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Poietics of Autobiography and Poietics of Mind: Cognitive Processes and the Construction of the Self

by

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ABSTRACT

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The three autobiographies I study in this work, Sartre’s The Words, Perec’s W or The Memory of Childhood, and Sarraute’s Childhood, are each at least partially devoid of chronological structure. Calendar-based order, traditionally associated with autobiography, fails to provide the coherence that the reader has come to expect. Hence, the reader must create a sense of coherence at a level other than chronological while bringing into play his conceptual resources.

This work shows that in these literary texts coherence is maintained based on the exploitation of conventional metaphors taken from everyday language. The autobiographers transform them in a manner that is creative and yet familiar to their readers. I first stipulate that the autobiography as genre is built on the familiar metaphor “Life is a journey,” for readers can generically understand the three autobiographies as three specific journeys, with a starting point in childhood and an ending point chosen by the writer. Thus, readers travel with the autobiographers on a road that the latter have already traveled (fictionally and/or factually) towards a destination unknown to the first at the outset of reading. In reading, they move to different stages of the book, and at the same time progress from location to location along the autobiographical path. Each time
they pass a stage, they move away from the starting point and approach the final
destination (the end of the book and the ultimate meaning it carries). The notion
"Autobiography is a journey" is a conceptual resource autobiographers and their readers
share as they metaphorically travel together along the autobiographical path, journeying
from one mental stage to another, and remaining all the while co-located.

This generic autobiographical journey is further structured by metaphors specific
to each work, which are useful tools for both writers and readers. Sartre, Perec, and
Sarraute use metaphors to capture their pasts and structure their autobiographical
artifacts, while readers employ them to conceptualize others' life experiences. The
autobiography is understood in each case through knowledge that is familiar to both
writers and readers. These conventional patterns of thought are metaphorical bridges
between the productive consciousness of the writers and the receptive mind of the readers
that allow the first to organize their works and the latter to understand them.
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Introduction

Reading is a free dream.
Jean-Paul Sartre

1. Modern Autobiography: The experience of an artifact

Autobiography is a broad literary genre that has a long history rooted in the fourth century, when St. Augustine wrote the first autobiographical work known as the Confessions. Most commonly understood as “the story of one’s life written by himself,” the concept of autobiography is based on biography, “the account of a person’s life, described by another.” One of the first biographies may be traced back before 400 to the first century A.D, when Plutarch recorded the lives of prominent leaders of the Greek and Roman world in his work Lives. From its beginnings in ancient biography to Chateaubriand’s Mémoires d’outre tombe, from Montaigne’s Essays to Sartre’s The Words, and from Rousseau’s Confessions to Simone de Beauvoir’s Les Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, to give only a limited sampling, autobiography has encompassed for centuries a variety of literary forms: confessions, essays, apologies, memoirs, etc.

Nearly every historical overview of autobiography starts with the origins of the modern meaning of the self and traces its changing nature throughout the centuries. A certain number of scholars¹ have written introductions, chapters, and books on the
historical, social, cultural and philosophical evolution of the self and of the closely related term, identity. The solidly established starting point of meditations on the inner experience is Augustine's *Confessions*, although, as James Goodwin states in *Autobiography. The Self Made Text*, some prominent precursors of autobiography may be identified prior to 400, most notably literary accounts left by Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.) and by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180). It is commonly agreed that the origin of recording one's own personal history dates back to the first centuries A.D. when, with the advent of Christianity, emphasis was placed on understanding the self in relation to God and to man's place in the religious universe. Known as a spiritual autobiography, St. Augustine's book is humbly addressed to God and represents a true confession of personal weaknesses and youthful sins. The purpose that governors Augustine's decision in selecting these events from his life is that he seeks forgiveness, redemption, and divine grace. As a form of autobiography, the confession represents an intimate activity meant in this case, at least, to persuade fellow mortals to follow a model of religious piety and devotion. This model remains persistent throughout the Middle Ages, whose culture focused on soul-searching and self-examination in relation to God, and it is carried even into the sixteenth century when Teresa of Avila wrote *The Life of Teresa of Jesus* (1565), depicting the spiritual trials she endured and recounting the powers of prayer.

During the Renaissance, autobiographers began to experiment with a wider variety of themes than those dealt with in early spiritual autobiographies. The emphasis
on strictly religious themes shifted to a predominance of secular themes. Two significant autobiographers of the Renaissance who pushed the boundaries of autobiography further from the church were Michel de Montaigne and Benvenuto Cellini. Their works played an important role in secularizing the spiritual autobiography and in establishing other autobiographical forms in addition to the confession: the essay and the memoir. In his *Essays* (1580), Montaigne is not solely concerned with recording facts, dates, and events. Instead, he interprets all this information and delivers his opinions, perceptions, and thoughts to the reader. As in the spiritual autobiography, Montaigne confronts his own weaknesses, but in addition, he presents his strengths. Benvenuto Cellini, another prominent author of the sixteenth century, also wrote about his life outside of the context of religious confession. As a journalist with a fine sense of history, he chronicles events and records his observations about artists, aristocrats, and clergymen. His memoirs represent a guide to understanding the cultural and political atmosphere of those times. Apart from the essay, the memoir is a distinct form of autobiographical writing that can be defined as the recollections of a person involved in (or witness to) significant events.

Rousseau’s eighteenth-century autobiography is even further distanced from the church than the works of Montaigne and Cellini. He entitles his work *Confessions*, reminiscent of Augustine’s *Confessions*. Nevertheless, Rousseau’s book is not addressed to God, its tone is not humble, and the author does not ask for forgiveness for his conduct. The word “confession” is used ironically because Rousseau does not confess anything to God and does not seek personal salvation. Unlike Augustine, Rousseau is concerned with human feelings and emotions. The traditional name given to this kind of
confession is "apology," which refers to the disclosure of sentiments and self-revelation. In this sense, as shown in Keppel's edition, Rousseau's *Confessions* represent a point of departure from traditional self-investigation and the beginning of an innovative autobiographical trend of self-affirmation and self-celebration.

This new kind of depiction of the self announces the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century associated with the (exacerbated) affirmation of subjective feelings. The second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century correspond to a period of a steady development of the autobiographical novel. Proust and Céline are two representative writers for this genre. By the 1950s and 60s, the memoir regains prominence as a number of memoirists use this traditional format to chronicle the past they have lived or witnessed, including Charles de Gaulles (*Mémoires de guerre*, 1954-1960), Simone de Beauvoir (*Les Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, 1958), François Mauriac (*Mémoires politiques*, 1967), and André Malraux, (*Antimémoires*, 1967).

However, at approximately the same time, autobiography and other traditional literary forms are questioned and "suspected." Autobiographers are discouraged from writing about their past, for this new "age" rejects classical attempts to develop traditional characters, coherent plots or objective portrayals of events. Autobiography then seems an impossible project, and anyone with the intention of writing about his life using narrative devices from the nineteenth century would certainly have been suspiciously charged with "mummy-like stiffness" and "flat appearance scenery." The critical atmosphere no longer favored the kind of literature readers were used to, a
literature that strove for a cohesive narrative, a straightforward collection of events, and the Romanesque qualities that could easily conform to a linear story. On the contrary, the mid twentieth century favored a literature of liberation that challenged the reader to forget what he had come to expect and that demanded more attention than traditionally required of the novel. This new literature tried to break the cohesiveness of the narrative voice, the characters, the plot, and the chronological order. Therefore, the new narrative discourse called attention to multiple meanings and enlisted the reader's collaboration in making sense of it.

Writers were not disdainful of the autobiographical genre for long. They soon engaged in a literary research of formal and thematic innovations and openly addressed the difficulty of capturing an objective and coherent image of the self. Freed from faithful depictions of their pasts, autobiographers, including Marguerite Yourcenar with *Souvenirs pieux* (1974), focused on the ambiguity of the writing "I" which equally designates the narrator who tells the story of his/her life and the character s/he was prior to the time of telling that story. The term "autobiography" is to a certain extent repudiated, and instead writers preferred less referential titles, like Jacques Lanzmann’s *Le Têtard* (subtitled “roman”). Serge Doubrovsky also avoided the term “autobiography” and coined the designation “autofiction” for his autobiographical work, *Fils* (1977). By using this term, Doubrovsky underlined the idea that grasping events in one’s life through fiction is a new avenue for autobiography in a context when, after the New Novel movement, “the language of an adventure becomes the adventure of a language.”

Besides claiming that autobiography is not factual, a number of other writers tried to show that autobiography may partially or totally be freed from chronology.
In the pages to follow, I will examine three such non-chronological autobiographies. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his autobiography *The Words* (1964), avoids conventional chapter divisions and introduces blocks of text divided by blank spaces and gathered into two halves. Inside these two parts, spans of time overlap; while Sartre presents himself at a certain point in time, personal details belonging to a previous chronological stage frequently intercede. Calendar-based order partially fails to provide the traditional coherence anticipated by the reader, who consequently is urged to shift his expectations from a life story narrated romanesquely *a posteriori* to a life story built on empirical reality as well as on fictional narrative. Chronology is even inexistent in Georges Perec’s *W or the memory of childhood* (1975) and in Nathalie Sarraute’s *Childhood* (1983). In the first autobiographical novel, Perec claims that childhood memories do not exist at all and hence it is impossible to structure them according to mere calendar-based order. In the second novel, Sarraute almost refuses chronology by juxtaposing (apparently) independent recollection of memories. She establishes a second narrator who continually questions her enterprise of evoking childhood memories and expresses serious doubts about the very possibility of writing one’s autobiography.

In modern times, especially the second part of the twentieth century, autobiography, as well as literary writing in general, appeals increasingly to the reader’s participation in the “disentangling”\(^{11}\) of one’s life story. Modern autobiographies do not unfold as they did in previous epochs when they remained easy to grasp and to follow. Autobiographical writing, under all forms of expression throughout the centuries, always illustrates the evolution of individual consciousness, and its *raison d’être* is to be offered to the collective as an example of individual human experience. Like any other form of
artistic creation, autobiography is intrinsically directed to the Other. Nevertheless, the interest attached to the Other's receptive consciousness of one's creation is a modern manifestation. Roland Barthes remarks that "classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature." The understanding of literature, and specifically of autobiography, lies between the productive consciousness of an individual (the writer) and the receptive consciousness of the Other (the reader). Modern autobiography in particular requires more cooperation from the reader, by exploiting more than ever before his conceptual resources to create meaning and by demanding him to develop new cognitive strategies for a creative reading. Before turning to the challenges of reception and understanding, I will briefly mention some conditions and limits of the evolution of individual consciousness.

In a widely cited essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," George Gusdorf identifies three cultural conditions necessary for the creation of an autobiography: conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life, self-knowledge, and self-examination. He shows that the genre of autobiography is not universal but on the contrary limited in time and space: "it asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world (29)." It is his opinion that "the man who takes delight in drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest (...), [he] thinks of himself as the center of a living space: I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete (29)." The awareness of the singularity of each individual life is, as Gusdorf asserts, a recent product of Western civilization. The individual who distinguishes himself from others is not a general phenomenon spread through all human history, since the feeling of belonging to a
community, of being with others and not outside of others, has prevailed through centuries and cultures. For example, Gusdorf mentions that in India the development of individual personality is considered an evil illusion and one should seek salvation in depersonalization (30). In Gusdorf’s view, two important metaphysical preconditions for the emergence of the autobiographical genre were the Copernican Revolution, when the individual began to engage more in individual adventures rather than in cosmic cycles, and the spiritual revolution, when the creator and the model coincided. After these two significant shifts, the individual became more curious about himself and about the mystery of his own destiny, and thus shifted his interest from public to private history (31). He inverted the focus of his attention in his thirst of self-knowledge and began to consider himself as an object of investigation. In some cultures, one’s contemplation of his own image is a sign of death (32). At the beginning of the Christian era, self-knowledge was based on self-examination through a spiritual dialogue between the soul and God. The practice of confessing sins systematizes self-examination and places the origins of autobiography in the Christian centuries of the Western civilization.

In introducing the characteristics of autobiography, it is necessary to recall the meanings of the three parts of the word itself: “auto” (self), “bio” (life), and “graphy” (writing). An autobiographical text is constituted, as James Goodwin puts it, of this interwoven pattern of self, life, and writing, and it can be defined as follows: “an autobiography represents the writer’s effort, made at a certain stage of life, to portray the meaning of personal experience as it has developed over the course of a significant period of time or from the distance of that significant time period.”\(^{14}\) It is clear that the writer who recounts his personal past is doing so retrospectively, looking backward from the
present to that past. This directional perspective is a fundamental characteristic of the autobiographical genre, as we have to keep in mind that the writer does not travel back into his past. He is who he is now and he recalls his past with his present consciousness. To James Olney, memory, as a faculty of the present, represents "the retrospective gathering up of a past-in-becoming into a present-as-being." Consequently, in his view, the past events and self that the autobiographer recalls do not precisely coincide with their earlier reality:

Time carries us away from all of our earlier states of being; memory recalls those earlier states – but it does so only as a function of present consciousness: we can recall what we were only from the complex perspective of what we are, which means that we may very well be recalling something that we never were at all. In the fact of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world, and surely it is not the same, in any real sense, as that past world that does not, under any circumstances, nor however much we may wish it, now exist.  

Goodwin further develops Olney’s conception of temporality and memory by stressing that autobiography does not replicate reality because “the mind does not record experience with complete objectivity or faithfulness. Moreover, the past cannot be recalled totally. The past evades complete recapture, especially as it recedes further back in time. Memory reconstructs and recreates, often more with an eye toward the present moment of remembering than toward the past experience remembered.” Thus, memories are shaped by the present moment, and unlike the very common implicit assumption that autobiography attempts to replicate reality, the autobiographer
remembers the past in the present, and by doing so, he imagines a transformed and hence different person and different world. One cannot build an autobiography as a duplication of the past, and if one pretends to grasp the past in its bareness, it is but a false pretense.

Having referred to the temporal aspect of the autobiography as a (meaningful) connection between what happened in the past and what is occurring in the present, I hasten to say that I share the opinion of those scholars who believe that the autobiographer, in unavoidably employing an encompassing and creative memory, does not simply recollect his life but instead creates an imaginative literature. In this view, modern literary autobiographers do not duplicate themselves, and autobiography is not, as James Olney expresses it, “easy reading,” and does not avoid “the depths in which modern fiction has its being.” The philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in An Essay on Man, asserts that “symbolic memory” is a fundamental characteristic of human beings. He defines it as a creative process of reformulating the past based on imagination:

In man we cannot describe recollection as a simple return of an event, as a faint image or copy of former impressions. It is not simply a repetition but rather a rebirth of the past; it implies a creative and constructive process. It is not enough to pick up isolated data of our past experience; we must really re-collect them, we must organize and synthesize them, and assemble them into a focus of thought. It is this kind of recollection which gives us the characteristic human shape of memory, and distinguishes it from all the other phenomena in animal or organic life.
The premise that writing about the past is a creative process leads to the assumption that autobiography is an artifact. Stephen Shapiro in his well-read 1968 essay, persuasively argues that the autobiography is a form of literary art and that the autobiographer is a "maker":

Like the poet, the autobiographer is a maker. Frequently, the limits of language, the slipperiness of experience, the difficulties of both comprehending and recreating experience become the subjects of autobiography, (...) this traditionally epistemological genre rings with the challenge to do the impossible: recapture time, shape the shapeless, make many one and one multiple, transform the inner image into a picture-mirror of others, make the flesh into words and words into flesh.\(^\text{22}\)

Autobiography, "this dark Africa of the genres," is in Shapiro's view part of the literary mainland: it is an imaginative organization of experience through language; it selects, dramatizes, evokes and magnifies; and it is rooted in the rhetorical resources of art. While emphasizing the artistic character of autobiography, Shapiro tackles the issue of chronology and asks the thorny question, "Is autobiography a slave to chronology? If the answer were yes, then autobiography would have no possible claim to being an art form, for the essential characteristic of art is the freedom to play with fact in such a way that details and data become symbols, patterns that illuminate our own experience."\(^\text{23}\)

The power of imagination is as important to the autobiographer as it is to the novelist. When the autobiographer revisits the past from a present point of view, his memory distorts and transforms it. The unquestioning trust in the memory as an accurate
path to the real past leads to frustration, for the autobiographer ends up with a recollection of familiar memories that are natural and spontaneous. This simple recollection is not a piece of art. On the contrary, when a writer "tries to recapture his personal history, (...) he re-creates the past in the image of the present."24 And in this recreation process, the writer is allowed to (if not expected to) use a variety of techniques of fiction.

It is surprising that in the twenty-first century, after a long period of "suspicion" of traditional art forms (since at least Nathalie Sarraute's 1950 essay "The Age of Suspicion," if not since Proust in the early 1900s) there are still readers who take the autobiographer's words as factually accurate. Modern autobiographies are not easy to read and comprehend. Readers should not look for the real Sartre in The Words, or the real Perec in W or The Memory of Childhood, or the real Sarraute in Childhood. These three authors are well known, each classified in a different category: Sartre, the central personality of the existentialist philosophy, Perec, an inveterate "oulipien,"25 and Sarraute, one of the most convincing defenders of the New Novel movement. Sarraute's "Age of Suspicion" that undermined the notion that reality could be captured in writing was published in 1950, and it is significant for the understanding of so-called "true facts" that the three autobiographies mentioned above are all published after this date. Their audience had thus already been warned that both author and reader are in "an unusual sophisticated state of mind":

For not are they [author and reader] wary of the character, but through him, they are wary of each other. [The character] had been their meeting ground, the solid base from which they could take off in a common effort toward new experiments
and new discoveries. [The character] has now become the converging point of
their mutual distrust, the devastated ground on which they confront each other.
And if we examine this present situation, we are tempted to conclude (...) that
«the genius of suspicion has appeared on the scene.» We have now entered upon
an age of suspicion.26

Therefore, the modern character vacillates and loses not only the author’s trust but the
reader’s as well. The author who still pretended to write as in Balzac’s time, says
Sarraute, would be dangerously regarded as lazy and fearful of change. “The result is that
when he starts to tell a story and says to himself that he must make up his mind to write
down for the mocking eyes of the reader, «The Marquise went out at five o’clock», he
hesitates, he hasn’t the heart, he simply can’t bring himself to do it.”27 The reader is
suspicious of outworn narrative forms (including autobiography, and this is one reason
why it is interesting to see how Sartre, Perec, and Sarraute have risen to this challenge)
and of descriptions of a stable universe “to which one could refer and (...), [be]
guaranteed by its resemblance to the «real» world, to the authenticity of events.”28 The
new reader is “instructed” by different narrative principles and has more sophisticated
expectations. As the New Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet shows, a modern reader should
expect a creative description characterized by movement (like in cinematography) instead
of a description reproducing a pre-existing reality. The reader should be aware that the
work is not a testimony concerning an external reality, but is its own reality for itself.29 In
brief, for Robbe-Grillet, the new novel does not “serve to set forth, to translate things
existing before it or outside it. It does not express, it explores, and what it explores is itself. Therefore, the writer does not describe, he constructs.

With these assumptions in mind, I do not expect to find the real autobiographer as he genuinely was at the time he describes (in the present case, childhood), nor do I expect the autobiography to embody the truth about the life of the writer. What I do expect when reading these autobiographies is that the recounted events happened to Sartre, Perec, and Sarrasute in a very broad sense and that the writers have intended, again in a very broad sense, to convey the feeling that “this happened to me.” I assume the role of the reader with an open mind, as I believe the writers intended. Thus, the feeling that “this happened to me/him” is transmitted through writing as well as through reading, and this mutual intention forms the basis of an autobiographical pact between writer and reader. Beyond this pact, the dichotomies of fiction/reality and false/true are of no importance because I am aware that through fiction the writer may reveal truth. I am willing to follow someone’s life story, knowing that at some points he tells the truth and that at other points he does not. The modern reader should take the autobiography as globally true, while remembering that the work is a construction. While the text offers a glance into someone’s life, the reader should remember that the life he has access to is the product of the writer’s mind. However, I am not “resistant”; I let myself experience “satisfaction” with what is presented as true and because of my participation, I, reader, create part of the autobiographical truth. If instead the reader continually seeks confirmation of everything he reads and constantly tries to separate truth from fiction, reading becomes frustrating and ultimately fruitless, for autobiography does not offer the truth of a life but the truth of
an experience. The autobiographical pact requires the reader's willingness to put himself in touch with the Other. In this way, as Barrett Mandel notes, "the autobiography (as genre) embodies truth when the reader seeks confirmation of his or her own perceptions of reality in terms of those experienced by another mortal." Mandel continues:

The truth of literature is created as much by the reader as by the author. (....) By my always knowing that the autobiography (however true) is at some level false and that the novel or play, however make-believe, is at some level true, I allow for the shift to occur every time my need for satisfaction (which is constant) requires it. In other words, because I know at some level that novels (poems, plays) are both false and true and that autobiographies (history, biography) are both true and false, I, as reader, am empowered to give them each room enough to change into what they have to become so that I can experience satisfaction with each. I can create the autobiography as true or false. It requires my presence in order to reflect reality.\(^{35}\)

After all, the reader has no choice but to trust the autobiographer, for he cannot objectively verify the accuracy of every detail and point of view presented in the text. Autobiography is necessarily a retrospective work in which the writer depicts a former image of the "self" which differs widely from "reality." This schism is the result of an effort dissociated in time from the period depicted, when the writer may formulate a different assessment of his childhood.

I assume that as reader I do not need to choose my own perspective but to follow the autobiographer's point of view on his own life. In autobiography, as stressed by Erving Goffman, limiting the perspective to one invites the reader to recognize it as
valid. The modern reader should not judge the transmission of experience and the construction of identity, but rather should try to understand how the transmission occurs and how identity is built. Goffman says that the lack of access to authentic identity should not be a source of frustration. Readers are invited to trust the one who directly experienced the events. As the postmodern theorist Emmanuel Lévinas expressed, existence is the only thing that cannot be communicated. I can talk about my life experience but I cannot copy it and paste it on to someone else. Given this lack of access to the events narrated on the one hand, and the lack of access to anybody's life experience on the other hand, I believe that the apparent consensus of point of view between writer and reader should be taken for granted in the autobiographical discourse.

Drawing from both reality and imagination, autobiography creates the illusion of the past through language. The past in itself can never be revived because it never really existed – the notion of the past is a creation of our mind and therefore an illusion. What is true is the autobiographer's effort to create the illusion of the past coming to life. Every time when we think back in time, the past is a "fresh creation," so that autobiography is literary art. The only moment of truth resides in the moment of creativity. "In ratifying the past," says Mandel, "the autobiographer discloses the truth of his or her being in the present. Thus, personal history is put forth in a certain light. The past may be an illusion, but the light of now is never an illusion. What it illuminates, it makes it real. Now is the only source of light." In any case, from a fictional as well a non-fictional point of view, autobiography is the achievement of a literary construction, for there is no life, individual or event right there, in the words. The words in themselves say nothing independent of
their context and the reader’s power to make sense of them. Language is a limited tool by means of which the past comes to life: the autobiographer assembles a limited number of words now in order to transmit to potential readers a multitude of meanings of his life experience.

The performative aspect of creative works has been brought to light in the twentieth century. Before it was believed that the author was in an anterior relationship with his work, which is to say that he existed before it, suffered, and lived for it. Roland Barthes compares this temporal relationship to that of a child living before his father. Nevertheless, the modern perception of literature has changed, and, he says:

In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. The fact is that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording (...), ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say), rather it designates (...) what linguists (...) call a performative (...) form.40

In my view, autobiography, before being judged as fictional, factual or both, is experiential: it shares experience with the reader using various literary techniques to capture the meaning of one’s life, and by doing so reveals the truth of a specific reality. The reader does not have direct access to the self but mediated access to an experience of the self. In The Words, W or The Memory of Childhood, and Childhood, we do not meet Poulou, Georges, or Natacha directly, but rather through reading about an experience of life, specific to each of them. If, for the writer, the only time of truth is the now of
creation, for the reader, the only time of truth is the now of reading when he discovers unique life experiences related to childhood. These experiences appeal to the reader because they belong to individuals who did not feel at peace with themselves (otherwise, they would not have felt the need to write autobiographies) and they open windows to original forms of the universal struggle of the self against the world.

Everyone has pictures and memories of his past, but the simple recollection of them does not represent an autobiography. In order to create an autobiographical edifice, these details have to be integrated into a context and presented in the light of an experience. It is in the authenticity of this experience that autobiography takes shape, not in the veracity of details. For example, the experiential content of the three texts I will investigate can be summarized succinctly. In The Words, Sartre first imitates his grandfather, for whom literature was an absolute of life, then is trapped in the mirage of saving the world by creating his own novels, and finally is disillusioned with literature, yet powerless to stop writing. This is the tragic experience of a writer who from childhood to adulthood tries by successive efforts to escape from the prison of words. First, he identifies with his grandfather’s ideals; second, he substitutes fantasy for reality; and third, he consciously rejects literature’s power to save mankind, though his lucidity becomes a new prison. Despite these experiential stages of life, Sartre is a prisoner, entrapped in literature. Perec, in W or The Memory of Childhood, also hands down an experience, in his case the one of an individual without childhood memories. Perec lost his parents at a young age: his father died after the Armistice and his mother along with other relatives died in the Nazi camps. He almost has no memories before the age of twelve, and is thus different from other people who typically do remember their
childhood. He therefore has to find a way to fill in the gaps of missing memories, which he needs to feel at peace with his past. He also needs them because he has the moral duty to keep alive, through the very process of writing about his blank past, the memory of those killed in the extermination camps. Through a personal experience of an individual the collective experience of a nation is revealed. Finally, Sarraute’s *Childhood* gives us a glance into Natacha’s life (Natacha is Natalie’s childhood name) during early childhood when she spends her time alternatively between her mother in St. Petersburg and her father in Paris. At a very young age, Natacha is deeply fascinated by her mother. Later, she is obliged to definitively settle into her father’s family, with her stepmother and half-sister. This change in her life brings sadness, a feeling of culpability, and most significantly, disorientation. She has a hard time trying to understand each person’s role in her life and finding her own place and personality in an atmosphere of tension between her separated parents. These three childhood experiences -- the experience of a prisoner in the net of words, the experience of a survivor suffering from loss and absence, and the experience of a child in the difficult process of becoming independent - are mirrors created by Sartre, Perec, and Sarraute. They are offered to the reader as windows opening upon their worlds, and through the act of reading, these windows become mirrors of the reader’s own world.

When one reads an autobiography (as well as other forms of literary art), he has an *a posteriori* relation to it that is mediated by the text. In other words, the autobiography in front of him is ultimately only a book; if he starts reading it, then he simultaneously lives in the temporality of the experiences narrated in the book. On the one hand, the autobiographer’s own experiential “horizon”\(^1\) (of his past and of his
present) and cognition (mental power of creation) are reflected in the autobiographical enterprise, and on the other hand, the reader does not meet the autobiographer directly and reads his words using his experiential horizon (of his own past and of his present) and cognition (mental power of interpretation). The writer creates and the reader has to make sense of his creation. The autobiographical text is a script or a prompt helping the reader to grasp the meaning of one’s own life. Sartre, for example, is not immediately present in the words, but the words guide the reader through the process of reading, induce some expectations in his mind, and possibly trigger associations related to his own life experience. In the course of reading, the autobiographer’s and the reader’s life experiences overlap. Through this mental overlapping, autobiography expresses its human relevance as a form of communication between one individual and another: conceived of by the autobiographer as a (metaphorical) mirror of his life, the autobiography is offered to the reader as a window opening upon new experiences. Nevertheless, in the act of reading, one also brings to the understanding of another’s life story his own experience of the world, and hence, in the end, autobiography becomes again a mirror, a mirror of the reader’s own experience.

The metaphorical passage between window and mirror is actually the passage between creation and perception. When I say that autobiography is offered to us, I mean, “offered with a certain intention”: the reader does not only receive the autobiography as an object, but he also perceives it in the act of reading. And when one perceives, he creates again, mentally repeating some of the operations that produced the text and activating new operations that are triggered by it. Sartre defends this dialectic in What is
Literature?, showing that a text is always incomplete and open-ended and always requires the reader’s participation:

(...) The literary object is a peculiar top, which exists only in movement. To make it come into view a concrete act called reading is necessary, and it lasts only as long as this act can last. Beyond that, there are only black marks on paper. (...) In reading one foresees; one waits. He foresees the end of the sentence, the following sentence, the next page. He waits for them to confirm or disappoint his foresights. The reading is composed of a host of hypotheses, of hopes, and deceptions. (...) The writer neither foresees nor conjectures; he projects. (...) It is not true that one writes for himself. That would be the worst blow. In projecting his emotions on paper, one barely manages to give them a languishing extension. The creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment in the production of a work. (...) The operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others. (...) Reading is not a mechanical operation. [The reader] projects beyond the words. (...) Thus, from the beginning, the meaning is no longer contained in the words, since it is he, on the contrary, who allows the signification of each of them to be understood; and the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language. 42

In addition, Sartre legitimizes the reader’s important role in the co-creation of the literary work by asserting that the creation finds its fulfillment only when it is being read. 43 The
artist’s work reaches its completion only in the reader’s consciousness, and therefore the (modern) artist recognizes that the reader’s cooperation is an essential element of his work. When gaps and silences are spread throughout the text, the reader is challenged to fill in the gaps and silences. In brief, because of his presence and subjectivity, the reader gives life to a book that would otherwise remain only a collection of signs. In Sartre’s view, “all literary work is an appeal,” for “the writer appeals to the reader’s freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.” Once the reader agrees to cooperate, he is bound by the duty to keep his mind open and willing to believe in what the writer puts forth – this is a form of engagement with himself and the author. It is characteristic of the aesthetic consciousness to respect this pact; once the reader has agreed to be guided by the autobiographer through a new experience he also agrees to perpetually renew his choice to believe the author. At the same time, the reader remains aware that this is a pact based on his willingness to believe and can therefore awaken any time he wants, because, as Sartre says, “Reading is a free dream.”

It is from a triple perspective that I study, or rather “read,” the three autobiographies that I “willingly” have chosen. First, autobiography is a creation and not a copy; second, autobiography communicates an experience rather than a recollection of facts and memories; and third, the content of the autobiography is not alone sufficient to create or transmit anything, for it needs my cooperation to co-create the autobiographer’s individual experience. From the artist’s perspective, the “autobiography-window” is the creation of his mind, and from my perspective as the reader, the “autobiography-mirror”
is the creation of my mind. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the present work is my own mirror that reflects the creative effort of my mind.

Furthermore, through the present work, I have responded to an intrinsic "appeal" to the reader, and it is only in the conceptual context disclosed through my mental processing that the autobiography takes shape. Outside my mind (and for this matter, outside any potential reader's mind), there is no experience to be lived and there is no meaning to be grasped. The mind is, to use Barthes's words, the destination space where a multiplicity of meanings are focused, and it is also the single field that holds together all the traces that constitute these three autobiographical texts. Therefore, autobiography is more than merely fictional or non-fictional; it is above all conceptual. Throughout the following chapters, I argue that autobiography is a mental process of creation (not a report, duplication or verification), and that the experiential self is carved out in the dynamic co-creation of the artist's individual consciousness as mirrored in the text and the reader's receptive consciousness as manifested in the act of reading. It is also my intention to demonstrate that the reader's creation of meaning is not merely his way of making sense of a text, but the way in which its organization is accomplished. The use of well-established conceptual tools or the invention of new ones allows the reader to comprehend an experience that is (partially) new to him. At the same time, through his comprehension, the reader also provides coherence to a narrative text that is not chronological and that juxtaposes unexpected, non-related chapters.

The text functions for the reader as a prop that provides clues for understanding. The reader must then project onto the text a meaning beyond the words with the recognition that the artist's experience is new and therefore unknown. But because this
experience is the product of his mind, the reader can expect to have some similarities in his cognitive system that would eventually help in the understanding of the autobiographical enterprise. Coherence would then be maintained through conceptual similarities based on similarities in experience of everyday life. Therefore, the reader’s own life experience might be useful in the comprehension of another individual’s life.

The experience is new (because it is a creation) and the autobiographer uses some conceptual devices that are familiar to the reader, who would not otherwise be able to understand the new creation. In other words, the writer has to provide ways to grasp the unknown through the known. This is “the psychological basis of the metaphorizing process,” as James Olney expresses it. He continues, “Metaphors are something known and of our making, or at least of our choosing, that we put to stand for, and so to help us understand, something unknown and not of our making.” The metaphor is a bridge between the experience in the book and the experience in life. Without this bridge, the reader is kept from comprehending what is transmitted, and consequently is a stranger to the experience of the self. In the process of reading, the reader always has the freedom to make personal associations that may coincide more or less with what the artist had in mind. Each speaks of the world as he sees it, and no one sees it in the same way. However, it is necessary that both writer and reader share some patterns of thought or they would be unable to communicate. In order to understand each other, they must express new concepts in terms of common concepts that are familiar to both.

Both writer and reader share the expectation that they will be able to understand one another. The achievement of common meaning is the purpose of any human interaction. The reader, for example, cannot continue indefinitely without making sense
of the text. He must find a way to arrange the information coherently. Research on the formulation of meaning is multidisciplinary, and the study of our conceptual possibilities has traditionally been studied by cognitive scientists. In this perspective, the way we understand each other is by using certain common cognitive models that we recognize easily. Writers, like all other language users, take some of these common cognitive models that are conventional and familiar to all of us, and use them as a foundation for their originality. The use of such widely shared conceptual models is in fact a guarantee that new domains of knowledge can be decoded, processed, and understood.

Both autobiographer and reader share a common goal. The first tries to depart the narration of his life story from a model that is recognizable to the reader, and the latter tries to relate the writer’s life to similar aspects of his own life. This initial principle of both writing and reading is a requirement for successful communication, and it also equally serves the purposes of both participants. The use of a familiar pattern enables the writer to organize his work, for he is able to approach or distance from the model that he employs as an organizational device. In turn, this familiar model that the reader locates in a work serves to guide him in reading, for he is able to understand that the writer is exploiting a model. This shared pattern between writer and reader leads to a conceptual mental overlap that ensures the transmittal of an experience. Only through this overlap they understand each other and are able to express or make sense of new experiences.

The three autobiographies I study in this work are each at least partially devoid of chronological structure. Calendar-based order, traditionally associated with autobiography, fails to provide the coherence that readers have come to expect. Hence, the reader must create a sense of coherence at a level other than chronological while
bringing into play his conceptual resources. Previously in classical literature, chronologically based stories also required conceptual processing, but since then, readers have become accustomed to conceiving of events in a chronological sequence. However, in modern autobiographical works that avoid traditional chronology, the reader has to deploy more conceptual effort and time to make sense of life stories that do not unfold in a calendar-based order. He must shift his attention to types of cognitive models other than traditional chronology. Based on his own life experience, the reader comes to realize that the autobiographer uses a specific conceptual template of conventional metaphors, a template which is also used in everyday life and which is easy to understand. What is difficult and requires attention and supplemental conceptual effort is the way in which the autobiographer takes this template from conventional language and employs it in literature. He constructs a highly creative work when he uses this common model to structure his literary work. The use of such a readily available pattern is a guarantee to the writer that the reader is able to connect to the new/original/innovative meaning of his artifact. Thus, from a conventional foundation, the autobiographer organizes his work in an original manner that employs varying strategies to retain coherence. This mental template based on common metaphors is the blueprint of the autobiographical narrative, the basis on which the autobiographer builds his creation. Each autobiography relies on a specific cognitive model. Readers set up and maintain conceptual coherence based on the stages by which autobiographers manipulate, transform, and expand these conventional templates into innovative ones. Though the understanding of these models in daily conversation is easy and fast, the understanding of the strategies through which they are employed in literature is a highly demanding mental activity. Before considering the
poetics of autobiography further, I will first consider the poetics of the mind more closely.

2. Poetics of Mind. The structure of our cognition

In a complex extra-linguistic reality, human beings construct elaborated forms of expression, such as language, mathematics, music, and art. These forms are impressive final products in which our experience of life is mirrored. They can be evaluated, analyzed, and deconstructed. It seems that human beings, using their abilities for the construction of meaning, succeed (more or less) in understanding the messages these forms convey.

We systematically manipulate forms, some easily accessible, some quite difficult: pictures, credit cards, books, formulae, and computational models are but a few examples. In such a formatted environment, we should not forget, as Fauconnier and Turner remind us, that form is not substance: the blueprint is not the house, the recipe is not the dish, and the computer simulation of weather does not rain on us. The illusion that meaning is transmitted through form is nonetheless persuasive. Fauconnier and Turner invite us to take the example of a picture of a baby that we see in a photo album. We have the feeling that we are actually seeing the baby, as he is well represented in a two-dimensional arrangement of colors. Nevertheless, these colors have almost nothing in common with the baby. It is our brain that makes the connection between the baby we know and the representation of the baby, and this way we conceptually construct a relationship of identity between the picture and the baby. Because the effort of our brain
is instantaneous and unconscious, we take the construction of meaning for granted. In actuality, as Fauconnier and Turner explain through this example, “we tend to take the meaning as emanating from its formal representation, the picture, when in fact it is being actively constructed by staggeringly complex mental operations in the brain of the viewer.”

Form, of course, is not to be repudiated, as it carries useful clues for the construction of linguistic and non-linguistic meaning. A painting, for example, is also a pattern that provides us with helpful formal clues: colors, lines, and objects. Robert Delaunay’s painting, *The Windows simultaneously opened to town* (1912), depicts triangles of colors surrounding the central vague silhouette of the Eiffel Tower. The descriptive title makes us think of a real window through which we would see the Eiffel Tower, yet there is no clear depiction of a window in the painting. The zones of orange, green, blue, and red induce through their juxtaposition an unusual vibration in the viewer’s eyes. Delaunay also introduces a subtle opposition between the cold colors of blue and violet and the warm colors of yellow and orange. Although lacking many referential prompts, this painting sets up a space where the viewer can subjectively project his perception of these small islands of contrasting color zones into a tumultuous ocean. The Tower, well integrated into the whole geometrical structure, gives a sense of ascension that echoes in our perception a sense of emotional elevation. In the central part of the painting, the two yellow and orange pieces, also directed upwards, might be associated with rays of light expanding across its surface. Windows, islands, or rays of lights are constructed by the viewer’s imagination through prompts like triangles of colors and the Eiffel Tower. The painting is an artistic form that does not represent much
in itself. What is behind this form is not a thing but rather the human power to construct meaning.

At a local micro-level of analysis, we perceive the components of the painting and the order in which these components are organized. At a global macro-level of analysis, we project from this form a meaning that is a mental product. Imagination plays an important role. From triangles of colors and from a certain strategy of representation, we imagine windows, islands, and rays of light. The viewers, besides their individual imagination, also share a vast repertoire of beliefs, opinions, ideologies, norms, values, and attitudes. We see the painting and might be aware of the context in which it was made. Delaunay was a pioneer of a new esthetic that tried to “open windows” to a new reality devoid of exterior references characterized by the simultaneous contrast of colors. Only through this contrast of colors and through the light that this opposition brings was the painter expected to create new sensations.

Delaunay painted a whole cycle entitled *Windows* in which he explored new ways of expressing reality, as were the poets Apollinaire and Cendrars. Awareness of the context in which he painted and his exploratory goals allow the viewer to construct meaning more easily and understand that the absence of a clearly descriptive subject in the painting is intentional. Delaunay wished to induce emotions in the viewer rather than clearly express them. The subject is then the light released through the juxtaposition of zones of colors. The lights and the colors signify a kind of pure art, as the painter called it, an art that inspires not from an exterior reality but from the internal imagination of the viewer.
The power of our minds to construct meaning might also be illustrated with an example of a ritual. Eve Sweetser explains that in a ritual present in some Italian village communities, it was customary to carry a newborn infant up a flight of stairs as soon as possible after birth, so that the child might socially “rise in the world” in later life. The baby that is physically raised prompts a mental construction of meaning that correlates the physical movement to a gain in status. Unlike in an ordinary trip up stairs, in this ritual, if one stumbles or falls while carrying the baby, it is believed to indicate future misfortune in the baby’s life. In this ritual context, our mind compresses the baby’s entire life into the short time period of the ritual and unleashes meaning: the baby to be carried up the stairs is the future adult who is going to live a life of some sort, and the manner of motion up the stairs corresponds to how the person will progress through life.

A picture, a painting, or a ritual enactment, are prompts that, based on the context in which they are produced and the person who produced them, help us to construct meaning. The connection between form, as a final product, and meaning, as the process of making sense of it, is also manifested in language and other forms of expression. Words are prompts, too: from the sentence to the text, they carry useful clues for the construction of linguistic meaning. Syntax demonstrates that the order of words and sentences is not arbitrary but reflects various functions in relation to other sentences in the discourse. In English and in other languages, the first noun phrase of a sentence generally tends to express information that is already known to the recipient because it was inferred from the context. The latter parts of the sentence tend to express information that is “new.” Word order may also have other functions, such as signaling contrast,
emphasis, or a choice among several alternatives.\textsuperscript{50} As Teun van Dijk points out, one of the phenomena most studied in discourse syntax is how sentence forms signal the distribution of information throughout discourse. He gives an example in which someone tells a story about a woman first referred to by a name such as “Jane Doe” or a full indefinite noun phrase such as “a lawyer.” Later, the same person may be designated by a definite noun phrase such as “the woman” or “the lawyer,” or only with pronouns such as “she” or “her.”\textsuperscript{51, 52}

Language is an important source of information not only about the construction of linguistic meaning, but also about the way in which we think and act. A well-represented example of such linguistic phenomena is the metaphor, which far from being merely a matter of words is an important part of our conceptual system. Linguists like Lakoff, Turner, and Johnson argue that metaphors are not random and form coherent systems according to which we conceptualize our experience.\textsuperscript{53} They also point out that metaphors emerge directly from our physical interaction with the environment or metaphorically from our cultural interaction with others. Because many of the concepts that are important to us are abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (emotions, ideas, time, life), we grasp them by means of other concepts that are grounded in our experience and are easily understood.

This conceptual approach to metaphors allows us to understand how we can conceive of and express one kind of experience in terms of another. For example, in Lakoff’s and Turner’s view a metaphor like “Life is a journey,” is a pattern of thought
that exploits our conventional understanding about lifetime.\textsuperscript{54} In the process of meaning construction, one uses "journey" as a source for understanding the target concept of "life." The authors show that in the metaphorical process, knowledge in the source is projected onto knowledge in the target. This projection is successful only if one has appropriate knowledge of the source in order to be able to use it for understanding the target. In this example, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of a journey, involving travelers, paths, and destinations. The metaphor "Life is a journey" requires a general skeletal knowledge about a life course, and it does not particularize any specific kind of journey. Nevertheless, in the author's view, this schema provides many matches of characteristics between the source and the target and facilitates conceptualization of life in many ways that instantiate it for different kinds of travelers. Every life is unique because each person is unique and each journey, while maintaining a consistent skeletal structure, may vary. A traveler might come to a dead end and need to find another route along which to progress; another traveler might journey quickly and skip some destinations; yet another might encounter a roadblock and have to remove it or find an alternate route.

Lakoff and Turner further explain that a conceptual metaphorical schema has a skeletal structure at the abstract generic level of comprehension.\textsuperscript{55} At the specific level of information, such a schema is activated and used in particular contexts to permit a rich conceptualization of life. Because our knowledge of journeys includes options for different types of journeys, the metaphorical understanding of life in terms of a journey correspondingly includes options for a variety of understandings of life.\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless,
using the same schema, even with diverse instantiations, produces conventional knowledge. Lakoff and Turner argue that our conceptual system includes an inventory of such schemas and that once we learn one, we do not have to learn it again each time we use it. It becomes conventionalized and thus is used automatically, effortlessly, and even unconsciously.  

Such conventional metaphors are powerful conceptual tools precisely because they are used repeatedly, constantly, and automatically. These conceptual models (not only metaphors but also personifications, metonymies, and causation) that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. Lakoff and Johnson persuasively argue that they also govern our everyday functioning, and that therefore our conceptual system is largely metaphorical. The way we think, what we experience, and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson assume that we are unaware of our conceptual system. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out, they say, is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like. Primarily, they have found that our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature and that we acquire metaphors in at least two ways: through our cultural experience and through our physical experience. I will present below a few of their examples.
Metaphors that are acquired from our culture are called “structural” metaphors. They allow us to understand one domain of experience by structuring it in terms of another. For example, in our culture, we often conceptualize life in terms of a journey, or time in terms of money or of a thief. Take these two last structural cultural metaphors: “Time is money” and “Time is a thief.” Time needs to be understood in terms of something else because the concept “time” is not clearly enough delineated in its own terms to satisfy the purposes of our day-to-day functioning. We therefore need to conceptualize of it in terms of another basic domain of experience. Based on our cultural experience we express “time” in terms of something else that is already well-known in our daily experience. To give us an idea of how often we use metaphors like “Time is money” in our everyday life, Lakoff and Johnson offer examples such as, “You’re wasting my time,” “This gadget will save you time,” “How do you spend your time these days?,” “He is living on borrowed time,” “I lost a lot of time,” etc. Wasting, saving, spending, borrowing and losing are properties that belong to the source domain of “money.” We project these properties onto the target domain of “time,” and through blending, we conceive of time based on our common experiences with money as a limited and valuable commodity. This is not an intrinsic way for human beings to conceptualize time but is tied to our modern Western culture.

Another cultural metaphor, “Time is a thief,” presented in Lakoff and Turner as a conventional metaphor, is also based on our experience of life. Time carries us away from our previous states of being, and the consequences of this temporal progression from birth to death, are inevitable. The authors explain that when time passes, it “steals” our beauty, strength, and youth. Our understanding of life is in the Lakoff-Turner opinion
bound up with our understanding of time: as we advance in life, time - like a thief - steals from us these valuable possessions. "Time is a thief" is a common metaphor because it is a rule of life common to everyone. As time goes on, our beauty and strength inevitably fade and none of us can escape the passage of time.

Besides structural metaphors, there is another kind that does not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another. Lakoff and Johnson call such metaphors "orientational." They provide the following examples:  

i) Happy is up: I am feeling up. That boosted my spirits. My spirits rose.

ii) Sad is down: I'm feeling down. He's really low these days. My spirits sank.

iii) High status is up: He is at the peak of his career. He's climbing the ladder.

iv) Low status is down: He's at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

v) Health and life are up: He is in top shape. As to his health, he's way up there.

vi) Sickness and death are down: He came down with the flu. He dropped dead.

vii) More is up: The number of books printed each ear keeps going up. His draft number is high. My income rose last year.

viii) Less is down: The amount of artistic activity in this state has gone down in the past year. The number of errors he made is incredibly low. He is underage.

The metaphors above have to do with "up and down" spatial orientation. All spatial orientations, such as "in and out," "center and periphery," "container and contained," or "moving along a path" arise from the fact that we have bodies that function in a physical environment. In other words, metaphors might express two kinds of experience: our
experience with our physical environment (moving, manipulating objects, etc) or our experience with other people within our culture (love, life, time, etc).

The orientational metaphors are not arbitrary, either, and are based on our interaction with our physical environment and to some extent our cultural environment. Lakoff and Johnson mention that such metaphors have a basis in our physical experience, as do, for example, the polar oppositions “up and down” and “in and out.” Other types of spatial metaphors based on concepts such as verticality, “moving along a path”, or “container and contained” are likewise based on our physical experience. These cognitive schemas are physical in nature, but they may be interpreted differently from culture to culture. In some cultures the future is in front of us, while in others it is in back. Such metaphors have a skeletal structure that is well rooted in our conceptual system. Because they are based on our bodies’ physical interaction with the world, Mark Johnson has named them “image-schemas,” which are:

[...] recurring, dynamic patterns of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that give coherence and structure to our experience. The verticality schema, for instance, emerges from our tendency to employ an up/down orientation in picking out meaningful structures of our experience. We grasp this structure of verticality repeatedly in thousands of perceptions and activities we experience every day, such as perceiving a tree, our felt sense of standing upright, the activity of climbing stairs, forming a mental image of a flagpole, measuring our children’s heights, and experiencing the level of water rising in the bathtub. According to Johnson and to Mark Turner, these image-schemas are fundamental building blocks of human cognition, for they emerge directly from our interaction with
the environment. This is why, they say, humans are automatically able to recognize image-schema correspondences between dissimilar concepts. Such is the case of image-schemas of verticality, of a path leading from one point to another, or of a bounded space with an interior and an exterior. Orientational metaphors such as happy/high/health/more is “up” and sad/low/sickness/less is “down” are based on the spatial image-schema of “up and down.” Lakoff and Johnson argue that these spatial orientations all have a physical basis. Drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression, and erect posture with a positive emotional state. Status is correlated with (social) power, and (physical) power is “up.” Serious illness forces us to lie down physically, and if we add more substance or more physical objects to a container or pile, its level goes up.

Our knowledge of “center and periphery” also represents a basic image schema in the Lakoff-Johnson-Turner theory of conceptual metaphor. We share this understanding based on our experience of center and periphery that involves the body, which is the center, and the perceptual field, which is the periphery. As percepts move to the center of the perceptual field, they are perceived in multiple sensory modalities and gain in intensity. The potential for interaction increases as an object approaches the center. One of our first experiences of center and periphery is our torso with its limbs. The central torso contains most of the vitals organs, and to it a variety of peripheral parts (arms, legs, head and neck) are attached. The center is key to the integrity of the whole body. If we remove an arm, what remains is still a body; if we remove the torso, what is left is disconnected parts. Mark Johnson says that from this basic experience, we are able to
move metaphorically to a more abstract interpretation of the center-periphery schema.\textsuperscript{65} The schema is thus manifest not only in the structure of our perceptual field but as a structure of our social, economic, political, religious, and philosophical world. In such cases, the center represents ourselves and our inner position in the world, a position distinct in its kind (philosophical, for example), and the periphery represents positions exterior to our own (religious, for example). This inner/outer dimension gives rise to self/other and mine/yours distinctions.

Therefore, most of our conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. Metaphors systematically structure the most basic understanding of our experience; they are "metaphors we live by" that shape our everyday perceptions and actions. In this view, the principles of metaphorical functioning are: i) Metaphor is a cognitive process in which one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another. The concept that serves as a model is named the source domain, and the concept to be understood is the target domain; ii) Each metaphor relies on mapping, or a set of systematic correspondences between the two domains; iii) Mapping makes possible the transfer of knowledge from the source domain to the target.

The idea that a complex system of cognition lies behind forms is at the heart of the cognitive approach to meaning creation in different kinds of forms of expression of the world, linguistic and non-linguistic. The form is only the tip of a spectacular cognitive iceberg, to echo Gilles Fauconnier's metaphor, and when we engage in any communicative activity, ordinary or artistic, we unconsciously draw on vast cognitive resources, call up innumerable models and frames, set up multiple connections,
coordinate large arrays of information, and engage in creative mappings, transfers, and elaborations. Fauconnier coined the label "backstage cognition" to designate all these cognitive processes, a term that includes metaphorical, analogical, and other mappings, framing, mental spaces, counterpart connections, metonymy, polysemy, conceptual blending, etc. Some of these features of backstage cognition have been studied in psychology (analogy), artificial intelligence and sociology (frames, roles, cultural models), and literature and philosophy (metaphor).

The idea that meaning construction is a mental representation is a cornerstone of cognitive science. In this approach to understanding meaning, elements in mental spaces refer to objects in the world indirectly as objects in our mental representations. These objects in the world are only perceived, imagined, remembered, or otherwise understood by someone. Fauconnier has developed a theory of mental spaces in his book *Mental Spaces. Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language* (1985). Even if initially this theory of cognitive semantics originally strove to answer questions about referential opacity, it has proven useful not only for the construction of meaning in language, but also in domains such as mathematics, gesture, and music. Its mechanisms have been shown to work successfully in cognition broadly understood.

Fauconnier's work, as well as the work of other prominent cognitive linguists including M. Turner, M. Johnson, G. Lakoff, S. Coulson, and E. Sweetser, is based on the idea that we use language naturally. This seemingly easy behavior masks a dynamic mental process supported by complex conceptual structures. In this perspective, language is seen as a limited guide that provides minimal clues for finding the principles
appropriate for building and interpreting language in context. As speakers, we use a
limited number of tools (words) to represent a multitude of meanings. Therefore, the
surface form of a linguistic expression reflects a particular cognitive organization. Turner
eloquenty points out that:

Expressions do not mean; they are prompts for us to construct meanings by
working with processes we already know. In no sense is the meaning of an
utterance right there in the words. When we understand an utterance, we in no
sense are understanding just what the words say; the words themselves say
nothing independent of the richly detailed knowledge and powerful cognitive
processes we bring to bear.67

Cognitive linguists agree that language form in context has the potential to trigger
massive cognitive constructions, including analogical mappings, mental space
connections, and blends. In this work I follow Fauconnier’s premise that backstage
cognition is characterized by the contrast between the extreme brevity of the linguistic
form and the spectacular wealth of the corresponding meaning construction.68 According
to Fauconnier, very sparse grammar guides the speaker along rich mental paths by
prompting complex cognitive operations. Speakers perform these operations repeatedly,
and usually effortlessly, due to the cultural, contextual, and cognitive substrate on which
language forms operate among interlocutors. This kind of uniformity and generalization
allows for a reasonable degree of consistency, Fauconnier says, in the prompted meaning
constructions. Although how this works remains in many ways mysterious, what is clear
for cognitive linguists is that language is radically different from a code.
Fauconnier further underlines the idea that language forms carry very little information per se, but can latch on to reach preexistent networks in the subjects and trigger massive activations. It is extremely difficult to explain how these mental activations take place, what consequences they trigger, and how they lead to meaning construction, and we have no awareness of this amazing chain of cognitive events that take place as we talk and listen. We are only aware of the external manifestation of language (sounds, words, sentences) and of the internal manifestation of meaning. As Fauconnier says, “with lightning speed, we experience meaning.”

Before considering some complex mental operations that we perform in meaning creation, I will first introduce three basic operations of backstage cognition: i) setting up mental spaces, ii) mapping elements from one space to another, and iii) blending these spaces. For example, to represent information in the metaphor “Life is a journey,” we set up two mental spaces, one of a “journey” and one of a “life.” In these spaces we represent these two entities and the relations between them. The speaker understands the metaphor through this indirect mental representation. He forms two mental spaces in which he puts relevant information first about “journey,” and then about “life.” The figure below represents these two mental spaces, which function like containers for information, with elements characteristic to the two discourse entities mentioned above.
Figure 1. Mental Spaces. The circles correspond to the mental spaces set up to represent "Life is a journey."

In the first mental space, the representation of "journey" includes the elements of travelers, paths, a starting point, an ending point, and destinations. These elements structure the mental space of our general knowledge about journeys. We also have a general knowledge about "life," and therefore we set up another container with the characteristic elements of a person living a life, the course of a lifetime, birth, death, and purposes. In order to understand "Life is a journey," speakers need to have an adequate understanding not only of the elements in each mental space, but also of the correspondences between elements in different spaces. They unknowingly exploit the
abstract structure of spaces and establish links between counterparts, or corresponding elements.

The mental space of the concept “journey” is a source domain because it provides a way to structure the understanding of the target domain of the concept “life.” After setting up these spaces, the speaker links elements from one to the other: traveler to a person, path to a course of life, starting point to birth, ending point to death, and destinations to purposes. These correspondences represent the counterpart mapping between the elements in their respective spaces. The cross-mapping that we mentally perform is based on a relationship of analogy, because we understand “life” in one conceptual domain in terms of “journey,” which resides in a different conceptual domain. This backstage cognition activity based on analogy is performed in the understanding of the metaphor “Life is a journey,” and it also might be performed in the understanding of other types of conceptual phenomena like comparatives, counterfactuals, presuppositions, referential opacity, etc.

At this point, after setting up spaces and after mapping elements from the source to the target, the speaker needs to form a new mental space to store the results of his previous cognitive activities. He uses this space in order to blend the mapped elements. Thus, this space is called “blend,” and it contains the following information: i) The person living life is a traveler, ii) His progress in life is a road, iii) His birth is a starting point, iv) His death is the ending point, and v) His purposes in life are destinations. Therefore, to understand life as a journey is to have in mind, consciously or more likely unconsciously, a correspondence and a blending of the elements in the two mental spaces. We understand that a purposeful life has goals, and one searches for means.
toward those goals. We further conceive metaphorically of purposes as destinations, and of the means toward those destinations as paths. Lakoff and Turner give the examples of using the phrases “going ahead with our plans,” “getting sidetracked,” and “working our way around obstacles.” The authors offer other common examples: children “getting off to a good start” in life, people worrying about whether they “are getting anywhere with their lives,” and people “knowing where they’re going in life.”

I will reuse the example of the ritual that I previously mentioned and that is a non-linguistic example, and will introduce further details on backstage cognition. In this ritual, we frame a situation where a baby is carried upstairs to ensure his success later in life. This mentally framed situation is a source domain input that contains elements such as a baby, a person carrying the baby, the starting ending times of the ritual, the intermediate time of carrying, the initial location (the bottom of stairs), the final location (the top of the stairs), and the carrier who causes the baby to move up. As shown in figure 2 that I composed following Sweetser’s analysis, this source domain input brings in material from everyday stair climbing prompts for the construction of a target domain input onto which elements from the source are mapped. These two inputs are mental spaces understood as small conceptual containers (represented in the figure by circles) constructed for the purposes of local understanding as we think and see.
Figure 2. The Blend: the baby being carried upstairs to ensure his future success.

The source domain depicts the physical rise of the baby and the target domain represents the future adult’s gain in status. The target domain is a schematic space in which life is already structured by basic metaphors so that living a life is understood as moving along a path, good fortune is up, and misfortune is down. Based on the analogical relation between these two mental spaces, a cross-space mapping occurs between their elements. This cross-space mapping connects counterparts in the input mental spaces. For example, the spectator of the ritual is meant to construct a counterpart mapping between some elements of the two inputs by finding elements in one input that have counterparts in the
other input. Specifically, he matches the baby with the adult hoping for success, the start
time of the ritual with the baby’s birth, the end time with death, and the carrying time
with life.

The main elements from both the source and the target domains are projected onto
a single blended space in which the direction of the child’s life is represented as going
upstairs. The source and the target domains are inputs for the blend. From the space with
the stairs, we project onto the blend the actual motion of going up the stairs, the manner
of that motion, and the identity of the baby. From the space with the baby as he will be in
later life, we project onto the blend the gain in status, the schematic motion in the space
of life, as well as the identity of the future adult. In the blend, these elements create a new
reality where an easy ascent of the stairs determines the child’s easy rise in life.

In relation to the inputs, the blend is a completely new space created by our mind
“on-line,” in the process of constructing meaning. Blending as a process is not just a
manipulation or projection of inferences. Rather, it leads to an entirely new integrated
meaning. The ascent of the baby up the stairs symbolizing the ascent in life is a creation
that belongs only to the blend: in either the source or target spaces the baby does not have
this newly created identity. Anything fused in the blend projects back to its counterparts
in the input spaces. It is always possible to “unpack” the blend, or recognize it as a blend
of input spaces, and it is always possible to mentally reconstruct those inputs. Based on
analogy and structure-mapping, the blend integrates distinct mental spaces into one
unique coherent network, named a conceptual integration network.

The projection from the inputs is selective: some elements but not others are
projected from each input into the blended space. In the baby’s source domain, some
features are already selected (the baby, the carrier, the stairs, for example), but other features (the environment, the weather, the physical characteristics of the baby) that could also have been represented, are not projected. In the process of meaning construction, we do not activate all the features of a mental space. They are available, but we only pick up the ones that are necessary to set up input spaces and to find relations (analogies, comparisons, etc.) between them.

There is also an emergent structure in the blend that is not available from either input. On the one hand, the blend inherits its structure from the inputs through a selective projection of features, and on the other hand, an emergent structure arises in the blend. First, the \textit{composition} of elements from the inputs makes relations available in the blend that do not exist in the separate inputs, as for example, the composition of the counterparts of the baby in the ritual and of the future adult he will become. Second, \textit{completion} brings additional structure to the blend. Completion occurs through a subtle psychological phenomenon of inference. The minimal composition in the blend is interpreted as a richer pattern, and through completion the spectator of the ritual infers that the physical ascent means a future gain in status. At this point, the blend is integrated because it represents an instance of a particular ritual frame, in this case the frame of a ritual determining one’s future success in life. By virtue of this frame, we can now “run” the scenario dynamically: in the blend, the baby is carried upstairs to ensure the future adult’s gain in status. This “running of the blend” is called \textit{elaboration}, through which the blend can be imaginatively developed.

As the ritual is enacted, Fauconnier and Turner explain,\textsuperscript{72} the participants and audience run the blend so that an easy ascent of the stairs symbolizes the child’s easy rise
in life. Running the conceptual blend is, as the authors point out, imbued with deep symbolic meaning because whatever happens in the blend represents the baby’s future life. While a slight stumble on a step while carrying a baby under normal circumstances would be insignificant, it is of great significance in the blend and might have negative consequences on the child’s life.

The power of the blend is to integrate distinct input spaces into a single brief event. In this newly created mental space, reaching the top of the stairs is the desired outcome that ensures a successful life. Blending is a powerful tool of conceptual integration. From two or more input spaces, we end up with a creative and compressed final space. Blending is a process that can be carried out repeatedly, and blends themselves can be inputs to other blends. Nevertheless, integration is not complete without a generic space, which is in this example the space of “a generic ritual foreseeing the change over time in one’s life.” At any moment in the construction of the network, the structure that the inputs share is captured in this generic space. This space contains generic features that are mapped onto each of the inputs. Figure 2 represents a conceptual integration network of four mental spaces in which the generic space, the input spaces, and the blend form a related minimal template. The blended space gives us a concise global overview, a platform from which to understand and manipulate the entire integration network.73

The essence of a conceptual integration network is, as Fauconnier and Turner explain, the projection from many different inputs into a single blended space. The integration in the blend of properties that stem from distinct inputs is a considerable achievement that is not implicit in the inputs. Integration in the blended space allows its
manipulation as a unit, makes it more memorable, and enables the thinker to run the blend without constant reference to the other spaces in the network. Conceptual integration is a compression tool par excellence, for it permits massive compressions of many different events into a single intelligible scenario. The blend cannot be but compressed, as we fuse many events into a new mental space. We should be able to unpack the blend or to decompress it, that is to trace back the constitutive counterparts in the inputs.

The final goal of blending is to achieve a "human scale," or the level at which we can have comprehensive understanding, and the main ways to fulfill this goal are compression and integration. The achievement of a blend at the human scale provides the feeling of global insight. Compressing time, space, memory, identity, etc. in the blend makes it cognitively more manageable. In the ritual with the baby, for example, the time is compressed, because the baby's whole life corresponds to the much shorter trip upstairs. This compression is not without consequences on the structure of the blend, for any minor stumble that did not injure the baby would normally be insignificant, in the blend such an incident would be considered a bad omen.

Within the field of linguistics, the mental space theory is applied to different language sequences, such as words or sentences, and to different linguistic phenomena, such as counterfactuals, comparatives, metonyms, or metaphors. Although, I am particularly interested in metaphors, please consider some other well-known examples in the field. Seana Coulson, in a widely-studied example, shows that the adjective "fake" carries an elaborate blending and mapping scheme. It calls for two input spaces with a disanalogous relationship. While "real" is in one space, its counterpart is in the other. In
the context of “a fake gun,” we project a real source domain with the real features of a gun, and a target domain in which we activate the fake feature. In the blend, we construct the image of a fake gun based on the compression of the real features mapped from the source domain and of the fakeness feature mapped from the target.\textsuperscript{76}

The inputs can be related by analogy, as in the previous example of a ritual, but there are other possible relationships, such as disanalogy as in the “fake” example, or identity as in “When I was twelve my parents took me to Italy.”\textsuperscript{77} All such relations – analogy, disanalogy, and identity – are vital because they underlie the whole conceptual network. This utterance prompts the hearer to construct two mental input spaces: one for the present time of speaking, and one for when the speaker was twelve years old. Framing the information in two mental spaces allows the hearer to understand that while the speaker was in Italy at age twelve, he is not necessarily there currently. There is an identity mapping between the speaker at the age of twelve and the speaker at the time of utterance. The hearer constructs a blended scenario in which identity is compressed, as neither input contains simultaneously an adult speaker and a child in Italy.

The same backstage cognition mechanisms are used in comparatives or counterfactuals,\textsuperscript{78} among other linguistic phenomena. In sentences such as “In that picture, Alice is taller than Lewis,” or “If Boris had gone to the party, Olga would still have gone,”\textsuperscript{79} we compare information on a mental level. In the first example, we compare on the one hand, how Alice and Lewis are in reality, and on the other hand, how they are in the picture. In the second example, we set up a factual mental space and a counterfactual one, and then blend features from both in order to achieve a new integrated meaning.
Backstage cognition is a mental activity deployed behind many forms, from pictures and paintings, to ritual enactments and words. As autobiography is an artifact and thus also a form, it is expected that in order to understand its meaning one also has to use the conceptual tools presented in the examples above. Setting up mental spaces, mapping, and blending helps the writer to structure his work and the reader to maintain coherence of a chronology-free autobiography. The use of these conceptual tools guides the reader and provides the principles for a dynamic creation of meaning. Thus, the reader is able to see how Sartre, Péric, and Sarrutte present their life experiences without having direct access to their lives. These conceptual tools, which are related to ways in which knowledge is structured in any individual, allow different points of view, specifically metaphors, to structure both the reader’s comprehension of these texts and the writers’ mechanisms of creativity.

In conclusion, the cognitive approach to the expression of meaning is based on the idea that any form in context has the potential to trigger cognitive constructions. Language, among other forms of expression, is only a prompt for mental processes that take place “behind” the words. Backstage cognition represents all the mental work of inference and meaning construction that takes place unconsciously. Projecting input spaces, cross-mapping, blending, and conceptual integration are activities that we use everyday to comprehend and communicate. Because backstage cognition is unconscious, it seems easy, but is in fact remarkably complex. Because we are normally unaware of our conceptual system, to find out how it works, we must look at language, which provides data that leads to general principles of understanding.
3. Poetics of Autobiography: Goals and Techniques

In the first part of this introduction I insisted on two important ideas. First, I explained that autobiography is not a duplication, verification or report of the past but a construction of the past in the present moment. The autobiographer remembers his personal past retrospectively with his present consciousness, he revisits the past from a present point of view, and he uses his imagination in the creation of an artifact, called autobiography. Second, through this process of recreating the past in the present, the autobiographer hands down an experience. Although everyone has memories about his past, the simple recollection of them does not represent an autobiography. In order to create an autobiographical edifice, the details of one’s life have to be integrated into a context and presented in the light of an experience.

I argue that autobiography is a mental process of creation that requires both the writer’s and the reader’s participation. I also demonstrate that the reader’s creation of meaning is not merely a way to make sense of a text but a way to organize it into a narrative. The use of well-established conceptual tools, as presented earlier in the introduction, or the invention of new ones, as explained throughout the following chapters, allow the reader to comprehend an experience that is (partially) new to him. At the same time, through the act of reading and comprehending the autobiography, the reader also provides coherence to a narrative text that is not chronological and that juxtaposes unexpected, non-related chapters.

What I seek in reading The Words, W or The Memory of Childhood, and Childhood is not a date, a name, or a physical person. I believe, to echo Barthes, that writing is the destruction of every voice and every point of origin, and that when writing
begins, the author, as a social person, enters into his own death. What I seek in these texts is a particular way of experiencing and expressing life. Nevertheless, I find myself faced with a collection of words and I have to make sense of them. The starting point of my reasoning is that I am, as Sartre says, “appealed to” or called to hold the reader’s place. Prior to reading, I am aware first that the text (partially) encompasses a human experience, and second that this text has a point of origin that is the autobiographer’s mind. I do not expect autobiography to reveal to me a physical person or a factual truth but to open a window on the autobiographer’s experience of life and his way of conceptualizing it.

Metaphor is an efficient conceptual device that humans use in expressing abstract or new concepts through other concepts that they understand in clearer terms. As a result, based on our experience as readers, in order to grasp the unknown and the unconventional transmitted in these three autobiographies (and eventually other creative forms), we make use of known and conventional experience by mapping a familiar concept onto an unfamiliar one. *The Words, W or The Memory of Childhood,* and *Childhood* are autobiographical creations and, following the Lakoff-Johnson-Turner theory of metaphor, Sartre, Père, and Sarraute use metaphors to structure their literary works. The resultant structure is based on the conventional mappings that operate in everyday language. Turner’s says of poetic invention, “originality is no more than the exploitation of what is unoriginal. (...) The imagination must operate in a known space; it must work with unoriginal structures of invention. These are the conditions that the imagination must meet in order to be intelligible. Originality is just a step away from
It is my assumption that both writer and reader move toward the knowledge of an individual experience (and through that experience toward the knowledge of the self) via conventional metaphors. These metaphors are bridges between the writer’s individual consciousness and the reader’s receptive mind that allow the first to structure his work and guide the second through the text.

On the one hand, I argue that these three autobiographers share with their readers commonplace metaphors that are structural or orientational. Further, when writing about their lives, they specifically intended to hand down a personal experience to others. On the other hand, I also believe that writers are able to convey their life experiences in narratives structured by familiar patterns of thought. Sartre, Perce, and Sarratue convey the general sense that “this happened to me” through specific stories structured by the exploitation of known metaphors. Thus, the autobiographer and the reader understand one another by this shared mental overlap. “This happened to me” is carried through writing as well as through reading by this common understanding, which forms the basis of an autobiographical pact between writer and reader. In my view, autobiography as genre is interesting because it transmits an individual experience to a receptive consciousness.

I show that these literary texts are based on conventional metaphors taken from everyday conversation and then transformed and enriched. The texts are creative, yet creative in a familiar way. We easily comprehend these common metaphors because our cultural and physical experiences are source domains in terms of which we understand the target domains of autobiography. Blending properties from both source and target allow us to make sense of new life experiences, and because blends can serve as inputs
for further development, we are able to progress through the text and therefore through meaning construction. It is key that the process of meaning construction is dynamic, for conventional metaphors are creatively used in a succession of conceptual integration networks. They are guiding principles for readers, as every similarity or dissimilarity between a metaphor and its exploitation marks a new stage in the reading process, and consequently a new stage in the autobiographer's life experience.

Using cognitive tools at the macro-textual level, as I do in this study, has not been done extensively before, except on relatively short literary texts. Paul Deane studied the metaphor of center and periphery in Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* (1995), and Donald Freeman examined the metaphors of path and container in *Catching the nearest way*, in *Macbeth* (1995). Such cognitive structures have traditionally been used for non-literary language at the level of word groups and sentences. In this work, I go a step further and apply the conceptual notions of source, target, blending, integration, etc. at the macro-textual level of an entire novel. Consequently, the input domains are rich, with complex properties contained not in a sentence but in blocks of text. It is not possible to present all the details at the micro-textual level, though such details might have an interesting impact on the textual coherence from one paragraph to another. The overarching goal of this study is to examine how we make sense of what others have experienced in their lives. My focus is on global meaning construction and the organizational value of conceptual tools at the textual level. Therefore, the mental spaces I set up are rich in information. The source domains are complex because they are metaphors in themselves and thus the result of a previous conceptualization of domains of experience. Maintaining the focus on the macro-textual level of analysis and on the
structural guide conceptual tools provides global insight on the information presented in several hundred pages.

My first hypothesis is that autobiography as genre is built on the common metaphor of “Life is a journey.” Based on the Lakoff-Turner characterization of this conventional metaphor, we can generically understand the three autobiographies discussed here as three specific journeys, with the reader traveling paths from starting points in childhood to varying ending points. The reader travels with Sartre, Perec, and Sarrasute on roads that they have already traveled (fictionally and/or factually) towards a destination unknown at the start of reading. As the reader advances through the text, he passes through different stages of the book and at the same time progresses from location to location along the path. Each time the reader passes a stage, he moves away from the starting point and nears the final destination (the end of the book and the final meaning it carries).

“Autobiography is a journey” is a conceptual resource that the autobiographer and his reader share. They are co-travelers along the autobiographical path, and as they move from one mental stage to another they metaphorically travel from location to location together, remaining co-located throughout the shared journey. These mental stages, mapped from the source domain of sequential locations along the path, are meaningful boundaries that organize the target domain of the autobiography. The journey is spatial and temporal in the source domain, while it provides a guide for reading the autobiography through the instantiation of mental spaces. The movement in the source domain of a path traces contiguous locations and connects them. This creates a sequential effect that gives coherence to the understanding of the concept “path.” In the target
domain of autobiography, the forward physical movement from the source domain of path is mapped onto the progress of a quest for identity. The shape of the path appears also to be the shape of the time of the autobiographer's life, though time does not actually have any shape. This path is organized into different stages that give coherence to the understanding of one's life, and the quest is specific to each autobiographer.

Sartre's quest is to find a way to legitimize his existence, and he strives to do so by adopting the roles of his grandfather, a hero, and an anti-hero. Père Père seeks a way to recollect his missing childhood memories, and the difficulties he encounters on his life path form the basis of a book that stands in for the missing memories and his absent parents. Sarraute's journey toward independence passes through stages of fusion with her mother, attempts at re-centering around the father, and finally autonomy.

Traditionally, calendar-based chronology is an effective way to organize an autobiography. We conventionally conceive of moments in life in successive order: for any two moments in life, one must precede the other. This succession is usually understood in autobiography as calendar-based temporality. Chronology, of course, requires conceptual processing, but because such processing is part of our daily habits, it does not pose any difficulties. Yet modern autobiography relies little on chronology, and at first it seems impossible to write and understand an autobiography devoid of chronological structure.

I argue that if on a journey's path points are spatially ordered and are physically successive, on an autobiography's path stages are conceptually ordered and mentally successive (in some cases even temporally overlapping). Adopting conceptual tools, like mental spaces, mapping, and blending, in the analysis of modern autobiography allows
me to address one of its thorniest challenges, namely the apparent discrepancy between the narrative structure of the text and the linear chronology of passing time. Nowadays, more and more scholars agree that autobiography "is not the slave of chronology" (Stephen Shapiro), and makes the past "afresh" (Barrett Mandel) in the artistic process of invention. The conceptual metaphor conceived of as a mapping of features from a conventional source domain onto an unconventional target domain, together with the blending process, allows me to show exactly how "the past is made afresh" and how autobiography functions free from chronological order. The generic conventional metaphor, "Autobiography is a journey," along with other specific metaphors discussed below and their creative exploitation by each autobiographer allow me to examine the possibility of freeing autobiography from chronological linearity and even from the recollection of specific memories. The successive progression of writing and reading is of course inevitable because of the linear organization of language, yet succession in modern autobiography is not chronological. I show that in these texts reconstructing the biographical self relies instead on selective cognitive processes that bring together distinct mental spaces integrated into dynamic conceptual networks. This highly specific cognitive organization allows the authors to use the past as an organizational structure for the construction of their identity. Accordingly, the self emerges as a dynamic and mental biographical creation, and the autobiographical narrative is best viewed as an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation. Thus, this study shows that even if chronology is severely disrupted and violated, coherence is conceptually maintained as the succession of mental stages on the metaphorical road of autobiography.
At the generic level, the agreement between autobiographer and reader is based on the source domain of a journey tracing a path. This concept is not original and is based on everyday experience. Because it is not invented but already experienced, it allows the reader to globally structure the abstract domain of autobiography through the familiar domains of journeys and roads. The generic level of "Autobiography is a journey" is instantiated at the specific level of each autobiography, where the path of the journey is specific to each autobiographer. Each trip has different obstacles, locations, and destinations and is therefore unique. However, even at moments when the reader briefly experiences confusion or disorientation because he does not know to what specific destination the autobiographer is advancing, he still maintains a general sense of coherence through the skeletal schema of a journey’s path (with a starting point, traveler, path, impediments, destination, vehicle, etc.). The specificity of every path is structured on one particular metaphor and on its original exploitation that relies on mental selection, projection, blending and integration into conceptual networks.

In Sartre’s *The Words*, for example, the author’s loss of his father troubles his sense of identity. Because he is orphaned, he feels his existence is gratuitous and in need of continual validation of his life. In order to hand down his haunting sense of unjustified selfhood, Sartre uses as a source domain the character of Griselda from Charles Perrault’s *The Tale of Griselda*, whose experience is in some respects similar to his. Sartre uses Griseldas’s story to actualize his childhood and structure his autobiography. Successively passing through stages of similitude, dissimilitude, and final disenchantment with Griselda’s condition, Sartre moves along the conceptual path of his life via stages of identity, and the reader travels with him from location to location on the road of his
autobiography. The succession of these multiple stages conceptually orders the book and provides the reader with a coherent life experience based on the author’s changing relationship to the Griselda character.

In the tale, Griselda is a model of obedience, patience and fidelity. She is also a victim of her cruel husband who treats her like an object, imprisons her in a castle, and tortures her psychologically. In *The Words*, Sartre’s experience is comprehended in terms of Griselda’s experience. Sartre’s grandfather Charles Schweitzer, a pedagogue and an authoritarian “patriarch,” is in charge of the six-year-old Poulou (as Sartre was called during childhood). Because the father died, Schweitzer completely controls the boy’s education. Like the prince’s attitude toward Griselda in Perrault’s tale, the grandfather’s attitude toward the boy is oppressive: he initiates Poulou to literature in such a way that the boy ultimately confuses reality and fiction, and his library metaphorically becomes the boy’s prison. Poulou, like Griselda, is treated as an object, and they both obey their masters: Griselda worships her husband like a god, and Poulou associates his grandfather with a holy man. Griselda endures her husband’s cruel tests without complaint and demonstrates profound patience and an inhuman moral strength. In turn, Poulou is an obedient child who makes little noise, does not cry, and is not violent or aggressive. When the boy has a chance to read works other than his grandfather’s classics, he becomes familiar with heroes like Michel Strogoff, Pardaillan, and Chanteclerc. These heroes are models of action and integrity with legitimated existences and motivated destinies. Compared to them, the boy feels like Griselda, without a destiny other than to obey their masters’ terrible wills.
Understanding someone’s life requires knowledge, and Sartre structures his autobiography on a well-known fairy tale character. In order to understand the target domain of Poulou’s life in terms of the source domain of Griselda, the reader must have appropriate knowledge of the tale. And Griselda’s story is a popular tale in children. Her obedience and fidelity make of her a proverbial model wife. The use of the source domain of Griselda is to the reader’s benefit because it so well known and thus easy to understand, and also to the author’s benefit because it helps him to structure his quest. Besides the widely-understood source domain, Sartre makes use of the conventional schema of analogy through which one individual’s life is understood in terms of another’s. One’s life experience, physicality, moral attitude, or identity is perceived through some other individual’s life, physicality, attitude, and identity. This abstract template is fairly familiar to children. For instance, when a little boy says, “I am Spiderman,” he sees himself as the superhero. Advertising uses often this schema, as with, for example, “Be like Mike.” Analogy based on metaphorical mapping from a popular source to the target of self identity is the same schema that fans of music or movie stars actualize in their minds when they see themselves as similar to their idols. Griselda, Spiderman, or Mike are source domains that, because they are commonly known, provide conventional structures for our conceptual system. Once we learn the schema of “X wants to be (like) Y,” we do not have to learn it again. We simply actualize the X role (me, Poulou, etc.) and the Y role (Griselda, Spiderman, Mike, etc.) in infinite possibilities. Sartre’s autobiography is only one specific example among many virtual actualizations of this abstract template.
In *W or The Memory of Childhood*, the reader faces the challenge of understanding how Père is able to write about his childhood when he surprisingly states in the beginning that he has no childhood memories. The alternating use of italic and roman characters neatly divides fictional and autobiographical chapters. The rigorous parallelism between the fictional and the autobiographical stories increases the reader's discomfort as he constantly switches from one narrative to the next. He is continuously challenged with maintaining coherence between the fictional narrative and the autobiography and finding an intertextual relationship between the two, however subtle.

"I have no childhood memories" is an unusual statement for anyone but especially an autobiographer. Generally, we accumulate memories of the span of time behind us. Père's experience is an exceptional one because usually an adult is able to remember his childhood to some extent. As mentioned earlier, Lakoff and Turner examine the thief-like aspect of time that steals youth, beauty, and strength. However, time also has a positive collector-like aspect, for as time passes we accumulate valuable experience and memories. We learn from our experience of different events, like work, exams, marriage, sickness, driving a car, and retain memories of places we have been, of people we have met, of activities we have participated in. Memories are valuable to us because we like to pass them on to others, they serve as landmarks on our life paths, and they are the foundation of who we currently are. I will thus name the conceptualization of this positive consequence of the passage of time, "Time leaves traces."

Père, however, claims not to have childhood memories, and such an absence of traces places him in an unusual position. One might ask who or what caused such an uncommon absence of traces? On the one hand, time-as-a-thief cannot be the agent in
Perec’s case because time naturally robs us of other possessions but in fact creates memories, and on the other hand, time-as-a-collector seems to have simply disappeared.

*W or the Memory of Childhood* echoes the particular historical context of the second war world and the deportation of Jews to the death camps. Perec indirectly names this time of war and torture “History with a capital H,” and when the reader becomes aware that his mother has been deported (and later died) in Auschwitz, he understands that a part of Perec’s childhood is synchronous with the Shoah, one of the most tragic experiences that befell humanity in modern times. His parents lost not only family memories, but also the opportunity to hand down to their child the memory of a collectivity, a language, and a culture. For Perec’s family, these traces are irretrievable. Beyond being ordinary victims of time-as-a-thief losing beauty, strength, and youth, they along with millions of others were deprived not only of the right to pass on their memories (personal and collective), but to live a full life and to die with dignity. Drawing on the conventional metaphors of “Time is a thief” and “Time leaves traces,” I name the specific period of the Shoah (1942-1954) “Time is an executioner.” Because of his parents’ death and because of the fissure in the natural collection of memories, time did not leave traces in Perec’s life. The executioner, or the Shoah, both “gassed” his mother and “gassed” his memories.

I consider “Time leaves traces” a common ground for all readers that may be represented as a horizontal axis (an axe is a weapon) going from birth to death along which time-as-a-collector accumulates memories. In the vocabulary of the “Autobiography is a journey” metaphor, memories are traces in our lives of past destinations, and their accumulation draws the path of what we have lived. Childhood
memories represent the starting point in life, and what Perec misses is precisely this “point of departure.” Usually, the collection of memories grows through time. Yet for Perec, there is no memory to be remembered and there is no trace to guide him through the past. Based on the image-schema of “up and down” in the orientational metaphors of “More is up” and “Less is down,” I represent time-as-an-executioner by a decreasing, downward axis from the horizontal axis of “Time leaves traces.” Perec’s book is a relentless quest to recall his memories, to retrace the path of his life, and to reach the line where natural laws, such as “time-as-a-collector” govern upon humans. The loss of the human quality of remembering is not commonality. This in not only something that is missing from normal life, but also a regress and a degradation of the individual. It is from this low unconventional point of “Time is an executioner” that we co-travel with Perec on a path that, because of his sustained effort to recover memories, will go up to the normal conventional point of “Time leaves traces.”

In Sarraute’s Childhood, the image-schema of “center and periphery” plays an important role. The work is the life story of a little girl, Natacha, that develops between two families, the mother’s and the father’s, and between two cities, St. Petersburg and Paris. Natacha spends the very first part of her childhood with her mother, who has a profound impact on her. The child sees the world through her mother’s eyes and takes her words in the most literal sense. She finds her mother to be the prettiest of women and worships her almost like a goddess. The daughter is closely connected to her mother; she is dependent on her and is contained within the mother’s circle of perception. However, Natacha later moves to the father’s family, where she is spatially dissociated from her mother. This spatial separation causes Natacha’s sadness, which is further exacerbated
because she feels her mother has rejected her now that she has remarried. Rejected or excluded, Natacha is kept at a distance from the mother’s metaphorical center, in relation to which she becomes the periphery. Nathalie Sarraute elaborates on the child’s troubled sense of being and presents different stages of experience: Natacha first became a fragile periphery when she left her mother and came to live in Paris, then temporarily found balance by choosing her father as a new center, and finally succeeded in establishing herself as a center and the other members of her family as peripheral parts of her life circle. The autobiography ends with this latest stage of independency when Natacha is in the middle of a stable circle around which her parents appear to orbit.

Representations of center and periphery are conceptualized in our mind as a schema, which is called a basic image-schema in the Lakoff-Johnson-Turner theory of conceptual metaphor. Everyone shares this understanding based on the experience of the body as a center and the perceptual field as a periphery. We can metaphorically draw on this basic schema, and we conceptualize on the one hand the center representing not only our body but also our inner position in the world, and on the other hand, the periphery representing the outer exterior positions to our own. This inner/outer dimension gives rise to self/other and mine/yours distinctions. As for this last distinction, Natacha, even after she became her own center, has never made the distinction mine/yours as a separation between physical objects, like her father’s house, her books, or other belongings. Her only sense of property manifests at the end of a difficult experiential path as good control (or even mastery) of words: she does not have the feeling of being home when in her room, but instead when she immerses herself in words. Possession here is not pragmatic but symbolic.
These three common ways that the writers frame their experiences and readers make sense of them ("X wants to be like Y," "Time leaves traces," and "center and periphery") are on the one hand source domains for Sartre, Perec, and Sarragute in capturing their past and structuring their autobiographical artifacts, and are on the other hand source domains for readers in making sense of others' life experiences. The target domain of autobiography is understood in each case through knowledge familiar to both the writers and their readers. These three conventional patterns of thought are metaphorical bridges between the productive individual consciousness of the writer and the receptive mind of the reader, bridges that allow the writer to structure his work and the reader to understand it. However, these familiar patterns are not merely used like static landmarks on the path of the autobiography, but are exploited originally in a dynamic process of creation. The analogy with Griselda is just the first stage of Sartre's quest for identity, which is followed by a new stage when he is in opposition to her, and another when he abandons her. The common metaphor of "Time leaves traces" and the uncommon metaphor of "Time is an executioner" form the starting point for a mental zigzag movement that traces a W-like conceptual path recognizable in the title of Perec's book. The "center and periphery" metaphor is also originally exploited in a dynamic process of perception of the self and of the peripheral others in Sarragute's autobiography. The reader shares with each author a primary experiential thought and then freely travels with Poulou, Georges and Natacha along a troubled and unique path of life. Through this shared conceptual trip, whether guided by Griselda, time-as-an-executioner, or center-peripheral perception, three individual experiences are presented: the experience of a prisoner in the net of words, the experience of loss, absence, and separation, and the
experience of a child in the tormented course of becoming her own center. Each of these original exploitations of conventional metaphors will be analyzed in detail in the following chapters.

Through reading these autobiographies, which are in the beginning windows to the authors’ worlds and later become mirrors of our own, the reader shares with their authors a journey, a path, and ultimately an experience. This cognitive approach to modern autobiography not only allows readers to coherently understand the meaning of these texts, but also allows them to understand how organization shifts from chronological calendar-based order to conceptual stage-based order. Coherence is then a matter of mental movement from one stage of being to another on the autobiographical path that corresponds to a physical movement from one location to another on the life path. Furthermore, constant metaphorical movement leads to a dynamic process of discovering the final destination of the path and of the autobiography. This movement also encourages the reader to play the active role of a traveler in someone’s life, or, in Olney’s terms, the role of one who gathers “that past-in becoming into this present-as-being.” This conceptual approach to modern autobiography demonstrates that autobiography is the story of evolution of an individual’s life and not the story of disparate facts and chronological events, and that reading the literature of an experience is ultimately the experience of literature.
Notes


11. This is Roland Barthes's word, for whom "in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced (...)." (*Image, Music, Text. Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, "The Death of the Author," New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 147.)


17. James Cox in “Autobiography and America,” Virginia Quarterly Review 47, 1971, 254, claims that autobiography is essentially a factual rather that a fictional narrative. Philippe Lejeune also posits that autobiography recounts the truth of a reality: “As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a “reality” exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of *verification*.” (in *On Autobiography*, John Paul Eakin ed., University of Minnesota, 1989, 22).

18. James Olney, in *Metaphors of self* (Princeton University Press, 1972, 29), emphasizes the impossibility of factuality and veracity in autobiographical discourse: “Time carries us away not only from others but from ourselves as well, and we are continuously dying to our own passing selves.”


25. Oulipo stands for “Ouvroir de littérature potentielle”, which translates as “workshop of potential literature.” Oulipo is a gathering of French-speaking writers and mathematicians that seek to create works using writing techniques of constraint
(lipograms, palindromes, techniques based on mathematical problems such as the Knight’s tour of the chess board). Founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais, the group now contains novelists Georges Perec and Italo Calvino and the poet and mathematician Jacques Roubaud (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oulipo).

31. Barrett Mandel’s article “Full of Life Now” (Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, Olney ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, 47-72), has largely influenced my view on the reader’s role in the perception of autobiography. The idea of a satisfied reader and of the writer’s intention to convey and maintain the sense that “this happened to me” comes from Mandel.
32. The term “autobiographical pact” is not here used in the same way as in Philippe Lejeune’s “The Autobiographical Pact,” (On Autobiography, translated by Katherine Leary, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 52, Paul John Eakin ed., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Lejeune proposes that a necessary characteristic of the autobiographical text is the principle of identification author-narrator-protagonist (5). First, I am not concerned with demonstrating that the three texts I study here are autobiographies or with finding a definition of the genre (by evaluating the attribution of authorship on the autobiography’s title page and onward through the book, as Lejeune does). Second, the non-identification of the three narrative instances does not trouble me. Instead, what seems important to me is an autobiographical pact understood as a metaphorical or conceptual entente between the intentions of the autobiographer and the assumptions of the reader. If, as a reader, I do not rigidly expect identification that can be reduced to graphs and tables, which Lejeune uses to find “genuine” autobiographies, then I may be able to grasp the meaning of the individual experience that is transmitted through the text. In my view, autobiography as genre is interesting because it transmits an individual experience to a receptive consciousness. If this transmission is successful, its impact in terms of experience of life and of reading - in brief, its humanistic character - matters much more than its adherence to or digression from rigid principles, graphs and tables. A similar argument against Lejeune’s approach and for the autobiography’s “humanness” is expressed in “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment”, by James Olney, in Olney ed., cited above, 1980, 18.
33. As B. Mandel explains, critics have seized upon the idea that because autobiographies are not real life, they must in fact be fiction (read: “failed” fiction). He goes on to
explicitly state that the truth is the goal of all serious writing: “There is a long-standing agreement among cultivated people that fiction can reveal truth (...), [and] that is also why universities have courses in literature.” (“Full of Life Now,” in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, in Olney ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, 54-55).

34. “Resistance” and “satisfaction” are Mandel’s terms, 55.


42. Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature? translated by Bernard Frenchman, New York, Philosophical Library, 1949, 40-44.

43. The reader’s important role in the fulfillment of a creative work has also been stressed by Barthes, cited above, when he comments on the multiplicity of meaning: “(...) there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (...) The reader is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted (148).”

44. Sartre, What is Literature? 46.

45. Sartre, What is Literature? 50.


48. Fauconnier and Turner. They discuss the example of the picture of the baby, *The Way We Think*, 5.


51. van Dijk, Chapter 1, 4.

52. Other patterns of form are also useful in systematizing discourse. John Dubois illustrates in "Preferred Argument Structure" that a pattern represents "neither a discourse structure nor a syntactic structure per se, but a preference in discourse for a particular syntactic configuration of linguistic elements, both grammatical and pragmatic." He discusses one-place predicates (e.g. in "Policies change," the verb change has one core argument filled by the noun phrase policies), two-place predicates (e.g. in "I enjoyed the movie," the core arguments are I and the movie), and three-place predicates (e.g. in "I told you that story," the core arguments are I, you, and that story). These are "preferred" argument structures in the sense that they are expected under this configuration because of the nature of the verb (transitive or intransitive). The verb enjoy is predicted to co-occur with a subject argument and an object argument, corresponding to the person who experiences the enjoyment and to the thing enjoyed. This verb with two core arguments is a grammatical formal pattern. Nevertheless, what the speakers fill in is not without consequences for the understanding of the sentence. If I first say to another person, "I enjoyed it," I understand the two core arguments, namely the subject and the object, but the other person would have a hard time figuring out for what it stands. Because from the start I use a pronoun instead of a noun, my interlocutor does not have access to the referent of it and therefore would find my sentence (almost) devoid of meaning. "I enjoyed it," taken out of context is still grammatically correct, but at the start of a conversation it induces incoherence. (John W. Du Bois, "Discourse and Grammar," to appear in *The New Psychology of Language: Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure*, Vol. 2, ed. by M. Tomasello, Erlbaum).


55. The generic level of comprehension contains information that lacks specificity and is therefore available for instantiation at a specific level of comprehension. Some examples of generic information include parameters such as basic ontological entities (entity, state, event), causal relations (enabling, creating, destroying), and modalities (ability, necessity, possibility). The generic schema for "Life is a journey" is "Events are actions." "Events" and "actions" contain little detail and can thus be instantiated, among other possibilities, by specific information like "life" and "journeys." Therefore, "life" is a specific-level schema for the generic-level schema of "event." It includes the generic structure of "event" and further develops that structure by specifying the values of generic-level parameters. For example, in the "life" schema, the event shape is one in which an entity is born. (Idem, Lakoff and Turner, 81-82).

56. Lakoff and Turner, 61.

57. Lakoff and Turner, 63.


59. Lakoff and Johnson, 3-4.

60. Lakoff and Turner, More than Cool Reason, 34-56.


64. The physical basis of this metaphor is presented in Paul Dean, "Metaphors of center and periphery in Yeats' The Second Coming," Journal of Pragmatics, 1995, 24, 633-634.


68. Fauconnier, cogweb.ucla.edu/Abstracts/Fauconnier, 3.
69. Fauconnier, cogweb.ucla.edu/Abstracts/Fauconnier, 3.


74. Fauconnier and Turner, 329.

75. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner cite and analyze this example in *The Way We Think*, 362.

76. Another often cited example is “Jacques Chirac,” the president of France. In the first input, we form a general and conventional conceptual frame in which we represent “the president of a nation.” In the second input, we frame a specific situation where we represent Chirac and France. There is cross-space mapping of counterparts between Chirac-president and France-nation. After selectively projecting these elements into the blend, an emergent structure is created, “president of France,” that is not available in either input. This kind of blend may become a conventional frame, just like “secretary of the treasury.” If we blend both together, we obtain another composite conventional frame: “the secretary to the president of France.”

77. This example is from Seana Coulson and Todd Oakley, “Blending basics,” Cognitive linguistics, 11, 3/4, 2000, 177.

78. Traditionally, counterfactuals like “If men had wings, they would fly” are viewed as cases of possibly valid reasoning from premises that are false.


1. Fine words

Sartre's "autobiographical desire" animates his entire literary work, as each of his novels or plays could be considered a fundamentally autobiographical project. In fact, Michel Contat shows that Sartre's literary projects "strictly correspond to a philosophy based on the cogito"; existentialism is a humanism, but in the first place, it is an "autobiographism." It requires a human being to position himself as a subject in the perception of the surrounding world and of the Other. According to Contat, the autobiographical project coincides with the existentialist project: expressing in words our own experience allows us to acquire self-awareness and to give to the Other "the truth of himself" that may indicate "the truth of everything." Critics have noticed that this "autobiographical desire" extends through a large number of Sartrian works and that the connection between autobiography and literature had been set since Sartre's very first work, "Jésus la Chouette," published when he was eighteen. The whole of Sartre's oeuvre could be considered his autobiography, and Rybalka and Contat have established Sartre's
complete biographical chronology. They start with the following: childhood (*Les Mots, L’enfance d’un chef,* "Journal de guerre"); adolescence ("Jésus la Chouette"); high school ("La Semance et le Scaphandre," "Paul Nizan"); Ecole Normale ("La défaite"), time spent outside Paris (*La Nausée*); pre-war Paris: (*L’Age de raison, Le Sursis*); war-torn Paris (*Carnets de la drôle de guerre, Lettres au Castor, La Mort dans l’âme, La Dernière chance*); 1950s: "Merleau Ponty vivant," letters to Michelle Vian); 1960s (conversations on *Sartre par lui-même, On a raison de se révolter*).

Furthermore, before writing his own biography, *The Words* (1964), Sartre had already practiced writing the biographies of others: he had written two life-studies on Baudelaire (1946) and Saint Genet (1952) in which he tried to "determine the meaning of life and the purpose that fills it" and to answer the question "how does a man become someone who writes?" Contat confirms this motive and shows that it was through the study of biography that Sartre was able to write his autobiography. He was a passionate reader of biographies who looked since childhood in the lives of others for a prefiguration of his own. *Baudelaire* and *Saint Genet* were followed by another biography on Flaubert and by numerous studies and essays on Mallarmé (Situation IX), Nizan, Merleau-Ponty (Situation IV), Kierkegaard (Situation IX) and other writers.

Sartre first mentioned his intention to work on an autobiography in 1953 in an interview with Paul Morelle. Asked about his current projects, he said of his autobiography, "Through my own history, I want to record the history of my time." However, details on the composition of *The Words* are both complex and uncertain. It
was apparently toward 1953-1954 that he wrote a first draft, entitled *Jean sans terre*. After Simone de Beauvoir read the manuscript in 1956, there is no indication that Sartre worked on it for almost a decade. It is only at the beginning of 1963 that he revised it extensively before it was published in 1964. Since the original manuscript is no longer available, one can only speculate on what in the existing text might also have appeared in the first draft. Contat indicates that the draft shown to Simone de Beauvoir in 1956 presents no significant intellectual change. In rewriting his autobiography during the “autobiographical decade” (1953-1963), Sartre worked solely on the writing and on the narrative order. His method remained the one he had established at the beginning of the project, had used in other biographies he had written previously, and had described in *Questions de méthode* (1957).

Sartre defined the biographical self in relation to the historical situation: the purpose of biographical research is to create a link between the singularity of one’s work, the particularity of an individual and the universality of his time and of history. Sartre called this constant flow from literary work to writer and to history the “progressive-regressive” method. Therefore, only one who expresses what he feels and thinks regarding the people of his generation and his environment is interesting as the subject of a biographical project. As Joseph Fell notes, one might suspect Sartre hoped that, by studying his autobiography, readers might learn something significant about their own lives. After all, Sartre believed that his analyses of Baudelaire and Genet had universal significance, as “each life is a unique response to a human condition which is nevertheless allegedly universal.” And in fact, Sartre confessed to Olivier Todd (1957,
see note 5) that one of his reasons why he wrote his autobiography was to show how he progressed from subjectivity to certain objectivity:

While writing this biography, I am not only concerned with the particular meaning of one life. I want to recall the rather curious evolution of a generation. I was born in 1905 in a circle of petty bourgeois intellectuals. I developed in an age whose masters were, after all, Gide and Proust, indeed an age of subjectivism and aestheticism.

It is indeed with rigor and application that Sartre, at the age of 59, wrote The Words, “avoiding everything novelistic, and even everything anecdotal to the extent that it was unimportant (Le Monde, 1955).” There are no conventional chapters, but simply blocks of text, divided by blanks and gathered into two “halves,” entitled “Reading” and “Writing.” Born into a bourgeois, book-loving family and raised by a widow mother and doting grandparents, Sartre’s childhood may be described as “a long love affair with the printed word” (cf. Publisher Comments, Vintage Books). The autobiography begins with an expository section on the writer’s family background: “Around 1850, in Alsace, a schoolteacher with more children than he could afford was willing to become a grocer” (9)\(^2\). This grocer’s son, Charles Schweitzer, was a protestant with a passion for the sublime. He became a teacher and married Louise, a catholic “with negative pride and self-centered rejection (12).” Charles and Louise’s daughter, Anne Marie, married Jean-Baptiste Sartre, with whom she had a son, Jean-Paul Sartre (called Poulou during his childhood). Shortly after the birth of his son, Jean-Baptiste passed away. Because of his absent father, Sartre describes his younger self as a traveler without a ticket on a train. Poulou is an orphan whose illegitimacy constantly pushes him to gain a sense of identity.
Sartre tells us that his father's absence and the fact that his mother was more like an older sister than an authority figure made him aware that, unlike most children, he had to find a destiny that was not immediately granted him.

After considering his father, Sartre moves to describe his grandfather, Charles Schweitzer, since Sartre and his mother come back to live in Schweitzer's house following his father's death. Charles Schweitzer has the physical characteristics of Victor Hugo, a tall, bearded man of nineteenth century, with a taste for magniloquent sublimity. Like a patriarchal grandfather and pedagogue, he guides Poulou's education. Since he is the only man in the family, Schweitzer exercises his authority on the child, and as a teacher, he introduces Poulou to his favorite authors: Lamartine, Flaubert and Hugo. From a very young age, Poulou breathes in the atmosphere of his grandfather's books. Moreover, the grandfather inflicts on the child ideas and attitudes common during the time of Louis Philippe. With sustained irony, Sartre denounces in his portrait of Schweitzer's the hypocrisy of bourgeois society and Romantic values. The adult manipulates the child by insisting that he read a quantity of books far inappropriate for his young age, by transforming him in a "miniature adult (43)" and by making him believe in the primacy of words over things. Sartre holds Schweitzer responsible for his constant idealist vocation, "the neurosis," "the madness" that made him take words, and therefore literature, as the quintessence of things. After the joy of reading many 19th-century works and other classics, and after the disappointment of not being able to find in this literary universe a mandate to justify his existence, he turns inward in an attempt to find meaning in his life.
When Poulou’s mother secretly offers him new books appropriate for his age, the boy begins to free himself from his grandfather’s favorite heroes. He starts using the resources of his own imagination to create a fantasy universe in which he identifies with childhood characters such as Griselda, Michel Strogoff and Pardaillan. This is another chance to “validate the ticket” and to invent a destiny for his contingent life: “I drew myself out of nothingness (31),” “I keep creating myself (32).” Poulou creates and inhabits a world of words and fantasy where he feels free of his grandfather’s authority and necessary to the world. The boy, by using his pen and the power of his imagination, plays the role of a hero-knight and becomes the maker and the master of this fabricated universe. Once again, Sartre sees himself as Poulou as being in a false situation: even if he built his own universe and his own heroes, different from those of Schweitzer, he keeps equating words and things. This idealism stemming from childhood accompanied Sartre for much of his life. Surprisingly (for us, but also for himself!), even when he was Roquentin, as he defines himself later, the antihero of Nausea who gave up hope and fame, Sartre still has faith in literature. Behind this existentialist character, an impostor was hiding: Jean-Paul Sartre, the author of Nausea who still believed he was the Chosen One of literature.

The Words presents us with the image of young Sartre “coming into possession of the words that give him a sense of the world.”14 He had believed he could save mankind through literature since the time he was a little boy plagiarizing, writing versified letters to his grandfather, and creating his own novels. First, this is the story of an illusion: the illusion of a child persuaded of his ability to act through words; second, it is the story of
an adult aware of this illusion (who is therefore an impostor); and third, it is the story of a famous writer aware of all these levels and yet incapable of facing reality in any way other than with his pen. Sartre's life is presented here in successive stages that correspond to different states of illusion and disappointment until the final phase of neurosis when the autobiographer is fully aware of the limits of his literary tools.\footnote{15} As a child, he embraced literature under his grandfather's influence; as an adult writer he is trapped in the net of words — words that are far from offering him an absolute meaning of life. Sartre still suffers from the child's literary disease and knows he cannot do anything about it: "I still write. What else can I do? (253)."\footnote{16, 17}

The saga of movement of the child's struggle for significance, from one identity stage to the other traces its own narrative path which provides the work with an alternative structure to chronological order. Needless to say that a life unfolds in time, in a calendar-based order, and yet in Sartre's case, readers maintain narrative coherence through the succession of distinct stages of identity, that map a conceptual path on which he moves along from the time when he imitates his grandfather, to the time when he acquires an idealist vocation, until the latest disappointment in all of the previous stages. Each effort he deploys to advance from an identity to the next is with a purpose, for he constantly tries to justify his life in the absence of his father, thus to gain a solid sense of identity.

If the succession is here conceptual, based on the child's stages of quest of a legitimate selfhood, one may suspect that the autobiographer also deploys strategies of narration directed toward the same aim as the child's: the self-invention, or, in other words, the aim to cast life history in narrative. Because the child lived his life like a plot,
embracing with enthusiasm literary characters from the grandfather’s library or from his own fantasy, the adult autobiographer also uses such an individual character to structure his autobiography. My suggestion is that Sartre takes the character of Griselda, which appears in the child’s fantasy, and employs it as a model of identity that could fulfill the child’s, as well as the adult’s quest of a legitimate existence.

In this conceptual approach to Sartre’s autobiography, I show that Griselda is a pivotal source domain for the dynamic conceptual development of the autobiography. The figure of Griselda functions as a model for a non-chronological and non-linear (re)construction of the biographical self. I demonstrate that Griselda represents a conceptual tool that Sartre uses to shape his past and understand his present consciousness. Receiving consistent input from two basic spaces, namely Sartre’s childhood memories and the life of Charles Perrault’s Griselda, in The tale of Griselda, Sartre’s autobiography progresses along a conceptual path in stages defined by systematic analogy and disanalogy with Griselda’s characteristics. This conceptual movement ranges from subtle resemblance to startling deviation to final disenchantment, and corresponds to successive identities achieved in the blending process with Griselda’s life. These multiple related blends that I shall name “Griselda,” “New Griselda,” and “Anti-Griselda,” are integrated into a global conceptual network that structures the generic space of “Autobiography is a journey” and the specific space of Sartre’s quest for identity.
2. In other words, who is Griselda?

Poulou’s fantasies can be understood as a resistance to his grandfather’s authority. They correspond to a later attempt at self-invention, when adulated by his family, he played the role of a happy child in the bourgeois Paradise. At the beginning of the autobiography, the child is described as an angel and a prodigy whose presence is extremely valued by his family. This temporarily justified position is gradually subverted by an acute self-consciousness of deception. Poulou realizes that he is just an adorable performer who masters rituals and ceremonies, and besides, he suspects that the adults in his life merely fake an interest in him: “I would suddenly discover that I did not really count, and I felt ashamed of my unwonted presence in that well ordered world (87).”

Oppressed by his aimless condition and manipulated by his grandfather Charles, who initiates him into the temple of his library, Poulou first encounters the world through books. In his mind, literature does not coexist with reality, but precedes it. This original addiction to words is perpetuated in secret by his mother who introduces him to children’s books, newspapers serials and popular magazines. Corneille, Voltaire, Vigny, Flaubert, and Mallarmé are replaced by the adventure literature of Jules Verne, Michel Zévaco, Charles Perrault, Maurice Bouchor and Paul d’Ivoy. The books of these new authors allow Poulou to build an alternative fantasy universe and to dare to hope to validate his mandate and find the security of a necessary existence. He goes beyond the (clandestine) reading and projects himself as a character in these plots, modifying or completing them. This is an ecstatic exercise that supplies the randomness of his life with immense joy; Poulou identifies with such different heroes as Michel Strogoff, Pardaillan,
Chantecler and Griselda. Michel Strogoff is Jules Verne's character, an officer whose "major mission (131)" is to punish bandits. "Justified as soon as he makes first appearance (130)," Michel Strogoff symbolizes a model of courage and heroic action. The second hero, Pardaillan, is a valued character in Michel Zévac's serial, *Le Matin*. He, too, has a destiny: he represents the people and "slaps wicked kings in the face (133)." The third, Chantecler, is the rooster in a farm-yard in Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, another character with a mission and with a clear reason for his existence.

It is not surprising that Poulou is such an admirer of these characters marked by action, justice and heroism. At this point in his life, when free of his family's supervision, the boy adopts the purpose of a hero character. With the power of his mind, he transforms himself from the wise and obedient child under his grandfather's control into a hero who acts, creates and masters his own fantasy universe. What is surprising at first sight is the reference to Griselda, a female character in Charles Perrault's *The Tale of Griselda*. She is first mentioned on page 129 of *The Words* (almost in the middle of the book) where Sartre confesses: "I had read the story of Griselda a dozen times with a thrill of pleasure (...) What pleased me about that not very praiseworthy story was the victim's sadism and the inflexible virtue that ended with the fiendish husband on his knees." Sartre refers to her five more times in the second part of the book (130, 133, 175, 180, 254), and she even figures on the last page when he concludes: "I sometimes flatter myself that I'm being misunderstood in my lifetime. Griselda's not dead. Pardaillan still inhabits me. So does Strogoff (254)." Thus, without any doubt, Perrault's character plays a role in Sartre's autobiography as she has played a role in Poulou's life. But there are some
questions to raise here: What role did she play? Just what kind of character is Griselda? How is it that a little boy casts himself as Griselda? When we read Perrault’s fairy tale, we may wonder if Poulou read the same tale: Griselda is not sadistic and her husband doesn’t end up on his knees. A brief summary of *The Tale of Griselda* may provide some insight into Sartre’s interpretation of Griselda’s character.²⁰

In this story, a great prince is urged by a delegation of his subjects to take a wife in order to insure the succession to the throne. He had so far avoided marriage, convinced that even the most agreeable women turn into coquettes, bigots, or tyrants once they become wives. He would agree to marry only on the condition that his future wife be patient and obedient and without pride, vanity, or a will of her own. One day while hunting, the prince becomes separated from the hunt and comes across the most beautiful young lady he has ever seen, a shepherdess watching over her father’s sheep. She modestly offers him a cup of water and sends him back on his way. At the palace the prince calls together his council and announces that he will not choose a wife from a foreign country but from among his own people. Further, he will not announce her name until the day of the wedding. The prince talks with the shepherdess’s father and, after great preparations for the wedding, leads his courtiers to the shepherd’s hut. Griselda is invited to become princess only after swearing that she will always obey her husband in all things. She swears that she will never refute his wishes and accepts the proposal humbly and gratefully.

Griselda becomes the perfect queen and gives birth to a beautiful daughter. At about the same time, a black mood descends on the prince that causes him to suspect that
his wife's discretion and humility might be feigned. To test her, he shuts her in her
apartments and as the greatest ordeal, he orders her daughter to be taken away and
entrusted to nuns under an assumed name. Griselda is told that the child died. She
continues to submit uncomplainingly to her husband who is so touched by her devotion
that he considers telling her the truth. Fifteen years pass and Griselda's daughter grows
into a beautiful young lady and falls in love with a nobleman and wishes to marry him.
The prince entirely approves of the marriage, but first he determines to turn this event
into an occasion for a final test. He announces publicly that he must remarry in order to
provide an heir to the throne and that he has chosen the girl in the convent. He orders his
current wife to put on her peasant's clothes and return to her father's hut. Griselda does
as he commanded, after declaring her sorrow at having failed to please her lord and
master.

Shortly thereafter, the prince calls Griselda back to the palace to ready the rooms
for his new bride. When the wedding guests are assembled, the prince reveals the whole
truth. The exemplary patience of Griselda had been established beyond all questions and
she is restored to her place of honor. Her daughter is returned to her and married to her
nobleman amid general enthusiasm. The people have great admiration for the prince,
forgiving him his cruelty to his wife because it had provided a model for female
constancy and obedience. Perrault did not publish a separate moral at the end of this
story. Instead he expounded on a few ideas in the introductory letter of dedication to an
unknown and unnamed "Mademoiselle." He ironically insisted that patience "is not a
virtue of Parisian wives, / But through a long experience they have acquired the Knack /
Of teaching it to their husbands."21
Griselda is clearly not sadistic and her husband does not fall to his knees either in Charles Perrault’s version\textsuperscript{22} or in the last novella of Boccaccio’s \textit{Decameron},\textsuperscript{23} in which the character of Griselda first appeared. In both literary works,\textsuperscript{24} she is a model of wifely, daughterly and motherly virtues, enduring without complaint all the distressing tests that her husband imposes on her. Indeed, Griselda is all but sadistic and the prince is all but humble. First, she does not get any kind of pleasure from her poor treatment in the hands of the prince; she is simply presented as the faithful wife who obeys her husband in every circumstance. There is no direct indication of the reasons for such an exemplary behavior other than that God blessed her with immense patience and the idea that every woman must submit to her husband. Second, when Sartre says: “I had read the story of Griselda a dozen times with a thrill of pleasure (...) What pleased me about that not very praiseworthy story was the victim’s sadism and the inflexible virtue that ended with the fiendish husband on his knees (129),”\textsuperscript{25} he implies that Griselda receives pleasure from inflicting psychological pain on the prince, a notion that is incompatible with her victimhood. It would have been more understandable had he referred to the victim’s masochism, as she did not inflict suffering on others but may perhaps have received pleasure from bravely enduring the psychological torment the prince inflicted on her. Further, in Sartre’s view, Griselda’s “inflexible virtue” makes the prince kneel down. In other words, he suggests that Griselda is paradoxically a victim who forces him to his knees. Her virtue represents for the autobiographer a tool for action, an arm against the prince, whereas in Perrault’s tale, her virtue is a shield and a blessed gift. Griselda is able to withstand all tests because she received from God the gift of unwavering virtue. Sartre’s interpretation diverges sharply from the tale and reverses the roles of Griselda.
and the prince: the shepherdess is the one who punishes and who exacts justice (like Pardaillan and Michel Strogoff), and the prince is the one who submits to her. In the original story, they are quite the contrary: throughout the tale, Griselda submits to her husband’s demands and the prince inflicts pain.

Once Poulou starts reading Jules Vernes, Maurice Bouchor, Paul d’Ivoy, and other writers of children’s literature, he enters a new stage of his life, escaping from his grandfather’s authority and creating a mental world of fantasy and eccentricity. This is a stage of self-creation in which he imagines himself a hero indispensable to others. The orphan now has a chance to validate the ticket, and he conceptually projects his “ticketless” condition into heroism. Thus, Michel Strogoff, Pardaillan and Chantecler offer to Poulou strong models of action and integrity legitimate existences and motivated destinies. Compared to them, Griselda in Perrault’s tale has no destiny other than obeying her husband’s terrible will; she doesn’t make decisions and she doesn’t dispense justice. Moreover, Griselda lacks a “legitimate mandate.” She is not able to justify her own existence and she poses as a victim of her cruel husband who treats her like an object, imprisons her in his castle, and tortures her psychologically. Griselda’s life is in the original tale the antithesis of the hero’s:

The prince:

The prince thought Griselda’s virtue was false and he wondered if all her goodness was not just a trap to make a fool of him. The prince told himself that if her virtue were real, bad treatment would only strengthen it.

1. He keeps her locked up in the castle.
2. He never lets her participate in any of the fun in the court.

3. He demands back all the pretty gifts he gave her in their happy days.

4. He takes her daughter away.

5. He tells her the child is dead.

6. He asks Griselda to return, in rags, to her hut.

7. He announces he must remarry in order to provide an heir to the throne.

8. He asks her to return to the castle and to make ready the rooms for his new bride.

Griselda:

1. Griselda does not complain: “I am sure this is all for my own good. True happiness comes through suffering.”

2. She obligingly obeys all his decrees.

3. Griselda submits.

4. She consents to everything.

5. “Nothing is dear to me except as it pleasures you.”

6. ”You are my husband, lord and master and however terrible your will, I must obey.”

7. She begs his pardon and she repents.

8. Griselda pleases him and she lowers her eyes.

9. She retires in her room.

Griselda’s life continually revolves around the prince’s wishes. She never acts by herself; she merely conforms to her master. As the set of verbs in the list above express, the prince has the active role while Griselda has the submissive role: the first acts and demands, the second endures and obeys. The shepherdess, once married, is confined to the castle (and later to her room) and she is limited in her action by her persecutor
husband. Here are all the elements of a prison: "the state or condition of being confined, restricted or limited in any way." Thus, Griselda is an imprisoned woman: on the one hand, marriage is for her a psychological prison, and on the other hand, the castle is a physical prison.

The "sadistic" Griselda is thus Sartre's own creation, a foil to Perrault's obedient character. However, just a few pages after the passage quoted above, Sartre surprisingly states: "In short, I could neither produce from myself the imperative mandate that would have justified my presence on this earth, nor recognize anyone else's right to issue it to me. I went back to my long rides, listlessly. I moped amidst the fray. A wool-gathering slaughterer, an apathetic martyr, I remained Griselda, for want of a czar, of a God, or quite simply of a father (133)." At this point, Poulou lives in a moment of distress when, after shaping his imaginary identity first into a hero and a knight and then into a martyr devoted to the redemption of mankind through the creation of literary works, he is disappointed and resumes a pointless living. Without an "imperative mandate" obtained through his own forces or issued by his father, Poulou identifies here with the "ticketless" Griselda, the one enduring her husband's tests in Perrault's tale. Just like her, the boy is psychologically imprisoned: the absence of the father constrains Poulou in a conceptual prison where he cannot legitimate his existence. Each scenario of imaginative adventure (hero, knight, or martyr) fails and takes with it the child's hope of escape from his state of confinement. Poulou realizes that the mandate cannot come from fantasized destinies or from a father "who sought refuge in death (15)." After successive efforts to create an identity, the child is powerless and he has no choice but to resign himself to his
lack of destiny. Griselda is the victim of her husband’s cruelty, and Poulou is the victim of his father’s absence.

These shifts back and forth between the two alternatives of a sadistic Griselda and of an enduring one set up expectations and trigger reevaluations in the reader’s mind, as it is clear that Sartre uses Griselda’s story to actualize his childhood and to structure his autobiography. In the middle of the book, when the autobiographer asserts: “I remained Griselda (133),” he implies that: i) Once, he has been Griselda; ii) He has tried to free himself from her, and iii) His effort to do so failed. Therefore, on page 129 the reader encounters a sadistic and active Griselda, and then a few pages later (133) he is introduced to a deceived and passive autobiographer who “remained Griselda.” Even if Perrault’s character is not directly mentioned before this point (129), I suspect that the reader realizes that Griselda might be a clue for understanding Sartre’s life. Sartre steps back in order to retrospectively consider the hypothesis of an early stage (in the first part of the book) in which the child have experienced life in terms of Griselda’s life and of a later stage of rebellion or rejection in which the child has tried to abandon the previous one.

On the one hand, Poulou read the story of Griselda a dozen of times “with a thrill of pleasure (129);” it is thus probable that he identified with Greselda’s (lack of) destiny during his period of confusing fantasy and reality. In other words, Griselda might have served for the child as a mode of perceiving the world. On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre, on the last page of his autobiography states: “I sometimes flatter myself that I’m being misunderstood in my lifetime. Griselda’s not dead. Pardaillan still inhabits me. So does Strogoff.” This last mention of her, as well as previous ones of both the antithetic,
sadistic and the enduring, patient versions of her, provides a clue to the organization and interpretation of the autobiography. In other words, Griselda has served for Sartre, the writer, as a conceptual organizing principle for his autobiography.

On the basis of my research into Sartre’s _The Words_, discussed in the pages that follow, I shall argue that Sartre’s autobiographical creation receives consistent input from two basic spaces, namely i) Sartre’s childhood memories and ii) The life of Griselda, the main character in Charles Perrault’s _The Tale of Griselda_. In the story, Griselda is a model of obedience, patience and fidelity, but she is also a victim of her cruel husband who treats her like an object, imprisons her in a castle, and tortures her psychologically. The different stages of identity creation that ultimately result in the final blend “Sartre is Griselda” (next to last paragraph in the text) gradually emerge from the dynamic creation of three related blends by the successive operations of analogy and disanalogy with the character of Griselda.

First, “Griselda” emerges from the blending space created by the input from Sartre’s childhood and Griselda. The analogy is based on the shared features of obedience, patient role, and confinement. The author’s disillusion with the structure of the emergent blend gives rise to a new attempt at capturing his identity. This new attempt, which I name “New Griselda,” emerges by disanalogy from the previous Griselda blend. Sartre becomes a hero, a figure constructed by systematic disanalogy with every characteristic Griselda possesses. Pride and arrogance are the counterparts of obedience, self-awareness is opposed to imitation, and acting/subject is incompatible with patient/object. Sartre’s disenchantment with this particular stage of his created self results in the emergence of the third “Anti-Griselda” blend, also related to “New Griselda” by
incompatibility and disanalogy: shame is the counterpart of arrogance, the antihero is viewed as the counterpart of the hero, and happiness and optimism fade away from the antihero. The successive identity achieved in the blends are in turn questioned and eventually abandoned; every effort to build a new identity leads Sartre back to the starting point of Griselda. This conceptual network gives us global insight into Sartre’s life and allows us to understand how the optimistic child becomes the disillusioned adult.

The “confinement” feature provides stability and structure to Sartre’s quest for identity because it is present in the three successive spaces. The “Griselda,” “New Griselda,” and “Anti-Griselda” spaces all eventually prove untenable in the author’s search for freedom. In each one of them, the “confinement” feature remains part of the emergent structure of the blend. As Griselda, Sartre is a prisoner of his grandfather’s cultural ideas, as New Griselda, he is a prisoner of his heroic dreams, and as Anti-Griselda, he is the prisoner of his antiheroic novels. Despite his three successive efforts, Sartre cannot escape the prison of Griselda.

3. Being Griselda: a matter of blending mental spaces

Grandfather Schweitzer is the dominant character in Poulou’s education. Given that the father is absent, the old man is the only one suited to take care of the boy. Anne-Marie, a widowed mother without resources, is forced to accept her father’s authority and to return to the status of a minor. She is for her son like a sister, a virgin, and a child – all but a parent. Poulou even asks himself: “Whom would I obey? I am shown a young giantess, I am told she’s my mother. I myself would take her rather for an elder sister (21).” He
doesn’t have parents, but he does have an authoritarian grandfather. In order to consolidate his position as *paterfamilias*, Schweitzer likewise considers Poulou’s mother as a child. Sometimes he hums: “No closer kin can e’er be found/Than a brother and a sister (54).” In this way, he is able to exercise his authority over both of them, without acknowledging any age difference. Grandfather Schweitzer is therefore the only man in the family and the young Poulou has no choice but to obey him. With his imposing appearance that reminds one of portrayals of God, Schweitzer is easy feared. He is tall and bearded, and his gravity impresses the faithful who actually take him for God the Father:

There remained the patriarch. He so resembled God the Father that he was often taken for Him. One day he entered a church by way of the vestry. The priest was threatening the infirm of purpose with the lightening of heaven: “God is here! He sees you!” Suddenly the faithful perceived beneath the pulpit a tall, bearded old man who was looking at them. They fled (22).

This patriarch wields all the power over his six-year-old charge’s education and instruction. This familial situation indicates an imbalance of power between the grandfather and the child, due to a difference in status reminiscent of Griselda’s story: Schweitzer, just like the prince, is free to lord over his grandson who, like Griselda, must acquiesce to his demands. In Perrault’s tale, the balance of power between Griselda and her husband is largely tipped in the prince’s favor just as in Sartre’s autobiography it is tipped in favor of Schweitzer. In the first case, the imbalance is due to social status (Griselda is poor and of lowly birth) and in the second case it is due to ontological status.
(the child is orphaned) and to maturity status (adult / child). Both Griselda and Poulou have to obey their masters.

This early state of affairs increasingly accentuates for the boy. He progressively perceives his grandfather’s attitude as a form of oppression: “Had he begotten me, however, I think he would have been unable to keep from oppressing me, out of habit (23).” The first stage of oppression starts when Schweitzer initiates his grandson to literature and introduces him to his impressive library of classics: Horace, Rabelais, Corneille, Flaubert, Hugo, and others. The boy is exposed to this temple of literature, and under the influence of his grandfather avoids fairy tales in favor of Mallarmé and The Grand Larousse. Thus, like a small adult, Poulou is infused with the ideas of a century to which he doesn’t belong:

Between the first Russian revolution and the first world war, fifteen years after Mallarmé’s death, when Daniel de Fontanin was discovering Gide’s Fruits of the Earth, a man of the nineteenth century was foisting upon his grandson ideas that had been current under Louis Philippe. That is how peasant routines are said to be handed down: the fathers work in the fields, leaving the sons with the grandparents (63).

Sartre, the lonely child, with only classics for companionship, holds Schweitzer responsible for his confusion of literature with life, his “neurosis,” as he names it. The origin of this “illness” stems from early childhood, when, sequestered in his grandfather’s library like in the belly of an inert old man, Poulou finds “more reality in the idea than in the thing because it was given to [him] first and because it was given to [him] as a thing (51).” In his perception, the library is “the world caught in a mirror (49)” and the books
are “standing stones (...) like bricks on the book-shelves (40).” His growing addiction to books under his grandfather’s supervision limits the child to a misleading vision that turns out later to be one of the early “symptoms” of Sartre’s alienation: “At times, I would draw near to observe those boxes which slit open like oysters, and I would see the nudity of their inner organs, pale, dusty leaves, slightly bloated, covered with black veinlets, which drank ink and smelled of mushrooms (41).” One of his first convictions in life (and as we will see, one of the most persistent) is that the book is his “religion” and the library his “temple (59).” The library/temple is a confined space where the boy spends most of his time. Etymologically, “temple” comes from the Latin templum and means “a space marked out for the worship of a divinity.” Indeed, the library sets up physical and psychological boundaries and is a closed space in which the divinity is Schweitzer, “the holy man (44).” After obedience, this is the second analogy with Griselda. She is confined in a physical space, the castle, and she worships her husband like a god. The grandfather and the prince are obeyed like divinities with complete power over the faithful Poulou and Griselda.

As for the “psychological” prison, Sartre presents his fascination with words as a life-long addiction. Since childhood, he has given himself up to the written world. Always surrounded by books, Poulou grows sensitive to the rigorous succession of words. Reading fills him with pleasure and joy. He deciphers, memorizes and recites passages. The little boy has the intense feeling that characters belong to him and that he is able to bring dried-up voices back to life. Closely guided by his grandfather, Poulou starts to create characters, passages and voices. Like a real writer, the child is deeply enchanted with language as he works over the words, tries them out and decides what they mean. In
his early childhood, Poulou is confined to literature (a certain type of literature that translates 19th-century culture) and is irremediably imprisoned in the net of words: "(...) I am essentially: a cultural asset. Culture permeates me, and I give it off to the family by radiation, just as ponds, in the evening, give off the heat off the day (40)." Enchanted by literature, enchained by language, Poulou is compelled to play at culture. He is an object of manipulation, confined in the grandfather's library and, as we will see, captive in his family circle.

In Perrault’s tale, Griselda endures cruel tests without complaint and demonstrates profound patience and superhuman moral strength. When the prince falls in love with her, he doesn’t ask her directly to marry him. He discusses it first with her father and she is only informed later of their meeting. Her marriage is more like a trade for the prince and a good deal for the parent. At the time of the wedding, when asked to agree to fulfill all the prince’s desires, the shepherdess answers: "I swear it (...). If I were to marry the least important man in the world, I should agree to obey him. His yolk would be a gentle one for me. How much rather, then, would I obey you if I found you my lord and master."28 The motif of the yolk expresses here Griselda’s inability to take action, to lead or to have initiative. The prince treats her like an object without feelings and personality when he takes their child away from her, when he orders her to return to her father’s cottage, and when he demands that she come back to the castle to prepare it for his marriage to a young princess. Griselda’s unlimited patience underscores a unique enduring – but also a passive behavior. She always conforms and she never acts: she is chosen by the prince, she is dressed in wedding finery, she is seated in a great carriage, she is tested, etc. Her constant calm and obedient nature suggest that she is always only
the affected person. Psychologically, Griselda is an object confined to the husband's
decrees, and physically she is an object imprisoned in his castle.

Like Griselda, Poulou is a wise and obedient child. He makes little noise, he
doesn't cry, he is not violent or aggressive. Extremely manipulated by adults, never
alone, always surrounded, the child loses his humanity and personifies a manageable
object. Grammatically, he represents the passive object, which is affected by an active
subject, and which does not accomplish the action of a verb. These examples are often
encountered in the first part of the novel: "My family buys me the books of Hansi; they
show me the pictures in them," "I am taken along," "They pushed me against him (...),"
"I am told what she said (36-37)," "I was given that bone to chew (63)," etc. The boy is
trapped in the net of words and he is also trapped in net of adults:

The family kept its eye on me, they felt my pulse, took my temperature, made me
stick out my tongue: "Don't you think he's a bit pale?" "It's the light." "I assure
you he's lost weight!" "But Papa, we weighed him yesterday." Beneath those
inquiring gazes I felt myself becoming an object, a flower in a pot. I would finally
be put to bed. Suffocating with heat, simmering under the sheets, I lumped my
body with its discomfort: I did not know which of the two was undesirable (89).

Spoiled and without desire, feminized by maternal tenderness, dulled by the absence of
the father and inflated with pride by the grandfather's adoration, little Sartre has to take
part in the family playacting and pretend that he is happy. Yet in his heart, Poulou is a sad
boy. The exaggerated attention he gets from the family suffocates him and makes him
feel like a dog or a plant. But he has everything he wants and consequently, what could
he possibly complain about:
My mother keeps telling me that I am the happiest of little boys. How could I not believe it since it’s true? I never think about my forlornness. To begin with, there’s no word for it. And secondly, I don’t see it. I always have people around me. Their presence is the warp and woof of my life, the stuff of my pleasures, the flesh of my thoughts (94).

In Perrault’s story, Griselda has a power of seduction over her husband. Her beauty and her moral qualities seduce the prince who adores her: she is so generous, so meek and so loveable! Griselda is offered to us as a model of wifely virtues. In his turn, little Sartre is also a model of childhood virtues. He seduces the circle of grown-ups in which he is trapped with his politeness and good nature. Once, at an anniversary party, dressed in a blue muslin robe, Poulou makes the rounds offering tangerines in a basket. The guests couldn’t help but exclaim: “He’s really an angel! (39).” At six years old, he is an adorable, good-looking boy. People are seduced by his blonde curls and by his round-cheeked expression. And so is grandfather Schweitzer, so pleased and so proud of the literary abilities of his “model grandson (83).” Griselda seduces her husband; Poulou seduces his grandfather and his family circle. Their words and their gestures have the capacity to make people surrounding them happy.

These four analogous features between Poulou and Griselda: obedience, confinement, passiveness, and seduction guide us to a new story that is the blend of Perrault’s tale and Sartre’s childhood. Poulou is a child surrounded by his bourgeois family; Griselda is a shepherdess and later a princess surrounded by the prince and his subjects. These two life stories have in common a protagonist who is obedient and passive, yet seductive. Thus, Griselda’s story is without a doubt a consistent source
domain for Sartre’s autobiography and allows us to elaborate in our mind a conceptual mapping between the child’s and Griselda’s mental spaces. This cross-space mapping, based on analogy vital relation, selectively projects a blended space where Poulou acquires a unique identity:

![Diagram of analogy between C (child's space) and G (Griselda's space)]

Figure 1: “Polou as Griselda” identity-blended space

The child’s space (C) and Griselda’s space (G) are brought together in a blending process based on analogical features that allows Poulou and Griselda to become
conceptual counterparts. These two characters are compressed in the blend into a new identity: a "Poulou as Griselda" mental space where Poulou is a unique child with a unique personality. The C input space has different features, such as the child’s orphanhood, his relations to others, his social environment, his experience of going to school and being educated, his reading, his age, and his obedient personality, to name a few. The obedient child in the input space C is not such an interesting literary image, for there are many children bearing the above-mentioned characteristics. However, in the blend, where his personality is viewed in relation to characteristics projected from Griselda’s space, Poulou acquires a new dimension: we may see obedient children all the time, but just one is obedient in Griselda’s terms. And this singular child is the one in the blend: little Sartre. This new space creates identity, and this stage is only the first in a succession of other identity stages, by which the child both moves along his life path and quests for a mandate that could validate a legitimate selfhood. "Poulou as Griselda" can be decomposed in the original inputs, but the power and compressed structure of the blend cannot be found in either input alone. Compared with C and G spaces, there is new meaning in the blend, and therefore a new identity. This blend is also the first stage in the development of the autobiography: the chronological reference to Sartre’s life is replaced by an early conceptual stage where Sartre’s life begins in relation to Griselda’s story and, as I will later show, constantly unfolds in relation to it.

The achieved identity "Poulou as Griselda" is not a matter of a copy and paste operation but a highly creative mental process. The blend enables a set of correspondences that seem natural even though we might never have previously matched Sartre with Griselda. Weaving this blended scenario requires a selective projection from
the input spaces into the blend. Even if objectively it is difficult to see Sartre in terms of Griselda because of the difference of genre (autobiography/fairytale), of century (20th/19th century) and gender (masculine/feminine), in the blend our mind creates a situation that has some characteristics of Sartre, some of Griselda, and some of its own (cf. next chapter).

The input spaces project selective features into the blend. For example, the child’s space projects the mental image of a little boy who is obedient and passive and who lost his father, and lives with his mother under the supervision of his grandfather. Griselda’s space projects features such as obedience, confinement, passiveness and seduction. However, other information is omitted: Griselda is a humble woman, she is getting married, she is a shepherdess who becomes a princess, she gives birth, etc. These characteristics are present in the input space G, but absent in the blend because they are unimportant for the intended message. In the blended scenario, Sartre acquires, through analogy to selective characteristics of Griselda, a new identity that was absent in the original input C. After these mental operations, the analogy seems obvious: Griselda is a model of obedience and her husband treats her as an object; in his childhood, Sartre was an obedient child and his family manipulated him like an object. This selective analogy is a mental achievement and a highly imaginative operation, for in different circumstances it would be hard to believe that we could easily understand Sartre and Griselda as conceptual counterparts.

In order to use this conceptual scenario as a foundation for Sartre’s construction of identity, it is important to understand that the essence of the analogy between inputs is a partially structured relation. Let me stress here the idea that Sartre’s identity is
comprehended in terms of Griselda's identity. The "Poulou as Griselda" mental concept sets up a scenario in which characteristics of Griselda are projected selectively and partially into a coherent mental space where we conceptualize Sartre's autobiographical construction. His sense of being Griselda stems from his perception of existing in a character-like situation, even though Sartre is clearly quite different from Griselda in most ways. But he experiences life like a manipulated object, trapped in the net of words and in the net of adults. The child endures the grandfather's authority as Griselda endures the prince's authority. They both are under the power of demanding men. The structure of the identity space takes on aspects of the structure of Griselda's space, and Poulou acts accordingly. His behavior and his perceptions correspond in part to the behavior and to the perceptions of Perrault's character.

Therefore, understanding Sartre's experience in his autobiographical discourse in terms of Griselda's experience in Perrault's fairytale allows us to set up a unique identity space and to organize it as a coherent experience. While a set of features is brought into our focus of attention, other features unnecessary for the intended purpose are not activated. The mental projection in the blend is partial, not total. If it were total, Sartre would actually be Griselda, not merely understood in terms of her. Consequently, Sartre is not really Griselda.
4. More than an analogy. Further insight into the blend

As I conceive of it, the “Poulou as Griselda” identity space has all the expected properties of a blend. There is a cross-space mapping linking Poulou and Griselda as conceptual counterparts with similar modes of behavior, such as obedience, confinement, passiveness and seduction. The reader brings these two input spaces together to form a new mental space in which he selectively projects a set of conceptual features that maintain the connections between the blend and the inputs. By composing elements from both inputs, the blend gives us much of the structure of this first identity stage in which the child’s behavior is analogous to Griselda’s. But it is more than just an analogy and than a composition of features. Drawing on this minimal analogous structure, Sartre continues to develop Poulou’s character. The child matures into a more distinct personality: he is obedient, confined, passive, and seductive, and yet also mimetic, prophetic, and imaginative. Once the blend has been established, it can be creatively developed by mental operations such as completion and elaboration. This process of imaginative development, called “running the blend,” is in this case a matter of running the identity space by developing new character features, such as imitation, prophecy and imagination. Through the elaboration of the blend, the gradual impact of this emergent personality can also be tested in relation to the ever-present quest to find a mandate that could justify life. Indeed, later, Poulou realizes that imitation is an imposture, prophecy is nothing but humming (“cabotinage (70)”) and (literary) imagination is a disease. As for now, I will introduce in some detail the emergent structure of the “Poulou as Griselda” identity space, starting with the imitation feature and continuing with the prophecy and imagination features.
Poulou is an orphaned child without a model to inspire him. The grandfather fills this empty role. With his impressive presence of a “holy man (44)” and his “motivated existence” as a teacher and a tutor, grandfather Schweitzer presides over an impressive library, as well as over his family, and he makes a strong impression on Poulou: “My respect increased for that holy man whose devotion was unrewarded (...) (44).” The obedient child imitates the adult until he becomes a small old man. He desires to be just like Schweitzer, to read all the books his grandfather has already read. In short, he hopes to master the library-sanctuary without being aware that he will become its prisoner. The possession of the patriarch’s sanctuary begins with the imitation of the ceremonial:

I was a daily witness of ceremonies whose meaning escaped me: my grandfather – who was usually so clumsy that my grandmother buttoned his gloves for him – handled those cultural objects with the dexterity of an officiant. Hundreds of times I saw him get up from his chair with an absent-minded look, walk around his table, cross the room in two strides, take down a volume without hesitating, without giving himself time to choose, leaf through it with a combined movement of his thumb and forefinger as he walked back to his chair, then, as soon as he was seated, open it sharply “to the right page”, making it creak like a shoe (41). [...] I wanted to start the ceremonies of appropriation at once. I took the two little volumes, sniffed at them, felt them, and opened them casually “to the right page,” making the creak. In vain: I did have the feeling of ownership (...) (45).

Fascinated by the grandfather’s books, these “standing stones (41)” that garnish the library shelves, Poulou believes that by reading them, he may legitimize his existence. Granfather Schweitzer, proud of his age and his culture, “tactfully (61)” presents to his
grandchild the illustrious authors. With a thirst of knowledge, the boy reads authors from Hesiod to Hugo. Rodogune, Théodore, Cid and Cinna become his favorite characters. He devours Musset, Corneille and the encyclopedia. The adult worships these authors as saints and prophets, and the child does likewise.

The imitation feature emerges in the blend based on the preexistent obedience feature, brought in by composition. “Imitation” is new in the blend and it adds to this space richer structure: the image of an obedient-like Griselda child is further completed by the scenario of a mimetic child. Little Sartre is not just obedient like Griselda, without complaining or acting, but he copies his superiors. The identity blend has not just a compositional structure projected from the C and G inputs, but also a new creative property that is not recruited from any of the inputs. As expected, the blended space has an emergent structure that is cognitively operational and allows us to manipulate the various features as an integrated unit. The blend has already been established and by integrating this new property, it acquires further structure. Running the blend gives us an additional set of features (imitation, prophecy and imagination) that highlight the complexity of the “Poulou as Griselda” identity space. This new space is far more than merely a common analogy between two characters and emphasizes Sartre’s creative power to construct new meaning.

Poulou emerges in Schweitzer’s perception as a prophetic child, and the grandfather idolizes him like a gift from Providence. This docile child, who allows his mother to put drops into his nose, to dress and to undress him, to rub him down and to tidy him up, has a prophetic power: “It is not enough for my character to be good, it must also be prophetic: truth flows from the mouth of babes and sucklings (28).” In fact, it is
the grandfather who projects onto him wisdom beyond the child’s age. Schweitzer sees in his words a sign of his death: “It was not Truth, but his death that spoke to me through my mouth (29).” Thus, the little boy “prophesizes”: “I make childish remarks, they are remembered, they are repeated to me. I learn to make others. I made grown-ups remarks. I know how to say things beyond my years without meaning to (30).” Paradoxically, he is adulated and at the same time sad. With only books for companionship and alone in the midst of adults, Poulou at times mentally leaves for an imaginative world that enlivens a dull everyday life. The boy fantasizes that when he is in the library, he is in his grandfather’s belly, “pregnant (70)” with the grown-up readings. One day he sees himself “giving birth (70)” to comments as valuable as those of his grandfather. This imaginative power acquires the traits of a disease, almost a delirium, when the boy sees himself in a disturbing vision as a double person:

Though they were absent, their future gaze entered me through the back of my head, emerged from my pupils, and propelled along the floor the sentences which had been read a hundred times and which I was reading for the first time. I who was seen saw myself. I saw myself reading as one listens to oneself talking (70). Like an “Elia kim of Belles Letters (76),” little Sartre soon finds his religion in the library-temple. He is, like his grandfather, a “sentinel of culture (67).” The fabricated universe of literature becomes his own world. At times, he loses contact with reality and he thinks that he “steeps himself in culture and he recharges himself with sacred every day (72).” The child forgets his role and “races along at breakneck speed, carried away by a made whale that is none other than the world (72).” He has no brother, no sister and no playmate. The writers are his first friends. The grandfather encourages this intimate
relationship and talks to Poulou about writers as if they were children: "(…) All children are inspired; they have nothing to envy poets, who are just children (67)." Poulou takes his grandfather's equation of writers with children to heart and believes that the literary geniuses he admires are his own. He dreams that he holds them in his hands and loves them passionately. Nothing is more natural and yet, nothing is more harmful:

I found more reality in the idea than in the thing because it was given to me and because it was given as a thing. It was in books that I encountered the universe: assimilated, classified, labeled, pondered, still formidable; and I confused the disorder of my bookish experiences with the random course of real events. From that came the idealism, which it took me thirty years to shake off (51).

The minimal conceptual template constructed in the beginning by composition of features (Figure 1) has been completed by the new characteristic of imitation, related to the previously projected feature of obedience. The blend is set up, and it can be further developed according to the principles that have been established for running it. Some of these principles of running the blend have been set by composition and other by completion. Hence, the child bears certain characteristics, and we run the blend to get a certain sense of identity that provides the solution to the child's quest. We are able to run the blend because we know the dynamics of the scenario of a child trying to validate his mandate. And in doing so, the child adopts a personality based of certain characteristics, which are brought into the blend by composition and completion. This scenario gives us principles having to do with the child's personality, acquired at a certain stage in life, with the clear purpose of justifying his existence. The creative possibilities of blending are multiple, and thus the space can be even further elaborated. The above-mentioned
features of prophecy and imagination are brought into the blend by the operation of elaboration, which allows us to recruit new structure for the blend. This new structure needs to be developed in accordance with the principles previously mentioned; hence the personality scenario is enlarged by the elaboration of these latest features. “Poulou as Griselda” blend is an instrument, which temporarily helps the child to fulfill his quest.

Later, the identity blend develops new features (like fakeness and imposture), which are incompatible with the principles of the current scenario. This incompatibility creates tension because it questions the identity achieved in this blend, and diverts the child from the purpose of finding legitimacy in Griselda like personality. The current blend cannot be extended by the elaboration of “fakeness” and “imposture” features because it would result in the representation of contradictory information. Thus, a new space is set up, which I call “New Griselda,” and which represents a new stage in the child’s struggle for significance, and therefore a new hope to validate his mandate. The correspondences and analogies seem an objective part of the scenario and not a mental construct. Previously, the similarities were hard to conceive, but now they seem straightforward. In the blend, Poulou is a novel invention with a new identity: a sweet, generous and wise six-year-old boy, under his grandfather’s influence, who ends up enchanted by literature, enchained by language and suffocated by his family’s tenderness. Griselda and Poulou are like two objects in a pretty glass globe: the young shepherdess is confined to the price’s cruelties and the model grandson is confined to culture and familial playacting. Correspondences between inputs like obedience, confinement, passiveness and seduction are compressed in the “Poulou as Griselda” identity space and thus, the links between the inputs and the blend remain open: we are able at any time to
project them back (to “decompress” them) to the original situation of the inputs. Furthermore, our mind builds on this template new imaginative meaning. For example, Griselda in Perrault’s tale is not presented as mimetic, prophetic or imaginative. Sartre goes beyond the analogy and introduces us to a boy who is obedient and who also prophesizes and copies adults’ ideas and words. This mimetic child, lost in the jungle of words, lives in a fabricated world of characters and fantasy in which he imagines himself as Saint Michael with the power to slay the Evil Spirit. Importantly, these three features (mimesis, prophecy, and imagination) emerge only in the blend and cannot be traced back into the inputs. The blend is an integrated scenario that draws from two analogous mental spaces and is greater than their sum:

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2: “Poulou as Griselda” blend / Emergent structure
Like Griselda, Poulou has a good nature: he is as gentle as a girl and generous with the people around him. His blond curls and his round cheeks seduce the adults. But at what point is he unintentionally seducing? In spite of his angelic appearance, Poulou seems to be a fabricated asset:

   In a word, I give myself; I give myself always and everywhere; I give everything. I have only to push a door to have – I too – the feeling of appearing on the scene. I place the books on top of each other, I turn out my mudpies, I yell. Someone comes and exclaims. I’ve made one more person happy. Meals, sleep, and precautions against bad weather are the high points and chief obligations of a completely ceremonial life. I eat in public, like a king: if I eat well, I am congratulated; my grandmother herself cries out: “What a good boy to be hungry!” (32).

In the blend, the seduction feature is projected from the inputs: Griselda seduces her cruel husband and Poulou seduces his authoritarian grandfather and the circle of his family. Nevertheless, are they sincere? Who is the sweet angel and who is the wicked demon? The story of Griselda is a fairytale, and Perrault depicts a charming world with enchanting characters: a prince falls in love with a beautiful young shepherdess and they marry. The tale has a moral and serves as an example for acceptance and good behavior. Griselda is a model of impressive endurance and strength, able to cope with her cruel husband. Her suffering is never revealed. As a standard for other women to follow, she is above any human qualities and is able to express the deepest love and altruism in spite of her circumstances. Perrault’s character is depicted as a truly virtuous woman and a generous and loving wife. These authentic human qualities are questioned in Sartre’s
novel. Poulou, this sweet child whose only remembered crime is salting the jam, is not a real Griselda. Away from Griselda, the child fabricates his lovely portrait, he takes time to consider how to astound people by his virtues, and misleadingly presents himself as kind and generous:

I spring forward, I slip a small coin into [the hands of the poor] and, most important, I present them with a fine egalitarian smile. I find they look stupid, and I do not like to touch them, but I force myself to: it is an ordeal; and besides, they must love me, that love will beautify their lives (34).

Virtuous for the fun of it, Poulou acts the part of an adorable child and fakes generosity: "My clowning dons the cloak of generosity (...) I drew myself out of nothingness in a burst of altruism and assumed the disguise of childhood so as to give them [the family] the illusion of having a son (31)." Griselda pleases by her real nature, Poulou pleases by his disguised nature: "Only one mandate: to please: everything for show (32)." And if his behavior is faked, fabricated for the show, who hides behind the scene?

The child's seductive good nature seems to be more and more a play-acting nature. Poulou is an idle character who is fabricated in such a way by the adults' desire. His personality is but an adopted role and everything around him serves as his props. He molds himself to the wishes of adults by acting the part of a dutiful buffoon. Eager to charm them, Poulou perceives the world like a play in which he performs and the grown-ups are his audience. Thus, he doesn't live in reality but in a show where everybody has his role. He is a stranger to the needs, hopes, and pleasures of the human species. This exile causes him anguish as he feels that he is nothing but an impostor. Behind the "Poulou as Griselda" identity hides a little monster, invented by his own family:
My truth, my character, and my name were in the hand of adults. I had learned to see myself through their eyes. I was a child, that monster which they fabricated with their regrets. When they were not present, they left their gaze, which preserved my nature as a model grandson, which continued to give me my toys and the universe. My thoughts swam around in my pretty glass globe, in my soul. Everyone could follow their play. Not a shadowy corner. Yet without words, without shape or consistency, diluted in that innocent transparency, a transparent certainty spoiled everything: I was an impostor. How could one put on an act without knowing that one is acting? (83).

This emergent imposture creates tension in the blend. The “Poulou as Griselda” identity achieved by a blending process (with the projected and emergent features in Figure 2) is at this point in the danger of being destabilized: Poulou cannot act like Griselda and at the same time like an impostor. This specific characteristic is incompatible with the previously achieved ones and disanalogous with Griselda’s true good nature. We understand Poulou through matching the child’s attributes with Griselda’s attributes, and through completion and elaboration of new features consistent with the child’s purpose of identity quest. The emergence of an artificial nature questions the identity built in this blend, for an impostor cannot cohabit with Griselda. Nevertheless, this disanalogy does not lead to incoherence. I will address further the paradoxical situation in which the identity blend is violated and yet the reader still maintains a coherent interpretation of the presented identity of the child. This paradox has a conceptual explanation that allows us to use the “Poulou as Griselda” blended space as the input for a new mapping and therefore for a new, yet related, identity stage.
5. Making new out of old: New Griselda

This new identity space achieved in the blend is not just the result of a borrowing operation: once the blend is in place, it acquires a further structure on its own. Nevertheless, the network is not complete, for the structure that the inputs share is captured in a fourth space called the generic space. This space contains abstract information, and the generic is someone who is writing his life story through the screen of “other.” This person in the generic space maps onto Sartre in one input space, and the “other,” which in the present case is a literary character, maps onto Griselda. Generically, there is a common experience shared by the two input spaces, especially in the case of a child who conceives of himself in terms of a cartoon or fairy tale character, but also in the case of an adult who identifies with his mentor or favorite movie star. This skeletal structure is instantiated in inputs by specific information: Sartre writes his life through the screen of Griselda. Moreover, this specific information is projected into the blend where Poulou acquires Griselda’s identity. On the one hand, the child’s input space (C) is the instantiation of an abstract, unknown person whose life is described since childhood. On the other hand, Griselda is the instantiation of another – in this case literary - character whose behavior provides a conceptual structure for the child’s life. The nature of the generic space is abstract, while the nature of the inputs and blend is specific:

1. Generic -- level information: Autobiography → Seeing oneself through the screen of an “other”/literary character. The Nature of “oneself” → generic behavior 1; The Nature of the “other” / literary character → generic behavior 2.

2. Specific -- level information: Poulou/Griselda → Poulou instantiates “oneself” and Griselda instantiates the “other”/literary character. The Nature of Poulou → specific
features that activate generic behavior 1; The Nature of Griselda → specific features that activate generic behavior 2 + further specification of the values of the generic level parameters.

In the generic space of the autobiography in which someone’s life is abstractly understood in terms of a literary character’s life, we have a common schematic notion of the nature\textsuperscript{34} of the autobiographical self and of the nature of the literary character. Their behavior - what they do and how they act - leads us to an understanding of their being - their lives; the way they behave leads us to the way they live. Behavior 1 and Behavior 2 are two abstract mental images that trigger in our mind expectations, for they are activated by specific features in inputs. This generic schema “X wants to be like Y,” where Y is a mentor, model, star, etc. is a commonplace schema in our mind that we understand easily. As long as the two roles X and Y are filled, the behavior concept in the generic space remains open to a number – possibly an infinite number - of features that instantiate that behavior. Sartre’s autobiography is just one specific example among many virtually possible examples of the actualization of this abstract template. In this case, behaviors 1 and 2 are activated in the C and G inputs by a certain number of specific features that are further projected into the blend (see Figure 3). Once the fakeness feature emerges in the identity space, all other specific features are questioned; when fakeness gradually develops into imposture, the structure of the blend is violated. One person cannot maintain a particular identity (built on the projected and emergent features in the blend) and at the same time “cheat” on that identity.
Figure 3: Generic Space

Poulou in the blend cannot be true while also fake: genuine and artificial are opposite features and therefore cannot share the same mental space. However, this incompatibility doesn’t affect the generic-level information, as fakeness and imposture are virtually possible features able to activate an abstract behavior. This is why, when we read the autobiography, the violation of the blend does not affect our understanding. The incongruity at the specific level is integrated at the generic level, but this apparent effortless mental activity has a major consequence for the blend. Assuming that the
violation is not accidental or insignificant, we may interpret it as an intentional request to change our conception of the “Poulou as Griselda” identity in exactly the way indicated. Thus, the violation urges us to take the blend as an input for further conceptual work and to move along the conceptual path to a new stage in which we can expect a new identity, disanalogous with the previous one. Consequently, we set up a new mental space that is grounded in disanalogy with the “Poulou as Griselda” blended space and is ready to collect all the features that are alien to Griselda: pride and arrogance, action and self-awareness, creativity and sadism. This new space that I call “New Griselda,” together with the “Poulou as Griselda” blended space, serves as an input for a second conceptual network in which Sartre’s identity reaches a new stage. But before moving on the conceptual path of Sartre’s life, I will address the anguish caused by the transition between “old” and “new.”

Little Sartre’s family surrounds the wise and obedient child with abundant attention and affection. This excessive fondness enchains him and makes him unhappy. Compelled to pretend that he feels like a king, Poulou, in fact, feels like a hopeless whimpering dog or like a fly climbing up a windowpane, falling and starting up again and again and again (93). Considering his confined condition, Poulou starts to develop negative self-esteem: “A bewildered vermin, a waif and stray, without reason or purpose, I escaped into the family play-acting, twisting and turning, running, flying from imposture to imposture (93).” Thus, being obedient and virtuous like Griselda is perceived as leading a dog’s life and even the life of an impostor as he feels compelled to pretend it is a king’s life.

Poulou gradually realizes that he has been nothing but an object in the hands of adults. Then, a question arises in his mind: what is his reason for being? In his
grandfather’s well-ordered world, he suddenly discovers that his life is merely a justification for the lives of others: “Charles made much of me in order to cajole his death, Louise found in my liveliness a justification for her sulkiness, as Anne Marie did for her humility (86).” His divine childhood was only a part in the staged ceremony that was, unfortunately, his own life. His reason for being slipped away as he just played a character - and not even the main character:

I had been convinced that we were created for the purpose of laughing at the act we put on for each other. I accepted the act, but I required that I be the main character. But when lightning struck and left me blasted, I realized that I had “a false major role,” that though I had lines to speak and was often on stage, I had no scene “of my own,” in short that I was giving grown-ups their cues (86).

The “obedient Griselda” becomes aware of her manipulation and her inutility is brutally revealed to her. Poulou feels ashamed of his “unwonted presence” in the world. Now, he realizes that he counts for little and is “nothing: an ineffaceable transparency (90).” In other words, he is superfluous. The feeling of death haunts him. Oppressed by his own nothingness, and rejecting the wise but insipid child he had been before, the boy seeks stability and verticality: “What would I not have given to be the seat of a contorted landscape, of an obstinacy and persistency upright as a cliff (90).” Griselda wakes up and abruptly shifts from haphazard to persistent and from obedient to obstinate.

Poulou’s seductiveness is not successful for long; the more he tries to please through his performances, the more his efforts are doomed to failure. At the hotel Noirétable, striking evidence hits him hard: he learns that others can also please. This happens when he is nine years old. Charles Schweitzer writes and stages a patriotic play
and Poulou plays character of the young Alsatian. He has a number of melodramatic speeches and strives particularly hard to please the audience and have all eyes fixed on him. But at the end of the performance, because he overplayed his role, the applause went to Bernard, another actor. At that moment, Poulou faces the anguish an aging actress might feel. With a desperate effort to regain the audience, he tears off Bernard’s beard and brandishes it as a trophy, hoping that people will laugh. But “(...) everyone uttered an Oh! of astonishment (106).” This is the child’s first failure, the moment he realizes that his feigned nature is evident and his charms fade away. Even Mme. Picard suspects him of lack of sincerity. The kind, sweet and generous child he was pretending to be, now demonstrates a disturbing, malicious, and vengeful nature. The decadent Griselda loses her power and she is to be replaced by the New Griselda, awakened from her meek and conformist identity. Accomplice to his family for a long time, Poulou awakens the depths of his consciousness and casts off his obedience: he does not want to be affected and suffer any more, instead yearning to act and affect others.

The child questions his existence and realizes that he has been an idolized object, a conceited lap-dog surrounded by rituals. The real reason of being is revealed to him in a time of deep loneliness. At the age of seven, imprisoned in a “glass palace in which the budding century beheld its boredom (110),” Poulou understands that his sole recourse is within himself. He is his own reason for being, and this self-awareness allows him to conceive of himself as indispensable to the universe. In this new stage, the child desires the freedom to act and affect people. From a patient object, he becomes an acting subject for important and secret reasons that concern Dijon, France, and all mankind. In a world of fantasy and dream that he inherits partly from the “Poulou as Griselda” stage, the child
opens his mind and transforms himself into a man of action. The patient Griselda gives
way to the active New Griselda. The imagination feature present only sporadically in the
previous blend becomes now a powerful creative tool, used consciously and efficiently
for the mental creation of a universe of dream and fantasy. In this sense, imagination is a
way to achieve inventiveness and creativity - two features opposed to the imitation of the
previous stage. Poulou imagines that he "invents," "introduces danger," "purges,"
"sacrifices" and "kills (114)." In his invented world, he is no longer a manipulated object
but an acting agent whose absence is immediately noticed: "Someone's missing here. It's
Sartre (114)." Poulou has been helped considerably in this transition from passivity to
action by his mother. During a walk, Anne-Marie stops with him, as if by chance, in front
of a newsstand and gives him the time to select books appropriate for his age. Fascinated
by the wonderful pictures and bright colors, the boy asks for them and the mother is
happy to offer him something different from his grandfather's classics. In this way,
Sartre was able to read a number of books, including *Cri Cri*, *Vacation*, *Around the
World in an Airplane*, *The last of the Mohicans*, etc. All these books, read secretly
outside his grandfather's sanctuary, give him, for the first time, real pleasure. If he had
previously provided entertainment for adults, now he was the one being entertained. The
New Griselda is on her way to coming into being:

I owe to these magic boxes - and not to the balanced sentences of Chateaubriand
- my first encounters with Beauty. When I opened them, I forgot about
everything. Was that reading? No, but it was death by ecstasy. From my
annihilation there immediately sprang up natives armed with spears, the bush, an
explorer with a white helmet. I was vision, I poured forth light on the beautiful
dark cheeks of Aouda, on Phineas Fogg’s sideburns. Freed from himself at last, the little wonder became a pure wonderment. Twenty inches from the floor, an unfettered, a perfect happiness was born. The New World seemed at first more disturbing than the Old (...) (74).

The New Griselda stage is a vision “twenty inches from the floor.” It is a pure creation of Poulou’s mind, yet so present and so real that the child is completely absorbed by it. The boy escapes into this world of dreams, and he is deeply convinced that one day he will become the New Griselda identity. Everything takes place in his head and nobody can reach or control his fantasies. The grandfather can no longer influence his grandson’s imagination. New Griselda is free to live her life and to make her own decisions.

Upon activating features like self-awareness, action and creativity, the New Griselda mental space suggests straightforward disanalogous correspondences with the “Poulou as Griselda” mental space. Sartre’s new identity emerges from the cross-mapping of these two input spaces in a new space, the “Poulou as New Griselda” blend. The input spaces are linked by the disanalogy vital relation. Although New Griselda is a different concept from Griselda, the two domains share disanalogous structure and vocabulary: one prepares a revolt, the other obeys; one creates, the other imitates; the first is authentic, the second is an impostor. Nevertheless, both inputs represent two different versions of Sartre’s identity and project different features into the disanalogous identity blend “Poulou as New Griselda.”
Figure 4: “Poulou as New Griselda” identity – blended space

This inverted relationship between opposing identities is captured in the mirror that reveals to the child a blended image of good and evil. This mirror helps him construct at a cognitive level the imaginative identity of a monster: “The mirror was of great help to me: I made it teach me that I am a monster (109).” The mirror reflects the disanalogous image of an Eliakim of Belles Lettres playing Quasimodo’s role and the inverted image of a guardian angel playing a soiled cherub’s role. The New Griselda
conceptual network makes it clear that the reference to Griselda does not simply encode a referential relationship between the child’s identity and a fairy-tale character, but directs the ongoing construction of Sartre’s identity in this autobiographical discourse. The disanalogy between the two stages reaches the most dramatic inversion when New Griselda becomes the perfect illustration of her cruel husband and becomes the one inflicting pain:

I had read the story of Griselda a dozen times with a thrill of pleasure. Yet I did not like to suffer, and my early desires were cruel: the defender of so many princesses had no scruples about mentally spanking the little girl next door. What pleased me about that not very praiseworthy story was the victim’s sadism and the inflexible virtue that ended with the fiendish husband on his knees. That was what I wanted for myself: to force the magistrates to kneel, to make them revere me so as to punish them for their bias (129).

With this new proud and sadistic identity, the child develops “a hatred of happy swoons, of abandonment, of that caressed and coddled body (112).” He says: “I found myself by opposing myself. I plunged into pride and sadism, in other words, into generosity (...). In order to escape the forlornness of the creature, I was preparing for myself the most irremediable bourgeois solitude, that of the creator (112).” Poulou prepares a revolt against the oppressor that entails a different philosophy of generosity that shifts from kindness to sadism and from meekness to pride and a different desire that shifts from mimesis to creativity and from obedience to self-controlled action. The New Griselda identity gives him real hope of escape from his grandfather’s library, from culture, and from family playacting and also the hope to reach “an unfettered and perfect happiness
(74)." Opposing his grandfather's oppression, the child sets up an imaginative space, where New Griselda is a fantasy, a vision and a dream, but a dream that he is determined to make true one day. Everything takes place in his head: as an imaginary child, fabricated by his grandfather's imagination, Poulou defends himself by means of his own imagination. He is so deeply involved in this imaginative simulation that it becomes a spiritual reality extremely present in his mind, but that remains to be built one day. The project is in place, only the construction is postponed. Before I turn to this escapist project and to the consequences that it entails, it will be helpful to make some remarks regarding the conceptual path that we have followed up to this point.

Even if Griselda is deeply incompatible with the new Griselda, the first triggers the second and the second relies on the first. We could not understand the later stage of identity without having a clear idea about a known space that serves as our background information for the coming conceptual process. Consequently, we understand the New Griselda space not independently but in (disanalogous) relation to the previous one. The two stages are, of course, chronologically successive: first Poulou as Griselda, then as New Griselda. And Sartre's life certainly advances chronologically. Nevertheless, as my work shows, his autobiography is not built in relation to the irreversibly chronological path of life, but in relation to a conceptual source domain that is Charles Perrault's *Tale of Griselda*. This input space is not a mere reference, but a conceptual source that Sartre uses actively and dynamically in the course of autobiographical construction. A Griselda-like life reflects the way Sartre thinks and feels about his own life. Therefore, the conceptual non-linear aspect takes over the chronological linear aspect. In this sense, I would like to remark that the transition between the Griselda and New Griselda stages is
not clear-cut. New Griselda doesn’t neatly follow the first identity stage, and the “Poulou as Griselda” blended space offers examples of significant overlapping of the two stages.

Recurrent insights and questions indicate that the child is hiding his true nature and predict the transition from Griselda to New Griselda. For example, Sartre writes, “I am so conscious of my force that I do not hesitate to arouse within me the most criminal temptations just in order to give myself the pleasure of rejecting them: what if I stood up and yelled Boom! (27),” and “What prevented me from yelling at the top of my voice: That old monkey [M. Barrault] stinks like a pig? (81).” Even though at this stage the child lives his life in terms of Griselda’s life, he harbors non-conformist temptations to “stay up,” to “yell,” and to be aggressive. This vocabulary is not compatible with the vocabulary of the current blend and gives us a glimpse of the future identity. These questions that shake the conformist Griselda become gradually more violent: “What prevented me from plucking Daisy’s eyes out? (148).” When M. Barrault with his strong breath bends over the child’s notebook for the first time, Poulou turns his head away. Such questions and gestures are the first signs of minor disobedience that announce the arrogant and sadist Griselda in the coming stage.

Inversely, the New Griselda stage overlaps at some point with the previous one. Remember that the imagination feature is emergent in the “Poulou as Griselda” blend, giving it - along with other features - a structure of its own. In the first blend, imagination is a tool of childish fantasy that gradually transforms into a powerful tool of action and creativity in the New Griselda blend, opposing in this way the imitation feature. However, since the beginning, imagination is associated at times with the disturbing aspect of delirium and disease: Poulou sees himself in an unnatural vision as a double
person. Later when the child escapes to a world of fantasy that belongs just to him, he experiences freedom and happiness. But later the old delirious visions come back and haunt him. This delirium feature is projected from the first identity space in which Poulou thought of the library as his grandfather’s belly and believed that he had the power to be in two places at the same time. Even though he acquired a new identity composed of self-confidence and optimism, the past does not allow him to fully experience his happiness. Some hidden links still project him back into the “Poulou as Griselida” identity space. For example, the boy is convinced that he sees death everywhere and loses his self-consciousness in a disturbing vision of death:

I saw death. When I was five, it lay in wait for me. In the evening, it would prowl in the balcony, press its nose against the window. I saw it, but I dared not say anything (...). I had an appointment with it every night in bed. This was a rite. I had to lie on my left side, with my face to the wall. I would wait, all atremble, and it would appear, a very run-of-the-mill skeleton with a scythe. I was then allowed to turn on my right side. It would go away. I could sleep in peace (95).

All these examples of temporal overlapping illustrate the fact that the creation process is not chronological: on the one hand, one identity stage may contain elements that belong to a later identity stage, and on the other hand, this later identity stage may echo the previous one. These stages are coherently and consistently structured on the conceptual level, in which Griselda’s story is used for the construction of autobiography and for the analysis of childhood.
6. Heroic dreams. Fantasy adventures

The disanalogy relationship in the New Griselda network (Figure 4) brings together two incompatible input spaces: the “Poulou as Griselda” blended space, which will farther serve as input in the conceptual process, and the New Griselda mental space. Both spaces project different features in the blended space “Poulou as New Griselda.” The previous conceptual network of Griselda, discussed in the third section (Figure 1), was grounded on an analogy between two spaces, but in this case the blend draws its power from being able to operate through incompatible spaces. In the New Griselda network, Poulou builds his identity on the contrast between an obedient and a disobedient Griselda, for he continues his search for a mandate, which could validate his life. Implicitly, in the blend, Poulou is the disobedient New Griselda: an identity that he constructs on the conceptual features projected from the New Griselda input: pride, action, self-awareness, sadism, and creativity. These features, incompatible with the ones in the “Poulou as Griselda” blend, are recruited in a new created space. New Griselda stays coherent at the generic level in which the commonsense schema “Seeing oneself through the screen of the other” has been already activated in our mind, and New Griselda fills in the role of the “other.” Of course, this generic role is actualized by specific features opposite to those instantiating the role of Griselda.

In the new blend, Poulou retains all the features of the disobedient Griselda and just one from Griselda: the confinement feature is the unique feature to be projected from the previous stage into the new one. But before presenting the (tragic) consequences of this unique “inheritance,” let me turn to the emergent structure of the “Poulou as New Griselda” identity space. The child recruits his pride, action, self-awareness, sadism, and
creativity from the “Poulou as New Griselda” space, but other aspects of his identity stem from his hero status. As the blend has been already established (Figure 4), now it is further elaborated and structured. On the one hand, the child has a complex identity that can be decompressed into the inputs, thus leading to its original implications, and on the other hand, the child acquires a heroic dimension, emergent in the blend.

Figure 5: “Poulou as New Griselda” identity - space / Emergent structure
Little Sartre starts reading books appropriate for his age, like *Around the World in an Airplane*, *Captain Grant's Children*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and they fascinate him because they make him dream. Gradually, absorbed by these fantasies, he escapes into the new worlds they present, even intervening in them and changing the characters and himself. Afterwards, this is his own temple and he has full power over his faithful characters! Why wouldn't he play a role in it too? And the cult of the hero is born in his mind:

My first stories were merely a repetition of *The Blue Bird*, of *Puss in Boots*, of the tales of Maurice Bouchor. They talked to themselves behind my forehead, between my eyebrows. Later, I dared touch them up, I gave myself a role in them. They changed nature. I didn't like fairies; there were too many of them around me. The magical element was replaced by feats of valor. I become a hero. I cast off my charms. I was no longer a matter of pleasing, but of imposing. I abandoned my family. Karlemami and Ann-Marie were excluded from my fantasies. Sated with gestures and attitudes, I performed real acts in my reveries. I invented a difficult and mortal world, that of Cri-Cri, of the Stunner, of Paul d'Ivoi (113).

New Griselda takes her husband's place; Poulou takes his grandfather's place. This is not just a matter of conceptual disanalogy between two input spaces, but a matter of creating a new world that goes with this disjuncture. The boy stands up and faces the grandfather with an army of characters and authors that are strikingly different from the classics. The "New World" seems more disturbing than the "Old (74)"; there are murders and pillages and torrents of blood. Everything escapes from the grandfather's established world in a perpetuated disorder in which villain crusaders, paladins and anarchists come on stage
eager to play action heros. Poulou becomes one of these characters as he wields his saber and “sends heads flying (114).” He has no reason to envy Charles any more, as now he has a brand new library. Standing up to his grandfather, Poulou emerges as a hero and a righter of wrongs: he purges, he kills and he crushes evil in his arms. The child is fascinated by characters like Cyrano of the Underworld and Arsène Lupin, symbols of national aggressiveness. These current heroes infuse him with the spirit of revenge. In his fantasies, he becomes an avenger. At the end of the day, he hurries to bed, eager to return to his “mad recklessness (114).” But in the end, he gets bored with war, vengeance and violence and discovers that when evil is followed by good, the hero is rewarded and admired:

I noted that the return to order was always accompanied by progress, the heroes were rewarded; they received honors, tokens of admiration, money; thanks to their dauntlessness, a territory had been conquered, a work of art had been protected from the natives and taken to our museums; the girl fell in love with the explorer who had saved her life; it all ended with a marriage. From these magazines and books I derived my most deep-seated phantasmagoria: optimism (75).

A new perspective unfolds in front of his eyes: why not use the power he has now to shape a different destiny? Instead of acting like a hated and feared hero, Poulou imagines himself as a rewarded hero and a remembered rescuer. He makes up scenarios of peril and thrilling insecurity in which he walks on a flaming roof to save an unconscious woman. When he discovers cinema, new scenarios flood his mind. Like a brave
musketeer, he defends a young countess against the king’s brother. The movies he watches on the screen consolidate his desire to stage his own characters one day.

New Griselda seems so alive in the child’s mind because she is simply a deferred future. Nevertheless, Poulou has to indefinitely postpone the glorification of his individual heroism and feels more and more that he is again locked up in a prison. This time it is the prison of his own fantasies, a world of repetition and imaginary action. The role of the hero he is playing does not help him find a profound reason for being. For now, Poulou cannot be New Griselda, but merely play her role. And he is tired of playing so many roles in so many performances! He realizes that his reason for being and his mandate for life cannot be found in a comedy or fabricated reality. True reality cannot be helpful either because the absence of a father locks him into an irreversible orphaned situation. He cannot do anything about the absence of his father and he has to conform to this privation: “I remained Griselda, for want of a czar, of a God, or quite simply of a father (133).” New Griselda collapses in spite of her self-awareness and her universe filled with heroic characters. Poulou finds himself behaving as an impostor for a second time and leading two invented lives. As Griselda, he was a model grandson celebrated by grandfather Schweitzer and, as New Griselda, he “sank into imaginary mopping (133).” He shifts from one role to another and remains a prisoner of make believe.

The heroism feature, emergent in the “Poulou as New Griselda” blended space, represents the hope to build the foundation for a different identity on the previous one. In the blend, Poulou grows aware of being manipulated by his grandfather and undergoes a deep transformation. From the New Griselda disanalogue input, he inherits features like action, pride, imagination and creativity. At times, he is sadistic and arrogant, two
properties opposed to the seduction and obedience in the "Poulou as Griselda" input space. The compression of these characteristics into a complex identity, achieved in the "Poulou as New Griselda" blended space, maps the mental image of a child who tries to master his actions and escape from culture and family playacting. He builds a simulated world of characters where he plays a role himself. This fantasy opens his mind to new adventures. Nobody can follow him in his dreams and he is free to accomplish the bravest deeds. The obedient and mimetic child he was before becomes a hero fighting for mankind. Sad and annoyed before, Poulou is a new child in New Griselda's world: he is optimistic, dynamic and happy. The disanalogy between Griselda and New Griselda seems to be the key for a happy ending. Little Sartre opposes his grandfather by creating a new world and faces him with characters other than those in classical French novels. The child's world is in place and runs: he is involved in the scenarios and modifies them. The grandfather is the master of a large library; Poulou is the master of his own library. By a disanalogous vital relation, Griselda takes the place of her husband and Poulou takes the place of his grandfather. This results in unexpected happiness: New Griselda can act, decide, create and inflict pain. She is self-confident, even proud and arrogant like the prince and Charles Schweitzer. In spite of his forays into a self-controlled life, the old Griselda, like a phantom, presses her nose against the window. The "Poulou as Griselda" input space does not just have a disanalogical cross-mapping with the New Griselda input; it also projects the confinement feature into the blend. This is a persistent link to a past that Poulou believed had vanished!

By defying his grandfather, Poulou thinks he opposes him. Every character he interprets is different from his grandfather's established order. The child perpetuates a
disordered and even violent world in order to run away from his grandfather. But the more he tries to distance himself from Schweitzer, the closer he gets to him. Surrounded by his own heroes, Poulou accentuates the adult’s egotistic cult. The child wants to be the master of his literary world just like Schweitzer is master of his library. More than ever, he is a caricature of his grandfather. The evasion in the New Griselda fantasy is not a step towards freedom but a step towards more pronounced imitation and therefore stricter confinement. In his eager desire to escape, Poulou thinks that he is quite different and far from Schweitzer, but actually, he is just a *mise en abîme* of his grandfather’s universe: they are both enchanted with literature and enchained by language. They are both trapped in a net of words! Thus, Griselda suddenly revives and activates the feature of confinement to the culture. Poulou believed for a while that he was a musketeer, but he realizes that he is just a sentinel, a sentinel for culture like Charles Schweitzer. New Griselda misled the child, faked the truth and revealed him as an impostor. For the second time, the imposture feature spreads tension in the “Polou as New Griselda” blended space, questions the child’s identity, and announces a new development. The story of life keeps progressing along the conceptual path.

Poulou is so deeply enchanted with the world of fantasy he created that it is hard for him to let go of it. Obviously, he has been misled, as his literary world is finally just a copy of the grandfather’s readings. However, the child got so involved in this creation (or fabrication) that he is ready to give New Griselda a second chance. Maybe he was an impostor who made up characters and imagined himself as a hero, but maybe there is also a possibility of rehabilitation. His dreams may become reality by shifting from imagination and reading to writing. Thus, the child is convinced that he is able to pluck
the pictures from his head and realize them in the external world. Expressing himself by writing would be a productive way to anchor his dreams in the world and finally get the mandate that would legitimate his life.

Charles Schweitzer, who is not aware of Poulou's secret dreams, is delighted by the idea that his model grandson enjoys writing. The child starts with little poems in response to his grandfather's letters. He makes such a good impression on his family that Anne-Marie teaches him the rules of prosody and offers him a rhyming dictionary. This is the start of an adventure in which he reinvents in writing the characters from his earlier readings. The boy experiences the anguish of a writer. Partly plagiarizing and partly imagining, Poulou is able to transform his fantasies into reality: the reality of the book. *For a Butterfly* and *The Banana-Seller* are his first novels. Blending memory with imagination, little Sartre has the strong feeling that his characters have the density of objects. His plots grow complicated, he adds new episodes and he multiplies enemies. With patience and application, he invents more and plagiarizes less. Writing gives him the power to project his epic dreams onto characters. As an author, the hero is still himself.

Writing offers the child a double pleasure: he brings his dreams into reality and he becomes a hero - a hero of the pen. New Griselda seems to be rehabilitated. The child has the power to take action in the real world and live like a hero. In his dreams, Poulou sought reality and now this reality appears across the white page; the words are the quintessence of things. This might be the key he was looking for that leads to freedom. And the key is at last in his hands. He is so good with words that everybody tells him he is meant to be a writer. Thus, the power to make his dreams come true is inside him since
everybody vouches for his talent as a writer. He, a fabricated child, becomes a true hero whose exploits are penned into books. This perspective finally convinces him: the child adopts the mission to write and to protect the human race.

The emergent heroism feature in the "Poulou as New Griselda" blended space is so accentuated here that it becomes hyperbolic. New Griselda, already oriented towards action and creativity, becomes in the blend a hero of the pen. Poulou is set to defend mankind against terrible dangers: "I was a writer-knight, I was being split in two, each half became a whole man, encountered the other, and challenged his existence (173)." New Griselda is at her apogee. Now, she is a fully acting subject and the disanalogy with Griselda is at its most pronounced phase. The writer-knight position aligns New Griselda with famous action heroes like Pardaillan and Michel Strogoff and places her in opposition to Griselda. Pardaillan, Michel Strogoff, New Griselda and little Sartre are blended into a single being. In the child’s mind, together they rescue the human species from danger and evil. The pen is a feared arm; the word is a mighty weapon! The boy imagines himself involved in the Dreyfus affair playing the role of Zola. He is insulted in the courtroom, but he stands up and his powerful phrases make people draw back. The quiet Griselda, stored away, gives at times a breath of fresh air to the restless New Griselda: "And, of course, I refuse to flee to England; unappreciated, forsaken, what a thrill to be Griselda again, to trump the streets of Paris without suspecting for a minute that the Pantheon awaits me (175)."

In order to save the world, Poulou is ready to die for it and transform himself from a writer-knight into a writer-martyr: "[T]he world was a prey to Evil; there was only one way of salvation: to die to one’s self and to the World, to contemplate the impossible
Ideas from the vantage point of a wreckage (178).” But when a knight sacrifices himself, he is doing so for the king’s sake. If Poulou is armed to fight and prepared to die, for whose sake is he doing so? This hesitation revives an old problem: he is a fake child, fabricated by his grandfather’s imagination, and without a father. Thus, nobody asks him to fight or die. How could he be a knight without a king’s orders? Besides, in order to fight evil, evil must exist. It is not enough to want to be a hero; there must be dragons to challenge him and justify his fight:

The anxiety persisted in another form. I sharpened my talent, well and good. But what purpose would it serve? Human beings needed me: to do what? I had the misfortune to question myself about my role and destination. I asked: “Well, what is all about?” and I thought then and there that all was lost. It was about nothing. Wanting to be a hero is not enough. Neither courage not the gift suffices; there must be hydras and dragons. There were none in sight (174).

Unfortunately, the grandfather, who believes in bourgeois democracy, assures the child that mankind does not need to be saved. Everything is perfectly fine and even on the way to perfection. Poulou is disappointed and finds himself useless: “I was back where I started from and I thought I would stifle in that world without conflicts which left the writer unemployed (177).” He cannot be a hero; there are no conflicts and nobody needs to be saved. New Griselda, then, is an impostor as well. With a desperate desire to be noticed and to hang on for one more second to his dream of heroism, the boy tries to play the oppressor. First, a writer-knight, then a writer-martyr, now he is a writer-oppressor. Griselda takes again the place of her oppressive husband. Before saving mankind, Poulou wants to blindfold and abandon it. He, the writer-hero, will run far away, leaving behind
an orphaned mankind surrounded only by his books that remind us of his brave presence in the world.

New Griselda is a new impostor. Arrogant and heroic, at times sadistic, she gave the boy the illusion that with his rich imagination and ease with words, he could be a hero: a knight or martyr able to fight against tyranny and save mankind. But once again he has been misled. The writing that gave him a new hope of escape is just one more imitation: “I wrote in imitation, for the sake of the ceremony, in order to act like a grown-up; above all, I wrote because I was Charles Schweitzer’s grandson (140).” Beyond this mimetic behavior, the heroic dreams he put on paper were even more illusory. He took words as the quintessence of things: “I thought I had anchored my dreams in the world by the scratchings of a steel nib (142).” Thus, Poulou faces a double imposture: the fake Griselda and the misleading New Griselda. Powerless and hopeless, he is ashamed by his literary exercises and wants to live in obscurity. The child prepared to win battles and enjoy glory is now deceived and humiliated.
7. Multiple blends as conceptual stages in the construction of autobiography

The humiliation feature is incompatible with the previous features in the "Poulou as New Griselda" blended space. Properties like pride and arrogance are disanalogous with humiliation and deception, and the identity acquired in this contradictory blend is judged to be an imposture. New Griselda, heroic and optimistic, collapses just like the mimetic and obedient Griselda did. Thus, because Griselda as well as New Griselda were not able to offer the child the mandate to validate a legitimate selfhood, he needs to continue his quest, leaving behind him these two false identity stages, with the hope that he will reach to the purpose he has. These two disanalogous mental spaces map incompatible features and share a single common property: the confinement to culture. This particular feature can be decompressed back in every mental space up to the original input space of Perrault’s character of Griselda. Analogous or disanalogous to Griselda, Poulou is servile to culture and in particular to literature. Poulou and Griselda are both submissive to the oppressor.

In the "Poulou as New Griselda" identity space, the child cannot be at the same time proud and humiliated, hero and impostor. The specific-level information is violated and it is necessary to open another mental space that could recruit all the incompatible incoming elements. Once again, at the generic level, this mental space that is triggered by the violation of the previous blend maintains its coherence because of the instantiation of generic roles in the commonsense metaphor "I see myself through the screen of the other;" but of course, the two roles have specific information. This violation at the specific level is a phenomenon present in the creative process since the beginning of the autobiography. One blended identity space persists in the metal process until a specific
feature, which cannot cohabit with the currently activated ones, violates it. One identity stage moves along the conceptual path to a new stage that is the outcome of incompatibility and disanalogy with the previous stage. Every conceptual stage is generated by what came before it, and this Russian-doll-like mental effect expresses the way the autobiographical discourse is conceptually structured. Sartre’s life story is grounded in a network of successive blends in which each blend serves as input for the next in terms of their analogous or disanalogous relationship to Griselda. Each successive identity acquired in the blend is suspected of imposture and seemingly abandoned, but each effort to build a new identity leads Sartre back to the starting point of Griselda.

The conceptual network of Sartre’s autobiography is built dynamically and at this point integrates two networks of spaces: the Griselda analogous space and the New Griselda disanalogous space. They both correspond to a different stage in Sartre’s autobiography: mimetic behavior and heroic fantasy. The humiliation and disillusion characteristics trigger the projection of a new space into which they could be integrated. I call this new space the Anti-Griselda space. This new construction depends on a complex blending that prompts disillusionment, as Poulou gradually looses his optimism and dreams of heroism. Features like disillusionment and, as I will show, anti-heroism, are achieved in the blend based on disanalogy with New Griselda. “Poulou as Anti-Griselda” is the final stage in Sartre’s construction of identity and can be matched to the previous blend “Poulou as New Griselda” based on the disanalogous situations of the deceived child and deceived adult. The disanalogous match is triggered by the incompatibility of two sets of features: on the one hand, arrogance is incompatible with humility, and
happiness with disillusion, and on the other hand heroism is incompatible with anti-heroism. Anti-Griselda is grounded in Poulou’s disenchantment with New Griselda.

Figure 6: “Sartre as Anti-Griselda” identity-space

Little Sartre has been misled by his grandfather’s ideas and by his own readings. He thought that he could give life to his characters by expressing his fantasy on paper. This idealism has been the child’s first realism: “(...) as a result of discovering the world through language, for a long time I took language for the world (182).” Writing gave him the persistent illusion that he had the power to create living things just by mixing words
ingeniously. Caught in the trap of phrases, Poulou had such an intimate relation with writing that he saw himself as ontologically related to it. The illusion had been so entrancing that the disenchchantment is startling:

I was beginning to find myself. I was almost nothing, at most an activity without content, but that was all that was needed. I was escaping from play-acting. I was not yet working, but I had already stopped playing. The liar was finding his truth in the elaboration of his lies. I was born of writing. Before that, there was only a play of mirrors. With my first novel I knew that a child had got into the hall of mirrors. By writing I was existing, I was escaping from the grown-ups, but I existed in order to write, and if I said “I,” that meant “I who write”. In any case, I knew joy. The public child was making private appointments with himself (153).

Writing appears to Poulou as a craft and adult activity and it is through writing that he developed into an adult. Moreover, his family infused him with the idea that he was gifted in literature and would undoubtedly shine as a writer by virtue of his talent. The next great man, after Napoleon, Themistocles and Philip Augustus, would be Jean-Paul Sartre. Thus, in the course of discussions that were repeated over and over by his family, his destiny was shaped. It was established that he was dedicated to belles lettres. During the war Poulou realizes that the real heroes are the soldiers and that heroism is within reach of every adult but him. He is ashamed by his childish fantasies and is ready prepared to give up literature. But the child regains confidence because it was said that he has an imperative mandate to write. The adults chose his vocation for him: “The grown-ups, who were installed in my soul, pointed to my star; I didn’t see it, but I saw their fingers pointing; I believed in the adults who claimed to believe in me (207).” This
image from childhood followed Sartre into adulthood, and he remained steadfast in his fascination with words. For a long time, Sartre took language for reality and like Poulou, the adult sets up cathedrals of words and believes in the incorruptible substance of the text. His disenchantment is an on-going process that covers the majority of his literary career.

The child capable of heroic dreams becomes the deceived man tethered to reality. As an adult, Sartre is convinced that he has kept his disturbing past at a respectful distance. He knows he is not born talented, for his books "reek of sweat and effort (163)." He only has been told that he is a gifted writer. Awakened from a childish dream that he now perceives as a neurosis, Sartre feels cured of his heroism. For example, Nausea, an existentialist novel representative for the antihero concept, was a big success. The writer seems to be liberated from the haunting memory of New Griselda and free from the heroic dream. Roquentin, the protagonist of Nausea, is an antihero who turns his back on adventure, courage and optimism. Presumably free from the heroic dream, Sartre is in fact an inverted hero. Griselda, New Griselda and Anti-Griselda accompanied his childhood, but Anti-Griselda survived into his adulthood. Readers imagined that the disillusioned Sartre lurked behind Oreste and Roquetin; in fact, Sartre was playing into the myth of himself as the existential author to again appear as a hero. There is no difference between Roquentin's creator and the child who imagined himself as Pardaillan, New Griselda or Michel Strogoff and who dreamed of saving mankind by using the pen as a sword. The writer-knight from of childhood is inverted here into an antihero, an antihero not opposite but identical to the hero. For a long time, Anti-Griselda
pretended to give him a new identity, but the heroic illusion persisted. As Sartre confesses, for thirty years he has suffered from a lucid blindness:

At the age of thirty, I executed the masterstroke of writing in Nausea — quite sincerely, believe me — about the bitter unjustified existence of my fellowmen and of exonerating my own. I was Roquentin; I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life. At the same time, I was I, the elect, chronicler of Hell, a glass and steel photomicroscope peering at my own protoplasmic juices. Later, I gaily demonstrated that man is impossible; I was impossible myself and differed from the others only by the mandate to give expression to that impossibility, which was thereby transfigured and become my most personal possibility, the object of my mission, the springboard of my glory. I was a prisoner of that obvious contradiction, but I did not see it, I saw the world through it. Fake to the marrow of my bones and hoodwinked, I joyfully wrote about our unhappy state. Dogmatic though I was, I doubted everything except that I was the elect of doubt. I built with one hand what I destroyed with the other, and I regarded anxiety as the guarantee of my security; I was happy (251).

The Anti-Griselda blended space comprises a long stretch of Sartre’s life and now we see Sartre instead of Poulou. The thirty years that rolled by are compressed into a single mental space in which the child moved through his life and became the adult Sartre. In this blend, time is compressed on a large scale and Poulou the child becomes Sartre the autobiographer. This space is an integral part in the overarching story: Sartre’s story of life. First mimetic and obedient, then heroic, and now antiheroic, Sartre presents different stages of his life that are compressed into three successive blended spaces: Griselda, New
Griselda, and Anti-Griselda. All these blends are integrated into the autobiographical conceptual network. This is possible only because vital relationships of analogy and disanalogy grounded in incompatibility and disenchantment link the inputs. Analogous to Griselda in the first blend, Sartre escapes in family playacting, the only freedom available to him. In all three spaces, he remains a prisoner. As a child, he is confined to his grandfather’s ideas; as a hero, he finds himself useless for mankind that doesn’t need his help; and as an anti-hero, he is an inverted hero, unaware that behind his characters he still celebrates the hero. In the beginning, Sartre is a prisoner of his grandfather’s readings, then of his heroic dreams, and later of his anti-heroic novels. Griselda, New Griselda and Anti-Griselda collapse one after the other. One could ask what is the result of these multiple blends drawn from restless attempts and repeated disillusionment? In order to answer this question, let me integrate all the previous blends into this global picture of autobiography in which Sartre’s life is conceptually built in a final megablend.
The final blend, "Sartre as Griselda," results from the conceptual integration of three networks that compress different events into a single intelligible scenario. The compression effect pulls together the elements of a story that unfolds through time. We are able to trace the meaning of Sartre's life from childhood until 1964 when The Words was published. "Sartre as Griselda" is the identity that the writer assumes in 1964, at the age of 59. The successive scenes of Griselda, New Griselda and Anti-Griselda prompt a final conceptual blend that represents the story of Sartre's life. The blend "Sartre as
Griselda” is a final megablend that includes all previous blends in a single compression. From many (successive) identities we arrive at a unique identity: “Sartre as Griselda” is a stage livable on the human scale.

By virtue of conceptual blending and massive compression, a relatively simple story like Perrault’s *The tale of Griselda* can prompt the construction of an extremely complicated meaning. Bringing together Sartre and Griselda in an elaborate, integrated network allows us to understand the writer’s autobiographical construction. Each previous blend becomes an input space projecting a unique feature into the final “Sartre as Griselda” blend. Collapsed one after the other, all Griselda spaces share a common feature: the confinement to culture, literature, and ultimately words. This characteristic can be decompressed in every successive blend back to the original Griselda input space based on Perrault’s tale in which the shepherdess is confined to her husband’s castle and imprisoned by his cruel whims. Each and every input space in the autobiographical conceptual network projects the confinement feature into the final “Sartre as Griselda” identity space.

Approaching, opposing, or inverting Griselda, the child as well as the adult are possessed by words. Sartre remains faithful to literature, as Griselda remains faithful to her husband. There is no way to escape. The only difference is that Sartre is aware of this imprisonment. Disillusioned with literature and yet unable to stop writing, trapped in a net of words and yet attracted by them, he finally realizes that literature possesses him and he has to accept to live as Griselda. *Nulla dies sine linea* is the tragic revelation of a prisoner that at some point hoped for freedom.
After his experience as an antihero, Sartre is disillusioned, a feeling that is projected into the blend from the Anti-Griselda input space. Now he is fully aware that he cannot save the world with his writing, he can neither be a martyr for writing, nor can he ignore his call to it. Sartre identifies with Roquentin and tries to give up the world and heroic dreams. He is the anti-hero who renounces everything but renouncement itself. The negation of heroism is just an inversion of it and remains dangerous. Trying to create a new world and destroy the old character of Griselda, Sartre locks himself up in a new prison. The more he runs away from Griselda, the closer he gets to her. This paradox is revealed to him in the final blend, where the 59-year-old Sartre is deeply aware of the impossibility of his freedom. He cannot save the world with his pen, nor can he stop writing: “My commandments were sewn into my skin; if I go a day without writing, the scar burns me; if I write too easily, it also burns me (164).” He is just a machine that makes books, therefore an impostor, but an impostor aware of who he is. And this makes all the difference. Sartre is a deceived and hopeless Griselda who knows that literature is useless to himself and the world, and nonetheless continues to write: this is his prison and also his freedom. Hopefulness is to Sartre a form of torture, whereas hopelessness gives him a sense of resigned peace. If this autobiography is tragic, it is because Sartre is aware of his limits. When he realizes that he is unable to justify, save, or punish the world, his tragedy begins. In this perspective, isn’t he a Sisyphus? Griselda, patient and obedient, bravely endures her husband’s severe treatment, and is therefore stronger than her destiny. Sisyphus’s condition is similar: he is stronger than the gods with his superior faithfulness to the falling rock. Sartre keeps writing books even though they are useless for the salvation of the world and the fulfillment of his heroic dreams. Griselda, Sisyphus,
and Sartre are related through their destinies as the oppressed, whether oppressed by a husband, the gods, or culture. We have to imagine Griselda happy, and thus Sartre happy!

Notes


2. Contat, 2.

3. Contat, 2, “Pour une conscience de ce type, le projet autobiographique coïncide avec le projet existentiel: rendre compte de soi, donner une forme narrative (ou dramatique), par une écriture communicative, à sa propre experience du monde, donner à autrui une vérité de soi qui puisse indiquer de celle de tous.”


6. This is Sartre’s question in *Situation IX* translated by Paul John Eakin in *Fictions in Autobiography*, chapter “Jean-Paul Sartre: The Boy Who Wanted to Be a Book,” Princeton University Press, 1985, 129: “I wrote *The Words* in order to answer the same question posed in my studies on Genet and Flaubert: how does a man become someone who writes? (...) What is interesting is the birth of the decision to write.”


9. For a complete discussion on the “genesis” of *The Words*, see Denis Boak, “The Genesis of Les Mots,” in *Essays in French Literature*, University of Western Australia, 1984, 21. She suggests that the cause for the gap between the first and final versions might be explained by political disappointments: “My suggestion would therefore be that (...) Sartre, far from abandoning imaginative fiction in the late 1940s because of preoccupation with politics, took up political involvement partly at least because his creative spring was running dry. Then, when politics had brought him a series of
disappointments, he turned back to literature in the form of autobiography, driven by a renewed need of self-affirmation (84).” Furthermore, Denis Boak notes that in The Words, Sartre’s purpose is explanatory rather than descriptive: “On this view, Les Mots was written in large part to exorcize humiliation. Above all, guilt and shame at, precisely, failure to adopt a political stance before the advent of war in 1939. How could I, Jean-Paul Sartre, mighty brain, brilliant young novelist and philosophical genius, have been so blind as to do nothing to combat Fascism and Nazism? This guilt could only have been compounded by the knowledge that a principal rival, Malraux, by the 1950s an ideological enemy, had nevertheless two decades before not only talked about but assumed the role of anti-Fascist combatant (...) (84).”


15. In 1965, in the interview given to Olivier Todd (“Jean-Paul Sartre speaks,” Vogue, in M. Contat and M. Rybalka, The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. A Bibliographical Life, Vol. I, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 447, translated by Richard McCleary), Sartre states: “(...) Weighed against a dying child, Nausea doesn’t count.” Despite the harsh criticism he received for putting a work of fiction like Nausea and a child dying of hunger on the same level, Sartre stressed the fact that it was important to raise the question: What does literature mean in a hungry world?

16. “Jean-Paul Sartre explains what he was doing in The Words,” interview with Jacqueline Piatier, Le Monde, 1964, in M. Contat and M. Rybalka, 1974, 429: “(...) There’s no reason to drag a poor guy through the mud because he writes (...).”

17. Sartre’s autobiography was well received by critics, who saw in it such diverse meanings as the author’s return to literature, a new manifestation of his bad faith, an expression of the blackest pessimism, etc. They nevertheless unanimously proclaimed its excellence and quickly placed it among autobiographical classics. The success of The Words was undoubtedly a determining factor in Sartre’s winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964; a good understanding of the work also allows us to see why he refused
it. These considerations on the reception of the book belong to M. Contat and M. Rybalka, (The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Vol. 1, 430), and represent a synthesis of the reactions of various critics on The Words shortly after its appearance. Charles Camproux is one of the first critics to write on Sartre’s autobiography. In October 1964, he published in “Les lettres françaises” an article entitled “La langue et le style de Jean-Paul Sartre” – an apology of the autobiographer’s style: “En tout cas, si les «livres de Sartre sentent la sueur et la peine,» celui-ci, «Les Mots,» sent le «feu de Dieu» à fleur de peau d’âme: et ça c’est un style! (4).”


19. Charles Perrault (1628-1703), famous for his Contes de ma mère l’Oye (1697) and for Le siècle de Louis Grand (1687) that he read before the Académie Française, began the main phase of the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes. He compared in this poem his age with that of Augustus and he clearly stated his belief that the moderns were superior to the ancients. He further developed this thesis in a prose work entitled Parallèles des Anciens et des Modernes (1688-1696). Boileau, his chief target, countered these attacks with his Réflexions critiques sur quelques passages du rhéteur Longin (1693). Perrault and Boileau were reconciled in 1694, although the dispute itself continued until 1975. (Dictionary of French Literature, edited by Sidney Braun, Philosophical Library, 1958).


23. For a detailed study on Boccaccio’s Griselda and for a parallel to popular tales that precedes it in different cultures see Dudley David Griffith’s “Origin of the Griselda Story,” University of Washington Publications, Vol. 8, No.1, 1931, 1-120.

24. Marc Soriano in Les Contes de Perrault. Culture savante et traditions populaires (Gallimard, 1977), second part “La piste du Folklore” (99-107) notes that Perrault’s transformations of the popular original tale are very limited and that his story remains close to Boccaccio’s Griselda. He follows the same incidents as Boccaccio: the engagement, Griselda’s promise, the marriage, the testing, the separation, and the reunion. Soriano shows that Perrault’s contribution is manifested on only a rhetorical level (with the exception that Griselda has only a daughter and not a son as well, as in the earlier version).
25. James Arnold and Jean-Pierre Piriou in *Genèse et critique d’une autobiography: Les Mots de Jean-Paul Sartre*, (Archives des Lettres Modernes, 1972, 144) comment on Sartre’s preoccupation with the story of Griselda. They see in it a reflection of Poulou’s incestuous identification with his mother. Sartre’s curious attribution of sadism to the proverbial victim is, in their view, a manifestation of the child’s fantasy of punishing the missing father - the origin of his illegitimate condition.

26. On the condition of sequestered, see Marie-Germaine Murat, “Jean-Paul Sartre, un enfant séquestré,” Les temps modernes, 498, 1988, 128-149.

27. Paul John Eakin has an excellent chapter on Sartre’s fascination with books, titled “Jean-Paul Sartre: The boy who wanted to be a book,” in *Fictions in Autobiography*, 126-180.


30. I would like to point out here that as for the information in the child’s space we have to trust the autobiographer himself. After all, this input is his creation and we have no chance to verify the accuracy of it. The question of the autobiography versus fiction has long intrigued the critics (cf. Paul John Eakin: *Fictions in Autobiography*, Princeton, 1985). Evidently, Sartre’s novel is a retrospective work in which he depicts a retrospective image of the “self” which may differ widely from what we may think of as reality. This depiction is a construction and Sartre, the writer, has a distinctive assessment of his childhood. As readers, we all have one single interest and one single point of view. We do not have different perspectives of the same event. This one point of view is split between the child and the writer, and the point of view of the first is recuperated and largely infused by that of the second. I assume that as a reader I don’t need to pick my point of view, but to follow his. In autobiography, as stressed by Erving Goffman (Frame Analysis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, 8), limiting this chance of perspective to one invites the reader to recognize it as valid. I do not intend to judge the construction of identity, but rather I try to show how this construction is built. The lack of access to authentic identity is not really a frustration. Not just in autobiography but also in fiction in general, the reader has no direct access to the situation described. Moreover, as readers, we are invited to trust the one who directly experienced the events in his own life. Following Emmanuel Lévinas (*Ethique et infini*, Paris: Fayard, 1982, 52), I think that existence is the only thing that cannot be communicated: I can talk about my life experience but I can not share it with anybody. Given this lack of access to the events narrated on the one hand, and on the other hand, the lack of access to anybody’s life experience, I think that in autobiography, we should take the apparent consensus of point of view between writer and reader for granted.
31. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson show in *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) that metaphors are partially structured concepts. They introduce the notion of “structural metaphor” which means that one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another. Examples like “Time is money” or “Argument is war” show that in our culture, time is conceived in terms of money and argument in terms of war. We comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (comprehending one aspect of arguing in terms of battle, etc.) that will necessary hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus one aspect of the concept (the battling aspect of arguing) a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor (the cooperative aspects of arguing). Lakoff and Johnson also demonstrate that metaphorical expression in our language is tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way.

32. This expression is used and explained by Mark Turner in “Poetry: Metaphor and Conceptual Context of Invention,” Poetics Today 11, 3. He persuasively shows that originality is no more than the exploitation of what is unoriginal. Imagination must operate in a known space in order to be intelligible. Originality is explained in terms of violation of the target domain. Mark Turner’s work on metaphor largely contributed to the development of this analysis.

33. The notion of “The Nature of Things” belongs to Mark Turner and is explained in “Language is a Virus,” Poetics Today 13, 4, 726. He argues that “The Nature of Things” is a commonplace notion, part of what he calls “The Great Chain Metaphor” – a conceptual complex that we use to understand forms of being at one level in terms of forms of being at another level, as when we understand a person metaphorically in terms of an engine or a sunflower.

1. A writing experience: fragmented narratives

*W or The Memory of Childhood* is the result of a long literary enterprise that lasted about six years, from July 1969 to April 1975. The first time Georges Perec evokes the idea of a vast autobiographical work he is thirty-three and has already published *Choses* (1965; Renaudot prize), *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?* (1966), *Un homme qui dort* (1967), and *La Disparition* (1969). Just after the publication of *La Disparition*, Perec wrote a letter to Maurice Nadeau, the editor and director of the journal *La Quinzaine littéraire*, expressing his intention to draft an ample autobiographical project structured into four books. The first book, *L'arbre. Histoire d'Esther et de sa famille*, would be a detailed description of his genealogical tree based on his aunt’s testimonial. The second, *Lieux où j'ai dormi*, would be a catalogue of all bedrooms in which he had slept, a kind of “vesperal autobiography.” The Fiction of *W,* the third book, would be an adventure story stemming from his first psychotherapy session at age thirteen during which he drew bizarre athletes with inhuman faces and rigid bodies. The last book, *Lieux,
would gather descriptions made at different points in time of twelve places in Paris, specifically chosen for the memories they evoke in him. This quadruple writing project,\(^5\) which was not yet entitled *W or the memory of childhood*, would require about twelve years of elaboration. *L’Arbre* would never be published but parts of it appear in the autobiographical story in *W; Lieux* was abandoned after a while; and *Lieux ou j’ai dormi* slowed down for diverse reasons. Père decided to continue with *W*, first publicized as a dreamy serial story of suspense and humor ("feuilleton") in the 1969, No. 81 issue of *La Quinzaine littéraire*.

Over ten months, beginning mid-October 1969, Père regularly sent his editor successive episodes that largely correspond to the nineteen fictional chapters of the book set in italics.\(^6\) This regular activity was interrupted once, on May 16\(^{th}\) 1970, when Père was not able to send to Maurice Nadeau his episode, forcing the editor to publish excuses for him. This silence followed the publication of an episode on May 1\(^{st}\) 1970 dedicated to the "women of W" corresponding to chapter XXVI in the book. This episode depicts the terrifying conception of children in the fictional (or semi-fictional) land of *W*: at an annual competition, the women of *W* are set naked upon the playing field to be chased down and raped by male athletes. This episode was emotionally difficult for Père to compose, which explains the interruption in the serial publication, because it evokes the memory of his mother who died in Auschwitz. Readers grew accustomed to incidents regarding this feuilleton, and they were already "warned" after the seventh episode (published in January 1970) that they should forget the previous chapters because the real story was just about to begin.\(^7\) This story that was initially publicized on the cover of the
magazine under the picture of a revolver, promising thrilling adventures, gradually transforms into a detailed description of a society built on the cut-throat competition of the Olympic Games. This society, simply called “W,” is situated on an island in Tierra del Fuego and hosts a sports camp where athletes participate in inhuman competitions. On W, losers of these athletic competitions are deprived of food and tortured; the women’s quarters are surrounded by an electrified fence; children that show deformity at birth are killed and only one out of every five girls is allowed to live. The readers of La Quinzaine littéraire were not prepared for such a shock and did not expect the story to evolve into a horrific account of an authoritarian, negativist and destructive society symbolizing the extermination camp at Auschwitz. Consequently, Maurice Nadeau received critical letters, but also compassionate letters from people who shared Perec’s emotion and suffering.

Despite personal distress, Perec finished the feuilleton in August of 1970 and announced his intention to integrate it into an autobiographical work of a complex structure articulated in three parts. The first would be a personal story of childhood memories, the second would recuperate the story of the feuilleton, and the third would chronicle the challenges in assembling autobiography and fiction. The main purpose of this new project would be the links between reviving the past, elaborating the phantasm, and the activity of writing. Nevertheless, in spite of his promise to the readers of La Quinzaine littéraire and in spite of some advanced drafts, Perec remained reticent, temporarily abandoning his project. At this time, he began psychoanalysis with J-B Pontalis who helped him to lead a more unfettered existence and possibly suggested some
ideas for the construction of W.\textsuperscript{10} This period of extended psychoanalysis with Pontalis lasted a few years (1971-1975) and overlapped with Perec’s most intensive dream-writing activity that culminated in the publication of \textit{La Boutique obscure: 124 rêves} (1973). This can be seen as one in a series of experiments in writing the self and his history through systematic recording of dreams and the recuperation of elements of previous autobiographical projects: family history, notes on places he knew, bedrooms he had slept in, the books on his bookshelf, and the cats that had kept him company, for example.\textsuperscript{11}

After many aborted autobiographical projects,\textsuperscript{12} after hesitant attempts at self-scrutiny, Perec finally manages to write down his anguish and his imagined realities. He began working on \textit{W or The Memory of Childhood} and publishes it in 1975. As the title suggests, the text is of a double nature. Perec weaves together fiction and autobiography: fictional chapters of a recreated childhood fantasy (reminiscent of the athletes he drew at age thirteen) are set in italic characters; chapters of (attempted) autobiography deal with fragmented memories from Perec’s past after the second war world and earlier recollections of childhood projects and are set in roman characters. Fiction alternates with autobiography in a subtle intertextual relationship not at first easy to define. The typography is the most visible aspect of the fragmentation of the book that corresponds to the intertwining of (at least) two stories. Perec himself tells us in a note on the book jacket that although the two strands may seem disconnected, they are nevertheless interrelated:

In this book there are two texts which simply alternate; you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up which

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each other, as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was only their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping (...).

The cover’s announcement of this doubling and mirroring effect does not rescue the reader from experiencing substantial discomfort. The reader must maintain a sustained conceptual effort as he vacillates from one narrative sequence to another to constantly maintain the rhythm and the coherence between them. As Philippe Lejeune admits, it is not difficult to be a bad reader and to spare yourself of a tiresome acrobatic exercise by reading first the italic part and then the roman part. The interwoven typographies thwart the “plaisir romanesque,” but Lejeune says that they in ways replicate the Hellenic ordeals endured by the inhabitants of W.¹³ And the typography and alternating chapters are not the only two difficulties! The book is divided into two parts by an ellipsis “(...)” that juxtaposes the fiction and the autobiography, which turn out to be actually doubly divided. The fiction first recounts the story of Gaspar Winkler (W1) and then the story of the island W (W2); the autobiography is divided too, as the first part insists on the lack of memories of prewar childhood (P1) and the second part contains memories of the war years (P2).¹⁴

In W1 Gaspard Winckler narrates his meeting with Otto Apfelstahl who requests that he join in the search for the islands of Tierra del Fuego. In these islands the original Gaspard Winkler, a sickly child, is believed to have disappeared during a shipwreck. Gaspard Winckler has deserted from the French army and, having no identity papers,
receives from a pacifist group the missing child’s identity (name and passport). The style is classically novelistic and the reader expects to read an adventure story, with mysteries, suspense, and a quest for missing persons or lost worlds. Yet, in W2 the story turns abruptly into a detailed description of an island in Tierra del Fuego named W, the site of a community devoted to sporting competition whose motto is “Fortius, Altius, Citius” (Stronger, Higher, Faster). The reader assumes that Winckler discovers this island while searching for the child who shares his name, but there is not any allusion in W2 to the search or to any of the events of W1. In W1, the narrator is the adult deserter Gaspard Winkler who tells the story of his voyage to W in the first person. In W2 an unnamed omniscient narrator describes the island of W in the third person. This discrepancy suggests, as Warren Motte explains, that the narrative voice is shifting and uncertain, just as the distinction between Perec-the-narrator and Perec-the-narrated is deliberately blurred.15 The Olympian society of W gradually reveals itself to be based on systematic injustice and oppression. Games and sports are part of a military regime: “But the Men must stand up and fall in. They must get out of the compounds – Raus! Raus! – they must start running – Schnell! Schnell! – they must come into the Stadium in impeccable order! (155).” Allan Astro suggests that W, in French a foreign letter used mainly in words of Germanic origin, represents the w in Auschwitz.16 Thus, the barbaric sports camp on the island W symbolizes the extermination camp at Auschwitz.

In P1, Perec insists on his lack of real memories. His mother perished in the concentration camps along with other members of her family, and his father died the day the Armistice of World War I was declared. The description Perec paints of his parents is
based on photos and information provided by relatives. The first chapter on Perec's life plays with the conventions of autobiographical literature: "I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four, my mother at six; I spent the war at various boarding houses at Villard-de-Lans. In 1945, my father's sister and her husband adopted me (6)." If the absence of memories at the beginning of P1 places the book in the perspective of an impossible autobiography, in turn, P2 contains Perec's memories of the war years following his stay in Villard-de-Lans in the Alps and of his return to Paris after the war. These memories are personal, but isolated and floating: "From this point on there are memories – fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome – but there is nothing that binds them together (68)."

Fiction and autobiography, apparently integrated into a stable narrative structure, divided by chapters and typographical print, echo each other. Despite rigorous parallelism, crossover occurs. Paul Schwarz presents some of the doubling effects between the fiction and the autobiography. For example, Schwarz notes that Gaspard Winkler's search for the lost child introduces a detective motif that is common to the first halves of both narratives. There is an obvious parallel between the investigation into the disappearance of the child (the original Gaspard Winckler) and Perec's search through old photographs for evidence of the orphaned boy he once was and does not remember. The child Gaspard lost his mother, Perec lost his as well. Both Perec's and Winckler's mothers are named Cécile and both narrators use similar language to describe their search. In W1, Winkler explains, "For years I sought out traces of my history, looking up maps and directories and piles of archives (3)," while in P1 Perec laments, "Even if I
have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable (...) (12)."

Furthermore, in both narratives the city of Venice is the site of a sudden memory: it is in a restaurant in Venice that Winckler thinks he had seen a possible survivor from W, and it is in Venice as well that Peref remem bers the pictures he had drawn at age of thirteen to illustrate a story called "W." Importantly, neither Winckler nor Peref is the protagonist of his own stories; they are only witnesses. One tells us in W1, "(...) in what I am about to relate I was a witness and not an actor. I am not the hero of my tale (4)," and the other states in P2, "The thing happened a little later or a little earlier, and I was not its heroic victim but just a witness (80)." The first was only an impassive and unremitting observer of the society of W, and the second was only a child at the time of the Second World War, and never lived in the concentration camps.

Both narrator-witnesses, Winckler and Peref have no doubt that testimony is the essential vehicle for retelling the past and ensuring that history is not forgotten. Gaspard Winckler is the survivor of a "sunken world" and a delay of many years finally decides to break his "icy silence (4)" regarding his voyage to W. He is impelled by a "commanding necessity (3)" to reveal and to revive. His status as the sole surviving witness of life on W eventually compels him to write down its terrifying story:

There could be no survivor. What my eyes had seen had really happened: the lianas had unseated the foundations, the forest had consumed the houses; sand overran the stadiums, cormorants swooped down in their thousands, and then silence, sudden icy silence. Whatever may happen now, whatever I may now do, I
was the sole depository, the only living memory, the only vestige of that world.

That, more than any other consideration, was what made me decide to write" (4).

Writing is an obligation that has been long evaded and which must now finally be 
honored. Jessica Maynard, using Derrida’s words, calls this narrative compulsion that is 
neither voluntary nor spontaneous a “demand for narrative,” a quest to return to the origin 
of the narrative and to tell exactly what happened.18 Writing is for Perec a moral 
obligation as well, even if he did not directly experience his parents’ life. He feels an 
obligation to perpetuate knowledge of their history and memory of their lives through his 
(indirect/fictional) testimonial writing. He explains:

I am not writing in order to say that I shall say nothing. I write: I write because we 
lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow among their shadows, 
a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, 
whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of 
their death and the assertion of my life (42).

Perec’s writing through the absence of his parents and of many other millions of Jews is a 
form of testimony, a manner of survival, and a way to situate his life in relation to 
history. Winkler and Perec are the sole depositories of a truth, and telling that truth is part 
of recalling the past and simultaneously part of constructing the present. The similarities 
between Winkler and Perec and the reciprocities of the two narratives weave subtle 
intertextual relationships and seem to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its 
parts. However, the perception of a harmonious whole often flickers between continuity 
and discontinuity and between convergence and divergence. Perec himself painstakingly
draws the reader’s attention to the discontinuity of the book, focusing not on the alternation between W and P, but rather on the break between the two halves of the book. He warns on the cover, “In this break, in this spilt suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation, can be found the point of departure for the whole of this book: the points of suspension on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.” This prominent statement regarding the punctuation marks invites us to reevaluate possibilities to bridge stories and to assimilate differences. The three points within parentheses stand alone in the middle of the book, on an empty white page that perhaps symbolizes the absence of the mother or the mourning for victims of the camps. Such an absence cannot be filled, for their death is irreversible, and a moment of mourning necessarily precedes testimony. This is a crucial moment when the two narratives cross themselves, when the distopic universe starts to reveal itself, and when memories emerge. In a way, it is perhaps only after this white elliptic page, as after a time of mourning, that Perec is able to continue the writing of the terrifying fiction of W, where metaphorically the Jews disappeared. The image of the suspense is also present in the text under other forms: the hernia truss (“suspensor”) that Perec wore when he was a child or the suspenders that attach Charlie Chaplin to his parachute on a magazine that his mother bought him. An orphaned child, Perec seeks support, and thus, maybe the parentheses around the three points represent some sort of suspenders for a parachute that could be the book W. The suspenders may also stand for the points of convergence between fiction and autobiography. At the same time, the white page may represent a pause (or a suspension) in writing as well as in telling. The story to be told in the next section (W2) is so terrifying that Perec becomes aphasic like the deaf-mute child (the
original Winckler) lost in a shipwreck. And this shipwreck is also Père’s: he is the survivor of a holocaustic past that is so frightening to recall and to tell that its very meaning enacts a phonic blocking. Among these interpretations of absence, mourning, aphasia, or suspension - in other words, discontinuity or continuity - I think there is no need to pick one over the others. The two halves of the book are separated on the narrative level by the punctuation marks and joined on the conceptual level where a personal story faces a global History. The four parts (W1, W2, P1, and P2) are discrete, discontinuously following each other, yet they converge into a final image of W that stands for Père’s life, inextricably linked to the unspeakable horror of the Shoah.

2. A life/death experience: a lacerated nation

Père sets out to write his life starting with “his memory of childhood,” but from the very beginning he encounters a fundamental problem: he has no childhood memories. The first sentence of the autobiographical narrative “I have no childhood memories” seems to deny the project of remembrance announced in the title of the book. But how could one not have childhood memories? What could cause this disturbing amnesia? A few lines later, the writer turns back to this remark and places his personal story under the sign of History: “I have no childhood memories (...) I was excused: a different history, History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps (6).” The word History is spelled with a capital H and in French this H is homophone with the word for “axe” (“hache”). Allan Astro explains that this capital letter is an emblem, and he shows that Père’s narrative is a traumatic “small-h history” that has been engulfed in
History.19 Therefore, Perec has little to say other than "barely a couple of lines (6)"; he lost his father at four, his mother at six, and an aunt adopted him. We suspect that his loss of memories is closely linked to the absence of parents and family, and this loss can only be grasped in reference to World War II and the deportation camps.

Perec's parents were originally from Poland. His father, Icek Perec, died on Armistice Day, in 1918, mortally wounded in the stomach. His mother, Cyrla Perec, was arrested in 1943 together with her father and her sister, Fanny Szulewicz. They were detained for a while at Drancy, and then sent to Auschwitz - the camp from which neither they nor millions of other Jews return. David Bellos, Perec's autobiographer, tells us in detail how their deportation took place:

It was a cattle-truck train, for a consignment of 1000 Jews. Convoy 47 left at 10:50 A.M., with 998 on board: 10 Bulgarian, 15 Belgian, 16 Austrian, 20 Czech, 32 Hungarian, 40 Greek, 65 Dutch, 109 Russian, 41 Turkish, 56 German, 64 Romanian, 154 denaturalized French, and 372 Polish Jews. Many were children; many were sick, some were mentally deranged. Their names were all neatly entered on the "exit" list kept by the French police to prove to the Germans that their orders were being carried out to the letter. Cyrla Perec, née Szulewicz, was number 464, Aaron Szulewicz number 636, and Fanny Szulewicz number 637 on the list for convoy 47. The conditions preceding their departure were so abominable that one of the deportees, Linda Gebler, aged sixty-four, perished on the station platform at Le Bourget/Dracy. After departure, there were three escape attempts before the train crossed the French Border. All failed. When the convoy got to its final destination, in Poland, not so far from Lublin, at a place that Cyrla
would have known as Oświęcim, 143 men and 53 women were taken out of the mass to have camp numbers that would henceforth replace their names. The term used by the SS for this operation was *selection*. The unselected were made to undress, sent into the shower room, and gassed immediately with Zyklon-B.

When Red Army soldiers liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945, they found a handful of half-dead survivors, skeletons in striped pyjamas. One of them was Primo Levi. There were fourteen still alive from the selection of 196 workers taken from convoy 47; thirteen of them were men and one was a woman. She was not Cyrla Perec.²⁰

Because Perec’s parents died during the war and deportation, they were unable to hand down to their child their history, their culture, their faith, and their hope. Perec experienced his Jewish origin not as a shared identity, but rather as an absence and a dispossession. He lost his parents, and at the same time he lost his culture, his religion and his language. For Perec, the loss is multiple: the absence of parents, the erasure of memories, and the dispossession of identity. And the loss is also symbolic, for while it represents a personal trauma, it globally represents the death of six millions Jews, the victims of the Shoah. The convoy 47 to which Cécile Perec was consigned is a metonymic image that stands for all the convoys to death camps in Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka and Auschwitz.

European Jews were the most numerous victims of the Shoah or the Holocaust,²¹ the intentionally and meticulously planned Nazi attempt to entirely eradicate target groups based on ethnicity. It is estimated that “The Final Solution of the Jewish
Question," as the Nazi called it starting in 1942, entailed the murder of 60 percent of all Jews in Europe and 35 percent of all Jews around the world. At the time, Nazis attempted to justify the genocide by claiming that the victims were "underlings" or "subhumans," both biologically inferior and a potential challenge to the superiority of the "Aryans." Its perpetrators saw it as a form of eugenics (the creation of a better race by eliminating those designated as "unfit"). Some specific characteristics of the Shoah distinguish this genocide from others in history. First, it was premeditated. In 1904, Alfred Ploetz founded the German Eugenics Society. Sixteen years later a work that was at the origin of the development of the German eugenics movement was published ("The Permission to Destroy Life Unworthy of Life"). Second, the Shoah was characterized by the efficient and systematic attempt on an industrial scale to assemble and murder as many victims as possible, using all the resources and technology available to the Nazi German state: lists of the victims, records of the killings, tags on the bodies, and efficient chemical substances for killing more people (they switched from carbon monoxide poisoning to the use of Zyklon B). Third, the Shoah was geographically widespread and methodically conducted in all areas of Nazi-occupied territory. Documented evidence suggests the Nazis planned to carry out their "Final Solution" in Britain, North America and Palestine if these regions were conquered. Fourth, the Nazi conducted cruel and deadly medical experiments on prisoners, including children, in order to research how to produce "racially pure" babies and to develop weapons and techniques of war.

Anti-Semitism was common in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Adolph Hitler's fanatical Mein Kampf was published in 1925, and even though it was not immediately popular, it became well known in Germany once Hitler acquired political power. During
the first years of War World II, Nazis restricted movement and created ghettos to which Jews were confined. The ghettos were actually prisons where many Jews died from hunger and disease. But anti-Semitism culminated in 1941, when Hitler decided to exterminate European Jews. In January of 1942, during the Wannsee conference, several Nazi leaders discussed the details of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Shortly after that they began to systematically deport the Jewish population from the ghettos and all occupied territories to the seven camps designed as "extermination camps": Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Maly Trostenets, Sobibór, and Treblinka II.

The period from 1942 to 1945 was one of the blackest times in modern history, with the deportation and extermination of six million Jews and five million others, slave labor and gassing, hunger, and death. It was, in a word, the unspeakable. Almost all survivors' testimonies mention the impossibility of remembering and recounting the Shoah. They tried to recount their inhuman experience in documentaries and books and all faced the limitations of language and imagination. The "cannot" of telling is sometimes doubled in their statements by the "must not," as they attempt to repress the horror of the past in order to move on in a life that will remain for many incompatible with poetry and dreaming. The classic formulation of such a perspective is Theodor Adorno's assertion that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Another famous writer and survivor of the Shoah, Robert Antelme, shares with us in his book *The Human Race* the frustrating experience of the "cannot" of telling:

Two years ago, during the first days after our return, I think we were all prey to a genuine delirium. We wanted at last to speak, to be heard. We were told that by itself our physical appearance was not enough; but we had only just returned, with
us we brought back our memory of our experience, an experience that was still very much alive, and we felt a frantic desire to describe it such as it had been. As of those first days, however, we saw that it was impossible to bridge the gap we discovered opening up between the words at our disposal and that experience which, in the case of most of us, was still going forward within our bodies. How were we to resign ourselves to not trying to explain how we had got to the state we were in? For we were yet in that state. And even so it was impossible. No sooner would we begin to tell would it start to seem unimaginable.”

The Shoah, one of the most tragic experiences that happened to humanity in modern times is defined as unspeakable and unimaginable. In order to testify, the returning deportees try to tell the story of their experience. Thus, they need to establish a process of communication, and its perception depends on what position the listener occupies in this communicative attempt. On the one hand, the Shoah is an unspeakable story for the speaker-survivors who want to express the horror they lived through in the death camps. On the other hand, the Shoah is an unimaginable story for the listeners who hear their testimony. The survivors experience the limitation of language, unable to find the right words for their unspeakable story. We know that language is only a guide for comprehension, and in this case the guide is insufficient, almost ineffective: there is an unbridgeable gap between words and the camp experience. In turn, those listening to the (attempted) telling find the story unimaginable, their minds unable to conceptualize the survivors’ traumatic experience. The Shoah is thus beyond language and beyond imagination. And the unimaginable does not apply just to us, the later listeners of the
third millennium who maybe have not experienced any war at all, but to the people who
lived during the deportation and horror of the World Wars. However, the speaker-
survivors feel a need to testify. Many of them promised their fellow inmates in the camps
who died and to themselves that one day they would relate what they lived through
together. It is therefore their obligation to give the six millions Jews their voice back, and
to recall the past in order to prevent the unimaginable from happening again.

A survivor’s telling and writing are the ultimate claim to belonging to the human
race. But what kind of writing could be appropriate under such circumstances? A simple
description of the death camps is not appropriate, for such a description is neither
bearable nor credible. There is a distinct need for a new way of telling and writing that
will enable the listener/reader to comprehend a situation that is nearly unimaginable, a
terror beyond the realm of nightmares. In a literary tradition, Robert Antelme wishes to
“sift” his memories, and thus to gradually present them to us. When we are introduced to
a reality beyond our imagination, we usually reject it as false or fictitious. Antelme tries
to access the inhuman in his testimony first through a “self-same imagining” in an
attempt to make it conceivable later:

This disproportion between the experience we had lived through and the account
we were able to give of it would only be confirmed subsequently. We were indeed
dealing then with one of those realities, which cause one to say that they defy imagining.
It became clear henceforth that only through a sifting, that is only through that self-same
imagining could there been any attempting to tell something about it.”

After all, the survivors kept their wounds and suffering alive in their bodies, but
could they conceive or comprehend in their minds what the Shoah really was? Did the
victims know what they died for? Did Cyrla Perec know why she had been consigned to convoy 47? A mental representation of the Shoah is perhaps as inaccessible for survivors as it is for us, indeed for the human mind in general. In any case, apart from conceptualizing and understanding the meaning of death camps, there is a concrete reality the Jews have experienced, that of the gas chamber, crematoria, darkness, solitude, unending oppression and slow annihilation. The survivors have to put this reality into words and the listeners have to find the power to make sense of it. It is just as important to hear the story as it is to tell it. Instead, Perec has no story to tell, as his “small-h history” has been engulfed by the “capital-H History.” His personal story existed, but it has been erased by the collective (inhuman) history:

For years, I took comfort in such an absence of history: its objective crispness, its apparent obviousness, its innocence protected me; but what did they protect me from, if not precisely from my history, the story of my living, my real story, which presumably was neither crisp nor objective, nor apparently obvious, nor obviously innocent? (6).

The writer has no memories to evoke and no parents to help him revive them. Yet, skeptical and hesitant, he decides to write and to tell. He does not know much about what is he going to write, for the project seems impossible to realize: “My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don’t know much about (12).” This impasse is soon circumvented because Perec on occasion constructs memories and invents his small-h history, as it should have been. Rightfully, he oscillates between the impersonal evidence of documents like photos and newspapers, and the flawed testimonial of different members of his family. He does not know what he fears more, “to stay hidden or to be
found (7).” The memories, always recuperated from indirect sources, are presented in many versions; they are constructed, corrected and multiplied. Despite uncertainty and faulty evidence, Perec has no doubt that writing is the motor for his testimony. Speech may be ineffective, “blank” and “neutral (42),” but writing as an engraving form of transmission is at least present and bold on the white page. Maybe writing does not say anything, but it inscribes the memory of the victims on the paper and marks down some small black characters that stand for an empty story. It does not really matter what the markings say, but what they symbolize: a visible trace on a page that would otherwise be empty, a trace that honors a stark absence. Therefore, writing is the trace of the victims’ death and the trace that fills Perec’s empty personal story:

I am not writing in order to say that I shall say nothing, I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say. I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing: writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life (42).

The autobiographical part in W or The Memory of childhood is dominated by the noticeable absence of Perec’s mother. Cyrla Perec died at Auschwitz and has no grave to mark her abbreviated life. All Perec knows about her is that she disappeared into the world of the camps. With this autobiographical background, it is easy to converge the fictive society of W with the reference to the Shoah. In this sense, even if the memory itself is flawed, partial or fabricated, writing of it represents a mandatory exercise for remembrance. And by means of writing about absence, loss and dispossess, gradually
(part of the) memory comes back. In the end, strong connections are forged, as the lacerated walls of the gas chamber and the same death his mother probably has had.

3. Time is more than a thief. Time is an executioner

In *More than Cool Reason. A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor,* George Lakoff and Mark Turner propose a conceptual perspective for the metaphorical representation of time in ordinary discussions about life and death. Their assumption is that our understanding of life and death is very much bound up with our understanding of time. This is because death is inevitable and because the mere passage of time can be seen as bringing about inevitable events. When we say, "it is just a matter of time" about some potential occurrence, we mean that the passage of time will inevitably bring the event to transpire. One of our major cultural models of life, they propose, is that each of us is allotted a certain fixed time on earth. Our allotted time will eventually be used up, and we will die. Therefore, the authors say, no full understanding of the metaphors of life and death is possible without an understanding of how they relate to our conceptions of time. For Lakoff and Turner, we consider life as a precious possession. This life-as-a-possession metaphor can be seen in such expressions as "He lost his life in an accident," "My life is my own," etc. It is not just our whole life that is conceived of as a possession, but portions of it as well, for example a number of years or even an individual year.

Lakoff and Turner further state that in addition to possessing all the portions of one's life, one also characteristically possesses at various times certain properties, such as beauty, strength and youth. Because youth is a possession, it too can be stolen, and hence
the phrase "robbed of his youth." Moreover, time itself is often considered to be the thief of youth or a segment of one’s life. As we live our lives, less and less of the allotted time remains and various properties such as beauty and youth diminish or disappear. In the authors’ perspective, the disappearances of these properties are events, and they further suggest that a noteworthy event is commonly understood not as just happening but as being caused by some agent. A huge proportion of the events that happen to us are, indeed, caused by agents, as when a vase falls off the table and we note that the cat knocked it over. The time-as-an-agent perspective corroborates for the authors of More than Cool Reason the time-as-a-thief perspective: youth, strength and beauty are possessions and their disappearance is an event provoked by time. Time is both the agent causing this action and also the thief stealing these possessions.

Nevertheless, apart from this effect of dispossession described by Lakoff and Turner, time is also an agent causing another type of action, which is also as natural as the previous one. It as a rule of life as well when time passes on and leaves behind traces of his passage. Thus, even if we lose some possessions, we gain others, like experience and memories. Although time-as-a-thief can steal the possessions mentioned by Lakoff and Turner, it cannot take away our memories. The more we advance in life, the more we accumulate these valuable possessions. Time is not only a “thief” but also a “collector” who gives us guiding traces back to our past. Memories are important landmarks in our lives and they are the foundation of our personality. Hence, I name the conceptualization of this action of the passage of time, “Time leaves traces.”
In *W or The Memory of Childhood*, Perec claims he does not have childhood memories. The reader understands "I have no childhood memories" as a lost possession, which is why he cannot have them anymore. The childhood span of time passed on without leaving to the writer any trace of its passage, and one could ask who "caused" this absence of traces? On the one hand, time-as-a-thief cannot be the agent because time robs us of other possessions but memories, and on the other hand, time-as-a-collector is inexistent because memories are absent. Importantly, the memories were there and they are no longer present in his mind. The writer possessed them at a certain point in time, and then, later, he lost them: "My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about. It is behind me; yet it is the ground on which I grew, and it once belonged to me, however obstinately I assert that it no longer does (12)."

Time is indirectly named "History with a capital H (6)," the war, and the camps. This time is particular in Perec's story, and drawing on the conventional metaphors of "Time is a thief" and "Time leaves traces," I name it metaphorically "Time is an executioner." This metaphor stands for the genocidal time when Nazis exterminated the Jewish people during the Second World War. The Shoah is not mentioned directly, but is the omnipresent implicit background through which consequences are vividly experienced. The agent here is "Time is an executioner," the possessions are childhood memories and the event is their absence. One might express an event as an action without directly identifying the agent. In a way, what is not named is even stronger and what is absent, by the accentuation of this absence, is in fact extremely present. Perec no longer has childhood memories and when the reader inscribes the occurrence of this particular
event in the time of genocide, he can personify time as an actor playing a causal role in the absence of memories event.

"Time leaves traces" is a common metaphor for everybody, for each of us remembers (parts of) his past. "Time is an executioner" is a specific metaphor for a particular group of people killed during the genocide by others who deliberately plotted their death. Thus, the memories they could have handed down to their children are also erased. The executioner "gassed" not only one individual's memories but memories valuable for an entire community. We are all victims of time-as-a-thief, but just a certain number of Jewish and other people (Communists, Gypsies, homosexuals, people with mental and physical disabilities) were victims of the Shoah. "Time is a thief" and "Time leaves traces" are rules of life that no one can change; "Time is an executioner" is a rule of death that could have been avoided, for the allied forces during War World II as well as the large majority of people outside the camps could have forcibly stopped the trains full of Jews going to Auschwitz. We all are equal before "Time is a thief" and "Time leaves traces." In turn, the deportee victims stepped down far away from this common experience of time. They lost in the camps their humanity and their lives. Death, in general, is a natural and final state; death in the Nazi camps was decided to be the final state by Hitler, the so-called "Final Solution." And this was the destiny of Perec's mother and of some other relatives. The writer did not experience the camps, but the absence of his memories is inextricably linked to this time of war and death when his personal story is engulfed by History.

Thus, the Shoah represents the horrible instantiation of the "Time is an executioner" metaphor. Conceptually, this metaphor sets up an input space that serves as a source
domain for the understanding of Perec’s life. The reader connects the writer’s absence of memories to the death of his parents in the deportation camps. Thus, he understands that marks in his childhood miss simply because his parents died before leaving them in their child’s life. I interpret “Time is an executioner” as an exceptional understanding of time, represented as a state of affairs inferior to a common ground level and as a precipitous fall from the human condition instantiated by the passage of time. This common level represents human life affected by the passage of time as described below:

1. Memories are landmarks on the path of our lives.

2. The more one advances in life, the more one accumulates experience and memories.

3. Time inevitably passes. Therefore, life, portions of life, inevitably diminishes.39

4. The passage of time is seen as playing a causal role in these events.

5. Time can thus be seen as a metaphorical agent, and the event as an action performed by that agent.

6. Because life and memories are possessions, their accumulation represents a valuable collection for an individual and for a community.

These points represent the common line of “Time leaves traces” that governs our lives as human beings. The Shoah or time-as-an-executioner is comprehended as a line that is directed down way from this line of normality because it represents a descent into “hell.” The executioner is synonymous with humiliation, dehumanization, gassing, and organized death. While time-as-a-collector defines us as human beings, with the ability of remembering places we have been, people we have met or activities we have participated
in, time-as-an-executioner negates the very characteristic of the human being: his or her humanity. As Perec puts it:

The essential principle of the concentration camp system was everywhere the same: negation. This might involve instant extermination, but that in the end was the simplest case. More often, it was a slow destruction, an elimination. The deportee had to become faceless, to be nothing but skin stretched over protruding bones. He had to be attacked and worn down by cold, by fatigue, by hunger: to demean himself and to regress. He had to offer the spectacle of a degenerate humanity, searching in dustbins and eating peelings or grass. He had to have fleas, scabies, be covered in vermin. He had to be nothing but vermin himself. Then Germany would have the concrete proof of its superiority.\(^{30}\)

The Shoah was not only gassing, but was foremost a forced regression to an animalistic stage. The meaning of dehumanization in the dictionary is “to deprive of human qualities.” Without qualities such as memories, pity, love, kindness, individuality or creativity we are less than human beings and we consequently deviate from a common level of a time that inevitably dispossesses us of certain characteristics. The absence of these qualities is not only something that is missing but also a regress and a degradation of a human being. Moreover, it is an unjust assault on human dignity and everything that deeply defines us. The survivors from Auschwitz and Treblinka descended into the underworld of hell, experienced this feeling of animality during the deportation, and struggled with their identity as humans after the Shoah.

This dishonest and malicious time has a strong echo in Perec’s life. The Shoah was been a destructive agent that killed his mother and caused the absence of his
childhood memories. If his parents, like millions of other victims, were dehumanized and therefore forced outside the normal passage of time, the malignant aspect of time touches the son as well and brings him too outside the ordinary line of time. Like a harmful agent, time deprives Perec of his childhood memories. This executioner time operates during the main period of deportation from 1942 to 1945, but its consequences can be measured in terms of dispossession until 1948 (at least) when the boy is twelve. From his birth to 1948, he cannot remember anything. Though Perec was already six when deportations began in 1942, no one can say with certainty that he should be expected to have childhood memories before that age. It does seem unlikely, however, that he should have no memories from 1942 through 1948, or the ages of six through twelve. Nevertheless, Perec globally places the whole period from 1936 to 1948 under the traumatic sign of dispossession. He treats this span of time with no regard to specific temporal stages (as, for example, the age of one or two when he perhaps could not have retained memories under any circumstances) and compresses it into a symbolic gap in time: there is before age of twelve and there is after this age.

Memories are valuable to us because we like to pass them on to our children, and understand them as landmarks in our lives. If we love them, we often remember them, and if we hate them, we still need to possess them in order to eventually abandon them later. Either way, we need memories on which to found our personality and our dignity. Augustine said "Behold, I am not able to comprehend the force of my memory, though I cannot name myself without it." It is from this point of view that memories are valuable: we name ourselves regarding (childhood) memories or on the contrary, against (childhood) memories, and their importance is that of a starting point in life. And it is
precisely this "point of departure" that is missing in Perec's life and without which his life has no meaning: "(...) childhood is neither longing nor terror, neither a paradise lost nor the Golden Fleece, but maybe it is a horizon, a point of departure, a set of co-ordinates from which the axes of my life may draw their meaning (...)"(12).

The traumatic nature of "Time is an executioner" left no room for childhood memories. This absence places Perec under the common line of the majority of people who have such memories. He is everything he should be but without memories. Based on the image-schema of "up and down" in the orientational metaphors "More is up" and "Less is down," I represent Perec's situation by a decreasing line down way from the common level of "Time leaves traces." His struggle to catch these memories or to invent them is interpreted as an increasing line toward a level of normalization understood as a positive effort in becoming like everybody else, or at least like the large majority of people.

The letter W has four axes; two descendant and two ascendant. It is my intention to show in the next sections that the four parts of the book metaphorically correspond to a successive conceptual movement of double descent and double ascent that activate in our mind the image of a possible W. From this perspective, I will argue that on the one hand, the first of the autobiographical narratives (P1) is consistent with a decreasing movement from the ground level of time-as-a-collector to the low point of time-as-an-executioner. On the other hand, P2, the second part of the autobiography, represents a mental movement from this low point of missing memories ascending to the common point where memories are (partially) recovered. Additionally, the fiction is also split in two parts: W1 metaphorically follows an ascendant path from an uncertain identity to the
(eventual) recuperation of a certain one or from a fake identity to the discovery of a real one while W2 tragically decreases from a human principle of sport and fair play to an inhuman principle of abuse and dehumanization. Hence, if we conceptually join these four axes going up and down, we draw a mental image of a W. This conceptual process is a creative process as the reader constructs meaning and reestablishes coherence after each successive chapter of fiction and autobiography. I insist on the mental nature of this conceptual representation, for it is not a question of drawing a physical, alphabetical W shape, but more of a virtual representation of a four-step mental process of descent and ascent. This mental W-like movement traces a conceptual space that metaphorically contains Perec’s life as well as the tragic death of the Jews who perished in Nazi camps. Each time Perec recalls his childhood memories, he follows a W-shaped path where his personal life evokes the death of camp deportees. W is therefore a frame that contains both a personal and a collective tragedy. One cannot be activated without the other. Remembering his childhood, and to this extent his past, is for the writer inextricably linked to remembering their death. Outside this frame, there is no (auto)biography to be found, as there is no fiction to be decoded. Finally, I will conclude that the work of autobiography is simultaneous with the Work of Memory, for they both are tied to the threads of W.
4. "I have no childhood memories." Loss, absence and separation

Let me turn now to the first autobiographical part and see how "Time is an executioner" works in the text and how this metaphor projects a decreasing path of loss, separation, absence and dispossession. From 1942, when his mother was deported, until 1948, when he was twelve, the writer does not remember much of his childhood. This is a direct consequence of the "Time is an executioner" metaphor. In a time of war and horror, the child was separated from his mother and sent to Villard-de-Lans in a Red Cross convoy. The child's life was saved, but as an adult, he cannot lead a life emptied of childhood memories. This absence is perceived as a break from his origins that might give meaning to his entire life. We all know that time is continuous and does not stop either in distress or happiness. We live into a continuous duration that extends in a successive line. Although time in general is an unbroken line, Perec's perception of time is broken and non-linear. Even if time is continuous, it is his perception that there is a gap in this uninterrupted length. First, for Perec the period of twelve years is a gap in the irreversible continuity. Second, I claim that in his case the linearity of time-as-a-collector that applies to nearly all human beings takes form of a line directed below this common level to the low point of time-as-an-executioner. This executioner, as the agent that caused the loss of memories, is the instantiation of History that engulfs "the story of [his] leaving, [his] real story, [his] own story (6)." The writer is of course aware that time is continuous, that the twelve empty years are behind him, and that these absent memories once belonged to him. Nevertheless, the battle of his story and History/executioner has been unequal. This particular agent has disposessed Perec of his story and emptied his mind of childhood memories. The broken continuity is expressed as striking evidence in the very beginning
of the first autobiographical part that opens in negation, restriction, loss and absence: “I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four and my mother at six (...) (6, my emphasis).”

In a sustained effort to recall memories, Perec tries to write down every detail that might possibly help him to remember. Yet, this fervent desire to fill in the gaps of his past is foiled by the uncertainty of his findings: memories are improbable, indirect, distorted, and on occasion made-up. One of his earliest memories takes place in his grandmother’s shop where, surrounded by his family, he pointed to a Hebrew character, supposedly a gammeth which is the first letter of his first name (Georges). But as soon as the memory is revived, details in a footnote ruin it. Perec recants it as it seems that the letter he pointed to was not a gammeth but an “M.” Besides, his aunt reminds him that he used to make out the letters not in Yiddish but in French newspapers. Another early memory that he pretends to have kept is that of a key his father offered him. Different versions of a golden key or a golden coin overlap one another, and thus the authenticity of the memory is subverted into an illusion or a dream.

Perec’s memories are almost exclusively reconstructed in this part of the book from indirect sources like baptismal or death certificates, newspapers, relatives’ statements, or marks on his body from some supposed accident. Perec takes his lack of memory of his date of birth as an occasion to bring up objective details that give him the feeling of having a life full of meaning. Since no one remembers his own birthday, anyone could easily find from a newspaper the events that happened that specific day and then come up with a list full of information. This list (in chapter 6) traces some of the
historical facts announcing time-as-an-executioner that was yet to come: in an American
daily, Stalin denounced Germany as a warmonger, Kosher slaughtering was banned in
Poland, and Nazis were convicted and sentenced for plotting riots in Austria. Still, all
these pieces of information are merely journalistic information but not personal
memories.

Between childhood and adulthood, the writer finds there is always an
unbridgeable distance that separates what he lived through until age of twelve (1948) and
the rest of his life. There is an omnipresent screen that interferes between the present and
that period of time. Père ́c rigorously gathers all kinds of details that could revive this past
but they are details of facts and documents and not of feelings or personal experiences.
For example, the last bit of evidence of his mother’s existence is (unsurprisingly!) a
notary declaration and Père ́c gives us exhaustive details about it (20): it was made in
accordance with clause 3 of the Law of 10 August 1927; it was entered by his father on
12 August 1936; Père ́c has a copy of it that is authenticated, typed in violet on a letter-
card; it is dated 23 September 1942 and it is postmarked the following day. One is not
surprised by this precise photograph-like description because Père ́c has an empirical
approach to his memories through photographs and includes descriptions of many such
documents throughout the autobiographic narrative. Importantly, he does not remember
the scene but rather the photo or the document, and thus access to the scene is denied
him. In this sense, the five photographs of his mother and the one of his father are
precious possessions to him that replace the possession of genuine memories. They are
described with precision and care, as if they were his personal memories.
One of the memories he tries to pin down seems more credible and reality-based than the rest: Cécile, Père’s mother, is separated from her child at the Gare de Lyon where he is consigned to a Red Cross convoy. She buys him a comic entitled “Charlie and the parachute,” and on its cover Charlie is suspended by his trousers’ braces to the parachute’s rigging lines. Père remembers, “though I have no broken bones, I wear my arm in a sling (26).” This surviving memory is first corrected a few pages later when Père no longer mentions having a sling (32), and then recanted in chapter 10 (54) when he says that he actually was not wounded at all but wore the sling in order to be evacuated. Right away, this memory is distorted and the sling could be a truss or bandage symbolic of the rupture he had with his mother. Therefore, the arm in the sling was just a phantasm, and as he states (again) in the footnote, he remembers having a truss and having had an operation for a hernia or appendicitis or both. These successive scenarios deconstruct the surviving memory, blur the reality of the past, and finally make Père (as well as the reader) doubt his capacity for remembering.

Next, in order to fill in his lack of memories, Père uses his literary skills and imaginative power and makes some up. Fiction is a helpful tool to build a fake autobiographical edifice and was used in the text he wrote at a young age when he was already haunted by an absence of memories. He used his inventive powers as well in the footnotes he later added to the early text. This is to say that between a young age (probably around twenty-four) and the age of 39 when he wrote the book, the fictitious autobiography always remained valuable to him. In the autobiographical text he recuperated from the past (chapter 8, 27-32), the young man was already using his imagination to construct different scenarios for his parents. For example, he “thought up
various glorious deaths (29)” for his father and he imagined his mother on a “twisting
ghetto street in a pale, sickly light” possessed of “a great tenderness, a great patience and
a lot of love (30-31).” As for grandfather Aaron, whom he never knew, he pictured him
to be a wise man chanting the Bible out loud and surrounded by grandchildren placed in
order of height and eating their soup (31). In footnote 19 written by Père the adult
author, he specifically states that this was a fantasy based on Andersen’s The Little Match
Girl or Les Misérables. In another note (8), Père discusses his father’s name, Icek Judko
Peretz. He found out later from his aunt that his father’s name was Icek and not André, as
he thought. It was common at that time to change Jewish names into French names as a
“basic precaution (33).” Thus, his father Icek became André, and his mother Cyrila
changed her name to Cécile. At that same time, Peretz was spelled Père and the writer,
without any certainty or proof, successively associated his last name with the Hebrew
word for “hole,” the Russian for “pepper,” and the Hungarian for “pretzel,” and
acrobatically traces back his Yiddish origin to the classic writer I. L. Peretz. Père’s
playfulness with his last name is part of a complex fantasy through which he hopes to
connect his origin to Judaism. He further elaborates on the discrepancy between the way
his name is spelled and the way it is pronounced in French as an additional connection to
his origin. Père should be written in French “Pérec” or “Perrec” because Père is often
pronounced Peurec. In another attempt to connect himself to a (wounded) nation and to a
stable origin, Père imaginatively morphs the childhood scene where the medal he was
awarded for diligence was unjustly torn off by the teacher into a scene where this torn off
medal is replaced by a star pinned on him. The objective reference to the Jewish star is
doubled by an affective reference to the mother who also wore it.
It is obvious that this sort of fabricated memory is just as unsatisfactory as the improbable, indirect or distorted memories Perec tries to gather. The period of time from 1936 to 1948 remains an empty space. After deploying all these statistical details, suppositions, variations and fantasies, Perec actually remembers nothing by himself. All his “memories” come from another source outside himself, from other people or photographs. He “believes” his childhood was a certain way, he “thinks” he can remember it, yet “he doesn’t know [it] quite well.” His supposed memories are pseudo-memories. The documents suggest how his past might have been, but he remains unsure. The photograph showing the mother and the child is a precious possession to him, yet it is merely a prop and not a scene, a reminder and not a remembrance. In 1946, Perec went back to Rue Villin to the house where he spent his childhood, hoping for a quick “repair” of his memory but “[he] doesn’t succeed in identifying the house (...) in which [he] had spent six years of [his] life and which [he] believed, mistakenly, to have been number 7 (48).”

The absence of memories is the fundamental problem that Perec encounters not only in writing about his life at an adult age but also in apprehending it as a twelve-year-old boy. How could one represent such an absence and how could one write about it? It is the activity of writing as a symbol that is significant rather than communication of content. As Perec does not remember much about his childhood, he is not able to write anything meaningful about it; yet writing becomes a symbolic representation. It becomes an emblem so that even if it does not say much in itself, it says a lot in reference to the story of his family that in turn comes to represent the story of all deportees, and thus the story of a nation. The mechanical gesture of writing about missing memories by marking
or engraving characters on a piece of paper has the significance of a memorial. The writer has no memory of the scene but the memory of photographs and documents and, through writing about them, the memory of the word. For him, remembering and writing are two processes that started at the same time: writing means writing about the absence of his childhood memories and the absence of his parents.

Even if his memory is displaced and the details of different events from his past are contradictory, one thing is clear: his personal story globally starts at the same time when time-as-an-executioner slips into place. In 1936, the year of his birth, Hitler had not yet marched into Poland but “was already in power and the camps were working very smoothly (19).” Therefore, the “time is an executioner” metaphor represents the starting point of his life and also of his amnesia. Moreover, the writer has the desire (and need) to connect the absence of his memories to the absence of his parents, and his personal story to a collective story. Starting below the common point of time-as-a-thief, he needs some kind of suspenders in order to be able to eventually ascend. This fabricated convergence of his individual date of birth with the anachronistic historical date of Hitler’s invasion of Poland, as well as the fabricated convergence of his name with Judaism, allow him to relate his unstable identity to a stable historical reference. Like Charlie from his storybook who needs his “bretelles” to attach to his parachute, Père also needs suspenders to make him resurface from the low point of “Time is an executioner” to the common point of “Time leaves traces.”

The anachronistic correspondence between Père’s date of birth and the beginning of the war is one instance in the general lack of chronology that pervades the book. The period of time from 1936 to 1948 is globally perceived without any internal
chronological order other than the radical break of *before* and *after* the age of twelve (1948). The autobiographical narrative relies on lapses, skepticism and abundant footnotes pointing toward errors in chronology, facts, or even spelling. The conceptual descent caused by “Time is an executioner” traces a decadent path of chronological disorder that blurs away memories.

As little as Pèrece remembers his childhood, he knows even less about his mother and her death. She has no grave and the lack of concrete evidence of her death is for Pèrece a constant alienation. He cannot remember her and because she has no grave by which to be remembered, he cannot mourn for her, “as if the discovery of this tiny patch of earth would at last put a boundary around that death which [he] had never learnt of, never experienced or known or acknowledged, but which for years and years [he] had had to deduce hypocritically from the commiserating whispers and sighing kisses of the ladies (38).” This long litany of loss, dispossession, separation and absence inflict on Pèrece an existential suffering. From the age of twelve, he tries to fill this unnatural gap in his life by writing first the early fiction about W and then the early autobiographical text. The lacunas in his memory motivate him to search to reestablish the continuity of his life. It is by means of writing that Pèrece tries to fill in the blank spaces of his past, and thus memories gradually start to arise, even if they are fleeting and disjointed. At the end of P1 (54), after writing with tenacity on absence and dispossession, memories come back and multiply in the very process of writing. I interpret this “repair” of memory as an ascent to the normal level of “Time leaves traces” and I connect this rise to the recuperation of memories in P2 that conceptually traces an upward movement from time-as-an-executioner back to time-as-a-collector. It becomes clear that writing is a prompt
for a cognitive representation corresponding to a mental W-like image. Therefore, the letter W in the title, in the fictional narrative, and in many references throughout the text is not only a graphic character under Père’s pen or a fictional construction in W1 and W2, but also a conceptual representation in Père’s mind and a conceptual boundary in writing, and therefore in reading. This W that represents both the physical mark of/ in writing and the mental representation in his mind symbolically stands for the assertion of his life and the memory of their death. VV projects a definitive image onto Cécile’s death and fills in the absence of childhood memories, for W is simultaneously a mark of all the persecuted and a mark of Père’s wounded childhood. Finally, it is this specific mental W frame that represents the set of co-ordinates from which the axes of his life draw their meaning.

5. Going up and down or from utopia to distopia. Athletic mental processes

Each autobiographical chapter in roman characters is doubled by a fictional chapter in italics. Père’s enthusiasm for fiction dates back to the conception of the feuilleton “W” in 1969 for La Quinzaine Littéraire, when he confessed in a letter to Maurice Nadeau that he would like to write an adventure story, a travel story, and an educational novel in the manner of Jules Vernes, Roussel, and Louis Carroll. Indeed, in W1 and W2, chapters are systematically structured in order to keep readers breathless, just like in a feuilleton or in the works of Eugène Sue or Dumas, two other writers mentioned by Père in his letter.

Gaspard Winckler is the first-person narrator of a story that he witnessed but in which he was not an actor. He is the only survivor of a horrible voyage, and being “the only vestige of that world,” he feels a “commanding necessity (3-4)” to write down this
horrible past left behind him. For several years, he forgot about this mission that had been entrusted to him. One day in Venice, the ghosts of the nightmare unexpectedly came back and he mistakenly thought he saw a man who belonged to that world in a restaurant in Giudecca. Realizing at that moment that there could not be any survivor and that he is really the only one able to hand down the story of that adventure, Gaspard Winckler makes the decision to speak out by adopting “the cold, impassive tone of the ethnologist (4).” It is precisely in Venice that Perec in P1 remembers the story of W he wrote years ago when he was a young boy. This spatial coincidence in the location of an “awakening” or “awareness” for both is neither accidental nor unique.

Both Perec and Gaspard Winckler are orphans who were later adopted and struggle to search for their origins. Like a witness stating his personal facts before a court, Winckler gives detailed, though incomplete, information about his name, his family, and his date and place of birth. Yet the names and dates are designated by their first letter or digits followed by dots: he was born on June 25, 19., around four o’clock, at R., a hamlet of three houses, not far from A. He says that he lost his father when he was six and mentions nothing about his mother. Two neighbors adopt him and he grows up in this family “half a son, half a farmhand (4).” At this point, the traumatic absence of parents is common to the two narrators. Gaspard Winckler is an army deserter working as a mechanic in an unspecified German town. Although it is not specifically noted who or what caused the death of Winckler’s father or, later, his own desertion, there are some specifics about military life and army activity. This may be taken as an allusion to some kind of destructive aspect of time associated with a time of war. Given the consequences of his unidentified act, Winckler leaves under an assumed identity with false papers.
Hence, it is not just the question of filiation from P 1 that returns but also the question of (lack of) identity. The shortcomings of his memory haunt Perec and make him question his acquired identity, which is founded on an empty space and a broken relationship with his origin. The false identity that has been given him allows Winckler to lead an apparently calm life, yet he finally settles in a town “right next to the border with Luxemburg (5)”: never quite settled, close to the border, always ready to run away. The first builds himself a dissimulated identity in relation to a made-up Jewish origin, as access to his real origin is denied him; the second is guilty of dereliction of duty and leaves under an assumed identity. In both cases, origin is blurred and identity is fabricated, thus unstable and unreliable. Perec and Winckler fall into a void of uncertain identities and their sustained efforts to ascend to a level of normalization, through writing for Perec (in P2) and an adventurous search mission for Winckler (in W1), correspond to distinct upward mental paths similar to the upward axes of the letter W.

This conceptual representation of an ascendant path is based in W1 on the gradual narrative preparation for a search mission for a sick child and on the accumulation of details of an adventure story that creates expectation and suspense for readers. For example, there is a gradual contrast between Winckler’s orphaned condition, autobiography and adoption – not very exciting details in an adventure story – and the stimulating details that increase the reader’s curiosity that Perec progressively adds. It is known that Winckler traveled to “ghost towns” with “bloody contests (3),” and, because he is the only witness, he decides to talk about it. Based on this set-up, the reader may expect a violent thriller. This witness is soon presented as a deserter from the French army with false papers, leading to the expectation of perhaps a detective novel that
focuses on the deserter’s arrest or a psychological novel that deals with his (eventual) troubled personality problems.

Reader’s curiosity is especially sparked when Winckler unexpectedly receives a letter (a common narrative process in adventure stories) from a man he does not know, inviting him to meet in a hotel. This letter is an object of wonder, for it is on letterhead bearing an unknown name, followed by a bizarre abbreviation (Otto Apfelstahl, MD). Below the name, there is a complicated coat of arms, excellently engraved, yet not easy to decipher. This symbol may be interpreted in many different ways, all unsatisfactory: it may represent a snake with bay leaves for scales, a hand that is simultaneously a root, or a nest and a brazier, etc. Besides, MD is an obscure abbreviation that does not make sense in French. Winckler goes to the Municipal Library to satisfy his curiosity and search for clarification in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and directories – a method that echoes Perec’s method of searching for memories in documents and photo albums. Undoubtedly, given all these mysterious details, readers readily expect a story promising suspense and the discovery of masked evidence. The verbs used help raise our anxiety, too: this letter first scaries Winckler, then he decides to run away, he thinks he is blackmailed, and later he contrives to master his fear (9).

After hesitating between fear and curiosity to meet the mysterious man, Winckler finally prepares his traveling bag, falsely tells his landlady and employer that he must go prepare his mother’s funeral, and then leaves. On his way to the train station, he obsesses over his conjectural, risky identity: “Did I mean to run away? I don’t think so; rather to be ready for any eventuality (11).” He is always prepared to run away and the constant effort to conceal his real identity is equivalent to a struggle for life. At the meeting, he
realizes that Otto Apfelstahl is aware of his false identity and even has supplementary details on his borrowed name. The deserter has been given the identity papers of Gaspard Winckler, a deaf-mute eight-year-old-boy, who is believed to have disappeared in a shipwreck in Tierra del Fuego. The support organization that took care of the deserter was quite cautious, supplying him with a genuine and not forged passport. It was the boy’s actual passport that Wincker got, a passport issued just a few weeks earlier for the purpose of a coming voyage and offered to the assistance organization by Cécile Winckler, the boy’s mother and member of the organization.

The fictional narrative develops from meaningless autobiographical details to a mysterious encounter, and finally a daring adventure when Apfelstahl asks Winckler to search the islands of the South Atlantic for the boy whose passport he now possesses. The boy was believed to have survived a shipwreck near Tierra del Fuego. From a mechanic working in a small town, Gaspard Winckler has the chance to become an explorer charged with finding a child out at the other end of the world. The intensity increases and the reader is curious whether he will join in the search. All the elements of the “romanesque” are present here: mystery, a quest for missing persons, adventure, and a voyage to lost worlds.

P1 involves a never-ending process of verification and questioning, with a long series of explanatory or corrective footnotes meant to dispel inaccuracy, but which in the end causes doubt and undermines all evidence. The more Perec tries to be specific, the less he succeeds. In the first autobiographical narrative there is (almost) no genuine memory and no definitive evidence that there could be one, and childhood remains an empty space. On the contrary, in W1, factual, substantial details abound. For example,
the narrator offers us all aspects of the child’s sickness and the coming voyage and shipwreck. This plethora of information amplifies the plot of the story and operates as an ever-growing list. The child is deaf and mute; he has no internal injury, no inherited disorder, no anatomical or physiological deformity to account for his disability; he is condemned to total isolation; his mother, a world-famous Austrian singer, takes him around the world hoping that the voyage will be a cure for his condition, etc. With four other people on board, the child and the mother leave for Trieste, where they board an eighty-five-foot yacht, The Sylvander, “a superb vessel which could take them through the worst typhoons (24).” Next follows a precise list of all possible ports of call on the Sylvander’s itinerary and details of the death of the crew’s members, particularly of Cécile’s.

At this point of high plot intensity filled with dense fictional detail, the reader is psychologically ready to embark with Gaspard Winckler upon the search mission in Tierra del Fuego. The reader is eager for adventure and discovery, especially the discovery of the child and clarification on Winckler’s identity. The object of the search is double: the child and the identity, as the identity is in this case a pragmatic object of investigation. Importantly, following this narrative strategy based on abundant details, readers expect the mission in the “ghost towns” and “sunken world” with “bloody contests” promised at the beginning of the story. Certainly, a detective novel or maybe even a thriller will follow!

These details that encourage the reader to draw inferences and develop expectations set the scene for Winckler’s ascendancy from a contingent everyday life to an adventurous search mission. Instead of merely continuing to accept his forged identity,
he now embarks on a quest for the person to whom this identity belongs. This development also entails a shift from a minimum of narrative details to the multiplication of them throughout the story. If in P1, time-as-an-executioner metaphorically wounds Perec and makes him descend below the common line of time-as-a-collector, from where he tries to recuperate memories to fill in the empty space of his childhood and thus to possibly achieve a harmonious identity, in W1, it is from this low point of a problematic, and in this case, given identity that Winckler starts his ascent equivalent to the gradual preparation for the search mission. The degrees by which the fiction develops trace the upward path of the mental representation of this gradual narrative that symbolizes at a macro-textual level the second ascendant axis of the letter W.

Nevertheless, W2 undermines our expectations of an anticipated scenario and turns abruptly to the meticulous description of an island in Tierra del Fuego, an island named W. There is no further mention of Gapard Winckler’s mission and we do not really know who the cerebral and distant narrator is who introduces us to W. Besides this frustration at not being aware of who narrates and who is in charge of Winckler’s mission prefigured in the previous chapters (if there is still one), the reader surprisingly discovers an exceptional place that only lost voyagers, victims of a shipwreck, and bold explorers have seen before. This seemingly idyllic setting is also an isolated place surrounded by a rough landscape:

The profoundly hostile nature of the lands all around it – a craggy, tortured, arid, glacial landscape, perpetually shrouded in fog – makes the sight of this cool and happy countryside seem all the more miraculous: in place of barren moors swept by wild Atlantic winds, in place of splintered rock faces and meagre seaweed with
millions of sea birds circling overhead, you see gently rolling hills crowded with clumps of walks and plane trees, dusty tracks edged with dry-stone walls or high bramble hedges, and great fields of bilberries, turnips, corn and sweet potatoes (65).

This island named W is “far away, at the other end of the earth” and this geographic separation is also a graphical one, represented by the three points within parentheses on a white page that isolates the two halves of the book. It soon becomes obvious that this place bears utopist characteristics like isolation, rigorous geometric disposal, harmonious constitution, hierarchic order, governing laws, codes and rules. Indeed, its shores offer no natural landing area, but only “unfaulted basalt cliffs” and “plague infested swamps” (chapter 12). It is an isolated place, almost a non-place, just like in the etymology of “Utopia,” “not-topos,” designating an idealized place. W doesn’t appear at all on most maps or it is featured “only as a vague and nameless blob”. Beside the luxurious abundant vegetation, there is a “remarkable mild climate” and this harmony is vaguely attributed to the circular shape of the western part of W, an area reminiscent of the back of a sheep’s head. It is believed that, despite numerous hypotheses on the origin of W, a certain Wilson, himself a champion excited by the idea of the Olympics, decides to found a new Olympia, a sportive society based on “the greater glory of the Body (67).” Thus, sport rules W and the national motto Fortius Altius Citius (Stronger Higher Faster) celebrates an athletic way of life. W was at first entirely uninhabited and the WASPs, (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants), “almost exclusively Aryans,” colonized it at the end of nineteenth century. The people live in villages with “monumental arches,” “splendid
stadiums,” “gigantic wall sheets” – an ideal environment that can be found only in Utopia. Indeed, this is a place comparable to Thomas More’s Utopia or to the Thélème monastery in Rabelais. It has a rigorous geometrical organization with most of the population concentrated in four villages; the road connecting the villages is particularly narrow; halfway between each village and its neighbor is a stadium used only for contests between those two villages, and in the middle of the quadrilateral formed by the four villages is the Central Stadium.

The concept of “village” goes together with a hierarchical organization and with a strict sport morality. It is not the entire population that lives in the villages, but only the sportsmen and people that are necessary to them, such as team managers, trainers, and doctors. They participate in diverse, ranked competitions. Lowest on the ranking order are the heats in which athletes of a given village win the right to take part in inter-village meets, next come the local championships between proximate villages, then come the selections among non-adjacent villages, and finally the games: the Olympiads, held once a year, the Spartakiads, held every three months, and the Atlantiads, held once a month, and all run by a Central Authority. More generally, these Olympic villages are equivalent to training camps where sportsmen limber up before major athletic events. These events are subjected to rigorous rules: any fault leads to automatic disqualification and defeat, failure to respect a custom unconnected with competition can only be interpreted as a challenge, and any athlete who is tempted to favor the victory of his camp is disqualified. In brief, total impartiality and implacable neutrality reign. Any infringement of the rules is also seriously reprimanded.
So far, the new Olympia is an utopist society based on well-established rules of integrity and fair play. It is "a fertile and verdant micromesopotamia (65)," an oasis with splendid landscapes, a mild climate, and a distant location, thus an exotic, dreamlike place. With an athletic vocation, people on W seem to embrace all principles of justice, fairness, and equitable competition. Yet at some point, we feel that things are not quite "right" in this society and that we are not quite at ease with some details. For instance, there are some odd exclusion practices, for only sportsmen and accessory personnel live in the villages, while old men, women and children are "accommodated," which is to say isolated, a few miles away from W:

All others whose jobs do not or do not any longer relate directly to Sport, that is, mainly, the old men, the women and the children, are accommodated in a set of buildings located a few miles south-west of W in a place called the Fortress. That is where, among other things, the central hospital and the sick bay, the asylum, the youth homes, the kitchens, the workshops, etc., are located. The name of the Fortress derives from its central building, a crenellated and almost windowless tower made of soft grey stone, a kind of petrified lava, which could quite easily remind you of a lighthouse (72).

Actually this is reminiscent of quite an other image than a lighthouse. This Fortress, where all physically weak people are confined while all the healthy, competitive men are selected for championships held apart in villages, strangely resembles the concentration camps. In the center, there is a crenellated tower for the Central Government, which is the same kind of tower pictured in the complicated coat of arms on Otto Apfelstahl's letter in W1. The references to "grey stone" and "petrified lava" connote death which in Louis
Arsac’s view\textsuperscript{34} is also suggested by the geographical disposition of part of W that is vaguely circular like a sheep’s head but “with its lower jaw distinctly out of joint (65),” suggestive of a violent death. Grey is the color that athletes wear along with an “outsized[d]” W blazoned on the back of their tracksuits. Segregation, emblazoned shirts and death are early clues that prompt the thought that this Fortress and this society could be far different from what we were tempted to think in the beginning. Besides, this Central Authority that regulates the “dynastic distribution (83)” of all events, is not only neutral in its decisions but also totally isolated from the athletes’ life, as they live in the watchtower and never interact with the athletes. Another surprising custom on W is the exclusion of sportsmen not crowned in competitions, as well as of those who suffer from a tic or have a slight handicap: they are offered as clowns for the spectators’ relief. They are mocked and subjected to a so-called “entertaining” contest that turns out to be rather dangerous and painful, and the show is actually rather “grotesque (86).” It seems that the only thing the Central Authority requires from athletes is the highest physical performance and consequently, those less strong and less competitive are excluded from the Olympic villages. The exclusion of those who do not meet a certain standard and who are designated as undesirable and sub-athletes parallels the exclusion of Jews who were similarly deemed undesirable and sub-human by Hitler and the Nazi regime. Further, the standard set in concentration camps in Poland and in training camps on W is one and the same: the superiority of the Aryans. In \textit{Histoire de l’utopie}, Jean Servier defines utopia as an envisioned, projected conception of a world that should exist and as a critical view on the world that does exist. Utopia is an imaginary construction of an ideal society that
underlines the problems and the lacks in our real society. In a humanist perspective, the writer of a utopia means to encourage his readers to think about the society they live in and to improve it, Servier says. But the more details we learn about W, the more we realize that idealism turns into barbarism, humanity declines to inhumanity, and utopia regresses to dystopia. From paradise, W degenerates into a morbid world whose inhabitants are subjected to terror, forced discipline, hunger, injustice, and death. Thus, as the letter W is auto-referential, a double V, the world W reflects its double as well, mirroring the genocide perpetrated against Jews during War World II. The “distinctly out of joint” society of W declines from a so-believed utopia to a horrifying dystopia and its stages of decline represent locations on a downward conceptual path that I represent as the second descendent axis (after P1) of a mental W macro-textual representation.

The main features of life on W are athletic performance, victory and the glorification of success. It is then extremely important for the Organizers to motivate the athletes, and what could be better motivation than what kicks them into their “basic survival mechanism (91).” Hence, meals are accordingly adjusted to give contestants the fighting-spirit needed for top-level competitions and thus, only 264 athletes out of 1,320 have a chance of eating dinner. The meals are consistently deficient in calories and vitamins, and therefore the vast majority of sportsmen are chronically undernourished. On the contrary, prizewinners are given a banquet with the most exquisite dishes, and because they are so hungry and cannot refrain from overeating, the next day they are unable to compete. Restraint is not encouraged nor does the Central Authority care that if the champion athletes do compete the next day, they have a greater chance of winning then those already hungry. Another main pillar of life on W is the onomastic system that
discards all proper names in favor of the denominations of performances and achievements. This way, "an athlete is no more and no less than his victories (99)," and as he keeps adding on more victories, his name looses all meaning and becomes "a neutral marker, barely more human than the official registration numbers (99)."

Wilson, the founder of W, promised when he founded his new society to follow the Olympic ideal of fair-play, yet the winners and losers are given unequal treatment and the more the former are rewarded, the more the latter are punished. Losers are humiliated and subjected to unpleasant exercises with painful consequences: bruised toes, blisters, and ulcers on the heel and sole. At the spectators' will, they may be put in a yoke and, if a single spectator wishes, the losers can be put to death; the whole crowd stones them and their dismembered corpses are displayed in the villages. This violent way of competition is accompanied by institutional discrimination and injustice. The Officers encourage all sorts of discriminatory measures that they view as effective stimulus for athletes consisting of arbitrary handicaps imposed randomly on individuals, teams or villages. For instance, one team might have to run 420 meters while the other has to run only 380, or some competitors might be given a five-point penalty while others get extra points. Hence, the law is unpredictable: "being the best is not enough to guarantee a win; that would make it too simple (118)."

All details of dystopist life in New Olympia are likened to those of life in Nazi camps. The arbitrary law evokes the law of SS officers in the extermination camps, where people were subjected to different kinds of unfair contests and where women were humiliated and raped. On W, women are separated from men and contained in special Quarters, surrounded by an electric fence that protects them from any male intruders.
Nevertheless, once a month, the fertile ones are set free naked in the Central Stadium where they are raped right in the front of the podium. The number of women is quite restricted as they are used just for giving birth. For this reason, “only one girl child out of every five is kept (125).” The young boys, in the course of their fifteenth year, leave the Quarters and join the Olympic villages where they have to spend six months in initiation, when they are handcuffed and chained to their bed at night. What follows is only the routine on W – humiliation, insults, injustices, and beatings. If the newcomers withstand this regime, they are named novices, they are given the insignia on a large triangle of white cloth, and they are welcomed to discover the savagery of W society:

(...) [T]hey see the cohort of the beaten returning, the exhausted, ashen-faced Athletes tottering under the weight of oaken yokes; they see them collapse onto the ground, where they lie with their mouths open, wheezing; they see them, a little later, tearing each other to pieces for a scrap of salami, a drop of water, a puff at a cigarette. They see, at dawn, the Winners returning, gorged with suet and rough liquor, slumping into their own vomit (139).

W endorses pure barbarism and a lack of humanity. The law of sport is the law of death under all possible forms: starvation, beating, lynching, physical exploitation, and psychological exhaustion. This is a decadent transformation from a miraculous happy countryside to a hideous place where people are dehumanized, brought to the limits of survival, and often lose their lives. All these macabre features are astonishingly similar to those of the concentration camps.

W is like a clear mirror image of the historical reality of the Shoah. It seems then legitimate and reasonable to take the Shoah as a source domain for a projection of similar...
features into the target domain of W, like forced discipline, hunger, injustice, terror, and death. Yet, I hesitate to take the genocidal time as source domain because human beings simply cannot understand the world of camps. The reader conceptualize it vaguely, in terms of loss, dehumanization and death, and he integrates details and recounted events, but he cannot say that he comprehends what this “experience” meant. Not even the camp deportees not the returning survivors could understand it. Robert Antelme defines it as “unimaginable” and Perec says that his mother “died without understanding (33).” In a well-known article dedicated to Robert Antelme, Perec asserts the following:

“We think we know the camps because we have seen, or think, or have seen, the watchtowers, the barbed wire, the gas chambers. Because we think we know the number of dead. But statistics never speak. We make no difference between a thousand dead and a hundred thousand. Photographs, souvenirs, gravestones, tell us nothing. In Munich, tourist signs invite you to visit Dachau. But the huts are empty and clean, the grass is growing. We think we know what the terrible is: a “terrible” event, a “terrible” story. It has a beginning, a culminating moment, an end. But we understand nothing. We don’t understand the unendingness of hunger. Emptiness. Absence. The body eating itself away. The word “nothing.” We don’t know the camps.35

The impossibility of understanding time-as-an-executioner and the death it perpetrated in the extermination camps blocks the reader from conceptually representing this frightful reality and thus, it cannot be integrated into our conceptual system as a common concept. One might carefully gather the smallest details, the most objective facts and statistics and
try to perceive their meaning and conceive of the inhuman experience genocide produced. But one remains stranger to that apocalyptic world and its logic is beyond his comprehension, and even for those who were there the camps remain an "unimaginable" world. Survivors do not want to think about it for fear of recalling it back and do not want to talk about it for fear that their testimony might be mistaken or fail. This impossibility of representation and comprehension does not allow us to integrate this macabre reality into our mind, so that it cannot serve as grounding for other metaphorical concepts. Consequently the reader cannot use it as a stable, common reference for the conceptualization of further knowledge. Thus, the Shoah domain is a historical, informative source and not a conceptual source. Like Perec, the reader should take it as informational background, always present and always afflictive. Moreover, W should be understood as an independent space that has its own structure, even without relation to the Shoah. Its reality is focused on sport, athletes and victory. I suggest that, perhaps, the fictional domain of W could be a source of interpretation of the incomprehensible world of the Shoah. It is precisely because the camps are beyond one’s comprehension that the writer builds a fiction to introduce us to a horrifying reality. This New Olympia turns into a grotesque universe where training camps are actually concentration camps, competitors run to death, winning Olympic titles means loosing individuality, and starvation is a common motivation. With a cold, emotionless tone, the cerebral narrator gradually walks the reader through the degradation of a world announced in the beginning as a utopia, and step-by-step they descend into a hellish underworld. It is by means of reading that one feels some of the fright, horror, and terror that the camp deportees felt during the deportation. Perec’s intention is not to recreate the same world but rather to reveal a new
one, striking enough to introduce some of the same effects. And, in the end, the reader feels ineluctably abandoned and powerless, somehow responsible; he feels he has lost his innocence!

6. Fleeting memories. Final ascent to the top of W

After writing about absence and dispossession (in P1), Perec gradually starts to recuperate his childhood memories. At the end of P1, memories come back and, while he remembers his school, they multiply through the very process of writing. The first memory, evoking a gas mask, is “the haziest,” the second of a painting of a brown bear is “more persistent,” and the third recalling the unjustly confiscated medal is “the most coherent (53).” These three instances strongly marked the child’s memory, as they were intense moments of unpleasant smell (the rubber of the gas mask), of great happiness (the picture), or of profound injustice (the medal unfairly seized). From hazy to persistent and finally coherent, memories revive and multiply, as Perec writes, the three become four: he also remembers the paper place-mats made at school, a symbolic image of a child weaving strips that mirrors the image of the writer weaving words. As the weaving seems productive (the child was good at it) and the texture seems promising (the memories return), more “interlacing” is expected in P2. The Latin “texere” that is the etymology of “text” and “texture” literally means “doing weaving” and “creating texture” - in this case, activating memories.

In P2, more and more memories resurface, and this is a moment clearly marked in the book: “From this point on, there are memories (...) (68).” Nevertheless, in this second part of the autobiographical narrative, there is no spectacular return of memories, nor a
quick restoration of memory. On the contrary, the process of remembering laborious and does not lead to a complete "repair" of the past. Even if Père C. succeeds in recuperating partial valuable memories, he will always be distressed and maintain a sense of grievance, loss, and absence. First, the recuperated memories remain disjointed for lack of reference marks, and second they stay dissociated, for lack of a chronological link:

From this point on, there are memories — fleeting, persistent, trivial, burdensome—but there is nothing that binds them together. They are like that unjoined-up writing, made of separate letters unable to forge themselves into a word (...). What marks this period especially is the absence of landmarks: these memories are scraps of life snatched from the void. No mooring. Nothing to anchor them or hold them down. Almost no way of ratifying them. No sequence in time, except as I have reconstructed it arbitrarily over the years: time went by. There were seasons. There was skiing and haymaking. No beginning, no end. There was no past, and for very many years there was no future either, things simply went on. You were there. (...) The only thing you do know is that it went on for years and then one day it stopped (68-69).

The memories arise against a constant background of absence and uncertainty. They are not grouped in a list like in his other book Je me souviens, and they intermingle with second-hand information and other vague memories or even, just like in P1, fantasies and contradictory versions. For instance, Père C. has no precise memory about the villa he lived in together with his aunt and her family, when they took refuge in Villard-de-Lans. Instead, he has numerous pieces of information on this house (location, architecture, neighbors) gathered from his aunt or from photo albums. Apart from these details
procured from outside sources, Perec "clearly" remembers one of his neighbors and his occupation: "I remember him clearly: he sawed his wood on a saw-horse made of a pair of up-ended parallel crosses, each in the shape of an X (called a "Saint Andrew's Cross" in French), connected by a perpendicular crossbar, the whole device being called, quite simply, an x (76)." Inspired by this resurfaced memory, the writer elaborates on the letter X, as it is the letter that stuck in his memory. The significance of it is multiple and independent of the scene. X is a letter that has the same shape as the thing it refers to; it is also the sign of a word deleted; the contrastive sign of ablation, the sign of multiplication, and the starting point for Perec's geometrical fantasy whose basic figure is a double V. Besides all its other well-known significances, the X's double V "traces out the major symbols of the story of [his] childhood (77): a swastika, a sign close to that signifying the SS (Nazi officers), and the star of David. This is an unequivocal reference to the Shoah and the Nazi regime that enriches the significance of W, also a double V, a letter that is present in the book, in Perec's life (the serial publication, the drawings), and in Perec's way of conceptualizing the world. From reported information to the rise of a genuine memory and to its elaboration, the memory helps Perec integrate the scattered fragments of his life. Perec gathers information and through writing he restores memory and, importantly, he interprets that memory in relation to the past.

Genuine memories in P2 do not exclude fantasies or memories imagined or fabricated. They coexist, and it is impossible for Perec to assert their origin. Such was his difficulty with the disturbing visit of aunt Berthe to the college: "Perhaps during that time she reminded me of this visit, or perhaps it is an entirely imaginary event (...)(105)." At other times, the difference between reality and fantasy is more noticeable. Talking about
the two sisters running the school, Père c favors an imaginary description: "(...) the two sisters [...] I imagine, rather than remember, in long grey robes (94)." Some of these imaginary memories are not devoid of emotion and tenderness. Tracing the disturbing discrepancy between the way things were and the way they should have been, Père c helplessly evokes the image of the mother and a whole scenario of familiarity that would have accompanied her presence: having dinner together, helping her to clear the kitchen table, and doing his homework. Like in P1, imagined accidents happen to the boy. Similarly to his "memory" of his arm in a sling at the Gare de Lyon, in P2, he "remembers" that his right arm was wrapped in bandages after he was knocked over. Yet, neither his aunt nor his cousin has any memory of this fracture. Besides, a man who was present at that time on the ice rink remembers a similar accident where another child was injured and Père c was only the witness of that scene. From these two examples of fabricated fractures in P1 and in P2, only the "desire" of being wounded and not the reality of the accident is to be taken as authentic. By adding variations of the same scene, Père c undermines the imaginary memories, yet he also sets up a symbolic system of injury, humiliation, exclusion, culpability, and trauma that metaphorically relates to the initial absence of origins, of parents, and of memories.

Among memories constructed from pieces of information, testimonies, photo albums, and his own imagination, genuine memories resurface even if they are dissociated chronologically and spatially. Père c starts to remember some of his past: objects, games, jokes, events, visits, etc. The recuperation of each of these memories represents a step toward an attempted normalization. From the total absence of memories in P1 to the possession of some in P2, there is an ascendant course leading to the common
level of “Time leaves traces” that applies to all human beings. The more we advance through life, the more we accumulate memories. On the way up to this common level of conventionality, each of the writer’s revived memories is a location on the conceptual path leading to his final goal of recuperating memories. The most vivid memories are those related to physical and psychological injury. A persistent sensation of itching continually bothers the boy. He remembers the shirt he once got from his aunt Esther for Christmas and the itching it caused him. This discomfort becomes even more painful, as a bee stings him and his thigh swells enormously; on another occasion, a medal torn off changes in his imagination into a star “pinned on (54).” Itchy shirts, beestings and pins are all signs of a corporal malaise, not extremely harmful, but just unpleasant enough to make him feel uneasy.

Perec also remembers various incidents in which he was humiliated, excluded, and unjustly punished. For example, once he wanted to play with his cousin and other boys in a game of battleships, but “they refused from the start to let [him] join in, saying he was too small to understand the mechanics of it, which [he] found very humiliating (88).” Later, his cousin Henri changed his mind and decided to teach him the game, but at some point, probably when Perec was particularly exasperating, Henri got mad and smashed the precious boards to pieces. The writer remembers his disbelief at this inexplicable incident, an impression that may link to other feelings of disbelief of other inexplicable incidents, this time not from his personal story, but from History: “(...) I remind Henri of this incident, pointing out to him each time how completely impossible, illogical and almost unreal it had seemed to me, recalling each time for myself the impression of disbelief I had felt on seeing those boards turned to shreds (145).” This
memory could metaphorically signify Perec’s humiliation and also his feeling of culpability for having escaped the Shoah, especially because he was too small to “understand the mechanism of it.” His exclusion from the game may symbolize his exclusion from the extermination camps (or the games of W). The destruction of the boards recalls the image of genocidal crimes, and each time Perec recalls this incident the Shoah seems to him “completely impossible, illogical and almost unreal.”

The danger of almost having been deported into that underworld is metaphorically “petrified] (116)” in his mind and body, and Perec can recall it through the physical sensation of his hands clenched around the cold metal of a balustrade. The balustrade protected him from falling – falling down the stairs or into the underworld of the camps. This sensation of nearly falling recurs in Perec’s memory of the illustrated cover page of the first book he read: “One of these covers depicted a child of about fifteen walking along a very narrow path cut halfway up in the side of a high cliff plunging down into an unfathomable gulley (141).” These memories are inextricably linked to the background of the Shoah, and Perec perhaps not coincidentally remembers different scenes of injustice from his childhood, injustice that symbolically stands for the great prejudice exacted against a nation. He remembers being unjustly punished for involuntarily having pushed a little girl in the staircase, for having promised to bring to his classmates non-existent cases of oranges from his voyage to Palestine, or for unintentionally having locked up a little girl in the cupboard where the brooms were kept.

Injustice is insistent in Perec’s memories and has severe consequences on the child’s personality. He develops an intense feeling of guilt and a sensation in his body of imbalance “imposed by others, coming from above and falling on [him] (54).” Moreover,
the loss of balance is associated with the fact that he is left-handed, thus "guilty" from birth in a way, a state that grows into a general awkwardness that evokes the "original handicap" of being a Jew. It seems that for Perek landmarks have been inverted: left and right, concave and convex, the acute and the grave accent, etc. If he was spared from the injustice perpetrated by human beings in the camps, he is still in danger of the gods' injustice. Because he was born left-handed, he is "sentenced" to an inevitable death: "This has resulted in my case (...) in a still undiminished inability to tell not just left from right (which was what stopped me passing my driving test: the examiner asked me to turn right, and I almost rammed a lorry on the left (...) (135)."

The absence of memories is gradually attenuated, as partial memories are recuperated. Perek remembers many different objects and events from childhood: his uncle's racing bicycle, his aunt making spaghetti, his baptism, the haymaking, the gathering of bilberries, the ski accident when his upper lip was cut open, a German visiting his school, and the first book he read. Memories are diverse and increasingly numerous as they progress from fleeting sensations to clear and detailed incidents. Their resurfacing from the low level of "Time is an executioner" (in P1) to the common level of "Time leaves traces" (in P2) traces an ascendant path to the natural condition of every human being possessing memories. Nevertheless, they remain unanchored by any chronology: there is no sequence in time; events are chronologically impossibly situated (79); incidents happen "a little later or a little sooner (80)," and are shifted in time by months or years (123); the journey to Paris vaguely takes "a very long time (156)," etc. His memories seem outside time and other useful landmarks: "Things or places had no name, or several; the people had no faces (69)." The acute absence of points of reference
constantly haunts Perec. He is orphaned, "unparented," "the nobody's boy (12)," and thus his point of departure in life has been erased. Then time-as-an-executioner stole his memories, blurred the past and broke the threads that tied him to childhood.

Rigorously searching for supports, the writer becomes obsessed with the lack of anchoring. From a young age, the imagery of separation and of disconnection consumes him: "(...) between my eleventh and fifteenth year, I filled a whole exercise book: human figures unrelated to the ground which was supposed to support them, ships with sails that did not touch the masts and masts which did not fit into the hulls (...) (68)." In an effort to replace the absent people who would normally support him, Perec makes up imaginary suspenders: braces, slings, trusses, bandages, and parachutes. These imagined remedies suggest the need for suspension and for support. They are almost artificial limbs, props for existence, and it is precisely these props that are tragically missing:

I don't know exactly what being a Jew means, what it does to me. It's an obvious fact, if you like, yet a mediocre one, a mark, yet a mark that links me to nothing either precise or concrete. It's not a sign of belonging, not linked to a belief, a religion, a praxis, a culture, a folklore, a history, a destiny, a language. It is an absence rather, a question, a throwing into question, a floating, an anxiety, an anxious certainty behind which there is an outline of another certainty, abstract, heavy, insupportable: that of having been designed as a Jew, and therefore as a victim, and of owing my life simply to chance and to exile. (...) To this (...) attaches the tenuous but insistent, insidious, unavoidable feeling of being somewhere alien in relation to some part of myself, of being "different," different not so much from "others" as from "my own kin". I don't speak the language that
my parents spoke, I don’t share any of the memories they may have had. Something that was theirs, which made them who they are, their history, their culture, their creed, their hope, was not handed down to me.36

Perec’s story is thus stripped of calendar-based chronology and of landmarks that might connect him to his origin, his culture, and his past. The chronology is to be found elsewhere, through a mental process of going down and up. The four parts of the book correspond to this conceptual movement of a double descent and double ascent that activates in our mind the image of a W. The first autobiographical narrative, P1, is consistent with a descent from the common level of “Time leaves traces” to the low level of “Time is an executioner”; the second autobiographical narrative, P2, projects a mental ascent from the low level of missing memories back to “Time leaves traces” where memories are recovered. Alternatively, the fiction follows the same dynamic movement: W1 metaphorically traces a gradual ascendant path from an uncertain identity to the (eventual) recuperation of a certain one, from a minimum of narrative details to the multiplication of them, and from an uninteresting life to an adventurous one. Then W2 tragically decreases from a utopian principle of sport and fair play to a nightmarish principle of abuse and dehumanization.

The first chapter of the book is fiction (W1), mentally represented as an upright axis, but this does not change in any way the conceptual representation of the W; it only flips it, without affecting the direction of the four-staged-mental movement of descent and ascent (ΛΛ vs. VV). If the memories and the fictional narrative are not ordered chronologically, they are nevertheless mentally ordered by successive conceptual
representations. Events are not conceived as temporal moments that could be marked in a calendar but are rather conceived as points or locations along the conceptual path, and are ordered in metaphoric stages of a successive double descent and double ascent. The mechanism that allows Perec to build the book is not the chronological association of memories, but their mental association in a W-shaped frame. The successive juxtaposition of its axes represents the chronology of the autobiographical and fictional segments. Therefore, the W shape is the conceptual template that sustains the narrative, and as it is Perec’s conceptualization of the book, I suggest that W is also a landmark in his life. In search of suspenders and braces, he finally finds a prop for the reconstruction of a world of absence, loss, and separation. Even if filled with numerous recuperated memories, his childhood partly remains an empty space, without parents, without origins, and without history. Yet, Perec captures this space in a W frame. As I conceive of it, the result of this mental weaving between points on the conceptual path is a global template set up on four mental axes. W is a skeletal schema that emerges from an experience, thus the “tracing” and the “weaving” are double. As I show in the next section, W does not just stand by itself but is anchored by a cross-mapping of correspondences between its axes.
7. W, "the memory of their death and the assertion of my life"

Perec's writing about his childhood is a way of enacting but not of recounting; the absence is too painful, the loss of his parents too definitive, the horror of time-as-an-executioner too unspeakable. His words are signs of annihilation - blank, neutral, and devoid of significance. If the words do not say anything, the engraving of characters and the tracing of lines that constitutes writing serves as an eternal memorial for those killed in the death camps. Perec insistently argues that one has a duty to write, to trace, to weave —never forget, never remain silent! He writes down words, the words trace lines, and the lines fill up their cruel absence and stand up for them. In his view, literature is called to recount, to reveal, and to testify. He is confident in the power of literature to make manifest what has been erased or obscured and to bring to light what has been marginalized:

Literature is not an activity separated from life. We live in a world of words, of language, of stories. Writing is not the privilege exclusively of the man who sets aside for his century a brief hour of conscientious immortality each evening and lovingly fashions, in the silence of his study, what others will later proclaim, solemnly, to be "the hour and integrity of our letters". Literature is indissolubly bound up with life, it is the necessary prolongation, the obvious culmination, the indispensable complement of experience, and the path that leads from one to the other, whether it be literary creation or reading, establishes this relationship, between the fragmentary and the whole, the passage from the anecdotal to the
historical, the interplay between the general and the particular, between what is felt and what is understood, which form the very tissue of our consciousness.\textsuperscript{37} For Perec, writing in the sense of recording with words, is the way to keep their memory alive and to give meaning to his empty childhood. In this perspective, "recording" is a significant activity that is achieved not only by means of words but also by means of diverse "tracing devices." The literal meaning of the verb "to trace" is "to record by means of a curved, broken or wavy line" and, throughout the book, the imagery of tracing is abundantly represented: lines, laces, strings, braces, Xs, strips, threads and spaghetti. These lines crisscross in an X or intersect in a V, and are captured in various suggestive images like a wooden cross, a dark suit with pinstripes, a knotted pretzel, overlapped skis, two crossed rifles, and four steel cables crossed over in an X. Alternatively, they may be parallel like drying spaghetti strands or a pinstripe suit. In either configuration, Perec needs these lines to weave a web, draw a boundary or trace a shape to prop up, support, and secure him:

1. Virtually as I wrote up these three memories, a fourth come back to me: that of the paper place-mats we made at school: we laid out, side by side, narrow strips of thin cardboard of various colors and wove identical strips crosswise, once over, once under. I remember being delighted by this game, that I quickly understood how it worked and I was very good at it (54).

2. (...) Berthe performed regularly [a cookery routine]: employing a glass and a strict sequence designed to make the most economical use possible of the dough, she cut it into little discs which were then put on a greased baking tray
to become eventually, either shortbread or, after some even more tricky operations, small stuffed croissants (136).

3. I also remember my aunt making pasta by spreading the dough right out over a flour-dusted wooden tabletop and using a knife to cut it into long thin strips which were then put out to dry. Another time she went so far as to make soap from a mixture of soda and beef dripping (and perhaps even ash) (79).

These lines parallel or intersecting lines, formed by strips of cardboard, pasta or dough are pragmatic, physical lines. Yet the familiar activities described in the examples above echo other (atrocious) activities practiced in the extermination camps: the economical cut into the dough maps quite another cut, this time into the flesh, and the soap in Auschwitz was similarly made from a mixture of soda, ash and “human drippings.” These natural lines are prompts for a conceptual projection leading to other domains of knowledge; thus they are also mental lines that trace not only in the text but also in the mind. Moving along a wavy, descending line in P1, ascending in W1, and again descending in W2 and ascending in P2, the reader is like a traveler accompanying Pereg on a conceptual path that symbolically traces a W boundary, a shape and a web of significations. First, W recalls his mother’s death, for this letter may be deconstructed into a swastika – a symbol of the infliction of death, and also into a star of David – a symbol of eventual selection for death. Second, a double V represents an abstract schema that reproduces upward and downward conceptual movements in relation to the discernable binarity of the text. W designates the mental structure of Pereg’s childhood experience, conceived as a trip on a path, and it also literary traces the narrative structure of the book based on juxtaposition and, as I show below, convergence. In this view, to the abstract W schematic image
corresponds a concrete representation of the book, for W - like an emblem or like a blazon - designates it. Third, W weaves correspondences in between its axes, but the interlacing threads are mental projections in the “loom” of meaning. Thus, it can be understood as a prop that Perec has searched for since childhood – a “place-mat” and a web that allow “rooting” and “anchoring.”

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1: W web: cross-mapping between spaces

If the reader considers P1, P2, W1 and W2 four mental spaces that serve as inputs for the conceptual construction of the book, it seems logical that he should evaluate possible “weaving” or mapping between their elements. For example, there is a correspondence between Perec’s mother in P1 and P2, Gaspard Winckler’s mother (the adult and the child) in W1, and mothers in the New Olympia in W2. The maternal image figures in the four spaces, symbolically binding them together in a set of correspondences (a1-a2-a3-a4) and integrating them into a global network. The memory of the missing mother is of such import to Perec that he recalls it various times in the autobiographical narrative, insisting upon the paucity of details he has about her: she was picked up in a raid, interned at Drancy, then deported to Auschwitz. Her name is Cyrla Schulevitz and once
she moved from Poland to France, she changed her name to Cécile. Père never managed to find any trace of her because most likely she was gassed, and thus, like most victims of the death camps, does not have a grave to be remembered. In P1, the writer persistently points out the lack of knowledge on his mother's life: "I don't see my mother growing older. The years pass by all the same; I don't know how she grew up; I know neither what she learnt nor what she thought (31)." The only unmediated memory of her is the separation at the Gare de Lyon and because it is unique, this remembrance is also a valuable possession. In P2, where memories resurface, Cécile's image remains impossibly blurry; she is definitively absent and her absence is replaced by the presence of different aunts. Yet her place can never be taken, and even if the boy is adopted, he always maintains a sidelong glance, just like the kid in a photo that looks from Berthe's arms holding it towards the right to the nanny goat "which is probably its mother (104)."

Alternatively, in W1, the adult Gaspard Winckler does not mention his mother, perhaps because she is dead as well. Similarly, the child Gaspard Winckler lost his mother, also named Cécile. Granted these analogies, we can easily connect the *Sylvander*'s shipwreck to the extermination camps, Tierra del Fuego to the fires in the crematoria, and ultimately the circumstances of the mothers' deaths to those of the camp deportees, who were slowly killed in a closed space where they scratched with their fingernails on walls and doors in search of escape. Père imagines in P1 that his birthday coincides with Hitler's march into Poland, and even if this is chronologically false, in any case "Hitler was already in power and the camps were working very smoothly (19)." This made-up coincidence might suggest that the march is a symbolic rape of Poland, and because Cécile was Polish and because he was imaginarily born that specific day, his
mother metaphorically has been raped too. On the other hand, in W2 women are literary raped. They are confined to the Women’s Quarters, separated from the athletes, and are released once a month onto the Central Park, where “as a rule, [...] right in the front of the podium, either on the cinder track or on the grass, [...] they get raped (125).” Death often follows this brutal custom, for “only one girl child out of every five is kept.”

A second correspondence between the four segments of the book relates to Perec’s name and its origin (b1-b2-b3-b4). In P1, Perec fantasizes about possible similarities in Yiddish between his name and that of the classic writer Y. L. Peretz. He is always in search of connections to his blurred past, his parents who have been killed, and his childhood that has been stolen from him. The desire is so fervent, the search is so meticulous, yet the results are so unspectacular! Perec did not share any of his parents’ memories, nor their history and culture. Then, in an attempt to find ties with his past, the slightest trace gives him a great hope. Even the discrepancy between the spelling and the pronunciation of his name is taken as a proof of his Jewish origin:

“I was born in France, I am French, I bear a French first name, Georges, and a French surname, or almost, Perec. The difference is minuscule: there’s no acute accent on the first e of my name because Perec is the way the Poles write Peretz. If I had been born in Poland, I would have been called, let’s say, Mordecai Perec, and every one would have known I was a Jew. But I wasn’t born in Poland, luckily for me, and I have an almost Breton name which everyone spells as Pérec or Perrec – my name isn’t written exactly as it is pronounced.”38
Perec tries to compensate for his lack of connections to the past by “dreaming of having rostrum bindings (107).” Imaginary trusses, and made-up braces attaching him to a parachute or a mat(rix) of origins. If in P1 small-h history has been engulfed by capital-H History, in P2, the writer found the complicity that would have marked his personal story. Flaubert, Jules Vernes, Roussel, Kafka, and Queneau provide Perec with a procured kinship and an “inexhaustible fount of memory, a material for rumination and a kind of certainty: the words were where they should be, and the books told a story you could follow; you could re-read, and on re-reading, re-encounter, enhanced by the certainty that you would encounter those words again (...) (143).” In W1, when Otto Apfelstahl asks Winckler to take part in the search mission for the lost child, the reader expects that he will accept, that he will find the original Winkler, and that he will consequently face his real identity. The question Otto Apfelstahl asks him, “Did you know what became of the person who gave you your name? (18),” has a particular echo in P1, as both Perec and Winckler have a problematical relation to their origin and their unstable identity. Using similar methods of searching for a stable identity (an ethnological approach, maps, directories, and archives for Winckler, and research certificates, album photos, testimonials, and memorabilia for Perec), they are both concerned with the tiniest details of their stories.

The uncertainty of name and origin is also projected in W2. For example, Tierra del Fuego is not featured on most maps or is marked “only as a vague and nameless blob with scarcely determined distinctions between land and sea (66).” As for naming in New Olympia, the Administration of W employs the most “subtle” and “precise” onomastic system understood as absurd and inhuman. In the first place, family organization does not
exist on W and children are the result of collective rape. Second, novices have no names and athletes must discard their proper names, as their identities are indistinguishable from their performances. For example, one athlete can bear several names if he is the winner of several competitions; thus he can simultaneously be Westerman (for winning first place in the ranking heat), Pfister (for coming in second in W championship), Cummings (for winning the North-W championship), Grunelius (for winning the selection trial), Gustafson (for carrying the Olympic trophy) and Casanova (for placing among the winners of an Atlantiad). When he appears before the Officials, he pronounces his name in strict order of precedence: the Gustafson of Grunelius of Pfister of Cummings of Westerman-Casanova. Symbols of victory are more important than the athletes’ names and the more competitions they win, the more their names multiply and the less power they have to designate them. In the end, the athlete becomes a champion and is dispossessed of his name, hailed as a great athlete without a human identity. Apart from the names they acquire through their victories, sportsmen may also be named by the initial letter of their villages followed by a serial number, various nicknames, or arbitrary denominations. When there is more than one person with the same name, the name is slightly modified and the first syllable duplicated. In the end, the names sound like nonsensical babbling: Kekekkonen, Jojones, MacMacMillan, etc. By winning an Olympic victory together with a title that replaces their proper names, athletes also obtain various privileges, such as having an extra shower or a personal trainer. The naming system on W is a system of annihilating human identity, reducing sportsmen to racing machines and dehumanized creatures. They are designated by neutral markers and official registration numbers that recall the serial numbers given to the camp deportees in
Poland. Besides, the personal trainer they have the “privilege” to meet is an “Oberschrittmacher,” a “chief trainer” who resembles an SS Officer, the trainer for death in Auschwitz. On the one hand, the more the athletes win on W, the less they can stand up as dignified human beings. On the other hand, the more the Jews tried to change their names, the less they succeeded in saving their lives. In P1, Perec is told that his father’s name was Icek and not André, his mother’s name Cyrla and not Cécile, and that between 1940 and 1945, many Jews changed their names from Bienenfeld to Beauchamp, from Chavransky to Chevron, or from Nordmann to Normand. In both W and the Shoah, the name is a sign of alienation and death.

Another cross-over that occurs between the four mental spaces of P1, W1, P2 and W2 is physical and psychological injury (c1-c2-c3-c4). One of the imaginary memories in the first autobiographical narrative (P1) is that of the medal unjustly torn off that changes in his imagination into a star “pinned on,” thus an object with pointed ends that could wound. In P2, the itching shirts Esther offered him as a Christmas present cause him discomfort that becomes even more painful later on, when a bee stings him and his thigh swells up. Pins, itching shirts, and stings are all signs of corporal malaise. Even if his memory is inexact, Perec remembers having some kind of physical wound, though he is unsure if it was a fracture, a rupture, or appendicitis. His body is subjected to real or imaginary harm, and the line that demarcates fantasy from reality does not matter: real or fantasized, the injury deeply affects him. Perec recounts the accident when he broke his shoulder blade and confesses that the accident made him ineffably happy. Yet, later he realizes that he has displaced the event and he was not even the affected person but only a witness. On another occasion, a boy hits Perec with his ski-sticks and cuts open his upper
lip, resulting in a scar of which the writer is immensely proud. In the absence of parents and memories, his memories of physical pain help him connect to the pain of his family’s deportation and find a palliative for the anguish of loss and separation. Personal injury designates the widespread persecution and injury of a nation.

If Perec suffers from incidents, accidents, fractures and ruptures, the child Gaspard Winckler in W2 is also in some way “injured”: he is a sickly, weak boy who is deaf and mute and thus condemned to virtually total isolation. Upon consultation, the doctors are clear that the boy has no internal injury, no inherited disorder, and no anatomical or physiological deformity. His precarious condition could only be ascribed to some infantile trauma. “Trauma” is precisely the word that applies to Perec’s condition too he has suffered a painful emotional experience. Moreover, they both are aphasic: the child has perhaps suffered an emotional shock and lost the ability to speak, and Pèrec writes because his story is “unsayable (42).” In W2, trauma is a way of life: athletes are starving, women are raped, games are arbitrarily ruled, and injustice is common. The privileges awarded to the victors are counterbalanced by “an almost excessive measure of humiliation and bullying inflicted on the losers (110).” They have to run an extra lap with their shoes on backwards, an exercise that is extremely painful resulting in bruised toes, blisters, and ulcers on the instep. On W, “any hope the victim might have had of securing a respectable place in the following days’ contest” has to be destroyed. Physical wounding and psychological injury represent common features that Pèrec accentuates throughout the four parts of the book that are bound together into a global significance of a wounded body and a harmed collectivity, of an injured person and a maltreated nation.
The cross-mappings among P1, P2, W1, and W2 trace or weave correspondences between spaces that are like the threads of a web or mat that symbolically "attach," "suspend," and "prop" Perec: "in the criss-cross web they weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the passage of my history, and the story of my passage (7)." This cross-over occurs between the axes of W, thus within this boundary that marks the void of childhood and traces its limits. Each time Perec remembers his past, he simultaneously activates in his mind the image of W, which is his mental prop and his metaphoric sling. From this point of view, W is a symbol that stands for the unreturned deportees, a symbol of the past and of the radical absence of parents and history. At the same time W is an emblem that stands for missing childhood memories, thus an emblem for life. In both cases, W is a sign marked against an aching void, a sign that has the power to remind, to recall and to dispel absence: "Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life (42)." A double VV is a dual letter that designates the binary narrative structure of the book; it is a letter that can be rotated and reconstructed into other emblems (a swastika, the star of David). It is also a blazon, mirrored in the title and in the fictional narrative. Apart from these multiple functions, W is also the conceptual frame that supports the cognitive structure of the book. The ascents and descents trace a path that Perec has projected in writing that is to be followed in reading. And when the reader and the writer understand each other, they are in a shared mental state, which is metaphorically mapped onto a shared path. We understand Perec through a shifting spatial sequence of double downward and double upward processes, as we metaphorically travel from location to location together throughout our shared trip.
Therefore, W is once again double: it belongs to Perec as well as to all other virtual travelers on the W-path and to all virtual readers of W or The memory of Childhood. In this sense, we too have experienced the anguish of absence, the lack of memories and the uncertain flight with a parachute with fragile strings. And, in the end, we feel somehow that we have traversed an existential gap: we feel we are survivors too!

Notes

1. Information on Perec’s life and literary carrier and projects, as well as considerations on the first draft of W are from Marie-Christine Bellosta and Hans Hartje in L’humain et l’inhumain, Paris: Belin, 1997, 97-259.

2. This letter has been published posthumous in Je suis né, Paris: Seuil, 1990, and is not yet translated in English. This is the reason why the coming quotations from this letter are in French, from the edition indicated above.


4. In the letter to Maurice Nadeau, Perec states: “Le troisième livre est un roman d’aventures. Il est né d’un souvenir d’enfance; ou plus précisément d’un phantasme que j’ai abondamment développé, vers douze-treize ans, au cours de ma première psychotérapipe. Je l’avais complètement oublié; il m’est revenu un soir, à Venise, en septembre 1967, où j’étais passablement saoul; mais l’idée d’en faire un roman ne m’est venue que beaucoup plus tard. Le livre s’appelle: W. W est une fle, quelque part dans le terre de Feu. Il y vit une race d’athlètes vêtus de survêtements blancs porteurs d’un grand W noir. C’est à peu près tout ce dont je me souvienne. Mais je sais que j’ai beaucoup raconté W (par la parole ou le dessin) et que je peux, aujourd’hui, racontant W, raconter mon enfance” (Je suis né, 61-62).

5. Philippe Lejeune has consulted the manuscript originals and has presented in great detail the genesis of the book as well as the variations and comments of the first draft, in “La genèse de W ou le souvenir d’enfance,” 1988, in Textuel. Cahiers Georges Perec, Paris 7, No. 2, 119-157.

6. From the feuilleton to the book, only a few grammatical changes have been made in the beginning and the end of the description of W. For example, in the feuilleton, there is a hesitation in the description of W and the reader has to choose between the certitude (“there is”), the doubt (“there would be”) and the prophecy (“there will be”). In the book,
Perec kept just the tension between conditional and present tense: “Il y aurait, là-bas, à l’autre bout du monde, une île. Elle s’appelle W (93),” compared in the feuilleton to “Il y aurait, il y aura, il y a, là-bas, à l’autre bout du monde, une île. Elle s’appelle W.” This difference is not noticeable in the translation made by David Bellos who translated the French conditional “il y aurait” with present tense: “Far away, at the other end of the earth, there is an island told of. Its name is W (65).” Thus, the English version doesn’t express this grammatical tension and doesn’t accentuate at this level the utopian character of W. The other difference between the feuilleton and the book is that chapters XXXVI and XXXVII, the last two chapters in the book, were making one in the feuilleton: the paragraph on “the subterranean remnants of a world” was followed by the quotation from Davis Roussé’s *Univers concentrationnaire* (cf. Marie-Christine Bellosta and Hans Hartje, 180).

7. “Il n’y avait pas de chapitres précédents. Oubliez ce que vous avez lu; c’était une autre histoire, un prologue tout au plus, ou bien un souvenir si lointain que ce qui va venir ne saurait que le submerger. Car c’est maintenant que tout commence, c’est maintenant qu’il part à sa recherche,” (*La Quinzaine Littéraire*, No. 87, January, 28).


10. Perec underwent courses of psychoanalysis with such famous doctors as Françoise Dolto (he was thirteen), Michel de M’Uzan and J-B Pontalis. One can ask the question of what impact these courses have on the writing of W. Isabelle Dangy suggests that the psychoanalysis actually “allowed” (idem, 20) Perec to write the book W. When he finishes the book, he shows it to Pontalis who, after reading it, ironically defined it as “a pile of remnants”. Perec interprets this view as an offending appreciation that would echoes his own expression in W “the subterranean remnants” that stands for “piles of gold, teeth, rings and spectacles (162)” taken from Jews and found later in the concentration camps. Fallowing Dangy’s point of view, there is obvious psychoanalytical influence in W: Winkler’s quest of identity is in some respects an analytical quest; Otto Apfelstahl could be the equivalent of a psychoanalyst who convinces Winkler to search a lost child named Winkler as well; the scene where the child Perec is in school and has the medal awarded for diligence unjustly tore by the teacher for having pushed a little girl on the staircase, is inverted into a scene where this medal torn off is replaced by a star pinned on (54) etc. The elliptical structure of the book, based on fragmentation and silence, would reflect the cleavages of human psyche. But even if the writer uses analytical tools and even if their traces are obvious in W, Perec “preserved his creative autonomy”, as the book is not a psychoanalytical experience entirely transposed from his life (Isabelle Dangy, 23).

12. Two of these projects, specifically those that preceded W the book, ended in failure, says Philippe Lejeune in “Le bourreau Veritas,” (Textuel, Cahier Georges Perec, No. 2, 1988, 114). The ample project dated in 1969 was based on four books and just a feuilleton has been published. The second project elaborated in 1970, after the publication of the feuilleton, was structured on three books, and just one, pretty short, has been published five years after, W or The memory of childhood (1975).


14. Henceforth, I will use these parenthetical W 1 (for chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11), W2 (for 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36), P1 (for 2, 4, 6, 8, 10), P2 (for 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31, 33, 35 and 37) to refer to the different parts of the book as indicated, and W will stand for W or The memory of childhood.


17. Paul Schwartz, Georges Perec. Traces of his passages, Summa publications, 1988. The chapter “The Autobiographical Works” (45-65) helped me summarize part of my introduction. For example, the division in W 1, W 2, P 1 and P 2 belongs to him, as well as some of the examples of doubling between autobiography and fiction. Other examples of crossover are analyzed in detail by Allan Astro (“Allegory in Georges Perec’s W ou le souvenir d’enfance,” 1987), Warren Motte (“Georges Perec and the Broken Book,” 1995). Bernard Magné (“Les sutures dans W ou le souvenir d’enfance,” 1988) called “the suturing” certain thematic and lexical correspondences between fiction and autobiography.


19. Allan Astro, 870.


21. These historical facts on the Shoah, as well as the characteristics (in this paragraph and the next), are from http://en.wikipedia.org/The_Holocaust. It is explained that the
word *holocaust* is originally derived from the Greek *holokauston*, meaning “a burnt sacrifice offered to God”. Holocaust was later used to refer to a sacrifice Jews were required to make by the Torah. The biblical word *Shoah*, meaning “calamity” in Hebrew, became the Hebrew standard term for the Holocaust in early 1940s. Many Jews and a growing number of Christians and other people prefer the *Shoah*, due to the theologically offensive nature of the original meaning of the world *holocaust* as a reference to a sacrifice to God. A well-known documentary on this period, by Claude Lanzmann, is also entitled the *Shoah*.

22. As Warren Motte mentioned, Theodor Adorno later recanted this position. He said: “Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems” (in Warren Motte, “Georges Perec and the Broken Book,” 8).


26. Lakoff and Turner, 35.

27. Lakoff and Turner, 36.


29. Rules 3, 4, 5 are from Lakoff and Turner, 37.


31. See note 24, chapter 8, in *W or the Memory of Childhood*.


Nathalie Sarraute: Childhood (1983)

1. Tropisms and the pursuit of a new reality

Nathalie Sarraute's first work, *Tropisms*, published in 1939, precedes the New Novel literary movement of the 1950s and 1960s. World War II intervened between the publication of this book and her second, *Portrait of A Man Unknown* (1948). Sartre wrote a preface to the latter and compared it to works by André Gide and Vladimir Nabokov. Nevertheless, the book was as unsuccessful as the first, and its publisher destroyed the edition in less than a year after the sale of 400 copies. By the same time, Sarraute was also publishing critical essays, a group of which were collected into a book, in 1956, *The Age of Suspicion*. Ruth Temple, in an early book on Sarraute, observes that it was only after publication of this book that her literary position was established: in 1957, Éditions de Minuit, directed by Robbe-Grillet, republished *Tropisms*; in 1959, Gallimard published *The Planetarium*, widely reviewed as an example of the New Novel; and in 1964, Sarraute received the Prix International de Littérature for her novel *Golden Fruits* (1963), a prize earlier awarded to Samuel Beckett.
The New Novel literary movement grew out of writers’ efforts to renew the novel’s form. A circle of “nouveaux romanciers” as the critics and public labeled them, included Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Claude Mauriac, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Michel Butor who expressed their desire for self-liberation from tradition. Their aspiration to innovation in literature is not to be interpreted as a rejection of the past but rather as a lack of interest in literature as pure entertainment. Claude Mauriac, in his 1964 essay “The New Novel in France,” speaks for all new novelists when he says that new, unexplored reality cannot be made visible with outmoded techniques: “As for the novel of classical form, (...) only a minimum of ability is needed to use it over again. Not to yield to the easy manner is the point upon which the writers of the so-called new novel find themselves unwittingly agreed; they all consider that formulas that have proved successful in expressing this or that aspect of reality become useless when one is venturing upon the unexplored.”

All new novelists predicate the natural evolution of literature, and especially Robbe-Grillet stresses the fact that literature is an ongoing process for the great writers who have contributed to it. The past is to be renewed, and the moderns, following the lead of their predecessors, aspire towards a constant evolution of all branches of art.

New novelists all strove to break with conventional fiction and to change the concept of character, narrator, plot, chronology, and dialogue. Nevertheless, as Gretchen Rous Besser notes, the New Novel did not signify an organized group or a “school.” She underlines the fact that the New Novelists had no leader, no manifesto, and no journal to express its ideas; “Rather, the name was loosely applied as a common denominator for a
number of different writers, following divergent paths, who were united in their
determination to discard outmoded conventions of fiction and to search for ways of
renewing the novel as an art form. Primacy was placed on originality of outlook and
freedom of expression.”

Rous Bessers’ description of Sarraute accentuates some strong affinities between
the novelist’s ideas and the group of New Novelists. The similarities are likewise
expressed in her collection of essays The Age of Suspicion and in Robbe-Grillet’s For a
New Novel. The convergences consisted mainly of a robust confidence in the
evolutionary process of literature, an insistence on the primacy of art as distinct from
political commitment, and the need for an appeal to the reader’s contributory
participation. Nathalie Sarraute insisted frequently on the concept of literature as a
“search” and “exploration” of new ways of expressing reality, and she is not alone in
affirming that literature follows a natural path of evolution. Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote
extensively on the evolutionary course of fiction. He noted that the New Novel pursues a
constant evolution of the genre. In his view too, this is not exceptional but natural, and it
might be said that Flaubert wrote the “new novel” of 1860 and Proust the “new novel” of
1910. New novelists do not claim that they are better than their predecessors or that they
want to make tabula rasa of the past; instead they aim to continue the work of former
writers.

The second affinity between Sarraute and her contemporaries that Russ Bessers
discusses is that they all conceive of art as an end in itself. Art cannot be related to the
service of a cause, even the most deserving, because such a connection paralyzes creativity. As Robbe-Grillet explains, the artist creates only for nothing. Like Sarraute, he believes that literature is not a tool intended to serve a utilitarian purpose but that it is rather a form of search whose writer is unaware in advance of what s/he is seeking. The third basic premise Sarraute shares with the other new novelists is that the reader’s participatory role is of primary importance. Reading is a cooperative venture, not a passive activity. Modern novelists abandon the reader in a fictional universe where the plot is not easy to understand, where he does not know who the narrator is or if there is more than one, and where characters might be anonymous and chronology fragmented. Therefore, as Rous Besser mentions, modern writers call for a complementary effort on the part of the reader to complete the work begun by the writer in a joint literary endeavor. The reader is no longer the recipient of a ready-made world; instead he is a partner in the process of creation. He is solicited to make his own contribution of sensitivity, intellect, and imagination to the elaboration of the literary text; he is required to rearrange fragmented chronology, to supply withheld information, and to recognize anonymous characters.15

When Sartre supplied the preface to Portrait of a Man Unknown, he christened the book an “anti-novel.” For him, Sarraute’s novel is “strange and difficultly classifiable” and does not “demonstrate the weakness of the genre, [it] merely demonstrate[s] that we are living in the age of reflection and that the novel is in the process of reflecting on itself.”16 Sarraute later objected to the term “anti-novel,” indicating that when Sartre coined this term, he had in mind a norm of what novel should
be that he used as a standard against which he measured other types of fiction. This is precisely the norm that Sarraute attacks.

Sarraute recommends in *The Age of Suspicion* that modern writers should relegate the creation of flesh and blood characters to cinema and theater. They should also deprive the reader of all details that would aid in the manufacture of illusions. Her literary credo goes against the novelistic tradition of Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Zola that was based on verisimilitude, well-defined plots and characters, linear chronology, and an omniscient author. In novelistic tradition, the character occupied a place of honor between reader and novelist. “At that time,” Sarraute says, “he [the character] was richly endowed with every asset (...) he lacked for nothing, from the silver buckles on his breeches to the veined wart on the end of his nose.” In contemporary fiction, however, characters lose everything from house and ancestors to name and personality. The role of the hero is usurped by an anonymous actor/character.

Rous Besser rightly points out that “Sarraute divests her characters of all superficial appurtenances of verisimilitude. They have no recognizable physical appearance or personality traits that stamp them as individuals. Most of them do not even bear a name.” SARREUTE notes also that writers and readers ceased to believe in characters and have begun to suspect them, for they no longer rival Balzac’s civil registry. “The happy days of Eugenie Grandet” are now behind us, and the setting of the stage from those days, with long descriptive passages, has vanished. What is left is almost nothing: there is no indication of who the character is, his name, or his appearance. Those
traditional characters described in literature over and over again seem lifeless to new novelists, and Sarraute compares them to the wax statues in the Musée Grévin.

Modern readers must adopt new literary strategies in order to map out a literary universe devoid of verisimilitude, meaningful descriptions, and external events. Action does not exist in the New Novel, and even if something at times does happen outside of the character's mind, it is divulged accidentally and indirectly. There is no external prop in the plot or in the description to help understand the existence of characters. Readers are suspicious of what new writers have to offer them and of these new paths they are invited to follow. The familiar world of tradition whose contours inspire confidence breaks down, and consequently readers mistrust the new horizon they now face.

Nothing reassures in the new novel. Gone is the powerful narrator who knew everything about what was going on with his characters. We do not know who narrates, if there is one or perhaps multiple narrators, or if the voice of a single narrator is split. In Sarraute's novels, we enter directly into someone's mind and come into contact with different kinds of sensations. Yet we do not understand how we got there and what "authorship" allowed us to enter that inner world. We experience at the same time as the character the psychological movements in the depths of his consciousness. Furthermore, readers do not learn things about an individual character; they are not spectators in a world-theater. Instead they are pulled into the fictive world and actively respond to its stimuli with their own movements of consciousness. As readers, we no longer are the passive recipients of a world already finished, where as Sarraute mentions, yellow is lemon, blue is sky and avarice is Père Grandet. On the contrary, in modern times, we
are actively and consciously cooperating in the creation of the literary text. We are not merely admiring but rather participating in the creation of the fictional world while also creating a world of our own.

Narrator and reader become aware that they both are able to perform creative acts in everyday life. There is no need for the narrator to deliver firm outlines of plots and characters because readers are able to draw on their own imaginative resources to create meaning. Thus, authoritative views of reality in narratives are treated with increasing skepticism. This distrust is not only directed toward the act of narration itself. An authoritative presentation of reality, Valerie Minogue argues, is no longer trusted in the global contemporary climate, from philosophy to phenomenology and physiology, and from theater to screen production. She exemplifies the existence of a sense of instability and distrust of authority in contemporary France in the wake of theorists like Merleau-Ponty and Freud who focused on the subjective and partial nature of our perception, and writers like Proust and Gide who tried to find new forms to express reality. She also mentions Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where the uncertainty of the characters’ relations with the audience and their creator provokes a deep unease. “There are moments in *Waiting for Godot* when the audience may suspect, in embarrassment, that either the actors have forgotten their lines, or, worse still, the playwright has forgotten to write them.” The “Nouvelle Vague” in film production also shares the New Novel’s concerns of skepticism and self-criticism. Jean-Luc Godard directs the audience’s attention to the artifices of the film by, for instance, changing film-speeds or showing the camera on the screen. Valerie Minogue concludes that this atmosphere of suspicion is characteristic of a
large part of twentieth-century art, and that artistic self-consciousness of the creative
process extends to the act of creation in general.\textsuperscript{13}

As early as 1939, Nathalie Sarraute published her first work, \textit{Tropisms} that
outlines her lasting preoccupation with subterranean psychological movements
encountered in all her novels. It consists of twenty-four separate short texts that critics
labeled prose poems or micro-dramas. The research of tropistic movements beneath
common appearances is the radical innovation that Sarraute proposes for liberation from
tradition. She describes this psychological reality of barely perceptible movements in the
sub-surface of consciousness:

These movements [tropisms] glide quickly round the border of our consciousness,
they compose the small, rapid, and sometimes the very complex dramas
concealed beneath our actions, our gestures, the words we speak, our avowed and
clear feelings. (...) I had to express them through the rhythm of the style as poetry
does, as they can hardly be expressed in words, I had to try to find images which
could convey to the reader the impression, the feeling of these tropisms produced
in the character without his knowing clearly what they really were.\textsuperscript{14}

The term “tropism” is borrowed from the natural sciences, where it stands for movements
of response to external stimuli such as heat or light. This long-standing preoccupation
with tropisms led Sarraute to a psychological realism where the reader is invited to
explore the unknown realms of one’s mind. The reader does not observe accredited
reality and still characters; rather he lives from the inside, he explores the area of
tropisms, and he is involved in the movements of his own sub-consciousness. For her, the
writer’s mission is to try to reach what is behind preconceived ideas and ready-made images and to explore what is below the surface of everyday reality. Therefore, the writer should strive to reveal what is unknown.

When facing this complex new psychological reality, Sarraute needed to abandon many familiar conventions of the novel. Committed to expressing the psychological truth that inhabits us all, she turns away from conventional plot and character and linear chronology. The movements beneath appearances that she wants to explore are microscopic, and thus in order to capture them, it is necessary to disconnect writing from all references to clock time. These internal movements cannot be uncovered in relation to an external time scale. Rous Bessser emphasizes this “timeless vacuum” in Sarrautes’ novels: “The temporal dimension (...) is a perpetual present. Her characters live entirely in their own here and now. (...) There is no linear progression, no chronological sequence of events, except in the most general way. Even if specific incidents are depicted (...) no necessary temporal order needs to be preserved. And inasmuch as everything is viewed through a subjective consciousness, (...) the notion of time disappears.”

Sarraute tries to capture inner movements at the moment they form in the mind. In this hermetic world of tropisms, where there are myriads of subconscious reactions to external stimuli, the character’s life, history, and place have no relevance. Everything is seen from the inside out. For example, Sarraute’s autobiography Childhood opens with recreated tropisms from her past. All information about Natacha, the little girl she once was, is accidental. All the reader learns of her is that she was born in Ivanovo, her parents were divorced, and she spent time in both families. Nathalie Sarraute seeks to pin down
tropistic sensations from her childhood, sensations that are registered by the consciousness of a little girl and that could revive similar ones in readers. Beneath conventional statements like the threat from Natacha’s governess “No, you’re not to do that,” when she tries to plunge a pair of scissors into the back of a sofa, or prefabricated statements like the mother’s instructions to chew her food until it becomes as liquid as a soup (which Natacha interprets literally) there are multiple rich inner movements that circulate in the child’s mind. Sarraute is interested in precisely making visible these hidden emotional reactions, which precede everyday incidents.\textsuperscript{16} As Valerie Minogue pertinently puts it, “Nathalie Sarraute’s explorations concern processes, not products.”\textsuperscript{17}

To acknowledge the complexity of the inner movements of the sub-consciousness is obviously not a common task for traditional critics. Their claim when the novel was first published was that Sarraute’s novels are disconnected from reality and are simply cold, literary experiments. In particular, de Beauvoir openly accused Sarraute, saying that her tropisms had no bearing on history or sociopolitical concerns. For de Beauvoir, the tropistic reactions of Sarraute’s anonymous characters revealed the paranoid, schizophrenic character of no one but their author. For de Beauvoir, all new novelists are isolated in their old ivory tower, far from the reality of personal commitments in the political and social arenas.\textsuperscript{18}

Nathalie Sarraute has always rejected the term “realist” in the conventional sense of the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition. Nevertheless, she is committed to another type of realism whose definition she stresses in \textit{The Age of Suspicion}. A realist writer is:
“an author who devotes himself above all –”

(...) to scrutinizing, to the utmost limits of his sincerity, and as far as the
sharpness of his vision will permit, what appears to him to be reality. To reach
this aim he relentlessly strips what he observes of all the casing of preconceived
ideas and ready-made images surrounding it, strips it of all that surface reality that
everyone effortlessly perceives and makes use of, for lack of anything better and
manages at times to reach something as yet unknown that he seems to be the first
to see.19

Tropisms are an omnipresent reality in human beings and precede the acquisition of
language. They represent a certain type of reality that we all possess that Sarrasute calls
“pre-language” or “sub-conversations.” The writer does not imagine their existence; these
hidden impulses beneath consciousness are part of what we are. They are movements that
we perform daily, actions that take place in us every time before clear recognition
surfaces in consciousness. “These movements are hidden. They never appear in broad
daylight. They are seldom expressed in monologues by the person who experiences them.
They hide behind normal, harmless appearances, under commonplace conversations,
der under daily gestures; they hide under cover of platitudes.”20 Therefore, Sarrasute only has
a mimetic intention to reveal or to uncover them through language. Her effort, as she has
repeatedly said, is only to grasp this preexisting side of reality not yet observed by others
and to find a form in which to communicate it.

Lack of description and action and anonymous characters are not representative of
a desire on Saurraute’s part to be “cold,” “difficult,” or “obscure.” Once she had made “a
tiny hole in the solid shell that protects all characters in life and in novels,” Sarraute had to focus on this new psychological reality, and thus needed to give up names and other novelistic props. She did so first, because “on the border of consciousness where tropisms can be observed (...) no names are ever pronounced,” and second, because she wanted “the reader to feel the inner movements, the tropisms, to concentrate on them and not to be much interested by the people in whom these tropisms take place.”

2. Slashing into smooth surfaces. Prohibition and transgression

*Childhood*, Nathalie Sarraute’s autobiographical work, is a collection of fragmented, elliptical minidramas of childhood memory. Natacha, the little girl Sarraute once was, was born in Ivanovo, and is shuttled back and forth between Paris and Russia after her parents divorce. Seeking to recover buried memories and past tropistic sensations, the writer juxtaposes distinct episodes from the past: Natacha rolling hoops in the Luxembourg Gardens, spending vacation time with her father, writing her first composition, going to school, visiting her mother in St. Petersburg, getting along with her stepmother Vera, stealing candy from a store, riding her bike in the park, etc. Unlike classical autobiography with concrete identities and well-formed images of the past, this modern autobiography does not seem to introduce us to a single motionless personal universe. Here, Sarraute maintains her long-lasting concern with intersubjective spaces. By resisting narrative and chronological continuity, she tries to uncover and represent the human emotional reality beneath the surface of clichéd verbal exchanges like: “It is not
your home,” “You have been abandoned,” “Vera is stupid,” “The husband and wife are on the same side,” etc. The seventy brief chapters of the work are centered less on incidents and more on impressions and repercussions of commonplace words and phrases. The chapters have no titles, and spacing and ellipses often break down the typographical continuity.

Again unlike traditional autobiography, *Childhood* avoids the retrospection often associated with life writing. Sarrasute predominantly uses the present tense, and as Ann Jefferson notes, this technique “provides the center of gravity in fiction, [so that] the past is resurrected and relived as present.”22 Expressing the past in the present moment of creation is a pertinent aspect of modernity. This was one of Sarrasute’s aims that she already described in *The Age of Suspicion*, where she suggested that the reader has to be placed in the present where memories form and develop, “like so many tiny dramas, each one of which has its adventures, its mystery and its unforeseeable ending.”23 Devoted to recalling the past in the present, Sarrasute seeks to reveal sensations and not an objective truth:

As in all writers, there are autobiographical elements everywhere: in the sense that I never write about things that I have not experienced or that I have not seen someone else experience. But that doesn’t mean that these are things taken from my own life. I don’t know anyone more generous than my father was and I portrayed a father who is a miser. I didn’t use autobiographical elements, but just sensations and impressions that are scattered all over the place.24
The autobiography opens with a dialogue between the narrator and her suspicious double about the possibility of evoking her memories: "Then you really are going to do that? "Evoking your childhood memories" (1)." By splitting the narrative voice and creating her alter ego in the role of a skeptical reader or harsh critic, Sarraute situates the autobiographical project in an atmosphere of questioning and distrust from the start. After the new novelists’ effort to explore unknown realities, how could one pretend to go back to autobiography, a traditional and outmoded genre, explored over and over again? The alter ego suspects that she (the narrator) might be out of new ideas, and after a period of intense creativity as she approaches the end of her career, perhaps "her forces are declining," maybe she wants to "retire," or simply "to stand aside (2)." Although Nathalie Sarraute, through the voice of the narrator, answers that the autobiographical project tempts her, her double’s voice insists on the risks of writing something that is still or motionless as in traditional fiction. Moreover, the voice reminds her of happy days when everything "fluctuated," "escaped," and "trembled (2)." The prohibitive voice does not discourage her; on the contrary, it pushes her to start exploring childhood memories. She is confident because she feels that "it’s still vacillating, no written word, (...) it is still faintly quivering, (...) little bits of something still alive (3)." She can thus validate the enterprise of evoking memories by virtue of the fact that there are living sensations beneath past events and the anecdotal material of memories.

Echoing this opening dialogue, the next sequence within the same chapter is simply juxtaposed to this initial debate. It describes another prohibition, this time directed not to the adult writer but to the child the writer once was. The alter ego’s words of
admonition and warning are mirrored in the words Natacha’s governess pronounces against the child: “Nein, das tust du nicht... No you’re not to do that.” The child defies her German-speaking governess’s prohibition, “Yes, I’m going to do it,” and ultimately plunges a pair of scissors into the silk back of the sofa. She remembers, “I plunge the point of scissors in with all my strength, the silk gives, tears, I slash the back of the settee from top to bottom, and I looked at what comes out of it...something flabby, greyish, is escaping from the slit... (6).”

Just as Natacha’s gesture of slashing the sofa is brought on by the governess’s negative reaction, Nathalie’s authorship of her autobiography is brought on by the alter ego’s negative reaction. In both cases, the prohibition transforms into real desire: Natacha destroys the sofa, and Nathalie defies the hostility of the double’s voice, which metonymically stands for literary “authorities.” Therefore, verbal action and physical gesture are here paralleled in a mirroring or “mise en abime” effect. The child’s stabbing liberates the soft and greyish stuffing beneath the “delightful silk material with satiny glints,” while the adult, too, will metaphorically stub some smooth surfaces. Sarraute had always been interested in revealing what is behind well-defined images, and she often mentioned that she aimed to “make a crack in the varnish of conventional appearances” in order to reveal tropistic realities. The settee stuffing could then be associated with the vague forms that lie on the border of consciousness. After these two preliminary sequences, we expect that the narrator, too, will slash a gaping wound not in fabric but in language. Therefore, her autobiography portrays an act of violation of neat rules and
laws, and this time, what it escapes from the slit is something hidden behind harmless appearances and daily gestures – tropisms.

Critics interpret the dialogical opening together with the sequence of slashing of the sofa as emblematic scenes. Emer O’Beirne, for example, recognizes them as an allegory of the act of writing, an attempt to articulate experienced sensations. He underlines the fact that “all the features of the writer’s activity are represented in the child’s transgressive desire to tear away the silk covering of the sofa and reveal the formless matter beneath.” In his view, this incident is also symbolic of “the writer’s identity, not only as remembered child but also as remembering adult, the present explorer of the amorphous matter of subjectivity as well as the past little girl with her transgressive urge.”27 Another critic, Leah Hewitt, interprets the opening scene as sexual imagery. She sees in Natacha’s gesture a desire for individuation against male self-conceptualization. According to her, “the phallic scissors that brutally stab and penetrate the settee coincides with a model of language as power, or inscription of selfhood.” Moreover, she sees the gesture as a metaphor for “the unleashing of a desire that has been constrained by a certain kind of (...) prohibitive language. (...) Her bold riposte rises up within her, breaks through the tension into a quasi-orgasmic explosion.”28 For Valerie Minogue, the silk of the sofa is associated with the mother’s silky skin, and the slashing metaphorically represents the rupture of the relationship between the good mother and the loving daughter.29
At the narrative level, the most emblematic fissure in the autobiographical convention is the "crack" in the narrative voice. Readers are typically accustomed to an authorial 'I' in literary and especially autobiographical narratives where the unity and power of subjectivity are largely deployed. In Childhood, they face an unexpected intersubjective dialectic between the narrative voice and the critical voice of her alter ego. This dialogic device undermines the authority of a powerful autobiographer, for the second voice is constantly asking questions, making sure that the narrator is sincere and that her memories are genuine. The alter ego's prohibitive words in the opening sequence function as a provocation: precisely because the autobiographical project is vividly distrusted, Sarraute will undertake it. Thus, under suspicion from the very beginning, Childhood, the subsequent narrative work, is nothing but the result of a primal denial of repressive doubts and scruples.

Among the critics who have analyzed this fragmentation of the narrative voice, Emer O'Beirne finds that this fracture "problematises the conventions of autobiographical discourse, in terms of both the accuracy of recollection (...) and the influence of the narrative act on how remembered events are recreated." For Philippe Lejeune, Sarraute anticipates potential objections through the critical voice of her alter ego. This way, she postulates a virtual reader, but at the same time, as Lejeune stresses, the real reader is kept at distance, so that the author is protected from the reactions of a potentially hostile reader. Further, Lejeune detects three different attitudes in the alter ego's voice. First, she "controls" the narrator-autobiographer, being suspicious of any errors or inexactitudes that might intervene in her memory. This corrective attitude
emphasizes the fact that autobiography is not a ready-made “asserted” narrative, but on
the contrary, a narrative of movement and exploration. Second, the alter ego “listens” to
the autobiographer like a psychotherapist, and through this kind of exercise past
memories are revived. Third, the critical voice “collaborates” as an active partner on the
resurrection of the past. Lejeune thinks that this collapse of the narrative voice makes
readers focus less on authorial control and more on the question of narration. Similarly,
O’Beirne aptly notes, “[i]n this way, the reader is invited to consider the text as an
unfolding event rather than as a product of writing (...).”

Sarraute also cracks chronology, another smooth surface of classical
autobiography. Although the dimension of time itself is not suppressed, sequences of
tropistic episodes follow each other without any solid, continuous temporal line. Lejeune
has convincingly retraced a possible global chronology: the work begins with two
undated memories from early childhood in Switzerland when Natacha was on vacation
with her father; chapters 3 to 15 take place between 1902 and 1906, when the girl lives in
Paris with her mother on rue Flatters; chapters 16-26 situate her in from 1906 to 1909,
from ages six to eight when she was in Petersburg with her mother and her mother’s
partner Kolia; chapters 27-70 concentrate on the years in Paris on rue Marguerin from
1909 to 1912, when her father married Vera.

From the New Novel, we learned to be suspicious of verisimilitude, and Sarraute
herself often proclaimed that the hidden reality beneath commonalities is devoid of any
“solid shell”: “the reader should be caught up and carried away in the whirlpool of these
inner movements, sometimes knowing immediately where he is, sometimes not finding it
out at all. This is of little importance." Despite a general temporal line referring to
events external from the narrator's life, the autobiography is internally fragmented, and
from one chapter to another, any clearly recognizable chronology is absent. According to
Rous Besser, Sarraute's purpose is not to compose the story of her life and to set down a
chronological autobiography; it is rather to offer fragments of experience and glimpses of
feelings that remind us of her first book, Tropisms.  

*Childhood* places readers in an uncomfortable situation where they have to make
sense of an autobiography that splits the narrative voice. The work thus undermines the
notion of an omniscient authority, denies retrospection by predominantly using the
present tense, and juxtaposes tropistic sequences without a solid internal chronology.
Besides all these aspects that are so unusual in the traditional domain of autobiography,
Sarraute increases fragmentation in a genre for which linearity is traditionally the piéce
de résistance. Like making holes in a solid surface, she accentuates discontinuity by
introducing spacing, pauses, and gaps at the typographical level (the use of [...], of
ellipses, and of blank spaces between chapters and between sequences within the same
chapter). As readers, we suspect that Sarraute aims to hand down inner movements rather
than events and banal external appearances and that her text is only a prop that gives us
clues for understanding. Therefore, we have to project meaning above the words and
conceptually fill those blanks that fissure the text. Sarraute solicits our creative
collaboration precisely through those gaps and challenges us to set up continuity and
meaning by ourselves, using our conceptual resources.
Seeking tropistic sensations in her own past, Nathalie Sarraute tries to slash the smooth surface of appearances and to reach the hermetic inner world of past impressions from her childhood and of buried repercussions of past verbal exchanges "I am trying to dig down, to reach, to grasp, to release, what has remained there, buried (75)," she says. The result of this effort is a fragmentary autobiography of temporarily isolated sequences, a cracked narrative of the self, and an elliptical organizational structure. Thus, readers are challenged to find continuity and global coherence at a level different from chronological, narrative, structural or referential.

The premise of my analysis is that the logical order of episodes and the coherent unfolding of scattered childhood tropisms can be found at the conceptual level, where we understand Sarraute’s life story in terms of a sub-linguistic common ability that subtends our use of language and is based on our physical experience that things have a center and a periphery; this is what cognitive scientists have called the "image-schema" of center and periphery. This schema is metaphorically applied to the domain of childhood tropisms, and those tropisms could be interpreted within a global emotional framework that conceptually structures the autobiography on the physical basis of a center that involves our body and a perceptual field, which is the periphery.

In *Childhood*, this conventional image-schema gradually marks distinct stages along Sarraute's life path. Natacha’s life story develops between two families, the mother’s and the father’s, and between two cities, St. Petersburg and Paris. She spends the very first part of her childhood with the mother, who has a deep impact on her. The child sees the world through the eyes of the mother and takes her words literally. She finds her the prettiest of women and worships her almost like a goddess. The daughter is
deeply connected with her mother; she is dependent on her, and she is contained in the mother’s circle of perception.

However, later, Natacha moves to the father’s family, and she is spatially and emotionally dissociated from the mother. This is not a mere aspect of the child’s sadness; she actually feels her mother has rejected her because of her relationship with Kolia. Rejected or excluded and physically distanced, Natacha becomes the periphery in relation to the mother’s metaphorical center. Nathalie Sarraute goes on the child’s troubled sense of being, and presents the reader with different stages of experience, including the fragile periphery she became when she left her mother and came to live in Paris, her persistent effort of temporarily finding balance by choosing the father as a new center, and her final success in situating herself as a center and the other members of the family as a peripheral part of her life circle. The autobiography ends with this latest stage of independency in which Natacha is in the middle of a stable circle and the parents are placed at a distance in orbits gravitating around the child’s center.

3. Non-perceptual field and the paradisiacal association with the mother

When Sarraute explains tropisms, she writes about inner movements with the following main characteristics: first, they are hidden beneath our common actions, conversations, feelings, and gestures; second, they are complex, rich impulses that take place in our mind; third, they are unconscious; and finally they inhabit all of us. To express these complex inner movements of the sub-consciousness is not an easy task for the writer, and she is the first to confess the great difficulties she faces when she tries to pin them down.
Her main concern is, as always, finding ways to transmit personal tropisms to others. This transmission is difficult even though "everybody feels them and is affected by them." These impulses are characteristic to every human being, based on every one's personal life experience. From interviews, it is clear that Sarraute does not intend to build up a theory of tropisms but that she rather strives to communicate these strong sensations to others. This is a real challenge for her, first because she is trying to hand down a personal experience, unknown to the reader, and second because she must find ways of expressing her tropistic impulses. The recognition of the reader as the recipient of tropisms gives sense to her work. Realizing that these movements take place quickly under the surface of our consciousness, she reflects on the manner in which they could be shown to the reader: "They have to be shown while they are going on by a process which resembles what, in the cinema, is called traveling, when the camera is moving as the same time as the object the operator wants to photograph. I had to take many frames to be able to catch these microscopic movements and then to show them as a slow-motion picture before the reader."37

If Sarraute finds a way of showing tropisms to the reader through cinematic techniques how could she actually narrate them? How can Sarraute, or indeed any writer, effectively transmit an emotional experience that is new and unknown to readers. My suggestion is that she communicates her tropisms through bodily sensations. This kind of physical experience is something common and known to all of us, as we all have a body and we all move in a physical space. Therefore, taking as an input a domain that is known could help readers to better understand a domain that is unknown. This kind of reasoning
is familiar to Sarraute, for she says she strongly believes in a movement from things known to things unknown. For her, this is the way literature ceaselessly discovers new and unknown material.\(^{38}\)

This approach is shared by researchers concerned with the creation of meaning. Among them, Mark Turner argues that literary inventions may have roots in common processes. He further stresses the fact that "[t]he imagination, (...) in order to be intelligible, must operate in a known space; it must work with unoriginal structures of invention."\(^{39}\) Gilles Fauconnier also analyzes the mechanisms of creativity, and underlines the idea that in metaphoric projection from a source to a target, one has to have a clear understanding of the source in order to be able to map elements in the target. In the same way, Lakoff and Johnson, for whom metaphor is a part of our normal conceptual system, explain that "[b]ecause so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need to get a grasp of them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientation, objects, etc.)."\(^{40}\)

My hypothesis is that the reader grasps tropisms, a domain that is new and unknown to him, through a domain that he knows better. I argue that, as readers, we connect to Sarraute's tropistic experience via our bodily experience of a center and a periphery. In her early childhood, Natacha is under her mother's influence, unable to free herself from it. Step by step, the child moves along her life path, and after different stages of struggle with herself and her family, she succeeds in becoming independent of her
parents and in keeping them at a distance. Nathalie, the autobiographer, tries to reveal to us the tropisms that hide behind the drama of a child separated from her mother and in the difficulty of coping with her absence. We understand the mother in terms of a physical center in which Natacha is first included, then expelled. The child is rejected to the periphery, and all her efforts concentrate on establishing herself as her own center and pushing the members of her family to the periphery.

This reasoning makes sense to the reader, who is familiar with center and with periphery from bodily experience. The center is the body, and the periphery is the perceptual field. Moreover, we all share the understanding that our body also has a center, which is the torso that contains most of the vital organs, and a periphery, which consists of the parts attached to the torso: arms, legs, head, and neck. We all share this physical experience, and therefore we do not require a lengthy, concerted effort to understand it. It is automatic, and most likely unconscious, because it is already assimilated in our minds. If we use the source domain of a physical center and periphery that we understand in clear terms, we are able to project elements in the emotional target domain of Natacha’s life, a domain that is new and unfamiliar to us.

Consequently, we are able to draw similarities between elements from the spatial source domain, like a physical center, and elements from the emotional target, like the mother’s influential sphere. When we blend these two elements, we conceive of the mother in terms of a center, and thus metaphorically understand that the mother is an emotional center to Natacha, who is under her power. We are also able to map a conceptual link between physical elements that are contained in a center and the young Natacha who adores her mother like a goddess. Later, when her mother rejects her, she
becomes a spatial periphery in relation to a distanced center. The analogy is almost exclusively based on the resemblance between spatial elements in the physical source domain and emotional elements in the target domain of Natacha's life. There is one exception, when the child is contained in the mother's influential center but spatially exterior to it when she is on vacation with her father in Switzerland. The metaphorical mapping of elements between the source and the target becomes literal when Natacha is older and takes the train from her mother in Russia in order to go to Paris to spend time with her father. At this moment, Natacha is not only emotionally separated from the mother-center, but also spatially distanced, literally and metaphorically on the periphery of her mother's center. This conceptual template helps us to coherently conceive of the child's life in terms of center and periphery until the final stage when we mentally link Natacha to the center, and the family members to the periphery.

Cognitive linguists like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson describe this kind of common physical experience, saying that polar oppositions like "center and periphery," "up an down," "in and out," along with other types of spatial concepts, like verticality, "moving along a path," "container and contained," represent in our mind common cognitive schemas. These cognitive schemas are physical in nature, for we all orient our bodies in space and thus experience such orientations. Because they have skeletal structure and are well rooted in our conceptual system, Mark Johnson names them "image-schemas." He further notes that these image-schemas are input source domains for many metaphors we use in daily conversation. When we say: "I'm feeling up," "My spirits sank," "He is in top shape," we metaphorically conceive of an emotional state in
terms of our physical experience of "up and down." According to Johnson, image-schemas are often used in order to express domains of experience other than physical. For example, we are able to move metaphorically from the basic image-schema of "center and periphery" to a more abstract interpretation of this conventional experience. From the structure of our perceptual field, we can move to our social, political, or philosophical world. The center represents us and our inner position in the world, and the periphery represents the outer exterior position to our own.43

In this experiential perspective, the reader connects with Sarraute through the conceptual bridge of image-schemas. On the one hand, the writer tries to express the emotional tropisms of her childhood caused by her displacement from the influential sphere of her adored mother. On the other hand, the reader, aided by the autobiographical narrative and by his own experience, recreates bodily sensations through which he is able to feel the discomfort of a child in search of her own territory. Tropisms, emotional inner movements, and image-schemas, cognitive structures rooted in physical experience, bear similar characteristics. Both are sub-linguistic and hidden behind conventional conversation and daily gestures. They also are unconscious, automatic and complex psychological realities, and, importantly, are in all of us. For Sarraute and for cognitive linguists, language is a code that guides understanding, a prompt that helps us navigate conceptual structures. Thus, both Sarraute and cognitive linguists aim to make a "crack in the varnish of language" in order to reveal the complex tropistic and conceptual mechanisms that hide behind conventional forms of expression, and that we bear to bring in our body and in our mind. Sarraute wants to reveal tropisms through the holes she
pokes in the solid shell of everyday activities, and cognitive linguists also try to reveal mental activities hidden behind the screen of language. Readers recreate these new emotional movements through the conventional physical movements of center and periphery, thus bringing together in the activity of reading the two processes of expressing sensations and creating meaning.

_Childhood_ is conceptually structured on the basic physical image-schema of “center and periphery,” and it unfolds in successive mental stages of the deconstruction of an initial center dominated by the mother. These stages are locations on Natacha’s life path. As readers, moving forward from one to another, at the same time, we advance deeper into Nathalie’s autobiographical narrative. On the one hand, we metaphorically co-travel with the child Natacha along a fractured path marked by her primal connection with the mother and by successive imbalance and decentering stages. We accompany her through a global journey from the time she is five until she is eleven. On the other hand, we also co-travel with the adult Nathalie along her narrative path, from the beginning when her autobiographical project aroused suspicion in the alter ego’s voice, to the end when she succeeds in writing it. Both Natacha and Nathalie are revealed to us under the sign of crisis: the child experiences her separation from her mother with regret and culpability; the adult faces discouragement and distrust when she assumes the role of autobiographer. Natacha must repair the damage caused by the fissure of the maternal connection; Nathalie must find a way to write her autobiography under unfavorable circumstances and “crack” some literary conventions in order to do it. The emblematic sofa-slashing episode is the symbolic monad that foreshadows an imminent change in Natacha’s life and in Nathalie’s writing. The first change generates a particular unfolding
of events, and the second triggers a new way of presenting them. Natacha and Nathalie both struggle to set up the foundation of a solid center. The first fights to become herself a centered, autonomous personality, capable of keeping her family circle at a peripheral distance; the second fights to revive a genre harshly judged as outmoded and to keep at a peripheral distance the literary “authorities,” including the critical voice within the dialogical autobiography.

Natacha, not yet six, on holiday in a Swiss hotel with her father, refuses to swallow her food until it is “as liquid as a soup (8).” The governess encourages her to eat faster. Children around Natacha in the hotel’s dining room imitate her, and their faces are just like hers, “grotesquely deformed by an enormous, swollen cheek (7).” Their parents point her out as a bad example for their children and ask that Natacha come and eat her meals alone. Although a young child, she is aware of the annoying effect her stubbornness has on others. She assumes the adults are whispering she is “an insufferable child, a crazy child, a fanatical child.” Even her father loses his patience. Natacha cannot be persuaded to eat faster, and although she endures “terrifying, degrading words (7),” she refuses to open her clenched lips to accept a bit of food before the previous one has not been chewed until it becomes “as liquid as a soup.” Following the instructions her mother gave her before Natacha left on vacation with her father, every morsel has to wait its turn to pass her teeth, and nothing can infringe this rule.

Natacha fears that if she is not strict enough with the mother’s “sacred (10)” rule and swallows the food when it is still thick, she will be tainted with cowardice and treachery and will never be able to confess. Like a sin kept hidden in her soul, failure to obey the mother-goddess would generate in Natacha shame and culpability. She must do
her best to accomplish her difficult mission to uphold every one of her mother’s “laws” to the letter while she is with her father, thus in a foreign territory. This territory has different laws, and therefore it is hard to successfully realize the mission, especially when the missionary is insulted and taken for crazy and fanatical. Nevertheless, in addition to over-thoroughly chewing her food, the girl heroically defends her mother’s law against any outside treat. With unquestioning devotion and fierce resistance, suffering mockery and reprimands and the displeasure of her father, Natacha braves punishment and exclusion, and, undisturbed, patiently swallows the mouthful only after it becomes as liquid as a soup.

The idea of territory and the influence of the person who is the center of that territory is brought to light when Natacha assumes for herself the role of a messenger or judge representing her mother in her father’s territory. She travels from “there” to “here,” and in the paternal space she is the only one who can apply the mother’s law, the only judge who can evaluate exactly when the food is “as liquid as a soup.” In this distinct space, the mother is powerless, for the father expresses his power over his own territory: “(...) she [the mother] doesn’t count here... I am the only one here who takes her into account (9).” When Natacha moves from one parent to another, she identifies with her mother, and consequently her mission is to defend her mother’s rules, which are also her own. Then, she instinctively assumes that she is the only one to represent those rules in the foreign territory of the father. The military metaphor of territory suggests the vocabulary of someone on duty at his post resisting an enemy, brandishing his colors and flag: “(...) I’m still here, at my post... I’m resisting... I’m holding out on this bit of territory on which I have hoisted her colors, on which I put up her flag (9).”
This careful respectfulness of the mother's rules is not infatuation or lack of cooperation: Natacha feels she is misunderstood, for she is under oath. Eating fast, before the food has been properly chewed, is not in her power. The power is displaced, and originates from a source remote from Natacha's own will. The child is ever mindful of her solemn promise to her mother who spells out the rule: "You must chew your food until it has become as liquid as a soup... Whatever you do, don't forget that when you are there, without me, no one there will know, they'll forget, they won't bother, it will be up to you to bear it in mind, you must remember what I'm telling you... promise me you'll do that (8)." Once Natacha promises, her mother's rule becomes her law, she internalizes it, and she lives under its power: "Yes, I promise, Mama, don't worry, set your mind at rest, you can rely on me (8)." "As liquid as a soup" triggers in the girl's mind tropistic reactions, for she feels anxious about not being able to correctly follow orders. She takes the mother's statement literally, chewing the food endlessly, and she understands her obedience as a talisman, protecting her and "preserv[ing] [her] from dangers" in a land where she does not belong, where she is in transit.

The deictic adverbs "there" and "here" draw specific boundaries between the territories of the mother and the father. Natacha does not have her own place; at present, although temporarily physically in the father's space, she is clearly affiliated with the mother's space and rules. The child is dependent on her opinions, she is included in her circle of influence, and she does not have her own point of view: "(...) she [the mother] is the only one who can know what's right for me, she's the only one who can distinguish what's good for me from what is bad (8)."
The child's obstinacy in obeying her mother contrasts with her ease in disobeying the governess when she slashes the sofa. Both events occur during the same brief time period. In the father's territory and under his rules, which are expressed through the nanny, Natacha premeditates the "criminal attack (5)" on the sofa with no shadow of fear or guilt. She is sure she will not be punished, for punishments are "improbable, unthinkable (5)" in the zone of "here." The father looks displeased and worried, but essentially his laws have little effect on the child. Breaking the father's law is almost natural when she plunges the scissors into the back of the sofa. On the contrary, the mother's law is perceived quite differently, and breaking it is beyond her imagination. Even the thought of transgressing it instills great fear and anxiety in the girl. She sees the world through the mother's eyes, she feels she belongs "there," in the maternal center of influence, where the mother can decide what is good and bad for her. The distance between the orbits of "there" and "here" encourages Natacha to better do her job: precisely because she is far from "there" where she feels she belongs, "here" she has the responsibility to loyally obey rules from "there": "I received it [the 'as liquid as a soup' rule] from her, she gave it to me to keep, I must conserve it piously, preserve it from all touch... (10) (my emphasis)". Only her mother has the divine power to release her from her sacred promise. However, the mother cannot deploy her influence in the foreign space where Natacha finds herself. It is probable that if Natacha was physically with her mother, she would have not adhered to the rules so strictly, but "here" nothing can intervene, simply because in the father's space, the father ignores the mother.

The tight connection with the maternal orbit of influence is maintained through clichéd phrases like "as liquid as a soup." The mother says these words probably without
expecting the child to process them literally. Nathalie, the autobiographer, digs beneath these clichés and finds unexplored tropistic sensations that Natacha, the child, experienced in the past. Some of the mother's everyday words function in the girl's mind like ropes attaching her to the maternal land in which she is (or she hopes she is) included. Among them are statements such as "If you touch one of those poles, you'll die" (in chapter six), or assumptions like that a woman should eat dust in order to become pregnant (in chapter seven). Because the child takes them literally, and because of their performative power on her, Marianne Schmutz names such statements "words-missile." The mother spells them out and like a missile, they provoke an "explosive" reaction in Natacha. Nathalie confesses: "No word, however powerfully uttered, has ever sunk into me with the same percussive force as some of hers (19)."

While on a walk with mother and Kolia, her mother's partner, Natacha feels an urge to experience the sacred words. She places herself in front of a wooden telegraph pole (the type of pole which her mother said could kill her), and although frightened, she touches the pole with her finger. It seems her mother's words are true! "I touch the wood of the telegraph pole with my finger... and immediately, that's it, it happened to me, Mama knew it, Mama knows everything, it's certain, I'm dead (....) I touched the pole (...) the most horrible thing possible was in that pole, I touched it and it passed it into me, it's in me, I roll on the ground to get it to come out, I sob, I howl, I'm dead... (20)." Mama is omniscient, and she is omnipotent too, for by simply laughing she dispels all bad spirits. Natacha again takes her mother's words literally when she eats dust in order to have a baby. And because she wants a little brother or sister, she collects dust and
invites her mother to eat some of the magic potion. Unfortunately, it seems she did not do it right, because another kind of dust is needed, a special one: the one on flowers (20).

The return to the "there" of the mother is felt as a return home; the incidents from the "here" of the father, are obliterated, and "once again everything took on that air of insouciance...(11)." Her mother, who is always presented as a shining figure, distinguished in a rather dark environment, fascinates Natacha. In chapter three, Sarraute depicts a lovely afternoon in the park, when mama reads a story to her daughter. The girl sits in a comfortable position, feeling the warmth of her mother's leg under her skirt. Everything around looks harmonious with boats sailing on the lake and goats pulling red velvet carts. Natacha notices that her mother is slightly absent-minded and seems to direct her words elsewhere. She does not check if the child is listening or understands. However, this moment of indifference that could cast a shadow on the shining figure of the mother is quickly dismissed. Natacha perceives her mother's momentary indifference as a liberation when she can freely play with the mother's words, even if they are not addressed to her. She integrates this moment into a charming environment, where the light is golden, the bells are tinkling, and the hoops are jingling. Later, Natacha secures the mother's positive allure and insists that not only was the environment charming, but also that "in the literal sense of the word, she charmed me (19)."

The alter ego's critical voice is suspicious of this perfect picture with an enchanting background and a magical fairy. First, the alter ego breaks down those charming sounds, remembering that there were also some "rattling sounds, the rasping sound of the red, pink, mauve celluloid sails of the toy windmills (13)." She suspects this folk-tale-like atmosphere of being "prefabricated." This is a heavy accusation, precisely
because Sarrasute dislikes all neat categories and strives to rid her writing of such dead shells and smooth surfaces. Second, the alter ego accentuates the nugget of suspicion of the mother’s behavior: “How long did it take you to realize that she never tried – unless very absent-mindedly and clumsily – to put herself in your place? (19)”

Suspicion also arises in the mind of the reader. It seems that these idyllic pictures hide something barely perceptible, just like the strawberry jam Nathacha ate hid suspicious white spots with the foul taste of calomel. The colorful appearances we are used to perhaps cover something less bright. For example, when Natacha is called upon to recite a poem in front of an audience, she consciously imitates the voice of a baby. In order to please, she renounces her identity to adopt another that is more appreciated by adults. As she conforms to the role of a sweet child, she is aware of committing an imposture, feeling “an abject renunciation of everything [she] feel[s] [her]self to be (53).” It is not surprising then that the girl equally appreciates the characters of Edward the scorned prince, and Tom the impostor, in the novel *The Prince and the Pauper*. They both are roles that Natacha herself has played.

The calomel also hides in other sugary memories. When Natacha and her mother visit her uncle Grisha at Kamenetz-Podolsk, the trip “has all the qualities of the events that make for «happy childhood memories» (23).” The landscape approaches the perfection of folk tales: the uncle has a huge family house, “full of nooks and crannies and little staircases (24),” a big piano, and many mirrors. The family is happy, smiling at one another among their four children. Everything is shiny, white, or bright, from the “gleaming parquet floors,” the white dust, the white bread, and the sunny weather, to the aunt’s bright room. In this magic house, described over a few pages with decorative
adjectives, the first streak of calomel brings some bitterness to the sugary taste of old times. Natacha gets sick with a fever and stops playing with her cousins. The sickness is the first sign that the charming picture will soon crack. Her mother comes to her room and reads her Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The child again feels that the mother is absent just like in the park. Her words are pronounced without any feeling, and they sound “brisk and clear (30).” This time Natacha is more skeptical, for she also feels that her mother is somehow glad when she stops reading the story.

At this point, the alter ego questions the narrator on the authenticity of what she felt at that time, and pushes her to continue focusing on that particular incident. She also remembers that the mother clearly complained about spending all her time with the sick child, with no one thinking to replace her. Although Natacha tries to attenuate the bad taste of these memories by fabricating excuses for the mother or by adding that these moments quickly vanished, the critical alter ego victoriously announces the end of happy memories. They must be fake, for such perfect memories always hide something bitter underneath!

Natacha is not yet ready to cast a shadow on her luminous mother. She only admits that she perceived some of these incidents, but does not judge them. The mother still charms the daughter, she is so beautiful, her skin is so silky. The little girl remembers, “(...) she looks at me through her pince-nez, their lenses enlarging her bronze-colored eyes, they seem immense, full of naïveté, innocence, good nature...and I cuddle up to her, I put my lips on the delicate, silky, soft skin of her forehead, of her cheeks (31).” Nevertheless, the signs of suspicion are there; once the alter ego voiced its criticism, the reader too becomes mistrustful of the mother. Readers suspect that Natacha
will soon need a pair of metaphorical scissors to reveal what is “flabby, greyish (6)” beneath the silky surface of the mother’s skin. Questions and scruples come to spoil the happy memories of childhood: why, in remembering the glittering house of Ivanovo,⁴⁵ which metonymically represents the maternal territory, can Natacha not remember her mother in it (chapter 9)? and why is Natacha so awkward when playing with hooking rings in the park, and thus excluded from the group of children (chapter 12)? Readers and alter ego jointly formulate the “stabbing” question: Who could “prevent what was in the air, what was about to happen, and [for which Natacha] already smacked of veiled treachery, of abandon? (43)” The tight ties attaching the child to the mother’s territory start to loosen, and gradually the split between the two widens, bringing imbalance and culpability.

4. Decentering, imbalance, and culpability. The mother as a perceptual periphery

Because of Kolia’s presence in her mother’s sphere, Natacha soon feels like a foreign organism that has infiltrated a space where it does not belong and that has to be expelled. From the status of an insider in a familiar space, feeling “like waves the warm current,” and “the radiation (62),” Natacha is unexpectedly relegated to the status of an outsider, of one who disturbs the close, communal moments the mother shares with Kolia. The fissure between mother and daughter depends during a classic moment: “Mama and Kolia were pretending to be wrestling, they were enjoying themselves and I wanted to join in, I took mama’s side, I put my arms around her, as if to defend her, and she pushed me away
gently... «Let go... husband and wife are on the same side.» And I backed away (63).” This memory still anguishes the adult Nathalie, and she tries to attenuate it, adding that at that time her feelings were of only a mild intensity. Certainly, the mother did not mean it; it was only a game. Nevertheless, the alter ego who implicitly witnessed the incident remembers it quite differently: Natacha backed away quickly, “as if [the mother] pushed [her] violently,” and the harsh words she pronounced seemed to have freed herself from the child’s arms.

Under the pressure of the critical voice, Nathalie, the autobiographer, does recognize that the game was “disturbing,” and she puts into words what is difficult to say: “I was interfering... intruding where I had no right to be (64).” The metaphor of an intruder who must be eliminated contrasts with the previous metaphor of a sentinel at his post defending the mother’s territory, her colors, and her flag. When representing the mother in the father’s space, Natacha believed that she was completely different from all other people included in that space: her father, her governess, the other children around and their parents. In that foreign territory, she was the only one who could stand up for her mother and her rules. At that time, the child was certain that she was, among all others present there, the unique one who had access to the mother’s land: “(...) I have come for a long way away, from a foreign place to which they have no access, whose laws they are ignorant of (...) (10).” When she is “home,” in the mother’s center of influence but with Kolia present, things abruptly reverse. Natacha is excluded from the space she had felt was also her own, and she surprisingly discovers that she is just like the others among whom she previously felt different. From an element that naturally belongs to a territory, the child becomes a “foreign body (64)” which has to be expelled. She is,
in fact, as foreign to the mother's center as her father and all the others in his space are. The mother metaphorically symbolizes the center of a territory, exercising influence over it, and she sets up borders within which she holds together inclusive elements, like her partner Kolia, her brother Grisha, his wife Anyuta and their children, the house in Ivanovo, the maids, and for a time, her daughter. Now, Natacha has a different status from these people, for just like the father, she has become exterior to the maternal orbit: she is ejected from it and assigned the place of a peripheral outsider to the mother's center.

The episode of the rejected foreign body is only one incident in a succession of others with increasing impact on the child. Although wounded by the mother's unexpected words, Natacha hopes that a reconnection with her mother is still possible. However, she will face other crises until she actually puts her mother at a distance. The process of separation is gradual and takes place in successive stages through which Natacha is displaced from the maternal territory and pushed from center to periphery. This incident only weakens her connections to the mother-center, but later the decentering progressively transforms into a definitive rupture. Natacha physically separates from her mother when she takes the train from St. Petersburg to Paris to visit her father. What is at first a temporary visit later becomes a definitive situation, for the child is banished to her father.

Natacha's relegation from center to periphery traces a conceptual movement from inside to outside, from St. Petersburg to Paris, and from mother to father. The ties connecting her to the influential mother loosen, and the process of detachment from her has started. Faulted for lack of empathy, and worse, faulted for indifference and
exclusion, the mother is further deconstructed by a series of subversive ideas: “The doll is more beautiful than Mama,” “Mama’s skin is like a monkey’s,” and “Mama is miserly (80-90).” These judgments mark a shift in Natacha’s perception as she compares her mother to others, points out defects in the mother’s beauty, and thus breaks away from the centered, almost divine personality able to hold together her territory.

The little girl at first views her mother as a goddess. Her beauty is absolute with delicate features, golden skin that is “more silky than silk” and “warmer and more tender than the feathers of a baby bird,” a face that has the “purity” and “air of innocence” of a child, bronze colored eyes, and silky hair (82). She is so beautiful that sometimes she is “inaccessible to everyone.” The very idea of beauty arose in Natacha from the mother’s physical appearance, which is beyond comparison. As the narrator says, “That’s the word: beyond it. Far removed from all possible comparison (82).” Beauty emanates from her body, for it uniquely reveals through her nature, without any coquetry. Essentially, beauty is her nature: “(...) the importance I had seemed to attach to the idea of beauty must have come to me from Mama. Who else could have inculcated in me? She had such a power of suggestion over me (...) she had certainly incited me, without me knowing how, to consider her very beautiful, of incomparable beauty... (81)”

When Natacha sees a hairdresser’s doll in a shop window, its beauty captivates her. After close evaluation, an unhappy thought “bumps into” the child, “knocking into” her, at last clearly coming to mind: “(...) it’s obvious, it’s certain, it is so: She is more beautiful than Mama (83).” This revelation generates an important change in the perception of the mother’s status. Not only is the child able to look at her from the outside, but also there is someone (or something) else besides her who is beautiful - even
more beautiful than her. First, the myth of the mother is dissected, and second, from her privileged position, the mother descends to the status of being but one of many possible beautiful creatures. She no longer has a monopoly on beauty, and therefore loses her divine power. The alter ego pertinently sums up the meaning of Natacha’s sacrilege: “(...) what must have irritated her [the mother] was that you had removed her from where she was... outside, beyond, and that you had pushed her among the others, where people compare, situate, assign places... (...) (85).”

Once this kind of reasoning takes shape in the child’s mind, it multiplies. She repeatedly entertains other such traumatic ideas and is tortured almost physically by the monstrous thoughts that the mother’s skin is like a monkey’s and that she is miserly. The more Natacha tries to suppress them, the more they intensify. The ideas cruelly entrench themselves in her body, sting her, and “dig their tiny barb (87).” The torture is too awful and has to stop. Natacha thinks she probably did not perceive her mother correctly. Hoping she was wrong, she goes back and reevaluates both mother and doll. Yet nothing can help; the doll is prettier, and moreover, on closer inspection the mother’s ears are not small enough, her eyes are not large, her lashes seems too short, and her hair is too straight.

Natacha feels she has to free herself from the malignant power of such hurtful ideas, and, still desiring her mother and hoping for her complicity, she decides to share with her these thoughts that could distance her from the mother:

Now that it [the idea] is in me, there is no question of me hiding it from her, I can’t distance myself from her to that extent, close myself up, enclose myself with my own with that, I can’t be the only one to bear it, it belongs to her, to both of
us... if I bottle it up in myself it will grow bigger, heavier, it will press harder and harder, I absolutely must let her see it, I'm going to show it to her... the way I show her a graze, a splinter, a bump...(83).

The girl assumes that the splinter-like ideas, though originally arising in her, should be shared with the mother so that they might evaluate and chase them away together. Natacha says she cannot close herself up, meaning she is afraid to separate from her mother and find herself on her own. She hopes her mother, like a rescuer who "extract[s] the torn (84)" would palliate her wound. Natacha's assumption is legitimate because they are mother and daughter, and because the mother has magic powers, as demonstrated when she predicted the girl's death from touching the telegraph pole. What mother said in that instance magically happened. This time, the girl expects her to have the power to make the pain disappear, and "[mother and daughter] shall go on [their] way quietly, hand-in-hand... (my emphasis) (84)" Natacha is afraid of being excluded from the space she previously inhabited.

However, what Natacha had hoped for is not what she actually gets. The anticipated hand-in-hand image turns out to be nothing but a slight graze. And if that was not enough, "the missile" is launched: "But Mama lets go of my hand, or she holds it less tightly, she looks at me with her displeased expression and says: «A child who loves his mother thinks that no one is more beautiful than she» (84)." The sin has been committed, and the sentence is heavy: because the child displaced her mother from her unique world of absolutes, leaving her open to comparisons with others, it means that she does not love her. Her unique beauty cannot permit the sacrilege of finding someone else more beautiful, and when this sin has been committed, the goddess casts out the unfaithful
from her world. Separation and exclusion are irrevocable because the sentence is universal, and applies to all children who dare to find anyone more beautiful than their mothers. The indefinite article in “a child” and the gnomic character of this sentence express an absolute law that cannot be infringed: *no* child who loves his mother finds someone else more beautiful than her. Natacha cannot take the place of this generic “a child” because, unlike all other children, she observed her mother, judged and evaluated her in comparison with others, and therefore is a child who does *not* love her mother. “A child who loves its mother never compares her with anyone else (85).” She is excluded from the mother’s world for finding her less beautiful than the doll and is also banished from the group of normal children who love their mothers. Natacha is again relegated to the place of an outsider:

And it was these words that stood out, it was they that preoccupied me... A child. A. A. Yes, a child among all the others, a child like all the other children. A real child who possesses the feelings that all real children have, a child who loves his mother... What child does not love her? Where has that ever been known? Nowhere. It wouldn’t be a child, it would be a monster. Or else she wouldn’t be a real mother, she would be a stepmother. Hence, a child who is like children are, like they should be, loves its Mama. And then, it thinks her more beautiful than anyone else in the world. It is this love it has for her that makes it think her so beautiful...the most beautiful...And I, it’s obvious, I don’t love her, since I think the hairdresser’s doll more beautiful (85).

The world splits in two, the group of all normal children, and the bad exception, the monster Natacha. The rule in the mother’s territory is clear: absolute love entails the
perception of absolute beauty. On the one hand, the child, by discriminating between
different kinds of beauty, betrays her mother and dissociates from her absolute. On the
other hand, the mother, through the exclusionary verdict she pronounces, generates this
separation. It is important to observe that Natacha had hoped her mother would free her
from such harmful ideas and that she would relieve her from the culpability they
provoked in her. The child is young, and she does not know that her perception is normal
in childhood. Generally, a child’s universe begins limited to the mother’s and gradually
enlarges and other elements come in. At this point, it is natural to quantify and qualify the
various elements in relation to one another. In other words, the mother is supposed to
cooperate in this natural process and to initiate Natacha into the world of reflection. Each time the child expects an alleviating answer, and each time the answer, like a
missile, tears her understanding of the world apart.

Dethroning a goddess is not without consequences. Natacha’s sacrilege is
exacerbated when she is persuaded she has a little devil in her body who, without her
permission, stirs up all the bad ideas. She looks at her beautiful mother, with her
décolletage and golden skin, and she suddenly thinks, “Mama’s skin is like a monkey’s
(87).” That devil instills that idea in her, she sees the monkey’s fur on mama’s arms, and
when the idea fully takes shape, it is impossible to eradicate. As a result, the child deeply
believes she is the most undesirable child, for “[t]he disease was in [her]. This disease
was choosing [her] because it found in [her] the nourishment it needed. It would never
have been able to live in the healthy, pure, childish mind which other children possess
(88).”
The clichés the mother repeatedly utters accumulate in the child so that when Natacha finds exception to them, the child feels she is defective or unworthy. Statements such as “Husband and wife are on the same side,” or “A child who loves his mother thinks that no one is more beautiful than she,” are like arrows piercing the child’s soul and the unity between mother and daughter. First, these clichés generate a feeling of culpability in Natacha that threatens her identity. Second, they gradually break the union between the two and lead to a definitive distance from the mother. In her mind, the child realizes that she is banished from the community of normal children who love their mothers. She is an outsider because of the “stigma (86)” of not loving her mother above all, and she is abandoned to her cruel ideas. Because there is no one besides the mother who could free her from the harmful ideas, and because the mother herself refuses to rescue her, Natacha keeps them inside her like “well-wrapped parcels (84).” She is “[d]elivered up, defenseless, to «ideas» (88).”

When the child leaves St. Petersburg and takes the train to visit her father in Paris, she distances herself not only emotionally but also physically from her mother. The voyage traces the path of a spatial separation from the mother’s center to the father’s center. Although this sojourn is physically fairly short, emotionally Natacha will forever remain quite distanced from her mother. The alter ego’s voice suspects that the abandonment is premeditated, idea that the adult Nathalie refuses to accept. Who could easily accept that one has been deliberately abandoned? “—Yes, something that would have made you feel that this time it wasn’t a departure like the others... – I find it hard, hurtful even, to believe that she could already then have envisaged... No, it isn’t possible that she could deliberately have wanted to abandon me to my father (95).”
The mother accompanies her to Berlin, and from there, a friend of her husband takes the child to Paris. This spatial trajectory, from St. Petersburg to Paris, with a break in Berlin, is significant, for the mother stops her voyage short so as not to interfere with her husband. Their territories remain completely disconnected. Natacha forges a connection between them through a friend who accompanies her from Berlin to Paris. Before the separation, the mother pronounces some other clichés that Natacha will take with her. Just as she chewed her food to liquefy it ("as a soup"), she has to chew over these other clichés throughout her trip and her stay in Paris. Like poisonous "well-wrapped parcels (84)," these statements settle in her mind and continuously perturb her. This time, the arrows are directed against the stepmother Vera. Instead of allowing the child to form her own opinion of Vera, the mother wraps up useful parcels of ready-made opinions: "You only have one mama in the whole world (91)," and "Vera is stupid (97)." Dislodged from her mother’s territory, disturbed by her new identity of stigmatized child, and heir to her mother’s damaging legacy, Natacha will have a hard time finding her way in the new territory. Without her mother, and with the strict rule that the mother cannot be replaced, the child will struggle to open the mother’s "well-wrapped parcels" and to definitively eliminate them.

On the train, Natacha is sad, and her tears stream down. In a way, she symbolically mourns her first childhood, when the mother charmed her and when her warm and soft presence protected her. A new stage is about to begin, a stage when Natacha has to face the anguish of the mother’s absence and find her own place in the world. Over the transitional trip from mother to father, trying to keep up with the sound of the train’s wheels, Natacha successively pronounces in French and Russian "soleil"
and “soltzhe.” Although the pronunciation is different, both words equally fascinate her, and she rhythmically repeats them as if to bridge not only the language differences, but also the physical separation between Russia and France, between mother and daughter.47

5. Quest for recentering. The father as a potential center

When Natacha finds herself alone and abandoned in the father’s territory, she suffers for the absence of the mother. This decentralization from a center to another does not consume instantly, in the separation episode at the train station. Dislodged from a territory she thought was also her own, Natacha carries with her a fundamental loss of identity. Even if she will be successful in her efforts to find her own center, the mother continues to send her from time to time disturbing letters that cloud Natacha’s new territory and unsettle her.

In turn, the father, in spite of a slight difference in the way in which Natacha perceives him, especially right before and after the trip from Russia to France, appears as a constant, solid character. He does not decline, like the mother, nor does he improve. Unlike the charming, insouciant and spontaneous mother, the father is austere with an accentuated sense of duty and a marked reluctance to express his feelings. Nevertheless, Natacha perceives him in the same way from the beginning to the end. His behavior is regular and he is scrupulous, cerebral, sometimes awkward, and does not surprise the child with any unexpected gestures or statements. This sense of stability is extremely important for the girl at a time when her mother’s spontaneity perturbs her and when she
changes country, parents, and place of living. Against a background of suffering and
guilt, the father’s constant position functions like a landmark in a stormy atmosphere.
The child relies on him, and the more they spent time together, the more their unspoken
complicity strengthens.

Natacha sees her father differently before and after the trip from St. Petersburg to
Paris. Before spending this time with him, Natacha associates him more with seasonal
vacations and occasional trips to Switzerland or Moscow than with a permanent lifestyle.
She remembers him buying presents for Christmas from a confectioner’s shop or singing
old lullabies. His face is bright and animated, and his smile is radiating. This serene and
luminous atmosphere dominated by the affectionate presence of the father contrasts with
what Natacha finds when she arrives in Paris at the Gare du Nord. This time, in the
father’s territory, the atmosphere is quite different. A “yellow greyness” and a “sinister
(98)” air replace the scintillating snow she was used to. Even the father’s welcome at the
Gare du Nord is “strange,” “so different from all his previous welcomes... a little cold,
stiff (98).” This difference in perception is not constant throughout the period of time
Natacha spends in France. It is only temporarily that the father’s image darkens, and only
in relation to the specific event of Natacha’s arrival in Paris. The contrast in his behavior
is directly related to the child’s troubled perception right after the trip from one parent to
the other. Thus, it is not more than a transitional emotional state of mind, for Natacha is
experiencing a dramatic period in her life, both wounded by her mother’s words and
suffering her absence. Once she settles down and becomes familiarized with her new
home, the father’s image quickly returns to normal.
Moving from mother to father and from one sphere of influence to another, Natacha’s relationship with her parents changes: the bonds with the mother weaken while the ones with the father strengthen. This change of perception in the child’s life triggers an evolution in her personality. The more complicity she builds with her father, the more confidence and independence she gains. The mother’s influence diminishes, and thus Natacha gradually dissociates from her center of perception. Less influential and also less present in the child’s life, the mother is put at a distance, so that from a containing center she is rejected to a peripheral position. This change in relationship brings Natacha closer to her father. Though she desperately needs a new center, she does not turn the father into one. In this fragile balance between an absent mother and a tender present father, her stepmother Vera plays an important role in helping her maintain a balance between parents. Meanwhile, Natacha grows up and goes to school. The world of knowledge helps her too to achieve objectivity and independence and to reflect on her own situation. Before turning to Vera’s role and to the influence of school, it is useful to investigate Natacha’s achievement of independence in light of the changing relationship with her parents. The nature of her relationship with each parent is profoundly different, at times even antagonistic. It is dependent on each parent’s conduct, both the father’s interaction and stability and the mother’s degradation and eventual separation.

Although the mother appears to be extroverted and spontaneous, at times she is unable to effectively communicate with her child. For example, when they are both in the park, the mother reads a story to Natacha, but the child cannot hear her mother’s voice. It is as though she is reading to someone else. The verbal exchange between mother and daughter is ablated, and because Natacha loves her so much, she tries to set up reciprocity
through a sensorial exchange. She cannot grasp her words, which flow elsewhere, but she connects to her mother by leaning her back against the warmth of the mother’s leg. At another time, when Natacha is sick, the mother keeps her company and reads her a story. A similar absence of meaningful communication happens again, for the mother reads the story “without [...] any expression,” and gives the impression that “she isn’t giving much thought to what she is reading (30).” Besides, she looks glad and shuts the book very quickly when Natacha tells her she is sleepy.

The mother’s lack of communication contrasts with the father’s active encouragement of interaction. Although introverted and rather reluctant to express his feelings through affectionate words of love, the father engages Natacha in diverse educative activities, like teaching her to count, to learn by heart the days of the week or to speak French. They reciprocally enjoy spending time together, laughing, and occasionally making fun of each other, like when they try to correctly pronounce the “r” in French. This privileged relationship with him remains constant from their active interaction in Ivanovo through her father’s help with her homework after Natacha goes to school in Paris. Father and daughter put together their forces in order to solve algebra problems. The father is “immediately (150)” available to help her out, and they work together on the homework:

So we are, the two of us, straining every nerve, my father sitting by my side at his desk, and me trying to remember what the mistress has explained... which I thought I had remembered but which has escaped me... sometimes, with our combined forces, our reasoning leads us to the number, that’s it, it’s the one my father arrived at through algebra. We are both filled with the same satisfaction, it
relaxes us, it's visible on our faces as we go into the dinning room, sit down at the table and, without another word about our problem, eat our meal with the others (151, my emphasis).

The communicative aspect is not the only difference between mother and father. They also react differently when Natacha faces difficulty. When she gets sick in Russia, the mother does not show genuine compassion for the girl, complaining that she is stuck with an ill child and that nobody thinks to replace her. Instead of this grudging nursing, at Meudon, when she gets infected from an injection against diphtheria, her father is worried and takes her to the doctor in Paris. Natacha remembers him reassuring her, and being gentle and affectionate: "Papa speaks to me gently, his hand is on my forehead... every time I regain consciousness I stretch out my arm and feel him there, very close... (197)."

On her way to achieving independence and establishing herself as her own center, Natacha progresses through different stages on her life path. Moving from the mother's center to the father's, she gradually changes from a passive child when spending time in Russia to an increasingly active youth in France. This progressive transformation takes place over a period of a few years, from ages five to eleven. Her change is discernable on multiple occasions, when she acts more self-reliant and overcomes old fears and nightmares, when she proves to be more secure and calms her haunting ideas, and when she shows herself to be more balanced and self-controlled by loosening her ties to her mother.

One evening, when spending time in Russia with her mother, Natacha becomes frightened by a picture, which projects in her mind a "procession of ghosts attired in long
white robes advancing in a lugubrious file toward the grey flagstones... (78).” Mistaking the glow of the flickering candles on the picture for ghosts, she panics and cannot move: “I would like to escape, but I haven’t the courage to cross the space impregnated with it [the fear] that separates my bed from the door (78).” Therefore, she is not able to act by herself, and because the fear dominates her, Natacha cries for help. She remembers that “someone” comes and covers the scary picture with a towel, someone whose description closely resembles the mother’s: “A grown-up in a casual, offhand manner, with the impassive gaze of a conjuror, has whisked it away by sleight of hand (79).” Thus, Natacha is passive, and someone else, probably her mother, interposed the towel between her and the source of her anxiety. This is only a temporary solution, which does not eradicate the child’s fear, and consequently it continues to act on her as an active subject on a passive object.

In parallel, while in France, a similar situation takes place. Natacha watches Fantomas, and at bedtime, she recalls from the scary movie two hands “wearing gloves made of human skin (217)” and fears they are approaching her neck from behind. The strangling hands are too close; the fear is too overwhelming. She sobs, she cries, and she begs her father to allow her to sleep with him and Vera. Although usually indulgent and affectionate, the father gets annoyed and sharply reprimands her: “That’s all I needed. I have to get up at six... and there’s nothing wrong with you, you aren’t ill, you lose control of yourself like a baby, a real sissy... at eleven years old, to have no more self-control than that, it’s a disgrace (218).” The father’s reprimand that she lost control of herself challenge Natacha to overcome her fear. She feels insulted, humiliated, and rejected, and because the father promptly refuses to let her sleep in his room, she has to go back to her
own to face the two gloved hands. The father does not offer her protection or temporary solutions like the mother did, and thus he pushes her to face her own fears. Infuriated by the father’s harsh words and at the same time stimulated to gain self-control, Natacha goes back to bed and dares the hands to show up. This is an important psychological moment in the girl’s evolution in the achievement of autonomy. From passive and fearful in the past, she now becomes active and fearless. By her own mental powers, she keeps the threatening hands at a distance, chasing them from her territory and banishing them back to the movie. She forces them to the periphery: “(...) it’s no use shutting my eyes, bracing myself, waiting, my fury must keep them at a distance, they dare not come out behind my back, they are still there, nice and quiet, in the film, a long way from me... (218).”

When she spends time with her father, Natacha’s haunting and disturbing ideas lose intensity and become “nice and quiet.” When she was in her mother’s territory, these ideas had full power over her. They lodged in her, metaphorically occupying her “whole space”: “Now that this idea [Mama isn’t as beautiful as the doll] has entrenched itself in me, it is not just a matter of willpower for me to dislodge it. I can force myself to uproot it, (...) but it’s still there, crouching in a corner, ready to get up at any moment, (...) to occupy the whole space... (86).” Far from mastering her own territory, Natacha is manipulated by the ideas. They almost torture her physically: “Ideas arrive at any moment, they sting, ah, here’s one...and the tiny barb digs in, it hurts... «Mama’s skin is like a monkey’s» (87).”

In contrast, Natacha’s ability to dominate the harmful ideas strengthens when she lives in the father’s territory. If before she internalized the ideas, calling them “my ideas,”
and felt guilty of being a “propitious, unclean, unhealthy place” where the ideas grew and “felt at home in [her] (119),” now, Natacha has reached a stage where she understands by herself that it is normal to carry ideas in her mind and that she is not the depository of them. If the mother had initiated the child in this understanding, she would have spared her many painful moments. More secure and more self-aware, Natacha evaluates the past in the light of the present: “How delightful it is, in contrast with what I am now... how clear my mind seems now, how clean, flexible, healthy... Ideas... «my» ideas... no more of those dubious «my»s... ideas, like everyone else has, occur to me as they do to everyone else (119).” This process of self-awareness helps the girl to liberate herself from a troubled past, and thus, fearless and self-reliant, she now becomes the master of her ideas, actively controlling them. She calls them up, examines them, and dismisses them whenever she wants. Natacha has reached the important stage where she makes a clear differentiation between her territory, with herself as its influential center, and what does not belong to this territory or what temporarily traverses it: “None of them [her ideas] can make me feel ashamed, none of them can affect me. Oh, how good I feel (...) (120).” Nathalie the adult clearly remembers this moment of freedom, and although the critical voice recalls the danger of the old days from the mother’s territory that could emerge again, she unequivocally retorts: “I don’t think so. It seems to me that at that moment I believed that I possessed forever a strength that nothing could subdue -- complete and utter independence (120).”

Natacha, like a traveler on a journey between two destinations, the mother’s and the father’s territories, gradually moves forward along her life path from a stage when she was dependent on her mother, asserting herself only through her mother’s identity, to the
stage when she becomes independent and draws boundaries around her own territory. This progressive motion toward the achievement of independence is accompanied by a regressive deconstruction of her connection to her mother. The more Natacha approaches autonomy, the more the bonds with her mother weaken, and the more she is rejected to the periphery. At the same time as the maternal ties loosen and the mother is felt as an impediment to her own destination, Natacha finds another guide to help her to continue her metaphorical life-journey. The father plays the role of such a guide who is consistently present in the child’s life from the time she comes to live in France. When Natacha becomes a stable center, both mother and father occupy peripheral positions, but the difference between the two is that the connection with the mother breaks and that the relationship with the father strengthens without putting her balance at risk. The maternal bonds are obstacles on Natacha’s life path that must be removed because of the difficulties they cause, while the paternal bonds offer guidance that eases her path toward autonomous territory. The metaphor of loosening ties with the mother and of the growing complicity with the father is repeatedly used throughout the autobiographical discourse.

In the beginning of her stay in Paris, Natacha feels alone and suffers because of the mother’s absence. At bedtime, she kisses her photo and confesses to her that “(…) [she] could no longer bear being so far away from her, she must come and fetch [her] (100).” Thus, she decides to write her a letter and to use a code previously agreed upon. If she were happy with her father, she would write, “I am very happy here,” underlining the “very,” and if she were unhappy, she would write only “I’m happy.” At the end of the letter, she wrote the second version. When the mother reveals the secret code to the father and he questions Natacha about her unhappiness, she is “stupefied” that the mother has
revealed their entente. In fact, she is so distressed that she loses confidence in her mother:

"I am shattered, overwhelmed, by the shock of such treachery. So now I have no one in the world I can complain to. Mama isn't even dreaming of coming to rescue me (...). Never again shall I be able to confide in her (101)." The reverse effect of such drama is that the distress, which the mother caused by revealing the secret code, brings Natacha closer to her father. An "invisible bond" begins to form that will connect father and daughter forever:

I must have displayed such total, such profound despair that, all of a sudden, my father, abandoning the reserve, the aloofness he always shows towards me here, clasps me in his arms more tightly than he had ever clasped me, even in the old days... he brings out his handkerchief and awkwardly, tenderly, almost trembling, he wipes away my tears, and I think I see tears in his own eyes. (...) At that moment, and forever after, despite all appearances, an invisible bond, which nothing was ever able to destroy, united us (102), (my emphasis)."

Mother and daughter are spatially distanced, and the only connection between them are the postcards they write. Nevertheless, what the mother is writing to Natacha is less and less relevant to the girl's actual age. These postcards infantilize her, as the mother addresses the child she was before and not the person she is in the present: "She doesn't know who I am now, she has even forgotten who I was (111)." Although Natacha is aware of the discrepancy between what the mother depicts her as in her letters and who she has actually become, the maternal union is painful to shatter. Her postcards are disturbing, and even if she wants her mother to stop writing, she cannot tear them up. This contrast fully translates the tragic conflict of a child who would like to set herself
free and who has a difficult time breaking the maternal bonds: “I feel I don’t ever want to
get a letter again, I want to break those bonds forever, but every time, the tender
cressing words at the end hold me back, envelop me... I soften, I can’t tear up the paper
these words have been written on. Piously, I put it away in my casket (111).”

In the father’s territory, Natacha is given a sense of responsibility, and even if she
still a child, she is harshly scolded when she steals candy from the store. The mother
treats her in her letters like a little girl, while the father severely reprimands her as if she
were an adult. When she confesses that she stole candy because “she wanted it,” the
father does not hesitate to express his deep disappointment in her selfish lack of moral
restraint. He furiously explains to her that, because “she wanted it” is no excuse for
stealing and she could be caught like a common thief (138). The father not only gives her
a sense of duty as in this incident, but also trusts her and allows her to make her own
decisions about her own life.

When the mother offers to take Natacha back after two years of absence, the
father leaves the entire decision to his daughter: “He tells me that she [the mother] is
making one condition: she won’t be able to come herself or to send anyone to fetch me,
he [the father] will have to take it upon himself to send me to her... And he knows
perfectly well that is she really so keen, she can quite well, she can afford it... and for his
part, this time he won’t lift a finger to help her, unless... «Unless you ask me to...» (153).”
Thus, she has to cope with the terrible difficulty of choosing with what parent to live and
where to live. Although she is shocked by this “abrupt reappearance (...), which [she] had
made an effort to put out of [her] mind (153),” and although she is aware that “it will be
painful for [her] to be the one to sever the bond that still attaches [her] to [her] mother
(155),” Natacha finally makes her decision: “I want to stay here.” Therefore, opting not to join her mother in Russia, she sets herself free from her through her own forces by being strong enough to personally decline her offer.

This moment is a turning point in Natacha’s life. First, the maternal bonds are broken, the past is slashed, and as a consequence, the mother is less and less present in Natacha’s life, as well as in the autobiographical discourse. Her figure fades away, she gradually loses consistency, and she becomes ghostly. When she reappears years later one more time, it is to write the letter agreeing to definitively leave Natacha in the father’s custody. Second, the girl’s connection with her father tightens: the girl feels “the force of what unites [them], and his total unconditional support (156).” Taught since she was a young child to distrust weighty words like love, Natacha knows that their union is just as strong as what people usually call love, and that, even if restrained, her father feels delighted that she “had made the right choice for herself (156).” When leaving his factory in Vanves, the affectionate words that he addresses to his daughter at the end of the day (and close to the end of the book) “Come on, my daughter,” indicate “the rather painful affirmation of a special bond that unites [them] (240).”

Third, after slashing the ties to her mother and strengthening the bonds with her father, Natacha experiences for the first time the feeling of being in her own territory. She sets herself free from the mother’s land, and like an object “submerged” and under pressure, she arises to a liberating territory: “(...) this reconstitution of what I must have felt is like a cardboard model that reproduces on a small scale what the buildings, houses, temples, streets, squares and gardens of a submerged town must have been like... (154).” The cardboard model metaphorically represents Natacha’s own territory, with boundaries
and inner elements emerging from beneath the suppressing maternal territory. The feeling of being in the possession of such a place is exhilarating and gives Natacha confidence in her power. This accomplishment is expressed through the metaphor of an enormous mass coming into view. The vocabulary also refers to a space, a territory or a land from which she can perceive others and the world as a strong, centered individual:

Something still arises, as real as ever, an enormous mass... the impossibility of wrestling myself away from what has such a strong hold on me, I have embedded myself in it, it supports me, sustains me, hardens me, shapes me... Everyday it gives me the feeling that I am climbing to a culminating point in myself, where the air is pure, invigorating... a peak from where, if I am able to reach it, to keep myself on it, I shall see the whole world stretching out in front of me... nothing will be able to escape me, there will be nothing I shan’t manage to know... (154).

6. Vera’s instability. Perceptual dissociation and constant practice for autonomy

Natacha meets Vera for the first time at an early age, when she periodically visited her father before her permanent move into his Parisian home. She remembers her as a jovial and dynamic lady who, on one occasion dressed up like a man, with her hair concealed under a bowler hat, and invited her to dance. At this time, Vera is associated with a charming atmosphere of joy and triggers positive tropisms in Natacha. The little girl is delighted when Vera whirls round with her “humming, charming merry stirring tunes, [...] faster and faster (...) (54).” In the following chapter, the stepmother is part of a powerful tropism as well. In the Luxembourg gardens, sitting on a bench between her
father and Vera while listening to a story from Hans Andersen’s *Fairy Tales*, she is overcome by a strong emotion of exaltation. This intense feeling is remembered together with the place, the people, and the landscape in which she experienced it. Thus, Vera, part of this episode, is related to a positive attitude and a happy atmosphere.

During the trip from Petersburg to Paris, Natacha, long before making her own opinion on Vera, comes into contact with outside judgments of her. First, in the train, when the girl talks to her teddy bear and tells him that in Paris she will meet “another mama (91),” the mother reminds her that she only has one mama in the whole world, thus dashing any possible hope for a temporary replacement. All Natacha can do is to be brave enough to cope with the solitude and pain caused by the absent mother. Second, according to her mother’s gossip, Vera is already categorized as “stupid (97).” Natacha receives these kind of statements like “well-wrapped parcels (84),” necessary for her stay in France: “(...) those words of Mama’s (...) the evening before our separation: «Vera is stupid»... a parcel she gave me, like the ones you give your child when you are sending it to boarding school... Here, my darling, you may find this useful when you are away from me, you may need it there... (167).”

In time, the child devotes her full attention to these verbal packages, but before opening them and objectively evaluating their content, she uses them automatically. When she does not understand Vera’s character or behavior, Natacha remembers her mother’s parcels of words, and although she does not fully believe in the meaning of those words, she uses them instinctively: “(...) for my part, when she forbids me or advises me to do this or that... when she says what she thinks about whatever it might be... is she capable of thinking? can she understand? since she is «stupid» (168).”
Natacha puts in considerable time and effort to open these packages through which the mother obstructs her child’s path to independence. A period of a few years elapses from the time she receives these parcels of words until the time she actually opens them and consciously evaluates their substance: “Vera is stupid” wasn’t like one of those antibodies that enable the organism to defend itself against an invasion by microbes. No, in that case, “Vera is stupid,” even if I had had it at my disposal, wouldn’t have been of any use to me as an antidote (170).” Later on, Natacha also questions the other statement of her mother regarding the impossibility of having a different mother in her life. Natacha transgresses the mother’s rule by asking permission to call the stepmother “mama-Vera.” Although the natural mother forbids her daughter to do so, the child’s psychological and emotional effort in processing the question represents a step forward in becoming independent and making her own choices.

With her preconceived ideas that Vera is stupid and that she cannot possibly function as a replacement mother, it is no wonder that once Natacha arrives in France, she has a completely different feeling about her than she did during their previous encounters. If Vera were a joyful and radiant person before, now she seems strange to Natacha who has difficulty recognizing her. The young woman who previously whirled around her and danced is at present quite reserved, and “her long face is very pale, her lower teeth protrude and cover her top ones, her thin, straight lips stretch as if they are pretending to smile (99).” This difference in perception might result from the mother’s harmful words spoken right before the girl’s arrival in France or, more generally, with the change in the child’s life as she leaves her mother and comes to her father. The trip from one parent to another and from one country to another is a symbolic one, for one stage
finishes in the child’s life while a new one starts. At this particular moment, everything seems dull to her, the Gare du Nord, the father’s apartment on the rue Marguerin, and even his welcome is “a little cold and stiff (98).” Thus, it is to be expected that Vera is also different in Nатаcha’s eyes. The stepmother is part of a more global change in Nатаcha’s life, and the reader might hope that later Vera could gain acceptance from the child, just as her father does.

Nevertheless, Nатаcha’s initial reaction to Vera’s appearance becomes a constant feeling throughout her stay in Paris. Her light transparent eyes surprise the child, hiding something like “an alarming little flame (99).” Nатаcha has this odd feeling not only in the beginning, but later on too, even after she grows used to her new home. This little flame in Vera’s eyes does not foreshadow anything good. It covers something unexpected and potentially frightening: “Her very pale blue eyes seem to become transparent, and a little flame in them lights up... in her fixed gaze, there is something obstinate, implacable, that makes you think of the gaze of a tiger (126).” Their light blue transparency communicates a temporary lull. Like a wild animal, at times she might be nice while guarding her instincts for a later attack.

Nатаcha’s relationship with Vera is unstable like the rapport one would have with a wild animal, sometimes cooperative, sometimes combative. Throughout the autobiographical discourse, from one chapter to the next, Vera appears to act very differently toward the child. She is on occasion mean and negative, later supportive and positive, the next day ambiguous and confusing. For example, the stepmother does not hesitate to sharply tell Nатаcha that the home where she lives is not her own home. In a way, she reminds the girl that she is coming from another place, from her natural mother,
and her home is there in Russia. Vera reminds her that she is only in transit in this new home, and therefore there is no need to familiarize too much with it. Only a few chapters away, the same Vera acts more affectionately with her stepdaughter. When Natacha is sick and needs to eat more meals in a day, Vera invites her to have these extra meals with her. They sit together at the table, and because the child has a quite an appetite, Vera offers her part of her own meal. This positive complicity is even more accentuated in the two following chapters. In one chapter, Natacha spends time with her father and Vera in the park. Again, Vera is radiant like in previous visits, and she helps Natacha to ride her bike. In the following chapter, stepmother and stepdaughter work side-by-side packing tobacco cigars. Nevertheless, a few chapters later, their complicity is again less visible. Vera refuses to buy her candy, and Natacha steals it. It is not clear why she would refuse to buy candy for the child: it could be simply because she is mean, refusing to fulfill her desires, or because she thinks it is in the child’s best interest to practice restraint.

This mercurial relationship between stepmother and stepdaughter enables the latter to constantly practice perceptual dissociation from a potential center. For a period of time, Natacha suffers because of her mother’s absence and tries to find at least a temporary center of security. On the one hand, Vera never gets too close to Natacha, thus not functioning as a replacement for the natural mother and encouraging Natacha to develop self-reliance. On the other hand, Vera is never too distant either, neither completely rejecting the girl nor damaging her fragile inner balance. The stepmother is an equivocal character, who, through her continually changing behavior, makes Natacha aware of the tension between getting close to an affectionate center and being rejected to a peripheral distance.
Natacha repeatedly experiences this back and forth motion from attachment to detachment, for Vera continually shifts her behavior. For example, she admires her stepdaughter’s handwriting when she sings her name and traces a very calligraphic “T” in her last name Tcherniak. Vera is so impressed by the esthetics of the letter that she decides to use the same handwriting, too. On another occasion, Vera is clearly careless and refuses to look after the girl when she is sick, leaving her entirely in her husband’s care. She also demonstrates a hostile attitude when she has to treat Natacha for lice, when she hides bananas from Natacha to keep them for her own daughter Lili, and when she forbids the English governess, employed especially for Lili, to practice English with Natacha, too. Kind and supportive or, on the contrary, negative and malicious, Vera cannot be categorized. She is always unexpected, always surprising, freed from any possible definition: “—When you come to think of it, you never did apply any word to her. Not even «unkind»... — It’s odd... when I happen to hear other children saying that my stepmother was unkind, it surprised me... other images immediately came to my mind which had nothing to do with «unkind»... (169).”

Vera prevents Natacha from any kind of attachment not only to herself in the role of a stepmother, but more generally to her father’s territory or to people from that territory. After the girl has been physically and emotionally disconnected from her mother’s territory, she becomes displaced and decentered, in search of a new home. It was natural for her to start exploring the possibility of introducing herself into a new territory and of attaching to a new protective center. But Vera is there, part of that new space, and with her wavering attitude, she directly or indirectly supervises Natacha’s interaction with others around her. The stepmother is like a regulatory element in the
child’s new universe. In her presence, the father controls his feelings toward his daughter, for their complicity is more accentuated away from Vera’s presence. Vera also prevents any interaction Natacha might have with the English governess, and she indirectly makes Adele, Lili’s babysitter, understand that there is a hierarchy between her own daughter and Natacha, as “Madam’s child” is different from “the child of a woman for whom Madame has no great liking, against whom Madame bears a grudge (...) (142).” Besides her regulatory influential presence, the stepmother also directs unequivocal remarks to Natacha, including the paralyzing injunction: “It isn’t your home (115).” In a way, the child is reminded that her permanent status is one of an outsider because her natural mother abandoned her, and she can only momentarily maintain the status of an insider in the father’s territory. Thus, she is constantly pushed to make individual efforts to build her own space. Vera’s words, although sharp, constrain Natacha to abandon any hope of possibly becoming a permanent insider in her house:

They [the words “It isn’t your home”] sank into me like a dead weight, and they made it impossible, once and for all, for the word «home» to take shape in me, to come to my lips... Never again «home, » for as long as I lived there, even when it was certain that outside that house there could never be any other home for me (116).

Curiously, Vera’s harsh words never hurt more than superficially. Natacha is surprised by their sonority, their intonation, and their unexpected arrival. However, in the end, these words are not obstacles along the child’s life path in the way her natural mother’s words were: they are not to be removed, for they are guideposts to the construction of a private space. When Vera tells Natacha “It isn’t your home,” she
actually helps her to realize that she needs to find a territory where she could build by herself a “chez soi.” More than helpful, the stepmother’s words are liberating. On another occasion, Vera says “Tiebia podbrossili,” meaning that Natacha has been abandoned or literally “thrown out (162).” At that moment, even if these words might have been brutal, the girl feels free, for she is relieved from the pain and guilt of being apart from her mother. Through this sentence, Vera actually makes her stepdaughter understand that she is not guilty for leaving her mother at a distance, because it is her mother who rejected her initially, not vice versa. Freed from her painful past and with no hope of replacing her mother with Vera or becoming attached to her father’s territory and the people within it, Natacha cannot find a secure center. All possible centers are moved away from her to a peripheral distance. All she can do is to turn into herself and try to establish herself as a center by building the boundaries around her own territory.

7. Centered selfhood. Balance and autonomy

Until this point, Natacha’s life unfolded in successive stages of deconstruction of the initial center represented by her mother. She progressed from the starting point of dependency, to the point where she weakened the maternal ties, to a final severance of any connection. First, the daughter is intimately connected with her mother and is contained in the mother’s circle of influence. She sees the world through her mother’s eyes, she has absolute faith in her words, and she worships her like a goddess. Then, when she moves to her father home, Natacha is dissociated not only spatially from her mother but also emotionally, as step by step her link to her loses intensity. The child feels
that her mother rejected her because of Kolia, her partner. Excluded from the mother’s center, Natacha becomes an outsider in relation to it, and this exclusion traces a conceptual movement from center to periphery. The ties connecting her to the influential mother fall apart, and the process of detachment from her is started. The mother gradually loses her power of fascination, and her bright image fades away and becomes evanescent.

Natacha’s perceptual shift from the mother to the father triggers an evolution in the child’s personality. The more complicity she builds with her father, the more self-confidence and independence she gains. As the mother’s influence diminishes, Natacha gradually dissociates herself from her center of perception. Less influential and also less present in the child’s life, the mother is put at a distance and rejected to a peripheral position. This change in relationship brings Natacha closer to her father. Although in great need for a new stable center, Natacha does not make her father her new center. Unlike the fluctuating mother, the father is a constant with his regular behavior, and does not surprise the child with any unexpected reactions. This sense of stability is important to Natacha, at a time when her mother’s spontaneity perturbs her and when she changes parents and home. It is in this new space that Natacha, challenged by her father, overcomes her old fears and harmful ideas. This process of self-awareness helps her to liberate herself from her disturbing past in her mother’s territory and to become fearless and self-reliant. In her father’s territory, Natacha is given a sense of responsibility and duty, as when she is harshly scolded because she stole candy from the store or when she has to make her own decision about what parent she should continue to live with.

In this difficult balance between an absent mother and a tender, present father, the stepmother plays an important role. She helps Natacha maintain an equilibrium between
her parents. She neither replaces the natural mother nor gives the child any hope of becoming a new protective center. On the other hand, Vera also influences Natacha's interaction with people around her, paying attention that no solid connection is made between Natacha and others. Their relationship is instable, for sometimes the stepmother is affectionate while at other times she is quite cold and brutal. Although the girl never judges her or characterizes her as a mean stepmother, she gets used to this constant dissociation at a time when she is precisely in search of a new territory. In a way, Vera opens Natacha's eyes to the fact that there is no possible space available around her for a new center, and that thus she should stop hoping for a ready-made shelter and start building her own space. By pushing her to look elsewhere than to the nostalgic first childhood defined by her mother or to the tender present characterized by her father, the stepmother spares her stepdaughter time and wasted effort on her path to autonomy.

Natacha is like a traveler from a location to another, on a journey between two destinations, between mother's and father's territories. She gradually travels along her life path as she journeys from the mother's to the father's territory, and this movement is organized into stages corresponding to distinct moments in her life. The key stages are when she is dependent on her mother to understand her own identity, when she separates from her mother and grows closer to her father, when she faces Vera's mercurial behavior, and when she finally becomes independent and draws boundaries around her own territory. These stages are locations on Natacha's metaphorical life path, and we readers move forward with her from one location to the next in the process of reading, as we advance through the autobiographical discourse. The image-schema of "center and periphery" organizes not only Natacha's life but also Sarraute's autobiography. The
reader metaphorically co-travels with the child Natacha along a fractured path marked by the initial connection with her mother and by the successive stages of centering and imbalance. He also accompany her on a global journey from the time she is patiently dominated by the power of words and ideas to the time when she actively masters them. From a passive and fearful child in the beginning, chased and hurt by words, she becomes in the end active and fearless of their power. Achieving autonomy not only in relation to people but also in relation to words is an important final stage in the child’s evolution. It gives security and a *raison d’être* to a space that is not a physical place but a mental universe of words.

Back in her first years of childhood, Natacha takes words literally. With an unquestioning devotion to her mother and a fierce resistance, in her initial encounters with her father, the child braves punishment, mockery, and exclusion. Undisturbed, by the chaos she creates, she patiently chews her food so it becomes “as liquid as a soup (8).” The mother’s clichéd words are sacred to Natacha who fully believes in their power. During a walk with her mother and Kolia, she defies the mother’s interdiction of touching a telegraph pole because it would kill her. The girl places herself in front of the pole and touches it with her finger because she is curious to see what death is like. Immediately she is certain that she has passed away. The mother’s words function as an action, and because Natacha did the forbidden, she cannot but expect to die. She also takes words to heart when she believes her mother’s old advice that a woman has to eat dust in order to become pregnant. However, the mother’s words are not always divine. The statements “You only have one mama in the whole world,” or “Vera is stupid,” are like poisonous well-wrapped packages that the mother gives to Natacha for her trip in France. The girl
has a hard time ruminating the meaning of these words before fully excluding them from her mind.

The child’s relationship with words is often physical; they “penetrate” her, “press,” and “bear down with all their strength, will all their enormous weight (4).” The governess’s reprimand when she slashed the settee with a pair of scissors “surround,” “constrain,” and “shackle (6)” her. Later, the “ideas” she harbors about her mother, that she is less beautiful than a doll, that she has the skin of a monkey, and that she is miserly, install themselves in her mind, and Natacha feels she is “defenselessly (88)” delivered to them: “(...) the idea comes back, it prowls around, it lies in wait... I’m frightened, I try to stop it from entering, I look away, but something compels me, I have to see (…) (90).” She is not the master of these harmful ideas that invade her territory. They “arrive at any moment, they sting, (…) and the tiny barb digs in, it hurts (87).” Against her will, she becomes a fertile ground where the ideas grow abundantly, occupying her “whole space”:

“Now that this idea [Mama isn’t as beautiful as the doll] has entrenched itself in me, it is not just a matter of willpower for me to dislodge it. I can force myself to uproot it, (…) but it’s still there, crouching in a corner, ready to get up at any moment, (…) to occupy the whole space... (86).”

Natacha gradually understands that it is common to carry all kind of ideas in her mind, and that those ideas are not her property. They come, they traverse her mind, and they go away; thus there is no need to panic or to feel guilty for something that is not private property rooted in her territory: “How delightful it is, in contrast with what I am now... how clear my mind seems now, how clean, flexible, healthy... Ideas... «my» ideas... no more of those dubious «my»s... ideas, like everyone else has, occur to me as
they do to everyone else (119).” This process of self-awareness helps the child to liberate herself from the guilt and pain of the past, and thus, fearless and self-reliant, she becomes her own master actively controlling the obedient, discreet ideas: she calls them out, examines them, and dismisses them whenever she wants. Natacha reaches the important stage where she makes the clear difference between her territory, with herself as an influential center, and what does not belong to this territory or what temporarily traverses it: “None of them [ideas] can make me feel ashamed, none of them can affect me. Oh, how good I feel (...) (120).” Nathalie, the adult, clearly remembers this moment of freedom, and although the critical voice recalls the danger of the old days from the mother’s territory that could envelop her again, she unequivocally retorts: “I don’t think so. It seems to me that at that moment I believed that I possessed forever a strength that nothing could subdue -- complete and utter independence (120).”

Natacha knows that she is without a home. On the one hand, her mother delays taking her back, and later the child herself refuses to return to her mother, and on the other hand Vera’s words “It’s not your home,” indicate that her father’s house is not her home, either. Thus, since her mother rejected her, Natacha is an outsider searching for a protected space where the power of others’ words could not penetrate her anymore and where the mother’s influential clichéd statements are kept at a distance. This is the space of well-spelled and mastered words, a space that is provided through school and education. Natacha builds an individual universe of “perfect,” “pure,” “beautiful (148)” words, and she separates herself from the previous physical space where she was an outsider and where the other’s words hurt her many times. She now enters a metaphorical verbal space where she is “chez soi,” for she constructs it with her own mental forces:
I am nothing other than what I have written. Nothing that I don’t know, that people project onto me, that they foist onto me without my knowledge, as they are always doing there, outside, in my other life... I am completely protected from whims and caprices, from obscure, disturbing movements, suddenly provoked... is it by me? or is it by what they perceive behind me and which I mask? And also, nothing reaches me here of that love, “our love,” as Mama calls it in her letters... which gives rise to something in me that hurts, which in spite of the pain, I am supposed to cultivate, to nurture, and which ignobly, I try to stifle... No trace of all that here. Here, I am in security (149).

When she is in contact with words while doing her homework, this metaphorical mental space is established within a physical space that no one can invade. Her room, although a small place in her father’s house, becomes her own territory when she does school work. Vera and the noisy Lili remain at a distance as they recognize that an important activity takes place there, an activity that they cannot disturb. This recognition of Natacha’s private territory is active only when related to school, because otherwise Vera does not hesitate to confiscate Natacha’s room for her sister, and Lili eagerly enters her borrowed room to destroy her beloved bear Michka. But when Natacha settles happily into her schoolwork, she establishes a distance between herself and others in a space where she feels at home:

It’s soothing, it’s reassuring to be here all by myself, shut in my room... no one will come and disturb me, I’m doing “my homework,” I am doing “work” that everyone respects... Lili is crying, Vera is furious, I don’t know why or with whom, people are coming and going on the other side of my door, none of all that
concerns me... I wipe my pen on a little felt square, I dip it into the pot of black ink, I cover, taking great care... there mustn’t be the slightest smudge... those pale, ghostly pot-hooks, I make them as visible, as clear as possible... I coerce my hand, and it obeys me better and better... (118).

Natacha has come a long way since her childhood in Russia, when she started to write her own novel filled with spelling mistakes and unfamiliar words with which she was ill at ease. In Paris, however, she perfected dictation exercises with every word correctly spelled and in order. The child still enriches her vocabulary and tries to insert new words among familiar ones. The spatial metaphor of two distanced spaces, one where the new words come from, and one under construction in Natacha’s mind, is expressed by two spatial adverbs, “somewhere and home”: “I went somewhere far away form home to fetch them, I brought them back here, but I don’t know what is good for them, I don’t know their habits (75).” She does not know how to use these new words, for they intimidate her. They are also different from the “home words”; she feels “as if they were deformed, a bit crippled, (...) wobbly, unsteady,” while the words from her early childhood are “solid words that [she] know[s] [...] very well (75).” Natacha advances in the construction of her universe of words from the stage when she hesitates using the unfamiliar ones to the stage when she is self-confident in her power to master words coming into her territory from outside sources, primarily anthologies and dictations. Meanwhile, she has learned how to spell, how to form phrases, and how to use a dictionary. Thus, after a long struggle with words, she now manipulates them with ease and confidence. Her composition “My First Sorrow” represents an important step in the achievement of her autonomy in relation to words:
In any case, they are words whose origin guarantees elegance, grace, beauty... I enjoy their company, I have all the respect for them that they deserve, I see to it that nothing disfigures them... If I feel that something is spoiling their appearance, I immediately consult my Larousse, no nasty spelling mistake, no hideous pimple must blemish them. And to connect them together, strict rules exist which you have to abide by... if I can’t find them in my grammar book, if there is the slightest lingering doubt, it’s better not to touch those words, to look for others which I can put in another phrase where they will be in their proper place, in their appropriate role. Even my own words, the ones I ordinarily use without really seeing them, when they have to come in here or there, an ornament which will highlight the brilliance of the ensemble (187).

The mastery of this new mental space of words gives the child a feeling of security and protection. Each word is properly placed, has a fixed role, and is “determinable,” and “immutable (190).” She has reached the stage where she perfectly arranges each element in her composition. Nothing stands out, nothing is unexpected: “«My first Sorrow» is fixed and rounded as one could wish, not the slightest asperity, no abrupt, disconcerting movement... nothing but a slight, regular swaying motion, a soft murmur... (190).” Such an exploit in her struggle with words marks an important stage in Natacha’s achievement of autonomy. Nevertheless, Nathalie the adult will furiously slash this “smooth roundness (189)” that Natacha masterfully creates in her childhood. The reader no doubt remembers the opening scene where the child slashes the silky settee and liberates the greyish stuffing beneath the smooth material. Sarraute has always been interested in revealing the tropisms behind such smooth well-defined images. Thus, this clear language devoid of
any irregularities is only a temporary location on Natacha’s life path which the adult will definitively abandon later. As the critical voice comments, the feeling of perfection lasts only for a while, for when Natacha goes to high school she discovers that each achievement is inevitably relative: “And how it threw you, how it confused you when, later, at the lycée, you discovered that that apparently finite, entirely accessible world, was opening out to all sides, coming apart, disintegrating (155).” But the autobiography stops right before Natacha goes to lycée, when one stage of her life ends while a new one starts.

At the end of this autobiographical journey along Natacha’s life path, readers arrive at the finish line where the momentum of her saga comes to rest. Natacha progressed from location to location, from the time when she lived in union with her mother until the time when she distanced herself from her, passing through successive stages of pain, guilt, solitude, and liberation. On this metaphorical path the mother has been an obstacle eventually removed while other characters, like the father or the stepmother, helped her to move forward. When she was rejected from the mother’s center, Natacha became an outsider. The disturbing journey the reader shares with her is fully dedicated to the achievement of a centered selfhood and to the construction of her own territory. Natacha made progress in her relationships with people, and with words as well. At present, she assigns a fitting place to her parents, and again, to words. Everything is well organized around her center. She securely holds together the peripheral parts: the vanished mother, the father and the stepmother. Like an autonomous center the child interacts with these peripheral parental orbits without being troubled. Only her mother’s words still occasionally echo in her heart, but they do not have the
power to dislodge her from her new territory. The possession of such a territory is less pragmatic and more symbolic, for there is no physical space to be conquered, only the mental space in her mind. What Natacha actually possesses is the understanding that words offer an indirect relationship with reality, and not a direct one, as was the case when they were physically torturing her. When she becomes aware of that language is a code, she finally can freely manipulate words, play character roles without feeling guilty of imposture, and protect her inner space against harmful external influences.

Notes


2. Temple, 4.


4. Gretchen Rous Besser, *Nathalie Sarraute*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979, 158. She also mentions that the new novelist movement at first had different names: L’Ecole du Regard, the School of Refusal, the New Wave, La Chapelle de Minuit, Romans de la table rase, Romans blancs, Anti-Novels, and Ante-Novels.

5. Rous Besser, 161-165.


7. Rous Besser, 164.


11. Sarrasute, 55.

12. Sarrasute, 57.


15. Rous Besser, 37.

16. Nathalie Sarrasute often expressed her conviction that tropisms are common in human beings. Far from exceptional psychological realities, these inner movements are in fact universal: “Ce que je poursuit dans mes livres, c’est une recherche de mouvements intérieurs qui existent chez tous ... et partout. Cette oeuvre [Enfance] cherche à recréer une sensation à un certain niveau de profondeur et à la faire exister par le langage. Toute l’attention du lecteur doit être centrée sur cette sensation, sans qu’il se préoccupe de savoir si le personnage qui en est le porteur est un ingénieur, ou un ouvrier, s’il est noir, blanc, etc. Ces questions quand j’écris, ne présentent pour moi aucun intérêt parce que je suis persuadée qu’au niveau où se trouvent les tropismes, tout le monde sent de la même façon. Ces sensations sont identiques, comme le mouvement du sang dans les veines ou les battements du coeur. C’est cela qui m’intéresse, c’est cela que j’ai toujours voulu montrer, peu importe chez qui...” in Gretchen Rous Besser, “Sarrasute on Childhood – Her Own”, French Literary Series, Vol. XII, 1985.

17. Minogue, 14.


30. O’Beirne, 64.


32. O’Beirne, 76.


41. See Introduction, 46, 48, and 49.
43. Johnson, 124-125.


45. John Phillips, in *Nathalie Sarraute. Metaphor, Fairy-Tale and the Feminine of the Text*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1994, 168) offers an interpretation of the house at Ivanovo as “a womb in both the metonymic and metaphorical sense: as Natacha’s birthplace, it may at the very least be regarded as a synecdochic representation of the mother; at the same time, the narrator’s memory of it embellishes its appearance, decorating it with antique lace and “cotton-wool” snow, and thus transforming it beyond the real into a metaphor for childhood happiness and security. (...) The Ivanovo house, here literally synonymous with the mother’s womb, has itself given birth to those fictitious houses, metaphorical wombs, which signify an absent happiness.”

46. Marianne Schmutz also notes that the mother could have helped Natacha to free herself from the guilt of her ideas, for the mother is an adult who knows that it is a natural human process to formulate judgments on the surrounding world. (*Enfance de Nathalie Sarraute comme autobiographie*, Lyon: Aldrui, 1999, 46-47).

Conclusion

French modern autobiography stems from an atmosphere of profound change in literary techniques in the second part of the twentieth century. After a long tradition of literature based on narrative cohesion, well-defined characters, omniscient-author technique, verisimilitude and linear chronology, the "new" literature tries to break with these outmoded devices to change the concepts of character, plot, chronology, and dialogue. Starting in the 1950's, "new" novelists, as well as other writers outside this literary movement, searched for innovative ways of expressing reality. Although each writer approached this problem differently, they all have in common the call for the reader's participatory role in the process of the creation of meaning.

Autobiographers were then challenged to find "survival" techniques for a genre traditionally built on chronological cohesion and on the unitary effect of collecting past events. The "new novelists" and their contemporaries engage in a literary research of innovation, and they shift their interest away from the objective depiction of facts and memories to focus instead on the integration of their past into a global context in the light of an experience. The three authors I study here hand down to their readers individual life experiences: the experience of a child imprisoned by his fascination with words, of someone deprived of childhood memories, and of a child struggling to achieve independence. Such autobiographers also try to show that autobiography may be partially or totally freed from chronology. This traditional chronological foundation of the autobiographical genre fractures in these texts, and thus readers are solicited to actively bridge gaps in disrupted calendar-based order.
Like every text, autobiography creates a space of interaction between writer and reader. The writer tries to convey an experience, while the reader strives to comprehend it. Two distinct intentions – transmission and reception - converge in the final goal of successful communication. The two protagonists of the process of meaning creation equally contribute to its fulfillment through the acts of writing and reading. As Barthes suggested, the reader's mind is the destination space where a multiplicity of meanings are focused, and it is also the single field that holds together all the traces by which the text is constituted. Thus, in these autobiographical texts, the reader is required to use his imagination and his mental power of creation to make sense of life experiences that are transmitted to him in a way unrelated to chronological sequence.

Because calendar-based order is fragmented or even inexistenct, the reader turns away from this customary structural pattern and searches for coherence in other cognitive models. Everyone has his own life experience that is useful in the comprehension of another individual's life. By drawing on his own experiences, the reader comes to realize that the autobiographer uses a specific conceptual template of conventional metaphors, a template which is also used in everyday life and is easy to understand. Although the experience the autobiographer communicates is new, it is easily transmitted through the use of metaphors that are equally familiar to both writer and reader.

Thus, Sartre uses the Griselda metaphor to express his life experience in terms of confinement in culture, literature, and finally words. The analogy with this character allows him to present his entire life as one consistent experience. Perec, on the other hand, writes the story of his life making use of metaphors such as, “Time leaves traces,” “Less is down,” and “More is up.” These conceptual devices help him to build his
autobiography even when his past at first appears to be an empty space devoid of memories. Sarraute, meanwhile, relies on the basic metaphor of “center and periphery” to communicate her experience as a child rejected by her mother, thus relegated to periphery, and her effort to establish her own center. The Griselda metaphor and the other above-mentioned metaphors are not embellishing devices briefly mentioned and stylistically employed in the narrative. On the contrary, autobiographers actively and extensively use them throughout their life stories with a two-fold purpose.

First, these metaphors allow the writers to structure their literary creations. Sartre, Perec, and Sarraute not only introduce the metaphors in their texts, but also creatively exploit them in successive stages of elaboration. The reference to Griselda does not simply encode an analogy between the child’s identity and a fairy-tale character, but helps Sartre to construct his identity and develop his autobiography. He is in the beginning similar to Griselda, then he is her opposite, and when he later abandons her, he realizes that she still possesses him. Perec structures his story in relation to the universal understanding that time leaves memories behind, although he posits that his own memories are inexistent. From this common ground, the reader conceptually travels with him down and up, creating an imaginary W-like movement. Each time Perec recalls his childhood memories, he follows a W-shaped path where his personal life evokes the death of camp deportees. W is therefore a frame that contains both a personal and a collective tragedy. Sarraute is first contained in her mother’s center of perception, and when they later separate, the child traverses different stages in her search for identity until she is finally able to be herself a strong center and to keep the peripheral others at a distance. In this context, coherence is no longer established through a calendar unfolding,
but through metaphor-related stages. Each similarity or dissimilarity with the model chosen at the outset of writing marks a further step in the autobiographers' life experiences and the narration of their books. Thus, these metaphors are blueprints of the construction of their autobiographies.

Besides their organizational value to the writers, these metaphors are also beneficial to the readers. They are solicited to make sense of an experience that is new to them and of an autobiography, that no longer respects chronology. In the process of creating meaning, the reader coheres the life experience of other individuals to his own, and thus readily understands common patterns of thought, including the correlation of an individual to the Other, who might be a show star, a model or a mentor. The resemblance, factual or desired, to someone else is a conceptual operation common to all human beings. The understanding of time in terms of the passage from birth to death, which leaves traces behind, is also a conventional conceptualization of life. And finally, the metaphor of "center and periphery" is common as well, for it is inscribed in our body (the center) and our field of perception (the periphery).

These familiar patterns of thought help readers to connect to the life experiences communicated by autobiographers. Once the readers activate such easily recognized and commonly used patterns, they apply them throughout the narrative. Each resemblance to and difference from the model is interpreted as a new stage in the writers' construction of identity. Thus, these common metaphors offer guidance to readers and establish coherence between the shared life experiences of reader and autobiographer. In conclusion, in the course of reading, the autobiographers' and the readers' life experiences overlap through familiar metaphors, which serve as organizational devices in
writing and as guiding principles in reading. Through this mental overlapping, autobiography expresses its human relevance as a form of communication between one individual and another: conceived of by the autobiographer as a (metaphorical) mirror of his life, the autobiography is offered to the reader as a window that opens to new experiences. During the act of reading, one brings his own experience of the world to the understanding of someone else's life story. Hence, in the end, autobiography functions as a two-fold mirror, reflecting not only the life of the autobiographer but also the life experience of the reader.
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Theory

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5. Perrault’s complete fairy tales, translated by A. E. Johnson and others, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.
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