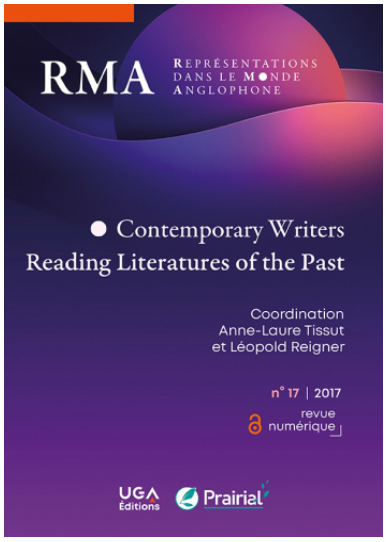

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Contemporary Writers Reading Literatures of the Past

Directeur de publication Anne-Laure Tissut et Léopold Reigner

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INTRODUCTION

Even before the development of a more international awareness of literature, partly thanks to extensive translation practices, writers have been finding inspiration not only from acknowledged literary traditions, but also in individual works from the past or contemporary times. Reading—writers' initial link with literature—offers material for writing, while fashioning writers' conceptions of literature, as well as their vision of their own work in relation to tradition.
This volume explores various forms of textual influence as manifested in the works of 20th and 21st centuries authors, to both trace continuities and assess said authors' "singularity", in Derek Attridge's terms. The papers gathered in this volume analyse a large variety of forms of influence, be they visible in the chosen topics or objects, in style, manner, or language itself—turns of speech, recurring motifs, or rhythmic patterns. Quotation, unacknowledged borrowing, allusion, imitation, parody, travesty, are but a few examples of the presence—unconscious or not—of another text in a literary work.

SOMMAIRE

Introduction

Anne-Laure Tissut et Léopold Reigner

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TEXTE

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2 This volume explores various forms of textual influence as manifested in the works of 20th and 21st centuries authors, to both trace continuities and assess said authors' "singularity", in Derek Attridge's terms. The papers gathered in this volume analyse a large variety of forms of influence, be they visible in the chosen topics or objects, in style, manner, or language itself—turns of speech, recurring motifs, or rhythmic patterns. Quotation, unacknowledged borrowing, allusion, imitation, parody, travesty, are but a few examples of the presence—unconscious or not—of another text in a literary work.

3 An author's writing with a forerunner's work in mind has been seen as part of an education process, as suggested by Walter Benjamin in *Understanding Brecht*.[1] To Howard Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, each writer misreads his forerunners, thus creating his own vision of earlier literature (p. xxiii), according to selection and distorting processes, often modified by cultural differences between the (mis)read and (mis)reading authors. Paying tribute, or at least attention, to another work when writing; unwittingly prolonging it or reformulating its major tenets in full consciousness, is also commonly viewed as a form of translation, whereby the reader/writer attempts

to reproduce the sensations he or she experienced when reading. In his essay *Le Roman multiple*, Adam Thirlwell even argued that literature keeps translating itself, as topics and forms move across continents and centuries.

4 Ultimately the analysis of the tensions between originality and imitation may offer a vision of literature as a regenerative force whereby previous writers' achievements keep being interpreted anew and thus given a new lease on life, while feeding the expression of new visions of literature and of creation in general. At stake throughout this collection are the complex processes of writing as well as of reading, which increasingly appear to be intricately woven together.

5 Dan Beachy-Quick opens the volume with a poetic meditation on influence, developing the river metaphor to explore the notion and express his "worry that our sense of influence has diminished". Indeed Beachy-Quick beautifully twists Bloom's concept of "anxiety of influence" to reformulate the poet's relationship to her predecessors, as "the anxiety to enter into those voices as fully as one can, and to sing within another poet's song". Such *ars poetica* requires a fusion of the poet's self into the larger poetic river: "Such is the effort influence might require of us whose dearest wish is to write what already has been written (and, I admit, I'm one of that number): to let the unchangeable attributes of what is not us give to us their shape." This overture ends with Beachy-Quick's poetically voicing anew the continuity of the forceful poetic river: "Singing / Removes you from the song, it finds a way / To be sung again, by another mouth, by other / Wings than yours."

6 Michael Federspiel, in "Aristote s'invite chez Nabokov: le ressort tragique dans *Lolita*", focuses on Nabokov's revisiting Aristotle's principles in his exploration of contemporary America. Federspiel demonstrates how, together with the beauty of his prose, the tragic mechanisms at work in Nabokov's novel may largely explain its success despite the reader's mixed feelings. Indeed "the reader comes to see in the characters' varying degree of abjection the reflection of essentially human shortcomings", and thus may be enabled to experience *catharsis*.

7 Léopold Reigner also chose to explore Nabokov's work, to trace and analyse the influence of his reading of Flaubert, hence, of an imaginary version of Flaubert's works. Through minute analyses of thematic and stylistic, even syntactical similitudes between the two bodies of work, Reigner brings to light two "axes of influence", namely, continuation and deviation, thus emphasizing "the force of individuality" in the appropriation process.

8 Nabokov's oeuvre remains at the center of interest in Elsa Court's paper, entitled "Nabokov, Kerouac, Updike: Exploring the Failed American Road Trip". Again, the interplay of influences is intricate since the paper uses Updike's writing *Rabbit, Run* (1960) "in reaction to the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) as "a background from which to think of an overdue comparison of Nabokov's and Kerouac's respective road epics". The "question of male identity and individualism in the context of the cultural politics of late-capitalism in the United States" is raised, through a minute comparative analysis of the three novels, paying special attention to the landscape of the road "and the way it is pitched as a symbol of social rules against the factitious sovereignty of the male motorist on the highway".

9 Pierre-Antoine Pellerin also studies the beat generation but through the specific angle of Whitman's ambiguous influence upon Kerouac, torn between conventionally celebrating Whitman as having created "a distinctly American verse that expressed the variety and grandeur of the young republic", and "lament[ing] the lyrical and sentimental outbursts from 'Song of Myself,' which in his eyes, betray a troubled and faltering masculine identity". Pellerin offers a critical reflection upon Bloom's theories of influence, suggesting the need to go beyond his vision of "influence as an Oedipal confrontation for authority" in the hope of "reveal[ing] the vicissitudes of literary masculinity in the postwar period", while providing "a renewed understanding of the relationship many poets had to Whitman and other male poets".

10 Florian Beauvallet, in his "The Singularity of Reading", tackles the topic of influence through British novelist's Adam Thirlwell's vision of the history of the novel, focusing on his paradoxical concept of "familiar originality". Inspired by Thirlwell's conception of the novel as a process of translation, running across borders and centuries,

Beauvallet calls upon Kafka, Roth, and Kundera, to name but a few, to define literary influence as "a two-way phenomenon, where past and present mingle in a reciprocal reinvention of the other through imagination and curiosity".

11 Sophie Chapuis starts from Jonathan Lethem's provocative statement that "plagiarism has become the twenty-first-century writer's condition", to explore the rich and complex intertextual play upon which Rick Moody builds his "stereophonic" autobiographies, namely *The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven* and *The Black Veil: A Memoir with Digressions*, thus revisiting the genre. Chapuis shows how Moody develops "a renewed relationship to the canon that both liberates from literary tradition and subverts the unique source of authority", as in the two considered books, "[t]he attempt at self-definition morphs into an openly collaborative project relying on intertextual practices and rhizomatic connections with past writers".

12 Focusing on Laird Hunt's *The Exquisite* and its tribute to W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*, Anne-Julie Debare endeavors to analyse the multifarious aspects of the "impression" left by Sebald upon the American novelist. In her paper, entitled "A Fellowship of Imaginations: Sebald's Aesthetics of Chiaroscuro in *The Exquisite* by Laird Hunt", she shows how Hunt's novel "becomes the locus of an extensive and fruitful exchange between what Pierre Bayard calls two 'inner books'", itself revealing of elective affinities between the two writers. The representation of pain, the criticism of historical discourse and the "aesthetics of indirection and chiaroscuro" are studied in both novels to demonstrate how Hunt's *The Exquisite* "tentatively prolongs [Sebald's] exploration of both real and intimate broken landscapes".

13 Clint Wilson offers to "rea[d] Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011) and its ironic retelling of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) as a postmodern experiment with the now famous Bloomian model", thus acknowledging the lasting relevance of such model while also revisiting it, "allow[ing] it to evolve alongside postmodern strains of irony, reflexivity, and metanarrative". The twist suggested by Wilson, who argues that *Pym* "is not anxious about its influences, but rather influenced by its anxieties", opens out the Bloomian model by challenging the rigidity of its categories, to

ultimately “cas[t] new forms of poetic identity and new valences of ‘anxiety’”.

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NOTES

1 “[…] a writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody” (Benjamin 98).

AUTEURS

Anne-Laure Tissut
Anne-Laure Tissut is a Professor of American Literature at the University of Rouen, France. Her research focuses on contemporary American literature, aesthetics, exchanges between forms and media as well as on translation. She also translates American and English fiction and poetry into French (Percival Everett, Nick Flynn, Amy Hollowell, Laird Hunt, Jerome Rothenberg, Adam Thirlwell, Steve Tomasula) and takes part in collective translations from French into American English.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/05274583X
HAL : https://cv.archives-ouvertes.fr/anne-laure-tissut
ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000046087261
BNF : https://data.bnf.fr/fr/14433257

Léopold Reigner
Léopold Reigner est doctorant en 3e année à l'université de Rouen, il travaille sur une thèse intitulée *Gustave Flaubert et Vladimir Nabokov : identité littéraire et continuité du processus créatif*, qui vise à mener une étude comparée de Gustave Flaubert et de Vladimir Nabokov, afin de déterminer la mesure de l'influence culturelle et artistique de l'auteur normand sur l'écriture de Nabokov.
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Epistemic Flow

Courant épistémique

Dan Beachy-Quick

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TEXTE

1 I like to think about those rivers coursing underground, swift currents hidden under the surface of the earth, like veins beneath the skin, I suppose, save when the river surges up it is not a wound but a spring—a spring like the one beside which young Pindar fell asleep, tired from the hunt, and woke to find some bees had built a hive inside his mouth. But who knows if such rivers exist. I don't. I've only encountered them in books, in poems, in ideas: a geography on loan. There's the Alph, Coleridge's opiate stream,

> […] the sacred river, ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea […]

whose name alone evokes the Hebrew letter *aleph*, initiatory vowel of the alphabet entire but which carries no sound of its own. Or so some say. Other scholars claim *aleph* is the sound of the throat opening to speak, making a fountain of that other hidden river, speech. There's also the river Styx, on whose agitated waters the gods themselves swear their oaths. And Acheron, across whose waters Charon rows—if they've remembered to carry with them a coin—the newly dead souls. That river of lamentation, Cocytus. And among the others, perhaps my favorite, the river Lethe, that river that undoes the mind, turns memory into oblivion, and quenches the thirst for truth, or the difficulty of knowledge, with forgetfulness, once you bend down at the bank, and take a sip of its waters.

2 There is another river, too, not exactly underground, river that is every river and so is also no river at all. Heraclitus describes it: "You

cannot step in the same river twice." Sometimes I call that river Memory; sometimes I call that river Mind. When thought teases us out into helpless waters and threatens the life it promised to explain, when beloved faces have no features but a blur and one must add the detail back in, we find we have stepped into that river, that river inside us. And then there is the river I call Light, which fills the nightly emptied channels, those arroyos some call self, and through the eyes pours in another day.

3 The etymology of *influence* comes from the Latin, and means "a flowing in." That flowing in is both an astrological term speaking of that spiritual flow of ethereal forms into human life, and the flow of water. As a principle, *influence* speaks to a radical relation between us and all we exist among, material realities but also the forces that inform those realities. But "realities" feels like a word not exactly right. I mean those gathered moments of intensity that seem, along with us, to endure for a time Time itself (that river Time), before the flow that forms them joins them wholly to its larger motion, and what was, flows away. Bodies, ideas, books; memories, love, children; the gifts of days, the gifts of night; the sun and the Milky Way, all have coursing within them the river Lethe, a river coursing also through *Alethia*, Greek word for Truth, whose subterranean influence reminds the mind that oblivion flows inside all that once became obvious.

4 As a poet born in the later 20th century, and writing across the millennium into this new one, I worry that our sense of influence has diminished, and the flow of those mighty rivers has grown weaker. Ezra Pound's dictum, "Make it new," in echo still urges certain assumptions of what marks poetic validity: eases of experiment, cleverness as innovation. But Heraclitus might view that Modernist advice in his ancient light, and remind us that what is new isn't what is without precedent, isn't what hasn't been encountered before—he would point at a river, any river would do, and remind us that what always has been and still is, is what is new. There is no work that must be done to "make it new," save to step in, to open eyes, to open mouth, by which I also mean, to open mind—to find some way to let what flows, flow in.

5 Socrates, in the *Cratylus*—the dialog in which he considers the origins of language—seeks out what rivers flow beneath the surface

of words. For a time, his interest lingers in the various words for knowledge itself:

> Hermogenes: What is the word?
> Socrates: Wisdom (φρονησις); for it is perception (νοησις) and flowing (ρου); or it might be understood as benefit (ονησις) of motion (φορας); in either case it has to do with motion… And επιστημη (knowledge) indicates that the soul which is of any account accompanies (επεται) things in their motion, neither falling behind them nor running in front of them; therefore we ought to enter an epsilon and call it επειστημη… Certainly σοφια (wisdom) denotes the touching of motion. This word is very obscure and of foreign origin; but we must remember that the poets often say of something which begins to advance rapidly εσυθη (it rushed). There was a famous Laconian whose name was Σους (Rush), for this is the Laconian word for rapid motion. Now σοφια signifies the touching (επαφη) of this rapid motion, the assumption being that things are in motion. (Plato 99)

A subtle strain of irony: Socrates is here explaining the occult etymologies of the words for wisdom and knowing to Hermogenes whose name means "born of Hermes," trickster god who gave to humans the alphabet and so the language that from those letters followed. But beneath the irony, and under the playful teasing out of words the hidden springs of their meanings, a poetic realization meanders to the surface. It is, Socrates claims, an understanding to which poets might come first, and though it sounds simple, it is not: that all is in motion.

6 Wisdom touches that motion, and knowledge—at least, that knowledge I might hazard to call poetic—joins things in their motion, not falling behind, not getting ahead. The first implication involves the work of reading. Rather than the effort to pull from a text some knowledge that then becomes one's own—a possession of a sort, one to add to the accumulated treasure as a miser adds another coin to the glimmering pile, a selfish economy that reflects back to oneself the illusion of expertise—the reader who reads wisely enters into a poem to catch up to the speed of its current, joins the flow of the thought coursing just below the words, and rather than place herself as net or sieve within the rush, hoping to catch what lives in the flow, becomes the flow, and so is herself the life carried along in the larger

motion. To emerge is, so strangely, so wondrously, not to think alone —but the river that flowed through the poem has also dug its channel into you, and in that bewildering canyonlands that might serve as image of the self entire, another fold for thought and perception to flow through has been etched. The self, seen as in a map, or from a height, is but that landscape such influences have carved—and when the storm comes, be it thunderclap of inspiration, or flash flood of sudden vision, that moment's force fills the self that influence formed.

7 So it is the poets I care most for, and the poet I would most want to be, possess an unexpected anxiety when it comes to influence—not the anxiety that leads to drawing away from those voices that might overwhelm and subsume one's own, but the anxiety to enter into those voices as fully as one can, and to sing within another poet's song.

8 I'm not speaking of imitation, though perhaps there is no finer story to illustrate my point than Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." In the tale, the speaker in guise of literary scholar of (and friend to) Pierre Menard, offers a complete list of all the author wrote—a number of monographs on philosophers and poets, including those on Leibniz and Valery, a translation of Quevedo, and a number of poems, symbolist in nature, sonnet in form. The speaker goes on:

> This is the full extent (save for a few vague sonnets of occasion destined for Mme. Henri Bachelier's hospitable, or greedy, *album des souvenirs*) of the *visible* lifework of Pierre Menard, in proper chronological order. I shall turn now to the other, the subterranean, the interminably heroic production—the *œuvre nonpareil*, the *œuvre* that must remain—for such are our human limitations!—unfinished. This work, perhaps the most significant writing of our time, consists of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII. I know that such a claim is on the face of it absurd; justifying that "absurdity" shall be the primary object of this note. (Borges 38)

Let me join in with this anonymous scholar in seeking to justify the absurdity of his claim by further clarifying the hopes of Pierre Menard himself:

> Those who have insinuated that Menard devoted his life to writing a contemporary *Quixote* besmirch his illustrious memory. Pierre Menard did not want to compose *another* Quixote, which surely is easy enough—he wanted to compose *the* Quixote. Nor, surely, need one be obliged to note that his goal was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes. (39).

This ambition, which at first blush seems laughable, later seems a sober miracle. Genius is pulled from the intimate confines of a single personality and is revealed instead as a common source, available to all—or to any of that all willing to do the subterranean work of digging down beneath the surface to seek the source. There it is one finds the coursing river not yet named, the river Influence. To enter it is to lose oneself, to lose one's voice, or to learn to listen differently, so that one's own words are but the echo of what other mouths are saying, as in the Greek Chorus of old, where *I* is a word that says *All*.

9 None of these ideas are new, nor are they meant to be. I am not a poet, or a thinker, who wants to "Make it new." To tell the truth, I don't know what that imperative means. As Plutarch claimed of Socrates, that he could hear the voices articulate in the air, a vision by which I've come to suspect that every utterance from a human life still speaks itself above us, and the gathering clouds on any given day are a conversation, and the atmosphere is just an opportunity to eavesdrop. But there is a counter-side to the same fact, an influential articulation deep in the chthonic rivers that shape within each of us whatever it is intelligence and perception come to be in a given life. If it is so, and if one can dig down within oneself (Paul Celan: "There was earth in them and they dug") deep enough, one can find that necessity of thinking that urged the great works of literature to become what they became, and only an arrogant fool would think that, once the book or poem is written, the source within it is gone. How could it be so? Then like a tree whose root taps down into empty aquifer in a land of drought the life would wither and offer no fruit. But this tree of knowledge, rooted in influence, so awfully and full-of-awe blooms.

10 I know there were rivers running through Eden, and though I've forgotten their names, I have my suspicions that those waters still flow. If so, they carry something still of Adam's mythic act of naming—no arbitrary effort, but cleverness or act of will, but so simply a seeing the deep signature in all things and saying for them the name they cannot speak themselves. Perhaps it is what is too easily forgotten, and whose consequences become selfishly lamentable, that no one needs to make their own language—it is already there, speaking.

11 How to speak with it is the influential question. For John Keats, it required the realization that the poet's self was no self at all:

> As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character [...] what shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of Saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children... (Keats 195)

12 The end of such annihilation isn't death, but a poem. It is one composed not of one's identical self—though the vestiges of the helpless fact of living one's own life cannot help but inform the work

that springs out up within it—but of those realities which have so pressed up within the writer that make his mouth their own. Such is the effort influence might require of us whose dearest wish is to write what already has been written (and, I admit, I'm one of that number): to let the unchangeable attributes of what is not us give to us their shape. The poet's open mouth, that invocatory O, is also the mouth of the cave deep within which Influence flows. One way to write is to walk straight into the poet's mouth.

13 And so I try—

> *Ode to a—*[1]
> 1.
> I wake. Sometimes it's that simple. Numb
> In the morning's dumb cloud-muted light
> I hear the rain fall drop by drop into the plum
> Tree growing purple rocks, bruises that delight
> The eye, high on the highest branch, but leave
> The mind empty as the empty mouth. O—
> For a mouthful of that—. Almost all of it is out of reach.
> Little alarm bell of the thrush's throat, leave
> Your song alone. Learn as I've learned. Let it go.
> Beauty thinks in fevers. Sings an ache it likes to teach.
> 2.
> From deep within the tree the lesson starts.
> At the student's approach, the teacher
> Departs. It's how I learned to tighten my heart
> Into a book with a clasp no key opens, fair
> Warning to anyone who fears each page
> Must be blank. It works if it beats. It works
> If between its covers it keeps its heat.
> To ask it your question requires the lost age
> Return new. That can't happen. I've tried to jerk
> The centuries back with a word or two, to cheat
> 3.
> Time with sweet rhymes, to make a bird a chime
> That in the gloom behind the eye rings true.
> Here I've sat somehow inside myself, time
> Beginning to turn a few hairs gray, youth
> No longer young. There's a simple thing I want
> To say, but the words don't work right,
> Don't ease this maze of mind back into a bower,

> But sorrow thought more intricate, taint
> The bright eye with lead. Even the sunlight
> Mocks what it brightens, murmuring *tomorrow*,
> 4.
> Darkens the moment's shine as shade gathers
> Deep within the leaves—where thrush, you sing—
> Long before dusk rushes the shadows in, long before
> A feather from a hectic breast goes missing
> In the uncut, full-of-night, grass. Love too is lost.
> Love walks in the dark on a palsied foot
> Reciting lines memorized long ago about the toil
> Of old heroes who died, ocean-tossed,
> After crushing ancient towers into dust, not
> Not knowing what else to do, but die—.
> 5.
> I cannot see what flowers are at my feet.
> I wouldn't know their names if I could.
> Memory litters the dark with words grown sweet
> In the mouth. To say one out loud
> Forms in the dark a little cloud that rains
> Down sense. White eglantine. Musk rose.
> They hum in the ear like the flies that haunt
> The honey they sip. It takes so much pain
> To see what is not there to see. To breathe deep in
> The missing scent. So you sing, I suppose.
> 6.
> And I listen. I try to sing along. To quiet
> Death into a child's game a child fears
> But not for long, where death dies and quits
> The charade, stands up, wipes away tears
> And says, *it's okay*. You choose your gloom.
> Emperors have heard this same song;
> So has my mother, Ruth, teaching her students
> Division in public school classrooms,
> Speaking softly to the dim child, *the answer's wrong*,
> *Try again*. Getting it right comes by accident.
> 7.
> I'm trying again. The same thing I always try.
> To hear the thrush sing abroad its soul
> In such an ecstasy—. Not an irony.
> Melody that deep in the blood tolls
> Now as always it's tolled, heart-bell

> That breaks the mind with ringing, ringing—
> Thrush, I hear you, you sing it out as always
> It's been sung, to fathers as to sons, to tell
> All what we would rather not know. Singing
> Removes you from the song, it finds a way
> 8.
> To be sung again, by another mouth, by other
> Wings than yours. Forlorn. The word
> Weighs down my tongue as years before
> It brooded down another's. Fate has one cure:
> To repeat the music even as it flees, or is fled
> Already, always, perfect seed of the ever-past
> Tense. For just a moment, just a song sung deep
> Within these fading leaves, I think I lived.
> I think so. I'm not sure. It didn't last—

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NOTES

1 "Ode to a—" first appeared in the literary journal, *Interim*.

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Mots-clés
poétique, épistémologie, Keats (John), Borges (Jorge Luis), Cratyle, influence, imitation

Keywords
poetics, epistemology, Keats (John), Borges (Jorge Luis), Cratylus, influence, imitation

AUTEUR

Dan Beachy-Quick
Dan Beachy-Quick is a poet and essayist, author most recently of a collection of essays, fragments, and poems, *Of Silence & Song* (Milkweed Editions, 2017). His work has been supported by the Lannan and Guggenheim Foundations, and he teaches in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Colorado State University.
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Aristote s'invite chez Nabokov : le ressort tragique dans *Lolita*

Aristotle Invites Himself in Nabokov's Lolita: *The Novel's Tragic Configuration*

Michael Federspiel

DOI : 10.35562/rma.1507

PLAN

TEXTE

Introduction

1 Soixante ans après sa publication, il n'est plus aucun doute possible quant à la valeur canonique du roman le plus controversé de Nabokov. Les lecteurs de *Lolita*[1], s'ils s'accordent sur la qualité littéraire indéniable de l'œuvre, ne manquent en général pas de se

souvenir également du trouble qu'ils ont ressenti au sortir du récit. Après tout, la plupart d'entre eux sont bien conscients d'avoir lu l'histoire plutôt nauséabonde d'un pervers qui kidnappe pour ses voluptés une pré-adolescente sans défense, et éprouvent donc naturellement une pointe de culpabilité à l'idée d'avoir pu apprécier l'exercice. Certains se sont sans doute à l'occasion posé la question de leur stabilité mentale ou de leur santé affective. Alors pourquoi cette réaction ambivalente chez le lecteur ? Ou plutôt : comment Nabokov ouvre-t-il au lecteur la possibilité d'aimer ce que l'on ne peut tolérer ?

2 Il est évident qu'un des défis de Nabokov avec un thème comme celui-ci était de maintenir le contact avec son lecteur jusqu'au bout de cette terrible histoire, car si une forme de morbidité initiale, d'attirance pour l'interdit, pouvait expliquer que l'on ouvre le livre, cette morbidité ne suffisait pas en revanche à garantir la poursuite de la lecture jusqu'à l'épilogue. Pour séduire son lecteur, un roman comme *Lolita* met en œuvre beaucoup de ressorts. La beauté lyrique ou de composition, le jeu, le dialogisme en sont quelques-uns parmi d'autres. Mais le ressort qui nous intéresse ici est plus ancien, et me paraît peut-être le mieux à même d'expliquer le mouvement d'attrait-répulsion du lecteur face au contenu du roman. On peut en effet postuler que l'une des raisons qui pousse à lire *Lolita* est un besoin de se trouver confronté à des contenus qui menacent nos valeurs, et que cette confrontation, si elle est orchestrée convenablement, remplit l'antique office de la *catharsis*, telle qu'elle a été théorisée par Aristote. En d'autres termes, les passions sourdes qui pourraient encore animer le lecteur soumis aux bonnes règles de la vie publique seraient expurgées via le ressort tragique.

3 Bon nombre de critiques ont isolé à raison des aspects tragiques du roman, mais ceux-ci ne sont pas suffisants pour parler de *catharsis*. Aussi conviendra-t-il ici de faire émerger dans la construction globale du roman une ligne qui confine à la tragédie antique, et le long de laquelle ces différents éléments tragiques peuvent s'imbriquer.

Destins cruels, mythes et antiquité : rapide tour d'horizon des emprunts au *topos* tragique dans *Lolita*

4 Dans un courrier de 1956 à son collègue Morris Bishop, Nabokov déclarait: « *Lolita* is a tragedy. » Si l'on considère dans un premier temps une acception large du terme « tragique » (à savoir la qualité d'une situation propice à exciter chez le témoin la tristesse ou une forte réaction émotionnelle), la veine tragique apparaît rapidement comme socle du roman, et cela dès l'histoire de celle qui préfigure Lolita, soit la jeune Annabel Leigh.

5 L'expérience amoureuse sans cesse contrariée qui lie Humbert enfant à Annabel connaît en effet une fin prématurée, puisque la jeune fille est arrachée à leurs émois par le départ de sa famille, et meurt quelques mois plus tard du typhus à Corfou (13). Cette histoire dramatique s'appuie sur le poème d'Edgar Allan Poe intitulé *Annabel Lee* (1849), qui développe le thème de l'amour éternel tout en étant parcouru d'un fort courant mythologique, deux ingrédients essentiels de nombreuses tragédies. Ainsi, dans le poème de Poe, l'amour de deux jeunes personnes est tant jalousé par les créatures célestes que celles-ci ordonnent la mort de la jeune femme. Son amoureux transi finit par la veiller à même sa tombe. On retrouve dans ce schéma les résonances du tragique *Romeo and Juliet*, en même temps qu'une référence claire à des puissances supérieures, jalouses et potentiellement malveillantes, qui s'ingèrent dans les projets des mortels, telles qu'elles figurent dans la mythologie grecque. Enfin, le mythe des sirènes, cousines maritimes des nymphes, justement, semble apparaître en filigrane dans ce « royaume près de la mer ». Ce substrat mythologique faisant partie intégrante de la tragédie sous sa forme antique, il n'est pas étonnant de le retrouver au cœur d'un roman présenté par son auteur comme une tragédie, et recherchant les mêmes effets sur son lecteur que ce genre théâtral.

6 Il est assez aisé de remarquer que l'antiquité et ses mythes, ou l'histoire des civilisations de manière plus générale, alimentent constamment la prose de Humbert, sous l'égide de l'érudit Nabokov. Ainsi l'obsession de Humbert pour les nymphettes, dès lors qu'il en fait la confession, est immédiatement érigée au rang de mythe. La description de son attirance particulière pour ce type de jeunes filles, en tout début de roman, se fait d'emblée en des termes mystiques, tandis que la taxinomie qu'il propose repose sur un emprunt clair à la mythologie :

> Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of 9 and 14 there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets". (16)

Comme toujours chez Nabokov, il convient cependant de noter que l'emprunt générique au mythe n'est pas pur, mais hybridé, ici avec les normes de l'article scientifique qui présenterait une idée et proposerait une terminologie. Dans la même veine, on pourra également se rappeler que « Les Chasseurs Enchantés », hôtel isolé dans lequel Humbert planifie de s'approprier Lolita et lieu emblématique de la consommation de l'amour nymphique, laisse à voir en bonne place dans la salle de réception une fresque figurant des dryades, des chasseurs enchantés et des animaux surprenants. Si la fresque est de mauvais goût, elle n'en attire pas moins l'attention du lecteur sur l'existence de ce substrat mythologique, même dénaturé.

7 La mythologie qui parcourt *Lolita* et sous-tend la tragédie antique, mythologie si chère à C. G. Jung en tant que source de notre inconscient collectif (*Psychologie de l'inconscient*) et qui a cohabité du temps de l'antiquité avec des disciplines dont nous faisons toujours grand cas aujourd'hui (médecine, philosophie…), laisse la part belle à toutes les formes d'une sexualité débridée.

8 L'emploi récurrent par Nabokov de cette mythologie n'est donc pas un hasard, puisque son caractère à la fois élevé et lubrique participe efficacement à l'entreprise humbertienne visant à prononcer le divorce entre moralité et beauté. Citant « un ancien poète », Humbert

nous déclare ainsi : « The moral sense in mortals is the duty / We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty » (283). En d'autres termes, nous « mortels » (on remarquera l'usage de la même épithète que celle figurant dans les récits mythologiques, servant à opposer les humains aux dieux) aurions pour devoir de ne voir le beau que dans les actions moralement acceptables. Néanmoins, si l'on parvient à désolidariser ces deux notions, l'on peut avoir accès à une conception du beau autrement plus divine, dans laquelle le sexe deviendrait « l'auxiliaire de l'art », comme Humbert le dit si bien (259). Cette position tenue par Humbert est d'ailleurs confirmée par Nabokov lui-même, qui s'en explique dans un entretien accordé en 1959 à Pierre Dumayet : « *Lolita* est la solution harmonieuse et élégante à un problème que je me suis posé » (« Lectures pour tous », 21 octobre 1959, archives de l'INA).

9 En dehors d'un intertexte mythologique plus ou moins transparent et accessible, Humbert évoque également les civilisations antiques dans le but évident de suspendre notre jugement sur ses pulsions, puisqu'à d'autres temps correspondent d'autres mœurs. Il évoque ainsi tour à tour le goût de l'auteur romain Virgile pour les jeunes personnes, plus particulièrement les garçons (19), les temples grecs et leur tradition du fascinum, cet objet sexuel que Humbert dit imposé à de jeunes mariées de dix ans (19). Il regrette encore le monde d'avant Jésus Christ, où les Orientaux usaient pour leur divertissement du charme de la jeunesse, et où de jeunes filles pouvaient être cueillies entre le travail et les bains par les Romains (124). En rappelant que Grecs et Romains s'adonnaient à la pédophilie, il espère prouver la nature arbitraire et temporaire de l'interdit, et démontrer le relativisme de nos lois.

10 Toutes ces références alimentent une émulsion antique qui baigne constamment le roman, et qui fertilise son contenu mythique ou mythologique.

La tragédie chez Aristote et sa transcription chez Nabokov

11 La tragédie grecque est une forme de théâtre antique très codifié. Nombre de tragédies content des histoires insoutenables ou

perturbantes pour l'imaginaire du spectateur. Aristote, dans sa *Poétique* (*circa* 335 avant J.-C.) établit que la tragédie comporte une « action noble, conduite jusqu'à sa fin et ayant une certaine étendue […] c'est une imitation faite par des personnages en action et non par le moyen d'une narration, et qui par l'entremise de la pitié et de la crainte, accomplit la purgation des émotions […] » (92-93). Il avance que la structure millimétrée des tragédies et leur caractère mimétique de la société sont propres à susciter chez le spectateur une sorte de choc empathique, qui permet à son tour une purgation des passions de même type que celles observées. On garantit ainsi que le public de la tragédie, une fois rendu à la vie réelle, se trouvera lavé de toute frustration, et ainsi de tout désir de transgression.

12 La tragédie fait très rapidement dans l'Antiquité l'objet d'une récupération politique, dans le but de pacifier les foules en fournissant un exutoire à leurs passions. Ainsi le tyran Pisistrate, au VI^e^ siècle avant Jésus Christ, organise déjà à Athènes des concours tragiques dont le but politique est de lui éviter les soulèvements populaires vécus par ses prédécesseurs. La tragédie, à des degrés divers, offre au public un reflet de sa société et de son temps. Elle peut être à cet égard rapprochée d'événements comme le Carnaval, qui possédait au Moyen Âge une fonction sociale similaire : pendant la durée limitée de ces manifestations, les règles habituelles perdent leur caractère absolu et le peuple peut vivre des situations ou des sentiments extrêmes par procuration.

Dramatis personæ

13 Du point de vue de la distribution, la tragédie grecque est inspirée des grands récits épiques, dont elle est proche, nous expose Aristote (90, 92). Elle est à l'origine fondée sur l'opposition entre un acteur (qui raconte) et le chœur (qui commente le récit). Puis, de narrateur dans les premières tragédies, l'acteur devient protagoniste, avant que le nombre de personnages ne croisse, à partir de Sophocle et d'Euripide, augmentant ainsi le caractère mimétique des représentations (Aristote 90).

14 Force est de constater que l'on trouve immédiatement dans *Lolita* ce qui ressemble de prime abord au monologue de l'acteur tragique Humbert, qui se fait le conteur de sa propre histoire. À l'ouverture de

Lolita, c'est donc comme s'il n'existait aucune autre entité partie prenante de l'histoire (aucun deutéragoniste, aucun tritagoniste) en dehors de l'unique aède Humbert. Simple narrateur à ce stade, il n'est pas encore non plus l'acteur intradiégétique de son récit rétrospectif à venir.

15 Il faut en effet attendre quasiment trente pages avant qu'Humbert ne laisse poindre le timbre timide d'un premier personnage secondaire au discours direct. Si d'autres acteurs tardent à apparaître, l'audience virtuelle de l'acteur Humbert est en revanche prise en compte dès l'ouverture, comme lorsqu'il s'adresse directement aux membres du jury de son procès à venir (« Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one », 9). Le lecteur lui-même fait l'objet de nombreuses apostrophes alimentant les fonctions phatiques et conatives décrites par Jakobson (209-248), et qui peuvent être comprises comme des émanations de l'art théâtral (ex. « mark, O reader », *Lolita* 65).

16 Humbert semble ensuite suivre l'évolution historique de la tragédie grecque, abandonnant son rôle de conteur tragique pour endosser celui d'acteur. On pourra ainsi noter que le *narrateur* Humbert, enfermé dans sa prison, s'efface au profit du *personnage* Humbert dès la fin du premier chapitre (9), pour ne réapparaître que sporadiquement (et brièvement) p. 13, puis p. 21, 31, 40, 56, 69, etc. La scène théâtrale est donc largement dominée par les actions du personnage Humbert, qui joue sa propre histoire. Le conteur s'efface ainsi au profit de l'acteur, favorisant une imitation de la réalité (*mimesis*), ou tout du moins une grande proximité avec elle.

17 Progressivement s'installent enfin le deutéragoniste Lolita et le tritagoniste Quilty, soit le trio tragique des tragédies classiques les plus « récentes » (ex. L'*Oreste* d'Euripide). Le personnage de Lolita apparaît ainsi, à travers le prisme des yeux de Humbert, à la page 39, et va progressivement prendre substance au cours de la première partie du livre. La construction du personnage se fait d'abord indirectement, par le biais des élucubrations du narrateur et des entrées de son journal intime, puis de manière plus palpable à la fin de la première partie et au cours de la seconde partie, après la mort accidentelle de Charlotte. Lolita obtient soudain sa place d'actrice en même temps qu'elle gagne pour la première fois une voix au discours direct, après la mort de sa mère. Il est à cet égard peu surprenant de

trouver notre nymphette lisant « Baker's *Narrative Technique* » (198), grâce à laquelle elle apprend à donner corps à son personnage, autant dans le roman en lui-même que dans la pièce de théâtre intra- et métatextuelle à laquelle elle s'apprête à prendre part. Quilty apparaît quant à lui en filigrane en fin de première partie et dans la seconde partie. En sa qualité de tritagoniste, il est bien moins « présent » à la scène que ne peuvent l'être les deux autres acteurs. Sa plus importante apparition est aussi celle qui marque sa fin, lors d'une sanglante confrontation dont la mise en scène, nous le verrons plus tard, n'est encore une fois pas étrangère à l'art tragique grec. Nos trois acteurs et l'aède (ou conteur tragique) Humbert nous livrent donc une forme de la tragédie antique pourtant étonnamment inscrite dans le décor de l'Amérique des années 1950.

Mimesis et construction du décor

18 *Lolita* a parfois été perçue comme une peinture de la société américaine des années 1950. Certains journalistes de l'époque n'avaient d'ailleurs pas manqué d'en faire la remarque à la publication de *Lolita* en langue française. André Billy disait ainsi par exemple dans son article paru dans *Le Figaro* du 27 mai 1959 : « Au total, *Lolita* peut être interprété comme un long pamphlet contre les mœurs du pays où l'auteur a choisi de vivre. » Les motels fréquentés par le couple en cavale, qui abritent une certaine dose de perversion ordinaire (Humbert livre une description peu engageante de leurs tenanciers, p. 146, comme de leurs clients, p. 116), le monde aguicheur de la publicité et l'argot acidulé des nymphettes dévergondées, le *roadtrip* au cœur des paysages américains, la tranquille banlieue américaine bien-pensante de Ramsdale, tout cela contribue effectivement à ancrer le roman et ses personnages dans une époque et un pays, et à en faire potentiellement un emblème de cette société. Mais Nabokov se défendait de vouloir donner des leçons, et il s'exprimait volontiers sur la manière dont, après avoir « inventé » sa Russie, il s'était mis en tête d'inventer cette Amérique qui l'accueillait (312). Celle qu'il met en scène pour son lecteur dans *Lolita* a surtout le mérite de constituer une toile de fond pour le spectateur de sa tragédie.

19 La relative différence qui peut exister entre l'idée que l'on se fait d'un environnement familier et sa représentation (potentiellement torturée) dans une œuvre est d'ailleurs propice à provoquer tout au moins une forme de défamiliarisation, allant potentiellement jusqu'à « l'inquiétante étrangeté » que Freud définit dans son essai du même nom. Il paraît intéressant à ce stade de notre étude de nous pencher plus avant sur la définition de « l'inquiétante étrangeté », dans la mesure où ce concept éclaire selon moi le fonctionnement de la *catharsis* tragique.

20 Les pièces qui étaient auparavant déclamées à une seule voix dans l'Antiquité évoluent pour être progressivement *jouées* par plusieurs acteurs. Dès lors, le jeu théâtral se rapproche de la réalité du spectacteur, créant la *mimesis* et facilitant l'identification du spectateur avec les personnages. Ce même spectateur, qui voit à présent dans le jeu théâtral une représentation de son propre monde, sera également en mesure de déceler les légères différences qui subsistent entre réalité intra et extra-diégétiques. Or c'est justement de ces différences entre la réalité diégétique et la réalité objective que découle toute la puissance d'une tragédie mimétique, car ces menues différences créent l'inquiétante étrangeté, qui est une voie d'accès au réprimé, selon Freud. Voir une tragédie permettrait donc au spectateur d'accéder (via des personnages miroirs) à ses conflits internes, à ce que la société a exigé qu'il réprime, et ainsi à interroger et assainir son rapport à la réalité grâce à la fiction.

21 La sensation « d'inquiétante étrangeté » apparaît d'après Freud lorsque l'inconscient est confronté à une situation ou à un événement qu'il a déjà rencontré auparavant, et qui présente une composante dont la gestion psychique pose problème. Le tableau problématique initial a d'abord été dévié vers un réservoir de souvenirs réprimés, puis cause un malaise lorsqu'il réapparaît sous une forme ou une autre. Le préfixe « un- » dans « *unheimlich* » est ainsi la marque du refoulé pour Freud (113). Ce qui est refoulé doit nécessairement avoir d'abord été rencontré une première fois, d'où la notion de « *heimlich* », ou familier.

22 L'origine de cette sensation est multiple selon Freud. Elle comporte d'abord la notion d'incertitude intellectuelle : « quand la frontière entre fantasme et réalité se trouve effacée » (111), chaque fois que les

circonstances défient l'entendement au sein même d'un environnement familier, alors apparaît l'inquiétante étrangeté. C'est le cas dans l'exemple donné par Freud de sa propre mésaventure lorsque, se promenant au gré du hasard, il vient à arpenter le quartier des prostituées d'une grande ville italienne. Malgré tous ses efforts pour s'en éloigner au plus vite, et comme si la structure de l'espace n'obéissait plus aux règles qu'on lui connaît, notre malheureux docteur viennois finit toujours par se retrouver à son point de départ. Ce passage cocasse de l'essai de Freud présente des similitudes intéressantes avec le parcours de Rita, dans *Lolita*, attirée malgré elle par la ville de Grainball, dont l'accès lui a été formellement interdit par son frère car ce dernier y entretient des ambitions politiques.

23 La thématique du labyrinthe, plus généralement, est également prégnante dans le roman de Nabokov. On la retrouve exploitée de manière significative autour du passage à l'hôtel des « Chasseurs Enchantés », comme pour venir appuyer le doute entre fiction et réalité, et ainsi favoriser l'impression d'inquiétante étrangeté au point nodal de l'entreprise scandaleuse de Humbert.

24 Freud estime qu'il existe deux grandes sources de l'inquiétante étrangeté. La première est alimentée par des événements refoulés ou d'anciennes superstitions, parfois produits de la construction psychique infantile, qui émergent à la faveur d'une coïncidence déroutante. L'autre, plus tenace, et plus transférable de ce fait à la fiction d'après Freud, se nourrit des complexes refoulés, comme le complexe de castration dont il émaille l'exégèse du *Marchand de sable*, de E. T. A. Hoffmann. Dès lors, traiter le sujet du développement sexuel, des comportements et déviances sexuels et de leurs tabous, avec la vie psychique qui les accompagne, et replacer ce sujet dans une apparence de réalité, apparaît comme une stratégie tout à fait appropriée afin de convoquer l'inquiétante étrangeté. Ceci est d'autant plus vrai lorsque l'auteur nous fait communier avec la pensée d'un narrateur qui vit probablement au quotidien ce sentiment d'inquiétante étrangeté lié à la mauvaise gestion de l'un ou l'autre complexe relevant de la psychanalyse. Ainsi Humbert retrouve-t-il en Lolita son défunt amour de la Riviera, avant de se le faire subtiliser par son double fugitif, qui n'est peut-être qu'une émanation de lui-même, tout en assouvissant au passage des fantasmes jusque-là refoulés qui feraient pâlir un analyste.

25 Nous avons vu que le hiatus qui existe entre l'action et le décor de la tragédie (*mimesis*) et le réel familier dont ils s'inspirent permet de faire émerger l'inquiétante étrangeté.

26 Cette dernière découle d'après Freud de notre construction psychique même, et s'appuie sur des événements psychiques refoulés qui sont, pour bon nombre d'entre eux, communs à toute l'humanité. L'inquiétante étrangeté est donc un lien vers cette zone noire qui contient les éléments dont la société exige pour sa sauvegarde qu'ils soient réprimés chez le sujet. Lire la part sombre de notre société nous force ainsi à questionner et réévaluer notre rapport au réprimé, et à l'interdit qui est évoqué.

27 L'inquiétante étrangeté semble par conséquent intimement liée à une certaine forme de tragédie, puisqu'elle est d'une part le produit de la *mimesis* tragique, et d'autre part un adjuvant de la *catharsis*. La *catharsis* étant un mécanisme psychologique avant tout, l'inquiétante étrangeté doit être considérée comme un outil d'accès à l'inconscient du lecteur qui va faciliter sa réalisation. Une fois ouverte la porte de l'inconscient, la remise en cause du modèle sociétal et la purgation éventuelle des passions ou autres frustrations par la terreur et la pitié se trouve facilitée.

Rapprocher les personnages du lecteur

28 La proximité existant entre le décor de la tragédie et la réalité du lecteur permettent déjà une forme d'identification avec les personnages (à même monde, mêmes pulsions, mêmes vices, mêmes contraintes sociales, mêmes éléments refoulés). L'émergence du sentiment de terreur ou de pitié lorsque nous assistons à leur chute, une chute qui aurait pu être la nôtre, est donc tout à fait envisageable.

29 Ne nous méprenons cependant pas sur mon propos. Il n'est pas question ici de soutenir que le lecteur visé par Nabokov est un pédophile en puissance, et que le but de *Lolita* est de purger cette passion. Ce type de comportement est suffisamment entouré d'interdits culturels et légaux tout à fait dissuasifs, sans que la littérature ait à se mêler de faire cette leçon. Nabokov révoque

d'ailleurs l'interprétation moralisante dans la postface de *Lolita* (« *Lolita* has no moral in tow », 314), ainsi que dans son entretien avec Appel, où il explique ne pas vouloir être assimilé à un satiriste car la satire est une leçon (tandis que la parodie n'est qu'un jeu).

30 Cependant, la présence d'un interdit aussi fort au sein d'un récit peut être interprété comme ayant valeur d'illustration, devenant une sorte de symbole de l'interdit par excellence, simplement car il s'agit de l'une des limites sociales actuelles les mieux gardées. Il est à cet égard intéressant de rappeler que c'est déjà la tragédie, Sophocle en particulier, qui a inspiré à Freud les grandes lignes de son complexe d'*Œdipe*, et contribué à mettre en lumière la place centrale du désir d'inceste (et du tabou qui y est associé) dans nos sociétés. À travers cet interdit à la fois universel et bien gardé, c'est donc le désir humain de transgression des règles qui devient objet d'attention.

31 Faible face à l'interdit, l'homme est toujours en proie au désir de transgression qui menace l'existence même de la société, ainsi que l'établit Freud dans son ouvrage *Totem et tabou*. En cela, le lecteur n'est pas différent de Humbert.

32 Par ailleurs, en dehors de tout rapport à la pédophilie, un tel roman demande d'abord que soit purgé chez le lecteur une forme d'élan *sexuel* mortifère, qui lui ferait préférer le sexe à toute autre forme de gratification, l'empêchant ainsi d'accéder au cœur esthétique du texte.

33 En effet, la littérature psychanalytique ou philosophique dépeint souvent les pulsions sexuelles comme délétères, lorsqu'elles ne sont pas canalisées ou sublimées. Chez Freud, par exemple, la libido peut être déviée vers des activités plus saines et créatrices (*Trois essais sur la théorie sexuelle*). Les passions en elles-mêmes, de l'ordre de l'élément perturbateur chez Aristote (*Rhétorique*, livre 2, I, 8), adjuvants de l'ignorance chez Platon (*Phédon*), pulsions subies chez Descartes (*Traité des passions de l'âme*), souvent diamétralement opposées à la raison comme chez Kant (*Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*), tyrans de l'âme chez Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, livre 2, XXI, 54-55), ont souvent été considérées comme un élan nuisible pour l'individu d'abord, puis pour la stabilité de la société ensuite.

34 La *catharsis* peut donc être perçue comme un enjeu important dans le roman de Nabokov. Elle est d'abord un enjeu pour le roman lui-même, afin qu'il ne soit pas injustement relégué au rang d'objet obscène ou consommé comme produit érotique. Elle est ensuite un enjeu pour l'individu et la société, dont le fonctionnement stable dépend de l'apaisement des tensions qu'elle induit.

35 C'est donc un véritable défi littéraire que Nabokov se lance, afin que la purgation des passions puisse être menée à son terme sans perdre le lecteur en cours de route du fait d'un contenu hautement discutable.

36 Au-delà de l'interdit et du désir de transgression dont nous venons de parler, que nous avons en commun avec le narrateur, le parcours de Humbert montre des caractéristiques du *pathos* ou du drame assez facilement observables. Le portrait qui est fait du personnage dévoile en effet des aspects de sa personnalité susceptibles de provoquer chez le lecteur empathie et/ou identification, et vient alimenter un sentiment qui se muera en authentique pitié à la fin du roman.

37 Ainsi, Humbert est d'abord quelqu'un de foncièrement inadapté au monde dans lequel il évolue. Il se définit comme une espèce à part, de la classe des « voyageurs enchantés », seuls capables de repérer les nymphettes, et surtout comme un enfant prisonnier d'un corps d'adulte : « I passed by her in my adult disguise » (39). Il est tellement inadapté à son monde et mal préparé à accepter ce qu'il considère comme son anormalité qu'il avoue avoir songé à se suicider : « I toyed with the idea of enjoying his [a fellow student's] little sister, a most diaphanous nymphet with a black hair bow, and then shooting myself » (29). Il évoque régulièrement dépressions et séjours en sanatoriums au cours de son récit. Le monstre est donc fragile.

38 Sa propre présentation en début de roman le dépeint par ailleurs comme un raté. Étudiant dépressif d'abord, appliqué mais trop mauvais pour obtenir son diplôme de psychiatrie (ou trop fou), il est aussi un poète frustré. Puis il se réoriente vers la littérature anglaise, où il n'est guère meilleur. Scientifique médiocre et de mauvaise foi lors d'une expédition arctique où il est chargé d'étude sociologique, il est également un homme malheureux contraint au simulacre avec les femmes. Son mariage avec sa première femme est une farce, une comédie de boulevard qui serait drôle si elle ne laissait transparaître

la misère aussi bien de monsieur que de sa femme Valeria, dont le personnage à peine ébauché respire la vacuité.

39 Humbert est au final un homme du peuple, aux multiples facettes. Il est monsieur tout le monde, reflétant les forces contradictoires potentiellement présentes en chaque être humain. Mosaïque d'une multitude de comportements humains, il est tantôt poète érudit, tantôt animal pathétique, client de prostituées, aliéné trilingue et imposteur intellectuel.

40 Il est également, comme tous ses lecteurs, aux prises avec un monde qu'il ne comprend pas, en proie au questionnement ontologique, et se trouve être le jouet de forces supérieures (l'auteur ou « McFate ») dont il soupçonne l'existence mais qu'il ne comprend pas. Néanmoins, les interventions auctoriales, dont on peut soupçonner l'existence, n'ont rien d'extraordinaire à proprement parler. Les événements qui président au destin hors-norme de Humbert sont plausibles, reliés logiquement à l'ensemble dans un rapport de cause à conséquence. Nabokov n'a ainsi que très peu recours au *Deus ex Machina*, conformément à la prescription d'Aristote pour les tragédies (*Poétique*, XV), cela afin de préserver le potentiel cathartique de l'histoire.

41 Il est important de noter que l'errance et les interrogations existentielles du héros tragique Humbert nous sont transmises par le texte, comme pour marquer la communauté intellectuelle et ontologique qui existe entre le narrateur de *Lolita* et n'importe quel lecteur. Ainsi Humbert éprouve-t-il par exemple du plaisir à transgresser l'interdit, tandis que nous éprouvons du plaisir à lire un texte à la puissance ludique, intellectuelle et esthétique indéniable, qui traite de cet interdit. Or Freud écrit dans *Totem et tabou* que parler ou s'informer du sujet tabou est aussi transgressif qu'accomplir l'acte tabou. On peut ainsi dire que nous transgressons d'une manière indirecte les mêmes règles que Humbert. De même, alors que McFate et Quilty se jouent successivement de Humbert sans que ce dernier ne puisse répliquer, son statut de narrateur lui permet à son tour de nous maintenir dans ce même état de doute, dans la mesure où son récit retient jusqu'au bout le nom de sa victime alors même que tous les indices qui permettent de la connaître sont bien disséminés dans le texte.

42 Enfin, il est une angoisse que nous partageons avec Humbert tout au long du récit : c'est celle de la langue et du contrôle que l'on exerce sur elle. Le narrateur craint en effet par-dessus tout la perte du langage, et ceci pour plusieurs raisons. D'abord parce que Humbert, comme Nabokov, est un immigré aux prises avec une langue qui n'est pas sa langue maternelle, et que son incapacité à saisir les nuances de l'argot utilisé par Lolita lui interdit l'accès à l'âme et au cœur de la nymphette. Il réalise au chapitre 32 de la seconde partie (283-284), alors que la nymphette marche aux côtés d'une des rares amies d'école qu'elle a le droit de fréquenter, que Lolita cultive un jardin secret auquel il n'aura jamais accès. Humbert intègre malgré tout, avec une certaine mauvaise volonté et une grande distance ironique, l'argot de la nymphette, dans le but évident de la séduire. Lolita n'est cependant jamais dupe du stratagème.

43 Humbert s'exclame en outre assez régulièrement quant à sa maîtrise de la langue (ex. « 'What's the katter with misses?' I muttered (word-control gone) into her hair », 120), dès lors que les circonstances le laissent à court de mots ou perturbent le contrôle qu'il exerce sur eux. En effet, en plus de représenter directement la rupture de la communication et donc la perte programmée de Lolita, ces faiblesses linguistiques suggèrent son potentiel échec, en tant qu'écrivain, à faire justice à la mémoire de Lolita et racheter ainsi ses fautes par l'art. Force est de constater que nous partageons encore une fois avec Humbert ces difficultés liées au langage. Ainsi l'apport extraordinaire des langues étrangères (xénismes allemands, français, latins, translitérations, néologismes, jeux de mots translangues et autres innovations) s'ajoute-t-il aux références érudites, aux citations, aux jargons, et à la syntaxe sinueuse de Humbert pour faire du roman un véritable défi intellectuel. Le problème de langage de Humbert est donc aussi potentiellement le nôtre.

44 Si Humbert est l'un des personnages aux traits tragico-pathétiques du roman, il y en a bien d'autres autour de lui. Nous avons déjà évoqué sa première femme, insignifiante, muselée, qui trouve la mort aux États-Unis dans un simulacre d'expérience behavioriste impliquant nudité et humiliation. Charlotte Haze, sa deuxième femme, est un écran de fumée, une femme sans personnalité qui se construit sur des prétentions de classe creuses. Son absence dramatique de profondeur est trahie par une élocution bourgeoise

feinte et un discours miné par la polyphonie, selon Yannicke Chupin (« “A medley of voices”, polyphonie et discours rapportés dans *Lolita* de Nabokov »). Enfin, résumer la vie du personnage de Lolita suffit à se convaincre du caractère tragique de sa destinée : débauchée à 12 ans, son enfance est ensuite irrémédiablement détruite par deux détraqués qui la soumettront à leurs perversions. Lorsque le destin lui permet enfin de rencontrer son mari, c'est l'indigence qui la touche. Elle meurt finalement en couche sans que sa progéniture ne lui survive.

45 La *mimesis* fonctionne également grâce au caractère universel de certains des thèmes abordés par Nabokov, qui entrent en résonance avec la mythologie personnelle ou collective des lecteurs. Au-delà de la question de la sexualité, c'est par exemple le thème de l'amour éternel qui se rejoue dans le roman, à grand renfort de poésie et d'intertexte mythologique classique qui placent l'histoire de Humbert sur un plan bien supérieur à celui de la simple imagerie pornographique.

46 Le personnage de Lolita doit être considéré, me semble-t-il, comme une figure à la destinée tragique, mais aussi comme une figure universelle du martyr et du sacrifice messianique.

47 Que ce soit dans la figure sacrificielle mourant pour nos péchés ou dans le personnage tragique qui périt pour des défauts identiques aux nôtres, il y a l'idée d'une profonde humanité, constellée de défauts et néanmoins digne d'être rachetée.

48 En effet, il faut préciser d'abord que c'est en mourant que Lolita permet la parution du livre hommage composé par Humbert, puisque cette parution est conditionnée par la disparition de sa principale héroine. Or cet événement a vocation à assurer la rédemption d'Humbert.

49 En effet, lorsque celui-ci vit son épiphanie, à la page 307 du roman, il constate l'absence de la voix de Lolita parmi celles d'enfants ; dès lors son récit aura pour objectif avoué de corriger cette lacune en offrant à la jeune fille l'éternité de l'art, afin que sa voix puisse enfin rejoindre la polyphonie universelle (et quasi mystique) des enfants. La mort de Lolita permet ainsi indirectement, en amenant la publication de son récit, de sauver l'âme de Humbert.

50 Lolita réussit donc là où la religion a échoué, ainsi que l'expose Humbert en II, 31 (il fait alors part de ses réserves quant à un catholicisme prompt à absoudre un monstre comme lui).

51 Mais le sacrifice de la nymphette permet également à tout homme de transcender sa condition d'homme par l'art. Tout comme le Jésus de la foi chrétienne, Lolita semble en effet mourir pour nous donner accès à un pan d'éternité, par un complexe mécanisme sémantique développé par Nabokov.

52 L'élaboration de ce mécanisme débute à la page 283, avec la cryptique maxime que Humbert attribue à un poète imaginaire, et selon laquelle le sens du « beau » tel que les mortels le conçoivent est subordonné à une nécessité morale : ce qui est beau ne peut l'être que si cette chose ou cette action est également moralement acceptable. De ce point de vue, *Lolita* ne peut théoriquement pas être considéré comme beau, puisqu'il s'agit d'un récit hautement immoral selon les critères qui ont cours.

53 Il faut alors lier ces considérations à la dernière phrase du roman pour saisir la portée du mantra humbertien de la création. Dans sa conclusion, Humbert définit indubitablement son entreprise comme une entreprise artistique, faite pour dépasser les époques. Il classe ainsi son œuvre au même rang que les manifestations artistiques qui perdurent depuis la nuit des temps : « I'm thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art » (309). L'œuvre de Humbert, qui doit être publiée à la mort de Lolita, doit justement permettre à la nymphette de survivre, tout comme les peintures rupestres et toute forme d'art permettent à leur auteur de dépasser sa mortalité. Le roman, dont le but (sauver la mémoire de Lolita) semble par ailleurs plutôt louable, appartiendrait donc bien au domaine de l'art.

54 Si le contenu des mémoires de Humbert est hautement immoral, selon nos critères de simples mortels, il est tout aussi indéniable cependant qu'il possède également des qualités artistiques associées communément à la beauté d'une œuvre (composition, originalité, langue). Ce sont d'ailleurs ces qualités qui ont contribué à convaincre le lecteur de poursuivre sa lecture jusqu'au bout, selon Maurice Couturier (voir le concept de « poérotisme », dans *Roman et Censure*, chapitre 5).

55 En conséquence, si l'immoralité a accouché de la beauté, nous pouvons déduire d'après la maxime de Humbert précédemment citée que nous avons bel et bien quitté le monde des simples mortels pour venir toucher un plan d'existence et de perception supérieurs.

56 L'histoire de Lolita, dans sa forme écrite, accède à l'éternité de l'art et touche finalement à la grâce dans ce nouvel état. La femme Lolita quant à elle, a pu être « solipsisée » (comme le projetait Humbert), sublimée par l'art, *in extremis*.

57 À la femme Lolita se substitue ainsi désormais sa projection artistique, et c'est son sacrifice en tant qu'être de chair et d'os qui nous permet, à nous autres lecteurs, à nous autres mortels, d'expérimenter cet autre plan de l'existence, hors de portée des mortels en temps normal, dans lequel le beau n'est plus subordonné au moral.

58 Le sacrifice de Lolita nous donne donc accès à l'éternité, à la manière du sacrifice conté par les Écritures. C'est grâce à cette complexe dialectique que Lolita vient à incarner une figure de Sauveur, tandis que le récit de Humbert devient une forme subversive de théologie qu'il n'est plus possible aux mortels de rejeter, sous peine de perdition.

59 En conclusion, nous dirons que *Lolita* favorise la *mimesis* par des personnages et un décor proches de nous, puisant également une certaine dose d'universalité dans les grands récits fondateurs afin de favoriser la mise en place du mécanisme cathartique à venir.

60 Un grand nombre d'éléments relevant de l'intrigue de *Lolita* ou de la construction des personnages relève également du tragique, nous l'avons vu. Mais est-ce bien suffisant pour considérer le roman dans son ensemble comme une tragédie ?

Reprise des codes structuraux et littéraires de la tragédie

L'alternance action/chant

61 Nous le disions plus haut, les tragédies antiques étaient construites sur une opposition entre aède et chœur, ou entre acteurs et chœur. Le jeu des acteurs était caractérisé par une certaine rigidité de posture et une solennité de geste, et leur texte était déclamé. Il s'opposait en cela au chœur dont le texte était chanté et accompagné de danses. Le texte des acteurs, pour chaque « épisode » (temps entre deux interventions du chœur) joué, était écrit en vers simples proches du langage familier, dans une optique de clarté. À l'inverse, le texte du chœur était écrit en vers complexes teintés de lyrisme et de poésie (Coulet, Aristote, XII).

62 On retrouve cette alternance dans le récit de Humbert, qui est divisé en plusieurs tableaux écrits dans une prose romanesque plutôt classique, faisant progresser l'action sans pirouette particulière, mais qui sont flanqués de part et d'autres d'inclusions plus lyriques écrites dans une langue complexe et poétique. C'est le cas par exemple lorsque Humbert clame son amour à Lolita sous forme de poèmes dont il met en lumière la nature. La liste de classe de Lolita à Ramsdale (51-52) est ainsi explicitement repérée comme élément empruntant à l'esthétique poétique : « It is a poem I know already by heart » (51). Cette liste, en plus d'être une séquence parfois rimée, souvent assonante ou allitérée, représente également un ensemble onomastique aux signifiants poétiques (Angel Grace — Carmine Rose), figure des points d'appel intertextuels nombreux (Byron, Marguerite — Falter, Ted — Knight, Kenneth…) et établit des résonances avec d'autres langues (Carmine, Rose — Fantasia, Stella — Haze, Dolores…). Elle est en outre un nœud dialogique qui connecte certains patronymes à d'autres sections du récit (McCoo, Virginia — McFate, Aubrey…).

63 Le poème dans sa forme auto-déclarée revient à l'occasion, par exemple sous la forme d'une sentence précédant l'exécution de Quilty, que Humbert qualifie de « poetical justice » (299), ou encore lorsque Humbert emprunte à l'argot des nymphettes pour composer le poème dédié à sa Lolita disparue (254-257). Démarrant sur les lamentations de l'amant déchu, jouant sur la forme empruntée aux magazines pour adolescentes que Humbert a retrouvés dans sa

voiture, ce poème devient « a maniac's masterpiece » (257). Il faut également faire cas des adresses régulières à Lolita, en son absence, qui se font sur le mode du chant et sous la forme de variations autour du motif de son nom (Dolores, Dolly, Lo, Lolita, etc., dès l'ouverture du roman, et à de nombreuses autres reprises). Enfin, le mode poétique est omniprésent dès lors que Humbert s'inspire du blason pour louer les qualités féminines qui se mêlent à la nature alentour, ou qui se superposent aux paysages américains grandioses qu'il traverse. Le modèle du blason sous-tend d'ailleurs déjà les émois adolescents de Humbert avec Annabel (12-13), et teinte le cheminement du couple Humbert-Lolita de Ramsdale à Beardsley. L'exaltation de Humbert pour le paysage qui défile commence à la page 152 et culmine p. 156 :

> More mountains; *bluish beauties never attainable* […] *heart and sky-piercing snow-veined gray colossi of stone* […] *pale puffs* of aspen; *pink and lilac* formations, Pharaonic, *phallic* […] *buttes of black lava*; early spring mountains with young-elephant lanugo *along their spines*; end-of-the-summer mountains, all *hunched up, their heavy Egyptian limbs folded under folds of tawny moth-eaten plush*; oatmeal hills, *flecked with* green round oaks; a last rufous mountain with a rich rug of lucerne *at its foot*. (156, c'est moi qui souligne.)

64 C'est encore ce mode d'écriture qui caractérise la déclaration d'amour de Humbert à Lolita adulte (277), et qui domine lorsqu'il s'agira de sublimer la conclusion de l'épopée humbertienne en une véritable épiphanie mêlant les corps, les cris et les formes topographiques: « both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth » (307). Tous ces passages, théoriquement chantés par un chœur dans la tragédie, empruntent la forme poétique, que ce soit par leur caractère lyrique ou assonant, par l'usage de la rime, par leur construction sur un modèle poétique défini (comme celui du blason), ou encore par le fait qu'ils soient annoncés explicitement comme appartenant au domaine poétique.

65 Cette opposition dans la tragédie entre langue ordinaire pour les épisodes, et langue poétique pour le chœur, est encore confortée par une opposition de voix. L'opposition entre acteur et chœur est donc

également mise en scène par une opposition entre singularité et pluralité, entre la voix unique de l'acteur et celle, symphonique, du chœur. Or on peut percevoir une opposition assez similaire dans le roman de Nabokov, car bien que *Lolita* puisse être abordée à tort comme une œuvre monologique, adoptant *a priori* l'unique point de vue de Humbert, il n'en est rien. On observe ainsi une alternance entre passages monologiques (où il existe une unicité relative de voix et de point de vue) et passages polyphoniques (où le dialogisme fait entendre une superposition de voix et de points de vue portés par la construction verbale — Bakhtine 276 ; Morson & Emerson 137). Force est de constater à cet égard que les passages poétiques, lyriques ou musicaux cités précédemment sont également des apothéoses polyphoniques, comme il se doit pour un chœur, mêlant les voix de multiples personnages.

66 La liste de classe par exemple, fait entendre l'hétéroglossie par l'apport intertextuel auquel elle fait appel (jargon d'entomologiste, plurilinguisme et locutions latines, autres références externes). Elle porte en outre les multiples histoires associées dialogiquement aux noms d'enfants qu'elle mentionne, faisant en quelque sorte entendre leurs voix. Elle est en cela une annonce de l'épiphanie finale, au cours de laquelle Humbert ajoute symboliquement la voix de Lolita au concert des voix d'enfant qui parviennent jusqu'à la corniche sur laquelle il se trouve, alors que la voix de la nymphette avait jusque-là disparu de cette partition.

67 Le poème intratextuel de Humbert à sa Lolita disparue (255-257) fait entendre la voix de la nymphette et de toutes ses cousines via l'assimilation de leur argot stéréotypé, lui-même déjà le fruit d'un remodelage de l'anglais. De même la sentence de Quilty mélange-t-elle les voix : celle de Humbert et de Lolita d'abord, que l'on entend souffrir dans ces lignes aux mains de Humbert puis de Quilty ; celle de T. S. Eliot, à qui Humbert emprunte l'anaphore introductive (299) ; celles des personnages croisés sur la route par le couple en cavale, et qui viennent ajouter leur présence au poème lorsque Humbert évoque ses souvenirs ; celles des personnages d'autres civilisations appelés par Humbert à titre de comparaison ; celles enfin des poètes (bons ou mauvais), dont le style résonne dans les lignes de Humbert.

68 Dans les blasons, qui assimilent le corps de la femme aux éléments du paysage, la voix poétique se mêle à la voix rauque et grivoise du conteur érotique, au croisement du double-entendre. C'est également là une voix mythologique qui s'élève, celle de toutes les histoires où la figure féminine est surhumaine, naïade, nymphe ou sirène. Partout où la nature se fait sexe, c'est également, par dialogisme avec une des scènes d'ouverture déjà citées (12-13), la voix d'Annabel que l'on entend d'outre-tombe. Enfin, de manière caractéristique, tandis que Humbert fait parler à la fois sa mémoire (il a déjà entrevu l'Amérique par le biais de tableaux et autres projections mentales par le passé) et ses yeux, lors de sa traversée des paysages américains, le blason réifiant le corps de Lolita laisse aussi entendre la voix dissonante de l'intéressée, qui subit le voyage et n'est guère transportée par la vue (152-157).

Découpage des tableaux

69 Dans la tragédie grecque, l'alternance dont nous parlions plus haut entre chœur et acteurs, entre langage complexe, lyrique d'un côté, et langage simple de l'autre, suit un schéma précis défini par Aristote (*Poétique*, XII). La pièce s'ouvre sur un *Prologue*, qui est un premier dialogue ou monologue déclamé en l'absence du chœur. Le prologue sert à situer la pièce et éventuellement à annoncer les événements qui ont précédé l'action figurée à l'ouverture.

70 La préface remplit en quelque sorte le rôle de prologue tragique. Comme le prologue, la préface fictive de *Lolita* est à la fois dans et hors du texte (car rédigée selon des codes réalistes de littérature scientifique par un éditeur fictif), et donne le cadre dans lequel la pièce va se jouer. Elle avertit de manière grave les pauvres mortels qui viendraient à lire le roman du sort tragique du héros, et de l'issue terrifiante qui attend ceux qui se hasarderaient sur les mêmes chemins. D'emblée nous sommes mis au courant de la captivité et du décès de Humbert, de l'assassinat de son ennemi, ou encore de la mort de Lolita et de sa descendance (même si cette dernière annonce se fait à ce stade encore sous forme voilée).

71 Puis c'est le *Parodos* ou chant d'entrée du chœur, qui doit donc être selon notre définition à la fois musical, poétique, et polyphonique. C'est effectivement ce que l'on trouve au chapitre 1 de la première

partie. Il s'agit à première vue d'un monologue que nous devons à Humbert. Ce monologue est cependant loin d'être monologique. Il est en effet le fruit du narrateur Humbert, qui, depuis sa cellule, écrit sa Lolita et chante son amour pour elle. Cet Humbert-là, contrairement au personnage Humbert dont on suit les actions tout au long du roman, s'est peu à peu éloigné du monstre égocentrique qu'il était à ses débuts. Il est le fruit d'un long cheminement qui lui a fait intégrer les voix discordantes de tous les personnages qu'il a rencontrés, aimés, détestés, dont il a appris les comportements, singé les postures, intégré les idiomes. Il est le fruit enfin des moments d'épiphanie qui émaillent son parcours. Ce passage dessine d'emblée toute la complexité du lien avec Lolita, incorporant jusqu'à l'existence du précurseur qu'était Annabel, dont la voix est entendue en marge des mots : « Did she have a precursor? She did [...] a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea » (9). Par ces mots, ce sont le poème de Poe et toute l'histoire d'Annabel qui sont appelés dialogiquement. Enfin, Humbert projette aussi d'ores et déjà par anticipation le murmure réprobateur du jury devant lequel il doit bientôt comparaître. La voix du narrateur que l'on entend en ouverture de ce roman est donc un mélange polyphonique de toutes les voix qui ont infléchi ce qu'était originellement la conception du monde de Humbert.

72 Ce premier chapitre est également éminemment musical. Il compose la mélopée qui traversera l'œuvre (sous l'une ou l'autre de ses variations), et qui prend la forme de cette adresse déchirante d'un amant à sa tragique absente : Lo. Lee. Ta. Ce premier chapitre représente même une transposition de la musique au langage autant dans le fond que dans le forme, décrivant le son et l'imitant à la fois par l'allitération : « the tip of the tongue takes a trip of three steps down the palate to tap at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta » (9). La danse même, permise au chœur des tragédies grecques, intervient dans le rythme chaloupé de la version anglaise originale.

73 Au-delà du premier chapitre, c'est l'alternance qui s'installe entre *épisodes* et interventions du chœur. On trouve ainsi à la suite la rapide biographie, simple et efficace, mise en place par Humbert. Élément attendu, elle est indispensable et mécanique, factuelle. La polyphonie et la poésie refont surface régulièrement, mêlant les voix des personnages morts et vivants, connus ou à venir, comme lorsque

Humbert intègre à sa prose la liste de classe de Ramsdale ou l'extrait du bottin théâtral, tous deux odes à Lolita, dont les noms parlent au lecteur en même temps que le narrateur. Allitérations, jeux de mots, annonces ou récurrences précoces ponctuent ces listes qui mélangent aux patronymes la somme des voix de leurs propriétaires, ainsi que leurs histoires.

74 La scène de la rencontre avec Lolita se fait comme on peut l'imaginer sur le mode lyrique (« a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun […] there was my Riviera love […] the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day », 39), tandis que se mêlent au souvenir pur de Humbert personnage la compréhension et la culpabilité de Humbert narrateur, ainsi que la voix de sirène d'Annabel, enfant damnée précurseur de Lolita, présente en filigrane. Les voix et les angles de vue sur la scène se multiplient alors, avec la survenue d'une vision allégorique de Humbert visant à transcrire la complexité de son sentiment :

> As if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnapped, discovered in gipsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw [Annabel] again […] I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts—that last mad immortal day behind the "Roches Roses". (39)

Une fois Lolita entrée en scène, évidemment, sa place grandissante est retranscrite toujours davantage au discours direct, et le chœur polyphonique se tait à nouveau.

75 Le chant polyphonique du chœur réapparaît ensuite régulièrement et sous plusieurs formes entre les épisodes joués par les acteurs. On le trouve d'abord dans les interventions remarquées du narrateur Humbert, qui s'immisce dans l'action pour y faire résonner la somme des voix qui l'ont modelé. Il résonne également au gré des blasons et poèmes, des intratextes cités ou inventés par Humbert, ou de tout autre intertexte qui vient ajouter son timbre à l'action qui se joue.

76 Il en va de même pour Quilty dans la seconde partie, dont le personnage, s'il prend bien substance dans les actions (il apparaît sur la route et d'hôtel en hôtel), bénéficie alternativement des louanges

chantées par le chœur polyphonique. Les voix de ce chœur sont alors formées par les foisonnantes références intertextuelles qu'il laisse à l'attention de Humbert sur les registres des hôtels, et qui apportent un commentaire et un autre éclairage sur le personnage (on y lit par exemple ses points communs avec Humbert). Au fur et à mesure de la traque de Quilty, le tempo narratif s'accélère et le chœur, sous l'une ou l'autre des formes décrites ci-dessus, s'intercale alors de plus en plus souvent entre les sommaires et les scènes (au sens genettien des deux termes). Il vient ainsi ponctuer de ses chants des séquences censées accélérer la progression de l'intrigue : le chœur bat la mesure, chante la folie et la perte des repères, matérialise le vertige qui gagne le protagoniste.

77 L'action finale se tient alors que Quilty et Humbert, tous deux personnages, tous deux présents (il s'agit donc d'un épisode), s'entretuent. Puis le chœur reprend le relais pour son *chant de sortie* constitutif de la tragédie, mêlant musicalité, poésie et polyphonie : Humbert se penche vers l'abîme, contemplant les paysages américains, somme de son épopée, et il perçoit alors des voix d'enfants jouant en contrebas. Il atteint à ce stade une sorte d'épiphanie douloureuse et comprend qu'il a retiré à jamais à Lolita la possibilité de faire partie de cet ensemble. Son récit a donc pour but absolu de replacer la voix de Lolita dans le grand ensemble des choses, et d'assurer ainsi une sorte de polyphonie quasi panthéiste, presque une clé de la compréhension du divin (Boyd qualifie ce passage de « grande épiphanie » dans le second tome de sa biographie de Nabokov, tandis que Appel, Alexandrov et Dawson voient tous en ce passage « l'apothéose morale » mentionnée par John Ray dans sa préface, comme le rappelle Leland de la Durantaye dans *Style Is Matter*, 88).

Schéma narratif

Le protagoniste

78 En étudiant de près la construction du roman de Nabokov, son apparentement à la tragédie antique apparaît encore plus clairement.

79 Aristote, dans sa *Poétique*, s'attache à décrire clairement les étapes et les principes qui président au déroulement d'une tragédie. Il décrit

ainsi le caractère *remarquable* du héros, qui doit être perçu comme tel en dépit des défauts, même importants, qui peuvent le caractériser (XV). Ce caractère remarquable n'est plus à prouver en ce qui concerne Humbert, personnage inédit dans la littérature, « poète et pervers », transgresseur absolu des codes du XX^e^ siècle, personnage central éminemment inhabituel pour un roman. Sa mort, inévitable, est annoncée dès la préface, et le spectateur de son parcours en connaît l'issue de la même manière que le spectateur de l'Antiquité connaissait l'issue mortelle qui attendait le héros des tragédies.

80 Au chapitre 29 de la première partie, Humbert définit « le héros de son livre », c'est-à-dire lui-même, comme quelqu'un de « tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect… » (129). C'est cette sensibilité particulière qui le rend capable de discerner une nymphette d'une simple petite fille, comme il en fait état dès l'ouverture du roman (16). Dans la mesure où ce penchant le poussera à prendre la décision d'enlever Lolita, l'engageant sur le chemin d'une mort programmée, il constitue le défaut tragique, ou *Hamartia*, caractéristique du héros d'une tragédie.

81 Comme c'est le cas par exemple dans *Œdipe Roi*, de Sophocle, Humbert est également lancé vers sa perte par la prophétie d'un oracle, prophétie prononcée de manière muette par la mort d'Annabel. Ainsi concède-t-il au chapitre 4 de la première partie que « in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel » (14). L'emploi du mot « fateful », traduisant l'idée de prédestination, est à cet égard significatif.

82 Les lunettes de soleil abandonnées sur la plage, dans la scène d'amour avec Annabel, tendent à pousser l'interprétation dans le même sens : objets métaleptiques pour le lecteur (qui, en même temps qu'il les chausse, endosse son rôle de voyeur), elles peuvent être considérées comme le symbole de l'oracle qui « voit » dans l'avenir et le passé, et qui prévoit la répétition de cette scène dans l'avenir, avec Lolita.

Développement de l'intrigue

83 Du point de vue de la structure, la mort inévitable du héros de la tragédie survient à l'issue d'un périple codifié qui passe nécessairement dans une tragédie par cinq grandes phases.

84 La première de ces phases est souvent appelée *Protasis*. Elle consiste en une scène d'exposition plus ou moins développée qui permet de présenter les personnages et de planter le décor. Elle est assurée dans *Lolita* par la courte biographie de Humbert qui figure le segment européen de son passé. Cette partie permet de cerner les multiples facettes de son personnage, son rapport aux femmes, sa pathologie, sa faiblesse face aux nymphettes. Elle s'achève après son arrivée aux États-Unis et son installation dans la petite ville de Ramsdale auprès de Lolita. Cette période est alors caractérisée par une stase géographique et narrative. Hourglass Lake en est d'ailleurs une indication : lac à la surface figée, il symbolise l'immobilité du temps (*an hourglass* est un sablier). L'excursion vers ses berges en est d'ailleurs éternellement repoussée, semble-t-il. Humbert reste sur place et la narration ne couvre que peu de temps ; elle se contente de planter le décor principal qui sera celui des États-Unis, et de donner leur consistance aux personnages.

85 Les complications inhérentes à la deuxième partie d'une tragédie, nommée *Epitasis*, surviennent à la suite de la mort de Charlotte. Le Destin, ou la « Bonne Fortune », comme Humbert l'appelle à la suite du décès brutal de Charlotte, laissent notre protagoniste face à un choix : la mère de Lolita étant morte, il pourrait encore à ce stade choisir d'épargner l'enfant, mais il commence immédiatement à tisser la toile des mensonges qui lui permettront de s'assurer une légitimité de tuteur. Il laisse par exemple entendre à Farlowe que Lolita serait le fruit d'une liaison qu'il aurait eue par le passé avec Charlotte, alors que cette dernière était déjà mariée (100). Puis il passera prendre Lolita et s'enfuira avec elle avant de la soumettre à ses volontés. Il est à mon avis judicieux de voir dans cette décision « l'erreur grave » commise par Humbert, telle qu'Aristote nous la décrit dans la *Poétique* (XIII), erreur liée à sa faille tragique. Humbert évoquera d'ailleurs par la suite à plusieurs reprises les alternatives qu'il existait à la mauvaise décision prise à cet instant. Cette *Epitasis*, moment de l'empêtrement du personnage et de la mise en place des complications, marque aussi la fin de la stase initiale, puisqu'Humbert s'engage sur la route avec Lolita.

86 La troisième partie d'une tragédie est souvent appelée *climax*, et figure un point de retournement décrit par Aristote. Il s'agit d'un point culminant au-delà duquel le retour n'est plus permis pour le

héros. La route vers ce point de non-retour est annoncée dans *Lolita* par des références onomastiques métatextuelles (les noms propres sont choisis de manière à suggérer une interprétation particulière du référent qu'ils désignent, et renseignent sur la construction de l'œuvre) : ainsi le terme « Climax » apparaît-il à plusieurs reprises dans l'œuvre, et en particulier immédiatement après le décès de Charlotte, événement qui conditionne justement la poursuite de la tragédie vers le *climax*. Ainsi un journal local, le *Climax Herald* (littéralement « l'annonceur de Climax », 105), annonce le décès de Charlotte, tandis que Lolita participe en l'occurrence à une randonnée qui doit la mener dans les environs de Climax (100). Enfin, nous apprenons plus tard de Lolita elle-même (137) qu'un dénommé Charlie qui débauchait les jeunes filles (dont Lolita) au sein du camp d'été tenu par sa prude mère, tenait ses préservatifs d'un pourvoyeur établi en la ville de Climax.

87 Car n'oublions pas que le *climax* peut aussi être entendu comme le point culminant de l'activité sexuelle. Le schéma d'une tragédie peut en cela être assimilé à la montée en puissance de l'excitation, *a fortiori* lorsque l'œuvre dont il est question s'articule autour du désir d'un narrateur pervers. Le climax à la fois de la tragédie et de la tension sexuelle du roman trouve donc naturellement une solution en la scène censée voir la réalisation des fantasmes de Humbert, à savoir la consommation de l'amour nymphique à l'hôtel des « Chasseurs Enchantés ».

88 Le *climax* peut être accompagné ou suivi d'une anagnorèse ou épiphanie, c'est-à-dire une révélation qui frappe le héros de la tragédie, lui rendant impossible tout retour en arrière à un état d'innocence ou d'ignorance. Que se passe-t-il donc autour du *climax* de la tragédie *Lolita* ?

Sur le rôle charnière du passage aux « Chasseurs Enchantés » dans la structure tragique

89 Lors de sa gratification à l'hôtel des « Chasseurs Enchantés », Humbert découvre à sa grande surprise que Lolita est déjà bien renseignée quant aux choses du sexe, ce qui réduit un peu sa culpabilité (et potentiellement celle du lecteur par la même occasion). Cette découverte ne constitue cependant pas en elle-même une

épiphanie au sens aristotélicien, c'est-à-dire une découverte majeure modifiant l'appréhension du monde par le héros, et surtout interdisant le retour en arrière.

90 La scène clé de l'hôtel, située à la jointure des deux parties, est un kaléidoscope de perceptions, baigné d'onirisme et d'irréel. Humbert compare d'ailleurs dans cette scène ses perceptions à une séquence cinématographique (128). La chambre semble flotter hors du monde, telle une grotte primale dans laquelle se rejouerait une ancienne scène de transgression universelle, nous dirait Freud. Elle suinte à cet égard l'inquiétante étrangeté. Le lecteur a donc du mal à accréditer cette scène, et à la fixer dans le reste du livre, malgré son rôle charnière. Le *climax* revêt ainsi des allures anticlimactiques.

91 La concrétisation du fantasme de Humbert en elle-même est elliptique, quasi inexistante. L'acte est déplacé du fond vers la forme : c'est le texte lui-même qui imite l'action, long, lent et langoureux dans sa tiède description de l'attente de Humbert, puis se contractant autour de la consécration (« by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers », 132). Le peu de détails que nous glanerons seront évasifs, noyés de références aux mœurs d'autres civilisations en guise d'excuse, dans des chapitres courts qui ne racontent rien (134-135). La seule vision de la scène qui nous est donnée l'est au moyen d'une sorte d'ekphrase (134), la description faite par Humbert d'une fresque mythologique de son propre cru, en des termes obscurs qui esquissent seulement une vision érotique.

92 Ce passage constitue cependant bien un point de basculement qui fixe le destin de Humbert une fois pour toutes (il ne pourra jamais revenir en arrière à partir du moment où il a eu une relation sexuelle avec une mineure dans un pays et une époque qui ne le tolèrent pas). Le modèle structurel de la tragédie semble donc ici bien respecté, afin d'assurer la progression fonctionnelle vers la *catharsis* du lecteur. Mais il faut bien noter que la tension sexuelle éventuellement accumulée en cours de route est désamorcée au moment clé. L'apologie de la pédophilie n'existe donc pas, seuls resteront en fin de parcours la terreur et la pitié auxquelles les passions de Humbert mèneront le lecteur. Comme le rappelle Aristote, le protagoniste de la tragédie « se retrouve dans le malheur non à cause de ses vices ou de sa méchanceté », aussi terribles soient-ils dans le cas de Humbert,

« mais à cause de quelque erreur » ou faille dans son caractère (Aristote, XIII). C'est sa sensibilité aux nymphettes et son erreur de jugement à la mort de Charlotte qui mèneront Humbert à toujours davantage de complications.

Sur l'anagnorèse

93 Aristote évoque dans sa *Poétique* plusieurs formes de reconnaissances ou anagnorèses, parmi lesquelles il semble privilégier la reconnaissance de personne (XI) : l'identité réelle d'un personnage est révélée, et doit venir tout bouleverser. La reconnaissance est parfois bilatérale. La manière dont s'effectue la découverte peut là encore être de plusieurs types, mais Aristote préfère une découverte découlant naturellement des actes accomplis par les personnages, en toute vraisemblance, ménageant si possible un effet de surprise (XVI).

94 Où et comment se déroule la reconnaissance dans *Lolita* ?

95 Pour commencer, même si le couple Humbert-Quilty est bâti sur une dynamique intéressante de *Doppelgänger* (la poursuite du double et de son identité occupe toute la seconde partie du roman), il me semble qu'une forme de reconnaissance, au sens aristotélicien du terme, se trame plutôt entre les deux personnages de Lolita et Humbert.

96 En effet, les conséquences de leurs actes sur la vie de l'un et de l'autre recèlent un potentiel tragique bien plus extrême, à la manière dont un Œdipe découvrirait être le fils de sa femme. Le processus de reconnaissance quant à lui démarre effectivement lors de ce passage clé de l'hôtel.

97 Il est d'abord intéressant de constater que le caractère mythologique de la nymphette et de la quête de Humbert disparaît de la scène centrale de l'hôtel. Humbert est contraint de le reconstruire sur une fresque qu'il imagine, comme si le mythique revenait finalement au plan d'existence fictif et pictural auquel il appartient. Car ce que Humbert découvre dans ce passage, c'est que la nymphette telle qu'il la conçoit ne peut être solipsisée, isolée et figée. Il disait plus tôt s'être fixé comme but de saisir la nature des nymphettes : « A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of

nymphets » (133). Il ne tarde pourtant pas à avouer son échec à cet égard :

> I'm trying to [...] sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. (135)

98 Si Humbert narrateur s'exclame ainsi à la suite de sa description du moment fatidique, c'est peut-être parce-que ce moment scelle justement le changement inéluctable de Lolita. Humbert condamne d'abord par ses actes l'enfant Lolita à vivre l'enfer dans la suite du roman, tout en causant la perte de sa qualité de nymphette. En effet, à la toute fin de la première partie, alors que le monstre Humbert a abusé de Lolita et lui avoue pour couronner le tout que sa mère est morte, Lolita devient symboliquement une femme puisque le couple doit faire un arrêt pour acheter des serviettes hygiéniques. La fin de la nymphitude de Lolita, amorcée ici, sera exprimée de manière on ne peut plus claire par Humbert un peu plus tard (204). Son corps a alors changé, elle est devenue plus musculeuse, ses formes ont évolué, et il ne ressent plus la même attirance pour elle. Cette prise de conscience est également importante dans la mesure où elle mènera au développement d'un amour réel pour la femme Lolita, et non pour la projection fantasmée d'une nymphette qu'elle était auparavant. La catastrophe à venir, qui inclura la mort de Lolita, est également d'ores et déjà annoncée, dans la mesure où toutes les femmes touchées par Humbert semblent devoir trépasser (Valéria, Charlotte, Rita, puis Lolita).

99 On pourrait donc conclure en disant que l'anagnorèse ou épiphanie se fait en trois temps dans *Lolita*. Le premier temps correspond au passage clé de la chambre d'hotel, situé à l'hémistiche du roman, point de non-retour conditionnant la suite du développement, marquant la fin du mythe de la nymphette intouchable et hors de ce monde (première partie, chapitre 29). Le second temps de l'anagnorèse correspond à la prise de conscience par Humbert que Lolita n'est plus une nymphette (seconde partie, chapitre 14). Le troisième et dernier temps de l'anagnorèse intervient alors que Lolita, qui a fugué pour tomber dans les bras de Quilty, s'est finalement assagie. Elle est mariée à un gentil benêt dont elle attend l'enfant.

Humbert s'aventure jusqu'à eux, et découvre en voyant Lolita dans des dispositions pourtant peu flatteuses qu'il est encore amoureux, et que son amour va donc au-delà de sa simple nympholepsie (269-280).

Complications et fin

100 De même que l'anagnorèse est kaléidoscopique, la *catastasis* ou quatrième partie des tragédies, est progressive. Elle comporte un renversement de la bonne fortune relative dont avait pu bénéficier jusque-là le protagoniste, et l'entraîne sur la pente descendante qui mène à la catastrophe. Ce changement de régime est perceptible assez rapidement après la scène de l'hôtel. Le dieu de l'histoire, qui semblait vouloir permettre à Humbert de donner libre cours à son imagination perverse, retire sa bénédiction. Ainsi voit-on par exemple Humbert s'établir à dessein dans un appartement avec vue sur une école, juste avant que des ouvriers ne s'attèlent à démarrer la construction d'un bâtiment qui lui barrera cette vue. La construction sera soudainement stoppée alors que le bâtiment aura juste atteint la hauteur nécessaire pour gêner Humbert, puis les ouvriers se volatiliseront mystérieusement (179). La *catastasis* est censée inverser le fonctionnement ascensionnel qui semblait servir le héros avant le *climax*. Il est déjà intéressant de noter qu'au niveau structurel, la *catastasis* représente dans *Lolita* une partie symétrique à l'*epitasis*, puisque le *climax* est suivi d'une période de stase à nouveau, non pas à Ramsdale cette fois-ci, mais dans une petite bourgade appelée Beardsley. Ce passage à Beardsley est marqué par une chute des valeurs morales. Humbert fait ainsi constamment du chantage à Lolita pour obtenir ses faveurs, la menace de la faire placer dans quelque austère institution, la surveille constamment, profite d'elle en des circonstances particulièrement pénibles et finit par instaurer un système de paiement à l'acte (184-185). Cet emprisonnement progressif et l'éloignement affectif croissant entre Humbert et Lolita, encore accentué par la découverte que Lolita la nymphette s'est muée en femme, vont finalement mener aux péripéties et à la chute du héros.

101 Ainsi Lolita va-t-elle commencer à faire les choses en cachette. Elle se rapprochera d'une amie nommée Mona, qui va l'aider à mener Humbert en bateau. Ensemble elles permettront l'émergence de Quilty, personnage qui est le négatif de Humbert. Dramaturge, il écrit

une pièce de théâtre (l'irruption du genre théâtral n'est pas anodine) à laquelle Lolita participera au sein de son école, malgré les réticences de son geôlier Humbert. Sentant le vent tourner, Humbert décide de reprendre la route avec Lolita, mais il a la conviction qu'il est suivi. Après maintes haltes favorables aux péripéties, Lolita finira par s'enfuir au bras de Quilty (246). Humbert continue son voyage seul un temps, poursuivant les fantômes de Lolita et Quilty sans relâche, flirtant avec la folie. Un jour il reçoit une lettre de Lolita lui apprenant que la jeune fille s'est mariée. Humbert la retrouve et apprend d'elle qui a été son ravisseur et rival. Il se met alors en quête de ce dernier et l'abat à son domicile avant d'être arrêté par la police et placé en détention.

102 La *catastrophe* (ou « événement pathétique » chez Aristote) doit apporter une solution à la tragédie et figure traditionnellement un nombre important de morts (servant au moins en partie le sentiment de terreur). Elle est bien présente dans *Lolita*. Quilty d'abord, meurt d'une manière fort théâtrale qui confine par moments au burlesque. Les deux hommes se battent ainsi dans un simulacre de pugilat, les balles semblent ne pas atteindre Quilty ou être molles comme du beurre. Lorsqu'il est finalement touché, il agit comme s'il ignorait avoir été blessé, continue de vaquer à ses occupations notamment en plaquant des accords sordides sur son piano, en montant un grand escalier d'apparat droit comme un I, ou en verbalisant sa douleur de manière fort histrionique tel un acteur déclamant des vers (« Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist… », 303). Cette mise en scène exagérée renforce l'impression de jeu théâtral, or le sentiment de terreur, s'il est excité par l'histoire, peut l'être tout autant par le biais de l'artifice scénique, ou « spectacle » (Aristote 93). À ce stade du roman, une partie des lecteurs aura également eu tout le loisir de s'identifier au narrateur et de compatir à ses malheurs. Il s'est donc sans aucun doute également pris au jeu de la recherche du rival évanescent, et de sa mise à mort. On notera d'ailleurs que Humbert, en répétant le meurtre de Quilty quelques temps avant la véritable exécution, évoque « a cathartic spasm of mental regurgitation » (288).

103 Juste avant de clore sa confession, Humbert exprime à nouveau ses regrets et son amour pour Lolita, qu'il replace dans une sorte d'épiphanie panthéiste alors qu'il observe le panorama qui s'offre à lui.

Ce faisant, il termine de redonner vie à Lolita par l'art, et ainsi à racheter ses actes. C'est sans conteste la jeune fille, au sort abominable et à l'impossible répit, privée même de la seconde chance symbolique qu'aurait pu lui offrir son enfant (mort-né un 25 décembre, date anniversaire du prophète dans la tradition chrétienne), qui cristallise le sentiment de pitié. Elle bénéficiera en dernière minute de toute la portée artistique de cette tragédie des temps modernes, comme l'a voulu d'une certaine manière Humbert en couchant sur papier son récit. Cette épiphanie pastorale dont il gratifie le lecteur en fin de récit a ainsi vocation à réinscrire *in extremis* sur le plan du mythe non pas la nymphette, mais la femme Lolita et l'amour que lui a porté Humbert.

104 Ainsi Quilty est mort, et Humbert est mort (nous le savons depuis la préface). Puisque le manuscrit de Humbert est publié, il nous le rappelle à la dernière page, c'est que Lolita est également morte. Nous avons donc bien affaire aux morts multiples qui souvent marquent la tragédie. À l'aune des relations complexes qui unissaient ces personnages, de leur impossible bonheur et de leur fin tragique, c'est bien un sentiment de pitié qui domine. Les morts en série, le malheur, la ruine affective et psychologique des personnages, l'amour contrarié, la désillusion, l'arbitraire apparent avec lequel frappe le destin, s'occupent quant à eux de susciter chez le lecteur la sensation de terreur, l'autre moteur de la *catharsis*.

Conclusion

105 *Lolita*, plus qu'une suite d'éléments tragiques juxtaposés, s'articule comme une véritable tragédie, dont les enjeux et les mécanismes sont les mêmes que ceux décrits par Aristote. Bien sûr, comme toujours avec Nabokov, il ne s'agit pas d'un emprunt générique pur.

106 Je montre ailleurs qu'il s'installe dans *Lolita* un dialogue générique qui infléchit et/ou pervertit les codes, suscite et contrarie des attentes chez le lecteur, dialogue dont la tragédie fait partie.

107 Ainsi le dialogisme qui s'installe entre les genres préside-t-il à une économie du doute, inscrivant le roman dans un mouvement perpétuel qui va suspendre le jugement du lecteur, lui permettant de parvenir au bout de sa lecture malgré le contenu.

108 La construction tragique de *Lolita*, inspirant terreur et pitié, participe à la purgation chez ce même lecteur d'éventuels désirs de transgression, tandis que la compassion qu'il vient à nourrir pour ces personnages hautement humains, dont il n'est finalement pas si éloigné, lui enseigne également une sorte de tolérance et de relativisme. Il tire ainsi de l'œuvre un bénéfice secondaire applicable à la réalité extérieure au livre, soit lorsque la *catharsis* permet de désamorcer les tensions au sein de la société qui est la sienne, soit lorsque le relativisme nouvellement découvert débouche sur une compréhension plus large de la réalité extérieure.

109 Nabokov disait dans sa postface: « *Lolita* has no moral in tow » (314). Cela tombe assez bien, puisque la tragédie qui pétrit le récit ne se soucie elle non plus guère de moralité. Elle ne dit pas ce qui est bien ou non, elle se contente de représenter à un temps T un schéma vraisemblable de l'existence, afin de mettre un public face à son reflet. Cette représentation permet en l'occurrence de faire vivre au lecteur un interdit arbitraire et temporaire, lié à une époque (Humbert le montre bien), afin d'expurger les passions que tout interdit est susceptible de faire couver. La tragédie, tout comme le roman de Nabokov, ne mène pas à une apothéose morale, elle ne fait que servir un but qui, même s'il peut être instrumentalisé ou politisé (Pisistrate l'avait bien compris), est avant tout littéraire.

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NOTES

1 Sauf mention contiguë d'un autre ouvrage dans le corps du texte, les références paginales simples entre parenthèses se rapportent à l'édition de Lolita annotée par Alfred Appel Jr, telle qu'elle apparaît dans la bibliographie.

RÉSUMÉS

Français

Lolita est une des rares œuvres ayant causé un scandale à sa publication et dont la teneur polémique n'a pas diminué avec le temps, 60 ans après sa publication. L'interdit qu'elle transgresse, interdit par excellence peut-être, est plus que jamais au cœur de notre société. Parmi ceux qui ont osé franchir la porte d'entrée du livre et parvenir à son terme, il n'est pas un lecteur qui ne se souvienne de son expérience et du goût qu'elle lui a laissé : une sensation paradoxale de malaise mêlée à une révélation esthétique, comme si l'on avait traîné une toile de maître dans un caniveau doré à l'or fin. Nabokov a, semble-t-il, voulu s'aventurer avec ce roman sur les terres d'une littérature non encore défrichée. La beauté de la prose, l'aspect participatif du verbe y sont pour beaucoup dans le succès de *Lolita*, qui a fleuri malgré le scandale. Mais c'est également sa structure tragique, au-delà des simples poncifs associés au terme, qui garantit à cette œuvre particulière d'être lue jusqu'au bout et appréciée. Le lecteur, porté par une construction sans faille digne des lignes directrices d'Aristote sur la tragédie, chemine malgré l'interdit sur la voie des destins qui lui sont contés et dont l'issue lui est connue d'emblée. Malgré ses réticences, il retrouve dans l'abjection variable des personnages le reflet d'errements proprement humains qui ne lui sont pas étrangers. Le parcours hors norme de ces personnages tragiques finira par inspirer au lecteur terreur et pitié, deux éléments essentiels et salvateurs, garants de la *catharsis* attribuée à la tragédie antique. Le présent article aura donc vocation à donner un aperçu des mécanismes de la tragédie qui sous-tendent le roman de Nabokov, tout

en montrant que ce genre conditionne à la fois le maintien du lecteur dans la sphère du livre, et la recevabilité de l'œuvre dans la sphère publique.

English
Lolita is one of the very few literary works which, having caused scandal upon their publication, have remained highly problematic over time, in this case 60 years through. The limit it trespasses is more than ever a burning topic in our society and has acquired near-symbolic value as an arch-offense. Among the readers who dared step across the gate of the novel and who managed to reach its conclusion, there is not a single person who does not remember perfectly well the flavor of that experience: a paradoxical sense of malaise mixed with aesthetic bliss, as for a masterpiece found in a gilded gutter. Nabokov, it seems, managed to take literature where nobody else had ventured before.The beauty of the prose or the reader's participation it demands did much for the success of *Lolita*, which bloomed despite the scandal. But it is also the novel's tragic structure, extending well beyond the stereotypes associated with the term, which ensures it will be read to the end and valued. Thus the reader, moving along the lines of a flawless composition respectful of Aristotle's views on tragedy, neglects their moral duty to rise up against the unbearable, as they learn about the fates of characters whose ends are foretold. Despite occasional disapproval, the reader comes to see in the characters' varying degree of abjection the reflection of essentially human shortcomings, to which he or she is not totally estranged. The extraordinary route of those tragic characters will eventually inspire in the reader terror and pity, the two salutary key elements Aristotle attributes to tragedy, and which lead to the purgation of passions he calls *catharsis*. The purpose of the present article is therefore to offer an overview of the mechanisms of tragedy that underlie Nabokov's novel, and also to demonstrate how this specific genre helps maintain the reader in the novel's grasp and eases the novel's reception in society.

INDEX

Mots-clés
Aristote, catharsis, mimesis, sexualité, société, tragédie, transgression

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Aristotle, catharsis, mimesis, sexuality, society, tragedy, transgression

AUTEUR

Michael Federspiel
Michael Federspiel est professeur agrégé d'anglais. Il enseigne la littérature, la traduction et la langue anglaise à l'université d'Angers (France). Il a par le passé

été attaché de recherche à l'université de Strasbourg (France) et a enseigné l'anglais scientifique à l'université de Toulon (France). Ses travaux portent sur la stylistique et l'approche littéraire des sujets sensibles. Auteur et traducteur de plusieurs articles dans le domaine de la médecine et des sciences humaines, il apprécie particulièrement l'interdisciplinarité. Il est membre fondateur et administrateur de la Société française Vladimir Nabokov.
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Nabokov's Flaubert: Influence, Deviation and Continuity

Le Flaubert de Nabokov : influence, déviation et continuité

Léopold Reigner

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TEXTE

1 The notion of influence is a problematic one, that takes on different meanings when used in different contexts. This paper does not aim to establish Flaubert's writing as the main influence, or indeed the driving force, behind Nabokov's work. Not only was Nabokov's work influenced by a certain number of writers just as important as Flaubert, such as Tolstoy or Pushkin, but both Nabokov's and Flaubert' staunch belief in the individuality of the artist makes such a perspective untenable. Flaubert proved this by his lifelong refusal to be associated with any literary movement, Nabokov by his claim that all great contributions to literature came from individual efforts, never collective ones. Andrew Field, in his biography of Nabokov, even wrote that for Nabokov the two words "individual artist" were inseparable (Field 146). In this case, influence should be seen as a link between the two works, stemming solely from Nabokov's individual interpretation of Flaubert's work. Nabokov, as a reader/writer, formed his own Flaubert as we all do when reading any book. Just as Gérard Genette indicates in his book *Palimpsestes*, where he stresses the importance of interpretation and the fact that when Proust imitates Flaubert's style in his famous pastiche, it is only a "Flaubert read by Proust". In the same way, Nabokov was not influenced by Flaubert but by a Flaubert read by Nabokov, whose style is made up of those of Flaubert's stylistic idiosyncrasies that were picked up by the reader/writer Nabokov. Therefore, the force of individuality is not to be neglected but should be incorporated into the idea of influence: influence is seen as a movement starting from Nabokov's singular

reading of Flaubert's singular invented world, and ending with the effect of this on Nabokov's writing.

2 The immediate effect of Flaubert's influence on Nabokov is the great number of references to Flaubert's novels in Nabokov's work. These references, which showcase Nabokov's admiration for Flaubert's work and his thorough reading of it, have been listed by Flaubertian specialists, notably in a "Nabokov" entry written by Isabelle Poulin in the 2017 *Dictionnaire Flaubert* (edited by Gisèle Séginger), but also by Nabokovians such as Maurice Couturier in his article "Flaubert and Nabokov" in the *Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (Alexandrov 405). Yannicke Chupin also, in her article "The Novel Is Alive", published in *Kaleidoscopic Nabokov* (Delage-Toriel and Manolescu 107), compared *L'Éducation sentimentale* to *Ada* and notably pointed out that Van Veen, in the novel, is born on 1st January 1870, one year after the end of Frédéric Moreau's story in Flaubert's novel. Many other direct references are to be found, such as Flaubert's being mentioned twice in *Lolita*, when Humbert Humbert uses what he calls the Flaubertian expression "nous connûmes" in an anaphora (*Lolita*, 145). The second occurrence is a meta-literary allusion to the status of characters, in which Humbert Humbert deplores the inability of literary characters to change course, or Fate: "Never will Emma Rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert's father's timely ear" (*Lolita*, 265). This shows Nabokov's knowledge of Flaubert's life and that of his family, Flaubert's father having been a well-known surgeon in the Rouen hospital. There are other references and deviated references in *Ada*, where Flaubert's name is distorted into Floeberg,[1] and *Pale Fire*, where the narrator points out that the device of synchronization used by the poet John Shade has already been used by Flaubert: "The whole thing strikes me as too labored and long, especially since the synchronization device has been already worked to death by Flaubert and Joyce" (*Pale Fire*, 157). Most of the references are to *Madame Bovary* though, thus illustrating Nabokov's opinion—and his father's before him—that this novel was "the unsurpassed pearl of world literature" (*Speak, Memory*, 134) and Flaubert's best work. However, Nabokov, according to his letters to his wife, did read Flaubert's complete works at least twice, including Flaubert's correspondence, which he used in his Cornell class on *Madame Bovary*. In *The Gift*,

where several references are made to *Madame Bovary*, is to be found a rare reference to Flaubert's last, unfinished novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, indicating that Nabokov had also read that novel and had it in mind, like *Madame Bovary*, when writing his own novels:

> (Oddly enough, exhibitions in general, for instance the London one of 1862 and the Paris one of 1889, had a strong effect on his fate; thus Bouvard and Pécuchet, when undertaking a description of the life of the Duke of Angoulême, were amazed by the role played in it… by bridges). (*The Gift*, 209)

This reference is made in the fourth chapter, which is devoted to the narrator (Fyodor)'s critical biography of Chernyshevsky. By having his narrator compare his own effort to Bouvard and Pécuchet's failed attempt at writing down the life of an "imbecile" (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*, 148), Nabokov uses Flaubert's example of a failed biography to undermine his narrator's comments.

3 Of course, the reasons why Nabokov makes numerous references to Flaubert and other writers vary, from a tribute paid to a beloved author to pure parody. Dale E. Peterson, in his article "Nabokov and Poe" in *The Garland Companion*, notes that Nabokov insisted on differentiating conscious from unconscious influence: "What is most telling about Nabokov's repudiation of so-called literary influence is his assumption that awareness of a stylistic echo removes the spell of an ancestor. It mattered to Nabokov to be clear about matters of apparent sameness; he drew careful distinctions between conscious and unconscious resemblances" (Alexandrov 463). According to Peterson, while Nabokov's parodies may also be attempts at defusing the notion of influence—in the same fashion as he attempts to defuse the "Viennese delegation"'s psychoanalytical interpretations in advance by introducing fake primal scenes in his novels—they also paradoxically link Nabokov's work to his reading of his precursors' works: "These parodies allowed Nabokov to distance himself from subjection to the 'influence' of Poe while consciously (and ironically) continuing to cultivate Poe's poetic principles in a post-Romantic age" (Alexandrov 463). Moreover, Peterson points out Nabokov's specific vision of parody, one of a stylistic game which feeds off the precursor's work rather than a mockery of it: "Nabokov […] sensed in the parody not a 'grotesque imitation', but a playful collision of

tradition with critical talent, as in his praise of Joycean parody for the 'sudden junction of its clichés with the fireworks and tender sky of real poetry' (SO 75–76)" (Alexandrov 465). Such parody may be found in a particular novel written by Nabokov: *King, Queen Knave*. Maurice Couturier, in his article on Flaubert and Nabokov from *The Garland Companion*, writes that *King, Queen, Knave* is a "parodic version of Flaubert's masterpiece" (Alexandrov 409), *Madame Bovary*. Nabokov, in the preface, writes that his "imitations" of Flaubert's novel constitute a "deliberate tribute". As Genette indicates, there is no perfect imitation, not even a copy, and the remaining question is that of the degree of transformation. The theme of the two novels is indeed similar, a story of adultery which gradually turns into a story of despair and near insanity, culminating in the death of the female protagonist. There are also many differences, such as the age difference between the lovers, a "remotivation" in Genettian language (Genette 457), or Martha's husband's complete indifference to his wife's demands and longings, compared to Charles Bovary's clumsy attentions, cluelessness and desperate true love for Emma, analysed by Genette as "transmotivation" (Genette 458). As Nabokov indicates, the real parody seems to lie in a few passages dealing with the common theme of adultery, such as the philandering wife's escapades and her adulterous thoughts.

4 Maurice Couturier has identified some of those passages, pointing out that the name of Martha's trainer, Madame L'Empereur, is very close to that of Emma's piano teacher, Mademoiselle l'Empereur (the same reference is to be found in *Lolita*, where the girl's piano teacher is called "Miss Emperor") (*Lolita*, 202). Another blatant reference Couturier mentions is the example of the slippers, a gift from Léon in *Madame Bovary*: "Des pantoufles en satin rose, bordées de cygne" (*Madame Bovary*, 397). In *King, Queen, Knave*, they become a « pair of slippers, (his modest but considerate gift) our lovers kept in the lower drawer of the corner chest, for life not unfrequently imitates the French novelists » (*King, Queen, Knave*, 128). Here Nabokov appropriates the Flaubertian objects or names and incorporates them into his own novel and in his own style, but acknowledges said borrowing. However, this hardly constitutes imitation, and is more in line with other references to Flaubert, where Nabokov seems to test his reader's knowledge, establishing

"une condition de lecture" (Genette 31), to use yet another expression by Genette. This type of references may serve another purpose for an author who rejected any notion of influence as applied to himself. Indeed, by resorting to explicit references Nabokov may have been trying to dismiss any assumption of covert traces of influence in his work, in the same way as he inserts false primal scenes and psychological symbolism in other novels to refute psychoanalytical interpretation (the oranges in *Mary*, the running taps in *Pale Fire*). By displaying the reference, Nabokov may be exhibiting his awareness of Flaubert's work to discard the idea of a more profound influence of the Norman writer upon his work.

5 Likewise, his allusions to "amiable imitations" in the preface indicate that all similarities with Flaubert's work are not coincidental but intentional. Indeed, several passages in the two novels mirror each other. The first one is located right after the adultery has taken place for the first time, as the female protagonist reflects upon her actions. In the two novels, the depiction begins with the same event: the character observing her own reflection in the mirror, and rediscovering herself.

6 In *Madame Bovary*:

> [...] Mais, en s'apercevant dans la glace, elle s'étonna de son visage. Jamais elle n'avait eu les yeux si grands, si noirs, ni d'une telle profondeur. Quelque chose de subtil épandu sur sa personne la transfigurait.

> Elle se répétait : « J'ai un amant ! un amant ! » se délectant à cette idée comme à celle d'une autre puberté qui lui serait survenue. Elle allait donc posséder enfin ces joies de l'amour, cette fièvre du bonheur dont elle avait désespéré. Elle entrait dans quelque chose de merveilleux où tout serait passion, extase, délire ; une immensité bleuâtre l'entourait, les sommets du sentiment étincelaient sous sa pensée, et l'existence ordinaire n'apparaissait qu'au loin, tout en bas, dans l'ombre, entre les intervalles de ces hauteurs. (*Madame Bovary*, 266)

In *King, Queen, Knave*:

> She proceeded to change, smiling, sighing happily, acknowledging with thanks her reflection in the mirror. […] It's all quite simple, I simply have a lover. That ought to embellish, not complicate, my existence, And that's just what it is—a pleasant embellishment." (*King, Queen, Knave*, 125/140)

Again, Nabokov borrows the theme from Flaubert, the character seeing her renewed self in the mirror, and pondering her having finally become the "woman with her lover" she had been longing to be since the beginning of the novel. However, the style is still Nabokovian, and this particular imitation seems to fit the notion of parody as described by Genette in *Palimpsestes*, a "playful transformation" ("transformation ludique", p. 45). It is actually not technically an imitation, but what Genette would call a transformation, since the reactions displayed are quite different: Emma Bovary is portrayed as ecstatic at having finally fulfilled her idealistic vision of love derived from her sentimental reading of Walter Scott and other romantic novels, and Flaubert seemingly mocks his character for her illusions by overdoing her satisfaction (which, compared with the novel's ending, is decidedly ironic). Martha is described as composed, assessing her adultery as her access to a new, improved social status. The effect is humorous for a reader of *Madame Bovary*, as Nabokov pointed out in his preface. The passage therefore constitutes a playful transformation, and differentiates Nabokov's character from Flaubert's, which Nabokov makes clear in the next page: "She was no Emma, and no Anna." But Nabokov also pursues Flaubert's already ironical description of his protagonist. In *Madame Bovary*, the description of Emma's feelings is incredibly emphatic, Flaubert describing Emma's recaptured femininity, as illustrated by the anaphora of "she", in the final unleashing of emotions which had been portrayed as frustrated for the last 200 pages. Martha's mild reaction highlights Emma Bovary's deluded state of mind, which Flaubert already attempted to convey through several exclamation points, and an enumeration of cliché expressions such as "fever of happiness", "passion", "ecstasy" and "delirium". Nabokov showcases his interpretation of Emma Bovary's character and brings Flaubert's emphatic description one step further.

7 Yet other aspects of influence may be shown by those passages that were directly referenced by Nabokov in his preface. In that particular excerpt, Nabokov borrows not only a theme used in *Madame Bovary*, but also seems to briefly imitate Flaubert's style. In this scene, Emma and Martha visit their lovers, Rodolphe for Emma and Franz for Martha. In the preface, Nabokov writes that he "remembered remembering" "Emma creeping at dawn to her lover's chateau along impossibly unobservant back lanes". The passage thus reads:

> Un matin, que Charles était sorti dès avant l'aube, elle fut prise par la fantaisie de voir Rodolphe à l'instant. On pouvait arriver promptement à la Huchette, y rester une heure et être rentré dans Yonville que tout le monde encore serait endormi. […] Cette première audace lui ayant réussi, chaque fois maintenant que Charles sortait de bonne heure, Emma s'habillait vite et descendait à pas de loup le perron qui conduisait au bord de l'eau.

> Mais, quand la planche aux vaches était levée, il fallait suivre les murs qui longeaient la rivière ; la berge était glissante ; elle s'accrochait de la main, pour ne pas tomber, aux bouquets de ravenelles flétries. Puis elle prenait à travers des champs en labour, où elle enfonçait, trébuchait et empêtrait ses bottines minces. Son foulard, noué sur sa tête, s'agitait au vent dans les herbages ; elle avait peur des bœufs, elle se mettait à courir ; elle arrivait essoufflée, les joues roses, et exhalant de toute sa personne un frais parfum de sève, de verdure et de grand air. (*Madame Bovary*, 267–268)

The passage from *King, Queen, Knave* is shorter, but mirrors Emma's escapades:

> More and more often, with a recklessness she no longer noticed, Martha escaped from that triumphant presence to her lover's room, arriving even at hours when he was still at the store and the vibrant sounds of construction in the sky were not yet replaced by nearby radios, and would darn a sock, her black brows sternly drawn together as she awaited his return with confident and legitimate tenderness.

8 The common theme here is the character's impatience, which conveys the irresistible nature of her affair. Martha's "recklessness"

echoes Emma's "bold venture". As in the other passage, the transformation of "plowed fields" and "pastures" into "vibrant sounds of construction" and "cattle" into "nearby radios" is playful. However, Nabokov's use of the form "would + verb" as he describes Martha's repeated actions when she "would darn a sock" is more telling, as it illustrates the influence on Nabokov's style of his vision of Flaubert's style. In Flaubert's passage, he uses the famous "éternel imparfait" as Proust dubbed it, so as to describe actions which are repeated by his characters in an habitual manner. In his class on *Madame Bovary*, Nabokov had to retranslate part of *Madame Bovary* for his students, since he disliked Eleanor Marx's available translation, particularly because she had eliminated Flaubert's specific use of the "imparfait" verb tense, to rather translate all its forms by preterits. This is what Nabokov says of Flaubert's use, and of the appropriate translation:

> Another point in analyzing Flaubert's style concerns the use of the French imperfect form of the past tense, expressive of an action or state in continuance, something that has been happening in an habitual way. In English this is best rendered by *would* or *used to*: on rainy days she used to do this or that; then the church bells would sound; the rain would stop, etc. Proust says somewhere that Flaubert's mastery of time, of flowing time, is expressed by his use of the imperfect, of the *imparfait*. This imperfect, says Proust, enables Flaubert to express the continuity of time and its unity.

> Translators have not bothered about this matter at all. In numerous passages the sense of repetition, of dreariness in Emma's life, for instance in the chapter relating to her life at Tostes, is not adequately rendered in English because the translator did not trouble to insert here and there a *would* or *used to*, or a sequence of *woulds*.

> In Tostes, Emma walks out with her whippet: "She would begin [*not "began"*] by looking around her to see if nothing had changed since the last she had been there. She would find [*not "found"*] again in the same places the foxgloves and wallflowers, the beds of nettles growing round the big stones, and the patches of lichen along the three windows, whose shutters, always closed, were rotting away on their rusty iron bars. Her

> thoughts, aimless at first, would wander [*not "wandered"*] at random […]." (*Lectures on Literature*, 173)

9 In the latest translation of *Madame Bovary* by Lydia Davis, Flaubert's imperfect has also been translated by *would*. For example, this is how she translates the ending of the second passage:

> Then she would strike out across the plowed fields, sinking down, stumbling, and catching her thin little boots. Her scarf, tied over her head, would flutter in the wind in the pastures; she was afraid of the cattle, she would start running; she would arrive out of breath, her cheeks pink, her whole body exhaling a cool fragrance of sap, leaves, and fresh air.

Lydia Davis, in a presentation at the Center of Translation, explained that she examined Nabokov's annotations and commentaries and used them in her own translation (Davis), a rare example of inverse influence, whereby Nabokov's vision of Flaubert's imperfect becomes part of the reading experience of *Madame Bovary* by English-speaking readers.

10 At any rate, this proves that Nabokov was well aware of the significance of this device as well as of the specific intonation it granted to Flaubert's style, so that its use in this passage, already Flaubertian in its theme, constitutes an imitation by Nabokov of Flaubert's style. This is not an isolated use of such value and effect of the imperfect tense by Nabokov though. Indeed, in *Lolita*, Nabokov uses *would* to describe "something that has been happening in a usual way":

> […] she would set the electric fan-a-whirr or induce me to drop a quarter into the radio, or she would read all the signs and inquire with a whine why she could not go riding up some advertised tail […] Lo would fall prostrate […] and it would take hours of blandishments, threats and promises to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs […]. (*Lolita*, 147)

In this passage, Nabokov sums up a large period of time through repeated actions, like Flaubert did through the use of the *imparfait*. In *Ada*, as well: "[…] she would clench them, allowing his lips nothing

but knuckle, but he would fiercely pry her hand open to get at those flat blind little cushions" (*Ada*, 59).

11 Still, transformation intervenes. Indeed, Nabokov's interpretation of Flaubert's *imparfait* is unique in its focus on the *imparfait* as expressing "a state or action in continuance". When Nabokov writes that "Proust says somewhere that Flaubert's mastery of time […] is expressed by his use of the imperfect", he is most likely alluding to Proust's 1920 article, "Sur le style de Flaubert". Yet, in this article, Proust lists several uses of Flaubert's *imparfait*, including but not limited to continuing actions or states. Indeed, he also mentions Flaubert's use of the *imparfait* to convey characters' speech in free indirect speech, quoting this passage from *L'Éducation sentimentale*: "L'État devait s'emparer de la Bourse. Bien d'autres mesures étaient bonnes encore. Il fallait d'abord passer le niveau sur la tête des riches […]" (Philippe 2004, 86). Nabokov, however, does not mention this use, and selects one of the effects of Flaubert's use of the *imparfait*. Nor does Nabokov's vision fully match Gilles Philippe's depiction of Flaubert's "imparfait phénoméniste", which "when substituted to the expected simple past, shows the unfolding of action, which seems to be much less of an event, and as it is perceived by a consciousness: 'Mlle Marthe courut vers lui, et, cramponnée à son cou, elle tirait ses moustaches'". [2] This example depicts a singular, unrepeated action expressed continuously, not "something that has been happening in an habitual way". At any rate, Nabokov's interpretation creates a Nabokovian version of Flaubert's *imparfait* which is focused on expressing the continuity of repeated actions. Moreover, the use of "would" in Nabokov's work seems to be reserved for love relationships between his characters, and the modal *would* is often written by a first-person narrator, not only to convey an impersonal and forlorn description of a character trapped in a repetitive state, like Flaubert did, but also the homodiegetic narrator's obsession, so that the repetitive state is also induced by this narrator as a character. Even in *Pale Fire*, where Kinbote describes a recurring dream by the King about the Queen Disa, the use of *would* has to do with love and obsession:

> These heartrending dreams transformed the drab prose of his feelings for her intro strong and strange poetry, of which would flash and disturb him throughout the day […] He would see her being

> accosted by a misty relative so distant as to be practically featureless. She would quickly hide what she held and extend her arched hand to be kissed [...] She would be cancelling an illumination, or discussing hospital cost with the head nurse [...] He would help her again to her feet and she would be walking side by side along an anonymous alley, and he would feel she was looking at him [...]. (*Pale Fire*, 168)

The idea of Nabokov being influenced by his own interpretation of Flaubert seems quite relevant here. His vision of Flaubert's *imparfait*, as described in his class on *Madame Bovary* and used in the above-quoted passages, is selective. Indeed, Proust explains that Flaubert also uses the imperfect tense to convey his character's speech indirectly, or a clichéd speech, while Thibaudet's view is that it sometimes serves to mark a brutal return to reality for the characters. Yet Nabokov only retained one of the values or effects of the Flaubertian imperfect. Therefore, his using the modal *would* as an equivalent for the French *imparfait* illustrates the importance of the reader/writer's interpretation in the phenomenon of influence.

12 Nabokov explores the *would* device in his class on *Madame Bovary*, in the "Flaubert's style" section, the *would* device being the fourth identified feature in Flaubert's style. Just as interesting when it comes to analyzing the influence of Flaubert's work on Nabokov is the first device mentioned: the use of the semi-colon and coordination conjunction "and". Here is what Nabokov says about this structure:

> In order to plunge at once into the matter, I want to draw attention first of all to Flaubert's use of the word *and* preceded by a semi-colon. (The semicolon is sometimes replaced by a lame comma in the English translation, but we will put the semicolon back.) This *semicolon-and* comes after an enumeration of actions or states or objects; then the semicolon creates a pause and the *and* proceeds to round up the paragraph, to introduce a culminating image or a vivid detail, descriptive, poetic, melancholy, or amusing. This is a peculiar feature of Flaubert's style.

> [...] Emma bored with her marriage at the end of the first part: "She listened in a kind of dazed concentration to each cracked sound of the church bell. On some roof a cat would walk arching its back in the pale sun. The wind on the highway blew up strands of dust. Now

> and then a distant dog howled; and the bell, keeping time, continued its monotonous ringing over the fields." (*Lectures on Literature*, 171)

Again, Nabokov's interpretation of this device highlights the importance of the reader's individuality when it comes to influence. Proust, in his study of Flaubert's style, considers that Flaubert's suppression of "and" in enumerations is just as significant as his use of it, and does not mention the *semi-colon and* as a way to "round up the paragraph". Rather he focuses on its introducing a secondary sentence, but never ending an enumeration: "En un mot, chez Flaubert, 'et' commence toujours une phrase secondaire et ne termine jamais une énumération" (Philippe 2004, 88). Thibaudet, in his study of Flaubert's style and of his use of "and", does not mention any particular punctuation associated with it, even for the "and" of "movement" as he calls it, which most resembles Nabokov's depiction of the device: "[…] et de mouvement qui accompagne ou signifie au cours d'une description ou d'une narration le passage à une tension plus haute à un moment plus important ou plus dramatique, une progression" (Thibaudet 265).

13 Once again, this Flaubertian device as seen by Nabokov can be found in several of Nabokov's novels. In *Lolita*, for example, in a paragraph where the *would* is also present:

> She sat a little higher than I, and whenever in her solitary ecstasy she was led to kiss me, her head would bend with a sleepy, soft, drooping movement that was almost woeful, and her bare knees caught and compressed my wrist, and slackened again; and her quivering mouth, distorted by the acridity of some mysterious potion, with a sibilant intake of breath came near to my face. (*Lolita*, 14)

The first two "ands" are quite different from the last. They merely coordinate the various clauses, which express successive actions depicting a scene of calm and affection. The semicolon, as described by Nabokov in his class on *Madame Bovary*, creates a pause in the scene, while the *and* introduces a culminating clause, including the vivid, slightly jarring, detail of the "quivering mouth". Likewise, Nabokov uses the preterit in the sentence introduced by "; and" contrasting with the "would + verb" construction of the first sentence, in the same way as Flaubert uses the simple past after the

imperfect. In Flaubert's work, this is not systematic. He sometimes also uses the imperfect for his last sentence, as can be seen in one of the examples quoted by Nabokov in his class: "[…] and she would push him away, half-smiling, half-vexed, as you do a child who hangs about you" [3] (*Lectures on Literature*, 171). Whenever Nabokov makes a similar use of "; and", however, he often uses the preterit, or another tense, but rarely the "would + verb" construction. The effect of this is a flattening of the continuous effect created by the imperfect or the "would + verb" construction. In Flaubert, even the simple past, describing an instantaneous action, gives an impression of slowness and doomed repetition, as indicated by the verb "continue" and the adjective "monotonous" in: "[…]; and the bell, keeping time, continued its monotonous ringing over the fields" [4] (*Lectures on Literature*, 171). This is due to Flaubert's "; and" device having the intention both to "heighten the tension" as Thibaudet pointed out, but also, as Nabokov taught in his class to "round up" (*Lectures on Literature*, 171) the sentence, the paragraph or the chapter. Nabokov only very rarely uses "; and" to end a chapter, which, in addition to the difference in the use of tenses, indicates that Nabokov's use of the device introduces a jarring or culminating clause rather than "round[s] up" the sentence.

14 That Nabokov should have had culmination as an aim when using "; and" is corroborated by a difference in rhythm. In all examples given by Nabokov of Flaubert's use of the device, the clauses introduced by "; and" take up only one or two lines, serving their purpose as conclusions of the sentence. However, Nabokov often introduces much longer clauses with the same device, sometimes amounting to explanatory digressions, as is the case in this quote from *Ada*:

> A freshly emerged *Nymphalis carmen* was fanning its lemon and amber-brown wings on a sunlit patch of grating, only to be choked with one nip by the nimble fingers of enraptured and heartless Ada; the Odettian Sphinx had turned, bless him, into an elephantoid mummy with a comically encased trunk of the guermantoid type; and Dr Krolik was swiftly running on short legs after a very special orange-tip above timberline, in another hemisphere, *Antocharis ada* Krolik (1884)—as it was known until changed to *A. prittwitzi*

> Stümper (1883) by the inexorable law of taxonomic priority. (*Ada*, 56–57)

In this passage, Nabokov seems to follow Flaubert's use of the device, rounding up the phrase with a culminating image, in this case Dr Krolik chasing a butterfly. Yet, unlike what happens in Flaubert's prose, Nabokov continues the sentence, introducing such vivid details as the two names of the butterfly, and several events, letting the reader know that Dr Krolik did catch the butterfly, but was beaten to the discovery by another lepidopterist. This is part of a pattern in Nabokov's use of "; and" where, instead of Flaubert's sharp, riding up clause, which heightens the tension by jarring with the previous slow enumerations, Nabokov introduces several images and details, as if starting on another idea altogether, so that instead of concluding the sentence, his last clause takes on a life of its own and becomes a series of culminating images.

15 The two authors' different uses of "; and" reflect a disparity in style and a decidedly original take on the device by Nabokov. Indeed, Nabokov's excess disconnects the device from the main clause. In the first example taken from *Lolita*, the playful description of the character's movements shifts into a darker depiction: "[…] her quivering mouth, distorted by the acridity of some mysterious potion" (*Lolita*, 14). These details clash with the tone created in the previous enumeration of actions. Thus the change in tone combines with the culminating effect. The following lines, taken from John Shade's poem in *Pale Fire*, offer a particularly striking example of this:

> We'll think of matters only known to us—
> Empires of rhyme, Indies of calculus;
> Listen to distant cocks crow, and discern
> Upon the rough gray wall a rare wall fern;
> And while our royal hands are being tied,
> Taunt our inferiors, cheerfully deride
> The dedicated imbeciles, and spit
> Into their eyes just for the fun of it. (*Pale Fire*, 47)

The structure of the poem separates "and" from the semicolon having remained in the preceding line. However, the basic pattern remains: an enumeration of images and actions, "empires of rhyme, Indies of

Calculus", "distant cocks", "a rare wall fern" is broken by a pause in the action, marked by the semicolon. The "and" which follows introduces a culminating image. This last clause also concludes the sentence, but Nabokov introduces another "and" in the sentence, thus prolonging it so that it makes up half of the stanza. Nabokov's deviation from his Flaubertian model is illustrated here, as the culminating image seems to have little to do with the beginning of the stanza. Indeed, the seemingly peaceful enumeration, painting a still picture in which one might use the Flaubertian imperfect without conflict with the original tone ("the distant cocks would crow") is followed by a striking depiction of a King who, having been made prisoner, maintains a shockingly cavalier and contemptuous attitude.

16 Nabokov's immoderate style pushes the Flaubertian culmination further so that the clause introduced by "; and" dwarfs the sentence beginning the poem rather than concludes it or "round[s] it up". This likely has to do with Nabokov's use of the first-person narrator, compared to Flaubert's third person, neutral narrator, better appropriate to achieve Flaubert's commitment to the impersonality of the writer. Nabokov, on the contrary, impersonates a character, and in this case a poet, John Shade, whose style is also largely Nabokov's, although its exuberance and excess probably also indicate a shift in the character's mindset. Such deviation from Flaubert's use of "; and" is not the only one of its kind.

17 Indeed Nabokov finishes the novel *Ada* with a clause introduced by "; and". The rhythm of the Flaubertian device is present, as Nabokov enumerates several images before coming to a break with the semicolon:

> Not the least adornment of the chronicle is the delicacy of pictorial detail: a latticed gallery; a painted ceiling; a pretty plaything stranded among the forget-me-nots of a brook; butterflies and butterfly orchids in the margin of the romance; a misty view descried from marble steps; a doe at gaze in the ancestral park; and much, much more. (589)

Despite the similarity in rhythm, a crucial element of the Flaubertian device is missing, as the "; and" structure fails to introduce a striking image, detail or action. Instead, a simple comparative, preceded by a

quantifier repeated once, without a verb, forms the whole clause. Nor does it "round up" the sentence, the paragraph, nor the novel itself. Quite the contrary, as the very brief clause suggests that all preceding images only make up a small portion of the imagery of the lovers' story. Thus the device is made to serve almost the opposite purpose it does in Flaubert, since, instead of concluding an enumeration by a culminating detail, the clause introduced by "; and" rather opens the sentence out, conjuring up a new enumeration of images, sometimes even unrelated to the beginning of the sentence. The enumeration being kept silent further stimulates the reader's imagination, giving way to a wide possibility of interpretations. This may be the major difference in the use of the "; and" by Flaubert and Nabokov. Flaubert uses the device to seal the sentence and engrave in the reader's mind the last striking detail. In Nabokov's prose, it seems to launch the sentence anew, breaking as it does from the beginning of the sentence to trigger flights of fancy and release new images.

18 What can Nabokov's appropriation of the Flaubertian "; and" device and deviation from it tell us about the issue of influence? In *The Anxiety of influence*, Blooms lists different types of influence corresponding to different postures taken by the influenced authors in regards to their predecessors (Bloom 1973, 14). To Bloom, influence can manifest itself in the form of imitation, continuation, complete deviation, recreation, appropriation, and even destruction. The type of influence described by Bloom which may best fit Flaubert's influence upon Nabokov seems to be what he calls *Tessera*: "[…] which is completion and antithesis. […] A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (Bloom 1973, 14). As has been seen through Nabokov's specific interpretation of Flaubert's imperfect tense and "semicolon-and" devices and his subsequent original uses of it, Nabokov seems to adopt Flaubertian turns only to take them in another direction.

19 The issue of interpretation as raised by this definition, however, relies on the key notion of "misreading", defined by Bloom as follows: "Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative spaces

for themselves" (Bloom 1975, 5). Misreading is thus seen as an inevitable deviation operated by the individual reading another's work, so that appropriation and interpretation of said work begins with the act of reading: "Reading, as my title indicates, is a belated and all-but impossible act, and if strong is always a misreading" (Bloom 1975, 3). While the individual deviation operated by any reader on the text does seem inevitable, the "mis-" prefix indicates a necessary flawed interpretation on the reader's part. This would require the existence of a true meaning of the text from which the individual reading would part. Nabokov's analysis of Flaubert's writing in his class certainly constitutes an individual vision of Flaubert but not necessarily a misinterpretation. Rather, his knowledge of Flaubert's work and his creative take on Flaubert's writing showcase the power of his "mis"-reading. His having translated passages of the novel himself rather than using an existing translation is more evidence of the originality of his reading: he created a Flaubert of his own, in agreement with his personal interpretation. Indeed, although his issues with Marx-Aveling's translation come from a complex understanding of Flaubert's style, specifically Flaubert's use of past tenses, Nabokov himself argues that a purely scholarly translation will not be an effective one if it lacks the essential quality of creativity:

> The scholar will be, I hope, exact and pedantic [...] The laborious lady translating at the eleventh hour the eleventh volume of somebody's collected works will be, I am afraid, less exact and less pedantic; but the point is not that the scholar commits fewer blunders than a drudge; the point is that as a rule both he and she are hopelessly devoid of any semblance of creative genius. Neither learning nor diligence can replace imagination and style. (Nabokov 1941)

20 Such creative genius implies invention on the part of the translator and originality, as stemming from an individual and subjective input. When Nabokov wrote his book on Gogol, he claimed that by translating him he had "created" him: "I had first to create Gogol (translate him) and then discuss him (translate my Russian ideas about him)" (Boyd 63). In the same way he created "his" Gogol, Nabokov created "his" Flaubert at the same time as he was influenced by the latter. Misreading therefore appears to have much to do with the reader's individuality as it influences his reception of the author's

work. In his essay *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus*, Pierre Bayard discusses the existence of an "inner book", formed by the reader's experience and previous readings:

> Tissé des fantasmes propres à chaque individu et de nos légendes privées, le livre intérieur individuel est à l'œuvre dans notre désir de lecture. […] les livres intérieurs individuels forment un système de réception des autres textes et interviennent à la fois dans leur accueil et dans leur réorganisation. En ce sens, ils constituent une grille de lecture du monde, et particulièrement des livres, dont ils organisent la découverte en donnant l'illusion de la transparence. Ce que nous prenons pour des livres lus est un amoncellement hétéroclite de fragments de textes, remaniés par notre imaginaire et sans rapport avec les livres des autres […]. (83–84)

As much as in Bloom's notion of misreading, Bayard's view suggests that the reader's imagination and ideas command his interpretation of the text, since each reading operates an individual deviation from the author's work. Such is the idea expressed by Pascal about Montaigne's influence upon him, quoted by Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*: "It is not in Montaigne, but in myself, that I find all that I see in him" (Bloom 1975, 56). Bloom dismisses this assertion as an effort by an anxious Pascal to distance himself from a precursor with whom he shares many "parallel passages" (Bloom 1975, 56). Yet, in this sentence, Pascal articulates a vision of the reader's creating an individual text, born of a selection of ideas, while discarding others having appeared in the course of reading. The fear of seeing one's individuality dismissed may be the reason for what Bloom calls the anxiety of influence, and why many authors are reluctant to admit their having been influenced. Nabokov is one of them. In a 1932 interview with the Estonian newspaper "Today", quoted by Field, he agreed that "one might speak of a French Influence. I love Flaubert and Proust" (Field 115). However, he also minimized his precursors' influence in a 1964 interview with *Life* magazine, while conceding some occasional similarities between his writing and his past readings:

> Today I can always tell when a sentence I compose happens to resemble in cut and intonation that of any of the writers I loved or

> detested half a century ago; but I do not believe that any particular writer has had any definite influence upon me. (*Strong Opinions*, 46)

The issue thus seems to lie in the definition of influence rather than in deciding whether he was influenced or not. Indeed, Nabokov declared in his class that "Without Flaubert there would have been no Marcel Proust in France, no James Joyce in Ireland. Chekhov in Russia would not have been quite Chekhov. So much for Flaubert's literary influence" (*Lectures on Literature*, 147). Would Nabokov, who wrote to his wife Véra that he had read *Madame Bovary* "a hundred times" (Voronina and Boyd 173), have been Nabokov without Flaubert? Probably not, but Nabokov's reluctance to discuss this influence may stem from his deep concern for the artist's individuality, and from his vision of influence as a "dark and unclear thing" (Field 265). However, when seen in light of the notion of misreading, the fact that Nabokov created his own Flaubert by reading his whole works in Russia between the age of 14 and 15, may allow for a definition of influence which would fully take into account the influenced author's individuality.

21 Derek Attridge, in *The Singularity of Literature*, gives a definition of influence inspired by Kant's "exemplary originality", described as a "type of genius" which "provides both a pattern for methodical reproduction by future artists lacking in genius and more significantly, a spur to future geniuses for the further exercise of exemplary originality" (Attridge 36). Influence is not only perceived as a source of anxiety for the influenced author, struggling to overcome his precursor's "genius", but also as a stimulus for the reader/writer's creativity. Flaubert himself, in his letters, describes this dual feeling when he discusses his reading of Shakespeare. In 1845, in a letter to Alfred le Poittevin, he writes: "Plus je pense à Shakespeare, plus j'en suis écrasé" (*Correspondance I*, 247). In 1846, to Louise Colet, he expresses a different feeling: "Quand je lis Shakespeare je deviens plus grand, plus intelligent et plus pur. Parvenu au sommet d'une de ses œuvres, il me semble que je suis sur une haute montagne : tout disparaît et tout apparaît. On n'est plus homme, on est *œil* ; des horizons nouveaux surgissent, les perspectives se prolongent à l'infini […]." (*Correspondance I*, 364)

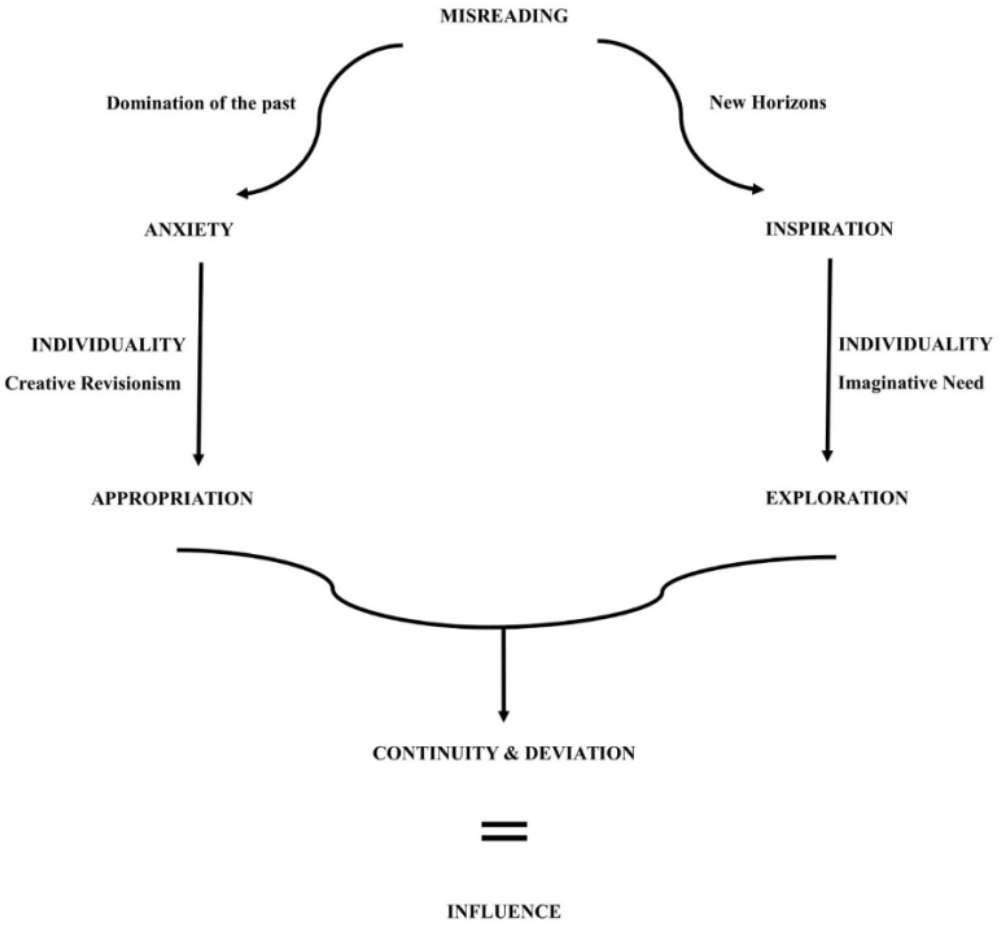
22 In *Palimpsestes*, Genette argues that even a writer with a strong "stylistic individuality" (he quotes Nabokov as an example) cannot be free of influence:

> […] une individualité littéraire (artistique en général) peut sans doute difficilement être à la fois tout à fait hétérogène et tout à fait originale et « authentique » — si ce n'est dans le fait même de son éclatement, qui transcende et de quelque manière *rassemble* ses éclats, comme Picasso n'est lui-même qu'*à travers* des manières qui l'apparentent successivement à Lautre, à Braque, à Ingres, etc. (176)

Originality and influence are therefore not incompatible at all, and influence may be seen as a two-fold movement of continuity and deviation, the influenced author's individuality being the driving force behind the two phenomena: continuity, because Nabokov carries forward not Flaubert's work but the work of "his" Flaubert, a vision born of his misreading; and deviation because Nabokov departs from this vision by exploring different ideas.

23 Such a process may be summarized by the following scheme:

Illustration 1. – Scheme of the process from misreading to influence.



24 Misreading is the fundamental element, leading the influenced author to produce an individual reading of the author's work, in this case Nabokov's misreading of Flaubert. Then, the reader/writer is faced with two paths, which he follows simultaneously: inspiration, marked by an enthusiastic discovery of new ideas and horizons found in the precursor's work. This corresponds to what Flaubert wrote about being inspired by Shakespeare, and Attridge's description of "exemplary originality" as a "spur for futures geniuses". The second path is anxiety, fueled respectively by a feeling of being dominated by past achievements, again described by Flaubert, but which Nabokov also expressed in poems such as "Fame", where the poet declares that his work is doomed to be forgotten. Afterwards, individuality, the key factor in the process, transforms impressions into actions, as the act of writing follows the act of reading. Such are the two axes of influence: inspiration leads to the precursor's ideas being further

explored and experimented with, while anxiety, which also induces creativity, leads to an individual interpretation and appropriation of the predecessor's work.

25 The impact of individuality may best be described once again through the example of Flaubert's "; and" device. Nabokov interpreted that device in his own way, describing the break made after an enumeration, followed by a culminating detail. This leads to Nabokov's appropriation of the device, put to use in his own works but not copied. Nabokov is the one who discarded the other uses of Flaubert's "; et" alluded to by Zola and Thibaudet and singled out its usage as the conclusion of a sentence. This concords with Pierre Bayard's vision of reading as a "gathering of fragments" (Bayard 83–84). [5] This may also be linked with what Bloom calls "creative revisionism", a phenomenon which allows the *clinamen* (deviation) process to occur: "The *clinamen*, or swerve [...] is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism [...]" (Bloom 1975, 42). Nabokov created his own definition of what he perceived to be Flaubert's devices and of their purpose, so that Flaubert's other uses of "; and" are dismissed in his analysis, while only one, clear Nabokovian definition is retained. This is coherent with Bloom's vision of creative revisionism: "[...] the new poet *himself* determines his precursor's *particular* law. If a creative interpretation is thus necessarily a misinterpretation, we must accept this apparent absurdity" (Bloom 1975, 43). Unless, as Paul Valéry states in "À propos du Cimetière marin", there is no true meaning of a text, and therefore no flawed interpretation, so that the more creative the reader is, the richer their interpretation will be:

> Quant à l'interprétation de la lettre, je me suis déjà expliqué ailleurs sur ce point ; mais on n'y insistera jamais assez : il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte. [...] Une fois publié, un texte est comme un appareil dont chacun peut se servir à sa guise et selon ses moyens : il n'est pas sûr que le constructeur en use mieux qu'un autre.

26 Nabokov's use of "; and" also explains the second axis of influence—inspiration leading to exploration. Indeed, while Nabokov appropriates and puts Flaubert's device to use, he does not use it

exactly in the same way as described in his class on *Madame Bovary*. Nabokov's "; and" device fits his general style, characterized by more excess and flights of fancy than Flaubert's. His imaginative drive leads Nabokov to deviate from the device's original purpose and effectively create a new device, marked by his individuality.

27 Following the two axes of influence, Nabokov, according to a complex process of continuity and deviation, both highlights his own vision of Flaubert, revealing unknown aspects of the precursor, and establishes his own "exemplary originality" by enacting his "stylistic individuality".

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NOTES

1 To Bryan Boyd, a reference to "the famously icy objectivity [Flaubert] strove for in his fiction" in his annotation of Ada on *ADAonline*. To Isabelle Poulin, in the Vladimir Nabokov entry for the *Dictionnaire Flaubert* (p. 1015), the false quote referencing Madame Bovary is a sign of Nabokov's interest in Emma Bovary as a reader poisoned by books.

2 "[…], qui, quand il se substitue au passé simple attendu, atténue considérablement la valeur événementielle et présente l'action en cours de déroulement comme si elle était perçue par une conscience : 'Mlle Marthe

courut vers lui, et, cramponnée à son cou, elle tirait ses moustaches'" (Philippe 2009, 98–99, my translation).

3 "[…] ; et elle le repoussait, à demi souriante et ennuyée, comme on fait à un enfant qui se pend après vous" (*Madame Bovary*, 96).

4 "[…] : et la cloche, à temps égaux, continuait sa sonnerie monotone qui se perdait dans la campagne" (*Madame Bovary*, 135).

5 "un amoncellement hétéroclite de fragments".

RÉSUMÉS

English

Nabokov frequently derided the notion of influence as pertaining to himself, and often characterized it as a way for critics to focus on unoriginality and the similarities between writers, thereby ignoring individual writers' peaks of original artistry. However, some of his statements demonstrate an acknowledgement that great writers have influenced their successors. One of these great writers admired by Nabokov is Flaubert, whose influence Nabokov considers so great that he claims in his class on *Madame Bovary* that, were it not for Flaubert, Joyce and Proust would not have existed. Which bears the question, would Nabokov have been quite the same without his reading and re-reading of Flaubert? We may attempt to answer this question by focusing not solely on the two writers' similarities but rather on Nabokov's creative use of Flaubert's influence. A revised definition of influence may center around the strength of individuality, by using Harold Bloom's notion of misreading, not necessarily as a misinterpretation but as a creative individual interpretation by Nabokov of Flaubert's work. This individual reading shows through in all of Nabokov's conscious references to Flaubert in his work, whether they be parodies or tributes. Moreover, Nabokov's analysis of Flaubert's style in his class on *Madame Bovary* provides a detailed account of his individual reading, as well as a list of devices to compare with Nabokov's own style. Of course, any similarity would have been doubly modified by Nabokov, first by his individual vision of Flaubert's style and then by his original use of them in his own style, one that is quite different from Flaubert's, so that, to quote Dmitri Nabokov in his preface to *The Man From the USSR*, the focus can be put on "the unique peaks" and not "the multitudinous plateau".

Français

Nabokov a fréquemment nié la notion d'influence s'agissant de son propre cas, la caractérisant souvent comme une façon pour les critiques de se concentrer sur le manque d'originalité et les similitudes existant chez différents écrivains, tout en ignorant les pics de beauté artistique des écrivains individuels. Pourtant, certaines déclarations de Nabokov

démontrent une reconnaissance du fait que des grands écrivains ont influencé leurs successeurs. L'un de ces grands écrivains admirés par Nabokov est Flaubert, dont Nabokov considère l'influence si importante qu'il déclare dans son cours sur *Madame Bovary* que Joyce et Proust n'aurait pas existé sans Flaubert. Déclaration qui soulève la question suivante : Nabokov aurait-il été tout à fait le même écrivain sans sa lecture et relecture de Flaubert ? Nous pouvons tenter de répondre à cette question en se concentrant non uniquement sur les similitudes existantes entre les deux auteurs mais plutôt sur l'utilisation créative que fait Nabokov de l'influence de Flaubert. Une définition revue de l'influence peut se focaliser sur la force de l'individualité, en se fondant sur la notion de mélecture d'Harold Bloom, vue non pas comme ne mauvaise interprétation mais comme une interprétation individuelle et créative de Nabokov de l'œuvre de Flaubert. Cette lecture individuelle est visible à travers les références conscientes faites par Nabokov à Flaubert dans son œuvre, qu'elles soient parodies ou hommages. De plus, l'analyse faite par Nabokov du style de Flaubert dans son cours sur *Madame Bovary* fournit un compte rendu détaillé de sa lecture individuelle, aussi bien qu'une liste de figures de styles à comparer avec le propre style de Nabokov. Bien sûr, toute similitude a forcément été modifié doublement par Nabokov, d'abord par sa vision individuelle du style de Flaubert et ensuite par son utilisation originale de ces procédés dans son propre style, un style sensiblement différent du style de Flaubert, de façon à, pour citer Dimitri Nabokov dans sa préface à *The Man From the USSR*, se concentrer sur les « sommets singuliers » et non le « plateau collectif ».

INDEX

Mots-clés
Nabokov (Vladimir), Flaubert (Gustave), influence, continuité, style, individualisme, singularité

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AUTEUR

Léopold Reigner
Léopold Reigner est doctorant en 3e année à l'université de Rouen, il travaille sur une thèse intitulée *Gustave Flaubert et Vladimir Nabokov : identité littéraire et continuité du processus créatif*, qui vise à mener une étude comparée de Gustave Flaubert et de Vladimir Nabokov, afin de déterminer la mesure de l'influence culturelle et artistique de l'auteur normand sur l'écriture de Nabokov.
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Nabokov, Kerouac, Updike: Exploring the Failed American Road Trip

Nabokov, Kerouac, Updike : le « road trip » américain mis en échec

Elsa Court

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 *Rabbit, Run* (1960) the first novel in John Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy, was initially intended to be written as a single novel focusing on Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, a young lower-middle-class American man and former high-school basketball champion coming to terms with the many disappointments of adult domestic life and subservient, unrewarding work in the context of a late-capitalist society. Both the novel and its hero were conceived by Updike in reaction to the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) three years before, which had brought the "spontaneous prose" and anti-conformist ideals of Kerouac and the Beat Generation to national pop-culture fame.

2 As critics have noted before, the first Rabbit novel was prefigured by a number of shorter pieces of writing in Updike's oeuvre which addressed, often critically, Kerouac's best-selling novel. At the time when he was beginning work on *Rabbit, Run* in 1959, Updike published a short caricature of *On the Road* in the *New Yorker*, and according to Donald J. Greiner, the creation of Rabbit Angstrom was anticipated by the publication, in the same magazine, of a 1957 poem

titled “Ex-Basketball Player”, which also captures the trope of the restless white American young man, with his frustrations and hopes, in terms of mobility and stasis (Updike, *Collected Poems* 4). Rabbit ages through the novels and each new decade carries him further and further away from the senseless adventures of America’s counterculture, yet it seems that Updike never ceased to respond to Kerouac throughout his career: in 1999, a poem titled “On the Road” gave a less corrosive, more nuanced nod to the legacy of Kerouac’s postwar youth culture. Critics have argued that the characters in several of his pre-Rabbit short stories are also, directly or indirectly, inspired by Kerouac’s characters and their vision of society. As Greiner convincingly suggests, his impatience over Kerouac had as much to do with content as it did with style, for when he rates him as a scribbler, “hurriedly tossing into a sentence all that comes to mind”, Updike establishes that the popularity of books like *On the Road* “must lie in [their] qualities of vernacular epic”, for lack presumably of any other notable quality (Updike 1983, 554, 573–574).

3 This notion of the vernacular epic is key when addressing, in fiction or in non-fiction, the historical paradigm of adventure and territorial conquest in American literature, one which finds its twentieth-century expression through the image of the road. In the opening lines of his afterword to *Rabbit, Run*, Updike cites *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, novels which deal with “marginal situations and eccentric, rootless characters” (265). They are examples of America’s canonical texts defined by their narratives of social restlessness, narratives which equate male companionship and movement with freedom, and domesticity with a form of entrapment unfit for the traditional experience of masculinity. Such a tradition, Updike suggests, bears a strong cultural and ideological impression on ordinary American lives such as his, for he writes that, by the end of the 1950s, he was himself, as a young American male, aware that the responsibilities of adult life would curtail the great sense of wonder he had once felt entitled to as an American youth. Following on this topic he writes of the real influence of Kerouac on many young American men in the late 1950s, sometimes to tragic effects. “Without reading [*On the Road*]”, he wrote, “I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road—

the people left behind get hurt" (268). The idea, perhaps, is that though both he and Kerouac had been exposed to—and seduced by—the male freedom paradigm when studying Melville, Twain, and James Fenimore Cooper, respectively, at Harvard and Columbia University, the essentially uncritical actualization of the same trope by Kerouac in 1957 would have a much more immediate impact on the lives of young men of all social statuses than the American classics could.

4 This afterword, which marks the completion of the *Rabbit* tetralogy in 1990, suggests that Updike's moral and intellectual response to *On the Road* preceded his reading of the novel itself, a good indication of the iconic status the novel enjoyed upon publication, and of the appeal which made it a cultural text but also a commodity accessible at least in part through other media than the reading of Kerouac's written words. Television for example, largely contributed to the making of Kerouac's public persona and, by association, to the popularity of the Beats. However, the subtitle of Updike's *New Yorker* parody of *On the Road*, "After Reading, at Long Last, 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac", suggests that if the *idea* of Rabbit preceded Updike's reading of Kerouac, he had read the novel carefully by the time *Rabbit, Run* began to take form.

5 In this piece, Updike demonstrated an incisive critical awareness of the Beats phenomenon, denouncing not only Kerouac's stylistic posture but also the ethical problems posed by Kerouac's modern reinterpretation of the male American freedom myth. Such ethical problems are shown to include Kerouac's lack of concern for the heroes' female counterparts, his incapacity to address the colonial undertones of the hero's desire to conquer the national territory, and the rambling self-aggrandizement of a young—or seemingly young—middle-class male narrator who is unaware of the social and economic privilege he enjoys. The parody is successful at emulating the style of Kerouac's spontaneous prose, while supplying enough details of the life of the narrator to give us a chance to review the counterculture lifestyle critically.

> I was thinking around in my sad backyard, looking at those little drab careless star-shaped clumps of crabgrass and beautiful chunks of some old bicycle crying out without words of the American Noon and half a newspaper with an ad about a lotion for people with dry

> skins and dry souls, when my mother opened our frantic banging screendoor and shouted “Gogi Himmelman’s here”.

By deploying such skill in exposing Kerouac’s stylistic and moral limitations—the turning of radical inaction into make-believe activities, the lack of self-awareness and the tendency to take refuge from daily responsibilities in myth while a (female) caregiver attends to those demands—Updike can be said to have also succeeded in distinguishing himself from what Kerouac represented from a historical point of view in the era’s conflation of literature with popular culture. He did so by marking his status as a stylist, demonstrating with this parody that he was a scholar of literature rather than simply a cultural icon taking momentary part in it. It is hard to imagine, conversely, Kerouac writing a parody of another writer, because such an exercise implies the acquisition of a critical distance from the medium which Kerouac did not seem to strive for at any point in his writing career.

6 Kerouac, to be sure, is not the author with whom Updike is most commonly associated today, no matter what Rabbit Angstrom may have borrowed from Sal Paradise. The fact that few of his contemporaries had an idea of Updike unless they had read his work suggests that he and Kerouac occupy different statuses in the postwar American literary landscape. *Slate*’s obituary for John Updike, for example, compared the novelist to Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov for the acute precision and flourish of his prose style. The article suggested that, in fact, if one could disqualify both Bellow and Nabokov as American stylists on the grounds of Bellow’s Canadian birth and of Nabokov’s transnational origin, perhaps one should in fact hail Updike “the finest American prose stylist of the postwar era” (Patterson and Chotiner). It is the stance that the article decided to take, celebrating his prose as “meticulous, crystalline, and luminously hyperrealist”, his language “opulent […], hanging on austere [American] forms”. Arguably, nothing could sound further away from Kerouac than this filiation with an American literary tradition of opulence and formal austerity.

7 Vladimir Nabokov, with whom Updike is more often associated, also made his way into the American literary canon by writing one of the great road novels of the postwar era, *Lolita* (1955). The novel, initially

set in the imaginary New England suburb of Ramsdale, narrates two frantic cross-country road trip episodes in the second half of the novel, which are illustrated with copious descriptions of the landscape and commerce of life on the road. In his effort to become an American author, Nabokov consciously aspired to describe American motels, as well as other roadside services particular to America, and comments he made in his afterword to the novel show that these components are essential to his novel and its use of American English (315). Though it is the style, not the subject of Updike's novels that granted him comparison with Nabokov as a "luminous" and "opulent" prose-writer, the question of narrative content poses itself also, when both writers examined similar aspects of the modern American road in an effort to write about individualism and the social contract. The elements of "vernacular epic" presented, albeit ironically, by *Rabbit, Run*, and its recognition of the car as the symbolic passport to autonomy in postwar America, bear echoes of the cultural analysis provided in *Lolita*, especially that which is supported by the road trip section and the prosaic and spontaneous language of the American vernacular on the roadside. Humbert Humbert's take on his own liberation from the social contract granted him by life on the road is, after all, knowing of the literary paradigm created by James Fenimore Cooper. Robert Roper, in a recent revisitation of Nabokov's American biography, insists on Nabokov's knowledge of captivity narratives and other American paradigms being implicit in his first truly American novel (152–153).

8 It is a subject of interest to road scholars such as myself that there should have been so little comparison between two of the great American road novels of the 1950s, no record of an interview in which Nabokov was asked what he thought of the Beats phenomenon, and perhaps it is fair to assume that this disassociation was born out of the assumption that Nabokov and Kerouac belong to two contrasted categories of American writers: one, bearing with him the best of Europe's education, and for whom the elegance and originality of a style was the *sine qua non* quality of a true work of art, the other for whom spontaneity and idiosyncratic perspective take precedence over craft and cultural analysis. Meanwhile, comparisons between Updike's work and Nabokov's, as we have begun to see, have predominantly touched upon stylistic preoccupations. It is possible

to suggest, however, that Updike's response to Kerouac in *Rabbit, Run*, showing an awareness of a canon on the American anti-social mobility paradigm, may provide a background from which to think of an overdue comparison of Nabokov's and Kerouac's respective road epics. This paper will now trace Updike's assimilation of Kerouac's vision in Rabbit's aborted drive to Florida at the beginning of the novel. From this comparison, I will move on to suggest that another parallel can be made, one with the road trip episode narrated in the second half of *Lolita*, which provides another example of the failure of the American literary hero's self-realizing adventure. To achieve this comparison efficiently and by raising the question of male identity and individualism in the context of the cultural politics of late-capitalism in the United States, I propose to pay special attention to the landscape of the road—its rules, signage, and services—and the way it is pitched as a symbol of social rules against the factitious sovereignty of the male motorist on the highway.

Rabbit on the road

9 Twenty pages into the novel, Rabbit Angstrom, a disillusioned twenty-six-year-old trapped in an unhappy marriage and a frustrating job, decides on a whim not to go home to his infant son and pregnant wife but to drive out of town instead where freedom and the more clement climate of the South seem to call out to him. As he exits the town and finds himself on the highway to Philadelphia, Rabbit navigates the road without knowing where he is going other than out of Pennsylvania altogether, and possibly far away from it. Much in the fashion of a Kerouac character, Rabbit drives through an idealized landscape rather than the territory itself, of which he possesses no map and chooses to ignore direction signage while only relying, at first, on his intuition. In this way, Rabbit relies on a mental map: he believes that he can drive all night and go "south, down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women" (23). The pursuit of this misty, pastoral, sexualized ideal leads him to believe that he can simply rely on "an animal feeling", one which tells him that a Florida sunrise awaits at the end of the drive, for he has read somewhere that Highway 1 "goes from Florida to Maine through the most beautiful scenery in the world" (28). But the

superlatives of Updike's free indirect speech do not quite match the relentless, blind enthusiasm of Kerouac's narrators. In comparison, the third-person narration which filters Rabbit's thoughts already give a sense of the unsustainability of his enthusiasm, giving a sense that the main character's confidence is already about to wear out.

10 Rabbit's general lack of orientation at first seems glorious, but once exposed to the laws of highway navigation, it is revealed as irresponsible and self-failing. The discrepancy between his dream of the highway and the consequences of his mindless navigation is first brought to light in Rabbit's interaction with a gas station attendant early on in the trip. Trying to locate his position in the absence of a map, Rabbit is put on the spot when the middle-aged man confronts him about his plans: "Son, where do you want to go?" The question suggests that driving in just any direction thinking his intended road will find itself goes against pure common sense, a common sense which defines a historic Protestant ethic on which, it is implied, America was built. Upon hearing the question again, it is said that Rabbit "suddenly realizes that he is a criminal" (29). From would-be self-reliant adventurer, Rabbit suddenly sees himself, through the eyes of this weary roadside attendant, as an outlaw on the run, a judgement which anticipates reprobation from society as a whole. This episode offers a first reality-check, it exposes the lack of solidity of Rabbit's resolve which has so quickly turned to paranoia. Perhaps Rabbit also realizes that his lack of resolve makes him culturally out of place on the road, and this is enough to spoil the highway for him. As if the road was a cohesive world which he had already failed to rise up to, people subsequently encountered in small diners look at Rabbit strangely, the radio in the car plays tunes that he imagines are sung for young married couples such as the one he has just deserted, and his stubborn persistence to aim for the South only leads him to a dirt road. Only there does he finally lose hope of making it to Florida and decide to head back to where he has come from, if he can.

11 This awkward, failed road trip is ripe with descriptions of roadside stations and diners. Minor encounters with locals, every time Rabbit makes a stop on the roadside, reveal a separation between life among rural communities and the traveler's experience. Rabbit is no actual criminal, but his lack of direction symbolically makes him an outlaw, a vagabond, someone who turned his back on responsibility. As a

result, Rabbit seems uncomfortable everywhere; and even young people in diners look at him suspiciously. It should be remembered that in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise never travels alone. He either hitchhikes or drives in the company of his peers. The occasional solitude depicted in Kerouac's work—such as in the opening sections of *The Dharma Bums* (1958), when the narrator is riding freight trains alone—is redeemed by a hobo community of the traveling poor. The lower middle-class citizens described on Rabbit's aborted drive presumably cannot afford—time-wise or money-wise—this bohemian vision of road companionship. It seems therefore as if Rabbit had fallen from the grace of a classic, Whitmanian road narrative in which addressing "the open road" alone was a way of reconnecting with America. Rabbit has entered instead a darker, more self-aware generation of road adventure, one which links back to Film Noir, interwar crime fiction, and their dominant mood of social paranoia.

12 In *On the Road*, gas station attendants are barely ever spoken to. Cigarette cartons and gas are purchased—or stolen—from seemingly self-operated stations on the side of the American highway. In Southern California, they are places where Mexican youths try to sell car accessories to the next car that pulls up, and can easily be persuaded to sell the narrator and his companions a "girl" for the night (256). Dean even recounts to the narrator how, in 1944, having gotten in trouble with the police, he had stolen a gas attendant uniform from a station in Flagstaff and managed to get hired at the next gas station in LA under a pseudonym (210–211). Perhaps it is Rabbit's history of playing by the rules and to little lasting effect, illustrated in his faded high-school basketball star status, that explains his utter failure as a con man of the American road. The isolation he consciously feels from America suggests a desire to belong, which the characters in Kerouac's novel already satisfy by belonging to their own clan. Over the rest of his journey, Rabbit will resist the impulse of hugging another gas station attendant, a "young but tall colored boy", whose "limber lazy body slumping inside his baggy Amoco coveralls" somehow moves the traveler (29–30).

Reckoning with the roadside

13 It should be noted that, although gasoline stations and roadside services described in *Lolita* are almost always devoid of staff, they are no less threatening to the would-be hero's individualistic quest. Much against the shimmering mirage of free agency projected on the road at the beginning of Humbert's trip, highway signage and services stationed at the roadside present an implicit continuation of the societal relationships through commerce and the enforcement of basic rules of social living. If the motel's relative lack of managerial authority is at first exhilarating to the narrator of *Lolita*, the language of their signage and notices gradually becomes apparent as Humbert starts to measure that society has not been erased by life on the road. Thus, the following managerial notice in a motel room appears as not only awkward but ominous:

> We wish you to feel at home while here. *All* equipment was carefully checked upon your arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of *any* kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. The Management. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People in the World. (210)

The omnipresence of the sign on Humbert's itinerary becomes a threat that society might be closing in on him, a threat which eventually materializes as the mystery driver by whom Humbert thinks he and Lolita are being followed. As in *Rabbit, Run*, the outcome of the road trip episode in Nabokov's novel is a failure with regards to the ideal of shameless moral self-reliance initially pursued. In *Lolita*, the second road trip episode also allows the title character to make her escape from her abuser, leaving Humbert alone to ponder on his extended breaching of the social contract, and eventually seek incarceration. In this context, as with Rabbit's drive, the moment of pausing at the roadside forces the driver to reassess his place in the country and in the world. Through this process of reckoning with the social order that could not be shed by mobility, signs but also mere objects are increasingly seen as testimonies of a national community previously negated. In the following gasoline station passage, shortly before Lolita's escape, the narrative is

brought to an uncomfortable reality-check while a roadside attendant is "hidden from sight" behind the car engine boot.

> Not for the first time, and not for the last, had I stared in such dull discomfort of mind at those stationary trivialities that look almost surprised, like staring rustics, to find themselves in the stranded traveler's field of vision: that green garbage can, those very black, very whitewalled tires for sale, those bright cans of motor oil, that red icebox with assorted drinks, the four, five, seven discarded bottles within the incompleted crossword puzzle of their wooden cells, that bug patiently walking up the inside of the window of the office. (211–212)

14 If traveler and roadside station attendants operate almost without contact, the criminal's anthropomorphic vision of the roadside's furniture, which lends it a reproaching gaze, confirms that the roadside is not a scattered network of isolated services but a system which is integrated to society, and through which Lolita will eventually be re-assimilated. A few stops later on the same journey, Humbert catches sight of an encounter between his young captive and a stranger with whom she seems to engage in an oddly familiar manner.

> Having seen to the needs of my car, I walked into the office to get those glasses and pay for the gas. As I was in the act of signing a traveler's check and wondered about my exact whereabouts, I happened to glance through a side window, and saw a terrible thing. A broad-backed man, baldish, in an oatmeal coat and dark-brown trousers, was listening to Lo who was leaning out of the car and talking to him very rapidly, her hand with outspread fingers going up and down as it did when she was very serious and emphatic. What struck me with sickening force was—how shall I put it?—the voluble familiarity of her way, as if they had known each other—oh, for weeks and weeks. (218)

15 The modern American road, as is revealed from the sheer *ennui* of these two latter passages, is not pure abstraction: it is supported by roadside services which tend to the driver's immediate needs—fuel, sustenance, distractions, as well as an array of modern comforts—and by the same token negate the road as a space of pure promise.

Because Paradise and his peers in *On the Road* steal from and subvert the commerce of the highway, they maintain the illusion of their independence from the system. Elsewhere, road narratives reveal that there is a certain class of citizen that lives on the movement of others, and that this relationship implicitly negates "independence". In *Lolita* and *Rabbit, Run*, this realization is a source of self-awareness and discomfort. In these novels, it is the mundane reality of the roadside which removes the motorized protagonist from the undisturbed solipsism of the drive and brings him on a level with the reality of a social order which is implicitly tied with a sense of national unity, in spite of the apparent distance between one stopping place and the next. Crucially, when Rabbit enters a roadside diner later on his hectic drive, he notices that locals look at him dismissively and consequently wonders "Is it just these people I'm outside or is it all America?" (31). America, in Rabbit's physical and mental journey, turns out to be a paradox: it is simultaneously the class of citizens living in towns who depend on the highway and the negation of this economic relationship.

The road narrative and its discontent

16 In his seminal book *Romance of the Road* (1996), cultural historian Ronald Primeau reflects on the evolution of the American road narrative across the twentieth century and argues that the postwar road trip, as it deploys the optimistic and, to an extent, reactionary political attitudes of self-reliance, fraternal bonding, and epicurean non-conformity which Kerouac's road novels channel, takes a sour and dystopian turn with the rising political awareness of the 1960s. In the wake of the genre's postwar glory days, this shift in attitudes is brought about in literature, according to Primeau, through either parody or a nihilistic assimilation of the road trip's established philosophy and conventions.

> After two decades of social protest, self-discovery, and the search for a national identity, the road for some turned sour. As the energy of Dean Moriarty's "Wild Yea Saying" diminished, the journey became discouraging. For others, by the late 1960s the road offered no

> hopeful renewal, but the frenzy of pure escapism. […] John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom is one of the earliest examples of an ambivalent hero who drives to escape, *Rabbit Run* (1960) expresses an American dream that doesn't seem to be working. (89)

Primeau's timeline is partly confusing, for it includes *Lolita* in a list of post-hopeful "quest parodies" in spite of the fact that the novel appeared in the mid-fifties, in the height of American motor culture's postwar optimism, and indeed two years before *On the Road*. Meanwhile, Primeau's assessment of these ambivalent expressions of the disillusioned road trip—self-reflexive parody or escapism—proposes to distinguish between the "dystopic nightmare" of Nabokov's novel on the one hand and the genuine moral and psychological exhaustion of Updike's characters (89).

17 Primeau's identification of a post-Kerouac road narrative overlooks, among other things, the elements of parody in Updike's *Rabbit, Run* which, as in "On the Sidewalk", captures Kerouac's idealism and turns it upon its head. The rendition of Rabbit's long night at the wheel of his car through a litany of ads, songs, and repetitive news reports heard on the radio, for example, reads like an actual inversion of *On the Road*'s anti-capitalist ideal.

> On the radio he hears "No Other Arms, No Other Lips," "Stagger Lee," a commercial for Rayco Clear Plastic Seat Covers, "I Didn't Care," by Connie Francis, a commercial for Radio-Controlled Garage Door Operators, "I Ran All the Way Home Just to Say I'm Sorry," […] news (President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg, Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa, the whereabouts of the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of this remote and backward land, are unknown, […]), a commercial for New Formula Barbasol Presto-Lather, whose daily cleansing action tends to prevent skin blemishes and emulsifies something, "Pink Shoe Laces" by Dody Stevens, a word about a little boy called Billy Tessman who was hit by a car and would appreciate cards or letters, "Petit Fleur," "Fungo" (great), a commercial for Wool-Tex All-Wool Suits, […] "Venis," and the same news again. Where is the Dalai Lama? (28–29)

The only frantic voice of Rabbit's journey is conveyed by the uninterrupted flow of the radio, whose carefully transcribed titles

and listing reminisce of Nabokov's parodic list of motel names and road signs advertising an endless repetition of curio shops and ice-cold drinks. Framed as the background to news concerning the war in Lhasa and the whereabouts of the Buddhist spiritual leader, the passage is a cynical nod to the author of the *Dharma Bums*, told from the perspective of a faithless young man who is spiritually lost. Nevertheless, the pull of finding himself in "sweet low cottonland" (29) by morning testifies to Rabbit's faith in something he cannot quite name but is written all over the pages of his aborted adventure: the vague knowledge of a cultural mood which is not enough to guide him to destination.

18 Meanwhile, against Primeau's assertion that Kerouac's *On the Road* is the postwar road trip's "blue-print" (2), the self-reflexivity of the road quest in *Lolita* would suggest a reckoning of the pattern *avant la lettre*. As Humbert reflects on their year-long travels at the beginning of part two, he remembers for example how Lolita would plead to take the hitchhikers they would see along the highway. Humbert felt particularly threatened by this generic figure, which he describes as

> [...] the clean-cut, glossy-haired, shifty-eyed, white-faced young beasts in loud shirts and coats, vigorously, almost priapically thrusting out tense thumbs to tempt lone women or sad sack salesmen with fancy cravings. "Let's take him," Lo would often plead, rubbing her knees together in a way she had, as [...] some man my age and shoulder breadth, with the *face à claques* of an unemployed actor, walked backwards, practically in the path of our car. (159)

It is very tempting to read an anticipatory portrait of Kerouac's peers in this description of the typical hitchhiker as repeatedly seen on the side of the highway, who appears as a threat to Humbert's easily-wounded masculinity. An old-fashioned European male, Humbert does not believe in male bonding as a way to escape social constraints. What *Rabbit, Run* and *Lolita* share, on either side of the publication of *On the Road*, is the lack of destination of their respective road quests on the one hand, and the solitude of their drivers on the other.

Conclusion

19 Beyond the considerations of stylistic and cultural cachet which most comparisons of Nabokov, Kerouac, and Updike's works have tended to focus on, the question of the primacy of the road motif in *Lolita*, *On the Road*, and *Rabbit, Run* points to an implicit—and so far understudied—cultural dialogue over the moral problem of "heroic" individualism supported by access to independent mobility.

20 Within this discussion, Primeau's thematic assessment of these three works of fiction overlooks the socially hopeful outlook in Updike and Nabokov's respective treatments of the road trip adventure. In both these cases, if the nihilist quest fails while the communities of the roadside thrive, the outshoot of society presented by the network of highway services is presented as potentially live and hopeful in that it negates the quest for pure individualism as the key to an authentic American experience. In both these scenarios the road trip fails, and the true experience of the country is missed out on, because of the protagonists' arrogance over the American community beyond the white male middle-class perspective.

21 More recently, Ann Brigham's reevaluation of *American Road Narratives* in literature and film notes that the cultural ubiquity of American mobility in the twentieth century has produced a near-automatic conflation of movement with freedom and escape which should be reassessed and questioned. Brigham observes that early twenty-first century expressions of automobility, on the contrary, have been sought and promoted as means of reconnecting with national identity in a post-9/11 political landscape. She argues that, in this context,

> [...] mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite—a mode of engagement. Indeed, the genre's significance emerges in its demonstration of the ways mobility both thrives on and tries to manage points of cultural and social conflict. (4)

22 Responding to "a range of road scholars and audiences [who] have celebrated the road as an unanchored space" over the twentieth century (6), Brigham points out that recreational travel trends

since 2001 have echoed the "See America First" campaign in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in exemplifying a use of road travel as assimilation to, not escape from, the country. Aligning myself with her book's introductory observations, I would go on to suggest the failed road trips of postwar American fiction go to support this theory, in so far as the desire, expressed in *Lolita*, *On the Road*, and *Rabbit, Run*, to achieve autonomous movement on the road might have been illusory from the beginning.

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RÉSUMÉS

English
This paper discusses overlooked explorations of the American road trip as a failed or failing enterprise in three canonical road novels of the postwar period: *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov, *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, and *Rabbit, Run* (1960) by John Updike. While giving an overview of the existing academic literature historicising the road trip as a cultural trope, the paper also reviews the question of influence and cultural heritage attached to the works in focus via their respective assimilations of a historically American form and socio-cultural paradigm. The paper finally proposes a new reading of these road trip narratives as unavowed quests for national and social assimilation, rather than the desire for pure escape which is traditionally associated with the practice since the 1950s.

Français
Cet article propose une discussion autour du road trip américain et de ses échecs, alors que ces derniers sont rarement envisagés par la critique littéraire ou culturelle. Pour ce faire l'article se penche sur trois romans américains d'après-guerre : *Lolita* (1955) de Vladimir Nabokov, *On the Road* (1957) de Jack Kerouac, et *Rabbit, Run* (1960) de John Updike. Tout en donnant un aperçu des textes théoriques s'étant intéressé au road trip américain en tant que concept et objet d'étude culturelle, cet article passe également en revue la question de l'influence et de l'héritage culturel qui unit les romans en question à travers leurs assimilations respectives d'un paradigme national. L'article propose enfin une nouvelle lecture de ces exemples de road trip dans le paysage américain, une lecture qui met en relief l'aspiration à appartenir au pays et à la société passés en revue lors du voyage, plutôt que le désir d'évasion invariablement assimilée au road trip depuis les années 1950.

INDEX

Mots-clés
road trip, littérature américaine, civilisation américaine, histoire du voyage, Nabokov (Vladimir), Kerouac (Jack), Updike (John)

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AUTEUR

Elsa Court
Elsa Court is a London-based researcher and journalist. She completed her PhD in 2016 at University College London, and is currently working on a book based on her PhD thesis on *Émigré Representations of the American Roadside: Explorations in Literature, Film, and Photography 1955–1985* (Palgrave). Her work has appeared in the *Financial Times*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the London Review of Books blog, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.
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Redressing Whitman: Jack Kerouac and the Postwar Anxiety of Queer Influence

Rhabiller Whitman : Jack Kerouac et l'angoisse de l'influence queer après-guerre

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin

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PLAN

TEXTE

> "Whitman is like a disrobement."
> (Kerouac, "Whitman: Prophet of the Sexual Revolution", n.p.)

1 For many modernist poets such as George Oppen, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman's free verse, his lyrical outbursts, and his vernacular language represented an embarrassing legacy. Pound insisted that he was "a Whitman who [had] learnt to wear a collar and a shirt", a phrase that betrays his rejection of Whitman's bohemian posture and unorthodox verse. Likewise, William Carlos Williams, while celebrating Whitman's poetics as written "in the American Grain", condemned the lyrical sentimentality which made him, he writes, "a remarkable failure": "It is useless to speak of Whitman's psychologic physiognomy, his this, his that. All of it is true and of no importance" (Williams 287). [1] The nebulous phrasing betrays Williams' anxiety towards Whitman's poetic crossings, an instability that also seemed to have troubled George Oppen who, in his reply to Williams, wrote that he had always

felt that Whitman's "deluge and soup of words [was] a screen for the uncertainty of his own identity" (Oppen 39). Modernist poets were wary of the hybridity of Whitman's poetic persona and of the fact that "if the dresses were changed, the men might easily pass for women and the women for men" (Whitman 644), as Whitman himself remarks about *Songs of Myself* in a letter to Emerson.

2 By contrast, many postwar poets and novelists unambiguously celebrated Whitman's poetics, considering him as a sort of patron saint of poets, an ideal literary persona on whom they tried to model their writing style and whose influence they openly acknowledged and claimed for themselves, so much so that they came to be labeled "Whitman's Wild Children", a phrase coined by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in his "Populist Manifesto" (Ferlinghetti 64). [2] Yet Whitman's influence on postwar writers has less to do with style, metrics or poetic form than with what Whitman's persona had come to stand for in their eyes—a rejection of poetic formalism and social conformism, and an invigorating alternative to the modernist aesthetics of Ezra Pound and T. S. Elliot—which Kerouac described as "a lot of constipation and ultimately emasculation of the pure masculine urge to freely sing" (Kerouac 1993, 56). In other words, Whitman became a signifier that they quoted over and over in their poems to support a heroic posture that enabled them to distance themselves from what they saw as the sterility of modernist poetry.

3 In *Guys like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, Michael Davidson goes a step further and argues that postwar poets welcomed the gender ambiguity and exploited the identity crossings that characterize the poetic persona in *Songs of Myself*. [3] "Whitman's excesses", he writes, "so embarrassing to an earlier generation, became his virtues for poets who came of literary age in the 1950s and 1960s. […] [The Modernists]'s concern that Whitman's identity was uncertain now becomes an affirmation of new social identities" (Davidson 2004, 106). Indeed, in the context of the sexual panic that permeated American society in the postwar period (exemplified, for instance, by the persecution of homosexuals during the "Lavender Scare", in the revelations contained in the Kinsey reports on sexuality, or in the debates surrounding the so-called "crisis of masculinity" and "feminization of society"), poetry represented a site where non-normative expressions of masculine identity and male desire

came to be formulated in entirely new ways. Davidson's account of Whitman's influence offers great insights into the poetics of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Robert Duncan, poets who consciously played with the instability of Whitman's persona to articulate alternative gender identities. Yet, because Davidson's study mainly focuses on poetry and covers a wide range of schools and authors, it fails to account for the more troubled relationship that many other postwar writers had to Whitman.

4 Indeed, not everyone rejoiced at the fact that the desire that had not dared speak its name for so long was beginning to be heard out loud in American letters. Certain writers actually distanced themselves from this perception of Whitman as an icon of "uncertain identity", and the emergence of "new social identities" was not always met with approval in literary circles. Kerouac's particular relationship to Whitman is quite revealing in this regard and constitutes an interesting case study of the way Whitman's queer influence was often perceived with an anxiety that betrays the sexual panic that pervaded the postwar years. Though Kerouac celebrates the spontaneous authenticity, rugged individualism, virile comradeship and rebellious freedom of Whitman's poetry, he cannot embrace the ambiguity and the poetic crossings with as much enthusiasm. In his essays and novels, he struggled with the Good Gray Poet's embarrassing legacy which, he felt, "disrobed" him, leading him to clear Whitman (and himself) from suspicions of homosexuality. This gendered dialectics of undressing (in the sense of forcing out of the poetic closet, of revealing one's open secret) and redressing (in the sense of correcting a perception, of hiding the naked truth about one's identity) reveals the vicissitudes of literary masculinity in the postwar period, a time when the suspicion of homosexuality and effeminacy loomed large over the artistic scene.

Kerouac as queer critic and Whitman's embarrassing legacy

5 In several essays written when he was still a student and a budding author in the 1940s, Kerouac adopted the role of an interpreter of *Leaves of Grass*, often taking position in the postwar debates around Whitman's identity and sexuality. Beyond their modest contribution

to Whitman's critical reception, these essays deserve our attention in so far as they betray the extent to which the Cold War paranoia against homosexuals contaminated the literary sphere and the perception of the American canon. In a short essay written in 1941 while he was a student at Columbia University, Kerouac presents Whitman as a man who was able to express the vigor and energy of the American people in a new tongue:

> Here was America, a big rugged country, and no one had as yet come along to tell the people of America just exactly what they were. Whitman's great poetry sang of the greatness of America and of its people, he actually united the picture of this America on his pages: and there, he had created a living philosophy for his fellow countrymen. (Kerouac 1941, n.p.)

In this praise of his predecessor, the young Kerouac reproduces the widespread and consensual depiction of Whitman as the poet of the American Renaissance. In terms that echo Whitman's own take on his poetic project, he praises the author of *Leaves of Grass* as having created a distinctly American verse that expressed the variety and grandeur of the young republic. Yet, in spite of this enthusiastic celebration of Whitman's free verse, democratic ideal and manly posture, Kerouac comes to depict the ambiguous influence that Whitman represents for him. In later essays, he laments the lyrical and sentimental outbursts from "Song of Myself", which in his eyes, betray a troubled and faltering masculine identity:

> Whitman terms himself "one of the roughs [...] manly and free, face sunburnt and bearded, posture strong and erect, a pure American breed, large and lusty, naïve, contemplative, masculine, imperious, sensual"—; yet how sickly he can sometimes be; and probably, most of the time, actually he was sickly in his soul that he had to cry: "Oh I am sick and sorrowful!"—There is in all this a pain-sickened prophecy of greater decadence to come in our time—if only our healthy American giants were illiterate to the words of Baudelaire, Freud, Kafka and the others. (Kerouac 1946a, n.p.)

Whitman is here depicted as an uncanny and distressing legacy, an enigmatic figure that paradoxically unites what Kerouac calls the "Faustian" and the "decadent" souls, terms that are not devoid of

gendered connotations. He embodies both a model of heroic masculinity—one that is not weakened by family constraints or marital responsibility ("manly and free", "strong and erect", "large and lusty", "masculine")—and a counter-model—one that displays a regrettable sentimentality and betrays a form of effeminacy ("sick and sorrowful", "decadence", "cry", "pain-sickened"). What is all the more interesting though is how Kerouac here assembles quotes from two anonymous reviews of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which Whitman himself wrote—"One of the roughs, […] manly and free, face sunburnt and bearded, posture strong and erect" (Whitman, in Hindus 34, originally published in 1855 in the *United States Review*), to which he added "a pure American breed, large and lusty, naïve, contemplative, masculine, imperious, sensual" (Whitman, in Hindus 47, originally published in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* in 1856), before adding another one entirely of his own making—"Oh I am sick and sorrowful!" Kerouac thus manipulates various intertexts and plays the role of ventriloquist so as to produce a portrait of Whitman that suits his own needs, one that he can both identify with and distinguish himself from.

6 In 1950, while attending Alfred Kazin's class at the New School for Social Research (which he called "the Silly New School"), Kerouac wrote another essay in which he extoled the virtues of the American bard. What is particularly interesting in this text is not only the fact that Kerouac adopts the position of an interpreter of Walt Whitman's texts, but that he explicitly takes position in the postwar debates around Whitman's identity and sexuality. Kerouac first presents Whitman as "the prophet of a sexual revolution", then goes on to insist that this revolution has nothing to do with homosexuality. He quite bluntly rejects any queer reading of his poems and refuses to acknowledge any hint of homoeroticism, silencing male-to-male desire and stabilizing Whitman's gender identity:

> In Whitman the assumption that he prophesizes a homosexual revolution could not be stupider. He celebrates the bodies of men and women, and the love they have inherited thereby, and often admits the darkness of his own conflict concerning his homosexuality […]. His New Orleans experience with a woman has been given great critical attention as the releaser of his maturity. In Whitman it is not so much that men are lovers, but that they are

> comrades who love, and the women apples on all sides.
> (Kerouac 1950, n.p.)

7 Though he acknowledges that Whitman may have been attracted to other men, he describes Whitman's homosexuality as an obscure impulse, the expression of an identity trouble, the symptom of a moral stain which he can only "admit", as one would admit a crime. Yet, it is never presented as meaningful or significant. In *Leaves of Grass*, Kerouac points out, there are only men and women, binary gender identities that seem to come straight out from some American version of the Garden of Eden. Kerouac then mixes together a biographical anecdote with literary criticism in order to reterritorialize a heterosexual version of Whitman as he refers to the poet's romantic adventure with a Creole woman in New Orleans. Interestingly enough, it turns out that this hypothesis has since been challenged by Whitman scholars (Asselineau, Chase). The analysis of the manuscript of one of the central texts that supported that claim, "Once I Pass'd through a Populous City", reveals that the object of the poet's love is male, Whitman having later revised his manuscript and substituted "woman" for "man": "Yet now of all that city I remember only a [wo]man I casually met there who detain'd me for love of me […] who passionately clung to me" (Whitman, quoted in Chase 43). Besides, the distinction that Kerouac makes between homosexuality ("men are lovers") and friendship ("men are comrades who love") only seems to reinforce that gender ambiguity (through the absence and indeterminacy of an object of desire) rather than dispel it. As to the metaphor of the apple used to describe relationships with women, it announces the chaste, Adamic quest that drives the narrative in *The Dharma Bums*, a novel in which women are "forbidden fruit", objects of desire which always threaten homosocial harmony. The hermetic separation between comradeship and homoeroticism must be maintained by all possible means in order to protect the American literary canon from the "influenza" of homosexuality, be it at the cost of keeping the canon in the closet. In that perspective, it is interesting to compare Kerouac's approach of Whitman's poetic persona with Francis Otto Matthiessen's take on Whitman in his influential analysis of the 19th literary canon published a few years earlier, *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). Just like Matthiessen, whose own

homosexuality was an open secret about which he kept silent (Grossman, Cadden), Kerouac celebrates Whitman as the embodiment of Emersonian self-reliance and praises his democratic spirit and the libidinal energy of his prose, but for similar reasons, silences the homoeroticism of his texts and the homosexuality of their author.

8 To understand the importance that Kerouac attached to Whitman's gender identity, it is necessary to outline the central role the latter played in Kerouac's literary project, which he outlined in an essay written in 1946 entitled "The Revitalizing of American Letters". In this text that explicitly echoes Emerson's "The Poet" and imitates its paratactic style and epic tone, Kerouac announces the coming of a male poet capable of renewing American culture through the epic force of his poems, as Emerson announced the coming of Whitman and of *Songs of Myself*. Kerouac calls for a return to the founding myths of the American nation which also happen to be the founding myths of American masculinity, with a solemnity and confidence which are meant to be heroic:

> I will make my position clear on one issue, and accept full responsibility for the statement: I would like to see American letters revitalized along more authentic and appreciative lines, discarding the interpretive and critical trends because they distort the Everything through the prism of a few minds that are not representative of the American people. The universal American writer would be the successful American type, that is, the American who loves his being an American and living in American culture forms—a lover of dancing, baseball, hay rides, moonlight over the lake, detective mysteries, movies, radio comedians, football, a lover of beer and bars and whiskey, of rodeos and jazz music and railroad hotels, of Hershey Bars, Birdseye lima beans, Phillies cigars, lime Rickeys, hamburgers, corn on the cob and everything and anything else that would go into a catalogue of particular American things. (Kerouac 1946c, n.p.)

This patriotic, if not populist, celebration of normative masculinity does not so much refer to rugged individualism and manly vitality than to consumer capitalism. Yet, it opposes the intellectual intelligentsia to the common people in a paratactic style that is reminiscent of Whitman. Like him, Kerouac chants the virtues of

American popular culture as if he wanted to reach out to the ordinary man and to assume the identity of the everyday man. It is accompanied by a portrait of the sterility and apathy which, in his eyes, affect his fellow writers or, as he puts it, "all the lesbians, fags, and intellectuals" who are "the contemporary practitioners of American writing" (Kerouac 1946c, n.p.), a paranoid conflation of intellectuals, poets and homosexuals which seems to announce Senator McCarthy's attacks against "liberals, communists and queers".[4] Of course, though he had not yet written a single novel, Kerouac hoped that his writing could give birth to such revitalization and that he could embody a postwar renaissance of sorts. Expressions like "the successful American type" and "the American who loves his being an American" are meant to draw out a projective self-portrait that his cycle of autobiographical narratives, in which Whitman often emerges as an ambivalent presence, tried to materialize.

Whitman's queer specter and the dangers of manly attachment

9 Like his essays, Kerouac's novels, which chronicle the life of postwar literary bohemia of which he was one of the foremost members, are haunted by Whitman's specter. Kerouac's redressing Whitman, his attempt at unqueering this seminal figure of American poetry, has to be understood in the context of the homosocial ties that connected poets of the Beat Generation and of the San Francisco Renaissance. Whitman's influence here is not understood "vertically" (or diachronically), but "horizontally" (or synchronically), in the way it affected the way postwar writers related to one another, sometimes leading them to contend with each other for literary posterity and for the status of the American bard's true heir.

10 In *The Dharma Bums* (1958), Whitman is repeatedly summoned up as a tutelary figure of the group of poets whose life is depicted in details in the novel. The narrative opens on a description of the famous Six Gallery reading, a sort of inaugural event which brought together Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure and Neal Cassady (as well as William Carlos Williams and Lionel Trilling), whom the narrator calls "the whole gang of

howling poets" (Kerouac 1958, 9)—a fitting metaphor that reveals the strong homosocial ties that bound this poetic community together. Ray Smith, the novel's narrator and Kerouac's alter ego, then recounts various adventures in the wild forests of the Sierra Nevada. After a long hike, Japhy Ryder, the protagonist of the novel whose character is based on San Francisco poet Gary Snyder, announces the coming of a revolution led by what he terms "guys like us":

> East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their back tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody. (Kerouac 1958, 155)

The collective enunciation Japhy resorts to in order to describe this spiritual avant-garde composed of Buddhist poets and forest vagabonds is not only marked as essentially masculine, but it also establishes a hierarchy between "guys like us" and other men. It founds a literary circle composed of single men, a fraternal order of Zen-influenced poets and young Adams whose affective ties can only be expressed in a platonic way. In that perspective, the orientalist discourse enables the narrator to reject the masculine roles of husband and father and to marginalize women—"Pretty girls make graves was my saying then" (Kerouac 1958, 21), the narrator insists—while protecting himself from any suspicion of homosexuality. It is therefore particularly interesting that at the very moment when the homosocial nature of the novel is made explicit for the first time, Whitman is called upon to voice out the dream of community of men without women:

> I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, […] I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray. (Kerouac 1958, 73)

Japhy Ryder, a very Whitmanian character who wanders in the wild forest of California and writes contemplative poems, here celebrates the homosocial bonds of pure and joyous comradeship in the margins of consumer society. He is presented as the heir of Whitman, but a Whitman who is closer to the rugged masculinity of outdoorsmen than to the androgyny sometimes found in *Leaves of Grass*. Reciprocally, Whitman is redressed as a "Dharma Bum", as if he were the group's spiritual leader: he is transformed into a critique of postwar consumer culture and his poem "As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario's Shore" (1867)—from which the phrase "Cheer up slaves and horrify foreign despots" is taken—into a political pamphlet. In a manner reminiscent of what Kerouac did in his essays, Whitman's persona and poetry are here again manipulated to produce not only a vision of "a great rucksack revolution", but a revision of the American bard that borders on revisionism. At the same time, while the novel relates the first reading of "Howl" (named "Wail" in the novel), a literary event that contributed to the emergence of a distinctly queer poetics, Kerouac silences Allen Ginsberg's homosexuality in the novel. The narrator even encourages Alvah Goldbook, the character based on Ginsberg, to get married and have children, as if to contain potential same-sex desires in the closet: "Alvah, trouble with you is […] you should get married and have halfbreed babies, manuscripts, homespun blankets and mother's milk on your happy ragged mat floor" (Kerouac 1958, 77). Though it describes how Alvah Goldbook / Allen Ginsberg took his clothes off during the reading of "Howl" / "Wail", the narrator refuses to voice out the open secret and naked truth about him.

11 *Desolation Angels*, a novel Kerouac wrote the following year (though it was published almost a decade later) as a sort of sequel to *The Dharma Bums*, also refers to the Six Gallery reading. Here, instead of silencing Ginsberg's homosexuality, the narrator forces the author of "Howl" out of the closet, revealing the open secret everyone by then knew about: "Irwin [Allen] was queer and said so in public, thus precipitating tremors from Philadelphia to Stockholm in polite business suits and football coach pants" (Kerouac 1965, 258). Yet, this outing once again enables Kerouac's narrator to distance himself from the queer influence of "Whitman's children", and of Ginsberg in particular. This passage should thus be read in the context of the

struggle for Whitman's legacy between postwar writers, Kerouac's Whitman differing markedly from the way Ginsberg staged Whitman in "A Supermarket in California" (1955). In this tribute to *Leaves of Grass* written exactly one hundred years after the first publication of Whitman's opus, Whitman's specter is conjured up in the aisles of a supermarket, an incongruous and anachronistic setting for the American bard. Like Kerouac's Whitman in *The Dharma Bums*, Ginsberg's Whitman here embodies a manly alternative to consumer culture and family ideology, a childless, unmarried father figure ("dear father", "graybeard") that stands in stark contrast with the people around him—"Wholes families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!" (Ginsberg 59). Yet, unlike Kerouac's Whitman, Ginsberg's rendition of the poet is markedly homoerotic as he is pictured "eyeing the grocery boys" around him in the company of Federico García Lorca, another homosexual poet. Whitman is not only a road companion and a conversation partner whom the poet addresses, but an imaginary lover with whom the poet dreams of living a marital life in a suburban home, the poem eventually offering a vision of conjugal bliss rich in ironic undertones: "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? […] Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past, blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?" (Ginsberg 59). If one considers the fact this poem was published in *Howl and Other Poems*, dedicated in part to "Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence in eleven books written in half the number of years (1951–1956)" (Ginsberg 45), no wonder Kerouac tried to distance himself from Ginsberg's Whitman, especially since the following year, Ginsberg used a notoriously ambiguous line from Whitman's "Calamus"—"resolved to sing no songs henceforth but those of manly attachment" as an epigraph to "Many Loves" (Ginsberg 65), his erotically-charged declaration of love to Neal Cassady, Kerouac's male muse and hero.

12 The fear of queer influence via Whitman takes unparalleled intensity when Kerouac's alter-ego and narrator ends up outing almost all other male writers, in a rhetoric of denunciation and listing that is once again reminiscent of McCarthyism, while at the same time clearing himself from suspicions of homosexuality:

> the reader should know that as an author I'd got to know many homosexuals—60% or 70% of our best writers (if not 90%) are queers, for man sex, and you get to meet them all and converse and swap manuscripts, meet them at parties, readings, everywhere—This doesn't prevent the non-homosexual writer from being a writer or from associating with homosexual writers—[…] I could give you a list a mile long of the homosexuals in the arts but there's no point in making a big tzimis about a relatively harmless and cool state of affairs—Each man to his own tastes. (Kerouac 1965, 259)

Yet, Whitman's influence is like the return of the repressed and manly attachment is eventually expressed indirectly through yet another reference to the poet. A few pages further, Kerouac's narrator describes a photograph on which the founding members of the Beat Generation (with the exception of Bull Hubbard / William Burroughs, who is Tangier at that time and whom the narrator joins soon after) stand arm in arm while on trip to Mexico, a photograph which has since become one of the most notorious archival documents recording the lives of that literary circle. The narrator elevates the image to epic proportions by comparing it with photographs of his vigorous ancestors who came from Canada and to photographs of Civil War soldiers by Mathew Brady (who, incidentally, also happened to be one of the author of many portraits of Whitman). Yet, this description of rugged masculine comradeship gives way to a lyrical evocation of manly attachment imbued with nostalgia and sentimentality, which leads him to conjure up Whitman's specter once again:

> We all stand there, proud, me and Irwin and Simon standing (today I'm amazed to see I had broad shoulders then), and Raphael and Laz kneeling in front of us, like a team. Ah sad. Like the old photographs all brown now of my mother's father and his gang posing erect in 1890 New Hampshire—Their mustaches, the light on their heads—[…] But our picture really resembles the old Civil War Buddy Photographs of Thomas Brady, the proud captured Confederates glaring at the Yankees but so sweet there's hardly any anger there, just the old Whitman sweetness that made Whitman cry and be a nurse— (Kerouac 1965, 269)

The narrator first describes the members of the Beat Generation as comrades in arms united in (and by) adversity ("Civil War buddies"), teammates bound by some sort of team spirit, blood brothers ("gang"). However, while he first insists on the virile comradeship that the photo conveys ("broads shoulders", "posing erect"), he can't hide the emotion and the elegiac feelings ("ah sad") that contemplating this image of male fraternity stirs in him. The affective content of the photograph is all the stronger since it immortalizes one of the narrator's last trips with his travel companions, the publication of *On the Road* (1957) one year later isolating the narrator from the rest of the group by placing him in the limelight. Yet he does not cry himself, but through the mask of the other—Walt Whitman's poetic persona—who sheds tears for him and provides an emotional outlet for the sentimental content of the photograph. Whereas Kerouac condemned Whitman for his mushy sentimentalism, Whitman is here called upon to avoid a public display of tears.

13 If we were to use Bloom's terms in the *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Kerouac struggled with Whitman by swerving away from his predecessor (*clinamen*), by trying to complete him (*tessera*), sometimes breaking from him (*kenosis*) or, by contrast mythifying him (*daemonization*), before finally purging all filial links (*askesis*) and assuming his place (*apophrades*). Yet, Bloom's terminology reduces literary influence to Oedipal transference by viewing artistic creation as a family romance and a psychological battlefield. In this perspective, influence becomes the narrative of the young author's vigorous (and narcissistic) struggle for maturity with his literary "father". What is left out in such an approach of influence is the particular historical context in which writers read their predecessors and the "horizontal" relationship that ties them to their literary peers (rather than the "vertical" relationship with their literary forebears). Instead of considering influence as an Oedipal confrontation for authority (between a literary father and one of his successors or symbolic sons) or as a sort of literary "survival of the fittest" (a Darwinian competition between "two strong poets" for literary posterity), mapping out the stage on which the drama of influence unfolded in the postwar era allows for a renewed understanding of the relationship many poets had to Whitman and other male poets.

14 Besides, Bloom's explicitly Freudian framework unavoidably leads to pathologizing and infantilizing authors, a tendency which his own reception of Kerouac's influence and posterity interestingly illustrates. In the introduction to the volume devoted to *On the Road* in the Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations Series published in 2004, Bloom begins by declaring that he "had not reread *On the Road* during the near half-century since its first publication" and that he is "not happy at encountering it again" (Bloom 2004, 1). In the usual disparaging, acerbic tone he resorts to when considering authors and works that do not conform to his vision of the canon and his notion of "strong literature", he calls it "rubbish", "a rather drab narrative" and adds that he "can locate no literary value whatsoever in *On the Road*" (Bloom 2004, 1). Bloom then ends this diatribe by drawing a parallel with Ginsberg's *Howl*, the two works unsurprisingly striking him as being "Oedipal lament[s]" written by authors "weeping in the wilderness for a mother's consolation" and as "easy, self-indulgent evasions of the American quest for identity" (Bloom 2004, 2). There is no need to defend Kerouac's literary achievements, whatever they may be, or to debunk Bloom's criticism of Kerouac, as problematic as it is. Yet, it seems that Kerouac and Ginsberg themselves have come to represent an embarrassing legacy, their achievement often belittled with much contempt and sometimes in revealingly gendered terms. Bloom's notion of influence leads him to classify Kerouac as a "weak" author who cannot overcome and resolve the anxiety triggered by his literary forebears (he does not mention Whitman, but Melville, Twain and Fitzgerald), a personal value judgment that fails to account for what is at stake in reading such an influential literary text.

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NOTES

1 The way Williams cannot bring himself to name "the love that dare not speak its name", using instead the pronouns "this" and "that" whose referents are absent, speaks volume about the embarrassment he felt towards Whitman's sexual identity. The way he discards it as meaningless while acknowledging at the same time that it is true is reminiscent of the mechanism of the open secret analyzed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, in particular of what she calls the "dismissive knowingness" of many scholars and academics towards homosexuality: "The author or the author's important attachment may very well have been homosexual—but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought" (Sedgwick 1990, 53). In other words, Williams's remark follows the grammar of "don't ask, don't tell": "It [homosexuality] didn't happen; it doesn't make any difference; it didn't mean anything; it doesn't have interpretative consequences" (53).

2 In this poem that takes the form of a call to poets of all schools to come down from their ivory towers and "out of [their] closets" (a metaphor with

implications that could not have evaded him though the poem does not deal with self-disclosure), Ferlinghetti invokes Whitman's name to encourage his fellow poets to give up what he terms boring poetry workshops and complex, hermetic language in order to mingle with the people in the street and communicate with/to them. Not surprisingly, Ferlinghetti laments the disappearance of free verse and open speech which Whitman embodies for him: "Where are Whitman's wild children / where the great voices speaking out / with a sense of sweetness and sublimity, / where the great new vision, the great world-view / the high prophetic song / of the immense earth / and all that sings in it [...] / Whitman's wild children still sleeping there, / Awake and walk in the open air" (Ferlinghetti, 61–64).

3 Though *Leaves of Grass* often evades dualisms and celebrates unity of opposites, Michael Davidson's insistence on free identity crossings and his contention that gender is fluid in Whitman should not be exaggerated. It is impossible to turn a blind eye on the male bravado, machismo and virile comradeship that also characterize his verse and, though passing is a recurrent strategy in his poems, they often essentialize women as mother figures and confine them to subservient positions.

4 As Emerson's call found in Walt Whitman the "new man" it hoped for, later that year, Kerouac met Neal Cassady in New York, an all-American man on whom he fashioned the protagonist of *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty. Several years later, he came to acknowledge the parallel in a celebration of Cassady's "muscular prose": "That trumpet of the morning of America, Emerson. As he announced Whitman, I announce Cassady" (Kerouac 1960, n.p.). By identifying with Emerson, Kerouac puts himself at a safe distance of his supposedly Whitmanian friend, the metaphor of the phallic trumpet being meant to reinforce his status as a resolutely masculine figure.

RÉSUMÉS

English

In his novels, poems and essays, Jack Kerouac emulated Whitman's poetics—his democratic ethos, his open form and his sexual themes—and identified with Whitman's literary persona. This position enabled him to distance himself from the Modernist canon, which he deemed "sterile" and "castrating". Yet, the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding Whitman's literary persona led him to address Whitman's sexuality in terms that speak volumes about the anxieties attached to male poetic identity in the 1950s. Indeed, in the context of the anti-homosexual paranoia that pervaded

American politics and poetics in the postwar years, Whitman's scandalous reputation as well as the age-old debates surrounding his sentimental attachments remained an embarrassing issue. In many of his texts, Kerouac re-dressed him as a thoroughly heterosexual poet in order to redress what he presented as other writers' and critics' misreadings of Whitman's poetics. The numerous references to Whitman's 'manly' persona, his celebration of Whitman's homosocial ideal and his confining him to the closet demonstrate the enduring anxiety of queer influence in American letters and Kerouac's desire to distance himself from his homosexual colleagues and friends.

Français

Dans ses romans, ses poèmes et ses essais, Jack Kerouac célèbre la poétique whitmanienne, qu'il s'agisse de son ethos démocratique, du recours au vers libre ou de l'érotisme farouche de certains passages de *Leaves of Grass*. La *persona* de Whitman devient ainsi un modèle auquel Kerouac s'identifie, notamment afin de se distancier d'un canon moderniste qu'il juge « stérile » et « castrateur ». Cependant, l'ambiguïté et l'ambivalence qui entourent la persona littéraire de Whitman le mènent à s'attaquer à la sexualité de ce dernier en des termes qui en disent long sur le malaise qui mine l'identité poétique masculine dans les années cinquante. En effet, dans le contexte de paranoïa anti-homosexuelle qui pèse sur la scène politique et poétique américaine à l'époque de la guerre froide, la réputation scandaleuse de Whitman ainsi que les vieux débats autour de ses liaisons sentimentales représentent plus que jamais un sujet épineux qui embarrasse critiques et écrivains. Dans de nombreux textes, Kerouac travestit ainsi Whitman en poète farouchement hétérosexuel afin de rectifier ce qu'il présente comme les erreurs d'interprétation dont les textes de Whitman ont fait l'objet. Les nombreuses références à la *persona* virile de Whitman, son éloge de l'idéal fraternel et la façon dont il cantonne l'auteur de *Leaves of Grass* au placard démontrent la persistance d'une crainte paranoïaque d'une influence homosexuelle dans la littérature américaine, ainsi que la volonté de Kerouac de se distancier de certains de ses pairs tels que William S. Burroughs ou Allen Ginsberg.

INDEX

Mots-clés

Kerouac (Jack), Whitman (Walt), Ginsberg (Allen), masculinité, homosexualité, homophobie, littérature de l'après-guerre, poétique, influence

Keywords

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AUTEUR

Pierre-Antoine Pellerin
Pierre-Antoine Pellerin is a lecturer in English studies at the Université Jean Moulin–Lyon 3, where he teaches American literature and translation. His PhD focused on the experience and representation of masculinity in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical cycle. He has published several articles on Beat Generation authors, most recently "Masculinité, immaturité et devenir-enfant dans l'œuvre de Jack Kerouac" (*Leaves*, no. 2, 2016). His other research interests include gender studies ("Reading, Writing and the 'Straight White Male': What Masculinity Studies Does to Literary Analysis", *Angles*, no. 3, 2016) and ecocriticism ("Jack Kerouac's Ecopoetics in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*: Domesticity, Wilderness and Masculine Fantasies of Animality", *Transatlantica*, no. 2, 2011).
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The Singularity of Reading

La singularité de la lecture

Florian Beauvallet

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PLAN

TEXTE

From homo habilis to novelists

1 The novel, or so said the advocates of the Nouveau Roman, must outstrip itself of its former shapes and strive for originality in order to reach new aesthetic forms. In the hope of overcoming rigid academism (which tends to take for granted what form is), Robbe-Grillet and his peers positioned themselves at the forefront of an avant-garde movement ingrained in a history of art—and most especially the history of the novel (and literature as a whole)—perceived as the result of a Darwinist evolution with at its core the notion of a “linear progress” (Scarpetta 1985, 292). As with most avant-garde thinking, the driving impetus behind it was an acute sense of limitation, steeped in an understanding of past aesthetic discoveries (Proust, Joyce) seen as a climactic point in the history of the novel: a point of crisis calling for a revolution. If we accept that understanding of literary evolution, novelists must reinvent what the novel is (and could be) so as to free it (and themselves) from the yoke

of tradition in favour of a search for innovation instead of iteration. Continuing with the Darwinist simile, the linear progress of literature can therefore be read as a curve spanning the whole history of literature, and along which milestones mark radical discoveries and changes. Hence, past achievements become various steps in a series without which the state of the novel would not be the same today: following this logic, the novel supposedly progresses and gradually *improves*. In that sense, what we may call the secessionist DNA of the avant-gardes (at first, avant-gardes are always a wish for revolution or at least a call for radical transformations or redirections) drives the precious leaps (improvements) in the history of literature, much to the same degree as the apparition of, say, the opposable thumb designates a fork in our evolution from primates to *homo habilis*.

2 However, as recent developments in evolutionary biology underline, evolution is as much the result of the (a) *survival of the fittest* (contextual improvements) as the consequence of (b) chance genetic mutations and mistakes. In that frame of mind, avant-gardes and their basic premise, the radical search for novelty in literature, could at once stand for (a) a life and death necessity (in this case "life" is understood as the survival of artistic forms) as much as for (b) a mere fluke or chance discovery. And here we conclude our Darwinist opening, reminding ourselves that evolutionary biology is but a passive activity whereas the evolution of literature proves to be more susceptible to change due to the agency of novelists.

Kafka and the Kafkaesque: a case of two Kafkas

3 Literary history and more particularly the history of the novel, is governed by an evasive definition (if not several) of what a novel can be. As a genre, the novel is "indeterminate" (Robert) and constantly in the search of its own limits (i.e. its definition). In that regard, one might say that there are not only as many possibilities for the novel as there are novelists but also that there are as many versions of the history of the novel as there are novelists/novels. Consequently, each and every novelist (and his or her art) can be apprehended as one culmination among many of a specific literary heritage.

4 Herman Melville, thanks to his magnum opus *Moby-Dick*, is commonly regarded as the culmination of Transcendentalism. In some other instances, however, critics are found to argue that an author can be the product of an originality without precedence, as is conventionally the case with Kafka's works—a judgement which can be easily pinpointed to the existence of a catchy adjective: Kafkaesque. Naturally, those adjectives are often a handy way to designates (if evasively) the specificity and uniqueness of an author without being specific as to what it entails, as Philip Roth observes: "At the popular level, the novels have given way to a word, 'Kafkaesque,' which by now is plastered indiscriminately on almost any baffling or unusually opaque event that is not easily translatable into the going simplifications" (2007, 229). But while Kafka is undoubtedly a *singular* object amid 20th century-literature, one can nonetheless doubt his celebrated *peerless* originality. Is Kafka's singularity an objective value or is Kafka's striking distinctiveness just a question of untraditional tradition? Has the word "Kafkaesque" named the thing or have the qualities of the thing been lessened by the naming? Whether the adjective discourages, "at the popular level", any attempt at defining what it presupposes or not, there is no doubt that it at least designates a cliché which, as much as Kafka's supposedly unprecedented originality, is not disputed. Opposite to Roth, geographically speaking, the British novelist Adam Thirlwell (in his introduction to *The Metamorphosis*) tackles the "Kafkaesque" smoke screen by lifting the veil of a list of "accepted truths":

> Unfortunately, it is now necessary to state some accepted truths about Franz Kafka and the Kafkaesque [...] Kafka's work lies outside literature: it is not fully part of the history of European fiction. He has no predecessors—his work appears as if from nowhere—and he has no true successors [...] He is therefore a genius, outside ordinary limits of literature [...] All of these truths, all of them are wrong. It is not a very accurate word, this word "Kafkaesque". (x–xi)

5 Following this provocative *entrée en matière*, Thirlwell proceeds to contradict each and every one of these "accepted truths", mainly by mapping out possible lineages with Charles Dickens, Robert Walser or Gustave Flaubert (xv). At first sight, one might think that Thirlwell's strategy is to downplay the originality and importance of Kafka's in

the European literary canon. However, a closer study of Thirlwell's understanding of the history of the novel calls attention to the paradox of "familiar originality" which leads us to interrogate the very phenomenon of influence with regard to the notions of originality and tradition.

The aesthetic paradox

6 We have so far mentioned two possible ways to apprehend the history of the novel and the evolution of the genre as a whole. We will now be so bold as to say that both cases—the radicalism of the Nouveau Roman and the supposedly genuine originality of Kafka—reveal two sentimental [1] understandings of the novel, if not of literature. It appears that those two instances revel in the idea of literature as a process akin to (improving) biological evolution, as we have seen. In one case, the Nouveau Roman illustrates (dramatically) what is perceived as a sudden mutation (or change) operated in response to a situation of need; for the novel to survive, after the stylistic accomplishments of the Modernists, it needed to drastically mutate and become something entirely new and thus inaugurate a new dawn of the novel. In the other, Kafka's aforementioned genius embodies the chance *apparition* of distinctive traits (which all the more ironically impresses on Kafka's accomplishments a religious overtone that is no stranger to Kafka's critics, notably Max Brod, who has come to represent the quintessential Kafka critic, and from whom the Jewish mysticism line of interpretation originates [2]). What the evolutionary angle does account for is the undoubtedly historical nature of the art of the novel. In *Les testaments trahis*, Milan Kundera expresses his view of literary evolution as inherently historical:

> Selon moi, les grandes œuvres ne peuvent naître que dans l'histoire. Ce n'est qu'à l'intérieur de l'histoire que l'on peut saisir ce qui est nouveau et ce qui est répétitif, ce qui est découverte et ce qui est imitation, autrement dit, ce n'est qu'à l'intérieur de l'histoire qu'une œuvre peut exister en tant que *valeur* que l'on peut discerner et apprécier. Rien ne me semble donc plus affreux pour l'art que la chute en dehors de son histoire, car c'est la chute dans un chaos où les valeurs esthétiques ne sont plus perceptibles. (30)

7 However, let us note that Kundera dwells on the historical nature of the novel according to two specific criterions: (1) one is the *value* of a work of art not as intrinsic but contextual; (2) the other is the point of view from which one can judge its value. What is crucial to notice here is the importance imparted to the critic—that is to say the Reader—in the evolution of literature. According to Kundera, and as echoed by Thirlwell in *Miss Herbert*, the history of the art of the novel (and the value of the works within) is a matter that befell to posterity since "value is only visible retrospectively" (129). Similarly, Thirlwell defends the idea that the value of a work of art cannot be fully grasped as long as it is not contextualised within a tradition. For Kundera, as for Thirlwell, originality and tradition are therefore closely linked, if not dependent on one another—a paradoxical correlation that Thirlwell best expresses as the aforementioned "aesthetic paradox"):

> If every new work regroups the preceding ones, then it initially seems original—but it then seems too fixed, when a new work comes along. The paradox of the aesthetic, then, is that it is a process which constantly claims not to be a process at all; 'every struggle for a new aesthetic value in art, just as every counter-attack against it, is organized in the name of an objective and lasting value [...]. The process of literary history is a continual redefinition of what constitutes literary value at all. (24–25)

8 For both novelists, the crux of the matter with regard to literary history is twofold: (1) novels and traditions are irremediably joint; (2) the value of a work of art is subjective and non-absolute, there is an interrelationship between novels and their contexts. According to this reasoning, therefore, we can imagine that a novel can go unnoticed for years (if not centuries) before being rediscovered and being restored within a literary heritage from which its originality will be all the more apparent—which leads us to a further observation: (3) the evolution of literature is at once subjective and non-topical; creation and critic is an ever-going process that Thirlwell encapsulates in the term "redefinition".

“International mongrel”

9 From here on, we are in a position to give a more accurate definition of what literary evolution can be. It appears hardly fitting to restrict literary evolution to a “linear progress” since, as we have just seen, its value is always part of a tradition and depends on retrospective examination. In that regard, avant-gardes are undoubtedly a positive catalyst for change and innovation though, in their inception, they remain a gamble first and foremost. Sitting opposite the linear hypothesis is the shared idea (by Thirlwell and Kundera) that literary evolution is a chaotic and non-linear phenomenon which rather resembles an ever-mutating history. One of the best illustrations for the notion of mutating history, non-linear and subjected to delays, leaps and bounds as well as mistakes, can of course be read in Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*:

> By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time. (63–64)

Such evolution is liable to change and reinvention (a quality not too dissimilar from Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as a genre [3])—a mutable history that Thirlwell envisions as a *mongrel*: “The history of the novel’s form is not perfect, or linear; it abandons some possibilities and favours others. The novel, this international mongrel, is patchy at best.” (2007, 382)

Born in translation

10 Therefore, we reach a point in our reflection where we can begin to fathom out a paradoxical dialectic between creation and influence, or between writing and reading. Thirlwell’s attitude towards literary history not only offers us a glimpse at the creative process behind his fiction but it also accounts for the core tenets of his aesthetics. In that regard, his essay *Miss Herbert* is as much part of his fiction as his fiction is part of his “theory” (or rather more “theorising” or “essayism”); an observation which can also be applied to a more

experimental book of his, *Multiples*. In the latter, Thirwell orchestrates as series of translations among several participants (all of whom are novelists first and foremost) in order to see what sort of mutations appear and what changes the texts are subjected to. This playful experiment inextricably highlights Thirlwell's own interpretation of the history of fiction as well as the intricacies of writing, reading and translation. For him, the novel's *être au monde* is "portability" which he alludes to on countless occasions: "The reader who wants to investigate the whole art of the novel will end up with a whole warehouse of imported goods" (2013, 1); "a quick global map of some of the most agile practitioners, alive or dead, in the young art of the novel, that is also a portable library of experiments with fiction" (6); "I tend to think that literary history is haphazard; it is a system of interlinked revisions and inspirations, like Franz Kafka's importation of Gustave Flaubert. All techniques are portable. Yes, I prefer a roll-on, roll-off literary theory" (2007, 330). It is therefore apparent that Thirlwell's art of the novel is subjected to (and no less motivated by) what he refers to as "importations" and transportation —that is to say multiple inspirations, influences and in a more concrete sense, technical borrowings which an author is free to adapt to his/her needs.

11 What is of utmost significance for Thirlwell is the international scale ("global map"; "imported goods") to which he tunes literary experiments. Of course, Thirlwell is not the only writer to perceive the history of the novel as an international art form. We have drawn similarities between him and Kundera earlier, to which we can add their corresponding view of *supranational literature* originating from the European crucible:

> Cet espace imaginaire est né avec l'Europe moderne, il est l'image de l'Europe ou, au moins, notre rêve de l'Europe, rêve maintes fois trahi mais pourtant assez fort pour nous unir tous dans la fraternité qui dépasse de loin notre petit continent. (Kundera 1986, 193)[4]

—a notion which can be traced back to Herman Broch and Goethe and his "weltliteratur". What this supranational dimension is worth noting for is the pervasive notion of liberty and impertinence in relation to the art of the novel and the idea of influence. As such, the novel appears as an illustration for "cosmopolitanism" (and vice versa)

which takes the form—in Thirlwell's aesthetics—of the ideas (most notably) of exile—a positive view of exile which is not far removed from Nabokov' own vision of the novel, [5] emigration—which Thirlwell relates to "the universal problem of preserving the things one values. Everything disappears, always. Therefore everyone is an émigré, an amateur émigré. No one is in possession of their past" (2007, 408). Finally cosmopolitanism takes the form of diaspora, about which Thirlwell notes:

> One of the problems with the word "diaspora" in this regard is that it is so freighted with depressed, melancholic meaning and there is a pressure of biography on Schulz to read him in that way. Actually when you read it, what is so fabulous is the scope of his imagination, assimilating everything! (2008)

Hence, the art of the novel is an art of adaptation and adaptability combined with a *cosmopolitan imagination* of unlimited reach. [6] It is therefore not surprising that Guy Scarpetta deems Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* as a fit example of the complex phenomenon of influence in the novel:

> […] ce livre, qui télescope les références islamiques et l'art, propre aux Temps Modernes, du roman ; qui réinvente la littérature, non pas malgré l'impureté ou l'hybridation culturelles, mais à partir d'elle ; qui fait d'une situation de double ou triple culture, de poly-appartenance, non pas le ressort d'un malaise ou d'un déchirement, mais celui d'une euphorie créatrice, d'un élargissement de l'imaginaire […] s'enrichissant de cette interaction ; ce livre, qui conjugue de façon souveraine l'Orient et l'Occident, l'immémoriale modernité. (1996, 60)

12 For us, "interactivity" is the key notion here as it designates the novel as an imaginary territory where different cultures (through tradition and heritage) interact with each other (as the whole *œuvre* of Salman Rushdie can attest) while different voices, identities, times and authors *interact*, *cohabit* and *alter* each other. Borrowing Fuentes' words (which I translate), one of the consequences of such a view of the novel is to "increase awareness of literature as a phenomenon in perpetual realisation" (31), at the core of which resides "the consciousness of the dependence between creation and

tradition" (29) which reinforces the idea that "nothing, in our world, can exist in the purity of isolation" (168).

Literary cosmopolitanism

13 Originality and tradition are therefore two side of the same (paradoxical) coin: that of imagination. [7] Recent developments in the art of the novel emphasise the key role played by the techniques of appropriation. As Patricia Waugh and Jennifer Hodgson point out in their article "On the exaggerated reports of a decline in British fiction", in recent years a noticeable number of young writers have categorized themselves as "cosmopolitan writers", in the sense that they "marry with and promiscuously blend the foreign with the indigenous, the international with the demotic—but what seems to fix their identity in their own eyes and ours is the avowed association with cultures and traditions that are not British". A keen interest in multiple cultures and traditions is a central aspect of the aesthetics of Adam Thirlwell and Kazuo Ishiguro, both of whom have for instance explored in fiction the intellectual legacy of Mittel-Europa, a symbolic beckon of the cosmopolitan identity: Thirlwell's *The Escape* and Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* both take place in a Central European metaphoric spa-town where historical, geographical and cultural boundaries blur in a cosmopolitan swirl. Those are only two British examples that are part of a constellation of international authors who inscribe their art in a global, or at least multicultural, legacy. [8]

14 But what Waugh and Hodgson accurately observe about those writers is their acute sense of belonging to a common though *multifarious* tradition. What their art insists on is the anachronistic quality of literature, which Waugh and Hodgson allude to under the notion of "interregnum": "new age of 're'—redevelopment, recycling, restructuring, reparation, reconciliation, residue, remainder, remembrance, recession—trying to rebuild foundations, recover roots and re-imagine a future re-connected with a revisioned past". As a result, such a conception unsettles the linear understanding of literature in favour of a more playful and flippant grasp of its dynamics.

Originality among thieves

15 To recognise and implement in one's art prior techniques and discoveries is at the same time a form of apprenticeship under the guise of homage but it is also a humble and humbling perception of literary history understood as a *multiple*: "Seule notre arrogance contemporaine voudrait nous faire croire que nous nous posons des questions qui n'ont jamais effleuré l'esprit de nos prédécesseurs. Les termes en sont différents mais l'équation demeure" (Barbedette 54). To clarify the terminology, it is important to appreciate the various understandings of "multiple"—a notion regularly called forth by Thirlwell. It not only implies that various histories of the novel can coexist at the same time—for instance, Kundera considers both *Don Quichotte* and Rabelais as the origin of the history of the novel, to which Thirlwell adds the crucial novelty of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*—but it also implies that novels in themselves are complex objects that keep being reinvented and helping reinvent the genre. Thirlwell perceive this quality in the simple act of translation, noting that because of it "literature is one of those strange arts where the original is often experienced as a multiple" (2013, 1). Because of translation, there exist multiple variations of a novel, in different languages translated at different times in history by different translators. It goes without saying that few novelists, and readers, would otherwise be able to enjoy literature in its original language. As a result, Thirlwell is led to believe that the very nature of literature is governed by a phenomenon of rewriting and reinvention:

> I wondered now if the future for style should be multiplicity. It should be allowed any anachronism—for why should the styles of the past be forbidden to you?— just as it should be allowed any geographical displacement. My new ideal, I'm thinking, and not without a qualm, is the pure, unembarassed inauthentic. (2013, 7–8)

The "inauthenticity" in question, perceived as a positive quality, obviously runs counter to our modern sensibilities. Inauthenticity as a *value* might appear as a flippant idea with regard to our Western literary legacy (ever since Romanticism, the accepted idea concerning the value of a work of art is its apparent originality) but various

authors such as Thirlwell, Tom McCarthy and Ralph Ellison exemplify how inauthenticity proves to be the paradoxical driving impetus behind (literary) creation. Indeed, McCarthy reminds us that "these practices—citation, reenactment, *repetition*, and modification-through-repetition—already of course, in one way or the other, have their place right at the heart of the Western canon (there'd be no Shakespeare without them)" (269), which echoes Ellison's idea of the "appropriation game":

> What makes an artist American for Ellison is less a priori identity than a freewheeling approach to culture that rewrites heritage not as passive inheritance but as an assemblage produced by the act of seizing or appropriating from the past and present. Ellison calls this dynamic, anti-proprietary practice "the appropriation game", one "everyone played". (Posnock 91)

Against modern proprietary isolationism to which the *copyright* is the commercial symbol (Barbedette 101), novelists perceive literary singularity first and foremost as a will to write from and among others—a phenomenon that Thirlwell flippantly designates as "stealing" [9] which shares a common ground with the idea of "recycling" in Barbedette's terminology:

> Mais *Don Quichotte* annonçait ce que *Tristram Shandy* a systématisé, à savoir le recyclage de la littérature. L'historien arabe permet à Cervantès de dire au lecteur que la littérature se reproduit en vase clos et qu'elle est à elle-même sa propre source. En d'autres termes, la littérature est hermaphrodite et n'a pas besoin de copuler avec la vie pour exister. La grande fornication interne qu'elle pratique conduit à penser qu'il ne saurait y avoir de textes-sources. Il n'y a que des textes recyclés. D'une certaine façon, l'histoire de la littérature recouvre l'histoire du plagiat. Chaque nouveau roman est le piratage d'un autre ; les histoires sont peu ou prou les mêmes. Un écrivain ne saurait trop espérer du grand chaudron de la vie ; il y a plus à apprendre de la fréquentation des œuvres — ou plus exactement, il y est contraint car rien de ce qu'il pourrait tirer de son expérience ne saurait surprendre par sa nouveauté intrinsèque. Seule son écriture est une occasion de transfiguration. (101)

16 For cosmopolitan writers (Thirlwell, Roth or Kundera) originality manifests itself, first of all, through the capacity of readers to appreciate the multifarious quality of literature and interpretation. What distinguishes a writer is therefore his/her capacity to read and reread (and therefore rediscover) past works in order to reinvent at once both their *value* and *invent* new values as regards the tradition of the novel—if only by re-using past techniques in new manners. Writing—original writing—is thus deeply rooted in the act of rereading, itself understood as creation:

> Pendant la course de l'histoire, le concept de tel ou tel art (qu'est-ce que le roman ?) ainsi que le sens de son évolution (d'où vient-il et où va-t-il ?) sont sans cesse définis et redéfinis par chaque artiste, par chaque nouvelle œuvre. Le sens de l'histoire du roman c'est la recherche de ce sens, sa perpétuelle création et re-création, qui englobe toujours rétroactivement tout le passé du roman. (Kundera 1993, 28)

17 Following this line of thought, it is conceivable that the future of the novel rests in its past. Literary influence, creation and originality are therefore closely related to the activity of (re)reading and translating —two activities which nurture the relationship between text and reader, the result of which consolidates the act of reading as the cornerstone between past and future: "[Anachronism] is a form of reading that consists of the invention of new relationships within literary history. Such a method tends to relativize the traditional hierarchy of the acts of writing and reading, suggesting an inversion" (Castro Rocha 132). Thus, anachronism and cosmopolitanism can respectively stand as novelistic strategies for reinvention and imagination, since "literature is a 'reversible' and 'curved' space where 'individual specificity and chronological precedence' do not apply" (Obaldia 271) and "where 'each writer *creates* his precursors', and where 'his work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future'" (ibid.). Because of the unrestricted scope of cultural and literary appropriations at hand (partly thanks to translation), novelists are free to reinvent the form of the novel as much as they are free to reinvent its history and its values. From this prospective-retrospective perspective, literary influence appears to be a two-way

phenomenon, where past and present mingle in a reciprocal reinvention of the other through imagination and curiosity.

18 As a final observation, we can add that the question of influence in the art of the novel implies the timeless "you and I" dialectic. The novel reminds us of the necessary inclusion of the Other when constructing one's own (literary) identity, what Fuentes calls "subjective collectivity" as Vincent Message points out:

> [Les romanciers] cherchent à rendre perceptible ce que Fuentes nomme notre « subjectivité collective », c'est-à-dire le fait que la construction de notre identité ne relève pas seulement d'un processus d'individuation qui rend chacun de nous unique, mais résulte aussi de notre inscription dans une collectivité qui nous dépasse. (11)

19 The art of the novel therefore epitomises the perpetual correlation between imagining and reimagining that Roth's narrator accurately portrays under the guise of a striking *mise en abîme* in *The Counterlife*: "The treacherous imagination is everybody's maker—we are all invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring everyone else. We are all each other's authors." (149)

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NOTES

1 We insist on the meaning of "sentimental": we denounce the *radical* and *exaggerated* nature of the propositions which we encapsulate as *sentimentalism*.

2 As noted by Thirlwell: "These small acts of tidying up are important because they are part of Brod's overall project to sanctify Kafka, to make him a writer of theological scruple, a great writer with a message of existential loneliness without God, and a writer of self-contained stories." (xxv)

3 According to Bakhtin, the novel *is* mutability: “la réinterprétation et la réévaluation permanente. Le centre de la dynamique de la perception et de la justification du passé est transféré dans le futur.” (Bakhtine 465)

4 See also: “Je parle du *roman européen* […] pour dire que son histoire est transnationale […] laquelle crée le seul contexte où peuvent se révéler et le sens l’évolution du roman et la valeur des œuvres particulières.” (Kundera 1993, 42)

5 “Par sa nature parodique, l’œuvre nabokovienne impose une présence capitale des littératures auxquelles elle a emprunté ; en cela, elle compose un alléchant panorama littéraire de l’exil.” (Barbedette 139)

6 For Posnock, this very notion encapsulates the art of the novel: “Greek for ‘world citizen”, *cosmopolitanism* is rarely a neutral term and often pejorative because it usually involves a refusal to revere local or national authority and a desire to uphold multiple affiliations. In an academic culture obsessed by identity, the cosmopolitan has the distinction of being grounded instead in the practice of appropriation: insouciance regarding claims of ownership and the drawing of boundaries becomes the basis of a cosmopolitan relation to culture. To achieve it liberates culture from the proprietary grip of a single group; possessiveness […] is set aside for sampling, fixity for mobility. Cosmopolites refuse to know their place. And cosmopolitanism, which challenges the sense of entitlement to cultural riches assumed to repose in privileged birth or inheritance, is in theory at least, what democratic America embodies.” (Posnock 6)

7 “But the point of reading Kafka’s early stories, and their influences, is not simply to locate his tradition. It is also to see what he does with this tradition. Kafka develops Walser’s technique of reticence, his exploitation of the apparently whimsical, into a far more stringent style.” (Kafka xvii)

8 European writers are not the sole representatives of literary cosmopolitanism. As we saw earlier, Philip Roth’s strategies of appropriation are perceived as a decidedly American trait while the Mexican writer Alvaro Enrigue continues the South American tradition of looking at History between the Old Continent and the Americas. Other specific forms of literary cosmopolitanism have found their voice in the Caribbean, in the work of Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant for instance.

9 “Influence is a complicated thing. There is copying, and copying is simple, but then there is everything else—the more structural, more abstract; more independent influences. These are less influences than

steals. They are apprenticeship. Reading ambitiously, a writer is on the lookout for techniques to adapt. And this creates some weird genealogies." (Thirlwell 2007, 270)

RÉSUMÉS

English

"The Singularity of Reading" explores the issues of creativity and influence in the art of the novel. The works of various writers are examined, such as Kafka, Philip Roth and Adam Thirlwell, for whom the process of fiction writing and reception challenge the notion of originality. Thus, the relationship between authors and literary traditions is investigated in order to emphasise the pivotal role played by the act of reading. As such, reading appears to be the cornerstone of literary creation, understood both as a guide for continuity and a driving impetus for appropriation and reivention. By focusing on reading as an integral part to the act of writing, we elaborate on the idea that the evolution of the novel as a form illustrates the mutability of its history and highlights the liberty for any author to reinvent past forms.

Français

« The Singularity of Reading » examine les problématiques de créativité et d'influence dans l'art du roman. Les œuvres de plusieurs auteurs sont abordées, notamment Kafka, Philip Roth et Adam Thirlwell, chez qui le processus d'écriture de fiction et de réception mettent à l'épreuve la notion d'originalité. De la sorte, la relation entre auteurs et traditions littéraires est analysée afin de mettre en avant le rôle clé joué par l'acte de lire. De la sorte, la lecture apparaît comme la pierre d'angle de la création littéraire, à la fois comme garant de continuité et d'innovation, en tant que source d'appropriations et de réinventions. En étudiant la lecture comme élément à part entière du processus d'écriture, nous développons l'idée que l'évolution du roman en tant que forme illustre la mutabilité de son histoire tout en soulignant la liberté pour tout auteur de réinventer des formes passées.

INDEX

Mots-clés

Thirlwell (Adam), roman, cosmopolitisme littéraire, anachronisme, réappropriation, non-authenticité, Roth (Philip)

Keywords

Thirlwell (Adam), novel, literary cosmopolitanism, anachronism, reappropriation, inauthenticity, Roth (Philip)

AUTEUR

Florian Beauvallet
Florian Beauvallet is completing a thesis on the work of the British novelist Adam Thirlwell, entitled *Toward an Aesthetic of Flippancy: The Art of the Novel of Adam Thirlwell* (under the direction of Anne-Laure Tissut at the University of Rouen) which offers an inaugural critical study of one of the striking voices of contemporary British fiction. His publications include “Le passé est imprévisible” and “L’imaginaire du montage” (published on *L’atelier des savoirs*). He also teaches literature and translation at the University of Rouen.
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Writing under Influence: Rick Moody's Stereophonic Autobiographies

Écrire sous influence : les autobiographies stéréophoniques de Rick Moody

Sophie Chapuis

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TEXTE

1 Stereophony is a term that originally belongs to the field of music and defines a system in which sound is reproduced in a three-dimensional effect. The word "stereophony" and the reproduction of sound it entails provides American author and critic Jonathan Lethem with a forceful metaphor to describe much contemporary fiction as a sum of echoes and reverberations. Lethem coins this concept in a text whose title "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" reads like a variation on Harold Bloom's canonical essay, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* but also draws on Roland Barthes' conviction that texts are necessarily composed of already read citations: "Any text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (Barthes quoted in Lethem 68). Lethem takes Barthes' notion of "stereophony" to its paroxysm and composes a ten-page manifesto which is entirely made up of sentences he borrows from multiple sources. The essay is followed by a four-page guide which exposes the complete list of references Lethem plundered to create this cut-up. At stake here is Lethem's ambition to dispute Harold Bloom's theory according to which "influence is *Influenza*" (Bloom 97). Lethem embraces the opposite stance arguing that influence is not a disease from which writers should recover. On the contrary, contemporary novelists should not give in to the pressure of influence but rather indulge in unlimited appropriation and plundering. To him, contemporary fiction cannot be original without largely dwelling on plagiarism: "The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable

material of all human utterances—is plagiarism" (Lethem 68).[1] In this essay published in *Harper's Magazine* in 2007, Lethem calls for an ecstatic relief and liberation from centuries of literary heritage and urges writers to steal freely. He defends the random pillage of texts and claims that plagiarism has become the twenty-first-century writer's condition. Indebtedness to the canon necessarily implies usurpation.

2 Lethem's short essay strongly resonates with the strategy adopted by American novelist and short story writer Rick Moody whose approach to literary influence is resolutely free from any form of anxiety. When interviewed by David Ryan about literary tradition, Moody declares "since everything is exhausted, everything is permitted" (Ryan 2001). Pushing John Barth's concept of exhaustion to the next level, Moody's writing largely feeds on lavish appropriation and loose borrowing, which causes generic volatility particularly for books which have an autobiographical dimension. The array of voices and sources summoned often cloud the text and hinder the attempt at unveiling the self. Because they are profoundly stereophonic, Moody's autobiographical texts are to be read as fiction for they are fraught with references that eclectically range from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Jacques Derrida or from Kurt Vonnegut to Jose Luis Borges. Rick Moody often pledges allegiance to prominent literary figures, whether it is made explicit in the preliminary dedications,[2] in the very title,[3] or in an appended bibliography[4] that reads like a coda. Influences and sources are exposed in a transparent way and somehow provide a ready-made critical apparatus which contributes to shaping a literary persona that results from a sum of miscellaneous influences. Texts advertised as autobiographies are supported with ample critical references—therefore, the genuine and intimate project of the autobiographical quest forever seems to be thwarted. The extensive list of primary sources or references muffle the writer's voice. At stake, here, is a reflection on the very possibility for autobiography to subsist when writing primarily relies on echoes, reverberations, and cross-referencing, in other words, stereophony. If Moody's writing feeds on plagiarism, doesn't it challenge the very genre of autobiography and force it to adapt and transform?

3 Such ambiguities lie at the core of two Rick Moody texts which are both presented as autobiographical though they are radically different in terms of length and structure. Moody's first attempt at unveiling the self takes the form of a non-narrative short story entitled, "Primary Sources", which is to be found in the collection *The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven*, published in 1995. It entirely reads like a ten-page bibliography composed of forty-eight entries and augmented by thirty footnotes which present the reader with a substitute for autobiographical material. From Plato to American-rock band The Feelies, from Montaigne to Stanley Elkin, the short story shapes the life of the writer according to a wide-ranging selection of books and music albums. Each page is divided into two different levels: the very blunt list, on the one hand, and the corresponding footnotes, on the other, in which Moody offers rambling comments about his life and sometimes insight about the selected works. Seven years later, Moody transforms his autobiographical sketch into a book whose ambition is to trace the history of the Moody family in a memoir entitled *The Black Veil: A Memoir with Digressions*. Similar use of lists is noticeable at the end of this book—in lieu of a coda, a sixty-five-entry bibliography runs on five pages and presents the reader with a selection of sources that the writer claims to have consulted to write his memoir. The bibliography primarily aims at making up for the erratic system of referencing that characterizes the book as Moody liberally appropriates words or phrases from writers without using any inverted commas or quotation marks. The whole memoir is built on an influx of references that subdue Moody's voice and obstruct the attempt to confess. As a result, literary influence operates, in both texts, as a chorus of voices that keep Moody silent and forever push Moody's voice to the margins. *The Black Veil* reveals that the author is an expert in the art of forging while "Primary Sources" only delineates a literary persona.

4 When *The Black Veil* first came out in 2002, it was subtitled *A Memoir with Digressions*. However, Rick Moody himself quickly decided to alter his original title and asked his publisher to remove definitively the subtitle of the book for the future editions. Such a change has a major consequence on the very nature of this work as it obviously increases its generic variability. The book was initially labeled as

non-fiction and unquestionably belonged to the genre of autobiography. [5] Yet, by removing the original subtitle, Rick Moody willingly turned his memoir into a work of fiction. Besides, from its very title, the book summons Nathaniel Hawthorne's ghost in the obvious echo it creates with the short story "The Minister's Black Veil" published in 1837. This joint authority raises questions as to who is telling the story for Hawthorne's spectral shadow is visibly cast throughout Moody's text. *The Black Veil* stands as a contemporary variation on Hawthorne's tale and at times reads like a two-handed piece of writing. Hawthorne's text is being plundered and fragments from many of his works are to be found in explicit quotations, brief allusions, or sometimes unacknowledged borrowing. Hawthorne is being so vocal that he sometimes silences Moody's voice, the text making confession more and more opaque. As Moody's and Hawthorne's sentences interweave, the text takes on a three-dimensional aspect. Indeed, "The Minister's Black Veil" is to be found in Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, a title which itself hints at an expression from *The Life and Death of King John* by William Shakespeare. [6] While Hawthorne borrows from Shakespeare, Moody subsequently borrows from both writers and, doing so, redesigns some thrice-told tale.

5 As Moody's and Hawthorne's voices compete, autobiographical material is pushed to the background. Therefore, the whole project of the memoir rests upon a manipulation, a hoax, that consists in substituting Nathaniel Hawthorne's reconfigured plot for Rick Moody's intimate life. The maneuvering at work in this book is intricate and requires some clarifications. Moody's first-person narrator embarks on a quest for an alleged ancestor, Reverend Joseph Moody, whose life and story have inspired Hawthorne with the character of Reverend Hooper, the fictional protagonist of his tale. So, Moody's fictional autobiography derives from Hawthorne's first footnote to his tale, which authenticates the existence of an actual clergyman named Mr. Joseph Moody. [7] This Puritan minister (1700–1753) provides Moody with fictional material for his mock autobiography—what sets the autobiography in motion is the belief that, somehow, the Moody family is related to this reverend whose potential for fiction was developed by Hawthorne. This inaugural footnote provides Moody with a plot that diverts him from genuine

confession as the whole point of the text is to lead the readers astray. The final epiphany reveals that the connection with Joseph Moody proceeds from lies that have been repeated from one generation to the next: "[T]he Moodys of my line had no conclusive relation to the Moodys of Handkerchief Moody's line, unless I was willing to make up one [...] *Therefore, my line, for some hundred years or more, had been liars about our lineage*" (284). Autobiography seems to be a promise that can never be kept as confession only fuels further obfuscation and leads to the construction of a fictional self. The genealogical quest leads the reader to a dead-end and serves no other purpose than celebrating the power of making up stories. However, the anxiety to document this hoax reveals the irony on which the whole novel is built. As a coda to his text, Moody publishes the original short story by Hawthorne to which he attaches a selection of references he consulted to conduct his family research. This final compilation does not illuminate the autobiographical quest as the more sources are made explicit, the less Moody's life can be apprehended. Critic Joseph Dewey aptly compares Moody to an embroiderer who spins veils:

> Like the Surveyor who invites his readers to embroider their own tale of Hester Prynne, here Moody helpfully appends to his 'memoir' the entire text of Hawthorne's story and a bibliography of critical sources—an invitation to do your own riff on the text. Here, you see, threads spin veils. (44)

6 The whole book feasts on borrowing, stealing and plagiarizing material from Hawthorne. Therefore, quotations are cryptically incorporated into the text and only part of them is decoded at the very end, when references surface and abound in the extensive bibliography. Yet, throughout the novel, we can note that the use of italics is almost always Moody's while Hawthorne's words are left unidentified by any typographical markers. Quoting immoderately from "The Minister's Black Veil" but also from the complete works of Hawthorne, Moody gives birth to a multi-layered body of texts engendered by multiple authorities. The preamble to the bibliography stands as one of the most ironical passages of the book since it reads like a confession but what Moody unveils is the very fact that his strategy has been, from beginning to end, dissimulation:

> My style of quotation in this book sometimes asks the reader to suspend the question of who exactly is doing the speaking. A dangerous undertaking, to be sure, and one that I seek to redress here. The aspiration concealed in this strategy is one of which, hopefully the literature present will properly appear to be quilted together from the texts of the past, sometimes consciously, sometimes less so. For the sake of completeness, however, please note the following: the vast majority of uncited quotations in these pages, as well as all the chapter titles, come from the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. There are also some phantom observations from Herman Melville, as well as Cotton Mather (chapter six), Roland Barthes (chapter seven), Robert Held (on firearms, in chapter nine) […]. (Moody 319)

7 The organizing principle of the novel is mostly based on concealment, a longstanding strategy adopted by the narrator as various episodes of his childhood testify: "Don't draw attention" (17) was his motto at school where he enjoyed being "spectral", adding "[K]ids pushed past me as though I were spectral. My camouflage was perfect" (17). This wish to be invisible partly accounts for the strategy of opacity at work in the novel. The habit of keeping silent can justify the writer's wish to be literally written through or spoken through.

8 In an essay about phantom voices and cryptic texts, French critic Marie-Ange Depierre [8] uses the concept of ventriloquism to name the process through which a writer's voice can channel another. She describes this vocal palimpsest as a mechanism through which voices overlap, compete and constantly chase one another. If ventriloquism necessarily implies the receding of one's voice in favor of another, we can argue that it relies on a double movement: withdrawal goes hand in hand with re-appropriation. The ventriloquist changes his own voice to pretend it comes from elsewhere, but by relocating words that come from another source, he creates an unprecedented production of sounds. Moody's table of contents largely draws on this technique. Indeed, the very long, narrative titles of the nineteen chapters that compose *The Black Veil* are unacknowledged borrowing from various novels and journals written by Hawthorne. Read end-to-end, we notice that the contents section sounds very much like the beginning of the "Minister's Black Veil", especially when we read the

titles of the first eight chapters which impart obvious Hawthornian motifs like the children, the Puritan community, or the veil.

> Children, with bright faces, tript merrily beside their parents, or mimicked a graver gait… 11

> The old people of the village came stooping along the street… 26

> The topic, it might be supposed, was obvious enough… 42 [9]

> Customers came in, as the forenoon advanced, but rather slowly… 54 [10]

> Stooping somewhat and looking on the ground as is customary with abstracted men… 68

> The deep pause of flagging spirits, that always follows mirth and wine… 76 [11]

> In his case, however, the symbol had a different import… 89

> It takes off its face like a mask, and shows the grinning bare skeleton underneath… 104 [12]
> (Moody, Table of Contents)

9 On closer analysis, it appears that the table of contents freely plagiarizes various texts by Hawthorne. This generates syntactical alterations, chronological disruptions, but also loose borrowing from a wide range of stories, novels and journals that sometimes have not even penned by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Rick Moody freely composes a text which sounds Hawthornian but actually is not. Hawthorne speaks through Moody, thus creating a unique palimpsest of voices, offering a variation on a recognizable Hawthornian tune as well. Doing so, he composes here an alternative version of the tale, and, as he dispossesses Hawthorne of his words, he gives birth to a text which is both familiar and unfamiliar: words indeed do not belong to the right story. Moody relocates Hawthorne's words into a new textual body that creates an original piece. The table of contents

reads like some stereophonic preface announcing a complex system of echoes. So, from the beginning, it is made clear that Moody's autobiography will be built on acoustic reverberations that may resist identification. The five-page bibliography that supplements the narrative is highly ironical for it documents a lie, a hoax, and reveals the counterfeit quality of the project while the list of references reads like a parodic attempt to be transparent and accountable.

10 Moody's response to the constant tension between fiction and non-fiction largely consists in laying bare the frontiers between genres and categories. Untraceable quotations ironically mix with exhaustive bibliographies that often result in a pointless system of references. Supporting a fictional narrative with a vast number of historical sources is a paradox that Moody enjoys pushing to its limits just as he takes pleasure in documenting the creation of his literary self. Indeed, in the short story entitled "Primary Sources", Moody piles up random names of albums and books that have shaped his life and promises the reader some transparent confession as early as footnote number one:

> 1. Born 10.18.61 in NYC. Childhood pretty uneventful. We moved to the suburbs. I always read a lot. I did some kid stuff, but mostly I read. So this sketchy and selective bibliography—this list of some of the books I have around the house now—is really an autobiography. (231)

11 The note makes it clear that the primary sources listed must be read like a substitute for personal confessions. Moreover, the pleonastic use of the adverb "really" is meant to dissipate any possible doubt and confirms the autobiographical project. However, if the birthdate is Moody's, the personal material presented remains evasive as the succession of paratactic sentences shows. The footnote actually opens on a reluctance to confess. The author's childhood is said to have been "uneventful"; "the suburbs" are not precisely located while "kid stuff" does not evoke any precise activity. Besides, in other footnotes, autobiographical episodes are arbitrarily juxtaposed with some literary anecdotes but the two often prove to be loosely connected. Footnote number 22 is a telling example of such disjunction:

> In 1987, I institutionalized myself. At that moment, Thurber and Groucho Marx and anthologies of low comedy seemed like the best literature had to offer. I thought I was going to abandon writing—something had to give—but I didn't. I felt better later. (238)

The blunt statement "In 1987, I institutionalized myself" remains highly elliptical and only randomly connects with the following comments.

12 Throughout the story, most autobiographical episodes are cryptic and diluted in literary remarks. It is as if the bibliography alone were to speak for itself. The annotation effort is left incomplete. A third of the book entries is not even commented as if titles of novels, essays, or music albums were enough for readers to get a clear understanding of Moody's personality. A soundtrack and a book-track provide a substitute for the promised autobiography as Moody literally shapes and imposes on us a selection of critical references that construct his persona. Some footnotes are entirely made up of quotations that can be found in *The Black Veil* as well. Cross-referencing can be spotted in both bibliographies. Footnote number 19 in "Primary Sources" is a quote from "The Minister's Black Veil" which is in turn to be found in *The Black Veil*, itself being somehow an extended footnote to Hawthorne's short story.

13 Both texts create a system of echoes and correspondences which completely muffle the voice of a writer who is literally written and spoken through. They engage us to reflect on the quintessentially stereophonic quality of Moody's writing, which mostly rests on an interactive and cumulative process. The writer becomes an embroiderer, or to put it again in Joseph Dewey's terms, "an editor and arranger of words" (46). This cut-and-paste poetics necessarily impacts narratives of the self as plagiarism and free borrowing transform their very nature and purpose. The attempt at self-definition morphs into an openly collaborative project relying on intertextual practices and rhizomatic connections with past writers. As *The Black Veil* organically grows from Hawthorne's tale, the autobiographical material assumes a fictional potential. The individual self is superseded by the delineation of a collective self, characterized by hyper-connectedness. It is thus not surprising that the narrator of *The Black Veil* constantly alternates between "I" and

"we"; not only does it reveal the instable and plural nature of the self, but it also underlines the intrinsic fictional quality of Moody's autobiography. The genealogical paradigm is revised as the autobiographical subject feeds on multiple layers of influences. Sources abound the better to expose, paradoxically, an ever-elusive self whose very speculation demands storytelling. Drawing on cut-up techniques, Moody's fiction is not just making it new to challenge forms and structures, it calls for liberal plagiarism and a renewed relationship to the canon that both liberates from literary tradition and subverts the unique source of authority.

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NOTES

1 Lethem explains that this sentence derives from a letter written by Mark Twain to writer and activist Helen Keller (1880–1968) as she had been accused of plagiarism.

2 *The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven* is a collection of stories published in 1995 and dedicated to John Hawkes.

3 Rick Moody published in 2002 a memoir entitled *The Black Veil*. The title is a direct reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil" which is to be found in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837).

4 This is the case in *The Black Veil*. Rick Moody, at the end of the text, provides a long list of sources that he supposedly consulted to retrace the story of the Moody family. The title of this section, "Selected Bibliography", is quite ironical for it stresses the non-exhaustive character of this five-page list and suggests that the writer's system of referencing is meant to be incomplete.

5 *The Black Veil: A Memoir with Digressions* was labeled as "non-fiction" on the series title page of the 2002 edition.

6 "Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale, / Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man" (William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John*, Act III, scene IV, 113).

7 "Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper" (305). This quote is the first footnote of "The Minister's Black Veil" which is entirely reproduced at the end of Moody's book.

8 Marie-Ange Depierre's essay privileges the examination of the figure of the haunted over the haunting figure. She analyzes the *fantasmophore*, someone who is haunted by voices, and the multiple strategies of erasure thus adopted by writers. Among them is the two-hand technique, a vocal palimpsest, that results in a constant chasing of the writer's voice. She argues: "L'écrivain hanté par l'œuvre d'un prédécesseur pourra-t-il trouver sa voix dans cette écriture syncopée — cet arrêt de soi pour livrer passage à

l'autre, cette écriture fuguée qui s'écrit à deux mains comme un palimpseste vocal où les motifs se répètent, se fuyant et se poursuivant l'un l'autre ?" (12)

9 The first three chapters are borrowed sentences that come from "The Minister's Black Veil". We can notice that Moody slightly changed the order of the first two sections as the original text reads: "The old people of the village came stooping along the street. Children, with bright faces, tripped merrily beside their parents, or mimicked a graver gait, in the conscious dignity of their Sunday clothes." (Moody, 305)

10 "Customers came in, as the forenoon advanced, but rather slowly." The quote is to be found in *The House of the Seven Gables* published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851.

11 "At length, however, there was a pause—the deep pause of flagging spirits, that always follows mirth and wine." This quote belongs to *The Scarlet Letter* published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850.

12 This quote is not a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne for it is taken from *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife*, written by the son of the writer, Julian Hawthorne, in 1884.

RÉSUMÉS

English

This article draws extensively on Jonathan Lethem's claim that contemporary fiction is profoundly stereophonic and reads like a sum of echoes and reverberations from other texts. Turning Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" into an "ecstasy of influence", Lethem encourages deliberate stealing and appropriation, claiming that plagiarism has become the twenty-first-century writer's condition. Central to this article is a reflection on the very possibility for autobiography to subsist when writing is quintessentially stereophonic. This cut-and-paste poetics is at the heart of two texts written by Rick Moody, a short story "Primary Sources" and a novel, *The Black Veil*—two works which completely revisit the genre of autobiography as, feeding on multiple layers of sources, they encourage generic volatility.

Français

Selon l'auteur et critique américain Jonathan Lethem, la fiction contemporaine est profondément stéréophonique. Elle est faite d'échos et de réverbérations provenant de multiples textes. L'influence doit donc cesser de représenter une « angoisse » comme le titre de l'essai d'Harold Bloom l'affirme mais un « ravissement ». Pour Lethem, le plagiat est aujourd'hui devenu la condition de l'écrivain. Si la fiction contemporaine est

intrinsèquement stéréophonique, dans quelle mesure le genre autobiographique peut-il subsister ? Cette poétique du couper-coller est au cœur de deux œuvres de Rick Moody, une nouvelle, « Primary Sources », et un roman, *The Black Veil* — deux textes qui, par leurs emprunts à de nombreuses sources, transforment radicalement le projet autobiographique en raison de l'instabilité générique qu'ils suscitent.

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Mots-clés
autobiographie, influence, stéréophonie, Moody (Rick)

Keywords
autobiography, influence, stereophony, Moody (Rick)

AUTEUR

Sophie Chapuis
Sophie Chapuis is Associate Professor at the University Jean Monnet, Saint-Étienne, France where she teaches American literature. She received her PhD in American literature from the University of the Sorbonne Nouvelle–Paris 3 in 2012. Her dissertation surveyed the complete works of American novelist and short story writer Rick Moody, focusing more specifically on the notions of accident and catastrophe. She has since then explored various aspects of Moody's fiction and published articles about masculinity, illness, and domesticity.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/190090618

A Fellowship of Imaginations: Sebald's Aesthetics of Chiaroscuro in *The Exquisite* by Laird Hunt

Imaginaires parents : l'esthétique du chiaroscuro de Sebald dans The Exquisite *de Laird Hunt*

Anne-Julie Debare

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 Sebald's death gave rise to a profusion of novels paying homage to the work of the German writer, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. A great many novels were published which imitated his characteristic fictional prose allying his melancholy narrator's aesthetic of montage, long digressions and typical billowing sentences. In the acknowledgments of his novel *The Exquisite*, Laird Hunt distances himself from such a tendency to imitate Sebald's aesthetics and produce a "dilution", here borrowing Ezra Pound's expression.[1]

2 By contrast, Laird Hunt says, *The Exquisite* is a playful referential homage to the master whose "favorite themes and obsessions" have been recast and taken up in a "ghost noir", a book "*unlike* one Sebald would have written" (Hunt 244). Nonetheless, a close reading of Laird Hunt's novel reveals a more complex dialogue between *The Exquisite* and *The Rings of Saturn*, which seems to exceed the conscious literary homage; here is another exemplary case of a work whose writing seems to have drifted away from its literary programming.

3 In order to resolve this knot, one needs to understand that Sebald's influence on *The Exquisite*—and more generally on Laird Hunt's writing—does not stem from the imitation of Sebald's fictional prose whose guiding principles would have been consciously deduced by Laird Hunt so as to integrate them into his writing (Attridge 116). Rather *The Exquisite* is the product of elective affinities and of a fellowship of imaginations. Indeed, *The Exquisite* far exceeds the mere intertextual homage to Sebald's favorite motifs as it becomes the locus of an extensive and fruitful exchange between what Pierre Bayard calls two "inner books" [2] (82), whereby Laird Hunt elaborates his literary response to Sebald's *Rings of Saturn*—a development of Sebald's preoccupations and prolonging of the literary possibilities opened out by the latter's novel.

4 One thus needs to explore what in Laird Hunt's novel stems from this affinity of imaginations and to study *The Exquisite* closely in order to make out the "red thread" [3] (Goethe 203) which is common to both works, that is, as Goethe's metaphor implies, their common thematic *material*, but also the aesthetic principles which organize both writings.

A playful homage to *The Rings of Saturn*

5 *The Exquisite* appears as a playful homage to *The Rings of Saturn* and takes up quotes, patterns, and other recognizable features of Sebald's writing. Both texts are the disjointed fruits of a retrospective assemblage by melancholy narrators whose accounts take the shape of detective stories.

A chronology of memory

6 In both works, memory loss, paralysis, vertigo, depression and panic attacks appear as the many traces of trauma. The text literally quakes with the narrators' symptoms. From their hospital beds, the melancholy narrators strive to recollect scattered memories of their peregrinations and this recollection process shapes the very form of their narratives. The narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* retraces his wandering through Suffolk along a stream of consciousness in which the resurfacing of memories follows a natural and organic chronology. Indeed, the thread of the narrative is fragmented, taking the shape of remembrance, and by means of digressions, circumvolutions and looping narratives, seems to skirt around "a blind, insensate spot" (Sebald 4). Each chapter thus becomes an echoing chamber for the recurring themes of the novel and the narrator's nameless pain. Similarly, the narrator of *The Exquisite*, a confused middle-aged New Yorker, delivers a narrative that recalls the tendril-like quality of Sebald's prose. The two different though all-but complementary plots that compose Laird Hunt's novel and which inform and echo each other in alternating chapters, also express a disjointed notion of time. In both novels, time is that of memories, of the event and of remembrance. [4]

7 Both narrators' melancholia suffuses the forms and themes of their narratives. They drift in a saturnine atmosphere and their mental state reflects on their perception of reality and the way they convey it—hence the presence of ghostly figures shrouded in mist, ashes and dust, drifting in gothic nocturnal landscapes of smoky rubbles and debris. In *The Exquisite*, the city of New York becomes a disquieting place, which conjures up its earlier name, New Amsterdam, for the capital of the *nether lands* is the place where an infamous thief named Aris Kindt died. The dissection of his corpse by eminent Dr Tulp in front of a crowd of philosophers and scientists gave way to the Rembrandt painting that is analyzed in detail by the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* in the opening chapter of the book. Aris Kindt is in fact the common denominator of both texts and is also the central character around which both simultaneous plots of *The Exquisite* gravitate.

Epistemological quests and personal investigations

8 In his acknowledgments, Laird Hunt claims to have written a "ghost noir" and, in fact, the *noir* narrative form seems appropriate to evoke Sebald's prose, as the main narrative in his books is looking for a missing story (Eisenzweig 9). *The Rings of Saturn* is no exception; as in detective fictions, narrative time here does not coincide with the time of the events. Indeed, the narrator writes the journal of his long walk along the English seaside *ex post*, only after he has strived to painstakingly remember the chain of events from his hospital bed. So does the narrator of *The Exquisite*, who writes a sort of retrospective statement once he has been convicted for the murder of Aris Kindt. A few metalepses interspersing the text mention it, such as "where I seem to have spent so much time over the course of these pages" (Hunt 230). Caught up in epistemological quests, both narrators are probing into their pasts and memories in search of the origin of their melancholia. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator attempts to shed light on the causes of the recurring symptoms that punctuated his trip, namely "a paralyzing horror when confronted with the traces of destruction" (Sebald 3), while Henry investigates a childhood trauma that was kindled anew by a succession of intimate incidents in the aftermath of 9/11.

9 Each of the two works thus features an investigation into its narrator's interiority. Parallel to this intimate investigation, *The Exquisite* offers a playful variation on the epistemological quest as the text develops as a thriller in which the enigma of Aris Kindt's death will be unraveled—the incipit announces the death to be investigated with the words "my dear friend who is now dead" (Hunt 1). Sebald's writing dramatizes the interpenetration of the world of the living and of the dead. His prose stages the way the dead inhabit our world and reminds the reader of their presence by inserting numerous allegories and *vanitas*, such as the picture of Thomas Browne's skull (Sebald 11), Aris Kindt in Rembrandt's painting and the various portraits of deceased authors and notables. Death is exhibited in archives and documentary pictures and is thereby *pinned up* in the text as in an entomology framework, inviting the

reader to a meditation on time and destruction. Death is thus literally anatomized by Sebald's prose. Similarly, although it borrows from hardboiled novels and crime fiction, *The Exquisite* focuses more on the process of annihilation than on missing corpses. For instance, the novel offers numerous variations of the *danse macabre*. Tulip—an avatar of Dr Tulp in one of the stories of *The Exquisite*—mentions the rhyme *Ring around the Rosie*, "a danse macabre for kids growing up in plague times" (Hunt 128) and evokes the virtues of "playing dead" (128) when explaining to Henry why some New Yorkers are ready to pay for murder simulacra. Indeed a "mock-murder service" masterminded by the exquisite Aris Kindt and his accomplices offers to stage a fake death in which each step of a murder is choreographed and thereby analyzed and decomposed. This theme recalls the function of Sebald's prose which induces the reader to consider any archive, picture and plot element as potential traces of, and consequently as potential clues to, an elusive and inaccessible truth—albeit indirectly. [5]

10 As the *femme fatale*—one of the fake murderers in *The Exquisite*—explains to Henry, in what seems to be a direct allusion to the hypotext's narrative strategy, "Murder is death amplified and pinpointed. Big focused death" (Hunt 93). The mock-death rituals must then be understood as a variation of *danse macabre*.

Anatomizing the tissues of Sebald's text

11 By borrowing Sebald's narrative strategy and by setting the narrator in the same situations, while giving him a similar mindset, *The Exquisite* conditions the reader to respond to the text in a specific way. The body of the text itself becomes the locus of an investigation, a literal and playful paperchase along which the reader comes to consider it as a woven structure spangled with references to and quotes from *The Rings of Saturn*. Laird Hunt's novel draws the reader's attention to such braiding of references by taking up Sebald's metaphor of the dark net. This net, which drapes the window in the narrator's hospital room in *The Rings of Saturn* and is supposed to prevent him from committing suicide, is the only thing that the narrator can see from his bed (Sebald 4). It is both a metaphor of realist representation, as the grid-pattern enables the elaboration of

a supposedly more realistic perspective, but also an analogy of the weft of the text. The text of *The Exquisite* also induces the reader to adopt a playful reading by pointing to its own materiality. It pastiches hardboiled style and comments upon its own recourse to the genre, its clichés and its particular lingo ("it sounded like bad noir dialogue" [91]). Besides the numerous metalepses, the first person switches to second person, thus highlighting the reader's role as extra-diegetic detective. Sebald's favorite metaphor of the writer as a weaver [6] contributes to this approach of the text. In *The Rings of Saturn*, writing and silk weaving are two activities that bring the craftsmen to a state of profound melancholia. And in fact it affects both narrators, for they both are actual writers. In *The Exquisite* characters and the text itself respond to and elaborate on the metaphor of weaving and "the melancholy from which, as it is well-known, weavers have a tendency to suffer" (160). Consequently, reading *The Exquisite* partly consists in unraveling the skein of thematic references and Sebaldian motifs borrowed from *The Rings of Saturn*, such as references to Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, herring fishing, Thomas Browne's concepts, *wunderkammers*, among others. Such references operate as so many patterns woven "not so much *onto* but *into* the plush carpet" (Hunt 129). The text weaves in the title of Sebald's novel and suddenly starts ringing with playful references (Aris Kindt's name "has a ring to it", the narrator is "heading into the ring", "all those rings and lines", "Ring around the Rosie" [124–128]) while the narrator evokes Tulip's silk robe.

12 The text of *The Rings of Saturn* is atomized into *The Exquisite* and its literary patterns seem to run across Laird Hunt's text. The image of the "red thread", borrowed from Goethe by Sebald and metaphorized by a black silk thread in the synecdoche of death and its shroud, is also taken up in *The Exquisite*. Indeed, if death was the red thread in *The Rings of Saturn*, that of *The Exquisite* seems to be Sebald's text itself, namely both the principle that binds the whole text together and the motifs adorning the weft of the text.

An archeology of pain: Laird Hunt's literary response to Sebald's preoccupations

13 Beyond a playful exploration of Sebald's writing, *The Exquisite* seems to be the locus of an elaboration—whether unconscious or not—on the central preoccupations of *The Rings of Saturn*. Perhaps the case of the character lying at the core of *The Exquisite*, namely Aris Kindt, needs to be looked at more closely in order to better understand how Laird Hunt's writing becomes the continuation of Sebald's words and literary intentions.

14 Aris Kindt is the subject of a prosopopeia, as the dead character is given the floor. The fact of giving voice to what Judith Butler calls an "ungrievable" [7] (34) of the historical discourse is one of the stakes of *The Exquisite*, and is also where Laird Hunt's novel more profoundly meets Sebald's fictional prose.

A literary attempt to subvert the history of the victors

15 In his work, Sebald strives to subvert a certain way of writing history. According to him, literature is the place where individual and collective memory can freely expand through imagination and escape the procrustean bed of positivist historical discourse. *The Rings of Saturn* seeks to question and decry the dominant discourse and strives to show history told from the point of view of the oppressed. It challenges the very idea of a single perspective on events and reconsiders historical discourse in the sense that the latter is always a "history of the Victors" [8] (Felman 29). In *The Exquisite*, history is oftentimes tackled by Aris Kindt and depicted as an ogre-like history that eats men up and makes them vanish. History, he says, "doesn't so much hate us as blindly devour us like a growing whale eating plankton" (Hunt 126). Against such oppressive, positivist conception of history, both works seek to point out those who have been deprived of their humanity and who are missing a face and a voice. Aris Kindt is one of those individuals that the Dutch justice had

sought to annihilate and reduce to the state of mere object of scientific scrutiny, as highlighted by the character of Mr Kindt before finally calling him by his real name, "Adriaan Adriaanszoon", "[a] man who has been given a face by history, an anguished face cast into shadow, a false name that has blotted out the real one, a body whose tenure has been forcibly completed" (165). Indeed, as the novel signals at the beginning: "Unchecked, [Kindt] said, our belief systems eventually overrun everything, blot out the world, at the very least rewrite the map" (23). Thus naming the corpse in the painting means giving back his identity to a man whose body *and* identity have been annihilated. In his interpretation of Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* points out the fact that the painting reflects the painter's empathy for Aris Kindt, as indeed the rules of realism seem to have been deliberately and grossly breeched in order to displace the "punctum" (Barthes 26) of the painting. Consequently, not only is the painting a vivid and realistic representation of a dissection but it is also the portrait of a victim, who was hastily convicted and sentenced to death for a petty theft and whose punishment was followed by and prolonged into a dissection at a time when science supposed that a body could still experience pain after death.

16 The same intent to shed light on the face of the corpse—the locus of Adriaan Adriaanszoon's identity—can be noticed in *The Exquisite* as the text, while insisting on the status of Aris Kindt as a victim, depicts a "man whose face was cast in shadow [...] torn open in the name of progress" (Hunt 128). Finding the name of the dead body is one of several narrative knots in *The Exquisite*. The novel stages a quest for the mysterious Aris Kindt's real identity, along which the reader will have to make the genealogy of each namesake [9] to get back to the original Aris Kindt. Just like the character himself, the text talks "about death and destruction", "sing[s] of death and its agents, bright and dark" as in a *danse macabre* in order to recall the memory of the dead or those who were killed "while they remain alive" (109)—namely slaves and other oppressed peoples and individuals whose unrecorded stories continue to haunt historical discourse.

Voicing pain

17 In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's prose seems to be stricken by an aching pain of several orders: a collective one, which was inflicted in the name of progress and which will need to be voiced in order to be relieved, and a more intimate one, namely the wound left by a trauma whose memory remains buried. Not only does The Exquisite tackle the subject of pain, as one acceptation of the title could suggest, but it also explores it by offering diverse representations of and variations on pain in an attempt to convey the *real thing*. Adriaan Adriaanzoon's harrowing dissection is diffracted in the narrative. Henry's dream of a dissection where Tulip is carving a man-size herring, then Mr Kindt's body, is evoked several times, hypotyposes and reenactments of Rembrandt's painting[10] flourish in both plots of Laird Hunt's novel and the character's pain is carefully conveyed by the narrator or Aris Kindt himself. The latter is characterized by his relation to pain: "He liked for his neck, as a reminder [of his namesake], he said, to have to hurt" (48). Pushed by an ancient guilt "spurred by the aftershock of a violation [reaching] deep into the past" (232), the exquisite character is drawn to some sort of masochism and enjoys being lashed at the Russian baths where he takes the narrator and Tulip. The novel also digressively expatiates from the pain of the real Aris Kindt: "Did you know that in those days we still believed that after death one could feel pain? I certainly could. Most excruciating were the extremities. The first thing they did was to open up my arm" (224). The exquisite pain haunts the novel: the text gives body and flesh to suffering which is no sooner evoked than it conjures up another one, thus abolishing time. In fact, all sufferings are compared and connected to each other: the pain that needs to be experienced by the victims of the mock-murders, Aris Kindt's pain which immediately summons up his namesakes', to gather them in a timeless universe. Indeed, sufferings are depicted as though they were wired to each other. "You know the old adage, my boy: touch one part of the web and the whole thing quivers", Aris Kindt says when mentioning the bizarre sorrow he feels when confronted with the dissection of fishes at the fishmonger, and he goes on to evoke "waking nightmares" (83) as one of these deadly agonies. The text obsessively endeavors to list all the acts of tortures

and painful deaths, recalling Sebald's and Thomas Browne's writings. As in a Museum of Natural History, or according to the model of a catalogue, both images favored by Sebald—and alluded to in *The Exquisite* through the visit of the diorama—the text endeavors to achieve an—illusory—exhaustive enumeration of all meanings covered by the hyperonym. Precisely both authors' writing styles proceed from accumulations and enumerations.

Of rubbles and ashes

18 By means of the accumulation of facts, archives and documentary images, Sebald's prose tentatively sketches a natural history of loss whereby the text attempts to deal with the lost object that haunts its narrative. Rubbles and traces of destruction marking the sites visited by the narrator are examined and referenced. Also, *The Rings of Saturn* is teeming with collections of objects, lists and enumerations, for instance in the long inventory of objects and debris gathered by the sea when Dunwich was engulfed, or as the picture of Michael Hamburger's obsessive collections of boxes, envelops and preserves shows. Sprawling sentences borrowed from Thomas Browne, [11] like so many textual *wunderkammers* that sometimes develop according to a vertiginous syntax, seek to probe the layers of debris that appear as so many remainders of human daily lives. The text metaphorizes such accumulations with the deposit of sand, ashes and dust, and develops the image of the glacier. Its form keeps arising throughout the text and appears for the first time in the description of Janine Dakin's office where scraps and papers have been accumulating:

> Like a glacier when it reaches the sea, it had broken off at the edges and established new deposits all around on the floor, which in turn were advancing imperceptibly towards the center of the room. Years ago, Janine had been obliged by the ever-increasing masses of paper on her desk to brink further tables into use, and these tables, where similar processes of accretion had subsequently taken place, represented later epochs, so to speak, in the evolution of Janine's paper universe. (Sebald 8)

Precisely, Laird Hunt's novel unfolds under the aegis of "alluvial" writing—Aris Kindt's "favorite word" (1).

19 Indeed the kin notions of stratification, sedimentation, or the piling up of materials are illustrated by landscapes of rubbles such as Ground Zero and New York Number two, an inaccessible and spectral second New York.

> Down dark, windswept hallways, across empty public spaces, past vanished water-tasting stations and stopped-up springs, along oily waterways littered with rusting barges and sleeping gulls, down abandoned subway tunnels and the parking guts of disused power station: into the second New York. (153)

20 *The Exquisite* offers playful variations on this theme such as the depiction of New York city life and landscape through a piling up of facts, daily scenes and impressions: "New York is swell. It is swell on a cold wet night and it is swell on a cold clear dawn. It is swell with the cars coming fast toward you and it is swell down by the subway tracks, where the people come to gather and watch each other and wait" (54). Accumulation—here presented by a concrete swelling of the text—is developed by Mr Kindt when evoking History according to the model of the Indian mound, namely "layer after layer of oyster shells, animal bones, and miscellaneous bric-à-brac: everything plus dirt" (24). In both Sebald's and Laird Hunt's books, the memory of something has been lost and remains inaccessible. Traces and remainders of destruction affect perception: smoke, mist and clouds of dust are screens thwarting vision just as accretions of rubble, sand and dirt cover the object of loss, giving rise to melancholia [12] and grief. For, in both novels, as highlighted by Mr Kindt in *The Exquisite*: "Sadness builds like sediment with the kind of predictability that still manages to astonish, the kind that often ends by masking its original cause" (Hunt 82). The past and the event of the trauma are places that can only be proned by way of an archaeological excavation: the character who literally *haunts* the narrator, Henry's aunt, is curing her depression by gulping down pills in order "to pull out her stegosaurus" (99). Similarly, in a childhood memory, Henry is sent to the garden to "dig out the devil" (98) at the rear end of the family garden.

21 While both narrators strive to voice and access a nameless pain, the text puts forward the hurdles hampering such an endeavor and

seems to suggest that indirectness is the only way to explore memory.

Oblique access: the aesthetics of *chiaroscuro*

22 Rubbles, debris and smoke appear as so many vestiges of the past and traces of destruction that stand in the characters' and readers' way towards meaning. Here meaning seems to skirt any attempt at a frontal approach, as it remains a blind spot that words can only try to circumscribe negatively, by way of patchy enumerations. How then can meaning emerge? In response, both works offer an aesthetics of *chiaroscuro*, a noir writing which merely highlights the ridges and crests of an ink-and-paper reality, and which invites the reader to invest those dark alleys of the text with their own imagination.

About the violence of light

23 In both works, light has a negative connotation. Sharp light is disquieting or "harrowing", as shown by the effects of the dog days on the narrator's mental health in *The Rings of Saturn*. In Sebald's novel, light is first and foremost related to various forms of violence and the will to shed light on reality necessarily implies brutality, especially if this undertaking is led in the name of the progress of science and civilization. As put forward by the narrator, one of the manifestations of this positivist mind is colonization: "The aim, King Leopold said, was to break through the darkness in which whole peoples dwelt, and to mount a crusade in order to bring this glorious century of progress to the point of perfection" (Sebald 118). The blank space on the map of Africa, tackled by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, is also an obscure territory, namely a place yet unexplored and unmapped by the white man, a place to be enlightened and submitted to western civilization's supposed rationality. However, the light of progress is so strong it transfigures the whole landscape as the uplands of Congo become "sun-scorched" (122) so that the territory becomes all the more mysterious and resists naming while darkness spreads in the minds of the colonists and contaminates them. By referring to Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Rings of Saturn* suggests that nothing can

eschew obscurity. Indeed, the text points out that the idea of perfectly shedding light on reality and thus both figuratively and literally attaining full understanding of the world is but an illusion, a mere effect of perspective, for full light does not mean the absence of obscurity but simply that the viewer cannot make out the shadows from his vantage point.

24 Intense light even triggers strong anxiety and panic attacks in both texts, as though the narrators had the firm conviction that this allegedly comprehensive and clear vision of things misses part of what was there to see. Henry acquires an increased "visual clarity" after his lobotomy, however he "[does] not feel at all well" and experiences "a rising surge of nausea" (181) in face of this "preternaturally lit" place. Clearness is a lure if not perhaps even a detrimental factor: "all the wonderful light seemed like it might start scorching the room" (181), Henry comments after his lobotomy. Detail and subtleties are burnt off of his memory just as in one of the numerous overexposed pictures in *The Rings of Saturn*, thus generating a "blind, insensate, spot" (Sebald 4) in Henry's mind as well. Both texts suggest that this blind spot left by trauma in the narrator's memory will only be more elusive if tackled *point-blank*. For this reason, both texts intend to give obscurity its right place in the economy of the narrators' lives and in the text itself. Darkness is not to be driven out of the narrators' minds but accepted and fraught with meaning—be it elusive; hence the omnipresence of night and ghostly presences as appeasing figures in *The Rings of Saturn*. Obscurity also pervades *The Exquisite*, in the parallel world of New York number two, "the great black yonder" (Hunt 157) also called the Necropolis. As in *The Rings of Saturn*, the realm of the dead interpenetrates the world of the living: "We are all of us wrapped in the darkened shadows of our afterselves" (156).

25 This *danse macabre* through various representations such as the mock-murders, gruesome nursery rhymes, and other *memento mori*, helps the various characters of the novel to fully realize that life and death are tightly interwoven. Similarly, the texts weave a web of black silk and ashes as so many metonymies and metaphors of death that enable the navigation between the banks of life and death.

The aesthetics of literary montage and noir writing

26 W. G. Sebald's and Laird Hunt's writings—just as Thomas Browne's—display similar views of the world where obscurity is predominant and where knowledge is precariously rebuilt around it.

> And yet, says Browne, all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow filled edifice of the world. (19)

Their writings implement indirectness and circumvention as strategies to access truth—or some truth, be it partial and plural—and proceed from what François Jullien calls "allusive distance", namely blurry descriptions, mediated representations, digressions, and obscure antitheses, all meant to stimulate the work of imagination and to open an indirect access to meaning. [13] The fragmented narratives and their dislocated organic chronology that follows the thread of the narrator's thoughts and recollections call for a loose form of reading, so to speak, whereby the reader's imagination invests the dark corridors of the text. Here meaning *comes out* of the text rather than it is told by its narrator as the reader recreates it by associating echoing elements. And in Sebald's prose indeed, the concentric rings of the narrative circumvolutions only tighten around the blind spot at the center of writing without ever naming it. Sebald's literary montage proceeds from this oblique associative and indirect reading. The reader has to forge the link between text and images as they weave between them. Indeed, in *The Rings of Saturn*, the meaning of images remains unstable for they are never mere illustrations of the text. Their *punctum* drifts according to the process of reading. The play of analogies, metaphors and echoes, what with the presence of other images, influences their interpretations. For instance, the picture of the tremendous quantities of herring caught in mass fishing loses its illustrative quality when the historical narrative gives way to considerations about the fishes' ability to feel pain, and to their dissections for obscure scientific reasons. The picture will finally echo the image of the dead bodies photographed at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen

camp. In Sebald's prose, meaning emerges or comes out without any clear mention.

27 Laird Hunt's novel is the locus for an aesthetics of indirection that also calls for a "loose" reading. In *The Exquisite*, the narrator *talks around* the event of 9/11, only to let out a flashing image or a sudden hint sometimes, giving the impression of a looming menace upon the characters' minds. The event is never mentioned directly but only referred to metonymically via its own traces such as ashes, smoke, the sounds of the worksite and images that were relayed by the media. When Henry attempts to name it and calls it "the horror downtown" (Hunt 76), he uses a word that only screens its signified and that simultaneously conjures up its acceptation in *Heart of Darkness*—one of Sebald's hypotexts—where it pointed to the limitations of language. [14] The event appears as a subsidiary element, though it pervades the text. Indeed, it is woven in a network of small signs that are so many facets of a reality that is characterized as *scattered* as it is indeed perceived by Henry through the black netting that covers the window of his hospital room. Reality is "scattered and lovely [...] like some kind of sparkling sea creature" (47), the text comments, in a playful passage that evokes the evasive Melvillian chimera of a unified representation of reality. Writing warns the reader against the lure of clarity and accuracy which, just as light, prevent meaning from reaching the surface of the text. Henry explains "how accuracy too often undoes us and precision too often blurs" (239). The form of the novel proceeds from this reticence to clarity as the plots thwarts the hermeneutic quest by alternating chapters of two distinct though twin narrative threads, which, despite numerous similarities, only respond to and inform each other. The result of such structure is the fundamental allusiveness and obscure quality of the text. As Henry says: "The story of [his] life is different, though, and even if it is not entirely coherent, even if *some parts have been elided into others*, it does have a beginning, a middle, and an end" [15] (120). The narrative of Henry's life is fragmentary, and the signified sometimes seems to have migrated into other signifiers, as in a dream, or an unhinged memory, some events having been displaced by others. Nonetheless the reader can still decode the text, though in this noir writing, meaning is not so much an act as an event. Meaning actually occurs in the reader's

imagination provided the latter has carefully recorded the play of echoes and the telling asides of the text. As in the surrealist game of the *exquisite cadaver*, the missing imaginary links between apparently very different chapters or passages will surface in these interstices, if at all. Within the play of relations at the heart of this noir literary montage, meaning may show up in a loose reading of the text—a reading itself conditioned by the allusive writing and structure. The text playfully thematizes this reading by staging a mock psychoanalysis session where Dr Tulp listens to Henry's disjointed monologue. Just as Dr Tulp does, the reader is invited to carefully follow Henry's narratives while associating and loosely stitching back dissimilar yet corresponding stories.

28 A close reading of *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Exquisite* bears witness to shared visions of the world and affinities of imagination. Rather than speaking of an influence of Sebald's aesthetics upon Laird Hunt's work, it would be more accurate to say that reading Sebald and more particularly *The Rings of Saturn* has left an impression on Laird Hunt's imagination, that it has both impressed and imprinted it, and has thereby influenced Laird Hunt's "inner book". His response—first as reader then as writer—lies at the junctions where Sebald's prose breeches the closed system of representations, and tentatively prolongs its exploration of both real and intimate broken landscapes.

29 Strolling along Sebald's prose through reading has, it appears, opened new literary possibilities for Laird Hunt in the same way as other artists' imaginations may have been marked by other aesthetic experiences or travels, as André Gide pointed in a lecture entitled "Concerning Influence in Literature":

> When Delacroix set out for Morocco, it was not to become an Orientalist, but rather, through the understanding he was to gain of more lively, more delicate, more subtle harmonies, to become more "perfectly aware" of himself, of the colorist that he was. (26)

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NOTES

1 Laird Hunt refers to Pound in *The Exquisite*'s acknowledgments (Hunt 244). See Ezra Pound's edged typology of authors: "When you start searching for 'pure elements' in literature you will find that literature has been created by the following classes of persons: 1. Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process. 2. The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors. 3. The diluters. Men who came after the first two kinds of writer, and couldn't do the job quite as well." (Ezra Pound 39)

2 “I propose the term inner book to designate the set of mythic representations, be they collective or individual, that come between the reader and any new piece of writing, shaping his reading without his realizing it. Largely unconscious, this imaginary book acts as a filter and determines the reception of new texts by selecting which of its elements will be retained and how they will be interpreted.” (Bayard 82–83)

3 “There is, we are told, a curious contrivance in the service of the English marine. The ropes in use in the royal navy, from the largest to the smallest, are so twisted that a red thread runs through them from end to end, which cannot be extracted without undoing the whole; and by which the smallest pieces may be recognized as belonging to the crown. Similarly a thread of attachment and affection is woven into Ottilie’s diary which connects it all together, and characterizes the whole.” (Goethe 203)

4 I acknowledge my indebtedness to Muriel Pic’s reading of Sebald and the acuity of her analyses.

5 Muriel Pic associates this particular feature of Sebald’s prose to detective fiction and literary investigation by taking up Carlo Ginzburg’s notion of “evidential paradigm”. See Ginzburg, 147–148.

6 See Roland Barthes’ metaphor of the text as tissue: “What is a text for the current opinion? It is the phenomenal surface of the literary work; it is the fabric of the words which make up the work.” “[T]he very graphics of the letter—although remaining linear—suggest not speech, but the interweaving of a tissue (etymologically speaking, ‘text’ means ‘tissue’).” (Barthes 1973, 32)

7 Judith Butler defines the term as follows: “[I]f a life is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied if not the unburiable. It is not simply, then, that there is a ‘discourse’ of dehumanization that produces these effects but rather that there is a limit to discourse that establishes the limits of human intelligibility. It is not just that a death is poorly marked but that it is unmarkable. Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds.” (Butler 34–35)

8 See also Shoshana Felman’s comments on Walter Benjamin article “Theses on the Philosophy of Justice”.

9 The text deliberately seeks to lose its reader in their enterprise: “Are you talking about your namesake or the namesake of your namesake?” Henry asks the last Aris Kindt as he describes Adriaanszoon’s dissection (Hunt 108).

10 "In front of an audience […] led by a most famous doctor, one with scalpel and illustrative anatomic manual devoured me." (Hunt 107)

11 The narrator comments while simultaneously taking up Thomas Browne's style: "Browne wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness." (Sebald 19)

12 "This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not what he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious." (Freud 19)

13 See François Jullien about Chinese imagination and its "loose" representation of reality that favors distance and indirectness and that renders reality in a blurry or obscure way (Jullien 451).

14 At the end of the novella, on his death bed, Kurtz, the rebellious colonist the narrator was seeking, starts fully grasping the extent of Western colonization and the evil nature of his own conduct although failing to satisfyingly name this realization. Facing a linguistic pitfall, he can only utter these words: "The horror, the horror!" (Conrad 11)

15 Emphasis mine.

RÉSUMÉS

English
This article investigates the influence of W. G. Sebald on the writing of the American novelist Laird Hunt through the comparative analysis of *The Rings of Saturn* and *The Exquisite*. This study endeavors to shed light on what, in Sebald's imagination and in the aesthetics of his fictional prose, could have both impressed and imprinted in Laird Hunt's creative imagination. If *The Exquisite* is first presented in the acknowledgments as a playful referential homage to the German master, a close reading of Laird Hunt's novel shows a more complex dialogue with *The Rings of Saturn*. Indeed, *The Exquisite* both echoes and prolongs preoccupations that inform Sebald's writing, especially the representation of pain, his critical view of historical

discourse and the aesthetics of indirection and chiaroscuro that underpin *The Rings of Saturn*'s text.

Français
Cet article se propose d'étudier l'influence de W. G. Sebald sur l'écriture du romancier américain Laird Hunt à travers une étude comparative des *Anneaux de Saturne* et de *The Exquisite* et de définir ce qui, de l'imaginaire et de la prose fictionnelle de l'écrivain allemand, a pu empreindre l'imagination créative de Laird Hunt. Si *The Exquisite* est en effet présenté dans sa postface comme un hommage référentiel et ludique au maître allemand, une lecture attentive du roman de Laird Hunt révèle un dialogue plus complexe avec *Les Anneaux de Saturne*. En effet, *The Exquisite* se fait à la fois l'écho et le prolongement des questions qui informent l'écriture de Sebald, notamment la représentation de la souffrance, la vision critique du discours historique et l'esthétique de la trahison et du clair-obscur qui sous-tendent *Les Anneaux de Saturne*.

INDEX

Mots-clés
indirect, noir, traumatisme, mémoire, discours historique, intertextualité

Keywords
indirection, noir, trauma, memory, historical discourse, intertextuality

AUTEUR

Anne-Julie Debare
Anne-Julie Debare is professeure agrégée and PhD Student at the Université de Rouen, Normandie (France). Her undergraduate dissertations dealt with the representations of the epistemological quest in American noir fiction. She is currently working towards a PhD on the reinvention of the American space in Laird Hunt's novels under the direction of Prof. Anne-Laure Tissut.
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Counter Misprisions; Or, the Influence of Anxieties in Mat Johnson's *Pym*

Contre-dissimulations, ou de l'influence des angoisses dans Pym *de Mat Johnson*

Clint Wilson

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PLAN

TEXTE

1 Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) casts an impressively long shadow. The most cursory investigation into the last thirty years of scholarship reveals how Poe's story helped inspire Jorge Luis Borges' criticism, the strange tales of H. P. Lovecraft, the fiction of Jules Verne and Julien Gracq, the ideas of personality and consciousness in the writing of Paul Bowles, the characterizations of criminality in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and even Yann Martel's 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*.[1] Among these legacies of influence, the most famous critical treatment of the novel is no doubt Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Reading the conclusion of *The Narrative*, where the titular character and his companion escape the South Seas only to be welcomed to the Antarctic coastline by a white giant, Morrison writes, "No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe. And no image is more telling than the one just described: the visualized but somehow closed and unknowable white form that rises from the mists at the end of the journey—or, at any rate, at the end of the narration proper" (32). Morrison's subtle nod to

the difference between journey's end and narrative's end acknowledges the way in which Poe's novel invites the possibility of either revision or continuation—a possibility seized upon by Mat Johnson's novel *Pym: A Novel* (2011). *Pym* not only springs forth from an anxiety of influence regarding the twinned literary powers of Poe and Morrison, but also ironically acknowledges that anxiety by constructing a narrative around an academic's quixotic search for the supposedly historical reality of Arthur Gordon Pym.

2 Johnson's novel effects a simultaneous linkage to and dislocation from its predecessors: its protagonist, Chris Jaynes, is able to continue and then trouble Morrison's critical framework regarding Poe. Hired as a professor of African American literature, Jaynes insists on teaching nineteenth-century texts of predominantly white writers —specifically his "passion," Edgar Allan Poe—so as to uncover "the very fossil record" of whiteness in America (Johnson 7–8). In Jaynes's analysis of the importance of revisiting writers like Poe, one can hear the echoes of Morrison's trenchant reading of how myths of whiteness "function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing" (33). But while Morrison is celebrated for her critical reading practice, Jaynes is denied tenure for his refusal to conform to the strictures of literary field and genre. Jaynes intentionally "misreads" his role in the academy by reading the wrong kinds of texts, and as the novel progresses, various readings and misreadings become central to both the plot and the book's examination of the "pathology of Whiteness" (14). The disgraced professor furthers his misreading by believing Poe's novel to be a literal history, which leads him on an Antarctic journey to validate his opinion. The ludic tone of the narrative proper thus resists the solemn reading practices exemplified by both Jaynes and Morrison, presenting its story in often extreme satire and irony. Or, as one reviewer of *Pym* notes, "the book is polyphonous and incisive, an uproarious and hard-driving journey toward the heart of whiteness" (Mansbach).

3 In its polyphony, Johnson's *Pym* is not merely a narrative shaped by what Harold Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence," although these anxieties are no doubt still at work. Rather, the novel is one degree

further removed: a self-conscious and second-order product of the strains of influence that powerfully shape literature and scholarship alike. With this metafictional framing, *Pym* plays with the "matrix of relationships" that Bloom ties to the concept of "influence" and its necessary counterpart, "misreading":

> "Influence" is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological—all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most [...] is that the anxiety of influences *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call "poetic misprision." What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it. (XXIII)

Much is at work in Bloom's outlining of "poetic misprision," not the least of which being the complicated and not altogether synonymous relationship between the terms "strong misreading" and "misprision." According to the OED, misprision broadly signifies "the mistaking of one thing for another," or perhaps more generatively, "Malformation, regarded as a mistake on the part of Nature." *Pym* is a novel about countless malformations: literary, historical, and even natural. Shaped by a matrix of relationships that include a deliberate misreading of both the historical factuality of Poe's 1838 novel and the racial politics of present-day America, *Pym* charts a course for the Antarctic, for a space of revisionist and counterfactual possibilities. That *Pym* consciously misreads history to produce its narrative reveals that it is not anxious about its influences, but rather influenced by its anxieties.

Counterfactual misprision

4 Fundamentally, *Pym* is a novel about reading—about "bad" reading to be exact. Its very composition is predicated upon its protagonist's excessively close reading of source material. Professor Chris Jaynes becomes so preoccupied with Poe's tale that he embarks on a journey that treats *The Narrative* as a literal telling of history. At the same time, the character of Pym is himself a bad reader of the market logics that dictate a story's reception and remembrance: his

"confidence in his authoriality," writes Ki Yoon Jang, "[…] is simultaneously undercut by his non-understanding of the increasingly reader-directed mechanism of literary markets" (360). In other words, *The Narrative*'s "Preface," written by "A. G. Pym," acknowledges the story as factually accurate while also admitting how the adventurer consented to allow Poe to publish the story "*under the garb of fiction*"—what he afterward refers to as a "*ruse*" (3). This fictional device is necessary, Pym clarifies, in order to avoid the appearance of falsehood: "having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess" (2). Scholars of Poe will recognize this language from the author's self-ironizing short story, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," where a British magazine editor instructs a writer on how to tailor stories to a popular audience. "How to Write a Blackwood Article," alongside its sequel, "A Predicament," is commonly read as Poe's attempt to summon, in the words of Ecaterina Hanțiu, a "satirical and destructive use of the cliché"—a description that might likewise apply to Johnson's *Pym* (30). Attuned to the ways in which the appearance of reality will market stories, Blackwood commands the story's aspiring author, "Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable about the Infernal Twoness" (217). J. Gerald Kennedy interprets this injunction to mean that "[a] writer catering to the popular audience cannot succeed […] by exposing the disturbing doubleness of experience, the breach between appearance and reality" (xvi). Indeed, Pym cedes to Poe's publication request in order to avoid potential charges of "doubleness," worried that readers might notice "breach[es] between appearance and reality." Seen within Poe's wider production, therefore, a careful reader will note how the artifice of *The Narrative*'s preface parodies the advice proffered by the fictional "Mr. Blackwood"—namely, to avoid even acknowledging the possible charges of duplicity leveled at any fiction "based upon a true story."

5 This parodic analysis of the original *Pym*'s "Preface" notwithstanding, the Poe scholar known as Chris Jaynes still reads the paratext as factual. Upon discovering a lost, or perhaps suppressed, manuscript by Pym's companion Dirk Peters, Jaynes proclaims it to be "the

greatest discovery in the brief history of American letters" (39). Even if readers are willing here to go along with the notion that Peters's lost narrative at last corroborates the original story, an astute reader will note how Johnson's *Pym* is already playing with the breach between appearance and reality by providing its own fictional "Preface," where Jaynes confesses the story to be relayed "under the guise of fiction" at the behest of Mr. Johnson (4). In summoning the same five words from Poe's Preface, Jaynes and Johnson—or perhaps only Jaynes—take part in a multi-layered game of wordplay and paratextual conceits that throw attentive readers into a whirlpool of allusions, cross-references, and contradictions. In treating *The Narrative* as historical event, and presenting this 2011 novel as a parallel historical encounter, *Pym*'s preface cues us into its self-conscious pattern of misreading. More to the point, by reading for factuality, Jaynes engages in a counterfactual reading practice that ignores the ironic artifices set forth by the original *Narrative*.

6 *Pym*, as a counterfactual interpretation of both Poe's novel and Poe's place in literary history, involves a form of "heresy," insofar as heresy implies a prehistory of the language of influence outlined by Bloom. *Pym* confounds orthodox—or might we say "doctrinal"—approaches to Poe's fiction. Writes Bloom,

> Poetic Influence, as time has tarnished it, is part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism. And revisionism, whether in political theory, psychology, theology, law, poetics, has changed its nature in our time. The ancestor of revisionism is heresy, but heresy tended to change received doctrine by an alteration of balances, rather than be what could be called creative correction. (28–29)

Pym returns us to the heretical ancestry of intellectual revisionism, misreading not due to some unconscious anxiety of influence, but in order to essentially "change," or at least challenge, "received doctrine." *Pym* reads against the accepted conventions of historicity and politics, a misprision that generatively reimagines the function of race in American fiction. *Pym* is not, I think, "creative correction"; what Johnson's novel entertains is much stronger than Bloom's language allows. This is why I would like to suggest that *Pym* grows out of an "Influence of Anxiety," rather than an "Anxiety of Influence." Jaynes's concern for the sociopolitical legacy of Poe's

novel, as well as his obsessive search for the historical underpinnings of its production, mark a self-consciously bad reading practice underscoring the ways in which a Bloomian model of literary inheritance might be said to domesticate or ignore the power of unorthodox thinking. That Jaynes embarks upon a dramatically literal reading practice in an era defined by postmodern irony is the greatest irony; his misprision highlights a need to continually reread the literary canon even as it satirizes the academic milieu in which such reading takes place.

7 If Jaynes is a heretically "bad" reader, this is not to say that he participates in a tradition of what Franco Moretti terms "distant reading."[2] Rather, Jaynes is a neurotically close reader, one who takes stock of almost every plot hole and error encountered in Poe's *Narrative*. He claims, in fact, that his love for *Pym* is partly inspired by its "failures":

> *Pym* that is maddening, *Pym* that is brilliant, *Pym* whose failures entice instead of repel. *Pym* that flows and ignites and *Pym* that becomes so entrenched it stagnates for hundreds of words at a time. A book that at points makes no sense, gets wrong both history and science, and yet stumbles into an emotional truth greater than both. (22)

Jaynes goes on to summarize the entire plot of Poe's novel, committing no less than ten pages and citing no less than nine extensive quotations from his source in order to mount the analysis. Jaynes naturally points our attention to the plot holes, such as the random appearance of Pym's beloved dog, Tiger, who emerges in the shadowed hold of the ship after the preceding thirty pages failed to mention the animal even once (23). He then underscores the ways in which *Arthur Gordon Pym*'s narrative and historical "failures" result in an "emotional truth" that is both beyond and in direct contrast to Poe's racist convictions. Even this conclusion is a form of bad reading, whereby his inability or unwillingness to critique Poe's racial politics results in his ostracism from the academic world in which he works.

8 In light of these critiques, *Pym* sets up a counterfactual retelling of *The Narrative* that seeks a deeper "truth," in a manner tapping into recent philosophical discourse on the topic of "counterfactual

conditionals." According to philosopher Marc Lange, a "counterfactual analysis of logical truth allows the concept of logical truth to be connected directly to necessity," meaning for us that any truth statement issued by a text can be more directly linked to its potential social or literary outcome if placed in the context of the very counterfactual language employed by Chris Jaynes (Lange 93). On the other hand, Heather Demarest has mounted a critique of Lange by claiming that counterfactual logic, when placed under the stress of "additional counterexamples concerning nested counterfactuals," cannot justify its turn toward necessity (333). I find both arguments instructive in that as they speak to one of the central tensions at work within *Pym*'s retelling: whereas Jaynes's mission to prove the existence of a historical Pym is a counterfactual conceit directed toward a "necessary" corrective regarding modern-day racial politics, the story also involves "nested counterfactuals" that seem to undermine, or at least satirize, that initial aim. *Pym*'s counterfactuals are in fact profoundly "nested," not necessarily arriving at some deeper truth, but arriving at a productive rereading of Poe's *Narrative*.

9 Quite explicitly, *Pym* engages in a mode of forensics that seeks to justify its contradiction of inherited histories about both literature and identity. To take but one example, he willfully challenges Poe's insistence that Dirk Peters was a Native American and therefore "white." Traveling to a Gary, Indiana, where Peters's descendants now supposedly live, Jaynes attends a meeting of the Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary (NAACG), where the results of a recent DNA test are delivered in hopes of qualifying its members for federal benefits. Nevertheless, the researcher discovers that the members are predominantly of African ancestry, with an average of only "six percent" Native blood (55). The ensuing uproar from the NAACG, whose notions of identity have been fundamentally disrupted, points to the ways in which genetic substance and identity are inextricably linked in popular discourse about DNA. In *The Poetics of DNA*, Judith Roof observes that DNA has been granted agential capacity such that, "When we imagine genes as agents, they become literal representatives of our bodies, our wills, and our desires. We become our genes and our genes become us, so that we imagine that we, too, somehow, survive from generation to generation" (149). Roof goes on

to characterize companies and researchers who sell DNA results—including such websites as *Ancestry* and *Living*DNA—as "selling identity cast as history" (199). In the terms of this essay, this researcher is selling "identity cast as facticity," or at least a form of facticity. However, insofar as DNA evidence is perpetually made knowledgeable through metaphors of identity discrete from—and at times in contrast to—actual history and forensics, the appearance of DNA in Mat Johnson's novel exposes the porous boundary between notions of "identity" and the realities of "fact."

10 By riffing on the acronym for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as referring to the supposed "fact" of DNA, *Pym* issues a counterfactual corrective, making the case that Dirk Peters was indeed African American despite the original *Narrative*'s insistence to the contrary. *Or is this more accurately a counterfictional corrective*? The layers of fiction and fact are hard to parse out. Relaying these DNA findings, Jaynes dispels his readers and the NAACG of their fictional narratives of history, thus making amends for another fiction—Poe's fiction—that erases the real Dirk Peters's history in the first place. And all of this information is relayed through Johnson's novel *Pym*, which in its full title announces itself as nothing more than fiction (*Pym: A Novel*). Johnson's *Pym* goes so far as to tidily explain Poe's paratextual material as an attempt to silence Peters: during his time in Gary, Jaynes is shown a letter from an exasperated Poe to an insistent Peters in which the author claims he will add "an epilogue in Mr. Pym's hand to serve as the final linking entry" (50). In the epilogue mentioned here, the reader finds not Pym's voice, however, but rather another writer's: "the writer of this appendix," a figure drawn in contradistinction to both the novel's protagonist and Poe himself (176). Poe, "the gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface," has become disillusioned with the veracity of Pym's account and has thus chosen to outsource the epilogue's scripting (176). This additional division in authorship represents another sleight of hand by Poe intended, J. Gerald Kennedy argues, "to maintain the illusion of an absolute distinction between Edgar Poe and Gordon Pym" (291). When taken as a whole, therefore, here is the so-called "truth" behind *The Narrative*'s production according to Chris Jaynes: Poe's novel, although declaring itself to be a fiction about and by Pym—wherein

Pym's "Preface" explains the fiction is fictional, and thus covertly factual—is gainsaid by the epilogue, which we learn was written by Poe in secret so as to silence a disgruntled Dirk Peters, now in hiding for fear that abandoning Pym in the Antarctic will bring about vengeful repercussions from white, racist America.

11 The series of "nested counterfactuals" set forth by Johnson's *Pym* problematize a linear reading practice, and by extension, frustrate the Bloomian model of influence. For Bloom, "to imagine is to misinterpret, which makes all poems antithetical to their precursors" (93). What makes *Pym* so confounding is the way in which it misinterprets by way of literal, historical engagement with its "parent" text; Bloom's use of the word "antithetical," therefore, does not easily fits a novel like *Pym* (94). On the other hand, if poetry is, as Bloom then suggests, "perverse, wilful, misprision," then *Pym* eludes us once again—for its specific brand of misprision is more than happy to follow the fiction established by its predecessor (95). What I am trying to suggest is that *Pym*'s counterfactual misprision charts a course away from the "antithetical" model advised by *Anxiety of Influence*, casting new forms of poetic identity and new valences of "anxiety" that rather than merely challenge Bloom's reading, offer new varieties of misprision and heresy. For Chris Jaynes, and Mat Johnson, how could it be otherwise? These two writers must direct themselves toward *four* original writers: Poe, Pym, Peters, and the unnamed writer of the epilogue. The influence is multiple, as are the accompanied anxieties. *Pym* is shaped by the influence of anxieties stemming from this fourfold narrative. Who to read, trust, defend, or pursue? Between fact and fiction, *Pym* is a blatant counterfactual construction meant to highlight those metaphors of identity that undergird our social and literary frames of reference. From Poe's "maddening" *Narrative* to Johnson's layered retelling, the displacement of any discourse of facticity seems to be precisely the point.

Counterpolitical misprision

12 Part and parcel to Chris Jaynes's misreading of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is his troubling redescription of the racial stakes inherent to Poe's fiction. Claiming that *The Narrative* arrives at "an

emotional truth greater than [science or history]," Jaynes offers an overly redemptive treatment of the original novel that risks eliding Poe's barefaced racism as addressed by Morrison and others. However, as Tim Christensen argues, *Pym*'s mode of retelling might be understood as a form of what Christian Moraru has called "postmodern rewriting" (168). Although there seems little doubt that Johnson's *Pym* indeed fits the mold of a "postmodern rewrite" that "reshap[es] […] cultural myths that ground the text being rewritten," it does so in deeply disruptive ways (168). For instance, Jaynes's project of exposing the "pathology of Whiteness" clearly satirizes the politico-academic template set forth by Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.* [3] On the very first page of the novel, Jaynes explains that the course he offers at the university denying his tenure is somewhat insensitively titled, "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind" (7). Jaynes is unwilling or unable to play the diversity game, to cater to the demands of the academy's standards of pedagogy. Yet, Jaynes's commitment to finding a "cure" for racism thrusts him into uneasy territory that only serves to seal his vocational demise:

> My work, it's about finding the answer to why we have failed to truly become a postracial society. It's about finding the cure! A thousand Baldwin and Ellison essays can't do this, you have to go to the source, that's why I started focusing on Poe. If we can identify how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it. (14)

Chris Jaynes embraces a misprision that is not simply counterfactual, but more accurately, counter to accepted political language. Jaynes's critique of Baldwin and Ellison as ineffectual in "dismantl[ing]" the dominant ideology takes aim at a tradition of African American literature that has established itself primarily in relation to a canon of black writers.

13 In so doing, *Pym* dismisses the language of racial "authenticity" as simply another failed attempt to arrive at the factual, or the real. Deconstructively, Johnson's novel calls into question the rigid categories of racial identity, continuing the thematics at work in the scene showcasing the DNA test results, where we found a porous boundary between notions of identity and appeals to facticity. The

university that denies Jaynes tenure is in search of the right kind of identity; they demand not only the appropriate ethnic participant, but also conformity to the apparatuses of racial authenticity in the contemporary academy. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in Jaynes's stead, the university hires a professor of *modern* African American literature, a man who immediately signals his authenticity as soon as he claims to study "[t]he real shit," that is, the "ghetto" (18). This man's name is Mosaic Johnson—whose initials and surname offer a transparent self-parody of Mat Johnson himself, also a currently employed college professor—and his willing obedience to the standards of diversity and periodization prompts Jaynes to inform his successor, "Every good zoo needs a caged gorilla" (21). Jaynes's violent metaphor, with its stark dehumanization of Johnson, turns racial categorization inside out, satirizing both Jaynes's short-sightedness and those who would believe that an African American professor must study his or her "own" literature. *Pym* thus remains reticent about the more traditional forms of identity politics, and following Jaynes's censure of Mosaic Johnson, engages in a trenchant biopolitical critique about the status of humanity across ethnic and political boundaries.

14 Indeed, throughout his outlining of biopolitics, Michel Foucault explains that racism is fundamentally formed by modes of ontological division that exert disparate degrees of biological power on one group or another. "The first function of racism," he says simply, "[is] to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower" (255). In other words, Jaynes's dehumanizing of Mosaic Johnson reveals how even within a given racial category, biopower can be wielded in order to mobilize ontological "caesuras" within itself. As a consequence, *Pym*'s repeated interest in the status of the human, inhuman, and nonhuman represents an ironic self-awareness of the ways in which racial discourse must resist reinstituting divisions, what Foucault calls "caesuras." Cary Wolfe has helped further expand the political stakes of Foucault's contributions by showing how biopolitics must be broad enough to encompass the wider "community of the living and the concern we should all have with where violence and immunitary protection fall within it, because we are all […] potentially animals before the law" (105). These words, from the conclusion of Wolfe's *Before the Law*, resonate with

Johnson's novel, where various characters are humanized or dehumanized in strange and unpredictable fashion, producing a political misprision that critiques authentic or redemptive views of racial progress. Biopolitics, while not the primary investment of this article, is nevertheless a crucial lens through which to understand the ways in which the vernacular of "humanism" is taken up and troubled through the counterpolitical and counterracial rhetorics of *Pym*.

15 Both Poe's *Narrative* and Johnson's *Pym* explore the role of the racialized other—often dehumanized or bestialized—albeit ultimately from different vantages. Jaynes retraces Poe's voyage toward the other: toward Poe's island of "Tsalal, the great African Disaporan homeland," a place "uncorrupted by whiteness" (39). Here he plans to rediscover the people Poe describes in abundant, dark detail: those whose skin is "jet black," whose "canoes were full of black stones about the size of a large egg," who do not qualify as human to Poe, being "barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches (131, 132, and 145). These "savages," as Poe calls them, are terrified of whiteness, living in a world supposedly free from any "*white* materials" (178). As the writer of *The Narrative*'s epilogue clarifies, "Nothing *white* was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage to the region beyond" (178). Pym and Peters escape Tsalal, only to be famously welcomed to the Antarctic by the shrouded white giant critiqued in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. *Pym*, however, inverts Poe's model: instead of escaping south from enslavement at the hands of black islanders on Tsalal, Jaynes and his crew escape north from enslavement at the hands of white giants on the Antarctic ice shelf. In "The Quest for Tsalal," Richard Kopley suggests that this reversal indicates of a deep "irony" at work within the novel, for

> [...] while the Tsalalians in Johnson's *Pym* are a black force for redemption, the Tsalalians in Poe's *Pym* are allegorically Romans laying siege to and destroying Jerusalem—that is, a white force for the elimination of redemption. The white "shrouded human figure" suggests, in my view, Christ prophesying the coming of the New Jerusalem. In both novels, then, regardless of the racial view advanced, the conclusion offers an image of transformative purity. (44)

Although Kopley's allegorical reading proposes interesting ways of reading Poe's novel, especially in light of its confounding conclusion, Mat Johnson's Pym continually resists "offer[ing] an image of transformative purity." In fact, announcing itself as directly opposed to the kind of "transformative" politics signified by Mosaic Johnson and the university's "Diversity Committee," Jaynes's story suggests ways of reading through and across the firm division of black and white, authentic and inauthentic, human and nonhuman.

16 Put another way, no racial category is above critique and no character can be said to embody "purity," for even Jaynes violently regards his anti-persona, Mosaic Johnson, as somehow less than human ("a caged gorilla"). Poe's *Narrative* is also surprisingly attentive to human/nonhuman dichotomies and is far from predictable in its exploration of human definitions. [4] First and foremost, Poe observes how the category of the "human" is troubled by discourses of eating, leading Jeremy MacFarlane to argue that Pym's encounters with cannibalism results in an "existential crisis that emerges from the necessity of eating in the novel" (28). But what one eats is not the only litmus test by which one can be called "human," for such classifications are also made through mere physical appearance. For instance, even as Poe observes the ways in which Dirk Peters is "deformed" and "Herculean," he is nevertheless quick to specify how his "hands […] retain a human shape" (38). And like Peters, the final figure of the novel—the one famously emerging from the Antarctic cataract—is Herculean, "larger in its proportions than any dweller among men" (175). Still, despite the creature's gargantuan size and despite *The Narrative*'s use of the gender-neutral pronoun "its," Poe is insistent that this perfectly white figure is "human" (175). *Pym* reads against Poe's definitions insofar as the characters refuse to call these creatures, whom they also encounter in Antarctica, "human." Their entire voyage is, in many ways, a blatant inversion of Poe's *Narrative*. Jaynes sails to the Antarctic aboard a ship called the Creole, captained by his emotionally unstable cousin Booker Jaynes, and manned by an all-black crew featuring Jaynes's best friend Garth Frierson, Jaynes's ex-wife Angela and her husband Nathaniel, and Jeffree and Carlton Damon Carter, filmmakers who express interest in making a documentary they tentatively title "*Negroes on Ice*" (77). When they discover a lost civilization of white giants beneath the ice,

including an ancient Arthur Gordon Pym somehow still living, they each respond to their new situation differently. Civil Rights activist and Creole captain Booker Jaynes sees only the creatures' whiteness, and because of this fact believes them to be "blind to us in every human way" (145). Booker's fear, in other words, is that they will be dehumanized in the eyes of the other—a fear soon substantiated when the party is sentenced to one hundred years of slavery by the ruling body of the Tekelians.

17 Dehumanization travels both directions in the novel, however, and Jaynes finds himself perpetually at the nexus of these transvaluations of ontology. The white giants are christened "Tekelians" by Jaynes—since they, like Poe's islanders, cry out "*Tekeli-li*"—but are further branded, even prior to their enslavement of the Creole crew, as "humanoids" (130), "monsters" (148), "snow monkeys" (153), and "snow honkies" (160). Concerning the last appellation, Jaynes supplies the following footnote: "I realize *honkies* is a racial slur and the Tekelians might not even technically count as human, but this was the word that […] stuck in my subconscious" (160). Elsewhere, Jaynes falters when trying to ask for help from the Tekelians, unsure if he can refer to them as "people" or not (147). Recording his own racism and his own instantiation of ontological "caesuras" between those who count as human or not, Chris Jaynes makes a redemptive, "transformative" reading of the novel's racial politics at best implausible and at worst impossible. And he alone is forced to negotiate these definitions, because Pym and the Tekelians regard him as white. As Jaynes makes clear during the scenes among the "snow monkeys," "A point of plot and order: I am a mulatto […] so visibly lacking in African heritage that I often appear to some uneducated eyes as a random, garden-variety white guy" (135). His status as liminal racial figure—as "mulatto"—allows Jaynes to negotiate the terms of the party's enslavement, even as he also repeatedly employs hostile, racially-charged gestures in describing their captors.

18 Chris Jaynes is uniquely positioned in yet another manner; due to his intimate knowledge of Poe's novel, he alone appears capable of translating the desires of both Pym and his Tekelian compatriots. In one telling moment, the party deploys Little Debbie cakes in a comedic re-troping of a cliché, colonial trading encounter. Christensen reads this scene as indicative of Johnson's critique of

consumer culture in late capitalism, whereby "the Tekelians succumb to the serial consumption of sugary snack cakes […] [which] creates desire beyond the possibility of satisfaction" (176). These Little Debbie cakes (read: "sublime objects") thus institute a "bottomless need," and eventually lead to the enslavement of the novel's adventurers. [5] Jaynes's reading of this moment is that when it comes to the relationship between the Tekelians and the Creole crew, it is not common humanity that unites them. "*Our animalism connects us*," Jaynes explains after sharing another cake with a hungry Tekelian (126). While Christensen's essay is rightly attuned to the capital critiques mounted by Johnson's *Pym*, I cannot agree with his assessment that Garth is "closer to the mark" by regarding the Tekelians as human. Garth saying, of the cakes, "Them shits is good" does not, to my mind, signal a clear awareness of common humanity (127). Arguing that the hunger for commodity is a uniquely *human* form of hunger, Christensen seems to take for granted the "human" as a separable, ontological category—a category that I see *Pym* recurrently deconstructing and redefining. The narratives of racial progress are traditionally grounded in the logics of humanity and humanism, but *Pym* reads against these narrative tropes, parodying human and nonhuman hunger as ultimately indistinguishable. To understand Pym's counterpolitical stakes is to grasp how, as Wolfe's *Before the Law* suggests, "animalism"—and not humanism—connects the diverse forms of life depicted in this satire.

19 *Pym* is penned against "authenticity," against the "human" as a discernible classification of being, and against political narratives based upon monolithic concepts like "transformation" or "purity." This is misprision at its finest delineation, indeed spelling out what Bloom calls a "deliberate misinterpretation […] of a precursor" (43). *Pym* critiques not only Poe, but also Morrison, a twinned misprision that may help explain why I argue the novel grows out of "the influence of its anxieties." *Pym* taps into preexisting political apprehensions, embodying a second-order treatment of the very concept of "anxiety," as such, by addressing who in the novel counts as human. No character is spared from slippage into the territory of the nonhuman: even Garth is momentarily seen as "inhuman," as a "beast," when Jaynes finds him hiding in the shadows of the ice tunnels, ravenously eating Little Debbie cakes (120). These moments

of ontological indeterminacy carry powerful significance, for they both invite and undermine an established politics that appeals to common humanity. Instead, *Pym* points toward our shared inhumanity as a counterpolitical gesture of self-conscious misprision that renders a biopolitical corrective on the level of "animality."

20 Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bloom is one step ahead of us, however, observant of a "radical analogue between human and poetic birth, between biological and creative anxiety" (58). That is, the biological fight for survival and distinction—which as Foucault tells us, is always already a political fight as well—is akin to the poetic desire to create and recreate its inherited literary tradition. Inasmuch as this reading of *Pym* has sought to engage with and perhaps exceed the Bloomian model of influence it must also acknowledge how Bloom's attention to antithesis is already tuned into the counterpolitical—and perhaps even *counterbiopolitical*—possibilities of artistic creation. In its many modes of rewriting Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative*, *Pym*'s most radical act is arguably its patent refusal to engage with the allegedly authenticating discourse of humanism, repeatedly exposing its characters' turns toward the fraught biopolitical language of animality and inhumanism. Johnson's novel, that is, rejects *The Narrative*'s interest in "retaining and redefining the human," as Dominic Mastroianni contends, in favor of exposing the fault lines of this binary altogether (186). What I think we learn from Jaynes's misreading of his various political and racial contexts is the way in which progressive ideas, once transformed into an inflexible identity politics, risk reinscribing the very boundaries against which those ideas were initially developed. A subtle retelling that moves against the grain of both Morrison and Poe, *Pym* engages a counterpolitical misprision as much about biological anxiety as creative anxiety, as much about the meaning of "human" as the categories of racial identity.

Countersublime misprision

21 Full of giants, *Pym* at last finds itself surrounded by looming, representative forces from a series of artistic legacies. All that has been repressed in the novel returns, as Bloom promises such repression must, since "Freud's vision of repression emphasizes that

forgetting is anything but a liberating process. Every forgotten precursor becomes a *giant* of the imagination" (106; my emphasis). Here Bloom uses the word "forgotten" liberally, signifying not a literal lack of memory, but rather a forced forgetting that makes creative—and yes, even biological—progress possible. Among these giant precursors are not only Morrison and Poe, but also the wider canon of eighteenth and nineteenth-century slave narratives, which Jaynes has spent his academic career avoiding. Consider, on balance, that the entire novel is predicated upon Jaynes's discovery of a manuscript by a black author, *The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters*—a title that plays with the early American literary formula made famous by *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Thus, as Jennifer M. Wilks has likewise noted, the standard canon represented by "not only the seafaring tale but also the neo-slave narrative" looms as a large, political force—and not merely a "plot device"—shaping *Pym* (3). In contrast to these literary tropes are the dominant, white aesthetics epitomized by the appearance of Thomas Karvel—a twenty-first century painter in the tradition of the Hudson River School clearly parodying contemporary artist Thomas Kincaid—who lives on the Antarctic continent. Coming to terms with the persistent aesthetics of the Hudson River School, including its erasure of labor and black bodies in favor of sublime landscapes, signifies a final way in which Johnson's novel counters the anxieties and influence of its precursors.

22 *Pym* arrives at its climax in the presence of Karvel and his wife, far-right conservatives who have fled to Antarctica to live within a perfectly contained politico-aesthetic atmosphere under the glass arches of "a state-of-the-art 3.2 Ultra BioDome" (239). In this NASA-designed BioDome, Karvel pipes hours of taped radio programs through overhead speakers, featuring conservative pundits Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity. Garth and Jaynes are saved from the Tekelians by Karvel, much to the delight of Garth, who is a lifelong fan of the man colloquially referred to as the "Master of Light" (recall here that Thomas Kincaid has been called the "Painter of Light") (35). Jaynes, on the other hand, despises the man's artwork, all the more so after being forced to accompany Garth on "Karvel spotting" trips, where Garth tries to find the exact spot where the

painter must have stood when creating some of his famous, and mass-produced, canvases (35). Like Garth, who visits these original sites to what if feel like to "climb in [the painting]," Karvel is also playing a game of "Karvel spotting" (36). He, too, wants to live inside his paintings, and the BioDome provides an opportunity to do precisely that: this "[h]ermetically sealed, fully self-contained" interior restages Karvel's paintings in dramatically literal fashion, with "too green" grass and water that is "actually *blue*" (240–241). Recall here that one definition of misprision is a natural "malformation." This malformation, however, is also "uncanny," which, following both Bloom and Freud, refers to a process by which "something which is secretly familiar [...] has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud 246). With its hyperreal construction of the sublime imaginary, especially its literal political echo chamber, the BioDome clearly metonymizes the "pathology of Whiteness" that Jaynes has spent his career pursuing. This vacuum for neoconservative, sublime ideology brings together the scientific and biopolitical undercurrents of the novel in one final critique of the poetics of the past.

23 *Pym*'s countersublime aesthetics underscore how the histories of art are implicated in the histories of racism, including the manner in which the language of influence might be said to privilege a canonical mainstream of white, male creators. For Bloom to say that poets must engage with the masters of the past begs the question, *Who counts as a "master"*? In what ways might the "anxiety of influence" unintentionally valorize an exclusionary aesthetic tradition of white, primarily male authors? Like the literary canon, the BioDome houses destructive ideas about inclusion and exclusion, human and nonhuman, freedom and enslavement:

> A man who lives a life worth living, he's a hunter. He hunts for something; he hunts for his dream. And his dream is always the same thing: to create a world he can truly live in, without Big Brother enslaving him to mediocrity. So I created this free land. First within my art, and now in life [...] A clean canvas. A place with no violence and no disease, no poverty and no crime. No taxes or building codes. This is a place without history. A place without stain. No yesterday, only tomorrow. Only beauty. Only the world the way it's supposed to be. (241)

Mobilizing metaphors of both hunting and artistic creation, or the "clean canvas," this vision of the sublime claims to avert violence by instituting its own kind of biopolitical violence. These images imply that certain sacrifices are acceptable in the pursuit of unfettered freedom: namely, the sacrifice of the nonhuman other and the sacrifice of all human others not permitted access to the rarified, artificial milieu of the BioDome. Moreover, by describing the BioDome in relation to what it is "without"—that is to say without poverty, violence, history, and especially disease—Karvel signals that his dream is to immunize himself from the outside world and its others, a move that according to Roberto Esposito enacts the very functioning of biopolitical logic. In *Terms of the Political*, Esposito asks, "What is immunization if not a kind of progressive interiorization of exteriority?" (41). [6] The BioDome is an example of just such an interiorization, taking the complexity of an "outside world," with its diseases and discord, and forcing it to fit the eco-aesthetic frame of this strange, experimental greenhouse.

24 Karvel's sublime is a biopolitical nightmare, supported as much by the violent rhetorics of exclusion as by its creator's monomaniacal vision for his art. "God created nature," he informs Jaynes. "I just improved on it" (241). Karvel works from that assumption that mankind is tasked with "improv[ing]" nature, an avowal that takes for granted not only the existence of God, but more troublingly, the idea that "nature" is a stable monolith. Timothy Morton has suggested we must understand the metaphors and imaginaries that subtend any idea of "nature," as they do any concept of the "human." In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton interrogates "how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category," instead finding the term to be often contextual and contingent, linked to aesthetic ideas of the past, including the "sublime" (13). [7] Karvel's singular understanding of nature is constitutive of his biopolitical framing. When Jaynes at one point suggests redecorating the BioDome, having heard of Karvel's dislike for the way a certain palm tree appears, the Master of Light's curt answer says it all: "No. There is only one look. There is only one vision. Perfection isn't about change, diversity. It's about getting closer to that one vision" (251). Karvel's racism is not *explicit*, as such, but rather knotted within his political, aesthetic commitments. His

"one vision" is a white vision—of landscape without labor or black bodies, of nature without its "dark" or non-painterly aspects. [8]

25 Because Jaynes reads against the sublime, perceiving its ugly associations with a larger political history, he remains unconvinced by Karvel's project. He regards the space as sheer "artifice," especially at night, when the waterfalls and radios are shut off (249). Jaynes's reservations in fact align with Christensen's point that the BioDome a supreme example of Baudrillard's theoretical "simulacrum," an image that "displace[s] reality as the ontological base of knowledge and being" (178). That is to say that the BioDome positions itself as "real" only inasmuch as it supplants or removes the model of reality upon which it is based. The BioDome seals itself off from so-called "nature" in order to, as Karvel sees it, replace and improve upon that "nature." The simulacrum then erodes the foundations of "reality," or as Baudrillard puts it, has the effect of "concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the limits of the artificial perimeter" (14). Nature and reality are both victims of misprision in Mat Johnson's *Pym*, nothing more than simulacra that destabilize the model after which they are formed. And it is telling that the BioDome fails to uphold its perfectly immunized "perimeter": fails, that is, to keep out the Tekelians, who soon destroy the shelter and propel Jaynes toward the story's end. In these final moments, Jaynes counters the politico-aesthetic master narrative of the sublime imagination by once more reading against the accepted canons and categories of art.

26 Once again, Harold Bloom anticipates us, regarding one of the signature traits of the anxiety of influence to be the establishment of just such a "Counter-Sublime." "*Daemonization* or the Counter-Sublime," writes Bloom, "is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins" (101). The Counter-Sublime is a mode of "*daemonization*," not of the precursor but of the protégé, in turn elevating and then weakenening the precursor through of mode of counteracting the inherited sublime imaginary. The Counter-Sublime, that is,

> […] suggests the *precursor's relative weakness*. When the ephebe is daemonized, his precursor necessarily is humanized, and a new Atlantic floods outward from the new poet's transformed being […] The Counter-Sublime does not show forth as limitation to the

> imagination proving its capability. In *this* transport, the only visible object eclipsed or dissolved is the vast image of the precursor. (100) [9]

The sublime is a fantasy, an image of man and nature that the next generation of poets must "eclipse[]" and "dissolve[]" with their own version of fantasy. If Jaynes is a "bad" reader, as I think *Pym* at times suggests, he at least proves to be a more incisive reader than Karvel or Garth. Jaynes alone can perceive the precarious artifice of this aesthetic production: the way in which Karvel's artistic masterpiece, the BioDome, is ripe for destruction. Jaynes alone documents the undergirding racial violence of Karvel's commitment to the "one vision" for his Antarctic dreamland, explicitly calling the BioDome a "plantation" (249). Layered misprisions—factual, political, and aesthetic—announce themselves with the BioDome's demolition, staging a literal implosion of *Pym*'s legacies of influence.

27 But to the extent that *Pym* directly encounters the anxiety produced by its influences, it also reveals how anxieties are already implicated in the literary precursors with which it engages. From Poe to Morrison to the Hudson River School, such pretexts are always already plagued by their own anxieties, their own influences. In its metatreatment of the language of influence, *Pym* appears much more like a "mash-up" of precursors, such that the Bloomian model is both apt and, at the same time, not quite complete. Here my analysis echoes Marjorie Garber's 2016 critique of Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. In "Over the Influence," Garber contends, "In these days of mash-ups, avatars, transformers, and surgical makeovers, influence is often a part of the artwork itself. Maybe it is the term that seems so out of date, so fifties, so seventies, so whatever. To revise, swerve, and tweak this essential function, we could rename it: how about the flu?" (759). To my mind, *Pym* is an example of this "swerving" aesthetic, which in its very formation acknowledges the limits and possibilities of influence. Garber humorously suggests the term "flu" as a substitute for "influence" because Bloom himself acknowledges the etymological linkage between the Italian *influenza* and poetic influence. "If influence were health," says Bloom, "who could write a poem? Health is stasis" (95). So, influence is a form of exposure or risk: a lack of immunization. Karvel builds his BioDome in order to institute absolute "stasis," unquestioned "health." The same might be

said of "Diversity Committees" and canonical classifications, which hermetically seal themselves off against the possibility of contagion. We find, in the end, that *Pym* has been charting a course through various influences and *influenzas*, swerving amid these traditions so as to ironically highlight the imbricated qualities of anxiety and influence, health and disease. In the end, this essay seeks not so much to undermine Bloom's "anxiety of influence" but to allow it to evolve alongside postmodern strains of irony, reflexivity, and metanarrative.

28 After all, Mat Johnson's misprision is of a second-order, where *Pym* might be called a strain of the "flu," a metanarrative that embeds its influences within the story proper. Like its source text—Poe's *Narrative*—*Pym* never arrives at its destination, whether that means rediscovering the island of Tsalal or, as Jaynes hopes, finding a "cure" for racism. In the concluding line from Jaynes's account, Garth, Jaynes, and the recently deceased Arthur Gordon Pym arrive at an island in the Antarctic seas: "Whether this was Tsalal or not, however, Garth and I could make no judgments. On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority" (322). These lines signal, for a final time, how monolithic categories are under pressure in Johnson's *Pym*—even the category of "blackness." For where Poe is attentive to the "jet black" skin of these others, Jaynes insists their complexion, as with the majority of those living on this planet, is "brown." This moment pushes toward a liminal, complex reading that refuses to participate in the ideological dialectic set forth by his predecessors: refuses, in other words, to strictly participate in the *daemonizing* Counter-Sublime proposed by Bloom.

29 In its various modes of counterfact, counterpolitics, and countersublime, *Pym* seeks to arrive at a deeper truth of societal formations, perhaps even a deeper understanding of history itself. Jaynes speaks quite pointedly to those who reject historical temporalities, noting how, for both Karvel and the Tekelians, whiteness is created by an exodus from history: "That is how they stay so white," he observes, "by refusing to accept blemish or history" (225). Wilks notes that this statement signifies a major motif for *Pym*, where the dream of a "postracial paradise" collides with a rejection of historical, political, or racial "blemish" (13). In and

through these blemishes, influenzas, and anxieties we must traverse. Against the factual, the political, and the sublime—insofar as these are univocal categories built upon exclusionary, biopolitical logics—*Pym* holds the capacity to radicalize Harold Bloom's account of poetic influence: to "swerve" from its now familiar pattern. Mat Johnson's misprision is a *mistake*, an intentional *mis-taking* of its legacies, a bold underscoring of its precursors' anxiety, and a novel step forward in the diseased, unimmunized influence of literature and race in our world.

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NOTES

1 See Esplin, Brown, Meakin, Pound, Thifault, and Kopley. For an excellent account of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*'s influence on its inheritors, see Zanger.

2 See Moretti, especially p. 62.

3 While not going so far as to view *Pym* as satirizing Morrison's seminal study, Jennifer M. Wilks argues, "Johnson complicates his exploration of racialized service via Chris' (re)turn to Poe after his firing" (6). Wilks then adds, "Johnson and African American contemporaries such as Percivel Everett and Danzy Senna juxtapose racial categories in order to complicate blackness" (7).

4 See Mastroianni for a discussion of Poe's experiments with hospitality as a means of "at least threaten[ing] to undermine white supremacist dogma" and redefining humanity (198). Also, for an even more recent account of Poe's relation between the human and nonhuman, see Lilley's incisive survey of the "malacological aesthetics" contained within *The Narrative*.

5 See also Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*, which Christensen engages with quite explicitly throughout his essay, especially in his discussion of this scene.

6 On biopolitics' relation to interiority and exteriority, Cary Wolfe offers, "It separates the inside from the outside, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, and yet also serves to bridge them, making them interdependent" (6).

7 Morton discusses the "sublime" most explicitly on pp. 46, 64, and 76.

8 Here I am thinking specifically of Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology*.

9 The Counter-Sublime does not imply that the "ephebe" can negate his or her literary inheritance, however, for as Bloom quickly adds, "Negation of the precursor is never possible" (102).

RÉSUMÉS

English

Challenging, and thus perhaps even performing, Harold Bloom's account of "the anxiety of influence," this article reads Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011) and its ironic retelling of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) as a postmodern experiment with the now famous Bloomian model. Attentive to the ways in which *Pym* undermines discourses of fact, politics, and the sublime, a more networked reading of Johnson's novel allows one to see the range of possible meanings for the concept of "misprision"—as a willful act of both "misreading" and "malformation." To grasp the ways in which Poe's novella and Johnson's re-narration intersect, this article will ultimately suggest that, given the depth of the contemporary story's parodic impulse, we must embrace an inverted formula for literary production: one based not upon the "anxiety of influence," but rather upon the "influence of anxieties." These anxieties are manifold—stemming from literary, racial, and aesthetic traditions—and are addressed by Johnson's *Pym* through a self-aware satire broad enough to reveal the ongoing relevance of Bloom's seminal study as well as the limitations of his often overly rigorous explanation for artistic creation. Ultimately, Bloom's concept of "poetic misprision" is still an apt manner in which to understand literary production, if complemented by a more nuanced analysis of postmodernism's self-reflexive expansion of the many ways that texts continue to misread, misinform, and mis-take their own meaning or intention.

Français

Cet article met en question, et peut-être en scène, les thèses exprimées par Harold Bloom dans *L'Anxiété de l'influence*, pour proposer de lire *Pym* de Mat Johnson (2011), réécriture ironique de *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) d'Edgar Allan Poe, comme une expérience postmoderne menée sur le désormais célèbre modèle bloomien. En portant attention à la manière dont *Pym* sape les discours factuel, politique et sublime, une

lecture sensible à la résonance des réseaux de mots et de sens qui sillonnent le roman de Johnson permet de faire apparaître un large éventail de significations possibles du concept de « méprise », qui est à la fois acte délibéré de « mélecture » et « malformation ». Afin de mieux saisir les diverses modalités d'intersection entre la « novella » de Poe et sa réécriture par Johnson, et étant donnée la virulence de l'élan parodique dans le récit contemporain, cet article suggère d'envisager la production littéraire selon une formule inversée, reposant non plus sur « l'anxiété de l'influence », mais sur « l'influence des anxiétés ». Fort nombreuses, issues de traditions littéraires, raciales et esthétiques, ces anxiétés sont mises en scène par Johnson dans son roman, à travers une satire très lucide, et dont l'ampleur révèle à la fois la pertinence continuée des thèses marquantes de Bloom et leurs limites, en particulier dans son explication excessivement figée de la création artistique. Le concept bloomien de « méprise poétique » semble demeurer opérant dans la compréhension de la création, en particulier si on la nuance à la lueur de la réflexivité postmoderne, qui illustre la diversité des modalités selon lesquelles les textes continuent à « mélire », « mésinformer », et se « méprendre » sur leurs propres sens ou intentions.

INDEX

Mots-clés

méprise, influence, contrefactuel, biopolitique, études raciales, sublime, ironie

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AUTEUR

Clint Wilson

Clint Wilson III is a PhD student at Rice University in Houston, Texas. His work has appeared or is forthcoming from *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *Environmental Philosophy*, and *ASAP/J*, among others.