

Autobiography as a Curiosity:
Generic (In)definition, Narrative Time and
Figuration in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*,
Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood* and
Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time*

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is an investigation of the relation between generic indeterminacy, narrative time and figuration through a comparative analysis of three generically ambiguous texts: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951/1966), Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) and Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time* (1998). Those issues will be examined with the help (or the hindrance) of a metaphor — the “curiosity”. Although it was initially employed by Brian Richardson to describe the non-mimetic temporal structure of *Speak, Memory*, the figure is used here not only in relation to narrative time but also as an alternative way of exploring the critical debates around the definition of autobiography as a literary genre.

The “curiosity” metaphor is first considered in relation to other figures of definition and indefinition employed in critical discourses about autobiography. The metaphor articulates the tensions between boundary-based definitional models (such as Philippe Lejeune's), hybrid “renaming” approaches (as evidenced in portmanteau tags such as ‘autobiografiction’ or ‘autofiction’) and anti-models such as Paul De Man's, suspicious about the possibility of containing, defining or naming autobiography (highlighted by their use of temporally impossible or paradoxical figures). Through the curiosity (a figure of generic oddity defined against a norm it disturbs), the thesis explores the problematic nature of boundary-based definitional approaches and argues that it is only by an explicit and immersive mirroring of the

circular and seemingly paralysing nature of autobiography (and its definition) that the genre can be described and kept alive.

The thesis's "curious" approach to autobiography involves a joint study of the metaphor not only in relation to genre but also to questions of narrative time and temporal indeterminacy (the "origin" of the figure). It seeks to explore this twinned process of indefinition through the medium of figurative mirrors — in particular, through self-referential and paradoxical devices such as *mise en abyme*. The procedure for this study involves a series of obsessive and patient readings of three "curiosities": *Speak, Memory*, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, and *Dark Back of Time*. Their use of *mise en abyme* devices will be examined in parallel to their generic indefinition and their temporal structure. Narrative time will be analysed both through classical narratological models (such as the *fabula* and *sjuzhet* distinction) and "fuzzier" approaches to narrative temporality (as David Herman's concept of polychrony). The thesis thus seeks to gather together a series of ambiguous figural and temporal motifs in the three texts (some of them left "uncollected" by previous critical approaches) in order to determine whether it might be possible to approach autobiography through less confining frames than those of the frontier/boundary/hybrid models.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction On forays and curiosities	1
Chapter One Autobiography as a curiosity	27
Chapter Two The octopus-lamp: Vladimir Nabokov's <i>Speak, Memory</i> (1951/1966)	107
Chapter Three The frame: Georges Perec's <i>W or the Memory of Childhood</i> (1975)	184
Chapter Four The wooden Hindu aide-de-camp: Javier Marías's <i>Dark Back of Time</i> (1998)	270
Conclusion On playing and not playing patience: A conclusion	350
Bibliography	354

For reasons of space, the quotations from *W or the Memory of Childhood* and *Dark Back of Time* (as well as references to other works by Perec and Marías) are given in English. I have sometimes modified David Bellos's and Esther Allen's translations. When I have done so, I have indicated it in the relevant footnote. Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations from secondary material are mine.

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On forays and curiosities: an introduction

2. See, for example, Christian Moraru's insightful analysis of the temporal curiosities of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory*

Brian Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse' in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*¹

Perhaps I should start with a footnote to the footnote. The above epigraph comes from Brian Richardson's 'Beyond Story and Discourse: Narrative Time in Postmodern and Non-Mimetic Fiction', his contribution to *Narrative Dynamics*, an anthology of narrative theory. Richardson's chapter focuses on the limitations of the traditional narratological distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, or *story* and *discourse*, particularly when applied to late modernist and postmodernist texts, as those categories 'are predicated on distinctions that experimental writers are determined to preclude, deny or confound – and this is also true of some postmodern forays into non-fiction'.² The note appears at the end of that sentence and provides an example of one of those 'forays': Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951/1966).

Speak, Memory will indeed be one of the three texts examined in this study, but my choice of that note as an introduction to the main purposes of this thesis –

¹ Brian Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse: Narrative Time in Postmodern and Nonmimetic Fiction', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2002), pp.47-63 (p. 59). Richardson is referring to Christian Moraru's article 'Time, Writing and Ecstasy in *Speak, Memory*: Dramatising the Proustian Project', *Nabokov Studies*, 2.1 (1995), 173-190.

² Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-63 (p. 47).

and the questions it explores — is not based on their coincident subject matter. Neither is it motivated by Richardson's apparent banishment of *Speak, Memory* to a peripheral position in his study of what he calls 'non-mimetic' narrative temporal structures (narratives that cannot be described by the *fabula/sjuzhet* distinction).³ Despite the fact that one of the purposes of this thesis is to redress the critical imbalance towards fictional texts in studies of narrative time — particularly in relation to so-called "experimental" narrative techniques — Richardson's note should not be read as proof of a critical tendency to sideline (and perhaps oversimplify) autobiography and its narrative structure. The chapter and the anthology are, after all, just dedicated to fiction: there is no particularly need for him to consider non-fictional examples. Reading the note as evidence of a conspiracy against autobiography might seem paranoid and excessive, like questioning the absence of Roman coins or porcelain cats in a stamp collection. No, what *really* motivates my choice of this note as an epigraph is a particular phrase, 'temporal curiosities': a phrase which deserves a far better fate than being tucked away in its drawer-like note — a prime mantelpiece position, perhaps.

The metaphor that Richardson chooses to display in his article to refer to structurally awkward non-fictional texts, however, is that of the 'foray'. Even though he does not need to, Richardson does acknowledge non-fictional texts in relation to mimetic models of narrative temporality — perhaps out of a desire for critical thoroughness, or even out of politeness. He affirms that the 'general mimetic

³ Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-63 (p.47).

assumptions' of models such as Genette's allow 'the theory to attempt to cover both fictional and nonfictional examples'.⁴ *Fabula/sjuzhet* models are 'generally adequate to describe the temporality of most nonfictional narratives'.⁵ The non-mimetic temporal models he describes in the essay (such as circular or contradictory temporalities) 'insofar as they engage in logical contradictions [...] are usually only possible in works of fiction'.⁶ Richardson's generalizations about non-fictional narratives could indeed be read as proof of the over-simplification of non-fictional texts, but his use of adverbs such as 'usually' or 'generally' (or the verb 'attempt') signal his openness to consider exceptions, and perhaps a certain uneasiness with his own generalizations.

The use of 'foray' to describe texts such as *Speak, Memory* is related to those previous statements. Although Richardson seems wary of the identification of the non-fictional with mimesis and logic, 'foray' somehow implies that those examples might have made an incursion into a territory where they do not properly belong: they are violent disturbances of the norm. From 'foray', we can infer that there is a frontier between fiction and non-fiction, but one which might not be impenetrable or stable. However, as we have seen in the epigraph, Richardson employs a very different metaphor when he gives an example of such forays – the 'curiosity'. Although the word still highlights the freakish character of such examples, it depicts their exceptionality in a more positive light, as perhaps something which adds to their charm and makes them collectable. Even if 'curiosity' still implies that there is a

⁴ Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-63 (p.47).

⁵ Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-63 (p. 47).

⁶ Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-63 (p. 48).

typical narrative form for autobiography, it does not establish it around the idea of a rigid frontier transgressed by those texts: those examples might be not aggressive attacks or malicious trespasses, but simply odd.

The difference between describing certain texts such as *Speak, Memory* as forays or as curiosities might seem unimportant – the change of metaphors might be nothing more than an instance of elegant variation. However, in the light of the critical debates about the definition of autobiography, the metaphors could be read as emblems of two very different approaches. Much of the theory of autobiography has made use of spatial metaphors such as the foray and – above all – the borderline to define the genre. The most important exponent of this approach is perhaps Philippe Lejeune, originator of a much commented (and frowned-upon) definition of the genre, which will be examined in more detail in Chapter One. The parameter-based approach to autobiography, however, is not exclusive to Lejeune: many attempts to redefine the genre (from Stephen Reynolds’ forgotten attempt at the beginning of the twentieth century – autobiografiction – to Serge Doubrovsky’s much more successful “invention” of autofiction) also rely on spatial metaphors such as frontiers and forays.

The best-known exception to this approach to autobiography is that of Paul De Man, who in his 1979 article ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’ argued against attempts to define the genre. For him ‘empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems

to be an exception to the norm'.⁷ His approach is thus perhaps closer to the metaphor of the curiosity: autobiography as something that cannot be categorised, but only collected. Although the metaphor itself is an over-simplification of De Man's arguments (it implies there is a norm which makes the curiosity "curious"), it is far closer to them than the foray — which presumes that autobiography occupies a stable territory where it either stays or from which it strays. In this essay, De Man explicitly questions one such example of spatial figural language: Genette's metaphor of the revolving door, which implies that certain texts move around in circles from fiction to autobiography and vice versa. De Man contests this model by remarking that

As anyone who has been caught in a revolving door [...] can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is [...] not successive but simultaneous.⁸

De Man's play with Genette's metaphor will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One, but for the moment I merely wish to point out that the extra turn De Man gives here to the figure of the revolving door signals a move away from the use of spatial models to describe the process of reading and identifying autobiography. De Man chooses instead a temporal model, and one that — unlike chronological time — cannot be conceptualised as a stable line: an impossible or illogical temporality. Although the metaphor of the curiosity is perhaps too meek (even euphemistic), it

⁷ Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Trev Lynn Broughton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), I, pp. 264-274 (p. 265), (first publ. in *MLN*, 94 (1979), 919-930).

⁸ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

somehow manages — imperfectly — to convey De Man's conclusions about the indefinable quality of autobiography and its figural structure.

Richardson's use of the word, nonetheless, probably did not have this debate on the generic status of autobiography in mind. The phrase 'temporal curiosity' is not referring at all to questions of genre or figuration but rather to narrative itself. It should be read as a sort of (pseudo) synonym for the kind of temporal narrative structures that he calls on other occasions (using a far more aggressive metaphor) 'violations of realistic temporality'.⁹ It is difficult to fathom why Richardson changed metaphors to refer to the narrative structure of *Speak, Memory* — or rather to describe it as described by Christian Moraru.

The reason why this article might have caught Richardson's attention as an explanation of how 'unnatural' or non-mimetic structures function in an autobiographical text might be due to Moraru's account of certain episodes in *Speak, Memory*. Moraru argues that 'Nabokovian (re)writing "fractures" time, segments its contingent continuity (and contingency altogether), and effects [...] an ontological breakthrough aesthetically'. He then offers a couple of examples to illustrate this process, such as the account of the composition of Nabokov's first poem in Chapter Eleven or the butterfly hunt that closes Chapter Six.¹⁰ Richardson probably had those episodes in mind when he referred to the 'temporal curiosities' of *Speak, Memory*: instances which defy or escape the *fabula/sjuzhet* distinction, but — as it may be

⁹ Richardson, 'Beyond Story and Discourse', pp. 47-73 (p. 48).

¹⁰ Moraru, 173-190 (p. 182). Moraru's article, however, only deals with narrative temporal structure as a side issue: it is primarily a comparison between Proust and Nabokov's approach to time, timelessness and literary creation, focused on their respective philosophical and aesthetic stances rather than on narrative technique.

inferred by the change of term — which perhaps do so in a unique way which has nothing to do with the “battle” between fiction and non-fiction.

The aim of this thesis is to display these curiosities with all the care and attention they deserve. Through the curious nature of these examples, it will seek to explore both the debate on the nature of autobiography as a genre and the discussion around what critics have termed ‘fuzzy’, ‘indeterminate’ or ‘anti-mimetic’ temporalities in the hope that the intersection of these two questions might provide a new angle with which to approach autobiography — in particular, a group of texts that have tended been included under ill-fitting, pinching categories such as “postmodern autobiography” or “autofiction”.¹¹ The curiosities (generic and temporal) under examination here include *Speak, Memory* — appropriately described by its author as ‘a unique freak as autobiographies go’ — and other two equally freakish texts, Georges Perec’s *W or the Memory of Childhood* (1975), a centaur-like combination of fiction and autobiography, and Javier Marías’s *Dark Back of Time* (1998), one of very few specimens — if not the only one — of the ‘false novel’ genre.¹² These three examples combine generic uniqueness with narrative temporal curiosities of various sorts.

It might be wise at this point to offer a sample of the wares under consideration, if only to ascertain if they are truly deserving of being described as ‘curiosities’. Let us consider, for instance, one of the episodes Moraru refers to and

¹¹ Sources of these categories are David Herman, Emma Kalafenos and Brian Richardson. See David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), pp. 212-213, Emma Kalafenos, ‘Toward a Typology of Indeterminacy in Postmodern Narrative’, *Comparative Literature*, 44.4, (1992), 380-408, and Brian Richardson, ‘Beyond Story and Discourse’, pp. 47-73.

¹² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Everyman’s Library, 1999), p. 247.

which might have prompted Richardson to come up with the ‘curiosity’ metaphor – the butterfly hunt.¹³ In this episode, Nabokov recounts a childhood expedition to the marshes adjoining his parents’ country estate: as he walks along towards the end of the bog, the flora and the fauna change to those of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, where Nabokov would hunt Lepidoptera as an adult in his American exile. At first sight, the passage seems an instance of prolepsis: an episode from Nabokov’s adult life is narrated out of sequence, before its due place in the story. The *fabula* of events seems easy to reconstruct – and hence not a particularly good example of a ‘temporal curiosity’. Michael Wood, however, has pointed out that ‘what feels magical in the boy’s adventure in the marsh is that *the boy himself* emerges in America, since as far as the prose tells us it’s still 1910, no time has passed’.¹⁴ The paragraph employs the past tense all the way through, creating the illusion of time travel: a sleight-of-hand trick which is never concealed from the reader. Nabokov admits that he likes ‘to fold [his] magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another’.¹⁵

Why is this sample of narrative showmanship selected as an example of an ‘ontological breakthrough’ outside of time? Moraru’s choice of the episode as ‘a form of the Greek *kairos*, the instant that disrupts the ordinary *chronos* to impose the absoluteness of *aesthetic time*’ (no less) is justified not so much by the passage itself but by the commentary that follows it.¹⁶ Nabokov starts by “confessing” that he does

¹³ Moraru, 173-190 (p. 187).

¹⁴ Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1995), p. 84.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 10.

¹⁶ Moraru, 173-190 (p. 187).

not 'believe in time' and then goes on to remark that 'the highest enjoyment of timelessness — in a landscape selected at random — is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants'.¹⁷ The act of butterfly hunting itself stands outside of time, out of the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet*. The scene should not be read as being "set" in 1910 or in 1947: its purpose is to question the idea of temporal "setting" — hence the dashed comment about 'a landscape selected at random', as if the background (Russia or America) was some kind of revolving screen prop.¹⁸ When read alongside Nabokov's own commentary of the scene, the passage becomes more mysterious: it presents a moment belonging to a timeless realm, a curiosity as rare as the butterflies themselves. This example — as we will see in Chapter Two — is by no means the most curious of all of *Speak, Memory's* 'temporal curiosities'. The overttness with which the passage points out its peculiarity mars some of its rarity, paradoxically cutting short the reader's own obsessive hunt for the narrative equivalent of rare Lepidoptera. The narrative tactics of *Speak, Memory* (like Lepidoptera) combine self-conscious display and camouflage, articulating a paradoxical desire for collection and concealment.

The "sample" from Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*, on the other hand, is a good example of the "hidden" curiosity. It can be found in Part Two of the book, in the section in which Perec recounts his childhood experiences as a war refugee in the Alps, where he had fled with his paternal aunt and her family to escape the Nazi occupation of Paris. The six-year old boy is enrolled in a Catholic boarding school,

¹⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 106.

¹⁸ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 106.

the College Turenne, in order to hide him. In Chapter Twenty-one, Perec refers to a visit from his aunt Esther. The chapter, however, is not an account of the visit, but rather a description of a photograph taken during it (dated '1943' at the back) in the form of an inventory of its contents. He describes his physical appearance, including the clothes he was wearing: 'a "cowboy" check shirt with short sleeves (undoubtedly one of those I shall mention again later)'.¹⁹ The parenthesis breaks the monotonous rhythm of the list and singles out the shirt as having a story of its own, which is delivered (as promised) in chapter Twenty-three. We find out that the shirt was a Christmas present from his aunt, a rather disappointing one: he remembers getting up in the middle of the night and observing with great pleasure 'a big rectangular box' near his shoes — later revealed to contain only two itchy cowboy shirts.²⁰

What makes this anecdote worthy of being labelled a temporal curiosity is the fact that the story of how he got the cowboy shirts is not a flashback, as one would expect: the two anecdotes are narrated in chronological order. Perec dates the Christmas present anecdote at the end of 1943 and does it 'very definitely', which means that, in the photograph, he is wearing the shirts *before* he receives them as a present.²¹ The first thing a reader might do when faced with this logical impossibility is to try to explain it by a possible misdating of either the photograph or the shirt episode. Or perhaps his aunt could have also given him cowboy shirts as a present the previous Christmas, that of 1942 — even the whole Christmas episode might be

¹⁹ Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, trans. by David Bellos (London: Harvill), p. 104. I have modified Bellos's translation slightly, as he translates the original 'sans doute' as 'probably', instead of 'undoubtedly' or 'for sure'. See Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 140.

²⁰ Perec, *W*, p. 116.

²¹ Perec, *W*, p. 114.

completely imaginary. But Perec is certain that the shirt in the photograph is the same one that he will talk about later, and that it was the Christmas of 1943. The memory of that night — he remarks — ‘has lodged and been frozen in my mind: a petrified image, unchangeable’.²²

The authorial interventions thus emphatically hinder any possible logical explanation or ordering of the two episodes: it is impossible to reconstruct a *fabula* from the *sjuzhet*; or rather it can only be done by putting in doubt the veracity of Perec’s words (and if so, of which ones?). Because the episode is found in the autobiographical arm of the book (and not in the fictional one, which would accommodate such ambiguities better), a faulty or misleading memory seems the only possible explanation, and yet it is far from being satisfactory. One could also argue that the story of the shirt should be read in relation to the death of Perec’s mother in a Nazi concentration camp, but even the background cannot provide a full explanation. The effect of this episode is very different to Nabokov’s experience of the timeless butterfly hunt, and far more disconcerting. It is not only harder to discover, but it is even harder to classify once discovered, generating a (probably unending) readerly whirlpool of obsession. It recalls distinctly the ordeal of De Man’s revolving door, where one cannot even *remain* in ambiguity.

In comparison to the anxiety created by Perec’s temporal curiosity, Marías’s example might seem frivolous to the *n*th degree. *Dark Back of Time* (1998) — a ‘falsa novela’ (a false or a fake novel) — is a rambling account of a series of increasingly

²² Perec, *W*, p. 116.

zany events resulting from the publication of a novel called *All Souls* (1989) – a true one this time – published by Marías himself, who is also the narrator of *Dark Back of Time*. Leaving aside for the time being the ambiguities around the book's genre and the identity of the narrator, the book is also traversed by another ambiguity of a different kind, far more imperceptible and indeed far more curious than the contents of the book itself. It concerns the temporal location within Marías's narrative (that is, the location of an event in the *fabula* within the *sjuzhet*) of the most astonishing of all the events it narrates: the fact that writing *All Souls* led to his author to become the King of Redonda.

I will describe this kingdom, its legend and its significance in more detail in Chapter Four: for the time being, it is sufficient to know that Redonda is nothing more (and nothing less) than a make-believe realm located in a tiny uninhabited island in the Caribbean, which might have been created either as a *folie de grandeur*, an advertising gimmick or a joke. John Gawsworth, a 1930s poet and Fitzrovia literary personality, inherited the title from the first king, M.P. Shiel in 1947: however, at the time of his death in the nineteen-seventies, Gawsworth was homeless and forgotten as a poet, a real-life curiosity, his early promise marred by alcoholism. The story of Gawsworth and Redonda was first retold in *All Souls* and reprised eight years later in *Dark Back of Time*, adding more information and stories, including those of other equally obscure writers peripherally related to Gawsworth. Only at the end of the book does the narrator reveal that he has become the new king of Redonda, after Gawsworth's successor Jon Wynne-Tyson abdicated in his favour, in gratitude for his diffusion of the Redonda legend in *All Souls*.

This is indeed the very curious “plot” of *Dark Back of Time* – a plot that nonetheless has tended to get ignored in most critical approaches to the book, which have paid more attention to the narrator’s musings on writing, language and chance. Its narrative structure has also attracted a fair amount of critical interest, but the mechanisms of that structure have not been explored in full. The reason is that, at first sight, the book does not seem to have a plot at all: it consists of a series of anecdotes and digressions strung together by haphazard links. For instance, the narrative moves from a description of the streetlamps outside the narrator’s window to a biography of novelist Wilfrid Ewart, then to an account of the narrator’s last encounter with writer Juan Benet or with his mother, then back to Ewart, and so on. It seems a clear example of an anachronous narrative – however, when considered in terms of the *fabula/sjuzhet* distinction, it is in fact straightforwardly linear, almost diary-like.²³

The disordered discourse has been read by critics such as Alexis Grohmann as a reflection of the intrinsically disordered state of the narrator’s mind and of life itself.²⁴ The book’s structure is haphazard, but not deliberately so – it is merely copying life. This explanation seems justified by the narrator’s own self-commentary: right at the start of the book he explains that

²³ It might be helpful to recall here a point Mark Currie made about the temporal structure of *Mrs Dalloway*: ‘the narration of a memory is not strictly an anachrony, since the event of recalling might belong in the temporal chain of the first narrative [...] In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* [...] the events of a single day are narrated according to rigorous linearity’. See Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p. 36.

²⁴ Alexis Grohmann, *Literatura y Errabundia* (Javier Marías, Antonio Muñoz Molina y Rosa Montero) (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 75-77.

The elements of the story I am now embarking upon are entirely capricious, determined by chance, merely episodic and cumulative [...] because in the end no author is guiding them, though I am relating them; they correspond to no blueprint, they are steered by no compass, most of them are external in origin and devoid of intention and therefore have no reason to make any kind of sense or to constitute an argument or plot or answer to some hidden harmony.²⁵

Seen in this way, the book's temporal structure seems far from curious. The order in which the events appear is the order in which the narrator thinks of them or remembers them: the *fabula* and the *sjuzhet* do not differ. The Redonda story is just a contingent event amongst others. Readers over-excited by curiosities should not give it any undue importance.

But, as in the case of Perec's shirts, what seemed initially simple and straightforward is revealed to be complex and puzzling under the obsessive eye of the curiosity hunter (the narrator, like Nabokov, is also as a keen collector — of rare books and toy soldiers). The key lies again in a couple of unassuming dates. Halfway through *Dark Back of Time*, the narrator mentions he has obtained a copy of Wilfrid Ewart's novel *Way of Revelation* signed by the author, and comments that 'It is unsettling that today, November 8 1997, the ink that Wilfrid Ewart traced without much thought [...] is here in Madrid'.²⁶ The date is probably given both to highlight the temporal abyss between Ewart's signature and his own writing and to inscribe the book itself within a temporal continuum (as if the book was, effectively, a diary). At the end of the book, however, the narrator reveals that 'since July 6 1997, I have

²⁵ Javier Marías, *Dark Back of Time*, trans. by Esther Allen (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 9.

²⁶ Marías, *Dark*, p. 215.

been the fourth of those kings, King Xavier'.²⁷ What this second date reveals is that at the time of writing about Ewart's book, he knew he was the King of Redonda yet failed to mention it. This fact disturbs the idea that the book's discourse is mirroring its story: the coronation is not narrated *as it happened*, it happened and was left unnarrated for many pages. Of the two temporal coordinates which constitute its *fabula* (6 July 1997 and 8 November 1997), only one of them – the second – can be located in the *sjuzhet*. We know that the narrator is the King of Redonda at the point of writing about Ewart's signature, but what about before? The coronation has no stable position in the *sjuzhet*: it could have happened before he started to write the book or at some point after he starts writing about the consequences of *All Souls*. The location of the first date (6 July 1997) cannot be pointed to with any certainty in the 214 pages that precede the second date.

Of course, it could be argued that this discovery does not make the coronation any less contingent. The ascension to a make-believe throne might not be an event worthy of serious consideration, but only the punch-line of a very long (and wildly digressive) meta-fictional joke. But the book is not a philosophical argument for contingency and chance, but rather a playful demonstration of the problems inherent in narrating the contingent. The author's initial self-pronouncements might need to be read sceptically: their deliberately serious and gloomy perspective could in fact be the mask for a secret and simultaneous *fabula*. The impossibility of locating the coronation is the springboard for a reflection on liminality (generic, temporal, and

²⁷ Marías, *Dark*, p. 303.

even existential) and the temporal structure of the confession. As a curiosity, it may be more frivolous than the other two examples, more self-consciously “curious”, but only if we can convince ourselves that the book is *only* about a make-believe realm and not about something else far more disturbing.

Hopefully, this preview of these three absorbing examples of the temporal curiosity has justified the need for a more detailed discussion — an analysis which will consider these instances of indeterminacy in relation to the indeterminacy of autobiography itself. The purpose of this thesis will be to determine how (or if) these three samples of the temporal curiosity can throw a new light on the repetitive, seemingly unsolvable debate about the generic status of autobiography. As the previous pages show, the three texts under consideration adopt different varieties of temporal fuzziness which resist being contained within the traditional categories of *fabula* and *sjuzhet*. This temporal indeterminacy is accompanied by a generic one: in very different ways, the three texts also resist any stable placement within a generic category, either that of autobiography or that of fiction. It is to this parallel blurring process (and its importance) that this thesis wishes to draw attention to.

Although the problem of the generic definition of autobiography has been studied and examined in great detail (there are excellent studies of this debate, such as Laura Marcus’s, Max Saunders’s exploration of Modernist ‘autobiografiction’ or Philippe Gasparini’s overview of the ‘autofiction’ phenomenon), the study of temporal indeterminacy is more recent, and has been primarily confined to fictional

examples.²⁸ Brian Richardson's chapter, for instance, only deals with novels; and so it is the case with an earlier study of the temporal structure of postmodern narratives, Ursula Heise's *Chronoschisms*.²⁹ Richardson is part of a scholarly movement concerned with the study of 'unnatural narratology', so-called in response to Monika Fludernik's cognitive model of 'natural narratology', which considers literary narrative in relation to a narrative model based on oral conversational storytelling.³⁰ Although some of the scholars attached to the "unnatural" narratology movement have devoted some attention to non-fictional narratives (such as Stefan Iversen's study of Holocaust testimonies), examples such as the ones this thesis deals with remain unexplored and uncategorised (if indeed they can be categorised).³¹

Another interesting model for temporal indeterminacy is that of David Herman (another narratologist working within cognitive models), who has created the category of "polychrony" to account for events with no determinate position in the story or the discourse.³² Again, Herman only applies it to fiction: although the texts analysed in this thesis could be used as examples of polychrony in non-fictional narratives, we will see that even Herman's flexible, elasticated model might not fully explain curiosities such as the story of the shirts or the mystery of the temporal location of the coronation. This thesis will try to discern how these approaches to

²⁸ See Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

²⁹ See Ursula Heise, *Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁰ For a clear outline of the positions of natural and unnatural narratology, see Monika Fludernik, 'How Natural is "Unnatural Narratology"?; or What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?', *Narrative*, 20.3 (2012), 357-370, and Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen and Brian Richardson, 'What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?: A Response to Monika Fludernik', *Narrative*, 20.3 (2012) 371-382.

³¹ Stefan Iversen, ' "In Flaming Flames": Crises of Experientiality in Non-Fictional Narratives', in *Unnatural Narratives- Unnatural Narratologies*, ed. by Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 89-103.

³² Herman, *Story Logic*, pp. 211-261.

problematic temporal structures can be applied to our examples, and the possible repercussion of such analyses in our understanding of autobiography as a genre.

All these might be more than sufficient arguments to justify the approach of this thesis — and yet one cannot fail to mention a further selling point about one's wares, perhaps the most intriguing of them all. There is indeed another feature of these three curiosities which may be equally revelatory about autobiography's generic status and temporal structure. Critical literature around autobiography and fuzzy/indeterminate temporality has barely paid any attention to self-reflexivity: however, the three examples of temporally indeterminate moments I previously discussed are also intensely (almost dizzyingly) self-reflective ones. Moraru does indeed acknowledge that for Nabokov butterfly-hunting is an ecstatic/aesthetic experience akin to writing, another experience outside of chronological time. *Speak, Memory* teems not only with self-reflexive moments such as the paragraph that concludes the butterfly hunt, but also with numerous examples of *mise en abyme* or mirror-images of the book. These devices illuminate and complicate the combination of time and timelessness in the book. In the case of Perec, the check shirts form part of another self-reflexive motif: that of the square or the grid, which he uses as a mirror for writing itself, for its solidity and its fragility — similar to that of the clearly remembered but logically impossible shirts. As well as the grid, *W* provides other examples of *mise en abyme*, such as a game of backgammon or the letters W, H or X, which are also reflections of its complex generic status. *Dark Back of Time* is also traversed by many narratives placed *en abyme* — from the Disney film *The Three Caballeros* to a story about a man and a woman waiting for a bus. All of these

narratives explore different liminal experiences (jumping into a film or a book, the beginning and the end of a love affair), reflecting the text's own blurred and uncertain limits, either between temporal events or between genres themselves.

The use of *mise en abyme* complicates even further the already complex temporal structure of the texts, creating new, doubled layers of indeterminacy. Self-reflexivity in autobiography also remains under-examined in its critical literature. In the introduction to his influential anthology of autobiographical theory, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), James Olney pointed out how 'autobiography is a self-reflexive, self-critical act [...] The autobiographer can discuss and analyse the autobiographical act as he performs it' and ventured that 'from St Augustine on a compiler could have put together a vast collection of critical, theoretical pieces drawn from and reflecting on autobiographies'.³³ The fact that – to my knowledge – such an anthology has not yet been compiled is a sign of the neglect of a feature which is somehow taken for granted in autobiographical texts.³⁴ *Mise en abyme* – in a sense the figure of self-reflexivity – thus remains largely unexplored in the context of autobiography.³⁵

This thesis will seek to approach this device in relation to De Man's theories about the figural structure of autobiography and its impossible temporality. It will thus seek to examine *mise en abyme* as a figure of generic definition and to relate the

³³ James Olney, 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment' in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-27 (pp. 25-26).

³⁴ The closest thing to such an anthology might be David Shields' *Reality Hunger*, which nonetheless chooses the rather unscholarly format of the mix-tape. See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011).

³⁵ There are, of course, exceptions. Some of the articles that study *mise en abyme* in relation to autobiography include Michael A. Chaney, 'Terrors of the Mirror and the *Mise en Abyme* of Graphic Novel Autobiography', *College Literature*, 38.3 (2011), 21-44 and Matthew Escobar, 'X: Identity, Reflexivity and Potential Space in Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs*', *Romanic Review*, 98.4 (2007), 413-433.

device to the problematic and paradoxical temporalities of the texts themselves, which the mirror-image replicates and displaces. By considering generic definition and indeterminate temporality in relation to *mise en abyme*, this thesis will seek to provide a new focus with which to consider both the over-examined issue of the generic status of autobiography and the under-examined one of the more paradoxical, contradictory and curious aspects of its temporal narrative structures. After all, the aim of this study might be simply to provide a little variation (elegant or inelegant) from a series of now rather tired and tiresome metaphors — such as the foray or the frontier — which misrepresent the complexity of the relations between autobiography and fiction, and ignore some of the more disturbing and paradoxical aspects of autobiography that De Man and other critics had pointed out. Autobiographical *mise en abyme* — a curiosity within a curiosity — is a peephole to the intricacies of genre and temporality in the three examples under consideration.

The thesis will proceed through the three samples in chronological fashion, although its aim is not provide a narrative of generic evolution or dissolution. Although it engages with some of the issues that have come to be discussed under the umbrella of literary postmodernism and its historical context, the thesis does not seek to discuss the three case studies *solely* in relation to literary history, but also in relation to critical debates around narrative, reference and temporality. Also — primarily for reasons of space — it only refers in passing to other important texts that could have equally formed part of the collection, and which indeed could be excellent mantelpiece companions for the three texts under consideration, such as Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), Michel Leiris's

La Règle du Jeu (a favourite of Proust) and Jacques Roubaud's *Le Grand Incendie de Londres* (another multi-volume *magnum opus*) which shares *Dark Back of Time*'s digressive spirit and indeterminate generic status.³⁶ However, a thesis is only a small display cabinet: in this case, our collecting obsession should certainly be curtailed. The study of autobiographical curiosities requires the roomy galleries of a book like Saunders's *Self-Impression*: what this thesis seeks to do is to substitute completeness for an obsessive observation of its three specimens. The chapters thus tend to stay as close as possible to the temporal experience of reading and – above all – rereading these curiosities. Although recent studies of French autobiography such as Claire Boyle's or Madalina Akli's have paid some attention to the reception of autobiography from a cultural, ideological or cognitive point of view, the temporality of reception (especially of obsession-inducing texts such as the ones under consideration) remains underexplored.³⁷

The thesis thus commences with an examination of autobiography as a curiosity from several points of view. Chapter One examines the metaphor first in relation to the conflicting positions about the generic status of autobiography. As

³⁶ See Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans by C.K Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and Andreas Mayor, rev. and ed. by D. J. Enright, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), Michel Leiris, *La règle du jeu*, ed. by Denis Hollier, Nathalie Barberger et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) and Jacques Roubaud, *Le grand incendie de Londres* (Paris: Seuil, 2009). I will refer to Proust's novel as the *Recherche* in the rest of the thesis. It needs to be pointed out that whilst Nabokov and Proust actively engage with Proust and Leiris (respectively) in their works, the parallels between Roubaud and Marías are probably coincidental. Although the first volume of *Le Grand Incendie* dates from 1986, it was not translated into English until 1992, and remains untranslated into Spanish to this date. As a curiosity, both Marías and Roubaud share an admiration for Hungarian novelist Miklos Szentkuthy, author of similarly digressive, erudite, fragmentary "novels". One should also mention, even if just in a footnote, the works of W.G. Sebald. Sebald included homages to *Speak, Memory* in *The Emigrants* and to *W* in *Austerlitz* (Austerlitz's mother buys the boy a Chaplin comic in the train station before sending him away to safety, like Proust's mother did). See W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1996), p. 16 and *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 308. Marías was an admirer of his work and made him a Duke of Redonda, the Duke of Vertigo.

³⁷ See Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Leeds: Legenda, 2007) and Madalina Akli, *Conventional and Original Metaphors in French Autobiography* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

well as a close analysis of two approaches that have come to be viewed as inimical — that of Philippe Lejeune and that of Paul De Man — the chapter also examines what may be termed the redefining approach, exemplified by Stephen Reynolds’s coinage of ‘autobiografiction’ (which he used to describe a series of contemporary uncategorisable curiosities) and Serge Doubrovsky’s invention of autofiction (again, a term created to “explain” his book *Fils*), as well as the more recent “remix” approach of David Shields.

As well as this overview of the history and current state of life-writing theory, this chapter also seeks to investigate encounters between autobiography studies and narratology. In particular, I would like to examine the influence of Paul Ricoeur’s ideas about narrative and temporality in relation to debates about the referential character of autobiography. The exploration of temporality also includes an examination of the discussions around “natural” and “unnatural” narratology and the redefinition of classical narratological categories in relation to questions of generic definition. This chapter concludes with an account of *mise en abyme*, in order to discern how its complex temporal and figural structure impacts on the aforementioned approaches to autobiography.

Chapter Two focuses on Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. Despite having used Moraru’s example of ‘temporal curiosity’ in this introduction, this chapter will try to go beyond his rather simple opposition between time and timelessness — a distinction which smoothes out some of the more problematic aspects of time and writing. The book’s generic status will also be revealed to be equally complex — despite the seemingly unambiguous indexes presenting it as an autobiography. The

chapter examines how Nabokov's use of *mise en abyme* devices destabilises both the book's genre and its temporal structure.

Chapter Three examines Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*. One of the earliest examples of a self-consciously and overtly hybrid approach to autobiography, the book is nonetheless difficult to categorise as a fiction, an autobiography or even an autofiction. This uncertainty is echoed in the curious riddle of the shirts, which I will try to examine in relation to generic and temporal questions, particularly around autobiography, fiction and testimony, and to the book's several self-representations *en abyme*. It is in this chapter where I will consider in more detail the ethical dimensions and consequences of generic and temporal indeterminacy.

Chapter Four deals with the most self-consciously "frivolous" member of the trio: Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time*. The chapter starts with a discussion of its paradoxical generic label (the "falsa novela" or false/fake novel) to move to an exploration of the enigma of the coronation in relation to genre, self-reflexivity and temporality. Marías's use of metalepsis as a destabilising device will be given special consideration. The chapter concludes with a reading of the book's extremely curious final twist, which has barely attracted any critical attention but which has central significance to the text's treatment of several kinds of liminality, including that between life and death.³⁸

³⁸ It has only been discussed by Alexis Grohmann and Amélie Florenchie. See Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 118 and Amélie Florenchie, 'Marías en clave borgeana' in *Cuadernos de narrativa: Javier Marías*, ed. by Irene Andrés-Suárez and Ana Casas (Madrid: Arco Libros, 2007), pp.155-168 (p. 163-164).

Hopefully, the copy of this preamble-cum-catalogue has provided sufficient justification for the “purchase” of this study and its aims. And yet one is still tempted to offer a last-minute bonus gift, another product demonstration. The three texts also contain moments in which everyday objects, more or less unassuming, are suddenly transformed into curiosities of various sorts: some of them surprising, some of them poignant, some of them uncanny. These objects perhaps represent the three texts under consideration far better than the self-reflexive passages which tend to crop up in most critical approaches – and which would definitely be included in the anthology proposed by Olney (such as ‘I confess I do not believe in Time’, ‘writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life’, ‘I believe I’ve still never mistaken fiction for reality, though I have mixed them together more than once’).³⁹ Let us consider them briefly.

In Chapter Eight Nabokov tells us how his tutor Lenski used to take him and his brother to Alexandre’s, a ‘painfully bourgeois bric-à-brac’ shop in St Petersburg to show them ‘an expensive ceiling lamp’ he wanted to purchase.⁴⁰ Nabokov explains that

Not wishing the store to suspect what object he coveted, Lenski said he would take us to see it only if we swore to use self-control and not attract unnecessary attention by direct contemplation. With all kinds of precautions, he brought us under a dreadful bronze octopus and his only indication that this was the longed-for article was a purring sigh.⁴¹

³⁹ The quotes are from Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 106; Péc, *W*, p. 42 and Marías, *Dark*, p. 7. They tend to be quoted in most critical articles and books on these books (this one included).

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 124.

⁴¹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 124.

Nabokov's charming metaphor here transforms a 'dreadful' lamp into the most wondrous of curiosities, an octopus incongruously suspended in the shop ceiling, as if levitating. No wonder Lenski coveted it.

Perec, on the other hand, remembers how he received a framed photograph of his father as a present after the war. In a note (where else?) he then points out how '[i]t's because of this present [...] that I've always thought frames were precious objects. Even nowadays I stop to look at them in the windows of camera shops, and I am surprised every time I come across frames for five or ten francs in Prisunic chain stores'.⁴² Frames, even those of the cheapest kind, are here transformed into rather poignant and emblematic curiosities.

In Javier Marías's case, the book itself is self-consciously presented as a curiosity, a sticker album of writers from the lower-division leagues.⁴³ Amid the abundant treasure it contains, perhaps none is more intriguing than a toy soldier. Marías ends the first section of the book by providing an inventory of the objects in his room as a kind of *memento mori*. Amongst these we find a 'Hindu aide-de-camp made of painted wood that I've just brought home with some hesitation, that figurine will also outlast me, or may'.⁴⁴ Why the hesitation? Why the 'may'?⁴⁵ The

⁴² Perec, *W*, p. 34. Prisunic are a French equivalent of Woolworth's or British Home Stores.

⁴³ Marías has mentioned in several interviews and articles his fondness for football sticker albums, a possible source (not the only one, of course) of his profusely illustrated books. See Marías, 'El álbum de los cabezudos', in *Aquella mitad de mi tiempo: al mirar atrás*, ed. by Inés Blanca (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2011), pp. 65-67.

⁴⁴ Marías, *Dark*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ The Spanish original reads 'y ese edecán hindú de madera pintada que acabo de traerme a casa con incertidumbre, también durará más que yo esa figura, posiblemente' (that Hindu aide-de-camp made of painted wood what I've just brought home with some uncertainty, that figurine will also outlast me, possibly' would a completely literal translation). Allen translates 'edecán' as 'lieutenant', but the correct translation is 'aide-de-camp'. See Marías, *Negra espalda del tiempo* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1998), pp. 13-14. Allen's change of 'ese' for a plain 'the' also makes the figure more remote and less dangerous: 'ese' suggests that the writer is looking at it, perhaps obsessively, as in a kind of spell.

curiosity is squared: the aide-de-camp could be the narrator's helper but he seems to doubt his loyalty. The figure is given an uncanny halo which extends like a fever across the whole — even though (or *because*) the figure is not mentioned again in the whole book.

An octopus-lamp, a frame, a wooden Hindu aide-de-camp: there might be no better emblems of what Nabokov, Perec and Marías do with autobiography — of how they transform, challenge, adapt or rearrange the form — than those sometimes unassuming, hidden, outlandish or mysterious curiosities. Hopefully by the end of the thesis, they would have abandoned the metaphorical drawers where they have remained in previous critical approaches to gain (or regain, rather) their rightful place in the shop window or the shelf.

Chapter One

Autobiography as a curiosity

1. [...] Peut-être d'ailleurs faut-il rester *dans* ce tourniquet.
Gérard Genette, 'Métonymie chez Proust'¹

We should perhaps remain *within* this whirligig [*tourniquet*].
Gérard Genette, in Paul De Man's translation in 'Autobiography
as De-Facement'²

Tourniquet

I. Appareil formé de une croix horizontale tournant autour d'un pivot, place à l'entrée d'un chemin ou d'un edifice afin de livrer passage aux personnes chacun à son tour [...] Porte à tambour [...] Plateforme horizontale tournant sur un pivot servant de jeu de plein air pour les enfants
II. [...] Cyllindre métallique à volets, tournant sur un pivot, et servant à présentoir [...]

(I. Contrivance composed of an horizontal cross turning a vertical axis and placed at the entrance of a road or building with the purpose of letting people in one at a time. [...] Revolving door [...] Horizontal platform spinning on an axis used in children's playgrounds
II. Metal cylinder on an axis used as a presentation device. [...])

Le nouveau Petit Robert

Whirligig

1. Name of various toys that are whirled, twirled or spun around *spec.* †(a) a top or teetotum [...] (b) a toy consisting of a small spindle turned by means of a string; (c) a toy with four arms like miniature windmill-sails, which whirl round when it is moved through the air.
2. Applied to various mechanical contrivances having a whirling or rotatory movement *spec.* (a) an instrument of punishment formerly used, consisting of a large cage suspended so as to turn on a pivot; (b) a roundabout or merry-go-round.

Oxford English Dictionary

¹ Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 50.

² De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

The whirligig and the revolving door: on play and torture

Business common-sense dictates that — before the seemingly exciting enterprise of introducing a new metaphor to the already rather crowded marketplace of autobiography studies — one must first proceed with a careful study of the alternatives currently on offer in order to ascertain that one is actually coming up with something new. That is the ostensible purpose of this first chapter: to provide a survey of the different critical approaches to autobiography — and their metaphors.

The chapter itself is modelled after one of those metaphors, the *tourniquet*: it is the critical equivalent of a postcard or a tie spinning display device *and* the (revolving) entry point into the issues to be examined in relation to our curiosities.³ This initial section provides an introduction (a turnstile) to the *tourniquet* itself. Through an analysis of the origin and evolution of this metaphor, it seeks to highlight some of the main issues at stake in critical discussions around the definition and indeed the very existence of autobiography. Let us proceed — if we can.

As it was the case with the introduction, this chapter also opens with a footnote, albeit a better-known one than Richardson's. It can be found in Genette's 'Metonymy in Proust', and was removed from paratextual obscurity

³ I am using the word here in French, primarily with the meaning of revolving door/spinning stand rather than in the surgical sense, which is common to both English and French. The French word appears in italics.

when De Man quoted it and translated it in 'Autobiography as De-Facement'.⁴ Genette's note was appended to his analysis of an episode in the fourth volume in Proust's *Recherche, Sodome et Gomorrhe (Sodom and Gomorrah)*. In order to fully comprehend the metaphor, it is necessary to be acquainted with its origin. The scene in question takes place in the afternoon before a party. Our narrator decides to amuse himself by looking (behind the shutters of the staircase window) at some rare orchids that his neighbour, the Duchess of Guermantes, has left out in the courtyard to be pollinated. As he observes the promising arrival of a bumblebee, he spies on another scene: at the same time as the insect, an acquaintance of his, the Baron de Charlus, also enters the courtyard – and, as the narrator observes in astonishment, starts flirting with Jupien, the owner of a tailor's workshop in the same courtyard, who is standing outside his shop. This leads to a full sexual encounter inside which the narrator proceeds to eavesdrop on. The passage compares the two unexpected and simultaneous encounters of the two men and the insect and the flowers – as Genette points out, this analogy creates 'a kind of secondary, and perhaps illusory, effect of *right timing*'.⁵

The note follows on this sentence, and in it Genette wonders whether we should analyse the metaphor of the orchid and the bumblebee as the *effect* of an unplanned coincidence, imposed by a real-life referent (a 'genetic causality') or if we should consider the metaphor itself as the *cause* of the

⁴ This essay contains an analysis of Wordsworth's 'Essay upon Epitaphs', which appeared as a footnote to *The Excursion*. De Man intriguingly calls this eccentric note an 'exemplary autobiographical text'. See De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 267).

⁵ Genette, *Figures III*, p. 50.

coincidence, that is, as an artificial coincidence (a 'teleological causality').⁶ If we read the book as an autobiography, it would be the former; if we read it as a fiction, the latter:

[I]l va de soi que chaque exemple peut soulever, à ce niveau, un débat infini entre une lecture de la *Recherche* comme fiction et une lecture de la *Recherche* comme autobiographie. Peut-être d'ailleurs faut-il rester *dans* ce tourniquet.⁷

Or in De Man's translation:

It goes without saying, in the case of Proust, that each example taken from the *Recherche* can produce [...] an endless discussion between a reading of the novel as a fiction and a reading of the same novel as autobiography. We should perhaps remain *within* this whirligig [*tourniquet*].⁸

By leaving the original in square brackets, De Man calls attention to his translation of Genette's metaphor. The words designate different objects: a *tourniquet* usually refers to a revolving door or a turnstile, rather than to a spinning toy — or to an obscure instrument of torture. De Man does not disguise his idiosyncratic translation: in the next paragraph, he returns to the "correct" translation of the term to then turn the door on its head and make it first into a 'wheel' and finally back into a whirligig.

As anyone who has been caught in a revolving door or a revolving wheel can testify, it is most uncomfortable, and all the

⁶ Genette, *Figures III*, p. 50.

⁷ Genette, *Figures III*, p. 50.

⁸ De Man, 'Autobiography', pp. 264-267 (p. 266).

more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous.⁹

The paragraph seems to be offering a performance or a demonstration of its own figures: the translation itself is spinning. Derrida has pointed out that the whirligig is used to introduce the 'motif of infinite acceleration'.¹⁰ Éva Antal, remarking upon the translation, states that 'the word *tourniquet* translated as "whirligig" [...] signifies not only a turning around, but also rolling over and over — stirring and returning endlessly.'¹¹ The text translation-cum-performance nonetheless belies Antal's model of alternance between the two meanings. The translation itself gets stuck in the whirligig (now clearly a torture), paradoxically unable to move whilst spinning out of control.

As an answer to Genette's metaphor, De Man's sleight-of-hand translation of *tourniquet* provides a stark warning about the dangers of defining autobiography. Play with it, and you will get stuck. Readers are pulled out of a seemingly ordinary situation (Genette's placid generic hesitation) into a nightmarish one — which they are 'caught' into imagining. 'Most uncomfortable' is quite an understatement. The passage is a paradoxically cool-headed demonstration of the dangerous loss of control involved in defining autobiography.

⁹ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp.264-274 (p. 266).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul De Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 23.

¹¹ Éva Antal, 'The Ironical Allegory of Remembrance and Oblivion (In Memory of Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida)', *The AnaChronisT*, 11(2005), 233-252 (p.248). Dorrit Cohn also quotes the Genette passage in *The Distinction of Fiction* and offers her own translation, 'It may well be that one has to remain *within* this whirligig'. It changes the 'we' into a 'one' but coincides with De Man's in the translation of "tourniquet", although not on the generic status of autobiography. See Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 69.

This chapter will seek to trace how this definition gave rise to such a nausea-inducing, quasi-apocalyptic metaphor — as well as the critical reactions De Man's whirligig generated, both in the fields of autobiography theory and narratology. It will also examine the whirligig in relation to structures of figuration, particularly *mise en abyme*. However, before doing so, it might be advisable to experience what De Man had in mind when he translated an entry-point as an instrument of torture. I will examine two cases: the scene in *Sodom and Gomorrah* discussed by Genette, and an anecdote writer Philippe Vilain relates in his study of autofiction.

Genette's set of criteria for generic definition, as we saw, were based on the temporal order of figure and referent — on what came first, in other words. Genette does not plump for a specific ordering in this example, although perhaps his characterisation of the *concomitance* as 'illusory' might point out at a possible teleological — and thus fictional — reading of the scene. The *concomitance* might seem illusory because there is so much of it: the scene brims with coincidences. One cannot help discerning an authorial hand making bumblebees fly in at the right moment and placing a conveniently empty shop near Jupien's (with an even more convenient combination of ladder and ventilator inside) in order to allow our narrator to eavesdrop not only on the Baron and Jupien's amorous encounter but also on their conversation afterwards, in which they curiously happen to talk about the narrator himself — the perk of all fictional eavesdroppers.¹² The accumulation

¹² Indeed, the conversation between Charlus and Jupien seems to be far longer than their tryst. Our narrator is described by the Baron as 'a strange little fellow, an intelligent little chit which shows with regard to myself a

and “definition” of those coincidences reinforces their illusory character. We might be out of the revolving door.

Or not. In this case, there is no ‘outside’ for Proust’s scene, and not just because his book lacks an unequivocal generic marker — even if it defined itself as an autobiography, the reader would still have no way of knowing whether the flowers and insects metaphor preceded the homosexual encounter.¹³ We are stuck and have no other choice than to read the figures themselves, the illusion: a structure which is far less concomitant and “defined” than Genette makes it appear. Let us consider the main analogy itself: as Eve Sedgwick astutely pointed out, it is far from being coincident itself.

The analogy opens gaping conceptual abysses when one tries [...] to compare any model of same-sex desire with the plight of the virginal orchid [...] No mapping of Jupien or Charlus as either the bee or the other orchid does anything to clarify or deepen a model of sexual inversion.¹⁴

And yet this gap between figure and reference does not make the causal connection between them a ‘genetic’ one, or the book an autobiography. The metaphor can become perfect and “defined” again if we read it not in relation to Charlus and Jupien, but to the narrator himself.

prodigious want of civility. He has absolutely no idea of the prodigious personage that I am and of the microscopic animalcule that he is in comparison’. His description as an ‘animalcule’ is particularly accurate, as we will see. See Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume IV, Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D.J. Enright (London: Chatto&Windus, 1992), p. 14.

¹³ The best overview of the debates around the *Recherche*’s genre is the fourth chapter of Cohn’s *The Distinction of Fiction*. Even Cohn, usually an advocate of generic separation, cannot decide for one of the other option. See Cohn, *Distinction*, pp. 58-78.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 220.

The encounter between orchids and bee might be mirroring that between the lucky eavesdropper himself and the lovers, the real miracle and ‘illusion’ in the passage. However – as the unpollinated orchids themselves – this is an analogy with no particular “seed” or “fruit”: it only generates endless self-reflections and multiple misreadings. De Man mentioned that the *Recherche* ‘narrates the flight of meaning, but this does not prevent its own meaning from being, incessantly, in flight’: there might not be a better illustration than our bumblebee.¹⁵ The “definition” of a generic definition like Genette’s is always blurred by the unsettled movements, the ‘flight’ of its base – figurative language. The *concomitance* Genette identifies is not itself illusory: what is illusory is the possibility of finding a “defining” origin which will settle this motion.

Our second example of a whirligig also concerns another surprising event, and is useful to place De Man’s metaphor in relation to that of the ‘curiosity’. The curious and the coincident seem to pose a problem for generic definition, as Genette identified. They seem to be excluded not only from autobiography (particularly if there are too many of them), but also from fiction. For Philippe Vilain, ‘one of the functions of the novel is to efface, subtract, remove, censor the more surreal, and hence implausible, elements of life’.¹⁶ As an illustration of this principle, Vilain recounts a real-life incident

¹⁵ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 78. De Man’s conclusion is part of a close reading of another passage from the first volume and does not refer to the bumblebee scene.

¹⁶ Philippe Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie: suivi de deux entretiens avec Philippe Sollers and Philippe Lejeune* (Chatou: Editions de la Transparence, 2009), p. 39.

he has recoiled to include in any of his novels or autofictions — which usually narrate, under no fictional name-mask, episodes from his private life.

Vilain's "secret" is that he was once held hostage in a bank robbery — an episode he cannot write about, not because it was traumatic but because it was 'a cliché straight out [...] of a terrible crime novel'.¹⁷ For Vilain, this story only finds its place as a kind of parable or allegory of generic definition and of the 'frontiers' of the novel — or rather autofiction.

Once narrated, it illustrates perhaps better than any theoretical argument the question of the frontiers of the novel, and the difficulty for a writer of autofictions, and indeed for any writer, of moving between the uncertain frontiers of reality and fiction.¹⁸

The curious hold-up, however, does not really 'illustrate' the question of the 'frontier' between autofiction or the novel and other genres at all. In fact, it only highlights the problematic nature of defining genre in relation to an exterior referent. The real-life "secrets" which form the content of Vilain's novels are censoring the "secret" of the hold-up.¹⁹ The robbery has become unnarratable in a novel because it was itself a novel, only of the "wrong" kind. And yet, as a parable, it manages to hold the other novels hostage, exposing their apparent "truth". The frontier is not just uncertain: it might not even be there at all.

¹⁷ Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 40.

¹⁸ Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Vilain's novels have dealt with intimate episodes from his life such as his affair with the writer Annie Ernaux, the illness of his father or a paternity claim from a former lover.

Vilain's parable will serve as a preamble for the concerns of the next section, which explores generic definitions of autobiography based on spatial models — similar to the ones Vilain uses — in relation to the figure of the curiosity. Amongst those spatial models, the frontier has become an enduring best-seller in the postcard spinner of autobiographical theory: the next section explores a particularly successful variant of a frontier-based model of definition — Philippe Lejeune's 'autobiographical pact' — and two 'curious' challenges: that of 'Autobiography as De-Facement' (which will be considered in more detail) and that of Derrida's 'The Law of Genre', which emphasise the paradoxical and unstable character of generic markers and definitions — which, as we have seen, can adopt the unlikely forms of a bumblebee or a bank robbery.

The frontier: the definition and indefinition of autobiography

Any attempt to understand both the enduring popularity and the flaws of the 'frontier' metaphor should start by exploring the challenges posed by the definition and description of autobiography as a literary genre. Approaches to this question from the second half of the twentieth century onwards have shared 'a concern with definitions and boundaries', as Trev Lynn Broughton has pointed out: metaphor and definition have gone hand in hand since Georges Gusdorf's 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', considered as the pioneering modern approach to the genre.²⁰

And yet frontiers have also been approached with suspicion (as in the case of De Man and Derrida) or least with caution. This has given rise to a critical field in which (as Robert Smith aptly puts it) 'there are not only many theories of autobiography, but [...] also a growing number of theories of those theories, and surveys [...] of autobiographical theories'.²¹ Survey-style meta-theoretical studies (and this section is one of them) seek to take a step back from battles around frontiers in order to observe them from a distance. They

²⁰ Trev Lynn Broughton, 'Introduction', in *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (see Broughton, above), pp. 1-58 (p. 7). See Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (see Broughton, above), pp. 28-48 (first publ. in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (see Olney, above), trans. by J. Olney, pp. 28-48). There are, of course, earlier examples than Gusdorf's, such as those discussed by Laura Marcus, or the meta-autobiographical statements in autobiographies that Olney referred to. See Chapters One to Four in Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, pp. 11-178 and Olney, pp. 3-27 (pp. 25-26).

²¹ Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 51.

attempt to become the postcard spinner itself rather than a particular postcard – a choice, however, not exempt of difficulties.

Laura Marcus – author of the first book-length survey on autobiography theory – noticed the contrast between the ‘distinctive genre of autobiographical criticism’ and the undefined and unregulated nature of their object of study, autobiography.²² Broughton has also observed that there is ‘a fundamental – some would say defining – uncertainty about whether or not autobiography exists as a genre’.²³ Marcus worries about the paralysing consequences of this indefinition, which makes even the study of studies difficult. Defining the object of study, or choosing a particular focus, might be problematic:

‘Autobiography’ appears as an ideal type or form, which may bear little or no relation to individual autobiographies. [...] the singular collective noun may express a conceptual reification, assuming an essence before the chosen critical task of defining and consolidating resemblances has even begun. In other discussions, particular autobiographies become elected as paradigmatic texts, out of which a number of observations about the nature of the genre can be drawn.²⁴

Even a defiant stance against definition, such as that of Linda Anderson – for her, definition is ‘a way of stamping [the literary critics’] academic

²² Marcus, p. 1.

²³ Broughton, ‘Introduction’, I, pp. 1-58 (p.3)

²⁴ Marcus, p. 7.

authority on an unruly and even slightly disreputable field' – still needs a 'field' to defend against critical attacks.²⁵

On the other side, critics sympathetic to definition – such as Lejeune – are assaulted by doubts: definition is 'a kind of insoluble problem, a sort of vicious circle: impossible to study the object before having defined it, impossible to define it before having studied it'.²⁶ Perhaps the best approach even for a survey is to renounce to its 'distinctiveness' (to use Marcus's adjective). As Broughton points out, canons 'circulate more freely in critical discourse as pretext than they do as consensus or doctrine'.²⁷ For her, the canon of autobiography could be reconceptualized

[L]ess as a body of authoritative texts than as landmarks on an intellectual battlefield on which inconsistencies, crossed purposes and equivocations *integral to the autobiographical project* itself are fought out.²⁸

The formulation of a canon is thus not necessarily linked to a rigid definition of the genre: it is rather a formulation of a cluster of problems inherent to any attempt at a definition of the genre. Critical discourse inevitably mirrors the 'inconsistencies, crossed purposes and equivocations' of the object of study: it is as 'unruly' as the field it treads upon or defends from trespassers.

Critics of autobiography and autobiographical theory might need to accept that they might not be able to bring this battle to a halt, but only make

²⁵ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2.

²⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 121.

²⁷ Broughton, I, pp. 1-58 (p. 16).

²⁸ Broughton, I, pp. 1-58(p. 17).

it worse. One can choose to take an aerial view of the battlefield — but with the full awareness that the only planes available to do so are fighter planes. The survey of the frontier and the battlefield metaphors that follows — whilst attempting to offer an overview of the different arguments for and against frontiers and definitions — cannot aspire to full neutrality: indeed, it will seek to relate those arguments to yet another cannon-like canon, that of our three curiosities.

A survey of the battlefield

Before entering into this battlefield, it is nonetheless necessary to mention that it is by no means the only conflict or even the “major” one. A focus on questions around definition and genre inevitably obscures other debates of importance about the idea of the subject or identity, the relation between autobiography and gender, sexuality or ideology, or the idea of authorship.²⁹ Another important thing to bear in mind is that it might not exactly be a raging, live battle — many recent approaches to autobiography (as we will in the section on narrative) even consider it extinguished. This section, however, assumes that it might not be possible to dismiss the conflict once it has been examined — and perhaps entered.

²⁹ For an extended analysis of these issues, readers should turn to Laura Marcus’s *Auto/Biographical Discourses*, or to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s excellent introduction *Reading Autobiographies : A Guide for Interpreting Life-Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

At the heyday of the debate, Smith divided the 'field' of autobiographical theory into 'three enclosures': the field-surveyors, those who doubt 'whether autobiography *can* be theorised as a genre' and the 'positivist' advocates of definition with their 'quasi-existentialist claims about self-knowledge' which place 'autobiography fairly within an ideology of individualism'.³⁰ Smith's third category brings together (and perhaps simplifies) what Broughton calls the 'founding statements' of autobiographical theory in the 1950s and 1960s (Georges Gusdorf or Roy Pascal, themselves inspired by the work of Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Misch at the turn of the twentieth century). Smith includes Lejeune in this group – the subject of the next section – although there are important differences between his work and that of previous critics. Lejeune's critical work is not a side in the conflict but a microcosm of the battle, a deliberately non-neutral exploration of the 'inconsistencies, crossed purposes and equivocations' of autobiographical criticism.

Philippe Lejeune

Lejeune's critical work – and particularly his definition – tends to be not only the most frequent "door" of surveys of autobiographical criticism, but also the spark of many of its conflicts (Broughton calls it 'the most often

³⁰ Smith, pp. 55-56.

quoted and hotly debated in autobiographical criticism').³¹ It has even been the source of internal conflict: years after formulating it, Lejeune thought it 'a "definition" of dogmatic appearance, with a rather uncertain theoretical status'.³² This is the spark itself, found in his influential essay 'The Autobiographical Pact':

Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.³³

The criteria for the definition are later broken down into their component parts later on: he distinguishes between categories that can be satisfied just in part (such as the narrative form (1b), the subject (2) and the retrospective point of view (4b)) and those which must be satisfied *in toto* (3 and 4a).

1. *Form of language*
 - a. Narrative
 - b. In prose
2. *Subject treated*: individual life, story of a personality.
3. *Situation of the author*: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical.
4. *Position of the narrator*
 - a. The narrator and the principal character are identical
 - b. Retrospective point of view of the narrative.³⁴

³¹ Broughton, I, pp. 1-58 (p. 15).

³² Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 120.

³³ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 120. Broughton comments on the fact that the definition's 'apparent assumptions about the nature of the 'person' as a self-determining, generically masculine individual'. See Broughton, pp. 1-58 (p.15). The masculine pronoun in it, however, is only present in the translation, as French possessives match the gender of the possessed and not of the possessor.

³⁴ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 4.

In Lejeune's breakdown of his definition, the emphasis changes from individualism and 'personality' to a series of pragmatic and reader-centred criteria. Autobiography is defined solely by 'the series of oppositions between the different texts, which are available for reading': his definition is a tool to distinguish an autobiography from a journal, an essay or a first-person narrative.³⁵

Partial criteria would explain the overlap between autobiography and other genres such as the memoir, the journal or the autobiography in verse.³⁶ There is no overlap, however, between autobiography and the first person novel: the identity between author and narrator and protagonist are

A question of all or nothing, and they are the conditions that oppose autobiography [...] to biography and the personal novel [...] An identity is, or is not [...] In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general) the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical.³⁷

Lejeune discards textual criteria in his definition: for him 'there is *no difference*' 'on the level of analysis within the text'.³⁸ The identity between narrator and the author is established *solely* by the use of the proper name, by what he calls

³⁵ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 4. See Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts : The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) for a different pragmatic approach to generic definition.

³⁶ Lejeune uses the term 'memoir' to characterise collective-focused portraits as opposed to individually-focused ones, but it has been used with other meanings by other critics and authors, sometimes to denote subjective criteria such as a light as opposed to a serious approach. There have been a lot less attempts to describe and define the memoir, and the terms are used interchangeably in many studies. Ian Jack, in an introduction to Diana Athill's collected memoirs, reverses Lejeune's use of the terms: memoirs are intimate and subjective, autobiographies, public and historically verifiable. See Ian Jack's introduction to Diana Athill, *Life Class: The Selected Memoirs of Diana Athill*, (London: Granta, 2009), p. ix.

³⁷ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 5.

³⁸ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p.13.

the 'autobiographical pact': narrator and author *must* have the same name. He thus redefines his initial definition of autobiography: the genre is 'a contract of identity [...] sealed by the proper name'.³⁹

This contract defines autobiography as a referential genre, as a text that claims to 'to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text'.⁴⁰ Referentiality is not defined, however, in terms of resemblance but solely on the promise of identity. An autobiography can be dishonest and still be an autobiography. For Michael Sheringham, this is 'the great advantage' of the pact: 'it ties autobiography to *reference*, not *resemblance*; to the interaction between of textual 'I' and extratextual counterpart, but not to any specific kind of relationship between them'.⁴¹

Lejeune's definition is thus not as dogmatic as he believed it to be: even the pact is described as 'a historically variable *contractual effect*', which, as Broughton remarks, 'leaves open the possibility of entirely different inflections of the medium-reader-producer relationship'.⁴² Although the pact allows him to draw a borderline between autobiography and fiction (the essay includes a chart of referential and fictional genres), the borderline itself is ultimately left in the hands of the readers, who might erase or redraw it if so they wished — as his very own theory demonstrates it.

³⁹ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 20.

⁴² Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 30 and Broughton, I, pp. 1-58 (p. 15).

As the self-deprecating description of his definition shows, Lejeune is in fact a rather rebellious reader of his own theories. For instance, the very same essay which includes his definition (or definitions) also includes the definition's indefinition, as it were: the quasi-*doppelgänger* of the autobiographical pact, the appropriately – and uncannily – named 'phantasmatic pact'. Lejeune proposed the idea of an 'Autobiographical Space' which spills out the neat borders 'sealed' by the proper name. He remarked that an author might wish for the *whole* of their oeuvre to be read autobiographically:

[T]he reader is [...] invited to read novels not only as *fictions* referring to a truth of "human nature" but also as revealing *phantasms* of the individual. I will call this indirect form of the autobiographical pact *the phantasmatic pact*.⁴³

By letting this ghost in, the placid legal appearance of the pact is disturbed at its very birth.

Later revisions of the 1973 essay only make this instability more explicit. Its first sequel, 'The Autobiographical Pact (bis)', falls head on into paradoxical and aporistic territory: referentiality becomes a question of faith or desire. As in love or religion, doubts must be knowingly ignored in order for the genre to continue:

Once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as a complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that

⁴³ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 27.

autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I had wanted to do, was to describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers.⁴⁴

Not everybody reads this as an act of self-sabotage: for Paul John Eakin, this passage ‘dramatizes the *operative force* of the notion of the complete subject in the performance and reception of autobiography even as it contests it’.⁴⁵ Lejeune’s performance, however, is anything but forceful: the ‘complete subject’ that autobiography defines and describes is the phantasm projected by an incomplete, divided and deliberately self-deluded subject.

The potential of this confession to erase the neat frontiers of the definition may perhaps explain the reasons for Lejeune’s later regret at having openly voiced his doubts in this “middle” period of his theories. The second sequel to 'The Autobiographical Pact' (from 2001) returns to the position of the first essay: late Lejeune is a firm advocate of early Lejeune. However, as we have seen, Lejeune’s writings are never of one piece, and this late essay is no exception. For instance, he compares his theory of the pact to ‘the judicial idea of a contract’, but also to ‘a mystical or supernatural alliance — a “pact with the Devil”’.⁴⁶ It is this ambivalence that, according to him, ‘has guaranteed the success of the formula. I am not a revolutionary theorist, but only a copywriter with a good idea, like the one who came up with *The*

⁴⁴ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 132.

⁴⁵ Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 25.

⁴⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 15.

Laughing Cow'.⁴⁷ The original definition of the pact also teetered between the legal and the uncanny, but the comparison to the popular processed cheese snack is far more intriguing: theory is turned into novelty, with no ultimate defining value. The secret to the pact's endurance might have been its potential to be read and unread, to ignite conflict (even self-conflict) rather than to bring it into a conclusion. Or it might just have been catchy, or curious.

The use of paradoxical solutions or the constant self-questioning in Lejeune belies his caricature as a rigid positivist: his theses ultimately propose and invoke a model of autobiography more open to debate and redefinition than it is usually acknowledged, as well as casting a doubt on the attempts (some his very own) of making the genre empirically observable and traceable. Returning to the crude metaphor of the battlefield, it is worth keeping these internal conflicts in mind when considering his counterpart in the enemy camp.

Paul De Man

'Autobiography as De-Facement' is the most widely debated example of what we may call the "suspicion" camp. As Timothy Dow Adams puts it, 'by 1979, autobiographical criticism had reached such an impasse that Paul de Man

⁴⁷ Lejeune, *Signes de vie*, p. 15.

described it as nearly pointless'.⁴⁸ De Man tries to account for that impasse by examining its foundations:

The theory of autobiography is plagued by a recurrent series of questions and approaches that are not simply false, in the sense that they are far-fetched or aberrant, but that they are confining, in that they take for granted assumptions about autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic.⁴⁹

The 'confining' assumptions that lead theorists into the whirligig of definition are the distinctions Lejeune's pact sought to fix: the idea of autobiography as a literary genre (distinguishable by a reader) and the idea of autobiography as distinct from fiction. Both are problematic: as we saw in the introduction, anomaly is the all-pervasive, ever-present characteristic of all autobiographies: the terms 'norm' and 'anomaly' (and 'curiosity', of course) need to be interrogated.

The frontier of autobiography and fiction is thus questioned, as well as its underlying assumptions (the possibility of reference, mimesis):

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest [...] that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined [...] by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and

⁴⁸ Timothy Dow Adams, 'Design and Lie in Modern American Autobiography', in *Autobiography* (see Broughton, above), I, pp. 327-343 (p. 328) (first. publ. in Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 1-16).

⁴⁹ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 264).

simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?⁵⁰

It is at this point that we encounter the *tourniquet* and the whirligig, his answer to Genette's assumptions that we might be able to discern "signs" of fictionality or referentiality based on textual criteria (such as coincidence or non-coincidence) without questioning figurative language itself. Autobiography thus needs to be unmade: the conventional meaning of the word (a referential self-portrait) becomes a metaphor for a process which undoes its truth claims and makes its claims for generic uniqueness invalid.

Autobiography is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutually reflexive substitution.⁵¹

De Man seems to be making autobiography the standard bearer for language's claims of referentiality in order to analyse how all of its troops fail in their endeavour. This undermines the legitimacy of its use as a descriptive term for certain texts: 'But just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say, by the same token, none of them is or can be'.⁵²

⁵⁰ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 265).

⁵¹ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

⁵² De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

This paradox is based on two uses of 'autobiographical': his own metaphorical one and the conventional one, which he has nonetheless undone and undermined, but which he still uses to communicate his point. The double use of the word has been pointed by some critics such as John Paul Eakin as a theoretical flaw: according to Eakin, De Man

[stresses] the fundamental instability of the categories associated with writing about the self, although it is worth noting that [he] proceeds to write about an entity called "autobiography".⁵³

Eakin seems to be ignoring here that De Man uses 'autobiography' in inverted commas, as a kind of "theoretical fiction": the term remains necessary but its problematic truth claims cannot remain unseen any longer.

De Man goes on to characterises this 'autobiographical' process of reading (which is, of course, autobiography itself) through another metaphor, that of the mirror, in order to emphasise the fundamental self-reflexivity of autobiography and language itself:

The specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure. The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization [...] of all textual systems made of tropological substitutions.⁵⁴

⁵³ Eakin, *Touching*, p.72. See Saunders, p. 5, for another objection: for him De Man confuses autobiography and the autobiographical.

⁵⁴ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p.266).

Autobiography's interest thus lies on its very explicitness about how it fails in what it purportedly seeks to achieve, allowing for the idea of success or failure itself to be questioned. As Derrida explains,

[F]ar from assuring any identification with the self [...], this specular structure reveals a tropological dislocation that precludes any anamnestic totalization of self.⁵⁵

De Man then moves on to discuss Wordsworth's 'Essay upon Epitaphs' and its figurations: particularly the epitaph, an example of prosopopeia, the trope on which autobiography's illusions of presence are founded.

[T]he fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech [...] Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [...] is made as intelligible and as memorable as a face.⁵⁶

De Man's reading of the proper name as prosopopeia is not restricted to Wordsworth's use of the term: in fact, it exposes the shaky foundations of pragmatic theories such as Lejeune's. The pact itself – seemingly free of the taint of specularity because of its performative, legal aspect – nevertheless relies on such specular structures (as its phantasmatic sibling or Lejeune's "confessional" articles disclosed). De Man reveals the covert whirligigs of Lejeune's neat, straight delineations: for him, in Lejeune's pact '[t]he specular

⁵⁵ Derrida, *Memoires*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ De Man, I, 'Autobiography', pp. 264-274 (p. 270).

structure has been displaced but not overcome, and we reenter a system of tropes at the very moment we claim to escape from it'.⁵⁷ The whirligig, he reminds us, is inescapable.

'Autobiography as De-Facement' exposes the phantasmatic foundations of the autobiographical pact, undermining its pretensions to offer reference or stable 'identity'. His assertion that 'any book with a readable title-page is [...] autobiographical' is not an endorsement of Lejeune's 'autobiographical space' but an exposure of its paradoxes: all readings spaces are 'autobiographical' because none can be. The possibility of De Man's theory to be misread is poignant when considered in the context of the posthumous revelation of De Man's wartime journalism: as Laura Marcus points out

It is certainly the case, rightly or wrongly, that it is now difficult not to read De Man 'autobiographically' [...] De Man's writings contain very substantial reflections on the modes of autobiography, confession and apologia – reflections which assert their generic 'impossibility' or the bad faith they manifest [...]. These elements [...] now tend to be read either as veiled confessions or dissimulations.⁵⁸

Even critics sympathetic to De Man's approach (such as Linda Anderson) end up reading him phantasmatically:

In retrospect [...] the obsessive figures of falling, mutilation and drowning, which pervade his criticism, and which he offers as

⁵⁷ De Man, I, 'Autobiography', pp. 264-274 (p. 267).

⁵⁸ Marcus, p. 212.

figures for the defacement of writing by tropes, could also be read as more darkly personal images of anxiety and guilt.⁵⁹

Other “autobiographical” readings of De Man, like Shoshana Felman’s ‘Paul de Man’s Silence’ are, however, less naive.⁶⁰ Her article does not dismiss De Man’s ideas as signs of bad faith: instead, she puts them in relation to questions around testimony and silence — as Jacques Derrida will do in some of his writings which directly address ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’ (particularly *Memoires for Paul De Man* and *Demeure*). The concluding section of this chapter returns to De Man’s essay in order to explore figuration (particularly self-reflexive, mirror like models like *mise en abyme*) in relation to “defined” models like the frontier — a figure which was also the subject of another important contemporary intervention in generic studies: Derrida’s ‘The Law of Genre’ (1979).

Jacques Derrida

Although not immediately concerned with autobiography, Derrida’s essay has exerted an important influence in autobiographical theory and its battles: as Marcus points out, it interrogates concepts (such as the law or the generic tag) which are usually considered as ‘unproblematically indicative of generic

⁵⁹ Anderson, p. 15.

⁶⁰ See Shoshana Felman, ‘Paul de Man’s Silence’, *Critical Inquiry*, 15.4 (1989), 704-744.

status or as codifications of an 'autobiographical intention' '.⁶¹ For Derrida, the generic marker is

[T]his supplementary and distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class. The re-mark of belonging does not belong. It belongs without belonging, and the "without" (or the suffix "-less") which relates belonging to non-belonging appears only in the timeless time of the blink of an eye [...] a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres; there is no genreless text; there is always genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself.⁶²

For Derrida, the generic tag is paradoxical and perplexing, calling into question the distinction between the inside and the outside of the text. Vilain's parable of the hold-up is a case in point. The story supplements the generic definition of his other 'novels' or 'autofictions' whilst revealing what is excluded from them. The story is "invited" to form part of Vilain's life-writing project as other episodes had been, but the invitation is accompanied by the condition that it should be kept separate from the rest — like an eavesdropper. As Derrida puts it, the law of genre

[I]s a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set [...] With the inevitable dividing of the trait

⁶¹ Marcus, pp.246-248.

⁶² Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. by Avital Ronell, in *On Narrative*, ed. by W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 51-77 (p. 61).

that marks membership, the boundary of the set comes to form [...] an internal pocket larger than the whole.⁶³

Derrida's intervention in 'The Law of Genre' destabilises the neatness of the 'frontiers' that Vilain wished to illuminate by the story of the bank robbery. This necessary but unwanted guest is neither in nor out of the line demarcating Vilain's novels or autofictions: it becomes a haunting presence, both brief and timeless, which exposes the frontier as a paradoxical and illogical non-space.

The ultimate "lesson" and irony of this parable is that it became a tag for a generic marker – autofiction – which was intended as a solution to autobiography's indefiniteness: even a composite tag might not solve the problem of generic identity but might only multiply it. Some of the responses to 'The Law of Genre' have made use of Derrida's fluid idea of genre as a defence strategy in the assertion of autobiography as a distinctive genre. Saunders, for instance, remarks that

[T]he fact that a modernist author blurs generic boundaries does not invalidate the concept of genre. It may highlight the inevitable overlapping of genres, since genres are not pure entities. [...] As Derrida argued in 'The Law of Genre', texts 'participate' in genres to which they cannot 'belong'. So it is with autobiography and the novel.⁶⁴

A De Manian reply to Saunders's use of Derrida would point out the problem of asserting that any mode of writing can *choose* to be fiction, or

⁶³ Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', pp. 51-77 (p.55).

⁶⁴ Saunders, p. 4.

contain fiction and do so in response to a particular historical context. Fiction might not be an ingredient to include or exclude at ease but the inevitable quality of figurative language. In that sense, composite markers like autofiction or the one Saunders explores in his book, 'autobiografiction' (coined in 1906 by Stephen Reynolds) cannot redraw frontiers but only expose or mirror them as displaced figures, as Saunders himself points out:

The notion of identity between author and narrator and protagonist inevitably contains an element of fictionality; that is, as it were, a legal fiction; one that enables classical autobiography to proceed; but which modern autobiografiction exposes for what it is.⁶⁵

The next section explores both hybrid coinages (autobiografiction and autofiction) as alternative responses to the problem of generic definition which nonetheless have had little effect (as Vilain's parable demonstrates) in calming down the battlefield. It seeks to examine whether they propose a model in which hybrid and pure genres coexist side by side or whether they call into question the idea of purity, or the idea of genre. Its focus will be primarily theoretical rather than historical (Saunders's and Gasparini's surveys nonetheless explore that dimension with great thoroughness): it attempts to explore the place of renaming approaches (as well as unnamings, like that of David Shields's) within the debates about the generic definition of "autobiography" – whatever that is.

⁶⁵ Saunders, p. 142.

New launches: the hybrid as the balm of Fierabras?

As in real-life postcard displays, there is a lot of the unpredictable and the serendipitous about the success or the failure of a new approach to autobiography. A careless placing of a new arrival behind a rival or in a hard-to-reach corner might condemn it to years of unpurchased obscurity — years that can be, however, miraculously reversed by a rediscovery. This was the case of both Reynolds's 'autobiografiction' and Doubrovsky's 'autofiction'.⁶⁶

However, this new-fangled success (particularly of 'autofiction') has not been universally celebrated. 'Autofiction' has not penetrated Anglo-American criticism in the same way it has done in France or Spain — where it is nonetheless also approached with suspicion. The Spanish critic José María Pozuelo Yvancos, speaking of the rediscovery of Doubrovsky's coinage, wittily compares the term to Don Quixote's balm of Fierabras, 'which cures all meta-theoretical remedies'.⁶⁷ Readers of *Don Quixote* might remember that the fabled balm — a concoction of wine, oil, salt, rosemary, eighty Our Fathers and eighty Hail Marys — only made Don Quixote vomit, and had an even worse effect in Sancho (it made him 'erupt from both channels').⁶⁸ Pozuelo Yvancos's comparison could thus be read as a warning against the seemingly

⁶⁶ Autofiction, however, took far less long to emerge from obscurity than autobiografiction: only about five or ten years.

⁶⁷ José María Pozuelo Yvancos, *Figuraciones del yo en la narrativa: Javier Marías y Enrique Vila-Matas* (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, Fundación Siglo para las Artes, Universidad de Valladolid, 2010), p. 13.

⁶⁸ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. by Edith Grossman (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), p. 120.

magic aura that such neologisms present as the solution to the tiring circularities of autobiographical studies. They might instead leave one doubly empty. It is a danger that this necessarily brief survey of three of such attempts will try to keep in mind.

‘A rather dreadful portmanteau-word’: Stephen Reynolds and autobiografiction

The act of renaming autobiography could be interpreted as the consequence or the side-effect of a rather rigid vision of genre: it might be preferable to create new genres for awkward texts rather than casting a doubt on the purpose and usefulness of generic boundaries. Stephen Reynolds’s ‘Autobiografiction’ (1906) could be read as an example of this approach, although only up to a point.⁶⁹ Although this coinage has recently been given its due importance by critics such as Charles Swann and Max Saunders (who uses it to explore the evolution of life writing at the end of the nineteenth century and in the modernist period), my intention here is to read it in relation to the dialogues, debates and metaphors of autobiographical theory.

Reynolds’s opening (which seeks to explain the odd coinage of the title) is an early example of how curious texts can destabilise the certainties of previous generic categories.

⁶⁹ Stephen Reynolds, ‘Autobiografiction’, *Speaker*, new series, 15, no 366, 6 October 1906, p. 28. I am very grateful to Professor Saunders for providing a copy and full transcription of the article in his King’s College webpage, online source <<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/ip/maxsaunders/ABF/Reynoldstext.htm>> [accessed 14 March 2013]. Reynolds sought to describe a series of contemporary texts which defied definition, like the pseudonymous autobiographies of William Hale White or A.C. Benson’s *The House of Quiet*.

The phrase 'autobiographical fiction' is mainly reserved for fiction with a great deal of the writer's own life in it, or for those lapses from fact which occur in most autobiographies. Hence the need for coining a rather dreadful portmanteau-word like *autobiografiction* in order to connote shortly a minor literary form which stands between those two extremes; which is of late growth and of a nature at once very indefinite and very definite.⁷⁰

Reynolds portrays the two extremes between which 'autobiografiction' stands as fairly hybridised themselves: the 'dreadful' coinage, however, does not refer to those mongrel 'extremes' but to an ideal (but paradoxical) middle way. Autobiografiction is compared to the point when 'the solid, liquid and gaseous states of sulphur are in equilibrium': it is a freak convergence of genres rather than a mixture.⁷¹ For Reynolds, this convergence is both thematic and formal: autobiografiction is 'a record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative [which] [...] reads very like [...] an essay.'⁷²

Convergence, however, is soon unmade and revealed as another mixture in Reynolds's development of his definition. Its content — 'spiritual experiences' — includes a mixed range of what we would describe as 'epiphanic' experiences (Reynolds calls them 'intensified'), which range from

⁷⁰ Reynolds, p. 28.

⁷¹ Reynolds, p. 28. Saunders rightly points out that the metaphor anticipates that which T.S. Eliot will use in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. See Saunders, p. 170. One also wonders whether sulphur is meant to suggest an alchemical or even hellish whiff to the whole procedure.

⁷² Reynolds, p. 28.

‘a vision of heaven to a joint of beef eaten with a full perception of its meaning in life’: in contrast to Vilain (and anticipating Perec’s gastronomic autobiography), the mundane is allowed in.⁷³ Its form is also redefined as a patchwork of formal features, or rather negative ones: it is a rejection of plot and story-telling but also of the chronological completeness of autobiography.

As Saunders points out,

[w]hat seemed a distinct *form* (spiritual experience presented through fictionalized autobiography) then appears as a hybrid *mode* of writing (the intersection of autobiography, fiction and essay) that can feature in any form’.⁷⁴

Reynolds’s metaphorical framework for his genre shifts from a static convergent model to a hybrid and diffuse one. For instance, he remarks that pure spiritual experiences are ‘mightily difficult to make a dish of. Like nitro-glycerine and absolute alcohol, it positively demands absorption or dilution’: autobiografiction becomes a recipe or a formula. Even the text itself mixes culinary and chemical metaphors about the act of mixing, as if to set an example.⁷⁵

The figures in Reynolds’s piece perform the indistinctness that defines them: Reynolds’s deliberately vague and paradoxical descriptions of the generic features which make up the formula of his genre only mirrors the

⁷³ Reynolds, p. 28. Saunders calls the beef ‘a hearty distraction’. See Saunders, p. 169. This autobiography is a list of the foods Perec ate in 1974. See Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 244-247.

⁷⁴ Saunders, pp. 177-178.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, p. 28.

‘mixed’ characters of his figures, conveying the hybrid as something that cannot be decomposed. Autobiografiction becomes both a recipe without an ingredient list and an ingredient list without a recipe.

It is this paradoxical quality that perhaps motivated Saunders to resurrect the term not solely because of its historical and descriptive value, but also because of its theoretical one. For instance, he uses it to attempt to destabilise the ‘frontier’ model of generic definition:

Literary autobiography thus establishes a structure in which a boundary is drawn between fiction and autobiography; but at the same time, the form undoes the boundary, suggesting both the autobiographic within the fictional works that appear to lie outside the autobiography; and also, conversely, the fictional within the autobiography itself.⁷⁶

Autobiografiction is reformulated not solely as the product of a mix but as its process. It is redefined through dynamic metaphors: ‘autobiografiction can be seen not so much as a separate genre or hybrid of two genres, as an expression of the structuration of genres.’⁷⁷ It is not ‘the thing auto/biography moves towards, but [...] the move itself’.⁷⁸ Movement, however, cannot be identified as a possible “solution” to the debate on the generic identity of autobiography: it is of itself unpredictable and uncontainable, and not always straightforward. It involves bringing back time and its perplexities into the picture — as well as the possibility of collapse,

⁷⁶ Saunders, p. 523.

⁷⁷ Saunders, p. 523.

⁷⁸ Saunders, p. 527.

torture, the whirligig. Pozuelo Yvancos's comparison of certain hybrid generic tags with balm of Fierabras should warn us about their seeming remedial appearances: movement, like the balm itself, might only result in sickness.

'That slightly magical neologism': Doubrovsky and autofiction⁷⁹

Saunders's dynamic turn for autobiographical theory will find an unexpected echo when we consider another attempt at generic redefinition, Serge Doubrovsky's 'autofiction'. The term (and the 1977 book in which it first appeared, *Fils*) has tended to be explained as a sort of "son" (an illegitimate one, perhaps) of the critical dialogue generated by Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact. Lejeune's chart of first-person narrative (organised around the parameter of pronominal identity) had left two of its squares empty: an autobiography in which author and protagonist do not share a name, and a fiction in which the author and the narrator/protagonist have the same name. Lejeune concluded that 'Nothing could prevent such a thing from existing'.⁸⁰

The unwitting seed created by this blank germinated in one of his contemporary readers, writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky. Lejeune later

⁷⁹ Philippe Gasparini, 'De quoi l'autofiction est-elle le nom?: Conférence prononcée à l'Université de Lausanne le 9 de octobre 2009', *Autofiction.org*, <<http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?post/2010/01/02/De-quoi-l-autofiction-est-elle-le-nom-Par-Philippe-Gasparini>>, [accessed 17 December 2012], not paginated.

⁸⁰ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 18.

revealed in 'The Autobiographical Pact (bis)' how Doubrovsky wrote to him at the time pondering on his intriguing void, a letter he quotes in the essay:

I remember, while reading your study [...] having checked off the passage [...]: "Can the hero of a novel declared as such have the same name as the author? Nothing would prevent such a thing from existing [...], but in practice, no example of such a study comes to mind." I was then right in the middle of writing and that concerned me, stuck me to the core. [...] I wanted very deeply to fill up that "square", which your analysis left empty, and it is a real desire that suddenly linked your critical text and what I was in the process of writing.⁸¹

The book that came to fill the empty square is a novel following a day in the life of a French literature professor called Serge Doubrovsky. Of course, the book is not a novel as such, but rather an *autofiction*, Doubrovsky's name for the new genre, involuntarily reminiscent of Reynolds' awkward portmanteau word. Both coinages work on the same principle: the need of a name that mirrors a hybrid text.

Fils was christened as an *autofiction* in the book's blurb. As Philippe Gasparini remarks, this piece 'assumes unapologetically its advertising purposes': like Lejeune's pact, the blurb is a reflection on autobiography, a manifesto, but also an advert, complete with puns.⁸² The word appears in the concluding paragraph:

⁸¹ Doubrovsky, as quoted by Lejeune in *On Autobiography*, p. 135.

⁸² Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 16. The blurb now tends to appear as a preface in the recent reprints. Doubrovsky plays with 'autofiction' and 'autofriction' as he remarks on the masturbatory quality of the book, adding some exciting sexual frisson to the blurb. See Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), p. 10.

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved to the mighty of this world in the autumn of their lives and in a grand style. A fiction of strictly real events and facts; autofiction, one might say; the language of an adventure as an adventure of language, beyond the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, either traditional or new.⁸³

Doubrovsky is voicing here a complaint against autobiography not too dissimilar to Reynolds's. Reynolds found the 'completeness' of autobiography too restrictive to communicate spiritual experiences. Doubrovsky also seems to find the retrospective solemnity and grandiose style of autobiography rather forbidding. In a later text, *Le Livre Brisé* (1989), he describes autobiography as a 'pantheon of funeral parlours' in which he hopes to 'sneak in with the help of fiction, under the cover of the novel': a paradoxical formulation that kills the genre and makes that murder particularly tempting because of the victim's deadness — turning autofiction into a kind of "Orpheus" genre.⁸⁴ Gasparini points out how the term is not so much a generic metaphor but a 'paradoxical antiphrasis (...) this isn't a pipe but a fiction'.⁸⁵

This quality has tended to be read as a response to postmodern uncertainties rather than as a defiance of generic categories: E.H. Jones, for example, sees autofiction as 'highly attuned with an age in which the subject is no longer accepted to be a unified, simple whole'.⁸⁶ For her, it is a 'late

⁸³ Doubrovsky, *Fils*, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Doubrovsky, as quoted and translated by EH Jones in 'Autofiction: a Brief History of a Neologism' in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature*, ed. by Richard Bradford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 176.

⁸⁵ Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 18.

⁸⁶ EH Jones, 'Autofiction: a brief history of a Neologism' p.177.

twentieth-century form of autobiographical writing [...] a gradual evolution of literary form', rather than 'the replacement of a dominant form with its opposite'.⁸⁷ Doubrovsky himself has described autofiction as 'a new type of autobiography', one of the 'sub-categories of autobiography'.⁸⁸

Gasparini defines Doubrovsky's take on the term by three features: indexes of referentiality (homonimity, focus on the 'strictly real'), fictional features (the 'novel' tag, use of narrative or the present-tense) and textual self-consciousness (formal originality, non-linear configuration of time). The balance between these features — as it was the case with Reynolds's chemical metaphors — is nonetheless easily disturbed, revealing in its unsettled quality the problematic character of such attempts at definition.

The term's evolution in criticism from its origin in *Fils* (which Gasparini traces in great detail in his survey) testifies to this impossible equilibrium: the term has been redefined as a metaleptic metafictional sub-genre (by Vincent Colonna), as a postmodern variant of autobiography (by Jones) or of the first-person autobiographical novel (by Gasparini himself) or as a variant of the autobiographical reading pact defined by an alternance between fictional readings and autobiographical readings within the same book (by Manuel Alberca and Arnaud Schmitt).⁸⁹ It has become as fraught as autobiography itself, ending up in the same old door which it sought to escape, its only

⁸⁷ Jones, p. 178.

⁸⁸ Doubrovsky, quoted and trans. by Jones, pp. 177-178.

⁸⁹ See Gasparini, 'De Quoi', not paginated, Manuel Alberca, *El pacto ambiguo: de la novela autobiográfica a la autoficción* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2007) and Arnaud Schmitt 'Making the Case for Self-Narration against Autofiction' in *a/b : Auto/Biography Studies* 25.1 92010), 122-137.

consolation provided by a calming litany of features which would destabilise the whole concept were one to examine them in more than a swift or perfunctory way (such as self-referentiality).

Or so the official story of the birth and later success of autofiction goes. There is, however, a twist. Isabelle Grell – in an article about the manuscript version of *Fils* – revealed how she stumbled upon an earlier appearance of the term *autofiction* in a discarded draft, a variant which reveals a wholly new dimension of the word.⁹⁰ In the fragment, the protagonist drives away after an analysis session, reading a dream notebook his analyst has asked him to keep:

the scene seemed to be the repetition of the same scene directly
lived as REAL without a doubt it made a fold am sitting in the
bench back of my hand over the wheel I place the notebook
between my fingers dream book constructed in a dream
volatilises me I am it's real if I write in my car
my autobiography
will be my AUTO-FICTION⁹¹

Autofiction, then, is nothing more (or less) than fiction (or autobiography) written in a car: as Gasparini remarks it is 'not a word but a pun engendered by a love of limousines'.⁹² Gasparini's use of 'engendered' is amusing: as if Doubrovsky has discovered that the real father of his "son" was not Lejeune

⁹⁰ Isabelle Grell, 'Pourquoi Serge Doubrovski n's pu éviter le terme d'autofiction', in *Gènese et autofiction*, ed. by Jean Louis Jeannelle and Catherine Viollet (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2007), pp. 39-51 (p.46).

⁹¹ Serge Doubrovsky, as quoted by Grell, pp. 39-51 (p. 46).

⁹² Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 12.

and the empty square, but his car — a disturbing parentage, understandably repressed. Doubrovsky admitted in an interview to Vilain that ‘I was self-deceived about its origin. You can never know yourself completely [...] I didn’t realise that the word had been created by the movement of my own text.’⁹³ In this passage, Doubrovsky almost seems to be rationalising his disturbing creature, as if it was nothing more than a virgin birth, or the product of the masturbatory text’s self-impregnation.

The critic is perhaps as dumbfounded as Doubrovsky about what to make of this freakish origin. Read in relation to the arguments of autobiographical theory, the original sense of ‘autofiction’ contests the idea that genres can be ‘mixed’ at all: it is figures themselves who are hybridised and this opens up the door to all sorts of curious variants, the products of shocking, unconscious or absurd associations (like Reynolds’s union of ‘heaven’ and the ‘joint of beef’), partial, capricious, lacking in totalising intentions. It is important to consider as well that Doubrovsky’s father-figure (as in “fathering” figure) — the car — is a dynamic and unstable one. Autofictions (and autobiografiction) are cars — or rather children of cars.

One wonders whether autofiction could be released from critical impasse through its automotive and freakish origins: that attempt, however, might still end in the same entry point. Neologisms and new products do not possess any magical powers, no matter what Gasparini claims: any renaming operation in autobiography is destined to become unsatisfactory as long as

⁹³ Doubrovsky, as quoted by Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction*, p. 12.

terms such as 'fiction', 'truth' or 'narrative' are used without being called into question. That is perhaps why the most reticent of those mixed approaches, that of David Shields, might be perhaps the least problematic in the long term.

The unnameable genre?: David Shields's *Reality Hunger*

The problems that arise from renaming approaches such as Reynolds' *autobiografiction* or Doubrovsky's *autofiction* might make us wonder whether the opposite tactic (that of 'unnaming' or 'undefining') would be more successful. 'Autobiography as De-Facement', as we have seen, is an unnameable both of autobiography and of the proper name — an antecedent of our third case study, David Shields's 2010 'manifesto' *Reality Hunger*. The text represents a novel engagement with some of the main strands of the debates of autobiographical theory and eschews on principle the possibility of being able to offer a solution. I would like to examine some aspects of Shields's untheory of autobiography as an alternative (or rather a mirror image) to the convolutions and avenues that the other previous definitions or attempts have led us to.

Reality Hunger could be said to resemble, up to a point, meta-theoretical approaches to autobiography such as Marcus's. The differences between their books, however, far exceed the parallelisms. Shields's book takes the appearance of scholar's draft notes towards a book on the theory of autobiography. Argument is abandoned: or rather, Shields expects the

collage/mix-tape structure of his text to do the argument on his behalf. His model seems to be *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: he borrows its alphabetical arrangement, albeit only to deliberately disregard it or play with it.⁹⁴

Shields uses his pseudo-alphabetical categories to gather together a series of statements about the novel or about autobiography, removes them from their context (authors are omitted), groups them along vague thematic lines (such as 'contradiction', 'collage', 'reality TV') and leaves them on their own to create an argument, thus making his non-committal approach to the subject deliberately explicit. The text is *blasé* about the possibility of saying something new about the subject, although it decides to perform rather than state that perplexity.

Reality Hunger's peculiar mode of intertextuality is nonetheless more ambiguous about its message than the seemingly transparent structure makes it out to be. It is not certain whether he expects readers to locate and identify his quotes or to take them for his own (or even their own). The book includes a sort of incomplete or draft list of references at the end (with author names, but no page numbers or other bibliographical information), introduced by a note in which he denounces it as an editorial imposition he commands the reader to ignore and even cut up with a pair of scissors. The book concludes with a sort of grand statement in which he asks his future scissor-wielding readers 'Who owns the words? Who owns the music and the rest of our

⁹⁴ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Shields uses some of the letters as figures (the Z section is called 'coda') but not on every occasion.

culture? We do – all of us – though not of all us know it yet. Reality cannot be copyrighted'.⁹⁵

Readers, however, should be wary of taking this conclusion as his 'manifesto'. It is in fact a rather arch and deliberately paradoxical intervention. It could be read as hypocritical and self-contradictory, in line with certain readings of Barthes' 'The Death of the Author'.⁹⁶ It seems to give authority to a particular origin-less reading of the text by appropriating the ideas of authorship and origin it seeks to refuse. Shields is probably fully aware of these objections, and the conclusion should perhaps be read as also seeking to promote a kind of readerly mutiny which would restore authors back into the text: a rebellion which would pencil names alongside quotes, and reread the text anew as a dialogue rather than as a cacophony. Despite appearances, the text seems to be asking to be read with both scissors and pencil. This final authorial intervention is no more deserving of trust than any of the others.

The deliberately bare-boned bibliography might indeed be read as a kind of request for an act of collective rereading. He fails to indicate not just the page, but even the source text in many examples. In a sense, the bibliography demands a notable effort on the part of rebellious or inquisitive readers, asked to 'complete' Shields's deliberately unfinished project in their own way. The undecidable quality of the conclusion and the book itself could

⁹⁵ Shields, p. 209.

⁹⁶ This also echoes certain criticisms of Barthes's 'The Death of the Author', which Sean Burke has collected. See Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp.20-33.

be read as a sign of post-modern exhaustion or as an invitation to a collaborative (and perhaps utopian) “solution” to these problems.

The text is thus stubbornly non-committal and mirror-like: a curiously original approach to autobiographical theory by dint of its deliberate unoriginality. The book seeks to copy both grand artistic forms like the collage and popular arts devices like sampling — as well as adolescent self-expression exercises like the mix-tape or the postcard or picture wall. Its importance to the theory of autobiography (particularly to its hybrid branches) lies indeed in its demystification of the balmy aura normally divested in novelty (of which this thesis is not particularly exempt). Although it could be read as an impartial participation in those discourses (James Wood, for instance, reads it ‘an argument for realism’, albeit not of the traditional kind), even this position becomes just another argument in the cacophony.⁹⁷ Autobiographical theory is here reinvented as inventory, demonstrating how repetition might also be useful as a critical tool for innovation — we should not be afraid to go back to the whirligig, rather than continuing looking for the next exit route.

⁹⁷ James Wood, ‘Keeping it Real’, *New Yorker*, 15 March 2010, online version, <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/03/15/100315crat_atlarge_wood> [accessed on 3 March 2013].

A way out? : narrative and autobiography

Reality Hunger can thus be read as a warning against ignoring the debates on the nature of autobiography, reference and figuration: they might not have been brought to a conclusion at all, despite a certain tendency to consider them as relics of a past critical era. An example of this approach is a recent overview of critical approaches to autobiography by Martin Löschnigg. He points out how, at the same time that the battle was being fought between mimetic and deconstructionist versions of autobiography, a new take on autobiography was quietly gathering strength, and – as he implies – perhaps ending the battle .

Löschnigg refers to what he describes as the constructivist (narrativist) theories of autobiography, represented by the approach of Paul John Eakin or Jerome Bruner. For him, those theories

[H]ave emphasized the role of narrative in the formation and maintenance of a sense of identity. They foreground [...] the creative (as opposed to the mimetic) function of autobiography with regard to individual identity, while [...] reviving the concept of autobiographical reference.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Martin Löschnigg, 'Postclassical Narratology and the Theory of Autobiography', in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. by Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), pp. 255-274 (p. 255).

For Löschnigg, this kind of approaches represent an enlightened and undeluded way out of the whirligig due to their focus on narrative itself:

[A]n emphasis on narrativity as a vital factor in the construction of identity [...] autobiography, in narrative terms, stages the drama of creating the autobiographer's identity.⁹⁹

Löschnigg seems to be referring here not just to narrativist theories of autobiography, but also to another important strand of autobiographical theory: the performative one, springing from Judith Butler's theories of gender. Although I will not be able to examine those approaches in detail (they tend to be concerned with questions of identity or gender rather than definition or temporality), they have nonetheless something in common with narrativist ones: both invoke a rhetoric of release from the claustrophobic spaces of deconstruction. As Saunders has pointed out, they 'leave the door open to the possibility of self-creation [...] and thus offer an escape from post-structuralism's deconstruction of selfhood'.¹⁰⁰

Narrativist approaches will also invoke a similar rhetoric of compromise as release. Eakin, for instance, describes autobiography as 'a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities'.¹⁰¹ It is both creation and rediscovery, it is the same as fiction and yet it is 'special': as he puts it somewhere else 'autobiography is nothing if

⁹⁹ Löschnigg, pp. 255-274 (p.256)

¹⁰⁰ Saunders, p. 513.

¹⁰¹ Eakin, *Touching*, p. 25. See his *Fictions in Autobiography* for a full development of this idea. See Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

not a referential art; it is also and always a kind of fiction'.¹⁰² This section will seek to interrogate this rhetoric of the 'way out'. It will start by exploring the main tenets of narrativist and narratological approaches to autobiography (as well as anti-narrativist arguments) in relation to generic definition to later narrow its focus to the role of the 'temporal curiosity' within the generic debate and the debate around natural and unnatural narratives briefly outlined in the introduction.

The narrative escape: Ricoeur, Bruner and cognitive narratology.

The rhetoric of release that Saunders observed in performative theories of autobiography can also be ascertained in narrativist approaches. Jerome Bruner described his own take on autobiographical theory as a kind of mixture between a spring-cleaning operation and an Ariadne-like escape from (self-created?) labyrinths:

Autobiography is altogether too familiar a form to be taken at face value. Its very familiarity risks obscuring its secretive metaphysics and tacit presuppositions, both of which would be the better for some airing. Autobiographical "theory" [...] too often loses its way amidst the same obscurities.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Eakin, *Touching*, p. 31.

¹⁰³ Jerome Bruner, 'The Autobiographical Process' in *Autobiography* (see Broughton, above), III, pp.165-183 (p. 165) (first publ. in *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, ed. by R. Folkenflik (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 38-56).

A glance at J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread* — his unpicking of labyrinth/release tropes in relation to narrative theory — might warn any prospective theorist (even an inverted comma-ed "theorist") of the dangers with which a cleaner-cum-Ariadne can be faced in relation to figurative language, and — we may extrapolate — to autobiography itself.¹⁰⁴ "Release" models are usually aware of such objections, to the point of incorporating those arguments as part of their counter-argument. This mode of definition by self-contradiction and paradox will need nonetheless to be interrogated as *the* possible "solution" to the battle — as Löschnigg has it.

As it is the case with many theoretical categories, there is no such thing as a single narrative-based approach to autobiography. Rather it comprises arguments from constructivist or cognitive psychology (such as Bruner's), psychoanalysis (Adam Phillips or Peter Brooks) or different philosophical schools (Alasdair McIntyre, Paul Ricoeur).¹⁰⁵ Because of the thesis's focus on temporal structure as a way of approaching and mirroring the curious nature of autobiography, I will mainly concentrate on Ricoeur's approach — without forgetting (even if it is only able to describe them briefly) the constructivist arguments of Bruner and cognitive narratology.

Ricoeur's theory of narrative is a good entry point to those arguments because he deals with the same question De Man unpicked, although in a different way: the relation between life and narrative. De Man, as we saw, sought to disturb the idea of a separate "life" outside the narrative: the

¹⁰⁴ See J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread: Story lines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁵ For a good overview of some of these approaches, see Volume 4 of Trev Lynn Broughton's anthology.

“frontier” between them is a fallacy because it implies the possibility of mimetic representation — hence his suggestion that autobiography produces the life, rather than the usual way round. Life is *just* recounted. In ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, Ricoeur approaches the relation from a different perspective. Like De Man, he also argues against literary theory’s ‘distinction between the inside of the text and its outside’.¹⁰⁶ Unlike De Man (who sees this outside as an illusion of the figure), Ricoeur argues that the door between outside and inside must not be destroyed, but simply kept open.

Ricoeur achieves this release by switching from text to reader (to interpretation and hermeneutics), a move which leads to the relieved return of referentiality:

From a hermeneutical point of view, that is to say from the point of view of the interpretation of literary experience, a text [...] is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself.¹⁰⁷

However, the most influential aspect of Ricoeur’s redefinition of the relation between life and text (certainly for the theory of autobiography) is his argument for the narrative quality of life itself. Rather than revealing the outside as illusion, Ricoeur proposes a redefinition of the origin, what he calls ‘the pre-narrative capacity of what we call life’.¹⁰⁸ Narrative is not an outside imposition but the fabric of which life (or rather experience) is made, and

¹⁰⁶ Paul Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. by David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.20-33 (p. 26).

¹⁰⁷ Ricoeur, ‘Life’, pp. 20-33 (p. 27).

¹⁰⁸ Ricoeur, ‘Life’, pp. 20-33 (p. 28).

which fictional narrative ‘imitates in a creative way’ (note the return of mimesis).¹⁰⁹

The metaphor Ricoeur uses to refer to the relation between experience and narrative is that of the ‘anchorage’ – another reassuringly stable figure. This anchorage is based on three features: the common phronetic (in the Aristotelian sense of ‘practical’ as opposed to theoretical) mode of understanding in both the reading of action and the reading of narratives, the fact that action is itself ‘symbolically mediated’, a ‘quasi-text’ (that is, ‘articulated in signs, rules and norms’) and on the aforementioned pre-narrative quality of life, the idea of ‘life as an *activity and a passion in search of narrative*’ – the action of a life has ‘temporal features which call for narration’.¹¹⁰ The structure of experience is the structure of a narrative.

This twinning of narrative and temporality is the most distinctive feature of Ricoeur’s philosophy, and one with important consequences for our understanding of autobiography. In Ricoeur’s deliberately loop-like definition, temporality is ‘that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity’ and narrativity ‘the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent’.¹¹¹ Ricoeur’s theory of narrative (of which I will only be able to provide a schematic summary) compares Heidegger’s models of temporal organization to the structure of narrative – and in particular to plot

¹⁰⁹ Ricoeur, ‘Life’, pp.20-33 (p. 28).

¹¹⁰ Ricoeur, ‘Life’, pp.20-33 (p. 29).

¹¹¹ Ricoeur, ‘Narrative Time’, in *On Narrative* (see Mitchell, above), pp. 165-186 (p. 165).

or 'emplotment' (a translation of Aristotle's *muthos*), as plot is able to transform linear successions of events into stories, and thus into temporality.

Emplotment is thus described as a 'synthesis of heterogeneous elements [...] a synthesis between the events or incidents which are multiple and the story which is unified and complete'.¹¹² In temporal terms, plot draws 'a configuration out of a succession': it is 'something that endures and remains across that which passes and flows away', 'a mediation between time as passage and time as duration'.¹¹³ Life, like narrative, is thus characterised by a play or a struggle (Ricoeur uses both models, confusingly) between concordance (Aristotelian 'emplotment', synthesis) and discordance (Augustinian's 'distention of the soul', temporal aporia, heterogeneity, mindless succession). Plot, on the other hand, is 'a totality which can be said to be at once concordant and discordant'.¹¹⁴

Ricoeur's model of plot is that of a tense but stable balance. It is significant that, halfway through his essay, Ricoeur changes the metaphor to describe the relation between concordance and discordance from 'play' to 'struggle' — as if the theorist had turned into a parent observing in astonishment how his children's seemingly harmonious games have suddenly become violent. It is perhaps this contained violence in Ricoeur's idea of 'emplotment' which makes it a useful tool with which to examine our three 'temporal curiosities'. They all at one point invite a Ricoeurian reading of

¹¹² Ricoeur, 'Life', pp. 20-33 (p. 21).

¹¹³ Ricoeur, 'Life', pp. 20-33 (p. 22).

¹¹⁴ Ricoeur, 'Life', pp. 20-33 (p. 21).

their temporal structures, but the play/struggle inherent in their temporal structures is in fact an instrument to problematize the existence of a (narrative or non-narrative) outside “life”.

Narrativist theorists, however, have used Ricoeur’s narrative model of experience and time to try to anchor autobiography to referentiality: Eakin (who, unlike Ricoeur, confuses narrative and chronology) argues for ‘a direct organic connection between narrative structure in autobiography and the world of reference it represents’.¹¹⁵ Responding to Lejeune’s description of chronological order in autobiography as a clichéd and conventional form, Eakin argues that ‘a narrowly literary approach to structure [...] fails to grasp chronology as a manifestation of the fundamental temporality of human existence’.¹¹⁶ Eakin, however, also argues that narrative is *both* an outside imposition or as natural choice: ‘narrative in autobiography is always a retrospective imposition on remembered experience, but the choice of narrative is justified by its roots in that experience’.¹¹⁷ His argument here is again a conciliatory one — and intensely circular.¹¹⁸ The examination of the tension between different narrative temporal models in our three curiosities — and how they play out the tensions between chronology, anachrony,

¹¹⁵ Eakin, *Touching*, pp. 192-193.

¹¹⁶ Eakin, *Touching*, p. 193.

¹¹⁷ Eakin, *Touching*, p. 197.

¹¹⁸ In that respect, Eakin’s reading of the four texts used to present his thesis is more complex and nuanced, and his book ends after that analysis with no strong conclusion at all, but with a mixture of rather despaired assertions and wistfulness (referring to David Maalouf’s ‘12 Edmondstone Street’) that ‘the world of reference beyond the text is lost beyond recall’, ‘the art of memory recalls us not to the life we have lost but to the life we have yet to live’ (p.229).

achrony and polychrony – will reveal the difficulty in seeking a way through the window of time.

In view of the difficulty (even impossibility) of escape, it is not surprising that critics uncomfortable with De Man's opaque and specular model of autobiography have welcomed Ricoeur's formulation of narrative as a mode of self-understanding with sighs of relief. For Ricoeur, the 'virtual narrativity' of experience does not stem 'from the projection of literature onto life', but arises from 'a genuine demand for narrative' as part of self-understanding: 'fiction is only completed in life and [...] life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it'.¹¹⁹ Galen Strawson, speaking of the turn towards narrative in philosophy and the social sciences, made a useful distinction between two different interpretations of models such as Ricoeur's: an empirical (descriptive) approach to narrative and a normative (ethical) one.¹²⁰

Eakin – who answered De Man's objections by first agreeing to them and then appealing to the quasi-therapeutic, balm-like quality of autobiographical illusions – is a good illustration of the normative approach:

If autobiographical discourse encourages us to place self before language, cart before horse, the fact of our readiness to do so suggests that the power of language to fashion selfhood is not only successful but life-sustaining, necessary to the conduct of human life as we know it.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Ricoeur, 'Life', pp. 20-33 (p. 28, p. 30).

¹²⁰ Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio*, 17.4 (2004), 428-452 (pp. 428-433).

¹²¹ Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, p. 191.

For Galen Strawson, thesis such as Eakin's

hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities [...] and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts'.¹²²

Strawson proposes an alternative non-universalistic non-narrative model of self-understanding which he calls Episodic (a sort of fragmentary, half Montaignesque, half-Shandean selfhood). Any alternatives to narrativist models — particularly the more prescriptive ones — should nonetheless take into consideration the problem of reference and specularity inherent in any narrative model, be it episodic or teleological.

Returning to the story of the balm of Fierabras as a useful allegory of these debates, we observe that — no matter how much Don Quixote managed to convince himself of its restorative qualities — it did not make it any more balm-like and less of a purgative/laxative. At the same time, the balm is not an outright poison as Strawson would have it: its effects are nothing more and nothing less than a double emptying. The balm is only a mirror of the narrative-engine of *Don Quixote* itself: a constant emptying of Don Quixote and Sancho so that they can be refilled (and then emptied again) as long as the narrative demands it.

¹²² Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', 428-492 (p. 429).

Perhaps because of these problematic therapeutic claims, many recent developments of narrativist approaches to autobiography have opted for an empirical observation of autobiography in everyday situations. The work of Bruner was pioneering in this respect and anticipates the approach of cognitive narratology. His case studies for autobiography range from Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* to the bedtime monologues of a two-year old girl. Bruner argues for a kind of continuum between this oral, imitative narratives and literary experiments, proposing an organic, life-like model of autobiography itself – with its oral form as its babyhood and experimental models as its maturity.¹²³ Autobiography is reformulated as a speech-act, as an act of communication with certain 'felicity conditions'.

Perhaps the greatest value of approaches such as Bruner's is their potential to reveal the illusory quality of the 'curiosity' metaphor. They could be taken as warnings that our charming find might be far from unique – and that we might be as deluded as those we seek to undermine. Cognitive narratology – which applies constructivist psychological models to literary texts – has come to define autobiography as the complete opposite of the curiosity: David Herman, for instance, argues that

the genre of *narrative* can be characterized as deriving [...] from the speech-act "telling what happened". The genre of *autobiography* [...] derives from the analogous transformation of the speech act "telling what happened to oneself".¹²⁴

¹²³ Jerome Bruner, 'The Autobiographical Process' in *Autobiography* (see Broughton, above), III, pp.165-183 (pp. 174-175).

¹²⁴ Herman, *Story Logic*, p. 35.

Another important cognitive narratologist, Monika Fludernik, comically acknowledges that the focus on cognitive frames can come to sound ‘ridiculously babyish’, as those frames are ‘taken for granted as part of one’s bodily enmeshment in the world’.¹²⁵ It is fair to ask if some of our immediate exasperation with the simplicity of Herman’s definition does not resemble that of an elder sibling being told that their younger brother or sister is just as clever as he or she is.

It can also be argued, however, that these two rather stark illusion-defeating approaches are not exempt from being the subject of a thorough questioning – for instance, about the nature of Herman’s ‘transformation’ of speech-acts into literary genres. Their recourse to tropes and narratives of innocence and nature (even in inverted commas) is also problematic, as it assumes a kind of hierarchy of the oral over the written. The narratologists grouped together under the ‘unnatural’ narratology umbrella (which include Richardson, the coiner of ‘temporal curiosity’) have sought to rebel against Fludernik’s naturalization of the unfamiliar. Richardson, for instance, affirms that ‘unnatural narratives produce a defamiliarization of the basic elements of narrative’ – positing their stance as a reclamation of Shklovski’s *ostranenie* and of the paradoxical negative knowledge of narrative obtained through its strangest and most curious variants.¹²⁶

Fludernik, replying to some of their objections, resorted to an amusing culinary metaphor to compare her approach and that of the unnatural

¹²⁵ Monika Fludernik, *Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 18.

¹²⁶ Richardson, ‘What is Unnatural Narrative Theory?’, pp. 23-40 (p. 34).

narratologists: while she tends 'to concentrate on the overall taste, ignoring some of the ingredients', the others 'savour the tinge of spice that conflicts with the overall familiar blandness of the pudding'.¹²⁷ This rather self-deprecating description could be taken by her foes as an admission of the baby-food-like quality of some of the cognitivist approaches, with their obsession with the "flour" of narrative. It is perhaps fairer to say that the main problem of Fludernik's metaphor is that in her example spice is seen as a mere footnote or a companion to blandness rather than as its enemy, ignoring the possibility that the 'spice' might utterly transform the pudding, even make it inedible – or a purgative.

'Temporal curiosities': *fabula/sjuzhet* in autobiography

The previous (incomplete) survey of the contribution of narrativist approaches to generic definition debates has highlighted the role of narrative temporality as a criteria to describe the genre – even if most critics from Lejeune onwards recognise that autobiography does not have a "defining" temporal structure, and that it shares its narrative model with fictional confessions. Northrop Frye, for instance, subsumed fictional and non-fictional autobiography under the macro-generic category of the 'confession'.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Fludernik, 'How Natural is Unnatural Narratology; or What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?', 357-370 (p. 362).

¹²⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 307.

Frye might have been an influence on a pioneering study of the temporal structure of autobiography by Jean Starobinski, in which autobiography is also characterised as a confession. For him, what defines autobiography is change:

It is the internal transformation of the individual [...] which furnishes a subject for a narrative discourse in which "I" is both subject and object [...] The narrator describes not only what happened to him at a different time in his life, but above all how he became [...] what he presently is. [...] The trace of experiences traces a path (though a sinuous one) which ends in the present state of recapitulatory knowledge.¹²⁹

Confessional narratives are both teleological (that is, directed towards the present self, rather than episodic) and linear (hence the metaphor of the 'path'). They would thus conform to Ricoeur's model of emplotment, with the "converted" present self configuring the chaos of the line, which nonetheless tends to be dutifully respected and followed. Lejeune's definition also used retrospection as a defining criterion for autobiography. The seeming inevitability of retrospection in autobiography has lead Dorrit Cohn to claim present-tense first-person narratives as exclusive to fiction, making it a rare case of a textual criterion being used for generic definition: one, however, that

¹²⁹ Jean Starobinski, 'The Style of Autobiography', in *Autobiography* (see Broughton, above), pp. 158-167 (p. 162) (first publ. in *Literary Style: a Symposium*, ed. and part. trans. by S. Chatman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 285-294).

present-tensed narratives such as *Fils* and *Le Grand Incendie de Londres* seek to subvert.¹³⁰

As to chronology (in narratological terms, the coincidence of *fabula* and *sjuzhet*), its pervasiveness has tended to be put into question far more often. Lejeune, for instance, believes it tends to be chosen not so much because it is natural (as some theorists would have it) but because of reasons of

verisimilitude, convention, facility. Any original inquiry into the structure of the narrative awakens the mistrust of the reader, who perceives something contrived, whereas the use of traditional narrative gives him the impression this is a personal experience.¹³¹

Lejeune nonetheless mentions that even canonical autobiography involves a certain degree of anachrony, although it is one based on 'the relationship between the *present* of the writing, and the *past* narrated by the writing'.¹³² Lejeune refers here to the frequent returns autobiographers make to the present of the narrative (usually to excuse the frailty of their memories). Lejeune sees it as a kind of affectation than only Stendhal and Chateaubriand have approached with seriousness. These types of anachronies are, however, something more than a harmless deviation from chronology. Up to a point, they superimpose a certain circularity or spirality (the difference is important) onto the line of chronology: the beginning announces the safe final

¹³⁰ Cohn's other textual criteria to tell autobiographies and first person novels apart is narratorial unreliability, as she claims autobiographers are never consciously unreliable as fictional narrators are. The problem of this approach is that it overplays the innocence and earnestness of autobiography, denying that the genre might wish to deconstruct itself deliberately. See Cohn, *Distinction*, pp. 109-131.

¹³¹ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 71.

¹³² Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 72

destination of the book, which is reached at the very end. The problem with this approach lies in the problematic distance that underpins that structure, which is actually rather precarious.

Deconstructive approaches to confession, such as those of Mark Currie, have highlighted the problematic character of these temporal frontiers between present and past selves. As he points out, confessional narratives

[E]ntail a steady decrease in temporal distance between the narrator and the narrated, and this must necessarily entail the erosion of the moral distance between confessor and confessed.¹³³

The structure itself destroys any pretences of presence:

The nature of the confessional narrative is to offer an unfolding allegory of temporal distance in the act of self-narration. It presents an example of the collapse of all temporal distance in self-narration.¹³⁴

Distance (and its ability to create Ricoeurian concordance out of the line) needs to be questioned: the model of the confession is not really a source of stable knowledge but another figure akin to the whirligig. Currie's observations about the confession can indeed be applied to some of our curiosities: Mariás, for instance, highlights the unstable nature of conversion by structuring his novel as an 'event' or 'change' (or maybe two) which cannot be placed in the narrative, and which disturbs the neat distribution of past and present selves.

¹³³ Currie, *About Time*, p. 61.

¹³⁴ Currie, *About Time*, p 60.

However, we started this study by pointing at a different source for our ‘temporal curiosities’: their ‘forays’ against the mimetic model of temporality based on the distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet* (the basis of the study of narrative temporality since Russian Formalism). In that model, *fabula* (the embodiment of linear time in the text) is assumed to precede the *sjuzhet*, which “scrambles” or “shuffles” it as if it were a pack of cards. As Frank Kermode pointed out, this is in fact a critical fiction: the *fabula* never had ‘an independent anterior existence’. In fact the natural state of packs of cards (except in their first boxed existence) is disorder, which is the engine itself of many games (particularly Patience-style ones), which involve a reconstruction (through innumerable obstacles) of the pack’s order.

Fabula should perhaps be read as one of the ‘ends’ of the game of narrative rather than as a natural or pre-existent right order.¹³⁵ David Herman also observes how ‘the order of telling also bears crucially — indeed, alters — the matter told’.¹³⁶ Although common-sense would argue that there is, after all, a *fabula* to autobiography, Herman’s observation should make us wary of jumping at that conclusion. Cohn has nonetheless proposed a ‘tri-level model’ for historical narratives which distinguishes between ‘reference/story/discourse’:

¹³⁵ About this, see also Richard Walsh, ‘Fabula and Fictionality in Narrative Theory’, *Style*, 35.4 (2001) 592-609 for another take on the subject.

¹³⁶ Herman, *Story Logic*, p. 214.

Outside the realm of fiction, the synchronous interplay of story and discourse is undergirded – no matter how shakily – by the logical and chronological priority of observed events.¹³⁷

However, there might be no such thing as a ‘logical and chronological’ referent for autobiography: it is not only inaccessible for the reader but it is not a proof of the referential character of the text.

Perhaps the most interesting redefinitions of the *fabula/sjuzhet* model for our curiosities are those which have not sought to add yet another element to the dichotomy, but to undo it. Emma Kalafenos described the temporality of postmodern narratives as *indeterminate*, as they hinder the reconstruction of a *fabula* out of the *sjuzhet*, or viceversa.¹³⁸ Richardson develops Kalafenos’s observation to propose a typology of ‘violations of realistic temporality’ which include circular temporal structures (such as that of *Finnegans Wake*), contradictory temporalities (Coover’s “The Babysitter”), antinomic or backwards (Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*), differential (in which a chronology is superimposed on another, as in Woolf’s *Orlando*), conflated (where different temporal zones fail to remain distinct) and dual or multiple (when different plotlines take a different amount of time to unfold, as in *Midsummer’s Night Dream*).¹³⁹ However, in a close reading, none of our ‘temporal curiosities’ really fit Richardson’s categories: indeed, they might be more aptly described by another reformulation of the *fabula/sjuzhet* model, that of David Herman, who proposed the category of *polychrony* to account for the occasions when

¹³⁷ Cohn, *Distinction*, p. 115.

¹³⁸ Kalafenos, ‘Toward...’, 380-408.

¹³⁹ See Richardson, ‘Beyond Story and Discourse’, pp.47-63.

'readers can sometimes be prompted to assign storyworld events not a definite but only a more or less determinate location in the story's timeline'.¹⁴⁰ Polychronic narrations 'order events in a fuzzy or indeterminate way'.¹⁴¹

Herman notes that polychrony should be separated from what Genette denominated *achrony* or timelessness: 'not knowing the exact temporal positions of several events occurring within a larger narrative sequence does not make those events achronic'.¹⁴² Herman's model seems to initially account for some of the more perplexing aspects of our examples: the coronation, for instance, would have an indeterminate place in the 'discourse' of *Dark Back of Time*. It is interesting to contrast the complexity and richness of his approach to temporality with the deliberate simplicity of his definition of autobiography: polychrony might make the speech-act of 'telling someone about oneself' impossible or deluded.

I will return to the different models of temporal order throughout the analysis of the three texts in order to consider them in practice. As I mentioned in the introduction, approaches such as Richardson's or Herman's do not take into consideration how self-reflexive structures such as *mise en abyme* may also disrupt chronology and its possible reconstruction from a scrambled discourse. Although the next section is devoted to incorporate *mise en abyme* into the debate on autobiographical definition, the device also has

¹⁴⁰ Herman, p. 212.

¹⁴¹ Herman, p. 212.

¹⁴² Herman, p. 219.

important consequences for temporal structure — as our curiosities will come to show.

A Way In: *mise en abyme* and the theory of autobiography

And so we wearily return to the start of our tour of the postcard display, its inevitable end. The metaphor itself excluded the possibility of any particular destination to our argument, dismissing any purgatorial aspirations for the definitional hell: it was inevitably a torture (the word appropriately coming from the Latin *tortura*, meaning ‘twisting, wreathing, torment, torture’) — perhaps a self-torture.¹⁴³ A possible “solution” to this hell of classification (it is doubtful it can be actually “solved”) might involve something more than an aerial approach — perhaps a metaphor swap.

Returning to Vilain’s story of the hold-up, he used a particularly apt adjective to describe the astonished attitude of the clients trapped inside the bank. The hold-up — he proceeds to describe — took place in front of ‘dumbfounded customers’ (‘clients médusés’ in French) ‘who, not believing in the reality of the scene, didn’t move’.¹⁴⁴ Much like future readers of the scene, paralysed in utter disbelief. The main charm of the sentence, however, lies in the adjective ‘médusé’, with its invocation of the Perseus myth — a sort of warning of the dangers of paralysis inherent in autobiographical definition.

If we then take Vilain’s cue and decide to see our dilemma not as a Hell but as a theoretical Medusa, possibilities of escape and defeat suddenly open up. It might be possible to defeat and behead the awkward question through

¹⁴³ Source of the etymology of ‘torture’ is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁴⁴ Vilain, p. 40.

its reflection in a mirrored surface. Or perhaps not: the shield alone was not enough for Perseus — he was also armed with flying sandals, an invisibility helmet *and* a sword. Or — changing the myth one more time — could we trick it into turning itself into stone, like a basilisk, so that it can be contemplated at leisure, with no risk of paralysis whatsoever?

The concluding section of our tour will be devoted to examine the possibilities and impossibilities of this sleight-of-hand myth swap when contemplating the problem of autobiography. Turning generic definition from revolving door to whirligig to Medusa is only, at best, a pseudo-solution: if it has been kept up the sleeve until this point, it is not because it solves the problem but rather because it mirrors it. Ultimately, the change of metaphor is only a deliberately clumsy, cack-handed trick used to introduce the figure of mirror-shield into the debates around the generic definition of autobiography — not in the form of Perseus's mirror-shield but rather as a mirror within a shield, or a *mise en abyme*.

That is indeed the most commonly used term to describe involuted narratives within narratives, and had its origin in a heraldic device which the creator of the term, André Gide, considered as the most perfect metaphor for what he was seeking to describe: a transposition 'on the scale of the characters' of 'the very subject of that work. Nothing throws a clearer light upon or more surely establishes the proportions of the whole'.¹⁴⁵ In heraldry, *mise en abyme* is used to describe a device 'that consists in setting in the

¹⁴⁵ André Gide, *Journals 1889-1949*, trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 30.

scutcheon a smaller one ‘*en abyme*’ at the heart-point’ (that is, a miniature of the shield within the shield).¹⁴⁶ The aptness of the metaphor (which Gide prefers to others, such as the convex mirror that reflects the room in certain Flemish paintings) is due to its capacity to illustrate neatly the rhetorical figure of synecdoche, of which *mise en abyme* is a variant: the exact miniature of a whole that comes to stand for it, “explaining” it in the process.¹⁴⁷

The evolution of Gide’s term in narrative poetics has nonetheless belied the air of hermeneutical clarity with which its creator divested it. In *The Mirror in the Text*, a comprehensive survey of the origin and evolution of the term, Lucien Dällenbach makes a distinction between this original meaning for the term (which he calls ‘elementary or simple duplication’) and other variants of the technique, such as paradoxical duplications (loop, Möbius strip-like structures such as that of the *Recherche*, in which the narrative inserted within the narrative is the first narrative itself, rather than a copy) and transcendental duplications, that is, the infinite regress structures to which the shield within the shield might give rise to, if the miniature shield also includes a miniature shield in its heart, *ad infinitum*.¹⁴⁸

Hence, the hermeneutical key that Gide discovered thus hid within itself a figure for the infinite and inconclusive character of interpretation, something which then problematizes the illuminating quality of its metaphorical moniker. Dällenbach, tracing the evolution of the device from

¹⁴⁶ Gide, p. 31.

¹⁴⁷ Gide, p. 30.

¹⁴⁸ Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Cambridge: Polity in association with Blackwell, 1989), p. 36.

the practice of novelists associated with the *Nouveau Roman* such as Robbe-Grillet, identifies a movement away from simple duplication into aporia in the use of *mise en abyme*, a movement that consequently disperses the neatness of Gide's definition. For Jean Ricardou, for instance, *mise en abyme* 'must now be considered as a range of practical and theoretical possibilities, rather than a notion to be rigorously and carefully employed.'¹⁴⁹

Much like autobiography, one might say. Ricardou's redefinition of Gide's term is thus particularly useful to our exploration of the parallels between *mise en abyme* and autobiography, as it points to a similar trajectory of dissolution and redefinition. The use of *mise en abyme* in autobiography has so far been analysed sporadically in relation to particular examples: Saunders, for example, frequently remarks on its appearance in some of the key Modernist "autobiografictional" texts. There is, however, no systematic study of the use of *mise en abyme* in autobiography (*The Mirror in the Text* is solely concerned with fictional texts), which could be explained by the fact that the device is not used any differently in autobiography than in fiction: it is, by no means, the much longed-for textual feature that will tell them apart.

Its importance to autobiography and its theory lies otherwise, as we will see. The value of *mise en abyme* does not lie in its potential for solving the problem (it problematizes the idea of a solution itself) or stopping the whirligig, but rather in its ability to mirror it. The device is a figure of

¹⁴⁹ Jean Ricardou, *Le Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, II (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 337, as quoted by Dällenbach, and trans. by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes in Dällenbach, p. 160.

definition, its mirror-shield rather than its Perseus – Medusa being resolutely undefeatable this time round.

Despite the relative neglect of the figure, *mise en abyme* could be considered as a lurking presence throughout the history of autobiographical theory. For instance, if – as Lejeune humorously states – the autobiographical pact is comparable to ‘The Laughing Cow’, it is not only because of its catchiness and convenience. The comparison aptly conveys also how Lejeune’s solution may unfurl into infinity and aporia, as De Man alerted us: let us not forget that the famous cow has two boxes of ‘The Laughing Cow’ as earrings (*mise en abyme* is a perennial favourite of packaging designers). The pact was an engine to create whirligigs, rather than the tool to stop its spinning.¹⁵⁰

Its presence, however, can be discerned even further back. Gusdorf’s pioneering phenomenological and limit-based approach to the genre uses a mirror metaphor to describe the essence of its nature and its temporal structure:

Any autobiography is a moment of the life that it recounts; it struggles to draw the meaning from that life, but it itself a meaning in the life. One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole, but it adds something to that to this whole of which it constitutes a moment. Some Flemish or Dutch painters of interior scenes depict a little mirror on the wall in which the

¹⁵⁰ Aldous Huxley famously compared inserted narratives to the packaging of Quaker Oats in *Point Counter Point*, quoted by Dällenbach, p. 196. There are many examples of this device among the many objects within the building of Perec’s *Life A User’s Manual*.

painting is repeated a second time; the image in the mirror does not only duplicate the scene but adds to it as a new dimension a distancing perspective. Likewise, autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment in his history. This delivering up of earlier being brings a new stake into the game.¹⁵¹

Gusdorf uses the same example to describe the impossibility of totality and closure in autobiography than Gide did to describe *mise en abyme* in his famous diary entry. Gusdorf and Gide concur that the value of the mirror in the painting lies in its 'distancing' abilities. The difference between them is found in Gusdorf's identification of the incomplete character of the mirror-view: transposed to autobiography, this means that the genre can never be a full synecdoche of the self – even if we concede, as Gusdorf did, that autobiography is a representation or a performance of a present self rather than a past one.¹⁵²

When finally seeking to define the genre, Gusdorf thus comes to reject as criteria both its historical and truth value and its artistic merit. What he proposes instead as the best approach is what he terms

[A] second critique that instead of verifying the literal accuracy of the narrative or demonstrating its artistic value would attempt to draw out its innermost, private significance by viewing it as the symbol [...] or the parable of a consciousness in search for its own truth.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Gusdorf, I, pp.77-94 (p. 89).

¹⁵² Gusdorf is also a pioneer in the use of theatrical/performative metaphors to describe autobiography.

¹⁵³ Gusdorf, p. 90.

Gusdorf here identifies the figural character of autobiography — as De Man will do years later. Their difference lies, of course, in Gusdorf's insistence of the figure having an 'innermost, private significance' that the reader can access; whilst De Man, as we saw, saw that autobiography 'demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization [...] of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions'.¹⁵⁴ Gusdorf identifies this impossible closure, but — perhaps disturbed by it — decides to act as if he had not seen it. The most striking sign of this distress, however, is to be found in the definition itself: I am referring here to the rather revealing hesitation between 'symbol' and 'parable'. The use of the ambiguous conjunction 'or' (which can mean both 'as well as' and 'instead of') subtly points at the difficulties of each choice — and its consequences.

In his 1971 essay 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', De Man discusses the differences between symbol and allegory (and a parable is but a sub-type of allegory) in a way which is particularly revealing not just to Gusdorf's definition, but also to the problem of autobiography and its relation to *mise en abyme*. De Man starts by remarking how Romanticism valorised the symbol over allegory because of its 'intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality the image suggests'.¹⁵⁵ Gusdorf's recourse to a similar rhetoric of intimacy and interiority suggests

¹⁵⁴ De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

¹⁵⁵ De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 189.

that he might predominantly see autobiography as symbol (rather than parable).

His hesitation, however, is very revelatory of how autobiography might escape the symbolic figural model. De Man moves to describe allegory as a temporal form, one that proposes a distanced, non-coincident model of figuration:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognised as a non-self.¹⁵⁶

Rereading Gusdorf's definition in the light of De Man's distinction, the symbolic mode feels more and more ill-fitting. If — as Gusdorf identifies — autobiography is always at an inevitable temporal distance from the self it seeks to represent (or symbolise), the hesitation should probably be resolved in favour of the parable: destroying thus the illusion of inner, deep knowledge of a self (be it present or past). As De Man points out, the Romantic preference for the symbol 'will never be allowed to exist in serenity, since it is a veil over a light one no longer wishes to perceive, it will never be

¹⁵⁶ De Man, *Blindness*, p. 207.

able to gain an entirely good poetic conscience'.¹⁵⁷ The parable acts here as the light — or the mirror — Gusdorf wishes to, but cannot unsee.

This seemingly troubling relation between autobiography and the parable/allegory cannot also be dispelled by the exit-manoeuvre into narrative discussed in the previous section. It is interesting to read Gusdorf's definition not only in relation to De Man's distinction between allegory and symbol, but also to the (rather De Manian) unpicking of narrative that J. Hillis Miller undertakes in *Ariadne's Thread*. Although speaking primarily of fictional narrative, his conclusions (unsurprisingly) can also be applied to autobiography. Miller's book examines and questions the metaphors of narratology, of which the most important one is that of the line. For him, the term

[N]arrative line is a catachresis. It is the violent, forced, or abusive importation of a term from another realm to name something which has no proper name. The relationship of meaning among all these areas of terminology is not from sign to thing but a displacement from one sign to another sign that in its turn draws its meaning from another figurative sign, in constant displacement. The name of this displacement is allegory. Storytelling, usually thought of as the putting into language of someone's experience of life, is in its writing or reading a hiatus in that experience. Narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy.¹⁵⁸

Miller and Gusdorf thus make the same observation about how narrative/autobiography opens a hiatus, a distance in relation to what it seeks

¹⁵⁷ De Man, *Blindness*, p. 208.

¹⁵⁸ Miller, p. 21.

to reflect, but Miller (echoing De Man) plumps for allegory rather than symbol as the figure for this displacement. 'Allegory [...] expresses the impossibility of expressing unequivocally, and so dominating, what is meant by experience or by writing'.¹⁵⁹

It could be argued, however, that Miller's use of 'expressing' here somehow still allows for some form of meaning, albeit a negative one. This is a danger that Miller is fully aware of: as he mentions in the conclusion of his book, 'The good reader will learn to distrust interpretations that claim to give reliable knowledge, even bracingly negative knowledge'.¹⁶⁰ Miller's strategy consists in not seeing this interpretation as the dead end it seems, but in spinning it further.

One of these spinnings interestingly involves 'Autobiography as De-Facement', which he uses to investigate not the relation between narrative and autobiography, but between narrative and death. Miller, following De Man, sees death as what 'names the otherness that inhabits any figuration and makes its validity and purport uncertain'.¹⁶¹ But, as he points out, the word 'death' is not the negative referent of narrative but is in itself a figure ('a displaced name', in De Man's words) for what cannot be named: 'a blind spot within knowledge', De Man's 'defacement'.¹⁶² Narrative (not just autobiography) is a form of prosopopeia, and '[s]uch prosopopeias are a form

¹⁵⁹ Miller, p. 21.

¹⁶⁰ Miller, p. 248.

¹⁶¹ Miller, p. 249.

¹⁶² Miller, p. 251.

of temporal allegory, a saying it otherwise, of the catachresis in the word *death*'.¹⁶³

Death, however, is by no means, a final referent but another figure of figures, like autobiography, like allegory, like *mise en abyme*. The connection between these figural structures will be explicitly put into play in *W* and *Dark Back of Time* (albeit in very different ways) – I will consider their relation as described by De Man and Miller in their respective analyses. The parallels between these different models of “squared” figures will form an underlying thread to the obsessive reading of the three curiosities.

Before starting that descent with *mise en abyme* as our pseudo-guide, it might be nonetheless wise to try to set some sort of outline of the figure and its identification – even if that identification later on proves faulty and emptying. In that respect, Dällenbach (the Lejeune of *mise en abyme*) is a useful starting point. Significantly, he seeks to dissociate *mise en abyme* with both the symbol and allegory:

The reflexion is not a symbol, since the relation between the literal and the metaphorical sense is *instituted*; neither it is an allegory, because the two meanings are not a priori interchangeable. It alone is neither opaque nor transparent, it exists in the form of a double meaning, whose identification and deciphering presupposes a knowledge of the text. [...] The hermeneutic key can never open up the reflexion until the

¹⁶³ Miller, p. 251.

narrative has revealed the existence and the location of the reflexion.¹⁶⁴

What Dällenbach's rather convoluted paragraph seems to imply is that *mise en abyme* differs from symbol and allegory because it is not immediate but delayed in its effects: it only comes into being once the reader is fully acquainted with the whole of the narrative, when it thus becomes the key to its interpretation. But that is also the case of allegory, and indeed of any figure, as De Man and Miller would argue. At a later point, Dällenbach rejects the allegorical nature of *mise en abyme* because he is afraid that it might mangle the text's polysemy by turning the whole into an allegory of its production (the sort of negative metaphysics that also troubled Miller). Despite this concern, Dällenbach nonetheless insists on considering the device 'a hermeneutic key', which would make it also another threat to polysemy. Allegory, as De Man or Miller would point out, is potentially unfinished and unfinishable — like *mise en abyme* itself.

The next question raised by the relation between allegory and *mise en abyme* is one of boundaries. Following the equation of *mise en abyme* and autobiography, it may be possible to read the whole of the three autobiographies as *mise en abyme* (or parables) of their referent. That reading, however, implies a peeping-out into some form of exteriority that is deeply problematic. In that respect, it is far more useful to start by keeping close to

¹⁶⁴ Dällenbach, p. 44.

Dällenbach's neat boundaries, and study the device in relation to the whole of the narrative rather than to an external "self".

Dällenbach's rules for identification involve two criteria: *mise en abyme* must be reflexive, mirror-like; but it also must be contained, fenced within the diegesis — that is, it must not be external to it, like a prologue or an authorial intervention, or a metalepsis. It can either be *intradiegetic*, that is, part of the narrative itself (his example is the suicide that Anna is a witness to in Chapter Eighteen of *Anna Karenina*) or *metadiegetic*, a suspension of the diegesis that does not involve a change of narrator or an ontological leap out of the book, such as narratives of dreams, ekphrastic descriptions of paintings, music (one of his examples is Vinteuil's septet in the *Recherche*).¹⁶⁵ It might thus be better to keep the curiosity within the curiosity distinct and contained: not because that might be necessarily the "right" approach to the device, but because it highlights (and reflects) how problematic it is to draw boundaries on what is nothing more than a reflection of an "unborderable" genre. Dällenbach should perhaps take into consideration that even seemingly 'contained' examples might spill outside their frontiers, and thus question the need for such detailed border drawing.

The thesis will also make use of other of Dällenbach's taxonomies, particularly those that relate to the temporal order of *mise en abyme* and its effects in disturbing neat distinctions between story and discourse. By considering the paradoxical temporality of *mise en abyme*, this study will seek

¹⁶⁵ Dällenbach, pp. 50-53.

to reintroduce discussions about reflexivity and its effects in the debate around narrative order and temporality waged between classical and post-classical, natural/cognitive and unnatural/postmodern narratology. Heise mentions that the use of *mise en abyme* can create 'a blurring of the time sense' in readers: it is this blurring and its relation to other forms of temporal and generic indeterminacy that this thesis will seek to explore.¹⁶⁶

Returning to the curiosity and the *tourniquet*, we have witnessed how our metaphor has undergone several *contretemps* throughout the tour of the postcard display. It has seen itself as frivolous, as euphemistic, as deluded about its singularity. But considering autobiography in relation to figural language, allegory or *mise en abyme* could be argued to prove, up to a point, that the metaphor is also useful as an approach to autobiography. Perhaps it manages to convey what De Man had termed the 'striking' way that autobiography has to demonstrate 'the impossibility of closure and totalization'.

The 'striking' quality of autobiography could be read as the opposite of the 'curiosity', that is, autobiography's innocence and good will (the way it does not realise what it is really doing), but De Man's choice of 'Essay upon Epitaphs' as his 'prototypical autobiography' reveals that he did not conceive the genre as naive but rather as self-aware and precocious. The 'striking'

¹⁶⁶ Heise, p. 60.

quality of Wordsworth's essay, or our three examples, could be said to lie in the way they defamiliarize the genre, and make it curious. Rather than feeling chastised by parental admonitions, our examples behave with the insouciance of elder siblings flaunting the advantages of superior age — and, in the process, reveal innocence to be only seemingly simple and transparent.

There remains, however, the question of the torturous *tourniquet*/whirligig. Reconfiguring autobiography as a curiosity is as blatant a displacement as the autobiographical pact, the miraculous hybrid or the 'life is a novel' thesis of the narrativists. Curiosities might prompt obsession, but perhaps not torture or nausea. Restoring *mise en abyme* into autobiography is an important step in order to avoid a misleading rhetoric of release and resolution that the theory of autobiography has adopted perhaps too unquestioningly: renaming the device as a 'curiosity' somehow undoes the step, and reveals us as timid and cowardly when faced with the whirligig as the rest. Should we thus discard it altogether? After all, the examples of curiosity in our three texts (particularly the wooden aide-de-camp) were not only examples of defamiliarization of the ordinary, but also of how this defamiliarization created torturous whirligigs of readerly obsession. The answer, of course, needs to wait for the analyses of our examples and for whatever conclusion they lead us to — if they indeed can conclude at all. They might only keep on spinning.

Chapter Two

The octopus-lamp: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1951/1966)

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap.

[A]ll poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are, the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*.¹

And so to our first curiosity: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and its octopus-lamp. Let us recall that our lamp was but an ordinary — even ugly — ceiling lamp which was elevated to the heights of the curious and the wondrous by a well-applied metaphor. This almost underhand performance of the defamiliarizing potential of figural language, disguised as a gentle laugh at a tutor's bad taste, gains sudden significance when read in relation to Nabokov's pronouncements about 'the lamp of art' and the 'tentacles' of poetry. It is tempting to read the tentacled flight (or pseudo-flight) of our lamp as a fusion of the two motifs: the emblem of *Speak, Memory* itself — an Apollonian elevation of the also 'painfully bourgeois' genre of autobiography to ceiling heights.²

¹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 14 and p. 169.

² I do not use 'Apollonian' here in the Nietzschean sense, although one wonders if Nabokov's reference to Apollo is merely the repetition of a cliché or if it is intended to create philosophical resonances in the passage. The other option, considering that Apollo does not tend to be represented as bewinged, is that he is referring to the Apollo *genus* butterflies to which the book's frontispiece emblem, the *Parnassius Mnemosyne* (Clouded Apollo), belongs to.

This lamp might perhaps shed some light on the concerns explored in the previous chapter – the nature of figuration and its relation to the problematic definition of autobiography as a distinct genre. The octopus-lamp – the elevated version of the watermark-revealing ‘lamp of art’ – could be used to justify a definition of *Speak, Memory* as a perfect specimen of autobiography as it was described by Gusdorf or Ricoeur. The lamp *reveals* selfhood, makes it transparent and grabs hold of it. The tentacles perform Ricoeur’s ‘concordance of the discordant’ and cancel out chronology (the principle anagrammatic philosopher Vivian Bloodmark calls ‘cosmic synchronization’).³ If this is the case, it might not be possible to collect it as a curiosity – that is, as a figure of the impossible generic definition of autobiography and the whirligigs of figuration

Our octopus, however, is not really flying. It isn’t groping anything either. As a sample-lamp, it might not even be switched on, or illuminating anything. Its appearance in the book lacks fanfare: it is brief, incomplete and seemingly irrelevant, a throwaway piece of social observation. It is not followed by philosophical meditations on the nature of time, or by explicit statements of Nabokov’s poetics; but by another seemingly inconsequential anecdote. Lenski, the tutor, takes Nabokov and his brother to meet his fiancée in the same secretive way as he had taken them to meet the lamp: the anecdote ends with an inventory separated by “ands”, a rhetorical device usually termed *polysyndeton*.

³ Nabokov, p. 169. Vivian Bloodmark is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. Other examples in other books include Vivian Darkbloom in *Lolita* or Baron Klim Avidov in *Ada*. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 2 and Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 175.

[H]e urged us to keep his bride's presence in Berlin secret from our parents, and a mechanical manikin in the pharmacy window was going through the motions of shaving, and tramcars screeched by, and it was beginning to snow.⁴

According to Gennady Barabtarlo the device creates a “fleeting”, slightly gasping diction’ and is used to convey ‘cinematically sliding images’ which ‘are not supposed to make a perfectly logical sequence’.⁵ This inventory is particularly dispersed and flurry-like. Whilst the metaphor of the octopus-lamp grabbed together two major self-referential motifs (the ‘lamp’ and the ‘tentacles’ of art), the list collects disjointed elements (both uncanny and familiar) but leaves their connections blank, undecided. It weakens the comfortable grip of the metaphorical tentacle, confirming the illusory nature of “flights” into knowledge or meaning. Emblems, definitions, conclusions are always fleeting in *Speak, Memory* — like Proust’s bumblebee, they are distracted or diverted from their pollinating and meaning-making duties.

These two scenes articulate what makes *Speak, Memory* not only “curious”, but also a paradoxically illuminating demonstration of the issues at stake in the generic definition of autobiography: the fleetingness of presence and meaning, the difficult balance between concordance and discordance, the prevalence of indeterminacy and paradox. The book’s singularity does not lie in the way it “crosses” any particular

⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 124. See Gennady Barabtarlo’s study of Pnin, *Phantom of Fact*, for a brief study of the device and its origin (Nabokov identifies its use in Dickens). See Gennady Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov’s Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), p. 107.

⁵ Barabtarlo, p. 107.

generic boundary, or the way it freshens up a tired genre, or the way it replaces linear time and linear narrative for a poetic, achronic, timeless, transcendent alternative. Rather, it proposes an aesthetic which flickers between gathering and dispersal in which *mise en abyme* devices (and couldn't we read our octopus-lamp as one?) play an important role in the book's generic and temporal definition *and* indefinition.

The chapter starts by considering the question of the book's genre and the critical debates it has given rise to: debates which seem odd or perverse in the light of the book's clear and seemingly unambiguous self-definition as either a 'memoir' (in its first version of the book, from 1951) or an 'autobiography' (in its definitive 1966 version).⁶ I will seek to explain the slippery quality of the book's generic status by examining in detail a paratextual definitional *mise en abyme* and the problematic entry it provides into the text's aesthetic of dispersed gathering. The second part is a deliberately obsessive peering into the book's inaugural *mise en abyme*, which I will use to discuss not only questions of genre but also to try to discern how the textual model it presents is articulated in terms of temporal structure, particularly in relation to the tension between chronology, anachrony and achrony. The third part tries to ascertain what happens to that model in the book's conclusion, when the text seems to provide the reader with a "final" word about its generic status and its ultimate aesthetic and moral significance.

⁶ See Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: A Memoir* (London: Gollancz, 1951) and note 12 of the Introduction.

The cornerstone: generic definition in *Speak, Memory*

The apparently unequivocal generic markers of *Speak, Memory* should have — in theory — spared the critic from the tortures of definition. The story about the true “parentage” of Doubrovsky’s *autofiction* has nonetheless taught us not to place excessive trust in paratextual self-definitions: their authority can be easily overturned by the discovery of a secret, archival, uncanny “original”. This was also the case with *Speak, Memory*: the posthumous publication in 1998 of ‘Chapter Sixteen’ or ‘On *Conclusive Evidence*’ — a mock-review which Nabokov had planned as the concluding chapter of the book — revealed that, before the book was ever called a ‘memoir’, it was actually described as a ‘unique freak as autobiographies go’.⁷

According to Brian Boyd’s biography, the reason for its exclusion was that ‘Nabokov decided the deception of the reviewer’s mask clashed with the integrity of the memoirist’.⁸ Although Boyd backs this remark with archival evidence, there is nonetheless something problematic about his explanation — particularly his equating of the book’s referential status with its ‘integrity’. It might be more deceitful to call the book a ‘memoir’. Nabokov had initially thought very highly of this chapter: rather than considering it an unnecessary — and even dangerous — supplement, ‘Third Person’ (its original title) was planned as the book’s apex rather

⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 247.

⁸ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 148.

than as an appendix.⁹ In a letter to Katharine E. White, Nabokov described the concluding chapter as the book's 'summit', a gathering of 'the various themes running through the book'.¹⁰

As an approach to generic definition *and* self-definition, the chapter is deliberately and explicitly paradoxical, as Boyd points out:

[T]hough he adopts the mask of an imagined reviewer, Nabokov offers us more — and more direct — guidance to the understanding of one of his works than he would ever provide in all the forewords and afterwords of his novels.¹¹

For Boyd, the chapter is a hermeneutical key *despite* its deceit: we may wonder whether it is not *because of* the mask that Nabokov offers such an insight. Any curious reader or re-reader would have detected the book's motifs, but — had it not been for the mask — we would have missed the nuances of Nabokov's approach to generic definition.¹² 'Chapter Sixteen' performs the ambiguous status of the generic tag described in 'The Law of Genre': it speaks in a different voice; in this case, the reviewer presents himself as a casual acquaintance, an insider and an outsider, authorised and dubious.¹³ The reviewer is a "sock puppet", but one with the

⁹ White was his editor at the *New Yorker*. Letter to Katharine E. White, 27 November 1949, in Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters: 1940-1977*, ed. by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli, (London: Vintage, 1989), p.95.

¹⁰ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, p. 94.

¹¹ Brian Boyd, 'Introduction', in Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Everyman's Library, 1999), p. xxiv.

¹² For instance, some of the earliest critical essays on the book by Elizabeth Bruss, Janet Gezari, G.M. Hyde and Dabney Stuart remark on the importance of the colour/jewel theme, the exile/nostalgia/memory of memory strand. See Bruss, pp. 152-154, Janet Gezari, 'Chess Problems and Narrative Time in *Speak, Memory*', *Biography*, 10.2 (1987), 151-162, G.M. Hyde, *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist* (London: Boyars, 1977), pp. 153-154 and Dabney Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), pp 183-190 .

¹³ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 251.

uncanny quality of the ventriloquist's dummy violently turning against his or her master. The fact that the reviewer compares *Conclusive Evidence* (as its equal) to a made-up sentimental childhood memoir — *When Lilacs Last* by Barbara Braun — creates a smudge in what initially seemed a revealing 'lamp' for the intentions of author, creating a whirligig right at the point when it seems to be rescuing readers from them.¹⁴

The next question raised by this discovery is whether the book's self-definition as a 'unique freak' should be approached with equal suspicion. The tag forms part of a negative definition of *Speak, Memory*:

A unique freak as autobiographies go, Mr Nabokov's book is easier to define in terms of what it is not than in terms of what it is. It is not, for instance, one of those garrulous, formless and rambling affairs, heavily relying on a diarist's notes, that experts in other arts or the administrators of our public existence are apt to produce ('Wednesday night, around 11.40, General so-and-so telephoned. I said to him —'). Nor is it a professional writer's kitchen, with bits of unused material floating in a tepid brew of literary and personal stuff. Emphatically, it is not the popular slick kind of reminiscences where the author keys himself up to the lofty level of grade-C fiction, and with quiet impudence sets down reams and reams of dialogue (Maw and the neighbour. Maw and the children. Bill and Paw, Bill and Picasso) which no human brain could have preserved in anything approaching that particular form.¹⁵

The three negative examples are scathing parodies of autobiography at its worst: its name-dropping tendencies, its formlessness, its use of artificial narrative devices (such as dialogues). Those three negatives are defined against *Speak, Memory's*

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 261. In the *Lolita* screenplay, Charlotte recommends a novel called *When the Lilacs Last* to Humbert: the book is a sentimental, pseudo-Freudian affair that Lolita dismisses as silly nonsense. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita: A Screenplay*, (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 1974), p. 47.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 247.

positive according to a mixture of *both* aesthetic and referential criteria. The three negatives allow the reader to define *Speak, Memory* as the exact counter-example of those parodies. Not only does the book reuse material from the fiction, it also uses dialogue sparingly (Galya Diment compares Nabokov's memories to 'silent movies') and has a convoluted temporal structure.¹⁶ It stands as an ideal middle between two deluded approaches to autobiography which only produce illusions of truth. The negative definition is nonetheless deliberately non-committal, in contrast to the surprisingly orthodox attitude towards the referential status of the genre that the reviewer adopts in other parts of the chapter. He is certain that Nabokov's intentions were 'to stick to the truth through thick and thin' and grandly claims that the book's components 'belong to unadulterated life'.¹⁷

'Chapter Sixteen' thus proposes an uneasy conciliation between referential and aesthetic truth as the basis of autobiography. The reader, however, should never lose sight of the fact that these seemingly "defining" statements do not come from the author, but from a distant "acquaintance" with a taste for kitsch. Considering that the most common approach to *Speak, Memory* is to regard it as a kind of superlative anomaly in the history of autobiography (Boyd describes it as 'the most artistic of autobiographies'), it is intriguing to consider that the original of these claims could have been intended as a parody of the delusions of individuality and novelty of the autobiographical manifesto.¹⁸

¹⁶ Galya Diment, 'Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Autobiography', in *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. by Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 36-53 (p. 43).

¹⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 248.

¹⁸ Boyd, 'Introduction', p ix.

The temptation to read 'Chapter Sixteen' as the paradoxically "truer" authorial intervention needs to be resisted: not only because of its unstable meaning, but also because of Nabokov's ultimate rejection of its strategies. This chapter's surprising self-awareness now lives side-by-side with the rather different approach to generic definition that Nabokov finally adopted throughout the three editions of the book: the 1951 *Conclusive Evidence/Speak, Memory* (UK title), the 1954 Russian translation *Drugie Berega* and the 1966 *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*.

In the published paratexts, the discomforts of definition are shrugged off perhaps too easily, as if the solution to the revolving door merely involved finding an alternative entrance. Nabokov provided his texts with unambiguous tags; and the forewords of both English editions equate autobiography with truth and fidelity to an external referent.¹⁹ The bare and succinct 1951 "Author's Note" starts by announcing that 'This account of the author's European past is as truthful as he could possibly make it. If there are any lapses, they are due to the frailty of memory, not to the trickery of art'.²⁰ The more garrulous 1966 Foreword also insists on the book's utmost quasi-scientific fidelity to a verifiable reality, a fidelity that needs to be respected to the point of sacrificing art ('What I still have not been able to rework through want of specific documentation, I have now preferred to delete for the sake

¹⁹ Nabokov seems to use 'memoir' and 'autobiography' interchangeably. The match-theme episode, which discusses 'the true purpose of autobiography', was not changed from one version to another and Nabokov called it an autobiography in letters to Edmund Wilson. See Simon Karlinsky, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters 1940-1971* (New York: Harper&Row, 1980), p. 188.

²⁰ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: A Memoir*, p. 7.

of over-all truth').²¹ After all, the book's first title was the rather forensic-sounding *Conclusive Evidence*.²² Although not many critics subscribe to this vision of the book as a bare record of facts (not even the author does), the strategy of simply calling the book 'autobiography' in order not to linger at the door for too long survives in many critical accounts.²³

As I previously mentioned, a curious effect of Nabokov's final decision to avoid a singularising approach resulted in a critical consensus about that particular point, although the genre of *Speak, Memory* has always felt far more difficult to pin down. Even those who tend to define it as an autobiography take refuge in the book's singularity as a sort of antidote. A good example of this approach is Galya Diment's 'Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Autobiography'. The article (written before the publication of Chapter Sixteen) is surprisingly close to the mock-review, even to the point of also using Stephen Spender's memoirs as a counter-example.²⁴ Diment dismisses critical readings that label the book as fiction and describes it as an anomaly, 'the most typical autobiography in the history of world literature' – echoing Shklovsky's dictum about *Tristram Shandy*. Both books 'skilfully and artfully uncover the otherwise concealed devices present in other works of the same genre':

²¹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 7. The puzzles and riddles include a little poem about the index, a second chess problem (of the retroactive type) and a puzzling reference to 'Hazel Brown (who, moreover, shares my passport)'. See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 7. The solution is Nabokov's eyes, which were of that colour. As to Nabokov's sacrifices in the rewriting, see Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 504.

²² The blandness of its shell nonetheless conceals a flavoursome palindromic middle: ive-evi.

²³ A recent example is Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 65.

²⁴ Although published in 1999, after the *New Yorker* publication, the article only mentions the mock-review in a footnote and barely quotes from it. This omission is explained in a post Diment wrote on 2 January 1999 to the Nabokov-L forum in which she mentions that she had just written an article on the subject, and that she wished she had been able to read the chapter whilst she was writing it, as it is the only mention Nabokov makes of Spender in print. See Galya Diment, Post to Nabokov-L, 2 January 1999, *Nabokov-L* online <<https://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind9901&L=NABOKV-L&P=R81&1=NABOKV-L&9=A&J=on&d=No+Match%3BMatch%3BMatches&z=4>> [accessed 1 April 2013].

for her, 'Nabokov attempts not only to make his memory speak but also forces it to analyze itself'.²⁵

Diment goes on to discuss how Nabokov underscores the artificial nature of certain autobiographical devices, such as dialogue. Comparing Nabokov to Spender, she concludes that the latter 'seems to endanger the "factual" side of his narrative to the point where his allegedly "real" facts are quickly becoming "invented", "fictional" facts'.²⁶ Similarly, Nabokov's disclosure of his compositional method (spiral patterns, thematic motifs)

[C]hallenges autobiographers like Spender to confess that in structuring their lives in a conventionally defined spiral manner they are often governed not by their "true" experiences but by equally compositional demands.²⁷

For all her initial dismissal of those who have read the book as fiction — critics such as Dabney Stuart — Diment's position is at times quite De Manian: she describes *Speak, Memory* as a meta-autobiography or an anti-autobiography, an *exposé* of the illusions of reference in autobiography and the arbitrary rules that govern it.²⁸ She nonetheless fails to take the conclusion further and ask whether once autobiography is exposed we can still think of it as a separate genre. She seems to imply we can, but probably in the same way that she writes about the factual, the real, or the fictional: in inverted commas — the typographical Virgils leading critics out of the hell of definition.

²⁵ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', pp. 36-53 (p. 37).

²⁶ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', pp. 36-53 (p. 43).

²⁷ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', pp. 36-53 (p. 46).

²⁸ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', pp. 36-53 (p. 36).

Diment supports her argument in favour of autobiography also by referring to Nabokov's 'strong opinions' on memory and the imagination.²⁹ In these interviews, Nabokov presents the relation between the imagination, truth and writing in a manner reminiscent of Keats (such as Keats's assertion that 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not').³⁰ Nabokov seeks to reverse the opposition between 'pure' or 'unadulterated' life and its representation by making the model itself into a copy. He explains that he regards 'the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination [...] Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy'³¹. Imagination is described as

[A] form of memory [...] When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions.³²

Diment uses this statement to allow autobiography to remain in an (inverted) com(m)a, half-dead, half-living: 'If imagination is a "form of memory", the facts remembered are [...] facts "imagined"'.³³

²⁹ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', pp. 36-53 (pp. 41-42).

³⁰ John Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, in Maurice Buxton Forman, ed., *The Letters of John Keats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 67. Humbert Humbert wrote a paper called 'The Proustian Theme in a Letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey', which for Sam Slote refers to a letter sent on the 22 November 1817. See Nabokov, *Lolita*, p.16 and Sam Slote, 'On the Nabokovian Resonance of "The Proustian Theme in a Letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey"', *English Text Construction*, 2.2 (2009), 161-172.

³¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 66-67.

³² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, pp. 66-67.

³³ Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', p. 41. The coma/comma pun is borrowed from Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who made it in his article '¡Ave Marías!', *El País*, 27 July 1998, online version, <http://elpais.com/diario/1998/07/27/opinion/901490407_850215.html> [accessed 1 April 2013], not paginated. Also see Bruss, p. 129 for a similar point.

This appeal to the imagination also recalls narrativist arguments, which displace the referent from an outside reality into a narrative selfhood. *Speak, Memory*, however, might not simply be a more “enlightened” version of autobiography, as the consequence of that “enlightenment” might be the complete destruction of the genre. Elevation might just turn it into a grotesque parody of itself.

Critics who opt to read *Speak, Memory* unambiguously as a fiction also make use of similar arguments to Diment. Dabney Stuart, for instance, argues that

It is an autobiography, but it is not a record, or account of facts (that troublesome curbing one keeps stumbling over). It is imaginative narration in which events, actions [...] are formed, shaped, and rendered significant by a single, ordering consciousness. It is, in short, fiction, a molding (*fingere*), not opposed to fact, [...] but the way fact is born.³⁴

Stuart calls the totalising, all-ordering, octopus-like consciousness as a witness for his conciliatory generic definition, without perhaps taking into consideration that it might not be capable of ‘forming’, or ‘rendering’ events at all. Alongside the parallel approaches of Diment and Stuart, we also find pragmatic Lejeunian angles: for Maurice Couturier, the book’s generic anomaly is found in its transgressions of the autobiographical contract — for instance, it introduces a second addressee (his wife Véra) in the conclusion of the book.³⁵

Speak, Memory has hardly ever been claimed as an autofiction, even though Nabokov’s initially described the book as ‘a new hybrid between [an autobiography]

³⁴ Stuart, p. 164. See also Hyde, p. 192 for a similar point.

³⁵ Maurice Couturier, ‘I, X Does not Equal Nabokov’, *Zembla* <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/forians.htm>> [accessed 1 April 2013], not paginated.

and a novel. To the latter it will be affiliated by having a definite plot'.³⁶ The hybrid quality of the book, however, has been pointed out by Jacqueline Hamrit in her Derridean reading of the book. For her, *Speak, Memory* 'stages impurity of genre': Nabokov 'has superimposed imaginary, fictive scenes to recollections, contaminating truth and fiction, memory and imagination'.³⁷ Although Hamrit is right in pointing at the self-consciously "created" quality of certain episodes, she perhaps fails to question how the idea of the "mixture" of autobiography and fiction is also problematized.

The figure of the mixture, as we have seen, can prove to be a distraction from the structures of figuration which underpin it as a definition. Although there are studies of Nabokov's use of specific metaphors in *Speak, Memory*, figuration and generic definition have tended not to be considered in relation to each other.³⁸ Only Maria Malikova has pointed out that connection: for her 'autobiography is neither a "truthful" past, nor a fantasy, but rather a discourse of the past where events are expressed through tropes'.³⁹ Although her assumption that events can really be

³⁶ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, p. 69. Nabokov will not call it a hybrid again and in the next letter (to a different publisher) he calls it an inquiry and now blends 'perfect personal truth with artistic selection'. See Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, p. 88. The only critic that calls *Speak, Memory* an autofiction (a 'photobiographic autofiction', after Johnnie Gratton) is Laurence Petit. See Laurence Petit, 'Speak, Photographs?: Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 3 (2009) <http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume3//04_Petit.pdf> [accessed 19 December 2012] (p. 2).

³⁷ Jacqueline Hamrit, 'Play! Invent the World! Invent Reality!: Nabokov/Derrida', *Oxford Literary Review*, 25 (2003), 157-177 (pp. 162-163).

³⁸ See for instance, Robert Alter's analysis of illumination metaphors in Alter, 'Nabokov and Memory', *Partisan Review*, 58.4 (1991), 620-629 (pp. 622-624) or Marina Grishakova's survey of visual and cinematic metaphors. See Marina Grishakova, *The Models of Time, Space and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006), pp. 211-217.

³⁹ Maria Malikova as quoted and translated by Vladimir Mylnikov in his review of *Auto-bio-grafiia* (published in Russian in 2002). See Vladimir Mylnikov, 'Vladimir Nabokov. Auto-bio-grafiia (review)', *Nabokov Studies*, 8 (2004), 199-203 (p. 202). This book, the only monograph on the memoir, was written in Russian and unfortunately is not translated so I am unable to devote sufficient attention to Malikova's theories (which I only know via Mylnikov's review).

‘expressed’ through tropes seems naive, her conclusion points towards an alternative angle from which to observe the book’s genre.

This incomplete survey of *Speak, Memory*’s generic definitions does demonstrate the difficulties in completely traversing the infernal whirligig (which explains why some of the approaches to the book in the last decade have tended to avoid the question altogether).⁴⁰ Their overreliance on extra-textual evidence – either letters or *Strong Opinions* – is problematic: as Michael Wood pointed out, ‘these are only opinions, the simplifying testimony of an interested witness to a complex act’.⁴¹ The book’s unambiguous generic tags or its pseudo-scientific pattern present a challenge also to an “indefinite” approach: they could be read as a deliberately inauthentic pose, which the complex self-awareness of the text belies; or they might reveal a Hamlet-like indecision about “murdering” the genre, perhaps because of its testimonial value.

The analysis that follows seeks to restore the 1966 Foreword back into the critical debate on *Speak, Memory*’s generic status. This restoration does not involve reading it as the way out of the whirligig, but rather as a performance of this definitional impasse through complex figural structures. Mirror-shields or *mise en*

⁴⁰ Articles or books dealing solely or partially with *Speak Memory* published in the last decade include Norman’s Benjaminian reading, Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Ellen Pifer, ‘Folding his Magic Carpet: *Speak, Memory* and *Lolita*, in *Revising Nabokov Revising: The Proceedings of the International Nabokov Conference in Kyoto*, ed. by Mitsuyoshi Numano and Tadashi Wakashima (Kyoto: The Nabokov Society of Japan, 2010), pp. 55-60. Laurence Petit and Sissy Frank have written on the photographs. See Petit and Sissy Frank, ‘Revis(it)ing Memories: Photographs in Nabokov’s Autobiography’, in *Revising Nabokov Revising* (see Numano, above), pp. 44-54. Another avenue of research has been the comparison with WG Sebald, who included homages to *Speak, Memory* in *The Emigrants*. See Leland de la Durantaye, ‘The Facts of Fiction or the Figure of Vladimir Nabokov in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 45.4 (2008), 425-445.

⁴¹ Michael Wood, p.228.

abymes — as figures of definition — are the starting point rather than the destination of our study (if it has one).

The time-bomb: *Mise en abyme* in the 1966 Foreword

The dynamics between collection and dispersal that we observed in the octopus-lamp episode are equally at play in the seemingly placid 1966 Foreword. Its solid figures of definition might be initially read as ‘lamps’ revealing the text’s internal coherence as its defining feature. The foreword, however, cannot be said to have a definitional style. It lacks the unity its figures claim for the whole: alongside grasping tropes we find riddles, bibliographies, corrections and even a chess problem. The cryptic and the referential, the literal and the figural are employed side by side.

This ambivalence needs to be kept in mind when considering the groping figures in the opening of the Foreword. Nabokov starts by describing the book as a ‘systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections’.⁴² The book’s initial serial publication is presented as the anomalous middle phase of a project which — the author reassuringly informs us — was always conceived as a compact entity.⁴³ The erratically published chapters ‘had been neatly filling numbered gaps in my mind which followed the present order of chapters’.⁴⁴ This feature is revealed

⁴² Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 3.

⁴³ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p.4.

through the use of architectural tropes. He mentioned he had thought of calling the book *The Anthemion* (the name of an architectural ornament) and the first chapter he composed – Chapter Five, about his French governess, written in French in 1936 – is described as the book’s cornerstone:⁴⁵

That order had been established in 1936, at the placing of the cornerstone which already held in its hidden hollow various maps, timetables, a collection of matchboxes, a chip of ruby glass, and even – as I now realize – the view from my balcony of Geneva lake, of its ripples and glades of light, black-dotted today, at teatime, with coots and tufted ducks.⁴⁶

How should we read these self-definitional figures? The ‘paint-by-numbers’ metaphor or the assemblage seem deliberately unchallenging figures of authorial control. The cornerstone, however, is far less “easy” to read. At first it seems conventional, a plain inventory. And yet by the end of the sentence it undergoes a wondrous metamorphosis: a drab assembly is transformed into a rapturous quasi-epiphany. Content and form become radiant, concordant and alliterative: even the colours of the waterfowl match (both coots and tufted ducks are black-and-white creatures).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 4.

⁴⁷ The use of ‘l’, ‘t’ and ‘d’ alliteration recalls the opening of *Lolita*. See Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 9. Nabokov uses the word ‘lilt’ to describe Lolita’s name in an interview: ‘For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the limpid and luminous letters is ‘L’. The suffix ‘ita’ has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required to’. See Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 21.

This movement and evolution could be read as both an enhancement and a challenge to the figure's pretensions to define the book in its totality. Hamrit, speaking of how Nabokov's works tease the reader about the existence of a key or a system remarks that:

Considering there is a play in the structure of a book does not preclude the existence of an order and a structure. Yet, it is not based on the notion of a centre. Indeed, it is not easy to fix *one* origin or organizing principle.⁴⁸

The Foreword could indeed be read as a demonstration of this principle: a paradoxical definition of indefinition and perhaps of autobiography itself. Or rather not – after all, figures are not keys to a definition and solution, but warnings about the problematic, even destructive, nature of the search for “solutions” or definitions.

But there is something else to this passage that deserves our most obsessive attention. Like the list that closes the octopus-lamp passage, it propels readers into a languid reverie of contemplation. The passage makes explicit the temporal (and thus allegorical, if we follow De Man) character of self-definition. As the sentence passes, the relation between cornerstone and contents (and cornerstone and whole) shifts between collaboration and sabotage, and this breach dents the synthetic powers of the figure. Definition is as much about patience (and unsatisfied patience at that) as about epiphanic, symbolic, immediate access. We should mistrust the synthetic light

⁴⁸ Hamrit, 157-177 (p.159).

the cornerstone trope radiates. It might not be an “illuminating” *mise en abyme*, but something else altogether: a time-bomb.

The passage, however, starts as a double panorama — a balcony view of the book’s system and of Lake Geneva at teatime. The trope of the cornerstone is a prototypical synecdoche: the part standing for the whole building. And yet Nabokov will erode the cornerstone’s potential for unambiguous symbolism by simply lingering on it and delaying its effects. Even if we insist on reading it as an ‘epiphany’, we have to concede that it is a delayed one. The importance of the cornerstone as the mirror of generic definition lies precisely in how it presents it as a process *in time*, and how the temporal dimension of definition destabilises the solidity and continuity it seeks to achieve (and which the stone symbolises). The trope is developed into an extended conceit (based on the traditional practice of filling the hollow of the stone with relics) which is carried forward towards a series of self-contradictory conclusions — some of them only perceptible after many patient returns. The chronology of reading is unsettled: instant revelation is substituted by a trickle of meanings which are simply strung together by commas or ‘ands’ and which do not form a coherent whole.

The first “discovery” is concerned with the temporal order of creation, and what this order might reveal about the nature of authorship in autobiography. Nabokov starts his list by mentioning that the stone ‘*already* held in its hidden hollow’ the relics (my italics): as if it was a stone picked at random which contained

the seeds (or the remains) of his life and past.⁴⁹ The volitional action of placing or writing those relics is turned into a quasi-miracle: any of the stones (the chapters) could be a cornerstone. 'Already' transforms a trope about form into one about genre and reference. Autobiographical patterns (unlike its contents) are considered to be exempt from referential tests: they are assumed to be either the product of the author's imagination or the reproduction of a literary convention. Up until this point, the reader could have safely assumed that Nabokov himself is both painter and creator of the painting-by-numbers. The use of 'already', however, suggests it might be otherwise: in fact, he is displaying himself as the discoverer of patterns, as if the real author of *Speak, Memory* was in fact Memory and the book has not been "written" at all.

Some critics have taken this suggestion quite seriously as the defining feature of Nabokovian autobiography: for instance, Vladimir Alexandrov concludes that the book's patterning of disparate elements

[I]s due not to an individual projecting order onto the world around him, but to the fact that memory operates in some mysterious harmonious way with the patterns "imprinted" by an otherworld onto life and nature themselves.⁵⁰

As an autobiographical self-definition, it subsumes not only content but also form to verification: the autobiography is but the final element in a series of perfect reproductions of harmonious patterns. This interpretation — which is emphasised

⁴⁹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 30.

by the foreword's justification for the rewriting of the book as an exercise in referential refinement — is by no means the key to the book that Alexandrov makes of it. It is suggested only to be dismantled.

The cornerstone does not only contain relics — it also hides a bomb which will detonate at some unidentified moment in the future. In contrast to the more immediate 'already', the next clue — the list of relics — can only be deciphered after the actual cornerstone, Chapter Five (and indeed the whole book), is read. The result of this deciphering confirms and belies the miracle of Nabokov's pre-patterned, pre-written life. Its five components do not appear as themselves in Chapter Five.⁵¹ This does not mean that this early fragment does not cohere with the rest of the book, but its coherence is puzzlingly communicated to the reader through a series of figures: rather than choosing examples of the actual building blocks — what Nabokov calls 'themes' — he offers the readers a list of metonymic representations.

The maps stand for the paths and gardens motif, the timetables for the train/travel strand and the chip of glass for the colour/jewel/rainbow cluster. But in the transfer to the cornerstone, the motifs become relics of themselves — the remnants of the writing and the reading process. They stand for another theme of Chapter Five: the memento and the keepsake, a motif which offers a more problematic version of memory than the 'light' metaphors.⁵² Mementos present memory as an obstacle rather than as an unhindered access to the past, emphasising the distance memory creates between model and representation. Zoran

⁵¹ The chapter contains a red stained-glass window and a train, though.

⁵² Alter offers a detailed discussion of this motif in relation to memory in 'Nabokov and Memory', 620-629 (p.622-629).

Kuzmanovich has remarked upon Nabokov's curious paraphrase of one of the metaphors in his first poem ('memory's sting'), which – as Nabokov explains – really sought to convey 'the ovipositor of an ichneumon fly straddling a cabbage caterpillar'.⁵³ Kuzmanovich concludes that, despite Nabokov's frequent characterisation of Memory as an all-powerful goddess, 'in one sense at least, Nabokov imagined memory as a sharp, long, parasitic and destructive tool'.⁵⁴ The three elements thus seem to stand for their presence and their absence *at the same time*, undermining the illusion of solidity their container conveys.

This friction between the solid and the vanished is even more perceptible in the third element of the inventory: the collection of matchboxes. Again, the collection is not mentioned in the chapter or the rest of the book – although matches (and lights) are one of the book's themes. The collection is another example of the relic-as-origin. Matchboxes could be read as the prelude of an act of genesis: Nabokov might be jokingly comparing the capitalised Genesis with his own – in the beginning, before the light, was the match-box.⁵⁵ However, they can also be read as the aftermath of the process, what remained after six days of work. The image is ambiguous because the matchboxes are kept closed: the reader will never know whether they are full or empty, whether they have been used (and by whom) or whether they are about to be used. And of course, matches can also be employed for

⁵³ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 175.

⁵⁴ Zoran Kuzmanovich, ' "Just as it Was, or Perhaps a Little More Perfect": Notes on Nabokov's Sources', *Nabokov Studies*, 7 (2002/2003), 13-32, (p. 22).

⁵⁵ Speaking of Biblical references, the cornerstone also recalls Psalm 118.

other purposes rather than illumination, such as an apocalyptic arson attack on the world one has so carefully (re?)created.

As well as providing an intriguing allegory of *Speak, Memory's* genesis (or apocalypse), the matchboxes also stand for another of the book's main motifs, that of the collection, which Will Norman has identified as the book's 'organising principle, which compensates for loss to history by providing unique meaning out of a specific nexus among moments in time'.⁵⁶ The matchbox collection is thus simultaneously a part and the whole — a collection within a collection (the contents of the cornerstone) within a collection (the book itself). It provides a second *mise en abyme* within the first, one which replaces Nabokov's model of autobiography as the tracing of a 'true' or pre-existing design for one in which the author can be clearly seen drawing whilst pretending to be tracing. The matchboxes may be hiding a miniature exploding device.

There is, however, another twist to the twist: this bomb might in fact be deactivated and its fire extinguished by the final (liquid) element in the inventory. Genesis and apocalypse might be succeeding each other in a loop, the creation-cum-edifice constantly being destroyed and rebuilt. The conclusion of the paragraph is significantly presented as a kind of digression from the dangerous involutions of the cornerstone: Nabokov interrupts the inventory to look out from his balcony at the charming panorama of Lake Geneva. It is a diversion in space and time, from the

⁵⁶ Will Norman, 'Unpacking Nabokov's Library: Historical Materialism and the Private Collection', in *The Exhibit in the Text: The Museological Practices of Literature*, ed. by Caroline Patey and Laura Scuriatti (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 143-159 (p. 146).

page to the balcony, from 1936 to the present of the writing, from the artificial to the unmediated. However, as we have seen, there is nothing particularly spontaneous and natural about the lake view: Nabokov uses his entire stylistic arsenal in this element, probably to create a mood of enchanted contemplation.

What separates this descent from that of the snow-storm in Chapter Eight is the fact that the view might achieve a closed meaning when re-read. It could be considered as the latest link of two (twinned) motifs: that of a fairy-tale-like “jumping into a picture” and that of the mysterious intimations of his future in his past. Among the objects his Swiss governess used to keep in her writing desk, there was ‘a picture postcard of a lake and a castle with mother-of-pearl spangles for windows’.⁵⁷ It is, of course, Lake Geneva. Just in case the reader was not aware that Nabokov had moved to its shores, the Foreword is helpfully dated and located in ‘Montreux, 5th of January 1966’.⁵⁸ He has jumped into the picture.⁵⁹

The conclusion of the *mise en abyme* could thus be read as a return to the initial self-definition of the book as miracle: as the list progresses, an undercurrent of doubt dismantles the “miracle” or otherworldly thesis, but the end could be read as a U-turn to the first thesis now “proved” by the miracle taking place in front of the reader’s eyes. The author looks away, digresses for a moment and is rewarded with the latest confirmation of the “otherworldly” patterning of his life. Digression

⁵⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ The theme is introduced in full in Chapter Four, when little Nabokov dreams of being able to jump into the painting above his bed, a charming forest scene. At the end of the chapter he finds himself in a forest, in America, chatting with his former drawing master. See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 63 and p. 69. Nabokov identifies the castle of the picture later in the chapter as the Château de Chillon in the shores of Lake Geneva. See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 87. Nabokov lived in Montreux from 1961, at the shores of the lake, and not too far from the Byronian castle. The postcard was also there in the 1951 edition: Nabokov probably had no idea that he might end living in Switzerland when he wrote it.

becomes epiphany. Of course, it is up to the reader to believe in this conversion. One can also remark that the over-stylization of the lake view might be a sign of the digression's "performed" and artificial quality: the author is not experiencing a vision, but rather demonstrating how his design works. The reader is led to the coincidence (the Alpha-and-Omega of all coincidences) but Nabokov leaves the interpretation of the design open. The lake view could be a miracle proving the book's "truth" or a relic, an emblem of absence, reminiscent of Mademoiselle's kitschy postcard. Rather than a magical window, the postcard is actually a mirror, a disquieting parody of the pearly and iridescent texture of both passage and book.

The *mise en abyme* presents different versions of memory and autobiography. The cornerstone is an allegory of memory which represents it as a window and a parasite, and this formulation gives way to two opposing definitions of autobiography. The first one poses the book as a kind of hyper-autobiography (true content, true design, a representation of world *and* otherworld, a prevalence of achrony over chronology). The second, on the other hand, presents it as an anti-autobiography: a tropological mirage, a constantly displaced, inconclusive allegory.

Of course, this half-true, half-sham myth of origins (an afterthought, a supplement, a matchbox) is in itself inconclusive and parasitical, and needs perhaps to be read in conjunction with the real origin of the book: its first 1951 version, and in particular to the other examples of *mise en abyme* (and, by implication, generic definition) within the text. We should nonetheless be wary of the definitional potential of a return to an origin. For Hamrit, 'the different chapters of the

autobiography recede in a constant *mise en abyme* which excludes totalization'.⁶⁰ This decentring process, however, should not be merely explained as the result of a multiplication of totalities. As the cornerstone trope shows, even a single *mise en abyme* can exclude totalization by virtue of its inherently allegorical, temporal, dispersed and digressive structure.

To gather together the dispersed conclusions of our analysis of the cornerstone (if they can indeed be gathered), the question which immediately springs to mind involves the relation between figure (particularly *mise en abyme*) and genre or generic definition. If *mise en abyme* initially invites the possibility of being read as a defining gesture in its 'illuminating' containment and compression of dispersed elements (akin to Ricoeur's concordance of the discordant), in practice it reveals itself to be but a reflection of the text's own dispersal and indeterminacy. Its temporal curiosity lies not in the fact that the figure seemingly transcends chronological time by "grabbing" two points in time at once. The cornerstone makes explicit the impossibility of such coincidences, problematizing the idea of the existence of a temporal or atemporal *fabula* hidden in the text's *sjuzhet*, and the idea of self-presence implied in *Speak, Memory*'s octopus-like plot.

The next section seeks to demonstrate this principle by paying even closer attention to another *mise en abyme*: this time, its "original" and "inaugural" example. The deliberately slowed-down pace of the analysis is a response and echo of the *mise en abyme*'s inherently digressive and dispersed structure, and the enchanted and

⁶⁰ Hamrit, 157-177, (p.160).

disheartened mood of semantic disorientation they invoke. Thomas Karshan has rightly described Nabokov as 'one of the most digressive writers in world literature' but the device has only been studied in a piecemeal fashion, as if this dimension had been hushed (as Lenski was when contemplating the lamp) by the tightness of his plots and imagery.⁶¹

The disintegration of the episode of the lamp into polysyndeton, or of the cornerstone into inventory are surprisingly close to what Ross Chambers identified as the 'etcetera principle' which the device of digression exemplifies:

[W]hereas contextuality is a condition of all discourse, no context is ever the whole context: there is consequently no message that does not admit of there being a second or other message, and indeed, by continued application of the rule, a third, fourth, and fifth, to infinity.⁶²

The structure of Nabokov's mirror-images involves both the tracing of definite patterns and the suggestion of a more subtle and invisible disjointed model made out of interconnecting tunnels and false movements. This non-structure relies upon effects of anticipation and delay, upon the good memory of readers but also upon their forgetfulness, upon their patient attention and their haste to bring things to a conclusion. The temporal models invoked by the book's combination of mirror-

⁶¹ Thomas Karshan, 'Review of Nina Khrushcheva's *Imagining Nabokov: Russia between Art and Politics*', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 3 (2009) <http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume3//16_Review_Karshan_Kruscheva.pdf> [accessed 19 December 2012], p.4. Significantly, Karshan's claim is found in a review of a book by Nina Khrushcheva, in which she claims Nabokov 'attempted to break from the vague, amorphous and inflated digressions and metaphors of 'circular' Russian literature', a claim that propels him to question if she 'might have read his novels at all' (See Nina Khrushcheva, *Imagining Nabokov: Russia between Art and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 15 and Karshan, 'Review', p.4).

⁶² Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), pp. 85-86.

images and digression (and the wildly differing versions of autobiography they spur) will then be put in relation to the whirligig of autobiographical definition – and its ultimate significance.

The mechanical manikin and the tramcar: on *mise en abyme*, autobiography, time and digression

Matches: *mise en abyme* as a 'mechanical manikin'

What I previously described as the “original” *mise en abyme* of *Speak, Memory* – the starting point of many analyses of the book – narrates a seemingly inconsequential anecdote used to illustrate a peripheral motif: the ‘match theme’ of his life.⁶³ As we will be spending some time in this particular spot, we should perhaps familiarise ourselves with all its elements. Appropriately – in the light of our previous conclusions – the match story is framed as a digression. Ostensibly, Chapter One is concerned with Nabokov’s earliest memories, and its third section (which has the match-theme episode at its core) starts with a jumble of reminiscences from a holiday in Abbazia in 1904, at the time of the Russo-Japanese war. This customary setting of memories within a larger historical context “triggers” an earlier memory related to the conflict. The inverted commas are needed here because there is nothing particularly automatic or spontaneous about this association: it is in fact a sham digression.

Nabokov proceeds with an anecdote of the shamelessly name-dropping kind – the ones parodied by his first reviewer – about a famous acquaintance of his

⁶³ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 16.

father: General Kuropatkin, the future supreme commander of the Russian forces in that conflict. The General is first described teaching a simple magic trick with matches to little Nabokov:

he spread out to amuse me a handful of matches,[...], placed ten of them end to end to make an horizontal line, and said 'This is the sea in calm weather'. Then he tipped each pair up so as to turn the straight line into a zigzag — and that was 'a stormy sea'.⁶⁴

As the General was going to proceed with another trick, they are interrupted by the sudden announcement that the General is to lead the Russian armies in the war. The narrative then jumps fifteen years: Nabokov's father, fleeing St Petersburg after the Revolution, meets an old man in peasant clothes who asks him for a match, who turns out to be none other than Kuropatkin. The episode concludes with a kind of dictum-cum-manifesto:

I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that, in the winter of 1904-1905, in Wiesbaden, I tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel Oranien. The following of such designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography.⁶⁵

This is one of the book's clearest definitions of what its model of autobiography entails. Because of this, it has become popular with critics: one could gain a good understanding of the reception of *Speak, Memory* merely by comparing

⁶⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *Speak*, p.16.

different approaches to this episode. Max Saunders considers the passage's aestheticism as the defining feature of Nabokov's take on the genre:

[T]he true purpose of autobiography is aesthetic: the evolution of themes [...] It's the match *theme* that matters to Nabokov [...] The national crises, and crises of others, provide the background to his perceptions and memories.⁶⁶

Curiously, patterns have also been read in a moral, metaphysical, transcendent key: that is the position of Alexandrov and Boyd. For the latter, patterns of recurrent themes reveal

[A]n artfulness and harmony hiding in things, even in things at their worst, watching over life with parental tenderness and leading us to the point where all patterns meet, to the great transition of death, to the shock of the mind's new birth.⁶⁷

Other analyses of the episode describe the story as a meta-autobiographical statement emphasising the text's engagement with history and ethics. Dabney Stuart pointed out that there are two designs rather than one in the episode – the match theme and the train-falling-through-the-ice theme.⁶⁸ If readers return to the jumble of memories which opens the section, they will find a description of a piece of Japanese war propaganda, a locomotive falling through the ice of Lake Baikal: the image echoed for real, but in miniature, in his own games. Stuart correctly remarks that the

⁶⁶ Saunders, p. 490.

⁶⁷ Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 165. The main difference between them is that Boyd does not see the designs as unambiguously heavenly but as transcendent.

⁶⁸ Stuart, p. 166. There are actually three themes woven here, as Alexandrov has pointed out: there is also a third theme of 'large bodies of water' (lake, make-believe sea, puddle). He points at their 'veiled' character but does not examine the significance of their interlacement. See Alexandrov, p. 43.

purpose of the passage is not to alert the reader not only about how the book will “follow thematic designs”, but also about how ‘he will [...] *not* point them out’.⁶⁹

The structure combines the explicit and the disguised; and for Stuart, disguise *adds* to the books moral poignancy, communicative force and referential value. The design ‘he *doesn’t* point out here is the more poignant of the two, is complementary to the first [...] and reveals what is basic to the design of both: the theme of exile’.⁷⁰ It is interesting to consider Stuart in relation to a recent reading by Will Norman, in which the passage is identified as an allegory of the relation between history and art:

History, conceived as the inexorable linear progress of a train determined in advance by the track laid out for it, is again associated specifically with martial violence and also with mechanization. Here, its destructive progress is halted and derailed, while the pattern of images which foretold its fate survives intact.⁷¹

Norman unusually interprets the falling trains in a positive light, unlike Stuart (a historical defeat turned artistic victory), but for him the fall into history is only delayed rather than averted: the allegory is itself derailed by the far less triumphant development of the text.

This tension between abstract self-definitions and the examples and metaphors used to illustrate them was first identified by Michael Wood in a groundbreaking and influential reading which called into question the rhetoric of

⁶⁹ Stuart, p. 166.

⁷⁰ Stuart, p. 166.

⁷¹ Norman, *Nabokov, History*, p. 64.

redemption that many critics have pinned to Nabokov's figures and correspondences. For him,

[T]he 'evolution of the match theme', ostensibly a mask and an answer for loss, leads directly to loss itself, to matches mislaid and trifled with [...] The purpose behind the purpose of autobiography, perhaps, is to tell us what the tracing of designs *can't* do for us.⁷²

For Wood, Nabokov's more optimistic pronouncements about time and death (and, I would add, about the book itself) are always qualified by the text itself — by what it conceals and what it delays.

None of the analyses, however, discusses the match-theme as a *mise en abyme*, a classification we should justify. Using Dällenbach's criteria, the match theme could be described as a reflexive metadiegetic utterance: an utterance of a particular incident in Nabokov's life which also stands for the whole of the autobiographical project itself. Although the episode forms part of the diegesis, it is nonetheless framed to stand apart from similar anecdotes. Matches, for instance, hardly reappear in the rest of the book, which sets them apart as a "theme of themes" — a meta-theme representing all the book's coincidental patterns.

The *mise en abyme* duplicates both utterance and enunciation: it is a sample of the book's structure of coincidental motifs, and a mirror-image of its creation and reception. As Stuart pointed out, the passage teaches readers by example: like

⁷² Michael Wood, p. 96.

sticker-collectors, we are given one packet for free to get us hooked but need to buy the rest ourselves. As well as wishing to echo the book's reception, the episode also makes explicit a key aspect of its creation: its nature as a balancing act between deliberate authorial design and the designs of fate or chance.

Nabokov's use of coincidence, repetition and pattern as the touchstone for the book's generic definition was also present in the Foreword, but here it will be teased to its limits — almost to the extremes of parody. The episode deliberately blurs the distinctions between his own arrangements and those of fate/chance — perhaps to foster the impression that fate may be actually a rather subtle and quasi-demonic artist, his equal if not his superior. One wonders, for instance, whether Nabokov is not punning with the different meanings of “match”. The episode consists precisely on “matching” matches, and the rather felicitous expression ‘match-theme’ describes at the same content and container: themes are matches, correspondences; and matches are a theme. The second coincidence reveals the elementary *mise en abyme* to be a loop-like, aporetic structure, with no certain origin — reminiscent of the uncanny ‘mechanical manikin’ and its incessant shaving.

This process of squaring continues in what Nabokov refers to as ‘the evolution’ of the theme: an evolution that does not only involve loss of the matches (and of ‘everything’) but also the matches’ coming into being as meta-narrative devices. Matches move from being unused playthings to being lights (the General, Nabokov says, ‘asked my father for a light’).⁷³ What Nabokov does here is to

⁷³Nabokov, *Speak*, p.16.

transform a rather commonplace metonym into a metaphor of the light's meta-narrative function, as if the lighted match was illuminating itself as a 'thematic design'. The light reveals the peasant to be Kuropatkin in disguise, closes the loop and, simultaneously, reveals its true nature as a *mise en abyme* under its clumsy disguise as a digression or a name-dropping anecdote. The anecdote functions as a kind of double illumination: one charmingly devoid of transcendence (there is no 'watermark' — only water), impishly revealing nothing but itself.

The purpose of this squared coincidence and the pun is not easy to discern. It may be a sign of what the Oulipian poet Jacques Jouet has designated as a poet's 'cratylic desire that is more or less opposed to the arbitrariness of the sign'.⁷⁴ Nabokov indeed uses the word 'light' as a light, but again one should not extrapolate that behind this is a confirmation of non-figural character of language (and of the "true" character of the book). After all, there is nothing natural about the match pun itself, which is the result of the freakish coincidence of two separate origins: 'match' meaning 'pair' is of Anglo-Saxon origin, 'match' meaning 'flame' comes from medieval French.⁷⁵ The pun could be read in relation to *mise en abyme* (and autobiography) as an enhancement of its figural and displaced quality. It also provokes a reflection on the idea of the origin and the role of chance in design: we may wonder whether the pun is simply adding an extra flourish to the anecdote or

⁷⁴ Jacques Jouet, 'With (and Without) Constraints', *SubStance*, 96, 30:3, 4-16 (p. 6), as quoted by Leland de la Durantaye in 'The Cratylic Impulse: Constraint and Work in the Works and Constraints of Oulipo', *Literary Imagination*, 7:1 (Summer 2005), 121-134 (p.130).

⁷⁵ The match pun could be compared to Nabokov's play with Mademoiselle's name in the original French version of the chapter, in which her invented name, O, is made into an emblem of the woman herself. See J.E. Rivers, 'Alone in the Void: "Mademoiselle O"', in *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 85-131.

whether it is its actual source and origin (the story having been chosen not because of its poignancy, but because it “matched” the pun).

A comparison to Proust’s *Recherche* might be useful here to understand the perplexing nature of the match-theme. There, the madeleine in lime-flower tea or the uneven paving stones acted as the random ‘matches’ that sparked the narrator’s autobiographical project. The match-theme, ironically, cannot be so easily identified as the spark of *Speak, Memory*: it is rather an illustration *a posteriori* of an abstract principle of composition whose origin (probably random and freakish) cannot be traced. The purpose of the whole episode may be nothing more than to test and tease the reader’s credulity, or — taking it a bit further — it may wish to mock autobiography’s delusions of reference at the very moment the text is proposing a theory of the genre that conciliates memory and imagination, science and art.

Also, as Stuart pointed out, the match-theme is presented as self-contained *and* unable to be contained. The end drifts and digresses into the supplementary theme of the trains-falling-through-ice, the counter-point that defines and undefines it. The conclusion plays with notions of solidity and liquidity, the real and the make-believe, and it is designed to highlight ironic discordances as well as concordance. Patterns might be fragile rather than solid, (snow)fall rather than lamps: in that case, the train/ice allegory would confirm the literality of the figures in this episode (and hence their “truth”), but in doing so robs coincidences of any aspiration to transcendence and permanence in themselves.

This feature is enhanced and echoed (another echo) by the elusive character of its referents: for instance, the fall of the locomotives only took place in the imagination of a Japanese propagandist. The trains that fall through the cracks in the puddle were only toy-trains, their fall only a make-believe one. The purpose of the train theme may be to point out how the seemingly solid “matches” may also have no solidity at all, and may only be evoked for their emblematic quality, or their ability to camouflage real disasters and personal losses in images that either prefigure or ape them.⁷⁶ This indirect technique has been remarked upon and described by critics such as Boyd, Diment, Bruss or Gezari – particularly in relation to how Nabokov narrates the assassination of his father – although nobody so far has remarked on how the explicit disguise of pain might only highlight the fragility of such autobiographical strategies, and the distance which separates such events from their figures.⁷⁷

The mixture of non-referents and hyper-referents which characterises the passage unsettles any attempt at generic definition through the *mise en abyme*. In a similar way to the cornerstone, its predecessor/sequel, the *mise en abyme* highlights pattern and design (rather than just memories or language) as the most significant element of the book, whilst leaving its significance undecided: patterns can be read as proof of the book’s autobiographical character; or as an authorial stamp which relegates referential truth to a secondary and perhaps insignificant level in relation to its artistic construction.

⁷⁶ Nabokov, *Speak*, p.16.

⁷⁷ See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, pp. Galya Diment, ‘“Nabokov” Doesn’t Rhyme With Love?: On Love and Control in *Speak, Memory*’, *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, 10 (1989), 275-83, Bruss, p. 149. and Gezari, 151-162.

In a way, pattern turns reference into something elusive and figural: an elusiveness which is not entirely the result of art but also of history. Hence, they might be the only possible strategy for autobiography rather than a deviation from it, although this by no means makes the genre escape the whirligigs of figuration or provides a referential anchoring to the text. The main difference between the match-theme and the cornerstone, as we have seen, is its immediacy, highlighted by the passage's use of puns and metaphors: the reader is invited to grasp its significance at once (Nabokov even hedges his bets by the addition of an authorial explanation). The whole can be immediately comprehended, even if its significance is left undefined.

Or perhaps not. It is tempting to read the pattern created by this "original" *mise en abyme* in relation to the figure of the anthemion that Nabokov proposed as an alternative title for his book (the typical decorative motif of frontispieces and garden fences that Nabokov describes as 'a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters').⁷⁸ The match-theme could be considered as the origin and the template of a meaning which its borders mirror and develop — like the anthemion's outer leaves. However, the episode subverts the hierarchy between centre and ornament: the match-theme needs to be supplemented by the train theme and the authorial coda. The neat boundaries of the *mise en abyme* are expanded: the matches need the toy trains, and the toy trains need the painted trains and so on. This extends to the relation between main narrative and digression: the

⁷⁸ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 4. Incidentally, that particular title does not appear in the long list he provided his British publisher when they requested alternatives to *Conclusive Evidence*; it might be a later addition. See Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, pp.118-119.

digression turned out to be the main narrative in disguise (and in condensed form) and this main-line was in its turn diverted by the toy trains.

The analysis of the match-theme needs to spill out into an analysis of the play and the tension between its centre and its interlacements: this spillage articulates the impossibility of containing genre within a definition or enclosing it within a *mise en abyme*. Our analysis of the borders of Chapter One considers whether their interaction with the centre articulates a different hermeneutical model to that of the light (which in itself is far less 'illuminating' than it claims to be), in order to describe how the stability of the centripetal model of definition is challenged by the pattern's development in time as well as space.

The tramcar and the snow: time, movement and dispersal in Chapter One

Nabokov's explanation about what 'pleased' him about the story of Kuropatkin and the matches emphasised not only the 'match' itself, but also its interruption and its dispersal (the "magic" matches 'trifled with and mislaid'). If the previous section concentrated on the paradoxes of the match-theme as a figure of generic definition, this tail will seek to do the same with its borders. The ability of the match-theme to grope and illuminate will be thoroughly interrogated through its temporal dimension. This section compares the temporal structure that the *mise en abyme* seeks to impose on the whole (and its philosophical and generic dimensions) to the

(allegorical) temporal structure it conceals, and which is articulated around a particular model of digressive figuration, the rambling comparison.

It might be useful, however, before starting on this temporal excursion, to return briefly to Dällenbach's Baedeker of the device, and in particular to his exploration of its temporal dimension. Whilst Gide's model was eminently spatio-visual, Dällenbach's is narrative — and hence temporal. He points out that *mise en abyme* is always anachronic, out of sequence, and that the technique

[C]annot avoid calling into question the chronological order of the book itself: unable to say the same thing at the same time as the story itself, its analogue, saying it elsewhere and 'out of time' sabotages the sequential progress of the narrative.⁷⁹

This conclusion is particularly relevant if we are to consider the device in relation to generic definition — particularly the question of reference and autobiography's relation to temporality. Rather than presenting an achronic panorama, *mise en abyme* creates a diversion — or rather a duplication — of the narrative's *fabula* and *szhujet*. The reduplication of the process creates a potentially infinite discordant line out of the single time-organising plot. Dällenbach also observes that *mise en abyme*'s potential for disruption or revelation depends on its temporal position within the narrative. Following Genette's model of temporal order, Dällenbach points out that a *mise en abyme* can be prospective (or proleptic) if located at the beginning of the

⁷⁹ Dällenbach, p. 60.

narrative (which he calls a 'programmatic loop'), retro-prospective if in the middle (a 'pivot') and retrospective (or analeptic) if placed at the end (the 'coda').⁸⁰

The position of the device determines its power as an instrument of authorial control and readerly subjection. Dällenbach points out that initial or final *mise en abymes* are far less common than middle ones because loops and codas risk making the narrative that follows or the *mise en abyme* itself redundant and isotopic. As the device 'allows a maximum closure and codification of the narrative, it correspondingly reduces the possibility of polysemy'.⁸¹ The risk is far smaller in the case of an 'isotopic shifter':

Thanks to the *mise en abyme*, the redundancy is diminished; the narrative becomes informing and open — and above all it accepts, after having imposed its own form on the 'analogue', that the latter, in turn, superimposes its own form on the narrative⁸².

Location, however, is only one factor in the creation of semantic stability or instability and authorial control: Dällenbach also points out other factors, such as the degree of analogy. The pivot's polysemy depends on its modification of the initial structure it is supposed to mirror as much as on its position.⁸³

Several questions rise at once when we return to the match-theme in relation to Dällenbach's taxonomy. The initial position of the "match-theme" enhances its definitional force, but its content throws this function into disarray. We may wonder

⁸⁰ Dällenbach, p. 60.

⁸¹ Dällenbach, p. 57.

⁸² Dällenbach, p. 57.

⁸³ Dällenbach, pp. 63-64.

whether it is possible for a loop to “programme” a completely open interpretation of the book. Initial *mise en abymes* might all be loops, but they might not necessarily be programmatic if the model they propose is hence denied by the narrative that follows. It is possible to argue that within Chapter One, the match-theme functions as a pivot rather than as a loop, which would then turn the whole of Chapter One into a *mise en abyme* and the ‘programmatic loop’ of the book.⁸⁴

Our questioning of the borders of the *mise en abyme*, however, should nonetheless bear in mind how this spillage might obstruct any models of authorial control such as those proposed by Dällenbach’s taxonomy. The rest of this section tries to ascertain not only the classification of the match theme in terms of Dällenbach’s structures, but also whether the match theme indeed “programmes” the reader’s reception or whether the dispersed and supplementary quality that we observed in relation to the matches and the trains undoes the *mise en abyme* and its definitional potential.

Starting thus with its temporal structure, the first part of this section considers the temporal narrative model “imposed” by the apparent synecdoche of the *mise en abyme*, as well as the philosophical implications of the model as a possible way of accessing and interpreting identity and selfhood (as Ricoeur and the Narrativists would have it). *Speak, Memory*’s temporal structure and its thematic treatment of time constitute one of the major concerns of critical approaches to the book – although the role of *mise en abyme* for the book’s definition of time and the

⁸⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 4.

configuration of its temporal structure remains unrecognised. The match-theme is indeed the first example of the 'curious' temporal pattern which Moraru identified: the linear sequence of Nabokov's lifetime is interrupted to offer a prolepsis (or 'sequel') into the future of one particular element, a future which sometimes involves the element's absence, sometimes its retrieval, sometimes both. This model of reading the past in relation to the future (related to Ricoeur's idea of emplotment) could be considered as the loop which the initial *mise en abyme* "programmes".

The structure nonetheless allows a certain degree of interpretative freedom due to its variation between negative, positive and ambiguous outcomes: despite the fact that the prolepsis in the match-theme is used clearly as an intimation of future loss, there is enough ambiguity in the motif for it not to impose its outcome as the 'outcome' of all prolepses. As we saw in Moraru's analysis, Nabokov's use of non-linear chronological structures has tended to be read as the narrative translation of his philosophy of time. Although Nabokov's thematic treatment of time is related to the temporal structure of *mise en abyme*, we should not read them as mirror-images of each other. The text mingles figural and performative treatments of time (of which the *mise en abyme* is but one instance) and overt and direct discussions of time as a theme, and plays them against each other — making it difficult to pinpoint a single philosophical (and generic) stance towards time and self.

Let's take, for instance, the reading that certain critics make of Nabokov's use of anachrony and achrony. Boyd reads it as an 'attempt to escape the rigid sequentiality of time' which shows 'the mind triumphing over time' and 'intimate[s]

something beyond human time'.⁸⁵ This position seems to be confirmed by the 'temporal curiosity' we examined in the introduction, the butterfly-hunt episode, which includes a much commented-upon "confession": 'I confess I do not believe in time'.⁸⁶ This remark is usually read (for instance, by Alexandrov or Moraru) as an unequivocal rejection of mortal, linear time and an affirmation of the triumph of human consciousness over its limits – a conclusion which misses the irony of its confessional frame, that most temporal of narrative structures.⁸⁷ Alexandrov reads the passage in relation to Vivian Bloodmark's octopus-like model of 'cosmic synchronisation': the text becomes a microcosm of the timeless realm of both consciousness and the otherworld.⁸⁸ This is, however, problematic: as a textual and temporal model, synchronisation is perhaps a utopian model (maybe even a garish one). It is also formulated paradoxically – either through masks and deceit (the anagram) or through linear temporal structures (the confession).

Regarding prolepsis itself, it is important to notice that Nabokov's victories over time are only proved by what we may call "successful" prolepses, like the butterfly hunt, when the past is retrieved in the future. There is something far less victorious about another kind of proleptic narrative model which the book implicitly exemplifies. Nabokov recalls at one point how his mother encouraged him to observe the present as if it was already a memory: she asked her son not to look at things but to remember them. Rather than defiance, this kind of prolepsis is an act of

⁸⁵ Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 152.

⁸⁶ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 106.

⁸⁷ See Alexandrov, p. 40 and note 10 in the Introduction for Moraru reference.

⁸⁸ Alexandrov, pp. 28-38.

surrender to time, an acceptance of loss. It is because of this (motherly) model of prolepsis that Michael Wood affirms that

[T]he dominant posture in *Speak, Memory* is not disbelief in time and not simple submission to it [...] It is an intricate engagement with what Nabokov, echoing Proust, calls 'time itself'.⁸⁹

The value of Wood's conclusion lies in its reluctance to impose a philosophical model onto the text. For other critics, the text's seeming embracing of 'time itself' has tended to be read through a Bergsonian lens. Such readings of *Speak, Memory* (such as Leona Toker's and Will Norman's) do not focus on Nabokov's use of anachrony but rather on another of Nabokov's temporal 'styles', found in the periphery of the match-theme: dawdling, enchanted, contemplative scenes of pure memory, such as the account of his first memory or his early hide-and-seek games.⁹⁰ Toker reads these scenes as representations of the idea of *durée* or duration (or, as Nabokov calls it, 'the pure element of time'), a temporal model emphasising a non-transcendent model of consciousness and selfhood: for her, those scenes enact an engagement with pure time, 'a *mobile* medium, in which one inserts the mobility of one's inner life'.⁹¹

Toker's conclusion might lead us to wonder whether Nabokov intended this model to be the true 'programmatic loop' and heart of the book. Norman, on the

⁸⁹ Michael Wood, p. 84. See also Michael Wood, 'Broken Dates: Proust, Nabokov and Modern Time', in *Nabokov's World, vol 2: Reading Nabokov*, ed. by Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 156-169.

⁹⁰ See Leona Toker, 'Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity', in *Nabokov's World, vol. 1: The Shape of Nabokov's World*, ed. by Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 132-140 and Norman, *Nabokov, History*, pp. 55-61.

⁹¹ Toker, pp. 132-140 (p.133).

other hand, concedes that scenes such as the one mentioned above attempt 'to render the experience rather than the metaphorical representation of *la durée*' as a pause in the tempo of the narrative, but he also points out how these moments are punctuated by the disruptive presence of History.⁹² He considers that Nabokov's philosophy of time is in fact closer to Benjamin's historical materialism, as *Speak, Memory* is

A work which enacts *la durée*'s interruption by history [...] Bergson's aesthetic [...] is founded upon notions of continuity and interpenetration, while *Speak, Memory* operates through the fragmentary and the episodic, the suspension of time through literary technique before its inevitable resumption as history.⁹³

Again, we should be wary of any attempt to explain the book under a single philosophical approach to time, history or identity. The use of fragmentation (and its opposite, collection and 'matching') and the episodic both suspend time and submit to its linear character. The very same technique which Norman and Toker read as a sign of Nabokov's engagement with Bergson's *durée* was read by W.G. Sebald as signifying timelessness, or a 'desire to suspend time' achieved through 'the most precise re-evocation of things long overtaken by oblivion'.⁹⁴

Any account of the temporal structure of *mise en abyme* (and its definitional significance) should not, however, bypass the temporality of figuration. Our survey of critical approaches to temporality in *Speak, Memory* demonstrates how the book's

⁹² Norman, *Nabokov, History*, p. 59.

⁹³ Norman, *Nabokov, History*, p. 61.

⁹⁴ WG Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell, ed. by Sven Meyer (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 151.

mise en abymes are deliberately unsatisfactory synecdoches: they fail to 'programme' its genre, its approach to selfhood, identity and time or its prevalent narrative style. A seemingly central *mise en abyme* is supplemented and modified by its borders, but those borders do not substitute the central model for another, as Hamrit suggested. Dispersal is not solely the effect of multiplication (of an 'and...and...and...' structure) but it is inherent to the *mise en abymes*. The engine of the 'matching' machine of the *mise en abyme* (a 'mechanical manikin') is fuelled by time: time as deferral, as loss, as history. The synecdoche conceals an allegorical structure of distance and dispersal: the signifying, illuminating, descriptive functions of Nabokovian *mise en abymes* rely on structures (the 'ands', the snow) that take the reader further and further away from the single univocal meaning they repeat and seek to impose (the manikin's 'motions of shaving'). In their turn, these figures expose the distance of the core (here, the match) from its absent referent.

Contemplating a *mise en abyme* is thus in itself a temporal experience: a journey out, a digression. The match-theme might have started as fake digression, but it concealed a true one inside. The vehicle in which this excursion is undertaken is — of course — a vehicle. The train simile exemplifies a different model of figuration to that of the octopus/lamp: the Homeric or epic simile; or, as Professor Timofey Pnin — and his creator — call it, the "Rambling Comparison".⁹⁵ Nabokov (like Pnin) traced the history of the device in his critical writings (such as the Cornell lectures) and practised a highly idiosyncratic version of it, which Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

⁹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Everyman's Library, 2004), p. 139.

(author of the only in-depth article on the trope) baptised as ‘amphiphor’ – a Nabokovian coinage defining, from the inside, a particularly rambling comparison in *Bend Sinister*.⁹⁶ For Sweeney, these ‘amphiphors’ are ‘characterized by extended analogies; baroque, seemingly uncontrolled imagery and rhetoric; and inherent ambiguity’.⁹⁷ She explains that Nabokov develops the simile’s ‘initial absurdity first into an ironic undermining of grandiose, romantic images, and then into a fundamental ambiguity which cannot be resolved’.⁹⁸ They are parodies of symbols, undecidable in their meaning.

One could indeed ramble on about this device: for reasons of space, I will only concentrate on the train simile (an interrupted rambling comparison) and mention – briefly – some of the surprising destinations the reader is led to in that journey. Nabokov might be playing with the original Greek meaning of metaphor, “transfer”, which is discernible in some of the critical terminology on the device: I.A. Richards designated as ‘vehicle’ the literal meaning of the word used metaphorically. Nabokov’s vehicles are literally vehicles (much as his matches are matches), and they are vehicles in motion, screeching tramcars.⁹⁹ It is not a coincidence that Professor Pnin exposes his theory on ‘Homer’s and Gogol’s use of the Rambling Comparison’ on board of a bus, a ‘crowded and spasmodic vehicle’ in New York, a

⁹⁶ See Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 214 for a comparison of Proust and Gogol’s use of the device, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, ‘Nabokov’s Amphiphorical Gestures’, *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 11.2 (1987), 189-211 (p. 189). The term comes from *Bend Sinister* and Nabokov uses it to describe an acrobat’s gesture. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), pp. 60-61.

⁹⁷ Sweeney, 189-211 (p. 190).

⁹⁸ Sweeney, 189-211 (p. 206).

⁹⁹ I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 96.

city he is unfamiliar with.¹⁰⁰ His journey is punctuated by his ‘vigorous ducking and twisting of the head’, as he tries to ascertain where he is and that will not miss his stop.¹⁰¹ Pnin’s trip, with its combination of the pleasures of rambling about rambling and the anxieties of an unfamiliar journey, echoes the experience of reading Nabokov’s figures of speech: both ride and similes are characterised by a tension between charming mirroring correspondences and spasmodic and unexpected turns.

Like Pnin himself, Nabokov’s readers are equally anxious about getting off at the right stop in order not to miss their hermeneutical destination. The train simile is a good example of the misleading, ambiguous quality of these figurative supplements, as Stuart and Wood’s contrasting readings of the episode demonstrated.¹⁰² The vehicles soon lose their ability to prop the “tenor” of the comparison — the match-theme — when their own prop, the ice, gives way under its weight; and yet Stuart is not wrong in seeing the train simile as the first example in another potentially infinite list of correspondences propping up the “original” match. Readers may get off wherever they prefer: or rather they may be conducted (or rather mislead) first to one stop and then to the other at different points in the reading.

Sweeney reads the Nabokovian “amphiphor” as a development of Gogol’s rambling similes (the subject of Pnin’s mobile lecture), although this example seems to be echoing another of its practitioners, Proust.¹⁰³ The opening of the *Recherche* also

¹⁰⁰ Nabokov, *Pnin*, p. 139.

¹⁰¹ Nabokov, *Pnin*, p. 139.

¹⁰² See Stuart, p. 166 and Michael Wood, p. 96.

¹⁰³ Sweeney, 189-211 (pp. 193-196).

featured travel as a kind of “vehicle” of sleep: Nabokov’s trains seem to share some of the qualities of Proust’s similes. The combination of polysyndeton and commas indeed echoes the balmy rhythm of railway-travel, as if the sentence itself was on a train. However, the reader is woken up from this trance by figures of rupture: the thinness of the ice interrupts the flow of play and childish reverie. The traveller in Proust’s comparison was reassuringly returning home: the broken ice is a stark reminder of how Nabokov’s trains cannot run homewards any more.

It probably does not come as a surprise that such an unstable figural model does not help to stabilise the text’s generic status, or its stand on temporality and selfhood. If we consider them in relation to Alexandrov’s or Boyd’s vision of *Speak, Memory* as a referential project of combination without invention, the passage affirms how the matches and the similes of *Speak, Memory* are to be found in a pool (or a puddle?) of specific memories rather than in distorted fictions. However, even if both matches are ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ (that is, have an external historical referent), their combination gives rise to a model which pulls the matches not only away from each other, but also away from anything they might seek to symbolise or represent. The train simile is a paradoxical vehicle for generating cohesion or reference: the interruption of the digression by the broken ice can be read as a meaning-creating move (because it leads the reader back to match the toy-train with the picture-train), but the result of the second ‘match’ leads the reader to a dead end: to imaginary history, to apocalyptic nightmare and fantasy, to echoes of a history which might be ultimately unrepresentable.

The central anthemion soon morphs from a stylised representation of the honeysuckle flower into a real overgrown bush spreading across the book's facade. One particular example of the "spread" of the central *mise en abyme* illustrates well its ambiguous character as both mechanical manikin and passing tramcar, and the consequences which both models have for generic definition, and its testimonial dimension. Chapter Nine (focused on Nabokov's father) closes with an anecdote from 1911. Nabokov's father was libelled in an article published by a reactionary newspaper, and was left with no other choice than to call a duel between him and the newspaper editor. Nabokov found out, and was gripped with fear. The story, however, ends happily: the editor published an apology and the duel was averted. The chapter ends with the boy running to meet his father after school, realising there will be no duel and breaking into tears. Years later, his father will be assassinated by a fascist thug who intended to kill the same friend the newspaper editor had insulted in his article.

And then it happened: my heart welled in me like that wave on which the *Buyniy* rose when her captain brought her alongside the burning *Suvorov*, and I had no handkerchief, and ten years were to pass before a certain night in 1922, at a public lecture in Berlin, when my father shielded the lecturer (his old friend Milyukov) from the bullets of two Russian fascists and, while vigorously knocking down one of the assassins, was fatally shot by the other. But no shadow was cast by that future event upon the bright stairs of our St Petersburg home.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, pp. 149-150. Wood points the final sentence is an explicit echo of *Great Expectations*. Note also the insistence on the 'bright' staircase. See Michael Wood, p. 86.

The temporal structure of this episode repeats that of the match-theme (prolepsis into death and loss, followed by a kind of return to the starting point). The duel (like the trains) simultaneously screens and presents Nabokov's mourning and pain. Janet Gezari relates it to Freud's concept of *nachtraglichkeit* ("deferred action" or "displacement", a memory re-remembered according to more recent experiences or psychological developments).¹⁰⁵ For her, through this structure of anticipation and retrospection 'Nabokov succeeds in presenting his father's death movingly but self-effacingly, neither sentimentalizing it nor drawing attention to himself [...] as a mourner'.¹⁰⁶ This might lead us to read the match-theme and its echoes as obsessive repetitions of the trauma of the father's death, as unnerving as the manikin's shaving: an indirect approach to autobiography and testimony. But, again, a vehicle (of a different sort) screeches by and breaks the spell – a sinking, rather than a rambling, comparison.

The child's bursting into tears is compared to a famous incident from the battle of Tsushima, in the Russo-Japanese war. The *Suvorov* was a Russian flagship which was set on fire and sunk by the Japanese, and the *Buyniy* was the ship that came to her rescue and managed to save some of her officers. The passage could be read as an example of Nabokov's model of indirect representation through figures which Sweeney highlights as one of the purposes of Nabokov's autobiographical 'amphiphors':

¹⁰⁵ Gezari, 151-162 (p. 160).

¹⁰⁶ Gezari, 151-162 (p. 160). Nabokov was a vocal critic of Freud's theories. There are, however a few psychoanalytic readings of the book apart from hers, like Geoffrey Green's. See Geoffrey Green, 'Visions of a "Perfect Past": Nabokov, Autobiography, Biography and Fiction', *Nabokov Studies*, 3: 1 (1996), 89-100.

[They] convey a sense of grief and loss so great it can only be expressed metaphorically; that is, only in a figure of speech can the emotion be controlled, resolved, and made a pattern of artistic significance.¹⁰⁷

The trope, however, is not only a self-effacing representation of grief (past and present): it is also a “snake” (as in the board game) which takes the reader back to the start of the game, to Kuropatkin and his trick. The connection introduces a discordant note in the rescuing wave. It is possible to read the simile as the ironically sombre riposte to little Nabokov’s dismissal of Kuropatkin’s match trick: what seemed pat and disappointing actually prefigured the war that interrupted the better tricks that Nabokov was expecting. In the battle, the matches are set alight and the wave becomes real. There might be no better trick than this one in the whole book. The simile unsettles the pattern of trauma/screen model of indirect reference (and possible healing) identified by Gezari through the introduction of a repetition within the repetition: rather than suggesting that the origin of the match-theme should be sought in the father’s murder (as its displaced memory), it proposes a different order. The match-theme is here the model, the onerous premonition of another onerous premonition. It makes matching matches (of any kind) uncanny, dubious and unsatisfactory.

Again, however, that isn’t all. Although Norman does not refer to this passage, we can read the *Suvorov* (and the ship motif of which it is a part of) in

¹⁰⁷ Sweeney, 189-211 (p. 206).

relation to the Benjaminian motifs he identifies. Ships articulate an incomplete or fragmentary release from history: they save three generations of Nabokovs (in their flight from Soviet Russia and occupied France), but not all the rescues are wholly successful. His father and his brother Sergey figuratively drown, like the *Suvorov* itself. This interpretation is not conclusive, however, and does not solve the quandary of the book's genre. The digression takes the reader both backwards and forwards in a double process of sinking and rescue: the loops of this passage toy with the possibility of making absence present behind figures or screens but do not seem to wholeheartedly commit to it as the core or the definition of the book. The sinking comparison supplements both scenes by multiplying their referents and suggesting a mode of signification that cannot help sink or fall. As the match is struck, the ship burns down: the placid sea becomes stormy.

How should we continue after such bleak loops? *Mise en abyme* seems to be everywhere and nowhere, constantly being switched on and off in a nervous, jittery fashion. If the match-theme is the timetable or the travel-guide for our journey, it is not a full one or even a correct one — like the out-of-date timetable that misleads Pnin into catching the wrong train to Cremona. Even when considered in isolation, statically and synchronically it fails to provide a stable self-definition: once the reader realises that it is neither isolated nor static, interpretations have multiplied. The *mise en abyme* generates a structure of by-paths demanding a close focus which is only partially rewarded: it takes us into unexpected and sometimes opposed avenues without offering any security that they might be the correct destination.

It is tempting to stop the journey here at the point where the octopus-lamp episode ended: in the snow, in a relentless fall of disconnected 'ands'. Thomas Karshan identified a related motif (the play with mottled surfaces of light and shade) as a sign or correlative of 'free play', which is set in opposition to rule-bound games.¹⁰⁸ Karshan, however, also observes that

[S]uch perfect freedom in play is inexorably elusive: a game player will naturally repeat the acts he or she at first improvised, generating patterns and even rules which then bind the game.¹⁰⁹

This caution should check our temptation not to read on and to remain outside: the freedom of the beginning might not be sustained, it might also become routine, even defined and stabilised in a particular genre, or a particular vision of time or self. The conclusion of this chapter considers time *in time*, as it were, in order to determine whether Nabokov's figures (both his *mise en abymes* and his rambling comparisons) are finally led to some form of destination in their ceaseless wandering.

¹⁰⁸ Karshan, *Art of Play*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁹ Karshan, *Art of Play*, p. 150.

Pivots and codas: *mise en abyme* in time

Pivots: jigsaw puzzles, miniatures, collections

A *mise en abyme* as non-definitional and paradoxical as that of the match-theme should at least avoid making the narrative that follows completely redundant: the elements and motifs might be familiar enough, but there is an element of surprise in identifying which part of the scattered non-patterns they echo. One could then conclude that it might be difficult for any *mise en abyme* following such an opening act to be read as anything else than a pale shadow. A quick survey of the examples that follow the match-theme reveals them to be more modest not only in their intentions and patterning, but also in their hermeneutical (or rather anti-hermeneutical) power and authority. Rather than seeking to dominate over its predecessors, they complement each other: they will aspire to illuminate merely a fragment of the text (or rather a fragment of its production and reception) rather than the whole.

Jigsaw puzzles, for instance — the first *mise en abyme* after the match-theme — synthesise merely one aspect of the writing and the reading process, the piecing together of fragments according to affinities and (deceiving) resemblances:

Under her expert hands, the thousand bits of a jigsaw puzzle gradually formed an English hunting scene; what had seemed to be the limb of a horse would turn out to belong to an elm and the hitherto unplaceable

piece would snugly fill up a gap in the mottled background, affording one the delicate thrill of an abstract yet tactile satisfaction.¹¹⁰

The puzzle includes a mottled background, but merely as one of the pieces rather than *the* piece. We have moved from free play to a game, albeit one with a clear goal but no set rules. The process of puzzle-solving is here presented as successful and intensely satisfactory, a model in which author and reader are mirror images of each other rather than rivals, as if both author and reader were reconfiguring scattered pieces into a whole.

But there are differences: in the jigsaw analogy, it is not clear whether the author is solely a puzzle-solver. In fact, he is also a puzzle-maker, cunningly disguising branches as horse legs, fragmenting his themes in such a way so as not to make them easily identifiable. The otherworldly readers (such as Alexandrov) would argue that he is merely copying natural mimicry, but the emphasis of this *mise en abyme* is not just on camouflage but on fragmenting and dispersing nature. As Perec will argue years later in the preamble to *Life A User's Manual*, 'it is not the subject of the picture, or the painter's technique, that make a puzzle more or less difficult, but the greater or lesser subtlety of the way it has been cut': the skill of writing and puzzle-making lies on the cunning with which both simple and complex images and

¹¹⁰ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 27. In Chapter Sixteen, Nabokov mentions there was a painting in his St Petersburg nursery 'in the bright sportive English style, used for hunting scenes and the like, that lends itself so well to the making of jigsaw puzzles'; it represented, with appropriate humour, a French nobleman's family in exile' (see Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 252). This painting is not in the book at all, and the quote is made up. The picture is only present in jigsaw puzzle form.

patterns (say, both mottled backgrounds and mischievous horse-leg-like branches) are fragmented and distributed.¹¹¹

The jigsaw-puzzle is a fundamentally optimistic mirror-image for *Speak, Memory*, offering the tantalising promise of completion as a reward for the reader's patience. The conclusion of the book (and final *mise en abyme*) is related to the stable figurative model imposed by the jigsaw puzzle. *Speak, Memory* ends at the point when Nabokov, his wife and his son are on their way to board the ship that will take them to America, in the port of St Nazaire. Nabokov and Véra see the ship's funnel concealed in the roofs of the town, and – instead of pointing it out to the little boy – they instead wait for him to realise what it is. The book ends at that point, with a final metaphorical flourish: the funnel is compared to 'something in a scrambled picture – Find What the Sailor Has Hidden – that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen'.¹¹²

Here we have another game as a *mise en abyme* – a picture puzzle. This kind of puzzle game is no longer fragmentary: it is instead a pure, synthetic condensation of the most thrilling aspects of jigsaw solving. The closing image, incidentally, could also be read as another example of Nabokov's engagement with the *Recherche*: it is reminiscent of Elstir's painting of the port of Carquethuit, in which the sea was painted in urban terms, and the town in marine ones. The narrator sees the painting's magical blending of town and sea as representing 'the rare moments in

¹¹¹ Georges Perec, *Life a User's Manual*, trans. by David Bellos (London: Vintage, 2003), preamble.

¹¹² Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 143.

which we see nature as she is, poetically'¹¹³. The painter seeks that 'the eye should discover no fixed boundary, no absolute line of demarcation between land and sea'.¹¹⁴ Both examples play with a poetic blending effect, although Nabokov is more succinct and concentrated in his effects than Elstir or Proust. The contrast between the two ekphrastic *mise en abymes* articulates well how the text moves from an unpatterned shimmering surface, reminiscent of the Elstir painting, into something more concentrated and less uncertain in its effects. Unlike the painting, which brims with camouflaged and ambiguous images, the picture-puzzle solely focuses on one instance of blending which then uses as a synthesis of – among other things – the writing and reading process.¹¹⁵

The self-conscious and meta-autobiographical character of the ending has been frequently remarked upon: Norman, for instance, concludes that 'the puzzle is the motif with which Nabokov chooses to end his autobiography, and is the model he has employed as a structuring device'.¹¹⁶ In another essay, however, Norman had identified a different organising principle for the book, the collection.¹¹⁷ His hesitation is not an inconsistency: both models can be said to work in conjunction. Collections are the first stage in the reading process. Ironically, these motifs appear in a dispersed and fragmented fashion in the text: there are successful collections (his mother with her basket full of Bolete mushrooms, his lepidopteral catches) and

¹¹³ Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. Vol I. Within a Budding Grove*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. by D.J. Enright (London : Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp.479-480.

¹¹⁴ Proust, *Within*, p. 480.

¹¹⁵ The image also plays with the idea of discovery as the birth of consciousness, and the echoes with his first memory. The funnel is not the only blended thing in the picture, the blue and pink underwear 'cakewalking on a clothesline' anticipate the future towards which the ship leads them, America .

¹¹⁶ Norman, *Nabokov, History*, p. 69.

¹¹⁷ Norman, 'Unpacking', p. 146.

unsuccessful or scattered ones (the uncommon Hairstreak butterfly that escapes through a hole in his net, his father's library).

Perhaps the most incisive insight of Norman's analysis of the motif is his singling out of a particularly poignant passage about his father's library. Nabokov mentions how he found in the New York Public Library 'a copy of the neat catalogue he had privately printed when the phantom books listed therein still stood, ruddy and sleek, on his shelves'.¹¹⁸ For him, the catalogue

Is the perfect metonym for *Speak, Memory* itself — a collection of signs pointing to absent referents, an ordering of memories. It may provide conclusive evidence of its library's previous existence, but it also marks its absence in the present.¹¹⁹

Norman calls this passage a coda: it represents the real end of the collection after the gratification and bliss of its completion. As a coda, it is out of sequence, proleptic, as if Nabokov was hiding the end half-way through the middle. If the collection is a figure for reception, it presents the process in the wrong order: by ending with the successful completion of the puzzle, he obscures the fact puzzles and collections do not end when they are finished and done — they might have special sequels and afterlives in which they might become undone again or disappear into one's stomach, like the ceps his mother gathered.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 140.

¹¹⁹ Norman, 'Unpacking', p. 155.

¹²⁰ Michael Wood's remark that Nabokov's mother 'is loss itself [...] mistress of what her son calls 'unreal estate'' is perhaps proved by the fact that her collections are self-consciously temporary. See Michael Wood, p.91. Nabokov Sr. and Nabokov Jr. collect items which they aspire to survive them, even in the case of the son's butterflies, to immortalise them, but they only half achieve their aim. See Norman's enlightening comparison with Benjamin for an elaboration of this theme.

I will not be able to devote the attention it deserves to another two important cluster of mirror-images: miniatures, of which Chapter Seven (the story of a seaside childhood romance) and Chapter Eight (the story of his tutors, where we find the octopus/lamp) are good examples – to the point that the latter could be read as a parody of the former, a deliberate undermining of its synecdochal purposes.¹²¹ Chapter Eleven (the story of Nabokov's first poem), which might be considered superficially as another miniature, has nonetheless more in common with a different style of *mise en abyme*, what Dällenbach calls the transcendental type or the fiction of origin.

Its most obvious model is again probably Proust (the episode of the church spires in the Guermantes walk), although it also draws heavily on Romantic poetics. This episode has been used (by Moraru or Alexandrov) as *the* evidence of Nabokov's transcendental mode of autobiographical reference. The chapter, however, is a synthesis of *all* stages of literary composition, displayed in order (unlike the puzzle or the collection *mise en abyme*): the triumph of inspiration (understood as an exercise in establishing relations between disparate objects), the charms and perils of rhyme (sometimes a revelation of secret links between words, others usurping the poem from the poet) and finally, and curiously, the uncomfortable disappointment of completion. At the end of the chapter Nabokov reads his first poem to his mother (who, moved and proud, begins to cry) and is startled by the consequences of his writing:

¹²¹ Chapter Eight is modelled, up to a point, on Harold Nicolson's *Some People*, a collection of ironic and rather callous fictionalised character sketches which Nabokov admired with characteristic ambivalence.

She passed me a hand mirror so that I could see the smear of blood on my cheekbone where at some indeterminate time I had crushed a gorged mosquito by the unconscious act of propping my cheek on my fist. But I saw more than that. Looking into my own eyes, I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass.¹²²

The chapter reproduces the text's mottled, sun-and shade games in a heightened, quasi-hysterical manner, moving from summer storm to the brightest of rainbows and sunlight and finally to a night scene illuminated in stark chiaroscuro: a bright landscape — a Benois, say, who is mentioned in the chapter — morphed into a De La Tour interior.¹²³ Wood provides an incisive analysis of this conclusion, which he reads as a counter-epiphany of dispersal (a legacy from his mother — who collected things that were destined to be eaten rather than preserved):

She allows him to see that writing too is loss, a form of dishevelment. This is not the way Nabokov usually talks about writing, or about himself [...] Nabokov elsewhere insisted so much on the composed self because the 'shocking' truth of writing continued to shock him. He didn't want to hide it, and he is confessing it here. But he didn't want to parade it, and the bravery of reconstruction appealed to him much more than the memory of disarray.¹²⁴

¹²² Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 177.

¹²³ See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 176. De la Tour was one of Véra Nabokov's favourite painters (together with Vermeer). See Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 362.

¹²⁴ Michael Wood, p. 93. See Alexandrov, pp. 26-27 for a characteristically optimistic reading of the moment of composition, a moment of absolute transcendence. Kuzmanovich reads it in terms of the sublime, as 'the red carpet to the abyss, the prelude to a fall', the dangerous, deadly counterpoint of the delights of inspiration. See Kuzmanovich, 13-32 (p.26).

Following Wood's argument, we could argue that Nabokov avoids giving too much emphasis to this shocking truth by scrambling the order in which it appears: reconstruction is disguised as the sequel, rather than the origin, of disarray. The *mise en abyme* of Chapter Eleven might represent the book in the 'right order', but it is an order susceptible to be infinitely repeated, and its meaning depends on the point in which the pattern decides to end. Reconstruction is both the beginning and the end of dispersal, and dispersal is the beginning and the end of reconstruction.

This overview of the pivots of *Speak, Memory* has not done much to dispel the fear of redundancy: and yet, as we read on, we are gripped in an anxious collecting fever in which yet another example of a motif calls for our attention, always revealing the same *and* something else. All *mise en abymes* are propping different aspects of the inconclusive conclusion of Chapter One, and yet they do so in a way which explicitly counters the methods of the beginning: the change from metaphors of free play (such as sun-and-shade effects, upwards and downwards movements) to metaphors of games (collecting, jigsaws, picture puzzles) suggest the progressive atrophy of the shimmering movements that Karshan talked about. They suggest a more tightly-controlled (game-like) model of reception and do it in a more overt and explicit fashion than the initial one. And yet, once their whole is reassembled according to the manufacturer's instructions, the result is a similarly undefined end-product. We are no closer to being able to define the book's stand on temporality or its genre: for example, the same figures that support the hyper-autobiography position (the puzzle, the first poem) also support the anti-autobiographical thesis (the text as deceit, artifice, dispersal). Again, we need to read on.

Coda: The chess problem

'If the initial *mise en abyme* says *everything* before the fiction has really started, the final or terminal *mise en abyme* has *nothing* to say save repeating *what is already known*'.¹²⁵ Nothing to say: this is Dällenbach's rather blunt dictum about the coda, and the nothing it says might be even less if everything has been said at the beginning, and then the same everything has been repeated myriad times across the book. And yet Nabokov includes a coda: or rather, several of them. An immediate explanation for this double hermeneutical reinforcement of *Speak, Memory* might be the leaky quality that we have observed in the text's pivots (which complement but also relativize each other's interpretative solutions) and the seemingly hieratic non-committal symmetry of Chapter One.

Several unanswered questions mingle at the conclusion, or rather at the brink of the conclusion of *Speak, Memory*. Generic definition has been related to the tension between spontaneous, unauthored coincidence and a coincidence achieved through metaphors, tropes and authorial acts of 'folding' or piece cutting. Although both types of coincidence are "autobiographical" (or "fictional"), the first one presupposes the presence of a reality (even of a reality mirroring a supra-reality) that the second one does not take for granted at all, a presence that can only take place as absence. Both problematically share the same props.

¹²⁵ Dällenbach, p. 65.

Speak, Memory's coda needs to be considered in relation to this uneasiness. Although Dällenbach conceives that an initial or a middle *mise en abyme* might contradict or offer differing interpretations — and thus act as isotopic shifters — he does not think the coda might seek to do the same. For him the problem of semantic redundancy can only be avoided in one way, 'by moving on to a higher plane and universalizing the meaning of the narrative', perhaps by resorting to 'a tale or myth'.¹²⁶ *Speak, Memory's* coda, which appears at the end of chapter fourteen is neither of those and has no obvious universalising purpose *by itself*.

The coda appears just after the other terminal *mise en abyme*, the portrait of Sirin (the pseudonym he used in his Russian writings) which employs a very different strategy, reminiscent of that Chapter Sixteen.¹²⁷ Unfortunately I will not be able to give it sufficient attention (there are excellent analyses of this section by James Wood, Max Saunders and Michael Wood) — as a coda, it is deliberately inconclusive: an advert for Nabokov's misleading modes of figuration (described, aptly, as 'a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought').¹²⁸ In contrast to this oblique masked approach, the book's other coda is modelled after a game — a chess problem, a sign that the play of sun and shade has evolved into a patterned monochrome board and a rule-bound game.

¹²⁶ Dällenbach, p. 65.

¹²⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, pp. 225-226.

¹²⁸ Nabokov, *Speak*, pp. 225-226. See Richard Lamb and James Wood, 'Discussing Nabokov', *Slate* <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_book_club/features/1999/discussing_nabokov/_2.html> [accessed 21 December 2012], Saunders, p. 491, and Michael Wood, p. 100.

Chess problems are described as 'highly specialised, fanciful, stylish riddles':¹²⁹

[A] beautiful, complex and sterile art related to the ordinary form of the game only insofar as, say, the properties of a sphere are made use of both by a juggler in weaving a new act and by a tennis player in winning a tournament.¹³⁰

The next two paragraphs make the analogy between chess-problem setting and literature (poetry in particular) even more explicit.¹³¹ The process of composition is described in terms similar to those of literary creation. Although the ostensible purpose of this extended metaphor is to assimilate writing to problem-setting, its effect is actually the opposite: it highlights the poetic or literary qualities of chess problems, and thus emphasises rather than contains the book's shimmering play.

The board becomes 'a system of stresses and abysses' (note the sibilant alliteration) — a succinct but evocative summary of the book's combination of harmony and vertigo.¹³² The description of his problems ('I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil') seems tailor-made for his similes.¹³³ The strangeness of the connection, taking the cosy 'bathing' motif into

¹²⁹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 226.

¹³⁰ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 226.

¹³¹ See Janet Gezari and W.K. Wimsatt, 'Vladimir Nabokov: More Chess Problems and the Novel', *Yale French Studies*, 58 (1979), 102-115 for an excellent overview of their points of connection.

¹³² Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 227.

¹³³ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 227.

a rather unexpected place conveys the tensions created by the book's hermeneutical time-bomb.¹³⁴

The compact shock of the simile is nonetheless defused as the reader is taken further and further into the analogy. The *mise en abyme* moves from a description of chess-problem setting to a specific chess-problem that the reader cannot avoid interpreting as a mirror-image for the book. Nabokov's model here is Lewis Carroll, who also started *Through the Looking-Glass* with a chess problem *en abyme*.¹³⁵ Nabokov's problem, a mate in two moves, is the allegorical 'expression' of a particular theme.¹³⁶ Nabokov describes (and solves) the problem before giving out the position of the pieces. This is his account:

It was meant for the delectation of the very expert solver. The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and discover its fairly simple, 'thetic' solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one. The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on an avant-garde theme (exposing White's kings to checks), which the composer had taken the 'greatest' pains to 'plant' (with only one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having passed through this 'antithetic' inferno the by now ultrasophisticated solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as somebody on a wild goose chase might go to Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the roundabout route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and, after that, his arrival at the simple key move would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 227. The bathing motif the contained and domestic variant of the sea/lake motif: his bath is full of 'celluloid goldfish and little swans', his son also plays with a toy ship in his bath. See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 61 and p. 261.

¹³⁵ Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, ed. by Martin Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 172.

¹³⁶ Nabokov, *Speak*, p.228.

¹³⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, pp.228-229.

The purpose of describing and solving the problem before readers have a chance to do it themselves is not deceitful: Nabokov's description is accurate, the solution correct.¹³⁸ Nabokov reverses solution and exposition partly because he probably was only too aware the whole thing might be mercilessly skipped if left bare, partly to force a rereading of the chapter.

The Phileas Fogg-like rambling comparison is in fact echoing the abstract discussion about spirals and the Hegelian triad which opened this chapter: the referent of the allegory/*abyme* of the chess-problem might not be *Speak, Memory* itself but the spiral. In another of the book's authorial self-definitions, the spiral is imposed as the primary structural principle of his life (and book?):

The spiral is a spiritualised circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a boy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series [...] represents the essential spirality of all things in relation to time. [...] If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call 'thetic' the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; 'antithetic' the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and 'synthetic' the still simpler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Incidentally, the *Partisan Review* version of the chapter did not provide the solution, but the book version did. See Nabokov, 'Exile', *Partisan Review*, January-February 1951, pp. 45-58. Nabokov complained in a contemporary interview to the *New York Times* that 'nobody has yet solved the chess problem!'. See Harvey Breit, 'Talk with Mr Nabokov', *New York Times*, 18 February 1951, online version <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/03/02/lifetimes/nab-v-talk.html>> [accessed 1 April 2013], not paginated. He also gives a detailed outline of the problem and all its false moves in *Poems and Problems*. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 182 and p. 203.

¹³⁹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 215.

The next paragraph uses the Hegelian triad to splice his life cleanly into three parts: thesis (childhood and adolescence in Russia), antithesis (European exile) and synthesis (American years, 'and new thesis', he added in 1966): the terms also used to describe the chess problem.¹⁴⁰ This passage has invited critics to create an analogy between the shape of his life and the shape of his book. Bruss reads the first five chapters as the thesis, the next five as the antithesis and the last five as the synthesis.¹⁴¹ Book and life, however, are not as analogous as Bruss believes, which explains the awkwardness of some of her divisions (her synthetic part contains both the antithetic and synthetic solution). If the book resembles a spiral at all, it is an asymmetrical and a three-dimensional one, with a thesis four times as long as its antithesis and a synthesis which is not actually part of the visible design but only glimpsed through its crevices.

Bruss's tripartite division is founded upon a specifically 'spiritual' or moral reading of the spiral, in which the pattern represents moral development, an escape from the self and an awareness of the sufferings of others. The spiral model suggests a different model of selfhood: one closer to the confession, and thus to traditional autobiography. Indeed, Diment had not singled out the spiral structure as one of the text's curiosities, but as a textual device that the text 'flaunts'.¹⁴² Nabokov's description of the spiral compares it favourably to the (vicious) circle as its improved, 'spiritualised' version — perhaps in an attempt offer a moral definition of the figures, and to make explicit the ethical dimension of pattern. Ellen Pifer — who compares

¹⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 215.

¹⁴¹ Bruss, pp.150-151.

¹⁴² Diment, 'Art of Autobiography', p. 46.

the book to *Lolita* — reads the book as a transparent confession, an account of his moral evolution.¹⁴³

Nabokov's account of his last meeting with his teenage sweetheart Tamara could be read in a confessional key, as a questioning of the restorative powers of memory and pattern and a rejection of his achronic "confessions". The narrative of the meeting superimposes his obsession with coincidence (presented as an adolescent phase) with a mature ethical consideration about the suffering of others, which — as Richard Rorty pointed out — tends to get conveyed through the use of poignant details (in this case, the bar of chocolate the girl breaks nervously during the encounter).¹⁴⁴ The contrast between the two details signals a possible split between selves, and presents memory as a palimpsest: the adult memory is written over the adolescent one, and it corrects it in shame. Symbolic, circular achrony is here substituted by a linear and temporal idea of selfhood and narrative time. Or perhaps not: the spiral, after all, is an ambivalent figure. It imposes a stable linear model in the narrative but in doing so it sets in motion the unstable whirligigs of figuration and the distance from its origins. The farewell scene might condemn pattern but it also makes use of it to create an ethical reading of the scene. The broken chocolate bar matches the broken glass under which Andersen's Little Mermaid (Tamara is compared to the fairy-tale character) is forced to walk for love or the chocolates lonely Mademoiselle used to devour.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Pifer, pp. 55-60. See Bruss p. 160-161 for a similar reading.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 164.

¹⁴⁵ See Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 186.

Nabokov's brief sketch of his brother Sergey is a poignant example of a failed confession: he is aware that the portrait is incomplete and faulty, an apology for having 'balked' the task but which fails again to write him back into the book.¹⁴⁶ Norman notes that Sergey's appearances 'are brief, dull and incidental. He is not assimilated into the patterning of the work, or found to coincide with its many thematic and symbolic structures'.¹⁴⁷ This failed restoration destabilises the confessional model and demonstrates its insufficiency, the incomplete and problematic character of its claims to presence, particularly in its moral dimension. The very form of the spiral as a figure of reflexivity excludes the possibility of arriving at a stable moral point, closing the gap between selves and reconstructing the broken self in the mirror. It is adopted only to be subverted and to be exposed as aporetic. Infinity can never be as cosy or as comforting as a bath. It is always a devil in a sponge-bag: it will burst out, even if its position conceals it.

The devilish conclusion of our exploration of the spiral *mise en abyme* is a warning against reading the chess-problem coda as what it initially purports to be: a figure that imposes a solution to the text and stabilises its flurries and its devils. It can be read as a stable model of reception and definition, but also as an infinite one. As is the case with other self-referential figures, it problematizes the correspondences it purports to illuminate, in this case, between the spiral, the

¹⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 200.

¹⁴⁷ Norman, *Nabokov, History*, p. 68. The second version however restores Sergey to certain scenes from which he was previously absent, although always as a rather shadowy presence, a failed side-kick. Sergey has a theme attached to him, the figure of Napoleon, which Norman reads as an allegory of the brutal forces of history that will destroy him (see Norman, *Nabokov, History*, pp. 70-71).

Hegelian triad and the problem. Because the problem is solvable, one may be led to think that is also the case with the book. Indeed, many critics have considered the chess problem as the instruction manual not only of *Speak, Memory* but of the whole of Nabokov's *oeuvre*.¹⁴⁸

Nabokov's description of the chess problem could be used as evidence for this argument. For instance, the anchoring of the problem to the historical context of its composition (May 1940, after the Nabokovs had finally managed to obtain a visa to emigrate to the United States) enhances its definitive and defined quality. In the final paragraph, the reader finally accesses the problem *in toto*: Nabokov offers its set-up on the board *and* its material reality. He reveals it was composed on a piece of paper stamped by the French Authorities, symbolising the release of both problem and author from Nazi control.¹⁴⁹ Nabokov concludes the chapter with the assertion that a secret has been revealed: 'it is only now, many years later, that the information concealed in my chess symbols, which that control permitted to pass, may be, and is in fact, divulged'.¹⁵⁰ The stamp might be the watermark — finally disclosed.

It may seem perverse to read this sentence and indeed the whole problem as anything other than a solution. Boyd interprets problem and stamp as the keys to the book: 'the [...] stamp also solved [...] the real-life problem of exile. America [...]

¹⁴⁸ Readings of *Pale Fire* in terms of the Hegelian triad and the problem include Chris Ackerley's 'Pale Fire: Three Notes Towards a thetic solution', *Nabokov Studies*, 2 (1995), 87-103, Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999) and James Ramey's 'Pale Fire's Black Crown', *Nabokov Online Journal*, 6 (2012) <http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume5_6/22_Ramey_PDFf.pdf> [accessed 22 December 2012]. See Janet Gezari 'Chess Problems' for a reading of the problem as a model of displacement.

¹⁴⁹ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁰ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 230.

provided as neat a synthetic solution [...] as bishop to c2'.¹⁵¹ Boyd's reading is backed by biographical information that the book omits: Nabokov's wife (the 'you' in the paragraph) was Jewish, so obtaining the visa was a question of life and death for the family, an unambiguous solution. It is, however, also a private one, like the addresses to 'you': something that the text refuses to reveal completely. It highlights how his autobiography is deliberately detached from his self, and should not perhaps be defined in terms of its supposed connection to its author.

However, the strongest argument against a conclusive reading of the *mise en abyme* is to be found in the figures that "stamp" Nabokov's supposed "solution". His identification with an emigration bureaucrat could be read as a rather self-deprecating portrayal of his slightly paranoid control over his text's 'information' (exemplified by the saturation of *mise en abymes* and codas). The comparison between the problem and a *poem* (rather than a narrative) tends to be disregarded: like a poem, it should not necessarily be read as a story with a beginning, middle and end. Its end, its solution, is a convention: a constraint that needs to be respected in chess problems (like rhyme or meter), but which does not define it and has no symbolic significance.

The Hegelian triad, as we mentioned previously, imposes a model based on a solution which is ill at odds with the problem itself. Although many critics have used the problem as a hermeneutical key, not many tend to read it closely. When they do (as in the case of Chris Ackerley), they follow closely the pattern established

¹⁵¹ Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 159.

by the Hegelian triad.¹⁵² Ackerley describes the play alternatives in terms of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model: the thetic solution involves promoting a pawn to Queen, which doesn't work because it can only involve one move (the problem is in two moves).¹⁵³ In the antithetic inferno — the 'avant-garde' solution in the figurative and literal sense, as it involves a piece at the avant-garde of the board — that very same pawn is promoted to knight, which opens up six possible mate options. All of those, however, can be countered by moving 'an apparently innocuous pawn': this move means that none of the six mates can be realised in the stipulated two moves. The synthetic solution involves no promotion but rather the blocking of that pesky pawn at the back though the bishop (the key move) which opens up four possible mate options to solve the problem.

In chess problems, there can be several options for the second move (all valid) but only one for the first move. Ackerley justifies the problem's analogy to the Hegelian triad by describing the first move as the synthesis of the problem. Whilst this reading is valid, it leaves a question open about how to read the four second-moves in relation to *Speak, Memory*. If we identify the move to America as 'bishop to c2', then we could consider that (say) Nabokov's literary success, his entomological discoveries, his happy family life and his scholarly achievements are the four possible "second moves". The analogy is possible, almost plausible, but it is awkward and messy: those achievements are simultaneous rather than four options excluding each other.

¹⁵² Ackerley, pp. 90-93.

¹⁵³ Ackerley, pp. 90-93.

The chess problem imposes a temporal model which is not as linear or as straightforward as the 'roundabout route' comparison makes it. The solution takes place half-way through — after it is found, the solver still needs to discover the different "second moves". The "solution" is displaced from its apparent conclusive position, and thus becomes difficult to identify. It might be the catalogue (the coda according to Norman), but it could be anything else: even the octopus, the manikin or the snow. Continuing with the deliberately faulty allegory, it is even more difficult to find equivalents in the text for the promoted white pawn, the bishop, or the 'innocuous' black pawn. Solution is here turned into a figure.

Like the octopus-lamp itself, the chess problem will be dispersed by the figure which immediately follows it. Chapter Fifteen opens with one of the most haunting of Nabokov's figures of absence, a return to the Berlin setting of the manikin and the snow. Nabokov remembers walking back home in the early hours after his son was born, and being startled by how the familiar evening shadows (which he remembers from when he had walked in the same streets 'childless') were reversed in the early morning. He goes on to compare them to the reflection

In the mirror of a barbershop the window toward which the melancholy barber [...] turns his gaze [...], and, framed in that reflected window, a stretch of sidewalk shunting a procession of unconcerned pedestrians in the wrong direction, into an abstract world that all at one stops being droll and looses a torrent of terror.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 232.

The meaning of this terror is unfathomable. It might have been triggered by the word 'childless': the fear that his son's birth could be reversed into his death, his absence.¹⁵⁵ The endless reversed reflections of the barbershop mirrors echo the manikin and its ceaseless repetition and make it unsettling, uncanny. In fact, the last chapter could be read as a deliberate delay of the dispersed model of figuration of the chess problem: a delay justified by a fear that cannot be 'unseen' once seen — like the solution of the picture puzzle.

The text's final return to the *mise en abyme* of the jigsaw puzzle does not necessarily represent a return to a more optimistic or comforting reading of pattern, or of the book's genre.¹⁵⁶ It might be not the key move after all: the chess problem has made the conclusions problematic, doubtful, floating. The puzzle model is temporary: it will be scattered, the discovery that 'cannot be unseen' will lead another thesis, and the port of St Nazaire will be turned into the port of Carquethuit, a shimmering surface where everything is dispersed and blended.¹⁵⁷

The snow — the most unadorned and inconspicuous of the items in the inventory — was perhaps the real key to *Speak, Memory*, to its mode of dispersed figuration pierced by absences. It even conveys the flurry-like and unsettled nature of these generic and temporal definitions as they were reflected (perhaps uncannily) in the mirror of the chess problem. The text's differing versions of itself (as an

¹⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁶ The best example of this is another puzzle *mise en abyme* about some pieces of pottery found on a beach. See Alter, pp. 620-621 for a good analysis.

¹⁵⁷ Nabokov, *Speak*, p. 243.

autobiography, a confession, a copy of an otherworld or a solid and beautiful edifice) might be nothing else than its false moves — to be neutralised by a pawn, to be neutralised in its turn by a bishop. None of those moves has any authority over the others: even figuration itself might be one of them.

What matters about *Speak, Memory's* flurry-like definition — and what it reveals about the generic debate — is that it is not a definition. It *resists* it, and quietly points out to the reader the mechanical reductive (shaving) quality of such readings. Although the notion that something resists definition has become something of a critical cliché (a bronze ceiling lamp in itself), it is one that — like the 'dreadful' lamp itself — might allow the 'life' of autobiography to flee the confinements of identity, of definitions and enclosures. It is because it is 'dreadful' and fear-inspiring in its unflinching uncovering of absence that autobiography (and the lamp) may "float" and survive, as its readers contemplate the miracle and purr — as Lenski did.

Chapter Three

The frame: Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood* (1975)

[I]t's because of this present [...] that I've always thought frames were precious objects. Even nowadays I stop to look at them in the windows of camera shops, and I am surprised every time I come across frames for five or ten francs in Prisunic chain stores.

Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood*.¹

Perec's frame, compared to a metamorphosed lamp and a self-consciously curious toy soldier, seems rather ordinary in comparison to our other samples. Unlike the lamp, it is not "elevated" by metaphor from its banal disguise. What turns the frame into a 'precious object' is *another* frame: just as the humble leather frame protected the photograph of Perec's father (propping and emphasising its value and singularity), Perec's poignant but understated description protects the frame and makes it valuable, 'precious', curious.

But there is more. The passage is framing the leather-frame (which, in its turn, is framing the photograph) not once but *twice*: the whole passage is a footnote — that is, a narrative frame for Perec's detailed description of his father's photograph. Along with other twenty-six notes, it supports a short autobiographical piece about Perec's parents which he wrote in his early

¹ Perec, *W*, p. 34. I will refer to the book only as *W* in subsequent references.

twenties. This piece — printed in bold to “frame” it from the rest of the text — was itself an early attempt of young Perec to provide — of course — a written frame for that cherished photograph of his father.

The piece thus starts with a description of the photograph in a tone which is alternately neutral and empirical (‘He is tall. He is bareheaded’), speculative and conjectural (‘Between the polished military boots — it is Sunday —’) and blank and tautological (‘The father in the photograph poses like a father’).² The footnotes/frames try to correct those speculations (‘to judge by its format (15.5x11.5), it is not an amateur’s snapshot’), but the reader is uncertain as to whether those propping deductions are accurate or not.³ As Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir explains, ‘what at first sight seemed a detailed, rather objective description [...] has become suspect like many of Perec’s memories’.⁴ And, we may add, the footnote/frame might have unwittingly spread that suspicion to itself. The reader cannot ascertain the factual veracity of any of the descriptions because this photograph (or indeed any of the other photographs described) is not included in the text. We only have frames.

Gudmundsdóttir points out how photographs in *W or the Memory of Childhood* are ‘historical documents that do not give any information beyond

² Perec, *W*, p. 27.

³ Perec, *W*, p. 33.

⁴ Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), p. 245.

their appearance, clues to a gap, a lack, to nothing'.⁵ They do not 'evoke memories, only absence'.⁶ In other words, they are frames. The leather one – for all its propping abilities – spreads inwards and outwards in infinite regress. If by looking *in* the reader is only lead to more frames (the photograph-frame is but the beginning of the chain, as we will see), the same process also takes place when the reader looks *out*.

The section which contains the description and the footnote is part of an autobiographical narrative comprised of nineteen short sections. This collection of fragments was also a frame for a novella called *W*. Perec published it in instalments in *Le Quinzaine Littéraire* between 1969 and 1970, and reprinted it with hardly any changes in *W or the Memory of Childhood*.⁷ *W* had been initially advertised as an old-fashioned adventure yarn, but the serial was a rather more unusual production.⁸

Although it starts with a first person narrator promising the reader an account of his terrifying adventures in an island called *W*, the story that follows – in which a suitably mysterious stranger asks our protagonist to help with the search for a deaf-mute boy who has gone missing after a shipwreck – is interrupted when the quest is about to start. As David Bellos recounts in his biography, Perec prefaced the seventh instalment of the story

⁵ Gudmundsdóttir, p. 244.

⁶ Gudmundsdóttir, p. 247.

⁷ See David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harvill, 1993), p. 546 for an account of the changes.

⁸ Philippe Lejeune and Anne Roche offer detailed account of the publication and first reactions to *W* the serial. See Philippe Lejeune, *La mémoire et l'oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe* (Paris: P.O.L, 1991), pp. 62-66 and Anne Roche, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance de Georges Perec* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 11-16.

(the beginning of the “adventure” so carefully framed) with a note which emphasised the interruption with ‘unpalatable bluntness’:⁹

There was no story so far. Forget what you have read: it was a different tale, at most a prologue, or a memory so distant that what follows cannot fail to submerge it. For it is now that it all begins, now that he sets off in his search.¹⁰

But there was to be no search (and no ‘he’ either) in the rest of the serial. What followed was a dystopian narrative, told in ‘the cold, impassive tone of the ethnologist’ about W, an island off the Tierra del Fuego.¹¹ The narrator, if it is still him, is a mere observer. W’s society revolves around sport and competition, and is governed by the Olympic ideal. This ideal, however, is taken to its extremes: W’s inhabitants are routinely humiliated and dehumanised in the name of Sport.

An inventory of increasingly cruel and debasing competitions follows, which is interrupted, in its turn, by an eerie prolepsis in which readers are told that when someone enters the Fortress (the site where rulers, women and children lived) in an unspecified future they will only find

The subterranean remnants of a world he will think he had forgotten: piles of gold teeth, rings and spectacles, thousands and

⁹ Bellos, p. 441.

¹⁰ Perec, quoted and translated by Bellos, p. 441.

¹¹ Perec, *W*, p. 4.

thousands of clothes in heaps, dusty card indexes, and stocks of poor-quality soap...¹²

As Philippe Lejeune aptly explains, the reader soon realises that *W* is ‘an allegorical narrative not about what may happen, but about what has happened’.¹³ What was left (or will be left) of the people of *W* is also what was left of the victims of Nazi concentration camps. The second part of *W* re-enacts the horrors of the camps for the readers, making them forget what came before and relentlessly dismantling hopes of adventure or heroism. This is the dimension which *W* or *the Memory of Childhood* and its autobiographical frame props. The first section starts by stating how Perec lost both his parents and how he has ‘no childhood memories’.¹⁴ He cannot truly explain why, or rather he can only explain it too well: ‘History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps’.¹⁵

The reader wonders whether that is the last frame in the chain, but History does not really answer the question. The French original (‘Histoire avec sa grande hache’) — as many critics have pointed out — puns with the two meanings of ‘hache’: the letter and “axe”.¹⁶ History is not a frame, it an axe: as Ross Chambers explains, this H/axe

¹² Perec, *W*, p. 162.

¹³ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 88.

¹⁴ Perec, *W*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Perec, *W*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Georges Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, p. 17. Ross Chambers offers a detailed analysis of the significance of the letter H and other letters. See Ross Chambers, ‘A Poetics of Quandary: Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and the Figure of Assemblage’, *French Forum*, 31.2 (2006), 53-80 (pp. 68-69).

Has chopped into his existence, inserting into it a gap or a blank that has made that existence a divided one [...] (dis)joined by a hiatus that renders his sense of being precarious.¹⁷

History is another gap, like the photographs were. After looking outwards we are back to where we started, to the frame in the shop window and the Prisunic. Indeed, what makes those objects so poignantly ‘precious’ is not just that they are frames, but also that (we imagine) they are empty. *W or the Memory of Childhood* might be the frame of *W* (the 1969-70 short novel), but if it is, it is – like the one in window – painfully blank. Or potentially full. We don’t know yet.

The purpose of this chapter will be to explore the paradoxes and enigmas raised by the empty frame and its seemingly endless multiplications and echoes. As we have seen by our “looking outwards” operation, the frame is used as a mirror-image, a *mise en abyme* which reflects the ambivalent and paradoxical nature of the text itself, half-autobiography, half-fiction – half-narrative, half-gap. The text’s explicit performance of these clefts (which were equally observable in the description of the photograph and its combination of objectivity, conjecture and tautology) make this text a particularly appropriate tool with which to explore the debates around the generic definition of autobiography, its narrative structure and the nature of its

¹⁷ Chambers, ‘A Poetics’, 53-80, (p. 66).

figurations, as well as its ethical dimension (which is brought to the fore by the text). *W or the Memory of Childhood* – like the picture frame – articulates what Chambers has described as a ‘poetics of quandary’ in which binary oppositions such as presence and absence, concordance and discordance, and – inevitably – autobiography and fiction are interrogated through the paradoxical enigma of another word which – like the frame – is misleadingly “cheap”, small, and easy to ignore: ‘ou’, or – in English – ‘or’.¹⁸

The chapter starts by reading the ‘or’ in the book’s title and the frame in relation to the dilemma of the text’s generic definition, then moves to an exploration of the paratextual frames of the book, and finally to a review of critical approaches to those frames in relation to the text’s generic status and its testimonial dimension as a narrative of the Holocaust. The second and third sections explore the text’s use of *mise en abyme* and its relation to its temporal structure as a way of approaching the text’s paradoxical mode of figuration. Although critics have approached the text’s ‘poetics of quandary’ through certain lenses (its use of letters, for instance), *mise en abyme* and narrative time have remained relatively underexplored: however, the text’s mode of endless reflexivity and its puzzling temporal enigmas will be revealed as mirror-images of each other. Its conjunction and disjunction form the lens through which this chapter approaches this text’s ultimately ambiguous and indeterminate mode of figuration.

¹⁸ Chambers, ‘A Poetics’, 53-80 (p. 53).

The division between the second and third section is not based around thematic lines, but instead follows the book's own split between Parts One and Two. This approach tries to stay close to the torturous but obsessive experience of reading the text, in order to allow us to discern the dialogues and collisions between its fictional and autobiographical segments, as well as the relation between the text's temporal structure and its use of *mise en abyme*. The conclusion tries to bring those analyses together in relation to a question posed by the conjunction of the frame and the 'or': once purchased, can the frame perform its duties? Will it be able to hold together and contain the hole of indeterminacy (the 'or') at its centre?

The Or-Text: (or)igins, frames and the generic definition of *W or the Memory of Childhood*

It is easy to overlook the significance of the disjunctive conjunction in the title of our curiosity. Its use is not original: Melville's *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* or *Moby Dick; or the Whale* or Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: a Family Chronicle* – to give examples from two of Perec's favourite authors – also have disjunctive titles.¹⁹ The second arm of the disjunction is traditionally used to provide a second explanatory title (usually referring to the book's theme). Of course, it may also be possible to read the second part not as an additional title but as *another* title: the book's title is either *Pierre* or *The Ambiguities*. In ordinary language, 'or' can refer to two types of logical disjunction: it can be either *logical* or *inclusive* (where one or more of its components is true, represented by the symbol \vee) or *exclusive* (where one component or the other are true, but not both, an "either/or" construction, represented by the symbol \oplus).

The next question that inevitably follows is whether the *or* at the centre of our title should be described as an inclusive or as an exclusive disjunction. Its layout might provide us with a clue: unlike its forebears, it has no punctuation and its three components appear in different lines rather than as

¹⁹ See Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (London: Penguin, 1996) and *Moby Dick; or, the Whale* (London: Penguin, 2003) and Nabokov, *Ada*.

a consecutive sentence in the title page. This separation might be a hint that its two alternative titles are not twins. Perhaps there is a difference, and the reader might need to choose.

The dilemma posed by the word *or* (even its syntactical tag, “disjunctive conjunction” is a paradox) can nonetheless be easily overlooked in the light of the title’s other mysteries — such as the meaning of the letter *W* or the odd singular (*‘le souvenir’* rather than *‘les’*).²⁰ Of course, for the book’s first readers the *W* itself was not a riddle, although the novella did not really explain the ultimate meaning of its title (it just mentions the island is called *W* because its founder might have been called Wilson).

After the last instalment of the novella in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, Perec added a note in which he explained to his probably baffled readers that *W* was only a fragment in a larger project, *W or the Memory of Childhood*.²¹ A reader might have then surmised that *the Memory of Childhood* was the theme of *W*, and would have waited (still baffled) for the next instalment. *W or the Memory of Childhood* arrived four years later than promised: it still included *W* (in italics) and a second text woven into it, an autobiography (in Roman script).²² Fiction and autobiography are alternated, constantly interrupting each other up to a (seemingly) central point, a page with only an ellipsis sign

²⁰ The oddity is lost in its English translation, as ‘memory’ both denotes the abstract and concrete meaning of the word.

²¹ See Bellos, p. 453.

²² There are excellent and very detailed accounts of the genesis of *W* in Bellos’s biography and in Lejeune’s *La mémoire et l’oblique*. The book was planned to be in three parts, which would be plaited (like a challah loaf, perhaps). The third part was meta-autobiographical, a commentary of how both texts came to be written and would include details of his analysis sessions. Some of it was incorporated into the autobiography section of *W*. See Bellos, pp. 448-462 and Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 92-138.

on it. After that point (or rather points) the series fiction-memoir-fiction-memoir starts anew.

We discussed previously how the autobiography section could be read as the 'frame' of the fiction, the tag or the supplement which explains it. Chambers — in a detailed reading of the title and the letter — reads the disjunctive conjunction as playing 'an analogous role' to the ellipsis sign 'while substituting for the continuity/discontinuity relation of the "points de suspension" an either-or of alternation, hesitation and dubiety'.²³ He thinks initially that it might be possible to read the *or* as an inclusive disjunction: both arms are true and they explain and prop each other.²⁴ He points out how Perec turns the letter W into a 'basic figure' from which other letters and symbols can be created (the letter X, the Star of David, a swastika).²⁵

This apparently pivotal character of the W has been picked upon by other critics. Madalina Akli, for instance, reads the letter as an unambiguously 'anchoring' emblem which stabilises the text, a master-key: the letter 'recalls his mother's death', designates 'the narrative structure of the book based on juxtaposition and [...] convergence' and is also 'a prop [...] a *place-mat* and a web that allow rooting and anchoring'.²⁶ Chambers — unlike Akli — reads on beyond the letter's semblance of coherence. For him, the letter's shape (its

²³ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72). Chambers does not use logic terminology to describe disjunction, his use of the term comes from Deleuze and Guattari.

²⁴ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72).

²⁵ Perec, *W*, p. 77.

²⁶ Akli, pp. 179-180.

middle in particular) point 'to a site of juncture without connection, or connected disjuncture': the centre is 'a place of intersection and *éclatement*'.²⁷

In other words, for Chambers the W might not be an "and" but an "or": it provides a prop 'but on shifting, unstable ground'.²⁸ The three parts of the title are mirror-images of each other, frames within frames. Even the singular 'le' is another unsolvable disjunction: as he remarks (as well as other critics such as Vincent Colonna), it could refer to 'the general topic of "remembering childhood", and hence to embrace the childhood writing of "W" as well as the memories addressed in the narrative of personal reminiscence'.²⁹ Or it could allude to

The forgotten memory [...] that cannot be recounted [...] the memory for which the double set of memories are only [...] a dubious [...] substitute, an inadequate supplementation.³⁰

The title (which Colonna describes as 'disruptive and unifying') spreads the unsolvable disjunction of its centre to its two borderlines, creating an infinite regress of frames — a whirligig.³¹

Akli's and Chambers's disparate readings of the letter W illustrate in miniature the critical debates around Perec's text (of course, the W is itself a

²⁷Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72).

²⁸Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72).

²⁹Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72) and Vincent Colonna, 'W, un livre blanc', in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance: une fiction. Séminaire 1986-1987*, ed. by Marcel Bénabou and Jean-Yves Pouilloux (Paris: UFR Sciences des textes et documents, Université de Paris 7, 1988), pp. 15-24 (pp 18-19).

³⁰Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 72).

³¹Colonna, 'W, un livre', p.19.

miniature, a synecdoche). Those debates ultimately revolve around the interpretation of the text's emblems, symbols and *mise en abymes* – which, as Chambers rightly points out, are both settling and unsettling. The act of interpretation of emblems such as the W becomes also an act of generic definition, as the contrasting positions of Akli and Chambers demonstrate. Akli reads the W as a perfect conjunction of content and form which reconciles figuration and memory, fiction and autobiography; Chambers sees it as a sign of both disjunction and conjunction, of writing as the restoration of memory and writing as its absence.

As we will shortly see, the conjunctive reading is perhaps the more frequent of the two. Chambers is one of the few critics who follow Perec's frames inwards and outwards in their incessant expansion (although he does not analyse the 'frame' motif).³² The conclusion at which he arrives from this dizzying excursion provides an interesting alternative to the other approaches to *W*'s genre – which will be discussed shortly. But before doing so, it might be wise to consider Perec's own generic definition: the frame of the title. It is likely it will leave us in the same place, but it might also allow us to look at the *or* from a safer distance.

³² Akli's approach is reminiscent to that of Bernard Magné. Apart from Magné, other conjunctive readings include those of Lejeune, Eleanor Kaufman or Claire Boyle. See Bernard Magné, 'Les sutures dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance: une fiction. Séminaires 1986-1987* (see Bénabou, above), pp. 39-53, Lejeune, *La mémoire*, Eleanor Kaufman, 'Falling from the Sky: Trauma in Perec's *W* and Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*', *Diacritics*, 28.4 (1998), 44-53 and Claire Boyle, *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France* (Leeds: Legenda, 2007).

‘Fragile overlapping’: X and the exergue of *W or the Memory of Childhood*

Although I have been so far referring to definitional paratexts as “generic markers” (as Derrida does in ‘The Law of Genre’), it is very tempting here to refer to them by another metaphor he uses in *Of Grammatology*, the exergue.³³ The reason for that choice would have nothing to do with Derrida’s use of the word, or its content and resonances (there is a small coin motif in *W*, though) but simply with the word itself: it contains the *e*, the *r* and the *g* of Perec’s name, the *e* of the dedication and even an *x*, another of the alphabetic emblems of *W*. Indeed, the first paragraph of this border-line piece ends with the word ‘intersection’ (Bellos translates it as ‘overlapping’) – an X.

Initially published as a blurb (French editions place it either in the back-flap or at the back cover), it was moved to the front in its English translation (one wonders what Perec would make of the errant drifting of his note, as if it was one of the lifeboats of the Bureau Veritas).³⁴ Compared to the author’s note published years earlier in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, this piece seems less enigmatic and oracular. Colonna, for instance, considers it ‘a veritable user’s manual to the book’.³⁵ This section analyses how this passage defines *W or the Memory of Childhood* (or not) from both a generic and a

³³ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.3.

³⁴ In the original edition the text appeared in the flap, in two posterior editions in the back cover. In the Harvill/Vintage translation by Bellos it appears inside the book, as a preface.

³⁵ Colonna, ‘*W un livre blanc*’, pp. 15-23 (p. 17).

narrative point of view, in order to ascertain if this piece — ostensibly the last frame of the book — provides any stability to the whirligigs of the title.

The note starts with a description of the text's curious structure, suggesting a possible interpretation for it:

In this book there are two texts which simply alternate: you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound with each other, as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was only their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in the one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping.³⁶

Initially, one could agree with Colonna in regarding the note as a helpful gloss to the mysteries of the book: the opening paragraph “explains” the awkward disjunction by emphasising instead the connection and interdependency between the two arms of the text. It inclines the reader towards an inclusive reading (in the line of Akli's): there is ‘overlapping’, there is an X. However, the first paragraph also insists on the fragility of that criss-crossing: the difference between the two is rendered through the metaphor of distance. Fiction and autobiography are also far from one another, casting mutual ‘distant light’ on each other. This distance could be read in both spatial and temporal terms, which makes their bridging more difficult. An X can, after all, be unmade into a square if its four arms are

³⁶ Perec, *W*, preface.

detached from each other: the X might be another frame inside another frame.³⁷

The opening paragraph is perhaps too inconclusive; but those readers looking for a manual should not desist yet. The second paragraph abandons foggy metaphors for clear-cut definitions, both generic and narrative. After establishing a kind of distant kinship between the book's two components, Perec immediately proceeds to differentiate them along generic and formal lines:

One of these texts is entirely imaginary: it's an adventure story, an arbitrary but careful reconstruction of a childhood fantasy about a land in thrall to the Olympic ideal. The other text is an autobiography: a fragmentary tale of a wartime childhood, a tale lacking in exploits and memories, made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meagre anecdotes. Next to it, the adventure story is rather grandiose, or maybe dubious.³⁸

Lejeune had identified the paratext as one of the most frequent locations in which the 'autobiographical pact' is performed — this blurb might be no exception. It explicitly defines the two "arms" in generic terms, although *not* as a single genre: one part is clearly a fiction, the other an autobiography. And the fiction is not merely a fiction but 'entirely' a fiction: perhaps because it

³⁷ In his digression about the letter, Perec morphs it into a great variety of signs and letters — apart from the square. See Perec, *W*, p. 77.

³⁸ Perec, *W*, preface.

belongs to a particularly “fictional” or non-realistic sub-genre, the adventure story.

However, the sharp outlines of the definition are soon blurred by the supplementary (framing) description of the two parts which follows their definition. The fiction is described as an ‘arbitrary but careful reconstruction of a childhood fantasy’: Perec hints here at its autobiographical anchoring.³⁹ The fiction is transmuted into an example of juvenilia — with the implication that it cannot be read solely in its own merits, but as a fantasy of the author’s youth (to use Lejeune’s expression).

The description of the autobiography, on the other hand, does not dismantle its referential status: in highlighting its fragmentary nature, it presents it as an honest and transparent representation of the recollections it purports to narrate. Its form and its content are concordant. As a definition, Perec’s note upsets the apparent generic balance and tilts the book towards autobiography: it asks us to look at the fiction as a ‘childhood fantasy’ but not to read the autobiography as other than referential. However, as Colonna points out, the two arms are also described as ‘textes’ (texts) and the whole as ‘livre’ (book): for all the apparent certainty of the definition, Perec does not place the whole unambiguously within one generic camp or the other.⁴⁰

³⁹ Perec, *W*, preface.

⁴⁰ Colonna, ‘*W*, un livre blanc’, pp. 15-23 (p. 17).

Another interesting feature of the supplementary description – and one which allows us to read questions of genre in relation to narrative structure – is that it separates the two “arms” according to formal criteria. The description of the fiction as an adventure novel does not immediately confirm or deny the reader’s initial expectation about that genre’s form (one expects adventures to be linear and plot-driven). The description of the autobiography, on the other hand, immediately identifies it as a formally anomalous one: it is full of gaps and ‘lacking in exploits’. If the generic definition tilted the book towards autobiography, the narrative definition nonetheless characterises his approach to the genre as both sincere and unconventional.

The blurb thus defines the two arms of the book *against* each other. The fiction, in contrast to the authenticity of the fragmentary structure, becomes suspect and perhaps false. Narrative choices are charged with moral and even ideological significance: indeed, for Claire Boyle Perec’s rejection of traditional linear autobiography is part of an indictment of ‘totalizing systems’ and ‘a political commitment to uncovering their ideological blind spots’.⁴¹ Perhaps the genre of the adventure story (and its non-fragmentary form) is also morally ‘dubious’. The text’s narrative and generic choices are read in a moral and ideological key. This reading, whilst convincing, is nonetheless based in a partial and fragmented reading of the blurb. In the

⁴¹ Boyle, p. 78. Boyle does not refer to the note here, however, but to the overall structure.

next sentence ('For it begins to tell a tale and then, all of a sudden, launches into another'), the 'dubious' nature of the tale is given an explanatory frame which problematizes the narrative definition of the text.⁴² It implies that the 'dubious' character of the tale of *W* might not be the result of its linear structure but rather the opposite. The fiction is here defined as a departure from the conventional narrative model of the adventure story: it is also fragmented. Perhaps there might not be any inherent moral or ideological value in fragmentariness: the tale might be suspect because of its cleft and elliptical nature. If that is true, readers may wonder whether the autobiographical is equally 'dubious'. Maybe, maybe not. As Colonna puts it, 'this new hiatus weakens the autobiographical covering of the fiction and the homogenisation of the two texts'.⁴³ Again, we are faced with a supplementary prop which ends up disturbing the stability fixed by its predecessor.

The blurb, however, does not end there either. It concludes by returning to the question posed by the beginning: how the two parts – which the 'defining' paragraph has starkly divided, particularly in narrative terms – might relate to one another.

For it begins to tell one tale and then, all of a sudden, launches into another: in this break, in this split suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation, can be found the point of departure for the whole of this book: the *points of suspension* on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.⁴⁴

⁴² Perec, *W*, preface.

⁴³ Colonna, 'W, un livre', pp. 15-23 (p. 17).

⁴⁴ Perec, *W*, preface.

The conclusion returns to the blurry focus and figural language of the start in order to explore the significance of the gap between the two texts. This gap, marked by an ellipsis sign, is described through both temporal and spatial metaphors. Perec first calls it an 'attente', an 'expectation': although Bellos's translation is correct, the French word can also refer to a concrete waiting period as well as to an abstract concept. The gap is thus an interruption of the flow of the reading process. Perec then switches to a spatial metaphor and calls it 'the point of departure'. The gap is redefined not as an interruption but a kind of *omphalos*, its belly button, at the same time centre and origin (or is it (or)igin?) of the whole structure. Again we are faced with a (tilted) choice.

Having concluded the preface/blurb, readers may wonder whether they have been led to a more stable observation point. The opening and the middle haven't, but we can still hope for a last-minute change. The spatial/temporal metaphors initially seem useful, although we may wonder whether we should actually interpret them in those terms. The spatial figure is also temporal (the point of departure as the true beginning of the book) and the temporal one spatial (the ellipsis as the bus stop or station platform in which we wait for the journey to start again). They designate similar spaces or spots of time. The *omphalos* reading also misinterprets the supposed centrality of the ellipsis: it might be a symbolic centre, but it is not a physical one. The book is interrupted a third of the way, rather than in the middle: *W* – unlike "W" – is not symmetrical. That does not necessarily make the ellipsis any less

of a departure point, but it hinders any easy identification between the stable model created by the W and a text which might not be balanced, and which denies us the chance of reading this dissymmetry (or inclination) as a definite choice.

The textile (and textual) tropes are equally hard to pin down. Childhood and writing are defined using different metaphors: his childhood and his memories are 'broken threads', writing is a 'web', and they are 'caught' in the ellipsis — a verb that turns the 'points de suspension' into a spider-web or a fishing net. The figures seem inconclusive — like the ellipsis sign. Indeed, they can be read alongside Chambers's detailed analysis of that ellipsis sign (which he reads on its own, without its paratextual props). He starts by affirming that the 'points de suspension' point' (his pun) at a 'supportive function of writing', which turns it into 'a relic [...] when the possibility of completeness and wholeness has been exploded and nothingness threatens'.⁴⁵ So, if we consider the web of the ellipsis from this point of view, the points *might* be able to catch the falling threads, and thus repair the cleft of the 'or' — as well as the cleft between genres and narrative styles. Returning to our initial comparison to the frame, we may deduct that the ellipsis might be different.

The exergue, however, has constantly teased the reader by suggesting the possibility of conjunction: both fiction and autobiography are

⁴⁵ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 69).

autobiographies, both adventure story and memoir are fragmentary. Those unions, however, have quickly generated new questions, new gaps. It is no surprise that Chambers's optimistic reading of the ellipsis sign becomes dubitative very quickly: he soon thinks that the 'suspension points draw attention to the void that surrounds them', and what they index is 'the absence of support, the silence and emptiness that writing attempts to supplement'.⁴⁶

The figures used by Perec do not exactly bring writing and childhood together, but describe them antithetically: the fact that they are both 'caught' does not mean that they can be assimilated into one another. Maybe the threads can be caught, but they cannot be turned into a web. The comparison of the ellipsis sign with a net cannot disguise that it also signifies a void: the centre of the empty frame. The figure of the web that gets caught in a web only serves to bring to mind the dizzying structures of framed frames which we observed at the start. We haven't moved on, of course.

⁴⁶ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 69).

Autobiography or fiction: *W or the Memory of Childhood* and the generic debates

Autobiography or fiction — is that the inevitable end-point towards which the blurb directs the discussion of the text's genre? The 'or' might be inclusive: both genres might be "true". Or it might be exclusive: only one of the genres is "true" of the book. Or none of them. In fact, the disjunction seems inappropriate and misguided: there is no such thing as the 'truth-value' of a genre. And autobiography might not even be in a disjunctive relation with fiction. For all the initial assertiveness of the blurb's generic definition, the frame of the 'generic tag' was quickly unsettled by the other frames which surrounded it.

And yet the blurb does not immediately dismiss autobiography as a generic tag. Like *Speak, Memory*, *W* also unfolds in a complex structure of *mise en abymes* (or framed frames) which unsettle the definition and the binary oppositions it relies on. The second and third part of the chapter will examine the relation between generic definition, reflexivity and figuration in more detail; but — before moving on — it might be useful to explore different critical approaches to the text's genre: *W*'s curious nature provides us with an excellent angle through which to assess arguments and positions in the debate about autobiography.

Taking that aim into consideration, the ideal starting point for our survey should be perhaps Philippe Lejeune, whose works also include one of the most detailed and exhaustively researched monographs on *W*: *La mémoire et l'oblique* (*Memory and the Oblique*). Although the introduction has examined Lejeune's delightful musings and U-turns (and U-turns of U-turns) about his theories, we have not explored how he applies the 'pact' to a complex and ambiguous text. Unsurprisingly, he examines paratextual generic definitions of the text (such as Perec's 1978 article 'Notes on What I am Looking For') as sites where the autobiographical pact is performed.⁴⁷ In this piece, Perec undertakes an exhaustive taxonomy of his works: *W* is placed in the 'autobiographical' camp, together with *Je me souviens* and *La boutique obscure*.⁴⁸ His definition of the text as an autobiography is not solely based on this supplement: for him, the detailed genetic study of the text's drafts and manuscripts also 'proves that it was an autobiography, constructed from the failure of a fiction'.⁴⁹ Curiously, he does not mention his criterion of homonymy between the author, narrator and protagonist — perhaps because it only applies to one part of the book rather than the whole.⁵⁰

In fact, his approach is not particularly pragmatic or reader-centred: his classification is supported by a definition of autobiography which differs

⁴⁷ See Lejeune, 'Georges Perec: Autobiographie et fiction', in *Genèse et autofiction* (see Jeannelle, above), pp. 143-147 (p. 146) and Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 141-143.

⁴⁸ His other three categories are sociological (books about the everyday), ludic (*La Disparition*) and novelesque or fictive (*Life a User's Manual*, "books to devour lying face down in bed"). See Perec, *Species*, pp. 141-143.

⁴⁹ Lejeune, 'Georges Perec: Autobiographie et Fiction', pp. 143-147 (p. 145).

⁵⁰ Incidentally, Perec discusses his surname in a lot of detail, and finds himself related to Izak Leib Peretz, a Polish writer in Yiddish. See Perec, *W*, p. 33.

from the one given in 'The Autobiographical Pact'. He affirms that in *W* 'autobiography is active in two levels: it is at the same time the means of the system, and its end'.⁵¹ He defines autobiography according to different criteria: its 'means', which probably implies the use of homonymity and first-person retrospective narrative; and its 'ends', which we would presume implies reference. Autobiography as an 'end' is also underpinned by the 'phantasmatic pact' and his model of the 'autobiographical space': a move that only leads to a thorough collision with the problem of figuration.

For Lejeune *W* integrates in one text the two components of the autobiographical space 'making them produce meaning through their assembly'.⁵² We would thus assume that the meaning of the autobiography is supplemented by the phantasmatic fiction. However, this fiction is also described as a 'failed' fiction (Lejeune mentions that these were Perec's words, not his). The notion of 'failure' was also used by him in his definition of the 'autobiographical space', although he applied it to an autobiography which needed to be supplemented by fictional phantasms because its author had 'organized [...] a spectacular failure of their autobiography' and had '*chosen* to leave their autobiography incomplete, fragmented, full of holes'.⁵³ Failure is the engine of the 'autobiographical space', but Lejeune's notion of

⁵¹ Lejeune, 'Georges Perec: Autobiographie et Fiction', pp. 143-147 (p. 145).

⁵² Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 85.

⁵³ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, pp. 27-28. Lejeune mentions in *La mémoire* that Perec talked of the novella as a failure. See Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 91.

failure is oddly articulated as an authorial formal choice, rather than a readerly one.

However, we may wonder whether that model actually describes *W*. The comparison might be unsustainable: according to Lejeune, in *W* the fiction is read phantasmatically because of its own failure, rather than the failure of the autobiography. What that failure entails is not easy to discern: a fiction cannot really “fail” to refer to an external referent, although it could “fail” to comply with certain formal criteria (which it is not in itself a failure). It is also not clear whether Lejeune is referring to a failure in the reception of the book, either. Of course, his criteria can also be applied to the autobiographical section. If both are failures, can there be a privileged mode of reading? Although *W* is structured around the interaction or collision of two texts, this game of contrasts does not lead to an unproblematic access to reference, truth and meaning, as Lejeune claims.

Perhaps the most illuminating parts of Lejeune’s reading of *W* are the ones that stray from the rigid models of ‘The Autobiographical Pact’. Curiously, he describes the interaction between the two texts through a familiar metaphor: for him

Perec [...] organised a kind of revolving door/stand between the two series, each being [...] the truth of the other, although truth is presented as a problem that the reader must take responsibility for.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 73.

Although the insistence on 'truth' is problematic, at least here it is presented as a 'problem'. Later on he defines the book not just as an autobiography but as a 'critical autobiography': an autobiography which 'instead of defending itself against suspicion, takes it into account' and where the author 'undertakes [...] a critical examination of his/her own memory'.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, many approaches in the last twenty years have tended to define *W* as an autobiography (Boyle or Linda Anderson's readings, for instance) and have uncovered (to different degrees) aspects of this self-questioning process.⁵⁶

Another important feature of Lejeune's analysis of *W* is its Freudian orientation, particularly his use of the concept of the 'screen memory'.⁵⁷ This mode of interpretation — whilst proving valuable insights — needs nonetheless to be explored in relation to the text's questioning of stable readings. Ultimately, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of his approach is his (rather Perecquian) inventory of the features that define Perec's autobiographical writings (discretion, conviviality, intertextuality, operability, sabotage, accumulation, obliqueness, blockage, enclosure and dissemination): a list which highlights their paradoxical, contradictory and perhaps undefinable character.

⁵⁵ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 74-75.

⁵⁶ See Anderson, p. 129, Boyle, p. 66.

⁵⁷ Other psychoanalytic readings include Kaufman, 44-53 and Andy Leak, 'Some Ramifications of the Theme of Laterality in the Work of Georges Perec', *Nottingham French Studies*, 40.2 (2001), 46-58.

Other approaches have sought to analyse *W*'s testimonial dimension and how its nature as a narrative of the Holocaust relates to its generic status. Claire Boyle takes Lejeune's remark about the 'oblique' character of Perec's autobiographical writing as the basis for her generic definition of the text: for her, Perec's book follows a new, awry mode of referentiality which seeks to subvert the systems of traditional autobiography but which still aspires to present a testimony of his personal history and that of his parents.⁵⁸ Boyle identifies an element of ethical unease in Perec's fragmented model of autobiography, which for her is partially alleviated by the text's use of allegory:

Perec's answer to the conundrum of how to testify to his experience against the backdrop of the Holocaust's legacy which has dispossessed him of his history and selfhood is to refuse to recount directly the defining events of his life. Instead he will bear witness to the past only by alluding to it, [...] Through the allegorical technique [...] Perec is able to answer an imperative to bear witness to his history; by employing allegory in conjunction with two parallel intercut narratives, he creates a dispossessed text which tells 'towards' his experience, whilst foregrounding the gaps and absences which are central to Perec's relationship to his own past through the text's incompleteness and fragmentation.⁵⁹

Boyle interprets the fictional arms of the book (particularly the second part, the story of the island) as Perec's attempt at representing the Holocaust through allegory. The fiction is not only a trace of his earliest creative attempt

⁵⁸ Boyle, p. 72.

⁵⁹ Boyle, p. 72.

to make sense of his personal history. It also must thus be read allegorically as well as autobiographically, as the closest Perec can get at representing the unrepresentable:

The W segments venture towards the horror of the deportations to concentration camps, thus allowing the *indicibilité* that cloaks the historical events, as well as the enterprise of autobiographical writing, to begin to be surmounted.⁶⁰

Perhaps the main problem with Boyle's theory is her assumption that a fragmented, self-conscious autobiography cannot provide sufficient testimony, and that allegory will give an unequivocal access to historical truth. She reads the W story as a 'critique of textual systems' (and by implication, of the totalitarian ideology that might underpin them) but then also points out how 'the success of *W or the Memory of Childhood* nevertheless depends on a textual system: allegory'.⁶¹ The frame again mirrors the frame. Boyle is aware of a paradox in Perec's use of allegory but it does not let it spoil her argument for the referential "success" of the book. Perec is as suspicious of allegory as he is of traditional autobiography: the book indeed simultaneously proposes and disarms totalising interpretations. Ultimately, the idea of success (like the idea of failure) is problematic, and oversimplifies allegory as a mode of figuration and reading. Her dismissal of contradiction

⁶⁰ Boyle, p. 73.

⁶¹ Boyle, p. 79.

fails to take into account that testimony might be itself aporetic (as Derrida discusses in *Demeure*).⁶²

Regarding contradiction and testimony, Ross Chambers offers an interesting alternative to models such as Boyle's. Chambers uses Deleuze and Guattari's idea of 'disjunctive synthesis' or *agencement* as an approach to *W*'s paradoxes. Chambers defines this concept as

[T]he "agencing" of an effect of signification that would be unavailable to direct expression and even escapes authorial control, but can nevertheless be registered and acknowledged (if not described) through an act of reading that in turn has cultural effects.⁶³

For Chambers, *W*'s 'deficiency of signification' can result in a

[R]ecognition that readerly supplementation shares with writerly supplementation a more basic deficiency – that of an inability to identify verbally what it is in language itself that *goes unsaid*.⁶⁴

Those silences could be read as a presencing of 'the void, [...] oblivion, [...] emptiness; or [...] atrocity, the Shoah, death, danger or destruction'.⁶⁵ Chambers's contribution to the generic debate is significant precisely because it is *not* a contribution to it: rather than trying to pin down the text around a binary opposition based on reference, he prefers to discuss the text's mode (or

⁶² See Blanchot/Derrida, *The Instant of my Death/Demeure*, pp. 32-38.

⁶³ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p.54).

⁶⁴ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 56).

⁶⁵ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p. 54).

modes) of figuration. However, his model shows how a rejection of reference might not entail a rejection of the possibility of testimony: a testimony which nonetheless operates through silence rather through tropological substitutions. In relation to the debates we have examined, Chambers's contribution emphasises the importance of reading *on* in *W* (as well as reading inwards and outwards) and the dangers of over-simplifying its modes of figuration.

Despite the problematic nature of the autobiography/fiction divide in *W*, we also find readings of *W* as either a fiction or an autofiction. Those who have read *W* as an autofiction include the term's father/mother, Serge Doubrovsky – although he also points out at the differences between his own and Perec's strategies.⁶⁶ The model of hybridity evoked by autofiction can only be half-applied to Perec's text: Lejeune has accurately pointed out how the relation between its two components is not 'not a fusion but rather a fission – the apparent war of two alternating texts'.⁶⁷ Despite of this, many critical approaches to *W* (particularly that of Bernard Magné) are based around the identification of what he calls 'suture points' or 'stitches' between the two sections. Magné's reading does not invoke hybridity, or even equality between the parts: for him 'the fiction submits to the autobiography, because the writing of the fiction is not solely part his biography [...] but – essentially – part of his autobiography'.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Serge Doubrovsky, in an interview with Isabelle Grell. See Isabelle Grell, '“Le travail de la madeleine l'envers”', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 46 (2009), 3-28 (p. 9).

⁶⁷ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 63, 'Georges Perec : Autobiographie et fiction', pp.143-147 (p. 144).

⁶⁸ Magné, 'Les sutures', pp. 39-55 (p. 41).

Perhaps the most controversial of all readings of *W* is that offered by David Bellos in his biography. Bianca Lamblin (Perec's cousin) strongly objected to some of Bellos's speculations: Bellos disregards *W*'s textual and figurative dimension in favour of reading it as a key to unlock Perec's secrets.⁶⁹ Bellos nonchalantly describes *W* in its very first mention in the biography as an "autobiographical fiction" (in inverted commas), a generic inscription which is never fully justified or explained.⁷⁰ One can guess why through his analysis, which is nonetheless based on a rather narrow concept of fiction (he uses it as synonym of "falsifications" and "lies"). Bellos attempts to correct factual errors in the autobiography but does not read those errors as sporadic anomalies. For him,

Almost every assertion in the memory chapters of *W or the Memory of Childhood* asks to be questioned, and the answer in most cases is that the memory [...] has been altered, reworked, decorated or plainly falsified⁷¹.

Bellos's analyses read Perec's *explicit* signposting of the provisional, fragile and figurative nature of his memories as a deceit, and thus as a fiction. He fails to recognise they might not be "lies" at all: tragically, there is no "truth" to judge them against. The weakness of Bellos's analysis is its reliance upon problematic assumptions about referential 'success' or 'failure'. For him, 'the whole dynamic of the writing of *W or the Memory of Childhood* lay precisely in

⁶⁹ See Bianca Lamblin, 'La biographie de Georges Perec par David Bellos: lecture critique', in *Antibiotiques: Cahiers Georges Perec* 7, ed. by Eric Beaumatin, pp. 32-70.

⁷⁰ Bellos, p. 5.

⁷¹ Bellos, p. 548.

falsification, in producing *a book that cheats but works nonetheless*'.⁷² The rhetoric of cheating (which *W* explicitly explores and undermines) only reinforces the problematic oppositions between success and failure, or truth and lies.

Bellos's reading, for all its apparent iconoclasm, does not really stray very far from that of Lejeune. His analysis of Perec's errors and lies interprets them in an autobiographical and referential key — like Lejeune, he sees fiction as the 'means' of autobiography. According to him, the errors are planted to be discovered by readers, in order for us to question what is being omitted from the text, what the memories hide, the truth behind oblivion and lies. For Bellos, the thread that connects Perec's 'lies' is his Jewish identity: through a network of invented memories he shows his guilty and uneasy wavering between denial and affirmation, and presents an indictment of the historical circumstances that made it possible (it is this unjustified insistence on Perec's guilt that Lamblin finds problematic).⁷³ Ultimately, like Boyle's analysis, it narrows down the "truth" of the book to one of its parts, rather than exploring how meaning is made and unmade by the interaction and collision between the fragments.

This sample of how genre has been approached throughout the history of *W*'s critical reception has highlighted the limitations of generic definitions based on referential criteria. For instance, Boyle's emphasis on access (oblique

⁷²Bellos, p. 546. Bellos is using the words that Perec used to describe on his failed early novels, *Le Condottiere*. See Bellos, pp. 545-546.

⁷³Bellos, pp. 550-555. See for example his analysis of Perec's first memory. Bellos, p. 552.

or direct) or success simplifies significantly the nature of testimony and historical reference. As we have seen, *W* is a text which is continuously (and temptingly) proposing various self-inflicted simplifications (or synecdoches of itself) only to immediately undermine and dissolve them, and in which success and failure are used as figures which the reader is required to interrogate.

The text's resistance to totalization will be the thread that connects this chapter's various foci. This movement was traced by Chambers through his analysis of the alphabetic motifs: this chapter, however, will use different props, props which may not have been "purchased" that often throughout the history of *W*'s critical reception. They will not be selected because they are necessarily better props or better frames: their lack of critical popularity does not make them any less frame-like — and ultimately any less insufficient. Readers of *W* are continuously tempted by synecdoches that seemingly reveal the meaning of the text (my "frames" frame is no exception): perhaps a more scattered approach might prove less restrictive. Despite our reservations about the illusory allure of novelty, the relative neglect of our samples might nonetheless reveal something about the role of props and frames in how the book has come to be remembered and read: we may wonder whether certain self-referential motifs are more important than others, and whether that hierarchy (like everything else) is suggested only to be dismantled.

The "bargains" which the second and third part of this chapter examines are the text's narrative temporal 'frame' and its use of *mise en abyme*.

W's narrative structure was characterised in the exergue as both disjunctive and conjunctive: a tension which is re-enacted in the conflicting metaphorical accounts of the text as a 'fission' (by Lejeune) and as a 'stitching' operation (by Magné). The next two sections seek to explore this tension by examining it in relation to the text's play with *fabula/sjuzhet* dichotomies in its organisation and its multiplication of temporal structures. The text's indeterminate and polychronous narrative structure will be examined in relation to the text's self-referential frames in order to discern the connection the text establishes between time, silence, figuration and testimony.

The narrative structure of *W* (as anything else in the text) cannot, however, be examined in isolation: it is itself a mirror which is mirrored (and disturbed) by the other mirrors of the text. This analysis makes use of the Gidean moniker for the device, *mise en abyme*: not because the term itself is a kind of master-key but solely to provide some theoretical propping to *W*'s framing games. In fact, the reflexive and paradoxical dimensions of the technique articulate succinctly the unsettling movements of *W*'s self-referential motifs. If the theoretical frame is relatively novel (the exception here is Matthew Escobar's essay on Gide and Perec), its "photograph" nonetheless isn't: what Chambers designates as Perec's 'figures of figuration' have not been ignored at all.⁷⁴ The letters (both French and Hebrew) and

⁷⁴ See Escobar, 413-433. Perec is the author of one of the most charming and intriguing ekphrastic *mise en abyme* fictions of contemporary literature, *Un cabinet d'amateur* (*A Gallery Portrait*). See Georges Perec, *Three by Perec*, trans. by Ian Monk (Boston: David R. Godine, 2004).

other motifs such as the “wound/prop/fall/parachute” cluster have become recurrent critical obsessions.⁷⁵

As I previously mentioned, this chapter examines *mise en abyme* through relatively “unpurchased” examples which include the temporal structure itself, frames in all their different disguises (which only Magné has commented upon), as well as one of Perec’s regular figural models – games – which have been bypassed by critics in favour of using sport to provide a critique of totalitarian ideology. *W*, however, combines both play *and* sport motifs: this opposition will also be interrogated. Perhaps the most important decision a critic must make before considering any of the frames of the book is to decline to study them in isolation: instead, the focus should fall on their collaborations and disagreements and the power dynamics that these relationships disclose.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the next two sections seek to combine the tidiness of a thematic approach (with a drawer for ‘time’ and another for ‘motifs’) with a deliberate reflection of *W*’s messy nature. At times, the structure follows that of a reading guide or an annotated commentary – indeed, the best one available, Anne Roche’s, is particularly insightful because of its unstructured format. Section two will cover the chapters preceding the ellipsis, and section three the chapters that follow it –

⁷⁵ See Bellos, pp. 552-553 and Lejeune, ‘La mémoire’, pp. 210-231 for analyses of the Hebrew letter; Chambers, ‘The Poetics’, 53-80 (pp. 64-74), Bellos, pp. 554-554 or Escobar, 413-433 for analyses of the significance of the letters, and Kaufman, 44-53 (pp. 44-53) and Kirsty Guneratne, ‘Left Behind: Memory, Laterality and Clinamen in Perec’s *W ou le Souvenir d’Enfance*’, *Romance Studies*, 24.1 (2006), 29-40 for studies of the fall/wound motif.

although the two parts (like the two ‘frames’) will not be described in isolation from each other. The purpose of this structure is to examine how the linear process of reading *W* is constantly being broken (or forgotten) and repaired (remembered and then re-membered, re-jointed).⁷⁶ Memory and oblivion are not only the concern of the author, but also of the readers — who are forced to perform both as they advance through the book. The preponderant “purchase” of certain motifs in the text’s critical reception could also be read as a sign of that the text might be remembering itself, that it might be creating its future memories (for instance, though the repetition of certain episodes).

Ultimately, memory itself (both the author’s and the reader’s) is revealed as paradoxical and aporetic: memory is also oblivion because it needs to forget oblivion in order to become memory. Rescuing a feature from oblivion (for instance, the backgammon game) also brings into relief what that ‘memory’ is itself forgetting. The text is facilitating our critical work *and* diabolically making it impossible. We must thus proceed with our reading with the awareness that we may be constantly defeated — but also with the hope that the text might not be a game at all. Or maybe not.

⁷⁶The re-member pun not based on the word’s etymology. Remember the word comes from the Latin “re-memorare” meaning “calling to mind again”, and not from “membrum”, meaning limb or body part.

A game of backgammon: Part One of *W or the Memory of Childhood*

A game of backgammon: this was the rather anti-climactic ending of the first instalment of *W* in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*. Until that point, as Roche points out, the tale seems to adhere to the narrative conventions of adventure stories.⁷⁷ However, the familiar breathable air of the story is soon clouded by the ‘mindless mist’ announced by the text’s epigraph (a line from Raymond Queneau’s *Chêne et chien*). The narrator’s ‘guiding spirits’ or ‘ombres tutélaires’ – Melville’s Ishmael and Bartleby – soon haunt and cloud the reader.⁷⁸ The narrator’s account of his childhood and early life which follows the preamble combines precision (dates) and vagueness (Kafkaesque initials).⁷⁹ The ‘mists’ and ‘shadows’ of the epigraph climax in the aforementioned (non) cliff-hanger ending: ‘I [...] spent most of my evenings watching television or, occasionally, playing backgammon with one or another of my workmates’.⁸⁰

The game is granted a place of privilege in the narrative, but why?

Although the ending might be nothing more than a parody of the closure

⁷⁷ Roche, p.17 Examples of framed adventures would include Poe’s ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’ or *Heart of Darkness*, amongst many others.

⁷⁸Perec, *W*, p. 4 and Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, p. 15.

⁷⁹Perec, *W*, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁰Perec, *W*, p. 5.

conventions of serial fiction, backgammon seems at first sight a rather convincing (perhaps privileged) *mise en abyme* for the whole: it might be indeed the real ‘guiding spirit’ of the book — particularly for those readers acquainted with Perec’s love of games and his Oulipian activities.⁸¹ The design of the board resembles the design of *W*. Its two arms might be playing against each other, moving forwards in opposite directions. Both narratives are also, in a sense, ‘bearing off’ their pieces: the opening chapter the tale could be said to be discarding the burden of ‘adventure-story’ clichés, and obstructing the reader’s passage through the board. The game of backgammon is itself a “move” in a larger game of backgammon. The autobiography — as we observed in our analysis of the frame and the description of the father’s photograph — will also be motivated by a similar desire to subtract and “bear off” its content by highlighting its “framed” quality. The game between the two sections might be but the echo of the game between Perec and the reader.

There is a point, however, when this allegory machine breaks down. The reader starts to wonder what (or who) are the dices, for example. It might be useful to compare it here to Nabokov’s chess problem. That figure seems to render the dynamics between writer and reader more accurately: Nabokov sets the problem and we play. But reading *W* as a game of backgammon

⁸¹ Studies of the ludic dimension of Perec’s writing include Warren Motte, *A Poetics of Experiment: A Study of the Work of Georges Perec* (Lexington, Ky: French Forum, 1984), Kimberly Bohman-Kalajah, *Reading Games: An Aesthetic of Play in Flann O’Brien, Samuel Beckett and Georges Perec* (Normal, Ill.: Dalkey Archive, 2007) and David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006).

between reader and writer assumes that reader and writer are playing against each other a game that none of them have written — which is not the case here (or is it?). The frame here is not toppled by another frame: it simply seems to be fall apart at one point. But then — we tell ourselves as we read on — that is precisely what happens to the story of W when it reaches the ellipsis: it breaks down. The allegory is an allegory because it is *not* an allegory.

As we open the backgammon board, a series of motifs, correspondences and paradoxes are thus brought to our attention. It is a 'programmatic loop' (to return to Dällebach's taxonomy), but one that *only* programmes loops. For Escobar, Perec (and Gide) use *mise en abyme* 'to create a sense of dynamic play between the texts being compared — a play that depends upon difference'.⁸² This play can be observed in the awkward nature of some of the parallels between board game and book, but here the play seems uneven: the *mise en abyme* wins because even its differences are mirrors of other differences. The reader is constantly beaten into further disjunctions, and yet the author refuses to plump for any specific meaning.

This is the paradox with which this analysis is concerned, which it will investigate in relation to two different aspects mirrored by the backgammon game. The first part is concerned with the parallels between play and narrative structure: it explores the book's and the game's tension between

⁸²Escobar, 413-433 (p.419).

forward movement, obstruction and subtraction (a tension which also has important consequences for generic definition). The second part will be focused on the games between the backgammon game and other examples of *mise en abyme* in Part One.

Moving on, blocking, bearing off: the temporal structure of Part One

The analysis of the narrative structure of *W* is also articulated around a disjunction, a choice. There are two structures to choose from: the two parts (and their respective *fabulas* and *sjuzhets*) cannot be analysed simultaneously. Of course, they could be compared, and their dialogue (or collision) might thus help create an explanatory model. An autobiographical reading of the fiction would subordinate the fictional timeline to that of the autobiography – the autobiography would be the master-structure because it reflects the authorial self's existence within a timeline. However, Perec states vehemently at the beginning of the memoir that he has 'no childhood memories': there might be no such thing as an original or "real" *fabula*.⁸³ The focus of our analysis will need to be bifurcated: we must first follow how the fiction moves in time across the board, and then how the autobiography does it. But then,

⁸³Perec, *W*, p. 6.

such an approach would ignore the fact that — as in the game of backgammon — both players are moving and blocking each other's play at the same time. We cannot lose sight of the misty, shadowy original; even if it seems wiser to tidy up our approach on generic lines.

We have observed already how the fiction starts by conforming to the retrospective first-person narrative model of adventure stories — as well as that of confessions. *W* is presented as a “secret” finally disclosed by the tale that will follow. The story suitably starts with the birth of the hero and moves forwards from then on, although not without obstacles — such as the backgammon game (which, as a *mise en abyme*, sabotages the linearity of the whole) or the intertextual spectral interferences. Of course, those features can also be read as part of the story's “bearing off” process: through those obstacles the story might be moving towards victory and hence slowly revealing its “secret”.

The chapters that follow the backgammon game are, however, not in themselves an account of the adventure but merely their prologue. This preamble proceeds in a linear fashion — although it also includes a nested narrative. Most of the chapters conform to the cliff-hanger convention: the enigmas those endings pose, however, are not resolved but ‘piled up’, ‘in imitation of Kafka's most famous narratives’, as Claude Burgelin observes.⁸⁴ Certain clue-like details like the initials after Apfelstahl's name (MD) or the

⁸⁴ Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 147.

coat of arms in his headed paper are described in detail but left unaccounted for. They left behind and forgotten as a consequence of the narrative thrust that propels the story to move to another threshold.

Of course, those might not be obstacles at all, but discarded pieces: indeed, clues such as the initials or the coat of arms were 'deciphered' by Roche as prolepses of the secret (or secrets) of W — not just the island itself, but also the historical reality concealed by the island.⁸⁵ If we apply their analyses to the temporal structure, they could be read as anachronies which interrupt the linear discourse and reveal what lies ahead not just in the fictional *fabula* but also in the autobiographical one, and which would 'stitch' them together. This stitching, however, imposes a hierarchy between the narratives and its temporal levels: the secret behind the secret is in the autobiographical level. It might not come as a surprise by now that this reading cannot really be sustained for too long. The narrator tells us that the designs of the coat of arms 'seemed to be open to several different interpretations, without it being possible to decide on a satisfactory choice'.⁸⁶ The 'stitch' is really a loop which dismantles a chronological reconstruction.⁸⁷

The origin unravels into an (or)igin: an empty ellipsis. The embedded story of the deaf-mute child might have no relation to the frame story (and hence we might have two threads rather than one). It is not an analepsis to

⁸⁵ See Roche, pp. 197-198.

⁸⁶ Perec, *W*, p. 8.

⁸⁷ A similar operation takes places in the enigma of the link between the two namesakes. See Burgelin, p.151-152 for an interesting reading.

“Winckler”’s past (or only a partial one) and it is not an analepsis to the story of the island and its secret. The two fragments are never stitched. And hence the whole story might be also disjointed from the autobiography as a spurious origin: indeed the composition of the story of the island (as we are told in the autobiographical frame) preceded that of its pseudo-prologue. Although the *fabula* of both embedded and frame narrative can be reconstructed, they cannot be joined together.

The narrative structure of the fiction is thus characterised by the now familiar tension between conjunction and disjunction, concordance and discordance. Even when the autobiography seems to attach itself (like a stray thread) to the structure of the fiction (say, when the story is read as a “stage” in Perec’s journey to memory and recovery), the attachment is temporary and fragile. The temptation of this connected reading is constantly suggested and dismissed as the reader seeks to reconstruct and tidy up its temporal structure in the memoir section. For instance, Chapter One and Chapter Two seems to be arranged in a sort of chiasmus (ABBA) pattern in terms of their structure and narrative style: if the fiction started with a confessional shape and ended with a linear but disjointed narrative, the memoir starts with an axed narrative and ends with the hope of temporal and personal reconstruction.

Bartleby and Ishmael still haunt or shadow the start of the memoir section, as its blunt (but sharp and ‘crisp’) opening — with its insistence on

his lack of memories and the 'axe' of History — demonstrated. It echoes the dulled linearity of the story of "Winckler"'s past rather than the evocative temporal loop of the beginning. As the narrative advances, the line of Perec's life will nonetheless be turned into a more reassuring confessional shape. The story of W itself (or rather of its creation) is given an explanatory frame: he created it when he was 13 as a series of drawings, then he remembered it in 1967, and then published it as a serial in 1969-70.⁸⁸ The threads of Perec's life-story might be woven together again (the dating is, for instance, quite precise) — even the fiction itself is incorporated into the autobiographical *fabula*. Attaching the two stories allows the reader to deduct that the autobiography is also heading towards a revelation: as Magné points out, both narratives are stitched together by the mention of Venice.⁸⁹ The secret would be the book the reader has in his/her hands (as if it was the *Recherche*): the origin retrieved.

The book that the reader is holding, however, is emphatically *not* a book that solves or reconstructs anything at all, and the concluding paragraph quickly alerts us of the fact, undoing the chiasmus “key”:

W is no more like my Olympic fantasy than that Olympic fantasy was like my childhood. But in the crisscross web they weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the

⁸⁸ Incidentally, the quotes from Queneau's *Chêne et Chien* which Perec uses as an epigraph also refer to Queneau's life at the quotation and his attempts to make sense of his early years. See Raymond Queneau, *Chêne et chien: suivi de petite cosmogonie portable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 57-58. The autobiography section also resumes, after the ellipsis, at Chapter Thirteen. Is there a relation between the chapter numbers and a specific year in Perec's life? The book has 37 chapters, but Perec finished it in 1974, when he was 38. But then, for the book's pattern to be fully chiasmic, it would need a further chapter of fiction:

ABABABABABA(...)ABABABABABABABABABABABABAB.

⁸⁹ See Perec, *W*, p. 3 and p. 6. The reference to Venice might be related to the Proustian air of the anecdote, where an involuntary recollection triggers memory and writing.

inscription and the description of a path I have taken, the passage of my history and the story of my passage.⁹⁰

The tale is not an origin but a reconstruction: fiction and memoir are (nearly) contemporary creations. The palimpsest is fake, and the quasi-Proustian story of the retrieval of memory and the past needs to be questioned, like all other origins.

Bellos's translation of the last sentence obscures the fact that the opening chapter concludes with another chiasmus (within a chiasmus, of course): the French original reads 'le cheminement de mon histoire et l'histoire de mon cheminement'.⁹¹ The sentence plays with readerly assumptions about the rhetorical device. A chiasmus relies for its rhetorical effect on the contrast between A and B: 'cheminement' and 'histoire' resemble each other (a 'passage' is a figure for a history/story). An AAAA chiasmus denies and emphasises the absent B: Perec's story/history is neither a story, nor a passage nor a history. The path he has taken is not *the* path. The conclusion only serves to remind the reader of the axe, which shreds the pseudo-Proustian weave (and its promise of temporal and generic stability) back into threads.⁹²

⁹⁰ Perec, *W*, p. 7.

⁹¹ Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, p. 18.

⁹² It is interesting to compare this ending with another occurrence of the textile figure, the moment when he wonders 'where the break is in the threads that tie me to my childhood'. See Perec, *W*, p. 12.

The rest of the memoir chapters unfold through a similar dynamic of weaving and unweaving which we have observed in the first chapter and in the fiction itself. The text invites us to read those moves as examples of ‘bearing off’: they might be part of the text’s advance towards victory, a paradoxical victory that only unhinges the two parts of the board/frame. There are nonetheless ostensible differences between how the fiction and the memoir “play”: the memoir is structured so that its fragmentariness is brought to the fore, and morsels of *fabula* and clue are camouflaged. The strategy the memoir follows is to combine what Roche calls the “obligatory scenes” of childhood memoirs (her inverted commas) with a piercing self-commentary which casts doubts over them (Roche calls it ‘ruin’), as well as with a series of meta-autobiographical codas.⁹³

Perec starts the defamiliarisation/ruining process of those scenes by their very arrangement: the *sjuzhet* of the memoir is disordered. His first memories come before his birth and his family history, with only the final part (a series of brief sketches of photographs and early memories) maintaining some semblance of chronological order in the disposition of its seven vignettes. And yet, even if it is disordered, it seems easy enough to tidy up into a *fabula*. Or maybe not. Perec’s strategy does not solely rely on anachrony for his ‘ruining’ operation. As Roche points out, Perec constantly hedges any certainty by using adverbs and adjectives of doubt or the

⁹³ Roche, p. 57 and p. 69.

conditional tense, and also points how the notes (such as the note about frames which forms the epigraph of this chapter) emphasise the ‘framed’ quality of these memories and their distance from the origin they seem to evoke – origin which, like the photographs, is absent, private.⁹⁴

The text in bold characters (composed around 1955-59) which the frame-note comments upon only highlights and makes explicit the palimpsest quality of *W*, the fact that is written over previous texts.⁹⁵ Not only does the dating become more imprecise here (hindering the reconstruction of the *fabula*), the inclusion of this early attempt at an autobiography also signals to the readers that the *fabula* they are reconstructing from the memories has a *fabula* of its own: there is a secret chronology of how and when he remembered or wrote certain episodes and how he reconstructed his past. At one point Perec mentions *Lieux*, his unfinished autobiographical project: this project was indeed an attempt to record the history of memory.⁹⁶ *W* – unlike *Lieux* – eschews clear chronology and scientific methodology, perhaps in acknowledgement of their insufficiency.

Other critics have sought to relate the instability of the *fabula* with Freud’s concept of the ‘screen memory’: Lejeune reads the annotated and

⁹⁴ Roche, pp. 69-70. Roche focuses on the first memories episode and the photograph of the father, but does consider the frame itself.

⁹⁵ Perec only mentions it was written ‘fifteen years ago’ but not say from when (*W* took 4 years to write). The visit to the father’s grave is uncertainly dated from 1955-1956. Dating is far more shaky here than at the start. See Perec, *W*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Perec’s idea for *Lieux* was to visit twelve places in Paris once a year for twelve years and write two descriptions of each place each time, one *in situ* and one from memory. The project was not completed, although he published some of his sketches of the Rue Vilin in Belleville (the street where he was born). See Perec, *Species*, pp.211-217. See Bellos, pp 417-419 for more details.

reiterated farewell scene as one, for instance.⁹⁷ The memory of memory, however, cannot be contained by any explanatory models (as we will see in the episode of the shirts). The section in bold characters is preceded by Perec's comment that '[t]he idea of writing the story of my past arose almost at the same time that my idea of writing'.⁹⁸ Memory and writing cannot be separated: the *fabula* of the *fabula* is only a frame imposed by the writing. It does not precede it.

The *mise en abyme* of the frame only serves to highlight the figural character of the temporal structure itself, and hence its unsettled foundations. This close interrelation is also observable in the structure of episodes such as the memory of the Hebrew letter, the swallowed key/coin, the torn medal, and the farewell to his mother, which — for reasons of space — I will not be able to examine in detail. Every obstacle, every bearing off is both a step forward in the game and a reminder of the state of paralysis and uncertainty the reader is lead to when one reads the book through the frame of the backgammon game. The second part of this section examines the figural model proposed by the two frames (the temporal and the figural) and the game of backgammon in relation to the other self-referential motifs in Part One: particularly to one which might not even be a motif, a *mise en abyme* or a figure at all.

⁹⁷ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 83-85.

⁹⁸ Perec, *W*, p. 26.

The sinking of Part One: *mise en abyme*, ellipsis and silence

Our trail across the temporal structure of the two arms of Part One has demonstrated that the game of backgammon is both a reflection and a distortion of *W*. The two arms are competing to bear themselves off — they employ different strategies but arrive at the same result. And yet critics like Magné, Burgelin or Roche have strongly argued against reading the relation between the two parts as a conflict. In closer examination, however, their ‘stitches’ are provisional, insufficient or illusory. Bearing this in mind, the dices still remain unidentified: perhaps they could represent the chance nature of writing and reading, or even a kind of indirect reference to Mallarmé.⁹⁹ The mirror-image is incomplete — perhaps because it still needs to be compared to the other mirrors it contains.

The backgammon-game, for instance, contains another game inside it: hide-and-seek, found in the other arm of the chiasmus. The figure appears just after Perec narrates his epiphanic recovery of the tale of *W* from the depths of his memory, when he mentions that

Once again the snares of writing were set. Once again I was like
a child playing hide-and-seek, who doesn’t know what he fears
or wants more: to stay hidden, to be found.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Mallarmé also wrote a famous ‘Sonnet in X’. See Dällenbach, pp. 178-180 for an analysis.

¹⁰⁰ Perec, *W*, p. 6. I have amended Bellos here. Bellos adds an ‘or’ between hidden and to but the French original lacks a conjunction: ‘rester caché, être découvert’. See Perec, *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, p. 18.

Andy Leak identifies hide-and-seek as a metaphor for the creative process, which he puts in relation to psychoanalysis.¹⁰¹ However, he also points out that game is itself paradoxical, a disjunction:

Hide-and-seek is a paradoxical game: to be played well, it has to be played badly. The asyndeton in the quoted passage is clearly not a mere effect of style: [it is not] a simple alternative. Each of the terms is marked both by a positive and a negative (desire and fear), making it possible to combine the two terms in four different ways.¹⁰²

Hide-and-seek temptingly suggests the possibility of a secret (to be revealed by the memory of W) only to immediately problematize it. Not only writing is both the seeker and the sought, but the game is presented as potentially infinite and unfinishable. Whatever (or whoever) it is that is “hiding” is threatened with collapse and loss, no matter what it chooses to do: either ending the game (and losing), or leaving it unresolved (and then winning). If hide-and-seek is an antiphonal response to the game of backgammon (or its frame) it only comes to highlight the fractured nature of games figures.

This collapse will take place in a passage which simultaneously performs this sinking and renders it impossible to represent. It is not a *mise en abyme* but rather a kind of self-referential discursive coda to the book. I am referring to the closing section of Chapter Eight — one of the most-often

¹⁰¹Andy Leak, ‘Hide and Seek and the Dynamics of Creation in Georges Perec’, in *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 39:1 (2002) 72-85 (pp. 72-73).

¹⁰²Leak, ‘Hide and Seek’, 72-85 (p.73).

quoted and analysed passages in *W*. It appears right after Perec's succinct account of how his mother and his two grandfathers were deported to Auschwitz and the description of his mother's death certificate, which he received in 1958.

This coda abandons the labyrinthine narrative and the playful self-referentiality of the footnotes for a muted, 'white' tone in which thoughts are juxtaposed with colons or semi-colons. Vocabulary becomes repetitive, almost obsessive. The notes become the scaffolding for a non-existing building. The coda is really an apology, again simultaneously targeted at the reader and himself but primarily at his absent readers, his parents. It is others that matter here, not the self.

It is not, as for years I claimed it was, the effect of an unending oscillation between an as-yet undiscovered language of sincerity and the subterfuges of a writing concerned with shoring up its own defences: it is bound up with the matter of writing and the written matter, with the task of writing as well as with the task of remembering.

I do not know whether I have anything to say, I know that I am saying nothing; I do not know if what I might have to say is unsaid because it is unsayable (the unsayable is not what is buried inside writing, it is what prompted it in the first place); I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Perec, *W*, p. 42.

Perec undoes here *W*'s disjunctive tension by performing a kind of arithmetic operation with its two branches, as if showing the result of adding up a positive (sincerity?) and a negative (artifice?) is but a zero (blank, neutral, 'rien'). The passage reconfigures the idea of what constitutes 'success' and 'failure' in memory and writing: the blank must be blank because it is a 'sign' of another blank. Silence is voicing silence — losing is not really losing.

However, the conclusion twists this "conclusion" a bit further. Even negative referentiality is a form of figuration. A passage which looked like an anti-*mise en abyme* ends up transforming the whole text into one: both its words and its blank spaces (Perec even brings them to the reader's attention at one point). This is how the coda ends:

I am not writing in order to say that I shall say nothing, I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say. I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.¹⁰⁴

Writing becomes an intransitive, object-less verb: its materiality (rather than its contents) matters. The word itself is read by Burgelin as the key that links *W* to his past and that of his parents.

¹⁰⁴ Perec, *W*, p. 42.

The very tracing of the letter, the material act of writing are linked without mediation to the physical existence of his parents. Metaphor of their disappearance, proof of their existence, writing becomes the thread that, beyond their death, links their life and his own life. There is no page blackened by him that does not refer to the blank of their disappearance.¹⁰⁵

Every single word we have read and will read is made to stand for the whole — and also for Perec himself and for his parents. This new frame for the writing (which frames *all* words) makes the reader look *upwards*, towards the hand that has produced the letters we have been reading and its very physical origin in other hands — which the reader will not be able to see. The gap is still there: the hand is alone. The parents can only be seen because of the trace they have left in the writing hand. The hand, however, can only trace itself. If it ‘presences’ them (as Chambers remarked), it does so as a void. When read in relation to the debate on the book’s genre and its value as a testimony, this passage makes the squabbles about genre redundant or petty. However, in doing so, the whole is sacrificed. When *all* words are figures they also become indistinct (like the four components in the fake chiasmus). If we look *up*, we cannot look *down*. Seeing the hand involves the unseeing and obliteration of the words themselves. This coda becomes the maelstrom where the rest of the book sinks and disappears.

Or not — it does go on, of course. Although the passage reads like the definitive final authorial comment of the book, it is located but one quarter

¹⁰⁵ Burgelin, pp. 145-146.

through the book, sandwiched between two crucial fictional chapters: Chapter Seven (who had prophetically ended with the account of the sinking of the *Sylvandre*) and Chapter Nine. This chapter starts with the narrator — who is aware that the story cannot end with the sinking — asking Apfelstahl ‘And then?’.¹⁰⁶ Fiction and memoir *seem* to be talking to each other, and the fiction “saves” the memoir: in continuing the story of W beyond the sinking of the yacht he also continues his own story beyond its sinking. We may ask, like the narrator, if and how and why it is meant to continue, but still we continue.

Although not for very long: soon after, the story soon sinks itself and takes the memoir down with it. The last chapter of the memoir (which concludes with the memory of Perec’s last moments together with his mother) ends with a parachute jump which critics have read as the text’s performance of its own rescue by an unlocking of the trauma of his separation from his mother. Eleanor Kaufman reads the fall as the ‘key to deciphering the memory of the trauma’, a positive experience related to the affirmation of his survival.¹⁰⁷ Lejeune, however, reads the farewell scene as *the* screen memory, an artificial retrospective creation. For Lejeune, the parachute jump is the origin of the memory: ‘The “deciphering” of the memory takes place at a time

¹⁰⁶ Perec, *W*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ Kaufman, 44-53, (p. 45).

which might really be the time when it was “ciphered””.¹⁰⁸ Memory and epiphany might be simultaneous, like Perec’s main text and footnotes.

However, perhaps what is particularly intriguing about this episode is the way it propels the reader to pore obsessively about certain motifs (the theme of suspension and wounds) to the neglect of others, such as the motif of the gift and the motif of books (a framed book, a comic book). The comic book is *the* gift from his mother, perhaps given to distract the little boy, to make their separation less painful for him. The passage’s obsessive description of the figure of the parachuting Chaplin perhaps proves that the mother was successful in her attempt to distract her son. The recovered parachute jump is only a repetition of this separation.

Regarding this point, it is important to bear in mind again how the memoir continues *in* the fiction. The enigma of the missing deaf-mute hinges on two possible explanations: he wasn’t in the yacht because he escaped or because he was abandoned. The narrator then asks Apfelstahl ‘Does that make any difference?’.¹⁰⁹ Apfelstahl replies ‘I don’t know’.¹¹⁰ Question and answer articulate the unspoken, painful enigma at the heart of the previous episode (was he abandoned or did he escape?) but also renders it petty: a frame which distracts the reader from the gap ahead, from the cut that splits the narrative and which forcibly and terribly pulled apart the hand of the

¹⁰⁸ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 84-85.

¹⁰⁹ Perec, *W*, p. 87.

¹¹⁰ Perec, *W*, p. 87.

mother from that of the child. That cut (the cut of the 'axe' of History) should not be allowed to go on *unseen*. We have not advanced from the start, but then perhaps we shouldn't.

A game of “running battleships”: Part Two of *W or the Memory of Childhood*

Part One’s performance of its own sinking did not really answer the question about the appropriateness of applying games models to *W*: both parts ‘bear off’ their pieces, but none of them wins. The ellipsis might be read as the conclusion of the game, but also as its interruption. And then, after the cut, everything changes and begins again — and a new games motif makes its appearance, creating yet another disjunction. The new game might be playing against backgammon — and might thus provide a completely different model for the text. The question must remain unanswered until the battle is fought.

Despite our reservations about applying a competition/rivalry model to *W*, the text seems to constantly thrusting the motif back at us. The second board-game self-referential model is itself a battle game: a game that Bellos translates as ‘running battleships’ (*bataille navale mouvant*).¹¹¹ The game is first introduced in Chapter Seventeen. Perec mentioned how his second cousin, Henri, was once playing it ‘furiously’ with another relative.¹¹² Perec asked Henri to teach him the game, but he refused because he considered him too young. The game reappears in Chapter Thirty-one: Perec manages at last to convince Henri, and the two children proceed to prepare with great care a

¹¹¹ Perec, *W*, p. 87.

¹¹² Perec, *W*, p. 87.

chequered board and some ship tokens. Just as they are about to start playing, Henri all of a sudden flies into a rage and breaks 'those precious boards to pieces'.¹¹³ Even the frame of the game involves a battle about a battle game which is itself fighting against another game.

As it was the case with the backgammon, the reader is soon enthusiastically searching for correspondences. This game — unlike its rival — has attracted some critical attention: Chambers reads it as

[A]n allegory of reading as an experience of the shattering of stability and the withdrawal of support that occur when arbitrary violence intervenes to reveal the fragility and undependability of what had until then been certainties.[...] Henri turns out [...] to be [...] one final agent of History.¹¹⁴

Chambers also points out the allegorical importance not just of Henri's destruction of the checkerboard but also of the game itself. It is not the usual variety of the game, which would invoke an ultimately solvable model of reading, the "sinking" of the book's meaning. It is an obscure 'running' ('mouvant') variant of the game, which for Chambers would be far more 'challenging' (and open to cheating, we may add).

¹¹³ Perec, *W*, p. 145.

¹¹⁴ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p.76).

Chambers also reads the variant, and Perec's dashed hopes of mastering it, as another figure of the instability of the text's meanings: the story reveals how

The point of interpretive finality where the text would hold firm [...] becomes a vanishing point. And what we are left to acknowledge [...] is that crucial disappearance itself: the evidence of the catastrophe in a residual dazzle of shifting patterns, relations and reflections; the sign of a disaster that itself cannot be named, nor explained, or even known, but of which only our thwarted reading constituted some kind of baffled acknowledgement.¹¹⁵

Chambers's interpretation of the 'running battleships' game does not differ significantly from the reading that we have made of the 'I write' maelstrom, or even of the backgammon board. The games might not be fighting but propping each other, providing another frame to the frame – and perhaps signalling the void and the silence through (or despite) their vertiginous regression.

Despite the redundant character of this second frame, there are still good reasons for using it as a 'guiding spirit' for the second part of *W*. Although the games mirror each other, 'running battleships' completes backgammon: it makes explicit the "broken" nature of that allegory, which the backgammon left suspended until the ellipsis confirmed it. At this point, the reader knows the story is broken: the story of Henri only serves to

¹¹⁵ Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (p.78).

highlight what the ellipsis had already made present. And yet it might provide a useful angle with which to approach the undeniable differences between Part One and Part Two, both in terms of its narrative structure and its use (and reuse) of *mise en abyme*.

With the exception of Lejeune and Burgelin, there has hardly been much attention dedicated to the remarkable narrative differences between the two parts, beyond the generic shift of the fiction.¹¹⁶ Those differences are sharply brought into focus by the contrast between the two self-reflexive games motifs. Unlike in backgammon, in the game of battleships (stable or not) the players cannot see each other's pieces: there is a physical barrier which cannot be surmounted. The barrier that separates the two narratives is here made explicit: there is no attempt at creating the illusion that they might be talking to each other. Of course, there might be the odd sinking of each other's ships, but even this figural model for the relation between the fiction and the memoir emphasises destruction rather than collaboration: it depicts the process of deciphering as aggression. But our ships are moving — and any (lucky or strategic) guess might never really be able to hit its target.

As the analysis of Part One, this section will also proceed in a similar fashion: it starts by an analysis of the contrasting temporal structures and moves then to consider *mise en abyme*. As in Part One, the foci tend to segue into one another and becomes at times difficult to tell apart — perhaps

¹¹⁶ See Burgelin, pp. 161-164 and Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 69-70.

because here they are *also* mirroring each other. The similarities become quite apparent in the case of the 'temporal curiosity' described in the introduction: the *fabula* becomes unsettled, like the moving ships of the board. As to the *mise en abymes*, what characterises their use in Part Two is perhaps the sheer abundance of them: self-referential motifs blossom in the form of digressive inventories, such as the one about the letters. This new style of *mise en abyme* (deliberately dispersed, perhaps less claustrophobic) contrasts to the style of the motifs of Part One, which Part Two does not abandon. The analysis of these two approaches to self-referentiality (and the shocking and poignant character the antitheses and parallelisms they draw) will be put in relation to the *W*'s 'I write' coda as a way of approaching again the text's generic definition and its ethical dimension.

Moving targets: achrony and polychrony in the temporal structure of Part Two

Using the game of running battleships as a guiding spirit to the temporal structure of Part Two might offer us a rather neat figure for the memoir's moving (or running) *fabula*, but it fails to account for both the temporal arrangement of great part of the memoir and of the fiction itself. The game also implies a certain resemblance between the structure (or the grid) of the two parts: this is perceptible in some parts (particularly the beginning) but not

in others. Of course, the game is never explained to the reader (as it wasn't explained to Perec himself). Not only was the grid shredded into pieces, but 'running battleships' is only a half-allegory or a fragmented allegory: the reader has to piece together this variant from various elements of the familiar "stable" game. Its unknown rules can only be imagined or guessed, but never "sunk".

This section, like the one about Part One, will also proceed along generic lines, but keeping an eye all the time for any sideways communication (the 'parler à cote' that Lejeune talked about) between them.¹¹⁷ Before we start, it might be a good idea to gather together the threads of Part One, particularly in relation to the book's macro-structure and its subsequent generic definition. Part One could be said to signal the *fabula* of the autobiography as the master-structure, although it proposes different temporal arrangements for its components: the story of W could either precede the autobiography, or be its contemporary. The reader faces the same disjunction at the start of part two: the story could be read as a true beginning or as a continuation of a supplement. The story itself, however, will refuse to be anchored or connected to the autobiographical "frame" and to define itself as a subordinate supplement: both narratives will be, after all, equally supplementary.

¹¹⁷ Lejeune, *La mémoire*, p. 167.

The difficulty of anchoring the two parts of the fiction is particularly acute in the new beginning of Part Two after the ellipsis. It starts again with a fiction, creating a chiasmus pattern. The fiction starts by suggesting a possible connection to the first part, a connection which is nonetheless quickly dismantled. Part One opened with 'For years I have put off telling the tale of my voyage to W'. Part Two starts 'Far away, at the other end of the earth, there is an island told of. Its name is W'.¹¹⁸ The reappearance of W signals it as the beginning of the promised 'tale' of his adventures. There is no 'I' anymore, but "Winckler" had warned us he would adopt the 'cold, impassive tone of the ethnologist'.¹¹⁹ The narrative soon starts to provide 'cold' data about the island, but when the narrator has to describe the origins of the colony, his style becomes dubitative and conjectural. But there is a further stylistic transformation to come: when the society and ideals of W are described, the ethnologist becomes an apologist. Cold inventories turn into rhetorical enumerations, adjectives are always superlative. There are indeed two ways of interpreting this shocking turn: either the tale is either been narrated by someone else (who might not be impartial) or our narrator has become an ironic observer who uses the rhetoric of triumphalism in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

However, perhaps the most unsettling aspect of this opening is its temporal framing. In the French original, the tale starts in the conditional ('Il y

¹¹⁸ Perec, *W*, p. 65.

¹¹⁹ Perec, *W*, p. 4.

aurait', which Bellos tries to convey by his 'told of'), as if the island was nothing but a hypothesis.¹²⁰ The narrator quickly switches to the present tense of the ethnological report, although the use of 'today' marks it as a real present rather than a historical one, which would contradict the narrator's assertion that he wrote the story years after his stay in W. Perec's use of tenses problematizes the model of retrospective testimony of the first part of the fiction: a testimony can change depending from when it is narrated. The narrative conflates in one ambiguous temporal standpoint (a present which is and isn't historical) an array of reactions to W (detachment, blind admiration, ironic detachment, moral disgust) which would usually be narrated in a linear fashion, if the narrative followed the confessional model to which the first part conformed to.

The floating moral position of the narrator cannot really be anchored throughout the progress of the story. "Progress", however, is not the right word here: the fiction is no longer organized around cliff-hanger endings or narrative suspense. And yet the story has a secret — that of W itself, the horrors of its society and ideals and their historical referent. The narrator is not always open about what some of the competitions entail, and withholds information from the reader — as his narrative of the Atlantiads (the most savage of all the events in the W competitive calendar) demonstrates. Before the event is described in detail, the narrator only refers to it in either a neutral fashion or through tantalising clues: the Atlantiads are 'quite a special sort of

¹²⁰ Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, p. 89.

race'.¹²¹ The agenda of the narrator is difficult to fathom: he might wish to prepare the reader to accept the *Atlantiad* as the "best" and most sport-like way to conceive children. But it is also possible that he is mocking the perverted logic of totalitarian discourse and propaganda, leading the reader to believe it, only to shock them even more at what they have come to accept. Or maybe, at this point, he may have repented from his initial enthusiasm, and decided to reveal what lies behind W's facade.

Critics have tended to consider the narrator of W solely as a mouthpiece for the official ideology of the island. Burgelin notes that he uses 'moralising clichés' and 'rationalising techniques' to 'makes us enter, from the inside, into the W system'.¹²² If he is a mouthpiece, it is not clear if he is a willing or an unwilling one, or if he starts by being willing and then changes his mind. The indeterminate position of the narrator within a temporal/ethical spectrum is never distinctly resolved, even at the harrowing conclusion. As the story advances, the historical referent of W — the concentration camps — is revealed to the reader. We learn that the athletes salute the authorities by lifting their arm and that they wear striped uniforms. Of course, those details only have significance in relation to the historical context of the narrative: the narrator, however, is repulsed by the cruelty inherent in the W system itself.

¹²¹ Perec, *W*, p. 100. The biggest clue is of course, the name given to the winners, Casanova. The name departs from the other naming conventions of W, who use the name of the first winner. Although the first "winner" of the *Atlantiads* might have been called Casanova, it is likely that the name was chosen for its association with unbridled masculinity and sexual prowess. It is an example of how W's laws (and Perec) cheat in order to achieve certain effects.

¹²² Burgelin, p. 160.

The narrative loses here its cool ethnological calmness and becomes febrile and (self) accusatory. The syntax and style become those of an unravelling mind, full of exclamation marks and enumerations. The climax is the chilling inventory of commands and orders, its syntax (chillingly, horribly) reminiscent of a machine-gun:

Run in a circle, lie down flat, crawl, get up, start running. Stand still, to attention, for hours, for days, for days and nights. Flat on your stomach! On your feet! Get dressed! Get undressed! Get dressed! Get undressed! Run! Jump! Crawl! On your knees!¹²³

The narrator is here adopting the discourse of the oppressors, but his diction and syntax suggests that he is trying to present those words from the point of view of the athletes, whose life is structured as a succession of repeated imperatives. At this point the reader cannot help looking out of the enclosure of *W*, or rather looking *up*: what we discover is the stasis and circularity of life in *W* (and of the book itself) is owed to a machine-gun pointing at the author's hand — or rather at other *absent* hands. The last imperative suggests a horror worse than running around in circles, a horror that can only be suggested or framed (but not represented) by those circles: the murder of his mother, his aunt and his two grandfathers.

The passage explicitly makes the story of *W* into a frame for the absent and the 'unsayable'. This reading, however, is not the result of the narrator's

¹²³ Perec, *W*, p. 159.

repentance: the passage is as ambiguous as the start, but it presents its undecidability in a more heightened and explicit fashion. It is by no means the moment when the narrative becomes a confession: even after this passage, the secret his *exposé* reveals is not the suffering of the athletes, but the mediocrity of their athletic performances (the record of the 100 metres is 23''4).¹²⁴ He is not dismayed by competition and its rules but by how W's rulers have departed from fair-play and have thus betrayed the Olympic spirit. His moral position is still unfathomable: this might be a final ironic riposte, or the nadir of a deranged ideologue. The narrative starts and ends with a disjunction which is both temporal and moral: an *exposé* of the unsettled nature of the 'ships' of the confessional self and its moral positions. It exposes how inadequate it might be to apply autobiographical or confessional models to the whole of W or to search for origins within its discourses: they obscure what is really absent, what it cannot be represented.

The conclusion of the tale of W, which introduced a second temporal cleft to the fictional arm, is itself another frame used to expose the dangers of narrative reconstruction, linearity, or the search for origins. The conclusion might be a 'stitching' of the parable to its historical reference (although this process is present throughout the whole story, but as absence), and even a 'stitch' to the first part of the fiction. Certain similarities between the opening paragraph of Part One and the concluding one of Part Two might lead a

¹²⁴ Percec, W, p. 161.

reader to believe that its narrator has been finally 'sunk': it might have been Winckler all along, he might have witnessed *W* at its "peak" and at its fall. This connection encourages readers to conjecture as the narrator did himself at the start: perhaps "Winckler" is connected to fall of this civilisation. The ellipsis might hide a comforting, cause-and-effect tale of heroism free from the snares of figuration and self-referentiality. Or rather not: *W* breaks up and is shredded (like the battleships grids) because *W* is also shredded; and it is in the cut where the traces of the absent are revealed. The conclusion does not solve the gap: it repeats it.

The narrative of *W* again echoes the tension between conjunction and disjunction, and emphasises (but not in an exclusive fashion) the ethical dimension of this tension. Something is at stake in the shredding of the game and of *W* but it not easy to discern what. It could be argued that the cut makes narrative structure itself (and its cause-and-effect model, its invitation to reconstruct a *fabula*) ethically dubious: narrative distorts and suppresses absence. But then we may wonder whether writing can exist outside of narrative ('I write: I write') or whether it is stuck in its frames, or whether those frames (even narrative ones) can also make the traces of the absent present. Perhaps a second frame, that of the second part of the autobiography is required here. Perhaps not.

This second part of the autobiography starts, like the fiction, with a promise of continuity — or, as Burgelin aptly puts it, 'under the sign of "from

this point on''' ('désormais' in French).¹²⁵ The rest of the opening sentence, however, soon ruptures it: 'From this point on, there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together'.¹²⁶ The opening refers back to the opening of Part One, and signals Chapter Thirteen as the actual beginning of the book as an autobiography, as a book of childhood memories (his memories started at thirteen, likewise).¹²⁷ Although this new start might be read as a confirmation of the existence of a secret *fabula* behind the reconstructed *fabula* the readers have immediate access to (in which the memories of part one *follow* those of part two), the insistence on the fragmentary, non-narrative quality of those memories (compared to the 'unjoined-up' calligraphy style he used until he was seventeen) dashes the readers' hopes for reconstruction – in the manner of an irate cousin Henri.¹²⁸

The fragmentary nature of the second part (and the impossibility of putting it back together again) is also highlighted by a pronominal change: the autobiographical 'je' mutates into a generic 'on' (Bellos translates it as 'you', but 'on' also means 'one' or 'us', a neuter mode of selfhood). Linear chronology becomes a ghostly, dubious prop: the temporal model here is one of a cyclical, indistinct temporality – like the time of W.

¹²⁵ See Burgelin, p. 161 and Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, p. 97.

¹²⁶ Perec, *W*, p. 68.

¹²⁷ Perec, *W*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ See Perec, *W*, p. 68. This unjoined writing suggests he wrote in capital letters or perhaps imitating print. Again the materiality of the word is emphasised: the printed version of *W* that we are reading is also unjoined. Chambers's article provides an excellent analysis of unjoined writing too, although he does not connect it to print. See Chambers, 'A Poetics', 53-80 (pp.64-65).

[T]hese memories are scraps of life snatched from the void.[...] Nothing to anchor them or to hold them down[...] No sequence in time, except as I have reconstructed it arbitrarily over the years: time went by. They were seasons. There was skiing and haymaking. No beginning, no end. There was no past, and for very many years there was no future either; things simply went on. You were there.¹²⁹

The passage is Perec's longest and most harrowing attempt at Bartlebian self-erasure: Allan Astro reads it as a sign that the memoir has become an allegory of 'the typical case of a refugee child during the war', although this erasure goes beyond a movement from the particular to the general.¹³⁰

And yet it ends — the self reappears at the end of the chapter, but as a kind of conditional ghost ('I would have liked to help my mother clear the dinner from the kitchen table').¹³¹ They are negative memories of a different sort, feeble but moving attempts at resurrecting the dead through substitute fictions, an echo perhaps of his games with toy soldiers as heroic avatars of his father. After this false start, however, memories start appearing in the semblance of chronological order, but the operation of reconstruction is starkly revealed to be artificial, prop-like, unable to thread and stitch his self back together again — perhaps because that operation has something dubious

¹²⁹ Perec, *W*, p. 69.

¹³⁰ Allan Astro, 'Allegory in Georges Perec's *W or the Memory of Childhood*', *MLN*, 102:4 (1987), 867-876 (p.870).

¹³¹ Perec, *W*, p. 70.

about it, as we saw when we tried to ‘stitch’ of the narrator of the Olympic nightmare with “Winckler”.

The ‘running’, elusive character of the book’s *fabula* is starkly “performed” for the reader in the episode mentioned in the introduction, the story about the cowboy shirts. In this case, calling it a ‘curiosity’ seems inappropriate: it is not curious but clearly torturous. The cowboy shirts episode demonstrates how *W* cannot to be contained in the *fabula/sjuzhet* model: the reader is faced with two moving battleships which cannot be pinned down or sunk. The Christmas scene could be placed in 1942 or 1943, the photograph in 1943 or 1944.¹³²

An immediate reaction to this puzzle is to read the ‘running’ variant of battleships in the light of the static one: perhaps they only *seem* to be moving. The two episodes might have a fixed position, but they are narrated in the wrong order. A Freudian ‘user’s manual’ to ‘running battleships’ becomes here particularly tempting. Although the chronological loop has — to my knowledge — remained unnoticed, the Xmas scene hasn’t. Anne Roche painstakingly dissects it through a Freudian lens as an example of a ‘screen memory’. Her analysis, however, does not start in a psychoanalytic key: she starts simply by comparing it to Perec’s other memories, finding it strikingly different. Indeed, the Xmas scene is the only instance in which Perec writes

¹³² Bellos’s biography does not solve the quandary (he does not mention the episode, however). He does mention that Perec was the only child in the school because his family were in hiding as the Germans were in the region. As the Germans had not arrived in 1942 it means that might have been able to spend Xmas with his family in 1942 that might point at the second option as the most plausible. See Bellos, pp. 70-72.

about memory as Nabokov sometimes does: as a moment of vision in which the barrier between present and past is pulled down.

I think the whole scene has lodged and been frozen in my mind: a petrified image, unchangeable, which I can recall physically, down to the feeling of my hands clenched round the uprights, down to the cold metal pressing against my forehead when I leaned against the handrail.¹³³

We may ask ourselves whether this quasi-epiphanic style of memory is a prompt to read this scene as an affirmation of the referential potential of autobiography: the past is finally anchored.

Roche is nonetheless doubtful, and on several accounts. For her the episode has the air of being 'a model school essay', a cliché — the homework Perec dreamed to be able to write in the sequence that closes Chapter Thirteen.¹³⁴ Roche points out how the memory is not 'about a particular Christmas, but about all the Christmas of the war, or rather a child's idea of Christmas'.¹³⁵ If we apply her idea to the temporal quandary, we could consider that the episode does not belong to the *fabula* of Perec's life: it might be achronic — an emblem, a symbol. But a symbol of what? It could be autobiography itself (or its most clichéd variants), but Roche decides instead to read it as a screen memory which conceals the world of W, the camps, and the trauma of losing his mother. The present (the itchy shirts given to him by

¹³³ Perec, *W*, p. 116.

¹³⁴ Roche, p. 96.

¹³⁵ Roche, p. 97.

his aunt) is 'linked to the universe that has killed his mother, even if the child is not conscious of it': as she points out, the shirts are a disappointment not because they are shirts or itchy but because 'they are not a present from his mother'.¹³⁶

Staying in this Freudian key, but moving to the chronological riddle, we could tweak Roche's conclusion to prove that the Christmas scene is not so much a 'screen memory' but a 'displaced' memory. The photograph is probably the out-of-sequence element in the series, and the sequence might be distorted to bring attention to a pattern of substitution and absences: the visit from his aunt recorded in the photograph was another non-visit from his mother. Perec might have realised that his mother would not come back in 1944, after his frustration with too many visits from the "wrong" women. He might have realised then that the most unambiguous sign of her terrible fate were those two "wrong" chequered shirts.¹³⁷ Perec might be playing here with narrative order to point out at the *fabula* behind the *fabula*: the Christmas scene comes after the photograph because it was remembered *after* the photograph, and read in relation to it. The photograph is really a frame.

Using Roche's analysis of the Christmas night might thus allow us to settle the 'running' fabula, but this stability is nonetheless short-lived. The account Perec gives of his memories of his aunt's visit to the school hints that, even if the photograph might have allowed him to read the Christmas scene,

¹³⁶ Roche, p. 99.

¹³⁷ Perec, *W*, p. 155.

it has not solved it or healed it, even up to the present day. The visit from the aunt becomes

A revelation of a basic “truth” (henceforth only strange women will come unto you; you will seek them for ever and for ever reject them; they will not be yours, you will not be theirs, for you will be able only to hold them at arm’s length...) the intricacies of which I don’t think I have quite unravelled yet.¹³⁸

And perhaps neither have we. In this extraordinary sentence the parenthesis interrupts and separates the ‘revelation’ from the ‘unravelling’: the centre here is a whirlpool-like plaint of utter loneliness and dispossession extending beyond the borders of the book. The revelation is unsettled and unsettling, never-ending, torturous. Even if the tangled-up chronology is unravelled it only leads to further knots: perhaps it should not be unravelled, as seeing only the frame (Freudian, symbolic) can make us unsee the void.

Bearing this in mind, perhaps the most useful narratological model to read this episode is David Herman’s concept of ‘polychrony’. Polychronous texts resist being smoothed out into *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, and *W* is particularly stubborn about this point. Perec is *very* sure of both dates, and that the shirt is the same shirt: the illogical nature of his arrangements cannot and *should not* be smoothed out by doubting Perec’s words and asking Bellos or Freud for help. The story should not be read in a mimetic or referential key, but as a

¹³⁸ Perec, *W*, p. 105.

figure: an attempt to question to the linear arrangement of the *fabula* – and what that linear arrangement excludes.

The purpose of the loop is to highlight the textual loop itself, its constant repetition. Herman has described polychrony as a distinctly *ethical* narrative choice, a mode of questioning the ‘hyperlinearization of history’ which totalitarian ideologies impose.¹³⁹ For him, polychronous narratives either

[W]arn against the danger of pursuing impossible totalities, wholly exhaustive stories, seamless and fully surveyable chains of cause and effects [or they might] suggest that history itself may not be structured according to prototypical narrative schemata.¹⁴⁰

Again, the question asked by the riddle of the shirts resembles the question posed by the fall of W. Herman’s account of polychrony highlights what is at stake in its answer: reconstructing a *fabula* might be nothing but a prop, providing only temporary support. In the case of the story of W, linking its three threads together might be even an affront. The figural character of temporal structure has already been suggested by Part One: Part Two makes it explicit, echoing time and time again the painful presence of the author’s hand, and the absence it traces. It is another frame, and one that should not be unmade into a line. Or an X. Or a W.

¹³⁹ Herman, p. 236.

¹⁴⁰ Herman, p. 261.

Games and grids: *mise en abyme* in Part Two

It should have become evident by now that any ramble we might undertake in any of the directions suggested by *W* tends to lead readers back to where they started. The temporal loop was an echo of the game of “running battleships” — and it was equally unplayable. A survey of the *mise en abyme* devices of Part Two might be a good point to return to our initial concerns about games motifs: the analysis of both *mise en abymes* has proved them to be twinned frames — but only if we read them as a whole, not just as games but as broken games or broken allegories. We may wonder if the game on its own is a distortion of *W*, maybe even a dangerous one. But such a reading would involve reading against the frame, playing against it: a strategy which all the frames frown upon. The reader has to be snared and has to lose, and has to lose in order to win. The game is played so that it can destroy itself.

The purpose of another collection of *mise en abymes* might seem initially rather futile, although it is also irresistible. In Part Two, motifs are dexterously plaited together: the pattern of the cowboy shirts is the pattern of the battleships grid, and that of the frame. Once seen, grids and squares turn up everywhere.¹⁴¹ Another collection of motifs may only contribute to the sense of paralysis, which — as our reading of the temporal loop showed —

¹⁴¹ The best collection of square motifs is that Bernard Magné, he also includes the checkered tablecloth, the tomb of Perec’s father, the Hebrew letter (although he misses the frame). See Magné, ‘Quelques’, pp. 208-211.

might be the only thing we could or *should* do. Any return to games or grids only leads to further repetition.

Or maybe not: for all their obsessive repetitiveness, there are certain nuances to Perec's self-referential motifs which do not deserve to be entirely brushed off, or left unpurchased. There might be, after all, curiosities amongst the curiosities. After all, Part Two introduces another memorial style to *W*, a style reminiscent of his *other* autobiography, *Je me souviens*.¹⁴² The meagre and lean anecdotes of his childhood become at times springboards for what we could be described as 'digressive litanies' – the overflow or the spillage of memory. In the first instance, the memory of an old man chopping wood first generates a small parenthetical digression on the significance of collarless shirts and later a more expansive one on the letter X (as the instrument he uses to place the logs is called an X). Further litanies concern litanies themselves, skiing, his confusion of left and right and his memories of Dumas' *Twenty Years After* and other literary favourites.

The fact that there is a litany about litanies should warn us against reading these digressions as a true or more natural approach to autobiography, or time, or even – as Burgelin remarks – as a 'link to his father and family', a sign of his attachment to a collective 'tradition of technical knowledge'.¹⁴³ Litanies are another example of Perec's 'figures of

¹⁴² See Perec, *Je me souviens* (Paris: Fayard 2011). See Claire Boyle for a comparison of the two texts. See Boyle, pp. 79-89.

¹⁴³ Burgelin, p. 164. The litany on litanies is on *W*, pp. 96-97.

figuration': all of them are repetitive and obsessive, gathering together examples until the elastic snaps and we return to where we started, to the beginning of the digression. One of the litanies, however, seems deliberately more awkward than the rest, harder to fit into a symmetrical frame: that concerning Perec's confusion of left and right. Perec, trying to explain to himself the reasons for a sleighing accident (which might have been completely invented), explains it as 'one of my favourite examples of my "frustrated left-handedness"' which — he elaborates — has left him unable to tell left from right.¹⁴⁴ This digression will also allow us to consider the square/grid motif from a different perspective.

As Chambers and Magné have pointed out, the Hebrew letter of Perec's first memory is another square, albeit an unclosed one — it has a little gap in the left hand bottom corner.¹⁴⁵ Neither of them, however, read this gap as an anomaly or as a digression from the whole. The position of the gap in the letter has been interpreted by different critics as a way of separating this figure from the rest, and thus as a form rescuing the text (and the reader) from interpretive and generic paralysis. For Magné, both the digression about left and right and the letter allow Perec to 'anchor' writing to his Jewish identity (Hebrew and Yiddish are written from left to right): the monotonous self-referentiality conceals autobiographical reference and testimony.¹⁴⁶ Andy Leak and Kirsty Guneratne also read Perec's "frustrated left-handedness" as a

¹⁴⁴Perec, *W*, p. 135.

¹⁴⁵ See Magné, 'Quelques', p.226 and Chambers, 53-80 (p.74).

¹⁴⁶Magné, 'Quelques', pp. 226-227.

kind of anchor: the text's "laterality" is read as a symptom of trauma and a connection to the mother.¹⁴⁷ Guneratne even relates it to the left-hand side position of the ellipsis: rather than a site of 'perpetual disorientation', the inclination to the left of the ellipsis proves that in the text still 'remains' 'a fundamental orientation.'¹⁴⁸

We should be nonetheless wary of reading this tilting as a form of choice — particularly as a choice that liberates the reader from the whirligigs of figuration. What the text's structure of "framing frames" has shown is that the ellipsis is not just present in page 61, but that it is *everywhere* — even in the gaps between letters and words. 'Left' and 'right' are floating, meaningless signifiers for someone who cannot anchor the word to a particular position: the left side might be a link to the mother, a sign of oppression or the site of a trauma, but then so is the right side. There is no transcendent or unique meaning to any side: they are undistinguishable.

Perhaps we should return at this point to our original suspicions about the games motif: for all the exact quality of all its echoes, there still remained awkward loose ends unable to be fitted into any model. Our other qualm also concerned the model of confrontation it imposed on the text, the idea that its parts might be split into winning and losing teams. However, the most unsettling feature of this *mise en abyme* is that it leads the reader to compare

¹⁴⁷ Perec, W, p. 135. See Guneratne, 29-40 (pp. 32-35) and Leak, 'Some Ramifications', 46-58 (pp.47-50).

¹⁴⁸ Guneratne, 29-40 (p.33).

those self-referential motifs with the other games of the book, those of the island of W.

As most critics of the book have pointed out, Perec uses the Olympic ideal of the island as a rather transparent allegory of Nazi ideology.¹⁴⁹ Critics interested in the ludic dimension of Perec's work have reconciled this apparent discrepancy by pointing out the differences between play and sport: Warren Motte, for instance, remarks how Perec made a distinction between sport, games of chance and games of skill.¹⁵⁰ There are no games of skill in W, he points out, only sport and games of chance (the athletes also play dices between themselves).¹⁵¹ For Motte, those games of chance reflect 'the arbitrary nature of life in W', whilst sport reflects 'the real cruelty of the society of W, revealed in its essence'.¹⁵² But his division between different modes of play is oversimplified: games such as backgammon or battleships combine both chance and skill.

A more interesting approach is that of Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, who reads the story of W as 'a corruption of Play'.¹⁵³ For her the autobiography presents

The struggle between the strict regulations of W's Olympian society versus the structural innovations of the text which tells

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Burgelin, p. 156.

¹⁵⁰ Motte, p. 56.

¹⁵¹ Motte, p. 56.

¹⁵² Motte, p. 56.

¹⁵³ Bohman-Kalajah, p. 210.

the story – conventions versus textual resistance, Sport versus Play.¹⁵⁴

The form and content of *W*, however, cannot be pulled out from each other as neatly as Bohman-Kalaja does: the ‘structural innovations’ are themselves ‘strict regulations’. Unlike *Je me souviens* (which is a better example of a free, loose text) the text does not ever digress from its form, not even when it digresses. Play and games are not restricted to the fiction. Even the model of sport proposed by *W* is wildly divergent from ordinary sport: their Olympic Games are a distorted and perverted version of the real ones, a dystopian parody. Individual achievement is suppressed in favour of the excitement of competition. The Authorities do not play fair: they are cheating and manipulating the games in order to achieve maximum control over their participants. Sport and play cannot be reduced to a simple binary opposition: sport is play’s twin as much as its enemy. The real enemy might be *W* itself.

However, even the binary opposition between *W* and the rest of the book is not as easy to sustain as it seems. Astro reads the story of *W* not as an allegory (in the De Manian sense), but as a symbol: for him ‘the representation of Auschwitz as a barbaric sports camp approaches a symbolic mode’, as Perec ‘portrays how we cannot achieve a stable distance from Auschwitz, ever present’.¹⁵⁵ And yet this interpretation – laudable as it is – ignores that stable, symbolic figuration is impossible in *W*, even on the island itself. The

¹⁵⁴ Bohman-Kalajah, pp. 214-215.

¹⁵⁵ Astro, 867-876 (p. 874).

description of W's geography — full of detail of no particular ideological bearing — could in fact be read as a dark, even parodic *mise en abyme* of the whole, particularly of its reception: the reader, like the athletes, goes round the book clockwise and anti-clockwise, creating competitions between the different sections. Those competitions are organised in a strict hierarchy; the same as the one the reader attempts to impose when he or she puts together the pieces of the text.

This *mise en abyme* might be another warning against the dangers of reconstruction, which only bring to the fore what really separates *W* from the games of the island: the games of the book should *always* be played for a draw. Although a draw suspends and breaks the game, the alternative, a victory, is worse. Perhaps the importance of Perec's use of competition as a figural model in the story of the island is the way it allows the reader to escape from its insidious snares. The story of the island does not say anything different or anything *more* about *W*, or about history: it is not a better or a worse testimony than 'I write: I write'. A draw.

At this point, it might seem rather pointless to include another game and another grid in our inventory, and yet there is another one that should not be left out. The penultimate chapter of the memoir (like the first chapter of the fiction) ends in a game: although this time is not a game that Perec has created or played (or not played) himself. At the end of his account of a visit to an exhibition about the concentration camps, he mentions that he remembers two things, 'the photographs of the walls of the gas chambers

showing scratch marks made by the victims' fingernails, and a set of chessmen made from bits of bread'.¹⁵⁶ The chess pieces allow another dimension of play and games to come to the fore: games can be an act of resistance and defiance. David Gascoigne points out that the game offers 'a symbolic catharsis for those whose lives are imperilled'.¹⁵⁷ Here – Gascoigne remarks – 'the figuration of the game is placed at the locus of the greatest pain and loss in his life'.¹⁵⁸ The book might finally, right at the end, provide a mirror-image of itself which allows the reader to rescue it from figurative stasis, and anchor it firmly to its historical referent. And yet this game is a trace rather than a presence: its lack of board signals poignant the cut that brought it into being. *W*, in a way, provides a board for this game but it does not complete it or play it. The games chosen as figures of *W* have to be different, only to make the chess game stand apart. Those frames (like the leather frame) point at the absence of the players who moulded the pieces, brutally removed from a game that can only testify for that removal, for the cut, for the hole.

We had ended the introduction by wondering whether the frame that we had purchased would be able to contain the hole of indeterminacy of *W* and its 'or'. Our passage has merely demonstrated that the frame was *itself* a hole, an

¹⁵⁶ Perec, *W*, p. 158.

¹⁵⁷ Gascoigne, p. 27.

¹⁵⁸ Gascoigne, pp. 26-27. Gascoigne also points out the symbolic resonances of bread ('the symbol of life itself') in Jewish culture. Bread is another important motif which I have not been able to examine. See Gascoigne, p. 27.

'or': it was empty when we purchased it, after all. The obsessive and repetitive nature of *W*'s figuration is, like the frame itself, much more valuable than its price. *W* and the frame expose — perhaps like no other of our curiosities — the dangers of overlooking, skipping or solving the whirligigs of figuration. Reading *W* requires the critic to 'bear off' any of the binary oppositions that give structure to their approaches: autobiography/fiction, *fabula/sjuzhet*, presence/absence. The hegemonic structure that generic definition in particular imposes on the text is exposed as dubious and problematic: their relation is not that of competition, or collaboration or symbiosis. There is no *relation* because there is no pair to be compared, and there shouldn't be.

Repetition is a risk and a weakness of any analysis which discards those structures, but it is perhaps a worthy risk. Even the search for novelties and discoveries, for what remained "unpurchased" has to be undertaken under no illusion that it will reveal anything new but a further example of the frame. And yet the astounding variety and depth of *W*'s frames deserves careful and obsessive consideration. The text's dismantling of narrative and linearity through its use of a disjunctive, floating, polychronous temporality invites the reader to consider what is at stake their reading: any hierarchical reconstruction forgets something, and *W* is a text which insistently does not allow the reader to forget — hence its obsessive repetitions. *Mise en abyme* is here emptied of any assumption to illuminate the whole: it escapes its borders and becomes the whole text.

It is because of it that *W* becomes a testimony to the absent: not because any of its parts says *more* than the rest, but because everything says the same: 'I write'. If the absent are made present, as Chambers claims, is not as anything other than absence itself. Speaking of his autobiographical work, Perec remarked whatever it is that it sought 'isn't the tragic event like when the violins start up! It has to remain buried the whole time!'.¹⁵⁹ 'It' cannot be dug out: although any of the treasure-marking Xs that we come across could be *the* multiplication sign that makes a positive out of two negatives, it could also be the sign of 'the mathematical unknown', an algebraic enigma which Perec does not give us enough information to solve.¹⁶⁰ Or the 'sign of ablation' in neurophysiology.¹⁶¹ Or a frame.

¹⁵⁹Perec. 'The Work of Memory', in *Species*, pp.123-133 (p. 128).

¹⁶⁰Perec, p. 77.

¹⁶¹Perec, p. 77. Ablation is the removal of tissue by surgery.

Chapter Four

The wooden Hindu aide-de-camp: Javier Marías's *Dark Back of Time* (1998)

...and that Hindu aide-de-camp made of painted wood that I've just brought home with some hesitation, that figurine will also outlast me, possibly.

Javier Marías, *Dark Back of Time*¹

And so to our last curiosity. Compared to our other “samples”, Marías's wooden Hindu aide-de-camp differs from the octopus-lamp and the picture frame in the fact that it is immediately recognisable as a curiosity. The figurine is the closing element in a 34 line-long inventory, in which the narrator of *Dark Back of Time* enumerates the objects in his room — a jacket, books, several family heirlooms and our wooden soldier. The thread connecting the disparate components of the list is the traditional motif of the *memento mori*: Elide Pittarello points out that objects are used here ‘to talk about death metonymically: of his own death through the death of others’.² The conclusion of the list seems to confirm this interpretation, and yet the very last word (‘possibly’) introduces a discordant note: why *wouldn't* the toy soldier outlast him? If it is not a *memento mori*, then what is it?

The soldier is also singled out of the other elements in the inventory by being a recent acquisition: he has ‘just’ brought it home, and ‘with some hesitation’.³ The start of the narrative coincides with the purchase of the figurine, and we may

¹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 11 with some modifications.

² Elide Pittarello, ‘Haciendo tiempo con las cosas’, in *Cuadernos de narrativa: Javier Marías* (see Andrés-Suárez, above), pp. 17-48 (p. 47).

³ Marías, *Dark*, p.11.

wonder whether he is not also embarking on his tale with similar apprehension. Is there a secret behind it? The narrator has previously claimed the elements in the story he has started to tell will be 'entirely capricious, determined by chance', they will 'have no reason [...] to constitute an argument or a plot or answer to some hidden harmony'.⁴ The uncanny presence of the figure seems to contradict this statement; although it is also perfectly possible that the purchase of the aide-de-camp and the start of the narrative *are* just coincidences, and that we might have mistakenly transformed a completely ordinary object into some kind of ominous curiosity.⁵ Perhaps the most interesting part of this mystery (or pseudo-mystery) is the way that its dilemma is dismantled right after being proposed. We cannot find out which of the two readings is right: just after the narrator has demonstrated the exciting games we could play with his newly purchased toy, he snatches it away from our hands. The figurine disappears from the narrative after this point, never to return.

The authorial commentary will also explicitly forbid us from creating stories out of the book's random elements. This *dictum* resembles a self-definition, although perhaps not a generic one: it may be better understood in relation to the narrative/anti-narrative debates. The narrator is rejecting what Ricoeur called *emplotment*: in fact, his stand is reminiscent of the anti-narrative model of selfhood and narrative advanced by Galen Strawson.⁶ The narrator, however, cannot be said to commit wholly to one or the other model, despite the authoritative air of the self-

⁴ Mariás, *Dark*, p. 9.

⁵ See note 5 in Chapter One.

⁶ See notes 182, 184 and 188 in Chapter One.

definition. The wooden soldier is readable as both 'story' and 'episode': it stands for the debate itself rather than one or other position.

Genre, however, has not been completely left out of the self-definition. The narrator mentions that the book's episodes have no plot to connect them – '[u]nlike those of truly fictional novels'.⁷ Does that mean that *Dark Back of Time* should be defined as non-fictional, as an autobiography, as a mirror of the random and contingent quality of real life? This is precisely what Alexis Grohmann argues when he insists that the book 'attempts [...] to capture the breath of life, it tries not to deform it and to create the effect of the real'. Its form is that of life itself: 'not rounded, [...] irregular – and ultimately errant'.⁸

Grohmann's phrase 'the effect of the real' recalls Barthes's *reality effect*, although he reads the unmotivated and "unrounded" quality of the text as a sign of its unadulterated "real" nature. Barthes, on the other hand, advocated that such seemingly unmotivated details signify no reality at all, but only its idea:

[W]hen these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do [...] is *signify* it [...] [They] say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of "the real" [and not its contingent contents] which is then signified.⁹

Hence, our soldier could be read as a "pure" representation of the reality of the narrator's room or as an empty signifier of the book's ultimately sham "reality". But the curiosity cannot be reduced to any of those interpretations: in fact, it also stands

⁷ Marías, *Dark*, p. 9.

⁸ Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 92.

⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 148.

for the book's emphatic anti-realist and meta-discursive character and its embracing of the legendary and the outlandish — of the fictional, of the story. The figurine is used to hedge and qualify the authority of the definition: it enables the narrator to construct a child-like persona for himself in contrast to the *gravitas* of the definition and the *memento mori* motif.¹⁰ Ultimately, the toy cannot be seen as a sign of neither fictionality nor its opposite but only as an emblem of generic undecidability — a *mise en abyme* of the text's ambiguity.

Our curiosity thus articulates in a succinct (but suggestive) manner some of the issues at stake in the critical debates around the generic definition of autobiography — particularly the relation between narrative, contingency and genre. It also highlights the self-contradictory, hesitant and unreliable quality of the narrative voice, who (to complicate things) happens to be called Javier Marías, to have the very same family and friends and to have written the very same books as his maker. Even narrative errancy and digression — which Grohmann read as the true narrative form of life and reality — can also be read as something artificial, a strategy to delay a story (or stories) which the narrator cannot bring himself to tell: perhaps because — as a paranoid reader might deduct — they might too horrible.

The temporal structure of the text (the indefinite location of the coronation within the *szujhet* discussed in the introduction) also belies the seemingly unmotivated and “pure” quality of the narrator's digressions. Digression creates a

¹⁰ As Gareth Wood points out, the motif of the relic is an explicit echo of Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia*, which Marías translated. See Gareth Wood, *Javier Marías's Debt to Translation: Sterne, Browne, Nabokov* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 166-169.

hidden network of ‘matches’ underneath the text’s scattered surface. The *fabula* they conceal or defer is, however, deliberately elusive. The reader wonders whether the book’s secret is *just* the make-believe coronation of King Xavier or whether there is another story behind the story – perhaps the one triggered or suggested by the toy soldier.

Dark Back of Time will thus allow us to explore some of the narrative devices that we observed in the two previous examples (*mise en abyme*, digression, temporal indeterminacy) – and their relation to generic definition – from a different perspective. In the introduction, I observed that this text is more openly zany and “curious” than the other two. For instance, its meta-discursive dimension is far bossier in tone. But (like in *Speak*, *Memory* or *W*) its self-reading is by no means unified and coherent. Concentrated examples of *mise en abyme* coexist alongside dispersed and self-contradictory ones. Meta-discursive passages do not unfold through argument and conjunctions but through a lethargic comma-fuelled syntax where different arguments imperceptibly sabotage each other.

The particular interest of *Dark Back of Time* for our study does not merely lie in its overt self-awareness (and how this feature affects its use of *mise en abyme*), but also in its different take on some of the other narrative structures we have observed in our previous two examples. *Dark Back of Time* (like *W*) is structured in different narrative levels: it includes several embedded stories (including two lengthy biographical interludes), as well as extensive quotes and references to *All Souls* (one of Mariás’s novels). Unlike in *W* – where the two levels remained distinct and separate, simply mirroring or even propping each other – the narrative levels of

Dark Back of Time behave far more anarchically, even to the point of mingling on several occasions. *Dark Back of Time* thus curiously combines *mise en abyme* with another unsettling technique, metalepsis, which we had not yet observed in any of our examples. Despite their differences (as pointed by Dorrit Cohn), both techniques share some of its ultimate effects: according to Cohn, both stir up ‘in the reader a feeling of disarray, a kind of anxiety or vertigo’.¹¹ This chapter investigates the consequences of that particular combination for the generic (in)definition of the text.

Another intriguing novelty of *Dark Back of Time* (the ultimate consequence, perhaps, of its combination of metalepsis and *mise en abyme*) is its explicit concern with the relation between autobiography, writing, reference and death. Pittarello observed that Mariás used objects to talk about death metonymically; however, the model of reference established here is far from transparent – the book’s rather mysterious conclusion should in fact be read in relation to De Man’s interpretation of Wordsworth’s epitaphs, particularly his linking of the question of referentiality, figurative language and death.¹²

The chapter, however, will start at the usual revolving door entrance: the first section examines the question of the book’s generic definition and its rather paradoxical generic tag, the false/fake novel. Despite my qualms about the borderline metaphor, this section makes use of liminal tropes to explore issues of genre and self-definition. The reason for this U-turn is that *Dark Back of Time* itself makes use of these figures, although it does not wholeheartedly embrace them: in

¹¹Dorrit Cohn, ‘Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme’, trans. by Lewis S. Gleich, *Narrative*, 20.1 (2012), 105-113 (p.110).

¹² See note 2 in this chapter.

fact, the book plays with and teases the stable model of knowledge and genre they have come to represent. In particular, this section explores Marías's use of metalepsis as a way of disturbing the book's generic stability. The second section looks at liminality and genre from a temporal-narrative point of view by exploring how the book's use of polychrony (the curious and uncertain location of the coronation), temporal indeterminacy and *mise en abyme* disrupts what Grohmann saw as the 'natural' (and hence autobiographical and referential) quality of the book's digressive structure. The final part returns to the "secret" story implied by the wooden aide-de-camp to try to make sense of the book's curious final twist. In particular, it tries to determine how the conclusion brings together metalepsis, digression and *mise en abyme* in order to explore the relation between genre, reference, figuration and death.

A return to the borderline: the goal-line of genre in *Dark Back of Time*

Szentkuthy's goal: undecidability and indecision in *Dark Back of Time*

Our enthralled contemplation of the wooden soldier has demonstrated that the definitional task promises to be as dizzying in *Dark Back of Time* as it was with our previous examples. The “story” of the figurine and its purchase could be read as a *mise en abyme* of the definitional whirligig, a mirror of the undecidable nature of the text's genre. Considering this, it might seem rather foolish to use anything else as the guiding trope of our analysis of generic definition in *Dark Back of Time*, and yet one is tempted to return to the borderline, if only for contrast. Although tropological curiosities (such as the paradoxical tag of the book, “false novel”) are one of the book's main figural motifs, the book is also structured through a series of liminal metaphors which will also be used as generic definitions. This section will try to examine the contrast and interplay between these two figurative models — and their relation to genre.

I will, however, start this exploration of liminality and genre in *Dark Back of Time* on a tangent (digression is contagious). ‘In Uncertain Time’ (‘En el tiempo indeciso’, literally, ‘In Indecisive Time’) is a short story composed three years before our ‘false novel’ in which we can find one of Marías's more striking examples of a

liminal metaphor.¹³ Of course, it was not intended to be a comment on a book which at the time had not even been written; but the metaphor illustrates similar concerns to those developed years later in *Dark Back of Time*. The metaphor in question is that of the goal-line. At the heart of this seemingly slight (even melodramatic) tale lies a memorable goal scored by the protagonist of the story: Szentkuthy, a promising Hungarian striker (and namesake of the avant-garde novelist) signed by a top Madrid club.

Szentkuthy's goal was the match-winner in a European Cup quarter-final game. He got the ball in a counter-attack, dribbled past the remaining defenders and the goalkeeper and ran with the ball towards the empty goal. At this point, shockingly, he decided not to shoot but rather stopped the ball just before the goal-line for a few seconds before letting it roll slowly across. The unnamed first-person narrator of the story (who met the striker a couple of times), reflecting on the goal, concludes that

It was only a second but I don't think a single one of those spectators will ever forget it. It pointed out the gulf between what is unavoidable and what has not been avoided, between what is still future and what is already past, between "might be" and "was", a palpable transition which we only very rarely witness.[...] He has thwarted imminence, and it was not so much that he had stopped time as that he had set a mark on it and made it uncertain.[...] Szentkuthy's will was, at the very least, vacillating, as if he wanted to emphasize that nothing is inevitable: it's going to be a goal, but look, it could just as easily not be.¹⁴

¹³Javier Marías, *When I Was Mortal*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Harvill, 1999), pp. 143-156.

¹⁴Marías, *When*, p. 152.

Szentkuthy's rather implausible goal becomes a metaphor for what Marías calls 'uncertain' or indecisive time, the moment of transition between what will probably happen and what eventually happens, when all outcomes are revealed as contingent. In delaying the inevitable, he makes both the goal and non-goal present and simultaneous, before the inevitable takes place. And it is the dawdling, the delay which makes the frontier discernible. Going back from this game to *Dark Back of Time* and genre, our wooden toy could be compared to the striker's delay in the goal-line: it is also saying that he could be a story, but he might just as easily not be.

The difference, however, between the striker and the narrator of *Dark Back of Time's* is that Szentkuthy scores. But is it possible for our narrator to remain in the goal-line of generic definition? De Man thought not — perhaps our narrator also ends up scoring and deciding after all his dawdling. In a 2006 interview to the *Paris Review* Marías mentioned that his 'natural state' was that of 'Indecision — but it doesn't mean I never decide. It means I take my time'.¹⁵ Indecision is here paradoxically defined as a delayed decision, perhaps because indecision is *also* a form of decision. Although Marías's opinions should not be read as those of his characters, this aphorism could be read in relation to both Szentkuthy's goal and to *Dark Back of Time* — perhaps as a way to approach the narrator's ambiguous errancy. Digression was read by Grohmann as a more natural and "real" narrative style, but it might in fact resemble Szentkuthy's goal more than he thinks: it might be read as the procrastination of a duty.

¹⁵ Sarah Fay, 'Javier Marías: The Art of Fiction, n 109', *Paris Review*, 179 (Winter 2006), online version <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5680/the-art-of-fiction-no-190-javier-marias>> [accessed 2 April 2013], not paginated.

However, we should nonetheless refrain from making hasty associations: there is a twist to Szentkuthy's story and goal which is particularly (if undeliberately) relevant for our discussion of the genre and the narrative structure of *Dark Back of Time*. 'In Uncertain Time' concludes with the narrator's account of Szentkuthy's death: our protagonist, we learn, was shot dead by his wife in revenge for his many infidelities (he told the narrator in one of their encounters that he used to celebrate his goals by "scoring" in the colloquial, sexual sense of the word). The conclusion exploits the goal's metaphorical potential: the narrator reads the murder in the light of the victim's most famous goal, and wonders whether the player's wife did not hesitate for a moment before shooting him just as her husband had done before scoring.

Perhaps there was a second when imminence was thwarted and time was marked and became uncertain, and during which Szentkuthy clearly saw the dividing line and the normally invisible wall that separates life and death, the only "might be" and the only "was" that count. These are sometimes at the mercy of the most trivial things, of two feeble fingers that have grown tired of slipping into a pocket or tugging at a sleeve, or of the sole of a boot.¹⁶

¹⁶Marías, *When*, p. 156. I have taken the liberty of changing Jull Costa's translation of the last sentence. She changes Marías's full-stop after 'count' into a comma and translates the end of the last sentence as ' these are sometimes controlled by the most trivial things, by two feeble fingers that have grown tired of slipping into a pocket or tugging at a sleeve, tired of being beneath the sole of a boot'. This translation, whilst grammatically correct seems to deprive the ending of its mystery and ambiguity. The original reads 'A veces están en el poder de las cosas más nimias, de unos dedos sin fuerza que se han cansado de buscar un bolsillo y tirar de una manga, o de la suela de una bota'. See Marías, *Cuando fui mortal* (Barcelona: Debolsillo, 2006), p. 156. The problems is that the last clause ('de la suela de una bota') could be both complement 'controlled by' and 'tired of'. The Spanish 'de' is used alongside both verbs, but that is not the case in English and the translator needs to choose between one meaning or the other. Jull Costa nonetheless makes her choice rather too unambiguous.

The liminal territory here is the goal-line that separates life and death, but, in an ironic role-reversal, Szentkuthy becomes the spectator rather than the goal-scorer. The interest of the tale's conclusion for our study lies not in its ironic nature or its pseudo-Othellian melodrama, but rather in how it relates to the narrative/anti-narrative debates: and in particular to the problematic retrospective and teleological model of knowledge that narrative imposes on discordant elements. The narrator's final words might be hinting at a cause-and-effect relation between goal and death, as each goal (and sexual conquest) brought Szentkuthy one step closer to his death. But the final words also suggest that what led to the player's downfall was not his womanising but his most famous goal – the very last words mysteriously suggest that the player's (hubristic?) dawdling on the goal line might have caused his end. His end might have been at the mercy of the sole of his boot in *that* particular European Cup game.

This reading proposes a different sort of narrative model: one based on irrational, superstitious and wholly unexplainable reversed causalities in which events are neither linked by teleological, cause-and-effect structures nor left unconnected and dispersed. This model relies on what Marías himself has called 'an exaggerated associative faculty, a hypertrophy of our capacity to see links and relations between all things'.¹⁷ The allure of association does not lie in its denial of causality but in its muted potential to contain all causalities, including reverse and

¹⁷Marías, *Literatura y Fantasma*, pp. 392-393. An excellent overview of this idea in Marías' narrative can be found in Grohmann's study *Coming into One's Own*, particularly his chapters on *All Souls* and *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*. See Alexis Grohmann, *Coming into One's Own: The Novelistic Development of Javier Marías* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 153-167 and pp. 247-282. Alan Marriott formulates this idea by referring to how horror stories (such as those of his admired Arthur Machen) rely on 'horrifying other halves', on the matching of two unconnected elements. See Marías, *All Souls*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Harvill, 1992), pp. 84-85.

irrational ones. This is in fact the reading path suggested by the toy soldier: an uncanny association between the absurdly wary purchase of a figurine and a loosely structured book without a plot. Continuing with the associations, we are reminded of Todorov's theory of the fantastic, based on the reader's unsolvable hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations.¹⁸ Marías's theory of narrative association could be said to free the reader from the ordeal of having to make a decision about the figurine – and ultimately about the book's genre. However, this approach weakens when one associates it to Genette's dilemma about how to read the bumblebee episode and – particularly – to De Man's rebuke: it is impossible to remain '*within* an undecidable situation'.¹⁹ Szentkuthy could not have stayed in the goal-line.

Should we thus infer from our rather forced association of 'In Uncertain Time' to the problematic generic definition of *Dark Back of Time's* that the latter also "scores" generically after all its dawdling and indecision? Perhaps not – although football and sport make excellent allegories of life and time, Steven Connor has pointed out that there are important differences between them:

Unlike 'real life', which, despite its upright reputation, is plainly a treacherous fogbank of delusions and deceptions, vanities and velleities, sport is the forcing into being of a condition in which it is impossible to deny what is really happening.²⁰

¹⁸See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

¹⁹De Man, 'Autobiography', I, pp. 264-274 (p. 266).

²⁰Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), p. 175.

There are no football allegories in *Dark Back of Time*: in fact, ‘a treacherous fogbank of delusions and deceptions’ is a surprisingly accurate description of the book, a work in which ‘what is really happening’ can be easily mistaken or denied.

Could we thus infer from Connor’s distinction that because *Dark Back of Time* cannot be represented through a sporting allegory, it must be “real life”? And yet, when it comes to the book’s genre (and its temporal structure), the allegory of the goal-line is not as forced and inadequate as it immediately seemed. *Dark Back of Time* – as we will see – does make a choice about the problem of reference. Although the definition as a ‘not truly fictional’ text hinted at the autobiographical or referential character of the text, its opening is rather close to De Man’s arguments about autobiography’s generic status and the problem of reference. The next section examines the opening of *Dark Back of Time* and its relation to the debate on the referential status of autobiography as a way of re-examining the aptness of the goal-line metaphor (and all its liminal siblings) as a critical tool with which to approach a curious goal and a curious book.

‘Still never’: the opening of *Dark Back of Time* and the question of reference

The opening two sentences of *Dark Back of Time* – which occupy a page and a half, and which have been the focus of much critical attention – have unavoidably been read as the book’s most explicit (and perhaps least equivocal) engagement with the question of its genre and its referential status. Pittarello describes it as a ‘metadiscursive opening’ and a hermeneutical key (or ‘instruction manual’) to the text.²¹ It is possible to read this opening as a kind of generic goal (or decision) which articulates unambiguously a rejection of the possibility of reference: we should nonetheless bear in mind that the passage’s syntactical convolutions, sprawling structure and argumentative self-contradictions might not leave any certainties – even negative ones – unscathed.

I will proceed to look at this sentence in detail. Speaking of convolutions and sprawl, Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s rather felicitous punning description of *Dark Back of Time* is particularly apt for this opening sentence. For him, the book is ‘in a permanent comma’. He also observes (in a second pun) that the punctuation sign is nonetheless also used with ‘well-thought comical effects’.²² The comic coma state of the opening can be discerned, for instance, in the narrator’s use of rhetorical prolepsis. This device has been described by Mark Currie as the anticipation of ‘an objection, or a resistance, from the reader to the strategies through which it

²¹ Pittarello, ‘*Negra Espalda*: Instrucciones de uso’, in *Foro hispánico 20: El pensamiento literario de Javier Marías*, ed. by Maarten Steenmeijer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 125-134 (p. 125).

²² See Cabrera Infante, ‘¡Ave Marías!’, not paginated.

constructs the world or advances its perspectives'.²³ The narrator's rejection of reference is actually triggered by a rhetorical prolepsis gone awry.

I believe I've still never mistaken fiction for reality, though I have mixed them together more than once, as everyone does, not only novelists or writers but everyone who has recounted anything since the time we know began, and no one in that known time has done anything but tell and tell, or prepare or ponder a tale, or plot one. Anyone can relate an anecdote about something that happened, and the simple fact of saying it already distorts and twists it, language can't reproduce events and shouldn't attempt to, and that, I imagine, is why during some trials — the trials in movies, anyway, the ones I know best — the implicated parties are asked to perform a material or physical reconstruction of what happened, repeating the gestures, the movements, the envenomed steps they took, the way they thrust the knife to become the accused, they are asked to simulate seizing the weapon once again and delivering the blow to someone who, because of it, ceased to be and is no more, or rather to empty air, because it isn't enough for them to say it, to tell the story impassively and as precisely as possible, it must be seen, and an imitation, a representation or staging is required, though now without the knife in hand and without the body — sack of flour, sack of flesh — to drive it into, this time in cool detachment and without racking up another crime and adding another victim to the list, but only as pretense and memory, because what they can never reproduce is the time gone by or lost, nor they can revive the dead who are lost within that time and gone.²⁴

The narrator thus starts by arguing for the ontological separation of reality and fiction, and — to try to demonstrate this point — embarks on a comma-ridden (and rather comical) 'rhetorical prolepsis' in which he ends up *agreeing* with the foretold objection. His defensive device becomes an own goal. This idiosyncratic

²³ Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), p. 153.

²⁴ Marías, *Dark*, p.7. I have taken the liberty of changing the translator's semi-colon after "accused" back to a comma as in the Spanish original.

generic definition thus moves from epistemological certainty into a thorough questioning and undoing of its initial argument.

This reading, however, is not unanimous: David K. Herzberger, for instance, sees no ambiguity or contradiction at all in the passage

[T]he narrator [...] seems to stand firmly on the ground of common sense (and tradition) when he asserts one world that is real and another that is make-believe, each always distinguishable from the other.²⁵

Samuel Amago, on the other hand, considers the passage as a statement of generic indeterminacy: for him, the opening is

[A]n example of how [...] the narrator is interested most in creating a sense of indeterminacy. Indeed, if the narrator were truly interested in making a confident assertion that fiction and reality occupy two separate ontological fields, certainly he might have been less equivocal in his choice of words [...]. The accumulation of adverbs that surround the main verb “confundir” [to confuse] — *no* [not], *todavía* [still], and *nunca* [never] — serve to do exactly that; to confound and perhaps confuse the reader.²⁶

Amago’s analysis rightly points out the importance of the adverbs in the seemingly certain opening statement. In particular, the narrator’s conjunction of ‘still’ and ‘never’ effectively sabotages the sentence’s logic, and thus its value as an argument and a definition. The sentence is semantically incoherent: ‘still’ and ‘never’ contradict and undermine each other’s meaning.²⁷ ‘Still’ threatens to blow and shatter the narrator’s certainty, and its threat is soon fulfilled: he has never confused

²⁵ David K. Herzberger, *A Companion to Javier Marías* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2011), p. 121.

²⁶ Samuel Amago, *True Lies: Narrative Self-Consciousness in the Contemporary Spanish Novel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), p. 132.

²⁷ Later on, the narrator repeats the sentence and makes it aware he says ‘deliberately incorrectly’. See Marías, *Dark*, p. 63.

fiction and reality but the example that he will use to illustrate the impossibility of language to reproduce reality comes from fiction, from trial films.

However, this distinction might be considered irrelevant in relation to the rest of the argument. Rather than indeterminacy, the narrator is denying the possibility of reference: the problem of the boundary between fiction and reality is subsumed into an examination of language itself. The film trial is actually the metaphor of a metaphor.²⁸ Pittarello has rightly pointed out that in the opening paragraphs, ‘the narrator tackles the ontological question *par excellence* of all Western tradition’, reaching ‘the gloomy conclusion that it is impossible to preserve experience through language’.²⁹ It does not matter if the trial is fictional: even a real trial would equally become fictional when told.

What Pittarello and other critics fail to observe in this passage is that even the metaphor of the trial (a deranged and murderous version of the ‘rambling comparison’) even dismantles itself in its attempt to signify the absence of reference. Ostensibly, the metaphor is used to point out our general suspicion against language: because language is unreliable, judges or lawyers may ask a defendant not to tell what happened but to represent the crime, to stab the victim again, now into the air. But is that really what a judge would or should do? For we may ask ourselves whether the defendant’s dramatic reconstruction would be any more truthful than his word: the defendant’s words (and, by extension, gestures) are assumed to be unreliable or insufficient to establish the truth. A judge is not expected to make a

²⁸ Marías, *Dark*, p. 8.

²⁹ Pittarello, ‘*Negra espalda*’, pp. 125-134 (p. 126).

decision solely on the basis of testimony, be it visual or linguistic. The trope moves further and further away from a stable meaning as it develops.

In fact, we could read the passage as a performance (a performance about a performance) that proves the narrator's scepticism about language: not only is he affirming we cannot tell what happened through language, he is also showing how we cannot tell that we cannot tell. The narrator's words speak for him, and speak more than he does, adding unwelcome layers of complexity to his point. The murderer here might be no other than the example itself, who betrays the narrator and stabs him in the back. If the narrator is here trying to offer a defence against the "autobiography" goal (disguised as a proleptic objection), he is doubly successful at it, exposing himself as fictional and unreliable.

However, despite my previous insistence on how this passage is an unequivocal generic goal for figuration and the impossibility of reference – a "golden goal" at that, the goal that concludes the match as soon as it is scored – the 'performance' reading is far from unassailable. The trial example is adequate enough, although it might be better applied to a witness rather than to a defendant. The narrator might be using the murder trial example not as a joke, but with the opposite intention: in order to emphasise how tragic, even deadly, the problem of language might end up being (the end of the sentence is elegiac and melancholic). This is the way Pittarello reads it, for instance: she remarks that Marías's 'approach is extreme, a matter of life and death'.³⁰ The impossibility of reference is not just comical but also coma-like and deadly.

³⁰ Pittarello, '*Negra Espalda*', pp. 125-134 (p.126).

Alongside this dimension, the trial metaphor is also used to explore the ethical consequences of the impossibility of reference and the aporias of testimony. This topic is explicitly discussed in a later reprise of the judiciary motifs. The narrator reflects on the epistemological conundrum of testimony in relation to his own family history (a history which is here identical to that of Javier Marías himself) and to the larger context of totalitarianism and the Franco regime.

[I]t is impossible to demonstrate that you have *not* done something or committed some crime if the opposite is presumed, from the start, to be the case, a thing all dictators know very well. To go no further than Spain itself, that was the judicial policy of the Franco regime.³¹

The narrator introduces a specific historical context into a metaphor that before stayed within the realm of purely abstract considerations about language and genre. The testimony of a defendant should not be immediately disbelieved out of hand, as the justice system might not be fair or impartial. As an example, the narrator uses the story of his father: a supporter of the Republic and democracy during the Civil War, he was falsely accused by a friend of charges such as writing for *Pravda* and being the Spanish companion of Dr Hewlett Johnson, the Red Dean of Canterbury.³² The narrator tells us how his father was put in prison, and only escaped being executed 'due to luck and my mother's tenacity'.³³

³¹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 24.

³² The Red Dean, Dr Hewlett Johnson, was a Communist activist, propagandist and Dean of Canterbury Cathedral. There is a recent biography of him by John Butler. See John R. Butler, *The Red Dean: The Public and Private Faces of Hewlett Johnson* (London: Scala, 2011).

³³ Marías retells the story of his father's accusation and trial in a lot more detail and depth in his next novel, *Tu Rostro Mañana (Your Face Tomorrow)*.

However, as in the trial example, language gets out of control even here: as Gareth Wood points out, the story of his father's betrayal is narrated in a quasi-Shandean manner. Even whilst providing a testimony of a historical injustice, the narrator still digresses: he is distracted by the figure of the Dean, and narcissistically interprets the false accusation not merely as something that could have cost his father his life but also as something that would have prevented his own existence.³⁴ The reader might wish to question whether this peculiar testimony is hindered by its shambolic, childlike execution — whether the story survives its telling. Wood thinks that it does: for him the tone here 'is more nuanced than Sterne's', particularly as the digressions turn into what Wood describes as 'a disillusioned account of the modern world's overanxiety to bury the past'.³⁵

Despite his nonchalance, the narrator does wish to provide here a testimony for the bravery and suffering of his parents under the Franco regime — he may wish to be believed.³⁶ Herzberger has pointed out that the book's testimonial passages provide

[A] powerful sentimental component to *Negra* that would seem to betray any notion that it can be viewed within postmodernism as a work of fiction that struggles to represent anything beyond its own construction.³⁷

³⁴ Gareth Wood, p. 126.

³⁵ Gareth Wood, p.126.

³⁶ Pozuelo Yvancos discusses the fictionalisation of the Julian Marías denunciation and trial in Marías' next novel, *Your Face Tomorrow*, arguing that Marías divorces truth from reference. See Pozuelo Yvancos, pp. 109-114.

³⁷ Herzberger, p. 133.

The importance of this dimension somehow belies the text's strong stance on the impossibility of referentiality and language — the passage on the father and the Red Dean, however, also demonstrates how no testimony is ever neutral.

Despite what Herzberger argues, the text's paradoxical stance is particularly postmodernist: Linda Hutcheon argues that 'Postmodernism does not so much erode our 'sense of history' and reference, [...] as erode our sure sense of what both history and reference meant'.³⁸ The book's most explicit engagement with Spain's recent history (a made-up conversation between mercenary pilot Hugh Oloff De Wet and Franco) proposes an explicitly fictional and conjectural approach to testimony which perhaps exposes totalitarian ideology in a more effective way than the story of the father. After all, the narrator also mentions how "'To tell what happened" is inconceivable and futile, or possible only as invention'.³⁹ Only perhaps: this "personal" and testimonial branch of the trial metaphor needs to be read in conjunction to the book's other, and far more frivolous, testimonial duties (which the next section discusses) as another demonstration of paradox and even perhaps of indecision — even if it is impossible. It might not have been a goal, after all.

Our perhaps over-certain identification of the narrator's argument with a De Manian approach to autobiography and reference needs to be qualified not only by the text's exploration of the ethical and ideological consequences of such an argument, but also by the text's performance of its own argumentative instability. Pozuelo Yvancos rightly points out the book 'is no less of a novel because of its reflexive dimension. It

³⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 46.

³⁹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 9.

isn't an essay; or a critical or philosophical treatise'.⁴⁰ The trial re-enactment aptly illustrates how Mariás uses philosophical arguments novelistically and turns them into imperfect allegories of themselves.

'An internal pocket larger than the whole': *Dark Back of Time* as a generic marker

If there is any certainty at all to be extracted from the opening of *Dark Back of Time* is that readers should not take the narrator's lucubrations at face value. This aspect is even more evident when we consider the book's *other* testimonial duty — ostensibly, the main reason for its existence. This other duty (in contrast to the one performed in the passages about his family) is deliberately frivolous. It is explained in the paragraph which follows the narrator's comically unsuccessful rhetorical prolepsis: there, the narrator returns to his first thesis (that fiction and reality are ontologically distinct) in order to declare once and for all to his jury of readers that he does not confuse reality and fiction — particularly his own reality and his own fictions.

In this pages I'm going to place myself on the side of those who have sometimes claimed to be telling what really happened or pretended to succeed in doing so, I'm going to tell what happened, or was ascertained, or simply known — what happened in my experience or in my fabulation or to my knowledge or perhaps all of it is only

⁴⁰ Pozuelo Yvancos, p. 65.

consciousness that never ceases — as a result of the composition and circulation of a novel, a work of fiction.⁴¹

The generic definition is an even more blatant example of how the ‘autobiography’ goal cannot be scored. The beginning of the sentence purportedly proclaims *Dark Back of Time* to be a testimony, a referential narrative, but as the definition advances — closely marked by every single comma and adverb — it becomes seriously injured. The only stable generic tag turns out to be not that of *Dark Back of Time* itself but that of a previous book, *All Souls*, which can be defined — with disarming ease — as a novel.

We should nonetheless not become too overenthusiastic in our application of sporting allegories. This passage also introduces a new aspect to generic definition which ‘either/or’ liminal metaphors such as the goal-line failed to take into account. What we find here is a definition within a definition: because one book is defined as a novel the other becomes an autobiography, and viceversa. Definition is here trapped in a mirror game of supplements which actually destabilises any defining trait. *Dark Back of Time* is itself the generic definition of another text: genres are not separate realms to be crossed and uncrossed at ease (or scored and saved) but may actually be contained within each other.

As the generic tag of *All Souls*, *Dark Back of Time* makes explicit the paradoxes of generic identification that Derrida explored in ‘The Law of Genre’. Before moving into that comparison, it might be a good idea to offer a brief introduction to the “source” of our curiosity. Published in 1989, the novel narrated the two-year stay in

⁴¹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 9. Again I have “corrected” Esther Allen, as she again rebels against Marías’ crazed syntax and punctuation, and adds an extra dash after “my knowledge” to separate the last clause.

Oxford of an unnamed Spanish lecturer in translation. The protagonist's namelessness and some biographical coincidences (highlighted by the original paratext) led many readers to consider it an autobiography in disguise: a misreading which *Dark Back of Time* ostensibly seeks to correct.⁴² So is the book a 'novel' tag which – as Derrida pointed out – cannot belong to the genre it denominates? Does that make it a non-novel? Or an autobiography? Or is this novel-tag *really* a novel? These deductions, however, seem to forget how Derrida insisted on the partial character of generic belonging. His vision of the generic mark also blurs the frontiers between binary distinctions such as inside/outside or part/whole in which much discussion of genre relies on. In fact, Derrida's reconfiguration of the paradoxical dimensions of the generic tag seems particularly fitting to *Dark Back of Time*: it is an internal pocket of the previous text that becomes larger than its container.

The nature of supplementarity and its relation to the digression's potential for semantic dispersal can be observed through *Dark Back of Time's* shambolic performance of its generic tagging duties. A particularly comical example is the narrator's attempt to prove that one (but only one) of the characters in *All Souls* (Will, the senile time-travelling porter of the Institutio Tayloriana) had a real-life – but non-senile – model: one Walter Thomas, known as Tom, of whom we are even offered a photograph. The function of Tom and Will is to operate as a tag within the tag: the real character that demonstrates the fictional nature of the rest of the cast, narrator included.

⁴² The best and most thorough account of the reception of *All Souls* is in the chapter dedicated to the novel in Grohmann, *Coming*, pp. 123-181.

This exception, however, will end up un-defining the other characters and their ontological status. The real model and its fictional copy are soon fused *and* separated. See, for example, the narrator's account of the death of Tom (the model), which soon turns into an elegy for Will (the copy) — who had not even died in *All Souls*. The death of the model also kills his fictional counterpart, as if one could no longer live once one of them had disappeared. This is a curious reversal of the cliché of immortality through fiction: here reality and mortality intrude in the world of the novel and kill one of the characters.⁴³ But then can a ghostly creature like Will die again? That is the paradoxical core of the Tom/Will dilemma: if he seeks to prove that there were some true elements in *All Souls* he needs to renounce to Will's life, but at the same time, he is aware that he cannot kill him in *All Souls*, as the former cannot be changed or rewritten.⁴⁴ He is to remain undead for eternity no matter how much he kills him now to prove his point. Even the photograph becomes equivocal: the old man's face becomes opaque, a flickering mask which the reader can turn into Will or Tom at will — or even perhaps suspect of not being any of them at all.

There is, however, an underlying punch-line to this dizzying non-tag: Will (whom he seeks to point out as "real") is perhaps the most evidently fictional or metaphorical character in *All Souls*: a symbol of Oxford itself, or even a *mise en abyme* of *All Souls*. It is thus difficult to see why a ghost is picked out amongst the other characters to be "real" and to tag the rest of the cast as fictional creatures: it might be a way of showing how the narrator comically falls into the same traps as his

⁴³ The narrator later reveals to have made use of the cliché to obtain certain favours from friends in exchange for fictional cameo appearances, as revealed in the hilarious dialogue with Professor Francisco Rico, a real-life eminent Spanish literature scholar, editor of the canonical critical edition of *Don Quixote*. See Marías, *Dark*, pp. 47-62.

⁴⁴ Marías, *Dark*, p. 18.

misreaders or a particularly sophisticated argument for the metaphorical, ghostly character of language. There is no reason why metaphorical or allegorical characters cannot be as real as “real” ones (or real cities, like Oxford itself) because they are both equally figural.

The passage demonstrates the problematic nature of binary models of genre such as the goal-line and the frontier: *Dark Back of Time* marks *All Souls* as both fictional and autobiographical, mirroring its own equally paradoxical self-tagging. And at the same time, it only manages to turn them both into figures of figures and fictions of fictions. It is very revealing, however, that even after the (deliberate) tagging fiasco of the Tom/Will section, the narrator keeps on insisting on his attempt to separate both texts. He even brings back the judicial metaphors of the beginning, perhaps to provide a little authoritative sheen to his rather futile task:

I could state and declare, as I’ve often done and am now doing again, that almost all of [*All Souls*] was invented, [...] that none of the characters had a counterpart in anyone who exists or once existed [...] Though in fact there is no reason to believe anything I state or declare, even if there does exist a credulous and unjustifiable tendency to believe the statements authors make about their own books.⁴⁵

This declaration, however, only confirms the reader’s initial suspicion about the narrator’s unreliability. He casts himself in the role of the defendant, but he is only the victim of a harmless misreading. The legitimacy and authority of his tagging operation is undone: he might be far closer to the accuser than the accused, whose

⁴⁵ Marías, *Dark*, p. 24.

testimony is regularly (and unfairly) seen as more reliable. Karen Berg mentions that '[a]uthorial intrusions of this nature stand out of place in conventional nonfiction and undermine the reader's implicit trust.'⁴⁶ He is in fact declaring that he is a liar – the paradox of paradoxes which completely unsettles any remaining certainty, and which returns us to the whirligigs of figuration.⁴⁷

Reivax and the 'false novel': the generic markers of *Dark Back of Time*

What to do, then, about the genre of *Dark Back of Time*? Perhaps this is a good moment to abandon the frontier and the goal-line and return to some of our other metaphors. It may not come as a surprise that *Dark Back of Time* has also tended to be defined as a hybrid. Pittarello, for instance, claims that the text 'is not included in any known literary genre and at the same time participates of all of them'.⁴⁸ Of course, we could regard all our meandering attempts at description as futile and unnecessary, as the text *already* has two generic tags – and two extremely curious ones at that, highlighting the figural and paradoxical character of the definitional act (as the other definitions also did).

⁴⁶ Karen Berg, *Javier Marías's Postmodern Praxis: Humour and the Interplay between Reality and Fiction in his Novels and Essays* (Säarbrucken: VDM Verlag Dr Muller, 2008), p. 120.

⁴⁷ See Mark Currie's *Postmodern Narrative Theory* for an exploration of this paradox, particularly in relation to the confessional genre. See Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, pp. 119-120.

⁴⁸ Pittarello, 'Negra', pp. 125-134 (p. 125). See Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 73 for another hybrid reading. A better tag than the hybrid, however, might be that of the parasitical novel, which would twin *Dark* to another tale about a make-believe king, *Pale Fire*.

One of them would not be immediately considered as a curiosity, particularly if read by Lejeune. Our narrator mentions at the start that he happens to be called Javier Marías:

This novel, entitled *Todas las Almas* [...] lent itself to the identification of its nameless narrator with its named author, Javier Marías, also author of the present narrative in which narrator and author do coincide and I no longer know if there is one of us or two, at least while I'm writing.⁴⁹

However, this mark of the autobiographical pact, the trait that distinguished autobiography from the first-person novel is here used in a playful and paradoxical way, reminiscent of its model – ‘The Laughing Cow’ box. However, any reading which takes the name as a generic marker needs to bear in mind that it might be actually used not as a tag but as a figure of definition – as a *mise en abyme*, in other words. For instance, the narrator tells us at one point that Javier is not actually his first name: it is Xavier, spelt with an X (as in the Catalan or French version of the name). In a charming ironic twist, Xavier will eventually become his regal name when he becomes King of Redonda – the other monarchs used Spanish versions of their English names for their title (MP Shiel was King Felipe; John Gawsworth, King Juan) so he has to use a foreign version of his name. His true name is also his make-believe name.

But there is more: at one point the narrator explains that when he learnt to write as a child (because he was left-handed) he used to write it backwards, that is, as REIVAX. When this original reversed name (the original of the original) is read in

⁴⁹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 13. Samuel Amago reads this as a reference to Borges's ‘Borges and I’. See Amago, pp. 139-143. Pozuelo Yvancos refutes this, see p. 105.

the right direction, the first three letters sound like the word 'rey', King.⁵⁰ His name becomes a pseudo-prophecy of his fate and a *mise en abyme* of *Dark Back of Time*: REIVAX is the novel itself in reverse order, its wondrous final revelation hidden at the beginning (like the story of the toy soldier?). Of course, this is perhaps only a freaky coincidence not to be taken seriously (or else anyone called Javier or Xavier would be claiming their rightful kingdoms) — but so was the soldier, and perhaps the book itself.

The transformation of the sober proper name into a curiosity can be compared in its paradoxical nature to the book's other generic tag, that of the 'falsa novela' (translatable as either 'false' or 'fake' novel).⁵¹ The tag could be read as an acknowledgement of the fictional nature of autobiography in its supplementary role, although it also seems to announce in its flagrant self-contradiction the absent/present quality of the generic tag. This paradoxical moniker is, after all, a sort of squared generic tag: the mark of a mark, the supplement of a supplement, and could be thus read as an exaggerated mirror-image of the book-cum-mark.

The term is never actually used within the book (it appears in the blurb, in inverted commas), although it is not extra-authorial: Marías frequently uses it to refer to the book, alternating it with "novel". The term itself is not Marías's own creation: as Grohmann first noticed, the expression was used by Spanish avant-garde writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna to refer to a series of parodic novellas published

⁵⁰ Rather than resembling Charles Kinbote at this point, the narrator resembles Shade's daughter, Hazel Shade, who also used to twist words, calling 'spiders' 'redips'. See Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.39.

⁵¹ Both are correct: 'false novel' is more common, but Gareth Wood translates it as 'fake novel' in his monograph. See Gareth Wood, p. 105.

between 1923 and 1927.⁵² The expression also appears in André Breton's *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), which includes a sub-section on 'How to write false novels'.⁵³ Both Gómez de la Serna and Breton's 'false novels' are false because they pretend to be realist novels in order to undermine them. *Dark Back of Time*, however, is not false because it is pretending to be an ordinary novel. Although it is pretending to be something, it not easy to tell *what* it fakes.

Perhaps the usual (and logical) model of seeking illustrious ancestors and origins as explanations for the curious is not the best approach to the 'false novel' – an associative approach (in the manner of Alan Marriott, the narrative guru of *All Souls*) might be perhaps more effective. In one of the tag's first appearances in print (in a diary-style article called 'Diario de Zurich'), Marías uses 'falsa' as a kind of afterthought: he first refers to *Dark Back of Time* as a novel, but a few sentences later he calls it 'the novel or false novel'.⁵⁴ Rather than an echo of Gómez de la Serna or of Breton, it is possible that he might be quoting himself – or rather one of his characters, the protagonist of *All Souls*. This narrator uses 'falsa' in relation to Muriel, a local girl from suburban Oxford he once picked up in a nightclub for a one-night stand: the girl is constantly referred throughout the novel by the pseudo-epic epithet of 'the false fat girl from Wychwood Forest'.⁵⁵

The reason for this rather crude appellation is that the narrator had chosen Muriel as his partner for the night because she was the least chubby amongst the

⁵² See Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 25.

⁵³ André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme. Poisson soluble* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1924), pp. 50-51.

⁵⁴ See Marías, *Aquella*, p. 357.

⁵⁵ I have amended Jull Costa's translation here. She translates 'falsa gorda' by 'not-so-plump girl' which is far less odd. See Marías, *All Souls*, p. 199 and *Todas las Almas* (Madrid: Santillana, 2002), p. 279.

group of permed, mini-skirted locals at the nightclub. He nonetheless took the girl home and slept with her, but not without regrets; as he could not help thinking of other women throughout their sexual encounter. The appellation 'false fat girl' seems to enable the narrator to save face and allows his masculine vanity to remain unscathed: she wasn't really fat, he does not sleep with unattractive girls. However, the adjective only exposes his neuroses even more: he cannot help seeing the girl as fat and undesirable and himself as a shallower or more callous man than he might acknowledge to himself.

The association of Muriel with the 'false novel' tag perhaps shows that Mariás similarly singles out *Dark Back of Time* as less of a novel than his other novels, but – like Muriel herself – still a novel no matter how much he convinces himself to the contrary. The tag might be read as a sort of self-deceit against the evident "novelness" of the book, which the author might be unwilling to fully recognise. The possibility of a character influencing its author seems quite in keeping with the jokey topsy-turvy spirit of the book, although again (like the Gómez de la Serna/Breton reference) might be no more than an unconscious echo.

The two curious generic tags of *Dark Back Of Time* thus only reveal different perspectives (literally in the case of 'Reivax') on the book's contradictory nature we had observed in the opening, or in its tagging of *All Souls*. If we return to the idea of the book's necessary generic decision, they could all be read as figures of the whirligig of definition, as a way of reflecting its dizzying ball-like movements rather than as a way of stopping them, indecisively, over the goal-line. After all, even Szentkuthy's goal was a 'false goal' in several ways. For instance, it was a false

because it was also its opposite, a non-goal, the missed opportunity. But its “false” quality can also be identified in the striker’s impossible (and implausible) transgression of the inexorably linear character of football and its goal-oriented logic (as non-reversible as time itself). As an allegory of time and narrative it seems deliberately ill-matching, distanced and dispersed, like that of the bumblebee and Charlus – or the trial, or the example of Will and Tom.

An intriguing consequence of this particular association is that if *Dark Back of Time* is itself a figure of figuration (the ball rather than the goal of autobiographical definition), it might also be a deliberately “false” one: a performance of this very failure to score. This is the concern and the question at the heart of the concluding section of our survey of the problem of genre in *Dark Back of Time*: if it is a figuration rather than a novel, an autobiography or a false novel, then how does it perform its revolutions? Again, I will focus here on the text’s use of *mise en abyme*, which, as we discussed earlier, is here coupled with another destabilising, ontologically disturbing device not present in ‘In Uncertain Time’: metalepsis.

The Three Caballeros and the King's interpreter: mise en abyme, metalepsis and figuration in Dark Back of Time

Figuration, as we have seen in the “stabbing” (or rather back-stabbing) example, operates in *Dark Back of Time* at a double level: it is both content and form; it is explained *and* performed. As it was the case in *Speak, Memory*, *mise en abyme* in *Dark Back of Time* will be used both as a device to mirror this instability and as a further example of the instability itself. Let us consider our premise in relation to the example identified previously, the Xavier/Reivax play. The name and its reverse could be read as mirroring two different generic definitions. In one of them, unproblematic signs of “reality” (Xavier) and of “fiction” (Reivax) succeed each other without any confusion. But both versions of the name can also be read as being equally “real” and equally “fictional” and ultimately undistinguishable: they are ultimately signs of figural realms which cannot be pinned to any particular meaning.

The power balance between these two readings, however, is not even — as demonstrated as the narrator’s final metamorphosis of his name. When our narrator finally tells us his secret, he introduces a new variant: ‘since July 6, 1997 I have been the fourth of these kings, King Xavier or still King X as I write this’.⁵⁶ The X could be read as a *mise en abyme* within the *mise en abyme*: the X “marks the spot” (*Treasure Island*-style) of the narrator’s original birth identity. Its treasure is that, at least whilst

⁵⁶ Marías, *Dark*, p. 303.

he is being written, he has no identity; he is unknowable and divorced from any external referent.⁵⁷ His treasure is his lack of treasure.

The interplay between Xavier/Reivax and X reveals a flaw in our ball-like reading of *Dark Back of Time*. The play between the two versions of the name (and its condensation in the form of the letter X) could be used as argument for the text's undecidability, which would not be articulated around the choice between a referential and a fictional reading but between two different fictional readings. The problem with this approach is that it contradicts our reading of the *mise en abymes* as allegories of figuration. If Xavier/Reivax or the X are unequivocal mirrors (that is, symbols) of undecidability, then we cannot really claim that they *perform* the whirligigs of figuration as an allegory would do: they seem to lead us to a conclusion – albeit a negative one. If we return to Dällenbach's categories, we could thus ask ourselves whether our examples of *mise en abyme* are not examples of the “programmatic loop” or the redundant “coda”, imposing an unambiguously ambiguous reading of the text. We may wonder whether the device stabilises meaning and calms readerly anxieties or if it is – as Cohn pointed – the source itself of that discomfort.

This is the concern which justifies a further exploration of other examples of *mise en abyme* in *Dark Back of Time*, particularly as they intertwine with another unsettling device, metalepsis. Defined by Genette as ‘any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters

⁵⁷ Amélie Florenchie reads the X as a sign of the narrator's disintegrating identity, and as reference to Kafka's K. See Florenchie, pp. 155-168 (p. 163). That, however, is only one of its meanings. As to the Stevenson connection, Marias has translated Stevenson's poetry, and frequently quotes him. See Gareth Wood, pp. 6-7.

into a metadiegetic universe, etc) or the inverse', it is employed, as Fludernik has noted, to destroy 'one's impression that the narrated world is real'.⁵⁸

Despite certain points in contact, metalepsis and *mise en abyme* present the relation between the different narrative levels of a text in different ways. Metalepsis is a transgression of the different ontological levels of the diegesis; *mise en abyme* creates those levels or mirrors them. Metalepsis is always a boisterous illusion-breaker, perhaps because — as Cohn points out — it 'occurs in sudden and surprising isolation'.⁵⁹ *Mise en abyme* is subtler and less obviously shocking, reflecting the failures of figuration without shattering them. That might be the reason why metalepsis is far less frequent in postmodern autobiographies: whilst *mise en abyme* extends and disperses the question of the relation between figuration and reference *ad infinitum*, metalepsis immediately alerts the reader that the seemingly safe revolving door is a vertigo-inducing whirligig.

The combination of these two techniques in *Dark Back of Time*, however, might not solely be explained through the text's questioning of referentiality. Currie has pointed out that metalepses are not only employed as instruments to destabilise the illusion of reference — as 'adventures in impossibility' — but also as 'scenarios for the exploration of ontological hierarchies'.⁶⁰ They should also be read in relation to the text's exploration of narrative power and reliability. A peculiar feature of the text's use of metalepsis is that the device (like his coronation) is approached warily and even fearfully by our narrator. Indeed, the first instances of the device are not

⁵⁸ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 234-235 and Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 100.

⁵⁹ Cohn, 'Metalepsis', 105-113 (p. 110).

⁶⁰ Currie, *Postmodern Literary Theory*, p. 168.

“true” metalepses but hypothetical ones, timidly emphasizing the unsettling undertones of the narrative.⁶¹

This hint forms the rapidly-beating heart of one of the book’s most playful episodes, involving the narrator’s former boss at Oxford, the head of the Sub-Faculty of Spanish, Ian Michael. He is one of the first people to read *All Souls* and sends our narrator a letter showing his appreciation for the novel. The banal surface of this anecdote is quickly disturbed when our narrator shockingly remarks that he read this letter ‘in horror and mortification’.⁶² The shock does not come from any critical harshness in the part of Michael, but rather from the fact that his former boss (who has assured him that he did not think *All Souls* a *roman à clef*) decides to update our narrator about his former colleagues by referring to them by the names of their supposed fictional alter-egos. The most disturbing part of the letter is Michael’s nonchalant remark that he bumped into Clare Bayes (the lover of the narrator in *All Souls*) the other day. A horrified “Marías” mentions that there was never a real-life model for this character. Michael’s misidentification sends the narrator into a spiral of panic and shame: due to his novel, there might be now a woman in Oxford being suspected of adultery with a Spanish colleague. As he explains, he has become ‘both her Cassio and her Iago, the false lover and the man who incited suspicion, not with my whisperings but with my writings, though without warning or foreseeing it’.⁶³

⁶¹ To clarify, the *mise en abyme* I refer here is of the simple duplication kind, and the metalepsis is of ontological kind, in which characters move between different diegetic levels. As Dorrit Cohn points out, Dallenbach’s aporetic *mise en abymes* (the book within the book which is the first book) are also examples of metalepsis: although that is not the case with the other two kinds. See Cohn, 105-113 (p.109). Also interesting in relation to this topic and *Dark* are Berg’s analyses of Eric Southworth’s fake death or the episode with the booksellers, pp. 172-132.

⁶² Marías, *Dark*, p. 65.

⁶³ Marías, *Dark*, p. 75.

Many critics read this exchange as an indictment of naive “autobiographical” readings (in line with other examples such as the bookshop owners who saw themselves represented in the Alabaster couple in *All Souls*, to the point of wanting to play them in the film version of the book).⁶⁴ However, we may also wonder whether it is really Michael who is being naive or stubborn here. No critic has pointed out that what the former boss is doing in his letter is to have a laugh at the expense of the narrator’s paranoia. The letter might be no more than a joke that the narrator misunderstands and blows to tragic proportions (and *Othello* of all tragedies). He might think he has become both Cassio and Iago, but the Shakesperean character he most resembles might be actually Malvolio.⁶⁵

The ambiguity of the episode does not end there, as the conclusion creates a doubt about how much our narrator is actually “in the joke”. Michael has been previously characterised by the narrator as a hypochondriac, as he believed he had caught eczema from the radiation left in the carpet by the previous owner of his flat. At the end of their exchange, he asks whether this ‘atomic carpet [...] is it still giving off radioactivity, or is it just shooting up X-rays to unmask you’.⁶⁶ The exchange suggests that “Marías” might have realised it was all a joke and has finally unmasked Michael. But the use of that particular word, ‘unmask’, suggests yet another interpretation to the exchange: that behind Ian Michael’s mask is none other

⁶⁴ See Pozuelo Yvancos, p. 89 for another reading of Michael’s reaction.

⁶⁵ The Shakesperean connection is also made explicit by the fact that the letter is dated on the 23 April, St George’s Day, Shakespeare’s birthday and the anniversary of his death, as well as that of Cervantes (according to tradition). Let us remember that the second part of *Don Quixote* revolves around a practical joke that two enthusiastic readers of Don Quixote and Sancho’s adventures play upon our poor heroes. See Marías, *Dark*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Marías, *Dark*, p. 75.

than “Marías” himself (or rather Marías), who has orchestrated this exchange in order to prove that perhaps only another fiction can make *All Souls* fictional.

However, despite the playful suggestion that Clare Bayes might have abandoned *All Souls*, this is nothing more than a suggestion: the worlds of *All Souls* and *Dark Back of Time* remain separate, no matter how much Michael (and the narrator) wish to meld them. Metalepsis is presented as both ‘horrifying’ and desirable. This metaleptic wish is articulated and expressed not by the narrator himself but through the use of *mise en abyme*. As well as the play between the level of *All Souls* and *Dark Back of Time* (a hypothetical metalepsis), there is also a third narrative level in the episode, a mirror-image of its concerns and its ambiguity. This example of *mise en abyme* inserts not one but two narratives into the main story.

At one point, the narrator tell us (seemingly for no particular reason) that when he received the letter he was watching a film on TV, which he cannot recall if it was the Disney cartoon/live-action extravaganza *The Three Caballeros* or a Ricardo Montalban/Lana Turner MGM musical entitled *Latin Lovers*. He only remembers that ‘incongruous sambas were sounding in my ears as I deciphered the letter’.⁶⁷ Like many other elements in this book, the films are nonetheless not as anecdotic as they seem at first glance: in fact, both are vehicles for narrative irony and mirror images of the book’s descent into fictionalisation. In other words, they are tantalising but unreachable glimpses of metaleptic bliss.

For instance, Michael’s misreading of *All Souls* (or the narrator’s misreading of his deliberate misreading) might have transformed our bumbling hero into a

⁶⁷Marías, *Dark*, p. 68. Note the use of ‘decipher’ rather than read, as it was an enigma to be solved. The films are *The Three Caballeros*, dir. by Norman Ferguson (Disney, 1944) and *Latin Lovers*, dir. by Mervyn LeRoy. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953).

dashing Montalban-like figure, the clichéd “Latin Lover” of the title, conqueror of voluptuous foreign blondes.⁶⁸ However, the note of adolescent wish-fulfilment in this mirroring is undone by the possibility that he might have been watching *The Three Caballeros*, and that his fictional mirror-image might actually be Donald Duck. The Disney film indeed offers rich intertextual pickings for the reader: like *Dark Back of Time*, it is a portmanteau film made up of separate sketches with Donald as a common protagonist. But even more intriguingly, it is structured around a series of metaleptic crossings: for instance, in one episode Donald is given a book about Bahia as a birthday present, from which the cartoon parrot Jose Carioca leaps out. Carioca then subsequently proceeds to shrink Donald and both jump together into the book, where, in a cartoon version of Brazil, Donald dances and falls hopelessly in love with a life-and-flesh woman. The world of the film, in which cartoons and actors (who paradoxically live inside books) interact with each other in equal footing, echoes the play and interaction between make-believe “real” people like “Javier Marías” and “Ian Michael” and fictional fictions like Clare Bayes or Will the porter.

The narrator points out the mirror-like nature of the episode explicitly: he mentions that he could see his face reflected on the TV screen, as if he was inside the film. The narrator “solves” his hesitation about which film he was watching by simply blending them, and thus breaking imperceptibly an ontological barrier: he comically remarks that ‘it is entirely impossible to see oneself blush against a backdrop of Carioca and Montalban, Donald Duck and Lana Turner’, as if they were

⁶⁸ See Marías, *Dark*, p. 70 for a humorous elaboration of the Latin Lover motif.

all together in the screen.⁶⁹ Both films laugh at the tragedy he has spun out of his friend's mischievous misreading and invite him to go along with the metaleptic joke, dismantling any of the little authority or reality that remained in him.⁷⁰

Regarding the question of generic in/definition and its relation to *mise en abyme* and metalepsis, the mirror-image here goes much further in its illusion-breaking duties (and undermining of referentiality) than the diegetic situation it mirrors, which is merely ambiguous. The scene offers a readerly dilemma within another readerly dilemma, offering different interpretative approaches. The choice between *Latin Lovers* and *The Three Caballeros* (between a straightforward clichéd narrative and a metaleptic fantasy) is heavily inclined towards the latter: the narrator's blending of the two films extends the magical trans-dimensional crossings of the Disney film even beyond its own ontological limits. If *The Three Caballeros* is the true mirror of the Michael/Marías scene, then it tilts the interpretation of the readerly dilemma in the primary narrative level (the choice between reading the episode as an authorial correction or reading it as a joke) towards the 'joke' reading, undermining the narrator's authority over his own texts. The *mise en abyme* subtly disturbs the apparent purpose of the episode (another correction of another naive reading), hinting at the impossible nature of generic definition and highlighting the narrator's paranoia.

As we previously mentioned, metalepsis in *Dark Back of Time* moves from being merely hypothetical towards its actual realisation. The narrator's hints of a

⁶⁹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 78.

⁷⁰ There is another filmic reference of some significance in the book to *Lili*, a film also involving the metaleptic interaction of actors and puppets. See Marías, *Dark*, p. 228 and *Lili*, dir. by Charles Walters (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953).

possible metaleptic crossing affect the temporal dynamics in the text: the text might not necessarily be wandering aimlessly and destroying itself in the process, it might be dawdling with a purpose — he may seek to delay the metalepsis hinted by the *mise en abyme*. Readers — turned into nerve-wracked spectators of Szentkuthy in the quarter-final game — can see the goal coming but are not sure of when it will happen. That goal (unlike the coronation, perhaps) is not a trivial matter: once the ontological barriers are broken down, there can no longer be any hesitation about the generic definition of the text and about the narrator's authority over his own text. This does necessarily mean that hesitation comes to an end: the 'goal' — in the light of later events — becomes the source rather than the end point of yet more readerly enigmas.

Let us consider that goal (or perhaps goals) in some more detail.⁷¹ It takes place in the now familiar setting of an inventory (the best place to hide an unsettling element): a list of the reactions of the narrator's friends to his coronation. In this list of friends and acquaintances — and their sceptical, amused or astonished responses to his news — we also find listed the opinions of one Ruibérriz de Torres. Regular Marías readers might remember him as a character in *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me* or the novella *Bad Nature*.⁷² Although it is possible that this Ruibérriz might be a real-life person that appears under his fictional moniker, the metaleptic reading is far too irresistible to be dispelled by common-sense objections. Of all of Marías's

⁷¹ See Marías, *Dark*, p. 71 for another pseudo metaleptic crossing, as the narrator imagines that the three legged dog in *All Souls* might be chewing on a copy of the novel.

⁷² See Marías, *Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Harvill, 1996) and Marías, *Bad Nature; or, with Elvis in Mexico*, trans. by Esther Allen (New York: New Directions, 2010). The narrator also mentions that Ruibérriz that is one of the surnames he bears like 'Custardoy, Manera and Cao', which points at the solely fictional character of Ruibérriz and creating him as a kind of double of his author. Marías used the surname of Custardoy (one of the surnames in the Marías/Franco family) to name another of his characters, the villain of several of his novels.

characters, Ruibérriz is indeed the most apt to comment on regal matters: not only does he occasionally ghost-writes speeches for the King of Spain, but he was also once employed as an interpreter for not just any king but for The King — Elvis Presley.

Ironically, Ruibérriz's reaction to the coronation of his friend/creator is the most sceptical:

[I]n Ruibérriz [...] the incredulity was mingled with a sarcasm that couldn't quite banish his curiosity, at least not to the point of telling me to shut up and stop bothering him with this nonsense.⁷³

Ruibérriz's intervention is perhaps the final punch-line of the book, and the pinnacle of the authorial self-mocking. Despite the aura of authority with which he had tried to divest his narrative, the narrator may have delayed his momentous news because he feared being disbelieved. And he is: and the most sceptic person in his audience is precisely one of his fictions, and one with a particularly shadowy and supplementary existence that resembles those of the doomed poets and adventurers the narrator is so enthralled by: probably a more deserving Redondan king than the author himself (although there is, unfortunately, no metaleptic *coup d'état*). Ruibérriz's intervention is thus clearly used as way of disturbing and unsettling the authority of the narrator. It reverses the magical charms of metalepsis that *The Three Caballeros* exaggerated: rather than seducing fictional women, the narrator gets slyly laughed at by a character more dashing, more adventurous and much better

⁷³ Marías, *Dark*, p. 323.

connected than himself.⁷⁴ Although metalepsis enhances the book's rejection of figuration, it may not necessarily make it unambiguous.

As we have mentioned, the rejection of a possible referential reading of the story (and the change from indecision to suspense) can also be read as creating another dilemma which, unlike the one revolving around the referential status of the text, cannot really be solved. The goal is an inadequate metaphor because it solely emphasises the positive consequences of the transgression of boundaries: like the metaphor of the curiosity, it underplays its more unsettling aspects. Metalepsis in *Dark Back of Time* is either a joke that can be easily dismissed and forgotten after its punch-line or something else more disturbing (like the unmentioned threat of the figurine), a calamity for both narrator and reader. If the digressions of *Dark Back of Time* are motivated by the narrator's desire to procrastinate a narrative duty, the question for the reader is how much this dawdling is motivated simply by mere playfulness or by fear and apprehension.

This is indeed the question that hangs over the ascension to the throne of Redonda: the goal of *Dark Back of Time*, the invasion of fiction to end all the invasions of fictions. And yet it is a strange metalepsis: Redonda, unlike Ruibérriz, is not Marías's creation. But it isn't "real", either. The obvious meta-discursive resonances of the legend mean that it has been inevitably read as *the* figure for the book itself, and its genre. Isabel Cuñado, for instance, has pointed out that 'the island is identified with literature, with an ontologically autonomous space': it 'allegorises a

⁷⁴ Ruibérriz does not come out too well in his latest fictional appearance, in *The Infatuations*. Not only he is the accomplice to a murder, he also fails to convince the heroine María to go out 'dancing' with him (she points out that his proposal is charmingly old-fashioned, but she declines). See Marías, *The Infatuations*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013).

hybrid space that questions traditional distinctions between reality and fiction'.⁷⁵ Cuñado perhaps turns the island into a too simple and obvious a symbol of fiction itself (which it is, up to a point), again resorting to a metaphor (the hybrid) which the narrative itself questions.

The most valuable part of her reading is perhaps her comparison between Redonda and the fabled *Ínsula Barataria* in *Don Quixote* (Marías even refers to Redonda as an 'ínsula' at one point, using *Don Quixote's* archaism). Their parallels are not solely based on the two islands' purportedly symbolic dimension, but on the fact that both are (or might be) nothing more than practical jokes: the crown of Redonda, like Barataria, might also be the "gift" of a reader (less cruel than the Duke and the Duchess, perhaps) wishing to "reward" (or to play with) a favourite fictional character.⁷⁶ As we mentioned in the introduction, the narrator becomes the King of Redonda after the previous king, Jon Wynne-Tyson — the successor of doomed poet John Gawsworth, who kept Shiel's joke alive — abdicated in his favour. The narrator does not wholly reveal the reasons for this abdication and instead decides to mystify the reader by suggesting (but not revealing) a more colourful story to his access to the throne. But the secret behind his inheritance might be nothing more than another misreading of *All Souls*.

The protagonist of that novel became obsessed with Gawsworth and convinced himself he might 'be' him one day (that is, equally doomed). King Juan might have mistaken the desire of the creature for that of its creator, and decides to grant it — like the Duke and the Duchess did, although perhaps with less dubious

⁷⁵ Cuñado, p. 55.

⁷⁶ Cuñado, p. 56.

intentions. The parallels with *Don Quixote* turn the unambiguous symbol of fiction and figuration into something more ambiguous, belying the assumption that the island stabilises the book's meaning: like Sancho himself, he might lose all power over his fate (and his readers) at the moment when he is granted the symbol of the power that he so sorely desired. His metaleptic crossing does not really fix one reading for the book (say, as a celebration of fiction) but leaves the author/narrator entirely at the mercy of his readers, and their more or less fevered imaginations. No wonder he might wish to delay the scoring of that particular story.

This leads us back to where we started – to Szentkuthy's goal and its unforeseen and unexplainable consequences. As an allegory of the generic definition of *Dark Back of Time*, it seems to tease the reader into discovering more and more unexpected correspondences which are, in their turn, consistently dismantled. We finished our analysis of the generic markers of *Dark Back of Time* (the 'declaration', the name, the 'false novel' tag) trapped in a paradoxical argument: those markers seemed to perform and reflect the problems of figuration and the whirligigs of generic definition by creating endless repetitions of the question. However, at the same time, they seemed to stop those whirligigs by insisting on the figural character of the whole. They were the ball and the striker. The introduction of metalepsis tilted the book towards a definite fictional (or rather figural) reading, emphasising the inevitable and unavoidable character of that decision/goal. And yet, metalepsis did not close the reading of the text at all: although ostensibly a humorous strategy to disempower the narrator (separating him even more from his

namesake), it also makes explicit the self-destructive potential of that operation, revealing the more unsettling aspects of narrative and figuration.

Marking Time: on procrastination, digression, figuration and death

‘[I]t was not so much that he had stopped time as that he had set a mark on it and made it uncertain’, the narrator of ‘In Uncertain Time’ philosophically muses about Szentkuthy’s goal. But what is involved in setting a mark on time? And did the goal *really* do that? Our problems with the interpretation of the phrase are in fact the result of a translation quandary. The Spanish original (‘lo marcó y lo volvió indeciso’) uses the polysemic verb ‘marcar’: it can be translated as ‘setting a mark’, although in a football context, it usually has the meaning either of ‘scoring’ a goal or ‘marking’ an opponent (that is, ‘keeping close and so hampering’ a rival, a sense that the English ‘mark’ also covers).⁷⁷ In Spanish, the verb paradoxically describes the actions of both defenders and strikers: although the ambiguity can be dispelled simply by considering the verb’s object (goal or player).

In the case of Szentkuthy, the word is used in the ‘marking’ sense, which creates a charming (and ironic) role reversal: the striker becomes a defender against Time, and manages to stop its advance towards the goal, even if only temporarily (and perhaps fatally). Our analyses of metalepsis in the text have emphasised the parallels between our narrator and Szentkuthy: both will “score” in a similarly dawdling manner, and in doing so slow down and ‘mark’ Time. The concern of this second part is not only to discern how such a ‘marking’ might take place, but also its effects and its consequences for generic definition. And, ultimately, it may seek to

⁷⁷ See note 13 in this chapter and Marías, *Cuando*, p. 156.

explain why: whether our narrator dawdles out of arrogance like Szentkuthy, or whether he does (perhaps like Szentkuthy, too) out of fear.

This is the dilemma around which the second part of this chapter is articulated. Rather than being a banal question, it will allow us to explore the more unsettling consequences of the problem of generic definition, particularly the text's self-conscious performance of its figurative character. The chapter starts with a more in-depth look at its 'temporal curiosity': its indeterminate, polychronous *sjuzhet*. That indeterminacy (and the digressive structure it generates) has tended either to be ignored; or – when acknowledged – to be naturalised as some form of transparent representation of contingency and chance. This narrative structure (like *metalepsis* before it) is mirrored by a series of increasingly complex *mise en abymes*.

The analysis of the mirror-games between the different examples and the main narrative level will unsettle the "natural" appearance of the book's digressions, and will reveal instead their figurative, allegorical and dispersed dimensions. The second part of this section examines the more disturbing aspects of the text's narrative procrastination, particularly in relation to its conclusion. Here the narrator seemingly (and suddenly) reveals a possible secret behind his secret: this revelation, however, will paradoxically turn the possibility of a single interpretative "goal" into something chimerical – and perhaps even undesirable.

‘Do not linger or delay’: digression, procrastination, narrative and genre

‘Do not linger or delay’: these were the instructions once given to the protagonist and narrator of *Your Face Tomorrow*, Jacques Deza, by his enigmatic boss, MI6 agent Bertram Tupra.⁷⁸ It might not come as a surprise that he disobeyed him, and that launched at that point into a 70 page-long account (complete with digressions about women’s legs and country-and-western songs) of an event – a frenzied search in the lavatories of a nightclub – which only took minutes to happen in real time. This scene is the most transparent and self-conscious example of Marías’s aesthetics of narrative procrastination, of which *Dark Back of Time* constitutes a less overt but equally poignant example. What sets the latter apart from the aforementioned digression in *Your Face Tomorrow* is that it is not immediately evident what the narrator of *Dark Back of Time* is delaying through his digressions, although – as our examination of metalepsis has shown – it may perhaps be guessed.

Whatever we conjecture will nonetheless go against the express wishes of the narrator. The declaration of intent which follows the trial example (examined in the introduction) was explicitly anti-narrative, highlighting not only the absence of a plot, but even of an ending:

I don’t believe this is a story, though, not knowing how it ends, I may be mistaken. I do know that the beginning of this tale lies outside it, in a novel I wrote some time ago [...].Its ending must also lie outside it,

⁷⁸ Marías, *Your Face Tomorrow*, vol. 2; *Dance and Dream*, trans. by Margaret Jull Costa (London: Chatto&Windus, 2006), p. 90.

and will surely coincide with my own, some years from now, or so I hope.⁷⁹

The narrator initially presents the book as a collection of random anecdotes (like *The Three Caballeros*), a structureless structure which sets the book apart from 'truly fictional novels': the book is not a novel because it does not conform to the pattern of a 'true' novel, that is, one with a cause-and-effect plot.

The book's apparent lack of cohesion has been the constant focus of most critical approaches to the book, which have either approached it in negative terms (Manuel Alberca thinks that the book cannot avoid 'an impression of gratuity and banality') or its opposite:⁸⁰ as Grohmann advocates, the book might be an example of a freer or more "real" or "natural" mode of writing, autobiographical in form if not in content.

Not only does it lack a plot [...] but also an author and a story [...] *Dark Back* does not create a story but rather a tissue of unordered secondary stories, linked by chance [...]. It also lacks an author, if we understood the author as the agent that consciously imposes an order, who puts the narrative under the control of a main plot which is structured and rounded.⁸¹

Even Grohmann himself seems at one point uneasy with his own arguments: digression only 'seems more natural, because its *naturalness* is really the product of

⁷⁹ Marías, *Dark*, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁰ Alberca, 'Las vueltas autobiográficas de Javier Marías', in *Cuardenos de narrativa* (see Andrés-Suárez, above), pp.49-72 (p. 70).

⁸¹ Grohmann, *Literatura*, pp. 75-76.

artifice'.⁸² Unfortunately, the rest of his analysis continues to make grand claims about the novel as a philosophical statement proving 'the activities of chance, the supremacy of the contingent'.⁸³ The narrative statement of intent nonetheless undoes and affirms authorial intention: there is no author except for the author who is telling the reader that there isn't an author, and is dissuading us from reading the book's 'natural' form suspiciously. But ultimately, both the reading that seeks intentionality to the book's randomness and one that doesn't are equally authorial.

Grohmann also seems to misconstrue here an important feature of digressive writing and even of narrative itself. As Ross Chambers has pointed, digression is not an anomalous, anti-narrative device: 'a story coheres dramatically, then, only under the constraint of being dilatory, of not taking the shortest path [...] between its opening and its conclusion'.⁸⁴ Errancy is not the sole defining feature of digressive writing: according to Chambers, it is equally defined by 'its failure to detach itself completely from a linearity from which it departs only to return in its due course'.⁸⁵ Our narrator, as we have seen regarding his use of metalepsis and the story of his coronation, is always fully aware of what he is straying from, and equally aware of his need to return to it.

After all, rather than a structureless report on the activities of chance, the narrative of *Dark Back of Time* is reminiscent of a joke: a very long and particularly straying one, with the coronation as its punch-line. Simon Critchley's description of their temporal structure seems tailor-made for our text:

⁸² Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 27. See Pittarello, 'Negra', pp. 125-134 (p. 128) for a similar point.

⁸³ Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 90 and Pittarello, 'Negra ...', pp. 125-134 (p. 128).

⁸⁴ Chambers, *Loiterature*, p. 20.

⁸⁵ Chambers, *Loiterature*, p. 32.

Jokes involve a shared knowledge of two temporal dimensions: *duration* and the *instant* [...] In being told a joke, we undergo a particular experience of duration through repetition and digression, of time being literally stretched out like an elastic band. We know the elastic will snap [...] and we find the anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant. [...] Viewed temporally, humorous pleasure would seem to be produced by the disjunction between duration and instant, where we experience with renewed intensity both the slow passing of time and its sheer evanescence.⁸⁶

Critchley's account of the temporality of jokes could in fact be used as an explanation of what 'marking' time might entail: a slowing down of the striker (duration) followed by a whip-like release from the defender and a goal (instant).

This process, however, is not as curious as the comparison to Szentkuthy's goal makes it seem. Jokes are in fact heightened examples of the dynamics of story-telling, which *Dark Back of Time* distorts, but from which it does not stray. The punch-line of *Dark Back of Time* is hyperbolically evanescent (like its metalepses) – to the point that it has led its 'story' or 'plot' to be regularly ignored or dismissed all together by some critics.⁸⁷ Similarly, the digressions of *Dark Back of Time* are also exaggeratedly so, emphasising the gulf between punch-line and digression. The question, of course, is how much that straying is the result of "pure" chance or a manoeuvre to make the punch-line even more evanescent. After all, what it reveals

⁸⁶ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.7.

⁸⁷ Amago, for instance, dismissed all of the section on Gawsworth and Redonda as 'the novel's infelicitously dry extended investigations and ruminations on an obscure British author named Gawsworth'. See Amago, p.198.

not only confirms the inescapable character of the whirligigs of figurations — it also completely undoes any semblance of authority for our (non) author.

The book's temporal structure (of which a brief outline was offered in the introduction, and which I will shortly examine) makes explicit to the reader (not *very* explicit, though) the 'emplotted' and configured character of our narrative — closer to Ricoeur's model than the narrator's initial protestations made it seem. *Dark Back of Time*, from its title onwards, announces itself as what Ricoeur denominated a novel (false or not) 'about Time'; and indeed the narrator's musings on time (and its philosophical background) have attracted much critical attention.⁸⁸ But, as it was the case in relation to the problem of reference, the book is not a philosophical treatise. Currie has pointed out that the difference between philosophy and fiction lies in the fact 'the narrative fiction is fundamentally capable of being constative and performative at the same time' (hence, he concludes, *all* novels are tales about time, performances of time).⁸⁹ And, as he points out, performance and theory might go hand in hand — or they might not.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, II, p. 101. Works on Marías and time include a recent book by Heike Scharm, *El tiempo y el ser en Javier Marías. El "Ciclo de Oxford" a la luz de Bergson y Heidegger* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013) and the thesis by Pamela Shuggi, 'La Negra Espalda de lo no Venido': Time, Timing and Irony in Javier Marías' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2010). The beginning of the thesis is available online at <<http://udini.proquest.com/view/la-negra-espalda-de-lo-no-venido-goid:849715554/>> [accessed 24 March 2013]. As for articles that discuss Marías' views on time, the most interesting are the already cited ones by Elide Pittarello, Amèlie Florenchie, and also Juan Antonio Rivera, 'La negra espalda de Javier Marías', *Claves de razón práctica*, 111(2001) 68-76 and Ana Rodríguez Fischer, 'Siempre habrá nunca: el enigma del tiempo en Javier Marías', *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos*, 644 (2004), 61-76. Gareth Wood's comparison with Sterne also includes important insights. See Gareth Wood, pp. 111-122.

⁸⁹ Currie, *About Time*, p. 90.

⁹⁰ See Currie's discussion of Graham Swift's *Waterland* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* in *About Time*, pp. 87-108.

Unsurprisingly, the book's temporal declaration of intent is as contradictory and ambiguous as its generic one. At first it *seems* explicitly anti-narrative, and even anti-temporal. His compares his voice to

[T]hat fickle and unpredictable voice we all know, the voice of time when it has not yet gone by or been lost and perhaps for that reason is not even time, perhaps time is only what has already happened and can be told or so it appears, and thus is the only one that is ambiguous. That voice we hear is always fictitious, I believe, and perhaps mine will be too, in these pages.⁹¹

This rather convoluted and obfuscated argument, which develops in a (seemingly) semi-improvised manner, demonstrates the narrative bent of the narrator's philosophy of time and offers an intriguing connection between temporality, genre and undecidability. The narrator compares here two ideas of time. One of them isn't time because it hasn't passed yet (because it is 'marked', perhaps?) and he assimilates the form of his book to it (which would make it a 'fiction', then). There is another time that is time proper, which is narratable, and — because of that — ambiguous. In narrative terms, the first "time" would correspond to a sort of pure duration (to an endless joke without punch-line), while the second "time" corresponds to a complete narrative with beginning, middle and end.

What we have here is a rather odd separation of fiction and narrative: he proposes an idea of "fictional time" which is separated from narrative time — a non-narrative that has non-time, or unpassed time as its referent (perhaps to be identified

⁹¹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 9. I have amended Allen's translation. Allen translates Marías 'diversion' for 'diversion', but 'fun' is a more precise and less ambiguous option. She also transmutes another comma into a semi-colon (after 'not even time'), but the comma works better in the muddled, semi-improvised character of the thought.

with pure digression). But the narrative structure of the book is far from pure: it has a punch-line, something *has* happened and what has happened not only determines the digressive structure of the story, but makes that digression impure and ambiguous. What is unclear here is whether the narrator is rejecting or embracing ambiguity (and hence, figuration and narrative), and proposing instead a model of fiction which, in contrast, might *not* be ambiguous. Of course, the main problem with the narrator's argument (which his narrative performance contradicts) is that non-time and time, "fiction" (in the narrator's sense) and narrative not only cannot be separated from each other, but are dependent on one another for their definition. We all 'know' the voice of non-time because of narrative.

Compared to the generic definition, what we have here is another dismantling of oppositions and frontiers: if the ontological frontier between reality and fiction was dismantled by figuration, is that equally the case with that of time/narrative and non-time/non-narrative ("fiction")? The question this paragraph raises in relation to figuration is whether narrative should simply be defined in a Ricoeurian manner, a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' (of the non-narrative) or rather if the narrator's identification of ambiguity as the corollary of narrative creates a less-conclusive model which is also temporal, but in a De Manian rather than in a Ricoeurian way.

The rest of this section will seek to interpret the narrator's temporal philosophy (and its relation to figuration) in relation to the text's temporal performances. I say performances because as well as the procrastinating digression-punch-line structure of the text (and its indeterminate *sjuzhet*), the text also offers a

series of reflections of this structure which multiply its enigma without offering a particular “handle” for the reader.

The moving goal-line: *fabula*, *szujhet* and indeterminacy in the narrator’s temporal performance

In the introduction, I described the narrative structure of *Dark Back of Time* as having an indeterminate *szujhet* and a determinate (if basic) *fabula*. This tension was the result of a particular narrative choice which so far has only been remarked upon by Gareth Wood. Most of Mariás’s first-person narratives (such as ‘In Uncertain Time’ and many others) follow the temporal model of the confession — his narrators tell their stories from an unidentified point from which they recall past events in a more or less orderly fashion. The past self is filtered through the consciousness of the present self. In *Dark Back of Time*, the moment of writing is dramatised and played out to the reader (as if it was a diary), which gives the impression that events are recorded *as they happened*, rather than being interpreted in retrospect.

Wood identifies this feature as a specific reference to the narrative practices of Tristram Shandy: as he points out, ‘following Tristram’s example, Mariás refers to one particular day on which he is writing.’⁹² He refers here to the date the narrator mentions to highlight the temporal gap between a date inscribed in an old book and

⁹² Gareth Wood, p. 113.

his own time ('today, November 8 1997'). The completion of the book is dated 'March 1998', and this — Wood explains — allows us 'to catch a glimpse of writing as also the passage of time'.⁹³ This evidence could be read as a confirmation of the book's temporal (and generic) declaration of intent: the book as a diary-style, unplanned, improvised work-in-progress, which according to Pittarello exemplifies 'in its anecdotal errancy the passage of a human being through the world'.⁹⁴ Not only there is a stable *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, but they are also mirror images of each other.

But then — as we discussed in the introduction, and as Wood also notices — the narrator also decides to give us the date of his coronation many pages later: 'July 6 1997'.⁹⁵ This means that when he wrote the previous date, he already knew he was the king. The dates confirm up to a point the thesis of the introduction (that he did not know the end of his story when he started it) but also belie it, showing that the narrator *knew* at some point and spent months avoiding his royal duties (like a sort of make-believe Prince Hal). The narrative of the coronation (like his use of metalepsis) is structured as a build-up of hints, which become unequivocal in the opening paragraph of the section which includes the November date:

I have become what Shiel and Gawsworth once were, or so it appears,
and it seems incredible that I wasn't afraid of this and accepted it [...]
It's hard to resist the chance to perpetuate a legend.⁹⁶

⁹³ Gareth Wood, p. 113.

⁹⁴ See Pittarello, '*Negra*', pp. 125-134 (p. 131).

⁹⁵ Marías, *Dark*, p. 303.

⁹⁶ Marías, *Dark*, p. 208.

The narrator's use of dating creates an imperceptible breach in the book between his life as plain (or rather Prince) Javier to his reign as King Xavier (the *fabula* of the book) — a boundary of which the reader is made aware but which isn't dramatized, and which cannot be located in the *sjuzhet*. The book is structured as a goal scored in slow-motion, but a goal that the reader does not witness and only becomes aware of after it has been scored. The narrator might have stopped time and narrative at one point, but we cannot tell when. 'Marking' Time might be impossible, chimerical, a fiction.

This structure also makes impossible for the reader to discern when his digressions go from being spontaneous and unmotivated to be exercises in procrastination. *Even* in a second reading the mystery remains: the re-reader may surmise with a fair degree of certitude that the line might not have been crossed in the beginning and knows for sure it has been crossed in the end (from the 'hint') but the interregnum between them remains ambiguous. The dilemma could not be cleared by surmising that this *fabula* might be the mirror of a real-life timeline — as if the hesitation could be solved by asking Javier Marías himself. The book's *fabula* does not have an external referent which precedes or mirrors *Dark Back of Time*. As Richard Walsh explains,

fabula is not independent of any *sjuzhet*—it is entirely dependent upon it, it is nothing other than the permutation and assimilation of *sjuzhet* into an ongoing interpretative version.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Walsh, 592-609 (p. 604)

It is, in other words, the supplement of a figuration, its interpretation. And in this case, the reading it enables is an ambiguous one, a polychronous one (to use Herman's term): one that cannot be explained as the representation of a 'natural' temporal experience, but as a mirror-image of figuration itself.

Read in relation to the book's constative approach to time, the indeterminate temporal structure of *Dark Back of Time* could be said to question the narrator's distinction between non-time (or 'marked' Time) and narrative time by making the former present and absent *at the same time*: the reader knows the goal is there, but is not sure where. Several critics have made a connection between digression and non-time, although without perceiving its elusive nature. For Grohmann, digression enables the narrative to 'create' this dimension, and offers Marías's own words as evidence for this:

In a novel [...] it is possible to make existent the time that either does not exist in life, or goes unnoticed because it does not wait and goes too quickly. One of the reasons I write books is to explore this existent and non-existent time, when the most important things take place without us realising.⁹⁸

These words, however, are too paradoxical to justify a 'natural' reading of the book's temporal structure as the reflection of a temporal experience. Pozuelo Yvancos justifies such a similar reading by appealing to the 'the presentness of the enunciative voice'.⁹⁹ But the narrator is neither 'present' nor a 'voice': he is

⁹⁸ Javier Marías, as quoted by Grohmann, *Literatura*, pp. 143-144.

⁹⁹ Pozuelo Yvancos, pp.72-73.

explicitly removed and distanced from his experiences. The 'exploration' of non-time might not involve its creation nor its identification, but merely an acknowledgement of its impossible 'presence', akin to that of meaning and reference itself.

However, even when the temporal structure has been acknowledged, it has not been read as posing a contradiction to the narrator's stance on time, or as an embracing of narrative or ambiguity. For Wood the revelation does not make the book any less spontaneous and diary-like or less premeditated. Because the narrator ends his story by promising a continuation (and Wood believes him), he surmises that

He needed time to reflect on what had just happened and to allow further events to unfold before he could further incorporate them into the world of the novel. It would at least explain why he leaves this *coup de théâtre* to the penultimate chapter and provides little in the way of details of his ascension.¹⁰⁰

He reads the coronation as the reason the book remains seemingly unfinished and half-told: it is a last minute surprise.¹⁰¹ Wood forgets here that the narrator has had more than enough time to react and savour his crown, and the half-told story of his ascent to the throne is a conscious stylistic choice (in line with other brief or unfinished stories in the book) rather than a panicked reaction.

However, perhaps the strongest evidence for our reading of the temporal structure of *Dark Back of Time* as a goal-less goal (a goal missed by the spectator, but

¹⁰⁰ Gareth Wood, p. 124.

¹⁰¹ Gareth Wood, p. 124.

not by the striker) is the way this figure for figuration is itself mirrored by a series of *mise en abymes*. For reasons of space, the next section will solely concentrate on one example in which the text's temporal and hermeneutical indeterminacy and the quandary of the uncertain location of the moving goal-line are reflected and refracted at the same time.

'Put out the light, and then put out the light': turning off *mise en abyme*

The indeterminate *sjuzhet* of *Dark Back of Time* has — unsurprisingly — made particularly difficult to splice the text in stable parts. From the point of view of the narrator, the book has a “pure” errant phase, a “covert” procrastinating phase and an “overt” procrastinating one. From that of the reader, it is divided into an “innocent” phase, a “suspicious” one and finally a “post-Edenic” one. Those frontiers do not coincide; they are either utterly unknowable in the case of the narrator (there might have never been a pure phase, for all we know) or unstable, in the case of the reader (as they are moved in each reading).

This instability ironically contrasts with the fact that *Dark Back of Time* could be divided into three separate parts or movements, separated by a refrain or leitmotif. The piece could be described as having a *concerto* structure: the first movement is largely humorous and playful in tone (an *allegro*), whilst the second one is largely melancholic and earnest (an *adagio*) and the third returns to the fun of the beginning

and gathers up all its motifs.¹⁰² This seemingly solid tripartite structure might have been used to stabilise its counterpart: we may wonder whether the leitmotif is synchronised with some other event — perhaps with the narrator's coronation, the absent goal.

This reading becomes even more tempting in the light of the content of this refrain. At this point, the narrator returns to his meditations on passing and 'marked' time, perhaps as a way to talk about his personal experiences with some distance.¹⁰³ However, the refrain is more than a mere philosophical interlude: it is also performative, a mirror-image of the narrative, another *mise en abyme*. Its purpose, as we will shortly see, is to give rise to the impression that we are witnessing 'marked' Time; only to quickly reveal its illusory character and the inevitable distortion or refraction inherent to the *mise en abyme* device.

Like the match-theme of *Speak, Memory*, this example of the mirror-image (a diegetic one) is also based around a light/illumination trope. The *mise en abyme* starts his life as a metaphor used to illustrate the narrator's musings on Conrad's concept of 'the shadow-line', the frontier between youth and maturity. This turns into a more general discussion about death and temporal frontiers, illustrated by a rambling simile in which what he calls 'respectful time' is compared to a streetlamp:

[W]e sometimes think there are no borders or abrupt stops or brutal cuts, that endings and beginnings are never marked out with the dividing line that, at other times, however, we think we see in

¹⁰² I am fully aware that this is an oversimplification of musical analogies and the novel itself. The second part, as we will see, includes the delightfully comedic biography of Wilfrid Ewart.

¹⁰³ Grohmann has identified this movement from the abstract to the concrete and the personal as one of the features of the book's style. See his excellent analysis in Grohmann, *Literatura*, pp. 120-123.

retrospect; and that belief is deceptive too, because neither the one or the other exists, or only as an enormous exception: not the sure, clean slice [...] not the juxtaposition or welter of confused and indistinguishable days — there are always forgotten patches and blotted out periods, I know them, to help us see the illusory limits. It's all more mysterious than that, more like an artificial prolongation, attenuating and inert, of what has already ceased, a ceremonial resistance to yielding or to marking the beginning of what is to come, like the streetlamps that stay lit for a while when day has already dawned in the great cities and towns and train stations and empty village depots, and they stand there still, blinking and upright in the face of the natural light that advances to make them superfluous.¹⁰⁴

The narrator returns to the division between 'marked' time and moving time (here split between its episodic and narrative dimension). Between those polarities stands 'respectful time', represented by the still-lit streetlamps.¹⁰⁵ He then teasingly relates these conflicting versions of temporality to the problem of frontiers and limits. This luminal metaphor of liminality is read by Pittarello as an illustration of 'the fluid nature of time' and the event as a 'deliberate rupture of the temporal continuum'.¹⁰⁶ Wood, on the other hand, believes the passage is not denying the existence of those limits (he calls them 'shifts'), but rather he is arguing against a teleological reading of them: the existence of those changes should not be 'confused with coherence or narrative'.¹⁰⁷ Wood's argument struggles to reconcile the narrator's apparent belief in a temporal flux with his embracing of narrative boundaries and events. Calling those boundaries 'shifts' (as if they were more loosely traced) does not make them less boundary-like, or less narrative — and his

¹⁰⁴ Marías, *Dark*, pp. 118-119.

¹⁰⁵ Marías, *Dark*, pp. 118-119.

¹⁰⁶ Pittarello, '*Negra*', pp. 125-134 (p. 131).

¹⁰⁷ Gareth Wood, p. 135.

ready identification of narrative with coherence (rather than ambiguity) oversimplifies the text's stance on the question.

The narrator is aware of the illusory character of temporal limits, but he is not rejecting those illusions outright. The streetlamps do *not* represent a rejection of narrative or borderlines, same as Szentkuthy's goal was not a rejection of goals. Time would not need to be polite if there was no narrative to apologise for. Again the narrator's argument cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the text and its performance. The book is structured around one of those uncertain boundaries: a boundary that, however, should not be charged with any intrinsic significance. The ontological status of this limit is not denied but simply made paradoxical: the narrative structure allows for it to be seen and unseen. What the narrator advocates here might not necessarily be the rejection of narrative but rather the acceptance in bad faith of narrative concordance as the ultimate truth rather than as an ambiguous and unreadable form of figuration.

The theoretical dimension of the metaphor of the streetlamps could be thus said to reflect the narrative structure of the whole without settling the *sjuzhet*. It is an ironic mirror of the reader's predicament: what we have read and what we are about to read is only the 'artificial prolongation' of an event that has already taken place. The quote above, however, is only the beginning of the simile. As it develops, readers are teased by the possibility that what they are reading is not a reflection on change (or of a change), but is the change itself. At one point, the transition from electric light to natural light is compared to a battle for regal succession, with the streetlamps as defeated kings ('These electric lights [...] make as if not to perceive the

conclusion of their reign') and natural daylight as a kindly victor that lets them pretend they are still kings.¹⁰⁸ Is the narrator referring to his secret? Does he *know*? And knowing, does he decide to allow his unknowing self to pretend nothing had happened? The passage might be a covert confession: an admission and defence of procrastination and delay as a narrative and even an existential strategy. The streetlamps, in their royal disguise, might be the 'light' that fixes the book's *sjuzhet* and its meaning.

It might not come as a surprise that the promise of stability and knowledge is soon defeated by yet another army — or rather by a general. As well as being compared to a battle, the streetlamps motif is also interwoven with Othello's bedside monologue (which the narrator had first quoted in the Ian Michael episode). The monologue could be read as another mirror-image of the narrator's tendency to defer duties (Othello is also trying to delay what for him is the unavoidable murder of Desdemona). The narrator, however, does not recall the whole monologue, but only one particular line: 'Put out the light, and then put out the light'.¹⁰⁹ The usual interpretation of that line is that the first 'light' refers to the candle Othello carries and the second one to Desdemona's life — the rest of the monologue goes on to compare one to the other. However, because the narrator lingers on this line rather than reading ahead, he is able to give it a novel interpretation: for him, Othello refers to the candle (and Desdemona) in *both* instances.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Marías, *Dark*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁹ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E.A.J Honigman (London: Nelson. 1997), act 5, scene 2, line 7.

¹¹⁰ Marías, *Dark*, pp.119-122.

The new reading twists the line's meaning to make it fit the narrator's purposes (whatever those are). For him, the repetition is a sign either of Othello's indecision or of his mock-indecision, which allows him some momentary relief and an 'artificial prolongation' of his love for Desdemona before he puts an end to it. This ingenious interpretation nonetheless relies for its effectiveness on the arbitrary boundary that the narrator's reading has drawn on the play: interpretation, after all, relies on such capricious line drawings. The interruption of a text also rewrites it.

The reference to *Othello* can be read as further evidence of the narrator's covert confession and as an ironic dismantling of that reading, which (like the narrator's own reading of *Othello*) relies on an arbitrarily drawn endings. It is because he decides later on to confess openly that he has been procrastinating that we read Othello's words as a secret admission. However, that meaning was only generated because the monologue was interrupted and *Dark Back of Time* wasn't. Even the significance we invest in the streetlamps, our description of them as the *leit motif* of the book, only arises from their uninterrupted character: they would not be so if they were not repeated. They are a refrain and a meta-refrain, a self-conscious reflection on the technique.

However, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the *Othello* line is its self-conscious performance of its content: Othello is not only putting out his candle or Desdemona's life, he is also turning off the symbolic, illuminating, confessional character of the *mise en abyme* — its apparent coincidence in time with the boundary it reflects. The line reintroduces ambiguity and distance into the *mise en abyme* and returns (re)readers to the puzzled position in which they first found themselves.

And the streetlamps will not only be put out once but twice. In their second appearance — just after the moving semblance of his brother Julianín, who died aged three, and whom the narrator never met — they are divested with yet another meaning.

They become non-time, timeless time, an ideal (perhaps impossible) form of memory which would involve the complete preservation of the past.

I don't know if in fact anything is really over or lost, at times I have the feeling that all our yesterdays are throbbing beneath the earth, refusing to disappear entirely, the enormous cumulation of the known and the unknown, stories told and stories silenced, recorded events or events that were never told and had no witnesses or were hidden [...] Yet we may wonder whether [...] what has been goes on indefinitely for the simple reason it has been, even if it only as part of the incessant, frenetic sum total of deeds and words whose tally no one takes the trouble to keep.¹¹¹

The streetlamps exemplify a kind of secular plea for immortality: 'Nothing is over [...] there is nothing that does not resemble the slow relay of lights I see from my window'.¹¹² Paradoxically, the fleeting lights are now incongruous metaphors of permanence: the divorce between trope and content is painfully obvious here, and becomes tragic rather than ironic, as it follows an earnest attempt to remember a child which left only faint traces in the world.

It is perhaps the unsustainable and fleeting character of this comparison that makes the narrator change the metaphor's referent as the refrain moves to its

¹¹¹ Marías, *Dark*, pp. 230-231.

¹¹² Marías, *Dark*, p. 231.

conclusion: the lights (now forever on) go from representing the survival of everything to just representing fiction.

[I]n fiction it can never be said “It’s over now, there, there, it’s all over”, not even as consolation or subterfuge, because nothing has really happened, silly, and in the territory that is not truth’s everything goes on happening forever and ever, and there the light is not put out now or later, and perhaps it is never put out.¹¹³

The association of non-time and fiction in this paragraph will be emphatically reprised pages later, in the section which explains the metaphor that gives the book its title, the ‘negra espalda del tiempo’ (an idiosyncratic translation of a line from *The Tempest*, ‘the dark backwards and abysm of time’). The trope tries to gather together the ‘fickle’ voice of unpassed time, non-time and fiction. The narrator describes it as giving a name to

[T]he time that has not existed, the time that does not await us and therefore does not happen, or happens only in a sphere that isn’t precisely temporal, a sphere in which writing, or perhaps only fiction, may — who knows — be found.¹¹⁴

Grohmann sees the narrator’s digressive style as a way of accessing this (non) temporal dimension, which — as he rightly observes — encompasses both the past and the dead and the future and the possible. This is also the dimension of fiction

¹¹³ Marías, *Dark*, p. 233.

¹¹⁴ Marías, *Dark*, p. 301.

and of metalepsis: it is, the narrator suggest, the dimension in which he has been crowned King of Redonda. Grohmann affirms at one point that Mariás's writing is based on 'setting of beings and objects in an atemporal perspective' – a reading which could be justified by the 'dark back of time'.¹¹⁵ The metaphor looks like a hermeneutic key (it is the title, after all), and seems to stabilises the book generically, hermeneutically and temporally.

It is, of course, only a sham key: the hysterical exhaustiveness of the inventory, combined with a characteristically hesitant tone (that 'who knows') unsettle its meaning. His words are disguising a confession, a narrative – the inevitable temporal character of fiction and the source of its ambiguity: indeed, the definition of narrative as ambiguity is repeated here, now overtly presented not as his own idea, but that of Spanish novelist Juan Benet. Pamela Shuggi has described the 'dark back' as 'the literary manifestation of the philosophical aporia of time': it is (as Szentkuthy's goal also was), but it is also the manifestation of another aporia, that of figuration and meaning.¹¹⁶ The 'dark back of time', which would seemingly settle this second meaning of the streetlamps as *the* meaning, is another equivocal and allegorical *mise en abyme*.

The deliberately self-contradictory conclusion should thus be read as a heartfelt admission of defeat and impermanence. The permanence of fiction is after all very different to that of immortality, either secular or religious: it is distorted,

¹¹⁵ Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 126. He compares him with Proust in that respect, a reading which simplifies the temporal dynamics of the *Recherche*.

¹¹⁶ Shuggi, 'La negra espalda de lo no venido', unpublished thesis, p. 3.

inconclusive and fleeting rather than solid and permanent. Fiction has been previously presented as only conferring a rather fragile and life-like form of immortality. The narrator is unreliable here, but not in a selfish way. His focus moves from the self to the Other (the whole of the “second part” does, in a way), but emotion and earnestness are insufficient to fix meaning and stop the whirligig. As it was the case with Othello, the second putting out of the light (the murder of Desdemona) is tragic and painful.

Another aspect to bear in mind when we read the second appearance of the lights is that, at this point, the re-reader *knows*: the narrator has already confessed (the first-time reader has to wait until the ‘dark back of time’ section, falsely imposing its version of time into this paragraph). Now that the reader knows there has been a goal, now that the *mise en abyme* has been resolutely turned off, the narrator nostalgically longs for the turned on lights – perhaps for his uncrowned past and whatever it may have come to represent. And yet he might not be talking about himself, for a change. Or he might be, after all. There is another element to the lights and this passage – which will be examined in the concluding part of this section – without which we should not approach not only the streetlamps but the whole ‘plot’ of *Dark Back of Time*.

‘The only way to disrupt time is to die and emerge from it’: time, death and figuration in *Dark Back of Time*

And so we move to the end (in more than one sense) – to what I referred in the introduction as the final twist and the “secret” of *Dark Back of Time*. That was, of course, an exaggeration: the twist might neither be a twist, nor a surprise nor a secret, although it is of great importance to the interpretation of the text. It brings sharply into focus a dimension that been previously only dealt with in enigmatic but carelessly discarded aphorisms such as the one in the title – a comment on a seemingly irrelevant anecdote about a ship steward who accidentally fell off a transatlantic ship – or indirectly, through the two playful biographies inserted in the main narrative, concerning two “real-life” toy-soldiers, the obscure writers – and officers – Wilfrid Ewart and Hugh Oloff De Wet.¹¹⁷

I am referring to death, which in the aphorism of the title is categorically defined as ‘the only’ way to disturb time – instead of writing, or of fiction or of digression. The biographies (which I will not be able to discuss in detail) are themselves reflections on writing and death: Ewart’s life is narrated *through* and *by* his death; whilst the biography of De Wet is narrated backwards, as if he had not died at all (ironically, his best-known book is the harrowing POW memoir *The Valley*

¹¹⁷ Strictly speaking, De Wet was not an officer, but a mercenary and a spy. He was also a painter and sculptor: the narrator knows of him because he sculpted John Gawsorth’s death-mask. Ewart is the author of World War One novel *Way of Revelation* and of some horror stories, which Gawsorth frequently selected for his ghost story anthologies.

of the Shadow).¹¹⁸ These biographical experiments offer contrasting takes on the question of narrative, death and fiction, without offering a stable approach to it.

The relation between narrative and death, however, is both explicitly and surreptitiously presented in the concluding two paragraphs of the text. In order to understand this “twist”, we need first of all to acquaint ourselves with another *mise en abyme*, which started as a kind of supplement of the metaphor of the streetlamps, a sort of second refrain. This *mise en abyme* concerns a woman and a man which initially seem to be standing for all the early-morning witnesses of the streetlamps (which also include our insomniac narrator). These blank examples are quickly transformed into fictional characters, creating a micro-novel (of the melodramatic kind) within the novel.

Both man and woman — the narrator speculates — have just left a sleeping lover in bed at home and are heading to work. Both seem to be in liminal stages in their love affairs: the woman at the beginning of one (she has just had a one-night stand with a younger lover), the man at the end (he has a younger wife/mistress he suspects only loves him because of his money). As a *mise en abyme* of the indeterminate *sjuzhet*, woman and man represent a beginning and an end, and thus reflecting, without solving, the reader’s plight.

Woman and man also make a second appearance in the next refrain; their story advancing in chronological fashion towards what we now guess will be an unhappy ending. The woman’s one-night stand has become a soul-sapping relationship, which has left her in a state of paralysis and indecision. The man, in its

¹¹⁸ See Hugh Oloff De Wet, *The Valley of the Shadow* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1949).

turn, has foolishly incurred big gambling debts in his quest for more money for his indifferent mistress/wife, and we learn that he has 48 hours to pay them back. And he owes money, of all people, to a group of bullfighters and their managers, who will be pretty ruthless with him if he does not pay (the narrator assures us, as if it was common knowledge).¹¹⁹ The second instalment looks at the borderlines of events and routines in a pleasingly symmetrical fashion: one event has turned into routine; the other routine has morphed into an event, or rather *the* event. If they are still reflecting the hidden coronation (now revealed), they mirror it as either a dull and mind-numbing process, or as the omen of an approaching catastrophe.

What happens in the third instalment of the story is, however, both inconclusive and unexpected. The stories of the woman and the man do not seem to have advanced much: she is still clinging to the young man, he is still alive and in debt. Perhaps — we surmise — not much time has passed between both refrains: less than two days, say. The narrator only mentions that the gambling man ‘hasn’t yet been given the knifing he thought he was certain to get, sooner or later’.¹²⁰ The *fabula* of the inserted narrative is polychronous: the two last instalments follow each other but we don’t know how closely, their chronology cannot be reconstructed. We will not be told anything else about the characters: the purpose of this refrain is not to advance the story but rather to rewrite it metaleptically.

The narrator, for instance, speculates that the woman might be a descendant of M.P. Shiel (he married a Spanish girl) — she might be the legitimate heiress to the

¹¹⁹ The bullfighters and their managers tip the story from melodrama into a more surreal and even farcical territory.

¹²⁰ Marías, *Dark*, p. 335.

kingdom and the whole story nothing more than a punch-line to the punch-line.¹²¹

What he does with the man, however, is far more intriguing. In the opening section of *Dark Back of Time*, the narrator had described his own facial features, which ‘can bring luck or misfortune’:

the eyes verging on Oriental and the mouth as if sketched on with a pencil – “beaky lip, beaky lip” – the chin almost cleft, the broad hands, a cigarette in the left one.¹²²

At the end of the third refrain, he proceeds to describe the facial features of the gambling man: ‘His eyes look almost Oriental and his lips as if sketched on with a pencil...’.¹²³ The man has *his* face. The reflexive character of the *mise en abyme* is made explicit, although there is something else to this twist than mere mirroring: a threat of metalepsis which is interrupted, and left unresolved by the end of the narrative.

Grohmann hesitates between reading the gambling man as the *doppelgänger* of the narrator or as a potential “Marías”, ‘one that was never made actual but whom the narrator could have been in a parallel conjectural life’ (he plumps for the second, which would mean the metaleptic barrier is not trespassed).¹²⁴ The other critic that has repaired on it, Amélie Florenchie, reads it as the climax of the progressive blurring of the identity and name of the narrator.¹²⁵ And whilst both readings are pertinent, they fail to take into consideration the fact that the gambling man is not

¹²¹ See Marías, *Dark*, pp. 330-334.

¹²² Marías, *Dark*, p. 11. The features are more or less those of Marías himself. The photograph in the back-cover of the first Spanish edition shows him with a cigarette in his left hand.

¹²³ Marías, *Dark*, p. 335.

¹²⁴ Grohmann, *Literatura*, p. 118. Marías is very fond of *doppelgänger* stories and themes. See Rebeca Martín’s article on the subject, ‘La destrucción de la biografía: El motivo del doble en dos cuentos de Javier Marías’, in *Cuadernos* (see Andrés-Suárez, above), pp. 231-241.

¹²⁵ See Florenchie, pp. 155-168 (p. 164-164).

just fictional (as the narrator also is) but also that he is about to die at any given moment, he is about to be 'fixed' and removed from time ('Everything is a still a question of time, and the knifing fixes it').¹²⁶ If there was to be a metalepsis, our narrator might be murdered.

This identification opens a myriad of suggestive (but inconclusive) associative readings. Wilfrid Ewart, for instance, was also killed by chance whilst looking out of a balcony: the toy-soldier might have fatally connected their fates. A comparison to *Pale Fire* also offers intriguing avenues. 'Pale Fire' (the poem) ends with John Shade's assurance that 'I/ Shall wake at six tomorrow, on July/ The twenty-second': he gets killed shortly after writing that line by a madman who believed him to be his former neighbour, whom he resembled.¹²⁷ The narrator concludes his tale by assuring his readers that the end of his story 'may never be put into writing because it will coincide with my own, some years from now, or so I hope. Or it may also survive me'.¹²⁸ Why the two 'or'? The first one is reasonable (a superstitious cliché), but the second one isn't: is he proposing that his ending will survive him because it will be written? Does that mean that the end of *Dark Back of Time* is his literal end?

The next paragraph of the conclusion, which returns to the streetlamps metaphor, makes this survival explicit, but it also makes it unnerving and eerie. The paragraph starts with the narrator looking up rather than down at the passengers — in that brief moment, the bus turns up and takes away his characters. And then he

¹²⁶ Marías, *Dark*, p. 335. I have modified Allen's translation here, she translates 'el navajazo lo fija' for the 'knifing makes fast', which is a bit unclear (she means 'fasten'). See Marías, *Negra*, p. 403.

¹²⁷ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, p. 58.

¹²⁸ Marías, *Dark*, pp. 335-336. Marías has translated Nabokov's poetry. He has never mentioned *Pale Fire* as a possible inspiration. See Gareth Wood's chapter on Marías's translations of Nabokov for a more thorough approach, pp. 226-257.

looks back at the lights, still on 'until the sleepy hand of some council employee [...] puts out the light and then puts it out'.¹²⁹ That was the end of the first refrain (which would add a pleasing symmetry to the book), but the narrator adds something else: 'And even then the passengers are still there, and even then the light has not been put out'.¹³⁰ He seems to be saying that even after the lights are put out, they are still on, and so are his two made-up passengers. He might be wistfully confirming how fiction can make things survive, an echo of the note in which the second refrain ended. But it is not only the light that stays; it is also the gambling man — that is, the possibility of a metaleptic extinction which cannot be wished away. The narrator might not want to let go of his story, but in letting the story survive he 'fixes' himself, he 'marks' himself as a man with only two days to live, or even less. We don't know. He might be already dead: the metaleptic murder might have already taken place. He might be a ghost, left incongruously on, lingering, delaying — like the streetlamps.

I am fully aware that the last interpretation over-reads what might be nothing more than an insignificant element. Even if we see it (and cannot unsee it) it might not need to be explained as a metalepsis, or the 'secret' the Redonda story is screening: the presence of other metalepses or other secrets is not enough evidence to prove that this one is also one. And yet the gambling man *is* a dying man, and death and writing had been explicitly linked by the narrator. Perhaps the

¹²⁹ Marías, *Dark*, p. 336. Allen translates 'funcionario' as civil servant, but the Spanish word refers to both government civil servants and to council employees, who would probably be the ones in charge of street-lighting.

¹³⁰ Marías, *Dark*, p. 336.

best way to approach this enigma is to return to the whirligig, to the problem of figuration — to the beginning, to the trial of a knife-wielding murderer. Death is in fact used here not just in a literal way but also in a figural one, as another allegory of figuration.

Let us consider again the narrator's assertion that his end 'may survive him'. Before then (although he acknowledges that his narrative is about to end), he confidently insists that his voice will go on. But then he wavers. We can interpret it as a confession of his ghostly nature, which would explain how his written end would survive him. But we are being too literal here, perhaps. Ghosts and death are not the referent of the story, they cannot stop the whirligig. J Hillis Miller (in a reading of 'Autobiography as De-Facement') points out that word 'death' performs what De Man called 'the defacement of mind':

the word *death* indicates a blind spot within knowledge [...] Death is an area of the mind that cannot be humanized [...] This place cannot ever be faced and named directly [...] any displaced name for [...] covers over what it names as much as it reveals it.¹³¹

The narrator's death is a figure for this process. No matter how much he claims to the contrary, the narrator is not a voice who can decide when to speak or not: he is not speaking, he is the words and he cannot go. As De Man remarks at the end of 'Autobiography as De-Facement',

¹³¹ Miller, p. 250.

Language [...] is not the thing itself but [...] the picture of thing, and, as such, it is silent [...] Language, as trope, is always privative [...] Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.¹³²

The narrator ends his story 'fixed' in this predicament. The story of the narrator's metaleptic death can be read as another displacement, another *mise en abyme* of the whirligig of figuration in which the narrative is permanently stuck.

We are thus inevitably led back to the beginning, to the toy soldier and to the other lens through which we have read *Dark Back of Time*, Szentkuthy's goal. Although the ambiguity of the toy-soldier seemed to contradict the whiff of certainty of the 'goal' metaphor and its apparent embracement of stable liminal metaphors, both had more in common than it seemed. The text's self-definition as a figuration (and the subversion of the conventionally stable generic tags performed as a consequence of that goal) only seemed conclusive at first: like Szentkuthy's goal, it only let loose a chain of associations and mirror images which share the inconclusive, mysterious, even ominous air of the wooden aide-de-camp.

The text's use of metalepsis, temporal indeterminacy and *mise en abyme* (the three techniques closely related to each other), as exemplified by the dilemmas around the Crown of Redonda, mirrored the text's vertigo-inducing spinning

¹³²De Man, I, pp. 264-274 (p. 273).

— sometimes in a light mood (in the text's thorough dismantling of narrative authority), sometimes in a darker and elegiac one, in which the impermanence and the permanence of writing and meaning is both a source of woe (in the second refrain) and a source of worry (in the final one). The toy soldier may have outlasted our narrator, like his ending — or yet it may not. Both might leave at the same time, both might remain forever: they are at the mercy of those who decide to play with them instead of leaving them gathering dust in a shelf.

On playing and not playing patience: a conclusion

I can play patience for hours instead of writing *W*.

Georges Perec, manuscript source, as quoted and translated by David Bellos in *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (first published in Phillippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique*)¹

Playing patience or writing *W*: in May 1970 (as Lejeune recounts in his study of the book) Perec found himself in that particular quandary. At that point, he was halfway through the serial publication of the novella in *La Quinzaine Littéraire*: Lejeune mentions that at the time he was probably working on what became Chapter Thirty in the 1975 book, the horrific account of childhood in the island. No wonder he sought solace and relief in a game that has been the temptation of procrastinators for years. Perec's dilemma, however, is something more than a curious anecdote about the difficulties he faced in composing *W*. His choice has surprising resonances with some of the quandaries writers and readers face when confronting autobiography. Perec must have stopped playing patience at one point, or else *W* would not have been completed. The book he produced was, however, curiously indebted to the game: it could be described a shuffled pack to be patiently sorted by the reader. However, *W* also demonstrates that at some point he might have renounced to the comforts of the card game.²

¹ Bellos, p. 450 and Lejeune, *La mémoire*, pp. 116-121.

² The game of patience was also used as a framing metaphor by Grant Gee in his adaptation of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, called *Patience*. See note 36 in the introduction for a brief overview of the points of connection between Sebald and Perec. See *Patience (After Sebald)*, dir. by Grant Gee (Soda Pictures, 2012).

One cannot help to read the choice between playing and not playing as an allegory of the relation between the generic definition of autobiography and the nature of figuration: it might indeed allow to gather together the issues explored not only in our reading of *W* itself, but also of our other curiosities. We could compare the traditional definition of autobiography to the game: both aspire to restore the shuffled self to its original linear order in the box. Or — if we adopt Gusdorf's approach or that of the performativist critics — autobiography should perhaps not be identified with the ordered pack, but rather with the game itself: a reflection of the players' successes and failures in putting themselves back together again, and in which failed games are as revealing as successful ones. Even if our three curiosities are all failed games, they could still be defined as autobiographies.

As we pointed out in Chapter One, the game can also be read an allegory of reading — not just of autobiographies but of all narratives. Readers also rearrange the *sjuzhet* into its original *fabula*: they could do it more or less successfully (especially in indeterminate or curious narratives), but they still doggedly attempt to reconstruct it. If that game cannot be solved, a new one is started. Here the allegory starts to become inadequate, and does not match any definition of autobiography. Pragmatic definitions of autobiography such as Lejeune's do not fit in the patience allegory: for Lejeune, what defines the genre is not the possibility or impossibility of restoration but a convention, an agreement, a coincident name.

However, as De Man pointed out, the pact was but a displaced whirligig. Lejeune's "solution" has only given rise to more games of patience, such as Doubrovsky's automotive child. Patience should perhaps be compared to De Man's

figure of the whirligig of figuration: the unsolved game is not a satisfactory conclusion or a stable definition, but the excuse for another attempt, and another failure — to be continued up to infinity, if the player is particularly unlucky. The games of patience involved in writing or reading autobiography — as De Man insisted — are *always* inconclusive, the springboard for another game.

In the light of these approximate allegories, the texts we have been examining could be playing *and* not playing patience. They refuse to play because they question the end of the game, the idea that the pack could or should be restored to its 'original' state: a process which closes writing, and replaces the game with a box. And, as we have seen in *W*, it matters that one can write 'I write' and that the game does not come to a halt. Their disruptions and distortions of narrative structure and their play with *mise en abyme* remind the reader that the life of autobiography (as writing) resides in its potential for generating more games, and more procrastination — and more patience, in the two senses of the word. The choice between writing and playing patience might not really be a choice at all.

As with allegories and all figures, it is at the moment when correspondence fails and the figure stabs its author in the back when a paradoxical insight (a negative one) is achieved. Or not. Returning to the curiosity, its value of the curiosity does not reside on its ability to rename autobiography, or make it new, or to make it static. It is perhaps only a reminder that the problematic nature of figuration De Man described in 'Autobiography as De-Facement' cannot be put away in a drawer or replaced by shinier alternatives. It is always there, in mundane objects like frames or in garish or outlandish finds like an eight-legged lamp or a

wooden figurine. They are worth collecting, even if the only thing one can do is pore over them obsessively and list them.

The problem of such an approach is that it does not lend itself well to conclusions. A reasonable way of dealing with that obstacle might be to simply sweep the filings our sharpening analyses have given rise to and put them in a little pile together. In *Speak, Memory*, for instance, we found a seemingly hieratic and static text (with an apparently well-defined genre and a robust structure, like the lamp) being pulled down and rebuilt time and again by *mise en abyme* figures and indeterminate temporalities, and thus kept alive and floating in the process. In *W or the Memory of Childhood*, the humble empty frame (like a patience game started over and over again) made explicit the testimonial and ethical dimensions of renouncing closure and restoration. In *Dark Back of Time*, the figurine/aide was the trigger of an increasingly unsettling succession of *mise en abymes* and metaleptic disturbances which brought into focus the paradoxical nature of the 'life' at the heart of autobiography. Once gathered, the filings seem perhaps repetitive and worthless, and one throws them away, with the uncomfortable feeling there will be more of them in the future, and that there will be not be any different. Or — in a last-minute figure swap — one finds in the previously unsuccessful game of patience the much sought-for excuse to reshuffle the pack and start another game.

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