Narratives of French Modernity

Themes, Forms and Metamorphoses

Essays in Honour of David Gascoigne
The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, was the fourteenth Frenchman to be nominated in the history of this prestigious award. ¹ On the Nobel Prize website, Le Clézio is summed up as the ‘author of new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explorer of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization.’² He speaks of himself in interviews and in his Nobel address as a ‘témoin du monde’, a phrase which specialist critics readily apply to his lyrical fictions of the 1980s onwards to describe their translation of his journeying in cultures and landscapes that contrast starkly with those of first world global capitalism:

Le Clézio est l’auteur d’une œuvre protéiforme dont l’apparente complexité peut s’avérer trompeuse. Quelle distance en effet entre le jeune écrivain en révolte contre les conventions du roman et les excès du monde techno-industriel et l’essayiste proche de l’anthropologue érigéant en modèle les sociétés amérindiennes plus harmonieuses, plus authentiques. [...] Nous pouvons vérifier à quel point la démarche réflexive de

¹ See <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/article4914236.ece> and <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates> for the other winners, including the very first in 1901, Sully Prudhomme. Winners André Gide (1947), Albert Camus (1957) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964) still feature on UK French Studies university curricula, whereas later winners such as Claude Simon (1988) or Gao Xingjian (2000) make only rare appearances. All websites quoted in this Introduction were last accessed in April 2010.

² <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2008/>. For a transcript of part of Le Clézio’s Nobel speech available among the rich collection of clips and information on this site, see also <http://mondesfrancophones.com/espaces/creolisations/conference-nobel-dans-la-foret-des-paradoxes/>.
Le Clézio se situe souvent à la croisée de l’interrogation historique, de l’observation anthropologique, et d’une spécula
cion d’ordre mythique et poétique.\(^3\)

Yet in spite of the translation of Le Clézio’s works into over fifty languages, in spite of his cosmopolitanism, his under
tstanding of literature as cultural exchange of the most profound and important order for the modern world, or again the visionary qualities of his writing, news of his
nomination led to consternation. Somehow his importance had largely
gone undetected on the postmodernist radars of critics and academic
specialists in France, the US and the UK.\(^4\) Was this literary-cultural
nomad and author of works that are ‘scandaleusement inclassables’\(^5\) paradoxically too postmodern, or not postmodern enough to attract
their attention?

The quotation above from Claude Cavallero’s monograph on Le Clézio
published in 2009 certainly suggests the latter. It places Le Clézio’s ‘anthro-
pological’ works at a clear, corrective distance from the earlier efforts of ‘le
jeune écrivain’, to determine the literary substance worthy of Nobel prizes.
Yet the works of the earlier period ‘en révolte contre les conventions du
roman et les excès du monde techno-industriel’, and hence part of the ‘œuvre
protéiforme dont l’apparente complexité peut s’avérer trompeuse’, clearly
bear the hallmarks of postmodernist writing. Le Clézio’s polymorphic texts
cannot therefore be as over-neatly polarized as Cavallero suggests.\(^6\) One

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4. The BNF Catalogue offers a fascinating insight into the relatively minor interest in
Le Clézio in the list of its holdings of edited volumes, media interviews and mono-
graphs about him. Officially founded in 2005, the ‘Association des Lecteurs de J.-M.
G. Le Clézio’ (<http://www.gallimard.fr/nicaise/html/autgall/01499.htm>) now
5. These are the words of Gerda Zeltner in 1970, quoted by Teresa di Scannio in her
6. Cavallero’s view is not that of other specialists of Le Clézio’s work, who see it as a
union of parts. See for example Ook Chung, *Le Clézio: une écriture prophétique*
need look no further than his first novel, *Le Procès-verbal*, which won the Prix Renaudot in 1963, to see that it already prefaces the many concerns that thread through the *œuvre* as a whole. Its remarkable authorial preface also launches the debates of the present volume concerning the definitions, classifications, themes, forms, ambiguity, metamorphoses and language of narratives of French modernity:

*Le Procès-verbal* raconte l’histoire d’un homme qui ne savait trop s’il sortait de l’armée ou de l’asile psychiatrique. J’ai donc posé dès le départ un sujet de dissertation volontairement mince et abstrait. Je me suis très peu soucié du réalisme (j’ai de plus en plus l’impression que la réalité n’existe pas); j’aimerais que mon récit fût pris dans le sens d’une fiction totale, dont le seul intérêt serait une certaine répercussion (même éphémère) dans l’esprit de celui qui le lit. Genre de phénomène familier aux amateurs de littérature policière, etc. C’est ce qu’on pourrait appeler à la rigueur le Roman-Jeu, ou le Roman-Puzzle. Bien entendu, tout ceci n’aurait pas l’air d’être sérieux, s’il n’y avait d’autres avantages, dont le moindre n’est pas de soulever le style, de rendre un peu plus de vivacité au dialogue, d’éviter descriptions poussiéreuses et psychologie rancie.

Je m’excuse d’avoir accumulé ainsi quelques théories; c’est une prétention un peu trop à la mode de nos jours. Je m’excuse également à l’avance pour les imprécisions et les fautes de frappe qui pourraient se trouver dans mon texte en dépit des révisions. […] Enfin, je me permets de vous signaler que j’ai entrepris la rédaction d’un autre récit, beaucoup plus étendu, racontant avec le maximum de simplicité ce qui se passe le lendemain de la mort d’une jeune fille.^[7]

While the various meanings of the ‘procès-verbal’ of the title are exploited throughout the text, the novel’s verbosity and use of dialogue call into question the reliability of its narrator(s). The challenge for the reader is whether to place confidence in any neat allocations of things to words and words to things. In its playful reordering of its world by alphabetical letter-chapters, beginning with ‘A’ and closing on ‘R’, *Le Procès-verbal* also questions classification systems and the making of sense and order in a mock-encyclopaedic romp that recalls Flaubert’s unfinished *Bouvard et*
Pécuchet with its Dictionnaire des idées reçues and heralds Georges Perec’s La Vie, mode d’emploi (1978). Foucault, too, lurks everywhere in the wings of this text which constantly explores the nature of ‘le savoir’. Adam Pollo, the novel’s protagonist, is a latter-day Marco Polo, explorer of civilization as if it were an alien new world. His experience gestures towards the then recent establishment of the American space programme and pre-figures how the astronauts of the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969 would see earth from a totally different vantage point. A. Pollo may be not only a second-hand mythological god, latter-day Adam, seer for his generation and even anti-hero, but also, simply, A. Protagonist(e), a ‘témoin du monde’ from partial, unfinished perspectives in the space beyond ‘R’ (the last chapter in the work). The novel is thus a kind of scrap-book of the personal clippings and ‘minutes’ of the ‘meetings’ Adam Pollo has with things, others, himself, space, time and writing in many genres. The narrative ends with Adam bed-bound in a liminal world (a psychiatric hospital?), between tenses and intertextual resonances (with, inter alia, Proust, Kafka, Simon and Foucault), a figure waiting not for Godot, but for further reader-authors to take an interest in the rich potential of his case. Indelibly stamped with the gravity of its immediate context – French colonial conflict, Cold War nuclear threat – Le Procès-verbal works out in literary form the collective-political and individual-existential malaise and uncertainties of its era. At the same time, it participates – though in very different ways from many of its contemporaries – in the tendency for textual play that marks novels of the period.

Le Clézio’s first novel can therefore be seen in various ways as a paradigm text for the present collection of essays. It is situated right at the centre of the time-frame that interests us: the twentieth century, with some overspill into the twenty-first. Thus, in the context of this volume, the word ‘modernity’ should be taken not as a synonym for ‘modernism’, but as a portmanteau term encompassing a wider and more complex set of temporal signifiers defining ‘modern’ or ‘recent’ times. This latter concept is

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8 The text contains hints throughout that Adam may have served in the Algerian war, which ended in 1962, as well as references to the possibility of nuclear holocaust.
of course infinitely susceptible to interpretation, and may be further complicated when applied to literature by the fact that the subjective experience of a given reader may be radically out of step with the scholarly categorization of literary works according to particular movements and ‘periods’. ‘Modernity’, however, finds its roots and broader situation in ways of seeing and understanding cultural ideals and their expression that were grounded, for France, in the establishment of the First Republic, and which are still unfolding as the consequences of those events. ‘Modernity’ therefore evokes more precisely the twentieth century’s dominant aesthetic movements of modernism and postmodernism as two constituent parts of this process, but equally conjures the apparently simpler notion of ‘most recent times’, those that are broadly understood by today’s population as contributing to our contemporary twentieth- and twenty-first-century condition and outlook. Written in the period of transition identified by Jean-François Lyotard as the birth of the postmodern age (which he places at the end of the 1950s), *Le Procès-verbal* again offers a model in which the infinitely subjective finds delimitation through a clustering of more communal and intersubjective configurations. The text raises questions about the location of evaluative priorities in the temporal, and specifically in the ‘now’, questions that our terms ‘modernity’ and ‘recent times’ seek to pinpoint in a dialogic process of investigation that weaves between period breaks and the many new movements that constitute modern literary theory. The ‘modern’, the ‘contemporary’, ‘le nouveau’, the ‘post-’, have indeed all proved seductive throughout French cultural history since the Revolution, as twentieth-century French critical theory of various hues only further endorses. The *Nouveau Roman*, like the *Nouvelle Vague* in cinema, illustrates the overriding desire to break with the past just as deconstruction challenges causal connections to it. We would prefer, however, to look beyond chronology,

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9 We are grateful to Margaret-Anne Hutton for her eloquent problematization of these notions during the symposium in honour of David Gascoigne, where most of the contributions in the present volume first took shape. Her essay below takes up the issue of periodization.

to see innovative ‘new departures’ in the context of a long and continual search for cultural renewal. It has been said, for example, that:

Modernism was modernism only when the rising foundations, beams and struts of modernity were still visible. Once modernity became an enveloping condition, artists who were part of that condition – from Pollock to Warhol, from Robbe-Grillet to Grass, from Artaud to Pinter – rebelled as much against modernist Prometheanism as against the modern inadequacies that provoked it.⁹

This model of constant evolution, questioning and self-regulation could be extended to all narratives of French modernity as we conceive of them, shifting and growing in perpetual motion, and always held in some kind of dynamic balance with different cultural forms and times. In talking throughout this volume of ‘French modernity’, then, we wish to suggest a greater focus on process than on category, despite the apparently limited, metropolitan and national thrust of those two words. It is, quite simply, both true and understandable that post-revolutionary France, with Paris as its capital, serves as a continual magnet for ‘French’ and ‘Francophone’ writing across our collection, an aesthetic and cultural reference point by default for experimental artistic production in the medium of the French language. All the narratives of French modernity explored in this volume, inside and outside the mainstream, respond in various ways to the spaces and times of French modernity, its counter-cultural energies and the way it calls upon renewed critical endeavour to understand ‘our times’.

As we have suggested above, Le Clézio’s first novel is an object lesson in configuring the slippery ground between oral and written accounts, between monolithic, official History (‘Histoire’) and plural, personal stories (‘histoires’), to weigh up whose word or voice counts as the authority for speech acts and for the authorization of knowledge. In Lyotard’s famous terms, formulated sixteen years later, Le Clézio’s début demonstrates the

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‘incrédulité à l’égard des métarécits’ that defines the postmodern. And indeed, the text’s mock-serious authorial preface, in the style of nineteenth-century confessional novels, knowingly frames the writer’s unfulfilled ambition for the text, so that its own account of the ‘postmodern condition’ might emerge from its delimited but open end. In addition to many of the thematic issues that the essays in this volume seek to explore and re-evaluate – the authority of métarécits such as ‘official’ History; relations between the individual and society; warfare; sexuality; violence; self and other; language; literary creation – the novel thus raises questions related to narrative form. The essays that follow weigh form and content together as we ask: What defines ‘narratives of modernity’ and how do they evolve? Which elements are common to modernist and postmodernist narratives because they are distinctively relevant to more broadly conceived narratives of our modern times? Are the roles of time, space and myth in narratives of modernity subjugated to self-reflexive language and a self-referential play of forms? And if grand narratives are obsolete, do narratives (always plural) of modernity displace (and replace) notions of meaning, history, truth, identity and ethical import by prioritizing ambivalence? Can important narratives of French modernity be recognized and evaluated, and hence distinguished from more derivative examples of their kind?

It will be clear from the foregoing that this book does not pretend to be an exhaustive survey or ‘narrative’ of the evolution of French literature in modern times: there are too many notable figures and movements missing from its pages for that to be possible – for example, we include little on surrealism and no essays at all on the Nouveau Roman (although it is an implicit subtext for the priorities of formal play discussed in several of the contributions below). This said, we do include important and iconic writers of the period – from Valéry and Apollinaire through Céline to Tournier, Modiano and the current generation of Houellebecq, Germain and Nimier – whose works, while they enable us to observe a certain chronological

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development through modernity towards postmodernity, also interrogate one another in fascinating ways across the century. These anachronistic, bi-directional echoes allow us to transcend the dangers of a terminology dependent on chronology (‘modern’, ‘post-’) that invites critics to imagine modernist / postmodernist writings as necessarily attached to sequential periods with a baton-change just after the mid-point of the twentieth century. Rather, the authors and works selected allow us to bring into relief the ways in which the modernist and postmodernist cross-cut one another, demonstrating the existence of exceptionally strong elements of continuity and crossover between such currents throughout the course of our elongated twentieth century. Our selection also enables us to question some elements of the consensus that has been posited about the postmodern in particular: for example, several contributors draw out from actual cultural practice some responses to those who see postmodernism as a recipe for ethical and aesthetic disorientation, for most of the formally postmodern narratives discussed here do not shrink from the positive presentation of alternative values.

Above all, in this introduction as in the chapters, that follow, we outline a range of literary resources exploited by our modern French narrators: important, dominant formal and thematic tendencies, and the various metamorphoses through which they pass to shape literary creation of the period. In this, we echo the volume’s Honorand, David Gascoigne (of whom more below), in his lifelong interest in the strategies through which the writer’s engagement with the world and with ideas is projected into textual form – and how that form may, in turn, inflect the various readings to which the text can be subjected.¹³

¹³ For a particularly concentrated example of this focus (which is evident throughout his work), see Gascoigne’s brilliant analysis of the translation into text of an author’s engagement with his own dreams in David Gascoigne, ‘Dreaming the Self, Writing the Dream: The Subject in the Dream-Narratives of Georges Perec’, in Johnnie Gratton & Paul Gifford (eds), Subject Matters: Subject and Self in French Literature from Descartes to the Present (Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 128–44.
Themes and forms

While none could be described as ‘realist’, and many are notably unrealistic, all of the works studied in this collection nevertheless show a high degree of reference to the recognisable ‘real world’. As Michael Tilby and Brian T. Fitch, both writing at the start of the 1990s, remind us, while the Nouveau Roman and structuralism ‘posited the text as a closed, self-contained system, sufficient unto itself’; there continued a lineage of French authors for whom textual self-referentiality was not enough. They not only saw ‘concerns beyond those of a narrowly literary nature as continuing to demand new forms of expression’ but also recognized ‘the need for the novel to engage with some of the more traumatic experiences that have called into question the right of our inherited cultural traditions to be regarded as civilised’. Likewise, while the majority of our texts, from both before and after the Nouveau Roman, may problematize and explore literary expression and authority as themes in their own right, they do so largely within the framework of a broader social and cultural critique.

Indeed, for several of our writers, the very nature of the relationship between textual referent and real-world counterpart, as well as the way that relationship is staged in the text, provides an important focus for analysis. Céline’s Casse-pipe perhaps most obviously draws attention to this concern: by ‘internally’ destabilizing relations between the various components of narrative and shaking signifiants free from their signifiés, the text enacts the absurdity and dislocation of an ‘external’ world marked

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16 Ibid., p. 3.
17 In this section, we shall be drawing freely on the contents of the chapters that follow without, however, interrupting the flow of our remarks to attribute every idea and interpretation. The influence of our collaborators should be taken as read.
by the brutality of war. Gracq, on the other hand, challenges the process of representation by placing at the centre of *Le Rivage des Syrtes* an absolutely crucial moment for the rest of the diegesis – a border-crossing that will trigger conflict – that is elided in the narration itself, and represented only vaguely and retrospectively. For other authors, the key question for narrative is how it can capture in verbal form the ‘unsayable’ of human experience, from the ineffable horror of the holocaust (Tabachnik, Rio, Germain) and the silencing trauma of torture and exile (Mertens) to the indescribable intensity of metaphysical ecstasy (Valéry, Tournier). Even Mounier’s non-fictional *L’Éveil de l’Afrique noire*, which directly engages through reportage with the pressingly real political and cultural issues of colonialism, education and ‘la civilisation’, demonstrates the complex tension between narrative and the world beyond it by using photographic illustrations of Africa produced not during Mounier’s own travels but from the ethnographic archives. Detached in this way from their original purpose and context, these visual referents inflect the impact of Mounier’s text, and indeed are bound to do so in very different ways for readers from different backgrounds and periods.

This relationship to the material world clearly reflects our narratives’ implication in the historical events of their time, throughout the period under study. Landmark events such as two World Wars and the holocaust loom conspicuously over the works of Céline, Modiano and Germain. Trends such as migration and asylum-seeking, together with decolonization and the inauguration of new north–south relations lead to explorations of these themes in the second half of the period, for instance in *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and *Terre d’asile*, while texts also evolve to accommodate changing social attitudes to gender, sexuality and power as the period progresses. Dominant intellectual currents can likewise be detected at work in many of the narratives: Nietzsche, the avant-garde and surrealism predominantly in the first half of the century; Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Kristeva in the second half; and Freud throughout the entire period. However unsurprising these chronological particularities are, it is useful to note them, for we can set against them one or two thematic and formal commonalities that bear closer inspection, and that might be kept in mind by readers of the essays that follow.
Introduction

The most strikingly predominant theme shared by the narratives under discussion is their marked preoccupation, spanning the century, with explorations of the self, most often vis-à-vis its others. One manifestation of this appears in a kind of covert ‘autofiction’, in which certain writers perform an autobiographical infiltration of their narratives, sometimes even spreading themselves over a number of characters, voices or (as in Mounier) ‘codes’. Most overtly, Patrick Chamoiseau sketches a fictional character (a ‘marqueur de paroles’ named Oiseau de Cham) evidently based upon himself as a means, paradoxically, of attenuating biographical attention of the sort that defines the real Chamoiseau as ‘A Writer’. Critics have seen in this strategy the hesitations of an author from a predominantly oral culture faced with the necessity of committing himself to paper. Less obviously, but in the grip of an even more focused self-problematization, Valéry explores an apparently abstract ‘moi’ crystallized in his *Jeune Parque*, and so gives expression to the intense observational experiment documented in his *Cabiers* in which he was himself both scientific observer and object of the observation. More furtively still, Céline makes an appearance in *Casse-pipe* via small details such as names or occupations that his characters share with his family, while Apollinaire is present in the furious energy with which he may be seen in *Les Onze mille verges* to explore his own very particular political and oedipal impulses. In very different ways, a ‘written’ authorial self – more or less distant from the writing self – is frequently offered as an element of narrative and object of interest.

A further point in common is that the self is, for all of the authors studied, robustly embodied, for they share, with varying degrees of prominence, a tendency to conceive of the individual subject not as pure intellection or


free-floating psyche, but as rooted in a physical being whose adventures in
the material world are in some way constitutive of her/his identity. While
by no means suggesting that these writers occupy the same point of view,
we can say that from the pornographic outrages of Apollinaire’s Vibescu
and Fleutiaux’s Ogre to the transgressive excitement of Gracq’s Aldo, the
suffering of Mertens’s Morales, the solar erotics of Valéry’s Parque, or the
religious transport of Germain’s Prokop, the body remains a key site of
meaning, an instrument of self-expression and a locus of exchange with
that alterity against which the self is measured and defined.

The relationship between self and other is explored by our authors to
rather different ends. For Nimier and Houellebecq, the self finds equilib-
rium in the precarious partnership of lovers, while in Mertens and Tournier
the restorative, balancing Other is a child. In the narratives of Apollinaire,
Céline, Fleutiaux, Tabachnik and (more abstractly) Gracq, the presiding
mode of relation is often combative or even violent. Mounier’s personalist
agenda and Chamoiseau’s creolist one establish ideals of tolerance in rela-
tions to the Other, albeit differently formulated according to their greatly
differing contexts. Within the Christian framework of Sylvie Germain’s
work, the search for the self can be seen as refracted through the ‘pari de
Pascal’; and the power of faith – even in the face of God’s silence – to restore
to authenticity a self that is in some way exiled, damaged or fractured.
Equally, however, her characters’ quest for the self is pursued constantly
through moments of relational interface: the in-betweens of language,
individuals and states of being. Sense of self, for Germain as for many of
our writers, is not a fixed state but a process of negotiated becoming. Most
ambiguous of all, perhaps, the narratives of Michel Tournier present self–
other relations that may actually be interpreted in opposite ways. Does
Tiffauges carry his boys like a monstrance, celebrating their alterity; or
does he carry them off, like a colonizing, cannibalizing Erlking? Is the
cabin-boy Jeudi a potential Other, empowered with autonomous speech
(‘je dis’) and possibly opening onto a future of relativity; or a mere dupli-
cate of Robinson, whose arrival seals not only the protagonist’s entry into
a self-sufficient solar ‘absolute’, but also a definitive closure of narrative?
Critics have been, and remain, divided on some of these questions. What is clear once again is the central interest of the self as literary theme and narrative resource.

Very often this interest in the self is underlined by the radical isolation of the protagonist whose self is under exploration for, as Edward Hughes shows, the use of polarities and marginalization is a well-established narrative tactic to externalize ‘identitarian drama’. This no doubt accounts for the popularity of the ‘robinsonade’ throughout Western literature after Defoe, but most particularly in French narratives of the twentieth century, as its frequent appearance in these pages will confirm. Removed from society and from history, the self becomes a human laboratory, a tabula rasa ready for radical psychological or spiritual developments, and capable of adopting new critical perspectives on the society the individual has left behind. This is also true to some extent of the loner isolated within society, and our narratives abound in marginals, exiles, monsters and individuals whose position or perspective is somehow separated from others’ of their kind: Houellebecq’s poetic voice for instance proffers an especially caustic

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22 And see Lieve Spaas & Brian Stimpson (eds), Robinson Crusoe, Myths and Metamorphoses (London & New York: Macmillan, 1996).
evaluation of late twentieth-century social behaviour, with its emphasis on good looks and superficial conformity, arising from the poet’s sense of exclusion from the sexual marketplace; Fleutiaux’s ‘Femme de l’ogre’, on the other hand, ultimately experiences her marginal condition more positively, as a liberation from conventional roles imposed on women by patriarchy, and a basis for growth and change, as the text’s final image of a moth – symbol of metamorphosis par excellence – suggests. Fleutiaux – an author who in many ways epitomizes the engagement between real world concerns and an ‘unrealistic’ narrative played out by mythical characters in a legendary setting – thus displays a profound interest in the workings of the individual self, while also conducting an implacable critique of contemporary French society. These marginalized perspectives allow writers of modern French narratives to ‘impose [upon readers] a displacement of their vision’, inviting them ‘to view a familiar set of […] norms from an off-centre position’.23

The isolation of the protagonist in some texts overlaps in significant ways with another literary form that marks several of our narratives: the katabatic journey or quest. A number of our narratives are structured by some version of the notion, expressed in Sylvie Germain’s *Immensités* and quoted by two of our contributors (Goulet and Garfitt), that ‘Il faut descendre très bas pour trouver un accès au Très-Haut.’24 The capital letters of ‘Très-Haut’ are valid not only for Germain’s metaphysical scheme in which the ultimate high authority is the Christian God, but also in other texts where the protagonist’s outward adventures reflect his/her internal descent, in Germain’s words, ‘très bas au fond de soi, dans les ténèbres de ses entrailles’,25 and where the ultimate outcome of the quest into the depths is one that – whether physical, psychological or spiritual – is attached to a sense of transcendence arising from the momentous nature of the journey. This intimate connection between the material and often painful ‘très-bas’

23 David Gascoigne, ‘Michel Tournier’, in Michael Tilby (ed.), *Beyond the Nouveau Roman*, pp. 64–99 (p. 95). Gascoigne’s remarks, applied to Tournier, are clearly valid for many of our writers.
and the lofty, transcendent ‘Très-Haut’ – or as David Gascoigne puts it, the ‘co-presence of the physical and the metaphysical’ which is to be found prominently in Valéry, Tournier and Germain and more obliquely in Gracq and Fleutiaux, suggests a degree of reference back to the patterns of ‘naturalisme mystique’ which combines meticulously naturalist description with metaphysical content to suggest the spiritual immanent in the material world. Other writers, laying less emphasis on a spiritual agenda as such, nevertheless also bring together monstrous, marvellous or mythological characters, deeds and settings in order to comment upon what we have termed ‘real world’ societal or political problems, as well as to reflect upon the nature of literature itself. Apollinaire’s monstrous narrative, played out under the sign of warfare, speaks of violence and excess, but at the same time exemplifies the uncontrollable poetic imagination; Chamoiseau, nearly a hundred years later, uses the mythical to create narrative on an epic scale that does justice to the enormity of the French slave trade – but also to touch on a potentially healing world of the ‘merveilleux’ beyond our own, accessed through imagination and artistry; Gracq’s protagonist Aldo becomes fully ‘himself’ when connected in some mysterious way to transcendent forces of a mythified History beyond the individual or human – an element of the text which spotlights the questionable role of Les Rivages itself as historical allegory.

At the same time, a rather different strategy is represented by writers such as Modiano, Tabachnik, Mertens, Nimier and Rio who, without shying away from archetypal narrative structures such as ritual, journey, quest, descent or polarity, prefer not to emphasize the mythical potential of narrative and focus more closely on a psychological depiction of

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human, social and moral issues, albeit combined in many cases with a self-consciously literary outlook. Thus, Modiano and Rio can be compared for their characters’ use of role-play not only to portray the fragmentation and even indeterminacy of a self placed under great psychological pressure by the complex moral questions bearing down upon it, but also to explore the nature of those questions themselves. As their protagonists adopt various masks, each of which can be seen as a new subject-position in relation to the character’s own dubious actions and allegiances, these texts invite a meditation on the value and indeed possibility of truth itself; and they figure that mistrust of the historical ‘métarécit’ – in this case, as regards the Second World War – that we have already observed in *Le Procès-verbal*. Yet both texts clearly can be read against the archetypal ‘journey’ narrative, and are fascinating for their very refusal to follow its clear-cut structures leading to the ultimate establishment of a renewed or restored individual self. Thus, they underline even further the disturbing disorientation of their protagonists. These writers, together with Mertens, Nimier and Tabachnik, discreetly use mythical structures under the surface of a largely believable ‘everyday’ scenario to undermine historical, political or cultural (even mythical) grand narratives with a constant, mobile questioning that is presented as more ethical than any certainty. This narrative mobilization either of recognisable individual myths or of their identifiable archetypal structures has the effect, as David Walker has noted, of ‘making us re-read old forms with a measure of self-consciousness, using our recognition of them as a means of setting in motion the workings of intertextuality and prompting a dialogue between the different interpretations of reality that different structures propose.’

We shall return below to the immeasurable

28 David H. Walker, ‘Formal Experiment and Innovation’, in Timothy Unwin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel from 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 126–44 (p. 142). Walker’s remarks are specifically attached to Tournier, but are clearly valid for a wide circle of writers. Tilby also noted these tendencies in 1991, pointing out that among the writers studied in *Beyond the Nouveau Roman*, ‘the most striking trend is a studied avoidance of recognisable contemporary French settings’ and ‘a delight in the imaginative potential of fiction that is realized most notably through the cultivation of the realms of fantasy and
importance of intertextual mechanisms as a resource in modern French narratives.

Following upon this centrality to our narratives of the interest in self and other, three more themes come prominently into focus, all of which are dependent on self–other structures: violence, sex and language. Regarding the first of these, the over-riding pretext for the presence of violence in our texts is the terrible experience of two world wars followed by continuous hostilities on French soil or in French colonies until the Algerian war came to a close in 1962.29 The majority of our texts bear the marks – whether explicitly or implicitly – of warfare of one kind or another, as well as war’s correlative brutalities such as the holocaust, imprisonment, torture and slavery. Some, like Céline in *Casse-pipe* and Tournier in *Le Roi des aulnes*, debunk the notion of cleanly mechanistic warfare in the twentieth century: through his absurd manufacture of new obscenities and by rendering meaningless such military systems as passwords and bureaucratic procedures, Céline suggests that modern war is as dehumanizing as ever it was before; Tournier’s depiction of increasingly decrepit technology as Tiffauges is relegated from driving his Hotchkiss to travelling by wood-burning truck, by horse and finally on foot, makes clear that there is nothing ‘progressive’ or ‘modern’ about warfare at all.30 Like Tabachnik, Germain and Rio, Tournier refers to a ‘given’ of Western culture when he evokes the holocaust as the ultimate expression of violence and depravity. Gracq is perhaps more ambivalent: he hints at the absurd disproportions of war and its causes by depicting the ludicrous ease with which the actions of an individual lead to a conflict of nations; but at the same time, he uses the familiar trope of war as a carnavalesque suspension of normal order, a state of generalized

30 The reference is all the more clear because Hotchkiss manufactured tanks and arms as well as cars. At the end of the book, Tiffauges, carrying Ephraïm, is fleeing the Russian tanks when he sinks into the bog.
permissiveness that can even be experienced as tempting. The misrule of war can thus occasion a dangerous, heady vitality as Eros confronts Thanatos (as in Gracq or Apollinaire); or a more muted and threatening confusion, as in *La Ronde de nuit*, where acts of violence take place ‘off-stage’, but the threat of it is present everywhere, from the names of certain characters (Violette Morris) to the bruised colours of the flowers and the women’s make-up. Chamoiseau, for his part, while condemning the ‘domination brutale’ of colonization and slavery, nevertheless acknowledges the temptations of ‘righteous’ violence exemplified by colonial freedom struggles all over the world in which *Biblique’s* protagonist becomes involved, only to realize that, in the end, the power structures inherent in imperialism are not dissolved by conflict but move out of the physical sphere into a ‘domination furtive’ of the weak by the powerful thanks to cultural hegemony, global capitalism and new technologies.\(^{31}\)

The portrayal of violence overlaps overtly with that of sexual contact in a small number of our texts, most spectacularly *Les Onze mille verges*, where outlandish sexual cruelties are celebrated as elements in a textual project; and *La Femme de l’ogre*, where the ogre’s unspeakable violations are condemned as pertaining to an inherently aggressive patriarchal order. Even in these shocking instances, sexual activity is evoked as much to throw light on other themes as to figure as a theme in itself. While Nimier and Fleutiaux question gender roles, and Tournier offers a sometimes scandalous critique of heteronormativity,\(^{32}\) our texts are mostly more interested in questioning a much wider range of normative discourses and power structures: the evolution in twentieth-century European attitudes to sex makes it a powerful metaphor or proving ground for more permissive mores and tolerant politics in general terms. Thus while the symbol of Valéry’s ideally balanced spiritual-physical Eros as life-force harks back to the nineteenth century in the totalizing, closed sign of the self-perpetuating *Ouroboros*

\(^{31}\) In addition to *Biblique des derniers gestes* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 2002), analysed by Anne Chevalier in the present volume, see Patrick Chamoiseau, *Écrire en pays dominé* (Pars: Gallimard, 1997).

(the snake biting its own tail), the ideal emblem of erotic plenitude nearly
a hundred years later would no doubt be more akin to Fleutiaux’s moth:
changing, growing, liberated from cultural patterning and the notion of
‘essential’ or inherent characteristics, and opening into future interactions
with the Other. In between these two images of very differently conceived
erotic impulsion, our texts deploy a vastly varied array of examples, opin-
ions and orientations related to carnal coupling – and, ambivalent as ever,
Tournier juxtaposes both at the end of *Vendredi*! Reference to sexuality is perhaps most interesting when it is used stra-
tegically to reinforce the liminal or the transgressive in a text, suggesting
that clear-cut boundaries between the basic categories of male and female,
masculine and feminine form part of an underlying landscape of differen-
tiation for those particular writers. For example, when Modiano’s Swing
Troubadour/Princesse de Lamballe indulges in transvestism, this and his
ambiguously bisexual names underpin the generalized sense of moral con-
fusion in the setting of wartime Paris. Similarly, when Tournier’s Robinson
begins to think of himself in the feminine as ‘l’épouse du soleil’, it is a sign
of his transition out of the backwardly heteronormative thinking that
characterized his earthbound phase, and into a new relationship with the
sun. In a more politically charged way, Chamoiseau’s Balthazar experiences
an unbridled polymorphous and role-reversing encounter with a woman
in a drifting boat, signifying the breaking down of all bodily barriers: this
sexually expressed liminality is part of a wider pattern of ‘endemic anxi-
ety around the limits and thresholds of the body’ which underpins and
‘mirrors a similar anxiety concerning any sense of autonomous selfhood’
that is inextricably linked to the oppressive Antillean history of slavery.33
In a different idiom, less dependent on the blurring of male and female
categorizations, the whole tenor of Gracq’s narrative becomes more sensu-
ous as the Farghian coast comes into view, charging with an erotic energy
the excitement of forbidden boundary-crossing.

33 See Maeve McCusker, *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory*, p. 147. The episode
in question occurs in *Biblique des derniers gestes*, pp. 711–17.
The transgression of boundaries and the imprint of history are also the themes at play in Rio’s *La Leçon d'abîme*, where sado-masochistic practices and voyeurism involve, variously: a (possible) perpetrator; victim and perpetrator surrogates; and an investigator, all bound up in a tale of holocaust atrocities. The sexual activities, and the watching of them, become a powerful device to examine a complex cluster of uncertainties, including the difficulty of disentangling the relationship between perpetrator and victim in a murky and perhaps fabricated historical account; and the inevitable implication of the historical investigator for whom impartiality is impossible yet whose involvement will only muddy the waters even further. The sexual element here draws in the reader-investigator-voyeur, forcing her/him urgently to confront the even weightier historical and philosophical matters raised by the text, such as authenticity, imposture and human cruelty, and the reception, evaluation and transmission of testimony. The dialectics of private and public, forbidden and permissive associated with sex give structural force to the device, while the use of sex as metaphor also suggests the strongly irrational element in urges of power, violence and cruelty that shape moments of our (continuing) history.

In short, while far from detached from the successive sexual revolutions of the twentieth century (as Mairi Maclean clearly shows in her essay), the authors discussed in this collection can largely be set apart from those who, like Cixous, Guibert or Millet, have written extended meditations on gender and/or sexuality *per se*. Even Michel Houellebecq’s poetic despatches from the carnal combat zone have as much to say about individual alienation and society’s penchant for commodification in general as they do about sexuality.

We have already noted that mythical and intertextual forms, and themes such as the self, violence and sex may be used to draw attention to literary practice itself. But beyond – or perhaps beneath – this interest in creative artistry, the writers discussed in this volume engage in various ways with more basic questions of communication through language. Apollinaire’s and Céline’s profane inventiveness contains a spark of almost vicious delight in neologisms and unaccustomed collocations; Chamoiseau restlessly probes the territory between written and spoken linguistic codes, resorting in *Biblique* to a verbal transcription of the imagined ‘gestes’ (in...
both senses) of a silent man; Valéry, Tournier and Fleutiaux too create communication through silence or physical gesture such as dance or performance. Tournier also shares with Germain a preoccupation with the sacred origins of expression in a species of Ur-language or, in Tournier’s term, *Logos* or ‘langue lourde’ that would not only bridge the self–other gap by being absolute in meaning and thus perfectly understood, but would also somehow reconcile word and silence, man and God. The ‘cri’ in Germain has something of this about it, as an essential expression of life, both purely simple and endlessly meaningful.

Such longing for an ‘absolute’ communication may be partly symptomatic of the vast shift in perspectives about the self and its re-founding in language brought about by structuralist and postmodernist thought. Re-reading the links between knowledge, power, society, ethics and discourse, Lyotard suggests, *inter alia*, that the disintegration of grand narratives and ‘anciens pôles d’attraction’ leads to a society where ‘chacun est renvoyé sur soi’. Yet he insists, nevertheless, that this does not by any means herald the end of society, for:

> Le soi est peu, mais il n’est pas isolé, il est pris dans une texture de relations plus complexe et plus mobile que jamais. Il est toujours, jeune ou vieux, homme ou femme, riche ou pauvre, placé sur des ‘nœuds’ de circuits de communication, seraient-ils infimes. Il est préférable de dire: placé à des postes par lesquels passent des messages de nature diverse.\(^\text{37}\)

The ‘lien social’, then, must be re-imagined largely as a ‘jeu de langage, celui de l’interrogation, qui positionne immédiatement celui qui la pose, celui à qui elle s’adresse, et le référent qu’elle interroge’. In other words, we are invited to understand the relation of self and other that so preoccupies our writers as fundamentally composed of discursive exchange in the interrogative mode. And while this thought has been taken up by literary writers to

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37 Ibid., p. 31.
38 Ibid., p. 32.
different degrees, it has – aided by its influential parallel development in the work of philosophers like Foucault and Derrida – had an irreversible impact on the way that we now read. Sceptical, questioning and ready for *différence*, the (post)modern reader (and not only within the academy) tends to approach texts in provisional mode, conscious of the contingency of meaning and the potential for multiple, changing or unreliable interpretations, more than one of which may be proffered by the text itself. In Tournier’s fascination with the ‘copie de la copie’, Rio’s manipulation of mimetic behaviour or Germain’s use of ‘echolalia’, we may see the writer’s conscious interrogation of authenticity as well as her/his exposure of ‘play’ – in every sense – in the fabric of meaning. For the twenty-first-century reader, whose practices of interpretation have been forged in postmodernity, this interrogation of authenticity also includes renewed negotiation of his/her own reading positions. Earlier writers, such as Gide, Céline and Camus, already prospect these territories, and offer a useful vantage point of retrospection on modernity that our volume as a whole promotes.

**Forms and metamorphoses**

One of the striking points to emerge from this volume is that the two most formally experimental, anti-realist and linguistically transgressive works discussed in these pages are written before the Second World War which, as we have seen, deeply marks books written in its wake. The importance of this observation takes the reader in several directions. Reading Apollinaire’s *Les Onze mille verges* and Céline’s *Casse-pipe* for their formal richness and techniques invites the critic to more careful re-evaluation and classification of what is innovative in the narrative forms of works by these as well as by later (post-war) writers. The forms we associate with modernist writing – such as the importance of mythic patterns through overt attention to their remaking – figure largely in Apollinaire and Céline. However, these writers’ treatment of such patterns is closer to that normally associated
with postmodernism, in that unmaking, dismantling and fragmentation predominate. Indeed, Apollinaire’s intense, almost obsessive uses of enumeration, serialization and ‘bricolage’ to disrupt narrative order and coherence largely pre-empt very similar formal strategies employed by France’s *Nouveaux Romanciers* and their descendants among postmodern writers, such as Echenoz, Le Clézio, Perec, Redonnet and Wittig. The existence of ‘pre-postmodern’ forms and writing practices in the works of Apollinaire and Céline thus makes the point of this volume. Over-neat taxonomies pivoting on the ‘before and after’ of a major event (for example the French Revolution, the Second World War) or on supposedly discrete, consecutive cultural movements (such as modernism and postmodernism) are immediately liable to reversal and deconstruction. The essays in the first section of this volume, while treating texts and writers in largely chronological order, also challenge modern positivist notions that the most recent narratives, because so contemporary, are the most formally complex or innovative.

Another avenue to consider, arising from the ‘bi-directional’ frame of reference we wish to recommend – of reading Houellebecq, say, through Céline, and Céline through Houellebecq – is that the twenty-first-century reader might usefully view and test the formal experimentation and recapitulations of each writer within longer creative and critical trajectories of a more encompassing French modernity. The self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of theme and form that determine much French ‘avant-garde’ writing – from Dada to Derrida – seem to play upon the values associated with key critical theories of *écriture*, such as Roland Barthes’s *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, Robbe-Grillet’s *Pour un Nouveau Roman*, Jacques Derrida’s *Écriture et la différence* and Julia Kristeva’s *Séméiotiké: recherches d’une sémanalyse*, that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and held enormous sway until at least the late 1980s.\(^{39}\)

While not inherently set against older forms *per se*, these theories prioritize recent emphases on textual complexity,

difficulty, undecideability, impersonality, multiplicity, interchangeability and intertextuality. It was deemed impossible for a ‘new’ text to be unlike any other, since it is always already in and of language, and of the world as (a mosaic of) text. As Kristeva put it:

\[\text{[T]out texte se construit comme mosaique de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d’un autre texte. A la place de la notion d’intersubjectivité s’installe celle d’intertextualité et le langage poétique se lit, au moins, comme double.}^{40}\]

The undoubted flexibility and potential inclusiveness of the linguistic turn, however, cover some problematic implications, including the levelling and homogenizing of pattern-making and processes of language change. The much-cited nature of the ‘undecideability’ of text is indeed double. One example serves to make the point: the preponderance of neologisms (‘intertextuality’, ‘différance’) in these theories of text and language which overtly deny authorship or origination of terms by relying on rules of grammar and etymologies (such as ‘robinsonade’ from *Robinson Crusoe*, explored in several essays in the second part of this volume). Yet the term ‘différance’ was not produced from extant rules and vocabularies within language systems thanks to some Brownian motion colliding its particles with a fortunate ‘chance’ result. Rather, its progenitor was Derrida. The neologism ‘intertextuality’ is more complex, since it is recognized as having been ‘coined’ by Kristeva,\(^{41}\) yet Barthes, Genette and Riffaterre have all laid claim to and particularized it in rather different ways. For purists, therefore, the word ‘intertextuality’ has several inflections (determined by its different coiners\(^{42}\)). For the general user after 1966, it is a usefully vague umbrella term for ‘allusion’ or ‘reference’. Intertextuality is thus all-encompassing, an operation of language since time immemorial, as well as very specific to 1960s theories emerging from the *Tel Quel* and other critical schools.


\(^{42}\) See Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. 
Its impossible generality and particularity, as well as its potential for pluralization and redefinition (as ‘intertextualités’ or as ‘intermediality’, for example\textsuperscript{43}), make the term ‘intertext’ or ‘intertextuality’ only as good as a most superficial identification of textual inter-relations. How the ‘inter-’ works variously upon the ‘text’/‘textuality’ cannot be more fully clarified except by specific redefinition.

Yet the formal, linguistic and ‘intertextual’ intensities of Apollinaire and Céline, as indeed of Modiano in the 1960s and Germain in the 1990s – in their highly (self-)referential but open-ended, decentred, dispersed, ambivalent, or even overly symmetrical, structures and allusions, both mocking and shocking the reader’s ‘reality’ thresholds – again offer a far-reaching challenge to these mid- and late-twentieth-century critical theories. It is not language as system (‘intertextuality’ may also be conflated with this term), or some more virtuoso formalism (a \textit{mise en abyme} of practices of \textit{mise en abyme}) that is at stake in these very different writers, but a more creative formal provocation: exuberance in, or strip-tease of, citational and generic conventions, the better to display and play with them for particular ends over and above verbal virtuosity. Texts in this collection by writers as diverse as Nimier, Fleutiaux, Modiano and Rio thus actively engage in intertextual performances by ‘trying on’ different narrative forms or subgenres, the better to demonstrate the creative, subversive politics of imitation – always partial and incomplete – of other texts and of the ‘real’ they represent. An important question, then, posed by the volume as a whole and the essays individually is: what are the particular ends of the various intertextual endeavours of writers of French modernity?

There are, therefore, no essays in this volume that explore hypertext fiction, the genre that might be closest to theories of \textit{écriture}/deconstruction, of which the \textit{Nouveau Roman} encapsulates one, distinctive, French narrative form prior to the emergence of works produced thanks to the internet.\textsuperscript{44}


\textsuperscript{44} ‘Hypertext’ fiction also has a longer trajectory than the development of the World Wide Web with its possibilities for co-production, narrative alternatives and
Instead, our focus is the *Nouveau Roman*’s many Others – encapsulated by Le Clézio’s *Procès-verbal* – those writers and works similar to it in terms of related formal interests and techniques, yet having distinctive thematic and narrative priorities. Among these techniques are multivocalism, multifocalism, and the shifting perspectives and frames of recognisable and unrecognisable times and spaces which abound in the very different works of the 1950s (by Mounier and Gracq); the 1968 text *par excellence*, Modiano’s *La Ronde de nuit*; and the works of Tournier or writing of the 1990s (by Chamoiseau, Nimier and others). If, like the *Nouveau Roman*, these works all actively return in various ways to ‘architextes’, to borrow Genette’s term for sub-generic, generic and supra-generic models (such as the Bible, the epic journey, the lives of saints), their authors are, however, well aware of multiple contexts in which any ‘architexte’ ceases to be a fixed, universal category. The world outside the text is thus of as much importance as the world of the text for Chamoiseau, Germain and Tournier for example, who use iconic and authoritative texts (such as the Bible), both as core formal reference points and as moral compasses. This formal reprise of a longer past the better to span the more vexing present has much more in common with Nathalie Sarraute’s theoretical discussions of the novel in *L’Ère du soupçon* (1956) than with Robbe-Grillet’s essay of 1957 ‘Sur quelques notions périmées’, which excluded as key properties of the novel ‘personnage’, ‘histoire’, ‘engagement’, ‘forme et contenu’. By directly recalling paradigmatic ‘architextes’ (such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or *Robinson Crusoe*) in the formal and thematic constructions of their works, Modiano, Tournier and

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hyperlinks. Lawrence Stern’s *Tristram Shandy* and Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* are cited as earlier precursors. Honoré d’Urfé’s *Astrée* provides an as yet undocumented French precursor to the digressive, hypertext fiction genre.


Mertens display a profound suspicion of breaks with past forms, as well as a certain wariness vis-à-vis the prioritization of fragmentation, ‘bricolage’ or the Kristevan ‘mosaic of texts’ as formal display of contiguous discontinuity. And crucially, this aesthetic of ongoing connection matches such authors’ preoccupation with those stances and positions – cultural, political or ethical – that are of continuing concern to French modernity.

A further direction for the reader to consider, issuing from our observation regarding the ‘pre-postmodernity’ of Apollinaire and Céline, is that while these two writers adopt formal narrative tactics that are clearly anti-realist and largely anti-mimetic, what emerges on examination is that they owe many of their apparently ‘postmodern’ features to gothic or baroque inspiration. Emphasis on the ugly, the grotesque, on the un-politically correct, the crude, the salacious or the effete has formal as well as thematic implications. The forms of shock inherent in Apollinaire and Céline thus invite readers to seek out the gothic and the baroque in both the forms and themes of other more experimental writers studied in this book. The limpid prose forms and almost translucent narrative structures of Gracq’s Le Rivage des Syrtes, for example, offer insights into gothic narrative architectures (reminiscent of Proust) that hold substance and symmetry in tension and balance. Similarly, the superfluities, and the forking and digressive structures of a writer such as Modiano illustrate and problematize baroque narrative structures, and reopen ways of rereading mise en abyme. Instead of a dizzying return of the same motifs, Modiano’s text refashions strangely similar ones by means of a repositioning of analogical narrative contexts. The invitation to search for the gothic and baroque is, however, of equal importance when it comes to reading writers exemplified in the second part of the book, who are not usually categorized as formally ‘experimental’. Both Tournier and Germain embrace, flaunt and supplement gothic and baroque narrative orders in their use of surplus, multi-layering and extravagance. So while size matters in French narratives of modernity – whether as minimalist or maximalist extensions of form, larger-than-life protagonists or roman à tiroirs – play with proportions of the conventional, and thereby creative control of the shocking, far outweighs engagement with the experimental for its own sake, or for its potential to dazzle and disorientate the reader. It is therefore our third term, ‘metamorphosis’, that
best encapsulates the quintessential matrix of the unconventionally conventional ‘themes’ and ‘forms’ encountered in the very different narratives of French modernity treated in this collection, and allows us to examine their potential for renewal.

Metamorphosis – the transformation of substance (themes) and shape (forms) – is for us a much more useful and dynamic model for, and approach to, narratives of French modernity than are theories of systems and signs, stimulating though these have been to rethink the interconnectedness of cultural productions and their constant deconstructions. For metamorphosis as theoretical paradigm largely resolves some of the problems flagged above, namely how to negotiate notions of ‘before and after’ embedded in any critical terminology with the prefix ‘post-’; and how to define the ‘inter-’ in ‘intertextuality’ (whether a slippery or homogenizing ‘gap’ between static or moving ‘semes’, or between textual fragments within a larger mosaic). Even though deconstruction sets out to challenge binary oppositions, it interestingly returns them by default, collapsing them into either variations of the same (process) or an unwieldy, endless multiplicity (of content). Singularity and the other nonetheless remain its always already self-defining principles, since its theorization is located in a specific set of contexts, which mark a break with, and new departure from, its antecedents. Metamorphosis, however, sweeps up deconstruction as but one of many movements, because the inherent structure and nature of metamorphosis concentrates specifically on the ‘gap’, the dynamics and processes of transformation with both shorter- and longer-term manifestations. So while the caterpillar which, via pupation, becomes a butterfly and the egg that, by incubation, becomes a chicken appear to turn into radically different forms, the process of metamorphosis (pupation / incubation) encompasses the dynamics of stasis and change at work. Instead of radical breaks, metamorphosis thus prioritizes radical continuities and strategic adaptations as the much more dynamic and sustainable of forms. The Jamesian ‘baggy

47 For the intellectual history of theories of the linguistic turn, see for example Peter V. Zima, The Philosophy of Modern Literary Theory (London: The Athlone Press, 1999).
monster’ that is the novel of (French) modernity certainly lends itself to formal investigation through the lens of dialogism (Bakhtin), the figure of the palimpsest (Genette), morphology (Propp) and mythologies (Barthes), as well as from the perspectives of metafiction (including *mise en abyme*),\(^\text{48}\) or through the many feminist, postcolonial, Jewish and other approaches to contents that critique earlier grand narratives and master plots. Readers of this volume may, however, find that metamorphosis – as trope, figure, mythical reference, plot dynamic, structural device, adaptation or transformation of prior models (intertextuality) – is both a more challenging and a more satisfying key to revisiting the ‘modern’ French novel.

Recourse to metamorphosis as critical term and approach also re-stimulates the question of what art is for: whether to please or to instruct. As intimated above, the politics of narrative is an important facet of many chapters in this volume, where the particular ends of the various works discussed extend beyond both neo-formalist concerns with textual play and verbal virtuosity for their own sake, on the one hand;\(^\text{49}\) and moral open-endedness on the other. Margaret-Ann Hutton’s discussion of the explicitly fascist narrative positionings in Tabachnik’s *La Mémoire du Bourreau* takes on any glib assumption that ambiguous, open endings are


without political or moral impact and, indeed, thereby addresses once more the vocation of art to instruct. How this instruction is conveyed is again usefully encapsulated by metamorphosis. By attending less to ends and more to particular means towards them, it prioritizes hortatory modes and forms of instruction. Warnings and encouragements therefore emerge from overt repetitions and equally from unambiguous play with ambiguity because metamorphosis targets how further movement or entrenchment of positions (as in Tabachnik) is determined by processes of transformation – not only political, but also formal and temporal. The art of metamorphosis, then, lies in the writer’s particular creative talent to move the readings (of the text and the world) into new spaces suggested by the text. Fleutiaux’s adaptation and graft of Perrault’s fairy tales in *La Femme de l’Ogre* is a case in point. While highlighting the horrors, imbalance and damaging outcomes of blatant male power, the tale equally eschews any easy utopian or feminist victory over ‘ogre’ power dynamics. Instead, as the title suggests, the ‘F/femme de l’ogre’ discovers the transformative nature of female empowerment *vis-à-vis* ‘ogre’ relations, as so many stages of distance from and closeness to them. The tale’s open end thus takes stock of metamorphosis as the always incomplete change from and into other states. Both ambiguous and artificially closed ends in narratives of French modernity therefore map movement and movements (aesthetic and political) as potential for change or renewal, or for another repeated cycle that returns either the worst, or the best, of human (and artistic) endeavour. If the aesthetics of metamorphosis has an ethical end, it is a tacit warning against prejudging which is which, and a tacit encouragement of a dynamic that refuses to stay the same out of mere inertia.

Metamorphosis thus promotes values of change in continuity, but shifts emphasis from notions of novelty, exchangeability and the present (as end-points of past change) to a reconsideration of outcomes enabling further developments: What is it that makes a form endlessly innovative, self-renewing or of longer fitness and adaptability for specific and non-specific purpose(s)? How do the narratives of modernity comment on

50 The same is also the case for ‘Petit Poucet’ and his discovery of his masculinity.
longer and larger processes by focusing, in other words, on the processes of change? In consequence, most of the texts that are discussed in the essays below explore form not as rupture, dazzling bricolage or iteration of so many fragments, but rather as continuity of variously transecting prose channels that inevitably redirect and reconnect older streams. The texts that formally subvert, divert and revert to older forms (exemplified by Fleutiaux, Modiano, Nimier and Tournier) demonstrate metamorphoses of forms that prioritize hybridity, a-symmetry, digressive and extraneous carbuncles of narrative that constantly offend genre, and question ideologies of purity, symmetry and order with their laws and hierarchies of exclusion and exclusiveness. Our collection, therefore, holds up not just a mosaic of texts of French modernity, but their diverse metamorphoses of past forms, so that their various dynamics provide readers with other bearings on rapidly changing, destabilizing modernity (as distilled in Adam Pollo’s experiences in Le Procès-verbal).

But metamorphosis has in our view even more wide-reaching implications for rethinking the importance of textual and intertextual dynamics. It strikes at theories of écriture by returning to what sustains them, namely writers and readers, and does so in a more collaborative dynamics than the creator/consumer hierarchy of active and passive roles, or reader-response criticism centred on theories of subjectivity. Many of the works treated in this volume focus by contrast on reader-protagonists of various stripes.

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51 It lies outside the scope of this introduction, but understanding more complex models of continuity permits renewed scrutiny of conflictual models of textual/intertextual production, such as those propounded in very different ways by Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) or Rosi Braidotti in Patterns of Dissonance (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). For a recent reappraisal of the importance of Bloom for current critical enquiry, see Reading, Writing and the Influence of Harold Bloom, ed. Alan Rawes and Jonathon Shears (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

52 A still eminently portable and profitable study for its longer overview on the subject is The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation, ed. Susan R. Suleiman & Inge Crosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980). See also the work of Wolfgang Iser (on the implied and the real reader) and Hans-Robert Jauss on reader expectation (bounded by the reader’s historical and other contexts).
– for instance, in Modiano, Tournier, Rio and Chamoiseau – seeking to make sense of their worlds through their readings of signs as texts, images, material realities and mentalities. As figures of the implied author, these reader-protagonists model ways of engaging with change in themselves and the world as consonant or discordant with what they already know about it – their prior readings, we might say. Literary allusion and remaking of ‘architextes’, re-enactment of katabatic or frontier-crossing journeys, initiation processes and failures all reconfigure as mirrors of the writer’s reading experience and coming to writing. Here once again the Nouveau Roman can be held up as a counter-example, for it claimed texts were completed not by authors, but by active readers, yet its heavy reliance on forms such as the polar (and reader knowledge of it) is the very thing that undermined this conceit. As the genre par excellence of intelligent designs and hierarchies of knowledge, the polar ‘architexte’ unmasks the Nouveau Romancier behind his/her novel as its putative omniscient author after all, because she/he is always more ‘intelligent’ than the reader. By contrast, metamorphosis as collaboration between the reader and the author, with both also recognized as readers of cultural texts, provides a much more mutually enhancing and interactive model for textual transformation and the sustaining of narrative forms. That Tournier is indebted to Flaubert who is indebted to Cervantes etc. does not entail a return to literary source-hunting or a re-establishment of canons promoting ‘bloodlines’ valorizing high- as opposed to popular-cultural ‘forebears’. Rather, attention to the often eclectic and different reading traditions that writers bring to and configure in their texts opens up the greater richness for narrative form understood as metamorphosis, not teleology. The ability of narrative to engage many pasts and possible futures is quintessentially linked to its ability to engage and shape past and future readers.

A new landscape of debate is thus opened up by all the contributions to this volume about what constitutes suitable and sustainable narrative forms and their continuities. A more ample ambit for dissonant and dissident forms can be encompassed within metamorphosis as so many variations on common themes and the uncommon expression of them. Texts such as Gracq’s Le Rivage des Syrtes, Germain’s Immensités and Nimier’s Celui qui court derrière l’oiseau confront the edges of form and limits of narrative by
examining thematically the place of borders, boundaries and frontiers, the contact zones between over- and undergrounds or first and other worlds, testing where (and how) these may be transgressed or found impregnable. Tabachnik’s *La Mémoire du bourreau* also forcibly reminds the reader of necessary formal dynamics that move beyond the complacent or politically correct. This work foregrounds the need for risky narrative strategies (as distinct, perhaps, from virtuoso experimental ones) that remind the post-modern critic that degrees of surveillance and censorship, collaboration and resistance are formal moves as well as ideological ones.

The pact between readers and writers is therefore also opened to change and transformation, if it includes the celebration of profound but mostly hidden impacts of literary texts as in-between spaces of pupation and incubation. Adam Pollo and *Le Procès-verbal* with which we began invite just such an involvement by the reader, to envisage with them other shapes for things, and ways of understanding the world that are so necessary to freedom of speech, human rights, excluded voices and avoidance of intellectual and cultural poverty. Transition, then, is the necessary mood and mode of our narratives of French modernity and it helps to explain why the journey narrative features so largely in this collection. Correspondingly, the journey of the reader of these pages need not by any means be a linear one. While each essay ostensibly belongs to one of two sets of eight contributions, their convergences, differences and contradictions emerge most forcefully, like the metamorphoses of theme and form, from more synthetic readings.

We hope these thoughts will prompt new readings of narratives of French modernity, whether in texts covered in this volume or others that could have been included in it. The kinetic properties of critical dialogue, the transformative nature of shared reading and analysis, are part of a process that all of the contributors particularly wish to celebrate: the profound metamorphosis in all of us that our Honorand, David Gascoigne, has inspired as colleague, teacher, mentor and exemplary reader of narratives of French modernity.
The Honorand

There were of course exceptions to the surprise generated by the announcement of Le Clézio as winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature. One particular pocket of enlightenment issued from circulation of his work in the early 1980s in UK University French Departments. *Le Procès-verbal* was among the texts for study on an innovative Honours course at the University of St Andrews, ‘The Novel since 1960’. Conceptualized and first taught by David Gascoigne in 1980–1 as a special subject, it ran concurrently with the more traditional ‘French Literature, 1918 to the Present’ (culminating with the *Nouveau Roman*), on which David also taught. For David, the ‘present’ was more properly the 1960s onwards, and he sought the opportunity to engage with writing that had not yet found critical acclaim or become a ‘school’, but which, from the distillation of his wide reading, encapsulated the *Zeitgeist* of French literature and society at that time, its spaces, themes, forms and language. Indeed, a defining feature of David’s course was precisely that little, and in some cases no, secondary critical work was available on the texts studied, a prospect both liberating and terrifying for students, as it is for literary critics of the new. The hindsight of almost thirty years only highlights more clearly the rare critical acuity for which David is known, by allowing us to see how informed were his choices of authors and texts for ‘The French Novel since 1960’. His criterion for judging the novel (pun intended) was not the attribute of recentness, but rather its future perfect capability of more enduring innovation and stimulation. The provisional course reading list for 1981–2 is reproduced at the end of this introduction. Characteristically this provided only the likely framework for the given year since David’s recent reading and thinking over any preceding vacation always guaranteed additions as well as changes to the order of the texts studied. In 1981–2 for example,

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53 The reading list for the course included works by Breton, Malraux, Céline, Sartre, Camus, Bernanos, Aragon, Nizan, Giroudoux, Ponge, Ionesco, Giono, culminating with Butor, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute.
in the event, Le Clézio’s *Le Procès-verbal* launched the course and Pascal Lainé’s *La Dentellière* (1974) also featured.

Although long before the age of downloadable university course specifications and email, ‘The Novel since 1960’ course saw rapid emulation in course offerings at other UK French Studies Departments. Indeed, Tournier’s widespread appearance on many course lists in the late 1980s can be traced by various routes back to St Andrews and David Gascoigne. No ‘modern’ or ‘recent’ French literature course, however, could imitate the metamorphoses that the original St Andrews version went through, since these were entirely due to David’s unfailing eye for new writers and works that would also prove ground-breaking or become the focus in his teaching of new special subjects. The course he shared with Nicky Haxell on French Women’s Writing was, for example, one of the earliest in the country to feature texts by Chantal Chawaf and Monique Wittig, while his Honours module on Time and Space in French Literature, which he taught until his retirement, grew out of an enduring interest in the topic that long pre-dated the intense enthusiasm for theories of space that suddenly blossomed in French Studies in the 1990s.\(^5^4\)

The present volume therefore pays tribute to David Gascoigne’s many contributions to enriching twenty-first-century perspectives and understanding of narratives of French modernity. Most obviously, his monographs and other publications record his mark on critical reception of the writing of, among others, Michel Tournier and Georges Perec. A bibliography of David’s work features elsewhere in this volume.

Of perhaps even greater significance, however, are the intangible legacies of David’s critical astuteness, his sure-footed knowledge about what is more lastingly innovative and inspirational for further departures and arrivals. Readers of David’s publications cannot fail to share his enjoyment

\(^{54}\) David Gascoigne (ed.), *Le Moi et ses espaces* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1997) is David’s most obvious contribution to this research, and incidentally contains the excellent ‘Entre les géométries et la jungle: quelques espaces du moi dans *Le Procès-verbal* de J.-M. G. Le Clézio’ (pp. 59–76), by David Gascoigne. However, the attentive reader will notice the powerful analyses he draws from spatial structures in many of his other publications.
of the ‘poetic adventure’ and to discover signposts in his rich critical observations and reading for their own further work. The sixteen contributors to this volume demonstrate how David’s mapping of the textual landscapes of French modernity informs their own analyses. However, these essays also show how David’s proactive, productive readings and modes of critical thinking bring about heightened analytical responses in others. Whether as his colleagues or as his former students (the co-editors have enjoyed both privileges), the contributors to this volume acknowledge the many ways in which regular contact with David’s generous spirit of engagement with texts has deeply inspired their work.

At the symposium in his honour where early versions of these essays were presented to David, he remarked with characteristic wit and generosity that one of his guiding principles was the network of friendships that informed his own readings. As much as intertextual, his responses to literature were, he said, most often ‘interlectoral’ – which is to say that he reads with the interests and talents of his colleagues and friends in mind, drawing both intellectual stimulus and companionable pleasure from weighing what one or other fellow-reader might make of a given text. Reading ‘with’ others for the mutually beneficial ‘interlectoral’ pleasures of better understanding captures David’s highest standards in both friendship and scholarship, and suggests a model of reception and analysis very much in keeping with his reputation for respecting other points of view while retaining the integrity, accuracy and sensitivity of his own. It also presents the possibility of multiple, mutually enhancing perspectives, continually refreshed within the act of reading itself.

The shape of our collection, in which the essays form two inter-related movements prospecting the same territories – a double figure of eight that allows dialogue between the movements to trigger further debate – is intended to aid the transversal thinking and openness to exchange at the heart of ‘interlectoral’ practice. The opening essay of the first movement, Ian Higgins’s exuberantly creative postmodern response to David Gascoigne’s interests as Père Gscholar and Director of the Renaissance Group Choir, also sets the tone by challenging the formality of most biographical essays in Festschrift volumes and inviting readers into the space of play – in the broadest sense – here established. It is in this spirit of positive delight in
literary play that the editors encourage readers to join us in approaching this volume ‘interlectorally’ – not only as a means to intensify critical connections across the reading community, but also as a way of discovering the measure of an extraordinary colleague and a brilliant analyst of narratives of French modernity. We invite you through this volume to the Lyotardian ‘texture de relations [...] complexe et [...] mobile’ of which David Gascoigne is a loved and vital part. His transformative, interlectoral reading and writing practice is beyond, but in need of, a theory.

Department of French
Senior Honours Special Subject

The French Novel since 1960

Texts for tutorial study (in probable order) Additional texts

Michel TOURNIER: Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique (1967) (Folio) Le Vent paraclert (1977) (Folio)
Le Roi des Aulnes (1970) (Folio) Les Météores (1975) (Folio)

Patrick MODIANO: La Ronde de Nuit (1969) Les Boulevards de ceinture (1972) (Folio)
(Folio) La Place de l’Etoile (1968) (Folio)

André PIEYRE DE MANDIARGUES: La Marge (1967) (Gallimard)
La Motocyclette (1965) (Folio)

(Livre de Poche) La Toison (1972) (Gallimard)

Emile AJAR: Gros-Câlin (1974) (Folio) La Vie devant soi (1975) (Mercure de France)

L’Angoisse du Roi Salomon (1979) (Mercure de France)

David’s (typewritten) bibliography for the course, distributed in time for reading to begin over the summer, also offered the notes following, some of which will give contemporary readers some idea of how undergraduate courses have changed.