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Unfettering Constraint: Deconstruction and the question of interpretation in the work of Georges Perec

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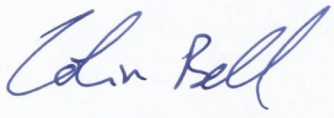

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A: Works by Perec

BO: *La Boutique Obscure: 124 rêves.*

BPBA: *Beaux présents belles absentes.*

CAB: *Un cabinet d'amateur.*

CSL: *Cantatrix Sopranica L. et autres écrits scientifiques.*

DISP: *La Disparition.*

EE: *Espèces d'espaces.*

EMM: 'Ecriture et mass-media'

GO: *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go.*

HQD: *Un homme qui dort.*

IO: *L'infra-ordinaire.*

JMS: *Je me souviens.*

JSN: *Je suis né.*

LC: *Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante.*

LG: *L.G. Une aventure des années soixante.*

PC: *Penser/Classer.*

PLRF: 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain'

QPV: *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?*

REV: *Les Revenentes.*

V: *Vœux.*

VME: *La vie mode d'emploi.*

W: *W ou le souvenir d'enfance.*

53J: *53 Jours.*

B: Cahiers Georges Perec

CGP1: *Colloque de Cerisy.*

CGP2: *W ou le Souvenir d'enfance: une fiction.*

CGP3: *Presbytère et Prolétaires: le dossier P.A.L.F.*

CGP4: *Mélanges.*

CGP5: *Les poèmes hétérogrammatiques.*

CGP6: *L'œil d'abord...Georges Perec et la peinture.*

C: Le Cabinet d'amateur

cab1: *Miscellanées.*

cab2: *L'Autobiographie.*

cab3: *Miscellanées II.*

cab4: *Mots Croisés.*

cab5: *L'Autobiographie (deux).*

cab6: *J.R.*

D: Other

CP: *La carte postale de Socrate à Freud et au-delà.*

DISS: *La Dissémination.*

ED: *L'écriture et la différence.*

GR: *De la grammatologie.*

MC: *Les mots et les choses.*

MP: *Marges de la philosophie.*

POS: *Positions.*

PSY: *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre.*

SFL: *Sade, Fourier, Loyola.*

S/Z: *S/Z.*

Introduction

> Il semble que plus la précision de ta perception augmente, plus la certitude de tes interprétations diminue.
>
> . . .
>
> La pluie vient. Tu ne sors plus de la maison, à peine de ta chambre. Tu lis à voix haute, tout le jour, en suivant du doigt les lignes du texte, comme les enfants, comme les vieillards, jusqu'à ce que les mots perdent leur sens, que la phrase la plus simple devienne bancale, chaotique. Le soir vient. Tu n'allumes pas la lumière et tu restes immobile, assis à la petite table près de la fenêtre, le livre entre les mains, ne lisant plus.
>
> – *Un homme qui dort.*

> J'essayais d'envisager, le plus calmement possible, toutes les hypothèses que suggérait cette lettre. Etait-elle l'aboutissement d'une longue et patiente recherche, d'une enquête qui, peu à peu, s'était resserrée autour de moi? [...] Je lisais et relisais la lettre, j'essayais d'y découvrir chaque fois un indice supplémentaire, mais je n'y trouvais que des raisons de m'intriguer d'avantage.
>
> – *W ou le souvenir d'enfance.*

> Derrière la forme il n'y a souvent que maladie.
>
> – Raymond Queneau, computer generated aphorism.

> [L]e secret de la lecture, s'il est quelque part, est dans la rébellion, non dans l'allégeance!
>
> – Marcel Bénabou, *Jette ce livre avant qu'il soit trop tard.*

The prolific body of work which Georges Perec produced in a remarkably short period of time is notoriously heterogeneous (from 1965, the date of publication of his first novel, *Les Choses*, until his death in 1982, his published work includes some nine novels, two plays, two collections of poetry as well as many unclassifiable prose works of greater and lesser length). Apart from any perceived 'difficulty' (and Perec was one of the most readable of the 'serious' writers of the period) it would seem that it was this stubborn versatility – or wilful unpredictability – which was responsible for his lack of public success during his writing life. It is true that *Les Choses* was a surprise best-seller, winning the Prix Renaudot in 1965. It is also true, however, that he effectively annulled this success by following the sombre

sociological – to limit ourselves to surface descriptions – *Les Choses* with the frivolous Queneauesque *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?*; and that this was in turn followed by the oppressive Kafkaesque *Un homme qui dort*; and that this was followed by the eccentric detective-style novel *La Disparition*; and so on, until a bewildered public could once again recognise something of Perec's 'style' in the apparently more classically realist *La Vie mode d'emploi*, his career being bookended with success when this latter won the Prix Médicis in 1978.

Ironically, since Perec's death, it has been this very diversity which has, in large part, contributed to his being considered one of the great French writers of the latter part of the twentieth century. It is also true, however, that those who praise this diversity also search for a certain uniformity: amongst Perecian critics, there is a tendency to look for a unifying factor, something that would group Perec's output into one coherent *œuvre*. Warren Motte, for example, one of the first Anglophones to write on Perec, comments that "the extreme heterogeneity of his writings makes the search for the constant far more problematic than it might otherwise be in a more homogeneous body of work" (Motte, 1984, p11) – the difficulty of the quest does not seemingly invalidate it. This constant has long since been found: it is what is known as *contrainte formelle*, formal constraint. For, irrespective of their individual methodologies, all Perecians agree that it is the use of formal constraint running through Perec's work which unifies it, turns it into the work of one man rather than some "machine à produire des textes" (PC, p9), as Perec once jokingly referred to himself. And, indeed, this fact would seem to be indisputable: Perec's first novel to be written *sous contrainte* was *La Disparition*; subsequent to this, all of his novels, his two collections of poetry and numerous shorter prose works were equally produced by his reliance on constraint. What, therefore, is this *contrainte formelle* which no reading of Perec can ignore? Let us make some preliminary points before coming to the more precise meaning of the term as employed by Perec (to a certain extent, the following discussion presupposes an acceptance of the Oulipian definition of constraint as the distinction we are about to make between constraint and convention relies as much on the meanings the

Oulipians give to these words as on their everyday meanings – we will discuss the Oulipo in more detail below).

Constraint, firstly, should not be confused with convention, as it is in the following passage: "We went with a divining-rod through the art of the past and the present. We showed only that art which lies untouched by the constraint of convention [...] and does not walk with the crutches of custom." (Franz Marc, foreword to the 2nd edition of the *Blaue Reiter*, quoted in Pierce, 1976, p3). In its generally accepted meaning, convention refers to a rule or set of rules agreed by the community at large and (as the Oulipians would have it) imposed on an individual from the outside (OED: General agreement or consent, deliberate or implicit, as constituting the origin and foundation of any custom, institution, opinion, etc., or as embodied in any accepted usage, standard of behaviour, method of artistic treatment, or the like). This is particularly evident in the case of social, political, moral or religious conventions. It is equally true in the case of literature, with one added twist: what is initially invention soon becomes convention. That is to say that, for example, the sonnet, the three unities of classical theatre or the narrative norms of realist fiction were all initially innovative when first used. However, as time passed, they assumed a restrictive or normative role; in time, they solidified and public opinion and good sense would not admit of a period when they did not exist. When this happens, these immutable laws are imposed on writers who, if they wish for their work to be considered 'good', must obey them – they are not chosen by individual writers but are externally decreed... until such time as a subsequent generation rejects them, inventing a new form which in turn becomes a convention. This, at least, is the meaning given to convention by all new artistic movements as, in order to justify their existence, they must qualify existing artistic practice as irrelevant (OED: Accepted usage become artificial and formal, and felt to be repressive of the natural in conduct or art; conventionalism). In short (and, again, largely from an Oulipian viewpoint), convention differs from constraint in two ways: it is externally imposed and it is a historical phenomenon, literary conventions often reflecting the social conventions of a given period. It could also be argued that there is no means of clearly

demarcating the meaning of convention from constraint: on the one hand, the choice of the term constraint is an unfortunate one as it gives rise to a certain confusion; on the other hand, it could be said that the semantic charge Oulipians give to constraint is designed to undermine the notion of convention from within.

All art forms are of course, to a certain degree, subject to their own peculiar conventions. What is particularly interesting about literature is the fact that it is subject to two conventions: the first is evidently literary, these are the structural conventions mentioned above; the second is linguistic, since language itself is a set of rules and, if we wish to be understood, we must follow them. For, as Ferdinand de Saussure remarked: "La langue ne peut [...] être assimilée à un contrat pur et simple, et c'est justement de ce côté que le signe linguistique est particulièrement intéressant à étudier; car si l'on veut démontrer que la loi admise dans une collectivité est une chose que l'on subit, et non une règle librement consentie, c'est bien la langue qui en offre la preuve la plus éclatante." (Saussure, 1972, p104). This can be expanded to the realm of literature as, though there is no grammar of literature in the strict sense that there is a grammar of language, there is nonetheless an ill-defined system which permits judgements to be formulated: while a sentence can be grammatically correct or incorrect, literature can be either good or bad. Most often, when formulated by literature as an institution (as in the case of normative journalistic criticism), this judgement is based on the work's adherence to or deviation from convention. We will see that, in Perec's hands, constraint undermines rather than reinforces the structural and linguistic conventions which the literary institution is founded on.

We have so far been implicitly defining constraint negatively in relation to convention and it is now time to examine it positively. It might therefore be helpful to examine the dictionary definitions of the terms which make up the expression *contrainte formelle*. The following have been taken from Le Petit Robert:

contrainte n. f. • XIIe; de *contraindre*

1♦ Violence exercée contre qqn; entrave à la liberté d'action.
2♦ Règle obligatoire.
◊ Gêne, retenue; le fait de se contraindre.
3♦ Littér. État de celui à qui l'on fait violence.
4♦ Dr. Acte de poursuite, mandement destiné à permettre à l'administration de recourir aux voies d'exécution contre un débiteur.
5♦ Phys., géophys. Ensemble des forces qui, appliquées à un corps, tendent à le déformer.

formel, elle adj. • v. 1270; lat. *formalis,* de *forma* → forme

1♦ Dont la précision et la netteté excluent toute méprise, toute équivoque.
2♦ Qui concerne uniquement la forme.
◊ Qui considère la forme, l'apparence plus que la matière, le contenu.
3♦ Philos. Qui concerne la forme, qui possède une existence actuelle, effective.
4♦ Log., math. Qui concerne la forme, l'ensemble des relations entre éléments.

Bearing in mind the meaning of the expression as understood in Oulipian practice and lifting the second meaning of both *contrainte* and *formel(le)*, we are now in a position to define *contrainte formelle* as "une règle obligatoire qui considère la forme, l'apparence plus que la matière, le contenu." (Though we have not evoked the multiple meanings of each term simply to show that we are capable of using a dictionary: in fact, the plurality of complex meanings which this apparently simple concept holds will be of importance to us as we attempt to 'unfetter' the notion of constraint. We will return to this throughout the thesis). However, it was implied above that constraint, in that it differs from convention, is not imposed from the outside. We therefore need to make the following amendment to our working definition: *contrainte formelle* is "une règle – imposée par l'individu qui la subit – qui considère la forme, l'apparence plus que la matière, le contenu."

Thus far, we have considered *contrainte formelle* independently of any reference to the specific case presented by Perec. Where then did he take the term from and can the above definition be applied to his version of constraint? In a modern context, the expression is not the sole property of Perec nor, indeed, is it his invention. It is rather the property, as it were, of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Oulipo), a group co-founded by Raymond Queneau and François le Lionnais in 1960 and which survives to

the present day. The aim of the group is to invent and resurrect formal tools which can be used for the production of literary texts. Aesthetically, the Oulipo considers that the more rigid the tool (constraint), the greater the value of the text it produces. Though this, of course, represents an ideal situation: care is taken to distinguish the constraint from the text it produces and a constraint with a high aesthetic value may produce a text with a low aesthetic value (there is even a debate within the Oulipo as to whether the constraint is actually a work of art in itself or whether it is merely the 'scaffolding' which is used in the creation of a work of art). In any case, Perec joined the Oulipo in 1967 and henceforth his work was marked by their conception of formal constraint.

Unfortunately, in none of their collective writings did the Oulipo see fit to define what constraint is (though it is clear that, to them at least, it stands in opposition to convention), preferring simply to present a list of constraints followed by short texts produced by said constraints. Indeed, the definition we provided above is rather heuristic, based as it is on an observation of Oulipian practice and not theory. Nor, though he frequently made use of the expression, did Perec ever provide a definition of *contrainte formelle*. Perhaps the closest which any Oulipian has come to a definition is the following text by Jacques Roubaud (currently the 'senior' Oulipian, though by no means their leader): "Les contraintes sont présentées de manière explicite, systématique et peuvent être écrites dans le langage de la logique mathématique. Les textes Oulipiens sont alors des *conséquences littéraires de ces axiomes*, selon des règles de déduction (seulement partiellement formalisées, elles, bien entendu) qui en font l'analogue des chaînes de théorèmes, corollaires et scholies, dont se bâtit un texte mathématique" (Roubaud, 1995, p211, author's emphasis). This passage maintains the distinction between the constraint and the text it produces, though it makes clear that the text actually is directly produced by the constraint.

Perhaps some examples of simple constraints will clarify these various definitions (the 'simple' refers to the formulation of the constraint, not necessarily to its execution); let us look at a structural (narrative) and a linguistic constraint, as we implied above that these are the most common literary forms of constraint. As an example of a narrative constraint, consider

the three characters A, B, C and the three objects x, y, z. The constraint dictates that, in the story to be told, each character must possess each of the objects in turn (assuming, of course, that the same object cannot simultaneously be possessed by two characters). An Oulipian will 'solve' the constraint before considering the story; the answer being as follows:

	Chronology		
A	x	y	z
B	y	z	x
C	z	x	y

So when A has x, B has y and C has z; when A has y, B has z and C has x; when A has z, B has x and C has y. It is clear that the constraint pertains only to the form and, the form being fixed, it is up to the writer to invent a content which will justify it: his story should make the constraint seem 'natural', though it is in no way determined by the constraint. Equally, even though the constraint is present at every level of the text, it is not the text. An example of a linguistic constraint would be *la contrainte dite du prisonnier*: in this fictitious situation, a prisoner must attempt to fit as much text as possible onto his limited supply of paper. He therefore eschews all letters with ascenders and descenders in order not to waste space: see, for example, a text by an apprentice Oulipian in a recent issue of the *Magazine Littéraire* devoted to the Oulipo: "moisir, moisir, moisir: vois nos mois sans amour nous n'avons vu ni nos mères ni nos sœurs..." (*Magazine Littéraire*, no. 398, p27). Once again, the content of the text is not affected by the constraint, simply the form.

If one maintains the standard form and content distinction, then it can be stated, as above, that formal constraint, as its name indicates, affects only the form and not the content. However, it is our opinion that the use of *contrainte formelle*, while not abolishing said distinction, nonetheless renders it problematic. In this situation, it might be more appropriate to speak of *texte* rather than of *sens*, as this former goes some way to blurring the form/content dichotomy. In the following quotation then, the word 'sens' has

been excised and 'texte' has been grafted into its place, a grafting which later pages will have to justify: "La production [du texte] est soumise à certaines contraintes: cela veut dire que les contraintes ne limitent pas [le texte], mais au contraire [le] constituent; [le texte] ne peut naître là où liberté est totale ou nulle: le régime [du texte] est celui d'une liberté surveillée. A vrai dire, plus on entre profondément dans une structure sémantique, plus il apparaît que c'est le front des contraintes, et non celui des libertés qui définit le mieux cette structure." (Barthes, 1967, p168). This provides a subtle alternative to the Oulipian view that the constraint and the text it produces are distinct: in the present case, constraint *constitutes* the text, and is therefore caught up in the textual shifts which occur in the reading process, constraint evolces with the text.

In reading Oulipian texts in general, and Perec's work in particular, it would seem therefore that the 'constraint effect' cannot be ignored. This expression is a paraphrase of Michael Riffaterre's 'automatism effect', a phrase by which he means that, when reading the Surrealists' automatic writings, one sees the automatism before one sees the text, and that the automatism produces a type of text which is *sui generis* (Riffaterre, 1974, p224). That Perecian critics almost always read his work in light of his use of constraint testifies to the powerful attraction of the 'constraint effect' – justifiable if one considers that it is the use of constraint which makes his work unique. It is also understandable given that Perec – unlike Raymond Roussel, who only revealed his *procédé* in a posthumous pirouette – frequently commented on his use of constraint; indeed, he seems to have been loathe to discuss any other aspect of his work. As Warren Motte comments, "[a]pparemment, Perec souhaitait que ses lecteurs prennent conscience du procédé, et tenait à focaliser leur attention sur cet aspect de son écriture" ('Jeux Mortels', in *Etudes Littéraires*, vol. 23, no. 1-2, 1990, p43).

Even when the mechanisms of a particular constraint remain hidden in the text, Perec always seemed to wish for the 'constraint effect' to be *lisible*, either by incorporating meta-textual allusions to it in the work it generated or simply by explaining himself in interviews. Constraint is therefore all

pervasive and Warren Motte, again, referring both to the heterogeneity mentioned above and the consistent use and visibility of constraint, writes that "[b]y the same token, Perec's writings appear to resist interpretation through the use of most pre-elaborated critical schemes" (Motte, 1984, p16). How then have Perecian critics read constraint, and have they managed to find new interpretative tools to measure up to this new form of writing?

In short, two particular critical methodologies dominate, to the virtual exclusion of any others, the secondary literature devoted to Perec. Such is, in any case, our claim, though it is a claim reinforced by the comments of a leading Perecian, Eric Beaumatin. Commenting precisely on the approaches normally taken, Beaumatin refers to the "l'insistante ardeur que mettent les perecquiens en leurs débats à gloser et tenter de résoudre ces contradictions entre positions biographistes et, pour aller vite, structuralistes" (Eric Beaumatin, 'L'homme et l'œuvre, ou comment s'en sortir', in CGP4, 1990, p12). He goes on to add that the first of these two trends, the biographical reading of Perec's work, can in part be explained by friendship (a good number of Perecians seem to have known the writer) and that the second of the two trends, the Structuralist reading of his work, can in part be explained by the intellectual fashion of the time. The biographical reading attempts to answer the 'why' of constraint: it attempts to determine what it was in Perec's psychological make-up, which events from his past led him to rely so heavily – some would say compulsively – on constraint as a creative tool. The Structuralist reading of his work attempts to unearth the constrictive mechanisms at work in Perec's texts – those texts for which the constraints have not been completely explicated by Perec – before attempting to create a broader signification from these archaeological remains.

An analysis of both these methodologies will be undertaken in the thesis proper, so we will limit ourselves now to some brief comments as to why they, while no doubt a necessary point of departure in the field of Perecian criticism, need to be re-evaluated and perhaps jettisoned. In our opinion, the biographical reading is the more flawed of the two methodologies for, in a time of textual experimentation and the so-called 'death of the author', it reintroduces the writer's private life as an object for scrutiny. That Perecian critics speak of a 'textual Perec' in an attempt to make this methodology

appear more contemporary in no way alters the fact the they are attempting to explain the work by the life. This is all the more offensive as the use of constraint is a highly literary technique and entails a good deal of reflection on the nature of literature itself – to annul it with some psychological compulsion is unfortunate. The Structuralist methodology is more respectful of the work's *littérarité* but, somewhat paradoxically, is rendered less effective than is usual by the work's already highly formalistic nature. What we mean by this is that, when applied to more 'traditional' texts, a formalist or Structuralist mode of criticism can throw up many hitherto hidden 'deep' or 'universal' structures and can be a useful means of providing alternatives to humanist readings of literature. However, when applied to a body of work which is itself highly formalist, which has its own deep 'individual' structures (individual, because each constraint is unique, there is no universal constraint), then Structuralism can quickly become redundant. Having catalogued, classified and explicated the internal logic of the constraints present in a given text, there is little else for a formalist critic to do (and, as Perec's texts constantly encourage the reader to look for the constraints they contain, it cannot be said to constitute an iconoclastic methodology, as is occasionally claimed on its behalf). Formalist readings of Perec are therefore rapidly obliged to take a step beyond formalism – unusually, this step is generally in the direction of a biographical reading, and is the so-called resolution of the contradictions mentioned above by Beaumatin.

While it is undoubtedly necessary to move 'beyond' formalism (though building on the initial work of the formalist Perecians), it is equally necessary to avoid falling into the biographical trap. In our opinion, the obvious methodology to adopt in order to achieve this is Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. This is because, as Derrida has often remarked, deconstruction makes use of structuralist tools, while simultaneously moving beyond Structuralism's static and spatial mode of analysis. See, for example, his comments in a 1982 interview: "Déconstruire, c'est un geste à la fois structuraliste et anti-structuraliste: on démontre une édification, un artefact, pour en faire apparaître les structures, les nervures ou le squelette, comme vous disiez, mais aussi simultanément, la précarité ruineuse d'une structure

formelle qui n'expliquait rien, n'étant ni un centre, ni un principe, ni une force." (Derrida, 1992, p88). (It is important to note that the move 'beyond' formalism is only possible because of the success of formalist readings; it is equally important to note that this step beyond into the 'post' of post-structuralism is more a slight shift in emphasis than a radical break.) Deconstruction will allow us to retain the emphasis on constraint as a constant presence in Perec's work, but will also allow us to treat it as plural, that is to say, it will allow us to avoid reading constraint as a unifying factor (as we will see, biographical readings of constraint reduce constraint to one meaning which in turn becomes the central 'truth' of Perec's work in its entirety). It will also allow us to move beyond the 'archaeology of constraint' and consider it in more general, abstract terms (formalist readings of constraint treat it as an empirical object which underpins the text proper, whereas we see it as a process at work within the text).

One would think, given the period in which Perec was writing, that a Derridean reading of his work would long since have been undertaken. This, however, is not the case. To the best of our knowledge, no Perecian (and certainly no French Perecian) has attempted to apply Derrida's theories to Perec's work. It is true that one leading Perecian, Bernard Magné, has written an article entitled 'Écriture et déconstruction dans les textes de Georges Perec' (Magné, 1989, pp231-238) – *écriture* and *déconstruction* being two key Derridean terms. And yet, in the article itself, no reference whatsoever is made to Derrida and the term *déconstruction* is not used with the force which he gives it, but is simply used as a synonym for the dismantling of a text which any literary critic indulges in, the breaking down of the text into its constituent parts before glossing each part in turn (another article by the same author uses the term in the same sense, implying that this restricted use is no accident – see 'La cantatrice et le papillon' (Magné, 1989, p201)). It is true that there is one Perecian, Jacques-Denis Bertharion, who makes a fleeting reference to Derrida: however, when he does so, it is to, of all things, reinforce his own biographical reading of Perec – he abuses the presence/absence economy in Derrida's term *différance* in order to assimilate it to Perec's nostalgia for the past (in 'Des *Lieux* aux non-lieux: de la rue Vilin à Ellis Island' (cab5, pp51-72)). The nostalgia for a lost presence which

Derrida speaks of is a nostalgia inherent in Western thought itself and cannot be compared to the nostalgia which any individual might feel. Moreover, in the same article, Bertharion provides the following summary of Derrida's take on the linguistic sign: "Le signe représente le présent en son absence. Il en tient lieu" (ibid, p55) – it seems to us that this is erroneous as, if Derrida can be said to maintain that the sign 'represents' at all (which is debateable), then it represents the impossibility of presence, not simply its absence.

This almost complete lack of reference to Derrida is extremely surprising given that Derridean readings of just about every author and literary period have now been undertaken. It is all the more surprising given that Perec was a contemporary of Derrida and that most of his work was produced in the period when Structuralism was on the decline and post-Structuralism on the rise. Critics of writers contemporary to and similar to Perec have not been slow to use Derrida's ideas in their work. Take, for example, the case of Italo Calvino, who was also a member of the Oulipo and who was therefore a practitioner of constraint. Some of his critics read his work in the light of Derrida and other post-structuralists (see Cannon, 1981, chapter 3, pp49-64), while others have explicitly compared Calvino to Derrida: "Calvino, like Derrida, cautions us to reject the primacy of the signified [...] and to subvert the logocentric theory of the sign" (Weiss, 1993, p127; see also his reference to "the poststructuralist Calvino, who, like Derrida, felt that no text is stable..." (ibid, p134)).

Our own approach to Perec will be somewhere between these two poles: it will attempt to show that there are similarities between Perec's work and that of other post-Structuralists, especially Derrida; and it will also attempt a quasi-Derridean reading of Perec, something which could be undertaken regardless of whether there are empirical similarities or not. A reference to what is known as 'theoretical fiction' will perhaps clarify this: Mark Currie, in his *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, makes a distinction between two types of theoretical fiction: on the one hand, there is a sort of novel of ideas, in which the form is rather classical but the ideas representative of Theory or post-Structuralism (an example of this might be Julia Kristeva's *Les Samuraïs*); on the other hand, there is the type of novel which actually performs Theory (an example of this might be Philippe Soller's novels

Drame and *Nombres*) – see Currie, 1998, pp51-70. Perec's work, for all its relentless theoretical and linguistic experimentation, retains a certain classical narrative form; and, for all its classical narrative form, it is also highly performative of post-Structuralist theory. Indeed, we might well adopt as our own Jo Ann Cannon's description of her approach to Calvino, whose work "reflects the changing perception in fiction which is documented in recent literary theory. In the course of my analysis, I have attempted to situate Calvino in the context of certain critical schools or methodologies, without privileging either the fictional or the critical discourse" (Cannon, 1981, p13). In short, we will simultaneously undertake a theoretical reading of Perec's fiction *qua* fiction and also read his fiction as though it were Theory.

The thesis is divided into three sections, each of which will employ a different methodology, the one described above only coming into play in the third section. This plurality is intended to allow us examine constraint – and interpretation itself – from as many angles as possible and also aims to respect the already referred to heterogeneity of Perec's writing. Before providing an overview of each chapter, let us first say a word on our corpus. Of Perec's texts written under constraint, we will leave aside the poetry and drama, focussing instead on his *prose à contraintes*: namely the novels *La Disparition*, *Les Revenentes*, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, *Un cabinet d'amateur* and *53 Jours* along with shorter pieces to be discussed as the occasion arises. We will also refer to novels which were not written under constraint as and when necessary (that is, to the extent that they help clarify the notion of constraint), notably *Un homme qui dort*, as well as Perec's autobiography, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. In addition to his prose fiction, we will additionally refer to Perec's non-fiction throughout the thesis: chiefly articles and interviews – again, largely to the extent that they throw light on constraint. If we refer frequently to interviews given by Perec, it is because he enters into theoretical discussions regarding constraint more willingly in conversation than in articles composed silently; it is not to be assumed that we are privileging the masterful presence of the author's voice over the more ambiguous nature of his texts.

The first section of the thesis, comprising just one chapter, will be solely concerned with Perec's non-fiction. It will aim to trace the evolution of his thought, at once examining its own internal logic and also relating it to the dominant intellectual models of the time. It is therefore an historically orientated chapter, moving from the Marxism of the post-war years to the post-structuralism of the 1970s. The reason for employing this quite traditional methodology is that, almost by definition, Perec's non-fiction deals more explicitly with 'ideas' than does his fiction – we will therefore be concerned with showing as clearly as possible the links between Perec's thought and that of other post-structuralists. This will allow us to proceed more allusively in later chapters.

The second section, comprising chapters two and three, will combine two related concerns: we will not only critically examine the biographical and structuralist methodologies almost exclusively employed by Perecians, but will also attempt to determine to what extent Perec's texts have contributed to this limited vision by setting up – explicitly or implicitly – the parameters in which they are to be read. Just as his non-fiction openly engages with the critical schools of the time, so his fiction – less openly – seems to favour certain types of critical discourse. This it does in two ways: firstly, by relying on characters who are interpreters and who therefore assume certain methodologies, be it in an informed manner or otherwise; secondly, by using more subtle rhetorical and structural techniques to guide interpretation surreptitiously along certain paths – as it happens, the two most frequently travelled by Perecians. Chapter Two will therefore examine the origins of the structuralist readings of Perec's work, while Chapter Three will examine the origins of the biographical readings of his work. In both chapters, the aim will be to show that while Perec's work often seems to 'publicly' endorse both methodologies, it later recants – though this takes place in 'private'. We will equally examine both methodologies on their own terms – that is to say that we will not undertake a Derridean critique of either (though we will indicate briefly where he does so).

The third section, comprising chapters four to six, will take the conclusions of sections one and two as its point of departure and allow itself indulge in three quasi-Derridean readings of Perec's work, each addressing

an aspect of *contrainte formelle* (though not strictly following on logically from one another, the three readings are nonetheless related). Though Derrida will be the central critical figure in this section, each chapter will equally place a certain emphasis on another leading post-structuralist: Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard respectively. Chapter Four will examine the origins of constraint in Perec's output, asking whether constraint can be said to have a simple origin or whether its logic was not always already at work in the text. It will also examine the deformative force of language in general – and constrained language in particular – and will consider the consequences of this for the classical notion of representation. Chapter Five will move on from the origins and consider constraint in full flight, examining the manner in which the transgressive force of constraint upsets convention (particularly linguistic convention and the convention which maintains that two subjects can bind themselves in a contract). Finally, Chapter Six will reverse the question asked by Chapter Four, wondering whether constraint can be said to exist at all as opposed to when it can be said to come into existence. This it will do by expanding the Oulipian notion of the clinamen until it destroys that which it is meant to protect.

And now, let us start teasing out the consequences of the following observation of Derrida's: "Pas plus qu'un autre, le texte [perecquien] n'est fait d'une pièce. Tout en respectant sa cohérence sans défaut, on peut en décomposer les strates, montrer qu'il *s'interprète lui-même*: chaque proposition est une interprétation soumise à une décision interprétative." (ED, p381, author's italics, 'hegelien' having been replaced by 'perecquien').

Section One

La possibilité d'explication…?

Chapter One

A portrait of the artist as a sometime critic

> Les explications, faute d'autre chose.
> – La femme (Emmanuelle Riva)
> in *Hiroshima mon amour*.

> – Ça veut dire que tu n'as jamais été un écrivain communiste?
> – Non, ça veut dire que j'ai été un écrivain. Il n'y a pas d'écrivains communistes. Quelqu'un a dit: expérimentalement le fait d'être communiste semble avoir tué le fait d'être écrivain.
> – Interview de Marguerite Duras in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 312/313.

> [O]n devrait, chaque semestre, et pourquoi pas à la même époque que les collections des couturiers [...], organiser une présentation de concepts, et la grande presse en rendrait fidèlement compte: Ce printemps, la tendance générale sera encore structuraliste. Retour remarqué des mini-concepts. Très joli flou psychanalytique en Sorbonne. Rue d'Ulm, un tout jeune concepteur proposa un cogito éclectique qui saura certainement plaire...
> – Georges Perec, 'Les idées du jour'.

Before he became a writer of fiction (or certainly before he was published as such), Georges Perec wrote and published several pieces of criticism. The first consisted of a series of simple *comptes rendus* in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, published in 1955, when Perec was not yet twenty.[1] He next went on to publish a series of polemical articles in the

[1] These reviews are, for the most part, not of interest to us as they do not reveal an embryonic aesthetic, but rather reproduce the clichés of journalistic criticism (credibility of narrative, skill with which characters are 'drawn', etc.). Consider the normative: "On aimerait mieux que l'auteur suivît la simple chronologie de 'l'affaire' et nous en déployât la succession, sans chercher à nous égarer" (Review of *Les Bijoutiers du Clair de Lune* by Albert Vidalie, *Nouvelle N.R.F.*, no. 25, January 1955, p145).

Of more interest is the review of Jean-Pierre Richard's *Littérature et sensation* (*Nouvelle N.R.F.*, no. 28, April 1955, pp715-716) in which Perec discusses the possibility of *adéquation* between man and the world. His belief that this state of grace can be attained resurfaces in a later, more personal piece (see *Cinéma Vérité (Pour)* below).

The other piece of interest is the review of *La Cible* by Henri Thomas (*Nouvelle N.R.F.*, no. 35, November 1955, pp967-968). This review is essentially favourable, despite the fact that "Henri Thomas ne raconte aucune histoire" (ibid., p967), approval which is all the more curious given Perec's later condemnation of the non-narrative, non-linear

'independent' left-wing review *Partisans* (published by François Maspéro, independently of the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF)). With the publication in 1965 of *Les Choses*, Perec's critical output becomes more sporadic, but remains nonetheless an important thread, running parallel to (and occasionally intersecting with) his fiction. This second 'post-*Choses*' phase of his critical writing is characterised by his involvement with the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Oulipo) which he joined (or rather, was co-opted by) in March 1967 and with the reviews *Cause Commune* (founded in the fallout of May '68) and *Change* (founded by Jean-Pierre Faye, after his excommunication from Tel Quel, and by Perec's Oulipian colleague, Jacques Roubaud). Perec's association with the Oulipo would inform almost all of his subsequent fiction and it is equally indicative of this later non-fictional period that it is the Oulipo's non-polemical, non-political style which has most influence, his involvement with *Cause Commune* and *Change* representing in no way an allegiance to their ideals (rather, he uses them primarily as a forum to publish work – fiction – in progress and other overtly subjective pieces).

Flawed and banal as Perec's criticism sometimes is (it would be farfetched to claim that his theoretical texts are as important as his fiction, in this respect he is no Blanchot or Ricardou – not least because of the fact that he elaborated no system or, indeed, 'non-system', taking rather a decidedly heuristic approach to his criticism), it is nonetheless important to note that, initially at least, he saw himself as, and wanted to be seen as, a Critic. In this respect, and in the limited optic of a study on Perec, it is necessary to take these texts seriously, to the extent that they represent the development of a personal aesthetic and establish certain parameters within which interpretation is deemed possible.[2] This chapter, therefore, proposes to analyse Perec's non-fiction with a view to foregrounding his passage from

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experiments of the Nouveau Roman, and of his inclusion of Henri Thomas in this movement (see *Nouveau Roman (Contre)* below).

[2] It is no accident that Perec's criticism has received little or no critical attention. The notable exception is David Bellos who, in his admirably exhaustive biography of Perec, touches on practically everything which Perec committed to paper. The ever-growing legion of French

social realist to aporetical scrivener (Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* was one of Perec's favourite works). An evolution which, to anticipate slightly, is not irrelevant for Section Three below which will examine the manner in which his fiction reflects the concerns of the following generation of literary theorists, not those of the post-war Marxists he had previously identified with.

Dogmatic realism (*La ligne générale*)

The immediate context in which Perec came to write his first proper texts is the post-war domination of French intellectual life by the PCF and, consequently, by orthodox Marxist thought. Despite this singular domination it is, however, an era both of warring factions within the PCF and of disputes between the official Communist literary review (*Les Lettres françaises* run by Aragon) and rival left-wing publications.[3] It was into this culture of dogmatism and dissent that Perec and a group of friends planned to launch their own review, to be called *La Ligne générale* in reference to the work of the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. Unfortunately, the group's grandiose aims (according to Claude Burgelin, they intended to "(re)fonder l'esthétique marxiste" (LG, p8, introduction)) were never realised, as the review was never published (despite being *à l'écart* of the PCF, the group nonetheless decided that they would not publish should the PCF not give its approval – which it obviously did not). The group's discussions and debates were not entirely wasted however, as several articles ultimately resulted from them,

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Perecians concentrate on his fiction (the restricted nature of their approach will be considered in Section Two).

[3] For an overview of the state of the PCF at the time see *Une Histoire du PCF* by Danielle Tartakowsky, chapters 7-9; for an overview of the PCF's relationship with French intellectuals see *Le Réveil des somnambules* by Jeannine Verdès-Leroux, chapters 4, 7 and 8; for a succinct overview of the plethora of reviews and magazines published at the time, see *The Time of Theory* by Patrick Ffrench, pp38-42 (this latter is equally interesting for the fact that it chronicles the group Tel Quel, one of the few to refuse politics in the early 60s – though they were later to embrace Maoism).

being eventually published in various other left-wing reviews.[4] It is these texts which we will now analyse.[5]

Cinéma vérité (*Pour*)

Given the group's admiration for Eisenstein, it is appropriate that the first programmatic text published, 'La perpétuelle reconquête' (LG, pp141-164, originally published in 1960), should deal with Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* which, it is declared, is "essentiellement, un film de montage" (LG, p151).[6] Aside from its reference to Eisensteinian montage (and implicit assimilation of *Hiroshima mon amour* into an Eisensteinian, and therefore social realist, aesthetic),[7] this sentence is significant for its "essentiellement" which opens up the very Platonic, non-Marxist question of the essence.[8] See the opening sentence of the article: "Qu'est-ce qui est essentiel dans *Hiroshima mon amour*?" (LG, p141). This clearly sets out that

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[4] On the history of Perec's flirtation with communism in general and of his role in *La ligne générale*, see *Georges Perec. A life in words* by David Bellos, chapters 26-27. See also Claude Burgelin's introduction to *L.G. Une aventure des années soixante*, the posthumous re-publication of the most 'important' texts actually published during this period.
To assert, however, as Eric Beaumatin does, that Perec was communist as a result of being Jewish is to ignore the historical context entirely. ('La biographie hypothalamique selon David Bellos: English gossip or french [sic] cancans?', cab3, p93). We will return to this in Chapter Three below.

[5] Although some of these texts were collaborative efforts (LG, pp183-184), Perec is acknowledged as being the driving force behind both the project for the review and the articles themselves. As such, the aesthetic presented is, *toutes proportions gardées*, largely his own: the texts "belong as a whole to the collected works of Georges Perec" (Bellos, 1995, p275).

[6] Another formative text from this period, the unfinished 'Défense de Klee' (dated the 19th of August 1959, published in the *Cahiers Georges Perec*, no. 6, pp16-26), mentions favourably the "ordre épique" (CGP6, p25) of *The Battleship Potemkin*. This text deals with similar concerns to 'La perpétuelle reconquête', applied to the field of painting. It is only from 1962 onwards that Perec turns his attention to literature (although, in 'Défense de Klee', he does criticise Beckett in passing, while praising Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* (CGP6, pp20 & 24)).

[7] Social realism became the official Party line from the Writers' Congress of 1934 onwards.

[8] It is as if the authors, at this stage, do not realise the significance of the term essence. This is rectified in a later article, 1962's 'Engagement ou crise du langage' (written by Perec alone), where Maurice Blanchot is taken to task for his 'metaphysical' concern with the essence of literature, "l'être même de la littérature" (LG, p78). It is claimed that he sees language as a means "de donner accès à un monde autre, supérieur, transcendant" (LG, p78).

What is of interest here is not that this is a serious misunderstanding of Blanchot's thought (which it is: while Blanchot uses the term essence, he does so only to fracture it from within, making a singular essence impossible, moving 'beyond' metaphysics (Blanchot, 1955, pp38-48)), but the *manner* in which it misunderstands it: it permits Perec to negatively define himself as anti-metaphysical, anti-essential, etc. In a word: materialist (in Marx's sense of the word).

it is the article's intent to determine the essence of the film. Indeed, after a lengthy paraphrase, the question is answered, the essence of the film (and of art, for the article constantly moves beyond the 'particular' of the film to broader considerations) is declared to be an attempt "de comprendre le monde, de comprendre ce qu'implique aujourd'hui la participation de l'homme à l'Histoire" (LG, p142). Rather confusingly, the immutability of the essence is assimilated to the notion of movement implied in the Marxist conception of History.[9]

This 'understanding the world' takes the form of a dialectical process (which dares not speak its name),[10] more Hegelian than Marxist (more Hegelian than the Hegelian Marx), as it entails the sublimation of one of the terms into a higher pair, in a movement towards totality: *Hiroshima mon amour* is "le parcours d'une conscience; d'une sensibilité éparse à une lucidité cohérente, d'une réalité partiale et discontinue à une totalité reconquise au-delà du mythe" (LG, p142).[11] This transcendental search (*au-delà du...*) for the "totalité retrouvée" (LG, p147) or "vision totale" (LG, p150) is best expressed by the following: "au-delà de Nevers renaîtra Hiroshima, au-delà d'Hiroshima naîtra la lucidité; au-delà de la lucidité, commencera la participation à l'Histoire" (LG, p145). This clearly illustrates that each dialectical opposition is resolved (sublimated) into a higher one, the final term being History. More precisely, a participation in the movement of History which can have only one inexorable outcome: the foundation of a Socialist state.[12] To this end, it is the function of Art to serve an ideological

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[9] Although this movement is not infinite: for Marx, feudalism is replaced by capitalism, which is (to be) replaced by socialism, at which stage the proletariat as a class will "have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonism [...], and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class" (Engels & Marx, 1967, p105). We will thereby attain the 'end of history', the dialectic of class struggle being resolved.

[10] The dialectic is only actually named as such in 1962's 'Le Nouveau Roman et le refus du réel' (LG, p35) and in the last article of this series, 1964's *'Wozzeck* ou la méthode de l'apocalypse' (LG, pp165-181): "Cette dialectique entre deux systèmes..." (LG, p176). We will return to this below.

[11] Incidentally, the term "conscience" occurs twenty-two times in the course of the article, once proudly standing alone as a sentence unto itself: "La conscience." (LG, p146).

[12] Just after the "...participation à l'Histoire", we read the following exhortation: "prendre conscience de ce que certaines conditions déterminent toujours des phénomènes identiques" (LG, p145), which reflects an implicitly Marxist view of History, although neither Marx nor the other principal communist theorists are referred to explicitly in the course of the articles.

master, as art must help us understand this process (it must possess a "volonté d'explication" which will lead to an "élucidation totale" (LG, p164)), must make us see its inevitability and, ultimately, bring this situation about: "Oui, il s'agit bien d'apprendre à changer le monde: *Hiroshima mon amour* est un film pré-révolutionnaire" (LG, p164) – we know the significance of the expression 'revolutionary art' for Social Realism. So ends 'La perpétuelle reconquête', its ideology abundantly clear. However, between the article's opening and closing remarks analysed here, lies an aesthetic (thematic and structural) analysis of the film, which we will now examine.

The discussion of the film is caught in a tension (awkward but not necessarily contradictory) between an application of the authors' ideological principles and a very classical, almost Arnoldian, concept of 'good art'.[13] The question is whether the latter is made to serve the former, or whether the two can coexist independently of each other. Let us first consider the requisites of 'good art'.

Perhaps the most abiding cliché regarding art is that it should depict universal concerns in a portrait of the singular. Here, *Hiroshima mon amour* is "d'abord un film subjectif" (LG, p151), but "la prise de conscience de la femme correspond à un passage du particulier au général" (LG, p151).[14] The 'general' referred to here is the Hegelian notion of totality discussed above. In order to attain this universality, the film must be technically perfect, it can be complex but it must remain coherent: "il faut qu'entre tous les éléments qui composent le film, les images, le texte, la musique, existe une *adéquation parfaite*" (LG, p151, emphasis mine).[15] This "nécessité intérieure" (LG, p151), this proper construction becomes an almost ethical concern, as the

[13] Perec's guru of this period was not Marx but Georges Lukács, and he was equally caught in this dilemma. In his *Essays on realism* he introduces the idea of political and artistic 'correctness' (Lukács, 1980, pp24-26). Not to be confused with its contemporary meaning, this correctness entails being faithful to Party policy on the one hand, and combining this with artistic skill on the other, being a 'good' writer (subtle characterisation, colourful narrative, realistic dialogue, etc.) – see the link with note 1 above.

[14] See also the article 'Pour une littérature réaliste', where literature is determined as an oscillation between the particular and the general, with a view to explaining the latter by the former (LG, pp53-54).

[15] See Chapter Five below for a critique of *adéquation*.

authors move beyond purely technical considerations:[16] "Ce qui nous semble plus important, c'est la *possibilité d'explication* de l'œuvre: sa nécessité, sa cohérence absolue. Il n'est pas un seul plan, un seul travelling, une seule séquence dont nous ne pouvons comprendre et expliquer qu'il est nécessaire et suffisant." (LG, pp157-158, authors' emphasis). This rather startling assertion moves beyond the notion of structure, reintroducing the authors' hidden ideology: despite the complex nature of the processes at work in the film (which, let us not forget, the authors deem necessary) it is ultimately and quite literally reduced to one meaning: "Jamais le sens d'une image n'est ambigu" (LG, p158) and "une signification et une seule" (LG, p159). This one meaning, and a corresponding belief in Truth, is of course the revelation of the true outcome of History.

This ideological reading maintains the classic distinction between the *fond* and the *forme*, another criterion for 'good art', only to make the latter subservient to the former.[17] The technical mastery ("cette intelligence absolue du langage cinématographique...") must express the content ("...n'est que le corollaire technique d'une autre intelligence: celle de notre monde" (LG, p158)). This is perfection, the form expressing the content, indissoluble from it: "le montage non-linéaire [...] rend compte du cheminement de la mémoire" (LG, p161). In the article 'Wozzeck', the classical singular-universal and form-content dichotomies are assimilated into a "dialectique au sein de l'univers scénique" (LG, p179) which is more explicit than the proto-dialectic evident in 'La perpétuelle reconquête': "Ce mouvement qui détruit totalement l'univers tonal traditionnel, mais qui l'intègre dans un système plus vaste..." (LG, p172). In doing this, an aesthetic concern is replaced with a political-historical one, the work of art being constantly mapped onto the world, in the belief that art can be revolutionary 'in the world' ("Toujours considérer l'art comme un rapport établi entre l'homme et le monde" (CGP6, p18)).

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[16] 'Good construction' is not to be confused with a recourse to convention, which is condemned elsewhere (LG, p162).

[17] Repeating the necessity outlined in 'Défense de Klee': "distinguer plutôt [...] entre le formalisme et 'l'œuvre à contenu'" (CGP6, p17).

This, therefore, is Perec's position in 1960, elaborated with respect to a film. In 1962 and 1963, he turned his attention to literature, writing four articles on the state of post-war French literary trends, 'Le Nouveau Roman et le refus du réel', 'Pour une littérature réaliste', 'Engagement ou crise du langage' and 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature' (all initially published in *Partisans*, reprinted in LG). His contention is that this period is "l'histoire de deux grands échecs: celle de la littérature 'engagée', d'une part, celle du Nouveau Roman, d'autre part" (LG, pp47-48). We will therefore examine his critique of these two 'schools', before analysing what his claim that "une nouvelle littérature est à naître" (LG, p49) actually entails.[18]

Engagement (*Contre*)

Sartre, in his favour, is credited by Perec with being the first to realise, in the wake of the Second World War, that classical bourgeois ideology no longer permitted a "saisie réelle du monde" (LG, p27) – while Camus is credited as being the first to attempt to take account of this stylistically (LG, p27). Certain of Sartre's ideas are conceded as being "solide" (LG, p83), particularly those which entail a critique of the bourgeoisie and of the writer become a bourgeois 'homme de lettres' (his *Présentation des 'Temps Modernes'* is quoted from favourably at length (LG, pp79-80)). However, sympathetic as Perec is to Sartre's politics, he feels that the artistic solutions which Sartre proposes are inherently flawed (which is what permits Perec to state that, while *la littérature de l'engagement* may have dominated the field between 1945 and 1950 (LG, p71), it has no more relevance at all by 1953 (LG, p48)).

In a word, the principal failing of the *roman engagé* is its naiveté regarding the achievement of its aims, rather than the aims in themselves: "Les rapports de la littérature et de la révolution n'ont jamais été simples. Le tort de la littérature 'engagée' est d'avoir cru qu'ils l'étaient" (LG, p49). On a

[18] The 'Hussards' (Blondin, Nimier, Nourrissier) are mentioned in passing as constituting a third, intermediary group between Sartre and the Nouveau Roman (LG, p67), but they are not taken seriously enough by Perec to warrant a discussion.

political level, this results in a preachy, didactic style (LG, p50) and a belief in the power of a simple appeal to "bons sentiments" to convince the reader (LG, pp28 & 44). On a literary level, it results in a reliance on convention (LG, p28) – already criticised in 'La perpétuelle reconquête' – which produces a "falsification humaniste du roman traditionnel" (LG, p73). More seriously, Sartre's *roman de situation* with its lack of internal narrator and supposed reportage style, which aimed to "rend[re] à l'événement sa brutale fraîcheur" (Sartre, 1948, p273) is instead felt to portray a static vision of the world. This is brought about by Sartre's utopian aspiration for an "absence totale de médiation" between the "auteur idéal" and the "lecteur idéal" (LG, p83) and his corresponding belief in a perfectly limpid language. Parodying Sartre's "brutale fraîcheur", Perec writes that "Le réalisme n'a jamais été la brutale restitution du réel" (LG, p84).[19] What is somewhat curious is that Perec feels that it is literature which loses most in this situation, not politics. *La littérature de l'engagement* is disrespectful to the work as it refuses to see that to be 'revolutionary', a work must also be 'complex'. Art is therefore reintroduced through the back door as a value in itself, not as something which is in the service of an ideology, a concept which comes to the fore in Perec's later writings.

The final complaint which Perec makes against Sartre is that, in his position of dominance of the intellectual landscape, he set up a false dichotomy: "dans la perspective sartrienne, la notion d'engagement épuise celle de la littérature, le seul fait de refuser l'engagement conditionne toute la littérature" (LG, p69). In doing so, he determined that the only alternative to committed literature was a certain *esthétisme*, thus paving the way for the Nouveau Roman.

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[19] As with Blanchot above, what matters is not the misinterpretation of Sartre but the reason for this misinterpretation. Sartre's vision of literature is much more dynamic and ambiguous than Perec gives him credit for, but it is equally necessary for Perec that he portray Sartre as a naïve idealist in order to give the impression that his own 'dynamic' vision is original. Of particular significance is the fact that, in the selection of phrases which he quotes from pp271-276 of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, he omits the following: "il nous fallait enfin laisser partout des doutes, des attentes, de l'inachevé et réduire le lecteur à faire lui-même des conjectures" (Sartre, 1948, p271) – this obviously undermines the paternalism which Perec sees in Sartre; see also Sartre's very Marxist emphasis on *historicité* during the preceding pages.

> Comment ne pas sourire devant les accusations de 'décadence', de 'gratuité', de 'formalisme', appliquées au hasard par les plus zélés des révolutionnaires à tout ce qui compte pour nous dans l'art contemporain? Comment ne pas craindre de nous trouver nous-mêmes un jour prisonniers du même filet?
>
> – Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman.*

As in his discussion of Sartre, Perec opens with what he considers to be the apparently positive aspects of the Nouveau Roman.[20] There are two, "l'un, critique, qui visait à détruire un ordre littéraire jugé inadéquat; l'autre, apparemment positif, qui tendait à élaborer les bases d'une description nouvelle de la réalité" (LG, p29). As he is opposed to both *la littérature de l'assouvissement* and *la littérature de l'engagement*,[21] Perec evidently favours the first of these: "Le 'Nouveau Roman' entend, à juste titre, combattre ce triomphe de la convention" (LG, p31).[22] This it does by refusing any "cadre de compréhension" (LG, p30), that is to say any remnants of the previous century's conventions. According to Perec, this entails abolishing psychology (which has not evolved since Balzac's 'characters'), linear time (which is too simplistic) and the omniscient narrator ("[qui] implique une saisie mystifiante du monde" (LG, p32)). These three points are basically a summary of Robbe-Grillet's articles 'Une voie pour le roman

[20] When Perec discusses the Nouveau Roman, he refers principally to Robbe-Grillet's theoretical works. As 'chef de l'école' (an appellation constantly denounced by Robbe-Grillet), he functions as shorthand for the movement. However, the following writers are named (and criticised, either implicitly or explicitly) in the course of the three articles in question here: Janine Aeply, Roland Barthes (named not as a novelist, but as a nefarious influence on the novelists in question), Samuel Beckett, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Butor, Jean Cau, Jean-Pierre Faye, Louis-René des Forêts, Roger Judrin, Robert Mathy, Claude Ollier, Jean Paulhan, Robert Pinget, Jean Ricardou, Marc Saporta, Nathalie Sarraute ("pour Nathalie Sarraute, le réalisme c'est décrire ce que l'on *croit* être la réalité" (LG, p64, author's emphasis)), Claude Simon, Philippe Sollers, Jean Thibaudeau, Henri Thomas.

[21] "Toute la littérature de l'assouvissement se définit aujourd'hui par une obédience scrupuleuse et bornée à une réalité dépourvue de tout contenu" (LG, p30). In this respect, he echoes Robbe-Grillet's condemnation of "la tradition française" (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, p26).

[22] The inverted commas which deny the Nouveau Roman its seriousness (or even its existence) disappear in the next article – a note of resignation perhaps?

futur' (1956) and 'Sur quelques notions périmées' (1957), a distillation of their most accessible concerns.[23]

However, Perec's critique of the Nouveau Roman begins with the view that the "apparemment positif" element has not in fact been realised. The new description which the new novelists aimed for is purely a myth – their techniques only result in a new form of convention (LG, pp29 & 33) which, moreover, involves a reliance on the mystifying power of the irrational ("le remplacement d'une convention rationnelle par une autre convention destinée à accentuer l'incohérence de la réalité" (LG, p43; see also LG, p33). This results in a sterile formalism (LG, p40) and in the use of "artifices" (LG, p42) – Claude Simon is criticised for his typographical experiments and for the 'hypocrisy' of the fact that he 'works' his manuscripts with different coloured pencils.[24] In this respect, despite the fact that the Nouveau Roman believes itself to be revolutionary (LG, p72), it is actually profoundly reactionary ("l'idéologie profondément réactionnaire qui sous-tend les théories esthétiques du 'Nouveau Roman'" (LG, p35) and "il se veut démystifiant, désaliénant. Mais son aspect réactionnaire fondamentale ne tarde pas à apparaître" (LG, p48)).[25]

Moving beyond simple assertion, we must ask of what this reactionary ideology is composed. For Perec, it is revealed most clearly in Robbe-Grillet's Heideggerian statement that "le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il *est*, tout simplement" (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, p18, author's emphasis). Perec refers to this particular statement, before adding "Mais c'est ce '*est*' qui ne signifie rien" (LG, p58). This *être-là* is reactionary because it implies a static

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[23] See Robbe-Grillet, 1963, pp15-24 & 25-44.

[24] See also, in 'Défense de Klee', the criticism of Miro's "trucs" (CGP, no. 6, p16). Does Perec really believe that art is not artifice, but natural and organic? He seems to at this time, but witness his own formal experiments a few years later. Barthes, who as we will see is to become Perec's 'guiding light', was to claim in 1966's 'L'analyse structurale des récits' that it was the desire to hide the codes of art in order to make it seem 'natural' which was bourgeois, not the codes themselves (Barthes, 1985, p200).

[25] It is not only the Nouveau Roman which is reactionary, the insult is also applied to science-fiction in general with its Rousseauist style nostalgia for "la vie [...] hygiénique et saine des premiers pionniers du continent américain" (LG, p127). This implicit anti-Americanism is somewhat out of character – Perec adored American musical comedies, for example, ironically one of the prime examples of an art whose function is to *assouvir le grand public*.

world, a world which cannot be changed, it is a "monde clos, hors du temps, de l'histoire" (LG, p42; see also pp33-35, 41-42, 48, 58 & 112).[26] Despite the approval given to the Nouveau Roman by the political left, this is felt by Perec to reveal a bourgeois world view: "Il accomplit vraiment trop bien ce que la bourgeoisie en attend: figer le monde" (LG, p42). Even more serious is the fact that the Nouveau Roman does not simply passively perpetuate bourgeois myths but, by virtue of the fact that its world is "en somme, un monde non dialectique" (LG, p35), ultimately justifies "les contradictions inhérentes à la société capitaliste occidentale" (LG, p39). By this Perec means that while the Nouveau Roman claims to have unearthed certain contradictions, its "complaisance dans l'angoisse" (LG, p63) and absolute lack of a "volonté de conquête" (LG, p57) actually serves to reinforce capitalist domination: "Il est plus facile de décréter la non-signifiance du monde que d'assumer et de dépasser les contradictions qu'il implique. Refusant toute perspective – et d'abord celle d'un monde socialiste – le 'Nouveau Roman' se complaît dans l'angoisse et le chaos" (LG, pp41-42).[27] Not the "propédeutique nécessaire" (LG, p40) to the Revolution which the left initially thought, it is rather an insidious affirmation of bourgeois values. To make matters worse, the Nouveau Roman's primacy is unassailable and the only development in the literary field is the formation of the group Tel Quel, which represents a further step in the formalist decadence born of a bourgeois society (LG, p74). Is there therefore no way out of the formalist impasse which French Letters are wallowing in? Perec would claim otherwise.

[26] This static *être-là* also results in an alienated individual, isolated from the course of History. In this respect, see Perec's analysis of Italo Svevo's *La Conscience de Zeno* (LG, pp54-56) which, with its claim that Zeno's acts are constantly related to the historical context in which the book is set, can be seen as a 'recuperation' of the novel from Robbe-Grillet's 1954 analysis of it which stressed the alienated nature of Zeno's conscience (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, pp77-81).

Vérité, Réalité et Révolution (*Pour*)

Having examined the failings of Sartre's commitment and the Nouveau Roman's formalism, Perec proposes a third path for the novel which is, in many ways, a sort of middle ground between the two "grands échecs": on the one hand, literature must move beyond the committed/non-committed dichotomy (LG, p74). More specifically, it must realise that it always is fundamentally committed, that it has no choice (LG, p44). Once it does this, it will abandon the simplistic didacticism of an appeal to *bons sentiments* and will instead realise that this inescapable commitment entails writing in a manner which respects the 'complexity' of the world, in a way which will reveal the underlying processes at work in Man's relation to the everyday world and to History: "L'engagement, aujourd'hui, c'est le respect total de la complexité du monde, la volonté acharnée d'être lucide, de comprendre et d'expliquer" (LG, pp44-45) – although it is not entirely clear how this *volonté d'explication* differs from Sartre's. In this respect, Perec appropriates one aspect of *engagement* while discarding that aspect of it which disrespects the complexity of the artistic process, which would subjugate art to ideology (a tension at work in Perec's writing which will eventually result in the complete abandonment of *engagement* and social realism in favour of *écriture*).[28]

On the other hand, with regard to the Nouveau Roman, he retains the contention that a new manner of describing the world needs to be found – a "nouveau réalisme" (LG, p65) – while maintaining, as seen, that the Nouveau Roman failed to deliver on its promise. The principal inspiration for this middle ground – a mixture of (artistic) dynamism accompanied by/in the service of a political ideology (the Party) – is the work of Georges Lukács,

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[27] Elsewhere, he attacks Blanchot's 'neutrality' when he remarks that *l'écriture blanche* is "l'apanage des gens qui ne veulent pas se salir les mains" (Letter to Jacques Lederer, October 1959, in *Cher, très cher, admirable et charmant ami*, p498).

[28] This 'third path' analysed here with respect to literature is not radically different from the propositions put forward regarding cinema in 'La perpétuelle reconquête'. The specificity of each medium is ignored in favour of an abstract 'Art', a necessary consequence of the subjugation of the artistic process to a pre-elaborated ideology.

particularly his *La Signification présente du réalisme critique*, which appeared in French in 1960.[29] Indeed, in his analysis of 'La vision du monde sous-jacente à l'avant-garde littéraire' (Lukács, 1960, pp25-85), he prefigures everything which Perec has to say on the subject of the Nouveau Roman, such as the notion of *l'Homme* presented in complete isolation and the reactionary, un-historical nature of the *être-là* (Lukács, 1960, pp31-33, 53 & 63). He also maintains the distinction between content and form, equally adopted by Perec (Lukács, 1960, p59).

When it comes to proposing an alternative, Perec also follows Lukács closely. Somewhat curiously, Perec's proposals are much closer to the publisher's blurb on the back cover of *La Signification présente du réalisme critique*, than to any passage from within the book itself: "Lukacs [sic] souligne l'opposition profonde entre deux types d'esprits: ceux qui croient à la raison et ceux qui s'abondonnent aux prestiges de l'irrationalisme; ceux qui croient à l'action effective de l'homme dans l'histoire, et ceux que le désespoir et l'angoisse condamnent au fatalisme. C'est à cette 'ligne de clivage' que correspond la coupure entre 'réalisme' et 'anti-réalisme'." What is of interest is not the accuracy or otherwise of this summary, but the fact that Perec seems to have relied more on its succinctness and accessibility than on the necessarily more complex and ambiguous analyses of the text proper.[30]

In positing his positive response, Perec admits that "[n]ous ne savons pas très bien ce qu'est la littérature révolutionnaire. Nous ne savons même pas

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[29] See Burgelin's admission regarding the importance of Lukács in his presentation (LG, p15). In fact, Lukács is the only literary theorist who is quoted favourably in the articles under consideration here (LG, pp39, 58 & 60).

[30] This is the first instance of a certain dilettantism on Perec's part when it comes to works which relate to literature but which are not actually fiction. Of particular relevance for us here is the fact that the quotation from 'Karl Marx' which closes *Les Choses* has been shown to come, not directly from Marx, but rather from "a retranslation into French of a Russian translation" (Bellos, 1995, p306), which is quite different from the original. It is only natural, therefore, that Perec's 'Marxism' be misguided.

See David Bellos also on Perec's "rudimentary" knowledge of Saussure, 'Perec et Saussure. A propos de *La Vie mode d'emploi*' (in *Parcours Perec*, pp91-95). Or Jacques Lecarme on the fact that Freud is 'quoted' in *La Vie mode d'emploi* through the intermediary of third-party popularisers such as Marthe Robert and Octave Mannoni ('Perec et Freud ou le mode d'emploi', CGP4, pp121-141). While this obviously undermines the seriousness of

s'il est possible, aujourd'hui, de rapprocher ces deux mots: littérature, révolution" (LG, p48). This doubt is of course feigned, revolutionary art is indeed possible. The prerequisite for achieving it is to belong to the Party or, if one is not a paid-up card-carrier, to at least accept the principles of Socialism (this is a Perecian 'advance' on Lukács who only felt that the artist should not refuse Socialism outright): "il est impossible dans la société qui est la nôtre [...] de créer une œuvre réaliste sans accepter explicitement le socialisme" (LG, p59)[31] – this despite the fact that Perec was never a member of the PCF.

The above quotation implicitly implies that it is true realism which is revolutionary. Every generation (including the various avant-gardes) claims realism as its own, Perec wishes to reclaim the term from the 'false' realism of Robbe-Grillet and Co.[32] More than an aesthetic of the literary object, realism is rather for Perec localisable prior to the act of literary creation: "Le réalisme est, d'abord, la volonté de maîtriser le réel, de le comprendre et de l'expliquer" (LG, p53).[33] While this results in an art which is necessarily complex in its rendering of the movement of the world (LG, pp56 & 62), there is never any doubt in Perec's mind that 'true' realism (i.e. which shows us the 'truth') is possible. Consider the following remarkable display of optimism: "le réalisme a toujours été et est encore possible. Il n'est d'époque, il n'est de conditions, il n'est de crises dont on ne puisse prendre conscience; il n'est d'anarchie qu'on ne puisse ordonner; il n'est de situations qu'on ne puisse maîtriser" (LG, p64).[34] This mastery of the world results in a very classic notion of truth as unveiling (LG, p51: "dévoilement"; see also p111),

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Perec as Critic, it can be put to use as a creative strategy in fiction (see Marcel Bénabou, 'Vraie et fausse érudition chez Perec', in *Parcours Perec*, pp41-47), Perec's real vocation.

[31] While it is necessary to embrace Socialism in order to create a realist work, such an act is no guarantee that the work will actually turn out as such (LG, p60). Again, the insidious independence of the work, of Art, silently undermines the proclaimed ideal: "il serait vain de croire que cette connaissance toute théorique puisse lui [the writer] être d'un quelconque secours dans la création d'une œuvre" (LG, p60).

[32] While Perec bemoans the fact that Robbe-Grillet is in no way a realist, Philippe Sollers, on the other hand, considers him to be *too* realist (in 'Sept propositions sur Alain Robbe-Grillet', *Tel Quel*, no. 2, Summer 1960, pp49-53), thus establishing his own interpretation of the term.

[33] It is also "la volonté de faire apparaître dans la fiction romanesque la possibilité et la nécessité d'une transformation de la société" (LG, p59).

[34] Or: "Nous pouvons dominer le monde" (LG, p113).

in a belief in the adequacy of language to its task which is not dissimilar to the aspiration towards limpidity which Perec criticises in Sartre.[35] Art ultimately becomes a tool, as in this final totalising statement:

> Moyen de connaissance, moyen de prise de possession du monde, la littérature devient ainsi l'une des armes les plus adéquates qui, à long terme, permettent de lutter contre les mythes que sécrète notre société, permettent de poser les problèmes, d'élucider les contradictions, de rendre évidente et nécessaire la transformation radicale de notre monde. Toute littérature réaliste est révolutionnaire, toute littérature révolutionnaire est réaliste. (LG, p52)

The notion of 'realism' is therefore liberated from the conventions which have progressively encrusted it since the nineteenth century, rendering it the supreme example of the bourgeois aesthetic.

Such is the revolutionary aspiration of literature. Perec goes on to provide us with a concrete example, Robert Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine*. Interestingly, this is less a work of fiction (literature) than a *témoignage*. It is as though the goals which Perec set for literature are unattainable, as if what he really aspires towards is a form of *reportage* which would move beyond a straightforward journalistic style and flirt with literary techniques while remaining aloof from their decadence. His theory therefore collapses under its own impossibilities – the impossibility of developing a *praxis* which would reflect this theory will be seen below.

Evolution (*Les Choses*)

Perec published no more critical pieces in the period which immediately followed the above outbursts (with the exception of 'Wozzeck' in 1964, which really belongs to the main body of articles from 1962). What next emerges from Perec's *mansarde* is actually his first novel, *Les Choses: Une histoire des années soixante*. Published in 1965, it is the fruit of nearly five years work, spanning Perec's 'formative' period, and roughly contemporary

[35] At this time, Perec reveals a very naïve view of language, practically denying the arbitrariness of the sign, in favour of the perfect correspondance between signifier and signified, necessary if literature is to reveal the truth: "Nulle damnation ne pèse sur le vocabulaire" (LG, p85). It would seem that this particular phrase is later parodied by Perec himself when he titled the prologue of *La Disparition* "Où l'on saura plus tard qu'ici s'inaugurait la Damnation" (DIS, p11), the Damnation in question relating to the fact that *La Disparition* is written in a castrated language, indicating his having moved beyond of a straightforward representation of the world through language (see Chapter 4 below).

to the articles discussed above.[36] As such, one would expect it to consist of a fictional representation of the ideas expressed in those articles. However, this is not the case. *Les Choses* marks the beginning of an epistemological shift or break in Perec's work, not because it is fiction and the preceding writings were theoretical – such a distinction is meaningless (means less all the time) – but because the very possibility of Truth is put into question (remember that Perec previously conceived fiction as an unveiling of the Truth).[37] This shift is not presented didactically in *Les Choses*, for to do so would be to remain within the previous logic, but is rather allusively present, almost despite itself. We can equate this to the eruption of *écriture* (a term Perec would soon appropriate) into an apparently closed system, a dominated logos. Adumbrated in *Les Choses*, the break is irrevocably developed, put into practice, in the interviews which Perec gave in the wake of the surprise success of *Les Choses* (Prix Renaudot), at a moment when the authorial discourse had the possibility of affirming itself in its mastery, of reiterating to a larger audience the ideas expounded previously in marginal journals. Finally, in two texts dating from 1967, a more refined theoretical version of Perec's new aesthetic is presented. It is this evolution/rupture which we will now analyse in more detail.

Il n'est d'explosion qu'un livre

As the focus of this chapter is Perec's non-fiction, it is not our intention to embark on an in-depth analysis of *Les Choses*. It is nonetheless necessary to indicate briefly the manner in which it diverges from the theory which preceded it. The tension between the two tendencies becomes immediately apparent when we examine the four principal sources (as acknowledged by Perec) of *Les Choses*. Speaking in 1967, at Warwick,[38] Perec identified the

[36] See the table in Bellos, 1995, p304 for an overview of the various versions of *Les Choses*.

[37] We will use the notion of 'epistemological break' disingenuously for the present as it has a certain strategic function in a chapter largely devoted to establishing a historical perspective for Perec's work. However, we are aware that, particularly since the work of Derrida, the notion of the *coupure* with its implications of an absolute origin is suspect. We will return to this and problematize it in Chapter 4 below.

[38] 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain', in *Parcours Perec: Colloque de Londres*. Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1990, pp31-40. While this text contains the

following four authors: on the one hand, Robert Antelme and Paul Nizan; on the other, Gustave Flaubert and Roland Barthes (although Barthes could also be placed on the other side of the divide). To a certain extent, this recalls Perec's distinction between form and content, while simultaneously undermining it – he now considers it to be a "fausse contradiction" (PLRF, p37. See also cab2, p72.).

On the side of 'content' we have Antelme, whose importance we have seen for Perec. We also find Nizan, whose novel *La Conspiration* is generally regarded as the one genuine example of French Socialist Realism – "il raconte l'histoire de jeunes gens qui ont le même âge que les personnages des *Choses* et qui essaient de faire la révolution et qui, évidemment, n'y arrivent pas" (PLRF, p35). (As mentioned, we could also include the 'political' or 'sociological' Barthes – the Barthes of *Mythologies*; not to mention the magazine *Madame Express*, which Perec also cites as reference material).[39] These then, are the expected references for a young writer whose aim is to write a 'total work of art' which would function as a critique of bourgeois society. More surprisingly, on the side of 'form', we find Flaubert, the writer who, perhaps more than any other, was hailed as a precursor by the Nouveaux Romanciers, was championed for his dedication to style, to the process of writing. He was also to a certain extent a realist in the 'classic' sense: his work is a critique of society. However, it is to the former aspect that Perec appeals, not the second. He says that he used Flaubert in three ways: firstly, by borrowing certain scenes from *L'Education Sentimentale*; secondly, by inserting thirty quotations from *L'Education Sentimentale* into *Les Choses*; thirdly, by emulating Flaubert's ternary sentence structure.[40] This shifts the focus from the ideological to the aesthetic, annexing Perec to

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clearest, most schematic presentation of his sources, Perec had already named the above in various interviews given in 1965 after he had won the Prix Renaudot (republished in *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, no. 2, Autumn 1993. See pp59, 67 & 68. For the sake of readability we will simply refer to the page number in cab2, while the original publication references will be found in the bibliography. Treating them as un undifferentiated block can be justified by the fact that all the interviews appear within approximately a week of each other, and were most likely conducted on the same day – mention of same decor, Perec is described in the same clothes, etc.).

[39] Suggested at by the phrase "Une mythologie de la mode" (cab2, p58)

the 'avant-garde' as a practitioner of *littérature citationnelle*, of a certain montage without didactic motivations.[41] (Equally, while the reference to Barthes *is* primarily to his 'sociological' texts, it also necessarily opens up his work on *écriture*, particularly in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (we will return to this below).[42]

On the level of the vocabulary employed in *Les Choses*, certain key words from the articles evidently resurface: *lucidité* (LC, pp21 & 70); *monde/image statique* (LC, p24); *l'H/histoire* (LC, pp26, 69 & 72); *réalité* (LC, p36); *compréhension* (LC, p36); *bourgeois* (LC, p45); *art/film total* (LC, p54); *conscience* (LC, pp70 & 72). There is even a paraphrase of Marx's famous sound-bite: "La fortune devenait leur opium" (LC, p89). While the pre-*Choses* project is therefore carried on to a certain extent, it is also parodied through the use of occasionally heavy-handed irony: of the two somewhat superficial characters, he writes "Rien de ce qui était humain ne leur fut étranger" (LC, p31) – this in relation to their work as "psychosociologues", that is, as the conductors of consumer orientated opinion polls. Meanwhile, instead of being integrated into the course of History (with the possibility of effectuating changes), they are alienated from it: "L'histoire, là encore, avait choisi pour eux" (LC, p26) – they participate, for example, in demonstrations against the Algerian war, but do so *à contrecœur* and even fearfully, although they are 'genuinely' left wing.[43]

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[40] PLRF, p36. Again, this is the clearest exposition of the role played by Flaubert in *Les Choses*, although it is also acknowledged in the Renaudot interviews (see cab2, pp64 & 68).

[41] As an example of the emerging primacy of the aesthetic over the ideological, see "Je ne crois pas que l'on puisse ramener mon livre à la seule sociologie; s'il est vrai que je ne me suis pas préoccupé de problèmes romanesques, j'ai eu tout de même affaire à des problèmes littéraires et même seulement à ceux-ci: mon livre, d'un certain point de vue, n'est rien d'autre qu'un travail sur les adjectifs et qualificatifs" (cab2, p64). It is this *certain point de vue* (obsession with language) which will eventually dominate (which already dominates) despite a contrary opinion expressed shortly afterwards: "j'essayais de décrire [re. *Les Choses*] un phénomène de civilisation plutôt que de faire une œuvre littéraire" (in 'Georges Perec, pas sociologue mais documentaliste', *Le Figaro*, 28 février 1966, p14).

[42] See Andrea Borsari, 'Entre oubli et mémoire. Georges Perec et les choses.' (cab3, pp57-74) for an interesting discussion of 'objects' in *Les Choses* and 'L'esprit des choses' in light of Barthes and Baudrillard.

[43] The reference to Algeria is, incidentally, due less to a political agenda than decadent literary motivations – it is actually one of the scenes (description of the 1848 revolution) lifted from Flaubert. The war in Algeria receives greater treatment in *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour.*

They are more passively caught up in the politics of the period than proactive 'revolutionaries'.

More fundamentally, *Les Choses* deviates from its 'template' through the fact that while the characters remain blocked, the narrative remains irreducibly open. By this we mean that Perec had previously considered that the 'truth' of literature was to show the reader (by presenting him with a character who learns and evolves and who is integrated into the social process) the complexity of the world which is revealed in a coherent (that is, closed) narrative. In short, the characters should evolve, while the narrative should be neatly wrapped up. In *Les Choses*, the situation is reversed, leading to the expression Nouveau Nouveau Roman being used in relation to it. There is little or no psychology of the characters, they are shadows, present only in their names.[44] Most importantly, they do not evolve in any manner over the course of the novel, they do not learn (are not 'lucid'). Despite the phrase "Ils changeaient, ils devenaient autres" (LC, p33) – which is actually an ironic expression as it merely refers to their appearance being subject to the transient permanence of fashion – they remain obstinate in their stasis: the second section of the novel ends with: "Ils étaient à bout de course, au terme de cette trajectoire ambiguë qui avait été leur vie pendant six ans, au terme de cette quête indécise qui ne les avait menés nulle part, *qui ne leur avait rien appris*" (LC, p132, emphasis mine).[45] So much for the "prise de conscience" valorised in 'La perpétuelle reconquête'. Conversely, the ambiguity of the trajectory (and thence of the narrative) is easily determined (or at least the existence of ambiguity is easily determined, to determine ambiguity itself would be to annul it through clarification). If we examine the novel's brief epilogue, we will see that it opens in the conditional before shifting to the future tense which indicates that the 'events' depicted within are virtual, are yet to take place, and might actually turn out differently (if at

[44] This is partly due to the fact that Perec believes that "[l]e bonheur contemporain n'est pas une valeur intérieure" (cab2, p66).
[45] See "Ce 'devenir' [of the characters] n'existe pas dans mon livre" (cab2, p70).

all).[46] More importantly, and as a direct consequence of the characters not having 'learned their lesson', as it were, it is impossible to decide whether the ending – Jérôme and Sylvie leaving Paris to take up a permanent position in Bordeaux – is 'happy' or 'sad', as witnessed by the oscillation of the final sentences: "les assiettes épaisses écussonnées sembleront le prélude d'un festin somptueux. Mais le repas qu'on leur servira sera franchement insipide" (LC, p143). Alternatively, the epilogue can be read as installing a certain circularity (again rooted to the characters' blindness, but assuming literary value through the role of the circle in modernity as a disruption of linear narrative): they had previously left Paris for Tunisia (LC, p107 *passim*), and may only be continuing this trend of desperate departures.[47] In any case, the fundamental ambiguity of literature has replaced the closure of ideology: "Si j'avais été un moraliste, par exemple, je pense que j'aurais ou bien trouvé une solution pour ces personnages, ou bien condamné fermement leur attitude" (PLRF, p39).

Viva voce

In the previous section, reference was made to the interviews given to the press after *Les Choses* had won the Prix Renaudot to the extent that they constituted an explicit commentary on *Les Choses*, as instances of an author establishing parameters within which interpretation of his work is valid. It is now necessary to examine them independently of this restricted optic, in order to determine the broader questions which they raise. We can say that they represent not so much the proposal of new directions, as the withdrawal of previous claims, again continuing the progression from ideology to *écriture*.

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[46] On the other hand, this future tense also indicates a certain fatality, reinforcing the blind passivity of the characters, their lack on *conscience*.

[47] See also: "La fin n'est ni positive ni négative; on débouche sur l'ambiguïté: c'est à la fois, dans mon esprit, un happy-end et la fin la plus triste que l'on puisse imaginer, c'est une fin logique" (cab2, p67). Immediately after, in response to the suggestion by the interviewer that the whole book is ambiguous, not simply the *dénouement*: "C'est vrai. Je ne renie pas cette ambiguïté" (cab2, p67).

Incidentally, the reference to the *fin logique* perhaps indicates a new found awareness of the specificity of *une logique de la fiction*, irreconcilable with the notion of expressing unaltered a preconceived theory/ideology (*une idée toute faite*) in fiction.

Before we deal with *écriture*, we need to mention that a certain humanism makes its presence felt as well, which is in one sense a move on from the anti-humanism of Marxism, but which falls short of the 'formalist' *écriture*. Taking its cue from Barthes's demystifying project in *Mythologies*, *Les Choses* also aims to unveil the 'myths' of its time. However, in *Les Choses*, this project is not turned towards the elaboration of a nascent semiology nor, indeed, towards a moribund morality ("Ceux qui se sont imaginé que je condamnais la société de consommation n'ont vraiment rien compris à mon livre" (cab2, p66; see also pp59 & 67)). Rather, like some benign sage, Perec demystifies the trappings of consumer society, not to enable us to transcend it, but rather that we might find happiness within it. *Les Choses* is therefore not a pre-revolutionary critique of society, but a guide, not for the proletariat, but for Man, indicating the possibility of happiness independent of political causes: "Il y a, aujourd'hui, une espèce de bonheur possible à l'intérieur du monde de la consommation, bonheur d'un restaurant, bonheur d'une moquette, bonheur d'un fauteuil, d'un Chesterfield... Ce sont des choses concrètes, pas imaginaires" (cab2, p70; see also *le bonheur de la modernité // le bonheur dans la modernité*, cab2, p72). If happiness is "l'utilisation des choses sans problèmes" (cab2, p59), then the function of *Les Choses* is to instruct Man in how to appreciate objects, the benefits of capitalism. In its insistence on real, concrete objects over imaginary, abstract concepts, this statement also inaugurates a curious anti-intellectualism which can be discerned in the writings of Perec the intellectual from hereon.[48]

Regarding the withdrawal of previous claims, this primarily relates to Perec's unfavourable comments on Robbe-Grillet in the *Partisans* articles. While he does not claim that they share similar concerns, he now seems to

[48] This anti-intellectualism is largely directed at the intellectual *institution*. For example, in his 'billet d'humeur' entitled 'Les idées du jour', he attacks the intellectual 'fashions' of the period (showing, in passing, a working knowledge of Foucault, Lacan and Levi-Strauss, or at least of their 'catch-phrases') for their mystifying power (cab3, p42). In 'Ecriture et mass-media', he prefers to use Snoopy over Marshall McLuhan as a figure with the intellectual authority to settle an argument.

feel that any differences result from their respective *praxes*, not from conflicting ideologies:

> Q: [Votre] façon d'envisager la littérature n'a finalement rien de commun avec Robbe-Grillet [...]?
> A: Peu importe. Robbe-Grillet s'en tient à une description de surface; il utilise des mots très neutres, ce que Barthes appelle un *langage transitif*, ou bien alors des mots chargés psychanalytiquement [...]. J'ai voulu, au contraire, que mes mots soient 'injectés' de sens, chargés de résonances. Moquette, par exemple: pour moi c'est un mot qui véhicule tout un système de valeurs. (cab2, p68)

This statement is repeated in two other interviews (see cab2, pp64 & 71), each time insisting on the technical distinction between Robbe-Grillet's *langage transitif/dénoté* (and each time accompanied by a reference to Barthes) and Perec's own 'charged' language.[49] What is significant is not the inevitable persisting differences but the calm, almost academic nature of the distinction when compared to the stridency of the previous polemic.[50] Equally important is the emergence of Barthes as Perec's obligatory reference, replacing Lukács. (Incidentally, while Barthes used Robbe-Grillet to elaborate his notion of *langage dénoté*, Perec uses Barthes to develop his *langage chargé*: the above discussion of the nature of the word *moquette* is

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Finally, he constantly undermines the idea that a writer must be influenced/inspired by 'serious' sources such as Hegel and Wittgenstein or that a novel should 'apply' philosophical and scientific theories (see 'Entretien Perec/Jean-Marie Le Sidaner', p7).

[49] Curiously, in the two other occurrences of this reference, Perec claims that Barthes specifically calls Robbe-Grillet's language *transitif* and *dénoté* (rather than Perec simply applying Barthes's notion of *langage transitif* to Robbe-Grillet himself): this is simply not so – in Barthes's articles on Robbe-Grillet (collected in *Essais critiques*) he uses the expression 'superficial description' amongst others, but neither of the terms attributed to him by Perec.

He does, however, in his article on Marthe Robert's *Kafka*, use the term *intransitif* to describe *la Littérature* as conceived by Kafka. This is significant in that Perec later refers to Marthe Robert's book in terms practically identical to those used by Barthes in his review of it (see Barthes, 1964, pp143-147 & EMM, p37). Another example of Perec producing a muddled argument because of not verifying his sources or of not reading Barthes closely enough? The confusion arises because Barthes uses the term *transitif* in its linguistic acceptance and in its philosophical one – which produces an implicit value judgement. Used linguistically ("passage direct du sujet à l'objet"), it could be applied favourably to Robbe-Grillet's descriptive technique. However, used philosophically ("Qui modifie, agit sur autre chose que l'agent" – Petit Robert), it designates an outmoded, 'bourgeois' conception of writing (see the article 'Ecrivains et écrivants', in Barthes, 1964, pp152-159) – *écriture*, on the other hand, is fundamentally intransitive, literary language undermining the possibility of action.

[50] This calmness is maintained by Perec from now on. See, for example, his complete absence of reaction when the 'descriptive space' of *Espèces d'espaces* is compared to that of the Nouveau Roman ('Entretien GP/Ewa Pawlikowska', p72).

very close to Barthes's definition of *le mythe* as meta-language, as a signifier grafted onto an already existing sign (Barthes, 1957, pp187-188)).[51]

[51] At this point, we need to indicate the supreme importance which Perec's relationship with Barthes will assume, to the extent that we can say that Barthes becomes *the* critical reference for Perec (much later, in 1979, Perec still comprehends his own writing in Barthesian terms – see 'En dialogue avec l'époque', pp46 & 49). The term 'relationship' indicates more an intellectual empathy than any actual friendship, although we know that they did know each other: Perec attended Barthes's seminars on rhetoric and showed an early draft of *Les Choses* to him, to which Barthes replied encouragingly (Bellos, 1995, pp146, 287-289, 293 & 299).

More interesting is the manner in which the evolution of Perec's critical methodology roughly mirrors that of Barthes, Perec perhaps relying on his reading of Barthes to introduce him to the intellectual trends of the period (another suggestion of a certain dilettantism on Perec's part). Thus, as Barthes moves through his 'Marxist' phase (essays on Brecht) so does Perec (who refers abundantly to the name 'Brecht' without any in-depth discussion); as Barthes evolves his structuralist semiology and analysis of literature, Perec 'applies' it (*Les Choses* reflecting *Mythologies* (not to mention the series of 'billets d'humeur' written in *Arts et Loisirs* in late 1966 under the rubric 'L'esprit des choses', which, aside from attempting to cash in on the success of *Les Choses*, reflect the original *Mythologies* articles in their analysis of contemporary cultural phenomena (all reprinted in cab3, pp39-56)); *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?* reflecting 'L'ancienne rhétorique. Aide-mémoire'; *Un homme qui dort* as an exploration of "les lieux rhétoriques de l'indifférence" (PLRF, p37); not to mention Perec's description of the lipogram as "le degré zéro de la contrainte" (Oulipo, 1973, p92)); finally, as Barthes develops his own idiosyncratic 'post-structuralism', so, it would seem, does Perec – this last claim will be analysed throughout Section Three (see also the reference to *S/Z* quoted below: *S/Z* is frequently held up as the point at which Barthes 'turns' from structuralism to textuality).

Those who are psychoanalytically inclined might be tempted to see this proximity as an attempt on Perec's part to oust Robbe-Grillet from the *couple vedette* Robbe-Grillet/Barthes. This would explain the vitriol of Perec's early attack on Robbe-Grillet, which is later tempered by the approval of Barthes (father/lover?), as the casual "*Les Choses* sont l'histoire de la pauvreté inextricablement liée à l'image de la richesse, comme me l'a écrit Roland Barthes" dropped into an interview indicates (cab2, p68, English translation of letter quoted in Bellos, 1995, pp298-299) – interestingly, there is absolutely no critical distance between Perec and Barthe's comment: what Barthes says is. Alternatively, we could postulate a *vouloir-être-Barthes*, as evidenced by the sometimes obsequious imitation and sycophantic comments. The dream entitled 'S/Z' in BO (dream no. 21) is revelatory in this respect: Perec marvels at the mastery and evidence of Barthes's analysis, so evident in fact that it is surprising that nobody thought of it before – "l'on s'étonne qu'il ait fallu attendre Roland Barthes". What is more, when he turns the book around and reads from the end, Perec realises that the epigraph to one of the chapters refers favourably to *La Disparition*. Here it is as if Perec is replacing Balzac instead of Robbe-Grillet in his desire for proximity to Barthes (we know that Balzac's short-story *Sarrasine* is reprinted at the end of *S/Z*, here ousted by *La Disparition*).

> On doit savoir *ce que c'est* que l'écriture pour pouvoir se demander, en sachant de quoi l'on parle et de quoi *il est question*, où et quand commence l'écriture. Qu'est-ce que l'écriture? A quoi se reconnaît-elle?
> – Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie.*

Throughout the early articles, Perec uses the term Literature unproblematically, indicating that his concerns were other than defining/questioning the specific nature of the writing process. Continuing the analysis of his evolution in this latter direction, it is now necessary to examine his progression from the use of the term Literature to the use of the term *écriture*. This occurs in two texts, both dating from 1967 and both already referred to, 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain' and 'Ecriture et mass-media' (the new-found commitment to the term *écriture* is evident in the title of this article where, paradoxically, the term literature might have been more appropriate, dealing as it does with the relationship between the literary 'institution' and that of the media – he discusses *les beaux-arts*, *les belles-lettres* in relation to the media, but never *la littérature*, always *l'écriture*).

Perec, of course, did not invent the modern usage of the term *écriture* himself. By the time he comes to employ it in 1967, it had already been in use for over ten years, beginning with Barthes's *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. Barthes, as is well known, distinguished between *langue*, *style* and *écriture*. The first two "sont le produit naturel du Temps et de la personne biologique" (Barthes, 1972, p14), they are therefore 'blind forces' beyond the choice of an individual writer. *Ecriture*, on the other hand, represents "la morale de la forme" (Barthes, 1972, p15), it is the result of a choice, of the writer's reflection on the nature of language. In this early definition, *écriture* retains traces of Sartre's *engagement*: "l'écriture est un acte de solidarité historique [...], elle est le rapport entre la création et la société" (Barthes, 1972, p14). This aspect of *écriture*, while not retracted, is soon abandoned in favour of a more radical proposition: "l'écriture n'est nullement un instrument de

communication" (Barthes, 1972, p18). This results in the proposal of the *degré zéro* of the title (itself partly an historical phenomenon), the *écriture blanche* of Camus and Blanchot which represents the dissolution of the bourgeois conscience and which is an attempt to "dépasser la Littérature" (Barthes, 1972, p56). The ensuing absence of style and division between language and communication (the world) is evidence of the unsettling nature of this concept, of its radical difference from *littérature*. Barthes's *écriture* is explored further throughout the *Essais critiques*, these and *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* presumably having been read by Perec by 1967.

A further development in the history of the term *écriture* occurred with the work of Jacques Derrida, which began appearing from the mid- 1960s onwards (as examples, see 1965's 'La parole soufflée' or 1966's 'Freud et la scène de l'écriture' (both initially published in *Tel Quel*, and reprinted in ED, pp253-292 & 293-340) or *De la grammatologie*, the first version of which appeared in *Critique*, Winter 1965-Spring 1966). Derrida's concept of *écriture* (or *archi-écriture*) in which writing is expanded to become the non-originary origin of the world, deconstructing the Western metaphysics of presence and, through his claim that every signifier refers always to another signifier, never a signified, bearing the differential trace which differs/defers it from itself as well as from the other, 'producing' the notion of *il n'y a que du texte*. This became almost instantly (in)famous and, while Perec does not refer specifically (that is, by name) to Derrida until several years later, there is evidence in some of his comments in the 1967 texts that he had read Derrida, or was at least familiar with the contemporary debate surrounding him.[52]

[52] Although Perec only refers to Derrida by name once in his work, and then only in a text dated March 1972, the passage in which he is referred to is not insignificant: "En me penchant par cette fenêtre, je vois tout un lot de livres présentés de telle sorte qu'ils ont l'air de ne former qu'un seul ouvrage emboîté dans un cartonnage dont le dos porte une large tache noire. Les livres forment un ensemble qui me donne l'impression d'être homogène. Le thème central en serait une école contemporaine au nom médiéval - le Gay Sçavoir ou la Sainte Sapience - et le nom est calligraghié très soigneusement au crayon noir. On retrouve, pêle-mêle, dans cet ensemble de gros ouvrages de Derrida [...] et il me semble que ce sont précisément ces livres que je cherche depuis si longtemps. Le prix demandé par le libraire est extrêmement modique, compte tenu de la valeur et de la rareté des ouvrages" (BO, dream no. 112, 'Les Livres'). Aside from demonstrating Perec's admiration for Derrida (the *valeur* and the *rareté* referring as much to the intrinsic value of the writing as of the tomes), the dream

The above, then, constitutes a very brief summary of the history of the term *écriture*, in the work of two of the intellectual 'stars' of the time. We must now examine Perec's appropriation of it. Again, it is not our contention that he adds anything particularly new to the topic (as he equally did not to Marxist criticism, or to criticism of Sartre and Robbe-Grillet), rather it is simply a question of showing that his intellectual allegiances have radically changed by this date.

At their most basic level, these two texts represent Perec reflecting on his career to date: in 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain' he provides two significant alternative (significantly alternative) titles: "Comment je suis devenu écrivain après avoir été romancier" and/or "Comment je suis passé du roman à l'écriture".[53] They also represent a new optimism for the future of French letters, despite the fact that this "ouverture" (repeated three times in 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain'; see also his aim to "esquisser une structure ouverte de l'œuvre littéraire"(EMM, p9)) is not in the direction of Social Realism ("une nouvelle image de la littérature française, du roman français contemporain [...] qui est tout à fait différente de ce que l'on a connu jusqu'à il y a [...] quatre, cinq ans" – that is to say he implies a rupture in French literature in general immediately after the period during which the *Partisans* articles were written, the implication being that Perec himself is subject to this broader epistemological shift (PLRF, p32)), but represents rather the irruption of *le discontinu* into literature: "Les modèles du

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logic of the text also reflects Derridean theory to an extent: the indivisibility of the Book is problematised in favour of the text or trace as the book covers merge into one another.

The only other clear reference to Derrida occurs two years later in *Espèces d'espaces*: "Je suscite des *blancs*, des *espaces* (sauts dans le sens: discontinuités, passages, transitions)" (EE, p19, author's emphasis). This sentence is accompanied by an "J'écris dans la marge", which actually appears as an annotation, in the margin of the text, echoing both the title of Derrida's *Marges de la philosophie* and the typographical layout of the essay 'Tympan' which opens that book.

Despite the rarity of the references, we can nonetheless discern an openness to Derrida's freeplay, which is not irrelevant to Perec's own conception of the ludic (a certain "pouvoir de liberté et de jeu" (EMM, p10)) as practised in his fiction. We will return to this throughout Section Three below.

[53] PLRF, p32. Or in other words: "A l'époque où j'ai commencé à écrire [...] il n'y avait pas d'écriture. Le problème de l'écriture ne se posait pas. Le problème qui se posait était un problème de contenu, un problème idéologique" (PLRF, p32).

discontinu multiplient les pouvoirs de l'écriture" (EMM, p9). This new Barthesian fragmentation is also to be found, according to Perec, in the work of Michel Butor and, significantly, in the work of Maurice Roche and Jean Ristat, both members of Tel Quel, the group previously condemned by Perec as being even more decadent than the Nouveaux Romanciers, now referred to approvingly.[54]

Discussing the term *écriture* itself, Perec refers to the work of Barthes and Marthe Robert, also mentioning the role which linguistics played in the development of *écriture*. He writes that we must now speak of *écriture* and neither of *littérature* nor of the *œuvre*. Furthermore, the development of this term permits us to focus on the work of the writer, work here intended in the sense of artisanship, labour, echoing Barthes's ongoing concern with demystifying the Romantic conception of the artist as 'inspired' (see Chapter 5 below). Perhaps more importantly, it would now appear that 'realism' is not possible, for technical reasons resulting from the analysis imposed by these new tools: "entre le réel que je vise et le livre que je produis il y a, il n'y a..., il y a seulement l'écriture" (PLRF, p34). *Ecriture* mediates between the world and the book, perhaps hinting at the arbitrary nature of the sign, and certainly demonstrating that writing is an inherently conventional act, there is no realism, only a set of conventions which give the impression of realism: "L'écriture est un acte culturel" (PLRF, p34).

This very Barthesian definition of *écriture* (primarily found in 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain') is accompanied by two occurrences of a very Derridean use of the word in 'Ecriture et mass-media'. Firstly, there is the laconic phrase "le silence de l'écriture n'est pas le silence de l'écrivain" (EMM, p7). This resembles Blanchot's assertion that *la solitude essentielle* is not solitude 'in the world' but solitude in the text itself,

[54] See PLRF, p38 and EMM, pp9 & 10. There is a subterranean intertextual thread running between Perec and Roche which has not been explored. See, for example, the typographical play in *Espèces d'espaces* (pp18-19) which is a 'quotation' of a similar play in Roche's *Compact* (p18); or the acrostic on p97 of *Compact*, similar to Oulipian experiments. See also what can only be described as Roche's 'simultaneous typography' in *Circus* (two words stacked on top of each other permitting two readings of a sentence), which is 'quoted' in *La boutique obscure* (Roche, 1972, p9; BO, dream no. 24). *Circus* is also subtitled 'roman(s)', anticipating *La Vie mode d'emploi. Romans*.

writing isolating the writer from himself (Blanchot, 1955, pp13-33). This is developed by Derrida in his 1964 essay 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre' (ED, pp99-116): "Absence de l'écrivain aussi. Ecrire, c'est se retirer. Non pas dans sa tente pour écrire, mais de son écriture même. S'échouer loin de son langage, l'émanciper ou le désemparer, le laisser cheminer seul et démuni. Laisser la parole. Etre poète, c'est savoir laisser la parole. La laisser parler toute seule, ce qu'elle ne peut faire que dans l'écrit" (ED, p108). This is related to Derrida's notion of the *trace* which renders mastery over meaning impossible, this being implied in "le silence de l'écriture": the disruption of the voice and of meaning which is no longer a choice on the part of the writer as it was for Barthes, writing disempowering the writer at the same moment it allows him to speak, thence the paradoxical "le silence de l'écriture n'est pas le silence de l'écrivain", the writer being able to speak in the world, but not in his writing.

The second Derridean notion is the following: "la citation constitue aujourd'hui l'un des modes les plus commodes (et les plus subtils) de la connotation, c'est-à-dire de la littérature, permettant l'écriture à partir de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire, entre le monde et l'œuvre, le relais d'un langage déjà littéraire" (EMM, p9). While the first part of this sentence reproduces Barthes's *connotation/dénotation* distinction and the notion of controlled intertextuality, the second part moves beyond this. The notion of "l'écriture à partir de l'écriture" institutes what could be termed an infinite chain which is without origin in reality: writing does not represent the world but is grafted onto a writing which is "déjà littéraire". Again, this is somewhat lapidary on Perec's part, but it does seem to echo Derrida's " 'Signifiant du signifiant' décrit au contraire le mouvement du langage: dans son origine, certes, mais on pressent déjà qu'une origine dont la structure s'épelle ainsi – signifiant de signifiant – s'emporte et s'efface elle-même dans sa propre production." (GR, p16). As we know, this signifier of the signifier prevents any recourse to a signified, which would halt the play of language, *écriture*, just as the less technical "l'écriture à partir de l'écriture" does. In this sense we can see that Perec shifts and slips between the two dominant expositions of *écriture*, continuing his own form of *bricolage*.

If Perec revealed himself open to the multitude of new theoretical discourses which emerged during this period, he nonetheless expressed certain reservations regarding the 'theoretical fiction' born of these theories (or of 'Theory').[55] Despite his approval of Butor, Ristat and Roche, he feels that in general such fiction is too heterogeneous, that is it lacks the rigour which a system provides and is consequently "insuffisamment significatif" or even naïve (not something one would normally accuse the Tel Quel novelists of being (see EMM, p9)). Equally, despite his approving quotation of Marshall McLuhan's "The story line must be abandoned" and the 'happy' fact that "les mass-media sont là pour ruiner la survie des narrations linéaires", he never actually abandoned narrative, incorporating his linguistic experimentation into coherent, though not necessarily linear, narratives (EMM, p8).

On the play of the text, of textuality, while expressing certain reservations regarding the implicit distinction between surface/depth and serious/frivolous, we can only agree with Patrick Ffrench's assessment of the similarities and differences between Perec and Tel Quel:

> *Tel Quel*, while close, in its focus on aleatory structure, to the *Oulipo* group to which Perec belonged, had a different, less humorous approach to the ludic [...]. *Tel Quel*'s innovative play is more austere, less comic, than that of writers like Perec. It also displays a less fetishistic regard for the surface-level idiosyncrasies of language, being more concerned with shifts at a fundamental level (Ffrench, 1995, p142).

This passage (and a similar statement on p67 of the same book) serves as a timely reminder, lest we be tempted to abolish the differences between Perec and Tel Quel – or between any two writers – in favour of an homogeneous 'theoretical fiction' which evidently does not exist.

Perec's taste for narrative (what he calls *le romanesque*) and system leads him to propose the following tentative solution: "Le problème est au fond d'élaborer à partir de ces éléments [typographic experiments, etc.] une rhétorique, c'est-à-dire un code des contraintes et des subversions permettant

[55] The term *fiction théorique* comes from Roche, 1972, p3.

de définir les limites de l'œuvre entre le trop aléatoire et le trop déterminé" (EMM, p9). Despite his openness to the 'beyond mastery' of theory, he ultimately recoils before this particular gulf, an oscillation which will be repeated throughout his career. Indeed, it is this taste for a certain order which is perhaps one of the reasons for his joining the Oulipo, and which the above passage reflects directly.

L'entrée en matière

It was in March 1967 that Perec was co-opted into the Oulipo. 'Ecriture et mass-media', from which the previous quotation is taken, was presented in October of the same year. Aside from being the first text in which Perec names the Oulipo (though he neglects to mention that he is now a member – perhaps a reflection of the Oulipo's semi-secretive status at this time), the passage reflects a direct adhesion to Oulipian 'theory' (we will explain these particular inverted commas below) with its "code des contraintes" referring to *contrainte formelle*, that specifically Oulipian practice.[56]

This historical fact, Perec's membership of the Oulipo, is generally held to be of the highest significance for his writing. This is undoubtedly true for his fiction, which from now on is 'resolutely Oulipian'.[57] However, the same cannot be said for his critical output. Firstly, as we have seen, because he had already begun to move in this direction with the writing of *Les Choses* (not forgetting the following novel, *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?*, with its references to Queneau and Jarry) and the interviews given subsequently. Secondly, because (as we will see) the Oulipo has a rather singular attitude towards theorising its own production, and to Theory in

[56] This last remark is not strictly accurate, as one of the aims which the Oulipo sets itself is the rediscovery of its predecessors, such as the 'Grands Rhétoriqueurs', for example. In the context of the French scene in the 1960s and 1970s it is, however, unique.

[57] All of his subsequent novels (*La Disparition*, *Les Revenentes*, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, *Un cabinet d'amateur* and the posthumous *53 Jours*) are constructed around a system of constraint. In addition, his two collections of poetry (*Alphabets* and *La Clôture*) are both Oulipian, as are many of the various short 'occasional' texts he produced (posthumously collected in *Vœux* and *Beaux présents belles absentes*). While not strictly Oulipian, both *Espèces d'espaces* and *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* are both rigorously structured (significantly, neither are strictly works of fiction).

general. As a result of this, there are only two texts produced by Perec which approach the status of theoretical reflection on the Oulipo: the first is the 'Histoire du lipogramme' (Oulipo, 1973, pp77-93), which is what it says, a very academic piece of historical scholarship, not a theory of Oulipian textual production (it is, incidentally, a model of its kind, foreshadowing Perec's ability to pastiche academic discourse, which will be discussed in Chapter Three).[58] The second is the project for a 'Littérature Sémo-Définitionnelle' (LSD), which we will consider after discussing the Oulipo's 'anti-theory'.

Perec did not contribute anything to the section in *La littérature potentielle* entitled "Théorie et Histoire" (Oulipo, 1973, pp17-44) for the simple reason that these texts pre-date his membership of the Oulipo.[59] For this reason, we will keep our discussion of the Oulipo's 'theory' very brief. As literary movements go, the Oulipo is a strange beast. It could almost be described as a post-modern movement, not in the sense that it propounds a post-modern theory of literature, but in that, contrary to the revolutionary aims (either artistic or political) of nearly every twentieth century literary movement, it does not claim to break irrevocably with the past, to 'invent' a radical new aesthetic. It is rather a 'meta-movement', that is it reflects on the very nature and possibility of a movement existing at all.[60] For example, in marked contrast to the resignations and excommunications of say, Surrealism, the only way of leaving the Oulipo is by committing ritual suicide in front of the plenary committee, especially convened for this purpose. Equally, a large amount of the Oulipo's creative forces are expended in self-derision, as in the famous "Oulipiens: rats qui ont à

[58] There is one notable departure from the academic mode in this text, a programmatic statement with particular relevance for the author who so violently condemned Claude Simon's 'artifice': "Uniquement préoccupée de ses grandes majuscules (l'Œuvre, le Style, l'Inspiration, la Vision du Monde, les Options fondamentales, le Génie, la Création, etc.), l'histoire littéraire semble délibérément ignorer l'écriture comme pratique, comme travail, comme jeu. Les artifices systématiques, les maniérismes formels [...] sont relégués dans ces registres d'asiles de fous littéraires [...]. [L]'on pourrait au moins rappeler que les maniérismes formels ont existé de tous temps et pas seulement, comme on feint de le croire, aux époques dites de décadence" (Oulipo, 1973, pp79-80).

[59] For a comprehensive account of the Oulipo prior to Perec's co-option, see Jacques Bens, *OuLiPo 1960-1963*.

[60] According to Jacques Roubaud, the Oulipo is "ni moderne, ni post-moderne mais une littérature traditionnelle d'après les traditions" (Roubaud, 1995, p206).

construire le labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir" (Oulipo, 1973, p36). Any Oulipian revolution can only be ironic. Finally, when mentioning the unique nature of the Oulipo, it would be a pity not to refer to their *generosity*: "Nous appelons littérature potentielle la recherche de formes, de structures nouvelles et qui pourront être utilisées par les écrivains de la façon qui leur plaira." (Oulipo, 1973, p38).

There results from this a dedicated anti-dogmatism, a marked reluctance on the Oulipo's part to produce texts which propound any discernible theory.[61] They prefer, rather, to produce fictional meta-texts, texts which reflect their own conception: works which are highly coded and continually gloss themselves. Perhaps as an implicit acceptance of these principles, Perec the Oulipian restricts himself to *praxis* rather than *theoria*: for instance, the text 'Still life/Style leaf' (IO, pp107-119) was commissioned as a 'texte théorique' on description and representation, but "devant l'incapacité où j'étais de produire un texte théorique sur la description, j'ai fait un texte, qui est à la fois une description et une description de la description" ('A propos de la description', p332). The one exception to this is the text which resulted in his co-option into the Oulipo, the 'Littérature Sémo-Définitionnelle'.[62]

PALF/LSD

The series of texts (written in collaboration with soon-to-be-fellow-Oulipian, Marcel Bénabou) which expounds the procedure known as 'Production automatique de littérature française' – of which the LSD is an element – constitutes perhaps Perec's most technical reflection on the nature

[61] Even the most cursory comparison of the Oulipo's two 'manifestos' (Oulipo, 1973, pp19-27) with, for example, Dadaist and Surrealist manifestos (Tzara, 1996, pp199-238; Breton, 1985, pp13-62) reveals this.

It is notable, however, that the Oulipo has more in common with Dada than with Surrealism (although Dada did purport to be revolutionary): both are anti-humanist, anti-dogmatic, self-derisory, reject the unconscious (and the inspired artist), and reject the seriousness of art. It is no accident that Marcel Duchamp was an honorary Oulipian (see his 'Conditions d'un langage' as a pre-Oulipian text (Duchamp, 1994, p48)).

[62] Despite his early handiwork, it would seem that Perec was suited by temperament to this group which refused to engage in polemic: for example, he was later to express 'unease' at the polemic raging between Tel Quel and *Change* ('En dialogue avec l'époque', p46) – while he publishes work in *Change*, he does not become embroiled in the polemic.

of language (ironically, yet appropriately if we recall Perec's occasional anti-intellectualism, the PALF began as a simple parlour game).[63] The PALF is divided into an initial exposé of the "Approches Théoriques" ('Présentation', 'Esquisse', 'Eléments pour une théorie'), followed by practical applications. For the purposes of the present chapter, we will concentrate on the former, although a brief overview of the texts produced is necessary in order to fully appreciate the theoretical exposition.

The 'Production automatique de littérature française' entails taking two sentences at random (in the present case, "Prolétaires de tous les pays unissez-vous" and "Le presbytère n'a rien perdu de son charme ni le jardin de son éclat"), replacing every word in each with its dictionary definition (or, more pertinently, with an obscure or archaic definition), and repeating this process with the sentence obtained from the first manipulation. The 'audacious' hypothesis underlying this practice is that the two sentences "finiront fatalement par coïncider" (CGP3, p17), that is, two identical sentences will be produced. This obviously subverts the notions of *Vérité*, *Réalité* and *Révolution* which 'le jeune Perec' adhered to, language instead slipping over itself in a cascade of definitions, never attaining the object defined:

> Dans la littérature traditionnelle, le choix se fait en fonction de critères de deux sortes: 1: Des critères internes au langage: cohérence, logique, correction grammaticale et syntaxique. 2: Des critères externes: conformité à un objet (représentation, lyrisme), conformité à un but (démonstration). [...] L'originalité du P.A.L.F. est qu'il supprime les critères extérieurs au langage et les remplace par des contraintes internes au langage. (CGP3, p25)

The principle of subversion is maintained, firstly, in the choice of sentences to be operated on: not least in the treatment of Marx, which is doubly subversive as it refers to Perec's previous ideals, now reduced to a language game (see also: "on vit surgir [...] vingt-huit Marx (un Chico, trois Karl, six Groucho, dix-huit Harpo)" (DISP, p13)). Secondly, the notion of 'diffraction' subverts the authority and rationality of the instrument at the heart of the PALF: the dictionary. In choosing an obscure definition to feed back into the

[63] Elements of this project were initially published in *Change*, no. 14, pp118-130 and in *La littérature potentielle*, pp123-140. These texts, along with several *inédits*, were subsequently

loop, the notion of the dictionary as object of enlightenment is undermined, as it contributes instead to the confusion. Take, for example, the sentence "La Marquise sortit à cinq heures". 'Processed' in the manner described, it becomes "Le toit avancé soutenu par des piliers fut mis en vedette à l'heure du thé" (CGP3, p23). Incidentally, this also illustrates the *production automatique* element of the project: applied mechanically to a sentence, the process results in a longer sentence, repeated again the result will be longer again. This anti-humanist approach negates the content or the expression in favour of the surface play of the signifiers.

The LSD is a variant of the PALF which abandons the belief that any two sentences will eventually read the same. Instead, it simply takes one sentence, repeatedly 'translating' it in the manner described above. This then, is the applied, practical aspect of the PALF. We now need to examine in detail one particular passage in the last and most developed theoretical exposition, 1973's 'Eléments pour une théorie':

> A l'origine de la [dictionary] définition, il y a un mouvement de défiance à l'égard de l'arbitraire du signe. La définition est censée apporter un dévoilement, une apocalypse. Mais, en réalité, la définition n'est qu'un jeu sur les signifiants, car, définir, ce n'est que substituer à un signifiant d'autres signifiants. Si l'on se livre à ce jeu indéfiniment, on aboutit à une cascade de signifiants jamais interrompue, car même si par extraordinaire on arrive à faire le tour de tous les mots de la langue, le nombre de leur agencements en définitions diverses est quasi infini. L'apocalypse n'arrive donc jamais. Par le biais de la définition, on prend donc le langage au piège: le signifiant ne conduit jamais au signifié. "Le langage ne peut plus s'arrêter, parce que jamais enclos dans une parole définitive, il n'énoncera sa vérité que dans un discours futur tout entier consacré à dire ce qu'il aura dit. (...) Le langage a en lui-même son propre principe de prolifération." (Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, p55-56).
>
> Le L.S.D. nous met donc en possession d'une technique d'analyse du langage. On peut en effet considérer la chaîne des définitions comme le discours autonome que le langage tient sur lui-même. Langage et méta-langage coïncident exactement et se condamnent l'un l'autre à un morne ressassement. (CGP3, p32)

The first section of this passage illustrates perfectly the distance which Perec has travelled from his original conception of literature and language: it specifically refers to the notion of truth as *dévoilement* which the *Partisans* articles propounded (see *Vérité, Réalité et Révolution* (*Pour*) above, and LG, p51), before rejecting it in favour of a very Derridean concept of language (*écriture*): "L'apocalypse n'arrive donc jamais. Par le biais de la définition,

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republished in CGP3 – for the sake of convenience, all our references will be to this edition.

on prend donc le langage au piège: le signifiant ne conduit jamais au signifié" (see *Littérature ou Ecriture?* above). Moreover, "L'apocalypse n'arrive donc jamais" happily anticipates on Derrida's 'No apocalypse, not now' (PSY, pp395-418), in which he characteristically plays on both senses of the word in order to prevent either from dominating, thus postponing the apocalypse indefinitely. Playing on the definition of apocalypse one, by definition, prevents it.

We come now to the quotation from Foucault. At first, it appears to be simply a particularly apposite confirmation of the theses propounded by Perec and Bénabou, a scholarly reference to a higher authority (and not a more subterranean instance of a *littérature citationnelle*): witness the exactitude of the bibliographical reference. Closer inspection reveals, however, that it is indeed a performative rather than a demonstrative grafting. Let us consider the original passage: "Le langage a en lui-même son principe *intérieur* de prolifération. [C]ette dimension absolument ouverte *d'un* langage qui ne peut plus s'arrêter, parce que, jamais enclos dans une parole définitive, il n'énoncera sa vérité que dans un discours futur, tout entier consacré à dire ce qu'il aura dit." (Foucault, 1966, pp55-56, emphasis mine). Leaving aside the minor variations in punctuation, we can discern two notable differences. The first relates to the fact that the interruption signal '[...]' (printed as '(...)' in the PALF) normally designates that a portion of the original has been omitted. Here, as well as signifying this, it also serves to articulate the text in reverse (which it fails to announce): the last sentence of the passage is actually quoted first by Perec. It is the very preciseness of the bibliographical co-ordinates which suggests that this is not an example of Perec's occasional intellectual dilettantism, but rather a deliberate overturning of academic authority (just as the PALF overturns the authority of the dictionary), generating a new signification from a new *agencement*. The second variation relates to the replacement of *intérieur* with *propre* to describe the proliferation at work in/on language. We say 'on' language because the effacement of the interior prevents recourse to the notion of

depth, restricting our play to the surface of language.[64] This further undermines in Perecian discourse the previously vaunted notion of the essence, inscribing him in the very modern 'aesthetic of surfaces'. As Gilles Deleuze wrote, "Cette découverte de la surface, cette critique de la profondeur, forment une constante de la littérature moderne" (Deleuze, 1969, p21 fn). The misquotation is an application of this surface play as, if there is no essence, then there is no immutable order in which the discourse must be presented. By expanding the ideas outlined in the PALF, we arrive at a situation where there is such a proliferation of multiple meanings that we can only discern the absence of meaning, or *non-sens*. It makes no difference whether Foucault is quoted accurately or not as, in any case, he means nothing (a particularly appropriate situation for a writer who devoted himself to exposing hidden figures of power and authority to find himself in).

However, Foucault is as aware as anyone that the question of the absence of depth is a very modern one. For this reason, his use of *intérieur* is not an unwitting movement of recoil before the scandal of the surface. This will become apparent when we consider the immediate context in *Les Mots et les choses* of the passage (mis)quoted above. It is actually a description of the nature of interpretation (*le commentaire*) in the sixteenth century, thence Foucault's "un langage" where Perec reads/writes "le langage"; thence also the use of *intérieur*, reflecting the very Baroque concern with depth and volume.[65] The passage quoted is therefore not a comment on the nature of language in general, but is restricted to the auto-generating nature of interpretative discourse: "La tâche du commentaire, par définition, ne peut jamais être achevée" (Foucault, 1966, p56). However, this affirmation is immediately followed by an "Et pourtant…", conveniently ignored by Perec: in fact, the freeplay of interpretative discourse is only made possible by the sixteenth century conception of a "Texte primitif" which also serves to check the "prolifération nécessaire de l'exégèse" (Foucault, 1966, p56). On the one hand, this *Texte primitif* is the literal text being interpreted, on the other it is

[64] Although from a Derridean perspective, the notion of *le propre* is itself suspect.
[65] See also 'L'univers réversible' in Genette, 1966, pp9-20.

the World itself, language still being deemed during this period to represent the world, and to be therefore limited to the World, itself finite, not infinite. In this respect, the *Texte primitif* is roughly analogous to what Derrida calls the *signifié transcendental*, that which would conduct the *signifiant* to the *signifié*, not just to another *signifiant* (GR, p73).

It could be argued that, on a restricted level, the quotation from *Les Mots et les choses* functions as a *Texte primitif* here: its existence makes a plurality of interpretations possible, but it also serves to limit them: the text must be respected (at least according to the rules of scholarly exegesis). However, by not respecting the 'linearity' of the text, by effectively effacing the idea of a *Texte primitif*, Perec's text places itself firmly in a modern perspective. In fact, the *glissement* operated in the meaning of Foucault's text mirrors the *glissement* (described a few lines previously) in meaning, the "cascade de signifiants". Thence the notion of performative quotation.

We see here Perec applying in a non-fictional text the ideas sketched out in 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain' and in 'Ecriture et mass-media'. There he demonstrated (described) the advances being made in Theory and in his theory. Here he performs them, 'demonstrating' in the process one of the tenets of so-called post-structuralist theory. It would seem that his evolution from dogmatic realist to aporetical scrivener is complete. Perec, however, takes the process one stage further, applying the principle of uncertainty to himself, meditating on the possibility of self-definition without slippage.

Aporia

In the wake of his co-option into the Oulipo and the texts which immediately resulted from this, Perec turns his critical eye upon himself, abandoning politics and criticism of others in favour of an Oulipian relativism.[66] The titles of two of these texts reveal the radical doubt and

[66] There are, of course, certain exceptions to this. Notably two texts which are overtly political, constructed around a utopian/dystopian, Socialist/Capitalist view of society: 'L'orange est proche' and 'Chalands et nonchalants' (*Cause Commune*, no. 3 & 7). While these texts recall the strident tone of the *Partisans* articles, they maintain an absolute

uncertainty now at the heart of his aesthetic: 'Approches de quoi?' and 'Notes sur ce que je cherche' (IO, pp9-13 & PC, pp9-12). There is, however, a certain cleavage which must be acknowledged in Perec's discussion of his work. We will explore the field of uncertainty below, but first we need to mention that about which Perec speaks freely and with lucidity: *contrainte formelle*. This statement needs to immediately qualified: on the one hand, Perec speaks freely about the mechanisms of constraint, providing detailed empirical descriptions of the constraints used in his books but, on the other hand, he refuses to move beyond this factual presentation to any speculation on the theory or motivations behind the use of constraint (this will be relevant for Section Two).[67] This attitude effectively results in a separation of constraint and the text produced under constraint, relegating constraint to a 'pre-literary' stage as, paradoxically, the fact that he can talk about it means that it is not *illisible* in the sense that *la parole poétique* is.

Self-definition (*Noli me legere*)

As in the case of Nietzsche, the passage to un-knowing passes by an initial affirmation of subjectivity and relativism, before developing into a radical epistemological uncertainty (see also, for a contemporary position close to Nietzsche, and filtered through Bataille, Soller's '*savoir = non-savoir*' (Sollers, 1968, p110). The movement of oscillation implied here is ludically echoed by Perec in 'De la difficulté qu'il y a à imaginer une Cité idéale' (PC, pp129-132) with its suspension of any possibility of decision operated by the successive, unresolved *je n'aimerais pas...mais parfois si...*). In 'Je ne suis absolument pas critique d'art' (CGP6, pp196-203), Perec

separation between art and politics, reaffirming our notion that for the post-*Choses* Perec, literature can no longer be made to serve an ideology.

Similarly, he produces a number of what he calls sociological texts. These practice a *regard oblique*, an ironic questioning of society's whims and manias and, in some cases, read like a popularisation of semiotics, revealing once again Barthes's influence (see, amongst others, 'Douze regards obliques' (PC, pp43-58) and 'Le Saint des Saints' (IO, pp89-96). None of these reflect on the nature of literature/writing and are therefore outside the scope of this chapter.

[67] For a discussion by Perec of the constraints underlying his work see, for example, 'Quatre figures pour *La Vie mode d'emploi*' (*L'Arc*, no. 76, 1979, pp50-53) and 'Ce qui stimule ma

overtly admits this subjectivity in his approach to writing on/collaborating with painters, his criticism no longer aspiring to Truth.

This subjectivity in his approach to others is paralleled by an inability to speak about himself (other than in the sense discussed above, the empiricism of constraint), an inability which is not due to a personal shortcoming but which is rather related to the nature of *écriture* or, in Blanchot's sense of the word, the *œuvre*. According to Blanchot (from whom the expression *noli me legere* is borrowed), the *œuvre* rejects/ejects the writer from itself, rendering the writer powerless over it: "Nul qui a écrit l'œuvre, ne peut vivre, demeurer auprès d'elle. Celle-ci est la décision même qui le congédie, le retranche, qui fait de lui le survivant, le désœuvré, l'inoccupé, l'inerte" (Blanchot, 1955, p17). The writer cannot explain his work because the work speaks for itself (while remaining silent). If we return to the period of rupture in Perec's 'parcours' we will find that, while not adding anything to this theory, he seems to adopt it (in the process moving towards a writer he had previously condemned as 'metaphysical'): "J'écris et je ne parle pas, et non seulement je ne parle pas, mais je ne parle pas de ce que j'écris, moi, je déteste ça [...] je ne suis pas critique, par conséquent je ne suis pas spécialiste de mon œuvre. Le fait que je l'ai écrite ne m'autorise pas à pontifier dessus..." (PLRF, p31). This is echoed in 'Ecriture et mass-media': "la fonction de l'écrivain est d'écrire et non de penser; et même si l'on peut accorder quelque crédit aux réflexions qu'il lui arrive d'émettre sur sa production, elles ne sauraient en aucun cas constituer une théorie" and "Le monde des mass-media tend à laisser croire que l'écrivain peut parler à la place de son œuvre (on lui demande le sens de ce qu'il écrit, on substitue l'interview à la critique)..." (EMM, pp 6 & 7).

When asked, in an interview given after the publication of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, "Y a-t-il encore une signification aux histoires que vous contez?", Perec replies bluntly "Ce n'est pas à moi de répondre" ('J'ai fait imploser le roman', p73). Not only can he not explain his work, but he no longer

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racontouze...' (T.E.M., no. 1, Spring 1984, pp49-59). Or, for example, for a discussion of some of his literary sources, see 'Emprunts à Flaubert' (*L'Arc*, no. 79, 1980, pp49-50).

attempts to explain the inability to explain: "Q: Qu'est-ce que le jeu? A: La définition? Je n'ai pas de définition." ('La vie: règle du jeu', p13). In this respect, and despite their other massive differences, the writer closest to him is probably Beckett who, unusually in French letters refused to play the role of the artist critic/artist theorist, replying sardonically to any request for clarification. Perec does not, however, maintain Beckett's sarcasm, at times seeming to apologise for his silence: "Je ne sais pas très bien. Finalement je ne sais pas si je sais parler de ce que je fais. Je sais que je le fais. Je sais que j'y consacre tout le temps que je peux y consacrer, toute l'énergie. Je sais que j'ai raison, presque d'une manière paradoxale..., parce que..." (*Poésie ininterrompue*, p7).[68] Ironically, the embarrassment caused by the *blocage* only reinforces its hold, as the speaker begins to stumble and stutter.

Stutter (*Bégaya-t-il*)

In the article which lends its title to this section, Gilles Deleuze re-values the traditionally negative view of the stutter in literature (Deleuze, 1993, pp135-143). Elsewhere, quoting Proust, he discusses the importance of being able to speak as a foreigner in one's own language (Deleuze, 1996, pp11-12). This does not entail speaking poorly or in *petit nègre*, but rather entails a disruption of the linearity of a discourse which would aspire to block the forces of desire, to close off the *lignes de fuite* through a process of creative fragility or *gaucherie*. This particular form of *bégaiement* can, by definition, only give rise to a *praxis*, never a *theoria*. *Alors, laissons la parole au poète*:

"Dans tout ça, je cherche une sorte de... Je n'arrive pas très bien à le dire..."

- *Poésie ininterrompue*, p5.

"L'image achevée, c'est, peut-être, la... Je sais qu'il y a une image. Quand on commence un puzzle... Je ne sais pas. Je sais que le puzzle s'appelle la vie et l'œuvre de Georges Perec, mais je ne sais pas à quoi ça ressemble. Peut-être que ça sera tout blanc"

[68] The interview in *Poésie ininterrompue* was actually a radio interview. The text here referred to is actually a typescript of this broadcast kept by the Fonds Georges Perec

- *Poésie ininterrompue*, p7.

"Il y a – comment peut-on appeler ça? – une recherche d'enracinement qui passe par les mots, comme si... Ouais... Je ne sais pas très bien comment je peux dire. Une manière, disons... je ne sais pas. Ce n'est pas très important d'ailleurs. Je ne me sens pas obligé de le chercher, de le savoir."

- *Poésie ininterrompue*, p8.

"Je ne sais pas vraiment."

- *Poésie ininterrompue*, p8.

"Encore, je n'ai pas... je veux dire... c'est assez difficile... qu'est-ce que je peux faire? Je peux..."

- 'Je ne suis absolument pas critique d'art', p198.

"Je ne peux pas, je veux dire, j'ai écrit mon premier livre il y a seize ans ou dix-sept ans, enfin, même plus. Je peux vous dire, j'ai essayé, enfin je m'en rends compte maintenant, plutôt, ou c'est maintenant que je m'en rends compte..."

- 'A propos de la description', p338.

"...l'interrogation sur l'espace, demandé par Paul Virilio, qui était un homme qui s'intéressait à l'architecture, en tout cas à l'urbanisme, en tout cas à l'espace ou en tout cas à je ne sais pas quoi. Je ne peux pas vous donner de réponse, comme ça, globale. Non je ne peux pas."

- 'A propos de la description', p339.

"A la limite, je ne sais pas comment je peux essayer d'expliquer cette image, parce que, c'est quelque chose qui m'a toujours frappé, c'est que, quand on pense qu'on connaît, je veux dire... [C]'est-à-dire, je ne peux pas dire que je connais une région..."

- 'A propos de la description', p343.

When, in one of his last interviews, he was forced to confront the question of Marxism, he sounds ill at ease: anxious not to sound like a literary aristocrat, but refusing to espouse any ideology whatsoever:

> *Vous sentez-vous proche d'une littérature prolétarienne?* La littérature prolétarienne est écrite par les prolétaires. Moi, je suis un petit bourgeois. Si je suis un prolétaire, je

(*polycopie* no. 19, pages numbered 1 through 8). Subsequent references to this text will simply state *Poésie ininterrompue*, followed by the relevant page number.

> suis un prolétaire de l'écriture. Je suis un prolétaire de l'écriture puisque j'écris pour un éditeur qui gagne de l'argent sur mon dos, ça c'est évident. Lui n'est pas producteur. Il est simplement fabricant du livre que j'écris. [...] C'est nous [les écrivains] qui fournissons la matière première. [...] Je ne peux pas écrire une littérature prolétarienne, décrire de l'intérieur la vie d'un ouvrier, ses combats, ses contradictions... que je ne connais pas." (Entretien Simony, p34).

(Did he *know* all the characters that he wrote about in *La Vie mode d'emploi*? and what of his previous exhortations to understand and comprehend the world? is this no longer part of the writer's task?)

For the final word on a fluid, slippery practice, here is an appropriately liquid conclusion: "Faut s'arrêter; bon, j'arrête et on va boire un pot. Je vous remercie beaucoup de votre attention." ('A propos de la description', p344).

Section Two

L'œil suit les chemins…

Chapter Two

The Critic in the Work

> VLADIMIR: Abortion!
> ESTRAGON: Morpion!
> VLADIMIR: Sewer-rat!
> ESTRAGON: Curate!
> VLADIMIR: Cretin!
> ESTRAGON: [*With finality*] Crritic!
> – Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot.*

> Ils sont fous, ces structuralistes.
> – Perec paraphrasing Obélix in 'Les idées du jour'.

In Chapter One, attention was paid to Perec's non-fiction and to the different critical methodologies he embraced (however fleetingly). In this chapter, the emphasis will shift to his fiction and to the status of criticism and, in that context, of critics too. This chapter is something of an appendix to the first and a prologue to the third, so it will be kept short. The intention is to examine two different *mises en scène* of the critical or interpretative process. The first, more sober, could most properly be termed meta-fiction, that is to say the work interprets itself to a certain extent. Given the highly formalistic nature of Perec's work, this process often entails reflection on the rules which governed the text's genesis (for example, the narrative of *La Disparition* frequently refers to a *manque* or *non-dit*, therefore highlighting the lipogrammatic nature of the novel, the fact that the letter 'e' is missing). It is not our intention to examine this phenomenon in the current chapter. Rather, we will focus on the more 'universally' meditative texts, texts which reflect on the process of interpretation in general, texts in which the narrative becomes criticism to a certain extent. It is hoped to show that these texts, without apparent irony or sarcasm, propound a theory which has certain similarities with a structuralist (or more broadly formalist) methodology.[1] The second *mise en scène* is more burlesque than the first and, to a certain extent, undoes it.

[1] This is not to imply that the texts are themselves structuralist. While a work of fiction may be formalist, post-modern or even post-structuralist, it is difficult to conceive of structuralist fiction. In this respect, it is preferable to speak, as Warren Motte does, of "les textes d'inspiration formaliste" ('Jeux Mortels', in *Etudes Littéraires*, "Georges Perec, écrire/transformer", vol. 23, no. 1-2, 1990, p43).

In the first, it is the narrative which assumes the meta-textual role. In the second, it is the characters themselves who attempt to analyse texts and objects with which they are confronted. They function as surrogate readers (readers who are, incidentally, well versed in the latest intellectual fashions and figures), whose methodology is not dissimilar to that put forward by the first *mise en scène*. However, it is to be hoped that an analysis of the irony directed at them as interpreters, coupled with their inevitable failure to interpret correctly that which they feel qualified to, will suggest that the initial *mise en scène* is not as straightforwardly 'pro' any particular methodology as it might initially appear. (In this respect, the structure of the current chapter prefigures that of the next one. There, we will also be concerned with examining the manner in which one text propounds a certain type of interpretation which a later text retracts. In the next chapter we will, however, add a third element to this bipartite division: we will indulge in some meta-criticism of our own, that is to say we will 'read the readers', considering the manner in which certain Perecians follow the initial method indicated while seemingly remaining oblivious to the retraction).

L'œil suit les chemins...?

But first, however, it will be necessary to return briefly to Paul Klee, whose importance for Perec was seen in the last chapter (see also Chapter 6 for further references to Klee). The reason for this is because the epigraph to *La Vie mode d'emploi*'s Preamble is a quotation taken from Klee's *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (*Pedagogical Sketchbook*), a work first published in 1925 while he was teaching at the Bauhaus. The phrase in question is something of a touchstone for Perec and many Perecians. In French, it reads as follows: "L'œil suit les chemins qui lui ont été ménagés dans l'œuvre" (VME, p15) and conveys, amongst other impressions, the notion that the author can guide or control the directions which interpretation of his work will take. In practice, what this results in is the fact that many Perecians are content to unearth the 'archaeology of constraint', the traces or paths which remain in the text of the preparatory scaffolding, considering that they have exhausted all avenues of criticism once this has been achieved. What is unusual is the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, no critic has seen fit place the phrase back into context, no one has referred to Klee's text other than through Perec's quotation of it. If we now

examine the passage from which it is taken, we will see that it is actually the final point in an ambiguous argument:

> The work as a human action (genesis) is productive as well as receptive. It is *continuity*.
> Productively it is limited by the manual limitation of the creator (who has only two hands).
> Receptively it is limited by the limitations of the perceiving eye. The limitation of the eye is its inability to see even a small surface equally sharp at all points. The eye must 'graze' over the surface, grasping sharply portion after portion, to convey them to the brain which collects and stores the impressions.
> *The eye travels along the paths cut out for it in the work.* (Klee, 1968, p33, author's emphasis).

Aside from the point to be discussed momentarily, this quotation is important for two reasons. Firstly, it establishes the dualistic nature of the work of art, oscillating as it does between the producer and the receptor, artist and spectator, writer and reader. Indeed, it is in the ill-definable 'space between' (continuity, in Klee's terms) that the work assumes its meanings – for there are as many meanings as readers. In various guises, the theme of the interplay between these two poles will inform almost all later chapters of this thesis. Secondly, and however implicitly, this passage indicates the temporal nature of perception: the eye grazes over the work, taking it in little by little.[2] It does not perceive it as one spatial whole, but rather as a succession of points. Again, one of the concerns of the following chapters will not only be to highlight the temporal nature of the reading process, but to stress that an awareness of this temporality is conducive to the elaboration of multiple interpretations (whereas a spatial reading tends to fix the work once and for all).

"The eye travels along the paths cut out for it in the work" / "L'œil suit les chemins qui lui ont été ménagés dans l'œuvre". While it is obvious that Klee is referring to the process of production and reception of the plastic arts (though this is less evident if one reads the French translation in isolation), it is nonetheless possible to apply his argument to the process of writing. The key notion is that of *limitation*. Firstly, as production, the work is limited: the artist or writer, by definition limited as a human, cannot perfectly transfer the idea into reality. It is therefore false (though very common in Perecian criticism, due to the seemingly rigid, controlled nature of his work) to assume that the writer can be said to mean – or be responsible for – everything which is written. Interpretative methodologies which rely on the *vouloir-dire* of the writer are flawed. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, *any* interpretative methodology is flawed. As the artist above, the critic is also limited as a

[2] Indeed, the opening sentence of *Les Choses* seems to interpret Klee's expression in this manner: "L'œil, d'abord, glisserait sur la moquette grise d'un long corridor, haut et étroit."

human (in the plastic arts, this limitation is physiological), and complete understanding – of an in any case incomplete work – is impossible. It is therefore misguided to read "The eye travels along the paths cut out for it in the work" in a self-reductive manner. That is to say, it is wrong to think that one should simply follow the paths in the work, that in doing so one is fulfilling one's function as critic.[3] While the author can attempt to guide interpretation by stressing certain paths, he can only do so imperfectly; and, although it is important to be attentive to the paths the author is attempting to lay, it is equally important to step outside them occasionally. We will return to this in Chapter Three below.

The jigsaw as formalist motif

The Preamble of *La Vie mode d'emploi* consists of a reflection on "l'art du puzzle" (neither the 'craft', nor the 'game', but the 'art of the jigsaw'; coming as it does immediately after the quotation from Klee, this phrase suggests that it is possible to interpret the jigsaw as a metaphor for art in general, and for writing in particular; or that the Preamble is in some manner a development of Klee's expression). It is now necessary to examine the extent to which this meditation reflects formalist methodology. However, before proceeding further, it should be stated that it is not our intention to enter into a detailed discussion of what exactly Formalism is (or, for that matter, of what its counterpart in the intellectual climate of France in the 1960s was, Structuralism) and how it differs from the related fields of semiology and semiotics (indeed, this section could perhaps equally well have been entitled 'The jigsaw as *structuring* motif').[4] A precise definition of Formalism or Structuralism is practically impossible to come by; as Paul de Man has remarked, if one considers "several of the names loosely connected with structuralism, broadly enough defined to include Saussure, Jakobson and Barthes as well as Greimas and Althusser, [then structuralism is] so broadly defined as to be no longer of use as a meaningful historical term." (de

[3] This is perhaps what Perec had in mind when he wrote of his desire to "empêcher la lecture réduite à une pure archéologie textuelle dont le seul but consisterait à retrouver la contrainte..." ('Le puzzle mode d'emploi', p56).

[4] For a further *mise en garde*, see François Le Lioinnais's comment that "[l]a très grande majorité des œuvres OuLiPiennes qui ont vu le jour jusqu'ici se place dans une perspective SYNTAXIQUE structurEliste (je prie le lecteur de ne pas confondre ce dernier vocable – imaginé à l'intention de ce Manifeste – avec structurAliste, terme que plusieurs d'entre nous considèrent avec circonspection." (Oulipo, 1973, p19).

Man, 1986, p7). To anticipate slightly, we will simply use the term Structuralism as shorthand for any manifestly formalist mode of interpretation.

Let us initially proceed negatively, defining those aspects of literary Structuralism which do not concern us here. The first is Structuralism's avowed intention to unearth the universal laws of which individual works of fiction are but one manifestation. In *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme? Poétique*, Tzvetan Todorov makes a clear distinction between *interprétation* and *poétique*: the first only ever finds the localised meaning of whatever individual text is being examined, whereas the second, more 'scientific', is concerned with the reverse: "son objectif n'est plus la description de l'œuvre singulière, la désignation de son sens, mais l'établissement de lois générales dont ce texte particulier est le produit." (Todorov, 1968, p18). For him, there are universal laws which preside at the birth of every work, but that work is only one manifestation of those laws, it is a "manifestation de lois qui lui sont extérieures" (ibid); the goal is therefore to proceed by induction and discover the universal from the particular.[5] If we were in turn undertaking a structuralist reading of Perec – attempting to uncover the universal laws of constraint – we might well begin here, but we are not so we will not. The second aspect of Structuralism which we are discounting is its reliance on binary oppositions. Jonathan Culler put it well in *Structuralist Poetics* when he wrote that "the relations that are the most important in structural analysis are the simplest: binary oppositions. Whatever else the linguistic model may have done, it has undoubtedly encouraged structuralists to think in binary terms, to look for functional oppositions in whatever material they are studying." (Culler, 1975, p14). However, no sooner has he stated this than he adds the following proviso (with which we agree): "The advantage of binarism, but also its principal danger, lies in the fact that it permits one to classify anything. Given two items one can always find some respect in which they differ and hence place them in a relation of binary opposition." (Culler, 1975, p15).[6] This critique of binarism is later expanded to a critique of Structuralism's desire to find ordered patterns in every work: "This process of progressive differentiation can produce an almost unlimited number of distributional classes, and thus if one wishes to discover a

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[5] In *Système de la Mode*, Barthes refers to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* as an example of this phenomenon and proposes an equivalent for the world of fashion: *vêtement/habillement*, the first referring to universal laws, the second referring to individual occurrences of same (Barthes, 1967, pp15 & 28).

[6] In *Système de la Mode*, Barthes again relies on binary oppositions while expressing reservations about them (Barthes, 1967, pp152-154 & 173-175).
See also Jacques Derrida's critique of Structuralism in 'La structure, le signe et le jeu' (ED, pp409-428).

pattern of symmetry in a text, one can always produce some class whose members will be appropriately arranged." (Culler, 1975, p57). We will return briefly to this after discussing *La Vie mode d'emploi*'s Preamble. The aspect of Structuralism which we will deal with is the insistence on the primacy of the network or system over the so-called essence of the individual unit. It is with this in mind that we will now read the Preamble.

The Preamble, therefore, consists of a meditation on the art of the jigsaw. Before examining its rich opening passage, let us consider an excerpt from near its end, an excerpt which deals once more with the duality of the relationship between the producer and the receptor. In the case of the jigsaw, this duality is a duel, as it is the artist's (jigsaw maker) goal to fool the spectator (jigsaw solver).[7] If the jigsaw maker does this with some skill, then "l'espace organisé, cohérent, structuré, signifiant, du tableau sera découpé non seulement en éléments inertes, amorphes, pauvres de signification et d'information, mais en éléments falsifiés, porteurs d'informations fausses..." (VME, p17). Leaving aside the duel, let us instead consider the terms employed which can be said to have certain structuralist connotations: the whole has significance whereas the individual elements are meaningless unless related to one another (that the jigsaw maker must attempt to prevent the jigsaw solver from seeing the relation does not affect the fact that it is precisely the relationship which is important).

This is a theory which is seemingly borne out by the opening passage of the Preamble, which is worth quoting in its entirety, not least because it consists of a single sentence:

> Au départ, l'art du puzzle semble un art bref, un art mince, tout entier contenu dans un maigre enseignement de la Gestalttheorie: l'objet visé – qu'il s'agisse d'un acte perceptif, d'un apprentissage, d'un système physiologique ou, dans le cas qui nous occupe, d'un puzzle de bois – n'est pas une somme d'éléments qu'il faudrait d'abord isoler et analyser, mais un ensemble, c'est-à-dire une forme, une structure: l'élément ne préexiste pas à l'ensemble, il n'est ni plus immédiat ni plus ancien, ce ne sont pas les éléments qui déterminent l'ensemble, mais l'ensemble qui détermine les éléments: la connaissance du tout et de ses lois, de l'ensemble et de sa structure, ne saurait être déduite de la connaissance séparée des parties qui le composent: cela veut dire qu'on peut regarder une pièce d'un puzzle pendant trois jours et croire tout savoir de sa configuration et de sa couleur sans avoir le moins du monde avancé: seule compte la possibilité de relier cette pièce à d'autres pièces, et en ce sens il y a quelque chose de commun entre l'art du puzzle et l'art du go; seules les pièces rassemblées prendront un caractère lisible, prendront un sens: considérée isolément une pièce d'un puzzle ne veut rien dire; elle est seulement question impossible, défi opaque; mais à peine a-t-on réussi, au terme de plusieurs minutes d'essais et d'erreurs, ou en une demi-seconde prodigieusement inspirée, à la connecter à l'une de ses voisines, que la pièce disparaît, cesse d'exister en tant que pièce: l'intense difficulté qui a précédé

[7] See Chapter Five below for further considerations on the potentially antagonistic nature of this relationship.

> ce rapprochement, et que le mot *puzzle* – énigme – désigne si bien en anglais, non seulement n'a plus de raison d'être, mais semble n'en avoir jamais eu, tant elle est devenue évidence: les deux pièces miraculeusement réunies n'en font plus qu'une, à son tour source d'erreur, d'hésitation, de désarroi et d'attente. (VME, pp15-16).

It is possible to read this passage as being both an explicit reference to Gestalt theory and an implicit reference to Structuralism. We will first consider possible references to Structuralism before returning to the reference to Gestalt psychology below. First, what exactly is a 'structure'? For Barthes, in *Système de la Mode*, adopting a definition proposed by Hjelmslev, it is "une entité autonome de dépendances internes" (Barthes, 1967, p13). As a result of this, it is the relations between elements which take precedence over the elements themselves: "une structure est un système de transformations qui comporte des lois en tant que système (par opposition aux propriétés des éléments)" (Piaget, 1968, pp6-7). Or, as Piaget again remarks a little further on, "ce qui compte n'est ni l'élément ni un tout s'imposant comme tel, sans qu'on puisse préciser comment, mais les relations entre les éléments" (Piaget, 1968, p9).[8] It is then the task of the interpreter to uncover these relations, relations which exist in the whole and not in the interpreter's mind. In an interview given shortly after the publication of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Perec links its Preamble with this notion of the structure: "Ce que j'aime dans l'idée du puzzle, ce que j'explique au début du livre [VME], c'est qu'une pièce isolée n'a pas de sens en soi. Elle est inerte. C'est la capacité de la relier aux autres qui lui donne son sens, sa cohérence."[9] This would seem to clarify the phrases from the Preamble above which read "[le puzzle] n'est pas une somme d'éléments qu'il faudrait d'abord isoler et analyser, mais un ensemble, c'est-à-dire une forme, une structure: l'élément ne préexiste pas à l'ensemble" and "seule compte la possibilité de relier cette pièce à d'autres pièces."

However, if we now examine the passage as a reference to Gestalt theory, then this clarity will give way to a certain murkiness. Firstly, it should be said that the Structuralists themselves did not see any unbridgeable opposition between their theories and Gestalt theory, maintaining rather that Gestalt was a precursor of Structuralism. Jean Piaget, for example, can write that "la forme la plus spectaculaire du structuralisme psychologique a sans conteste été fournie par la théorie de la

[8] This is a very commonly stated tenet of Structuralism. See also Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p40 and Barthes, 1957, p184.
[9] 'La vie: règle du jeu', p11.

Gestalt" (Piaget, 1968, p47). Any criticism he directs at it relates not to a fundamental flaw, but to the fact that it did not go far enough along the path it opened up:

> [Q]uand les Gestaltistes croyaient discerner dans les perceptions primaires une totalité immédiate comparable aux effets de champ en électromagnétisme, ils avaient certes le mérite de nous rappeler qu'un tout est autre chose qu'une simple somme d'éléments préalables, mais, en considérant le tout comme antérieur aux éléments ou contemporain de leur contact, ils se simplifiaient la tâche au risque de manquer les problèmes centraux de la nature des lois de composition. (Piaget, 1968, p9).

This view, in line with standard expositions of Gestalt, suggests that it places more emphasis on the whole than on the elements, that it is the pattern which is formed which counts, not the relation between elements (Gestalt is normally rendered in English by 'pattern' or 'configuration'). That then is Gestalt as both acknowledged by and critiqued by Structuralism, its 'successor' – and a 1978 reader of *La Vie mode d'emploi* would probably pick up on the implicit references to Structuralism in the Preamble. However, it is Gestalt which is explicitly mentioned in the Preamble, and if we now turn to it, we will see that it, in turn, provides a means of critiquing Structuralism. Indeed, this critique would seem to follow on from the Klee epigraph, hinting at the possibility that Perec's text is being consciously ironic with regard to Structuralism. For one of Gestalt's central theses is as follows:

> The nervous system of the observer and the observer's experience do not passively register the physical input in a piecemeal way. Rather, the neural organization as well as the perceptual experience springs immediately into existence as an entire field with differentiated parts. In later writings this principle was stated as the law of Prägnanz: The neural and perceptual organization of any set of impinging stimuli forms as good a Gestalt, or whole, as the prevailing conditions allow. (Encyclopedia Britannica).

In other words, we see a whole where one might not necessarily exist. Or, as it has also been put:

> Closure and good continuation represent two of the factors that are held to determine what percepts will emerge from a complex stimulus. Implicit in them (and in the general principle of Prägnanz) is the assumption that whenever possible some figure will be perceived; more specifically, that the visual field will be articulated into figures and patterns of figures. *It is understood that such emerging patterns are not in the stimulus. Although they are permitted by the stimulus, they are created by the perceptual system; that is, by the perceiver himself.* (Encyclopedia Britannica, emphasis mine).

As in Klee's "The eye travels along the paths cut out for it in the work", the act of perception does not passively register a whole, but rather creates it. This is in line with Jonathan Culler's comment above that Structuralists often create the patterns which they claim to seek. The Preamble seems therefore to have a structuralist subtext, though this is then subverted by – what? – the text.

Caution: Interpreter at work

> La vérité est dans ces pages. Elle *doit* y être. Mais où? Parmi les innombrables chemins possibles, lequel m'y conduira?
> – Georges Perec, *53 Jours*.

Having examined the manner in which the Perecian narrative puts forward a certain type of reading, let us now examine whether the Perecian characters which read or interpret do so in the same manner. A convenient point of departure for this section will be the novel *Un cabinet d'amateur*. Subtitled, '*Histoire d'un tableau*', it describes the genesis and reception of a 'gallery portrait', a painting which represents other paintings gathered together in a collector's gallery. It is, moreover, the story of a forgery and this adds an extra twist to the irony directed at some of the interpreters at work in the novel. There are three different types of critic or critical discourse contained in the text: journalistic, academic and, for want of a better expression, amateurish (perhaps this last group could also be called 'Sunday critics'). We will look briefly at these three groups, before passing from an examination of the 'Sunday critics' in *Un cabinet d'amateur* to an examination of the same school in other Perecian novels.

Though not necessarily of great interest in themselves, a brief montage of the *dossier de presse* devoted to the painting should reveal two points. In the *Chicago Tagblatt*, Anton Zweig wrote that it was "une œuvre étrange, edgar-poësque, qui n'a pas fini de faire couler beaucoup d'encre". Walter Bannerträger, in the *New York Zeitung* regretted that he could only "mentionner qu'en passant [ce] portrait d'un symbolisme subtil dont l'inspiration hautement métaphysique remet très certainement en cause beaucoup d'idées trop communément admises sur ce qu'est le Beau dans l'Art." Finally, Christian von Muschelsohn wrote in the *Morgenstern* that the painting revealed "une sourde exaltation des nouvelles valeurs nietzschéennes réinvestissant la totalité du monde visible et invisible" (CAB, pp12-13). If we include the notice from the exhibition's catalogue in this category, then we can read that the painting "débouche tout à coup sur la Spiritualité vertigineuse de l'Eternel Retour." (CAB, p23). The first point to be made about these press clippings is that they show a considerable variety of analysis, they reveal a certain 'plurality of critical discourse'. While it is not necessarily of interest to resolve the following question, it is nonetheless

worth asking: Can they all be correct in their different views or does this difference of opinion imply that none of them are?[10] In the very early stages of the novel, the reader's attention is therefore drawn to the subjective nature of criticism – this serves to increase the irony later directed at the third group, those looking objectively to 'get the measure' of the painting. The second point to be made relates to intellectual fashions: in the novel, the painting was first exhibited in 1913, and the press clippings above are from the same year. In this context, it is possible to read the two (somewhat arbitrary) references to Nietzsche as reflecting a desire on the part of the authors to keep with the times, a desire to be seen to be at the vanguard of ideas.

The notion of intellectual fashion is also raised by the second critical discourse present in the novel, though somewhat more obliquely. It concerns an academic article which also appeared in 1913 and which is perhaps anachronistic in its methodology (the fact that the author of the article was one of the individuals involved in passing the forged painting off as authentic does not affect this point). The article in question, by one Lester K. Nowak, was entitled 'Art and Reflection' and appeared in the *Bulletin of the Ohio School of Arts*. It opens as follows: "Toute œuvre est le miroir d'une autre" (CAB, p29) and its argument is then paraphrased by the narrator:

> un nombre considérable de tableaux ne prennent leur signification véritable qu'en fonction d'œuvres antérieures qui y sont, soit simplement reproduites, intégralement ou partiellement, soit, d'une manière beaucoup plus allusive, encryptées. [...] Concurremment à la notion même de musée et, bien entendu, de tableau comme valeur marchande, le principe initial des 'cabinets d'amateurs' fondait l'acte de peindre sur une "dynamique réflexive" [Nowak] puisant ses forces dans la peinture d'autrui. (CAB, p30).

While the processes of *mise en abyme* and intertextuality are not in themselves modern inventions, the analysis sketched out above by Nowak seems to be just a little too modern when pursued further. For instance, his comment that painting is a "travail de miroir à l'infini où comme dans les *Ménines* ou dans *l'Auto-portrait* de Rigaud conservé au musée de Perpignan, regardé et regardant ne cessent de s'affronter et de se confondre" (CAB, p34) could perhaps be said to prefigure Foucault's text on *Les Ménines* which opens *Les Mots et les choses*.[11] Equally, the following comment could be said to prefigure some of Baudrillard's reflections on the post-modern condition which we are condemned to live: "Car, concluait Nowak, il ne fallait pas s'y tromper:

[10] While it is our belief that there can only ever be such a plurality of interpretations, this does not prevent it from being ironic in the context of the novel, set as it is early in the twentieth century, when plurality was not admitted in critical discourse.

cette œuvre était une image de la mort de l'art, une réflexion spéculaire sur ce monde condamné à la répétition infinie de ses propres modèles." (CAB, pp34-35).

It is to be wondered just what purpose is being served by putting such mid- to late-century thoughts in the text of an author supposedly writing in 1913. On the one hand, it suggests that Perec has a certain genuine affection for this school of thought (the lack of irony directed at Nowak, and the fact that he is 'in on' the swindle might imply this). On the other hand, it might be a gentle reminder to the modernists of the 1960s that their ideas are not necessarily as revolutionary as they would like it to be thought (Nowak's being 'in on' the swindle might equally imply that these modern thinkers are mere frauds). The Oulipo places considerable stress on the fact that what is believed to be 'avant-garde' at any given period has often been accomplished just as radically in the past. As an Oulipian, Perec may be mocking the belief, common in the intellectual climate of the time, that such a thing as linear scientific progress is possible in the field of art and criticism.

Thus far, any irony directed at critics has been mild, principally constituting a reminder of the inexact and relativist nature of interpretation. The irony becomes more pointed, however, when directed at the third category of critic to be found in Perec's work. This category is particularly easily led (or led astray). In *Un cabinet d'amateur*, these Sunday critics seize upon a seemingly innocent sentence found in the exhibition's catalogue and use it as the point of departure for their 'mania'. (This phrase is ultimately revealed to be far less innocent than it is initially presented as being: the forgery being perpetrated is motivated by revenge and, to be successful, needs to generate as much interest in the painting as possible – the text of the catalogue, written by the forgers, is therefore an extremely important one, for it effectively constitutes the first text written about the painting, and the point of view it puts across is therefore privileged – first reviews last longest). The sentence reads as follows and is a particularly explicit example of the manner in which an author can employ 'guiding tactics' to channel interpretation along certain paths, relying implicitly on the fact that the insufficiencies of the eye will prevent it from discovering other paths (a notion to which we will return in Chapter Three): "Nombreux seront sans doute les visiteurs qui tiendront à comparer les œuvres originales et les si scrupuleuses réductions qu'en a données Heinrich Kürz." (CAB, p22). In fact, the

[11] See Chapter Four below for a more detailed examination of the relationship between some of Perec's

painting 'Un cabinet d'amateur' rapidly becomes the most popular painting in the exhibition and the organisers find themselves obliged to restrict both the number of people allowed in to see it at any given time and the length of time for which people are to be allowed stay examining it. However, such is the obsession with the painting that some employ any type of ruse possible to stay for just a moment longer while others end up fighting over their position in the queue. It is worth quoting at length from the passage which describes their 'interpretative activities':

> Personne ne sembla jamais se lasser de comparer les originaux et les réductions de plus en plus petites d'Heinrich Kürz. Très vite on s'amusa à calculer que le format de la toile était d'un peu plus de trois mètres sur un peu plus de deux mètres, que le premier 'tableau dans le tableau' avait encore près d'un mètre de long sur soixante-dix centimètres de haut, que le troisième... [and so on up to the measurements of the sixth 'tableau dans le tableau']. Et le lendemain du jour où un quidam, qui s'était muni d'une loupe de bijoutier et s'était fait faire la courte échelle par deux compères, affirma qu'on y distinguait très précisément l'homme assis [and that he could be made out once more again] plusieurs dizaines de visiteurs arrivèrent avec toutes sortes de loupes et de compte-fils, inaugurant une mode qui, pendant plusieurs mois, fit la fortune de tous les marchands optiques de la ville.
>
> Le jeu favori de ces observateurs maniaques, qui revenaient plusieurs fois par jour examiner systématiquement chaque centimètre carré du tableau, et qui déployaient des trésors d'ingéniosité (ou d'audacieuse acrobatie) pour tenter d'aller mieux regarder les parties supérieures de la toile, était de découvrir les différences existant entre les diverses versions de chacune des œuvres représentées...
>
> [Ces 'modifications impondérables'] excitaient au plus haut point la curiosité des visiteurs qui s'efforçaient tout aussi vainement d'en faire un dénombrement précis que d'en comprendre la justification originelle. (CAB, pp24-28).

In this passage, the irony could scarcely be more evident. It is initially directed at the characters themselves and then, by extension, at their interpretative activities.[12] That directed at the characters is rather self-evident: consider the *quidam* and his *compères*, or the fashion which they start, or their *acrobatie*, or finally the fact that they are *observateurs maniaques* whose attempts to understand reveal themselves to be vain or futile. The final sentence of the above passage is a little more interesting as it indicates how these amateurs confuse two separate issues: put simply, the 'how' and the 'why' of a work of art. It could be argued that the sterility of the former method forces them to have recourse to the latter, which only ever results in the proffering of psychological banalities.[13]

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work and Foucault's important text.

[12] As David Bellos has remarked, 'un cabinet d'amateur' is indistinguishable in speech from 'un cabinet d'amateurs' (Bellos, 1995, p666).

[13] We will return to this in Chapter Three, where it will hopefully be seen that Perecian critics tend to proclaim themselves to be interested in the 'how' of constraint (that is, they conduct formalist readings of his texts) before surreptitiously considering the 'why' of constraint (which only ever produces one answer).

The irony directed at their interpretative activities is centred around this quest for the 'how' of the work, the vain desire to "faire un dénombrement précis." If the special inclusive nature of the painting 'Un cabinet d'amateur' – its being a gallery portrait – makes it universally representative of painting as a whole (in a sense, it *is* all paintings), then those who would seek to understand the laws and rules governing its genesis are actually seeking universal laws, laws which are outside of any work and which govern every work's creation. We are now consciously paraphrasing Todorov, for the amateurs here referred to seem to be looking for those universal forms to which he refers. Just as each individual work of art produces a singular occurrence of the universal laws, so do the different works here reproduced within the one painting. If one gathers together enough singular occurrences of a phenomenon in one place, then one will inevitably see variations – these are normally difficult to see because the whole is difficult to see. The painting 'Un cabinet d'amateur' acts as one very condensed whole, making it easy to spot the variations. Therefore, while seemingly attempting to quantify the laws and variations to be found in one work of art, the amateurs of the text are actually looking for universal laws and variations, in a word, they are behaving like Structuralists. To close our argument with a loose syllogism: The amateurs at work in the text are being mocked and they are acting like Structuralists, therefore Structuralism is being mocked.

If we now turn our attention to a slightly later unfinished novel, *53 Jours*, we will see another amateur – a "pauvre professeur de mathématiques" – hard at work (and working hard at failing). To be fair to him, he – the narrator – is set a difficult task in this detective novel which, like *Un cabinet d'amateur*, also abounds with forgeries and *fausses pistes*. He lives and works in Grianta, a fictional North African town and ex-French colony. He is charged by the French consul with the task of investigating the disappearance of one Robert Serval, an expatriate writer of detective novels. The reason for this is that Serval had specifically instructed the consul that, should anything happen to him, then the narrator would be the person to solve the mystery and that the key would be found in Serval's latest novel (still in typescript form). Although the narrator had forgotten it, he and Serval (a pen name) had apparently been to school together, and the consul hands him Serval's manuscript with the line: "Mais vous saurez certainement mieux que moi lire entre les lignes" (53J, p26), indicating the narrator's interpretative task from the outset. Therein begins a tortuous tale of deceit and forgery and we would do well to avoid attempting to produce a neat summary of it

– for example, *53 Jours* is divided into two parts, '53 Jours' and 'Un R est un M qui se P le L de la R': in the latter, it is revealed that '53 Jours' is not the 'real' novel (the narrator of '53 Jours' is not the narrator of *53 Jours*) but is instead a novel being read by a character in 'Un R est un M qui se P le L de la R'.[14]

What can be said, however, is that, for our purposes, *53 Jours* resembles *Un cabinet d'amateur* in two crucial ways. Firstly, it is itself something of a gallery portrait, containing all of literature in itself. It constitutes an infinite *mise en abyme* of 'literature' (the novel): in *53 Jours*, the narrator must read Serval's novel *La Crypte* which, as Nowak remarked of 'Un cabinet d'amateur', contains many other works encrypted in it, one of them being a novel entitled '53 Jours'... Moreover, *La Crypte*, being a detective novel, contains a detective who must attempt to solve a mystery. He fails and is replaced by another detective who goes by the name of Serval and who eventually solves the mystery by reading a detective novel, in a process parallel to that of the narrator (though the latter fails where the first succeeded). Secondly, just as in *Un cabinet d'amateur*, a wide variety of critical approaches are present: the narrator tries in turn at least four different methodologies which we will examine shortly. The important point is that if *53 Jours* is a 'universal' novel, then the narrator's methods are universal and his failures could be said to be, not the localised failure of a particular methodology, but the failure of that methodology *qua* methodology. Or, at the very least, an ironic comment by Perec's text on that methodology.

Let us now examine the four different methodologies which the narrator successively 'tries on for size' (we must, however, be careful not to draw too many conclusions about any particular methodology as each is only barely sketched out – it is rather the narrator's overall failure which invalidates or weakens them). Given the task he is faced with, his general attitude is not surprisingly as follows: "De toute façon, mon travail n'est pas de faire un rapport de lecture sur *La Crypte*, mais d'y rechercher des éléments susceptibles de nous fournir des indications sur la disparition, celle-ci apparemment bien réelle, de Robert Serval" (53J, p63). The first interpretative path proper which he undertakes follows on from this notion: he reasons that if he was chosen by Serval to unravel the mystery, then it is because of the fact that they were in school together and that he must therefore know something about Serval which nobody else does. He therefore indulges in biographical criticism (of which, more in Chapter

[14] For a detailed examination of the different *emboîtements* to be found in the novel, see Bernard Magné,

Three below), initially looking for passages in the text which might refer to their shared schooldays and then for passages which might refer to their shared exile in Grianta – with, of course, particular emphasis on any enemies Serval might have made over the years (Grianta being essentially a dictatorship lends credence to this idea). This methodology does not, however, turn up any viable leads. When he realises that he is on the wrong track and that nothing narrated "au premier degré" (53J, p69) will provide the answer, he adopts a new methodology: "il ne faisait pas de doute pour moi que l'examen des brouillons m'en fournirait la plupart des clés, en me révélant par exemple comment tel ou tel nom avait été choisi, ou quel événement réel avait trouvé sa transcription dans un des méandres de la fiction de Serval." (53J, p74). While still looking for a reality which has been transposed by the text, his approach is now more sophisticated, more textual, in that he is not simply relying on his recollections of the past: in short, he is now trying his hand at genetic criticism. His quest for the early drafts of the novel leads him to the typist whose services Serval had engaged to type up his text. Unfortunately, this methodology does not turn up any viable leads as she informs him that Serval simply dictated his text to her from his notes and that none of these are now nor were ever in her possession and that, moreover, the only time he ever revised the typed text was when he changed the name of a yacht which has no importance to the story from *Misène* to *Monitor*. The typist does, however, relate to the narrator a comment made to her by Serval which sets him off on his third interpretative path. Serval allegedly said the following during his initial meeting with her: "Ne croyez surtout pas, Mademoiselle, que j'invente. Je ne fais que chiper de-ci et de-là divers détails dont je me sers pour ma propre histoire. Tout le monde fait pareil, d'ailleurs, et pas seulement les auteurs de romans policiers!" (53J, p81). She further reveals to the narrator that Serval used four specific novels as sources for his story and this sets him off down the path of intertextual criticism, particularly when he learns that Serval copied an entire passage from one of these, changing precisely twelve words between the 'original' and the 'copy' (53J, pp83 & 87). Despite this apparently significant alteration, this methodology does not turn up any viable leads, though the narrator remains convinced that he must be on the right track: he speaks of the "importance fonctionnelle" of structural differences and comments that "j'ai été taraudé par une intuition inexplicable: la vérité que je cherche n'est pas *dans* le livre,

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'*53 Jours* pour lecteurs chevronnés...' in *Etudes Littéraires*, Volume 23, no. 1-2, 1990, pp185-201.

mais *entre* les livres. Cette phrase à l'air de vouloir ne rien dire, mais je me comprends: il faut lire les *différences*, il faut lire entre les livres comme on lit 'entre les lignes'" (53J, p93, author's emphasis). His continued exploration of textual variations leads him to his fourth methodology, what could perhaps be termed a Cabalist style of reading: "Le secret du livre ne réside ni dans ses anecdotes, ni dans ses péripéties, mais dans ces distorsions onomastiques dont je pourrais multiplier les exemples" (53J, p94).[15] Just as the Cabalists permuted the consonants in the name of Yahweh, so our intrepid investigator latches on to syllabic variations resulting in the slight deformation of names from one book to another (from the intertextual sources to Serval's typescript). He proceeds with caution as he is aware that "on peut faire tout dire, par définition, aux vingt-six lettres de l'alphabet" (53J, p95), and yet, having finished his quasi-mathematical operation, he is left with the name – derived from three others – 'Blabami', the head of the secret police at Grianta.[16] Although this seems like a viable lead, it soon turns into a dead end.

Having successively tried the four different methodologies described above, the narrator is no nearer the truth. In fact, it turns out that his investigations have only served to make him the prime suspect in what turns out to be the real crime: not the murder of Serval by the consul as he believes, but the opposite – the mystery of Serval's disappearance is in fact part of Serval's plan to frame the narrator for the murder of the consul by Serval himself. As we stated at the outset, each particular methodology is only just sketched out and there is little or no explicit irony directed at them – other than the global failure of the narrator. There is, however, a hidden irony revealed when the text is read, not from the point of view of the interpreting narrator, but from the point of view of Serval, the mastermind behind the frame. It turns out that the typist, Lise Carpenter, was Serval's accomplice and that her role was vital in inflaming the narrator's investigative ardour – as well as his ardour, *tout court*. For it is in the merging of these two passions that the irony becomes clearer, enabling us to speak of *la séduction de la forme*. The narrator, apparently a somewhat solitary middle-aged man, is immediately attracted to Lise, an attraction which is cemented when she takes him swimming and she casually strips off before bathing in the nude (53J, p105). Although not daring enough to do likewise this first time, he later works

[15] See also Starobinski on Saussure's searching for historical figures encrypted in the names of fictional characters (Starobinski, 1971, p8).
[16] For a further example of onomastic manipulation, see 53J, p128.

up the courage: "Cette fois-ci, m'enhardissant, je pus, comme Lise et avec elle, goûter la joie de se baigner nu" (53J, p109). Apparently, he 'reasons' that if she is open enough to reveal her forms, then she must be trustworthy, and so he is lost. It is possible that Perec is here acknowledging the seductive force of form/alism, while suggesting that it is a somewhat treacherous beast (while comparing the critic to a frustrated middle-aged man?).[17]

If we now turn our attention to *La Disparition*, we will find another interpreter hard at work: the novel opens with one Anton Voyl attempting to understand an obscure figure in his carpet; though he "s'acharna huit jours durant" (DISP, p20) at this task, he fails to find a solution to the mystery and, as a result, dies. We will return in more detail to the particular problems raised by this figure in Chapter Four, what is important for the moment is the fact that the novel is immediately set up to be read as an 'apprentissage des signes'. Moreover, given its date of publication, 1969, references to criticism in it are more explicitly formalist/structuralist than in the later works discussed above. There is, for instance, passing reference made to "un support doctrinal au goût du jour qui affirmait l'absolu primat du signifiant" (DISP, p309). Equally, at various stages throughout the novel, whenever they are faced with a problem or enigma whose solution is beyond their grasp, the characters make reference to famous critics who they feel could help them: "Il nous faudrait un Champollion, murmura, abattu, Amaury" (DISP, p113) – Jean-François Champollion was of course the man largely responsible for the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics (see also DISP, p195). It is likely that he is referred to for two reasons: firstly, his name is a natural lipogram in 'e'; secondly, his work on hieroglyphics was based on a restricted corpus, the Rosetta Stone – in the same manner, though unbeknownst to them, the characters of *La Disparition* are working with a restricted corpus, a fact which gives a certain pathos to their appeal to Champollion. This appeal is later repeated and also brought more up to date, in that the figures now appealed to are contemporary to the novel's action: "– J'ai dit il y a un instant qu'il nous faudrait un Champollion. Mais un Champollion n'y suffirait plus, dit, abasourdi, Augustus [sic], il nous faudrait aussi un Chomsky. – Ou plutôt un Roman Jakobson qui nous dirait son structural avis sur 'Nos Chats' qu'il analysa jadis! – Pourquoi pas un Bourbaki! – Pourquoi pas un Oulipo?" (DISP, p127). The references to the Oulipo and Bourbaki (the anonymous group of

[17] For more on the parallels between the body and the text (the text as *corpus*), see the final section of

mathematicians) are overtly humorous, while the references to Chomsky and Jakobson, though irreverent, are not developed further (though there is an earlier joke about Chomsky's work "sur la jonction Insignifiant-Signifiant" (DISP, 92)).

In one important passage of the novel, a character (Anton Voyl in a flashback to before his own fatal failure) sets about interpreting a message which has mysteriously appeared on a billiard table (a *clin d'œil* to Raymond Roussel). Before starting, he provides his audience with the following description of the reading process:

> Il y aura ainsi trois instants du discours: d'abord, nous croirons voir un galimatias confus, un capharnaüm insignifiant, constatant pourtant qu'il s'agit d'un signal affirmatif, sûr, soumis à un pouvoir codifiant, à l'approbation d'un public qui l'a toujours admis: un outil social assurant la communication, la promulguant sans infraction, lui donnant son canon, sa loi, son droit. [...]
> Il y aura donc d'abord un pouvoir du Logos, un 'ça' parlant dont nous connaîtrons aussitôt l'accablant poids sans pouvoir approfondir sa signification. [...]
> Puis, à la fin, nous saisirons pourquoi tout fut bâti à partir d'un carcan si dur, d'un canon si tyrannisant. Tout naquit d'un souhait fou, d'un souhait nul: assouvir jusqu'au bout la fascination du cri vain, sortir du parcours trop rassurant du mot trop subit, trop confiant, trop commun... (DISP, pp195-196).

While the latter section of this passage veers off into the type of meta-text which we discounted at the beginning of this chapter, its opening section presents, with its emphasis on code and communication, a quite linguistic model of discourse analysis. This it does with little or no irony.

The irony, however, appears once the message has been interpreted and seems to be directed at Jacques Lacan, a fact which the *'ça' parlant* above or the earlier "ravin lacanial" (DISP, p128) might perhaps have prepared us for. Having therefore deciphered the text, Anton Voyl explains its origins: "Il s'agit ici d'un patois issu du Chiapas, dit 'Lacandon'. La tradition voudrait qu'on l'ait surtout mis à contribution pour la constitution d'augurants pronostics. L'on connaît sa transcription, mais non sa prononciation, car, baragouin imparti à l'anticipation, à la divulgation, à la vaticination, il s'assortit toujours d'occultations dont la traduction n'appartint jamais qu'aux voyants, qu'aux chamans." (DISP, p198). The irony here is fairly self-evident and is primarily directed at Lacan's infamous impenetrability and at his surrounding himself with disciples (we will examine the intertext between Perec and Lacan in more detail in Chapter Five). However, it has taken Voyl so long to decipher the text that, even though he has come up with the correct interpretation, it is too late for him to put it to use, and the person he was attempting to save dies.

Chapter Three below.

Throughout this chapter (and Chapter One), we have seen that Perec had a genuine awareness of and even sympathy for the various modes of interpretation of which he was a contemporary. However, we have also seen in Chapter One with our analysis of *Les Choses* that the writing of fiction tends to disrupt or, at the very least, cause to be set aside, ideology and methodology. In the present chapter, we have similarly seen that what is presented in one text (the preamble of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, which is perhaps not quite fiction) can be undone in more overtly fictional texts. It would, however, be wrong to conclude that the very possibility of interpretation is being denied, it is more likely that it is intellectual fashion which is being mocked. Or would it be wrong to so conclude? The following example of 'learned discourse' is not attached to any particular school, and yet the confusion it portrays implies a certain cynicism, one which though not as violently cynical as Lucky's famous speech in *Waiting for Godot* nonetheless resembles somewhat that garbled message: "Un clair-obscur: attribut proximal d'un 'a contrario': à l'instar du signifiant signalant ipso facto qu'il a fallu, pour qu'il soit, trahir tout son autour (l'actualisation niant, donc montrant la virtualisation, il fallait, pour saisir l'immaculation du blanc, garantir d'abord sa distinction, son 'idiosunkrasis' original)....." (DISP, p128).

Chapter Three

Georges Perec par Georges Perec?

> Il s'ensuit que l'écrivain s'interdit [...] *le témoignage*: puisqu'il s'est donné à la parole, l'écrivain ne peut avoir de conscience naïve: on ne peut travailler un cri, sans que le message porte finalement beaucoup plus sur le travail que sur le cri: en s'identifiant à une parole, l'écrivain perd tout droit de reprise sur la vérité.
>
> – Roland Barthes, 'Ecrivains et écrivants'.

> Je ne suis pas responsable de la monotonie des solutions qu'apporte la psychanalyse: le soleil, en conséquence de ce qui vient d'être dit, ne saurait être à nouveau qu'un symbole sublimé du père.
>
> – Freud in *Schreber*, quoted by Derrida in *La Carte postale*.[1]

La nouvelle autobiographie?

The year 1975 saw, along with the publication of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* and, in the field of criticism, Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique* (so called autofiction had also made its appearance by this time, with authors such as Modiano and Doubrovsky; not to mention Sartre's much earlier exercise in inauthenticity, *Les Mots*). It is to be wondered, therefore, because of this temporal coincidence, whether Perec can be said to belong to this trend, the 'Nouveaux Autobiographes', as it were (thence the question mark in the chapter's title) – is he primarily an autobiographical writer, as some critics would have us believe? At first glance, it would indeed appear that autobiography is a major concern for Perec. He was fond of dividing his work into categories, and the autobiographical is one he chose. In 'Notes sur

[1] This French translation is more forceful then the English one, which reads: "The sun, therefore, is nothing but another sublimated symbol for the father; and in pointing this out I must disclaim all responsibility for the monotony of the solutions provided by psychoanalysis" (Freud, 1079, p190).

ce que je cherche', a text written after the very 'romanesque' *La Vie mode d'emploi*, it is still placed second in the list of categories:

> La première de ses interrogations peut être qualifiée de 'sociologique': comment regarder le quotidien; elle est au départ de textes comme *Les Choses*, *Espèces d'espaces*, *Tentative de description de quelques lieux parisiens*, et du travail accompli avec l'équipe de *Cause Commune* [...]; la seconde est d'ordre autobiographique: *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, *La Boutique obscure*, *Je me souviens*, *Lieux où j'ai dormi*, etc.; la troisième, ludique, renvoie à mon goût pour les contraintes, les prouesses, les 'gammes', à tous les travaux dont les recherches de l'OuLiPo m'ont donné l'idée et les moyens [...]; la quatrième, enfin, concerne le romanesque, le goût des histoires et des péripéties, l'envie d'écrire des livres qui se dévorent à plat ventre sur son lit; *La Vie mode d'emploi* en est l'exemple type.[2] (PC, p10).

However, despite the apparent importance of the autobiographic, it is imperative to note that *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is Perec's only 'autobiography' (and even this book is subtitled a *récit*). For our purposes here, we will adopt Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography in *Le pacte autobiographique*: "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" (Lejeune, 1975, p14). Moreover, he adds that "L'autobiographie, elle, ne comporte pas de degrés: c'est tout ou rien." (Lejeune, 1975, p25). We must therefore be quite strict in what we term autobiography. For instance, the identity between the author and the narrator must be clearly established. This occurs in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* when the un-named autodiegetical narrator of the autobiographical text ('Je') mentions the name given him on his *déclaration de naissance*, Georges (W, p31) and later undertakes a discussion of the history of his family name, Peretz (W, p51-52).[3] Earlier on, it occurs indirectly with reference to a text previously published by the narrator bearing the name Georges Perec (W, p14). Moreover, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is largely concerned with childhood memories, crucial in "l'histoire de [l]a personnalité." The autobiographical pact in question (between the writer and

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[2] Of the four works cited in the autobiographical category, 'Lieux où j'ai dormi', also mentioned in *Espèces d'espaces* as a work in progress (EE, pp31-35), was never actually completed. The exact nature of the other works will be examined below.

[3] For the sake of convenience, we will use the following abbreviations from now on: W1 for the fictional narrative in the *Première Partie*, W3 for the fictional narrative in the *Deuxième Partie*; W2 for the autobiographical narrative in the *Première Partie*, W4 for the autobiographical narrative in the *Deuxième Partie*.

the reader, the writer declaring his book to be an autobiography and the reader trusting him) is signalled from the outset (or end): the *quatrième de couverture*, written by one G.P., declares that one of the two texts is indeed an autobiography. We will therefore content ourselves for the moment with calling *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* an autobiography.

Let us now consider briefly some of Perec's other work with 'autobiographical tendencies'. *Je me souviens*, a collection of some 455 memories, is rather an experiment in collective memory and is more an exercise in anonymity than an affirmation of the author's individuality.[4] What is more, it cannot be termed a *récit*, being rather a list. Perec himself denied its autobiographical nature: "Ça fonctionne comme une sorte d'appel de mémoire parce que c'est une chose qui est partagée. C'est très différent de l'autobiographie, de l'exploration de ses propres souvenirs, marquants, occultés." (JSN, p83). *La Boutique obscure*, a book of dreams, is an exploration of the link between "le rêve et l'écriture" (BO, *quatrième de couverture*), and can only be termed autobiographical in the sense that any given person's dreams will contain elements of their daily life (events, acquaintances, etc.).[5] It is thus referential, but only partly so (for Lejeune "...la biographie et l'autobiographie sont des textes *référentiels*: [...] ils prétendent apporter une information sur une 'réalité' extérieure au texte, et donc de se soumettre à une épreuve de *vérification*." (Lejeune, 1975, p36, author's emphasis)). This is a consequence of a text being autobiographical and not a determining condition (it is not only biographies and autobiographies which are referential, but also history books, etc.). The fact that *Je me souviens* refers to Perec's memory of *poinçonneurs* on the Métro, for example, does not automatically render it autobiographical.

Apart from these published works, Perec, over the course of his career, planned, projected and undertook various other autobiographical projects. One such overview of these is provided by Perec in his 'Lettre à Maurice

[4] See the interview 'Ce qu'il se passe quand il ne se passe rien', p17.

[5] In his 'preface' to *La boutique obscure*, Perec emphasises the deformative force of writing on the dreams written: "Pourquoi les transcrirait-on, d'ailleurs, puisque l'on sait que l'on ne fera que les trahir" and "De ses rêves trop rêvés, trop relus, *trop écrits*, que pouvais-je désormais attendre...?" (BO, non-paginated, emphasis mine).

Nadeau'.[6] Philippe Lejeune, in *La mémoire et l'oblique*, presents another, earlier list, found amongst Perec's papers after his death (Lejeune, 1991, pp 30-32).[7] Entitled *Autoportraits*, it outlines nine projects. Of the nine, three were later to be completed, but turned out to be radically different from their intended form:

No. 3: *Karakosi* 'becomes' *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?*

No. 8: *Les moments d'un couple* 'becomes' *Les Choses*

No. 9 *Bartleby* 'becomes' *Un homme qui dort*

Radically different in that, coming from a list entitled *Autoportraits*, the completed texts are manifestly works of fiction.[8] This illustrates the deformative power of writing hinted at above, and puts us on guard against confusing the author's intentions with the actual text.

It would seem therefore that, despite the fact that the autobiographical was one of the fields which Perec himself divided his work into, it was not as important as it has subsequently been perceived to be: of all the autobiographical projects which Perec undertook at various stages, only *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* actually became what it was intended to be: the others were either abandoned or transformed into works of fiction. To refer once more to Lejeune: "[L]'écriture autobiographique n'a été pour Perec ni une activité constante [...] ni une activité 'terminale' [...], mais [...] elle correspond à une phase médiane, à une crise, à une métamorphose, après laquelle elle s'est effacée, est revenue au second plan." (Lejeune, 1991,

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[6]JSN, pp51-66. Projects announced in this "vaste ensemble autobiographique" (p58) include, apart from *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*: *L'Arbre*, *L'Age* and *Lieux*. None of these were brought to fruition.

[7] He later provides a comprehensive chronology of all of Perec's autobiographical ambitions, both published and abandoned. (Lejeune, 1991, pp49-57)

[8] Exposed to the press after winning the Prix Renaudot in 1965 for *Les Choses*, he commented that: "Jusqu'à présent, dans les explications que j'ai données sur *Les Choses*, j'ai commis une erreur: racontant la genèse du livre, j'ai laissé croire à une relation de type autobiographique entre mon personnage et moi. Cette relation est un fait – dans la mesure où toute littérature est autobiographique – mais secondaire." (quoted in Lejeune, 1991, p33). Affirming *Les Choses* as fiction, the second sentence of this statement, in its apparent banality, also serves to undermine that which is 'properly' autobiographical: by expanding the category beyond reason, it is to some extent nullified. Furthermore, it suggests that an autobiographical reading of texts is itself secondary.

p29).[9] Moreover, autobiography as a genre is destabilised: now valorised as one of the four elements, now dismissed as a self-evident banality. It is perhaps in this spirit that, only lines after the categorisation quoted above, Perec writes that: "[c]ette répartition est quelque peu arbitraire et pourrait être beaucoup plus nuancée: presque aucun de mes livres n'échappe tout à fait à un certain marquage autobiographique (par exemple en insérant dans un chapitre en cours une allusion à un événement survenu dans la journée)" (PC, pp10-11). To use the term autobiography in this loose sense is to divorce it from any connection to the 'moi' of an author and deprive it of any emotive charge it may have left.

W ou le souvenir agrandi

It is now necessary to ask why *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* receives such critical attention – and this despite Lejeune's recent comment that "[l]'autobiographie gêne. Elle gêne intellectuellement, esthétiquement, affectivement..." (Lejeune, 1998, p11). Perhaps the above analysis has unwittingly provided an answer: its very uniqueness in Perec's work might serve to highlight it. This hypothesis turns out to be unfounded as, in practice, the critics do not define autobiography as rigorously as above. The fact remains that, although they treat *Je me souviens*, etc. as autobiographical, it is still *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* which is focused on. We will return to

[9] Roughly speaking, the 'crisis' in question is the period of psychoanalysis which preceded, and in many ways permitted, the writing of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Moreover, apart from recognising that Perec is not primarily an autobiographer, Lejeune is one of the few to admit that the 'projet autobiographique' (such as it is) is in its essence fractured from within: "Il est impossible de parler, au singulier, du projet autobiographique de Perec; il faut écrire une histoire de ses projets" and "Le but n'est plus la construction d'une somme totalisatrice à la Proust ou à la Leiris, mais une dissémination également totalisatrice." (Lejeune, 1991, pp16 & 37). He is therefore sensitive to the fact that Perec's (auto)biography cannot be reduced to one admittedly brutal fact: the death of his mother at Auschwitz. Or, that Perec's work cannot be reduced to autobiography.

Perhaps it is Perec's often stated admiration for Leiris which incites critics to expand the category beyond *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, unconsciously applying Butor's remarks on Leiris to Perec: "A cet égard, l'œuvre de Michel Leiris, et surtout ce grand ouvrage inachevé dans lequel il a enfin découvert pleinement son propre moyen d'action et d'expression, dans lequel il est parvenu à la maturité de sa voix, ce grand ouvrage définitif dans la mesure où, tel celui de Proust, on sait très bien qu'il ne pourra véritablement finir qu'avec la mort de son auteur, étant comme la philosophie pour Platon, une méditation, un apprentissage de la mort, présente une valeur exemplaire." (Butor, 1960, p262)

this below. Perhaps, on the other hand, it is the innovative nature of the work: an autobiographical narrative which alternates with a patently fictional one. This is plausible, but, when one considers that Perec's work in general, particularly his use of constraint, is commonly held to have 'renouvelé les enjeux de l'écriture', then this hypothesis must also be treated with caution.[10]

What remains is the idea, not necessarily openly admitted amongst academics, that it is the emotional force of the work which commands our attention. Once again, however, this is not unique to *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*: *Un homme qui dort*, *Les Choses*, and *La Vie mode d'emploi* in particular are all calculated to produce an emotional response in the reader: specifically, a sense of sadness coupled with sympathy for the characters (the popular success of the latter two no doubt attests to this, while the narrative of *Un homme qui dort* (one of the least studied of Perec's works) makes no effort to paint a sympathetic portrait of the main protagonist). Interestingly, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, which is highly emotional, was initially rather coolly received by the public (see Bellos, 1995, p563). However, its unique balance of emotion and intellect makes it very compelling to academic readers. Rather than succumb in turn to the force of this emotional bullying, it is time to examine critically the techniques used to implement it. The reading which follows is to a large degree inspired by Stanley Fish's *Is there a text in this class?*.[11]

1. *L'Histoire avec sa grande hache*

What is unique to *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, coupled with its autobiographical nature, is its subject matter. It deals, as is known, with Perec's childhood.[12] A childhood which, from the autumn of 1941 until the

[10] The focus on *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* also goes against the preference generally given to Perec's Oulipian work. Despite its rigorous structure, it "has no explicit formal constraints to bend" (Bellos, 1995, p597).

[11] This is not to imply subscription to all the theses Fish propounds, although his insistence on the fact that the text's "(apparently) spatial form belie[s] the temporal dimension in which its meanings [are] actualised" and that "the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning" is particularly effective for our current needs (Fish, 1980, pp2 & 3, author's emphasis; see also pp25-27).

[12] For more details on this period, see Bellos, 1995, chapters 5-7.

end of the War, was spent in hiding at Villard-de-Lans, in the Vercors. What is more, it deals with the tragic deaths of his parents: his father killed on the day of the Armistice by an unexploded shell and his mother murdered at Auschwitz (see W, pp53 and 57). It is undoubtedly these facts, coupled with Perec's careful treatment of them, which make it so difficult to ignore *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*.[13]

We are now at the crux of the matter, confronted with the first of Perec's 'guiding tactics': his use and manipulation of extra-textual sources. That Perec was aware of the implications of his 'History' and that he makes a conscious and 'literary' use of it in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is attested by his article 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité de la littérature', written over ten years previously:

> On n'attaque pas la littérature concentrationnaire. Dès qu'un livre parle des camps, ou même, d'une manière plus générale, du nazisme, il est à peu près assuré d'être accueilli partout avec une certaine sympathie. Même ceux qui ne l'aiment pas ne voudront pas en dire du mal. Tout au plus n'en parlera-t-on pas. (LG, p87)[14]

That there is a link between the two works is hinted at by the fact that the two titles have a similar structure: both are hinged around the conjunction *ou*, and so form a sort of X, a figure which in turn is inscribed in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and which gives rise to a geometrical fantasy involving the Star of David and the SS insignia (W, pp105-106).

It is illuminating to read the opening page of the first chapter of W2 (actually the book's second chapter) in the light of the above text:

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[13] The more one thinks about it, the harder it becomes to justify ignoring these facts. Yet that is precisely what we are doing: bracketing them off in order to analyse the techniques used for guiding the way we read *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. The intention is obviously not to trivialise what happened, it is simply time that a different critical approach was taken. In fact, the guilt felt by myself now, generations removed, in attempting to side-step the historical context, testifies to the weight it exerts.

[14] For a remarkably lucid analysis of this phenomenon, see the opening chapter of *Le Juif imaginaire*, particularly the following: "Bref, en dépit de mes efforts, je ne portais pas le deuil de ma famille exterminée, mais j'en portais l'étendard: que je relate, à mon tour, les épisodes familaux de la solution finale, et mon interlocuteur, saisi d'un mélange de stupéfaction, de honte, et de respect voyait en moi autre chose que moi-même: le visage des suppliciés. [J]e pouvais bien donner dans la sobriété et m'évertuer à disparaître derrière mon récit, en fait, je paradais, j'épatais la galerie, je forçais l'admiration des spectateurs." (Finkielkraut, 1980, pp18-19). Finkielkraut's actual situation is somewhat different from Perec's in that he is what he himself calls a *Juif imaginaire*, that is he was born after the war. Nonetheless, the mechanism which he describes is almost exactly the same as that used in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Of particular interest is his comment on sobriety of style given that Perec writes that he would like to "*adopter le ton froid et serein de l'ethnologue*" (W, p10) and later that "je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, est neutre" (W, p59). As Finkielkraut points out, this serenity of tone in no way diminishes the morbid attraction of the discourse.

> 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; j'ai passé la guerre dans diverses pensions de Villard-de-Lans. En 1945, la sœur de mon père et son mari m'adoptèrent.
>
> 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.
>
> «Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance»: je posais cette affirmation avec assurance, avec presque une sorte de défi. L'on n'avait pas à m'interroger sur cette question. Elle n'était pas inscrite à mon programme. 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. (W, p 13)

Bearing in mind the strategic value of incipits, it is worth looking closely at this passage. The blunt opening sentence obviously contradicts our initial expectations regarding the information to be imparted. Beginning with 'Je', we expect it to follow with something like 'Je me souviens...' or 'Je suis né...'. Instead, it contradicts its role as opening sentence by closing off the past. Ultimately, though, it only postpones the inevitable: in the next sentence, the narrator does indeed begin to talk about his childhood. We learn that he was orphaned, probably during the War, but not necessarily because of it. This is important because it is not until the third paragraph that we are forced to the conclusion that one or both of his parents died in the concentration camps, and that they and he are therefore most likely to be Jewish. The practical effect of this is that the reader is slowly drawn in emotionally before he realises that he is dealing with "littérature concentrationnaire". It would seem that Perec has learned the lesson that his own analysis imposed: if the only negative reaction one can have in the face of that which overtly declares itself to be "littérature concentrationnaire" is to ignore it, then the trick is to draw the reader in emotionally before he realises the exact nature of what it is that he is reading. Moreover, this process of deferment draws attention to the difficulties of discussing such painful memories.

The text also establishes a technique of 'reading in reverse': learning of the camps at the end, the reader flips back to the beginning in order to re-evaluate the import of the narrator's orphan status. In doing so, he must also re-read "...cette question. Elle n'était pas inscrite à mon programme" which

takes on rather sinister connotations ('question' hints at 'la question juive', while 'programme' hints at the programme of extermination, the Final Solution). The second paragraph equally acquires new depth: the initial 'innocence' is found to be lacking. Instead, it is replaced by an implication of guilt. Whose exactly is not clear, but the reader himself is not necessarily excluded (indeed, the question "mais de quoi me protégeaient-elles" can be read as a rhetorical device designed to implicate the reader, *n'est-ce pas*?).

If he is especially conscientious, the reader may continue this process of reading in reverse. He will then re-read the opening chapter of W1 only to discover that its narrator is also an orphan, adopted by a friend of his father's. What is more, he will read the following:

> *Quoi qu'il arrive, quoi que je fasse, j'étais le seul dépositaire, la seule mémoire vivante, le seul vestige de ce monde. Ceci, plus que toute autre considération, m'a décidé à écrire. Un lecteur attentif comprendra sans doute qu'il ressort de ce qui précède que dans le témoignage que je m'apprête à faire, je fus témoin, et non acteur.* (W, p 10)

This would seem to suggest the identity of the two narrators: the 'Je' of W1, like Perec in W2, was not actively caught up in the History which he is to relate (Perec was not sent to the camps), but is rather tragically powerless. But, perhaps because of this, he is the only one left to tell the tale (which transforms writing into a moral imperative). From all this, how can one not conclude that what was initially perceived as fiction (W1), is also subsumed into the autobiography (i.e. that it also 'refers' to the events portrayed in W2 and W4). Indeed, how could it not, given the tragic nature of the latter? – this will be seen presently when the *récit d'aventures* is treated as being *suspect*. That, at least, is what the reader is forced to conclude: as Adorno remarked, fiction, and Art in general, are impossible in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

2. *La fragile intersection*

The second 'guiding tactic' employed by Perec is explicitly announced by the *quatrième de couverture*:

> Il y a dans ce livre deux textes simplement alternés; il pourrait presque sembler qu'ils n'ont rien de commun, mais ils sont pourtant inextricablement enchevêtrés, comme si aucun des deux ne pouvait exister seul, comme si de leur rencontre seule, de cette lumière lointaine qu'ils jettent l'un sur l'autre, pouvait se révéler ce qui n'est jamais

> tout à fait dit dans l'un, jamais tout à fait dit dans l'autre, mais seulement dans leur fragile intersection.
> L'un de ces textes appartient tout entier à l'imaginaire: c'est un roman d'aventures, la reconstitution, arbitraire mais minutieuse, d'un fantasme enfantin évoquant une cité régie par l'idéal olympique. L'autre texte est une autobiographie: le récit fragmentaire d'une vie d'enfant pendant la guerre, un récit pauvre d'exploits et de souvenirs, fait de bribes éparses, d'absences, d'oublis, de doutes, d'hypothèses, d'anecdotes maigres. Le récit d'aventures, à côté, a quelque chose de grandiose, ou peut-être de suspect. Car il commence par raconter une histoire et, d'un seul coup, se lance dans une autre: dans cette rupture, cette cassure qui suspend le récit autour d'on ne sait quelle attente, se trouve le lieu initial d'où est sorti ce livre, *ces points de suspension* auxquels se sont accrochés les fils rompus de l'enfance et la trame de l'écriture.
> G.P.

Initially, it might seem that the essence of this text is its utilisation of the same technique as above: that of declaring that the autobiography relates a wartime childhood without straightaway linking that childhood to the Holocaust. However, it also introduces a new concept: the intersection. Emphasising the bipartite nature of the book, it encourages a reading, not between the lines, but between the texts. Their interdependence is such ("comme si aucun des deux ne pouvait exister seul") that neither one is capable of engendering meaning on its own. It is only by lighting one with the other that what is not said in either can be revealed. (There is also an implicit emotional plea present here: it is as if the reader is being asked, through an intertextual reading, to help the author overcome the void at the heart of his own text – as if the "fragile intersection" will somehow be rendered more stable, the blank of "*ces points de suspension*" filled in.) How could any (academic) interpreter resist this appeal both to his intellect (intertextuality) and his heart?

This reliance on intertextuality is not limited to the *hors-texte* that is the *quatrième de couverture*. The latter half of the first chapter of W2 refers to the writing and previous publication of the fictional *W* (in *La Quinzaine littéraire* between September 1969 and August 1970) before stating: "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." (W, p14). Apart from simply restating the bipartite division ("le réseau qu'ils tissent"), both sentences in this paragraph actually *perform*

it: the first sets up the following chiasmic schema: *W ressembler fantasme olympique // fantasme olympique ressembler enfance*. The factual assertion that W and his childhood have nothing in common, is contradicted by the sentence's structure, where *W* mirrors *enfance*. The schema set up by the second is: *cheminement mon histoire // histoire mon cheminement*. In this way, we can see once again the linking of 'his story' in the first *volet* (his past and his fiction) with History in the second *volet*.

Perhaps more importantly, we are confronted yet again with two sentences which, because of their structure, can be combined to form an X (which, graphically, resembles the shape made by stitches in fabric). The nodal point of this X is the phrase "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". Apart from employing a surrogate reader to operate a *mise en scène* of the process of reading, a certain type of reading is being encouraged. In other words: *lire le réseau* in order to unveil what would otherwise remain hidden ("jamais tout à fait dit dans l'un, jamais tout à fait dit dans l'autre"). And, as has been seen, the links between the first two chapters are sufficiently obvious to convince the reader that this technique is worth pursuing further.

3. *Cache-cache*

Like the second technique used by Perec, the third also makes an appeal both to the heart and the intellect. Like the first, it refers to extra-textual reality in that what is at stake is the *verifiability* of the text. Once again, it is in the opening chapter of W2 that this technique's statement of principle is to be found: "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." (W, p11). On first reading, this passage seems to be limited to two fairly obvious interpretations. Firstly, it would seem to refer to a period prior to the composition of the book (just before, Perec has alluded to his sudden remembering of his childhood 'fantasme olympique', an event which set the process of writing in motion). In this sense, the statement refers to the

difficulties he must have felt regarding the wisdom and the validity of dredging up and exposing to the public such a painful past ("rester caché, être découvert"). Secondly, as everybody knows, memory is notoriously treacherous.[15] Even with the best of intentions, it would be physiologically impossible to remember everything. Yet, on the surface at least, the above passage seems to put forward the thesis that memory is simply a question of willing – provided one has the will. Once again, however, if we read in reverse, we will find an admission to the contrary: "En dehors du titre brusquement restitué, je n'avais pratiquement aucun souvenir de W" (W, p11). Now it would seem that remembering is dependent on a sudden anamnesis ("Il y a sept ans, un soir, à Venise, je me souvins tout à coup que cette histoire s'appelait «W»", (W, p11)) which is not willed and which, moreover, cannot be relied on to reveal all of the past. The passivity of the process is emphasised by the phrase "se mirent en place" (although passive, we are not dealing with Proust's involuntary memory, which miraculously restores the past in all its minute detail). In this sense, the passage says nothing that might not have been said by any erstwhile autobiographer.

It is only by combining these two apparently exclusive interpretations that we can understand the subtle nature of the third 'guiding tactic'. It is through a reappraisal of the key concepts of passivity, intentionality and imperfect memory that the underlying mechanism is revealed. What if, we might ask (or, more to the point, we are expected to ask), the reluctance to reveal was not limited to the pre-textual stage? What if the lapses in memory were not actually involuntary? Let us re-examine the passage in its entirety: "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." It is now reasonable to assume that "les pièges de l'écriture" do not refer to the author being trapped, but refer instead to traps voluntarily put in place to misguide the reader. The game of hide-and-seek is being played, not by the author with himself, but with the reader. The consequence of this is that the reader can expect to be

[15] See, for example, May, 1979, pp77-81.

deliberately misled by the factual information being supplied, and is therefore encouraged to put the principle of verifiability to the test.

What does remain constant in both theories is of course the notion that the motivation for the game is to be found in Perec's childhood trauma (in this sense the game is a sort of bastardised version of the psychoanalytical theory of resistance). The reader who uncritically accepts the proposed schema is once again bearing witness to the emotive force of the subject matter and, in looking for errors as directed, considers himself to be paying tribute to a tragic life.[16]

In the chapter of W2 which immediately follows this exposition, Perec again gives the reader a sufficiently obvious example to persuade him to pursue this manner of reading. Introducing his first two memories, he summarises the already elaborated technique for those who missed it: "Mes deux premiers souvenirs ne sont pas entièrement invraisemblables, même s'il est évident que les nombreuses variantes et pseudo-précisions que j'ai introduites dans les relations – parlées ou écrites – que j'en ai fait les ont profondément altérés, sinon complètement dénaturés." (W, p22). He then goes on to set the scene for the first memory: aged three, he is in his grandmother's *arrière-boutique*, completely surrounded by his extended family (the feeling of protection is emphasised: "cette sensation d'encerclement ne s'accompagne pour moi d'aucun sentiment d'écrasement ou de menace; au contraire, elle est protection chaleureuse, amour" (W, p22)). There are Yiddish newspapers scattered around the place.

In this idyllic setting, the child takes his first steps towards greatness:

> Tout le monde s'extasie devant le fait que j'ai désigné une lettre hébraïque en l'identifiant: le signe aurait eu la forme d'un carré ouvert à son angle inférieur gauche, quelque chose comme
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> 
>
> et son nom aurait été gammeth, ou gammel. (W, pp22-23).

[16]Referring to his date of birth, he writes "Longtemps j'ai cru que c'était le 7 mars 1936 qu'Hitler était entré en Pologne. Je me trompais..." (W, p31). This sentence is rather like the lawyer who makes a provocative comment knowing it will be stricken from the record – though not from the jury's minds. Beyond any reference to an error of memory, this phrase suggests that, from birth, Perec was placed 'under a bad star' (see the etymology of *désastre*), a fact now indelibly stamped onto the reader's mind.

However, even before he has finished narrating the memory, he begins to correct the errors: describing the family "réunie autour de l'enfant qui vient de naître" he then adds "n'ai-je pourtant pas dit il y a un instant que j'avais trois ans?" (W, p22). He also adds a footnote (that pinnacle of truth) to "...aurait été gammeth, ou gammel" where he writes "C'est ce surcroît de précision qui suffit à ruiner le souvenir ou en tout cas le charge d'une lettre qu'il n'avait pas" before specifying that the sign he drew does not exist. In a second footnote, he says that he has recently been told that he used to play at deciphering French, not Yiddish, newspapers.[17]

Having walked the reader by the hand through this particular *explication de texte*, Perec can probably assume that he will hurry off to find more, unannounced, errors. Once again (once again), the subject matter (childhood, family, innocence, all now lost forever) guarantees the reader's *obéissance*.

Le viol du bourdon

Having examined the manner in which *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* sets up interpretative parameters which most critics slavishly follow, it is now necessary to examine the manner in which the autobiographical is expanded to the realm of fiction. Our privileged target will be Bernard Magné, who draws attention to himself simply by being the leading Perecian (or perhaps he annoys us with his repeated use of the expressions 'tout bon lecteur' and 'tout lecteur averti' to describe the reader who ultimately shares his opinions; or perhaps because he formulates categorically the conclusion one would arrive at if one were 'duped' by the traps to be found in *W*: "L'énonciation autobiographique est donc en position dominante, à un niveau hiérarchiquement supérieur par rapport à la fiction, qui est, vis-à-vis de l'autobiographie, en situation d'inclusion").[18]

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[17] Chapter VIII (W2) is constructed in its entirety around the tension created by the use of footnotes. In this case, two earlier texts about his parents are 'rectified' by information added by copious footnotes. Apart from correcting spelling mistakes and chronological errors, the footnotes also draw attention to the role played by invention in the process of memory: see notes 2, 19 and 21 (W, pp49 & 56).

[18] In 'Les sutures dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', CGP no2, p41.

We will begin with an article entitled 'Le viol du bourdon'.[19] The title is a reference to (and deformation of) a much used expression in *La Disparition*: see, for example, the title of chapter four: "Où, nonobstant un «Vol du Bourdon», l'on n'a pas fait d'allusion à Nicolas Rimski-Korsakov" (DISP, p53). In *La Disparition*, the expression assumes a meta-textual function, designating the *non-dit*, the unnameable absence of E. The strict definition of *bourdon* in this context is "Faute d'un compositeur qui a omis un ou plusieurs mots de la copie" (*Le Petit Robert*).

Taking this definition as his point of departure, Magné distinguishes what he terms *l'erreur* (le bourdon) from the *clinamen* ("Le clinamen étant principe de disprogrammation est principe de programmation: par rapport à un système, il ne constitue pas un raté mais un mode local, momentané et différent de fonctionnement", (cab3, pp75-76)) and from *le faux* ("Le faux suppose l'élaboration consciente d'un dispositif pragmatique destiné à leurrer le lecteur", (cab3, p76)).[20] It is clear that what sets the error apart from the other two is the fact that it is unintentional (rendering it impossible to decide whether it was the author or the printer who committed it). This Magné acknowledges: regarding "l'erreur involontaire", the question is determining whether "la mise en réseau" is possible: "Mon objet, c'est l'erreur comme lieu du sens, hors toute préméditation" (cab3, p76). A psychoanalytical reading of *l'erreur*, as slip, is seemingly set aside in favour of a structuralist one.

After sketching out a brief (but impeccable) typology of errors, Magné moves on to the semiology of error. It is here that he operates a sleight of hand, undoing the notion of unintentionality. Firstly, by effectively dismissing "l'erreur celée" (isolated error) as being of no interest: "Faute de mieux, on optera pour la coquille" (cab3, p78). If *l'erreur* as defined above is

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Warren Motte is one of the few Perecians to maintain a critical distance from this all pervasive autobiography: "those instances where Perec refers to himself as author of the text again border on a larger phenomenon, autobiography. The result of Perec's insistence upon his rôle as author tends, however, towards an elaboration of the figure Perec-author as a textual entity, almost a fictional being, distinct from projections of Perec-person in the extra-textual world." (Motte, 1984, p39).

[19] 'Le viol du bourdon', Bernard Magné, *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, no 3, Printemps 94, pp75-88.

[20] The clinamen will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Six below.

not a *coquille*, then what is? (Coquille: "faute typographique" (*Le Petit Robert*)). This betrays the fact that it is not the errors which constitute a network but Magné's reading of them: regarding the erroneous inversion of Mme Marcia and Mme Moreau (the attribution of a "boîte à épices" to Mme Marcia's non-existent cook) in chapter LI of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, he writes: "Ce qui permet de *réaliser*, autour de cette boîte à épices avec sa fausse attribution une quintuple épissure d'autobiographèmes" (cab3, p81, emphasis mine) – all that is missing is the personal pronoun 'me': "Ce qui [me] permet de *réaliser*...". In itself, there is nothing scandalous or new in the idea that critics create meaning. What is troublesome is his lack of acknowledgement of the situation, and secondly, his introduction of the term *autobiographème* – the term *biographème* was coined by Barthes in his *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* where it is used somewhat whimsically, not to say ironically, irony which is altogether missing in Magné's appropriation of it. Moreover, in the same passage, Barthes describes the text as "destructeur de tout sujet", and specifically relegates the *biographèmes* to extra-textual details (SFL, p14).[21]

Which links to the second point: behind the apparent objectivity of this term (derived from terms such as *phonème*, *graphème*, etc.) lies the very notion earlier excluded: intentionality. It cannot be stressed enough that for a passage to be autobiographical, it must be intended as such by the author. Being perceived as relating to the author's biography by a third person does not mean that a passage is *auto*biographical. For example, if we consider the

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[21] In an article entitled 'L'autobiotexte perecquien' (cab5, pp5-42), Magné defines the *autobiographème* as follows: "un trait spécifique, récurrent, en relation avec un ou plusieurs énoncés autobiographiques attestés, organisant dans un écrit, localement et/ou globalement, la forme du contenu et/ou de l'expression" (cab5, p10).
It is the "en relation avec un ou plusieurs énoncés autobiographiques attestés" which bothers us: this effectively means that Magné (by his own admission) searches for tropes or -èmes in *W* (the *autobiographie attestée*) before putting them 'en relation avec' the rest of Perec's work. Moreover, the list is constantly growing: Magné's original list consisted of *la cassure, le manque, le 11 et le 43, le 37 et le 73, les symétries bilatérales, le bilinguisme* and *l'instabilité onomastique*, with *la judéité* functioning as an 'archi-autobiographème' (cab5 pp11 & 38). To these are added *le carré, le 53* and *le 17* (cab5, p11). In extending *le manque* to the rest of Perec's work, Magné refers to "les objets détériorés et incomplets" (cab5, p14) – any mention of, for example, a rickety chair or tattered boot is therefore autobiographical? Eventually, perhaps, Perec's use of the full stop in *W* will be seen as representing a *cassure* – and immediately taken to mean that every full stop in every novel represents same, making all his novels autobiographical.

so called *autobiographème* '43' (1943: the year Perec's mother died) it is clear that if another writer were to use 43 in a text, it could not be said to relate to Perec's autobiography. Equally, by the very nature of the logic of error, it cannot be said that its occurrence here has autobiographical status. Once again because it was not intended (if Magné viewed the error as a sort of Freudian slip he would be entitled to make this expansion but, as we have seen, he does not so he is not). At the most, one should only write that 43, amongst its other functions – in W and elsewhere in Perec – serves as an autobiographical 'flag' in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*.[22]

This double deception on Magné's part is perhaps best illustrated in the discussion of an illicit 'g' in the *beau présent* (a text written using only the letters present in its dedicatee's name) for Sophie Binet and Michel Dominault (BPBA, pp57-65): "Georges Perec fait apparaître avec ce 'g' quelque chose qui peut se lire comme l'initiale de son prénom" (cab3, p79). Here again, the error is viewed as intentional ("fait apparaître") and as referring to the 'moi' of the author (see also cab3, pp82-84). This process reaches its apogee when, outside of any connection to error, commenting on the phrase "L'archéologue cherchant les traces des rois arabes d'Espagne",[23] Magné writes "soit Georges Perec cherchant les traces de son histoire" (cab3, p85). To quote the authors of a recent polemic, "as far as we can see, [this] means precisely nothing" (Bricmont & Sokal, 1998, p165).

Wilfrid Mazzorato makes this confusion of error and intentionality even more explicit.[24] Comparing the table of contents of the 1988 edition of *La Boutique obscure* with that of the original, he discerns certain discrepancies. Solid scholar that he is, he decides to count them. Lo and behold, he discovers that there are 34 errors (i.e. the inverse of 43) and 11 "chiffres décalés" (cab2, p33) – it was on the 11th of February that Perec's mother was

[22] Aside from disrupting the logic of Magné's own terminology, the insistence on the autobiographical has another unfortunate consequence which the already quoted "Mon objet, c'est l'erreur comme lieu du sens, hors toute préméditation" (cab3, p76) can now be seen to indicate. Here, the use of 'du sens' as opposed to 'de sens' implies that there is only one meaning possible: the autobiographical one: 43 *always* refers to the death of Perec's mother, etc.

[23] VME, p293.

deported. That this is an astounding coincidence is beyond doubt. But, to move from coincidence to autobiography, which Mazzorato does, is hardly justified (cab2, p33). Whatever doubts remained regarding the potential psychological causes of the errors analysed by Magné must surely be dismissed here: Georges Perec died in 1982. Barring the possession of some typesetter by Perec's ghost, the 1988 table of contents is no more than a curiosity. (Or, to give the typesetter his due, he might even be considered the 'author' of the contents, given his radical rewriting of them.)

Le puzzle mode d'emploi

In the next article to be discussed, Magné elaborates on the meta-textual connotations of the image of the puzzle in *La Vie mode d'emploi*.[25] Once more, his analysis is, roughly speaking, situated in the structuralist tradition: "Lire efficacement les pièces du puzzle (du texte), c'est donc, dépassant leur valeur référentielle, ne plus les considérer comme les fragments d'un univers reproduit, mais, retenant leur valeur fonctionnelle, les analyser comme les éléments d'un système produit." (Magné, 1989, p43). The puzzle is a meta-textual metaphor. As meta-text, it is also "une fonction *intratextuelle*, relevant de l'homogène, opérant dans le seul espace du texte" (Magné, 1989, p33 fn, author's emphasis). Therefore self-representation. As metaphor, it has a double function. Firstly, it is a *masque* when seen to refer to the narrative, driving it along. Secondly, it is a *marque* which attracts the attention of a careful reader, anxious to understand the text's construction. Magné also believes that this second function is itself a cover, hiding the deeper meaning of the puzzle's meta-textual nature. It is the unearthing of this latter meaning which interests him: "Tout concourt ici à faire du puzzle, en sa portée métaphorique immédiate, une première '*couverture*', élément superficielle d'une stratégie métatextuelle un peu plus bathmologique qu'il n'y paraît" and "Dans telle lecture de premier degré, ce qui, du puzzle, est retenu, c'est la

[24] In 'Peut-on entrer dans *La Boutique obscure* sans se heurter à la table? (Histoire d'un accident de lecture)', Wilfrid Mazzorato, *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, no. 2, Automne 1993, pp31-36.

mise ensemble, au plan du roman pris comme un tout, d'histoires éparses et fragmentaires. Ce qui, du coup, est méconnu, c'est la mise en œuvre du même emboîtement à deux autres niveaux." (Magné, 1989, p36 & p37, author's emphasis).

Initially, therefore, he focuses on the "deux autres niveaux": the chapter as puzzle in itself and *La Vie mode d'emploi* as part of Perec's *œuvre*, itself part of the "vaste puzzle de la littérature" (Magné, 1989, p37). From the microscopic to the macroscopic.

Leaving this aspect of his analysis aside, this reading will focus on his interpretation of the puzzle as connotating "indiscutablement une activité scripturale axée sur la mise ensemble du fragmentaire" (Magné, 1989, p38). This 'piecing together' is related to an apparently contradictory notion: "Figure privilégiée de la *connection*, le puzzle est donc aussi pris dans un dispositif antagoniste: celui de *l'omission*." (Magné, 1989, p44, author's emphasis). As one might have guessed by this stage, Magné's bathmological reading (his dive to the depths in order to discover what is hidden there) is tending towards familiar territory: moving surreptitiously beyond his stated intentions, he is linking the puzzle, beyond the text, to the *lieux communs* concerning Perec's psychological motivations for writing (overcoming absence/loss, etc.).

Evidently, this is done with great subtlety, an autobiographical reading of *le manque* being initially put carefully aside:

> Le manque, sous la forme privilégiée de l'usure, aurait alors pour but paradoxal de remplir l'immeuble, d'y assurer la présence d'un vécu en en multipliant les traces. Il serait du côté de la 'vie', bref de la représentation. Sans doute, à un second niveau, peut-on lire cette prolifération des manques comme thème récurrent à valeur autobiographique (mort du père, disparition de la mère). Il est alors du côté d'une vie, bref de l'expression. Mais le titre du livre, en sa dualité, suggère une autre lecture possible, cette fois du côté du 'mode d'emploi', bref de l'écriture. Le manque serait moins alors un effet de réel ou un mythe personnel qu'une structure textuelle. (Magné, 1989, p45).

The surreptitious progression (from regarding *le manque* as an announced 'structure textuelle' to regarding it as an unannounced 'structure autobiographique') is hidden in the relation between two footnotes. The first

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[25] 'Le puzzle mode d'emploi. Petite propédeutique à une lecture métatextuelle de *La Vie mode d'emploi* de Georges Perec'. (Magné, 1989, pp33-59).

has already been seen ("Le métatextuel, tel que je l'entends, est une fonction *intratextuelle*, relevant de l'homogène, opérant dans le seul espace du texte"). The second is to be found on page 39: "On le voit: la fonction métatextuelle d'un élément de la fiction peut parfaitement coexister avec sa fonction autobiographique, ce qui est évidemment le cas pour l'évocation de ces malheurs familiaux où se perçoit sans difficulté un écho des souvenirs d'enfance de *W.*" (This is a comment on the story in *La Vie mode d'emploi* concerning a family dispersed by the Russian revolution (VME, p198)). Now, there is a blatant contradiction visible here: the meta-textual only designates the text it comes from, yet it can also be autobiographical. The only way to reconcile these opposing statements is by making the text from which the meta-textual comes an autobiography. That is, by treating *La Vie mode d'emploi* (subtitled *romans*) as autobiography.

This Magné unashamedly does when he turns the character Cinoc into "une manière de double de Perec. Dès lors, tout le travail métatextuel qui multiplie les relations d'équivalence entre écrire et relier les bouts doit être à son tour relié à l'entreprise de Georges Perec faisant de l'écriture le moyen privilégié de (re)construire sa propre histoire et notamment d'en retrouver la continuité en renouant les fils brisés de l'enfance." (Magné, 1989, p41)[26] – "Again, the end of the passage is meaningless" (Bricmont & Sokal, 1998, p 150).

Once more, Magné acts as trope for the *troupeau*. As Jacques-Denis Bertharion writes, expanding the autobiographic to the entirety of Perec's work, "La problématique de la mémoire est d'un abord complexe dans les textes de Georges Perec. Sans doute l'œuvre entière dessine-t-elle comme un immense autoportrait éclaté, sorte de 'puzzle' autobiographique qui ne cesse de nous questionner et de nous fasciner."[27] Elsewhere, Magné's terminology is adopted and combined with his insistence on the autobiographical nature

[26] See also page 49: "Ainsi, ce qui commande toute l'armature distributionnelle de *La Vie mode d'emploi*, depuis la stricte mise ensemble et en ordre des chapitres jusqu'au manque précisément localisé qui en fait une structure plurielle et productive, c'est cette structure fondamentale du 'carré ouvert à son angle inférieur gauche', où se tisse, inextricablement, dans un souvenir reconstruit, les trois motifs de la famille, de la judéité et de l'écriture qui travaillent toute l'œuvre de Perec."

of certain numbers: "En empruntant les *chemins qui nous sont ménagés dans l'œuvre* perecquienne par le dix-sept, nous avons voulu suivre le parcours d'une écriture qui, pour autant qu'elle cache sa source dans sa course, révèle avec ses manques ses masques et avec ses masques ses marques, et *dont nous ne croyons pas avoir fini de suivre les méandres*" (This refers to the fact that Perec's mother was arrested on the 17th of January 1943).[28] They naturally consider every occurrence of 17 anywhere in Perec's work as referring to this fact.[29]

Double V: subVersion and deViation

> [J]e redoutais de devoir un jour tomber entre les mains de certains de ces habiles qui, munis de scalpels mal effilés et de grilles rouillées, se jugent en mesure de déceler sous un silence un cri, derrière telle absence un signe, et dans la dénégation même des traces un aveu.
>
> – Marcel Bénabou, *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres.*

Having examined the relationship between *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and its critics, we must now turn our attention elsewhere. It is time to examine a work of textual criticism by Perec (written in collaboration with Harry Matthews): 'Roussel et Venise. Esquisse d'une géographie mélancolique' (CSL, pp73-115). It was written during the period October 1975 to December 1976 and published in *L'Arc* (1977, no. 68; issue devoted to Roussel).

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[27] In '*Je me souviens*: un cryptogramme autobiographique', *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, No 2, Automne 93, p73.

[28] In 'L'intervention du dix-sept', Wilfrid Mazzorato & Serge Raysséguier, *Le Cabinet d'amateur*, No 4, Automne 95, p108 (authors' emphasis).

[29] It has to be said that it is not only Perecian critics who indulge in this form of pseudo numerology. Two Oulipians, Catonné and Caradec, in their respective works on Queneau and Roussel, hold that each writer had numbers with autobiographical significance which they surreptitiously inscribed in their novels (Catonné, 1992, pp33-40 & Caradec, 1997, p13).

Taking as their point of departure five hand-written sheets which "had been inserted in a cloth pocket between the press-board and the end paper on the recto cover" (CSL, p74) of an antique book (*Tragoedia Ducis Partibonis*, printed by Quarli in 1532) deposited in the library of Fitchwinder University, and later identified as being written by Roussel, the two exegetes proceed to exhaust the information contained therein (after having proved, through consultation of auctioneers' archives, that Roussel's mother had purchased the Quarli on the 17th September 1895 in Venice (CSL, p79)).

The five sheets contain the draft of a play, best summarised by the authors themselves:

> La scène se passe à Venise à la fin du XIXe siècle. Accusé d'avoir violé sa fiancée, un jeune noble est sauvé in extremis par deux enfants, le frère et la sœur de la jeune fille, qui jouaient à saute-mouton à l'étage au-dessus. Car leurs sauts provoquent des trépidations qui libèrent les cris que la jeune fille a poussés au moment de l'agression et qui, captés par les canalisations d'eau, se sont emmagasinés sous forme de bulles dans la pomme de la douche. Cette 'révélation liquide': "Gob!...Laisse!.." accuse Gobbo, le batelier de la famille, qui avoue. La jeune fille ressuscite et le mariage est rapidement célébré. (CSL, p75)

After a brief analysis of the Rousselian *procédé* at the origin of this draft (the genial transformation of 'La Tragédie du Doge Partibon' into 'L'outrage est dit de douche par petits bonds'), our two authors proceed to what is in effect the substance of their article: "[I]l nous a semblé en l'occurrence prometteur de nous interroger sur le rôle de ce livre et en particulier sur le *pourquoi de l'insertion* des cinq feuillets. Il nous a semblé plus que probable qu'ils formaient, avec le Quarli, un tout, même s'il était difficile à première vue de simplement les rattacher les uns aux autres." (CSL, p78, emphasis mine). The search for this *pourquoi* leads them to consider the import of Roussel's Venetian holiday of 1895. They conclude in a love affair between Roussel and a certain Ascanio. Ascanio's death shortly afterwards profoundly affects Roussel and, over the course of his life, he uses the incision in the Quarli to house his memories of this affair. The establishment of this fact allows Perec and Matthews to postulate "une unité sous-jacente" (CSL, p86) to Roussel's *œuvre*, it being in effect a prolonged expression of mourning

(*deuil*). This permits them to trace encrypted references to Ascanio in Roussel's work from *La Doublure* (1897) to the *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1928) with the conclusion reached being: "L'œuvre de Roussel est, pensons-nous, commémoration unique de ses autres voyages, non de ceux qu'il fait dans sa vie publique, mais de ceux qui prirent place dans le 'système topologique secret' où il avait enfoui la perte de son objet unique: Ascanio." (CSL, p87).

La parodie dissimulée

Described in this manner (which was done in an attempt to prolong the illusion), the article seems perfectly legitimate, if somewhat old-fashioned in its biographical leanings. Indeed, on first reading, it seems equally legitimate and genuine. It is a difficult text to classify (accepting for the moment the possibility of fixing a text in a given genre).[30] In 'Faux et usage de faux chez Georges Perec', Marcel Bénabou describes it as "mêlant subtilement le vrai, le vraisemblable et le faux, il se situe à mi-chemin du pastiche avoué [...] et de la forgerie." (cab3, p29). David Bellos, for his part, is happy to term it a pastiche in which everything "must at once look plausible and be false" (Bellos, 1995, pp612-613). A comparison of definitions from *Le Petit Robert*,[31] reveals that the closest definition would seem to be *supercherie* (unlike *parodie*, 'Roussel et Venise' is not burlesque; unlike *pastiche*, it does not imitate Roussel's style; *fraude* has the added implication of illegality, so this will not do either). And yet, *supercherie*, particularly in the expression *supercherie littéraire* is not quite adequate: it usually implies a genuine (malicious) attempt to deceive (for example, the false Rimbaud *La Chasse spirituelle*). We will leave this discussion momentarily in suspense. Before

[30] All the more so when compared to the other texts which constitute the collection *Cantatrix sopranica L.* For example, the titular 'Experimental demonstration of the tomatotopic organization in the Soprano (*Cantatrix sopranica L.*)', "étude les fois que le lancement de la tomate il provoquit la *réaction yellante* chez la Chantatrice" (CSL, p11). This is obviously a burlesque imitation of scientific discourse, signalled as such from the outset.

[31] *parodie*: Imitation burlesque (d'une œuvre sérieuse); *pastiche*: Imitation ou évocation du style, de la manière d'un écrivain, d'un artiste, d'une école; *supercherie*: Tromperie qui implique généralement la substitution du faux à l'authentique; *fraude*: Action faite de mauvaise foi dans le but de tromper.

returning to it, we will first examine briefly some of the clues which indicate that 'Roussel et Venise' is not, in any case, exactly what it seems.

As it happens, the opening paragraph (CSL, p73) actually provides five separate clues (announced by the "cinq feuillets inédits"?). Firstly, there is a proliferation of F's (Rosamund Flexner, Fitchwinder University, Mortimer Fleisch, Formal ambiguity, "flamboyant continent qui le fascine", "feuillets") which suggests strongly the presence of *du Faux*. Secondly, Rosamund combines the first syllable of Roussel's surname, and the last syllable of his Christian name: Ray*mond Ro*ussel. This is perhaps too coincidental in its pointing to the presence of 'literary' techniques in a supposed work of criticism (particularly when one considers that Perec often used such techniques in his fiction). Moreover, it prefigures the later emphasis on mirrors and reflection.[32] Thirdly, bearing in mind the *anglophone* contribution to the article, Fitchwinder might well refer to a 'wind up' (it is later echoed by reference to one Joshua Ewett (CSL, p81) whose name in turn can be seen as a deformation of the exclamatory 'you wit!').[33] Fourthly, Mortimer Fleisch, whose name is possessed by *la mort*, refers us to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, which deals with a false death as it is a work of fiction. A fictional intertext is thus established: Ascanio, "de complexion délicate" (CSL, p81), dies young; moreover, much is made of Venice's seaside resorts as *lieux de rendez-vous* (CSL, p96).[34] Fifthly, a footnote refers

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[32] In light of this, consider the following name: Paulina Grifalconi (CSL, p80). It obviously contains the initials GP in reverse (Matthews does not seem to have inscribed his name into the text).

[33] Fitchwinder University is actually an invention of Matthews, as it first appears in his novel *The Conversions*, with the consequence that one of the 'sources' for this supposed academic article is a patently fictional text. The name seems to constitute a running joke between Perec and Matthews: the spoof 'Distribution spatio-temporelle de *Coscinoscera Victoria*, *Coscinoscera tigrata carpenteri*, *Coscinoscera punctata Barton* & *Coscinoscera nigrostriata* d'Iputupi' (CSL, pp35-52), is co-authored by the excessively (?) Irish Pogy O'Brien, of Fitchwinder University. Perhaps more importantly, Matthews, in the subsequent issue of *L'Arc* devoted to Perec, attempts to prolong the Roussel spoof: "J'étais retourné à Fitchwinder University, décidé à reprendre mes 'fouilles' en vue de notre livre sur Roussel" ('Abanika, traduire?', L'Arc, no. 76, p73). The same letter also introduces the triply alliterative Miss Maxime Moon, from the aforementioned institution, anticipating on our fifth point above.
See also Bénabou, 1992, p80 for a further reference to Fitchwinder.

[34] As well as having some of its origins in a work of fiction, the article also spills over into a later one, *La Vie mode d'emploi*. One of the many stories contained in this latter work concerns an elaborate confidence trick aimed at passing of an earthen vase as the vase from which Jesus drank at the last supper. Ironically, one of the documents which the con men

to Carson College. This establishes a chain of excessively coincidental alliterative monograms, echoing RR (Paulina Petrasova, Vente Vianello (CSL, p79), Ethan Ewett (CSL, p81)) and, eventually, W, literally a double V.

It is not possible or necessary to indicate all the misleading facts in the text. Suffice it to say that Roussel apparently never went to Venice, going instead to Milan in 1896 (Kerbellec, 1994, p36; Bellos, 1995, p613). Moreover, when Mme. Roussel's art collection was auctioned off after her death in 1912, several works were indeed withdrawn by Raymond Roussel, but not the (false) Groziano ("une des traces matérielles du séjour vénitien" according to Perec and Matthews (CSL, p83)). On the contrary, a "paysage de Venise" was actually sold, let go (on the auction, see Kerbellec, 1994, pp28-33).

As regards texts quoted in the article, they are all false (Bellos, 1995, p613). The most significant of these is the page long 'quotation', attributed to the psychoanalyst O. Pferdli, which deals with melancholia and incorporation, and which is used as the basis for all subsequent identifications between "la vie et l'œuvre" (CSL, p86).[35]

La parodie critique, la critique parodiée

Returning to the problems of classification caused by 'Roussel et Venise', it is now time to attempt to determine just what exactly (if anything) is parodied. A return to the language of the article will hopefully clarify the question. It does not imitate Roussel's language or 'style' (and so is not a parody or pastiche of Roussel). Indeed, it does not openly present itself as fiction (which it would have to do to pastiche Roussel, a writer of fiction). On the other hand, as seen above, it does in effect contain sufficient markers as to its fictitious nature to counteract any long term desire to deceive (it is not, therefore, a *supercherie*).

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supply to establish the lineage of their vase is a Quarli (complete with five sheets inserted into the binding) whose "authenticité ne faisait aucun doute." (VME, p118).

Remaining on the nature of the language in the article, what can be said is that (in its sobriety, its non-burlesque manner) it imitates a certain *discourse*: (auto)biographical criticism. In this case, sobriety becomes burlesque. It is our contention that, by initially replicating this discourse and then subverting it, 'Roussel et Venise' attacks the very possibility of biographical readings of texts and, by extension, of autobiography itself (that biographical interpretations drop the 'auto' (self) of the autobiographies they 'read' silently testifies to this: they cannot replicate the self of an *autre*. Their project is flawed from within. It remains to be seen whether the self can reproduce itself).

Let us now examine the progression, in 'Roussel et Venise', from imitation to subversion. Let it be noted that, in their stated ambition to examine the *pourquoi* behind the insertion of the five pages into the Quarli, the authors are explicitly making a reference to Roussel's psychology and its impact on his *œuvre*. This is reiterated by the following: "Bien que nous ayons l'intime conviction que la pièce, comme projet *et* comme forme, est *reliée* au souvenir de Venise et d'Ascanio (se trouve dans la *reliure* du livre vénitien), il nous sera difficile d'étayer nos intuitions avec des arguments directs." (CSL, p82 fn, authors' emphasis). Roussel's play (incomplete as it is) is linked to the 'reality' of its author. Announcing their methodology, the authors also seem to be aware of its limitations: its reliance on their intuition and the impossibility of direct proof.

In light of this, they initially proceed with caution, subjunctives and conditionals abounding, careful to avoid unqualified assertion of what is only an hypothesis: "Raymond Roussel accompagnait sa mère à Venise. Il est possible qu'il ait assisté à la vente", "Il est plus vraisemblable [...] de supposer que sa mère le lui offrit" (CSL, p79-80); "il est hautement vraisemblable que ce soit lui qui ait fait pratiquer une incision dans la reliure du livre." (CSL, p81); "Il est difficile d'imaginer un touriste passant trois semaines à Venise sans aller une fois au moins au Perlini et c'est sans doute

[35] It is in fact a "reasonably accurate résumé" (Bellos, 1995, p613) of a real article: N. Abraham and M. Torok, 'Introjecter – Incorporer. Deuil ou Mélancolie'. *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, no. 6, 1972.

un des premiers endroits à la mode qu'Ascanio ait tenu à faire connaître à Roussel", "un salon de thé alors très en vogue, où Ascanio et Roussel auraient pu retrouver leurs mères au terme d'une de leur promenades" (CSL, p94); "La jeunesse vénitienne appréciait beaucoup ses légers repas chauds, et il n'est pas invraisemblable de penser qu'Ascanio et Roussel y déjeunèrent ensemble" (CSL, p95); "la station balnéaire [...] où il est aisé d'imaginer Ascanio et Roussel nageant ensemble" (CSL, p99). Admirable as this reserve is, it also dooms the project from the outset. For, as we know, no critic/researcher is content to remain at the level of hypotheses, he must prove. And, when proof is not available, he asserts.

This transition is as subtle as it is inevitable: "Ascanio et Roussel *traversent* le canal Majeur qui s'ouvre alors sur un véritable détroit, *tournent* autour de l'île" (CSL, p 96, emphasis mine).[36] The use of the present tense serves to assert as true what was previously expressed as a hypothetical conditional. In doing so, it undermines the whole argument of the article: any pretence to objectivity or verifiability is dropped. The progression to the present permits another, more insidious, progression:

> Sans aller jusqu'à prétendre qu'Ascanio et Roussel se soient allongés côte à côte sous le couvert de ces ombres chaudes, on peut aisément supposer que c'est là, dans ce dépaysement luxuriant [...] que Roussel découvrit la force érotique de sa passion. Peut-être la découvrit-il comme une force déroutante et sombre, de même que les passagers du *Lyncée*, déroutés, découvrent l'Afrique contre leur gré. (CSL, pp96-97).

Coming just after the assertion quoted above, and despite its paying lip service to the notion of uncertainty, this passage introduces a particularly virulent *lieux commun*: the identity between the writer and his characters – in Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique*, the *Lyncée* is the name of a ship wrecked off the coast of Africa, depositing its passengers into the hands of ferocious captors (see Roussel, 1963, p170 *passim*).

Despite an earlier statement regarding 'la vie et l'œuvre' ("cette dernière seule nous intéressant ici" (CSL, p86)), we can see that it is precisely the

[36] See also "Dans l'année qui suivit Ascanio mourut. Venise devint le lieu de l'imprononçable [...]. Cependant, au plus profond de lui, il continuait à marcher avec Ascanio dans les rues d'une Venise" (CSL, p89).

opposite which is true.[37] Or, more accurately, what they maintain is that 'la vie *est* l'œuvre'. Despite being legitimated by an appeal to psychoanalysis,[38] this thesis permits the critic to say literally anything he wants about the work. In the present case "une correspondance terme à terme entre la topographie des textes et le déroulement de la passion vénitienne" (CSL, p92) is established (see also CSL, pp93 & 96). The practical effect of this is to limit the work to one possible interpretation only (remember Magné's *du sens*): "L'œuvre de Roussel est, pensons-nous, commémoration *unique* de ses autres voyages, non de ceux qu'il fait dans sa vie publique, mais de ceux qui prirent place dans le 'système topologique secret' où il avait enfoui la perte de son objet *unique*: Ascanio. Le lieu de cette topographie est Venise" (CSL, p87, emphasis mine) and "font de Venise cet espace onirique dont Roussel put tirer la *mappemonde* de son œuvre, les sites et les axes de ses livres, où les lieux et les voyages sont les projections directes des promenades terrestes et nautiques qu'il fit avec Ascanio." (CSL, p90, authors' emphasis). Ignoring the aesthetics of silence and its complex relationship with literature, it is always taken as expressing loss.

If the nature of parody is to hide its author's true intentions (Rose, 1979, pp28-33; Bricmont & Sokal, 1998, p241), then this text succeeds admirably. The *glissements* which it operates between hypothesis and assertion, man and work are so inherent in a particular form of criticism as to seem perfectly natural, even acceptable. However, it is to be contended that here they are done quite deliberately (by times subtle, by times too obvious) in order to subvert biographical criticism. If the closing section of 'Roussel et Venise' is re-read in light of this, it becomes clear that, far from being a modest admission of the authors' own limitations or a homage to Roussel, it is directed at the discourse parodied throughout:

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[37] If anything is burlesque in this text, it is surely this repeated and blatant contradiction between theory and practice. The mechanics of biographical criticism, once set in motion, cannot be stopped: "Bien que nous nous soyons interdit de relever les correspondances événementielles, innombrables, mais, chez Roussel, évidemment ambiguës, entre les écrits et l'expérience vénitienne, nous ne pouvons nous empêcher de remarquer que la *Poussière* décrit une chasse au trésor au terme de laquelle le trésor est découvert: la passion de Roussel aurait-elle été, sur la plage, physiquement consommé?" (CSL, p99).

[38] "Nous pensons pouvoir expliquer ce silence et les conduites qui se rattachent à Venise par un phénomène que la psychanalyse appelle 'l'incorporation'" (CSL, p84).

> Qu'il y ait ou non sous ces fragments dérisoires le fil fragile d'un projet que tout au long de ses années d'écrivain Roussel n'aurait cessé de forger et qui aurait été son œuvre capitale, cette œuvre maîtresse qui l'aurait fait reconnaître de tous, cela est finalement sans importance: il n'y a pas de mystère Roussel, *son œuvre ne constitue pas une énigme à résoudre; c'est notre lecture seule, notre soif d'explications,* notre goût pour les tenants et les aboutissants, *qui suscite autour d'elle cette impression d'un secret à forcer.* Mais, s'il y a secret, il n'est certainement pas là où nous l'allons chercher. (CSL, p 106, emphasis mine)

This passage indicates clearly that it is the critic who projects his own desire onto the work. Of the explanations previously given in the article, they are said to be "également valables, également excitantes pour l'esprit, et également inutiles" (CSL, p 106fn).[39] It is only at the very end of the article therefore that the authors' views are made quite clear. The article is, in effect, their *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (see Proust, 1954, pp126-128).[40] Indeed, describing Sainte-Beuve's work on 'l'homme et l'œuvre' as a "traité de géométrie pure" (Proust, 1954, p127), Proust could have been one of the sources for the article, with its careful and precise mapping of man onto work.

W, Venise, l'indicible

It is now our intention to insert this critique of biographical criticism back into Perec's autobiography, in an attempt, not to determine whether autobiography itself is subverted (that is beyond the scope of the present analysis),[41] but rather to re-examine briefly biographical criticism of Perec in

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[39] This is expanded on the following page: "Toute explication de Roussel achoppe en fin de compte sur la seule évidence d'une méthode infinie. Que cette pièce hypothétique dont nous avons tenté de décrire l'éventuelle genèse soit l'ultime et posthume métonymie d'un séjour véniten autour duquel se serait organisé le phantasme d'écriture, renvoie, non à l'illusion d'un discours qui prétendrait dire Roussel, mais, finalement, à l'émotion incomparablement roussellienne qui saisit le voyageur lorsque, arrivant devant les Apostoli, il découvre pour la première fois la ville dont Roussel fut l'architecte mental." (CSL, p107).

[40] Though it is not the only one of Perec's texts to denounce biographical criticism: the narrator of *53 Jours* attempts to solve the mystery he is caught up in by gaining information on the life of the character Serval (who also happens to be a writer) and then reading his work in this new light, looking to biography and fiction to provide an answer to 'reality'. He fails miserably.

[41] In this respect, see Derrida's admirable reflections on the im/possibility of *témoignage* (Derrida, 1998, pp9-50).
Or, remaining solely within the sphere of *W*, what if one takes the opening "Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance" at face value. What then follows would, of necessity, be invention – see the comments on fabulation (W, pp23 & 58).

its light. In this respect, the date of composition of 'Roussel et Venise' is significant as it was started less than a year after *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* was completed.[42] It would seem therefore to constitute a rejoinder to the earlier work, a withdrawing of the possibility of biographical writing and reading which the earlier work advanced – though in a text sufficiently obscure to ensure almost total ignorance of the retraction (a tactic which we like to regard as deliberate, though, of course, this cannot be proven). There are sufficient intertextual clues to permit such a re-insertion, should one wish, not least the *feuillets* "rentrés à la fente" and the "fragile intersection" themselves. Or perhaps the "tragédie vénitienne" (CSL, p74), which would echo the (tragic) anamnesis which brought Perec's (tragic) childhood memories flooding back to him one evening in Venice (W, p14). The list goes on. Suffice it to say that, rather than 'Roussel et Venise' being 'biographasised' by *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, it is the latter which is fictionalised.[43] (Indeed, Magné's treatment of 'Roussel et Venise' shows him ill at ease, anxious to skirt around the possible disruption of his carefully elaborated readings by this sardonic anti-reading. In 'La cantatrice et le papillon', his article which deals with Perec's scientific pastiches, he maintains that the various 'connotateurs de littérarité' which litter these texts undermine their presumed scientific nature – in short, the whole text is contaminated by fiction. However, before he makes this statement, he is careful to section off 'Roussel et Venise', protecting it and his reading of *W* from the pastiche's corrosive force – he maintains in a footnote that 'Roussel et Venise' "ne révèl[e] pas de nouvelles stratégies d'écriture". Conveniently unworthy of study, he is saved from addressing the questions it raises (Magné, 1989, p203 & p194, fn)).

Interestingly, introducing the very passage which many regard as providing the definitive statement of the autobiographical project which would underlie *all* of Perec's work (W, pp58-59), Perec acknowledges that (echoing our Barthesian epigraph) it is not simply a question of opposing "la sincérité d'une parole à trouver et l'artifice d'une écriture" (W, p58). Rather, one is at work within the other.

[42] According to David Bellos, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* was finished in November 1974 (Bellos, 1995, p540). 'Roussel et Venise' was written over the period October 1975 - December 1976.

[43] If *W* is fiction, then the following comment applies to it: "Logiquement parlant donc, aucune phrase du texte littéraire n'est vraie, ni fausse." (Tzvetan Todorov, *Qu'est-ce que le structuralisme?*, p36).

It needs to be said that Magné's undeniably ingenious readings suffer from a syndrome which Umberto Eco diagnoses in certain Joyceans (indeed, suffer from it because of their ingeniousness): over-interpretation/*surinterprétation* (Eco, 1992, pp228-231) – roughly, an excess of exegetical energy expended for the yield obtained. A typical example would be his delving into the inversion of 34/43 seen above. (A more blatant, dubious one would be precisely in his reading of the intertextual links between both sections of *W*. While he reveals some interesting lexical links between consecutive fictional and autobiographical chapters, he also comes up with the following 'intertext': Ch4/ch5: journaux/journal; Ch9/ch10: identifier/identifier; Ch12/ch13: il y aurait/il y aurait; Ch13/14: rencontrait/rencontres.[44] This, to misappropriate a Derridean expression seems to constitute a "suture scandaleuse" (GR, p154), as these lexemes are so banal as to contribute nothing to any interpretation, he is linking simply because he has been instructed to). More insidiously, and this is in keeping with Riffaterre's definition of over-interpretation in his polemic against Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss's celebrated reading of Baudelaire's 'Les Chats', what Magné does is interpret a certain fact/word/theme in *W*'s fictional narrative in light of its autobiographical narrative, and then apply this reading to *all* occurrences of the same fact/word/theme in Perec's work.[45] One unfortunate consequence of this is that any possible 'aesthetics of absence' in Perec's work – an otherwise fruitful field in modern literature – is brutally annulled: any occurrence of anything which resembles *l'indicible* (without necessarily equalling it: on the conservative side, some sort of ambiguity; on the radical side, an inherent indeterminacy) is automatically equated with the one central loss in Perec's life, paradoxically providing an unavoidable centre to a resolutely fragmented œuvre. It is in part the rediscovery of this void at the heart of language and not the person which will concern us in Section Three – see, for example, Perec's comments

[44] 'Les sutures dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', CGP no2, pp42-46.

[45] For Riffaterre, the fact that *le chat* sometimes connotes *la femme* in Baudelaire is no reason for assuming that the cats in 'Les Chats' connote women. For an overview of Riffaterre's argument, see Compagnon, 1998, p79.

in 'Poésie ininterrompue' to the effect that the *vide* is at the heart of literature, not the self.[46]

Why you try to f**k him like a bitch?

> 'Rabbi,' cries the head of the ghetto, 'the golem is slaughtering all of Prague! There will not be a Gentile left to light the Sabbath fires or take down the Sabbath lamps.'
> – Isaac Leib Peretz, *The Golem*.

> C'est donc encore à *W* qu'il faut revenir.
> – Bernard Magné, 'Le biais'.

Before finishing this chapter, it will perhaps not be irrelevant to ask why Magné and others display such an *acharnement* not simply in portraying Perec as an autobiographical writer, but as a Jewish writer (remember that, for Magné, Perec's Jewishness is the 'archi-autobiographème'). While we cannot necessarily provide an answer, we certainly cannot avoid the temptation of proposing the following impressionistic meditation. Consider this collage of quotations, one from Perec (already quoted above), and two from Magné (from the articles discussed above, though not themselves quoted):

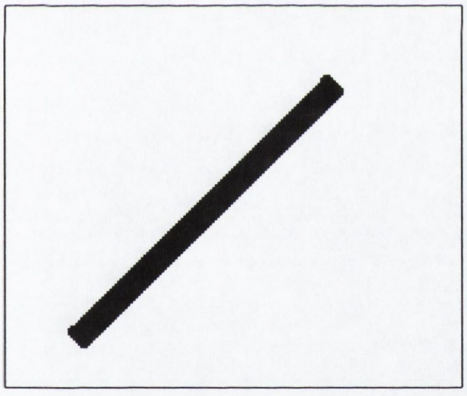
> Tout le monde s'extasie devant le fait que j'ai désigné une lettre hébraïque en l'identifiant: le signe aurait eu la forme d'un carré ouvert à son angle inférieur gauche, quelque chose comme
>
> ב
>
> et son nom aurait été gammeth, ou gammel. (W, pp22-23).

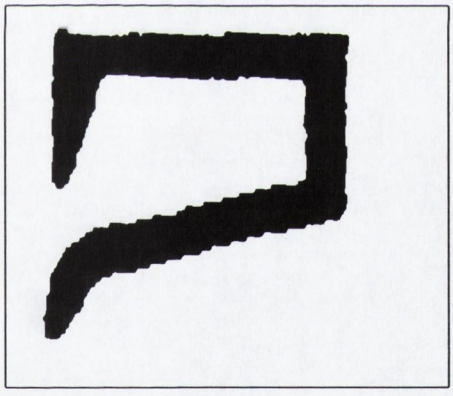
> [O]n ne peut pas ne pas être tenté de lire ce 'carré ouvert à son angle inférieur gauche' non plus comme simple forme *statique*, désignant le lieu immobile d'un manque que viserait à combler une écriture, mais comme forme *dynamique*, vecteur orienté désignant le geste même d'une précise écriture dont l'angle inférieur gauche constituerait le point d'aboutissement, d'une écriture organisée selon une *diagonale sénestro-descendante*... ('Le puzzle mode d'emploi', p49, author's emphasis)

> Il ne faut jamais résister à l'injonction du signifiant: donc je saute ce bourdon, je le viole, j'en force le sens, et je le prends... [E]t dans le même mouvement, cette erreur, je la viole, je lui fais violence pour lui trouver un sens, je la force à dire. ('Le viol du bourdon', p75)

[46] 'Poésie ininterrompue', p1. This view is not confined to Perec. For one example among many, see Sollers's comment that Robbe-Grillet's books are "construits à partir d'un manque qui est constant..." (*Tel Quel*, no. 17, 'Débat sur le roman'). It is certain that Sollers is not referring to a personal psychological lack, but to a structural linguistic lack.

Rather than develop now the potential of this intersection, we will content ourselves with suggesting that the *lecteur averti* bear in mind two points. Firstly, the fact that the above memory is immediately followed by another 'dreamlike' one (its dreamlike nature perhaps permitting a psychoanalytical reading of its symbolism?). This second memory comes complete with significant variations: Perec's father returns from work and gives him a key; or a gold key; or a gold coin; or Perec is sitting on the potty when his father returns; or, finally, "mon père me donne une pièce, j'avale la pièce, on s'affole, on la retrouve le lendemain dans mes selles." (W, p23). Secondly, we would exhort him (it is no accident that we are using the universal masculine in the present case) to consider the type of anatomical diagrams found in all encyclopaedias, and which represent the human digestive and reproductive systems, and couple them with the dynamism hinted at by Magné when contemplating this alternative typographical layout:





Un curieux ménage à trois: Jews, writers, critics

> Les Youtres te déplaquent dans le trou du cul et si tu veux te faire enculer, tu n'as qu'à nous avertir.
>
> – Letter signed 'Salvador juif' in *L'École des cadavres* (Céline).

It is to be contended that there is a parallel in the relationship between writers and critics and in that between Jews and anti-Semites (or, for that

matter, philo-Semites).[47] In an attempt to demonstrate this, we will first briefly examine two modern classics which deal with, in part or in whole, the general dynamic linking Jews and anti-Semites: Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* and Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. We will then apply their theses to a forensic examination of the relationship between Perec and (some of) his critics, though readers is perhaps a better term as there is little that is critical in some aspects of this relationship.

One of the central notions of *Réflexions sur la question juive* is the interdependence between the Jew and the anti-Semite, or at least the dependence of the anti-Semite on the Jew. Sartre essentially says that the anti-Semite *creates* the Jew, that he needs him in order to feel superior to him: "Ainsi l'antisémite a-t-il ce malheur d'avoir un besoin vital de l'ennemi qu'il veut détruire" (Sartre, 1954, p33; see also, for example, pp14, 32 & 84). In effect, the anti-Semite could really be anti- anything as what he needs is simply an object to project his impotence and rage on, his failure to assume responsibility for himself – in Sartre's jargon, the anti-Semite is inauthentic. (How often have we heard the theory that critics are frustrated writers venting their limitations on their more successful rivals?).

As one example of this interdependence, Sartre spends a good deal of energy examining the sexual nature of the relationship between the Jew and the anti-Semite (Sartre, 1954, pp52-58 & 130-132). He introduces this notion by saying that it results from an application of psychoanalytical theses to the situation, and then continues: "Le manichéisme [at the origin of the anti-Semite's world view] masque une attirance profonde vers le mal" (Sartre, 1954, p52). He then goes on to speak of the Protestant who was sent into indignant rages by the sight of women in bathing costumes and who consequently loitered around swimming pools as much as possible, before continuing "Tel est l'antisémite. Aussi une des composantes de sa haine est-elle une attirance profonde et sexuelle pour les Juifs. C'est d'abord une curiosité fascinée pour le Mal. Mais surtout, je crois, elle ressortit au sadisme." (Sartre, 1954, p54). He explains this by saying that it is precisely

[47] According to Sartre, anti-Semitism and "libéralisme condescendant" are linked in that they both treat the Jew as an object and poison his life. (Sartre, 1954, p165).

the weakness/powerlessness of the individual Jew (who is a sort of passive object) which lifts the anti-Semite's hatred from the 'normal' (as in the hatred of a powerful oppressor, for example) to the sadistic.

It is this sadism which is properly perverse in the relationship:

> Aussi l'attirance sadique de l'antisémite pour le Juif est si forte qu'il n'est pas rare de voir ces ennemis jurés d'Israël s'entourer d'amis Juifs. [They surround themselves with 'good Jews'...] En fait ils se plaisent à protéger ces quelques personnes, par une sorte d'inversion de leur sadisme, ils se plaisent à garder sous leur vue l'image vivante de ce peuple qu'ils exècrent. Les femmes antisémites ont assez souvent un mélange de répulsion et d'attraction sexuelles pour les Juifs... (Sartre, 1954, p55).

The sadism of the anti-Semite is echoed by the masochism of the inauthentic Jew (for Sartre, an inauthentic Jew is one who lets the anti-Semite define him, one who is defined by the *regard d'autrui*). In the case of the inauthentic Jew, masochism is an attempt to escape his responsibility, to deny the characteristics of his race: "Or, le masochisme est le désir de se faire traiter en objet. [Le juif inauthentique] essaie de se réaliser comme chose inanimée et, du même coup, il abdique ses responsabilités." (Sartre, 1954, pp130-131). He tries to become an object to escape from the torment of being Jewish, but in doing so plays into the hands of the anti-Semite, whose sadism thrives on the passivity of its target.

It is in this psychoanalytical reading of the relationship that Sartre goes some way to joining Kristeva's later work, though for her, while the relationship is undeniably sexual, it is moreover familial, verging on the incestuous. Her analysis is based on a reading of Céline, but also moves beyond this to describe the general dynamic. In Sartre's reading, the Jew is essentially weak, an object dominated by the anti-Semite. Kristeva inverses the power relationship somewhat, maintaining that the anti-Semite's delirium arises from the fact that the Jew is powerful, or perceived to be as such (the infamous 'worldwide Jewish conspiracy' theory). The Jew's perceived power is not, however, absolute: it is not "la maîtrise froide [...] de la domination classique", but rather, "[d]ans le fantasme antisémite, le pouvoir juif ne suscite pas le respect comme le fait l'autorité paternelle. Bordé de crainte, il déchaîne au contraire l'excitation que suscite la rivalité avec le frère, et entraîne l'Aryen qui s'y engage dans le feu de la passion déniée." (Kristeva,

1980, p214). So the Jew's authority is not paternal but fraternal, and therefore more easily challenged. Moreover, as well as being an elder brother, the Jew is "un objet du père, un déchet, sa femme en quelque sorte, une abjection. [...] Le juif devient ce feminin érigé en maîtrise, ce maître altéré, cet ambivalent." (Kristeva, 1980, p217). He is abject, and the anti-Semite who desires him is contaminated by this abjection, becomes abject himself. What is more, Kristeva insists on the anal nature of this curious eroticism, especially in the case of Céline who feels that the Jew is active in comparison with the 'grotesque insouciance' [Céline] of the Aryan. She quotes Céline as referring to himself as a "figure d'enculé" and goes some way to implying that, rather than fearing this, he actually desires it.

Before proceeding on to the next section, a strategic grafting may indicate the direction in which we are moving. In the following passage, the phrase 'le Juif inauthentique' has been replaced with 'l'écrivain' and the expression 'aryens' has been replaced with 'critiques':

> [L'écrivain] n'a pas pour son corps le mépris des ascètes [...]: dans la mesure où il ne *l'oublie pas*, il le traite comme un instrument, qu'il se soucie uniquement d'adapter avec précision à ses fins. [M]ais en outre, on doit sans doute discerner, au moins dans quelques cas, au fond de cette impudeur, un certain désespoir: à quoi bon voiler la nudité d'un corps que le regard des [critiques] a déshabillé une fois pour toutes? (Sartre, 1954, pp147-148, author's emphasis).

Or, as Sartre again asks elsewhere, "D'abord un Juif ou d'abord un homme?" (Sartre, 1954, p69). We in turn might wonder whether Perec's readers consider him to be firstly a writer and then a man, or firstly a Jew and then a writer?

Le protectionnisme français

> – Un bâtard! s'accabla Augustus.
> – Mais aussi un Anglais, ajouta Tryphiodorus.
> – Georges Perec, *La Disparition*.

Before examining the manner in which some of Perec's readers can be said to reflect the dynamic described by Sartre and Kristeva, we need to explore the manner in which Perec occasionally *exposes* himself. For, while

we have seen that he is a writer who is supremely aware of the manner in which his work will be read, he can also be somewhat careless. There is a deplorable but commonly used expression which refers to the victims of sexual assault and which states that 'they were asking for it'. While it is obvious that nobody 'asks for it', it can be said that people's actions can be misread, or that their actions in a certain context can be misconstrued. It is now necessary to examine a certain trope in Perec's work in light of this.

The trope in question is that of lying prone on the ground or bed or, in French, *être allongé à plat ventre*; it is a trope which seems to condense the fact of being a reader, a writer and Jewish into one singular *plaisir du texte*. This is an expression which crops up with some regularity in Perec's work, whether he be describing the position of fictional characters or referring to himself.[48] Most importantly, it is linked to the acts of writing and reading. In an article entitled 'Lire: esquisse socio-physiologique', he provides a list of all the possible positions in which one can read and which includes the following: "lire couché: couché sur le dos; couché sur le ventre; couché sur le côté, etc." (PC, p118). Elsewhere, however, it is the *à plat ventre* which dominates. It is firstly linked with reading, for example in 'Notes brèves sur l'art et la manière de ranger ses livres' when, upon rediscovering a long lost book while rearranging one's library, one "rem[et] au lendemain ce qu'on ne fera pas le jour même [et] on [le] redévore enfin à plat ventre sur son lit." (PC, p39). Moreover, it is specifically linked with Perec reading: "C'est couché à plat ventre sur mon lit que j'ai lu *Vingt ans après*, *L'Ile mystérieuse* et *Jerry dans l'Ile*." (EE, p26). Significantly, the same expression appears in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, explicitly linking the trope to Perec's 'biography' (or so it is believed): "Couché à plat ventre sur mon lit, je dévorais les livres que mon cousin Henri me donnait à lire." (W, p191). Finally, there seems to be an awareness on Perec's part of the exciting nature of reading, be it sexual or otherwise for, as he stated during a round table discussion: "Moi, j'imagine le lecteur vraiment à plat ventre sur son lit (*ha*

[48] For some examples of the phrase used to describe the posture of fictional characters see "Un homme est couché à plat ventre sur le sommet de la chaudière qui alimente tout l'immeuble." (VME, p107) and "...un viellard grincheux à plat ventre..." (VME, p116).

ha ha: halètements en tirant la langue – Rires), en passant des pages parce que ça l'embête...".[49]

The link with writing and Jewishness is more tenuous, but exists nonetheless. Firstly, as regards writing, there is the following comment: "J'ai essayé de faire de *La Vie mode d'emploi* l'équivalent des livres que je lisais à plat ventre...".[50] Perec, as writer, is harking back to his time as reader, and his time as reader is equally informing his praxis as writer. As a writer, he is projecting both himself and his reader into the one idyllic posture, and one almost senses that he would like to *écrire à plat ventre*. Secondly, as regards the expression being linked to Jewishness, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* contains a quotation from David Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* which describes prisoners being made to crawl "à plat ventre dans la boue..." (W, p220). While it has been pointed out that Rousset's book describes life in a camp for political prisoners and not Jews, the strategic position of the quotation, coming as it does at the very end of *W*, when the parallels between the sporting island described therein and Nazi camps has become abundantly clear, makes it very difficult to see being Jewish as anything other than the obligation to lie prone on the ground.

Given the triple concentration of the expression *à plat ventre*, let us now attempt to gloss one last quotation on the subject before moving on to examine the manner in which some of Perec's professional readers respond to the invitation: "Anne Breidel est étendue à plat ventre devant la baignoire, sur un drap de bain vert. Elle est vêtue d'une chemise de nuit de linon blanc relevée jusqu'au milieu du dos; sur ses fesses striées de cellulite repose un coussin thermo-vibromasseur électrique..." (VME, p230). The first point to be made is obviously the fact that her buttocks are not simply metaphorically exposed, but are rather literally exposed. Secondly, onto this naked textual flesh, is placed a vibrating cushion which, like any 'good' reader, shakes up the text which it comes into contact with (solicits it, as Derrida might say). Moreover, the aim of the cushion is to strip away the extraneous layers of

[49] 'Ce qui stimule ma racontouze', p55. See also Chapter 5 for Perec's comments on the dynamic of seduction between the writer and the reader.
[50] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p48.

flesh, leaving only the 'bare bones'. Coupled with the graphic invitation reprinted above, the letter open in its bottom left corner, this would then seem to be an unequivocal invitation to Perec's readers to do the same, a 'hands on' approach being encouraged.

As a writer and a Jew, therefore, Perec seemingly thrusts his posterior into the air, leaving it exposed and in a position to be manhandled by whomsoever sees fit. Whether this is because of the despair of which Sartre speaks cannot be answered. What can be said is that Perec's French readers are not at all hesitant in claiming possession of his person; while, at the same time, violently rejecting attempts by others to lay claim to him – especially the perfidious Englishman, David Bellos.[51] Whatever residual delicacy it is possible to claim at this point prevents us from developing the first point any more than is strictly necessary. All that we feel we should do is refer the reader back to the graphic juxtaposition which opened this section of the chapter.[52]

All that remains, therefore, is to attempt an examination of the violence with which some French critics have attacked David Bellos's biography of Perec. The aim is not to suggest that the biography is flawless, as it does of course contain errors (which others are better placed to determine than the present writer), and it does occasionally suffer from a certain superiority of tone. It is, however, a remarkable work, one which contains a wealth of information for any student of Perec. However, beyond any desire to rectify factual errors, it is precisely the tone of the attacks which is surprising.

The first to step into the fray was Eric Beaumatin with an article entitled 'La biographie hypothalamique selon David Bellos: English gossip or french [sic] cancans?'.[53] Its very title implies that Bellos is overly interested in

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[51] One example of the manner in which the critics sidle up to the body of Perec's work is to be found in the title of the following article by Magné: 'Emprunts à Queneau (bis)' (Magné, 1989, pp133-152). The title would have one believe that it was Magné's second article on the subject, but it is actually an appropriation of a Perecian article entitled simply 'Emprunts à Queneau' – does Magné believe that he is continuing Perec's work? Or consider the more or less gratuituous quotation by Magné of a letter written to him by Perec in which *on se tutoie* ('Le viol du bourdon, p76).

[52] Or consider the fact that Perec takes care to specify that, in Hebrew, the name Peretz (his father's actual name) means 'trou' (W, p51).

[53] cab3, pp89-105. While, at the time of writing, Beaumatin and Bianca Lamblin (see below) were the sole critics to have written articles attacking Bellos, it has been announced that the

Perec's sex life – the hypothalamus is that part of the brain which regulates sexual behaviour, amongst other things. This is simply not true: in a book totalling some 800 pages, Bellos makes only two explicit yet discreet references to Perec's sexuality. Beaumatin also ironically refers to Bellos as *le docteur Bellos* and *le professeur Bellos* before coming right out and calling him puerile (cab3, pp96-97).[54]

Not the least of the many curious arguments employed by this article is the fact that, almost in the same breath, Beaumatin criticises Bellos for not making more links between the life and the work, for trying to move away from this perspective, before claiming that he is "servilement dépendant des élucubrations fantasmatiques de *W*", that is to say that he has done no more research than read *W*.[55] On the contrary, Bellos seems to be one of the few to have understood that what appears in *W* cannot necessarily be read as the truth: "The attention we pay to this evening by the canal [the famous anamnesis in Venice] is a measure of Perec's later success in making us read his own life through a grid that he himself set up." (Bellos, 1995, p371).

Most revealing, however, is the energy which French readers expend on denouncing the 'Englishness' of the work. This adds something else to the politico-ethnic equation for it is well known, in France at least, that the English *sont tous des pédés*. The implication is that, while it is acceptable for the French to impose Perec's Jewishness on him, acceptable for them to treat him like an object, it is unacceptable for anyone else to do so (though that is not Bellos's intention). It is hard not to relate this attitude to Sartre's comments on the anti/philo-Semites who surround themselves with 'good Jews' (or, to shift cultural references momentarily, 'house niggers') – it is precisely Perec's *mauvaise conscience* which makes him good to have

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next issue of the *Cahiers Georges Perec* (no. 7) – currently delayed – will be devoted in its entirety to *lectures critiques* of the biography.
Magné, for his part, seems to find it difficult to resist making digs at Bellos *en passant* – and this in part before the biography was published. See, for example, Magné, 1989, p52 fn, or 'Du registre au chapitre, p187 fn (in *Penser, classer, écrire de Pascal à Perec,* pp181-194). The attacks which he makes post-biography (for example, in 'Le viol du bourdon, pp 81 & 84) may be motivated by the fact that, in the biography, Bellos qualifies the term 'néotexte' as an ephemeral fad (Bellos, 1995, p668 – the biography was originally published in 1993). Now, Magné had previously devoted an entire article to reading *La Vie mode d'emploi* precisely as 'néotexte' (Magné, 1989, pp61-98).

[54] At the same time that he attacks Bellos, he praises Magné (cab3, p91).

around. He is somebody whom it is easy to protect and demean, he is theirs and woe betide any foreigner who would attempt to take him away.

The denunciation of Bellos's Englishness begins with the title of Beaumatin's article and carries on from there. He opens by stating that 'English' style biographies transgress "le goût français" with their "exhaustivité volontiers indiscrète et irrespectueuse" (cab3, p89) and goes on to express his indignation at Bellos's pretension to pass comments on the French language: his comments on the rules of French orthography are qualifed as being no better than a "fatras pseudo-scientifique de café du commerce" (cab3, p94). This is because Bellos maintains that French assimilates foreign words and names into its own orthographical system, whereas English respects their difference (the insinuation perhaps being that the French are less welcoming of foreigners). It is at this point that Bianca Lamblin, Perec's cousin (which admittedly complicates matters), steps in. She opens her recent article, 'La Biographie de Georges Perec par David Bellos – Lecture Critique',[56] by stating how much she appreciates Beaumatin's 'demolition' of Bellos before qualifying Bellos as "un écrivain de langue anglaise, volontiers critique à l'égard des 'grenouilles'."[57] The first clause of the sentence is undoubtedly true, but the second is debateable.

She goes on to add that "[c]e dernier [le biographe] se substitue donc abusivement à Georges Perec (ou à d'autres) et projette ses propres idées ou ses fantasmes en lieu et place de ceux de l'écrivain. Le résultat est souvent désastreux."[58] While it is partly true that Bellos allows himself to speculate where perhaps he should not (though much less so than 'French' biographers do: the biography of Barthes by Louis Jean Calvet, for example, is almost pure speculation), the critique of what is perceived to be a homosexual act could scarcely be more explicit.[59] Her indignation at Bellos's perceived attraction to Perec is followed by indignation at the fact that he does not even

[55] Ibid, pp91-92.
[56] Le Jardin d'essai, 2000, pp71.
[57] Ibid, p11.
[58] Ibid, p11, fn.
[59] Lest it be lost amidst all this diatribe, it is important to point out that Lamblin in particular, much more so than Beaumatin, makes some *valid* criticisms of Bellos's work. See pp14, 18,

find him handsome: mention is made of the fact that "[s]ur le thème de l'apparence physique de Georges, David Bellos se réfère constamment à sa laideur presque repoussante" and of the pleasure he apparently takes in reproducing a description of Perec which details his ugliness, which reveals his "sentiment de répulsion" regarding Perec's physical appearance.[60] Ironically, this denunciation of Bellos's apparent interest in Perec's appearance is made with the aim of re-establishing the notion of Perec as an attractive individual: the thinking critic's favourite sex-symbol.

22, 29. Although she also seems to forget that *W* is a book: "Cette hypothèse [de Bellos] ne correspond pas au texte de *W*." (ibid, p15).

[60] Ibid, pp16 & 19.

Section Three

De la contrainte…

Chapter Four

Description: disappearing into sleep

> Pratiquez donc une coupure, arbitraire et violente...
> – Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*.

> [L]e miroir, lui, par un mouvement violent, instantané, et de pure surprise, va chercher en avant du tableau ce qui est regardé, mais non visible, pour le rendre, au bout de la profondeur fictive, visible mais indifférent à tous les regards.
> – Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*.

Le jeu infini des formes indifférentes

In this chapter we will re-examine Georges Perec's relationship to the image and representation. Generally held to be a 'painterly' writer (witness the numerous descriptions of paintings in, for example, *La Vie mode d'emploi* and *Un Cabinet d'amateur*), this does not preclude him from maintaining an ambivalent attitude to the possibility of reproduction (reflecting the view of mimesis as a copy). He would seem rather to be more interested in the differences which obtain between the 'original' and the 'copy' (and, by extension, with the impossibility of preventing certain *glissements*): "ce papier dont tu connais chaque fleur, chaque tige, chaque entrelacs, et dont tu es le seul à pouvoir affirmer que, malgré la perfection presque infaillible des procédés d'impression, ils ne se ressemblent jamais tout à fait..." (HQD, pp49-50).

These are differences which it is impossible to remain indifferent to, even at the risk of lulling to sleep, for a certain thematic of sleep cannot evidently be ignored when analysing *Un homme qui dort*, the first piece in the exhibition, a work which maintains itself in the space between sleep and waking, wakefulness: "Dans *Un homme qui dort*, ce ne sont pas des rêves mais le moment où l'on s'endort, l'état d'endormissement ou d'endormement. [D]ans la neurophysiologie c'est très caractérisé, c'est avant

le sommeil proprement dit et ce n'est plus tout à fait un état de veille."[1] Indeed, one of the central questions to be answered is whether the differences, as producers of meaning, can be controlled or whether they must inevitably proliferate unchecked.

Beginning with an analysis of language as a means of representation (or self-representation), the chapter will then move on to examine the representation of paintings and paintings as possible representations. This analysis undertaken it will then return to language, but a singular language, for it will examine, through the use of the lipogram in *La Disparition*, the consequences and questions for the replication of the world which the lipogram raises (given that the lipogram produces a text which is alphabetically incomplete, can it produce an image faithful to the original?).[2]

Mais où se trouve la contrainte?

In Chapter One, it was suggested that Perec's co-option by the Oulipo in 1967 constituted a turning point or paradigm shift in his critical/theoretical output. It could be argued that the same applies to his fiction: it should be possible to divide his fiction into pre-Oulipian and Oulipian (indeed, the very term *prose à contraintes* implies the ability to classify in such a manner). Assuming momentarily that this is a valid *démarche*, then *Un homme qui dort* (1967) constitutes Perec's last non-Oulipian work, while *La Disparition* (1969) constitutes his first Oulipian one, is the first one to be written *sous contrainte* (it was in the period between these two books that Perec first came into contact with the Oulipo).

This would seem to constitute a significant turning point, or 'turn', or *kehre*, as commentators on Heidegger call his apparent conversion. All the more so as it would seem easy to situate it (unlike Heidegger's).[3] This notion is given some weight by Perec himself, who said in an interview that "il y a une coupure assez nette dans mon travail entre les premiers livres jusqu'à *Un*

[1] 'Entretien GP/Ewa Pawlikowska', pp72-73. To anticipate on the later developments, Derrida also refers to this strange state when discussing the nature of mimesis (DISS, p247).
[2] A lipogram is "A composition from which the writer rejects all words that contain a certain letter or letters." (OED).

homme qui dort et puis ensuite, à partir de mon entrée à l'Oulipo, il y a vraiment une nouvelle orientation..."[4] Notwithstanding this affirmation, the notion of the turning point is not as straightforward in fiction as in theory and gives rise to three preliminary questions (although it is of course theory which makes this questioning possible in the first place – see, in a somewhat different context, "the validity of such a dividing line will soon enough become itself the divisive issue." (de Man, 1986, p27)).

Firstly, the desire (and ultimately the possibility) of positing such a given or fixed point must be questioned. This is so because it implies the absolute end of one phase and the beginning of another. And, as is known, the positing of a fixed originary point is symptomatic of Western metaphysics in general: "A vouloir écrire l'histoire de la décision, du partage, de la différence, on court le risque de constituer la division en événement ou en structure survenant à l'unité d'une présence originaire; et de confirmer ainsi la métaphysique dans son opération fondamentale." (ED, p65).[5] For Derrida, the term 'metaphysics' is shorthand for all that implies origin, presence and goal.

And again, in a passage which will resurface later on:

> Ce qui s'écrit différance, ce sera donc le mouvement de jeu qui 'produit', par ce qui n'est pas simplement une activité, ces différences, ces effets de différence. Cela ne veut pas dire que la différance qui produit les différences soit avant elles, dans un présent simple et en soi immodifié, in-différent. La différance est l' 'origine' non-pleine, non-simple, l'origine structurée et différante des différences. Le nom d' 'origine' ne lui convient donc plus. (MP, p12).[6]

Secondly, while there is an apparent linear progression from one book to another, this progression takes the form of a rupture. For, though his first three novels show an attentiveness to structure, the following, pre-programmed by mathematical formulae, take this to a new extreme. Such a

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[3] On the many texts on Heidegger's turn see, for example, Philipse, 1998, pp233-237.

[4] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p45.

[5] So much for the desire of positing such an originary point. As for the possibility: "Commencement toujours fictif et la coupure, loin d'être inaugurale, est imposée par l'absence, sauf illusion à décompter, de tout commencement décisoire, d'événement pur qui ne se divise, ne se répète et ne renvoie déjà à un autre 'commencement', à un autre 'événement', la singularité de l'événement étant plus que jamais mythique dans l'ordre du discours." (DISS, p364).

[6] See also: "Rien – aucun étant présent et in-différant – ne précède donc la différance et l'espacement." (POS, p40).

before/after distinction implies that there is a fundamental difference in the being of the texts, a text written under formal constraint being irreducible to a 'normal' or 'everyday' text. In keeping with this, the early works are often classified as sociological and psychological, while the later Oulipian texts are simply ludic: "On peut préférer le Perec facétieux des textes qui suivront à ce Perec gris sombre qui se débat avec le somnambulisme blanc ou la rage noire." (Burgelin, 1988, p74). See also Stella Béhar: "l'Histoire est présentée dans ces romans [*Les Choses* and *Un homme qui dort*] comme la conjonction d'événements sociologiques, économiques, politiques et culturels qui situent l'être humain dans le monde" (Béhar, 1995, p48). Indeed, she sees the first three novels as a triptych which elaborates "une anthropologie de l'homme moderne" (Béhar, 1995, p18). The implication is that 'sociological', 'psychological' and 'ludic' are not merely thematic differences but structural ones.[7]

This distinction is expanded on and reinforced by Warren Motte in an important passage (it needs to be specified that this chapter, while not arguing the opposite of Motte's claim, does view it as very problematic):

> If the importance of the game is undeniable in *Un homme qui dort*, it is used as subject matter rather than as structure. The hero of the latter text 'plays' constantly, and the work is full of references to games. But the game serves only a thematic purpose in *Un homme qui dort*: it provides a means by which the protagonist attempts to conquer his ennui, to kill time. The game in *Un homme qui dort* is not yet the world. *La Disparition*, however, borrows its structure directly from the game. The ludic activity is situated on two levels, that of the lipogrammatic form and that of the ludic intrigue. (Motte, 1984, pp53-54).

Thirdly, assuming such a turning point exists, the question remains as to its determinability: existing or taking place in the space between two books (specifically, between *Un homme qui dort* and *La Disparition*), it rests on unsolid ground, it itself is unsolid because its dwelling place can oscillate between the infinite and the minute. For example, if side by side on a shelf, the gap is negligible (indeed, the books could even be glued together, thus creating one single entity; or, for that matter, a whole new work).[8] Thus the

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[7] Indeed, to the extent that *Un homme qui dort* refers at all to the notion of constraint, it would seem to be in a non-Oulipian, everyday sense of the term: "ce bain de contraintes qui n'en finit jamais" (HQD, p43).

[8] As in the dream 'Les Livres' (BO, no. 112) quoted in Chapter One.

turning point can conceivably be as little as one page, as little as to be mistaken for just one more blank space in the ongoing written text, or as little as a blank within a word. Alternatively, it can be stretched out, both in time (at which precise moment in the two years between the books does it occur, does it occur at one precise moment?) and in space (given that the texts which determine it are mobile, is it not also mobile?). It is this very elasticity which renders suspect the existence of a singular turning point and so the specificity of the properly Perecian/properly Oulipian text. In other words, was the economy of *contrainte formelle* not always already at work in the Perecian text?[9] For example, enumeration is generally held to be a ludic technique and so would belong to the second phase. However, a list such as the following from *Un homme qui dort*, with its derision, contaminates the later playful lists with a darker meaning, while they, simultaneously, attempt to 'neutralise' it. Sitting at the terrace of a café the narrator describes what he sees:

> Des milliers d'actions inutiles se rassemblent au même instant dans le champ trop étroit de ton regard presque neutre. Ils tendent en même temps leurs mains droites et se la serrent comme s'ils voulaient la broyer, ils émettent avec leur bouche des messages apparemment pourvus de sens, ils tordent en tous sens leurs joues, leur nez, leurs sourcils, leurs lèvres, leurs mains, ponctuant leurs discours de mimiques expressives; ils sortent leurs agendas, ils se dépassent, se saluent, s'invectivent, se congratulent, se bousculent... (HQD, p58)

This extract from a list comes in the middle of the section beginning on page 53, which itself can be seen as an extended list. While not as rigorous as, for example, the list in *Espèces d'espaces* concerning moving house which begins "nettoyer vérifier essayer changer aménager signer attendre imaginer inventer investir décider ployer plier..." (EE, p50), and which goes on for the best part of a page, its emotional charge nonetheless infiltrates the notion of enumeration in Perec's work, and so, by extension, the later apparently more frivolous list. This is perhaps what Perec had in mind when he wrote that: "...rien ne semble plus simple que de dresser une liste, en fait c'est beaucoup plus compliqué que ça n'en a l'air; on oublie toujours quelque

[9] The importance of this question cannot be stressed enough. It will find a curious refrain in Chapter Six below, where one of the central questions will be "Was the economy of *contrainte formelle* never always already at work in the Perecian text?".

chose, on est tenté d'écrire, etc., mais justement, un inventaire, c'est quand on n'écrit pas, etc..."[10]

Obviously of Derridean inspiration, this third preliminary point, the blurring of the before/after distinction, and of causality in general, is equally related to an Oulipian theory, which perhaps goes some way to justifying the potential violence here being operated on Perec (let us not forget that, in Le Petit Robert, the first definition of 'contrainte' is "Violence exercée contre quelqu'un"). The theory in question is that of *plagiat par anticipation*, anticipatory plagiarism, which declares that the likes of Rabelais plagiarised the work of l'Oulipo (see Oulipo, 1973, p27.)

The aim of these preliminary questions is to point out that the idea of *contrainte formelle* is not a given. Firstly, it seems unlikely that the question 'What is...?' can be asked of it as it is not actually a 'thing', it is not present in the text as such.[11] It is not an empirical object or a concept, but a process. This is famously illustrated by the fact that the first reviewers of *La Disparition* failed to notice that there were in fact no E's in it. This suggests, not an oversight on the part of the reviewers, but that the absence of E does not imply the presence of constraint. Secondly, the use of constraint implies a continual displacement of signification (of the text subjected to constraint as well as of constraint itself). This is particularly evident in the Oulipian technique S + 7 which consists in replacing every substantive in a given text with the seventh that follows in a dictionary of choice. The infinite number of variations inherent in this technique (one can change either the S, the + or the 7) prevents any targeted text from having a fixed meaning.[12] Constraint must therefore be questioned obliquely, 'solicited' as Derrida might say. So, having drawn attention to these difficulties, it is now time to minimise them, and, like a multi-tasking computer, leave them running in the background, where they will nonetheless continue to operate, while the substance of this

[10] 'Notes concernant les objets qui sont sur ma table de travail', p17. It is curious that at the precise moment when he is discussing lists, his use of 'etc.' saves him from having to furnish a list of alternatives.

[11] On the implications of the question 'Qu'est-ce que...?', see GR, p31.

[12] For an exposé of this method, see Oulipo, 1973, pp143-145.

chapter is engaged with. Substance which, superficially at least, will have little to do with constraint.

L'étrange aventure de l'indifférence

What, then, is *Un homme qui dort* about (what does it 'represent')? It is about a student who, one day, decides not to get up when his alarm clock rings. That the day in question happens to be the day of his final exam in sociology means that this *grasse matinée* has serious consequences. Indeed, the narrator (or, perhaps better, the protagonist, given that the novel is written in the second person) goes on to sever all his ties with the outside world: he starts to avoid his friends who soon get tired of calling to his *mansarde*, he sleeps all day and only goes out at night, passes his time playing solitaire and going to the cinema, and endeavours to make each day resemble the previous to the extent of lighting his cigarettes every forty five minutes exactly and of always eating the same meal.

In order to better understand the protagonist's behaviour, it will be convenient to look briefly at Claude Burgelin's reading of the novel in his monograph *Georges Perec*.[13] It is clear to Burgelin that the protagonist's "vie inversée [...] dit l'inappétance à vivre et le désespoir blanc" (Burgelin, 1988, p59). Indeed, it is the very sobriety of the style which "nous fait pénétrer dans l'intimité des états entre désespoir et folie, entre dépression et rage froide" (Burgelin, 1988, p60). For Burgelin, the thematic of sleep elaborated in the novel is a metaphor for the indifference born out of depression: "'Dormir', c'est ici arriver à se faire une carapace d'indifférence" (Burgelin, 1988, p62). He further links indifference with the anonymous, automatic gestures

[13] Burgelin, 1988, pp59-74. That Burgelin is one of the few critics to devote any time to *Un homme qui dort* reflects the bias in favour of the so-called ludic texts. Sylvie Rosienski-Pellerin, in her *PERECgrinations Ludiques*, is one of the few others to write on *Un homme qui dort*. For our purposes here, it needs to be noted that, despite the perspicacity of her reading, and her nominal treatment of *Un homme qui dort* as a ludic text, she then characterises its play as 'sérieux' and 'existentiel', proceeding with a Sartrien reading of the narrative in 'tu' as play with the other (Rosienski-Pellerin, 1995, pp151, 159 & 172-174).

indicative of depression (Burgelin, 1988, p62). In doing so he is establishing a psychological interpretation of indifference.[14]

Roman d'une dépression, it is hardly surprising that, as it were, nothing much happens. Divided into sixteen sections, there is no plot as such. Burgelin acknowledges this when he speaks of the novel's musical structure, based upon saturation and repetition, describing it as "une succession d'arrêts" (Burgelin, 1988, p60). Just as the protagonist wanders aimlessly around Paris, so it seems does the novel. This is not to imply that it is not carefully structured but rather that it refuses all progress towards a telos or goal.

However, no sooner said than denied. Which is to say that having acknowledged the novel's fragmentary structure and the problematisation of progress it implies, he goes on to state that "*Un homme qui dort* est l'Odyssée presque immobile d'une libération" (Burgelin, 1988, p70), thus negating the disruptive force of indifference. For, while it may be able to postpone momentarily the hegemony of linearity and meaning, they will ultimately triumph: "A partir de ce renoncement pas vraiment concerté, commence l'itinéraire, plus initiatique qu'il ne veut le faire croire, de l'homme qui dort." (Burgelin, 1988, p60). In other words, the protagonist's depression is just a phase or stage to be gone through. Emerging from it, he fulfils his destiny and that of every human by taking his place in the world. His shell of indifference is breached when he succumbs to anger. Incapable of supporting any longer the burden placed on him by his refusal of the world, he rails against those who accept their social rôles. In doing so he himself emerges from his refusal and the novel ends with him waiting to take his place alongside his fellow men as "[l]'indifférence ne t'a pas rendu différent" (HQD, p142). Once again, Burgelin emphasises the teleological

[14] While we are of course absolutely indifferent as to whether Perec would agree with our interpretation or not, it is nonetheless perhaps not entirely irrelevant to note the following: "Je déteste ce qu'on appelle 'la psychologie', surtout dans le roman" ('Entretien GP/Ewa Pawlikowska', p71).

This general anti-psychological stance is reinforced in the case of *Un homme qui dort* which is elsewhere referred to as an exploration of "les lieux rhétoriques de l'indifférence" ('Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain', p37). Aside from suggesting a sort of *exercice de style*, this comment equally prolongs Perec's Barthesian references.

nature of this 'itinerary': "Au terme de ce parcours affalé ou piétinant, l'homme qui dort a triomphé de la mort psychique" (Burgelin, 1988, p70).

The principal characteristic of Burgelin's reading of the text is therefore his focus on initiation into the world as the anonymous protagonist travels through indifference, emerging a better man for it. To conclude this discussion of Burgelin, it should be said that, on a certain level, *Un homme qui dort* is about all the above and does indeed progress towards a certain liberation. However, as no interpretation is innocent, certain aspects of Burgelin's have been highlighted, aspects which attempt to, dare it be said, constrain the play of meaning in *Un homme qui dort*.

It is now hopefully clear that the notion of indifference is central to *Un homme qui dort*. As read by Burgelin, indifference retains its psychological meaning: it is a form of apathy. As such, 'sleep' is not to be read literally but as a metaphor for withdrawal, something to be overcome. As inwardness, indifference would thus seem to form a binary pair with difference, which represents outwardness, the one being the opposite of the other, just as true is the opposite of false. However, it is important not to be too hasty in establishing pairings (not least because this is a Structuralist means of proceeding, see Chapter Two). This is because indifference, as stated, is a psychological concept. Difference, or *différance*, with an 'a', on the other hand, particularly as understood here in Derrida's terminology, is a philosophical concept. How then can the two be said to form a pair? In order to justify this we must now see whether indifference can be construed in a different manner, giving it a more active differentiating role as opposed to the depressingly passive. To do this, it will first be necessary to examine the meaning of difference.

Perec himself said that "la différence [est] fondamentale par rapport à mon système d'écriture."[15] An example of this importance can be seen in a text such as 'Still Life/Style Leaf' (IO, pp107-119). A description of the objects to be found on Perec's desk, the text operates a *mise en abyme* by describing a sheet of paper on Perec's desk, on which one can read a description of the objects to be found on Perec's desk. The text therefore

begins again, doubling itself with minor variations, fifty to be exact.[16] In this case the differences are structural and, in differentiating the text from itself, productive. Productive in that they produce a situation where meaning becomes possible. However, it needs to be said that the 'play of difference' is here controlled by the author (or at least intended to be), and as such seemingly not related to *différance*.

It is now necessary to refer back to the passage from page 12 of *Marges de la philosophie* quoted above. The first sentence in this paragraph states that *différance* with an 'a' produces or allows be produced structural differences, rendering meaning possible while preventing truth or Meaning with a capital M; *différance* differs and defers. This is explained in the second sentence by the fact that *différance* does not come before these differences. For, if it was fixed as cause, it would serve to guarantee truth just as God, the ultimate cause, does. The third sentence elaborates this notion, showing us that *différance* itself is fractured and is carried along with the differences it produces while not producing. See, for example, the following: "Tout dans le tracé de la différance est stratégique et aventureux. Stratégique parce qu'aucune vérité transcendante et présente hors du champ de l'écriture ne peut commander théologiquement la totalité du champ" (MP, p7).[17]

What is crucial for our purposes is the sentence "Cela ne veut pas dire que la différance qui produit les différences soit avant elles, dans un présent simple et en soi immodifié, in-différent" (MP, p12).[18] For the movement of this sentence is at least double: at the same time that it establishes the possibility of opposing difference and indifference as concepts in the one field, philosophy, it deconstructs this opposition. *Différance* is not indifferent, but the play of difference simultaneously renders indifference, that simple present, impossible. Like *différance*, indifference is also fractured from within. It might be said that, being indifferent, we are in difference. (This is perhaps the time to mention that, in the language of logic, an *état indifférent* is that which can be either true or false.) Indifference remains

[15] 'A propos de la description', p342.
[16] See *Parcours Perec*, pp107-108 for a complete list.
[17] See *Positions*, pp16-19 for the most succinct explanation of *différance*.
[18] As seen above, 'in-différent' can also be written 'in-différant' (POS, p40).

passive, in that passivity which suspends the assignation of meaning, not in the passivity of depression: "la passivité [...] se pose ou se dépose comme ce qui interromprait notre raison, notre parole, notre expérience" (Blanchot, 1980, p32). Quoting Blanchot has the effect of importing another chain of concepts which could be used to 'describe' indifference. They are the related concepts of *le passif*, *le neutre*, *le fragmentaire* and of *désœuvrement* (themselves 'ancestors' in many ways of Derrida's *différance*).[19]

Having thus radicalised indifference, it must now be re-examined in *Un homme qui dort*. Let us first of all follow the apparent movement of the text. The first mention of indifference is on page twenty-nine where the protagonist writes "Tu n'est qu'une ombre trouble, un dur noyau d'indifférence, un regard neutre fuyant les regards." This echoes the notion of the protective shell, indifference as a state which one literally inhabits, *noyau* further implying a certain unity. So far the protagonist is very much caught up in indifference as a symptom of depression. This remains the case throughout the narrative until near the end where a change in perspective can be observed. This occurs after the outburst of anger mentioned above when the protagonist states that: "Tu n'a rien appris, sinon que la solitude

[19] This importation is far from arbitrary for, despite the emphasis on Derrida's *différance* as a means of rereading indifference in *Un homme qui dort*, there exists a fictional precedent: Blanchot's *Le Dernier Homme*.

Despite their many differences, there are nonetheless many similarities between these two works: from the certain but not quite definable similarity of the titles (which goes beyond the simple use of the word *homme*) to a shared theme, that of the double: "Il ne fallait pas qu'il se dédoublât. C'est la grande tentation de ceux qui finissent" (Blanchot, 1957, p23). Equally, the protagonist of *Un homme qui dort* seems to appropriate for himself another of Blanchot's well known titles (and, by extension, a broader Blanchottian concern): "tu ne veux que l'attente et l'oubli" (HQD, p25).

Most importantly, however, *Le Dernier Homme* is a novel in which indifference is a central concern. Crucially, it is (just as in *Un homme qui dort*) used in two different manners. On the one hand, it is used in the common sense of that which is banal, lacking in interest (see, for example, Blanchot, 1957, pp8, 11, 17, 28 & 43). On the other hand (and simultaneously to the above), this everyday usage is undermined (not transcended). The passage in which this happens needs to be quoted in full:

"Il était entre nous, et pourtant il avait des préférences cachées, des mouvements que l'on ne pouvait prévoir, qui le rejetaient tout à coup au loin, non seulement indifférent à l'égard de ceux qui étaient là, mais nous rendant indifférents à nous mêmes et nous retirant des êtres qui nous étaient les plus proches. [M]ais qui sommes-nous ensuite, comment se retrouver auprès de soi...?" (Blanchot, 1957, p20).

In this passage, the "indifférent à l'égard de" refers to a unified subject (remaining unmoved by the outside, a *noyau*), but suddenly (and violently) this changes. The following "indifférents à nous mêmes" refers not to someone indifferent to his own concerns but,

n'apprend rien, que l'indifférence n'apprend rien: c'était un leurre, une illusion fascinante et piégée." (HQD, p140) Instead of being an ally, it is now an enemy. In an access of self-hatred the protagonist rejects his vie-inversée: the following occur in rapid succession: "L'indifférence est inutile", "Ta neutralité ne veut rien dire" and "L'indifférence ne t'a pas rendu différent." (HQD, pp140-141). Depending on one's perspective, it could be said either that the protagonist has failed in his project or that he has succeeded in overcoming his depression. Either way the reader is presented with an apparent outcome, the novel having reached its conclusion just as Burgelin says.

"L'indifférence est inutile." This little sentence is the cause of all our ills for it is what first suggested that all is not what it seems with indifference. Taken in conjunction with another phrase, "neutre, évident, dégagé de toute valeur, et non pas, surtout pas, fonctionnel, car *le fonctionnel est la pire des valeurs*, la plus sournoise, la plus compromettante" (HQD, p65, emphasis mine), which valorises that which is useless, it implies something other than a simple rejection. Something other than that it should be thrown away for being unable to produce, like a broken tool for example. (It was seen above that Derrida puts 'produce' between quotation marks.) This suggests that *l'inutile* can be read in terms of *le neutre*, that which is suspended between the active and the passive, that which produces while not producing.

This rejection of the rejection of indifference also implies the rejection of the acceptance of any implicit teleology. In other words, on the level of the novel's structure, the protagonist is not to be considered as having followed any itinerary or of having progressed towards any place in society. At one stage he writes: "Ce qui te trouble, ce qui t'émeut, ce qui te fait peur, mais qui parfois t'exalte, ce n'est pas la soudaineté de ta métamorphose, c'est au contraire, justement, le sentiment vague et lourd que ce n'en est pas une, que rien n'a changé, que tu a toujours été ainsi..." (HQD, pp27-28). Later on he writes "L'indifférence n'a ni commencement ni fin: c'est un état immuable,

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precisely, and paradoxically, different from himself, irreducibly divided, removed from *soi*: "comment se retrouver auprès de soi...?".

un poids, une inertie que rien ne saurait ébranler" (HQD, p90).[20] This suggests the same questioning of origin and telos as in Derrida, questioning which undermines the book as unity or totality. As Perec asks elsewhere: "Pourquoi ne pas privilégier la dispersion?" (EE, p81).

Furthermore, it seems that language itself is affected: "L'indifférence dissout le langage, brouille les signes" (HQD, p90). This is illustrated by a passage in which "[t]u t'assieds au fond d'un café, tu lis *le Monde* ligne à ligne, systématiquement. C'est un excellent exercise." (HQD, p62). There follows a list of every rubric from foreign affairs to culinary matters. He reads literally every word in the paper but without attempting to decipher them or attribute meaning. He then says that "Il faut que les hiérarchies, les préférences s'effondrent." (HQD, p64). This implies, not the replacement of one hierarchy with another, but the refusal to come to rest in any given one: "Nulle hiérarchie, nulle préférence." (HQD, p94). Neither sense nor nonsense. But equally no fixed meaning.[21]

Écartèlements

After this long detour it is now time for the long promised substance. In this respect, all that has so far been said is in fact a preface. Preface to what is itself a preface: situated outside the narrative, which 'begins' with the second section, the protagonist's refusal to get up for his exam, the opening passage of *Un homme qui dort* assumes the function of a theoretical exposition. (It is perhaps more accurate to say that the novel has always already begun, as the first line reads "Dès que tu fermes les yeux, l'aventure du sommeil commence" (HQD, p11). This 'dès que' implies that the adventure has been

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[20] Similarly, in *L'écriture et l'expérience des limites*, Philippe Sollers writes of the movement of production/destruction that it "n'a donc ni commencement ni fin" (Sollers, 1968, p152).

[21] It has to be acknowledged that this dissolution of language represents an ideal state of affairs (let us bear in mind de Man's warning that "there is probably no word to be found in the language that is as overdetermined, self-evasive, disfigured and disfiguring as 'language'." (de Man, 1986, p13). Elsewhere (and using a terminology which echoes that of *Un homme qui dort*), Perec writes of his unsuccessful attempt to imagine "une pièce inutile, absolument et délibérément inutile", that "[l]e langage lui-même, me semble-t-il, s'est avéré inapte à décrire ce rien, ce vide, comme si l'on ne pouvait parler que de ce qui est plein, utile, et fonctionnel" (EE, p47).

lived before its current description. It also provides another link to *Le Dernier Homme* which equally (re)begins with a 'dès que').[22]

Let us firstly present a brief summary of this passage. It would appear to be a description of one of those peculiar states mentioned above: neither sleep nor waking. Eyes closed, the protagonist's 'gaze' wanders around the room before focusing on something just before his eyes. This something is a screen or painting balanced on his nose, most likely the inside of his eyelids. It has two principal traits. Firstly, it is of variable colour, darkening when he forces his eyelids more tightly shut. Secondly, this darkness is not uniform. Specifically, it is punctuated by light-coloured pouches, of variable shape and size. When he attempts to focus on these, he finds himself staring at the window. This is undoubtedly a familiar phenomenon, the harder one tries to sleep the less chance one has of succeeding. All the protagonist can do is repeat the process, something he duly does. This time, there appears in his field of perception what is described as a plank. He feels that if he manages to climb onto the plank he will sleep. Once again, however, the act of trying induces failure and he winds up with a headache.

Let us now propose a reading of this section which views it as meta-text. It is not strictly speaking a *mise en abyme* as it does not reflect the structure of the novel in miniature.[23] Rather, it is a comment on the very nature of the Perecian text. The passage begins with a three dimensional space: the room. This can be rather summarily described as the world or external reality, such as it is. For, in this 'reality', objects are not directly perceived but inferred: the washbasin from a reflection and the shelf from the shadow of a book, it is their absence which is present. From this three dimensional space the optic moves rapidly on to a two dimensional one: "un espace à deux dimensions, comme un tableau sans limites sûres qui ferait un très petit angle avec le plan de tes yeux" (HQD, p11). This it would seem is a metaphor for the page or

[22] For another fictional precedent, see Philippe Sollers's 1965 novel *Drame* which opens with a false opening as well as describing a movement in and out of sleep similar to that of *Un homme qui dort*.

[23] Compare the following definitions: "[le métatextuel est] l'ensemble des dispositifs par lesquels un texte désigne, soit par dénotation, soit par connotation, les mécanismes qui le produisent" (Magné, 1989, p33) & "est mise en abyme toute enclave entretenant une relation de similitude avec l'œuvre qui la contient." (Dällenbach, 1977, p18)

book. It is possible to picture the protagonist squinting at it as it is held right up to his eyes (it seems to be attached to the bridge of his nose). Metaphor for the page, but not the blank page. For, apart from the fact that it is characterised by its obscurity, it is not uniformly so: "la répartition de l'obscurité ne se fait pas d'une manière homogène" (HQD, p12). In fact, the surface of this tableau is punctuated by pouches or capsules which resemble somewhat "l'idée que tu te fais d'une glande lacrymale, par exemple, à bords minces et ciliés, et à l'intérieur desquels tremblent, s'agitent, se tordent des éclairs très très blancs" (HQD, pp12-13). These arguably 'represent' the words on the page. On an actual page words do indeed form pouches of darkness against the paper's whiteness. Here, the gland is the word, the lashes are the tails of the individual letters and the *éclairs* are both the spacings between the letters and the spaces or hollows within the letters, such as in an 'o' for example.[24]

Saying that this passage is meta-textual is, in itself, saying very little. It is now necessary to examine how the text perceives the function of language, what, if any, structure it has. (Incidentally, comparing words to a *glande lacrymale* could, conceivably, be seen as linking language to tears and thence suffering. This, however, establishes a thematic correspondence which, however tempting or valid, would only serve to punctuate the text with a humanist pinprick, deflating the disruptive work of indifference. This is equally why the text is not to be read as a metaphor for the *feuille blanche*, which would only serve to refer back to the suffering of an individual: the author, a figure which is singularly absent from this text.)

What, therefore, characterises language as portrayed in this passage? It is to be suggested that the central notion is that of indeterminability. Firstly, there is an emphasis on motion and fluctuation, "distribution nomade et non sédentaire" as Deleuze might say (Deleuze, 1969, p76). This perpetual motion affects the possibility of language having a fixed structure. A cursory look at the verbs in the passage shows that they privilege motion and change: "il s'assombrit plus ou moins selon que tu fermes plus ou moins fortement tes paupières" (HQD, p12); "modifier l'inclinaison du plan par rapport à ton

[24] On a text referring to its typographical characteristics/reality, see Ricardou, 1973, p70.

corps" (HQD, p12); "modifier la densité, ou la qualité, de l'obscurité que tu perçois" (HQD, p12); "à l'intérieur desquels tremblent, s'agitent, se tordent des éclairs très très blancs, parfois très minces, comme de très fines zébrures, parfois beaucoup plus gros, presque gras, comme des vers" (HQD, pp12-13); "ils dansent devant toi" (HQD, p13) and "déformé au point d'être constamment déporté sur la gauche" (HQD, p14). Language as flux and not stasis.

The second trait ascribed to language is closely related to the first. The difference is that it refers to meaning. It can be speculated that, as the structure is unstable, meaning is also. See for example: "bien que déjà, évidemment, les notions de proche et lointain, haut et bas, devant et derrière, aient cessé d'être tout à fait précises" (HQD, p12). This is obviously reminiscent of Derrida's deconstruction of binary pairs mentioned above. Not only is the relationship between the terms not precise, neither are the terms themselves. The inability of language to name accurately and thus assign meaning is illustrated by the following sentence: "Ces éclairs, bien qu'éclairs soit un terme tout à fait impropre, ont cette curieuse vertu de ne pouvoir être regardés" (HQD, p13). As has been seen, éclairs refers to the interior of words; so, not only can language not name, it is also incapable of naming itself – it can only improperly designate itself. As Derrida says of the sign, it is "cette chose mal nommée" (GR, p31) – *chose* written under erasure. What is more, when the protagonist attempts to determine the form or substance of these *éclairs*, they vanish (reflecting the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle which the following also bears witness to: "Il semble que plus la précision de ta perception augmente, plus la certitude de tes interprétations diminue" (HQD, p127)).

The interpretative eye or gaze now needs to zoom out momentarily in order to examine the text's overall progression. As mentioned above, it moves from the three dimensional to the two dimensional, from the world to the page. The movement does not stop there however. Rather, it continues with its logic of reduction, moving on towards the singular: "il y a d'abord trois espaces que rien ne te permettrait de confondre, ton corps-lit qui est mou, horizontal, et blanc, puis la barre de tes sourcils qui commande un

espace gris, médiocre, en biais, et la planche, enfin" (HQD, p14).[25] This plank is described, firstly, as being hard and immobile and, secondly, as being sleep or rest. As such, it counteracts the unchecked motion described above. Furthermore, in suggesting a progression towards stability and unity, it implies the ability to fix meaning. It is analogous to what Derrida calls the 'transcendental signified', that which halts the freeplay of meaning through the unity of its presence (God, for example).[26] The protagonist would seem to desire this as he wants to climb onto the plank. To do so he also must be reduced to a monad: "il faudrait ramener le lit, le corps, jusqu'à ce qu'ils ne soient plus qu'un point, qu'une bille, ou bien, ce qui revient au même, il faudrait réduire toute la flaccidité du corps, la concentrer en un seul endroit" (HQD, p15).[27]

The phrase "qu'un point, qu'une bille" is the centre around which the text hinges, as it is the culmination of the movement three-two-one. This is not to imply that the desired stasis is achieved as, on the contrary, the second face of the hinge relaunches the movement, radicalising it: "Mais le corps, à cet instant, ne présente plus du tout la belle unité de tout à l'heure, en fait, il s'étale dans tous les sens" (HQD, p15). To anticipate slightly on our discussion of painting, we can say that this reduction followed by expansion echoes the observation of *Tel Quel* secretary Marcelin Pleynet, who commented in an article entitled 'Peinture et «Structuralisme»' that Cézanne was the first to explode the "réduction (idéologique) monoculaire" which dominated Western vision, and which Pleynet explicitly compares to Derrida's 'signifié transcendental' (Pleynet, 1971, p191).[28] This outward motion is not the ordered movement three-two-one but absolute dispersion through the rhizome along plural *lignes de fuite*. (See *Kafka* by Deleuze & Guattari, chapters two and three). For them, language, particularly literary language, particularly language as used by a *littérature mineure*, is subject to

[25] We are referring here to an ideal plank, as a real one is of course three dimensional.

[26] In a passage which happily coincides with our terminology here, Derrida writes that: "Dieu [...] est le nom de l'indifférence même" (GR, p104). The indifference in question here is of course an impossibility, though no less ardently desired for that.

[27] On the importance of the bed as a place of singular unity, see the reference to the "lit-monade" (EE, p26).

a movement of deterritorialisation and the rhizome is similar to a warren with multiple entrances and exits which prevent the introduction of the enemy, Meaning (see *Kafka*, p7). The dispersion of the protagonist's body in response to the plank's approach is just such a defensive strategy: the body disperses in an attempt to flee Meaning which is, quite literally, a headache.[29]

(Mis)representing constraint

> Alors là, il y a tout un système de transgression, de destruction des conventions de la représentation et de la transformation de la représentation en autre chose. C'est ça qui me fait fonctionner.
>
> – Georges Perec, 'Je ne suis absolument pas critique d'art'.

The sub-text accompanying the unworking of the humanist reading of indifference relates to representation in the broadest sense, i.e. the representation of a character and his psychology, thoughts and deeds. Remaining within the sphere of *Un homme qui dort*, it is now time to attempt an approach of the narrower, more technical version of representation: mimesis. As with all the chapters in this third section, the problem will be approached through a roughly post-structuralist optic. To this end we will approach the notion of mimesis through the functioning of the *miroir* and the *tableau* (as filtered through Derrida and Foucault).[30] (While the approach we take is loosely post-structuralist – and even more loosely deconstructive – we will also be concerned with showing the possibility (not the certainty) that Perec incorporated elements from the Theory of the time into his fiction. This reliance on intertextuality would seem to reintroduce the very non-deconstructive notion of authorial intent into our methodology.

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[28] Pleynet's subsequent distinction between *tableau/peinture* (explained in very Derridean terms) will of some use to us below.

[29] This dispersal occurs on more than one occasion in the novel, suggesting the ongoing fight against meaning/stasis (see HQD, pp97-103 & 132).

[30] Before losing ourselves in the maze: In 'La Double Séance', Derrida helpfully gives the following references as where the Platonic doctrine is exposed: *Philebus*, 38-39; *Sophist*, 218-233; *Republic*, 393, *passim*. Geoffrey Bennington, in turn, provides a clear analysis of Derrida's deconstruction of mimesis (Bennington, 1998, pp126-142). Meanwhile, the classic text on mimesis in a literary context is of course Auerbach's *Mimesis*.

Paradoxically, however, it only serves to reinforce our deconstructive credentials as the very logic of deconstruction states that no text can entirely control itself: this obviously applies equally to the text *qui se veut* deconstructive. By being aware of this phenomenon, we can hopefully use it strategically: thence our unwillingness to claim that any apparent intertextual reference, however convenient it might seem, implies that it was consciously designed as such by Perec – it is rather the *texte* which establishes links, independently of the author's intentions.)

Envisioning Vectors

If representation is a form of reflection then it does not normally limit itself to surface, or superficial reflection. Rather, just as perspective in painting provides the illusion of depth, so does representation aim to portray the inner object (the idea). Any mimetic act worthy of the name would not forego the pleasures of profundity. What then are we to make of the following: "Atteindre le fond, cela ne veut rien dire" (HQD, p139)? As with *indifférence*, this also functions in a dual manner. On the one hand, it refers to the protagonist's mental state, his disgust with himself and the world. On the other hand, it points us in the direction of the Perecian concept of representation. Aside from implying an aesthetic judgement (the artist who chooses not to include depth in his work), this sentence suggests a technical impossibility. Any impression of depth can only be an illusion: "Toute l'action de [*La Vie mode d'emploi*] se déroule en façade. C'est un livre à deux dimensions puisque c'est un tableau. [A] deux ou trois reprises, on voit au fond des pièces une porte qui s'ouvre sur l'arrière, mais c'est une illusion d'optique."[31]

This is a remarkable statement for two reasons. Firstly, and to anticipate slightly, because it reads like a quotation of Foucault's description of *Les Ménines* which opens *Les Mots et les choses*.[32] Secondly, and perhaps more

[31] 'La vie: règle du jeu', p24.

[32] See the description of the visitor and the "porte ouverte" (MC, pp26-27). Even more 'similar' to *La Vie mode d'emploi* is the opening of Foucault's text: "Le peintre est légèrement en retrait du tableau. Il jette un coup d'œil sur le modèle; peut-être s'agit-il

profoundly, precisely because it limits the notion of depth (while assimilating two apparently separate art forms, reducing the novel to two dimensions, thereby effectively annulling the possibility of representation of reality).[33] This reduction echoes that found above in *Un homme qui dort* and also finds a precursor in *Les Mots et les choses*: according to Foucault *Les Ménines* represents the material tools of the painter's trade (i.e. three dimensional objects) before offering a representation of the representation (i.e. the two dimensional *tableau*). Most importantly, the reduction is followed by expansion, outward motion (again echoing the movement highlighted above in *Un homme qui dort* – but what echoes what here? which is the original model and which the copy?): "puis *la représentation se dénoue*: on n'en voit plus que les cadres" (MC, p27, emphasis mine).[34]

This is truly a curious discussion of representation, more concerned with dimensions, angles and vectors – as Gasché reminds us in his book on Derrida: "*Re-flectere* means 'to bend' or 'to turn back' or backward, as well as 'to bring back'." (Gasché, 1986, p16). Yet it is no accident, but rather part of what might be termed (in the parlance of the time) the radicalisation of representation: the concern with what happens when the image *déborde du cadre*.[35] For when it does overflow, the issue is no longer the image (and the supposed faithfulness of the reproduction) but rather the issue becomes issue, as the image flows along the various *lignes de perspective*, *de force* and *de*

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d'ajouter une dernière touche, mais il se peut aussi que le premier trait encore n'ait pas été posé." (MC, p19). Aside from strangely prefiguring the flat, sober tone of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, this passage also seems to pre-empt the conceit which provides the basis for its narrative: the story of the painter Valène who wishes to paint the building he lives in and all its inhabitants and their respective stories. Like the painting in the above passage from Foucault, it is described as if completed before this is ultimately reversed to reveal that Valène has not got beyond his preliminary sketches (see the final pirouette, which reveals that Valène's tableau is "pratiquement vierge" (VME, p602)).

[33] Elsewhere, the reverse can be seen. In *Un Cabinet d'amateur* the narrative possibilities of painting are explored, not simply anecdotal/allegorical/figurative painting, but rather a series of paintings used to tell a story (CAB, pp26 & 42-45).

[34] The difference is that in *Un homme qui dort*, the process can be described as 3-2-1-<; whereas in Foucault it is rather 2-1-<. For another possible similarity, or potential source of inspiration for *Un homme qui dort*, see "si on veut maintenir ouvert le rapport du langage et du visible [...] il faut effacer les noms propres" and "langage gris, anonyme, toujours méticuleux et répétitif" (MC, p25).

[35] See, particularly, Derrida's slightly later 'Parergon' (VP, pp19-168). Or Dällenbach's gloss on the term *réflexion*, which reads almost like a call to arms: "aux confins du dedans et du dehors, elle constitue, pour une surface à deux dimensions, une manière de passage à la

fuite which make it up. This is perhaps what Foucault has in mind when he glosses Pachero's adage ("L'image doit sortir du cadre") with "Etrange façon d'appliquer au pied de la lettre, mais en le retournant..." (MC, p24). Again, to abuse the term, this radicalises the concept: what Pachero meant was probably that the image should be dynamic stylistically, while remaining faithful to its model; whereas for Foucault, the same phrase implies the literal emergence of the image from the frame which binds it.[36] Indeed, this overflowing is made almost inevitable by Foucault's somewhat curious definition of a painting: "fragment rectangulaire de lignes et de couleurs chargé de représenter quelque chose aux yeux de tout spectateur possible" (MC, p24).

To this end his analysis/description of *Les Ménines* centres around the vectors which compose it (although this method results in the determination that the *centre* is actually outside the *tableau* (MC, pp29-30)). One of the effects of this emphasis on the vectors is the blurring of the distinction between the representation and the original, between the artist and the spectator, between the inside and the outside: "une ligne impérieuse [...] que nous ne saurions éviter [...]: elle traverse le tableau réel et rejoint en avant de sa surface ce lieu d'où nous voyons le peintre qui nous observe; ce pointillé nous atteint immanquablement et nous lie à la représentation du tableau." (MC, p20). Elsewhere, he writes of imperious *pointillés* which escape from the painting and of the unstable superposition of the two planes (MC, pp29 & 24).

We are stressing this aspect of Foucault's text in order to highlight its affinities with *Un homme qui dort*. This is because, for a novel which on one level is remarkably static (due to its protagonist's lethargy), it is also

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limite." (Dällenbach, 1977, p22) – *réflexion* also puts the emphasis on vectors: 'Changement de direction des ondes' (Petit Robert).

[36] While Foucault's 'archaeology' justifies the following comment: "Foucault's hypothesis is that there exists a sort of 'positive unconscious' of vision which determines not what is seen, but what *can* be seen. His idea is not that all ways of visualising or rendering visible are possible at once." (Rajchman, 1994, p226, author's emphasis), this rereading by Foucault of Pachero's adage gives the lie to the idea that the text in question is simply a description of the Renaissance conception of representation (and therefore that it has little to do with *Un homme qui dort*). While Foucault does take the Renaissance as his point of departure, he does not limit himself to it (see the very last paragraph of the text which makes this quite clear (MC, p31)).

preoccupied with motion, specifically with *lignes de perspective*.[37] We will look briefly at these in order to ease the passage into a discussion of the *miroir* and *tableau* as exhibited in *l'homme qui dort*'s own private studio.

It is ironic that at the moment the protagonist's life grinds to a halt, it should be described in the following terms: "rien ne reste de cette trajectoire en flèche" (HQD, p23). However, while his life may not be advancing, his body certainly is, flying off into the nothingness (see *Écartèlements* above) or, alternatively, attempting to avoid objects which are projected out of the nothingness, as in the "boule de lumière qui vient sur toi, t'évite de justesse" (HQD, p84). Even when he and his surroundings seem to be at rest, they are described in a language which would not seem inappropriate if applied to a painting (though the threat of motion is scarcely veiled): "poussières en suspension dans un rai de lumière" (HQD, p29). The play of light gives way to that of shadow on another occasion which brings the spectator into the (Foucauldian) picture, as it were, the vectors which emerge from the object/painting seeming to reach out and incorporate the viewer: "Parfois, l'obscurité dessine d'abord la forme imprécise d'un as de pique: il y a devant toi un point d'où fuient deux lignes qui s'écartent et reviennent vers toi après un long virage" (HQD, p79).[38] Finally, mention needs to be made of the protagonist's fondness for *billard électrique* (HQD, p106). The pinball machine, as we know, is composed of two parallel surfaces, the lower decorated with ladies and locales exotic (*tableau*), while the upper is of glass and permits to player to see through to the lower level – but also to see himself at play, thence perhaps the tenacity with which he plays (the *fenêtre* as *miroir/glace*). Between these two plates rolls a metal ball, shunted backwards and forwards at oblique, fractured angles (*vecteurs*) – though it could not break through its frame without physical danger to the player/spectator, which gives this game an added piquancy which those who vaunt the dangers of theory for the unified subject are wont to ignore.

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[37] Regarding immobility, as Sylvie Rosienski-Pellerin astutely points out, some of its sentences (such as "Homme assis sur une banquette étroite" (HQD, p29)) could serve as titles for paintings (Rosienski-Pellerin, 1995, p163).

[38] See HQD, p53 for an interesting passage concerning the very fluid play of light and shadow.

The mirror fragmented

We will begin this section by aping the *glissement* which Foucault operates by commencing with what seems to be a classical manifestation of the mirror before slipping into something more modern. Let us therefore look quickly at that most abyssal of Perecian texts, *Un Cabinet d'amateur*, dealing as it does with over one hundred 'original' paintings represented/reproduced within a larger, seemingly all encompassing painting.[39] (Though the process does not produce faithful copies of the originals, deformations necessarily occur, indeed are encouraged – thence the reference above to the narrative possibilities of painting as, in one case, it is the successive deformations of the original that tell a story). Therefore, amongst a myriad of other paintings, *Un Cabinet d'amateur* presents us with the following description of the fictitious *Portrait d'un chevalier* ("école de Brescia"):

> Le chevalier est représenté de dos, nu, devant une source où il s'apprête à se baigner et qui lui renvoie *l'image parfaite* de son corps nu vu de face. A la droite du tableau, une cuirasse en acier bruni est appuyée contre un tronc d'arbre mort et le profil droit du chevalier s'y réfléchit dans tous ses détails, cependant que de l'autre côté, une femme vêtue d'une longue robe blanche flottante présente au chevalier un grand bouclier rond où son profil gauche se reflète, *à peine déformé* par la convexité brillante du bouclier. (CAB, p74, emphasis mine).

Elsewhere in the novel it is said of this painting that it is intended to show the superiority of painting over sculpture, because it can show "plus en une seule vue *d'après nature* que ne le fait la sculpture" (CAB, p95, emphasis mine). However, what is of interest to us is the progression apparent within what is nominally a very classical example of representation (witness the *d'après nature*). Firstly, the painting moves beyond the simple duality which normally characterises reflection (object/image) by expanding this out to a tripartite relationship. In this case, the apparent object (*le chevalier*) is itself an image which is in turn divided into three images of images. It is also hard to conceive of an alignment so perfect as to prevent overlap from one

[39] It is hard to know what to make of (the otherwise faithfully Derridean) Gasché's statement that: "The alienation of the mirror in its Other and the reflection of the object are linked together in such a way as to form a totality in which they are reflected into one another, leaving absolutely no remainder outside." (Gasché, 1986, p21). For, unlike for example Foucault, who can speak of a period in history when there may have been held such a conception of reflection, Derrida makes no such prelapsarian allowances, as we will see presently.

reflection to the next: an aspect of the knight's physiognomy reflected in the stream is bound to be reflected equally in one of the other *miroirs de fortune*, and so on, *ad infinitum* (though this infinite mirroring is radically different from, for example, the type of *mise en abyme* characterised by *la vache qui rit*: the cow is reproduced integrally each time – in the present case, the clumsily tessellated reflections are partial and fragmented).[40] This expansion adds a *supplément* to the traditional couple as the supposed totality obtained subverts itself (in order to reconstruct the object, the painting must actually deconstruct it – in the traditional sense of the term). We will see this echoed by Derrida presently. Secondly, the unstable superposition of the two terms *l'image parfaite* and *à peine déformé* is worth considering (not forgetting the unqualified third reflection which comes between them: the *cuirasse* which shows 'all the details', and undoubtedly a few more besides: what, for example, of the woman holding the shield? she must surely appear in one of the other reflecting surfaces, no doubt supplanting the knight's primacy on occasion?). The first term, *l'image parfaite*, speaks for itself: the water is perfectly still, not disturbed by a single ripple, and the knight's reflection is therefore as smooth and 'lifelike' as though he were indeed looking at himself in a mirror – no unflattering lengthening of the nose, or protrusion of the ear. The second, *à peine déformé*, is more interesting: the litotes cannot hide the reality, for if something is scarcely deformed, it is nonetheless deformed. As a consequence, while not in itself contesting the possibility of representation, it does present a poor quality copy. Moreover, its position in the text, following not preceding the *image parfaite*, suggests that future developments will be along the same lines, that the image will become more and more deformed and less and less like the original.

This disruptive force at work in a seemingly classical painting (as 'represented' by Perec) is all the more evident in *Un homme qui dort* (although we will see in the next section that classicism also appears in *Un homme qui dort* only to be horribly mistreated – handled with a disdainful

[40] The *vache qui rit* is an example of what Dällenbach calls 'la réduplication à l'infini': "fragment qui entretient avec l'œuvre qui l'inclut un rapport de similitude et qui enchâsse lui-même un fragment qui..., et ainsi de suite" (Dällenbach, 1977, p51).

constraint, as it were). It is necessary to precede our discussion of the mirror in *Un homme qui dort* with a triptych of lengthy quotations, a sort of "triangle virtuel" (MC, p21) on which we will base our reading. The first *volet* is of Perecian origin, prolonging the play of in/difference encountered above:

> [C]e papier dont tu connais chaque fleur, chaque tige, chaque entrelacs, et dont tu es le seul à pouvoir affirmer que, malgré la perfection presque infaillible des procédés d'impression, ils ne se ressemblent jamais tout à fait. [...] Cette *glace fêlée qui n'a jamais réfléchi que ton visage morcelé en trois portions de surfaces inégales, légèrement superposables*, que l'habitude te permet presque d'ignorer, oubliant l'ébauche d'un œil frontal, le nez fondu, la bouche perpétuellement tordue, pour ne plus retenir qu'une zébrure en *forme de Y* comme la marque presque oubliée, presque effacée, d'une blessure ancienne, coup de sabre ou coup de fouet. (HQD, pp49-50, emphasis mine).

While the second two *volets* are of Derridean origin (or perhaps not, given that a curious interdiction hangs over the 'origin'):

> Il n'y plus d'origine simple. Car se qui est reflété se dédouble *en soi-même* [author's emphasis] et non seulement comme addition à soi de son image. Le reflet, l'image, le double dédouble ce qu'il redouble. L'origine de la spéculation devient une différence. Ce qui peut se regarder n'est pas un et la loi de l'addition de l'origine à sa représentation, de la chose à son image, c'est que *un plus un font au moins trois*. (GR, p55, emphasis mine).

> S'annonce ainsi *une division intérieure* de la *mimesis*, *une autoduplication de la répétition même*; à l'infini, puisque ce mouvement entraîne sa propre prolifération. Peut-être y a-t-il donc toujours plus qu'une seule *mimesis*; et peut-être est-ce dans l'étrange miroir qui réfléchit, mais aussi *déplace et déforme* une *mimesis* dans l'autre [...] que se loge l'histoire – de la littérature – comme la totalité de son interprétation. (DISS, p235, emphasis mine, except for the three *mimesis*).

It is not our contention that Perec is deliberately or specifically referencing Derrida, but it is undeniable that there is a certain resonance between these three blocks. Before we attempt to play them artfully and allusively off each other (thence the plethora of italics, for fear that we lose ourselves and fail to make the appropriate connections), let us first of all mention the *miroir fêlé*, for the above is not its sole appearance in *Un homme qui dort* (it is mentioned on pages 24, 28, 89, 95, 110, 134 & 135; of course not all of these are relevant for us here, some simply reflect the fact that the protagonist is a poor student who cannot afford to replace his mirror – or his indifference to his appearance). The first time the expression is used, it suggests not simply the *mise en abyme* of the object reflected (the protagonist), but the *mise en abyme* of the act of perception: "tu regardes la

bassine, l'étagère, tes genoux, ton regard dans le miroir fêlé" (HQD, p24).[41] The look which looks at itself can perhaps not look at anything else (rendered impotent by its narcissism). But in only looking at itself, does it/can it see itself (or simply a reflection of itself)? *Peu importe*, as, in any case, whatever it sees, be it object or image, will only be a shimmering, unstable mirage: "ton regard qui se pose et glisse [...] ne retenant jamais que des combinaisons de formes et de lumières qui se font et se défont, sans cesse, partout, dans ton œil, [...] dans ton miroir fêlé" (HQD, p95). Here it is not the reflected object which is confused with the act of perception, but rather the perceiving eye which becomes the reflecting surface, points of departure and arrival confused and splintered.

(It must be pointed out that not all the occurrences of the *miroir fêlé* are as dazzling as we would like. One in particular goes some way to reintroducing the metaphysical notion of depth which we have been doing our best to elide: "ceci, dans la glace fêlée, n'est pas ton nouveau visage, ce sont les masques qui sont tombés" (HQD, p28). The implication is that, beneath the surface layer (or layers, as the *nouveauté* of the face could refer to the fact that there are three reflections in this particular mirror), lies the protagonist's authentic *être*: the *noyau* which resists fragmentation. However, given Perec's general care in his use of language, it is surely no accident that this is the only mention of a *glace fêlée* – as opposed to a *miroir fêlé* – other than in the passage from page 50 quoted above. This is because *glace*, as well as meaning a *miroir*, can also mean a *vitre* ('Glace sans tain' – Petit Robert). As such, it allows us to see through to the other side, or to the inside, without our being dispersed in reflections – whereas in the passage from page 50, it allows the protagonist to see through the gaps in his body, not through *to* the gaps.)

Now back to our trio of quotations. It should hopefully be evident that we have been playing with the ideas contained therein throughout this

[41] Elsewhere, when it is seemingly a question of the protagonist being reflected, and not his *regard*, the morosely bovine metaphor employed hints at the more jocular bovine icon mentioned above: "la *vache* dans le miroir fêlé se laisse faire" (HQD, p135, emphasis mine). Although this particular *vache*, while perhaps reflected infinitely, is bound to be *déplacée* et *déformée*.

chapter (and particularly throughout this middle section), even before we actually referred to the source material. Rather than continue this play, we will now try to expose the two main links between Derrida's texts and Perec's in as straightforward a manner as possible, putting our vanity case away once and for all (we will occupy ourselves more with showing the existence of the links rather than expounding on them):

1. Strange Trinity: "L'origine de la spéculation devient une différence." On the division inherent in reflection, Derrida is unusually clear and categorical: "Ce qui peut se regarder n'est pas un et la loi de l'addition de l'origine à sa représentation, de la chose à son image, c'est que un plus un font au moins trois." Because the origin is itself divided, so is the reflection. Moreover, the reflection does not represent faithfully the division of the origin: elsewhere, Derrida speaks of a 'double supplémentaire' which is "à la fois ressemblant et différent, différent parce que – en tant que – ressemblant, le même et l'autre que ce qu'il double" (DISS, p235).[42]

The "étrange miroir qui réfléchit" is also to be found in the passage from *Un homme qui dort*. The mirror there is fractured, more to the point it is broken into three sections: the "zébrure en forme de Y" of the protagonist's reflection is actually that of the mirror, the Y dividing it into three distinct plates. As a result of this, the mirror, as "origine de la spéculation" becomes a locus of difference, it does not reproduce the (same) face, but rather "ton visage morcelé en trois portions de surfaces inégales, légèrement superposables". Because of the uneven nature of the fragmentation, each image is different from the other, and the protagonist must artificially reconstruct the whole (unlike reflection *d'après nature*) by attempting to excise the supplemental third element.

2. Auto-duplication: "S'annonce ainsi une division intérieure de la *mimesis*, une autoduplication de la répétition même." Mimesis is necessarily divided

[42] Derrida's constant insistence on the triadic nature of this process, so important for us, is not without similarities to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs. Peirce held that any thing ('object') was represented by a second thing ('representamen') to a third thing ('interpretant'). Further, the interpretant can in turn become a representamen of the object to another interpretant, and so on infinitely. This triangular relationship entails a continual shifting of the interpretant's position, constantly opening up new angles and ensuring that interpretation is an infinite process.

because the object (any object) at its origin is divided. Not content with a tripartite division, Derrida introduces an "au moins trois" which implies further additions. Additions which will come, not from the outside, but from within, infinitely, "puisque ce mouvement entraîne sa propre prolifération." Once again, the freeplay of *différance* prevents the chain from being limited: each thing contains the sign of its absence, which is in turn the sign of an absence.

In the passage above from *Un homme qui dort*, it is the apparently banal wallpaper which relates to this infinite autoduplication. What should be a perfect example of controlled, mechanical reproduction (and, by extension, of the work of art in the mechanical age) nonetheless leaves residual traces of difference: "malgré la perfection presque infaillible des procédés d'impression, ils ne se ressemblent jamais tout à fait." Precisely because of the mechanical nature of the process, these differences are self-replicating, automatically producing more dissimilar surfaces, surfaces which subsequently feed into the fractured mirror, re-launching the process.

In/Out/Through the Painting

If the mirror offers "cet enchantement du double" (MC, p22-23), enchantment which is deceptively complex, then what of the painting? can it be said to represent external reality, or does it only represent itself? In attempting to determine this, we will oscillate between Foucault and Perec (bearing in mind that we have already established above certain links between the two texts, namely a tendency towards self-representation coupled, paradoxically, with an emphasis on movement beyond the frame – or is this paradoxical? Let us not forget Dällenbach's comments on reflection and *mise an abyme* as a "passage à la limite"). Before looking at the one actual painting which appears in *Un homme qui dort*, let us first look at the broader question of perspective and point of view.[43]

[43] This point of view is not to be understood as the holding of an opinion, but rather, as Sylvie Rosienski-Pellerin says: "Nous prenons ici le terme *point de vue* dans son sens littéral, c'est-à-dire comme désignant la place de l'observateur" (Rosienski-Pellerin, 1995, p167, fn). The emphasis on the spectator and his position is not accompanied by the introduction of his subjectivity.

According to *Un Cabinet d'amateur*, "une perspective légèrement faussée peut suffire à entraîner des illusions aberrantes" (CAB, p47). One possible conclusion that could be drawn from this is that what a work represents depends on the position of where one is standing: that figuration might be "une illusion d'optique imputable à la différence des échelles, des perspectives" (HQD, p81).[44] At its most everyday level, this is a fairly benign concept: anybody can experiment empirically with it in front of a given painting. On another level, as the context from which the above is taken implies, the painter can experiment with perspective within the painting, creating disorientating, 'unreal' effects (although this is only a play on realistic painterly convention, disrupting what Barthes might call the "effet de réel" (S/Z, p51), not on the possibility of representation *per se*). On yet another level, it might be read as suggesting that there is no actual, necessary correspondence between the thing and its image (if every object is unique and indivisible – it is not – then its representation should be likewise). If this were not the case, then all that there would remain would indeed be "une spectaculaire illusion de perspective" (HQD, p23), or spectacular illusions.[45]

Let us now look at the painting which appears in *Un homme qui dort*. Like the *Chevalier au bain* from *Un Cabinet d'amateur*, it initially seems to be a classical work, both in its subject and setting. Indeed, like a true bourgeois, the protagonist indulges in some cultural tourism: "tu vas au Louvre le dimanche, traversant sans t'arrêter toutes les salles, te postant pour finir près d'un unique objet: le portrait incroyablement énergique d'un homme de la Renaissance, avec une toute petite cicatrice au-dessus de la lèvre supérieure, à gauche, c'est-à-dire à gauche pour lui, à droite pour toi" (HQD, p93).[46] We consequently find ourselves back in the Renaissance again, in front of a portrait which represents a unique object (every individual is unique?). However, like Foucault's take on *Les Ménines*, this painting also

[44] Incidentally, the term figuration in mathematics means 'the multiplying of a number into itself' (OED), a sort of mathematical *mise en abyme*?

[45] As already seen, indifference also affects our ability to apprehend the world (in a very literal sense): "Tu n'a rien appris, sinon que la solitude n'apprend rien, que l'indifférence n'apprend rien: c'était un leurre, une illusion fascinante et piégée." (HQD, p140).

[46] This actually is a real painting (and can be found in the Louvre), entitled *Le Condottiere* (The Warlord), by Antonello da Messina

reaches out to the spectator in an unusual manner. This is made evident elsewhere in the novel, when the protagonist is (once again) examining himself in the mirror. The traits he attributes to himself closely resemble those found in the painting: he also has a *regard* "incroyablement énergique" and a "minuscule cicatrice au-dessus de la lèvre" (HQD, p134). Therefore, *Le Condottiere* itself, while not representing a mirror within itself as *Les Ménines* does, becomes a sort of mirror (implied by the play on the left-right inversion in its description). Consequently, the distinction between model, image and spectator becomes blurred, subject to the "superposition instable" of which Foucault writes (as painting, the warlord is image and 'tu' spectator; as mirror, it is image and 'tu' model – or is it model and 'tu' image? – or, as spectator, is 'tu' a spectator of himself, is the painting watching him? Can we speak of a Deleuzian 'becoming'? – a *devenir-tableau* of 'tu' and a *devenir-tu* of the painting – such a dynamic vision would neatly fit in with Pleynet's terminology below). Once again, it is the vectors, the process of motion which takes primacy over the static image. Forgetting temporarily everything which has been said above about the mirror, it might be hoped that it could be the "double parfait" (MC, p23) of the painting – although, just as the mirror in *Les Ménines* is not, neither is this mirror/painting. In short, it might be said that the mirror/painting produces an image from the vacuum, rather than re-producing one. This production/re-production distinction is to be found in Pleynet's 'Peinture et «Structuralisme»', where he propounds the movement 'beyond' *tableau* to *peinture* in explicitly Derridean terms: whereas the tableau can be qualified as *représentation*, *parole*, *phoné*, and *unité*, the term *peinture* denotes *production*, *transformation*, '*écriture*', and *multiple* (Pleynet, 1971, p193). This neatly captures the spirit of what we have been trying to achieve with our analysis (it also seems related to the oft highlighted distinction between the static 'game' and the dynamic 'play' – opposition missing from the French 'jeu' – where game would correspond to *tableau* and play to *peinture*).[47]

[47] Another ex Tel Quelien, Jacques Henric, forged a neologism which, he claims, overcomes the play/game lack in French: it is *puzzleliser* and is curiously relevant to Perec with his

The following quotation from *Les Mots et les choses* would seem to prolong this outward movement of vectors which we have been discussing; it seems to find, however, an echo in *Un homme qui dort* which serves to turn it back in on itself, opening up (or closing down) the field of auto-representation: "le regard du peintre adressé hors du tableau au vide qui lui fait face accepte autant de modèles qu'il lui vient de spectateurs; en ce lieu précis, mais indifférent, *le regardant et le regardé* s'échangent sans cesse." (MC, p20, emphasis mine). This particular formula (*le regardant et le regardé*) is repeated at least twice in Foucault's text (MC, pp22 & 29)[48] and resurfaces in Perec's (along with the *vide* from which it comes):

> Tu n'est plus qu'un œil. Un œil immense et fixe, qui voit tout, aussi bien ton corps affalé, que toi, *regardé regardant*, comme s'il s'était complètement retourné dans son orbite et qu'il te contemplait sans rien dire, toi, l'intérieur de toi, l'intérieur noir, vide, glauque, effrayé, impuissant de toi. [...] Tu te vois, tu te vois te voir, tu te regardes te regarder. (HQD, p102, emphasis mine)

This particular formulation of the expression makes it clear that the *regardé* and the *regardant* are one and the same: the eye which should see outside can only see inside (yet again, the notion of depth and interiority peeps out from behind the curtain of indifference, as self-regarding becomes self-loathing).[49] Obviously more than simple myopia, this phenomenon echoes the novel's previously analysed opening passage: there the text on the page was seen to define itself in terms of its resemblance to the eye; here, this is pursued as the text/eye is seen to turn in on itself, eye which sees only itself as eye, text which constantly refers to itself as text, unable to render reality, incapable of reflecting anything except its own shattered image.

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frequent use of the puzzle as metaphor (Henric, 1986, p105).

[48] Its occurrence on page 29 is accompanied by the following, which clarifies the formula's self-reflexive thrust: "Le tableau en son entier regarde une scène pour qui il est à son tour une scène" (MC, p29).

[49] In the three times the expression occurs in Foucault, the *regardant* precedes the *regardé*, whereas Perec reverses this, putting the passive *regardé* before the active *regardant*.

> Qu'arrive-t-il au roman, que va raconter la langue française lorsque la lettre 'e' a disparu...?
> – Georges Perec, 'La maison des romans'.

It is now time for us to shift our attention from questions of visual representation (albeit as presented in a text) to questions of textual representation or, more importantly, self-representation. To do this, we need to first accept the consequences of having followed Derrida's advice, and come to terms with the *blessure ancienne* resulting from the violent and arbitrary incision which we inflicted with our interpretative sabre onto/into our (various) selves and textual alter-egos (we are closer to 'tu' than we would like – thence perhaps our own *acharnement* in depriving him of his humanity).

Across the great divide

We opened this chapter by questioning the notion of the turning point, or at least the notion that the post-1967 texts were more ludic than the pre-Oulipian ones (cf. the quotation from Warren Motte). It is hopefully clear by now that the text on the 'primitive' side of the divide is actually a remarkably open text (what Barthes might call *scriptible* (S/Z, p10 *passim*)), more formalist and less humanist (or as formalist as it is humanist) than one might expect. The text on the near side of the divide, as mentioned, opens with a rewriting of the opening of this earlier one – this rewriting is also a deformation: as is suggested by **contrainte n. f. 5♦** Phys., géophys. Ensemble des forces qui, appliquées à un corps, tendent à le déformer.

The question is therefore: in what manner does this lipogrammatic rewriting change the 'original', and is it more playful (on a structural and thematic level, as Motte claims)? For the sake of clarity, we should perhaps anticipate slightly on our response: it can be said that *La Disparition* is not more ludic than *Un homme qui dort*; nor, however, is it simply less so. Or: it is more ludic in a controlled, constrained, Oulipian manner, whereas *Un*

homme qui dort, for all its restraint, is conceivably more subject to Derridean freeplay. It is precisely because it is 'framed' (i.e. heavily coded, with the incidences of redundancy increased) in a certain manner that *La Disparition* is less open to multiple interpretations.

That *La Disparition* opens with such a reworking is, at least, not in doubt: the title of the first chapter reads as follows: "Qui, d'abord, a l'air d'un roman jadis fait où il s'agissait d'un individu qui dormait tout son saoul." (DISP, p17) – although this opening chapter does not open the proceedings as it is preceded by an 'Avant-propos', calling to mind the opening chapter of *Un homme qui dort* which served to continue an already open text, while also functioning as prologue for what was to follow. This title, however, seems to be turned into an ironic *antiphrase* by what immediately follows it:

> Anton Voyl n'arrivait pas à dormir. Il alluma. Son jaz marquait minuit vingt. Il poussa un profond soupir, s'assit dans son lit, s'appuyant sur son polochon. Il prit un roman, il l'ouvrit, il lut; mais il n'y saisissait qu'un imbroglio confus, il butait à tout instant sur un mot dont il ignorait la signification.
>
> Il abandonna son roman sur son lit. Il alla à son lavabo; il mouilla un gant qu'il passa sur son front, sur son cou.
>
> Son pouls battait trop fort. Il avait chaud. Il ouvrit son vasistas, scruta la nuit. Il faisait doux. Un bruit indistinct montait du faubourg. Un carillon, plus lourd qu'un glas, plus sourd qu'un tocsin, plus profond qu'un bourdon, non loin, sonna trois coups. (DISP, p17)

It is immediately obvious that, although we could be said to be dealing with the same subject, its treatment effectively creates a new one (production and not re-production). There are, nonetheless, similarities, notably in the character's behaviour: although here he (Anton Voyl) actually cannot sleep, he shares a distinguishing physical characteristic with 'tu': "un rictus maladif marquait son pli labial" (DISP, p30). He also shares a common attitude to reading and current affairs: consider the "journal qu'il parcourut d'un air distrait" (DISP, p18) – with similar consequences for language, here an "imbroglio confus". In an ironic echo, which creates a certain symmetry, he also is prey to aimless wandering, as he "allait au hasard, par-ci ou par-là, suivant son inspiration" (DISP, p21). The irony in this becomes evident when we read the phrase on another level: if considered as referring to the narrative *trame*, then it is untrue (a sort of *fausse mise en abyme*?) as the reasoning

behind the use of constraint is to prevent the novelist from having to rely on chance inspiration, as made clear elsewhere in the novel (DISP, p310).

More important than these superficial similarities, however, are the underlying differences. Notwithstanding the three fateful blows heard and felt above, there is no mirror to be shattered in Voyl's room (though he possesses the obligatory window which frames his suffering, while also indicating a possible issue). Instead, in its place, he rather curiously has a "frigo mural" (DISP, p18) in which he stores his milk (no cold coffee for him). This disconcerting absence of the mirror can perhaps be explained as follows: if, as we claimed, the opening passage of *Un homme qui dort* effectuates a progression/fluctuation/reduction between a three-, two- and one-dimensional space, then the two dimensional mirror/painting was, amongst other things, a necessary conduit between the other two planes. There is, however, no such determinable reduction operable in *La Disparition*, although similar questions are raised, as the three dimensional refrigerator supplants the two dimensional mirror (there is also the question of the *roman* and of the *vasistas*, substitutes for the two dimensional space, though they do not come between as the mirror does). Of supreme importance, indicating the depth of the difference between the two texts, is *La Disparition*'s treatment of the monad, the one dimensional entity: as the insomniac Voyl hallucinates over his carpet, he thinks that he can see the "point nodal" or "noyau inconnu" which presides silently over his folly (DISP, p20). In *Un homme qui dort*, this noyau is exploded outwards. In *La Disparition*, however, it falls further in on itself: several lines further on from the above, the now renamed "point primordial" is equated explicitly with a "trou abyssal". Whereas the outward motion in *Un homme qui dort* could be read as 'reality embraced' (not the option chosen), the message here is rather more categorical: the text is quite literally falling in on itself, *abyme* which can only refer to the *abyme*.

Une langue châtrée, un monde irréel?

Aside from the explanatory word from Perec used as epigraph for this section, the meta-textual and abysmal nature of *La Disparition* is made clear

from the outset of the narrative. Although some of the signs (that is, which denote the fact that there are no Es in the text) are initially allusive, their accumulation serves to render them transparent.[50] The list is practically endless: from Voyl's truncated name to the recurrent play on the numbers five, six, twenty-five and twenty-six (DISP, pp18, 19, 23 & 24, to begin with); from the barman's inability to make a porto-flip due to his lack of '*œufs*' (DISP, p29) to the term *bourdon*, which means a typographical error (DISP, pp17 & 22, amongst others). All of this has been frequently commented on, what is of interest to us is the notion that if a text is occupied with self-representation, then it does that and only that: "Et si un texte se donne toujours une certaine représentation de ses propres racines, celles-ci ne vivent que de cette représentation, c'est-à-dire de ne jamais toucher le sol." (GR, p150). As a question of expediency, given the difficulties attached to the mimetic process, is a text not better off settling for this form of 'root-gazing'?

This question leads us to what we readily acknowledge to be a highly whimsical notion, though one nonetheless worth exploring. Let us try to imagine a world without Ferdinand de Saussure, a world in which the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign was yet to be recognised, a world which consequently believed that the link between the signifier and the signified was necessary and ineluctable (indeed, God given).[51] What would such a world make of *La Disparition*? Or, put another way, if there is a necessary link between language and reality, then what reality does a language without any Es describe? Does it, in the jargon of science-fiction, describe a universe parallel to our own, similar in many respects, yet fundamentally different (just as *La Disparition*'s version of *Un homme qui dort* is similar yet different) – ask any aficionado of drug culture: a world without E might well seem unbearably 'real' (although, from his point of view, it could be said that

[50] According to Dällenbach, one of the consequences of reliance on mise en abyme is an amplification of the level of redundancy in a work (Dällenbach, 1977, p77).

[51] On the arbitrary nature of the sign, see Saussure, 1972, pp100-102. See also the insistence on displacement which prefigures our comments above on the nature of language in *Un homme qui dort*: "Une langue est radicalement impuissante à se défendre contre les facteurs qui déplacent d'instant en instant le rapport du signifié et du signifiant. C'est une des conséquences de l'arbitraire du signe." (Saussure, 1972, p110).

such a world would be parallel also). If language is charged to represent reality, to reproduce concepts and objects, then the reality *La Disparition*'s language reproduces should arguably be less complete than the reality which the French language as a whole represents, given that the language used in *La Disparition* is severely truncated or 'unnatural' (the term castrated does come to mind, but is perhaps not entirely appropriate as it is a language deprived of the feminine E). It is here that the matter becomes more complicated, precisely because the language of *La Disparition* is truncated but *not* different: while archaic and obscure, the language used is, with a few exceptions, absolutely correct, standard French.[52] By extension, it cannot be said that the novel reproduces a fundamentally different reality, as it is merely a subset of French, the universal set. This can be said of any novel (and, *a fortiori*, sentence), yet one would not dream of claiming that *A la recherche du temps perdu* is unrealistic/does not reproduce reality simply because, monumental as it is, it does not contain the totality of the French language – incompleteness is not related to arbitrariness. As anticipated, this line of questioning rapidly becomes a dead end, yet perhaps shows us a fruitful alternative.

Once again, this alternative hinges around the production/re-production distinction. If we take as our premise the notion that language produces reality, then the case of *La Disparition* becomes clearer. Rather than reflecting some spurious parallel universe, the novel (every novel) produces its own reality, or its own textual reality. It is in this sense that the novel 'never touches the ground', as there is no ground to touch other than the word 'ground'. In this respect, *La Disparition*'s uniqueness (its lipogrammatic nature) is brutally annulled: no more than any other text does it reflect reality, though this not because it is a lipogram. All that can be said is that it draws attention to the artificiality of language through its few linguistic inventions. Take, for example, the word *moucharabié* (or *moucharabieh*): in *La Disparition* it is spelt *moucharab* (DISP, p33) – we

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See also Derrida on the *immotivation* of the sign (GR, p74).

[52] The same cannot be said of Perec's other major lipogram, *Les Revenentes*, which proceeds with a systematic rewriting of French orthography (see Chapter Five)

can only call this truncated if we hold up the standard orthography as a natural template to which it should conform; if, however, we view it as productive, then it need not be felt to be lacking (indeed, its absence actually adds a surplus by drawing attention to the constraint governing the text).[53] To inscribe this argument into the discussion of the mirror, we could say that "Ce speculum ne réfléchit aucune réalité, il produit seulement des «effets de réalité»" (DISS, p254) – so called realism (and indeed language) is only a set of conventions designed, in Barthes's near identical phrase, to produce an *effet de réel*.

The figure in the carpet

Even though the language of *La Disparition* is inherently incomplete, this does not prevent it from attempting to reach out to reality and to describe it – to 'paint pictures', as it were. As will now be seen, the attempts made in *La Disparition* to describe or fix a certain visual image only result in an *imbroglio* lamentably *confus*. The tormented Anton Voyl is once again trying to make sense of the confusion which surrounds him. This time he fixes his attention on the rug on his floor, seemingly still prey to uncontrollable hallucinations. Squatting there patiently, he "fix[e] d'un air las *l'intrigant* croquis qui apparaissait ou disparaissait sur l'aubusson suivant la façon dont s'organisait la vision..." (DISP, p18, emphasis mine).[54] This particular 'figure in the carpet' (presumably an echo of Henry James's story of the same name) goes on to assume a variety of evanescent forms (seemingly at least partly dependant on the position of the observer), all of which have in common a passing and unnameable resemblance to the visual form of the letter E, both upper and lower case (though Voyl is of course unaware of

[53] As Dällenbach says of Roussel's *procédé*: "Pour la plupart, telles mises en abyme du travail producteur sont le fait de récits soucieux de mirer sans cesse l'aventure de leur propre génération." (Dällenbach, 1977, p102). In an Oulipian context, see one of Jacques Roubaud's 'principes parfois respectés par les travaux oulipiens': "Un texte écrit suivant une contrainte parle de cette contrainte" (Oulipo, 1981, p90)

[54] Aubusson is of course a town in France famous for its carpets and tapestries. See also "l'indistinct motif du tapis d'Aubusson" (DISP, p27).

what the forms represent).[55] Voyl finishes by losing himself in "tout un tas d'imparfaits croquis, dont chacun, aurait-on dit, contribuait à ourdir, à bâtir la configuration d'un croquis initial qu'il simulait, qu'il calquait, qu'il approchait mais qu'il taisait toujours" (DISP, p19) – notice the inability to obtain a unified origin ("croquis initial"), thence also the inability of the 'copy' to faithfully represent it.

Now to explain the perhaps unusual emphasis on the intriguing above, given that the important aspect would seem to be indeterminability, irrespective of whether any given subject finds the process intriguing or not. The superficially anodyne appearance of this term actually has serious consequences for the apparent *mise en cause* of the mimetic act (the questioning of the model/copy hierarchy) which *La Disparition* has seemingly inherited from *Un homme qui dort*. This is because *intrigant*, as well as its originary meaning (i.e. intriguing), can also be read as the act of constituting/constructing the intrigue or plot of the novel (in the present case, while the surface plot could be said to revolve around the (five?) characters in search of an answer regarding Voyl's disappearance, the underlying, fundamental intrigue is precisely the lipogrammatic nature of the text – equally in the sense that some find the use of constraint intriguing). Therefore, in that the confusion and indeterminability of the figure in the carpet is actually necessitated by both the plot and the intrigue, said confusion becomes highly *motivated*, becomes over-determined with meaning, meaning which ineluctably leads to the one unitary point: the self-designation of the text as lipogram. This un-representability of the figure ("la figuration d'un bourdon" (DISP, p19)) motivated by the interdiction decreed by the narrative, contrasts with the apparently similar un-representability of objects and images in *Un homme qui dort*, which is actually more in line with a Derridean freeplay and attendant *immotivation*. For, while any given word in *La Disparition*, as a member of the universal set 'French', is an arbitrary and unmotivated sign, the same word, as member of the subset 'words which

[55] In *The Figure in the Carpet*, the figure is purely metaphorical, serving to symbolise the conceit which underlies and binds together the writer Vereker's work (James, 1986, p374). *La Disparition* tries to render this metaphoricity literal, with disastrous results (though the figure at the same time is linked metaphorically to Perec's conceit: the lipogram).

are lipogrammatic in E', finds itself endowed with a high degree of necessity, or motivation. This language's inability to seize the image in the carpet, to represent it, ultimately fades before the unifying convergence on the code itself, which serves to 'unveil' the constraint. In *Un homme qui dort*, on the other hand, the fragmentation and distortion serves no such higher purpose, it simply is; the un-representability found there is not itself a sign representing any hidden image/rationale.

While the use of constraint, with its continual (p)reference of/to the code or medium over the object designated by the code, does provide grounds for inferring a certain critique of the mimetic act, it nevertheless, because of this critical reference, largely annuls its own efforts: constraint itself becomes the unitary origin which the text represents.[56] Paradoxically, what we initially classified as an 'everyday' type of text, *Un homme qui dort*, while less ludic, nonetheless – apparently, to the extent that anything is given to appear – undermines mimesis more radically, in the process upsetting the notion of a binary hierarchy (model/copy, before/after).

[56] As Ian Reid shows in a rapid overview of the critical debates spawned by *The Figure in the Carpet*, the obsession with the 'secret', even if that secret is deemed indeterminable, only serves to place it in a position of centrality, which actually commands and annuls the supposed indeterminacy (Reid, 1992, pp31-32).

Chapter Five

Transgression: penetrating the (w)hole

> Axiome: Retirez le Q de la coquille: vous avez la couille, et ceci constitue précisément une coquille.
> – Boris Vian, *Cantilènes en gelée.*

> Perdidit antiquum litera prima sonum.
> – Edgar Allan Poe, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.*

The ghost of Sade (*Les Revenentes*)

This chapter will examine the relationship between transgression and the ludic, inscribing itself in the conception of transgression elaborated in the 1960s which sees transgression as a structural or formal process (*économie*), rather than as a moral issue. It will begin with the orgy scene in *Les Revenentes* before considering the broader question of the contract or duel (legal, sexual or psychoanalytical, intersubjective in any case) – as in **contrainte n. f. 4♦** Dr. Acte de poursuite, mandement destiné à permettre à l'administration de recourir aux voies d'exécution contre un débiteur?

This will be done largely through certain of the intertexts present in *Les Revenentes*, whose very title implies that it does not stand in isolation (at the very least, a restrictive theory of intertextuality would recognise that it refers to Perec's previous novel, *La Disparition*, and so to the return of the letter E; a more global theory of intertextuality, on the other hand, might claim that the expression *les revenentes*, deprived of the singularity inherent in it as title (*nom propre*), suggests the uncontrolled and uncontrollable play of exchange between text(s) – indicative of a certain *il n'y a que du texte.*[1] The analysis (or: anal-ysis) which follows will attempt to maintain a balance between these two tendencies.

[1] *Les Revenentes*'s subtitle is neither *roman* nor *récit*, but simply "TEXTE", while it opens with a quotation, declaring its openness from the outset (REV, pp9 & 11).

If, structurally speaking, transgression (or excess) can be approximately defined (because it is in its nature not to remain within the limits imposed on it) as overflow, the inability to contain x + 1 in the space intended for x, then *Les Revenentes* is excessive in that it constantly breaks through the frame which surrounds it, be it conceptual, aesthetic, or material. And yet, as it designates itself, it would seem to invite framing, or enclosure. How exactly is this invitation worded? It is not, if one restricts oneself to the text of *Les Revenentes*. And yet it affects the very conception of the text, is partly inscribed in the term conception itself; is, indeed, present in that which hopes to prevent conception, the condom. What is this which is at once prophylactic and fertile? It is, quite simply, *contrainte formelle*, considered as a genetic process (as in Roussel's *procédé*), that is as a technique which is employed *en amont* of the text proper – but which filters through the before/after divide, contaminating the text. (Although constraint is never as clear or categorical as its *formelle* would have us believe: "mais la police fut formelle: il n'y avait pas de lettre à côté du cadavre, ni nulle part" (VME, p187). In this case, the letter is unequivocally missing, though not necessarily *hors circuit*, as it will undoubtedly turn up again, although its rightful recipient may be disappointed.) So conceived, or contrived, constraint is the seed from which the text grows. Constraint is, however, a strange seed: consider it, *contrainte formelle*, reduced to its initials, cf., the standard abbreviation for the injunction 'compare with', it becomes an order which sends the reader away from the already divided place he inhabits, in search of the unattainable core of the matter, inaugurating an infinite chain of signifiers, which is precisely/approximately the definition generally given to intertextuality, cf. Kristeva in her *Sèméiotikè*: "tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte" (Kristeva, 1969, p146). Constraint as shorthand, typifying the intertextual process, but also as intertext with itself, for there are as many constraints as texts written under constraint. The simplicity of the expression belies the fact that each textual manifestation of *contrainte* operates and

signifies uniquely, and can therefore only be defined negatively in relation to a function it played elsewhere, which gives rise to the image of the split seed, as opposed to the spilt seed. In the present case, the constraint used gives rise to a monovocalism in E or, if one prefers, a lipogram in A, I, O and U.

Les Revenentes is therefore placed massively under the sign of E, in French the letter most closely associated with the feminine. Doubly so in that the adjective *formelle* agrees with the feminine noun *contrainte*. Moreover, the word '*con*trainte' contains 'con', a slang expression for vagina, while 'form*elle*' contains the third person pronoun 'she/her' (Derrida opens up the word *constellation* in a similar manner, illustrating its inner feminine nature: "mélange androgyne d'étoiles et de ciel: *con* et *stella* (DISS, p390, author's emphasis). Barthes, equally, had previously played on the word *concerner*, splitting it: *con-cerne* (Barthes, 1957, p192). This particular play – read: *le con cerne...* – introduces the idea of *clôture* which is central to *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, as we will see).[2] Thence the insistence on the notions of conception and framing, both allusively present in the term *enceinte*, traditionally the telos of the feminine: it is through the *con* that the text comes into being, is made pregnant with meaning and, when this reaches its term (becomes excessive), through the same place (*lieu de passage*) that it must in turn emerge from the enclosure, the matrix. What is the *clôture* is also a *ligne de fuite* (as will be seen when the graphic nature of the letter Q is examined, the only letter which rivals the primacy of E in *Les Revenentes*). Further down this family tree, 'pregnant with meaning' introduces the paternal seed, the lone semen which is in this case at the very least pollysemic, and which avoids the question of filiation and authority (the Logos).

[2] Elsewhere, "le texte, par le mouvement de sa constellation" (DISS, p402) echoes the notion of text as fabric, perhaps applicable to the opening of *Les Revenentes*: "sept Mercédès-Benz vertes, les fenêtres crêpées de reps grège" (REV, p13).

This displaying/displacing of the *con* can also de applied to deconstruction itself. J. Hillis Miller does just this in 'The Critic as Host', where he speaks of the 'de' and 'con' as

All the above to avoid stating simply (*formellement*) that the analysis will focus on the explicitly described orgy scene in *Les Revenentes*, bastard son of the Marquis de Sade, an orgy which is also intimately linked to one aspect of '*con*trainte'. And that, moreover, dating from 1972, it also bears the mark of Barthes's *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* and Derrida's *La Dissémination*. The essays collected in these books were, for the most part, published individually from 1968 onwards and so an influence on *Les Revenentes* is eminently possible. Moreover, as was seen in Chapter One, Perec was influenced from the very beginning of his career by Barthes and was later to refer approvingly to Derrida.[3] This is therefore a genealogy which will have to be borne in mind when discussing *Les Revenentes* not simply as a post-Sadean text, but as a post-structuralist one (though it is not our intention to 'prove' statistically any filiation).

But this strip-tease has gone on long enough. So let us begin by indicating briefly the intertext with Sade. The first point in common is a certain "principe de délicatesse" (SFL, p141). By this is meant, amongst other things, the fact that Sade *se vouvoie* when indicating to himself changes that needed to be made in his text: "Ne vous écartez en rien de ce plan" (Sade, 1975, p446). It would appear that Perec was similarly distanced from

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illustrating the double movement of deconstruction (Bloom et al., 1979, p251).This opens up a different thematic from the one here, though as to which is primal, it cannot be said.

[3] *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* was published in 1971, a year before *Les Revenentes*. While the collection *La Dissémination* was not published until 1972, the two essays which concern us here, 'La Double Séance' and 'La Dissémination', were published in 1970 and 1969, respectively.

It would seem also that, in a certain circle, Sade was 'in the air' frequently at the time. The likes of Bataille, Blanchot and Foucault showed an interest in him from the fifties on. This in turn inspired the writers of Tel Quel, culminating in a special issue of *Tel Quel* devoted to 'La pensée de Sade' (*Tel Quel*, no. 28, Winter 1967). As well as texts by Sollers, Damisch and Tort, this issue included Barthes's 'L'arbre du crime' (reprinted in *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*) and Klossowski's 'Le philosophe scélérat' (later republished on its own, see below).

1970 then saw the publication of Pierre Guyotat's *Éden, Éden, Éden* -- a work of fiction which combined stylistic experimentation (it is an 'open' text, constituted of one unfinished sentence) and explicit sexual material (the adventures of a group of soldiers in Algeria). Though not published in the 'Collection Tel Quel', Guyotat did frequent the group and the novel was prefaced by three illustrious names: Sollers, Barthes and Leiris. True to the

himself when composing *Les Revenentes*, initiating an int(e)r(a)subjectivity to which we will return. This is suggested by the *quatrième de couverture*, which begins "Vous avez lu quelque part que la lettre la plus fréquemment utilisée de la langue française était la voyelle 'e'. Cela, bien sûr, vous a semblé injuste, et même intolérable, et vous avez décidé d'agir." This *vouvoiement* is maintained throughout the passage. Aside from the obvious identification with Sade which it reveals, there is also the reference to the intolerable, a term much used when describing Sade's work. Here, pushing us towards a certain *expérience des limites*, it assumes a programmatic value, prefiguring the explicit intertext which is to follow.[4]

Before examining similarities in the texts, let us first mention a difference: the orgy in *Les Revenentes* is inserted into the narrative as the culmination of a plot led by the narrator and his accomplices to steal jewellery belonging to a guest of the Bishop of Exeter, Bérengère de Brémen-Brévent, the idea being that in the general melee it will be easy to appropriate surreptitiously the gems. In this respect, the scene differs from Sade, whose orgies are always their own motivation. However, it soon becomes obvious that the narrative and descriptive energy expended on the scene exceeds that required by the logic of the intrigue.[5]

As regards similarities, *Les Revenentes* opens with seven limousines entering the grounds of the Bishop's residence. At this point in the narrative no comment is made regarding the Bishop's somewhat libidinous nature. However, in retrospect, certain parallels can be drawn with the voyage to, and enclosure in, the Château de Silling as described in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*. Obviously not quite as secluded as Silling, which is to be found

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preoccupations of Tel Quel at the time, Sollers and Barthes associated Guyotat's text with that of Sade.

[4] As in Sade, this *délicatesse* is emulated in the relations between the characters: "– Cette excellence dézeere-t-elle qe je le brenle? demende très genteement Estelle. – Fêtes, fêtes, très chère, fêt l'Evêqe" (REV, p97).

[5] The novel is divided into thirteen unnumbered and untitled sections. Of these, only the last two are devoted to the orgy: number twelve deals with the immediate preparations for the orgy (essential given the importance of ritual and regulation, as we will see), while number thirteen deals with the orgy proper. Measured in this manner, the orgy does not seem excessive or even important. However, of one hundred and twenty-five pages of actual text, these two sections alone occupy fifty-one. That is to say, forty-one percent of the total. The actual theft of the jewels is dealt with, as a *chute rapide*, in one page at the close of the novel.

deep in the Black Forest and which is protected by brigands in the pay of the libertines, the Bishop's residence is nonetheless fortified and guarded: "L'évêché est cerné: cent tentes dressées près des entrées, cent trente Fédérés brevetés et experts le défendent" (REV, p18). Moreover, it contains a church which is used to house toilets, as in *Les 120 journées*: "elle mène vers le trensept en éqerre dens leqel l'Evêqe fé fère des grendes twelettes qerrelées plènes de chèzes percées (REV, p88). Unlike in Sade, these toilets are not there to permit the humiliation of the victims but are purely functional, and make no further appearance. The church which houses them, as 'sæptum' or enclosure, the etymology of transept (*trensept*) shows, provides the closed space necessary for the orgy to take place: "Ici comme ailleurs, c'est la clôture qui permet le système, c'est-à-dire l'imagination." (SFL, p23).

As in Sade, a certain symmetry is to be observed in the distribution of the protagonists. There are twenty-two in all, and they can be divided into the following groups:

1. The victim of the conspiracy (Bérengère de Brémen-Brévent)
2. Seven 'masters' (subdivided into the four conspirators: Clément (the narrator), Hélène, Estelle, Thérèse; the leader of a rival gang, Ernest; and the Bishop and his aide, Le Père Spencer)
3. seven *éphèbes grecs* or *pédés* (the rival gang): Gégé les Pervenches, Jeff de Denver, les Frères Bénédek (Dédé and Stephen), Peter le Replet, Bebel le Béléfré, and Lew-les-belles-fesses
4. seven priests under the command of the Bishop: Tencrède de Stenbergen, Edme de Bénévent, Kenneth Peebles, René Vernet, Herbert Scheele, Celse Delessert, and Stephen Brewster

The latter two groups correspond roughly to what in Sade are referred to as *fouteurs*. On the surface, it would seem that the number twenty-two is not as conducive to permutations as the groups of four and eight which Sade uses in *Les 120 journées* (for a classic example of permutation, see the four groups of four permuted/shared amongst the four *maîtres* (Sade, 1975, p88)). At most, it would seem to permit the formation of eleven couples, which is not as elegant a solution as Perec normally chooses. There is however a reason

for this occurrence of the number twenty-two (aside from the fact that *sept* is a natural lipogram, giving us three groups of seven, plus the victim) to which we will return.[6]

As Barthes remarks, there is always in Sade, for any given *tableau*, someone to arrange the *mise en scène*, what he calls an *ordonnateur* (SFL, p33).[7] However, this person holds no permanent primacy in the hierarchy: no sooner has he accomplished the distribution of the personnel to his satisfaction, than he relinquishes his authority by joining himself to the edifice, becoming a 'mere' actor. This disruption of the hierarchy is compensated for by the fact that the *ordonnateur* is always one of the masters; in this capacity, of course, he maintains absolute control over his victims. This is reversed in *Les Revenentes* by the fact that it is a member of a subordinate group (a priest) who organises the major set-piece, although he does also join in himself. In general, the hierarchy in *Les Revenentes* is not as strict as in Sade: there are no victims in a Sadean sense for, though Bérengère is the victim of a theft, she is a willing participant in the orgy, as are the others. When certain participants (Ernest and his *pédés*) are eventually punished, it is for the real crime of attempted theft, and not because of their hierarchically inferior status.

The mathematics of the erotic

The above as background. What is of importance here is the permutational and combinatorial elements of the orgy, the manner in which the aesthetic form takes precedence. Let us consider the following, which is announced before the orgy begins (as Barthes says: "la pratique suit la parole

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[6] As Bernard Magné remarks in his article 'Les Revenentes: de l'effervescence entre lengge et texte', contrary to the meta-textual role played in *La Disparition* by the numbers *cinq*, *six*, *vingt-cinq* and *vingt-six*, the number seven (*sept*) plays no such role. He neglects, however, the function of twenty-two, although he does discuss the meta-textual connotations raised by the intertext with Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (see Magné, 1989, pp188-189).

[7] Aside the from the static poses which we will encounter in *Les Revenentes*, the sexual act is presented elsewhere in Perec as a fixed *tableau* or living sculpture: "L'homme, les mains posées sur la taille de la femme, lui lèche le sein gauche cependant qu'elle, légèrement cambrée, enserre de sa main droite le sexe de son compagnon tout en se caressant elle-même de l'autre main." (VME, p177). The action, as it were, is not developed, the pose remains static.

et en reçoit absolument sa détermination: ce qui se fait a été dit", the text precedes the action (SFL, p40)): "L'Evêqe en effet est très streect: le clergé, de temps en temps, se permet de révéler ses préférences envers des 'événements' frenchement débreedés, mets l'évêqe hème qe ses fêtes respectent des règles sévères et les trensgresser, c'est fréqemment reesqer de se fère relegger" (REV, p88). The notion of transgression introduced here is singular in that it does not refer to the transgression of sexual norms, which are not considered at all, but rather to the transgression of the rules which govern the already transgressive behaviour. ("Souvent la transgression de l'interdit n'est pas elle-même moins sujette à des règles que l'interdit. Il ne s'agit pas de liberté. [L]e souci d'une règle est parfois le plus grand dans la transgression car il est plus difficile de limiter un tumulte une fois commencé." (Bataille, 1987, p68)). What is unacceptable is not illicit sex but unregulated sex and it is in this light that the novel is post-Sadean, concerned as it is with the formal rather than the moral nature of transgression. (This is also the approach taken by Foucault in his 1963 article, 'Préface à la transgression': "Le jeu [...] de la transgression semble être régi par une obstination simple: la transgression franchit et ne cesse de recommencer à franchir une ligne qui, derrière elle, aussitôt se referme en une vague de peu de mémoire, reculant ainsi à nouveau jusqu'à l'horizon de l'infranchissable." (Foucault, 1994, p236)).

This emerges more clearly in what is the novel's major set-piece. After a period of initial unrestrained enthusiasm, one of the priests expresses his dissatisfaction with the "triste partouze" (SFL, p171). He would prefer that the orgy follow the strict rules mentioned above. There follows a debate on the merits of the opposing positions, a debate which is essentially a summary of the different views taken on the use of *contrainte formelle*, and of the Romantic versus the post-Romantic conception of the artist in general. In this respect, the debate can be read as an acting out of Barthes's observation that: "Bien que toute création soit nécessairement une combinatoire, la société, en vertu du vieux mythe romantique de l' 'inspiration', ne supporte pas qu'on le lui dise." (SFL, p40). On the one hand, complains Tencrède, the priest in favour of constraint, "Tel bèze et tel se lesse fère, tel se brenle et tel se fêt

lécher, mets ce n'est règlé, ce n'est pensé! Z'êtes tels des bêtes! Et, en tent q'esthète, je le regrette extrèmement!" (REV, pp113-114). What emerges from this statement of principle is, firstly, the aesthetic nature of constraint, which, precisely, values form over content. Secondly, an opinion is passed on the nature of what is human. Contrary to a Romantic viewpoint, which values spontaneity, the reliance on animal instinct, Tencrède considers that it is man's capacity for reasoned action which is important. In light of this, he goes on to inscribe himself in a certain aesthetic tradition by naming, surnames only of course, Paul Klee, Maurice Scève and Anton Webern; all of whom paid great attention to form.[8]

The opposing camp, the Romantics, indulging the cult of the self and of free expression of the soul's passions, maintain that liberty is the important element: "Let's be free! Lesse les gens se bézer leebrement!" (REV, p114). They put the emphasis on the inspiration of the moment: "bézer, c'est créer per se, c'est créer tel qe" (REV, pp114-115). They also appropriate the notion that what is perverse is not transgressive behaviour itself, but the transgression of rules governing such behaviour. In their case they reverse this argument, claiming that it is the rules which are perverse: "N'entreprends tes enchevêtrements pervers! Lesse les mecs s'enfeeler pépère!" (REV, p115).[9] By extension, it is every formalist aesthetic which is rejected, declared vain, in favour of the expression of self: "Ces scènes ne révèlent qe vènes dégénerescences et dérèglements de crévés!" (REV, p115). Are

[8] Klee has been dealt with elsewhere; Scève incorporated cabalistic and mathematical concepts into his poem *Délie* (see the analysis by Bertrand Guégnan in his 'Notes pour une vie de Maurice Scève' (Guégnan, 1967, pXXIII *passim*); Webern, as is well known, was a leading exponent of twelve-tone music.

Incidentally, the disparity (temporal and generic) evident in this short list is not uncommon when Perec lists his own influences: "un certain nombre d'auteurs (de Joyce à Hergé, de Kafka à Price, de Scève à Pierre Dac, de Si Shônagon à Gotlib) définissent, circonscrivent le lieu d'où j'écris" ('Entretien Perec/Jean-Marie Le Sidaner', p3).

[9] This debate on the notion of perversity echoes Klossowski's, grafting a certain fetishism (in this case, of the letter) onto the perverse: "Car si l'on entend par libertinage la pure et simple propension à l'orgie si dénuée de scrupules qu'elle puisse être, le désir du pervers ne s'y assouvit jamais autrement que par le goût scrupuleux pour un détail, par la recherche scrupuleuse d'un détail, par un geste qui va scrupuleusement à ce détail, et dont le souci échappe à ceux qui se livrent aux déchaînements d'appétits frustes. Le pervers poursuit l'exécution d'un geste unique" (Klossowski, 1967, p29). A "geste unique" echoed by the fact that *Les Revenentes* appeared in the collection "Idée Fixe", which the *quatrième de couverture* assimilates, applying it specifically to the use of constraint in *La Disparition* and

degenerate those who need the stimulus of constraint, bondage, as opposed to those with life force sufficient enough to create themselves, to use a vaguely Nietzschean terminology.

The end result of these discussions is that all agree to experiment with an ordered arrangement (an *opération*, or combination of postures, to use one of Barthes's terms).[10] The resulting synchronic tableau is exhaustive in many respects, and it is here that the number twenty two assumes its full significance as it designates the twenty two characters who are manipulated into position, but also the twenty two remaining letters of the alphabet which are subject to the same erotic permutation or manhandling (twenty six letters, minus the four missing vowels), giving rise to "un accroissement quasi mathématique du crime".[11] Firstly, in this tableau, every position is attempted and every area of the body simultaneously penetrated or inundated. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, given the rewriting of language required, practically every body part is named. (Perec's other major lipogram, *La Disparition*, also contains the description of a body which could be classed as exhaustive/excessive: it runs over several pages and devotes a paragraph to every 'item' on the body, literally moving from head to toe – actually from head to rump (DISP, pp183-184). It is as though the asceticism of the lipogram needs to be compensated for through Epicurean feats of writing). The body parts are as follows (in order of appearance):

p83: ventres, fesses
p90: henches
p96: gemmes de ses encêtres, lèvres, membre
p97: verges, fentes, lengges, dents, feengers
p98: le sexe, temple secret, sperme
p99: qéqette, beete
p101: erteyes, jembes, glend, nénés, frèzes
p104: keekee
p109: seng
p110: menche
p112: testeeQles, le Q, pwels
p122: esselles

Les Revenentes, before implying that while the process might evolve, there is no escape: "il est désormais temps pour vous de vous laisser envahir par une autre idée fixe".

[10] We will return below to the argument which brings about the unification of the opposing camps.

[11] Michel Tort, 'L'effet Sade', *Tel Quel*, no. 28, p69.

Note the preponderance of those capable of penetrating and those capable of penetration, with particular reference to the numerous synonyms for penis. Note also the liquids, blood and sperm, at work within the solidity of the limbs and organs. Equally, every preference is catered for, from buggery to incest, from bestiality to coprophagy (REV, pp100, 111, & 135-136 for the first occurrence of each). This grammar of exhaustivity is complemented by another: a grammar of reciprocity, every actor in turn being acted upon, every subject becoming in turn an object. For Deleuze, this "réversibilité nécessaire" indicates that, against Lacan, *le sadique* sees no difference between himself and *autrui* (Deleuze, 1969, pp371-372). The question as to whether we are dealing with two identical atoms – Deleuze's terms – hurtling into each other, or with a dominant and a subservient atom will be of relevance below.

The ludic revisited

In this section we will import into our analysis another series of intertextual references alluded to in *Les Revenentes*. These will then permit us to revalue the notion of playing with the reader, elaborated throughout Perec's work, by using the concepts evolved in game theory. We will take the relationship between Bartlebooth and Winckler in *La Vie mode d'emploi* as a paradigm of the two-player game.

Missing letters, purloined concepts

In *Les Revenentes*, reference is made on two separate occasions to a text entitled "Les Lettres menqentes" (REV, pp91 & 138). Given the context, which we will discuss, this is evidently a reference to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and to its French translation, *La Lettre volée*, as rendered by Baudelaire. Furthermore, given our emphasis on the incorporation by *Les Revenentes* of criticism contemporary to it, we can additionally see this as a reference to Lacan's 'Séminaire sur *La Lettre volée*', long famous by the time

Les Revenentes was written.[12] As for the departure from the consecrated translation of the title, this was obviously necessitated by the lipogrammatic nature of *Les Revenentes*.[13] (Aside from inspiring Lacan and game theorists – see below – Poe's tale was also picked up on by Barthes in his seminal 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', providing him with a metaphor on which to hang a statement of principle with which we can only agree: "le sens n'est pas 'au bout' du récit, il le traverse; tout aussi évident que la *lettre volée*, il n'échappe pas moins qu'elle à toute exploration unilatérale" (Barthes, 1985, p174). Adapted to the thematics of the present chapter, we could say that no unilateral exploration of the (text's) body would reveal all the niches where meaning might be hiding – reading as touching?).

The first reference to "Les Lettres menqentes" occurs when Bérengère is, just prior to the orgy, attempting to decide on the best manner of hiding her jewels. She does not suspect an actual plot to steal them, she is just suspicious of human nature: "Qe qelqe clephte se lesse tenter et c'en est fé de ces gemmes!" (REV, p91). Eventually:

> [E]lle décrète q'elle lesse ses gemmes et les enferme dens des qessettes de fer. Les clés pénêtrent dens les verterelles, et pèsent près des pènes lesqels s'enclenchent sèchement. Bérengère cèle les qessettes dens les renfencements de qelqe crédence q'elle scelle mêmement. Elle est prête de céler de même l'ensemble des clés, qend elle se remembère l'exemple des 'Lettres menqentes' et, très frenchement, presqe négleegement, elle lesse trèner les clefs près de ses chevets. (REV, p91)

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[12] Although Lacan is not specifically named to in *Les Revenentes* (*contrainte oblige*), Perec did refer to him in 1969's collaborative *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go*, where he and a certain Zygmund Freud are named as celebrity players of go, perhaps an ironic comment on the nature of the analyst-analysand relationship (GO, p125). In 1973, a year after *Les Revenentes*, further reference is made to Lacan and his discourse on truth. This reference is preceded by a passage on a projected Oulipian project, 'Littérature Sémo-Définitionnelle' (LSD), which is of interest to us here, linking as it does psychoanalysis, transgression and the *chaîne signifiante*: "de même que dans le discours de l'analysé, se produit une régénération du signifiant grâce à une série de transgressions successives [...], de même, ici [LSD], on évite la dégénération du signifiant – que ne manquerait pas d'engendrer la linéarité, la rigueur des équivalences s'enchaînant comme autant de syllogismes – en ménageant des transgressions définitionnelles" (CGP3, pp32-33). This emphasis on the signifier (primacy of) echoes Lacan's insistence on same in his 'Séminaire sur La Lettre volée': see his "Un signifiant qui donne prise sur la Reine..." and the notion of "chaîne signifiante" which opens the seminar (Lacan, 1966, pp7 & 19).

This notion of "transgressions successives" suggests perhaps that there is no true, definitive transgression, but rather an infinitely circular process (see Foucault's comments in 'Préface à la transgression', quoted above, or Hubert Damisch who refers to "la tâche infinie de la transgression" ('L'écriture sans mesures', *Tel Quel*, no. 28, p51)).

[13] These "lettres menqentes" also serve an obvious meta-textual function, designating the four vowels which are missing from the text.

In this instance, the reference would seem to be to Poe's original story, as the emphasis is on what is commonly held to be the essential theme of that text, the notion that the best method of hiding is to leave out in the open.[14] This version of events, with its insistence on the plot and on Dupin's virtuosity, focuses on two of the main elements of detective novels. Indeed, the second scene in *Les Revenentes* which refers to *The Purloined Letter* would also initially seem to inscribe itself in the same line of interpretation, as one of the characters declares that: "le meyer recette de céler est de sembler lesser en éveedence!" (REV, p138).[15]

This repetition (*automatisme de répétition*) mirrors the standard view, while simultaneously subverting it, as in this case the text *The Purloined Letter* is itself the letter left out in the open, disguising the text which is actually hidden (the obvious hides the less obvious, as opposed to being hidden by it): if we look more closely at this second scene, we will see that, as well as referring to Poe, it also refers to Lacan. In this instance, at the very end of the novel,[16] the conspirators finally get their hands on the jewels:

> – Well, et ces gemmes? demende Thérèse.
> – Let's see.
> Ce n'est enchevêtré de déneecher les clefs; elles trènent près des chevets.
> – Est-ce qelqe strétègemme de Bérengère?[17]
> – Certes, mets je le décèle ézément: Te remembères les 'Lettres Menqentes': le meyer recette de céler est de sembler lesser en éveedence!
> Et, certes, les clés descellent les crédences, et dens ces crédences se révèlent les qessettes, et dens les qessettes les gemmes: perles, ferrets, neqelesses, etc...
> (REV, pp137-138).

As stated, this scene obviously repeats the first "lettres menqentes" scene, in that it refers to the cliché about *The Purloined Letter* (hiding in the open). There is also, however, a more subtle and fruitful intertext which we

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[14] See also: "Mais cette vérité n'est affichée que pour qu'on ne la remarque pas." (53J, p164).

[15] Compare this phrase with Dupin's comments that the very large letters in the game which consists of finding place-names on a map "escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious" and that "the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it [the letter] at all" (Poe, 1993, p144).

[16] It is perhaps not insignificant that the two episodes involving the "lettres menqentes" occur immediately before the orgy and immediately after it. In this sense they serve to 'frame' the orgy, suggesting that the two models, erotic novel and detective novel, are related.

will now attempt to tease out. As in *The Purloined Letter*, the strategy of hiding in the open fails here, although not because of the perspicacity of a particular individual (Dupin). The novelty of this episode is that it refers to *The Purloined Letter* as text, that is to say as an element in the public domain, subject to being known (the challenge becomes cultural, similar to the challenge of uncovering intertextual links). In this sense, it is as much a commentary on Poe's text as is Lacan's Seminar. Attempting to hide an object by using the technique described in *The Purloined Letter* is therefore likely to fail for the simple reason that those looking for the object have potentially also read *The Purloined Letter*. They will therefore not be fooled by this trick (just as the Prefect of Police, in *The Purloined Letter*, had he read a prior text describing the same technique, would not have been deceived). This is exactly what happens in this episode: "Te remembères les 'Lettres Menqentes'". This ironic reversal of the situation depicted in *The Purloined Letter* is most likely a wink to Lacan's *boutade* in his Seminar that: "C'est là un leurre dont pour nous, nous ne recommanderions l'essai à personne, crainte qu'il soit déçu à s'y fier." (Lacan, 1966, p26).[18] Bérengère should perhaps have relied on a more obscure text for her inspiration as the characters' knowledge of Poe's text is repeated by Perec's knowledge of Lacan's.

If we accept that this episode is a knowing (though perhaps slightly facile) reference to Lacan, there is another trap which awaits us. It would be easy, because of the now evident link to a psychoanalytical text, to concentrate our attention on the presence in the two episodes quoted of symbols for male and female genitalia ("Les clés pénêtrent dens les verterelles", "qessettes", "crédences", etc) and to proceed from there to a

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[17] As Bernard Magné remarks, it is here that the invention *strétègeme* is itself re-written as *strétègemme*; thus "le rapport avec les gemmes, objet de convoitise, devient directement lisible" (Magné, 1989, p187).

[18] Equally, could Thérèse's "Let's seve the Qeens!" (REV, p96), aside from implying *sève*, be a reference to Dupin's desire to 'save the Queen', a desire highlighted by Lacan?

Aside from this communal missive, there is a more subterranean (and, at the same time, more *graphic*) occurrence of missing and supplementary letters running through this network: Lacan's "politique de l'autru*i*che" (Lacan, 1966, p24), Derrida's *différance*, Poe's "Perdidit antiquum litera prima sonum" and, of course, the E in *Les Revenentes*. Not mistakes (*coquilles*), but transgressive typographies, letters which will never reach their destination.

fully fledged psychoanalytical interpretation of *Les Revenentes*.[19] To do so would be to remain embroiled in the oedipal logic of the *lettre volée*, by attempting to follow it to its (often postponed yet) ultimately unique destination: "une lettre arrive toujours à destination" (Lacan, 1966, p53). Deleuze and Guattari's observation that in Kafka the (psychoanalytical) conception of Oedipus undergoes "un grossissement jusqu'à l'absurde" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975, p18) is relevant here as *Les Revenentes* is saturated with a humorous use of sexual symbolism, short-circuiting the unconscious connections (consider its eulogy of incest: "C'est vrément schwette l'enceste!" (REV, p122, *passim*)).[20]

It is our intention instead to focus on an apparently minor element in *The Purloined Letter*. One which Lacan also mentions, though no sooner has he done so than he ridicules it. In shifting our attention to this episode, the succession of triangular relationships analysed (some – Derrida (CP, p456) – would say imposed) by Lacan gives way to one which is simply dualistic (apparently dualistic). The situation is as follows: Dupin is providing an explanation of his method of reasoning and of where the Prefect went wrong; he illustrates this with an anecdote about a schoolboy playing the game of 'even and odd':

> For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'Are they even or odd?' Our schoolboy replies 'Odd', and loses; but upon the second trial he wins, for then he says to himself, 'The simpleton had them even upon the first trial, and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd – he guesses odd, and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds

[19] Which would in turn mirror Lacan's psychoanalytical reading of Poe. See also Derrida's critique of Lacan's reading entitled 'Le facteur de la vérité' (Derrida, 1980, pp439-524) and Perec's "le chemin que parcourt une lettre est une stricte affaire de code: Mallarmé, Latis, ou la cartographie ne peuvent être que des facteurs de bruit..." (EE, p112). The interference in the system ("facteurs de bruit") preventing it from being certain that the letter will arrive *à destination*, or that, should it arrive, its message will not be contaminated: "une lettre n'arrive *pas toujours* à destination et, dès lors que cela appartient à sa structure, on peut dire qu'elle n'y arrive jamais vraiment, que quand elle arrive, son pouvoir-ne-pas-arriver la tourmente d'une dérive interne" (CP, p517, author's emphasis).

[20] See the entire chapter entitled 'Un œdipe trop gros' (pp17-28). They insist on the fact that Kafka was aware of Freud's theories, just as Perec was aware of Lacan's, and that he played with them, rather than unwittingly illustrating them.

Similarly, it is not my intention to proceed with a specifically Lacanian reading of the text (of literature in general), such as is undertaken, for example, by Ben Stoltzfus: "Every text contains repressed material that structures a never-ending dialog with the Other – a fictitious self made up of the confluence of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real" (Stoltzfus, 1996, p138, *passim*). Humbling as it would be for him, Lacan is only a pretext here.

> that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even' – he guesses even and wins. (Poe, 1993, pp139-140)

When questioned, the narrator defines this process as "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent" (Poe, 1993, p140).

Qualifying Dupin's behaviour here as that of a magician claiming (falsely) to have demonstrated the mechanism of his illusion, Lacan writes:

> Tel opère Dupin, quand il part de l'histoire du petit prodige qui blousait tous ses camarades au jeu de pair ou impair, avec son truc de l'identification à l'adversaire, dont nous avons pourtant montré qu'il ne peut atteindre le premier plan de son élaboration mentale, à savoir la notion de l'alternance intersubjective sans y achopper aussitôt sur la butée de son retour. (Lacan, 1966, pp29-30)

Without entering into the finer points of Lacan's theory of intersubjectivity, let us retain the formal structure of the model it proposes.[21] At its simplest, the term 'intersubjectivity' means between two subjects (*sujets*) or individuals. In the realm of fiction, this dualistic relationship is suggestive of the interplay between the writer and the reader (a sort of interminable *va-et-vient*).[22] In this respect, it is no accident that the detective novel has often been seen as an exemplary model for the writer-reader relationship as, in essence, it consists of a zero-sum game between the detective and the

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[21] In as much as Lacan explains his theory of intersubjectivity, see Lacan, 1966, pp24-27.

[22] We will go into game theory in more detail below. Let us first consider, however, the similarities between the passages quoted from Poe and Lacan with the following extract from a presentation of game theory: "[N]othing prevents the opponent from mentally placing himself in the shoes of the first player, in which case optimal reasoning will inevitably lead him to the same conclusions as those the first player reached by reasoning optimally. [S]uppose that optimal reasoning on the part of the first player in the matching pennies game led him to favor the choice of heads over the choice of tails. Then optimal reasoning on the part of the second player would subsume a prediction of this favoritism. But if the second player knows that the first player favors heads, then the second player will favor tails because his payoff is greatest when his choice differs from that of the first player." (Binmore, 1990, p3). Or the following, commenting on the same game: "The paradox is this: if we are successful in constructing a theory that indicates which strategy is best, an intelligent opponent with access to all the information available to us can use the same logic to deduce our strategy. The opponent can then second-guess us and win. So it would be fatal to use the 'preferred' strategy suggested by the theory." (Davis, 1997, p22). Davis actually goes on to discuss *The Purloined Letter* and, in particular, the case of what he calls "Poe's remarkable wonder child" (Davis, 1997, pp27-31).

This ironic situation is parodied in *La Vie mode d'emploi* with the description of a game of electronic backgammon in which all the players have to do is roll the dice, the computer actually deciding which pieces to move (for both players): "chaque joueur disposant à tour de rôle de la meilleure attaque et/ou de la meilleure défense, l'issue la plus fréquente d'une partie est un blocage réciproque des pièces équivalent à un nul" (VME, p164).

criminal, with clearly defined objectives (payoffs, in the jargon of game theory) for each. *Les Revenentes* is no exception: the criminals (Clément and Co.) can either fail to get the jewels; fail to get the jewels and get caught; get the jewels and get caught; or, get the jewels and escape (it is the latter solution which applies to *Les Revenentes*). Before expanding on the applications of game theory to the Bartlebooth-Winckler duel, let us first examine Perec's attitude towards his reader and, in particular, his adoption of the detective novel to his own ends. [23]

La lecture mode d'abus

In a series of interviews given around the time of the publication of *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Perec made extensive and recurrent references to the notion of the jigsaw (*puzzle*) and of the game between the writer and the reader: "Mais si on pouvait résoudre tout de suite un puzzle, il n'y aurait pas de plaisir! Ce livre, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, c'est pareillement une partie qui se joue entre le lecteur et moi."[24] These comments were no doubt inspired by the thematic of the novel, presumably still heavily present in Perec's mind.[25] Taken as a block, two seemingly irreconcilable trends (*économies*) can be detected in these comments: that of seduction and that of provocation (a form

[23] See Perec's injunction that *La Vie mode d'emploi* should be read as a detective novel ('En dialogue avec l'époque', p48). Moreover, *La Disparition*, *Les Revenentes* and *53 Jours* are all explicitly based on the model of the detective novel.

[24] 'L'impossible M. Perec', p32. This statement echoes the 'formalist-Romantic' debate discussed above, in that pleasure (*jouissance*) comes from the anticipation which is engendered by the temporal element present in the elaboration/dismantling of all structures. See also: "il n'y a que cette espèce de lointain, très proche en même temps, entre les lecteurs et l'auteur, c'est un jeu qui se joue à deux [...], il n'y a pas d'au-delà." ('En dialogue avec l'époque', p46). Or: "j'ai voulu construire un livre avec lequel l'auteur et le lecteur puissent jouer comme un puzzle" and "[u]n livre, c'est un peu comme une partie d'échecs entre le lecteur et moi: au départ il n'y a rien, puis on commence à lire, interviennent des personnages, et à la fin il ne reste rien." ('La maison des romans', pp32 & 33).

[25] On the other hand, it is conceivable that Perec approached this press campaign in the same manner that he and co-director Bernard Queysanne approached the promotion of their film version of *Un homme qui dort* (1974). In that instance, they chose four themes or catchwords which they repeated in every interview (Bellos, 1995, p541). This case could be another conscious shepherding of the press and, if so, would be another example of Perec's knowing approach to the reception of his work.

of play common no doubt to most couples).[26] The first is calculated to attract the reader, while the second is intended to repel him.

As an example of seducing the reader, we can take the following statement:

> Q: Ce qui est en jeu, c'est la communication.
> A: Oui.
> Q: C'est ce qui est en jeu dans le jeu.
> A: Oui. Ou la séduction. Enfin, je veux dire la relation au lecteur. Il n'y a que deux personnages dans tout livre: l'écrivain et le lecteur qui jouent ensemble comme une partie d'échecs.[27]

Or this exchange:

> Q: Quand vous écrivez, le jeu correspond finalement à une stratégie du désir. C'est la drague?
> A: C'est la séduction! Ce n'est d'ailleurs pas caché: je vous raconte une histoire, je ne vous dis pas la fin tout de suite, mais un peu plus tard... Je ne vous raconte pas cette histoire-là mais vous pouvez la reconstituer...[28]

Elsewhere, Perec speaks of "le romanesque, le goût des histoires et des péripéties" (PC, p10). It is clear that the economy of desire is, for him, linked to the narrative act, and, more specifically, to the element of suspense generated by the postponement of revelation, just as in a detective novel.[29] It is also important to emphasise that seduction does not entail passivity on the part of the reader, he is not a simple 'target' but must choose to move towards the author. This is illustrated by Perec's distinction between the terms *séduction* and *fascination*: "Il y a des mécanismes de fascination qui s'exercent au niveau des foules, qui annihilent les possibilités de dialogue."[30] More than a simple reminder of Perec's *Cause Commune* heritage, this insistence on the reader's active role introduces a certain ambiguity. It is not entirely clear who is in control: the author who teases the reader with his tricks, or the reader who can humiliate with his indifference a writer desperately looking for approval. It also opens up the prospect that Perec was

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[26] See the appropriation of the concept of *économie* in the *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go*: "le but du jeu, son image, son projet, son *économie*, son principe" (GO, p39, authors' emphasis, perhaps highlighting their awareness of one of the theoretical terms in fashion at the time).

[27] *Poésie ininterrompue*, p8.

[28] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p48.

[29] "Cesse de tempérer, Excellence, fêt Estelle, et me déverse cette semence tellement tergeeversée!" (REV, pp108-109). Compare with Derrida's discussion of *temporiser*, one of the meanings hidden in *la différance* (MP, p8; POS, pp17 & 40).

[30] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p47

sketching out a form of reader-response criticism of his own. If the reader is active, then he is not simply accepting a unitary meaning imposed on him by the writer, but is creating his own plurality of interpretations during the course of the reading process. Perec's assertion regarding *La Vie mode d'emploi* that "on ne peut pas chercher une vérité dans ce livre" hints at this potential abdication of authorial power, the paternal Logos being subverted by the Other.[31]

If seduction is a function of narrative, then provocation would appear to be a function of description. The comments made by Perec pertaining to provocation and suffocation occur when he is discussing his descriptive technique which, particularly in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, entails pushing a seemingly neutral, objective description to the limits of the readable. The classic example is the exhaustively described yet unworkable tool (precisely because the apparently realistic description accumulates feature upon feature, rendering it completely unreal): a "Perceuse-percuteuse à variateur électronique" (VME, p103). In reference to this particular depiction, Perec admits that "J'ai peut-être fait là un peu de provocation."[32] In general, he refers to "un brassage encyclopédique, un entassement jusqu'à l'asphyxie?"[33] or "un surcroît de précision et de l'accumulation qui, je crois, doit provoquer deux choses: une sorte de hébétude, d'asphyxie, et ensuite une sorte de jubilation."[34] Jubilation is not to be confused with seduction, as jubilation is a solitary pleasure, experienced by the writer at the moment of composition and subsequently by the reader (seduction is an ongoing dualistic process, an economy). Jubilation is also, interestingly, linked to the use of formal constraint: "Ce que m'a apporté l'Oulipo, c'est la jubilation de l'écriture."[35]

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[31] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p46

[32] 'Un livre pour jouer avec', p18.

[33] 'L'impossible M. Perec', p32.

[34] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p47-48. Elsewhere, description is linked to *jouissance*, the distinction between *jubilation* and *jouissance* undermined, at least for Perec ('Entretien GP/Ewa Pawlikowska', p74).

[35] 'La maison des romans', p33 (or, much earlier, DISP, p311). In this case, Oulipo is shorthand for formal constraint. In his interview in *Poésie ininterrompue*, Perec light-heartedly linked his use of constraint to certain unspecified masochist tendencies. Given his insistence on suffocation, we might be tempted to conclude that he had the technique known as 'scarfing' in mind: this involves reducing the flow of blood to the brain in order to produce a more violent orgasm (*jouissance/jubilation*). This particular 'joy of constraint' is

Unlike seduction, provocation does not involve two players in motion. Rather, the one who provokes remains aggressively immobile, while the provoked recoils (seduction involves two mutually attracted players moving towards each other).[36] The two processes would seem to be incompatible. And yet, during this same promotional period, Perec does link them:

> Q: Ces énumérations sont un plaisir pour vous, mais le lecteur, quel effet en reçoit-il?
> A: Je pense un effet proche de l'asphyxie, une sorte d'ivresse qui déforme l'image de la vie. Ecrire un roman ce n'est pas raconter quelque chose en relation directe avec le monde réel. C'est établir un jeu entre l'auteur et le lecteur. Ça relève de la séduction.[37]

Aside from providing an implicit critique of mimesis, this passage reflects the fact that a certain amount of provocation (*asphyxie*) is present in seduction, and *vice versa* (the reader will not read a book which bores him, at the very least he wants to be titillated). It suggests that Perec was very much aware of 'how far one should go'. This is relevant to *Les Revenentes*, in that the 'intellectual' reader, seduced in advance by the concept of the lipogram, might well be shocked by the erotic content of the novel; meanwhile, the aficionado of erotic fiction, anticipating some solitary relief, might well be provoked by the novel's unrelenting linguistic experimentation (the reader 'pays for' his desire in both senses of the expression). The suggestion is that there is an antagonistic core to the game with the reader. This will be clarified if we examine a text which predates these interviews by ten years.

Written in 1969, the *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go* is a collaborative effort. Perec's two collaborators were both mathematicians and it is reasonable to assume that they introduced him to the rudiments of game theory. The stated aim of the book is to introduce the Japanese game of go to the French public. As such, the authors permit themselves a few swipes at chess, arguably the most popular game of strategy (and equally the game most closely associated with literature). There is another reason for this, however, as from a game theorist's viewpoint chess is

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expounded on in *Les Revenentes*: "c'est qend le mec est presqe crevé qe le membre se dresse, et le remède sélect, c'est de le pendre!" (REV, p102).

[36] This is not to be read as a piece of psychological naiveté. I do not intend to imply that in order to seduce, one must be genuinely attracted to the other. The expression 'mutually attracted' simply describes the structure of the process, not the motivations behind it.

[37] 'Un livre pour jouer avec', p18.

of little interest because it is finite so "in principle, every position on the board is either (a) a win for white, (b) a draw, or (c) a win for black" (Davis, 1997, p8). Our go enthusiasts display an almost identical scorn for chess: "C'est un jeu qui [...] ne connaît que trois issues sans nuances: la victoire, la défaite, le nul. [O]n ne peut pas gagner d'*un point*, ce qui est l'un des suprêmes raffinements du GO!" (GO, p24, authors' emphasis). Nonetheless, they recognise that go is ultimately itself a finite game: "Comme les échecs, comme les dames, le GO se joue à deux [...] et se termine après un nombre fini de coups. Rien n'y est caché, et le hasard y est exclu, sauf dans les mécanismes psychologiques des joueurs." (GO, pp21-22). Its superiority lies in the nuances mentioned above which result in the fact that: "le GO constitue-t-il la meilleure simulation finie d'un jeu continu" (GO, p26). Although finite, go gives the appearance of being infinite, a point that will not be without consequence further on: "Un des principaux écueils à la compréhension du go, c'est de savoir quand la partie est terminée".[38]

The most obvious analogy between go and the game between the writer and the reader is the fact that both are two player games. Consider the headings "Du Duel" and "De la guerre" (GO, pp26 & 27): "Les possibilités de jeu, assez limitées dans les tous premiers coups, augmentent considérablement vers le milieu de la partie pour décroître ensuite quand approche la fin. Le GO est donc [...] un Duel." (GO, p22). One could say that, at least in the 'traditional' novel, it is at the opening when the scene is being set, and, at the close, when the plot 'comes together' that there is least room for manoeuvre, as there is only one *dénouement* possible. This similarity is not one-sided as go is itself compared to writing: "Il n'existe qu'une seule et même activité à laquelle se puisse raisonnablement comparer le GO. On aura compris que c'est l'écriture" (GO, p42).[39] Go owes the honour of this comparison to its aesthetic, polemical and cerebral nature (GO, p17) as well as to the "subtilité de ses résultats" (GO, p26) and the fact

[38] 'Et ils jouent aussi', p32.

[39] As with the use of *économie*, the use here of *écriture* instead of *littérature* suggests an awareness of contemporary critical debate (see Chapter One, section entitled *Littérature ou Ecriture?*).

that it is "un jeu qu'on ne maîtrisera jamais" (GO, p41), just as the *chaîne signifiante* is beyond individual control.

If go is literary, then it is also warlike: "jeu de guerre, le GO va jusqu'à remplacer la guerre: ainsi confia-t-on au GO le soin de décider de l'issue du conflit sanglant qui opposait Sha An à son neveu Sha Ghen" (GO, pp16-17). If it can replace actual war, it can also help prepare for it: "Dans certaines circonstances, la pratique assidue du jeu de 'go' ou 'wai k'i' peut être considérée comme un entraînement intellectuel, moral et psychologique au métier des armes, à l'étude de la stratégie moderne et même à la guerre secrète." (GO, p29). Even more extraordinary is the fact that losing a game can have real physical consequences, as in the legendary battle between two grand masters which ended with one spitting blood (GO, p20).

By a potentially spurious syllogism, we can say that if the ludic (go) is literary and warlike, then literature is ludic and warlike. The antagonistic nature of the literary game is rendered more evident by this analogy. Indeed, choking the reader is, in this light, a noble battle. If it is a battle (duel), then there can only be three possible outcomes, notwithstanding the claims that there is no truth to be found. It emerges that the Perecian concept of the game has little to do with any putative reader-response criticism. It is instead concerned with strategic manoeuvres which will ultimately result in 'victory' for the writer.[40] This is most obvious when Perec refers to an art-form which we have not considered until now, the crossword: "Je me rends compte que le mot croisé est un jeu entre un auteur et le lecteur, entre le faiseur de mots croisés, celui qui construit la grille qu'on appelle le sphinx et celui qui résout la grille qu'on appelle l'oedipe."[41] In this case, the writer always wins: if the reader fails to solve the puzzle, then he has been outwitted; if he solves it, then he has been forced to follow the trail left by the writer (there is no possibility of the reader adding to the crossword by 'inventing' his own solution/meaning, he is either right or wrong). The Perecian concept of the

[40] This despite Perec's assertion that it is only sport which is competitive, not the game ('La vie: règle du jeu', p13).

[41] 'En dialogue avec l'époque', p49. What can be done with this reference to Oedipus, it is almost *too* suggestive? Perhaps we could link it with a reference to Lacan and the Sphinx in *La Disparition* (DISP, p43)?

game is therefore despotic and, ultimately, solipsistic: there is in reality no means for the reader to influence the writer (as in a move by move game), there is no dialogue, the dualistic relationship is a sham and the writer only really plays with himself or, at most, his text (an extension of himself). When asked to name his favourite games, Perec lists off word games, jigsaws and tangrams before admitting: "Vous voyez que je ne cite que des jeux solitaires..."[42]

Fin de partie (Bluffer's Blues)

One appropriate way of describing the relationship between Bartlebooth and Winckler is to borrow an expression from the *Petit traité invitant à la découverte de l'art subtil du go*, which could have been written specifically to illustrate their ritualised antagonism, "ce mélange de suavité impassible et de subtilité féroce" (GO, p14). Bartlebooth's story is of course the central story of *La Vie mode d'emploi*. Of the numerous monomaniacs portrayed in the novel, it is he who runs through it as a central thread. This privileged position often results in him being seen as a metaphor for the artist, and for Perec in particular. As such, 'le cas Bartlebooth' provides an insight into the 'amont' of constraint: through him we catch a glimpse of the psychological make-up which predisposes a person to impose constraints on himself (this of course echoes back to the psychological reading of constraint analysed in Chapter Three above). In this section, we will instead focus on his relationship with Gaspard Winckler, artisan and jigsaw maker of unparalleled skill.

Wealthy beyond belief, Bartlebooth is completely indifferent to all the trappings of wealth. Searching for a project to occupy him, he feels the growing presence of "une certaine idée de la perfection" (VME, p157). The resulting project is therefore resolutely aesthetic and does indeed make an artist of Bartlebooth (though it is certainly not his paintings in themselves

[42] 'Et ils jouent aussi', p30. As far as playing with his text goes, consider the following guilty admission: "Mon véritable jeu, c'est la littérature et le jeu que je joue avec elle" ('J'ai fait imploser le roman', p73). Note the feminine pronoun *elle*.

which make him so). It is worth quoting in full the following summary of Bartlebooth's project, which shows at once its simplicity and folly:

> Pendant dix ans, de 1925 à 1935, Bartlebooth s'initierait à l'art de l'aquarelle.
>
> Pendant vingt ans, de 1935 à 1955, il parcourrait le monde, peignant, à raison d'une aquarelle tous les quinze jours, cinq cents marines de même format (65 x 50, ou raisin) représentant des ports de mer. Chaque fois qu'une de ses marines serait achevée, elle serait envoyée à un artisan specialisé (Gaspard Winckler) qui la collerait sur une mince plaque de bois et la découperait en un puzzle de sept cent cinquante pièces.
>
> Pendant vingt ans, de 1955 à 1975, Bartlebooth, revenu en France, reconstituerait, dans l'ordre, les puzzles ainsi préparés, à raison, de nouveau, d'un puzzle tous les quinze jours. A mesure que les puzzles serait réassemblés, les marines serait 'retexturées' de manière à ce qu'on puisse les décoller de leur support, transportées à l'endroit même où – vingt ans auparavant – elles avaient été peintes, et plongées dans une solution détersive d'où ne ressortirait qu'une feuille de papier Whatman, intacte et vierge. (VME, pp157-158)

It is, firstly, the period 1935 to 1955 which is of interest here: during this time, Winckler, mirroring the rhythm set by Bartlebooth, would spend two weeks transforming each painting into a jigsaw. Bartlebooth, therefore, effectively controlled Winckler's life for twenty years. Secondly, the period 1955 to 1975 constitutes a prolonging of the previous, as Bartlebooth belatedly interacts with the traps set for him by Winckler in the jigsaws.

Described schematically, this situation corresponds with what is called a zero-sum game: it is a two player game in which there can only be a winner and a loser.[43] No state of equilibrium can be reached (a state of equilibrium is an outcome which is beneficial to both parties): "A zero-sum game is any game where the losses exactly equal the winnings. All sporting events are zero-sum games. For every winner there is a loser" (Thurow, 1980, p11).[44] This means that the players obviously cannot work together, co-operation is not an option: "The term 'zero-sum' [...] means the players have diametrically opposed interests" (Davis, 1997, p14). Bartlebooth must attempt to solve jigsaws which Winckler must attempt to design as being un-solvable (which Bartlebooth in turn expects him to try to do). In the present case, Bartlebooth wins if he solves the jigsaw, Winckler if he fails to do so.

[43] It would perhaps be prudent to state here that, in the wake of Sokal and Bricmont, we must be careful when applying mathematical concepts to the human sciences. Let us say therefore that any subsequent use of game theory to illustrate one aspect of the ludic is purely metaphorical, no literal correspondence is implied.

This is complicated by the fact that Winckler considers his five hundred jigsaws as forming one unit or one ongoing game. However, from the perspective of game-theory, we are dealing with a succession of independent strategic zero-sum games. In contrast to an extensive game, a strategic game is one in which "each player chooses his plan of action once and for all, and all players' decisions are made simultaneously" (Osborne & Rubinstein, p3). This might initially seem a strange comment to make about a process which spans forty years. However, the game would only be extensive if it entailed Winckler making a jigsaw, Bartlebooth solving it, Winckler then reacting to Bartlebooth's 'technique' in his designing a second jigsaw, and so on. As it happens, Winckler makes his jigsaws 'once and for all', not knowing how Bartlebooth will approach their resolution.

This situation, as a zero-sum game, also accords with the following succinct overview of game theory: "The basic assumptions that underlie the theory are that decision-makers pursue well-defined exogenous objectives (they are *rational*) and take into account their knowledge or expectations of *other* decision-makers' behaviour (they reason *strategically*)" (Osborne & Rubinstein, p1, authors' emphasis). We have just seen each player's objective. The notion of strategic reasoning (not to be confused with a strategic game) mentioned here also refers us back to our discussion of Poe and Lacan and the phenomenon of identification with the other's intellect. This phenomenon is equally present in *La Vie mode d'emploi*: firstly, in the story of the Swedish diplomat, Ericsson, avenging his family's death (VME, p192) and, secondly, in a discussion on the art of the jigsaw: "en dépit des apparences, ce n'est pas un jeu solitaire: chaque geste que fait le poseur de puzzle, le faiseur de puzzle l'a fait avant lui" (VME, p251). The jigsaw maker must reason as he expects the jigsaw solver to reason, pre-empting him. Bartlebooth, accordingly, must attempt to determine the various *pièges, embûches* and *illusions* (VME, pp414-415) by projecting himself into Winckler's mindset. In an ironic twist, Winckler sometimes employs the

[44] Or, in French: "Les duels, c'est-à-dire les jeux à deux personnes et de somme nulle, ont tous une solution, c'est-à-dire une ou plusieurs issues où chacun des joueurs joue son moindre mal [...] en se garantissant un gain maximum." (Séris, 1974, p8).

same technique as the Minister in *The Purloined Letter*: instead of fracturing a given image, as Bartlebooth expects, "il laissait tel quel, d'une seule pièce, ce nuage, cette silhouette, cette tache colorée qui, nets de tout pourtour, devenaient inutilisables, découpes uniformes" (VME, p416).[45]

If we have been drawing on the similarities between game-theory and the Bartlebooth-Winckler relationship, it is only to now discard them, with the hope that this will clarify the Perecian conception of the game, which we described above as despotic and solipsistic. It is this latter which is of particular interest as what we are really dealing with is not one two-player game, but two one-player games: Winckler attempts to play the game through to the end, but Bartlebooth effectively breaks the contract binding the two players. This means that, while Winckler's obsession with revenge, while not strictly 'rational' in the everyday sense, is consistent with rationality as defined in game-theory: the desire to win. Indeed, so strong is this desire that it leads him to open up a potentially very interesting aspect of the game: the bluff.[46] It is this bluff which leads to his victory: Bartlebooth famously dies at the moment he is left with a W shaped piece, the last remaining hole being X shaped (VME, p600). While this is generally held to represent the tragic nature of Bartlebooth's project, it is also tragic from Winckler's point of view (thence the bluffer's blues) as Bartlebooth has long since ceased to play against him, leaving Winckler with vengeance in a void. Bartlebooth has refined his technique, guesses Winckler's traps, and yet he fails to solve the jigsaws because:

> Pour Bartlebooth, ils n'étaient plus que les pions biscornus d'*un jeu sans fin dont il avait fini par oublier les règles, ne sachant même plus contre qui il jouait*, quelle était la mise, quel était l'enjeu, petits bouts de bois dont les découpes capricieuses devenaient objets de cauchemars, seules matières d'un ressassement solitaire et bougon. (VME, p167, emphasis mine)

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[45] Further extending the intertextual network, reference is also made to Bartlebooth's attempt to "voir *autrement* ce que fallacieusement l'autre lui donnait à voir" (VME, p415, author's italics). He must see as the other sees, see the other, echoing our discussion of intersubjectivity and Lacan's theory of the Other.

[46] For a discussion of the bluff closely related to our purposes, see: "The bluffer is to the game involving two players what the lie is to the single consciousness. [T]he bluff opens up the interaction of *two* thinking subjects. [T]he bluffer's bluff is [...] about preventing us from winning through being able to predict what he will do. [T]he bluff in a game of two players creates the possibility of at least four strategies." (Forrester, 1997, p49, author's emphasis).

Bartlebooth is no longer rational in the game-theory sense of the word: he is no longer playing to win, but is only aiming for "un oubli profond du corps et du but à atteindre" (VME, p419; the almost Zen-like nature of this 'unbecoming' is emphasised on p418). Indeed, the solitary nature of his *ressassement* is emphasised by the use of the word *bougon*: "Bougonner: Exprimer pour soi seul [...] son mécontentement" (Le Petit Robert).

As every lawyer knows, while it takes two parties to enforce a contract, it only takes one to break it. Bartlebooth's defaulting is not the result of a deliberate act, but rather the inevitable consequence of human nature and, more importantly, the consequence of a force inherent in the project itself (irrespective of its extended temporal framework): the necessary breakdown of both intrasubjective and intersubjective relationships. Playing on the double meaning of the word *déception,* we could say that deception (Winckler's) leads to disappointment (also Winckler's): "encore une fois un jeu, mais un jeu terrible: on a beau essayer d'en comprendre les règles, on sait d'avance que toute stratégie nous conduira inévitablement à la défaite."[47] That two people cannot play the same game depends not on individual ill-will, but on the fractured economy of the ludic. The writer cannot play with the reader, the only question that remains is whether he can play with himself (and whether he can beat himself – for, if he wins against himself, then he also loses).

[47] 'Qui est-ce?', p9.

Sterility and *dissémination*

> La sortie hors de l'unité 'primitive' et mythique [...], la coupure, la décision – décidante et décidée – le *coup* partage la semence en la projettant. Elle inscrit la différence dans la vie [...], la multiplicité numérique ne survenant pas comme une menace de mort à un germe antérieurement un avec soi. Elle fraye au contraire la voie à 'la' semence qui ne (se) produit donc, ne s'avance qu'au pluriel. Singulier pluriel qu'aucune origine singulière n'aura jamais précédé. Germination, dissémination. Il n'y a pas de première insémination. La semence est d'abord essaimée. L'insémination 'première' est dissémination.
>
> – Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*.

Having looked at the combinatorial elements of the orgy in *Les Revenentes* and the broader notion of the contract which would bind the reader to the writer as participants in their own orgy, it is now time to examine the forces at work in *Les Revenentes* which would subvert the limited play of the combinatorial and the very possibility of a contract (duality) being valid or enforceable.

Language, Libido & *Trensgression*

Moving beyond the combinatorial aspects of the orgy, we must now look at the orgiastic/erotic nature of the language used to 'describe' it. It is here that the notions of excess and transgression come into their own, the language employed exceeding all orthographic and syntactic rules.[48] And this despite the apparent asceticism of the monovocalism (deprivation of four vowels). Our point of entry into this section is the moment of reconciliation of the opposing sides (Romantics and Formalists) on the constraint debate – should the orgy be regulated or not. This is brought about by the Bishop who declares that "Je pense, décrète l'Emeenence, qe le terme même de 'pense-fesses' lesse entendre qe c'est excellent de penser!" (REV, p115). The term

pense-fesses is a deformation of *pince-fesses* necessitated by the lipogrammatic nature of the text. It is not limited to an orthographic deviation, however, as it serves to overcome the dialectic which opposes the two camps. This it does by including the concept of rationality and order contained in *penser* (i.e. philosophy, science, literature) with the notion of unfettered animal instinct contained in the standard *pince-fesses*.

(At this stage, two incidental points need to be made. Firstly, the term *pense-fesses* initially occurs on page twenty of the novel, and is the first departure from the three preliminary rules established for the text at the outset: the first allows for 'Qu' to be written 'Q'; the second allows for the use of 'Y'; while the third admits that "Divers types de distorsions (la liste en serait fastidieuse à dresser) seront plus ou moins progressivement admis au cours du texte" (REV, p7).[49] The term *pense-fesses* is the first occurrence of such a distortion, it is the first un-programmed deformation of language we encounter in *Les Revenentes*. As such, its logic of rationality (meaning) is undermined from within by its uncontrolled nature (syntax). Secondly, while it is not our intention to suggest that *pense-fesses* acts as an Hegelian *relève* (*Aufhebung*) in any strict sense (although the Bishop's declaration is qualified as a "trenscendente exégèse" (REV, p115), sublimating the thesis and antithesis into a synthesis?), it is nonetheless worth noting that Hegel does appear in the text in three different guises. Firstly, as a lipogrammatic deformation of *également*, here spelt *hegelement* (REV, p90). Elsewhere, he is used as a synonym for master-thinker: "qel entendement, qel flère! Cet enflé d'Ernest, c'est l'Hegel de cette pègre" (REV, p59). Finally, prefiguring Derrida in *Glas*, the homophony (in French) between Hegel and *aigle* is played upon: "Cette bende de débeeles s'est jetée dens l'Hegel des Fédés (REV, p132). It is not in *Les Revenentes*, however, that Perec first refers to Hegel. He initially appears, alongside George Lukács and Elie Faure, there also deformed by linguistic jubilation, in *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au*

[48] I have attempted to let this transgressive prose function in an unadulterated manner by quoting 'tel quel' from *Les Revenentes*, without explaining or 'translating' the orthography.
[49] It is, incidentally, the drawing up of just such a list which Bernard Magné is primarily concerned with in his already quoted article 'Les Revenentes: de l'effervescence entre lengge et texte'.

fond de la cour?: as, for example, in the meeting "dans le café d'en face, où l'on parlait Lukasse, Heliphore, Hégueule et autres olibrii de la même farine" (QPV, p16). This latter is itself derived from the earlier 'Défense de Klee': "ta gueule hégueule" (CGP6, p21) and, probably originally, from Queneau. This mixture of affection and disrespect, coupled with the multiple meanings derived from his name, serves to open up the philosopher of closure to new possibilities, a fact that is not insignificant for us here.)

Returning to the term *pense-fesses*, and the link between the erotic and the act of writing, we need to consider the fact that, as Barthes remarked, every neologism is obscene, and that linguistic transgression is as offensive as moral transgression. This connection is more than simply metaphorical:

> Les deux codes, en effet, celui de la phrase (oratoire) et celui de la figure (érotique) se relaient sans cesse, forment une même ligne, le long de laquelle le libertin circule avec la même énergie: la seconde prépare ou prolonge indifféremment la première, parfois même l'accompagne. En un mot, la parole et la posture ont exactement la même valeur. (SFL, p37).

This notion manifests itself in two separate ways in *Les Revenentes*.[50] Firstly, and most obviously, by linking writing/literature to the sexual act, and thence moral transgression. Secondly, through the notion of structural excess, a discussion of which opened this chapter: if transgression is a question of exceeding limits, then a given language is transgressive to the extent that it refuses to be pinned down to a fixed meaning ("cet excès de la syntaxe sur le sens" (DISS, p284)), to the extent that the syntactic disrupts the semantic: "le crime consiste à transgresser la règle sémantique" (SFL, p141). This second aspect is arguably more radical than the first (or less so, to the extent that it prevents recourse to the root).

Before looking at the former, let us examine the following brief quotation, in and out of context, from Derrida's 'La Double Séance': "La dissémination dans le repli de l'hymen, telle est donc l'« opération »." (DISS, p330). Leaving aside temporarily the terms *dissémination* and *hymen*, we will discuss *opération*. This is to emphasise the fact that we have now gone

[50] Linguistic transgression is linked to erotic transgression elsewhere, as in the game called *Œuvres anthumes*, which involves the homophonic translation of the titles of Perec's books: "Que faut-il dire à une jeune fille que la fellation intimide?" "Lèche, ose." [*Les Choses*] (V,

beyond the erotic as permutation, which Barthes's use of the word *opération* limited us to. In the context of Sade, such a notion was liberating in that it permitted an approach to his work which bypassed the need to address the so-called moral issue. However, for any given number of actors, there are a finite number of permutations, and therefore the play of meaning must come to rest at some stage. While the permutational is polysemic, it is not 'dissemic': "Le concept de polysémie relève donc de l'explication, au présent, du dénombrement du sens. Il appartient au discours d'assistance. Son style est celui de la surface représentative. L'encadrement de son horizon y est oublié. La différence entre la polysémie du discours et la dissémination textuelle, c'est précisément la différence, 'une différence implacable'." (DISS, p426).[51] Derrida's *opération*, on the other hand, inscribed as it is in the logic of the hymen, placed as it is in quotations, is an operation which does not operate. That is to say it does not produce, it is the seed which gets lost in the folds of the labyrinth and never reaches its objective (it is a spilt seed and a split seed – "La semence est d'abord essaimée."). It is this logic which we will now attempt to follow, without reproducing.

In the text of *Les Revenentes*, alongside the linguistic deformations, there are words which are naturally lipogrammatic in E. Two of these will clarify the erotic as a metaphor for writing, with the same movement that we use to oppose natural lipograms to unnatural sex. They are *membre* and *fesses*, the male member and buttocks, the expectant page, belonging to either sex. That the *membres* are a metaphor for the pen is suggested by the fact that, at one stage in the orgy, the priests dye theirs with henna (REV, p125), indicating a pen dipped into an inkwell – not to mention the priest whose *membre* is tattooed (REV, p96), indicating that what writes can also be written on, there is no absolute distinction and so no absolutely virgin surface. Elsewhere, the word *manche* (here: *menche*) is used as a synonym for *membre*, the definition of which is a tube through which liquid flows. These 'pens' need a surface on which to write. This is provided by *fesses*,

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pp85 & 91). And, on a slightly more frivolous note, in the playful alliteration of "attouchements aquatiques" (VME, p236-237).

[51] Characteristically, Barthes elsewhere speaks out against texts which are "simplement polysémiques" (S/Z, p12).

and *ventre*, the other natural lipogram which suggests a blank page, which are frequently "tellement bègné[s] de sperme qe [les] étencher demenderè des serpeehères!" (REV, p113).

Linking the penis to the buttocks, as sodomy, which the letter Q suggests so eloquently, could be seen as transgressive itself, though it is not our intention here (*le cul* is simply written as a capital Q (REV, p116), while we also have "enQler" (REV, p100) and "j'éjéQle" (REV, p112) – our desiring subjects are therefore forced to choose between a feminine E and a male Q (the other as sexually other)). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Klossowski considers sodomy to be the transgressive act *par excellence* as it denatures the reproductive act.[52] Here, on the contrary, there is talk of insemination: "Et le Révérend pénêtre lentement Thérèse et entreprend de l'ensemencer." (REV, p99).

That this is in name only is illustrated by the following scene between Clément and Estelle: "Je me démène en Estelle et j'éjéQle tellement frénéteeqement qe ce me semble qe le Zembèse déferle! -Père et Mère, bèle Estelle, tes jets m'éventrent ! Elle s'extrèe le membre effervescent et de ses lèvres s'empresse de lécher les grendes lempées de sperme qe j'émets" (REV, p123). At the moment of his orgasm, he withdraws, letting his sperm fall onto barren ground. The Reverend's moment of pleasure is also interrupted, left suspended (*en souffrance*), as the narrative moves on from him before he manages to effectuate the desired insemination (REV, p99). (A marvellous example of a non-sexual ejaculation being interrupted can be found in *La Disparition* where a character's exclamation is left suspended

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[52] "[L]a sodomie se prononce par un geste spécifique de contre-généralité, le plus hautement significatif aux yeux de Sade: c'est celui qui frappe précisément la loi de propagation de l'espèce et qui témoigne ainsi de la mort de l'espèce dans un individu. [T]out en étant le simulacre de l'acte de génération, il en est la dérision." (Klossowski, 1967, p31). See also Bataille's comment that perverse sexuality is that which is "détournée de la finalité génitale" (Bataille, 1967, p28).

The notion of homosexuality as transgressive and deviant has led to the following tongue in cheek question being asked: "In this light, would truth-telling be like heterosexuality, and would lying, deception, and dissimulation be like homosexuality, sadism, and all the other perversions?" (Forrester, 1997, p31). Is it any wonder that for Lacan, concerned as he is with Truth (see CP, pp464-465 & pp489 *passim*), the letter must always be found between the legs of the chimney, this symbol for the female indicating the normative, 'straight' function of the Truth (CP, p467-468).

over the end of a chapter – before being reprised at the start of the next one, only to be immediately negated/withheld (DISP, pp72-73)).

It is during this supremely erotic moment shared between Clément and Estelle that the language used moves beyond the erotic, opening up another (in)fertile field. As Clément comes, his partner cries out "tes jets m'éventrent!" (REV, p123). Not a reference to his virility, this disembowelling is rather another occurrence of the letter Q, another instance of a matrix being opened up, violated, by a dash, penis, pen, forcing the contents of the closure out into the open. Indeed, it would seem that the Q is an example of auto-penetration, as it is at once a *matrice/cul* and a penis penetrating same. This will perhaps be made clearer if we change typescript, emphasising the graphic nature of this phenomenon: Q. This auto-penetration problematises the notion of the contract – does one not always only (p)lay with oneself? and, if so, can this play 'produce' anything? So, even had Clément remained inside, his semen would have fertilised nothing, but would have trickled out into the open – "L'insémination 'première' est dissémination."

(In light of this the whole vocabulary/thematic of the gap in *Les Revenentes* and elsewhere needs to be analysed, beginning with the use of the terms *brèche* and *fente*.[53] These terms would seem to relate to (Perec's conception of) the feminine, functioning as metonym: "Espèce de femelle ébréchée!" (REV, p100. See also pp97, 112, 120). Perhaps Perec would oppose the singularity of the phallus to this division ("Qe les verges se dressent et qe béent les fentes!" (REV, p97)), as something which would overcome it – admittedly only a stopgap measure?[54] It remains to be seen whether the phallus is as unified as it would wish to be. On another level, the etymology of *fesses* leads us back to the Latin *fissa*, which itself means *fente* or fissure. The scene of writing is therefore fractured from within, before the pen even punctures the virginal hymen, the blank page).

[53] See, for example, the play *La Poche Parmentier*, in which the thematics of the gap are obsessively present. Consider also the fact that *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and all palindromes are texts which are literally *fendus en deux*.

In 'La Double Séance', Derrida analyses the concept of the hymen, emphasising its double logic which prevents the operation or event from taking place: "L'hymen, consummation des différents, continuité et confusion du coït, mariage, se confond avec ce dont il paraît dériver: l'hymen comme écran protecteur, écrin de la virginité [qui] se tient *entre* le dedans et le dehors de la femme, par conséquent entre le désir et l'accomplissement." (DISS, p262, author's emphasis). Following on from this, the word hymen does occur in *Les Revenentes*, but its use seems to restrict it to one of its possible meanings, that of union: "Pendent ce temps, l'hymen de l'Evêqe et d'Estelle semble près de se perpétrer" (REV, p108). Rather than attempt to extend it forcefully to its second meaning, that of veil or separation, which could be done by pushing the notion that if the union is accomplished, terminated, then separation must follow, we will briefly examine another term which serves a double function. The term is *gemme* and it is present in the text from the outset as it designates the jewels which the conspirators intend to steal, thus providing the motivation for the orgy. Moreover, it is appropriately encrypted in the *strétégèmes*, strategies, which they elaborate in an attempt to procure the jewels. In the orgy itself, it assumes the meaning of testicles, as in "gemmes de ses encêtres" (REV, p96), testicles which elsewhere have a Q grafted onto them: *testeeQles* (REV, p112).

If we consider for the moment the standard definition of *gemme*, a precious stone, we can say that it signifies something which is solid and unified, a sort of monad. While not necessarily an indivisible element, it has aspirations in that direction. As such, it signifies the centre of the novel, or central isotope of the diegesis: at once the sacred object which the hero of folk-tales searches for and the telos of the detective novel, which is one of the explicit models for *Les Revenentes*. In this respect, the *gemmes* are a substitution for the letter in *The Purloined Letter*, as desired object (although, whereas the letter undergoes precisely a substitution, here the objective is to

[54] Derrida isolates this 'phallogocentric' desire in Lacan as well: "Si le phallus [voice, truth] était par malheur divisible ou réduit au statut d'objet partiel, toute l'édification s'effondrerait

remove the gems). Once they are acquired (recuperated), the circle is complete, all narrative responsibilities having been discharged.

This movement of recuperation heralds a return of the concept of Truth. It would seem that, like the letter as analysed by the Seminar, the gems, despite being plural, are indivisible in that they have a unique destination, which is their meaning. It would seem that, just as in the Seminar, despite an apparent attention to the "logique du signifiant" (CP, pp449 & 452), the gems have a content (*contenu*) which restricts this logic:

> [C]e que le Séminaire tient à montrer finalement, c'est qu'il y a un seul trajet *propre* de la lettre qui retourne vers un lieu déterminable, toujours le même et qui est *le sien*; et que si son sens (ce qui est écrit dans le billet en circulation) nous est [...] indifférent et inconnu, le sens de la lettre et le sens de son trajet sont nécessaires, uniques, déterminables en vérité, voire comme la vérité. (CP, pp464-465, author's emphasis).[55]

In Lacan's reading of the text, and despite his claims to the contrary, the letter as signifier is replaced by the letter as envelope, that is as something which literally has a content (depository of meaning). It now remains to be seen whether the gems are 'really' contained within this logic.

That they are not is first suggested by the fact that the concept *gemme* (like the hymen) obliterates the distinction between the inside and the outside which the letter maintains. The very solidity of the gems means that they cannot contain anything and must therefore be examined as form rather than content. This re-emergence of form (syntax) in turn disrupts their solidity as, on the other hand, *gemme* also means the resin of a pine tree ("Suc résineux qui coule des pins par les incisions de l'écorce du tronc" – Le Petit Robert). As such, in its liquid form, as overflow, it avoids attempts to pin it down, to stabilise it. Moreover, as a liquid which emerges from a breach in the hermetic seal of the tree's bark, it has certain affinities with semen which emerges from a breach. And, in the present case, given the presence of

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et c'est ce qu'il faut à tout prix éviter." (CP, p506)

[55] This very Derridean concern is foreshadowed by Jean-Luc Nancy's and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's (very Derridean) reading of Lacan's Seminar: they also wonder about the "rapport au lieu" and thence the relationship to truth (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1973, p32).

various *fentes*, with semen which passes through a breach, disseminated on the other side.[56]

Caught up in their own disseminatory logic, the *gemmes* have disastrous consequences for the phallus as unified centre of meaning. This is because the expression "gemmes de ses encêtres" is also contaminated: "la dissémination [...] *entame* l'unité du signifiant, c'est-à-dire du phallus" (CP, p472, author's emphasis). It can no longer be held up in opposition to the *brèche*, as it itself is fractured. It is, paradoxically, at this point that the language of *Les Revenentes* is most *adequate* to its task.[57] Calling up yet another meaning of *gemme*, it can be said that in *Les Revenentes* language literally pulses and throbs. This because *gemme* also means a bud or growth (*Bourgeon*). And the language used, because of the deformations required by the lipogram, bulges and grows in the strangest of places. In so doing, language eschews representation for performance. This is suggested by the word *gigantesque*: here it is spelt *geeggentesqe*, growing by a letter to indicate its meaning more clearly, while simultaneously becoming a new word. Likewise, the slang term for penis, *bite*, is rewritten as *beete*, expanding with desire.

It is this plurality of meanings of the term *gemme*, as indicated by its liquid state, which contaminates *Les Revenentes*, breaking through the frame which would contain it, subverting the "code herméneutique" (S/Z, p21) of the detective novel.[58] In this respect, it needs to be pointed out that the novel's principal *tableau* is brought to a false climax when one of the protagonists sneezes, causing the edifice to collapse. This spraying of another bodily fluid serves simultaneously as a metaphor for and parody of the male

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[56] Apart from the noun *gemme*, there also exists a verb *gemmer* (used, incidentally, in 'La Dissémination', p397): "Inciser l'écorce de (certains pins) pour recueillir la gemme" (Petit Robert). Of course, the liquid logic of *gemme* means that it can never be collected.

[57] Although this notion of adequacy, along with the notion of performance in the same paragraph, can only be ironic. Consider Derrida's "Pour une telle performance, nous pouvons nous croire compétents." (PSY, p399) and his critique of *adéquation* as a truth value (CP, pp491, p467). See also the earlier use of the term *capable* in a sense very close to *adéquation* as employed in 'Le Facteur de la vérité' (EPER, p93).

[58] For Derrida, also, it is the "projet herméneutique" which postulates "le sens vrai d'un texte." Significantly, it is "la question de la femme" (in Nietzsche) which renders null this project, in favour of the question of style (*écriture*) liberated of all content (EPER, p86).

orgasm, showing once more the disruption of the logic of permutation in favour of the logic of dissemination.

Speaking of false climaxes, said the bishop to the actress, there is an element in this particular puzzle which we have been holding in reserve or *en souffrance*, only to reveal it now in a last minute plot twist, reminiscent of the finest detective novels: up until now we have been taking *Les Revenentes* as our starting point for the intertextual chain which hinges around *The Purloined Letter*, emphasising the breakdown of the intersubjective contract from the perspective of the failure of the ruse itself. There is, however, and this is our *coup de théâtre*, an earlier rewriting of *The Purloined Letter* in *La Disparition*. That this is Perec's other major lipogram is no coincidence as it is in relation to a certain 'vol du bourdon' which runs throughout the novel, *de bout au bout*, localised here in the smoke of Dupin's parlour. This version of the story emphasises instead the failure of Dupin, the seemingly infallible interpreter. Before expanding on this, let us first look at the consequences of the letter's theft:

> – [P]our tout pli disons normal, si l'on nous avait ravi un x ou un y, ça nous aurait fait un faux bond minimal. Mais ici, il a pour filiation un bourdon trop important...
> – Un bourdon? s'intrigua Dupin [...]
> – Pardon du jargon, sourit Didot: disons qu'il nous paraît s'agir d'un vol pour nous vital car il abolit, il fait vain, *il fait caduc tout souci d'organisation*: il *affaiblit nos pouvoirs* dans la proportion d'au moins un sur cinq! (DISP, pp53-54, emphasis mine).

Leaving aside the standard reading of this passage (i.e. its meta-textual nature) we can firstly determine a possible reference to Lacan (or to Queneau and the mathematicians who were members of the Oulipo) and his fascination with mathematical formulae with the "un x ou un y".[59] We can say, secondly, that the passage illustrates neatly the progression from the permutational to the disseminatory which we have been trying to suggest: any possibility of organisation is rendered impossible by the missing link in the *chaîne signifiante*. Thirdly, and this leads up to Dupin's failure, the prowess or adequacy of the investigators is undermined by this very logic. Following

[59] This, at least, is the view of Ali Magoudi, though he does not push the reference further as a textual phenomenon, interested as he is with a primarily psychoanalytical approach to Perec and the construction of identity in the post-Holocaust world (Magoudi, 1996, p13). He does, nonetheless, refer to the "rupture du lien intersubjectif" which he discerns in *La Disparition* (Magoudi, 1996, p64).

the exposé of the problem by the Prefect, Dupin, as per the original, recognises the Minister's ruse. He then sets off to recover the missive: "– J'y vais. Dans un instant, tu auras ton papyrus. Mais quoiqu'il ait raison, du moins dans son calcul, *il manqua son coup*. – Jadis, au moins, j'avais du Pot, murmura-t-il." (DISP, p54, emphasis mine). Despite the identification of his intellect with that of his opponent (as justly mocked by Lacan), he fails to return the letter to its rightful place (Lacan as justly mocked by Derrida). It would appear that, for Perec, based on his two subversive rewritings of *The Purloined Letter*, the letter has indeed not got a *trajet propre*. Moreover, it is not up to the virtuosity of a particular individual to restore the letter to the chimney's legs, as the economy of the *lettre volée* instigates what might be called an aesthetics of *déception*, with the emphasis on aesthetics as failure/impotence: *il manqua son coup*.

In conclusion, we can only refer once more to Barthes's magisterial *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, making Perec's post-Sadean nature all the more explicit by replacing Sade with Perec: "Et pour [Perec], il y a bien quelque chose qui pondère la langue et en fait une métonymie centrée, mais ce quelque chose est le foutre [...], c'est-à-dire à la lettre la dissémination." (SFL, p11). That the matrix, as Q, was never satisfactorily enclosed has been seen. It now emerges that the other representative of the feminine, the E, as mother and offspring of the text, is also, like the description of the E in *La Disparition* "un rond pas tout à fait clos, finissant par un trait horizantal" (DISP, p19), the process of transgression never "tout à fait" complete.

Chapter Six

Le Clinamen: dérèglement systématique?

> Faustroll définissait l'univers *ce qui est l'exception de soi.*
>
> – Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien.*

> From one of these discussions was born the following conjecture: if the lottery is an intensification of chance, a periodic infusion of chaos into the cosmos, would it not be desirable for chance to intervene at all stages of the lottery and not merely in the drawing?
>
> – Jorge Luis Borges, *The Babylon Lottery.*

Democritus to Perec: History of a concept

It would seem that the expression *contrainte formelle* is apt in more ways than one for, while the *formelle* obviously relates to the idea of *forme* or structure, it also has another meaning (which, according to Le Petit Robert, is actually its primary meaning): "Dont la précision et la netteté excluent toute méprise, toute équivoque." For example, in an everyday context: "Mais ma tante est à peu près formelle: je n'avais pas le bras en écharpe..." (W, p77; see also VME, p187 & 53J, p55). Constraint therefore, to be constraint, must be clear and unequivocal. As often stated, its very reason for being is to counteract the nebulous, open-ended practices of most writers.[1] While it may convincingly be argued, within reason, that any given non-constrained (or non-constricted) prose text may be either a short story, a novella, a novel, or even a prose-poem, such is not the case with texts written under constraint: for example, a lipogram, tautogram or pangram either is or is not a lipogram, tautogram or pangram. The definition of each is precise and it is possible to

[1] In this respect, a key text in the elaboration of an Oulipian ideology was Queneau's 'Technique du roman', an explanation of the reasons which led him to implement constrictive practices in his first novel, *Le Chiendent* (see Queneau, 1965, pp27-34). This text also refers to *indétermination*, *inclination*, *sortir de la règle*, and *syncoper le rythme* – terms which should become clear as we progress.

verify empirically whether the text obeys the laws governing its composition.[2]

And yet, all is not quite as *formelle* as it would initially seem. In Chapter Four we questioned whether constraint could be said to have a determinable beginning. Now, we must question whether it can be said to 'exist' at all, archaeological remains notwithstanding, or whether it can only ever be "à peu près formelle" – is it not rather the opposite of **formel, elle adj 3♦** Philos. Qui concerne la forme, qui possède une existence actuelle, effective? (The foolishness of denying the existence of our *objet d'étude* does not escape us). This is because the idea of *l'anti-contrainte* is an integral part of the idea of *contrainte* (just as Perec's aunt is also unwittingly *a(u)nti(e)-formelle*): the Oulipians are, despite their protestations, artists and so not averse to the occasional deviant practice. The return to the unregulated conduct of the *prosateur vulgaris* is justified in Oulipian theory by an appeal to the concept of the *clinamen* (or 'swerve', explained below).[3] In Perec, quoting Klee, the clinamen is presented as "l'erreur dans le système", as that which gives life by preventing constraint from being excessively mechanistic. Outside of his poetry, it is most developed in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, the text which will be our main focus in this chapter.[4]

Generally considered as being a controlled strategy – a localised disruption – which does not threaten a text's coherence, we will examine the manner in which the clinamen exceeds its function. It is a 'resistance to constraint' as understood in de Man's comment: "Resistance may well be a

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[2] While, as David Bellos remarks, this becomes more complicated when a text has been generated by multiple constraints (as is the case with *La Vie mode d'emploi*), the principle is nonetheless the same.

[3] While it is frequently asserted that the clinamen is an integral part of Oulipian practice, it is nowhere developed theoretically (see our comments on the unusual nature of the Oulipo as a 'movement' in Chapter 1). Unfortunately, the same is also true of the various *dossiers* and *cahiers* published by the Collège de 'Pataphysique.

[4] Although Perec first refers to the clinamen by name in interviews given in 1978, the following from the already quoted 'Eléments pour une théorie' (1973) can be seen as a quite explicit reference to the theory of the clinamen:
"Diffraction: la définition est choisie dans le champ sémantique le plus éloigné possible du champ initial.
Justification de ces principes: leur utilisation permet de compenser le caractère figé, académique, du corpus linguistique véhiculé par le dictionnaire (quel qu'il soit) et *introduit un élément de vie* qui permet de balayer la totalité des champs linguistiques." (CGP3, p29, emphasis mine).

built-in constituent of its [theory's] discourse" – the resistance comes not from external sources but from within (de Man, 1986, p12). One of the underlying principles of Oulipian practice, if not theory, is the notion of virtuosity – and, by extension, of control, authorial *maîtrise* of the matter being manipulated. Rather curiously for such a modern aesthetic, this idea goes someway towards reintroducing the intentional fallacy: it is implicitly assumed that, because Oulipian texts are subject to such rigorous structures and generative processes, nothing can slip in which was not intended. As a result of this, even the implementation of the 'swerve' is, paradoxically, held to be controlled or determined. In a sense, it is tamed – it only disrupts the text to the extent that the author wills it to disrupt the text... To combat this reading we will draw principally on Baudrillard's appropriation of the 'Pataphysical understanding of the clinamen (and, to a lesser extent, on his references to Bataille's 'excessive' economy). In *La Vie mode d'emploi* this lack of closure is thematised by the unfinished (because unfinishable) jigsaw puzzle (for Bataille, *la part maudite* is the excess of energy which cannot be subsumed into a closed system).

Related to this is the idea of death: the clinamen, as symbolised by the W-shaped piece which Bartlebooth cannot place in the jigsaw, in some respects 'causes' his death. Rather than giving the machine life, the clinamen can be seen as being the principle of death always already at work within the system of constraint – to borrow a medical metaphor, it spreads like a virus or cancer through the text. It is the virus waiting to happen in every healthy cell. This is because its freeplay works against the search for unity which often characterises constraint – in this respect, the clinamen is a concept which is anti-structuralist as it undermines the principle of 'autoréglage' held to be one of the essential properties of all systems (Piaget, 1968, p13). In subverting itself, the work commits the textual equivalent of suicide.[5] It is important to note that the clinamen is not simply a decoration or afterthought, but is an integral, fundamental element of every Oulipian text: as Jacques Roubaud says, its "origine démocritienne indique assez bien la finalité: un

[5] This is a different form of textual suicide from the other one often found in Perec: the bi-partite work, of which the second half undoes the first. As, for example, in *53 Jours*.

coup de pouce donné au mouvement rectiligne, uniforme et terriblement monotone des atomes originels pour, par collisions, *mettre en marche le monde du texte* dans sa variété" (Roubaud, 1995, pp217-218, emphasis mine). In this reading, which closely adheres to Lucretius' exposition of the clinamen, it is the clinamen which comes first, rendering fiction and constraint possible. In another reading, also by Roubaud, it is constraint which comes first: "Le statut de la contrainte est donc *fondamental*" (Oulipo, 1981, p54, emphasis mine). Not only is Greek materialism explicitly linked to textual materialism ("monde du texte"), but it can be seen that there is a certain ambiguity as to whether the textual clinamen governs the field of constraint, or whether constraint can comprehend (*comprendre*, in both senses of the word, to appropriate a Derridean pun) the clinamen – is it a general rather than a regional economy, to borrow Bataille's terminology?

Contested origins

> I have known what the Greeks did not: uncertainty.
> – Jorge Luis Borges, *The Babylon Lottery*.

Although Perec and the Oulipians are obviously not academic philosophers and therefore not necessarily concerned with the 'correct' interpretation and application of concepts from the history of philosophy, it will nonetheless be useful to briefly trace the history of the clinamen, which is, as it happens, what passes for uncertainty in ancient Greek philosophy. Indeed, the title of this section is a play on the fact that, on the one hand, there is a good deal of modern uncertainty about the exact historical origins of the clinamen and, on the other hand, the fact that while it was 'invented' to explain the origins of the world, the clinamen gave rise to a violent polemic amongst the ancients, most of whom claimed it did no such thing.[6] Such was the violence of the polemic that it is perhaps not surprising that the clinamen

[6] Amongst modern commentators, Wolff asserts that the clinamen problematises the notion of Beginning or Origin (Wolff, p41); while Furley notes that the plural *corpora* in *De Rerum Natura*, Book 2.217 rules out the possibility "that a single swerve began the whole process of

all but disappeared until the Renaissance – and not simply because our principal source on it, the manuscript of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, which develops the basic idea propounded by Epicurus, was only rediscovered in 1417 and printed in 1473 – but partly because Epicurus was "a thinker of a very modern sort" (D.S. Hutchinson in Introduction to Inwood & Gerson, pX).[7]

The first of these uncertainties becomes evident when the following two quotations are compared:

> Je m'impose des règles pour la construction de mon livre, qui sont souvent extrêmement difficiles et quand je ne réussis pas à les suivre, je 'triche' et j'appelle ça un 'clynamen' [sic]. C'est une notion qui vient de [l'Oulipo], et avant cela du collège de 'Pataphysique et, encore avant, de Démocrite et de la théorie des atomes... Est-ce bien Démocrite?... Au début, il faut un petit quelque chose pour que les atomes se touchent, pour que le système devienne dynamique. Il appelait ça le clynamen [sic]. Ensuite, on a donné ce nom à la petite distorsion dans la règle qui fait que la règle fonctionne. Klee a un très joli mot pour ça, il dit: le génie c'est l'erreur dans le système.[8]

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collision and rebound" (Furley, p173). Is it conceivable that, much like *différance*, the clinamen is a non-originary origin?

[7] It is worth quoting a large section from Cicero's polemic against Epicurus, not least because his arguments prefigure those frequently made against Derrida and other exponents of 'irrational' post-modernism (with which, we hope to show, the clinamen has many affinities):

"**18**. Epicurus generally does not go far wrong when he follows Democritus [...] but these are the catastrophes which belong to Epicurus alone. He thinks that these same indivisible and solid bodies move down in a straight line by their own weight and that this is the natural motion of all bodies. **19**. Then this clever fellow, when it occurred to him that if they all moved directly down and, as I said, in a straight line, it would never come about that one atom could make contact with another and so [...] he introduced a fictitious notion: he said that an atom swerves by a very little bit, indeed a minimal distance, and that in this way are produced the mutual entanglements, linkages, and cohesions of the atoms as a result of which the world and all the parts of the world and everything in it are produced [...]. The swerve itself is made up to suit his pleasure - for he says that the atom swerves without a cause [...] - and without a cause he tore from the atoms that straight downward motion which is natural to all heavy objects (as he himself declared); and by so doing he did not even achieve the goal he intended when he made up this fiction. **20**. For if all the atoms swerve, none will ever cohere in a compound; but if some swerve and some move properly by their own impetus, this will amount, first of all, to assigning different spheres of influence, so to speak, to the atoms, some to move straight, others to move crookedly; and second, that very same confused concourse of atoms [...] will not be able to produce the orderly beauty of the world." (Cicero, *On Goals*, 1.18-20; Inwood & Gerson, p47).

Andrew Pyle also mentions polemics against the clinamen by Aristotelians, Platonists, Stoics and Sceptics (Pyle, p169).

[8] 'La vie: règle du jeu', p22. While the quotation from Klee is extremely important to Perec (he quotes it in at least three interviews), it has little to do with the clinamen. The only reference which we could find for the saying was in Will Grohmann's book *Paul Klee*, which is one of the standard reference works on the painter and which Perec apparently read in French translation (Bellos, p295). There, Grohmann writes: "Speaking conversationally during a lesson, Klee once formulated this provocative statement: Genius is the error in the system." (Grohmann, p48). He glosses the statement by saying that it refers to the inspiration

> C'est cette intervention que les Oulipiens, et avant eux Jarry, appellent le *clinamen*. La petite erreur, qui nous vient de Lucrèce, et sans laquelle aucun atome n'accrocherait les autres, sans laquelle donc le monde n'existerait pas.[9]

This is not simply a case of ignorance on Perec's part – there was, in fact, a good deal of debate over the attribution of the clinamen. However, as the clinamen is part of the broader theory of atomism, let us begin with as succinct an overview as possible of atomism (something which, to the best of our knowledge, no Oulipian or Perecian commentator has so far done).

The theory of atomism was first propounded by Leucippus and Democritus – although some even doubt the existence of anyone by the name Leucippus – as a rejoinder to the Parmenidean 'One'. The atomists were materialists – that is, they held that there was nothing but matter. Matter was made up of atoms and void. Atoms were 'compact and full' – that is, small and indivisible, whereas the void was referred to as 'non-being', the space through which the atoms moved. Paradoxically, given the contemporary understanding of the term, this non-being was held to be as real as being – it was also matter, but of a different kind. Epicurus later clarified that both atoms and void were infinite: "For if the void were unlimited and bodies limited, bodies would not come to a standstill anywhere but would move in scattered fashion throughout the unlimited void, since they would lack anything to support them..." (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 42; Inwood & Gerson, p7).

The atomists' main concern is said to have been to establish the indivisibility of their 'primary bodies' and that "such attributes as size and motion, so necessary for doctrinal atomism, are decidedly secondary to the indivisibility or atomicity intended by Leucippus and maintained by Democritus." (McDonnell, p10).[10] As regards size and shape, the atomists held what now seems to be the rather quaint notion that the atoms were all of different sizes and shapes – some had hooks or tails while others had various

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of an individual artist – an analysis with which it is hard to argue but which is surprising given Perec's frequent statements to the effect that the idea of inspiration is meaningless.

[9] 'La maison des romans', pp33-34.

[10] For a comprehensive examination of the mathematical principles underlying atomism, see Pyle, pp1-40.

indentations or crannies. As regards motion, they were rather vague, which is unfortunate given that their theory rested on the belief that the world was created by atoms coming into contact with each other and then sticking together to form larger bodies (the hooks of the one lodging in the nooks of the other). This failure to explain and justify the manner in which atoms moved led to many of their later problems.

For, as materialists, they were also mechanists – they could only believe in necessity: Leucippus is said to have proclaimed that "No things happen in vain, but everything for a reason and by necessity" (quoted in Stobaeus, *Anthology* I iv 7c; Barnes, p243), a belief shared by Democritus (Cartledge, p18). By 'necessity', the atomists meant not the modern understanding of the word – determinism – but simply causality. This was a view shared by the entire Greek world and it was Epicurus' later deviation from the doctrine *ex nihilo nihil fit* that led to his ridicule. So: given that the world is created or caused by the collision of atoms… what causes the atoms to collide? in what manner do they move through the void so as to come into contact? – bearing in mind that the atoms were not *automata* ('self-movers') but were nonetheless held to have always (already?) been moving and colliding (Pyle, pp158 & 160). Initially, the question remained unanswered: "That the atoms were in incessant motion no one questions, but it seems […] that the type of motion was not specified, or perhaps that it was allowed to be as random as sunbeams in an enclosed space while Aristotle sought in vain for specifications such, at least, as circular, or straight, up or down." (McDonnell, p13). McDonnell goes on to argue that Democritus developed his theory of the 'vortex' in response to Aristotle's request for clarification. He apparently proposed the following solution: "The worlds come into being as follows: many bodies of all sorts of shapes move 'by abscission from the infinite' into a great void; they come together there and produce a single whirl [or vortex, *diné*], colliding with one another and revolving in all sorts of ways…" (Diogenes Laertius on Democritus in his *Lives of the Philosophers*, quoted in Cartledge, p16). This, again, was claimed by Democritus to happen by necessity and is not to be confused with the later clinamen – rather the larger, heavier atoms sink down to the centre while the

smaller ones are flung out to the edge of the vortex. Unfortunately, he seems to have produced no proof to the effect that this notion obeyed the laws of causality: "Democritus too, when he says that a whirl of every kind of forms was separated off from the whole but does not say how and by what cause, seems to generate it spontaneously and by chance." (Simplicius, *Commentary on the Physics* 327.23-26; Barnes, p248).

It was in response to these criticisms that Epicurus refined atomic theory, attempting to explain the creation of the world in terms of causality. Like his predecessors, he held that there were atoms and the void, and that both were infinite. What he changed was the manner in which the atoms moved through the void. According to Aetius, Epicurus gave weight to the atoms and claimed that they all fell straight downwards at equal speed (Aetius 1.12.5; Inwood & Gerson, p90).[11] This, however, immediately gave rise to another problem: if the atoms are all falling straight down at equal speed, how can they ever come into contact with each other? As Aetius continues: "Atoms sometimes move in a straight line, sometimes in a swerve, and those which move upwards do so by collision and rebound" (Aetius 1.12.5; Inwood & Gerson, p90).[12] This 'swerve' is of course the clinamen, introduced here for the first time – the O.E.D. defines clinamen as an inclination or bias, linking it to the biological term cline, both of which are said to derive from *clinare*, to incline, and *klânein*, to slope or bend.

In the absence of any extant texts by Epicurus dealing explicitly with the clinamen, *De Rerum Natura*, by his Latin apologist, Lucretius, is generally held to provide a faithful presentation of Epicurus' ideas (not least because it is also factually coherent with Cicero's critiques of Democritus):

> One further point in this matter I desire you to understand: that while the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void, *at times quite uncertain and uncertain places* [*incerto tempore ferme incertisque locis spatio*], they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused amongst the first-beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything. (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 2.216-224, emphasis mine).[13]

[11] Although, as seen, Democritus' earlier vortex theory seems to rely on the atoms having different weights.

[12] Or, elsewhere: "Epicurus says there are two kinds of motion, the straight and the swerve." (Aetius, 1.23.4; Inwood & Gerson, p90).

[13] See also Book 2.293.

The internal logic of his own theory forced Epicurus to invent a 'fiction' at the sight of which the Ancients all laughed heartily: in attempting to show that atomism respected causality, he produced a perfectly uncaused deviation. How could an uncaused action be held as being the cause by which atoms come together to form matter? – "[T]hey do not concede to Epicurus that the atom can swerve the tiniest bit, on the grounds that he introduces a causeless motion coming from not being." (Plutarch, *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*, 1,015bc; Inwood & Gerson, p90). Case closed.[14]

While somewhat more circumspect, modern commentators have also struggled with the clinamen. They also generally agree that it fails to provide a coherent means of explaining the origins of matter and prefer to focus instead on the second instance where Lucretius refers to it. While, for Lucretius, this second usage is dependent on the acceptance of the first 'natural philosophical' explanation of the clinamen, it can be examined independently of it as it deals with psychology:

> Again, if all motion is always one long chain, and new motion arises out of the old in order invariable, and if the first-beginnings do not make by swerving a beginning of motion such as to break the decrees of fate, that cause may not follow cause from infinity, whence comes this free will in living creatures all over the earth, whence I say is this will wrested from the fates by which we proceed whither pleasure leads each, swerving also our motions not at fixed times and fixed places, but just where our mind has taken us? For undoubtedly it is his own will in each that begins these things, and from the will movements go rippling through the limbs. (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 2.251-263).[15]

In his study *Aristotle and Epicurus on Voluntary Action*, Furley maintains that the swerve was introduced as a means of breaking the causal chain 'object – sense perception – soul' (Furley, p161 *passim*; p196 & p233). For, if this chain was not broken, then man's actions would be directly caused by his environment and it would be impossible to hold a person liable for his

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Or, as Perec undoubtedly encountered it: "Les atomes choient tout droit par le Vide, emportés par leur poids propre: *à des instants indéterminés et en des points indéterminés*, ils manifestent une quasi-déviation infime, tout juste suffisante pour qu'on puisse parler d'une modification d'équilibre." (Lucrèce, II, 216; Jarry, 1972, p1,234)

[14] Aside from the already quoted passage from Cicero above, see also his *On Fate*, 18-48 and *On the Nature of the Gods*, 1.69-70. Even Francis Wolff, who is decidedly 'pro-clinamen', is forced to admit that it only serves to "renforce[r] la fragilité" of Epicurus' doctrine (Wolff, p28).

[15] See also the fragment from Book 25 of Democritus' *On Nature* (Inwood & Gerson, pp76-77) which deals with the rejection of psychological determinism in ethical terms.

deeds. Instead, as the swerve breaks the causal chain, it becomes possible to formulate an ethical judgement on a person and his character. However, the paradox is of course that if the swerve were to intervene every time "at a quite uncertain time", then it would be equally impossible to hold a person responsible for his deeds. In attempting to reject determinism and insist on individual freedom and responsibility, Epicurus has instead produced randomness. Furley attempts to limit this – to provide a 'regional' clinamen – by suggesting that the swerve only intervenes once in a person's life. This is just enough to ensure that all of his acts are not pre-determined, without meaning that they are all un-determined. In a similar vein, Englert attempts to rehabilitate the swerve somewhat by limiting its effects. Also primarily concerned with psychology, he reads the theory as stating that once an atom has swerved, it returns to falling straight down, that is, that a person's character reasserts itself, counteracting to some extent the undetermined random nature of the true clinamen (Englert, 1987, p23).[16]

After Lucretius' efforts, the clinamen all but disappeared from philosophy. When it finally resurfaced at the end of the 19th century, in the work of Alfred Jarry, it would seem that it was precisely that which had previously led to its disfavour which now led to its rehabilitation. While the clinamen was merely an addendum to ancient Greek atomic theory, it was the primary building block of Jarry's new 'science': 'Pataphysics – which was to be "la science du particulier, quoiqu'on dise qu'il n'y a de science que du général. Elle étudiera les lois qui régissent les exceptions et expliquera l'univers supplémentaire à celui-ci" (Jarry, p668; also Shattuck, p8). It would seem that the wayward swerve was perfectly suited to Jarry's anarchic approach to literature. In a sense, what could be more iconoclastic than to glorify one of the most ridiculed philosophical concepts ever, turning the established hierarchy on its head? 'Pataphysics is allegedly to metaphysics what metaphysics is to physics and aims to study the supplemental or parallel

[16] Somewhat surprisingly, it is Deleuze who best presents the 'common sense' reading of the clinamen: "Les Epicuriens opèrent un autre clivage de la causalité, qui fonde aussi la liberté: ils conservent l'homogénéité de la cause et de l'effet, mais découpent la causalité d'après des séries atomiques dont l'indépendance respective est garantie par le clinamen - *non plus destin sans nécessité, mais causalité sans destin.*" (Deleuze, 1969, pp15-16, emphasis mine).

universe (or universe as supplement?). Or, in a typically gnomic – and quasi-Nietzschean – aphorism: "La 'Pataphysique se situe par-delà le vrai et le faux" (Launoir, p20). Small wonder, therefore, that the clinamen is *fundamental* to this new science, that it is one of its founding principles: "Le Collège de 'Pataphysique [...] ne saurait exclure de ses murs *le domaine de l'erreur et de la folie*, lui qui, après Epicure, place le Clinamen et l'aberration au principe" (Launoir, p130, author's emphasis).[17]

The exposition of "les lois qui régissent les exceptions", when it came, could never be simple. Such as it is, it was provided by Jarry in his 'roman néo-scientifique', *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien* (written in 1898, first published in its entirety in 1911).[18] While undoubtedly humorous, Pataphysics is not simply a joke or philosophical pastiche.[19] Nonetheless, it is hard to know what to make of the following definition: "La pataphysique est la science des solutions imaginaires, qui accorde symboliquement aux linéaments les propriétés des objets décrits par leur virtualité" (Jarry, p669). Somewhat prosaically, a *solution imaginaire* could be read as a meta-solution, though it is likely that Jarry had something less tangible in mind. An example of a meta-solution would a chess player who, confronted with a losing position, chooses to dash the pieces to the ground – that is, he 'steps outside' (or 'above', given the etymology of meta) the accepted rules of the game: in short, he cheats.[20] More in the spirit of 'Pataphysics, a *solution imaginaire* is probably to a meta-solution what a meta-solution is to a solution.

More important for our purposes is the chapter simply entitled 'Clinamen' which contains the following dense and convoluted paragraph, less an explanation than a demonstration of the clinamen:

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[17] Let us not forget that the Oulipo is officially a *sous-commission* of the Collège de 'Pataphysique and is as such liable to share the above views.

[18] Which, as it happens, has quite a 'Greek' feel to it: from Faustroll being measured in atoms (p658), to the mention of bodies falling to the centre and void rising to the periphery (p669), to a description of water which is reminiscent of the early natural philosophers (p670).

[19] In a different context, Deleuze has argued that Jarry's thought foreshadows Heidegger's in many ways (Deleuze, 1993, pp115-125).

[20] See Perec's comment above: "je 'triche' et j'appelle ça un 'clynamen'" (La vie: règle du jeu, p22). See, however, HQD pp72-73 on the limited interest of both a game without a meta-solution and of old-fashioned cheating.

> "...Cependant, après qu'il n'y eut plus personne au monde, la Machine à Peindre, **animée à l'intérieur** d'un système de ressorts sans masse, tournait en azimut dans le hall de fer du Palais des Machines, seul monument debout de Paris désert et ras, et comme une toupie, se heurtant aux piliers, elle **s'inclina** et **déclina** en **directions indéfiniment variées**, soufflant à son gré sur la toile des murailles la succession des couleurs **fondamentales** étagées selon les tubes de son ventre, comme dans un bar un *pousse-l'amour*, **les plus claires, plus proches de l'issue**. Dans le palais scellé hérissant seul la polissure morte, moderne déluge de la Seine universelle, la **bête imprévue** *Clinamen* éjacula aux parois de son univers..." (Jarry, p714, my emphases in bold to distinguish them from the italics in original).

This text manages to condense the core elements of the theory into one poetic paragraph: from the etymology of the word (*s'incliner/décliner*) to its originary nature (*fondamentale*); from the fact that it can occur at any given moment (*directions indéfiniment variées*) to the seeming reference to the vortex and the fact that it serves to 'classify' the atoms (the clearer, 'lighter' colours are sent further than the darker, 'heavier' ones); and finally the very important thesis that the clinamen is internal to the system and not an external disruption of it (*animée à l'intérieur*).[21] Tellingly, there is no attempt made to justify or restrict the fact that the clinamen is a *bête imprévue*. Instead, this epithet takes pride of place as the clinamen paints *its* universe – the universe owes its existence to the clinamen and the clinamen can dispose of it as it wishes. Or, more accurately, according to its (unpredictable) nature.

Before closing this overview, we should like to insist once more on the tension between two possible readings of the clinamen (which will be important for our next two sections): the first sees the clinamen as secondary and attempts to limit its disruptive force (what we call a regional economy), while the second sees it as primary and assumes that is always already at work everywhere (what we call a general economy).[22] We have already seen that the clinamen can be expressed as a Derridean non-origin, and to favour the general over the regional economy is also to highlight the (post)modern elements of this classical concept. Indeed, the above tension is expressed in near identical terms by Barthes and Baudrillard, both of whom implicitly

[21] See also the reference to the clinamen as a "principe interne d'inclination" (Wolff, p180).

[22] See also the parallel which Derrida draws between Bataille's terms *écriture de maîtrise* and *écriture de souveraineté* and his own *écriture mineure* and *écriture majeure*. The first terms in each pair are related to the regional economy while the second terms are related to the general economy (ED, pp390, 392 & 396).

favour the general (or, if Baudrillard does not actually favour it, he nonetheless believes that we are now living it):

> [L]e *système* est un corps de doctrine à l'intérieur duquel les éléments [...] se développent logiquement [...]. Le système étant fermé (ou monosémique) est toujours théologique, dogmatique. [...] Le *systématique* est le jeu du système; c'est du langage ouvert, infini [...]. Son mode d'apparition, de constitution, n'est pas le 'développement' mais la pulvérisation, la dissémination [...]. C'est un délire large, qui ne ferme pas mais permute. (SFL, pp114-115)[23]

> Pour *l'anomie*, on sait de quoi il retourne: la loi est supposée connue, et l'anomie n'est pas une aberration, elle est une infraction à un système déterminé. Alors que pour *l'anomalie*, il y a doute sur la loi même à laquelle elle échappe et sur la règle qu'elle enfreint. Cette loi n'existe plus, ou n'est pas connue. Il y a infraction, ou plutôt errance par rapport à un état de choses dont on ne sait plus s'il est un système de causes et d'effets. (Baudrillard, 1983, p39)

In the text 1: Restricted Access

We now need to follow Roubaud's advice and move what we have learnt back into "le monde du texte". We will first examine a reading of the textual clinamen which views it as regional. In a textual sense, what this means is that it is constraint which is fundamental. It is therefore possible to construct a text around a given constraint or constraints without a clinamen being present at all – there is no danger of one appearing without the author's wishing it 'at a quite uncertain time'. However, should the author so *choose*, he may decide to insert one from the outside – at a quite certain time. The author therefore maintains total control of his text and the clinamen simply contributes to improving the performance of the constraint – the system – within which it is working. Although working within the system, it does not originate within the system – it is no longer a "principe interne d'inclination". In this restricted view of the clinamen, it is generally seen as being the result of an aesthetic judgement made by the writer: if the system is too rigid, it will appear 'unnatural' and therefore less pleasing to the eye. The clinamen therefore improves both the mechanics and the aesthetics of the machine. As Perec said of his use of it in *La Vie mode d'emploi*: "Cela m'a servi à *détruire les symétries*, à dissimuler les structures. Chaque fois qu'on veut appliquer rigidement un système, il y a quelque chose qui coince. Pour

qu'on puisse fonctionner dedans avec liberté, il faut *introduire volontairement* une petite erreur."[24]

This, it could be argued, is a peculiarly Oulipian solution to an Oulipian problem – there is no suggestion in the Greek version of the theory that the clinamen is the result of divine – authorial – intervention, quite the contrary. The idea is precisely that constraint should be purely *formelle*, not aesthetic (see the Manifestoes). The following, while superficially similar to what any Oulipian might write, is actually highly heretic: "Je m'impose des contraintes esthétiques. Cela passe aussi bien par l'inversion des stéréotypes que par une écriture métaphorique. Une fois ces contraintes stylistiques imposées, je me sens plus libre pour écrire."[25] For an Oulipian, constraint is nominally neither *esthétique* nor *stylistique* but *formelle*. And yet when they realise that purely formal constraint cannot satisfy them, they choose to reintroduce aesthetics in a formal manner. Which means that they are not content to rely on their own aesthetic judgement, but must instead turn it into an alternative localised constraint functioning within the broader one. This is dangerously close to what a psychoanalyst might refer to as rationalisation. Perec therefore speaks of a "programmation du hasard", saying that he had "l'idée d'enlever un chapitre [from VME] de façon à ce qu'on ne puisse pas reconstituer le système qui n'existe que pour moi et que je voulais un peu 'tour de piser', rendre un peu bancal quelque part: il fallait qu'il y ait une erreur mais *cette erreur ne pouvait pas être laissée au hasard complet* pour beaucoup de raisons..."[26]

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[23] It is in this sense that we intend the *systématique* of the chapter's title, playing on the oscillation between noun and adjective.

[24] 'La maison des romans', pp33-34, emphasis mine. Or, on the text's mechanics, the already quoted "la petite distorsion dans la règle qui fait que la règle fonctionne" ('La vie: règle du jeu', p22).
On the aesthetics of the clinamen, see Perec's comments that the *artifice formelle* in *La Disparition* was "trop systématique" – not in Barthes's sense of the term ('En dialogue avec l'époque', p48). Or his comments that he was unhappy with the excessively rigid constraints of the poems collected in *Alphabets* – which produced a "système tellement aride" – and that thereafter he decided to introduce a "joker" into his poetry ('Poésie ininterrompue', pp2-3). It would seem that in general – be it in poetry or in prose – he felt compelled to begin by applying the constraint as strictly as possible but would later feel that this was not sufficiently aesthetic or 'artistic'.

[25] Daniel Pennac, interview in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 2 March 1992.

[26] 'Ce qui stimule ma racontouze', p51, emphasis mine.

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, we can find a thematic exposition of this regional clinamen (not a structural exposition, to refer once again to Warren Motte's questionable distinction, as *W* is not itself written under constraint). The second part of the 'fictional' narrative of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (W3 in the terminology we adopted in Chapter Three) is concerned with the in-depth description of the organisation and administration of the island W, which is devoted to the Olympic ideal to such an extent that every aspect of life on the island is regulated to this effect – all behaviour is heavily codified. The text of course encourages us to read this as a metaphor for the concentration camps – or as the use of constraint as being born out of a reaction to the concentration camps – but it is also possible to read it less dramatically as simply a metaphor for constraint.[27] Consider the following in this respect: because the training regimes are extremely specialised for each sporting discipline, they are unsuitable for producing athletes capable of excelling in more than one field. Therefore, the athletes who train for the pentathlon and decathlon could only be far inferior to those who only train for one event, with the result that the quality of these competitions – their aesthetic quality – is equally substandard. As a result of this, the spectators (here the writer/reader merged into one) grow dissatisfied and restless, with the possibility that riots will erupt threatening the smooth running of the games. To remedy this, the organisers – *les Arbitres* – come up with a novel solution which turns the competitors' mediocrity into an advantage: "ils en firent des épreuves pour rire, des *fausses épreuves* destinées à délasser le public [...]: le 200 mètres se court à cloche-pied, le 1 500 mètres est une course en sac, la planche d'appel du saut en longueur est souvent dangereusement savonnée, etc." (W, p116, emphasis mine). A *sportif* who relies on his acting abilities therefore stands a better chance of winning than one who relies solely on his (deficient) sporting capacities.

This is a good example of a programmed or regional clinamen: a limited disruption provides the necessary amount of 'give' required to prevent larger

[27] This has been dealt with in Chapter Three above. Although we cannot develop the idea here, it would also be possible to read this text not as constraint being a metaphor for fascism, but as fascism being a metaphor for constraint. It could easily be argued that constraint is itself fascistic – just as Barthes argues that all discourse is fascistic in *Leçon*.

disruptions to the system. The clinamen acts as a safety valve or, more technically, as a manifestation of the instinct of self-preservation: the public's laughter dissipates the threat of rioting occasioned by the athletes' mediocrity, whereas if the system were obliged to function purely mechanistically, it would grind to a halt, or explode. That is to say, if the public did riot, then the other events would be disrupted – the general system, the games in their entirety, would be unable to function. Therefore, a secondary and externally imposed disturbance helps generate a self-regulating system. This, however, is not to reckon with Baudrillard, who claims that the so-called safety valve can be more efficient than chance in disrupting the system: "[O]n ne peut pas compter sur le hasard pour amener le catastrophe: il faut trouver son équivalent programmé dans le dispositif de sécurité." (Baudrillard, 1983, pp29-30). We will return to Baudrillard's theories when discussing the general clinamen below.

In his abundant treatment of the topic, Bernard Magné seems to prefer what tends towards a general reading of the clinamen, and yet he ultimately pulls back and accepts the localised reading of the clinamen proposed by Perec in keeping with 'doctrinal' Oulipian theory. For example, he opens his article 'De l'écart à la trace' – neither, needless to say, a Derridean gap nor trace – by favourably quoting Ricardou's definition of *la dyspoièse* as "une défectueuse exécution des opérations requises".[28] He then writes that the clinamen "remet [...] en cause le fonctionnement global d'une structure ou d'un [sic] contrainte", seemingly unequivocally allowing it to roam freely through the text.[29] Going on to discuss Perec's short text '243 cartes postales en couleurs véritables' (IO, pp33-68), Magné writes that "le travail du clinamen [y] est tel que la contrainte de base explose littéralement, comme si, à force d'être transgressée, la règle finissait par devenir... l'exception."[30] This statement seems to hint at a pataphysical reading of the clinamen. However, it is based on a structural reading and refers to the empirics of one particular text, and not to the clinamen as an abstract principle. It refers to the

[28] *Littératures*, no. 7, pp9-25.
[29] Ibid., p14.
[30] Ibid., p15.

fact that, of the series of postcards which comprise the text, some only include two of the items which they are supposed to: *localisation*, *appréciation*, *occupation* 1, *occupation* 2, *salutations*. Magné seems to regret instantly this creeping generality and proffers the following statement, which essentially nullifies the previous one: he says that *any* infringement of "les normes orthographiques" (i.e. any neologism) is in fact a clinamen.[31] But orthography is a function of broader linguistic conventions, not of a particular constraint. Moreover, every 'creative' writer takes liberties with language. For example, Ubu's *phynances* is not a clinamen, despite the fact that the clinamen is elsewhere important to Jarry's work, as a) *Ubu* is not written under constraint and b) even if it were, the constraint itself would have to bear on orthography for a deviant spelling to constitute a clinamen – misspelling a word in a text whose generative constraint consists in permuting narrative units (as is the case with the '243 cartes postales en couleurs véritables') does not therefore amount to a clinamen either. Contrite, Magné reverts to discussing a "clinamen réglé" and his final word on the subject is that "si le hasard est toléré, c'est seulement sous le contrôle de la règle".[32] That is to say, he accords the writer complete mastery over the functioning of the clinamen. As hinted at earlier this implies, not an error in the system, but a second autonomous system operating within the 'universal' system – the clinamen not as an internal disruption but as a perfectly well-oiled secondary system.

It might now perhaps be an opportune moment to draw a diagram, in the hope of clarifying a dismally confused passage of argumentation. Consider:

[31] Ibid., p16.

[32] Ibid., p21. This is made even more explicit in the following: "le disfonctionnement du système est lui-même systematisé" (Magné, 1989, p47). In a seemingly similar vein, he later writes of the clinamen as being a "disfonctionnement momentané" (Magné, 1989, p158). However, the use of the term *momentané* (probably inadvertently) introduces a temporal dimension into what has until now been discussed in spatial terms (localised, etc.). We will return to this below.

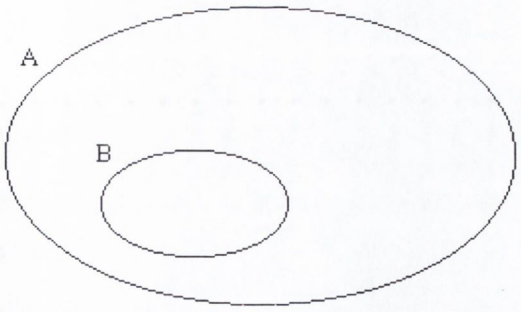

Figure 1: Regional Clinamen

We first need to remind ourselves that when speaking of the clinamen, it is important to distinguish between its *origin* (which is external for a regional clinamen and internal for a general clinamen) and its *effects* (which are always internal). The above Venn-type diagram details only the effects. In the diagram, A represents the global constraint or system of constraint (while it is possible to argue that any given single constraint constitutes a system when put into practice, it is certain that we can speak of a system of constraint*s* when dealing with, for example, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, a text constructed around multiple, inter-related constraints) and B represents the clinamen at work within A. The regional clinamen is introduced from the outside and its effects are contained within the ellipse B, leaving the remainder of the system unaffected – the regional clinamen is limited to a circumscribed spatial location and has no temporal dimension at all. It would of course be possible to increase the number of regional clinamen at work within A, but each one would have, as it were, a limited sphere of influence. In principle, given the geometric nature of the figures at work, there would always remain a virgin pocket, part of the original system which functions as smoothly as it did before the clinamen was introduced.

Finally, we should like to refer to another statement by Perec on the subject of the clinamen in *La Vie mode d'emploi* which, while it nominally remains within the ambit of the regional clinamen, nonetheless hints at a more general clinamen:

> Plus profondément, il faut que ce chapitre disparaisse pour casser la symétrie, pour introduire dans le système une erreur parce que quand on établit un système de contraintes, il faut qu'il y ait aussi *l'anti-contrainte* dedans. Il faut – et c'est important – *détruire le système des contraintes*. Il ne faut pas qu'il soit rigide, il faut qu'il y ait du jeu, comme on dit, que ça grince un peu; il ne faut pas que ça soit complètement

> cohérent; il faut un clinamen – c'est dans la théorie des atomes d'Epicure: 'Le monde fonctionne parce que au départ il y a un déséquilibre'. ('Entretien GP/Ewa Pawlikowska', p70, emphasis mine).

On the one hand, this passage refers to the aesthetic motivations behind the use of the clinamen (*casser la symétrie*) and to the fact that a little give is a good thing (*il faut qu'il y ait du jeu*). On the other hand, it is hard to see how the anti-constraint to which Perec refers and which causes the destruction of the system can be either limited in scope or controlled – mastered – by the author... as witnessed by the awkward juggling of vocabulary relating to both death and life.

In the text 2: Access all areas

> La Loi est implacable, mais la Loi est imprévisible. Nul n'est censé l'ignorer, mais nul ne peut la connaître.
>
> – Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance.*

Before proceeding with our theory of the general clinamen, it should be pointed out that this is not simply a case of imposing Derridean terminology onto an Oulipian concept. The previous quotation shows the implicit tendencies towards generality, but there is a more explicit example. In *Poésie, etcetera: ménage*, Roubaud refers to an Oulipian form known as the ALVA or 'Alexandrin de longueur variable' (Roubaud, p219). It is clear that uncertainty and indeterminability are internal to this particular constraint (not to mention humour). Even more explicit is his reference to what is known as *la contrainte Canada-dry*: it looks like constraint, it tastes like constraint, but it isn't constraint! He actually calls this an example of a *clinamen généralisé* – although, from his point of view, it is just this individual clinamen which is general, not the clinamen in general (Roubaud, p218).[33] There is also the example of the following, ultimately abandoned, curious project of Perec's: the 'opera' *L'art effaré*, in which the libretto was to be constructed around

[33] The same is true of Magné's grudging acceptance of the existence of a 'clinamen sauvage' (Magné, 1989, p52, fn).

homophonic transformations of the five notes *do-ré-mi-la-si*.[34] In the score, the playing of each note would coincide with its enunciation in the text (e.g. *Scylla mire et dorée*..., i.e. si-la-mi-ré-do-ré...). Into this strict construction, each singer is given a freedom which is far from programmed, but which rather gives free rein to an individual's *fantaisie* – or, perhaps in the Greek sense, psychology: "Dès que l'un des choristes le désire, il passe à..." and "Chacun quand il le veut..."[35]

But, as with the regional clinamen, it is in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* that the general clinamen is developed metaphorically to the greatest extent. As with the Epicurean clinamen, it is presented here as being related to psychology, characterised by doubt in the athletes' minds: "[I]l ne suffit pas d'être le meilleur pour gagner, ce serait trop simple. Il faut savoir que le hasard fait aussi partie de la règle. [...] Il est plus important d'avoir de la chance que du mérite" (W, p156). Given Perec's frequent bi-lingual puns this 'chance' could well be an English intruder signifying not luck but *le hasard* – which would therefore be doubly inscribed in the quotation, with no reference to any *programmation*.[36]

The partly human freedom of 'L'art effaré' is also to be found in the actions of W's *libres arbitres*:

> Mais l'inégalité des traitements réservés aux vainqueurs et aux vaincus n'est pas, loin de là, le seul exemple d'une *injustice systématique* dans la vie W. Ce qui fait toute l'originalité de W, ce qui donne aux compétitions ce piment unique qui fait qu'elles ne ressemblent à aucune autre, c'est que, précisément, l'impartialité des résultats proclamés, dont les Juges, les Arbitres et les Chronométreurs sont, dans l'ordre respectif de leurs responsabilités, les implacables garants, y est fondée sur une *injustice organisée*, *fondamentale*, *élémentaire*, qui, *dès le départ*, instaure parmi les participants d'une course ou d'un concours une discrimination qui sera le plus souvent décisive.
>
> Cette *discrimination institutionnelle* est l'expression d'une *politique consciente et rigoureuse*. [...] Il faut que même le meilleur ne soit pas sûr de gagner; il faut que même le plus faible ne soit pas sûr de perdre. [...] La mise en pratique de cette politique audacieuse a abouti à toute une série de mesures discriminatoires... (W, pp147-148, emphasis mine).

[34] 'L'art effaré' in *Le Fou Parle*, no. 21/22, December 1982, p3.

[35] Ibid., p3.

[36] As Geoffrey Bennington says of Derrida's 'system' of thought: "car le logiciel comporterait aussi des instructions déplaçables selon un hasard qui, lui, excéderait, en l'y ouvrant, toute maîtrise programmatrice. Une telle machine suspendrait la lecture dans un système ouvert, ni fini ni infini, labyrinthe-abîme." (Bennington, p291).

As with Jarry's dense text quoted above, this passage also contains a certain lexical charge which relates it to classical expositions of atomism and the clinamen: notably the expressions *fondamentale* and *élémentaire*, which remind us that the atoms are the fundamental elements.

Most importantly, however, for our purposes is, firstly, the fact that this injustice or deviation is put into practice *dès le départ*, that is to say, it is the clinamen which is *fondamentale*, not the rule. In this case, unlike the regional clinamen, we are not dealing with a secondary, external grafting, but a primary, internal growth. (When talking about clinamen as fundamental, we must be careful to avoid setting it up as a transcendental: it is not the condition by which the system is made possible.) Secondly, and related to the first point, is the fact that the resulting injustice and discrimination are institutional and systematic. This is to be read, not as meaning a discrimination sanctioned by the institution, but as a discrimination which affects the institution – referring us back to *systématique* in Barthes's sense of the term.

As a consequence of this, and although the *politique* might be *consciente* in its conception, its implementation results in a radical unpredictability. For, as the text goes on to explain, this particular policy takes two forms. The first is the least important and consists of exceptions announced before the race starts, that is to say positive or negative handicaps imposed more or less arbitrarily on certain athletes or teams. As for the remaining policy: "Les secondes mesures sont imprévisibles; elles sont laissées à la fantaisie des Organisateurs" (W, p148). Just as in *L'art effaré*, these interventions are at the sole discretion of the referees, referring us back to the psychological reading of the clinamen which disrupts determinism. The reliance on *fantaisie* results of course in complete unpredictability: in no way can these disruptions or *dérèglements* be said to be programmed, no formula would enable us to calculate their arrival, duration or effect.[37] Equally, their effects

[37] Bearing this unpredictability in mind, and proceeding with caution, we could perhaps metaphorically link our theory of the clinamen to Chaos Theory. It could be argued that the structures of the regional clinamen operate on the level of the macroscopic visible world while the general clinamen operates at the microscopic level. As such, the regional clinamen would obey the standard laws of physics, while the general clinamen would seemingly

cannot be said to be limited – either spatially or temporally – to one area of the system: they can occur at any moment and in any place. So, for example, a referee might, on a sudden whim, decide to move the hurdles slightly in one lane of a race already underway. Or, more tellingly, an "arbitre fallacieux" may shout out STOP at any moment, obliging the athletes to freeze in mid-flight. The athlete who remains still for the longest is, however, not guaranteed to win, instead "c'est celui qui tiendra le plus longtemps qui sera *probablement* proclamé vainqueur" (W, p149, emphasis mine). This *probablement* shows us just how vertiginous the clinamen really is: not only has the initial STOP been unpredictable, but a potential second (indeed, infinite number of) clinamen has now been added on to it by this innocent *probablement*. Just as a line is said to be infinitely divisible, so the referee has the possibility of infinitely changing his mind, each revision further undermining the notion of cause and effect as well as the notion that the system functions at all as its *dispositif* would indicate: "Les grands Officiels ont tout pouvoir: ils peuvent laisser faire, comme ils peuvent interdire; ils peuvent entériner le choix du hasard ou lui préférer un hasard de leur choix; ils peuvent décider et revenir à tout moment sur leur décision." (W, pp207-208).

There is even one particular race which may be described as being all clinamen and no constraint or, as Roubaud would say, is a sort of Canada-dry race. It is the race known as 'Les Atlantiades' and which basically consists in X number of male athletes chasing X-n number of women around the stadium, the 'prizes' being the capture and rape of the women by the athletes. As the narrator dryly remarks, all other races – even when disrupted by fallacious referees – take place in a "climat de rigueur", whereas the Atlantiades are "sous le signe de la plus entière liberté" (W, p175). That is to

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produce completely random lawless patterns. These patterns are not of course random but the possibility of infinite repetition they give rise to mirrors our conception of the general clinamen as something which stretches both backwards and forwards.

Another scientific concept which we could metaphorically compare to the clinamen is entropy (this is something which also has a close resonance with Bataille's excessive economy). The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that entropy always increases: every time an action takes place in a closed system, energy is wasted, and the level of order in the system decreases. The entropy of thermodynamics involves decay: every time something happens, the system grinds down a little bit more.

say, they turn into a free-for-all as the athletes punch, kick and generally attempt to maim their opponents, increasing their own chances by reducing the number of competitors. In this case the compulsion to deviate is seemingly stronger than any regulatory system could possibly be, and so no attempt is made to regulate. The clinamen as Eros, unwilling to be subjected to any law? Perhaps.

Just as we felt obliged to have recourse to a diagram to explicate the regional clinamen, so it may now be useful to repeat the process with the general clinamen:

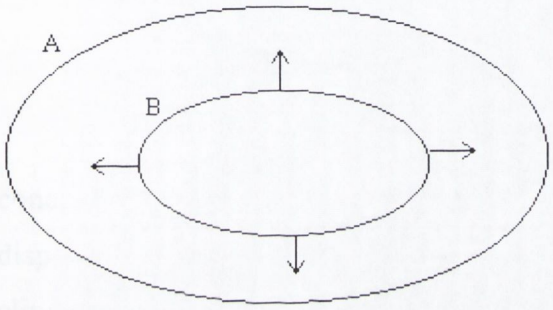

Figure 2: General Clinamen

As in the previous diagram, A represents the global constraint, while B represents the clinamen at work within it. While we maintain that the general clinamen originates within the system this, again, is not manifested in the diagram, which shows only the clinamen's effects. In the present case, the clinamen is not limited spatially as it originates at a single point within A, expanding outwards until it is co-extensive with the boundaries of A, before collapsing back in on itself in an approximation of the rhythmic systole-diastole motion.[38] The general clinamen is therefore not limited spatially – not localised – to a particular area of the text or system within which it operates. Indeed, there is no area of the universal set which is not in some way contaminated by its actions (it could even be argued that the clinamen exceeds the text, that it steps outside it: why should B stop when it reaches the boundaries of A? Could it not keep going, so that B becomes what was A, the universal set, while A becomes what was B, a subset? This opens up the

vertiginous possibility of the clinamen leaping from text to text, virus like). Moreover, this systole-diastole replaces the pure spatiality of the regional clinamen with a certain temporality – as hinted at by Magné's *momentané*. In the process, the principle of death erupts into that which was hitherto felt to be the bringer of life. Indeed, not only the principle, but the certainty of death is introduced, leaving only one possible issue.

Error in the system, the system as error

> [L]iste des emplettes à faire de toute urgence (café, sucre, sciure à chat, livre Baudrillard, ampoule 75 watts, piles, linge, etc.).
> – Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*.

We ended the last section by introducing, seemingly from nowhere, a concept – *the* concept – that can have little to add to topographical boundary disputes. And yet, no matter how purely textual the Oulipian theory of the clinamen may be, their (and especially Perec's) insistence that the clinamen gives life to the system of constraint could only ever result in one outcome. For if the text which plays host to a clinamen is a living thing, then surely the following comment of Freud's is relevant, necessary even: "If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*'." (Freud, 1984, pp310-311, author's emphasis). This quotation is taken from 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' which, as we will now see, is no accident, as it is precisely there where Freud introduced the death instinct, or Thanatos, as an alternative to the hitherto hegemonic life instinct, or Eros.

[38] If the clinamen is like a heartbeat, then it can only be like that of one of Beckett's characters, Malone perhaps, as he palpitates on, living in order to die.

'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' begins of course with a discussion of the 'compulsion to repeat', the famous *fort-da*.[39] It was through the observation of a child's obsessively repetitive game – a game which re-enacted the painful departure of his mother (departure in the daily humdrum sense of going to the shops, etc.) – that Freud realised that the instinct to receive pleasure or minimise pain was not necessarily the only one, though it was certainly dominant. This led in turn to the postulation of the death instinct. While the compulsion to repeat does not in itself concern us here, it is nonetheless worth noting that Freud believed it to result from the fact that the instincts are 'conservative' and not 'innovative', that is to say they "tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things" (Freud, 1984, p310). From our point of view, it is tempting to remark that, while the clinamen may seem like a 'radical' addition to Oulipian practice, it is actually a primary, 'conservative' instinct as it wishes to return to the primeval state of chaos which predates the order of constraint.

A lengthy quotation is now necessary, in order to show exactly how similar the terminology used by Freud in discussing the dominant nature of the pleasure principle, a dominance which all but obscured the existence of an alternative to it, is to that used here to describe the clinamen:[40]

> We have pointed out how the living vesicle is provided with a shield against stimuli from the external world; and we had previously shown that the cortical layer next to that shield must be differentiated as an organ for receiving stimuli from without. This sensitive cortex, however, which is later to become the system *Cs*. [Consciousness],

[39] We dealt with the compulsion to repeat in relation to transgression in Chapter Five. Now would perhaps be an opportune time to deal with the distinction between transgression and the clinamen: as mentioned in the Introduction, there is a difference between convention and constraint, and this distinction is roughly analogous to that drawn between transgression and the clinamen. The transgression studied in Chapter Five was the transgression of convention, not of constraint – the monovocalism employed in *Les Revenentes* entailed the transgression of linguistic conventions: a monovocalism in e simply states that no words in the text will contain the letter e, it does not state that the text must only use words which are naturally monovocalic in e. Therefore, for all its seemingly unprogrammed deformations of orthography, the constraint is respected absolutely. There would only be a clinamen in *Les Revenentes* if one of the other vowels appeared in it. Transgression affects a system other than the one it originates in, whereas the clinamen affects precisely the system it originates in.

[40] It is of course possible that an earlier – childhood (?) – reading of Freud by the present author influenced his own reveries on the subject – a perfect example of rampant intertextuality.

> also receives excitations from *within*. The situation of the system between the outside and the inside and the difference between the conditions governing the reception of excitations in the two cases have a decisive effect on the functioning of the system and of the whole mental apparatus. Towards the outside it is shielded against stimuli, and the amounts of excitation impinging on it have only a reduced effect. Towards the inside there can be no such shield; the excitations in the deeper layers extend into the system directly and in undiminished amount, in so far as certain of their characteristics give rise to feelings in the pleasure-unpleasure series. The excitations coming from within are, however, in their intensity and in other, qualitative, respects – in their amplitude, perhaps – more commensurate with the system's method of working than the stimuli which stream in from the external world.
> [However], a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. (Freud, 1984, pp300-301, author's emphasis).

Freud's last point is particularly apposite: it echoes very precisely what we have been arguing about the treatment of the general (or internal) and the regional (or external) clinamen. It seems to us that the excessive disruption occasioned by the internal clinamen has been transferred (or *projected*, as Freud goes on to say in the passage immediately following the above quotation) to an outside source, from where it can be more effectively controlled.

We should now also like to refer to what is effectively Freud's final word on the matter. It is a point to which we will return below, but it is to be hoped that the fact of introducing it now will allow it to work its way through our text, in the manner of the clinamen. He ultimately concludes that no sooner had inanimate matter come to life, than it attempted to cancel itself out, and that in light of this observation:

> the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent to the organism itself. We have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. (Freud, 1984, pp311-312).

In a word, the more the Oulipians attempt to master all aspects of their texts – including the 'life-giving' clinamen – the more they ensure that the texts will die a textual death, that is to say will die from within, from the same thing which gives them life: language.

Fatally flawed strategies

> [E]ncore une fois un jeu, mais un jeu terrible: on a beau essayer d'en comprendre les règles, on sait d'avance que toute stratégie nous conduira inévitablement à la défaite.
>
> – Georges Perec, 'Qui est-ce'.

So far in this chapter, in attempting to expose and define the concept of the general clinamen, the emphasis has been placed less on exposition – that is, an analysis of the general clinamen in operation, a reading of a particular Perecian text which illustrates and contains the general clinamen – than on metaphor. Of course, all 'new' concepts must perforce be introduced by metaphor, as the metaphor serves to forge a link with some existing idea or practice. More to the point in the present instance, however, is an awareness of the difficulties of empirically unearthing the general clinamen in any given text. By its nature, in focussing on a rigidly delimited section of text, analysis will seem to reveal only a regional clinamen (or, at best, a regional example of the general clinamen). How can a reading of a text reveal that text's temporal nature, the so-called systole-diastole of the clinamen which we proposed and which evidently is invisible to the empirical eye? If one accepts Derrida's *trace*, then the problem is eased somewhat (indeed, this whole chapter presupposes an acceptance of the *trace*). For, in accepting the *trace*, one accepts – in *theory* – the possibility that any apparently secluded section of text is in fact open to past disruptions and deformations, that it is *travaillé* from within by these ghosts. One therefore accepts – again in theory – that, for example, a passage containing a clinamen which is located towards the end of a novel bears the mark of all previous clinamen which have occurred throughout the novel. That there is, in fact, a temporal chain of clinamen running through the text from beginning to end – and from before to beyond. Though, of course, it is still equally difficult to show in *practice*. It is for this reason that such energy was expended on developing the concept of the general clinamen. For it is important that the theory be sufficiently healthy to stand on its own, even should the textual analysis which purports to prove it

fail. It is also for this reason that we must now at least attempt this empirical reading, the caveat described above writ large on our forehead.

But first – there is always a 'but first', another cowardly temporisation – let us attempt to make explicit the links between Epicurus, Jarry, Freud and at least one 'post-structuralist' writer, hopefully strengthening our theory (or: *délire*) in the process. The last section ended with Freud's discussion of the 'death from within', and it would seem that the following from Baudrillard jumps right in where Freud left off, prolonging his resonance. Discussing the difference between the prefixes 'exo-' (without) and 'eso-' (within), Baudrillard writes that "avec le cancer, il s'agit d'une réaction *ésotérique* [and not *exotérique*]: le corps se révolte contre sa propre organisation interne, il déjoue son propre équilibre structurel. C'est comme si l'espèce en avait assez de sa propre définition et se lançait dans un délire organique" (Baudrillard, 1983, p48). This is taken from *Les Stratégies fatales*, a book in which Baudrillard explicitly develops a 'pataphysique des systèmes'.[41] In the following, the opening of the last paragraph in particular could have been written as a description of the Oulipo's motivations, while the remainder of the paragraph describes the manner in which their creations turn against them:

> Un exemple de cette ex-centricité des choses, de cette dérive dans l'excroissance, c'est l'irruption, dans notre système, du hasard, de l'indétermination, de la relativité. La réaction à ce nouvel état de choses n'a pas été un abandon résigné des anciennes valeurs, mais plutôt une surdétermination folle, une exacerbation de ces valeurs de référence, de fonction, de finalité, de causalité. Peut-être la nature a-t-elle horreur du vide en effet, car c'est là, dans le vide, que naissent pour le conjurer les systèmes pléthoriques, hypertrophiques, saturés - toujours quelque chose de redondant s'installe là où il n'y a plus rien.
>
> La détermination ne s'efface pas au profit de l'indétermination, mais au profit d'une hyperdétermination – redondance de la détermination dans le vide.

[41] See: "Dead point: le point mort où tout système franchit cette limite subtile de réversibilité, de contradiction, de remise en cause pour entrer vivant dans la non-contradiction, dans sa propre contemplation éperdue, dans l'extase... Là commence une pataphysique des systèmes. [...] Le système se dissuade lui-même..." (Baudrillard, 1983, p19). While this is taken from a 1983 publication, and is therefore 'post-Perec', the idea is present in earlier work by Baudrillard, it is simply in the latter that it is most explicitly developed and therefore most useful in the present context. See, for an example of an earlier occurrence of the same theme, 1977's *L'effet Beaubourg – Implosion et dissuasion*, where Baudrillard contends, firstly, that it is the very success of the 'système Beaubourg' which contributes to its destruction and, secondly, that systems no longer explode but implode, saturated and short-circuited by their own feedback and "circuits de contrôle surdéveloppés" (Baudrillard, 1977, pp35-40).

> La finalité ne disparaît pas au profit de l'aléatoire, mais au profit d'une hyperfinalité: plus fonctionnel que le fonctionnel, plus final que le final – hypertélie [Elsewhere: "ce qui va plus loin que sa propre fin"].
>
> Le hasard nous ayant plongés dans une incertitude anormale, nous y avons répondu par un excès de causalité et de finalité. L'hypertélie n'est pas un accident dans l'évolution de quelques espèces animales, elle est ce défi de finalité qui répond à une indétermination croissante. Dans un système où les choses sont de plus en plus livrées au hasard, la finalité tourne au délire, et il se développe des éléments qui savent trop bien excéder leur fin jusqu'à envahir le système tout entier. (Baudrillard, 1983, pp15-16).

Des contraintes à n'en plus finir

> L'incertitude même sur le fond nous pousse à la surmultiplication vertigineuse des qualités formelles.
>
> – Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales.*

The following description of the constraints operating in *La Vie mode d'emploi* owes much to the work of Bernard Magné, Jacques Neefs and Hans Hartje, whose work in preparing the book's preliminary manuscripts for publication (and their presentation of same) has been crucial in allowing us to read the hitherto *illisibles* constraints – despite occasional reference by Perec to their existence and, even, despite him having revealed minor details about them, it is impossible to reconstitute them from the finished novel (unlike, for example, *La Disparition*).[42] Nonetheless, in what follows, the aim is not simply to repeat their work, the emphasis will instead be on brevity and on highlighting the occurrences of the clinamen in the novel's architecture.

As is well known, *La Vie mode d'emploi* centres around a Parisian apartment block, and Perec often likened it to those paintings which represent buildings with their facades removed, allowing the viewer to capture simultaneously all human life contained therein. The grid of the apartment block gives rise to one set of constraints, while the others regulate the contents of each chapter:

[42] See the *Cahier des charges de* La Vie mode d'emploi. *Présentation, transcription et notes par Hans Hartje, Bernard Magné et Jacques Neefs.* CNRS Editions-Zulma, 1993. For some of Perec's comments on the subject, see *Espèces d'espaces*, pp57-61 and 'Quatre figures

Constraint no. 1: *La polygraphie du cavalier* or the knight's tour. This classic chess problem – how to make the knight travel around the board never landing on the same square twice – is here adapted to a 10 * 10 grid. Perec worked out the solution by trial and error and it determines the order of the chapters in the novel. Each square on the grid corresponds to a room or part of room in the building (be the 'room' in an apartment, the stairwell, the basement, etc.). The novel begins on square 6,6 (counting down and right from the top left) in the stairs and the narrative lurches along with the knight from there on. Moreover, every time the knight touches one of the sides, a new section is begun.

Clinamen no. 1: This initial constraint is immediately disrupted by a clinamen. In the solution of the knight's tour retained by Perec, the knight reaches the bottom left-hand corner on his 66th move. On the diagram of the building, the bottom left-hand corner is of course *une cave*. However, chapter 66 of the novel details the room which the knight lands on on his 67th jump, Mme Marcia's *boutique*. Therefore, 'chapter 66' has been erased from the works and the novel has only 99 chapters instead of 100.

This gap in the bottom left corner becomes, in many ways, the invisible or absent centre of the work, all subsequent disruptions emanating from it, domino-like: dead point. For, if the grid described here was a three-dimensional entity, then the removal of one square would free up all the others – as, for example, in the common hand-held children's game in which 15 little plastic squares are placed in a frame capable of holding 16, the aim of the game being to reconstitute a picture by sliding the pieces around. It is tempting to push this further and refer to the following, in which the chapters become huge *plaques* subject to a form of continental drift, destabilising the entire edifice: "Cette sorte de jeu des systèmes autour du point d'inertie s'illustre de la forme de catastrophe congénitale de l'ère de la simulation: la forme sismique. Celle où le sol manque, celle de la faille et de la défaillance, de la déhiscence et des objets fractals, celle où d'immenses plaques, des pans

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pour *La Vie mode d'emploi*'. *L'Arc*, no. 76, 1979, pp50-53. For a succinct explanation of the system of constraints, see Bellos, 1995, pp598-604.

entiers glissent les uns sous les autres et produisent d'intenses frissons superficiels." (Baudrillard, 1983, p27).

Constraint no. 2: This concerns the contents of the novel, in the broadest sense of the term. To begin with, Perec had 420 elements to include. These he distributed in 42 lists of 10 elements. The first 40 are organised horizontally in 4 groups of 10 and have titles such as 'position', 'activité', 'murs', 'sols', and 'longueur'. The list 'murs', for example, contains elements such as *boiseries*, *lièges*, *panneaux*, etc. The last two lists are called 'couples' and function somewhat differently. In principle, one element from each list was to be included in each chapter.

Constraint no. 3: This is known as a *bi-carré latin orthogonal d'ordre 10* and regulates the choice of elements from each list for a particular chapter. In short, it is a form of algorithm which ensures that there will be no repetition nor omission in the distribution of elements. Feeding the coordinates of each chapter (e.g., 6,6 for chapter 1) into the algorithm automatically determines which elements will be chosen for that chapter from the different lists.

Constraint no. 3a: The *pseudo-quenine d'ordre 10*. This is an extension of constraint no. 3: the *pseudo-quenine* is a permutational device which allowed Perec to generate 21 different *bi-carrés latins* from the original, one for each pair of lists. For, in effect, he felt that it would be too simplistic and repetitive to use the same *bi-carré* for each list. In practice, this means that instead of feeding the coordinates for a given chapter 21 times into the same algorithm, they must instead be fed into 21 different algorithms. The distributional pattern is therefore never repeated and any potential feeling of excessive mechanism is avoided.

Clinamen no. 2: The second clinamen intervenes in constraint no. 2, though we felt it best to present constraints 3 and 3a before discussing it. One of the pairs of lists consists of 'manque' and 'faux'. Instead of each containing ten different missing or false elements, these lists are simply numbered 1-10. So,

when it is time to feed the coordinates of a given chapter into the bi-carré latin for this pair of lists, a pair of numbers is obtained, as with all the other lists. However, unlike the other lists, these numbers do not refer to position within the list, but refer instead to the other lists themselves.

Let us attempt to clarify: consider chapter 1 (6,6): if we feed its coordinates into the algorithm for lists 2, *nombre* and *rôle* (plural because each list is actually a pair of lists), we obtain the numbers 9,4. This means that we take the ninth element from the list *nombre*, which is 3, and the fourth element from the list *rôle*, which is *démarcheur*. The chapter will therefore include three 'somethings' and a *démarcheur* (as well as all the other items programmed by the other lists).

Following the same procedure with the algorithm for lists 20 (*manque*, *faux*) produces the numbers 0,7. This does not mean that element 0 from *manque* is missing and element 7 from *faux* is false – as stated, there are no elements in these lists. It means instead that there will be a *manque* in list 0 (*fleurs*, *bibelots*, *manque*, *faux*) and a *faux* in list 7 (*lectures*, *musiques*, *tableaux*, *livres*).[43] In chapter 1, Perec chose to apply the *manque* to the *faux*: that is to say, applying the *manque* from 0 to the *faux* from 0 results in the fact that "il manque le faux dans le sept" (note on the manuscript)!

For our purposes, it is important to stress two facts in the midst of all this confusion. Firstly, the logic of the algorithm means that *there is a clinamen present in every chapter* (since the list *manque/faux* is incorporated into every chapter). It is therefore conceivable to speak of a chain of clinamen running through the text. It is particularly appropriate that Perec should choose to connote them with the terms *manque* and *faux* as the chain they establish, the system of referral they elaborate, is surely characterised by the absence of truth. That is, just as nothing anchors the *chaîne signifiante* to a fixed meaning, so nothing can prevent the unpredictable indeterminate nature of the clinamen from working through each chapter…

[43] We are aware that this oscillation between 'lists' as being simply one list, or a pair of lists, or a group of four is confusing. Unfortunately, however, such was Perec's idiosyncratic use of the term and it is only possible to fully understand the workings of the process by examining the plans and drawings reproduced in the *Cahier des charges*.

Secondly, as hinted at by our 'chose to apply' above, and as stated explicitly by the authors of the *Présentation*, "MANQUE et FAUX permettent un 'clinamen' programmé [so-called] et combinent calcul (le choix du groupe est déterminé par un bi-carré latin) et liberté (le choix de la contrainte dans le groupe dépend de la volonté du scripteur)" (p20). This brings us back to W's *libres arbitres*: despite all the care taken to elaborate a rigidly coded system, and the care taken to program a (rigidly coded) safety-valve into the works, all ultimately rests on the *fantaisie* of an individual: fallacious Perec can choose which of the four elements to apply the clinamen to... Which, of course, returns us to the second instance where the clinamen is discussed in Lucretius: free-will. This freedom despite (or within) constraint is aggravated when the following is considered: one would think that, having gone to the trouble of erecting this multi-layered system of constraint, complete with 'programmed' infractions, that Perec would have respected it, that it would indeed be constraining. Such, however, is not always the case: Perec occasionally noted on the folio for each chapter the number of elements from the 42 lists which were actually included in the finished text. While some chapters include all 42 constraints, others are less assiduous: chapter 5 only contains 24 out of 42 while chapter 16 contains 28 out of 42.[44] Constraint, therefore, is seemingly nothing, brushed aside at will as though it does not exist. Indeed, the final *boutade* on the subject could very well be that the choice of such and such a constraint over another is, as an example of free-will being exercised, itself a clinamen...

La part maudite

> Tu préfères être la pièce manquante du puzzle.
> – Georges Perec,
> *Un homme qui dort.*

La Vie mode d'emploi ends with the death of Bartlebooth, who is left holding a W-shaped jigsaw piece in his hand while the one remaining empty

[44] See the *Présentation*, p20. See also Magné's 'Du registre au chapitre', p186.

slot in the nearly finished jigsaw on the table in front of him is X-shaped.[45] This excessive piece constitutes something of a rejoinder to the missing chapter and, like it, concentrates many themes and ideas into one *trop-plein*. The end being nigh, it is only right to brush the others aside and concentrate on the essential: death.

The time it takes a cigarette to burn down is more fatal than any amount of tar or nicotine it contains (wrote the author on his third cigarette of this sentence): Bartlebooth's majestic folly is of course something of a metaphor for constraint. There is, however, one major difference between constraint as practiced by Bartlebooth and constraint as practiced by Perec: there is no place in Bartlebooth's project for chance of any kind, be it programmed or otherwise. His project is a life project and any playful tinkering with the mechanism would infringe on his being. There is therefore no clinamen introduced to 'give life' to the system or otherwise, since the system is his life. His is an attempt to push constraint through to the end in its purest form, without the slightest deviation. Where, therefore, the unplaced piece, the cancerous growth which exceeds its function…?

Answer: time's fruit. To the extent that Bartlebooth's system is rooted in the temporal process – it was originally elaborated as a means of 'killing time' as much as anything else – it must inevitably be killed by time. This principle is illustrated by the one Perecian project which based its constraint explicitly on time: *Lieux*. The aim of this project was to describe twelve Parisian locations, once *in situ* and once from memory, over the course of twelve years and combined two constraints: a standard permutational one (which ensured that Perec had two locations to describe each month without repetition or conflict) and a temporal one (the twelve years the project was supposed to last). The project was never finished and it is our contention that it had to fail, for the time required to put an idea into practice is a form of decay, and when the idea to be put into practice was time itself then this

[45] "L'*économie générale* met en évidence en premier lieu que des excédents d'énergie se produisent qui, par définition, ne peuvent être utilisés. L'énergie excédante ne peut être que perdue sans le moindre but, en conséquence sans aucun sens. C'est cette perte inutile, insensée, qu'*est* la souveraineté." (Bataille, *Méthode de méditation*, quoted in ED, p397, author's emphasis).

decay is double. Once constraint is moved from the spatial to the temporal, it becomes subject to time, the ultimate clinamen…

Conclusion

> Quelle incitation à l'hilarité que d'entendre le mot 'but' en suivant un convoi funèbre!
> – Emil Cioran, *Aveux et anathèmes*.
>
> Achever! Quel mot. On n'achève point quand on cesse et quand on déclare fini.
> – Joseph Joubert, *Pensées*.

The three sections of this thesis correspond to the three main lines of enquiry running through our work, the three principal questions which we were attempting to answer. These were: firstly, what interpretative parameters are to be found in Perec's non-fiction; secondly, what interpretative parameters are employed by Perecian critics (and are these influenced by Perec's non-fiction or fiction); thirdly, and most importantly, what other interpretative parameters could conceivably be deployed to analyse Perec's work (and what sort of analysis would they produce)? This presentation reflects the order in which the questions were dealt with in the thesis. In reality, however, the situation is slightly more complicated, in that such questions as the ones above do not emerge in a completely disinterested manner – nor necessarily in the order described above – from pure contemplation of the work. They are rather to be explained by what Heidegger in his famous discussion of the vicious circle terms a 'fore-having' – 'something we have in advance' which influences or grounds our interpretation: "If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal to what 'stands there', then one finds that what 'stands there' in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting." (Heidegger, 1962, p192).

According to Heidegger, this circular 'fore-having' cannot be avoided and, in any case, is not itself something which invalidates a particular interpretative decision. It is rather the undiscussed nature of the assumption which is problematic – one should be aware of the 'baggage' one is bringing to bear on the work to be interpreted. It is therefore necessary to admit that the three questions described above did not develop in the order in which

they are presented herein. Instead, the first two were initially invented to justify the third. Moreover, this third question was at first more an assertion than a question: it was an 'I want to use Derrida to read Perec…' Over time, this assertion evolved into the self-reflexive and fragmentary methodology we ultimately worked with in Section Three. However, the admission that the first two sections were initially designed to validate the third is not meant to imply that they were secondary, much less to dismiss them. Rather, we soon realised that a purely Derridean reading of Perec would leave many important questions unanswered and would undoubtedly lead to an impasse itself, just as the sole reliance on biographical or formalist methodologies has lead to similar impasses. The fact that Derrida can dispense with historical and comparative criticism is as much a function of his stylistic virtuosity as his philosophy (though this side-stepping can of course be theoretically justified by the latter). For our part, we came to the conclusion that a certain amount of contextualisation was necessary, that a fuller understanding of the intricacies of Perec's fiction would only be possible if several different methodologies were used in parallel. Our historical approach in Chapter One was therefore a prerequisite if the third section was not to appear ungrounded. Equally, chapters Two and Three were necessary in order to show, not the general invalidity of formalist or biographical methodologies, but the specific limitations placed on them by Perec's texts.

Throughout, the questions were formulated in such a manner as to elicit a positive response and the paths leading to the answer are therefore of as much interest as the answer itself (this is not meant sardonically but is a reference to the phrase from Barthes we quoted in Chapter Five: "le sens n'est pas 'au bout' du récit, il le traverse" – in the same manner, questions are not justified solely by the answer which comes at the end, closing them off, but reveal their meaning on every page by a slow and patient unravelling). The fact that certain answers were expected was no guarantee that they would appear, nor does their appearance mean that we can then ignore the paths they took to get here.

The expected answer to the first question was that Perec's non-fiction would contain elements which would reveal certain similarities with post-

structuralist theories of the text. Here is the source code: Literature – Truth – Totality – Understanding – U – Writing – Play – Substitution – Unknowing. As stated at the outset of Chapter One, Perec's theoretical writings are not as important as those of some of his contemporaries and they certainly do not constitute a system of thought. However, by examining his non-fiction in chronological order, we were able to bring to light hitherto undiscovered shifts and rifts in his thinking and aesthetics. Though the shifts may have been somewhat haphazard and the thinking decidedly sketchy, the overall trend is unmistakable and of its epoch: Perec moved from the espousal of a Marxist viewpoint in the late 1950s and early 1960s to the espousal of a Barthesian/Derridean theory of the text by the late 1960s. It is not necessarily our contention that Perec was as zealous a convert to this latter theory as some of his contemporaries were, nor that it was the advent of post-structuralism alone which caused him to abandon his occasionally strident Marxism. It is instead our belief that his own deep-seated faith in literature as literature would, in any case, have caused him to reject Marxism (or at least Sartre's didactic version of Marxism which Perec was initially closer to than he would have cared to admit) sooner rather than later – witness the difficulties he experienced in reconciling the work's complexity and ambiguity with the doctrinal demand for clarity of exposition, theoretical difficulties which he soon resolved in praxis (that is, abandoning them with the writing of *Les Choses*). His turn to post-structuralism was therefore perhaps as much a matter of expedience as of conviction – witness the development of his own rather idiosyncratic textual aesthetics examined towards the end of Chapter One. In short, Perec was very much his own man when it came to expressing allegiance or non-allegiance to the various schools of thought vying for supremacy in French intellectual life in the decades following the Second World War. This is said to avoid overstating the case for Perec's post-structuralism, though it does not invalidate the view that his casual commitment to post-structuralism was perhaps casual precisely because he shared a deep affinity with many of its tenets, an affinity which did not need to be vehemently expressed in the language of military allegiance. It is indeed quite possible that it was the fragmented and non-conformist nature of post-structuralism which appealed to him as much

as its more abstract concerns. However, whatever Perec's motives may have been, we believe that we have shown in Chapter One that his post-*Choses* non-fiction certainly shows the influence of post-structuralism.

The expected answer to the second question was that Perecian critics would limit themselves to two narrow approaches to Perec's fiction and that these approaches would seemingly respect the work while ultimately being fooled by it. Here is the source code: Text (object) – Architecture – Traps – Trap-based analyses – Retraction – Ignorance – Prejudice – Fetishism – Redundancy. In chapters Two and Three we therefore dealt with the *mise en scène* of, respectively, structuralist and biographical readers in Perec's fiction. The crucial difference between these two *mises en scène* is perhaps the fact that the structuralist surrogate readers were purely fictional creations whereas the biographical surrogate reader was Perec himself, scrutinising his own work in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. This fact no doubt partly explains the subsequent emphasis placed by Perecian critics on biographical criticism, though we have also shown that it is the result of a highly suspicious philo-Semitism – one which objectifies its target, disrespectfully manhandling it (We have perhaps focused too much on this aspect of French Perecians' resistance to other critics – the resistance is undoubtedly as institutional as it is ethnic, motivated by a desire to retain control over research into Perec). We have equally shown that some Perecian critics choose conveniently to ignore those occurrences in his work which suggest that these two modes of criticism are to be approached with caution (it can only be a case of wilful ignorance and not unintentional ignorance as, though the 'retraction' contained in, for example, 'Roussel et Venise' may have been sufficiently obscure to be hidden from the general public, the same can scarcely be said for academic readers). In Heidegger's terms, their 'fore-having' – their 'obvious undiscussed assumption' – is so strong as to render them blind to the text. It is therefore not the methodologies themselves which are at fault, but rather the restricted manner in which they were applied. It seems to us that by incorporating some of Derrida's concepts (see Chapter Two, note 6 and Chapter Three, note 41), these methodologies could be applied afresh to Perec's work and could still produce interesting results, for there is no doubt that his work *is* partly autobiographical and partly formalist.

The answer to the third question outlined above – 'what other interpretative parameters could conceivably be deployed to analyse Perec's work (and what sort of analysis would they produce)' – could only be more complex, even though in practice we only dealt with the second part of the question, the first itself being 'fore-had'. There is no simple source code to be provided here, mainly because the text as object has been replaced by the text as process – paralleled by the substitution of *contrainte formelle* as dynamic economy for *contrainte formelle* as archaeological-architectural-psychological exhibit. This substitution was implicit from the outset: in the Introduction, we initially provided a definition of constraint based on Oulipian practice ("une règle – imposée par l'individu qui la subit – qui considère la forme, l'apparence plus que la matière, le contenu") before suggesting, with the quotation from Barthes ("les contraintes ne limitent pas [le texte], mais au contraire [le] constituent"), that a more dynamic model needed to be established. Indeed, though still valid as an empirical definition of pre-textual constraint, the Oulipian gloss on the expression was of little use to us in Section Three. Instead, we employed two different techniques to 'unfetter' constraint. The first involved bringing the plurality of meanings hidden in the expression *contrainte formelle* to the foreground: for example, *contrainte* includes the notions of violence, legal obligation and deformative physical forces while *formelle* includes the notions of clarity, certainty and actual existence. This *analyse sémo-définitionnelle* was then coupled with a Derridean inspired reading in order to show that the texts themselves do not produce a stable meaning. The combination of these approaches led to a double instability (or, perhaps, freedom) being uncovered in *contrainte formelle*: that inherent in the expression itself and that inherent in the constrained text (and, by extension, in the constraint which inhabits the text). The question now is whether we are in a position to provide a new definition of constraint which would take these developments into account. We are inclined to think not, as any definition, in attempting to close down certain possible significations, opens up as many alternatives. All we can therefore do is provide a non-exhaustive list of some of the characteristics we discovered in constraint. So, rather than summarise the arguments advanced in the third section chapter by chapter, we will instead make some general

comments on the changes to our perception of formal constraint brought about by the section as a whole. We have, no doubt, sufficiently laboured the point concerning our 'take' on constraint at this stage, so let us be brief: constraint is dynamic not static; constraint is temporal not spatial; constraint is multiple not unique; constraint asks questions of itself as well as of the texts it permeates; if constraint is the central figure in Perec's work then it is an absent centre, it is something which was at work before it came into existence and which ceased to exist as soon as it started to function. (These points all relate to constraint considered in general. Individual occurrences of a given constraint can also be static, spatial and unique. This tension need not be resolved as it contributes to constraint's plurality and prevents us from concluding that the interpretation we provided is the only possible one.)

Finally, it is our belief that the methodology developed here has not been exhausted, and that certain issues raised in passing merit closer attention. Regarding a post-structuralist reading of Perec's fiction, neither representation nor transgression have been dealt with completely here, nor are they the only possible fields which might benefit from a post-structuralist approach. For example, the question of the subject has scarcely been raised at all: to examine the relationship between the effects of constraint on the subject and the disappearance of the subject in much post-structuralist writing, one could begin with the fact that the singular subject ('Je') is literally forced to disappear from *La Disparition* because of its lipogrammatic nature (though the communal 'Nous' remains). Equally, our exploration of the clinamen has very much only just begun: each historical phase of its development needs to be examined separately and in relation with the Oulipo to ground our theory of the general clinamen properly. Once this theory has been developed further, a greater effort will have to be made to combine it with close textual analysis, something which is at present difficult to achieve.

As for other possibilities raised for further research, here are some examples: Perec is not the only Oulipian writer and, assuming our methodology is felt to be valid, it could then be applied to other Oulipians – Jacques Roubaud, who was more involved than Perec in the theoretical

debates of the time, in particular would seem to be a worthy candidate; but there is also now a new generation of Oulipians, ones who are more explicitly situated in the fallout from the theory of the 1960s and who voluntarily qualify their work as post-modern; as a collective body, the Oulipo's 'anti-theory' was touched on – a more detailed comparison of this with, firstly, the manifestoes and theoretical writings of other artistic movements and, secondly, with Theory itself is surely worth undertaking. Regarding Perec, there are two particular paths we would like to explore further, one relating to his non-fiction and the other to his fiction. Firstly, we would like to gather together the various links drawn between Perec and Barthes and systematically develop them into an independent work. It seems to us that playing the work of these two writers off against each other would be a very fruitful process. Secondly, we would like to explore further the similarities and differences existing between Perec's fiction and the fiction produced by members of the group Tel Quel (for example, the novels of Philippe Sollers, Maurice Roche, Pierre Rottenberg and Jean-Louis Baudry). The fiction of these latter writers has largely been ignored and one manner of approaching it would be to emphasise its reliance on permutations and combinations, thence allowing us to segue on into links with Perec and the Oulipo.

Finally, if we can claim to have thrown new light on Perec's work, we cannot claim that we have solved the 'question of interpretation': we have not been holding up our methodology as the only viable means of reading Perec. Our Derridean reading was only a starting point in the slow process of examining all aspects of the logic of constraint. Just as we found it necessary to move beyond formalism, it will also become necessary to move beyond post-structuralism. Indeed it is only fitting that a writer who is renowned for his heterogeneity should inspire us to adopt as many interpretative positions as possible.

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