“MY STYLE WILL BECOME ITSELF A PART OF MY STORY”: A STUDY IN GENERIC INNOVATIONS IN THE LIFE-WRITING NARRATIVES OF GEORGES PEREC AND CAMILLE LAURENS

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Abstract

“‘My style will become itself a part of my story’: A Study of Generic Innovations in the Life-Writing Narratives of Georges Perec and Camille Laurens,” examines how serial life-writers develop forms of writing that mirror the ways in which they work through trauma. I argue that the life-writing forms employed by these authors are as much a part of their writing project as the content of their narratives. The first chapter presents an overview of life-writing as a genre, with a particular focus on autobiography and autofiction. The second chapter analyzes the structure of Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* and seeks to explain why two of its three narratives were conceived as fictions. The third and final chapter investigates the effects of repetition on Laurens’s autofictional corpus, especially the role of repetition in the characters’ understanding of themselves and of patterns of loss in their lives.

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Introduction

"My style will become itself a part of my story"

In his book entitled *Memoir: A History* (2009), Ben Yagoda indicates that the sales of life narratives have increased "more than 400 percent between 2004 and 2008" (7), making life writing one of the most popular literary genres of the past two decades. Amongst the multitude of subclassifications that are included in life writing, the most well-known are autobiographies, autofictions, biographies, essays, memoirs, and personal journals. However, as we will see in chapter 1, the genre of life writing often challenges these subclassifications. Although life writing is informed by unique experiences, Michel Sheringham asserts that the genre is "highly intertextual" (15) and that life writers tend to read their predecessors for inspiration and with a view to define their own work:

> Rousseau finds Montaigne evasive; Chateaubriand finds Rousseau unseemly; Stendhal finds Chateaubriand egotistical. There is Rousseau (and Proust) in Gide; Gide in Green; Leiris in Perec; Leiris designates Nerval and Breton as precursors; Gene and Gorz write with and against Sartre; Leduc with and against Beauvoir; Sartre and Beauvoir write with and against each other and their acolytes. (15-6)

While Sheringham points out that there is continuity in the genre, he also subtly suggests that each life writer contributes something new to the genre, which should not be surprising since everyone's life story is different. The question is: what do they contribute to the genre apart from an original narrative?

Given its rising popularity, life writing, as a genre, has been increasingly studied and written about. Perplexed by the structure of certain modern autobiographies[1] Philippe Lejeune participated in the research of a group called I.T.E.M (Institut des Texts et Manuscrits Modernes)[2] at the C.N.R.S[3] and worked on textual genetics: he was given access to the pre-texts[4] of selected works in order to gain some insights into the authors' thought and preparation process before they wrote their autobiographical narratives. Lejeune hoped to determine how these authors had consciously or unconsciously chosen to comply with autobiographical conventions, as well as how they created the unique structures of their narratives: Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* contains two fictional narratives which are juxtaposed to the autobiographical one; Sarraute's *Enfance* is told by two narrative voices who address each other and build the narrative as a dialogue; Sartre's *Les mots* can be read as a narrative that is divided into two parts ("Reading" and "Writing") or into five acts, like a theater play. While analyzing Sarraute's pre-texts for *Enfance* and for some of her fictional writings, Lejeune noticed that her process was different:

> Nathalie Sarraute changed her writing habits when she began *Childhood*. In the case of her novels, she would write a rough draft of the whole, and then work on it several times from beginning to end. *Childhood*, on the contrary, was written step by step, chapter by chapter, without any prior overall draft. At the same time, her reluctance to practice the classical genre of childhood memories led her to invent a new system of enunciation (a dialogue between herself and her counterpart). (1991, 5)

[1] Lejeune pays particular attention to Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les mots*.
[2] Institute of Modern Texts and Manuscripts.
[3] C.N.R.S stands for "Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National Center for Scientific Research).
[4] Lejeune writes: "I shall use 'pre-text' to translate the French expression 'avant-texte' forged by Jean Bellemin-Noël in 1971 and now widely used in French genetic studies to signify all that had been *before* the final text and was written or collected *for* it: not only first drafts, but plans, scenarios, notes and also documentation of any kind gathered on purpose for a particular project" (1991, 10).

Any previous writing experience that a writer has prior to starting an autobiography seems almost irrelevant: telling one's story is different from inventing characters. This discovery brings Lejeune to point out the two issues "at stake in genetic studies: *generic specificities* (to what extent does the writing of autobiography differ from other kinds of writing?) and generic innovation (why and how are writers led to innovate?)" (1991, 5). *Generic innovations* must be determined narrative by narrative to understand what they contribute to the genre. For instance, with the constant evolution of technology, life writing is no longer limited to literature: there are now digital forms such as blogs, vlogs, YouTube channels and social media stories (on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) which document people's lives in real time.

In an obvious way, form is an integral part of the personal narrative that life writers chose to tell. The same narratives could be expressed through different forms of by combining forms.[5] Published in 2003, Sophie Calle's *Douleur Exquise* combines text and pictures. The narrative itself is split: in the first part, Calle was traveling to Japan and every day, she wrote to her lover who was supposed to meet her on her way to Japan in New Delhi, but he never turned up. Instead, he sent her a telegram announcing that he was in an accident. She eventually found out that he was uninjured and had met another woman. In the second part, Calle is trying to cope with the pain of their breakup and asks people to tell her about their most painful memories. Both parts of the narrative are accompanied by pictures that Calle took while she was traveling by train from Moscow to Hong Kong. Other than the fact that the pictures were taken while the text was written, the two forms are seemingly unrelated: the pictures do not illustrate the text, but they matter nonetheless – or Calle would not have included them. They are personal memories of the author's

[5] The way I use "form" here encompasses terms such as *subcategories* and *media* because there is an overlap between the two: for instance, a vlog is a subcategory of life writing which uses video as its primary medium. However, some works, such as Calle's *Douleur Exquise* combine media or forms by using both photography and text.

surroundings at the time when she was writing. However, since the pictures do not complement the text, it is impossible to interpret why a specific picture was paired with each text entry.

I am convinced that life writing is more popular now than ever because of its diversity and its creative platform: as we will see in chapter 1, there are general conventions that help readers and critics label texts as life narratives. Nevertheless, writers can experiment with conventions, such as the choice of a narrative voice for instance, to include more than one narrator, or present the author / narrator / protagonist's life from multiple points of view. This means that even the most fundamental narrative conventions of life writing are still evolving. Moreover, the number of subcategories is constantly growing as well. For instance, we might think of life writing as focusing on only one individual, but ethnography is a form of life writing used to describe the history and customs of entire communities. There are also subcategories which cover particular topics: diseases, transitioning to a different gender, self-help narratives, travel narratives, etc. Indeed, a single narrative can even trigger the creation of a new subcategory: Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* (1977) was the first official autofiction, but it took another two decades for the subcategory to become more widespread. I argue that life writing has become a popular genre because of its potential for innovation as it can accommodate everyone's story. In fact, everyone's life is unique, and each writer can create a form / subcategory to tell his / her story in the manner that seems the most appropriate to them.

Regardless of form or subclassification, most life narratives share a common trait: they often arise from a traumatic experience and represent a "need to speak to someone; the need for the Other's look to substantiate our claim to selfhood" (Sheringham, 142). Indeed, trauma is not simply an event on someone's timeline; it becomes part of who they are. In the case of life writers, I argue that trauma becomes part of their identity as individuals and as writers. In fact, it is common

to publish more than one life narrative, about the same trauma or revolving around the same themes: on the verge of death, Montaigne produced three volumes of his *Essays* and wrote about almost every aspect of his life to leave a trace of himself; Rousseau witnessed the distortion of his public image by society and wrote *Les Confessions*, *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* and *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* in an attempt to show who he was and to gain back control over his public representation; Jacques Ferrandez wrote ten volumes of his cartoon entitled *Cahiers de l'Orient*, all of which depict the events and the aftermath of the Algerian War that he experienced as a child. This serial production of life narratives exposes how much trauma has affected these authors. It becomes a way of coping with trauma and of representing themselves before, during and after a traumatic experience, as one would while undergoing therapy. Indeed, people often go to therapy to understand what happened to them and to rebuild pieces of their identity that were lost or shattered due to the traumatic events that they survived.

In *L'Autobiographie en France*, Lejeune equates writing to a form of therapy when he asserts that "écrire son histoire, c'est essayer de se construire, bien plus qu'essayer de se connaître" (84). I would argue that life writing, in a manner that is similar to therapy, does both: we will see in chapters 2 and 3 that the narrators / protagonists of the works I selected build a certain portrait of themselves throughout their narratives and come to understand themselves differently through the process. Life writing and therapy deal with getting to know and understand a person who is constantly changing. Modern life writers even explicitly make use of psychoanalytical concepts in their narratives, which highlights either their knowledge of psychoanalysis or their personal experience with it. Either way, they tend to use it to their advantage, often after they have recounted a traumatic memory or dream, in order to analyze said memory or dream and show that they are in control. Of course, they were not in control when they first experienced the memory or dream,

but the way they express themselves years later feels controlled and organized: they know how their past has affected them and they know how to interpret the symptoms that are related to their trauma. As such, they illustrate Sheringham's idea that "the subject of autobiography is a hybrid, a fusion of past and present, self and other, document and desire, referential and textual, *énoncé* and *énonciation* – not a product but a process" (21). Psychoanalysis is a process in and of itself: it offers a method and a structure in order to bring out a transformation in a subject. Therefore, in my dissertation, I seek to examine how trauma and psychoanalysis can drive both content and structural choices in the representation of identity in life narratives. Simply put, trauma is at the core of the selected life narratives. It affected every aspect of the author's life, so much so that they needed to share their experiences with others through writing. However, the experience of trauma itself is not always easily translatable: there may be no words to describe the experience and its effects accurately, or it might be hard to talk about the trauma. Sometimes, it might be better to show rather than to tell and one way to do is through patterns and structures. This is where psychoanalysis becomes useful: it helps a patient make sense of their trauma, its symptoms and patterns. I propose to show that the authors I selected used psychoanalysis to create narratives and structures that reflect both their experience with trauma and their way of coping with it. They show how trauma has affected their lives, who they became as a consequence of trauma and who they are becoming as a result of understanding their trauma.

Entitled "'My style will become itself a part of my story'[6]: a study of generic innovations in the life narratives of Georges Perec and Camille Laurens," this dissertation follows in the footsteps of Lejeune's interest in the study of genre. However, instead of examining external

[6] This is the short translation of a passage from the preamble of the Neufchâtel manuscript of Rousseau's *Les Confessions*. The full original sentence in French reads: "mon style inégal et naturel, tantôt rapide et tantôt diffuse, tantôt sage et tantôt fou, tantôt grave et tantôt gai fera lui-même partie de mon histoire."

sources, I propose to analyze echoes between the content and form of the selected works in order to determine, on the one hand, the reasons that led their authors to innovate; and on the other hand, what the respective structures contribute to their narratives. The project joins discussions about the nature and conventions of life writing as a genre with analyses how the selected life writers navigate these conventions while also creating original narratives and structures. My goal is to explore the relationship between form and content and the possibility – and necessity – of treating form as content in the representation of trauma. I am interested in the purpose and structure of innovation in the selected works. Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Perec and Laurens have created complex structures that mirror the psychoanalytical process that they followed in order to cope with trauma.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of life writing as a genre, with a particular focus on autobiography and autofiction since they are the two subclassifications represented by the works I chose to analyze. Throughout the chapter, I argue that the genre revolves around the construction and representation of identity in all aspects of the narrative. By presenting the conventions of the genre, I show how subclassifications can be distinguished from one another. Then, I propose to explain how life writers conceptualize the idea of identity by examining common strategies, from the author's intentions and motivations to the tools – textual and others – they use in their representation. Finally, I explore the idea that the protagonist's identity may also be constructed externally to the text by discussing the possible roles that the reader may fulfill.

Indeed, readers often take on the role of a silent witness to the narrator / protagonist's life narrative. The fact that pieces of Perec and Laurens's selfhoods are hidden in the structure of their narratives calls for a change in the reader's behavior and reading practice. In chapters 2 and 3, we will see that throughout their works, Perec and Laurens use similar strategies – repetitions and

variations. One difference between these two authors is that Perec uses repetition and variations in the creation of one work, while Laurens uses them throughout a corpus. In each of the chapters, I will therefore discuss what the use of repetition and variations means for the reader's practice and understanding of the narrators / protagonists' trauma.

Chapter 2 is devoted to an analysis of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* by Georges Perec. This work, which is presented as the author's autobiography, consists of three narratives, told by three separate narrators. Two of the three narratives are fictional and the third one is explicitly autobiographical. Nevertheless, the common thread between all three narratives deals with identity, more specifically, with hiding and doubting one's identity as a result of a traumatic event. Even though all three narratives present different protagonists, the two fictional narratives are intertwined with Perec's autobiography: the book itself contains two parts, each of which alternates fictional and autobiographical chapters. Moreover, even though this is not part of the narrative, it is important to point out that Perec was a member of Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle), a group dedicated to literary innovation. The members of Oulipo have been compared to some "rats qui construisent eux-mêmes le labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir (*Abrégé de littérature potentielle*, 6). This characterization suggestions that the content and form of *W* are far from random and there must be a coherent method hidden inside the text. Sheringham asserts that "selfhood or subjectivity in autobiography is always a function of the constraints, limits, boundaries, and orders which are made pertinent by the particular nature of a given autobiographer's undertaking: the self in the text is always a self in context" (21). Therefore, in this chapter, I seek to interpret the unique structure of Perec's works and explain why two of the three narratives were conceived as fictions. Since the main issue of *W* deals with identity, I argue that the structure of *W* holds the key to the identity that Perec tries to share with the reader.

Chapter 3 focuses on four novels in Camille Laurens's autofictional corpus which revolve around their respective female protagonists' overwhelming sense of loss and absence in their lives. Although the protagonists are different, their lives are extremely similar. In fact, two storylines are consistently repeated: the female protagonists all lose their first-born child, a son named Philippe who only lived a few hours, and they are all trying to understand why a romantic relationship ended abruptly. While repetition plays a role in Laurens's professional life, her collection of essays entitled *Encore et Jamais, variations* (2013) reveals that she is fascinated by repetition as a natural phenomenon that has affected her life as well through the reoccurrence of losses of the same nature. In her essays, references to Freud, Lacan and their use of repetition as a therapeutic method point out her knowledge of and experience with psychoanalysis. My goal in this third and final chapter it to examine the repetitions and variations of the storylines, as well as how the loss of a child and the loss of a lover affect the lives and identities of Laurens's protagonists. I argue that repetition is not a simple narrative signature but serves the purpose of furthering both the reader and each protagonist's understanding of repeated losses and how they affected them. In the chapter, I will explore the idea that the works I selected form a corpus and need to be read together.

One of the common traits between the works of Perec and Laurens is their explicit reference to psychoanalysis, their acknowledgment of the potential performative aspect of the psychoanalytical process: through therapy, symptoms and patterns are transformed into meaning. In my work, I seek to show that trauma is no longer just a theme of life writing but has become a force that drives the development of both content and form and leads to innovations such as the creation of new subclassifications.

Chapter 1

The Construction of Identity in Life Writing

The term *life writing* was first used in 1939 by Virginia Woolf in "A Sketch of the Past". According to Zachary Leader, it includes "not only memoir, autobiography, biography, diaries … but also letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceeding (as a legal term), lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms" (*On Life Writing*, 1).[7] G. Thomas Couser indicates that "the preference for the broader terms is not a function of indifference toward generic distinctions ; rather, it reflects the increasing diversity of texts being studied by scholars and the reluctance to establish or acknowledge any hierarchy among them" (*Memoir*, 42).[8] While all the works and subclassifications present similarities – Philippe Lejeune tells us that "le sujet commun est qu'ils racontent la vie de quelqu'un" (*Le Pacte autobiographique,* 13) – they also exhibit many differences and variations in terms of the presentation of their protagonist(s), the identification or differentiation between author / narrator / protagonist, as well as the scope and goals of these narratives. For instance, Couser points out that "*Autobiographies* are generally more comprehensive – in chronology and otherwise; *memoirs* are generally more focused and selective" (24). In addition, some subclassifications are extremely specific about their topic: an autopathography records the protagonist's symptoms throughout an illness; scriptotherapy is a

[7] In *Essays on Life Writing, from Genre to Critical Practices* (1992), Marlene Kadar counts over fifty subclassifications. I include a non-exhaustive list of subclassifications here in order to prove that the umbrella term "life writing" encompasses a wide varity of topics: autobiographics, auto/biography, autobiography (2nd and 3rd persons), autoethnography, autofiction, autography, autogynography, autopathography, autothanatography, autotopography, bildungsroman, biomethography, captive narrative, case study, chronicle, collaborative life narrative, confession, conversion narrative, ecobiography, ethnic life writing, ethnocriticism, genealogy, heterobiography, journal, journaling, letters, life writing, life narrative, meditation, memoir, oral history, otobiography, oughtabiography, periautography, personal essay, poetic autobiography, prison narrative, relational autobiography, scriptotherapy, self-help narrative, self-portrait, serial autobiography, slave narrative, spiritual narrative, survivor narrative, testimonio, trauma narrative, travel narrative, witnessing (Kadar, 210-34).

[8] Broader terms such as "life writing" and "life narrative".

form of writing that is intentionally used to enhance the outcome of someone's experience with therapy. In his discussion on the subclassifications of life writing, Couser asserts that "categorizing works is not the *end* of genre analysis but its starting point. The goal is not to *classify* works but to *clarify* them. We cannot fully understand what a particular author or story is doing without some sense of the operative conventions, which are a function of its genre" (9, Couser's emphasis). The formal similarities and differences between the subclassifications represented by the works selected for this dissertation will be of particular interest in the first section of this chapter.

The works studied in Chapters 2 and 3 – Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and the narratives selected from Camille Laurens's corpus – present different forms of (self)-representation, such as the author's choice of narrative voice for instance. They also belong to distinct classifications of life writing: while *W* juxtaposes an autobiographical narrative with two fictional ones, Laurens's works are all autofictional in nature. Nevertheless, they exhibit striking similarities as well, especially as far as their themes are concerned: both authors explore the effects of loss and other traumatic events (historical or personal) on the development of their identities as authors of life narratives, and most importantly as individuals. They illustrate Couser's point that "at its best, life writing does not register preexisting selfhood, but rather somehow creates it. This inverts the intuitive idea that one lives one's life, then simply writes it down. Instead, in writing one's life one may bring a new self into being. If this is true, then in reading life narrative, we witness self-invention" (14). In my study of both narratives, I will examine how the authors talk about their processes of understanding the effects of trauma and how they present themselves / their characters before, during and after trauma.

Throughout the present chapter, I will therefore argue that the construction of identity is at the core of life writing at different levels: it determines how genre and subclassifications are

defined and how individual identities are built and represented in narratives.[9] My first goal in this chapter will be to provide an overview of the formal literary conventions that define the subclassifications and therefore allow readers to distinguish between them. Then, I will focus on life writing as a genre to examine various conceptions of identity, from the author's intentions to the use of memories and psychoanalysis to construct identity, both intentionally and subconsciously. Finally, I will explore conceptualizations of readership and reading practices as they are implicitly or explicitly defined in life-writing narratives and in theoretical works.

I. Similarities and Differences between Subclassifications

Autobiography

At the beginning of the first book of his *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau declares : "Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur" (33). Centuries later, in his study on autobiography as a literary genre, Philippe Lejeune could not disagree more with Rousseau when he asserts that "L'autobiographie a toujours existé, même si c'est à des degrés et sous des formes diverses" (313).[10] Although we can concede to Rousseau that every autobiography is unique, others before him had already embarked on their autobiographical project. Among the most canonical works are St Augustine's *Confessions*, consisting of thirteen volumes written in Latin between 397 and 400 AD, and Michel de Montaigne's *Les Essais*, consisting of three volumes. The authors, the time periods and the works are very different from

[9] Although some subclassifications focus on a particular topic, identity and its construction or reconstruction is always a main issue. For instance, a genealogy will show how a family was made and might describe the identity of the family as a unit; prison narratives often deal with who the narrator / protagonist was before prison and how their time in confinement has changed them; a travel narrative will of course focus on describing the area of interest, but the author may also talk about how traveling to / through certain places has affected them, their opinions, etc…

[10] Of course, Rousseau would have been aware of previous life narratives. Although he might not have meant to claim that his *Confessions* were the first autobiography to exist, the phrase "une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple" is ambiguous. If it does not claim that this is the first autobiography, it certainly praises the *Confessions* for their extreme uniqueness.

one another; yet, they all fall under the classification of *autobiography*, which suggests that they share formal similarities.

The opening chapter of Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique* seeks to define the term autobiography. Lejeune calls attention to the fact that there are many ways to study autobiography. However, for him, it is first and foremost a literary form.[11] His first working definition states that autobiography is a "*Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité*" (14, italics in original). He then provides a list of conditions which must be fulfilled in order for a work to be considered an autobiography:

1. *Formes du langage* :
    a) récit
    b) en prose.
2. *Sujet traité* : vie individuelle, histoire d'une personnalité.
3. *Situation de l'auteur* : identité de l'auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur.
4. *Position du narrateur* :
    a) identité du narrateur et du personnage principal,
    b) perspective rétrospective du récit. (14)

Although these categories should make it easy to form a clear definition of autobiography, Lejeune quickly points out that certain (auto)biographical narratives do not fulfill all the conditions:

[11] "Ce qu'on appelle l'autobiographie est susceptible de diverses approches : étude historique, puisque l'écriture du moi qui s'est développée dans le monde occidental depuis le XVIIIe siècle est un phénomène de civilisation ; étude psychologique puisque l'acte autobiographique met en jeu de vastes problèmes, comme ceux de la mémoire, de la construction de la personnalité et de l'auto-analyse. Mais l'autobiographie se présente d'abord comme un *texte* littéraire" (7).

Les genres voisins de l'autobiographie ne remplissent pas toutes ces conditions. Voici la liste de ces conditions non remplies selon les genres :

-mémoires : (2),

-biographie : (4 *a*),

-roman personnel : (3),

-poème autobiographique : (1 *b*),

-journal intime : (4 *b*),

-autoportrait ou essai : (1 *a* et 4 *b*). (14)

These subclassifications are included under the broader term of life writing because their form or content do not match the conditions established by Lejeune. For instance, a biography is written by someone other than the protagonist; an autobiographical poem would be shorter than an autobiography; a private journal has its own conventions[12] ; self-portraits, essays and memoirs are more focused on a particular topic or event. As a consequence, Lejeune determines that only two of the conditions "sont affaires de tout ou rien" (15) for autobiography to exist. They are the ones that deal with the identity of the author, narrator, and protagonist.

Throughout the opening chapter, Lejeune examines the various pronouns used to refer to the protagonist(s), the kinds of narratives that result from the use of these pronouns, and how they may distinguish autobiographical narratives from works of fiction. This examination of the use of pronouns is significant as it will also be one of the formal elements that distinguishes autobiography from autofiction. Lejeune creates the following chart (18):

[12] Private journals usually keep a record of the date of each entry. They can be addressed to their own author or to someone else or to no one in particular. The entries are often written closer to the events recounted in the narrative: on the same day or within a few days.

personne grammaticale / identité	JE	TU	IL
narrateur = personage principal	autobiographie classique [autodiégétique]	autobiographie à la 2e pers.	autobiographie à la 3e pers.
narrateur ≠ personage principal	biographie à la 1ère pers. (récit du témoin) [homodiégétique]	biographie addressee au modèle	biographie classique [homodiégétique]

Figure 1. Grammatical person and identity in autobiography.

As Lejeune points out, however, this chart does not take every possible (grammatical) scenario into consideration : "Il existe des autobiographies dans lesquelles une partie du texte désigne le personnage principal à la 3ème personne, alors que dans le reste du texte, le narrateur et ce personnage principal se trouvent confondus dans la première personne : c'est le cas du *Traître*, dans lequel André Gorz traduit par des jeux de voix l'incertitude où il est de son identité" (17). One might also mention Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* (1983) which presents two autobiographical narrative voices. One of them expresses itself using "je," while the other one addresses it using "tu."[13]

Moreover, the identity of the author / narrator / protagonist is not just represented by personal pronouns, but also by proper names, which pose issues of their own. Initially, when Lejeune turns to the topic of names, he determines that "L'autobiographie (récit racontant la vie

[13] In his book *Quand Je n'est pas un autre*, Guillaume Paugam explains that "Des deux voix de ce dialogue, il n'est de signe apparent permettant l'identification – l'échange aurait lieu entre 'Nathalie Sarraute et son double', comme le veut une convention établie jusqu'en quatrième de couverture pour laquelle on ne sait, au juste, laquelle est 'double' de l'autre ni pourquoi. Elles revêtent pourtant une identité propre marquée par un rôle et un registre distincts" (174).

de l'auteur) suppose qu'il y ait *identité de nom* entre l'auteur (tel qu'il figure, par son nom, sur la couverture), le narrateur du récit et du personnage dont on parle. C'est là un critère très simple, qui définit en même temps que l'autobiographie tous les autres genres de la littérature intime (journal autoportrait, essai)" (23-4). Once again, some narratives differ from this rule. For instance, an author can use a pseudonym as his / her pen name. The narrator / protagonist may choose to refer to themselves by a different name. A prominent illustration of these variations occurs in Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* (1890). "Henry Brulard" is the narrator / protagonist's name; "Stendhal" was Marie-Henri Beyle's pen name – three distinct names, one person. This issue is at the core of autofiction as well.

Autofiction

The term *autofiction* was coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky in reference to his novel *Fils*. In one of her many articles about autofiction, Karen Ferreira-Meyers explains that autofiction is a "Notion subtile à définir, liée au refus qu'un auteur manifeste à l'égard de l'autobiographie" (2012, 104). The complexity of this notion sparked the interest of the literary world, with an increasing number of both primary and secondary sources over the past three decades. Arnaud Genon and Isabelle Grell, two professors of French literature co-founded the autofiction.org website which keeps a list of writers of autofiction and provides professors and journalists a platform on which they can publish their research.

Over the course of his career, Doubrovsky gave multiple definitions of what autofiction is.[14] Several years after the publication of *Fils*, he declared: "L'autofiction, c'est la fiction que j'ai

[14] The very first definition is featured in the text of the back cover of *Fils* and reads as follows: "Autobiographie? Non. C'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde au soir de leur vie et dans un beau style. Fiction d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, *fils* des mots, allitération, assonances,

décidé, en tant qu'écrivain, de me donner de moi-même et par moi-même" (1988, 77).[15] Therefore, in autofiction the relationship between the author and the narrator/protagonist is more complicated than it is in autobiography. Authors of autofictions can decide to speak in a variety of voices, usually in the first or third person, and to move back and forth between these voices. The latter is a technique used by Camille Laurens in *Ni toi ni moi*, in order to indicate when she does or does not assume responsibility for in the narrative. *Ni toi ni moi* is divided into two narratives: one in which Laurens shares her personal emails with a filmmaker who wanted to adapt one of her short stories into a movie, and a narrative in which the screenplay is being conceptualized. In the former, her use of "je" explicitly refers to herself, while in the latter, she mostly uses "elle" to refer to the female protagonist who stands in for her. However, there are also a few instances of "je" in the autofictional narrative that are not explicitly claimed by the author.

In addition to the issue of pronouns, autofiction also plays with the proper nouns used to refer to the author / narrator / protagonist. Ferreira-Meyers explains that one of the criteria that distinguishes autofiction from autobiography is that "there has to be onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator as well as the subtitle 'novel'" (2012, 105). However, while this classification might fit autofictional works in which the author, the narrator and the protagonist share the same name, there are other possible scenarios as well. For instance, Laurens's female protagonists are not always named Camille. Yet, Laurens's works are autofictions and illustrate the definition brought forth by Vincent Colonna in his dissertation (published in 2004), according to which "the term autofiction encompasses all the processes of fictionalization of the self, the other main feature of the autofictional process, in so far as the author is fantasizing his own

dissonances, écriture d'avant ou d'après littérature, *concrète*, comme on dit musique. Ou encore, autofiction, patiemment onaniste, qui espère faire maintenant partager son plaisir."

[15] "Autobiographie / Vérité / Psychanalyse." Paris : PUF, 1988 (cited in Ferreira-Meyers, 2012, 104).

existence, a project in which imaginary characters are more or less close extensions of his / her self" (Colonna, paraphrased by Ferreira-Meyers, 2012, 106). Laurens has claimed that she is and is not the same person as her characters. Over the course of my analysis of her corpus, I will examine how resemblances and differences between author and narrator / protagonist are built.

In the end, the subclassifications of life writing are characterized by different formal conventions and a different focus. The subclassifications represented in this dissertation, autobiography and autofiction, are separated by the subtitle "novel." It is worth noting that although all subclassifications exhibit specific features that allow readers and critics to identify them, there is no simple formula that allows us to distinguish between subclassifications. At the end of the opening chapter of *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune even admits that "Réussir à donner une formule claire et totale de l'autobiographie, ce serait en réalité échouer" (45). Similar comments have been made about autofiction.[16] Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and Laurens's corpus are perfect illustrations. For a long time, *W* was classified as an autobiography because it juxtaposes an autobiographical and two fictional narratives. However, it may be better classified as an auto-fiction. I hyphenate the term here to emphasize that part of the narrative is clearly claimed by Perec as autobiographical, while he also acknowledges that the other narratives are fictional. Conversely, Laurens's works are autofictions (no hyphen) because they are fictionalizations of the author's life. Overall, life writing is better thought of as a spectrum along which narratives fulfill various conditions in terms of form and content. In turn, each subclassification also presents a spectrum of possible scenarios to fulfill particular conditions as we have seen. In other words, life writing provides the readers with "une conception identitaire instable, sans fixité, telle qu'elle est vécue dans le quotidien" (*Autofictions et Cie*, 228). Identity,

[16] In *Autofiction et dévoilement de soi*, Madeleine Ouelette-Michalska asserts that the concept of autofiction "échappe à la fixité des règles et aux identifications prescrites" (83).

both that of a literary genre and of a person, evolves and is constructed over time. The next section of this chapter will therefore be dedicated to examining how identities are constructed in life writing.

II. Life Writing's Conception of Identity

Motivations and Intentions

Although each life-writing narrative tells a different story, there are similarities in the strategies employed by life writers to talk about who they are. In other words, we can identify distinct literary elements and narrative moments, starting with the reasons why individuals want to tell their stories. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton explains that life writers "see their life as worth remembering because they are, in their own eyes, someone who has taken decisions which exerted, or can be seen as having exerted, a more or less wide influence and which have visibly changed part of their social world" (19). In doing so, they often bear witness to their experience and that of other people while leaving a written trace of their lives for posterity.

Whether they mean to or not, life writers "frequently bombard us with claims about their motives and intentions" (Sheringham, 1). Some writers make their intentions clear from the beginning. In "Au lecteur," his opening essay, Montaigne declares : "Je veux qu'on m'y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice : car c'est moi que je peins. Mes défauts s'y liront au vif, et ma forme naïve, autant que la révérence publique me l'a permis" (*Les Essais*, 39). Two centuries later, Rousseau expresses similar intentions when he writes : "Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature ; et cet homme ce sera moi"

(*Les Confessions*, 33). Although Montaigne's and Rousseau's intentions resemble each other, intentions are not universal: every life writer has his / her own.[17]

Of course, there is more than one way to take these intentions into account when reading a life-writing narrative[18] and there is more than one way to indicate one's intentions. Sheringham points out that a life writer "has at his or her disposal a variety of tags – *Confessions, Mémoires, Souvenirs, Vie de…, Autobiographie* – which, when featured on a title-page, discussed in a preface, or alluded to in passing at any stage, can be used to signal (or camouflage) intentions" (16). Montaigne's *Essais* and Rousseau's *Confessions* both display and camouflage their authors' intentions. Although Montaigne's *Essais* cover a variety of topics, a part of the third volume focuses on the symptoms he experienced through illnesses and reveal an individual who is afraid of dying and wants to live on through literature.

As for Rousseau, he declares from the beginning that he showed himself as "méprisable et vile quand [il l'a] été, bon, généreux, sublime, quand [il l'a] été" (*Confessions*, 33-34). Throughout *Les Confessions*, he confronts moments of his past that made him who he was and of which he might not have been proud, in the hope of countering an image that had been painted of him to society. However, the very content of the *Confessions* undermines his intentions. In Book X, Rousseau points out that writing his memoirs could not be done "sans laisser voir aussi d'autres

[17] Sheringham writes that "Beneath the official moves they readily own up to – putting their lives on record, offering a sincere account of their formation, discovering who they are – we often find a swarm of less explicit desires which may or may not be acknowledged: confession, exculpation, self-justification, self-transformation, self-acceptance; the desire to turn a life into a fable, a fetish, or a monument; the desire to liquidate the past, to embalm it, to exorcise it, to glamorize it, to dramatize it, to bowdlerize it; the desire to set the record straight, to falsify it; to correct false impressions, or to propagate them; to evade all definitions and images or to generate them" (137).

[18] "One response is to see it as of relatively minor importance since, the argument would go, motives advanced by autobiographers are secondary by comparison with the primal impulse from which autobiography allegedly springs, that of bringing form, meaning, and coherence to past and present experience. A second approach might be to deny the existence of any primal motive and to suggest that autobiography should be seen as involving, characteristically, a cluster of motives – and hence of sub-genres such as the confession, the apologia, the memoir – which combine in different dosages in given texts […] A third approach would construe talk about intentions as a sign of the 'contractual' nature of autobiography, and emphasize the form and function, rather than the content, of such discourse" (Sheringham, 1-2).

gens tels qu'ils étaient et par conséquent cet ouvrage ne [pouvait] paraître qu'après [sa] mort et celle de beaucoup d'autres" (*Confessions*, 617). His work may have changed people's opinion of him posthumously, but Rousseau could not benefit from any positive reaction from the public since he had already passed.[19] When intentions and content contradict each other, or when intentions are implicit, "the question of the author's ultimate intention is the enigma bequeathed to the reader" (Sheringham, 15). This is the case for Perec's work, since he does not explain why or how his autobiographical narrative is related to the two fictional narratives published along with it. Finally, one might also think about motivations and intentions in the context of life writing "as act and narrative process" (Sheringham, 2), i.e motivations and intentions drive the internal organization of life writing which is the topic of the next section.

"Will-to-form"

In his book on autobiography, Sheringham presents two opposing theories that explain how life writers might think about their lives as a coherent unit that pre-exists the literary work, or that is constructed by it. Wilhelm Dilthey likened the activity of life writing to that of "connecting threads" and argues that "The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created connections which he is now putting into words" (Dilthey, 214). Sheringham explains that according to Dilthey, autobiography (although one could argue that this is true of life writing as such), "brings no substantial increment; rather it articulates and manifests a structural cohesiveness (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*) to which each past experience has contributed" (Sheringham, 2). In other words, lives presented in life writing are

[19] Rousseau also mentions his intentions to bring his written narrative with him on the day of his Last Judgment (33). He was a man of faith and would likely have believed in some form of afterlife. However, a written transcript of his life would not be necessary since God is everywhere and knows everything. This clearly shows that Rousseau's true intentions are masked.

already coherent units before they are written down on paper. On the other end of the spectrum, Georges Gusdorf argues that life writers "create the meaning they claim to find" while completing their narratives (Sheringham, 4). This is the point of view adopted by Sheringham in his study of various French autobiographies; this is also the point of view I have chosen to adopt in the present dissertation. Sheringham concludes his explanation of Gusdorf's argument by asserting that "The 'life' constructed in autobiography is not, as in Dilthey, sanctioned by a pre-existing cohesiveness, but is the product of a 'will-to-form'" which "expresses itself primarily in aesthetic terms" (Sheringham, 4), i.e through literary devices.

Early on in his analysis, Sheringham introduces a device that he calls "autobiographical incidents" (97) by providing famous examples: "Augustine steals some pears, Montaigne falls off his horse, Rousseau steals a ribbon, Stendhal drops a knife, Gide meets Wilde, Sarraute stabs a sofa… Incidents figure prominently in the autobiographical tradition, but the kind of significance they are granted varies considerably" (97).[20] Sheringham goes on to identify two types of incidents: domesticated incidents[21] and wild incidents. For the purpose of this section and of my argument, I will focus on the latter to examine how such incidents can build aspects of the author / narrator / protagonist's life and identity, before providing an example from Rousseau's *Confessions*.

Sheringham presents three aspects that define *wild incidents*. The first one suggests the fact that an incident is considered as *wild* "when, rather than being allotted a specific role in the text (and remaining constrained by that role), it is endowed with a certain autonomy which underlines

[20] "An incident is a kind of event, and an event ('événement'), if we consult Lalande's dictionary is : 'Ce qui advient à une date et lieu determines, lorsque ce fait présente une certaine unité, et se distingue du cours uniforme des choses de même nature'" From Lalande's *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, quoted by Sheringham (99).

[21] "Their essential characteristic is that whatever weight they are given, their meaning derives principally from the narrative line which 'puts them in their place'. The domesticated incident not only exemplifies something other than itself (all autobiographical incidents do this to some degree) but is very largely subordinated to a transcendent logic. Rousseau's thefts during his apprenticeship, his desertion of M. Le Maître, his first encounter with Mme de Warens exemplify the author's views on tyranny, his exculpating theory on moments when we are 'not ourselves', the decanting of experience in memory" (Sheringham, 103).

its specific and irreducible qualities" (104). It is often a singular event that greatly affects the protagonist's life both at the time of the event and later on. Since this can be said about most events depicted in life writing, Sheringham provides more characteristics when he writes:

> Secondly, wild incidents draw attention to discourse and to the moment of writing. The elaboration of hypotheses and the positing of alternative descriptions may explicitly display the constructive process involved in autobiographical writing, while devices such as juxtaposition (Leiris) or superimposition (Chateaubriand) may, implicitly, point to the text as construct. Moreover, wild incidents tend to vivify the channel of communication with the reader – explicitly, through a discourse which stresses the imponderable, the ineffable, the ineradicable; or tacitly, by confronting the reader more squarely than elsewhere with his or her interpretative role. A third facet is the relationship to temporality. In becoming a textual moment, the wild incident 'stops the clock', suspends the relay of past time, questions the natural link between causality and temporal flow, asserts its own temporal coordinates. (105)

These two characteristics – the attention paid to *the moment of writing* and the *relationship to temporality* – can be perfectly illustrated by the episode in which Rousseau steals a ribbon in Book II of the *Confessions*.

After abandoning his apprenticeship in Geneva, Rousseau entered the service of Mme de Vercellis who died shortly after his arrival. When all her servants had to move out of her house, an inventory revealed that a ribbon was missing. Rousseau tells the reader that

> Beaucoup d'autres meilleures choses étaient à ma portée : ce ruban seul me tenta, je le volai, et comme je ne le cachai guère, on me le trouva bientôt. On voulut savoir où je l'avais

> pris. Je me trouble, je balbutie, et enfin je dis, en rougissant, que c'est Marion qui me l'a donné. (*Confessions*, 125)

He explains that Marion was Mme de Vercellis's cook, describes her as a loyal, well-behaved young woman, so people were surprised when he accused her. Eventually, Marion had to be confronted :

> On la fit venir ; l'assemblée était nombreuse, le comte de la Roque y était. Elle arrive, on lui montre le ruban, je la charge effrontément, elle reste interdite, se tait, me jette un regard qui aurait désarmé les démons, et auquel mon barbare cœur résiste. (125)

The end of this passage is fascinating and revealing: while Rousseau admits to accusing Marion in her presence, he also seems proud to have sustained her gaze. In fact, he could have written "mon coeur barbare" which follows the normal word order. However, by placing the adjective ("barbare") before the noun ("cœur"), he draws the reader's attention to his ability to remain unfazed while facing Marion.

Nevertheless, Rousseau's use of different tenses in the excerpts quoted above points to two distinctly different attitudes. The preterit is employed to refer to the theft itself. It is combined with the frequent use of commas, which has the effect of accelerating the storytelling, while it also creates a certain emotional distance from the event. Indeed, the use of the preterit is expected in a literary work and the theft is a singular event in the past. However, the speed at which the theft is described reflects Rousseau's uneasiness and makes the telling of the event sound as though the theft was simply background information for a bigger story. The part of the story that matters most is recounted in the present tense. In the first passage, Rousseau uses the present tense to tell the reader about his emotional state once the ribbon is discovered: "je me trouble," "je balbutie," which are indicative of his uneasiness with his own actions. In the second passage, the present tense is

used to describe both Rousseau and Marion's reactions after he accused her. In this case, the present tense makes the story more vivid and present, so to speak, as if it were happening in real time, both as Rousseau is writing it and as the reader is reading it. The story feels so alive to the reader, because it is still very much alive in Rousseau's mind as well. In fact, he explains that before writing the *Confessions*, he had never told the complete story and therefore, "ce poids est donc resté jusqu'à ce jour" (127). Calling it a "poids" (*weight*) further reinforces the impression of trauma and guilt weighing heavily on him for decades. This incident, while it is a significant event in Book II, is not directly connected to any other event in the entire narrative. It serves the purpose of pointing out Rousseau's guilt and state of mind at the time of the event and at the time of writing, four decades after the incident. It creates the impression that he is a remorseful person.[22] Later on in the *Confessions*, Rousseau's character as a person is attacked by friends and acquaintances from the Enlightenment circles for giving his children up for adoption and for his intimate relationships with women other than his companion. Admitting to his wrongdoing, casting himself as remorseful and burdened by the weight of his actions early in the narrative may have been a strategy used by Rousseau to gain the reader's sympathy and trust, feelings that the reader maintains throughout. Sheringham characterizes this focused attention on a moment of the past as a form of "fetishization" of the self. What is fetishized is the "profusion of signs, tokens, and traces of selfhood which are generated as the autobiographer 'processes' memories, conjectures and documents" (8). Here, the use of the present tense to talk about past actions and feelings can be read as a fetishization and construction of the protagonist's identity. Of course, tense in language is only one of the tools deployed in life writing to build identity. The next section will be devoted to other devices, with a particular attention to memories, documents and conscious references to

[22] Although, years later, in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, Rousseau completely shatters this image of himself by creating a theory that justifies lying in order to protect oneself.

psychoanalysis to show how life writers rely on elements of their past to build their identity in the present.

Building the Present through the Analysis of the Past

Life narratives in general deal with the protagonist's past and are often produced after traumatic experiences – the works I selected for my dissertation certainly were. In telling their stories, life writers rely on their memories, other people's memories and testimonies, as well as a variety of documents, both personal and official. In certain cases, especially in modern life narratives, the authors / narrators allude to their knowledge of psychoanalytical methods. Lejeune asserts that "Si la psychanalyse apporte une aide précieuse au lecteur d'autobiographie, ce n'est point parce qu'elle explique l'individu à la lumière de son histoire et de son enfance, mais parce qu'elle saisit cette histoire dans son cours et qu'elle fait de *l'énonciation* le lieu de sa recherche" (9). In this way, Lejeune equates life writing with the site of a psychoanalytic process. In this section, I first provide a definition of what trauma is and an explanation of how it can affect memory. Then I present examples of documents and psychoanalytical methods used in life writing to cope with the effects of trauma on memory.

Trauma and Memory

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth explains that even though trauma was first understood as "an injury inflicted on the body" (3), Freud's work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) extended the meaning of this medical concept to refer to the

> wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – [which] is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event

> that […] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth, 3-4)

In the works selected for this dissertation, the life writers' traumatic experiences deal with loss: Perec lost both his parents during the Second World War; Laurens lost her first-born child and the love of a man with whom she thought she would spend the rest of her life.

As indicated by Caruth, trauma *imposes itself* on the mind. As such, symptoms and expressions of trauma are often chaotic and demand to be interpreted in conversation with the patient. Freud articulated his method of interpretation in "Remembering, repeating, working through" (1914): the patient needs to repeat the trauma in order to understand what its expressions signify. Accepting and *working through* one's trauma thus is as a necessary phase in the process of self-understanding and in the reconstruction of one's identity.

Paradoxically, while the process of "remembering, repeating, working through" aims at facilitating the reconstruction of one's identity, "a central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory," as Michelle Balaev points out, "asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity" (149). She elaborates further, writing that the "traumatized protagonist may experience a doubling or self-estrangement" (162).[23] In fact, this *doubling* of identity is at the heart of my analysis of both Perec and Laurens's works. It is also at work in a narrative I previously mentioned: indeed, in *Enfance*, Nathalie Sarraute uses two distinct narrative voices, a "je" and a "tu" address each other. Guillaume Paugam explains that,

[23] Indeed, throughout a psychoanalytical process such as "remembering, repeating, working through," the patient needs to confront various memories, dreams and symptoms which belong to a time of their life that was forgotten or repressed. As such, the identity of the patient at the time of his/her psychoanalysis needs to be deconstructed in order to allow for pieces of the trauma to resurface, be analyzed and understood.

> La seconde voix peut être dite « introspective », puisque tournée vers ses propres souvenirs (ceux-là même que la première se fait confirmer qu'il s'agit d'« *évoquer* »), tandis que la première semble davantage « réflexive » -- comme un regard de contrepoint dédié à la critique du récit de cette seconde. La plupart du temps, on la voit questionner tantôt la vérité des faits, tantôt les motivations du récit. (*Quand Je n'est pas un autre*, 174)

The two voices in *Enfance* interact to construct the protagonist's story and identity together: the second voice challenges the way the first voice depicts past events, both with respect to the language she uses and the accuracy of the details she remembers.

When dealing with memories, the accuracy of the recounting of events might be questioned because our memories of events are subjective. The psychologist Daniel L. Schacter asserts that "memories are records of how we experienced events" (*Memory Distortion*, 6). Such a record of an event is unique and subjective to every person involved: if two persons (or more) are present for an event, but they will look at the event from different positions, pay attention to and remember different details that matter to them personally. Schacter conceives of memories as "fragments of experience," not inaccurate representations of experiences themselves. Moreover, he declares that "we construct autobiographies from fragments of experience that change overtime" (9), that is to say that every time we remember something, we remember it differently, depending on our age, the time of day, our state of mind or additional pieces of information that were not previously available to us. Therefore, it is possible to say that "what we call our memories often belong not to the period they ostensibly refer us to but to one or more of the stages in a process of 'permanent modification' to which they are subject" (Sheringham, 298). This will be exemplified in Chapter 2 by one of Perec's memories of his departure from the occupied zone. This memory is revisited

three times over the course of the narrative; each occurrence presents new details and interpretations of the significance of this memory in his personal development.

In addition, traumatic experiences complicate the formation and expression of memories even further. The same mechanisms that our unconscious deploys in order to cope with trauma affect the way we remember. Ferreira-Meyers affirms that "l'inconscient falsifie la mémoire par refoulement, déplacement, condensation et souvenirs écran" (2010, 58). Through these mechanisms, the details of an event are repressed or forgotten (*refoulement*[24]) distorted and haphazardly assembled (*déplacement*[25] and *condensation*[26]) or another memory if fabricated by the mind to stand for the traumatic experience (*souvenir écran*[27]). These mechanisms and symptoms need to be fully analyzed to comprehend the nature of the trauma. The ever-changing nature of memory, as well as trauma's effects on memory can make it difficult for someone to trust one's recollection of an event. Therefore, in life writing, authors often rely on documents to help them remember and confirm parts of their identity. Moreover, some authors (including Perec and Laurens) show that they are aware of the field of psychoanalysis and use it to their advantage by

[24] Freud writes: "by virtue of a particular psychological condition, the *thoughts could not become conscious to me*. I call this particular condition 'Repression'" (*On Dreams*, 32; Freud's emphasis).

[25] *Displacement* refers to the process through which what was repressed returns in a different form, often in dreams. Freud explains that "the dream is a *sort of substitution* for those emotional and intellectual trains of thought which I attained after complete analysis […] I contrast the dream which my memory evokes with the dream and other added matter revealed by analysis: the former I call the dream's *manifest content*; the latter, without at first further subdivision, its *latent content*" (*On Dreams*, 7). In light of this description, one could say that the *manifest content* is the displaced form of memories.

[26] For Freud, "Another manifestation of the dream work which all incoherent dreams have in common is still more noticeable. Choose any instance, and compare the number of separate elements in it, or the extent of the dream, if written down, with the dream thoughts yielded by analysis, and of which but a trace can be refound in the dream itself. There can be no doubt that the dream work has resulted in an extraordinary compression or *condensation*. It is not at first easy to form an opinion as to the extent of the condensation; the more deeply you go into the analysis, the more deeply you are impressed by it" (*On Dreams*, 14).

[27] Freud describes *screen* memories as follows: "One of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other – a resistance – tries to prevent any such preference from being shown […] The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one. And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial" (*Screen memories*, 306-7).

mimicking psychoanalytical methods to interpret their memories and dreams. The next section will present strategies employed in life writing to ward off the effect of trauma on memory and therefore assert aspects of identity.

Documents and Psychoanalysis

Since memories can be distorted, life writing narratives tend to include or refer to personal and official documents provide confirmation of pieces of their past about which they are unsure. At the beginning of his autobiographical narrative in *W*, Perec declares: "Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance" (17), which is ironic given the title of the narrative. However, chapter after chapter, the reader comes to understand that Perec's childhood memories have been compromised by the traumatic loss of his parents. Consequently, a significant number of the memories he narrates is corrected by him thanks to documents and other people's testimonies. Two instances in particular merit mention here. In Chapter VIII of *W*, Perec includes a story he has written about his parents, then adds twenty-six annotations to correct details that he discovered were wrong. One of these details concerns his parents' names: a conversation with one of his aunts revealed to Perec that the names he remembered (André and Cécile) were not their birth names; rather, they only started using them upon their arrival in France. Without his aunt, Perec may not have discovered this piece of his parents' identities. This discovery, combined with his unreliable memories and the fact that he was a young child when he was separated from his family, made Perec feel that he did not know his parents, to the point of questioning their familial bond. Nevertheless, pictures of him and his mother – which will be analyzed in Chapter 2 – proved to him that they had lived together, shared their lives for a period of time, that they were in fact a family. In both instances, external pieces of

information are used to confirm aspects of Perec's familial identity that had been forgotten or were never known in the first place.

Life writers consciously and purposefully use psychoanalytic methods to discuss the way trauma manifests itself before analyzing these manifestations or leaving their interpretation up to the reader. Life writers draw on psychoanalysis to articulate their trauma and their past in a more meaningful way than they could otherwise without it. In fact, a significant part of sharing one's trauma is the formulation of trauma, whether it is with words, images, or sounds. In Chapter 2, I will parse Perec's self-conscious use of screen memories to talk about the effects that the loss of his parents had his psyche: he describes a memory, tells the readers that he knows that it stands for something else and leaves it up to the reader to fill in the blanks with his / her own interpretation. In Chapter 3, I will show how Laurens incorporates Freud's method of "remembering, repeating, working through" in her works to cope with various losses in her life.

Overall, what emerges throughout these devices – incidents, documents, psychoanalysis – is the idea that identity is not stable. Rather, it is exposed as a work in progress which can be made sense of by patching fragments together over time. As a result, the identity that is claimed at the beginning of a life narrative will often differ from the identity that is constructed throughout and asserted at the end. In the following section, I propose to describe and illustrate these different stages of identity in life writing.

The Products of Life Writing: the Self, the Writing Self, the Written Self

Identity is conceived as so malleable and unstable in life writing that Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson present the terms of "'I'-then" and "'I'-now" to talk about protagonists' evolving identities. As we have seen in the example of Perec's rewritings of events, a protagonist' memories

and identity can shift multiple times throughout the narrative. Therefore, Smith and Watson posit that we need to attend to "multiple 'I'-thens" and "multiple 'I'-nows" and propose the following categories: the "'real' or historical 'I'"[28], the "narrating 'I'"[29], the "narrated 'I'"[30] and the "ideological 'I'"[31] (*Reading Autobiography*, 59). However, since the narrator and the protagonist are not always narrating the story as 'I', I use neutral terms that take identity, not the person, as the referent. I will refer to these distinct identities as the *self*, the *writing self* and the *written self*. Indeed, in Sarraute's *Enfance*, for example, the two narrative voices stand for two representations of the same *historical self* and construct her identity together. We have two narrative voices – a "je" and a "tu" –, but only one *narrated self*.

We can observe these three identities at work in Rousseau's episode of the stolen ribbon. I have already pointed out Rousseau's use of different tenses to talk about the event itself and about his feelings. The present tense, which makes the memory more vivid to the reader, represent an aesthetic choice of the writing self. It casts the written self as a remorseful person who is burdened by the weight of his shameful actions, although the *historical self* might not be.[32] These three

[28] "Because there are traces of this historical person in various kinds of records in the archives of government bureaucracies, churches, family albums, and the memories of others, we can verify this 'I''s existence. We can hear [their] voice, if [they are] still alive. But this 'I' is unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the 'I' that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative" (*Reading Autobiography*, 59).

[29] "The 'I' available to the readers is the 'I' who tells the autobiographical narrative. This 'I' we will call the narrator or the narrating 'I'. This is the 'I' who wants to tell, or is coerced into telling, a story about himself" (*Reading Autobiography*, 59).

[30] "The narrated 'I' is distinguished from the narrating 'I'. As Françoise Lionnet suggests, the narrated 'I' is the subject of history whereas the narrating 'I' is the agent of the discourse (*Autobiographical Voices*, 193). The narrated 'I' is the object 'I', the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (*Reading Autobiography*, 59).

[31] "According to Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject*, the ideological 'I' is the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells his story (105). Historical and ideological notions of the person provide cultural ways of understanding the material location of subjectivity; the relationship of the person to particular others and to a collectivity of others; the nature of time and life course; the importance of social location; the motivations for human actions; the presence of evil, violent, and self-destructive forces and acts; the metaphysical meaning of the universe" (*Reading Autobiography*, 59).

[32] It might not always be possible to pinpoint the difference between the *written self* and the *self*. In Rousseau's case, the reader would only understand this discrepancy by reading all three of his life narratives, especially *Les Réveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, in which Rousseau reveals that he felt that he had to lie about the ribbon in order to protect himself.

identities are a by-product of life writing. They are an integral part of the genre. Thus, readers must train their attention to how the writing self uses its power to construct an identity through language and techniques if they want to understand the identity at stake within the narratives. In the next and final section, I will focus on how life writer's aesthetic and stylistic choices affect and define reading practices. Then I will examine the reader's role, if any, in the construction of the narrator / protagonist's identity.

III. Readership and Reading Practices

As mentioned in the Introduction, life writing has become extremely popular over the past two decades. Memoirs and autobiographies authored by prominent public figures such as presidents and celebrities often become instantaneous best-sellers. Such life-writing narratives give readers a glimpse into the private lives of the rich and famous, a chance to know people who would otherwise be out of reach. Sheringham asserts that there is a "voyeuristic side to being a real reader of autobiographies" (140). Indeed, there is an inherent promise contained in life writing, that these texts aim "at telling the truth about the past; [their] contract implies the possibility of some kind of verification" (Lejeune, 1991, 3). However, as explained in the previous section, memories are often unreliable and subjective, even modified and distorted by trauma, which leads to a fair amount of re-creation and construction on the author / narrator's part and casts doubt on what constitutes the truth in these texts.

While life writers often vow to tell the truth, it will become clear throughout this dissertation that different conceptions of the truth are at work. In *Les Confessions*, Rousseau professes that he will show "un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature" (33), thus offering himself as an example for all of humankind. However, the project of telling *toute la vérité* is inconceivable

in many regards, not only because it would reveal all secrets, but also because it is extremely difficult, if not impossible to know and write everything about oneself. Indeed, Rousseau' project already fails in the first book of the *Confessions* when he introduces his parents and then quickly moves on to describing his life around the age of eight when he went to live with his uncle Bernard. One gets the sense that instead of telling everything, Rousseau focuses on significant and formative episodes, such as the spanking he received from Mlle Lambercier, when he is unjustly punished for her broken comb or his extreme avidity for books from a very young age. Moreover, at the beginning of the second part of *Les Confessions*, in the seventh Book, Rousseau admits that: "Ma première partie a été toute écrite de mémoire et j'y ai dû faire beaucoup d'erreurs" (347). He then adds : "Je puis faire des omissions dans les faits, des transpositions, des erreurs de dates ; mais je ne puis me tromper sur ce que j'ai senti, ni sur ce que mes sentiments m'ont fait faire ; et voilà de quoi principalement il s'agit" (348). Emotional and subjective truth appears to be more important to Rousseau than factual truth.[33] While Rousseau promises his reader the whole truth at the beginning of the project, what he eventually delivers is a partial and subjective truth.

The status of the truth is even more complicated in the works of life writers such as Perec and Laurens. In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, all three narratives are directly and indirectly related to both World War II and Perec's childhood experiences, which suggests that for Perec, life is made of multiple versions of the truth. These competing versions of the truth are further exemplified by Perec's rewriting of his parents' story, the three occurrences of his memory of his departure from Paris, and his use of screen memory. Similar comments can be made about Laurens's autofictional corpus which features female protagonists who are not only mirror images of each other, but also versions of the author herself. Significantly, there are details in the

[33] This is so common amongst life writers that Marlene Kadar points it out in her book entitled *Essays on Life Writing, from Genre to Critical Practice*: "something might be factually untrue but might be emotionally true" (24).

protagonists' lives that are always the same and details that are modified in order to preserve the life writer's – and other people's – privacy and prevent the reader from verifying certain claims. For instance, Laurens was sued by her ex-husband because she had named characters after him and after their daughter in *L'Amour, roman*, which he considered to be a breach of privacy. Even though Laurens won the lawsuit – the judge cited the fact that the narrative was a work of autofiction –, her subsequent publications deal with names in a different manner: the main male romantic interests' names always start with the letter A, but their names and professions differ from one narrative to another. The real person who is represented by these characters might have a name that begins with A, or Laurens might have fabricated this detail to make the reader think that his name begins with an A.

Overall, these different conceptualizations of the truth might leave the reader unsure about what to believe and about how to understand the identity / identities displayed in life writing. Sheringham indicates that "Critics seeking to define autobiographical 'truth' have often opted to set aside factual veracity: let the autobiographer's truth, they declare, be his or her "supreme fiction'" (18). The *whole truth* is an illusion; it might not even belong to the writer since, as we have seen in this chapter, memories are subjective and can easily be distorted by external factors such as a traumatic experience. Therefore, in the following section, I will discuss genre conventions and concepts of referentiality that readers can rely on in their quest to understand the narrator / protagonist's identity. Then, I propose to examine possible reader's attitudes and reception of both autobiography and autofiction. Finally, I will explore the reader's potential role in constructing the protagonist's identity from the text.

Reading Autobiography and Autofiction

Although autobiography and autofiction are both subclassifications of life writing, we have seen that they present different types of narrators and different conceptions truth and identity. These last two concepts, however, are unstable and vary from one life narrative to another, which might make it hard for the readers to relate to the narrator's / protagonist's story and to understand the identity that is presented to them. In her article "Autofiction: 'Imaginaire' and Reality," Ferreira-Meyers asserts that readers need to rely on the concepts of "fictionality and referentiality": since they "underlie our perception of the world, how these are articulated in the text is a factor in the reception of literary work" (107). In the context of life writing, *fictionality* refers to the relationship of the narrative to reality, fiction or both; *referentiality* designates the manner in which the protagonist can be linked to the author, the narrator, both or neither of them. Lejeune explains that "Our attitude will vary according to whether the text appears truthful or not" (1991, 3), whether the identities of the author, the narrator and the protagonist collide or differ. It is these attitudes that I propose to examine here.

In autobiography, fictionality and referentiality are straightforward. Even though the writing self might embellish the truth and construct the identity of the protagonist through literary devices, the simple subclassification of *autobiography* tells the reader that they are reading about a real person; it anchors the narrative into reality. The commitment to referentiality implies that the protagonist and the person whose name is displayed on the cover are one and the same. Lejeune declares that "Le pacte autobiographique, c'est l'affirmation dans le texte de cette identité, renvoyant en dernier ressort au nom de l'auteur sur la couverture" (26). In some cases, autobiographers even refer to themselves by name in their narratives. Rousseau calls himself "Jean-Jacques" and "Rousseau" in *Les Confessions*; Perec tells the story of his last name, its

different possible spellings and meanings in various languages. Often, autobiographers will also mention their birthdate and birthplace which are two verifiable pieces of information, especially in our technological day and age. While describing the readership of autobiography, Lejeune explains that the *pacte autobiographique* "determine en fait l'attitude du lecteur" (25). The oneness of the author / narrator / protagonist's identity is either asserted or it is not, but "si elle est affirmée (cas de l'autobiographie), il [the reader] aura tendance à vouloir chercher les différences (erreurs, déformations, etc…)" (25). The reader will look for difference in order to assess the extent to which s/he can trust the author / narrator.

In autofiction, fictionality and referentiality are more complex. The prefix *auto* in the name of the subclassification indicates the participation of autofiction in reality: readers know that they are reading a version of a real person's life. Life writers such as Doubrovsky and Laurens even acknowledge that they write about their own lives and that they purposefully replace or make up details to blur the lines.[34] This is why Philippe Savary qualifies autofiction as "une réflexion constante autour du rapport entre la fiction et la réalité, l'illusion et la vérité" (2003). Lines are also blurred as far as referentiality is concerned. Autofiction is a place where "le romancier veut toujours se dire […] mais il ne veut pas [toujours] que cela se sache, ou en tout cas pas trop, parce qu'il tient à protéger son for intérieur et à garder sa position haute par rapport au lecteur" (Couturier, 213). Autofictions can be written with a first-, second- or third-person narrator / protagonist or even exhibit a back and forth between multiple voices. This is the case in Laurens's *Ni toi ni moi* in which Laurens alternates chapters where she speaks as herself and chapters about

[34] In *Dans ces bras-là*, as Laurens explains the purpose and organization of the narrative, she writes: "Je ne serais pas la femme du livre. Ce serait un roman, ce serait un personnage, qui ne se dessinerait justement qu'à la lumière des hommes" (17). Then after describing the women in the female protagonist's life, she writes: "Je serais donc aussi ce personage, on peut le penser, bien sûr, puisque j'écris, puisque c'est moi qui laisse épars entre nous les feuillets où je parle d'eux" (19). We can note her use of the conditional present to spread doubt.

the screenplay she is creating. In *Autofiction et Cie*, Jacques Lecarme explains that "L'autofiction offre à l'auteur et au lecteur une image d'une conception identitaire instable" which forces "le lecteur à s'interroger sans relâche sur la manière dont il est possible de juger l'authenticité du propos littéraire" (228). In addition, protagonists in autofiction may or may not share the author's first name, thus separating them even further. Writing about identity, Lejeune argues that "si l'identité n'est pas affirmée (cas de la fiction), le lecteur cherchera à établir des ressemblances, malgré l'auteur" (25). We will see this in my own analysis of Laurens's corpus: her protagonists have a lot in common with each other and with her; examining the similarities between them might point the reader to an understanding of their shared trauma. Nevertheless, similarities might also be faked as part of the autofiction. Therefore, Ferreira-Meyers indicates that while the reader will want to establish connections, "le lecteur doit vouloir et pouvoir lire le récit comme étant autofictif" (2010, 60), to focus solely on the identity that is presented through the narrative.

These attitudes towards life narratives turn into reading practices: the more life narratives we read, the more we know what to expect from them and how to understand the identities displayed in them. Lejeune even asserts that life writing is a "mode de lecture autant qu'un type d'écriture" (45), which clearly implies that the reader has a role to play in life narratives that extends beyond the act of reading itself. The next section will focus on what this role might be.

The Reader's Role(s)

Even though the reader exists outside the narrative's bounds, nobody writes just for themselves, even when they claim to do so. In *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, Rousseau declares that he writes only for himself as part of his reflection during his solitary walks. Nevertheless, a significant amount of the narrative addresses the fact that he lived his life feeling

persecuted. As such, *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* is a continuation of the work he started in *Les Confessions* and *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques:* Rousseau shows himself to the public to clear his name. All three narratives present him in the way he wanted to be seen and remembered by society and are therefore meant to be received by a reader.

In a chapter entitled "Dealing with the Reader," Sheringham writes that "In search of love, esteem, or recognition, the autobiographer places a demand on the reader. The demand is addressed to no one in particular, but the moment we read the text it is addressed to us" (141). Indeed, life writers might not address the reader directly, but the reader is nonetheless often referenced. For instance, the first of Montaigne's *Essais* is entitled "Au lecteur," which refers to any and all readers. Other life writers, such as Rousseau, have a specific idea about who their reader should be. In fact, while Rousseau suggests that *Les Confessions* were written for the day of his Last Judgment[35] – since God knows everything and would be the fairest judge of all –, he also writes: "C'est à moi d'être vrai, c'est au lecteur d'être juste" (439). He ascribes a role to the reader: the intended reader, the only reader that Rousseau would acknowledge, is the one who will do him justice.[36]

Therefore, whether s/he wants it or not, the reader is an integral part of life writing. Sheringham writes that "The reader is a ghost which is always already in the machine: this may make it a difficult role to play; but it does not alter the fact that reading autobiography can take on at least some of the characteristics of an intersubjective encounter" (139-40). Indeed, as previously

[35] Rousseau writes : "Que la trompette du Jugement dernier sonne quand elle voudra, je viendrai, ce livre à la main, me présenter devant le souverain juge. Je dirai hautement : 'Voilà ce que j'ai fait, ce que j'ai pensé, ce que je fus. J'ai dit le bien et le mal avec la même franchise'" (33).

[36] A similar idea is expressed in *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, in the essay "Histoire du precedent récit," which concludes the narrative. Here, Rousseau details his plan to leave his manuscript on the alter at Notre Dame because he could not entrust it to a publisher or to anyone else. When his plan failed, he determined that he should perform public readings and give the manuscript to anyone who would approach him with a genuine interest for his story and for the truth (419).

indicated, life writers often refer to the reader and might even explain what they expect from them, thus opening a line of communication which is designed to get the reader involved. This is very clear in Rousseau's life narratives: he is looking for someone who will believe him, and the reader may or may not be able and / or willing to fulfill this role.

And yet, narratives such as the ones I selected for this dissertation are not straightforward about their expectations for the reader. The works of Perec and Laurens are made of multiple voices, multiple identities, multiple narratives which are somehow all connected even if their connections are not made explicit; they are the mystery that is bequeathed to the reader. While reading Perec and Laurens's works,

> The reader is not simply asked to endorse a verdict on the past, or to participate in the construction of meaning beyond which is given. To play the unwritten part we have been allocated we must understudy all the roles in the mobile dialogue between the voices, and thus appreciate the enduring fears and victories which make them a necessary part of the autobiographical process. (Sheringham, 164)

In fact, in Chapters 2 and 3, we will see that the structures of Perec and Laurens's works are connected to their identity and to the traumatic experiences they are recounting. Whether s/he is aware of it or not, the reader needs to take on multiple roles – spectator, witness, analyst, etc… – in order to understand the relationship between the different voices and narratives, and more significantly, to understand why the links between them are not made explicit. This is the work I propose to conduct in this dissertation.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, as described throughout this chapter, identity is at the center of life writing, regardless of the subclassification. There are literary conventions which help us talk about the different types of narrators possible. What separates the subclassifications of life writing is the scope of their respective topics. What does not change from one subclassification to another is the fact that the contents of these narratives are built on the lives of real individuals who have often gone through a life-changing or even traumatic experience. This trauma can be depicted in the narratives, especially nowadays since author / narrators rely on psychoanalysis to show how trauma has affected them, their memories and their identity. By exposing the symptoms of their trauma – the holes and discrepancies in Perec's memories, or the inexplicable and almost unavoidable patterns of loss in Laurens and her protagonist's lives –, life writers exhibit awareness about themselves and their trauma as works in progress: their identities are in pieces, and they are attempting to put these pieces back together. The reader joins the life writer in this endeavor: s/he is an invited partner whose presence and participation are set up by the author / narrator. Although there are pieces of their story that life writers cannot or do not want to express directly, the narratives that they build contain everything that the reader needs to figure these pieces – such as the reason why Perec included two fictional narratives in his autobiography or the purpose of repetition in Laurens's corpus – out on his/her own. Therefore, from pronouns, content, and form to the planned participation of the reader, life writing is a construction and a performance of identity that is fully orchestrated by life writers: they write themselves as they want to be seen and in doing so, they create roles and identities that can only be performed by the reader in order to understand the self at stake within the narrative.

Chapter 2

When the Truth Cannot Be Told: Perec's Creation of New Discourses in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*

The narrative that is presented as Perec's autobiography consists of three separate stories, told by three different narrators. The opening narrative deals with a fictional character named Gaspard Winckler. The story of this Second World War deserter is told in the first-person. The reader soon learns that Gaspard Winckler is not his real name; his true identity is also never revealed. Nevertheless, identity is at the core of his narrative, as he is approached by someone who claims to know who he is and asks the deserter to help him find the real Gaspard Winckler. The second narrative presents Perec as a first-person narrator of his own autobiography. His story deals with memories (or lack thereof) of his childhood: his family lived in Paris, and when the war became a threat to them as Jewish individuals living in the occupied zone, Perec's mother decided to send him to live with their family in the southern free zone. Throughout his autobiography, Perec takes the reader through his own childhood memories, as well as through the discoveries of pictures and places related to his parents. The last narrative is told by a nameless third-person omniscient narrator who takes on the role of ethnographer of the island of W in the Tierra del Fuego. There, we discover a society organized around athleticism and daily competition. Men and women live separately on the island: the men are to become athletes and father children; the women are meant to have and raise children. Although the link between W and the real world is only made explicit at the very end of the book, the reader recognizes an allegory of the Nazi concentration camps.

The book is separated into two parts: the first one contains Winckler's narrative and Perec's autobiography; in the second part, Perec's autobiography continues with the story of W. Chapters

then alternate between fiction and reality. In the autobiographical chapters, Perec asserts that W is part of his own story. There are indeed similarities between all three narratives and echoes between Winckler's and Perec's stories, so that readers might interpret Winckler as a sort of alter ego for Perec. However, these similarities and echoes remain unexplained: there is no explicit link between the narratives, no explanation as to why and how the fictional narratives form part of Perec's autobiography. The differences between the narratives mean that the text is resistant to structure as we cannot understand why the narratives alternate instead of being presented one at a time. This resistance is reflected in the scholarship on *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*: scholars have compared Winckler and Perec, and the allegory of W and the concentration camps, but they have not yet tried to interpret the interplay between all three narratives.

In this chapter, I therefore propose to analyze the intent behind all three narratives, along with the connection between the two fictional narratives and Perec's autobiography. Throughout, we will see that trauma, identity and repetitions are at the core of Perec's project. As mentioned, there are similarities and echoes between the narratives. There are also a lot of repetitions of memories and events in Perec's autobiography. This is reflected in the construction of this chapter, as the slight variations in these repetitions expose Perec's shifting points of view about memories as the author and subject, at various points in time. Each slightly modified repetition adds details to an earlier description, thus creating multiple versions of memories and events. In the last section of the chapter, I will then draw a parallel between the construction of Perec's autobiography and the construction of the entire book, arguing that the fictional narratives can be read as different versions of Perec's reality.

I. Identity Crisis:

Confusion

The issue of identity is at the core of all three narratives in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Each narrative begins with a different narrator, and each one exhibits various identity issues. The first identifiable narrator is a deserter named Gaspard Winckler; although as the narrative goes on, the reader discovers that this is not his real name: he was given a new identity after he fled from France. The name of Gaspard Winckler had already belonged to a young boy who disappeared in a shipwreck near the Tierra del Fuego. Over the course of the story, the deserter's use of the name Winckler becomes problematic as he is contacted by a man named Dr. Otto Apfelstahl, who reveals that he knew the real Gaspard Winckler and that he knows who the deserter is, though the reader never finds out his real name. As far as the deserter is concerned, his identity, both real and fake, must be protected at all costs. The second narrative presents Georges Perec as the narrator and protagonist of his autobiography. As I will discuss below, Perec exhibits issues of identity as he reveals the struggle of growing up without truly remembering who his parents or his family were. He grew up during World War II and was sent to the South of France by his mother. Even in the South, his identity as a Jew needed to be concealed. Here, issues of identity are connected to a need to recover memories of one's parents. Furthermore, at the beginning of their respective narratives, both Winckler and Perec suggest that because of all the struggles they have been through, they do not have a clear sense of their identity, of who they are outside of who they needed to be in order to protect themselves.

The allegorical story of W is told by an unidentified omniscient narrator, who begins the narrative by casting doubt on the very existence of the islands when he says: "*Il y aurait, là-bas, à l'autre bout du monde, une île. Elle s'appelle W*" (93). The reader does not know yet that "là-

bas" refers to the Tierra del Fuego. Moreover, the expression "à l'autre bout du monde" is confusing. Even though the general frame of reference of the entire book is France and Europe, the narrator of W never identifies himself or his position. Therefore, "l'autre bout du monde" could be anywhere, depending on where the narrator is located at the time of his speech. Stylistically, this narrator chooses to use the present conditional ("aurait") to cast more doubt, rather than the indicative present ("s'appelle"), which would have anchored the existence of the islands in reality. This contradiction in the presentation of the islands sets the mood for the entire narrative. Indeed, in other descriptions, the narrator points out some of the rules of W which do not make sense. One of them deals with the illegality of running counterclockwise. However, every morning, an athlete from each village runs counterclockwise until he meets another athlete and challenges him to a duel. The narrator also indicates that nobody knows the Law on W, but everybody is supposed to respect it and abide by it. Overall, the presentation of W leaves the reader wondering about the reality of this place, and about the identity of the narrator and his connection to the island and the other narratives. Ultimately, the narrator of W remains nameless. At the end of the allegory, Perec draws a parallel between W and the Tierra del Fuego, a real archipelago situated off the coast of Chile.

At the beginning of the first narrative, which eventually becomes Winckler's, an unidentified narrator tells the reader: "Je fus témoin, et non acteur. Je ne suis pas le héros de mon histoire" (14). Already, the reader faces a surprise as this first-person narrator's self-characterization resembles a warning, almost a full-disclosure statement to the reader, so that the latter does not have high expectations for him as a character. These sentences show the reader that the narrator is willing to assess who he is and to make judgments about himself that assign a lesser role to him than he may deserve in his own story.

The sentiment and self-positioning attitude are echoed at the very beginning of Georges Perec's autobiographical narrative. His first sentences even contradict the title of his work as he points out the following: "Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance. Jusqu'à ma douzième année à peu près, mon histoire tient en quelques lignes : j'ai perdu mon père à quatre ans, ma mère à six" (17). The contradiction between the title of the book and the first sentences could establish Perec as an unreliable narrator; it might make the reader wonder what this narrative will really deal with, if it is not about memories of his childhood. However, as I will explain later, Perec sometimes tells multiple versions of the same memories as he remembers events differently in various situations. He also does not shy away from telling the reader that his memories of his childhood have at times proven to be unreliable as family members and friends have corrected them. Therefore, instead of concluding that Perec does not have any memories of his childhood, it would be more accurate to say that he does not have any reliable memories of his childhood. Later in this opening chapter of his story, Perec explains why he does not have any memories, pointing out that this defect did not happen randomly or voluntarily on his part. In fact, it is the opposite : "J'en étais dispensé : une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place : la guerre, les camps" (17). The capitalization of the words "Grande" and "Histoire," as well as the play on words "sa grande hache" (its big H/axe), serve the purpose of personifying history while casting it as the cause of Perec's lack of memories, as well as his lack of agency[37] over them and over his life. Indeed, in this sentence, Perec shows that history decided his fate when World War II broke out and took the lives of both his parents. Nevertheless, Perec makes sure to let the reader

[37] I use the term "agency" to refer to a lack of choice in the three narratives. When Perec was a child, decisions (such as being sent to the Free Zone) were made for him, and he has had to deal with their aftermath. Winckler made certain choices when he deserted during the war. However, his ability to make decisions might be impaired by the confrontation with Dr. Apfelstahl: his knowledge of Winckler's real identity could be used as leverage to force him to do his bidding. Finally, the athletes on W also lack agency as their only purposes in life is to compete and father children.

understand that having no memories does not stop him from writing about his childhood, and about the parents he barely knew. Across the various chapters of his narrative, Perec gradually informs the reader about his writing project, revealing that "Le projet d'écrire mon histoire s'est formé presque en même temps que mon projet d'écrire" (45), thus linking identity and writing, not memories and writing. This last sentence reinforces once and for all that identity is a crucial element of the narratives. Indeed, the word "histoire" encompasses Perec's memories, stories about his life, events that influenced him as a person and as a writer, events that made him who he was. In other words, his project can and should be read as a road map to understanding him, and it had to be done in writing as the sentence suggests that writing is tied to writing "[son] histoire": one cannot exist without the other.

"Rester caché, être découvert"

Issues of identity are at the center of all three narratives. In his autobiographical chapters, Perec reveals a lot of doubts about himself and his family, and he is very cautious in the way he presents himself and his story:

> Cette absence d'histoire m'a longtemps rassuré : sa sécheresse objective, son évidence apparente, son innocence, me protégeaient, mais de quoi me protégeaient-elles, sinon précisément de mon histoire, de mon histoire vécue, de mon histoire réelle, de mon histoire à moi qui, on peut le supposer, n'était ni sèche, ni objective, ni apparemment évidente, ni évidemment innocente. (17)

In this passage, the word "histoire" may take on a variety of meanings: historical time, personal and collective story, as well as narrative. The number of distinct adjectives used to describe this one word is overwhelming, as none of these adjectives is synonymous with any of the other ones

mentioned in the passage. They are juxtaposed, but never connected. Moreover, all these different versions appear to be problematic to Perec as it is easy to identify them, to put a name (or an adjective) on them in order to define what they are; but in the end, they are not at all easy-to-understand. Perec himself points out that they are "ni apparemment évidente, ni évidemment innocente." Nothing about the different versions of his (hi)story is as it seems. The thought that he understood what these different versions of his story represent for him is reassuring at first. The question in the middle of the passage is crucial, as he realizes that as innocent as his stories seem, they cannot protect him. But protect him from what? From whom? While Perec's answer remains very vague, it is possible to imagine what his lack of memories protected him from. Indeed, after this paragraph, he mentions that "une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place : la guerre, les camps" (17). The "histoire réelle" he evokes in this excerpt, the one he needed to be protected from, refers to World War II, the Holocaust, the Jewish genocide.

Perec remained protected from this "story" until the age of thirteen, when his family made him go to therapy. He started to write a story that eventually became the narrative of *W*, which he then set aside and forgot for a long time. As readers of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, we know that he completed the narrative. In the same chapter, Perec points out that he had to write it, as the story caught up with him eventually: "Une fois de plus, les pièges de l'écriture se mirent en place. Une fois de plus, je fus comme un enfant qui joue à cache-cache et qui ne sait pas ce qu'il craint ou désire le plus : rester caché, être découvert" (18). Perec uses the metaphor of hide-and-seek to describe the fear, but also the excitement accompanying his work on *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*: he is not only the author of the two fictional narratives in the book, he is also the narrator and protagonist of his autobiography. Although he does not explain what "les pièges de l'écriture" are,

the repetition of "Une fois de plus" at the beginning of both sentences forces a parallel between "les pièges de l'écriture" and "resté caché, être découvert," as if they were equivalents. At this point in the narrative, it is difficult to understand why Perec is having difficulties. However, later on in the story, he remembers having broken his shoulder-blade as a child (a memory which will be discussed below), but is then corrected by an old classmate, who remembers that the accident happened to another classmates. Aware of having appropriated the story of this accident to himself, Perec then says: "je n'en fus pas la victime héroïque mais un simple témoin" (113). If we consider that Perec escaped the war because his mother sent him to live with family in the South of France, this description applies to him for a number of reasons: he can be seen as a "simple témoin" of World War II, since he did not die as his parents did ; because of their sacrifices, he also did not have to experience life in the Nazi concentration camps, as millions of Jewish people did. One can well imagine why he might have feared writing a book entitled *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, which does not always deal with memories, and why he might have felt like a fraud. Nevertheless, amidst his hesitation, he still chooses to write his story, which shows that the desire to "être découvert" was stronger than to "rester caché."

Once again, Perec has this hesitation in common with another character. The unidentified narrator at the very beginning of the book also reveals that he was afraid of telling his story : "*J'ai longtemps hésité avant d'entreprendre le récit de mon voyage à W. Je m'y résous aujourd'hui, poussé par une nécessité impérieuse, persuadé que les événements dont j'ai été témoin doivent être révélés et mis en lumière …*" (13). The differences between Perec and this narrator lie in small details. This narrator talks about a "nécessité impérieuse" and uses the expression "doivent être révélés": both of these expressions convey a sense of obligation to speak that emanates from something or someone outside of the narrator's control. Let us not forget that his unidentified

narrator could be Gaspard Winckler – since he identified himself as the narrator in the remainder of the chapter –, or it could be someone else. However, if it is indeed Gaspard Winckler, this statement would contradict the way he introduces himself in the first chapter of the narrative. In the following excerpts, Winckler illustrates the very notion of "rester caché, être découvert":

> *À seize ans, je quittai R., et j'allai à la ville ; j'y exerçai quelque temps divers métiers mais, n'en trouvant pas qui me plaise, je finis par m'engager.*
>
> […]
>
> *Je suis né le 25 juin 19…, vers quatre heures, à R., petit hameau de trois feux, non loin de A.*
>
> […]
>
> *À V., au cours d'une permission, je désertai.* (15)

The repeated use of capital letters to refer to places, as well as the use of ellipses at the end of his birth year, allow him to prevent these pieces of information from being exposed. After all, Winckler is a deserter who fears for his safety as he has been fleeing from one country to another. Using strategies such as the ones mentioned above allow him to both satisfy the reader's curiosity as to which time period he belongs in, while keeping the full truth about his identity to himself. This is a recurring theme in Winckler's narrative. Indeed, at the very beginning, the unidentified narrator / Winckler reveals his reason for telling his story: "Quoiqu'il arrive, quoi que je fasse, j'étais le seul dépositaire, la seule mémoire vivante, le seul vestige de ce monde. Ceci, plus que tout autre considération, m'a décidé à écrire" (14). This sentiment, although not explicitly expressed, also runs through Perec's autobiography as he is the only one who could have written his story and that of his parents. Winckler's speech[38] suggests a certain sense of urgency: his need

[38] Even though the narrative is written, I use the term "speech" instead of "discourse" because, from the beginning, the tone of the narrative sounds as though Winckler were speaking – sometimes to himself, asking himself questions

to point out that he is the last living person who knows who he is resonates with the abrupt ending of Winckler's narrative, and he disappears without a trace at the end of the book's first part. While the reader remembers him, s/he is left in doubt about Winckler's real identity. The reader is the last "dépositaire" of Winckler's struggle, but not of his true identity. In the end, Winckler conserves his agency over his memories, his identity, and his fate, since the reader does not know whether or not he decides to go on a rescue mission to find the boy whose name he was given. The simple fact that he is able to preserve his agency gives him more power than Perec had as a child. Indeed, the concept of ownership of memories is close to Perec as well. It is essential to his process of self-discovery. One of the consequences of him having no memories of his childhood is that most of the time, he re-discovers himself through other peoples' memories of him and of his parents.

The Tools of Recovery

As if the opening sentences of his autobiographical chapter were not powerful and clear enough, Perec insists that "Comme tout le monde, j'ai tout oublié de mes premières années d'existence" (25). Throughout his narrative, he reveals all the tools that he uses to recover pieces of information about his parents and about himself. One useful source of information is the people around him. On one occasion, Perec recounts a meeting with an old classmate from elementary school. The two of them talk about events that occurred when they were young boys. As mentioned earlier, Perec reminds his friend that he broke his shoulder-blade. His classmate then corrects him as he remembers that the accident happened to another boy in their school. Perec admits that he remembered it wrong. Another important person in his life is his aunt Esther, with whom he lived

–, addressing the reader, which reinforces a sense of urgency: the reader needs to listen to his story before he disappears at the end of the first part of *W*, thus making the reader the last living person to know about him.

when his mother sent him to the South of France. Esther was his father's sister. While talking to Esther, Perec learned that he had a sister named Irène. Esther was "la seule personne se souvenant aujourd'hui de l'existence de cette seule nièce qu'elle ait eue – son frère Léon a eu trois garçons – Irène serait née en 1937 et serait morte au bout de quelques semaines, atteinte d'une malformation de l'estomac" (36). This is the only time Esther is mentioned: any other time, when Perec talks about his family, and especially about the women who took care of him, he refers to them as aunts, grandmother, and cousins. In this excerpt, Esther is singled out because she is a strong link between him and the family he lost. She is also the only mother figure he remembers clearly.

Through Esther and other family members, Perec had the opportunity to see pictures of his parents and of himself as a child. Even though none of the pictures is reproduced in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec mentions them quite often, as they appear to become very valuable to him. In one of the pictures, he is sitting next to his mother. Perec describes himself as follows: "Mes mains sont potelées et mes joues rebondies. J'ai de grandes oreilles, un petit sourire triste et la tête légèrement penchée vers la gauche" (75). At first glance, there is nothing unusual in his description. However, the use of the indicative present gives the description a more "present" feeling, as if Perec were rediscovering himself in the picture, as if he did not know himself. Indeed, as he describes himself in the first picture, Perec writes : "J'ai les cheveux blonds avec un très joli cran sur le front (de tous les souvenirs qui me manquent, celui-là est peut-être celui que j'aimais le plus fortement avoir : ma mère me coiffant, me faisant cette ondulation savante)" (74). In this sentence, it becomes clear that before seeing the picture, Perec did not have any memory of his appearance as a child, nor did he remember his mother doing his hair. While the pictures themselves are valuable for Perec, as they represent the only images he has of his parents and of himself as a child, Perec also pays close attention to inscriptions on the back of the photos ; certain

pictures have notes on the backside and Perec wonders whose handwriting this is : “L’écriture mélange des majuscules et des minuscules: c’est peut-être celle de ma mère, et ce serait alors le seul exemple que j’aurais de son écriture (je n’en ai aucun de celle de mon père)” (78). The words he finds on paper provoke a reaction in him: the reader senses an emotional attachment to this handwriting, and a wish for it to belong to one of his parents. It appears to be precious, as if it held a piece of someone’s personality. It is a souvenir to collect, a concrete piece of memory that helps Perec connect with his parents. However, while this mysterious handwriting is a significant example of how written words mark Perec, it is not the most relevant.

In fact, Perec finds the most important pieces of his identity in the words carved into his father’s grave. As he describes his very first visit to his father’s grave, around the age of eighteen, he breaks down for the reader the shock he experienced at the time:

> l’impression la plus tenace était celle d’une scène que j’étais en train de jouer, de me jouer: quinze ans plus tard, le fils vient se recueillir sur la tombe de son père ; mais il y avait, sous le jeu, d’autres choses : l’étonnement de voir mon nom sur une tombe (car l’une des particularités de mon nom a longtemps été d’être unique : dans ma famille, personne d’autre ne s’appelait Perec), le sentiment ennuyeux d’accomplir quelque chose qu’il m’avait toujours fallu accomplir, qu’il m’aurait été impossible de ne jamais accomplir, mais dont je ne saurais jamais pourquoi je l’accomplissais, l’envie de dire quelque chose, ou de penser à quelque chose, un balancement confus entre une émotion incoercible à la limite du balbutiement et une indifférence du délibéré, et en-dessous, quelque chose comme une sérénité secrète liée à l’ancrage dans l’espace, à l’ancrage de la croix, de cette mort qui cessait d’être abstraite. (58-59)

I will come back to this passage later in the chapter in order to discuss Perec's aesthetic choices to present and position himself during this event. For now, I want to draw attention to the wide range of expressed emotions. This excerpt stands as a turning point in the narrative as well as in Perec's personal life. First, the lack of punctuation emphasizes the overwhelming impact of his feelings. In fact, this paragraph goes on for ten more lines and contains only colons, semicolons, and commas. The lack of periods, in particular, suggests that there is an agglomeration of emotions, each and every one of which needs to be felt before Perec can calm down and realize what this discovery would mean for him. In this passage, it is essential to understand that Perec, as an adolescent, falls apart as he attempts to put some pieces of his identity together, all because of a simple word on a tombstone. Nevertheless, in this passage, the accumulation of a wide range of emotions, combined with the disjointed sentence structures, conveys a feeling of uncertainty: as Perec starts to build his identity, the emotions he expresses are mostly negatively connotated: "étonnement," "sentiment ennuyeux," "balancement confus," and "indifférence" make it hard to imagine that Perec could reach the "sérénité" that he evokes. Overall, this excerpt conjures up the need and desire to build an identity based on the object of Perec's discovery, though this enterprise appears rather disunified at first.

In his memory of seeing his father's grave for the first time, Perec first experiences a sense of unreality: "Une scène que j'étais en train de jouer, de me jouer" evokes a certain theatricality, as if Perec felt that he was someone else. Indeed, he is becoming a different person in that very moment. A few pages prior to this episode, Perec explains that "Dans l'intervalle séparant leurs trois naissances,[39] c'est-à-dire entre 1896 et 1909, Lubartow aurait été successivement russe, puis polonaise, puis russe à nouveau. Un employé d'état civil qui entend en russe et écrit en polonais

[39] This refers to the births of his father and his siblings.

entendra, m'a-t-on expliqué, Peretz et écrira Perec" (56). Perec also mentions the fact that when his parents moved to France, they changed their names: in Poland, they were Icek Judko (47) and Cyrla Szulewicz (59); in France, they were André and Cécile Perec. Most of their official documents had their birth names, which explains why Perec was so shocked to see his last name carved on a tombstone. This inscribed word finally allowed him to feel that he was not alone, that he was part of a family. It gave him the gift of recovering[40] an identity that he had been searching for all his life. This idea is reinforced by the expression "une émotion incoercible." This is a powerful image as it allows the reader to understand that these feelings are not faked nor forced in any way: they had been there, buried for so many years, waiting to be triggered.

Before I continue, I would like to pause here and explain why I choose to use the term *recovery*. Even though his parents cannot be recovered, in the sense that they cannot come back to life, certain feelings (presented as lost, non-existent, or never developed), such as a sense of belonging to a family, can be strengthened by the variety of documents and places that Perec describes in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance.* Simply put, when Perec lost his parents, he lost a part of his identity as he did not have the opportunity to know who they were. He also lost the chance to feel that he was their son. While *recovery* does not capture all aspects of this experience, it comes closest to describing Perec's process of compiling and retrieving pieces of information about his parents and about himself. For instance, as he goes to his father's grave, Perec does not "discover" that his parents were dead. However, official documents (such as birth and death certificates) have their Polish birth names on them, and it seems that Perec believed for a long time that nothing related him to his parents. What he recovers at his father's grave is a proof of kinship.

[40] The word recovery is defined as "the action or process of regaining possession or control of something stolen or lost," *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

The last feeling Perec mentions is indeed serenity, which is provoked by the tombstone and the last name on it. Perec notes that his emotions are made possible by the "ancrage dans l'espace." While visiting his father's grave, Perec not only finds confirmation of the existence of the family to which he belonged, he also discovers a concrete, physical place which functions as a permanent reminder that they were once a family. In a way, the tombstone marks both his father's death and the affirmation of his life. Here, Perec can anchor himself and remember his parents. In 1970, Pierre Nora coined the term *lieux de mémoire*. As Andrej Szpocinski explains in his 2016 essay entitled "Sites of Memory," "Nora never defined precisely the notion of *lieux de mémoire*, nor was it his primary goal. He rather wanted to raise the awareness of the wealth of research strategies which can be used to investigate the diverse forms of the past's continued existence in the present" (Szpocinski, 246). In this sense, his father's grave (as a place), as well as the name on it, serve two purposes: they give Perec a place where he can grieve, but they also allow him to feel the continuity of his family as his parents' legacy lives through him and his last name.

Names play an essential role in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. They mediate identity for both Perec and Winckler. Gaspard Winckler is not the soldier's real name: he reveals that he had to get a new identity after he deserted and that he kept moving from one place to another to protect himself. During their encounter, Dr. Apfelstahl asks him the following question : "*Vous êtes-vous déjà demandé ce qui était advenu de l'individu qui vous a donné votre nom ?*" (33). Even though "donner son nom à quelqu'un" is a common expression in French, Perec could have written "l'individu dont on vous a donné le nom." Both sentences convey the same idea of transmission. However, the sentence from *W*, "l'individu qui vous a donné votre nom" suggests that the *individu* knowingly gave his name to Winckler, which is not the case. "L'individu dont on vous a donné le nom" would be more appropriate as in this case, the *individu* does not have any agency: he did not

take part in the action of giving his name to another person. This episode in Winckler's narrative resonates with Perec's discovery of his father's grave. While both excerpts deal with identity, they nevertheless differ in terms of what the name means for Perec and for Winckler. The discovery of his shared last name leads Perec to recover parts of his identity and his sense of self, while for Winckler, discovering that the person whose name he received might still be alive, means that he may lose his identity and must find a new one to survive. His situation is potentially traumatic and devastating as it could be a matter of life and death. Indeed, as far as Winckler is concerned, the fact that his name belongs to someone else directly threatens his existence as he could be found, tried and sentenced to death as a deserter. In contrast, Perec's situation is more positive: seeing his last name on his father's grave gave him proof that he belonged to a family and to his parents.

Throughout the narratives, multiple parallels are made between Perec and Winckler, both the boy and the soldier, which could indicate that Winckler is an alter ego for Perec. In fact, Perec's mother's name was Cécile, while (the real) Winckler's was Caecilia; after Winkler deserted, he spent some time in Venice and Perec reveals that he was in Venice when the story of W came to him; Winkler doesn't want to eat pretzels during his encounter with Dr. Apfelstahl (30). While this may seem like an insignificant detail, pretzels are also mentioned when Perec explains the origin of his surname, which used to be spelled "Peretz" means "pretzel" in Hungarian (56). Furthermore, Winckler's narrative could also be linked to the story of W: after all, his name and the island's name start with the same letter. Even though some elements occur in both narratives, links are never confirmed. If links were made explicit, the reader could understand how the three narratives are constructed. Instead, they remain separate until the end.

This separation is how the book is constructed, not only at the narrative level with different plots, but also aesthetically as two of the narratives are written in italics. At the core of this

separation, as we will see in the next section, is a distinction between the fictional and the autobiographical. In the last section of this chapter, as I bring Perec in conversation with Lyotard's work, I will further analyze the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* to show why the narratives had to be separated, on an ethical level.

II. Physical Writing on Paper

Aesthetic Choices as a Narrative Mode

Perec creates a clear separation between the narratives through some of the aesthetic choices he makes, e.g., the graphics he uses. Winckler's story and the narrative of W are both written in italics, while Perec's autobiography uses a standard font. This aesthetic choice not only separates the narratives, it also reinforces their nature: italics is a slanted font, which conveys the idea of a crooked reality, or at least a reality that has been worked upon and modified. This reinforces the fictional natures of both narratives; meanwhile the standard font used in Perec's autobiography lets the letters stand straight, which suggests that his narrative strives to be more straightforward and contains a real, truthful story.

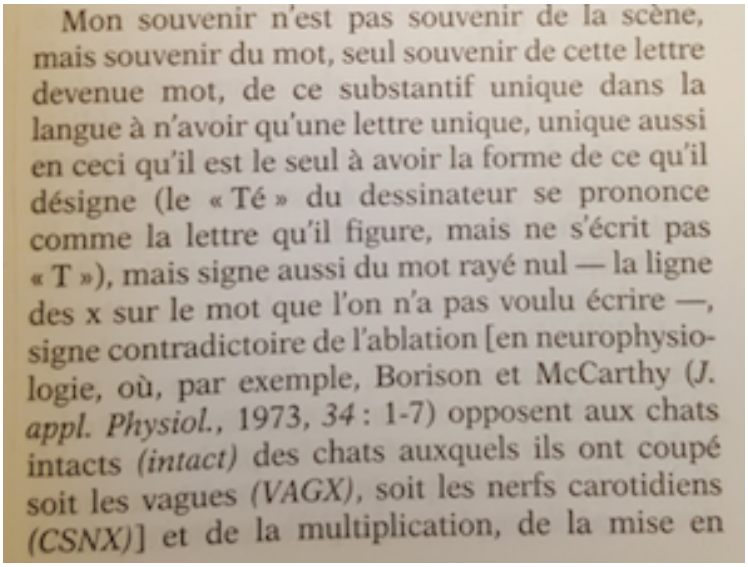
While Perec uses different fonts to distinguish all three main narratives, he also employs the same technique in the eighth chapter, in which he presents two short stories about his parents. This chapter is unlike any other in the book as it consists of two different parts: in the first, Perec tells the reader details about his parents that he thought were true for a long time; in the second part, he adds twenty-six annotations and corrects details. The stories and the annotations are physically separated within the chapter, as the annotations are at the end instead of directly after each story. Their fonts divide them even further: Perec's parents' stories are written in bold, while the annotations are written in normal font. This difference has a purpose: as a writing convention,

using a bold font usually means that the author wants to emphasize something important, and the reader needs to acknowledge it as such. Moreover, the bold font might serve another purpose: since the reader must pay more attention to these narratives in the first place, the bold font might indicate that the original stories are more important than the annotations. The font would thus indicate Perec's preference for the original stories, as they otherwise have an equal weight with the annotations, given that both the stories and the annotations are introduced in the same chapter.

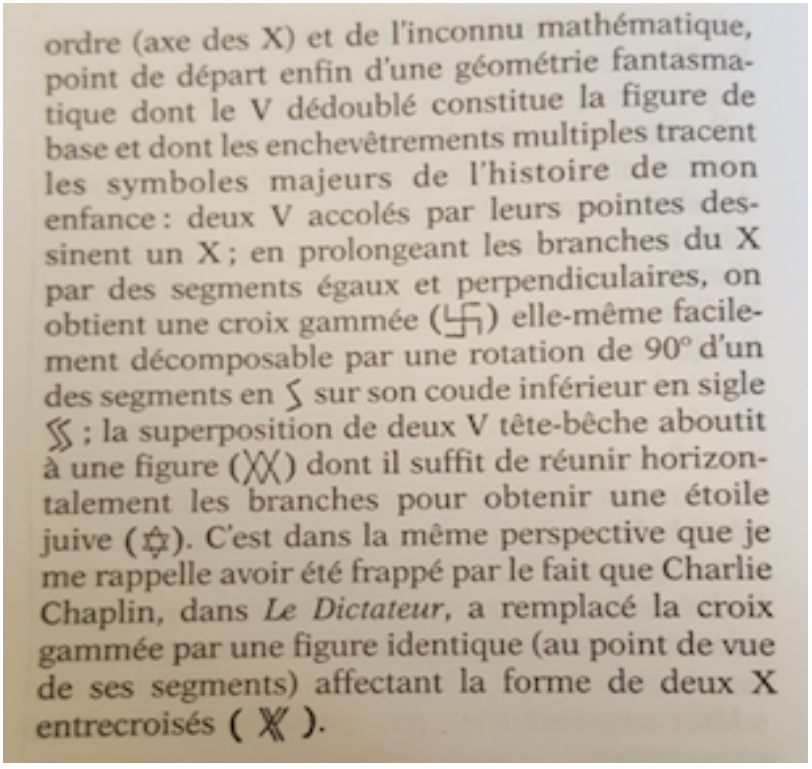
Fonts are not the only tool used by Perec. Punctuation within and between chapters also serves a purpose. We have seen that as a narrator of his own story, Winckler relies on ellipses in order to avoid giving too many personal details about himself. Thus, the ellipses signify self-protection. The same punctuation is used to separate Part One and Part Two of the book, except this time, the ellipses are surrounded by parentheses. The use of "(…)" in between the two parts could have multiple meanings, although it is difficult to determine which exactly, since there is no context. A first function of the ellipses could simply be to create a break, to separate the two parts of the book, so as to let them exist as distinct entities. After all, we leave Winckler at the end of Part One and Part Two begins with the story of W; even Perec's autobiography takes a turn and focuses more on him and his childhood rather than on his parents. Thus, the ellipses might indicate that Perec does not have anything more to say about his parents and Winckler. Ellipses may also represent a sign of continuation: indeed, Perec's autobiography continues in the second part of the book. Finally, we could read the ellipses as an omission, an echo of the end of Winckler's narrative after his meeting with Dr. Apfelstahl when he says: "Je me tus. Un bref instant, j'eus envie de demander à Otto Apfelstahl s'il croyait que j'aurais plus de chance que les garde-côtes. Mais c'était une question à laquelle, désormais, je pouvais seul répondre…" (87). The answer to the question that Winckler asks himself here is completely omitted.

We also need to take the parentheses into consideration. Combined with the ellipses, they remind us of the punctuation used to truncate a long quote in order to focus on the relevant part(s) of the quote. Therefore, parentheses could point to the fact that the most important parts of the narratives are about to begin in Part Two. This would make sense, since the opening chapter of Part Two finally brings the reader to W, the central focus of the book's title. The expression "mettre quelque chose entre parenthèses," comes to mind because it is often used to talk about trauma; in this case, it could mean that the narratives in Part One were painful to tell and needed to be put between parentheses. Finally, one might consider the combination of the ellipses with the parentheses. In part One, Perec's last chapter ends with a promise to revisit a memory he already mentioned: the significance of his memory of his arm being put in a cast during his travel to the South of France. This creates an element of suspense for the reader. In a similar way, Winckler leaves the door open for interpretation when he does not answer his own question. If the ellipses represent omissions and the parentheses help repress some details, then it is possible to read this punctuation as an acknowledgment that what the narratives need to put certain experiences between parentheses.

One last way of creating meaning with "physical writing" deals with Perec's use of minimal units of meaning: letters. To begin with, Perec dedicates *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* to "E," which can be interpreted in various ways. He avoids the letter "e" in *La Disparition*. "E" could also be a dedication to his aunt Esther who raised him. However, it could also refer to his parents as the letter "e" in French sounds like the word "eux" (them). While the letter "e" is used as a positive element in the dedication, Perec mentions the memory of a letter that he associates with various traumatic experiences. This memory comes from having observed a neighbor while he was sawing wood on a surface that resembled an X:



Mon souvenir n'est pas souvenir de la scène, mais souvenir du mot, seul souvenir de cette lettre devenue mot, de ce substantif unique dans la langue à n'avoir qu'une lettre unique, unique aussi en ceci qu'il est le seul à avoir la forme de ce qu'il désigne (le « Té » du dessinateur se prononce comme la lettre qu'il figure, mais ne s'écrit pas « T »), mais signe aussi du mot rayé nul — la ligne des x sur le mot que l'on n'a pas voulu écrire —, signe contradictoire de l'ablation [en neurophysiologie, où, par exemple, Borison et McCarthy (*J. appl. Physiol.*, 1973, *34* : 1-7) opposent aux chats intacts *(intact)* des chats auxquels ils ont coupé soit les vagues *(VAGX)*, soit les nerfs carotidiens *(CSNX)*] et de la multiplication, de la mise en



ordre (axe des X) et de l'inconnu mathématique, point de départ enfin d'une géométrie fantasmatique dont le V dédoublé constitue la figure de base et dont les enchevêtrements multiples tracent les symboles majeurs de l'histoire de mon enfance : deux V accolés par leurs pointes dessinent un X ; en prolongeant les branches du X par des segments égaux et perpendiculaires, on obtient une croix gammée (卐) elle-même facilement décomposable par une rotation de 90° d'un des segments en ⟆ sur son coude inférieur en sigle ⟆⟆ ; la superposition de deux V tête-bêche aboutit à une figure (⟆⟅) dont il suffit de réunir horizontalement les branches pour obtenir une étoile juive (✡). C'est dans la même perspective que je me rappelle avoir été frappé par le fait que Charlie Chaplin, dans *Le Dictateur*, a remplacé la croix gammée par une figure identique (au point de vue de ses segments) affectant la forme de deux X entrecroisés (⨯).

(109-110)[41]

Figure 2. Excerpts from *W ou le souenir d'enfance*.

Even though this is a memory from his childhood, the reader realizes that the associations Perec makes could only have been made as an adult. It is important to notice that, apart from the

[41] I am including this quote as pictures because some of the symbols used by Perec cannot be reproduced perfectly.

association with mathematical axes, all other connections to the letter X are linked to traumatic experiences: from removing muscles on cats, to the resemblance with a swastika and the letters SS, to the way he manipulates the letter to form a star of David. This accumulation of meanings and referents could best be described as *overdetermination*. The term was famously used by Freud to describe both the process of dream formation and interpretation. Freud explains that "Each one of the elements of the dream content is *overdetermined* by the matter of the dream thoughts; it is not derived from one element of these thoughts but from a whole series" (*On Dreams*, 17). However, while this overdetermination exists in the text, it is not lost on the reader that Perec mentions that an X can be called a "Croix de Saint-André." André was the name that Perec's father chose when he moved to France. Therefore, the letter may also be seen as a symbol of the pain associated with the loss of his father. Finally, it is worth noting that before the accumulation of meanings for the letter "x" begins, Perec describes the cross as a "géométrie fantasmatique dont le V dédoublé constitue la figure de base et dont les enchevêtrements multiples tracent les symboles majeurs de l'histoire de mon enfance : deux V accolés par leurs pointes." "V dédoublé" and "deux V accolés" also describes a "W." Even though the letter is not mentioned directly, it is linked in this excerpt to the loss of his father, and thus intricately connected to the events of his childhood. Apart from the title of the book, this sentence is the only semi-explicit link between Perec's autobiography and the fiction of W: in other words, between the traumatic life on W and Perec's childhood. Whether it is an "X," a "V dédoublé" or a "W," in this excerpt, Perec shows that the weight of trauma that can be attached to objects as small as letters.

Writing as an Experience of Trauma

In Winckler's case, it is not a single alphabetical letter which causes him pain; rather, their combination in a series of words and sentences make him panic. As he wakes up in the morning after receiving Dr. Apfelstahl's letter, he admits : "Le lendemain matin, pris d'un pressentiment tenace, je fourrai dans mon sac de voyage un peu de linge et ce que j'aurais pu appeler, si cela n'avait été à ce point dérisoire, mes biens les plus précieux… Voulais-je fuir ?" (23). Winckler had been on the run, until he was given his new identity. Therefore, Dr. Apfelstahl's letter presents a threat to his security and identity. As he comes to this realization, his desire for self-protection drives him to consider fleeing, as this is the only solution he knows. Winckler is affected psychologically in this excerpt. The nature of this threat is better explained by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experiences*:

> the Greek *trauma*, or 'wound', originally referring to an injury inflicted on the body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature and most centrally in Freud's text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, i.e. experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

For Winckler, the traumatic experience that might need to be repeated, is the experience of being on the run, of fleeing from one place to the next one in order not to be caught and face trial for

desertion. This trauma is triggered by Dr. Apfeltstahl's letter, i.e., by simple letters on paper and the threat that they pose to his identity.

Perec himself admits to being the victim of the power of words when he first tells the reader about how and when the story of W began: "À treize ans, j'inventai, racontai et dessinai une histoire. Plus tard, je l'oubliai. Il y a sept ans, un soir, à Venise, je me souviens tout à coup que cette histoire s'appelait W et qu'elle était, d'une certaine façon, sinon l'histoire, du moins une histoire de mon enfance" (17-18). The importance of this excerpt lies in the fact that this is the only memory in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* that is never doubted. The way Perec presents it in this excerpt is worth commenting on. The nuance between "l'histoire" and "une histoire" represents a wide gap in the importance one should give to this memory: "l'histoire" makes it the only story of Perec's childhood, while "une histoire" gives it less importance as one story amongst others. It is important that the story of W had been with him for a long time before he could finish it. In fact, one must read between the lines in order to understand what Perec is trying to share. He created the world of W as a teenager and subsequently forgot about it. His use of the simple past (a literary form of the preterit) in "oubliai" reinforces the meaning of the verb: in French, the simple past indicates that an action was done once; it was completed and, in this case forgotten, never to be thought about again. This evokes how intense traumatic experiences are processed: the traumatic event occurs and is stored away in the subject's memory. Often traumatic events take years to resurface. Freud's work in "Remembering, repeating, working through" teaches us that in order to understand traumatic experiences, once they resurface, the subject must not only remember, but repeat the traumatic events so as to understand the symptoms they provoke and move forward:

> He [the subject] must find the courage to direct his attention to the phenomena of his illness. His illness itself must no longer seem contemptible, but must become an enemy worthy of his mettle, a piece of his personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for his future life have to be derived. (Freud, 152)

For Perec, the first invention of W responds to a traumatic event, so traumatic indeed that putting the story down on paper led him forget about it for at least two decades. In a way, writing the allegory of W can be read as the repetition of a first experience of trauma, since it is an attempt at representing the horror of World War II, which had devastating consequences on his life. Perec himself describes the process of writing this first version of W as ineffective:

> Désormais, les souvenirs existent, fugaces ou tenaces, futiles ou pesants, mais rien ne les rassemble. Ils sont comme cette écriture non liée, faire des lettres isolées incapables de se souder entre elles pour former un mot, qui fut la mienne jusqu'à l'âge de dix-sept ou dix-huit ans, ou comme ces dessins dissociés, disloqués, dont les éléments épars ne parvenaient presque jamais à se relier les uns aux autres, et dont, à l'époque de W, entre, disons ma onzième et ma douzième année, je couvris des cahiers entiers : personnages que rien ne rattachait au sol qui était censé les supporter. (97)

In this excerpt, the "écriture" that Perec describes is his own handwriting: it seems that he believed that his handwriting could bring all the elements of his story together, but they remained separate. Writing could have been a bridge between his thoughts about the concentration camps and his understanding of what his parents died for. Instead, the stories as well as his drawings remained "disloquées," in pieces. The fact that this first attempt at writing the story of W failed to connect his trauma to the real world might have constituted a traumatic event in itself. In a way, it is

possible to hypothesize that one of the goals of finally writing *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* dealt with overcoming the fear of failing to write about it at all.

Writing as a Way of Life

Eventually, persistence in writing became a necessity. Before *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec wrote another allegory about the Second World War entitled *La Disparition*. This is the longest lipogram in history, avoiding the letter "e," and presents a mystery in which six long-lost siblings are reunited after the death of a friend. They are all hunted by their grandfather who must kill all his descendants in order to break a curse. This narrative is evidently an allegory for Hitler hunting Jewish people throughout Europe in order to realize his ideal of the Aryan race. Six years later, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* was published. Quite possibly, the success of *La Disparition* paved the way for Perec's new attempt at completing *W*. In any case, the important thing to remember is that Perec came back to the story of W and to the experience of writing this story even though it was traumatic the first time around. Therefore, while writing can be the cause of trauma, it can also help to approach the trauma and try to cope with it. Perec even illustrates Freud's concepts of "repeating" and "working through" trauma as he mentions that he wrote his parents' stories from chapter eight multiple times: "Je les recopie sans rien y changer, renvoyant en notes les rectifications et les commentaires que j'estime aujourd'hui devoir ajouter" (46). The verb "recopier" (*to write again*) suggests this was not the first time that Perec writes these stories down (again). Therefore, there is a repetition of the act of writing these stories specifically, which implies that writing is a process that needs to be done over and over again. The end of this sentence further implies further that, throughout the process, the outcome or the content of writing changes, as Perec's annotations in the book are added to the stories for the first time.

Furthermore, more than a process, writing is a way of life for Perec. Not only does he reveal that "Le projet d'écrire [son] histoire s'est formé en même temps que [son] projet d'écriture" (45), he also informs the reader about his reading habits and about what literature has meant to him all his life:

> Les mots étaient à leur place, les livres racontaient des histoires ; on pouvait suivre, on pouvait relire, et relisant, retrouver, magnifiée par la certitude qu'on avait de les retrouver, l'impression qu'on avait d'abord éprouvée : ce plaisir ne s'est jamais tari : je lis peu, mais je relis sans cesse, Flaubert et Jules Verne, Roussel et Kafka, Leiris et Queneau : je relis les livres que j'aime et j'aime les livres que je relis, et chaque fois avec la même jouissance, que je relise vingt pages, trois chapitres ou le livre entier : celle d'une complicité, d'une connivence, ou plus encore, au-delà, celle d'une parenté enfin retrouvée. (195)

The use of the word "parenté" is fascinating because it usually points to familial relationships: the French expression "lien de parenté" is used to talk about blood ties with any person in a family. Nevertheless, knowing Perec's loss of his parents, and the fact that "parenté" is here associated with the adjective "retrouvée," reinforces the idea that Perec considers words and literature in general to act as parents: they give him a feeling of comfort, they provide a sense of family and security, because he can come back to them at any time. This is a security that even his father's grave, as a *lieu de mémoire*, cannot provide him. Indeed, more than a simple sense of security, Perec evokes pleasant emotions and relationships of "jouissance," "complicité" and "connivance" which refer to a deeper, intimate (maybe mischievous) connection between him and the works of literature he mentions.

In this chapter, we have observed that writing, in all its forms, is central to Perec's project. Be it in the choice of fonts and punctuation, in simple units of letters and words written on paper,

and in the activity and the process of writing: it is an experience of trauma for Perec. Writing can trigger trauma, and it is itself triggered by trauma. Therefore, it should be no surprise that writing can also create a space in which trauma can be addressed and, however tentatively, solved. As Perec reveals his intimate connection to literature, we understand that writing is a chosen way of life for him. It holds such a prominent place in Perec's life and in the way he shaped *W* that we need to understand which functions are served by writing in the book itself, as well as for Perec, both as a writer and as an individual.

III. The Writing Project: Recovery and Paying Tribute

Recovery

There is not just one goal or one function of writing. All three narratives present a unique story and revolve around separate narrators; each narrative has its own purpose within Perec's autobiography. I will explore these various purposes throughout the present section, and more particularly in the subsection entitled "Paying tribute." Since Perec lost his parents at a young age, a first function of writing deals with the recovery of memories of them, in whatever form they come. As mentioned above, the book is dedicated to "E": whoever or whatever this "e" stands for, in Perec's corpus, it is first and foremost a symbol of recovery, a proof that what was lost in writing can also be recovered in writing. Indeed, the letter is missing in *La Disparition*, which is Perec's first allegorical narrative about World War II. The fact that the letter reappears in his second allegorical work indicates that what had been lost may have been recovered in this book. Of course, the letter vanished in *La Disparition* as a result of Perec's self-imposed constraint for the work, which was conceived as a lipogram. Therefore, it is no surprise that it reappears in later works, as Perec did not follow the same constraint twice. Nevertheless, as I will explain in this section, the

combination of the reappearance of the letter "e" with other details in the narratives, points to the letter as contributing to the overall project of recovery.

My analysis of this tiny detail may be complex and far-fetched and perhaps not entirely clear, however, so is Perec's construction of the narratives. His book is complex and unclear, but nothing is ever done randomly. In what follows, the aim of my interpretation is not to find a definite answer, but to show how minute details in the narratives can be connected in order to attempt to make sense of Perec's writing project. I will come back to this point in the conclusion of the chapter when I discuss Perec's involvement in the Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) group. For now, suffice it to say that Oulipo was interested in exploring and pushing the limits of all literary forms. One of the textual elements that points towards associating the "E" in the dedication with Perec's parents more than with any other of my previous interpretations deals with Perec's use of letters and numbers. "E" is one of the twenty-six letters in the alphabet, which becomes relevant when we remember that the eighth chapter contains twenty-six annotations to the stories Perec wrote about his parents. I argue that there is a connection between the reappearance of the letter "e" and the number of annotations in the eighth chapter, which is also the first chapter that shows the reader that Perec is actively involved in the recovery of every bit of information about his parents. The annotations are in fact numbered: twelve of them correspond to his father's story and the remaining fourteen deal with his mother's. The annotations either presents additional details (for example about the pictures Perec describes) or correct a detail that was wrong in the original story: for example, some annotations clarify the correct spelling of his parents' name or the fact that he was not an only child. The annotations represent recovered pieces of information and memories that would otherwise be forgotten. I believe that this combination of seemingly unrelated elements suggests that the "E" stands for Perec's parents and for the work of recovery he did to

show who they were. Although the pieces of information he offers are scattered and may not be relevant to the narratives, even less relevant to what Perec is trying to say about his parents, I believe that they are not just random pieces of the puzzle. Perec's involvement in the Oulipo group, suggests that his procedure is not accidental. As the rest of this chapter unfolds, we will see that every detail, every narrative technique in Perec's work is deliberate and therefore must be read as having a purpose for the narrative it is embedded into, as well as for the entire work.

Indeed, Perec's way of remembering his parents resembles a multi-media puzzle, comprised of other peoples' memories, of pictures and of rare official documents recording proofs of both their lives and deaths. Very early on in his narrative, Perec points out that all the documents he has are useful only to a certain point : "Même si je n'ai pour étayer mes souvenirs improbables que le secours de photos jaunes, de témoignages rares et de documents dérisoires, je n'ai pas d'autre choix que d'évoquer ce que trop longtemps j'ai nommé l'irrévocable" (26). There is a contrast between the fixed nature of the tools used by Perec to tell his story, and the changeable, evolving outcome they allow him to create for himself. Indeed, all the adjectives attached to the tools that he mentions have negative connotations : "souvenirs improbables" suggests that his memories are unreliable because it is unlikely that he would have memories from such a young age ; the yellow color of the picture indicates that they are old and not clear anymore ; "témoignages rares" highlights the difficulty of finding people who would remember him and his parents; finally, "dérisoires" shows the potential uselessness of anything that Perec has collected. Yet, despite their seemingly useless nature, Perec notes that he has no choice but to use them, because as useless as they may be, they are still the only things that can help him to "étayer" (*support, back up*) his unreliable memories. The last part of the sentence even hints at a potential benefit of using these tools as Perec talks about "ce que trop longtemps [il a] nommé l'irrévocable."

On the one hand, *l'irrévocable* refers to something that cannot be changed. Even though Perec does not explain what he is referring to, the *irrevocable* events in Perec's life are the death of his parents, his lack of memories of them, as well as his lack of connection to them. On the other hand, it is associated with the *passé composé* and the adverb "longtemps." Combined, "longtemps" and the *passé composé* often suggest that the action represented by the verb is no longer true. Perec uses the same structure, or an equivalent in various chapters, for pieces of information that used to be true for him for a long time before they were corrected. While talking about his father, Perec reveals that he was "le seul à avoir cru, pendant de très nombreuses années, qu'il s'appelait André" (55). He then notes that "l'une des particularités de [son] nom a longtemps été d'être unique : dans [sa] famille personne d'autre ne s'appelait Perec" (58). Therefore, one might say that what Perec once thought was "irrevocable" may not have been so anymore at the time he wrote *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. As hopeful as it seems, a few questions remain, such as: why does Perec point out that he thought about these things as *irrévocable* for "trop longtemps"? Why might he stop calling them *irrévocable*? *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* was published in 1975, when Perec was thirty-nine years old. His first visit to his father's grave occurred in 1955 or 1956, when he was almost twenty years old. Therefore, there is an almost twenty-year gap between the time he discovered the connection he shared with his father and the time this connection was revealed to the public. As for the question of why he stopped calling it *irrevocable*, we might infer that every bit of information, every picture, every document that imposes itself as physical proof of the of their family made it less possible for Perec to call it "l'irrévocable." As a written and published product, *W* represents the culmination of at least 20 years of evidence collection.

It would seem that writing is the medium that allowed for these changes to occur. As Perec explains why he is writing *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, he says : "je ne sais pas si ce que j'aurais

à dire n'est pas dit parce qu'il est l'indicible (l'indicible n'est pas tapi dans l'écriture, il est ce qui l'a bien avant déclenchée)" (63). Once again, the use of a word in a specific context is worth noticing, as it reveals something about how Perec relates to his parents. "L'indicible" refers to anything that cannot be said for various reasons: words might not exist, or they might not be strong or accurate enough to fully describe a specific topic or feeling. "L'indicible" also refers to something that cannot be said because it is too difficult or too painful to talk about. Perec draws a connection, as well as a potential distinction between two modes of transmission, i.e., speaking and writing: there seems to be a hierarchy between the two as what cannot be said triggers the activity of writing. The distinction, introduced by the adjective "tapi" (*hidden*), deals with what what spoken and written words allow us to retain from speech. This excerpt thus informs the reader about the origins of the project of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Indeed, spoken words evaporate into thin air, while written words are traced on paper and therefore permanent. In other words, the difference between a spoken and a written *indicible* is that the written one endures. "L'indicible" triggers writing, but by definition, it remains *indicible* in writing as well: all that writing can accomplish is to acknowledge it, acknowledge the incompatibility between trauma and a language that is inadequate to express what is wrong, what hurts. Whatever language tries to do, it will only point to itself as lacking. This sentiment is expressed in Henri Raczymow's "La mémoire trouée," when he explains the nature of his writing:

> mes livres ne cherchent pas à combler cette mémoire absente… mais à la représenter, justement, comme absente. Je tente de restituer une non-mémoire, par définition irrattrapable, incomblable. C'est vrai pour tout homme, parce qu'en tout homme il y a un tel trou symbolique incomblable. Mais c'est vrai tout particulièrement pour le Juif

> ashkénaze né en Diaspora après la guerre. Parce que ce trou symbolique rejoint un trou dans le réel. ("La mémoire trouée," *Pardès 3*)

Where Raczymow wants to show the reality of his memory as flawed and unbridgeable, Perec echoes the sentiment by showing the inadequacy of language to fill its own holes, as well as the holes in his life. In other words, Perec tries to bridge the gap of the *indicible* is by exposing the challenge it represents, and by still trying to find the right words to talk about trauma.

"Pour être, besoin d'étai"

One of the *indicible* traumas that Perec tries to describe as accurately as possible deals with the environment in which he grew up: he was raised by aunts, grandmothers, cousins, and by the nuns at the Catholic school he attended. The very idea of having parents seems foreign to him. In fact, his words suggest a belief that he did not have parents at all:

> Mon enfance fait partie de ces choses dont je sais que je ne sais pas grand-chose. Elle est derrière moi, pourtant, elle est le sol sur lequel j'ai grandi, elle m'a appartenu, quelle que soit ma ténacité à affirmer qu'elle ne m'appartient plus. J'ai longtemps cherché à détourner ou à masquer ces évidences, m'enfermant dans le statut inoffensif de l'orphelin, de l'inengendré, du fils de personne. (25)

There is a significant escalation at the end of this passage. The first two sentences are presented as obvious statements about Perec's childhood: a) he does not know much about it and b) no matter how much he tries to resist the idea, his childhood was his.[42] The last sentence serves as an explanation for the first two. It explains why Perec cannot relate to his childhood: by his own admission, he hid behind the statuses of "orphelin," "inengendré" and "fils de personne."

[42] Perec never explains what he means by that.

"Orphelin" is appropriate as Perec lost his parents. However, "l'inengendré" tells another story. The prefix "in-" is used to negate or create the opposite of an existing word; in this case, the opposite of "engendrer" (fathered). However, "inengendré" is not an easy word to translate as it suggests that he feels that he was not fathered or fatherless and that he might have been "unfathered," meaning that he was aware that he had a father, but then lost this very concept of having a father altogether. Lastly, "fils de personne" goes even further, as it removes his parents completely from his life, along with any other relative. While this series of nouns tells the readers about Perec's state of mind, these revelations are again accompanied by the adverb "longtemps" and the *passé composé*, which indicates that his description of himself was no longer accurate when he wrote the book. It is as if the discoveries he exposes about his parents in his autobiography helped him realize that his parents really existed and were part of his life. Of course, they existed and Perec is aware of it. Nevertheless, within the book, the concreteness of their existence evolves from chapter to chapter. In the eighth chapter, when they first appear, they are reduced to a list of verifiable facts. However, towards the end of the first part of *W*, their existence is filled with emotions and becomes more personal for the reader as well as for Perec, as he asserts that they left a "marque indélébile" (64) on him and are no longer an abstraction.

Perec uses another play on words to indicate how he feels about growing up without his parents. At the beginning of chapter IV, while talking about his childhood, he says: "Je ne sais où se sont brisés les fils qui me rattachent à mon enfance" (25). The word "fils" in French can refer to *sons* or to *threads*. This is important because the same word appears later as Perec describes being in the train station with his mother before the Red Cross took him to the South of France. Describing this scene at the train station leads him to remember a jumping exercise he did as a paratrooper. First, Perec explains that the Red Cross was allowed to take children to the free zone

if they were “orphelin de guerre” (80) or if they were injured. He remembers having had one of his arms in a sling and thinking that his arm was broken. This detail was corrected later on by a family member who claims that his arm was never broken: his mother must have pretended that he was injured so that the Red Cross could take him to the South. Nevertheless, this is what Perec remembers, along with his mother buying him a comic book entitled *Charlot*, whose front page showed Charlot with a parachute attached to his suspenders. As he finishes recounting this memory, Perec says :

> Un triple trait parcourt ce souvenir : parachute, bras en écharpe, bandage herniaire : cela tient de la suspension, du soutien, presque de la prothèse. Pour être, besoin d’étai. Seize ans plus tard, en 1958, lorsque les hasards du service militaire ont fait de moi un éphémère parachutiste, je pus lire, dans la minute même du saut, un texte déchiffré de ce souvenir : je fus précipité dans le vide ; tous les fils furent rompus ; je tombai, seul et sans soutien. Le parachute s’ouvrit. La corolle se déploya, fragile et sûr suspens avant la chute maîtrisée. (81)

This passage is significant in the autobiography as it concludes a thread of memories related to the last time that he saw his mother as the Gare de Lyon. Perec draws a parallel between two situations that involved a need for support. The first one deals with the episode of the Gare de Lyon, where he remembers having his arm in a sling, even though he did not need it. The second situation occurred during his jump out of a plane as a paratrooper, during which he felt as though the parachute was useless and as if he was falling without support. In other words, in the first situation, support was not needed but it was felt and remembered; while in the second one, the support of the parachute was there, but Perec felt that it failed. For each memory, he uses multiple words to conjure up the idea of support: “écharpe,” “bandage herniaire,” “suspension,” “soutien,”

"prothèse," "étai," "fils" which all represent a momentary solution in response to something damaged. As we have already discussed with the discovery of his father's grave, Perec longed for permanence. In any case, everything in this excerpt exposes a need for some sort of a support system in order to be able to live: "Pour être, besoin d'étai."[43] One can only imagine that he lost the structure and support he is looking for when his parents died. This excerpt may not seem as though it is directly connected to Perec's parents, but it is linked to the motivation for his writing project. It is important to remember that this excerpt is included after the third mention of the Gare de Lyon. The memory of Charlot's suspenders brings back the memory of Perec's unfortunate accident as a paratrooper, in which the threads of the parachute that were supposed to hold Perec in suspension, broke. The fact that the word "fils" is repeated multiple times in relation to traumatic events creates echoes in the text, as well as an accumulation of meaning and broken referents. These echoes in the text become part of the structure of Perec's autobiography: they are the thread that guides the readers through Perec's various versions of the same memory. The multiple mentions of the Gare de Lyon, the accumulation of meaning and referents for the word "fils" all mirror the work of therapy as it revisits certain memories; they support Perec's memory project and his project of recovery.

Discovery of Deaths / Recovery of Lives

Perec lost this stability without even knowing it. Even though he points out that his parents' deaths appear "comme une evidence" and that they are "dans l'ordre des choses" (49), they have

[43] Without seeing how this sentence is spelled, one could also hear: "Pour être, besoin d'étais/était." "Étais" is the 1st person singular conjugation of "être" in the *imparfait* and "était" is the 3rd person singular conjugation of the same verb. This sentence would then suggest that one needs to know their past in order to live in the present.

not always been or felt so to him. Indeed, as he visits his father's grave, Perec suggests that before he saw the tombstone, his father's death was almost an abstraction:

> comme si la découverte de ce minuscule espace de terre clôturait enfin cette mort que je n'avais jamais apprise, jamais éprouvée, jamais connue ni reconnue, mais qu'il m'avait fallu, pendant des années et des années, déduire hypocritement des chuchotis apitoyés et des baisers soupirants des dames. (59)

As the episode of the tombstone draws to an end, Perec reflects on what this visit meant for him and for the way he thought about his parents. He seems, or so his language suggests, to resent that it took so long for this moment to happen. Expressions such as "jamais apprise" and "jamais éprouvée" tell the reader that he was never explicitly told that his parents were dead. Nevertheless, he also uses the expression "déduire hypocritement," which tells the reader that he inferred the truth based on people's attitudes towards him. The word "hypocritement" remains ambiguous in this excerpt, as it could mean that Perec considers himself a hypocrite for inferring this piece of information without telling others or asking for confirmation; but it could also imply that he was a hypocrite with himself because he half-knew the truth and ignored it. There is no way to tell what Perec means by "hypocritement."

The idea that he *half-knew* the truth is extremely important for this scene as until then, his parents' deaths were abstractions. At the grave, what had remained unsaid until then unfolds very concretely in front of his eyes, as his father's death is inscribed permanently in the tombstone. The use of the verb "clôturer" is also worth commenting on: "clôturer" can mean *to end something* and *to build a fence / frame around something*. Here, it can be read with both meanings in mind: the visit puts an end to Perec's implicit knowledge of his father's death and identity; it also creates a framed space for his father's death and life to exist and become explicit realities. This is a space

to which Perec could go back in order to remind himself of their bond if he ever doubted it again. The tombstone, like photos and other documents, represents a permanent verifiable piece of evidence that Perec and his parents were a family. As mentioned above, the visit to his father's grave is a shock for Perec, as seeing his last name carved into the tombstone gives him the feeling of not being alone anymore: it provides him with a feeling of belonging to a family.

Perec's father's tombstone commemorate his life and gave Perec a piece of his father back. However, Perec could never have a similar experience about his mother since he indicates that "Nous n'avons jamais pu retrouver de trace de ma mère ni de sa soeur" (61). He then adds more details about the circumstances of her death:

> Ma mère n'a pas de tombe. C'est seulement le 13 octobre 1958 qu'un décret la déclara officiellement décédée, le 11 février 1943, à Drancy (France). Un décret ultérieur, du 17 novembre 1959, précisa que, "si elle avait été de nationalité française", elle aurait eu droit à la mention "Mort pour la France". (62)

This is a significant moment in the narrative. Perec recalls that the visit to his father's tombstone occurred in 1958 or in 1959. This means when he discovered his father's grave and recovered the link between them, his mother's death still had not been acknowledged by the French government. The last sentence of the excerpt also emphasizes another difference between his parents: since his father died while he was serving in the military, he most likely received the mention "Mort pour la France" even though he was not a citizen. Unlike his father, his mother, was a civilian. If she died in Drancy, she must have been arrested either by Nazi officers or by French police officers who were collaborating under the Vichy government. Although Perec does not comment on those decrees and presents them as facts, the last sentence of the passage resonates with feelings of resentment and disappointment towards the French government, as his mother's death was not

acknowledged for a long time and was not given the same importance as his father's, even though they died during the same war.

Instead of a grave, Perec recovered pictures of his mother from other family members. Before he starts to describe some of pictures, Perec asserts that he has very vague memories of his mother, but they are still memories: "L'image que j'ai d'elle, arbitraire et schématique, me convient; elle lui ressemble, elle la définit, pour moi, presque parfaitement" (51). As vague as his memories are, it seems that they are nonetheless comforting, as they are proof that he lived with her. There is one picture in particular that Perec describes but does not include in the book—indeed, none of the picture are included. In this picture, his mother and he are sitting on a bench in a park: "Elle nous montre, ma mère et moi, en gros plan. La mère et l'enfant donne l'image d'un Bonheur que les ombres du photographe exaltent" (73). More than anything else, it is this image, even if it's only an illusion created by the photographer, that Perec wants to recollect about his mother. The significance of this picture does not reside only in the fact that it represents them together; it also lies in the feeling of happiness that it exudes. It is this happy feeling that Perec tries to recreate later on when he compiles a list of activities that he would have liked to do with his mother:

> Moi, j'aurais aimé aider ma mère à débarrasser la table de la cuisine après le dîner. Sur la table, il y aurait eu une toile cirée à petit carreaux bleus ; au-dessus de la table, il y aurait eu une suspension avec un abat-jour presque en forme d'assiette, en porcelaine blanche ou en tôle émaillée, et un système de poulies avec un contrepoids en forme de poire. Puis je serais allé chercher mon cartable, j'aurais sorti mon livre, mes cahiers et mon plumier de bois, je les aurais posés sur la table et j'aurais fait mes devoirs. C'est comme ça que ça se passait dans mes livres de classe. (99)

In this excerpt, Perec describes in detail what his childhood could have looked like (according to his schoolbooks), if he had grown up with his mother. Two things are worth pointing out about this passage. First, this description concludes the passages in which Perec talks extensively about his mother. It follows the descriptions of pictures that he possesses of her. Secondly, Perec mentions books at the end of the excerpt. The last sentence allows Perec to create a metaliterary moment: this is how things happened in the books he read as a child, and in a way, this is how things happen in his book as well. The fact that this passage follows the description of the pictures, combined with the ideal scene from the schoolbooks, suggests that Perec is (re)creating an ideal and fixed version of his mother and of their relationship. The amount of detail lets the reader imagine the scene perfectly, just as any other picture that Perec describes in the narrative. It reads as a picture that captures the bond between him and his mother. Once again, this is made possible by the act of writing, since such a picture does not physically exist outside of Perec's mind. On his father's tombstone, the carved family name makes their bond a heart-felt reality, while Perec's own written words help him recover the bond with his mother. Therefore, as Perec explicitly learns about his parents' deaths, he paradoxically recovers aspects of their lives as well.

There is a comparison to be made between the visit to his father's tombstone and the imagined scene with his mother. In both episodes, the objects that have been discovered (the tombstone and the pictures) trigger feelings in him. He discovers feelings that help him bond with the idea of his parents, feelings that he would have had earlier if his parents had not died. Another common element is that both passages are highly stylized and filled with emotions that can be described only retrospectively, which may make the reader question the authenticity of these passages; on the one hand, they can seem fabricated because of all the emotional details and elegant style; on the other hand, they also seem very real, as readers can imagine and / or remember the

feeling of doing their homework with their parents for example. In any case, these moments pay tribute to Perec's affection for his parents.

Paying Tribute

While Perec's father's grave can be seen as a *lieu de mémoire*, I believe that all the narratives in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* can be considered *lieux de mémoire* dedicated to his parents, as well as to other victims of World War II. At the end of the eighth chapter, Perec explains why he writes about his parents:

> J'aurai beau traquer mes lapsus (par exemple, j'avais écrit 'j'ai commis', au lieu de 'j'ai fait', à propos des fautes de transcription dans le nom de ma mère), ou rêvasser pendant deux heures sur la longueur de la capote de mon papa, ou chercher dans mes phrases, pour évidemment les trouver aussitôt, les résonances mignonnes de l'Œdipe ou de la castration, je ne retrouverai jamais dans mon ressassement même, que l'ultime reflet d'une parole absente à l'écriture, le scandale de leur silence et de mon silence : je n'écris pas pour dire que je n'ai rien à dire. J'écris : j'écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j'ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leur corps ; 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. (63-64)

In the entire eighth chapter, as Perec tells his parents' stories, and especially in this last excerpt, he pays tribute to them and to their family. He points to their "absence" and their "silence," however, his writing makes them present to the reader and, even though it does not really give them a voice since they never speak in the book, it gives them a space in which they can exist, a

space in which their lives are not silent anymore. I have suggested above that in discovering their deaths, he paradoxically recovered proof of their lives. What is interesting to notice in Perec's awareness about the fact that he cannot recover everything about his parents is that it does not prevent him from writing about them. It is somewhat paradoxical because the whole eighth chapter deals with details about their lives, who they were and what remains of them. Therefore, it is easy to think that this is a celebration of their lives. However, the last quote focuses more on their deaths, perhaps because all he has recovered is proof of their deaths. The act of writing immortalizes both their lives, and even more so, their deaths. Through his narrative, he pays tribute to them and immortalizes their lives in the book. The last sentence names two functions for the act of writing: the first function is to pay tribute to them by making sure that their lives are recorded in the book; the second function deals with the performative act of writing: by writing about his parents and making the connections between all of them clear to the reader, Perec reconstructs their family within his literary world. There is an exchange at work in this excerpt as well: Perec declares that they left a "marque indélébile" on him. In this specific passage, and in his entire autobiography, Perec's creates a "marque indélébile" of them via the ink used to print the copies of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. With this narrative, he gives them both a burial site and the acknowledgment they deserve. He also finally acknowledges himself as their son, thus paying tribute to himself as an integral part of their family.

However, Perec does not just pay tribute to his parents and himself. Throughout all three narratives, he pays tribute to various groups of people who suffered during World War II. One of these groups consists of children who survived the war but lost their parents. In a passage that deals with his indifference towards his female family members, Perec writes:

> On se fichait pas mal de savoir laquelle des deux tantes c'était et même on se fichait qu'il y ait des tantes ou qu'il n'y en ait pas. En fait, on était toujours un peu surpris qu'il y ait des tantes, et des cousines, et une grand-mère. Dans la vie, on s'en passait très bien, on ne voyait pas très bien à quoi ça servait ni pourquoi c'étaient des gens plus importants que les autres ; on n'aimait pas beaucoup cette manière qu'elles avaient, les tantes, d'apparaître et de disparaître à tout bout de champ. (98-99)

Here, the impersonal pronoun "on" has various meanings. Depending on the context, it can be synonymous with "nous" (we), "les gens" (people) or "tout le monde" (everybody). The speaker who uses "on" may be included in it or s/he may be excluded from it. Even though Perec uses the impersonal "on," this excerpt sounds extremely personal, as the reader already knows that he was adopted by his aunt Esther and that he grew up surrounded by family members who were essentially strangers to him before he lived with them. Nevertheless, this excerpt can also describe the reality of other children who lost their parents and had to grow up with family members they barely knew. I read this passage as an allegory, since we can match its content to what happened to Perec in real life, but we are also invited to witness the emotional damage inflicted on children who lost their parents at a young age during World War II, which could be seen as a political stance on Perec's end. The fact that the reader can still hear Perec's voice in the allegory makes it all the more powerful: if the reader has developed an emotional reaction to Perec's story, s/he may also be inclined to develop a certain sense of empathy for him and other children. I believe that in this passage, Perec pays tribute to other children of the Holocaust, and he performs the identity of an orphan, which allows him to be part of something bigger than himself.

Lastly, Winckler's narrative and the story of the population on W can be read as tributes to Jewish people. Indeed, Gaspard Winckler can be interpreted as an embodiment of Jewish

individuals who managed to escape the war and who had to obtain new identities in order to survive. Some of Perec's relatives were amongst them, as they obtained visas to go to the United States. At the same time, the inhabitants of W also stand for the victims of the concentration camps. In certain ways, W is a direct representation of the system of the concentration camps: for example, men, women and children live separately in different compounds. Athletes are attributed numbers that correspond to their victories, just as prisoners were given tattooed numbers to identity them. Finally, the relationship between the Novices and the Athletes on W resembles the relationships described by Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), as the prisoners often could not communicate together. On W :

> *Des novices un peu plus anciens que lui essaieront parfois de lui expliquer, de lui raconter, ce qui se passe, comment ça se passe, ce qu'il faut faire et ce qu'il ne faut pas faire. Mais, le plus souvent, ils n'y arriveront pas. Comment expliquer que ce qu'il découvre n'est pas quelque chose d'épouvantable, n'est pas un cauchemar, n'est pas quelque chose dont il va se réveiller brusquement, quelque chose qu'il va chasser de son esprit, comment expliquer que c'est cela la vie, la vie réelle, que c'est cela qu'il y aura tous les jours, que c'est cela qui existe et rien d'autre, qu'il est inutile de croire que quelque chose d'autre existe, de faire semblant de croire à autre chose, que ce n'est même pas la peine d'essayer de déguiser cela. Il y a cela et c'est tout.* (190-191)

In his autobiography, Primo Levi points out that concentration camps prisoners could not understand each other because they spoke different languages. However, he also reveals that speaking the same language does not necessarily mean that people can communicate their experience to another : "Allora per la prima volta ci siamo accorti che la nostra lingua manca di

parole per esprimere questa offesa, la demolizione di un uomo" (23).[44] This reflects the situation of the Novices and the Athletes on W, as they cannot communicate effectively either: language does not allow the Athletes to explain to the Novices why they must live the way they do. In both narratives, language fails to represent and convey the human experience. While Perec cannot claim to be part of either of these groups of Jewish people, the fact that he pays tribute to them allows him to assert his Jewish identity by showing that one does not need to have lived through the horrors of the Holocaust to remember the wrongful crimes committed against the Jewish community.

Paying tribute to his family and to various groups of people who were affected by World War II allows Perec to be part of something bigger than himself. Even though the story of Gaspard Winckler and the ethnography of W are fictions, Perec asserts in his first autobiographical chapter that they are also part of his childhood: "W ne ressemble pas plus à mon fantasme olympique que ce fantasme Olympique ne ressemblait à mon enfance. Mais dans le réseau qu'ils tissent comme dans la lecture que j'en fais, je sais que se trouve inscrit et décrit le chemin que j'ai parcouru, le cheminement de mon histoire et l'histoire de mon cheminement" (18)**.** Perec may not have made the conscious decision to flee the war on his own, but hiding his identity was as much part of his childhood as it was part of Winckler's story. Perec did not experience the concentration camps either, but they are part of his story as a historical figure: if Hitler had not waged war on Europe and tried to exterminate Jewish people, Perec might not have lost his parents at such a young age. By paying tribute to various groups, he claims multiple identities as a son, as an orphan of the Second World War, and of a Jewish man who remembers the damages caused by the war and who pays tribute to his people.

[44] This is my translation: "So, for the first time, we realized that our language lacks the words to express this offense, to express the destruction of a man."

As he discovers pictures and places related to his parents, Perec is finally able to recover the sense of family he longed for. Writing about all the things he discovered also means that he can change the narrative around him and leave a permanent trace of his family in the book. As he pays tribute to his family and to other victims of World War II, a certain sense of unity emerges in Perec's autobiography. However, this unity may only be a product of the recovery project. Indeed, throughout the narratives, Perec's identity is far from unified as he serves the various functions of author, narrator, commentator of his own story; he is the protagonist, a historical figure and an individual. Therefore, the last two sections in this chapter examine how these different functions come into play to construct the three narratives and the multiple versions of events and memories that they contain.

IV. Aesthetic Choices

Author vs. Individual

This section deals with aesthetic choices that reflect the multiplicity of roles played by Perec as the author, narrator, and protagonist of his autobiography, commentator / analyst of his own story. Through the analysis of various literary techniques, this section aims to show how stylization reveals split perspectives. Often, there is a discrepancy between Perec's point of view as a child, and comments made in hindsight by an older Perec, or by him as a narrator.

Perec frequently uses multiple tenses with the same verb or action. This is evident when Perec visits his father's grave and speaks of a "sentiment ennuyeux d'accomplir quelque chose qu'il m'avait toujours fallu accomplir, qu'il m'aurait été impossible de ne jamais accomplir, mais dont je ne saurais jamais pourquoi je l'accomplissais" (58). The use of various tenses opens up multiple perspectives on the meaning of this event. The use of the plus-que-parfait in "m'avait

toujours fallu accomplir" captures Perec's point of view as a child, before the action even happened. The adverb "toujours" emphasizes the idea that this visit had been a permanent necessity, even when Perec did not know that he would have to do it eventually. As I have shown in the previous section, Perec implicitly knew that his parents were dead, and thus might have inferred that this visit would become unavoidable. The verb "falloir" expresses an imperative; this imperative is usually conceived as external to the speaker: someone or something makes the speaker feel this obligation. The second instance of the verb in "qu'il m'aurait été impossible de ne jamais accomplir" is conjugated in the conditional past, which typically expresses a regret about the past. Here, the regret would have been to not go to his father's grave. However, Perec could not have known that he would have regretted not having gone until after he went and realized what this visit meant to him: only by going to his father's grave could he have found out that his father had the same last name as he. This visit is a turning point in Perec's life, as it helped him to start putting some of the pieces of his identity back together. Finally, the use of the imparfait in "je l'accomplissais" refers to the exact moment of the visit. The imparfait can be used to talk about habits in the past or to describe ongoing events in the past that have no clear beginning or end. In this excerpt, the imparfait gives the impression that, as the narrator, Perec is projecting himself back in the past in order to describe the scene as if it were unfolding in front of his eyes as he was writing about it. If the action of "accomplir" were to be seen from Perec's point of view at the time he wrote the book, three other verb tenses could have been used: the plus-que-parfait (pluperfect) as in "je l'avais accomplie," the passé composé (preterit) as in "je l'ai accomplie" or the simple past (the literary preterit) as in "je l'accomplis." All three past tenses indicate that the action is seen as completed. With these various verb tenses, Perec shows his perspectives before, during and after his discovery of his father's grave. It is important that these split perspectives occur in

the narrative immediately after Perec announced that he and his father share the same last name, which is the first moment of unity in the autobiography. Narratively speaking, this is a significant turning point, as the father and son are brought closer together by the text, while the multiple tenses seemingly pull Perec apart by attributing to him three separate points of view. This is not a rare occurrence in Perec's writing practice, although the movement in opposite directions (bringing things or people together while also pulling them apart) takes many forms, as we will see.

Another device that Perec favors is the chiasmus. At the beginning of his first chapter, after saying that the story of W is part of his story, he adds that it is part of "le cheminement de [son] histoire et l'histoire de [son] cheminement" (18). "Le cheminement de mon histoire" is ambiguous due to the different meanings of the word "histoire" (*story / history*). If "histoire" is meant to be understood as *story*, it could refer to either Perec's life story or to the fictional stories included in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Either way, "le cheminement de mon histoire" focuses on the author in Perec and on how he composes his autobiography and his fictional stories, especially since they have different structures. Winckler's narrative follows a chronological order; the ethnography of W does not contain any dates, so it reads as a simple description. However, the autobiography is far more complex as it jumps back and forth between memories of the past and the author / narrator's present as he writes the book. The chapters themselves jump back and forth between the narratives – Winckler and Perec's in Part I, Perec and W's in Part II. On the other hand, "l'histoire de mon cheminement" focuses on the development of his life. Indeed, "chemin" (*road*) is a common metaphor used to talk about one's life. With this chiasmus, the author brings his life and his art together in the same sentence, while keeping them apart by creating a sense of ambiguity as to which one is more similar to W: it could be one of them, both or neither.

Another important chiasmus relates to Perec's parents when he asserts that "leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture ; l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie" (64). Once again, there is a discrepancy between two perspectives: "leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture" can be read as Perec's comment as a son who mourns that he has but few tangible memories of his parents. It does not matter how much he writes about them, they will never come back, and he has only a few pieces of information about them that he can share. At the same time, "l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort" is a comment that we can attribute to Perec as the author. As he pays tribute to his parents, he also expresses hope about his work and what writing can achieve to preserve their legacy and memory in words that will never die. So far, it seems that the writing self and the historical figure in Perec have very different perspectives. However, even when they appear to be diametrically opposed, Perec finds a way to make them coexist within the space of the narrative: these different perspectives are often juxtaposed in the text, but they do not overshadow each other, nor do they cancel each other. They simply expose perspectives that belong to different parts of Perec's identity: the author / narrator and the historical figure.

Other devices include polysemy and accumulation. The two come together in a passage at the beginning of Perec's autobiography when he describes the effect of his lack of memories:

> Cette absence d'histoire m'a longtemps rassuré : sa sécheresse objective, son évidence apparente, son innocence, me protégeaient, mais de quoi me protégeaient-elles, sinon précisément de mon histoire, de mon histoire vécue, de mon histoire réelle, de mon histoire à moi qui, on peut le supposer, n'était ni sèche, ni objective, ni apparemment évidente, ni évidemment innocente. (17)

The polysemy of the word "histoire" is significant in this passage. As I mentioned earlier, "histoire" means *story* and *history*. However, in this context, it can also refer to Perec's personal

history, i.e., the various details that compose certain events of his life. The first instance of "histoire" in this excerpt, however, refers to memories, since Perec asserts that he does not have any memories of his childhood in the paragraph preceding this one. "Memories" and "history" are obviously not synonymous. Nevertheless, they are placed at the beginning of the first and second paragraphs of this chapter respectively, which puts an emphasis on both the lack of memories and the lack of history (or story). This also creates a parallel between memories and history. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that Perec's chapters are autobiographical. In autobiographies, the author / narrator often tells their (hi)story by describing their memories. Since Perec is at the same time the author, the narrator and the individual at the center of his autobiography, it is possible to read "histoire" in multiple ways, especially as *fictional story* and *personal history*. The accumulation of qualifiers in this excerpt is also worth analyzing as they could be applied to both meanings of "histoire."

If we read "histoire" as *fictional story*, then some of the qualifiers also describe the narrative about W: "sa sécheresse objective" may remind the reader of the unknown narrator's declaration at the beginning of chapter I that he would like to use "*le ton froid et serein de l'éthnologue*" (14). "Sec" (*dry*) and "froid" (*cold*) are commonly used to describe someone who is detached from their speech. Moreover, "évidence apparente" may refer to the fact that W is an allegory of the concentration camps and "innocence" suggests that, at first glance, W looks like a society in which life has been organized around the ideal of Olympic games. The illusion falls apart when this ideal society reveals itself to be an absolute nightmare, at which point the story is "ni sèche, ni objective, ni apparemment évidente, ni évidemment innocente" anymore. Of course, the very same qualifiers also describe Perec's personal history and his lack of memories: in fact,

the reason why he has a lack of childhood memories, and especially a lack of memories of his parents, is because his personal childhood history is far from innocent.

Furthermore, this excerpt presents an apparent discrepancy between "histoire vécue" and "histoire réelle," casting them as opposites. However, because of chapters eight, the reader knows that this is not the case: all the annotations do not contradict the stories that Perec wrote about his parents. Perec himself, as the author, explains the purpose of the annotations : "Je les recopie sans rien y changer, renvoyant en note les rectifications et les commentaires que j'estime aujourd'hui devoir ajouter" (46). Of course, "rectifications" means *corrections*, but Perec also uses the verb "ajouter" (*to add*). I read the annotations as additions to the truths already told in the original stories. The latter constitute the pieces of information that Perec held as true for a long time; the former are new pieces of information that he uncovered as he grew up and that were added to what he already knew, without erasing memories. Concretely, Perec's discovery that his parents' given names were Icek and Cyrla did not erase the fact that in France, they were known as André and Cécile. All of these pieces of information are true. They are simply different aspects of the same truth. The same goes for Perec's "histoire vécue" and "histoire réelle": his lived experience may have been that he did not have many memories of his parents, but the reality is, as he asserts later on, that they lived together and formed a family. Once again, both versions are true, and they all belong to Perec.

This brings me to the last device. At various points in his autobiography, Perec uses the verb "appartenir" in order to talk about his relationship to his memories and to people. The following excerpts illustrate such relationships ;

> Mon enfance fait partie de ces choses dont je sais que je ne sais pas grand-chose. Elle est derrière moi, pourtant, elle est le sol sur lequel j'ai grandi, elle *m'a appartenu*, quelle que soit ma ténacité à affirmer qu'elle *ne m'appartient plus*. (25, emphasis added)[45]

In this passage, Perec insists on his lack of agency, echoing the excerpt from a previous chapter when he declares that "une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place" (17). I believe that we can read this passage as follows: as long as Perec did not know about World War II, his childhood felt as though it belonged to him. However, once he discovered the truth about the war and the reason for his parents' death, he felt that his childhood was stolen by "la Grande Histoire." The second excerpt deals with one of Perec's aunts, Berthe, who visits him at school, but whom he had never met before:

> Je garde avec une netteté absolue le souvenir, non de la scène entière, mais du sentiment d'incrédulité, d'hostilité et de méfiance que je ressentis alors : il reste, aujourd'hui encore assez difficilement exprimable, comme s'il était le dévoilement d'une vérité élémentaire (désormais il ne viendrait à toi que des étrangères; tu les chercheras et tu les repousseras sans cesse ; elles *ne t'appartiendront pas*, tu *ne leur appartiendras pas*, car tu ne sauras que *les tenir à part*…) dont je ne crois pas avoir fini de suivre les méandres. (142-143; my emphasis)

Once again, Perec expresses his resentment and his rejection of the female family members who took care of him during his childhood. However, one could also argue that even though the excerpt originally deals with his aunt Berthe, the noun "étrangères" and the object pronouns could refer to any female figure in his life. Furthermore, the verbs "appartenir" and "tenir à part" are used in

[45] I acknowledge that I have previously used this same quote in the chapter. However, I first mentioned it to expose the various statuses that Perec gave himself in order to show his relationship to himself as part of his family. For the purpose of this section, this same excerpt is used to analyze Perec's relationship towards his memories and childhood, as well as his different perspectives at various points in his life.

relation to plural object pronouns: “elles,” “leur,” “les.” While “elles” is feminine plural, “leur” and “les” can refer to groups of males only, but also to mixed groups with female members. However, since “elles” is feminine plural, it is easy to see the connection between this excerpt and the allegorical passage analyzed earlier in which only female family members are mentioned.[46] Behind his complicated relationship with all the female figures around him, the reader can see the real issue: he does not belong with his aunts, grandmothers, and cousins because he only wants to belong with his mother.

What is interesting in the first passage is the use of two different tenses – the passé composé and the present tense – and their two different structures: one is assertive and the other one is negative. Despite their differences, both instances of the verb say exactly the same thing: his childhood belonged to him and still does. However, the way Perec decomposes the verb “appartenir” into “tenir à part” is striking, as it works perfectly in both passages; it also reflects on Perec’s work in the entire book. “Appartenir” can be decomposed into two phrases: “à part tenir” (*to hold the pieces of something*), and “tenir à part” (*to keep things separate*). In the first excerpt, while it is entirely possible to read “appartenir” with its primary meaning of belonging, it is also possible to hear “elle m’a à part tenu,” meaning that his childhood, or his memories of it, only held pieces of him and of his identity. Concretely, as a child, Perec did not know much about his parents or about himself.[47] Therefore, his childhood can only represent pieces of him as almost everything was taken from him: his parents, his identity, his memories. Even throughout the project of

[46] “On se fichait pas mal de savoir laquelle des deux tantes c’était et même on se fichait qu’il y ait des tantes ou qu’il n’y en ait pas. En fait, on était toujours un peu surpris qu’il y ait des tantes, et des cousines, et une grand-mère. Dans la vie, on s’en passait très bien, on ne voyait pas très bien à quoi ça servait ni pourquoi c’étaient des gens plus importants que les autres ; on n’aimait pas beaucoup cette manière qu’elles avaient, les tantes, d’apparaître et de disparaître à tout bout de champ” (98-99).

[47] We’ve seen earlier in this chapter that he was never told explicitly about his parents’ death. His family also hide his identity by sending him to a Catholic school.

recovery, it is obvious that the pieces he recovered would always be just that: pieces – fragments which can never be fully assembled.

"À part tenir" and "tenir à part" exemplify what is at work in the structure, as well as in the content, of all three narratives. In regard to the content of each narrative, the idea of "à part tenir" is illustrated by the fragmentary nature of the chapters. Each of them holds different pieces of the story. The same structure illustrates the idea of "tenir à part," as each narrative occurs in installments instead of all at once. As for the entirety of the book, all the narratives hold pieces of Perec's childhood story, however, these pieces are "tenue à part" from each other as the links between and amongst them are never made explicitly clear to the reader. Finally, it is important to that, at a micro-level, Perec uses this verb for both people and memories: he holds pieces of information and memories about them that allow him to feel closer to them and to assert that they were a family; and yet, his lack of knowledge and memories "le tient à part" (*keeps him apart*), separate from them because there will always be a gap between them that cannot be bridged.

À part tenir / Tenir à part

The concept of "tenir à part" is also significant for one of the strongest memories that Perec describes in the second part of the book. The memory begins with the following statements : "je suis tombé en arrière et me suis cassé l'omoplate ; c'est un os que l'on ne peut plâtrer" (112). This accident allegedly happened while Perec was ice skating. However, in 1970, he had the opportunity to talk to a former classmate named Louis Argoud-Puix, who did not remember him, but recalled very clearly that a similar accident had happened to another classmate named Philippe Gardes (113). Perec concludes the presentation of this memory by saying that:

> L'événement eut lieu, un peu plus tard ou un peu plus tôt, et je n'en fus pas la victime héroïque mais un simple témoin. Comme le bras en écharpe de la gare de Lyon, je vois bien ce que pouvaient remplacer ces fractures éminemment réparables qu'une immobilisation temporaire suffisait à réduire, même si la métaphore, aujourd'hui, me semble inopérante pour décrire ce qui précisément avait été cassé et qu'il était sans doute vain d'espérer enfermer dans le simulacre d'un membre fantôme. (113-114)

The important fact to understand in this excerpt is that as an individual, Perec, is aware that some of his memories are false, and he uses them as an author because they serve a purpose. In fact, false memories, or *screen memories* as Freud labeled them, do have a function. In his 1899 article, Freud explained that there are different forces involved in the creation of memories:

> One of these forces takes the importance of the experience as a motive for seeking to remember it, while the other – a resistance – tries to prevent any such preference from being shown […] The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one. And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial. (*Screen memories*, 306-307)

In other words, Perec appropriated someone else's accident and remembered it as if it had happened to him, as a way of expressing a traumatic experience that did happen to him but that he could not put into words. What is important to understand here is that this traumatic experience does not have to be physical. In fact, in *On Dreams*, Freud explains that substitution can stand for "emotional and intellectual trains of thought" (7), as well. In the same book, Freud presents the

concepts of *manifest content* (the content represented by the substitution) and *latent content* (the content of the original traumatic experience). In Perec's case, the manifest content is the broken shoulder-blade as a symbol of something else that was broken in real life.

The fact that Perec mentions the gare de Lyon is significant because, as I have previously indicated, the image of "les fils" (*threads*) occurs in his memory of himself and his mother at the train station. It is also present at the beginning of chapter IV when Perec declares : "Je ne sais où ce sont brisés les fils qui me rattachent à mon enfance" (25). Therefore, one might argue that the link between the memory of the gare de Lyon and the screen memory of the broken shoulder-blade is an emotional one: what was broken at the train station was not Perec's arm or his shoulder-blade, it was the physical bond between him and his parents. Lastly, it is worth noticing that Perec characterizes this screen memory as "inopérante" at the moment of writing ("aujourd'hui"). The use of "aujourd'hui" suggests that even though it does not work anymore, the screen memory may have been useful in the past to refer to his traumatic experience. The word "inopérante," translated as *ineffective* is also worth analyzing. In French, "inopérante" comes from "opérer" (*to operate*, *to function*). Therefore, "inopérante" connotes inefficiency; it also creates a play on words to indicate the uselessness of surgery to repair what has been broken. Indeed, Perec indicates that a broken shoulder-blade cannot be fixed, just as there is no existing surgery that could bring his parents back or sew the "fils" of his childhood back together. Once again, in this excerpt, Perec serves two functions – those of narrator and of commentator – as he purposefully uses a play on words and a psychological concept in order to describe his struggle with memory.

In this entire section, I have shown that Perec the author / narrator and Perec the historical individual, are often at odds in the way they perceive certain events. While the individual's perspective is often more realistic, the author / narrator's perspective seems more refined (i.e.,

polished), enriched by hindsight, and theatricalized at times. The literary devices often pull the narrative in multiple directions, both putting the "fils" back together and tearing them apart. In the end, all the different versions of events, all the different perspectives and inconsistencies in the narrative, resonate with the letter at the heart of the title of the book: W. Indeed, in his 2014 article "Georges Perec, Lost and Found in the Void: The Memoirs of an Indirect Witness," Eric Beck Rubin reminds us that "In a translator's note, Bellos points out W, pronounced in French as *double vé*, can be read as *double vie*, or 'double life'" (118). Everything in *W* is doubled: Winckler can be read as Perec's alter ego; the allegory is a fictional version of the concentration camps; there are multiple versions of the same stories, and Perec serves multiple functions as he is both the author / narrator and the individual at the center of his autobiography.

All the devices explored in this section highlight discrepant points of view resulting from the different functions that Perec occupies as author / narrator and as an individual. Indeed, many devices reflect insights that can only have been made in hindsight. This means that the author interferes with his narrator function in order to tell his story. By including multiple points of view and multiple versions of events, Perec suggests that details and perspectives can change over time. This does not mean that the various versions are untrue; they are simply presented through different voices (author, narrator, individual – the young child and the adult), just as the three narratives in *W* are told by different first and third person fictional and real-life narrators.

V. The Creation of New Discourses

The Necessity of Multiple Narratives

The very title of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* suggests the existence of multiple truths. The use of the conjunction "ou" raises the question as to whether this is the story of W or the story of

childhood memories. “Ou” is ambiguous and invites the reader to ask which story is being told: W or childhood memories. Indeed, “ou” can be inclusive (it could be both stories at the same time), exclusive (one story or the other, but not both), or alternative (presenting “le souvenir d’enfance” as an alternate title for the book); it could also be read as an “and/or,” in which case it would both juxtapose the stories but also equate them. Moreover, as I have showed throughout the chapter, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* is built on repetitions and slightly different versions of memories and events. Thus, the letter *w* in French reads as “double v,” which sounds like “double vie” (*double life*). There are series of similar doubles in the book: as mentioned earlier, Winckler (both the boy and the soldier) can be read as doubles for Perec; the story of W functions as an allegory, i.e., as a fictional version of the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War; finally, within Perec’s narratives, some memories and anecdotes are told more than once; often, there is an original and an updated version. It would be easy to read these multiple versions as unreliable. However, the retelling and revising of stories is actually very common in real life. For example, each person has his / her own memories of certain events, which differ from someone else’s, as no two individuals will pay attention to the same details. Sometimes, there is more than one version of events in a person’s memory. In fact, in *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs points out that every time we consciously try to remember an event, the memory of the event is changed. He compares memories to reading a book and asserts that

> what happens most frequently is that we actually seem to be reading a new book, or at least an altered version. The book seems to lack pages, developments, or details that were there when we first read it; at the same time, additions seem to have been made because our interest is now attracted to and our reflections focused on a number of aspects of the action and the characters which, we well know, we were incapable of noticing then. (46)

Therefore, even though it might seem that Perec writes different versions of events to confuse the reader, this technique remains truthful to the way he experienced and conceived of memories and narratives of his life.

On a deeper level, a close reading of the text can identify two contributing factors for the creation of separate narratives and of multiple versions of events. The first factor concerns the lack of agency that Perec expresses from the very beginning of his autobiographical chapters. In the first chapter, he points out that there is a lack of (hi)story in his childhood as he declares: "J'en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps" (17). His lack of agency can be compared to that of the population on W. The Olympic society has been established and no one can contest the rules: women are to bear children who will becomes Athletes; men become Athletes and father children. They have no other choice. In contrast, Perec chose to transform his lack of agency into a productive work of art by trying to recover the irrecoverable. Even though the project of recovering his parents cannot be fully accomplished, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* represents a space in which his parents and he can exist as a family. By asserting their familial bond, Perec finally exercises some agency and declares himself as their son. However, one could also argue that what he is able to reconstruct of his family is very minimal and exists only in writing. Perec himself admits that there are limitations to his project as he concludes the eighth chapter of the book:

> Je dispose d'autres renseignements concernant mes parents ; je sais qu'ils ne me seront d'aucun secours pour dire ce que je voudrais en dire.
>
> Quinze ans après la rédaction de ces deux textes, il me semble toujours que je ne pourrais que les répéter : quelle que soit la précision des détails vrais ou faux que je pourrais y ajouter, l'ironie, l'émotion, la sécheresse ou la passion dont je pourrais les enrober, les

> fantasmes auxquels je pourrais donner libre cours, les fabulations que je pourrais développer, quels que soient, aussi, les progrès que j'ai pu faire depuis quinze ans dans l'exercice de l'écriture, il me semble que je ne parviendrai qu'à un ressassement sans issue. Un texte sur mon père, écrit en 1970, et plutôt pire que le premier, m'en persuade assez pour me décourager de recommencer aujourd'hui.
>
> Ce n'est pas, comme je l'ai longtemps avancé, l'effet d'une alternative sans fin entre la sincérité d'une parole à trouver et l'artifice d'une écriture exclusivement préoccupée de dresser ses remparts : c'est lié à la chose écrite elle-même, au projet de l'écriture comme au projet du souvenir. (62-63)

Perec does not explain what he would really want to say about his parents, but it is clear that it goes beyond trivial details included here and there in his autobiography. The importance of what he has to say does not have anything to do with how many times it is repeated. What does matter, as Perec emphasizes at the end of this excerpt, is the written product itself. Therefore, as much as the individual stories matter, the book as a whole matters more. I will explain this further below. For now, what is interesting is the discrepancy between this excerpt and what Perec actually does in the book: on the one hand, every chapter in the first part of the book deals with Perec compiling evidence of his parents and him belonging to a family. This shows a will to recover and recreate a sense of family. On the other hand, excerpts such as this one, undermine this project, dooming it to fail, which it does to a certain extent. Therefore, we see two different versions of the project: while the written product shows an attempt at unification, such unification remains unattainable in real life. There will always be an ideal written version of his family, and an *irrevocable* real-life version.

In addition, a sense of guilt, expressed multiple times by Perec, contributes to the creation of various narratives and versions of events. In the correction of his memory of the broken shoulder-blade, Perec calls himself a "simple témoin" as opposed to a "victime héroïque." As readers, we know that his screen memory is linked to his broken relationship with his parents. To a certain extent, Perec may have similar feelings towards witnessing the events of World War II from afar, while his parents were direct victims. In another memory from elementary school, Perec recalls that a little girl fell in front of him, as the children were rushing down the stairs, and he was accused of having pushed her. His reaction to this event, in hindsight, is remarkable:

> mais je *sens* encore physiquement cette poussée dans le dos, cette preuve flagrante de l'injustice, et la sensation cénesthésique de ce déséquilibre imposé par les autres, venu d'au-dessus de moi et retombant sur moi, reste si fortement inscrite dans mon corps que je me demande si ce souvenir ne masque pas en fait son exact contraire ; non pas le souvenir d'une médaille arrachée, mais celui d'une étoile épinglée. (79-80; Perec's emphasis)

Even though Perec does not name it, the reader recognizes the reference to the Star of David, which he did not wear as a child because he grew up in the free zone and went to a Catholic school in order to hide the fact that he was Jewish. It is unclear whether, as a child, Perec knew that he was Jewish or what the Star of David meant. The only thing he mentions in *W* is that after he moved to the South of France, the German soldiers who were there liked him. A friend of his grandmother who used to babysit him admitted that she was afraid he would say "quelque chose qu'il ne fallait pas [qu'il] dise et elle ne savait comment [lui] signifier ce secret" (77). This passage does not explain what Perec could have possibly said. However, as an adult who reflects on his childhood, he experiences a deferred sense of guilt for this little girl who fell, even though he was not directly responsible. He experiences guilt and shame and feels as though he was marked by the symbol

that was meant to bring shame to Jewish people during World War II. The word "épinglée" adds another level to his shame: it evokes the piercing of something through clothing, as if a sense of being wrongly accused had been imposed on him, attached to him. Nevertheless, Perec cannot put this feeling into words, because he never had to wear the Star of David. The reader can only assume that Perec might feel guilty and ashamed for having survived while his parents died during the war. In "The Absent Memory," Ellen Fine explains that "For those born in the shadow of genocide, apprehensions about the right to speak are often linked to the guilt of nonparticipation, a kind of regret for having been born too late… the past eludes and excludes them" (44). As a result of his survival, Perec may have experienced guilt for actions in which he could have intervened but did not.

The same sense of guilt and shame plays a part in what Perec allowed himself to write about his childhood. On a literary level, authors such as Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann, who survived the Holocaust, have defined some constraints and boundaries which deal with who is allowed to write about the Holocaust and in which genre:

> If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them. I have written them in order to testify. My role is the role of the witness… Not to tell, or to tell another story, is… to commit perjury. (Elie Wiesel, quoted by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 204).

Or as Claude Lanzmann writes:

> L'Holocauste est d'abord unique en ceci qu'il édifie autour de lui, en un cercle de flamme, la limite à ne pas franchir parce qu'un certain absolu d'horreur est intransmissible : prétendre le faire, c'est se rendre coupable de la transgression la plus grave. La fiction est

> une transgression, je pense profondément qu'il y a un interdit de la représentation. ("Holocauste, la représentation impossible", *Le Monde*, 1994, 12).

These excerpts from Wiesel and Lanzmann present limitations for both survivors and their children. Fiction is rejected as a mode of expression to talk about the Holocaust. Both Wiesel and Lanzmann talk about the "perjury" and "transgression" of fiction, of telling a story that is not yours. Perec may have felt the need to follow the rules they laid out: in his case, writing *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* as a first-person autobiography would have been a transgression. This would explain why he turned to fiction to tell Winckler's story as well as W's; their stories are part of his own, even though he did not experience them himself. Therefore, the creation of multiple narratives and narrators became a necessity in order to tell the story that Perec wanted to tell. David Bellos's translation of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Bellos includes a short text – absent from the French publication of *W* – which he must have translated from Georges Perec as it is signed with his initials (GP) and reads as follows:

> In this book there are two texts which simply alternate; you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up with each other as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping.

It is this "not quite said" which will be of interest in the next section, as I try and explain how repetitions and echoes between the three narratives reveal how the reason why the story of Perec's childhood could only be told through fictions.

Perec and Lyotard: Le Différend in W ou le souvenir d'enfance

In a 2009 article entitled "Untimely childhood in literary Holocaust memoirs and novels for the young," Vloeberghs presents distinct discursive traits arising in memoirs written by people who survived the Holocaust as children: these characteristics include playing with the concepts of time and identity. Vloeberghs praises these narratives for their creativity:

> In the context of this awareness that the historical horror of Auschwitz transcends any attempt at accurate representation […] and straightforward storytelling, each author writing about the Holocaust is challenged to probe, run up and shift these 'limits of representation' through the development of particularly innovative and creative literary modes. (52)

These "innovative and creative literary modes" are very much at work in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. The narratives are seemingly separate, and yet, when they come together, they tell the story of a troubled childhood, damaged by the events of the Second World War. And yet, apart from mentioning "la guerre, les camps" (17) at the beginning of his autobiography, Perec never refers to any specific event of World War II. The causes of his trauma are suggested and left open to interpretation. We must turn to critical and literary theory in order to understand the function of the fictional and allegorical narratives in *W*.

In 1983, Jean-François Lyotard published *Le Différend*. His definition of *le différend* deals with the fact that "À la différence d'un litige, un différend serait un cas de conflit entre deux parties (au moins) qui ne pourrait pas être tranché équitablement faute d'une règle de jugement applicable aux deux argumentations. Que l'une soit légitime n'impliquerait pas que l'autre ne le soit pas" (9). In other words, a *différend* occurs when there is an incommensurability between two discourses that cannot be bridged. It would be as if both parties spoke a different language with no common ground for understanding each other. The "règle de jugement" would be such a common discourse;

it would represent a mutually acceptable way for both parties of understanding each other, but it does not exist. The most prominent example given by Lyotard deals with survivors of the camps, who cannot provide testimony of the existence of gas chambers to revisionist historians who deny the Holocaust, because only those who perished in the gas chambers have experience the full horror of the Holocaust. Since they are dead, they cannot tell their stories. Lyotard outlines the paradox of their situation:

> Avoir 'réellement vu de ses propres yeux' une chambre à gaz serait la condition qui donne l'autorité de dire qu'elle existe et de persuader l'incrédule. Encore faut-il prouver qu'elle tuait au moment où on l'a vue. La seule preuve recevable qu'elle tuait est qu'on en est mort. Mais, si l'on est mort, on ne peut témoigner que c'est du fait de la chambre à gaz. (16)

In this first statement, the *différend* is created by each side's definition of what a witness is. There can be no agreement as, in one side's definition, witnesses are persons who can testify because they are still alive; in the other side's definition, the only true witness of the gas chambers is dead. Lyotard then describes the situation of a survivor who tries to testify in front of an imagined tribunal:

> Dans tous ces cas, à la privation qu'est le dommage s'ajoute l'impossibilité de le porter à la connaissance d'autrui, et notamment d'un tribunal. Si la victime cherche à passer outre cette impossibilité et à témoigner quand même du tort qu'elle subit, elle se heurte à l'argumentation suivante : ou bien le dommage dont vous vous plaignez n'a pas eu lieu, et votre témoignage est faux ; ou bien il a eu lieu et, puisque vous pouvez en témoigner, ce n'est pas un tort que vous avez subi, mais seulement un dommage, et votre témoignage est encore faux. (19)

Two elements of this statement are worth analyzing, as they create a double wrong for the witness. The first wrong deals with the inability to share one's experience with other people: the witness cannot make others understand the damage that has been caused to him / her. Should the witness try to speak, his / her discourse will be considered in two very different ways by the other side. The witness's discourse would present a "tort" (wrong, injustice) that has been done to him / her, while the other side would see the witness's situation only as a "dommage" (damage). It is worth noting that while both represent a wrong, a "tort" usually refers to a moral wrong that could only be corrected with reparations; in contrast, a "dommage" refers to a physical or material damage, which can be corrected by restitution. The witness who testifies is wronged as his / her discourse is denied twice. Lyotard further refines his definition of the *différend* by saying that it is a "cas où le plaignant est dépouillé des moyens d'argumenter et devient de ce fait une victime" (24). In other words, this is a case of double victimhood: the witness was first victimized in the concentration camps, and a second time through a discourse that does not allow for his / her story to be acknowledged by others.

If we take a closer look at Lyotard's argument, it becomes obvious that the problem for the witness does not concern simply their status as a witness or as a survivor; it also concerns the kind of discourses that the witness is allowed to produce. At this point, I would like to explain the complexity of Perec's situation as seen through Lyotard's lens. Since Perec did not experience the concentration camps, he is neither a survivor nor a witness of the Holocaust. However, as a Jewish person, he survived the Second World War while others were murdered, and a wrong (tort) has been done to him when his parents died. Since death is irrevocable, there is no restitution for Perec. Therefore, if Perec had written a narrative in which he had presented himself as the victim of a wrong, this discourse would have created a *différend*. It does not mean that he did not suffer from

the damage that the loss of his parents represents; it only means that Perec had to invent a new discourse that would allow him to tell his story without creating a *différend*.

Until a new type of discourse is found, the *différend* remains, which, according to Lyotard, means that there is a danger of silencing survivors: "Ce qui est sujet à menace n'est pas un individu identifiable, mais la capacité de parler et de se taire. On menace de détruire cette capacité. Il y a deux moyens d'y parvenir : rendre impossible de parler, rendre impossible de se taire" (26). Again, we are faced with a paradox: how can one speak and remain silent at the same time? In order for the victim to tell his / her story, Lyotard advocates for the creation of the new types of discourses:

> Faire droit au différend, c'est instituer de nouveaux destinataires, de nouveaux destinateurs, de nouvelles significations, de nouveaux référents pour que le tort trouve à s'exprimer et que le plaignant cesse d'être une victime. Cela exige de nouvelles règles de formation et d'enchaînement des phrases. Nul ne doute que le langage soit capable d'accueillir ces nouvelles familles de phrases ou ces nouveaux genres de discours. (29)

In Lyotard's thinking, these new discourses would allow the witness to tell their story without bringing forward any opinion or judgment as to who is right and who is wrong. Such discourses would not even break the *différend*: they would allow it to remain in place while also providing a way for the witness to speak their truth. Even though the *différend* would still stand, the witness would then have created a form of discourse that allows them to speak, and to remain silent at the same time. Concretely, this means that the moral wrong that Lyotard imagined – when the witness is not allowed to share their story with others – disappears. By creating new discourses, the witness gives himself / herself reparation: not for the original "tort" or "dommage" s/he went through, but for the inability to speak that the *différend* created.

As indicated by Lyotard, the new discourses could also create new "destinataires" (addressees), "destinateurs" (addressers), "significations" (significations / signifiers) and "référents" (referents). I will explore further the notions of "destinataires" and "destinateurs" in the conclusion of the chapter. For now, I would like to give an example of new "significations" and "référents." The most striking example in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* deals with the different versions of "histoire" that Perec mentions.[48] In the accumulation of possible meanings attached to the word "histoire," Perec distinguishes between "histoire vécue" and "histoire réelle." While "vécue" (lived) and "réelle" (real) are almost be synonymous in this context, Perec distinguishes them. He does not explain the significations of either adjectives, but their referents are different: "histoire vécue" could refer to the way Perec felt as a child, i.e. as if he was "le fils de personne" who had no memories or false memories of his childhood; on the other hand ; "histoire réelle" could refer to all the corrected versions of memories, as a well as the reality of "la guerre, les camps" which took his parents away from him. The important detail to remember is that Perec himself never explicitly connects the words "vécue" and "réelle" to any referent. As I will discuss in detail in the conclusion, Perec leaves the interpretation to his new "destinateur," i.e., the reader.

I believe that the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is the result of a *différend* in which Georges Perec would be a collateral victim of the Holocaust, since he lost his family during the war. This loss has influenced his entire life as a person and as a writer. An irreparable wrong has been done to him and his family. However, he never experienced the concentration camps, and is therefore not considered a victim or survivor of World War II: he did not die during the war, nor was he physically injured. Nevertheless, throughout his autobiography, the reader is forced to realize how much of an impact the loss of his parents had on his life and identity. One can feel the

[48] See Section IV, "Author vs. Individual".

void that his parents have left. After all, to Perec, their absence forms the starting point of *W*. Thus, the "not quite said" mentioned in the previous section stands for Perec's will to tell his story as a collateral victim of the Holocaust. Indeed, he even denies himself the status of "victime héroïque" by calling himself a "simple témoin."

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, the autobiographical chapters provide verifiable details of Perec's personal life. Winckler and W's narratives relate events that could have been part of Perec's childhood; and even though he did not experience them personally, physically or mentally, these events have shaped his life, his memories, or lack thereof. In her 2001 article entitled "The Testimony of Fantasy in Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance,*" Joanna Spiro points out that "In presenting this double narrative as his autobiography, Perec suggests that he can tell his story only by telling 'another story', that is, through what Wiesel calls perjury, through the transgression of the taboo felt by many survivors and their children" (117). Lyortard would consider this "other story" Perec's new type of discourse: Winckler and W's narratives are intricately linked to Perec's autobiography, but they are also separate from it because of their content and style: the use of a different first-person narrator in Winckler's story, and a third-person, omniscient narrator in W take the responsibility of telling these stories away from Perec. As in Lyotard's new discourse, the two narratives allow Perec to tell the story of his childhood, while keeping the *différend* intact. After all, the *différend* as Lyotard sees it, does not prevent either discourse from existing, nor does it try to create new discourses that would cancel the *différend* itself. The *différend*, as it exists, serves as a trigger for the creation of new discourses that allow their authors to tell their stories, while bypassing the *différend*.

The Structure's Significance

The structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* matters because that it creates a new type of discourse. The three narratives, and more specifically the two fictional ones, allow Perec to talk about events that he cannot claim to have experienced personally, but that shaped his life nonetheless.

I argue that the form and genre of the three narratives in *W* matter because they tell stories that "la Grande Histoire" does not tell. Of course, everyone knows about the Jewish genocide and about concentration camps. However, narratives written by children of Holocaust victims are rare. Their stories, their struggles, their victimhood are very much forgotten. Furthermore, as I have shown with the examples of Elie Wiesel and Claude Lanzmann, the stories of children like Perec might be frowned upon by survivors of the camps. At the end of the book, Perec shows that the lessons that "la Grande Histoire" can impart are often forgotten : "les fascistes de Pinochet se sont chargés de donner à [son] fantasme une ultime résonance : plusieurs îlots de la Terre de Feu sont aujourd'hui des camps de déportation" (222). In 1973, during a conflict between Chile and Argentina, Dawson Island became a Chilean detention camp for political prisoners. With this revelation at the end, the allegory of W falls apart: what should have been a didactic tale about the horrors of "la Grande Histoire" fails. Indeed, allegories typically contain a moral; they might be set in a different reality or in an imaginary world and might warn the audience of some danger and offer an alternate ending to the illustrated events. However, Perec chose to place W in the very same archipelago that was used by Chile for its detention camps, thus showing that history cannot be rewritten, it is only bound to repeat itself. No lessons were learned.

To conclude, Perec's different narratives call on readers to witness various aspects of World War II, to discover multiple stories and open their eyes to the different types of victims of

the Holocaust. This resonates with a statement of the narrator of W about life on the island. The narrator explains that the Athletes have no way of comforting the Novices because they cannot explain why or how the violence of the games became their life, and they cannot guarantee that something else exists outside of life on the island. He simply says that, "*Il faut se battre pour vivre. Il n'y a pas d'autre choix. Il n'existe aucune alternative. Il n'est pas possible de se boucher les yeux, il n'est pas possible de refuser*" (191). The expression "se boucher les yeux" is striking because "se boucher" is commonly used in "se boucher les oreilles" (to stop up one's ear) so as to prevent oneself from hearing, whereas one usually speaks of "fermer les yeux" (to close one's eyes). The verb "fermer" (to close) implies that one might also "ouvrir les yeux" (to open one's eyes). In contrast, "se boucher" (to plug, block) suggests a restriction and an impossibility of seeing. I argue that through the structure and the narratives of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec invites the reader to listen to stories that are neither his nor the reader's. Through his fictional narratives, Perec shows the importance of creating new discourses in order to expose various versions of the truth to the reader. These new discourses invite the reader not to commit the wrong of "se boucher les yeux" when confronted with the stories of collateral victims.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is as important as the content of the three narratives. It the structure becomes that allows us to understand the purpose of the narratives. The various narrators and the narrative techniques used by Perec to construct *W* all contribute to the creation of a new type of discourse that allows him to share the various stories that belong to his childhood. In his autobiographical chapters, Perec provides multiple versions of memories to show that there can be multiple versions of the truth. These

versions do not necessarily contradict one another: they can coexist within the same space, the same reality, just as the discourses of the *différend* can coexist through the creation of a "règle de jugement." The existence of one discourse does not prevent another discourse from existing.

Perec's pain and traumatic experience of growing up without his parents are undeniable. From the beginning of his autobiography, Perec suffered from a lack of agency and personal history imposed by the burden of "la Grande Histoire" before he could begin to understand the long-lasting consequences that his parents' deaths would have on his life. Through the recovery of details, photos and memories provided by family members and friends, Perec tries to recover as many pieces of his parents as he can. At the end of the first part of *W*, it is clear that he is aware that the recovery will never be complete. Yet, he still experiences feelings towards his parents that he thought were not possible. He holds pieces of the puzzle, but his story still contains holes that will forever remain empty.

Since the work of recovery never truly succeeds, a lot of things are left unsaid in all three narratives, which leaves the reader in a position where much is expected of him or her. Joanna Spiro notes the importance of the reader in *W:* "The emphasis on the presence of an audience at the tormented spectacles of W leads to the question of spectatorship in general in this text. The text emphasizes various positions from which one observes: the spectator, the witness, the traveler or ethnographer, and by implication, the reader and the analyst" (137). Whether s/he is aware of it or not, the reader is invited to take on these various roles and to work alongside the narrators in order to bridge the gaps in the stories when the narrator – especially Perec – cannot fully tell his story as it would create a *différend*. The best illustration of this occurs with the screen memory of the broken shoulder-blade: Perec does not fully explain the latent meaning of the screen memory. Instead, he leaves the interpretation to the reader. This open role that is given to the reader can be

compared to the openness created by the new discourses that Lyotard describes in *Le Différend*. By assigning the reader an active role, Perec transforms him / her into a new "destinataire" who is no longer a passive witness of the story, but an active builder of its meaning as s/he deciphers the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*.

Creating new types of discourses and spaces that demand the reader's involvement in the construction of the narratives meaning(s) is a game for Perec. In *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978), when describing the experience of the reader, Perec asserts that

> One will deduce something about it that is without a doubt the ultimate truth of the puzzle: despite appearances, it is not a solitary game: each gesture that the arranger of the puzzle makes, the makers of the puzzle made before him; each piece that he takes and takes up again, that he examines, that he caresses, every combination that he tries and tries again, every tentative movement, every intuition, every hope, every discouragement, were decided, calculated, studied by the other.[49]

The reader / new "destinataire" thus becomes an essential part of the narrative: as s/he follows the clues left by the author along the narrative, s/he is the only person who can make sense of the structure and of every "calculated" move made by the author. As such, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is a perfect illustration of the principles of Oulipo, which Koos summarized as follows:

> The fundamental principle of Oulipo was to demonstrate through experiments the essential ludic nature of literature. Among these experiments were lipograms, palindromes (Perec's contribution runs over five thousand letters), bilingual poetry, poetic anagrams and similar exercises involving the systematic replacement or manipulation of formal elements. ("Georges Perec: P or the the Puzzle of Fiction," 186)

[49] This translation was found in Leonard R. Koos's article, "Georges Perec: P or the Puzzle of Fiction." *Yale French Sudies,* Special Issue: After the Age of Suspicion: The French Novel Today (1988): 185-188.

Throughout *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and its three narratives, Perec creates and manipulates the literary form of the autobiography. The autobiographical chapters serve as a base to anchor the narratives in reality and in Perec's personal life. However, the autobiography was not the first narrative to exist in W. In fact, "What appears in *W ou le souvenir* d'enfance as the W strand was originally published on its own in serial form in *La Quinzaine littéraire*" (Spiro, 128). Winckler's narrative and Perec's autobiography were then combined with the story of W. Obviously, all three narratives develop their own story in a coherent way, and each one of them could exist separately. However, it is only when all three of them are combined that they create the new type of discourse that allows Perec to tell various versions of his story.

Chapter 3

The Functions of Repetition in Camille Laurens's Autofiction

In this chapter, we will be moving even further away from the notion of an autobiography in which author and protagonist are one and the same. While *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* includes an autobiographical narrative and two fictional ones, Camille Laurens's work is for the most part autofictional and presents female protagonists who are closely based on her. Even though Laurens and her protagonists are not identical, the latter sometimes share her first name, or the name of literary fictional characters with whom Laurens admits feeling an affiliation or a resemblance. Moreover, even though Perec wrote multiple autobiographical narratives – such as *La Boutique obscure* (1973), *Espèces d'espaces* (1974) and *Je me souviens* (1978) – these are separate works and each of them focuses on a specific aspect or time of his lives. In Laurens's case, we enter the dimension of serial life writing. Indeed, her autofictional works are interconnected because they always deal with the same themes: the loss of a child and the loss of love.

Born on November 6, 1957, in Dijon, France, Laurence Ruel – known professionally as Camille Laurens – studied French literature before becoming a teacher. While teaching French in Morocco for a decade, she started to write plays with her former husband, and later published fiction on her own. However, in 1994, the loss of her first-born child, Philippe, pushed her in the direction of autobiography and later on autofiction in order to work through her experiences of loss. For more than twenty years after the publication of *Philippe* (1995), her autofictional work has been focused on the relationship between a mother and her dead child, the end of relationships between men and women, as well as the relationship between an author and their work. Inevitably, since the stories bear resemblances to Laurens's real life, it would be tempting to read them as

autobiographical. However, as we will see in the chapter, Laurens is keen on always reminding the reader that she may or may not be the protagonist of her novels.

The word "autofiction" was coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 in reference to his novel entitled *Fils* (*Sons / Threads*). To this day, the definition of autofiction is still very much in flux. In her 2009 book entitled *Autofiction et dévoilement de soi*, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska points out that autofiction "échappe à la fixité des règles et aux identifications prescrites" (83). Therefore, before trying to understand what autofiction is, it is essential to discuss Doubrovsky's definition of "fiction" alone. According to Doubrovsky, the notion of fiction "n'est pas à prendre au sens d'inventer, mais plutôt au sens de modeler, façonner" (Saveau, 148). As a consequence, autofiction is not a work of creation that reinvents the author's life, it is a crafted version of their life: certain details may correspond to what happened in the author's real life, as much as they may differ from what happened. As for characters, some authors choose to use people's real names, but they may also decide to change them. In the end, what matters is that certain biographical details (such as names, birthdates, professions or the name of the neighborhood) are not verifiable in order to protect people's their right to privacy. This topic will be addressed further in my discussions of *Philippe* in section I and of *Dans ces bras-là* in section II.

Identity is a common theme in autofiction. In his 1993 book, *Autofictions et Cie*, Jacques Lecarme explains that "L'autofiction offre à l'auteur et au lecteur une image d'une conception identitaire instable, sans fixité, telle qu'elle est vécue dans le quotidien. Ce genre littéraire […] contraint le lecteur à s'interroger sans relâche sur la manière dont il doit évaluer l'engagement de l'écrivain dans son texte et sur la façon dont il est possible de juger de l'authenticité du propos littéraire […] le lecteur doit vouloir et pouvoir lire le récit en tant qu'autofictif" (59-60). After all, one of the aims of autofiction deals with being able to tell one's story while also preserving a

modicum of privacy by blurring the lines about where autobiography ends and where autofiction begins. Camille Laurens has become a master at playing with this line by using ambiguous pronouns: in *Ni toi ni moi* for example, she often switches between "je" and "elle" (referring to the protagonist named Hélène). Therefore, the reader might ask him-/herself whether "je" refers to Laurens herself or whether it belongs to Hélène's internal monologue. Thus, in order to avoid any confusion, when talking about the author, I will refer to her as Laurens; if I am talking about the female protagonists, I will refer to them by their names: Camille, Hélène and Ellénore.

As I mentioned earlier, the autofictional corpus that I am forming for this chapter revolves around two themes: the loss of a child and the loss of love through failed romantic relationships. The corpus includes the following titles: *Philippe* (1995), *Dans ces bras-là* (2000), *Cet absent là* (2004) and *Ni toi ni moi* (2006). *Philippe* is presented as an autobiography. However, as I will show in the section dedicated to the theme of the dead child, it also fit unders the label of autofiction. The text deals with Laurens's experience of giving birth to her first-born child, who lived only for two hours. In the narrative, Laurens includes excerpts of Philippe's autopsy report, and excerpts of legal and medical texts that seem to blame the doctor who delivered Philippe. Throughout the narrative, Laurens shares excruciating details about her feelings during labor, about the trauma caused by this loss, and how writing about Philippe has helped her start to cope with the pain.

Dans ces bras-là is presented as a novel, although it reads more like a private journal: it consists of short chapters written almost exclusively in the first person. In the introductory chapter, Laurens, as the author, points out that the protagonist of this novel is a woman who may or may not be herself. Laurens only assumes authorship of the first chapter and is not mentioned anywhere else in the narrative. The first-person female protagonist, Camille, then proceeds to describe a

number of men in her life – father, lovers, friends, soon-to-be ex-husband, psychiatrist, dead son, etc… –, her relationships with them. *Cet absent-là*,[50] a short narrative intertwined with portraits in black and white by photographer Rémi Vinet, is also presented as autobiographical since Laurens talks about some of her conversations with Vinet as they discuss which portraits should be included in the book. It also deals with the end of a romantic relationship with a man whose portrait could have been included in the selection but was not. Laurens reports that Vinet was never satisfied with the pictures he took of this man: even though he was physically present, he was always mentally or emotionally absent, and the pictures felt empty. Although the lover in *Cet absent-là* is not named, the same relationship might be at the core of *Ni toi ni moi* because the male protagonists are extremely similar in their absence and behavior. *Ni toi ni moi* was supposedly based on an email exchange between Laurens and a filmmaker who wanted to adapt one of her short text entitled *L'homme de ma mort*. However, we do not know if this filmmaker exists since only one of his emails is included in the correspondence, and *L'homme de ma mort* does not actually exist. The narrative itself deals with a doomed relationship between a writer, Hélène, and a filmmaker, Arnaud. As Laurens and her correspondent work on the screenplay for their movie, they both realize that this is an impossible project: Laurens describes a relationship that ended as suddenly as it began, without knowing why or how it really ended; there is nothing to show on screen. I chose these four works because they all contain details about Philippe and failed relationship(s) that are slightly altered, from one book to the next one.

Throughout the chapter, I include excerpts of Laurens's *Encore et jamais, variations* (2013), which is a series of essays about repetition. The essays approach the theme of repetition through various perspectives: repetition of life events, repetition as part of therapy, repetition in

[50] This title has been published with or without the dash: *Cet absent-là* and *Cet absent là*, which significantly changes the meaning of the title.

music and dance, repetition in literature, etc. I use *Encore et jamais, variations* as one of the lenses through which I analyze the autofictional corpus, because the essays often provide reflections and insights on the theme of loss. In this chapter, each theme – the loss of a child on one hand and the end of romantic relationships on the other – will be presented in a separate section though all sections address the traumatic impact on the female protagonists and examine how repetition and variation affect / contribute to the themes throughout the corpus. We will see that repetition and derivation serve a different purpose for each theme because the themes are profoundly different at their core: the loss of a child deals with a traumatic event of the past that occurred once in Laurens's life. Therefore, here, the repetition of this theme is oriented towards accepting the loss and healing from it because nothing else can be done. In contrast, we will see that the theme of failed romantic relationships deals with a trauma that can and does reoccur. Therefore, the repetition of this theme is oriented towards the future, towards gaining an insight into the causes of failure in order to avoid making the same mistake(s) again. Repetition thus becomes the unifying thread of this chapter and the focus of my conclusion, which shows how it interacts with the genre of autofiction to create another subcategory of life writing.

Why Repetition?

Encore et jamais, variations is a series of essays on which Camille Laurens worked for almost a decade. While the text notes her interests in various types of repetitions, an explanation for how the project started is more explicitly found in *Ni toi ni moi*. During their first date, Arnaud asks Hélène what she is working on. Hélène explains that she is working on repetition, all kinds of repetition, but especially the ones we cannot control, the ones we suffer from and cannot explain:

> Le projet sur la répétition est venu de là : quand j'ai buté sur le constant qu'avant moi ma mère avait elle-même perdu un enfant à la naissance […] Je me suis dit qu'il n'y avait pas de hasard dans les familles, seulement les mêmes cadavres dans des placards jumeaux, qu'on se refile de génération en génération comme les maladies et les secrets. (50)

In *Encore et jamais, variations*, she adds that even though her mother lost her third child and Laurens lost her first, "mon deuil était comme l'ombre portée du sien, j'avais en quelque sorte pris sa place dans le lit de douleur, je trimballais son paquet, ventre gravide voué au néant, cœur gros de secrets lourds dont on n'accouche jamais" (104). The play on words with the verb "accoucher" (*to deliver a child)* is extremely poignant, as both women went through the pain of losing a child after giving birth, only to feel the weight of an emotional and physical burden of which they cannot deliver themselves. Therefore, at the core of Laurens's work on repetition, there is a profound experience of loss that cannot be fully explained. Laurens puts this experience forward in the opening chapter of *Encore et jamais, variations*. When she describes the project, she asks a series of questions about repetition:

> C'est que je ne sais pas quoi faire de ça, de cette chose qui insiste et revient sans mon accord, contre lui parfois. Répétons-nous pour notre malheur ou notre plaisir ? Répéter, est-ce vivre à grandes guides ou bien mourir à petit feu ? Se hâter vers un idéal, se blottir dans le bien-connu ou radoter sa propre impuissance ? Est-ce progresser, reculer, piétiner ? Si c'est un mouvement, alors vers où ? Vers une origine rêvée, en arrière toute, vers un horizon pur, droit devant, direction perfection ? Si c'est une danse d'un pied sur l'autre, du sur-place dandinant et velléitaire, alors pourquoi ? Pourquoi ne pas cesser de répéter ? Pourquoi continuer à recommencer ? Qu'y a-t-il dessous ? Qu'y a-t-il au bout ? (12)

There are three parts to this excerpt. The first sentence approaches the theme of repetition from the perspective of identity: Laurens calls it "cette chose" (*this thing*), a term that is used when we do not know what to call something, or when the speaker wants to distance him-/herself from the object they are talking about. From "Répétons-nous" to "impuissance," we can first observe a shift in the narrative voice: the "je" of the first sentence refers to Laurens herself and involves only her. However, the use of "nous" and of verbs in the infinitive in the questions that follow are more inclusive and encompass everybody, as if to suggest that repetition is present in everyone's life. Even though Laurens's interest in repetition is deeply personal, the questions she presents are meant to involve the reader: by reflecting on the same questions, the reader might understand his / her own experience(s) with repetition.

The second shift concerns a focus on the purpose of repetition. "Répétons-nous pour notre malheur ou notre plaisir?" is notably a question that Freud has asked in works such as "Remembering, repeating, working through" (1914) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). These works explore repetition not only as a symptom[51] of a repressed trauma trying to resurface and make itself present again to the patient's mind, but also as a primary therapeutic mechanism[52] through which trauma is understood and integrated in the patient's life. In each of the three questions, Laurens uses polar opposites such as "malheur" and "plaisir," which could indicate that repetition produces one or the other without any middle ground, because both of them are part of repetition: they are intertwined throughout the therapeutic process and are not easily distinguished.

[51] In "Remembering, repeating, working through," Freud describes his method and gives the example of a patient who has recurring dreams. The therapy sessions focused on repeating these dreams by having the patient talk about them and discussing their possible meaning(s).

[52] *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* presents a little boy playing with a spool after his mother's departure from the house. During his game, the boy keeps repeating "fort" (gone, away) as he pushed the spool, and "da" as he brought it back to himself. Freud hypothesizes that this game represents the child's emotions: sadness when the mother goes away and happiness when she comes back. Repeating the movement is comforting because it helps the child control and thus cope with his mother's absence.

The patient never chooses to repeat, but it is part of the healing process. Finally, the remainder of the excerpt deals with repetition's movement (past or future) as well as its purpose. As we progress throughout the various sections in this chapter, the following questions serve as an organizing principle for my analysis: What is repeated about the themes? Is it just the themes that are repeated or do their specific details (names, events) recur from one book to the next? Is there an evolution or a regression in the way these themes are approached throughout various narratives: do the female protagonists seem to have a better understanding of their trauma than their fictional predecessor? What does repetition contribute to the theme of loss over the course of the corpus: what does repetition create as a therapeutic tool? In other words, what does repetition allow Laurens to say about her son and about her failed relationships?

Repetition as a Literary Structure

I want to point out that even though Laurens's original interest in repetition sprang from her personal life, most of the chapters, as well as the chapters' epigraphs in *Encore et jamais, variations*, deal with repetition in art and especially in literature. The very first epigraph summarizes Laurens's work :

> Il y a une unité dans la vie et, quoi qu'on fasse, tout se ramène à une petite constellation de choses qu'on tend à reproduire sous des formes diverses, un nombre illimité de fois. (Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme*)

I am particularly interested in Leiris's notion about "formes diverses." Indeed, Camille Laurens does not just repeat the same themes over and over again, she also rewrites some of her works. Her autofictional novel *L'Amour, roman* (2003) is a rewriting of her novel *Romance* (1992). *L'Amour, roman* was re-published because Laurens was sued by her former husband who wanted his name

and their daughter's name removed from the work. Their names were eventually changed. Similarly, *Romance nerveuse* (2012) is an autofictionalization of Laurens's 2007 complaint against Marie Darrieusecq in an article entitled "Marie Darrieusecq, ou le syndrome du coucou." After the publication of Darrieusecq's *Tom est mort* (2007), which tells the story of a mother who lost her four-and-a-half-year-old son, Laurens accused Darrieusecq of "plagiat psychique" and claimed that Darrieusecq was exploiting the loss of Philippe to write a seemingly autobiographical narrative while having never experienced this kind of loss herself. While each of these works – as well as the ones included in my corpus – are separate publications, their plots are echoed in various media: articles, fiction, autobiography, and autofiction. In the end, even though Camille Laurens's repetitive autofictions are more or less based on her life, the type of repetition that is of interest in this chapter is purely literary: Laurens creates these repetitions in her novels, i.e., the events repeated in her works might not have occurred more than once in her life.

Tellingly, in *Encore et jamais, variations*, when Laurens describes various types of repetition that she likes, admires, and is attracted to, she talks about literary figures and introduces the concept of derivation as follows: "Mais parmi ces figures, il en est une qui me touche plus que les autres, c'est la dérivation. Elle consiste à répéter à peu d'intervalle des mots qui ont même origine, ou bien le même mot sous des formes différentes (on l'appelle alors polyptote), si bien que se répètent en variations non seulement le son mais aussi le sens" (52). The concept of derivation will become relevant as the chapter and its themes unfold, as I ask: what is repeated and what does repetition contribute to the theme? Moreover, I will come back to the concept of derivation in the conclusion when I examine what repetition means for the corpus as a whole and how it can help us conceive a new category of life-writing for the autofictional works that Laurens has created over the years.

Finally, I would like to give one more possible definition for the word *repetition*. This definition is provided by Laurens herself in *Encore et jamais, variations*, and it answers one of her earlier questions about the movement of repetition. Laurens talks about repetition in the arts, and she quotes the words of a pianist:

> Si la pianiste Hélène Grimaud, quant à elle, garde volontiers le mot de "répétition" pour sa discipline, c'est dans le sens particulier que lui donne le philosophe Soren Kirkegaard. Elle souligne que le mot allemand correspondant au terme danois est *Wiederholung*, « mot parfaitement translucide si nous remarquons que *holen* signifie chercher, au sens d'aller chercher quelque chose ». Répéter signifie donc re-chercher, aller chercher à nouveau, « ce qui implique que ce qui doit être répété ne fait pas partie des choses que l'on puisse acquérir une fois pour toutes ». Ainsi, ce qu'on va chercher lorsqu'on répète n'appartient pas au passé ; ce n'est pas une chose connue qu'on réitère, mais une chose future qu'on anticipe. (40)

In the context of music, as in the context of the corpus selected for this chapter, I propose to read the word *repetition* as a derived recurrence (i.e., the repetition of an event whose details have been slightly modified) as it characterizes the selected narratives.

In this chapter, I first examine the theme of the loss of a child. I explore the way Laurens describes her pain, what she mourns beyond the physical loss of her son, and I analyze how repetition allows her to deal with the loss by creating a new form of life for Philippe. In the second part of the chapter, I turn my attention to the theme of failed romantic relationships. I explore Laurens's attempts at representing relationships through various media (photography and cinema) to try to capture the essence of the failure. Then I analyze how the repetitions and similarities between the male and female protagonists' behaviors contribute to the reader's understanding of

why the portrayed relationships failed. Throughout the chapter and in my conclusion, I argue that repetition and derivation mirror both the traumatic experiences of loss and create a way of dealing with trauma itself. In addition, the conclusion will explore the interaction of repetition and derivation with the subcategory of autofiction, as well as the role that the reader can play to create meaning out of repetition and derivation.

I. Philippe: Dealing with Loss by Serving Justice

Philippe was first published in 1995, a year after Camille Laurens's first-born child Philippe died, only two hours after he was born. The book is divided into four chapters entitled "Souffrir," "Comprendre," "Vivre," and "Ecrire". "Souffrir" and "Comprendre" are the longest sections with about thirty pages each, while "Vivre" and "Ecrire" are only seven and five pages-long respectively. These titles read like fragments of life or like the stages of recovery in therapy. "Souffrir" presents a detailed account of the weeks and hours preceding Philippe's birth, as well as a description of Laurens's pain and state of mind after his death. "Comprendre" includes excerpts of Philippe's autopsy report and takes the reader step by step through Laurens's experience of labor in order to elucidate the events which led to Philippe's death. "Vivre" and "Ecrire" express Laurens's need to write about Philippe in order to deal with her pain, as well as to give meaning to her loss. Throughout her entire corpus, Laurens has paid tribute to her son in various ways, from dedicating *Les Travaux d'Hercule* (1994) to him and her husband, to mentioning him in the following works: *Quelques-uns* (1999), *Dans ces bras-là* (2000), *L'Amour, roman* (2003), *Le Grain des mots* (2003), *Cet absent-là* (2004), *Ni toi ni moi* (2006), *Romance nerveuse* (2009), and *Encore et jamais, variations* (2013). The loss of a child defines the female protagonists in all the titles listed above. But only *Philippe* and *Encore et jamais, variations* narrate

the story of his death and her mourning at length. In this section, I will first analyze how Laurens presents the traumatic event of losing her child. Then, I will examine what precisely is repeated about him in the books I selected. Finally, I will show what repetition has contributed to Philippe's story over the years.

Losing Philippe

At the beginning of *Philippe*, Laurens shares a fear she developed while being pregnant: since it was her first child, she was afraid of being clumsy, of not knowing how to be a good mother (15). When she finally gets to meet and hold Philippe for the first time, she is immediately reassured and says: "les gestes me sont venus, tous, comme les mots d'amour aux lèvres, et tout angoisse m'a quittée d'un coup devant cette evidence […] il n'y a rien à apprendre" (15). When Philippe died two hours and twenty minutes after his birth, Laurens's first reaction in the book is to say: "j'ai eu deux minutes pour être mère" (16). Throughout the narrative, Laurens continues to express a feeling of injustice: she did not have enough time to be a mother. Even worse, when she goes back home to her familiar environment, she believes that some people look at her with judgment:

> Il y a ceux qui me tapotent le dos et m'assurent, comme si j'avais raté mon bac, que je vais « finir par y arriver » ; celles qui sont fières de la santé de leurs enfants et laissent percer la vanité sous leurs condoléances : tout le monde ne réussit pas à *donner la vie*. (68, Laurens's emphasis)

People's remarks and attitudes towards her are extremely offensive: on the one hand, the narrative voice shows how people dismiss that she gave birth and, therefore, deny her motherhood. On the other hand, the narrative voice understands their remarks as accusations. Indeed, expressions such

as “finir par y arriver” and “tout le monde ne réussit pas à *donner la vie*” suggest that she had failed Philippe during the birthing process. The use of the idiom “donner la vie” merits a closer look. It is typically translated as “to give birth,” but when it is translated word for word, it really means “to give life,” as if a mother was entirely responsible for her baby’s life. Here, paradoxically, it is used to suggest that Laurens is responsible for his death. Over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that Laurens felt the pain of her son’s death and of their judgment for a long time. One episode anchors her pain as a permanent and constantly renewed experience. She explains that Philippe is buried in Couchey, a small village in Burgundy, in the family vault. She talks about her family and says : “chaque fois que je veux voir mes morts, je vais à Couchey”[53] (32). The tension is palpable here in the play on words: the sentence “je vais à Couchey” (*I’m going to Couchey*) sounds exactly like “je vais accoucher” (*I’m in labor*). Going into labor is equated to death, and visiting Philippe is compared to experiencing the pain of labor.

Another thought that haunts Laurens’s writing is the idea of the life Philippe could have had. Laurens points out that she and her husband had to go to the morgue to see Philippe one last time. However, it was not called a morgue but a “service des défunts” (16). She then reminds the reader of the origin and meaning of the word “défunt”: “Du latin *defungi*, accomplir. Est défunt celui qui a accompli sa vie” (16). This realization becomes even more painful a few pages later when Laurens reveals that her husband had imagined all kinds of futures for their son, such as “bébé nageur, cavalier, comédien, artiste, athlète” (19-20). She eventually punctuates this passage with an implicit reference to a famous poem by Joachim du Bellay when she writes: Philippe est

[53] The play on words is brilliantly devastating, even more so when you realize that it is real. Laurens is from Couchey, Burgundy. When I was in high school, my French Literature class participated in the selection of the Prix Goncourt in 2007, when *Ni toi ni moi* was amongst the novels that were considered for the prize. Laurens visited my high school. During the Q&A in which my class partook, she mentioned that she was able to come see us because she was visiting her family in the next town over, Couchey.

né et mort à D. Mais c'est à Marrakech qu'il a vécu entre ses parents le début de son âge" (27). In the original poem, du Bellay describes Ulysses's return home : "Heureux qui comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage, ou comme celui-là qui conquit la Toison, et puis s'est retourné, plein d'usage et raison, vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge." In Ulysses's case, coming home is a joyful event: he accomplished his journey, his destiny and he can now die happily. And yet, even though Laurens mentions "le début de son âge" (which suggests that it continues), Philippe never truly did anything in Marrakech or anywhere else. In other words, Ulysse's journey had a beginning and a successful end; Philipe's never really began.

In fact, when Laurens returns to Marrakech, people do not acknowledge the fact that she does not have a baby with her. To highlight this behavior, Laurens uses an anaphora beginning eight sentences with "Il y a ceux":

> Il y a ceux pour qui ça n'est pas bien grave…
>
> Il y a ceux qui établissent une hiérarchie du malheur : le pire, c'est quand même de perdre un enfant, un *vrai*…
>
> Il y a ceux qui me tapotent le dos…
>
> Il y a ceux qui allaient justement me téléphoner…
>
> Il y a ceux qui rasent les murs pour nous éviter…
>
> Il y a ceux qui sont contents et qui ne savent pas le cacher…
>
> Il y a ceux qui nous furent chers…
>
> Il y a ceux qui font comme s'il ne s'était rien passé (67-70)

The anaphora reinforces the idea that these incidents were not isolated; it insists on the repetitive nature of the verbal and non-verbal wounds that were inflicted on her. There are differences in how people approached the topic of Philippe's death, but in the end, Laurens condemns them all

for one reason: “Par eux, à leur insu, Philippe souffre mille morts: en faisant comme si de rien n’était, ils font comme s’il n’était rien […] Les semaines qui ont suivi sa naissance, chaque fois qu’on m’a parlé d’*autre chose*, il est mort à nouveau” (70-71). In the end, what remains above all else and is repeated over and over again, is the insurmountable psychological trauma of the experience of loss. To those who told her that the real tragedy is to lose a *real* child who had lived, Laurens answers that, “Peu importe l’âge auquel meurt un enfant: si le passé est court, demain, est sans limite. Nous portons le deuil le plus noir, celui du possible. Tous les parents pleurant les mêmes larmes : ils ont des souvenirs d’avenir” (68). With this sentence, Laurens points out that the experience of loss is not just in the past, it is also a trauma and a loss waiting to be repeatedly experienced in the future.

The Repetition of the Theme

Surprisingly, very few details are repeated about Philippe from one book to another. Only two facts are consistent throughout the corpus: the lost child is always a boy, and his name is Philippe or begins with a P. One detail from *Philippe* is repeated with a variation in *Ni toi ni moi*: Hélène, the female protagonist goes home to Burgundy to visit family and write an article about epitaphs. During this visit, she takes her daughter to visit her son’s grave. The village is not named as it is in Philippe, but it is in Burgundy, nonetheless.

In most of her works, having lost a first-born child is simply part of the female protagonist’s story, just as she is always divorced, has a daughter later on in life and is a writer. Philippe comes up multiple times in *Ni toi ni moi* over the course of Hélène and Arnaud’s relationship: during their first date, Hélène reveals to Arnaud that her son died. A few months into their relationship, they decide to try to have a baby. Hélène is excited at first: she would love for her daughter to have a

sibling. However, their relationship starts to degrade almost immediately after having made this decision, and they never have a child together. Hélène is saddened by the loss of the opportunity to have another child; it feels like she lost her baby all over again. *Dans ces bras-là* contains a short chapter in which the protagonist explains that she lost her first-born child, a son, before having a daughter. She also talks about the fact that her parents lost their third daughter a few days after her birth. *Cet absent-là* deals with the trauma of losing Philippe, as well as ending a relationship with a lover. Philippe and the lover are overly present in the sense that the novel revolves around them, how to deal with losing them and the emptiness they left behind. Yet, they are also absent from the narrative: the narrative voice describes her feeling about their absence but not necessarily about them as persons; they are talked about, but not represented in pictures because they cannot be captured: they have come to embody the very idea of emptiness and emptiness becomes them in return. I will argue that what really is repeated about Philippe, if anything, is a heavy and overwhelming sense of absence.

In her description of labor already, Laurens explains that doctors and nurses were in and out of her room, but she was mostly alone: "Je suis en sueur, débraillée. Je suis, de toutes les manières possibles, *abandonnée*" (*Philippe*, 51). Indeed, even though the baby's heartbeat was in tachycardia, nobody came to his aid until it was too late. After his death, the only traces that remained of Philippe were sonogram pictures, Polaroids taken at the hospital, and the tracing of his heartbeat from the monitoring system (*Philippe*, 23, 26). However, Laurens points out that all these traces can provide is an image, "Ni odeur, ni caresse, ni cri" (23). The senses of smell, sound and touch are missing, to the point that Laurens compares her life and her body to death. Philippe and she are both in the dark;[54] at night, her body, which was once pregnant with Philippe, becomes

[54] On page 27, Laurens says "Le bébé est dans le noir" and on p33, she describes herself "dans le noir de la chambre".

completely empty: “le silence est total, l’immobilité presque parfaite. Puis, très vite, ma poitrine se creuse, mon estomac se troue et de cette tentative de possession charnelle, la vérité soudain m’apparaît : je ne suis pas le corps, je suis la tombe” (33). Even when she tries to find traces of him, everything turns into overwhelming absence. Where there was once life, two lives, there is only death.

A similar feeling can be found in *Cet absent-là*. The primary subjects of this narrative are the loss of Philippe and the end of a romantic relationship. This autobiographical narrative is paired with a series of portraits entitled “Figures,” by a photographer named Rémi Vinet. The portraits are inserted in Laurens’s text, although in a way, they remain separate: with the exception of two that face each other, all portraits are placed on the right pages, while the left pages facing them are blank.

In her description of this project, Laurens explains that “La photographie est le meilleur support de la mort, son meilleur supporter” (35). She goes on to quote passages from Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* when he points out that there is a paradox inherent in every picture: they keep what has been photographed alive forever (“éperdument vivant”), which makes the viewer aware of the fact that what has been photographed is bound to die. In other words, a photograph represents the physical presence of something that is utterly absent. One of the longer segments in *Cet absent-là* illustrates this concept perfectly. Laurens talks about looking at herself in the mirror, and about the people she thinks about when she sees her reflection: her father, her mother, and of course, Philippe. Right after her description of what Philippe looks like in her imagination, the next page turns to the portrait of a newborn baby whose head lies in someone’s hands. In “Troubling Memories” (2009), Hannah Kilduff notices that “The way the text frames the image […] leads us to project on to this *Figure*, our knowledge and emotion for Philippe. A reader cannot help but see,

or at least want to see, an echo of Laurens's mourned child in this baby's face, especially as it is in this passage that Philippe's name is first explicitly mentioned" (377). On the page that follows this portrait, Laurens informs the reader one more time that she has four Polaroids of Philippe, taken at the hospital, which confirms that the picture on the preceding page is not of Philippe since it is not a Polaroid. In its presence on the page, the portrait of an anonymous baby reinforces the idea of Philippe's death and absence even more. In a text that deals with absence at its core, Laurens intensifies the feeling of absence by adding more layers to it: Philippe is absent at various levels – from life, from the text, from the pictures that accompany the text. As we will see in the conclusion of this section and of the chapter, Laurens's layering of absence is done with purpose.

One might say that although the theme of the loss of a child has so consistently reappeared in Laurens's work, not enough pieces of information reoccur in the corpus. Therefore, in the final section, I propose to explain that what really matters is not the number of details about Philippe, but the repetition itself, and what it might contribute to Philippe's story.

Justice for Philippe

Almost twenty years after the publication of *Philippe*, *Encore et jamais, variations* continued to pay tribute to Laurens's son. A few chapters are dedicated to him; one in particular, entitled "Liberi aut libri,"[55] stands out for the parallel that Laurens draws between the doctor who delivered Philippe, and the publisher under whom *Philippe* was first released. *Philippe* contains excerpts of the autopsy report Laurens received after her son's death. In *Encore et Jamais, Variations*, she quotes the report which points out that the doctor who delivered Philippe "aurait dû faire immédiatement une césarienne, le sortir tout de suite. Au contraire, il l'a laissé s'épuiser"

[55] "Liberi aut libri" translates to "Children or books".

(165). In the next paragraph, Laurens explains that when she left her first publisher P.O.L, she tried to get the rights to *Philippe* in order to have it published somewhere else. However, the publisher refused and instead, told her: "Ce que je peux faire, en revanche, c'est le laisser s'épuiser" (165). The repetition of "s'épuiser" is significant here because the verb has two different meanings depending on the context. In the first sentence, it means that the doctor let Philippe suffer through his tachycardia, until he was so exhausted that he died. In the second sentence, the publisher talks about discontinuing the publication of *Philippe* and letting bookstores run out of it. The first offense was committed on a person, the second one was inflicted on a physical object. In the end, both were left to die, physically and metaphorically: letting the book run out of print means that *Philippe* (the novel) / Philippe (the person) would eventually end up on people's shelves but might not be read by new generations of readers anymore, until both the novel and Laurens's son disappear from the public's collective memory. However, by constantly making her son a part of her narratives, Laurens is forcing her readers to acknowledge and remember him. In "Cet enfant-là," Daoud Najm points out that "le retour de Philippe témoigne d'un mouvement vers l'avant qui garde en suspens le deuil, car il a pour point de fuite son indicible même" (5). By making him part of her works, Laurens forces Philippe to come out of the dark: the repetition of the theme of the dead child thus seems inevitable, almost "inépuisable" in the sense that Lauren's pain may become easier to deal with over time, but the loss of a child is not a trauma that can ever be erased. As Laurens continues to evolve as a woman / mother / writer, Philippe may also continue to appear whenever the meaning of his loss comes back to haunt her.

In order to draw attention to Philippe, Laurens uses other people's discourses in her works. *Philippe* presents excerpts of medical and legal texts, along with Philippe's autopsy report and an analysis of Laurens's labor by an expert, Professor Papiernik. Three of these excerpts in particular

seem to echo each other. In his report, Professor Papiernik points out that Philippe suffered alternately from both bradycardia and tachycardia, as well as from shoulder dystocia, which has been known to impact the health of both a baby and its mother. Laurens first quotes the *Encyclopedia Universalis's* article about dystocia : "*Au cours de toutes les dystocies, si l'expulsion tarde au prix d'une souffrance réelle et possible du fœtus, il faut utiliser des dispositifs d'extraction – notamment le forceps"* (54). This is immediately followed by Professor Papiernik's opinion about the doctor's actions during Laurens's labor : "*Je ne sais pas pourquoi le Dr L. n'a pas utilisé le forceps – dont l'usage aurait pu et dû raccourcir la période d'expulsion et la bradycardie de 15 minutes qui l'a accompagnée*" (54). The last excerpt is supposed to be taken from *Droit Médical* and asserts that "*Le médecin n'a pas obligation de résultat. Mais il a l'obligation de moyens*" (62). All of these excerpts criticize the doctor who delivered Philippe by simply laying out the mistake he made and pointing out that he did not do his job fully. In "Narratives of Death: Mothering and Losing a Child," Gill Rye comments on Laurens's use of various excerpts and types of discourse in her autobiographical narrative and declares that "These documents and, in particular, the way the extracts from them are put together, work as a strong indictment of the obstetrician" (47). All of these are indeed pieces of official and public documents. They represent knowledge that Dr L.[56] should have remembered and used to help Philippe live. To my knowledge, Laurens and her husband never sued Dr. Delignette for malpractice or for the wrongful death of their son, but the use of official documents might have been enough for Laurens to publicly accuse him and blame him for his incompetence.

Finally, Laurens simply uses her most effective tool to remind others of Philippe's existence: writing. She named a book after him; she makes him a part of her protagonists' stories:

[56] The first edition of *Philippe* included the doctor's real name, Marc Delignette. However, he sued Laurens to have his name removed and his name was replaced by Marc L.

every time his name is written and printed on a page, he lives a little bit longer. Philippe has now become a recurring literary character whose story arc is only bound to keep repeating itself. As such, Philippe's life is permanently motionless and dependent on Laurens's need to write about him or not. What matters to Laurens is the simple act of talking about him. This very idea is highlighted in *Philippe*. In a passage that focuses on her former husband, Laurens writes that "Yves répétait souvent cette idée : que peu importe la durée de la vie, que, même, peu importe son effective réalité, il suffit qu'on l'ai imaginée" (19). This is the beginning of a passage quoted earlier in this chapter when Lauren's husband imagines all kinds of careers for their son.[57] She concludes this passage by saying: "Philippe, sorti moins du ventre de sa mère que du rêve de son père" (20). In other words, it is enough to have imagined who Philippe could have been, and it is enough to write about him in order for him to exist. It has to be enough because a still, imagined life is all that he will ever get to live. One last great example of this idea is illustrated by the death announcement that Laurens includes in the narrative:

> *Les Dépêches*, quotidien régional, mentionne dans sa rubrique nécrologique du 9 février, parmi une liste de retraités, la mort de Philippe, « domicilié chez ses parents, à Marrakech (Maroc) ». Son père et moi avons été heureux de cette formulation : c'est comme s'il y avait eu, en effet, une vie là-bas, qui ne nous semble pas tant une existence anténatale, *in utero*, qu'une vie entre la naissance et la mort, sous le soleil de l'hiver africain. (27)

Les Dépêches was indeed a local newspaper in Dijon, France. It was created in 1958 and stopped its publication in 1992. Therefore, the announcement could not possibly have been published in it in 1994. I checked the archives of the other dominating newspaper called *Le Bien Public* and they do not have anything on record about a child named Philippe Mézières on February 9, 1994. Either

[57] « Bébé nageur, cavalier, comédien, artiste, athlète » (19-20).

the announcement was published in another newspaper, or Laurens invented its existence, maybe to give Philippe a proper goodbye or to create a sense of family that they never had the chance to enjoy completely.

In conclusion, Philippe's loss was extremely unexpected and sudden, so sudden that Laurens barely had time to experience what it would have meant to be his mother. The wound of his loss is unforgettable, especially since Laurens knows that his death could have been prevented if the obstetrician had taken the right steps in a timely manner. Philippe was left to die and the two of them slipped into darkness. Laurens, however, transformed her pain into a source of creativity that keeps her loved son alive, even superficially. In the last chapter of *Philippe*, she explains that she is acutely aware of the fact that writing will never replace or bring back her son. However, "On écrit pour faire vivre les morts, et aussi, comme lorsqu'on était petit, pour faire mourir les traitres. On poursuit un rêve d'enfant: rendre justice" (*Philippe,* 80). With regard to Philippe, the repetition of his death serves two purposes: on the one hand, it reflects how present the pain of his loss is in Laurens's life; on the other hand, his (re)appearance throughout the years gives her the opportunity to give him the life she had imagined for him. In "Troubling Memories," Kilduff points out the paradox behind *Philippe* and *Cet absent-là* when she writes that "The 'absence' at the heart of these narratives remains ungraspable while strangely and densely present" (370). She goes on to remark that Laurens's work is therefore "reminiscent of the Derridian notion of the supplement" (370). In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida analyzes Rousseau's way of dealing with what he perceived as society's distortion of his image and reputation. Instead of staying exposed, Rousseau decided to retreat from society and kept writing in order to show himself through his work as he wanted to be seen, and to leave a trace of his true value. Derrida explains that "the operation that substitutes writing for speech also replaces presence by value" (155). In Derrida's mind, writing

becomes a "symbolic reappropriation of presence" (155), i.e., writing becomes a supplement for presence. The concept of supplementarity is described a paradox:

> the concept of the supplement – which here determines that of the representative image – harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *zenith* [*le comble*] of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *technè*, image, representation, convention, etc, come as supplements to nature and are rich with this cumulating function […]
>
> But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of;* if it fills to the brim [*comble*], it is as if one fills [*comble*] a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of presence. (157)

If writing was the only way for Rousseau to exist and be present in society during the time of his public absence, it was also the best way Laurens knew how to deal with Philippe's death through the repetition: *Philippe* (the novel) supplements and replaces Philippe. Indeed, when Laurens writes about Philippe, each narrative adds itself to his short life. Yet, writing also replaces him metaphorically since Philippe disappeared when he died, but his name and the life / lives Laurens imagined for him are forever immortalized on paper. Repetition, in this case, serves the purpose of keeping him alive within his mother's novels.

Although repetition is also used as a mechanism meant to work on the trauma of failed romantic relationships, we will see in the next section that the repetition of this theme presents some differences. For instance, when dealing with the loss of a child, Laurens always named the child after her own, and the circumstances of his death are the same from one narrative to another. With regard to failed relationships, the male and female protagonists present some similarities, but

their identities (i.e., their names and backgrounds) are different. My method of analysis will remain unchanged: firstly, I will present the way Laurens describes the relationships in the corpus. Then, I analyze her attempts at representing them through various media. I analyze the derived recurrences of the male protagonists' behaviors to understand not only their role in the failure of relationships, but also the role(s) that these men play in the female protagonists' lives. Finally, I explore the way repetition and derivation engage the reader's participation in the formation of meaning and create a new subcategory of autofiction.

II. Understanding Romantic Relationships through Representation in Literature, Cinema and Photography

As presented in the introduction of this chapter, relationships between men and women form the other dominent theme in Laurens's work. At its core is an ever-recurring experience of failed relationships. Starting in *Dans ces bras-là* (2000), the narrator and female protagonist, Camille, makes a list of the various men in her life. In what resembles private journal entries, Camille describes the men's behaviors and personalities, and classifies them by giving them titles such as "l'éditeur" (23), "le mari" (36), "le chanteur" (55), "le premier amour" (101) or "l'homme oublié" (241) to indicate only a few among the thirty-eight different men mentioned in the narrative. Most of them were lovers or potential love interests; all of them are described as failed relationships in one way or another.

While *Dans ces bras-là* presents portraits of many men, other narratives such as *Cet absent-là* (2004) and *Ni toi ni moi* (2006) revolve around only one relationship each. In *Cet absent-là*, Laurens reveals that she was in a relationship with a man who is referred to and addressed as "toi" or "tu" when she started to work on a collaboration with photographer Rémi Vinet. She even

invited this lover to be one of the *Figures* that would be included in the book. However, his portrait was not included in the collection because it was lacking in presence. Laurens reveals that all she ever saw in it was emptiness:

> L'œil visible est cerné d'un gris presque noir – une insomnie, mais sans chagrin. Car le regard n'exprime rien, ou plutôt si, il exprime son rien jusqu'à l'épuisement, c'est ça qui l'épuise, tout ce rien à moudre. Le mot qui me vient est le mot anglais *blank*, qui convient mieux que l'adjectif *vide* par lequel on le traduit souvent en français. *Blank look*, voilà : pas un regard vide, un regard plein de vide. (*Cet absent-là*, 63)

This man is physically present, visible on the photograph, but there is nothing more than a spectre to see. Throughout the narrative, Laurens reflects on the nature of photography as a medium, as well as on her relationship with a man whom she could never quite capture.

In *Ni toi ni moi*, Laurens mourns the loss of a romantic relationship through an attempted collaboration with a filmmaker who wanted to adapt one of her works. Over the course of their email exchange – of which we only get to read Laurens's emails –, Laurens offers a series of possible scenes for the script to illustrate the relationship between her protagonists, Hélène and Arnaud. However, Laurens and the filmmaker can never agree on how to make this movie because they do not understand what is at the core of the relationship they are trying to depict. Indeed, all three narratives included in this section ask the same question about love. This inquiry is best expressed on the back cover of *Ni toi ni moi* when the narrative is summarized as follows:

> Il est réalisateur, elle est romancière. Ils savent ou croient savoir quelque chose des histoires qu'on se raconte et du cinéma qu'on se fait. Et pourtant, comment enchaîner ces deux phrases qui les lient, puis les délient, ces deux plans fixes : Je t'aime – Je ne t'aime

> plus ? Qu'est-ce qui se passe entre deux ? Qu'est-ce qui passe – ne fait que passer ? Comment dire ce qui ne s'entend pas, comment montrer ce qui ne peut pas se voir ?
>
> C'est un roman d'amour ? Un roman de haine ? Peut-être un roman policier : on enquête sur la disparition de l'amour.

In all three narratives, romantic relationships are discussed at length, but never resolved. In "Écrire le cadavre de l'amour : du désamour dans l'œuvre de Camille Laurens," Joëlle Papillon captures the singularity of Laurens's approach when she writes that "Alors que dans les romans sentimentaux la lutte entre les partenaires mène à la conciliation, dans les romans contemporains la lutte mène plus volontiers à la disjonction. L'œuvre de Camille Laurens, notamment, paraît presque entièrement tournée vers cette question : *pourquoi est-ce que ça ne marche pas ?*" (173). However, I would go one step further because: while Laurens's female protagonists usually ask this question about their lovers, the same question is also asked about male friends and relatives.

Indeed, more than a lack of understanding of relationships, what can be discerned is Laurens's female protagonists' lack of understanding of themselves and of the reasons why they are attracted by certain men. In *Dans ces bras-là*, Camille describes her project as follows:

> Ce serait un livre sur les hommes, sur l'amour des hommes : objets aimés, sujets aimants, ils formeraient l'objet et le sujet du livre. Les hommes en général, tous – ceux qui sont là sans que jamais l'on sache d'eux autre chose que leur sexe : ce sont des hommes, voilà tout ce qu'on peut en dire –, et les hommes en particulier, quelques-uns. Ce serait un livre sur tous les hommes d'une femme, du premier au dernier. (16)

This quote at the beginning of the narrative shows a real obsession with men. Even though they are the topic of focus, they are treated as objects. In addition to calling them "l'objet," and reducing them to their sex, Camille treats them as objects through her use of pronouns when she says, "voilà

tout ce qu'on peut en dire." While the use of "en" is not grammatically incorrect here, it is colloquial, since "en" usually replaces things and quantities. It would be grammatically correct to use a disjunctive pronoun and say: "voilà tout ce qu'on peut dire d'eux." Therefore, through Camille's lens, men become a specimen to be studied. In fact, in "Speculum, De l'autre homme : réflexions sur *Dans ces bras-là* de Camille Laurens," Catherine Rodgers points out that "Une partie du travail de la narratrice de *Dans ces bras-là* consiste à percer ce qui unit les hommes, ce qui les définit, et on serait presque tentée d'y voir un effort pour mettre à jour l'éternel masculin" (94). Expressions such as "ce qui unit les hommes," "ce qui les définit" and "l'éternel masculin" suggest that all men in the narrative are the same in essence. They represent an archetype that needs to be analyzed. In order to understand how and why the theme of failed relationships keeps coming back, one must continue Camille's work. Thus, in the following section, I examine how the various media used in Laurens's works might enlighten the reader about the nature of heterosexual relationships. Then, I analyze the elements that are repeated from one book to another to expose the portrait of Laurens's notion of a generic lover: details of their identity (names, professions, personality traits), and their attitudes towards women (with a focus on their relationships with their mothers and the female protagonists). Finally, I investigate what repetition and the male archetype that is create throughout the corpus reveal about Laurens's female protagonists as well.

Trying to Understand Relationship through Various Media

Interestingly, in the corpus I have chosen for this chapter, men are talked about employing different media. Indeed, in *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi*, Laurens created projects to cope with real-life break-ups, which are then integrated into narratives that involve a collaboration between different forms of storytelling: text and photography in *Cet absent-là* ; text and cinema in *Ni toi ni*

moi. In *Cet absent-là*, Laurens reflects on the nature of photography and images in general as a way to understand the fundamental nature of the man who left her. In *Ni toi ni moi*, she cites the conventions of script writing to explain the shots and scenes that could illustrate Helène and Arnaud's story. As such, these various media become ways to mediate her and her characters' understanding of their relationships. In "Effets de projection : l'écriture du sujet par le détour du cinéma," Nancy Murzilli explores Laurens and other writers' use of cinema in their creation and development of characters, and she asks the following question : "Qu'y a-t-il à retirer de la double médiation du cinéma et de l'écriture ?" (204). For the purpose of this section, I would like to modify her question and ask: what is the purpose of a dual mediation via photography and cinema? In order to answer this question, I will analyze how Laurens talks about these media forms and how they reflect the relationships at the center of the selected narratives.

Even though *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi* each focus on one medium, they share a common theme best expressed by the epigraph of *Cet absent-là*: "*L'amour est l'exception du vide, mais le vide se concentre tout autour"* (Roberto Juarroz). At the start of her remarks on photography, Laurens asserts that photography "transforme un sujet en spectre" (*Cet absent-là,* 35). Over the course of the narrative, she describes the portrait that Rémi Vinet made of her lover and the idea of absence keeps coming back. At first, Laurens describes a phone call during which she could hear her lover's voice gradually fade and lose its strength, to the point that he disappeared: he was speaking, but his voice felt unanimated. She compares this phone call to his portrait in terms of their substance : "Ce sera pareil pour la photo, je n'ai pas besoin de la voir pour savoir que tu y donnes à voir ton absence […] La photographie fixera non ton apparence mais ta disparition" (34). In both instances, we find a physical manifestation of the man – his voice on the phone, his body on the photograph – but there is no presence, no substance to indicate that he is in

fact there. The photograph, in particular, should be an object to help her remember him, keep memories of him, but instead, it cannot retain him, or keep him alive or present because even in his presence, he is absent. In fact, on occasions, I have seen the title of this book written in two different ways: *Cet absent-là* which translates as "the/this absent one" and *Cet absent là* which translates as "the absent one here." In a way then, photography is the right medium to talk about this lover, even though it does not teach her anything that she did not already know about this man. It simply highlights his dominant trait and paradoxical nature. Moreover, it is also worth pointing out that in addition to his absence in the picture, the narrative voice notices her own absence in his look. The portrait was made while he was looking at her, but in her opinion, it seems that he is not looking at her or anything. She says "je te vois ne pas me voir" (64). Both of them are erased from the picture; nothing remains.

Ni toi ni moi faces a similar challenge. The filmmaker who allegedly contacted Laurens wanted to adapt *L'homme de ma mort*,[58] which he had heard her read on the radio. In the first email of the narrative, Laurens tries to warn him about the complexity of the project:

> Les deux phrases ne sont pas : je t'aime, je ne t'aime plus, qui supposent une durée, mais, en palimpseste : je t'aime, je ne t'aime pas, ce qui vous complique beaucoup la tâche ! Si vous persistez dans ce projet, il faudra faire un film où chaque image contienne son négatif, chaque visage son masque, chaque décor son envers, chaque plan son brouillard. Il faudra mettre au point un jeu de calques. Il y a toujours quelqu'un qui est caché derrière, une image invisible, une ombre au tableau. Il faudra filmer les fantasmes et les fantômes, donner sens à ce qui n'en a pas et forme à ce qui n'en a plus. (23)

[58] This title does not exist as one of Laurens's works.

Every image, every scene needs to contain its opposite superimposed in the same shot. In addition, Laurens mentions the need to use *masks* and *fog*, which conveys the idea that the protagonists would be concealed from each other when they are supposed to meet each other and exude love. The mention of masks evokes the idiom "porter un masque" (*to wear a mask*) to indicate that people hide who they truly are, a notion that will become relevant in my analysis of the male protagonists' personality. For now, suffice it to say that Laurens's vision seems impossible to achieve. In fact, in the same email, Laurens expresses her skepticism about the project when she explains that

> La cause des choses, le sens qu'elles ont et le sens qu'elles prennent, pourquoi ça bifurque, pourquoi ça dérape, qu'est-ce que j'ai fait, pourquoi tu dis ça, qu'est-ce que je t'ai fait, pourquoi tu ne m'aimes plus ? Parfois les mots peuvent en rendre compte, l'absence, ça les connaît. Mais les images ! Il n'y a rien à développer, vous comprenez, rien à déployer. (20)

In her own words, Laurens buries this project from the beginning because she does not think that images will help to show what happens between "je t'aime" and "je ne t'aime pas." Over the course of their correspondence, Laurens makes multiple attempts at describing scenes that fit her ideal. She even seems to have completed the script. However, the reader is informed at the end of the narrative that the film has not been made. The filmmaker himself does not know how to make it: there are too many "obstacles" according to him, too much to figure out (328). She finally convinces him that this is an impossible project and he encourages her to publish their emails: "je crois que tu tiens ton roman. Il faut écrire ce que personne n'entend, et montrer ce que personne ne voit" (328). In the end, cinema could also have been a good way to illustrate Hélène and Arnaud's relationship, just not in the way Laurens wanted. There would simply be a fade-in to a black screen after "je t'aime" and a fade-out after "je ne t'aime pas," but this would not be a film,

would it? The problem with this project is that both Laurens and the filmmaker know what they would like to create, they know what they want to see on the screen, but they do not know how to make it happen. Laurens admits:

> vous savez ce que je voudrais ? C'est voir non pas ces images, mais le passage de l'unde à l'autre, comment s'opère le passage, le saut de page, repérer le tournant, la sortie de route, voir comment ça tourne, ça tourne rond, ça tourne vinaigre, qu'est-ce qui se passe entre deux, qu'est-ce qui passe, comment ça se passe quand ça se passe ? Vous trouvez normal, vous, que l'amour passe ? Qu'il ne fasse que passer ? Il est là, puis il n'y est plus : vous avez une explication ? (20)

This description can be compared to the one Laurens gives about what happens between "je t'aime" and "je ne t'aime plus." The questions she asks are impossible to represent in one shot because love does not disappear in one second; it disappears over time. Its end often has multiple causes. Here, Laurens and the filmmaker are almost trying to let the shots themselves reveal the truth. In *Ni toi ni moi*, as in *Cet absent-là*, the turn to another medium proves ineffective. Laurens struggles to represent the unrepresentable: a person or a relationship cannot be reduced to a single picture or a single shot; they are complex entities, made of multiple layers. For this reason, in the next section, I argue that in order to try and understand what goes wrong between Laurens's male and female protagonists, we need to look at the layers she created for these characters through repetition in various narratives.

Building Archetypes in order to Understand Men/Women Relationships

Throughout the years, Laurens has depicted many romantic relationships between men and women in her narratives. However, even though the storylines are different, some significant

details keep coming back, especially with respect to the male protagonists. For instance, their first names all have the same first letter: Abel, Amand, André, Amal (*Dans ces bras-là*), Arnaud and Adolphe (*Ni toi ni moi*). Moreover, the lovers and Laurens's collaborators have similar professions: Arnaud and the correspondent in *Ni toi ni moi*, as well as the lover in *Cet absent-là* are filmmakers; Abel (*Dans ces bras-là*) and Jacques (*Ni toi ni moi*) are psychoanalysts. There are also a number of artists: a photographer (*Cet absent-là*), "l'écrivain", "l'acteur" and "l'éditeur" (*Dans ces bras-là*). Their professions are of special interest to Adrienne Angelo in her article entitled "Camille Laurens's Phantom Readings: Literary Allusions and Intertextuality in *L'Amour, roman* and *Ni toi ni moi*." Angelo points out that all these men "occupy positions of power within their respective arenas of employment: as filmmakers, psychoanalysts or playwrights. All three professions, it should be noted, seek to showcase, analyze and visualize 'woman' as object of the cinematic or clinical gaze" (151). Ironically enough, they are supposed to be the ones looking at women, but in Laurens's works, men are carefully being looked at and analyzed.

Angelo's remark is interesting for another reason. While these men are supposed to be looking at women, many of them would want to see women disappear instead. This is evident in *Dans ces bras-là* when Camille describes the worst men who, instead of taking an interest in a woman, want to "l'annuler, supprimer son corps désirant […] l'écraser, l'oppresser, la liquider, oui, voilà, la liquider dans le sang" (262-263). She goes on to equate this behavior with murder. Although their behavior never reaches actual physical violence, the lovers in *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi* exhibit a desire or or even possess the power to make women disappear from their sight. In *Cet absent-là*, when Laurens looks at the picture of her lover and comments: "je te vois ne pas me voir" (64), even though they were sitting opposite each other when the picture was taken. In *Ni toi ni moi*, during a fight, Hélène leaves Arnaud in the bedroom so that they can both calm

down. Whe she comes back, the atmosphere had changed completely: “Je suis revenue dans la chambre pour prendre mes affaires, c’est à ce moment-là que j’ai vraiment disparu, je l’ai vu dans ses yeux, je n’étais plus là” (238-239). These moments of disappearance characterize the relation between men and women in Laurens’s narratives: at some point in the relationship, the woman disappears in the man’s eyes, or she is never present at all. Laurens even made a pun out of it in *Dans ces bras-là* when she named one of her male characters Amand Dhombre, which can be read as “amant d’ombres” or lover of shadows.

In the end, even though Laurens’s men are different, their identities blend together over the course of the narratives. Laurens even acknowledges this uniformity in *Ni toi ni moi*. When she discusses her fascination for Benjamin Constant’s *Adolphe* with the filmmaker, she tells him : “A un moment, je me suis tellement immergée dans ces lectures qu’assez vite Arnaud, Benjamin et Adolphe n’ont fait plus qu’un seul homme” (41). However, it does not stop there. If the men are all the same, so are the women. At the beginning of *Ni toi ni moi*, Laurens tells the filmmaker: “quand j’écris les identités se mêlent : je, elle ou moi, lui, toi ou vous” (24). A little further in the narrative, when she discusses Constant’s *Adolphe*, Laurens compares Constant’s character Ellénore to her own character Hélène and goes as far as saying that Ellénore “est toutes les femmes” (42). I argue that the male and female protagonists’ identities in *Dans ces bras-là*, *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi* are so similar that they all blend together. This blending is made possible by the repetition of details such as names, professions, patterns in relationships (their sudden beginnings and ends), the male protagonists’ essence (physically present but emotionally absent), and the female protagonists’ storylines. It is also made possible by the concept of autofiction itself and by Laurens’s idea about a first-person narrator and about identity in a broader sense. In *Encore et Jamais, variations*, she explains that

> Je est donc un abus de langage, une facilité sémantique. Ce mot répété cent mille fois a pour référence une chose floue. Je est une espèce d'homonyme : il se prononce de la même façon que Je mais n'a pas le même sens. (128)

In other words, "Je" is never the same: it is always changing and evolving even though the pronoun that refers to it does not. "Je" keeps referring to the same person but at different stages of their life. This is why Laurens can afford to use "Je" and switch back and forth between various pronouns that refer either to herself or to her autofictional female protagonists. Since the reader knows that Laurens's works are autofictional, it is easy to compare the female protagonists to Laurens, notice patters, and hypothesize that the male and female protagonists are themselves derived recurrences of only one man and one woman who we can assume are Laurens and a former lover.

Not only do their identities blend together, but the family dynamics that they knew as children are also identical across genders. The lovers in *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi* both have depressive mothers. Although this detail is only mentioned in passing in *Cet absent-là*, it plays a major part in *Ni toi ni moi*. In the epilogue, Hélène is at her lover's, Jacques, a psychoanalyst, when she finds a dictionary of psychology. In it, she discovers an article entitled "Complexe de la mère morte" (363) that describes how growing up with a depressive mother can affect a child's development and personality. Among the child's traits, the following is the most significant for my analysis:

> *Il consacre dès lors tous ses efforts à la deviner, à la distraire, à l'intéresser, à la faire rire et sourire, à lui rendre goût à la vie, ce qui donne souvent lieu à des sublimations artistiques. Il s'épuise à ranimer la mère morte*. (364)

In other words, the child/son of a depressive mother will try to become her hero. In Arnaud's case, he never succeeded in bringing his mother out of depression since she is still described as depressed

in her old age. As I mentioned, this detail becomes even more relevant when we look more closely at Camille's description of her father in *Dans ces bras-là*. The father was abandoned by his mother at a young age; he is often serious, and he does not smile or laugh often. Therefore, his daughter tries to make him smile when she sits on his lap after every meal (79). Camille concludes one of the chapters dedicated to him by saying that "Ainsi se forge, au fil des mois de sa dernière enfance, son idéal d'homme, sa définition de l'homme idéal : c'est quelqu'un qui a souffert, mais qu'on peut rendre heureux" (79). The notion of an ideal is worth commenting on, first for its suggested meaning: "ideal" evokes the idea of perfection. However, as we have seen, Lauren's female protagonists are far from happy with their lovers since their relationships bear their weight of difficulties and obstacles. Secondly, an ideal can be something that we imagine, look for, create or re-create an ideal, which is exactly the case for Laurens as a writer since the male archetype keeps reoccurring in her corpus. The father is not a prominent character in any of the other narratives mentioned in this chapter. However, a similar reference to happiness features in *Ni toi ni moi*. In one of their conversations, Hélène asks Arnaud about his previous relationships. He tells her that he has not really had a long-term relationship and he wants to make sure that she is completely free to be with him. He tells her: "Je ne veux pas souffrir," then adds "Tout ce que je désire, c'est être heureux. Et tu es la femme de ma vie" (87), which Hélène chooses to believe. An example of the way Hélène brings him to life and makes him happy can be observed during one of their sex scenes. Arnaud is described as still, almost lifeless and Hélène needs to bring him back to life:

> en suivant les lignes, je donnais forme à son corps défendant, je l'informais de son existence, je la lui faisais physiquement éprouver. C'était ça, l'aimer, juste ça peut-être, à cet instant : être celle qui lui prouvait son corps, qui en témoignait, comme une empreinte sur un drap. (76)

Even though the word "heureux" is not used in this excerpt, there is a clear intention to make Arnaud feel alive and well. The emphasis in this passage is on Hélène being the hero: when she says "être celle," it sounds like she is or wants to be the only one who can make Arnaud feel alive.

It seems that both Hélène and Arnaud faced difficulties in their relationship with their parent of the opposite sex. In "Écrire 'le cadavre de l'amour'," Joelle Papillon highlights this issue and comments that "Les théories psychanalytiques voient dans le désir un glissement d'objets : derrière l'homme ou la femme désirés se trouveraient la mère, le père, ou un idéal, mais jamais vraiment la personne que l'on a sous les yeux" (175). Indeed, in the previously mentioned fight scene between Hélène and Arnaud, after Hélène sees herself disappear in Arnaud's eyes, she asserts that:

> Il avait mis quelqu'un d'autre à ma place, ou quelqu'un s'y était mis sans crier gare, quelqu'un qui le menaçait, qui avait l'habitude de le planter là, de l'abandonner, de le mépriser, de le détruire – une femme à abattre. (239)

Although she is not identified as such in this excerpt, the woman Hélène talks about is Arnaud's mother who suffered from depression for as long as Arnaud could remember. Arnaud always wanted to make her happy and help her get better but to no avail. Therefore, Hélène and Arnaud suffer from the same trauma: their supposed ideal of the opposite sex is based on an emotionally unavailable parent. While this may only be the case for Hélène and Arnaud, as we have seen in this chapter, the similarities in the descriptions of the male protagonists throughout the corpus make the individual identities of these men collapse and merge, to the point that it would be easy to hypothesize that the same man is at the center of multiple narratives. Indeed, one might also claim that their female partners represent the same woman. Autofiction is Laurens's way of revisiting the same love affair over and over again in order to exhaust it, understand it and

eventually heal from it. Autofiction allows her to recreate the same protagonists without revealing the identities of their real-life counterparts. After all, Laurens was sued twice for her autobiographical work: first, by the doctor who delivered Philippe because he wanted his last name to be removed from the narrative; then by her ex-husband in 2002, so that she would erase his name and their daughter's from one of her novels. After both cases, her books had to be re-edited and the names of the plaintiffs were changed, thus also changing the status of these works from autobiographies to autofictions. Although the form of autofiction was imposed on her by a legal decision autofiction then became Laurens's literary signature. It seems to me that the legal restriction gave her an opportunity for creativity and reinvention as an author. For years, autofiction has given her an outlet where she can repeat characters and storylines as well as develop her very own mechanism to heal her trauma.

Writing repeatedly about the same (type of) man may be the only way to truly represent him and his multitude of layers without revealing his identity. However, over time, this might prove to be a complex endeavor because the more Laurens writes about him, the more she might reveal and the more identifiable he may become to the public. This means that from a legal and a literary standpoint, Laurens needs to be careful about the identifying details she chooses to repeat. For instance, I pointed out the pattern of the male protagonists' names beginning with the letter "A." It might be the real man's initial, or it may be one of Laurens's creation that she chooses to repeat in order to make the reader think that her real-life lover's name truly begins with an "A." This detail becomes part of the game of autofiction in the sense that the reader may think s/he uncovered a truth but s/he will never be able to verify whether it is the truth or not. In addition, it is clear that the selected narratives compulsively repeat of both themes analyzed in the present chapter. As a feeling individual, Laurens cannot control the reoccurrence of these themes: trauma

does not go away because she wrote about it. All she can control is the way she repeats them, until all the layers have been exposed and an explanation has been reached. While the lawsuits imposed an aesthetic choice onto Laurens, the psychological constraints of trauma impose the need for a creative response and derived recurrences. Literature allows for this layering in a way that her projects on photography and cinema could not because they tried to capture the male protagonist in a single, two-dimensional image.

Since the works in this chapter are presented as autofictional, my hypothesis is that Laurens is the woman at the core of these narratives. She used her works to try to understand a failed romantic relationship. In fact, in "Truth, Trauma, Treachery: Camille Laurens v. Marie Darrieusecq," Leslie Barnes asserts that "Laurens's narration performs what Suzette Henke terms a 'scriptotherapeutic' function, recovering and reconstructing the order of events so as to master them" (1003). This explains the treatment of men as objects to be studied: although human beings are complex and ungraspable in essence, Camille endeavors to at least try to obtain some insights into their behavior. In her article about *Dans ces bras-là*, Catherine Rodgers reaffirms that "Camile cherche avant tout à comprendre les hommes" and that "Le livre de Laurens fait preuve d'une recherche de cette éthique de l'altérité" (101). In fact, apart from the female protagonists, women are almost completely excluded from Laurens's books and when they are included, they are directly opposed to their male counterparts. However, in studying men, Laurens also discovered something about the women who love them. In looking for what separates men and women, Laurens / Camille / Hélène uncover the opposite of what they set out to prove: instead of being able to blame the failure of relationships on men, the female protagonists are confronted with the need to acknowledge their own responsibility, an essential step toward healing and moving on without repeating the same patterns indefinitely. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that

even though the male and female protagonists are derived recurrences of each other, they are autofictional in essence, i.e., they are not real. Repetitions and derivations do not matter to them because they exist within the bounds of the narratives. Repetitions and derivations matter to Laurens and to the reader who might notice them and understand that there is a progression throughout the corpus and that these works need to be read together as a community of works that unfolds a progressive understanding of common themes. I propose to define these texts as a series of narratives that share a common theme or topic which can only be fully understood if we read the entire corpus and in the specific order of publication.

III. Conclusion

The compulsive return of the same themes – the death of a child and failed relationships – create a unique corpus out of Laurens's autofictional works. Philippe's death was first portrayed in the eponymous narrative that describes the circumstances surrounding his birth. Over the past twenty-five years, Philippe has appeared in almost all of Laurens's autofictional and fictional narratives. In all texts, the name of the dead child, and the circumstances of his death are the same. In most of the narratives, the dead child is usually only mentioned only as background information on the female protagonist. The loss happened in her past and is still affecting her. However, as we have seen, *Philippe* and *Encore et jamais, variations* provide more information: what Laurens mourns is that Philippe did not get to have the life that she and her ex-husband had imagined for him; he did not have time to do anything or be anyone. He has only ever existed on paper, in her books. This explains why Laurens was upset and hurt when her former editor (P.O.L) refused to give her the rights to the book so that she could publish it somewhere else: if the publication was discontinued and bookstores ran out of the books, Philippe would disappear again. Instead, he

keeps reappearing in subsequent narratives. At first, writing about Philippe offered a way to deal and cope with his loss. However, the repetition of his story, book after book, serves another purpose: even though Philippe is always dead in the narratives, each time his name is written, he gets a new life, a new family, and his memory lives on. Therefore, I argue that in the case of the theme of the dead child, repetition represents a movement forward: as long as Philippe is part of Laurens's narratives, we can imagine that his story is not finished yet: there may still be more to learn about and from him.

The same can be said about the theme of failed relationships. Over the course of this chapter, it has become clear that the same man is at the center of the various narratives I selected. The male protagonists of these stories exhibit many similarities: the initial letter of their names, their professions, their distant attitude towards women. However, here, the repetition is more subtle. While all the details about Philippe do not vary, with respect to the theme of failed relationships, repetition turns into derivation. In the introduction of this chapter, derived occurrences are presented as the modified repetitions of an event. In the case of *Dans ces bras-là*, *Cet absent-là* and *Ni toi ni moi* derived occurrences include the similar portrayals of behaviors and psychological traits designed to create character archetypes throughout the narratives. This derivation serves a purpose. In *Dans ces bras-là*, the narrator, Camille, embarked on a quest to understand men and their relationships with women. While describing the various men in her life, Camille keeps coming back to her father. She understands that her relationship with him has forged her male ideal: she keeps pursuing romantic relationships with men who resemble him; they are distant, depressed and she tries to make them happy. The male protagonist in *Cet absent-là* fits this description: he is strangely absent even when he is physically present. Arnaud, in *Ni toi ni moi*, resembles him as well: he is happy and in love at first, then quickly starts to disappear. As

she examines him, Laurens / Hélène discovers the missing piece of the failed relationships puzzle: Arnaud's attitude is related to his mother's depression. What we see through the derivation of these narratives is another movement forward, a progression in the understanding of the protagonists. I argue that derivation mirrors the work of repetition that a patient goes through during therapy. To that extent, each derivation brings forth details, memories and behaviors of the same type so as to acknowledge and analyze similarities over time. *Dans ces bras-là* establishes the type of man that the female protagonist is attracted to, as well as her central conflict with her father; *Cet absent-là* does not make much progress but it creates a connection between the male protagonists; *Ni toi ni moi* keeps the connection going, while also revealing the male protagonist's issue with his mother. This represents a progression in the original quest: while Camille was looking for evidence of alterity between men and women, Laurens / Hélène discovers their similarity. Therefore, derivation serves the purpose of deepening the reader's understanding of the repeated themes.

At this point, I would like to compare Perec's and Laurens's use of repetition in their works. in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec rewrites the short stories about his parents in order to modify them and correct details because he found out that his original stories were inaccurate. He keeps coming back to certain memories, such as a scene of him and his mother saying goodbye at the Gare de Lyon which is repeated three times. Each time, he adds details, as if he were remembering it more clearly. We could also talk about derivation in Perec's writing: in fact, Gaspard Winckler's mother's name (Cécilia) is strangely close to Perec's mother's name (Cécile). This detail has been used by many critics to hypothesize that Winckler is Perec's alter ego in the narrative. Another derivation could be seen in the story of W, the allegory representing the Nazi concentration camps. As we saw in the previous chapter, this story allowed Perec to talk about the camps as part of his life, even though he did not experience them himself. Therefore, Perec's and Laurens's uses of

repetition and derivation are similar in the sense that they allow them to constantly add more details to their stories and explore various aspects of their traumas. Nevertheless, one of the main differences lies in the fact that Perec uses repetition and derivation across three stories within the same life narratives, while Laurens does it across multiple life narratives published years apart.

Another similarity worth mentioning concerns the active roles that Perec and Laurens create for the reader. Indeed, while reading *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, the reader fulfills multiple roles: reader first and foremost, but also spectator, witness, analyst. Laurens demands a similar active participation from the reader. Unlike Perec, she presents her idea of the role of the reader explicitly in *Encore et Jamais, variations* when she explains André Gide's conception of his own writing:

> Dans le *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide explique qu'il écrit pour être relu, qu'il n'y a de lecture que de relecture. Si cette reprise lui semble nécessaire, c'est qu'il voit son œuvre comme un ensemble symphonique ou un art de la fugue, fait d'échos, de points et de contrepoints, de variations, de dialogues entre les genres, les thèmes, les époques, les autres et soi, qu'une lecture isolée de permet pas d'embrasser. (94)

According to Gide, reading something once is not enough: reading implies re-reading in order to understand the narrative and everything that builds it. The comparison to an "ensemble symphonique" suggests that there is a thread across the different oeuvres of the ensemble, as well as movements – an opening, a development and a conclusion – and every oeuvre adds to the thread until the conclusion. This is a perfect metaphor for Laurens's corpus, especially in terms of Gide's mention of "dialogues entre les genres." Indeed, in addition to exposing the many layers of Laurens's identity and trauma, the unique structure created by repetition and derivation demands that the reader reflect on two things: the purpose of repetition and derivation in the corpus and the

way in which they contribute to what constitutes autofiction. I argue that repetition and derivation create the kind of symphony that Gide describes. I am particularly interested in the conversations that they force the reader to have about genre, identity and readership in Laurens's corpus specifically. Everything is constantly in flux. In terms of genre, repetition and derivation create echoes among Laurens's works, which transform into a unique community of works, a community that could itself be characterized as a subcategory in the world of autofiction. Repetition and derivation also demonstrate important concepts of identity: Laurens's male and female protagonists are both always the same and different. This reflects on what happens to a person / patient who is working through trauma: the person is the same at his/her core, but they evolve as they get a better or firmer grasp on their trauma. This conception of identity is part of Laurens's idea about reading and readership:

> Plutôt que de s'offrir la possibilité d'une découverte susceptible de lui procurer un plaisir nouveau, le relecteur préfère s'assurer de retrouver une joie familière […] Chaque lecteur étant différent, le relecteur est donc aussi différent de lui-même. Sa relecture ne lui restitue ni le sens qu'il y avait trouvé la première fois ni le plaisir qu'il en avait tiré ; en tout cas, son expérience, son imaginaire, son humeur du moment, son désir aussi infléchissent sa lecture et renouvellent sont regard. (95)

This reminds us of Laurens's comments about "je" being a different person all the time: just as "je" is constantly in motion, the reader is a different person during every read, both at a meta level, the reader encounters other works and gains experience as a reader, but also as a person who is transformed by his/her personal experiences. Laurens's corpus encourages the reader to repeat and have new experiences through the same readings. The reader becomes his / her own palimpsest since (s)he keeps rewriting over his / her own experience, thus adding to it.

Finally, I want to argue that the experience of the reader reflects what Laurens has created in her corpus. Autofiction and repetition / derivation mutually allow each other to exist: since autofiction is more or less based on the author's life, it allows for Laurens's repetitions and derivations; even though the derivations we have seen are close in meaning, the narratives are still different and separate. In turn, repetition and derivation define Laurens's contribution to autofiction and to life writing as a whole: they create a palimpsestic form of life writing. Indeed, through repetition and derivation, we have seen that similarities between characters are revealed and characters archetypes emerge. With each new narrative, the protagonists are different, and yet, they remain the same, thus offering the reader the pleasure of similarity, while giving them the illusion of newness. Over the years, what Laurens has created is a corpus in which each narrative can be read on its own but is better understood through its community of works.

Conclusion

The Performativity of Structure in Life Narratives

The works analyzed in this dissertation perfectly illustrate the idea of a *will-to-form* presented in chapter 1: life writers write about their lives in retrospect, after events have already happened and especially once they managed to organize these events in a coherent way for the purpose of their narrative process. This organization, however, is not always clear and at first needs to make sense only to the life writer. As chapters 2 and 3 show, both Georges Perec and Camille Laurens write about powerful, traumatic, life-altering experiences that left profound marks on their lives and identities as individuals and as writers. The traumatic experiences that they survived eventually resurface and dictate the structures of their narratives, thus revealing aspects of the trauma they suffered that are not explicitly expressed or dealt with throughout the narratives. In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Perec includes three narratives and often presents two or more versions of events. These constraints are self-imposed for personal and professional reasons.[59] For Laurens, repetition is clearly motivated by her personal interest in the subject matter and her experience with psychotherapy. In any case, the contents of Perec's and Laurens's works exhibit performances of identity, while the structures have a performative component: the narratives accomplish more than sharing their respective author's experience; the structures are the final pieces of each author's psychoanalytical puzzle. In the description of the performative potential of life writing, Smith and Watson declare that,

[59] See Introduction, p8. In *Abrégé de littérature potentielle* (2002), Raymond Queneau refers to the members of Oulipo as "rats qui construisent eux-mêmes le labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir" (6). Perec was a member of Oulipo and often innovated and experimented with the structure of his narratives. Laurens is not a member of Oulipo, but the fact that she uses repetition and variations throughout the works I selected shows that they are important to her. If repetitions and variations are not constraints for her, they are certainly a sort of signature which she chooses to reiterate from one narrative to another.

> A *performative view* of life writing theorizes autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects, rather they are produced and reiterated through cultural norms, and thus remain provisional and unstable. (145)

This view perfectly describes the works I selected: the identities they present are constantly being worked on. The authors' use of structures that are unique to them and their reliance on psychoanalysis leave the door open to changes in the protagonists' stories. The nature of their trauma evolves through the narrative. The form and content of these life narratives turn writing into a place where understanding and healing can begin to happen.

As detailed in chapter 1, *performance* relates to the construction of specific identities; *performativity* concerns a narrative's ability to transmit ideas that are only implicit in the text, and therefore provide an additional message to the narrative. Perec's performance of identity arises out of the recovery of memories and objects that help him assert his identity as his parents' son, which was not a self-evident truth at the beginning of the narrative. The performative aspect of his narrative is the result of the new discourses that he creates: Perec shows that as far as he is concerned, there is always more than one version of history and of the truth, and these versions can coexist in the same space. My analysis shows that Perec integrated two fictional stories in his life narrative in order to shed light on a part of his identity that was not easy to express or claim about himself: he survived World War II, but he too was a victim. While his parents were harmed physically—they died in concentration camps—he suffered emotionally. In his autobiographical narrative, Perec admits that he does not know what he wants most: "être découvert, rester caché." I argue that the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* allows him to do both. The author's ultimate power derives from the structural resistance to a definitive interpretation: the narrative

provides readers with just enough clues to help them understand how the different narratives are related and why two of them had to be fictional, while never explicitly revealing Perec's reason(s) for structuring the narratives the way he did. Furthermore, Perec never allows himself to adopt the identity of a "victime héroïque" and remains a "simple témoin" instead. Nevertheless, I argue that Perec is both. The form and content of *W* reveal that he was a different kind of victim: Perec and other surviving orphans are unacknowledged victims of the Holocaust. Through *W*, Perec acknowledges them and gives them representation.

In Laurens's works, performance and performativity are related: through repetition, Laurens and her protagonists enact and assert pieces of an identity that was shattered because of traumatic experiences. Throughout her autofictional corpus, Laurens's protagonists perform the identities of mother, daughter, lover, wife, writer, and woman. Since the repeated themes of her works deal with different identities, the narratives are marked by at least two performative aspects: making Philippe a part of her protagonists' lives allows Laurens to keep her son alive forever, to give him the life he never had. In a sense, repetition is the most appropriate way to talk about absence because it creates a space where absence is erased. At the same time, repeating the same struggles and dynamics in relationships between men and women eventually reveals something unexpected: Laurens and her protagonists originally set out to investigate what all the men in their lives had in common, thinking that these men were the reason why the relationships ended. However, through repetition and the analysis of various relationships, the female protagonists discover that they themselves suffer from the same trauma that plagues the men they loved they idealized their parent of the opposite sex, tried to make them happy when they were depressed and eventually became involved with romantic partners who resembled the idealized parent. Looking beyond the narratives I selected, it is interesting to note that after *Ni toi ni moi* (2006), Laurens's

work changed: she published more essays and returned to theater and fictions, that is, the genres of her first publications. Her protagonists are still female, but their ages vary and now include children and adolescents. After 2006, romantic relationships are no longer prominent: they are either non-existent or face new challenges. Therefore, I argue that the repetition of this theme performs the role of a scriptotherapy, that is to say, the use of writing as a therapeutic method.

It is important to remember that the method I used throughout this dissertation might not be relevant for other life narratives. It is appropriate for Perec's and Laurens's works because both implicitly lay out their methods in their narratives. Perec and Laurens use psychoanalysis and repetitions with variations for different reasons and to different ends. The creation of structures that mirror their traumatic experiences and psychoanalytical processes almost seems like a game for the selected authors, but it is "not a unidirectional movement of the writer to the reader, this is a double movement" (Ferreira-Meyers, 2012, 108). Doubrovsky even wrote: "the readers support us, provided we really give ourselves away, they feed on us, we on them, there is transfer, transfusion of life" (1999, 47). In Perec's and Laurens's narratives, all the reader needs to do is notice the patterns or repetition, clues and follow the threads. By designing such unique structures, Perec and Laurens also create a new subclassification of life writing which I believe is best described as investigative and demands a specific kind of reader: one who will agree to play the roles assigned to him / her (reader, witness, analyst, investigator) and connect the dots between the clues. The reader who chooses to follow the writer's method then becomes a companion, someone without whom the entire narrative would not unfold. Not every reader will notice and follow the method, but those who do get closer to the truth of the narratives.

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