

## 2.3 George Perec's *Un homme qui dort*

### A Jigsaw Puzzle of Literary Pieces

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Having discussed the employment of the second-person narrative perspective in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* and Michel Butor's *La Modification*, the thesis will now focus on two highly experimental and liminal second-person examples: Georges Perec's *Un homme qui dort* and Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*. Both texts elaborate on the use of the second-person narrative perspective by inaugurating the pronoun as their main narrative figure. By providing striking examples, they both show the expansion of the second person's rhetoric and poetic properties and reveal its dynamic and resilience at its most extreme, experimenting with the limits of language and representation.

Georges Perec's *Un homme qui dort* was written in 1966 and published a year later to little public acclaim. It was Perec's second novel, shorter but more lyrical than his earlier prize-winning *Les Choses*, and had been described by the author as "l'envers de ce que j'ai écrit," "un antidote," "[...] le "refus" des choses, le refus du monde."<sup>209</sup> Perec's novel centres, like the texts examined earlier, on a self-awareness and self-discovery story in a narrative that mimics the form of the *Bildungsroman* but does so in a non-heroic and unconventional mode. *Un homme qui dort* chronicles an experiment in social detachment and indifference, reflected in a striking reduction of plot and characters, that a student performs in order to gain his missing identity.

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209 | Perec (1967/2002), 212.

Tu dois oublier d'espérer, d'entreprendre, de réussir, de persévérer.<sup>210</sup> [...] Tu apprends à rester assis, à rester couché, à rester debout. Tu apprends à mastiquer chaque bouchée, à trouver le même goût atone à chaque parcelle de nourriture que tu portes à ta bouche.<sup>211</sup>

The narrator of the story remains anonymous until the end; he narrates the experiment to a 25-year-old student who is the only character in the text and performs it by guiding him throughout the project of indifference in an intimate tone (established by the choice of the second-person singular form *tu*) and with the affirmative voice of an omniscient, controlling narrator who stands off-scene (*voice-over narrator*). *Un homme qui dort* mirrors other narrative heroes and texts that deal with the same effacement thus creating a palimpsest of literary variations on the same theme, sometimes implicitly, other times explicitly, coexisting in the narrative. The striking intertextuality of the novel is so intense, appearing almost in every sentence and utterance, that it justifies the characterisation of *Un homme qui dort* as a jigsaw puzzle of literary pieces in the title of this chapter. Perec's novel, a liminal and unique case of second-person fiction, invites such a ludic and thus concentrated approach analysing and examining its components.

## THE NOVEL

The story of *Un homme qui dort* begins the moment the experiment starts and lasts until its conclusion, finishing with passages that imply a shift towards re-socialisation and re-integration. Focussing solely on this experiment that is an episode in the student's life, the narrative reveals no other information about him. Perec isolates the story as a life fragment and employs, like Butor, an *in medias res* opening. In Perec's example, however, the technique illustrates

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**210** | Perec (1967/2002), 248.

**211** | Perec (1967/2002), 248.

even more forcefully the notion of isolation which is key to the whole novel and the reduction in plot elaborating on the concept of a life (or story) fragment reaching its representational limits.

Naturally the end of the novel coincides with the end of the experiment. What is stressed throughout the pages is the student's experience and performance, reflected in the rhetoric of the text and in terms of content, and how the experiment, with its aspiration to fundamental disengagement from life's normal activities, collapses under the weight of its own purposelessness. To cut a long story short, *Un homme qui dort* ends with the rejection of the experiment and echoes the positivity of a new start in the student's life as he exits from this episode able to re-integrate into his normal life.<sup>212</sup>

Perec wrote this story one year before he joined the Oulipo movement in France in 1967. Of course, *Un homme qui dort* incorporates some of the ideas and characteristics of that movement – for example emphatic intertextuality – but it also signals the further developments in Perec's writing career. In 1978 the author confirmed the key role that intertextuality played in his text and described it as a “texte pré-oulipien. Un livre sur la rhétorique classique. J'ai construit un récit, puis j'y ai repéré toutes les figures dont je m'étais servi, dans un index à la fin du livre. C'est à la suite de ça que je suis entré à Oulipo.”<sup>213</sup>

The reading of *Un homme qui dort* plunges readers into a network of textual relations. To interpret and understand the sentences of the novel one needs to undertake a parallel reading, moving between intertexts and tracing them. As revealed in the above statement, Perec in employing the second person to reflect his hero's experiment in social detachment is actually addressing all the narrative figures that influenced his novel, and he responds to them with his version of the indifferent hero.

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**212** | David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction. Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative*. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006) 132f.

**213** | Georges Perec, *Entretiens et Conférences I: 1965-1978*. Eds. Dominique Bertelli and Mireille Ribière. (Nantes: Joseph K, 2003) 242.

*Un homme qui dort* straddles Perec's juvenilia and his sociological writings of the early 1970s. However, the autobiographical dimension of the text (portraying the author and his friends) is impersonal, neither individual nor collective, as we have seen, for example, in Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*.<sup>214</sup> In the text we read, all protagonists mentioned or implied remain anonymous until the end; even the central figure of the student lacks a specific identity. The sense of impersonality – emphasised by the theme of indifference and social detachment – is also strengthened by the selection of the ambiguous second-person pronoun as a narrative voice, depersonalising the tone with its inherent ambiguity and suspending the notion of a definite reference to a person. In addition the richness in intertextuality that characterises *Un homme qui dort* benefits from the ability of the pronoun to shift reference to different heroes of the absurd and prevents any reading of the story as a personal one.

The indefinite sense of the pronoun enables Perec to experiment with the limits of intertextuality, expanding on the notion of addressing the uncertain as we have seen in Butor and pushing the technique to its limit. In Perec's text it is not just the uncertain and unknown addressed through the indefinite *tu*, it is the not-yet shaped character of the student who is addressed, composed of all the heroes projected in his experiment. Given the shifting quality and the ambiguity of the *tu*-form, Perec was able to address each figure individually without challenging the coherence of his narrative. He introduced a *tu* that can actually be divided into multiple *tu*-s according to the intertextual references that can be traced in the novel. The key role that intertextuality plays in Perec's novel not only shows a liminal self-reflexive text of experimental character, but it also adds to the experiment around which the plot revolves, the interpretation of a reading. We not only read the evolution of an experiment and how a hero develops; by reading *Un homme qui dort* we complete a reading of all its intertexts.

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**214** | Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 253.

In 1974 Perec decided to adapt the story for the screen. Working in collaboration with the author, Bernard Queysanne directed the film version which lasted 78 minutes and won the Prix Jean Vigo.<sup>215</sup> While the film adaptation follows the script, structure and rhythm of the literary text, it is less obscure (partly due to the change in medium) and easier to follow. Consequently, the film may facilitate the reception of the text, especially regarding some points of critical debate and disagreement, but it lacks the uniqueness of the original text.

For example, the relationship between the narrator and the student is an issue that has prompted many questions and found various interpretations over the years. In the film, the narrator's voice is that of Ludmila Mikaël, and Jacques Spiesser speaks the part of the student. Choosing a female narrator for the film supports the argument that the voice narrating and dominating the discourse is dissociated from the student and prevents any reading of the text as internal monologue.

In contrast to the original novel, what is most strikingly missing from the film is the vital importance of intertextuality. Though the quotations and intertextual references are also present in the film, even foregrounded in close-ups of books and pictures of authors, the dominance of the visual element over the literary undermines and fails to reflect the significance of intertextuality. By presenting the same story in another medium, the references and allusions to other texts undermine the notion of intertextuality *per se*, that is the composition of a *polyphonic* novel and its dialogic nature by which it addresses other narratives. In the film version, the references to other narrative heroes suggest a transfer to another medium, and in doing so intertextuality loses its directness and immersive character that normally would impact on the actual narrative and generate it in the process. In the film adaptation, intertextuality reflects only

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**215** | *Un homme qui dort*. Dir. Georges Perec and Bernard Queysanne. (Dovidis/ Satpec: 1974), Film.

the origin of the story while depriving it of its dynamic and sense of current dialogue that occurs in the text-form.

With the employment of a second-person narrative agent, Perec may not have taken the readers of his time as much by surprise as Butor did with the publication of *La Modification* in 1957, nor did he manage to do so with the theme itself; after all the narrative implies his awareness of earlier texts that addressed the same theme. But he did surprise his audience in the way he used intertextuality in his text, making it fundamental to its structure and composing it with references, implications, hints and traces that are all listed in an index at the end of the book. In *Un homme qui dort* he thus reflects the idea that literary works are not purely original but rather are the result of a continuous literary interaction and interrelation between authors and texts and are part of an ongoing literary dialogue that transcends time and place.

Perec's novel will be analysed taking into account its fundamental duplicity and structural dualism, first as a text dealing with indifference and, second, as a palimpsest of other texts and literary influences. The aim of this chapter is to analyse and define the impact and various functions of the second-person employment in Perec's novel and expand the assumptions and conclusions of this study towards other themes and properties that could be key to second-person storytelling. With *Un homme qui dort*, the thesis offers the grounds to pursue yet again a story of self-discovery but this time studying the making of a person not just within the narrative, but influenced and shaped by other narratives as well. This chapter aims to elucidate second-person storytelling as related to intertextuality and suggests some deeper understanding of the technique based on a unique, experimental example.

## THE SCRIPT OF THE EXPERIMENT

Tu n'as envie de voir personne, ni de parler, ni de penser, ni de sortir, ni de bouger.

C'est un jour comme celui-ci, un peu plus tard, un peu plus tôt, que tu découvres sans surprise que quelque chose ne va pas, que, pour parler sans précautions, tu ne sais pas vivre, que tu ne sauras jamais.<sup>216</sup>

As briefly mentioned before, *Un homme qui dort* centres on an episode in the life of a 25-year-old sociology student who one day puts down his copy of Raymond Aron's *Leçons sur la société industrielle* and stops attending his classes at the university. Feeling connected to the world no longer and wishing to escape the preordained roles available to him, the student is shown to suffer from a lack of meaning in his life. A hero of the absurd, he doesn't attempt to ameliorate his situation; influenced by his reading as well as by several literary heroes dealing with the same problem, he intensifies his social alienation instead by deliberately trying to become "celui sur qui l'histoire n'a plus de prise."<sup>217</sup> Aspiring to find meaning in life and to reach a state of pure freedom, he starts in effect an experiment in indifference and social detachment, the one that constitutes the narrative.

Composed of a large number of short self-contained passages ranging in length from a few words to about four pages, the novel progresses from one unnumbered passage to the next, with no explicit sense of narrative logic. The 112 passages are each signalled by the start of a new page, forming sixteen chapters in total. To meet the requirements of the present thesis, the text is divided into three parts according to their thematic content thus corresponding to the experiment's stages of progress from decisiveness to doubt and, finally, to negation and failure. In each part the thematic develop-

**216** | Perec (1967/2002), 225.

**217** | Perec (1967/2002), 273.

ment is reflected in the narrative style, with different verbal forms, tones and rhetoric.

Ce n'est pas un geste prémédité, ce n'est pas un geste, d'ailleurs, mais une absence de geste, un geste que tu ne fais pas, des gestes que tu évites de faire.<sup>218</sup> [...]

Tu ne finiras pas ta licence, tu ne commenceras jamais de diplôme. Tu ne feras plus d'études.<sup>219</sup>

The narrative starts with a passage of reverie that connotes a numb reaction to the external environment. It thus implies the state of its main character and prepares from the very beginning the grounds for what is going to be narrated next in the text, the story of an experiment on social detachment and indifference.

Dès que tu fermes les yeux, l'aventure du sommeil commence. À la pénombre connue de la chambre, volume obscur coupé par des détails, où ta mémoire identifie sans peine les chemins que tu as mille fois parcourus, les retraçant à partir du carré opaque de la fenêtre [...]<sup>220</sup>

Immediately afterwards, the narrative continues with a detailed description of the adventure of sleep, communicating that the student suffers from a sleeping disorder. It also contains an extended reference to perception, introducing the existential and philosophical character of the text. The first part chronicles the experiment in indifference from the moment it has been decided upon until it reaches its peak, in a continuously affirmative tone reflecting security and determination.

Once the student has decided to be detached socially, he is pictured cloistered in his room during daytime and walking around the streets of Paris by night. The narrative takes place either in his

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**218** | Perec (1967/2002), 224.

**219** | Perec (1967/2002), 225.

**220** | Perec (1967/2002), 219.

small dormitory room or in random streets of the French capital, and it shows the process of increasingly complete isolation from any social encounter or commitment, emphasising the student's committed aspiration towards indifference.

Tu restes dans ta chambre, sans manger, sans lire, presque sans bouger. [...] Tu n'as pas envie de te souvenir d'autre chose, ni de ta famille, ni de tes études, ni de tes amours, ni de tes amis, ni de tes vacances, ni de tes projets. [...] Tu ne revois pas tes amis. Tu n'ouvres pas ta porte. Tu ne descends pas chercher ton courrier. Tu ne rends pas les livres que tu as empruntés à la Bibliothèque de l'Institut pédagogique. [...] Tu ne sors qu'à la nuit tombée, comme les rats, les chats et les monstres.<sup>221</sup>

The only time the action shifts away from Paris is at the end of the fourth chapter when the student visits his parents' house near Auxerre and spends some months there with them. Totally absorbed by indifference, even there he never shows any tendency to socialise or any desire to connect with them. The student's attitude in this episode emphasises the aspired-to social detachment as realised and makes the lack of human interaction even more evident. The student who hardly talks to his parents ("Tu parles à peine à tes parents. Tu ne les vois guère qu'aux heures des repas"<sup>222</sup>) spends most of his time alone and shows interest mainly in inanimate things that do not require any mutual interaction:

C'est à cause de cela que l'arbre te fascine, ou t'étonne, ou te repose, à cause de cette évidence insoupçonnée, insoupçonnable, de l'écorce et des branches, des feuilles. C'est à cause de cela, peut-être, que tu ne te promènes jamais avec un chien, parce que le chien te regarde, te supplie, te parle.<sup>223</sup>

**221** | Perec (1967/2002), 227.

**222** | Perec (1967/2002), 235.

**223** | Perec (1967/2002), 237.

The student's indifference gradually becomes a state of mind, a cognitive function that could probably offer a response to the question of the absurd: "tu n'es qu'une ombre trouble, un dur noyau d'indifférence, un regard neutre fuyant les regards."<sup>224</sup> The narrator describes how the student feels displaced in his own life, an uncomfortable state of desperation, expressed as an absence of goals and social contact. While such feelings and experiences accumulate and as the experiment progresses, the student's determination to dissociate himself from any social life and abstain from it crystallises and presents itself as a solution to his existential crisis:

Tu n'as guère vécu, et pourtant, tout est déjà dit, déjà fini. Tu n'as que vingt-cinq ans, mais ta route est toute tracée, les rôles sont prêts, les étiquettes: du pot de ta première enfance au fauteuil roulant de tes vieux jours, tous les sièges sont là et attendent leur tour.<sup>225</sup>

The success of the experiment entails a systematic abandonment of any self-development and of any social or emotional attachment and the cultivation of a flat zero existence instead which might lead to achieving "la vie annulée."<sup>226</sup>

Ne plus rien vouloir. Attendre, jusqu'à ce qu'il n'y ait plus rien à attendre. Trâner, dormir. Te laisser porter par les foules, par les rues. Suivre les caniveaux, les grilles, l'eau le long des berges. Longer les quais, raser les murs. Perdre ton temps. Sortir de tout projet, de toute impatience. Être sans désir, sans dépit, sans révolte. Ce sera devant toi, au fil du temps, une vie immobile, sans crise, sans désordre: nulle aspérité, nul déséquilibre. Minute après minute, heure après heure, jour après jour, saison après saison, quelque chose va commencer qui n'aura jamais de fin: ta vie végétale, ta vie annulée.<sup>227</sup>

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**224** | Perec (1967/2002), 230.

**225** | Perec (1967/2002), 238.

**226** | Perec (1967/2002), 245.

**227** | Perec (1967/2002), 244f.

At the end of the first part the project seems to be accomplished successfully as the student has reached a state of indifference, living happily in isolation free from desires and hopes, an outsider and loner:

Tu vis dans une bienheureuse parenthèse, dans une vide plein de promesses et dont tu n'attends rien. Tu es invisible, limpide, transparent.<sup>228</sup>

Nulle hiérarchie, nulle préférence. Ton indifférence est étale: homme gris pour qui le gris n'évoque aucune grisaille. Non pas insensible, mais neutre. [...]

Maintenant tu es le maître anonyme, celui sur qui l'histoire n'a plus de prise, celui qui ne sent plus la pluie tomber, qui ne voit plus la nuit venir.<sup>229</sup>

Sometimes in extremely long sentences, other times in shorter expressions, the narrative takes the form of a continuous one-way flow, addressed to the student without any alteration of tone apart from the echo of a flat, affirmative utterance, implying that no reaction, answer or feedback of any kind is expected. It is worth mentioning that in the rhetoric of *Un homme qui dort* the experimental character of the text and the notion of hypothesis is implied; narrated emphatically as a narrative in process, presenting an evolving experiment and reflecting the simultaneous making of a person, Perec's text shows radical self-reflexivity. It chronicles the results of an experiment in indifference composed in an experimental narrative form (the narrative jigsaw puzzle).

Vie sans surprise. Tu es à l'abri. Tu dors, tu manges, tu marches, tu continues à vivre, comme un rat de laboratoire qu'un chercheur insouciant aurait oublié dans son labyrinthe et qui matin et soir, sans jamais se tromper, sans jamais hésiter, prendrait le chemin de sa mangeoire, tournerait à gauche,

**228** | Perec (1967/2002), 262.

**229** | Perec (1967/2002), 272f.

puis à droite, appuierait deux fois sur une pédale cerclée de rouge pour recevoir sa ration de nourriture en bouillie.<sup>230</sup>

Its verbs appear mainly in the present tense or, exceptionally, in the future tense, with some forms in the infinitive. The dominating present tense adds to the fact that the experiment is in progress, like the narrative itself, that is the development of the student's narrative persona. These verb forms add to the sense of a bounded present and evoke stability and fixity of purpose. The inscribed contemporaneity of the discourse is not only an outcome of the text's grammar and the selection of the present tense but also derives from the employment of the second-person perspective. The use of the pronoun strengthens the sense of actuality and connotes an implication of face-to-face interaction and of a happening-now narrative, which the reader together with the student witnesses the moment it is narrated.

Non. Tu préfères être la pièce manquante du puzzle. Tu retires du jeu tes billes et tes épingles. [...] Tu n'écouteras plus les bons conseils. Tu ne demanderas pas de remèdes. [...] Tu ne sors plus de la maison, à peine de ta chambre.<sup>231</sup>

The future tense tends to be employed to convey guidelines supplied by the narrator. The excerpts in the future reflect determination, security and decisiveness, but as they are expressed in the future tense they tend to show aspiration rather than actuality. In such a view, the passages in the future tense – even in the first part of the narrative that is affirmative – affect the sense of fixity and imply doubt and openness to outcomes of the experiment other than success, altering the tone momentarily from affirmative to reassuring. By the time the experiment reaches its peak with the student becoming indifferent, the tone of the narrator changes again from

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**230** | Perek (1967/2002), 272.

**231** | Perek (1967/2002), 239f.

affirmative to questioning, echoing a new sense of doubt, confusion and inquiry.

[...] mais est-ce bien à toi de le faire? Ta place dans la hiérarchie, tes années de service ne te dispensent-elles pas de cette corvée?<sup>232</sup>

Meanwhile the aim and aspirations inherent in the experiment are constantly questioned ("Quels secrets cherches-tu dans ton miroir fêlé?"<sup>233</sup>) in a tone of high tension. The student appears confused and scared, unable to detach himself from his human needs, feelings and reactions. At the end of chapter 15 there is a strange pause in the narrative and a change to the third person, connected with a summary of another text (Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*)<sup>234</sup> that is placed in the narrative in a descriptive and informative tone.<sup>235</sup> At this point the narrator breaks with the sequence and style that he had used throughout the text so far; going by the esoteric tone, he now takes on Melville's style, choosing a third-person perspective and an exoteric view of what is narrated. In a passage of radical intertextuality, Perec's narrator stops addressing the student, ceases the narrative and the experiment as such to summarise Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* instead.

At that point *Un homme qui dort* reveals a direct dialogue with Melville's narrative. In doing so, Perec steps into the production of the meaning of his narrative and, at the same time, reveals and instructs the student and his own readership to turn to Melville to complete the experiment by reading the novella and taking into consideration a comparison with *Bartleby*. Thus, the narrator reveals –

**232** | Perec (1967/2002), 275.

**233** | Perec (1967/2002), 297.

**234** | Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. 1853. (Leipzig: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

**235** | "Jadis, à New York, à quelques centaines de mètres des brisants [...] On le fit enfermer, mais il s'assis dans la cour de la prison et refusa de se nourrir!" Perec (1967/2002), 298f.

what Perec described in later interviews – the relationship of his text with Melville's and draws an implicit parallel between the student's fate and that of *Bartleby*, while the radical intertextuality demands an active reading engagement with the text.

The text therefore is presented as a production which, rather than being examined here and read individually as an absolute object, will be understood as a compilation of cultural textuality about indifference and heroes of the absurd. For Perec, Melville's *Bartleby* was a milestone in that tradition. Hence in *Un homme qui dort* we can identify both a vertical and a horizontal dimension in the dynamic of the narrative and the experiment; in the horizontal dimension, Perec's narrative *tu* reflects the process of developing a character in a story of an experiment in social detachment, similar to what we have seen in Butor. In the vertical dimension, the narrative *tu* reflects a dialogue with the anterior and synchronic literary corpus with which Perec is in dialogue. The choice of the narrative *tu* over any other narrative form enables Perec to maintain this duplicity throughout the narrative without breaking the coherence and flow of the text. It is the ambiguity and shifting quality of the second person that can embrace both the vertical and the horizontal axis of the narrative dynamic, as in traditional examples of intertextuality in a story that reflects the development of a character and chronicles both the formation of an *I* and a reading quest in a literary paradigm of emphatic self-reflexivity.<sup>236</sup>

It is important to note that after this direct reference to Melville, the narrative proceeds directly and swiftly to its end. The narrator's tone in this last part involves amplifying the tension with a faster rhythm (in the film version of *Un homme qui dort*, this is mediated through the background music). Sentences are enriched with additional punctuation and exclamation marks while some verbs are put in the imperative. The student now appears accessible as he gradually adopts the characteristics of an autonomous yet anony-

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**236** | Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 66.

mous narrative figure. The narrator names and rejects as fake the literary heroes of his forerunners Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Thomas Mann – “ne les crois pas”<sup>237</sup> – revealing what was only implicitly reflected in the persona of the student at the beginning – and adds a critical self-reflexive comment about literature and literary heroes.

Moreover, emotions and human needs that were suppressed in the first part of the experiment in indifference are revealed (“Tu as beau te serrer contre lui, haleter contre lui, le tilt reste insensible à l’amitié que tu éprouves, à l’amour que tu recherches, au désir qui te déchire”<sup>238</sup>), determination and effort wane (“Tu as perdu tes pouvoirs”<sup>239</sup>) and expectations are proven futile (“Mais il n’y a pas d’issue, pas de miracle, nulle vérité”<sup>240</sup>).

Tu traînes, mais la foule ne te porte plus, la nuit ne te protège plus. [...] Comme un prisonnier, comme un fou dans sa cellule. Comme un rat dans le dédale cherchant l’issue. Tu parcours Paris en tous sens. Comme un affamé, comme un messenger porteur d’une lettre sans adresse.<sup>241</sup>

The potential and limitations dictated by this experiment are expressed rhetorically in passages written either in the future indicative or including modal verb formulations and phrases that stress what the student can and cannot do, defining the frame and limits of indifference and its impact on him. The narrator removes the student from the possibility of reaching a further stage of indifference and acknowledges that the experiment in indifference and depersonalisation could never be accomplished. To this purpose, a

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**237** | “Tu n’es pas mort et tu n’es pas plus sage [...] Combien de Robinson, de Roquentin, de Meursault, de Leverkühn! Les bons points, les belles images, les mensonges: ce n’est pas vrai.” Perec (1967/2002), 301.

**238** | Perec (1967/2002), 280.

**239** | Perec (1967/2002), 282.

**240** | Perec (1967/2002), 282.

**241** | Perec (1967/2002), 286.

symbolic nightmare is described that undermines the whole project: the detached, observing consciousness becomes a single eye, ever open, that cannot be deprived of its primary function of seeing, which means perceiving, its own *raison d'être*.

Tu n'es plus qu'un œil. Un œil immense et fixe, qui voit tout, aussi bien ton corps affalé, que toi, regardé regardant, comme s'il s'était complètement retourné dans son orbite et qu'il te contemplait sans rien dire, toi, l'intérieur de toi, l'intérieur noir, vide, glauque, effrayé, impuissant de toi. Il te regarde et il te cloue. Tu ne cesseras jamais de te voir.<sup>242</sup>

The necessity of performing even a single action contravenes the goal of indifference and becomes the line that cannot be crossed, marking it as unattainable. Subsequently, the strategy for a life of freedom obtained through social detachment is dropped, and the tone of the narrator gradually shifts from a questioning to a disappointed one, as hopes and desires expressed in the first part of the text are now abandoned.

L'indifférence est inutile [...] Mais ton refus est inutile. Ta neutralité ne veut rien dire. Ton inertie est aussi vaine que ta colère.<sup>243</sup>

Cesse de parler comme un homme qui rêve.<sup>244</sup>

At the end of the experiment the narrator initiates a sort of text-inscribed conclusion, summarising observations and assumptions in the form of a project review. Indifference proved to be in vain and, moreover, it had become a menace to the student who felt trapped in the attempt to reduce his life to a minimum. Still unable to act, the solution and exit from the labyrinth of indifference come naturally with time, without requiring any personal initiative:

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**242** | Perec (1967/2002), 278.

**243** | Perec (1967/2002), 303.

**244** | Perec (1967/2002), 304.

Le temps, qui veille à tout, a donné la solution malgré toi. Le temps, qui connaît la réponse, a continué de couler.  
 C'est un jour comme celui-ci, un peu plus tard, un peu plus tôt, que tout recommence, que tout commence, que tout continue.  
 Cesse de parler comme un homme qui rêve.  
 Regarde! Regarde-les. Ils sont là des milliers et des milliers, sentinelles silencieuses. [...] <sup>245</sup>

The final words of the narrative describe the student at Place Clichy waiting for the rain to stop. As he never managed to become a transparent existence, his return to normality and ordinary human behaviour – to feel the rain and wait for it to stop – comes as a kind of closure moving away from indifference and bringing a positive end to the project and the narrative. The tone at the end of the text is positive and optimistic and stresses the fact that as long as the student is neither dead nor mad like some of the self-destructive heroes mentioned or implied in the text, life goes on, all possibilities remain open and he can restart his life.

## THE SCRIPT OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Pour mon dernier livre, qui s'appelle *Un homme qui dort*, j'ai fait la même chose en me servant principalement de deux auteurs, l'un est Kafka, l'autre est Herman Melville. Alors, si vous voulez, il y a, en ce qui me concerne, une image de la littérature qui se dessine et qui serait l'image d'un puzzle. Ça, c'est une... Butor a très bien expliqué cela. Butor a expliqué que tout écrivain était entouré par une masse d'autres [...] et, si vous voulez, ce puzzle qui est la littérature, dans l'esprit de cet écrivain, a toujours une place vacante, et cette place vacante, c'est évidemment celle que l'œuvre qu'il est en train d'écrire va venir remplir. <sup>246</sup>

**245** | Perec (1967/2002), 304.

**246** | Perec (2003), 83.

*Un homme qui dort* involves two scripts that interact and reflect one another: the one described in detail above summarises the experiment in indifference that the student undergoes and is narrated to him in the form of a direct address by the narrator; the other reflects on the rhetorical experiment of the narrative collage that Perec performs within it, making a narrative out of other narratives. While the first script is easy to follow as it evolves along with the experiment, the second script presents a challenge to the reader, since the references to other texts and heroes (fictional or historical) are numerous and appear in various forms: directly mentioned in the text or implied in quotations of text passages, text summaries, verses, words and descriptions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that almost every sentence of the narrative recalls another figure or text.

At the beginning the student is presented as a marionette, an experimental figure belonging to the project that he executes. Playing out the experiment in indifference and incorporating several literary figures, he lacks an identity of his own and appears to be more a combination of preformed identities, ones with which the reader is familiar as they echo major works and well-known heroes of world literature. As the narrative develops we thus witness a gradual development of his own identity (reflected in the rhetoric of the text within the second-person perspective) and we realise that within this process of performing, the student is actually *trying out* other literary figures that are eventually rejected.

The mining of intertextual references already begins in the title *Un homme qui dort*, extracted from Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.<sup>247</sup> It is further established by opening the novel with Kafka's epigram from the *Zürau Aphorisms*<sup>248</sup> translated into

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**247** | "Un homme qui dort tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes." Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 11.

**248** | "Es ist nicht notwendig, daß Du aus dem Haus gehst. Bleib bei Deinem Tisch und horche. Horche nicht einmal, warte nur. Warte nicht einmal, sei

French by the author and put at the beginning as a cover-quotation for the narrative:

Il n'est pas nécessaire que tu sortes de ta maison. Reste à ta table et écoute. N'écoute même pas, attends seulement. N'attends même pas, sois absolument silencieux et seul. Le monde viendra s'offrir à toi pour que tu le démasques, il ne peut faire autrement, extasié, il se tordra devant toi.<sup>249</sup>

The text finishes with an extended reference to Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* that appears as a short summary just before the end. The two texts create the poles between which *Un homme qui dort* balances, while traces of intertextuality are scattered in between. By using the quotation from Kafka as a pre-text, Perec defines and justifies the style of his narrative, i.e. the esoteric tone and the choice of the second-person perspective. By using two intertextual allusions to frame his text and revealing within the narrative its literary influences and thematic precursors, the author conjures the technique of a narrative bridge, a clear reference to the Oulipian methodology of experimenting with radical intertextuality, and thus clarifies the way he generated the text.<sup>250</sup>

De la même manière, pour *Un homme qui dort*, la lecture à outrance, enfin, pendant des semaines et des semaines, d'une nouvelle de Melville qui s'appelle *Bartleby, the Scrivener* et des *Méditations sur le péché, la souffrance et le vrai chemin* de Kafka, enfin du journal intime de Kafka, m'a conduit

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völlig still und allein. Anbieten wird sich Dir die Welt zur Entlarvung, sie kann nicht anders, verückt wird sie sich vor Dir winden." Franz Kafka, "Aphorismen-Zettelkonvult". In *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*. Ed. Jost Schillemeit. 1992. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002) 140.

**249** | Perec (1967/2002), 217.

**250** | Gascoigne (2006), 37.

presque nécessairement, comme à travers une espèce de voie à la fois royale et tout à fait étroite, m'a conduit au livre que j'ai produit.<sup>251</sup>

The theme of indifference and the silent abdication from choice and volition in response to the absurd have already been declared as an a priori hint to readers in the quotation from Kafka. These then expand within the narrative as numerous references to major literary works and allusions to authors of the absurd, and make up the second script of intertextuality, forming the so-called narrative collage of *Un homme qui dort*. The collage functions as a self-reflective element revealing aspects of the generation of the text that justify its style and narrative perspective, and although challenging, it actually gives the content a pattern and a certain structure and serves its coherence. As the experiment in indifference evolves, Perec's forerunners and their works appear in the text associatively, reflecting on the assumptions and results of the project itself.

Le collage pour moi c'est comme un schème, une promesse et une condition de la découverte. Bien sûr, mon ambition n'est pas de réécrire le Quichotte, comme le Pierre Ménand de Borges, mais je voulais par exemple refaire la nouvelle de Melville que je préfère, *Bartleby, the scrivener*. C'est un texte que j'avais envie d'écrire: mais comme c'est impossible d'écrire un texte qui existe déjà, j'avais envie de le réécrire, pas de le pasticher, mais de faire un autre, enfin le même Bartleby, mais en peu plus ... comme si c'était moi qui l'avait fait. C'est une idée qui me semble précieuse sur le plan de la création littéraire [...] C'est la volonté de se situer dans une ligne qui prend en compte toute la littérature du passé. On anime ainsi son musée personnel, on réactive ses réserves littéraires.<sup>252</sup>

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**251** | Georges Perec in Mireille Ribière (comp.), *Parcours Perec [travaux du] Colloque de Londres*. 1990. (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1998) 36f.

**252** | Georges Perec in Ariane Steiner, *Georges Perec und Deutschland. Das Puzzle um die Leere*. (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2001) 106.

Meanwhile other references to the poets of malaise and mythology appear in the narrative.<sup>253</sup> The student suggests a persona developing its own identity, addressed in the narrative by the second-person enigmatic narrator and enabling constantly shifting references to various literary heroes and their corresponding themes: he mirrors heroes of the absurd and reminds us strongly of Jean-Paul Sartre's Antoine Roquentin in *La Nausée* (1938) or Meursault, 'L'Étranger' in Albert Camus' eponymous text,<sup>254</sup> pictured as an outsider, playing out Melville's *Bartleby* and *preferring* like him to stay out of any social environment. However, it is important to emphasise that Perec's intertextuality appears as a dynamic process in which patterns and themes that interrelate between texts and that appear in *Un homme qui dort* are embedded in the text, thus modified and reflected anew, in a way *re-narrated* by Perec.

Therefore, the student develops into a contemporary hero of the absurd by reflecting on the literary ancestors and by elaborating on the theme of the outsider, experimenting with the choice of living isolated and out of the social frame instead of repeating or echoing attitudes and characters of other narratives uncritically. The results of his experiment are announced in the text.<sup>255</sup> This example stresses the notion of self-reflexivity in intertextuality as a result of

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**253** | "[...] que vienne la nuit, que sonnent les heures, que les jours s'en aillent, que les souvenirs s'estompent" Perec (1967/2002): 227. and "Bateau ivre, misérable miracle: le Harrar est une attraction foraine, un voyage organisé." Perec (1967/2002), 238.

**254** | "Combien d'histoires modèles exaltent ta grandeur, ta souffrance! Combien de Robinson, de Roquentin, de Meursault, de Leverkühn! Les bons points, les belles images, les mensonges: ce n'est pas vrai. Tu n'as rien appris, tu ne saurais témoigner. Ce n'est pas vrai, ne les crois pas, ne crois pas les martyrs, les héros, les aventuriers!" Perec (1967/2002), 301.

**255** | "Non. Tu préfères être la pièce manquante du puzzle. Tu retires du jeu tes billes et tes épingles. [...] Tu n'écouteras plus les bons conseils. Tu ne demanderas pas de remèdes. [...] Tu ne sors plus de la maison, à peine de ta chambre." Perec (1967/2002), 239f.

a dynamic and productive *literary discussion* between authors and texts that generates the composition. We realise that intertextuality is presented at its most dynamic when we have a closer look at the main intertextual references in *Un homme qui dort*.

Melville's Bartleby is not reflecting *indifference* since he is actually stating his choice and preference *not to do* certain actions and duties in the office in which he is working, that it is his preference to stay out of the social environment.

"Bartleby," said I, in a still gentler tone, "come here; I am not going to ask you to do any thing you would prefer not to do – I simply want to speak to you."

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

"Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"

"I would prefer not to."

"Will you tell me *any thing* about yourself?"

"I would prefer not to."

"But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you."

[...] "What is your answer, Bartleby?"

[...] "At present I prefer to give no answer," he said, and retired into his hermitage.<sup>256</sup>

Bartleby represents the choice and conscious attitude of being indifferent, like the student who attempts the status of indifference as part of an experiment that involves several rules, choices and decisions. This choice that might eventually lead the student to reach indifference as a state of mind and not as a matter of selection and choice, is actually the kernel of the chronicled experiment of *Un homme qui dort* (that of the plot and that of the composition) that is reflected as an attempt and involves a paradox that will be discussed later in the chapter. Hence the student in that sense is quite different

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**256** | Melville (1853/2015), 20.

from the actual heroes of the absurd, who have reached a state of indifference: Sartre's Roquentin and Camus' Meursault.

Whereas through Roquentin, a shadowy character and solipsist, Sartre's *La Nausée* explores a world without meaning that reflects a world of nothingness, and Camus shows in Meursault a character ostensibly without consciousness, Perec's attempt at developing an indifferent hero resulted in the rejection of such archetypes, in the sense that indifference has no benefit other than indifference itself for the hero, who in the end was never able to reach it in a pure sense. At the obscure ending of *La Nausée*, Roquentin announces his desire to write a book, something beautiful, which would nevertheless make people ashamed of their existence: "Il faudrait qu'elle soit belle et dure comme de l'acier et qu'elle fasse honte aux gens de leur existence."<sup>257</sup> In direct contrast, Perec's ending in *Un homme qui dort* implies that re-socialisation reflects positivity and the rejection of the absurd.

In the last chapter (16) of *Un homme qui dort*, we encounter a reference to another hero in almost every sentence and utterance, in emphatic contrast to the student who has now acquired and developed his own identity, and describing also the failure of the experiment and the vanity of indifference.

Tu n'est pas mort et tu n'es pas plus sage.

[...] Les volcans miséricordieux ne se sont pas penchés sur toi.

[...] Mais toi, pauvre Dédalus, il n'y avait pas de labyrinthe. Faux prisonnier, ta porte était ouverte. Nul garde ne se tenait devant, nul chef des gardes au bout de la galerie, nul Grand Inquisiteur à la petite porte du jardin.

[...] Tu n'as rien appris, sinon que la solitude n'apprend rien, que l'indifférence n'apprend rien: c'était un leurre, une illusion fascinante et piégée.

[...] L'indifférence est inutile. Tu peux vouloir ou ne pas vouloir, qu'importe!

[...] Tu n'es pas mort. Tu n'es pas devenu fou.

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**257** | Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1938) 250.

[...] C'est un jour comme celui-ci, un peu plus tard, un peu plus tôt, que tout recommence, que tout commence, que tout continue.<sup>258</sup>

The jigsaw puzzle of narratives consisting of different texts and authors adds to the text a richness of motifs and metaphors that appear as literary influences, and it enriches the script of intertextuality further.

One such motif is that of the broken mirror: in his dorm the student has a cracked mirror in which his face is split into three different parts. The cracked face reflects the inner and outer perspectives that coexist within the text and also the intertextual allusions, the other narrative personae that are implied or mentioned in the text.

[...] Ceci, dans la glace fêlée, n'est pas ton nouveau visage, ce sont les masques qui sont tombés, la chaleur de ta chambre les a fait fondre, la torpeur les a décollés.<sup>259</sup>

Before focussing on the second-person narrative perspective and the way it interrelates and functions in both scripts, we will refer to the two paradoxes on which the text is based, one of which was briefly mentioned before. The first concerns the social roles and possible forms of revolt against convention that are presented or implied in the text and that appear predictable and banal. As intertextual implications these are already included in the narrative. While the protagonist refuses to identify with several fictional and historical (self-)destructive antiheroes – with Faust who sold his soul to the devil, Empedocles who threw himself into the crater of Mount Etna, Herostratus who burnt the temple of Artemis at Ephesus in order to immortalise his name, or even Sisyphus – his attitude initially leads to a negation of literary and cultural stereotypes but ends up being just another literary stereotype. Perec himself denounces his literary

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**258** | Perec (1967/2002), 301-304.

**259** | Perec (1967/2002), 229.

precursors as dishonest by adopting the view that they express fascination with a life they aspire to discredit. In addition, the individual's refusal is exalted to the level of heroism, when indifference seems the only possible escape.

The second paradox is inherent in the core plot and in the experiment in indifference itself: performing the latter as a possible escape from and response to the absurd, the student becomes an elaborate version of an absurd hero, one of Perec's principal inspirations for this work that also challenges the myth of the outsider. However, as the experiment maintains the paradoxical goal of simultaneous mastery and passivity which suggests a contradiction, it is doomed to fail.<sup>260</sup> The novel defines indifference as a cancelling of life by minimising it to nothing, a notion that echoes clearly the abandoning of life interests and the lack of any excitement, thus alluding directly to Sartre's Antoine Roquentin.

We can see the same contradiction at the level of rhetoric and structure: the novel privileges a sense of randomness over casual links in its main part, evoking a sense of "anti-histoire" despite quoting numerous stories by other authors. As we saw earlier, the concept of a game might have had a paradoxical function as to the content, but it appears similarly in the rhetoric of the text as Perec does not present a project based on instincts, reflections and luck; on the contrary, he follows certain rules and narrative schemes to explore the limits of his narrative experiment.

It may seem that the script of intertextuality is a product of automatic writing, in the sense that the intertexts and references appear unexpectedly and with pretentious randomness, but because they align with the evolving experiment, it is clear that the second script follows the logic of the first and that it also has a certain structure, since different literary figures are recalled or commented on in accordance with the student's state of mind or a particular stage of the experiment. The strategy Perec employs against spontaneous

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**260** | Alison James, *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 33f.

creation echoes the idea developed by the Oulipo movement that emphasises the importance of conscious control over the writing process, hence it highlights his remarkable technique and reveals a highly elevated style.<sup>261</sup>

## THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

As described earlier, *Un homme qui dort* borrows its title from Proust, its tone and style from Kafka and its theme from Sartre, Camus and Melville. No matter which hero the student acts out at each point of the text, the evolving narrative reflects a process of continuous reduction linked to the rejections of its forerunners, thus affecting the narratorial perspective of the text. In the final chapter, the narrator reveals the major components of the script and admits to their rejection. Hence the evolution of the narrative reflects the end of the experiment in indifference (first script), the completion of the narrative collage (second script) and the modification of the narrative perspective while signifying reduction and determination.

The narrative *tu* evolves from an undefined apostrophic reference, a generic and collective *tu* in which several heroes coexist and which designates a developing narrative persona, to a rhetorical device of address for the eventually fully-shaped hero. Perec's *Un homme qui dort* is an example of second-person storytelling that employs the pronoun's perspective very differently from what we have seen in the previous examples of Christa Wolf and Michel Butor. Perec uses the pronoun as the main narrative figure of the discourse without reference to a definite person, even with problems of self-awareness.

Mais le héros d'*Un homme qui dort* est un interlocuteur muet: ce "tu" ne dit jamais "je". Le "tu" est d'autant plus insolite que ce pronom caractéristique de l'échange verbal renvoie ici à un sujet autiste. [...] Le recours au

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**261** | James (2009), 15.

“tu” dans la construction du récit ne fait que souligner encore davantage, dans l’histoire racontée, l’enfermement d’un personnage qui refuse toute communication.<sup>262</sup>

Couched in the second-person singular form *tu*, the text is endowed with a specific sense of intimacy, which also raises the issue of determining the narrative voice and its enigmatic relationship to the protagonist. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter in connection with the film adaptation of *Un homme qui dort*, narrative voice and protagonist have no other relationship in the narrative than that of creator and executor.

The student is deprived of any sense of personhood; he just belongs to the project as its executor and vital component. He is introduced as a potential thus ambiguous, developing and thus undefined narrative figure, performing and being an experiment, addressed by the narrator in the second-person singular; the latter in fact designates the text’s main narrative figure instead of the student due to the ability of the pronoun to encompass multiple addressees and to shift continuously between them, covering all the narrative forerunners, elements and needs mentioned above. Until the end of the narrative the student represents an (elaborated) combination of all other heroes implied or mentioned in the text, a hero made up of (the reflection of) other heroes but lacking personal identity.

The evolution of the *tu* throughout the narrative comes with a continuous reduction and limitation of digressions and references. As the project evolves, the narrative examples of indifference that are mentioned directly or indirectly are rejected, thus reducing the scope and range of address, whereas the student develops a concrete persona at the same time. When finally all the implications and literary paradigms are refused, the student stops being a cognitive entity (*topos*) of other figure-reflections and qualifies as a figure of indifference himself. By the time the project reaches its end and a new, complete version of an indifferent narrative hero is available,

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**262** | Perec (1967/2002), 213f.

one that has actually refused to be the outsider, the narrative *tu* finally acquires a definite sense and addresses the student and the person he has become exclusively.

Responding to the fundamental question of whether other pronouns might be appropriate for this narrative, the answer is negative. The complex narrative structure studied throughout this chapter would work neither in the first nor in the third person. For a start, the choice of the narrative's theme excludes the first-person employment, as it would be contradictory to the whole project of indifference, reflecting activity, initiative and requiring personhood instead of passivity and the cancelling of life. Such a choice would also mean that some decisions had already been made, i.e. the text would not chronicle an ongoing experiment but rather the result of an experiment already completed or expected to be completed. Had *Un homme qui dort* been written in the first person, it would also be impossible for the narrator and the author to incorporate all the narrative examples in the text and discuss them in order to form a narrative collage of references.

For similar reasons a third-person narrative would not work either. Should Perec, like Melville, have preferred the third-person perspective, he would have needed to limit the narration to the perspective of the outsider, leaving aside the reflections, thoughts and emotions that the narrator of *Un homme qui dort* reports. As mentioned earlier in connection with the (non)choice of the first-person perspective, no pronoun other than that for the second person would enable the narrator to keep the contemporaneity of his text and reflect the notion of an experiment in terms of theme and rhetoric. The same holds for intertextuality: a third-person perspective would eliminate from the theme and rhetoric of the text the significance of intertextuality, one that enables Perec to experiment with different figures until he forms his own version of the indifferent hero, thus contributing to the existentialist-philosophical literary discussion of the absurd. For the requirements of a third-person narrative, Perec, in order to introduce the text other than by *tu*, would need to have a concrete persona already formed; this would eliminate the self-re-

flexive aspect of the narrative and rule out the second script of *Un homme qui dort*.

It is the choice of the second-person pronoun that actually permits the combination of the external perspective needed by the narrator for the experience of the experiment in indifference that is chronicled, like Melville in connection with *Bartleby's* deliberate social detachment, while at the same time employing Kafkaesque tones for addressing inner thoughts without, however, affecting the sense of the impersonal.

Dans *Un homme qui dort* toutefois, le personnage n'est pas aboli: c'est "tu". Il ne peut pas avoir un nom. Mais il est très présent, c'est quelqu'un qui murmure; c'est ce "tu" qui apparaît quand on se regarde dans un miroir, quand on se parle. Quand on se dit "tu" ... Il ne s'agit donc pas d'un "je", encore moins de "l'autre", d'une troisième personne.<sup>263</sup>

The employment of the second person for the dominant narrative voice generates duplicity in the novel by addressing simultaneously the actual project of indifference inscribed in the text through the student and the series of historic and fictional heroes who are compared to the actual hero and who deal with the same issues (indifference, the absurd, a sense of not-belonging). Perec's *tu* is a narrative choice which enables the author to compose in one narrative a double script and address all coexisting and implied figures and circumstances by implementing them in the narrative and processing them in it.

The author reveals in his cover-quotation that he follows Kafka in employing this form so as to benefit from the narrative ambiguity and resilience inherent in the second-person viewpoint. He thus manages to bridge different narratives in one discourse and succeeds in challenging the myth of the outsider and the theme of

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**263** | Georges Perec in Yvonne Goga, "Formes de l'autoréflexivité mallarméenne dans *Un homme qui dort* de Georges Perec." In *Écrire l'Énigme*. (Paris: PUPS, 2007) 135.

indifference by reflecting on it as a literary theme and existential resolution based on examples from fiction, mythology and history that are profound in the narrative and appear as its integral parts. It is only by using the second-person (singular) form that Perec adds a resilient and versatile narrative component to his text, one that enables him to pursue the project of indifference within an experimental text and thus manages to combine both scripts and aspirations, without putting the textual coherence at risk.

## CONCLUSION

*Un homme qui dort* is a book devoted to the exploration of a world without meaning. It is a philosophical novel that does not propose philosophical arguments in the formal sense but dramatises them instead. It is also a document of its own making. Appearing in France in the sixties and written from a second-person perspective, *Un homme qui dort* is often linked to Michel Butor's earlier *La Modification*. However, even if the two novels share some profound similarities – for example reflexivity, the notion of a closed space and the obsessive attention to visual perception as well as detailed descriptions of surroundings – they do not offer a basis for any generic assumptions regarding the second-person perspective as they employ it quite differently in terms of form (Perec uses the second-person singular *tu* and not the plural *vous*), function and rhetorical properties.

What the two texts do have in common is their uniqueness *vis-à-vis* the movements that dominated the French literary scene upon their appearance. Butor's *La Modification* may belong to the *Nouveau Roman* period but involves elements from the traditional novel and therefore cannot be considered a pure and representative text of that movement; the same may be said for Perec and the place of *Un homme qui dort* in the works of the Oulipo group.

As with *La Modification*, *Un homme qui dort* constitutes an account of the formulation and failure of a project about human exis-

tence, an attempt to achieve re-orientation in life after a crisis. In the fictional frame both protagonists move from one state to another, creating the illusion that (here and now) they are prone to sharing their experience on an extra-fictional level. In both cases, the individual and his self-definition are brought to the fore, starting from an undefined sense of malaise, half-awake (Butor) or half-asleep (Perec). Butor's protagonist moves from a state of crisis and doubt to one of certainty, as does Perec's, with the difference that in his case the resolution comes unintentionally and naturally as time passes and his student has no authority or personhood to take action.

*La Modification* is a story of return and re-evaluation of that which exists, while *Un homme qui dort* tells the story of how being indifferent does not make any difference in the end. In his obsessive concern with objects, extensively enumerating itineraries and trivial actions, Perec elaborates a new version of the myth of the outsider, questioning the myth itself as his hero recognises the vanity of being excluded from any social constellation. In gathering examples of other literary outsiders from major works of literature, he rejects their vision of heroism achieved through self-destruction or sacrifice for the sake of ideals. Reading the text we follow an attempt at finding meaning in the meaningless, in a project where the suspension of time and the sense of isolation is striking.

Making the ordinary and the everyday a part of fiction reminds us, of course, of Butor and his protagonist Léon, who represents an ordinary man dealing with his life decisions with the fears, agonies and hesitations of a real person and not of a traditional fictional hero. Perec's story is of the banal and ordinary built on the accumulation of the insignificant, and it reflects the need to integrate in society and find meaning within a social context. After Butor's ordinary hero, Perec centres his story on the value of the *quotidien*. In this, he is influenced directly by Lefebvre<sup>264</sup> who was preoccupied with its theorisation during the late fifties.

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**264** | For a more comprehensive approach to the topic, see Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l'Espace*. 1974. (Paris: Anthropos, 2000).

Ce qui se passe vraiment, ce que nous vivons, le reste, tout le reste, où est-il? Ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour, le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire, l'infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l'habituel, comment en rendre compte, comment l'interroger, comment le décrire?<sup>265</sup>

It is Perec's achievement that he manages with his second-person account to expand the second-person narrative to extreme limits, beyond Butor's self-reflective *vous* or Wolf's self-analysing and self-examining *du*. Perec acknowledged the twentieth-century crisis in realist representation, rejecting the solution proposed by the *Nouveau Roman* (at least in its first phase, as represented mostly by Butor) and showing a solid faith in literary experimentation and even transformational procedures in his writing. For him, literature is revolutionary by nature as it demonstrates the need for social change through formal modifications.<sup>266</sup>

Perec's self-reflexive text may be read as an allegory of fiction writing undertaken in a mode of social detachment and pure observation, and as a comment on literature as a continuous exchange of ideas and inspiration: games of influence and favour between authors. Reducing the narrative to a minimum in terms of plot and personae and releasing it from any time constraints or specifications, Perec uses the second-person singular to narrate a story of non-action in total contradiction to the historic context in which he wrote the book, namely the tensions and agitation of 1968 in France.

*Un homme qui dort* demands an active reading: the more fully the intertextual allusions are decoded, the deeper the reader's appreciation. The author does not reveal to his audience the composition process of his text as much as Christa Wolf did, neither does he provide any sort of guidelines, encouragement or instructions on authorship as Butor did, for example. However, he does list his ancestors and literary influences and reveals his sources of inspi-

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**265** | Georges Perec, *L'Infra-Ordinaire*. (Paris: Seuil, 1990) 10f.

**266** | James (2009), 24.

ration in the form of a literary index on the topic of indifference, adding to the self-reflexivity of his text. *Un homme qui dort* focuses on the experimental and hypothetical within the second-person viewpoint to explore a literary theme within a text that combines and urges direct contact with its literary companions.

Keeping to the sequence of second-person texts that are analysed here based on the complexity of the narrative perspective rather than chronological order, and having discussed Perec's liminal text that challenges the limits of composition and the scope of the second-person pronoun, the thesis will now focus on an earlier and even more enigmatic and experimental text, Ilse Aichinger's *Spiegelgeschichte*.

