



## Nabokov and Perec

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# EPI-REVEL

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## Nabokov and Perec

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What follows is an edited version of a talk presented at the 1995 Nabokov conference at Nice. It asks to be appreciated in the context for which it was conceived: the medium of verbal discourse; an audience of expert Nabokovians before whom knowledge of Nabokov's works could be taken for granted; a conference which had as its theme "Nabokov at the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism." I began my talk with a word of sincere thanks and a word of apology. The word of thanks was to David Bellos, Perec's translator and biographer, both for encouraging me to read Perec in the first place, and through his biography, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, for giving me the information from which to fashion the tools for a comparison with Nabokov. The apology was for being a somewhat reluctant comparatist, with a tendency always to get too distracted by difference.

But after reading Gogol one's eyes may become gogolized [...]<sup>1</sup>

The most obvious difference between Nabokov and Perec, to which I shall be returning, is the generation difference. Vladimir Nabokov, born April 1899, died July 1977 aged 78; Georges Perec, born March 1936, died March 1982 aged 45. However, I would like to consider first how Perec and Nabokov did appear before the French reading public as contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s. Between the very successful publication of the French *Lolita* in 1959 and the French *Ada* in 1975 many of Nabokov's Russian novels were issued or re-issued in French translation, as well as several of the English novels and the Autobiography. If Nabokov was not exactly a household world in the 1960s and 1970s he had very definitely a place in the French intellectual scene. Perec certainly was reading him. In 1963 we know that he read *Lolita*, and at the end of 1965 he was reading *La Défense Louzhine (The Defence)*. And Perec, too, was attracting a good deal of attention. He had his first success with his first novel *Les Choses (Things)*, 1965, and he crowned this in 1978 with the success of what turned out to be his last major work *La Vie mode d'emploi (Life A User's Manual)*. With nice symmetry in the following year, 1979, Perec was accorded the same attention as Nabokov had been given in 1964, when the literary journal *L'Arc* devoted an issue to his work.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of their reception, therefore, Nabokov and Perec can be looked upon as contemporaries. Kindred spirits, too, in the privileged place they accorded the ludic principle in their art, in their shared enthusiasm for all manner of verbal games and formal strategies. Perec from his youth was an inveterate games player: he played cards; he enjoyed all manner of board games; and he loved crosswords, both solving them and, like Nabokov, compiling them. After *Les Choses* he became increasingly interested in combining this love of games strategy with experiments in narrative form. This is the connection that has begun to be explored in the recent criticism. We can note Paul Braffort's discussion of Perec and Nabokov's shared enthusiasm for word-golf in the recent March 1995 issue of *Europe* devoted to Nabokov. And this is the interest that connects both Nabokov and Perec with the activities of OuLiPo. OuLiPo, standing for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop for Potential Literature), was conceived by François le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau in 1960 as a confidential grouping of writers and scientists (predominantly mathematicians) enlisted in researching into the literary potential of patterns adapted from formal languages. The key concept was narrative constraints. Perec was recruited as the second young member of OuLiPo in 1967. Very shortly afterwards, towards the end of the 1960s, the idea was mooted to invite the grand master strategist Nabokov to become a member.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov 1973, 144.

<sup>2</sup> The Nabokov issue, edited by René Micha, was n° 24; the Perec issue, edited by Bernard Pingaud was n° 76.

Queneau, distinguished poet, novelist, literary critic, was an admirer of Nabokov's work and, as head of Gallimard's readers' panel, had been instrumental in the publication of the French translation of *Lolita*. Nabokov, in his turn, had been enthusiastic in his approval of Queneau's *Zazie dans le métro* when it appeared in 1959. There is to date a measure of uncertainty among critical commentators about whether the two writers actually ever met.<sup>3</sup> The clarification of this matter would add but a small postscript in literary history, but it does prompt speculation about another "if" of history, about what common ground there might have been between the two men who, after all, were of the same generation (Queneau was born in 1903) had Nabokov never left Europe and had they met earlier in the 1920s or 1930s. Whilst in all likelihood there would have been no close personal rapport, Nabokov might have sensed a kinship with Queneau's *ars poetica*, had he, for instance, read his novel *Le Chiendent* (1933), constructed upon a mathematical formula, or his essay *La Technique du roman*" (*Technique of the Novel*, 1937) with its eloquent defence of the importance of rules in novel writing, or his homage to Proust, *La Symphonie inachevée* (*The Unfinished Symphony*, 1938), where he affirms the artistic position which twenty years later would hold good for his defence of *Lolita*.<sup>4</sup>

However, to return to the actuality of the 1960s and the idea of Nabokov joining the OuLiPo fraternity: this suggestion, though attractive, was soon abandoned as unrealistic. And with good reason. Nabokov had never been a "groupie." And even in the relatively mellow period when he was flushed with the success of *Lolita* and showing a certain amount of interest in left-wing French intellectuals and younger writers, it is hard to conceive of him having consented to make the journey from Montreux to Paris to monthly group meetings.

But if Nabokov's association with OuLiPo was purely notional, Perec's was very real and productive. It was directly through association with OuLiPo from the late 1960s on that his experiments with literary form took off and flourished. The range of experiment was tremendous. He devised a radio play *Die Maschine* (1967-68),<sup>5</sup> a synthesized language machine programmed to subvert the text of Goethe's *Wandrer's Nachtlied* (*The Rambler's Lullaby*). In 1968 he wrote a lipogram-novel, *La Disparition* (*The Void*), which was his way of coping with a severe case of writer's block by composing an entire 320 pages narrative without the most essential vowel in the French language, the letter *e*. He followed this, a year later, with *Le Grand Palindrome* (*The Great Palindrome*) which reached the Guinness Book of Records, and some 500 words in either direction.<sup>6</sup>

Perec thrived on the most fiendishly formidable constraints. But the most ambitious piece of problem-solving writing of all must rate the 700 pages *La Vie mode d'emploi*. It is not the intention here to describe the mechanism of this novel, the multiple constraints and rules and in-built mistakes according to which the narrative functions, but just to point to a Nabokov connection. Perec sat down to write the novel immediately following Raymond Queneau's death in October 1976. It is dedicated to him, an act of homage to the acknowledged master craftsman by a second generation Oulipian. But among all the many other literary allusions and borrowings that it contains the novel celebrates, too, that other master, Nabokov, who died just a few months later. Nabokov is named in a *Post-scriptum* as one of a number of writers "quoted" in the text of the novel, but the location of the allusions is left unidentified. The most easily recognizable reference is, however, to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in

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<sup>3</sup> See Braffort 1995, 94-95; Boyd 1991, 398.

<sup>4</sup> "La santé n'est pas dans le choix d'un sujet, mais dans sa maîtrise; non dans la matière, mais dans l'esprit. Malgré les apparences, et quelle qu'ait été sa vie, Proust est un auteur sain et fort — comme Balzac" (Queneau 1965, 227).

<sup>5</sup> Date of publication, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> This circulated in typescript under the title "9691. Edna d'Nilou" and was published in the collection *La Clôture et autres poèmes* in 1980.

the adaptation of chess strategies, in particular the knight's move, for the plotting of the narrative, and also in the enigmatic inconclusiveness of the ending. Perec ends his novel, like Nabokov, with the death of its hitherto unseen central character and a teasing sense of frustration which engages finally author and reader. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the narrator V discovers that he has been sitting outside the wrong patient's room and that his half-brother Sebastian is already dead. The last chapter of *La Vie mode d'emploi* (this is chapter 99, we note, not a rounded 100), has the millionaire puzzle fanatic Bartlebooth found dead in his study holding the last piece of the last jigsaw cut from his paintings by the puzzle-maker Winckler. The piece the dead man has in his hand is shaped like a "W". But the gap in the puzzle is in the shape of an "X".<sup>7</sup> Perec does not explain how Winckler worked his revenge and the reader is left to speculate on the significance of the "W". As Perec himself commented in interview shortly after the book's publication, "writing [...] is a matter of establishing a game between reader and writer."<sup>8</sup>

Concluding this brief discussion of the Nabokovian sub-text in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, it is pertinent to record the charge of coldness and human emptiness that has been made against Perec's novel, because it is one so familiar to readers of Nabokov.<sup>9</sup> It is the question of whether all the elaborate strategies and game-playing are a substitute for emotion and human involvement, or, on the contrary, a channel for communication of the matter of "life." Is there, finally, meaning in the title, *Life A User's Manual*, or is it just an overarching dry joke?

The issue of the communication of feeling and emotion through artifice takes on another dimension in the field not of imaginative fiction, but of autobiography. This was another "force-field," like the ludic, which attracted both Nabokov and Perec. The rest of this paper is devoted to consideration of this aspect of their work, in particular to the ways both authors structure the treatment of the theme of personal loss in their versions of autobiography.

But let this detail from Perec's biography serve as a small bridge passage. In December 1981, three months before his death, Perec contributed to a radio broadcast in which well-known guests were invited to list the fifty things they would most like to do before they died. Perec in his contribution, "Some of the things I really must do before I die," deliberately broke off after naming his thirty-seventh thing, saying simply: "There must be many others. I choose to stop at thirty-seven." The thirty-seventh thing was, as he put it, something "that cannot now be envisaged but that would have been possible not so long ago [...] To make the acquaintance of Vladimir Nabokov" (Bellos 1993, 708).

Perec, like Nabokov, had a fascination with significant dates. He had registered that he would *turn* thirty-seven, palindrome-style, on 7.3.73. He began writing what became his autobiography *W* the day after this thirty-seventh birthday and he chose to end it on the thirty-seventh chapter. What he may or may not also have realized was that when he was born in March 1936 Nabokov was a month off his own thirty-seventh birthday.

## W and Speak, Memory

The focus here is on the last published versions identified by both authors as "autobiography," that is, Perec's, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, published in 1975 when he was approaching forty, and Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, published in 1966 when he was sixty-seven. However, the method of composition of these works, as well as the earlier treatments of autobiographical material, offer many other intriguing points of connection which invite more detailed investigation: the parallel, for example, between Nabokov's

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<sup>7</sup> This letter-play may perhaps echo the German expression meaning to deceive: "*jemandem ein X für ein U vormachen*."

<sup>8</sup> "Georges Perec, interview with Jacqueline Piatier." *Le Monde*. (29 September 1978) (Bellos 1993, 629).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, François Nourissier, "Georges Perec: Métaphysique sur ordinateur." *Le Magazine littéraire* (14 October 1978); Anthony Burgess, *The Independent* (16 September 1987).

unpublished sixteenth chapter, “The Person in Question,” and Perec’s abandoned plan for an “Intertext”; also, the teasing echo in the twinned “v”’s of *W* of the two “v”’s of *Conclusive Evidence*, a title chosen, Nabokov told *Figaro* in 1978, as a secret link between Vladimir and Véra.<sup>10</sup>

Nabokov, we know, incorporated a good deal of autobiographical material in his fiction, but Perec incorporates a fiction as a structural working part of his memoir. It is a fantasy, set on the remote island of *W* (situated somewhere off the southernmost tip of South America) which describes a society organized entirely in service to an Olympian competitive sporting ideal. The story, as becomes increasingly transparent, is a grim fantasmagoric projection of the organization of life in Nazi concentration camps. It is marked off in the text by italics. This account is given a quasi-authentic frame of reference by the introductory story line (also in italic type-face) of a narrator invited to investigate the disappearance of a boy whose identity (passport and name) he had been given when he deserted from the French army. The name is Gaspard Winckler. The boy, a deaf and dumb defective, had been on a long sea voyage with his mother. His body alone had not been recovered after the ship foundered off Tierra del Fuego. A question-mark hangs over his fate. Had he just fallen overboard, or had he been abandoned by his mother and her companion? This introductory narrative breaks off at the point when Winckler is contemplating the hazardous journey ahead. A page marks the break filled with just *points de suspension*, dot, dot, dot, inside brackets: (...). That marks the end of Part One. The island description follows in Part Two. The link then between the two parts and the two accounts is the gap. It is left to the reader to bridge it: firstly, in geographical space, connecting frame story with island fantasy via the common location of Tierra del Fuego; secondly in time, connecting by means of a five year interval the italicized fictional narrative with the autobiographical account of Perec’s early memories of the war years. Perec’s account of his childhood is set in plain type in the text and is told in chapters which alternate with the fictional narrative. The missing boy in the fiction was eight years old when the voyagers set off. Five years have passed when his namesake Winckler is asked to investigate his disappearance. This means the boy would have been thirteen had he survived. Perec was thirteen, he announces, when he made up a story called *W* about an island community concerned exclusively with sport. He wrote it, then forgot it. Perec’s act of writing is thus by implication associated with filling a silence and becoming the ears and voice of a deaf and dumb boy.

Perec’s parents were Jews. Perec’s father had died in a prisoner-of-war hospital in 1940. Perec had no memory of him. The crucial date in Perec’s early childhood was 1941 when he parted from his mother for the last time at the Gare de Lyon. He was being evacuated from Paris on a Red Cross convoy. In 1941 Perec was 5 years old. His mother was arrested and deported two years later. She “disappeared” in Auschwitz. The same gap which marks the break between the Winckler introduction and the island fantasy is the gap which marks this “disparition” at the Gare de Lyon.

Perec’s version of autobiography is built around disappearances, memory gaps, missing links, ambivalence. Aside from the enigmatic structural gap between the two parts we can note the unelucidated play with letters. The letter “W” of the title prompts first a suggestion of the name Winckler, but, in Bellos’s brilliantly convincing reading, it is also shown to suggest an inverted “M” and an allusion to Fritz Lang’s film *M*, banned by the Nazis in 1933 (Bellos 1993, 553-55). And who, a reader may wonder, is designated by the “E” in the dedication “Pour E?” Is it Perec’s aunt Esther, or his cousin Eli, or, perhaps, we should read the words as they are pronounced, as “Pour e-u-x,” that is, intended for his missing, missed parents. The two epigraphs heading Part One and Part Two are equally elusive. They are taken from

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<sup>10</sup> See Bellos 1993, 450-52; Boyd 1991, 144, 629.

Queneau's verse narrative of psychoanalysis, *Chêne et Chien (Oak and Dog)*: "This mindless mist where shadows swirl, / how could I pierce it?"; "This mindless mist where shadows swirl / — is this then my future?"<sup>11</sup> And Perec's "foreword," which appears in French editions on the back cover, is a miniature masterpiece of deceptive clarity, having an engagingly simple syntax, but with the meaning blurred by hesitations and qualification.

In the text itself Perec enlists fiction, as noted, for part of the telling of autobiographical "truth". More than that, however, that part of the work which purports to be a conscientious effort to reconstruct an accurate factual picture of Perec's wartime childhood, with places revisited and other people's testimonies gathered, turns out, on closer inspection, to be a veritable tissue of falsehood. Perec's biographer who has researched the correspondence between the account given in *W* with the known facts of Perec's life in great detail, concludes that "almost every assertion in the memory chapters of *W* asks to be questioned, and the answer in most cases is that the memory [...] has been altered, reworked, decorated or, more plainly falsified." (Bellos 1993, 548). But why? Not to deceive the reader, but to direct him to look for another kind of truth which resides in the things left unsaid, which resides in falsehood; the truth of a childhood filled with things, like his Jewishness, that Perec was told to forget, vital things (like his parents) that he desperately wished he could remember and could not; and others, like the complex mixture of resentment at being abandoned and guilt at losing his parents, that he preferred to remember to forget.

How very different all this is from Nabokov's approach. How different-seeming is his strategy for coping with loss. In his memoir everything, from the title, *Speak, Memory* (and, likewise, the earlier variant: *Conclusive Evidence*), to the Dedication (To Vera), to the Foreword, proclaims confidence, clarity and a standpoint which, on the Poetry/Truth, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, axis of the management of autobiography, is positioned well towards the pole of Truth. Add to that a map, and the A to Z of an index and the reader seems well equipped to find his way. Of course, there is artfulness in this, and plenty of it. The more curious reader is encouraged not just to follow the main chronological route, but to explore and pleasure in the less obvious by-ways, the thematic meanders as well as the short cuts. But there is no risk of him getting lost. The journey has a beginning and an end which is not an end but a new beginning, and the clues that are planted (pram, gardens, sailor suit in the opening and closing chapters) are all pointers to the continuity of existence through time and space, affirmation of existence through language, through art, finally through the ongoing life of the next generation. Not disjunction then, as with Perec, but connection. Not an unfinished jigsaw with a piece that does not fit, but a picture which *can* be unscrambled to "find what the sailor has hidden" (*SM*, 310). Not fractured lives and broken bones (this latter being a recurrent theme in *W*), but fragments of pottery found on an Italian seashore by successive generations which can, through the power of imagination, be pieced together across the centuries to restore "the complete, the absolutely complete" bowl (*SM*, 308). Not Perec's "mindless mist where shadows swirl" but, as Nabokov writes at the end of the chapter about his mother, "a chance to peer from the mast [...]" And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction" (*SM*, 50).

Of course this is all sleight of hand, a literary construct, a stage set, this harmonious world of perfect childhood, with its mix of pastoral idyll and Russian nineteenth-century memoir and its predictable props: porticoed house, lake, park, sun-drenched paths, deep snowdrifts ("And let me not leave out the moon" (*SM*, 99)), its faithful, or not so faithful retainers, nubile peasant wenches, tutors, governesses, village schoolmasters, trysts, duels; a world where pain,

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<sup>11</sup> "Cette brume insensée où s'agitent les ombres, / comment pourrais-je l'éclaircir?" "Cette brume insensée où s'agitent des ombres, / est-ce donc là mon avenir?" English translations are from *W or The Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos.

suffering, even death itself can be distanced, held at bay. But the enchantment of the Garden of Eden is predicated on the knowledge that it will inevitably be lost. Loss, in actual fact, is just as central to Nabokov's autobiography as it is to Perec's, as are the brutal realities of dispossession, war, destruction and death. The meaning and the poignancy of the narrative relies on the reader's appreciating the joke, the irony that this world is gone and gone for good. It relies on the reader's having the historical reality firmly in his mind and on his sharing the knowledge of the things that are left unsaid. Readers who see this as "a nervous and arrogant book [...] full of cracks in apparently smooth surfaces" (I quote here from Michael Wood, a recent example of this sort of reader (Wood 1994, 100, 101)) are, I think, missing this irony which underpins the whole narrative. All that grand account about worthy forbears which fair shouts out "I belong," begs the questions, "what to? what remains? who cares?" The same with the account of grand houses, of vast fortune: all gone. Of cultured, loving parents: irretrievably lost. Even the arch pen-portrait of the young Sirin "the author that interested me most" (*SM*, 287) was written when Nabokov's eminence as an *émigré* writer was just as much a thing of the past, just as much of a *Sogliadatai*-style, *Eye*-like fiction, as his inheritance and his Russian homeland. It is a self irony which penetrates every level of the narrative, down to the banana-skin slapstick of the dashing young eleven-year old blade coming a cropper on the ice rink (*SM*, 206), or the distinguished writer revisiting his *alma mater* and only managing to remind his Cambridge tutor of his identity by treading yet again in the tea things (*SM*, 273). I do not see this as papering over the cracks. Quite the opposite. For its full effect, its humour as well as its pathos, it requires the reader to see the cracks and then, then see the joins.

But one gap and one question remains. What about Nabokov's awkward reticence about his brother Sergei, his homosexuality, his death in a concentration camp? Why leave him out of the earlier versions? No doubt there were complex personal reasons for this. But I am not concerned here to investigate psychological trauma any more than with Perec. My point is that in the construction that Nabokov here has made of a perfect past, the ambivalence and complexity of a relationship such as he had with Sergei simply has no place. Whether or not the omission or persistent reticence is psychologically governed I see it as *artistically* justified.

What we are presented with here with *Speak, Memory* is the demonstration by an artist, in late middle age, of supreme control of his material. Here he is fashioning that material, remembered experience, into autobiography, where the dominant note is life, but the sub-dominant is loss and death. Already, though, as he was writing the memoir, he was getting the ideas for his next novel, *Ada*, where he would deconstruct, debunk the pastoral idyll, expose the demons lurking in the Garden of Eden, the cruelty and selfishness of gilded youth. Later still, with *Look at The Harlequins!*, he would go further in creating an inverted fictional biography.

Finally, we may consider what perspective is to be gained from putting Perec's version of autobiography alongside Nabokov's in this way. Beyond the self-evident difference in temperaments, it is abundantly clear that here we are encountering writers at different stages in their development. Perec is working out deeply felt personal traumas through art: the act of writing is an act of commemoration, a memorial to his lost parents. He concludes his sixth chapter with this moving comment:

[...] I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign, once and for all, of a once-and-for-all annihilation [...]. 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 [...] writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.<sup>12</sup>

In *W*, as with even more exacting constraints that he adopted elsewhere, such as the alphabetical constraint of the lipogram in *La Disparition*, a device which was initially adopted as a defence against emotion finally forced out from him expressions of deep feeling that he would not easily admit to having.

Nabokov, by the time he came to write *Speak, Memory* and *Ada*, has got beyond this stage. He seems to be able to re-use, refashion his material as it suits him — turning his hand now to comedy, now to tragedy, now memoir, now exuberant fantasy. If we want to look for closer parallels with Perec we need to look back in time to the mid, late 1930s, to the time when Nabokov was of the same age as Perec. It was then that we see Nabokov working through complex personal and aesthetic problems of his own and imposing upon himself some formidable strategic and structural constraints in the process.

In sum, then, what this comparison with Perec and the context of this conference has caused me to do is to reconsider the question of whether there is a divide in Nabokov's work and, if so, where and how it comes about. Part of the problem about categorization of Nabokov's work as modernist or post-modernist arises, I venture to suggest, at risk of appearing excessively simplistic, because he lived long enough to have a succession of “-isms” rise and fall around him. With Perec, I suspect, there would be no hesitation in identifying him as a post-modernist. He lived and died tidily within post-modernism's recognised span. Within the manifest continuity of Nabokov's work I do, however, see a divide, and this adoption of Perec's perspective has made me see it all the more clearly. Viewed through “Perec” eyes it appears as the most glaringly obvious one of all: the divide between his writing in Russian and his writing in English. After the increasingly complex narrative strategies that Nabokov adopted throughout the 1930s, it comes about when he embraces the greatest constraint of all and begins to write, not just, Perec-style, forgoing the use of one letter, but depriving himself of an entire alphabet, hard sign, *yat'* and all. This, I suggest, was when *he* went through the looking glass and experienced the exhilaration of looking at literature, at the world, at himself, from the outside. This was when, like his imprisoned character Cincinnatus, he could revel in the liberation of treating himself as “other.”

“What a misunderstanding”, said Cincinnatus and suddenly burst out laughing. He stood up and took off the dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers. He took off the linen trousers and shirt. He took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took off his rib cage like a hauberk. He took off his hips and his legs, he took off his arms like gauntlets and threw them in a corner. What was left of him gradually dissolved, hardly colouring the air. At first Cincinnatus simply revelled in the coolness: then, fully immersed in his secret medium, he began freely and happily to... (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 29)

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<sup>12</sup> [...] Je sais que ce que je dis est blanc, est neutre, est signe une fois pour toutes d'un anéantissement une fois pour toutes. [...] je n'écris pas pour dire que je ne dirai rien, je n'écris pas pour dire que je n'ai rien à dire. J'écris: j'écris parce que nous avons vécu ensemble, parce que j'ai été un parmi eux, ombre au milieu de leurs ombres, corps près de leur corps; [...] l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie (*W*, 58).



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