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Life Writing As Care of the Self: Fictional Autobiographies in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century French Literature

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**LIFE WRITING AS CARE OF THE SELF:
FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN NINETEENTH- AND
TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH LITERATURE**

Melissa Faye Verhey

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation defines fictional autobiographies as novels featuring a fictional character writing an autobiography, and it argues that these novels contribute to autobiographical theory. Whereas these texts have often been read as veiled accounts of the author's life, reading them as fictional autobiographies shows that they recount an imaginary life in an autobiographical mode while sustaining a meta-reflective inquiry into the processes of autobiography. This research demonstrates how fictional autobiographies combine the distance of fiction and the specificity of life writing to illuminate the intersection of selfhood and narrative.

This project analyzes four French epistolary fictional autobiographies from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. The first chapter argues that the lackluster spiritual autobiography in Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve's 1834 *Volupté* makes a case against rigid modes of interpretation, whether they be the conventions of the Christian life or of traditional literary criticism. The second chapter argues that Paul Bourget's 1889 *Le Disciple* functions as a laboratory of moral thought, allowing an open-ended exploration of the moral responsibility of the writer in society. The third chapter argues that François Mauriac's 1932 *Le Nœud de vipères* innovates the literary trope of religious conversion, by representing conversion in the present tense and emphasizing the role of writing in personal transformation. The fourth chapter argues that Marguerite Yourcenar's 1951 *Mémoires d'Hadrien* presents a secular alternative to the Christian tradition of life writing by imagining the emperor Hadrian contemplating his life and approaching death through the lens of freedom.

Collectively, these fictional autobiographies represent the writing subject and the written autobiography as co-creative forces in identity formation. In each novel, life writing draws the subject into care of the self: an ethical quest for self-knowledge that challenges preexisting beliefs and offers new insights. Introspection brings the possibility of both self-knowledge and delusion. In these novels, the lack of response to autobiographical letters implies that what is missing is an interlocutor whose questions can prevent solipsism, which would mean that the self depends on others for self-knowledge. By dramatizing writing, these fictional autobiographies propose life writing as a spiritual exercise for secular times.

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INTRODUCTION

“[We] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions,
which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity,
and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”¹

“Our tales are spun, but for the most part,
we don’t spin them; they spin us.”²

I. Self and Story

Contemporary neuroscience tells us that the self is an illusion. Although we experience our self as a single coherent “me” that makes decisions, there is no evidence that our brains have a center where this “me” is located. Instead, in the words of neuroscientist Bruce Hood, our sense of self “emerges out of the orchestra of different brain processes like a symphony of the self.”³ We experience “a powerful deception generated by our brains for our own benefit.”⁴ This bundle theory of the self, whose name derives from David Hume’s description of perception in his 1739 *Treatise of Human Nature*, runs contrary to the ego theory, which posits that our self is a permanent, continuous entity that contains the core of our essence. The idea that the self is an illusion challenges the commonsense notion that we are living a story, and that our life experiences, both mundane and exceptional, are part of a meaningful narrative of who we are,

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method Of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects* (London: White-Hart, 1739), 1.4.6.4.

² Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 418.

³ Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2013), XII.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IX.

and how we came to be. The bundle theory of the self flies in the face of our phenomenological experience of a single, coherent self. Selfhood may be an illusion, but what is certain is that this illusion can be useful for understanding ourselves and navigating the world.

Considering that our self is a bundle of sensations and an illusion produced by our brain might lead us to wonder why we live in stories. In his book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, Jonathan Gottschall contends that humans belong to a storytelling species, *homo fictus*. Our compulsion for storytelling gives us an evolutionary advantage: by imagining unreal situations, we can simulate alternative scenarios, test out hypothetical actions, and make better choices. In Gottschall's account, storytelling improves our social cohesion and our decision-making, ensuring our survival as a species. Novelist Nancy Huston's essay, *L'Espèce fabulatrice*, argues that we inhabit various involuntary fictions, such as religion, nationality, family mythology, and politics, which in turn define us. For better or for worse, the human condition is fabulation, and Huston recommends not eradicating fiction, but taking it upon ourselves to choose complex fictions that enable us to understand ourselves and our world better.⁵ Knowing that we are wired for story means that paying attention to how narrative works is key to understanding human culture and ourselves.

II. Autobiography and Self-Knowledge

If we consider our identity as a collection of stories that help us craft meaning out of experiences, then identity amounts to a house built on the sands of unstable, malleable narratives. Consequently, we may wonder whether narrative is a reliable tool in our quest for self-

⁵ Nancy Huston writes: "Il n'est ni possible ni souhaitable d'éliminer les fictions de la vie humaine. [...] Tout ce que l'on peut faire, c'est essayer d'en choisir des riches et belles, des complexes et des nuancées, par opposition aux simples et brutales." (*L'espèce fabulatrice* [Arles: Actes Sud, 2008], 191.)

knowledge. Autobiography, which literally means self-life-writing, deals directly and concretely with these questions of making a self through story. The task of the autobiographer is to create a coherent story of her life, first identifying an origin, then weaving together a sequence of meaningful events and experiences that explain how she has become the person she is today. Autobiography draws even the most naïve writer into philosophical issues related to identity, agency, and self-knowledge. A person hoping simply to record what has happened will be confronted with the tensions between two unequal terms: life and story. Transforming one's life into narrative necessarily engages the following questions: whether autobiographical writing mediates self-discovery or self-construction; whether writing brings about reliable self-knowledge; to what personal needs for meaning and self-understanding autobiography responds; how imputing actions to characters involves moral decision-making; and finally, whether the writer is creating his narrative or is being created by larger cultural narratives, be they national, religious, or political.

Studying autobiography allows us to observe the relationship between selfhood and the narrative created from a life. Based on Paul Ricœur's theory of narrative identity, I posit that this relationship between selfhood and narrative is an ethical one. Writing *Temps et Récit III* left Ricœur wondering what common ground might be found between historical and fictional narratives. In his subsequent *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricœur argues that narrative identity, or hermeneutics of the self—the attempt to understand oneself in light of a narrative understanding of one's life—can link history and fiction, as well as provide a middle ground between two opposing conceptions of the self: the certainty of Descartes' cogito and the “cogito brisé” represented by Nietzsche.⁶ Ricœur proceeds by distinguishing two aspects of personal identity

⁶ Paul Ricœur, “3. Vers une herméneutique du soi,” *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 27.

that he terms *ipse* and *idem*. *Idem* (same, *même*) refers to the stable, unchanging elements of character, while *ipse* (self, *soi*) addresses change, positing identity over time. These poles of sedimentation (*idem*) and innovation (*ipse*) have a dialectical relationship. Identity is always uncertain and predicated on attestation: a new trait may be integrated into one's *idem* identity, while a long-established trait might be dislodged.⁷

In Ricœur's model, identity hinges on narrative and language, and establishing identity involves responding to the question *qui* rather than *quoi*. About the question *qui*, Ricœur writes:

C'est la question que nous posons de préférence dans le domaine de l'action: cherchant l'agent, l'auteur de l'action, nous demandons: qui a fait ceci ou cela? Appelons *ascription* l'assignation d'un agent à une action. Par là nous attestons que l'action est la possession de celui qui l'a faite, qu'elle est la sienne, qu'elle lui appartient en propre. Sur cet acte encore neutre au point de vue moral se greffe l'acte d'*imputation* qui revêt une signification explicitement morale, en ce sens qu'elle implique accusation, excuse ou acquittement, blâme ou louange, bref estimation selon le "bon" ou le "juste."⁸

In Ricœur's view, identity begins with asking *qui*, a question that directs our attention to actions and agents. Storytelling then involves both morally neutral choices (what Ricœur terms *ascription*) and morally charged choices (*imputation*). This conception of narrative identity lends itself well to autobiography, which involves selecting events, identifying characters, and then ascribing and imputing actions to these characters.

⁷ The sixteenth-century case of Martin Guerre provides an exemplary illustration of the importance of attestation in identity: a peasant named Martin Guerre disappeared, and a few years later, an imposter presented himself successfully as Martin Guerre, and he lived with Martin's wife Bertrande and fathered two children before he was accused of impersonation. Guerre's case illustrates the instability of personal identity that is based on attestation: the impostor, along with Martin's close relations, affirmed his identity as Martin Guerre. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁸ Paul Ricœur, "L'identité narrative," *Esprit* no. 140/141 (July-August 1988): 295-304.

I should note that narrative identity remains hotly contested among philosophers. In his article, “Against Narrativity,” leading opponent of narrativism Galen Strawson summarizes and rejects the two core theses of narrativism, which he terms the psychological Narrativity thesis and the ethical Narrativity thesis.⁹ The first is descriptive, contending that we all experience life as a story. Strawson attributes the psychological Narrativity thesis to philosopher Daniel Dennett, whose book, *Consciousness Explained*, provides an epigraph to this introduction. The second is prescriptive, arguing that conceiving our lives as stories is fundamental to living a good life. Philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Marya Schechtman are both proponents of this second position that Strawson terms the ethical Narrativity thesis.¹⁰ Narrativists may uphold either or both of these ideas, and Strawson rejects both.¹¹ He rebuts the idea that narrative is a universal experience, citing Sartre’s protagonist in *La Nausée* as counter-evidence, and he argues that to prescribe narrativity is to “hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and [be] potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.”¹² Taking seriously Strawson’s qualms about universalizing narrative experience and making this an ethical requirement, this literary research investigates narrative as one possible avenue for self-constitution, and one possible site for ethical transformation. The artifacts being studied are literary texts, and so the question being asked is never simply what identity is, or of what the good life consists, but rather, in these cases where a life is being recounted in narrative, how narrative language helps or hinders the ethical quest for self-knowledge. The value of Ricœur’s

⁹ Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” *Ratio (new series)* XVII, (December 4, 2004): 428-429.

¹⁰ See Marya Schechtman’s *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹¹ Strawson, 428-429.

¹² *Ibid.*, 429.

notion of narrative identity for this project lies in its articulation of storytelling as a morally involved activity in which the self is ethically engaged.

Understanding autobiography as ethically engaged raises questions about this relationship between writing and ethics: whether writing is a motor for ethical transformation; and what possibilities and limitations writing holds for the self-directed work of ethics. In his landmark study, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot argued that ancient philosophy is above all an art of living, and that philosophical discourse only has value inasmuch as it coexists with a lived practice. Even though doctrines and practices varied among different schools, ancient philosophy had a common goal: the art of living. Concrete activities, which Hadot calls spiritual exercises, assisted the individual in learning to live, to converse, to die, and to read. Undertaking spiritual exercises led to a transformation in one's character, and in one's vision of the world.¹³ Hadot's contemporary, Michel Foucault, was also investigating ancient practices of care of the self during the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas Hadot's research was motivated by the apparent incoherence of certain philosophers, Foucault's interest was the historical relationship between the subject and truth. In a Collège de France lecture, "L'Herméneutique du sujet," Foucault resuscitates the concept of *epimeleia heautou* (*le souci de soi-même*) and connects it to the better-known Delphic prescription *gnôthi seauton* (*connais-toi toi-même*), which appeared in philosophy with Socrates.¹⁴ Foucault insists on the historical interconnectedness of care of the self (*le souci de soi*) and the quest for self-knowledge (*connais-toi toi-même*). This latter issue of self-knowledge is engaged directly in the process of life

¹³ Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2002), 21.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Cours du 6 janvier 1982," *L'Herméneutique du sujet, Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 3-42.

writing. This project looks at how autobiographical writing might also be functioning as a form of care of the self, or what Hadot terms a spiritual exercise: a lived practice of philosophy.

III. Fictional Autobiography

This research looks at fictional autobiography, which are novels that recount imaginary lives. They feature first-person narrators writing retrospective accounts of their lives. In some cases, a fictional editor intervenes to contextualize this document with a preface for a frame story. But although these texts deploy many of the tropes of autobiographical writing, the life story remains firmly located in the fictional world, bounded by the limits of the text. Fictional autobiographies fail Philippe Lejeune's litmus test for autobiography, the *pacte autobiographique*, according to which the author, narrator, and main character share one identity. So far, our description of fictional autobiography amounts to a negative definition: would-be autobiographies missing historical referents. This research set out to reframe fictional autobiography in positive terms, by asking how the coupling of fiction and autobiography might be generative for our understanding of either the novel or autobiography.

The next question is what additional possibilities are afforded by fiction that would not be possible had the authors used the material of their own lives. One lens for comparing autobiography and its fictional counterparts is Lejeune's notion of the *pacte autobiographique*, which describes the author's relationship to the text.¹⁵ In autobiography, Lejeune calls the author *embrayé*, engaging their whole self and history in the creation of their story. By contrast, fiction writing lets authors set their own story aside. The identity of the novelist is *débrayé*, or disengaged, from the text. My hypothesis is that fiction disengages author from text in a way that

¹⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

is fruitful, not for understanding the author, but for observing how the author thinks about, and possibly theorizes, autobiography and issues of identity and selfhood. In other words, fiction might be a tool for writers to address theoretical concerns of autobiography, unencumbered by demands for historical accuracy. Fictional autobiography allows authors to imagine situations that will target and illuminate the aspects of identity, subjectivity, and narrative that they find urgent, puzzling, or interesting. Casting autobiography through fiction lets us observe the process of life writing: how it provokes self-evaluation, how it makes room for solipsism, how it is impacted by other individuals and by culture, and how it produces surprises that challenge the autobiographer's self-understanding.

A note on generic terminology may be necessary here. I am using the term fictional autobiography, rather than *roman autobiographique*, which refers to novels that are lightly fictionalized accounts of the author's own life. The term *roman autobiographique* implies a lens of interpretation that evaluates the level of similarity between the themes of the novel and what is known of the author's own life. It is sometimes applied pejoratively to imply that the author is lacking the creative capacity to take distance from their own experience and generate an original story. Another literary genre that may come to mind is *autofiction*, which Serge Doubrovsky coined in 1977 to describe literature in which author, narrator, and main character are one, but that integrates fiction into the text.¹⁶ This dissertation deals with literature in which the author remains outside of the text. As a generic label, fictional autobiography recognizes the fictional nature of these novels, while directing our inquiry away from either the author's own quest for identity or a biographical mode of interpretation. This choice of terminology seeks to accurately

¹⁶ The first edition of Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* is classified as a novel, but the back cover introduces the term autofiction: "Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut, *autofiction* [...]," (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977).

describe the author-text relationship, and to valorize both the fictionality and the thematization of autobiography in these novels.

IV. Corpus

This study draws four samples of fictional autobiography from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve's *Volupté* (1834); Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple* (1889); François Mauriac's *Le Nœud de vipères* (1932); and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951). These novels share thematic elements and formal similarities. Each character occupies a position of authority, whether in the Church, intellectual circles, the family, or the Roman Empire. Each character is a man nearing death, and each decides to write down his life story in a letter. Each begins writing by articulating an other-oriented purpose, but in each case, writing surprises the letter writer, and the purpose of life writing evolves.

The writers of these novels share some commonalities as well. Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar were influential literary figures, and they each enjoyed a large readership in their time and attained the status of *immortels* in the French literary establishment. Sainte-Beuve only published one novel, *Volupté*, but he wrote voluminous criticism, notably in his Monday column, which garnered him the nickname *le lundiste*. Sainte-Beuve is remembered as France's first modern literary critic. Marcel Proust's polemic against the biographical method in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* set the tone for twentieth-century literary criticism, but Sainte-Beuve's criticism has enjoyed renewed scholarly attention in the twenty-first century. Bourget may be less well remembered today, but during his lifetime he was widely read, and he published a novel on a nearly annual basis at the height of his career. The prolific novelist was a positivist turned Catholic who was at the forefront of a wave of French intellectuals converting to Catholicism

between 1885 and 1935. Mauriac caught the end of this wave, and during his life was a celebrated *romancier catholique*, even though he resented the term, as well as a noted journalist beginning in the 1930s. Yourcenar stands out from the previous three authors in this corpus as a woman, the first *immortelle*, and a native of Belgium, who spent most of her life in the United States. The *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, which was largely responsible for her election to the *Académie française*, were written in her cottage on Mount Desert Island in Maine.

Although their writing spans over a century, Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar were all involved in the intellectual conversations of their time, debating the nature of literature, religion, and freedom. That each wrote a fictional autobiography suggests that these authors saw the potential of fiction for theoretical inquiry, and that they were probing the perennial questions of identity, life writing, and self-knowledge in the context of a specific issue. These four case studies highlight four unique possibilities of fictional autobiography: to critique dominant modes of literary criticism; as a laboratory of moral thought; as a model for ethical practice; and as cultural critique.

In the first chapter, I examine *Volupté*, the only published novel by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, France's first modern literary critic. *Volupté* had a mixed reception when it appears in 1834. It sold quickly, and six editions were published during Sainte-Beuve's life time alone, but Honoré de Balzac's reaction was less complimentary. Balzac announced he would rewrite *Volupté* and published *Le Lys dans la vallée* the following year. Scholars have since tended to perpetuate Balzac's verdict, often classifying *Volupté* as a *roman autobiographique*, a none too successful fictionalization of Sainte-Beuve's own love life.

Another picture emerges if we bracket biographical interpretation to look instead at the text from the angle of narrative identity. Sainte-Beuve's protagonist, a priest named Amaury, is

struggling to fit his life experience into the tight constraints of the spiritual autobiography, and particularly the religious conversion trope. I argue that the real drama of *Volupté* lies in autobiography, which takes center stage as Amaury interprets his life in a letter to a younger man, smoothing over incongruities, and finding himself surprised by what he has written. Sainte-Beuve's novel challenges the idea that solitary self-examination increases self-knowledge. *Volupté* carries an implied critique of rigid interpretational methods. In Amaury's case, this rigid method is the narrative trope of religious conversion, which goes unexamined and remains a structuring principle for Amaury's theology. *Volupté* addresses the challenges of interpretation in the context of Amaury's spiritual life, but it speaks to the issues Sainte-Beuve confronted in his career as a literary critic. Sainte-Beuve championed an innovative form of interpretation, which was premised on mobility, the notion that the criteria against which a work is judged must be created anew and custom-fitted for each work. The argument behind this innovative method of literary interpretation is that a fixed set of criteria cannot valorize what is new and unique. The traditional method appears obliquely in Amaury's story: Sainte-Beuve's character is unable to valorize new experiences, because he is fixated on complying with the requirements of the religious conversion trope. *Volupté* is an early-career text that already encapsulates Sainte-Beuve's critique of traditional literary criticism, which he articulated more explicitly in his later critical writings.

The second chapter examines Paul Bourget's 1889 novel, *Le Disciple*, which provoked a quarrel between freethinkers and those upholding traditional morality. Bourget was already well-known as a positivist critic and novelist, but *Le Disciple* represented a departure from his usual writing, taking on the question of the writer's moral responsibility. This was an urgent question for Bourget in 1889, as he had received an admiring letter from Henri Chambige, before the

latter was charged with murdering his mistress. Besides remarking on the novel's similarities to the Chambige Affair, scholars of *Le Disciple* have tended to see the text as a *roman à thèse* making an apology for Catholicism.

While the plot does turn on a conversion from positivism to Christianity, this chapter looks more closely at the mechanisms at play in the characters' evolving identities and worldview. The protagonists are a young man, Robert Greslou, and an established Positivist philosopher, Adrien Sixte. Greslou is convicted of murder, and from jail he is writing his life story in a letter to Sixte. In the frame story, Adrien Sixte reads Robert's story of conversion to positivism, and his efforts to apply this philosophy to his entire life, which ends with the death of his lover, Charlotte. Seeing his views so accurately yet monstrously replicated by Robert Greslou, Sixte renounces his entire philosophy and converts to Christianity. Although this story might at first glance seem to suggest that Sixte is responsible for his reader's interpretation and moral development, a closer analysis of the text raises doubts: about whether Greslou is responsible for Charlotte's suicide, given that she is propelled by cultural notions of virginity and honor; whether Greslou's interpretation of positivism can be considered representative; and whether Sixte's sense of guilt necessarily means he is responsible.

Even if this story compellingly demonstrates that positivism, as Bourget understands it, could have a pernicious effect on the moral development of the youth, *Le Disciple* makes only a negative apology for Christianity, presenting it as the opposite of positivism. For Bourget himself, the experience of the Chambige Affair and the writing of *Le Disciple* seem to have pointed him toward the Church. This research reveals *Le Disciple* to function less as a *roman à thèse* than as a laboratory for moral thought. In *Le Disciple*, Bourget uses a fictional situation to think through a complex issue, but this thought experiment yields fodder for more conversation,

rather than easy answers. This indeterminacy may help explain why today *Le Disciple* remains the most well-known of Bourget's many novels.

The third chapter examines François Mauriac's 1932 *Le Nœud de vipères*. This was the first novel Mauriac published after his conversion to Catholicism, so both the ecclesiastical authorities and the literary world were eager to read it, the former to verify Mauriac's orthodoxy, and the latter to see whether becoming religious would impair Mauriac's artistic skill. Both parties were satisfied: Mauriac's works were not censored, and his literary reputation remained intact. Scholarship on *Le Nœud de vipères* has for the most part focused on appreciating the influence of Pascalian theology and Mauriac's penetrating analyses of interpersonal relationships and human psychology.

This study brackets the theological questions to look at how the identity of Louis, the protagonist, is impacted by the process of writing his life. By looking at identity formation rather than evaluating the authenticity of the character's transformation, we can see that *Le Nœud de vipères* makes a powerful argument for self-writing as an ethical practice. Even before key plot events, such as the death of his intended letter recipient and wife, writing his life confronts Louis with his own inconsistencies and his fallibility. Over the length of the novel, the writing protagonist evolves, losing certainty in himself, opening up to his family, and relinquishing his earthly possessions. Practices of selfhood, such as autobiographical writing, rereading, and dialogue, impel Louis to abandon his self-view as an impartial, omniscient judge. Louis adopts a more open, self-questioning posture in his relationships.

Autobiographical writing plays an important role in personal transformation in *Le Nœud de vipères*. Mauriac diffuses the moment of transformation over the length of the text, a choice that both revises the religious conversion trope, and identifies self-writing as the locus, medium,

and motor of inner change. Mauriac was likely resolving an artistic challenge: he wanted to do justice to the theme of religious experience, and he stated that it was beyond his capacity to write a satisfactory scene with Louis speaking to a priest. The central position of autobiographical writing nevertheless valorizes as ethical those practices of selfhood that have no Christian specificity, such as introspection, self-writing, and conversation. For Mauriac's character Louis, autobiographical writing functions as the care of the self described by Foucault, a practice that prepares him for death. Whether *Le Nœud de vipères* advocates these practices as a means of accessing a specifically Christian experience or a more universal sort of personal growth remains ambiguous, and this may account for the novel's ability to appeal to both the clergy and the intellectuals of interwar France.

The fourth chapter looks at Marguerite Yourcenar's 1951 novel, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, which imagines the Roman emperor Hadrian writing an autobiography in the two years before his death in 138 CE. A controversy about publishing rights provided unexpected publicity for the *Mémoires*, which received immediate acclaim by critics who described it with adjectives like marmoreal. Scholars of *Mémoires d'Hadrien* have appreciated the classical erudition of Yourcenar's historical fiction, debated its genre, and remarked on its complex temporality, as it speaks simultaneously to second-century Rome and postwar France. They have also noted that the deep research behind the *Mémoires* is a Yourcenarian trademark; her own autobiography begins with two volumes of maternal and paternal family history that go back several centuries.

Rather than focusing on the historical research and verisimilitude of the *Mémoires*, this case study examines the role played by writing in Hadrian's last days. Yourcenar's character presents himself as someone well steeped in care of the self. He has tested his endurance through physical challenges, ascetic diets, and austere sleeping conditions, and he prides himself on his

tolerance of others, and his commitment to freedom over comfort. This picture of an equanimous character at peace with his life might suggest that Hadrian's writing is entirely other-oriented, motivated by a desire to teach his successor. He presents this writing as a corrective to official histories, but a closer look at Hadrian's discourse about himself and his relationships shows that the act of writing responds to his own needs. Without naming regrets, Hadrian considers his responsibility for his lover's suicide, he reflects on his last and failed campaign in Palestine, and he struggles with what freedom means now that he is dying.

Writing mediates Hadrian's reflections on the life he has lived and the practical dilemma of how to find agency while dying. Hadrian considers suicide as an alternative to writing. He remembers the suicides of others and records his own evolving stance on voluntary death. Hadrian even arranges for his own murder, which is prevented by his entourage. Lacking the freedom to commit suicide, Yourcenar's character takes another tack. Through writing, he reframes his identity in light of his duty to the Empire, and casts the long, slow death being forced upon him as his last service to the republic. By imagining a pre-Christian autobiography, Yourcenar's *Mémoires* challenges cultural ideas inherited from Christianity related to suicide, sexuality, and the measure of a good life.

CHAPTER ONE

Fictional Autobiography to Critique Methods of Interpretation: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve's *Volupté*

I. Introduction

Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve is best remembered as a prolific columnist and the founder of modern literary criticism in France. Every Monday for decades, Sainte-Beuve wrote articles that were collected and published after his death as the *Causeries du lundi*. Earlier in his career however, Sainte-Beuve had written history, poetry, and fiction. His first book was the *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française et du théâtre français au XVI^e siècle* in 1828, followed by the poetry collections *Vie, poésies et pensées de Joseph Delorme* and *Les Consolations* in 1829 and 1830. In 1834, at the age of 30, Sainte-Beuve published his only novel *Volupté*.

Sainte-Beuve's legacy as a critic, first and foremost, seems to have been calibrated by the sheer volume of criticism he wrote. His fictional works were written early in his career, and although they may appear to be mere digressions in his development as a critic, these early works, particularly *Joseph Delorme* and *Volupté*, deal with a theme that became emblematic of Sainte-Beuve's criticism: life writing and the relationship between life and literature. Sainte-Beuve never distanced himself from these early works, participating actively in the publishing process of subsequent editions. In his last year, 1869, he oversaw the 6th edition of *Volupté*, the novel that is the subject of this chapter.

Volupté is a novel about life writing: the protagonist Amaury is a priest approaching the end of his life, and he tells his life story in a letter to a younger man. Amaury sets out to write a moralistic account of his youth, but the result is a meandering text that combines the doubt and questioning of self-examination with a teleological thesis that drives the narrative to its conclusion. Amaury, now remembering his life, interprets his entire life as unfurling under divine guidance, and this belief feeds into an overarching self-narrative of providence and grace, of God as the agent of his transformation. Although Amaury's stated intention is to produce a didactic religious memoir, his writing surprises him, and the material of his life resists the demands of the spiritual autobiography. Life writing produces moments of surprise, bordering on doubt, but Amaury continues working with the narrative of providence, or "dessein suprême." Amaury works actively to create a narrative that both encapsulates his lived experience and conforms to the narrative arc of providence and grace.

A. Literature Review

Scholars have tended to read Sainte-Beuve's literary writings in autobiographical terms, as both *Joseph Delorme* and *Volupté* feature first-person narrators with similar traits to the author. A notable example of autobiographical interpretation is George Morin's 1928 *Sainte-Beuve et la médecine*, which uses the names Joseph Delorme and Sainte-Beuve interchangeably to refer to the author.¹⁷ This pattern extends to *Volupté*, which has been read as a *roman autobiographique* by scholars who have identified details from Sainte-Beuve's life in his novel. In his biography of Sainte-Beuve, Maurice Allem drew connections between Amaury's relationships with the married Madame de Couaën and Madame R., and Sainte-Beuve's own

¹⁷ Georges Morin, *Sainte-Beuve et la médecine: Essai de philosophie médicale* (Paris: Baillière et fils, 1928).

relationship with Adèle Hugo, the wife of Victor Hugo.¹⁸ Pierre Courcelle, a twentieth-century expert on Augustine, called *Volupté* a “confession autobiographique,”¹⁹ arguing that Sainte-Beuve’s personal life—his readings of Augustine, his feelings as expressed in letters to Félicité de Lamennais—is visible in *Volupté*.²⁰ Courcelle identified a second source of inspiration: Sainte-Beuve’s good friend Ulric Guttinguer, who underwent a religious conversion, and who had experienced spurning by his lover, Rosalie. Guttinguer wanted to write about Rosalie’s infidelity, so he gave a box of his correspondence to Sainte-Beuve, hoping his friend would help him develop his ideas and disguise the characters. The collaborative novel *Arthur* was never completed, but when *Volupté* appeared, Rosalie was recognizable in the character Mme. R.²¹ André Guyaux argues that Guttinguer makes an appearance in *Volupté* as the “ami de Normandie.”²² This biographical and historical scholarship has surfaced a web of connections between *Volupté* and Sainte-Beuve’s reading, correspondence, and relationships, but explaining the novel solely in terms of autobiography risks foreclosing other interpretational possibilities.

We do not know whether Balzac saw *Volupté* as an autobiographical novel, but he did evaluate it harshly on an artistic level. After reading *Volupté*, Balzac announced that he would rewrite it “en mieux,”²³ publishing *Le Lys dans la vallée* in 1835. Taking *Le Lys dans la vallée* as

¹⁸ Maurice Allem, *Portrait de Sainte-Beuve* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1954), 93.

¹⁹ Pierre Courcelle, “Les Lectures augustiniennes de Sainte-Beuve et la conversion de Guttinguer,” *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 61, no. 3 (1961): 369.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 361; 366-7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 368.

²² André Guyaux, preface to *Volupté*, by Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986), 11. Guyaux misidentifies the reference to the “ami de Normandie,” which occurs in Chapters XXII, XXIII and XXV, but not in Chapter XVI.

²³ In his biography of Balzac, André Maurois opens his chapter on *Le Lys dans la vallée* as follows: “Au printemps de 1835, [Balzac] avait de grands travaux, les uns sur le métier, les autres en projet : *Le Lys dans la vallée* (réplique de *Volupté* de Sainte-Beuve, ‘en mieux’).” See: *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac; Olympio ou la vie de Victor Hugo; Les Trois Dumas*, 1954-1957, ed. Robert Kopp, (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1993), 228.

an indication of how Balzac interpreted *Volupté* suggests that he understood Sainte-Beuve's novel as a *roman d'initiation sentimentale*. Balzac's rewriting was a success, and the theme of both novels—initiation to romantic relationships—has reappeared in novels such as Flaubert's *Éducation sentimentale*. Balzac's reaction may be a valid evaluation of the text's ability to tell a captivating story of romantic initiation, but given Sainte-Beuve's critical innovations, *Volupté* may amount to something other than a realist *roman d'initiation* or a *roman autobiographique*.

Other scholars have affirmed the autobiographical elements of *Volupté* while arguing that the novel had a heuristic value for Sainte-Beuve. Wolf Lepenies writes: "Sainte-Beuve, romancier, utilise son personnage pour parler de lui-même et de son propre passé, et pour réfléchir à son avenir, comme à titre expérimental."²⁴ Franklin Debrabant writes about *Volupté*: "Il s'agit de remonter à la source du mal, de le vivre dans toutes ses éventualités, d'éprouver fictivement les échecs antérieurs ou à venir pour se ressaisir, se régénérer. [...] Amaury, victime expiatoire, réconcilie Sainte-Beuve avec lui-même."²⁵ These interpretations suggest that fiction played a therapeutic role for Sainte-Beuve, who may have been coming to terms with his own life through the character Amaury.

Véronique Dufief-Sanchez has analyzed *Volupté* in her study of the *roman personnel*, which she defines as a novel written in the first person, in which the author is easily identified with the main character, and in which the author's *moi* shines through all the characters that come in to relationship with the fictional subject.²⁶ Dufief-Sanchez identifies *Volupté* as one of the initiators of the *roman personnel*, along with François-René de Chateaubriand's *René*,

²⁴ Wolf Lepenies, *Sainte-Beuve. Au seuil de la modernité*, trans: Jeanne Etoré and Bernard Lortholary, (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 326.

²⁵ Franklin Debrabant, "Volupté, l'écriture génétique de l'échec," *Le Discours et le sujet*, ed. Raphaël Molho (Nanterre : Publications de l'Université de Paris X, 1974), 14-21, 15-16.

²⁶ Véronique Dufief-Sanchez, *Philosophie du roman personnel de Chateaubriand à Fromentin (1802-1863)* (Geneva: Droz, 2010), 51-56.

Étienne Pivert de Senancour's *Obermann*, and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*. Reading these novels as a sub-genre of the *roman autobiographique*, Dufief-Sanchez nevertheless pushes the autobiographical reading beyond decrypting biographical elements in the text. Dufief-Sanchez argues that the *roman personnel* constitutes a "réflexion concrète sur les vertus philosophiques de la fiction," in which nineteenth-century authors examine their writerly vocation, articulate their intellectual autobiography, and engage with the philosophical questions that preoccupied them.²⁷

Ann Jefferson's study of biography in France has surfaced a critical dimension in Sainte-Beuve's literary works, effectively uniting the poet and the critic. Jefferson argues that the preface of *Joseph Delorme* is not only a plausibility tool, but also a critical frame that illuminates how Sainte-Beuve thought about literature.²⁸ This new valorization of Sainte-Beuve's literary work by researchers such as Dufief-Sanchez and Jefferson has coincided with a renewed appreciation for Sainte-Beuve's criticism.

B. Problematic and Plan

In *Volupté*, Sainte-Beuve highlights the narrative and ethical challenges of turning a life into a story. The character Amaury undertakes his autobiography with a naïve view of writing, but the process draws him into introspection and evaluation, surfacing tensions between his professed values and the events of his life. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the central drama is not Amaury's past life, but his present experience: writing, interpreting, remembering and evaluating his life. Tensions emerge between the perspectives of the reader and the writing character.

²⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁸ Ann Jefferson, "Sainte-Beuve: Biography and the Invention of Literary Criticism," *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113-134.

Given Sainte-Beuve's lifelong interest in the relationship between life and literature, exemplified in his *Portraits littéraires*, the appearance of a fictional autobiography, *Volupté*, is unsurprising. In his later criticism, Sainte-Beuve sought to locate the moment in the writer's development when his *génie*, his unique literary talent, emerged. This method of literary criticism engages the issue of life interpretation in the third person. Fictional autobiography allows Sainte-Beuve to explore these questions in the first person, without the constraint of historical veracity. The result, *Volupté*, is a text that offers a penetrating investigation of memory, narrative and the self, anchored in the context of 1830s France. This analysis deliberately brackets the autobiographical reading to attend to the internal tensions in *Volupté*. This chapter will examine Amaury's justifications for writing; his account of a recent shipwreck and the impact of this event on his self-understanding; before considering how life writing functions as a form of care of the self in *Volupté*.

II. The Novel's Prefaces as Critical Framing

A. The Fictional Editor's Preface

Volupté begins with two prefaces, the first by a fictional editor named S. B., and the second by Amaury. These prefaces offer some cues about the circumstances of writing. A fictional editor explains that Amaury wrote his letter while traveling to America. The editor maintains Amaury's anonymity, but he does allude to Amaury's high standing within the Roman Catholic church, suggesting that he may be a bishop. Mentioning Amaury's status serves to bolster his endorsement of *Volupté*, and establish the letter writer as a moral authority, himself endorsed by the Catholic Church. Amaury's own letter makes little mention of prestigious affiliations, instead relying on the life story itself to make an argument for the clerical vocation.

Amaury prefaces his letter with a short note of explanation, mentioning that his friend has probed him about his past. The letter comprises the bulk of *Volupté*, but the introductory material provides an important frame for reading Amaury's story, and interpreting the two layers of narrative, the story of writing and the story of his life.

Two separate prefaces, one by the editor, one by Amaury, create distance between the reader and Amaury's story. Although Amaury's memories, feelings and advice occupy a lot of space in *Volupté*, the preface primes the reader to assume a posture of skepticism towards Amaury's letter. Two pages signed "S.-B." precede Amaury's letter, and this short presentation contextualizes the priest's story, and comments on the title. The publisher explains how Amaury's letter came to be published under the title *Volupté*, which is hardly fitting of a religious memoir:

L'éditeur de cet ouvrage a jugé d'ailleurs que les personnes assez scrupuleuses pour s'éloigner sur un titre équivoque perdraient peu, réellement, à ne pas lire un écrit dont la moralité, toute sérieuse qu'elle est, ne s'adresse qu'à des cœurs moins purs et moins précautionnés. Quant à ceux, au contraire, qui seraient attirés précisément par ce qui pourrait éloigner les autres, comme ils n'y trouveront guère ce qu'ils cherchent, le mal n'est pas grand.²⁹

This defense of keeping the original title reveals the publisher's ambivalence about the possible moral value of reading *Volupté*: those who avoid such a title will miss little; those who are attracted won't be harmed much. The suggestive title is a tactic to attract readers in need of moral instruction, yet the publisher admits that both the morality and the title of this text are dubious, which raises the question of why the publisher is even reprinting the text. This fictional

²⁹ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté*, ed. André Guyaux (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986), 31.

publisher's preface implies that *Volupté* neither conveys moral instruction, nor fulfills the expectations of readers who would choose it for its title.

The etymology of *voluptas* further challenges the plausibility of reading *Volupté* for edification. In Latin, *voluptas*, or pleasure, is differentiated from *gaudium*, which means joy. For the Stoics, joy was the aim of the good life.³⁰ Joy is predicated on self-transcendence, which enables individuals to accept their fate, while pleasure depends on one's external circumstances. For the ancients, the term pleasure could not be appropriated into the quest to live a good life, and it remained firmly outside of philosophy as a way of life. In Sainte-Beuve's novel, the publisher's pious justification of the title *Volupté* does not hold up as a strategy for moral instruction, but it alerts the reader to the complex web of interpretations being constructed around Amaury's life, by the character himself, by a fictional publisher, and now by the reader. The publisher's preface prompts the reader to evaluate Amaury's moral landscape, and the letter's internal moral logic.

This publisher shares Sainte-Beuve's own initials, but the pious tone of the preface is a clear contrast to Sainte-Beuve's public persona. By first suggesting that he is the editor through his tell-tale hyphenated initials, then presenting a view that cannot belong to the author himself, Sainte-Beuve cleverly stakes out his relationship to the moral landscape being explored in *Volupté*. Whereas a wholly fictitious editor would leave open interpretative possibilities regarding Sainte-Beuve's views on Amaury's story, Sainte-Beuve's appearance as an overly pious editor foreclose the possibility of sincerity on the part of the author. The editor's preface has two important functions. On the level of plot, the preface explains how Amaury's letter has come to be published, even though the editor's pious logic runs contrary to itself: an editor of

³⁰ Pierre Hadot, "Réflexions sur la notion de 'culture de soi,'" *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), 324-325.

devotional material ought to see the pitfalls of publishing Amaury's letter as a testimony for Christianity or the clerical lifestyle. But the preface also functions to point to Sainte-Beuve's relationship to the ideological framework of *Volupté*. Sainte-Beuve's parody of the contemporary trend of claiming to publish a found document suggests he is reflecting on form itself, and using the novel as a space of inquiry to investigate the problem of individual identity, memory and the good life.

Ironically, the good life that Amaury embraces shares some resemblance with Sainte-Beuve's: after his conversion, Amaury begins evaluating the lives of the saints. This biographical work leads him to conclude that the Christian life can be equated with the good life. The emphasis on biography, both in evaluating others' lives and writing his own, resembles the work of Sainte-Beuve, who himself was reevaluating the characters of French literary history to conceptualize literary history. Whereas the critic is concerned with the literary merit of an author, Amaury is preoccupied with the moral universe.

The priest is interested in knowing how his own life measures up to the good, and this brings up the prior issue of what constitutes the good life. These issues are brought to the fore in *Volupté* by the work of the author as much as by Amaury's own formulations. Sainte-Beuve constructs the story using familiar figures in the publishing world: a writer, a reader, and an editor. In this case, there is the priest writing a letter, an addressee, whom we only know through the priest's descriptions, and an editor who conspicuously withholds the identity of the letter writer. These characters draw the reader's attention to the reading, writing and interpretation that is occurring within the text. The triad of characters—writer, reader, editor—dramatizes the transformation of life into literature. The presence of three characters highlights a core problem of Amaury's project—how to translate memory into a letter of guidance—and stage a

conversation about the good life. The implied reader need not be a compliant one: he is encouraged to listen to Amaury's ponderings on divine love and the good life, while evaluating whether the priest can be taken seriously, whether he shows the self-awareness that would make him worthy of his authority. The implicit author writes the reader into the script of *Volupté*, and gives him the role of questioning whether the priest's authority is legitimate, and evaluating his claims against the evidence he himself is presenting. In a coded way, *Volupté* orients itself to a secular, freethinking reader of 1830s France, and it subtly discourages the docile, devotional reading that the editor and Amaury demand.

Carefully placed prefaces function to highlight differences between Amaury's interpretation of why and how he is writing, and the perspective offered to the reader by the published volume of the fictional memoir. Even before evidence appears that suggests Amaury may be writing for self-oriented reasons, *Volupté* gives the reader some hints that Amaury is not fully articulating, and may not even know, his motivation for writing. Amaury's certainty that his life story will be edifying, as well as his belief that his writing will be unmediated by emotions or interpretations, may provoke the reader's suspicion. In addition to this, the presence of morally evaluative language in the preface—both the editor's and Amaury's—elicit a less sympathetic reading, and prime the reader to exercise caution around Amaury's interpretations.

B. Amaury's Preface to his Autobiography

In the first two pages of the letter, Amaury justifies his project and elucidates his method and intention. He explains that it is only because his friend requested his life story that he has decided to write, and that he will write only the simple truth of his history. Such explicit comments on how and why Amaury is writing reveal something of his moral identity and serve to render departures from this program more striking. Amaury's need to justify writing about

himself reflects an anxiety about being seen as self-oriented and his fears about what he may find in these memories. He wards off any criticism of self-indulgence in advance by framing his writing as a response to demands, and claiming that it will have a positive moral effect on the addressee. Details of the writing conditions are vague, and the goal of writing is to help the addressee:

Vous m'avez plus d'une fois sondé indirectement, mon ami, sur l'époque déjà bien éloignée où j'ai dû subir cette crise, pour moi salubre : je veux vous répondre à loisir aujourd'hui. Dans cette espèce de retraite forcée où des circonstances passagères me confinent, privé d'études suivies, entouré d'étrangers dont je parle mal la langue, je m'entretiendrai chaque jour quelques heures avec vous.³¹

This explanation offers an eminently practical reason for writing: there's little else to do, and besides, it could have a pedagogical use for his friend. Amaury is writing about himself only because it has been requested and because responding may be the best use of his time.

Such an other-oriented explanation for writing is not uncommon in life writing, especially in religious life writing. Although Augustine addresses God in his *Confessions*, he intended to encourage and guide the reader's conversion. His *Confessions* were one of two books that were well-known to the Spanish saint, Teresa of Ávila, who presents her own autobiography as the execution of an order. The opening line reads: "The life of the holy mother Teresa of Jesus and some of the favours granted to her by God, written by herself at the command of her confessor, to whom she submits and directs it."³² Teresa regularly refers to this command in order to redirect her story back to the assigned topic. For example, after a couple sentences

³¹ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 13.

³² Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila*, trans: L. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 21.

praising God for transforming her imperfections, Saint Teresa writes, “I must now return to what I have been commanded.”³³ Her confessor’s command serves to justify a self-narrative and to structure the content, focusing on life events rather than on developing interpretations about the divine in her life. Teresa explains that her writing will help her confessors to know her better, effectively framing the text as other-oriented: requested by others, and of use only to others. Amaury is not commanded to write by his confessor, but he is eager to point out that his writing is an other-oriented activity, and that the alternative would be idleness. For both Teresa and Amaury, writing about oneself is defensible only if requested by someone else, and if it can bring benefit to the reader. Neither of these life writers claim to seek self-knowledge. Both writers work on a dual thesis: an accurate autobiography that accommodates and exemplifies a Christian narrative of conversion and sanctification.

Amaury’s stated purpose for writing affects his method and colors the way he thinks about language and story. Because he is writing in order to transmit rather than to discover himself, Amaury can visualize the writing process as transcription rather than exploration. In the first pages of *Volupté*, Amaury lays out a method for remembering and writing. His description of the process resembles a physical journey inside his body, where the memories are located:

[...] je recommencerai, une dernière fois, de feuilleter en mon cœur ces pages trop émouvantes auxquelles je n’ai pas osé toucher depuis si longtemps; je vous les mettrai de côté, une à une, sans art, sans peinture, dans l’ordre un peu confus où elles me viendront [...] ³⁴

Amaury imagines memory as immediate and graspable, as though it were a prefabricated book that only needs printing. He sees himself burrowing into his memory, turning the pages of his

³³ Ibid., 38.

³⁴ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 36.

heart to capture the memories, and then writing them down. Imagery of retrieving memories, as well as the claim to write without artifice build Amaury's argument that his writing is a truthful reproduction of his history. Saying that his writing is artless functions to preempt criticism related to style and communicate a moral judgment on stylistically elaborate writing. By stating that his letter will be free of artifice, Amaury suggests that ornament might distort or falsify his story. If simple writing is truthful writing, then refined, stylistically advanced writing is contamination. This sort of statement, claiming not to use rhetoric, is in itself an established rhetorical gesture, one that Montaigne used in his preface entitled "Au lecteur":

Je veux qu'on m'y voye en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans estude et artifice: car c'est moy que je peins. Mes defauts s'y liront au vif, mes imperfections et ma forme naïfve, autant que la reverence publique me l'a permis. Que si j'eusse esté parmy ces nations qu'on dit vivre encore souz la douce liberté des premieres loix de nature, je t'asseure que je m'y fusse très-volontiers peint tout entier, et tout nud. Ainsi, Lecteur, je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre : ce n'est pas raison que tu employes ton loisir en un sujet si frivole et si vain.³⁵

Like Sainte-Beuve's character several centuries later, Montaigne claims he will write artlessly in order to depict himself just as he is, exposing his faults unless public modesty requires they be concealed. Montaigne claims that his self-portrait is so faithful to his real self that author and oeuvre are one: "je suis moy-mesme la matiere de mon livre." Like Amaury, Montaigne faces the question of purpose: why is he writing about himself and for whom? Where Amaury responds by positing the usefulness of his writing to his friend, Montaigne makes no defense for his writing. Instead he says that reading the *Essais* would be vain and frivolous, and so he is

³⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien, and Catherine Magnien-Simon, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2007), 27.

writing to God. Questions about the purpose and the method of self-writing seem to bleed into each other; neither Montaigne nor Amaury can respond to one question without touching on the other. For Montaigne, the confessional tradition serves as a pretext to cloak the *Essais*, which are ostensibly addressed to God. Amaury makes a more practical claim, employing the same rhetorical device of eschewing rhetoric to defend his simple style and assert the truthfulness of his account, coloring an aesthetic choice with a positive moral value.

This intertwining of aesthetic and moral values places additional demands on our letter writer, who has stated his preference for simple language and his view that it is most capable of truthfulness and transparency. Now Amaury must inhabit the role of the good kind of writer, who recounts memories without adding interpretation or ornamentation. Amaury's identity is woven into a view of language that separates content from style, message from language. A failure to execute the writing project according to this morally charged conception of language poses a risk. He identifies himself as the good sort of memoir writer, who writes truthfully and with an other-oriented purpose. Maintaining this simple style free of interpretation is necessary to maintain credibility. Conversely, departures from the account he has set out to write may threaten the positive view of self he has constructed.

This threat to the self arises from Amaury's identification with what he defines as the good. It may be useful here to consider Charles Taylor's view of the moral self. Taylor contends that to be an individual is to be situated in a moral space, and that one's moral identity is the sum of one's moral reactions. He points out that an individual's moral views have an implicit background, or moral ontology, that often remains unexplored. One effect of this implicit, unexplored background, is that there is "a lack of fit between what people as it were officially and consciously believe, even pride themselves on believing, on the one hand, and what they

need to make sense of some of their moral reactions, on the other.”³⁶ It is precisely this “lack of fit” which is interesting in the characterization of Amaury, who takes his moral identity as the focal point for writing his memoir. We will soon see that this sort of disjunction between an avowed moral identity and a surprising, incongruous other, is what spurs Amaury to his writing table, to work out who he is and for what he stands. Even before this moment in the text, he identifies his moral development as his main interest in writing. Amaury’s plan is to map out his development as an individual. This development is twofold: he traces his moral development, how he grew to his current understanding and practice of the good life in the clerical vocation. The second strand of Amaury’s development has to do with his uniqueness, the specific traits of personality that find their use in lifestyle. The memoir reveals that Amaury’s conscious beliefs—defined by Christian doctrine and his role as a priest—sometimes differ from his moral reactions.

Charles Taylor’s way of conceiving of the moral self lends us helpful terms for identifying and understanding the underlying moral issues in Amaury’s autobiography. Moral reactions refer to immediate reactions, nearly instinctual evaluations, in morally charged situations. The ways in which an individual qualifies something as better or worse, or higher or lower, point toward an implicit moral background. The moral self is the individual’s profile of evaluative judgments, and this moral identity is both unique to the individual, and subject to continuous change. Moral reactions, whether they be slight preferences or strongly held convictions, form the individual’s moral identity, that silhouette of unique moral reactions.

Sainte-Beuve’s novel directs our attention to the same aspect of individual identity that Charles Taylor is discussing, the difference between the values that Amaury claims to live for, and certain incongruous moral reactions. Amaury’s task is to reconcile his moral instincts and

³⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

the good he professes—a specific religious view that can connect him with others. This religious identity has the power to connect him to others, but it requires that Amaury persuasively communicate his identity as a member of that group, and it depends on his expert use of language. The success of Amaury’s memoir as a letter of spiritual guidance depends on the proper deployment of Christian terminology and concepts, engagement with religious tradition, and a demonstration that the faith he professes has been assimilated into his identity and life. Conversely, the “lack of fit” between consciously held beliefs and incongruous moral reactions requires explaining. The notion of moral landscape emphasizes that the individual is embedded in networks of interpersonal relationships and broader cultural norms. This view of the individual as a moral self inhabiting a moral landscape will help us parse the interwoven stories of Amaury remembering and writing. His memoir seeks to address the incongruities between the value system he claims to espouse and his personal experience. Contradictions in the memoir point to more than a failure on Amaury’s part to be the sort of person who is living what he considers the good life. Contradictions point to a lack of self-knowledge. The need to understand the self, and the incompleteness of Amaury’s understanding of his moral identity, appear at the root of his writing.

The prefaces of the fictional editor and of Amaury highlight the problem of moral identity in a couple ways. The editor frames the text as devotional reading, Amaury gives an unsatisfying explanation of why he is writing and how he plans to carry this out. The moral reactions related to writing itself betray something of his moral identity already in the first pages of *Volupté*. Two specific examples have to do with the claims to other-oriented action and to truthfulness. Amaury makes it clear that he is writing solely for the benefit of his friend, and that he will write artlessly, equating an aesthetic choice with truthfulness. He has emphasized that he

is only engaging in an autobiographical project as a form of altruism to his friend. Although he doesn't say that self-oriented writing is bad, his care in excluding himself from this category of writers implies critique. Similarly, Amaury's claim to write artlessly articulates a concern that other methods of writing would be prone to error and falsifications. In Amaury's explanation of why and how he is writing, the reader witnesses two specific moral reactions, learning that Amaury values candid, guileless speech and other-oriented action. Amaury imagines the relationship between memory and writing as a task of reading and transcription, unmediated by interpretive judgment. Such an attitude draws attention to Amaury's moral identity, nudging the reader to pay attention to Amaury's view of self and his beliefs about his project.

The vision of writing laid out by Amaury also speaks to the historical moment in which *Volupté* was written, both in terms of scientific history and literary history. Sainte-Beuve, perhaps influenced by his own medical training, dreamed of a more scientific approach to literary studies, where individual cases of genius could be mapped onto a larger scheme that classified the types and manifestations of human genius. Sainte-Beuve began with literary portraits, seeing these individual case studies as the building blocks for the burgeoning field of literary science, which would only be able to theorize families of genius once a large number of cases had been compiled and analyzed. Surgical language often appears when Sainte-Beuve is discussing his work. In a study of D.-J. Proudhon, Sainte-Beuve refers to literary analysis as an "autopsie d'âme toute vivante."³⁷ Sainte-Beuve's medical training and scientific literacy are visible in how he discusses literature. The autopsy of living souls that Sainte-Beuve sought to carry out in his literary portraits is being enacted here in the first person by his character. Amaury's goal is to render his inner life transparently. Rousseau makes the same claim to

³⁷ Sainte-Beuve, *P.-J. Proudhon: Sa vie et sa correspondance, 1838-1848*, 4th edition (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1873), 57-58.

transparency in his *Confessions*: “Je me suis montré tel que je fus, méprisable et vil quand je l’ai été, bon, généreux, sublime, quand je l’ai été : j’ai dévoilé mon intérieur tel que tu l’as vu toi-même.”³⁸ Amaury does not claim his memoir to be unique, but he expresses the same confidence as Rousseau in his ability to portray himself just as he is in writing, and the eventual utility of his writing to the reader. The prefaces to *Volupté* wink at the confessional tradition, with rhetorical games of sincerity and transparency, but by using fiction, Sainte-Beuve subtracts the historical person from autobiography, shedding light on the process of remembering itself.

III. Shipwreck: Amaury’s Religious Conversion Story Challenged

A. Meeting of Amaury’s Past and Present

In the beginning of *Volupté*, Amaury maintains a separation between his present writing self and his past remembered self. He explains why and how he is writing, but keeps this discussion in the preface, quarantined from the story itself. Once begun, the memoir betrays only sparse traces of the Amaury who is writing, in the form of reflections on how to continue the story or how to interpret the memories he is sharing. The writer is more or less concealed, and present experiences are held outside of the letter until the midpoint of the letter, when Amaury tells us about the shipwreck that precipitated his life writing. This revelation marks the collision of two layers of narrative, as the story of writing intervenes in the story being told. In the first tome, the editor’s preface and a prologue by Amaury precede Amaury’s letter while remaining separate from his chronological account. In the second tome, the story of writing bleeds into the story being written. The second, fuller explanation of why Amaury is writing reveals the story of

³⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond, and Robert Osmont, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 5.

writing to be integral to the story recounted, and challenges Amaury's earlier explanation for writing.

The structure of the text highlights the intervention of the story of writing in Amaury's life story. The two tomes of *Volupté* were originally published as two separate volumes in 1834. Readers of this first edition would have encountered the second half of the book as a second book, experiencing the symmetry between the two parts: Amaury begins both parts with an explanation of why he is writing. Later *Volupté* appeared in one volume. In the 1869 edition, the 6th and last that Sainte-Beuve supervised, the division between the two tomes disappears. A footnote at the end of Chapter 14 marks the place where the first tome ends in earlier editions: "C'est ici que dans la première édition (1834) se terminait le tome premier, et comme la première partie de l'ouvrage."³⁹ Sainte-Beuve's 1869 treatment of the text seems almost paradoxical: the publication of the two tomes as one, without even a page break, would suggest the separation had no impact on the text, yet the footnote points out that the break between the 14th and 15th chapters fit with the internal logic of *Volupté*, splitting the two parts of the story. Sainte-Beuve had previously expressed an opinion on the author's duty to participate in the publishing process, and as he did not die until October 13, 1869, it is likely that he would have been involved in the process of publishing the 6th edition that appeared in the same year.⁴⁰ Editions of *Volupté* have generally followed the path of the 1869 edition, footnoting what used to

³⁹ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté*, 6^e édition, avec un appendice contenant les témoignages et jugements contemporains (Paris: Charpentier, 1869), 206.

⁴⁰ Sainte-Beuve likens literary works to children in his 1846 *Pensées*: "Un auteur consciencieux est tenu de soigner les éditions de ses œuvres, quelque ennuyeux que ce soit: 'Tant qu'on vit, me disait à ce propos M. Ballanche, il ne faut pas abandonner ses enfants à la charité publique: c'est bien assez qu'après nous il en doive être forcément ainsi'" (*Portraits Contemporains*, ed. Michel Brix [Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008], 1771).

be the separation of volumes.⁴¹ An unusual exception is a 1933 edition by Gallimard which claims to conform to the 1869 edition, but instead of marking the tome division with the 1869 footnote, it reproduces the two-volume publication of the earlier editions.⁴² This edition, which introduces the volume break into the 1869 text, might be interpreted as an argument for the seemingly natural division between the two halves of Amaury's letter, which mirror a break in Amaury's writing.

As in the preface to *Volupté*, Amaury begins the second part of the letter by explaining his reasons for writing, and this second instance of Amaury providing justification for his writing gives us a fuller portrait of the writer. The reader learns that during all this time Amaury has been writing from Portugal, and that the confined space surrounded by foreigners cited in the opening pages is in fact the monastery and its Portuguese-speaking inhabitants. Amaury had boarded a ship in France for America, but it shipwrecked off the coast of Portugal. Amaury follows in the footsteps of Candide, who was also a victim of shipwreck in Portugal. Lisbon experienced a devastating earthquake in 1755, leading Voltaire to reflect on the problem of evil, and launch an attack on Leibniz's philosophical optimism through his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* and his satirical novel *Candide*. In the short novel that runs Candide through all the elements of a Bildungsroman at a comically fast pace, Voltaire concentrates a sequence of unfortunate events that eventually undo Candide's belief in philosophical optimism. When Candide is caught in a storm with his Leibnizian tutor, their friend Jacques drowns, and the tutor

⁴¹ André Guyaux's 1986 edition marks the division with a footnote, as in Sainte-Beuve's 1869 edition. A 1927 edition by Pierre Poux (Paris: Éditions des Presses Françaises) prints the text in two volumes, breaking between the 13th and 14th chapter, and marking the original break with a footnote at the end of the 14th chapter.

⁴² Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1933). The following appears in the first pages: "Texte conforme à la dernière édition parue du vivant de l'auteur. (Sixième édition, Paris, Charpentier, 1869.)"

convinces Candide that the port of Lisbon was providentially created so that Jacques could drown there. In *Candide*, the shipwreck and earthquakes occur as Candide is developing some resistance to the doctrine of his childhood. Sainte-Beuve was certainly a reader of Voltaire,⁴³ and his choice to have Amaury shipwreck in Portugal parallels Voltaire's use of the Portuguese coast to endanger the protagonist and his deeply held beliefs. In *Candide*, shipwrecking assists the young hero in his development as a freethinker. For the older protagonist of *Volupté*, the storm is a catalyst for writing and evaluating his life, and he reveals this halfway through his letter.

Amaury has just left the Portuguese monastery and boarded a new ship for America when he begins writing the second half of the letter. Settling into his place aboard the ship, he begins by justifying his writing, just as he did the first time he sat down to write. Is this repetition a writerly tic, a performance of the character preparing himself to write by first centering his thoughts around his purpose? Is it to orient the text toward the world of the reader, even if the main subject is the author's life? Either of these hypotheses are plausible. What is of particular interest is that these two iterations of purpose differ in focus and content. The second explanation introduces some incongruities, and the letter writer shows no self-consciousness about this. A major shift between the two explanations is Amaury's movement from focusing on the addressee's needs to focusing on his own experience. In the first preface, Amaury immediately directed his attention to his friend, explaining how he planned to address his spiritual needs by telling his own story. His orientation to helping his friend was part of his argument in justifying his writing. This time he begins by stating his own need: "Mais avant de continuer, mon ami, j'ai

⁴³ Max Bach notes that although he never wrote a portrait of Voltaire, Sainte-Beuve regularly engaged with Voltaire's political and religious thought. Bach traces an evolution in Sainte-Beuve's views of Voltaire; Sainte-Beuve became less critical of the Enlightenment thinker as his own political views grew more anticlerical. "Sainte-Beuve and Voltaire," *The French Review* 31.2 (1957): 109-115.

besoin de vous fixer en quelques mots la situation présente d'où je vous écris ces pages."⁴⁴

Amaury mentions his current location of writing, and the frightening circumstances that have led him there. Up until this point, Amaury has kept discussion about the writing process separate from the story itself. Here at the halfway point, the story of writing intervenes in the story Amaury is telling. Why does the history of Amaury's writing appear here, weeks after the shipwreck occurred, and not in the first part of the letter? The interaction of the two layers of narrative raises questions about why Amaury is writing and about writing as a medium for self-knowledge.

B. Unacknowledged Self-Oriented Motives for Writing

In his second explanation, Amaury offers a more primary reason for writing than its eventual usefulness to the reader. He recounts the circumstances in which he decided to write: after boarding a ship bound for America in France, a violent storm interrupted the trip. Three days of struggle brought the vessel to the shore of Portugal, where it shipwrecked. Amaury washed up alone on the shore. He describes how being in mortal danger affected his inner life, activating his memory:

Or la tempête, en me tenant à chaque instant présente aux yeux l'idée de la mort, avait ressuscité en moi toutes les images de ma première vie, non pas seulement les formes idéales et pleurantes qui s'en détachent et s'élèvent comme des statues consacrées le long d'un Pont-des-Soupirs, mais elle avait remué aussi le fond du vieux fleuve et le limon le plus anciennement déposé. Toute poussière s'éveillait, toute cendre tremblait en mon tombeau, comme aux approches d'un jugement qui, même pour les plus confiants et les plus tendres, s'annonce de près comme bien sévère.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 224.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

The storm threatens Amaury's life, and the resurrection of his past threatens his view of self. Confrontation with death stirs up a series of images, presenting Amaury with a spontaneous reconstruction of his past. The self Amaury sees during the storm is unflattering and shocking, and he vows that if he survives, he will write a letter to his friend.

The link between Amaury's narrow survival and his decision to write is not immediately evident, but the images he uses to describe memory indicate the importance of judgment in his experience. Some memories are compared to statues, "*formes idéales et pleurantes*," like those that line the Bridge of Sighs in Venice. This bridge, so named by Lord Byron, is the only fully enclosed bridge in Venice, because it served as a passageway for criminals who were being transferred between the palace where the interrogation rooms were located, and the prison cells. Historically, the bridge would have been mainly used by petty criminals, but Lord Byron imagined it as the last place for a condemned person to look upon the city. Byron's image has proved enduring, and bridges around the world have been given the same name, which may account for Amaury's use of the plural here. He compares his memories to statues on a Bridge of Sighs, conjuring up Byron's image of sighing prisoners crossing from judgment to punishment. Memory becomes even more sinister when Amaury compares the effect of the storm on his memory to a river bed being stirred up. The upheaval of memories that had long lain dormant seem to Amaury to be a sign of impending judgment, a call to reexamine his past. The negative images spontaneously generated during the storm are incongruous with Amaury's view of himself, creating a need to work through his past and reconcile the statues and the sediment he has just seen. Amaury's confrontation of death gives him a shocking view of himself. The contrast between statues and stirred up sedimentation in the imagery surrounding memories shows ambivalence about Amaury's relation to memory itself. Statues suggest memory is

curated, while the storm turning up the riverbed depicts memory as a destructive force beyond Amaury's control. Stirring up the sediment reactivates memories long hidden from Amaury's consciousness.

The uncured memories that are brought to the forefront of his mind carry risks to Amaury, compelling him to perform a self-examination. What sort of risk does memory have for Amaury, and what is at stake in how he deals with his past? The memories that present themselves to his consciousness during the storm challenge Amaury's sense of who he is, and his belief that he has lived a life of divine service. The challenging of this identity has social and theological implications. Amaury's social role is one of spiritual and moral authority, and the silt of Amaury's past threatens his status and legacy in the Church and in public life in both Europe and the United States, where he is a respected clergyman. Theologically, it is important for Amaury's biography to follow a narrative arc of conversion and sanctification. His narrative respects certain conventions of the Christian spiritual biography: he structures his story chronologically, focusing on key years in his youth to highlight his conversion. Amaury also tries to portray his romantic relationships as sins of youth, to contrast these experiences with his relationship with God. While his letter isn't particularly convincing in this regard, Amaury does reproduce the narrative of sinful youth, conversion by grace, and sanctification.

The last part of the Christian life narrative depends heavily on death—how it takes place and the judgment that accompanies it. In *L'Homme devant la mort*, Philippe Ariès traces how beliefs about death and divine judgment evolved.⁴⁶ Studying the deathbed scenes of Renaissance iconography, Ariès discovers the important elements of the Christian death, some of which are visible in Amaury's account. Judgment plays an important, though evolving, role in scenes of

⁴⁶ Philippe Ariès, "L'heure de la mort. Mémoire d'une vie," *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), 99-140.

death. In medieval iconography, a compressed, individual biography of the dying person is produced at the moment of death, and it is upon this abridged account that the life of the deceased is evaluated, and his eternal fate is decided. Renaissance iconography shows a shift in the understanding of divine judgment; now the fate of the soul was believed to be decided at the moment of physical death, which made a good death important. Treatises on the technique of dying well, *artes moriendi*, highlighted what was necessary for a good death. Death is the moment of reckoning: the dying person is shown his sins by the devil, while an angel on his other side points to the grace of God. The dying one ought to be suitably impressed by his sinful life so that he is neither glibly accepting grace and his place in the afterlife, nor so overwhelmed by his sin that he loses faith in God's grace. In *Volupté*, Amaury's experience of judgment and self-examination relays the same tension between damnation and grace. The power of Amaury's memories being churned up make his remains (*toute cendre*) tremble in his grave, as though he were approaching "[...] un jugement qui, même pour les plus confiants et les plus tendres, s'annonce de près comme bien sévère."⁴⁷ From this theological aspect stems a social element of the good Christian death: the dying must be surrounded by loved ones. Being at home with family was so important that unexpected and surprising deaths were excluded from consideration as a good death. One practical reason for this is that witnesses are necessary to confirm how a person died. These last moments were essential for determining the spiritual legacy of the departed. Amaury's story of how he almost died in the storm includes the compressed biography, with an emphasis on his sins, and the hour of death as a time for settling accounts. Amaury's near death departs from the model of the good death in one important way: he is alone, and his

⁴⁷ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 225.

would-be death catches him by surprise, and has no witnesses. Surviving this gives Amaury a chance to live longer, but also to die better.

After this taste of death and judgment, Amaury is given a new lease on life, and he writes as though he were dead and speaking from beyond the grave. The perspective of eternity that Amaury assumes makes it possible for him to tell his entire life story and explain its meaning. Acting as a witness to his own death, Amaury writes both as an autobiographer, shedding light on his inner world, and as a biographer, observing a finished life. The possibility of viewing his life as finished and complete is helped by the fact that Amaury is writing while on a one-way voyage to North America. In the final chapter, he summarizes his latter years like this: “Mon ami, vous savez tout; le reste de ma vie n’a été qu’une application, autant que je l’ai pu, des devoirs et des sentiments généraux envers les hommes.”⁴⁸ Amaury is describing his life since going to seminary, and he refers to “le reste de ma vie” in a way that collapses the boundary between future and past, contributing to the feeling that the narrator is writing from beyond the grave. The perspective that Amaury adopts benefits from the symbolism of crossing the ocean, like crossing the Styx which divides earth and the underworld and from water as a substance of purification, such as in Christian baptism. Amaury creates a feeling of timelessness in the narrative, as though his self-examination is occurring beyond time and space. This timelessness is challenged in moments when the reader perceives Amaury in his role as an interpreter and storyteller.

This is particularly salient when Amaury tells his friend about the shipwreck, because the reader suddenly learns something about the narrator’s recent history, and with this information, it is possible to see ways in which the recent and current experiences of the narrator are coloring

⁴⁸ Ibid., 383.

his account of his life. How Amaury recounts the shipwreck incident also makes it clear that his decision to write has a self-oriented purpose as well. Amaury is responding to his own need, and the activity of remembering means his letter is colored by his current circumstances. His writing is not the simple transcription he had intended to carry out, because the text has internal contradictions that can only be explained by Amaury's evolving perspective on recent life events. Amaury's initial justification for writing doesn't break down with the knowledge that he has just survived a shipwreck, but this new, fuller explanation that opens up the second tome presents a more complicated view of his reasons for writing.

C. Amaury's Resistance to Personal Growth

Although more complex reasons for writing emerge from the shipwreck story, Amaury's language surrounding his project hardly changes. He explains that his friend was the first thing he thought of after this experience, and lists the various vices of which his friend needs to be cured.

Quand je fus donc jeté là, presque noyé sur le rivage, la bouche pleine encore de l'amertume de ces graviers anciens, et plus abreuvé de mon repentir que des flots, à peine essuyé dans mes vêtements et abrité au voisin monastère, j'ai songé à vous—à vous, jeune ami, affadi là-bas dans vos plaisirs, et à cette amertume pareille, et plus empoisonnée peut-être, qui vous était réservée. J'y avais songé déjà dans le péril, et je m'étais dit de vous écrire, si j'en sortais, quelque lettre d'avis suprême. Mais ici le temps était long, la conversation entre les bons pères et moi était courte, par mon peu d'usage de leur langue ; je résolus donc de vous dérouler en forme de mémoires une histoire de ma jeunesse à loisir.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 225.

As in his first explanation, Amaury bolsters his argument with practical considerations: the shipwreck created an unexpected window of time, and he cannot communicate with the other priests because of the language barrier. Nor can he use this time to study, because he has no books with him. Amaury presumably had brought books from France, but these would have been lost with the rest of his possessions in the shipwreck. Writing his life story is the only way he can make this time useful, Amaury argues. Nearly hidden in the list of practical reasons for writing is the revelation that Amaury made a vow to write: “je m’étais dit de vous écrire, si j’en sortais, quelque lettre d’avis suprême.”⁵⁰ In what could be read as a bargain with God, Amaury promises himself that if he survives, he will write to his friend. This letter is proof of Amaury honoring his promise.

At the heart of this discussion about why he is writing lies a morally-charged question: is Amaury engaging in a self-oriented activity or an other-oriented one? His prologue framed this as purely other-oriented. Constraints—lack of study materials, exile—and a sudden window of free time makes writing the most profitable use of his time. Given Amaury’s identity as a priest, these justifications speak to the expectation that a clergyperson minister to others. Amaury lists his practical considerations, preempting any criticism that this life writing is self-indulgent. But these explanations seem less complete once the reader learns about the storm that led Amaury to make a vow and that precipitated a need to work through his memories. The second time Amaury justifies writing, the reader knows that it is at least partly self-oriented. Meanwhile Amaury continues to weave in the narrative of service to others in his retelling of the shipwreck. He points out that he thought about his friend already during the storm, and vowed to write him. He says that although his memories of his past life were bitter, he immediately considered how

⁵⁰ Ibid.

much more bitter his friend's memories might be. Amaury recounts the experience as though he lived it in the third person, finding useful lessons for others in his present experience.

Volupté's second tome opens with a new reason for writing that orients the reader differently for the second half of the letter. Two of Amaury's stated beliefs about writing are challenged. First, his conception of writing as an unmediated transcription loses credibility when contradictions appear in his explanations for why he is writing. Second, his belief that writing this letter is an altruistic endeavor seems doubtful. Even if Amaury really does take an interest in his friend's well-being, other motivations besides the care for another are present in his letter. Amaury is caring for himself as well, working through memories that have troubled his understanding of who he is. Sharing his memories with a younger man also points to the role of writing to communicate a legacy, in the spiritual formation of another, and in memorializing his unique story through autobiography.

Amaury's letter shows writing functioning as a care of the self, yet his overarching narrative of himself remains unaltered. In his account of the shipwreck, he remains the giver, the other-oriented priest whose experiences and actions can only accrue value when they minister to others. He cherishes these beliefs about why and how he is writing so much that he cannot accommodate contrary evidence. To admit that writing is a self-oriented activity, or to allow that he is indeed interpreting his memories, would threaten his view of the good, and his belief about what sort of person he is. Amaury's refusal to yield to contrary evidence reveals a conflict between the importance he gives to other-oriented action and his desire to be identifiable as a giving person, and his own needs after surviving a life-threatening storm.

Amaury writes the shipwreck episode into his story without disrupting his story of Amaury the benevolent writer, which gives him a stable support as he pushes his narrative

forward. By keeping this larger narrative in place, and configuring recent events so as to fit into an altruistic narrative, Amaury wards off the sort of doubt that would derail the letter before its dénouement. Amaury resists interpreting the shipwreck as the impulse for writing; instead he recounts the event as a service to others. Meanwhile the reader is a witness to this act of narrative intervention. The meeting of the two levels of narrative, the story of writing and the story of Amaury's life, gives the reader a window into the storyteller's process of sculpting life events into a meaningful story.

IV. Amaury's Active Role in Interpreting his Life

The illusion that Amaury is writing from outside of time as an observer of his own history breaks down when he moves from the monastery to the ship. The remembering, interpreting storyteller takes on flesh as he includes details about where he is writing and what he is doing during the time of writing. From the point of this revelation, *Volupté* offers a different reading experience. The introduction of Amaury's present circumstances into the story he is telling reveals the inextricability of the two stories and the presence of both the narrating self and the narrated self. Past life and present life coincide, and it becomes clear that the life being recounted is shaped by Amaury's current experience.

Once the reader has encountered Amaury the writer, glimpses of the narrator can be seen elsewhere in the text. Michel de Certeau prefaced his study *L'écriture de l'histoire* with some remarks on modern Western practices of history, observing that such history takes as its starting point the delineation between past and present.⁵¹ Amaury's writing mimics historiography, as he produces an autobiography to explain himself and his past. He attempts to hide his traces as the

⁵¹ Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 10.

interpreter, the one making sense of memories, but slippages, things that resist and escape meaning, shed light on the system of interpretation Amaury is imposing. The old man writing reveals himself in the letter, and the reader perceives this writing self in the structure imposed on memory, the attempts to maintain control of the narrative, and in the self-oriented function of writing.

A. Spatial Chaptering

The reader's newfound knowledge of the Amaury's travel and trauma illuminates the logic of his narrative, which is structured in a deceptively simple way. His circumstances offer him a key for thinking through his life, and this is evident in the spatial structure of his life story. Writing from a monastery and then a ship, and unable to communicate with others, Amaury's daily life is shaped by his status as a foreigner and his bodily immobility. It is hardly surprising that from this vantage point, his life appears as a sequence of places where he has lived. Using places and spaces to remember things belonged to the field of rhetoric in the ancient world. The art of memory sought to improve one's natural faculty of memory through artificial memory, which involved training memory through association between place and memory. By imagining things to be remembered in specific locations in a building, one could train one's natural faculty of memory and improve it.⁵² Simonides famously remembered every guest at a banquet after the roof caved in, and he was able to indicate the deceased to their relatives because he had remembered the places where they were seated. In *Volupté*, Amaury's life is neatly divided into spatial chapters, with his stages of development mapped onto the places he has been. Amaury's memories are associated with places, and while this creates a tidy biography, its very tidiness suggests that the narrative is a product of remembering: an active mental process which has

⁵² Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

organized events and used places as a mnemonic device to store memories in their place. The one-for-one pairing of places with an event or relationship simplifies the narrator's ability to recall, but also suggests remembering is mediated by past instances of remembering, that Amaury has trod through these memories before, organizing and sorting them into categories.

Amaury follows a linear chronology, beginning with childhood and ending with himself in the moment of writing, on his way to New York. Within this chronological outline, Amaury uses places to segment his life into moments and events. Thus his family's home, with his favorite attic room, come to designate by metonymy his childhood. Amaury glosses over these 17 years as "chastes années," characterized by "silence, régularité, travail et prière."⁵³ As such, the attic room and the childhood home refer to the Amaury who has not yet been exposed to society. His social circles expand as he matures, and various places are associated with times in his life. The farm La Gastine designates the first months as an independent youth, and the young woman he courted there. The Couaën estate points to Amaury's burgeoning political career as a Royalist, and his lifelong friendship with the Couaën family. Paris, the capital city, is the place where Amaury studies a little, has an affair with a married woman, and squanders his time and money on licentious behavior. Thus Paris becomes associated with Amaury's years as an indulgent and rootless young adult. The story of his youth in terms of places culminates with an exodus from Paris to the seminary that is located in an unspecified French countryside. The seminary signifies Amaury's return to his childhood piety, and recalls Amaury's rural childhood home. This geographical return to rural France runs parallel to Amaury's interpretation of his joining the Church as coming home and returning to God. The family home, the farm of La Gastine, the Couaën estate, Paris, the rural seminary: these are the places that contain the stories

⁵³ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 38.

of Amaury's youth. These chapters link places to specific relationships in his life, breaking up his chronological story into distinct time periods of his own history. Amaury narrates his past life, mapping his personal development onto specific place-moments. The structure he chooses is plastic enough to contain his present detour in Portugal and his voyage to America, and makes space for future developments. By casting his history as a series of travels and moves, Amaury is able to integrate disruptive changes into his story. The shipwreck in Portugal and a trans-Atlantic move fit with the itinerant identity he is constructing.

Spatial chaptering offers a simple and elegant solution to the narrative structure of the life story, but it also points to the ways in which Amaury's past selves are present in his writing. Amaury claimed that in order to write, he would "feuilleter en [s]on cœur."⁵⁴ Are these pages the memories he believes he can access without mediation, or are these pages of a book that Amaury has penned and edited in his mind, through years of remembering? The reader sees Amaury as the young protagonist of the story and as the old man writing, but *Volupté* also hints at another Amaury who is not meant to figure prominently here: the Amaury who lived from the time between the past era that is the subject of writing and the present day. Between the past and present is an intermediate past, during which Amaury's youth would have been remembered, either informally or intentionally. Amaury does not say much about his memory practices during all these years, except in the preface: "Je recommencerais, une dernière fois, de feuilleter dans mon cœur ces pages trop émouvantes auxquelles je n'ai pas osé toucher depuis si longtemps."⁵⁵ Even if Amaury has avoided thinking about his past, what he remembers of it is shockingly different from the reel of images he sees in the storm. His shock in seeing a compressed biography of his life is that it is so different from what he remembered, even though he had not

⁵⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

been intentionally sculpting his memories to make them more palatable to himself. The supposedly untreated memories that Amaury has not dared to touch in recent years, are communicated through a pattern of correspondences between places and events. Specific places conjure up a memory that is emblematic of a stage in his development and a relationship he had in that place and time. The structure of this historical account reveals a developed memory practice, Amaury's own personal tradition for understanding the person he was and the person he has become.

B. Immobility and the Illusion of Timelessness

Places form the pillars of Amaury's narrative, revealing his intervention as a historian separating eras of his past. Writing from an enclosed space, he emphasizes the travel in his past, as though his awareness of movement were heightened by virtue of his present immobility. The contrast between mobility and immobility draws another connection between the account Amaury writes of his past, and the effect of his present experience on how he remembers. The effect of the present on remembering points to the importance of the body in the process of remembering, recounting and writing. Amaury's physical body is both the constant and the contingent element in his perception of the world, and his writing reflects this reality. We have seen that his bodily movement provides the form to his narrative, but his physical enclosure and recent trauma also play into his narrative.

Amaury's enclosure is highlighted when he draws attention to the circumstances of writing and explains how he came to be in the monastery in Portugal. Finding himself with free time in an unexpected place, Amaury uses the time and space outside of ordinary life to turn inward to examine his life. Sainte-Beuve's choice to have Amaury writing in confinement situates this text in a long tradition of introspective writing, beginning with Augustine's

Confessions. This process of shutting oneself up away from the world to explore the self recalls the circumstances of Descartes' thought experiment: he first turns inward, shutting himself in his room, stopping his ears, and shutting out sensation; from this state he turns outward again, sharing his experience in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes pursues his quest for knowledge and understanding through the enclosed activity of thinking, taking his inner life as a starting point. Decades after Sainte-Beuve, Proust's narrator would embark on a similar project of remembering and writing in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. For these writers, pursuing knowledge involves one's own subjective interiority, and this enclosure within the self is reflected in the physical space of writing: Amaury writes from a cell in the monastery, then the berth of the ship. Although this introspection takes place in a closed room, the process does not remain sealed. Amaury—like his predecessors in the literary tradition—will eventually leave his writing chamber and send out the written product of self-examination. Amaury neatly ends his writing project and his physical isolation at the same time: when he hears the crew announcing land, he wraps up his letter to his friend. Signing off his writing and stepping onto land, Amaury's introspective experience is brought to a close, and he turns outward, opening himself to his new life in America.

In the monastery waiting for the ship, and then in the berth of the ship, Amaury is physically isolated and immobile at his writing table. The enclosed space of the ship compels Amaury to write, and mirrors his mental activity of self-examination and introspection. Amaury's immobile body is traveling, mirroring the voyage into the self that he undertakes through writing. As Amaury recounts his conversion story, a narrative of transformation, he inhabits a ship that transports his immobile body to a new continent. Immobility and mobility intersect in a way that mimics the writer's own activity of remembering. The solitude of the ship

conceals the passage of time, suggesting that Amaury's present situation is a non-event: in fact, for the duration of the confession, no mention of eating or sleeping is made. The stillness of the ship, the lack of social possibilities, in short, the lack of event in the writer's current experience, contribute to the sense that Amaury is speaking from the perspective of the eternal, *sub species aeternitatis*. Underemphasizing the activity of writing conceals that Amaury is still traveling—on a voyage into the self through writing, and on a voyage to America—and that he does not know the end of his life story. It also conceals Amaury's role in producing a history, in selecting and ordering his memories, and representing them in an intelligible way.

C. Amaury's Rhetorical Interventions

The activities that writing involves—selecting, ordering, explaining—becomes visible in Amaury's letter in the moments when he intervenes to guide the narrative. Amaury's present self writes itself into the text, through structural choices, such as spatial chaptering and the plot of Christian conversion that he imposed onto his history, but the narrator also makes himself visible in places where Amaury's memory resists his interpretation. Michel de Certeau's view of the historian cutting and pasting history offers a helpful image for looking at how Amaury's memories bump up against each other:

Mais ce que cette nouvelle compréhension du passé tient pour non pertinent—déchet créé par la sélection du matériau, reste négligé par une explication—revient malgré tout sur les bords du discours ou dans ses failles : des “résistances,” des “survivances” ou des retards trouble discrètement la belle ordonnance d'un “progrès” ou d'un système d'interprétation.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 10.

Examples abound of these incongruities between Amaury's system of interpretation and the memories he shares. Amaury imagines memory in various ways in his letter, but his views on memory do not evolve toward a clear resolution. How memory functions, the purpose of remembering and the reliability of memory remain open questions. Although Amaury initially claims that remembering is a transparent process, akin to transcription, this does not resolve the problems surrounding memory. Through the length of *Volupté*, memory raises more questions than it answers, and Amaury's rhetoric raises suspicion surrounding his control of the narrative, his ability to remember, and whether language obscures or illuminates. If Amaury loses control of his story, it undermines his argument; if remembering is complicated and the memories are muddled, the premise of his memoir as realistic representation is undone. The inevitable presence of rhetorical gestures breaks the illusion of transparency. Memory and remembering become less self-evident to Amaury as his writing progresses.

While initially comfortable with the image of transcription, Amaury later shows awareness that writing a memoir requires him to pilot the narrative. One example is his memory of meeting Mme de Couaën in the garden at sunset. The young Amaury ran to meet her, and took her hand as they ran toward the setting sun. In this anecdote, the remembering Amaury is present: he acknowledges his rhetorical choices in retelling this story and he judges his past self, denouncing the ease with which he cultivated this relationship. What is noteworthy is how Amaury comments on this sunset scene. First he points out that this is an abridged account centered on a specific theme: "Voilà bien, mon ami, voilà en abrégé toute la fortune de l'erreur principale qu'il me reste à vous conter."⁵⁷ Amaury acknowledges that he is synthesizing his past in order to highlight specific aspects of his life. Furthermore, he tells his friend that what he has

⁵⁷ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 245.

just told may not have the desired effect. Amaury would be content with ending his story here, letting this one anecdote about Mme de Couaën serve as an “emblème,” or symbol, of his error and his failed passion, but this could risk obscuring the message that he is trying to send to his friend: “ce serait vous en laisser une trop souriante idée, et j’ai à vous faire sentir de près les efforts et l’impuissance d’atteindre, les déchirements et les ronces.”⁵⁸ Now the letter writer acknowledges that he is considering the impact of his writing on his reader. This involves choosing to compress or expand his accounts of the past, and making rhetorical choices that will make his friend *feel* the gravity of his sin and the suffering it caused.

Second, Amaury moves toward the abstract when talking about this error he committed. Instead of examining specific actions and motives in the anecdote he has just shared, Amaury speaks in broad terms, drawing generalizations from his own experience. He describes how “en toutes ces passions qui commencent,” these nascent relationships may not seem weighty: “il semble [...] que ces mains, qu’on se donne l’un à l’autre, ne sont pas des nœuds ni des chaînes, et qu’elles pourront cesser à temps de se tenir, sans qu’il y en résulte pour chacun des traces sanglantes.”⁵⁹ What really happens, Amaury concludes, is that even light relationships involve bitter pain and scarring when they are undone:

[...] la marque demeure et fait cicatrice avec souffrance ou endurcissement. Passé un certain nombre très petit d’images premières, le cœur devient un miroir tout rayé où les objets les plus heureux ne se réfléchissent plus qu’à travers un réseau ineffaçable.⁶⁰

Generalizing creates distance between the remembered event and the moral takeaway Amaury is constructing for his friend. He is warning his friend to enter relationships with caution, and by

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

rendering his own experience in an allegorical register, Amaury introduces the idea that the sort of relationship he had with Mme de Couaën does damage to the soul, and hinders spiritual development. He uses imagery of scarring, and compares the heart to a mirror that is made illegible because of the scratches. Amaury believes these relational ruptures of his early years have compromised the ability of the soul to reflect clearly. The commentary Amaury writes on his relationship and on its effects on his inner life contains a problem: if careless attachments in youth leave enduring marks on one's inner life, and if Amaury has learned this through his own experience, how trustworthy is Amaury, and to what degree is his narrative of spiritual growth credible? Speaking in abstract terms functions to veil these incongruities, keeping Amaury from having to admit that his past is an obstacle to clear memory and a well-maintained inner life. The way Amaury recounts and comments on the sunset episode with Mme de Couaën demonstrates a couple things. First, remembering and writing involve active rhetorical decisions, even for the narrator who self-identifies as transparent. Second, Amaury leans toward the allegorical in explaining his past, selecting one episode of his past from which he then generalizes human experience and constructs universal lessons. Finally, Amaury participates in a discourse of inner life that calls into question his qualifications for guiding someone else's inner life.

V. Care of the Self in "Volupté"

A. Neglect in Amaury's Youth

Properly tending one's inner life is a common thread in *Volupté*. Amaury's discourse on self-examination reveals his belief that care of the self is important, but he evaluates himself negatively with regards to his own practice. Amaury traces the neglect of his inner life to his first time living away from home: during a six-week stay with his uncle, the teenage Amaury

neglected his “habitudes régulières,” leaving room for the development of “ce penchant dangereux à la tendresse, que mes habitudes régulières avaient jusque-là contenu.”⁶¹ Several years later, his obsession with Mme de Couaën and his lack of discipline effect a “lent ravage intérieur” on Amaury.⁶² His busy life in Paris keeps him from attending to his inner life, and when he examines himself he finds it undone: “je rentrai en moi pour me sonder et m’examiner, il se trouva que ma disposition intérieure s’était défaite toute seule.”⁶³ Amaury diagnoses this unkempt inner self because he notices that whereas he formerly desired to serve the Couaën family, he now finds himself longing to escape to a freer life. He defines this untrained soul as a state of having no focal point, no central organizing principle: “L’âme humaine [...] devient bientôt comme une machine ingénieuse qui s’électrise contrairement en un rien de temps et au gré des circonstances diverses. Le centre, à force de voyager d’un pôle à l’autre, n’existe nulle part; la volonté n’a plus d’appui.”⁶⁴ The self, uncared for, can react to stimuli, but it loses its center and exists nowhere.

“Volonté” constitutes the criterion by which Amaury defines mental activities that are edifying. He distinguishes dreaming from praying by its passive nature, when he remembers the time he accompanied Mme de Couaën to a chapel. As a young adult, Amaury spent a lot of time with the Couaën family, veiling his infatuation with the marquis’ Irish wife with a more career-minded pretext: his desire to find his way in the world through this well-connected family. Once when the marquis was away, Mme de Couaën requests that Amaury accompany her to a chapel, so that she can pray for her aging mother in Ireland. When they arrive at the chapel, Amaury finds himself in a more religious disposition than he has for a long time, but, believing that his

⁶¹ Ibid., 41.

⁶² Ibid., 77.

⁶³ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 149.

presence and prayers would sully the prayer of the saintly Mme de Couaën, he leaves her in the chapel to pray, and remains dreaming outside by the cliff overlooking the sea. Reflecting on this moment later in life, Amaury points out that his inclination to refrain from praying goes against Christian doctrine: “j’oubliais que toute prière est bonne, acceptable; que la prière du plus souillé des hommes, si elle sort du cœur, peut ajouter quelque chose à celle d’un ange.”⁶⁵ Amaury then distinguishes dreaming from praying. Dreaming is passive: a vague sensation that requires no effort of will.

Rêver, vous le savez trop, c’est ne rien vouloir, c’est répandre au hasard sur les choses la sensation présente et se dilater démesurément par l’univers en se mêlant soi-même à chaque objet senti, tandis que la prière est voulue, qu’elle est humble, recueillie à mains jointes, et jusqu’en ses plus chères demandes, couronnée de désintéressement.⁶⁶

Passivity and self-interested desires are the marks of dreaming, while prayer involves concentrating one’s will and training one’s desire toward a disinterested good. The opposition between passive dreaming and active prayer is visible in the body’s posture: the praying individual is turned inward with hands folded, while the dreamer looks outward, and experiences internal reactions based on external stimulation. The practice of prayer trains the self to be uninterested in personal gain. This sort of active training is imagined spatially and architecturally in *Volupté*, and extends beyond prayer to include self-examination, reading the works of spiritual masters, and remembering. In commenting on this event, Amaury admits to having wondered what would have happened if he had prayed rather than dreamed during this moment with Mme de Couaën. The narrator is still wondering about his past: “Une pensée m’a bien des fois occupé

⁶⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 84.

depuis.”⁶⁷ Amaury admits that he has often thought back on this moment when he chose passive dreaming over prayer. His continued criticism of his spiritual practice in the past, as well as his belief that the decisions of his youth have marred him irreparably, work against the interpretation he is offering of his life, in which his past sinful self has been transformed.

B. Implied Neglect in Adulthood

Amaury speaks highly of “maîtres spirituels,” but this praise accentuates the difference between his own practice and theirs. He tells about how he read the works of masters like Bourdaloue, Jean Gerson and Jean Climaque, praising them for their self-knowledge. Their attention to “les moindres replis de l’âme” makes them more knowledgeable about the human soul than the most corrupt members of society, thanks to years of training:

Car, chaque soir, chaque matin, à toute heure du jour et de la nuit, durant des années sans nombre, vous avez visité coins et recoins de vous-même, comme, avant de se coucher, fait dans les détours du logis la servante prudente.⁶⁸

In this discussion of the Church fathers, Amaury slips from talking about his past self first encountering these readings to the present. The present tense here suggests that it is the older Amaury who is admiring the masters’ attention to self-examination, even as he himself is purportedly counseling his addressee. We also learn later that during his entire career in the Church, Amaury has expressly avoided serving as a regular spiritual director, in the name of caring for his own spiritual needs: “[...] jeune encore, ayant tant à veiller sur moi-même, sur les anciennes et les récentes plaies, j’ai dû redouter tout fardeau trop lourd, toute charge régulière d’âmes.”⁶⁹ Nearly twenty years have elapsed since going to seminary, and Amaury claims these

⁶⁷ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 235.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 385.

years have been occupied in divine service, following the expected trajectory after a conversion, yet he has never taken on the responsibility of being a spiritual director. This admission shows that Amaury is less practiced than one might expect from a priest writing a letter of spiritual guidance. His admiration for the spiritual discipline of the masters opens the possibility that he himself has not followed the same rigorous path of development.

Amaury's own account suggests that he lacks spiritual discipline. He castigates himself for not tending to his inner life in his youth, without giving evidence that his practices changed since becoming a priest. Amaury admires those who can remember easily because their souls have been made orderly and transparent through regular spiritual discipline. His own stories depict himself as not having maintained a solid inner life, and by his own admission, his difficulty remembering things clearly is a result of his soul's deformation in his early youth. Amaury is an unreliable narrator, even by his own account. Evidence that Amaury has not grown in the expected ways following his conversion suggests that the interpretation Amaury is giving to his life does not fit his past.

C. Writing as an Unacknowledged Care of the Self

Amaury's writing demands a focus and concentration akin to that required for prayer. Amaury's main criterion for prayer is that it involves "volonté," unlike dreaming. Writing his story and focusing on the elements that will be of use to his friend demands sustained focus. Although Amaury's history of not tending to his inner life, not maintaining rigorous spiritual practices and not training his mind to remember clearly, the very act of writing his introspective letter responds to these failings. Amaury's discourse on attending to his inner life and his definition of prayer group active mental activities such as reading, writing and remembering, in the same category. The letter writing that Amaury undertakes fulfills his criteria for prayer.

Given that Amaury's impetus for writing is his near death and the unflattering view of himself that he encountered, the writing of his failures has a reparative function. Even though his story confesses his failures, the act of writing embodies his attempt to repair his past, undoing the negligence to his inner life by confronting his memories and interpreting them to understand himself.

The impetus for Amaury's letter is an encounter with death, but he is quick to turn the discussion away from himself, framing his encounter with death in terms of its eventual utility to his friend. Although Amaury does not admit that writing is responding to his own need, the encounter with death is connected to life writing. Amaury writes from the perspective of a survivor, and while his body is safe, his sense of self remains shaken. Storytelling holds out the possibility of finding a meaningful thread among memories, current experience, and expectations of the future. And although Amaury does not complain about the solitude he's experiencing, his letter writing reflects a decision to reconnect with a younger man, toward whom Amaury assumes a paternal role. After the solitary experience of near death, Amaury extends outward again. Stories, friendship and future expectations bring the social Amaury back to life, extending his self out of the body and into the world. The future has reappeared to Amaury with its infinite possibilities, and he is left to reconcile his present experience, his expectations and the fresh memories that have been churned up.

The destabilizing experience of being presented with a self he does not like leads him to reestablish agency through narrative. Faced with chaos and disorder, Amaury turns to narrative and its power to overcome fragmentation by configuring, ordering and unifying parts into a coherent plot. His brush with death has presented him with a shocking and unflattering view of himself. While his memoir may serve as edifying reading material down the road, a more

immediate purpose is self-oriented, responding to this need to understand the self and make sense of it. By assuming the position of the writer, a historian of himself, Amaury implicitly acknowledges that his past remains troubling to him. Writing offers a means to control his story, guiding how events, details and experience are woven together, and what significance they have in an overarching personal narrative. Taking the helm in his own narrative means Amaury can make his life intelligible, attributing meaning to it.

D. Limits of Life Writing for Self-Knowledge

Augustine reflected on time in the eleventh book of his *Confessions*, as he contemplated the concept of eternity. He realizes that the present is only a small increment of time, and he wonders what the past and the future are, because they are never experienced as such. He concludes that it is imprecise to speak of three times, past, present and future. Rather, there is “a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things to come [...] The present considering the past is the memory, the present considering the present is immediate awareness, and the present considering the future is expectation.”⁷⁰ The reduction of Amaury’s self to his body during the storm gives him a task now that he has survived. He must reconcile the three forms of the present: memory, immediate awareness, and expectation. Amaury chooses to harmonize these three realities through life writing, highlighting the role of narrative in understanding the self. Writing a letter makes the self narrative a social act. Storytelling occurs in relationship and as part of a dialogue, even if the text only includes one side of this communication.

Amaury cannot provide a history of himself that is free of explanation, analysis, and interpretation. The storyteller’s physical movement draws his attention to his present experience,

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 235.

prodding him to include the event in the letter, and reinterpret his reason for writing. The event and drama of *Volupté* is centered on Amaury's recounting and interpretation. He even uses the discourse of hermeneutics when he talks about his sinful youth. Amaury says that now he sees that God was placing signs in his life to call him back to the good life, but he acknowledges that he was not reading them correctly. In Amaury's own words, misinterpretation of God's signs was the cause of his straying ways; correct interpretation, thanks to divine illumination, has saved him.

Amaury is quick to turn his own experience into a teaching moment. Amaury values other-oriented living, and his high view of service to others keeps him from admitting any self-oriented benefits, even spiritual benefits, that he might receive. Amaury speaks of *bien-être* in one instance:

[...] le grand nombre des hommes dans les affaires de ce monde ne suivent pas d'autres mobiles que les faux principes d'une expérience cauteleuse qu'ils appliquent à l'intérêt de leur nom, de leur pouvoir, ou de leur bien-être.⁷¹

Criticizing those who use their principles hypocritically for personal gain, Amaury suggests possible gains, grouping *bien-être* along with power and a good name as vain pursuits. Amaury does not avow that his project is self-oriented, nor does he express a need for self-knowledge. His belief that he knows himself and just has to transcribe his life into a letter forecloses the possibility of exploring the question of who he is openly. His narrative does contain moments of self-examination. Rather than asking who he is, Amaury seems to be asking whether he is a good person. His interest in himself is immediately directed to a moral evaluation of himself, suggesting that for Amaury, self-examination is an acceptable form of reflection. His identity is

⁷¹ Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 391.

not an open question for him, as religion gives him language for understanding who he is, and narrative model to hold onto. Amaury's religious identity tells him who he is, leaving him to evaluate how he inhabits this identity, tracing his evolution, the degree to which he succeeds and fails in living out his Christian identity.

Although he shies away from the language of the care of the self and refuses to acknowledge overtly any personal benefit he might gain, narrating draws Amaury into a practice of care of the self. As he orders his life, positing connections between events, he engages in self-examination. With this larger narrative of redemption serving as a guide, Amaury configures his own unique sequence of events so as to fit into this larger model proposed by the Christian tradition, and modeled in the speech and writings of other members of the faith. Amaury's carefully coded participation in life writing could be read as a testament to the evidence of external social pressures in the text. Amaury occupies an important position in the Church, and he occupies his clerical role as a writer, offering his letter as counsel to another.

Amaury's storytelling can be read as a modern instance of care of the self, as the ancients understood it: a tentative, questioning self-examination occurs in these pages, and the letter is addressed to a close friend, situating the exercise in a dialogue between two individuals. Even if this function of writing is unacknowledged or unintentional, the letter manifests an interest in understanding the self, and attempts to make sense of personal identity and the good.

Volupté cannot be read as a finished explanation of who Amaury is, because we have watched Amaury's interpretation of himself change even in the course of writing it down, and we know that he will continue living and interpreting himself and his life when he settles in America. Only the moment of death puts an end to the continuity of living and narrating, and this continuity implies that Amaury's letter is a written trace of a moment in narrative identity. One

question that emerges from considering *Volupté* as a mise en scène of care of the self, is how Amaury seems to incorporate contradictory positions into his letter, without resolving them: the reader becomes aware of his complicated circumstances for writing, but Amaury doesn't change his position on what is compelling him to write. Even if we assume Amaury's intentions are as clear and other-oriented as he claims, do we have evidence that Amaury receives any epistemic gain from his writing?

Amaury shows a growing awareness of the incongruities in his narrative, and he ends his letter by asking himself whether he ought to send the letter. He reins in his memories to his central thesis about divine love, showing that he wants his story to communicate a personal testimony that also manages to make a strong argument for the superiority of divine love over human, carnal love. This is formulated in the last lines of *Volupté*, when Amaury considers not sending the letter.

Puis-je, à une telle vue, jeter encore un seul regard en arrière, m'inquiéter de l'écho de ces souvenirs dans un cœur ? Faut-il, mon ami, dès à présent, vous laisser arriver ces pages ?

Faut-il que vous ne les lisiez qu'après ma mort ?⁷²

Amaury has no ready answer to his own question. He is aware that the letter has not turned out as he imagined it would, and wonders whether it would be appropriate to send it. It is unclear whether Amaury's question is concerned with the needs of his friend or for his own reputation as bishop. This question shows Amaury's awareness of the letter's contradictions, but he never confronts the possibility that he has been writing for his own benefit. From the reader's perspective, Amaury's self-awareness seems incomplete, partially developed. He is attuned to some sort of internal problem in the text, and hesitates about whether he should send the letter.

⁷² Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté* (1986), 393.

But instead of reinterpreting his reason for writing, Amaury sidesteps the issue and pushes the story forward to its destination, as he nears his own destination: New York.

Amaury's idea that writing a memoir is like transcription is challenged through the writing process. The activities of remembering and writing highlight the tension between Amaury's agency in storytelling, and the contingency of the narrative on factors outside his control. Accumulating evidence that writing is helping himself threatens Amaury's identity, as well as the belief that he can control his narrative. Writing a memoir does challenge Amaury's views on language and memory, but the unresolved knots and paradoxes in *Volupté* intimate an ambivalence toward introspective writing as a path to knowledge.

III. Conclusion

Reading Sainte-Beuve's novel as a fictional autobiography shows that *Volupté* confronts major issues of autobiography. Amaury's struggle to fit his memories into a spiritual autobiography illuminates the tension between autobiography's conventions and its demand for authenticity. The stakes are high for *Volupté*'s protagonist, whose salvation is threatened if his life story veers too sharply from the conventional arc of the Christian life. Under these conditions, Amaury is intent on glossing over contradictions, rather than seeing these narrative knots as opportunities for learning and self-understanding. Sainte-Beuve's novel illustrates the limitations of a rigid method of interpretation: Amaury's loyalty to a narrative convention, the religious conversion trope, deprives him of tools for interpreting life events that do not fit within these narrow confines.

Amaury's refusal to look at incongruous memories thwarts his personal growth, but *Volupté* intimates that all is not lost for Amaury: his certainties are shaken in spite of his

resistance to new insights. Amaury's story hints at the ethical potential of life writing, which draws him inadvertently into self-examination, a spiritual exercise that advances the quest for self-knowledge. *Volupté* also identifies a risk, that life writing can foster solipsism, and even delusion. *Volupté* concludes without offering any certainty that the letter was sent, but the possibility of a response holds out another possibility: that Amaury's interlocutor will ask questions that challenge him and further his self-understanding.

Volupté exposes the need for adaptive methods for interpreting lives. Sainte-Beuve went on to make a similar argument about interpreting literature in his career as a critic. A year after the publication of *Volupté*, Sainte-Beuve devoted one of his literary portraits to the seventeenth-century skeptic Pierre Bayle, whom he praised for "son esprit mobile, empressé, accueillant."⁷³ Sainte-Beuve opposes this tolerant, adaptive method of criticism to the rigid method of judging literature against the exemplary models of Aristotle and Quintilian, a method that was still being championed by Jean-François de La Harpe in the eighteenth century. *Volupté*'s exploration of inflexible modes of interpretation align with, and perhaps foreshadow, Sainte-Beuve's key contribution to literary criticism: the notion that only adaptable, flexible interpretive methods will allow us to understand what is new, innovative, and unconventional.

⁷³ Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "Du génie critique et de Bayle," *Portraits littéraires*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Maxime Leroy (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1956), 985.

CHAPTER TWO

Fictional Autobiography as a Laboratory of Moral Thought:

Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple*

I. Introduction

Paul Bourget's 1889 novel, *Le Disciple*, has served alongside Voltaire's *Candide* as a classic example of the *roman à thèse*, even though its thesis remains ambiguous. *Le Disciple*'s status as a *roman à thèse* may be due to Paul Bourget's legacy in the genre—perhaps more merited for his later works—combined with the fact that *Le Disciple* remains one of his most well-known works. Much of the secondary literature on *Le Disciple* has served indirectly to problematize this classification. Scholars have put forth a variety of theses to summarize the argument of Bourget's supposedly didactic novel. Teodor de Wyzewa, who belonged to the first generation of *Disciple* readers, saw it as a statement against *l'art pour l'art* that was particularly shocking coming from Paul Bourget,⁷⁴ who had made his name as a disciple of Hippolyte Taine. T.H. Goetz emphasizes the social impact of literature and its “civilizing effect,” proposing that *Le Disciple* argues that the author is responsible for reinforcing “man's natural, religious and social ties.”⁷⁵ For Pascale Seys, the thesis is that determinism such as Hippolyte Taine's is incapable of establishing moral responsibility.⁷⁶ Jean Borie finds a double thesis: a

⁷⁴ Teodor de Wyzewa, introduction to *Le Disciple*, by Paul Bourget (Paris: Nelson, 1939), 10.

⁷⁵ T. H. Goetz, “Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple* and the Text-Reader Relationship,” *French Review* 52.1 (October 1978): 61.

⁷⁶ Pascale Seys, “Maître ou complice? La philosophie de Taine dans *Le Disciple* de Paul Bourget,” in *Le Chant de Minerve*, ed. Bruno Curatolo (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 36.

demonstration of the theme *science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme* and the opposition of two possible masters for Robert Greslou, the count André de Jussat and the philosopher Adrien Sixte.⁷⁷ In an aside, Marc Angenot remarks that the “thèse simpliste” of *Le Disciple* is: “qui s’inspire du matérialisme évolutionniste finira par déshonorer une jeune bourgeoise.”⁷⁸ Emmanuel Godo affirms *Le Disciple*’s place among *romans à thèse* before analyzing the complicated morality put forth in the text. Godo argues that the novel’s failure as a clear *roman à thèse* constitutes its strength and explains its perennial interest as a novel. Godo sees two possible theses in Bourget’s novel: the responsibility of the writer, or the importance of *territoire* in a healthy moral development.⁷⁹ I have not seen any interpretation of the text as an argument for the Catholic faith, and the general lack of consensus surrounding *Le Disciple*’s thesis suggests that we may be shortchanging the novel by labeling it a *roman à thèse*. The fact that it has been so difficult to identify the thesis of *Le Disciple* may mean that it is not a very good *roman à thèse*. But if *Le Disciple* fails as a *roman à thèse*, this implies a failure on the reader’s part, for choosing an ill-fitting metric, then reproaching the text for its disappointing performance of an already unlikeable genre.

Some scholars have located Bourget’s entry into the tradition of the *roman à thèse* with *L’Étape*, which appeared in 1902, seven novels after *Le Disciple*, and one year after his conversion to Catholicism. Paul Bourget himself described his work in less pejorative terms,

⁷⁷ Jean Borie, “Esquisse d’une étude littéraire et idéologique du *Disciple* de Paul Bourget,” in *Avez-vous lu Paul Bourget?*, ed. Marie-Ange Voisin-Fougère and Daniel Sangsue (Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2007), 15.

⁷⁸ Marc Angenot, “On est toujours le disciple de quelqu’un, ou le mystère du pousse-au-crime,” *Littérature* 49.1 (February 1983): 58.

⁷⁹ Emmanuel Godo, “La morale fissurée: *Le Disciple* de Paul Bourget,” in *Moralité de la littérature, morales de l’écrivain*, ed. Jean-Michel Wittman (Paris: Champion, 2000), 34-35; 40-41.

preferring the *roman d'analyse*, or the *roman d'idées*, an expression coined by Balzac.⁸⁰ Bourget criticized the *roman à thèse* in the preface to *La Terre promise* (1892), as well as in a speech to the Académie Française, calling it a “false genre.”⁸¹ Already during Bourget’s lifetime in 1925, Edgar Milton Bowman suggested that the publication of *L'Étape* marked a turning point in Bourget’s literary career.⁸² For Bowman, 1902 is the threshold of Bourget’s entry into the more didactic genre, necessarily excluding *Le Disciple* which appeared in 1889. In the introduction to her book *Le roman à thèse ou l'autorité fictive*, Susan Suleiman points out that in recent French literary history, the most striking examples of the *roman à thèse* include Maurice Barrès’ *Les Déracinés*, Émile Zola’s *Vérité*, the novels of Louis Aragon, François Mauriac’s *Nœud de vipères*, and the most well-known novels of Paul Bourget: *Le Disciple* and *L'Étape*.⁸³ Although Suleiman does not exclude *Le Disciple* from the *roman à thèse* as she defines it, she does not give it a starring role in her study of the genre.⁸⁴ Suleiman’s choice to analyze *L'Étape* rather than *Le Disciple* corroborates Bowman’s thesis that Bourget really began writing didactic novels in 1902. In the same vein, Jean-Christophe Coulot’s preface to a 1994 edition of *Le Disciple* contends that this novel is unlike the rest of Bourget’s works: “[*Le Disciple*] échappe aux

⁸⁰ Victor Brombert, *The Intellectual Hero: Studies in the French Novel 1880-1955* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 16.

⁸¹ In his response to Maurice Donnay’s acceptance speech to the Académie Française, Paul Bourget said, “Condamnons la littérature à thèse, genre essentiellement faux ; distinguons-en la littérature à idées, genre légitime, genre nécessaire. Si nos romans et nos drames n’y aboutissaient pas, nous ne serions que des amuseurs.” (Paul Bourget, “Réponse au discours de réception de Maurice Donnay,” *Académie Française*, December 19, 1907, <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/reponse-au-discours-de-reception-de-maurice-donnay>.)

⁸² Edgar Milton Bowman, *The Early Novels of Paul Bourget* (New York: Carranza & Co., 1925), 20.

⁸³ Susan Suleiman, *Le roman à thèse, ou l'autorité fictive* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 10.

⁸⁴ Suleiman defines the *roman à thèse* as a “roman réaliste (fondé sur une esthétique du vraisemblable et de la représentation) qui se signale au lecteur principalement comme porteur d’un enseignement, tendant à démontrer la vérité d’une doctrine politique, philosophique, scientifique ou religieuse,” (ibid., 14).

reproches qui s'adressent à sa production ultérieure, où le souci de défendre une thèse étouffe l'action, où la morale dissipe toute évocation romanesque, et où le Bien prend un visage bien trop commun pour nous séduire.”⁸⁵

The plot of *Le Disciple* certainly does put some thorny moral questions into focus, most notably the responsibility of the writer in society, and the possibility of founding a secular morality in the Third Republic. Adrien Sixte, a positivist philosopher who maintains an ordered and reclusive lifestyle, is interrupted one day by a message calling him to present himself to the judge for interrogation regarding the crime of his disciple, Robert Greslou. Two years earlier, Robert had come to meet with Sixte, impressing the scholar with his precocious talent for psychological analysis. Since then he had received a couple letters from Robert, who wrote mainly about his ideas on psychology, and also mentioned that he was going to tutor a young boy from an aristocratic family. Now Sixte learns that Robert is imprisoned on the grounds that he has killed his student's older sister Charlotte. Sixte is interrogated by the judge, and then visited by Robert's mother, who delivers a long letter from Robert entitled “Mémoire sur moi-même.” Sixte considers, but eventually decides against burning the letter, which begins with a contract: if Sixte reads it, he must keep everything he reads for himself. This letter fills three-quarters of *Le Disciple*, and consists of Robert's reflections on his actions, as he relates them to the principles of positivism taught by Sixte. Reading this affects Sixte to such a degree that he abandons his routine and is unable to work for weeks. Sixte has learned that although Robert did not murder Charlotte, he used her as an unwitting subject in his psychological experiment of seduction. Robert made a suicide pact with his lover, but only Charlotte carried through with it. Out of respect for Charlotte's reputation, Robert has decided to remain silent in court and sacrifice

⁸⁵ Jean-Christophe Coulot, avant-propos to *Le Disciple*, by Paul Bourget (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1994), viii.

himself. Sixte now faces a moral dilemma, whether or not to intervene in court. In the end, Sixte goes to court, Robert is acquitted, and Charlotte's older brother, the comte André, hunts Robert down and kills him in the street. Robert's mother prays over his body throughout the night, and Sixte, "grand négateur," finds that his thought and reason are insufficient, and what run through his mind are the Father's Prayer and a sentence from Pascal's *Mystère de Jésus*: "Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m'avais pas trouvé."⁸⁶

Le Disciple first appeared as a *feuilleton* during the spring of 1889, and when it was published as a book by Lemerre in June, 22 000 copies were sold in the first six weeks. It was a real literary event that came to be known as "la Querelle du *Disciple*," because of the polemic that erupted, centered on two figures: Anatole France, who upheld the primacy of science, and Ferdinand Brunetière, who took a stance on the importance of morality and tradition. The negative portrayal of positivism through the character Adrien Sixte raised questions about Paul Bourget's allegiances to the positivist movement, and the plot of *Le Disciple* resembled a widely mediatized criminal case, the Chambige Affair. Henri Chambige, the accused, had come from Algeria to Paris to study law. He had writerly ambition, and discovered literature and philosophy in Paris. Leading figures such as Maurice Barrès, Anatole France, and Bourget saw Chambige as one of their own. He had begun participating actively in the intellectual life in Paris, writing a novel and a treatise, and he had even given a talk. Chambige admired Paul Bourget, and he visited him, considering him one of his masters.⁸⁷ After reading one of Bourget's novels, Chambige wrote him a letter in the middle of the night expressing his admiration for him:

⁸⁶ Antoine Compagnon notes that Pascal's meditation, *Mystère de Jésus*, was not published until 1844. The sentence that Bourget quotes can be found in fragment 553 of the Brunschvicg Edition of Pascal's *Pensées* (Compagnon, 327 footnote).

⁸⁷ These notes on the reception of the novel and the Chambige Affair are drawn from Antoine Compagnon's 2010 edition of *Le Disciple*.

“Maître, Il est quatre heures du matin; mes mains sont encore tremblantes à la lecture d’A. Cornélis.”⁸⁸ Several years later, Chambige returned to Algeria, and began an affair with a married woman, who agreed on condition that Chambige kill her and himself afterward. Chambige killed Madeleine Grille, but did not carry out his suicide. News of Chambige’s crime sent a shock wave through Paris and Europe, and as the newspapers published stories, conjectures and hypotheses surrounding the gripping true tale, those who had known him in Paris were left feeling vaguely responsible for the situation.

While the parallels between Henri Chambige and Robert Greslou are striking, Paul Bourget’s novel began to germinate long before Chambige’s crime in 1887. Marc Angenot traces *Le Disciple* back to the 1877 manuscript *La Passion d’Armand Cornélis*, whose main character is Adrien Six, and the 1886 *André Cornélis* that Chambige so admired. Angenot argues that all three of these texts feature a main character that resembles Hippolyte Taine, and that all three novels tell the same story: “celle d’un esprit ‘satanique’ qui jette dans la haute société un jeune homme d’origine modeste, vite perversi, lequel finit par commettre un meurtre.”⁸⁹ Angenot’s summary of *La Passion d’Armand Cornélis*, *André Cornélis*, and *Le Disciple* foregrounds the thesis of *déracinement*, which remains in the background of *Le Disciple*. Angenot’s idea that Bourget had himself embraced pessimism and atheistic determinism as a last resort to avoid a less appealing fate—teaching in a dreary provincial town—offers a plausible explanation for Bourget’s slow return to the Catholicism of his childhood.

⁸⁸ The letter from Chambige was published by the newspaper *L’Indépendance Belge* in a special section on graphology. It shows handwriting samples from various famous and notorious figures ranging from Jack the Ripper to Paul Bourget himself. As Antoine Compagnon points out, it seems only plausible that Bourget himself sent Chambige’s letter to the newspaper. (Henri Chambige, “Lettre à Paul Bourget,” in “Supplément graphologie,” *L’Indépendance belge*, January 1, 1889. <http://uurl.kbr.be/1069774>.)

⁸⁹ Angenot, “On est toujours le disciple de quelqu’un,” 51.

Paul Bourget did eventually convert to Catholicism, but this conversion consisted of a gradual evolution of thought over a long period of time. His friendship with Hippolyte Taine dated back to 1873,⁹⁰ and he had first come into contact with Taine when he had just arrived in Paris in 1867. Taine had been teaching at the École des Beaux Arts for two years, and Bourget quickly became one of his most eager students. Bourget's development as a literary critic was helped by his friendship with Barbey d'Aurevilly among others, and his work was greatly influenced by Taine's thought. The publication of the *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* in 1883 established Bourget's reputation as a critic. With Bourget having this public persona as a positivist disciple of Taine, *Le Disciple* was a shock that marked the end of his friendship with Taine, who in a letter wished him well and predicted his conversion:

Peut-être la voie que vous prenez, votre idée de l'inconnaissable, d'un au-delà, d'un noumène, vous conduira-t-elle vers un port mystique, vers une forme du christianisme. Si vous y trouvez le repos et la santé de l'âme, je vous y saluerai non moins amicalement qu'aujourd'hui.⁹¹

Although Taine was not incorrect in his prediction, Bourget did not convert until 1901. *Le Disciple* was written and published over the period of one year, from 1888 to 1889, six years after the deeply Tainian *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, one year after Chambige's crime, and still eleven years before Bourget's full return to Catholicism.

This historical timeline raises the possibility of reading *Le Disciple* as a novel written during the author's own crisis - if not of faith, than of allegiances and philosophies - and may account for why a thesis is so hard to find in a novel that nevertheless deals with specific moral

⁹⁰ Antoine Compagnon, dossier accompanying *Le Disciple* by Paul Bourget (Paris: Librairie Générale de France, 2010), 361.

⁹¹ Hippolyte Taine to Paul Bourget, September 29, 1889, in *H. Taine, sa vie et sa correspondance*, Vol. IV (Paris: Librairie Hachette et cie., 1907), 293.

issues embedded in a specific and familiar context. *Le Disciple* explores many of the questions that were tormenting the author himself: what sort of moral code can French society embrace once the inherited Catholic values are rejected? Is it possible for people to live in community if they have been uprooted from their home region, and are surrounded by other uprooted people? To what degree is the writer responsible for how his ideas develop in the mind of the reader? Given Bourget's relationship to Chambige, there is also the possibility of reading *Le Disciple* as the author's exploration of his own guilt in connection with the crime in Algeria.

Bourget had already made the shift to fiction writing so that he could explore psychological issues that interested him, and to depict "les états de l'âme" that were not present in the cases he had studied in *Les Essais de psychologie contemporaine*. Bourget explains this turn from criticism to fiction in his 1894 *Lettre autobiographique*:

[...] un instinct, que je ne pouvais pas dominer, me poussait à d'autres tentatives. Ce qui m'avait intéressé dans cette série d'essais, ç'avait été non pas les écrivains eux-mêmes, mais les états de l'âme manifestés par ces écrivains. [...] De même que j'avais aperçu par-delà les pages des livres des sentiments vivants, par-dessous ces sentiments j'apercevais ces âmes vivantes, et le roman m'apparaissait comme la forme d'art la plus capable de les peindre.⁹²

Here Paul Bourget admits that he was using the novel to study topics he had previously approached as a critic. That Bourget saw the novel as an ideal medium for investigating psychology opens up the possibility that *Le Disciple* is functioning as an exploratory space for Bourget, as he subjected his own beliefs and values to a critical examination and put positivism and determinism on trial.

⁹² Paul Bourget, "Lettre autobiographique," Washington, January 1894, in *Le Disciple*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Librairie Générale de France, 2010), 338.

Readers have tended to see this novel as a *roman à thèse*, a generic classification that has been accompanied by other interpretative patterns, such as comparing fictional and historical characters, evaluating the morality represented in the text, and searching for Paul Bourget's thesis. While searching for the possible theses of *Le Disciple* can bring out varied interpretations and tease out the many moral issues being explored in the text, paying attention to the undecidability of the text opens the text to a wider range of interpretations.

This analysis considers *Le Disciple* as a laboratory of moral reflection: a literary space in which Bourget experiments with the ideas of positivism and the issue of the moral responsibility of the writer and the intellectual. Details of Bourget's intellectual and religious evolution, as well as the context in which *Le Disciple* was published, support the possibility that the novel is functioning as a laboratory: a place to test ideas that were preoccupying the author himself. The metaphor of experimentation and the laboratory nevertheless draws from a positivist paradigm. If Bourget is indeed using fiction, a non-scientific discourse, to test positivism, which rests on experimental science, then it should be less surprising that this novel produces no unambiguous thesis.

Bourget represents reading and writing as methods for puzzling out important questions within the novel. Torment is connected to reading and writing in *Le Disciple*. The preface of the novel, signed in Paul Bourget's own name, dedicates the text to the "jeune homme de mon pays," and describes a young man who reads to resolve his personal questions: "tu vas, cherchant dans nos volumes, à nous tes aînés des réponses aux questions qui te tourmentent."⁹³ Robert Greslou expresses his agony as a motive for writing in the preamble to his memoir: "Maintenant

⁹³ Paul Bourget, *Le Disciple*, ed. Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Librairie Générale de France, 2010), 45.

et dans la détresse de mon agonie intellectuelle, je me tourne vers vous [...].”⁹⁴ After reading Robert’s memoir, Adrien Sixte experiences such mental turbulence that he is unable to work for weeks: this chapter is entitled “Tourments d’idées.” This *tourment* is complicated for Sixte, because he is struggling to understand his responsibility and his level of involvement in Robert’s life. Sixte wrote the books that inspired Robert. These writings, regurgitated into a strange new incarnation, bring torment to their creator. Torment can be the cause and the effect of reading and writing.

Reading and writing constitute important plot devices, as well as a subject in its own right in *Le Disciple*: the writing of Robert Greslou furnishes the central building block for the framing narrative, and embeds the voice of an other within the text. At the same time, the issue of the writer’s responsibility is being dramatized through the reading and writing characters, Sixte and Robert. Grammatical and syntactical choices enable Robert to represent himself as an agent of his identity and his choices, but this self-representation veils the active role of others in forming his identity. This chapter will pay attention to the ways in which language is represented, particularly whether *Le Disciple* challenges or complicates the notion of narrative identity, and whether this novel contests the notion of an autonomous subject. I will look first at Robert’s confession, then at the frames surrounding the first-person memoir.

II. Robert’s Confession

A. Responding to Failure with Narrative Control

For Robert, lived experience and literary form are at odds with each other, and he attempts to recast himself as an agent through narrative. In the first pages of Robert’s letter,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 121.

Bourget introduces a tension between control and its oppositions: vulnerability, helplessness, and inadequacy. Robert's self-described state is one of remorse, distress, questioning, and doubt. He feels an "agonie intellectuelle," questions his role in Charlotte's suicide, and is doubting his positivist convictions. One of Robert's reasons for writing is that he is unable to focus on anything else. He explains this in a short preface to the *Mémoire sur moi-même*.

Depuis deux mois tantôt que je vis dans cette prison, l'instant où j'ai pris cette résolution de vous écrire ce mémoire a été le seul où je me sois retrouvé tel que je fus avant ces terribles événements. J'avais essayé de m'absorber dans quelques travaux d'ordre abstrait, je n'avais pas pu.⁹⁵

Failure to write a scholarly work leads Robert to autobiographical writing, which he spins as an academic undertaking: Robert titles it with the singular *Mémoire*, which signifies an academic genre, rather than the plural *Mémoires*, which would denote personal writing.

This is not the first time that failure has been an impetus for action in Robert's life: failing his exams at the École Normale prompted him to take on a tutoring position for the Jussat-Randon family in Aydat, near Clermont-Ferrand. Although tutoring in the province is the result of failing exams, Robert frames the tutoring job as opportunity: to prepare for his exams, and to carry out field research by observing an aristocratic family. Both tutoring for the Jussat-Randon family and writing his life story from a prison cell substitute for the scholarly activity that Robert would prefer. Robert recasts both of these activities, tutoring and life writing, as a transformed version of the scientific contribution that he cannot make.

Confronted with failure, Robert creatively reasserts his agency by reframing his circumstances—teaching in the provinces and writing from a prison cell—as alternative

⁹⁵ Ibid., 123-124.

opportunities for psychological inquiry, repositioning himself as an objective scientist who is in control of his experiments. If Robert were in control of the experiment he conducted on Charlotte, that would imply he has a greater responsibility for her suicide. How Robert asserts his agency and control has moral implications, and he raises the issue of responsibility by invoking his role as an “auteur” of the drama in the Jussat-Randon home:

[U]ne espèce de souffrance si particulière [...] envahit mon cœur, lorsque je me souviens du drame que j’ai traversé, de certaines actions que j’ai voulues, d’autres dont je suis l’auteur, bien qu’indirect [...] ⁹⁶

Robert’s narrative choices carry a moral weight: asserting his control would make him responsible for a fatality, but claiming helplessness would imply incompetence as a positivist disciple of Sixte, discrediting his so-called scientific seduction experiment. Authoring an account of Charlotte’s death allows Robert to break down the event into discrete moments, diffusing responsibility. Robert identifies three categories of events that are painful to remember: the tragic event he has undergone, the acts that he has willed, and the acts that he participated in indirectly. He only claims direct responsibility for the second category, “actions que j’ai voulues.” Robert describes his other actions in passive terms. Breaking down the action surrounding Charlotte’s death helps Robert exculpate himself from the charge of murder. Here a narrative of helplessness works in Robert’s favor, and he selectively renders himself as a passive or ignorant participant. Agency and helplessness are constantly being juxtaposed in Robert’s memoir, as he tries to portray himself alternately as a capable scientist and a helpless victim.

A recurring theme in Robert’s writing is his lack of control over both the psychological experiment and his writing about it. The details Robert gives of his life and his writing describe a

⁹⁶ Ibid., 123.

character who struggles with losing control in his self-mastery, his lived experiences, and his writing. His struggle for control manifests itself as a desire for understanding. Robert admits that by writing to his master, he is seeking “une parole qui m’explique à moi-même ce qui m’est inexplicable.”⁹⁷ Robert turns to life writing to make sense of his experience of disorder and helplessness.

B. Writing: Purpose, Method and Form

We have seen that Robert exerts narrative control over his life, spinning his failures as new scientific initiatives, and making careful decisions in imputing actions to himself. It is striking that for Robert, writing is a way of reclaiming control while he is at the mercy of the judge, who is interpreting Robert’s actions and the legal code, imputing actions to persons, in order to pronounce judgment. This struggle for control is apparent in the esthetic form Robert chooses for recounting his life. He opts for the psychological treatise in the form of a letter to his master. The text claims two forms that are incompatible, because the letter imploring his master for help portrays a victim, while the psychological analysis claims understanding and control. Not only do Robert’s reasons for writing contradict themselves, the writing project that he executes diverges from his stated intentions. Elements of his letter, such as the religious conversion trope, demonstrate his failure to carry out a serious psychological analysis. Objective psychological analysis coexists uneasily with the confession in his memoir.

The novel’s narrator signals this discrepancy between title and content early on. Right before inserting Robert’s letter, the narrator points out that although Robert entitled it *Mémoire sur moi-même*, the real title should have been “Confession d’un jeune homme d’aujourd’hui.”⁹⁸ Through this new title, the narrator establishes a connection with Alfred de Musset, whose 1836

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 120.

Confession d'un enfant du siècle told the story of one individual to speak to an entire generation half a century earlier.

Substituting “confession” for “memoir” emphasizes the confessional aspect of a letter that Robert intended to be a psychological analysis of the self. Robert’s use of scientific terms, both in the title and in subheadings such as “Mes hérédités,” does not prevent religious motifs from entering his autobiography. A closer look at the letter reveals that Robert borrows heavily from the conventions of the conversion story to understand himself and his life.

It is possible to make sense of this if we look at Robert’s stated purpose for writing, and he gives several reasons, most of which stem from his helplessness in present situation. We have seen that Robert is unable to focus on more abstract writing while in prison, so he turns to life writing. He seeks an explanation of himself from Sixte, as well as an affirmation of his convictions, which he now doubts: “Ces convictions se trouvent impuissantes à me procurer cette paix de la certitude qui était la mienne. Je doute avec mon cœur de ce que mon esprit reconnaît comme vrai.”⁹⁹ He needs to talk, and he believes his master is the only one who will understand him: “Enfin, mon cher maître, je suis très misérable, et j’ai besoin de dire ma misère. À qui m’adresser, sinon à vous, puisque je ne saurais espérer d’être intelligible à qui que ce soit, hors du psychologue dont je suis l’élève?”¹⁰⁰ As if to prove their affinities, Robert explains that his method is borrowed directly from Sixte, correcting “ma méthode” with “votre méthode.” He explains his outline: “J’ai jeté hier sur le papier un plan de cette monographie de mon moi actuel, en pratiquant la division par paragraphes que vous avez adoptée dans vos travaux.”¹⁰¹ By emphasizing his borrowing of Sixte’s method, Robert emphasizes his discipleship and implies

⁹⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 124.

that his writing will demonstrate his mastery of Sixte's method and his own capacity to reproduce this method. Finally, Robert argues that, if nothing else, his writing will provide Sixte with useful data for his psychological analyses: "à tout le moins je vous aurai fourni un document exact sur des façons de sentir que j'ai crues autrefois précieuses et rares."¹⁰² This final, desperate justification for writing is the only other-oriented argument, the only one that purports to serve someone other than Robert himself.

Already in his apology for the confession, Robert gives a surplus of interpretations. He suggests many possible reasons for writing, but every reason is at conflict with the others: failure to focus on scholarly work suggests the narrator is not capable of writing anything objective, focused, or scholarly. The need to talk does not mesh with showing one's mastery of psychological method. And seeking affirmation of dogma resembles a call for a chaplain more than the beginning of a dialogue with a philosopher. All of these cannot be equally true at the same time. What is particularly remarkable is the tension already in the introduction between a system of interpretation—the objective psychological memoir—and the plurality of motivations for writing. This tension undermines Robert's credibility, suggesting he may not be capable of carrying out the project he has devised. The multiplicity of reasons for writing betrays the internal multiplicity and incoherence of the self, transmission, and self-knowledge in Robert's *Mémoire* and in the novel as a whole. It suggests that life writing here functions in a selective way, and is unable to represent the whole life. Even if he uses scientific discourse to write his autobiography, Robert cannot avoid interpreting and mediating his experiences.

Robert discusses his method in scientific terms, but his most salient intention for writing is subjective, personal and need-based. Robert hopes that Sixte will analyze his memoir and

¹⁰² Ibid.

respond with an explanation that affirms his previous convictions and provides an intelligible meaning to his recent experience, because he is unable to do so himself. Robert is surprisingly clear-headed about the fact that he is writing out of a personal need for comfort and solace. He approaches his master because he believes they are deeply bound to each other through their intellectual affinities. Robert even specifies the exact sort of help he is seeking in the preface:

Mais pourquoi essayer de vous traduire avec des phrases littéraires un état mental que je veux justement vous exposer par son détail, à vous le grand connaisseur des maladies de l'âme, pour que vous me donniez le seul secours qui puisse m'être bienfaisant: une parole qui m'explique à moi-même ce qui m'est inexplicable, qui m'atteste que je ne suis pas un monstre, qui me soutienne dans le désarroi de mes croyances, qui me prouve que je ne me suis pas trompé depuis des années, en adhérant à la foi nouvelle avec l'intime énergie d'une créature sincère? Enfin, mon cher maître, je suis très misérable, et j'ai besoin de dire ma misère. À qui m'adresser, sinon à vous, puisque je ne saurais espérer d'être intelligible à qui que ce soit, hors du psychologue dont je suis l'élève?¹⁰³

Robert argues that Sixte is deeply bound to him as a master and source of his method, his doctrines, and, indirectly, his current situation. As the recipient of the letter, Sixte is thrust into a new role as the doctor of the soul, a chaplain of sorts. Robert wants to be affirmed in his beliefs, and reassured that he is not a monster. He is willing to die for the sake of Charlotte's honor, but he needs to be certain that he has not been mistaken "en adhérant à la foi nouvelle"¹⁰⁴ during these past years. Robert imposes the role of the physician on Sixte, who, he believes, can diagnose his mental state, and make his feelings intelligible by placing them into the framework of psychological theory.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

In his apology for writing, Robert sets himself up for an impossible challenge: transmitting autobiographical details to Sixte without clouding them with subjective bias. By posing a rhetorical question—“pourquoi essayer de vous traduire avec des phrases littéraires un état mental que je veux justement vous exposer par son détail”¹⁰⁵—Robert shows some skepticism about translating experience into writing, but this skepticism only extends to literary language. His solution is science writing, presupposing that such writing can escape the biases of subjectivity.

C. Form: the Conversion Narrative

Robert designs an outline for his memoir that on a superficial level structures his story as a psychological analysis worthy of Sixte. The headings include *Mes hérédités*, *Mon milieu d'idées*, *Transplantation*, *Première crise*, *Seconde crise*, *Troisième crise*, and finally *Conclusion*. In spite of these scientific terms, confessional language and topoi emerge already in the first pages of his letter. Robert tells an archetypal conversion story that incorporates childhood experiences, discovering authors that become central to the new worldview, and a changed understanding of self and the world. His story is made interesting by the fact that his journey is a reversal of the Christian conversion: his eyes are opened to the falseness of religion, and he converts to the rational principles of his master, Adrien Sixte.

The first gesture, under the heading of heredity, is to lay out proleptic aspects of his identity in his childhood, reinforcing the seemingly natural adoption of a doctrine that fits his true self so well. Robert discusses his unique and longstanding tendency of *dédoublement*: “il y a toujours eu en moi deux personnes distinctes: une qui allait, venait, agissait, sentait, et une autre qui regardait la première aller, venir, agir, sentir, avec une impassible curiosité.”¹⁰⁶ This

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 125.

characteristic later meshes perfectly with the study of psychology as it is expounded in Sixte's works. The category of heredity also groups together stories and descriptions of Robert's family history and his parents, who represent two modes of understanding: religion and science. Robert was given a religious upbringing by his mother, who brought him to mass, but he noticed that his father never joined them. When he asked his mother why, she explained that his father attends a different mass, and that children should never ask why their parents do something. This childhood experience marks a difference between Robert and his mother, and his growing realization that his father is well-respected leads him to connect learning with authority and respect, and he adopts the values of his father. Robert is introduced to the natural world and reading through his father, who takes him on long walks, teaches him about the land formations and insects and planets, embodying his own maxim: "Ne rien rencontrer que l'on ne s'en rende compte scientifiquement."¹⁰⁷ When his father dies after one of these excursions, Robert is left under the guidance of his mother, whose worldview he dismisses. After his death, Robert's father continues to have influence on his son's education. Robert is now old enough to read the books that previously served only as a booster seat at dinner, such as Shakespeare. He reads the books from his father's library until his mother notices and puts them under lock and key. Robert claims no resemblance to his mother, whom he describes as "une femme du Midi, absolument rebelle à toute complexité, pour qui les idées de choses sont seules intelligibles."¹⁰⁸ About their relationship, he says :

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 137

Cela peut sembler étrange que, demeurés seuls en ce monde, elle et moi, elle si énergique, si dévouée, et moi si jeune, nous n'ayons pas vécu, au moins durant ces années-là, en complète communion du cœur.¹⁰⁹

Robert reacts to his feeling of disconnect from his mother by theorizing a connection between geographical origins and personality traits, arguing that marriages between individuals from different regions creates domestic problems:

En tout cas, les familles modernes présentent sous les étiquette conventionnelles les plus cruels phénomènes de divorce secret, de mésintelligence foncière, quelquefois de haine, qui se comprennent trop quand on pense à leurs origines.¹¹⁰

Robert explains his family discord through the theory of *déracinement* that was in vogue in the late nineteenth century. He attributes his difficult relationship with his mother to the uprootedness of their family, growing up in Clermont-Ferrand with a mother from the Midi and a father from the Lorraine region. Hippolyte Taine, whose thought Bourget is representing in *Le Disciple*, did posit that “*la race, le milieu et le moment*”¹¹¹ composed one’s elementary moral state. Bourget’s disciple takes this idea more literally, and this explanatory analysis of his family’s regional origins anticipates the development of a more literal notion of *déracinement*,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 135.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹¹¹ “Trois sources différentes contribuent à produire cet état moral élémentaire, *la race, le milieu et le moment*. Ce qu’on appelle *la race*, ce sont ces dispositions innées et héréditaires que l’homme apporte avec lui à la lumière, et qui ordinairement sont jointes à des différences marquées dans le tempérament et dans la structure du corps. Elles varient selon les peuples. [...] Lorsqu’on a ainsi constaté la structure intérieure d’une race, il faut considérer le *milieu* dans lequel elle vit. Car l’homme n’est pas seul dans le monde ; la nature l’enveloppe et les autres hommes l’entourent [...] Il y a pourtant un troisième ordre de causes ; car avec les forces du dedans et du dehors, il y a l’œuvre qu’elles ont déjà faite ensemble, et cette œuvre elle-même contribue à produire celle qui suit.” (Hippolyte Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Vol. 1 [Paris: Librairie de L. Hachette et cie., 1866], XXIII, XXVI, XXIX.)

epitomized in literary history with Maurice Barrès's 1897 novel, *Les Déracinés*.¹¹² Thirteen years after publishing *Le Disciple*, Bourget would give *déracinement* a more central part in *L'Étape*: the protagonist, Joseph Monneron, uproots himself from the Ardèche region for a career in the national education system, and his children, cut off from their father's values, develop criminal behaviors.¹¹³ In *Le Disciple*, however, Bourget presents *déracinement* through the voice of Robert Greslou, a somewhat undependable character.

Under the heading *Mon milieu d'idées*, Robert highlights aspects of his childhood that he now reads as foreshadowing his conversion to Sixte's philosophy. These childhood details imply that some essential part of his identity was completed by discovering philosophy, that he had innate qualities of the philosopher before he knew the term. He emphasizes his doubts about Catholicism, and the ways in which he was unknowingly becoming ready for philosophy and psychology. At this point Robert has not yet come to doubt Catholic teachings, and his sleep is disturbed by images of divine vengeance and hell, the preferred themes of the priest. Robert distinguishes three causes behind his growing distance from the Church. First, his sensitivity to the subtleties of his inner life, paired with the Catholic practice of confession, create a perverse pleasure in confessing, leading Robert to favor sin over virtue. Secondly, Robert finds himself admiring young professors who resemble his father in their pursuit of knowledge and in their lack of religious practice. The third cause is his discovery of contemporary literature at the age of fourteen; reading, like atheism, can connect him to the father he lost. By the time Robert takes his first philosophy class, he is ripe for the beginnings of religious doubt: he has read

¹¹² Christy Wampole, *Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 113-114.

¹¹³ “[L]e professeur [...] se laisse tomber sur le fauteuil de son bureau, en proie à des sentiments si contradictoires qu’il ne les démêlait pas lui-même. De ses quatre enfants, il y en avait au moins un d’heureux [...]” (Paul Bourget, *L'Étape* [Paris: Librairie Plon, 1902], 513.)

contemporary literature, he has practice in psychology through his passion for confessions, he admires thinkers, and he has had two lovers, a thirty-year-old working-class woman and a professor's wife.

Robert's discovery of psychology amounts to a religious experience. His first philosophy course presents him with what he now sees to be a conventional approach, which is nevertheless compelling:

Quel cours cependant et combien empâté de fatras de la psychologie classique!

N'importe, inexacte et incomplète, officielle et conventionnelle, cette psychologie me passionna. La méthode employée, la réflexion personnelle et l'analyse intime; — l'objet à étudier, le Moi humain considéré dans ses facultés et ses passions; — le résultat cherché, un système d'idées générales capables de résumer en de brèves formules un vaste tas de phénomènes; — tout, dans cette science nouvelle, s'harmonisait trop bien avec le genre d'esprit que mon hérédité, mon éducation et mes propres tendances m'avaient façonné.¹¹⁴

These first encounters with psychology spark Robert's interest, and he eventually discovers the work of Adrien Sixte. Reading Sixte brings about an experience of enlightenment: "Le voile tomba. Les ténèbres du monde extérieur et intérieur s'éclairèrent. J'avais trouvé ma voie. J'étais votre élève."¹¹⁵ Robert's initiation into Sixte's psychology is conveyed in terms of mystical experience. An experience of revelation while reading converts Robert into a disciple of Sixte. The trope of revelation while reading harkens back to Augustine's confession, when he hears a voice saying "Tolle lege." Sainte-Beuve brings in the same trope in the description of Amaury's conversion in *Volupté*. Here in *Le Disciple*, this trope reappears with a twist: the revelation is a space of fatal misunderstanding for Robert. Like in the Christian tradition of

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 164.

reading as a space of revelation, Robert finds that reading the works of the masters—in this case, intellectuals—is akin to looking in a mirror. He sees himself described perfectly by Sixte. Convinced by the clarity with which his inner and outer world are illuminated by the text, Robert identifies himself no longer as a critical reader, but as a disciple: “votre élève.” Robert establishes a devotional relationship with Sixte’s books. He applies what he learns to his life, and he emulates what he understands to be Sixte’s lifestyle, method, and way of seeing the world.

Paul Bourget frames Robert’s confession in such a way as to reveal the disciple’s misreading of himself. He articulates his identity in terms of his affinity to Sixte and more generally his belonging to the scientific community. But even while Robert is arguing for his scientific credibility, his discourse is structured by the narrative of religious conversion. Robert’s tale of how he was won over by science shows that he continues to function in a paradigm of revelation, even while affirming the doctrines of empiricism. There is discordance in Robert’s conversion story: he professes positivism, but uses the narrative tropes of Christianity to do so. This overt contradiction between the new belief system and the practices and paradigms of the old is a prescient representation of something that scholars of religious conversion are only beginning to name. In his seminal work *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James described conversion as a moment “in which, often amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.”¹¹⁶ One hundred years later, it is becoming clear that while narratives of religious conversion emphasize discontinuity, anthropologists and sociologists observe much more continuity than discontinuity between the old religion and the new. This phenomenon has

¹¹⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 240.

been described as adhesion, a term that Marc Baer defines as instances in which: “the person or group adopts new beliefs and practices alongside the old.”¹¹⁷

The manifestation of adhesion in Bourget’s portrayal of conversion might be read as keen psychological insight on the part of the author. But this tension between positivist doctrine and Christian paradigms of self-understanding in Robert’s writing also points to the character’s inability to understand himself. Robert does not succeed in his attempt at rational self-mastery, and this failure suggests that another method is required for self-understanding. The reader of *Le Disciple* benefits from Bourget’s framing devices, which highlight the irony in Robert’s account: he claims control and mastery of both the scientific method and himself, but religious discourse forms the architecture of his narrative. His devotional relationship to reading and writing inscribe him in the tradition of the spiritual autobiography, with one difference: rather than writing a letter of instruction to a novice like Sainte-Beuve’s Amaury, Robert is addressing his master, with the twofold goal of asking for help and proving his worthiness as a disciple. Robert proves his worth by skillfully employing positivist concepts, and weaving his life story around his identity as a follower, and these techniques of self-presentation are meant to persuade his master that he is a devoted follower, and to convince him to help.

Inverting the tradition of the master instructing disciple, *Le Disciple* focuses attention on the master, whose views are being challenged through Robert’s implementation of positivist doctrine. Robert’s understanding, or perhaps misunderstanding, of his master’s teaching poses a challenge to Sixte’s philosophy, but it also pushes against a view of reading or teaching as a one-way transmission of ideas. Transmission of knowledge appears as a complex phenomenon in *Le*

¹¹⁷ Marc David Baer, “History and Religious Conversion,” *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.001.

Disciple, whether in the form of religious revelation or secular instruction, and this makes it difficult to affirm that Robert's criminal development constitutes an argument against positivism.

Bourget represents reading and writing as a locus of misunderstanding in *Le Disciple*, indicating both a linguistic and a political issue. Robert's *Mémoire sur moi-même* investigates the writer's responsibility for how readers engage with their ideas. Sixte learns from reading this letter that he cannot control the gap between signifier and signified, because readers make their own interpretations. Taking Sixte's scholarly writing and his ascetic, solitary life as a model, Robert has no positivist framework for human relationships outside of the relationship between an observing scientist and the subject providing the case study. Robert construes a quasi-scientific justification for seducing Charlotte, fashioning her as an object of experimentation without her consent.

Sixte finds Robert's actions abhorrent, but it is unclear whether Robert's interpretation constitutes a misunderstanding of Sixte's philosophy, or whether Robert actually reveals Sixte to himself by grasping aspects of Sixte's character and philosophy that had not been visible to the philosopher himself. Bourget sides with misinterpretation, while affirming the writer's responsibility: Sixte assumes the burden of his writings' ill effects, and the narrator compares Sixte to a doctor whose new treatment unexpectedly harms patients, an analogy that upholds both the philosopher's good faith and his responsibility to his readers.

Bourget does not clearly blame either Sixte's writing or Robert's reading for the latter's moral development. By juxtaposing the good-hearted Sixte with an antisocial and apolitical lifestyle, however, Bourget suggests that Sixte's art of living is not a neutral esthetic choice, as Sixte would like to believe. Bourget exposes the fragmentary nature of a philosophy that does not extend to human relationships and community. For Sixte, an irreproachable life consists of a

clock-like routine and autonomy from interdependent human relationships. Bourget shows in *Le Disciple* that even Sixte's tidy domestic economy does not free him from human relationships. Although Sixte imagines himself uninvolved in human relationships, his supposed autarky conceals an irresponsible ethics of living that impacts and implicates others.

D. The Post-Conversion Self

The uncontrollable nature of interpretation becomes apparent already in the writing process for Robert, as his self-portrait repeatedly deviates from a story of control and mastery to a story of passivity and inability to understand his life and himself. He continues to employ conversion tropes in his account of his experience as a new convert. In Sixte's writings, he finds his entire life can be explained and given meaning: "Toutes les incohérences de ma jeunesse, en effet, comme vous me les expliquiez! Cette solitude morale dont j'avais tant souffert, [...] je la comprenais maintenant."¹¹⁸ Robert resolves to devote himself to intellectual life after this conversion experience, and he even makes a vow of celibacy: "Je vous aurai tracé un portrait complet de mon âme à cette minute si j'ajoute que je m'étais promis, une fois pour toutes, de rayer l'amour du programme de ma vie."¹¹⁹ The writings of Sixte function as Scripture in Robert's confession. Robert cites this scientific Bible, interspersing quotations from Sixte among his anecdotes and reflections.

With this new lens for understanding himself and the world, Robert sets out to observe his surroundings. He regularly takes walks in the outskirts of Clermont-Ferrand, and applies Sixte's doctrine on the relativity of virtue and vice to the natural world: "J'appliquais au paysage qui m'environnait cette interprétation philosophique de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler le mal."¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Bourget, *Le Disciple*, 166.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

An example is the viper he sees slithering among the rocks: “La dangereuse bête m’apparaissait comme une preuve de l’indifférence de cette nature, qui n’a d’autre souci que de multiplier la vie, bienfaisante ou meurtrière, avec la même inépuisable prodigalité.”¹²¹ Robert’s example of the viper is particularly striking for discussing the amorality of the non-human world: snakes pose a literal danger to humans, but the species was also involved in introducing illness and evil into the world in the Genesis creation story. Robert interprets the viper in a way that empties it of the symbolic connection to sin, using the occasion to articulate his own evolutionary views. He aligns himself yet again with his father, reading nature in terms of scientific observation, rather than mythology. Robert seeks affirmation of his views in nature, which is not a fallen post-Paradise garden, but an amoral Darwinian space in which every life form seeks its own survival.

Robert’s conversion provides the setup for his dramatic relationship with Charlotte, but it also exposes the framework of Robert’s identity. Like a new believer, adopting a new worldview creates and enforces newly defined boundaries of group identity. His radical embrace of Sixte’s doctrine explains his perceived affinity with the philosopher; conversely, Robert avoids identifying with those he perceives as intellectually inferior.

“Othering” language is present in the entire confession, and Robert distinguishes thinking characters from those who, he believes, do not think. When as a child Robert notices that his father does not attend mass and is well respected as a “grand savant,”¹²² he concludes that “les mêmes règles ne gouvernent pas les hommes très intelligents et les autres.”¹²³ This becomes a major tenet of Robert’s thinking: “ne pas considérer comme une loi, pour nous autres qui pensons, ce qui est et doit être une loi pour ceux qui ne pensent pas.”¹²⁴ Robert sees his mother

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 131.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

as belonging to this lower class of people to whom rules apply. He notices that his father is well respected for his knowledge, and he learns from this public esteem to hold his father in higher regard than his mother, who, religious and fearful of science, ends up overseeing his education after his father's death. Robert's sense that his mother cannot understand him is amplified when he overhears her speaking to a friend about her fears for her son who has not displayed grief since his father's death: "Dieu vous entende, [...] mais je tremble qu'il n'ait aucune espèce de cœur."¹²⁵ Shortly thereafter Robert is caught reading his father's books, and his mother locks the bookcase. This incident of censorship cements his view that his mother does not belong to the group of people who think.

Robert's view that he belongs to a different group of people, along with his late father, affects his view of others, and his understanding of duty towards others. He remarks: "j'ai de très bonne heure senti qu'au rebours de la parole du Christ, je n'avais pas de prochain."¹²⁶ This allusion to Luke's Gospel is forceful. Luke transmits Jesus' teaching as "Tu aimeras [...] ton prochain comme toi-même,"¹²⁷ the teaching that lies behind the Golden Rule. The word "prochain," reappears in the same chapter to designate the Good Samaritan. Using "prochain" as a substantive still resonates with these two well-known Gospel references regarding the definition and proper relationship to one's neighbor. Robert denies having any "prochain," and by borrowing this word, he exempts himself from the duty of identifying with others. By refusing to qualify those around him as his "prochain[s]," Robert places himself outside of ethical duty to others.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 139.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 147.

¹²⁷ Luke 10:27 (Louis Segond).

Animal language reinforces the boundaries that separate Robert from other people. His first lover is a working-class woman, who only acquires a name after several pages about her: “Marianne, c’était le nom de la créature.”¹²⁸ Robert describes their relationship in terms that suggest Marianne is transferring her animality to him: “je m’abandonnai vraiment au délire animal.”¹²⁹ In the passage describing his new understanding of the viper, Robert continues observing the landscape. He shares his observations of the peasants, as someone who has just outgrown his own religious beliefs:

Mes vieilles croyances en un Dieu père et juge me semblaient des songes d’enfant malade, et je me dilatais jusqu’aux extrêmes limites du vaste paysage, jusqu’aux profondeurs de l’immense ciel vide, en songeant que moi, chétif, j’avais assez réfléchi déjà pour comprendre de ce monde ce qu’aucun des paysans que je voyais passer ne comprendrait jamais. Ils venaient de la montagne, conduisant leurs grands chariots attelés de bœufs paisibles, et ils saluaient les croix dévotement. Avec quels délices je les méprisais dans mon cœur, eux, et l’abbé Martel, et ma mère, quoique je ne me fusse pas décidé à déclarer mon athéisme, prévoyant trop quelles scènes cette déclaration provoquerait.¹³⁰

In the same way that Robert’s reconversion from Christianity changes the viper from a symbol of original sin to a life form intent on survival, the sky is no longer the home of “Dieu père et juge” but an empty space, an “immense ciel vide,” in which Robert can project himself. Robert looks down from a high place, reflecting on the vast expanse of his own thought, and the limitations of the peasants’ thought. He observes their comings and their goings, their procession

¹²⁸ Bourget, *Le Disciple*, 160.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

from the mountains, their reverence for the cross. Unencumbered by religious belief, Robert assumes the role of the anthropologist. His observations create distance between himself and the peasants, and the one sentence that doesn't communicate an overt value judgment nevertheless suggests an equation of peasants with animals: they come from the mountain, not the village; their carts are harnessed to cattle that are docile, perhaps like themselves; and any cross along their route inspires a Pavlovian response. In Robert's eyes, peasants fit into the landscape, and the repetitive, predictable patterns of their everyday life make them more like their cattle than himself, the reasoning, unbelieving observer. In spite of his newly acquired views on evolution, science and religion, Robert doesn't assimilate the Darwinian view into his beliefs about himself. He continues to see himself as superior to lower social classes and the animal world, rather than as an animal himself, intent on his own survival.

Animal associations are used to dehumanize people with whom Robert doesn't identify, but these binary categories of the rational, atheist human and the traditional, religious, lesser people are complicated by his relationships. On the one hand, he admires Sixte and seeks to emulate this person who is "une sorte de Spinoza moderne, si complètement identique à [ses] livres, par la noblesse d'une vie tout entière consacrée à la pensée!"¹³¹ He sees his father as someone who would align with the values of the intellectual, and he reveres his memory in the belief that his father would understand him, and that his particular disposition is his inheritance from his father. At the same time, Robert continues to care for his mother: learning has separated him even more from her, and they may not have a close relationship, but he decides to work as a tutor to relieve her of his expenses while he studies for his baccalauréat, and one of his main concerns throughout the trial is that his mother be spared the details of his crime.

¹³¹ Ibid., 169.

Robert's boundaries between insiders and outsiders are stretched when he moves into the Jussat-Randon home, and comes into contact with a new social group, the aristocratic family. His brief meeting with M. De Jussat convinces him that this family is mainly interesting as a case study, so Robert resolves to approach the assignment as a scientist, observing and recording their behaviors. When Robert arrives, though, he is surprised to find himself experiencing very human emotions: jealousy, admiration, and desire. His intellectual power and the sense of superiority it confers on him are confronted by the eldest son. Count André is a military captain who enjoys hunting and riding, and the real authority in the Jussat-Randon home. Robert finds himself face to face with someone who could be the hero of a novel:

Tous mes maîtres préférés et les quelques anciens amis de mon père étaient, eux aussi, des cérébraux. Quand je m'étais dessiné des héros de romans après mes lectures, j'avais toujours imaginé des mécaniques mentales plus ou moins compliquées, jamais leurs conditions physiques. En un mot, si j'avais songé à la supériorité que représente la belle et solide énergie animale de l'homme, ç'avait été d'une manière abstraite, mais je ne l'avais pas sentie. Le comte André, âgé de trente ans, présentait un exemplaire admirable de cette supériorité-là.¹³²

Meeting the count André muddles Robert's boundaries of superior and inferior people. Intellect, he realizes, is something he values, but he is now meeting a person whom he admires and who is invested in less cerebral pursuits. Unlike the peasants, the working-class woman, or Robert's own mother, André strikes Robert as a respected figure. This same quality—public esteem—was what Robert had admired in his father, and made him see his mother as inferior. André also represents social power and prestige, but his value system is contrary to the values

¹³² Ibid., 179.

that Robert has been laying out. His first meeting with André draws out a tension that is never made explicit in his letter, a tension between power and intellect. Robert's father was respected for his intellect, and this was Robert's cue to follow his father's path of atheism and learning. Power and intellect do not go together for André, who has little interest in intellectual activity and suspects too much learning will be detrimental to his brother's development. Robert is puzzled by this disjunction between his felt admiration and his stated values. This conflict points to an unarticulated aspect of Robert's moral identity. Although he mentions that he was affected as a child by the displays of respect for his father, he does not assimilate his admiration for power into his stated value system. He emphasizes the virtue of intellectual work, but when he is faced with someone who shares one of his father's admirable traits—real power in society and in the home—he is torn between two value systems. Unexpected feelings of admiration for this *homme militaire* reveal that underneath Robert's stated values—the virtue of the pure life of thought—lies a desire for the power and respect that are conferred on public intellectual figures.

For once Robert is astonished, and we can follow his attempts to make sense of this character that doesn't fit into his binary understanding of superior and inferior people: “Je regardai André de Jussat, là, aussitôt, comme un être à part de tout ceux que j'avais connus jusque-là; [...] j'y pensai plus qu'à sa fragile et gracieuse sœur.”¹³³ In spite of his “naïf étonnement,” he immediately turns to the method taught by Sixte, proceeding through his surprise by observing André and learning about his heredity. Robert figures that his surprise is due to always having been surrounded by *cérébraux* like his father, and he explains André's imposing presence in racial terms by the Jussat-Randon genealogy: “Ils sont de pure race conquérante, au lieu que dans les veines du descendant des cultivateurs lorrains qui vous écrit ces

¹³³ Ibid., 178.

quelques lignes coule un sang de race conquise, le sang d'aïeux asservis à la glèbe durant des siècles."¹³⁴ Robert recognizes his own double deficiency in this regard, as the product of a mixed marriage and a descendent of a conquered race, but he counters this by asserting his intellectual superiority to André. Reasserting his superiority, Robert reintegrates animal language to describe this person who defies his definition of an inferior person:

Il me suffit de l'étudier, au dîner, ce premier soir, mangeant posément, avec cette belle humeur d'appétit qui décèle la vie profonde; parlant peu, mais de cette voix pleine et qui commande, pour éprouver, à un degré surprenant, l'impression que j'étais devant une créature différente de moi, mais accomplie, mais achevée dans son espèce.¹³⁵

The arrival of André challenges Robert's distinction between superior and inferior people, so Robert provides some narrative repair to reestablish his superiority, classifying André into a different but lower species. As in the scene with the peasants, Robert takes up the position of the observer, watching André's behaviors with the respect observed for a powerful but unintelligent animal. The precarity of Robert's superiority becomes clear through the competition that arises between the two: "[une] sorte de rivalité subite [...] fit de moi, dès ces premières heures, un adversaire, presque un ennemi du comte André, sans que d'ailleurs il s'en doutât une minute."¹³⁶ Robert finds himself drawn into competition, and the object of this competition is André's little sister, Charlotte, whom Robert plans to seduce through his mental powers, as a sort of psychological experiment.

Robert's meeting with André, whose name signifies masculinity, reveals an unarticulated part of Robert's moral identity. Observing how physicality and authority meet in this character

¹³⁴ Ibid., 181.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 180.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 181.

sparks a reflection on other sorts of accomplishment than the cerebral, and at the same time it uncovers a less palatable aspect of Robert's moral identity. André does not meet Robert's only explicit criterion: intellectual aptitude. Robert's unwillingness to discount André as inferior shows that beneath Robert's stated veneration of the intellect lie an admiration of power and a desire for authority. Power and knowledge become discrete categories once Robert sees André's example of power without learning. Robert's account exposes a conflict between stated and implicit values, suggesting that power is a forceful, if not primary, motivation for Robert, and that intellectual accomplishment functions as a route to power. André's embodiment of power coupled with anti-intellectualism poses a problem for Robert, who has been constructing his identity on a specific notion of the other: the anti-intellectual, the religious and those without any real social status or power, such as his peers growing up, his mother and the peasant population. André impacts Robert's view of himself, destabilizing his belief that he is superior because of his intellectual aptitude. The change of milieu—from the cerebral values of the paternal home to the aristocratic values of the Jussat-Randon home—affects how Robert understands himself, and shows personal identity to be rooted in the social world.

The disciple's *Mémoire* betrays a few possible motivations for seducing Charlotte, disguised by a scientific alibi. Robert names the possibility that he might have acted out of passion: "Il y a des heures [...] où je me dis: 'J'ai tout bonnement été amoureux de Charlotte, parce qu'elle était jolie, fine, tendre, et que j'étais jeune; puis je me suis donné des prétextes de cerveau parce que j'étais un orgueilleux d'idées qui ne voulait pas être aimé comme un autre.'"¹³⁷ Another possibility is that Robert, who finds himself in a new social context where intellect is less valued, sees Charlotte as a means to compete with his rival, André. When Robert

¹³⁷ Ibid., 192.

describes his decision to seduce Charlotte, he does not even use her name: “ce projet de séduire la sœur du comte André.”¹³⁸ A few pages later, Robert again refers to Charlotte through her brother: “Une vague intuition me fit-elle apercevoir dans un cabotinage de deception et de mélancolie un plus sûr moyen d’intéresser davantage la sœur du comte André?”¹³⁹ Charlotte’s appeal for Robert lies in her relationship to André, whom Robert finds both intimidating and attractive. Robert’s *Mémoire* offers a more compelling description of his first impression of André than of Charlotte. Robert’s remark, “Elle, ce n’est pas le premier soir que je l’ai remarquée,”¹⁴⁰ suggests that his real interest is the count André.

The problem of control and chaos manifests itself on several levels in Robert’s confession. First, we have the most literal level of uncontrolled chaos: Charlotte is dead, and this was not part of the experiment that Robert set up. Second is Robert’s situation: he is awaiting the judge’s verdict; the literal reading and interpretation of his life and actions in order to determine his future. In prison, Robert is quite literally helpless. The one action he could take is to reveal that Charlotte killed herself; hence he seeks affirmation on his decision of martyrdom, and understanding the entire drama which has slipped out of his control. Thirdly, the decision to write his life stems from a failure to produce scientific writing; this failure is a direct result of his situation. Fourthly, Robert’s helplessness, vulnerability and complete lack of mastery and control are evident throughout his letter: the title of his letter announces science writing, but the proceeding writing is a confessional letter full of the tropes of religious conversion.

Even narrative control escapes Robert. His autobiography has missed its mark, even though it had a clear mission, and it raises questions about Robert’s life. This failure to execute

¹³⁸ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 201.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 193.

the argument he intended to write about his life has implications for the other instances of writing in *Le Disciple*, and we will turn to the frame story to look at Sixte and the issue of writing, responsibility and transmission, and then we'll look at the observations drawn from the novel as a whole to come back to the question of Paul Bourget and the *roman à thèse*.

III. The Frame Story

A. Readers as life writers

Through the frame story, Bourget situates Robert's confession in a conversation among other characters who are trying to make sense of Robert's life. Sixte has access to the first-person narrative, and André knows that Charlotte committed suicide thanks to a letter she left him. The other characters rely on other texts to draw conclusions about the crime. Each character in their own way crafts an interpretation that explains the crime and that attributes responsibility for Charlotte's death. Narrated in the third person, the frame story tells the story of a community grappling with a hermeneutical problem: Robert's life.

Four characters—Valette the judge, Sixte the philosopher, Robert's mother, and Charlotte's father—are each invested in their interpretation of Robert's behavior, insofar as it moves blame away from themselves. By reconstructing the crime with the available evidence, imagining Robert's motivations and tracing the sequence of events, all of these characters become life writers themselves. Each of these characters has a unique take on Robert's life, and they seek to exculpate themselves and the group they represent from any responsibility or implication in the crime.

Valette is the first character to imply Sixte's responsibility in Charlotte's death. The narrator presents Valette arranging dinner plans with his friend, then assuming his role as judge

when he welcomes Sixte moments later. Valette's inner thoughts are exposed by the narrator, so the reader can follow this practical psychologist as his assumptions about Sixte are slowly dismantled over the course of conversation. Valette first thinks he is dealing with "un de ces hommes de lettres qui croient devoir nous mépriser,"¹⁴¹ next, that Sixte is acting naive, before concluding that Sixte is sincere: "La stupeur qui se peignit sur le visage du philosophe manifesta une telle sincérité, que le juge en demeura lui-même étonné."¹⁴² Physiognomy is Valette's main tool for reading Sixte's expressions and drawing conclusions about him. Valette correctly reads Sixte's sincere astonishment at the details of Charlotte's death, but he still argues that the philosopher is implicated in the crime, showing him the evidence that points towards him. Robert had only a few books, many written by Sixte, and a few by English psychologists, and Valette shows these heavily worn and annotated books to Sixte.

Valette's interest as a judge is to locate the guilty party in Charlotte's death, and he hypothesizes that Sixte's thinking has badly influenced Robert, who subsequently developed into a criminal. Valette's professional bias has him seeking guilty individuals, because any sort of collective responsibility would make punitive measures impossible. For Valette, who functions in a specific legal framework, finding individual criminals is necessary for upholding a culturally-specific notion of justice that attributes responsibility to an individual and punishes that individual accordingly. An alternative reading of Robert's life—that a young, middle-class man, with few prospects and no father, has turned to an extremist form of philosophy to find meaning, purpose, identity, and a father figure—might lessen the culpability of both Robert and Sixte, diffusing the responsibility for Robert's radicalization onto various people and social

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁴² Ibid., 90.

factors that could not be clearly identified and then punished. Not finding a clear culprit would be more troubling to Valette's court than the possibility that philosophy has corrupted Robert.

The narrator validates Valette as a trustworthy character who is well versed not only in the printed word of the law, but also in the worldly text of gestures, facial expressions, and conversation. The narrator shows Valette's process of interrogation: his first hypothesis that Sixte is feigning ignorance is replaced by various other tentative hypotheses throughout the conversation, until Valette arrives at a conclusion that concurs with the portrait drawn by the narrator himself, encouraging the reader to trust Valette as a reader of the case. Valette's interaction with Sixte follows the narrator's own portrait of the thinker, and their coinciding views of Sixte draw attention to the narrator's position as yet another biographer in the text, but we will come back to this question of the narrator's role after looking at how the other characters interpret Charlotte's death.

The next person to accuse Sixte of responsibility in the crime is Robert's mother. She tells Sixte that he owes it to her to write to and visit Robert, accusing him of having corrupted her son:

"Il faut que vous promettiez de lui écrire, de venir là-bas. Vous me devez bien cela," insista-t-elle d'une voix dure. "Vous m'avez tant fait souffrir. [...] S'il a perdu la foi, à qui la faute? À vous, monsieur, à vos livres... Mon Dieu! Que je vous ai haï à cette époque!"¹⁴³

The Jussat-Randon family is equally interested in placing the blame for Charlotte's death outside of their own family. Charlotte's father, who until now has been characterized as a self-absorbed hypochondriac, suddenly regains his youthful vigor: "Il avait les yeux brillants, de la

¹⁴³ Ibid., 116.

jeunesse dans la voix et dans les gestes. La passion de la vengeance, au lieu de l'abattre, le soutenait."¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, André knows that Charlotte killed herself, but he is interested in protecting the reputation of Charlotte and the family, and considers Robert guilty of harmfully influencing Charlotte.

True to his portrayal as a supremely impractical thinker, Sixte reacts to these accusations by reflecting not on whether Robert is guilty, but as to his psychological makeup, devising research questions about his heredity:

La réapparition de l'animalité féroce chez le civilisé suffirait seule à expliquer cet acte...
Il faudrait aussi étudier l'hérédité personnelle de l'assassin [...] Le père est mort jeune?
Si l'on établissait qu'il y a de l'alcoolisme dans la famille, peut-être aurait-on là un beau cas de ce que Legrand du Saulle appelle l'épilepsie larvée.¹⁴⁵

Sixte accounts for Robert's development in a way that eludes his own culpability, and in order to reach this conclusion, he deemphasizes the notion of individual responsibility. He employs sophisticated theories from his discipline to attribute responsibility to factors other than philosophical readings, such as heredity, family, and alcoholism. Like his disciple, Sixte uses animal imagery to distance himself from a person with whom he has no desire to identify.

These characters—Valette, Robert's mother, the Jussat-Randon family, and Sixte—represent the interests and value system of a specific group. Valette seeks individuals to try and punish. Robert's mother locates the source of evil outside of her home, in the books Robert read. The Jussat-Randon family pegs the outsider as the criminal, protecting their reputation according to the honor code of the aristocracy. André does not accept Robert's vindication by the jury, and

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 313-314.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.

he kills him saying, “J’ai fait justice.”¹⁴⁶ Sixte’s explanation protects himself from blame, while at the same time upholding the value of intellectual freedom. These characters defend various entities—the judicial system, the family, the academy—and their defenses and judgment are formed by the value systems in whose name these entities function: justice, family piety, aristocratic honor, and free thought. By deflecting blame, the characters designate others as the scapegoat, preventing any need to examine their own values and contradictions. Sixte is the sole character who cannot construct a satisfactory account of Robert’s life without implicating himself.

B. Master relationships

Sixte’s deep involvement is owed to Robert’s belief that he is his disciple, a belief that becomes disturbingly obvious to Sixte as he reads the letter. Sixte first went through the intellectual exercises of analyzing Robert as a case study, but Sixte’s conscience becomes only more troubled as he learns more. Reading Robert’s letter amounts to an encounter with a monstrous double of his own thought. In the *tourment d’idées* that follows, Sixte no longer walks in a determined fashion, but with stops and starts, hurrying, and gesticulations, “comme disputant avec lui-même.”¹⁴⁷ Sixte’s behavior is remarked and commented by the neighbors, and the concierge, père Carbonnet, suggests a cause: “C’est peut-être *quéque* fils qu’il a *quéque* part qui tourne mal...”¹⁴⁸ And Carbonnet is correct in a way: the master-disciple relationship, like the filial relationship, is one of responsibility and transmission. Sixte is confronted with an incarnation of his thought that is at once uncannily like him—in such a way that reading offers

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 326.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 291.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 292.

an experience of debating with himself—and different: he cannot recognize this person as his disciple, a representative of his beliefs.

Before reading, Sixte had been able to distance Robert by calling attention to his animality. After reading Robert's letter, Sixte realizes that his theories are deeply embedded in Robert's thinking, and he needs to engage more deeply with the issue of his involvement in the crime. Sixte is horrified by the similarities between himself and his disciple: "L'identité entre son état moral actuel et l'état moral de son élève lui apparut comme si haïssable qu'il essaya de s'en débarrasser par un nouveau raisonnement."¹⁴⁹ The similarities between Sixte and Robert are less of a revelation to the reader; the narrator's biography of Sixte's childhood, youth and career already identified characteristics of the psychologist—living in a cultural vacuum, eschewing family and friends—that are then emulated by Robert. Like the crime and confession that Robert authors, Sixte's first book, *Psychologie de Dieu*, was prepared in solitude and set off a commotion: "son œuvre, conçue et composée comme dans une cellule, fut du premier coup mêlée d'une manière tapageuse à la bataille des idées contemporaines."¹⁵⁰ Robert's crime and Sixte's philosophy are authored under similarly solitary conditions, which prevent them from anticipating the ramifications of their actions and ideas. Bourget implies that dialogue is essential to the search for knowledge, whether in scholarship or in one's personal quest for self-knowledge.

Various master-disciple relationships are represented in the novel besides that of Sixte and Robert. André is in many ways the disavowed master of Robert, who finds himself admiring the count in spite of himself. Robert's seduction plot, although he frames it in terms of science, belongs quite squarely to André's domain of aristocratic competition over women. And although

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 301.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

Robert is paid for tutoring Lucien, he fashions himself as a personal experimental psychologist to Charlotte, against her knowledge. These instances of master-disciple relations expose a fundamental irony: the teachers are in no way masters of the situations, testing the notion of one-way transmission from teacher to student. Charlotte's death has led Robert to doubt his faith in positivism, and Robert's confession leads Sixte to doubt his philosophy, and follow his disciple's example by reviewing his own life and the values that have ordered it, trying to grasp the formula of his being:

Il rentra, décidé à passer en revue toute sa vie. Il s'aperçut tout petit enfant et qui travaillait à ses devoirs avec une minutie de conscience digne de son père l'horloger. Plus tard, quand il avait commencé de penser, qu'avait-il aimé, qu'avait-il voulu? La vérité. Quand il avait pris sa plume, pourquoi avait-il écrit, pour servir quelle cause, sinon la vérité? À la vérité, il avait tout sacrifié: fortune, place, famille, santé, amours, amitiés. Et qu'enseignait même le christianisme, la doctrine la plus pénétrée des idées contraires aux siennes? "Paix sur la terre aux hommes de bon vouloir," c'est-à-dire à ceux qui ont cherché la vérité.¹⁵¹

Our omniscient narrator-biographer has already pointed out that the formula of Sixte's life has been "penser,"¹⁵² and in this moment of self-examination Sixte's motto is articulated once again: "Dire toute sa pensée, ne dire que sa pensée."¹⁵³ Robert's letter challenges Sixte to reach beyond the paradigm of his own thought to Christian doctrine in order to call Robert to repentance. Thought as life formula offers continuity to the doctrinal rupture Sixte is undergoing.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 302.

¹⁵² Ibid., 70.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 302.

Even while doubting his teachings and suddenly using Christian language to respond to Robert, he is able to affirm the search for truth as a core value that has and will undergird his life.

Having reestablished his understanding of himself in a way that allows for a radical change in belief, Sixte undertakes a close reading of Robert's letter. He rereads the entire letter, finding every place in which he is cited, and proving that each instance is a distorted, decontextualized perversion of his thought. Following this exercise, Sixte proposes an interpretation of the tricky text that is Robert:

Avec sa magnifique sincérité, le philosophe le reconnaissait: le caractère de Robert Greslou, déjà dangereux par nature, avait rencontré, dans ses doctrines à lui, comme un terrain où se développer dans le sens de ses pires instincts, et, ce qui ajoutait à cette première évidence une autre, non moins douloureuse, c'est qu'Adrien Sixte se trouvait radicalement impuissant à répondre au suprême appel jeté vers lui par son disciple, du fond de son cachot.¹⁵⁴

Sixte posits that there was some essential evil in Robert before he began reading, a view that places the blame on Robert, and offers Sixte a less uncomfortable position as he comes to accept his responsibility for Robert. That he feels guilt for Robert's crime makes him more like Robert who feels guilty for his indirect involvement in Charlotte's suicide. Sixte concludes that he can not extricate himself from his role as Robert's master.

Greslou disait vrai: un maître est uni à l'âme qu'il a dirigée, même s'il n'a pas voulu cette direction, même si cette âme n'a pas bien interprété l'enseignement, par une sorte de lien mystérieux, mais qui ne permet pas de jeter à certaines agonies morales le geste indifférent de Ponce-Pilate.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 303.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 303-304.

Sixte reasons himself out of the horrifying possibility that he and Robert are similar. In order to do so, Sixte begins engaging with religious teachings and the notion of mystery, which allows him to assert his difference from his disciple, while at the same time accepting some responsibility for Robert's situation. Sixte ultimately recognizes Robert as his disciple, albeit a disciple who has deeply misunderstood his teachings. Sixte's recognition of his disciple implies that he is bound to Robert. He concludes that washing his hands of the situation would not be a neutral stance, but ethically problematic.

From the perspective of narrative, this qualified recognition is interesting. On the one hand, it means that Robert's confession has been an oblique success: Robert's writing offers a convincing demonstration of his absorption of Sixte's thought. Robert's aim was to demonstrate his mastery of the field to his professor, while at the same time seeking a professional opinion on his case. Even though Sixte has been shocked at every stage of reading, he is persuaded that his own doctrines are entrenched in Robert's horrifying thought processes. Recognizing himself in the confession convinces him of his ethical obligation toward Robert. On the other hand, Sixte's qualified recognition of the disciple is made possible by his narrative reworkings. Masterful narration—retelling his life to himself in a sort of self-examination, then rereading Robert's letter to identify and reject every instance of citation by the disciple—allows Sixte to recognize his disciple without damaging his identity as a superior thinker. Recognition is contingent on his ability to prove that his student thinks differently from himself, and that this stems from misunderstanding: a failing that reasserts Sixte's superior intellect. How Sixte processes his responsibility, his own understanding of his life, and the evolution of his thought while confronted with a monstrous double of himself testifies to narrative's force in reconciling opposites.

C. Selfhood in *Le Disciple*

Through their characters and their relationship as master and disciple, Adrien Sixte and Robert Greslou shed light on Bourget's conception of selfhood in *Le Disciple*. Perhaps the most striking lesson is that the self is not autonomous, but dependent on others for its identity. Robert and Sixte would have us believe they are autonomous beings who arrived at their beliefs and values through logical deduction. Both reduce social contact to a minimum and present themselves in terms of choice and agency. Robert does this in the first person in his confession, spinning a personal failure into a controlled experiment. The narrator gives us a view into Sixte's thought processes, as he claims his life has been ruled by the quest for truth, which can explain both his career as a writer and thinker, and his turn to religion when confronted with a wayward disciple.

Sixte does not stand freely outside of culture and history: his thinking is shaped by his milieu, relationships, and interlocutors. While his return to Catholicism is a striking example of this, there are other moments in the text that illustrate Sixte in relationship with his environment. He creates a living space that relates to him on his terms, hiring Mariette to set up his household and keep it functioning like clockwork. Like a Balzacian character, Sixte's character is exemplified by his surroundings. Entering Rue Guy-de-la-Brosse, or the Maison Vauquer, one can meet its inhabitant and grasp the essential parts of his personality, even before he makes an appearance. Sixte functions as a clock for the neighborhood, suggesting that his apparently autonomous lifestyle has nevertheless been formative for the culture and daily life of an entire street block. Taine, and presumably Sixte, theorized the importance of *milieu* in his psychology of selfhood. Sixte teaches a philosophy premised on determinism, but he holds himself outside of this system. Sixte overlooks the possibility that his own subjectivity might be affected by or

affecting his entourage, preferring to see himself as an undetermined agent.¹⁵⁶ This oversight plays out dramatically for Robert, who does not realize that he is assimilating the aristocratic values of the Jussat-Randon family, and who mistakes his seduction of Charlotte for a controlled psychological experiment.

Robert's fatal misunderstanding of Sixte's doctrines problematizes the notion of transmission as a one-way conveyance of information from master to disciple. Both parties are involved as readers, and they reinterpret their own views and make decisions based on their understanding of the other's writing and action. Communication and interpretation form a two-way path, and the separation between Robert reading and Sixte writing books props up the drama of the plot. And although the narrator emphasizes the social and economic autarky of Sixte's existence, the philosopher does think through his work in relation to society. Reflecting on the relevance of psychology as a discipline, Sixte thinks to himself, "C'est pourtant la science d'où dépend l'avenir de ce pays-ci..."¹⁵⁷ A scholar who views their work in terms of the good of the country cannot be considered apolitical. Sixte is antisocial, but he recognizes the work of the intellectual as political and social, and he accepts responsibility for a disciple he did not choose and whose learning he did not control. Sixte is changed by Robert and his writing, and this

¹⁵⁶ Hilary Nias argues that Taine's bleak picture of human intelligence nevertheless concealed a more hopeful stance: "His conception of the self demonstrated that, stripped of all the elements which implied individuality, it was radically disempowered. Yet in spite of this Taine claimed it for the ability, by unstinting effort and modification, to erect a system for interpreting the origins, the nature and the purpose of existence, even though this system might be entirely erroneous. It met, as we shall see, with conflicting responses. But no one deciphered the code which spelt out that peace of mind could be attained in the acceptance of this limitation, and that the ceaseless pursuit of both represented the only worthwhile philosophical ambition. Only Marcus Aurelius, perhaps, with his resignation, or Spinoza with his silence, Pascal with his doubt, Darwin with his anxiety, or Stendhal with his Beylisme, urging at least the resigned enjoyment of a restricted happiness, might have recognized and comprehended Taine's Stoic theory of the validity of knowledge for its own sake [...]" (*The Artificial Self: The Psychology of Hippolyte Taine* [Oxford: Legenda, 1999], 186.)

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

unchosen disciple and unchosen reading illustrates yet again the role of the other in forming the self: in *Le Disciple*, self-fashioning involves both active choosing and control, as well as passive receiving and undergoing.

A second feature of the self in *Le Disciple* is that it is not knowable. The text presents Robert's attempt to understand himself in a first-person confession, and in the third person, the narrator shows Sixte trying to understand why he feels responsible while believing himself innocent. Robert's confession displays a tension between the self-mastery and self-knowledge he claims, and the lack of awareness he performs in writing the letter. Sixte reaches an impasse in his ability to understand himself and the human psyche. He runs into obstacles when trying to explain Robert's life, and he hardly achieves more clarity on his own life. Interpreting Robert's motivations and choices propels Sixte to the language of sin and repentance, itself at odds with his own doctrines. Robert's interpretation of Sixte's scholarship reveals aspects of Sixte, that remained invisible to himself:

L'aventure de Robert Greslou lui montrait dans ses livres les complices d'un hideux orgueil et d'une abjecte sensualité, lui qui n'avait jamais travaillé que pour servir la psychologie, en modeste ouvrier d'un travail qu'il croyait bienfaisant, et dans l'ascétisme le plus sévère, afin que jamais les ennemis de ses doctrines ne pussent argumenter de son exemple contre ses principes.¹⁵⁸

Sixte recognizes that as a philosopher, his life is connected to his books, and that readers might compare his public persona and his writing. What Sixte has not accounted for is the possibility that his writings might convey pride and sensuality: these might be characteristics that he has been hiding under an ascetic lifestyle, which become visible to readers. Alternatively,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 296.

Robert's surprising interpretation of Sixte's philosophy might speak more broadly to the risks of linguistic communication: Sixte's writing escapes his control, and his writing takes on meanings than he has not anticipated. Put otherwise, Robert's interpretation may be a correct reading that illuminates Sixte's character in new ways, or it may be a misreading of Sixte's philosophy that is nevertheless entirely plausible.

Before reading Robert's letter, Sixte acknowledges lack of self-knowledge in collective terms while reflecting on Robert's case. He contemplates a *grand vieux sanglier* in the Jardin des Plantes, thinking to himself:

Et dire, [...] que nous ne nous connaissons guère plus que cet animal ne se connaît! Ce que nous appelons notre personne, c'est une conscience si vague, si trouble, des opérations qui s'accomplissent en nous. [...] Qui sait? Ce jeune homme était préoccupé par la multiplicité du moi. N'avait-il pas un sentiment obscur qu'il portait en lui deux états très distincts, comme une condition première et une condition seconde, deux êtres enfin: un, lucide, intelligent, honnête, amoureux des travaux de l'esprit, celui que j'ai connu; et un autre, ténébreux, cruel, impulsif, celui qui a tué?...¹⁵⁹

Sixte's access point to the problem of self-knowledge begins from the position of the researcher taking an academic interest in Robert's biography, considering humans as a species, rather than another person like himself. Reading an autobiographical letter addressed to him and asking for his help changes his position toward Robert, undermining his own beliefs and the meaning of his own life.

Sixte's first attempt at reconciling the Robert he knew and the Robert on trial points to a third aspect of selfhood under discussion in *Le Disciple*: the importance of unity of the self. Sixte

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 108-109.

suggests that Robert's problem is that he is composed of two separate parts. Robert explains his duality as the capacity he has had since childhood to be both acting and observing at the same time. We get no explanation as to how Robert's duality might be of a different moral quality than the duality enacted by an objective, observing scientist. In fact, the novel describes Sixte himself as essentially composite. The narrator presents Sixte as a three-part individual:

Celui-ci était composé de trois individus comme emboîtés les uns dans les autres: il y avait en lui le bonhomme Sixte, vieux garçon asservi aux soins méticuleux de sa servante et soucieux d'abord de sa tranquillité matérielle. Il y avait ensuite le polémiste philosophique, l'auteur, pour tout dire, animé, à son insu, du susceptible amour-propre commun à tous les écrivains. Il y avait enfin le grand psychologue, passionnément attaché aux problèmes de la vie intérieure, et il fallait, pour qu'une idée eût accompli sa pleine action sur cet esprit, qu'elle eût traversé ces trois compartiments.¹⁶⁰

Sixte's three selves operate sequentially, unlike Robert, who describes himself as two persons at the same time. The judge Valette also has a dual construction, but these identities are masks connected to functions. The narrator presents Valette as a reliable character, who transforms with ease from the witty, worldly man to the skilled court interrogator. The narrator clarifies that this is not hypocrisy: "Ces passages d'une attitude à une autre sont beaucoup plus sincères que ne l'imaginent ceux qui constatent ces contrastes de tenue entre l'homme privé et le fonctionnaire."¹⁶¹ Valette's masks are justified by the nature of his profession, which requires a separation between the private and the public. The problem of the "multiplicité du moi" that so interests Robert remains an enigma in the text: what makes Valette's masks different from Robert's dual consciousness? And what can we make of Sixte's tripartite self? Only the narrator

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 102.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 87.

can tell, and the reader relies on this authorial voice to code Valette's masks as correct behavior, and to legitimate Sixte's three-part construction as the sign of an erudite yet naïve individual. Whether and how Robert's criminality is connected his dual consciousness remains unanswered.

The composite text demands an active reader to act as a judge. *Le Disciple* presents two suspects, Robert and Sixte, who each respond to Charlotte's suicide by reviewing their own life. Robert Greslou's written *Mémoire* compels Adrien Sixte to take stock of his own life, and the narrator communicates this "tourment d'idées" through free indirect speech or reported speech. Other characters, such as the judge, Robert's mother, Charlotte's family members, and Sixte's neighbors, offer their perspectives on the master and the disciple, and these reports furnish the reader with a complex picture of the legal case. The two life stories of Robert and Sixte, as well as the perspectives of other characters, complicating any judgment of the characters' responsibility for Charlotte's death.

IV. Conclusion

In *Le Disciple*, Bourget investigates the writer's responsibility as a moral leader by casting this question into fiction. The death of a young woman adds urgency to this philosophical issue: Bourget shows us that the mystery in the case of Charlotte's death is not who killed her, but who is responsible for her suicide. The law offers an easy yet unsatisfactory answer: Charlotte is responsible for drinking the poison, and Robert is released from prison. Whereas the law seeks to identify one guilty party, fiction complicates the issue by diffusing responsibility among multiple parties. *Le Disciple* illuminates the complex web of interdependent human relationships, pushing back on the idea that a crime can be interpreted by disentangling characters and actions into discrete elements that can be judged guilty or innocent. The death in

Le Disciple is a mystery, not because we do not know what happened, but because we learn what happened and we still cannot decide who is responsible. *Le Disciple* exculpates both Charlotte and Robert from total responsibility, instead showing that the weight of Charlotte's death looms over many, including: the philosopher who may have underemphasized ethics in his intellectual work; the disciple who may have been interpreting his readings in a self-serving way; and a culture that has taught Charlotte that virginity is more valuable than life.

We do not know whether Bourget intended *Le Disciple* to expound a thesis or to complicate it, but choosing fiction over philosophical or critical modes of writing allowed Bourget to think about Sixte's responsibility, and by extension, his own role as a writer in society. *Le Disciple* furnishes a laboratory for contemplating moral responsibility without having recourse to the simple metrics of either French law or Church dogma. Bourget may have been hoping to find one answer from this experiment, but his novel rejects the premise that one party might be wholly responsible for Charlotte's death, or even that an event can be parsed into autonomous elements: individuals and their actions. Bourget's preface to *Le Disciple* hints at the lesson he finds in the tale of Adrien Sixte, Robert Greslou, and Charlotte de Jussat-Randon. Entitled "À un jeune homme," the preface offers a *morale* before the fable: "Il n'est pas d'honnête homme de lettres, si chétif soit-il, qui ne doive trembler de responsabilité..."¹⁶² Bourget states the didactic goal of his novel: to guide the youth, and impress upon writers their duty as moral guides. Bourget signs the preface with his own initials, a gesture that could signal seriousness or jest, in the same way as Sainte-Beuve preaches piety in his preface to *Volupté*, which he signs under the initials "S. B." If Bourget is indeed jesting, then this would mean that *Le Disciple* was not even intended to be a *roman à thèse*.

¹⁶² Ibid., 45.

If Bourget was sincere in this pedagogical objective, the fact that *Le Disciple* fails to make a clear argument for Sixte's responsibility means that Bourget, in an instance of dramatic irony, replicates the flaw of his character. Sixte's error lies not so much in the philosophical system he has constructed, but in his beliefs about language upon which his life and philosophy are based: the idea that attentive logic and ascetic living can prevent misreading, and that the author's good intentions might function as a talisman against harmful or self-serving interpretations. Through Robert's letter, Sixte discovers that his self-fashioning has not been entirely under his control, and that the self he was communicating through word and deed has taken on other meanings for his disciple. Although Adrien Sixte's first name evokes the powerful Roman emperor Hadrian, this allusion might be comical at best, given Sixte's lack of social or political awareness. Sixte's belief in the clarity of logical expression is at odds with the social reality of language, whose meanings are constantly being constructed and negotiated.

Whether or not Bourget was intentionally resisting the *roman à thèse* and its didacticism, *Le Disciple* refuses to bend toward one lesson. The story of Sixte and Robert was escaping Bourget's control during the writing process. Bourget planned to write a novel about Adrien Sixte called *Adrien Sixte*. Once Bourget began writing the "Mémoire sur moi-même"/"Confession d'un jeune homme d'aujourd'hui," Robert came to occupy nearly two-thirds of the novel. The character of the disciple takes on flesh, surprising his creator, Bourget, as well as his master, the philosopher whose ideas have formed him. Sixte is astonished at the uncanny incarnation of his thought in his disciple: "Et les mots de la confession, au lieu de rester de simples caractères, écrits avec l'encre froide sur l'inerte papier, s'animaient ainsi en paroles derrière lesquelles il sentait palpiter un être."¹⁶³ Like the disciple who is formed by Sixte's

¹⁶³ Ibid., 298.

thought and develops it in ways the philosopher did not anticipate, *Le Disciple* reaches beyond Bourget's control.

Bourget merges epistolary and realist conventions, bringing polyphony to the inward-looking genre of life writing. *Le Disciple* is comprised of an introspective letter, set in a frame story that borrows from the realist tradition: a third person omniscient narrator, a character whose personality echoes from his milieu, and direct references to realist heroes.¹⁶⁴ The inserted epistle and realist frame are prefaced by Bourget's dedicatory note, a nod toward *Le Disciple*'s Romantic ancestors, *Atala*, *Obermann*, *Delphine*, and *Adolphe*, whose prefaces orient a long first-person soliloquy in the larger framework of the author's literary project.¹⁶⁵ Bourget's preface adds yet another voice to *Le Disciple*, producing conflict between Robert's *Mémoire*, Sixte's story recounted by the narrator, and P. B.'s preface, which presents the novel as a didactic story. This structure renders the extradiagetic narrator conspicuous, and draws attention to the ways in which the story of Sixte and Robert can be read as a meta-reflection on Bourget's understanding of his own social role.

We can only speculate as to how *Le Disciple* impacted Bourget's intellectual and moral development, but history suggests that Bourget accepted the *morale* he put forth in the novel's preface, affirming the writer's responsibility for society. In the decades that followed, Bourget

¹⁶⁴ Robert distinguishes himself from the heroes of realist novels, in his characteristic performance of blind self-awareness: "Je vous raconte cet enfantillage pour vous prouver le degré de ma sincérité intime et combien je ressemblais peu, tandis que le landau roulait sur la route d'Aydat, au jeune homme ambitieux et pauvre que tant de romans ont dépeint. Avec mon goût habituel du dédoublement, je me souviens avoir, dès cette heure-là, constaté, non sans orgueil, cette différence. Je me rappelais le Julien Sorel de *Rouge et Noir*, arrivant chez M. de Rênal, les tentations de Rubempré, dans Balzac, devant la maison des Bargeton, quelques pages aussi du *Vingtras* de Vallès," (ibid., 174).

¹⁶⁵ Rousseau's *Confessions* omit this: identity of author and character allow Rousseau to describe his project in the text itself. Montaigne writes his own preface without adding an additional voice to his *Essais*.

renounced positivism, converted to Catholicism, began writing novels with clear theses, and joined the anti-Dreyfus *Ligue de la patrie française*. Bourget diagnosed social ills in terms of regional uprootedness, and he became an important mentor for Maurice Barrès. Bourget was no doubt acting in good faith when he turned to religious, national, and cultural rootedness as a reaction to problems he saw in the intellectual culture of his time, but he evidently did not anticipate the nationalism and genocide that would mark the twentieth century. Bourget may have missed one of the lessons of *Le Disciple*: Bourget's intellectual evolution ironically replicates the mistake of his character Sixte, underestimating the potency and unpredictability of ideas.

CHAPTER THREE

Fictional Autobiography Modeling Self-Writing as an Ethical Practice:

François Mauriac's *Le Nœud de vipères*

I. Introduction

Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l'homme? quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradictions, quel prodige? Juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver de terre, dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur, gloire et rebut de l'univers. Qui démêlera cet embrouillement?¹⁶⁶

Centuries after Blaise Pascal marveled at the puzzling nature of *l'homme*, François Mauriac published *Le Nœud de vipères*, a novel that investigates strikingly similar questions. Pascal's writings on faith and God were foundational to Mauriac's development as a thinker and as a Christian.¹⁶⁷ Mauriac mentions Pascal frequently in his autobiographical writings, *Ce que je crois* and *Mémoires intérieurs*, and in *Bloc-Notes*, the published collection of his journalism. *Le Nœud de vipères* is replete with Pascalian themes, such as human complexity, the importance of charity, and the tension between reason and faith. The written reflections of Mauriac's character Louis seem to respond to Pascal's provocative suggestion that even reason can feed self-

¹⁶⁶ Blaise Pascal, Fragment 122, *Pensées*, Le Guern ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 580.

¹⁶⁷ François Mauriac writes: "Il est étonnant que l'écrivain à qui je dois le plus et qui m'a le plus marqué, et qui fut mon maître dès ma seizième année, dès que j'eus entre les mains les *Pensées* et *Opuscules* de l'édition Brunshvicg, le demeure aujourd'hui encore [...]" (*Ce que je crois*, *Œuvres autobiographiques*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. François Durand (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 610.

interested judgment: “[...] est-ce par raison que vous vous aimez?”¹⁶⁸ But Mauriac is also a reader of Montaigne, and he participates in a humanist inquiry into the self that is broader than the Catholic specificity of *Le Nœud de vipères*. I argue that although Mauriac deploys evocative religious symbols and tropes in his narrative performance of a distinctly Catholic religious conversion, *Le Nœud de vipères* challenges traditional notions of conversion by making life writing the motor and medium of self-transformation.

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, François Mauriac tells the story of an unlikely religious conversion. In contrast with his wife’s devout and family-centered life, Louis has built his identity on his rational approach to life, and his extraordinarily acute perception of human behavior, both in the legal profession and in the home. Louis has little patience for the Catholicism he has witnessed, yet his minority status as an atheist means that his moral evaluations always appear in relation to Catholic doctrines and teachings. Louis makes clever critiques of Catholic bourgeois culture, but even though he identifies as nonreligious, he inhabits a world ordered by Catholic culture and traditions. His rebellion takes the form of eating meat on Friday, when the rest of the family is eating fish. Even Louis’s writing project, a bitter *réquisitoire*, fits into the liturgical calendar:¹⁶⁹ Louis begins writing on Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter, and he writes through Pentecost and Ordinary Time into Advent. Louis dies in the middle of writing on November twenty-third,¹⁷⁰ which is both the date

¹⁶⁸ “Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point; on le sait en mille choses. Je dis que le cœur aime l’être universel naturellement et soi-même naturellement, selon qu’il s’y adonne, et il se durcit contre l’un ou l’autre à son choix. Vous avez rejeté l’un et conservé l’autre—est-ce par raison que vous vous aimez?” (Pascal, Fragment 277, *Pensées*, Brunschvicg ed., 201).

¹⁶⁹ Caroline Casseville, *L’Évolution intérieure des personnages chez François Mauriac, un exemple dans le roman “Le Nœud de vipères”* (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université d’Avignon et des Pays de Vaucluse, 1986-1987), 130 and 146 ; See also Yves Le Hir, “Temps et durée dans ‘Le Nœud de Vipères’ de F. Mauriac,” *Les Lettres Romanes* XIV (1960), 4-5.

¹⁷⁰ Louis’s last sentence includes the temporal marker “ce soir” and Hubert explains his father’s death to his sister: “Tu sais que notre père est mort à sa table de travail et qu’Amélie l’a trouvé,

of Pascal's conversion in 1654,¹⁷¹ and the Eve of the feast day of Saint John of the Cross.¹⁷²

Saint Teresa of Avila, whose words serve as the epigraph to *Le Nœud de vipères*, collaborated closely with Saint John of the Cross in initiating the Order of the Discalced Carmelites.¹⁷³

François Mauriac places his character in a web of correspondences: Blaise Pascal, who created a literary *Mémorial* on the very night of his religious conversion;¹⁷⁴ Saint John of the Cross, whose doctrine of love Mauriac referenced in his political thought;¹⁷⁵ Saint Teresa of Avila, who admits her own uncertainty about who she is and what she desires.¹⁷⁶ Louis identifies as anti-religious, but his expressions of selfhood occur in a social world that is distinctly Christian and Catholic.

le matin du 24 novembre, la face contre un cahier ouvert[...]" (Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 526).

¹⁷¹ Pascal documents his conversion as taking place at night from 10:30 to 12:30 (*Mémorial*, 4); Mauriac's character Louis dies on the same date, also in the evening.

¹⁷² The feast of Saint John of the Cross is now celebrated on his death date, December 14, but the Roman Catholic Church celebrated it on November 24th from 1738 (when his feast was first added to the General Roman Calendar) until 1969 (*Roman Calendar*, 67).

¹⁷³ Saint John of the Cross's writings include *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which emphasizes mortifying "every attachment to sensate things because in comparison to God, these things are pure darkness." Although he was a leader in ascetic living, his teachings centered on charity, and he taught that "in the evening of life we shall be judged by love," (Lodi, *Saints of the Roman Calendar: Including Feasts Proper to the English-Speaking World*, trans. Jordan Aumann [New York: Society of St. Paul, 1992], 394-396).

¹⁷⁴ According to some accounts of Pascal's conversion, such as Jean-Louis Barbeau de la Bruyère's version, Pascal's brush with death on the Pont de Neuilly directly preceded his conversion and writing of the *Mémorial*. This sequence of event seems to conform more to the tropes of the conversion than to historical fact, as Henri Gouhier discusses in *Blaise Pascal: Commentaires* ([Paris: Vrin, 1971], 379-381). Pascal had three transformational experiences: an accident, a sermon, and the event preceding the *Mémorial*. This surplus of events challenges the conventions of the conversion story, something La Bruyère seems to have been rectifying by putting all three events in close succession to cause one major transformation in Pascal's life.

¹⁷⁵ "Voilà le point précis à propos duquel le chrétien, mêlé à la politique, doit s'interroger sans cesse: jusqu'où peut-il aller trop loin? Se battre oui, et pourtant ne pas pécher contre cet amour sur lequel saint Jean de la Croix a dit que nous serions jugés au dernier jour. Vous serez jugés sur l'amour" (Mauriac, *L'Engagement politique*, 9).

¹⁷⁶ See the epigraph of *Le Nœud de vipères*: "Dieu, considérez que nous ne nous entendons pas nous-mêmes et que nous ne savons pas ce que nous voulons, et que nous nous éloignons infiniment de ce que nous désirons" (381).

Religious conversion and, more generally, ethical transformation, form the central drama of *Le Nœud de vipères*, but the substance and meaning of Louis's transformation present an interpretational challenge. At the beginning of the novel, Louis identifies strongly as a nonbeliever in terms of religion, and in his relationships, he prides himself on his lucidity and his ability to understand others' behaviors and motives. Certain that his family is exploiting him, Louis is intent on diverting the inheritance from his family. By the end of the novel, Louis is using religious language, doubting his assumptions, signing away his inheritance to his descendants, and opening up to new relationships with his family.

Textual and extra-textual evidence supports the thesis that before Louis dies, he demonstrates his intention to adhere to the Roman Catholic faith. A letter from his granddaughter Janine in the epilogue confirms that Louis had met with a priest, and had arranged to take communion on Christmas.¹⁷⁷ Readers such as M. Laurent have emphasized the Catholic specificity of Louis's transformation in *Le Nœud de vipères*: "La conversion morale de Louis après la mort de sa femme s'accompagne d'une évolution religieuse qui le conduit à la Foi en Jésus Rédempteur. Il ne s'agit point d'une indistincte religiosité."¹⁷⁸ This change of affiliation from skepticism to Catholicism does not, however, prove that Louis has undergone an authentic, inner transformation. Through this tale of religious conversion, Mauriac raises more universal questions about personal transformation: what evidence, if any, could prove this conversion

¹⁷⁷ The character Janine addresses her incredulous uncle: "[...] je vous affirme qu'il a eu trois entrevues (une à la fin d'octobre et deux en novembre) avec M. le curé de Calèse [...] En vain prétendez-vous que s'il avait été absous, il aurait communiqué. Moi, je sais ce qu'il m'a répété, l'avant-veille de sa mort: obsédé par son indignité, le pauvre homme avait résolu d'attendre Noël" (Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 531).

¹⁷⁸ Laurent, M., *'Le Nœud de vipères' de F. Mauriac: Analyse Commentée*, Series: *Lisons Ensemble*, Le Français au Baccalauréat (Paris: Éducation Promotion Culture, 11 rue de Sèvres), 26.

authentic? What is the substance of Louis's transformation? What forces are at work in bringing about this sea-change?

A. Literature Review

The scholarly conversation on Mauriac's oeuvre and *Le Nœud de vipères* has circled around three intersecting categories: his biography, Catholicism, and literary influences. Mauriac was unwillingly labeled an *écrivain catholique*, and it was public knowledge that he was a practicing Catholic. His writing frequently treats Christian themes and theological issues, and so conversations of the religious elements in his work often refer to what is known about Mauriac's own religious beliefs and lived experience.

Anne Duprez explains how François Mauriac came to have such a homogeneously Catholic upbringing.¹⁷⁹ Her recent biography of Claire Mauriac draws Mauriac's mother out of the shadows, and argues for her deep influence on François Mauriac's thought. Jean-Paul and Claire formed a secular-religious marriage, but Jean-Paul passed away when François, the fifth and youngest child, was only 20 months old. As a single parent, Claire raised the children in a strictly Catholic home, limiting the children's reading to Church-approved books and Catholic periodicals. (François' older brother needed special permission to read Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple*, and he made his case successfully on the grounds of his studies.) François Mauriac distanced himself from Catholicism in early adulthood.

Mauriac converted back to Catholicism in late 1928, and *Le Nœud de vipères*, which began taking shape in 1931, was the first novel published after this event. Mauriac's return to the

¹⁷⁹ Anne Duprez, *Claire Mauriac, le roman d'une mère* (Bordeaux: Le Festin, 2015). Duprez's work fills a gap in the scholarship on Mauriac's family history. Biographers and historians have studied François' father Jean-Paul, who left more written traces than his mother, Claire, even though he had no direct influence on François' intellectual development. Others have focused on Mauriac's descendants, especially the writers among them: his oldest child Claude Mauriac and his granddaughter Anne Wiazemsky.

Church fits into a larger trend of intellectuals converting to Catholicism during France's Third Republic.¹⁸⁰ A significant subgroup of these converts were, like Mauriac, returning to the Catholicism in which they had been raised. Mauriac underwent a crisis during the late 1920s, and Charles Du Bos recommended him to the Abbé Altermann, who became his spiritual director through his conversion.¹⁸¹ Altermann was known to be demanding, and he urged Mauriac to write his conversion story. The result was an essay, *Le Bonheur du chrétien*, in which Mauriac did not so much tell a conversion story as rescind the ideas expressed in this essay's pre-conversion counterpart, *Les Souffrances du chrétien*. Even in *Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs*, which was written between 1958 and 1965, Mauriac gives only a vague narrative of his conversion, in which he credits the Abbé Altermann for his pastoral care:

A ce moment de ma vie où j'étais dans le fossé de la route, perdant le sang, il m'avait pris sur ses épaules, porté jusqu'à l'auberge. Il ne lui avait pas suffi de me confier à l'aubergiste, il était demeuré près de moi, ne me quittant à aucun moment. Il m'avait emmené à Solesmes; puis il me rejoignit à Malagar et fit avec moi le pèlerinage de Lourdes. Je pouvais me croire son seul pénitent: il avait abandonné les quatre-vingt-dix-neuf autres brebis. Durant cette période, sa charité avait été sans défaillance, bien qu'il fût scandalisé par mes habitudes bourgeoises de confort: toujours la première classe dans les trains, toujours le meilleur hôtel, même à Lourdes! et toujours à table les plats que je préférais, comme si je n'eusse pas dû faire pénitence, et il était certes aux premières loges

¹⁸⁰ See Frédéric Gugelot's *La Conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France, 1885-1935* (Paris: CNRS, 1998).

¹⁸¹ For Mauriac's 1928 conversion timeline, see Jean-Luc Barré's account in *François Mauriac: Biographie Intime 1885-1940* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2009), 423-438.

pour connaître les raisons que j'avais de me mettre au pain et à l'eau. Mais il sut être doux à ces heures-là!¹⁸²

Where we might expect a narrative performance of religious experience, Mauriac recycles the New Testament trope of the lost sheep, avoiding any account of inner transformation. He writes the essay his spiritual director demands, and his conversion is public knowledge, but he gives no details of his crisis or of how he was persuaded by Christianity. In his relatively recent and authoritative biography, *François Mauriac: Biographie Intime*, Jean-Luc Barré connects Mauriac's religious crisis to his homosexuality.¹⁸³ Previous biographers have elided the question of sexuality, referring to the crisis as the product of an "orage affectif" or an "amour déçu."¹⁸⁴ Barré demonstrates that this period of crisis coincides with Mauriac's platonic relationship with Bernard Barbey. Without mentioning Barbey, Mauriac describes his state during the period when he wrote *Souffrances du chrétien*: "Pendant deux ou trois ans, je fus comme fou. [...] Les raisons épisodiques de cette folie en recouvraient de plus obscures, née à l'intersection de la chair et de l'âme."¹⁸⁵ If Barré is correct that the tensions among Catholic doctrine, bourgeois social norms, and sexuality produced a crisis, then Mauriac's elision of details about his conversion is unsurprising.

It was in this context of the well-known author's public yet mysterious religious conversion that *Le Nœud de vipères* appeared, and the great critical attention this novel garnered in 1932 was in large part owing to curiosity about Mauriac's own postconversion identity. While

¹⁸² François Mauriac, *Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs, Œuvres autobiographiques*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. François Durand (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 752.

¹⁸³ Jean-Luc Barré, "Ces sortes de penchants," *François Mauriac: Biographie Intime 1885-1940*, (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2009), 371-394.

¹⁸⁴ Jean-Luc Barré connects this to two figures: Jean Lacouture and Violaine Massenet (*François Mauriac*, 371).

¹⁸⁵ François Mauriac, *Ce que je crois*, 616.

clerics checked the novel for theological orthodoxy, the literary world read the novel to see whether Mauriac's newfound religion had impacted his artistic talent. This first generation of readers came to various conclusions.¹⁸⁶ Charles Du Bos saw in *Le Nœud de vipères* the great Catholic novel, a positive artistic outcome of a crisis. M. Turnell diagnosed it as the beginning of an artistic decline, a judgment that coincided with Mauriac's own fear that religious conversion would translate into artistic defeat. D. O'Donnell read Mauriac's conversion and his subsequent novel as a sign of surrender to the Catholic establishment, which was growing increasingly concerned with Mauriac's art, notably his pre-conversion *Destins*. Jean Touzot describes how the Church at various levels of its hierarchy, "depuis l'aumônier de patronage jusqu'à Monseigneur," was following and reacting to Mauriac's publications:

Chacun réagit, fort de sa compétence, si bien que se brise la moule de la chronique littéraire entre les mains de ces confesseurs, théologiens, apologistes, spécialistes de la spiritualité conjugale ou de la catéchèse. Toute l'Église se met en alerte, et il est sans exemple qu'un écrivain catholique ait suscité un tel déploiement de forces.¹⁸⁷

If Mauriac was indeed responding to this pressure from the Church, then his conversion could be read as inauthentic: maybe Mauriac was choosing Catholic affiliation so that his work would be read generously as art inspired by faith, rather than criticism from an outsider. Others found that Mauriac's criticism of Catholic culture was insufficient. Claude Edmond Magny took issue with what he saw to be superficial social criticism, that does not reach the foundations of bourgeois Catholicism:

¹⁸⁶ Thornton-Smith, Colin Bernard, *Creative Problems Presented By the Theme of Grace in the Modern French Catholic Novel Up to Bernanos and Mauriac* (PhD Diss., University of Melbourne, March 1963), 292.

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Luc Barré (*François Mauriac*, 367-368) cites Jean Touzot's "Quand Mauriac était scandaleux," *Œuvres et Critiques I.1, Prose romanesque du XXe siècle* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1977).

Non seulement Mauriac laisse intact le monde de l'argent (malgré ses portraits d'êtres avarés ou cupides), et cette réalité qu'est la Famille solidement appuyée sur l'Héritage. Mais après avoir paru un instant les ébranler, il les redore d'une sorte de poésie mythique, empruntée à la magie enfantine, comme dans *Le Mystère Frontenac*. Si bien que son œuvre finit par rassurer, plus que toute autre, par un retour aux valeurs du passé, individuel ou collectif: la bourgeoisie se trouve justifiée sentimentalement par le souvenir de promenades adolescentes dans les forêts landaises ou l'évocation des jours heureux coulés chez les bons pères.¹⁸⁸

Magny cites *Le Mystère Frontenac*, but his criticism can also be applied to *Le Nœud de vipères* which, in spite of its scathing judgments of an elite Catholic family, does not ultimately challenge "la Famille solidement appuyée sur l'Héritage." The protagonist of *Le Nœud de vipères* reflects at length on the role of money in his relationships, but the novel's happy ending includes his religious conversion, partially renewed relationships with his family members, and the decision to give his inheritance to his offspring. Valérie Vincendeau is less concerned with the possibilities of social critique afforded by *Le Nœud de vipères*. Regarding the relationship of class and property to religion, Vincendeau argues that the Christian conversion saves the text from a purely pessimistic view of human relations: "Sans cette perspective chrétienne, *Le Nœud de vipères* apparaît comme la dénonciation féroce de la propriété et du pharisaïsme qui pervertissent les échanges humains [...]"¹⁸⁹ These scholarly conversations anchor Mauriac's work in the context of his own life, his evolving beliefs, and his cultural milieu: the bourgeois Catholicism of the early twentieth century.

¹⁸⁸ Claude Edmond Magny, *Histoire du roman français depuis 1918* (1950, cited from the Classiques Larousse, *Le Mystère Frontenac*), 116.

¹⁸⁹ Valérie Vincendeau, *L'Évolution des personnages dans "Thérèse Desqueyroux," "La Fin de la nuit," et "Le Nœud de vipères"* (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Bordeaux III, 1990), 100.

Research on Mauriac has also approached his work from the angle of literary and theological influence, notably that of Pascal and Montaigne. Mauriac himself acknowledged Pascal's influence on his thinking, and Amal Farid's study of spiritual conflict in Mauriac's novels shows the Pascalian quality of their depictions of human activity. Farid suggests that Mauriac's praise of Pascal—"il traverse tout l'homme pour atteindre Dieu"¹⁹⁰—can be applied to Mauriac's own writing.¹⁹¹ In Mauriac's world, all roads lead to God, and he creates tormented, sinful characters whose quest, however circuitous, eventually brings them to God.¹⁹² For Vincendeau as well, Pascalian theology is central to *Le Nœud de vipères*, "un roman de basé sur l'idée de la Révélation."¹⁹³ Enrique Sánchez Costa calls Mauriac "le plus pascalien des écrivains du *renouveau catholique*."¹⁹⁴

Caroline Casseville detects Pascalian theology and reminiscences of Dostoyevsky in the movement of *Le Nœud de vipères*: a hidden yet present God overcomes the deceptive powers of gold, vengeance, and hate.¹⁹⁵ The primacy of charity in Pascal's thought is visible too: only love is able to cut through the *nœud* that forms Louis's central preoccupation and the title of the novel. One of the strengths of Casseville's analysis is that she parses the Christian theology of *Le Nœud de vipères* while at the same time recognizing that Mauriac deals with universal questions: the problem of self-knowledge, the temptation of silence in human relationships, the desire for

¹⁹⁰ The full sentence reads: "Pascal, le seul humaniste digne de ce beau nom; le seul qui ne renie rien de l'homme; il traverse tout l'homme pour atteindre Dieu" (Pascal, *Les pages immortelles*, 29-30).

¹⁹¹ Amal Farid, *Le Conflit spirituel dans les romans de Mauriac* (PhD Diss., Université de Caire, 1972), 394.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 394.

¹⁹³ Vincendeau, *L'Évolution des personnages*, 73.

¹⁹⁴ Enrique Sánchez Costa, "La Réception de Pascal chez les écrivains du *renouveau catholique* français (1890-1940)," *Courrier du Centre international Blaise Pascal*, 34 (2012): 13-21, DOI: 10.4000/ccibp.277.

¹⁹⁵ Casseville, *L'Évolution intérieure*, 159.

justice, and attachment to property.¹⁹⁶ Casseville cites François Mauriac's journal, where he states that self-knowledge is the foundation that makes ethical relationships possible: "Il n'est pas d'autre route, pour apprendre à aimer autrui, que la connaissance de soi-même, que ce regard sans illusion qui, à travers nous-mêmes, atteint toute l'humanité misérable..."¹⁹⁷ By connecting self-knowledge to love, Mauriac effectively links the charity-centered theology of Pascal's *Pensées* to the humanistic tradition of self-exploration embodied by Montaigne's *Essais*.

While reading Mauriac's *Le Nœud de vipères* primarily in terms of a specifically Christian, Catholic theology and literary tradition allows for a deep appreciation of the Christian symbolism in *Le Nœud de vipères*, the text itself engages with a tradition of humanistic inquiry that extends beyond the frame of its early twentieth-century cultural and historical context. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, Mauriac takes on universal questions about the puzzling nature of the self, the problem of language in autobiography, and the role of writing in the quest for self-knowledge. In order to understand how Mauriac understands personal transformation, I bracket the religious and cultural specificity of the text to detect the forces that bring about inner change. Rather than searching for signs of divine intervention or clues about his salvation, I look at Louis's discourse about himself, his values, and his writing. Close examination of Louis's journal reveals that the cause and form of religious conversion in *Le Nœud de vipères* are not as orthodox as one might expect from a newly Catholic writer.

B. Silence: Louis's Accusation and Self-Indictment

In the first pages of *Le Nœud de vipères*, Louis explains to his wife, Isa, why he is writing this letter to her. Through this statement of purpose, Louis unwittingly announces the central problems he will encounter as he writes his life story. Louis cites silence as his motivation for

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹⁷ François Mauriac, *Journal I* (Paris: Grasset, 1934), 73.

writing, but he uses ambiguous language that raises questions about which party is responsible for the silence in their marriage. Already in the opening pages of the letter, the reader can perceive that Louis lacks self-awareness. Addressing his wife of forty years, Louis explains that he is writing to break the silence that has characterized their marriage:

Mais il y a quelque chose en toi, quelque chose de toi dont je veux triompher, c'est de ton silence.¹⁹⁸

Pendant ces quarante années où nous avons souffert flanc à flanc, tu as trouvé la force d'éviter toute parole un peu profonde, tu as toujours tourné court.¹⁹⁹

Il faut que je vive encore assez de temps pour achever cette confession, pour t'obliger enfin à m'entendre [...]²⁰⁰

Louis accuses Isa of a silence that is lodged within her (“en toi”), emanating from her (“de toi”), and preventing her from listening to him. By accusing her both of not speaking and of not listening, Louis implies his own role in the silence that has characterized their marriage. This silence is not an absence of speech or a total quiet, but endless chatter that shuns “toute parole un peu profonde.”²⁰¹ Louis’s written intervention both breaks the silence and maintains it, because while he is expressing himself on paper for her to read after his death, he is currently neither sharing his notebook nor starting a conversation with Isa. Louis articulates his desire for human connection indirectly by accusing Isa of closing him out with her silence. This discourse operates on silence: rather than stating his desire, Louis makes an accusation that communicates his desire without naming it.

¹⁹⁸ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 387.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 387-388.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 389.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

Alternating first- and second-person pronouns signal unresolved questions in Louis's objective in writing. At first, the use of the second-person singular—*toi, ton silence*—puts Isa in the center of the text. Louis intends to overcome Isa's silence, and to be heard himself. Slipping between the first- and second-person pronouns facilitates contrary claims, allowing Louis to accuse Isa of silence and demand a listening ear. How does Louis's desire to explain himself respond to Isa's alleged silence? If the silence is really produced by her, and if she has avoided deep conversations, would Louis not be interested in listening to her and starting a conversation? Louis's pronoun choices in his statements of purpose reflect his own ambivalence about why he is writing. Louis intends to write a *réquisitoire*, a form that focuses on the convicted, in this case Isa. Yet, even as he writes accusations against Isa, Louis's accusations refer back to himself, calling for the introspection he is trying to avoid.

Along with these questions of addressee and purpose, the form and method of Louis's writing shows ambiguity. Louis plans to settle the accounts in his marriage with this *réquisitoire*, yet he claims that he has already renounced vengeance. Settling accounts requires two accounts, but only one perspective appears: Louis's own reflections, which are produced in the cloistered space of his bedroom. Louis uses a monologic form, the letter, and he writes from a space cut off from his family, the very individuals by whom he wishes to be known and understood. His monologue is at odds with the silence he wishes to overcome. That Louis's central concern in writing is his own history of injuries, feelings and perspectives suggests that he is the subject of his own book. Although he accuses his wife of silence, Louis responds by explaining who he is, a gesture that implies his own sense of guilt and responsibility for the silence in their marriage.

Silence amounts to a family inheritance in *Le Nœud de vipères*. Louis wryly states that “le goût de la brouille est un héritage de famille,”²⁰² and he tells how his family dealt with arguments: his father argued with his parents, and his grandparents died without reconciling with, or even seeing, the daughter they had turned out of their home thirty years earlier. Cutting off contact is a solution to disputes, and Louis accepts this inheritance of hatred by cutting off contact with his cousins in Marseilles, the descendants of the aunt disowned by his grandparents. Inheritance is a driving theme in Louis’s writing, as he attempts to manage both his legacy and his money. The heritage of silence confronts Louis with a choice: he can continue the legacy of his family, or he can interrupt it. He hopes to live long enough to finish his confession and make himself heard, and doing this well could rectify his legacy. Louis positions himself as Isa’s judge, in possession of all the facts, but he also presents himself as a guilty person who is justifying his behavior by casting himself as a misunderstood victim. Louis alternately incriminates and justifies himself, and his indictment of Isa coexists with his own self-examination.

For the reader, a major part of the drama in *Le Nœud de vipères* lies in the gap between Louis’s understanding of himself and the self he unwittingly portrays in his letter: a man writing his life story in good faith, but who does not manage to narrate out the wrinkles of his account. What is visible to the reader already here in the first pages of Louis’s writing is that the character is an enigma unto himself. Mauriac signposts the issue of self-knowledge through an epigraph from Teresa of Avila: “Dieu, considérez que nous ne nous entendons pas nous-mêmes et que nous ne savons pas ce que nous voulons, et que nous nous éloignons infiniment de ce que nous désirons.”²⁰³ This prayer communicates the devotional intention on the part of a fictional editor, but it also primes the reader to look for specific themes and problems of selfhood in Louis’s

²⁰² Ibid., 386.

²⁰³ Ibid., 381.

letter: (in)ability to know the self, and (in)ability to name or move toward the object of desire.

Louis is not consciously choosing to embark on a quest for self-knowledge or reconciliation, and this lack of awareness heightens the drama of his writing project. *Le Nœud de vipères* tackles the issue of self-knowledge through introspection, raising questions about how to live well, and the role of the other in constructing the self.

C. Problematic

The reader faces a challenge in interpreting Louis's self-writing, mirroring Louis's own struggle to make sense of his life. His letter to Isa presents a written record of his attempts to represent himself accurately. Although Louis does not theorize about writing, the practice engages him in a hermeneutical activity, and his discourse undergoes a marked shift over the course of writing. I argue that this shift signals an evolution in Louis's hermeneutical method. Although his writing initially employs a legal model to interpret his relationships, this proves inadequate as he delves into his memories and compares these memories with his current experiences.

The text's ambiguous genre, combined with Louis's ambivalence about his writing project, give him the freedom to let go of a deeply entrenched method of understanding his relationships and himself. Louis's uncertainty and ambivalence translates into a creative practice that transforms his understanding of himself. That Mauriac rewards his protagonist for his doubt, uncertainty, and suspicious attitude toward religious practice suggests a critique of French bourgeois Catholic culture, and raises additional questions about the relationship of writing to self-knowledge. Can self-writing constitute a spiritual exercise, and is a specific method of self-writing being advanced in *Le Nœud de vipères*? What view of the self emerges from Mauriac's depiction of life writing? To what degree does Mauriac's novel inscribe itself in the tradition of

the confession or the religious conversion narrative, and does Louis's writing problematize the notion of introspection as a route to reconciliation and forgiveness?

Because Mauriac narrates personal transformation through his character's introspective life writing, an analysis of Louis's system of interpretation will respond to these questions about the writing subject and moral identity, and illuminate Mauriac's conception of personal transformation. This chapter will look at the implicit hermeneutics at work in Louis's discourse to trace how ethical transformation occurs, and the role of self-writing in this transformation.

D. Generic Hybridity as a Productive Force

Le Noeud de vipères dramatizes life writing in part by working between genres, with regards to its intended recipient, temporality, and form. The novel as a whole can be described as epistolary: Louis addresses his wife, Isa, and his letter is followed by letters of two of his family members who are interpreting the meaning of their (grand)father's life between themselves. But a major portion of the novel is Louis's writing, which is complicated by Isa's death, and it hovers between epistolary and a more self-oriented writing, that includes the retrospection of autobiography and the entries associated with diary.

Considering the intended recipient doesn't clearly answer whether Louis's writing qualifies as a letter. He does address his wife, but other factors suggest his writing is not only a letter to Isa. Even before she dies, Louis asks himself about "cette fièvre d'écrire qui me prend,"²⁰⁴ and after Isa's death, he continues writing. The readers end up being his children and grandchildren, for whom the text is more like a diary. Hubert and Janine argue about how to read it, and their debate centers on a well-worn question in the field of diary: authenticity. Is such an amorphous text proof that Louis is writing an authentic, trustworthy portrayal of himself in his

²⁰⁴ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 387.

most sincere, intimate moments, or is it an artfully crafted image of a man as he wished to be seen? Hubert argues for the latter: Louis's journal only has epistemic value for a psychiatrist: "... ce cahier, surtout dans les dernières pages, apporte avec évidence la preuve du délire intermittent dont le pauvre homme était atteint. Son cas me paraît même assez intéressant pour que cette confession fût soumise à un psychiatre."²⁰⁵

Aside from the characters' reading the letter in terms of the diary, there are some formal qualities that link Louis's letter to the diary genre. The process of writing takes the form of regular entries. These entries are not dated—thus failing an important litmus test²⁰⁶—but they are unmistakably journal entries in how they render visible the rhythm of daily life, recording present experience. The reader can see Louis's mental process on the page, as he moves his attention from the present to the past. Entries often begin with Louis's recent experiences, before he leads his reflections back to a more distant past. Another question for the diary is whether it is intended to be read.²⁰⁷ Louis wavers in his answer. He does not envisage publication, nor does he commit to an audience, even before his wife dies. He asks himself whether he should give this letter before he dies, which opens up the possibility of reconciliation before death: "Cette nuit, il me semble que ce ne serait pas trop tard pour recommencer notre vie. Si je n'attendais pas ma mort, pour te livrer ces pages? [...] Si je te demandais pardon?"²⁰⁸ Louis wonders whether he should destroy the notebook: "[Ces pages] ne s'adressent plus à personne. Il faudra les détruire

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 528.

²⁰⁶ "On dit souvent que le journal se définit par un seul trait: la datation" (Philippe Lejeune, *Autogenèses, Les Brouillons de soi II*, [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013], 362).

²⁰⁷ Philippe Lejeune has studied how diaries end, remarking that diarists rarely explain the end of writing, while the beginning is amply commented. Unlike autobiography, the diary has no projected end, and diaries typically end without warning. Diaries deliberately ended are often about to be destroyed, reread, or published (*Autogenèses*, 355).

²⁰⁸ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 460-461.

dès que je me sentirai plus mal.”²⁰⁹ He alludes to a new audience: “Je sais maintenant à qui je le destine, il fallait que cette confession fût faite; mais je devrai en supprimer bien des pages dont la lecture serait au-dessus de leurs forces.”²¹⁰ He even recognizes that his letter is turning into a diary: “Ce n’est plus une lettre, mais un journal interrompu, repris...”²¹¹ Louis himself recognizes the hybrid nature of his writing, with regards to its intended reader and its form.

In terms of content, his writing swivels between the day-to-day recording of the diary and the retrospective gaze of autobiography. Louis includes anecdotes of present experience, interspersed with memories of the past, unlike autobiographies, which typically have a strong narrative form of beginning, middle and end. Louis’s retrospective gaze does draw out stories of his childhood and youth, like autobiography. Yet the loose narrative structure, which makes interruptions visible in the writing, also means the text lacks a strong interpretive angle. His strongly held beliefs are challenged through writing and the reader can watch him revising his understanding of the past and of himself as he makes discoveries.

Louis’s lack of commitment to a literary form indicates uncertainty, even as he insists upon his lucidity and certainty about his writing project. This lack of commitment to either the tight narrative of autobiography or the intentionality of a letter nevertheless becomes a productive force, raising questions and challenging Louis to deeper self-reflection. Writing challenges the fictional writer, who begins with a clear understanding of himself and his project, and loses certainty about himself as he progresses in writing and in living. Both of these activities become objects of inquiry as the subject considers itself. Surprises in writing and in life

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 462.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 484.

²¹¹ Ibid., 399.

destabilize Louis's certainty in his self-knowledge and his perception. Mauriac's character produces a composite form of life writing, an artifact of personal transformation.

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, the task of understanding a life is undertaken in the first-person by Louis, and in the third person, by his family after his death. Through the written traces of Louis's life and the filter of their own memories and experiences, his family members grapple with understanding their (grand)father after his death. In a 1939 essay called *Les Maisons fugitives*, François Mauriac reflected on the impossibility of reconstructing a person from their letters and diaries:

L'impossibilité de survivre se rattache au mystère de la personne. Ce qui disparaît, c'est justement ce qui centrât les êtres différents dont nous sommes composés. La mort rompt le faisceau et éparpille au hasard des esprits qui les recueillent, des fragments de cette 'somme' que nous étions. Pour la reconstituer, il faut travailler non sur la personne vivante, mais sur des textes, sur des lettres (ce qu'il y a au monde de plus mensonger), sur des journaux prétendus intimes et toujours destinés au public. Nous ne disons jamais l'essentiel même quand nous en avons la prétention. Pour ce qui touche aux lettres, le mot même de "correspondance" devrait nous donner à réfléchir: cela seul importe de correspondre à une certaine image que se fait de nous-même l'être à qui nous écrivons.²¹²

Mauriac does not trust letters and diaries as substitutes for the living person, for two reasons. First, scattered texts cannot replace or even imitate the coherent self embodied by a living person. Second, the sorts of texts left behind tend to conceal: even private diaries envisage a reader, while letters portray a self that corresponds to the expectations of the recipient. *Les*

²¹² François Mauriac, *Les Maisons fugitives VII, Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes III*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Jacques Petit (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 901.

Maisons fugitives questions the problem of life and literature in the abstract, but seven years earlier, *Le Nœud de vipères* explores concretely the challenges of reconstructing a character from their letters and diaries.

Le Nœud de vipères poses an interpretive challenge to the reader, because it presents at once problems of autobiography (memory), letter writing (orienting the writing according to one's beliefs about the recipient), and diary (less structured writing in instalments). This amalgamation of genres demands code switching from the reader, whose perspective is repeatedly frustrated: not only is there no third-person narrator to verify Louis's account, but Louis seems blind to himself.

He is writing sometimes for himself, and sometimes for others. Writing for himself would allow a flattering self-portrait, while writing to others requires that the account stand up to the scrutiny of others who have their own memories of the recounted events. Both readers, himself and his family, hold the possibility of drawing out truth. Nevertheless, there are ripples in his story, and unanswerable questions surface. This implies lack of self-awareness, rather than dishonesty. As a fallible human, his ability to know himself and to see clearly are limited. By employing composite forms of self-writing, Mauriac pushes aside commonly-asked questions about autobiography, such as truthfulness and honesty, to probe instead the complex relationship between self-knowledge and self-representation. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, uncertainty and ambivalence about the purpose of writing and the intended reader create an interpretive challenge for the character and the reader, propelling the narrative and the character's ethical transformation.

II. Zero-Sum Relationship Models

Mauriac evokes two sorts of exchange, the hard logic of legal and commercial exchange, and relational exchange. Courtroom logic and commercial transactions provide the framework for Louis in understanding his marriage and family life. Relational exchange is what Louis craves, what he has dreamed of for his own marriage. Only in novels and plays has Louis witnessed “des amantes et des épouses qui font des ‘scènes,’ qui s’expliquent à cœur ouvert, qui trouvent du soulagement à s’expliquer.”²¹³ But even in this ideal, gathered from artistic representations, Louis imagines one-way communication. The novels and plays someone of Louis’s era and class would have been watching would have involved heterosexual relationships; using the feminine nouns, “des amantes et des épouses,” means that Louis imagines a woman communicating openly and finding solace in expression. This implies a silent male partner, rather than a conversation between two partners. Even in Louis’s idealized relationship, he is an observing, evaluating spectator, rather than a participant co-constructing the relationship. Although Louis does not articulate his own desire, he wants to be known and understood. He nevertheless borrows conceptual models from his professional life in law and commerce to understand his relationships in terms of gain and loss, and offenses and penalties.

A. The Courtroom Model

Applying professional language to the personal realm begins when Louis explains why he is writing: to settle accounts with his wife, Isa. He begins writing with an accusation in the future anterior, accusing Isa for how he imagines she will react after his death: “Tu seras étonnée de découvrir cette lettre dans mon coffre, sur un paquet de titres.”²¹⁴ Louis accuses her of a solely mercenary interest in their marriage, and he frames his writing around her faults. He sees paper

²¹³ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 387.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 385.

as a space where he will finally be heard, although he considers the possibility that Isa tears up his letter before reading it. Louis's articulation of his writing project is a legal one, and he takes on the role of a plaintiff registering his wife's crimes over the past 40 years, as well as the role of judge. By putting Isa on trial, Louis dreams of payback, of justice finally being enacted after a lifetime of suffering. But while Louis accuses his wife of treating him like a unit of exchange, valuable only for the revenue he represents, Louis borrows the terms of his opponent, interpreting his family relationships and his marriage in terms of accounting, and drawing up a record of wrongs.

Although he wishes for conversation, explanation, and sharing in his relationships, Louis uses legal discourse to put his wife on trial. He clarifies to her that this letter is not an "éloge funèbre" but a "réquisitoire contre vous,"²¹⁵ the plural "vous" here referring to his wife, children and grandchildren. Louis's successful career as a "grand avocat d'assises" has presumably given him much experience in interpreting the behaviors, words, and motivations of suspects, and he prides himself on his lucidity:

Le trait dominant de ma nature et qui aurait frappé toute autre femme que toi, c'est une lucidité affreuse.

Cette habileté à se duper soi-même, qui aide à vivre la plupart des hommes, m'a toujours fait défaut. Je n'ai jamais rien éprouvé de vil que je n'en aie eu d'abord connaissance.²¹⁶

Louis's supposed talent for keen observation calls to mind Paul Bourget's characters in *Le Disciple*, the judge Valette and the disciple Robert. In Bourget's novel, Valette is presented as the best reader of character; Valette's assessments of the aloof philosopher Sixte and of his

²¹⁵ Ibid., 388.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

disciple Robert are both validated by the narrator. In *Le Noeud de vipères*, however, the legal character's readings are not validated by the author. Louis prides himself on his inability to be duped, but it becomes clear that his interpretations are not infallible. Louis's account of his interpretive abilities, using the language of the "trait dominant," has more in common with Robert, who is doubly accused by the narrator and other characters, than judge Valette in *Le Disciple*. Like Robert, Louis characterizes himself as a skilled interpreter of people, but as the story continues, mounting evidence of bad reading demands skepticism from readers. For example, in making sense of how their relationship began to sour, Louis traces the origin to events before their engagement: "Il y eut pourtant des signes, mais que j'interprétais mal."²¹⁷ Meanwhile their engagement is the result of a misunderstanding for which Louis blames Isa: "Inutile de rappeler nos fiançailles. Un soir, elles furent conclues; et cela se fit sans que je l'eusse voulu. Tu interprétras, je crois, une parole que j'avais dite dans un tout autre sens que celui que j'y avais voulu mettre."²¹⁸ Louis's record of correct interpretation is challenged within his own writing. In order to make a strong case against Isa, he must argue that he has been a victim, because continuing to assert his clear judgment and acute perception would weaken his framing of Isa as the wrongdoer. Louis's admission to not reading well mars his positive view of himself as a good reader. Whether or not Louis speaks sincerely, this explanation serves the important rhetorical function of portraying himself as a victim.

By choosing the form of a "réquisitoire," Louis projects himself to an imaginary time after his death, and from beyond the grave he pronounces his wife's failings. Louis imagines Isa repenting, and this image of her repenting is itself a compensation to him, as long as he can continue believing in this posthumous reckoning. When Isa dies, Louis realizes that neither

²¹⁷ Ibid., 403.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 404.

restoration nor a reckoning are possible. That Louis chooses to speak from outside of the time of his life constitutes another borrowing from the courtroom. The problem is temporal: normally, an indictment addresses a crime that occurred in a bounded interval of time. The event of the crime is reconstructed, analyzed, compared to other biographical information and evidence from beyond the time of the crime. The crime that Louis addresses, however, spans a long time period, their entire life together, and it extends to future offenses after he dies: Isa's imagined rush from his recently expired body to his safe.

That Louis can only resolve the temporal problem by assuming an imaginary position indicates that the method of the courtroom is inadequate for mediating family relationships. Keeping silent until his death conveniently erases the problem of live communication: responses, interruptions, surprises, and new knowledge that confounds his system of interpretation. Courtroom logic presupposes that of two competing parties, one is guilty and one is innocent. The exchange of accusations and defenses results in pronouncing the verdict—the established truth—that in turn deprives both parties of any nuance. This zero-sum exchange is ill-adapted to resolving the offenses in Louis's marriage and family life. By choosing to remain silent until after his death, Louis participates in the offense of which he is accusing Isa—not sharing and conversing—as well as in the reduction of relationships to a type of exchange that he criticizes. Louis renders silence for silence, punishing his wife with the law of talion, an eye for an eye.

Borrowing from the courtroom method to resolve personal relationships, Louis projects himself into a posthumous temporality and assumes an omniscient perspective. Both are impossible, and Louis's assertion of lucidity serves only to make his narration less credible, raising questions about what he really does know about Isa, his family, or himself. The legal method fails as a means to restore relationships, or even to reconstruct the events accurately, as

Louis works in isolation and secrecy in his bedroom. The courtroom logic allows Louis to confront an important relationship, his marriage, while eliding his own subjectivity. He avoids stating his own self-oriented desires to be seen and known, and he avoids the vulnerability of hope. Misapplying legal language to his marriage enables Louis to look away from himself. Like the contradictions in Louis's stated purpose for writing, however, this legal approach makes visible Louis's lack of self-knowledge.

B. The Commerce Model

Louis is a lawyer by profession, but the language of commerce runs more deeply in his family history. Now launching a case against his wife, Louis creates a record of wrongs that revolves around money and its unfair circulation, drawing attention to the class conflict in their marriage. Commerce is Louis's mother tongue: he repeatedly cites the "instinct de paysan" that he inherited from his mother, who could sense cheating and potential loss as though with a sixth sense. Louis's mother negotiates relationships through the tidy codes of debts and loans, which are mediated by signed contracts that lay out the expectations of each party for the terms of the agreement. She bequeaths to her son her attunement to unfair exchange, which constitutes a hermeneutics for understanding herself and her world. With the exception of her filial relationship, she relates to others through legally binding agreements, limiting possible outcomes to either economic gain or loss. Such an interaction is illustrated when she speaks with the Fondaudège family, shortly before Louis begins courting Isa. While Louis harbors the dreams of Julien Sorel as he observes the Fondaudège family, Louis's mother sees them simply as clients. Louis describes how his mother approached Isa's mother:

Un jour, comme je revenais du Casino, je surpris ma mère en conversation avec Mme de Fondaudège, obséquieuse, trop aimable, comme quelqu'un qui désespère de s'abaisser au

niveau de son interlocuteur. Au contraire, maman parlait fort: c'était un locataire qu'elle tenait entre ses pattes et les Fondaudège n'étaient rien de plus à ses yeux que des payeurs négligents. Paysanne, terrienne, elle se méfiait du négoce et de ces fragiles fortunes sans cesse menacées. Je l'interrompis comme elle disait: "Bien sûr, j'ai confiance en la signature de M. Fondaudège, mais..."²¹⁹

Louis intervenes on behalf of his future in-laws, and obtains an extension for them, but now, writing about the incident decades later, he concludes that his mother had been right, and that he made a mistake by intervening: "l'instinct paysan de ma mère ne l'avait pas trompée: ta famille m'a coûté assez cher [...]"²²⁰ Louis equates his mother's "instinct paysan" with her distrust of relationships that are not governed by commercial contracts. Reinforcing his feeling that he has been cheated, Louis follows up this anecdote of himself misreading a situation. Isa's elegant mother was the first person to draw Louis's attention to the family, and he dreamed of "des défis stendhaliens" to be able to speak with her. When he eventually does have this opportunity, he is disappointed:

Mais depuis qu'il m'était donné d'échanger, après les repas, quelques propos avec ta mère, elle m'ennuyait et dérangeait les romanesques idées que je m'étais faites à son sujet. Tu ne m'en voudras pas de rappeler que sa conversation était plate, qu'elle habitait un univers si borné et usait d'un vocabulaire si réduit qu'au bout de trois minutes je désespérais de soutenir la conversation.²²¹

The Fondaudège family does not meet Louis's expectations of an elegant and wealthy family. Stating this, however, reveals Louis's own dreams of class mobility, although he did not

²¹⁹ Ibid., 400.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 400-401.

then consider that his wealth may have been appealing to Isa's family. Louis now suspects that they had a vested interest in gaining him as a son-in-law: Isa was not considered a good match by others of their class because of her own as well as her family's medical history, and Louis, although from peasant stock, brought significant assets, and had no siblings with whom to divide his inheritance. The two families were initially linked through business transactions, and it was Louis who believed that by marrying, he could forge a relationship of love, that, if not free of economic interests, was at least not governed by them. Yet he describes his romance with Isa as an infatuation with the entire family, and the class they represent: on vacation, they are served in a separate part of the dining room, with their own servant, and Isa's mother is well dressed. Louis now takes his mother's view that the Fondaudège family is not so much wealthier than they, but simply more "dépendant" in their spending habits.²²² Louis now believes that his mother, in spite of her peasant manners and limited education, had a better method of interpreting human relationships, and that her policy of treating every borrower with equal amounts of suspicion gave her a more accurate grasp of the Fondaudège finances, and the risk they posed.

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, Louis's interpretation of Isa's motives for marrying him will change, but in this early part of the novel, Louis believes Isa and her family are entirely motivated by money. Recounting this story of his first meeting with the Fondaudège, Louis casts himself as the deceived party. By assimilating into the Fondaudège family, Louis believed he could escape the strict economy of his own family, where every relationship implies a potential gain or loss. Now in his old age, Louis views his younger self as unable to decipher the codes of a bourgeois lifestyle, or to glimpse the same economic laws at work behind its elegant façade.

²²² Ibid., 399.

Louis argues that, for a brief time in his youth, he sought to abandon the miserly ways in which he had been trained, and to inhabit an alternative economy, one of love and mutual gain, rather than one of competition. Louis argues that it was Isa's family that compelled him to resist a more romantic view of marriage and instead embrace his mother's "instinct du paysan," protecting his assets, this time from grasping family members, rather than borrowing clients.

Although this interpretation is later shown to be incorrect, it shapes Louis's narrative, which implies that Isa is responsible for making him the monster he is today. One of Louis's primary accusations is that Isa has cheated him of his part. Isa has not spoken as much to him as to the children and the servants, that he has not received his fair share of her attention and care. Another target of his *réquisitoire* are his children and grandchildren, who, he believes, are only interested in acquiring the largest possible share of the inheritance. When he interacts with his family, he reads their actions, behavior and words through the lens of the business transaction, in which every gain implies a loss for another party. At the time of writing, Louis is fighting to keep his children and grandchildren from inheriting his assets after his death, but at the same time, he recognizes that his own actions are deplorable.

Louis's opening question for himself is, "Comment y fus-je amené, moi qui n'étais pas un monstre?"²²³ His writing seeks to answer this question, implicating Isa, her family, and their children as unwitting co-conspirators against him. In order to make the argument that he was made into a monster by his family and in-laws, Louis presents himself as a victim, someone led to become the avaricious monster he recognizes as himself. As in his claim that he was tricked into marrying Isa, Louis once again narrates himself into the role of the victim. But by implying that he is not a good reader, he erodes the reader's trust in his self-avowed perspicacity. Mauriac

²²³ Ibid., 386.

does not give us an omniscient narrator, and we rely on—and are challenged by—Louis’s perception, and his record of others’ actions.

III. Challenges to Louis’s Zero-Sum Relationship Model

Courtroom and commercial relationships models provide Louis with zero-sum logic for interpreting his marriage and family relationships without engaging in introspection. As the letter progresses, this framework is challenged by the problem of inheritance, and a conversation with Isa, who then dies suddenly.

A. Inheritance: One-Way Giving

Approaching death, Louis faces the issue of inheritance, which involves a one-way posthumous giving, rather than an exchange of equally valued goods. Louis believes that Isa has set their children against him, and in retaliation, Louis is planning to deprive them of their inheritance. Louis once attempted to give money to his nephew Luc, whom others suspect to be Louis’s son; Luc refused the gift, and died shortly afterward at war. Louis is now placing his hopes on his illegitimate son, Robert, who lives in Paris.²²⁴ How Louis faces the question of inheritance is revealing about his relationship to money, but also about his economy of relationships. Louis is preoccupied with establishing fairness, and his reflections on his life are oriented around strict notions of gain and loss. Louis will lose his money either way when he dies, but his search for alternate heirs reveals that how and to whom the money is given matter to him. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, Louis recounts three instances of giving, including the two failed gifts to Luc and Robert, and finally the successful bequeathing of his assets to his legitimate

²²⁴ The term “illegitimate” is used here to distinguish Robert from Louis’s legitimate children, who were born from his marriage to Isa. This distinction plays an important role in the social norms surrounding inheritance in Louis’s early twentieth-century bourgeois context.

children. Louis does not examine his motives in looking for another heir, but the scenes with Luc and Robert offer clues.

Mauriac locates writing in Louis's bedroom, where he is spending his last days, and which was also his childhood bedroom. Louis has practical reasons for writing in his bedroom: he is spending most of his time there, and he is writing secretly. This private space intimates vulnerability, unlike his office, which signifies the public and professional aspects of his identity: administration, contracts, meetings, and work-related communication. The fact that Louis is writing in his bedroom evokes deathbed wishes and more personal writing than what might occur in the office with the same instruments, pen and paper. By locating writing in the bedroom, Mauriac brings to Louis's self-writing the associations of the bedroom as a private space where the most authentic self resides. Along with the diary form, the intimate site of writing creates a claim to authenticity. By setting the major parts of *Le Nœud de vipères* in the bedroom, Mauriac suggests that the languages of law and commerce are inappropriate, and Louis's letter will not succeed as the *réquisitoire* he intended.

Only once in *Le Nœud de vipères* does the reader get a glimpse into Louis's office, when he recounts an episode with his nephew Luc. In the study, on top of the bookcase, is a plaster head of Demosthenes. It is nearly impossible to move Demosthenes' head, because it is filled with gold coins. Louis tells how he offered a belt full of coins to his nephew who was going to war, but Luc refused, mocking the notion of money as protection. Luc went missing during the war, but he did send a postcard to Louis right before he was deployed: "Tout va bien, ai reçu envoi. Tendresses."²²⁵ Decades later, remembering Luc's easy disregard for money and the

²²⁵ Ibid., 458.

postcard, Louis reflects: “Il y a écrit: *tendresses*. J’ai tout de même obtenu ce mot de mon pauvre enfant.”²²⁶

This setting emblemizes Louis’s professional identities as a businessperson and a lawyer, but the scene is revealing of how he views himself and his value, and how he imagines his legacy. Louis shares a name with the kings of France and with the coins named after them, and he understands himself in terms of his monetary value. Louis is offering part of himself when he offers *louis* to his nephew. The plaster head filled with gold shows Louis as a cautious peasant who stores his gold at home, rather than entrusting it to the bank during the First World War. The topic of inheritance is introduced by the figure of Demosthenes, the Greek orator whose first success was the case he made to receive his inheritance from his guardians. In offering money to Luc, Louis diverts inheritance from his legitimate children to a nephew whom Louis is suspected to have fathered.

In offering Luc a belt filled with gold, Louis gives what for him represents security: money. In the military, money offers no safety, and Luc knows this; like a Stoic, he is detaching himself from his possessions, and Louis perceives this: “il était préparé pour la mort.” Louis views himself as capital, even though he wishes to be valued in other terms. He withholds himself from his family by withholding his money from them. Isa overhears Louis’s conversation with Luc, and she doubts the authenticity of this generosity: “Avoue que tu savais qu’il n’accepterait pas ton or. C’était un geste de tout repos.” Isa criticizes Louis’s avarice, and he in turn accuses her of valuing him only for his money, not out of self-interest, but out of interest for their children’s security: “Tu ne l’a jamais aimé qu’à cause des enfants.”²²⁷ Louis believes that Isa sees him as a unit of currency, a *louis d’or*, and he has internalized this view of

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid., 407.

himself, equating money with protection: “Un vieillard n’existe que par ce qu’il possède. [...] j’ai peur de m’appauvrir. Il me semble que je n’accumulerai jamais assez d’or. Il vous attire, mais il me protège.”²²⁸ Louis’s running accusation of Isa is that she has reduced him to a source of money, but he conceives of himself in these same terms. Even as Louis accepts this equation between self and capital, he admires Luc, who represents a better way of living, indifferent to earthly possessions and fearless in the face of death.

When Louis makes plans to give the inheritance to his son Robert, he is again searching for an heir who does not resemble him. Louis does not probe this odd desire, but instead suggests that it is a universal experience of fathers: “Existe-t-il des pères à qui l’on fait plaisir en leur disant: ‘Votre fils vous ressemble?’”²²⁹ Louis finds that Robert resembles him as a grotesque caricature, and Louis sees himself in Robert’s regret at having cost his mother so much money: “il baisse la tête, ne se console pas de tout cet argent perdu.”²³⁰ Louis sees unlikeable parts of himself refracted through his children: his physique in Robert, his avarice in his legitimate children.

These attempts to find heirs who are different from himself indicate that Louis’s objective with his inheritance is not motivated by a desire for justice or fair exchange. Rather, this search reveals something more self-oriented: that Louis dislikes the person he has become. If Louis can find a dissimilar heir, he can imagine a better legacy than “le goût de la brouille”²³¹ and money-centered relationships, both of which he inherited from his ancestors and has already transmitted to his children. In the end, Louis does bequeath his assets to his legitimate children, but his

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid., 463.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., 386.

attempts to reroute the inheritance show that this one-way giving offers a space where he can imagine a different and better self through his legacy.

B. Conversation: Learning Isa's Point of View

Conversation with Isa confronts Louis with another challenge to the zero-sum models he has been using to understand his marriage. Louis's method of interpretation borrows from judicial and commercial logics, which do not account for subjectivity, and his critical error is applying this to relationships. Belief in his lucidity prevents Louis from inquiring about his family's motives and experiences. In the courtroom, a conflict of interpretations gives rise to discussion and debate, before it is finally resolved by the verdict, pronounced by the judge whose power is conferred by the public. Outside the courtroom context, the judge has no such power, and for Paul Ricœur, to pronounce the last word in literary criticism or in social sciences—or, we might add, in life—amounts to violence.²³² Louis participates in hermeneutical practice when he evaluates his life, and by bringing the methods of the courtroom to his private life, he supplants conversation and questions with a verdict on family life that has no legitimate authority. Like the judicial model of the interpretation, so too the commercial model proves itself inadequate for arbitrating family relationships.

Two major events, a conversation with Isa and her sudden death, compel Louis to face what has been lurking under the surface of his writing and consciousness since the first page: the

²³² Paul Ricœur writes, "In front of the court, the plurivocity common to texts and to actions is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make an appeal. Like legal utterances, all interpretations in the field of literary criticism and in the social sciences may be challenged, and the question 'What can defeat a claim?' is common to all argumentative situations. Only in the tribunal is there a moment when the procedures of appeal are exhausted. But it is so only because the decision of the judge is implemented by the force of public power. Neither in literary criticism nor in the social sciences is there such a last word. Or, if there is any, we call that violence" ("The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text," *New Literary History* 5.1 [Autumn 1973]: 110).

lucidity for which he prides himself has repeatedly failed him, and that he has been a more active constructing participant in his marriage and family than he would like to believe. One day, Isa joins him on a bench in the garden, with their children beyond earshot. Isa asks about the status of her dowry, and Louis tells her that it has grown significantly, and that it still belongs to her, then suggests she go reassure their children, “ces anges de désintéressement.”²³³ This begins a conversation, the only recorded conversation between Louis and Isa during the time of writing in *Le Nœud de vipères*. (Other dialogues between Louis and Isa take place years prior, or only include Isa’s words.) Isa asks why Louis hates his family; Louis responds that they hate him, and he accuses Isa of being too engrossed with the children to pay attention to him. Isa defends her focus on the children: “Il fallait bien me rattacher à eux. Que me restait-il en dehors d’eux? (et à voix plus basse), tu m’as délaissée et trompée dès la première année, tu le sais bien.”²³⁴ As the conversation continues, Louis feels a glimmer of hope that he may have been wrong about not being loved, and he finds this feeling strange, “puisqu’il s’agissait de sentiments révolus, finis. L’espoir d’avoir été aimé, quarante années plus tôt, à mon insu... Mais non, je n’y croyais pas...”²³⁵ Louis persists with his accusation that Isa only paid attention to their children, and her response strikes a blow to his beliefs about himself, his wife and his marriage:

“Mes enfants! quand je pense qu’à partir du moment où nous avons fait chambre à part, je me suis privée, pendant des années, d’en avoir aucun avec moi, la nuit, même quand ils étaient malades, parce que j’attendais, j’espérais toujours ta venue.”

²³³ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 476.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

Des larmes coulaient sur ses vieilles mains. C'était Isa; moi seul pouvais retrouver encore, dans cette femme épaisse et presque infirme, la jeune fille vouée au blanc, sur la route de la vallée du Lys.

“C'est honteux et ridicule à mon âge de rappeler ces choses... Oui, surtout ridicule. Pardonne-moi, Louis.”²³⁶

This new knowledge affects Louis's belief in himself as a good reader, that his strategy of always being suspicious of others' intentions makes him exceedingly perceptive and impossible to trick. Isa's confession that she loved Louis and deliberately kept a physical space for him in her bed topples Louis's claim to absolute victimhood, and contests his claim that she married him out of economic interest. François Mauriac introduces Isa's voice at a key moment, so her counterargument appears in her own voice in a transcription of their conversation, and Louis's reflections only come afterward. Louis is shocked to learn that his wife loved him, but his ensuing reflection shows that his own view of himself is deeply challenged. He begins to grapple with something that has felt transparent until now, his grasp of others' intentions, of the real motivations of his wife:

Un doute me vint à cette minute-là. Est-il possible pendant près d'un demi-siècle de n'observer qu'un seul côté de la créature qui partage notre vie? Se pourrait-il que nous fassions, par habitude, le tri de ses paroles et de ses gestes, ne retenant que ce qui nourrit nos griefs et entretient nos rancunes? Tendance fatale à simplifier les autres; élimination de tous les traits qui adouciraient la charge qui rendraient plus humaine la caricature dont notre haine a besoin pour sa justification...²³⁷

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Louis realizes that although his observations felt immediate, they were always being mediated by a suspicious hermeneutical stance, rather than the charity-centered hermeneutics advocated by Pascal: “on n’entre dans la vérité que par la charité.”²³⁸ Louis’s hatred blinded him to nuance, obscuring details that did not fit with his interpretation of Isa. By negative example, Louis’s blindness to his own subjectivity illustrates one of Mauriac’s favorite quotations, the motto of Prosper Mérimée: “Souviens-toi de te méfier.”²³⁹

Hearing Isa’s perspective on their marriage shatters Louis’s belief in the infallibility of his perception, and his accurate analyses of others’ behavior and motivations. This revelation casts doubt on Louis’s self-knowledge, as well as his understanding of others. Loyalty to a specific self-conception and an interpretation of his marriage has clouded Louis’s faculties of observation, curtailing questions and doubts. The legal perspective, the search for evidence to support a claim, and the language of economics, Louis’s mother tongue, now appear to him as instruments of bias. He has suspected that Isa’s love was a conspiracy for his money, but never has he brought this high level of suspicion to his own claims. This new knowledge that Isa loved Louis confounds his system of interpretation, which was based on his passive observations of his family. Although writing has raised questions about Louis’s perception and surfaced contradictions in Louis’s interpretations, conversation forces Louis to reconsider his angle, and raise doubts about his interpretive method which has remained largely implicit until this scene.

²³⁸ Pascal, “L’Art de persuader,” *De l’esprit géométrique, Œuvres complètes II*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 171: “Et de là vient qu’au lieu qu’en parlant des choses humaines on dit qu’il faut les connaître avant que de les aimer, ce qui a passé en proverbe, les saints au contraire disent en parlant des choses divines qu’il faut les aimer pour les connaître, et qu’on n’entre dans la vérité que par la charité, dont ils ont fait une de leurs plus utiles sentences.”

²³⁹ Letter, François Mauriac to the abbé Jean Mauriac, January 18 (year unknown), FM-MS.22.6, FM-MS.22.7, third letter, “9 Lettres autographes de François Mauriac à son frère l’abbé Jean Mauriac,” Archives du Centre François Mauriac de Malagar.

IV. Writing and Ethical Transformation

Conversation with Isa marks a turning point in Louis's story. The process of writing has already presented challenges to Louis's supposed mastery, and he has considered editing out problematic sections: "Vais-je effacer cela? Tout recommencer? Impossible: le temps me presse."²⁴⁰ Until now, he has managed to avoid any statements that directly contradict the thesis of his *réquisitoire*. Isa's confession that she loved Louis and has been hurt by him refutes his thesis and undermines his approach: Louis's zero-sum hermeneutics presuppose that he possesses the necessary knowledge and the impartial perspective to interpret his marriage correctly.

Louis is now forced to reconsider his beliefs about others, and to enter into a different hermeneutical mode. The legal method of the trial and business transactions have relied on impossible temporality and supposed objectivity. Isa dies soon after this conversation, which renders vengeance impossible. Applying *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, is no longer an option, and Isa's perspective defies Louis's view of himself as a bystander-become-victim, rather than an active participant in the marriage and family life. Isa's death challenges the form itself of Louis's writing: his letter lacks an addressee.

A. Gradual Transformation

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, there is no road to Damascus moment, no single instant of transformation. Mauriac's resistance to the religious conversion trope produces what can be a frustrating reading experience: after Louis's argument is refuted, he continues reproducing relationship patterns that have misled him, such as maintaining silence and recording wrongs.

²⁴⁰ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 399.

The garden conversation with Isa, however, does correlate with an innovation in Louis's writing. Until now, Louis has rarely cited his own speech, and even more rarely the words he has spoken during the *temps de la narration*. Previously, Louis represented himself as an observer, eliding his own participation in family life and his implication in creating the family dynamic. In the early part of the *réquisitoire*, Louis portrays himself as silent, and not once does he communicate his needs out loud to Isa. Now, Louis records both voices in dialogue, his own and Isa's, as well as his thoughts as he interprets what Isa is saying. When Isa explains she was hurt by Louis's affairs with other women, Louis is first filled with hope, before his suspicion cuts in ("Mais non, je n'y croyais pas"²⁴¹) and he voices a counter argument.²⁴² Although this conversation does constitute a rare, successful dialogue, Louis does not take this opportunity to express his hope for reconciliation, and Isa dies before any reconciliation occurs.

Missed correspondence is a recurring theme in *Le Nœud de vipères*, and written communication is frequently thwarted. The telegrams announcing Isa's decline arrive too late for Louis to see her before her death. Their son Hubert could have addressed the telegrams to the place where Louis was staying, but he didn't want to disclose that he knew of Louis's hiding place in Paris. In a literal sense, problems of temporality—unsent letters, tardy telegrams—prevent communication. Communication and communion are prevented not by technical failure, but by the characters' self-protective instincts: Hubert's concealing what he knows, and Louis's reluctance to express hope. Louis's suspicion has become second nature, and his aversion to vulnerability persists after his argument against Isa is dismantled.

Louis rescinds his case against Isa, and identifies new opponents: their children. The claim that Isa sees him as an "appareil distributeur des billets de mille francs" is relinquished

²⁴¹ Ibid., 477.

²⁴² Ibid.: "Tu n'as pas eu un mot, un cri... Les enfants te suffisaient."

after their conversation in the garden, a natural space that calls to mind the garden of Eden and its perfect harmony and communion before the fall.²⁴³ Louis notices Isa's suffering when he overhears her saying, "Je voudrais me coucher, dormir, ne pas me réveiller."²⁴⁴ She too is aging and dying, and he realizes that when she leans over him on the bench to ask, "Tu souffres?" that sitting together they resemble "deux époux qui finissent de vivre après des années de profonde union." Their sitting together is brought about by their children, who have been sending Isa back and forth to ask Louis for money. Louis remarks that his children are motivated by the desire to provide for their own children, and that facing their family, he and Isa are adversaries who are both victims of their children's conspiracies, linked through "la complicité de la vieillesse."²⁴⁵ Soon after comes the revelation that Isa loved Louis, and when they walk back to the house together, Louis interprets the image of the "nœud de vipères":

Les fauteuils vides formaient un cercle étroit. Ceux qui les avaient occupés avaient senti le besoin de se rapprocher pour se parler à voix basse. La terre était creusée par les talons. Partout, ces bouts de cigarettes que fume Phili. L'ennemi avait campé là, cette nuit; il avait tenu conseil sous les étoiles. Il avait parlé ici, chez moi, devant les arbres plantés par mon père, de m'interdire ou de m'enfermer. Dans un soir d'humilité, j'ai comparé mon cœur à un nœud de vipères. Non, non: le nœud de vipères est en dehors de moi; elles sont sorties de moi et elles s'enroulaient, cette nuit, elles formaient ce cercle hideux au bas du perron, et la terre porte encore leurs traces.²⁴⁶

Previously, Louis identified with the vipers, imagining his heart as a tangle of divergent desires. Now, he identifies his children and grandchildren as the vipers, whom he has generated,

²⁴³ Ibid., 399.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 474.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 475.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 478.

and who are now plotting against him. The *nœud* or the *nid* is a fitting image for the family members, who live together and share overlapping, but not entirely aligned, interests. As when he was accusing Isa, Louis excludes himself from the group he identifies as the *nœud de vipères*, even though their traits—by nature or nurture—are inherited at least partly from Louis. Tangled vipers have a biblical resonance; in a speech to the Pharisees, Jesus calls them a “brood of vipers.” This speech is known as the Woes of the Pharisees, and includes eight charges of hypocrisy. Louis considers the *nœud de vipères* repeatedly, and the image comes to stand in for Louis as a character, encapsulating the judgment of his letter and the apparent plurality in his personality. Even while identifying himself with a knot of vipers, though, Louis displays himself as a good person, emphasizing his commitment to truth and authenticity, and criticizing the hypocrisy he witnesses among church-goers. For Louis, lucidity and honesty count as “strongly valued goods,” to borrow the language of Charles Taylor, and he repeatedly identifies himself with values of honesty and truthfulness, as he shares anecdotes that portray him in otherwise negative terms: refusing social conventions, or miserly to the point of withholding medical care. Louis’s autobiography becomes a double narrative: the making and unmaking of the *monstre*.

B. Writing as Self-Examination

After Isa’s death, Louis begins taking up more space in his writing, and he gradually becomes the object of his own inquiry. Before exonerating Isa, Louis was writing to her and incriminating her, constructing his identity around her actions, character traits, and behaviors. When Louis redirects his writing from Isa to their family, his accusations are interspersed with more self-oriented reflections. Louis does not articulate self-knowledge as a goal for his writing, and he does not openly admit his errors. The gap between the reader’s insight into the character and his own self-awareness creates the drama of reading. Mauriac refuses to create an

instantaneous transformation, in which a flash of awareness permanently alters Louis's character. As though suspicious of such a transformation, Mauriac disperses Louis's self-growth over time, and against Louis's will: even though Louis does not claim to be pursuing self-knowledge, life writing draws attention to the puzzle of himself.

The quest to know the self gradually becomes more central in Louis's writing, even though he never acknowledges this. Louis does not identify his new readership, but there are some clues that he is addressing his family. He alludes to them in the plural ("leurs forces"), and then recounts a story that incriminate his son and son-in-law; if again the recipients are also the targets of accusations, then the recipients are Hubert and Alfred, or perhaps the family as a whole. Furthermore, Louis only talks about family relationships, so it seems likely that Louis is addressing his story to his family, or perhaps a few key members of it:

C'est bien mon écriture. J'en examine de tout près les caractères, la trace de l'ongle de mon petit doigt sous les lignes. J'irai jusqu'au bout de ce récit. Je sais maintenant à qui je le destine, il fallait que cette confession fût faite; mais je devrai en supprimer bien des pages dont la lecture serait au-dessus de leurs forces. Moi-même, je ne puis les relire d'un trait. À chaque instant, je m'interromps et cache ma figure dans mes mains. Voilà l'homme, voilà un homme entre les hommes, me voilà. Vous pouvez me vomir, je n'en existe pas moins.²⁴⁷

Louis identifies readers and modifications to be made, but this reorientation of the writing project shifts attention to himself. There is no plan of vengeance, and the language of justice seems to be draining out of Louis's writing. He looks closely at his handwriting, as though surprised it belongs to him. Marveling at himself from a distance, he vows to finish his story. He

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 484.

offers “confession” as a synonym for the story that he is writing, and the notion of “réquisitoire” has disappeared. With the word “confession,” Louis implicates himself in a framework of justice.

The changing position of the reader shows the function of writing to be changing as well. Here the readers are not presented as targets for accusations, but as persons worthy of consideration: he plans to edit his writing to spare them from a too hurtful experience. Louis’s goal is not to be seen as right, and to convict others of their wrongs, but simply to assert his existence, to be seen and heard, regardless of how others might treat him. Louis does accuse his family of plotting against him, but he does not describe his writing as a medium for vengeance.

While telling the story of his son and son-in-law’s attempt to obtain the inheritance from their half-brother, Louis intersperses his evidence with reflections on himself. In one such moment, Louis writes about the joyful sense of well-being he experiences eating lunch. He has no pain, he is digesting his steak well, and the meal is economical: the portion is large enough to spare him the expense of another course. Louis even reflects on his good mood:

Un homme de mon âge, me disais-je, dont la vie est depuis des années menacée, ne cherche plus très loin les raisons de ses sautes d’humeur: elles sont organiques. Le mythe de Prométhée signifie que toute la tristesse du monde a son siège dans le foie. Mais qui oserait reconnaître une vérité si humble?²⁴⁸

Louis attributes his wellbeing to a good meal, but it coincides with his release on revenge. Whether or not Louis’s interpretation is correct, that he turns inward and is reflecting on his own emotional and physical state is a new development. Earlier in the letter, Louis recorded no positive feeling, no happy experience. Even his story of falling in love was cast as a deception that blinded him. But now, even as Louis spies on his scheming family, he has released his anger

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 488.

toward Isa. Abandoning his revenge plot coincides with Louis's ability to feel pleasure and reflect on himself, suggesting that *lex talionis* was destructive to Louis's own health. Conversely, Louis centering himself in his writing correlates with his sense of wellbeing.

C. Choosing Dialogue Over Silence

As the text progresses, it becomes clear that no single event or force is responsible for Louis's transformation. Writing, conversation, and events such as Isa's death all work to challenge Louis's interpretations of himself and the way he relates to others. In the following scene, Louis reflects on the human need for dialogue:

Ce fut un souci du courrier qui me donna la force de me lever, le lendemain, vers midi, et de me rendre au bureau de la poste. Il pleuvait, j'étais sans parapluie, je longuais les murs. Mes allures éveillaient la curiosité, on se retournait. J'avais envie de crier aux gens: "Qu'ai-je donc d'extraordinaire? Me prenez-vous pour un dément? Il ne faut pas le dire: les enfants en profiteraient. Ne me regardez pas ainsi: je suis comme tout le monde, — sauf que mes enfants me haïssent et que je dois me défendre contre eux. Mais ce n'est pas là être fou. Parfois je suis sous l'influence de toutes les drogues que l'angine de poitrine m'oblige à prendre. Eh bien, oui, je parle seul parce que je suis toujours seul. Le dialogue est nécessaire à l'être humain. Qu'y a-t-il d'extraordinaire dans les gestes et dans les paroles d'un homme seul?"²⁴⁹

For perhaps the first time, Louis states his own need. In this scene, Louis acknowledges his solitude and his need for conversation. He is alone without an umbrella, seeking human connection at the post office. The possibility of mail has been enough to persuade Louis to get up, and it contains news of Isa's death, ruling out any possibility of reconciliation or dialogue

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 495.

with her. Louis is “un homme seul” who is “toujours seul,” and in the absence of an interlocutor, he imagines a response to the people staring at him. Talking to himself—like monologic writing—responds to his need for dialogue. Although he mentions his children’s hatred, he is no longer litigating through his writing. He talks about his suffering, both from loneliness and from the side effects of drugs, without accusing others.

Forced by external circumstances—not finding anyone to receive his assets, outliving the letter’s recipient—Louis abandons revenge, making himself the matter of his book. He explains that his monologic speech is a product of failed dialogue: “Je parle seul, parce que je suis toujours seul. Le dialogue est nécessaire à l’être humain.”²⁵⁰ Louis’s marriage was characterized by silence, and he both blamed Isa for this silence and contributed to it himself. After her death, the empty house underscores the permanence of this new silence, and Louis feels his chest swelling, “parce que, maintenant, il était trop tard et qu’entre elle et moi tout était dit.”²⁵¹ As though learning from the pain of this silence, Louis takes a different approach in his relationship to his children. He confronts them, rather than storing his observation for a future revenge.

The newly active role Louis takes in interrogating Robert and confronting Hubert and Alfred occurs at the same time as a shift in temporality in his writing. At the beginning, the *temps du récit* and the *temps de la narration* were frequently separated by decades. Louis’s life from childhood to the early years of marriage were broken by the occasional mention of the present. Toward the end of the letter, Louis is writing about recent and current events. Writing about the distant past correlated with Louis’s belief in his infallible understanding of others. Writing about the present and the recent past eliminates the possibility of a totalizing perspective, and it affects how Louis interacts with his family. The convergence of *temps du récit* and *temps de la*

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 501.

narration draws together two seemingly disparate activities, experiencing and recounting. As life and art occur at the same time, they become coexistent and codependent practices. In terms of genre, we might consider this portion of *Le Nœud de vipères* most like a diary.

Paul Ricœur speaks of interpretation as what is common to living and narrating, and in Louis's writing, interpretation bridges life and story.²⁵² In writing, Louis creates dialogue with himself, as he tries out various interpretations of what is happening around him. Each new piece of evidence modifies his understanding of the situation: his initial view of Robert and his mother as honest characters who are utterly disinterested in his money is shattered when he learns that their slowness was a tactic to delay transactions until they have met with Hubert and Alfred. Louis is using writing to help him understand recent events, but he also begins initiating dialogue with his family members to understand what is happening, rather than writing elaborate interpretations in his bedroom. Actively interpreting through living and writing, Louis intervenes in family relationships, rather than simply observing them.

Self-reflection and writing are begun as a strategy of revenge, yet they become practices of the self. Although writing is an unintentional care of the self, it leads Louis to begin arguing and discussing with his family. After Louis has given away his assets to his children, money is no longer the center of conversation, opening up new relational possibilities. His children, who are looking for explanations for Louis's change of heart, remain suspicious, but a sort of friendship develops with his granddaughter. Janine is in distress after her husband's departure, and she moves in with Louis. In their conversations, Louis and Janine are not competing for limited resources, such as money or attention, but nurturing themselves and each other. They recognize each other's suffering and contemplate whether faith can alleviate suffering. The dialogue

²⁵² Paul Ricœur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," *On Paul Ricœur: narrative and interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), 20-33.

between grandfather and granddaughter illustrates a new economy that is not zero-sum. Speaking, reflecting, and listening bring gain to both of them.

D. Writing a New Inheritance

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, writing creates something new: the practice increases Louis's self-understanding, and the text he leaves behind constitutes another type of inheritance for his children. This new inheritance accrues value the more it is shared. Writing helps Louis himself: it mediates his inquiry into the self, and it changes his self-understanding. As a result, he reaches out to his family, and he names his desire for human connection: "Bienheureux si je réussissais à pénétrer jusqu'à un seul être, avant de mourir."²⁵³ This wish is fulfilled when his granddaughter surprises him with her interest in spending time together and moves in with him. Louis also gives away all of his money and land, as it becomes more important for him to die in peace than to exact justice.²⁵⁴ Louis changes over the course of writing, relinquishing his habits of passive observation, judgment, and vengeance.

When Louis uses the lens of justice, either of the fair business transaction or of *lex talionis*, he ultimately fails to restore relationships or find healing. The language of justice serves as a pretext, concealing Louis's need for restoration and healing. Abandoning retribution and freeing himself of worldly goods, Louis can experience something new: relationships that are not governed by monetary value, and the possibility that he is valued, or liked, even when he has nothing to give in return. His recurring memory of the words of a clergyman, "Vous êtes très bon,"²⁵⁵ shows his desire to be seen and remembered as a good person.

²⁵³ Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, 521.

²⁵⁴ "Que cette dispute, naguère, m'eût diverti J'aurais salué avec joie les signes annonciateurs d'une bataille sans merci autour des quelques bribes d'héritage dont je ne fusse pas parvenu à les frustrer. Mais je n'éprouvais plus qu'un peu de dégoût, de l'ennui... Que cette question soit vidée une fois pour toutes! Qu'ils me laissent mourir en paix!" (Ibid., 506).

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 438 and 525.

Even though a transformation in Louis's character is visible in writing, whether this text is an authentic expression of his inner life remains an open question. In letters after Louis's death, family members Hubert and Janine argue about Louis's legacy, values, and beliefs. The family has not had to inquire about the meaning or value of their monetary inheritance: after all, the value of currency is determined by the economy, and its meaning or purpose is decided by the inheritor: whether to sell, save, or spend. Arguments about the monetary inheritance were limited to questions of who and how much: the problem of fair distribution, and connected to that, the relational value Louis might be communicating through his decisions about the inheritance.

Louis's unexpected generosity, along with the written document he leaves behind, confront the family with an indecipherable legacy. Louis's bequest to his children might signify a change of heart towards his family, or a desire to buy their affection. It can be read as a sign of personal growth or religious conversion. But there is another uncomfortable fact, which is that Louis was unable to find anyone else to receive his money. Louis's motives for giving are as difficult to interpret as the letter Louis has left behind. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, interpretation is a central puzzle in human relationships and self-understanding. Even when money serves as relational currency, relationships are fraught with misunderstanding.

Writing mediates Louis's development, and forms a literary, rather than financial, inheritance for the family. The conversation now centers on the meaning of Louis's life, rather than strategies to obtain his money. Whereas the financial inheritance caused competition and strategizing among the children, the letter creates a community of readers. Even if the family members argue and take different positions, their dispute is not a zero-sum competition. Louis's own development away from law and commerce models of relationships is handed down through

his letter. Writing creates a new economy of mutual gain: Louis has benefited from the practice, and his children are given a letter that does not resolve the enigma of their father and grandfather, but invites them into a conversation with his legacy and with each other. Through a letter turned diary, Louis creates a literary inheritance that can be neither owned nor divided. Unlike the legal trial or the business transaction, the letter enriches the giver and the receiver, the writer and the reader.

V. Conclusion

The tension between *lex talionis* and grace in *Le Nœud de vipères* prefigures Mauriac's politically engaged journalism in the decades that followed the novel's publication in 1932. During the *épuration* after the Second World War, Mauriac contested the *loi talion*, and advocated for the separation of powers, impartial judges, and the presumption of innocence, repeatedly citing the Dreyfus Affair.²⁵⁶ Mauriac's status as a prestigious Christian intellectual made him a de facto spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church, and his persistent interventions regarding the legal trials and punishments after the fall of the Vichy regime garnered him the nickname "Saint François des assises" in *Le Canard Enchaîné*.²⁵⁷ Although Mauriac did not overtly discuss grace in his journalistic writing, his denunciation of vengeance and his advocacy for fair trials were rooted in his Christian theology.²⁵⁸ Mauriac never did create a detailed story of his own religious conversion, and his fictional autobiography may be the text that most closely resembles a personal statement of faith in Mauriac's œuvre, not because of any autobiographical resonances, but because of the topics Mauriac explores with the freedom of

²⁵⁶ Jeanyves Guérin, *Les listes noires de 1944* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2016), 156.

²⁵⁷ See the January 10, 1945, edition of *Le Canard Enchaîné*. Cited by Jeanyves Guérin, 155.

²⁵⁸ See "Chapitre V: De l'épuration," in Jeanyves Guérin, *Les listes noires*, for a detailed account of Mauriac's role as a public intellectual after the Second World War.

fiction: *lex talionis* as opposed to Christian charity and grace; the hypocrisy of bourgeois Catholic culture; and religious experience as a profoundly intimate encounter with the self in writing.

But although the theology of *Le Nœud de vipères* is distinctly Christian, the novel expresses a deep faith in the process of writing, and self-writing in particular, as a force for self-discovery and ethical transformation. In Mauriac's novel, self-writing is an ethical exercise even while Louis is vehemently opposed to considering his own errors. Autobiographical writing becomes a force for and a site of ethical transformation. Mauriac acknowledges the inherent risks of life writing, self-delusion and solipsism: Louis's erroneous interpretations are proven false in a conversation with Isa, whose death then pushes Louis to initiate conversation with his family and forge new relationships. In the quest for self-knowledge, life writing is insufficient, unless coupled with dialogue.

Writing nevertheless receives the starring role in *Le Nœud de vipères*, which critiques and revises the religious conversion trope. Whereas a traditional conversion story is written after the religious experience, Mauriac shifts the temporality to the present tense. Louis writes through his transformation, rather than retrospectively. The result is near synchronicity between life and writing that creates the illusion of a found artifact documenting the changing inner states of a person undergoing a religious experience. This innovation draws together life and narrative to center the drama on Louis's efforts to interpret himself and his life, as real-time events intervene to disprove or modify his claims.

This temporal choice helps Mauriac to avoid one of the narrative pitfalls of the religious conversion trope. Telling or living the conversion story poses a challenge. Christian theology teaches that justification, the conversion moment, is followed by sanctification, the lifelong

process of perfecting the Christian life. If conversion is the resolution to crisis, sanctification is the dénouement. Living the dénouement means living a life free of intrigue, error, or transcendental experiences that would undermine the conversion. In other words, the only event left is death. (A less fatal alternative is entering the priesthood: Sainte-Beuve's hero in *Volupté* tries to restrict his exposure to temptation and narrow his lived experience to good works and prayer, with limited success.) *Le Nœud de vipères* averts the challenge of an event-free post-conversion life by making narrative ending, death, and conversion coterminous.

Mauriac's treatment of the religious conversion anticipates the recent narrative turn in religious conversion studies. Whereas William James sought to describe and analyze the phenomenon in his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, contemporary scholars of religious conversion have taken another tack in parsing complex, subjective accounts of inner change: considering the conversion narrative as the locus of the conversion, rather than the alleged historical event to which the narrative refers.²⁵⁹ Besides its practical application—allowing scholars of any or no religious belief to join the conversation on religious conversion—this solution also betrays a willingness to view experiences of the divine as narrative creations.

The temporal convergence of religious experience and autobiographical writing in *Le Nœud de vipères* has implications for Mauriac's theology. We can read this as a Pascalian-influenced tale of a conversion brought about by mysterious, divine forces that lie beyond the text and beyond human comprehension. But self-writing is so central to Louis's conversion as both locus and force of change, that a more secular view is also possible. Perhaps inadvertently,

²⁵⁹ Lewis R. Rambo and Charles Farhadian, introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8. See also in the same volume: Peter G. Stromberg, "The Role of Language in Religious Conversion," 117-139; Bruce Hindmarsh, "Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography," 343-368.

Mauriac creates a persuasive argument for life writing as a spiritual exercise whose application is not limited to practicing Christians.

In *Le Nœud de vipères*, two core elements bring about transformation: writing and dialogue. In ancient philosophy, the recommended spiritual exercises can be divided into two parallel categories: exercises carried out in solitude, and exercises carried out in community. The ongoing quest for self-knowledge is the central focus on ancient philosophy, which constituted an art of living rather than a purely academic pursuit. This quest required both focused, solitary introspection, and an interlocutor whose most important quality is not education or rank, but frankness. The Stoics advocated exercises such as abstinence, examination of conscience, filtering of representations, and possession of the self. This focus on the self was not intended to foster narcissism, but rather its opposite. The goal of these exercises, while self-oriented, was to go beyond the self and understand oneself as belonging to a larger, cosmic whole; as Seneca puts it, “se plongeant dans la totalité du monde,” (*toti se inserens mundo*).²⁶⁰ Mauriac’s character unwittingly engages in solitary and communal practices of selfhood, which in turn draw his attention outward toward others.

It bears mentioning that *Le Nœud de vipères* remains an unsettling text with an indeterminable meaning. Close reading of how Mauriac represents ethical transformation is instructive for understanding the author’s engagement with the tradition of spiritual autobiographies; for probing the possibilities and limitations of life writing as a tool in the quest for self-knowledge; and for observing how fiction allows Mauriac to investigate the theoretical problems of both autobiography and the Christian life. It is however impossible to ascertain the authenticity of the experiences recounted in *Le Nœud de vipères*. We have no textual evidence

²⁶⁰ Pierre Hadot, “Réflexions sur la notion de ‘culture de soi,’” *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), 326.

that would allow us to banish the discomfiting possibility raised by Hubert: that Louis has engineered this conversion story in order to play on his family's sympathies and to revise his legacy. Few, if any, readers have taken Hubert's interpretation seriously, but if Mauriac has spun the story of Louis's conversion, we cannot rule out the possibility that the character Louis is an equally gifted storyteller.

Fiction allows Mauriac to explore how life is transformed into narrative, as well as to probe the ways in which we are "living autobiographically" even before putting pen to paper.²⁶¹ Louis's life resists being reduced to one meaning, even after death. By refusing the reader any certainty, *Le Nœud de vipères* draws our attention to the process of interpretation. Louis's story shows the expansive potential of self-writing: life writing can reveal the meta-narratives structuring our life, and expose the narrative fissures and discrepancies that have slipped past our attention. When coupled with conversation, self-writing can sever the epistemic foundations of our self. In the case of Louis, this uncertainty is the home of transformation.

²⁶¹ See: John Paul Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

CHAPTER FOUR

Fictional Autobiography as Cultural Critique: Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*

I. Introduction

In the opening scene of her 1951 novel, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Marguerite Yourcenar imagines the aging emperor at a doctor's appointment. Hadrian is presented as a vulnerable mortal, disrobed for a physical examination. Without the emperor's clothing, Hadrian is simply a man focused on his declining health, rather than the symbolic head of the Roman Empire. Hadrian's deliberate intimacy invites the reader to see "un homme seul qui est moi-même,"²⁶² rather than his mask of emperor. Such a gesture calls to mind the preface of Michel de Montaigne, a key humanist figure in Early Modern France and creator of the essay as a literary genre. In a preface entitled *Au lecteur*, Montaigne states that his *Essais* depict him "sans étude et artifice."²⁶³ Yourcenar's Hadrian also presents his writing as an opportunity to see the man, rather than a curated persona. He claims authenticity when he explains to Marcus Aurelius that he is writing him a letter to offer a corrective to official history.²⁶⁴ Lawrence Porter remarks:

Hadrian relates the humiliation of a visit to the doctor, during which his disrobing for examination not only underscores the democracy of the body—illnesses do not spare kings—but also symbolizes the act of stripping his social mask to reveal his hidden

²⁶² Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, ed. Yvon Bernier, in *Œuvres romanesques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 302.

²⁶³ Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, eds. Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien, and Catherine Magnien-Simon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2007), 27.

²⁶⁴ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 301-302.

feelings. He intends the memoirs to provide an intimate counterpart to and corrective for the official version of history that glorifies and consequently dehumanizes the Emperor.²⁶⁵

This apology for writing communicates a view of the self as compartmentalized, containing public and private selves. Hadrian conceptualizes himself as an *homme privé* who wears the mask of the emperor, but whose private self remains separable from this public persona. Aging and dying challenge this compartmentalized model of selfhood, drawing Hadrian into life writing. He likens his decline in health to betrayal:

J'avais toute ma vie fait bon ménage avec mon corps; j'avais implicitement compté sur sa docilité, sur sa force. Cette étroite alliance commençait à se dissoudre; mon corps cessait de ne faire qu'un avec ma volonté, avec mon esprit, avec ce qu'il faut bien, maladroitement, que j'appelle mon âme; le camarade intelligent d'autrefois n'était plus qu'un esclave qui rechigne à sa tâche.²⁶⁶

This dissolving alliance between body and soul strains Hadrian's self-concept, which is predicated on freedom and action, which were important Roman values.²⁶⁷ The Latin *libertas*, from which the French *liberté* is derived, can describe civil liberty (not being enslaved, enjoying citizens' rights), political liberty (not subject to a monarchy or another people), or a more general absence of constraint: freedom to live as one likes, independent existence, and frank speech.²⁶⁸ Yourcenar's Hadrian evokes *liberté* frequently in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, but close

²⁶⁵ Laurence M. Porter, "The Peaceable Empire: Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*," *Women's Vision in Western Literature: The Empathic Community* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2005), 156.

²⁶⁶ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 476.

²⁶⁷ Yolande Gris , *Le Suicide dans la Rome antique* (Montr al: Bellarmin, 1982), 28.

²⁶⁸ F lix Gaffiot, "libertas, -tatis," *Dictionnaire illustr  Latin-Fran ais* (Paris : Hachette, 1934), 906.

examination of this discourse shows that Hadrian wavers between two specific definitions of freedom: freedom that depends on external circumstances, such as the emperor's power to act; and a more Stoic notion of freedom, cultivated through spiritual exercises, that strives to remain independent of external circumstances. These definitions are at odds with each other, and this fundamental conflict about how to define freedom forms the dramatic center to the *Mémoires*. Hadrian's deteriorating body forces him to turn toward a more Stoic definition of freedom, if he wishes to preserve a view of himself as free. In the *Mémoires*, however, the issue of freedom is not just an abstract topic of meditation. How Hadrian defines freedom will have implications for how he must die. If freedom is the power of self-determination and action, then Hadrian must commit suicide to die in freedom. If, however, freedom is a state attained through spiritual disciplines by which an individual's happiness is entirely independent of external, uncontrollable factors, such as one's social condition and one's health, then Hadrian must find freedom in the slow process of an unassisted death.

This conundrum of dying freely is complicated by Hadrian's era and social position: suicide is not a proper death for an emperor. Yourcenar's character responds to this ethical and social question by writing. Hadrian looks back on his life in order to discern the meaning of freedom, which has direct implications for his present. Life writing allows Hadrian to contemplate the alignment of his life and his values, and the process of writing, like Scheherazade's storytelling, delays death.

A. Loss of Freedom as a Challenge to Hadrian's Identity

New limitations to Hadrian's autonomy challenge his identity in what Paul Ricœur terms the dislocation of *ipse* and *idem* identities. Ricœur's notion of narrative identity theorizes the tension between change (*ipse*) and continuity (*idem*) as two sides of a coin. Until now, Hadrian

has been experiencing *ipséité*, growth and change over time, without any threat to his *mêmeté*, the feeling that he remains the same person in spite of these changes. Hadrian has negotiated these contrary and interdependent terms by imagining himself as an *homme privé* who has been wearing the removable social mask of emperor.

Yourcenar imagines how the Emperor Hadrian wrestles to embrace this second definition, cultivating inner freedom through writing when changing his circumstances is impossible. Confronted with a physical decline that limits his daily life, Hadrian would like to take refuge in the private life he enjoyed before becoming Emperor, for which suicide becomes metonymous. Protocol forbids this return to private life; Hadrian must undergo the solitary experience of dying as Emperor, symbolically reinforcing his commitment to the Empire's values. Aging creates new physical constraints, but it also reveals social constraints that have been exerting pressure on Hadrian throughout his rule as Emperor. Hadrian's position requires his actions be governed by the symbolic and social needs of the Empire, and the profoundly personal event of dying creates conflict between Hadrian's political commitments and his desire to end his suffering. Hadrian grapples with the loss of a certain kind of freedom—physical mobility, power to determine his own life and the life of others—by writing. Hadrian is committed to a positive view of himself as free, and writing helps him embrace the second definition of freedom, which recasts a death he did not choose as a form of freedom.

Hadrian uses narrative language to reconnect his current experience to his past experiences and values. Unable to identify himself in his present condition, Hadrian looks back to see whether his past can illuminate his present condition. At first glance, Hadrian's life history is no more reassuring than his ailing body. Hadrian sees a void, rather than a narrative arc that would confer meaning upon his lived experiences: “Quand je considère ma vie, je suis épouvanté

de la trouver informe.”²⁶⁹ As in the book of Genesis, lack of form is a call to creation: Hadrian responds to formlessness and the existential discomfort it provokes by speaking his life into an intelligible form.²⁷⁰

B. Historical Hadrian

Yourcenar’s characterization of Hadrian is based on historical knowledge, which she weaves into her account of Hadrian’s last days. Hadrian retired two years before his death in 138, and his mausoleum was already being built. Hadrian’s dying days were cursed by Servianus, who was unfairly implicated in a plot to kill Hadrian and condemned to death. Before dying, Servianus made an offering in which he cursed Hadrian: “That I have done nothing wrong, you gods know very well. As for Hadrian, this is my only prayer, that he may long for death, yet be unable to die.”²⁷¹ Servianus’s wish appears to have been granted: Hadrian suffered recurrent nosebleeds, and although he had believed that his lover Antinous’s death was a sacrificial one that would cure him, his health worsened. A severe hemorrhage nearly took his life at Tibur, and historian Anthony Everitt suspects Hadrian suffered from dropsy, congestive heart failure, and possibly chronic erysipelas, all of which would have made sleeping nearly impossible: lying down would relieve some discomfort, but make breathing difficult.²⁷² Once, Hadrian asked for poison and a sword. Another time, he forced his hunting assistant Mastor to agree to stab him, but others intervened before Mastor could carry out the order.²⁷³ But Hadrian also turned to writing. We know that he wrote an autobiography, which was most likely a letter to his

²⁶⁹ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 304.

²⁷⁰ Genesis 1:2 describes the earth using the same adjective (*informe*) that Hadrian uses to describe his life: “La terre était informe et vide.” The adjective “informe” appears in a number of French Bible translations, including the 1904 Roman Catholic Fillion translation and the Protestant 1707 David Martin and 1874 Louis Segond translations.

²⁷¹ Anthony Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome* (New York: Random House, 2009), 313.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 317-318.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

immediate successor, Antoninus.²⁷⁴ (Marcus Aurelius, the addressee in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, was named Antoninus' successor by Hadrian.) An opening fragment of this autobiography has been found in Egypt:²⁷⁵

The Emperor Caesar Hadrian Augustus to his most esteemed Antoninus, greeting. Above all I want you to know that I am being released from my life neither before my time, nor unreasonably, nor piteously, nor unexpectedly, nor with faculties impaired, even though I shall almost seem, as I have found, to do injury to you who are by my side whenever I am in need of attendance, consoling and encouraging me to rest. From such considerations I am impelled to write you as follows, not, by Zeus, as one who subtly devises a tedious account contrary to the truth, but rather making a simple and most accurate record of the facts themselves...and he who was my father by birth fell ill and passed away as a private citizen at the age of forty, so that I have lived half as long again as my father, and have reached nearly the same age as my mother.²⁷⁶

Hadrian requested that his entourage keep a close suicide watch over him. In addition to his autobiography, Hadrian wrote poetry, and his one surviving poem, *Anima vagula blandula* serves as a recurring motif in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*.

Little soul, you charming little wanderer,
my body's guest and partner,
where are you off to now? Somewhere

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 319.

²⁷⁵ The Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, which holds this manuscript, describes it as a fragment that was written in ancient Greek on the back of a taxing list. The first five lines of Hadrian's letter are written first in the hand of a schoolmaster, followed by a repetition in the hand of the pupil (<https://oi.uchicago.edu>; Registration Number E8349).

²⁷⁶ Thorsten Oppen, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 219.

without color, savage and bare;

you'll crack no more of your jokes once you're there.²⁷⁷

Yourcenar takes the above historical details about Hadrian's last days and expands them to a thick description of Hadrian's inner life. Comparing historical evidence to the imagined world of Yourcenar's novel as we have done here suggests an impermeable barrier between history and fiction, a barrier contested already in the 1970s by Hayden White, who theorized that historiography is a form of fiction writing.²⁷⁸ Classical historian Keith Bradley has investigated this issue in a study of biographies of Hadrian. In an article analyzing fictional and historical accounts of Hadrian written between 1951 to 2008, including Yourcenar's *Mémoires*, Bradley looks at "how in various ways all the works concerned are equally successful and problematic, successful because they allow certain aspects of the historical subject to be perceived, problematic because they are all subjective inventions."²⁷⁹ Bradley's study valorizes Yourcenar's imaginative reconstruction not only as a literary and aesthetic artifact, but also as a contribution to the historical scholarship on Hadrian.²⁸⁰

C. The *Mémoires d'Hadrien* as a Comparativist Text

Yourcenar's deep engagement with ancient sources, alongside echoes of Montaigne and Genesis, accentuate the complex temporality of the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. The text engages the mythology and ethics of the Roman Empire as well as the Christian heritage of modern France, addressing postwar French readers through an imagined letter to Marcus Aurelius. Studying

²⁷⁷ Everitt, *Hadrian*, 319.

²⁷⁸ See Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) and *The Content of the Form* (1987).

²⁷⁹ Keith Bradley, "Recovering Hadrian," *KLIO: Beiträge zur alten Geschichte*, 94.1 (2012), 131.

²⁸⁰ For a historical appreciation of Yourcenar's work, see Rémy Poignault's *L'Antiquité dans l'œuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar: Littérature, mythe, et histoire* (Tournai: Éditions Latomus, 1995).

Yourcenar's reconstruction of Hadrian demands a constant oscillation between two historical eras and two literary, religious, and philosophical traditions. Classicist Paul Allen Miller has pointed out that "the *Mémoires* neither address the world of 1951 Paris intellectuals in the manner of *Les Temps modernes* or *Le Deuxième Sexe*, nor do they speak a language strictly intelligible to a Roman of the second century CE."²⁸¹

Perhaps owing to this temporal ambivalence, the *Mémoires* have fermented a reading tradition that takes as its point of departure the role of history. Yourcenar herself struggled to classify the genre of the *Mémoires*. Two months before publication in December 1951, on the last page of the *copie de travail*, Yourcenar jotted:

Questions qui continuent à se poser en octobre 1951

—

Nom de l'auteur (Y. ou C.)

Classification du livre (roman ou essai)²⁸²

As Yourcenar was deciding how to classify the *Mémoires*, neither biography nor history figured as contenders. Rather, she was choosing between two hybrid literary genres that invite experimentation: the novel and the essay. The author was also hesitating between publishing under her given surname, de Crayencour, or Yourcenar, the near-anagram she had devised with her father. Her publisher sought to persuade her to use her patronym, claiming that Yourcenar sounded too foreign. When the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* appeared in 1952, it was presented as a novel by Marguerite Yourcenar. This foreign-sounding name was perhaps particularly apt for the

²⁸¹ Paul Allen Miller, "Hadrian's Practice of Freedom: Yourcenar, Beauvoir, and Foucault," *EuGeStA* 2 (2012): 278.

²⁸² Marguerite Yourcenar, *Copie de travail, Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Photocopy of manuscript, Binder labeled (31) Avril 1951, Centre International de Documentation sur Marguerite Yourcenar (CIDMY), Brussels, Belgium.

Mémoires, which inhabit a type of third space between the classical and the Christian, the Roman and the French.

Deliberate uncertainty defines the historical time, the cultural milieu, and the implicit reader of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. With regards to history, Yourcenar called the *Mémoires* a *roman historique*, although Rosa Maria Chiapparo points out that the *Mémoires* runs against the conventions of historical fiction by their “*récréation intérieure* d'un personnage historique.”²⁸³ Culturally, Yourcenar locates her character in ancient Rome while writing to her contemporaries. This gives her the latitude of a comparativist in treating issues of morality and ethics; antiquity functions to relativize modern European ways of life. The *Mémoires* remain deliberately uncertain with regards to their readership. On one level, Yourcenar ventriloquizes Hadrian to speak to her contemporaries, benefitting from Hadrian's remoteness and his renown and authority. The author omitted a dedication to her partner Grace Frick, because it would have emphasized her own voice, interfering with Hadrian's.²⁸⁴ Within the *Mémoires*, Hadrian is ostensibly addressing Marcus Aurelius, his successor, but he is also writing for his own benefit. Sometimes Hadrian employs the second-person to address his late lover, Antinous, a gesture that calls to mind Montaigne's own absent interlocutor, his deceased friend Étienne de la Boétie. Hadrian's writing is addressed at various moments to himself and to others, both contemporary Romans and twentieth-century Europeans. The *Mémoires* remain uncertain about their historical time, their implicit reader, and their literary tradition, and we might read this uncertainty as pedagogical, training us in comparativist reading. Yourcenar juxtaposes the ancient and the modern, a powerful historical character and fiction writing.

²⁸³ Maria Rosa Chiapparo, “De la définition d'un genre: La réception de *Mémoires d'Hadrien* à sa parution et la question de l'Histoire,” *Francofonia* 47 (Autumn 2004): 76.

²⁸⁴ Yourcenar did include a brief dedication to Frick (“à G. F.”) in the “Carnets de notes” (519).

D. Plan

Yourcenar's historical imagination allows for an innovative exploration of identity formation through autobiography. Hadrian characterizes himself as someone who has always sought freedom over comfort, but shifting from agent to patient challenges Hadrian's understanding of himself and his understanding of freedom. Writing offers a space for him to negotiate the meaning of freedom and reconcile with his suffering and his lack of agency. Hadrian's unique situation and context allow Yourcenar to pose important questions for her contemporaries. Through her character, Yourcenar interrogates the definition of freedom and the limits of individual autonomy, bracketing the Christian framework of sin, judgment, and salvation.

This chapter will examine Hadrian's ongoing meditation on freedom by looking at its two principal articulations: his discourse on suicide and freedom, and role of writing in this thought process. After looking at how suicide is considered as a possible avenue to freedom, this chapter will observe Hadrian's deployment of life writing as a tool for self-determination and self-fashioning, before examining how Yourcenar uses historical fiction to reconsider the question of individual freedom, and to offer an optimistic view of writing as a powerful tool for reimagining and rebuilding relationships to oneself and to others.

II. Hadrian's Essay on Suicide

Yourcenar's Hadrian is contemplating whether suicide might be an act of freedom, letting him shape his end with the same decisiveness that has characterized his reign as emperor. He reflects in writing, a process that allows him to shape his legacy. As Hadrian molds his life into a narrative shape, suicide becomes a recurring topic, and the question of how to die structures the

letter. In the Roman Empire, suicide was permissible under certain circumstances, depending on the situation and on one's social position. The emperor's discussion of suicide in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* reflect the polysemy of voluntary death in Hadrian's time, as well as the complex moral thinking that such a reality demanded. Yourcenar's multi-sided approach to suicide speaks to Hadrian's historical context, but it also recalls Montaigne's treatment of suicide in the French tradition.

A. Montaigne on Suicide

Nearly 400 years before Yourcenar wrote the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, even before the word *suicide* existed in French,²⁸⁵ Montaigne wrote about the ethics of *homocide de soy-mesmes* in an essay. He cloaked the real content of his essay under the title "Coustume de l'Isle de Cea" in order to escape censorship.²⁸⁶ Today, news reporting on suicide is monitored carefully for clinical reasons, to prevent suicides by contagion. In Montaigne's time, the Church was restricting all writing on the subject. Suicides were on the rise in the sixteenth century, owing perhaps to the Renaissance fascination with death, to the rediscovery of Seneca's pro-suicide writings, or to the depressing nature of the Calvinist doctrines spreading through Europe.²⁸⁷ The Roman Catholic Church took action, and the 1563 *Catéchisme du Concile de Trente* forbade suicide "sans aucune réserve."²⁸⁸ By the time Montaigne was writing about suicide in 1572-1574,²⁸⁹ the Church had

²⁸⁵ The word "suicide" was first attested by the Académie Française in 1762. The first appearance of the word is located in Abbé Desfontaine's 1734 article in *Le Pour et le Contre*. (See "suicide" in the *TLFi : Trésor de la langue Française informatisé*, <http://www.atilf.fr/tlfi>, ATILF - CNRS & Université de Lorraine. Consulted April 24, 2017.)

²⁸⁶ Patrick Henry, "The Dialectic of Suicide in Montaigne's 'Coustume de l'Isle de Cea,'" *The Modern Language Review* 79, no. 2 (April 1984): 279.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Albert Bayet, *Le Suicide et la morale* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1922), 542.

²⁸⁹ Henry, "The Dialectic of Suicide," 278.

formally adopted “la morale simple,” which held all suicide as wrong, rather than “la morale nuancée,” which allowed for justifiable suicides.

Montaigne wished to examine the issue from all sides, and writing about suicide from any angle other than “la morale simple” in the 1570s was dangerous. Montaigne’s strategy was to create distance between himself and the ideas he put onto the page. Patrick Henry has demonstrated in his analysis of “Coustume de l’Isle de Cea” that Montaigne deployed a double strategy of defense. First, Montaigne chooses a title that gives no indication of the essay’s content. Second, Montaigne prefaces his essay by saying that he is playing the fool, and that he submits to divine authority.²⁹⁰ But Montaigne’s essay on suicide is remarkable for another reason than its cunning defense tactics.

Montaigne borrows the method of the Pyrrhonian Skeptics in “Coustume de l’Isle de Cea.” The Pyrrhonian Skeptics practiced a technique called *epoché*, which involved suspending judgment. Montaigne mimics this *epoché* when he presents arguments in favor of suicide, against suicide, and then offers some cases of when suicide might be justifiable. Putting forth various arguments in the voice of the jester, Montaigne avoids the first-person pronoun, and attributes responsibility for dangerous ideas to the fool-narrator he creates. Finally, Montaigne culls his arguments from various texts without citing their sources. Henry traces the pro-suicide arguments to Seneca’s *Ad Lucilium Epistolae Morales* and the anti-suicide arguments to Augustine’s *City of God*. After considering the issue of suicide from many possible angles, Montaigne draws no categorical conclusion.

Yourcenar’s discussion of suicide in the *Mémoires d’Hadrien* mimics the skeptical method that was practiced by the Pyrrhonian Skeptics, rediscovered in the Renaissance, and is

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 279.

visible in Montaigne's essay. Like Montaigne, Yourcenar invites the reader to discover multiple contexts, motives, and situations that might precipitate a suicide. There is, however, one notable difference between the treatment of suicide in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* and the "Coustume de l'Isle de Cea." Montaigne's jester presents arguments in the abstract, as a disinterested philosopher. Yourcenar's Hadrian is, like Montaigne, considering suicide as a solution to his suffering. Unlike Montaigne, Hadrian is writing in the first-person, and even within the text, Hadrian cannot maintain a disinterested philosophical position, because he must determine the correct path for himself. This key difference allows Yourcenar to push the discussion on suicide further than Montaigne was able to in his essay. Through fiction, Yourcenar explores how the skeptical method might help her character take a stance on suicide, if not categorically, at least for himself.

B. Suicide in the Roman Empire

During Hadrian's life, Christianity was a little-known sect, and even within the Christian community, no definitive stance was taken on suicide until 348, when the Council of Carthage, reacting against Donatism's praise of suicide, condemned the practice. Augustine's *City of God*, demonstrates this hardening stance, declaring that those who commit suicide will be excluded from eternal life.²⁹¹ Augustine argues that the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" applies to suicide, especially because the words "thy neighbor" are omitted, unlike the commandment against bearing false witness against one's neighbor.²⁹²

²⁹¹ "No man may inflict death upon himself at will merely to escape from temporal difficulties—for this is but to plunge into those which are everlasting; ... no one may end his own life out of a desire to attain a better life which he hopes for in death, because a better life after death is not for those who perish by their own hand" (Augustine, *The City of God*, Book 1, Chapter 26, 61).

²⁹² Ibid., Book 1, Chapter 20, 52.

In pagan antiquity, however, there was no unanimity on the issue; suicide was categorically opposed by the Pythagoreans, while permitted by the Stoics and Epicureans.²⁹³ The Roman Empire was particularly favorable to voluntary death, perhaps owing to the popularity of Stoicism among Roman elites.²⁹⁴ Yolande Gris  s study *Le suicide dans la Rome antique* records 314 suicides among prominent Romans between the fifth century BCE and the second century CE.²⁹⁵ George Minois calculates that this represents a higher proportional rate of suicide in ancient Rome than between 1300 and the present day.²⁹⁶ Complicating this picture is that ordered suicide was a form of execution, so these suicides do not necessarily represent the individuals' free choices.

This historical setting allows Yourcenar to bypass Christian notions of divine judgment and sin in her treatment of suicide. Yourcenar imagines Hadrian reflecting on an ultimate question: why remain living when life is painful, death is approaching quickly, and an aging body is limiting possibilities for action? Yourcenar's Hadrian stands out from the Catholic worlds of Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, and Mauriac when he discusses suicide. Hadrian is preoccupied with discovering how he ought to live, even though his future is rapidly shortening. Owing in part to his age and his illness, Hadrian inverts the question of how to live, asking himself instead how he ought to die: voluntarily, or naturally.

Dying presents a unique puzzle to Hadrian, who is accustomed to making decisions autonomously and drawing the boundaries on others' lives. After actively shaping his career and the Roman empire, Hadrian finds his agency horribly limited. Suicide makes frequent

²⁹³ Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 43.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹⁵ Gris  , *Le Suicide*, 34-53.

²⁹⁶ Minois, *History of Suicide*, 46.

appearances in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, in the form of Hadrian's ideation and attempts, as well as the suicides of other characters. Yourcenar's novel imagines Hadrian writing his life story, but it also provides a novel-length meditation on suicide, revealing the entanglement of life writing and voluntary death.

At times, Hadrian's reflections suggest that voluntary death can be an act of freedom and autonomy, an ultimate form of self-authoring that would let him participate in shaping his life in its most biological form, by planning and executing his own death. Voluntary death represents agency and power, but even so, this agency is limited, reacting to a given set of circumstances. Voluntary death, as well as the slow, passive, natural death represented by life writing, seem to offer a sort of freedom, but it is clear that these options are neither equivalent nor interchangeable. Hadrian must decide whether freedom is exercising power and agency over one's situation, or whether freedom consists in the ability to be free regardless of his situation. The *Mémoires* document Hadrian's evolving moral reflection on voluntary death. He eventually develops an argument for natural death, but Hadrian's anti-suicide stance hardly amounts to a decision: others prevent him from committing suicide, and writing helps Hadrian accept this decision.

Hadrian compares these last months of his life to approaching land after a long sea voyage. He comments that he can see the "je commence à apercevoir le profil de ma mort,"²⁹⁷ an

²⁹⁷ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 288-289: "Dire que mes jours sont comptés ne signifie rien; il en fut toujours ainsi; il en est ainsi pour nous tous. Mais l'incertitude du lieu, du temps, et du mode, qui nous empêche de bien distinguer ce but vers lequel nous avançons sans trêve, diminue pour moi à mesure que progresse ma maladie mortelle. Le premier venu peut mourir tout à l'heure, mais le malade sait qu'il ne vivra plus dans dix ans. Ma marge d'hésitation ne s'étend plus sur des années, mais sur des mois. Mes chances de finir d'un coup de poignard au cœur ou d'une chute de cheval deviennent des plus minimes; la peste paraît improbable; la lèpre ou le cancer semblent définitivement distancés. Je ne cours plus le risque de tomber aux frontières frappé d'une hache calédonienne ou transpercé d'une flèche partie; les tempêtes n'ont pas su profiter des occasions offertes, et le sorcier qui m'a prédit que je ne me noierai pas semble avoir eu raison. Je mourrai à

image that is literalized in his tomb, a double of himself whose construction he can see in the distance. Hadrian is less alarmed by the nearness of death than of the way that uncertainty is being removed. He lists all the types of death that he has imagined for himself in the past, grieving the loss of unknowns through the types of death he will not experience. He counts both the heroic, active deaths—stabbing, falling from a horse—and deaths by other illnesses—leprosy and cancer. Even the place of his death can be guessed with reasonable certainty. Life writing curiously turns into death writing, allowing Hadrian to appropriate his death, imagining ownership of an uncontrollable event by writing about it.

The ever-shortening horizon of Hadrian's future contributes a countdown poetics to his letter, and the dramatic tension of the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* has to do with how he ought to die—both what a good death resembles in his circumstances, and how he will perform it—and whether he will finish writing before that moment. Imminent death means that the future suddenly feels knowable, and this certainty and inevitability compel Hadrian to consider suicide as an act of freedom.

C. Hadrian's Experiences of Suicide

Hadrian's treatment of the ethics of suicide is embedded in his own life story. As he recounts his life, he remembers the people he has known who have committed suicide. Over the course of his account, the question of suicide becomes increasingly personal. Hadrian easily accepts the autonomy of the secondary characters who choose to end their life, but he struggles when his own lover, Antinous, takes his own life. Moving from acquaintances to his lover, and finally to himself, Hadrian's history with the problem of suicide grows increasingly intimate and

Tibur, à Rome, ou à Naples tout au plus, et une crise d'étouffement se chargera de la besogne. Serai-je emporté par la dixième crise, ou par la centième? Toute la question est là. Comme le voyageur qui navigue entre les îles de l'Archipel voit la buée lumineuse se lever vers le soir, et découvre peu à peu la ligne du rivage, je commence à apercevoir le profil de ma mort."

urgent. Unlike the philosophical stance of Montaigne's "Coustume de l'Isle de Cea," Hadrian's consideration of suicide is concrete and personal. Yourcenar creates drama by interweaving a problem of moral philosophy with her character's identity, and she propels the story by moving from the impersonal to the intimate. Hadrian's relation to suicide evolves from that of a spectator to an actor, and his interpretations of suicide evolve. Although Hadrian does eventually articulate his stance—that it is correct for him as the emperor to die a natural death—he does not prescribe a general principle on suicide.

i. Secondary Characters

Various secondary characters commit suicide in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, including an Indian sage, and some of Hadrian's subordinates. Hadrian describes the death of the Indian sage:

Ce brahmane était arrivé à l'état où rien, sauf son corps, ne le séparait plus du dieu intangible, sans substance et sans forme, auquel il voulait s'unir: il avait décidé de se brûler vif le lendemain. Osroès m'invita à cette solennité. Un bûcher de bois odoriférant fut dressé; l'homme s'y jeta et disparut sans un cri. Ses disciples ne donnèrent aucun signe de regret: ce n'était pas pour eux une cérémonie funèbre.²⁹⁸

That Hadrian remarks on the sage's seemingly painless self-immolation and on the disciples' lack of sorrow is revealing about his own assumptions and perspectives on death and suicide. The disciples are witnessing the same event as Hadrian, yet they do not experience this death of their master as a funerary event. Their belief that eliminating the body allows one to join an intangible, immaterial god endows them with an entirely different experience of death. The sage himself expresses no hesitation or pain, which suggests that such a structure of belief has a qualitative impact on how he experiences the fire. The Indian sage episode invites us to consider

²⁹⁸ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 397.

death as polysemous, something that can be welcomed or feared, pain or bliss. This ceremonial self-immolation implies that while death is an incontrovertible fact of human life, its meaning and experience varies according to culture and context.

The other suicides in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* take place in the Roman social context, where suicide has different meanings depending on one's social rank and the circumstances in which it occurs. Voluntary death was forbidden for soldiers, who would be punished if they survived, and slaves, who were not to commit theft of private property by stealing their own lives from their owners.²⁹⁹ When Hadrian is contemplating suicide, he remarks, "Mon propre code interdisait aux soldats cette sortie volontaire que j'accordais aux sages; je ne me sentais pas plus libre de désertre que le premier légionnaire venu."³⁰⁰ The emperor is aware that voluntary death is permissible for philosophers and sages, more than for men of action. Soldiers, like the emperor himself, symbolize something greater than themselves, and must embody the Empire and act out its values: "Un prince manque la latitude offerte au philosophe: il ne peut se permettre de différer sur trop de points à la fois, et les dieux savent que mes points de différence n'étaient déjà que trop nombreux, bien que je me relatasse que beaucoup fussent invisibles."³⁰¹ Hadrian recognizes that, having accepted the position of emperor, he lacks the freedom to participate in ascetic practices, to follow unconventional teachings. Care of the self must be carried out within the limits of what is acceptable for the persona of emperor, and we will see that this social role means that voluntary death is not an option for him.

Even for a well-positioned philosopher, such as Euphrates, suicide requires permission, and he requests authorization from the emperor Hadrian, who has recently taken him on as a

²⁹⁹ Minois, *History of Suicide*, 48.

³⁰⁰ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 502.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

reader. For the Stoic Euphrates, suicide is a type of euthanasia; he wishes to reduce the suffering brought upon him by a liver abscess. Hadrian grants leave to Euphrates:

Je le pris comme lecteur, mais les souffrances que lui causait de longue date un abcès au foie, et l'affaiblissement qui en résultait, le persuadèrent que sa vie ne lui offrait plus rien qui valût la peine de vivre. Il me demanda la permission de quitter mon service par le suicide. Je n'ai jamais été ennemi de la sortie volontaire; j'y avais pensé comme à une fin possible au moment de la crise qui précéda la mort de Trajan. Ce problème de suicide, qui m'a obsédé depuis, me semblait alors de solution facile. Euphrates eut l'autorisation qu'il réclamait [...] Le philosophe se présenta au palais le soir même pour une causerie qui ne différait en rien des précédentes; il se tua le lendemain.³⁰²

Unlike the sage's death, Euphrates' suicide impacts those he leaves behind, especially Hadrian's young lover, Antinous. The two discuss Euphrates' departure several times, and Hadrian describes Antinous's reaction: "l'enfant en demeura assombri durant quelques jours."³⁰³ Hadrian later suspects that this suicide may have factored into Antinous's own suicide, which weakens the notion that suicide is only of ethical concern to the person considering it.

These two cases of suicide, the sage and the philosopher, as well as the fact that soldiers and emperors are not permitted to commit suicide, reveal a complex picture of suicide and freedom in the world of Hadrian. In the Roman Empire, the option of voluntary death is restricted to certain social classes. Yourcenar's Hadrian maintains a straightforward attitude of acceptance toward suicide, respecting the autonomy and freedom of those who choose to end their life.

³⁰² Ibid., 411-412.

³⁰³ Ibid., 412.

ii. Hadrian's Lover, Antinous

The unexpected suicide of Hadrian's lover, Antinous, challenges his view that suicide is entirely a matter of autonomy and personal choice. Hadrian fears that he may be at least partly responsible for his lover's death: Antinous is neither well educated nor a sage, but rather a very young man despairing at his fading beauty and the realization that his time as Hadrian's muse and lover is limited. Whereas the Indian sage's death constituted a spiritual achievement for him and his followers, and Euphrates' suicide was the product of a rational decision to reduce suffering, Antinous's disappearance is illegible. Unlike Euphrates, Antinous does not ask permission, and so his death surprises Hadrian and leaves him with questions: why Antinous did this, whether he saw himself as a sacrifice, and whether Hadrian was responsible for this death.

Hadrian is unable to know for certain why Antinous chose to die, but as readers of the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, we are privy to his attempts to understand. Hadrian retrospectively identifies signs of his upcoming death. For instance, an account of a trip to make a sacrifice on Mt. Cassius becomes a foreshadowing of Antinous's own sacrifice. Hadrian and Antinous, along with a group of priests, climb the mountain, and when they near the summit, a storm breaks out. When the sacrifice is about to take place, lightning strikes and kills the intended victim, a fawn, and the *victimaire*, the person responsible for administering death. Hadrian describes the reaction of Antinous to this event and constructs an explanation for his subsequent suicide:

Antinoüs agrippé à mon bras tremblait, non de terreur, comme je le crus alors, mais sous le coup d'une pensée que je compris plus tard. Un être épouvanté de déchoir, c'est-à-dire de vieillir, avait dû se promettre depuis longtemps de mourir au premier signe de déclin, ou même bien avant. J'en arrive aujourd'hui à croire que cette promesse, que tant de nous se sont faite, mais sans la tenir, remontait chez lui très loin [...]. Elle expliquait son

indolence, son ardeur au plaisir, sa tristesse, son indifférence totale à tout avenir. Mais il fallait encore que ce départ n'eût pas l'air d'une révolte, et ne contînt nulle plainte.

L'éclair du mont Cassius lui montrait une issue: la mort pouvait devenir une dernière forme de service, un dernier don, et le seul qui restât.³⁰⁴

By interpreting Antinous's death as a sacrifice, Hadrian implicates his own responsibility for this death. This interpretation suggests that Antinous made this decision to avoid aging in advance, and that he found justification for suicide through the concept of sacrifice. Hadrian had already dabbled in mysticism in the presence of Antinous before the incident on Mount Cassius. A priest, perhaps aware of Hadrian's opposition to human sacrifice, recommended sacrificing a falcon. Hadrian suspects that the usual sacrifice was a slave, and Antinous's carefully staged suicide suggests he knew as much, taking the sacrificial role upon himself. When Hadrian and Chabrias trace Antinous's path to the river, they determine that Antinous revisited the site of the ceremony and burned some of his hair in the chapel before taking his own life.³⁰⁵ Chabrias sees the suicide as a sacrifice: "Chabrias qui, en sa qualité d'initié orphique, considérait le suicide comme un crime, insistait sur le côté sacrificiel de cette fin; j'éprouvais moi-même une espèce d'horrible joie à me dire que cette mort était un don."³⁰⁶ Chabrias's words do not relieve Hadrian of his sense of responsibility. Perhaps in an attempt to exculpate himself, Hadrian reframes his lover's death: "Je m'efforce de ramener mon crime, si c'en est un, à des proportions justes: je me dis que le suicide n'est pas rare, et qu'il est commun de mourir à vingt ans. La mort d'Antinous n'est un problème et une catastrophe que pour moi seul."³⁰⁷ Using objective language helps

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 429.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 440.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 443.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 420.

Hadrian relativize his loss as a catastrophe “pour moi seul,” which is limited to the personal realm.

Considering the suicide as “une catastrophe pour moi seul” also implies that the meaning of Antinous’s life and death resides with Hadrian. The intertwined lives of Hadrian and Antinous push against Hadrian’s notion of individual autonomy; viewing individuals as heteronomous and socially linked complicates questions of responsibility, tolerance, and self-knowledge. Hadrian’s attempts to make sense of his lover’s illegible suicide reveal his efforts to be little more than conjecture, underscoring the limits of his knowledge. Hadrian now questions whether he knew his lover while Antinous was alive. Hadrian is affected by this death that he may have caused: perhaps his experimentation with sacrifice led Antinous to believe that he ought to sacrifice himself; or, perhaps his behavior as a lover led Antinous to conclude that his happiness was limited to his youth. During Antinous’s life, Hadrian projects his desires, and after his death, Hadrian continues projecting, sometimes his guilt, sometimes his redemption. Hadrian struggles to decipher Antinous’s final act, evaluate his own responsibility for it, and understand himself in relation to the death of his beloved.

Details from Antinous’s last days, as well as Hadrian’s guilt about having neglected his lover, distinguish Antinous’s suicide from the other voluntary deaths in the *Mémoires d’Hadrien*. The Indian sage believed he was joining the divine, Euphrates put an end to physical suffering in his old age, and both announced their intentions beforehand. Whereas these deaths seem to embody the Roman values of action and freedom, Hadrian worries that Antinous’s suicide represents a more passive reaction to neglect.

iii. Hadrian Considers Suicide

After witnessing the suicides of others over the years, Hadrian is now considering voluntary death for himself. This is not the first time that he has considered ending his life, but his motivations have changed. As a young man facing his enemy Lusius Quietus, he was prepared to end his life if he were captured: “Ce fut à cette époque que je chargeai pour la première fois mon médecin de me marquer à l’encre rouge, sur la poitrine, la place du cœur: si le pire arrivait, je ne tenais pas à tomber vivant entre les mains de Lusius Quiétus.”³⁰⁸ Young Hadrian would have preferred to die than to live in captivity. But freedom and action, two defining aspects of Hadrian’s identity, are challenged in old age.

Hadrian’s logic of freedom through voluntary death could justify suicide, but his circumstances have changed the social ramifications of suicide. On the one hand, Hadrian’s motive for suicide is no longer military defeat, but old age. Suicide would constitute a noble alternative to captivity, but Hadrian’s loss of freedom has to do with his declining health. On the other hand, the emperor’s choice is limited by his social rank. In the *Mémoires*, Yourcenar’s character has been careful to distinguish his private self from his public persona, but this imagined distinction comes to a head over the issue of suicide. Whereas a private individual might have the right to voluntary death, Hadrian embodies the Empire, and as such, he must die an emperor’s death.

Hadrian sees the similarity between his own position and that of Roman soldiers, whose fates do not rest on personal choice. Hadrian recognizes that he is subject to the same rule he established for soldiers: “Mon propre code interdisait aux soldats cette sortie volontaire que j’accordais aux sages; je ne me sentais pas plus libre de désertre que le premier légionnaire

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 353.

venu.”³⁰⁹ On the issue of voluntary death, Hadrian has less freedom of choice than the philosopher Euphrates.

Hadrian tries twice to arrange his own death. He asks his master hunter, Mastor, to stab him, but Mastor takes the sword, flees, and is found raving on the far side of the palace grounds.³¹⁰ The next day, Hadrian notices that he has been further disarmed; his metal stylus on his desk has been replaced with a harmless reed pen. Hadrian then asks the physician Iollas for poison. Iollas does not say no, but the next day he is found dead in the laboratory. Hadrian realizes that Iollas poisoned himself so as to avoid disobedience and murder: “Ce cœur pur de tout compromis avait trouvé ce moyen de rester fidèle à son serment sans rien me refuser.”³¹¹ The loss of another person’s life brings pause to Hadrian: “La mort d’Iollas fidèle à son devoir de médecin m’exhorte à me conformer jusqu’au bout aux convenances de mon métier d’empereur. [...] J’ai renoncé à brusquer ma mort.”³¹²

Hadrian’s decision to die a natural death is made partly by his entourage, and, perhaps as a means of appropriating this choice for himself, Hadrian generates arguments for natural death, such as the following: “Il est convenu qu’un empereur ne se suicide que s’il y est acculé par des raisons d’État.”³¹³ Hadrian begins writing his autobiography with the presupposition that his inner self has remained concealed and separate from his life as emperor. Over the course of writing his autobiography, attempting and failing to end his life, Hadrian comes to accept the limitations of his social position on his last days. Hadrian concludes with a resolution to die in the same way as he has lived, continuing his skeptical practice and his study of the self right to

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 502.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 503.

³¹¹ Ibid., 504.

³¹² Ibid., 505.

³¹³ Ibid., 502.

the end: “J’observe ma fin: cette série d’expérimentations faites sur moi-même continue la longue étude commencée dans la clinique de Satyrus.”³¹⁴

Yourcenar places her character in a position that blurs the distinction between agent and patient, free and fettered. This posture impacts how Hadrian thinks about the ethics of suicide. On the one hand, Hadrian remains noncommittal: he refrains from drawing any conclusion or principle from the various suicides he has witnessed and his own experience. He both affirms the political and social necessity of the emperor’s natural death, and tries to end his own life. It is conceivable for the reader that the character commit suicide after the time of writing, as the obstacle has been a lack of means, rather than a strong resolve to die as an emperor. On the other hand, Hadrian’s position highlights the difference between the philosopher’s abstract contemplation of the ethics of suicide, and the practical, engaged reflection of an individual considering suicide. *Mémoires d’Hadrien* challenges the notion of an autonomous self, underscoring Hadrian’s dependence on others, and the pressing issue of how to die provides a clarifying lens for defining freedom.

III. Writing: A Practice of Freedom

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted the ways in which the *Mémoires* embodies ambiguity and indecision. Yourcenar was undecided about her authorial identity (de Crayencour or Yourcenar) and the genre of her work (essay or novel), and the *Mémoires* share this indeterminacy. Yourcenar blends the theme of care of the self, a Stoic outlook, and resonances of the Skeptic method with distinctively modern elements: the anachronistic salutation “Mon cher

³¹⁴ Ibid., 511.

Marc”³¹⁵; the linear, retrospective account of a life beginning from childhood that first appears with Augustine’s *Confessions*. Such heterogeneity effectively suspends the *Mémoires d’Hadrien* between the ancient and modern traditions of self-writing. By confronting the modern reader with historical, thematic, and formal heterogeneity, the *Mémoires* demand a comparativist reading.

A. Hadrian in the Epistolary Tradition

By imagining Hadrian writing a letter, Yourcenar places her character in the tradition of epistolary writing, and more specifically, as a literary successor to Seneca. Scholars such as Verónica Murillo Chinchilla have remarked in passing that Yourcenar models her character on Seneca, but the value of the letter for introspection in the *Mémoires d’Hadrien* has not been investigated. Yourcenar’s Hadrian emulates the Stoic philosopher who served Nero as tutor and adviser, and who died eleven years before Hadrian was born.

Seneca is best known for his *Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium*. He wrote 124 letters addressed to Lucilius in retirement, after working for Emperor Nero for 15 years. Seneca traveled around Italy, writing essays on natural history, as well as the letters to Lucilius during his final years, 63 and 64 CE.³¹⁶ Dying formed the leitmotif for Seneca, who memorably described life as “dying every day.”³¹⁷ Retirement was a struggle after a public career in the court of Nero, and Seneca was unable to truly withdraw into his private life. His freedom was limited under the watch of Nero, and his writing was censored; Nero would order his suicide in 65 CE.

³¹⁵ Anne-Yvonne Julien points out this anachronism. If included, a Roman salutation would follow the formula: “Tel adresse ses salutations à tel autre.” (*Mémoires d’Hadrien: étude, Écriture de soi* [Paris: Editions Belin, 1996], 13.)

³¹⁶ Richard Gummere, introduction to *Ad Lucilium epistolae morales*, by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (London: Heinemann, 1917), viii-ix.

³¹⁷ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Letter XXIV “On Despising Death,” in *Letters on Ethics: To Lucilius*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 19.

Under these circumstances, Seneca turned to letter writing. His reputation as a philosopher had been compromised by his involvement in Nero's crimes, but political stories are absent from Seneca's letters. He nevertheless gestures toward his guilt by describing himself as morally sick, offering his letters as medicine for the reader.³¹⁸ John Schafer reads Seneca's letters as an attempt to salvage a life that was a failure by his own measure:

Seneca, both as author and as the authorial I of the work, had aspired to combine philosophical learning and literary talent with political power: he failed. Cashiered from politics, he has only the care of his soul. Luckily (perhaps) for him, his doctrinal commitments include the belief that only this matters. The *Letters*, then, depict a life lived accordingly and attempt to make that belief plausible by rendering that life interesting, large, majestic.³¹⁹

Letter writing offered an opportunity for self-fashioning. Reading Seneca alongside the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* exposes the filiation that Yourcenar was weaving as she constructed a literary Hadrian who was both a descendent of Seneca's *Epistolae Morale* and a precursor to Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. The historical Hadrian did share some common experiences with Seneca: he too spent the two years before his death in retirement, writing poetry while tending to administrative affairs.³²⁰ But Yourcenar's depiction of Hadrian draws more parallels between Seneca and Hadrian.

³¹⁸ "He compares his moral condition to that of a patient with skin lesions that have at least stopped spreading, though they are also not healing. He claims to have found an unguent for these sores, a medicine he will record and transmit for posterity: the *Letters* themselves." (James Romm, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* [New York: Alfred Knopf, 2014], 151-152.)

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³²⁰ Everitt, *Hadrian*, 306-320.

Like Seneca, Yourcenar's character takes death as his leitmotif, and struggles with retirement, because he no longer has the possibility of a truly private life; even dying is choreographed to harmonize with his public image and his role as emperor. Yourcenar's character is also dealing with guilt, both with regards to his role in the death of his lover, and with regards to the intolerance he showed toward the Jewish people, uncharacteristic in his record of religious tolerance. (Hadrian had forbidden Judaism, and he sparked the Bar Kokhba revolt when he built a temple to Venus in the place of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.) And, just as Seneca is aiming to present a private self in the letters that is different from his political persona, Hadrian envisages his *Mémoires* as a record of his private self, and a corrective to public records. Yourcenar's character explains to Marcus Aurelius, echoing Rousseau, "Je t'offre ici comme correctif un récit dépourvu d'idées préconçues et de principes abstraits, tiré de l'expérience d'un seul homme qui est moi-même."³²¹

The *Mémoires d'Hadrien* share another important rhetorical feature with Seneca's *Epistolae Morales*: the letters were never sent. Historian James Romm explains:

Wherever Seneca went in these years, he carried on work on his magnum opus, a remarkable set of short moral essays framed as letters. Ostensibly addressed to Lucilius, these letters were in fact aimed at a wide audience. But the fiction of an intimate correspondence gave Seneca latitude in the structure of the essays, as well as unusual freedom to vary voice, tone, and technique. The melding of ethical inquiry with epistolary style produced a breakthrough for Seneca. He carried on the *Letters to Lucilius* at far greater length than anything else he had written and with greater candor about his life and thoughts—or at least, what *seems* to be candor.³²²

³²¹ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 302.

³²² Romm, *Dying Every Day*, 149.

That the central fiction in Seneca's letters to Lucilius is their epistolary form raises another question: what does the letter form contribute to self-writing? Seneca was writing under the eye of Nero, so avoiding censorship may partially explain this tactic. Having an interlocutor, even an imaginary one, may bring more to self-writing than protection from censors.

For Yourcenar, the letter constituted a realistic pretext for accessing the inner world of an emperor. She had first considered exploring the Roman world from the point of view of Plotina, Trajan's wife, but felt that a woman's perspective would have been too limiting: "La vie des femmes est trop limitée, ou trop secrète. Qu'une femme se raconte, et le premier reproche qu'on lui fera est de n'être plus femme. Il est déjà assez difficile de mettre quelque vérité à l'intérieur d'une bouche d'homme."³²³ Writing a diary of Hadrian would have allowed Yourcenar to explore an emperor's quotidian, at the expense of verisimilitude: "Ceux qui auraient préféré un *Journal d'Hadrien* à des *Mémoires d'Hadrien* oublient que l'homme d'action tient rarement de journal: c'est presque toujours plus tard, du fond d'une période d'inactivité, qu'il se souvient, note, et le plus souvent s'étonne."³²⁴ The letter carried the diary's advantages of interiority, while adding new possibilities: an essayistic mode of writing, and the retrospective posture of autobiography.

Michel Foucault identified the letter as a prime form for care of the self. In his essay "L'Écriture de soi," Foucault sketches the late appearance of writing in care of the self, which included spiritual exercises such as abstinence, memorization, self-examination, meditation, and listening practices.³²⁵ Writing expanded the individual's training in two ways: writing could

³²³ Marguerite Yourcenar, "Carnets de notes," in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, *Œuvres romanesques*, ed. Yvon Bernier (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 526.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 534.

³²⁵ Michel Foucault, "L'Écriture de soi," *Corps écrit* 5 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 5.

mediate a linear process that moved from meditating to writing notes, and finally implementing the fruits of one's meditation; or, writing could participate in a circular exercise, in which a person would meditate, write notes, reread the notes, and be moved back to meditation.³²⁶ The way in which writing is embedded into ethical practices leads Foucault to identify an ethopoetic function of writing that takes two forms: hypomnemata and correspondence. Hypomnemata took the form of notebooks, functioning as material memory of things read, overheard, and thought. Whereas hypomnemata aid self-constitution by holding an eclectic assortment of wise sayings together for rereading and meditation, letter writing exerts a contrary pressure to draw a coherent account out of heterogeneous parts.

The presence of an interlocutor, even an imagined one, affects the content of self-writing. The epistolary form creates a self-consciousness as the writer presents themselves to someone else. The presence of a letter reader implies introspection, an opening of the self to another person.³²⁷ Foucault distinguishes the letters of the orator Cicero, and the introspective letters of Seneca, Plutarch, and Marcus Aurelius, because Cicero relates events, while the latter writers present their selves. The introspective writers recount how they spend their most ordinary days, and relate news of their health, interpreted as the interferences of their body and soul. Style is affected as well by the epistolary form: in *De elocutione*, Demetrius argues that letter writing can only involve a spare diction and a free compositional form,³²⁸ as though the text were the result of a real encounter between the letter writer and the recipient.

Yourcenar imitates Seneca when she makes Hadrian a letter writer, and she represents the emperor undertaking spiritual exercises in his old age. The opening scene of the *Mémoires*, in

³²⁶ Ibid., 6.

³²⁷ Ibid., 17.

³²⁸ Cited by Foucault, 17.

which Hadrian recounts his visit to the doctor, inscribes this letter in the tradition of introspective letter writers who wrote at length of their physical and spiritual health and the rhythms of their daily routine. Thematic and stylistic features connect Hadrian's letter to the epistolary practices of care of the self in the first centuries, and Yourcenar effectively constructs a Hadrian that is the literary successor to Seneca and forebear of Marcus Aurelius.

B. Hadrian and Autobiography

Hadrian's experience of old age leads him to reconsider what freedom might resemble in his current circumstances, and life writing offers him the possibility of mastering his legacy through narrative. The autobiographical aspect of Hadrian's letter borrows from the later Christian tradition of confessions and self-examination, introducing an anachronism in Yourcenar's recreation of Hadrian. The origin of autobiography is usually located with Augustine's *Confessions*, which were written between 397 and 400 CE, more than 250 years after Hadrian's death.³²⁹ Other forms of life writing were already being practiced, however. In the first century CE, Plutarch published *Parallel Lives*, a touchstone in the history of biography. In the first century BCE, Julius Caesar wrote a memoir, *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, in which he recounted nine years of war in the third-person. Autobiography and memoir are not easily distinguished forms of life writing. Memoir has been variably defined according to its subject (public figures) or its time scale (an episode of life rather than the entire chronology), but even these distinctions are porous in contemporary life writing. Marguerite Yourcenar's decision to call her book *Mémoires* shows her awareness of the potential anachronism, but the text nevertheless exceeds the limited scope of Julius Caesar's memoir of war. Yourcenar's Hadrian writes about his private life, and he folds key episodes into a purportedly comprehensive

³²⁹ Henry Chadwick, introduction to *Confessions*, by Augustine of Hippo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxix.

chronology of his life. That Yourcenar combines modern autobiography with ancient life writing fits with the other types of hybridity we have seen in the *Mémoires*, such as the blending of fiction and history, and of the essay and the novel.

Yourcenar's narrator follows the conventions of modern life writing: Hadrian includes anecdotes about his childhood and stories about himself as a young man making a career in the army; and he tells a chronological story of himself, respecting the implicit teleology of autobiography, that all the recounted events have contributed to making him who he is today. Like the narrators in the previous chapters of this dissertation, Hadrian finds himself reframing his purpose over the course of writing, and his writing betrays tensions: between his need to define freedom and his desire to represent himself in a positive light; between the values he espouses and the life he recounts.

i. Hadrian's Secular Conversion

In writing his life story, Hadrian relies on a secularized version of the religious conversion to make sense of an abrupt change in himself. In *Volupté*, a religious conversion separates Amaury's young, pleasure-seeking self from his adult self as a priest. As an interpretive structure, the religious conversion limits future attempts at self-interpretation; by explaining a life according to an arc from darkness to light, or from bad to good, the conversion resists a novel interpretation or any self-discovery that cannot be adapted to fit the conversion story. The result is that Sainte-Beuve's character is unable to recognize new discoveries and experiences without rejecting the epistemic structure he relies on for self-understanding.

Yourcenar's Hadrian faces a similar challenge, even though religious belief does not play a role in his identity. In the early pages of the *Mémoires*, Hadrian presents himself as having private and public selves, and his intention in writing is to retrieve the private self. Hadrian

describes his young self as unfocused, at times training himself in asceticism and building his military reputation, at other times dabbling in mysticism and sending for oracles. Hadrian was a group of characters, rather than one unified person: “Des personnages divers régnaient en moi tour à tour.”³³⁰ Becoming emperor resolves this tension, streamlining Hadrian’s identity into one unified public persona:

Un calme extraordinaire s’était emparé de moi: l’ambition, et la crainte, semblaient un cauchemar passé. Quoi qu’il fût arrivé, j’avais toujours été décidé à défendre jusqu’au bout mes chances impériales, mais l’acte d’adoption simplifiait tout. Ma propre vie ne me préoccupait plus: je pouvais de nouveau penser au reste des hommes.³³¹

Hadrian theorizes his transformation from a striving individual to emperor in a way that resonates with the Amaury’s becoming a priest. Hadrian submits his entire self to a greater good, the Empire, and he relegates his private self to an inferior position. Hadrian’s transformation contains the key elements of Amaury’s classical religious conversion: he devotes his entire self to a higher good; he describes a rupture from his past life; and his new self is liberated from ambition, fear, and uncertainty.

ii. Confronting and Refining a Personal Myth

Fear and uncertainty revisit Hadrian in old age, revealing the inadequacy of this personal myth of transformation. Hadrian has understood himself to contain separable public and private selves, and he has viewed his transformation into the Emperor as the end of his self-construction, a final crystallization of his identity. Now his public duties are lessening, and his physical strength is declining. Hadrian’s present experience of passivity and solitude clashes with his past life of military expeditions and travel. Facing his last days, Hadrian would like to return to his

³³⁰ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 328.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 358.

private life after years of service to the Empire, and he believes that he can recover his private self through letter writing.

Hadrian does not recant his theories of self, but he refines them gradually and subtly throughout his letter. He discovers that the freedom to retreat to his private self does not extend beyond the page. His public and private selves are no longer extricable, and his entourage is ensuring that he dies as an Emperor. Without the freedom to commit suicide, Hadrian renounces this desire to choose his death, and he reframes dying as a last service to the Empire. Through writing, Hadrian revisits the values and practices of his youth: self-observation, ascetic exercises, a Stoic posture toward misfortune and difficulty. Hadrian's need for care of the self manifests itself in his writing, which reveals that he is seeking strength and wisdom through the writing process.

iii. Self-Evaluation and Remorse in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*

Besides borrowing the conversion trope to structure Hadrian's autobiography, Yourcenar also incorporates confessional themes. Hadrian admits failure and remorse on personal and political levels. Guilt in his personal life is expressed most notably with regards to the death of Antinous: "J'offre ici aux moralistes une occasion facile de triompher de moi."³³² Regret about political action centers on Hadrian's violent interactions with the Jewish people: "Je ne le nie pas: cette guerre de Judée était un de mes échecs."³³³ Hadrian recognized that this campaign ran counter to his values of pacifism and religious tolerance: "Si seize ans du règne d'un prince passionnément pacifique aboutissaient à la campagne de Palestine, les chances de paix du monde s'avéraient médiocres dans l'avenir."³³⁴ Writing about these wars, the emperor looks for a way to

³³² Ibid., 420.

³³³ Ibid., 472.

³³⁴ Ibid., 473.

explain massacres and religious suppression, and he attributes partial responsibility to the monotheistic character of Judaism, which is at odds with Roman and Greek polytheism: “En principe, le judaïsme a sa place parmi les religions de l’empire; en fait, Israël se refuse depuis des siècles à n’être qu’un peuple parmi les peuples, possédant un dieu parmi les dieux.”³³⁵

That Hadrian writes his life in a pre-Christian time period before Augustine fundamentally alters the content of the *Mémoires*, which are free of anxiety about salvation that typifies literary performances of the Christian life. Divine judgment is strikingly absent from Hadrian’s account, and his end-of-life reflections are formulated in relation to social issues: freedom and peace amid the diversity of the Roman Empire.

IV. Care of the Self in the Twentieth Century

By telling his story, Hadrian is pushed to refine the myths of self that he has lived by. Writing allows Hadrian to revisit the person he believes himself to be, while providing him with the material he needs to refine both his identity and how he frames his current experience. In this sense, Hadrian’s writing functions like the *hypomnemata* notebooks studied by Michel Foucault: writing reminds Hadrian of his values, assisting him as he develops a personal end-of-life ethics.

The last pages of the *Mémoires* reveal a transformation in Hadrian’s self-conception, as he valorizes self-observation as an end in itself. He draws an arc of continuity from his young self, who practiced spiritual exercises in the face of an uncertain future, and his current situation facing an unknown death. Without explicitly rejecting the notion that becoming Emperor crystallized his identity and put an end to care of the self, Hadrian undoes that logic by undertaking a writing project that functions as care of the self, and by reworking his

³³⁵ Ibid., 467.

interpretation of his life in a way that allows growth and change. At the outset, Hadrian defined his letter as the story of “un seul homme qui est moi-même.”³³⁶ Now at the end, Hadrian allows for uncertainty by describing his present practice, rather than a packaged, interpreted past: “J’observe ma fin...”³³⁷ By naming self-observation as his primary occupation, Hadrian marks his transition from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa* and affirms the value of his retirement.

Life writing mediates Hadrian’s reflection on what constitutes a good life, and his evaluation of his own life. Hadrian weaves his memories into a comprehensible narrative that inscribes his experience into a larger metanarrative of the Empire. This work of transforming his life into art—narrative form—prepares him for death, and he emphasizes the challenging nature of this work: “La méditation de la mort n’apprend pas à mourir; elle ne rend pas la sortie plus facile, mais la facilité n’est plus ce que je recherche.”³³⁸ Concluding his letter, Hadrian commits to continued self-observation, inscribing an ethic of lucidity into his conceptualization of a good death: “Tâchons d’entrer dans la mort les yeux ouverts.”³³⁹

A. Yourcenar’s Response to Existentialism

Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Mémoires d’Hadrien* brought Hadrian to life in the 1950s, and classicist Paul Allen Miller argues that Yourcenar provides a rebuttal to existentialist freedom through the voice of Hadrian, and that Yourcenar’s thought is based on her excavation of ancient, and particularly Stoic, sources, a move that Michel Foucault would undertake several decades later. Hadrian’s idea of freedom rests on the notion of training and practice, rather than an ontology of man as free. It is not known whether Foucault read Yourcenar, but his work on ethics

³³⁶ Ibid., 301-302.

³³⁷ Ibid., 511.

³³⁸ Ibid., 510.

³³⁹ Ibid., 515.

derives from the same imperial philosophy as Yourcenar's Hadrian.³⁴⁰ Miller identifies two moments in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* that speak to the existentialist notion of freedom. In the first, Hadrian explains his personal philosophy of freedom, which includes a pointed critique of existentialism's ontology of freedom:

Pour moi, j'ai cherché la liberté plus que la puissance, et la puissance seulement parce que, en partie, elle favorisait la liberté. Ce qui m'intéressait n'était pas une philosophie de l'homme libre (tous ceux qui s'y essayent m'ennuyèrent) mais une technique; je voulais trouver la charnière où notre volonté s'articule au destin, où la discipline seconde, au lieu de freiner, la nature. Comprends bien qu'il ne s'agit pas ici de la dure volonté du stoïque, dont tu t'exagères le pouvoir, ni de je ne sais quel choix ou quel refus abstrait, qui insulte aux conditions de notre monde plein, continu, formé d'objets et de corps. J'ai rêvé d'un plus secret acquiescement ou d'une plus souple bonne volonté. La vie m'était un cheval dont on épouse les mouvements, mais après l'avoir, de son mieux, dressé. Tout en somme étant une décision de l'esprit, mais lente, mais insensible, et qui entraîne aussi l'adhésion du corps, je m'efforçais d'atteindre par degré cet état de liberté, ou de soumission, presque pur.³⁴¹

In a second instance, Yourcenar ventriloquizes through Hadrian to attend to existentialism, this time having to do with the use of freedom. A slave in the mines attempts to kill Hadrian with a knife, and Hadrian responds by disarming the man and offering him medical treatment, rather than ordering the slave's immediate execution. Hadrian's strategy is to loosen constraints, creating an indeterminacy in which the slave becomes free to master himself:

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 270. See also Françoise Gaillard, "La Culture de l'individualité. Relire Foucault et M. Yourcenar," in *Michel Foucault, la littérature et les arts: Actes du Colloque de Cerise — juin 2001*, ed. Philippe Artières (Paris: Kimé), 109-124.

³⁴¹ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 318.

[...] sa fureur tomba; il se transforma en ce qu'il était vraiment, un être pas moins sensé que les autres, et plus fidèle que beaucoup. Ce coupable que la loi sauvagement appliquée eût fait exécuter sur-le-champ devint pour moi un serviteur utile.³⁴²

Miller's argument that the *Mémoires d'Hadrien* are responding to existentialism confirms that Yourcenar is maintaining a dialogue with her contemporaries while imagining the inner world of a Roman emperor. This Stoic freedom is emblematic of Hadrian's experience of life writing and dying. Yourcenar's character has set out to determine whether to commit suicide, and in the end, the decision is not fully his own, as others foil his attempts. Constrained by the conventions of his position as emperor and prevented from suicide by his entourage, Hadrian begins exerting power over himself to accept a natural death. Hadrian argues that it is fitting for an emperor to die naturally, recasting death as a continuation of the Stoic exercises begun in his youth: observing himself, mastering himself, and applying "la liberté d'acquiescement."³⁴³

B. Imagining Secular Selfhood

Yourcenar's *Mémoires* fit into a longer modern tradition of fictionalizing Antiquity. Chateaubriand's 1809 *Les Martyrs, ou le Triomphe de la religion chrétienne* posits Christianity's poetic superiority, and Gautier's 1857 *Le Roman de la momie* borrows from the book of Exodus. Later, writers reimagined Antiquity as a point of comparison to Western, Christian society. Flaubert's 1862 *Salammbô* exoticized third-century BCE Carthage. Yourcenar admired Flaubert's work, and a comment made by Flaubert made a lasting impression on her. In the "Carnets de notes" accompanying the *Mémoires*, Yourcenar reflects:

Retrouvé dans un volume de la correspondance de Flaubert, fort lu et fort souligné par moi vers 1927, la phrase inoubliable: 'Les dieux n'étant plus, et le Christ n'étant pas

³⁴² Ibid., 374.

³⁴³ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 319.

encore, il y a eu, de Cicéron à Marc Aurèle, un moment unique où l'homme seul a été.'

Une grande partie de ma vie allait se passer à essayer de définir, puis à peindre, cet homme seul et d'ailleurs relié à tout."³⁴⁴

Yourcenar imagines Hadrian as this "homme seul," setting the *Mémoires* in this precise moment between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius. The ventriloquism that Miller identifies in Yourcenar's discussions of freedom could also describe her treatment of religion. Hadrian writes:

Je me réjouirais que nos religions vagues et vénérables, décantées de toute intransigence et de tout rite farouche, nous associassent mystérieusement aux songes les plus antiques de l'homme et de la terre, mais sans nous interdire une explication laïque des faits, une vue rationnelle de la conduite humaine. Il me plaisait enfin que ces mots mêmes d'Humanité, de Liberté, de Bonheur, n'eussent pas encore été dévalués par trop d'applications ridicules.³⁴⁵

Hadrian has praise for Roman religion and for his own historic moment, in which religion has a symbolic and poetic value for Rome, without interfering in rational thought and politics. Reconstructing the ancient world lets Yourcenar inject a sense of relativity into the traditions, beliefs and mores of her own time and place. Hadrian embodies a different way of being in the world, with regards to his own sexuality, his religious culture, and how he measures the value of his life, unconstrained by the Church's classification rubric for sin and error. Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* represents new possibilities for self-making in a secular age by reimagining a lost tradition.

³⁴⁴ Yourcenar, "Carnets de notes," 519.

³⁴⁵ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 372.

V. Conclusion

Choosing the pen over the sword as a means to self-determination, Hadrian chooses a contemplative process over suicide, a decisive, final act. He has learned from Antinous that suicide is indecipherable; Hadrian cannot find out whether or what Antinous was communicating through his suicide. Unlike dying, writing can be edited: Hadrian can clarify his thinking, nuance his opinions, look at a question from all sides, and even modify his ideas based on new experiences and realizations. Writing is synonymous with living in the *Mémoires*, a practice of freedom that puts Hadrian in communion with Marcus Aurelius and himself. The letter is a form of creation, in which Hadrian attempts to distill and capture an essence of himself that is truer than the public chronicles and monuments, and that will survive his death.

Writing is healing too in the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. As Plotina wrote in the inscription over the library—"hôpital de l'âme"³⁴⁶—reading and writing help Hadrian make sense of an identity crisis occasioned by retirement and old age after an active life in politics and the military. Transposing his life story onto paper, Hadrian undertakes the task of sifting through memories, interpretations, and a model of selfhood, working through contradictions toward a truer, more coherent personal history, and adapting the concept of self that has served as a shorthand of his identity during his active life.

History tells us that Hadrian's last moments were not as Stoic as the conclusion of the *Mémoires* suggest: knowing he was dying, Hadrian paid no heed to his doctors' dietary restrictions, eating and drinking whatever he wished in a seaside resort. His last words were shouted: "Many doctors killed a king!"³⁴⁷ Yourcenar's Hadrian seems to know, though, that writing, like monument building, allows him more control over his legacy. And so the *Mémoires*

³⁴⁶ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 462.

³⁴⁷ Everitt, *Hadrian*, 320.

d'Hadrien leave the readers with a Hadrian who is master of himself, keeping company with himself, addressing his soul as in his poem *Anima vagula blandula*:

Petite âme, âme tendre et flottante, compagne de mon corps, qui fût ton hôte, tu vas descendre dans ces lieux pâles, durs et nus, où tu devras renoncer au jeu d'autrefois. Un instant encore, regardons ensemble les rives familières, les objets que sans doute nous ne reverrons plus... Tâchons d'entrer dans la mort les yeux ouverts...³⁴⁸

In the *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, writing reveals Hadrian to himself and to his reader, Marcus Aurelius. Through historical fiction, Yourcenar retroactively creates a mentor for Marcus Aurelius: an introspective, letter-writing Hadrian. An erudite scholar who anticipates Foucault, Yourcenar imagines the prehistory of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, which had a permanent place on Foucault's night table, and which survive as a landmark of Stoic self-writing. Through the slippage between the author and the narrator, the historical and the fictional, the first *immortelle* of the Académie française fit herself, unwittingly or not, into the Western canon.

³⁴⁸ Yourcenar, *Mémoires*, 515.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has looked at four fictional autobiographies that were published from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century: Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve's 1834 *Volupté*, Paul Bourget's 1889 *Le Disciple*, François Mauriac's 1932 *Le Nœud de vipères*, and Marguerite Yourcenar's 1951 *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. Fictional autobiographies create a fictional subject to reproduce conventions associated with traditional autobiography, such as a chronological story, a retrospective stance, and a first-person perspective. This unusual marriage of autobiography and fiction raises questions about how to read fictional autobiography, without having recourse to the explanation that these texts are examples of the *roman autobiographique*, lightly fictionalized accounts of the author's life. These analyses of fictional autobiographies demonstrate that coupling fiction with the literary conventions of autobiography sheds light on both fiction and autobiography, and compels us to develop lenses other than the autobiographical pact for interpreting autobiography.

I. Fictional Autobiography: Thought Experiments Through Fiction

The literary genres most commonly associated with thought experiments are science fiction and speculative fiction, which pursue “what if” questions to imagine alternative selves and societies. Like science fiction and speculative fiction, fictional autobiographies generate a distance from the real that is productive for thought experiments. By inventing a character who is writing an autobiography rather than writing their own story, the authors create a critical distance between their own identity and their investigation of autobiography. To borrow Philippe

Lejeune's term, these texts are *débrayé*, or disengaged, which enables them to investigate the theoretical issues of autobiography, as well as specific issues of moral philosophy.

Through their fictional autobiographies, Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar cast a specific moral question into a thought experiment, by embedding it in thick description: what happens when a priest tries to write a spiritual autobiography but his experiences clash with narrative convention? What happens when the ideas of a reclusive intellectual inspire and radicalize a reader, with fatal results? What happens when a dying man's vengeful letter to his wife confronts him with an unflattering self-portrait? What happens when we look at contemporary social and political issues—peace-keeping, religious pluralism, and tolerating diverse sexual practices—from the perspective of an emperor who lived before Christianity became the default worldview in the West?

Fictional autobiographies take advantage of authorial disengagement to observe how autobiography works by imagining how a character under specific pressures might translate lived experience into a narrative. Sainte-Beuve's *Volupté* exposes the tensions in trying to mold one's life story to fit the model of the Christian life, a narrative labor that is morally charged for Amaury, whose salvation depends on having lived the Christian life. Paul Bourget considers the moral responsibility of the intellectual through the characters of Adrien Sixte and Robert Greslou; although Sixte feels responsible for the suicide of Robert's lover and converts to Christianity, the text leaves the question of responsibility open. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, François Mauriac investigates what religious experience looks like in an era of twentieth century rationalism and skepticism, and he locates the motor of ethical transformation in life writing. Marguerite Yourcenar uses the figure of Hadrian to reimagine the definition of freedom, sexual morality, and the good life, bracketing Christian notions by choosing a pre-Christian setting.

The thought experiments carried out in these novels demonstrate the value of concrete situations and characters for carrying out moral philosophy. By setting characters in a specific context and confronting them with a specific issue, these novels suggest that each individual's unique situation requires adaptive moral reasoning, rather than abstract principles based on the notion of a universal subject. Fiction enhances the power of these thought experiments in two ways. Fiction gives the author the creative latitude to invent a scenario that pinpoints a specific moral issue, and it draws attention to the ethical and philosophical issues at play, rather than distracting the reader with the historical questions of what happened.

II. Fictional Autobiography: Critique and Theory of Autobiography

Fictional autobiographies tell the stories of lives that were not lived, in the voice of characters that have not existed. Because these novels posit no historical referentiality, they shed light on how the history of reading autobiography in France has been marked by a judicial approach to truth telling. These novels show how discarding the autobiographical pact as a primary lens for reading autobiography can be productive, by preventing us from assuming the posture of the fact-checker, who transforms an autobiography into a verifiable, potentially objective piece of evidence about the writer's life. Dispensing with the pact, even temporarily, brings the subjective process into view, letting us observe how autobiography mediates the author's self-discovery.

A. Judicial Mode of Reading Autobiography in France

In France, literary criticism of autobiography has reflected legal and religious paradigms of truth telling and judgment, and Philippe Lejeune's notion of the autobiographical pact can be seen as a symptom of this pattern. Lejeune was the first researcher in French studies to theorize

autobiography, and he devised the autobiographical pact as a way to define the genre, basing his work primarily on Rousseau. Autobiography has traditionally been viewed as having few formal conventions, and Lejeune's pact deals with this fluidity by shifting the focus from the content of autobiography to the relationship of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. When these three figures are identical, a text meets Lejeune's requirements for the autobiographical pact. The metaphor of the pact has been an effective tool for creating categorical boundaries in the study of autobiography, but it also focuses attention on narrative coherence among narrator, protagonist, and author.

The autobiographical pact primes a judicial interpretation of autobiography by implicitly equating narrative coherence with truthfulness. This method of interpretation has its corollary in the courtroom, where an event is reconstructed by weaving together a coherent account drawn from scientific evidence, eyewitness accounts, the victim's testimony, and the suspect's storytelling performance. In a similar way, autobiography can be approached by comparing the written text to extratextual evidence about the author's life. This reading extends the text's boundaries beyond the printed autobiography to include media interviews, public appearances, social media presence, municipal records, and the testimonies of family and friends, effectively rendering the author and text coterminous. Reading autobiography in this way involves looking for consistency among sources, endowing consistency with a moral quality: coherence connotes integrity, while contradiction implies duplicity.

Fictional autobiographies challenge this equation of narrative coherence with sincerity or truth. By creating fictional characters, the texts remove the possibility of using extratextual information about the author as a key for interpreting a first-person life story. Because fictional autobiographies do not purport to tell the author's own story, they focus our attention on the

internal coherence of the text. Fictional autobiographies force us to find other ways of reading autobiography than the legal lens which has been reflected in the Christian tradition of written confessions, a form of truth telling that fits into a theological paradigm of divine judgment and redemption. Further research might explore how this legal lens came to dominate methods of reading *écriture de soi*, and how this inheritance is connected to France's religious roots and its legal system.

Fictional autobiographies differ from autobiography as defined by Lejeune precisely in the absence of an autobiographical pact. This authorial disengagement reveals that the default mode of reading autobiography involves a judicial stance, and it challenges the reader to develop other methods for interpreting and thinking about autobiography. Since the twentieth century, innovative forms of French self-writing have resisted this equation of coherence and truth, instead undertaking an esthetic, literary inquiry into subjectivity and self-knowledge. Notable figures include Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the neologism *autofiction* in 1975, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose autobiographical trilogy *Romanesques*, published between 1984 and 1994, has been called *nouvelle autobiographie*. Along with earlier autobiographies by Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Leiris, these works have been counted among the predecessors to contemporary autofiction. This research on fictional autobiographies suggests that the history of challenging Rousseau's model of autobiography reaches further back than these twentieth-century autobiographical innovations to nineteenth century authors such as the critic Sainte-Beuve, who used fiction to challenge the conventions of autobiography and explore the asymmetrical relationship between a coherent narrative and a quest for self-knowledge.

B. Alternative Modes of Reading Autobiography in France

Fictional autobiography throws into relief the legal and theological paradigms of judgment which have inflected the reading of autobiography in France. Freeing the reader of the burden of finding coherence between the written life story and the author's own life, these texts focus our attention on other issues related to subjectivity and the act of representing oneself and one's experiences in a written narrative. Fictional autobiographies compel the reader to develop alternative modes of reading autobiography. This research illuminates three distinct possibilities for reading autobiography without the autobiographical pact.

i. Autobiographical Process as Care of the Self

Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar give the process of storytelling a central role in their fictional autobiographies. This *mise en scène* of remembering and writing highlights the narrator's active role in shaping a story, by selecting important events and attributing actions to characters. Hesitation about how to relay an experience accurately and doubt about one's memory show that even narrators committed to a faithful representation of their life are inevitably exercising agency and creativity in their interpretations. By dramatizing autobiographical writing, these novels explore the potential of self-writing for ethical transformation.

The writing protagonists do not name self-knowledge among their objectives for writing an autobiography, but the process of writing confronts each character with self-discovery. Autobiographical writing draws these protagonists into a conversation with themselves that can be described as a form of care of the self. By examining and writing about themselves, the protagonists find themselves undertaking something akin to the spiritual exercises of Antiquity. Care of the self was practiced through sets of spiritual exercises that were devised to mediate the

individual's ethical growth. Some exercises were carried out in solitude, such as reading, remembering, and writing. These solitary spiritual exercises fit into a relational context: care of the self was brought to completion when the practitioner maintained a relationship with a close friend, whose main qualification was frankness. Pierre Hadot has shown how ancient philosophy was practiced through these ethically formative spiritual exercises.³⁴⁹

The introspective writing represented in these modern French fictional autobiographies resembles the care of the self that Hadot describes. Life writing in all of these novels is connected to the question of its value as an ethical practice that lends itself to self-knowledge and to personal transformation. Although the theme of ethical transformation recurs in each fictional autobiography, the role of autobiographical writing in these processes remains ambiguous. These fictional autobiographies explore the risks and possibilities of autobiography as a technique for self-knowledge, and they ultimately express ambivalence about the ethical value of autobiography.

Visible gaps in the characters' self-awareness suggest that even lengthy introspective writing projects do not guarantee self-knowledge. Amaury (*Volupté*) carries out his writing project to the end, in spite of mounting evidence that his interpretation of his life is clumsy and ill-fitted to his experiences. Robert Greslou (*Le Disciple*) demonstrates mastery of Positivist doctrine and the conventions of autobiography, yet his interpretations of himself as an objective, rational subject never allow him to recognize other irrational motives for action, such as desire. These characters experience some growth in self-understanding, but inconsistencies within the

³⁴⁹ Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002). See in particular the chapter entitled, "La philosophie comme manière de vivre" (289-304), which concludes: "Telle est la leçon de la philosophie antique: une invitation pour chaque homme à se transformer lui-même. La philosophie est conversion, transformation de la manière d'être et de la manière de vivre, quête de la sagesse."

text reveal more room for growth. Introspection, these texts suggest, can lead toward a self-knowledge that is never complete.

Furthermore, these texts allude to the possibility that introspection might even deter self-knowledge. Although writing can confront the subject with inconsistencies, the narrative act can also create a firewall that prevents the subject from seeing new ideas, instead selecting ideas that conform to and reinforce one's own views. One challenge to self-knowledge through autobiography lies in the rigor of narrative form, which exerts a pressure to exclude and overlook the details that do not fit, and to select those details that fit with our story, our preferred paradigm for understanding ourselves and the world. Narrative demands for unity and coherence risk overrunning our critical faculties. These fictional autobiographies remain ambivalent about the ethical value of introspective, autobiographical writing. Such ambivalence prevents either a facile embrace or a summary dismissal of self-writing as a tool for ethical transformation. Rather than communicating an argument for or against introspective writing, the ambivalence in these texts may be modeling a cautious, questioning, and meta-reflective engagement with autobiography as a medium for self-knowledge.

These texts make an implicit argument for the importance of an interlocutor in the quest for self-knowledge, because solitary introspection can leave preexisting opinions unchallenged. The writers in these fictional autobiographies do address their life story to another person in a letter, but the texts do not contain the responses, except in the case of *Le Disciple*, where a frame story describes the addressee's reaction. While we could argue that the interlocutors are rendered present in the letters, because the letter writers orient their stories to their addressees, these readers have no voice. Without these responses, we are left to wonder whether the recipients would reinforce their friend's interpretation of their life, or whether, like a therapist or a good

friend, they would ask probing questions that could assist the storyteller in deepening his self-understanding.

ii. Autobiographical Text as Trace of Care of the Self

If we consider the process of writing an autobiography as a form of care of this self, this alters the meaning of the written text. Rather than seeing the published autobiography as a literary counterpart to its author, we can view the text as a historically marked artifact, the written trace of the self interpreting the self.

Using fictional disengagement to their advantage, these novels by Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar imply that the process and circumstances of autobiographical writing offer a key to its interpretation. Traditional autobiography conceals the present narrator to foreground the life being told. By deemphasizing their present experience and concealing their present self behind the chronological account they are writing, autobiographies make a rhetorical argument for their honesty and authenticity. But in each of these novels, the autobiographer's present experience is revealed as a motor for the writing project. For example, Louis in *Le Nœud de vipères* begins writing an indictment of his wife, with the goal of pronouncing judgment on their marriage and enacting justice. As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that Louis's emotional needs for intimacy are driving his writing. The writing protagonists devise complex narrative strategies to circumvent the vulnerability of admitting that writing is fueled by an emotional need, rather than a rational, controlled, other-oriented objective. Death on the horizon—an image literalized when Hadrian sees his own tomb being built in *Mémoires d'Hadrien*—triggers a frantic attempt to weave lived experiences into a meaningful story.

Whereas a judicial approach encourages us to see autobiography as a self-written history, looking for the present tense in autobiography sheds light on the interpreting subject and the less

visible forces shaping the narrative. This frame presents autobiography not as an objective history, but as an artifact of the subject in a specific time and place, a literary self-portrait. Representing the *temps de narration* allows us to watch the subject think, and observe how interpretation is colored by her current situation. Circumstances that provoke or accompany autobiographical writing might be external forces such as media pressure or financial need, but writing might also stem from an inner need for meaning making prompted by an existential or faith crisis, a betrayal by a close friend or family member, or a confrontation with one's own mortality.

Viewing autobiography as a historically-marked process allows us to treat its written traces—the printed autobiography—as an archaeological artifact of a specific moment of the self's history, the moment in which the subject felt compelled to write a life story. Scholars of religious conversions have devised a similar method for interpreting accounts of religious conversion. Rather than taking the date written in the autobiography as the historical date of conversion, these scholars view the moment of writing as a moment of transformation, asking what crisis or circumstances led the individual to write their conversion story in this particular moment. Looking for the present experience of the writing subject in autobiography may tell us more about the subject than the purportedly comprehensive history that autobiography presents.

By rejecting the interpretive lens that autobiography proffers—a focus on the past being recounted—, we can interpret the written autobiography as an affirmation of identity: that I, in a given season of my life, in a given set of material and social circumstances, in a given mood, and with a given reader in mind, understand my life to take this narrative shape, having this significance for my present and future. Attending to the writing subject reveals that autobiography constitutes a method for thinking about and theorizing oneself and one's identity.

Whereas a judicial approach to autobiography casts incongruities as a sign of dishonesty and unreliability, viewing autobiography as the physical trace of an ethical exercise removes the negative moral connotation from contradiction. If we approach autobiography as a text produced at a specific moment in the subject's history, written in specific material, psychological, and social conditions, we can valorize narrative incongruity as a potential site for self-discovery.

This interpretive model could be extended from fictional lives to autobiography. This study has shown how a narrated *bios* can claim center stage in an autobiography, obscuring *autos* and *graphein*, the present subject and the act of writing, which provide keys to interpreting the text. Although this method derives from fictional autobiographies, it could be used to interpret autobiography. Deliberately bracketing the extratextual life of the writer may yield new insights into autobiography, illuminating how the writer and the writing shape each other as co-creative forces.

iii. Autobiography as Symptom of Culture

Autobiography focuses on recounting the lives of individuals, but because even introspective writing relies on culturally available language and imagery, autobiography can illuminate the dominant cultural modes for conceptualizing identity and communicating inner life. The four fictional texts in this corpus cannot be taken as representative historical samples of self-conceptualization in modern France, but these novels do speak to the relationship between Christianity and personal, individual identity.

These fictional autobiographies point to the changing role of Church doctrine and practice in the individual's quest for self-knowledge. Whereas Amaury is a priest in *Volupté*, and Adrien Sixte and Robert Greslou define themselves in opposition to Christianity in *Le Disciple*, Louis refines the definition of the Christian life in *Le Nœud de vipères* in a way that challenges

the Church's monopoly on moral development. Meanwhile Yourcenar's Hadrian defines himself in a cultural landscape void of any Christian notions of redemption and grace. Christianity—as a set of beliefs and practices or as an institution—figure strongly in the texts preceding the Second World War. Further research might investigate whether the Second World War represents a rupture for Catholic identity in France, and whether this accelerates a literary and cultural secularization which had lagged behind the official separation of Church and state.

Alongside this evolving position of the Church in individual identity, these texts show innovation in how the religious conversion trope conveys inner transformation. Robert Greslou in *Le Disciple* recounts his intellectual development as a positivist by using the religious conversion trope. Even though the content of his ideology is opposed to Christian doctrine, Robert deploys the narrative arc and imagery of the spiritual autobiography, describing how when he first read Positivist philosophy, the veil fell from his eyes and he saw the world in a new and deeper way. The characters employ culturally available language for discussing ethical transformation and personal development, and Christian themes of redemption, grace, and conversion emerge particularly in the three texts that precede the Second World War. *Mémoires d'Hadrien* does address a French Catholic readership in a slightly different way. Yourcenar ventriloquizes Hadrian to highlight elements of Roman religion and morality, creating an implicit comparison to France's Christian cultural inheritance. Hadrian's reflections present the postwar European reader with an alternative moral paradigm that is drawn from imperial Rome.

Life writing draws these fictional subjects into a relationship with larger cultural narratives. The presence of wider cultural ideas in individual life stories nuances the question of autonomy in autobiographical writing. While the fictional subjects do take the initiative to create their story and guide the narrative arc they impose on their lived experience, they draw from a

network of symbols and associations that are present in their language and culture, that have been inherited from previous generations and that are continuously being renovated, maintained, and developed by others of their nation, language, social group, and profession. This dynamic relationship between self and society in these fictional autobiographies shows the self as both autonomous and heteronomous, simultaneously creating itself and being created through language.

III. Autobiography's Capacity for Representation

This research has shown how fictional autobiographies takes advantage of fiction's distance and autobiography's specificity to probe moral issues, religious identity, and the quest for self-knowledge. One issue that merits further research is the issue of representation in autobiography, and specifically the representation of gender and social class.

A received idea about autobiography is that it has no distinct formal conventions; indeed the lack of stable formal conventions is what led Philippe Lejeune to take the relationship of author, narrator, and protagonist as the starting point for generic classification. A closer look at the fictional autobiographies in this corpus, however, reveals some striking similarities among the characters who are writing their lives: Amaury, Robert, Louis, and Hadrien are all male characters who have originated from the middle- or upper-class, and who have benefited from a good education. All of them have professional identities: priest, junior philosopher, lawyer, and emperor. These commonalities of gender, social class, and profession suggest that these lives lend themselves well to autobiography, or at least to the sort of autobiography epitomized by Rousseau's *Confessions*. The conventions of autobiography that emerge in these fictional autobiographies underscore the link between the life being recounted and the literary form.

Autobiography's literary tropes are linked to specific identities and lived experiences. These fictional autobiographies by Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, Mauriac, and Yourcenar all represent characters who have agency, who can be cast as protagonists, and whose lives can be made to fit a linear narrative arc. Gender, class, and agency emerge as key parts of reproducing an autobiography in the vein of Augustine and Rousseau. Women are well represented in nineteenth century French life writing, but they were more active in writing diary than autobiography. Diaries do not construct a comprehensive account of a life: they are self-conscious about their function as an *aide-vivre*, and they record repetitive events. There were of course exceptions to this gendered distinction between masculine stories of lives and feminine stories of days: George Sand wrote *Histoire de ma vie*, while Henri-Frédéric Amiel's principal legacy was his 17 000-page diary. But these exceptional cases support the correlation between writing a comprehensive life story, and experiencing agency in one's life through a trajectory of progress and self-realization: Sand was a successful author, and Amiel struggled professionally.

Considering the subject's social and historical location as a literary convention pushes against the notion that autobiography is an accessible, ultimately democratic literary form. A familiar trope in autobiography is the claim that the story draws its form directly from life: Sainte-Beuve's fictional character, Amaury, presents his autobiography as a transcription from the pages of his heart. But these fictional autobiographies show that the esthetic demands of narrative favor a specific type of subject: an agent, in these cases male, who has the power to design the shape of his life. His work is not repetitive drudgery servicing someone else's projects—such as that of a slave, or even a servant—but a career: a professional arc of self-realization that builds toward a personal, individual legacy. Writing a traditional autobiography requires living a life that fits what can be an exclusive narrative form.

Whether or not Sainte-Beuve, Bourget, and Mauriac were conscious that autobiography's conventions hinge on specific experiences and social roles, their fictional autobiographies accurately replicate the conventions of an autobiographical subject. Yourcenar chose to write about Hadrian rather than Plotina, aware that the character of an imperial Roman woman—even a politically active woman—would pose too many constraints on the narrative. By creating powerful male autobiographical subjects in fictional autobiography, these texts highlight a foundational link between claiming the power to write one's story and experiencing agency in the world. Conversely, they imply that literary innovation would be required for an unconventional subject to write their autobiography.

Further research could investigate whether formal experimentation in autobiography can function as a literary form of hospitality, and whether innovations in autobiographical forms might accommodate a wider diversity of lives, welcoming subjects whose lived experience—of repetition or powerlessness—defies the esthetic laws of a linear, retrospective autobiographical narrative. Such a project might probe the border between autobiography and testimony to find out whether agency is the feature that distinguishes these forms of self-writing, and if so, whether agency ought to enter our definition of autobiography. This angle of research would shift the ethical focus of writing and reading autobiography from a legal issue—telling the truth in an account that corroborates with historical evidence—to a political issue of representation. By looking at the sorts of lives being recounted in contemporary autobiography, we might find out how French autobiography is making room for a more diverse array of characters and lived experiences. Such research might look at how autobiographical writing involves bicultural translation for unconventional subjects who are recounting their lives to readers of another gender, religion, or social class.

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