DETECTING TEXTS

THE METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE STORY
FROM POE TO POSTMODERNISM

EDITED BY

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"Metaphysical detective stories reveal much about the relation of modernism to postmodernism and of high to low literary culture. *Detecting Texts* makes an excellent case for the coherence and breadth of the genre. Its broad scope, clear writing, and notable contributions to a number of literary subfields are among its many virtues."
— **Shawn Rosenheim**, *Williams College*

"No currently available anthology addresses the topic of the metaphysical detective story so directly, so fully, or so relevantly."
— **Brian McHale**, *West Virginia University*

Although readers of detective fiction ordinarily expect to learn the mystery's solution at the end, there is another kind of detective story—whose history encompasses writers as diverse as Poe, Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Auster, and Stephen King—that ends with a question rather than an answer. The detective not only fails to solve the crime, but also confronts insoluble mysteries of interpretation and identity. As the contributors to *Detecting Texts* contend, such stories belong to a distinct genre, the "metaphysical detective story," in which the detective hero's inability to interpret the mystery inevitably casts doubt on the reader's similar attempt to make sense of the text and the world.

Detecting Texts includes an editors' introduction that defines the metaphysical detective story and traces its history from Poe's classic tales to today's postmodernist experiments. In addition to the editors, contributors are Stephen Bernstein, Hanjo Berressem, Joel Black, Anna Botta, Robert L. Chibka, Jeanne C. Ewert, John T. Irwin, Jeffrey T. Nealon. Raylene Ramsay, and Michel Sirvent.

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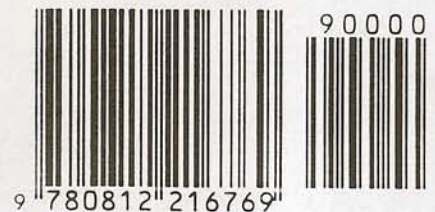
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Detecting Texts

The Metaphysical Detective Story
from Poe to Postmodernism

Edited by Patricia Merivale
and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney

Contents

Postmortem: Modern and Postmodern

Forging Identities

In Place of an Ending

Chapter 7
Reader-Investigators in the Post-*Nouveau Roman*
Lahougue, Peeters, and Perec

Michel Sirvent

> It is not impossible to imagine . . . a novel whose fiction would be
> exciting enough so that the reader intensely felt the desire to know
> its last word which precisely, at the last minute, would be denied to
> him, the text pointing to itself and toward a rereading. The book
> would be thus. a second time, given to the reader who could then,
> while rereading it, discover everything in it which in his first mad
> fever he had been unable to find.
> —Benoit Peeters, "Agatha Christie: Une écriture de la lecture" (177)

Toward a Post-*Nouveau Roman* Detective Novel

A trend that I will characterize as the "post-*nouveau roman* detective
novel" may be distinguished in the current French literary scene.[1] A
new narrative hybrid form is being developed which partakes of both
the mystery story and the early *nouveau roman*. Novels of the first phase
of the *nouveau roman*, particularly Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* (*Les
Gommes*, 1953), Michel Butor's *L'Emploi du temps* (1957), and Claude Ol-
lier's *La Mise en scène* (1958), as well as a *nouveau nouveau roman* like
Jean Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits* (1969), used detective-story structures.[2]
Although they played with some traits of mystery fiction, they did not
fully belong to the detective genre. They were parodies, metafictions,
or anti-detective novels, but not traditional detective stories. Likewise,
thirty years later, a significant number of novels by authors as different
as Patrick Modiano, Jean Echenoz, René Belletto, or Jacques Roubaud
draw from the detective model without entirely following the rules of the
game.[3] As opposed to current representatives of the genre,[4] the *nouveau*

roman detective novel and post-*nouveau roman* detective novel recycle generic characteristics by means of innovative textual strategies.[5] Georges Perec calls his *"53 jours"* a "literary *thriller*" (Bellos 710) and, to use an expression from the text, Jean Lahougue's *La Doublure de Magrite* can be defined as a "feuilleton avant-gardiste" (186).

It is well known that the *nouveau roman* calls into question most of our expectations of what a narrative should be—in terms of plot, psychology, characters, logical and chronological series of sequences. However, its "anti-representational" or "auto-representational" effects, as Ricardou analyzed them at the time, are now fairly familiar to the postmodern reader: what used to be *scriptible* (writable) has since become a little more *lisible* (readable).[6] Today, whether such narrative strategies are called "self-reflexive," "metatextual," "metafictional" or, preferably, "metarepresentational,"[7] post-*nouveau roman* detective novels use *nouveau roman* textual devices while returning to what may appear to be a more conventional way of storytelling.[8] They offer the pleasures of reading (it is a clear return to the *romanesque,* or novelistic) and do not obviously subvert our expectations. Beneath their innocent surface, however, what supports these puzzles may be a very sophisticated network of infratextual as well as intertextual correspondences. Briefly, in these novels metarepresentional strategies are no longer deliberately antirepresentational. Contemporary with the *nouveau roman* but distinct from it, Perec's versatile work—which shifts constantly from playful Oulipian mechanical exercises (performed also by Italo Calvino and Roubaud, among others) to autobiographical and extraordinarily imaginative, often humorous, novels—has certainly anticipated this significant evolution, one that blends intricate *specific* formal constraints with a more representational narrative format.

Although I would not agree with Stefano Tani that *any* interesting contemporary fiction takes more or less advantage of detective-story techniques (149, 151), I don't deny that there may be a fundamental mystery or suspense in any non-detective novel per se ("une forme fondamentale": see Boyer 74). There must be a structural reason, as well as several cultural factors, that explain why some contemporary French novels innovate (from a narrative or textual standpoint) while drawing material, substance, patterns, and elements from the detective genre.[9] The reason is the reader's assigned role in the construction of these fictional universes, as related to underlying textual strategies. Beyond the various analogies that facilitate this parallel between two stages of the French novel—from the early *nouveau roman* in the 1950s, via Perec's original itinerary, to the post-*nouveau roman* of the 1980s, a time when most former *nouveaux romanciers* turned to autobiography—the mystery

structure provides a crucial place for the reader to participate in the very intrigue she is expected to complete.

And Then There Were . . . Three

> I rarely feel like reading what it is possible for me to live outside of novels. From this stems my interest in Agatha Christie.
> —Jean Lahougue, "Ecrire à partir d'Agatha Christie" (5)

It is no coincidence that three French detective novels—Benoît Peeters's *La Bibliothèque de Villers* (1980), Lahougue's *Comptine des Height* (1980), and Perec's *"53 jours"* (1989)—all draw, in different ways, from one of the most classic detective novelists: Agatha Christie. In his afterword to the first edition of *La Bibliothèque*, Peeters recalls Christie's principles of composition, as inferred from her "romans à énigme," and correlates the formalized structures that organize her mysteries with Ricardou's textual principles, as developed through his theory and practice of the *nouveau roman*. Peeters focuses on the generative role of nursery rhymes in such Christie plots as *Ten Little Indians* (1939): "Very few books correspond better than Agatha Christie's to Jean Ricardou's phrase: 'composing a novel does not mean having an idea, and then giving it a form; rather, it means having the idea of a form from which a story may be deduced'" ("Tombeau" 121–22).

Lahougue explains "how to write from Agatha Christie," analyzing the composition of *Ten Little Indians* and referring to Ricardou's concept of "générateur" to define the nursery-rhyme device as "the most demanding of all constraints chosen by Agatha Christie," since "it supplies the number of characters, a symbolism, the modalities, and even the name and form of place" ("Ecrire à" 6). Not only does Lahougue's title *Comptine des Height* also suggest nursery-rhyme technique, but his foreword announces: "I am one of those who learned to read with Agatha Christie." Indeed, the structure of *Comptine des Height* borrows its plot from *Ten Little Indians*: "Ten characters in a closed place die one by one according to the mechanisms of the nursery rhyme and the implicit rules of the 'puzzle type' of detective novel" ("Ecrire à" 8). Like Peeters, then, Lahougue not only recognizes his debt to Christie's generative nursery-rhyme formula, but emphasizes writing principles very similar to the ones defended by Ricardou in *Problèmes du nouveau roman*. Both authors renounce any extratextual point of departure in composing a novel, focusing instead on the determination of fictional matter by narrative and writerly constraints derived from the peculiarities of the medium, material context, or specific genres chosen: "We must impose

the most formal constraints upon ourselves. Problems of writing that must be resolved will be born from these constraints and it is essentially the resolution of these problems that will produce the organization of the book, its landscape, its intrigue and its heroes" (Lahougue, "Ecrire à" 5).

So it is no surprise that Annie Combes points out the "modernity" of the author of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), and specifies that some of Christie's narrative devices may be very close to what has been radicalized in the writing techniques of some *nouveaux romanciers*—and Perec (10, 249). She compares Christie's use of generative schemes (based on phrases, numbers, or letters) to organize the plot, as well as the order of chapters, with Raymond Roussel's way of creating a story by playing on the linguistic dimension of a given proverb (102–12).[10] Just as Christie "constructs a book around a nursery rhyme, basing the progression of the narrative on the order of the stanzas," building "a plot on a number, and using the alphabet to establish a series of crimes" (Combes 10), so Perec proceeds in a Roussellian manner. For example, Combes shows how the series of deaths in Christie's *The ABC Murders* (1936) is determined by the alphabet: the victims' names and the names of the places where they are killed suggest "alphabetical murders"; "the whole story derives from the letters A, B, C" (219). The structure of Perec's *A Void (La Disparition*, 1969) is also determined by the alphabet: it omits the letter *E* so that the missing letter becomes an enigma, both unsaid—unnameable—and evoked allegorically. Furthermore, there is a missing chapter (number five, which corresponds to the position of *E* in the alphabet) in this novel composed of twenty-six chapters. Although Perec's lipogrammatic novel does not explicitly belong to the mystery genre, it can thus be read as a mystery. As in a "classical detective story" (Combes 220), the disappearance of the letter *E* is constantly signified, yet never declared: it constitutes the "crime" to be unveiled by the reader (see my "Lettres volées" 14–15).

Along with these writing constraints, which Christie and Perec have in common with *nouveaux romanciers* and with Roussel, Perec's novels also refer to Christie's stories, although not as overtly and systematically as Lahougue's *Comptine des Height* and Peeters's *La Bibliothèque de Villers*. In *"53 jours"*, one of the characters, Wargrave, clearly borrows his name from *Ten Little Indians*. In *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), there is also a "Lawrence Wargrave," author of the detective story "The Judge Is the Assassin"; and the synopsis of this detective story provides an intertextual clue to *"53 jours"*: "X killed A in such a way that Justice, who knows it, cannot accuse him. The committing magistrate kills B in such a way that X is suspected, arrested, judged, condemned and executed without having ever been able to prove his innocence" (*Life* 334). But more

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generally, when Perec declared his interest in mysteries, long before he decided to write a detective novel, he mentioned Hercule Poirot in a passage that summarizes many of the novelistic traits in question:

> I hardly read detective novels any more, except some old Hercule Poirot. But as a producer of fiction, the detective novel continues to interest me and concern me in the sense that it explicitly works as a game between the author and the reader; a game whose intricacies of plot, the mechanism of the murder, the victim, the criminal, the detective, the motive, and so on, are obviously pawns: this match that is played between a writer and his reader, and whose characters, settings, sentiments, happenings are but fictions which drive one to the sole pleasure of reading (of being puzzled, moved, delighted, etc.), is for me one of the most efficient models of novelistic functioning. ("Entretien" 10)

First, the mystery genre's stereotypical pattern makes it a convenient narrative model for Perec. Second, what it narrates is overtly fictitious: the game relationship displaces the referential background. This does not mean, however, that detective fiction is not representational. It refers less to "the real world" than to an intertextual—or infratextual—set of rules. Third, Perec takes the detective genre as a model because he finds its paradigmatic plot structure "one of the most efficient models of novelistic functioning" as a whole. This detective model can thus be a paradigm for any novelistic plot structure, whether it reads as an explicit detective story or not. Last, the detective narrative paradigm underlies any fiction, insofar as the plot becomes a pretext for a writer-reader game. Perec emphasizes that most classic mysteries are games. Conventionally, the reader loses the match against the author "if s/he fails to discover who is guilty before the final explanation scene" (Combes 36). S. S. Van Dine set out the famous detective-story rule that the reader, as well as the detective, should be given the opportunity to solve the enigma. While Perec's last unfinished work, *"53 jours"*, Benoît Peeters's *La Bibliothèque de Villers*, and Lahougue's stories adhere more closely to the mystery genre than do *nouveaux romans*, one might wonder how the reader's role in these recent fictions differs from that induced by "tales of pure puzzle" written by Van Dine, Christie, G. K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers around the time of the Detective Club. The "pragmatic situation" has changed: the reader's role is transformed insofar as narrative strategies are no longer simply representational.

In the classic mystery, enabling the reader to solve the puzzle demands specific narrative strategies that imply a "fair" distribution of relevant information. "Writing (organization of anecdote as well as textual arrangement) is directly conceived in relation to the deciphering process that follows" (Peeters, "Agatha" 166).[11] It is because the subsequent reading of the text determines its writing that we can speak, as

Peeters says, about "écriture de la lecture" ("writing the reading"). By means of a careful distribution of lures and clues, which Combes calls a "writing contract," "the secret of the narrative will be shown by meticulously chosen details that will suggest the mystery *without betraying it*" too soon (17; my emphasis). A practical condition of mystery writing, its "double imperative," is "to hide the criminal as well as possible and distribute the signs of his guilt" (18). This is also the role of the writer for Lahougue: "Through convention I will show a crime (insert signs in my narrative which will permit reconstruction, its place, time, author and cause) and at the same time conceal it (thereby exploiting all the ambiguities of these signs)" ("Ecrire à" 5). Combes calls this strategy "écriture indicielle" (68, 229–45). In this sense, the writer is certainly the author of the crime, and the reader the detective of the text: "the author's relationship with the reader parallels that of the detective with the criminal." Peeters summarizes this correspondence in the following equation: "criminal = author: detective = reader" ("Agatha" 167).

However, although Christie "inscribes the solution to the puzzle between the lines" (Combes 9), it has often been pointed out that the mystery reader is rarely capable of solving the puzzle before the conclusive explanation scene (Eisenzweig 49–77; Combes 245, 264). For instance, Lahougue insists that practically any of the protagonists could have committed the crimes in *Ten Little Indians*: "although there are no arbitrary details, this does not mean that we can find revealing details either. Unlike Poirot, Wargrave does not tell us at the end of the book: 'Here is what you should have noticed.' And for a good reason: no contradiction, no clue (in spite of this implicit rule and formal constraint, according to which the narrative should show the murder before concealing it) denounces the murderer before his own confession" ("Ecrire à" 8). On the one hand, the textual possibility of discovering the solution is often doubtful. On the other, Peeters points out that since the investigator generally "carries out his investigation to the end," the anticipated explanation scene discourages the reader "from doing as much" ("Agatha" 176). As Peeters puts it, "what's the use of reading since the text will end up reading itself?" This is why the author of *La Bibliothèque de Villers* would prefer *Ten Little Indians* without Judge Wargrave's final confession of his crimes and his suicide: "*Ten Little Indians*, abandoned to themselves, leaving the text literally without voice, would be a book ten times more exciting" (176). Toward the end of his study, Peeters quotes Borges's 1941 story "An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quain": "The reader of this singular book is thus more discerning than the *detective*" (176; Peeters's emphasis)—implying that, to whatever degree a mystery might be left unsolved by its fictional agents, the actual reader might still be able to carry on the investigation.

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The consequences of this narrative strategy are that one is led to formulate two complementary constraints. First, instead of being able to rely on a final explanation delivered by an omniscient detective, or carefully prepared by a manipulative narrator, the reader is confronted with a textual construct that deliberately *omits* this conventional eluci-dation scene, as in *La Bibliothèque*.[12] Hence the reader must complete the *incomplete structure*, because it is deprived of its unraveling phase, the one characterized by a "final nomination" (Barthes 216). In a sense, such metarepresentational detective novels radicalize only one provi-sional condition of the mystery: the temporary incompleteness that de-fines the "hermeneutical code" (215). In Barthes's terms, "Le lisible a horreur du vide" ("what is readerly hates emptiness") (112), whereas the *nouveau roman* accumulates, as Robbe-Grillet recalls, "lacunae and contradictions."[13] Second, and more important, what is questioned is the existence of sufficient textual means to enable the reader to find the solution of an unresolved mystery.

Various Cases of Intertextuality

Following the *nouveau roman* theory and practice of generators (Ricar-dou, "Révolution" 930), these three novels call attention to two prob-lems. First, they question the "lecturabilité" (readability) of the detective text (Ricardou, "Eléments" 17). I will call *readability* (and, in this con-text, *detectability*) *the mystery text's construction which, despite its incompleteness, virtually enables the reader to pursue*—that is, *to complete*—*its unsolved or un-resolved aspects through a precise strategy of clue distribution.* In the analyses that follow, I will emphasize the reader's complementary response to the structure of the text in Perec's and Peeters's novels.

But—here is my second focus—these three novels make us question how fiction is intertextually determined. The three novels help us better distinguish between a variety of intertextual productions. The first level of intertextual relations is *generic,* since all three texts refer to a particu-lar genre—or subgenre—and, more specifically, to a particular repre-sentative of the mystery genre (Agatha Christie or Georges Simenon). They actually combine two generic traits, since these novels also relate to another novelistic form, the one that characterizes the *nouveau ro-man.* Indeed, at the second level of intertextual relations, these three different novels also share the *generative* principle underlying some of Roussel's, Christie's, and the *nouveaux romanciers'* compositions.

However, on a third level, post-*nouveau roman* intertextual practice differs from the *nouveau roman* in that each novel *overtly* relates to a *par-ticular* mystery classic. In the *nouveau roman,* the relation to the detective genre is mostly paradigmatic: it refers to an abstract pattern that is in-

verted or subverted (see *The Erasers*, with its underlying reference to the Oedipus narrative). Whereas post-*nouveaux romans* are specific transformations (*récrits*, literally "re-writes") of anterior texts, the major difference between the earlier "deconstruction" of the detective genre in the *nouveau roman*, and that in the post-*nouveau roman*, is that the relation in the latter is overtly *hypertextual* (Genette, *Palimpsestes* 14). To take the example of Lahougue—who is, in this regard, the most representative of the three writers—each of his latest stories is an experiment in various types of hypertextual relations. As *Comptine des Height* develops and goes beyond the writing constraints of *Ten Little Indians*, so "La Ressemblance" (1989), from his recent collection of the same title, takes up many elements from Vladimir Nabokov's *Despair* (1934), while complicating its ambiguous ending.[14] In a similar way, *La Doublure de Magrite* (1987) partly rewrites Simenon's *La Première enquête de Maigret* (1948).

Furthermore, I will distinguish—and this explains the progression I see from Lahougue to Perec via Peeters—between Lahougue's deliberate hypertextual strategy and a fourth level of intertextual relationship. This level not only involves a single model or text—the canonical model, or a particular story by Christie or Simenon—but several specific texts at the same time. To qualify this type of *(poly)hypertextual* integration—as opposed to Lahougue's *(mono)hypertextual* practice—I borrow Ricardou's concept of "syntext" (*Nouveaux problèmes* 304). I argue, then, that Peeters's and Perec's practice is *syntextual*, as opposed to Lahougue's hypertextual strategy. For example, Peeters's novel not only relates to *Ten Little Indians* but also, as we shall see, draws on two or three other texts which seem to have been selected because they share a similar plot (see Baetens 225–26). Finally, with Perec, the syntextual connection is far more diversified, although still very discernable, because he borrows his pre-texts from Stendhal, Flaubert, and Balzac, or from his own earlier fictions—as is the case for most of his novels, from *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (1975) to *Life: A User's Manual* (see Magné). The relation of *"53 jours"* to Christie's fictions, if not loose, is certainly less systematic than in *Comptine des Height* and *La Bibliothèque de Villers*. However, we will see that the structure of this last novel reflects the intertextual strategy itself, making the textual puzzle *detectable*.

La Doublure de Magrite

> Please do not think, Mademoiselle, that I am inventing. I am only pilfering here and there various details which I will use to organize my story. Everyone does the same, by the way, not only the authors of detective stories!
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> —Georges Perec, *"53 jours"* (91)

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The ties are so close between Lahougue's *La Doublure de Magrite* and Simenon's *La Première enquête de Maigret* that we can speak of hypertextual transformation—which is my third level of intertextual relation. Instead of syntextually transforming and merging *more than one* text, as Peeters and Perec do, Lahougue is literally and explicitly concerned with *one* specific pre-text. For instance, the epilogue of Lahougue's novel rewrites the prologue of Simenon's story.[15] Lahougue explains in his essay "Ecrire vers Simenon" how he cited, modified, and elaborated the original text, just as Maigret sympathizes with his targets by absorbing their social milieu. In other words, Maigret's very method of investigation inspires and motivates the rewriting technique: "Georges Simenon's Maigret . . . unlike his elders, Holmes and Poirot, who are pure logicians of the novel's time and space, as we know, proceeds through 'sympathy' or by identification with the other. In *La Première enquête de Maigret*, Simenon said of him: 'He was capable of living the life of all men, of putting himself in the place of all men'" (12). *La Doublure* deals with an actor's performance in a play adapted from a book by "Georges Simon [sic]." Because he has the same name as "Simon"'s famous character, Magrite, the actor involuntarily becomes the detective he represents on stage, Inspector Magrite (*Doublure* 12, 129). The psychological identification between detective and criminal that defines Maigret's method of investigation (81, 134) translates into the actor's *actual* identification with the role he plays. The hero's acting out of the character he represents on stage is thus a *mise en abyme* of how the writer models his own principle of composition according to Maigret's notorious fictional method of investigation. In a Borgesian way, it is the very process of hypertextual rewriting that is fictionalized and shaped accordingly: "And because my hero identified with Maigret, and since one of the major themes of the novel was the identification with the other, how could I fail to identify myself with Georges Simenon? Hence the idea of a pastiche" ("Ecrire vers" 12–13).

In addition to frequently quoting Simenon's classic detective novel (from the epigraph to scattered citations throughout the text), *La Doublure* also borrows from Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*.[16] In both novels, a character's role can be transformed into its own opposite through identification. While Robbe-Grillet's detective, Wallas, becomes in spite of himself the criminal he seeks, in *La Doublure* the amateur actor, like Proteus, acts out his fictional role to the point where he will "successively assume all the roles of the characters he encounters": "Let us imagine a murder scene with four characters: an assassin, a victim, an active witness, a passive witness. Let us imagine that such a scene is repeated four times in the course of the narrative in identical conditions, and that the hero becomes in turn the active witness, the assassin, the passive witness and the victim" ("Ecrire vers" 11). In *The Erasers*, it is the investi-

gation that motivates the crime. In other words, the crime is less a cause than a consequence. In *La Doublure*, however, Magrite is the product of his own performance: the identification motivates first the investigation and finally the acting out of the most characteristic detective functions. In short, acting determines action. These character functions (detective, suspect, criminal, and so on) are not only reversible, in the manner of Oedipus (the detective/criminal), but this reversibility (which was only *virtual*, that is, psychological, in Simenon's fictions) happens to be *actualized*. To generalize this pattern, *subjects become the object* of their quest—which metaphorically defines the process of reading.

While *La Doublure* uses materials from detective classics, it also draws from the poetics of the *nouveaux romanciers*. One example is the Robbe-Grilletian theatrical staging of the original realist description of Maigret's office (219–21). Robbe-Grillet's theatrical detective universe is well known: his characters give the impression of playing a role, like Mathias in the 1955 *Le Voyeur* (Boyer, "Double" 65); the ensemble of literal and fictional elements find themselves in a labyrinthine mirror game, in a general system of duplication, in short in the poetics of "auto-representation" (Ricardou, *Nouveaux problèmes* 140–78). But while in *The Erasers*' world of variations, doubles, reflections, and simulations, the investigator and criminal end up identifying with each other, in *La Doublure*, Robbe-Grilletian parodic theatricality is literally acted out: actors perform in reality the parts that they happen to represent in fiction. This situation not only re-presents the writer-reader interactive relationship, but also points out a Borgesian communication between the two "logically" separate universes—the one in which we narrate or read, the one which is narrated or represented ("extradiegetic" and "diegetic," in narratological terms: see Genette, *Narrative* 228–31).

While on one level *La Doublure* concerns the way in which fiction transforms reality, on another, it calls into question any clear borderline between one's own identity and that of one's double (45–49). The novel, for instance, stresses the themes of the "I," the "mirror," "the loss of and quest for identity," and the "role of memory" in this quest for identification with the other (Lahougue, "Ecrire vers" 12). The very concept of "identity" (not simply the characters' identity) is challenged by the hero's functional metamorphosis. In this sense, the novel appears as a fable about the power of re-presentation as well as a fable about novelistic characterization. Lahougue's ambition was to "make [his] reader become a real character in the plot," while including "three essential acts, namely: the opening of the book, its reading, the closing of the book in the story. The third act, which actually consists in making the narrator disappear, seemed to me comparable to a murder or a kidnapping" (11).[17] The actor, Magrite, as a multifunctional character (one

name stands for various characters, each with different perspectives), represents the reader—the one who acts, or rather, who activates written fiction and replays the scenes as described from different angles. As the heterodiegetic narrator who is "killed" by the closing of the book, Magrite stages his own disappearance: in the final act, he "pretends to be dead" (215). We might surmise that the actual reader may be led, by identifying with this process of shifting between fiction and reality, to become the producer of fiction as well as the murderer of the text—just as the actual writer, Lahougue, who rewrites the "master narrative" (Simenon's text), is thus a reader (the Oedipal murderous "son") who becomes the detective writer of a new hypertextual story. As it is reactivated in *The Erasers*, the Oedipus pattern, which recurs throughout the detective genre, becomes the allegory of hypertextual rewriting.[18]

La Bibliothèque de Villers

> They must have been convinced that the missing chapter would appeal to me.
>
> —Georges Perec, *"53 jours"* (158)

La Doublure combines at least two intertextual relations besides the fact that it pertains to the detective genre: first, a *generic* relation—mostly mediated by the Oedipus narrative—which concerns the parodic strategy, more than the text itself, of *The Erasers*; second, a *hypertextual* relation that consists of literally rewriting specific passages—borrowing specific metaphors and traits from Simenon's text. Whereas this first relation is mostly paradigmatic and covert—it refers to an abstract pattern much as *The Erasers* relates to the Oedipus narrative—the ties between *La Doublure* and *La Première enquête de Maigret* are, by contrast, overtly textual. But while Lahougue's hypertextual practice involves a single text model for each new story, Peeters's *La Bibliothèque de Villers* and Perec's *"53 jours"* specifically relate to several pre-texts at the same time; this level of intertextual relation is *syntextual*. *"53 jours"* multiplies allusions to several texts, including Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* (Magné 186), while Peeters's plot draws its material and principles from—besides Christie's *Ten Little Indians*—novels and short stories as different as Borges's "Death and the Compass," Butor's *L'Emploi du temps*, Ollier's *La Mise en scène*, Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits*, or Maurice Leblanc's "La Dame à la hache" (in *Les Huit coups de l'horloge*). *La Bibliothèque de Villers*, on the one hand, mostly discovers and combines one structural pattern common to Borges's and Leblanc's short stories, and, on the other, reuses the circular rereading pattern as developed in Ricardou's study of *La Mise en scène* (*Pour* 159–99). Both Christie and Leblanc made use of nu-

merical generators to build up some of their stories (Combes 173–79), but in "La Dame à la hache," this type of textual organization is far more developed than in Christie, and closer to the *nouveau roman* and *La Bibliothèque de Villers*. I will focus on the structural resemblance of *La Bibliothèque* to Leblanc's story, which—although Peeters never mentions it, whereas he clearly acknowledges the connection with Borges and Christie in the novel's two editions—is particularly striking.

In Leblanc's short story, solving the puzzle amounts to discovering the logic of a series of crimes. As indicated by its title, Leblanc's collection *Les Huit coups de l'horloge* (1923) is composed of eight short stories. In "La Dame à la hache," the investigator, Prince Renine, alias Arsène Lupin, discovers that the female victims' names are all formed of eight letters and start with the letter *H* (like "Honorine"). Then another variable appears: for each crime, the murderer kills with an axe. Since in French the word *hache*, or axe, is pronounced the same way as the letter *H*, which is the eighth letter in the alphabet, one surmises a kind of numerical and literal solution. The logic of numbers and letters, once disclosed, suggests that there may be eight victims, all women whose names will begin with an *H* and be composed of eight letters. As these similarities unfold to disclose the pattern, the investigator is led to foresee and then prevent another murder in extremis: the seventh crime, whose victim was supposed to be his very own mistress, Hortense. Finally, we deduce that the murderer, Hermance, had planned to commit suicide, becoming the eighth victim and thus completing the series.

Peeters's story contains a similar structural investigation: hidden analogies must be found between crimes which at first seem unrelated. Furthermore, this investigation clearly amounts to a deciphering process: four murders, whose disclosed similarities enable the narrator-investigator to prevent the fifth crime. As *Les Huit coups de l'horloge* consists of eight stories, so *La Bibliothèque de Villers* is divided into five chapters. Furthermore, the recurring number (5), which is transposed through various details within the story, becomes a clue to the discovery of the assassin: his or her name should be composed of five letters. We are led to this solution by the peculiarity in the first four victims' names: their first and last names start with the same initial—Ivan Imbert, Virginie Verley, René Roussel, Edith Ervil.

Peeters's story is far more elliptical than Leblanc's. There are many fictional as well as narratological aspects setting up this organized yet incomplete structure. The narrator is not only a mystery reader, but an amateur detective who becomes the main investigator. While doing some research at the Villers library, where he is investigating five unsolved crimes that took place twenty-five years before, another series of five crimes occurs in which he becomes more and more involved. At one

point, the narrator-detective is led to suspect his chess partner, Lessing (cf. Ollier's *La Mise en scène*), the librarian who invited him to investigate the old crimes and who turns out to be a detective novelist. Until the fourth crime is committed. Lessing represents the author-criminal of the present murders who competes with the narrator. But with the fifth crime, he suddenly becomes the victim—leaving narrator and reader without any plausible solution.

Like the special agent Wallas in *The Erasers*, Peeters's narrator takes on the two opposite character functions of detective and criminal. In Robbe-Grillet's novel, however, the detective is described in the third person; there is an invisible narrator as absent as possible from the narration, and no fictional investigator whose main occupation is reading. Peeters's narrator, on the other hand, is an anonymous character. He could be anyone. Indeed, he progressively takes on all possible roles (as in *La Doublure de Magrite*). He becomes witness, detective, accomplice, possible victim. Through a classical process of elimination, he is one of the last characters left alive and thus becomes one of the major suspects. When we realize that the reader completely relies on this ambivalent narrator-investigator's autodiegetic narrative, we then expect some comprehensive explanation in which the narrator turns out to be the murderer, as in Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. But, being deprived of it, one of the fundamental grounds of the narrative-reader contract is completely undermined: the narrative account as a whole becomes suspicious.

The second major break in the narrative-reader contract lies in the fact that the elliptical scene is, unconventionally, not the very "crime scene" that the investigator's discourse usually reconstructs, but this missing final explanation scene itself. Inasmuch as the narrative is totally unreliable, what is to be produced here is merely *another scenario*. If we have no choice but to put ourselves in the detective's place to finish the story, we end up *rereading* the text, thus assuming the narrator's role—but according to a different readerly frame. The correlation of variables—the distribution of black and white objects and descriptive details, constituting the metaphor of linguistic signs on the page; the recurring number 5, referring to the spatial organization of the text; the narrative construction—invites the reader to formulate the unsaid culprit's name: the "LIVRE" (that is, the "book" that we have been reading). This solution derives from the anagrammatic and acrostic rapport between the five victims' names, including Lessing, whose name allows us to supply the first missing letter (*L*). Also, each chapter starts with one of the victims' initals printed in bold, in this precise order: 1. "Il . . ."; 2. "Vêtu . . ."; 3. "Relier . . . "; 4. "Edith . . . "; and 4. "La mort . . ." This reading is confirmed by the town's name, "VILLERS," which contains, except for

one (the *S*), the same letters. What is perhaps more important than this infratextual solution is that the incomplete/substitutive structure of the narrative invites us to an infinite elliptical process—in the rhetorical as well as geometrical sense of the term (because the last letter, *L* for "Lessing," has to be placed at the beginning of the series, suggesting this circular rereading). Since the librarian/murderer/detective novelist's place is left *vacant*, the narrator or reader may take on Lessing's role and become the next librarian/murderer/detective novelist. Twenty-five years later, we may surmise that another reader or detective will be induced by a new Lessing to do some research in the Villers library and end up becoming still another Lessing, and so on ad infinitum. This interpretation is supported by an anagram of the library's name, "LIVRES" (as well as *en vrilles* ["in spiral form"], shall we add?)—that is, "books," this time in the plural, which is suggested by the extra letter (*S*) in the town's name—but also by the name "Lessing" ("*les signes*"), which offers an intertextual clue: the cyclic pattern forming the structure as well as the subject matter of Ollier's *La Mise en scène*. As a reader, the narrator is first of all our double. In the end, our role is to double the narrator: by being *the one who narrates the unsaid*.

"53 jours"

> "La Crypte" is a novel in two parts whose second part meticulously destroys all that which the first has tried to establish; a classic procedure of many mystery novels here pushed to an almost caricatural paroxysm.
>
> —Georges Perec, *"53 jours"* (42)

I will here focus on intertextual reading as investigation in Perec's last novel—in which, as Roubaud puts it, "the mystery of unaccomplishment is tied to the project of the book" (97). It is as if the unfinished state of the novel—interrupted by Perec's death in 1989—echoed the construction of the plot itself. There are structural reasons—not only biographical reasons—which may have led Perec to put elements of unaccomplishment into the fiction: the intricate construction of the novel composes the enigma (96). The book, decentered, was supposed to be in two parts, of thirteen (eleven more or less entirely written) and fifteen chapters, respectively (*"53 jours"* 191). It would have had the same title—*"53 jours"*—as its first part: "'53 jours' is the title of the story in the first part which the narrator of the second receives and about which he undertakes the exegesis" (194).

The text follows an embedded narrative pattern "whose center is the detective novel" (199), the author of which turns out to be both false vic-

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tim and real criminal, and whose fictional reader-narrator becomes the investigator—only to be trapped, in the end, as the accused. A deciphering of "53 jours" constitutes the investigation in the second narrative by the second narrator—"Un R est un M qui se P le L de la R"—wherein we can recognize an abridged transcription of Stendhal's famous phrase, "Un Roman est un Miroir qui se Promène le Long de la Route" ("A novel is a mirror that strolls along the road"). Here, not only does investigating revert to reading a detective novel, but, since the text to be deciphered is constituted by a metadiegetic narrative, we find ourselves confronted by exactly the same material as the metafictional detective.

There are three *mises en abyme* of this overall structure in the first part, "53 jours." A detective novelist, Serval, mysteriously disappears; in order to resolve this puzzle, the anonymous narrator, given the role of temporary detective, is assigned to read the notes for Serval's novel, "La Crypte," whose main character (according to Ellery Queen's rule, which states that the "pseudonym and the hero must be confused"), is a homonym of the author, Serval. As does *53 jours* itself, "La Crypte" contains "a rather curious photograph in black and white" with the inscription "Tombouctou 52 jours," which allows us to suppose a count down of these embedded narratives. Of course, in this succession of internal duplications, the Serval of "La Crypte" must also read a detective novel to solve a puzzle—that is, the mysterious story "The Judge is the Assassin," whose author and narrator's name, Laurence Wargrave, recalls the apparent victim and assassin of *Ten Little Indians*. Internal analogies and intertextual links lead us to suspect that the accidental death of a certain Rouard, in "La Crypte," is nothing but the simulation of a false victim. According to the summary of "The Judge is the Assassin," a Mr. Tissier explains to Wargrave that "he was able to stage his own murder"—from which Rouard was able to draw "the organizing principle" thanks to which the victim of a simulated crime can be designated as the criminal. The composition of the novel is thus like that of a quadruple bottom box, the four levels being, within *53 jours* and retrospectively within "Un R est un M qui se P le L de la R," first, "53 jours"; second, "la Crypte"; third, "Le juge est l'assassin"; fourth, "K comme Kaola" (217). We learn that four models, working as self-reflexive clues, inspired "La Crypte": first, *Ten Little Indians*; second, a short story by Maurice Leblanc entitled "Edith au cou de cygne"; third, Bill Ballinger's *Une Dent contre lui*;[19] and fourth, the spy novel *K comme Kaola*, from which Serval borrows fourteen lines that he transcribes, with the exception of twelve words of twelve letters each (92–94). And, of course, each of these intra-/intertextual references could hide the key to the puzzle.

What gradually emerges from this imbroglio is the identification of the narrator-reader-detective with his model, who is the author of the

detective novel and, at the same time, the director of his own kidnapping: Serval. In the last chapter completed by Perec (the twelfth!), the narrator searches—in "La Crypte"—for a solution to the case in which he is involved, not only as investigator and reader but also as victim of a kidnapping. Thus, while reading a "miniature plot that reflects our own," the unwilling investigator ends up through identification "in the ghostly skin of that murderer of himself." Thus, in respect to either the reader-detective or the narrative structure, the process—one of self-effacement—seems to evolve toward progressive dissolution. And the final explanation is infinite, first given and then refuted, indefinitely combinable and deferrable.

Like Perec's "fictional autobiography," *W, or the Memory of Childhood, "53 jours"* is composed around a typographical ellipsis. The diptych structure juxtaposing two separate narratives constitutes a major element in the enigma. Not only does the unresolved mystery of the first part turn out to be embedded in the second part, but it will serve, literally, as the very material to be deciphered in order to pursue the ongoing investigation. Furthermore, this dizzy embedding of overlapping narratives reflects the structure of labyrinthine investigation into one's own past. Biographical allusions abound in *"53 jours"*, thus linking the detective story to Perec's fantasy/autobiography. Undoubtedly, the common denominator between the detective plot, the autobiographical enterprise, and the puzzle game is the pattern of investigation as reconstruction from fragmentary elements. (For instance, *Life: A User's Manual*, which is organized like a jigsaw puzzle, offers multiple embedded, interlocking tales—like chapter 31, entitled "Beaumont 3"—that are parodic detective stories.) A simple look at the notes left by Perec, and published in the same posthumous volume, suggests that the writer was also searching for a solution to this unprecedented structure—to such an extent that in the last chapter of the novel, the next fictional writer-investigator, whom the unsuccessful preceding investigator-reader is to meet, is called "G. Perec" (186).

Instead of Ending . . .

> One dreams in vain of a final chapter which would be itself a bearer
> of new ambiguities and which would oblige one to reread the book.
> —Jean Lahougue, "Ecrire à partir d'Agatha Christie" (6)

Agatha Christie's best works combine two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, she innovates: the occasional use of generative pretexts announces a literary practice in which "the laws that govern [her] novels have nothing to do with those that organize reality" (Peeters, "Tombeau"

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100). In this sense, her writing anticipates the reader's investigation of the text. On the other hand, there was, at the time, another generic constraint: the laws of representation. She "had to continuously disguise the process which makes fiction come about," which could therefore threaten representational illusion (122). In short, this comes down to a poetics that, on the whole, *dissimulates* textual strategies, which is opposed to a poetics of metarepresentation: the pleasures of fiction should not necessarily entail the obfuscation of the mechanisms that produce it (Ricardou, "Innocence" 281–82). Thus, if for Christie "there is always a thought concerning the effect to be produced" (Peeters, "Tombeau" 128), it does not mean that her stories actually enable the reader to carry on the investigation beyond their representational ending.

In post-*nouveaux romans*, endings are always illusory, incomplete, and/or virtually infinite: they seem at least to propose a rereading of endings that never stop ending. Between chapters 4 and 5 of *"53 jours"*, a series of hypotheses follows the false final explanation in "La Crypte": "Once a solution is found, another one which is absolutely different is in turn given in a few lines; it's the basis of it, the case's final new development, its ultimate reversal, its last revelation, its anticlimax, which leaves the reader perplexed or delighted, facing two hypotheses which are both acceptable even though diametrically opposed" (70). After a period of deconstructing the detective genre in the *nouveau roman*, the strategy of the post-*nouveau roman* seems to be to *construct* the pragmatic conditions of an interactive rapport between text and reader. By eliminating the final explanation scene or multiplying cryptic versions of it, the plot leaves us no choice but to continuously reread and pursue the text. In *"53 jours"*, the core of the enigma is this virtually infinite, meta-diegetic, digressive, and reflexive structure through which the narrative progresses. Each narrative, whether primary or secondary, proceeds by commenting on similar overlapping narratives. In this embedded structure of stories that mirror each other, we grasp that no story can explain the puzzle that initiates it *on its own level*. The overall principle seems to be that each puzzle resolves itself by shifting to another diegetic level, by a sort of leap—or metadiegetic transfer—in a series of abysses that become more and more minuscule up to the last, utterly cryptic point. The outcome of such a text remains unresolvable, unless it is referred to the next intertextual scene. In other words, the novel's intratextual structure is *the metaphor of its intertextually oriented solution.*

Also, this mystery, like those in Lahougue's or Peeters's detective stories, is both incomplete and *virtually* completable. The reader is given the opportunity to complete such unresolved texts because the mystery also lies, at the level of the signifier, among the textual traces to be disclosed. Clues are not only *diegetic*, addressed to a fictional investigator whom the

reader tries to surpass, or to a fictional reader represented in the story, but they are also *likely to be textually detected*, in the same way that we could tentatively form the unsaid and improbable name of the culprit in *La Bibliothèque de Villers*. Reading thus becomes a multidimensional activity that takes into account all aspects of the text, narrative as well as linguistic, fictional as well as structural. Combes calls these clues "textual detectandes" (240–41); I will call them, more precisely, *extradiegetic detectandes*, insofar as they can only address the reader—not the characters. This is the case when detectandes lie in the narrating discourse, not the narrated fiction. They are, like clues at the diegetic level, both masked and traceable, hidden and "readable": they are simply *deferred*, left to the reader's perspicacity. Thus we better understand Peeters's formula: "to investigate is to detect the signs that have been distributed throughout the text" ("Ecriture" 169). We could thus define the *detectability* of the mystery as this *textual possibility* of finding a solution that is never made explicit.

By reformulating Ricardou's once famous phrase, let us provisionally sum up this evolution: from a time when fiction narrated the "adventures of writing" (*Problèmes* 111), to one in which narratives call forth "the adventure of reading."

Notes

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1. My translations unless otherwise noted. For a preliminary study of the post-*nouveau roman* detective novel, see my "(Re)writing Considered as an Act of Murder" (255–59).

2. On the relationship between the *nouveau roman* and the detective genre, see Alter, Boyer, Charney, Combes, Janvier, Lits 60–61, and Vareille 191–203. The detective genre in question is more or less a *type* of the mystery genre, that is, the tale of detection, "the tale of pure puzzle, pure ratiocination" (Holquist 154). This model is not far from the one privileged by the early *nouveau roman*, as Eisenzweig points out (Robbe-Grillet, "Entretien" 18).

3. Along with the three writers studied here, this post-*nouveau roman* detective novel could include Modiano's *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (1978); Echenoz's *Méridien de Greenwich* (1979) and *Cherokee* (1983); Belletto's *Film noir* (1980) and *Sur la terre comme au ciel* (1982); Roubaud's *La Belle Hortense* (1985), *L'Enlèvement d'Hortense* (1987), and *L'Exil d'Hortense* (1990), among others.

4. For example, Manchette's or Daenincks's sociopolitical crime stories are popular representatives of the genre. Like most novels published by Gallimard's *série noire*, they remain clearly bound within a representational strategy.

5. The borderline between, on the one hand, "the detective novel taken seriously"—to borrow the conclusive phrase from Janvier's inaugural study of the *nouveau roman* policier—and, on the other hand, a so-called typical detective story is certainly not always clear. Although Japrisot was published earlier and

is perceived as a "popular" writer, his *Piège pour Cendrillon* (1962) presents traits that can be found in Peeters's *La Bibliothèque de Villers* and Lahougue's "La Ressemblance," particularly the use of narrative voice (infra). Similarly, a widely read author such as Pennac is not only published in the prestigious "blanche" collection from Gallimard, but combines "low" and "high" art characteristics that explicitly recall Gadda's *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* (*Au bonheur* 137).

6. Although I think that Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* (1955), Ollier's *Le Maintien de l'ordre* (1961), or Pinget's *L'Inquisitoire* (1962) are not yet perceived as *textes lisibles* outside the academic world, I propose the term post-*nouveau roman* in reference to the textual/ narratological denominators conceptualized, in Ricardou's *Le Nouveau roman*, under the common strategy of a "*mise en cause du récit*" (231). See also Smyth, "*Nouveau*" 54–73. To make things clear, I never imply that there is only one *nouveau roman*: Sarraute, Ollier, or Pinget, and so on, are all "original" writers, and each experiments in many ways with uncommon narrative forms. What they share, however, whatever their differences are, is a common *metarepresentational* strategy (Ricardou, *Le Nouveau* 247).

7. See Ricardou, "How" 280–82. In short, written structures that bring about effects of meta-representation "exceed effects of representation" and "let transpire that which representation tends to obliterate within its mechanism" (281).

8. According to Renaud Camus, "Today's novelist inherits all the formal constraints of his predecessors as well as an extra constraint, which is that the text must be readable [*lisible*]" (quoted in Leclerc 67 and in Jullien and Polizzotti 337).

9. Obviously, the post-*nouveau roman* does not repeat the same parodic use of the detective genre as the early *nouveau roman*: Echenoz's first two books are clearly very different from Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*. However, for the *nouveau roman* detective novel, there remain "striking similarities which go beyond the whim of a particular inspiration, and we can wonder what they imply" (Charney 18). Vareille sees "an *internal necessity*" that explains the many borrowings from the detective genre (192–93; original emphasis).

10. Roussel became a major model for Robbe-Grillet, and Ricardou partly developed his theory of generators on the basis of Roussel's "procédés," as explained in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*. For Roussel's connection to the *nouveau roman*, see Ricardou, "Le Nouveau Roman est-il roussellien?" and "L'Activité roussellienne" (*Pour* 91–117).

11. Ollier regards Leroux's *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* as "a masterpiece of mystery fiction," producing a particularly complex "fictional dynamics" caused by the "discrepancy between the evidence acquired by the detective and the evidence made available to the reader." This discrepancy is the ground for every detective story ["le fondement de tout récit policier"], and in Leroux's book "it reaches the widest amplitude" ("La Double" 139).

12. If the *nouveau roman* "borrows countless techniques from the detective novel," that appropriation stands out for an essential reason: "The investigation is hardly ever resolved (it is perhaps Butor, in *Degrés*, who offers the most captivating model of total defeat). . . . In the detective novel, on the contrary, we are assured of reaching a solution, of attaining a complete reality that will join the various threads of the investigation and explain everything" (Charney 21).

13. "Someone investigates a case that he does not understand. Someone investigates a series of elements which seems to tell a story, but the story has many lacunae and contradictions" (Robbe-Grillet, "Entretien" 21).

14. Here the relation is still more complex, since we could say that Lahougue's

short story parodies and condenses, in Genette's sense of "serious transformation," a novel that is already a generic parody. In other words, we deal with a parody of a parody. In Nabokov's *Despair*, the narrator (Hermann) kills his assumed double (Felix) and takes his place. In Lahougue's "La Ressemblance," this scenario becomes a metaphor for his revision of Nabokov's novel (for an extensive study, see my essay "(Re)Writing Considered" 267–82).

15. In an earlier version, the epilogue transcribed the first pages word by word; but when Simenon complained, the published epilogue became a paraphrase of the original instead of a "collage." Indeed, the cover of *La Doublure de Magrite*—which was originally titled *La Doublure de Maigret*—quotes and parodies the original cover of Simenon's novel. It is an interesting case of what we may call, in Genette's terms, *peritextual hypertextuality* (*Seuils* 10).

16. The central café scene in *La Doublure*—repeated several times from a different actor's perspective, as each variation systematically drops one of its components, thus inscribing a different blank each time—recalls the already parodic (Simenonian) café scene in *The Erasers* ("Ecrire vers" 18).

17. Lahougue explains, "The detective becomes a victim. The reader becomes a detective. The assassin turns out to be the reader" ("Ecrire vers" 11).

18. "The detective novel enacts reading and thematizes the figure of the reader within its own narrative" (Felman 24). Felman sees *Oedipus Rex* as a "paradigm par excellence of the detective genre" (25n1).

19. The original title is *The Tooth and the Nail* (New York: Harper, 1955). For a bibliography of Perec's detective intertexts, see Bellos 121–22.

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