

DE GRUYTER

Alexandre Gefen

REPAIR THE WORLD

FRENCH LITERATURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY



CULTURE & CONFLICT

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Alexandre Gefen
Repair the World

Culture & Conflict

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Alexandre Gefen

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French Literature in the Twenty-First Century

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DE GRUYTER

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Introduction

What matters is that with the world we make countries and languages; with chaos, meaning; with meadows, battlefields; with deeds, legends and that sophisticated form of legend, history; and with common names, proper ones. Pierre Michon, *Mythologies d'hiver*.¹

There is no end to the mourning of contemporary French literature's passing nor to the condemnation of what Richard Millet has called a "post-literature,"² viewed as having nothing in common with what we have known under this name since the beginning of the nineteenth century; so, too, are there constant reminders that the prestige and the typically French Romantic notion of letters has been eclipsed. And yet the decline of the collective functions of literature and the contemporary desacralization of the writer, as well as the decline of modern and postmodern formalist currents, have proved advantageous for new roles. Here, I will argue that the beginning of the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a notion of writing and reading I would describe as "therapeutic" – of a literature that heals, that cares for, that helps, or at least that "does good." It appears to me that, in our democracies lacking in major collective hermeneutical or spiritual frameworks,³ literary narrative holds the promise of considering the singular, of making sense of pluralized identities, of reweaving geographies through the formation of communities: these programs are not so much emancipatory as reparative. The heroes of contemporary French fiction are ravaged communities, the vulnerable, and those left out of the history books. These neo-humanist discourses participate in what we have grown accustomed to calling, since the work of Dominique Viart,⁴ a return to "transitivity." Positioning itself against both "storytelling" and entertainment, literature would like to take on the world, to act, to remedy suffering, to help us improve our daily lives. Such doctrine is widespread, found just as readily in societal discourse on the uses of literature as with the authors themselves, and opposes an ideal of intransitivity that still largely predominated at the end of the twentieth century. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 2006, Antoine Compagnon

1 Pierre Michon, *Mythologies d'hiver* [Winter Mythologies], Paris, Verdier, 1997, back cover.

2 Richard Millet, *L'Enfer du roman: réflexions sur la postlittérature* [The Novel's Hell: Reflections on Postliterature], Paris, Gallimard, 2010.

3 See Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, Cambridge (MA), Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007.

4 See Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations* [French Literature in the Present: Legacies, Modernity, Mutations], 2nd edn, Paris, Bordas, 2008, p. 16.

was still asking the question, “What is literature for?”⁵ Meanwhile, contemporary authors have found many uses for what Valéry Larbaud called “that unpunished vice, reading”: literature reveals, bears witness, “gives intimate access to the other, expands the field of knowledge and the depth of experience,” as wrote Pierre Jourde, who recently asked this same question in his blog *Confitures de culture* [Culture Jams].⁶ Patrick Modiano, upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, proposed that it can “impart mystery to individuals who are seemingly overwhelmed by day-to-day life, and to things which are ostensibly banal – and the reason they can do this that they have observed them time and again with sustained attention, almost hypnotically.”⁷

“The writer has nothing to say”: this phrase, found in Maurice Blanchot’s as well as in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s works,⁸ seems to be at odds with the way literature has been written since the end of the twentieth century. Turning its back on the formalist tradition as well as the practices of a committed literature based on a Sartrean model, contemporary literature confronts the world, not to change it or remove itself from it, but rather to consider that which can only be considered through literature. With a return to the subject and to the real that started in the 1980s along with a new focus on the world and renewed interest in the issues of transmission and identity, literature has come to serve as a tool of self-construction and sharpened moral reflection. If it refuses to be mere entertainment, contemporary French literature strives to take care of originary life, vulnerable individuals, those forgotten by history, ravaged communities, and our restless democracies by offering readers its capacity for thinking about the imperative of individuation, commemorating the dead, sharing difficult experiences, and inventing possible futures: this is how it takes on the world. “There is preciousness as soon as art becomes a mirror of itself. No – the arts must aim for a kind of conciliation, a negotiation with the world, and with others,” writes Pierre Michon, commenting on this turning point that revealed its first symptoms in the form of biographical fictions.⁹ What I address in this essay is this collective imaginary, which has been particularly active since the start of the new millennium and which – in place of religion

5 Antoine Compagnon, *La Littérature, pour quoi faire? Leçon inaugurale prononcée le jeudi 30 novembre 2006*, Paris, Collège de France, coll. “Leçons inaugurales du Collège de France,” no. 188, septembre 2013.

6 Pierre Jourde, “À quoi sert à la littérature (2),” blog “Confitures de culture,” *L’Obs*, 11 March 2009.

7 Patrick Modiano, Nobel lecture, 7 Dec. 2014, p. 12. English: www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/modiano-lecture_en-1.pdf.

8 Maurice Blanchot, *L’Espace littéraire* [Literary Space] (1955), Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 12; Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* [For a New Novel], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1963, p. 42.

9 Pierre Michon, *Le Roi vient quand il veut* [The King Comes when He Wants], Paris, Albin Michel, 2007, p. 56.

or a political agenda – literature looks to in order to repair our status as victims, to correct traumas in the individual memory or societal fabric, without making a distinction between “high literature” and the writing workshops open to all.

The aim of this book is thus to explore contemporary French fiction in order to reflect on the decisive metamorphoses that are taking place right before our eyes: with the emergence of a model that literature uses to justify and recognize itself – a paradigm for proposing a mode of action and a form of insertion into contemporary society – there have been transformations of literary practices, of genres and norms, of the place of the writer, and especially of the utterance we qualify as literary. I describe this clinical, therapeutic paradigm as a way of asking writing and reading to repair, revisit, mend, and fill in the gaps in contemporary communities, to reweave collective and personal histories, to stand in for the mediations that are missing from social and religious institutions, which, at a time when individuals are being called on to invent themselves, are viewed as obsolete and derelict. It seems as if the frequently explicit guiding principle at the heart of contemporary literary projects is to rescue or to act, however modestly, on our individual or national suffering, using the literary utterance as a form of address or liberation, and turning to fiction so as to put words to the lost or the unspeakable and to identify and respond to the wounds of the world. This guiding principle contributes to the resocialization of literature, which becomes an activity indispensable to self-expression before being a vocation or a magistracy reserved for the chosen few, as well as to the resocialization of writers, who become “partners in elucidation” for all¹⁰ by leaving their ivory tower. Breaking equally with a patrimonial conception of literature and with formalism, this principle makes the work a shareable experience, a hermeneutic device that can be appropriated and sometimes modified by the readers themselves through forms of “relational” art,¹¹ or simply a reappropriation of artistic authority, of “empowerment” for amateurs. This development is accompanied by the creation of new spaces of exchange and new forms of conversation, particularly with digital creation and the role of social networks, and I believe this compels us to renew our objects of study as well as our methods of analysis. For example, it gives rightful place to the pragmatic thinking of John Dewey and Richard Shusterman, for whom the work of art is to be considered as fulfillment for those who created it or who are immersed in it, rather than an intrinsic end – hence an attention to

10 Dominique Viart, “En lieu et place des sans-voix,” [In Place of the Voiceless] in “Ce que la littérature sait de l’autre,” [What Literature Knows About the Other] ed. A. Gefen, *Le Magazine littéraire*, no. 526, Nov. 2012, p. 78.

11 For this well-known expression, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *L’Esthétique relationnelle* [Relational Aesthetics], Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 1998.

stated aims and uses (“What does literature want to do?” “What do we want to do with literature?”), which become more important than the ontological and territorial thinking (“Is this literature?”) traditionally applied by literary theory and literary poetics.

An aesthetic-ethical turning point

From Régis Jauffret delving into the life of a young female martyr locked in a cellar¹² to other writers discussing migrants or the precariat in spite of their invisibility, the objects of “remediating” literature’s operations are manifold: wounded and overlooked selves; deprived, enslaved, and blindsided communities; unnamed, forsaken alterity; obscured and trivialized histories riddled with holes; suffering, deserted, and dying bodies; tragedies and beings without language or representation. What these all have in common is that they call for empathy – that is, the capacity of narrative to put us in the place of others so as to share their emotions and understand their position in the most problematic of situations, as prescribed by a French version of what is now known across the Atlantic as the “ethics of care.” It promises to “heal what can be healed,” to borrow a phrase from Emmanuel Carrère’s empathetic masterpiece *D’autres vies que la mienne* [Lives Other than My Own] (2009). Hence the significance in the contemporary field of literary forms such as narratives of transmission, of recollection, and of testimony. These are all similar in that they do not constitute literary programs or aesthetic schools, but rather forms of intervention – sometimes concrete – in the *banlieues*, factories, or prisons, whether they operate in the present, intervene in the past as a form of retrospective reparation, or develop protective prophecies to help face the future, as in the case of Antoine Volodine, for example.

This role given to empathy is part of an aesthetic-ethical turn that consists of using narrative to produce what the philosopher Paul Ricœur called narrative identities [*identités narratives*] in which we can recognize ourselves, “re-understand” ourselves, and project ourselves, both personally and socially. Literature declares itself useful because it engages us with experiences in thinking that possess moral value, and especially, I believe, because it allows us to renew our grasp on alterity in a society that has split into individuals. The narrative and its characters allow us to move from “thinking for ourselves” to “thinking from the point of view of any-

¹² See Régis Jauffret, *Claustria: roman*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2012, or the narrative by Alexandre Seurat inspired by the Marina Sabatier affair in *La Maladroite* [The Clumsy One], Arles, Éd. du Rouergue, 2015.

one else” through the mediation of affects. It is a matter of bearing witness, not for an abstract history, but for a concrete and embodied other; it not a question of reflecting and modeling but feeling and connecting; and it is less about describing and informing than of sharing a sensitivity to the precariat, to victims. This literature, asserting that language and narrative are restorative forces, presents variations in highly diverse aesthetic traditions: social empathy (from François Bon’s analysis of the victims of deindustrialization to the attention to the downtrodden evidenced in the work of Patrick Modiano, or “those who are left behind” for Danièle Sallenave),¹³ mystical empathy (in Pierre Michon, for example, a writer whose mystique of alterity is more Christian *charity* than Anglo-American *care*), as well as disquieting forms of therapeutic novels among writers who treat the topic of mourning (Pierre Guyotat, Pierre Pachet, etc.). To this list can be added narratives that bear witness to catastrophes or simply to the state of the world, such as the narratives of writer-journalists who investigate poverty in the style of Olivier Rolin, with an immersive model of empathy through direct identification. Even for Régis Jauffret, one of the French writers who is the most committed to describing the suffering of alterity and who defines himself as a “megalomaniac, even in grief,”¹⁴ this restorative attention seems compatible with forms of ironic detachment, as if bad feelings had to offset good ones, and irony had to offset compassion.

It is a matter of responding to the depression linked to the modern summons to invent one’s own existence; it is a matter of coming to terms with the mundane, of justifying the choices made for one’s liberty by freeing oneself with the invention of a style and an identity of one’s own, even if it means demonstrating that the latter are mutable and fragile. The underlying referential models are thus based on the psychology of “self-help” with an “expressivist” approach. This anxiety about identity does not necessarily lead to autobiographical or autofictional forms. It can lead to writing about alterity with the use of a biographical matrix: mimesis becomes a way of serving the fragility of ownness (the writer seeks to grasp and preserve difference, which has become a value in itself), in a “helping” literature, proposing a politics of reciprocity. For writers like Annie Ernaux, “helping” means helping the world, archiving the present time, commemorating

13 For this expression, see “L’extrême contemporain: question de roman,” [Today’s World: A Question for the Novel] *Po&sie*, no. 41, 1986, pp. 16–22, and cited by Bruno Thibault, “À l’écoute de ceux qui sont à la traîne’: le récit dialogué dans *Adieu* et dans *Viol* de Danièle Sallenave,” [“Listening to those who are lagging behind”: the narrative in dialogue in *Adieu* and in *Rape* by Danièle Sallenave] in Michael Bishop and Christopher Elson (eds), *French Prose in 2000*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2002, pp. 117–123.

14 Régis Jauffret, *Lacrimosa: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 2008, p. 216. The novel stages a dialogue with a young woman, also a schoolteacher and writer, who committed suicide.

everything that dies, keeping traces, inscribing, dreaming of a Noah's Ark that expands infinitely, using a hypermnestic Proustian model whereby literature is at once epiphany of the origin, museum of a primary world, and archive of a culture. Collective ambition is not absent from contemporary literature: communities ask literature to renew the ties of filiation¹⁵ and impossible genealogies, to speak of the secret or forbidden inscriptions and the territorial reality. This concern with memory is based on a Foucauldian vision of history, a reparative notion by which historic speech restores worlds and comes to correct the omissions of official discourses at their margins, with the virtualizations of history and the vision specific to the literary imagination serving to complement one another. It is a question of giving voice to the ignoble and offering a clinic of the social world in the romantic tradition of societal and political intervention as well as an educational vision of literature and its apportionment, a French version of the American doctrines of empowering communities through discourse. As we shall see, there are other possible aesthetic directions for these forms of re-engagement with the world: from Patrick Deville to Laurent Mauvignier and from Jean Hatfeld to the Rolin brothers, what has emerged is an active model of the writer as investigator or witness, based on a direct experience or else restitutive exploration or immersion that likewise revisits previous divisions between literature, knowledge, and social intervention.

The end of literary intransitivity

The “self-help” sections that are gradually replacing the “literary non-fiction” and “Essays” sections in our bookstores are giving increasing space to art therapy and writing workshops for well-being. Everywhere, there are others offering to save reading, not in the name of knowledge or culture, but as a fulfilling and renarcissizing leisure activity. In the United States, famous philosopher Martha Nussbaum sees reading novels as a way to ensure “poetic justice”¹⁶ and to lead us to the good – a far cry from Georges Bataille, who said that “if literature moves away from evil, it quickly grows boring.”¹⁷ The influential blogger Maria Popova, born in Bulgaria and based in the United States, declares that the four functions of lit-

15 Laurent Demanze, *Encres orphelines: Pierre Bergounioux, Gérard Macé, Pierre Michon*, [Orphan Inks] Paris, José Corti, coll. “Les Essais,” 2008.

16 See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

17 Georges Bataille, televised interview with Pierre Dumayet (“Lectures pour tous” [Readings for All]), regarding the theme *La Littérature et le Mal* [Literature and Evil], 21 May 1958.

erature are to save you time, make you nicer, cure you of loneliness, and prepare you for failure.¹⁸ Other writers in the US draw on cognitive science to justify the use of novels as a form of mental exercise and social training. In the name of a neo-Darwinian philosophy, literature is deemed useful in regulating collective passions and proposing imaginative solutions to our need to adapt to new situations. Tzvetan Todorov, who once heralded formalism, later redefined the powers of literature in terms consistent with what is found in many self-help manuals: literature “can reach out to us when we are deeply depressed, can lead us to the other human beings around us, give us a better understanding of the world, and can help us live.”¹⁹

It is therefore clear that literature, in the broad sense of the word that we will use, is now widely becoming a medicine for the soul. A popularized form of this idea is also present in Régine Detambel’s “bibliotherapy”²⁰ project as well as in the wraparound band reading “antidepressant novel” – a catchphrase seen on Stéphane Carlier’s paperback edition of *Les Gens sont les gens* [People are People]. It is possible to become oneself and acquire that much-touted faculty of resilience by enriching our lives with the experience of books, creating the “axe that breaks the frozen sea within us,” in Kafka’s famous statement.²¹ Writing and reading now aim to support this dogged autonomization of the individual, which sociologist Alain Ehrenberg²² and anthropologist François Flahault²³ view as a syndrome of our liberal society. This explains the prominence in the contemporary field of a range of discourses of self-definition and self-justification that insist on the idea of a remediation or a “restitution” of meaning to readers, to borrow a decisive term from French critic Dominique Viart.²⁴ This remediation becomes, by default, the very definition of literary activity; the contemporary field is original not by

18 Maria Popova, “What Books Do for the Human Spirit: The Four Psychological Functions of Great Literature,” *Brainpickings* blog, 9 October 2014.

19 Tzvetan Todorov, *La Littérature en péril* [Literature in Peril], Paris, Flammarion, 2007, p. 72.

20 See Régine Detambel, *Les livres prennent soin de nous: pour une bibliothérapie créative* [Books Take Care of Us: For a Creative Bibliotherapy], Arles, Actes Sud, 2015.

21 Franz Kafka, letter to Oskar Pollak on January 27, 1904, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol III, ed. Claude David, trans. Marthe Robert, Claude David and Jean-Pierre Danès, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 575.

22 Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d’être soi: dépression et société* [The Fatigue of Being Yourself: Depression and Society], Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998. Also see Simon Lemoine, *Le Sujet dans les dispositifs de pouvoir* [The Subject in the Apparatuses of Power], Rennes, PU Rennes, 2013.

23 François Flahault, *Be yourself! Au-delà de la conception occidentale de l’individu* [Beyond the Western Conception of the Individual], Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2006.

24 See Dominique Viart, “Le silence des pères au principe du ‘récit de filiation’,” [The Silence of Fathers as Principle of the “Narrative of Filiation”] *Études françaises*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2009.

counting on distant and remote examples, but rather in always tending to associate the reader, by way of projection and empathy, with the experiences of others, however remote.

This essay aims just as much to describe the forms and places of intervention of this literature (or of this use of literature) as to describe its programs of action. To this end, emphasis is placed on the value of social and individual uses as well as the explicit aims and explanatory discourses. The idea that literature heals us and makes us better is a contemporary mantra that cannot be verified, and here is not the place for making any judgements regarding the rightly controversial debate about the effect of literature on individuals and societies, nor regarding the possible ways in which texts can act on individuals. These are matters of psychology and sociology, and to date the analyses are only in the embryonic phase.²⁵ However, analyzing the discourses on the power of literature means recognizing that, in the contemporary field, literature is not an end in itself, but a powerful social and symbolic device that acts on consciences and hearts. It is this operation of affective transference and internal intervention that the landmark narrative *Réparer les vivants* [Repairing the Living] (2014) by Maylis de Kerangal thematized for an entire generation with its highly metaphorical account of a heart transplant. This text, like several hundred other explicitly therapeutic or “reparative” narratives, falls under what I would like to call, in a distant borrowing from a key concept in Isaac Luria’s Hebrew mysticism, *tikkun olam* (literally: “to repair the world”), a doctrine of responsibility for and repairing of the world.

I find that several clarifications are necessary: discussing literature means, regardless of how cautiously one may proceed, making an essentialization and even in the case that there are effects attributed to it, a reification – an anthropomorphization. What I mean here by literature is not an entity with autonomy of action, not an official doxa or a dominant and homogeneous literary movement, nor a fully and explicitly realized idea, but simply an ideology that is definitional but sometimes hazy, and updated variously by criticism, paratexts, and literary metalanguage. Without question, this idea is not unique, nor is it necessarily unequivocal, and often it is problematized, questioned, or vigorously contested. However, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the presence, indeed the pervasiveness, of such a therapeutic *use* of literature among many writers and readers and to observe its genealogy and formulations. As Roland Barthes la-

²⁵ See especially the synthesis by Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2007, p. xix et seq.

mented,²⁶ we lack a history of literature that specifies not its scope, practices, and forms, nor even its definitions, but rather its purposes or finalities, which would allow us to see possible shifts in contemporary practices. Such a project should not limit itself to the history of the decline of a literature autonomized as a finality without end or purpose and that sacralizes its own uselessness. There is no indication, moreover, that identifying all the forms whereby fiction emancipates itself from representation in order to beat itself at its own game, the instances where forms are valid as forms, where the practices of symbolization are focused on the writer's ego and the internal references of texts to each other, can prove the existence of an implicit aesthetic regime in literature prior to the nineteenth century. Much of the current research dramatizes the split that took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the word "literature" came to mean a separate activity, a particular (and eminently marginal) field in the realm of knowledge and representations, a milieu and a vocation of its own. Yet this split prevents us from using the term "literary," in the old sense of the word, for any form of expression prior to this supposed autonomization and its consequences, the clear division of vocations, forms of knowledge, and types of discourse. This is, for example, the position taken by classicist Florence Dupont, who radically refuses to apply the word "literary" to works prior to the invention of the word by Germaine de Staël at the very start of the nineteenth century. By contrast, thinking of literary activity in terms of uses within the context of a broader pragmatics to incorporate human activities that enlist linguistic supports for various purposes (convincing, seducing, converting, entertaining, etc.) makes it possible to reintegrate finalized actions (pleasing, convincing, etc.) as well as ritual activities, which a strictly aesthetic definition would have excluded, into the broadened literary field. The contemporary "de-essentialization" of literature, as the nineteenth century imagined it and as *La Nouvelle Revue française* endorsed it, for example, leads us to map out concrete writing activities, both individual and collective, without any preconceptions. Abandoning the religious model of the writer and the scholar that still largely prevails in people's minds opens up the possibility for the long-term integration of the facts of the "literary" into the richness of writing practices and symbolic interventions. Such a movement is reflected in the nominalization of adjectives such as "the literary," in the *Dictionnaire du littéraire* [Dictionary of the Literary], which was published in 2002 by sociologists and liter-

²⁶ Roland Barthes, "La littérature, aujourd'hui" [Literature Today, 1961], in *Essais critiques* (1964), *Œuvres complètes*, new edition by Éric Marty, vol 2 (1962–1967), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2002, pp. 269–528 (book), pp. 411–421 (article), especially p. 413.

ary historians Paul Aron, Denis Saint-Jacques, and Alain Viala.²⁷ When literature no longer exists as a univocal idea and when the word designates different practices almost to the point of homonymy, when criticism takes note of the particularities of the subject and returns to Barthes to seek not the madness of systems but the power and potential of subjectivation, and when argumentative space has dissolved into a globalized and digitized debate, what must be studied is the usage of the literary writers project, a usage their mediators prepare (critics, booksellers, interpreters, pedagogues), and their readers implement, in accordance with various forms that may themselves vary at times. Such a paradigm shift leads us to switch our interest from substance to effects, and from an intransitive definition of literature to its transitivity. Whereas literature written prior to the 1980s could avail itself of an endogenous, linguistic, and technical critique, and a view of itself informed only by its own history, contemporary authors account for their projects in terms of the ethics and micropolitics of subjects, reintroducing forms of consciousness of the world and of the other that present themselves as singular. It is therefore necessary to turn to pragmatic definitions such as the one provided by Richard Shusterman, who focuses on an extremely inclusive “aesthetic experience” and prefers to trust the horizons of reading rather than supposedly specific literary properties.²⁸

A remediating literature?

The idea that literature has performed work of repair, first as a form of substituting the thing with the signifier and thus as a tomb or as a reminder of what is no longer, is not new; it has certainly existed alongside the notion of a socially or morally utilitarian exercise of literature in rhetoric, categorized since Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* as the trio *docere*, *placere*, and *movere*. Comedies and eulogies, chronicles and letters of consolation, and epic poetry and elegiac poetry overlapped and sometimes intertwined; meanwhile, works of glorification and of mourning, parodies and protests against the passage of time, panegyrics on desire and lamentations for absence did not prove irreconcilable. It was likely at the end of the eighteenth century that this division started and that we find, perhaps for the first time, this antinomy between writing conceived as a gratuitous and jubilant addition or, in contrast, as a response to finitude and a gesture of substitution:

27 Paul Aron, Denis Saint-Jacques and Alain Viala (eds), *Le Dictionnaire du littéraire*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

28 See Richard Shusterman, *The Object of Literary Criticism*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1984, p. 51.

this is the ambivalence of the term “supplement” as Derrida analyzes it in his reading of Rousseau. This seemingly contradictory dual function of literature as a game, as a useless addition and yet a necessary compensation, can thus be seen in the analysis of the concept of “supplement,” considered in its double sense of addition and substitute. Supernumerary and exorbitant, the supplement of the literary utterance is “[C]ompensatory and vicarious [. . .] an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place*,” writes Derrida, who emphasizes that “the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.”²⁹ Without necessarily subscribing to these positions, we can take from this a general framework that invites us to reinsert literary writing into the long history of functionally useless yet symbolically indispensable devices of substitution and repair. To put it another way, it is possible to read literary texts under a double regime: either that of the objectives the work contributes to, or that of decontextualized languages and semantics. In my own context for critical analysis, which is deeply informed by sociological, anthropological, and historical reading tools as well as by an aesthetic model, along with an external critique and an internal one, the literary utterance can be analyzed simultaneously in accordance with these two modes, which are only antinomic when one neglects “the propensity of language to exceed its aesthetic investment in every direction,” according to Gérard Genette.³⁰ The cost of this antinomy is enormous, since it would lead us to remove literature – in literary regime – from any relation to truth and action and also to prevent forms that are not literary in terms of poetics – the essay, the biography, the non-fictional narrative, scientific poetry, etc. –, from being included in the history of literature. To avoid this overwhelming antinomy from both a diachronic and a synchronic point of view, it is possible to consider that there are stipulations of literature in any intensive investment of utterance, however determined it might be by designated ends, and likewise in any act of distribution, viewed as a possible detachment from a primary context of reception. Nothing prevents us from offering a literary reading of such speech act, moving its evaluation to a formal level and thus reinscribing the work in an intertextual network, whether this is anticipated by the work or not.

“The tomb is the father of signs,” philosopher Alain wrote. As such, we can concede that many literary forms have perhaps always been a form of compensation in the face of the world’s finitude and a cure for the misfortunes of the day,

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1967, p. 208. Author’s emphasis. English translation from *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997, p. 145.

³⁰ Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1991, p. 12. English translation from *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca and London, Cornell UP, 1993, p. 2.

even if it is surely impossible to relate the infinite number of ways the arts of language have been used to a single anthropological function, as diverse utilitarians would like to do. Here, I am thinking of the morals of art that attribute to literature the capacity for ethical education and of the apostles of literary evolutionism who see literature as having an adaptive function of a quasi-biological order, from philosophies of language as loss to those of language as repair. Of course, there is no slogan or literary school based on remediation. The fact that many of these discourses are implicit is certainly not irrelevant and speaks to the contempt which the heirs of an intransitive literature still show for any narrative that is distinguished or justified by a goal of intervention in the world, as well as the scorn for any literature whose love for the form and the device would not be the only overdetermination. Our sense of the literary remains deeply configured by the Barthesian opposition between the author – for whom “the raw material becoming in a sense its own end,” “the world’s *why*” is absorbed “in a *how to write*” and remains “a question” – and the writer – a “transitive” man who “posits a goal (to give evidence, to explain, to instruct)”³¹ who ends up being profoundly discredited by an aristocratic requirement of gratuity and intransitivity. Clearly, thinking about the literatures of remediation means trying to refrain from opposing writing projects that take on a question, a subject, or a problem and aim to be direct performances or at least cognitive operations, against a “literary” tradition where the formal ambition is supposed to primarily hold the reader’s attention and be the ultimate subject of knowledge. It also means, as H  l  ne Merlin-Kajman proposes, attempting to deploy original concepts to understand a literature that privileges “its restorative function” over rhetoric³² by suggesting that it be called “transitional,” by way of analogy with Donald Winnicott’s well-known concept.³³ While this matter remains to be fleshed out, it still provides evidence of an attempt to renew categories and a shift from a philosophical to a psychological theory of literature. In France, the intense media coverage at the start of the 2016 literary season of the term “exofiction” that was used to refer not just to biofiction, but everything that breaks with autofiction. The term “exofiction” was actually invented by writer Philippe Vasset in 2011 to characterize “a literature that

31 Roland Barthes, “  crivains et   crivants” (1960), in *Essais critiques*, ed. cit., p. 403–410, cit. pp. 404, 405, 407. English translation from *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, New York, Hill and Wang, 1983, pp. 144–145 and 147.

32 H  l  ne Merlin-Kajman, *Lire dans la gueule du loup: essai sur une zone    d  fendre, la litt  rature* [Reading in the Wolf’s Mouth: Reflections on an Area to Defend, Literature], Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 271. Also see *L’Animal ensorcel  . Traumatismes, litt  rature, transitionnalit  * [The Bewitched Animal. Trauma, Literature, Transitionality], Paris, Ithaque, 2016.

33 Merlin-Kajman, *Lire*, p. 272.

mixes the narrative of the real as it is together with the fantasies of those who create it.”³⁴ In other words, what cognitivists would call a literature of *enaction* thus attests to a strong trend in narrative prose since the 2000s: toward realism and an attraction to documentary evidence as well as a work of unveiling and hermeneutic intervention. In fact, exofiction – if we are to adopt this term – can be just as much about ordinary interiority as remote existence: what characterizes it is how it uses the work of language to perform a psychological operation aiming to rework knowledge and beliefs.

This involves taking the risk of modifying well-known perimeters and of bringing closer together natively literary writing with ordinary writing. This provides an opportunity to critically question our traditional criteria for literarity and to free literature of the extremism that precludes us from seeing what the work can actually achieve psychologically, by rediscovering the very problem posed at the beginning of Dewey’s *Art as Experience*:

In addition, the very perfection of some of these products, the prestige they possess because of a long history of unquestioned admiration, creates conventions that get in the way of a fresh insight. [. . .]

A primary task is thus imposed upon one who undertakes to write upon the philosophy of the fine arts. This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.³⁵

It is important to note that describing these salvational, therapeutic, and regulating discourses in all their variations, these *interventions*, is in no way for me a way of justifying or even adhering to them, especially given that these metadiscourses often assume a self-critical stance, that they rarely distance themselves from a suspicion and an awareness of the limits of language steeped in the twentieth century’s crisis of literary humanism, and that the writers debate them amongst themselves. I do not know if Michon’s flights of lyricism in *Les Vies mi-*

³⁴ Philippe Vasset, “L’Exofictif,” *Vacarmes*, no. 54, winter 2011. See for example Mathilde de La Chalonge commentary, “De la fiction à la biographie, l’exofiction, un genre qui brouille les pistes,” [From Fiction to Biography, Exofiction, a Genre that Blurs the Lines], on the site “Actua-Litté: les univers du livre,” August 10, 2016.

³⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), New York, The Berkley Publishing Group, p. 2. On the application of contemporary Deweyan artistic forms, see Yaël Kréplak, “Le continuisme deweyen à l’épreuve des situations. De l’art comme expérience aux pratiques artistiques en interaction,” [Deweyan Continuism Put to the Test of Situations. From Art as Experience to Interacting Artistic Practices] in Jean-Pierre Cometti and Giovanni Matteucci (eds), *Après “L’Art comme expérience”: John Dewey dans le débat contemporain* [After *Art as Experience*: John Dewey in the Contemporary Debate], Paris, Questions théoriques, 2016.

nuscles [Small Lives] will be able, as the author dreams, to bring back children who died too young with words. I do not know if Carrère's project to bear witness for the victims of illness or the tsunami is anything more than a pose to escape aesthetic isolation. I do not know if Ernaux or her readers felt better thanks to the memory she offered to a vanishing world. I do not know if François Bon's desire to make visible the forgotten, the ignoble of the social order, makes any sense. I do not even know if it prepares and constitutes the possibility for subsequent political action, or even of empathetic attention that could guide ordinary forms of care. I do not know if Jean Rouaud will manage, with literature, to "fill the gaping space between words and things" or if Patrick Deville, with biographical narratives, will be able to "save" the ten billion people who have inhabited this planet. On the one hand, such options give rise to misgivings and counter-discourses that make art a way not of mending but actually keeping fractures open, or simply reminding us of its impotence – as in the case of Olivier Cadiot, who notes ironically in his *Histoire de la littérature récente* [History of Recent Literature]: "It is often said that literature is a therapy, but it is not. It's not that, absolutely not. Writing things down doesn't cure anything; you don't tolerate things any better by stripping them down with words – as if *things would get better by saying them*."³⁶ On the other hand, the extent of literature's effects is a field of research that the cognitive sciences and affect studies have only just started to define,³⁷ and the concepts endogenous to literary studies that accompany them such as catharsis and symbolization are still subject to debate: literary history can and must describe discourse, hopes, plans, and intentions rather than concrete, quantifiable effects. This is what I will endeavor to do, based on a necessarily very recent literary corpus together with the accompanying metatextual, media, and social discourses: this work is very much akin to a literary history of the twenty-first century. Defining a work first in relation to the world's becoming rather than literature's, situating it within the logic of work on oneself and on others, asking it to provide substantial forms of historical or political knowledge as well as asking it to give an account of a truth that it alone can access or to carry out a philosophical experiment in the possible, rather than a linguistic experiment, are very distinct literary options. The fact that these are the orientations of the majority of contemporary French literary works, that they define their values, that they guarantee their legitimacy, requires our thinking.

³⁶ Olivier Cadiot, *Histoire de la littérature récente*, volume I, Paris, P.O.L., 2016, p. 10.

³⁷ I refer here to an initial study: Alexandre Gefen, Carole Talon-Hugon and Mathilde Bernard (eds), *Arts et émotions: un dictionnaire* [Arts and Emotions: A Dictionary], Paris, Armand Colin, 2016.



Facing Oneself

Chapter 1

The quest for visibility

I live in a society of *transmitters* (being one myself): each person I meet or who writes to me, sends me a book, a text, an outline, a prospectus, a protest, an invitation to a performance, an exhibition, etc. The pleasure of writing, of producing, makes itself felt on all sides [. . .]. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.¹

The empire of the first person

Few cultural surveys are easier to make than the one to be accomplished by simply walking into a bookstore today: it seems that the primary function of literature is to give visibility to individual lives, be it in the form of biographies or biographical fictions about others or of self-narratives, without there being any contradiction between the two categories. This “expressivist” role of literature manifests itself just as much in the very nature of these publications as it does in the social desire to publish, and to make being included in the national bibliography a way of justifying one’s existence, if not a form of hope for survival. The thematic classifications made by the Bibliothèque nationale de France [BnF] speak for themselves: in the “Personal narratives” category, there are 705 entries for the period between 1970 and 1979; 3,854 between 1980 and 1989; 6,952 between 1990 and 1999; 13,571 between 2000 and 2009; and for the period between 2010–2015, which is currently being catalogued, the BnF has already reported 9,500 entries. Meanwhile, it is important to bear in mind that this category is not necessarily implemented with great rigor and that other forms of personal writing should also be added.² In terms of French publishing, the Anglo-American-inspired “Vécu” collection launched in 1967 by Robert Laffont had some commercial success with popularized versions of autobiographi-

1 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), in *Œuvres complètes*, new edition reviewed, corrected, and presented by Éric Marty, vol 4 (1972–1976), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2002, pp. 575–770, cit. p. 658. English translation from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1977, p. 81.

2 As empirical research has shown, only a fraction of autobiographies and autofictions are referenced; if the more comprehensive category “Biographies” (which includes autobiographies that are not considered “personal accounts”) is used, the development is comparable: 1970–1979: 1,947 entries; 1980–1989: 9,021; 1990–1999: 14,561; 2000–2009: 23,561; 2010–2015: 13,220 entries.

cal investigations peculiar to American anthropology,³ resulting in such sub-genres as autobiographies of peasants or teachers, of unhappy childhoods, and entire book series dedicated to workers' autobiographies ("Combats" at Le Seuil, "Témoigner" [Witnessing] at Stock, etc.).

It is difficult to apply such a survey to fiction and to measure the use of novelistic perspectives based on the use of the first-person, especially in regards to examining the expansion of novelistic forms of autobiography and autofiction, but it is worth noting that in the recent entries for a literary prize ("Prix de la page 111," 178 novels), for example, 53% were at least partially written in the first person.⁴ The novel or the "literary" narrative, now overwhelmingly autobiographical, is resolutely "the ever-contested space of a desire to take on oneself,"⁵ even if it means bearing the double cost of the critique of the Cartesian subject – from psychoanalysis to the postmodern critique of the intentional fallacy, by way of deconstruction – and the critique of the narrative devices that expose the subject: autobiographical transparency, linearity, closure as the medium for establishing a plot, realism, transparency of the message, etc. "The space of the I-ME" exposes itself to the deconstruction of what Robbe-Grillet called, in *Le Miroir qui revient* [The Mirror that Returns], "the humanist myth of depth,"⁶ – that is, the idea that language is "free" and able to grasp "the truth."⁷ In any case, to me it seems that three components of this shift explain the configuration of the literary space taking place in the same era: an expressiveness that was turning into self-exhibition; a consciousness sensitive to one's own fractures requiring repair; and a demand for uniqueness that stemmed from a "perfectionist" desire to refine one's identity by exploring one's differences. The first aspect of this movement – the exhibition of the subject who makes the private space of intimate life "literary" in narratives with autobiographical elements – can be viewed in light of the development of what Christopher Lasch has referred to, in a famous book, a "culture of narcissism." It is interesting to invoke this concept in order to understand the "discur-

3 See Jean Peneff, *La Méthode biographique: de l'École de Chicago à l'histoire orale* [The Biographical Method: From the Chicago School to Oral History], Paris, Armand Colin, 1990, pp. 9 et seq.

4 See Bertrand Guillot, "Non, la littérature française n'est pas nombriliste, ni parisienne . . . et nous avons des chiffres pour le prouver," [No, French literature is not navel-gazing, nor Parisian . . . And we have the numbers to prove it] "Second Flore" blog, 30 Sept. 2014.

5 Dominique Rabaté, *Vers une littérature de l'épuisement* [Towards a Literature of Exhaustion], Paris, José Corti, 1991, p. 191.

6 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1985, p. 10. English translation from *Ghosts in the Mirror*, trans. Jo Levy, London, John Calder, 1988, p. 15.

7 *Ghosts in the Mirror*, p. 20.

sive proliferation”⁸ (to borrow a phrase not from a narrative historian, but from another sociologist, Danilo Martuccelli) of literary and social forms of writing about the self. The craving for fame and its famous “fifteen minutes” is the first explanation for such an expansion: sociologist Nathalie Heinich has shown how the modern era has made the acquisition and development of a media profile a fundamental aspiration. A first explanation involves extending the paradigm of visibility, rooted as it is in visual culture, to literature, which can in its own way ensure the democratization of fame.⁹ This democratization has culminated with social networks; it is believed that there were about 1.4 billion people posting details of their lives on Facebook in 2015, generating 3.5 billion “likes” per day.¹⁰ But such a desire for fame is not enough to explain the ever-intensifying deluge of autobiographical forms identified by literary histories in the 1970s and 1980s – and more generally, the rise in the number of authors: for example, between 1995 and 2008, there was a fivefold increase in the number of first novels published per year –, and we must look for explanations from sociologists to address this radical change in our knowledge.

The Western individualism manifested by these “personal narratives” has been the subject of multiple definitions and competing genealogies.¹¹ Yet the great metanarratives of individualization, whether considered from the perspective of autonomous action and judgement or the affirmation of difference, all privilege culture as a site of expression, or even as the driving force for the long process, described so astutely by Louis Dumont,¹² of moving from a holistic to an individualistic society. The pictorial portrait has often been identified as one of the decisive markers¹³ of a differentialist individualism, but the importance given to interiority as the core of the individual makes literary writing just as fundamental a device for the individualization of sensibilities: there was a subjectiviza-

8 Danilo Martuccelli, *Grammaires de l'individu* [Grammars of the Individual], Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio Essai,” 2002, p. 357.

9 See Nathalie Heinich, *De la visibilité: excellence et singularité en régime médiatique* [On Visibility: Excellence and Uniqueness in the Media], Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

10 Carmen Fishwick, “I, Narcissist – Vanity, Social Media, and the Human Condition,” *The Guardian*, 17 March 2016.

11 See Nathalie Heinich, *De la visibilité*.

12 Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme: une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne* [Essays on Individualism: An Anthropological Perspective on Modern Ideology], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1983.

13 See, for example, Tzvetan Todorov, *Éloge de l'individu: essai sur la peinture flamande à la Renaissance* [In Praise of the Individual: An Essay on Flemish Painting in the Renaissance], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2004.

tion of the point of view in the Middle Ages¹⁴ and the emergence of an authorial signature, autonomization of judgment during the Renaissance, privatization of the reading of novels in the French classical period, access to a problematic interiority of the subject from the 1650s onwards, vindication of originality as a value,¹⁵ the discovery in the eighteenth century¹⁶ of a subjective realism suitable for describing private space, and then the intensified idiosyncrasy of writers throughout the nineteenth century. Literary histories agree with sociologies of the subject to make poetic developments in fictional narrative optical instruments of subjectivation. Thus, Norbert Elias sees with the emergence of the interior monologue “a new level of consciousness” since, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, writers’ attention “became concentrated not only on the narration of the events but on how the people experienced them.”¹⁷ “Literature” in the modern sense – that is, in the Romantic sense, as an original and subjective expression of the subject – is therefore coextensive with modern subjectivity, complementing its ambitions and challenges with individualized genres and forms of enunciation. First-person writing (memoirs, diaries, autobiographical and autofictional writings) constitute particularly significant vectors for this notion of subjectivation, but not exclusively so; the third-person novel has a dual capacity to distinguish a style and a form through the mark of an author and to project itself into the subjectivity of a character. The modern criteria for judging a literary work very distinctly confirm fiction’s power of subjectivation: the originality of a style inimitably depicts a personality, an authorial “temperament,” and the power of the novel resides in the intensity of “life” of characters who are meant to be inimitable.

A literature for the democratic age

The end of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a philosophy and practice that Charles Taylor proposed to call “expressivism”: the idea that we can know our deepest nature “through articulating what we find within us” and by

14 See Michel Zink, *La Subjectivité littéraire autour du siècle de saint Louis* [Literary Subjectivity around the Age of Saint Louis], Paris, PUF, 1985.

15 Roland Mortier, *L’Originalité: une nouvelle catégorie esthétique au siècle des Lumières* [Originality: A New Aesthetic Category in the Age of Enlightenment], Geneva, Librairie Droz, 1982.

16 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1957. Reprint: University of California Press, 2001.

17 Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York and London, Continuum, p. 101.

making it “manifest” in a “medium with certain specific properties.”¹⁸ In other words, expressivism responds to the idea that “each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live.”¹⁹ This assertion is exemplified in the Romantic turn, which it defines, making it possible to understand Victor Hugo’s assertion that “[s]o frequently ill-defined, Romanticism is, all things considered – and here is its real definition, if only its radical aspect is considered – nothing other than *liberalism* in literature.”²⁰ With liberalism emerges the idea that “each man contains within himself a world apart,”²¹ as Chateaubriand put it. Individuals each harbor an inner universe waiting to be expressed and a life project that they must find and that they are able to transmit. “For me, I have resolved not to hide and to be myself to the end, to listen, on the whole, to my heart in its outpourings as in its indignations, and to resign myself to following my own law,” promises Chatterton in Alfred de Vigny’s eponymous play.²² French Romantic literature draws on this principle and places the subject’s specific life in the idea of imagination. Expressive individualism, however, remains either an abstraction or an aristocratic virtue: “a literature of the court is succeeded by a literature of the people,” Hugo promises,²³ without such a project having been realized through a real universalization of speech. In some general measure, it is possible to relate all artistic forms, as John Dewey does in *Art as Experience*, to the personal expression that results from a destabilizing experience²⁴ that art “intensifies and amplifies.”²⁵ But the fact remains that the valorization of personal expressiveness, as opposed to the quest for general truth, is the result of Romantic modernity.

The way Tocqueville imagines the poetics of a literature of the democratic age (“an uneducated and almost savage force in thought will prevail, with a great variety of products, singular in their fecundity”)²⁶ is a prophecy that would not be

18 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard UP, 1989, p. 374.

19 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 375.

20 Victor Hugo, Preface to *Hernani* (1830), in *Œuvres complètes: Théâtre, I*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, Ollendorff, 1912, pp. 523–527, cit. p. 527.

21 François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (1849–1850), III/1, iii, 6, ed. Maurice Levaillant, preface by Julien Gracq, Paris, Flammarion, 1982, v. II, p. 114.

22 Alfred de Vigny, *Chatterton* (1835), act I, scene 5, in *Œuvres complètes de Alfred de Vigny*, volume VII, Paris, A. Lemerre, 1885, pp. 255–385, cit. p. 295.

23 V. Hugo, Preface to *Hernani* (1830), p. 525.

24 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chap 4: “The Act of Expression,” pp. 60–85.

25 Dewey, *Art*, p. 107.

26 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique* [Democracy in America], Paris, Pagnerre, 1848, volume III, p. 116.

fulfilled prior to the contemporary period, regardless of what Sainte-Beuve was to later posit:

We have to resign ourselves to the new ways, to the invasion of literary democracy as well as to the advent of all other democracies. It does not matter that this seems to be more blatant in literature. Writing and getting published will become less of a distinctive trait. With our electoral and industrial mores, everyone, at least once in his life, will have had his page, his speech, his prospectus, his toast, will be an author.²⁷

Granted by the democratic perspective, the free expression of the subject's autonomy resulting from the Romantic project of "complete and absolute emancipation of the Self"²⁸ (Brunetière) was to assume the most varied forms of personal writing – Philippe Lejeune has made a history and inventory of them – despite the double moral and aesthetic suspicion they would be subject to in the French tradition. The inventor of the modern notion of literature, Germaine de Staël, summed it up very well when she attacked "bad taste, as was seen to dominate for a few years during the Revolution": "People are generally of the conviction that the republican spirit requires a change in the character of literature. I believe that this idea is true, but in a different sense from that which it is given. The republican spirit demands greater severity in good taste, which is inseparable from good morals."²⁹

For a long time, the expressive injunction that was born with liberal individualism therefore only assumed the form of private writings or literary expressions that were subject to moral and aesthetic frameworks of a strict and aristocratic nature. Therefore, the literary appetite for generality and for serving a collective meaning guided the possibilities for individual expressiveness opened up by democracy.

From expressiveness to contemporary autobiography

Starting in the 1970s onwards, this expressivism subject to the constraints of romantic writing became a kind of universal necessity, assumed by autobiographical forms that were then placed "at the heart of literary life" as "the principle of fiction

27 Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "De la littérature industrielle," [On Industrial Literature] *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, Bruxelles, vol 7, Société Typographique Belge, 1839, p. 554.

28 Ferdinand Brunetière, *Manuel de l'histoire de la Littérature française* [Handbook of the History of French Literature], Paris, C. Delagrave, 1898, p. 421.

29 Germaine de Staël-Holstein, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* [Literature in its relation to social institutions, 2nd edn, 1800], in *Œuvres complètes de Mme la baronne de Staël*, volume IV, Paris, Treuttel et Würtz, 1820, p. 423, obvil.paris-sorbonne.fr/corpus/critique/stael_litterature/.

and documentary investigation, on the stage of the theatre, as well as in poetry,” Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier noted in their assessment of contemporary French literature.³⁰ This expansion of the expressive space of the private self was accompanied by the transition from a “literary” literature, restricted to the chosen few and viewed as a form of representing the world, to a literature that had been democratized and responded to a social summons to self-expression and to the manifestation and the densification of the subject. Writing and writing one’s life story overlapped: the collection “L’Un et l’Autre” [The One and the Other], published by Gallimard and created in 1989 by psychoanalyst J.-B. Pontalis, mixed biographical and autobiographical fiction and for twenty years hosted many of the most significant works of literature, followed in 2015 by a more strictly autobiographical collection, “Nos vies” [Our Lives], under the leadership of J.-M. Delacomptée. The latter explained the principle in an interview: “‘Our Lives’ appeared before me. ‘Our Lives’ came from the intensity of the need to write.”³¹ The collection declares: “Who has not experienced something overwhelming, an episode that was life-changing or at least left the mark of an intense period?”³² By being communicated in words, viewed as a form of recording in terms of ordinary writing, individual experience is provided with a foundation and visibility. To borrow from Erving Goffman, the rhetoric of “performing” and spectacularizing the subject’s activity³³ participates in the social mechanisms of the production of self, while turning it into literature involves far more spectacular corrective operations whereby the ordinary itself becomes an object of visibility, and minority behaviors become the object of a valorized performance.

“An unexamined life is not worth living”: Socrates’s memorable formula³⁴ encouraged many philosophical arts of living.³⁵ But here we are far from a simple examination of consciousness: expressivism constructs mythologies from the ordinary, giving importance to distinguishing traits that could be considered secondary. Its objective is social as well as interior, symbolic as well as moral. What could have remained “ordinary writings” meant to be preserved for private use, passed on in a family circle as memorial relics or, at most, left with a memorial institution such as the archives of the Association pour l’autobiographie et le pat-

30 D. Viart and B. Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, p. 27.

31 Collection “Nos vies.” Interview with Jean-Michel Delacomptée, director of the collection, Gallimard site.

32 Presentation of the collection by Jean-Michel Delacomptée on the Gallimard site.

33 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Anchor Books, 1959.

34 Platon, *Apologie de Socrate*, 38a, trans. Émile Chambry, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1965, p. 51.

35 See Thomas Bénatouïl, “Les usages de Socrate,” *Critique*, no. 627–628, August-Sept. 1999, pp. 639–648.

rimoine autobiographique [Association for Autobiography and Autobiographical Heritage] (APA) founded by Philippe Lejeune, or its English equivalent *The Great Diary Project*, were now appearing in public forms for exhibition: self-publishing and vanity publishing, publishing online, transpositions into the biographical threads of social networks, these are all ventures aiming for visibility and aspiring to the consecration, so rarely achieved, that publishing with a commercial publisher and public success would provide.

The ARBRH (“Association pour l’approche, la recherche biographique et la ré-appropriation de son histoire” [Association for the Approach, Biographical Research, and Reappropriation of One’s History]) and the very active ASIHVIF (“Association internationale des histoires de vie en formation” [National Association of Life Stories in the Making]), which were founded in the 1980s, aim to support the production of life stories in professional and educational contexts, but also in hospitals and for citizen projects, with a view to “promoting and preserving the ways in which each subject arises.”³⁶ There is an abundance of practical manuals and theoretical reflections to guide everyone in “(re)tracing their life story in writing so as to become its author, in the literal and literary sense of the word.”³⁷

It should be noted that, far from being limited to a self-help perspective, the biographical method was established by the Chicago School starting in the 1920s as a fundamental practice of sociological investigation, under the auspices of William Thomas, Robert Park, and Howard Becker, leading in particular to the publication around 1930 of autobiographies of infamous men, gangsters, thieves, and prostitutes.³⁸ Over the course of the twentieth century, the life history became an interdisciplinary paradigm³⁹ aiming to observe the relationship between the temporalities of individual and socio-historical logic, the “micro and macro,”⁴⁰ located at the crossroads of Van Gennep’s anthropology, works of sociology (Leonard D. Cain, Matilda

36 Site for ASIHVIF, “Qui sommes-nous?,” [Who Are We?] 2016.

37 Annemarie Trekker, “Écrire pour (re)tracer son histoire de vie,” [Writing to (Re)Trace One’s Life Story] in Vincent de Gaulejac and Michel Legrand (eds), *Intervenir par le récit de vie: entre histoire collective et histoire individuelle* [Intervening through Life Stories: Between Collective History and Individual History], Toulouse, Érès, 2008, p. 236.

38 See the thorough study by Jean Peneff, *La Méthode biographique*, pp. 35–69.

39 See the history established by Christine Lalive d’Épinay, Jean-François Bickel, Stefano Cavalli and Dario Spini, “Les parcours de vie: émergence d’un paradigme interdisciplinaire,” [Life Courses: The Emergence of an Interdisciplinary Paradigm] in Jean-François Guillaume (ed), *Parcours de vie: regards croisés sur la construction des biographies contemporaines* [Life Courses: Perspectives on the Construction of Contemporary Biographies], Liège, Éd. de l’ULG, 2005, pp. 187–210.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

Riley, then Martin Kohli and John Meyer in particular), and the “life course” current of behavioral psychology espoused by Glen Elder, while keeping a distance from psychoanalytical references to the “family novel.” In France, the sociological model expressed a natural reticence towards the individualistic and liberal values that these self-care practices would manifest: the defenders of popular autobiographical practices follow the paths opened up by Henri Desroche, director of studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes and the CNRS, the inventor of the “reasoned autobiography,” and Gaston Pineau, a supporter of popular education who wanted to put life stories in the service of the “culturally dominated” – in terms that Pierre Rosanvallon has now inherited.⁴¹ Wanting to avoid any suspicion of normativity, the practitioners of life histories support their work, but they emphasize that retrospective narratives must be oriented towards the future and its potentialization.⁴² Hostile to a notion of life history that would be limited to “narcissistic fascination,” this French and Belgian tradition wanted, on the contrary, to “produce a sociological reading of individual life courses”⁴³ by denouncing the “double pitfall of negligence and the cult of the subject.”⁴⁴

This fantasy of universalization, which Kundera, for example, commented ironically on (“everyone without exception bears a potential writer within him, so that the entire human species could rightly take to the streets and shout: ‘We are all writers!’ [. . .] One morning (and it will be soon), when everyone wakes up as a writer, the age of universal deafness and incomprehension will have arrived”⁴⁵) is more than just an extension of the possibilities of recovering and textually explicating the self that makes everyone a potential writer, but rather a response to a new demand for exposure. If we look closely, in the critiques of autobiography and autofiction, it is not the genres themselves, which any reader must acknowledge have already existed for a long time, but the democratization of their practice that is vilified: “the genre [of autobiography] attracts anybody. Nowadays whoever it is that comes along feels perfectly in their rights to tell of their little life, their little ideas, and their exciting relationships in a joyful jumble.

41 See Alex Lainé, *Faire de sa vie une histoire: théorie et pratiques de l'histoire de vie en formation*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, “Sociologie clinique” coll., 1998, pp. 97–104.

42 See for example Lucie Mercier, “Re-traiter sa vie,” [Re-processing your Life] in J.-F. Guillaume (ed), *Parcours de vie*, p. 234.

43 A. Lainé, *Faire de sa vie une histoire* [Make your Life a Story], p. 256. Also see Christine Delory-Momberger (ed), *La Condition biographique: essais sur le récit de soi dans la modernité avancée* [The Biographical Condition: Essays on Self-Narrative in Advanced Modernity], Paris, Téraèdre, 2009.

44 A. Lainé, *Faire de sa vie*, p. 74.

45 Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Aaron Asher, New York, Harper Collins, 1999, p. 147.

At first glance, telling your story does not seem that complicated,”⁴⁶ writes Pierre Jourde, an astute observer of literary trends. Such an expansion of the autobiographical genre has given rise to innumerable criticisms, including from certain autobiographical writers,⁴⁷ because since the autobiographical project is not specific to literary expression, it makes it impossible to make an a priori distinction between literature and the paraliterature of life, or even autobiographical workshop writing. Such evolution points to the difficulties of proposing a definition of literature that avoids axiological presuppositions (good writing, richness of meaning, etc.), when intransitivity, which is the most common criterion for defining the literary, is rendered obsolete. By having recourse to literary writing, expressive narcissism gains an ability to recover personal identity in a rewarding and memorable way, to create “self-admiration” in problematic situations such as those linked to trauma, which I will come back to, but also those that are marginal or invisible. And it could be argued that the “added value” of being published in a literary collection, for example, or of being included in a “literary” tradition, has less to do with the symbolic significance still attached to being included in the field of restricted literature than with the increased visibility and longevity attributed to literariness. In fact, both manuals on personal development through writing and those devoted to writing exercises make an essential place for artistry: the *Exercices pratiques d'autolouanges pour retrouver l'esprit d'enfance, découvrir le plaisir d'écrire, témoigner d'une beauté intérieure*, a highly successful manual by Marie Milis, asserts that “practicing self-praise stimulates self-esteem and reconnects everyone with their talent and you discover your inner Rimbaud.”⁴⁸ Dany Orlor’s comprehensive manual, *Autoanalyse et atelier d'écriture* [Self Analysis and Writing Workshop], invokes the examples of Gustave Flaubert, Hermann Hesse, and Marguerite Yourcenar and stresses that “the artistic dimension creates a readiness to progress analytically through a better acceptance of the differences it reveals”⁴⁹ and then goes on to affirm, “We must begin by not denying the artistic dimension of any imaginative activity, regardless of the debates among professionals about what art is and what it is not. Too often

46 Pierre Jourde, *La culture bouge encore* [Culture is still on the move], Paris, Hugo Doc, 2016, pp. 275–276.

47 See Philippe Vilain, *La Littérature sans idéal* [Literature without Ideals], Paris, Grasset, 2016.

48 Marie Milis, *Exercices pratiques d'autolouanges pour retrouver l'esprit d'enfance, découvrir le plaisir d'écrire, témoigner d'une beauté intérieure* [Practical Exercises in Self-Love to Rediscover the Spirit of Childhood, Discover the Pleasure of Writing, and Witness Inner Beauty], Paris, Payot, 2013, p. 18.

49 Dany Orlor, *Autoanalyse et atelier d'écriture*, Paris, Robert Jauze, 2009, p. 189.

we tend to equate it with a talent that we deny ourselves.”⁵⁰ Among psychologists who are theoreticians of the practice, the anticipated aesthetic gain is expressed in a very similar way: it is attentiveness to writing viewed as the stamp of a personality, since according to French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, “the style is what makes it possible for the author’s character and the image of the author’s body to leave their traces in the text.”⁵¹

In fact, in these narratives that aim for expression, the distance introduced by the presence of a narrator, an intermediary stratum that typically appears between authors and their *I*, along with the modulation in the presentation of events belonging to the fiction and the singularization permitted by the style are effaced in favor of texts that may be flat and antiliterary, that decree access to the self by way of self-expression without further due process, that declare and demarcate ownness in an affirmation of one’s own sovereignty without seeking to back it up with a system of shared values. “I am myself the subject of my book,” Montaigne affirmed in a phrase that is now famous. But, in the contemporary field, this form of speculative identification, which in Montaigne’s *Essais* engages an anthropological generalization and not an apology for difference, is transformed into a sometimes hysterical claim of singularity. The book immediately materializes a difference that bears value, even if it means backing autobiographical writing with photographs.⁵² Thus, in contemporary autobiographical writing, whether it is included in literary collections or published more modestly at the author’s expense, the pact of truth and moral transparency gives way to a monstration where the stakes are of differentiation, of individuals becoming their own spheres of reference by taking it upon themselves to disassociate from any moral or aesthetic issues. Its narrative ontogeny creates a kind of silo of identity where *ad hoc* forms of representation are squeezed in: the presumption is then that each form of life will have its own aesthetic values and therefore its own style of narrative. Without suspending the value judgement that we can then make, it seems essential, in order to analyze the aims of these forms of autobiographical expression, to forego a narrow literary qualification that would use formal criteria to judge literary quality. Aesthetic status depends on the work of

50 Orler, *Autoanalyse*, p. 192 (note).

51 A. Trekker, “Écrire pour (re)tracer son histoire de vie,” p. 249.

52 See Danièle Méaux and Jean-Bernard Vray (eds), *Traces photographiques, traces autobiographiques* [Photographic Traces, Autobiographical Traces], Saint-Étienne, Publications de l’université de Saint-Étienne, CIEREC, Travaux 114, 2004; Jean-Pierre Montier (ed), *Transactions photolittéraires* [Photoliterary Transactions], Rennes, PU Rennes, 2015. For a very good example of a narcissistic autobiography with a photographic foundation, see *Les gens heureux n’ont pas d’histoire* [Happy People Do Not Have a Story] by Éloïse Lièvre, Paris, JC Lattès, 2016.

consciousness and mastery of experience, as much as on the writer's investment in a literary tradition – if “there is no expression, unless there is urge from within outwards,” if “this welling up” is “clarified and ordered by taking into itself the values of prior experiences,”⁵³ the “emotion as thus ‘objectified’ is aesthetic,”⁵⁴ Dewey notes, opening the way for an analysis that encompasses all remotely reflexive forms of self-expression. Similarly, it is not necessary to make a distinction among autobiography, autofiction, and the biographical novel, which is often merely a matter of fashion or a particular publishing series, in order to grasp the underlying intention of these texts: the way in which they will help subjects to distinguish themselves, to assert themselves, to find themselves, as evidenced by the transversal slogan placed under the patronage of Thoreau and Nelson Mandela by Marie Milis's personal development manual, and which defines both literary autobiography and its personal version: “to write and proclaim a text written in the ‘I’ mode with amplification and without lies.”⁵⁵

The demand for extroversion (“to promote the ways in which each subject comes into being,” as ASIHVIF puts it) and for mastery of appearances is such a powerful ethic that it only comes up against another form of mastery of personal representation, that of the right to privacy, in the lawsuits, now so common, pitting autobiographers against the individuals they depict: the 2003 complaint against Camille Laurens filed by her ex-husband; the 2013 convictions of Christine Angot for *Les Petits*, of Marcela Iacub, of Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, the Éric Reinhardt case, etc. As clumsy as it may seem, the reasoning for the court's ruling against Christine Angot's narrative states that while the novel “claims to express a universal truth about the human condition,” “the fact that the narrative is based on reality prevents it from expressing a universal truth,”⁵⁶ and sufficiently demonstrates the deliteralization of the contemporary autobiographical narrative, or at least to the refusal to attribute to it the status of fictional representation. Without delving into the legal debate on the rights of individuals who are depicted or the debate among literary theorists that contrast autobiography and its more or less fictionalized forms (autofiction, to use Serge Doubrovsky's famous term),⁵⁷ it is clear that self-representation is upheld as a value and as an overarching right. Whether or not it passes through the mediation of a novelistic and fictionalizing transposition of the *I*, contemporary autobiography projects and displays in the public sphere a self as-

53 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 64.

54 Dewey, *Art*, p. 81.

55 M. Milis, *Exercices pratiques d'autolouanges*, p. 30.

56 David Caviglioli, “Les romanciers peuvent-ils encore s'inspirer de personnes réelles?,” *BibliObs*, 28 June 2013.

57 Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils*, Paris, Galilée, 1977, blurb.

signable to the author whose right to express a personal truth knows no limits. Perhaps the most peculiar example of this is the trial between philosopher Paul Ricœur and Christophe Donner for the latter's narrative *L'Esprit de vengeance*, which described the Ricœur household and the suicide of Ricœur's son. Donner was convicted and had to remove from the novel any reference to the family name (a "redaction," denounced Donner).⁵⁸ It pitted the philosopher, who upheld a personal identity constructed through self-narrative and whose work was used specifically to understand the contemporary recourse to personal narrative, and a radical practitioner of this narrative of truth with a personal worth not intended to be submitted the universal rules of the public sphere – no more so, incidentally, than to the agreed aesthetic rules – but to have its own rightful legitimacy.

⁵⁸ Christophe Donner, *L'Esprit de vengeance*, Paris, Grasset, 1992; see the blurb for the reprint of the novel.

Chapter 2

The quest for singularity

I have thought, listening to an old man tell me his life story, “This man is a museum of himself.” Édouard Levé, *Autoportrait*¹

Literature and the idealization of difference

In the average banality of its inscriptions in the real, subjects create meaning and declare themselves of interest, and authors of autobiographical narratives have asserted this matter of self-investigation at the threshold of the ordinary. Anticipating the creative forms of autofiction, the flat, non-fictional autobiography strikingly asserts the interest of the singular subject: what Barthes called a “protestation of singularity” leads him to “try making the ‘ego’s ancient sovereignty’ (Nietzsche) into a heuristic principle”² and to publish the subject without having to justify its importance.

I like, I don't like: this is of no importance to anyone; this, apparently, has no meaning. And yet all this means: *my body is not the same as yours*. Hence, in this anarchic foam of tastes and distastes, a kind of listless blur, gradually appears the figure of a bodily enigma, requiring complicity or irritation.³

The Barthesian formula was to be immensely fruitful: born in the vicinity of Percequian inventories, it allowed for thinking of the self by list, with the temptation of reducing identity to series of “biographèmes” viewed as so many distinctive criteria, as if singularity could be articulated by the intersection of distinctive coordinates in a geography of possibilities, and have the world’s memory record the unique place where an individual once stood. From Édouard Levé’s *Autoportrait* to Patrick Modiano’s *Un pedigree* (“I’m writing these pages the way one compiles

1 Édouard Levé, *Autoportrait*, Paris, P.O.L., 2013, p. 9. English translation from *Autoportrait*, trans. Lorin Stein, Champaign, Dublin, and London, Dalkey Archive Press, 2012, p. 7.

2 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (1980), in *Œuvres complètes*, new edition reviewed, corrected, and presented by Éric Marty, vol 5 (1977–1980), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2002, p. 785–892, cit. p. 795. English translation from *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 8.

3 R. Barthes, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, p. 692. English translation is from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1994, page 117.

a report or a résumé, as documentation”),⁴ by way of the texts of Annie Ernaux (who promotes “an objective autobiography” with its main rule being “the most extreme realism, as little difference as possible between life and literature”⁵). This anti-novelistic and documentary aesthetic, this materialist autobiography of the surface, constitutes a way of thinking about oneself on the surface, of affirming the importance of what is unimportant, and first and foremost the way in which the subject inscribes itself in the real without having a pre-defined place there. This form of self-care consists, to borrow terms from Giorgio Agamben, of appropriating “the historical transformations of human nature that capitalism wants to limit to the spectacle”⁶ in order to produce an ethos in which “a being is [. . .] engendered from its own manner” in reclaiming for an ethics of the subject, by way of a singular reversal, the media age’s devices of observation and staging. The autobiographical subjects expose themselves by accepting the paradox that results from the affirmation of their own importance in the banality of their configurations, in “whatever singularity,” to use another phrase from the Italian philosopher. They lay claim to their identities in a way that is not exemplary, but rather realistic, and sketch their contours based on their specific forms of inscription in the world, engaging autobiography in a hyperrealist enunciation in which the everyday has a deliberately central place. Taking the two most radical defenders of “realistic” autobiography, Annie Ernaux and Christophe Donner, we discover a similar way of constructing the self in the mundane: Ernaux makes her self-portrait from a practice of “ethnological study of myself”⁷ by asserting that “our experience of the world cannot be subject to classification,”⁸ so that if the “self is made up of its own images, the signs of an era belong to everyone.”⁹ Donner places less emphasis on external sociological determinations than on the relationship to the ordinary and to the common truth of facts: the “real is what art

4 Patrick Modiano, *Un pedigree*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 44. English translation from *Pedigree*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, New Haven and London, Yale UP, 2015, p. 41.

5 Annie Ernaux, *L'Atelier noir*, Aurillac, Éd. des Busclats, 2011, p. 63.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (1993), trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 6th edn, p. 49.

7 Annie Ernaux, *La Honte*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 40. English translation from *Shame*, trans. Tanya Leslie, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1998, Kindle.

8 A. Ernaux, *Journal du dehors*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 9. English translation from *Exteriors*, trans. Tanya Leslie, New York, Seven Stories Press, 1996, p. 7.

9 A. Ernaux, *L'Atelier noir* [The Black Workshop], p. 103. For this point, see Florence Bouchy, “Expérience et mémoire du quotidien” [Everyday Experience and Memory] in Francine Best, Bruno Blanckeman and Francine Dugast-Portes (eds), *Annie Ernaux: le Temps et la Mémoire* [Annie Ernaux: Time and Memory], Paris, Stock, 2014, p. 87–103.

must know”¹⁰ and literature functions, according to him, as a “reconciliation with the real.”¹¹ If we manage to “find a way for the representation of the self to escape the poison of the imagination,”¹² writing allows us to confirm our existence within the real.¹³ This discourse is also identifiable in someone such as Philippe Forest, for whom “the writings of the I [. . .] present themselves as so many poetic attempts that are made in order to finally touch the real and to thus reach the impersonal truth.”¹⁴ Here, *reconciliation* with the real and *confirmation* of the subject are the benefits promised by literature when it provides the subject’s visibility with its manner of *attention* that is sensitive to the world, capable of easing the tension between the democratization and trivialization of lived experiences and the subject’s desire for singularization. This leads to autobiographical subjects who accept and analyze their own determinations without sacrificing a differential specificity: literature is employed to hold together a realistic and egalitarian hermeneutic that drives out overdeterminations and a naive idealism of difference.

Wild intimacy

Whether the realistic autobiographical subject is one of a modernity attentive to the invisible historical and sociological logic that works on individual feeling (as with Ernaux, who declares that she must depict social alienation and her private resistance)¹⁵ or of a postmodernity that exposes the flat ontology of de-hierarchized existences through the use of a literary “new realism,” writing comes to glorify the order of the infra-ordinary and the epiphenomenal. It simultaneously offers a memorable trace and a gratifying mirror. “What we want is your unique style. And what you have to say, which is also unique. You. Who you are. You. You who are unique,” writes the narrator of *Sujet Angot*,¹⁶ in an extreme reformulation, written in the second person, of this obsession with the identifying signature. Anchored in the ordinary, in what linguists call nynegocentrism, the triumph of the “me/here/now,” this autobiographical real often takes on the appearance of a disclosure tantamount to the normalization and justification of atypical personal choices or un-

10 Christophe Donner, *Contre l’imagination* [Against Imagination], Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 13.

11 Donner, *Contre*, p. 26.

12 Donner, *Contre*, p. 33.

13 Donner, *Contre*, p. 109.

14 Philippe Forest, “Je & Moi: avant-propos,” *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 598, Oct. 2011, pp. 7–20, cit. p. 19.

15 See A. Ernaux, *L’Atelier noir*, p. 22.

16 Christine Angot, *Sujet Angot* (1998), Paris, Pocket, 1999, p. 11.

common experiences through writing, particularly when it is about sexual intimacy, at the risk of equating autobiographical need with sexual exhibitionism. While Philippe Vilain considers shamelessness to be an “aesthetic component of autobiography,”¹⁷ Pierre Jourde makes the severe remark that contemporary autobiography is the convergence of “intimacy and sexuality as merchandise.”¹⁸ The narrative experiment conducted in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) is one of the finest examples of this kind of autobiographical writing, which legitimizes its author by exposing her. The narrative, which aims to recount her countless collective lovemaking in a “sexual biography,”¹⁹ is a quest for self through representation, spectacularization, and the staging of her own “performances.” In the tradition of Foucault, who emphasized the progressive cultural autonomization of sexual life and the individualization of the discourses that accompany it, Catherine Millet adopts a deliberately phenomenological and self-focused narrative with the intention of making a “personal assessment” in terms that would satisfy sociologists of “life histories.” This demonstrates the peremptory nature of a discursive knowledge of the self as a means of achieving autonomy: it is a matter of “telling the truth of it all” and exposing the “unique version of my singularity,”²⁰ of giving unto oneself as a representation and “sutur[ing] the cut between the interior and the exterior,”²¹ of giving life a discursive medium – even if it means making autobiography a test of transparency and bringing it closer, as Millet does, to the “faculty of giving oneself” of saintliness. Biography renarcissizes the self – just as Millet’s self is narcissizing for others with its hypervalorization of man as phallus, at the risk of its involution. Being presents itself as an entirely Deleuzian desiring machine, without any hidden recesses, depth, or history; it is the very narrative: “as with Pollock painting being in his canvas, I was, me writing, in the book.”²² Identity is desire and the world announces itself in an eternal present, in space and variation and therefore without the temporality and sociality that accompany all ethical thought. The subject is extimate, it is a skin even before it is even a body, in a narrative that glorifies the surface: “there are no proceedings – in any sense of the word,” for, as the narrator

17 Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, Paris, Grasset, 2005, p. 35.

18 Pierre Jourde, *La Littérature sans estomac*, Paris, L’Esprit des péninsules, 2002, p. 20.

19 Catherine Millet, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.: récit* (2001), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll. “Points,” 2002, p. vi.

20 C. Millet, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, p. vi. For an alternate English translation, see *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, trans. Adriana Hunter, New York, Grove Press, 2002, EPUB: “establishing a truth, the truth of a very particular individual.”

21 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. 162.

22 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. vii. Alternate translation, *The Sexual Life*, “just as Pollock in the act of painting was present in his canvases, I portrayed myself writing within the book.”

writes, “time condenses on one ‘all over’ surface.”²³ This is indeed the quest for an ever-enhanced visibility, with scopic obsession being central and accepted: “my eye guides me more than any other organ”²⁴ and the body lends itself to the gaze in stagings in the manner of Cindy Sherman – there is also a photobiography to complement the narrative, *Catherine Millet’s Legends*. Having “grown up in the 1950s, when the television set took its place in families,” when “the ‘spectacle’ began to diffract our lives,”²⁵ she makes a very precise attempt at the appropriation of the capitalist spectacle described by Agamben. For her, this consists of mastering and internalizing the apparatuses of self-exposure: literary self-analysis is combined with a device involving the narrator’s contemplation of “film [that] shows the whole of [her] body, behaving as it never would dressed, as [she carries] out [her] normal day-to-day tasks,” while making love.²⁶ Reappropriating the self-image, “suturing” the narcissistic structure, filmed, viewing and narrating herself, Millet achieves “the coincidence of [her] real body and these multiple, volatile images.”²⁷ Having become central, the subject has no outside and aspires, at best, to draw the world inside for its pleasure: “I was completely available: at all times and in all places, without hesitation or regret, by every one of my bodily orifices and with a totally clear conscience.”²⁸ Enlarged and divinized, the ego incorporates all alterity through its libido and becomes universal through its very particularity: the most “indelible” of the verses that Millet recalls is a line by Bossuet: “I was sent only to make up the numbers.” Such is the Promethean form of access to eternity that modern subjects plot in their narratives, inverting the humanist principle of curiosity towards the outside and generalizing Hugo’s founding resolution: “Ah, what a fool you are to think I am not you!”

In the age of generalized mediatization of spaces, it is thus a “wild intimacy” that reigns with a “scent to extremes” in the confluence of “transparency and obscenity,”²⁹ in “hostimacy” (Madelénat), or even extimacy.³⁰ In this sense, contemporary autobiography universalizes the confessional program at the heart of its

23 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. vii. Alternate translation, *The Sexual Life*, “There is no trial, no case to be made,” [for, as the narrator writes] “time is condensed in one ‘all over’ surface.”

24 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. 170. Alternate translation, *The Sexual Life*, “my eyes guide me far more than any other organ.”

25 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. iii.

26 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. 233. Modified English translation from *The Sexual Life*, EPUB.

27 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. 234.

28 Millet, *La Vie sexuelle*, p. 46. English translation from *The Sexual Life*, EPUB.

29 Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales*, Paris, Grasset et Fasquelle, 1983, p. 29. English translation from *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philippe Beitchman and W.G. J. Niesluchowski, introduction by Dominic Pettman, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2008, p. 26, p. 45.

30 Daniel Madelénat, *La Biographie* [Biography], Paris, PUF, 1984, p. 229.

older versions by neutralizing its moral dimension in favor of valorizing singularity as foundational singularity. But where the confession of Augustinian autobiography tends to regularize the relationship between the self and the community, the contemporary autobiographical narrative aims at singularization and an increase in the gap; it is deliberately disruptive and seeks through ostentation not to cure marginality, but to expose it: there is no longer any shame except that of invisibility. These expressive autobiographies, which focus on the *lived experience* for revealing and reinsuring identity, are not the only literary model, nor even the only contemporary form of writing about the self. Nevertheless, they configure the poetics for it, including in seemingly more classical forms: “A reconstruction of an historical figure and of the world of his time written in the first person [. . .] can therefore dispense with formal statement of evidence of the historical facts concerned. Its human significance, however, is greatly enriched by close adherence to those facts,” Marguerite Yourcenar explained regarding *Mémoires d’Hadrien* [Memoirs of Hadrian].³¹ These autobiographies polarize the debates by serving as a foil for those who denounce contemporary “narcissism” and in reacting with the creation of an anti-individualist literature, paradoxically sensitive to contemporary flows and forms of dispersal: Michel Houellebecq’s novels, for example, turn all contemporary mythographies on their head, have recourse to photos, to identity papers, and the various traces and markers of singularity:

Nor did I have any photos of myself: I had no reminder of what I might have been like when I was fifteen, or twenty, or thirty. I didn’t really have any personal papers: my identity could be contained in a couple of files that would easily fit into a standard-sized cardboard folder. It is wrong to pretend that human beings are unique, that they carry within them an irreplaceable individuality; as far as I was concerned, at any rate, I could not distinguish any trace of such an individuality. As often as not it is futile to wear yourself out trying to distinguish individual destinies and personalities. When all’s said and done, the idea of the uniqueness of the individual is a pompous absurdity.³²

This inquiry is therefore central for the contemporary subject, whether contested by Houellebecq in the name of a pre-democratic ideal the author leaves unacknowledged (but that is hypocritically exhibited in the way the author makes the

31 Marguerite Yourcenar, “Note,” in *Mémoires d’Hadrien* [1951], Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 349. English translation from *Memoirs of Hadrian*, trans. Grace Frick, in collaboration with the author, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1963, EPUB.

32 Michel Houellebecq, *Plateforme: roman*, Paris, Flammarion, 2001, p. 189. English translation from *Platform: A Novel*, trans. Frank Wynne, New York, Knopf, 2003, p. 130. See the article by Philippe Ducat, “Houellebecq ou la casse du sujet,” [Houellebecq or the Breakage of the Subject] in *L’Intime/L’Extême* [The Intimate/The Extimate], eds. Aline Mura-Brunel and Franc Schuerewegen, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2002, pp. 55–63.

hypostases of a hyper-mediatized ego visible in his characters), interrogated by Ernaux as she strives to find what remains singular once all the “alienations” (sociological, psychological, historical) of the subject have been removed, transcended by Pierre Michon in his dream of making “an autobiography of the human race”³³ by finding himself, or brandished as a basic given that overrides common laws. The claim to be oneself is a fundamental impulse of individuals who inhabit the contemporary world, and they find visibility and expressiveness in the concrete and uninhibited re-narration of their experience. It is thus possible to measure the extent to which the consecration of autobiography and personal writing is a radical break from the abstract universalism of the era that preceded it, when Gilles Deleuze advocated for an impersonal grasp of the world – “only when the world, teeming with anonymous and nomadic, impersonal and individual singularities, opens up, do we tread at last on the field of the transcendental”³⁴ – and, along with it, the extent to which it overturns the French anti-personalist tradition, averse to the ambitions of private spaces, whereby “literature only begins when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say ‘I.’”³⁵ In contrast, the structure of the modern subject, which is to constantly re-narcissize, can no longer rely on ordinary and exogenous valorization but must invent or at least attempt to impose and expose an original and centripetal personal identity – at the cost of the autonomy of literature, which is transformed into a device for assisting subjects in their quest for social visibility.

Be yourself, the weight of a societal summons

Breaking with the old adage that considers “the individual as ineffable,” taking issue with the positions adopted in the 1970s opposing the subject and biographical order (consider Bourdieu’s denunciation of the “biographical illusion”), and opposing a certain analytical philosophy that tends to empty the subject of any substra-

33 See Florence Playe, “Les proses de Pierre Michon: “autobiographie du genre humain”? Ambiguïté générique et statut du narrateur,” [Pierre Michon’s Proses: “Autobiography of the Human Race”? Generic Ambiguity and Narrator Status] in Bruno Blanckeman, Aline Mura-Brunel and Marc Dambre (eds), *Le Roman français au tournant du XXI^e siècle* [The French Novel at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century], Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2004, pp. 223–230.

34 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1969, p. 125. English translation from *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, New York, Columbia UP, 1990, p. 103.

35 G. Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1993, p. 13. English translation from *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 3.

tum, contemporary cultures are thus asserting the “power to be oneself”³⁶ through the textual ostentation of the subject, with the stakes being just as social as they are individual. There have been numerous observations, frequently marked by a critical bias, about this intensification of expressive individualism in the context of the first globalization and the collapse of all-encompassing ideologies. In terms of literary analysis, the study of autobiographical writing, despite its progressive institutionalization, continues to be marked by French humanist-inspired moralism that often reminds us how “the self is hateful.” In terms of sociology, the analysis of contemporary expressivism must be removed from the double fire of anti-liberalism on the left and conservatism on the right. Finally, in terms of psychology, Freudian or not, this contemporary narcissism is presented as a danger or even an epidemic – in a recent essay, two American psychiatrists, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, drew on epidemiological studies to make of narcissistic disorders an epidemic worse than obesity among Americans under 30.³⁷ Following Richard Sennett’s 1974 assertion in *The Fall of Public Man* that “narcissism is the Protestant ethic of modern times,”³⁸ Christopher Lasch has made a case against “the illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency”³⁹ and the forms of expression that accompany it: “the popularity of the confessional mode testifies, of course, to the new narcissism,” writes the American sociologist before reviewing contemporary autobiographies that would no longer have “the detachment indispensable to art,” but whose authors “now rely on mere self-disclosure to keep the reader interested” – he takes the example of Erica Jong, who “[won] an audience by writing about sex with as little feeling as a man.”⁴⁰ Recourse to the autobiographical genre is seen as a form of extroversion, presentation of sexuality, affirmation of women, with realism shifting from the work of representation to the simple unmediated expression of the self: Lasch thus establishes a critical apparatus that is often used against contemporary autobiography.

Coco Chanel’s famous slogan was “To be irreplaceable, one must be different.”⁴¹ For Alain Ehrenberg, whose thinking is located at the crossroads of French sociology and Freudian psychoanalysis, this narcissistic extroversion can be ex-

36 Vincent Descombes, “Le pouvoir d’être soi. Paul Ricœur. *Soi-même comme un autre*,” [The Power of Being Yourself. Paul Ricœur. *Oneself as Another*] *Critique*, no. 529–530, June–July 1991, pp. 545–576.

37 Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

38 Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1992, p. 333.

39 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), New York and London, W.W. Norton and company, 2018, p. 286.

40 Lasch, *The Culture*, pp. 26–27.

41 According to Marcel Haedrich, *Coco Chanel*, Paris, Belfond, 1987, p. 176.

plained by the fact that “we have entered a society of self-responsibility: each person must imperatively find a project and act on his or her own in order to avoid being excluded from the bond, regardless of the weakness of the cultural, economic or social resources at his or her disposal.”⁴² Following the Second World War, there was a relaxation in state, social, and family symbolic constraints, while the economic expansion fostered a concrete material autonomy of the subject, allowing for the effective realization of the project initiated by liberal democracy of the subject’s autonomization and autogenesis. Thus “the generalization of a mode of existence of individuality long limited to elites or artists, to a kind of experience that can be detected at the beginning of the nineteenth century in literature and high society, through the dandy and the artist.”⁴³ For Twenge and Campbell, “[t]wo cultural ideas are at the root of the narcissistic epidemic: that self-admiration is very important, and that self-expression is necessary to establish one’s own existence.”⁴⁴

The fact that expressivism is a consequence of the subject’s modernization makes autobiographical expression a universal constraint, or at least a sort of obligatory passage for the subject, asymptotically opening up a horizon where all individuals are the producers of their own self-narratives and write themselves. Cynthia Fleury calls on each person to identify themselves publicly as a “first act” of courage⁴⁵; Pierre Rosanvallon, with the best intentions in the world, proposes that everyone “tell their life story” on the Internet, in a collection edited by prominent publisher Le Seuil, as part of a project of democratic renewal that is inseparable from self-expression – there, one finds the modest lives of the vulnerable, autobiographies of fishermen, slaughterhouse workers, and transplant patients. This book series does not distinguish between texts by established authors (Maylis de Kerangal, Ernaux, etc.) and anonymous writers who are taking on a self-narrative for the first time.⁴⁶ It is thus possible to assess the crushing constraint that this new obligation to be visible and in the spotlight so as to “count” places on the individual:

42 Alain Ehrenberg, *L’Individu incertain* [The Uncertain Individual], Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1995, p. 14.

43 Ehrenberg, *L’Individu*, p. 18; thesis that is found, for example, in Christian Le Bart, “L’individualisation: un grand récit occidental,” [Individualization: A Great Western Narrative] in Emmanuel Lozerand (ed), *Drôles d’individus: de la singularité individuelle dans le Reste-du-Monde* [Weird Individuals: Individual Uniqueness in the Rest of the World], Paris, Klincksieck, 2014, pp. 81–92, specifically p. 85.

44 Cited by Steven Michels, *The Case against Democracy*, Santa Barbara (CA), Praeger, 2013, p. 141.

45 Cynthia Fleury, *Les Irremplaçables* [The Irreplaceable], Paris, Gallimard, 2015, pp. 12–13.

46 See the site for the “Raconter la vie” [Narrate One’s Life] series, raconterlavie.fr/collection/.

To live in society is first and foremost to see one's existence apprehended in its daily truth. Untold lives are in fact lives that are diminished, denied, implicitly disdained. It is an absence that redoubles the severity of living conditions. Being invisible – for that is what it is at issue – is primarily a cost for the individuals themselves. For a life left in the shadows is a life that does not exist, a life that does not count.⁴⁷

An egalitarian democracy would thus mean equal visibility of life histories as assumed by the participants themselves, who are made fundamentally responsible for their own discretion. Such a summons is rather overwhelming and recalls the critiques that Judith Butler borrows from Nietzsche against such an exhortation, deemed more social than truly personal: “We start to give an account only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable by a system of justice and punishment.”⁴⁸ “To be oneself: in the Western world today, this is undoubtedly the slogan for which there's the greatest consensus,” writes François Flahault.⁴⁹ Yet, for cultural critics, this slogan is an injunction made by what Butler calls, perhaps after Althusser, a “structure of address” in which “narcissism that is supported through socially enforced modes of individualism” can lead “to an ethical violence that knows no grace of self-acceptance or forgiveness.”⁵⁰ In other words, as Jean-Claude Kaufmann argues, “inventing oneself does not just happen; there is nothing random about the mechanisms of identity creation [. . .] they are inscribed in very precise, socially defined procedures.”⁵¹ This accounts for the severe judgments that accompany contemporary forms of self-expression, which Cornelius Castoriadis, inspired by Guy Debord,⁵² relates to a “culture of selfishness” corresponding to “a rise in insignificance.”⁵³ The forms of transparency and innocence that contemporary writings of the subject overwhelmingly

47 Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Parlement des invisibles* [The Parliament of the Invisible], Paris, Raconter la vie-Seuil, 2014.

48 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 2003, p. 10.

49 François Flahault, *Be yourself!* p. 6.

50 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 135–136.

51 Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'Invention de soi? Une théorie de l'identité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014, p. 291.

52 See Cornelius Castoriadis, *La Montée de l'insignifiance* [The Rise of Insignificance], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1996, and C. Castoriadis and Christopher Lasch, *La Culture de l'égoïsme*, trans. Myrto Gondicas, Paris, Climats, 2012.

53 “Le spectacle n'est que le langage commun de cette séparation. Ce qui relie les spectateurs n'est qu'un rapport irréversible au centre même qui maintient leur isolement.” Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* [1967], thesis 29, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 30. English translation: “The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation. What binds the spectators together is no more than the irreversible relation at the very center which maintains their isolation” from *Society of the Spectacle*, St. Petersburg (FLA), Red and Black Publishers, 2002, p. 13.

assert are condemned and equated with a desperate quest for meaning in a world deprived of verticality. Symbolic recognition is to be understood as “an *ontological* criterion for the existence of the contemporary subject,” but “individuals are now *alienated* in their relationship to the other, unable to leave their servile position, because without the presence and insistence of the gaze of the other, they could no longer exist (Lacan, 1948),” notes Joël Birman.⁵⁴ “Induced by contemporary individualistic societies, the incitement – and even the injunction – to repeated self-exhibition distinctly reveals self-alienation,”⁵⁵ Claudine Haroche adds. The psychoanalytical and moral critique of self-exhibition is supported by a political one emphasizing the congruence between a new state of liberalism that offloads the optimization of productivity onto individuals, requiring them to participate in a capitalism of innovation, and the social obligation to produce, behind the care for oneself, a self-organization of the psyche based on an ultimate value: singularity.

54 Joël Birman, “Je suis vu, donc je suis: la visibilité en question” [“I’m seen, therefore I am: it’s a question of visibility] in Nicole Aubert and Claudine Haroche (eds), *Les Tyrannies de la visibilité: être visible pour exister* [The Tyrannies of Visibility: Being Visible in Order to Exist], Toulouse, Érès, 2011, pp. 39–53, cit. pp. 41, 43.

55 Claudine Haroche, “L’invisibilité interdite,” [Forbidden Invisibility] in N. Aubert and C. Haroche (eds), *Les Tyrannies de la visibilité*, pp. 77–102, cit. p. 92. Regarding the French critique of personal development, see Nicolas Marquis, *Du bien-être au marché du malaise: la société du développement personnel* [From Well-being to the Market of Malaise: The Society of Personal Development], preface by Alain Ehrenberg, Paris, PUF, 2014, pp. 11 et seq.



Facing Life

Chapter 3

Reassuring the subject

I was born on July 30, 1945, at 11 allée Marguerite in Boulogne-Billancourt, to a Jewish man and a Flemish woman who had met in Paris under the Occupation. I write “Jewish” without really knowing what the word meant to my father, and because at the time it was what appeared on the identity papers. Periods of great turbulence often led to rash encounters, with the result that I’ve never felt like a legitimate son, much less an heir. Patrick Modiano, *Pedigree*.¹

The culture of personal development

Regardless of what one might think about discourses of emancipation being reverted to structures of alienation, the fact remains that autobiography is far more than just a means for recording. Instead, it is treated as a tool, a device, and a machine for producing reassurance and responding to the anxieties of the contemporary individual. It is not just a matter of asserting one’s form of life to the world but of making self-writing a means for the redevelopment of its very structure in its response to the need to construct a personal journey that resists the sociological overdeterminations of one’s fate while offering coherence and overall meaning. In his analysis of discourses on personal development, Nicolas Marquis identifies two different ways to interpret “finding meaning”: making life interesting and making life understandable. They are based on a two-fold desire to access both autonomy and interiority,² a dual objective that can be found in literatures of the *I* insofar as they not only help the self to invent and distinguish itself but also to understand itself. The power to be oneself and to create oneself is a way of telling one’s own story and giving an account of one’s origins, of making sense of one’s own narrative in order to exist as a subject in “a context in which constant self-improvement is suggested as the only reliable insurance against economic insecurity,” as Micki McGee writes in her analysis of self-help manuals.³ Whether one attributes the expressive summons to a new turn in liberalism or simply to the development of modern individualism, it does indeed relate to a paradigm of self-concern and self-help. The analysis made by sociologist Eva Illouz of “self-help” discourses, starting with Samuel Smiles’s voluntarist Victorian theory (*Self-Help*, 1859), clearly shows

1 P. Modiano, *Un pedigree*, p. 9. English translation from *Pedigree*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, p. 1.

2 N. Marquis, *Du bien-être au marché du malaise*, p. 197.

3 See Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 11–13.

the extent to which, in spite of all their variety, they denote a common “political technology of the self,” to borrow an expression from Michel Foucault’s late works. For Illouz, this technology is radically new in Western cultural history: it is linked to the emergence of political liberalism and the language of economic efficiency. Philosophers have critically analyzed the neoliberal episteme and its frequent occurrences of storytelling. For example, Pierre-Guillaume Paris writes, “These devices of activation and subjectivation have an individualizing function that retranslates structural socio-economic problems and dysfunctions into psychological terms.”⁴ Illouz, meanwhile, compares professional therapies inherited from Freudianism and personal development techniques, which share a common “emotional style,”⁵ and brings together modern psychology of the subject and a specifically American individualistic tradition of self-improvement.

The “tyranny of intimacy”⁶ in the psychologies of personal development places sexuality at the center of theories of well-being, which focus particularly on applying the new concept of emotional intelligence to master the most private of emotions, which are subject to observation and manipulation.⁷ A comparison between contemporary autobiographies and self-help discourses is particularly effective in understanding these forms of narratives that contribute to a common culture of expressivity and respond to the same demand for emotional control, elucidation of identity, and valorization of singularities. Certainly, as John Dewey notes, “[t]he re-making of the material of experience in the act of expression is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work.”⁸ Indeed, putting experience into perspective is an ordinary social activity whereby the subject reappropriates a primary emotional order. As a primary form of the culture of the subject and of self-care in the broadest sense, self-expression is a cultural practice we engage in constantly. Any process we use to engage it can be called aesthetic (in this instance: literary) without the involvement of any *a posteriori* value judgments. Drawing on the idea inherited from the elite artist culture that

4 Pierre-Guillaume Paris, “Ambivalence du récit de soi dans les institutions de soins” [Ambivalence of the Self-Narrative in Care Institutions] in Valéria Milewski and Fanny Rinck (eds), *Récits de soi face à la maladie grave* [Stories of Self in the Face of Serious Illness], Limoges, Lambert-Lucas, 2014, pp. 109–118, cit. p. 115.

5 Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, p. 14. Also see, regarding the culture of personal development in the Anglo-American world, see Stephen Briers, *Psychobabble: Exploding the Myths of the Self-Help Generation*, London, Pearson, 2012, and Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, Oxford, New York, Oxford UP, 2006.

6 Illouz, *Saving*, p. 105.

7 Illouz, *Saving*, p. 142.

8 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 84.

life should be experienced as a work of art and that the authority of the text is a mode of self-mastery, one of the salient features of contemporary self-help discourses is the use of writing to register the expression of an experience and outlive it: “the self-creating self must create a written narrative of his or her life and secure it in written language. While literacy itself brings with it the possibility of the insularity or inwardness that some have labeled ‘narcissism,’ it also provides the possibility of leaving a written legacy – a work that outlasts one’s own life,”⁹ notes Micki McGee in her analysis of self-help practices. In this regard, it is easy to compare the discourses of contemporary autobiographers who evoke the emancipatory, liberating, and conserving dimension of the subject’s expression, on the one hand, with the discourses of personal development and their aims – finding within oneself authenticity, power, and meaning in life, to use a list offered by Nicolas Marquis –,¹⁰ on the other. Furthermore, we can observe an extremely similar discourse among professional biographers-for-hire or on e-biography sites.¹¹ Accordingly, a biographer with a degree in *Histoire de vie en formation* [Life Story in the Making] (HIVIF) from the University of Nantes (to the best of my knowledge, this is the only training of its kind in France) explains his work as follows: “There is no such thing as a ‘big or ‘little’ life story; there is one’s life, their Life. Each one is a singular journey that deserves to be told, and in so doing you become the master of your own destiny, communicate your experience, share your memories, or pass on an intangible, human heritage.”¹² Vincent Message, in his analysis of Eric Reinhardt’s *Cendrillon* [Cinderella], notes that in its depiction of the writer, the latter is likened to an “auxiliary” in the “personal struggle for self-esteem”: “the psychotherapists, the personal development specialists” who “help us, if we can’t do it on our own, to reshape a narrative that will make it possible to make further progress.”¹³ A common culture of self-help and self-care has become a substantial ethical principle, capable of accounting both for the behavior of individuals (who are asked to take an interest in themselves before making commitments to others) and for the function of contemporary artistic objects or attitudes.

As philosopher Cynthia Fleury suggests, the contemporary individual’s fundamental democratic responsibility is to “form a singularity now free of tutelage” that

9 M. McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.* p. 155.

10 N. Marquis, *Du bien-être au marché du malaise*, pp. 156 et seq.

11 For example, the site “Biobble ‘e-portrait & postérité,” fr.biobble.com/.

12 Presentation by Thierry Brulavoine, on the GREC (Groupement des écrivains conseils) site, 4 April 2016, www.ecrivainsconseils.net/item/. Also see his site “Traces de vie,” tracesdevie.bzh.

13 Vincent Message, “Du récit de soi à l’âge du capitalisme narratif.” [On Self-Narrative in the Age of Narrative Capitalism]. Proceedings of the Study Day, “Face au storytelling: selon quels critères définir la “fiction littéraire” [Facing “Storytelling”: What Criteria Define “Literary Fiction”?], p. 7.

“refuses to be replaced.”¹⁴ For these discourses, literature is a good way to obtain a “certificate of existence,”¹⁵ since it serves as a form of assertion and legitimization. This need to furnish a description, however, is first and foremost a response to a demand for recognition: behind the display there is something missing, and it is as if literature in fact fills in the holes riddling the paths towards integration and social inclusion. As the contemporary practitioner and theorist of autobiography Philippe Vilain writes in his *Défense de Narcisse* [In Defense of Narcissus], “I don’t always write about him because he loves himself, but, quite on the contrary, so that he may be loved”: he exhibits “a desperate need, ultimately, to place ourselves before the reader’s eyes to ask in return for that which we no longer always find in ourselves.”¹⁶ The literarization of experience is thus more than just an operation of expressive description: it invests values in existential trajectories that seem at first glance to be of no historical importance, or introduces them into marginal and depreciated forms of life. The philosophical imperative of self-knowledge – as in the beginning of Stendhal’s *Life of Henry Brulard*: “I’ll be fifty years old, and it’s about time I got to know myself. What have I been, what am I? In truth, I would find it hard to say” – gives way, in the absence of certain access to an elusive interiority, to a self-exposure that is necessary to counter the feeling of non-existence, if not depression or madness. Telling and trying to make sense of life so that events are not “lived for no reason” as Ernaux¹⁷ puts it, shedding light and making visible so as to guarantee and secure being by representing it in an “exposing” literature, to borrow an expression from Gustave Flaubert.¹⁸ In Jacques Borel’s summary on autobiography, novelists write about themselves “because they know that they must die,” “because it seems to them that there is something to save.”¹⁹ Thus, they must “make their experience appear,” “get as firm a grasp as possible on it with their writing,”²⁰ because this memory “is what their being leaves behind, as the very as-

14 C. Fleury, *Les Irremplacables*, p. 67, 63.

15 To borrow an expression from Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* [The Autobiographical Pact] (1975), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1996, p. 212.

16 P. Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 26.

17 Annie Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 18. English translation from *A Girl’s Story*, trans. Alison L. Strayer, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2020, Kindle edition.

18 “La littérature prendra de plus en plus les allures de la science; elle sera surtout *exposante*” (“Literature will begin to look increasingly like science; above all, it will be *exposing*” Gustave Flaubert, letter from 6 April 1853 to Louise Colet; flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/conard/lettres/11.html. Author’s emphasis.

19 Jacques Borel, *Propos sur l’autobiographie* [Reflections on Autobiography], Seyssel, Champ Vallon, coll. “Recueil,” 1994, p. 14.

20 Borel, *Propos*, p. 16.

surance of it.”²¹ Another autobiographer, Charles Juliet, stated: “I write to make myself present to myself. I write to engender myself,”²² which provides an ontological foundation for putting oneself into a text. Quoting Kierkegaard and surely also recalling Proust at the end of *Time Regained*, Philippe Forest explains that “as Scheherazade saves her life by telling stories, so do I save or sustain mine by means of writing.”²³ Here, Forest offers a tragic version of the autobiographical requirement that is likewise found with Christine Angot, for whom “[d]eath is preferable to not being able to write,”²⁴ as well Serge Doubrovsky, who concludes *Laissé pour conte* [Left for Accounting] with: “TO WRITE MY SURVIVAL.”²⁵ It can also be a “weapon” for taking one’s destiny back into one’s own hands, in order to – in Delaume’s words – appropriate it.²⁶

Certainly, in keeping with the example given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, literary autobiography can intervene to remedy shame: “if we were to [. . .] consider personal writing from the perspective of repair, that is, the restoration of something lost by the intimate writer’s very fault, we could deepen the analysis of the fantasy of omnipotence, of the prevalence of anguish and guilt found at the heart of very many personal writings,”²⁷ Sébastien Hubier argues. He is joined by the sociologists who follow in the footsteps of Serge Tisseron and place emotion at the heart of social existence.²⁸ Ernaux’s story dedicated to a twelve-year-old’s “shame” about her identity provides sufficient demonstration of this, but beyond writings about event-related traumas, there is a more general void of identity. Ernaux herself evokes such void when she confesses to “this feeling of being ‘penetrated by others like a whore’, to repeat what I wrote about in *Journal du dehors*,” the “feeling that others exist, but not me.”²⁹ The writer has

21 Borel, *Propos*, p. 124.

22 Cited by Philippe Derivière, “Le charme de Charles Juliet,” *L’Express*, 30 April 2014.

23 Philippe Forest, “Vrai témoin de la vérité,” [True Witness to the Truth] *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 598, Oct. 2011, pp. 80–98, cit. p. 98.

24 Christine Angot, “Acte biographique,” [A Biographical Act] *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 598, Oct. 2011, pp. 31–40, cit. p. 33.

25 Serge Doubrovsky, *Laissé pour conte: roman*, Paris, Grasset, 1999, p. 429.

26 See Chloé Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre: roman* [In my House Underground: a Novel], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2009, p. 118.

27 Sébastien Hubier, *Littératures intimes: les expressions du moi, de l’autobiographie à l’autofiction* [Intimate Literatures: Expressions of the Self, from Autobiography to Autofiction], Paris, Armand Colin, 2003, p. 79.

28 See Stéphane Dawans, “Récits de vie. La honte comme biographème universel et singulier,” [Life stories. Shame as a universal and singular biographeme] in J.-F. Guillaume (ed), *Parcours de vie*, pp. 109–132.

29 Annie Ernaux, “Le vivre-ensemble commence à eux,” [Living Together Begins with Them] remarks collected by Alexandre Gefen, *Marianne*, 23 April 2016.

become so absorbed by her narrative task that she equates her life with it. But this is no longer the “textualism” of Montaigne, who announced a cultural legacy by identifying himself with his book, nor that of Rousseau, whose moral identity had to defend itself against society by creating an immense confession intended to demonstrate the truth of it. Contemporary autobiography makes narrative a site where identity holds its own with no foundation apart from its own gesture of declamation and inscription made to confront a feeling of inner emptiness. The contemporary metaphysical dread has shifted and is expressed in terms of visibility: “everyone is pained by the thought of disappearing, unheard and unseen, into an indifferent universe, and because of that everyone wants, while there is still time, to turn himself into a universe of words,” notes the subtle observer Milan Kundera.³⁰ It appears that literature resists the depression that results from being “tired of being oneself,” as Alain Ehrenberg³¹ puts it, as well as the feeling of being abandoned. Subjects must resist the ethnographic banality and impression of originality that autobiographical analysis mirrors back to them as well as the exteriority of memory, deposited in social spaces and shared specular devices, by having recourse to writing as a gesture of reassurance.

The autobiographical narrative thus responds to a desire for visibility, and yet also resolves the concrete problems that time poses for the “uncertain individual”: “the augmentation of private life should therefore not be understood as a narcissistic display – it is an epiphenomenon, it is what private life becomes when it is modeled on public life: a space where we communicate in order to negotiate and reach compromises instead of commanding and obeying,”³² Ehrenberg suggests. Elsewhere, he evokes the need to “have interpretative resources to simultaneously access self-understanding and obtain recognition by the other [which becomes] an essential fact of daily life.”³³ “It is necessary to lend oneself to others and give only to oneself”: the phrase from Montaigne has been reinterpreted, appearing not without irony in Godard’s *Vivre sa vie* [My Life to Live] (1962), and is now the lifeblood of these contemporary manuals. In sociology, Jean-Claude Kaufmann speaks of the work of self-construction as a “unifying bricolage” and “a stabilized exteriorization,” evoking the need to carry out “complex transactions in an attempt to elicit a new unity.”³⁴ “The aim of the interventional life story is to result in changes for

30 M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, p. 147.

31 See A. Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d’être soi*.

32 A. Ehrenberg, *L’Individu incertain*, p. 24.

33 Ehrenberg, *L’Individu*, p. 169.

34 Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Ego: pour une sociologie de l’individu*, Paris, Hachette littératures, coll. “Pluriel,” 2004, p. 268.

the benefit of the person who tells it,”³⁵ explains psychologist Michel Legrand, for whom the autobiographical life story makes it possible to “name” experiences or people and, above all, to construct a “framework that provides meaning,”³⁶ whether it be authentic or not, whether it be scripted in advance or not, because the self-narrative is at the heart of “psychotherapies of memory” capable of opposing the “effects of collective de-symbolization,” he writes, borrowing his terms from Marcel Gauchet.³⁷ As such, an author like Ernaux is invested in “bringing to light a dominant truth that [the self-narrative] seeks in order to ensure a continuity of being”³⁸ in a need for a summation that is never realized and that she pursues from book to book, in her quest for a strong and unifying narrative framework.

The narrativist principle

The work of literary thought ensures not only the visibility, but also the “reconnection” of “those who are absent, words, arguments, impressions, memories, [and] images” described by Pascal Quignard³⁹ as well as the construction of a life path that is based on the organizing power of narrative. It makes it possible to “introduce some order into the inexplicable confusion that assails me,”⁴⁰ as Doubrovsky writes. Establishing order at the narrative level thus mediates the organization and construction of a destiny. Counter to Rilke’s famous motto “You don’t have to understand life’s Nature,/ Then it becomes a grand affair,” our life choices are “in search of interpretations that rationalize them,” says Charles Larmore⁴¹ in the name of a contemporary moral philosophy exemplified by the Chicago School, which views literary representations as being central to the memory’s process of constructing both individual and collective identity. This is because only narrative can ensure the continuity of the self and the responsibility of the subject. This “narrativism,” which places writing of the self at the center of any life project, appeared in France from the 1980s onwards in the form of the notion of “narrative identity” proposed by Paul Ricœur, the direct echoes of which are found both in literary

35 Michel Legrand, *L’Approche biographique: théorie, Clinique* [The Biographical Approach: the Theory, the Clinical], Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1993, p. 250.

36 Legrand, *L’Approche*, p. 267.

37 Legrand, *L’Approche*, p. 282.

38 A. Ernaux, *Mémoire de fille*, p. 115. English translation from *A Girl’s Story*.

39 Pascal Quignard, *Boutès*, Paris, Galilée, 2008, p. 64.

40 Serge Doubrovsky, *Le Livre brisé* [The Broken Book], Paris, Grasset, 1989, p. 267.

41 Charles Larmore and Alain Renaut, *Débat sur l’éthique: idéalisme et réalisme* [Debating Ethics: Idealism and Realism], Paris, Grasset, 2004, p. 65.

writing and in therapeutic discourse – the latter is one of the authors whom Régine Detambel and Marc-Alain Ouaknin cite the most frequently. The formula, like all the notions that accompany it and that contemporary literary criticism has constantly incorporated and popularized, is mobilized in its scholarly and popularized forms by most contemporary theories, which re-evaluate the ethical or political stakes of literary productions – one only needs to read Nancy Huston’s essay *L’Espèce fabulatrice*, which affirms that “the self is a bit of chromosomal information hung with fictions,” so that “to become oneself is to activate the mechanism of narration.”⁴²

This theory of narrative identity considers an account, a telling, not as a self-regulating formal space or a moment in a rhetorical project, but a powerfully operational cognitive device, since “emplotment” is the means by which it is possible to subsume and master the world’s empirical and psychological discrepancies. The author of *Oneself as Another* thus finds his philosophy vindicated by contemporary aesthetics that are making a “return to narrative,” just as much by the writers who urge contemporary literature to abandon the formalist deadlock and return to the sphere of the biographical as by poststructuralist literary critics facing the current rise in number of writings of the self. With the “narrative turn,” memorial narratives and testimonial literature are, for Ricœur, examples of operational moral devices of “*lieutenance*” (standing-in).⁴³ The autobiographical genre can then be removed from Lejeune’s structural analysis, which remained an *ad hoc* device, and more generally from its marginal position in the field of literary studies. It becomes the matrix form – the simple form – of any narrative. The innumerable variations, especially fictional ones, of the contemporary biographical narrative then take on meaning as so many explorations of our phenomenological and existential relationship to time, restoring to the biographical genre, an epistemological space that is frequently discredited, its centrality in literature and history. Ricœurian literary thought, originating in the reading of Proust, seems tailored to understanding these very contemporary genres, which in their reformulations precisely parallel the philosopher’s original focus. Indeed, it is impossible to overlook the fact that Doubrovsky’s *Broken Book* appeared a few months after *Oneself as Another* in a surprising encounter between Ricœur’s theory of the “wounded *cogito*” and Doubrovsky’s⁴⁴ “twisted *cogito*,” which is the very model of a narrative confronted with the impos-

42 Nancy Huston, *L’Espèce fabulatrice* [The Fabulator Species], Arles, Actes Sud, 2008, p. 24.

43 Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, vol 3: *Le Temps raconté*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1985, pp. 228–229; *Time and Narrative*, vol 3, *Narrated Time*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, and the University of Chicago Press, 1984–1990.

44 S. Doubrovsky, *Le Livre brisé*, p. 189. The novelist constantly makes plays on the polysemy between *fil*s (son) and *fil*s (threads), terms that look alike but have differing pronunciations.

sibility of grasping the self through the internal dialectics of rational thought. In order to keep consciousness from closing in on itself, Doubrovsky's book "breaks" so as to open itself to alterity in a continuous and restless desire for an almost physical "attestation" and the production of an *in posse* continuity. Counter to the post-structuralist critiques of the "the humanist myth of depth,"⁴⁵ the autobiographical project is indeed this vertical thinking of human time and, as with Ricœur, the object is indeed to reweave the "threads" of "the enigma of pastness."⁴⁶

Ambiguity of genealogies

Literary thought that produces narrative identities thus aims to carry out "hermeneutic restoration work on a subject that has been rendered austere due to the focus on its human finitude, historicity, and debt," as Vincent Descombes argues.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the modest and subtle autobiographer Marcel Cohen, in an inner dialogue with his own anxiety to preserve "what it seemed so necessary to safeguard in books,"⁴⁸ replies that "the desire to find a form for the formless remains a strong message." In a literature of reweaving that aims to re-establish filiations as well as render experience with intensity, this work of reassurance intervenes in life as foreseen, but also in genealogies and origins. I am thinking, for example, of this form of commenting on family album photos – from *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* in 1975 to the very recent *Les gens heureux n'ont pas d'histoire* by Éloïse Lièvre, 2016 – and of looking for one's own reflection in the biographies of ancestors – from Pierre Michon's *Vies minuscules* in 1984 to Julie Wolkenstein's *Adèle et moi* in 2013 by way of Arno Bertina's *Ma solitude s'appelle Brando: hypothèse biographique* in 2008.⁴⁹ Such a view is contemporary with the mass emergence of archaeological writings of the subject: an exceptional observer of the history of sensibilities, Ernaux herself aims to produce an "archaeology of the imaginary"⁵⁰ and notes how, from the 1980s onwards:

45 A. Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient*, p. 10; *Ghosts in the Mirror*, p. 15.

46 See P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, vol 3, p. 228. English translation from *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, p. 121.

47 Vincent Descombes, *Le Complément de sujet: enquête sur le fait d'agir de soi-même* [The Subject Supplement/Complement: Investigating Self-Acting], Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 8.

48 Marcel Cohen, *Sur la scène intérieure: faits* [The Innermost Scene: Facts], Paris, Gallimard, 2013, p. 10.

49 Julie Wolkenstein, *Adele and Me*; Arno Bertina, *My Loneliness Is Called Brando: A Biographical Hypothesis*.

50 A. Ernaux, *L'Atelier noir*, p. 126.

Genealogy was all the rage [. . .] Identity, which until then had meant nothing but a card in one's wallet with a photo glued onto it, became an overriding concern. No one knew exactly what it entailed. Whatever the case, it was something you needed to have, rediscover, assume, assert, express – a supreme and precious commodity.⁵¹

Beyond repairing the internal coherence of a life as a result of reuniting the heterogeneity of an existence, the work of “genealogical autobiography”⁵² devices allows the narrator to think about kinship in the face of an “uninhabitable inheritance”⁵³ (Pierre Michon) by producing continuities where they are lacking through the very materiality of the book. Thus Mathieu Simonet restores familial continuity in the face of a schizophrenic father, with the last line expressing a summons for transmission: “When you're an adult you will write a very big book.”⁵⁴ However, these continuities are in fact broken for the benefit of a new identity produced by the narrative when the lines of descent are too overwhelming, as in the case of Carole Zalberg: “They didn't take me into their graves with them. Not my mother, nor my mother's mother, nor my mother's mother. When this new life comes out of me, I'm hoping not to be freed of its weight, as light as a feather, but of theirs.”⁵⁵ Whether it is a matter of addressing the problem of mothers (from Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* [The Lover] to Lydie Salvayre's *Pas pleurer* [No Crying]), of fathers (from Claude Simon's *L'Acacia* to Pierre Pachet's *Autobiographie de mon père* [My Father's Autobiography]), by way of Virginie Linhart's *Le jour où mon père s'est tu* [The Day My Father Fell Silent],⁵⁶ real or imaginary adoption (from Charles Juliet to Édouard Louis), identities at odds with their roots (from Andreï Makine to Nina Bouraoui), these endeavors aim to re-articulate the syntax of a life in a very broad version of what Laurent Demanze has called “narratives of filiation.”⁵⁷ They are, in all their various forms, narratives of restoration, where the anamnesis must not lead to rumination but rather vitalist redevelopment.

51 A. Ernaux, *Les Années* (2008), in *Écrire la vie*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Quarto,” 2011, p. 1024. English translation from *The Years*, trans. Alison L. Strayer, New York, Seven Stories Press, Kindle edition.

52 See Bruno Blanckeman, “Figures intimes/postures extimes,” [Intimate Figures/Extimate Postures] in *L'Intime/L'Extime*, pp. 45–51, cit. pp. 47–48.

53 Pierre Michon, *Vies minuscules*, p. 236.

54 Mathieu Simonet, *Barbe rose: roman* [Pink Beard: A Novel], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2016, p. 186.

55 Carole Zalberg, *La Mère horizontale: roman* [The Horizontal Mother: A Novel], Paris, Albin Michel, 2008, p. 11.

56 See Madeleine Borgomano, “L'ombre du père . . .,” [The Father's Shadow. . .] in Bruno Blanckeman *et al.*, *Le Roman français*, pp. 249–261.

57 See L. Demanze, *Encres orphelines* [Orphan Inks].

From being a mere tenant of my being, I became the owner by virtue of having explored its floors.

I'm no longer trembling.
I am finally me.⁵⁸

Claude Arnaud relates these lines at the end of an autobiographical novel dedicated to the instability of identity, employing a domestic metaphor that aptly describes the work of appropriation with a structured exploration of the self that is at stake in narrative identities. Some expressions of this are linear and conventional, while others are more amusing. In Marie Simon's novel, published in 2016, it is actually a baby in utero who comes to recover his mother's past life: "I'm coming to remove the lines from her hands, to right the wrongs and set the counters back to zero. I'm coming to teach her to swim, to be her own orchestra, and to make choices with one outstretched finger."⁵⁹ Origin and identity are posed not as a foundation but as a problem, and the aim of the narrative is not to anchor subjects in determinations, but rather to make them aware of the overdeterminations getting in their way so as to better overcome them, as is likewise the case with certain personal growth manuals.⁶⁰ There are numerous rigged autobiographical devices as in *Rapport sur moi* by Grégoire Bouillier (2002), a brilliant reinterpretation of the family novel that endeavors to understand the suicide attempts of the author's mother. "Fiction for fiction, mine gave me back my freedom of movement,"⁶¹ Bouillier writes regarding his delirious way of interpreting his own life in the light of Homer's *Odyssey*. This danger of being trapped by determinisms and exhausting oneself in identifying them is a seminal theme for the autobiographical narrative, which explains why the question of adoption, real or symbolic, is an almost obsessive motif. Deprived of a natural legitimacy, deprived of clear origins – "I've never felt like a legitimate son, much less an heir,"⁶² says the narrator of Modiano's *Un pedigree* –, the exposed and narrated self finds form and justification only through the narrative, only in the narrative, a device for emplotment and reordering that reimagines filiations through symbolization and substitution. It is therefore not the novelistic nature of the events themselves

58 Claude Arnaud, *Je ne voulais pas être moi* [I did not want to be me], Paris, Grasset, 2016, p. 173.

59 Marie Simon, *Ce que j'appelle jaune* [What I Call Yellow], Paris, Léo Scheer, 2016, p. 13.

60 See for example Marie-Jeanne Trouchaud, *50 exercices de psycho-généalogie*, Paris, Eyrolles, 2013.

61 Grégoire Bouillier, *Rapport sur moi* (2002), Paris, J'ai lu, 2004, p. 90. For an alternate English translation, see *Report on Myself*, trans. Bruce Benderson, Boston, Mariner Books, 2009.

62 P. Modiano, *Un pedigree*, p. 9. English translation from *Pedigree*, p. 1.

that makes literature, as in the traditional *Bildungsroman*, but rather the horizontal work of reweaving memory.

At any rate, contemporary forms of aesthetic experience – both the experience and the reception of the creation – seem to dispense with traditional aesthetic mediations – literary traditions, conventional forms, filters provided by publishers or advisors – and rely on a direct and varied personal culture. This phenomenon leads to the dissolution of traditional hermeneutical frameworks, such as literary genres. Nonetheless, the issue of self-care and the expressivist model of autobiographical narrative as a technology of the self rather than a literary genre provides an explanatory framework for many features of contemporary autobiography. In particular, these include the place of women and minority discourses, the matter of sexuality, the primacy of the everyday, and the assertion of its own criteria for importance. The simplified perspective of a narrative governed by the self and the possibly unrefined nature of the writing, the differential invocation as a form of emancipation, the affirmation of the memorial value of the gesture of written remembrance, and the ambition to report on lives left on the edges of the world are all in service of the valorization, counter to melancholy and malaise, of their most precious treasure: the power to say “I.”

Chapter 4

Reconstructing the self

These are only figures of chance fading slowly, various sorts of traces, fleeting lines of life, false reflections, and dubious signs that language, seeking a hearth, has inscribed as if through fraud and from the exterior without testing them or getting to their depths, only carving out in the darkened body of memory the most elementary part – colors, smells, sounds – everything that breathes under the open sky in the truth of a fable fearing the depths. Louis-René Des Forêts, *Ostinato*.¹

Writing as resistance

Paul Ricœur’s “narrativist” formula could certainly participate, *volens volens*, in what Christopher Lasch referred to as the “antireligion of therapy,” which aims to console the “psychological man” of the twentieth century who is “plagued by anxiety, depression, vague discontents, a sense of inner emptiness.”² The fact remains that the conventional autobiographical anamnesis is not and never has been the unequivocal method: the contemporary field abounds in forms of writing the *I* that do not follow the linear path of an awakening that results in reorganization. The idea that a healthy self can be based solely on a retrospective unveiling is very much influenced by Freudian hermeneutics, and far from being unanimously accepted, it has been the subject of debate: this is what is known as the “narrativism debate,”³ a disagreement that is emblematic of both the gains and questions raised by the ethical psychologism of Paul Ricœur. For Galen Strawson, who was the one to fire the first shots to then be followed by philosophers such as David Shoemaker, the narrativist dogma consists of assimilating moral reflexivity and the capacity to put oneself into a narrative – as we have discussed, this is a position which, in turn, grants a potential ethical dimension to

1 Louis-René des Forêts, *Ostinato*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1997, p. 15. English translation from *Ostinato*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln (NE), University of Nebraska Press, 2002, p. 5.

2 C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, pp. 40–41.

3 See Gloria Origgi, “Mémoire narrative, mémoire épisodique: la mémoire selon W. G. Sebald,” [Narrative Memory, Episodic Memory: Memory According to W. G. Sebald] in “Les philosophes lecteurs,” [Philosophers as Readers] *Fabula LHT*, no. 1, www.fabula.org/lht/1/Origgi.html; as well as my article “L’éthique est-elle un récit? Le récit une éthique? Retour sur la querelle du narrativisme,” [Is Ethics a Narrative? Is Storytelling an Ethic? Returning to the Controversy over Narrativism] in *Actes du colloque international “Les Moralistes modernes,”* Université de Belgrade, 22–23 October 2009, www.fabula.org/colloques/document1352.php.

all narratives – and of imagining, contrary to temperaments linked to non-narrative but “episodic” forms, the scriptural inscription of the subject. For Gloria Origgi, who introduced this debate into the French scholarly field, the first criticism directed at “narrativism” was made in the name of the variety of forms assumed by our experience of time and identity. What Strawson contests in his famous article “Against Narrativity”⁴ is both that narrative, conceived as a quest for coherence and framework, should be the *de facto* basis of our identities (psychological thesis) and the condition for the possibility of right action (ethical thesis). The English philosopher tirelessly resists the tide of the times with this radical contestation of any equation of life with fiction.⁵ Central to this debate is the thesis that the continuity of the self is restored by the power of literary intervention. This question is found in the current debates around “storytelling”: those who deride this notion emphasize again and again that the narrative form of a life is a particularly subjugating structure and inadequate for accommodating episodic or epiphanic imaginings of temporality.

Whether there is a category of personalities with an “episodic” temperament or not, this debate should show us that contemporary forms of autobiography support divergent and discordant forms of writing about the self that trouble, repel, or disqualify the subject. Literature has produced both conventional emplotment formulas and what Foucault referred to as “strategies of resistance” to normalization.⁶ In producing open and ambivalent forms of self-narration, it has echoed a certain postmodern paradigm of the subject as described by Terry Eagleton in the mid-1980s: “a dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this and that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend, or fashion.”⁷ Literature responded to a concern not about dispersion but rather simplification, which is the obverse of the social injunction to produce narrative identities. It would surely be too simple to oppose inventive, autofictional literary forms – in other words, giving oneself the freedom to play with the pact of truth and sincerity that is a feature of autobiographical reading – and the more linear, realistic, and conventional paraliterary forms of the social world that Christian

4 Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2004, pp. 428–452.

5 See especially: G. Strawson, “I Am Not a Story,” *Aeon Magazine*, 2015.

6 See Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, cited by John Houston, “Ideology, Representation, Schizophrenia: Toward a Theory of the Postmodern Subject,” in Guy Shapiro (ed), *After the Future: Postmodern Times and Places*, New York, SUNY Press, 1990, pp. 77–78.

7 Terry Eagleton, “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism,” *New Left Review*, no. 152, July–August 1985, p. 71, cited by J. Houston, “Ideology, Representation, Schizophrenia,” p. 68.

Salmon, drawing on theories of managerial storytelling, refers to as “tracked experiences.”⁸ The field of “restricted” literature offers highly differentiated methods for self-writing, from methods of unveiling that lay bare the infra-ordinary to complex and “literarizing”⁹ forms of aestheticization. The contemporary individual’s expression is differentialist, asserting freedom from external overdeterminations and seeking uniqueness in the possible metamorphoses of the narrative. Meanwhile, there is no reason to not dissociate recourse to therapeutic treatment in books from narrative hermeneutics: I would like to take as an example one of the final scenes from Karine Tuil’s *L’Insouciance*, where the heroine is offered Rilke’s poem “You Don’t Have to Understand Life’s Nature”¹⁰ because of the “consolatory virtues of reading,” under the auspices of Proust and of the “great and useful sorrows the writer will use to make literature.”

As for “social” writing, just reading the testimonies collected for Pierre Rosanvallon’s “Raconter la vie” project is enough to appreciate how diverse they are: while the linear narrative of “organizing” a life is indeed present, it is not unambiguous or simply comforting. Nor does it dispense with forms of intensive and rigorous self-exploration, regardless of whether they correspond to contemporary aesthetic canons or not. Let’s take, as one example from among many, this testimony made by somebody who is not an author by profession but a social worker in a shelter. These lines appear early in the autobiography:

Me amidst all of you, all of you with me. Me with my train, my schedule, my extraordinarily ordinary house and my vacation in August. With my family dinners. You with the streets, violence, alcohol, the burn of loneliness, barbarity, and knives. The poorest of the poor in the heart of the projects. Sleeping, of course. Me and you, you and me, us, together, sharing for 5 years a space opened by a shelter in Lyon that I was in charge of running. I didn’t really know what to do, what to be when dealing with people deprived of everything. Or more precisely, stuffed with decay, distress, scabies. So, at first contact, with a fresh post-graduate degree in psychology, I started to play psychologist. A way of grasping at straws. [. . .] I got rid of it all. I shelved Freud and the others, and finally said to myself that the best way to help you was to be myself. Living among the dead.¹¹

8 Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013, p. 13. English translation from *Storytelling: Betwitching the Modern Mind*, trans. David Macey, London and New York, Verso, 2017, EPUB.

9 See B. Blanckeman, “Figures intimes/postures extimes,” pp. 48–49.

10 Karine Tuil, *L’Insouciance: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, pp. 508–509. Let’s recall Rilke’s poem: “You don’t have to understand life’s nature, then it becomes a grand affair. Let every day just of itself occur/like a child walks away from every hurt/and happens upon the gift of many flowers.” Trans. Cliff Crego.

11 Philippe Lubrano Lavadera, *D’en bas*, online at the site “Raconter la vie,” 22 September 2014: raconterlavie.fr/recits/d-en-bas/.

To express oneself, but by echoing one's own exteriority to oneself; to find an identity in a gesture of non-belonging directed towards the reader, by using a running style that interrogates a social silence as much as a detriment of speech: self-writing tends towards a reflexivity that repels any immediately utilitarian horizon. It is ready to temporarily accept its own banality and that of its expression to more accurately describe a "myself" that is conceived of as a speech event. In this narrative "from below," writing supports but does not simplify a project of writing a self posed as problematic. The demand for lucidity produces a narrative that departs from simplifying models in order to find its own way and reveals how, just as much as the most literary of endeavors, behind the "neo-naturalism" of the personal there lies an experimental project¹² where, as Claude Burgelin eloquently put it, "the 'I' can make the 'me' leave."¹³

To take another example, that of digital self-writing, to me it seems difficult to reduce the Internet to a "new narrative order," whereas Salmon contends that "computer-assisted storytelling" is an extension of the technostucture's systems of mastery and control, and he denounces the "engineers of storytelling, who are determined to take possibilities for the automation of narrative seriously."¹⁴ The forms of critical deconstruction, pluralization of the event, and enunciative refraction are present at the very heart of the re-narrativization devices criticized by those who see the new media as instruments of enslavement and web authors not as authors at all, but merely writers (*écrivants*) in the Barthesian sense.¹⁵ Facebook's "timeline" is a way of presenting our daily reality that aims to get us to transcribe all our activities in the form of a digital biography and to inscribe the course of an entire life starting at birth in a temporal arrow, along with public events as well as encounters, journeys, and memories. It is reminiscent of the "Scriptgenerator" imagined by Philippe Vasset in the book *Exemplaire de démonstration* [Demo Copy] (2002), a machine that produces literature from the databases that are our life stories as we "self-document" them digitally. But the multiplicity of documentary types and the latitude offered for playing with identity contravene the normativity of the categories suggested by Mark Zuckerberg's company: marriage, children, religion, etc. Mash-ups – devices of aggregation and totalization – and the tools for recording our virtual or social activities – activities that are semanticized, contextualized, and geolocalized to the point of intrusion – find counterparts in forms of textual evasion, of the interpenetration of identities

12 P. Forest, "Je & Moi: avant-propos," pp. 13–14.

13 See Claude Burgelin, "Architectures du singulier," *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 598, Oct. 2011, pp. 41–52, cit. p. 47.

14 C. Salmon, *Storytelling*, pp. 99–100.

15 See R. Barthes, "Écrivains et écrivants," in *Essais critiques*, pp. 403–410.

and interactions that make it impossible to provide an overall interpretation. Especially the creativity of misappropriations – poetic hacking, data liberation movements, collaboration with machines¹⁶ – and the web’s anarchist and subversive counter-culture, which has survived the Internet’s capitalist turn, should not be underestimated. Not to mention the resistance to the network generated by the network itself, which is quick to denounce its own addictions, to view itself as a threat, and to suggest that users withdraw from the virtual world,¹⁷ as if the digital narrative itself was expected to stage that very specific style of contemporary autobiographical narrative characterized by the dream of taking a break from the requirement to be oneself.

Erasure and reinvention of the self

Since the post-war period, narrating has meant “put[ting] oneself through the ordeal of this first forgetting that precedes, founds, and ruins all memory,”¹⁸ as Maurice Blanchot announced before suggesting that “[t]he meaning of speech, then, requires that before any word is spoken, there must be a sort of immense hecatomb, a preliminary flood plunging all of creation into a total sea,” a negative lesson troubling all testimony and all instances of speaking out, as many contemporary autobiographers well recall.¹⁹ Marguerite Duras, for example, tells in *La Vie matérielle*: “I have no story, just as I have no life. My story is pulverized every day, every second of every day, by the immediacy of life, and it’s impossible

¹⁶ See the article by Hubert Guillaud about writing with “bots,” “#Lift 12: Écrire avec les machines,” site “internetACTU.net,” 8 March 2012.

¹⁷ See Thierry Crouzet, *J’ai débranché: comment revivre sans Internet après une overdose*, [I Unplugged: How to Live Without the Internet After an Overdose], Paris, Fayard, 2012. There are many works on this theme in English, such as the recent appeals by Ilana Gershon (*The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media*, Ithaca [NY], Cornell UP, 2010) and by Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (*Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Princeton [NJ], Princeton UP, 2011). For the literary version of this theme, see the essay by Dominique Rabaté, *Désirs de disparaitre: une traversée du roman français contemporain*, Rimouski, Tangence, 2015.

¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, “La Voix narrative (le ‘il’, le neutre),” [Narrative Voice [the “he,” the neutral] in *L’Entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 556–567, cit. p. 564. English translation from *Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 385.

¹⁹ M. Blanchot, “La littérature et le droit à la mort” [Literature and the Right to Death, 1948], in *La Part du feu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, 291–331, cit. pp. 312–313. English translation from *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford (CA), Stanford UP, 1995, p. 323.

for me to see clearly what's usually called one's life."²⁰ She had already written in *The Lover*: "The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line. There are great places where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one."²¹ Oliver Rohe on the publication of *Défaut d'origine* [Original Defect] – with a title that could not be any more explicit – tells us: "This book is the story of someone who is unable to locate the space for speech within. A failure located at the very heart of writing. It is useless to write without being aware that one is in the process of failing. Writing is a form of execution. Language itself harbors the very killing it describes."²²

Far from being limited to a demonstration of the self, self-writings expose themselves to the risk of inner conflict and to the danger of being dispersed and effaced. Their quest for authenticity is not meant to just provide subjects with a narrative skeleton and the space to exhibit, but also to assist them in a quest for accuracy, with the radical nature of its risk-taking and displacements forming the basis for its legitimacy. The autobiography attempts to dispel the illusion of the sovereignty of the self "so as to discover the impersonal domain of the impossible, of what is 'intimate,'" which, Philippe Forest writes, quoting Bataille, "has the passion of an absence of individuality"²³ – this is a clever but somewhat rhetorical reformulation of the individualism already seen in Ernaux that aims to simultaneously satisfy the contemporary enthusiasm for the intimate and a critical and political demand for a surpassing of the subject that was inherited from Marxism and structuralism. Far from being marginal, this notion predominates in contemporary avant-garde writing: for the very influential group known as the "Inculte" [Uneducated] (Maylis de Kerangal, Arno Bertina, Mathieu Larnaudie, and François Bégau-deau), for the novelists published by "Verticales" and others close to them (Philippe Vasset at Fayard and Vincent Message at Le Seuil, Chloé Delaume, François Bon, Charles Robinson, etc.), literature must, in order to "take on the multiplicity of the real," become aesthetically and generically "profane" and profaning, "improper" and destabilizing, "heterodox and heterogeneous,"²⁴ as defined by their theorist, Mathieu Larnaudie. Any intention to write about modernity's "fractured subjects,

20 Marguerite Duras, *La Vie matérielle*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Folio," 1987, p. 99. English translation from *Practicalities*, trans. Barbara Bray, New York, Grove Press, 1990, p. 77.

21 M. Duras, *L'Amant*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1984, p. 14. English translation from *The Lover*, trans. Barbara Bray, New York, Pantheon Books, 1997, p. 8.

22 Oliver Rohe, cited by Pascal Paillardet in "Né quelque part. *Défaut d'origine*, d'Oliver Rohe," [Born Somewhere. *Original Defect*, by Oliver Rohe] *Le Matricule des anges*, no. 46, September 15-October 15, 2003, p. 48.

23 P. Forest, "Je & Moi: avant-propos," p. 19.

24 Mathieu Larnaudie, "Propositions pour une littérature inculte," *La Nouvelle Revue française*, no. 588 ("Le siècle de la NRF"), February 2009, pp. 338–354, here pp. 352, 346, 348, 351.

open to all winds” involve accessing “an intelligence that surpasses them” by portraying their very undoing: the shattering of the *I* is “its felicitous dissemination [. . .] elsewhere”²⁵ with an aesthetic that is a kind of extension of Deleuzian (identity nomadism) and Barthesian (the “writerly” subject) theories for the network age.

This explains the capacity of these self-narratives to tell of life changes that no longer fit into a model that is organized and unified, but rather one that is split: an interior plural is adopted and the biographical is written as scraps, with the application of possibilistic methods. These shifting narratives, which Jean-Pierre Martin provides several examples of in *Éloge de l'apostat*,²⁶ stand in opposition to the normative nature of the self-help narrative in its desire to produce readjusted, optimized, socially adept, and economically productive individuals. Yet the common thread, from Roland Barthes to Claude Roy, is the desire to tell “the personal account of an about-face.”²⁷ This “unthinkable” of claiming apostasy, an about-face, or even a versatility of identity, is another “way of opposing a communitarian world with the strength of a singularity,”²⁸ suggests Jean-Pierre Martin, relying on F. Scott Fitzgerald’s phrase that “all life [. . .] is a process of breaking down”: troubled “by two opposite myths, that of loyalty to oneself and that of rupture with oneself,”²⁹ the narrative of the modern self will acknowledge the subject’s versatility, its consistently exceptional behavior. Like many lifestyle philosophies, this vindication of a triumphant subject’s egotistical *vita nova* is something of an aristocratic version of the modern imperative to achieve. It nevertheless highlights the extent to which contemporary anthropology of the subject requires making space for its possible surprises and reversals by choosing to expose its inconsistency and its new fractures as well as its hidden idiosyncratic causalities and by guarding – against itself, if necessary – an underlying thought that will to the last breath reaffirm the ideal of its autonomy against determinisms.

One could conceivably pit these writers of fracture against those of autobiographical restoration, just as narrative imaginations have been pitted against episodic imaginations – Paul Bourget thus contrasts writers like Goethe, for whom

25 Arno Bertina, “L’histoire et moi,” [History and Me] *Inculte*, no. 11, September 2006, p. 12–15, cited by Cécile Jobé, *L’Émergence d’Inculte (2004–2009): les enjeux littéraires et sociologiques du collectivisme en littérature française contemporaine* [The Emergence of Inculte (2004–2009): The Literary and Sociological Issues of Collectivism in Contemporary French Literature], MA Thesis, Université de Liège, 2010, p. 61.

26 Jean-Pierre Martin, *Éloge de l'apostat: essai sur la vita nova* [In Praise of the Apostate: An Essay on the Vita Nova], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2010.

27 Martin, *Éloge*, p. 26.

28 Martin, *Éloge*, p. 33.

29 Martin, *Éloge*, p. 248.

literature is a “remedy,” with those for whom “the work of art is not a remedy, but an aggravation, a festering of the inner wound. Above all, these writers want to feel. Literature is only a means of exasperating their neurosis, of exalting their inner frenzy.”³⁰ Yet their very postmodern vision of the subject is not completely at odds with the idea of narrative identity, which can be extended to delinearized and decentered formulas of narrative. For Ricœur, the rational appropriation of the “connectedness of life,” to use a term that the philosopher borrows from Dilthey,³¹ is not necessarily a matter of behaviorism, but rather of non-prescriptive identifications and the setting of temporalities back into motion. If all of life is the quest for an organized becoming – Ricœur essentially affirms that life is a passion in search of a narrative –, it is not possible to equate a pedagogical reconfiguration of time (that of a narrative seeking to commemorate) with blind conditioning or alienation, but rather with the exercise of our freedom to enrich our ethical imagination. This is what Ricœur suggests when he stresses, in *Oneself as Another*, that “literature proves to consist in a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test.”³² Our forms of continued existence in time are tested without any presuppositions about their nature in this “laboratory” through the lability of biological or social contingencies, including the most unusual.

These “laboratories” offer, as I shall discuss further below, spaces for the development of values and thought experiments, but they are, first and foremost, expressive spaces for subjects, which reformulate the self in an inventive way or even model supplementary identities – the need for identity reformulation explains the appetite, well beyond experimental literature, for forms of “autofiction.” Unlike autobiographies or fictional memoirs, which focus on the relationship to alterity, autofiction retains a project of self-description as its fundamental principle but heroizes singularity by pushing it to its limits and exposing it to its own metamorphoses. Autofiction, a genre that is difficult to define, is thus an identity experiment deposited in language and as such it emblemizes the intensification of the autobiographical quest for self in the context of an interplay between a fragility of identity and a skeptical demand: “Since the dawn of literature, writers have directed all their experiments towards the ‘I’ and its subversion. Autofiction is now the ultimate laboratory for this subversion: the laboratory for the deconstruction, the dissemi-

30 Paul Bourget, *Études et portraits*, vol 3. *Sociologie et littérature*, Paris, Plon-Nourrit, 1906, p. 222.

31 Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1990, p. 186. English translation from *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago and London, the University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 115.

32 Ricœur, *Soi-même*, p. 176. English translation from *Oneself as Another*, p. 148.

nation, the wild proliferation of 'I's,"³³ notes Chloé Delaume in her defense and illustration of the genre, *La Règle du Je*, emphasizing the extent to which it manifests a political resolve to intervene in the technologies of the self. Far from turning away from the matter of elucidation, autofiction helps augment it by allowing for a recentering and a reappropriation of identity in a context where the latter would be impossible to achieve with a direct regrasping of the historical self – in Delaume's case, a traumatic identity that was deserted, because unlivable, of a child who witnessed her mother's murder and then her father's suicide:

My name is today because I've insisted on a second beginning. Where fiction always gets tangled up with life, where reality bends to the lines of my fable. The one I write every day, with me as the heroine. My old I written by others was a supporting character in a family romance and a passive onlooker in the collective fiction. I could only reclaim my flesh, my actions, and my identity through literature.³⁴

This could not be any clearer: literature is defined here as the capacity for building a narrative identity that is not merely a subset of the collective discourse or family mechanics; it intervenes where realist anamneses would not allow it, all the while pursuing an indirect but undisguised expressionistic purpose. "*Move away from you and from me*,"³⁵ says Beckett: the dream of "driving the I to suicide"³⁶ that Delaume shares with the other writers of the "broken *cogito*" serves only to bring it back to life.

The perfectionist quest

It is perhaps Pascal Quignard who has taken "literary" criticism of contemporary expressions of the individual the furthest:

Do not try to be different from the others, because the desire to be different from the others is what the world dictates. To be so is to adapt yourself to the ways of the majority and of one's rivals. To try to be interesting is to want to be identified. Do not try to be interesting.

³³ Chloé Delaume, *La Règle du Je: autofiction: un essai* [The Rule of the "I": Autofiction: An Essay], Paris, PUF, 2010, back cover.

³⁴ Delaume, *La Règle*, p. 6.

³⁵ Charles Juliet, "Rencontre avec Charles Juliet," interview with Philippe De Jonckheere and Jacky Chriqui, Lyon, 21 July 1999, in the "désordre.net" library, www.desordre.net/textes/bibliotheque/auteurs/beckett/juliet.htm.

³⁶ C. Delaume, *La Règle du Je*, p. 13.

Do not identify yourself with anything. Do not become identical with yourself. Do not go towards yourself.³⁷

The writer explicitly targets the discourses of self-affirmation and reappropriation of identity that are characteristic of guides to happiness, mocking the ready-made identities they provide and critiquing with particular severity the ambition for visibility and differentiation with which writing has commonly been invested. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Antoine Compagnon concluded that literature remained “the site *par excellence* for self-discovery” and said: “Become who you are!”³⁸ From the *Petits traités* [Small Treatises] to the *Dernier royaume* [Last Kingdom] cycle, Quignard’s fragmented narratives, riddled with mistrust, call for the refusal of identity in favor of a tragic becoming: “Do not become the same as yourself [. . .] Do not become yourself, but become the self, the intimate sacred object, the incommunicable part, the ancient past,” which seems to refuse any positive determination of identity:

Individual is not a state. Nor a strain. There is no atomic identity deep inside us. There is no particular character to be assumed on this planet. To become individual is to desire, to become conflicted, to become infinitely divisible, tirelessly. To become increasingly torn apart.
The individual is fascination, torn apart.
Not appeased: torn apart.³⁹

The author seeks to provide a formula of individuality that is defined not in superficial difference, but in a gap, a marginality, an autonomy, a mobility that radically thwarts any social configuration in favor of a dialogue with the reader. If it looks towards a beyond language (*un hors langage*), that of the “incommunicable,” this identity remains literary in essence and draws on fictional hypostases – the lives of the characters whose existences are generally imagined by the narrator. It proceeds from a work of creation that is inextricably linguistic, ethical, and ontological: in writing is to be found the negative source of identity and action, a model of liberation and dis-anchoring where the empowerment produced by the scriptural quest is not an immobilization of the same, but instead a gain of mobility (temporal, geographical, personal) in the face of the future.

Among Quignard and other authors of largely introspective works who also challenge any positive form of identity construction – I am also thinking of writ-

³⁷ Pascal Quignard *La Barque silencieuse (Dernier royaume VI)*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2009, p. 55. English translation from *The Silent Crossing*, trans. Chris Turner, New York, London, Seagull Books, 2013, p. 61.

³⁸ Antoine Compagnon, *La Littérature, pour quoi faire?*, § 81 and 89.

³⁹ Pascal Quignard, *Vie secrète*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 224.

ers like Louis-René des Forêts, Roger Laporte, and, in a very different way, Michel Leiris –, there is a skepticism that serves a perpetual dissatisfaction with the self, an attentiveness to what perpetually makes words fail us and miss the mark. This sensitivity to the shortcomings of language can be interpreted in a Blanchotian or Lacanian sense, but also in the sense of Anglo-American moral perfectionism, insofar as it participates in a desire to find one’s way, through the use of language, by prevailing over the traps set by social conformity and taking the quest for one’s own voice and the obstacles in the way seriously. Perfectionism, which is defined as “an emphasis, [. . .] a refocusing of morality on ‘what matters to us,’ on the need for self-transformation, before action in the world,”⁴⁰ offers an interesting model for understanding forms of self-inquiry that attempt to consider the ordinariness of one’s own form of life by thwarting social and political machinations. As defined by Stanley Cavell, who is in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau but also of Nietzschean self-love, in a way perfectionism constitutes the philosophical and ethical version, both critical and demanding, of the doctrines of personal development. It is based on a project of transforming the self (rather than accessing and defining the self) based on a primary dissatisfaction. This concrete attentiveness to ways of being and to one’s own form of life, this project of trusting oneself in a positive way, refuses the abstract distancing of an individual’s pre-categorized thought and prefers paying attention to the rigged complexity of language and to the ordinary ways of living one’s life – hence an essential interest in the literary, where the tangle of one’s own experiences and words is deposited. It seems to me that the perfectionist ambition can effectively describe the experience of withdrawing from one’s internal evidence and asserting a voice of one’s own disconnected from a moral injunction. Pascal Quignard has provided an influential model of this with his affirmations of autism and the heroization of the “lettered,” which are even almost paraphrases of the “ascetic-artistic” thinking of one of Europe’s very distinctive representatives of perfectionism, Peter Sloterdijk. In *You Must Change Your Life*, the latter denounces a certain mode of “selfishness” that extends from the socio-economic sphere to art and the “demonization of self-preference”⁴¹ in order to promote a personal performance

⁴⁰ Sandra Laugier, “Présentation. L’autre voie de la philosophie morale,” [Introduction. The Other Way of Moral Philosophy] in S. Laugier (ed), *La Voix et la vertu: variétés du perfectionnisme moral* [The Voice and the Virtue: Varieties of Moral Perfectionism], Paris, PUF, 2010, pp. 1–30, cit p. 2. Also see S. Laugier, “Présentation,” in S. Laugier (ed), *Éthique, littérature, vie humaine* [Ethics, Literature, Human Life], Paris, PUF, 2006, pp. 10–11.

⁴¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge (UK), Polity Press, 2013, p. 430.

of “forms of life and practice”⁴² that is the only way to restore the possibility “of distinguishing oneself radically from the world.”⁴³ But in a broader sense, the perfectionist tradition can be linked to self-expression efforts that refuse to be an investigation or an unveiling and question the illusion of realistic representation. In these writings, “to want to get rid of the self is no less presumptuous than trying to form a clear idea of oneself through the use of language,”⁴⁴ writes Louis-René des Forêts, an author who in *Ostinato* defines himself as “*insoumis*” (“insubordinate”).⁴⁵ With perfectionism, then, the supreme ideal is no longer so much the conquest of an altered or unnatural dignity, of political autonomy or economic independence, or the rediscovery of roots as it is the quest for a *sui generis* form of personal precision. The writer finds himself “(n)ot coping with a past as a prefiguration of the future but restored to the ignorance of himself in the blinding light of the present.”⁴⁶ He refuses the ordinary and relies on the experience of language to delve into perceptible differences and find his voice, though this comes with a certain savageness and throws previous voices into crisis. For him, the self therein is “always realized *and* yet to be realized, and this is the paradox of self-confidence, a self that does not exist prior to confidence,” as Sandra Laugier writes.⁴⁷ For this self, “there is no real world other than the one ‘with which I speak’.”⁴⁸ This resolves the opposition between the two approaches that pull contemporary individualism in different directions, according to Danilo Martuccelli: “endless change” and “the individual as unity.”⁴⁹ The subject is rooted in its own epiphany. Through the linguistic voice of transcendentalism or the narrative voices of autofiction (for which “only the novel is in a position to tell of life”),⁵⁰ contemporary egos want to be augmented by writing and touch on a kind of dream of self-engendering (“I got myself pregnant,” a contemporary essay on autofiction declares),⁵¹ a project in which the re-grasping of the self becomes inseparable from the act of writing. Such a project effectively describes, I believe, many works that reject the framework of narrative identities or the work of self-analysis (moral or psychoanalytic) and that have renounced the program of direct

42 Sloterdijk, *You Must*, p. 35.

43 Sloterdijk, *You Must*, p. 436.

44 L.-R. des Forêts, *Ostinato*, p. 138.

45 des Forêts, *Ostinato*.

46 des Forêts, *Ostinato*, p. 15.

47 Sandra Laugier (ed), *La Voix et la Vertu*, p. 12.

48 Laugier (ed), *La Voix*, p. 17.

49 See Danilo Martuccelli, *Sociologies de la modernité: l'itinéraire du xx^e siècle* [Sociologies of Modernity: The Itinerary of the Twentieth Century], Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

50 P. Forest, “Je & Moi: avant-propos,” p. 17.

51 C. Delaume, *La Règle du Je*, p. 6.

elucidation of identity that has inspired the traditional autobiographical gesture. This paradigm could be applied to the final autobiographical works published in the 1980s by writers such as Marguerite Duras, Louis-René des Forêts, Roger Laporte and even Michel Leiris, who insist on the shortcomings of language. This perfectionist intention to embark on a “personal search for words to describe an experience *that has actually robbed you of the vocabulary to address it*”⁵² is found even more directly in the next generation on a widespread scale, including their explicit heirs (Pascal Quignard, Philippe Forest, and Serge Doubrovsky), the patently identitarian writers at Minuit (Daniel Oster, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Christian Gailly), those who stage the postmodern and uncultivated chaos of the self (Arno Bertina, Oliver Rohe, etc.), or those who paradoxically use the individual investigation to seek methods for the dilation and dissolution of the subject, with an expressiveness that expresses itself as a quest for erasure (Camille de Toledo, Philippe Vasset, Didier Blonde).

It seems to me, however, that these complex forms, which are frequently radical and literary, do indeed participate in the same “subjectivist expressivism” that aims, whether it be in the highest French tradition of autobiography or in ordinary writing, for a gesture of support, defense, and personal reconstruction through anamnesis or epiphanic augmentation. Such is the case in a context where the subject is troubled by the absence of external frameworks for self-conduct and obvious modalities of definition along with the requirement for visibility and autonomy. The self-narrative, whether responding with invention that constitutes a language of its own or the reappropriation of more conventional frameworks, provides an opportunity for rediscovering the three forms of literary action that I have endeavored to distinguish – making an existence visible, defining its unity, supporting its complexities and changes. The program proposed by professional biographers: “A life of commitment! [. . .] sharing and transmitting your deepest values”; “A feeling of family [. . .] Telling your life story; Life taking a turn? [. . .] Make its priorities clear.”⁵³ As with these supposedly ordinary forms of expression, the “great health”⁵⁴ promised to the modern subject by literature since Deleuze is indeed to be found in the work of expanding and repairing the *I*.

52 Sandra Laugier, “Culture populaire, critique ordinaire: une philosophie des genres mineurs,” [Popular Culture, Ordinary Criticism: A Philosophy of Minor Genres] in Emmanuel Pedler and Jacques Cheyronnaud (eds), *Théories ordinaires* [Ordinary Theories], Paris, Éditions de l’EHESS, 2013, p. 144; author’s emphasis.

53 Home page for the site “Traces de vie,” tracesdevie.bzh.

54 G. Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique*, p. 14. English translation from *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. xv.



Facing Trauma

Chapter 5

The powers of writing

Sending that text, with her family history suddenly pouring out into the conversation, wasn't really a cry for help. She wanted for me to recognize her as she affirmed her suffering. For me to recognize her as a writer, because that's all she could be, her status as a victim justifying the action and the result. She took the trauma as incontrovertible proof: since the horror is true, there is literature. Chloé Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans*.¹

Charles Taylor has described contemporary culture as being marked by the “the primacy of self-fulfillment, particularly in its therapeutic variants.”² The contemporary moment has called on writing to ensure the triumph of the self over any obstacle by creating forms of intervention that are not only psychological but literally medical, making literature a directly operative approach to mental healing. The “ordinary” life stories are clearly located on the border of self-improvement and therapy³ and assume that the self is incomplete or constrained. In the face of the varied traumas of our modern condition, literature is viewed as a form of intervention with courses of action ranging from immunization to emergency medicine, from sensitization to suffering to a defensive and reactive form of writing.

The culture of trauma

The focus on the concept of trauma plays a major role in the contemporary culture of personal expressivity: fundamentally, trauma is a way of looking at pain and misfortune from a narcissistic point of view. With an approach that makes a distinction between internal happiness free of suffering or pain and an external world that imposes traumatic aggressions on the developing self, trauma serves as a counterpart to self-actualization. In their inquiry into the victim's condition, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman suggest that the notion of trauma has become a general and decisive cultural factor. Trauma “states a truth of humanity at the expense of other possible registers of qualification and action,”⁴ with such

1 Chloé Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans: roman* [A Woman with No One in It: A Novel], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2012, pp. 10–11.

2 C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 508.

3 See for example L. Mercier, “Re-traiter sa vie,” p. 227.

4 Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *L'Empire du traumatisme: enquête sur la condition de victime*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007, p. 21.

a truth being universalized to become “an ultimate truth of the human condition.”⁵ Trauma produces a “specific knowledge”: a relationship to the unspeakable⁶ considered in relation to the Shoah and understood in a transgenerational manner, characterized in particular by the indistinguishability of individual trauma from collective trauma. Fassin and Rechtman’s critical generalization, undeniably marked by nostalgia for a “political” era when the demand for action was viewed as primary in relation to the call for traumatic recognition, is certainly debatable, yet it remains that a considerable number of essays demonstrates the spread of a culture of victimhood, which goes hand-in-hand with its own expressive modalities and particular forms of repair.⁷ As Myriam Revault d’Allonnes has shown in her reading of Tocqueville, “compassion” is a form of pity that is depoliticized and disconnected from the workings of individualism and modes of detachment in modern democratic society.⁸

In *Comment Hitchcock m’a guéri*, Serge Tisseron demonstrated that in France, since the 1980s, this ideology has assumed the form of “resilience,” with an obligatory nod to French psychoanalyst Boris Cyrulnik.⁹ The trio of trauma, resilience, and compassion has entered literature in several ways. One sign of this is the accelerated development in France in recent years of what is known as literary trauma studies. This field emerged in the United States in the 1970s, when literature was called upon to have social utility in communities, and reflects this thau-maturgical aspiration by proposing a paradigm based largely on a psychoanalytic notion of trauma.¹⁰ Studying the words of Holocaust survivors as well as victims of sexual abuse, trauma studies and its variations (violence and trauma studies, disaster and trauma studies, abuse and trauma studies, etc.) consider literature as a form of “speech” in response to suffering endured. Kali Tal has emphasized the

5 Fassin- Rechtman, *L’Empire*, p. 118.

6 Fassin- Rechtman, *L’Empire*, p. 113.

7 See for example the critiques by B. Leclair, *L’Industrie de la consolation*; Guillaume Erner, *La Société des victimes* [The Society of Victims], Paris, La Découverte, 2006; Michel Richard, *La République compassionnelle* [The Compassionate Republic], Paris, Grasset, 2006; Caroline Eliacheff and Daniel Soulez-Larivière, *Le Temps des victimes* [The Era of Victims], Paris, Albin Michel, 2006.

8 Myriam Revault d’Allonnes, *L’Homme compassionnel*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2008.

9 See Serge Tisseron, *Comment Hitchcock m’a guéri: que cherchons-nous dans les images?* [How Hitchcock Healed Me: What Are We Looking for in Pictures], Paris, Hachette littératures, 2011, pp. 90–92.

10 See Susannah Radstone, Janet Walker, Noah Shenker, “Trauma theory,” site “Oxford Bibliographies,” last modified 30 September 2013. In particular, see Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore (MD), The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

difficulty of integrating trauma narratives into conventional literary criticism,¹¹ and this difficulty is even more pronounced in French academic culture, which is resistant to categorial singularization. In France, thanks to the work of Catherine Coquio in particular, it is first and foremost historical trauma that has been the subject of inquiry – focused on collective voices rising up in response to war and disaster as well as the matter of decolonization –, while other scholarship in the French language, notably from Switzerland and Canada, has begun to expand the field's scope.

This interest in the literary manifestations of collective trauma have paved the way for a therapeutic notion of literary expression. Barbara Havercroft concludes that “according to theorists, the narration of trauma [. . .] remains absolutely essential to the healing, even partial, of the victim,” and that it “also allows victims to integrate the episode into their lives (before and after the incident), and to become active subjects rather than being passive objects of violence.”¹² As Ruth Leys¹³ has shown, reflections on the mechanisms of action for this process of recollection have, since the 1920s, produced two opposing hypotheses – one of them being purely mechanical, based on the notion of release as the route to recovery, with memories returning to the conscious mind so as to free the patient, whereas the other is based on representation and displacement in the present of the memory. This second model, with its capacity to delve into the deep layers of consciousness and to reconstruct complex situations, is better suited to describe an elaborate literary narrative, and is the one that has generally been adopted: Catalan psychiatrist François Tosquelles has gone so far as to hypothesize that what patients say while undergoing psychotherapy in order to recover their singularity is very similar to a poet's quest for identity.¹⁴ In Tisseron's psychoanalytical terms, this involves “reintroducing the creative dimension where the trauma had undermined it,”¹⁵ indebted in particular to the process of metaphorization. In other words, literature's ability to act against trauma results from its capacity to “desingularize while continuing to individualize”¹⁶ and to make it possible to ben-

11 See Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge UP, 2004.

12 Barbara Havercroft, “Questions éthiques dans la littérature de l'extrême contemporain: les formes discursives du trauma personnel,” [Ethical Issues in the Literature of the Twenty-First Century: Discursive Forms of Personal Trauma] *Les Cahiers du CERACC*, no. 5, Apr. 2012, pp. 20–34, cit. p. 24.

13 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 94 et seq.

14 François Tosquelles, *Fonction poétique et psychothérapie* [Poetic Function and Psychotherapy], Toulouse, Érès, 2003.

15 S. Tisseron, *Comment Hitchcock m'a guéri*, p. 99.

16 H. Merlin-Kajman, *Lire dans la gueule du loup*, p. 271.

efit both from the incorporation of comforting generalities and the prerogatives of an ever-incomparable pain, offering something that resembles a means for defining the individual. The foundation of such a thesis is essentially psychoanalytical: despite Freud's skepticism about the possibilities of self-therapy, his theory of trauma (infantile and of sexual origin), pursued by the likes of Ferenczi and Winnicott up through Lacan, is now being generalized to accidental traumas.¹⁷ Freudian psychoanalysis aimed to offer a "talking out" that succeeds in "bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked,"¹⁸ though this cathartic narrative is extended to historical trauma as well as to unforeseen life events.

From historical sufferings to private traumas

Returning to the literary catharsis of private traumas, the contemporary guiding principle is to make it "an extra-artistic effect produced by an artistic experience"¹⁹ – that is, a therapeutic transformation of the self through the experience of writing or reading. This allows for forms of memorial freedom as well as doubling and therapeutic symbolization, as per the various versions of Freudian trauma theory (over the past twenty years, expressive writing practices in the Anglo-American world, particularly in hospitals, have been the subject of serious medical studies, which have in turn informed personal purposes for writing).²⁰ Traces of this project are found in the innumerable writings, particularly by women, where the narration of real or imagined experience is consistently viewed a response to the blows of fate.²¹ In France, breaking with the literary tradition of the *plaint* and *lamenta*

17 See E. Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, pp. 152 et seq.

18 Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Études sur l'hystérie* (1895), translated from the German by Anne Bermann, Paris, PUF, "Bibliothèque de psychanalyse," 1967, pp. 25, 4. English translation from The Standard Edition of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 2, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, London, Hogarth Press, 1981, pp. 36, 6.

19 The phrasing is from Carole Talon-Hugon, "L'épreuve des émotions dans l'expérience artistique," in Jean-Charles Darmon (ed), *Littérature et thérapeutique des passions: la catharsis en question*, Paris, Hermann, 2011, p. 256.

20 See especially the meta-study conducted by Karen A. Baikie and Kay Wilhelm, "Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing," *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, vol. 11, no. 5, August 2005, pp. 338–346, and the reflections by Tara Parker-Pope on the social impact of these studies in "Writing Your Way to Happiness," "Well" blog in the *New York Times*, 30 January 2015.

21 The best summary of contemporary writing about trauma is the previously cited article by Barbara Havercroft, "Questions éthiques dans la littérature de l'extrême contemporain."

ment, inspiration here seems to draw primarily on forms that provide a personal narrative of historic wounds. Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), an allegorization of his parents' deportation, serves as "autopsychotherapy," to borrow an expression from Philippe Lejeune,²² and achieves "a deliverance, constantly deferred and nevertheless effective."²³ Turning to the works of Marguerite Duras, from *Hiroshima mon amour* (1960) to *La Douleur* (1985), it seems to me that the latter text plays a decisive role because with the anticipation of Robert Antelme's return, it expresses the transition from historical to private trauma. Presenting various forms of the imprints of the Second World War and decolonization, these texts position trauma at the center of the literary stage. They soon found representatives among more mainstream authors who were writing about psychiatry in the 1970s²⁴ and then, starting in the 1980s, who tackled private traumas on an individual basis. I find that the success of Michèle Manceaux's *Grand reportage* (1980) and Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (1984), which are narratives of depression, serves as a reliable gauge: Marie Cardinal stated that in order "[t]o make them understand and to help those who lived in the hell where I also lived, I promised myself that one day I would write an account of my analysis, and turn it into novel in which I would tell of the healing of a woman as like me as if she were my own sister."²⁵ On the last page of her book, Manceaux is in the process of healing and also decides, as if in a *mise en abyme*, to write a novel. The genre became characteristic of "mainstream" literature at the turn of the millennium, just as much as the type of "feel-good books" that, while also being easy for readers to project themselves into, serves as its counterpoint; such literature was characterized by a kind of competition in the order of pathos through a series of works that made room for a new female voice on supposedly taboo subjects, along with a trend for narratives of illness and mourning I will return to later. These works address "getting back on track" following a break-up (Françoise Chandernagor's *La Première Épouse*, 2006), a period of depression (Pascal Quignard's *Les Désarçonnés*, 2012, Pierre Guyotat's last stories, or, more recently, Hélène Curriel's *Un quinze août à Paris: Histoire d'une dépression*, 2014), an abortion (Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement*, 2000), a traumatic sep-

22 Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'Oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe*, Paris, P.O.L., 1991, p. 65.

23 Dominique Rabaté, "Le récit moderne et la promesse cathartique," in *Poétiques de la voix*, Paris, José Corti, coll. "Les Essais," 1999, 205–222, cit. p. 221.

24 See Françoise Tilkin, *Quand la folie se racontait: récit et antipsychiatrie*, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 1990.

25 Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (1976), Paris, Hachette, coll. "Bibliothèque H," 1984, p. 269; *The Words to Say It*, trans. Pat Goodheart, Cambridge (MA), VanVactor & Goodheart, 2003, p. 248.

aration (Yves Charnet's *Le Divorce*, 2013), or even a rape, as with Virginie Despenes, Christine Angot, Ludovic Degroote, and Édouard Louis, by triumphing over a trauma buried for too long in the memory. The same applies to writers like Delphine de Vigan, who contributed to a collection of short stories with a title that states the aim of the project in no uncertain terms: "Words for Wounds" (*Mots pour maux*).²⁶ A pain specialist who writes for the general public, she has addressed the themes of exclusion (*No et moi*, 2007), anorexia (the autobiographical story *Jours sans faim* relates how a psychiatrist saved one of his anorexic patients: "Someone calls her and promises her life. His words cut through the darkness, take it all away, silence the cries, silence the silence"²⁷), bullying (*Les Heures souterraines*, 2009), narcissistic perverts (*D'après une histoire vraie*, 2015), and her mother's suicide (*Rien ne s'oppose à la nuit*, 2011). This last text begins with Vigan discovering the body of her mother, who has already been dead for several days. She explains how "dozens of authors before [her]" have "attempted to write [their] mother"²⁸ while she, on the contrary, had been unable to access the narrative. The dividing line she draws between suppressed traumas and narrated pain could not be any more explicit: "she spoke of [the events which marked her childhood] with a certain aggression, but divorced from any story or narrative context, as though they were stones she was throwing to hit us full on or in order to rid herself of the worst memories."²⁹ Another athlete of pain, Marc Pautrel, who publishes in limited editions, has a range of traumas that is just as broad. In *Orpheline* (2014), he recounts the pain of a secret that is too much to bear ("She tries to keep her secrets. But these secrets are too heavy and the evidence is clear, impossible to hide: she no longer has her parents"³⁰) and the long inner journey that leads to her liberation from "unbearable suffering."³¹ *L'Homme pacifique* (2009) recounts the final agonies of an old man who speaks with the narrator up until his death ("Though he's sick and nearing the end of his life, he keeps speaking; four days before his death, we talk on the phone for half an hour [. . .] there are scenes to describe, more scenes to describe, nothing must be forgotten").³² *Polar* (2009) portrays a bipolar girl who

26 See Delphine de Vigan, "Mes jambes coupées," in *Mots pour maux: nouvelles*, preface by Philippe Grimbert, Paris, Gallimard, 2008.

27 D. de Vigan, *Jours sans faim: roman*, Paris, J'ai lu, 2008, p. 117. Regarding anorexia cured by literature, also see the wonderful account by Tieri Briet, *Fixer le ciel au mur*, Arles, Éd. du Rouergue, 2014, and the novel by Geneviève Brisac, *Petite*, Paris, Éd. de l'Olivier, 1994.

28 Delphine de Vigan, *Rien ne s'oppose à la nuit: roman*, Paris, JC Lattès, 2011, p. 18. English translation from *Nothing Holds Back the Night*, trans. George Miller, London, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 18.

29 Vigan, *Rien*, p. 151–152. English translation, p. 125.

30 Marc Pautrel, *Orpheline: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "L'Infini," 2014, p. 21.

31 Pautrel, *Orpheline*, p. 82.

32 Marc Pautrel, *L'Homme pacifique: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "L'Infini," 2009, p. 58.

commits suicide in front of the narrator (and it concludes with a remission: “the nightmare is over, but the suffering remains”).³³ *Un voyage humain* (2010) recounts the shock experienced by a man whose dreams of becoming a father are dashed when the baby is miscarried: “When I describe a very difficult scene [. . .] once the writing is done, there is almost a joy, or at least a contentment,”³⁴ the author explains. Literary expression acts as a catharsis for other issues. Whether it is Ernaux writing about the loss of virginity or Angot about incest, the guiding principle in this literature is the use of words to triumph over shame.³⁵ Thus, in Hélène Duffau’s *Trauma* (2003) there is a lengthy description, narrated in the first person, of the strategies and methods a woman’s uses to overcome being raped, while Danièle Sallenave’s *Viol: six entretiens, quelques lettres et une conversation finale*, (1997) establishes a fictional psychotherapeutic device. In this book, which is addressed to victims, an investigator is able to get a mother whose child was traumatized by her incestuous spouse to talk. This place the writer has provided for her to speak is filled with her courage: “I said to myself: ‘If I talk to her, well, I don’t know. But it will, at least, be less awful.”³⁶

Autobiography and psychotherapy

“I am. I am better. To convince myself of this, all I have to do is reread this manuscript: over the course of the pages, I’ve progressed from common pain to a particular sorrow,”³⁷ writes Françoise Chandernagor in her desire to “regain control of the situation”³⁸ through her narrative, to survive her break-up and to learn, in keeping with the contemporary hedonistic-individualist credo, “to be good to someone who will appreciate it: myself.”³⁹ Yet depicting the steps that could very well also be found in magazines does mean that the novelist runs the risk of creating a therapeutic narrative lacking any literary dimension. This explains her refusal to deal with “common pain” that could be accused of lacking originality and her compli-

33 M. Pautrel, *Polaire: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “L’Infini,” 2013, p. 14.

34 M. Pautrel, “Ma vie n’est qu’un prétexte à pouvoir écrire,” interview with Philippe Bouret, in *Écrire, c’est vivre: les Entretiens de Brive*, Paris, Éd. Michèle, 2015, p. 8.

35 Regarding this very important theme, see Jean-Pierre Martin, *Le Livre des hontes*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll. “Fiction & Cie,” 2006, and *Sigilia: revue transdisciplinaire franco-portugaise sur le secret*, no. 14, Autumn-Winter 2004 (“La Honte, gris-france”).

36 Danièle Sallenave, *Viol: six entretiens, quelques lettres et une conversation finale* (1997), Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio,” 1999, p. 184.

37 Françoise Chandernagor, *La Première Épouse*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 246.

38 Chandernagor, *La Première*, p. 254.

39 Chandernagor, *La Première*, p. 225.

cated negotiation with the nature of her narrative and the uses of literature. Chandernagor, a member of the Académie française, must by all means scornfully differentiate her way of healing from the artistic therapies practiced by ordinary mortals:

My mother, who has never read Freud, supports the medical point of view espoused by her two aunts: “I don’t see what pleasure you can find in talking about your husband . . . But anyway, if it gets you to ‘sublimate’! At the end of the day, you novelists are lucky: paper soaks it all up, the sorrows, the complexes! You can get all the worst out, all the dirt, find some relief for yourselves!” Inspiration? No, expectoration. The novel as a spittoon, art as an outlet, a handkerchief, an enema, a toilet flush . . .

How to make others understand that painting, music, and writing purges only those who are not painters, musicians, or writers? Writing a book about my husband does me good, not because I complain in it, but because I write it: I work, wrangle with words, struggle with the Angel all night long – it is not the cry but the style that heals.⁴⁰

The case of Chloé Delaume is perhaps the most representative of the literary richness of the genre, which is far from being simply restricted to the one paradigm of raw testimony. In response to an unusual family drama, literature is used in ways that are no less extraordinary, combining the violent extraversion of experience with intense symbolization. The author, as she repeats with every book, has made herself a “fictional character” so as to escape the “sordid narration” of “family fiction”:⁴¹ just as she does not seek to inhabit a stable identity, she does not propose a directly therapeutic outcome for literature. The narrator explains to a suicidal reader:

She took the trauma as incontrovertible proof: since the horror is true, there is literature. She hadn’t grasped that a wound on its own scarcely makes a sound, but I could not tell her the truth.

I advised her to consult someone, someone qualified. To find the right form, to ask herself why she was writing. If what she needed was to write or if it was to be published. Creation or Recognition. Personal accomplishment vs Social status. [. . .] I told her that literature was in no way a therapy, that it was probably the opposite.⁴²

Such denials might seem surprising: but as in Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, they serve as a bulwark against a biographizing reductionism in the name of a higher and more aristocratic notion of the literary profession by paying its dues to the values of autotelism. According to these values, literature only applies when per-

40 Chandernagor, *La Première*, p. 223.

41 C. Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre*, p. 204.

42 C. Delaume, *Une femme avec personne dedans*, p. 11.

sonal passions are overcome in the name of a universalist postulate. This opposition between a literature of mere expressive creation and purgation, on the one hand, and entry into the external and common circuits of valorization, on the other, could not be any clearer; it only remains for Delaume to complement her refutation with another one:

I don't write to heal from thanatopathy, no, not at all. The unique objective, the sole motivation, is to modify the real. Writing so as not to die can only be meaningless. I write to deconstruct: modifying the real, fiction and language is an instrument of war.⁴³

To me, however, it still seems possible to apply a psychological interpretation to what Delaume transforms into a metaphysical question: in the face of a trauma as radical as the one that affects the writer, the use of writing as an ontological tool rather than a purely defensive one opens up the possibility of hoping for psychological gains greater than what could be hoped for with a precarious recovery. Rationales that are psychological (embracing a new identity rather than making do with the old one), political (transforming the world rather than dealing with it), and literary (preferring creation to imitation) converge to justify an indirect cathartic strategy that is more complex than mere purgation. *Dans ma maison sous terre* provides a good illustration of this: with this literary-existential narrative, the narrator seeks to recover from a “thirteenth suicide attempt in the winter of 2004”⁴⁴ by producing a book of revenge against a grandmother who is entirely devoid of empathy. The staging of a walk through the cemetery where the narrator’s mother (who was murdered) is buried takes on the character of a ritual of violent exorcism and psychomachia. Relief is achieved only through rage: “I don’t cry for my Mom anymore because I’ve been around her current residence, so that’s one good thing, at least. [. . .] The anger within must have soaked up everything”:⁴⁵ if it is indeed a question, as Delaume explains, of “not reducing autofiction to a therapeutic process, with the reader taken hostage and embedded behind the sofa,”⁴⁶ the genre, like other forms that narrate traumatic experience, offers forms of literary catharsis of varying complexity (Delaume speaks willingly of empowerment and *verbothérapie*).⁴⁷ “Everyone has their own traumas that in-

⁴³ Delaume, *Une femme*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Delaume, *Dans ma maison sous terre*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Delaume, *Dans ma maison*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ Delaume, *La Règle du Je*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Chloé Delaume, spoken lecture for “Auteurs en scènes. Lieux et régimes de visibilité des écrivains contemporains,” June 3, 2016, Université Paris 7-Diderot.

evitably reappear in self-writing, since it engages directly with life,”⁴⁸ explains the inventor of the genre, Serge Doubrovsky. Some literary forms are based on the values of testimony and authenticity, whereas others prefer the accreditation offered by a complex work that is formal and narrative, or even the use of the novel: here we see a return to the opposition made in Anglo-American countries between therapeutic art that is expressive and therapeutic art that is creative, between writing viewed as an outlet and writing viewed as displacement and reappropriation.

“Samuel Beckett wrote, ‘When you’re up to your neck in shit, the only thing left to do is sing.’ If his example were to become widespread, we would live in music,” Chantal Thomas quipped, reflecting on the modern forms of the plaint.⁴⁹ It is also as if, confronted with a notion of writing that reduces it to a process for exorcising post-traumatic disorders (“PTSD”), now so widely known, literature had to remind us how it differentiates itself from mere decompensation and from the ordinary use of language. This is because, as Jakobson noted, one of the primary functions of language is the expression of mental states proper to human emotions. Therefore, literature should preserve itself as an autonomous field for the creation of meaning and value while simultaneously accounting for, in terms of the therapeutic dimension, what is both a humanistic imperative for utility and a way of justifying a contemporary literary production that is considered to be threatened. This accounts for the theory of “relocating” that rejects the idea of a “translation” but assents to the idea of a transfer. This hypothesis is reminiscent of the way Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, made literary displacement a means for re-evaluating the traumatic experience by allowing subjects to develop their own exit scenarios. “I have good reason to think that the psychoanalytical faith in the healthy powers of speech (as opposed to the ravages of silence) is well founded,”⁵⁰ Emmanuel Carrère writes in *Lives Other than My Own* to explain how his encounters with suffering gave him a different understanding of writing. Without even managing to organize subjective experience, writing would thus participate in the social sharing of an interiority that would be freed of its fantasies. The latter, through metaphorized or symbolized expression,

48 P. Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*, p. 192.

49 Chantal Thomas, *Souffrir*, “La Plainte,” Paris, Payot, 2004, p. 165.

50 Emmanuel Carrère, *D'autres vies que la mienne*, Paris, P.O.L., 2009, p. 288; English translation from *Lives Other than My Own*, trans. Linda Coverdale, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2011, p. 226.

would assume a shareable form. This procedure can be easily compared with the work of psychotherapeutic practices.⁵¹

Such a version of literary work, considered as an outlet for the psyche and a form of ordinary “speech,” obviously gives rise to reservations in a French literary tradition that is determined by a demand for stylistic and narrative recreation of affects, not only in the case of Richard Millet (who believes that now “[t]he novel is a homeopathic psychoanalysis”)⁵² but also in the case of the subtly ironic observer, the novelist and dramatist Olivier Cadiot, who writes in *Histoire de la littérature récente*:

All throughout the day, we hear over and over that talking is good, vital, and necessary. *Verbalizing* is enough to make bad memories disappear. While you’re at it, let’s bring in a mobile psychiatric trauma treatment unit for each of our worries. *Dear miracle survivors of the recent plane crash: it’s time to say everything. Or else it will stay? But where? In the throat? Blood, fluid, a ball of mucus and straw that blocks your lungs. I will leave you only a thin stream of air,* says the Lord somewhere.

Literature does not push anything through. It just makes what is happening coexist peacefully. You can only translate – not *translate*, in the sense of revealing in another language – but rather transport every little pebble, every spark, every feeling into a dense and white space. It’s a big move, with everything stored in a bespoke case.⁵³

Cadiot attempts to take a stand by trying to understand the forms of literature’s “intervention” and by portraying the term in the process. His position is somewhat unclear, and his solution is as well; these are representative of the contemporary discomfort with the idea of a traumatic source of literature and its therapeutic mission. This tension, which is at least as old as Romanticism, opposes an emotivist way of thinking about expression (thus, for Germaine de Staël, to whom we owe our modern conception of literature, “great thoughts come from the heart”⁵⁴) and the desire to master and rank emotions that is derived from the classical “art of distance” and that was recovered with the turn of art for art’s sake (“The first quality of Art and its goal is *illusion*. Emotion, which is often obtained by certain sacrifici-

51 See for example Judith Lacoue-Labarthe, “Regards croisés sur le domaine ‘littérature et psychologie,’” *Atelier Fabula*, 12 Nov. 2011, www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Litterature_et_psychologie.

52 Richard Millet, *L’Enfer du roman*, fragment 541, p. 272.

53 O. Cadiot, *Histoire de la littérature récente*, p. 10–11.

54 G. de Staël-Holstein, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, p. 496.

ces of poetic details, is something quite different and of an inferior order,” wrote Flaubert).⁵⁵ Yet it is as if the contemporary conception of literature could not totally free itself from the expressivist idea of Romanticism that grafts expression onto authentic and personal emotion, though without resigning itself to the idea that writing could become a mere literary transposition of suffering.

55 Gustave Flaubert, letter from September 16, 1853 to Louise Colet; online at the site for the Centre Flaubert de l’université de Rouen: flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/conard/lettres/lettres1.html. Author’s emphasis.

Chapter 6

The virtues of reading

I don't remember that reading *Grand Meaulnes* cured me of my teenage polymorphic acne. The writer as healer or sorcerer – isn't that just another illusion engendered by our dream of a performative literature that is actually capable of biting into the real with the word *jaw*? Éric Chevillard, "SOS-Écrivains"¹

The bibliotherapeutic dream

The homeostatic version of literature as a spillway for a process of affect regulation draws on the psychoanalytical conception of literature as the expression of the repressed and the sublimation of impulses. From this perspective, literature is considered as more or less voluntary psychotherapy for both author and reader, who repeat and relive the emotions of the text internally. Evidence for this is found in the way psychologists' reflections on literature are no longer limited to viewing it as an expression of neurosis but as a constructive processes.² While it was viewed as an affliction in the Romantic period, literature has become a treatment, with literary value being measured by its therapeutic effectiveness, not only for the author who heals their own traumas by verbalizing them but also for the reader who finds relief in the book. One of the elements of the contemporary turn is the insistence on the therapeutic role not only of the production of meaning through writing, but also of simply reading, even if the books don't have an expressly curative purpose. The models are ancient: according to the Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily, the entrance to the library of Ramses II bore the inscription "the house of healing for the soul";³ Montesquieu wrote in 1726 that he had "never had a sorrow that an hour of reading did not dispel";⁴ Proust suggested that reading could be "a kind of curative discipline."⁵ In its most

1 Éric Chevillard, "SOS-Écrivains," *Le Monde des livres*, April 23, 2015.

2 See Anne Brun and Bernard Chouvier (eds), *Les Enjeux psychopathologiques de l'acte créateur*, Brussels, De Boeck Supérieur, coll. "Oxalis," 2011.

3 See Jonathan Bate and Andrew Schuman, "The Art of Medicine. Books Do Furnish a Mind: The Art and Science of Bibliotherapy," *The Lancet*, vol. 387, February 20, 2016.

4 Montesquieu, *Pensées diverses*, in *Œuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, vol 7, ed. Édouard Laboulaye, Paris, Garnier frères, 1879, p. 151.

5 Marcel Proust, "Journées de lecture" (1906), in *Contre Sainte-Beuve, précédé de Pastiches et mélanges, et suivi de Essais et articles*, ed. Pierre Clarac and Yves Sandre, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade," 1971, pp. 160–194, cit. p. 178.

common contemporary version, literature – be it Balzac or the works known as “feel-good novels” – will help you understand yourself and be attentive to others.

The reading historian Brian Stock has shown the importance of the spiritual tradition of ethical reading from Augustine to Wittgenstein; he reminds us that “Western readers have always read for enjoyment, but that, within such enjoyment, they have consistently included an ethical design,”⁶ despite the decline of a reading tradition based on meditation and visualization. Countering Montaigne’s skepticism about lessons to be derived from reading, Stock argues for its ethical and psychotherapeutic virtues in a contemporary world where “the scientific appreciation of mind-body practices is expanding at all levels of society,”⁷ an idea that is accompanied across the Channel by a retrospective interest in the therapeutic uses of ancient wisdom literature.⁸ In the modern sense, the term “bibliotherapy” emerged in the wake of American transcendentalism just a century ago in a kind of humorous prophecy called “A Literary Clinic,”⁹ written by the American pastor and essayist Samuel McChord Crothers, who was an admirer of Emerson. In the United States, it has become one of the possibilities offered by the vast array of “art therapies” and is complemented, in a less medical version, by the practice of book counseling. Based on the idea, now quite common, that “we need stories to live,” Régine Detambel, who is also a physical therapist by profession, offers various writing workshops with a therapeutic purpose. Her book *Les livres prennent soin de nous: pour une bibliothérapie creative* [Books Take Care of Us: for a Creative Bibliotherapy] presents the following program: “In cases of physical or psychological distress, with disability or in old age, books allow us to create or restore a space ‘of our own.’”¹⁰ From the psychoanalytical side, there is also Marc-Alain Ouaknin¹¹

6 Brian Stock, *Ethics through Literature: Ascetic and Aesthetic Reading in Western Culture*, Hanover, London, UP of New England, 2007, p. 135.

7 Brian Stock, “Minds, Bodies, Readers,” *New Literary History*, vol. 37, no. 3, Summer 2006, pp. 489–501, p. 492.

8 See, for example, the volume by Stephen Bertman and Lois Parker, *The Healing Power of Ancient Literature*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, or the wonderful book by Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, London, Vintage, 2010.

9 Samuel McChord Crothers, “A Literary Clinic,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 118, no. 3, Sept. 1916, pp. 291–301. On the origin of the practice, see Ceridwen Dovey, “Can Reading Make You Happier?,” *The New Yorker*, 9 June 9, 2015.

10 R. Detambel, *Les livres prennent soin de nous*, back cover; see, in the same genre, Élodie Chaumette, a clinical psychologist and literary columnist for France Culture, *Ces livres peuvent changer votre vie*, Paris, First, 2016.

11 See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie: lire, c’est guérir*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, coll. “La Couleur des idées,” 1994.

and his suggestion to use “bibliotherapy” to re-establish our private hermeneutics by playing with the meaning of words, and from the world of general medicine there is Pierre-André Bonnet’s essay, *La Bibliothérapie en médecine Générale* [Bibliotherapy in General Medicine].¹² Interested in both self-help books and general literature, Bonnet showed that while 80% of the general practitioners he surveyed were unaware of the term “bibliotherapy,” 53% had already offered “reading recommendations” in the context of a general medical consultation,¹³ with 94% of patients willing to accept reading advice from their doctor.¹⁴ Works with more or less scientific approaches that served as inspiration for Detambel, such as those by Michèle Petit (*Éloge de la lecture: la construction de soi*¹⁵ and *L’Art de lire ou comment résister dans l’adversité*),¹⁶ emphasize the role of reading as a form of resilience “in times of crisis,” as based on examples of mobile libraries, reading circles, and reading workshops in Latin America, where novels exercised a “restorative power”¹⁷ for drug addicts, people who were sick, and even former guerrillas.

In the Anglo-American world, these theories are even more common. They are found in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of “reparative reading,”¹⁸ which has become known among feminists as the “reparative turn,”¹⁹ as well as in a

12 Pierre-André Bonnet, *La Bibliothérapie en médecine générale*, Paris, Sauramps médical, 2013, a work that resulted from a dissertation (voir *infra*). Also see the fine overview by Léa Guidi, “La bibliothérapie, pratique médicale méconnue en France,” “Monde du Livre” blog, June 5, 2013 (:mondedulivre.hypotheses.org/1700), as well as an assessment of scientific literature about bibliotherapy in the context of the hospital by Isabelle Blondiaux, *La lecture peut-elle soigner? Lecture et soins palliatifs, enquête bibliographique et mise en perspective*, unpublished thesis, Université Paris VI, UFR Saint-Antoine-Tenon, 2008. Regarding writing experiments in psychiatry, see the dissertation by Sara Bedard-Goulet, *Lecture et réparation psychique: le potentiel thérapeutique du dispositif littéraire*, Littératures. Université Toulouse le Mirail – Toulouse II/ Université de Montréal, 2012, tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00846001/document.

13 Pierre-André Bonnet, *La Bibliothérapie en médecine générale: médecine humaine et pathologie*, dissertation by l’Université Aix-Marseille II, 2009, pp. 52–53; tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00641546/document.

14 Bonnet, *La Bibliothérapie*, p. 69.

15 Michèle Petit, *Éloge de la lecture: la construction de soi*, Paris, Belin, coll. “Nouveaux mondes,” 2002.

16 Michèle Petit, *L’Art de lire ou comment résister dans l’adversité*, Paris, Belin, coll. “Nouveaux mondes,” 2008.

17 Petit, *L’Art de lire*, pp. 140–145.

18 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham (NC), Duke UP, 2002, pp. 150–151.

19 See Robyn Wiegman, “The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘Turn’” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 15, no. 1, Apr. 2014, pp. 4–25. In French, this queer perspective, consisting of “diminishing the binary clichés that have served as foregone conclusions for a long time,” especially “separations, binarisms, divisions, dualisms existing between nature-culture,

plethora of manuals and essays for the general public. In *Art as Therapy*, Alain de Botton proposes to make literature a “therapy” with indications that far exceed mere consolation or entertainment: every novel can serve as a self-help manual for overcoming the tensions and frustrations of daily life.²⁰ Another one of his books, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*,²¹ “reveals Proust’s thoughts on how to revive a relationship, choose a good doctor, enjoy a holiday, make friends and respond to insult,”²² with the emphatic reminder that Proust was simply continuing the work of his father, a physician, by making reading a therapy – an idea that would be echoed in French author François-Bernard Michel’s²³ *Le Professeur Marcel Proust*. In the same genre, Roger Housden offers *Ten Poems to Change Your Life* (2001) as well as other collections with a similar aim: ten poems to say goodbye, to set you free, to open your heart, etc. The recent British manual *Literary Remedies: Healing Yourself with Books* offers remedies for “neglect, alcoholism, baldness, heartache, backache, hemorrhoids, high blood pressure, insomnia, jealousy, motherhood, obesity, hay fever, loneliness, [and] aging,”²⁴ arguing that “[f]or several decades, bibliotherapy has been very successful in the form of practical self-help books. But lovers of literature have been using novels as balms – consciously or unconsciously – for centuries.²⁵ Deceptively light, the entries often touch on serious subjects (for example, “Cancer, caring for someone suffering from”) and offer a particularly original way of reading, combining words of guidance with explanations of the examples provided by the works; when dealing with adultery, the literary manual states, “Having an affair does not always destroy a long-term partnership, and if you’re the aggrieved spouse who suspects or knows that your partner is having an affair, it’s worth taking courage from Siri

sex-gender, body-mind, imaginary world-real world,” is offered by Émilie Notéris, *La Fiction réparatrice*, Paris, Supernova, 2017, p. 20.

²⁰ See Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, *Art as Therapy*, London and New York, Phaidon, 2013. Also see William Deresiewicz, *A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and the Things That Really Matter*, New York, Penguin Press, 2011.

²¹ A. de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, New York, Vintage International, 1997.

²² Presentation of the book on Alain de Botton’s site, alaindebotton.com/literature/.

²³ François-Bernard Michel, *Le Professeur Marcel Proust: essai*, Paris, Gallimard, “Hors série Connaissance,” 2016.

²⁴ Presentation of the book on the site for JC Lattès, www.editions-jclattes.fr/remedes-litteraires-9782709648639.

²⁵ Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, *The Novel Cure: From Abandonment to Zestlessness: 751 Books to Cure What Ails You*, New York, Penguin Books, 2014, Introduction. See the presentation of the book on the site “The Novel Cure” (: thenovelcure.com) as well as the article by Gavin Francis, “The Novel Cure by Susan Elderkin and Ella Berthoud – Review,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2013, : <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/18/novel-cure-elderkin-berthoud-review>.

Hustvedt's *The Summer Without Men*.²⁶ Ella Berthoud and Susan Elderkin, the authors of *The Novel Cure*, are not alone: since the 2000s, bibliotherapeutic practices were actually institutionalized in Wales (where 30,000 self-help books are now borrowed each year, with three of the self-help titles figuring among the ten most borrowed books) to then go mainstream in England. A non-governmental organization called the Reading Agency, which has the slogan "When you read, everything changes,"²⁷ distributed a list of 30 titles that could be "prescribed"²⁸ based on medical studies²⁹ showing the impact of reading on depression. These examples have found their way into *The School of Life*, a private English personal development institute that Alain de Botton, Ella Berthoud, and Susan Elderkin participate in and that has enjoyed success worldwide.³⁰ French attempts to imitate the genre still seem decidedly bland – consider, for example, *Bon pour le moral: 40 livres pour se faire du bien* (2010), a collection written by the academic Christine Marcandier for the Seuil paperback collection; Stéphanie Janicot's *Cent romans de première urgence pour (presque) tout soigner* (2008); and Michaël Uras's *Aux petits mots les grands remèdes* (2016).³¹

"Reading doesn't do anything, doesn't add anything, it lets what is, be," said Maurice Blanchot.³² No statement could run more counter to the "ordinary" statements about the values of reading such as those collected by literary forums like Babelio or Lecteurs.com and that ought to be explored as the object of a quantitative study. To cite one example among many, a discussion on "life-changing" books reveals many converging positions that focus on the idea of comfort ("I have often been very withdrawn, but when I read I feel like I can do what I want without fear of being hurt. In reading I find comfort when I'm not well or when

26 E. Berthoud and S. Elderkin, *The Novel Cure*, art. "Adultery," p. 9.

27 "Because everything changes when we read," see the "The Reading Agency" site.; <https://readingagency.org.uk>.

28 See Martial Brown, "GPs to Prescribe Self-Help Books for Mental Health Problems," *The Guardian*, 31 January 2013.; www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jan/31/gps-prescribe-self-help-books.

29 See Christopher Williams, Philip Wilson, Jill Morrison, Alex McMahon, Andrew Walker, et al., "Guided Self-Help Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Depression in Primary Care: A Randomised Controlled Trial," *PLoS ONE*, January 11, 2013.; [dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0052735](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0052735).

30 See Mathilde Carton, "The School of Life, à la recherche de soi," *Les inRocks*, 16 July 2014.; www.lesinrocks.com/2014/07/16/style/the-school-of-life-a-la-recherche-de-soi-11840040/.

31 Christine Marcandier, *Bon pour le moral: 40 livres pour se faire du bien ! Un guide réalisé par Christine Marcandier-Bry*, Paris, Éd. Points, 2010; Stéphanie Janicot, *Cent romans de première urgence pour (presque) tout soigner*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2008; Michaël Uras, *Aux petits mots les grands remèdes*, Paris, LGF-Préludes, 2016.

32 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Folio essais," 1996, p. 255.

I'm angry, reading helps me to stay calm, not to lose my temper with others" or "during a long, long period of hospitalization, a person and his books and audio tapes helped me a lot to fight my way out").³³ Bibliotherapy, far from simply eliciting ridicule, has produced reactions that are highly reminiscent of those made in response to writings about trauma: the paradigm has been broadly disseminated and become commonplace among communities of readers, with the system of literary values yielding to it little by little. As such, Éric Chevillard, elsewhere an outspoken critic of literary utilitarianism and a defender of neo-formalism, uses surprisingly positive terms to describe Morten Søndergaard's novelty book, *A Pharmacy of Words* (2014) – "a little literary first-aid kit reminding us that words aspire to conquer evils, meaning that perhaps it's no longer necessary to bemoan the close proximity of the homonyms *mots* and *maux*"³⁴ – and Detambel's bibliotherapy. Overcoming his "desire to mock" and denouncing all instrumental illusion, the author of *La Nébuleuse du crabe* defends the underlying principle: "In situations of illness, failure, or confusion, we also suffer from a form of lyrical despair, with the evil triumphing since it cannot be moved to and then combatted in language. Bibliotherapy should make it possible to escape from this confusion through the rhythm, the precision of the writing, the power of the form,"³⁵ because to him it appears to be different from "the works of personal development, these destitute Coué methods that call on readers to be positive about their cancer, along with the lessons of wisdom à la Paulo Coelho, which have the effect, moreover, of depressing the fighting spirit and sickening the healthy body."³⁶ The eudemonistic and hedonistic use of literature leads to the suggestion that reading become just as much a tool as a resource for existential learning. Provided that the attack is not made head-on and that it is joined by the demands and values of restricted literature, these prescriptions for reading as an instrument of well-being and healing now participate in common discourse, readily drawing on "noble" references: Greek medicine, Proustian reflections, and the humanist notion of reading.

33 Messages posted on 22 January and 27 April 2016 on the forum "Les livres qui ont changé ma vie": www.babelio.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=223657&sid=64612c094e3bd5f70d483ff94e24a5b4.

34 É. Chevillard, "SOS-Écrivains."

35 Chevillard, "SOS-Écrivains."

36 Chevillard, "SOS-Écrivains."

The catharsis model

The guiding principle for describing this healing effect is catharsis, which modern readings have made a method for purging private as well as collective passions. Relatively vague in Aristotle, the concept is saturated with rather contradictory interpretations and it is still debated, despite William Marx's illuminating essay,³⁷ whether it is mythical, moral, medical, philosophical, cognitive, or psychoanalytical in nature.³⁸ While catharsis is specific to the theatre in Aristotle, contemporary references to the notion tend to eliminate the need for a dramatic representation or mimesis. In this regard, catharsis is assuming its independence and is moving into an ever-increasing number of creative fields, from performance to cinema, and is of interest to researchers and practitioners from all walks of life. In a broad sense, catharsis can be understood as a way to heal individuals of their hidden wounds, to create social cohesion around a common feeling (it is the political dream of Aristotelianism to use theater to reintegrate individuals troubled by their harmful emotions into the heart of the city), or else to take away individuals' social barriers, as imagined by Antonin Artaud.

The term is thus central to contemporary debates about the uses of reading by way of what is known in aesthetic philosophy as the "paradox of negative emotions." It is important to revisit this so as to better understand the growing number of various theses regarding the benefits of fiction, even if at the outset it simply related to the notion of pleasure: in what way are we to find well-being in feeling fear, despair, etc., when encountering a fictional narrative? This issue, also known as the "paradox of tragedy" or the "paradox of horror,"³⁹ has been addressed in numerous ways, both from the perspective of the philosophy of art and of the cognitive sciences, providing just as many models for understanding the cathartic phenomenon. To borrow from the American philosopher Jerrold Levinson's method of classification,⁴⁰ the possible philosophical interpretations are of several types. The first hypothesis is that of "compensation": the pains are outnumbered by the pleasures and thus forgotten, and this makes it possible for us to experience aesthetic

37 See William Marx, *Le Tombeau d'Édipe: pour une tragédie sans tragique*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, coll. "Paradoxe," 2012.

38 See the interpretations collected by Marc Escola on the *Atelier Fabula* site, www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Catharsis_d%27Aristote_%26grave%3B_Freud.

39 See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, New York, Routledge, 1990. Also Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Pity and Fear Fictions?," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 21, 1981, pp. 291–304.

40 See Jerrold Levinson, "Emotion in Response to Art," in J. Levinson (ed), *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2006, p. 51–54. Also see the collective work directed by the same author, *Suffering Art Gladly: The Paradox of Negative Emotion in Art*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

pleasure before an ugly or repulsive object, with the spectator's terror purged and transformed. The second explanatory hypothesis relates to a phenomenon of "conversion": according to Hume, during a performance or a reading, the aesthetic qualities of the work, be they poetic or rhetorical, lead us to mentally transform the suffering into overall pleasure. Another "organicist" hypothesis affirms that art requires us to accept contradictory and complementary emotions, both positive and negative, and that the relevance of negative emotions to the whole is even a determining criterion for the overall evaluation of the work. Yet another thesis: according to the "revisionist" explanation, only the subject determines the positive and negative "valence" of emotions. Finally, according to the "deflationary" hypothesis, represented in particular by Kendall Walton,⁴¹ the emotions we experience are not really about the characters and are not similar to ordinary emotions; they are only artistic variants of our emotional range that are activated in a game of make-believe. The word is thus used in very different senses, whether to characterize the directly therapeutic way in which expressing real experiences and testimonies supposedly provides relief for victims or the regulating and immunizing manner in which the staging of repressed passions is supposed to manage them. This distinction overlaps with but remains separate from the opposition between the catharsis of the author and that of the reader and spectators, as well as the opposition between personal trauma and collective trauma.

Whatever the word might have meant for Aristotle and whatever underlying explanation there might be for the concept, nobody doubts its power: it is clear how important the term is in art therapy and bibliotherapy manuals as well as in discourses on literature, with it providing direct or indirect healing of trauma through the text. This is based on empirical claims and a rather vague psychological and physiological foundation, as Nelson Goodman explains mockingly:

The problem of tragedy and the paradox of ugliness are tailor-made for ancient and modern Freudians, who have not passed on the opportunity. Tragedy is said to have the effect of purging us of pent-up and hidden negative emotions or of administering measured doses of the killed virus to prevent or mitigate the ravages of an actual attack. Art becomes not only palliative but therapeutic, providing both a substitute for the reality that is good and a safeguard against the one that is bad. Theatres and museums function as auxiliaries to departments of Public Health.⁴²

⁴¹ See Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard UP, 1990, or, also by the same author, *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2015.

⁴² Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, Second Edition, 1976, p. 246.

In a paradigmatic crossover, literary theory provides for Freudianism as psychoanalysis draws its models from fiction. In *Healing Fiction* (1983), Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman masterfully demonstrated to what extent case studies since Freud have been fictions the leitmotiv of which is: “*the main character enters therapy*.”⁴³ This fictionalizing vision of Freudianism was in accordance with the linguistic consideration of the subject among the Lacanians and became subject to intense debate in the world of psychoanalysis as well as literary theory,⁴⁴ and in the process this encouraged the inclusion of reading as an element in healing in medical psychology. In the same way that writing workshops provided the social and therapeutic version of autobiography, the vocal exercises, psychodramas, and plays of “art therapy” make catharsis the direct ancestor to expressive therapies.⁴⁵ They are based on a rather hazy Freudianism – or alternatively, in a more modern way, on the somaesthetics promoted by Richard Shusterman, which seek to produce practical experiences “aimed at somatic self-improvement”⁴⁶ on the basis of texts, which themselves play a very minor role.

Literature as exorcism

Another version of the theory of purgation, freed to an extent from the connotations linked to theatrical catharsis and recentered on trauma, can be found in a notion of literature as exorcism: literature is believed to rid the soul of its specters through a kind of system of communicating vessels. Here, we remain within the framework of a homeopathy that aims to drive out suffering by reactivating it in a different way. But far from perpetuating and safeguarding images, writing comes to aid the writer in getting rid of them. “[B]y describing accurately the nocturnal monsters that threaten to invade my waking life I am writing in order to destroy them,”⁴⁷ writes Alain Robbe-Grillet regarding his autobiography, *Le Miroir qui re-*

43 James Hillman, *Healing Fiction*, New York, Station Hill, 1983, p. 13.

44 See especially the chapter Dorrit Cohn dedicates to this topic in *The Distinction of Fiction*, Baltimore (MD), London, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999 pp. 38 et seq.

45 See Stephen K. Levine and Ellen G. Levine (eds), *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspective*, 1999, London, Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 228 and 230.

46 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge UP, 2008, p. 29. Regarding the “therapeutic” version of somaesthetics, see Dorota Koczanowicz: “‘You Must Change Your Life’: Pragmatism and the Therapeutic Function of Art,” in D. Koczanowicz and Wojciech Małecki (eds), *Shusterman’s Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2012.

47 A. Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient*, p. 17; *Ghosts in the Mirror*, p. 20.

vient, but also about his novels intended to “exorcise [. . .] ghosts.”⁴⁸ More recently, Jacques Borel declared that he wrote so as “to exorcise demons (or anguish) that might otherwise devour him.”⁴⁹ This is certainly a far cry from the exorcisms of Henri Michaux and his lyrical poeticizing (in 1945 he wrote, “In the very place of suffering and fixation, there is the introduction of such exaltation, such magnificent violence united with the hammering of the words that the evil is gradually dissolved to then be replaced by a demonic and aerial ball – a marvelous state!”),⁵⁰ even if the author is to be credited with a way of thinking that uses medical metaphors to describe the work of art, in particular the concept of “anaphylaxy” to consider the sensory intensification as induced by art.⁵¹ Exorcism actually expresses a non-mystical but more broadly psychological use of writing as a possible way to drive out inner disturbances. This is closer to the way in which art therapy strives to heal through expression⁵² and to provide a pragmatic outlet, whether for cries of emotion or more elaborate expressions of fantasy. Still other formulations are possible: Johannes Türk borrows the concept of vaccination from Walter Benjamin, who uses it in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* to describe the cultural technique of preparing for exile by writing about one’s childhood, and from Freud the idea of an “immunological memory,” a metapsychological prophylaxis. Türk suggests that certain uses of literature can be traced back to the quest for immunity in the face of mental suffering. He thus argues that through “[b]y being afraid of jealousy and by hypostasizing it, Proust’s text tries to develop an emotional immune system in the face of death.”⁵³ This is akin to the Stoics’ spiritual exercises of immunization that had an importance in the philosophical tradition as recalled by Pierre Hadot.⁵⁴

Let us provisionally conclude that the question of emotions authorized or provoked by literature has been eclipsed by several decades of literary research centered on formal interrogations as well as a disdain for problematics that “psychologize.” Yet the focus now is for literary criticism and writers’ metadiscourses

48 Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir*, p. 16; *Ghosts in the Mirror*, p. 19.

49 J. Borel, *Propos sur l'autobiographie*, p. 14.

50 Henri Michaux, *Épreuves, exorcismes, 1940–1944* (1945), Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Poésie,” 1995, p. 7.

51 See Gérard Danou, “Henri Michaux et la médecine de soi,” in Gérard Danou and Christian Noorbergen (eds), *Henri Michaux est-il seul?*, proceedings from the Cerisy conference (1999), Troyes, *Les Cahiers bleus*, no. 13, 2001, pp. 35–44; Jérôme Roger, *Henri Michaux, poésie pour savoir*, Lyon, PU Lyon, 2000, pp. 208–209.

52 See S. K. Levine and E. G. Levine (eds), *Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy*, p. 97 et seq.

53 Johannes Türk, “Rituals of Dying, Burrows of Anxiety in Freud, Proust, and Kafka: Prolegomena to a Critical Immunology,” *The Germanic Review*, vol. 82, no. 2, pp. 141–156, this quote p. 151.

54 See especially Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2nd edn, Paris, Études augustiniennes, 1987, pp. 26 et seq.

to offer, with reading configured as emotion, imaginative and new solutions to ordinary suffering – individual cathartic therapies that are legitimized at a later stage by discourses on the social uses of reading. Whether speaking of mithridatization, exorcism, transitional displacement, or catharsis, the underlying mechanism remains opaque. Is it necessary to identify with the character of a novel if one hopes to emerge changed and healed from an encounter with a work of art? What should the reading subjects' involvement be? What about their capacity for concentration and empathy or, conversely, abandonment? Although multiple disciplines have attempted to shed light on this issue, what remains most important is to see that the novelty and vitality invigorating research on the broad pragmatics of textual effects, in the cognitive sciences and in psychological and sociological theories of reception and reading, result from the ethical turn of literary studies and the naturalist turn of epistemology in their attempts to elucidate contemporary literary forms. The latter are difficult to describe using conventional generic and formal criteria because they have become devices in having renounced the dogma of intransitivity and incommunicability and in inviting us to think less in terms of meaning and hermeneutics than of effects and therapeutics.

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Facing Disease

Chapter 7

Literature in the clinic

To begin the healing process, perhaps all it takes is a sentence, just one: this one, for example. Bernard Pingaud, *Écrire jour et nuit*.¹

Alongside a reactionary writing that responds to trauma by describing it to purge it, there has been a development since the 1980s onwards a literature of support (*accompagnement*) for illness that draws a very similar expressive paradigm. Eventually, starting in the 2000s, it gave rise to forms of direct intervention in hospitals. If reflections on how to make good use of disease are at least as old as humanism, the way in which contemporary writers take on the nosological narrative directly and without the mediation of fictional settings is new. With these texts, autobiography contributes to psychological resilience without necessarily responding to a dream of eternity. In what Céline Lafontaine has referred to as “the post-mortal society,” with the quest for “bionomy,” an optimization of the body imported from the managerial model,² an intensified concern for the self-driving medicine to push the limits of age and death, literature serves writers and their metadiscourses in the re-evaluation of life’s limits: it allows us to regain control with a view to psychologically triumphing over the limits of biological possibilities. Consider, for example, Jean-Dominique Bauby’s *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, which present the recollections of a man left completely paralyzed and who “patiently extracted from the void”³ a story dictated by the blink of his single working eye, overcoming a logistical challenge that proved so fascinating that the book became a bestseller. For Stéphane Grisi, who adds three other works from the end of the twentieth century – Thomas Bernhard’s writings on his tuberculosis, Fritz Zorn on his cancer, and William Styron on his depression – to Hervé Guibert’s texts, it is even possible to speak of the birth of a genre, autopathography,⁴ starting in the 1980s. Its purpose, from the Freudian perspective, is to “achieve the author’s ego restoration” and to “counterbalance the painful experi-

1 Bernard Pingaud, *Écrire jour et nuit*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 157.

2 Céline Lafontaine, *La Société postmortelle: la mort, l’individu et le lien social à l’ère des technosciences*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2008, pp. 138–139.

3 Jean-Dominique Bauby, *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1997, p. 136. English translation from: *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly: A Memoir of Life in Death*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt, New York, Vintage Books, 1997, p. 131.

4 Stéphane Grisi, *Dans l’intimité des maladies: de Montaigne à Hervé Guibert*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, coll. “L’Intelligence du corps,” 1996, p. 25.

ence of inner personality splitting caused by the illness.”⁵ In any case, what these stories have in common is their healing ambition: “What seems to us to be fairly new in the last twenty years or so is a certain recognition of the therapeutic virtue of writing without literary pretensions, so-called ordinary writing, which is asserted through stories that adhere to the lived medical experience,” as Gérard Danou noted in 2001.⁶ At the beginning of his major study *Anthropologie de la maladie*, François Laplantine also identifies new discourses that present “a beneficial model for the perception of illness”⁷ as well as new textual forms, with “the validity of these forms of autobiography represented by patients’ diaries” and “psychoanalytical novels.” The latter are strongly marked by the psychoanalytic approach to treatment which they in a way replicate, as in works by Bernard Pinquand, Georges Perec, and Serge Doubrovsky. For all these narratives, it is not a matter of interpreting, but rather of recounting a direct experience in the form of a chronicle or a diary. In these texts, “if the illness is not always beneficial, as it is in the case of the narrator of *Mots pour le dire*, who considers herself to have been ‘lucky enough to fall deeply into the illness’ [. . .] it nevertheless is of vital significance for the person who experiences it,”⁸ notes Laplantine. Meanwhile, in the field of psychiatry, “the ‘informative life story’ of madness and psychiatry from the 1970s onwards was opposed to the formalism that was very present in the philosophical-literary field⁹,” notes Françoise Tilkin. She studied a large corpus (more than a hundred accounts) of autobiographical accounts of madness which “made it possible for voices to be heard from those (the insane, nurses, relatives) who were previously silent or limited to babbling in dedicated enclosures, to reporting to intermediaries.”¹⁰ Negotiating the ill-defined boundary between non-fiction and “outsider art” (*art brut*), such texts have posed problems for contemporary critics, who are unsure how to weigh the relationship between the functional and literary aspects of these narratives – Tilkin mentions Robert Escarpit, who from 1965–1970 expressed hesitation about characterizing texts so little influenced by the aesthetic category of intransitivity as “literary”).¹¹ Such hesita-

5 Grisi, *Dans l'intimité*, p. 216.

6 Gérard Danou, “Littérature et médecine ou les pouvoirs du récit,” in G. Danou (ed), *Littérature et médecine ou les pouvoirs du récit*, Paris, BPI/Centre Pompidou, coll. “BPI en actes,” 2001, pp. 9–12, cit. p. 10.

7 François Laplantine, *Anthropologie de la maladie*, Paris, Payot, 1986, p. 175.

8 Laplantine, *Anthropologie*, pp. 173–174, note 7.

9 F. Tilkin, *Quand la folie se racontait*, p. 371.

10 Tilkin, *Quand la folie*, p. 370.

11 Tilkin, *Quand la folie*, pp. 84–86.

tions are all the more pronounced because these narratives are far from adopting the sole stylistic principle of the witness's blank writing (*écriture blanche*).

Autopathographies of AIDS

The writings produced by AIDS victims in the 1980s, whether political or collective in the United States or literary and personal in France,¹² were to modify the first practices of “autopathography”: in very different ways, they led to hyper-realistic representations of the body and a performative use of narrative while also sharply questioning the conditions for our recourse to literature. In their exceptional literary richness, ranging from the meditations of Gilles Barbedette to the baroque, hedonistic, and “pop” pornography¹³ of Guillaume Dustan by way of Hervé Guibert's postmodern methods of exhibition, AIDS narratives and novels have often produced a discourse focused closely on literature, which they have checked directly against its particular ambitions of unveiling and revision. Guibert explains that he was “comforted at the *right* moment of his illness”¹⁴ by his success as well as his readers' emotional responses. In an anecdote that is as revealing as it is amusing, he tells of classifying the thousands of letters he received after having provided an account of his illness and then announcing that he would no longer be writing. The two categories were equally embarrassing. There were those that said: “You're not going to die [. . .] we'll find a cure in time, and in the meantime write a new book, we're thinking of you, we love you” and those that said: “You're going to die, that's for sure, but it's great because there's an extraordinary logic to this death, in terms of the books you wrote. When you're dying, remember that I'll keep introducing your books to those around me, and that it will make momentous, extraordinary waves.”¹⁵ It was as if his novels, narratives, and autobiographical experiences had reactivated two versions of an autonomized literary paradigm that both managed to relegate the author's concrete experience to a secondary position in comparison with his books or their significance. This led Guibert to be trapped in a notion of literature that made his readers refuse his abandoning the romanticism of illness in favor of the two proposed solutions, silence or a shift to “gay writing.” On the

12 Regarding this opposition, see David Caron, “La littérature du sida,” *Le Magazine littéraire*, no. 426, December 2003, p. 53, and Stéphane Spoiden, *La Littérature et le sida*, Toulouse, PU Mirail, coll. “Cribles,” 2001, p. 39.

13 I borrow the expression from Thomas Clerc, “Préface du présent volume,” in Guillaume Dustan, *Œuvres I*, Paris, P.O.L., 2013, p. 26.

14 Hervé Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 175.

15 Guibert, *Le Protocole*, pp. 178–179.

contrary, with his literary enterprise, Guibert left his mark by renouncing a sanctified vision of the novel and preferring to put writing at the service of experience and relief. He did this through a variety of forms, at times revealing the experience photographically and relating it bluntly (in *CytomégaloVirus: journal d'hospitalisation*), at others displacing it in a complex system of allegorization (*Paradis*), and at others mixing the two methods, such as *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* ou *Le Protocole compassionnel*. One anecdote is particularly telling: from amidst the thousands of letters that Guibert received and that that left him ambivalent, he made an exception by replying to just one letter, which proposed a mythical-therapeutic (“novelistic”) solution: a writer from Casablanca, unquestionably lacking in talent, has a friend who is capable of curing cancer and therefore AIDS. The novel continues with the narrator’s picaresque adventures in Casablanca, from which he returns if not cured, at least newly enriched with compassion. The work as a whole reveals that having recourse to literature opens up possibilities for heroization: “AIDS allowed me, through tragedy, to become a hero. When I was just a character, I became a hero,”¹⁶ Guibert himself explained. This was not the sacrifice of the author for the benefit of his work, but rather an affirmation of the work’s transitivity. Certainly, the expression of trauma is constitutive of identity and illness constitutes a form of deep access to the subject (“for me, AIDS [. . .] will have been a paradigm for my project of unveiling the self and of pronouncing the unspeakable”).¹⁷ However, writing is not meant to be equated with AIDS, but to heal from it, to make it possible to “reappropriate the disease,”¹⁸ to resist the disruption it brings about, through methods of re-identification (the self-portrait or the filmic or photographic portrait) or of the diffraction of identity that has curative powers, as with *Paradis*.

Writing is of immediate help – “I decided to replace the Tranxene with work. As of May 1st, I stopped the Tranxene and started writing this story, without any discernible point of reference,”¹⁹ the narrator of *Paradis* tells us, adding, “When I don’t write anymore, I die”²⁰ – and it allows for at least temporary victories: “It is when I write that I am most alive. Words are beautiful, words are right, words are victorious, with all due respect to David, who was scandalized by the publicity slogan: ‘The first victory of words over AIDS’.”²¹ As such, how is it possible not to

16 Interview with Christophe Donner, cited by Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: l'entreprise de l'écriture du moi*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 240.

17 Hervé Guibert, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 247.

18 J.-P. Boulé, *Hervé Guibert*, p. 261.

19 Hervé Guibert, *Le Paradis: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, p. 127.

20 Guibert, *Le Paradis*, p. 130.

21 H. Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, p. 124.

be struck by the desperate appeal at the end of *Cytomégalo*virus to the two resources that Guibert used to cope with disease, writing and suicide?

Writing in the dark?

Writing to the end?

End it all to avoid reaching the point of fearing death?²²

But this literary accompaniment also involves complex scenarios in which fiction becomes the sanctuary for a possible world where the disease can be staved off. We remember the way in which *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* strives to tell the story just as much as it strives to get rid of AIDS by staging an imaginary cure: "this book's *raison d'être* lies only along this borderline of uncertainty, so familiar to all sick people everywhere."²³ Fiction becomes a refuge, even when it sets a trap: Guibert evokes "this novelistic logic that so hypnotizes me, at the expense of all idea of survival [. . .] I care more for my book more than my life" and he ends his novel with an indictment of an imaginary friend. He creates a fictional world capable of describing AIDS directly and metaphorically displacing the suffering it causes. If literature is chosen over life, the gesture is in no way sacrificial but actually self-interested: it is because it has become the only place where there is a chance of surviving a virus that could not, at the time, be treated. This overinvestment in literature takes the form of exaltation with a romantic turn: "when I'd learned I was going to die, I'd suddenly been seized with the desire to write every possible book – all the ones I hadn't written yet, at the risk of writing them badly,"²⁴ writes Guibert, a turn we also find among other AIDS writers. Pascal de Duve writes a declaration of love to the disease: "Yes, this spring is the first. I love my AIDS"²⁵; he refutes Char's phrase, "We have only one option with Death, which is to make art before it," preferring "to make art at *the same time* as Death – exploiting it ruthlessly and shamelessly."²⁶ De Duve, who calls himself a "sidereal AIDS patient" (*Sidéen sidéral*), wants to "preserve its influence among those who will have loved me," to become "a dead star, but still glowing in the hearts of some,"²⁷ through a quite Sulpician glorification of love and life. While dying, Guy Hocquenghem used science fiction to construct the dream of an "eter-

22 H. Guibert, *Cytomégalo*virus: *journal d'hospitalisation*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1992, p. 92.

23 H. Guibert, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, p. 11. English translation from *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale, South Pasadena (CA), Semiotext(e), 2020, p. 3.

24 Guibert, *À l'ami*, p. 70. English translation, p. 72.

25 Pascal de Duve, *Cargo Vie: récit*, Paris, JC Lattès, 1993, p. 65.

26 de Duve, *Cargo*, p. 135; De Duve's emphasis.

27 de Duve, *Cargo*, p. 30.

nal life for which his body was only the temporary host.”²⁸ Guillaume Dustan converted sexual adventure into a grand spectacle while Jamil Rahmani and Michel Canesi, in *Le Syndrome de Lazare* (2006), turned the discovery of an AIDS diagnosis into a mystical tale of resurrection. It is difficult to imagine more varied ways of making literature both an apprenticeship in death²⁹ and a life practice through a French philosophical tradition potentially revived by the contemporary Anglo-American culture of positivizing hardships and surpassing the self. The final example here is the novelist and essayist Gilles Barbedette, a Nabokov specialist and author of a defense of the novel as a “lie”³⁰ but also co-founder of *AIDES*. In *Mémoires d'un jeune homme devenu vieux* – a text that was cut short by his death from AIDS in March 1992 and published the following year, though somewhat forgotten today – he reflected directly on the functions of literature while grieving his friend and watching his own disease progress. We see his dissatisfaction with viewing literature as rescue gradually give way, with solitude and suffering, to the adoption of another paradigm. His reflections link literature to an entertainment that expresses the impossibility of mastering the world:

We ask the novel to do what life itself is not capable of doing. We ask it to improve the course of life or to reverse it. We want to backtrack even though it's not impossible. Since I know that the novel is incapable of being a prophet and novelists are not healers, I've never thought that it had any profound function other than as recreation.³¹

These reflections are combined with plans for a new literature that would speak of the impossibility of the self and of “the utopia represented by our history as individuals.”³² But very early on, however, contradictions arise: thus, Barbedette declares himself convinced that he has “undertaken a work that will outlive me.”³³ The personal notes are poignant (“I am so afraid for my health sometimes. Maybe my novel protects me. I strangely believe in the protective power of books, in the curative virtue of literature”)³⁴ and intersect with a line of thinking that proposes an intermediate model: “The great fascination that the novel exerts over any other form of writing is that it makes it possible to step out of oneself and

28 Guy Hocquenghem, *Ève: roman*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1987, p. 311.

29 See the analyses by Stéphane Spoiden, *La Littérature et le sida*, p. 90.

30 Gilles Barbedette, *L'Invitation au mensonge*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “NRF essais,” 1989.

31 Barbedette, *Mémoires d'un jeune homme devenu vieux*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 48.

32 Barbedette, *Mémoires*, p. 64.

33 Barbedette, *Mémoires*, pp. 48–49.

34 Barbedette, *Mémoires*, p. 73.

enter into an invented, fabricated, redesigned model. This is why literary work is like a therapeutic cure.”³⁵

This contradiction is similar to the one François Noudelmann identified in late Foucault, where a critique of truth and the subject was surreptitiously exchanged for a philosophy of transmission and self-care when he discovered he had AIDS.³⁶ From one page to the next, Barbedette relates to a less and less distanced form of writing and turns to a conception of literature as resistance “to continue giving meaning to [his] days.” Then, what re-emerges is a drastic call for narrative to save the memory of his friend (“I sometimes wonder: if I didn’t have the time to write this story, who would know just how extraordinary Jean was?”)³⁷ along with a large-scale return to the paradigm of sacred individuality and immediate textual survival: “To write – all the way to the shape of the letters or the style – is to affirm the singular and unique nature of existence,”³⁸ with the final lines of the manuscript asking “Why fade so quietly?”³⁹ “[T]hese ordinary writings about AIDS that also exist as literature are not viewed as an external category but participate in the practices of self. [. . .] the project of existence, even if this existence is totally threatened, becomes primary in relation to the literary project. And as a result, in my view it is the whole of this project of existence that becomes the work, and not the text,” explains Philippe Artières.⁴⁰ There is no better way to describe how, at least in terms of discourse and metadiscourse, in the matter of just a few decades there has been a shift from a life placed at the service of literature to a literature placed at the service of life, from a work as life to a life as work.

Illness as an opportunity to write

Excluding stories about aging, which have been the subject of several studies,⁴¹ there has been no investigation of the many other narratives about illness that flourished with the expressive literature of the 1980s and continued up to the consecration of the genre in the 2000s (proof of this is the creation of the “Paroles des

³⁵ Barbedette, *Mémoires*, p. 72.

³⁶ See François Noudelmann, *Le Génie du mensonge*, Paris, Max Milo, 2015, chap. “Le courage du mensonge: Foucault,” p. 64 et seq.

³⁷ G. Barbedette, *Mémoires d’un jeune homme devenu vieux*, p. 103.

³⁸ Barbedette, *Mémoires*, p. 150.

³⁹ Barbedette, *Mémoires*, p. 189.

⁴⁰ Philippe Artières, “Écritures ordinaires du sida,” in Gérard Danou (ed), *Littérature et médecine ou les pouvoirs du récit*, Paris, BPI/Centre Pompidou, 2001, pp. 161–176, cit. p. 173.

⁴¹ See Martine Boyer-Weinmann, *Viellir dit-elle, une anthropologie littéraire de l’âge*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2013, and D. Viart and B. Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, pp. 231–232.

Patients” (“Words of Patients”) prize, which describes itself as “consecrating a new literary genre: accounts of sickness as the main subject of a work” and insists on the quality of the style, the power of the narrative, the depth of the reflection, and the universality of the message transmitted).⁴² Some, like Nicole Malinconi’s *Hôpital silence* (which describes the hospital where she goes for an abortion as a place where “one is stripped of one’s own words” and where one remains “as if deported”)⁴³ and Alix Cléo Roubaud’s magnificent diary of medical self-observation (1979–1983) adhere to the same distanced paradigm as Guibert’s *Journal d’hospitalisation*. Many of them affirm the writer’s resilience as well as a more or less nuanced positivization of the disease, such as Valérie Dax’s *Le cancer, c’est ma chance* (1983). This philosophy is a reversal of the guilt-ridden discourse associated with disease as addressed by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*, particularly the metaphors of war that accompany the fight against cancer.⁴⁴ But far from freeing cancer from the “fantasy of inescapable fatality,”⁴⁵ in my view she only intensifies it. Here, the subject feels the urge to tell of the disease and to positivize it, backed into a corner by the “commonly-held belief that the will to live is one of the major factors of the cure,”⁴⁶ which Philippe Forest vehemently criticizes in an account of his daughter’s cancer. He leads a “fight” which has been described as tending to deny death by privatizing it.⁴⁷ According to Barbara Ehrenreich, such an inversion participates in a culture of positivity that has distant roots in religion, requiring individuals to optimistically take charge of their own destiny, to claim responsibility for it with a smile and with pride while repressing any negative feelings, to the point of there being a social obligation to view being fired or getting cancer as a blessing.⁴⁸ Two diaries of dying illustrate the French version of such a tendency, undoubtedly inspired as much by Stoic as by Calvinist morality: the first is by Alain Cahen, who in his final notes promises himself: “Write every day, even if it’s only two lines. As a sign of life. Find that zone there which in time can take hold after that winter”,⁴⁹ and the second is by Christiane Singer, who compares the narrative

42 See the site for the prize “Paroles de Patients,” www.parolesdepatients.org/category/paroles-de-patients/.

43 Nicole Malinconi, *Hôpital silence*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1985, p. 134.

44 See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York, Doubleday, 1989, pp. 65 *et. seq.*

45 Sontag, *Illness*, p. 87.

46 Philippe Forest, *L’Enfant éternel: roman* (1997), Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Folio,” 1998, p. 307.

47 See R. W. Higgins, “La mort? Une exception,” *Éthique & Santé*, vol. 3, no. 1 (“Vieillesse et fin de vie”), Febr. 2006, pp. 35–42 (doi:10.1016/S1765-4629(06)70561-X).

48 See Barbara Ehrenreich’s wonderful *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*, London, Granta Books, 2009 and in particular Chapter 1 on breast cancer.

49 Alain Cahen, *Les Jours de ma mort*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1983, p. 112.

she writes in the six months she is given to live to a “castaway’s raft”⁵⁰ and explains on the last page of her diary that with the book, she “had the crystalline duty of sharing what [she] experienced in the time allotted so that the personal shell would break and make room for an expanded existence [. . .] and saved [her] life by opening it up to everyone.” These two examples testify to the paradigm that makes the ordinary activity of writing a fundamental struggle for life and an aspiration to expressively share the hope for survival. Jean-Michel Palmier’s posthumously published meditations on his cancer and life in the hospital, which have become better-known in academic circles than among members of the general public, are also driven by “the need to speak,” which is “one of the conditions of survival for most of us.”⁵¹ The struggle of these authors to sustain expressions of joy and gratitude up to the final lines and the last moments is particularly indicative of how the scriptural paradigm, the need for communication through writing, and the philosophy of positivity have, in a secularized world, been able to replace older forms of faith and communication in the face of death. We can see the ambivalence of the *pharmakon* and the alternative in which narratives of illness can be trapped: on the one hand, they offer a therapeutic space for subjects who can rearticulate their experiences as well as a possible re-heroization of writing; on the other hand, they cordon off both the definition of literature and the definition of the subject. Guibert notes that “Handke said that the death agony is the only possible epic”⁵² yet he exposes himself to what Eva Illouz has summarized in a cruel paradox: “Therapeutic culture – the primary mission of which is to heal – must generate a narrative structure in which suffering and victimhood are the real definitions of the self [. . .] the self-help narrative is fundamentally a narrative of suffering.”⁵³ This leads Guibert to lament “the most unjust premonition in the world,” namely, that adversity should have made the book necessary and possible.⁵⁴

The most contemporary accounts of physical or psychological illness enter into this tragic problematic of empowerment – this includes, for example, the depression of Pascal Quignard, who states in *Les Désarçonnés*: “Writing is not living, it is surviving [. . .] all writing is an ecstasy that time prolongs beyond the possibility of death, once this possibility has been experienced as being close at hand.”⁵⁵ I find evidence of this in *Se survivre*, the account that Patrick Autrèaux, himself a doctor, gives of his chemotherapy. He alternates between a therapeutic

50 Christiane Singer, *Derniers fragments d'un long voyage*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2007, p. 117.

51 Jean-Michel Palmier, *Fragments sur la vie mutilée*, Paris, Sens & Tonka, 1999, p. 54.

52 Hervé Guibert, *Le Mausolée des amants: journal, 1976–1991*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, p. 368.

53 Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, p. 173.

54 H. Guibert, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, p. 220.

55 Pascal Quignard, *Les Désarçonnés (Dernier royaume VII)*, Paris, Grasset, 2012, p. 53.

struggle to “make an effort to give the illness some range, to remove it from himself”⁵⁶ and unexpected epiphanies (when, after a painful examination, he starts to compose a poem to describe how “the whole world had just passed through him”).⁵⁷ The writing is allegedly born of cancer (the patient recounts having experienced it as an annunciation: “You will die young, you must write,” a voice told him)⁵⁸ and sets out to access a form of healing with metaphysical value: “I gave a meaning to the colossal aspiration that was emerging: not to change or to be made new, as I had believed, but to write differently – to write in order to cure what no one can cure us of.”⁵⁹ By delving into the writing of trauma and illness, the writer confronts the possible banality of his affliction, which he seems to accept with his “newfound compassion”⁶⁰: “It was a warning and an order, and also, at least as I heard it, a promise: to be a writer is much more than writing. It’s saving the most intimate of what you have, which you discover is not your own.”⁶¹

The collective dimension of the testimonies written by cancer patients, which Autréaux juxtaposes with those written by war survivors, and the surpassing of individual experience are at the heart of the same author’s subsequent accounts: it is a matter of describing the hospital, “that half [of the world] invisible to healthy people”⁶² and the realm of the sick in its “distressed geography.”⁶³

I kept at hand a few authors who had become my companions as I drifted internally. Once the shock was over and the treatments had begun, I began to read a lot [. . .] I was looking for help from those voices that describe storms and have experienced vast suffering, attentive to how they resonated with me so as to understand the peculiarity of what was happening to me, and to cope.⁶⁴

In Autréaux’s reflection on the Swiss writer Fritz Zorn, whose famous *Mars*⁶⁵ inaugurated modern autobiographical narratives of cancer in 1977, it is possible to clearly identify the specificity of the contemporary use of literature. Zorn, con-

56 Patrick Autréaux, *Se survivre, et autres tableaux*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2013, p. 32.

57 Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 25.

58 Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 51.

59 Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 65.

60 Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 66.

61 Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 51.

62 Patrick Autréaux, *Dans la vallée des larmes: récit*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, p. 30.

63 Autréaux, *Dans la vallée*, p. 25.

64 Autréaux, *Dans la vallée*, p. 28.

65 Fritz Zorn, *Mars: je suis jeune et riche et cultivé, et je suis malheureux, névrosé et seul* (1977), preface by Adolf Muschg, trans. from the German by Gilberte Lambrichs, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Du monde entier,” 1979.

vinced that his cancer was psychosomatic, combines self-analysis and the description of the disease's progress, psychoanalytic treatment, and hospitalization. In so doing, he opens up a narrative semantics of modern illness in its intersection with psychoanalysis, which is precisely what Autréaux refuses in favor of a reading of Primo Levi:

Primo Levi [. . .] calmed the inner storm and saved me from spiritual shipwreck. Fritz Zorn's despair isolated me and pulled me back into my own destiny, it threw me into the pit of an insurmountable solipsism [. . .] prevented me from finding relief, in spite of everything, in what I had seen. It detracted from the exhilaration of confronting the unknowable.⁶⁶

Autréaux contrasts the solution of the previous century – narration that brings illness and the quest for identity together into a tragic alliance – with a contemporary paradigm of treatment in which literature no longer comes to help and refuses to make illness a metaphor or narrative a hermeneutic. Writing seeks not meaning but signs, and in illness it discovers the mystery of the world (which Autréaux expresses in mystical terms) and the hope of healing through empathy and solidarity, as can be observed in testimonies about concentration camps, for example. The writer survives his cancer and resumes his role in the emergency room to then provide a narrative, *Soigner*,⁶⁷ that focuses on caring for his grandfather. This completes the work of relocating the narrative from the interior to the exterior. It is an apology for living well, with a struggle driven by writing and tenacity, that follows an education in dying well from the works of Montaigne and the neo-humanist Jean Reverzy, who was a doctor to the poor and to writers. “Never let yourself be put in a *coffin*,” Antonin Artaud cries in a deranged and ear-splitting voice. Fritz Zorn heard it too late,” notes Chantal Thomas in her beautiful and furious meditation on suffering.⁶⁸ This literature of thaumaturgical monstration and combat tends towards forms of performativity that the narratives from the AIDS era had started to establish and that continue in original devices for psychological “intervention.” Belgian psychoanalyst and novelist Henry Bauchau turned his treatment of an autistic child into a novel called *L'Enfant bleu*, published in 2004,⁶⁹ and his fiction, in a sense, sets us squarely in an art therapy studio. Using a more indirect and discordant approach, Olivia Rosenthal's eminently playful writing on her experience with Alzheimer's disease is characterized by a ludic formalism reminiscent of the oblique strategies used by Perec and Roubaud in the face of misfortune. Rosenthal quotes the words with which Duras

⁶⁶ Zorn, *Mars*, p. 88.

⁶⁷ Patrick Autréaux, *Soigner*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “L'Un et l'Autre,” 2010.

⁶⁸ C. Thomas, *Souffrir*, p. 214.

⁶⁹ Henry Bauchau, *L'Enfant bleu: roman*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2004.

begins *La Douleur* – “literature has made me ashamed” – and from which the novelist derived the rigor crucial to a literature of personal testimony, whereas for Rosenthal it’s the basis for a writing that can, through the use of new forms of intervention, overcome the anathema driven by the post-war period.⁷⁰ Rosenthal, who has created a great variety of public performances, uses Alzheimer’s in *On n’est pas là pour disparaître* as an opportunity to play bizarre interactive games with her reader:

“Here’s an exercise.”

Imagine yourself in the shoes of someone whose story has been washed away.⁷¹

OR:

“Here’s an exercise.”

Picture the most disgusting beast you can think of and name it after someone you know. What name would you give this beast?⁷²

Here, the exercises that doctors recommend to patients for slowing down the progress of the disease and the medical discourse directed at relatives are transformed into singular literary machines. Literature quite concretely becomes a participatory form and also a form of therapeutic exercise to resist disappearance, just as much as it is a form of accompaniment that allows us to recognize ourselves in a personal experience, skillfully universalized through the playful form, in a society where the issue of aging has pervaded the literary space. This interactionist literature finds striking examples in the works and devices of Mathieu Simonet, which fall under the category of writing as easily as the categories of investigation and performance. In *La Maternité*, a non-fictional account, Simonet transforms the scene around his mother’s deathbed (with Simone de Beauvoir’s *Une mort très douce* from 1964 undoubtedly serving as a model) into a choral narrative comprised of the language of support spoken by various individuals involved (including the psychiatrist Isabelle Blondiaux, herself the author of a thesis entitled *La lecture peut-elle soigner, Lecture et soins palliatifs*).⁷³ The writer collects the words of “death professionals,” whom

70 Olivia Rosenthal, “‘La Douleur’ de Marguerite Duras interroge la frontière entre l’humain et l’inhumain,” statements collected by Sabine Audrerie, *La Croix*, July 20, 2011, www.la-croix.com/Culture/Livres-et-idees/Olivia-Rosenthal-La-Douleur-de-Marguerite-Duras-interroge-la-frontiere-entre-l-humain-et-l-inhumain-2011-07-20-691048.

71 O. Rosenthal, *On n’est pas là pour disparaître*, Paris, Verticales/Phase deux, 2007, p. 145; for an alternate translation, see *We’re not Here to Disappear*, trans. Béatrice Mousli, Los Angeles, Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2015, p. 109.

72 Rosenthal, *On n’est pas là*, p. 164; alternate translation, *We’re not Here to Disappear*, p. 127.

73 I. Blondiaux, *La lecture peut-elle soigner?*

the author thanks, noting that he has “sometimes truncated the answers, so as to make of this book a ‘literary object’ and not a work of journalism.”⁷⁴ He also takes note of the prevailing discourse, including the presumption that “the hypothesis of the therapeutic virtue of reading, particularly literary works, is clinically relevant,”⁷⁵ which the author cautiously borrows from a report by a scholarly psycho-oncology organization. The place of the book is uncertain: the narrative is provided in response to a request (“Mom told me: ‘During this treatment, I’m going to keep a diary. I’ll give it to you. And you can do what you want with it. Write a novel. A story.’”⁷⁶) and leads the narrator to peace, though not absolute truth. When a palliative care nurse explains to him that writing a book is part of the “rite of passage” that is death, Simonet comments rather ambivalently: “Maybe that’s what literature is. The illusion of a castle we reconstruct in a country we believe has no history,”⁷⁷ providing an excellent summary of the contradiction between realist postulate and thaumaturgical aspiration that confront many contemporary accounts of illness, whether internal or external. A reader of Guibert, Simonet continued his work intertwining therapeutic care and writing with a textualist tribute to his father suffering from schizophrenia in *Barbe rose* (“my father was above all a book, written words”),⁷⁸ and especially with collective writing devices. This work began with *Carnet blanc*, which depicts the author dispersing his notebooks as his terminally ill mother grows sicker and sicker, and the exhibition *Intense proximité* at the Palais de Tokyo, where the writer invited volunteers to hold a stranger’s hand for the duration of a visit. In coordination with the Assistance publique–Hôpitaux de Paris, he asked 1,000 patients from 37 hospitals to participate in a “collective autobiography” that involved a writing residency located in hospitals. This was, to my knowledge, the first of its kind. “Notebooks will be left at the patients’ disposal in each hospital, with writing suggestions agreed on ahead of time with the establishments’ media libraries. The texts the patients write in these notebooks will be transcribed and disseminated in several ways: read aloud, published online, etc.”⁷⁹ Like other

74 Mathieu Simonet, *La Maternité: roman*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2012, p. 184.

75 Simonet, *La Maternité*, p. 173.

76 Simonet, *La Maternité*, p. 10.

77 Simonet, *La Maternité*, p. 177.

78 Simonet, *Barbe rose*, p. 186.

79 Presentation of the project *Carnet37*: “Mathieu Simonet à l’Assistance publique – Hôpitaux de Paris,” site remue.net, Programme de résidences d’écrivains de la région Île-de-France.; remue.net/spip.php?rubrique693. See the site for the project: “Carnet37. Récits d’adolescence dans les 37 hôpitaux de l’AP-HP. Une autobiographie collective proposée par Mathieu Simonet,” www.carnet37.com.

collective devices situated at the crossroads of art and medicine,⁸⁰ this project of fostering networks and distributing writing, simultaneously moving and artificial, testifies to a desire to humanize the hospital through games and also to the truly performative place assigned to reading and self-writing in the process of healing. It also tells us about the new position of the writer, who, driven by a desire that may come across as fanciful or promising, comes to integrate the medical field, not just to bear witness but to participate fully in the work of therapy.

Medical humanities and narrative medicine

The contemporary success of physicians who are also writers such as Martin Winckler attests to this original territorial crossover: the character of the physician-writer is extremely old, but what is new is that they write *as* physicians, bearing witness (there are several examples)⁸¹ and also considering their medical and literary practices in relation to one another. If therapeutic culture describes the author as a healer of bodies and souls (even Jean-Philippe Toussaint likes to be compared to a “Chinese physician” . . .),⁸² the depictions of physician have likewise changed, bringing them closer in this respect to writers. This is the case with the physician in Maylis de Kerangal’s *Réparer les vivants*; the beautiful description by Emmanuel Venet, himself a psychiatrist, of Ferdière, Artaud’s psychiatrist and a failed writer who “risked his reputation to keep the volcano that threatened him alive, in honor of the extinguished volcano he had inside;”⁸³ and Marie Didier’s portrait of Philippe Pinel, who humanized psychiatry in the nineteenth century: “You have known illness, the cold humors, as they used to say, when talking about the tuberculosis that endangered your life; I stayed in a sanatorium for several years. You became a caregiver, I became a physician;”⁸⁴ the text is dedicated “to those who do not have a voice.”⁸⁵ Emmanuel Venet aspires with literature to take charge of this “jumble whereby we accept our fate,” and “to give ourselves the task of restoring to medicine the share of poetry it’s reluc-

80 I am thinking for example of Frank Warren’s *PostSecret*, an anti-suicide, psychotherapeutic project that uses postcards as forms of intervention (see my article “Mon âme a son secret,” *Le Magazine littéraire*, no. 530, April 2013).

81 See the bibliography for “Groupement des écrivains médecins” on the GEM site.

82 See Agnès Mannoorettonil, “Jean-Philippe Toussaint ou l’art délicat de l’infinitésimal,” *Études: revue de culture contemporaine*, 2014/9, Sept., pp. 73–82, especially p. 79.

83 Emmanuel Venet, *Ferdière, psychiatre d’Antonin Artaud*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2006, p. 32.

84 Marie Didier, *Dans la nuit de Bicêtre*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “L’Un et l’Autre,” 2006, p. 17.

85 Didier, *Dans la nuit*, epigraph, p. 7.

tant to accept.”⁸⁶ In *Contre-visite*, published in Gallimard’s Collection Blanche, Marie Didier, a general practitioner, wants to “tell of [the] ephemeral crossings, not with the aim of paraphrasing the fragments of an ultimately ordinary past but to make them more precise, to hone an attention that is becoming blunted,”⁸⁷ – that is, to transpose her experience as a nurse into a literary form and to combat anonymization with a slogan that marks the end of her narrative: “don’t forget.”⁸⁸ This largely poetic account is, like Venet’s, interspersed with echoes of Jean Reverzy. It is clear how original this approach is, as well as the confidence in the powers of literature not just to describe but also to correct the inclination in modern medicine towards dehumanizing abstraction. In his preface to Victor Segalen’s *Cliniciens ès lettres*, Jean Starobinski describes the choice that literature was given between becoming a “separate universe” with the art for art’s sake movement or aiming “to compete with the laboratory”⁸⁹ by presenting clinical cases of the human body. He then strikes an analogy between the mechanisms of medical and literary interpretation (its “coded rigor”). But while Segalen values “impassiveness” and “impartiality,”⁹⁰ a tending physician instead makes literary and medical empathy two analogous mechanisms. In *En soignant, en écrivant*, an essay reprinted in the “J’ai lu” collection (*La Maladie de Sachs* has been translated into twelve languages and adapted for radio and film, providing any necessary proof of the genre’s success), Martin Winckler writes:

One becomes a doctor to ease suffering or symbolic pain [. . .] But that is also why I write. That’s why, for me, writing and caring occupy the same place. It’s not enough just to take care of people. You also have to give an account of their lives, you have to bear witness to their struggles. Treatment and writing both have a lot to do with transmission. Obviously, my vocation is to repair and to communicate, through treatment and writing. In providing treatment, I carry on my father’s desire to repair. In writing, I strive to understand what he covertly bequeathed to me, to liberate the words he buried in me, to extract them from silence and oblivion.⁹¹

Here, it is clear how far we’ve come from the model of Reverzy, the medical writer who was influenced by Blanchot and who wrote *Place des Angoisses* (1956). Charles Juliet describes Reverzy as having “approached that point where literature’s only purpose is its own essence” and where “literature rises up in a sad

⁸⁶ Emmanuel Venet, *Précis de médecine imaginaire*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2005, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Marie Didier, *Contre-visite*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Didier, *Contre-visite*, p. 167.

⁸⁹ Jean Starobinski, “Segalen aux confins de la médecine,” preface to Victor Segalen, *Les Cliniciens ès lettres* (1902), Saint-Clément-la-Rivière, Fata Morgana, 1980, p. 18.

⁹⁰ V. Segalen, *Les Cliniciens ès lettres*, p. 117.

⁹¹ Martin Winckler, *En soignant, en écrivant*, Montpellier, Indigène éditions, 2000, p. 207.

attempt to appropriate what escapes it and to abolish its limits.”⁹² Contemporary literature, on the other hand, no longer solves the riddle of suffering located in the contemplation of anguish and doesn’t try to learn about death by plunging the reader in darkness or narrowly considering its own enunciation, but looks instead to propose positive values of care, repair, and transmission that are embodied in the patient’s and the physician’s linguistic reworking of experience.

The literary examples are clearly consistent with contemporary medical practices of “narrative medicine” that aim to “honor patients’ stories” in order to improve care.⁹³ These practices, now widely accepted, are based on the “narrative therapies” and “attachment narrative therapies” that emerged in the late 1970s as an alternative to the Freudian therapies deemed to be guilt-ridden and deterministic. Some of these methods are simply “bibliotherapeutic,”⁹⁴ but most are based on the subjects’ externalization and “creative” reclamation of their individual histories.⁹⁵ Subjects should strive to produce enhanced and memorable narratives based on an attentiveness to “contrast”⁹⁶ and to “seek to deconstruct single outcomes,”⁹⁷ which is in close keeping with poststructuralist literary theory and a culturalist and constructivist paradigm. The work with the therapist is considered analogous to the readerly imagination.⁹⁸ Developed in the United States, this active practice of narrative medicine is intended for both caregivers and patients and involves narratives of care produced by gravely incapacitated or dying patients. They have been the subject of recent research⁹⁹ in line with the practice of Valéria Milewski, a former playwright, who follows patients in palliative care at the Chartres hospital. Within the context of the association “Passeur de mots, Passeur d’histoire,” which aims to “develop and promote biographical work for the

92 Charles Juliet, *Jean Reverzy*, Paris, L’Echoppe, 1992, p. 31–32.

93 See Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*, New York, Oxford UP, 2006. Also see Christophe Niewiadomski, *Recherche biographique et clinique narrative: entendre et écouter le sujet contemporain*, Toulouse, Érès, 2012.

94 See for example Janice Maidman Joshua and Donna DiMenna, *Read Two Books and Let’s Talk Next Week: Using Bibliotherapy in Clinical Practice*, New York, Wiley, 2000, which promotes the usage of literature in situations as serious as those that involve domestic violence or sexual abuse.

95 See Michel White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, New York, Norton, 1990, pp. 38 et seq.

96 Michael Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors*. London, Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2006, p. 7.

97 Payne, *Narrative*, p. 14.

98 See Payne, *Narrative*, pp. 92–94; and Michael Guilfoyle, *The Person in Narrative Therapy: A Post-structural, Foucauldian Account*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 189.

99 See V. Milewski and F. Rinck (eds), *Récits de soi face à la maladie grave*.

seriously ill,”¹⁰⁰ she accompanies them in the writing of their biographies,¹⁰¹ which are to be given to their loved ones several months after their death.

Whether serving to communicate immediate experience or an entire life story, these therapies make a decisive place for works of literary fiction, as do the personal development manuals that are their counterpart on the individual level. Describing the “specialized cognitive machines” that allow us to represent the world to ourselves, Jeffrey Kottler asserts in a veritable pan-fictionalist apology for fiction that “[i]n fact, there is compelling evidence that fiction, whether novels, movies, or television shows, can be even more powerful to impact or influence people’s behavior than self-help or nonfiction books [. . .].”¹⁰² Consequently, far from being an impossibility or mere decoration, the literary dimension is central to the narratives of illness produced by physicians themselves within narrative medicine itself:

From the start, writers brought weighty and moving materials to the seminar. By this time, I was no longer surprised at the power of the writing generated in such settings. The quality of narrative oncology poems and prose supported my growing hypothesis that even inexperienced writers can achieve a grave and elevated with complex literary structures as they try to represent the consequential events of the illness that they witness in their work.¹⁰³

This is followed by a description of a working group in which close stylistic and narratological analyses made sense of what happened in the process of literarization: one health care worker, a young pregnant nurse, used the metaphor of a crocus for a patient who had likewise been pregnant and who had just died with her fetus. Thanks to the working group, she discovered that through “this metaphor, the writer recognizes the *potential* in this patient, the promise and life in her – however short the growing season to come – and the coldness and deadness of the hospital environment in contrast to her blossoming strength.”¹⁰⁴ Then, it was the use of verb forms that enabled the community of health care workers to understand the relationship between the young pregnant nurse and her recently deceased patient. I myself am convinced that in the case of such literary mediation, there was no wishful thinking for the magical virtues of positivity, a post-modern slogan, or added spirit, but that it allowed for forms of metaphorical transmission between the nurse and her deceased patient while introducing

100 Benjamin Leclercq, “À l’hôpital de Chartres, des ‘biographies thérapeutiques’ pour retisser sa vie,” *Le Monde*, 8 Jan. 2013.

101 See the site for the association “Passeur de mots, Passeur d’histoire,” valeria-milewski.com.

102 Jeffrey A. Kottler, *Stories We’ve Heard, Stories We’ve Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2015, p. ix.

103 R. Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 221.

104 Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 222.

worldly boundaries to prevent harmful contamination and the opportunity for the community of health care workers to share their experiences. The “ordinary,” “relational” literature dreamed of by the twenty-first century has often proven to be so meaningful. As such, has it ever been so consistent with what is traditionally expected of “high” literature?

Chapter 8

The work of mourning

To resurrect you. To recreate you. To tell of you over the course of the years and of winters with this light that carried you, but which one day, to your misfortune and mine, was torn apart. Charles Juliet, *Lambeaux*.¹

As much as illness, grief is a major theme in contemporary literature:

Books on death are published by the dozen every month. Nothing is more common. Grief brings us to words. As authors or readers, we search for them, because they are the only conceivable offering for the deceased.²

writes Forest, well aware of the contemporary sociosymbolic function to which the mainstreaming of this theme points. In fact, in the twenty-first century, the narrative of mourning has become a kind of contemporary sub-genre of the memorial narrative and the trauma narrative. It was first practiced by loved ones: Cécile Yapaudjian-Labat has shown the intensified treatment of the issue of mourning and melancholy in the works of Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, and Samuel Beckett from the 1980s onwards, who moved away from critical writing and then refused “be imprisoned by a subjectivity closed in on itself” and “by an ethical gesture [. . .] committed to taking charge of, to assuming, the loss.”³ It was then taken up by writers of the last years of the century. I am thinking here of the commemorative works written by Jacques Roubaud (*Quelque chose noir*, 1986), Michel Deguy (*À ce qui n'en finit pas*, 1995)⁴, and Claude Esteban (*Élégie de la mort violente*, 1989) as well as a number of very thinly fictionalized testimonies about the trauma of death and the work of mourning that have characterized the new millennium. Though it may seem to be something of a litany, I find it interesting to make the list because it makes it possible to identify the trend in time and also understand its monographic and reactionary aspect: the mourning of a child in Philippe Forest, Camille Laurens, Laure Adler (*À ce soir*, 2001), Aline Schulman (*Paloma*,

1 Charles Juliet, *Lambeaux*, Paris, P.O.L., 1995, p. 8.

2 P. Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 191.

3 Cécile Yapaudjian-Labat, *Écriture, deuil et mélancolie: les derniers textes de Samuel Beckett, Robert Pinget et Claude Simon*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, coll. “Études de littérature des xx^e et xxi^e siècles,” 2010, p. 657.

4 See Dominique Rabaté, “‘Maintenant sans ressemblance’: le temps du deuil et du poème (Deguy, Éluard, Roubaud),” in Pierre Glaudes and D. Rabaté (eds), *Deuil et littérature*, Bordeaux, PU Bordeaux, “Modernités” series (no. 21), 2005, pp. 319–332.

2001), Anne-Marie Revol (*Nos étoiles ont filé*, 2010), Bernard Chambaz (*Martin cet été*, 1994), and Jacques Drillon (*Face à face*, 2003); a mother's death in Arnaud Cathrine (*Sweet home*, 2005) and Benoît Duteurtre (*Livre pour adultes*, 2016), in Thomas B. Reverdy's trilogy *La Montée des eaux* (2003), *Le Ciel pour mémoire* (2006), and *Les Derniers Feux* (2008), and previously in Colette Fellous's *Rosa Gallica* (1989) and of course in Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes; a father's death (Marie Nimier in *La Reine du silence* in 2004 and Stéphane Audeguy in *Nous autres* in 2009); a wife's death (*Veuf*, by Jean-Louis Fournier, 2011; Pierre Pachet in *Adieu*, Serge Doubrovsky in *Le Livre brisé*, and, very recently, *Vous n'aurez pas ma haine* by Antoine Leiris, a poetic testimony about his wife killed at the Bataclan); the death of a companion (Thierry Fourreau's *Perfecto* from 2004 and Nathalie Rheims's *Claude* about Claude Berri, in the form of a letter addressed to the departed, 2009) or of a friend ("Caroline" in *La Messe anniversaire*, 2007, by Olivier Adam, a writer who has made mourning practically his sole novelistic theme; the exuberant "Thomas" for Catherine Cusset, in *L'Autre qu'on adorait*, 2016); of a brother (Jérôme Garcin, *Olivier*, 2011), etc. There are now dozens of these kinds of narratives. A more precise generic typology might contrast formal devices, but whether they are testimonial narratives or fictional displacements, these works possess several strong characteristics: unlike the older consolations of literature, the first person is the focal point of an experience that does not interrogate death as a metaphysical question but rather the work of mourning itself. This work of mourning is the paradoxical occasion for a textual celebration and a memorial recreation. But if "modern literature, since the Romantic rupture [. . .] thinks of itself as a paradoxical experience of mourning where the loss of the object of love (oneself as a child, the mother-wife or sister, the homeland from which one is exiled, etc.) opens the door to writing as an opportunity for salvation, for reunion,"⁵ as Dominique Rabaté notes, it's at the expense of pointedly questioning the powers of writing and the conditions for the author's possible healing as well as a salvation of the memory of the deceased. Writing as a reiteration and a writing of healing are at odds; an Orphic and resurrectionist view and an intransigence that refuses any literary conversion or any fictional reinterpretation of mourning so as to preserve its singularity; likewise, a vision of literature likening it to a vitalist soteriology ("I was writing to save myself and to save her,"⁶ to quote Colette Fellous's words regarding the narration of her mother's death agony) is at odds with the funereal

5 Dominique Rabaté and Yves Charnet, "Épilogue. Entretien entre Yves Charnet et Dominique Rabaté," pp. 431–437, cit. p. 431.

6 Colette Fellous, "Discussion animée par Colette Fellous," in Gérard Danou (eds), *Littérature et médecine ou les pouvoirs du récit*, Paris, BPI/Centre Pompidou, 2001, pp. 251–266, cit. p. 251.

rumination of a “poem of the dead” (“an intuition of an inaugural order [. . .] would make me confuse mourning and literature from childhood onwards,”⁷ writes Yves Charnet). These views, be they minimalist or maximalist, nonetheless converge to assign a fundamental expressive function to the writing of mourning.

I believe it is necessary to point out that in these writings, the narrative of grief is as important to the catharsis of the writer as it is to that of the readers, who turn to literature in response to the disappearance of codified forms of grief.⁸ This is evidenced, for example, by the activity of communities of readers around this theme,⁹ as well as the success of essays such as Joseph Luzzi’s *In a Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing, and the Mysteries of Love*,¹⁰ which recounts how studying Dante allowed the author, who turned the Florentine writer into what would be known in the United States as a grief counselor, to mourn the death of his wife. Régine Detambel explains her bibliotherapeutic recourse to the work of Camille Laurens by merely transferring the metaphors that the novelist uses for herself so her own readers may appreciate them:

Without any doubt, Camille Laurens is the writer who best understands words and their therapeutic virtues, “their active principle, their juice, their honey.” [. . .] For writing is a form of therapy. Language has an effect. “It acted like a balm, a remedy, admittedly subtle, with effects that may have seemed negligible at first, but still remain successful: language-balm, a cerate of words that slowly and surely soothes grief. For words are a bandage: they are the means by which thought develops [. . .] and they also tend to our wounds.”¹¹

The release of Camille Laurens’s narrative *Philippe*, which she “offered” in memory of her son of the same name who died at birth, attests to the fact that, far from being a series of plays on words born of pain and co-opted by theories of bibliotherapy, the way in which others’ narratives can provide readers with a vocabulary that allows them to retrospectively redefine the emotions they had and feel better about them has been experienced ad nauseum by those who have written about mourning: Laurens, just like Forest, found herself besieged for months by letters from readers showing their gratitude, thanking her for having recounted an experience, whether real or imagined, that had previously been inau-

7 Y. Charnet, “Épilogue. Entretien entre Yves Charnet et Dominique Rabaté,” text cited, p. 435.

8 See especially Vinciane Despret, *Au bonheur des morts: récits de ceux qui restent*, Paris, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte, 2015.

9 See the Babelio site, with no less than 6,260 tagged with the keyword “deuil” (“grief”) voir: www.babelio.com/livres-/deuil/1520.

10 Joseph Luzzi, *In a Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing, and the Mysteries of Love*, New York, HarperWave, 2015.

11 R. Detambel, *Les livres prennent soin de nous*, “La page comme pansement,” p. 97. The long quotation from Camille Laurens is excerpted from *Quelques-uns*, Paris, P.O.L., 1999, p. 12.

dible (“You made me understand what it was like to lose a child”), explaining to her the benefit of shared emotion, providing the names of dozens of other dead children, sending her manuscripts imitating *Philippe*, as if a writer’s account could serve not only as a source of comfort to her readers, but as a veritable breviary.

The voice of the dead

The idea of surviving in the form of the written word is as old as civilization: I will return to contemporary forms of the tomb (*tombeau*) later in this book, but first I want to emphasize the way in which writers establish their narrative as a form of therapeutic care for mourning by verbalizing it and making it part of an autobiographical journey in a problematic process of literary embodiment. Far from making it possible to affectively and conceptually revisit the memory in order to detach oneself from it, it is a matter of observing and describing from the inside the survivor’s ruminating, the echolalia and recantations of language in the face of grief, and the difficulty of finding an adequate psychological solution. In Linda Lê’s *In Memoriam*, the narrator admits that she failed to listen to a voice of rescue: “Now that she was dead, I had to contend with the emptiness of my mind: I had experienced the unforgettable and I would spend the rest of my days dwelling on this mourning.” She was unaware that “the dead woman’s voice would always come to us, like a call that we had failed to heed,” which is precisely the voice of a writer whose “madness was to believe in a literature that saves.”¹² Between absorption and detachment, resentment and sublimation of pain, contemporary writings on mourning are all therapeutic experiments with possible modalities for support. After the death of his friend and before preparing to die himself, Gilles Barbedette, for example, sets himself the goal of “disappearing into the work, of forgetting himself in the work of memory and nostalgia, as the subtlest way of reaching the orbit where his memory is located.”¹³ In the same way, Serge Doubrovsky considers a flow of movement where, on the one hand, the one the work is intended for provides for the literature (“My companion in life and writing has left me. [. . .] But the writer does not have the right to remain silent. The task must be continued, the work finished. [. . .] Ilse gave me her life so that our book could be. I owe her”),¹⁴ but also where, on the other hand, the writing

¹² Linda Lê, *In memoriam*, Paris, Christian Bourgois, 2007, pp. 188, 190, 89.

¹³ G. Barbedette, *Mémoires d’un jeune homme devenu vieux*, p. 51.

¹⁴ S. Doubrovsky, *Le Livre brisé*, p. 312.

ensures continuation in its very movement (“if I want to recreate you, I must write, as long as I type in the morning, I perpetuate you, facing the window, as long as I write, I reconstruct you”).¹⁵ To write is to say “you will always live” (“*tu vivras toujours*”), to borrow the title of a famous song and a recent account of mourning a mother,¹⁶ by performatively ensuring survival at the subject’s risk: in *Adieu*, Pierre Pachet uses stylistic resources to proclaim existence, to “affirm in the face of death that all is not finished. All is not finished.”¹⁷ Furthermore, it seems that the violence of secular literary faith asserts itself in proportion to the brutality of the mourning: “I write so that you may live. Here lies Philippe Mézières. What no reality can ever do, words can. Philippe is dead, long live Philippe. Weep, you who read, weep: may your tears bring him out of nothingness.”¹⁸

It is undoubtedly because “mourning and tears do not consent to being passed over in silence. They demand their due – of reflection, of time, of offerings. They want cries of love and revolt, sleepless nights, and the racket of all the mourners asked to attend,”¹⁹ suggests Chantal Thomas as she reflects on suffering – but certainly not under just any conditions. Laurens’s lament demands pathos, as does Forest’s (he remarks, not without bitterness: “The critics will all tell you that it’s possible to recognize a distinguished writer because, in confronting such a serious subject, the pitfall of pathos is avoided. [...] Thus, the intensity of the emotion will be measured by how thick the gag placed over the mouth is”),²⁰ but it belongs to a narrative that combines expressiveness with analytical testimony, with part of *Philippe* being dedicated to the medical and technical question of “why.” In so doing, the account adopts the contemporary paradigmatic model of traumatic testimony, based not on an autobiographical pact but on a formal and stylistic device: realism in the descriptions, first-person point of view, self-analysis of emotions, and fragmentation at the level of the overall narrative as well as the individual sentences. The desired impact of the narrative is based on this generic model – “By writing, I arm myself. My life’s casing is fragile and would have collapsed long ago without the iron of the sentence”²¹ – and its explicit equation with medicine: “The doctor and the writer are in the same business.”²² Drawing on psychoanalysis, Laurens sets up an inversely proportional

15 Doubrovsky, *Le Livre*, p. 415.

16 Arnaud Genon, *Tu vivras toujours*, Paris, Rémanence, 2016.

17 Pierre Pachet, *Adieu*, Belfort, Circé, 2001, p. 123.

18 C. Laurens, *Philippe*, Paris, P.O.L., 1995, p. 75.

19 C. Thomas, *Souffrir*, p. 213–214.

20 P. Forest, *L’Enfant éternel*, p. 191.

21 C. Laurens, *Philippe*, p. 73.

22 Laurens, *Philippe*, p. 71.

relationship between authenticity and the safeguarding of the self: the closer the narrative is to what was experienced (i.e., actually documentary and embodied), the more effective it will be in healing its narrator. Fictionalization, on the other hand, is rejected: the novelist tells a mainstream newspaper, “At first, I couldn’t read anything of these stories that weren’t ‘for real,’ especially novels, when everything was blowing up ‘for real.’”²³ In a controversy that has remained famous, she accused Marie Darrieussecq of having “mentally” plagiarized her in *Tom est mort*. The accusation is especially interesting in her condemnation of any fictionalization of trauma (“moving phrases, poignant details, scenes to create”)²⁴ in a polemic that is reminiscent of those made at the same time by Claude Lanzmann against supposed forms of aestheticizing the Shoah. This quarrel, which has been studied extensively in France with respect to plagiarism and in trauma studies²⁵ as a way of questioning the limits of representation, actually brings the disturbances caused by the emergence of a therapeutic postulate in the literary field, which is defined by aesthetic criteria, to confront one another. Accused of transposing “a suffering whose debt has not been paid”²⁶ into the aesthetic space of writing, Darrieussecq defends the right to participate in the work of remembrance in her own way: her “writing gathers the words of the dead”²⁷ in fiction, which can take on any subject through the principle of identification and empathy. But this justification does not cut all ties with the idea of testimony; it is quite the opposite, in fact, since she states that she addresses an intimate and even autobiographical suffering (the fact that her mother lost a child): “Sometimes I’ve had to invoke a dead brother to justify my right to write a novel.”²⁸ On the other hand, Laurens does not renounce “literature” or the ambiguity of a possible fictional reading of her account, which is not reflected in a pact but rather reveals the construction of

23 Camille Laurens, “Apprivoiser la douleur du deuil,” *Psychologies*, www.psychologies.com/Moi/Se-connaître/Bonheur/Articles-et-Dossiers/Cultivons-notre-joie-de-vivre/Camille-Laurens-Apprivoiser-la-douleur-du-deuil.

24 See C. Laurens, “Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou,” *La Revue littéraire*, no. 32, Autumn 2007, pp. 1–14, here p. 10.

25 See Leslie Barnes, “Truth, Trauma, Treachery: Camille Laurens v. Marie Darrieussecq,” *MLN*, vol. 130, no. 4, 2015, p. 997–1015; <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/610616>; Colette Trout, “From *Le Bébé* to *Tom est mort*: Writing the Unspeakable Terror of Motherhood,” *Dalhousie French Studies*, vol. 98 (“Marie Darrieussecq”), Spring 2012, pp. 101–109; Kathryn Robson, “Psychic Plagiarism: The Death of a Child in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Tom est mort* and Camille Laurens’s *Philippe*,” *French Studies*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2014, pp. 46–59.

26 C. Laurens, “Marie Darrieussecq ou Le syndrome du coucou,” p. 11.

27 Marie Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police: accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction*, Paris, P.O.L., 2010, p. 311.

28 Darrieussecq, *Rapport*, p. 310.

an identity through pain and an access to expressiveness through trauma (“Until now, I have always found it unthinkable, or perhaps more precisely, impractical, to write *I* in a text intended to be published, made public. For me, *I* is the pronoun of intimacy; it has its place only in love letters. I write to say *I love you*. I yell because you did not yell [. . .]”):²⁹ she can therefore be suspected of offering what Darrieussecq calls in her defense a “certificate of grief (*certificat doloriste*) . . . I suffer therefore I am.”³⁰ Ontologically torn, like the very notion of literature that it cannot renounce, the mourning narrative cannot escape a paradoxical injunction: on the one hand, in the name of a culture of expressive authenticity, the literature of mourning can only be based on experience; on the other, it cannot be reduced to a simple form of recording *without literature*. I interpret these constraints as the uneasy emergence of a therapeutic culture in a literary context that is strongly characterized by the appearance of transitive values (address, compensation, substitution, transformation of the departed) and in a cultural practice with a definition that remains dependent on the idea of intransitivity.

The difficulties of writing

Such difficulties are further accentuated in the work of Philippe Forest, who made the death of his daughter, who passed away at the age of 4 of a sarcoma, the central theme of his work (the novels *L’Enfant éternel* in 1998 and *Toute la nuit* in 1999, then several essays with *Tous les enfants sauf un* in 2007 and *Le Roman infanticide: essais sur la littérature et le deuil* in 2010). With Laurens, he shares the requirement of not “prov[ing] unworthy of the test of reality and [aiming] to be endlessly faithful to it.”³¹ Yet with Forest there is the obsession with negative thinking about the work, denying any hope of cure or solace. “Mourning will not turn into an epic devoid of consolation. Writing is modest work, a point-less rescue operation in the disaster of time: to preserve the wreckage of an instant, a gesture, a word . . . Not to dream of heroic necromancy, of triumphant resurrection . . .,”³² notes the writer, in a negative version of the dream of the “resurrection of an entire life” à la Michelet that Pierre Michon successfully exemplified with the neo-lyricism of *Vies minuscules*, particularly the great proces-

²⁹ C. Laurens, *Philippe*, pp. 74–75.

³⁰ Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police*, p. 17.

³¹ Philippe Forest, *Le Roman infanticide: Dostoïevski, Faulkner, Camus, essais sur la littérature et le deuil* [The Infanticidal Novel: Dostoevsky, Faulkner, Camus, Essays on Literature and Mourning], Nantes, Éd. Cécile Default, 2010, p. 16.

³² Forest, *L’Enfant éternel*, p. 227.

sion of the dead at the end of the novel: “I would have liked to write from the heights of that vertiginous moment, from that trepidation, exaltation, or inconceivable terror, to write as a child without words dies, dissolves into the summer, in a great unsayable emotion. No power will decide that I have achieved nothing of that.”³³ Instead, Forest presents himself as “hoping for no consolation from words. Moreover, not needing to be consoled. Knowing that no help exists that comes from them. But that they nevertheless demand to be said – if only in the mute form of a prayer made by anyone and for anyone.”³⁴ In other words: “The page is not the afterlife where there is a hollow apotheosis of the living and the dead. Each sentence is a refusal.”³⁵ The writer cannot represent, all images are obliterated, is capable only of indexing presence, not capturing it, can only brood and not reinvent, designate but not define. The narrative of mourning – like the narrative of genealogical memory that Forest practices in *Le Siècle des nuages* – therefore offers itself as a humble sign, a modest stele, with the austerity of a kind of funerary inscription:

Each inscription is an epitaph, telling of the passage of whoever writes it. The signs that remain overlap, cover each other, efface each other. They make up nothing more than an illegible mess of letters and numbers. Yet every mark harbors the irrefutable memory of the moment when it was made. I write with a knife in the bark of a tree, the thickness of a stone. I draw with my finger in the dust, the sand, the ash. Initials, a shape, a date, a heart, an arrow, what have you. Nothing more.³⁶

Writing can only take place at the point of its limit or in its negativity: Forest evokes “a salvation devoid of sense,”³⁷ affirms that “any mental process is treason,” that “those who survive fabricate rituals of illusion. They use them to invoke the dead, calling them vaguely back to the world so that they accompany them endlessly in shadow,” and that writing “is one of these derisory rituals.”³⁸ Admittedly, such contradictions between extensive textual production and metatextual discourse that relativizes the values of literature, with the richest and most ambitious literary practices (the travel novel, the family portrait, the biographical narrative, the essay) co-existing alongside the desperate, defeatist discourses on the virtues and powers of writing, can be found in other writers. Forest is not the

33 P. Michon, *Vies minuscules*, p. 248. English translation from *Small Lives*, trans. Jody Gladding and Elizabeth Deshays, Brooklyn (NY), Archipelago Books, 2008, p. 215.

34 Philippe Forest, *Le Siècle des nuages: roman* [The Age of Clouds: A Novel], Paris, Gallimard, 2010, p. 31.

35 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 227.

36 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 131.

37 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*.

38 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 226 for the last three citations.

first great writer to have proclaimed the uselessness and vanity of literature – it is, after all, a French tradition, from La Rochefoucauld, who poked fun at the redeeming powers of discourse by mocking the untruthful variety – “Unable to live forever, they immortalized their reputations” –, to the ontological negativity of the post-war period. Yet few authors have backed up such a negative theology of literature on fantasized bereavement, having looked instead to a direct experience. How is it possible, then, to understand this paradoxical position adopted by Forest, the tireless writer of mourning who refuses any work of mourning? The first step is to note that the rumination is not without psychological positivity: as he writes in *Siècle des nuages*, “in the empty sky [. . .] there’s a story, in spite of everything, even if we know it’s misleading: not in the hopes of conquering oblivion or obtaining a reprieve from it, but just to show once, just once, that something will have been, once, and time itself, once it has erased this thing, will be able to do nothing about it, nothing about the fact that it was”:³⁹ in other words, inscription and symbolic barriers are made against forgetting. Though ruminating can lead to melancholy, it is likewise not devoid of psychological value. The writer promises himself that he will keep his eyes open to “the inscrutable darkness that time overshadows and see the beloved face, obliterated in black, pass by in perpetuity”;⁴⁰ that is, that he will write tirelessly of his grief for the child in order to keep her alive. According to the psychoanalytical conception of mourning, repetition becomes a way to summon the deceased, generating a melancholy that is itself lethal; but instead of refusing this repetition (or even converting it into positivity like the post-Freudian J.-B. Pontalis, who suggests that for the artist “[w]hen the loss is *in view* it ceases to be a mourning without end”),⁴¹ Forest clings to it by affirming that he “holds inside the hallucinated form of the one who was. Thought begins its work on him, not to accomplish, but to defer, to sabotage, even to forbid the work of mourning.”⁴² Hence this paradox: writing that serves to speak to the impossibility and to substitute presence with signs is a writing that is necessary for “giv[ing] an account of this element of the impossible (desire, mourning) that defines the human experience and that it alone can communicate in the form of a narrative that consents to fiction without renouncing the truth.”⁴³ Thus at the same time there is the asymptotic demand for these

39 Forest, *Le Siècle des nuages*, p. 30.

40 Forest, *L’Enfant éternel*, p. 227.

41 J.-B. Pontalis, “Perdre de vue” (1987), in *Perdre de vue*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Connaissance de l’inconscient,” 1988, pp. 275–298, cit. p. 298.

42 Forest, *L’Enfant éternel*, p. 226.

43 Philippe Forest, “Le roman-roman est en coma dépassé,” *BibliObs*, 29 Nov. 2011, bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/rentree-litteraire-2011/20111123.OBS5198/le-roman-roman-est-en-coma-depasse.html.

empty words: “Someone is speaking, then. Very far away, very close, you can never tell. [. . .] Author, reader, the truth sometimes passes like this, blurred, in the night. It must not be silenced.”⁴⁴ And thus also the reintroduction of a lyrical illusion, denounced elsewhere, in the invocation of his dying daughter:

*In the beat of a heart, we'll have joined you. Remember what our books told you in a soft voice. And this bed is a festive boat, gliding between the stones, the water lilies, the reflected stars. I couldn't find a lantern to equal your night. There isn't one. Forgive me . . . So, take whatever gleams and whatever breaks away from the dark blue background of oblivion. I've brought it to you. The moon and its thousands of stars . . . Already nonexistent, flow through my voice, which will not be stilled.*⁴⁵

Here, there is a return to realistic testimony that converges with discreet poetization (“Only the machine oversees the calculated breathing that sustains the body of their now forsaken child. That is all. Know this: this is what happens to the living”),⁴⁶ which leads to adjectivation and metaphorization, then the prophetic invocation to eternity: “The child who dies is eternal. Her hours are numbered, but time, for her, opens laterally. Each second harbors days that are themselves counted in years, in centuries of infinity.”⁴⁷ The problematic is similar to the matter of providing testimony about the Shoah, which constitutes its hidden archetype: a certain type of representation is not obliterated to cede to the silence of the unrepresentable but instead to a cathartic reorganization of mimesis. Such reconfigurations may leave the reader perplexed: ultimately, what is the point of combining the denial of any hope of scriptural survival with metaphysical invocation, of denying the work of mourning any positivity by attacking its “instrumentalization” as a “kind of doxa” through psychoanalysis and by castigating “the ‘religion of resilience,’ so popular and so harmful, of Boris Cyrulnik and his disciples”⁴⁸ and yet writing of nothing but mourning? Why strive to “bear witness to what has been” but refuse to “make sense of the experience”⁴⁹ and devote hundreds of pages of analysis to it? What is the point of constantly reminding us of the futility of literature in the face of the demand for silence (at most, in raw testi-

44 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 148.

45 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 390.

46 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, p. 391.

47 Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*, pp. 383–384.

48 Philippe Forest and Vincent Delecroix, *Le Deuil: entre le chagrin et le néant*, dialogue overseen by Catherine Portevin, Paris, Philo éditions, 2015, p. 32. Regarding contemporary writing about grief, see Bernadette Hidalgo-Bachs and Catherine Milkovitch-Rioux (eds), *Écrire le deuil dans les littératures des XIX^e–XX^e siècles*, Clermont-Ferrand, PU Blaise Pascal, Collection “Littératures,” 2014.

49 P. Forest and V. Delecroix, *Le Deuil*, p. 12.

mony) only to betray this principle? Ultimately, working in contradiction, a posture found in many writings of trauma, has ethical, political, and metaphysical benefits: it is a way of maintaining the co-presence of a horizon of a critical literature, that of the Sollers school, while being able to find relief in the written word; it is to assume the posture of an atheistic skepticism without exposing oneself to the risk of nihilism, failing neither contemporary secularization nor humanist betrayal; it is to keep on living without forgetting or surpassing the event. On an aesthetic level, it means avoiding recourse to the “words of the tribe” in the face of the common experience of mourning by producing a narrative of a richness that is to free the experience from its banality while avoiding the double aesthetic pitfall of frontality and hackneyed poetization. While textual resilience is a form of oblivion just as much as silence, Forest’s declaration that he renounces any literary healing for himself while still composing immense tombs to his daughter is a psychologically and symbolically effective solution.

The origin of literature

Such predicaments are not idiosyncratic to Forest: we can, for example, find them in Annie Ernaux, for whom writing about her mother’s death is to think “I don’t want to make literature”⁵⁰ and also, just at the start of the contemporary era of the mourning narrative, in the notations that Barthes gathered and published under the title *Journal de deuil* [Mourning Diary]. In this intimate text, the critic made the paradoxical configuration of the genre extremely clear: “I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths.”⁵¹ In other words, there was a refusal to transform mourning into an aesthetic object, whether intended by the writer or driven by language, along with the affirmation that literature was nevertheless, in essence, a writing of mourning, as confirmed by what I find to be one of the most beautiful definitions of it: “Which is what literature is: that I cannot read without pain, without chok-

⁵⁰ A. Ernaux, *L’Atelier noir*, p. 50.

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil-IMEC, coll. “Fiction & Cie,” 2009, p. 33. English translation from *Mourning Diary, October 26, 1977-September 15, 1979*, ed. Nathalie Léger, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 2010, p. 23. Regarding personal therapy practices and Barthes, see Sylvie Mathé, “Caritas: la littérature comme guide de vie selon Roland Barthes,” in *Enseigner la littérature à l’université aujourd’hui, Fabula/Les colloques*, www.fabula.org/colloques/document1516.php.

ing on truth, everything Proust writes in his letters about sickness, courage, the death of his mother, his suffering, etc.”⁵²

Barthes, rejecting the medicalization of mourning as much as the idea of surpassing it, anticipated and refuted the notion of a literature as “mood repair”⁵³ – “Irritation. No, bereavement (depression) is different from sickness. What should I be cured of?”⁵⁴ –, which led him to launch the project of *La Chambre claire* [Camera Lucida], in which the use of photography was tantamount to a discreet cenotaph and provisional eternity: “No, what I wanted – as Valéry wanted, after his mother’s death – was to ‘write a little compilation about her, just for myself (perhaps I shall write it one day, so that, printed, her memory will last at least the time of my own notoriety.)”⁵⁵

This moral injunction of a “modest” writing, to borrow Forest’s term, summons literature to give an account of its utility and to assert itself as a form of memory that simultaneously permits affective sharing and the non-negotiable singularization of experience. “What is the use of [literature],” Barthes wonders, after being astonished by the “power [of] useless language” deployed by Chateaubriand: “What is the use of saying *yellow cat* instead of *lost cat*? of calling old age a *night traveler*? [. . .] perhaps it is this: to suffer less.”⁵⁶ Just as much a problematization as a formal renewal, the narrative of mourning offers to relegitimize and rework the notion of literature.

52 R. Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, p. 189. English translation, *Mourning Diary*, p. 177.

53 To borrow an expression from Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches Us about Emotion*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge UP, 2011, especially p. 112 et seq.

54 R. Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, p. 18. English translation, *Mourning Diary*, p. 8.

55 *Journal de deuil*, p. 25.

56 Roland Barthes, “Chateaubriand: *Vie de Rancé*” (1965), in *Nouveaux essais critiques* (1972), *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty, vol 4 (1972–1976), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2002, pp. 23–121 (book), pp. 55–65 (text), cit. p. 65.

Chapter 9

Projectionist ethics

It doesn't matter that I was born white in 1976. I could have been born with red skin in 1804, or been a prostitute with yellow skin in a Beijing brothel under the Ming dynasty. I could have been a black man in a human zoo at the beginning of the twentieth century. We've been distributed haphazardly by the roulette of race, sex, and time. You can't ask numbers drawn at random to be in solidarity with each other, or to feel compassion for the weaker numbers. I am my own homeland. Régis Jauffret, *Microfictions*¹

Above, I have emphasized first-person narratives and forms of reading that look to heal the self, with literature having a directly performative value as direct enunciation or as contextualized implementation – what could be called “enaction” – in reading. In these instances, the first-person singular serves as the vector for the forms of self-care assumed with the rewriting of the subject's history, affective or narcissistic compensation, the rehashing of experience for clinical purposes, and the complexification and reformulation of experience: subjects redefine and transform themselves through expression or, in the case of reading, through expressive projection. These remediating writings or readings are capable of eliciting admiration and hope but are dismissed derisively as utilitarian practices. Apparently indifferent to such judgments, they summon the reader as only spectator or witness, taking pride in referring to themselves alone for approval and measuring their success primarily in terms of the subject's well-being. However, this is not in absolute good faith, given that the publication – taken in the etymological sense of the word – exposes them, in the quest for anthumous or posthumous approval, to the public tribunal of the good and the beautiful. But literature's potential therapeutic value is far from being limited to the empowerment of the first-person *I*. In contemporary discourse, literary intervention and its ways of improving and repairing the world likewise involve ethically or politically driven work on representations that looks beyond the use of the first person: biographical writing in the third person, interlocution in the second person aiming for dialogue, and the use of a “we.” It is not possible, as Hume does in a completely different context, to set attitudes aiming to represent the world against those aiming to transform or preserve it: third-person literary representations of alterity, of its suffering or marginality, and of territories and communities are also forms of literary corrective action. Literature, understood as compassion and rehumanization, as emotional understanding and

1 Régis Jauffret, *Microfictions: romans*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 300.

empathy, is closest to real clinical action when the narrative *I* assumes the position of a doctor of souls: “to take care of men is also to take care of their history,”² states Patrick Autréaux, suffering from cancer and needing to life story of an old poet he met on his travels. This idea is also to be found in Laurens, this time in the form of a comparison between “medical semiology” and reading: “[m]edicine, like writing, is first and foremost the Science of the Other: we must learn to read and love its Face.”³ Expressive individualism and attention to alterity, far from being opposed to one another, come together in these narratives; while François Flahault makes a “sense of existence” and the desire to be oneself into a desire for limitlessness that clashes, sometimes painfully, with social coexistence,⁴ the writings of suffering often report a surpassing of centripetal self-analysis through renewed attention to others: “I prefer what I have in common with other people to what sets me apart. That, too, is new,”⁵ writes Emmanuel Carrère, the narrator of *D’autres vies que la mienne*, in taking stock of how he has been changed by the experience of pain. Drawing on theorists of care as well as a re-reading of Emerson, Sandra Laugier has suggested that it’s possible to resolve the apparent contradiction between rigorous attention to oneself and attention to others by contrasting an abstract individualism with the expressive individualism that, by dispelling the illusion of autonomy, leads to a real and concrete attention to what *befits* the other.⁶ The contemporary literary texts I consider proceed from such a dialectic: many thaumaturgical narratives affirm that there is no discontinuity between self-care and empathy for the other. Discourses of self-care promise that individual suffering and healing are accompanied by increased attention to others, as in the case of Hervé Guibert, who contends that “it was necessary to find beauty in the sick, in the dying,”⁷ and of Pierre Guyotat in *Coma*, a long and poignant account of hospitalization, a “crisis that brought me to the brink of death”⁸ that leads the narrator to “advance in the development of my language and in my understanding of the world – and my dispossession before the richness of others,”⁹ merging the discovery of his weakness and the enrichment of

2 P. Autréaux, *Se survivre*, p. 42.

3 C. Laurens, *Philippe*, p. 72.

4 François Flahault, *Le Sentiment d’exister: ce soi qui ne va pas de soi*, Paris, Descartes et Cie, 2002, p. 369.

5 E. Carrère, *D’autres vies que la mienne*, p. 308. English translation from *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 242.

6 See Sandra Laugier, “Ne pas laisser l’individualisme à la droite,” *La Revue socialiste*, no. 29, Oct.-Nov. 2007, pp. 69–77, www.grand-angle-libertaire.net/ne-pas-laisser-l-individualisme-a-la-droite-sandra-laugier/.

7 H. Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, p. 115.

8 P. Guyotat, *Coma*, p. 9.

9 P. de Duve, *Cargo Vie*, p. 10.

his perceptual vocabulary aimed at others. The mechanism may be one of an exchange (Françoise Chandernagor, for example, explains at the end of her depressive journey that “I want to provide a refuge for the weakest, the most broken of these familiar voices that have supported me, beyond their own strength, over the course of more than two years: the friend who is fighting cancer and the one who is battling alcohol, the neighbor whose son committed suicide, the photographer who was dumped by her husband, the friend who’s out of work, the widowed old uncle, and the little orphaned cousin”)¹⁰ or of attentiveness to others that is sometimes expressed by the Christian term of “kindness,” a word used by Guibert himself when he evokes the “otherworldly generosity of the sick towards one another.”¹¹ The biographical form and the investigation of vulnerable communities – approaches that I will later revisit – likewise contribute to all these forms of honoring alterity that strive for imagined participation with the mysterious expectation that thought will produce healing or at the very least a cognitive and ethical benefit.

The powers of empathy

Giving presence and visibility to others, projecting oneself affectively through empathy, and “caring” for them through literature are central aims in contemporary metadiscourses, both as a mission assigned to the author and as a way of relating to literature. According to the doxa of our time, literature not only allows us to understand our own emotions and to be able to designate them but also to use reading to decode the sensibilities of others and in this way grow closer to them: according to what Carole Talon-Hugon calls “projectionist” moral theories¹² and Solange Chavel’s theories of “moral imagination,”¹³ literature, particularly fiction, creates a “tunnel” between self and other by making it possible for us to emerge from a state of isolation in relation to those before us. It is believed that narrative, with its ability to produce empathy, drives us to an affective displacement that is neither aloof sympathy nor transitory emotional contagion and, through the mediation of a narrator we can project ourselves onto and of situations we can share in, an initiation into compassion. The role of culture in the broadest sense and of literature in particular is to offer us various forms of affective positional displacement, not just in relation to others but also ourselves. Insofar as literature

¹⁰ F. Chandernagor, *La Première Épouse*, p. 214.

¹¹ G. Barbedette, *Mémoires d’un jeune homme devenu vieux*, pp. 20–21.

¹² Carole Talon-Hugon, *Morales de l’art*, Paris, PUF, coll. “Lignes d’art,” 2009, p. 68.

¹³ Solange Chavel, *Se mettre à la place d’autrui: l’imagination morale*, Rennes, PU Rennes, coll. “Essais. Raison publique,” 2011.

allows us to willingly suspend a personal identity in favor of others, it enables us to explore other consciousnesses and sensibilities. Reading provides the opportunity for a project of empathic decentering, an exercise in temporarily leaving the self, without necessarily leading to hysterical identification or alienation in the bovarism denounced by Freud. The narrative's modification of the space, time, and enunciation coordinates for our natural situation of being in discourse undoubtedly responds to our need for a double and for a play on points of view (our "role imagination");¹⁴ whatever the case may be, the affective consequences it possesses are potentially immense, despite being difficult to predict.

Originally a part of the Romantic project (Coleridge contends that the artist's imagination allows him to access otherwise inaccessible truths through "sympathy," understood in the broad sense as the ability to grasp nature and human beings in their organic specificity – a foundational notion of the literature for which Shakespeare is provided as a model and which differs profoundly from the classical model, whereby art should seek to define classes and types), empathy has become a form of education in the other and a default rationale for politics. Modern social democracy was subsequently defined by the establishment of "empathic communities," i.e. groups in which symbolic and affective identifications merged. Empathy was originally advanced by Theodor Lipps as a specific way of knowing based on the idea that knowledge is acquired as if by resonance, but the concept was later reworked within the context of phenomenology (from Hegel to Sartre), German aesthetic philosophy and its notion of *Einfühlung*, psychoanalysis (Melanie Klein), and the cognitive sciences. The notion, which has gradually become a tool for analyzing and describing behavior, can be used in fields as removed from each other as economics and reading theory. As an essential affective mechanism of intersubjective exchanges, it belongs just as much to the field of moral and political philosophy as to psychology, and it has a long history that goes at least as far back as Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). For Smith, empathy is, along with approval, at the heart of social benevolence, insofar as it makes it possible to overcome selfishness; in keeping with this suggestion are Martha Nussbaum's ethics of reciprocity and the theories of care, which to me seem to have replaced existentialism (which, as is the case with Sartre, involves the suggestion of "A whole man, made up of all men, worth any one of them, and any one of them is worth him") or the phenomenology of the gift as the standard ethical philosophy for literature. For these theories, being able to recognize oneself in others and to understand to what extent their humanity is our own, outside the dialectic of the

¹⁴ See S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 28.

strong and the weak, is the source of law, the foundation of all forms of solidarity, and at the heart of all ethics.

Altruistic ideology

The capacity for literature participates in the selection and valorization of altruism as an indispensable self-defense mechanism for the species or simply as a facilitator of social relations. Here, I am thinking in particular of the frequently cited work of psychologists Mar and Keith Oatley about the ways in which reading fiction enhances our ability to connect with others,¹⁵ as well as Mulligan and Habel's work¹⁶ on fiction's capacity for fostering the development of children's intersubjective communication skills and social behavior. It is a matter of valorizing literature as a driving force for the creation of affective communities or as a catalyst for our capacities for empathy, owing to the power attributed to fictional enunciation to lead us to change our positions emotionally and intellectually. Even cognitive theorists who draw on the famous theory of mirror neurons and identify empathic phenomena in newborns or bonobo monkeys, along with evolutionary theorists who describe empathy as a mechanism of social self-regulation, highlight the complexity of the cognitive logic involved together with the need for practice and education: empathy is not just a reflexive moral emotion, but is rather an *in absentia* form of relationship and communication with the other. With the mental displacement produced by empathy, I put myself in the position of the other, disidentify with myself and my private language in order to re-identify myself, and exercise the democratic virtue of designating the existence of a moral consciousness and subjectivity, equivalent and equal to my own, in others. Such a displacement is certainly more than mere emotive contamination and is certainly more than sympathy: the "sharing" is inseparable from the "understanding." It is through empathy that we can become

15 See especially Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley, "Evolutionary Pre-adaptation and the Idea of Character in Fiction," *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, July 2005, pp. 179–194; R. Mar, K. Oatley, Jonathan Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, and Jordan B. Peterson, "Bookworms versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction versus Non-fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds." *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 40, 2006, pp. 694–712; R. Mar and K. Oatley, "The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 3, no. 3, May 2008, pp. 173–192; R. Mar, K. Oatley and J. B. Peterson, "Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes," *Communications*, vol. 34, 2009, pp. 407–428.

16 Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, "An Experimental Test of the Effects of Fictional Framing on Attitudes," *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 1, March 2011, pp. 79–99.

aware of and participate in others' difficulties and suffering. Therefore, it is as much through feeling as through reason that we discover equality. It is indeed the recognition of this ethical and political power that has led those such as Martin Hoffman, in keeping with Adam Smith,¹⁷ to place empathy at the heart of the ontogenesis of moral sentiments (presuming that empathy allows us to move from private guilt to social action), and to insist on the central role, at the political level, of empathy in the birth and solidification of the modern globalized democratic conscience. Being able to recognize oneself in others and to understand to what extent their humanity is our own is the origin of law and the foundation of all forms of solidarity. Here, it is worth considering the contemporary success, particularly in the United States, of lifestyles based on empathy, as evidenced by the popularity of manuals designed for teaching oneself empathy¹⁸ and, in keeping with a mission upheld by many emerging institutions from the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University to the Empathylab, the promotion of the social and educational use of stories and attitudes that foster empathy. What Roman Krznaric designated in his bestselling book as the "empathy revolution"¹⁹ promises nothing less than happiness and peace through the leveraging of social cognition research about empathy mechanically leading to more moral behaviors and the recommendation, for example, of therapeutic reading practices from a very young age,²⁰ what C. Daniel Batson calls the "empathy-altruism hypothesis."²¹ This idea, which has now made its mark on Francophone studies in the United States within the context of postcolonial studies,²² has also produced multiple echoes in France as well, as in the case of Serge Tisseron.²³ An extreme version is provided in Jeremy Rifkin's famous book, *The Empathic Civilization* (2009), which refers to our "race to global consciousness" and makes the novel "the first learning tool ever designed to

17 Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge UP, 2000.

18 See the organizations identified by The Center for Building a Culture of Empathy, : cultureofempathy.com/.

19 See Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*, republished under the title *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (New York, A Perigee Book, 2014) and translated into several languages.

20 See for example Trisha Waters, *Therapeutic Storywriting: A Practical Guide to Developing Emotional Literacy in Primary Schools*, London, David Fulton Publishers, 2004.

21 See especially Chapter 2, "The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis," in C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2011.

22 See Philip Bailey "The 'Spark' of Human Sympathy in Francophone Literature," *The French Review*, vol. 88, no. 4, May 2015, pp. 15–32.

23 See Serge Tisseron, *L'Empathie au cœur du jeu social*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2010.

explore universal human sentiments,”²⁴ and it has also been used (as in the concept of care) within the Democratic Party and Barack Obama in particular. Discussed and contested,²⁵ these philosophies of empathy, even in the abstract formulations such as those provided by Martha Nussbaum, can be seen as forms that revalorize literature; in turn, they have spread throughout literary studies, especially following on the work of Suzanne Keen.²⁶

Introduced into the mainstream with bibliotherapy (Alain de Botton called the ability to understand our loved ones based on artistic models the “Marquis du Lau phenomenon,”²⁷ after Proust), the empathy that accompanies being immersed in fiction, a mechanism as old as the novel itself for seeing the world through others’ eyes, has acquired a new political dimension in the contemporary field with the resurgence of a novel that is engaged or at least concerned with suffering. Defined as “interpersonal emotive resemblance,” empathy has for many contemporary writers become the vector for a neo-humanism based on emotion, capable as it is of opening our hearts to others, and for readers it has also greatly bolstered the ethical value of reading – and, subsequently, of the humanities. Let us take as an example the amateur reading blog of a male retiree:

When I read fiction I read things that can be difficult, but I’m not directly afraid of them, because I know that they are not real and that I’m not the one experiencing them. [. . .] I’m better able to understand others since I’ve exposed myself to a way of thinking other than my own. I become more empathetic. This enables me to accept those who are different from me, since I learn how to understand them.²⁸

or the critic Pierre Jourde’s more professional blog:

Literature gives us access to the other. In so-called “real” life, this other remains a stranger to us. How else, if not through the novel or autobiography, can we get an insider’s view of a nineteenth-century peasant, of a young eighteenth-century Englishwoman, of a Russian soldier, of somebody with an intellectual disability? Literature allows us to see what they see,

24 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathetic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*, New York, Polity, 2010, p. 312.

25 See especially the positions of Paul Bloom in the forum “Against Empathy”: “Opening the Debate,” *Boston Review*, Sept. 10, 2014, bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy.

26 See our volume *Empathie et esthétique*, eds. Alexandre Gefen and Bernard Vouilloux, proceedings from the international conference at Bordeaux (10-12 May 2010), Paris, Éd. Hermann, 2013.

27 A. de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, p. 21.

28 Bechir Houman, “Lire rend plus intelligent, plus empathique et plus heureux,” “Pépites” blog, 23 April 2016.

to feel what they feel, to expand our lives and our experiences, to get perspective on what we are and to open ourselves to empathy.²⁹

There is indeed an expectation that empathy and the transference it promises will do their work, with the added value of narrative empathy being to overcome the limits and biases of ordinary social empathy by immersing the reader in fiction.³⁰ Similar to catharsis, the concept is sufficiently vague to allow for the attribution of *ad hoc* reparative powers to writing and reading. For, as theorists of “projectionist” ethics explain, such an attitude is not innate and must be learned; it is not inviolable and can turn into indifference. This is where artistic works come in, supposedly providing a form of education that is sensitive to the other and establishing affective connection with all beings. Art, ethics, and politics are thus expected to converge: to understand how we can learn compassion from a novel or feel a sense of inner revulsion in response to the suffering depicted in a painting is to understand how literary and artistic works can contribute to our learning to live together. In postmodern narratives, then, empathy does not just operate on an individual basis but is also a factor of social action. Empathy is allegedly a mental phenomenon that is, to use the vocabulary of cognitive science, “pre-wired” by evolution, as evidenced by the “mirror neurons,” and it receives just as much analytical attention – i.e., what natural aptitudes we have for inferring others’ mental states – from neuroscience as from what is called “theory of mind.” It is therefore just as much of a cultural exercise, where the role of linguistic processes is essential, as it is a personal skill: in empathy, the mediation facilitated by affect is inseparable from the acquisition of a vocabulary and a form of rationality that allows us not only to feel, but also to think ourselves in the other – and, by extension, the other in ourselves. Accessing the suffering of others in order to recognize its legitimacy and recognize ourselves affectively in others requires not just the education of our sensibility, but also a capacity for temporary identity displacement. This displacement is something for which artistic works, especially fictional narratives, apparently train us. If stories assist us in narrating our identities, they are also devices that can get us to escape, both affectively and cognitively, our nynegocentrism – our enunciative and phenomenological inscription in a “me/here/now” – and allow us to suspend, at least temporarily, the grip of our private mental universe in order to try to assume

²⁹ Pierre Jourde, “À quoi sert à la littérature (1),” “Confitures de culture” blog, *L’Obs*, March 3, 2009; pierre-jourde.blogs.nouvelobs.com/archive/2009/03/03/a-quoi-sert-la-litterature-1.html.

³⁰ This is, for example, the hypothesis presented by Mary-Catherine Harrison, “How Narrative Relationships Overcome Empathic Bias: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Empathy across Social Difference,” *Poetics Today*, vol. 32, no. 2, Summer 2011, pp. 255–288.

the condition and situation of others, which fundamentally means, as Pascal Quignard suggests, learning to forget ourselves (“The essence of reading is this same feeling of forgetting ourselves. The joy of forgetting oneself.”)³¹ In a glorification of tears as the convergence between the mental and physical, Quignard describes this access to others as promised by empathy, understood as a way to leave one’s self and language to allow for real presence:

It is possible that our suffering will never be entirely the same as the suffering of those we love. Our misfortunes cannot fully reach the other. Our pains cannot touch the other directly. Our hands can. Strength passes through the wall of the chest, thought the cavernous box of the head, pleasure the sack of the skin, and water the eyes.³²

Long discredited in literature, here “tears” are reclaimed for their attention to faces, expressions, and even touch, for their capacity to make the world a space of affective encounters (to take a very recent example, Olivier Steiner’s narrative *La Main de Tristan*,³³ which shows various ways of affectively understanding others), and now memoirs, portraits, travelogues, and contemporary biographies assert not only the pleasure of curiosity and disorientation, but also meaningful mental action. This action is based as much on a phenomenology of presence derived from Emmanuel Levinas as on an ethical or even political notion of empathy: it is less the ontological dimension of the encounter with the other than its practical dimension – as mental and perceptual training, as an expansion to new modalities of existence, as a concrete affective transfer – that justifies the exercise of literature in the twenty-first century.

Literature and the ethics of care

Regardless of how one interprets the merits of the moral productivity of empathy³⁴ and the merits of our contemporary social devices for consolation, a significant portion of French literature is attempting to define and reinvent itself today in terms of this watchword, directly affiliating itself with what across the Atlantic is called the ethics of care. The similarity of the countless contemporary texts that generate empathy, whether in popular literature (such as David Foenkinos’s tearful *Charlotte*) or not, differentiates them from historical “realist” or humanist sen-

31 P. Quignard, *Les Désarçonnés*, p. 58.

32 P. Quignard, *Vie secrète*, p. 464.

33 Olivier Steiner, *La Main de Tristan*, Paris, Éd. des Busclats, 2016.

34 See for example the reservations made by Solange Chavel, *Se mettre à la place d’autrui*, p. 109 et seq., especially because of what is referred to as the problem of “imaginative resistance.”

sitivity to misfortune and is linked to several features that closely resemble the ethics of care, defined by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher as “*a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.*”³⁵ These features include:

- thematic material privileging the subalterns and the voiceless: unlike the novel’s traditional preoccupation with the “lowly” or the poor, the writer tackles a communicative inferiority: suggesting the recognition of an autonomy that exists within dependency, the theory of care resonates all the better with literature since it is an asymmetrical moral theory that does not presuppose the complete exchange of positions nor absolute resemblance but rather an adjustment in the attention directed at new questions and new subjects;
- a shift in emotional intensity from the situation itself to the narrator’s relationship to their subject: the novelist aims not to represent pathos but rather empathy as a process, with the double objective of avoiding emotional saturation in order to facilitate the reader’s identification and to introduce critical reflexivity into the empathy;
- the deflation of the novel into a narrative: it is the ordinariness and not the extraordinariness of suffering that is aimed for, even in the representation of catastrophe, which leads the narrative to an art that is deliberately sparse and anti-romantic, or at least to reveal its processes through a form of guilt linked to the literary utterance;
- the absence of abstract moral discourse: the writer’s discourse or metadiscourse does not propose that the case be universalized through exemplarity or theory, but rather that a small-scale identification be activated. In this regard contemporary novelists do not propose an ideology but rather a micropolitics of feeling. Such a demand cannot be assimilated to a predetermined project but is rather exercised in a situational and circumstantial manner, and “moral understanding is frequently conveyed without recourse to moral judgments.”³⁶

There are many examples of this kind of attentional literature in the French-speaking world, thanks in no small part to the jobs previously held by some of its writers (to give just a few examples: Patrick Chamoiseau was a social worker, Giséle Pineau a nurse in a psychiatric hospital, Emile Ollivier a socio-cultural facilitator for migrants in Quebec, and Fatou Diome a housekeeper in Dakar). In the

35 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, New York and London, Routledge, 1993, p. 103.

36 Cora Diamond cited by Sandra Laugier, *Wittgenstein: les sens de l’usage*, Paris, J. Vrin, 2009, p. 312.

French literature that concerns me here, I can find no better example of this contemporary novelistic empathy than Emmanuel Carrère's successful *Other Lives than my Own*, a work that portrays many forms of vulnerability and many sites and situations of care, starting with the typical case of dependency and hospital treatment. In this way, the writer subtly analyzes infirmity and the relational breakdowns that dependence entails; he writes in a sober style, avoiding any "tear-jerking," and this is accompanied by a very particular form of poignant bluntness: such is the case with the character who, we learn, "received her disability card a few days before her eighteenth birthday."³⁷ Elsewhere, Carrère describes the daily life of the nurses and the team providing support for a patient in palliative care, demonstrating a shrewd ability to analyze the medical and psychological protocols as well as the complex relationships between the dying and those caring for them. Individual portraits emerge – like Patrice, for example, whose capacity for presence allows him to provide care for the staged decline of Hodgkin's disease: "his task would be to care for her, help her, carry her the way he had from the beginning"³⁸ as well as a "chubby guy with a lisp in pink Bermuda shorts, who with his dyed hair worn in bangs [. . .] volunteer[ed] on Sundays to make up corpses, guiding the fingers of their loved ones over the faces," "[p]erhaps, quite simply" driven by "the desire to be of help."³⁹ The narrative seeks in its own way to "carry" the emotion conveyed by the protagonists of the story, thus offering to literature, in terms I have mentioned elsewhere because I find them so paradigmatic, the role of "healing what can be healed."⁴⁰ Carrère makes himself a public writer of sorts, reducing his literary project to a work of commission: "Someone said to me: You're a writer, why don't you write our story? It was a commission, I accepted it."⁴¹ He takes as a model the judge who, "[l]istening to the sufferings of others, [. . .] instinctively adopts the attitude that guided him through his ordeal with cancer" and deduces from it an ethic of the literary utterance: "Now, too, he doesn't hunt for the perfect thing to say; just lets the words come on their own. They may not be the right ones, but this is the only way the right ones have a chance of coming."⁴² The literary utterance is thus in the service of others: it is a matter of passing on an emotion that does not belong

37 E. Carrère, *D'autres vies que la mienne*, p. 216. English translation from *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 168.

38 *D'autres vies*, p. 262–263; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 205.

39 *D'autres vies*, p. 99; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 75.

40 In French: "panser ce qui peut être pansé" (*D'autres vies*, p. 310); Coverdale translates "offer what solace I can," p. 243.

41 Back cover, also *D'autres vies*, p. 107; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 82.

42 *D'autres vies*, p. 147; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 115.

to the author, who is only the temporary medium: “I was enthralled by the idea of a short narrative, something readable in a couple of hours, similar to the time we’d spent with Étienne, a text that would let others share the emotion we’d felt listening to him,”⁴³ explains Carrère. Together with the idea that the narrative device is capable of freeing itself from the barriers constituted by identity, time, and place in order to adjust and retranslate, this instrumental and rhetorical notion of literature complements the specific mechanisms of attention that care intends to place at the heart of our relationships with others by renouncing the privilege of fictional irresponsibility and the joys of linguistic insularity that characterize avant-garde literature. In *Lives Other than My Own*, this baseline notion of literature seems to exclude all the symbolic benefits of the writer’s situation: on the final page of the book, there is a dedication to three little girls, “Diane and her sisters,”⁴⁴ who are orphaned when Juliette, whose final days Carrère describes, passes away. If the victims receive only a very textual form of recognition, all the author receives in return for his experience is highly personal relief as his difficult marriage is shaken up, which the book describes in response to a need for autobiographical contextualization specific to Carrère and the ethic of direct involvement which, since *L’Adversaire* [The Adversary], has become the hallmark of his books.

In Carrère’s work, there are thus principles of narrative medicine, as outlined by Rita Charon: “Using narrative knowledge enables a person to understand the plight of another by participating in his or her story with complex skills of imagination, interpretation, and recognition.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, on an ethical level, Carrère’s text encompasses the various forms care can take according to theorist Joan Tronto: caring about, a requirement specific to the literary utterance, which must turn towards the world; taking care of, or the need to support others’ faltering speech by making a trace of it; care giving insofar as the ethics of the narrative provides testimony for the witness with all the necessary delicacy, obtaining their consent beforehand; care receiving, in the way in which the author agrees to see his own anguish appeased and his own love relationship healed by the example set by those whose paths he has crossed.⁴⁶ The writer suggests a continuity between the social empathy specific to real life, such as that which he experiences in the company of the tsunami victims – “In great distress, Jean-Baptiste comes to get me in the bungalow. The French couple whom we met two days earlier has just arrived at the hotel. Their daughter is dead. He needs me to help him deal

43 *D’autres vies*, pp. 107–108; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 82.

44 *D’autres vies*, p. 310; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 243.

45 R. Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, pp. 9–10.

46 See J. C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, pp. 105–108.

with this"⁴⁷ –; the empathy that comes from listening to the narrative of “other lives,” with the model located somewhere between friendship and journalistic interest; and, thirdly, the literary injunction to bear witness, an injunction that has become “a common goal.”⁴⁸ From this continuity between the relationship *in praesentia* and the book’s utterance *in absentia*, Carrère infers the ability of literature to provide particular forms of discursive care allowing at least for an ethical gain, the overcoming of selfishness for the listener. Can such an individual benefit be extended to the reader? Can such a use of utterance, which one hesitates to call “literary” in the post-Romantic sense that the word generally possesses, be universalized? Could the accompanying aesthetic, which in a way reduces the book to the *arte povera* of a concrete linear narrative and to an autobiographical narrative without stylistic effects, accompanied merely by modest speculations on the nature of others’ experience, be representative of contemporary literature? I think it is first necessary to highlight the extent to which the limits of empathy are the subject of a careful description that describes the boundaries of the novel’s power and of human speech in general, as in the scene in which the narrator, resting with his companion just after the tsunami, violently perceives the limits of interpersonal communication and affective sharing:

Later, we’re lying on the bed, side by side. My fingertips caress hers, which don’t respond. I’d like to take her in my arms but I know that isn’t possible. I know what she’s thinking; it’s impossible to think of anything else. A few dozen yards away from us, in another bungalow, Jérôme and Delphine must be lying down as well, wide awake. Has he taken her in his arms, or is that impossible for them as well? It’s the first night. The night of the day their daughter died.⁴⁹

It is worth noting that Carrère asserts the exceptional status of his enterprise: “You’re the only guy I know who could think a friendship between two lame and cancer-ridden judges who pore over debtors’ files at the *tribunal d’instance* in Vienne would be a golden opportunity,”⁵⁰ remarks one of his interlocutors. On several occasions, the autobiographical voice looks inward and attributes the narrator’s capacity for empathy his narrative strives to demonstrate to his own fragility: it was his “own pain” that “helped him to listen,”⁵¹ an intimate suffering found throughout a body of literary work that never ceases to question the foundations of personal

47 Carrère, *D’autres vies que la mienne*, p. 15; *Lives Other than My Own*, p. 7 (translation modified).

48 Carrère, *D’autres vies*, p. 112.

49 Carrère, *D’autres vies*, p. 23; *Lives Other than My Own*, pp. 13–14.

50 Carrère, *D’autres vies*, p. 110.

51 Carrère, *D’autres vies*, p. 124.

identity and the weaknesses that can lead us to project ourselves onto others; let's think of *La Moustache* and *L'Adversaire*. In this sense, *Lives Other than My Own* is a positive variation of an identity flaw the writer shares with the madman or the usurper. A similar process of contemporary testimony by proxy can be found in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'Ablation*. The novelist speaks on behalf of a friend who is afflicted with prostate cancer, which has rendered him impotent. In a very raw and harsh manner, he recounts both the details of the medical support and the suffering, in accordance with a program that the writer sets out in a prologue:

As vigilant witnesses and keen observers, novelists are sometimes entrusted with lives so that they may tell of them in their books. They thus perform the service of public writers. This is what happened to me two years ago when a friend, a mathematics scholar, asked me to write his story. At first, I hesitated, offering instead to help him. But he said he could never do it alone.

I listened to him for hours, I accompanied him in his wanderings throughout the hospital and I discovered a fascinating world, full of rich and fertile material for writing.⁵²

The role of Ben Jelloun's narrative is to commemorate a lost sexual desire just as much as it is to express the confused identity of the patient who is weakened and humiliated by his disease. And yet, the motive remains the same as in Carrère's work: the contemporary writer has resumed the office of the public writer and is able to provide access to speech and this in turn benefits literature, which, to use Ben Jelloun's imagery, is "fertilized" by the encounter with the world of the hospital. There are many other examples of this literature of testimony that are linked to an encounter with illness and suffering and that employ direct address, for example the beautiful account by Marie Depussé, *Dieu gît dans les détails* [God Lies in the Details], evoking one of the residents of the La Borde psychiatric hospital with this phrase: "I will try to speak about Loyse. I owe her that, at least. I cannot describe her face. Perhaps it was beautiful. We were all victims of the ugliness she forced on us."⁵³ It is easy to gauge the gap between this writing that is not only transitive but also provided with an addressee, even openly utilitarian, and the closed paradigm of the autotelic project that Barthes summarizes in one of his most ascetic propositions: "To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never make me loved by the one I love (the other), to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates noth-

⁵² Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'Ablation: récit*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014, p. 9. See the commentary by Pierre Assouline, who emphasizes how speaking out by proxy is a recurring motif for the author: P. Assouline, "Enterrer les morts, réparer les vivants" [Burying the Dead, Repairing the Living], *La République des livres*, 10 Jan. 2014.

⁵³ Marie Depussé, *Dieu gît dans les détails: La Borde, un asile*, Paris, P.O.L., 1993, p. 128.

ing, that it is precisely, *where you are not* – that is the beginning of writing.”⁵⁴ An author such as Carrère, on the other hand, writes for others, strives to be loved by them, wants to compensate for a disappearance, to sublimate suffering, sees himself precisely where his addressees are – and ultimately prefers to be as true as possible (in the sense of descriptive precision as well as ethical delicacy) over aesthetic value.

This ethics of care and this faith in empathy may be dismissed as nothing more than good intentions and have been met with skepticism. In his *Maxims*, Classical moralist La Rochefoucauld characterized pity as “a reflection of our own evils in the ills of others,”⁵⁵ its value considered solely as a preventive insurance against our own suffering. And there is the paradox of empathic distance denounced by Proust: “I came to recognize that, apart from her own kinsfolk, the sufferings of humanity inspired in her a pity which increased in direct ratio to the distance separating the sufferers from herself. The tears that flowed from her in torrents when she read in a newspaper of the misfortunes of persons unknown to her were quickly stemmed once she had been able to form a more precise mental picture of the victims.”⁵⁶ Such issue has been the object of theoretical denunciations from all sides.⁵⁷ “You died of pansympathy,” Jules Supervielle warned us in an eponymous poem.⁵⁸ However, at the risk of making objects that refuse to be artistic, artistic and of locking away the suffering of others in a cloying pathos or else a formal logic that is heteronomous regarding ethical issues, or at the risk of simply locking up the other in a caricatural emotivity by forgetting the requirement for accuracy in language, we cannot underestimate the contemporary importance of empathy viewed as a moral and political culture of sensibility with restorative virtue. Reading is viewed as a form of attention or participation, and writing is placed at the service of the *narrative needs* of others, or simply as a form of care through mental participation.

54 Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty, vol 5 (1977–1980), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2002, pp. 25–296, cit. p. 132. English translation from *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 2001, p. 100.

55 François de La Rochefoucauld, maxim no. 264, in *Maximes. Mémoires. Œuvres diverses*, Paris, LGF, 2001, pp. 175–176.

56 Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), Paris, Gallimard, 1919, vol 1, p. 168. English translation from *In Search of Lost Time*, vol 1, *Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin, New York, The Modern Library, 1992, p. 171.

57 See S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 223 et seq., revisited by F. Lavocat, *Fait et fiction*, pp. 354 et seq.

58 Jules Supervielle, “Tu mourus de pansympathie. . .” (1919), in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. Michel Collot, Paris, Gallimard, p. 75.

Chapter 10

Equipping knowledge

Literature is a strange contraband operation, after all. Philippe Forest, *L'Enfant éternel*¹

Alongside this empathy perceived as a form of both projection with the value of an encounter and affective knowledge with ethical worth, alongside this view of the literary connection, contemporary discourses converge to make literature a source of knowledge. Literature can offer forms of mediation for understanding others in atypical situations while simultaneously establishing mechanisms for affective exchange. In addition to sensible identification, literature is believed to produce knowledge of a particular type – not propositional knowledge, but practical reasoning, know-how – practice, training. This is where its mission, its usefulness, find justification: in the face of subjects or questions that are either too complex – because they require the consideration of contradictory positions – or inaccessible – because being past or future, they involve rare or necessarily fictional experiences. It is difficult to disentangle the discourses regarding the educational and cognitive capacities of literature,² where approaches stemming from the philosophy of knowledge that insist on the “practical” knowledge of literary representation and those stemming from the philosophies of ordinary language following the second Wittgenstein are mixed together, and it is likewise challenging, within these theories, to distinguish between individual benefits – decentering knowledge, experiencing the impossible, accessing complexity, equipping language, etc. – and expected collective benefits – allowing for social adaptation, regulating intersubjective conflicts, producing distributed cognition, etc. Thus, not without a certain neo-moralism, Martha Nussbaum has praised literature as a means of expanding the imaginations of judges, with novels capable of distancing them from a simplified and deterministic vision of the human being.³ She has made such assertions at a time when judges providing the reading of books as a penalty was becoming an alternative solution for the reformation of criminals; a

1 P. Forest, *L'Enfant éternel* [The Eternal Child], p. 147.

2 See Pascal Engel, “Trois conceptions de la connaissance littéraire: cognitive, affective, pratique,” *Philosophiques*, vol. 40, no.1, 2013, pp. 121–138.

3 See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

few cases have been recorded in Canada,⁴ the USA,⁵ Italy,⁶ and even Iran.⁷ The program “Changing Lives through Literature: an Alternative Sentencing Program,” created in 1991 by a probation officer and a professor of English literature at the University of Massachusetts- Dartmouth, allows some prison sentences to be replaced by reading seminars.⁸

From sentimental to adventure novels, from psychological novels to erotic ones, fiction comes to populate our worlds of representation with behaviors, reactions, expressions, illuminating metaphors, emblematic characters, and analyses of the hidden realms of the mind or the subconscious. These artefacts are narratives that are felt to be ontologically false or biased but that nevertheless offer local, concrete, and accessible models and solutions for all our discourse and commitments, and that seek, in their scripting and staging of emotions or feelings, to force their topicality into the personal world of the reader. Clearly perceived as a device, the narrative of *À la Recherche du temps perdu* is nonetheless a source of opinions, assumptions, and judgments about humanity that many of us have integrated seamlessly with our universe of beliefs to “think by case.” As we have seen, this ambition is augmented in projectionist ethics because the main merit of empathy is to allow for a role-playing imagination that, in turn, makes it possible to move, according to a Kantian opposition, from “thinking for oneself” to “thinking from the point of view of anyone else.” The affective dimension of empathy does more than create a mere tunnel and a fragile link to the characters; it opens the door to a de-centered knowledge and a change in point of view. There are multiple gains that are hoped to be won through literature: not just the reverence of alterity according to Levinasian ethics or the indirect engagement of reflexivity through the return of reading to the world, as suggested by Ricœur,⁹ but the very concrete production of a “knowing how,” to use Gilbert Ryle’s formula (as opposed to a “knowing that,” an abstract knowledge¹⁰), the analysis of situations through detailed descriptions, and

4 “Appel Court Upholds Book-Reading Sentence in Manslaughter Case,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 14 June 1985.

5 Quentin Duverger, “Un juge de l’Utah condamne à lire *Les Misérables* au lieu d’une peine de prison,” [Utah Judge Sentences *Les Misérables* to Read Instead of Jailtime] “VNI vousnousils: l’emag de l’éducation” site, 21 February 2012.

6 Clément Solym, “Rome: Condamné à acheter 30 livres sur le féminisme à une prostituée de 15 ans,” [Rome: Sentenced to Buy 30 Books on Feminism to a 15-year-old Prostitute] “ActuaLitté: les univers du livre” site, 23 September 2016.

7 Julie Torterolo, “Un juge iranien condamne des délinquants à lire des livres,” [Iranian Judge Sentences Offenders to Read Books] “AL ActuaLitté: les univers du livre” site, 10 Sept. 2015.

8 See ctl.umassd.edu/about/home.cfm

9 See P. Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* [Oneself as Another], pp. 188 et seq.

10 See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2000, chap. 2, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” pp. 27–32.

the staging of speculative fictions and thought experiments. Literature becomes the opportunity for a stroll through all of human diversity and for “case-based” thinking that has regained importance in the social sciences.¹¹ In its own way, it proposes what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, borrowing another concept from Gilbert Ryle, calls a “thick description”¹² – even François Bégaudeau’s very atypical *Antimaneuel de littérature* assigns to it the function of “densifying one’s emotional and cerebral life”¹³ – when it is not an opportunity for an experimental philosophy. The proof of this is the trend, which has been particularly pronounced since Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes* [The Kindly Ones] (2006, one million copies sold) to Régis Jauffret’s recent *Cannibales* (2016), of getting us to explore the minds of the insane or of criminals through homodiegetic or epistolary novels, an exercise in mental displacement that surely contributed to Charlotte Lacoste’s remark about a “fascination for executioners”¹⁴ in contemporary French literature.

The fact that biography, in its most inventive and curious forms, has become a major genre in literature is another clear indication: the genre of *imaginary life*, and more generally of what Bruno Blanckeman has proposed to call “transpersonal” writings,¹⁵ far from dwindling with the popularity of biographical fictions in the 1980s, ceaselessly projects before our eyes the most varied forms of life¹⁶ while promoting decentered thinking through literature that is viewed as an augmented reality of the experience of elsewhere and of others. In the twenty-first century, Arno Bertina, Jérôme Ferrari, Thierry Beinstingel, Carole Zalberg, Didier Blonde, Marie Cosnay, Alban Lefranc, Marc Pautrel, Katherine Desbiolles, Yasmina Khadra, Olivier Saison, Simon Liberati, Mathieu Larnaudie, Céline Minard, and Nathalie Azoulai have come to join Gérard Macé’s *Vies antérieures*, Pierre Michon’s *Vies minuscules* [Small Lives], Arnaud Cathrine’s *Vies romances* [Fictionalized Lives], Patrick Mauriès’s *Vies oubliées* [Forgotten Lives], along with Modiano, Assouline, Chevillard, and Quignard, to get us to visit new inner territories, to the benefit of our ethical agility and our ability to understand existences for their own sakes and their particular importance, value, and concerns. By taking the

11 See Jean-Claude Passeron and Jacques Revel (eds), *Penser par cas* [Think through Cases], Paris, Éd. de l’EHESS, 2005.

12 See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (1973), from *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973.

13 François Bégaudeau, *Antimaneuel de littérature* [Anti-Textbook of Literature], Paris, Bréal, 2008, p. 267.

14 Charlotte Lacoste, *Séductions du bourreau: négation des victimes* [The Executioner’s Seductions: The Victims’ Denial], Paris, PUF, 2010.

15 See Michèle Touret (ed), *Histoire de la littérature française du xx^e siècle* [History of Twentieth-Century French Literature], Rennes, PU de Rennes, 2008, vol 2, p. 486.

16 See A. Gefen, *Inventer une vie*, pp. 230 et seq.

novelistic lens *en masse* to look at the lives of others, whether they be famous, commonplace, or villainous, they take us on a tour of unprecedented inner territories. This cognitive exoticism and recourse to the faraway, which can lead to eccentricity, incongruity, or madness, is neither mere curiosity nor the sheer pleasure of multiplying identities. Rather it is the improvisational workshop where literature offers us what Kundera calls “experimental egos”¹⁷ and intends to make us see and discuss our value systems and lifestyles by questioning our “imaginative resistance.”¹⁸ As Richard Rorty has pointed out, “[b]oth individuals and communities choose their lives on the basis of how they seem when compared to other lives, experienced or imagined.”¹⁹ This is found in other major genres: microfiction, which is an opportunity to showcase the variety of languages, morals, and human attitudes – “I is everyone and anyone,” proclaims the back cover of Régis Jauffret’s *Microfictions*; the human interest story [the *fait-divers* as news item, tragic incident, or petty crime], which is not intended as a general moral lesson but to provide observations of complex ethical confrontations and instances of micro-politics; or perhaps the narrative of a trial, with writers of the “Inculte” group²⁰ having produced a volume that makes literature a device for cataloguing and demonstrating the extraordinary variety of conflicts and legal matters; or finally, what the *heterotopias* of science fiction may have as forms of political or ethical speculation. All of these narrative forms offer provisions for a complicated world, reflecting on the complex intercultural situations of globalized societies by authorizing a plurality of identities and opening up a “laboratory of moral dilemmas.”²¹

A paradigmatic example is *Réparer les vivants* [translated as *The Heart*], the story of a heart transplant and a technical “repair” that gets as close as possible to the doctors, caregivers, families, donor, and recipient. Maylis de Kerangal shows us the workings of a major medical decision and, owing to the cognitive transfer permitted by fiction, includes the conflicting demands of contradictory needs so as to make it possible to appreciate the delicate shift that leads a doctor,

17 Milan Kundera, *L’Art du roman* [The Art of the Novel], Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 171.

18 Regarding this concept, see the contribution made by Tamar Gendler to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, art. “Imagination,” §5.2 Imaginative Resistance, 24 March 2011.

19 Richard Rorty, “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning,” *Diogenes*, May 2004, no. 202, pp. 129–140, cit. p. 140.

20 Collectif Inculte, *En procès: une histoire du xx^e siècle* [On Trial: A Twentieth-Century History], Paris, Éd. Inculte, 2016.

21 See Frédérique Leichter-Flack, *Le Laboratoire des cas de conscience* [The Laboratory of Moral Dilemmas], Paris, Alma, 2012; also see, by the same author, *Qui vivra qui mourra. Quand on ne peut pas sauver tout le monde* [Who will live who will die. When you cannot save everyone], Paris, Albin Michel, 2015.

contrary to the law that would authorize him to remove both the donor's corneas in addition to the heart, to change his course of action:

[He knows] that the symbolic significance differs from organ to organ – Marianne reacted only to the idea of removing her son's heart, as if removing the kidneys, liver, or lungs was more conceivable, and she refused the removal of corneas, which, like muscle tissue and the skin, are rarely the subject of the family's consent – and understands that he must compromise, make an exception to the rule, accept their restrictions, respect this family. It's empathy.²²

This refined, phenomenological analysis of the relationship between case and law through the sensitive responses of people and linguistic circuits does justice to medicine as much as it promotes the capacity of literature to offer knowledge that is not only practical, but embodied and pluralized (Kerangal's novel adopts each point of view, one after the other), helping us to understand how, to paraphrase Jean Renoir, "the most terrible thing in this world is that everyone has their reasons."²³ Regardless of whether they appear in investigative literature like Kerangal's, psychological novels – such as the reflections made by Yves Ravey, Hélène Lenoir, and Marie Ndiaye on complex and inextricable psychological and family situations –, or lines of reasoning such as those by Pierre Bayard as he wonders if he would have been a collaborator or a resistant during the war²⁴ or if he would have saved Geneviève Dixmer – the heroine of Alexandre Dumas's novel he fell in love with as a teenager – from the scaffold,²⁵ case studies, realistic analyses, and heuristic speculations share the same aim of producing appropriate lines of reasoning. Pascal Engel links this tendency to a neo-Aristotelian cognitivism that produces practical reasoning,²⁶ but it can be seen more generally as a form of attention that is sensitive and adaptable to individuals' abilities, their actions, and their forms of life. If, as Pierre Michon suggests, literature makes us "more human,"²⁷ this is in the humanist sense of Terence's famous adage "I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me." This is because it allows for

22 Maylis de Kerangal, *Réparer les vivants: roman*, Paris, Verticales, 2014, p. 131. English translation from *The Heart*, trans. from the French by Sam Taylor, New York, Picador, 2106, pp. 107–108.

23 According to Octave in Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939): "Tu comprends, sur cette terre, il y a une chose effroyable, c'est que tout le monde a ses raisons." [You see, on this earth, there is one dreadful thing, and that is that everyone has their reasons].

24 Pierre Bayard, *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* [Would I have been a resistant or an executioner?], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2013.

25 P. Bayard, *Aurais-je sauvé Dixmer?* [Would I have saved Dixmer?], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2015.

26 P. Engel, "Trois conceptions de la connaissance littéraire."

27 Pierre Michon, "La littérature a aidé l'homme à devenir plus humain," [Literature has helped man to become more human] *BSCnews*, 22 June 2012.

plays of comparison, revelations, and axiological effects of disorientation but also because the knowledge of alterity that it offers arises precisely from the very substance of language and the very representations that shape the subjects. Contemporary literature, far from attesting to a cognitive renunciation, political or ethical impotence, or an ironic or playful postmodernity, claims to enter into concrete and documented human problems in a modest, sensitive, and intralinguistic way. Its aim is not so much to produce the logical generalities dreamt of by Aristotle's *Poetics* but rather empirical knowledge conducive to the reader's interpretation, reappropriation, and personal re-use, serving to cure us, in contrast to abstractions and rationalizations perceived as being dangerous.

Semantic education

Along this recovery of literature's utility, Anglo-American moral realist philosophy has turned into a prerequisite the major task to "*recover language*, and reality with it"²⁸ by articulating private language with public and ordinary speech. This philosophy of ordinary language has had a decisive influence on the contemporary return to favor of literature and the recognition of its "added value." Such a philosophy, which pays attention to language plays, questions the accessibility of the deep self; indeed, following Stanley Cavell, it examines the illusions of the first-person utterance and makes literature the place for a profound interrogation of the authenticity of the relationship we have with our own speech.²⁹ In the skeptical tradition of Wittgenstein, who famously said "*the limits of my language are the limits of my world*,"³⁰ the idea is to use literature to "bring to light" the work of language and to re-establish our ethics in it. The aim is to flush out the illusions of pure and sovereign subjectivity and to interrogate social norms in order to establish an ethical relationship with others in a more rigorous manner. This "semantic education," as Pascale Molinier, Sandra Laugier, and Patricia Paperman have called it,³¹ participates in care in the broad sense of the term. With

28 Sandra Laugier, *Du réel à l'ordinaire. Quelle philosophie du langage aujourd'hui?* [From the real to the ordinary. What philosophy of language today?], Paris, J. Vrin, 1999, p. 163. Author's emphasis.

29 See Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.

30 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922), 5.6, trans. C.K. Ogden, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922, p. 74.

31 See Pascale Molinier, Sandra Laugier and Patricia Paperman (eds), *Qu'est-ce que le care? Souci des autres, sensibilité, responsabilité* [What is Care? Caring for Others, Sensitivity, Responsibility], Paris, Payot & Rivages, 2009, pp. 21 et seq.

its enrichment and rehumanization of perceptive vocabulary, it is a fundamental concern of the contemporary French novel, which does not merely reflect on theoretical cases or speculate on the concrete meaning of rules, but rather closely examines what meaning words have for those telling them in their particular contexts. This quest for accuracy finds its literary expression in the use of formal devices for representing characters' interiority and their own voices. It can lead to work on voices and conversations considered as forms of life – as in Franck Lebovici's "ordinary narratives" project,³² which extends artistic attention to matters as subtle as face-to-face conversations – or, more commonly, to more "literary" mechanisms for capturing psychological alterity, such as polyphonic writing and internal monologue. To return to the example provided by *Lives Other than My Own*, while Carrère opts for the form of exactitude provided by the first-person testimony and the form of care that is the narrative delegated by one of the individuals who is featured in it, some of his contemporaries subscribe to the tradition of representing inner life for its complexity, its bad faith, the particular tone, and the manifest development of their character's voice, exposing us to what Cora Diamond calls "the difficulty of reality."³³ There are clear parallels that can be drawn between this semantic hyperawareness as a philosophical therapy of language and contemporary writing on interiority by authors such as Mathias Énard and Mathieu Larnaudie. In a very dramatic scene in Larnaudie's *Notre désir est sans remède*, a story that is representative of the new contemporary realism in literature – materialist, embodied, and polyphonic – the novelist focuses his attention on the arbitrariness of language: "[t]o change one's name is to change one's world,"³⁴ he comments, apropos of a character who is unable to relate to his identity through "a few letters indifferently assigned by a twist in heredity, by lazy convention, by a proud lineage, by a taste for dissimulation, by a concern for a disruption of identity, by the mistaken notation made by an Ellis Island customs officer resistant to Eastern tones, or by simple decree."³⁵ He depicts the televised breakdown of his heroine, famous actress Frances Farmer, whose insubordination and excesses led to her being locked up in a psychiatric hospital and receiving electroshock treatment, followed by a long battle to regain her freedom:

32 See Grégory Castéra, Yaël Kreplak and Franck Lebovici (eds), *Des récits ordinaires* [Ordinary stories], Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 2014.

33 Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Animal Life* by Stanley Cavell et al., New York, Columbia UP, 2008, pp. 1–43.

34 Mathieu Larnaudie, *Notre désir est sans remède: roman* [Our Desire Has No Remedy: A Novel], Arles, Actes Sud, 2015, p. 75.

35 Larnaudie, *Notre désir*, p. 15.

*First of all, I would like to tell of my experience in the hope that it may help the many people I know who are facing difficulties similar to the ones I encountered. I want to do this for them and for myself; and with this last word, myself, her voice rises in pitch, deviates slightly from the delicately inflected line her intonation followed up to that point.*³⁶

The failure to say the word *myself* with her own voice depicts an interrogation of the substantial and therefore narratable nature of the *self* deposited in the arbitrariness of the shared utterance: in a sense, the protagonist experiences the difficulty *of wanting to say what one says*, to revisit Cavell's concern. The novel interrogates the degree to which any narrative coincides with the personal truths of the biographical subject and, more broadly, the subjective relevance of any delegated utterance, but also depicts, in the path that Farmer follows from being a vulnerable actress to a raging alcoholic, a martyr of psychiatry, and then the host of a television show, what we could call, borrowing an expression from Vincent Descombes, the "confusions of identity."³⁷ The critical concern inherited from the "age of suspicion" of the 1970s with regard to the superstructures unconsciously deposited in language has been transformed into an interrogation of private language and the fragility of voices. The narrator speaks on behalf of characters trying to understand and express themselves, not in spite of or beyond the arbitrariness of the signifier, but within it, refining the contours of ordinary representations. It has been pointed out that contemporary literary language now views itself as a space of investigation in its own right by identifying with common language and ordinary discourse in its extreme attention to enunciation.³⁸ It makes identities visible within discourse, as is the case with the character of Mathias Énard in *Zone*, a vast interior monologue about the Mediterranean following the Yugoslav Wars occasioned by the character's long train ride. The character's prolonged escape and linguistic peregrinations are inseparable:

[. . .] I dreamed of a post to South America, for a change of polluted air, names, and languages, maybe that's the reason for this journey, moving through phonemes as if into a new world, neither my father's language nor my mother's, a third language, another one, and in the rhythm of this monotonous train rewrite myself to be reborn when I get out [. . .]³⁹

³⁶ Larnaudie, *Notre désir*, p. 219. Author's emphasis.

³⁷ Vincent Descombes, *Les Embarras de l'identité* [translated as *Puzzling Identities*], Paris, Gallimard, 2013.

³⁸ See Julien Piat, "Que reste-t-il de la 'langue littéraire'?" [What remains of the "literary language"?] *Revue critique de fixation française contemporaine*, no. 3, 2012.

³⁹ Mathias Énard, *Zone: roman*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2008, p. 132. English translation from *Zone*, trans. Charlotte Mendel, Rochester (NY), Open Letter, 2010, p. 127.

Stating places and stating common languages, defining the enunciation, and grasping identities are inseparable operations. Knowledge is identified with the knowledge of language and the “mystery of language” is identified with the “mystery of the world,” and it is in this mystery and not elsewhere that transcendence is located, to borrow from the lovely analyses Pierre Hadot has offered of the *Tractatus*.⁴⁰ Hence, the particular ascent to the universal in the last lines of *Réparer les vivants*, a long simultaneist enumeration with the death of a man and the rebirth of a woman intersecting in the present, in the entanglement of day and night, somewhere between medical realities and ordinary utterances about mysteries beyond the reach of language:

Did Claire hear Thomas Rémy's voice during her anesthetic dreams, as he sang his song of a good death? Did she hear him at four in the morning as she received Simon Limbres's heart? She is placed under extracorporeal assistance for another thirty minutes and, then, like Simon, she is sewn up, the retractors releasing the tissue for a delicate ladylike suture [. . .] Alice recovers and risks a smile as Harfang whispers into her ear, so, little Harfang girl, what did you think of all that?, while Virgilio takes off his surgical cap and lowers his mask and decides to ask her to join him for a beer somewhere in Montparnasse, for a plate of fries and a bloody steak, to prolong the atmosphere of this night, while she puts on her white overcoat and he strokes the fur collar, while the first rays of daylight touch the undergrowth and the moss turns bluish, while the goldfinch sings and the big surf comes to an end in the digital night: it is 5:49 a.m.⁴¹

“What did you think of all that?”: the question, with its modest and hypocoristic aspect, performative in the way it marks a shared amazement, will remain unanswered. Rather than a direct metaphysical or moral reflection, it is more of a religious meditation on life and death, with the mystery of the limits of language being expressed in language, or at least designated in it: “that which *expresses itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language,” to borrow another famous phrase from the *Tractatus*.⁴² Kerangal's narrative thus “repairs” multiple injustices inherent to ordinary discourse: leaving a young man's death in a van accident without any words, forgetting the work of hospital health care workers and the questions they face, not thinking about an event as dramatic as a heart transplant, not describing the “a place apart [. . .] for tangential lives, deep comas, terminal cases.”⁴³ Striving for precision, it borrows a vocabulary, sometimes technical, that's as close as possible to those portrayed in the book. At the risk of recreating epic from trauma and

⁴⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage* [Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language], Paris, J. Vrin, 2004, p. 64.

⁴¹ M. de Kerangal, *Réparer les vivants*, pp. 280–281; *The Heart*, p. 242.

⁴² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 4.121, p. 45.

⁴³ M. de Kerangal, *Réparer les vivants*, p. 32; *The Heart*, p. 21.

aesthetically heroizing misfortune, Kerangal aims to make beauty out of the good and good out of beauty. This work serves as an example of contemporary literature's new attention to detail, its pantheistic ambition to express the whole of co-present realities, expressed directly, almost naively, in plain wording and without any allegorical pretension, without any disjunction between the material and subjective orders, without any initial hierarchization of places of truth, starting from ordinary perceptions and ordinary ways of expressing the perceptible (noting what time it is as a way to close the novel), so as to make a shift that gets as close as possible to human subjective truths by revealing what they really know which means also revealing what they do not.

The societal virtues of literature

The philosophy of ordinary language is far from being the only philosophical horizon for explaining what uses literature might serve. And it is an entirely different form of realism that is invoked in contemporary discourses to account for the cognitive utility of literature, especially narrative fiction. As Françoise Lavocat notes, “the rise of the cognitive sciences, from the 1990s onwards, coincides with an unprecedented valorization of fiction in the history of Western, and even global, thought.”⁴⁴ If the re-evaluation of literature as a discourse of self-help was overwhelmingly based on a Freudian heritage, the discourses justifying the social utility of literature found powerful support in the cognitive sciences, both in the philosophy of mind and in evolutionary psychology. If the idea that literature allows all individuals to better understand their immediate world is at least as old as Aristotelianism, and if it has previously found other models in other human sciences – “Novelists are simply ahead of psychoanalysts in the understanding of human feelings,” suggested the late J.-B. Pontalis⁴⁵ – I believe it is important to recall these foundations that constitute the hidden theoretical horizon of our renewed responsiveness to literature. Alongside works that attempt to rethink trauma through neuroscience, such as Catherine Malabou's essay, *Les Nouveaux Blessés*, 2007,⁴⁶ cognitive psychology has made literature both a mode of cognition and the capacity for behavioral

⁴⁴ Françoise Lavocat, *Fait et fiction: pour une frontière* [Fact and Fiction: For a Frontier], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2016, p. 357.

⁴⁵ J.-B. Pontalis, presentation of the series “L'Un et l'Autre” [The One and the Other], on Gallimard website, [www.gallimard.fr/Divers/Plus-sur-la-collection/L-Un-et-l-autre/\(sourcencode\)/116293](http://www.gallimard.fr/Divers/Plus-sur-la-collection/L-Un-et-l-autre/(sourcencode)/116293).

⁴⁶ Catherine Malabou, *Les Nouveaux Blessés: de Freud à la neurologie, penser les traumatismes contemporains*, Paris, Bayard, 2007; *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, New York, Fordham UP, 2012.

adaptation. From a perspective that is more or less directly behaviorist, it has argued that literature can be considered as a tool for regulating social behavior. The first form of functionalism involves emphasizing the ability of art, particularly narrative forms, to increase our cognitive capacities and our mastery of the environment, to establish and transmit complex social structures. Drawing on Marie-Laure Ryan's analyses,⁴⁷ we can cite various "inflationary" hypotheses that make of narrative literature a fundamental mental exercise: all memories take on a narrative form (Roger Schank); humanity developed language in response to a need to tell stories (Mark Turner); narrative constructs reality, identity is a narrative construction and narrative teaches us to read other people's minds (Jerome Bruner); experience is not the subject of narrative, but is made possible by it (David Herman). There is general agreement about the notion of mental training: according to Jacques Morizot, fiction "breaks in our cognitive capacities,"⁴⁸ and, according to the influential E. O. Wilson and his theory of the "consilience" of fields of knowledge through cognitive science: for him, the arts are means by which we cultivate and regulate the complex cognitive machinery on which our most highly developed functions depend.⁴⁹ This explains in particular the importance of narrative in particular, not at an existential level as in Ricœur, but at a cognitive level: H. Porter Abbott⁵⁰ and Katja Mellmann⁵¹ thus emphasize the intellectual productivity of narrativity and its central status. The latter places it at the center of "a complex cultural congregation of innate dispositions,"⁵² along with other high-level adaptive capacities such as those responsible for inductive reasoning and determining causality. American theorist Mark Turner goes one step further by making narrativity the very origin of language. For him, "parable is the root of the human mind – of thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and possibly

47 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation," *Style*, vol. 44, no. 4, Winter 2010, pp. 469–495, cit. p. 482.

48 Jacques Morizot, "Évolution et esthétique," [Evolution and Aesthetics] in Roger Pouivet and J. Morizot (eds), *Dictionnaire de philosophie esthétique* [Dictionary of Aesthetic Philosophy], 2nd ed., Paris, Armand Colin, 2012, pp. 84–86, cit. p. 185.

49 Edward Osborne Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998), London, Abacus, 2010; see chapter 10, "The Arts and their Interpretation."

50 H. Porter Abbott, "The Evolutionary Origins of the Storied Mind: Modeling the Prehistory of Narrative Consciousness and Its Discontents," *Narrative*, vol. 8, no. 3, Oct. 2000, pp. 247–256.

51 Katja Mellmann, "Voice and Perception. An Evolutionary Approach to the Basic Functions of Narrative," in Frederick Luis Aldama (ed), *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2010, pp. 119–140.

52 K. Mellmann, "Evolutionary Psychology as a Heuristic in Literary Studies," in Nicholas Saul and Simon J. James (eds), *The Evolution of Literature: Legacies of Darwin in European Cultures*, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 2011, pp. 299–317, cit. p. 313, note 41.

even speaking.”⁵³ The American theorist considers narrative to be at the center of three fundamental capacities: telling, projecting, and producing parables. Countering Aristotle as well as Noam Chomsky, Turner refutes the idea that language has an underlying logical structure or that there is a cerebral module dedicated to this capacity that has developed over the course of evolution.⁵⁴ Narrativity does not result from the way the brain is organized, but is actually its source; such a hypothesis makes the cognitive exercise that engages literary narrative fiction paramount to all others.

In addition to these theories that insist on the more general capacities for mind organization⁵⁵ offered by fictional immersion in possible worlds, there are theories that focus on the social role of fiction and that also often stem from evolutionary psychology. According to Jonathan Gottschall, a major figure in this emerging discipline, *homo sapiens* is a “storytelling animal”⁵⁶; fictions simulate “a variety of social relations, behaviors and consequences”⁵⁷ and allow a better understanding of the human environment through the exercise of anticipation and changes in mental roles. He views fiction as an exercise in our prosocial abilities, improving “our ability to understand others; it promotes a deep morality, which transcends religious and political beliefs.”⁵⁸ Gottschall is not that far from Butler or theorists who address the morality of empathic role change, but returns to an evolutionary logic where the capacity to adapt to difficulties, as emphasized by Ellen Dissanayake, is essential. Literature provides us with stimulating and useful access to the interiority of others as well as the illusion of a life that can be experienced: “[. . .] fiction’s happy endings seem to warp our sense of reality. They make us believe in a lie: that the world is more just than it actually is. But believing that lie has important effects for society – and it may even help explain why human beings tell stories in the first place.”⁵⁹ Thus, for example, a theorist like William Flesch explains that fictions in the world are dominated by a retributive justice – referred to, as in Martha Nussbaum, as “poetic justice” –, by a need to preserve the species

53 Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, New York, Oxford UP, 1997, p. 168.

54 This is close to the critique Quine makes of the “copy theory” of language: see “Ontological Relativity” [1968], in W. V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York, Columbia UP, 1969, pp. 27–69.

55 Quine, p. 167.

56 Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Makes Us Human*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

57 Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, “Reverse-Engineering Narrative,” in Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (eds), *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Evanston (IL), Northwestern UP, 2005, pp. 177–195, cit. p. 188.

58 Jonathan Gottschall, “Why Fiction Is Good for You,” *The Boston Globe*, 29 April 2012.

59 Gottschall, “Why Fiction.”

through optimism.⁶⁰ Art, and representative art in particular, thus allows the species to produce and transmit general knowledge about itself – knowledge that is concrete, affective, and embodied – and thereby complement more abstract orders of knowledge. This knowledge not only has the power to produce regulating reference models and to thoroughly examine the normative conflicts that are common in developed societies – faithfulness to the model of desire vs. faithfulness to the idea of family, obedience to the state vs. preservation of the family unit, etc. –, but also to explore particular cases and even atypical, amoral, or traumatic situations about which it informs the group: it is the exemplarity of the unexemplary. From this perspective, literature does not just play a role in allowing us to refigure and come to grips with our experience, as narrativist philosophies have shown, but also contributes to the fundamental skill of being able to contemplate others' psychological structures by acquiring, at least in a general way, a mapping of the mind and by being able to anticipate the reactions of other individuals – mind reading, understanding of others. This form of initiation into alterity is undoubtedly the heir to what the literary tradition has called, in the words of Dorrit Cohn, “transparent minds,”⁶¹ which refers to the aspiration of literature to discover and explain psychological life through the mediation of fictional interiorities. According to this view, fiction provides us with cognitive tools for modeling behavior that allow for the form of divination we ordinarily use to interact with others' minds. This perspective explains the recurring theme of the psychological portrait and the biographical narrative in literature: evolutionist thought likens these forms, so frequently the basis for modern plots, to a type of psychological speculation.⁶² Alan Palmer relates this mind mapping work to the plays of enunciative position in literature that portray consciousness at work – “in essence, narrative is the description of fictional mental functioning”⁶³ – for the benefit of cognition, action, and even a form of distributed identity.⁶⁴ Like Mark Turner in *The Literary Mind*, Palmer views the human brain as an active and plastic system modified by experience, and considers language to be an instrument used by individual

60 William Flesch, *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological Components of Fiction*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard UP, 2008.

61 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* [1978], Princeton (NJ), Princeton UP, 1978.

62 See Wilfred L. Guerin *et al.*, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, New York, Oxford, Oxford UP, 1992, p. 149–150. David Nettle, “What Happens in *Hamlet*? Exploring the Psychological Foundations of Drama,” in J. Gottschall and D. S. Wilson (eds), *The Literary Animal*, pp. 56–75, likens *Hamlet* to a kind of play of riddles.

63 Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 12.

64 Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, p. 15.

brains to exert biological influence on others from a distance, to the point that a kind of virtual brain of the species is created. The hypotheses inevitably made by the reader, the conjectures, the reflections needed to analyze the situations, and the enunciative games of literature make narratives into devices for understanding the mind's mechanisms of action and cognition. Therefore, fiction is, according to this model, a mode of resisting difficulties that are metaphysical – humans are animals aware of their own mortality – and social – the complexity and fluidity of human societies. For Dissanayake in *Homo Aestheticus* (1992), art is as fundamental a result of evolution as nutrition, for it allegedly adds interest to the ordinary activities of existence and makes the difficulties of life more tolerable.⁶⁵ What is truly novel about this idea is that it traces art's reparative intervention in the human condition back to at least the Neolithic period. Thanks to art and its ability to instill desire and beauty in the interactions between individuals, the group became bearable. And human activities were not reduced to purposes such as reproduction and the quest for survival, but rather acquired an aura: art made human actions special, meaningful, and memorable. In the same way that work on form would come from a desire to absorb natural asymmetries and rugosities. For Dissanayake, art was deployed to maintain social harmony. Art did not make any changes to the human condition – political deflation – but intervened as a therapy – clinical reinvestment –: it strengthened individuals, ensured the inner cohesion of groups, and facilitated our relationship with nature. This idea can also be found among non-Darwinian psychologists of fiction such as the influential Keith Oatley.⁶⁶ Such functionalist notion of aesthetic defunctionalization argues that art fosters the ability to organize complex behaviors and interrelations. As is the case with certain anthropological views on literature,⁶⁷ this research applies a utilitarian notion of aesthetic behaviors that is both inspiring and risky insofar as it makes literature a tool of social coordination and proposes that literature does not effect solely the pooling and debating of moral values, but also the creation of a kind of self-regulating col-

65 Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

66 See Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, Chichester (West Sussex, UK), Malden (MA), Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

67 See for example Thomas Pavel, *La Pensée du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, pp. 46–47. English translation from *Lives of the Novel: A History*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton UP, 2013, p. 17. To him, even the individualizing and hyperspeculative reflexivity of literature provides “substantial hypotheses about human life and imagine fictional worlds governed by them” that serves as an axiological framework.

lective instinct. William Flesch (*Comeuppance*, 2008) and Blakey Vermeule⁶⁸ have suggested that our interest in novels is explained not by a quest for individual morality but rather for collective morality, which is itself imposed by the logic of the species, and not of particular individuals. According to a paradox already analyzed by Kant, our antisocial aptitudes are part of our social existence. We see connections to such a theory with Pavel's axiological vision in which the novel plays the role of a toolkit for solving contemporary social questions: the novel "asks whether moral ideals do or do not belong to the human world [. . .]. The novel examines [. . .] whether, in order to uphold ideals in a world that does not guarantee their supremacy, individuals must simply resist the world, act to change it, or concentrate on overcoming their own failings [. . .] whether human beings can ever be morally reconciled with the world in which they are born, and *feel at home* in it."⁶⁹ In this way, the "literary Darwinians" offer a general explanation of the literary fact that breaks with our entire French critical tradition. For them, the literary fact is not marginal to human behavior but central to the species; it is not anti-social but regulatory; literature does not have its own ontology or endogenous logic but is biologically over-determined; texts and the interpretation of them are not a place of freedom but a cognitive apparatus, and so on. It is important here not to judge these theories, but to see how they resonate with literature's new hold on social behavior, personal development, and self-management, which explains the extremely mainstream character of the works of Alan Palmer, Mark Turner, and Jonathan Gottschall, who, drawing on a Darwinian paradigm, are ready to explain to us, in the words of Gottschall, "why fiction is good for you."⁷⁰

The powers of irony

Such a mechanistic view of fiction and such a broadly utilitarian conceptual framework make it possible to turn the most critical literature into a "prosocial" agent, to integrate the narratives of resistance and their deliberate anomalies into the work of readaptation, to attribute the non-knowledges or counterdis-

68 See Blakey Vermeule, "A Comeuppance Theory of Narrative and Emotions," *Poetics Today*, vol. 32, no. 2, Summer 2011, pp. 235–253.

69 Thomas Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel: A History*, p. 18.

70 For a synthesis of these approaches, see my article: "La fiction est-elle un instrument d'adaptation? L'interprétation des textes littéraires par la psychologie évolutionniste en question," [Is Fiction an Instrument of Adaptation? Questioning the Evolutionary Psychology's Interpretation of Literary Texts] in Françoise Lavocat (ed), *Interprétation littéraire et sciences cognitives* [Literary Interpretation and Cognitive Science], Paris, Hermann, 2016.

courses of the most rebellious writers to processes of cultural optimization, to turn irony into a form of therapeutic cognition, to emphasize the indirect effectiveness of what the most detached literary postures have to offer, and to turn the deconstructions of shared representations into forms of positive cognitions. What many contemporary works have in common is that they “transmute the memorial of events into the fiction of the possible,” as so beautifully expressed by J.-B. Pontalis,⁷¹ by staging the world differently than it is. “To begin with, we can define a *counter-fiction* as a *fictional narrative aiming to transform current reality in a struggle against the reproduction of a given that is perceived as destructive*,”⁷² writes one of their theorists, Yves Citton. In the same way that the work on trauma facilitated by creative verbalization made it possible to reprocess it, the shifts introduced by counter-fictions can serve as tools for analysis or banishment, allowing for this principle of regulation from a distance, also one of the presumed attributes of catharsis, at the collective level. To take examples from experimental writers, there is the exploration of the most deranged human psyches as offered in Régis Jauffret’s novels; the anti-realist speculations of an author such as Céline Minard who questions self-help (“Do we assist ourselves by distancing ourselves, by pulling away, by disengaging from our states? By slipping a gap of air between self and its representations? [. . .] Is this the risk to be taken? Getting lost, breaking away? The risk to be taken in order to save oneself”)⁷³; the ways in which Jean-Charles Massera and Emmanuelle Pireyre set out to condemn the media empire of capitalist storytelling of the good (Pireyre notes, “And once they don’t understand the stories, people collapse, develop illnesses, and experience depression,”⁷⁴ which is to be read as an ironic antiphrasis and a way of taking oneself to task); and Camille de Toledo’s call to counter literary spoon-feeding with the tragic difficulty of language and the feeling of the inseparable. Serving as indictments of the world and disruptions of sign systems, they offer benefits in the long term: they want to bring about a revolution, failed elsewhere, in language. “Within the *general fiction economy*, writers are whisperers. We operate in some proletarian depths of the general fiction industry. [. . .] And with this attention to what in reality is a fiction, we start to establish the syntax of another narrative, of other fictions, of a multi-

71 J.-B. Pontalis, “Derniers, premiers mots” (1987) [Last, First Words], in *Perdre de vue*, pp. 255–273, cit. p. 256.

72 Yves Citton, “Contre-fictions: trois modes de combat,” [Counter-fictions: three combat modes] *Multitudes*, no. 48, March 2012, pp. 72–78, cit. p. 72, author’s emphasis.

73 Céline Minard, *Le Grand Jeu* [The Great Game], Paris, Rivages, 2016, p. 181.

74 Emmanuelle Pireyre, *Féerie Générale* [General Enchantment], Paris, Éd. de l’Olivier, 2012, p. 172.

tude of other fictions. [. . .] What we can transform, *potentially*, are our beliefs,”⁷⁵ Toledo stated in an interview, asserting the political dimension of such a post-revolutionary cognitive project.

The dystopias and alternative mythologies produced by Antoine Volodine (*Terminus radieux* [Radiant Terminus], 2014), Bruce Bégout (*Le Park*, 2010), Hugues Jalton (*Zone de combat* [Combat Zone], 2007), and Michel Houellebecq (*Soumission* [Submission], 2015), which together with many others constitute a major contemporary genre, make it possible to escape from reality in a counterfactual way but also contribute implicitly to a political project by warning us and offering a projective intelligence specific to fiction – speculative knowledge that can also be valued as a form of supplementary knowledge. In the same way that divergent, abstruse, or highly atypical forms of self-representation can support the desire for hyperparticularism that leads the individualistic quest while also accommodating shifted self-projections, the wildest experimentation can be equated with cognitively productive and highly inclusive gymnastics: literature makes it possible for us to adapt to post-industrial complexity and to globalization, if only because literature, with its capacity for making the most contradictory points of view heard and for modifying representations, alone makes it possible to think about multiculturalism.

The same is true of the most unbridled irony, which certainly plays a therapeutic role for the author as well as the reader. Richard Rorty has demonstrated this point through ethical reasoning that seems to be totally opposed to any utilitarianism. What the philosopher called an “imaginative identification”⁷⁶ with the details of others’ lives, which is specific to literature, also effects the recognition of the “contingency of language”⁷⁷ and the refusal of a common sense that would arbitrate in a pre-constituted world. On the contrary, irony helps us “see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others”⁷⁸ by staging the conflict between obligations to oneself and obligations to others. It is therefore possible for the novel to invent a new final vocabulary that serves to repair abstract and arbitrary oppositions of the normative and axiological order, mainly because a book’s ethical power draws on its power for irony and self-destruction. Rorty, for whom analytic philosophy leads to elevating the aesthetic avant-gardes, suggests that the less reliable the narrative, the more it frees us by demonstrating that we are incapable of believing in our own general ideas. In short, irony, as an anti-ethnocentric relativism and a refusal

75 Camille de Toledo, “Poètes, romanciers, philosophes, artistes, nous sommes des légions à œuvrer pour que ça infinisse,” [Poets, novelists, philosophers, artists, there are legions of us working to make it infinite] interview with Johan Faerber, *Diacritik*, 16 September 2016.

76 R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge UP, 1989, p. 191.

77 Rorty, chap. I, pp. 21–46.

78 Rorty, p. 195.

of all explanation and final hope, does not serve a sense of human solidarity. Instead, it creates a sentiment of solidarity, one that seeks to expand the sphere of an anti-universalist “we” and accepts that the salience of similarities and differences “is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary.”⁷⁹ Rorty suggests that literature as irony allows for “an ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.”⁸⁰ To equip language is also to lead it to processes of defamiliarization. It is in this way that distanced or ironic literature has an element of positivity that increases “our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people,”⁸¹ an ethic of deviation that is fundamentally consistent with other contemporary politics of style.

79 Rorty, p. 263.

80 Rorty, p. 198.

81 Rorty, p. 17.



Facing the World

Chapter 11

Reconstructing territories

Did I ever really have this lost country? I am losing it, I keep losing it. I brace every hour of my time there within me, in my mind, in my memory, as one helps an old relative to walk through the corridors of a hospice, hoping he still has a little of himself that remains within. Pierre Jourde, *Pays perdu*.¹

The geographical question

After the Second World War, there was an overwhelming loss of interest among avant-garde writers in the form of writing about the land marred by the tradition of Maurice Barrès. The geographic question, however, made a comeback in literature from the 1980s onwards, first with Claude Simon and Michel Chaillou, then with Richard Millet, Pierre Michon, Pierre Jourde, Marie-Hélène Lafon, and Pierre Bergounioux, but also with more unexpected authors such as Maryline Desbiolles. These narratives reveal a hyperawareness of the spatial dislocation of the French territory and the cultural chasms that widened upon the completion of the rural exodus following the war. They demonstrate a focus on the land that is typical of what has been called, in keeping with Michel Foucault and Edward Soja, the “spatial turn,” while at the same time testifying to an awareness of space where discontinuities, ruptures, and disconnections contrast with the overall flatness promised by maps and communications devices. The nostalgia is therefore for a “lost country” (“*pays perdu*”) to borrow from the title of Pierre Jourde’s novel; it is, in other words, the feeling of displacement and the impossibility of return, the guilt caused by a socio-cultural debt, domestic exoticism: for this generation of writers, the French provinces constitute a space that is, contrary to any regionalist view, both foundational and vanished, archaic and strange, mythical and poignant.² But what Dominique Viart refers to as “the reconquest of literary spaces previously lost to

1 Pierre Jourde, *Pays perdu*, Paris, L’Esprit des péninsules, 2003, p. 17.

2 The main features of this poetics of the provinces have been identified by Sylviane Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage: Pierre Michon, Pierre Bergounioux, Richard Millet* [The Province’s Legacy], Genève, Droz, 2002, and Aurélie Adler, *Éclats des vies muettes: figures du minuscule et du marginal dans les récits de vie de Pierre Michon, Annie Ernaux, Pierre Bergounioux et François Bon* [Fragments of Silent Lives: Figures of the Minuscule and the Marginal in the Life Stories of Pierre Michon, Annie Ernaux, Pierre Bergounioux and François Bon], Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012, pp. 23–32 in particular.

textual formalisms”³ involves using words to reclaim the “lost territories of the Republic,” to use a now-commonplace expression. It is not just a quest for origins and a personal recollection but a set of literary responses to a sense of declassing. As Aurélie Adler has shown, this work of restoration complements the efforts made by historians from the same period, from Jacques Revel to Alain Corbin. The latter writes: “We will at the very least attempt here to make humble repairs to the historians’ neglect of everything that falls irretrievably into the void of oblivion, to work modestly against what the bulldozers in the cemeteries of the countryside are doing today.”⁴

The “additions” the writer makes is based on several features: a knowledge of the interior that is capable of inhabiting previous mental representations and material life in a way that is more personal than ethnography as well as, first and foremost, a linguistic repair that corrects social insignificance through the grandeur of language,⁵ converting the minuscule into myth and proceeding in a manner, as previously demonstrated by critics, that differs significantly from the mere novelistic dimension present in pastoral novels: “the high, powerful, theatrical, erudite word, placed in the service of the lands emptied by the rural exodus and of those who inhabited, fled, cursed, and regained them,” as Marie-Hélène Lafon has explained.⁶ These narratives exhibit a definite refusal of “relocalization”⁷ and are shaken by a regressive impulse – that of a literary desire for devastation as ambivalent as any quest for origin – but, in a lyrical manner or the way of the historian, they aim to reintegrate territories and trades into the space of modernity by reinserting them into literature. It is a question of responding to a “double bind [. . .] coming from things” and using language to “change them so they remain,” as Pierre Bergounioux has written.⁸ Meanwhile, Aurélie Adler’s interpretation is that provincial identities are “[l]egitimized, bridged, or spliced by voices that seek to redress (Michon), elucidate (Bergounioux, Ernaux) or amplify

3 Dominique Viart, “Mémoires du récit, questions à la modernité,” [Memories of the Narrative, Questions to Modernity] in D. Viart (ed), *Écritures contemporaines, 1. Mémoires du récit* [Contemporary Writings, 1. Memories of the Narrative], Paris, Caen, Minard, La Revue des lettres modernes, 1998, p. 13, cited by S. Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage*, p. 265.

4 Alain Corbin, *Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798–1876*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, p. 10; *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York, Columbia UP, 2001. Cited by A. Adler, *Éclats des vies muettes*, p. 49.

5 S. Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage*, p. 71.

6 Marie-Hélène Lafon, *Chantiers* [Worksites], Paris, Éd. des Busclats, 2015, pp. 109–110.

7 S. Coyault-Dublanchet, *La Province en héritage*, see pp. 264 et seq.

8 Pierre Bergounioux, *Miette* [Crumb], Paris, Gallimard, 1995, p. 125.

(Bon) their (social, linguistic, metaphysical) shortcomings.”⁹ In this way, the provinces are not left to die without dignity – they are not left without words or without meaning. Confronted with what Henri Lefebvre called the hiatuses¹⁰ between the conceptual homogeneity of modern unitary theories of space, on the one hand, and the lived experience of economic and symbolic dislocation, on the other, these novels about the provinces offer original aesthetic solutions that are in fact the distant descendants of the family saga and the pastoral epic. Rather than suturing representations together, they acquiesce to their multiplicity: the provinces, simultaneously accessible and lost, are a space of superimposed values and representations, but, in the words of Ernst Bloch, “non-contemporaneous.”¹¹ These forms therefore leave biographies that are still in progress, identities that are lying fallow; they question the foregone conclusion of the “we” and opt for *sfumato* to leave areas of shadow – the disclaimers “I don’t know” and “I’m unaware of” are repeated like a litany in Bergounioux and Michon. They prefer to present “crumbs” of genealogy rather than uphold the illusion of heritage, to offer tormented affective geographies and enigmatic originary spaces: the literary solution is to expose fractures and chasms empathically while seeking to repair definitively shattered social and cultural mechanisms.

This undertaking, which is something of a literary version of local development and territorial continuity policies, is by no means limited to rurality in the strict sense of the term, but sets its sights on the generally escheated provinces: Pierre Bergounioux and François Bon bring the post-industrial space of the Syam forges in the Jura,¹² the railways of the Moselle, and the factories of Poitou¹³ into the realm of literature. While this “still complete territory” offers only a “litany of invisible names”¹⁴ and while this world “does not interest the collective memory” because “a book is not made with images of sluices, reinforced switch rails, and wire-drawing mills from back when steel was king,”¹⁵ François Bon presents himself, not without some idealization, as the last witness of a world that will disappear: “Perhaps we won’t even look through the train windows anymore” he

9 A. Adler, *Éclats des vies muettes*, p. 310.

10 Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'espace* [The Production of Space], Paris, Éd. Anthropos, 1974.

11 See Ernst Bloch, *Héritage de ce temps* (1935) [Legacy of our Time], trans. Jean Lacoste, Paris, Payot, 1978, as well as the article by Azoumane Ouattara, “Ernst Bloch visionnaire de notre temps,” [Ernest Bloch: A Visionary of Our Time] *Le Portique*, 5–2007, leportique.revues.org/1399.

12 Pierre Bergounioux, *Les Forges de Syam* [The Forges of Syam], Besançon, Éd. de l’Imprimeur, 2001; rééd., Lagrasse, Verdier, 2007.

13 François Bon, *Autobiographie des objets* [Autobiographies of Objects], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2012.

14 François Bon, *Paysage fer* [Iron Landscape], Lagrasse, Verdier, 1999, p. 22.

15 Bon, p. 81.

concludes in *Paysage fer*.¹⁶ Materialist attentiveness to the metallic traces of human work in what Bon calls the “back” (“l’arrière”) of cities¹⁷ and the memory’s resuscitation of peasant ancestors are closely allied in a gesture that attempts to transcend simple nostalgic memory by inhabiting the drama of the dislocation itself:

History, according to Michelet, sometimes resembles a disease.

The social body is shaken by fevers and nausea, prone to massive hemorrhaging. There is also a pathology of space. The small lands remain in the margins of time, their stay accompanied by obscure, chronic disorders, which local resources make it more or less possible to remedy.¹⁸

writes Pierre Bergounioux in *Simplex, magistraux et autres antidotes*, which is an anamnesis of the distresses of childhood and the microscopic solutions from that time, memories put into perspective by the power of writing. For a child from the provinces, he explains in an interview:

The archaic, strict, and obscure commonplaces that had driven life for centuries shattered upon making sudden, brutal contact with the great outside. In order to pull ourselves together, to continue, to face what was happening to us, it was necessary to see clearly. The adults we’ve become are now entrusted with the task of edifying and calming the children we were [. . .]¹⁹

The analytical, poetic reconquest that the adult undertakes is geographical and autobiographical: without yielding to “pastism” or to an essentialist illusion of identity, without offering a political panacea for social changes, without hoping for miracles or Proustian epiphanies, the “pathology of space” can be cured, like any childhood trauma, with the reappropriation of the word and demarcation of memory. It is a solution that is constructivist rather than essentialist. The gesture of mapping is local, even intimate, combining refamiliarization with the past and disidentification with the world of yesterday, and this involves working with the primitive fabric of language and aesthetic blending: as with other writers of “small lands left in the margins of time,” the desire to name and reestablish lines of descent is above all a project of individual elucidation, even while an author such as Bergounioux makes it the heart of a very articulate reflection on the contemporary world and in the work of Michon it provides a way to start the story of

16 Bon, p. 89.

17 Bon, p. 81.

18 Pierre Bergounioux, *Simplex, magistraux et autres antidotes* [Simple, Masterful, and Other Antidotes], Lagrasse, Verdier, 2001, back cover.

19 Pierre Bergounioux, *Exister par deux fois* [Existing Twice], Paris, Fayard, 2014, p. 19.

the novel over again. Except for the latter and author of *Small Lives*, the expected gain is not collective salvation or even the defense of a transitive and situated literature but a symbolic revaluation, a memorial attestation, a personal and social appeasement driven by the narrative's acknowledgement of a dislocated but inhabited geography – one that is far more than just haunted – as if the crisis of the subject could also be resolved spatially.

Since the 2000s, a literature of the urban fringes and their re-poeticized everyday life,²⁰ of “zones” – to use a word that is, according to Brian McHale, typical of postmodernity²¹ –, and even of “non-places” – to use a well-known expression from anthropology –, has contributed to this work of suturing the provincial space. On the surface it looks quite different, since it falls in line with the urban poetry of modernity, via Breton and Perec, rather than an anxious anti-modernity; it has the same desire as the literature about the provinces not to let deserted spaces fall from view, and to inhabit the urban fringes with words by turning them into “heterotopias,”²² i.e. places governed by their own systems of representation and that it is a matter of reintegrating into the world.

Also charted are zones absent from maps such as the “fake Paris” built at the end of the First World War to redirect German bombs and recalled by Xavier Boissel in *Paris est un leurre* [Paris is a delusion] (2012, published by Inculte) or the Spanish ghost town described by Anthony Poiraudau (*Projet El Pocero* [Project El Pocero], 2013, also published by Inculte), urban specters intended to indirectly revive our concrete awareness of space. Philippe Vasset's *Un Livre blanc* [A Blank Book], with the subtitle “account with maps” (“*récit avec cartes*” [Narrative with Maps]) is a project that consists of combining the maps reproduced in the book, which are “representations that often cannot be reconciled with what they are supposed to designate,”²³ together with literary expeditions to actual urban places. While these are undertaken with the aim of producing a “committed documentary,”²⁴ they quickly slip into the realm of the poetic. The book sets out to make the ambitious junction between the maps themselves, the exploration of the dead zones, historical investigation, and legend, and as we chance upon the

20 For the everyday in contemporary writing, see Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Oxford, UK, Oxford UP, 2006.

21 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, New York, Routledge, 1987, pp. 43 et seq.

22 See Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres” [Of Other Spaces] (conference at the Cercle d'études architecturales, 14 March 1967), *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5, Oct. 1984, pp. 46–49; in *Dits et écrits*, vol 2, 1976–1988, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 1571–1581.

23 Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc: récit avec cartes*, Paris, Fayard, 2007, p. 9.

24 Vasset, *Un livre blanc*, p. 27.

soliloquy of a ghostly character while wandering the wastelands, it poses the questions: “How to live here? Despite the continuous satellite coverage and the network of surveillance cameras, we know nothing of the world.”²⁵ There are also attempts to chart post-human cities such as the “zeropolis” of Las Vegas described by Bruce Bégout in the novel of the same name²⁶ so as to investigate the “mystique of banality” of “supermarkets and colorful avenues”²⁷ in *L’Éblouissement des bords de route* [The Glare of the Roadsides], and to focus on train stations, paradigmatic non-places, demonstrating that they make up a world of their own. In 2011, Joy Sorman camped out for a week at the Gare du Nord in Paris to immerse herself in what was happening “behind the scenes,”²⁸ while Martine Sonnet took an even more ambitious approach with *Montparnasse monde* [Montparnasse World] making attempts through trial and error to appropriate a place, using “words poorly suited”²⁹ to the technical realities in the telling of both its life and its history, to “[. . .] accommodate its world. Montparnasse, a station with variable personal geometry, for my use, I inhabiting it and vice versa.”³⁰

These poetics of incorporation can be contrasted with the discourses of combat that the *banlieue* has recently given rise to and that are hardly reparative. There are, for example, the despondent denunciations of the *banlieues* in Pierre Jourde’s disillusioned fable, *Carnets d’un voyageur zoulou dans les banlieues en feu* [Notebooks of a Zulu Traveler in the Burning Suburbs], the post-apocalyptic and post-Marxist outskirts found with authors such as Olivier Rolin, Hugues Jallon, and Antoine Volodine,³¹ and the urban investigations carried out by the generation of the “Inculte.” I am thinking in particular of Joy Sorman’s post-bankruptcy inventories in *L’Inhabitable* [The Uninhabitable] (2016), which describes six Parisian addresses in 2010 and then in 2015, and *Gros œuvre* [Structural Work], 2009, which focuses on thirteen temporary or precarious settlements, as well as Thomas Clerc’s survey of *Le Dixième Arrondissement* [The Tenth District]. In *Une année en France: référendum, banlieues, CPE*, François Bégaudeau, Arno Bertina, and Oliver Rohe offer a “literary cartography” that depicts the 2005 “anti-CPE” riots through an investigation that rejects the “essayist’s downward gaze” in favor of an exploration of the

25 Vasset, *Un livre blanc*, p. 136.

26 Bruce Bégout, *Zéropolis*, Paris, Allia, 2002.

27 Bruce Bégout, *L’Éblouissement des bords de route: récits*, Paris, Verticales, 2004, p. 117.

28 Joy Sorman, *Paris, gare du Nord*, Paris, Gallimard, 2011, p. 75.

29 Martine Sonnet, *Montparnasse monde: roman de gare*, Paris, Le Temps qu’il fait, 2011, p. 13.

30 Sonnet, p. 12.

31 See Mélanie Lamarre, *Ruines de l’utopie: Antoine Volodine, Olivier Rolin* [Ruins of Utopia: Antoine Volodine, Olivier Rolin], Villeneuve-d’Ascq, PU du Septentrion, 2014.

imaginary.³² Likewise fascinated by what they view as political beginnings – “a violent context is needed to create a group”³³ –, they denounce the power of institutions and the police while initiating a field investigation that uses resources of style to give voice to the spatial disjunctions and points of view “stifled by repression.” Following François Bon, who “brought the people back into the French literary space” by “sending the book to the world of the *banlieue*,” “the break in syntactic construction will describe a geographical space that is broken, forced into separation.”³⁴ The book is intended as both a mimetic register of fractures and a means to harmonize forms of resistance, their words, and their microhistories, collected and re-translated to the sounds of rap, “the lung that absorbs and spits out the noises of the world here and now.”³⁵ The “literary” is therefore this capacity to recapture the voices of those on the losing end by searching them out on their own turf in order to make a new France, to make a new world.

In a French climate where the response to the identity injunction and the denunciation of “riffraff” (“*racailles*”) seeks to recover Derrida’s “specters of Marx” and the lost intensities of engagement, such explorations of suburban space easily drift toward the dream of a leftist *Grand Soir*, the revolutionary chaos and fires of which many nostalgic contemporaries imagine delightedly. We can think of the metaphysical incantations aiming to “open up new spaces to the senses” in Philippe Vasset’s *La Conjuratation* (2013)³⁶; the hypothetical civil war in Jean Rolin’s *Les Événements* [The Events] (2014); the hymn to the violence of the “riffraff” in François Cusset’s *À l’abri du déclin du monde* [Safe from the World’s Decline], raised against our “fat and soft” era that has reduced us to “slaves on tranquilizers” in “straitjackets of wires and cables”; the call to revolt in Charles Robinson’s *Fabrication de la guerre civile* – “It’s liberation, it’s pressing the off button very hard, it’s: we don’t want to repair the machines any longer, to reform them, to condemn a previous state”³⁷ –; the re-revolutionary debates in Leslie Kaplan’s *Mathias et la Révolution* [Mathias and the Revolution] (2016) or, indirectly, in Joy Sorman’s *Du bruit* [Noise] (2007) and even in Éric Vuillard’s *14 juillet* [July 14] (2016). In the tract by post-Marxist intellectuals from the far left entitled *L’Insurrection qui vient*, the keys to such literary fascination are explicitly provided: “The dormitory

32 François Bégaudeau, Arno Bertina and Oliver Rohe, *Une année en France: référendum, banlieues, CPE* [A Year in France: Referendum, Suburbs, CPE], Paris, Gallimard, 2007, back cover.

33 Bégaudeau *et al.*, p. 157.

34 Bégaudeau *et al.*, p. 99.

35 Bégaudeau *et al.*, p. 144.

36 Philippe Vasset, *La Conjuratation: roman* [The Conjuratation: A Novel], Paris, Fayard, 2013, p. 197.

37 Charles Robinson, *Fabrication de la guerre civile: roman* [Making the Civil War: A Novel], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2016, p. 627.

towers in the suburbs north of Paris, abandoned by a petty bourgeoisie that went off hunting for swimming pools, have been brought back to life by mass unemployment and now radiate more energy than the Latin Quarter. In words as much as fire.”³⁸

In these texts, featuring complex devices that borrow largely from the American model of the choral novel, where an organized course of inquiry diffracts into constant shifts in point of view and surprising associative leaps, literature repairs the continuity of the Parisian-*banlieue* area as well as the very possibility of talking about politics. It is a matter of connecting spaces that are recognized by maps and GPS yet remain invisible, of reconciling the supposedly infinite capacities of the postmodern subject with the actual condition of the vanquished in a country in crisis.

At the turn of the millennium, the very unity of the country was questioned, leading some writers to interrogate the very idea of France, sometimes for the worse. Consider, for example, Renaud Camus’s *La Campagne de France* [The Campaign of France/France’s Countryside] in 2000, or Richard Millet’s *Province* in 2016. How to take the French space as whole, on the cusp of its presumed dislocation, while refusing to essentialize it and propose false universals? It seems to me, insofar as it is possible to be a historian of the present, that Jean-Christophe Bailly’s *Le Dépaysement* [Change of Scene] (2011) provides a remarkable model in this regard. The author’s aim is to travel throughout the cities and the countryside of France in order to “understand what the texture is that gives it existence – the properties, the distinctive features – and to explore what has formed, informed, deformed it.”³⁹ Bailly wants to give a “mobile snapshot”⁴⁰ of it through whirlwind trips, with the act of writing making it possible for him to refuse the official discourses on identity. Here too, the space interrogated by writing becomes a world, “a world, an entire city – this immensity that it’s still possible to hold in one’s hands with the help of a map.”⁴¹ The France taken up by the narrative becomes, as the narrator explains, “what the Italians called *progettazione* [. . .], that is, a space where sliders are moved easily so as to vary the surface areas.”⁴² The goal is to reweave, but to not engage in storytelling – to reject “the linearity induced

38 Comité invisible, *L’Insurrection qui vient*, Paris, La Fabrique ed., 2007, p. 41. English translation from *The Coming Insurrection*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2009, p. 56.

39 Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Dépaysement: voyages en France*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2011, p. 9.

40 Bailly, p. 13.

41 Bailly, p. 21.

42 Bailly, p. 17.

by the articulation of meaning.”⁴³ At the end of more than four hundred pages of walks and musings on origins, the narrator concludes:

Thus, from one side of the country to the other there are the loose strings from an irregular weft, the common threads sometimes interrupted while little balls end up in knots, a network of synapses similar to that of a map that memory would trace with its finger, like a child following the lines of a book or a blind person following the fine embossing of words in Braille.⁴⁴

The narrator’s models are to be found in the American transcendentalists for their attention to the landscape and to nature and also in Heidegger but, on the formal level, in the literary tradition of travels “by leaps and gambols,” as Montaigne put it: familiarity is considered in terms of disorientation, the ethnology of what is close, as Bailly chooses to make understanding a difficulty unto itself and to transmute this very difficulty into poetry.

French political and social anxiety, along with the poetics of the investigation and the document, thus rework the postmodern ontological question “What is a world?” so as to ask, in the face of deregulated pluralism and the fragmentation of social space under late capitalism, “How to remake a common universe?” For in these geographical investigations specific to twenty-first-century French literature, the narrative aim seems to be to move from a theoretical geography and a dislocated territory to a *world* – an omnipresent word in these literary geographies – because it, according to a program suggested by Perec in *Espèces d’espaces* as early as 1974, always remains to be constructed:

[. . .] the world, no longer as a journey having constantly to be remade, not as a race without end, a challenge having constantly to be met, not as the one pretext for a despairing acquisitiveness, nor as the illusion of a conquest, but as the rediscovery of a meaning, the perceiving that the earth is a form of writing, a *geography* of which we had forgotten that we ourselves are the authors.⁴⁵

Thinking the global

This geography is now of a globality that is both economic and cultural, which it is fundamentally the writers’ mandate to grasp. It is beyond the scope of this book to

⁴³ Bailly, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Bailly, p. 412.

⁴⁵ Georges Perec, *Espèces d’espaces* (1974), Paris, Galilée, 2000, p. 156; author’s emphasis. English translation from *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. John Sturrock, London, Penguin, 1997, p. 79.

make a more general attempt to map all the texts that have, countering Samuel P. Huntington's 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations*, attempted to build "transcultural" or "intercultural" bridges over the past two decades, whether these voices are categorized as belonging to Francophone studies, immigration literature, or "exile" studies.⁴⁶ These literatures, as described in particular by Crystel Pinçonat,⁴⁷ who draws on Janine Altounian's work on "survival"⁴⁸ and the notion of the "fable of the self," clearly reflect a "desire for symbolic reparation,"⁴⁹ based on both the French "*roman de filiation*" [the filiation narrative] and American minority studies. It may seem that the strategy of reconciliation through a language that is shared and the matter of informing on historical wounds may seem to be in opposition, but they share a common belief in the capacity of literature to move up to the front lines of cultural conflicts. But as in fiction that approaches the subject from the outside – Mathias Énard in *Rue des voleurs* [Thieves' Street], Olivier Adam in *À l'abri de rien* [Sheltered from Nothing], and Darrieussecq in *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* [You have to love men a lot] –, these post-traumatic explanations of exile are more identity-based than geographical, and the connection is more memorial than territorial. Here, I would like to emphasize the efforts to recreate a global literary consciousness. The French territory is first included in a Europe where there is a need to reweave the cultural threads – this is the whole point of Camille de Toledo's involvement in his various projects, including *Europa-Eutopia*, which aims to respond to "an imperative for translation between worlds"⁵⁰ – as well as historical threads – this is in particular the aim of Mathias Énard's *Zone*, a memorial epic of the wounds Europe suffered from the war in the former Yugoslavia. Then it is Europe itself that French literature attempts to connect to the rest of the world: Énard comes to rethink the orientalist tradition in *Boussole* [Compass] (2015) while Maylis de Kerangal (*Tangente vers l'Est* [Tangent to the East], 2011), Danièle Sallenave (*Sibir*, 2012), Emmanuel Carrère (*Un roman russe* [A Russian Novel], 2007), Anne Wiazemsky (*Aux quatre coins du monde* [Around the World],

46 See Alexis Nouss, *La Condition de l'exilé: penser les migrations contemporaines* [The Condition of the Exile: Thinking Contemporary Migrations], Paris, Éd. de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2015.

47 See Crystel Pinçonat, *Endofiction et fable de soi* [Endofiction and Fable of the Self], Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016, p. 58, and the corpus provided by *Nouvelles odyssées: 50 écrivains racontent l'immigration* [New Odysseys: 50 Writers Tell the Story of Immigration], ed. Laure Barbizet-Namer, Paris, Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration, 2009.

48 See Janine Altounian, *La Survivance: traduire le trauma collectif* [Survival: Translating Collective Trauma], Paris, Dunod, 2000.

49 C. Pinçonat, *Endofiction et fable de soi*, p. 58.

50 See Camille de Toledo, "Europa-Eutopia," 15 Nov. 2015, "Toledo-Archives: une tentative de rassemblement" site, toledo-archives.net/actualites/europa-eutopia/.

2001), Olivier Rolin (*En Russie* [In Russia], 1994), and Sylvain Tesson (*L'Axe du loup* [The Wolf Axis], 2004) interrogate the cultural borders with Eastern Europe as they travel, to take just one example of a geographical area. Finally, it is the entire globe that is called upon to “make world” [*faire monde*], as evidenced by the proclamation of the 2007 manifesto for “a world literature in French,” with the intention of performing repairs at the global level. For the fifty writers who signed the manifesto, this involves “giving a voice and putting a face to the unknown of the world,” breaking with a literature accused of having “no other purpose apart from itself.”⁵¹ This opposition, though debated, does testify to a transitive reorientation of the contemporary literary project – if not in practice, then at least in consciousness – in the direction of marginalized and minority voices, and also to an interest in re-making a world that accounts for “the concert of the multiplicity of *experiences*.”⁵² This can be qualified by noting that authors who did not sign the manifesto and who adhere to a tradition of experimentally exploring representation have also produced novels that aim to bring realities from outside Europe into the French language and make them heard together. This is the case of at least two works that reinvent the Unanimist novel of Jules Romains in the age of globalization: first, Olivier Rolin who, in *L'Invention du monde*, uses newspapers to “describe a day in the world: its prodigious diversity, the unity that makes it a world. Its banality, its constant strangeness”⁵³ (this is the spring equinox of 21 March 1989), as depicted by the press prior to the rise of the Internet, though already making the world “instantly visible and readable through and through, in any one of its tangled lines.”⁵⁴ In his footsteps came Laurent Mauvignier, taking a less contemplative and more empathic approach with *Autour du monde*, a choral novel that tells of a given day through fourteen narratives that intersect with the tsunami of 2011. War and calamity reduce the world to “a graveyard of names”⁵⁵ and the writer attempts to restore their contemporaneity through fiction. In order to catch the attention of all “the people who are moving around the world at the same time [. . .] of all those people who brush against each other and will never meet,”⁵⁶ the novelist wonders about the need to “redress the dead stories, stories we had forgotten,” at the risk of

51 “Pour une littérature-monde en français” manifesto in *Le Monde des livres*, 15 March 2007.

52 Alain Mabanckou, “Le chant de l’oiseau migrateur,” in Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud (eds), *Pour une littérature-monde* [For a World-Literature], Paris, Gallimard, 2007, pp. 55–66, cit. p. 64.

53 Olivier Rolin, *L'Invention du monde* [The Invention of the World], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1993, p. 522. See the analyses by Christine Marcandier, “Autour du monde avec Mauvignier (*1Book1-Day*), *Diacritik*, 25 October 2015.

54 Rolin, *L'Invention du monde*, p. 31.

55 Laurent Mauvignier, *Autour du monde* [Around the World], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2014, p. 113.

56 Mauvignier, p. 372.

“prolonging them, rekindling them, like a poorly extinguished fire.”⁵⁷ He dreams of a child named Lazarus who is capable of conquering death while endlessly wondering: what must and what can be saved?

Certainly, narratives that struggle with the textualist – for Rolin, “[i]t was not true to say that the world did not exist,” for “it did exist – constantly created by words”⁵⁸ – and even the very personal, even narcissistic, accounts of the same globalized disasters – Carrère, in a direct way, in *Lives Other than My Own*, or, in an indirect way, Michaël Ferrier in *Fukushima: récit d'un désastre* [Fukushima: Narrative of a Disaster] and Christine Montalbetti in *Love Hotel* – are a far cry from the “creolization of the world” of an author such as Édouard Glissant, founder of the Institute of the “*Tout-Monde*,” the All-World.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, they share the idea of a literature viewed as attentiveness to diversity and planetary suffering. These forms do not exhaust the vast repertoire of integrating geographies offered by contemporary authors. Mention should also be made of other meditations on globality – the overhead view from the international space station in *La vie est faite de ces toutes petites choses* [Life is made up of these little things] by Montalbetti (2016), the global construction sites described in 2010 by Kerangal’s *Naissance d'un pont* [Birth of a Bridge] and Chloé Korman’s *Hommes-couleurs* [Men-Colors], the “global history” of the century proposed nonchalantly by Stéphane Audeguy’s *La Théorie des nuages* [The Theory of Clouds] –, or the reflections on the globalization of work, such as François Bon’s *Daewoo*. We can also add Philippe Vasset’s remapping of the world from the perspective of the globalized economy in the cycle that started in 2008 with *Journal intime d'un marchand de canons* [Diary of a Cannon Dealer], or from the perspective of digitalization: in *Carte muette* [Mute Map], the writer aims to “project the invisible onto the perceived world in order to see these swarms of messages, archives, texts, and figures strike against the landscape and drape it in humming sheets”⁶⁰ in order to confront the “death of the superb anonymity of space, which has become an omniscient expanse, a place where an absolute memory is inscribed.”⁶¹ In each instance, the contemporary quest for a planetary novel is more of a search for a comprehensible and sensitive world than for a new epic. The recording of words and thoughts, the concrete attention to places, the analogical thinking, the narrator’s own sensitivity to being “porous, connected, even imperfectly, to this terrible

57 Mauvignier, p. 132–133.

58 Rolin, *L'Invention du monde*, p. 45.

59 See the site of the Institut du tout-monde, established in 2006 by Édouard Glissant, www.tout-monde.com.

60 Philippe Vasset, *Carte muette: roman (Machines, 2)*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, p. 12.

61 Vasset, p. 116.

thing that is happening elsewhere”⁶² relay global events or try to create emotional cartographies at the time of a unified world: it is not a question of simplifying and homogenizing space – nor even, as Romains attempts to do – of describing its hidden harmony, but of making its singularities resonate together in the light of a global event.

Protecting the world

“[Books] are not to be held by letters printed on a page, but are living characters translatable into every tongue and form of life. I read them on lichens and bark; I watch them on waves on the beach; they fly in birds, they creep in worms; I detect them in laughter and blushes and eye-sparkles of men and women,” wrote Emerson⁶³ in defense of the continuity between the library, alterity, and nature. The horizon of this exploration, made possible by literature’s capacity to serve as a link and to reintegrate the individual into the concert of the world, is the transcendentalist openness to the universe and the living. A new pantheism is born in the choral writings of space and continues with an ecological attentiveness. I will therefore conclude this reflection on the contemporary desire to “remake world” (*refaire monde*) with a few words on what we might call the ecological remediation of literature. Unexpectedly enough, prior to the emergence of ecocriticism and then ecopoetics in the 2000s, literary discourse about the living world clearly pertained to the functions of symbolic connection and remediation.⁶⁴ More precisely, it is possible to identify several forms of literary intervention that to a certain extent are to literature what land art remediation projects are to contemporary art⁶⁵: the desire to use memory in order to save places ravaged by the Anthropocene – the meditations on wilderness by Jean-Loup Trassard, Jean-Christophe Bailly, or Pierre Bergounioux, for example, which serve as a continuation of their work with lost territories –, the desire to become advocates for wilderness and to propose through literature an attentiveness no longer centered on the human, or even a new pantheism that reintegrates the natural world into the human one, as is the case with the “world writings” (*écri-*

62 Christine Montalbetti, *Love Hotel: roman*, Paris, P.O.L., 2013, p. 149.

63 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, London, George Routledge and Sons, 1885, p. 257.

64 See Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu: essai d'écopoétique* [What is Taking Place: An Essay in Ecopoetics], Marseille, Éd. Wildproject, 2015, and Alain Romestaing, Pierre Schoentjes, Anne Simon, “Essor d’une conscience littéraire de l’environnement,” [The Rise of a Literary Awareness of the Environment] *Revue critique de fixation française contemporaine*, 2012.

65 See especially Alan Berger (ed), *Designing the Reclaimed Landscape*, Abingdon (NY), Taylor & Francis, 2008.

tures-monde) of Kerangal and Mauvignier. This involves both demonstrating narrative empathy for animals and recognizing their place – “These harmless and tender prey, I had no doubt that they had an interiority. I knew their value and their fragility. We owed them protection,” writes Alice Ferney⁶⁶ –, defending their supporters – Ferney makes her book “the tribute that those who offer their existence to the Earth so well deserve”⁶⁷ – and also developing an expanded and decentered awareness that refuses any “‘natural’ cut in the spectrum of similarities and differences which spans the difference between you and a dog, or you and one of Asimov’s robots,” as Richard Rorty writes.⁶⁸ Even if this literature exposes itself to the risk of anthropomorphism – just as the literature of marginalities exposes itself to the risk of making subalterns speak involuntarily –, it produces a writing of the animal by proclaiming what Jean-Marie Schaeffer has called in an influential book “the end of the human exception.”⁶⁹ Stéphane Audeguy, a great specialist in literary ventriloquism, recounts the imaginary life of a lion in *Histoire du lion Personne* [Story of the Nobody Lion] (2016), just as Pierre Michon did with Van Gogh, rounding out the long list of writers who have thought about animal alterity through the intermediary of a feline; Marie Nimier, Renaud Camus, and Michel Houellebecq depict their dogs; Pascal Quignard recalls the analogies between genocides and hunting – “What do you mean by the moral inclinations of the human species? The extermination of wildlife? The invention of slavery? The crucifixion? The invention of work? War? The Polish camps? The Siberian camps? The graves of Rwanda? The metal racks of Cambodia?”⁷⁰ – and Jean-Baptiste Del Amo denounces factory farming in a vast fresco (*Règne animal* [The Animal Kingdom], 2016). “Your parents don’t know anything about abandoned animals and wild children, but you will,”⁷¹ Olivia Rosenthal proclaims in *Que font les rennes après Noël?*: it is a matter of indicting the guilty, of repairing the wrongs done to the animals, but also, and somewhat paradoxically, of freeing animals from human language through literary language. Hence the stories

66 Alice Ferney, *Le Règne du vivant: roman* [The Kingdom of the Living: A Novel] Arles, Actes Sud, 2014, p. 12.

67 Ferney, p. 202.

68 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 192.

69 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *La Fin de l’exception humaine* [The End of Human Exception], Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

70 P. Quignard, *Les Désarçonnés*, p. 158. The title can be translated as *The Unseated Ones* or *The Disconcerted Ones*.

71 Olivia Rosenthal, *Que font les rennes après Noël?* [What do reindeer do after Christmas?], Paris, Verticales, 2011, p. 28; for an alternate translation, see *To Leave with the Reindeer*, trans. Sophie Lewis, Sheffield, And Other Stories, 2019.

that take animals as witnesses, such as Valère Novarina's⁷² *Discours aux animaux*, in order to reinvent language within the horizon described by Bailly of "the talking fiction of a denominational world, of a world that does not yet know names and that, perhaps, does not expect them, behaving freely outside their norms, their jurisdiction."⁷³ When it is a matter of listening to the voices of the world in order to then make heard "the words of all voices, including those of the toad and the gibbon,"⁷⁴ and when, as Mark Payne writes, "human beings no longer understand their encounters with other animals as the meeting of nature and culture,"⁷⁵ the operations permitted by the literary imagination and enunciation are obviously indispensable. Whether they draw on the Emersonian tradition, an underlying Heideggerianism, or the heterogeneous but equalized world of the "new realists," these rhapsodic writings of animal – if not vegetal – voices, these eccentric projections, describe a world that humans could only re-inhabit by withdrawing from it as human. Literature would like to restore a former universal sympathy so to dissolve into nature, itself a sound issuing from it just like any other. However, such a project is no longer that of the Romantics: literature writes, its metadiscourses tell us, as a response to a martyred environment that must be healed by words; it speaks in the name of a nature that no longer speaks naturally with humans, but which must be given back its own voice and its instability, even if it means completely destabilizing the regime of realism.⁷⁶ Nature is no longer an abstract totality, passive and separate, but a kingdom inhabited by entities on equal footing with human beings and awaiting individualization.⁷⁷ In its contemporary project of remaking world, literature wants to restore both the cohesion of space and of the living.

72 Valère Novarina, *Le Discours aux animaux* [Speech to the Animals], Paris, P.O.L., 2016.

73 Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Parti pris des animaux* [The Animal Bias], Paris, C. Bourgois, 2013, p. 102.

74 Bailly, p. 109.

75 Mark Payne, *The Animal Part: Human and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 145.

76 This is Amitav Ghosh's strong assumption in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 24 et seq.

77 See Pierre Schoentjes, *Ce qui a lieu*, pp. 164 et seq.

Chapter 12

Remaking community

[F]aces and voices [. . .] call forth the narrative because on its own the real can't make the connections[. . .] and because you must get past someone's annoyance, or something held back in someone's voice, in search of a name barely mentioned, and that you scrawled in a black notebook. François Bon, *Daewoo*.¹

In literature as in politics, the question of territory cannot be separated from the social question. Anyone browsing French works in a bookstore will be struck by the ubiquity of a literature that aims to describe as well as denounce the contemporary plights of society, focusing especially on the blind spots of economic and political debates as if literature in particular needed to dedicate itself to echoing underrepresented experiences in order to produce, with its specific means of amplification, “a *therapeutics for deteriorating social relations*,”² as Michel de Certeau referred to it well before the identification of literature's therapeutic turn. The major themes that I will attempt to cover (work, marginalities, minorities) and the pragmatic actions that support them (the literary reformulation of suffering, but also the investigation, immersion, participation, and dissemination of narrative literature) extend the individual's expressive needs to the level of the social group. Above all, they propose using literary devices as communicational vectors of substitution. Authors will write what individuals have difficulty formulating themselves, what the subaltern – because of work, origins, or belonging to a sexual minority – is not in a position to say, what the marginalized person is not in a position to think, for the benefit of a society that does not have the ability to hear, even if it means disrupting axiological systems so as to better rework them.

The clinic for the precarious

I will first take the example of “work” as a site for the reconsideration of the social body's expressive difficulties. This literary portrayal of suffering at work has been the subject of several recent works that have mapped the problems that writers

1 François Bon, *Daewoo: roman*, Paris, Fayard, 2004, p. 14. English translation from *Daewoo*, trans. Youna Kwak, New Orleans, Diálogos Books, 2020, Kindle edition.

2 Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire* [1980], Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. liii, author's emphasis. English translation from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Rendall, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998, p. xxiv.

have sought to rework: “[t]he tertiarization of employment, the infiltration of managerial discourse at all levels of life, and impoverishment of the human experience that ensues.” This leads the writers to two main types of representation: “on the one hand, the retrospective investigation, testifying to a disappearance (Martine Sonnet, François Bon, Thierry Beinstingel, Marie-Hélène Lafon, and Jean-Loup Trassard); on the other hand, the novelistic exploration of a liberalism that appears increasingly hegemonic and irreversible (Nicole Caligaris, Jérôme Mauche, Mathieu Larnaudie, Élisabeth Filhol, Jean-Charles Massera, and Lydie Salvayre),” write Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck.³ The list has continued to grow, and recent novels by Éric Reinhardt and Stéphanie Dupays could likewise be added to it. What is it, then, that separates such texts from the long tradition of depicting the ravages of capitalism or the disappearance of the rural world, for example?⁴ It is undoubtedly the transition from a literature of combat and address to a literature of discursive critique and symbolic support. I do not know if these texts offer a “hermeneutics” of work, due to the absence of a clear interpretative direction, but it is worth noting that Adler and Heck, along with Jacques Rancière, refer to a politics of literature that imagines “new possibilities for living together” by means of an “attentiveness to unusual forms of articulation and subjectivation.”⁵ As Pascal Mougin subtly demonstrates, Élisabeth Filhol’s portrayal of employees at a nuclear power plant (*La Centrale* [The Power Plant], 2009) raises awareness about an ecological problem and extremely covert forms of suffering at work, but above all it proposes a way of “giving poetic form to these clashes”⁶ by means of a formal device specific to the novel, the internal monologue. When Didier Castino tells of the end of the working class in *Après le silence* [After Silence] (2015), he does so by giving voice to his father, who died in an accident in a steel mill at the age of 43, with an astonishing resurrection that sheds light on the contemporary situation. When François Bon sets out to commemorate the struggle of the Daewoo factory workers, he defies doctrinal illusion and the rhetoric of fiction in favor of documentation and investigation: “you want what remains sealed under cement and concrete to be rescued by

3 Aurélie Adler and Maryline Heck (eds), *Écrire le travail au XXI^e siècle: quelles implications politiques?* [Writing Work in the Twenty-First Century: What Are the Political Implications?], Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016, p. 10. Also see Marie-Hélène Boblet, “Au nom des ressources humaines,” [On Behalf of Human Resources] *Revue du MAUSS permanente*, 6 December 2015.

4 On the contemporary legacy of the culture of work from the 1970s, see the lovely text that Virginie Linhart wrote about her father Robert Linhart, the author *L’Établi* (1978): *Le jour où mon père s’est tu* [The Workbench (1978): The Day My Father Fell Silent], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2008.

5 A. Adler and M. Heck, *Écrire le travail au XXI^e siècle*, p. 11.

6 Pascal Mougin, “Enjeux, portée et limites d’une littérature critique du monde du travail: l’exemple de *La Centrale* d’Élisabeth Filhol,” *Écrire le travail*, eds. A. Adler and M. Heck, p. 38.

raw truth.”⁷ It is a matter of combatting all forms of erasure for a mythologized moment because “what penetrates the news, what separates or smashes the stability established between people and things, disappeared without adequate consideration of the consequences.”⁸ In order to recall the memory of the unfortunate individuals involved in the social struggle, Bon affirms, not without sadness, that “the main thing was to be living,”⁹ quoting Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. For “the names of those who are no longer” are “like so many shadows calling.”¹⁰ Faced with the rupture of the social systems previously related to work and the discursive forms accompanying them, literary discourse intervenes by means of symbolic modes of compensation with all the strength of cultural cross-references – here, Rilke. With a very French nostalgia for the great political narratives, it offers forms of designation and textual recording as a new credo. “If the [female] workers no longer have a place anywhere, may the novel be memory,”¹¹ writes Bon. Like the re-enchantment of disinherited industrial sites, bringing the voices into concert – the word is ubiquitous in a narrative that takes the theater as its model, as is the case with all of Bon’s emulators – seeks to restore a coherence, once legendarily provided by the manual work of craftsmen and workers, but now lost, among humans and between humans and the world.

Beyond the matter of addressing the disappearance of a social class and bridging the Marxist horizon, contemporary writers who use literature as a tool for social remediation intend to reduce forms of social invisibility all together. The question is central to contemporary philosophers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 2009) in the United States and Guillaume Le Blanc in France. The latter in particular, drawing on Foucault and Butler, seeks to create the conditions for a discourse of the unseen and their ability to enter into shared narratives, whether they be migrants (*Dedans, dehors: la condition d'étranger* [Inside, Outside: The Condition of a Foreigner], 2010) or if they suffer from precarity (*Vies ordinaires, vies précaires* [Ordinary Lives, Precarious Lives], 2007; *L'Invisibilité sociale* [Social Invisibility], 2009). He dreams of a “social clinic,” a “treatment for the precariat” that assumes the role of “maintaining this fictional montage of a self by reinsuring, in the fullest sense of the term, procedures of recognition that have been destroyed in the disaffiliation from social norms that results from precarity.”¹² Here, Le Blanc embraces ethics such as care and the phenomenologies of relation

7 F. Bon, *Daewoo*, p. 9. English translation from *Daewoo*, Kindle edition.

8 Bon, p. 13.

9 Bon, p. 119.

10 Bon, p. 14.

11 Bon, back cover, presentation of the author.

12 Guillaume Le Blanc, *Vies ordinaires, vies précaires*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2007, pp. 239–240.

along with the contemporary literary aim of initiating discursive remediations, though the formulation remains somewhat vague. Literature was making a place for the invisible well before Michon – we find traces of it in the early Romanticism of the 1830s. Its modern forms, attentive to anonymity, displacement, and the sense of the multitude, were invented during the twentieth century – modernity's first literary tomb to the lowly is perhaps the one Giuseppe Ungaretti wrote in 1916 to Mohammed Scheab in *In memoria*: “His name was/ Mohammed Scheab// Descendant/ of the nomadic emirs/ committed suicide/ because he no longer/ had a homeland/ [. . .] He rests/ in the Ivry cemetery/ [. . .] And perhaps I alone/ still know/ that he lived.”¹³ The exhumation of those whom Foucault referred to as “infamous men”¹⁴ and the representation of what Paul Veyne called the “weak intensities”¹⁵ of history, the lives of the lowly or of beggars, the lives of the forgotten or the marginalized, is one of the fundamental intentions of recent French literature, which offers here outside the hospital a literary counterpart to the contemporary ethics of “care.” This undertaking requires not only the representation of people and places who are out of view, but also narrativization – respectfully and accurately shaping that which has neither a pre-constituted form nor discourse, and which is not to be crushed by a generalizing grip. It is necessary to tell the story of the streets and their daily life, the “ordinary course of things in the city,” to borrow the title of an essay by Arlette Farge,¹⁶ and to make room for the *minores* of the grand narrative. Disclosing and pointing out are thus the aims of this humanitarian enterprise running through all of contemporary French literature and includes both theatrical works – Ariane Mnouchkine comes to mind – and documentary accounts, as well as the spectral writing of Patrick Modiano, who is tied to the Parisian fringe (*Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* [In the Café of Lost Youth], 2007), François Bon's neo-realism and Yannick Haenel's fable (*Les Renards pâles* [Pale Foxes], 2013) – and even, in a sense, Michel Houellebecq's scathing self-irony regarding those who have lost status because of liberalism. As such, the twenty-first century is characterized by a materialist and documentary poetics, ambitions of quantification and exhaustiveness: as Bon proposes with regard to the ordinary lives of “street people,” “a step-by-step inventory of names and lives, including the places visited and what

13 Giuseppe Ungaretti, *In memoriam* [*In memoria*, 1916], in *Vie d'un homme: poésie 1914–1970*, trans. Jean Lescure, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, Gallimard, 1973, pp. 35–36.

14 See Michel Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes,” [The Lives of Infamous Men] *Cahiers du Chemin*, January 1977, in *Dits et écrits*, vol 2, pp. 237–253.

15 Paul Veyne, “L'interprétation et l'interprète. À propos des choses de la religion,” [Interpretation and the Interpreter. About the Matters of Religion] *Enquête*, no. 3, 1996, pp. 160–180.

16 Arlette Farge, *Le Cours ordinaire des choses dans la cité du XVIII^e siècle* [The Ordinary Course of Things in the City of the Eighteenth Century], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1994.

each one says about these places” ought to be made,¹⁷ but above all the desire to rearm those living in precarity by speaking *for* them or *with* them. In other words, to extend empowerment, which is provided to the glorious or gloriously ill, to those excluded from the social body.

The literature of the unseen

Authors have developed procedures for relaying and rerouting speech so as to become spokespersons for the fallen and the dependent – the vicar, in the etymological sense, of the voiceless, a sort of public writer – while simultaneously abandoning the traditional conditioning of the *romanesque* novel or the social neo-novel as exemplified today, for example, by Gérard Mordillat. In the face of invisibility, literature’s procedures for repair exhibit an inventiveness that profoundly questions the very category of the literary. Ever the trailblazer, François Bon serves as an example of this by establishing new textual solidarities both in narrative testimonies and in writing workshops. His *C’était toute une vie* (1995) brings together the notes “as close as possible to the reality” of the “life trajectory” of a young drug addict, Myriam, mother of three children, whom he met a few days before her death during a writing workshop. “Now she’s dead, we’re at the cemetery in front of her grave with the dates: 1961–1993, there are even two engraved plates and we were provided with an explanation,” comments the narrator, who describes the call of the “in the name of” which served to motivate the work: “we’re forced to write because there might be no other memory of the words we’ve collected, and they haunt you: the deposit weighs too heavily. Of the faces that we have known, one has disappeared. [. . .] And fiction has the task of organizing the images of it, in the name of this memory.”¹⁸ Bon’s literature serves to “add one more name to the list, already so long, that each of us makes of those who are absent from the world,”¹⁹ to “contend with the effacement itself.”²⁰ Literature makes it possible to dream of using words to compensate for what has not been, or not really been, such as the happiness of the poor, the existence of Myriam and the aimless youth of 30, rue de la Poste in the novel of the same name – in other words, the condition of those who are separated from their communities and acted upon by economic superstructures.

17 François Bon, *Impatience*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1998, pp. 12–13; author’s emphasis.

18 F. Bon, *C’était toute une vie* [It was a lifetime], Lagrasse, Verdier, 1995, back cover, written by the author.

19 F. Bon, *Prison*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1998, p. 29.

20 F. Bon, *Daewoo*, p. 9.

We can see the difference from previous forms of empathetic reportage, as, for example, Joseph Kessel's 1960 investigation of *Alcooliques anonymes*.²¹ With the nuances of this poetics of enunciative disappropriation, which exposes authors to the risk of becoming mere ventriloquists or having their identities dissolved in the work of a writing workshop, and this delegation and formal deflation that calls in a crisis of fiction to tell the drama of exclusion, literature – not without some messianism – resolves to recover an energy and faith in its powers that the notional years of the postwar period had sometimes taken away from it.

Talking about, talking for, talking with, and getting people to talk, with the aim of recreating a community: this expressive, uttering clinic, experimentally materialist, elsewhere takes on other remarkably inventive forms that push the limits of the novel in a different way than Bon does. In particular, there is a borrowing of forms and especially heuristic procedures specific to extra-literary disciplines and social sciences: biography, anthropological investigation, retrospective historical work, and even journalism – as if it were necessary to be reminded yet again of the ability of literary forms to reinvent themselves by examining apparently external discursive and hermeneutic forms. In particular, Éric Chauvier's *Anthropologie* (2006) is a fascinating speculation on the intersecting approaches employed by literary and ethnological writing to contend with “social invisibility.” The literary writings about the vulnerable are strongly opposed to the social sciences. The starting point of the narrative involves “find[ing] ways to [. . .] make a Romani beggar woman encountered at an intersection ‘reappear’”²² by using the methods of sociology and ethnology in a critical way. But the narrator discovers the limits of such a method with a failure he refers to as “*pathological anthropology*.”²³ Abstract and generalizing analysis leads to “missing the intensity of an encounter and the full brilliance of a possibility,” even as the memory engages the narrator in a poetic fascination worthy of Breton's *Nadja*: “The brilliance of this gaze constitutes the primary basis for what we might call, freeing the term from all its academic aspects to retain only its experimental value, its test value, a trial of the general by the light of a singular adventure [. . .]: *an anthropology*.”²⁴ Thus begins an associative journey, an investigation in the form of epistemological meandering that hinges on the “*sense of disrupted familiarity*”²⁵ – Chauvier borrows the concept from John Searle

21 Joseph Kessel, *Avec les alcooliques anonymes* [With Alcoholics Anonymous], Paris, Gallimard, 1960; reprinted with a foreword by Fabienne Deschamps, “Folio,” 2013.

22 Éric Chauvier, *Anthropologie*, Paris, Allia, 2006, p. 7.

23 Chauvier, p. 17; author's emphasis.

24 Chauvier, pp. 16–17.

25 Chauvier, p. 12; author's emphasis.

– and that has a conclusion that is deceptive: only the memory of bedazzlement constitutes a “steadfast bulwark against anything that might undermine it [the beggar’s gaze] by taking away its unique aura, by suffocating it, by liquefying it, by neutralizing it – that is, by making it visible, by making it marketable.”²⁶ It is thus through literature that we arrive at the “political anthropology”²⁷ that Victor W. Turner dreamed could benefit what he called the “power of the weak.” Absorbing the “impression of disrupted familiarity” or leaving it open: fundamentally, the gesture of designating a fracture is the first step in bridging it and makes it possible to meet the dual contemporary ethical requirement to tackle injustices while not heroizing the victims in a parochial literature.

The generation of fieldwork writers intend to incorporate the territory of the non-fiction novel and its journalistic forms into literature just as much as the experiences and procedures of the social sciences. Carrère’s position is unambiguous: “I am entirely convinced that journalism is part of literature. It is a form of literature like the five-act tragedy, the sonnet, the novel, the essay”²⁸ Carrère, who conducted a whole series of investigations for *XXI* magazine, the most recent of which involved fieldwork with the migrants and inhabitants of the “Calais Jungle,” is unapologetic in his desire to expand the realm of letters by making journalism what Gérard Genette would call a genre that is *constitutively* literary – and not *conditionally* literary, by style, by diction.²⁹ And yet Carrère switches the locus of fascination: the world is “a mystery that fiction can never deliver whereas in that which documents, there is a form of opacity of the real that persists.”³⁰ What adds mystery to the world is not literature but investigation, a way of reshuffling the cards so as to present the reader with raw documents, which can be found in what have been conveniently called “factographies,”³¹ and which involves refusing the seductions of the imagination in favor of a literature that is no longer defined by deviating from representation or rendering the signifier opaque, but by re-interrogating the

26 Chauvier, p. 135.

27 Marc J. Swartz, Victor W. Turner and Arthur Tuden, *Political Anthropology*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1966.

28 Emmanuel Carrère, “Emmanuel Carrère, le journalisme et ‘l’opacité du réel,’” [Emmanuel Carrère, Journalism and the “Opacity of Reality”] interview with Fabrice Alfi, *Mediapart*, 22 Febr. 2016.

29 See G. Genette, *Fiction et diction* [Fiction and Diction], pp. 31 et seq.

30 E. Carrère, “Emmanuel Carrère, le journalisme et ‘l’opacité du réel.’”

31 See Marie-Jeanne Zenetti, *Factographies: l’enregistrement du réel en littérature* [Factographies: The Recording of Reality in Literature], Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2014; “Factographies: ‘l’autre’ littérature factuelle,” [Factographies: “The Other” Factual Literature] in Alison James and Christophe Reig (eds), *Frontières de la non-fiction: littérature, cinéma, arts* [Frontiers of Non-Fiction: Literature, Cinema, Art], Rennes, PU de Rennes, 2013, pp. 25–34.

world from the inside. Carrère produces investigations that are original in their ability to skillfully depict the investigator, to interrogate their presuppositions, and even to outline alternative interpretations – all of which are the types of concerns typical for the author of *The Adversary* – but also to thicken the analysis and intensify observations and questioning. If literature is journalism, it is because it shares the subject matter (the present) and methods (field investigation), but it is also literature because it can make its knowledge richer and more effective. I am not certain that a theoretical reflection on the “literarity” of these texts is a priority, but any such enterprise would, I believe, require a shift away from definitional criteria that are thematic (fiction) or formal (diction) to use instead those that are pragmatic and cognitive. And perhaps, also, abandoning the aesthetic conception of literature as the “art of language,” given the varied forms of non-fictional narration. Thus, literature no longer aims for a *je ne sais quoi* but rather vital knowledge, that of forging bonds. It is no longer intended to bring pleasure but to combat the misfortunes of the world.

This is particularly true for the forms of journalism constituted by immersive investigations: this includes the aforementioned *Paris, Gare du Nord* by Joy Sorman, and Florence Aubenas’s *Le Quai de Ouistreham*, in which the author gives an account of pretending to be a job seeker doing housework in sordid conditions. A book of genuine empathy, the narrative is dedicated “To those of Caen, whose lives I shared,”³² and is part of a tradition of literary journalism inaugurated by Günter Wallraff (*Ganz unten*, 1986, then *Günter Wallraff Undercover*, 2010, which relates other experiences of assuming different identities) – and Barbara Ehrenreich in the United States. A narrative that is as much about integration as it is about a journey of identity, *Le Quai de Ouistreham* is thus a fictional apparatus, but not a fiction. To address the bonds that are deteriorating but also those that resist social disinheritance, Aubenas adjusts to ordinary representations, expressing herself with great restraint – “The hour of work lasts a second and an eternity,”³³ she tells us, for example, about cleaning the ferries –, as if to incorporate into her narrative the very texture of an experience abandoned by language. The narrative reconstruction of human beings is not impossible, but modest, diametrically opposed to the ideology of competitive individualism underlying the employment office’s suggestion to the unemployed to create an “attractive” CV. The sociological observation gives way to a description of the amicable solidarities that make the world livable, and at the end of the book, the author indicates that these strong connections were the real benefit, more so than the investigation.

32 Florence Aubenas, *Le Quai de Ouistreham*, Paris, Éd. de l’Olivier, 2010, p. 271; for an alternate translation, see *The Night Cleaner*, trans. Andrew Brown, Cambridge (UK), Polity Press, 2011.

33 Aubenas, *Le Quai*, p. 93.

Aubenas has strongly theorized this “creative” and immanentist solution, denouncing the danger of a literature refocused on the “neoliberal” self and steeped in a culture of trauma, in which “[t]he causes of personal suffering become a guarantee of authenticity, in a kind of search for the truth that can only be elusive,”³⁴ while no longer believing in “the classical transitive engagement”³⁵ that has the disadvantage of “acting not for the thing itself, but for its presumed subsequent effects.”³⁶ On the contrary, the “only solution for humans is to change their situation, with no guarantee of ever knowing the result,”³⁷ and to act by decentering themselves in order to be truly themselves, through a commitment that is situational and not abstract, challenging any division between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the minor and the major battles, to “rediscover what is unique to the human adventure, with meaninglessness as the source of all meaning”³⁸ – in a program that is not just that of a humanist journalism, but that of the politics of contemporary literature.

I have placed great emphasis on these highly original forms of writing about social connection and their head-on approach to investigation; this empathy, however, extends well beyond the field of “restricted” literature, to use a category coined by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s.³⁹ Thus, for example, the burning issue of migrants – perhaps newer than that of prisons, which has received much attention in post-Foucauldian literature – has been the subject of many humanitarian novels, whether they be tied to the journey itself, such as Annelise Heurtier’s *Refuges* (2015), Pascal Manoukian’s *Les Échoués* [The Stranded] (2015), *Lampedusa* by Maryline Desbiolles, in a collection for children (2012), or Laurent Gaudé’s *Eldorado* (2006); or the alterity of migrants in Olivier Adam’s *À l’abri de rien* [Sheltered from Nothing] (2007), Pierrette Fleutiaux’s *Destiny* (2016), Karine Tuil’s *Douce France* [Sweet France] (2007), and even Éliette Abécassis’s *Clandestin* (2003). The interest in this topic is attested to by the activities of the major publishing houses just as much as the micro-publishers – Denis Heudré’s *Bleu naufrage: élégie de Lampedusa* [Wreckage Blue: Lampedusa Elegy], published in 2015 by La Sirène étoilée – and the works that have appeared in translation: two important works were translated

34 Florence Aubenas and Miguel Benasayag, *Résister, c’est créer* [To Resist is to Create], Paris, La Découverte, 2002, p. 80.

35 Aubenas- Benasayag, p. 129.

36 Aubenas- Benasayag, p. 87.

37 Aubenas- Benasayag, p. 49.

38 Aubenas- Benasayag, p. 119.

39 Pierre Bourdieu studied the interactions, within the larger literary field, between the subfield of “restricted production” (geared at a restricted audience) and the one devoted to mass production, the polarization of which gave rise to an “average literature.” See his seminal essay, “Le marché des biens symboliques,” *L’Année sociologique*, no. 22, 1971, pp. 49–126.

immediately into French: Emma-Jane Kirby's journalistic investigation *The Optician of Lampedusa* (2016), and the parable by Dutch author Tommy Wieringa, *Dit zijn de namen* (2015). These are joined by neo-lyrical forms such as Kerangal's waking reverie in *À ce stade de la nuit* [At this Point in the Night], which is meant to offer a form of poetic care through the imagination – "I thought about the ghosts dwelling in the names, and I wondered how to hear them, how to perceive them."⁴⁰ And especially the two novels by Emmanuel Darley, who is also a playwright and a writing workshop facilitator, *Un des malheurs* [One of the Misfortunes] (2002) and *Le Bonheur* [Happiness] (2007), attempt to record the clamor of multiple voices by reinscribing them in a series of monologues organized as a choir. "You all are you, multiple yous,"⁴¹ *Le Bonheur* tells us. It aims to tell the story of the war without making it coherent, a bit like *Tumulte* by François Bon, by endeavoring to respect both the syntax and the lexicon of those involved and elevating the experience to a tragedy. Perhaps at a greater remove in comparison to the "poethic" radicality of documentary immersion, anthropologies, and other *in situ* investigations, these recent texts on migration attempt to transfigure the experience without transforming the forms and norms of fiction. But they are part of the same humanitarian turn: French literature, using one strategy or another, is starting to become a literature of intervention.

In search of a *we*

Owing to a generalized empathy and a project for normative reform, "the political art forms of the end of the twentieth century are thus characterized by the quest for proximity,"⁴² suggests Paul Ardenne. This proximity manifests itself in letters by a literature of "connection" and often of concrete presence, which Dominique Viart has proposed to call "fieldwork literature" (*littérature de terrain*).⁴³ Writing does not just presuppose the invention of narratives that refuse the heroics of the social in favor of a withdrawal into a hermeneutics of the ordinary but also in-

⁴⁰ Maylis de Kerangal, *À ce stade de la nuit*, Paris, Verticales, coll. "Minimales," 2015, p. 38.

⁴¹ Emmanuel Darley, *Le Bonheur*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2007, p. 11.

⁴² Paul Ardenne, "L'art contemporain a-t-il une dimension politique?," [Does contemporary art have a political dimension] Lecture, 15 March 2001, "Arpla" (Arts Department, Université Paris 8) site.

⁴³ See his project: Dominique Viart, "Les littératures de terrain: dispositifs d'investigation en littérature française contemporaine (de 1980 à nos jours)," [Fieldwork Literatures: Investigative Devices in Contemporary French Literature (from 1980 to the Present)] 7 December 2015, online at the CRAL videotheque.

volves an act of concrete presence on the part of the writer, which manifests itself through attention to the context (writing in residence) as well as conditions and professions (literary prizes for apprentices, doctors, and so on), and even through the collective practices of writing workshops. François Bon, a pioneer of these writing workshops that have spread to all branches of society, has conducted writing workshops in places such as the Bordeaux prison (*Prison*, 1998) and in secondary schools (*Dans la ville invisible* [In the Invisible City], 1995; *Sang gris: un atelier d'écriture à La Courneuve* [Grey Blood: a writing workshop in La Courneuve], 1991) and with the homeless and unemployed (*C'était toute une vie* [It was a lifetime], 1995). Certainly, closer to the model of group therapy than to the collective writings of the salons of the Ancien Régime, these workshops promote discourses that are expected to satisfy both the reappropriation of experience and the constitution of a collective identity. Promoted as much for the benefit of the rural population in Yonne⁴⁴ as for social workers in Seine-Saint-Denis,⁴⁵ to take two examples among thousands, these writing workshops, renouncing the extra-territoriality of literature, reject the aristocratic aura and participate fully in the common space, in the same way as community art. These initiatives are much more than the forms for exhibiting literature “in context,” as described by Lionel Ruffel.⁴⁶ They significantly displace our conceptual categories, which are challenged by this departure from autotelism, and seek to power the concept of democracy with practices that are exemplary in being horizontal and inclusive. How to classify *Les Lucioles* [The Fireflies] (2014), a collective book that, under the leadership of writer Olivier Steiner, mixes texts written by young homosexual runaways who were taken in by the association “Le Refuge” together with other contributions from Nina Bouraoui, Philippe Besson, and even Charles Dantzig?⁴⁷ While such practices, both professional and amateur, have attracted the attention of sociologists, generally inspired by the work of Howard Becker, as well as political authorities (see the inquiry led by Olivier Donnat, *Les Pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère numérique* [The Cultural Practices of the French in the Digital Age], 2009) as a new issue for public policies, we still lack an analysis of the discourses and values of the communities involved in such activities, which receive varying degrees of support from authors, as well as their mode of organization.

44 See the presentation of the “Vivre l'Yonne. Fédération associative” website.

45 See Mireille Roques, “Le succès des ateliers d'écriture,” [The Success of Writing Workshops] *Lien social*, no. 702, 25 March 2004.

46 See Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha: les mondes du contemporain* [Brouhaha: The Worlds of the Contemporary], Lagrasse, Verdier, 2016, pp. 92 et seq.

47 See the presentation on “Le Refuge” site, 3 June 2014, www.le-refuge.org/telechargements/com-muniques-de-presse/item/lancement-les-lucioles-recueil-de-textes-au-profit-du-refuge.html.

Such oversight is attributable to a lack of surveys and adequate theoretical tools. Here, I will focus on providing what seems to me a canonical definition of the literary project underlying the field experiences by looking to Leslie Kaplan, a writer, playwright, and poet committed to reflecting on the relationship between “art and citizenship” and who draws on an explicitly utilitarian approach to literature, here considered as a “tool”⁴⁸:

There is the widest variety of situations, with all the places of the contemporary world – the city, the hospital, the prison, the nursing home, the schools . . . However, it’s important to note that every time there is an attack on a social connection, it is the connection with language that is also attacked. In states of despair, language is also affected, the basic human connection of language, the trust in words, in what others say. [. . .] For me, it is obvious that writers who are interested in the social connection can find meaning in experiences in the field, demanding as they might be, because these experiences also serve to reaffirm what forms the basis of their work as writers. [. . .] It is a matter of inventing in relation to what is at the heart of a request, even if it is not articulated: language as the construction of the subject in its relationship to the world, the recirculation of what is isolated and trapped in desolation.⁴⁹

Here, the contemporary doxa regarding the therapeutic virtues of the word could not be made any more explicit; it makes it possible to resolve the theoretical problems posed by these workshops, to affirm the compatibility of an individualistic writing project and collective work, of a commitment centered on language as an autonomous space, and of writing in crisis or emergency situations and responding to plights that are clearly extralinguistic. Clinical sociologist Vincent de Gaulejac asserts, “Providing interventions through life stories is presented as a means for consolidating the weakened social cohesion in hypermodern societies.”⁵⁰ Meanwhile, Jacques Rhéaume analyzes the four elements that encourage empowerment: “the building up of self-esteem, the recognition and acquisition of skills, a relational framework marked by egalitarian relationships, the development of a

⁴⁸ See “Art et citoyenneté” [Art and Citizenship] in Leslie Kaplan, *Les Outils* [Tools], Paris, P.O.L., 2003, pp. 170–189, and the study by Julien Lefort-Favreau, “Les communautés littéraires de Leslie Kaplan. De l’usine à l’atelier d’écriture, l’égalité des intelligences,” [Leslie Kaplan’s Literary Communities. From the Factory to the Writing Workshop, the Equality of Intelligences] *Tangence*, no. 107, 2015, pp. 55–72.

⁴⁹ Leslie Kaplan, “Du lien social,” [On Social Ties] online, remue.net/cont/kaplan2.html.

⁵⁰ Vincent de Gaulejac, “Introduction. L’histoire de vie a-t-elle un sens?,” [Introduction. Does the Life Story Make Sense] in V. de Gaulejac and Michel Legrand (eds), *Intervenir par le récit de vie: entre histoire collective et histoire individuelle* [Intervening through Life Stories: Between Collective History and Individual History], Toulouse, Érès, 2008, pp. 13–31, cit. p. 14.

critical social conscience.”⁵¹ This looks like a general psychological version of the empowerment theories that have gradually replaced the community education efforts of the post-war period. Significantly, the influential and longstanding Centre de culture populaire de Saint-Nazaire now aims to spread writing practices for the “civic, intellectual, social, and technical emancipation of employees and families at work and at home.”⁵² These issues can be found with the writers’ residencies⁵³ that sometimes accompany these workshops and that now constitute an essential dimension of writers’ resources and the book trade. Writers are often invited to a residency in exchange for literary output based on a theme suggested by the institution and are entrusted with facilitation duties or regional “revitalization.” Yet there is, as Bon observes, a resulting paradox: “the residency thus invites writers to have a place in its socialized activities, while factoring in that their function is not socializable.”⁵⁴

Behind the possible instrumentalization of these practices for the institutions that finance them with the aim of restoring “coexistence,” there lies the project of making writers more than mere social facilitators: they could again be storytellers capable of bringing the common back to communities, in keeping with Walter Benjamin’s well-worn but still relevant allegory. On the horizon is the invention of the “we,” an issue grappled with as much in the political realm as in the world of analytical philosophy – in a recent essay, Vincent Descombes upholds an individualism that is not subtractive but additive, an opposition inspired by Louis Dumont, and aims to “reestablish himself within his human condition”⁵⁵ – as well as poetic theory: in *L’Élargissement du poème* [The Enlargement of the Poem], Jean-Christophe Bailly proposes to make the “we” a “circle that is actually

51 Jacques Rhéaume, “Quand l’histoire devient agissante. Étude de cas en milieu associatif,” [When History Becomes Active. Case study in an Associative Environment] in Gaulejac- Legrand, *Intervenir*, pp. 63–88, cit. p. 69.

52 See the presentation of the Centre online, www.ccp.asso.fr/association/presentation/.

53 See le *Guide des aides destinées aux auteurs: bourses d’écriture, résidences en France et à l’étranger* du CNL, which identifies 184 residencies in 32 countries, 68 of which were in France in 2009; Geneviève Charpentier, “Typologie des résidences d’écrivains en France,” conference at the Salon du livre 2010, 29 March 2010, online at the site for the Fédération interrégionale du livre and de la lecture; Nathalie Colleville, “Résidences d’écrivains (1): pour quoi faire?,” *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France (BBF)*, 2010, no. 4, pp. 90–91.

54 François Bon, “De quelques paradoxes sur les résidences d’écriture. De la nature du rapport entre l’auteur et son partenaire dans une résidence d’écriture,” 14 May 2009, online at the site “Tiers-livre.”

55 V. Descombes, *Les Embarras de l’identité*, p. 253. English translation from *Puzzling Identities*, trans. Adam Schwartz, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard UP, 2016, p. 199.

always open, always opening up to the arrival.”⁵⁶ Far surpassing the methods of Henri Lefebvre’s “revolutionary Romanticism,” the recovery of this “we” is as central to the writers’ politics as individual well-being. Here we explicitly find Deleuze’s proposed post-revolutionary program: “Health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people who are missing.”⁵⁷ Certain literary reuses of the spaces of digital social networks thus tend towards a virtual community of writing, but also the constitution of collectives: *Inculte*, which establishes itself as a “we” in its works with multiple signatures or its theoretical reflections, and whose writers are steeped in the postmodern politics of Jacques Rancière and Roberto Esposito⁵⁸; and the curatorial platform led by Camille de Toledo, which is actually called “*Le Peuple qui manque*” [The Missing People].⁵⁹ This “we” should certainly also incorporate the political-poetic collectivism of authors like Jean-Marie Gleizes and Jean-Claude Pinson, so as to examine texts as possible suggestions that make it possible to reconnect experience and expression so as to inhabit the world poetically.⁶⁰ Likewise, it is this “we,” intensely problematized by contemporary philosophy,⁶¹ that novelistic attempts to represent the world, in an effort to counter normative exclusions, propose to enrich. Consider, for example, Charles Dantzig’s very beautiful *Histoire de l’amour et de la haine* [The History of Love and Hatred] (2015), which attempts to oppose the discourses of the anti-same-sex marriage *Manif pour tous* [Demo for All] and gender divides with a sort of expanded version of Stendhal’s *De l’Amour* [On Love].

The practices of presence are augmented by experimenting with imaginary resocialization through narrative or simply by putting voices back into circulation. In this quest for the integration of “liminal communities,” to borrow Victor

56 Jean-Christophe Bailly, *L’Élargissement du poème*, Paris, C. Bourgois, 2015, p. 172.

57 G. Deleuze, *Critique et clinique*, p.135. English translation from *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 4.

58 See Aurélie Adler, “Fictions de la communauté: effraction, reconstitution, altération dans les récits d’Oliver Rohe, Arno Bertina et Mathieu Larnaudie,” in Bruno Blanckeman and Barbara Havercroft (eds), *Narrations d’un nouveau siècle: romans et récits français (2001–2010)*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013, pp. 83–94.

59 See his “curatorial platform” *Le Peuple qui manque*, www.lepeuplequimanque.org

60 See Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète: essai sur la poésie contemporaine* [Inhabiting as a Poet: An Essay on Contemporary Poetry], Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1995; “Poésie pour ‘un peuple qui manque’” [Poetry for a Missing People], *Littérature*, 1998, vol. 110, no. 2, pp. 22–37.

61 See especially Élise Marrou (ed), “Dire ‘nous’,” [Saying “we”] in the online journal *Klésis*, no. 34, 2016, www.revue-klesis.org/.

W. Turner's eloquent phrasing,⁶² it would also be necessary to include all of the works that, since Anne Garréta's *Sphinx* (1986) – a novel in which the narrator's gender is unclear –, have sought not only to reintroduce representations of the voices of the “dominated” but also to disrupt the divisions deposited in the substance of language, according to a Barthesian critical tradition, by applying to literature the program of cultural studies that emerged from what is known as “French theory.” However, that would add to the list made here, which is already too long, of political interventions made by writers as twenty-first-century literature dreams of coming to the aid of the often-contradictory demands of individualism, altruistic attention, and a collective demand for resocialization in a context of crisis.

⁶² See Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Piscataway (NJ), Transaction Publishers, 1969.



Facing Time

Chapter 13

Retrospective justice

Maybe [. . .] you don't know what a real story is if you haven't lifted the ones underneath, the only ones that count, they're like ghosts, our ghosts, that accumulate and are like the stones of a strange house where you lock yourself in all alone [. . .] Laurent Mauvignier, *Des hommes*.¹

The word “repair” also has a strong, almost legal sense pertaining to compensation. It is this meaning that contemporary writers assume in the investigations and retrospective trials they conduct: there is not one sordid event, wound of history, massacre, or ethnocide that narrative could not denounce, compensate for, or rectify. When it is too late for writers to intervene in the present, there are still the open wounds of history that can be healed. In *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes* [Laëtitia or the End of Men] (2016), for example, Ivan Jablonka seizes on a hideous murder that gained instant notoriety to then be quickly forgotten; Laurent Mauvignier looks deep into the sordid history of the Algerian war in *Des hommes* (2009); Éric Vuillard commemorates Buffalo Bill in *Tristesse de la terre* [Sorrow of the Earth] (2014); and Pierre Michon, in *Les Onze* [The Eleven] (2009), twists the grand narrative of the French Revolution to expose its annihilating cruelty. Using fiction to tell of something again is to reconfigure an official past that is accused of having obliterated the dominated. Due to the intercession of literary, fictional, and documentary forms, history is called upon, as much as philosophy and literature, to become therapeutic. In constructing this great universal cenotaph, writers aim to restore dignity to names that have been erased, sometimes by setting their sights on individuals to whom we have a limited connection, as with Dora Bruder or Louis-François Pinagot,² to use two characters, one from an “account,” the other from a work of historical speculation, whose visibility is reduced to a simple line left on a register. “It is impossible to pray for the dead if you do not know their names,” explains Daniel Mendelsohn in *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, a story particularly admired and imitated in France, in reference to the gaps in family memory for the *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, that the investi-

¹ Laurent Mauvignier, *Des hommes: roman*, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2009, p. 270. English translation from *The Wound*, trans. David Ball and Nicole Ball, London and Lincoln (Nebraska), University of Nebraska Press, 2015, p. ix.

² See Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (1997) and Alain Corbin, *Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot*.

gation aims to fill.³ When it concerns a stranger, this attention (one could even say affection) draws on the vicarious power of literature with its force as “supplement,” to use Derrida’s phrasing.

More intense than the simple “duty to remember,” a bare-minimum cathartic concept that appeared at the turn of the century, these forms of retrospective reparation with metaphysical connotations are the historical counterparts to the interventions in the present and the warnings about the future central to the contemporary ethics and politics of literature as addressed earlier in this book.⁴ Steeped in the hybridizations resulting from the dialogue between literature and history that has continued since the 1980s – the ego-histoire, microhistory, and the narrative of filiation are, for example, some of the major genres in Dominique Viart’s inventory⁵ –, these more or less fictionalized narratives are guided by Michelet’s resurrectionist project, but present it in ethical terms: the aim is simultaneously more modest, more partial, and shakier than the “resurrection of all of life.” It is also different insofar as it is a matter of rectifying errors just as much as omissions and of expressing resentment, of indicting the heirs of the executioners, even if this means causing scandal.

The specters of history

Sometimes denounced as a way of thinking about history that focuses too much on victims and minorities, the starting point for such an approach to collective trauma and public reparations is the question of the Shoah, which remains both a problem and theme central to literature after generations of narratives have consistently reflected its horror and examined its philosophical consequences. Reparation by way of counterfactual history is patently original and exists alongside forms of historical fiction – Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes* [The Kindly Ones], David Foenkinos’s *Charlotte*, and Laurent Binet’s *HHhH* – as well as a liter-

3 Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006), New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2013, p. 28.

4 See the study by Sébastien Ledoux, *Le Devoir de mémoire: une formule et son histoire* [The Duty of Remembrance: A Formula and Its History], preface by Pascal Ory, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2016.

5 See Dominique Viart (ed), *Nouvelles écritures littéraires de l’Histoire* [New Literary Writings of History], Paris, Caen, Lettres Modernes Minard, 2009; D. Viart, “La mise en œuvre historique du récit de filiation: *Histoire des grands-parents que je n’ai pas eus* d’Ivan Jablonka,” [The Historical Working of the Parentage Narrative: *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* by Ivan Jablonka] *Revue des sciences humaines*, no. 321, January-March 2016.

ature of belated testimony or “imaginary testimony.”⁶ Many such variants are unique – the juxtaposition of document and fiction in Yannick Haenel’s *Jan Kariski*, 2009, or the sublimation of memory in Jacques Roubaud’s very beautiful *Parc Sauvage* [Wild Park], 2007 –, but the opposition within the Shoah narratives between a poetics of attributable testimony or verifiable document, on the one hand, and the fictionalization of the novel, on the other, goes back to the post-war period. François Azouvi has shown that the terms Maurice Nadeau and Jean Cayrol clashed over in 1953 regarding the use of fiction in Robert Merle’s 1952 *La Mort est mon métier* [Death is my Profession], are exactly the same as those found in debates about Littell’s *Bienveillantes*.⁷ The confrontation between these two aesthetico-ethical options – the anti-novelistic approach and the hyper-novelistic approach – in fact arises for any telling of trauma. This aesthetic irresolution refers to an ethical irresolution: the idea that these narratives can serve for a historical catharsis remains unthinkable in the face of a genocide that denies any possibility of redress. Considered irreparable and even unrepresentable, the Shoah has rendered the notion of collective catharsis unmentionable, as shown by Catherine Coquio,⁸ who cites Danielle Sallenave’s reference to an “impossible” catharsis. The trauma narrative is subject to a double ethical constraint, since raw testimony is suspected of attempting representation that has been deemed impossible while the heuristic fiction is suspected of carrying out an unfortunate reconstruction. This has led to endless debates between an impossible transparency – in “Écrivains et écrivants,” a text that has been of enduring influence, Barthes rejects testimony when he writes that “since he has consigned himself to language, the author cannot have a naïve consciousness”⁹ – and fictionalization that is considered suspect, at best, of proving useless at a historical moment where there has been a maximum institutionalization of the memory of the Sec-

6 See M. Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police* [Police Report], chap. 9: “Le témoignage imaginaire” [Imaginary Testimony].

7 See François Azouvi, *Le Mythe du grand silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la mémoire* [The Myth of the Great Silence: Auschwitz, the French, and Memory], Paris, Fayard, 2012. Merle’s text is a fictional autobiography of perpetrator Rudolf Höss, SS officer and commandant of Auschwitz.

8 Catherine Coquio, “La catharsis sous condition: de l’interdit de représentation à ‘Holocauste comme culture’,” [Conditional Catharsis: From the Prohibition of Representation to the “Holocaust as Culture”] in Jean-Charles Darmon (ed), *Littérature et thérapeutique des passions: la catharsis en question* [Literature and the Therapeutics of the Passions: Catharsis in Question], Paris, Hermann, 2011, pp. 195–237, especially p. 208. Also see Jean-Charles Darmon, “Fiction et émotions à l’épreuve de l’extermination de masse: remarques sur le thème de la ‘catharsis impossible’,” [Fiction and Emotions in the Face of Mass Extermination: Remarks on the Theme of “Impossible Catharsis”] *Nouvelle Revue d’esthétique*, 2014, vol. 2, no. 14, pp. 57–69, especially p. 60.

9 R. Barthes, “Écrivains et écrivants,” in *Essais critiques*, p. 405.

ond World War, and at worst, of aesthetic instrumentalization. The position of Imre Kertész, both an irrefutable witness and a producer of a mimesis that escapes doxic representation, is essentially the only one that is tenable for critics.

Leaving aside the debates about the methods of representing the Shoah in the context of twenty-first-century France, it is important to note that the writings about genocide have now become indirect writings of suspicion, of the guilt of inherited or fantasized trauma. Thus, in *La Réparation* [The Repair] (2012), Colombe Schneck contrasts the financial reparations offered by the compensation committees with the form of reparation that consisted of giving her daughter the name of her grandmother gassed in Auschwitz. The narration, supplemented with family photographs, could not reach its conclusion until the narrator was able to reconstruct her family memory: “Two years, four months. Salome Bernstein was born at the beginning of March 1937 and she died at the end of October 1943. She would have been seventy-five years old today. She, for me, has at last become absent.”¹⁰ This *Réparation*, mediated by images and childhood, is as much a revisitiation of Mendelsohn’s *The Lost* as Henri Raczymow’s *Un cri sans voix* [A Voiceless Cry]¹¹ (1985), a model of historical-psychological return to the self, but it differentiates itself with the sharpness of memorial guilt. In *Les Réparations* [The Repairs] (1981, republished in 1999), Claude Gutman gives voice to a Jewish boy who has nobody except his grandmother, a woman who manages deportee accounts at the Amicale israélite de Montreuil and seeks to “repair” his shattered family history. Such investigations have become very common and there are many examples of this particular approach, such as Tatiana de Rosnay’s worldwide bestseller about the Vel d’Hiv’ roundup, *Elle s’appelait Sarah* [Sarah’s Key, in the English original title] (2006, more than two million copies). Most often, it is a matter of discovering oneself to be a victim: this is the theme of other novels in the style of Mendelsohn such as Fabrice Humbert’s *L’Origine de la violence* [The Origin of Violence] (2009), or even, at a time when a victim’s status is envied, fantasizing about being a martyr of the Shoah. Mazarine Pingeot’s novel, *Pour mémoire* [For the Record] (2009), explores a particularly catastrophic case of this downward spiral in the fantasy of reparation with a modern-day teenager who does not have any Jewish heritage but, after seeing *Nuit et brouillard* [Night and Fog], is traumatized at having been spared. Most of the stories aim to track down the last culprits – this is, for example, Yannick Haenel’s intention in *Jan Karski* and Bruno Tessarech’s aim in *Les Sentinelles* [The Sentinels] (2009), and is also question raised allegorically in Philippe Claudel’s *Le*

¹⁰ Colombe Schneck, *La Réparation*, Paris, Grasset, 2012, p. 212.

¹¹ Translated as *Writing the Book of Esther*, trans. Dori Katz, New York, Holmes & Meier, 1995.

Rapport de Brodeck [Brodeck's Report]¹² (2007) – or else the last victims, with the theme of repair as a form of textual justice tending to become a literary cliché.¹³ Such representations are derived both from the culture of trauma, born in the 1960s with Bruno Bettelheim's intersection of psychoanalysis and reflections on the concentration camp experience,¹⁴ and from a *spectral* conception of history resulting, for the successors of Walter Benjamin, from the encounter of post-Marxism and the sacralization of Auschwitz, a genocide that fell into the “ambush of the absolute,” in George Steiner's words.¹⁵ Thus, at this junction was born a form of repair consisting not of forgiveness on the writer's part, but rather an opening up of the wounds so as to render justice – even if it then meant appeasing the spirits of the victims by giving them back a history and a name.

Literature has always spoken of the dead. Literature has always known how to make itself a tomb: the “*tombeau*,” the portrait of the deceased, has even been a genre since the great plagues of the Renaissance. Literature *in memoriam*, in remembrance.

But the twentieth century is the century of tombs that are absent. The one in which murderers dispossess victims of their names, their bodies, and their deaths. Memory is no longer an elegy, it has become a struggle,¹⁶

notes Marie Darrieussecq, an excellent observer of the times, to describe the way in which the contemporary sensibility now interprets all that haunts it, well beyond the original question of the Shoah. It is therefore not surprising to find the culture of trauma and the unrepresentable relating such obsessions retrospectively to all the wars of the modern era. This has been demonstrated for the First World War,¹⁷ with contemporary narratives that represent it being troubled by problematic mourning – from Sébastien Japrisot's *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* [A Very Long Engagement] (1991), to Xavier Boissel's *Autopsie des ombres* [The Autopsy of Shadows] (2013), which features a soldier whose job it is to identify the

12 Translated as *Brodeck: A Novel*, trans. John Cullen, New York, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009.

13 On the most recent representations of the Shoah, see Kathleen Gyssels and Evelyne Ledoux-Beaugrand (eds), “Représentations récentes de la Shoah,” *Image & Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2013. From a comparative perspective over a longer period, Alexandre Prstojevic's *Le Témoin et la Bibliothèque: comment la Shoah est devenue un sujet romanesque* [The Witness and the Library: How the Holocaust Became a Subject of Fiction], Nantes, Éditions nouvelles Cécile Defaut, 2012.

14 See F. Azouvi, *Le Mythe du grand silence*, pp. 285 et seq.

15 Steiner cited by Azouvi, pp. 357–358.

16 M. Darrieussecq, *Rapport de police*, pp. 292–293.

17 See Carine Trévisan, *Les Fables du deuil: la Grande Guerre, mort et écriture* [Fables of Mourning: The Great War, Death, and Writing], Paris, PUF, 2001; and D. Viart and B. Verrier, *La Littérature française au présent*, pp. 127 et seq.

nameless corpses left in the trenches –, and that aim at the reheroization of unknown or forgotten soldiers. Since the 1980s, this has also been the literary task of authors like Jean Rouaud, for whom the First World War was “the founding element of our era” because it “destroyed everything, starting with memory.”¹⁸ Retrospective justice can be extended to other, possibly ancient, historical moments,¹⁹ with one of the most interesting demonstrations of long-delayed repair having been provided, in my opinion, by Jean-Paul Kauffmann’s *Outre-terre* [Overland] (2016). The latter recounts his return to the site of the iconic Battle of Eylau, a cemetery now shadowy and abandoned, but famously remembered as the deathplace of Balzac’s eponymous character, Colonel Chabert, who manages to survive but loses his identity. If the Balzacian novella describes the emergence of the modern obsession with non-recognition and the birth of a forgotten people,²⁰ it is because this inaugural mass grave of modernity is where “the trace that the living leave behind in the world, sought by warriors since Antiquity” was for the first time refused,²¹ a problem that Kauffmann endeavors to address – and therefore, in a sense, to heal – in his narrative by creating a “monument erected in honor of the forgotten and nameless,” a sort of dictionary to accompany their individuation, for “all these people with no traces to stand out from this mass that attempts to subsume them.”²²

Regardless of when such memory disorder started, literary repair participates in the collective duty in its own way. Here, individual rescue is given priority – in *Passé sous silence*, Alice Ferney observes the “burial of names and individuals in the past,” and notes that “it is easier to document the war in general than a single soldier’s war”²³ as she attempts to understand the execution of Bastien-Thiry in 1963 –, but memorial communities can also be created. An example can be found in the unique project, led since 2008 by Jean-Yves Jouannais, consisting of a monthly cycle of performances at the Centre Pompidou entitled

18 Cited by D. Viart and B. Vercier, *La Littérature*, p. 131.

19 I refer, for example, to the argument provided by Sophie Milquet in *Écrire le traumatisme. Mémoire féminine dans les fictions sur la guerre civile espagnole: représentations, formes, enjeux (1975–2010)* [Writing Trauma. Female Memory in Fictions about the Spanish Civil War: Representations, Forms, Issues (1975–2010)], Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2013, which analyzes the “poetics of trauma” specific to this corpus.

20 I refer here to my own study: Alexandre Gefen, “Scénarios de la reconnaissance,” [Recognition Scenarios] *Nouvelle Revue d’esthétique*, 2014, vol. 2, no. 14, pp. 71–80.

21 Jean-Paul Kauffmann, *Outre-terre: le voyage à Eylau* [Overland: Traveling to Eylau] Sainte-Marguerite-sur-Mer, Équateurs, 2016, p. 223.

22 Kauffmann, p. 214.

23 Alice Ferney, *Passé sous silence: roman* [Passed Over in Silence: A Novel], Arles, Actes Sud, 2010, pp. 9–10.

L'Encyclopédie des guerres [The Encyclopedia of wars]. At the intersection of lecture, performance art, and theatre, Jouannais explores scenes of conflict and their representations from ancient times to the present day, going in alphabetical order. Versions of this contemplative initiative, which enjoyed popular success, also appeared in Reims, at the Villa Arson in Nice, and then in books that were just as unusual: *Les Barrages de sable: traité de castellologie littorale* [Sand Dams: A Treatise on Coastal Castellology], devoted to barriers of sand (2014), and *L'Usage des ruines: portraits obsidionaux* [The Use of Ruins: Obsidional Portraits] (2012), a gallery of beleaguered individuals. Somewhere between the approaches of Christian Boltanski and those of French trauma writers, this inventive exploration of our wounds is just as representative of the contemporary paradigm of art as it is of the social extension of the literary memorial project.

The work of recognition

The culture of the Shoah and its impossible “repair” now finds itself faced with the “competition of victims.” For historian François Azouvi, this is the best and the worst possible thing: “The best, because the gestures of recognition, by ‘opening space for hope on the horizon of politics’ ‘unleash an irradiating and irrigating wave that, secretly and indirectly, contributes to the advance of history toward states of peace,’ as Paul Ricoeur writes. But it is also the worst, because there is something interminable and competitive in the struggle for recognition.”²⁴ In the twenty-first century, a preeminent form of the demands for repair thus relates to issues that are less visible than the European wars and other ethnicides and that contemporary literary politics of recognition align with the model of the Shoah. For it is this same pattern of haunting/investigation/exhumation that underlies the plethora of contemporary works seeking to correct injustices as numerous as the convulsions of history, from the remembrance of homosexuals exterminated by the Nazis – Olivier Charneux, *Les Guérir* [Healing Them] (2016) – to the rehabilitation of the marginalized members of the Baader gang (Alban Lefranc, *Si les bouches se ferment* [If the Mouths Close], 2014) and the victims of Stalinism, such as Olivier Rolin’s *Le Météorologue* [The Meteorologist] (2014), the imagined life of Alexey Feodosievich, who was executed in 1937, and even Jean Echenoz’s *Courir* [Running] (2008), the imagined life of runner Emil Zápotek, a martyr of the Prague Spring. It is possible to compare, for example, what I believe to be the most significant narratives about French colonization in Algeria published in recent years – Laurent

²⁴ F. Azouvi, *Le Mythe du grand silence*, p. 396.

Mauvignier's *Des hommes* [*The Wound*] (2009) and Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête*²⁵ (2014) – with Pierre Guyotat's famous and influential *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats* [A Tomb for Five Hundred Thousand Soldiers] (1967), as well as two historically intermediate works: Arno Bertina's *Le Dehors ou la migration des truites* [The Outdoors or the Trout Migration] (2001) and François Bourgeat's *La Nuit Algérie* [The Algeria Night] (2003).²⁶ If *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats*, a transgressive epic with metaphysical echoes, seeks a hand-to-hand encounter with history and language, Bertina's and Bourgeat's narratives, which share the impossibility of their main characters' return to Algeria, are already narratives of *the aftermath*. Daoud and Mauvignier, a decade later, are at the stage of exorcising the traces of memory and correcting rhetoric: *Des hommes* depicts the return of the repressed elements of the war in a small French village by transcribing the words of traumatized soldiers ("You know, Nicole, we cry in the night because one day we're branded for life by such horrific images that we can't bear to tell them to ourselves")²⁷ while *Meursault, contre-enquête* adopts the model of an investigation to exhume the victim, "a poor illiterate God created apparently for the sole purpose of taking a bullet and returning to dust, an anonymous person who did not even have the time to be given a name"²⁸ in a collective memory from which he was excluded: "the only shadow is cast by the 'Arabs,' blurred, incongruous objects left over from 'days gone by,' like ghosts, with no language except the sound of a flute."²⁹

Contemporary narratives have looked even further geographically than the Algerian War in seeking to palliate the ravages of colonization symbolically. As with J. M. G. Le Clézio starting at *Onitsha* (where "the desert sand has covered the bones of the people of Arsinoë")³⁰ to track down ethnocides and genocides, the question of erasure haunts Laurent Gaudé in his portrayal of an Iraqi woman archaeologist who wants to save the memory of early civilizations from contemporary wars (*Écoutez nos défaites* [Listen to Our Defeats], 2016). A similar question likewise drove Niels Labuzan to expose the little-known massacre of the Hereros in South-West Africa on the occasion of one of its first memorial services (*Cartographie de l'oubli* [Mapping Oblivion], 2016); and Arno Bertina evokes the despoliation of the Bamileke culture (*Des lions comme des danseuses* [Lions as Female Dancers], 2015). Several contemporary narratives serve as threnodies to the mem-

25 Translated as *The Meursault Investigation*, trans. John Cullen, New York, Other Press, 2015.

26 D. Viart and B. Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, pp. 262–263.

27 L. Mauvignier, *Des hommes*, p. 268. English translation from *The Wound*, p. 217.

28 Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2014, p. 11.

29 Daoud, *Meursault*, p. 12–13.

30 J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Onitsha: roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 250.

ory of disappeared civilizations and first peoples. To give another important example, almost all of Gérard Macé's body of work can be read as a struggle to prevent the memory of the history of peoples without history from being buried: the main source for his ethnographic tropism is cultural anxiety about a disappearance. It is up to the anthropologist to save a culture or simply a language – in the way that Georges Dumézil can “hope to transmit a little of the life, the breath of those who pronounced the sounds of Ubykh, just as a rock several thousand years old traps the air that the dead breathed”³¹ – but also the writer. In Macé, this ambition to intervene shapes a poetics of narrative that is based on a model of ethnographic inquiry, though it is accompanied by a form of guilt and self-criticism: in many of the works by the author of *Trois coffrets* [Three Cases], including his photographs of Ethiopia, there are elements of a far-reaching case against Western ethnocentrism for having ruined the world, or at least against the civilizing ambivalence of our culture, with Western curiosity equaling malediction. To love humanity is to save it from itself, to heal it with words or simply to give it back its substance through the subtlety of language in a desperate struggle against its fantasies of control and homogenization, “[p]rovided that we prefer the art of storytelling to hasty conclusions, and the diversity of the world to its explanation.”³² In other words, literature has the power, to the sound of other people's languages and the cost of inflected forms of “probably” or “maybe,” to project us into the soul of our brother or neighbor and also to compensate for what the absence of shared languages, spaces, and categories makes inaccessible by any way other than the imagination, whether it be the suffering of an Egyptian scribe or the Osage Indians, or what Montezuma's last thoughts might have been. Such projects of symbolic compensation and memorial revision are to be found even more prominently in postcolonial literature: tackling the ravages of colonization head-on, Francophone literature has from the outset sought to be a literature of intervention, urgently reworking the history of the victors.

Such reparations are certainly symbolic, even if Didier Daeninckx, a forerunner in the interrogation of the history of the dominant through his use, for example, of the detective narrative to interrogate the unspoken history of the Algerian war in *Meurtres pour mémoire* [Murders for Memory] (1983), went so far as to initiate the very process of repair in *Le Retour d'Ataï* [The Return of Ataï] (2001). *Cannibale*, published in 1998, evokes the way in which a Kanak tribe was exhibited as an attraction during the 1931 Colonial Exhibition and some of its members were exchanged for crocodiles at a German circus. Daeninckx denounces the aes-

31 Gérard Macé, *Le Goût de l'homme* [Man's Taste], Paris, Gallimard, 2002, p. 38.

32 Macé, p. 12.

thetic appropriation that these warriors were victims of even after their death and that consisted of exhibiting “a Kanak warrior’s head covered with polychrome paintings and crowned with a clay headdress” so as to facilitate the contemplation of “the nudity of their death” in display cases.³³ As with Gérard Macé together with Éric Vuillard, who sorrowfully notes that “show business and the human sciences had their origins in the same displays, with curiosities lifted from the dead,”³⁴ literature performs an act of contrition for the early human sciences. In search of the jar containing the head of Atai, leader of the first Kanak rebellion, the Cannibal takes us down the path of the Surrealists, whose tracts Daeninckx recalls (“Do not visit the colonial exhibition”), along the “trail of repentance”³⁵ that leads to objects employed to affirm the superiority of the white man, such as the corpse of the Hottentot Venus, but also to other invisibilizations such as the figure of a homeless man who has come to bury another in the “grave of the unknown”³⁶ in the Thiais cemetery. *Le Retour d’Atai* then stages the imaginary restitution and repatriation of the insurgent’s head. Published in 2002, this novel was read by the director of the Rouen anthropological museum, who invited the writer to a restitution ceremony for a Maori head from his museum. This event ultimately led to the rediscovery of Atai’s real head in the museum’s collections and to its official return to his descendants. As the writer recounts in an afterword, “[o]n August 28, 2014, in the amphitheater of the Jardin des plantes in Paris, Overseas Minister George Pau-Langevin returned Atai’s skull, after 136 years of exile, to his descendants who had come from New Caledonia.”³⁷ The novel was thus able to actualize and perform the repair originally imagined in its fiction.

Victims in the present

Another, no less powerful model of historical therapy takes the route not of the novel or of investigative fiction, but of an investigation-testimony that is resolutely situated on the side of non-fiction, serving to invalidate yet again the relevance of the boundaries between novels, narratives, journalism, and history

33 Didier Daeninckx, *Cannibal* followed by *Le Retour d’Atai*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2015, p. 109.

34 Éric Vuillard, *Tristesse de la terre: une histoire de Buffalo Bill Cody: récit*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2014, p. 14. English translation from *Sorrow of the Earth: Buffalo Bill, Sitting Bull and the Tragedy of Show Business*, trans. Ann Jefferson, London, Pushkin Press, 2016, p. 14.

35 Didier Daeninckx, *Cannibale* followed by *Le Retour d’Atai*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2015, p. 109.

36 Daeninckx, *Cannibale*, p. 155.

37 Daeninckx, *Cannibale*, p. 190.

when the literary work, in the broadest sense, is determined by extra-aesthetic ends. One of the cases that has drawn our awareness to the forms and powers of narrative is Jean Hatzfeld's unique work on Rwanda. Initially a novelist inspired to write by the war when he had been an international correspondent, Hatzfeld set out to invent other forms from the 2000s onwards to describe the genocide of the Tutsis, which he had investigated. This involved giving voice to the victims' words in the form of testimonies from the survivors: *Dans le nu de la vie: Récits des marais rwandais* [Life Laid Bare], four narratives accompanied by photos taken by Raymond Depardon (2000) and then from the killers (*Une saison de machettes* [Machette Season], 2003) before framing new retranscriptions of testimonies in *La Stratégie des antilopes* [The Strategy of Antelope], 2007, a text that is presented as a narrative account ("récit"). This trilogy was published in the literary collection "Fiction & Cie" by Le Seuil, which gives it a status that is as difficult to describe as that of other "conditionally" literary works comprised of a choral assembly of retranscriptions, as encountered in other contexts. The approach is, however, far easier to describe in terms of its aims and functions: writing is used to combat what Hatzfeld calls "the unspeakable," which is ascribable not to the nature of the events – as with theologizations of the Shoah –, but to the fact that those involved are not present:

What is *beyond words* is the destruction of memory along with the destruction of human beings. It's the destruction of the memories of millions of Jews in Europe or Tutsis in Rwanda, because only they could have spoken of that destruction of their memories – only they, who were destroyed. [. . .] Writing can't replace this testimony of the dead but helps to bring it into the survivors' stories somehow. Writing can also retrace what isn't said.³⁸

A counterintuitive suggestion then appears: "to start from oral testimonies" rather than from a narrative or a survey:

it's a self-evident form of writing when the motivation is essentially literary, and when one is moved by the desire to bring the reader into the genocidal universe and to pass along a story [. . .] This kind of literature is comparatively sinuous, slow, belated, metaphorical, inspired, but quite effective for transmitting information from one point to another when the direct path, the straight path, the one journalists are the first to use, is blocked. And that path is systematically blocked after a genocide – whether in Europe, Turkey, or Rwanda – because journalists are stymied, and their readers and viewers just as much so, if not more so, by such a stupefying event.³⁹

³⁸ Jean Hatzfeld, *La Stratégie des antilopes: récit*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2007, p. 206. English translation from *The Strategy of Antelopes: Rwanda after the Genocide*, trans. Linda Coverdale, London, Serpents' Tail, 2009, p. 167.

³⁹ Hatzfeld, p. 207. English translation, *The Strategy*, pp. 167–168.

Other accounts of the Rwandan genocide have chosen the voice of testimony or of more or less confirmed fiction (see for example *Petit Pays* [Small Country], by Gaël Faye, 2016),⁴⁰ but here we see a very particular ethico-aesthetic configuration described: writing does have the purpose of transmitting information in the form of a story involving the reader (transitivity), but while its material is situated as close as possible to the real as it is can be known, namely the testimony of all those involved, it is nevertheless deliberately indirect: it cannot and must not strive to produce a direct, explanatory frame narrative.⁴¹ It fills in the history of the event from within, but also complicates the hermeneutics of it, not to submit its attempt at clarification for its own literary ends, but rather in the name of a dense vision of history. Thus, in the literature of the twenty-first century, forms of peaceful complementarity between the historical and the literary have been established (incidentally, Hatzfeld has recently resumed his work as a novelist to address the war in the former Yugoslavia), in a pragmatic alliance that is profoundly different from the competitiveness that prevailed in the modern era, and that stands in contrast to postmodernism's plays with traps and even the abstract congruence theorized by Paul Ricœur in the 1980s.

Equally original methods can be found in the deployment of justice of *fait-divers* by historians informed by the problem of invisibility such as Philippe Artières and Ivan Jablonka. A far cry from the trend for portraying crime with a psychological realism that is more cathartic or analytical than directly restorative – from Laurent Mauvignier's *Ce que j'appelle l'oubli* [What I Call Oblivion] (2009), to Simon Liberati's *California Girls* or Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* [Lullaby] (2016), it is a matter of extending the principle of justice to specific cases and offering a form of corrective surgery, not by changing or augmenting history through fictions, but by practicing empathetic forms of microhistory. In *Vie et mort de Paul Gény* [Life and Death of Paul Gény] (2013), for example, the historian Philippe Artières conducts a quasi-police investigation into the death of a great-uncle. In *Au fond* [At the Bottom] (2016), he seeks to understand the traumatic death of his own brother in the difficult climate of the mining region of Lorraine by implementing an array of accounts, interviews, studies, and documents – materials with a historiographical richness and objectifying dimension that seek to counterbalance the human distress that they nonetheless make it possible to glimpse. Ivan Jablonka, who likewise popularized the methods of

⁴⁰ See the project “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire,” [Rwanda: Writing Out of Duty of Remembrance] which brought together two African writers: www.africultures.com/vitrine/rwanda/rwanda.htm.

⁴¹ For recent memorial works, see Sonja Stojanovic, *Mind the Ghost: Thinking Memory and the Untimely through Contemporary Fiction in French*, Liverpool, Liverpool UP, 2023.

the New History of the 1970s⁴² as well as post-formalist forms of literary inquiry and who is an apostle of the “democratic apostolate”⁴³ of the social sciences, condenses the contemporary discourse on the historical desire for narrativist reparation that he strove to apply with *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes*:

I would like to [. . .] deliver women and men from their death, to tear them away from the crime that caused them to lose their lives and even their humanity. Not to honor them as “victims,” for that would be to send them back to the end; simply to restore them to their existence. To bear witness for them.

[. . .]

I have delusions about resurrecting the dead; I try to record the ephemeral circles left on the water’s surface by the beings sinking to the bottom [. . .]⁴⁴

He writes about the project *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes*, an investigation that leads to the following conclusion:

She was different from the other kids.

She would have moved. She would have passed her driving test. She would have become a sales clerk or a daycare nanny. [. . .]

I don’t want to leave her all alone. Let my book be her phosphorescence, the glittery trail and the laughter she left in the air one summer afternoon, a wake of words that speak as much to her grace and nobility as to her spelling mistakes, as much to her distress and unhappiness as to her Facebook selfies and her karaoke nights at the Girafon.⁴⁵

If we look closely at this passage, we can see that it brings together all the contradictions of the culture of repair in the humanities, which were already present in the left-wing neo-individualism of Pierre Rosanvallon, who oversees the “Raconter la vie” collection, which features a volume by Jablonka devoted to beauticians.⁴⁶ A priestly ambition to “deliver women and men from their death” overlaps with its denial. The lyrical illusion (“phosphorescence”) contradicts the refusal of the effect. The novelistic motif of the narrator’s erotic fascination with his subject (“Laëtitia is me”) disrupts the ambition of archaeology and care for others. The alleged admiration is tinged with forms of pity. As for the writing of “difference,” it seeks to recog-

42 See Philippe Carrard, *Poétique de la Nouvelle Histoire: le discours historique en France de Braudel à Chartier* [Poetics of the New History: The Historical Discourse in France from Braudel to Chartier], Lausanne, Payot, 1988.

43 Ivan Jablonka, *L’Histoire est une littérature contemporaine* [History is a Contemporary Literature], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2014, p. 319.

44 Ivan Jablonka, *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes* [Laëtitia or the End of Men], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2016, pp. 8–10.

45 Jablonka, *Laëtitia*, p. 365.

46 Ivan Jablonka, *Les Corps des autres* [The Bodies of Others], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2015.

nize a true autonomy for Laëtitia by evoking the minutest details of her life without being able to keep itself from dissolving her into a vertical discourse: “I chose a light and faltering unknown who inherited nothing, except a *story that surpasses her*.”⁴⁷ The memorial then runs the risk of resembling a work of charity – “The interest we show in her, like a return to grace, restores her to herself, to her dignity, and her freedom,”⁴⁸ says Jablonka – and of offering this form of contrived ennoblement that consists of an “art of making the poor speak by keeping them silent,” in the words of Jacques Rancière.⁴⁹

Whether or not they achieve the ideal of accuracy necessary to do justice to the dead, the writers take Lazarus as a model just as much as Nemesis. Based on the constructivist idea that real and fictional entities complement or oppose each other in our mental universes of reference, in a game of reciprocal corrections, alternating between idealizing and dismantling the past, which serves as the foundation and often the driving force for present action, twenty-first-century literature makes history neither a backdrop nor an obscure force, but a discourse to be rectified by complementary and corrective renarrations. Literary forms for appropriating the terrorism of the new millennium are starting to take shape, leading *Le Magazine littéraire* to refer to these first books specifically as “reparative literature,”⁵⁰ and it is necessary to appease the ghosts of the victims haunting human history by giving them a burial, whether by creating obituaries for the dead of November 2015⁵¹ or making an inventory of mass graves, remembering peoples exterminated by colonization or of remedying ordinary violence. In other words, we must offer them, by way of compensation, a share in the great narrative of the world, no matter how small – a fragile and reversible reconstruction with experimental forms that constitute, in large part, the richness of the literature at the turn of the twenty-first century.

47 I. Jablonka, *Laëtitia ou la fin des hommes*, p. 358; my emphasis.

48 Jablonka, *Laëtitia*, p. 8.

49 Jacques Rancière, *Les Noms de l'histoire: essai de poétique du savoir*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1992, p. 96. English translation from *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 45.

50 Alexis Brocas, “Face au terrorisme, la littérature réparatrice,” [In the Face of Terrorism, Reparative Literature] *Le Magazine littéraire*, no. 573, Nov. 2016, pp. 18–20.

51 This is Olivier Steiner’s *Cent trente* project, *Diacritik*, 21 Nov. 2015.

Chapter 14

A substitutive memory

Everything will be erased in a second. The dictionary of words amassed between cradle and deathbed, eliminated. All there will be is silence and no words to say it. Nothing will come out of the open mouth, neither I nor me. Language will continue to put the world into words. In conversation around a holiday table, we will be nothing but a first name, increasingly faceless, until we vanish into the vast anonymity of a distant generation. Annie Ernaux, *Les Années*.¹

Beyond the justice of filling in the gaps of memory and the particular historiographical corrective aims associated with it, what contemporary writers are asking literature to remedy is finitude. If there is in fact a leitmotif specific to contemporary literature, it is to offer a textual tomb or cenotaph (*tombeau*), a particular form of memory provided by paper that competes with both the museum and the cemetery. As seen above, narrative memory often participates in the genealogical construction of the subject and its struggle against suffering and mourning, proposing modes of transgenerational remembrance, if not dreams of eternalization, to a distraught contemporary condition. Well beyond the retrospective reparation of trauma or historical injustices, any form of disappearance has become scandalous due to an egalitarian ideology of memory that has developed in inverse proportion to the acceleration of life and the increase in population.

“The anonymous man is one of the most famous figures in contemporary historiography,”² writes historian Philippe Artières in a line of reasoning that is also perfectly applicable to literature. At the beginning of *Romance nerveuse* [Nervous Romance], Camille Laurens writes in a panic, “Today there were 218,799 births in the world, and 218,840 by the time this was written. 90,102 have died today, 11 as I type this sentence. [. . .] It’s racing at the speed of dollars spent on dieting, the Earth is panicking in rapid fire, vomiting those neither seen nor known.”³ Not only is there a return of “the snow of wounded, precarious memories, of unconsidered, senseless pasts, which inhabit us without our knowing it,” as Régine Robin suggests in *La Mémoire saturée* [Saturated Memory], also referring to Jean-Christophe Bailly in her discussion.⁴ And yet any possibility of forgetting the “neither seen nor known” is problematic, as if in the age of the museumification and

1 A. Ernaux, *Les Années*, p. 933. English translation from *The Years*, trans. Alison Strayer, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2017, EPUB.

2 Ernaux, *Les Années*, p. 75.

3 Camille Laurens, *Romance Nerveuse*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010, p.13.

4 Régine Robin, *La Mémoire saturée*, Paris, Stock, 2003, p. 22.

datafication of the world, humans suffered from any memorial interruption, despite Nietzsche's warnings in his second of his *Untimely Considerations*: "Forgetfulness is a property of all action; just as not only light but darkness is bound up with the life of every organism."⁵ Perhaps what the contemporary memorial inflation wards off and what literature comes to resolve in its own way is, perhaps, a metaphysical panic: a fear of finitude accentuated by the proliferation of life forms that global digital life makes visible, and that invests the writer with a religious ministry. As such, W. G. Sebald is thrown into disarray by the contemporary disappearance of memory, which he contrasts with the forms of continuity in traditional societies:

To remember, to retain and preserve was vitally important only when population density was low, we manufactured few items and nothing but space was present in abundance. You could not do without anyone then, even after death. In the urban societies of the late twentieth century, on the other hand, where everyone is instantly replaceable and is really superfluous from birth, we have to keep throwing ballast overboard, forgetting everything that we might otherwise remember: youth, childhood, our origins, our forebears and ancestors.⁶

This memorial obsession can be explained, I believe, by the secularization of modern society as much as by its massification. It is in this spirit that we should read the reflections of Michel de Certeau, who was the first to describe modern writing as a project of survival and transmission. The writer "expects from the other the marvelous and ephemeral excess of surviving through an attention that it alters,"⁷ and literary writing as a whole has, according to the philosopher, begun to function as the "double" of "therapeutic power." Literature "proliferates around political and therapeutic institutions,"⁸ "[i]n a scriptural problematic tied to the ability not to miss any part of time going by, to count it and accumulate it, to profit from what has been acquired so as to make capital the substitute for immortality."⁹ Possessing memorial means for accumulation out of all proportion to the past, literature is tempted to obtain eternity through accumulation and to repair quantitatively the metaphysical wound of finitude. Hence contemporary memorial digressions, such as the one that suggests, as with Patrick Deville, that the

5 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Considérations inactuelles* (1873–1876), trans. Henri Albert, Paris, Mercure de France, 1907, p. 126. English translation from *Thoughts Out of Season*, Part II, trans. Adrian Collins, 2016, Project Gutenberg EPUB.

6 W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo* (2003), trans. from the German by Anthea Bell, New York, The Modern Library, 2005, p. 32.

7 M. de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, p. 287. English translation from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 198.

8 de Certeau, p. 285.

9 de Certeau, p. 286.

entire life of every human being be written down: “An estimated eighty billion humans have lived and died since the emergence of *Homo sapiens*,” and “if we each wrote a mere ten Lives during the course of our own, no life would be forgotten. None would be erased. They would all attain posterity, and justice would be done.”¹⁰ Any form of forgetting seems an injustice and a metaphysical crime. When it has not been able to serve as the vehicle for the expression of singularity through autobiographical writing, literature is to serve as a supplementing device for memorial collection to remedy the silence of subjects who have not been able to bring their narrative identities before the world on their own.

The era of hypermnesia

Not only is art “a kind of magical operation, capable of evoking a countenance lost,” as Marguerite Yourcenar suggested,¹¹ but in this light it also becomes an exhaustive inventory that seeks to duplicate the world in order to immortalize those absent. Consider the paradigmatic *Encyclopedia of the Dead* invented by the postmodern novelist Danilo Kiš, a book where the details of every life would be recorded, as in the famous genealogical archives of the Mormons, in a register serving “as a great treasury of memories and a unique proof of resurrection,”¹² offering the “consolation” of knowing “that there were still people on this earth who recorded and accorded value to every human life, every affliction, every human existence.”¹³ Literature reveals its readiness to serve, for lack of any other ritual or form of immortality, as a tomb. In a form of cratyism, the written word replaces and supplements the absent while also saving the survivor, by a symbolic formula established by Perec in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*:

[. . .] 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

10 Patrick Deville, *Peste & Choléra*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2012, p. 91. English translation from *Plague and Cholera*, trans. J.A. Underwood, London and New York, Little, Brown, 2014, Kindle edition.

11 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, p. 146. English translation from *Memoirs of Hadrian*, EPUB.

12 Danilo Kiš, *Encyclopédie des morts* (1983), translated from the Serbo-Croatian by Pascale Delpech, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 47. English translation from *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989, p. 43.

13 Kiš, *Encyclopédie*, p. 67. English translation, p. 64.

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.¹⁴

As seen above, the literature of mourning contains the event of death in two respects: it is the motivation for writing in the first place but is also the trace of the deceased. “One writes to bring the dead to life,”¹⁵ suggests Laurens. The book of mourning is therefore also a book of homage and a memorial biography: finding consolation in the story and remembrance is a way to soothe the pain by verbalizing it but also a way to keep the beloved to oneself by providing a “mausoleum,”¹⁶ in the case of both large-scale accounts as well as more fragmentary or more modest forms,¹⁷ requiring the work of inventorying and exploring memories. Thus, to give one example among many, here is how Thomas B. Reverdy describes the task of the writer:

He will attempt to find, to sort, to understand, from among those memories he has of his mother, those he can still make speak. It will be painful, and it will do him good. He'll open the cupboards. He'll rediscover her perfumes in scarves. He'll search the drawers. He'll reread the letters as if they'd just been delivered [. . .] He'll see himself, as a child, in the photos, with his own eyes, and it will be painful. It will do him good¹⁸.

Literature is seen as a secularized transposition of the hope for eternal life that lies at the core of Christianity, insofar as it offers a refuge of paper to the fragile memory of the loving heart. It offers itself as a form of assumption with the post-mortem writing coming to rescue the departed “from the night,” as the stereotype goes, and providing a distillation of their essence. Dominique Rabaté notes, “If the book saves, it is problematic in a way because the book takes the place of religion or it picks up where it leaves off, since it is entrusted with a resurrecting mission; Proust’s work gives one of the highest examples of this, as it has no fear of considering literature

14 Georges Perec, *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), Paris, Gallimard, 1993, pp. 63–64. English translation from *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos, Boston, D.R. Godine, 1998, p. 56.

15 Camille Laurens, *Philippe*, p. 74.

16 “Ce mausolée: se souvenir” (This mausoleum: to remember) is the subtitle to *Perfecto* by Thierry Fourreau, Paris, P.O.L., 2004.

17 Regarding this opposition, see Dominique Carlat, *Témoins de l'inactuel: quatre écrivains contemporains face au deuil* [Witnesses of the Unactual: Four Contemporary Writers Facing Grief], Paris, José Corti, 2007, p. 164.

18 Thomas B. Reverdy, *La Montée des eaux: roman*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2003, p. 141, cited by Isabelle Bernard-Rabadi, “L’infini du deuil dans l’écriture romanesque de Thomas B. Reverdy,” *Post-scriptum: revue de recherche interdisciplinaire en textes et médias*, June 2016, web: post-scriptum.org/l-infini-du-deuil-dans-l-ecriture.

as the only form of ‘life really lived’.¹⁹ Through an over-investment in the powers of writing, the survivor sublimates the departed and this writing activity is to ensure the beloved’s survival. Furthermore, in this post-mortem work of memory, the emergence of the narrator, the memory of the deceased, and historical memory are often intertwined, although it is not easy to confuse these strands. Various forms of this intertwining of personal, familial, social, and historical reparation through memory are provided by many of the works in the collection “The One and the Other,” previously mentioned in reference to the literature of expressivity, particularly of its most emblematic titles, Jean-Michel Delacomptée’s *Écrire pour quelqu’un* [Writing for Someone] (2014):

We do not write for ourselves, but for others. For the dead who subsist within us, and for the living who read us. Even manuscripts left deliberately unread at the bottom of drawers are addressed to someone: to lost relatives, to old flames, sometimes to loved ones who will never know. And this is even truer when we write in honor of those we have loved and admired who are now gone. As such, books create tombs. So do poems. They do not cover the dead in marble but rather with a gentle devotion. They are urns within our reach that we just have to open; it is where we bury our memories, and its ashes are words.²⁰

If it is indeed a question of writing *for* someone, literary transitivity and the addressee return to literature not because of a desire to influence the living, to speak to the living, but rather because of a dialogue with the dead.

On literature considered as a museum

In addition to the literature of mourning and the popular success of the traditional forms of memoir and autobiography whose astonishing democratization was one of the reasons for writing this book, I consider the emergence of an original resurrectionist literature to provide proof of the triumph of this literature of memory. Emblematic of this is the exceptional public and critical success of Annie Ernaux’s *Years* since its publication in 2008, redoubled by the reception of the other autobiographical fragments that fill the rare gaps left by the author such as *Retour à Yvetot* [Return to Yvetot] (2013) and *Mémoire de fille* [A Daughter’s Memory] (2016). In these documentary memoirs, the past is presented as being threatened with imminent disappearance and is transformed into a museum. This is symptomatic not only of the French panic at the turn of the millen-

¹⁹ Dominique Rabaté, “Entretien avec Yves Charnet,” in *Deuil et littérature*, p. 11.

²⁰ Jean-Michel Delacomptée, *Écrire pour quelqu’un*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “L’Un et l’Autre,” 2014, p. 170.

nium and of a nostalgic look at the culture and values of the *Trente Glorieuses* [the post-war boom], but above all of this museal inclination that requires writing to form a barrier against time. In the last lines of *The Years*, Ernaux writes:

She hasn't abandoned this ambition. But now, more than anything, she would like to capture the light [. . .] that was already present in the stories of Sundays in childhood and has continued to settle upon things from the moment they are lived, a light from before. Save

- the little village fête at Bazoches-sur-Hoëne with the bumper cars
- the hotel room on the rue Beauvoisine in Rouen, not far from the Lepouzé bookstore, where Cayatte filmed a scene for *To Die of Love*

[. . .]

- the film *People of No Importance*

[. . .]

- the woman of the Benthalha massacre in Algeria in the photo by Hocine that resembles a Pietà
- the dazzling sun on the walls of San Michele Cemetery, seen from the shade of the Fondamenta Nuove
- Save something from the time where we will never be again.²¹

What is it that comprises this literary Noah's ark – incidentally, I have cut Ernaux's list, which goes on for several pages? What exactly is it that we are trying to "save" through literature? Not just personal memory or lost youth but a collective memory – not just the author's own life, but the shared world of a generation, an experience that is only interesting because it incorporates the social world and traumas of history with its "capital axe" [*grande hache*] to borrow from Perec, in accordance with a sociological autobiography device organized by an analogical and emotive principle. For, in contrast to other realms of memory, where, as Régine Robin writes, what is at stake is "the control of the memorable, the conjuration of the singular, the incongruous, the surprise, the indeterminate. It is a matter of countering the threat of a transmission that would stray,"²² literary memory is clearly empirical, subjective, and mobile, associating historical anecdotes and unshareable emotions, tombs of "faces now unseen" and prosopographical indices.

At a time when these memorial forms tend to be dematerialized online through potentially infinite shares – it is believed that Facebook, which does not delete the profiles of deceased users, will be populated in a few decades with more virtual graves than living users²³ –, these dreams of inventory, with Perec and now Ernaux, serving as a form of distant inspiration, constitute one of the major contemporary

21 A. Ernaux, *Les Années*, pp. 1083–1085.

22 R. Robin, *La Mémoire saturée*, p. 453.

23 Daphné Lepoutois, "D'ici la fin du siècle, il y aura plus de morts de de vivants sur Facebook," *Slate*: www.slate.fr/story/115031/2098-plus-morts-vivants-facebook.

genres. Even outside of traumatic contexts where there is an inventory of victims, the “I remember” has become a canonical exercise in any writing workshop. The writer has become not only a historian, but a keeper of the vigil, a warden of time. Perhaps no one has more movingly showcased this passion for collecting,²⁴ where a book’s pages are identified with those of the “encyclopedia of the dead,” than Alain Fleischer, the author of *Carnet d’adresses* [Address Book] (2008), another dreamlike journey of remembrance. In *Les Angles morts* [Blind Spots] (2003), an investigation into “conjuring” through literature, as significant as the one Jacques Roubaud simultaneously conducted with his “Projet” cycle, the writer depicts the work of the guardian of memory at its most prodigious.²⁵ Providing a powerful metaphor for the contemporary writer-documentarian, Fleischer’s collector is portrayed as an enthusiast committed to bringing the mementos accumulated on his shelves back to life. He in fact “collects objects only out of my desire, out of my impatience to revive them, to see them come to life again”²⁶ and devotes himself, for example, to repairing old cameras:

to get the machine up and running again, to revive it, and to give it, which had been an eye opened to so many lives now gone, the opportunity to see again and to record visible life, life in progress, fresh life, this lively life we make images of that survive beyond death until the day they themselves fade away in their turn²⁷

These magical objects invent a uchronia where Fleischer revives the Yiddishland, not as immediate memorial summation but rather as the poetic invention of a “blind spot” that, through language, replaces a vanished lens through which the world annihilated with the Shoah would have survived.²⁸ Writing can imagine machines to rewind time, such as Omega watches turning backwards, and works so that “one day the book of time can be reopened to a page from the previous chapter”²⁹ and resurrect that which has been lost to time, as if, like the ontological manipulations of the Kabbalah, a textual operation could guarantee eternity:

24 On the figure of the collector, see Laurent Demanze, *Les Fictions encyclopédiques: de Gustave Flaubert à Pierre Senegès* [Encyclopaedic Fictions: from Gustave Flaubert to Pierre Senegès], Paris, José Corti, 2015.

25 The five branches were brought together in *Le Grand Incendie de Londres* [The Great Fire of London] in 2009 along with a sixth, *La Dissolution* [The Dissolution], 2008.

26 Alain Fleischer, *Les Angles morts: roman*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2003, p. 29.

27 Fleischer, *Les Angles morts*, p. 36.

28 See *Écrire, écrire, pourquoi? Entretien avec Josyane Savigneau* [Writing, Writing, Why? Interview with Josyane Savigneau], Paris, Éditions de la Bibliothèque publique d’information, 2014, p. 15 (§ 70).

29 Alain Fleischer, *Les Angles Morts*, p. 391.

[. . . Will there be a horse without a coachman pulling a phantom carriage to direct the gaze to the entrance of a vanished palace, or to the garden planted with poppies and aphrodisiac herbs in the villa of Maurice Maeterlinck, or of an oriental prince, or of a famous actress hiding her old age and shielding her final years before an eternal landscape? Will there be an aberration of light on a summer afternoon to resurrect those strolling through the Place Masséna, the customers sitting on the terraces in front of the municipal theatre, the fishmongers on the Cours Saleya, the little children in uniforms from a sanatorium on the coastal road?³⁰

Here we see the double rupture, both quantitative and qualitative, with past literary memorial forms: on the one hand, literary memory must apply itself to preserving each detail without prejudice to their importance; on the other hand, it must offer all beings their own tomb, regardless of their status – as Éric Chevillard joked, “[e]ach individual is in danger of extinction and should therefore benefit from urgent safeguarding and protection measures.”³¹ The choice of minor subjects is evident in the work of historians of the “non-historical” and it is therefore not surprising to find de Certeau alongside Foucault in the work of Artières, a historian-writer who publishes in collections by Le Seuil or Verticales that are traditionally reserved for novels and who addresses everyday life and ordinary writings but also unresolved murders and the dramas of industrialization: “Fundamentally, isn’t it the writer’s role to build tombs for the dead? [. . .] What is writing, if not a funerary practice[?]” he wonders, before citing the two examples of “Darwin [who] on the death of his daughter Anna made a box in which he had kept a set of objects, including writings by the deceased” and “Mallarmé’s little-known poem for his son, who died at the age of eight, which is entitled ‘Pour un tombeau d’Anatole.’”³² Indeed, *Rêves d’histoire: pour une histoire de l’ordinaire* (2014) and *Miettes: éléments pour une histoire de l’infra-ordinaire de l’année 1980* (2016) enlist the resources of the imagination to revive a memory of the deceased through details, whether it is a matter of mentioning, under the auspices of Perec and Sebald,³³ classified ads from *Libération*, read as “message[s] in a bottle” and “desperate pleas,”³⁴ or ordinary biographical traces, lists of found objects from the nineteenth century, photographs of anonymous people, and other unexpected

30 Fleischer, *Les Angles*.

31 Éric Chevillard, *L’Autofictif en vie sous les décombres* [The Autofictive Alive under the Rubble], Talence, L’Arbre vengeur, 2014, p. 46.

32 Philippe Artières, *Vie et mort de Paul Gény: roman*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2013, p. 214.

33 See P. Artières, *Rêves d’histoire: pour une histoire de l’ordinaire* [Dreams of History: For a History of the Ordinary] (2006), Paris, Verticales, 2014, pp. 13–14.

34 P. Artières, *Miettes: éléments pour une histoire de l’infra-ordinaire de l’année 1980* [Crumbs: Elements for a History of the Infra-Ordinary of the Year 1980], Paris, Verticales, 2016, p. 139.

documents left by the dregs of time – tenuous but moving pieces from an enthusiast’s collection presented to a society with a thirst for memory.

The resurrection of the anonymous

The contemporary passion for the most tenuous and unfathomable lives is one of the most important threads in the assiduous contemporary production of *imaginary lives* – which is not just an inquiry into human plurality but also a vast resurrectionist enterprise. Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1997) provides the contemporary literary archetype of these lost identities to be rehabilitated and reinhabited. Modiano’s account of his extensively researched investigation into the disappearance of a Jewish girl who runs away from her hiding place during the Occupation – he then finds her name by chance on a list of deportees – interweaves the investigation log together with the author’s own memories. This approach combines and surpasses the traditional heuristic models of autobiography, the psychological novel, the spy novel, the crime novel, and journalistic non-fiction so as to depict the mental wanderings of an elusive and dilatory “I”: Dora Bruder cannot be caught until after she escapes and can only be saved by preserving that form of freedom from history afforded to her by the very failure of the discourses that want to find her. In all its ambiguity, *Dora Bruder* has thus become a paradigmatic “memoir” of contemporary investigations of memory, which I believe find another breathtaking example in Didier Blonde’s *L’Inconnue de la Seine* (2012), which depicts the imaginary life of a young, completely anonymous woman who drowned in the Seine in the late nineteenth century.³⁵ This unknown woman has haunted literature from the 1910s, when the theme appears in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, to Man Ray’s *Objects of my Affection* (1960) and Truffaut’s *La Mariée était en noir* [The Bride Wore Black] (1968), by way of Horváth, Nabokov, Claire Gool, William Gaddis, Anaïs Nin, Döblin, Brecht, Camus, Éluard and the entire Surrealist generation, and even Maurice Blanchot, who kept a cast of her death mask. The mask itself shows the refined face of a young woman with closed eyes, her look dreamy and almost angelic, her half-smile indecipherable. In “L’Inconnue de la Seine,” Supervielle creates a poetic tale that recounts the dreams of the drowned girl who tries to “reach the sea,”³⁶ joining a colony of “Soddens” (“Ruisselements”) in the river who are governed by a “Grand Damp” (“Grand Mouillé”)

35 Didier Blonde, *L’Inconnue de la Seine* [The Unknown Woman of the Seine], Paris Gallimard, 2012. A first version of the novel appeared in 1988 under another title, published by Régine Desforges.

36 Jules Supervielle, “L’Inconnue de la Seine” (1929), in *L’Enfant de la haute mer* [The Child of the High Seas] (1931), Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 54. Author’s emphasis.

before opting for solitude: it is emblematic of an impossible escape from the world. In Aragon's *Aurélien*, the mask becomes a metaphor for the star-crossed love of the two protagonists, while for Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who reproduced a photograph of it in one of the editions of *L'Église* [The Church], the mask expresses "the poetic persistence of the anonymous."³⁷ But in Blonde's 2012 novel, the reverie is reinscribed in a tradition of urban wanderings going back to De Quincey and Breton, marked by Modiano's hypermnesic meanderings and Sebald's spectral haunting, and is consistently guided by a concrete desire for assignation that regulates and counterbalances the dreamlike posture: "Now that I have this certificate of existence before my eyes, I can see that all fiction has such little weight in comparison with the death mask,"³⁸ notes the narrator, who becomes fixated on finding out the drowned girl's name. Because for Blonde, who falls in line with a nominalist realism that is a far cry from the Surrealist enchantments and the metaphysical, social, or psychological questioning of his twentieth-century predecessors, "[o]ur name is the only thing that accompanies us, unscathed, and serves as a bulwark against the aggressions of time [. . .]"³⁹ The investigation thus proceeds in the search for documentary materiality and serves as a katabasis, an Orphic and Dantesque descent into the Underworld to find tangible clues: the narrator tells of wandering through the Roger-Viollet archives, making his way to the morgue of the Prefecture of Police (now no longer in existence), then the Forensic Institute, where the narrator encounters other contemporary bodies, and then the archives, where he finds a 1901 file that seems like a possible match for the drowned girl. While the name and real identity of this "inconnue" had never interested his predecessors, no more so, in fact, than what her actual life had been, for him the aim is to "erect a paper monument so that her anonymous ghost may live again, for one night."⁴⁰ As a victim of modernity, the "inconnue" becomes for the writer of the twenty-first century a figure to be concretized, a name to be restored, an identity to be equipped with reality and a demonstration of the unlimited ambition of a memorial project.

Contemporary writers, whether they be novelist-historians or historian-novelists, thus dream of producing a nominal and exhaustive memory of the world:

The real disappearance is that of the anonymous masses. What does a "normal" life leave behind? [. . .] This disappearance, this submergence of the anonymous in nothingness, is

37 Cited by Bertrand Tillier, *La Belle Noyée: enquête sur le masque de l'Inconnue de la Seine* [The Beautiful Drowned Woman: An Inquiry into the Mask of the Unknown Woman of the Seine], Les Éd. Arkhé, 2011, p. 8. Also see the study online by Anja Zeidler, "Influence and Authenticity of *l'Inconnue de la Seine*."

38 D. Blonde, *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, p. 17.

39 Blonde, *L'Inconnue*, p. 53.

40 Blonde, *L'Inconnue*, p. 58.

the common lot of humanity. Only the curiosity of a historian or a novelist can give life to these unknown, anonymous, and forgotten people,

suggests Régine Robin in *Saturated Memory*.⁴¹ Henceforth, the problem is indeed that of posthumous invisibility, which literature must counter just as vigorously as it does social invisibility, traumatic destruction, and the plain difficulty of developing one's own identity.

It remains to be seen what such a project, aligned with history if not the museum, does to the idea of literature: it leads from realist record-keeping to a truly magical operation of resurrection, an old Orphic myth that it is surprising to see combined with such a horizontal narrative, but which leads to the production of a textual soteriology – that is, a method of obtaining salvation. Ernaux's vocabulary is clearly Christian, Fleischer's forms of memory are possibly inspired by the Judaism of the Book and the Deuteronomic injunction *Zakhor* ("remember"), and the shift towards a religious conception of literature is undeniable. There is, following the example of Michon's entire body of work, the invention of a literary counter-theology. "Trust this sign," – as per the title of a short story in *Maîtres et serviteurs* [Masters and Servants], a recourse to literature to overcome finitude, – contemporary writers of memory tell us: "Here and there the name of Piero [della Francesca] is spoken, is multiplied and divided into nothingness. It won't be long now. One day, God will no longer hear one name before any other. He will send a sign to the seven. They will raise seven trumpets to their lips."⁴²

This is the common point between writings of personal identity and testimony, biographies in search of alterity, accounts of personal and collective trauma, and even field investigations: to act as a bulwark against oblivion and to propose, in place of a religion and its priests, rituals of support and commemoration, if not an eschatological horizon in the form of a library, as if the fear of death generalized the fear of injustice. The aim is not only to make us see and eliminate the blind spots, but also to survive, to use literature to fight against both invisibility and expiation. It is also in this sense that medicine and literature are related, as Martin Winckler explains in *La Maladie de Sachs*:

Way before I became a doctor, I was writing. But when you're a doctor, what use is writing?
 I would have liked, I already had the idea – I have it now, in any case – of putting down on paper the name of every patient I've seen die. Of every baby I've seen born.
 [. . .]

⁴¹ R. Robin, *La Mémoire saturée*, p. 94.

⁴² Pierre Michon, *Maîtres et serviteurs*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1990, p. 131. English translation from *Masters and Servants*, trans. Wyatt Mason, New Haven, Yale UP, 2013, p. 156.

You write to try to knit up the holes in evanescent reality with bits of string, tie knots in transparent veils, knowing that they're going to tear open somewhere else."⁴³

It is not by chance that such a general and retrospective conception of the novel as a tomb emerged in parallel with these writings of memory, which are not limited to the contemporary passion for the biographical, but have spilled over into all novelistic forms. For Marc Angenot, the novel is nothing more than “the textual transposition of funerary epigraphy as a trace of an ordinary, non-illustrious life [. . .], inviting with its lacunary brevity to compensate by imagining a life for a proper name.”⁴⁴ To me, it does not appear that, prior to the end of the twentieth century, there is any equivalent to such a critical view of the novel as a graveyard of ordinary lives. The increase in scriptural memorial practices has thus become universalized in a precept for repairing not just historical guilt but mere forgetting. This phantasmatic struggle against the danger of generalized amnesia has continued for twenty-first century writers, who have literature transport a universal memory of everything and nothing, an inflation that in turn leads to a fascination for the ephemeral, in the same way that expressive individualism also engendered a literature of anonymity. At the risk of hypostasizing the present on an external horizon, literature is thus seen as a way of striving not only for a restorative expression, but also for a resurrection of the world.

Regardless of how one might interpret this development, this memorial atavism, with writing serving as a reparations trial for the victims of history as well as those who have simply been forgotten, has become so characteristic of twenty-first century literature that it has been responsible for two Nobel prizes, Le Clézio in 2008 and Modiano in 2014. In similar terms, these two authors have attributed to literature the same function as bearing witness in a court of law for our times. For Le Clézio, who champions the peoples of Oceania as well as other minority cultures, in literature as well as within the NGO “Survival International,” writers must “give their names to each tree,” “bring this word to those who are excluded from it,” be “witnesses” and speak “for those who are hungry,”⁴⁵ while Patrick

43 Martin Winckler, *La Maladie de Sachs: roman*, Paris, P.O.L., 1998, p. 464. English translation from *The Case of Dr. Sachs: A Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2001, pp. 424–425.

44 Marc Angenot, “L’oubli, la trace et la fiction: sur la généalogie du roman entre l’épigraphie funéraire et la parodie de Plutarque,” [Oblivion, Trace and Fiction: On the Genealogy of the Novel Between Funerary Epigraphy and Parody of *Plutarch*] *Futur antérieur*, supplément “Le texte et son dehors. Autour de la littérature et de son esthétique” [The text and its exterior. Around literature and its aesthetics], eds. Claude Amey and Carlo Arcuri, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1992, pp. 19–30.

45 J. M. G. Le Clézio, “Dans la forêt des paradoxes. Conférence Nobel,” 7 Dec. 2008, pp. 3–4.

Modiano's intention is to pick up "disconnected traces, fleeting and almost ungraspable human destinies" and "when faced with this large blank page of oblivion [. . . .] to make a few faded words visible again, like lost icebergs adrift on the surface of the ocean."⁴⁶ The globalization of French literature is now the globalization not of its formal experiences or its aspiration to the universal, but of its memorial reparation.

⁴⁶ Patrick Modiano, "Conférence Nobel," 7 December 2014, p. 12. English translation by James Hardiker.

Conclusion

In your fight against the world, side with the world.

Franz Kafka, quoted by Wadji Mouawad, “Je t’embrasse pour finir.”¹

The practices and mystics of repair

I feel better, announces David Foenkinos in a novel that uses these very words for the title (*Je vais mieux*). He was driven to share the joy of his triumph because, as he writes, “[I] wanted to tell everyone about my happiness.”² One reader of Philippe Delerm’s *Bonheur* (*Happiness*), which the author says “uses the word happiness in a twisted world – that of literature,”³ writes: “Reading one of his books makes me at peace with life. At least for a while. And when I’m in a bad mood, I pick one up . . .”⁴ “What this second novel has to offer every reader is happiness, poignancy, and repair,” promises the back cover of another bestseller, Jean-Paul Didierlaurent’s *Le Reste de leur vie*,⁵ a novel about a mortician that the publisher calls an “ode to life”: authors, readers, editors, and critics alike join forces to make literature a machine for feeling better. Yet declaring that “this novel helped me” or “this book made me feel good” is less socially acceptable than saying that “this novel upset me” or “this novel terrified me” – as if, on the behalf of the “paradox of horror,” in literature and art the spectrum of positive emotions remains suspected of naiveté. This is in keeping with a break that likely dates to the period following the 1830 Revolution and the failure of Romanticism⁶ and that with modernity has only intensified. Yet it is the noble ideal of an existence in accordance with books, of a “development of one’s own life as a personal work of art”⁷ and of an artialization of ordinary life for the better promoted by an entire philosophical

1 Wadji Mouawad, “Je t’embrasse pour finir,” [I kiss you to finish] in M. Le Bris and J. Rouaud (eds), *Pour une littérature-monde* [For a World-Literature], pp. 175–195, cit p. 188.

2 David Foenkinos, *Je vais mieux* [I’m getting better], Paris, Gallimard, 2013, p. 330.

3 Philippe Delerm, *Le Bonheur: tableaux et bavardages* [Happiness: Pictures and Gossip] (1990), Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 19.

4 Commentary online at Amazon.fr, 25 Oct. 2015, www.amazon.fr/bonheur-Tableaux-bavardages-Philippe-Delerm/dp/2070339300.

5 Jean-Paul Didierlaurent, *Le Reste de leur vie* [The Rest of Their Lives], La Laune, Au diable vauvert, 2016.

6 This is the view of, for example, Mériam Korichi, *Traité des bons sentiments*, Paris, Albin Michel, coll. “Bibliothèque Idées,” 2016, pp. 555 et seq.

7 Michel Foucault, “Une esthétique de l’existence” (1984) in *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. “Quarto,” 2001, pp. 1549–1554, cit. p. 1550.

and aesthetic tradition. At a time when a notion of the literary vocation as a form of survival and an altruistic definition of publication prevail, literature that does good is not, as seen above, just a matter of a pastime, of “restorative novels,” nor of those adult coloring books that bolstered the book market in 2015 in France and the United States. It cannot be reduced to “chick lit,” to self-help guides, or to the vague spectrum of the healing arts, but provides a horizon of the most demanding narrative forms, as I sought to demonstrate in this book.

The commitment to identity, the desire to provide treatment, the ideology of relation, and the obsession with memory all work to the point of hysteria in French literature of the twenty-first century. If it were necessary to have a summary of these aims, we could perhaps find it in the visionary scope of a work that runs as counter to feel good books as Mathieu Riboulet’s *Les Œuvres de miséricorde* [The Works of Mercy], which is at once an erotic journey with sadomasochistic tendencies, a meditation on the future of Germany, and a reflection on the powers of art. The narrative proposes nothing less than to tell the story through seven chapters that follow the seven injunctions of Saint Matthew, with the author making the most of having the same name as the apostle: “To feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, harbor the pilgrims, comfort the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead: acts of mercy form a set of moral imperatives decreed by the Church that are meant to help Christians add to their weight on the scales of the Last Judgement.”⁸

It is easy to recognize here so many forms of literary assistance, somewhere between care and charity, in a way that is not just allegorical but also palpable, since visits to the sick, to prisoners, and to the dead are, as we have seen, duties that contemporary literature performs directly. Writers of the old transitivity, which gave art direct or indirect moral purposes, aligned themselves with what Riboulet calls the “seven works of spiritual mercy [. . .]: to advise the doubtful, to teach the ignorant, to reprimand the sinners, to console the afflicted, to forgive offences, to tolerate the unwelcome, to pray to God for the living and the dead.”⁹ As with Maylis de Kerangal, who intended to “bury the dead and mend the living,”¹⁰ Riboulet proposes seven “acts of so-called ‘bodily’ mercy,”¹¹ aiming to describe from within the marginality of homosexuality, the schisms of a Germany that was torn apart, and physical suffering so as to be as one with “*the violence that people inflict on each other* – historical, social, individual, and sexual vio-

8 Mathieu Riboulet, *Les Œuvres de miséricorde: fictions & réalités*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2012, p. 10.

9 Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 10–11.

10 M. de Kerangal, *Réparer les vivants*, p. 133; *The Heart*, p. 109.

11 M. Riboulet, *Les Œuvres de miséricorde*, p. 10.

lence, and the violence of war.”¹² This perspective sums up the secularized dream of a literature of mercy, paying tribute to the dead and supporting the living. “How to lay hands on a wound?”¹³ This is the question Riboulet asks himself, along with many of his contemporaries. “What to do with all these dead?”¹⁴ if not take them in and make them a part of literature, which for him involves the subjective reformulation of the narrative – “I did not collect Adrian’s body at dawn, but rather his story, months later in the limestone, in the sun, and in peace,”¹⁵ – the metaphorization of impulses – chapter 15 is entitled “Hate the sick,/the prisoners,/the pilgrims,/the dead,/the hungry and the thirsty,//hate/the naked,”¹⁶ – before returning to ordinary life with a new continuity between writing and caring for others. “Put pen to paper, perform an act of mercy./ Then celebrate Adrian, his disorderly beauty,/ and the joint of pure weed he passes me, laughing.// Think about calling Andreas and Tajdîn,/ tell them words of love./ Then sleep, work, go/ and make dinner.”¹⁷ Here again, there is an affirmation of the idea that attention, access to the other, and then physical or psychological healing (the “repair,” or a technical intervention that is direct, without introducing any transcendence or aspirations of transformation), or simply the augmentation of self – functions traditionally performed by the medicines for the body, the soul, or society (from spiritual counseling to psychotherapeutic treatment) – benefit from being delegated to the text, through the vector of knowledge just as much as of emotion, and that such functions define the best in literature.

For behind its technical connotations and the notion of a cognitive instrumentalization of literature, the word “repair” is also to be understood, in the contemporary context, according to its full religious dimension. The Hebrew doctrine of repairing the world (*tikkun olam*), which in the western hemisphere has enjoyed immense success well beyond Judaism by merging with Christian¹⁸ charity, and which imposes on humans a responsibility for the world and for social action, is consistent with its Christian versions (Ernaux’s soteriology, Emmanuel Carrère’s or Maylis de Kerangal’s philanthropy) and its secular versions (Joan Tronto’s care is defined, as we have seen, as “repairing” the world). “Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can,” said Barack Obama in one of the most famous

¹² Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, back cover.

¹³ Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 45.

¹⁴ Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 117.

¹⁷ Riboulet, *Les Œuvres*, p. 153.

¹⁸ See for example Elliot N. Dorff, *The Jewish Approach to Repairing the World (Tikkun Olam): A Brief Introduction for Christians*, Nashville, Jewish Lights, 2012.

phrases from his speech in New Hampshire in January 2008. *Mutatis mutandis*, this same *tiqqun olam* is found just as much in Judeo-Christian ethics as in approaches to repairing a common world coming from the left¹⁹ – even in the revolutionary messianism of the situationist ultra-left: *Tiqqun* is in fact the name of the short-lived journal created by Julien Coupat (activist and possible leader of the “Invisible Committee”) with the motto “the repair of all things *through the action of people themselves*”²⁰ with the aim of “re-establishing contact between our evolutions”²¹ by means of an ethical war that involves making people see “the *how of* beings, not what they are, but *how* they are what they are. Their form of life,”²² that is to say, by pursuing a “*politics of whatever singularity.*”²³

A new ethical and political doxa

Far from being unanimously perceived as the happy triumph of a literature that has been made useful, the idea of individual or social repair through art remains an object of perplexity. A highly amusing allegory of this comes from Philippe Vasset. In *La Légende* [The Legend] (2016), he depicts the marginal figure of Joseph-Antoine Boullan, the heretical priest who founded the Œuvre de la Réparation, originally intended to save people from hell through prayer but ultimately advancing a principle of “mystical substitution” that recommends sinning in the place of sinners. A hilarious satire of Pierre Michon’s resurrectionism, *La Légende* is a compilation of heretical lives of outsiders of the *banlieue* and offers a form of bizarre homage by driving the project of Christian sanctification to the point of madness: the dream of habitation and revalorization, of the compilation of memories and the hoarding of contemporary existence, “lives copied and pasted, instantaneous and desirable lives, rushed lives, immediately dissolved in the circulation of

19 See for example the reflections offered by Yves Citton, Sandra Laugier and Bruno Latour dans *Multitudes*, no. 45 (special issue “Du commun au comme-un,” Summer 2011), which converge around repair and reconfiguration of the common through attentiveness, www.multitudes.net/category/l-edition-papier-en-ligne/multitudes-45-nospecial-ete-2011/.

20 *Tiqqun*, “Qu’est-ce que la Métaphysique Critique?,” *Tiqqun. Organe conscient du Parti Imaginaire*, no. 1 (“Exercices de Métaphysique Critique. Anéantir le néant”), self-published, 1999, pp. 5–21, cit p. 16; docs.tiqqun.org/Tiqqun1-ExercicesdeMetaphysiqueCritique.pdf; authors’ emphasis.

21 *Tiqqun*, “Comment faire?,” *Tiqqun. Organe de liaison au sein du Parti Imaginaire*, no. 2 (“Zone d’Opacité”), Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2001, pp. 278–287, cit. p. 279.

22 *Tiqqun*, “Comment faire?,” p. 281.

23 *Tiqqun*, “Comment faire?,” p. 282. The expression comes from G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 85.

data.”²⁴ The work of “repairing” them appears as a fantasy that is as ridiculous as it is fascinating. This is undoubtedly because the idea of usefulness in art (which would in turn be reduced to a means) is the subject of massive controversy and resistance on both sides of the Atlantic. “Reducing art to *self-help* is the worst possible insult to cultural masterpieces,” deplored the *New York Times* when Alain de Botton and John Armstrong turned Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum into an art therapy venue for an exhibition that caused an uproar.²⁵ When the theory of the narrative, and more broadly of the text, is made to be not a subset that depends on a linguistic or semiotic theory of literature but instead a central hinge between the theory of action and ethical theory,²⁶ the result is an extraordinary revalorization of our work as linguists, historians, stylisticians, and narratologists, and, in addition, an unhopd-for prolongation of the linguistic turn. Yet this option exposes literary theory to new and exogenous knowledge if it is to account for the therapeutic mechanisms that are actually engaged. Such a choice, by retrospectively reexamining the Western history of art, weakens the idealist and autotelic philosophical base on which all modern art has been built since the era of Romanticism. The new ethical doxa explains, for example, that narrative fiction is simultaneously reassuring and destabilizing because it involves lower-level processes (the training of our mental capacity for refiguration), but also because it reduces the distance between general paradigms and local ethical issues and deploys imaginative variations, *seeing as*, diversifying our relationship to space and time. Fiction is, in Ricœur’s words, “*revealing and transforming*.”²⁷ What this means is that literature is loved not as disruption but as mediation, not for its gratuitousness but for its value, not because it denounces but because it repairs, not for its form but for the problems it embraces. Generally, such a paradigm shift is challenged more because of ideological issues, and less because of serious philosophical criticisms of literary cognitivism (for example, the difficulties in defining a literary knowledge that bears practical or semi-propositional truths²⁸), of narrativism (such as the literary fantasy of a psychic structure analogous to a fiction, as denounced by Galen Strawson), and of projectionist ethics (such as the highly hypothetical driving power of the weak ties of readers and characters). With the emergence of writers who no longer represent a

24 Philippe Vasset, *La Légende*, Paris, Fayard, 2016, p. 138.

25 Cited by “Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum Turned into Therapeutic Centre,” “The Philosopher’s Mail” site, thephilosophersmail.com/utopia/amsterdams-rijksmuseum-turned-into-therapeutic-centre/. Also see similar reactions in England with *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/apr/25/art-is-therapy-alain-de-botton-rijksmuseum-amsterdam-review>.

26 P. Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 180.

27 P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, vol 3, p. 229.

28 P. Engel, “Trois conceptions de la connaissance littéraire,” p. 135.

secret aristocracy of the chosen but rather fit in with the natural functioning of society and with the rebirth of a reader who no longer derives pleasure from the “unpunished vice” of reading but from a necessary form of work on oneself, the entire traditional “value chain” of cultural creation and consumption has been disrupted. In the contemporary imagination, notions of selflessness, marginality, and risk remain pre-eminent values of literature.

It is therefore not surprising that the idea of a repairing literature should be perceived as an insufferable political program: when Philippe Forest denounces the project of “assigning a therapeutic function to literature,” which “means entrusting it with the mission of accounting for the world, and of helping people to resign themselves to the scandal of it, to come to terms with its iniquity,”²⁹ whereas “true literature repairs nothing of the disaster of living,”³⁰ it is a matter of comparing one ideology of literature with another, and preferring the negative view driven by the post-war period over the positive redefinitions of the twenty-first century. Though on the surface it may appear personal, what is at stake is clearly political: in contrast to a literature mythologized in its critical negativity, the idea of a self-help literature, a consensus-generating literature, is seen as a falsely emancipatory device of neo-liberalism, with the aim being to optimize individual capacities for the benefit of creative capitalism and usage governed by an economic habitus. Lambasting the “industry of consolation,” Bertrand Leclair thus emphasizes the way in which “the notion of personal transformation” is “founded on individual suffering” in order to establish, in the absence of an overall willingness to change the world, a “new-age ideology”³¹ of self-repair, while the “Comité invisible” denounces a literature that is “the formal freedom conceded to those who cannot accommodate themselves to the nothingness of their real freedom”:³² “The injunction to be strong produces the weakness that sustains it, *to the point that everything seems to take on a therapeutic aspect*, even working, even loving.”³³

This ideology makes textual work on oneself an ultimate solution to any existential or social problem, with the cost being a loss of the relationship to the other. For instance, in his *Antimanuel de littérature*, François Bégaudeau notes sarcastically that literature could serve “to cure something, as one writer explained in an interview: ‘I’m indebted to literature to have made it possible for

29 Philippe Forest, *Tous les enfants sauf un: essai*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 165.

30 Forest, *Tous les enfants*, p. 168.

31 Bertrand Leclair, *L’Industrie de la consolation: la littérature face au “cerveau global,”* Paris, Verticales, 1998, p. 120.

32 Comité invisible, *L’Insurrection qui vient*, p. 72; *The Coming Insurrection*, p. 87.

33 Comité invisible, *L’Insurrection*, p. 14.

me to compensate for the absence of tenderness.' When all she had to do was call me: 068543234."³⁴ But this would come at the cost of denying objective truths, since any suffering or problem is only a representation that can be addressed by psycholiterary devices, and first and foremost of any hope of politically transforming the world. This is confirmed by considering that, on the other side of the political spectrum, Richard Millet attacks the devaluation of literature implied by its therapeutic use: "In the irrelevance of its hegemony, the contemporary novel resembles a disease of the soul: it consists in bringing to the surface that which was intended for the lower tasks of the mind – religious confession, psychoanalysis, medicine."³⁵ The critical and aristocratic ideologies of literature oddly concur to contest its power or need to lead to a common and shareable improvement. I find that these can be related to the innumerable criticisms of the culture of narcissistic individualism, personal development, and the cult of positivity, whether the blame for the therapeutic ideology is imputed to Calvinism or American neoliberalism.

The debate regarding the therapeutic future of letters likewise involves critics, who are invited to select and classify works according to their reparative power: "We have reached a point where it has become useful to present books by critics, some of them excellent, as supportive guides to personal development,"³⁶ note Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmonde – a line of reasoning that could be applied to the "Un été avec" [A summer with] series published by Les Équateurs. The debate is also taking place in the field of contemporary psychology, confronted with the psychologies of positivity, as well as in contemporary philosophy. Philosophy is indeed made to compete with personal development discourses or confronted with the possibility of being likened to them. A colleague recently told me of his disappointment at finding his essay on identity³⁷ listed in the "personal development" section of a Cultura bookstore: in the same way that Alain de Botton uses *À la Recherche du temps perdu* to "stop wasting time and start to appreciate life" and "adjust our priorities before it [is] time to have a last game of golf and keel over"³⁸ or that Pierre Zaoui proposes a "philosophy understood not as a series of propositions and demonstrations, but as a survival manual, as a promise of hid-

34 F. Bégaudeau, *Antimanuel de littérature*, p. 267.

35 R. Millet, *L'Enfer du roman*, fragment 427, p. 226.

36 Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmonde, "Better Living Through Bibliotherapy," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, Summer 2016.

37 Dorian Astor, "*Deviens ce que tu es*," [Become Who You Are] Paris, Autrement, coll. "Grands mots," 2016.

38 A. de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, p. 9.

den exits, as a self-managed pharmacopoeia,³⁹ philosophy is called on directly as a form of coaching. There are many philosophers who fight against the seduction of such a paradigm. They remind us that philosophy is a quest for truth and not for happiness, that it is critical thinking and not mere therapy, and they denounce both the fantasy of the total autonomy of the subject and what Pascal Bruckner has referred to as the dream of perpetual euphoria.⁴⁰ Philosophy may nonetheless be tempted to surrender, remembering Epicurus's precept: "Vain is the word of the philosopher that does not heal any suffering of man,"⁴¹ which was evoked by Michel Foucault – a philosopher used as a guarantor by discourses of wisdom, in much the same way that Ricœur has been for narrative therapies or bibliotherapies since reminding us that the original basis for the word "therapists" was a philosophical sect.⁴² With "philotherapy," ancient traditions of spiritual exercises, recently evoked by Pierre Hadot to emphasize their importance, are assimilated to personal development courses, leading to a revival of interest in the ancient wisdoms, as evidenced, for example, by William Braxton Irvine's best-selling essay, *A Guide to the Good Life*.⁴³ As with literary thought, philosophy is torn between a critical tradition that makes it a way of unsettling conventional forms of contentment, on the one hand, and the highly lucrative temptation to become a form of existential guidance without political or spiritual horizons, on the other. Tom Stern recently asked, "Do we cheapen philosophy when we use it as therapy?"⁴⁴ Just as with literature, philosophy is driven to think about and accompany forms of care as much as it is driven to base therapeutic speech on reason.⁴⁵

39 Pierre Zaoui, *La Traversée des catastrophes* [Crossing Disasters] (2010), Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2013, p. 11.

40 Pascal Bruckner, *L'Euphorie perpétuelle: essai sur le devoir de bonheur* [Perpetual Euphoria: An Essay on the Duty of Happiness], Paris, Grasset, 2000.

41 Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet: cours au Collège de France, 1981–1982* [The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982], ed. Frédéric Gros, gen. eds. François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 2001, p. 10 and note 29.

42 See M. Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, pp 112–114.

43 William Braxton Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2009. On the alleged continuity between ancient spiritual exercises and today's cognitive therapies, see Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History*, Malden (MA), 105, 2004, Chap. 3 "Medicine for the Soul: From Epicureans and Stoics via the Seven Deadly Sins to Cognitive Therapy." A sign of the times, "philotherapy" was recently popularized by the novel by Éliette Abécassis of the same name: *Philothérapie*, Paris, Flammarion, 2016.

44 Tom Stern, "Do We Cheapen Philosophy When We Use It as Therapy?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 July 2015.

45 See Lazare Benaroyo, Céline Lefève, Jean-Christophe Mino *et al.* (eds), *Philosophie du soin: éthique, médecine et société* [Philosophy of Care: Ethics, Medicine and Society], Paris, PUF, 2010.

The therapeutic (re)interpretations of literature

The “therapeutic” mode of interpretation is in fact powerful enough to apply to Henri Michaux advocating for a medical use of poetry⁴⁶ or a Neo-Stoic like Montaigne but also the authors of intransitivity who found secret remedies in writing and reading: this includes Proust, whose father was a doctor and a great dispenser of advice, as well as Mallarmé, who occupies a central place in the great narrative we create for empowerment, starting from the point where we consider that life’s detours can themselves be medicine. “For Mallarmé, literature was the goal, indeed the very purpose of life; it was felt here, authentic and real. To sacrifice everything to it, as he did, he had to believe in it exclusively. I don’t believe that there is an example of a more uncompromising conviction in our literary history,” explained Gide, reprised by Thibaudet and the whole of literary history.⁴⁷ The poet “silently points to the reaches of the summit and the rarefied air,”⁴⁸ as Thibaudet eloquently states. He was the poet who, according to Vincent Kaufmann, wanted to “establish literature *once and for all* in an absolute difference in relation to everything else, as if its strength depended on a purity destined to be lost,”⁴⁹ aiming for a refined literature enamored of itself. But, in the same way that Philippe Forest assumes his radical positions against any literary cure for the benefit of a calming memorial exhortation, there is no reason not to identify in the redirection that Mallarmé gave to the course of literature and in the formalist injunction a personal therapeutic solution that was ideologized *a posteriori*. In this regard, I followed the lead provided by the psychoanalyst Laurie Laufer’s commentary on the unpublished verses that Mallarmé wrote for Anatole, who died of an illness in 1879,⁵⁰ and which, as mentioned above, were a

46 See Gérard Danou, “Henri Michaux et la médecine de soi.”

47 André Gide, “*In memoriam* Stéphane Mallarmé” [été 1898], in *Prétextes*, 7th edn, Paris, Mercure de France, 1919, pp. 251–259, cit. p. 258. Included by Albert Thibaudet, *La Poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé* [The Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé], Paris, Gallimard, 1926, p. 445. See William Marx, *L’Adieu à la littérature: histoire d’une dévalorisation, XVIII^e–XX^e siècles* [Farewell to Literature: A History of a Depreciation, Eighteenth-Twentieth Centuries], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2005.

48 Albert Thibaudet, “Mallarmé et Rimbaud” (1922), *Réflexions sur la littérature* [Reflections on Literature], Paris, Gallimard, 1936.

49 Vincent Kaufmann, *La Faute à Mallarmé: l’aventure de la théorie littéraire* [Mallarmé’s Fault: The Adventure of Literary Theory], Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2011, p. 30; author’s emphasis. Also see the commentary by Cosmin Toma, “Vincent Kaufmann, *La Faute à Mallarmé*,” *@analyses. Revue de critique et de théorie littéraire*, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring-Summer 2013, pp. 526–541.

50 See Laufer Laurie, “La sépulture mallarméenne. Pour un tombeau d’Anatole,” [The Mallarméan Burial. For a Tomb of Anatole] *Cliniques méditerranéennes*, vol 2, no. 80, 2009, pp. 97–110, cit. p. 97.

source of fascination for Philippe Artières. In one of the most moving fragments of this collection, published in 1961 by Jean-Pierre Richard under the title *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*, the poet establishes a strange pact with his lost son:

1)
 you can, with your little
 hands, drag me
 into your tomb – you
 have the right to –
 – myself
 who follow you, I
 let myself go –
 – but if you
 wish, we
 two shall make. . .
 2)
 a union
 a marriage, superb
 – and the life
 left in me
 I will use
 to – – – –⁵¹

The child's death leads Mallarmé to this strange endless finality, while the rest of the poem offers figures of erasure (“death – whispers softly / – I am nobody – / do not know myself”⁵²; “no more life for/ – / me/ and I feel/ lying in the tomb/ by your side”⁵³). It is striking to see a father entrust an intimate and unique tribute to such an idiosyncratic poetic form, to find the theoretical vocabulary of disappearance from *Igitur* used for the occasion of intimate grief. Rather than identifying here a kind of neurotic literarization of existence, one might be inclined to think that the “elocutionary disappearance of the poet”⁵⁴ is a response to the experience of grief evoked elsewhere in abstract terms. In other words, if “Mallarmé was constantly effacing himself from his own language, to the point of not wanting to figure in it except as an executant in a pure ceremony of the Book in

51 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*, ed. Jean-Pierre Richard, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2006, f. 39–40, pp. 177–178.

52 Mallarmé, *Pour un tombeau* f. 61, p. 199.

53 Mallarmé, *Pour un tombeau* f. 79, p. 217.

54 Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crise de vers,” [Verse Crisis] in *Divagations* (1897), *Œuvres complètes*, vol 2, ed. Bertrand Marchal, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, pp. 204–213, cit. p. 211.

which the discourse would compose itself,” as Michel Foucault writes,⁵⁵ if in his work “literature is heading towards itself, towards its essence, which is its disappearance,”⁵⁶ as Blanchot contends, it is to face a death that is not conceptual but rather encountered concretely with the mourning of Anatole. Like the young Freud, Mallarmé hypnotized himself. Far from being useless or autotelic, the writing of negativity served as a self-therapeutic psychological device that contributed to a remediation of grief: it was a solution for the one writing, it proposed solutions to the one reading. The imaginary contract Mallarmé concluded with the word allowed him to outlive his son, “the life left in me” at the cost of the loss of the subject as well as the object of the poem. The impassivity, distance, and intransitivity of art are also responses to trauma; they are particular psychological solutions in which representation is symbolically sacrificed for the sake of spiritual healing or a sanitized bubble protected from the contaminations of the world. “He says that compassion is suffering added to suffering, and that’s why he prefers to remain positive and rejoice in the misfortune of others,” writes Eric Chevillard in *L’Autofictif* [The Autofictional],⁵⁷ mocking both a “funerary literature” he invents titles for (“*My dog is dead, so is Daddy*” and “*Zoe’s cancer is starting to spread*”)⁵⁸ and the moralist tradition of Nisard: “Writers are spiritual guides, directors of conscience. Lost souls will not waste their time in consulting them, for they will know how to put them back on the right path. [. . .] Madness, fantasy, satire, belligerence and defiance, melancholy, and all the other black suns of poetry have rolled into the ditch with the milkmaid’s wagon.”⁵⁹ Jules Renard’s words, so right and so cruel, invariably come to mind: “Beauty of literature. I lose a cow. I write about its death, which brings me enough money to buy another cow.”⁶⁰

55 Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966), Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 317. English translation from *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 306.

56 Maurice Blanchot, “La disparition de la littérature,” [The Disappearance of Literature] *Le Livre à venir* (1959), Paris, Gallimard, 1986, pp. 265–274, cit. p. 265; see *Le Pas au-delà*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 62 et seq. English translation from Aaron Hillyer, *The Disappearance of Literature: Blanchot, Agamben, and the Writers of the No*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, p. 1.

57 Éric Chevillard, *L’Autofictif doyen de l’humanité: journal 2014–2015*, Talence, L’Arbre vengeur, 2016, p. 65.

58 Chevillard, *L’Autofictif en vie sous les décombres* [The Autofictional Alive under the Rubble], p. 79.

59 Chevillard, *Démolir Nisard: roman* [Demolishing Nisard: A Novel], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2006, p. 64.

60 Jules Renard, *Journal inédit, 1903–1905* [Unpublished Diary, 1903–1905], ed. Henri Bachelin with Jean-Paul Hippeau, Paris, Typographie François Bernouard, 1927, entry from 26 September 1903, p. 1040.

The paradox is perhaps that while the literatures of compassion and empathy may play a participatory role, the modalities of writing that are the most impassive or distanced, whether out of abstraction or irony, are no less active: through an indirect form of utilitarianism, they may aim to protect an individual from suffering or to warn against potentially dangerous social representations by mocking their discourses and deconstructing their storytelling. It is not my intention here to psychoanalyze Mallarmé, to bring his bad faith into check, or to follow in the footsteps of Henri Mondor, his doctor and executor, to reintroduce biographical explanations for an author who found such details inane. Nor do I wish to propose hypotheses about a purely tragic – or political⁶¹ – origin of literary intransitivity. Yet there is nothing to keep us from identifying in Mallarmé's negative theology a symbolic salvific construction that has its origins in grief. In a sense, it is as if the discourse of suspension and closure geared towards literary history could be read in light of a promise whispered to a dead child, as if literature, after Mallarmé, had withdrawn from the world in tribute. Beyond the question of the private uses of poetry and the possible transferability of an impassive, distanced, or ironic literature to medicine, such examples indeed invite us to write an external and heteronomous history of literature, or rather of the "literary" in the broad sense of the term: a history of the uses and functions attributed to the work of writing, focusing on the action of literature rather than its interpretation, investigating its experience and not its essence, at the risk of the psychologization or functionalist anthropologization of our theory of literature.

We do not know very much about the real ethical and psychological effectiveness, however quantifiable, of literature and its contemporary redefinition as a school of empathy, since the value of social sharing and of inner work on trauma and suffering remains subject to debate.⁶² On the other hand, there is no reason not to extend certain abstract "restorative" functions, such as the ability to correct and resolve normative divisions perceived as outdated or dangerous, to non-literary fiction (as found, for example, in series). However, the theme of a helping,

61 As suggested recently regarding Mallarmé, Jean-François Hamel, *Camarade Mallarmé: une politique de la lecture* [Comrade Mallarmé: A Politics of Reading], Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 2014; for Blanchot, Hadrien Buclin, *Maurice Blanchot ou l'autonomie littéraire* [Maurice Blanchot or Literary Autonomy], Lausanne, Éd. Antipodes, 2011.

62 The debate was launched with the article by James W. Pennebaker, "Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process," *Psychological Science*, vol. 8, no. 3, May 1997, pp. 162–166; I also refer to the very skeptical observations by Bernard Rimé, *Le Partage social des émotions* [The Social Sharing of Emotions], Paris, PUF, and the reflections by Luc Boltanski, *La Souffrance à distance: morale humanitaire, médias et politique* [Suffering at a Distance: Humanitarian Morality, Media and Politics], Paris, Métailié, 1993.

self-augmenting literature, a panacea that makes it possible to understand one's own life and that is useful to societies for thinking about uncertainty, is prevalent in many discourses, from medical studies to bookstore displays. This power is expressed metaphorically – Roland Barthes' lovely phrase comes to mind: "literature does not allow you to walk, but it does allow you to breathe,"⁶³ – though there have been attempts to find a rational explanation, whether psychoanalytical or cognitivist, for such presumed power that have appeared concurrently, though there are those such as Barbara Ehrenreich who have simply attributed this supposed universal power of the mind to act on the body and on events to a form of magical thinking that is theological in origin.⁶⁴

As demonstrated to the point of caricature by the extraordinary publicity given to a recent Yale University study claiming that reading increases life expectancy, with an estimated two years gained from the regular consumption of novels,⁶⁵ some of the key ideas examined here – that literature fosters empathy and makes people better, that the literary expression of trauma is freeing because it allows for the inventive reappropriation of experience, that writing and reading allow for the reconstruction of the self, that novelistic representation functions as a laboratory for thought, that one of the primary functions of literature is memorial and commemorative, and so on – have, in the space of a few decades, become commonplace. The scholarly explanation of the therapeutic transitivity of literature, drawing on somewhat vague cognitivist psychology, is becoming increasingly normalized: the wraparound band for the French edition of Matt Haig's "anti-depression" bestseller, *Rester en vie* (2016), published in 24 countries, quotes a journalist to proclaim that "Matt Haig uses words like can openers. Are we the cans"⁶⁶? The poetic games of an author like Emmanuelle Pagano are a far cry from such sensationalist copy, but the paradigm remains the same: in *Nouons-nous* [Let's tie the knot] (2013), a novel that serves as an inventory of all the forms of obsession that haunt our consideration of previous ties and an exploration of all forms of connection, the writer invents the following method, which takes the idea of an "antidepressant" novel quite literally:

63 R. Barthes, "Littérature et signification" (1961), in *Essais critiques* (1964), pp. 508–525, cit. p. 514.

64 See B. Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die*.

65 See especially Avni Bavishi, Martin D. Slade, Becca R. Levy, "A Chapter a Day: Association of Book Reading with Longevity," *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 164, Sept. 2016, pp. 44–48. For echos of such a study in popular culture, see for example Agathe Meyer, "Lire augmente l'espérance de vie," [Reading Increases Life Expectancy] Topsanté.com, 8 August 2016.

66 See the presentation of the book on the site for the publisher Philippe Rey.: www.philippe-rey.fr/livre-11Rester_en_vie-312-1-1-0-1.html.

He was on a ton of medication, anti-anxiety drugs, anti-depressants, sleeping pills. I replaced them with words of love. Little phrases written down on pieces of paper. Hundreds, thousands of them. I ordered transparent capsules in packages of five hundred from a website specializing in pharmaceutical products. I rolled up my tiny writings and inserted them into each capsule. To be read every day, morning, noon, and night.⁶⁷

In the same way that modern literature accompanied the first wave of individualism by offering forms of introspection and biographical representation, contemporary literature intervened to support a second wave of individualism in the 1970s by providing suitable models of sovereignty for “situative,” “combinable” and “revisable”⁶⁸ identities and results-oriented responses to the culture of trauma. It was believed that literature protected individuals from external instabilities thanks to its narrative frameworks while simultaneously offering them the promise of mobility, plurality, and uniqueness. Contemporary works thus interweave complex operations, potentially supporting expressive autonomy while also curing the individual of the illusion of singularity; grieving while refusing any possibility of forgetting; of giving narrative forms to genocides while proclaiming them unspeakable; as such, literature may then perhaps be defined as the very capacity of language to make these discursive contradictions coexist. To this end, therapeutic literature provides a writing of reconciliation and connection with the formal and stylistic experiments specific to the literatures of rupture and contestation that defined the twentieth century. Although it is not necessarily easy to distinguish among the sources and lineaments, there are several features, as discussed above, that ultimately characterize this paradigm and that can be interpreted in terms of cultural anthropology: literature is presumed to help both communities and individuals, and its action works as much through the social or individual appropriation of writing as through reading, which has an effect that is symmetrical to that of textual production. While the first-person narrative is the preferred form, it is not the only one, since the action of testimonial or investigative narratives is not distinguished from that of fictional narratives: it is considered to be parallel or complementary. Strongly marked by its “addresser,” to apply the linguistic term, this literature has explicit interlocutors and specific objects. Literary aid is invoked in situations where it is, to use the vocabulary of the medical profession, “non-substitutable” (end of life, cases overlooked by geography or history), but also in infinitely more ordinary cases that warrant an original re-appropriation of social or private existence.

⁶⁷ Emmanuelle Pagano, *Nouons-nous*, Paris, P.O.L., 2013, pp. 194–195.

⁶⁸ See the analyses by Hartmut Rosa, *Accélération: une critique sociale du temps* [Acceleration: A Social Critique of Time] (2005), trans. from the German by Didier Renault, Paris, La Découverte, 2010, pp. 297–300.

Charles Juliet's small collection entitled *Ces mots qui nourrissent et qui apaisent: phrases et textes relevés au cours de mes lectures*⁶⁹ was thus not such a far cry from a classical tradition of anthologies that served as medicinal vade mecums: like Juliet, there are writers who simply claim to access very ancient forms of self-care through self-narration – after all, Apollo, father to Asclepius, was both the god of poetry and of medicine. Others like Emmanuel Carrère and Maylis de Kerangal, accept the departure from a reflexive intransitivity and aristocratic gratuity, with literature viewed pragmatically as a collective and empirical mediation, to modify representations and repair the individual in danger: “this fish to be fished out, fish of beauty, fish-self,” as beautifully put by Wadji Mouawad.⁷⁰ Such neo-individualism has become a selling point for mass-market literature, and has been taken up *mutatis mutandis* by restricted literature. Even if we are to abandon the assumption that art is a supportive practice and a universal solution to human suffering, we at least ask it to restore the intelligibility of the world, being as we are in “a world knowing that without narrative there is no intelligence of the world,” as Jean Rouaud has written.⁷¹

This essay is, then, a cartography of contemporary sensibility, which contrasts with a postmodernity that is viewed as a nostalgic or ironic relationship to art, though it sometimes adopts its poetics. This abandonment of the dream of abstract universality and aloof autonomy is a clear turning point in our literary history. The digression that defined the aesthetic regime of literature for two centuries is coming to an end. Let's close with Gérard Macé's most beautiful metaphor:

The little thief who wanted to break the clocks [. . .]
is now the mechanic who wants to put the universe back together,
who wants to fix automata and the critically injured,
mechanical toys, in the memory of his father.⁷²

The literature that came before literature sought to represent the good, whereas the literature that comes after literature seeks to do good. Once a thief of fire, the writer is now a sentinel of the present or a witness of memory, a psychiatrist or a judge, a tailor, a social worker, a priest or investigator, a psychologist, a lawyer,

69 Charles Juliet (ed), *Ces mots qui nourrissent et qui apaisent: phrases et textes relevés au cours de mes lectures* [Words that Nourish and Soothe: sentences and texts I picked up during my readings], Paris, P.O.L., 2008.

70 W. Mouawad, “Je t’embrasse pour finir,” art. cited, p. 190.

71 Jean Rouaud, “Mort d’une certaine idée,” [Death of a Certain Idea] in M. Le Bris and J. Rouaud (eds), *Pour une littérature-monde*, pp. 7–22, cit. p. 21.

72 Gérard Macé, *Homère au royaume des morts a les yeux ouverts* [Homer in the realm of the dead has his eyes open], Paris, Le Bruit du temps, 2015, p. 14.

or even a mechanic of the soul: stitching back up, getting better, helping, healing, and saving are the guiding principles for twenty-first-century literature at a time when literature has become a way of coping with terrorism, thinking about the climate crisis, protecting the subject from the logics of digital surveillance, coping with health crises and lockdowns, and rearticulating forms of universality compatible with varied experiences as well as those that suffered from previous domination. In the face of doctrines in which “literature is called on for assistance,”⁷³ I have responded with both interest and perplexity: whether this new transitivity is seen as a fruitful and effective return to humanist literary optimism or an improvised and utilitarian response to the existential and social distress of the contemporary subject remains largely a matter of opinion.

⁷³ The expression comes from German sociologist Wolf Lepenies regarding the “Raconter la vie” series by Pierre Rosanvallon: “Wahre Romane zur Rettung der Demokratie,” *Die Welt*, 28 Jan. 2014.

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