



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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*W, or The Memory of
Childhood: Georges
Perec, Postmodernism,
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*W, or The Memory of
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Georges Perec is a good example of a postmodern writer, not least for his interest in literary games, word play, and constrained writing.

*Georges
Perec*

Roman

La disparition

Les Lettres Nouvelles

Denoël



REVENENTES
chère, c'est cler ! je
démêle les menées de un
edle Street, c'est les
Behrens !

excrément !
peere d'Exeter ! Cet
rvent de Spengler regre
Bergen-Belsen !
t pense m'effreyer, men
le, ce Behrens, prétend

, elle est verte, elle se
blée je sens que c'est le
n mêler.

rends, ce mec ! Je m'en
ler et l'éjecter chez ses
!

esse descendre ! brèem
femmes.

ettes, le temps de m'èr
s, j'en fé le serment !

irement les lèvres q'è-
je prends mes révé-
ette, legs de Pépé en

s fets et gestes (exam-
révéler) et le Legger,
r Chéné — et j'en

terror en Exeter ces
ns.

C'est grend, Exeter, et les repères
de pègre, c'est bezef ! Chez Bébert,
c'est fermé ; je refé quelqs mètres
dens Needle Street, mets je sens que
les crèches de Behrens, c'est else-
where. Les rentes, c'est dens Needle
Street que Behrens se les engendre —
vendre ses merdes, gérer ses chem-
bres, prêter sept pence et en repren-
dre trente, c'est bezef de freek pres-
tement et sens feesk — mets ce genre
de mec s'héberge dens des crèches
dens le genre de celles que des mecs
tels que Reckfeller, les Grends d'Es-
pègne, les Pères d'Engleterre, bref,
les gentlemen les zèment : select, les
bergères Chesterfeeld, les crédences
d'ébène, les secrétères Régence et le
tremblement ! Même que ces mecs
prennent des ères de Mécène et
engressent les gens de lettres, les pem-
phlétères, les exégètes, les chentres et
les menestrels !

J'erre vènement de mess en self et

Postmodernism is often scorned or dismissed for such trickery, which can seem frivolous, apolitical, even nihilistic.

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But Perec's *W, or the Memory of Childhood* shows that games can be deadly serious.

Postmodern scepticism does not entail abandoning either politics or ethics. Indeed, life itself can be at stake when either silence or wordplay are the only strategies available to protect the blank space harbouring the speaking subject, a space that is simultaneously affirmed and denied.



POSTMODERNITY, POSTMODERNISM, AND FRAGMENTS

“I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” (François Lyotard)

We no longer believe in any one overarching discourse that might legitimate or make sense of other discourses.

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In the absence of any agreed metanarrative, we have competing claims to legitimacy and truth.

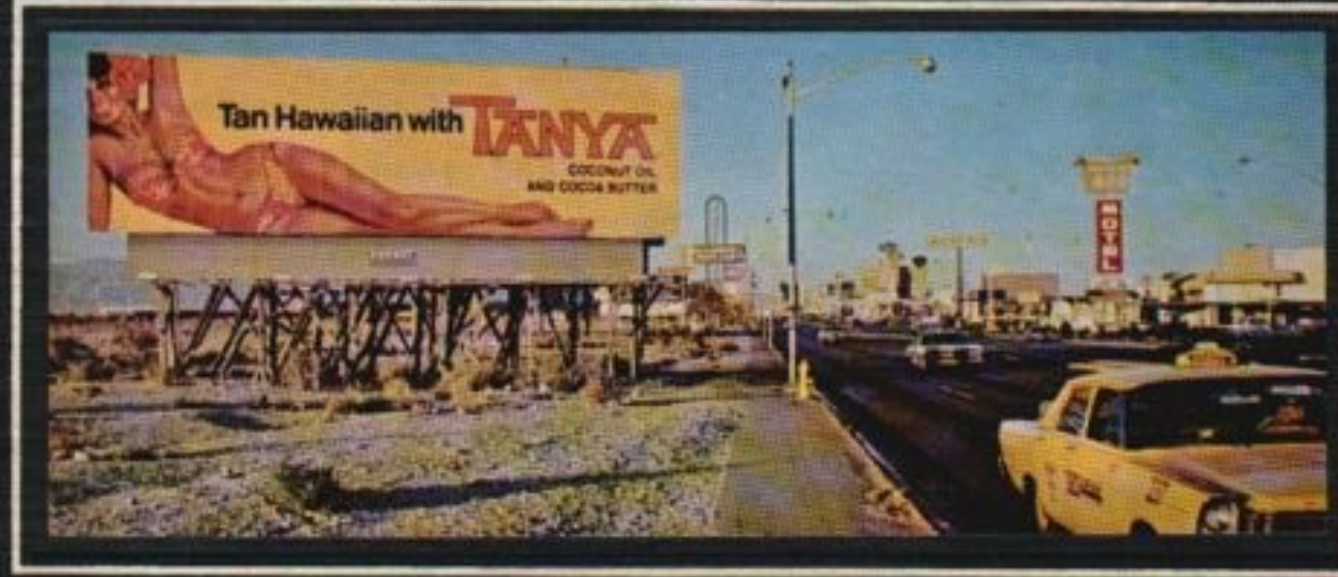
History is, if not at an end, no longer closed and cut off from the present: past and present are simply relative terms, with no clear hierarchy between them.

A trait of postmodernism, as an aesthetic movement or style, is its tendency to raid the past. Postmodern architecture frequently incorporates (say) neoclassical elements—a cornice here, or a pediment there—or even copies prior models wholesale.



Vancouver Public Library, Central Branch

Architects rejected the modernist dictum that “form follows function,” preferring a proliferation of decorative motifs, often inspired by mass culture.



LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

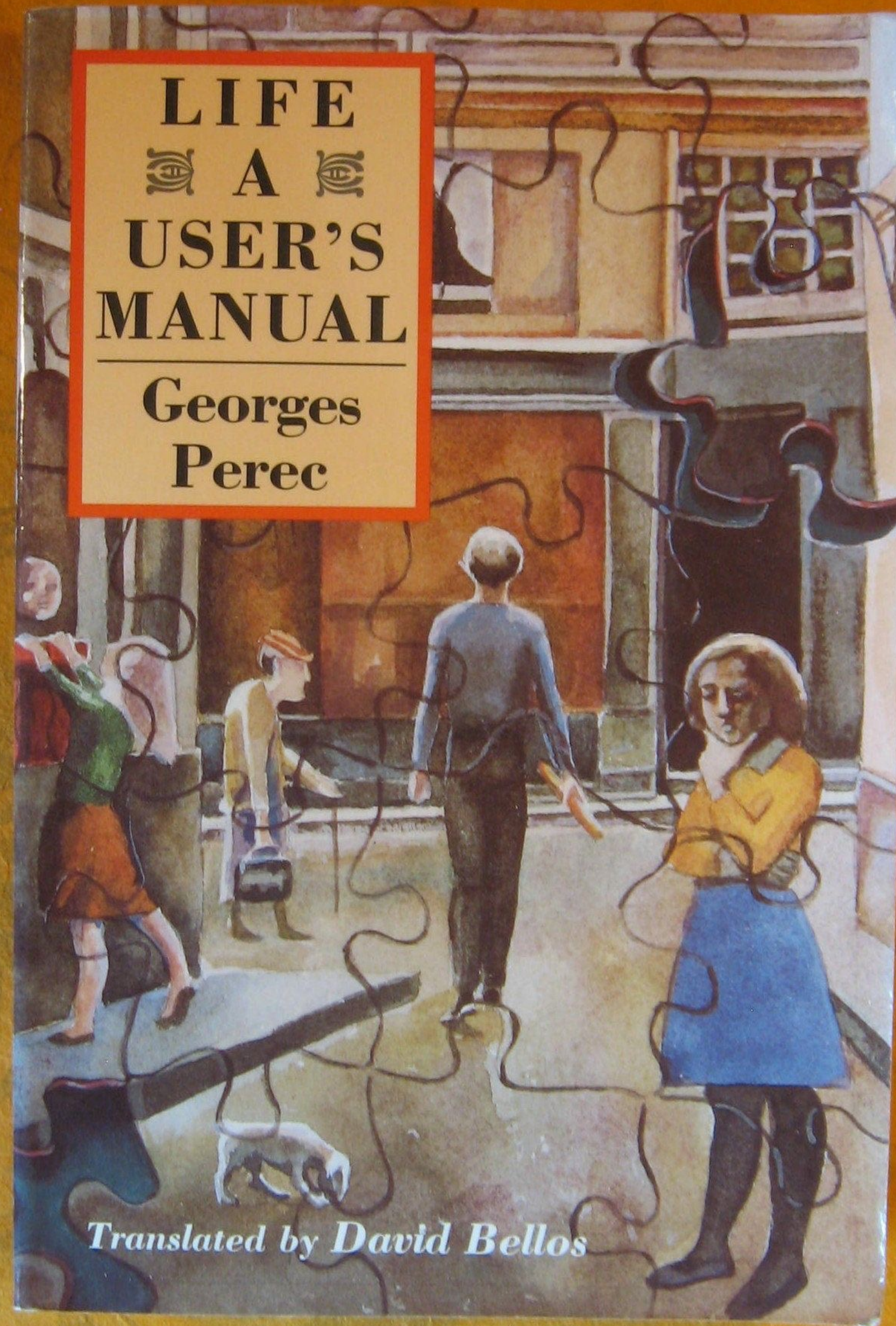
Robert Venturi Denise Scott Brown Steven Izenour

In literature, authors were similarly prone to historical pastiche, ventriloquizing a range of different styles, and to various forms of narrative or linguistic trickery.

The result can be a collage that refuses
final closure or even coherence.

LIFE
⦿ A ⦿
USER'S
MANUAL

Georges
Perec



Translated by David Bellos

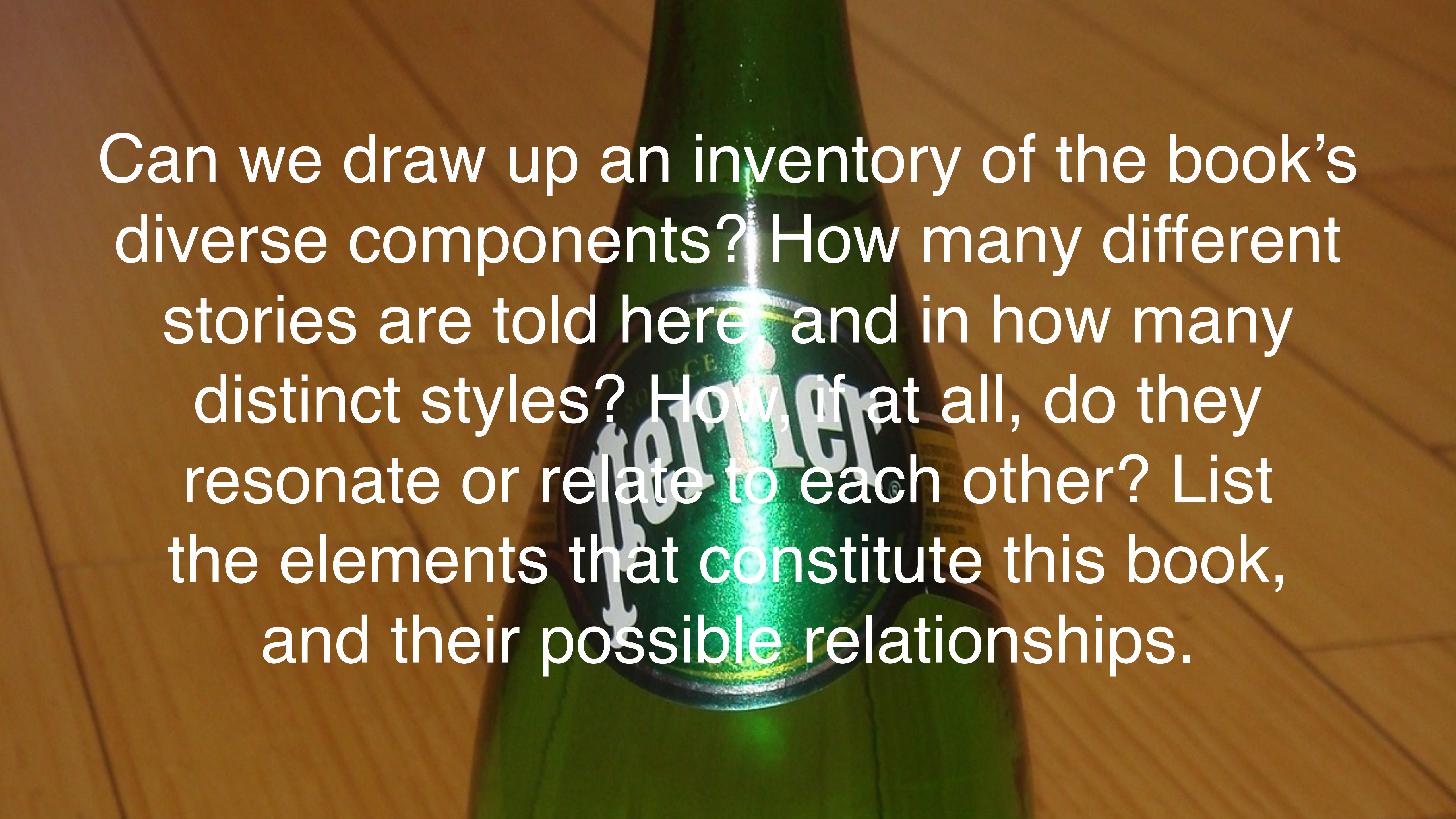
These texts are compilations of fragments
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Where modernism held out the hope of final reconciliation on second sight or in review, postmodernism doubts this is ever possible.

W's title alone suggests an unresolved rift:
either *W* "or" *The Memory of Childhood*;
and "W," the letter, evokes yet more duality,
a doubled "U" or "you" in English, a double
vé or double vie, doubled life, in French.

Can we draw up an inventory of the book's diverse components? How many different stories are told here, and in how many distinct styles? How, if at all, do they resonate or relate to each other? List the elements that constitute this book, and their possible relationships.

A green beer bottle, likely a Pilsener, is centered in the frame. The bottle is set against a background of light-colored wood with a visible grain. The text is overlaid on the bottle and background in a white, sans-serif font. The text is a single paragraph of questions and a request for a list.

Can we draw up an inventory of the book's diverse components? How many different stories are told here, and in how many distinct styles? How, if at all, do they resonate or relate to each other? List the elements that constitute this book, and their possible relationships.

One of the book's threads, in alternating chapters, is the story of Gaspard Winckler.

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Every other chapter in the book concerns Perec's own autobiography, focusing first on his parents, descendants of Polish Jews, who died during World War Two.

“a fragmentary tale of a wartime childhood, a tale lacking in exploits and memories, made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meagre anecdotes.”

“(. . .)” (61)

The war, and the camps, are a preoccupation that binds and joins these different threads. But at the same time, they are what ensures that nothing quite comes together.

The Holocaust resists any attempt to make sense of it, however much Perec explores how chaos can emerge from order, how noble ideals can harbour a logic that at best leads to mediocrity and at worst degrades into barbarism.



LIFE WRITING AND THE RETURN OF THE SUBJECT

Can Perec himself, this book's author/narrator, constitute the unity otherwise missing among the fragments?

“For years I did drawings of sportsmen with stiff bodies and inhuman facial features: I described their unending combats meticulously: I listed persistently their endless titles.” (163)

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Does not the author come back in from the cold? Does the postmodern condition then devolve into unbridled narcissism?

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more than it is an attempt to recover
some kind of historical truth.

Everything is filtered through
Perec's consciousness.

“I have no childhood memories. [. . .] For years, I took comfort in such an absence of history: its objective crispness, its apparent obviousness, its innocence protected me; but what did they protect me from, if not precisely from my history, the story of my living, my real story, my own story [. . .]?” (6)

“my own story, which presumably was neither crisp nor objective, nor apparently obvious, nor obviously innocent.” (6)

It is as though what is to be revealed could be evidence of complicity or guilt, as though the novel were an inadvertent confession.

But what if there were nothing at the centre of the narrative? What if the place to be taken by the subject turned out to be blank?

Names are at once the most personal of attributes, in that names are what identify us as individuals, and also the most impersonal, in that they are conferred on us by others, usually our parents.

“the complex fantasies, connected to the concealment of my Jewish background through my patronym, which I elaborated around the name I bear, a name which is distinguished, moreover, by a minute discrepancy between the way it is spelled and the way it is pronounced in French: it should be written Pérec or Perrec.” (36)

Perhaps the real secret that the name encodes is that there is nothing to hide. The name points merely to an absence.

“Three dots in round brackets constitute the conventional sign that something has been omitted from a textual quotation. The centrepiece of *W or The Memory of Childhood* does not say that there is nothing there; in Perec’s words, *I am not writing to say that I have nothing to say* [W 42]. . .

“To put it less obscurely than Perec wished to, page 61 indicates typographically:
I’m not telling.” (Bellos 549)

The void at the heart of the text would indicate not so much an impossibility, the unsayable, as a refusal; it would be the sign of resistance. It is not just that not everything can be said; it is that not everything *should* be said. From this point of view, *W* is the very opposite of a confession.

W is both an attempt to put a life in writing
and an equally strenuous effort to keep
life and writing distinct.

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and an equally strenuous effort to keep
life and writing distinct.

Either way, the task Perec sets himself
is well-nigh impossible.

In the end, what is at issue may be politics or ethics. Postmodernism, by putting truth in question does not necessarily abandon either politics or ethics. It merely points out both that neither discourse is all-encompassing, and that there is more than one way to be political, or ethical.

Sometimes the best strategy is silence.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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