textit{Pourquoi} and \textit{Jette} contain factual detail that allows us to map the narrators onto Bénabou’s biography. For instance, the protagonist of \textit{Jette} is part of an erudite literary ‘set’ at ease using Oulipian techniques; the narrator of \textit{Pourquoi} tells of his sunny childhood mornings walking to the synagogue (details that will recur in his most directly autobiographical work, \textit{Épopée}). Despite this, the unreliability of these

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\textsuperscript{29} C. Reig, ‘Lector in nebula: les infortunes de l’herméneute’, in \textit{Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini}, p. 120.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. This resonates with existentialism’s rejection of the ‘moi intérieur’: see Roquentin’s discovery in \textit{La Nausée} (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) that existence ‘n’était rien, tout juste une forme vide qui venait s’ajouter aux choses du dehors, sans rien changer à leur nature’ (p. 179). Sartre emphasizes Roquentin’s personal choice: ‘c’est moi qui me tire du néant auquel j’aspire: la haine, le dégoût d’exister, ce sont autant de manières de \textit{me faire} exister’ (p. 143): the freedom of choice indicates the rejection of an essential ‘moi intérieur’. Similarly, Roquentin’s diary notes that ‘l’existence n’est pas la nécessité. Exister, c’est \textit{être là}, simplement (p. 184): this echoes Bénabou’s indication that a text need not ‘mean’ anything beyond itself, stating ‘Il est, tout simplement’ (\textit{PQ}, 172).
narrator figures means that Bénabou stops short of direct identification of the author with the protagonist. Not only this, but he stresses that the reader should resist this ready identification, with the narrator, author, and apostrophized reader all assuming the ‘je’ position in Pourquoi. He states:

‘rien n’oblige à identifier celui qui dit je avec lui, l’auteur. Sait-on seulement s’il se tient le moindre atome de solidarité avec ce personnage ? Je après tout n’est qu’un mot comme un autre, un simple outil – commode parfois – avec lequel il n’est pas interdit de jouer […] Après tout, chacun est capable de distinguer un auteur réel d’un auteur potentiel, ou plus simplement encore un écrivain de son héros’ (PQ, 24).

Bénabou interrogates the idea that the narrator and author are the same person. Making playful reference to Rimbaud’s declaration of radical self-alterity (‘Je est un autre’), Bénabou transforms Rimbaud’s statement into a problem of language, stating that the problem with using ‘je’ is not only that the ‘I’ contains an essential alterity, but also that the word ‘je’ itself holds no particular meaning.31 Using the ‘je’ is a useful literary device, to be distorted and played with. Indeed, this joke is suggested by the fleeting, uncatchable text in Jette. Just as meaning slips from the protagonist’s grasp as Sophie leaves with her copy of the Livre, Bénabou suggests that identity too is subject to the same elusiveness, evading the reader’s attempts to grasp it through the cartwheels of the mobile ‘je’ in Bénabou’s text.

We see again in the statement above the conferral of interpretive power onto the reader, who Bénabou states will easily distinguish his use of the device of the mobile ‘je’: the distinction between an ‘auteur réel’ and an ‘auteur potentiel’, in the context of an Oulipian writer concerned with literature’s potentialities, is furthermore notable. This potential author is the author that Bénabou hopes to become in Pourquoi, who will produce the perfect book. The real author is the one, however, who produces the book before us, despite his tribulations in writing it. Any stable identity to be found within the text is therefore called into question. The narrator’s disdain for autobiography – shared by Bénabou – is evident in his view of the genre as a ‘tiède désert du narcissisme’ (PQ, 165), where the autobiographer takes part in a fickle spectacle ‘où celui qui dit je ne cesse de changer de rôle’ (PQ, 162). This statement encapsulates Bénabou’s own method of proceeding in Pourquoi: his assumption of the reader’s voice

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31 A. Rimbaud, ‘Lettre à Georges Izambard’, 13th May 1871. Rimbaud discusses, as Bénabou does in Pourquoi, his difficulty in finding his predestined vocation as a poet: ‘je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre voyant’.
in the passages of apostrophe, as well as the continual blurring between the narrator and author’s ‘je’, creates this very impression of continually substituted roles, where the ‘je’ is mobile and mutable. Regarding Reig’s suggestion that Bénabou denies any ‘interiorité du moi’ in his texts, I assert that Bénabou resists the possibility of finding the ‘moi’ within his slippery texts, yet is simultaneously seduced by the tool – ‘commode parfois’ – of playing with the potentialities of first-person writing.

These potentialities are the interplay between life and literature that Bénabou’s texts encourage the reader to contemplate. Reig’s analysis suggests that literature becomes a ‘forme de vie’ for Bénabou, contingent on but separate from ‘real life’. However, Bénabou states in Pourquoi that he finds this dichotomy arbitrary. His response to this ‘très classique’ distinction of these two ‘voies’ is to proceed by ‘dévoilant progressivement mon inaptitude à m’engager sur l’une aussi bien que l’autre’ (PQ, 112). Rather than choosing between living or writing, he wishes his texts to reveal his incapacity for both: as such, his literary texts become a form of life (‘forme de vie’) separate from ‘real life’, in which finding the ‘interiorité du moi’ is impossible. He notes that

‘[I]’écriture serait le moyen par lequel je pourrais donner à ma vie la singularité véritable à laquelle j’aspirais. Ce que je rêvais d’être, il me suffirait d’en faire le récit’ (PQ, 138).

This statement suggests that his textual life, the ‘moi’ which exists in his texts, is an idealized, substitute ‘moi’: it suffices that he write about the life to which he aspires in order to give his real life the singularity he desires. Bénabou suggests a type of textual existentialism, where the writer has the freedom and power of choice to endow the textual ‘moi’ with any life he chooses. This is reinforced by his indication that literature’s function is not to ‘redoubler inutilement le réel, mais de le continuer par d’autres moyens’ (PQ, 182). Literature is figured not as a substitute for life, but as a complement to it, with its own conventions and means to elaborate the real. This suggests again Bénabou’s view of the dichotomy between writing and life as arbitrary: these statements also reinforce the sense in which a concrete, totalized sense of self will not be found in Jette or Pourquoi, as the ‘moi’ featured in those texts does not attest to Bénabou the author.

32 Whilst Sartre notes in La Nausée the necessity of choosing between ‘vivre ou raconter’, Bénabou is instead positing the possibility of writing the real singularity he seeks into textual, yet virtual, existence.
Bénabou’s texts centre around an impasse: the incapacity to read (in *Jette*) or write (in *Pourquoi*). It is also the impossibility to discern or pinpoint identity in writing. As such, Bénabou’s autobiographical works can be considered among those that Gilmore terms ‘limit cases’ that ‘offer a means to think about the ways in which autobiography is partially structured through the proscription it places on self-representation’. By suggesting that the limit point of literature – particularly autobiography – is its inability to pinpoint identity, Bénabou’s texts stretch the boundaries of what autobiography might achieve. He notes in an interview that he sees his writing as a ‘production’, not an ‘œuvre’ nor a ‘masse critique’ having any ‘cohésion’. The idea of his writing as a continuous, ongoing production rather than a totalized body of work chimes with Brignoli’s suggestion that, like Leiris and Perec as his textual brothers, Bénabou is more interested in the process of writing rather than its product. This writing process is also the ongoing progression of self-examination, which, Bénabou suggests, will be unable to fully discern the writer’s identity. And yet, Bénabou’s emphasis on the ludic, exciting, at times frustrating, relational exchange between writer and reader in literature in *Pourquoi* and *Jette*, as well as his discussion of the complications of autobiographical writing in both texts, suggests that he wishes to play a game of ‘qui-perd-gagne’ (*PQ*, 191) where identity and meaning are negotiated between writer and reader.

Bénabou’s approach to autobiography contrasts that of Gusdorf. Bénabou’s relational emphasis in his texts, where the reader is actively invited into participation

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34 M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in *Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini*, p. 177. The etymology of ‘production’ (from Latin *producere*: to extend, to prolong, to lengthen, to advance, to give birth to) suggests Bénabou’s method: a continuing forward movement of renewal and extension, rather than a totalized product.
35 L. Brignoli, ‘Un pacte avec le livre: l’écriture compacte de Marcel Bénabou’, in *Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini*, p. 54. See also C.-E. Magny’s statements in her *Lettre sur le pouvoir d’écrire* (Paris: Seighers, 1947), written to another multilingual writer like Bénabou, Jorge Semprún ‘ce qui importe ici n’est pas le poème […] mais seulement l’expérience intérieure qui l’a engendré’ (p. 8). Magny stresses the experience of writing rather than its final product.
with the work, demonstrates his resistance to individualism in favour of an intersubjective exchange that forms the base of his autobiographical production. This has been associated in autobiographical criticism with feminist analysis that reacts against Gusdorf’s individualist emphasis. Benjamin, for instance, advocates for the intersubjective dimension of individuation, which means that ‘at the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it’. Relating this to Bénabou’s texts, one can appreciate his strong invitation to the reader to participate in his texts as an act that involves them in a dynamic of recognition. Although the ‘je’ in his texts is slippery, and troubles the extent to which the reader can readily find meaning, Bénabou’s continuous attempt to assemble his experience into a written text requires – even demands – the other of the reader. Eakin notes that in autobiography there is an ‘impulse to undo the work of individuation altogether’: indeed, as Reig states, Bénabou resists the ‘intérieurité du moi’ in Pourquoi and Jette. Eakin suggests that this is part of a desire to be ‘released from the burden of self-reflexive autonomy’. I argue that we can view Bénabou’s relational exchange with his reader as a strategy to share this burden with the reader, such that self-reflection is an interchange between writer and reader, where identity is negotiated in the encounter with the other.

**Part 2 - The ‘inabouti’ as a textual strategy**

*Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres* and *Jacob, Ménahem et Mimoun: Une Épopée familiale*

This relational, negotiated, ludic exchange is at the heart of the relationship between writer and reader in Bénabou’s texts. Meaning and identity are negotiated through a process of mutual recognition – or, indeed, a process of mutual misapprehension (like the protagonist of *Jette*).

With this established, a central dynamic of Bénabou’s work is the notion of the ‘inabouti’: the unfinished, the incomplete, the unsuccessful. Bénabou makes the idea

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39 Ibid.
40 The final, departing word of *Épopée* is ‘inabouti’ (*EF*, 247): this word, carrying with it the echo of ‘Bénabou’ for a writer so concerned with wordplay and hidden linguistic jokes, is undeniably pregnant with significance.
of the incomplete a textual strategy that is woven into the very structure, form and thematic fabric of his work. Contat raises a question that can be used as a pertinent touchstone for considering this aspect of Bénabou’s texts: ‘Quel rapport y a-t-il entre l’expérience vécue de celui qui écrit le texte et le texte qu’il est en train d’écouter?’\footnote{M. Contat, \textit{L'Auteur et le manuscrit} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), p. 24.} Examining the relationship between the lived experience of the writer and the text that he is writing gives an insight into Bénabou’s use of the ‘inabouti’, as it indicates that his lived experience is just as provisional, ephemeral, and incomplete as the texts he produces. Bénabou continually attempts to write the ideal book: the ‘livre rêvé’ (\textit{PQ}, 58); or the ‘livre unique’ (\textit{PQ}, 87), which takes for its model his childhood favourite \textit{Le Livre unique de français}; or, indeed, the Torah itself (\textit{EF}, 49). The ideal book is an all-encompassing family epic that could capture the harmony he felt with the world as a child (‘une littérature qui saurait me restituer, dans son intégrité, ce sentiment d’harmonie avec le monde’, \textit{PQ}, 42), yet without the trappings of traditional autobiography.

Unlike for Perec, writing \textit{is not} life for Bénabou.\footnote{The deictic trace that unifies life and writing does not apply in the same way to Bénabou as for Perec.} Instead, literature is presented as a virtual dimension of the writer’s life that allows him to work through various concerns of his life.\footnote{The use of the word ‘virtual’ is also seen in W. Motte, ‘The Rhetoric of the Impossible’, \textit{SubStance}, Vol. 28, 1999, p. 11.} These concerns include the difficult yet necessary communication of the past, of personal and familial history, and of memory. With Bénabou’s emphasis centred on the relational exchange between writer and reader, he stresses his lack of definitive self-knowledge. Literature thus becomes the virtual realm that functions as an extension of his life, through which he is able to explore how self-knowledge might be negotiated on the literary plane. The textual strategy of the ‘inabouti’, therefore, suggests the open-ended and incomplete nature of Bénabou’s self-insight, whilst figuring literature as the virtual, potential and provisional realm where this search for self-knowledge might take place.

Firstly, Bénabou expresses the ‘inabouti’ in \textit{Pourquoi} and \textit{Épopée} through the idea of the virtual dimension of literature, writing towards a virtual, potential (but unattainable) perfect book. In this quest, he contends with both paralyzing literary forebears and his excessive profusion of memory before pen is even put to paper. Secondly, Bénabou stresses the ‘tentative’ aspect of literature in his work, also explored...
by Perec. Bénabou suggests the always-provisional, experimental dimension of his books. By stressing the abortive nature of his texts, and the reflexive irony of each textual iteration, Bénabou uses the ‘inaabouti’ as a textual strategy in order to underline the open-endedness and provisionality of any attempt to discern self-knowledge in writing.

The virtual dimension of literature

Bénabou is drawn to writing an ideal ‘Book’. In Épopée, he attributes this to a personal and familial ‘prédestination’, as, being Jewish, his status as one of the ‘peuple du Livre’ means that his relationship to books is not only deep but preordained (EF, 49). He reformulates Mallarmé’s statement that ‘tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre’ as ‘tout semblait donc avoir conspiré pour me faire aboutir à… un livre’ (EF, 49). Mallarmé articulates the spiritually liberating operations of reading, the fleeting yet pleasurable machinations of an encounter with a book, which provides a distillation of the world in textual form. Bénabou, however, troubles this notion. Whilst he feels predestined to become a writer, we see his hesitancy towards this ‘Book’ (capitalized throughout as the ‘Livre’; see EF, 11). The use of ‘semblait’ suggests the discrepancy between the seeming propulsion towards literature that he feels and the reality of his struggles to begin his first book. The world, rather than existing to create the ideal book, colludes against him (‘conspiré’), indicating the struggle between the writer’s reality and his idealized literary ambitions. This is reinforced by ellipsis, which contrasts with the forward sense of motion indicated by ‘aboutir’ to create a jarring sense of

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disjuncture. Bénabou establishes the frustrating discrepancy between the idealized, virtual masterpiece he feels compelled to write and his real situation as a writer incapable of achieving this.

Yet, crucially, Bénabou suggests that he can take advantage of this disjuncture for his own literary purposes. He notes that in the univers de livres, the virtual plane of literature, ‘aux réalités concrètes se substituent les mondes qu’on crée’ (PQ, 44). If the literary realm is separate from his real life, it becomes a created world in which he can explore not only the concerns of his lived experience, particularly his childhood experience, but also his relation to literature itself. Literature becomes a ‘machine à explorer la mémoire’ (EF, 211): this recalls Leiris’ stylization of introspection in L’Âge d’homme that allowed him to dramatize the exercise of autobiography, emphasising its purpose as a tool in the exercise of exploring memory and identity.

I will demonstrate two aspects of virtuality in Bénabou’s work: first, how the virtual, ideal book creates a sense of discrepancy with the author’s actual experience of writing; and secondly, how literature’s virtual dimension accommodates Bénabou’s excess of memory.

Bénabou’s Épopée recounts the writer’s attempts to tackle the great family epic that he feels predestined to write. Bénabou discusses how he will go about approaching this epic story, whilst obliquely interlacing his family history into the tale of his abortive attempts to write this epic. Much like in Pourquoi, the book in question – the epic ‘Benabouyade’ (EF, 228) – is consumed in the very act of trying to write it, such that the Épopée with which the reader is finally presented is not at all the book that Bénabou had promised to write, nor the book under discussion in the text itself.

This suggests the essential discrepancy that characterizes Épopée. One of the most difficult aspects of his task of writing the epic is that ‘j’étais quasiment sans expérience (EF, 111): Bénabou’s naivety forces an incongruity between what he aims to achieve and what he is able to write. Notably, Bénabou discusses the literary forebears who he hopes to take as models, yet who paralyze him. For example, he attempts to translate Proust’s ‘cathedral’ architectural model for A la recherche onto his own life, imagining his virtual book as the Temple in Jerusalem: yet he stumbles at his lack of knowledge about the structure of this building (EF, 125). He attempts Joyce’s ‘simple transposition’ of the Odyssey into the Dublin of Ulysses, instead basing his future book

47 This recalls Roquentin’s final aspirations in La Nausée: to finally write ‘une autre espèce de livre’ other than his failed history of the life of M. de Rebollon, p. 247.
on a reworking of the Aeneid. However, he finds that his literary models are unfit for purpose (‘plus j’y travaillais, plus les choses me paraissaient compliquées’, EF, 130). All his attempts to pastiche Flaubert, Dante, Conrad, Melville, or Kafka fall by the wayside. Lejeune has designated this dimension of Bénabou’s text as ‘autobiocopie’, where writers attempt to mine the work of others for their own autobiographical purposes.  

Lejeune argues that autobiographical narratives employing ‘autobiocopie’ are ‘une reprise ou une transformation de formes de vies préexistantes’. In his attempt to revise the work of others, however, Bénabou does not find a useful conduit for other lived experience, but encounters only ‘tyrannie’, ‘les tourments et les luttes’ (EF, 134) exerted by these literary models. Bénabou expresses his difficult relationship to archetypes that inspire in him, which Bloom calls the ‘disease of self-consciousness’.

Bénabou makes this virtual discrepancy into the heart of Épopée. Schaffner suggests, comparing Bénabou’s endeavour to A la recherche, that Bénabou succeeds in making the récit of Épopée itself the histoire of the unfinished book before the reader, in the same way as the récit and the histoire of A la recherche are contingent and intertwined. The book therefore operates on a simultaneous proliferation of récit and histoire that appears to diverge through this repeated sense of discrepancy: the virtual, ideal book remains to be written; Bénabou cannot live up to his literary models or use their insight for his own purpose. Yet, this seeming divergence belies the contingency of the textual product in question – in Contat’s words, ‘le texte qu’il est en train d’écrire’ – and the experience of its writing by the author. Bénabou himself contemplates this fact in the closing pages of Épopée. Rather than considering a book as the necessary product of all writing, he advocates for an approach where the ‘livre inachevé et inachevable’ becomes ‘un véritable genre littéraire, avec ses normes et préceptes propres’ (EF, 244). The norms and precepts of this genre of failure would include the conviction that ‘le récit a le vertu d’engendrer les mêmes résultats que l’action qu’il

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48 P. Lejeune, Brouillons de soi, p. 16.
52 Culler identifies the impossibility of synthesis in narrative, due to an ‘effect of deconstruction’ that occurs where the ‘supposed priority of event to discourse is inverted’. The discourse, ‘telling’, récit or sjuzhet of Épopée takes primacy over its events, histoire, or fabula, resulting in an ‘undecidability’, J. Culler, The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature and Deconstruction (Abingdon: Routledge, 1981), pp. 181-183.
raconte’ (EF, 246). This is reminiscent of the ‘livre-oracle’ (EF, 57), the Talmud, which Bénabou held in awe as a child, as reading the Talmud seemed to performatively enact its content. This is precisely the contingency of récit and histoire that Schaffner identifies; a metatextual, performative book where the telling can produce the same effects as action or plot.\textsuperscript{53} In terms of the virtual realm of literature, in Épopée Bénabou’s repeated emphasis on the ultimate contingency of the search for the text and his final product indicates that literature and lived experience are divergent yet dependent fields for Bénabou. Eakin notes that recognition of this type of dependent divergence (which involves recognizing what he terms the autobiographical ‘teller-effect’ as an illusion) ‘can prompt us to locate the content of self-experience in an autobiography not merely in the central figures of the I-character and the I-narrator […] but in the identity narrative as a whole’.\textsuperscript{54} As such, the récit and histoire of Épopée are contingent, and converge to demonstrate a type of self-experience that can be understood as a concomitant process, rather than emphasizing writing’s final product.

Writing is, nonetheless, the precise place in which this can be explored, as a virtual extension of his real life. The use of the ‘inabouti’ in this virtual sense suggests that Bénabou hopes to write unfinished texts with ‘une narration sans cesse à reprendre’ (EF, 247), afforded by the virtual and incomplete status that literature holds. The account of the difficult origin and structuring of his texts becomes Épopée itself. Thus, the metanarrative account of disjunction between the virtual, ideal book and the final product before the reader becomes creatively productive. He notes in the final pages of Pourquoi the generative operation of writing, stating ‘écrire qu’on voudrait écrire, c’est déjà écrire. Écrire qu’on ne peut pas écrire, c’est toujours écrire’ (PQ, 190). It unblocks the production of a book which, although not being the ideal family epic he initially desired, in its own way explores the history of his family and the author’s relationship to writing. Bénabou presents the virtual plane of literature, able to accommodate this contingent intertwining of récit and histoire, as the realm for this encounter.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Magny’s advice to Semprun about aesthetic creation indicates that in order to re-establish the different zones of the ‘moi’, ‘une simple prise de conscience ne suffit pas; il y faut une transmutation esthétique qu’on ne peut guère […] définir autrement que par son résultat’ (Lettre sur le pouvoir d’écrire, p. 17). We see the same emphasis on the indefinable process versus the result of writing that is a concern of both Bénabou and Perec.

\textsuperscript{54} P. J. Eakin, ‘What are we reading when we read autobiography?’, in Chansky and Hipchen, The Routledge Auto / Biographical Studies Reader, pp. 214-221 (p. 220).

\textsuperscript{55} This recalls Leiris’ suggestion in ‘De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie’ that autobiography can be compared to a bullfighting arena where the encounter with the self plays out.
Bénabou indicates in *Épopée* and *Pourquoi* that the transmission of memory is haunted by this sense of disjuncture between the virtual book and his real experience of writing. The excessive profusion of memories of his childhood leads to a sense of stifled inactivity (‘ce qui me nuisait, c’était la profusion, le foisonnement, l’hypertrophie, de la mémoire’, *EF*, 21). Literature’s virtual capacity, as a realm for exploring the vacillations of memory, is key to Bénabou’s encounter with his past, as being virtual and unfinished, writing does not require him to be definitive about his relationship with his childhood and his family history. Regarding Contat’s question, Bénabou suggests a continually evolving relationship between his position as a writer in the act of writing and the text produced, where memory is interwoven into the *récit* and informs the *histoire*. As Bénabou reflects further into his past and his family’s history and re-examines his ‘expérience vécue’, his relationship with the book evolves, such that the eventual product of his writing is not a consolidated family history, but an expression of the lived experience of a writer remembering his past from the present moment of writing, with all the fluctuations that this involves.

Bénabou notes in *Pourquoi* that access to his childhood, unlike for Perec, is not impeded by the passage of time nor by any loss of connection between his child and adult lives. He states that childhood’s ‘*traces* ne s’effacent pas et même elles m’ont semblé, avec le temps, s’incruster de plus en plus profond, sans pour autant cesser d’être lisible en surface’ (*PQ*, 124, my emphasis). The notion of the trace, already discussed in relation to Leiris and Perec, is pertinent here. For Bénabou, the legible trace (‘lisible en surface’) relates to the memories of childhood that cannot be erased, which have etched themselves into his present life as an adult. Past experience is appreciated as a written and readable sign. Bénabou’s predestination to become an author, therefore, relates to the idea of memory as writing through the emphasis on the word. Writing can secure memory, despite its excessive profusion: he notes in *Pourquoi* his belonging to a ‘culte du souvenir’, where he feels compelled to ‘le fixer, de le récupérer, voire de le recycler’ (*PQ*, 125). Crucially, just as he earlier attributes his profession as a writer to his belonging to the Jewish ‘peuple du livre’, he notes that this compulsion to remember stems from his ‘devoir de mémoire, une obligation de souvenir […] l’interdiction d’oublier’ that comes from being Jewish (*PQ*, 124).

Childhood, the past, remembering and writing are so inextricable for Bénabou, however, that their interdependence results in abortiveness. These motivations for writing coagulate in a ‘seul magma’ (*PQ*, 123), a moving and volatile muddle, such that
his idealized future Book cannot get going. Yet, the confusion of these motivations for writing (‘ses motifs, au double sens de ce mot’, PQ, 123) becomes generative of his texts. Brignoli notes that ‘une autobiographie, pour Bénabou, n’est pas le produit de la condensation de la mémoire, mais de sa dispersion’: his texts are the transmission of this sense of diffusion.\textsuperscript{56} As memory proliferates uncontrollably, Bénabou indicates that giving memory literary form will afford him discipline: he notes ‘j’allais canaliser, discipliner les débordements de ma mémoire en leur donnant une forme littéraire’ (EF, 28). The récit of both Pourquoi and Épopée enact this generative unblocking of memory by its shaping into the story of its own dispersal. In relation to the present act of reflective writing, Bénabou notes that the relationship between his past and present has always been fluid. He notes in Pourquoi that ‘je vivais le présent comme un souvenir’, and that he was reluctant to order his life in the hope that his memories would classify themselves into a natural order, becoming the virtual book that would represent ‘ma vie devenue lisible’ (PQ, 108). The idea of memory as a readable, written trace is again evident here. Bénabou’s admission that this hopeful expectation did not materialize as a coherent book demonstrates that the relationship between remembering the past and its codification in the present act of writing involves capturing the dispersal of memory in literary form, all whilst the present and past are experienced together.

The present récit shaped and delivered by the adult Bénabou recounting the past histoire of his difficult confrontation with his predestined vocation and the dispersed memories of his childhood evolve in tandem, to suggest that his incapacity to write is generative of the works themselves.\textsuperscript{57} Bénabou performatively enacts in both Épopée and Pourquoi his conviction that ‘la mémoire n’est pas une donnée simple: […] elle se livre à un constant travail qui reinterprète sans cesse le vécu’.\textsuperscript{58} Through the mediation of the present, memory has continuous effects on the present moment of writing. Bénabou suggests that the virtual dimension of literature, always unfinished and operating on the disjuncture between the idealized Book and the writer’s reality, can


\textsuperscript{57} Riffaterre suggests that in texts such as these containing the enunciation of a certain intention by the author, a double interpretation is encouraged: ‘l’intérpretation que semble exiger l’énoncé métalinguistique d’intention et celle qu’indiquent les formes de l’énoncé objet de ce métalangage – le résultat de cette simultanéité pouvant être une forme d’ironie’ (M. Riffaterre, La Production du texte, p. 10). This irony is certainly created in Épopée between the supposed aim of the text and its eventual final state.

\textsuperscript{58} M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 188.
accommodate this constantly shifting mediation. His texts deal with the fluctuations of memory by suggesting the continuing mediation of past and present is an ongoing process, by definition ‘inabouti’. Bénabou aptly encapsulates this process in an essay on his vocation as a historian and writer, noting that ‘le passé n’est nullement une réalité figée qu’il faudrait retrouver, mais qu’il change avec le présent, qu’il est en perpétuelle construction’.  


The ‘tentative’

Bénabou also stresses the unfinished nature of his texts through the sense of the ‘tentative’. By this, he suggests his books’ always-provisional, experimental dimension that emphasizes the continual process of writing. Bénabou thus uses the ‘inabouti’ as a textual strategy to underline the open-endedness and provisionality of any attempt to discern self-knowledge in literature. Whilst Perec discusses his “pourquoi j’écris’ auquel je ne peux répondre qu’en écrivant’ (P/C, 12), Bénabou discusses his repeated attempt to write towards the same (virtual) book. Writing, Bénabou suggests, is doomed to remain unfinished, as he is incapable of writing his envisaged ‘Book’: yet, it nonetheless holds meaning as an attempted activity of trial and error. As for Perec, writing is not perceived in utilitarian terms, with the product of writing representing accomplishment or completion: the use of the ‘tentative’ subverts the associated temporal dimension of completion as a mark of a text’s success. Bénabou indicates that discerning identity through writing is a continual process of approach and attempt. The ‘tentative’ is demonstrative of the immediacy of writing, such that the relationship between the lived experience of the author and the text that he is producing (as in Contat’s formulation) is offered as a present-focused attempt at the experience of self.

The continual nature of Bénabou’s writing project can be identified in both Pourquoi and Épopée. This continuous dimension relates to how the past, memory, and identity are brought into the present in his texts, such that the past is mediated through the present and embodied act of writing. Elbaz has hinted at this, noting that in

60 See the epigram to Épopée: ‘Nous bégayons longtemps nos pensées avant d’en trouver le mot propre’ (Joseph Joubert, Carnets). Bénabou highlights the continual stuttering towards the ‘bon mot’.

Bénabou’s texts ‘narration […]’ cannot simply recover in a naïve way the past that is presumably lying there waiting to be uncovered or recovered. That past is itself the product of the writing experience, and one cannot transcend this present of writing in order to get to that primary narrative content’.62

With this in mind, it is possible to identify within the texts examples of how Bénabou posits writing as a mindful practice or experience. Nonetheless, the disjuncture between this experience and its intended results – producing a book – remains problematic for him. He notes that in his school holidays, he would amass all the required materials for writing as part of a ‘rituel intérieur’ (PQ, 49). In a type of meditative experience, he stares at the outdoor scene beyond his desk (‘je m’initie peu à peu à la contemplation minutieuse’, PQ, 50). This embodied contemplation is, however, at the expense of any writing: he states that ‘si le paysage devant mes yeux se modifie sans cesse, le papier blanc devant moi change pour ainsi dire pas’ (PQ, 51). This ritual involves the compulsive repetition of behavioral patterns: the unfolding of all of his previous attempts at writing from his last holiday, their meticulous arrangement on his desk, followed by their close inspection (PQ, 52). These attempts are always disappointing: ‘par quelle série de prismes étaient-ils passés pour aboutir à ce degré d’insignifiance?’ (PQ, 53). The rhetorical question here indicates his exasperation: the use of the word ‘aboutir’, related disappointingly to ‘insignifiance’, highlights the bathetic contrast between his hopes and the actuality of his writing.

Yet, Bénabou indicates that this disappointment is a product of the complexity of the processes of writing the past: the scraps of writing that he has attempted contain elements that ‘se sont entremêlées pour constituer mon histoire […] derrière les décalages et les contradictions, se dessinent les silhouettes des divers personnages qui ont vieilli en moi’ (PQ, 54). This statement explains the confusion of Bénabou’s personal history, which he has attempted to order through the organizational dimension that writing permits him. The suggestion that he sees himself as composed of multiple ‘divers personnages’ demonstrates that the source of his frustration is the desire to ‘aboutir enfin à un ensemble cohérent’ (PQ, 54), which is incompatible with the notion of dispersion discussed above. Writing is an attempt, therefore, to enforce an order that is nonetheless instable (‘toujours prêts à se défaire’, PQ, 55). This process is fated to repeat itself: Bénabou states that ‘je ne cesse de recommencer’ (PQ, 55). The antithesis

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in this phrase between stopping and starting is arresting simple. Bénabou’s apostrophic rhetorical questioning reinforces this frustration:

‘Car comment circuler dans ce monde où règne le discontinu, le décousu, l’inachevé, le partiel? Faut-il que je m’astreigne à ne plus traquer que l’insignifiant sous prétexte qu’il serait seul le lieu de la signification? Impossible de fermer les yeux sur l’absurde disproportion entre l’effort et le résultat’ (PQ, 55).

The virtual world of literature is ruled by ‘le discontinu’, suggesting fragmentation; by the undone or disjointed (‘décousu’); and crucially, by the incomplete or unfinished (‘l’inachevé’), which is only part of a suggested whole (‘le partiel’). Bénabou questions if his role as a writer is to endlessly turn in circles around meaningless fragments of his past. The circularity of this writing enterprise suggests the notion of the ‘tentative’, where the compulsive, repeated, circular act of writing is fated to remain provisional.

Indeed, in one of the imagined sections of dialogue with the reader, Bénabou asks ‘nous allons encore longtemps tourner en rond?’ (PQ, 69). His response to this question is: ‘Sans doute. Mais au moment où l’on croit que l’auteur tourner en rond, il décrit en fait une spirale’ (PQ, 69). This spiral is attributed to the author’s incapacity to ‘se figer dans une attitude qu’il présenterait comme définitive’ (PQ, 69). As such, this provisional, tentative, circular abortiveness is related to Bénabou’s reluctance to commit himself definitively to the page, as this would betray the vacillations of the past, which itself is mediated in the present act of writing.

Bénabou has noted that he views his body of work less as an ‘œuvre’, and more as a ‘production’. This emphasizes the continual and provisional aspect of not only his texts considered together, but reinforces each text’s internal incompleteness. Their relation to each other is thematic, recycling the same motifs of abortiveness and metanarrative, to suggest that each text is a reworking of the previous publication. He notes in Pourquoi that ‘un livre eût pour fonction non de redoubler le réel, mais de le continuer par d’autres moyens’ (PQ, 182, my emphasis). As such, a book’s function is to take up a relay using its own means, rather than to reflect the world mimetically. One can consider Bénabou’s auto-recycling as an implementation of this strategy of continuation. Indeed, the original title for Epopée familiale submitted to his publishers

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63 This recalls Leiris’ characterisation of a book as ‘une vrille’, a gimlet screw or tailspin. M. Leiris, Mots sans mots, p. 97.
64 M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 177.
was *On écrit toujours le même livre*. This was rejected, but the statement was incorporated into the final lines of the book. The pervasive notion of the ‘tentative’ implies that Bénabou is repeatedly attempting to write the same single book.

The final lines of *Épopée* reinforce this. He states that he has been unable to write his ‘épopée héroïque’, but has discovered that the form of writing to which he is most suited is the following:

> ‘[une] tentative pour assembler, à l’intérieur d’une narration sans cesse à reprendre – car je suis persuadé que l’on écrit toujours le même livre -, les restes éparpillés d’un travail destiné à demeurer inabouti.’ (*EF*, 247, my emphasis).

The provisional and experimental dimension is evident in the designation of his newfound genre as a ‘tentative’. The notion of ordering, organization, and marshaling of fragments is clear (‘assembler’): yet this is contrasted by the suggestion that these fragments will remain unfinished (‘inabouti’) within this assemblage. Again, we see the disjuncture between coherence and tentativeness that Bénabou suggests when defining his work as a ‘production’ rather than an intelligible ‘œuvre’. Reig suggests that Bénabou refuses ‘l’intériorité du moi tout comme l’extériorité de l’œuvre’: the indication above that his work involves a strategy of tentative attempt where incompleteness is embedded into the ‘intérieur d’une narration’ implies that literature can accommodate incompleteness and fragmentation better than it can accommodate subjective interiority.

Therefore, Bénabou emphasizes the provisional dimension of the ‘tentative’, stressing the investigational aspect of his work and its attempt to both mediate the past through the present act of writing, and to tentatively approach the self. This approach is shown, however, to swerve and warp with the unfolding of the texts that try to implement this strategy. The ‘tentative’ is therefore related to generative failure. Laskowski-Caujolle has called this the ‘paradoxe bénabolien’, where the incapacity to write becomes the generator of the text.65 Bénabou emphasizes his work’s abortiveness to demonstrate that failure can become constitutive of a book. This is seen in the progression of his outlook from *Pourquoi* to *Épopée*. He notes in *Pourquoi* that [j]e n’ai jamais réussi à mener jusqu’au bout un premier livre’ (*PQ*, 45); yet *Pourquoi* was indeed Bénabou’s first completed book. In *Épopée*, he states that these failures are part

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of an incremental approach to his real goal: ‘au rythme de mes échecs, je cernais de mieux en mieux mon but’ (EF, 133). This culminates in his questioning of the end product of literary activity: ‘le livre est-il l’aboutissement normal de tout projet d’écriture?’ (EF, 243). Bénabou has progressed from performatively generating a text through an extended use of praeteritio in Pourquoi to interrogating the relationship between the ‘effort et le résultat’ (PQ, 55) in Épopée.

In both texts, he draws attention to the materiality of the book by emphasizing his metaliterary approach. In Pourquoi, this approach is playful: it arguably progresses in Épopée to demonstrate Bénabou’s probing of the function and purpose of writing, and its desired results. This generative failure emphasizes the reflexive irony of each textual iteration, fated to remain incomplete from its very start. Nonetheless, the exploratory, investigatory dimension of each attempted work allows Bénabou to move progressively closer to the virtual, ideal ‘Book’ he hopes to write, all the while fully aware of the disjuncture that this opens up between his ideal, and his actual textual failures. He suggests that this disjuncture is the condition of literature: he can only ever stress the tentativeness of his attempts to write a perfect book which will bring his past into the present through writing. The ‘telling’ or the récit of this attempt becomes more important than the actual content of the histoire: whilst he aims to redress the ignorance in France of the mellah of his childhood and the community of Moroccan Jews that lived there in Épopée, the ‘telling’ of this aim in fact performs the same function as providing his family’s factual history. This generative failure means that only in the closing pages of both Pourquoi and Épopée does he suggest to the reader that he has discovered his ‘real’ calling as a writer. This calling is to make apparent in his work the ultimate fruitlessness of attempts to recover, order, and communicate the past – namely, personal and familial history – in writing, which in his view are fated to fail. Bénabou thus uses the ‘inabouti’ as a textual strategy to underline the open-endedness and provisionality of any attempt to discern retrospective self-knowledge in literature.

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66 This idea is explored in another of Bénabou’s works, Écrire sur Tamara (2002): its quatrième de couverture asks ‘Écrire sur Tamara? Peut-être devrais-je plutôt dire: ne pas écrire sur elle’. This text is also concerned with the tentative attempts to write about the protagonist Manuel’s love interest, which can only be achieved by not writing about her.
Part 3 – Bénabou’s irony, humour and parody

The use of the ‘inabouti’ indicates the indeterminacy of the relationship between narrative and identity in Bénabou’s work. By stressing the incomplete nature of his autobiographical narratives, and in particular their generative failure, Bénabou implies that the ends of writing (the product) and its means (the process) do not converge to produce any meaningful recovery of his personal and familial history, but rather diverge and disperse, resulting in abortive texts that reflect the provisional and continual process of imperfect self-insight.

Yet, Bénabou’s texts are also notable for their humour and resulting accessibility. He realizes in Pourquoi that he had always been the butt of any joke to amuse others. Upon assuming his predestined career as a writer, he hopes to claim this humour for his own advantage:

‘Décidé désormais à ne rien prendre au sérieux que la dérision, je croyais sincèrement que je n’avais qu’à paraître pour apparaître dans les lettres comme un être à part’ (PQ, 187).

This comic statement demonstrates Bénabou’s playful mix of self-deprecation and black humour, incorporating homophonic wordplay (‘à paraître’ / ‘apparaître’; ‘être à part’) into his sarcastic outlook on his position as a writer somewhat on the margins of literature. Bénabou’s teasing texts mobilise the ludic dimension of the Oulipo’s methods to parody both postmodern specularity and the soul-searching dimension of autobiography, for which he holds a certain contempt. I argue that this use of ironic black humour relates to his specific position as a multilingual autobiographer at the crossroads of Judeo-Franco-Maghrebi culture. His ‘lifelong love affair with language’ is at the heart of this use of humorous irony, and betrays the foundation of his relation to himself, others, the world, and literature itself as a Moroccan francophone Jew.

The humour of his work is often overt: indeed, Pourquoi won the ‘prix de l’Humour noir’, joining the ranks of past winners such as Bazin and Queneau. Yet his use of humour is not gratuitous, but instead related in important ways to his autobiographical endeavour. It demonstrates Bénabou’s indebtedness to Leiris: as noted,

67 ‘Je dois dire que je me défiais tout particulièrement de l’autobiographie. À cause de la dose de narcissisme, de complaisance à l’égard de soi-même à quoi elle mène presque immanquablement’, M. Bénabou, interviewed by A. Schaffner, in Marcel Bénabou: Archiviste de l’infini, p. 187.
Leiris’ ludic use of wordplay inspired Bénabou to launch himself into writing.\footnote{M. Bénabou, interview with M. Saad, 2016: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onhTRS5duT0} (accessed 25/04/18.)} Bénabou noted, in characteristic, humorous style, in an article on his autobiographical practice that ‘le jeu découle du je’ or ‘le je découle du jeu’.\footnote{M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 34.} In Épopée he notes that his mixed linguistic heritage allowed him to perform a ‘gymnastique intellectuelle amusante comme un véritable jeu’ (EF, 117). These two phrases illustrate the interweaving of play (the ‘jeu’) into his serious exploration of self and his identity (the ‘je’) that is rooted in language and writing. His work is thus characterized by a black humour that uses irony to blend the ludic with the serious. Playing with the two words at the heart of writing, ‘écrire’ and ‘mot’, provides him with two aphoristic phrases that encapsulate his personal theory of literature, replete with black humour: ‘écrire’, c’est tracer deux lettres et puis rire’; and ‘le mot porte la mort sans avoir l’air’.\footnote{Marcel Bénabou, ‘Quelques clefs pour Pourquoi je n’ai écrit aucun de mes livres’, \url{http://oulipo.net/fr/quelques-clefs-pour-pourquoi-je-nai-ecrit-aucun-de-mes-livres#ftn5}, accessed 3/7/2017.} These two jokes are, Bénabou notes, at the heart of his literary enterprise, writing that ‘tout l’effort du livre va tendre à marier ces deux approches’, on one hand ludic and the other more solemn.\footnote{Ibid.} Appreciating this outlook on literature is helpful in examining how playful black humour, irony, and parody are employed in Bénabou’s work. Winnicott indicates that play in children, when combined with the use of art forms, tends ‘towards a unification and general integration of the personality’.\footnote{D. W. Winnicott, \textit{The Child, the Family, and the Outside World} (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 145.} Bénabou’s play in literature, I argue, tends towards Winnicott’s personal integration, but in a characteristically tentative approach that simultaneously resists any totalization that Winnicott’s ‘unification’ might suggest. Indeed, Bénabou’s use of humour and play indicates something closer to what Winnicott elsewhere describes as a ‘precariousness’ involved with gaming in the ‘potential space’ between players ‘in the service of communication’. If the players involved in literature’s communicative game are the reader and writer, then in the ‘potential space’ of the book the negotiation of Bénabou’s sense of self is arguably precarious, provisional, and complex.

Bénabou’s play with language stems from his mixed linguistic heritage, being able to slip between Arabic, Hebrew, and French from a young age in the _mellah_ of Meknes: this childhood experience is carried into adulthood. He remarks in _Pourquoi_ that ‘on n’en a jamais fini avec son enfance’ (_PQ_, 123), which indicates the continuity he sees between the problems of language from childhood that have persisted into his adult life. Unlike Peref, cut off from the languages he might have shared with his parents through their tragic deaths and therefore maintaining an ambiguous relation to his potential multilingualism, Bénabou’s linguistic heritage remains a constant throughout his life even after his emigration to France.  

This mix of languages is both an advantage and a burden for Bénabou: this is demonstrated in both _Pourquoi_ and _Épopée_. On one hand, it forms the basis of his passion for linguistic gaming, and on the other it poses an ambiguous relation to his identity. He has noted that ‘the environment in which I was immersed as a child was characterized by a singular assortment of diverse languages, between which complex and unstable connections were made’.  

He characterises his relationship to language as the ‘agaçantes questions de langages’ in _Épopée_, describing how the tricky manipulation of accents and idioms demanded a ‘constante vigilance’ (_EF_, 115). This is enhanced by the familial sociolect that Bénabou’s family use (his mother’s widespread use of nicknames, for example), in contrast to the language ‘de la rue’ between friends, where Judeo-Arabic was more common than French: the ‘français châtié’ (_EF_, 117) was reserved for school. The two connotations of ‘châtié’ – ‘polished’ or ‘punished’ – suggest the fraught status of this language for Bénabou. This linguistic mobility provides him with a relation to language that forms the basis of many interpersonal relationships:

‘Gymnastique intellectuelle […] elle pouvait même devenir source de satisfactions subtiles, comme ce sentiment de supériorité qu’elle me donnait à l’égard de ceux qui, réduits au maniement monotone […] d’un seul idiome, ne connaissaient pas les finesse de ma pyramide linguistique. Mais gymnastique à la longue nocive: elle m’a très tôt habitué à modeler ma parole sur celle d’autrui’ (_EF_, 117).

This passage demonstrates how his linguistic heritage is both liberating and problematic: it affords him a sense of power, yet also troubles the stability of the relationship between language and identity, often predicated on others. He notes that his

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74 Perec mentions this in _Récits d’Ellis Island_, pp. 43-44.
75 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, 'Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession', p. 31.
enjoyment of several different languages and their own interior games (such as the anagrams and acrostiches contained in the Torah) gave him a ‘war-chest’ of different linguistic resources.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 32-33.} However, in Pourquoi, he notes that his difficult relationship to French prevented him from becoming a writer: this relation is said to be ‘bâti […] depuis l’enfance sur un curieux mélange de dévotion superstitieuse et d’admireative ferveur’ for the coloniser language (\textit{PQ}, 104). He sees himself as a ‘résident privilégié’ in French (\textit{PQ}, 105), one who has been allowed by the grace of the state to reside in the French domain. This creates a ‘devoir de reconnaissance’, a duty of gratitude to the language, and ‘le sentiment d’une dette’, which must be repaid by becoming a servant of the language, a writer who writes in French in repayment (‘un ouvrier du français’, \textit{PQ}, 105). Yet the capacity to code switch gave his young life ‘le piquant d’un jeu’ that allowed him to slip between identities: he notes that ‘je finissais par ne plus savoir où était, qui était mon vrai moi’ (\textit{PQ}, 135). This demonstrates the connection between language and identity for Bénabou. Whilst his mixed linguistic heritage allows him to create a ‘tout nouveau moi’ depending on changing interpersonal circumstances, it also poses him an internal conflict of identity (‘je vivais cet exotisme comme un injuste exil’, \textit{PQ}, 136).

However, linguistic play comes with the contingent problem of being unmoored between languages. Bénabou feels an affinity with Elisha Ben Abouya, who he discovers in the French translation of the \textit{Talmud de Jerusalem} as a child: a rebellious sage cast out by the Jewish community and referred to only by the Hebrew nickname \textit{Aher}, meaning ‘Other’. Bénabou, feeling like an ‘other’ by virtue of his linguistic alterity, seeks to incorporate ‘cet Autre archétypique’ into his autobiographical writing: becoming an exile in between languages like the exiled Ben Abouya. Linguistic gaming, therefore, ingrained in Bénabou from childhood and casting a shadow onto his adult relationship to language and writing, is tinged with the type of ‘precariousness’ – a hazardous tight rope between languages – that Winnicott suggests is at the heart of play. Psychotherapist Adam Philllips suggests that ‘we cannot describe ourselves without also describing what we need to escape from, and what, we believe, we need to escape to’: in detailing his relation to language as one of exile and non-belonging, yet also paradoxically retaining a fondness for remaining an ‘other’ outside of any single language, Bénabou indicates that his identity is formed by this affiliation to language.\footnote{A. Phillips, \textit{Houdini’s Box: The Art of Escape} (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 4.}
In Phillips’ psychotherapeutic experience, escaping is ‘linked to a sense of failure’. By recounting his self in French, Bénabou indicates that his desired destination of escape is to be monolingually French. Yet, at the same time, he cannot define himself outside of this mixed linguistic heritage (Adams’ ‘what we need to escape from’). This irony is characteristic of Bénabou’s relation to language.

In this, Bénabou finds an affinity with another Maghrebi Francophone Jew, Jacques Derrida. Derrida describes in *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* (1996), published the year after Bénabou’s *Épopée familiale*, his problematic relationship to his own mixed linguistic heritage. Derrida notes that being ‘franco-maghrébin’ does not mean a ‘richesse d’identité’, but rather ‘un trouble d’identité’, a feeling of always being ‘other’ between each language. Identity and language are bound up for Derrida: the ability to designate the self, what he calls the ‘je-me’, is dependent on language, which is underlined in the colonial situation as ‘l’impossible propriété d’une langue’. In an essay entitled ‘Le multilinguisme des miens’, Bénabou addresses this relation to Derrida explicitly, stating ‘Le monolinguisme de l’autre donnait plus de prix encore au multilinguisme des miens’. This statement indicates again Bénabou’s enjoyment of his multilingual status, offering him a superiority over monolinguals. In contrast to Derrida, as Astro notes, Bénabou’s experience of multilingualism is not ‘haunted’ to the same extent by potential fragmentation of identity:

‘Chez les judéo-maghrébins au contraire, comme chez beaucoup de Juifs dans le monde, la pluralité des langues était, bien plus qu’une simple habitude mentale, une véritable obligation vitale. Il ne s’y attachait donc aucune connotation négative, car l’identité judéo-franco-maghrébine, conçue non comme une donnée figée, mais comme le résultat d’un processus, s’accommodait fort bien de ses composantes multiples qui permettaient une plus grande ouverture au monde.’

He notes that ‘judéo-franco-maghrébin’ identity is inherently mutable, unfixed, and the result of a process. This indicates a crossover between the tentative, provisional aspect...

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78 Ibid, p. 6. The link here to Perec’s autobiographical entreprise in *W*, which he characterizes as a game of ‘cache-cache’ with the reader, is notable.
80 Ibid, p. 54 and 121.
of his writing project, which he sees as a continual ‘production’ rather than a cohesive, fixed entity. For Derrida the political situation of forced multilingualism from the colonial experience – worsened by the fact that Algerian Jews’ French status was stripped from them between 1940 and 1942 – suggests an essential alienation in language.\footnote{‘[L]’identité demeure en question’, J. Derrida, \textit{Le Monolinguisme}, p. 31.} For Bénabou, however, this essential linguistic mobility is the source of his ability to play in language:

‘c’est […] dans […] l’activité littéraire que ce multilinguisme originel […] pourrait avoir laissé les traces les plus nombreuses: la désacralisation de la langue, la découverte précoce de l’arbitraire du signe, le goût du jeu entre les langues, le goût de la greffe, de la contamination, tout ce qui devait me mener, comme à mon lieu naturel, à l’Oulipo.’\footnote{M. Bénabou, ‘Le multilinguisme des miens’.

Multilingualism allowed Bénabou, in his view, an early insight into the arbitrariness of signs and the associated ludic potentialities of language that would lead him to the Oulipo. Nonetheless, his feeling of superiority and flexibility regarding language remains a double-edged sword: he notes in \textit{Épopée familiale} his feelings of rage and injustice at being exposed amongst a group of young Jewish students for his ‘incapacité à dire un seul mot en yiddish’ (\textit{EF}, 43). Despite the richness and potentialities of his linguistic heritage, he remains marginalised as a Sephardic Jew from the European Ashkenazi.\footnote{Perec notes his difference from other Jews who have had full access to their cultural heritage in \textit{Récits d’Ellis Island}.} This drives him to write his family epic, restoring to the French language the forgotten status of the North African – specifically Moroccan – Jewry: ‘Je me sentais investi du devoir de lutter contre cette injustice’ (\textit{EF}, 44).

Therefore, whilst Bénabou might claim that his relation to language does not have the same complications in terms of politics and identity as for Derrida, or Perec, or the Algerian writer Haddad (‘il me faut bien constater que mon rapport à la langue que j’utilise ne ressemble guère au leur’), I argue that in \textit{Épopée} and \textit{Pourquoi} his relation to language has significant ramifications in terms of politics and identity.\footnote{M. Bénabou, ‘Le multilinguisme des miens’.

Crucially, he notes that this must be undertaken through an interlinguistic process: ‘pour
moi la seule forme acceptable de pérennité: être traduite dans les mots du français’ (EF, 45). This indicates that his mixed linguistic heritage has, in his view, bestowed him with the specific capacity to shed light on his Moroccan Jewish community. The history of his community will be assured through its translation in the figure of Bénabou himself, being the multilingual conduit, bridging the divides between languages and cultures, coloniser and colonised. His paralysis when faced with the task of writing his first book stemmed from, he admits, his incapacity to ‘faire de ma différence la source même de ma force’ (PQ, 113): in progressing to Épopée, he transforms this difference into power, assuming his destiny to restore ‘le prestige de la famille’ (PQ, 127), writing the history of his family in French.

McNulty notes in her brief yet incisive analysis of the Oulipo that their play with language goes beyond the frivolous. Oulipian writers propose that ‘constraints actually set us free’. Their work implicates an act of liberation, which surpasses the material entertainments of humorous literature, to suggest a personal and conceptual emancipation that might result from the application of their play with forms: ‘at stake are not only new literary possibilities […] but latent possibilities within the writer as a subject’. Their play with the potentialities of language implies various potentialities of subjectivity: this is central to Bénabou’s experience of language, which both stems from and results in his essential ‘multiplicité’ (PQ, 113), his linguistic and subjective capacity for mobility. Bénabou himself notes this, stating that:

‘it is not only the virtualities of language that are revealed by constraint, but also the virtualities of [he] who accepts to submit himself to constraint’. This statement suggests Bénabou’s acknowledgement that play with language in the virtual realm of literature allows for ‘virtual subject[s]’ to emerge, subject(s) that might be multiple and mobile, unfixed. The capacity to explore this multiple, ‘virtual subject’ is at the heart of Bénabou’s proclaimed goal for Épopée: to speak for the

90 Ibid.
92 T. McNulty, Wrestling with the Angel, p. 258.
unheard multilingual voices of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora. The term ‘virtual subject’ indicates an otherness that is key to Bénabou’s own experience of language, as seen in his affinity to the ‘aher’ (the ‘autre’, EF, 229): an essential alterity of the self that Brignoli has identified as the ‘dédoubllement de soi-mème’ in Bénabou’s work.93, 94 Bénabou speaks not only for himself, but for a wider community, necessitating this doubling of the self.

McNulty’s analysis is helpful in allying the Oulipo’s aims and achievements to those of psychoanalysis:

‘Like the Oulipo, [psychoanalysis] supposes that freedom or free choice is made possible by a particular kind of work, the struggle with constraints […] an understanding of freedom as the result of a particular kind of work, rather than an ontological conception of freedom as an inborn attribute of the living being’.95

The liberation proposed by both psychoanalysis and the Oulipo’s working methods implies a creative and beneficial freedom as a result of continual, applied work. If French, the ‘français châtié’ (EF, 117), implies a constraint for Bénabou, it represents a route towards both textual and personal emancipation, allowing the liberation and exploration of a virtual subjectivity, essential to Bénabou’s mission in Épopée. McNulty indicates that Pèrelec accepts a ‘missing centre’ as the condition of language, which allows him freedom. For Bénabou, I argue, he too finds creative productivity through the assumption of such lack, leading to his freedom. This lack is not absent parents, as for Pèrelec, but the lack of a single mother tongue, his essential multilingualism that allows him to revel in the play of language, incorporating humour and irony into his approach to writing as a demonstration of this freedom. The twisting alterity of the self reflected and refracted through the slippery hierarchy of languages at his disposal (EF, 115), allows for what Winnicott identifies as ‘general integration of the personality’ in Bénabou’s playing, yet through play’s ‘precariousness’. Whilst multilingualism and its constraints allow Bénabou to explore the different virtualities of subjectivity, leading him to mine the power of his difference as a Judeo-Franco-Maghrebi writer and achieve some level of ‘integration’, this is in fact achieved through the instability of lack that is 

93 The etymology of the Hebrew ‘aher’ not only indicates ‘other’ or ‘another’, but also belatedness, ‘to tarry or delay’, or ‘behind’. This is notable in relation to the provisional and abortive nature of Bénabou’s work. See Abarim’s online Biblical Old Testament Hebrew Dictionary, at http://www.abarim-publications.com/meaning/Aher.html#WXiD4NMrfjFO (accessed 26/7/2017).
95 T. McNulty, Wrestling with the Angel, p. 264.
also liberating. Therefore, Bénabou’s play with language reveals an underlying meditation on the potentialities of subjectivity: how the subject is liberated and multiplied through play with language. This is performed, crucially, through Bénabou’s characteristic blend of black humour and sincerity.

Bénabou, furthermore, uses humour, irony, and parody to play with the autobiographical genre itself. In addition to his play with language, Bénabou engages directly with the conventions of the autobiographical genre to draw attention to its limitations, and to parody it. This playful approach on one hand serves to highlight what he sees as the unnecessarily soul-searching, narcissistic dimension that autobiographical texts seem to demand. He sees the genre as one involving a fair amount of vain, even lazy, navel-gazing, yet also many pitfalls and traps (‘pièges et traquenards’) that are pointless for the writer to try to resist (PQ, 162). He is at pains to point out at certain moments his discomfort – his ‘répulsion’ (PQ, 165) – with the genre, primarily worrying that his necessarily self-absorbed personal memories are useless to anyone other than himself (‘En moi, me disais-je, qui songerait à se connaître? Les souvenirs que je préserve avec tant de soin sont inutilisables’, PQ, 163). Though he claims to speak on behalf of the Jewish mellah, he furthermore wonders whether he in fact has no right to do so (‘N’ai-je pas, en le quittant [le mellah], perdu le droit de parler en son nom?’, PQ, 163). He therefore employs a dimension of parody of the genre to critique its conventions and expectations, and by doing so appeasing his concerns over its personal consequences and difficulties. On the other hand, despite his professed disdain for the genre, he continues to employ the first person and to mine his familial and personal history in Pourquoi and again, to an even greater extent, in Épopée. I argue that he views autobiography as riddled with problems – the ‘enquête sur soi’ is a ‘terrain glissant [où] la mauvaise foi se fait reine’ (PQ, 162) – yet that it remains a genre to which he compulsively returns. Therefore, his use of parody betrays an ambiguity at the heart of his autobiographical endeavour: whilst he pokes fun at autobiography’s conventions and limitations, he nonetheless repeatedly returns to it.

Bénabou’s playful criticism of the autobiographical genre constitutes a parody of postmodern specularity, of the self-involvement that Bénabou calls the ‘tiède désert du narcissisme et de la complaisance’ (PQ, 165). Burgelin notes that Bénabou’s approach to autobiography concentrates not on the inexpressible, or the question of the ‘comment dire’ like autobiographies, but instead on the object of autobiography, the book; more specifically, a book that would be able to say everything (Bénabou’s
relation to his family, to Moroccan Jewish history, the *mellah*’s relation to wider Jewish history, etc.). Yet the eventual failure of this book, both in *Pourquoi* and again in *Épopée* which highlight their own incompleteness, provides a parody of this desire for totality. This serves to turn autobiography’s conventional ideology back upon itself. Burgelin suggests that by evoking ‘the epic, the philosophical meditation, the critical essay, and by offering a self-critical and mocking commentary on these genres by parodying and subverting them through pastiche, mockery, and plays on words’, Bénabou employs an internal parody that destabilizes the basis of his own autobiographical writing as it unfolds. For instance, the openings of both *Pourquoi* and *Épopée* satirize the supposed importance of appropriate incipits in autobiographical works. Taking aim at the opening lines of the likes of Rousseau and Proust, Bénabou declares in the first chapter of *Épopée*, entitled ‘Incipit’, that his long-admired, fetish incipit phrase has mired unused for thirty years. The opening of *Pourquoi* is a similar ironic parody of the supposed importance of the incipit (‘Les premières lignes d’un livre sont les plus importantes’, *PQ*, 11). This serves as a playful parody of the solemnity of autobiography, which in an essay he calls the ‘suffisance de l’autobiographie’ that he seeks to avoid.

This is an example of what Lejeune identifies as Bénabou’s use of ‘macro-parodie’ (as well as ‘micro-réemploi’, the term Lejeune uses for intertextual quotation), which allows him to ‘se moquer apparemment de l’idéologie autobiographique’. In Lejeune’s view, this use of parody makes *Épopée* a work ‘dont la ruse suprême […] est d’apparaître comme un beau récit de la jeunesse de l’auteur’, where in fact it is a parody of such texts. Bénabou himself notes that Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, which seems to provide a basis for autobiography, was for him ‘assez difficile à respecter’. This critical dialogue between Lejeune and Bénabou illustrates Bénabou’s playful resistance to the genre. Bénabou’s awareness of the critical conversation surrounding autobiography, and his active confrontation and playful parody of it, suggest his desire to subvert the genre.

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97 Ibid, p. 43.
100 P. Lejeune, *Brouillons de soi*, p. 21-22
However, his playful resistance to autobiography’s conventions jars against his repeated return to the genre and its seeming usefulness to him. As the conduit for his community’s voice, being at the crossroads of French, Jewish, and Maghrebi culture and endowed with the destined vocation as writer, Bénabou is insistent on the necessity he feels to write: this can be seen in both Pourquoi (the ‘dette qui ne pourrait pas s’êteindre que par le sacrifice du bien le plus précieux […] c’est-à-dire une part de ma vie active’, PQ, 105) and Épopée (‘je me sentais investi du devoir de lutter contre cette injustice’, EF, 44). His position regarding the necessary task of writing – a predestined, sacrificial, and ongoing exercise of his vocation – is underscored by the sense that it is only Bénabou who can perform this duty. This suggests that writing autobiographically is the only appropriate means by which to complete his duty. The writing of the specific life of Marcel Bénabou will allow the history of his forgotten community to be reinstated: his life and his writing therefore demand the autobiographical genre, despite his misgivings about its limitations and his playful resistance to its conventions. Writing autobiographically allows him to overcome the debilitating over-profusion of memory he experiences as an undergraduate at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the late 1950s: ‘recours au passé, moyen classique pour contourner un présent bloqué’ (EF, 27).102 He notes in Pourquoi his admiration – even jealousy – of other autobiographers who have been able to make their life story into an example for others (‘Ils n’ont qu’à dire, et chacun immédiatement se reconnaît en eux’, PQ, 163): his anxiety about becoming the conduit for his community indicates his enduring attraction to the autobiographical genre. His feelings about his childhood in Morocco remain ambiguous to him in Pourquoi: he notes that ‘mes années marocaines, c’était dans mon souvenir tantôt un paradis perdu, tantôt au contraire le temps que j’avais appelé celui de l’exil antérieur, ou du mauvais exotisme’ (PQ, 161). When he comes to write Épopée, nine years after Pourquoi, he more clearly expresses his hope that these ambiguous experiences will find resolution by their fixed literary form (‘transformer mon expérience en langage’, EF, 28). This completes what he previously called the ‘travail de deuil qui n’avait eu au demeurant jamais été sérieusement entamé’ (PQ, 161): a work of mourning, of processing, which he had been unable to initiate until he began to write autobiographically.

Bénabou’s play with the autobiographical form does, in some senses, follow from his play with language: the use of parody to subvert and ironize autobiographical

102 This statement is reminiscent of Leiris’ desire, expressed in Biffures, to ‘rompre avec le cours du temps pour revenir à la liberté d’enfance’ (Biffures, p. 263).
conventions is a disruptive tactic, which employs black humour to blend serious autobiographical enquiry with a lighter, irreverent tone that attempts to distance Bénabou from the narcissistic dimension of autobiography that he so disdains. The use of parody to critique postmodern specularity also reinforces Bénabou’s dynamic involvement of the reader: just as he asks his readers to question what they expect from literature by implicating them strongly as an intradiegetic entity, he also encourages them to question the conventions and expectations of autobiography, by attacking some of its norms (its necessary self-involvement; its textual tropes) whilst also adhering to others. Autobiography therefore remains for Bénabou a compelling mode of writing that allows the fusion of writing and life, encapsulated into his own individual being, which will permit him to fulfill his duty of speaking on behalf of the Moroccan mellah, employing the mental and subjective flexibility with which his mixed linguistic heritage has endowed him. The ‘dédoublement de soi-même’ that Brignoli identifies in Bénabou’s writing allows him to speak at once for himself and for his community, the ‘other’ or ‘aher’.\(^\text{103}\) Autobiography, being the result of both memory’s dispersal and profusion and also the means to acquit himself (‘m’acquitter’, EF, 28) from the debt he owes to his family and wider community, remains the most viable mode in which this can be performed.

Bénabou employs playful black humour, irony, and parody, combining the ludic with the serious in his project of written self-exploration. This can be identified both in Bénabou’s play with language, and with the autobiographical genre. Bénabou’s play is characterised by a nuanced blend of sincerity and playful irony. His multilingual heritage has brought with it an approach to language that allows him great intellectual flexibility, permitting him privileged access to the ludic potentialities of language. Yet, this is also underscored by a problematic instability in his identity that he is perhaps less willing to admit directly than Leiris, Perec or Derrida. His play with the autobiographical genre betrays a similar ambiguity. Whilst he critiques and parodies the genre, he nonetheless indicates that it is a necessary medium in which to write. Winnicott indicates that play in children, when combined with the use of art forms, tends ‘towards a unification and general integration of the personality’.\(^\text{104}\) Examination of Bénabou’s playing in literature, I argue, demonstrates that he tends towards this personal integration, but in a characteristically tentative approach that simultaneously

\(^{103}\) L. Brignoli, ‘Un pacte avec le livre: l’écriture compacte de Marcel Bénabou’, p. 52. 
resists any totalization that Winnicott’s ‘unification’ might suggest. Rather than a child progressing to integrated adulthood through play, Bénabou’s play is often tinged with melancholy and subversion, a precarious escapism that reflects the instability of his identity. Indeed, Bénabou’s play demonstrates a ‘precariousness’ involved with gaming in the ‘potential space’ between players ‘in the service of communication’.105 If the players involved in the communicative game of literature are the reader and writer, then in the ‘potential space’ of the book, the negotiation of his sense of self is arguably precarious, provisional, and complex.

**Conclusions: From Leiris to Perec to Bénabou**

I have advocated for an appreciation of Bénabou as a crucial, innovative, and understudied member of the Oulipo; and, more significantly, an important figure in the landscape of twentieth-century Francophone autobiography.

I have analysed three principal dimensions of Bénabou’s autobiographical work. First, his experimentation with the place of the reader in his autobiographical writing implicates them dynamically and dramatically, using techniques such as frequent apostrophe to address them in a way that is both hostile and complicit. In this respect, Bénabou builds on the approach to the reader that I have identified in the work of Leiris and Perec, which encourages the reader to be an active partner in the negotiation of the writer’s obscure identity. Second, I have shown that Bénabou stresses the incomplete, ‘inabouti’ aspect of his writing. He indicates that autobiography is a virtual plane for continual and ongoing experimentation with the self, a tentative sphere of enquiry where writing is part of an unfinished exercise of identity. Third, I have illustrated that Bénabou’s use of parody, black humour and irony attempts to turn autobiography’s narcissistic, solipsistic or self-interested conventions on their head. However, I assert that Bénabou also demonstrates by the same token that autobiography remains a seductive genre in which it is arguably necessary for him to write, particularly due to the role he represents as conduit for the *mellah* of his childhood. As such, my enquiry into Bénabou’s work responds to the three principal research questions of the thesis. Like Leiris and Perec before him, Bénabou posits a composite self continually in flux in his autobiographical writing, arrived at both through a creative engagement with the

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difficulties of autobiography and through his works’ strong engagement of the reader as a partner in the understanding of his self.

Bénabou both sees and portrays himself as a reluctant autobiographer. However, his work betrays the genre’s importance for his examination of self. His approach to autobiography illustrates its materiality, achieved through a ludic, ironic strategy that contributes to the irreverence of his style. Yet the reader, encouraged to be an active participant and contributor, can discern that beyond this irreverence Bénabou’s work exposes his concern with the vagaries of writing and reading, the players involved in it, and the capacities of a work of literature. He attempts to redress what he sees as an unjustified imbalance of ignorance about the history of Moroccan Jews, which it is incumbent on him to rectify through the tracing of his familial past. This becomes a synecdoche for the history of his community. Yet his concern with the capricious contingency of writing and reading – which thrill and vex him in equal measure – results in an abortive and always-provisional oeuvre that uses humour and play as its principal vehicles. His hope that writing will provide him the ‘singularité véritable’ (PQ, 138) that evades him betrays a teleological drive, pursuing a goal which ultimately proves impossible.

I consider Bénabou’s emphasis on the metatextual materiality of his ludic texts as an extension of Leiris’ desire to ‘faire un livre qui soit un acte’ (ADH, 14) in L’Âge d’homme. Drawing on Leiris as an Oulipian ‘older brother’ in his stylization of the combative yet collaborative relationship between reader and writer in the exploration of self-experience, Bénabou uses Oulipian methods of constraint and experimentation to explore the capacities of the autobiographical act.106 Whilst being ludic and playful, Bénabou is able to emphasize the overlapping concerns of ‘jeu’ and ‘je’, putting identity in play in his texts by asking to what extent any real, significant sense of the author’s self might be drawn from his own writing. Like Perec, who also found his ‘famille d’adoption’ in the Oulipo, Bénabou emphasizes the tentative and provisional nature of his autobiographical enquiry.107 Furthermore, the abortive quality of Bénabou’s texts ultimately suggests that grasping any consolidated self as a result of autobiography is impossible: as in Leiris’ L’Âge d’homme, Bénabou suggests that the frame of the autobiographical mode cannot contain the self it purports to investigate. Above all, Bénabou draws on the relational dimension of autobiography also stressed by both

106 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.
Leiris and Perec yet adapted to Bénabou’s own darkly humorous outlook, in order to suggest the fleeting and negotiated nature of his identity, explored along with his reader. By stressing the tentative sense of the ‘inabouti’ that pervades his work, Bénabou suggests that writing itself is an exercise of identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.
Conclusion

‘Je après tout n’est qu’un mot comme un autre, un simple outil – commode parfois – avec lequel il n’est pas interdit de jouer’.
M. Bénabou, Pourquoi, 24

This thesis has interrogated the idea that identity is ‘in play’ in the work of Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou. I have demonstrated through close reading how identity is not only ‘in play’, but ‘at stake’ for these writers: at once ‘en je’, ‘en jeu’, and beset by several ‘enjeux’. I have maintained that ludic game-playing, which is both risky and full of creative potential, is associated for all three with the idea that writing itself is an exercise of identity: a provisional and ongoing process. It is through the play of autobiographical writing and reading that the writer can approach greater insight into his self. I have demonstrated how their autobiographical work responds to shared questions that overlap, inform, and influence each other in significant ways.

The thesis has sought to answer three central questions. The first research question asked: in what ways do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou posit their self in their autobiographical writing? I have shown that all three writers show a resistance to a totalized, unified self to be found as a product of autobiographical writing. Instead, their texts posit a complex, composite, multipart self. The aim of autobiographical writing for these writers is not so much to seek absolute self-knowledge or self-comprehension, but instead to explore how the very act of writing allows the autobiographer a limited window of insight into their self, with this practice crucially shared directly with the reader. Their work resists the idea of ‘compréhension à tout prix’.¹ My examination of each writer has shown that their autobiographies privilege above all multiplicity and plurality, rather than closure or capture. The self is perceived and communicated by Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou in perpetual flux: both self-perception and its communication in writing are inflected with provisionality and open-endedness. For Leiris, the change in his political and cultural surroundings in the aftermath of the Second World War is navigated through autobiography in conjunction with unresolved personal

¹ M. Blanchot, La Part du feu, p. 253.
anxieties that have followed him from his childhood into early adulthood. Perec, an orphan of the same war and the Holocaust, uses autobiography to probe the absences that characterize his life story. Bénabou, who has left behind his Judeo-Franco-Maghrebi childhood for a life amongst the Parisian intellectual elite, writes autobiographically to negotiate the ambiguous relationship to literature engendered by his context.

The second research question asked: how do Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou each approach the difficulties of autobiographical writing? These writers have a common interest in the difficulties and limit points of autobiography, even the failure of their autobiographical enterprises. Open-ended and incomplete identity finds its reflection in incomplete autobiography, which wrestles with its own difficulties. I have demonstrated the difficulties that Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou each identify in autobiography, and the techniques they employ to contend with these. Whilst Leiris grapples with the intertwined stakes of autobiography, writing, life and death, Perec probes the representational nature of writing and art, and the implications of this for autobiography, probing the nature of artistic and written representation. Bénabou, for his part, uses autobiography to subvert its own rules and logic, employing parody to poke fun at the genre: yet, in *Epopée*, we see his wrestling with the process of autobiography that ultimately thwarts itself, becoming a genre governed by the ‘inabouti’. Ludic and creative potentialities arise for all three writers in response to the tensions that they identify in autobiography, such that their autobiographical works represent creative responses to the problems continually raised by the evolving genre of autobiography.

The third research question asked: what is the place of the reader in relation to Leiris, Perec and Bénabou’s texts? Gilmore notes that the public dimension of autobiography ‘exposes a limit between the private and the public: [autobiography] is a representation of personal experience meant to make a claim on public attention’. By breaching the border of the private into the public realm, autobiography necessarily implicates a reader. I have shown that these three writers demand an active reader, who is invited to participate in a relationship of

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reconstructive exchange with the author as a partner in the literary game, supplementing the writers’ lacunary self-knowledge. As such, my research has been guided by these writers’ indication that the subject is ‘no less than constituted by the relations into which it enters’: their identity is essentially dialogic.³ Rather than suggesting a Cartesian subject existing and perceiving itself in isolation, these three writers each emphasize the relational aspect of their autobiographical work in innovative ways. Arfuch notes that the nature of the modern autobiographical subject is:

‘a subject constitutively incomplete […] whose existential dimension is dialogic […] constructed by an Other […] speaking of subjectivity in this context amounts to speaking of intersubjectivity’.⁴

Leiris, Perec and Bénabou all mine the power of this relational exchange with the ‘Other’, the reader. Blanchot notes that writing an autobiography is to ‘cesser d’être pour se confier à un hôte – autrui, lecteur – qui n’aura pour charge et pour vie que votre inexistence’: a giving oneself over to the reader, the Other, who will take responsibility towards the writer as their ethical position dictates they must.⁵ It is in this way that Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou confer their texts to their reader, whose charge is ludically to participate in the reconstruction, indeed the re-creation, of the life and identity that the writer has attempted to encode within the text. When reading autobiography, Arfuch argues that we seize ‘the word intrinsically linked to the configuration of experience, the idea of community that supports the simplest exchange of language and even its trace in writing’.⁶ The reader enters into a shared community with the autobiographer, where reading their written trace – central to the conception of literature shared by Leiris, Perec and Bénabou – allows them to appreciate the particular ‘configuration of experience’ that characterizes that writer.

⁵ M. Blanchot, La Part du feu, p. 105.
I have shown the different roles that each writer has posited for their readers. Leiris positions the reader of *L’Âge d’homme* as a complicit confessor, to whom he bares his soul, exposing himself to the risk of the bull’s horn by coming into honest contact with himself. The masochistic dimension of autobiography means that, for Leiris, this exposure is both thrilling and painful: above all, Leiris confers a responsibility on his reader not only to exculpate and empathize with him, but to reconstruct his fragmentary self. Perec’s reader, however, is at once a partner in a game of chess or Go, a ludic and jovial adversary, yet also a puzzle-solver attempting to piece together the puzzle laid for them by Perec. By this, Perec seeks to encourage the ‘regard oblique’ in his reader, an inquisitive curiosity that challenges conventions of representation and reception. Bénabou takes this even further: he sees his reader as a decoder, one who will uncover and confer meaning, but who is at the mercy of the ‘bonne foi’ (*Jette*, 39) of the capricious writer.

The communality in their approach to autobiography can be attributed in part to the personal connections: Leiris stands as an ‘older brother’ to Perec and Bénabou, and to the Oulipo more widely. Their overlapping perspective on autobiography can also be ascribed to the context in which they wrote. Not only were they members of important experimental writing groups (the surrealists and the Oulipo), but each was immersed in the intellectual and social upheavals of post-war France, all whilst a boom was occurring in autobiographical theory and practice. Whilst I have examined the same three broad research areas – the complex self; the difficulties of autobiography; the place of the reader – for Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou, I have simultaneously sought to emphasize the ‘projet d’écriture’ particular to each writer.

I have demonstrated that Leiris prioritizes the collaborative exchange with his reader, to imply an indeterminacy and instability of identity. Leiris suggests that his unstable identity is to be negotiated between ‘others’ rather than easily recovered from a consolidated retro- and introspective narrative. He casts his reader as a complicit confessor, bestowed with significant responsibilities. He

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7 M. Bénabou and R. Lapidus, ‘Between Roussel and Rousseau, or Constraint and Confession’, p. 23.
asks them not only to reconstruct his fragmentary text (as the reader is also tasked to do in Perec’s *W*), but hopes that the presentation of his inconclusive introspection will inspire his readers to initiate a similar encounter with themselves, a more wide-ranging ‘affranchissement’ of all those who engage with his text. I have shown how Leiris tackles the difficulties he sees in autobiography. The inevitable failures of his masculinity, his confrontation with death, and the conceptualization of autobiography as a masochistic performance combine in *L’Âge d’homme* to demonstrate how Leiris challenges the idea that a totalized sense of self might be recovered as the product of a consolidated text.

Examination of the work’s thematic structure, drawn from Leiris’ ethnographic skills, and the deployment of framing as a narrative device, have shown how Leiris attempts to tackle autobiography’s complications. Despite attempts to order and control his memories, a totalized sense of selfhood remains elusive, especially where the frame of autobiography itself is inherently limited.

Identity is in play in *L’Âge d’homme* in that it is constantly fleeting. It has inspired other searching autobiographies that, too, question the constitution of self in autobiographical narratives, not least by Perec and Bénabou. Perec, like Leiris, pushes his readers to scrutinize the complexity of written representation, and its successes and limitations in capturing the experiential flux of life. Continuing in the vein of Leiris, reading Perec’s autobiographical work is an active, oblique process where obscure and lacunary identity is negotiated between writer and reader. I have shown that Perec used art to reveal the metatextual and artificial nature of attempts to capture reality in writing. In doing so, he questions – and encourages his reader to question – the constitutive elements of that very perceptual reality, namely how our perceptions of the world, our selves, art and literature are necessarily mediated through constructions. Perec highlights the divergence of reality and its representations, and imaginatively reinterprets and represents experience, probing the status of ‘the real’ itself and emphasizing the limits of perceptual reality.

From the embryonic *Le Condottière*, Perec emphasizes the fruitful transfer between art and autobiography, where questions of artistic sincerity, representation, and self-representation were at stake. I have argued that this early
text is critical to an overall understanding of Perec’s later approach to autobiography. This reaches a culmination in \textit{W}, where mechanisms of trompe-l’oeil, anamorphosis, and \textit{mise en abîme} are transposed from the visual to the textual realm. By his insistence on art’s corruptibility, Perec also suggests the constructed nature of writing and its limitations in capturing the world and the self in autobiography. Perec suggests that the perpetual flux of life essentially escapes representation. By suggesting that knowledge of one’s own identity is only ever partial, lacunary, and experienced moment by moment, Perec invites the participation of his reader by disavowing himself of any claim to complete self-understanding. As such, Perec builds on Leiris’ hope for the reader’s liberation, encouraging them to take an oblique perspective on literary texts. Perec asks his reader to see differently, to ‘[r]egarde de tous tes yeux, regarde’ (\textit{VWE}, 15). I have shown how Perec posits a composite self arrived at both through a creative engagement with the difficulties of autobiography and through his works’ strong gesture towards the reader as a partner in the understanding of his self. Perec’s emphasis on the constructed nature of writing and its attempts to capture reality would be extended after his death by his close friend, Marcel Bénabou, yet adapted to Bénabou’s own purposes.

In the third chapter, I sought to highlight Bénabou as an innovative and understudied member of the Oulipo, and an important figure of twentieth-century French autobiography. His experimentation with the place of the reader in his autobiographical writing implicates them dynamically and dramatically, in a way that is both hostile and complicit: in contrast to Leiris’ complicit confessor or Perec’s chess partner, the reader is at once rebuffed and seduced by Bénabou’s capricious texts. I have shown that Bénabou stresses the incomplete, ‘inabouti’ aspect of his writing. He thereby indicates that autobiography is a virtual plane for continual experimentation with the self, a tentative sphere of enquiry: this is a feature equally identifiable in the work of Leiris and Perec to different extents. Whilst Perec and Leiris emphasize the ethical implications of the trace that writing leaves behind, Bénabou’s agenda in \textit{Epopée} in particular is of a more political ilk: the trace of his writing is a testament to the history of Moroccan Jews, encapsulated in the family epic of the Bénabou family. I have illustrated
that Bénabou’s use of parody, black humour and irony attempts to turn autobiography’s narcissistic, solipsistic or self-interested conventions on their head. However, I assert that Bénabou also demonstrates by the same token that autobiography remains a seductive genre that is arguably necessary for him to write in, particularly due to his role as conduit for the *mellah* of his childhood. We can therefore consider Bénabou’s work as a direct response to Perec’s. Bénabou quite literally extended Perec’s work, for instance writing the final, 100th chapter of *VME* in a short text entitled *L’Appentis revisité*. Yet on a larger scale, we can view Bénabou’s autobiographical work as a response to Perec’s innovations. Bénabou challenges conventions of writing (in *Pourquoi*) and reading (in *Jette*), as Perec had achieved throughout his work that questions mechanisms of literary representation. Bénabou’s most explicitly autobiographical work, *Epopée*, is indebted to Perec through its challenge to the reader’s understanding of the autobiographical genre and the materiality of such a text. Whilst Perec’s *W* indicates through its title a fractured, indeterminate memoir that plays out within the text as it alternates between fiction and autobiography, Bénabou’s *Epopée* appears to promise a family epic that thwarts itself in its very deployment, which nonetheless ultimately stands as the very epic it fails to be.

His approach to autobiography illustrates its materiality, achieved through a ludic, ironic irreverence. Bénabou’s concern with the materiality of the text in his autobiographical works draws on Leiris’ experimentation with the materiality of his own self in *L’Âge d’homme*, where he sought to turn himself into the object of his own ethnographic study and stylized his self-perception throughout the text. His concern with the capricious contingency of writing and reading results in an abortive and always-provisional oeuvre that uses humour and play as its vehicle. His hope that writing will provide him a sense of ‘singularité véritable’ (*PQ*, 138) that evades him betrays a teleological drive, pursuing a goal which ultimately proves impossible: in this, he shares with Leiris and Perec the enduring sense that their autobiographical endeavours might prove futile. Nonetheless, the process of autobiography itself is valuable as an exercise of identity. Bénabou emphasizes the overlapping concerns of ‘jeu’ and ‘je’, putting identity in play in his texts by asking to what extent any significant sense of the author’s self might be drawn
from his own writing. Above all, Bénabou draws on the relational dimension of autobiography also stressed by both Leiris and Perec, in order to suggest the fleeting and negotiated nature of his identity, explored along with his reader.

The tentativeness of their work relates to what literature represents for each writer. I have shown that all three see writing as a virtual plane, a realm of possibility and potential, an extension of ‘real life’ where the writer is able to enact operations on himself that might not be possible in reality. Although Schechtman asserts that ‘[l]ife and literature are inherently different enterprises with different rules and different logics’, these writers have shown that autobiographical investigation provides a fruitful parallel realm in which aspects of self-perception can be explored. For Leiris, the operations of self-ethnography in *L’Âge d’homme* mean that he is able to stylize and shape his introspection, ordering it into framed episodes of anecdote to be assembled into a photo-montage. By this token, he could use writing as a realm for the exercise of identity: a practice which brings with it the implications of play by its view of the self as something to be approached through repeated experimentation. In Perec’s case, the virtual plane of writing is where autobiography and fiction can be interwoven to create a third way, where these two contrasting modes of writing are made to interact with each other so that the reality of his identity exists in the potential space between the two. The deictic trace that writing represents ties the author to present reality, inaugurating the new type of realism that Perec sought, which would enrich reality and make it more significant. Bénabou’s response to the potential space of literature not only relates to the daunting canon of authors that he feels have gone before him, but to the possibilities of writing to mark the presence of the author and thereby reinstate the memory of Moroccan Jews to the French consciousness. This potential is ultimately paralyzing: yet the *praeteritio* of Bénabou’s metatexual reflexivity continually calls attention to his purpose, particularly in *Epopée*. Although we can consider *Pourquoi* and *Jette* as works which pave the way for the larger ambitions of *Epopée*, their experimentation

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with the component parts of the ideal ‘Book’ and its reception are central to Bénabou’s perspective on writing. Above all, he suggests that the ongoing game of writing is one that invites the reader into the creative exercise, not to reach an endpoint of comprehension, but to gain an insight into the polysemy of the self as communicated in writing.

The playful, ludic dimension of these writers’ approach to the self has been fundamental to the arguments of the thesis. I have asserted that these writers are united by a view of the subject that is ‘in play, a subject in practice […] a subject in process’.9 Ludic game-playing, which is both risky and full of creative potential, is associated for all three writers with the idea that writing itself is an exercise of identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self. I have understood the ludic dimension of these writers’ autobiographical work as entailing their way of making a game of their self-referentiality, continually exhibiting the mechanisms of their narrative structures and making the implied reader an explicit rather than implicit gaming partner. Caillois’ typology of play categorizes games by type: I see these writers’ autobiographies as using innovative combinations of patience, strategy and skill with spontaneity, mimicry and exhilaration.10 Gaming for these writers is a continual exercise, a repeated practice that rejects totalization and monosemy and is unending, polysemic, and open to potentialities. It fundamentally underscores the open-endedness of identity which is continually at stake for all three writers: the ‘je’ and ‘jeu’ are in constant play. Indeed, Perec noted that the only activity that could be compared to the mysterious, subtle, elusive and addictive game of Go and its ‘chemin infini’ was the game of literature.11

The reader is continually involved as a partner in the writers’ ludic strategies: at times asked to carefully reconstruct, at others rebuffed by the writer, and at others still challenged by the fragmentation and experimentation of these texts. These texts illuminate the stakes of writing for both author and reader. If writing

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9 J. Gratton, Subject Matters, p. 15.
10 R. Caillois, Les Jeux et les hommes, p. 66.
leaves a deictic trace as a marker of presence and of existence, as I have argued for both Leiris and Perec, what is the status of this trace if the reader does not uncover it? If Bénabou’s texts rely on a relationship that is sometimes hostile, and at other times complicit, what would happen if the reader withdraws from this relationship? In other words, what do both the writer and reader stand to lose if they do not ‘win’ the game of autobiographical writing? Indeed, Caillois suggested that ‘il faut en outre et surtout qu’ils [players] aient licence de s’en aller quand il leur plaît, en disant: ‘Je ne joue plus’.12 I have argued over the course of this thesis that the endpoint of autobiography for these writers is not all-encompassing self-comprehension, nor less any totalization. For that reason, we can view the ludic gaming of their texts not as a strategy of winning or losing, but rather as an incitement to the reader to consider texts differently. Rather than establishing rules for the reading game that guide the reader through the text in a strategy of ‘perfect play’, these texts assert a type of freedom – what Leiris calls an ‘affranchissement’ – for the reader. Much like the ideas of constraint which govern Oulipian exercises, these writers set out certain formal constraints – such as the fragmentary mosaic of \textit{L’Âge d’homme} and the two independent strands of Perec’s \textit{W} – that inspire creativity and engagement.

This also implies encouraging the reader to take a new perspective on how a self is constructed as a product of a text: not only this, but I have demonstrated how these three writers have asked their readers to reconsider the mechanisms of transmission of meaning from writer to reader. By putting identity in play, they not only stretch the boundaries of autobiography, engaging with its limit points and difficulties, but they challenge the nature and function of literary texts, particularly in a genre beset by values of truth, honesty, and authenticity. Augé indicates that readers’ ‘successive readings will question and enrich [autobiography]. Thus the work will no longer belong to the author; he will be dispossessed of it […] To write is to die a little, but a little less alone’.13 The ludic nature of these writers’ work allows readers to engage with their texts repeatedly,
as their games are open, rather than closed. Like the unfinished jigsaw puzzle of
VME, each text considered in this thesis uses ludic strategies that require the
reader’s work with each reading. Unlike a detective novel, whose ruse is broken
once the mystery is solved, texts such as W, Pourquoi, and L’Âge d’homme
demand the reader’s involvement each time they are read. The reader’s possible
withdrawal or disengagement from the game of writing is a risk that forms part of
the allure of the game itself. Indeed, it is central to the vitality of these writers’
endeavours: the risk that their self-enquiry may go unheard underscores the
relational emphasis of their work, which indicates that identity is sought and
negotiated between subjects and others, partners in a game of mutual recognition.

It would have been possible to use a thematic approach, rather than my
choice of writing a chapter dedicated to each author. However, I believe that the
strength of my structure has been in respecting the innovations of each writer, and
has allowed both myself and readers of this thesis to delve deeper into the
particular perspectives of each writer in turn. This approach also respects the
heredity and chronology that links the three writers, demonstrating how Leiris’
autobiographical innovations have found a legacy in the writing of Perec and
Bénabou, and furthermore to show how Perec’s writing and premature death
resulted in Bénabou taking up the mantle of his ludic autobiographical work,
adapted to his own circumstances. Moreover, I have illustrated in an integrated
way the points of communality and difference between the three at appropriate
junctures throughout the principal chapters.

Though beyond the remit of this thesis, it is notable that a large part of
Leiris’ life was given over to art criticism. Given the interest that Perec held for
art – though insisting he was not an art critic – it would be fruitful to compare
their views on art outlined in part in this thesis. This would provide a further
perspective on their autobiographical practice and the self-representation it entails.
This could be extended through further discussion of Perec’s ekphrastic use of
photography in W. It would furthermore prove stimulating to pursue Derrida’s
discussion in Le Monolinguisme of maternal languages in relation to Perec and
Bénabou: ‘la langue dite maternelle […] de la naissance quant au sol, de la
The upheavals in the lives of these two men and the linguistic borders they have crossed could provide the basis of an extended discussion on the impact of languages on their autobiographical practice. Furthermore, it would be possible to extend this research by studying in greater depth these authors’ membership of two iconic literary groups of the French literary landscape: in particular, by tracing the genealogy of surrealism into the Oulipo as movements both emerging in the aftermath of war. Whilst questions of gender have not been central to my discussion, this could be taken forward in the future by incorporating a female autobiographer of the twentieth century into my study (such as Ernaux, Angot, or Darrieussecq, who wrote her PhD thesis on Leiris and Perec).

Perec died prematurely in 1982, followed by Leiris in 1990; Bénabou has not published any major material since 2002. Yet, their autobiographical innovations still have important resonances more recently. Three days after the terrorist attack of 13th November 2015 in Paris which killed 130 people, journalist Antoine Leiris wrote a Facebook post describing his defiance in response to the murder of his wife, Luna-Hélène Muyal-Leiris, at the Bataclan theatre. He later extended this into a book entitled Vous n’aurez pas ma haine. Leiris addresses the terrorists directly, stating:

‘Alors non je ne vous ferai pas ce cadeau de vous haïr [...] Vous voulez que j’ai [sic] peur [...] que je sacrifie ma liberté pour la sécurité. Perdu. Même joue encore.’

Antoine Leiris frames his moral combat with the terrorists as a disengagement from their increasingly hostile tit-for-tat, disrupting their spiralling game of hatred and mistrust. The book’s defiance stems from this act: his book functions as a challenging riposte, a gaming strategy that exposes the terrorists’ reactive mechanisms. By denying them their ideal endgame – responding with tolerance

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rather than hatred – Leiris refuses their game’s logic, with his reply standing as a
defiant ‘move’ that rebuffs his opponent. *Vous n’aurez pas ma haine*, a
confessional, first-person work that struck an international chord for its frankness
and poetry, joins a particular heritage of writing in France that involves Antoine
Leiris in unexpected ways. Over seventy years earlier, his great-grand uncle,
Michel Leiris, published *L’Âge d’homme*, written at the age of 34, the same age as
Antoine Leiris when he lost his wife. The literary genealogy of one family
highlights enduring concerns about first-person writing: its capacities not only to
respond to conflicted psychological states, but to implicate certain addressees and
to probe the difficulties and limit points of written expression. Antoine Leiris’
work thus extends similar literary operations that his antecedent Michel had once
interrogated in response to personal upheaval almost seventy years earlier: how
first-person writing can put in play the different agents involved in its game.

The autobiographical work of Leiris, Perec, and Bénabou is an exercise of
identity: an ongoing, provisional, and unfinished process by which, through the
play of writing and reading, the writer can approach greater insight into his self.
Their work challenges us to think in new ways about how we perceive and
communicate our selves. Their ludic contributions remind us that the stakes of
autobiography for readers and writers may be serious; yet I have shown that this
need not prevent the autobiographer approaching questions of the self with an
attitude of playful and tentative curiosity.

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18 Antoine Leiris’ great-grandfather was Jacques Leiris, the ‘frère ennemi’
featured in *L’Âge d’homme*. 
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Appendix

Figure 1

Antonello da Messina, ‘Portrait de l’homme, dit Le Condottière’ (1475), housed at the Musée du Louvre, Paris, found at

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Portrait_of_a_Man_-_Antonello_da_Messina_-_Louvre_MI_693 (accessed 10/05/18)
Figure 2

Illustration of Captain Nemo’s salon from Jules Verne’s *Vingt lieues sous les mers*, 1869, by Alphonse de Neuville and Edouard Riou, showing Nemo’s ‘cabinet d’amateur’. Found at

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20000_Nautilus_Salon.jpg (accessed 10/05/18)
Diego Velasquez, ‘Las Meninas’ (1656), housed at the Museo del Prado, Madrid, found at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Las_Meninas,_by_Diego_Vel%C3%A1zquez,_from_Prado_in_Google_Earth.jpg (accessed 10/05/2018)
Figure 6

Han Van Meegeren painting ‘Jesus among the Doctors’ before an expert panel in 1945, two years before his trial on falsification and fraud charges. Found at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_van_Meegeren_(1889-1947)_schildert_in_1945_als_demonstratie_van_zijn_kunnen_,_Bestanddeelnr_133-1144.jpg (accessed 10/05/18)