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PEREC'S UNSURE TEXT: EXPLORING DEPRESSION EQUIVOCALLY WITH *UN HOMME QUI DORT*

MATT PHILLIPS
TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD, UNITED KINGDOM
matthew.phillips@trinity.ox.ac.uk

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During a nightmarishly sleepless night, neither the first nor last endured by the protagonist of Georges Perec's *Un homme qui dort*, there appears a passage which seems to summon a self-reflexive reading: 'Il devrait y avoir des textes à ce sujet, des textes sûrs, qui permettraient de faire face à ces situations, beaucoup plus fréquentes qu'on ne le croit généralement.'[1] The protagonist, a student in post-war Paris, is in the midst of a crisis that — as this article explores — might be termed depression. The self-reflexive reading would ask if *Un homme qui dort* fills the gap it here signals, if it is itself a 'texte sûr', an unequivocal text, sufficiently self-assured that it might reliably guide those facing similar situations. This is the sort of reading I will be undertaking here.

Un homme qui dort is a text charged with the question of literature's therapeutic potential, one which has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years. The World Health Organization has published a review of the role of the arts (including literature) in improving health and well-being,[2] while 'bibliotherapists' including Régine Detambel in France and Ella Berthould and Susan Elderkin in the UK have been prescribing books to clients, and literary scholars have been exploring questions about literature's therapeutic potential and ambitions.[3] The present study intends to contribute to this ongoing discussion through its reading of Perec's unsure text, a text that problematizes the language and categories through which mental distress is apprehended, but

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[1] Georges Perec, *Un homme qui dort* (1967), ed. by Florence de Chalonge, in *Œuvres*, ed. by Christelle Reggiani, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), I, 167–242 (p. 219).

[2] Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, *What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being? A Scoping Review* (Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2019).

[3] See, for example, Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011); Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde: la littérature française face au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Corti, 2017); Beth Blum, *The Self-Help Compulsion: Searching for Advice in Modern Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); and Jürgen Pieters, *Literature and Consolation: Fictions of Comfort* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

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also the notion that it, as a literary text, might aid its reader in confronting such an experience.

This it does in dialogue with the literary theorist Kenneth Burke. For Burke, 'the poet is [...] a "medicine man"' in that he offers strategies or attitudes for confronting recurrent dilemmas.[4] In 'Literature as Equipment for Living', Burke posits that 'In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them. Another name for strategies might be *attitudes*'.[5] Literary works, he suggests, participate in this naming of situations and steering of attitudes:

> A work like *Madame Bovary* [...] singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis*, for people to 'need a word for it' and to adopt an attitude towards it.[6]

What attitude or strategy Gustave Flaubert's novel might propose is left unstated, though Burke elsewhere casts a wide net, pointing to the sorts of things he is getting at as 'strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands of one sort or another'.[7] Moreover, he suggests, the very naming of things might already prove consolatory: 'I recognize that people like to label, that labeling *comforts* them by *getting things placed*.'[8]

Perec's text unsettles both aspects of what makes literature, for Burke, 'equipment for living'. This article considers *Un homme qui dort*'s unsure attempts to find a word for a common pattern of experience — to 'diagnose' it — and to propose a strategy for confronting it. It begins by observing how recent readers and critics have regularly described the novella's protagonist as 'depressed', yet typically with some reticence. If their diagnoses speak to the contemporary preponderance of psychiatric frameworks for interpreting distress, their reticence serves as evidence for my claim that the text troubles such categorial efforts. This textual equivocation is then illustrated through close reading and a discussion of two of the novella's more remarkable features: second-person narration and pervasive intertextual allusion. The article then turns to the text's ending, asking whether it might be read as proposing an attitude towards (what we might equivocally label) depression. Previous interpretations of the novella's final chapter fall roughly into two camps: those which insist on its inconclusiveness; and those which instead perceive it as presenting the protagonist's recovery. In my view, the text affords both readings,

[4] Kenneth Burke, 'The Philosophy of Literary Form', in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), pp. 1–137 (p. 64).

[5] Kenneth Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living', in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, pp. 293–304 (p. 296–97); original emphasis.

[6] Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living', p. 300.

[7] Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living', p. 304.

[8] Burke, 'The Philosophy of Literary Form', p. 8; original emphases.

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and thus manifests a special type of ambiguity tangled up with the question of literature's therapeutic potential.

Finally, a word on vocabulary: I appeal here to medical terminology, using, for example, the verb 'diagnose' alongside and interchangeably with 'name', 'categorize', or 'label'. The use of such vocabulary is not meant to buttress the authority of psychiatric frameworks for interpreting experiences of distress; on the contrary, it seeks to unsettle them, thereby mirroring the categorial trouble at play in Perec's text. Similarly, I sometimes refer to contemporary psychiatric diagnostic frameworks. These are not without controversy, having been subject to criticism on account of, for example, the influence of profit-driven pharmaceutical and insurance companies in their formulation, and how their 'diagnostic criteria may lead to unnecessary pharmacological interventions or no treatment, and to diagnoses and classifications that normalize, stigmatize, and exclude'.[9] Again, I refer to these frameworks not to defer to them, but to confront them with the messy multiplicity, ambivalence, and unsureness of Perec's work.

Given the text does not itself use the term as a label for the protagonist's experience, 'depression' and its lexical inflections recur with arresting frequency in commentaries by readers lay and professional — albeit in often equivocal or qualified formulations. While some reviewers on online platforms present their diagnoses baldly — Goodreads user 'Tentatively, Convenience', for instance, states the book is 'about a person whose depression practically reduces them to a zombie' (11 December 2009) —, others couch it with hesitation: 'Is the student dealing with a form of what we now recognize as clinical depression?' (Glen Russell, 29 May 2020); 'It basically is the "story" of a young man going through depression (or that is my take on the book, anyway)' (Diane, 15 January 2017); 'Grâce à des séries d'accumulations, Pérec [*sic*] nous fait toucher du doigt le mal être qui s'apparente probablement à la dépression' (torpedo, 9 April 2018).[10] Uncertainty is here variously tagged, through rhetorical questioning (Glen Russell); through an appeal to the subjectivity of interpretation (Diane); through language of semblance and probability (torpedo). Yet in each case depression has occurred to the reader as a salient notion for thinking about the book and its protagonist. Depression is evoked too in readings by professional literary critics. Stella Béhar, for instance, writes that 'son personnage […] semble vivre un comportement déviant à mi-chemin entre la dépression apathique et la folie lucide'; Claude Burgelin, that Perec 'nous fait pénétrer dans l'intimité des états entre désespoir et folie, entre dépression et rage froide'; Julia Dobson, that 'the central protagonist's quest […] can be read as a depressive state'; and Russell Williams, that the 'young Parisian student [is]

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[9] Ruth Cruickshank, 'Not Knowing and the Problematics of Naming Eating Disorders: OSFED/EDNOS/TCA-NS and Annie Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* [*A Girl's Story*]', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 20 (2020), 273–98 (p. 280).

[10] Quotations in English can be found on the Goodreads page for *Un homme qui dort*, <https://www.goodreads.com>, and those in French the Babelio equivalent, <https://www.babelio.com>.

suffering from what sounds distinctly like a severe dose of depression'.[11] Again, these literary-critical diagnoses are pronounced not without reticence, indicated by formulae of interpretation ('can be read'), semblance ('semble vivre', 'sounds distinctly like'), and betweenness ('à mi-chemin entre', 'états entre [...] et [...]').

The protagonist doubtless evinces enough symptoms set out in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and the eleventh revision of the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Diseases* to countenance such a diagnosis.[12] To start with, 'insomnia' (*DSM*-5) or 'changes in sleep' (*ICD-11*) — *Un homme qui dort* begins ironically, with a chapter tracking the failed attempt at slumber by a protagonist often referred to by critics as 'the man asleep', and this failure is repeated throughout the text. Moreover, for 'fatigue or loss of energy' (*DSM*-5) or 'reduced energy or fatigue' (*ICD*-11), consider the following extract from near the start of the second chapter:

> C'est d'abord seulement une espèce de lassitude, de fatigue, comme si tu t'apercevais soudain que depuis très longtemps, depuis plusieurs heures, tu es la proie d'un malaise insidieux, engourdissant, à peine douloureux et pourtant insupportable, l'impression doucereuse et étouffante d'être sans muscles et sans os, d'être un sac de plâtre au milieu de sacs de plâtre. (p. 176)

Here the narrator — or better, 'addresser', given the text's use of the second person — intimates for the first time that the pattern of experience the protagonist (or 'addressee') is experiencing possesses durable, synthesizable singleness; that it is ('c'est') a singular something. But that something is indicated only deictically, not pinned down with a noun; 'c'est' thus signals, for now, a lexical gap, a refusal or inability to name.

It also introduces a rhetorically rich sentence, persistently swollen by parallelism. Parallelism amplifies the sense of things not pinned down; indeed, the hesitations between multiple, sometimes contradictory options for describing the addressee's experience are in congruence with the 'indecisiveness' the *DSM*-5 identifies as a symptom of major depressive disorder. Parallelism also serves to slow the sentence down, interrupted as it is by circumlocution and commas performing fatigue's frustration of movement. The first parallel structure seems tautological, though both terms ('lassitude', 'fatigue') are in advance deemed not quite right ('une espèce de'). The second — 'depuis très longtemps, depuis plusieurs heures' — is temporally disorienting: 'depuis très longtemps', in the context of a 'malaise insidieux', implies a duration longer than 'plusieurs heures'.

[11] Stella Béhar, *Georges Perec: écrire pour ne pas dire* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 43; Claude Burgelin, *Georges Perec* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 60; Julia Dobson, 'Vanishing Points: Shifting Perspectives on *The Man Who Sleeps / Un homme qui dort*', in *Georges Perec's Geographies: Material, Performative and Textual Spaces*, ed. by Charles Forsdick, Andrew Leak, and Richard Phillips (London: UCL Press, 2019), pp. 47–64 (p. 50); Russell Williams, 'The Novels of Self-Isolation', *3:AM Magazine*, 19 May 2020 <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am>.

[12] American Psychiatric Association, 'Major Depressive Disorder', in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), pp. 160–68 (pp. 160–61), henceforward *DSM*-5; World Health Organization, '6A71.3 Recurrent Depressive Disorder, Current Episode Severe, without Psychotic Symptoms', in *International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics*, 11th revision (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018), <https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en>, henceforward *ICD*-11.

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Both closing similes, meanwhile, are suggestive of the 'psychomotor retardation' mentioned in the *ICD*-11. The 'sac de plâtre' metaphor is especially evocative, and not only of dull and heavy fatigue. It is an image of atomization: powder particles in a bag itself but a particle in a larger mass of bags. The evocation of a surrounding baggy multitude also hints that whatever the addressee is experiencing is not unique; that it might, in fact, be a common 'pattern of experience'. Finally, plaster is a raw material for construction, even aesthetic creation. On the one hand, this suggests the diversity of forms the addressee's nascent state might take. On the other, it points to the addressee — this sack of plaster — as now becoming, on account of this experience, a character suitable for a work of creation (this very novella); more than that, as becoming a character type, as belonging to a category of literary characters, many of whom will be making intertextual appearances as the book proceeds.

That recent readers and critics should have categorized the man asleep as depressed — with ambivalence but persistence — is unsurprising. It speaks to the cultural dominance of the concept of depression in the contemporary world and to 'the increasing availability and acceptability of the language of mental disorder'.[13] Sociologist Nikolas Rose has argued that 'psychiatry is shaping the very experience of living as its languages and diagnoses pervade the ways we understand and respond to our problems';[14] if this is so, little wonder its languages and diagnoses should register in how we understand and respond to literary works. Fellow sociologist Eva Illouz, likewise, has examined the emergence of what she calls a 'therapeutic emotional style', of 'therapeutic discourse as a cultural framework that orients self-perceptions and conceptions of others';[15] contemporary commentaries on *Un homme qui dort* suggest that this framework orients conceptions of fictional characters, too.

Moreover, within therapeutic discourse, depression is an especially preponderant term. Today it is the most frequently diagnosed mental disorder: depressive disorders have been ranked in the top three global causes of non-fatal health loss for nearly three decades.[16] But depression is also now firmly anchored in the vocabulary of popular culture. French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg observes that 'quotidiens et magazines la tiennent pour une maladie à la mode, voire pour le mal du siècle. La dépression s'est transformée en outil pratique pour définir nombre de nos malheurs'.[17] This success is owed not least to the term's 'rare plasticité d'usages'.[18] Primary care specialist Christopher Dowrick observes that among nosologists

[13] Nikolas Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), p. 65.

[14] Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*, p. 3.

[15] Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 15, 12.

[16] See Spencer L. James and others, 'Global, Regional, and National Incidence, Prevalence, and Years Lived with Disability for 354 Diseases and Injuries for 195 Countries and Territories, 1990–2017: A Systematic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017', *The Lancet*, 392 (2018), 1789–1858 (p. 1790).

[17] Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi: dépression et société* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998), p. 9.

[18] Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi*, p. 10.

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there is disagreement 'as to whether the category is too large, confusing normal experiences with illness and encompassing mutually exclusive subsets of depressive disorders; [...] or else too small, ignoring substantial symptomatic overlap with anxiety, pain syndromes, and medically unexplained symptoms':[19] whether it is too baggy a sack of a category, or should be made baggier still.

The concept of depression thus has greater currency in medical and popular culture today than it did when *Un homme qui dort* was published in 1967, and therapeutic discourse has more pervasively penetrated the ways we perceive ourselves and others — to the point where *of course* 'depression' springs to mind, if ambivalently, when readers read Perec's novella. Yet it is not a new term; indeed, according to Ehrenberg, 'La dépression amorce son ancrage médical et social à la fin des années 1960'.[20] Psychiatrists were already struggling with a definition: 'Pierre Deniker, le "patron" de la psychopharmacologie à Sainte-Anne, estime en 1966 que "le terme de *dépression*, couramment usité de nos jours, couvre souvent des faits fort disparates."'[21] Meanwhile, 'Le premier article "de fond" sur la dépression est publié par *Elle* en 1965', an article suggesting that depression 'rend irritable ou conduit à se replier sur soi' and that 'la fatigue en est *le* signe annonciateur';[22] compare this with *Un homme qui dort*: 'C'est d'abord seulement une espèce de lassitude, de fatigue'.

Hence Perec is writing *Un homme qui dort* as the concept of depression is at the outset of a process which will lead to its current cultural ubiquity. Though 'depression' would not have appeared to Perec nearly as hegemonic a framework for understanding psychological distress as it is for many contemporary readers, there is good reason to think he was familiar with the term then growing in popularity. He was himself well acquainted with the worlds and vocabularies of medicine and psychiatry: by the time he wrote *Un homme qui dort*, he had undergone psychotherapy with first Françoise Dolto then Michel de M'Uzan, and had been employed since 1961 as a documentalist in a research laboratory for medical neurophysiology.[23] It is therefore worth pausing on the one occurrence of the word 'dépression' in the novella: though it is not ostensibly used to name the protagonist's crisis, the word does feature under a different definitional guise. In the book's sixth chapter, the addressee is found sitting on the parapet of the Pont Louis-Philippe, where he watches a 'dépression en entonnoir qui perpétuellement se creuse et se comble' (p. 197). Here the concept hides in a polyseme, a

[19] Christopher Dowrick, 'Depression as a Culture-Bound Syndrome: Implications for Primary Care', *British Journal of General Practice*, 63 (2013), 229–30 (p. 229).

[20] Alain Ehrenberg, 'De la névrose à la dépression: remarques sur quelques changements de l'individualité contemporaine', *Figures de la psychanalyse*, 1 (2001), 25–41 (p. 27).

[21] Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi*, p. 95.

[22] Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi*, p. 146; original emphasis.

[23] See David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harvill, 1999), pp. 96, 150–52, 250–52. A later piece by Perec ('Les Lieux d'une ruse', in *Penser/classer* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), pp. 59–72) offers an account of a subsequent period of psychoanalysis in the 1970s, an account that resonates with my reading of *Un homme qui dort* in its favouring of ambiguity and equivocation over diagnostic categorization. For an illuminating discussion of 'Les Lieux d'une ruse' and of Perec's ambivalent relationship with psychoanalysis more generally, see Anna Kemp, 'Playing and Being in Georges Perec', *French Studies*, 72 (2018), 557–71.

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paronomastic metaphor. From a grimly ominous position — sitting precariously on the parapet of a bridge — the addressee looks down and sees a 'dépression'.

This depression 'se creuse et se comble'. It is a singular thing, but an inconsistent one, by turns full and empty. To a reader in 1960s France, this image might have evoked manic-depressive psychosis; today, it might evoke bipolar disorder. But there are other ways to think of depression as empty and full. Consider playwright Sarah Kane's statement that 'Many people feel depression is about emptiness but actually it's about being so full that everything cancels itself out';[24] here fullness and emptiness do not alternate, but rather, fullness becomes so full it becomes empty. Or consider the following passage:

> Tu trouves [...] un bonheur presque parfait [...], parfois gonflé d'émotions nouvelles. [...] Tu vis dans une bienheureuse parenthèse, dans un vide plein de promesses [...]. Tu survis, sans gaieté et sans tristesse [...], comme ça, simplement, évidemment, comme une goutte d'eau qui perle au robinet d'un poste d'eau sur un palier, comme six chaussettes trempées dans une bassine [...], comme une mouche ou comme une huître, comme une vache, comme un escargot, comme un enfant ou comme un vieillard, comme un rat. (p. 207)

Here, empty fullnesses abound: 'un bonheur presque parfait [...], parfois gonflé d'émotions nouvelles'; 'une bienheureuse parenthèse', 'un vide plein de promesses'. These first two sentences vaguely evoke a kind of happiness, though already one senses a reticence in the 'presque' of 'presque parfait'. This 'happiness' is figured as an empty vessel: his 'happiness', itself an emotion, is sometimes inflated by other emotions — plural and novel, yet none warranting elaboration, as though their plurality precluded specification. Likewise, the 'promesses' which populate the addressee's life are so many as to bar any desire to invest in any one in particular.

So if the subject here is notionally a *bonheur*, it is not an affirmative happiness, but one of neutrality, cancelling out 'gaieté' and 'tristesse', 'avenir' and 'passé'. Stylistically, too, this passage evinces a certain vacuous filling up of space as it swells into subclauses. Consider, in particular, the closing spate of similes. It begins with deictic vagueness ('comme ça') masquerading as self-evidence ('simplement, évidemment'), and the congeries that follows does nothing to properly pin down what it is like to be the addressee. Some of the options are straightforward opposites ('enfant', 'vieillard'); others share some associative relation (oysters and snails are both hollows filled, and the oyster echoes the waterdrop 'qui perle au robinet'); but, collectively, they lack any obvious unifying principle.

The passage, like the novella more generally, is brimming with words and images contending to characterize the addressee's experience. In a lecture given at the University of Warwick shortly after completing the manuscript, Perec explains that his works might be defined as a sort of 'parcours' that he elaborates 'à partir [...] d'une idée vague, d'un sentiment [...], en me servant [...] de tout un acquis

[24] Cited in Lyn Gardner, 'Of Love and Outrage: Sarah Kane Obituary', *The Guardian*, 23 February 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

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culturel'.[25] In so doing, he seeks to say 'tout ce que l'on peut dire sur le theme d'où je suis parti. […] *Un homme qui dort*, c'est les lieux rhétoriques de l'indifférence, c'est tout ce que l'on peut dire à propos de l'indifférence'. *Un homme qui dort* is thus presented as a work exploring language and ideas surrounding what Perec here calls indifference; it begins with a 'sentiment vague' ('une espèce de lassitude, de fatigue'), and proceeds to introduce a surfeit of terms and images for apprehending that feeling. To say all one can about something is to say too much, to bring into equivocal contact competing rhetorical frameworks for grasping that thing. The text is filled to the point of confusion, even cancellation, with diagnoses, descriptions, metaphors, and epithets that, singly, seem to make sense of his state, but, cumulatively, make a mess of attempts to make sense. The addressee's state or experience is variously (and not only) described as a 'démission' (p. 182) or indifference (p. 183); coldness or 'sérénité sans lassitude' (p. 211); 'un poids, une inertie' (p. 214); 'détachement total' (p. 220); 'malheur' or an 'illusion dangereuse d'être […] infranchissable' (p. 224); suffering (p. 238); despair (p. 239); refusal or neutrality (p. 240). Then there are the various epithets and sobriquets — 'un homme qui dort', of course, but also (again, this list is far from exhaustive): 'Amnésique errant au Pays des Aveugles' (p. 182); 'une ombre trouble, un dur noyau d'indifférence' (p. 183); 'petite araignée attentive au centre de ta toile' (p. 195); 'Flâneur minutieux, nyctobate accompli, ectoplasme qu'un drap flottant ferait à tort passer pour un fantôme que n'effraierait même pas les petits enfants' (p. 216); 'le maître anonyme du monde' (p. 217).

There are all sorts of inconstancy at play here: while 'démission' and refusal suggest the activity of a choice or a project, despair suggests an affliction; 'sérénité sans lassitude' is positively valenced, especially set next to 'souffrance'; 'le maître anonyme du monde' strikes a heroic pose, while the childproof ghost is comically pathetic. One might interpret inconsistency symptomatically. In his book on melancholy in early French modernism, Ross Chambers writes:

> Apatheia, acedia, taedium vitae; mal du siècle, ennui, spleen… La mélancolie, au cours de sa longue histoire et en attendant les dépressions nerveuses […] d'aujourd'hui, a connu de nombreuses formes et s'est désignée par un nombre surprenant d'appellations. Mais telle est sa 'nature', si ce mot n'est pas trop déplacé, s'agissant […] d'une défaillance de l'être qui plonge l'individu souffrant, d'une part, dans la multiplicité, la diversité, la dérive, et d'autre part dans l'indifférenciation, l'in-différence.[26]

Failing to pin one's depression down — as 'depression', 'melancholy', a 'démission', or 'indifférence' — might then be a symptom of depression itself; the restiveness of the depressive's attempts to characterize their experience might be chief among their characteristics. If, for Burke, 'labeling *comforts* […] by *getting things placed*', then one of depression's discomforts might be this displacement, this not knowing where or how to place things, including oneself.

[25] Georges Perec, 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain' (1967), in *Entretiens et conférences*: I, *1965–1978*, ed. by Dominique Bertelli and Mireille Ribière (Nantes: Joseph K., 2003), pp. 76–88 (p. 84).

[26] Ross Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition: les débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: Corti, 1987), p. 223.

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Amid the din of diverse descriptions, there is discernible a more specific ambivalence regarding the political or aesthetic import of the man asleep's experience. This ambivalence lies within a web of unanswered questions: Is the addressee's state aetiologically explicable? Is it or is it not a response to socio-historical circumstances? And if it is, to what extent can that response be considered a volitional strategy? These are matters on which critics have been divided, a dissensus evidencing the text's own indeterminacy: Martyna Zapolnik, for example, errs on the side of pathology ('la maladie force le héros à rêver de solitude'); Béhar interprets the addressee's behaviour as bearing greater volitional heft ('protestation passive contre le tumulte de la vie active, il n'agit plus'); while Andrew Leak opts for a compromise ('this incipient, quasi-pathological depression is accompanied by a semiconscious refusal to allow himself to be inserted into a particular social order').[27]

Questions of aetiology and volition are raised early and apophatically in the novella's second chapter. The addressee's first missed appointment is a sociology exam whose subject is not without possible pertinence to these questions:

> Tu ne diras pas […] ce que tu sais, ce que tu penses, ce que tu sais qu'il faut penser sur l'aliénation […], sur la modernité et sur les loisirs, […] sur Marx rival de Tocqueville, sur Weber ennemi de Lukács. (p. 177)

The first thing the addressee does not do, then, is recapitulate and intervene in debates that could shed light on his state — one we might also name 'aliénation', and consider with reference to Marx, Weber, and Lukács. A social aetiology is thus evoked in a peculiar case of preterition: the text flags up the existence of theoretical explanations of states like the addressee's precisely by announcing that he is not minded to explore them. We can read preterition here in different ways. Is the text mocking in advance readers it knows will come armed to interpret it with theoretical erudition? Or else is it pointing its readers towards those very critical *pistes* its addressee refuses? And yet:

> Tu ne refuses rien. [… I]l a suffi, il a presque suffi, […] de l'inopportune conjonction […] d'un bol de Nescafé au goût soudain trop amer, et d'une bassine de matière plastique rose […] où flottaient six chaussettes, pour que quelque chose se casse. (p. 181)

Does the addresser protest too much, in refusing the notion that what the addressee is doing is refusing — that his condition might also involve some volition? What follows is a patently risible aetiology, for which soggy socks and soluble coffee are sufficient causes for the addressee's distress; an aetiology the text seems to know is risible, for 'il a suffi' is swiftly qualified with 'presque': an adverb lifting a heavy causal load, understatedly gesturing towards the host of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors it might contain. (One might choose to read the plastic

[27] Martyna Zapolnik, 'Le Récit à la deuxième personne dans l'écriture du malaise: analyse comparative d'*Un homme qui dort* de Georges Perec et de *L'Inconsolable* d'Anne Godard (1re partie)', *Cahiers ERTA*, 21 (2020), 9–25 (p. 19); Béhar, *Georges Perec*, p. 43; Andrew Leak, 'Phago-Citations: Barthes, Perec, and the Transformation of Literature', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 57–75 (p. 64).

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tub and instant coffee as already metonyms for consumer capitalism, and hence as vaguely gesturing towards a socio-economic aetiology.)

The second chapter thus plants questions about aetiology and volition apophatically, by declining to pursue them. The fourth chapter, meanwhile, seems to offer fuel for an interpretation that would read the addressee as volitionally refusing a particular set of socio-historical circumstances:

> Tout est déjà dit, déjà fini. [… T]a route est toute tracée. Les rôles sont prêts, les étiquettes: du pot de ta première enfance au fauteuil roulant de tes vieux jours, tous les sièges sont là et attendent leur tour. (p. 190)

The addresser here forecasts for the addressee a predictable future in which he is intractably passive: seated from beginning to end. Repetition serves to enforce a sense of monotony, of *déjà dit*: including the *déjàs* of 'déjà dit, déjà fini', but also the internal rhyming and alliteration of 'ta route est toute tracée'. Finally, through the rhyming of 'jours' and 'tour', the final clause comes to resemble a classical alexandrine, complete with twelve syllables and a medial caesura ('tous les sièges sont là ‖ et attendent leur tour'), metrically miming a sense of too-perfect completion.

The sentiment expressed here — of a future without risk, without event — echoes socio-historical work on post-war France; for instance, Kristin Ross's claim in her cultural history of the period that 'the arrival of the new consumer durables into French life […] helped create a break with the eventfulness of the past, or better, helped situate the temporality of the event itself as a thing of the past'.[28] This context engendered the cultural criticism of, for example, Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre, with whom Perec was well acquainted, not least through the journal *Arguments*.[29] Perec's text might thus invite an interpretation motivated by a post-Marxist critique of this sort. It does not, though, authenticate such a reading, and one might just as well flip things around: is the addressee depressed because the world is depressing, or does he find the world depressing because he is depressed? In any case, we are soon told the addressee prefers to be the 'pièce manquante du puzzle' (p. 190). Here, volition seems to come back into play, in the form of the addressee's preference to absent himself from the social jigsaw.

Meanwhile, other critics have interpreted the novella through the lens of trauma, emphasizing — in addition to or instead of socio-historical matters — perceived autobiographical markers seen obliquely to connect the addressee's condition to the personal tragedies of the author's own childhood. This reading has been most forcefully articulated by Annelies Schulte Nordholt, who suggests that 'l'activité frénétique, monotone et ininterrompue du protagoniste rappelle la mise en acte compulsive qui, chez Freud, est l'un des symptômes de la névrose traumatique'.[30] Perec lost both his parents during the Second World War: his father

[28] Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 10.

[29] On Perec's links to *Arguments*, see Bellos, *Georges Perec*, pp. 163–64.

[30] Annelies Schulte Nordholt, *Perec, Modiano, Raczymow: la génération d'après et la mémoire de la Shoah* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 73.

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was killed fighting for France in 1940, and his mother was deported to Auschwitz in 1943. Schulte Nordholt bases her reading in part on supposed allusions to the dates of his parents' disappearances: a reference to page 112 (p. 176) of Raymond Aron's *Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle* symbolizing the 11 February (11/2) on which Cyrla Perec was deported; the sixteen chapters of the novella alluding to the 16 June of Icek Perec's death.[31] There are other clues, too: for example, mention of the Rue de la Pompe and the Rue des Saussaies (p. 212), both of which housed Gestapo buildings during the Occupation.[32]

Allusions of the sort are only more or less supposable, and the most salient fact of Perec's life for an autobiographical reading is contradicted by the novella: the addressee spends the fourth chapter at his parents' house. For Schulte Nordholt, the crypticity with which Perec's trauma is encoded in the text constitutes a form of 'dénégation', 'une manière, comme l'a montré Freud, d'admettre le refoulé tout en évitant de l'admettre entièrement'.[33] She thus diagnoses both protagonist and author: the protagonist is diagnosed with the author's trauma, and any biographical inconsistencies between the author and the protagonist are symptomatic evidence of the very trauma they share. However, like the socio-historical interpretation of the addressee's distress, this reading through the lens of autobiographical trauma is one the text perhaps implicitly invites, but far from confirms. We may therefore interpret this crypticity and inconsistency differently: as another instance of the text's unsureness, its muddling of readers' hermeneutic efforts, inviting while bedevilling their diagnoses and aetiologies.

Matters of diagnosis, aetiology, and volition in *Un homme qui dort* are, then, confoundingly indeterminate. They are made all the more so by one of the most obviously remarkable features of Perec's novella, its use of second-person address, which has important but perplexing implications for the addresser's diagnostic and aetiological reliability. In a 1966 note, Perec himself lists five ways one might interpret the use of the second person, including: 'B) Une forme de journal intime'; 'C) Une étape dans la relation auteur–personnage'; 'E) Le regard d'un *je* devenant *tu*'.[34] He then rebuffs the notion his second-person narration might function in such a way as to facilitate readerly identification, instead asserting that *Un homme qui dort* 'égale 50% E 30% B 20% C'. The reader must thus puzzle out the knotty question of who this addresser is — the question Perec answers with the mock precision of percentages. They might identify addresser with addressee, by reading the narrative voice as that of a diary-writer or a '*je* devenant *tu*', as Perec suggests. Or they might hear the addresser as another, be that other the author or someone else entirely.[35] Or else they might lump together some mixture, muddied by inconclusion and inconsistency percentages can only feign to mop up.

[31] See Schulte Nordholt, *Perec, Modiano, Raczymow*, pp. 70, 89–90.
[32] Schulte Nordholt, *Perec, Modiano, Raczymow*, p. 84.
[33] Schulte Nordholt, *Perec, Modiano, Raczymow*, p. 73.
[34] Perec, 'La Deuxième Personne dans *Un homme qui dort*', in *Œuvres*, ed. by Reggiani, I, p. 248.
[35] In the 1974 film adaptation directed by Perec and Bernard Queysanne, the addresser is voiced by actress Ludmila Mikaël, a choice troubling the identification of addresser with addressee or author for any reader familiar with the film.

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Whatever decision or non-decision the reader makes, the second person cleaves a gap between addresser and addressee. If one identifies addresser with addressee, one might more readily read this voice's inconstancy symptomatically, as of a depressive; but with *tu* nonetheless comes the rift of a self-splitting. This gap is one through which irony has occasion to enter. As Chambers writes, irony produces

> le discours narratif d'un texte comme à prendre pour une sorte de citation […] qu'il faudrait entourer […] de guillemets invisibles. C'est un *autre* qui parle dans le texte; et celui-ci refuse de prendre la responsabilité des paroles qu'il *attribue* ainsi.[36]

But crucially, 'ironie et sincérité sont toutes deux phénomènes de lecture: elles ne peuvent se *prouver*'.[37] *Tu* thus introduces the possibility of irony; it establishes a distance from which the reader might be encouraged to query the text's account of the experience it describes — indeed, query the text's own attitude towards that account.

Consider, for example, the following: 'Tu es un oisif, un somnambule, une huître. Les définitions varient […], mais le sens reste à peu près clair: […] tu ne veux que durer, tu ne veux que l'attente et l'oubli' (p. 180). Who labels the addressee 'un oisif, un somnambule, une huître'; who 'takes responsibility' for these words? Are we to understand these as the candid judgements of the addresser, despite the many more or less conflicting descriptions that precede and succeed them; or as self-descriptions on the part of the addressee, more or less ironically quoted by the addresser? The addresser acknowledges inconsistency — 'les définitions varient' — but assures the addressee 'le sens reste à peu près clair'. Yet this statement is scarcely convincing and makes little sense, for how could the sense of an unspecified thing be even 'à peu près clair' if the definition of that thing keeps changing?

Invisible quotation marks lurk here in another way, too, in intertextual allusions. The words 'l'attente et l'oubli' summon Maurice Blanchot, while the reference to an oyster evokes Francis Ponge's prose poem, which figures the oyster as 'un monde opiniâtrement clos', and an allegory for aesthetic creation.[38] These are but two members of the novella's intertextual hodgepodge, comprising too Baudelaire, Céline, Dante, Kafka, Melville, Michaux, Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, and many others.[39] In Perec's 1967 lecture at Warwick he explains that, when he writes, any ideas he has have already been 'broyés' by expressions which are themselves inherited from the culture of the past.[40] This is to say, these intertextual allusions — to *L'Attente l'oubli*, to *La Nausée*, to Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener' — also

[36] Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition*, p. 63; original emphases.

[37] Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition*, p. 200; original emphasis.

[38] Francis Ponge, 'L'Huître' (1942), in *Le Parti pris des choses*, ed. by Ian Higgins (London: Athlone, 1979), p. 45.

[39] Intertextuality in Perec's novella has been the subject of much critical analysis. For the most recent discussion, see Raoul Delemazure, *Une vie dans les mots des autres: le geste intertextuel dans l'œuvre de Georges Perec* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019). For an extensive list of intertextual allusions in *Un homme qui dort*, see Raoul Delemazure, 'Catalogue raisonné des emprunts intertextuels dans l'œuvre de Georges Perec', *Le Cabinet d'amateur* (2019), <https://associationgeorgesperec.fr/IMG/pdf/rdelemazure_catalogue_raisonne_des_emprunts_intertextuels_dans_l_oeuvre_de_georges_perec_raoul_delemazure.pdf>, pp. 23–28.

[40] Perec, 'Pouvoirs et limites du romancier français contemporain', p. 81.

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belong to the 'lieux rhétoriques de l'indifférence' that *Un homme qui dort* explores; they too compete to provide expressions and forms for apprehending the addressee's distress. They might be read as revealing some overlap between the pattern of experience at play in Perec's novella and those other works it conjures; yet through their profusion and conflict, they further confuse any attempt to pin that experience conclusively down.

If for Burke 'each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal dictionary', providing a name for a pattern of experience that 'recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis*, for people to "need a word for it"' — then *Un homme qui dort* is something more like the thesaurus entry for 'depression', an entry it suggests is getting mighty busy.[41] The reader of *Un homme qui dort* is offered all manner of diagnostic opportunities — all sorts of names for what they are encountering — and no doubt comes armed too with their own conceptual and lexical predilections; meanwhile irony and inconsistency serve to try their hermeneutic resolve. One thing *Un homme qui dort* might be the name for, then, is a struggle to name patterns of experience like those we sometimes name 'depression' — a struggle that might indeed be characteristic of such a pattern of experience, and one in which *Un homme qui dort*, in all its unsureness, holds its readers, invites them to participate.

To put this another way, *Un homme qui dort* is a text about whether or not it is a text about depression; a text that troubles our attempts to pin it down as about depression, alienation, trauma, or whatever else, by so plurally evoking conflicting words and frameworks for apprehending the addressee's distress. This is so, at least, until the final chapter, where the text's and reader's unsureness shifts onto other terrain. What is unsure at the novella's ending are two interrelated matters on which the remainder of this article will focus: first, whether the addressee is experiencing a recovery; and second, whether the text should be understood as prescribing to its reader a therapeutic lesson.

Two contrasting interpretations of the ending of *Un homme qui dort* predominate in the novella's reception: while many view the ending as suggestive of recovery, others instead find only inconclusiveness. Burgelin, for example, affirms that by the narrative's closing, 'l'homme qui dort a triomphé de la mort psychique'; Manet van Montfrans, that 'ce texte solipsiste se termine sur le retour du héros à la société'; Michael Sheringham, that 'the ending suggests the protagonist has understood the need to return to the world'.[42] Lay readers have similarly read the final pages as suggestive of the addressee's return to the social world, albeit sometimes with regret: a Goodreads reviewer by the username of 'Φίλ' laments that 'Malheureusement, je crois que la fin présage qu'il est prêt, peut-être même

[41] Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living', p. 300.

[42] Burgelin, *Georges Perec*, p. 70; Manet van Montfrans, *Georges Perec: la contrainte du réel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 112; Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 256. Some readings of the novella's ending are no doubt influenced by the later film adaptation. As Bellos writes of the soundtrack in the film's final sequence, 'electronic organ pipes and angel voices impose their own lyrical meaning on the work' (*Georges Perec*, p. 531); the film's ending, though not wholly unambiguous, perhaps more strongly suggests recovery than does the novella's.

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désireux, à se réinsérer dans la foule inconsciente et irréfléchie de (p)zombies que nous appelons l'espèce humaine' (9 November 2020). In the other critical camp there is, for instance, Leak, for whom the novella ends 'on an ambiguous note, with no moral implied, no lesson having been learnt'; Chris Andrews, for whom 'the ending is scrupulously neutral, wide-open'; and Bellos, who suggests 'its resolute inconclusiveness invites (indeed provokes) psychological projection'.[43]

There is merit in both branches of interpretation, indeed both are necessary for a full appreciation of what is at stake at the end of the novella; for there is a special kind of ambiguity at play in the final chapter, one in which 'inconclusiveness' itself ranks as an option. There are good reasons to read the ending in terms of recovery, just as there are good reasons to judge it instead inconclusive. If we consider both the 'happy ending' and the 'inconclusive ending' as *types* of ending, there exists a higher-order ambiguity in this final chapter, where both 'happy' and 'inconclusive' are legitimate hermeneutic decisions.

As we shall see, this hermeneutic ambiguity hinges first and foremost, again, on how one interprets the relationship between addresser and addressee. But first we must consider another matter of ambiguity also at stake here, not unrelated to the first, having to do with the text's transitivity — with its therapeutic potential or ambition, with whether or not it offers advice, or prescribes an attitude or strategy for confronting patterns of experience akin to those sometimes named depression. *Un homme qui dort* has been read as therapeutically didactic, suggesting readers adopt an attitude of openness to the world: Goodreads reader Lisa, for example, explains that 'the way I understand Perec, we [had] better embrace our fears and passions and hopes, as we only live once and are in no condition to actually manage indifference until we die' (1 January 2018). Not all readers welcome this prescriptive turn; Péter on Goodreads describes the novella as 'comfy as fuck but that didactic last chapter ruined it tho [*sic*] smh [shaking my head]' (2 December 2015). A transitive lesson is more or less implicit in the accounts of professional readers, too; in, for instance, Sheringham's claim that '*Un homme qui dort* [...] affirms the need to engage with others', or Matthieu Rémy's that, 'Condamné à cette société glacée et glaçante, l'homme qui dort est aussi condamné au possible qu'elle donne malgré tout: vivre sa vie'.[44] This ambiguity, about prescriptiveness, is not unrelated to the previous one, about narrative closure, for if one reads the ending 'happily' then one might be more likely to interpret the addresser's prescriptions as at least intradiegetically successful. On the contrary, if one deems the final chapter inconclusive, one might be less inclined to see the text as prescriptive or endorsing its addresser's advice. David Gascoigne, for example, argues that 'the very open, downbeat ending leaves the

[43] Leak, 'Phago-Citations', p. 68; Chris Andrews, 'Puzzles and Lists: Georges Perec's *Un homme qui dort*', *MLN*, 111 (1996), 775–96 (p. 782); Bellos, *Georges Perec*, p. 361.

[44] Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 256; Matthieu Rémy, 'Penser et représenter la société des années 1960: *Les Choses* et *Un homme qui dort* comme tentatives de littérature réaliste critique', *Roman 20–50*, 51 (2011), 27–38 (p. 37).

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reader nothing substantial to take from the story by way of a moral or an ideological conclusion'.[45]

There is certainly an at least apparent shift in the addresser's tone from descriptive to prescriptive in the novella's final pages. This new-found didacticism is reflected in three key textual features. The first might be termed intertextual negation: the addresser dismisses the addressee's resemblance to notorious literary forebears, including the protagonists of J.-M. G. Le Clezio's *Le Déluge*, Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.[46] Warren Motte writes of these allusions:

> The hero rejects successively the models of behavior proposed by the twentieth-century novel [...]. Intradiegetically, the hero rebels against his previous comportment [...]. On the extradiegetic level, they may be read as resolutions taken by Perec as author, as he situates himself with regard to the literary *chefs-d'œuvres* which dominate his cultural heritage.[47]

Motte's first insight reflects one good way of reading this chapter: the addresser is identified with the addressee, who is seen to be adjusting his attitude and hence repudiating the influence of the 'models of behavior' (or strategies) emblematized by earlier literary works. The text is also seen here by Motte to become self-consciously literary: the addresser draws attention to the novella's status as a literary text by distinguishing it from predecessors.

A second dominant textual feature in this final chapter is what we might call a syntax of revelation. This syntax hinges on the conjunction 'mais', which abounds and preponders here; for instance: 'Le rat, dans son labyrinthe, est capable de véritables prouesses [...]. Mais toi, pauvre Dédalus, il n'y avait pas de labyrinthe' (p. 239); 'Tu peux croire qu'à manger chaque jour le même repas tu accomplis un geste décisif. Mais ton refus est inutile' (p. 240). 'Mais' here indicates the overcoming of an illusion. As Bertolt Brecht highlights, 'not–but' sentences 'include an expectation which is justified by experience but, in the event, disappointed. One might have thought that… but one oughtn't to have thought it'.[48] 'Mais' is thus didactic; it corrects the addressee's mistaken beliefs.

Last but not least, the emergence of imperatives marks a shift in narratorial mood. There are three in the final chapter, the only three uttered by the addresser throughout the novella: 'Combien d'histoires modèles exaltent ta grandeur, ta souffrance! Combien de Robinson, de Roquentin, de Meursault, de Leverkühn! Les [...] belles images, les mensonges: [...] ne les crois pas [...]!' (pp. 238–39); 'Cesse de parler comme un homme qui rêve' (p. 242); 'Regarde! Regarde-les. Ils sont là des milliers et des milliers [...], plantés le long des quais, [...] des trottoirs

[45] David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 145.

[46] See Chalonge's notes in the Pléiade edition; Perec, *Œuvres*, ed. by Reggiani, I, 991, n. 71–73.

[47] Warren F. Motte, *The Poetics of Experiment: A Study of the Work of Georges Perec* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1984), p. 120.

[48] Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' (1951), in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 136–47 (p. 144).

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noyés de pluie de la place Clichy, en pleine rêverie océanique' (p. 242). Intertextual negation is at stake again in the first of the chapter's imperatives, which implores the addressee to nix literary models that exalt suffering: Roquentin, Meursault, Leverkühn, and Robinson — perhaps Crusoe, as Florence de Chalonge and Raoul Delemazure both suggest, but perhaps instead or also Céline's Léon Robinson.[49] The third passage cited above indeed evokes the rainy Place de Clichy to be found at the end of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, as well as the opening chapter of *Moby Dick*. Coming flush after the second imperative, the third, somewhat cryptically, beseeches the addressee to appreciate his commonality with the surrounding crowd, all also dreaming ('qui rêve', 'en pleine rêverie') in the rain.

If the reader identifies addresser with addressee, these negations, revelations, and imperatives might represent something of an epiphanic recovery on the part of the man once asleep. And if they do perceive what is happening as recovery, they might also accept the addresser's directions across the diegetic divide, as good directions with potential for some transitive purchase on their own extratextual life. But there are alternative hermeneutic opportunities here too. For one, if the reader is already in the habit of reading the addresser's words ironically, they might not cease doing so now; the addresser might still be ironizing with invisible quotation marks the addressee's sudden epiphany. Moreover, there is a cruelty to the addresser's proclamations and exhortations: 'Tu n'as rien appris, sinon que la solitude n'apprend rien [...]. Tu étais seul et voilà tout et tu voulais te protéger' (p. 140). This cruelty might be not so much a sign of recovery as a symptom similar to what Freud attributes to the melancholic: 'The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself'.[50] Both the *DSM*-5 and *ICD*-11 also speak of 'feelings of worthlessness' as symptomatic of depression, feelings we might find reflected in the protagonist's own interpretation of his experience as a case of self-delusion and moral weakness.

The novella's final paragraph leaves room for both interpretations: 'Tu n'es plus le maître anonyme du monde [...]. Tu n'es plus l'inaccessible, le limpide, le transparent. Tu as peur, tu attends. Tu attends, place Clichy, que la pluie cesse de tomber' (p. 242). To 'no longer be the anonymous master of the world' might mean to recover, to reconnect with the world and with others; but it might also be a matter of remaining in distress, except now without the enchanted fantasy of special powers that accompanied it before. The addresser refuses a series of earlier epithets, but not in favour of a singular solid one; instead, he and we are left with none whatsoever. We are told the addressee is scared and is waiting, but the final two sentences are open to plural readings. We can choose to read them 'happily':

[49] See Chalonge's annotations to the text in Perec, *Œuvres*, ed. by Reggiani, I, p. 991, n. 75; and Delemazure, 'Catalogue raisonné des emprunts intertextuels', p. 27.

[50] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and others, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), XIV (1957), pp. 243–58 (p. 246).

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the addresser has learnt to fear a crisis that he had once mythologized — a crisis metaphorized in the vehicle of 'la pluie' — and now waits for it to come to an end, a waiting indicative of a more hopeful orientation towards the future. This 'happy' reading is perfectly possible, but others are viable too. For example, what if the addressee is more utterly ambivalent: not fearing the rain and waiting for its end, but fearing and awaiting the very same object — the end of the rainfall, that is, the end of his crisis? Moreover, the rain has not in fact stopped: what if he is right to fear that it will not? Finally, we might discount metaphor from our reading, in which case we are left with just a frightened man waiting in the rain, and no clear sense of what comes next.

There are thus multiple readings possible here. On the one hand, one might understand the man asleep to be 'waking up', to be changing his attitude, to be moving beyond the crisis whose names, causes, and symptoms the novella has been equivocally exploring. Furthermore, if one subscribes to this reading, one might be inclined to read the text as espousing the attitude voiced by its addresser. In such a reading, the man asleep becomes almost symbolic for literature itself: just as the addressee 'rejoins the world' in the closing chapter, so too does literature in the form of this 'sure text', which now sets forth to proffer advice to its readers — the addresser issuing imperatives not only to the addressee, but the reader too, and offering an alternative to the 'histoires modèles' of Robinson, Roquentin, Meursault, and Leverkühn.

However, such an account of mental distress — one which ends volitionally, with the protagonist willing himself out of something like depression — might be controversial; for such a reading of the ending is uncomfortably close to a vision of mental distress that says 'get a grip', 'pull yourself together', and is thus insensitive to the intractability of some experiences.[51] Yet such imperatives are not altogether foreign to depressive experiences; the depressive person might hear commands of this sort, from within or from others. To a reader who sees the novella's ending instead as inconclusive, the addresser's prescriptions might appear less like transitive lessons and more like the vexing voice of frustrated demands.

This ambiguity — a narrative and functional ambiguity, about what is happening in the narrative and what the text is doing — offers a special kind of solution — a solution by irresolution — to the 'difficult balancing act' that Josie Billington suggests beleaguers discussions of literature's therapeutic potential.[52] For Billington, 'any therapeutic effect of literature arises precisely from literature's never trying or meaning to be a therapy'.[53] In Perec's case, we have a text that is ultimately unsure whether it means to be a therapy or not. This is to say, Perec's text is an unsure text; or rather, a text that it is unsure if it sure, unsure it is a text

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[51] For a critique of such an understanding of mental illness by a service user, see Charlotte Walker, 'Ten Things Not to Say to a Depressed Person', 31 July 2011, <https://charlottewalker.uk/2011/07/31/ten-things-not-to-say-to-a-depressed-person>.

[52] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 113.

[53] Billington, *Is Literature Healthy?*, p. 136.

fit to guide its readers, unsure it knows the right name for the pattern of experience it describes or by what strategy or attitude one ought to confront it. Holding its readers in this unsureness, *Un homme qui dort* invites them to explore with equivocation the names, causes, symptoms, and possible futures and solutions to experiences like those we might no longer so surely call depression.

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