

Performing Authorship

The case of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq

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2014

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is all my own, and that all references have been cited accordingly.

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21 September 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Carole Sweeney for challenging and supporting me over the years. I would also like to thank Peter Dunwoodie, whose discussions on Céline and Genette helped me shape this project.

I could never have done this without the ongoing support and encouragement from my family: Mamy and Papy, Mom and Dad and my sister Héloïse. My most heartfelt and grateful thanks also go to my partner Jacob Smart, to my friends Jenny Skidalski, Emilie Charlesworth, Zoe Sujon, Colin Brent and Alex Chaudhary. Thank you for being there for me, for listening and not letting me give up. You helped me grow and get through this amazing journey.

Abstract

Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq both approach the paratextual practice of the literary interview as a performance. Moreover, they both share an openly cynical attitude towards the press and critics, and it is within these power relations that a fictional character is created – the author.

Within this framework, the literary field is a stage in which an agent can only become an author if he hides behind the mask of his ‘posture’. The space of the paratext then becomes a field of forces, the site of a power struggle between several agents of the literary field; the author, the publisher, the literary critics and the media all trying to control the author’s image and the reception of the text. The final aim of this struggle lies in the attribution of value to a work, and who decides on the ‘correct’ interpretation, the ‘true’ meaning of a text.

Based on Jérôme Meizoz’s theory of ‘authorial posture’, it is the contention of this thesis that Louis Destouches and Michel Thomas are performers; and ‘Céline’ and ‘Houellebecq’ their fictional creations, which are, furthermore, not to be confused with ‘Ferdinand’ and ‘Michel’, their first-person narrators. Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq both introduce an element of performance between author and text. They become fictional creations by retroactively ‘acting out’ the main characters created in their novels in the public sphere. The performance changes the status of the author and of the text, destabilizes the dynamic between author and text, and puts into question the production of meaning, whereby any attempt at interpretation becomes self-contradictory. This thesis is, therefore, an attempt to answer the following questions: how do Céline and Houellebecq change the way one reads a text? How do they subvert the idea of the ‘author-function’?

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Introduction

‘One can enjoy reading Céline without being an anti-Semite, the same way one can enjoy reading Proust without being homosexual!’ Nicolas Sarkozy¹

In March 2006, Nicolas Sarkozy, at that time a presidential candidate, thought he would amuse the public by making fun of his *bête noire*, Madame de la Fayette’s *The Princess of Clèves* (1678). He professed that ‘the other day, for fun – we take whatever fun we can get – I was looking at the exam syllabus for administrative managers. Some sadist or idiot – you choose – had put on the syllabus to ask candidates about *The Princess of Clèves*. I don’t know if it often happened to you to ask the woman at the ticket office what she thought of *The Princess of Clèves*... Just imagine!’² Little did he know that his repeated sneers against this seventeenth-century classic novel would create such outrage. Some universities went on strike and marched in protest against his attitude to literature, education, and culture in general. The protest took an interesting twist over the years, as sales of the book rose dramatically, and marathon readings of the book were staged. *The Princess of Clèves* is now considered to be an ‘unlikely symbol of political resistance’ and a ‘hot political issue’ in France.³

¹ ‘On peut aimer Céline sans être antisémite, comme on peut aimer Proust sans être homosexuel!’ Nicolas Sarkozy, quoted in Jérôme Dupuis, ‘Quand Sarkozy célébrait Céline’, *L’Express* <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/quand-sarkozy-celebrait-celine_954362.html> (accessed: 9 July 2014) - all translations from original French texts are mine, unless stated.

² Hélène Cixous, ‘Nicolas Sarkozy, the Murderer of the Princess of Clèves’, *The Guardian*, 23 March 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/23/sarkozy-murderer-princess-of-cleves>> (accessed: 9 July 2014).

³ For a detailed exploration on the protest sparked by Sarkozy’s comments, see, for instance, ‘Cours public: Nicolas Sarkozy et la littérature’, 25 February 2009 <<http://universitesenlutte.wordpress.com/2009/02/25/cours-public-nicolas-sarkozy-et-la-litterature>> (accessed 9 July 2014) or Andrew Gallix, ‘Why a 17th-Century Novel Is a Hot Political Issue in France’, *The Guardian*, 23 March 2009 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/mar/31/princess-cleves-sarkozy-lafayette>> (accessed: 12 July 2014).

However, Sarkozy's appreciation of his favourite writer, the controversial Louis-Ferdinand Céline, has sparked more mockery than political fury. In France, celebrated as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century alongside Marcel Proust, the author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) is still perceived as a 'literary monster', mainly as a result of the publication, between 1937 and 1941, of three virulent anti-Semitic pamphlets. Sarkozy famously declared in 2008 that one can like Louis-Ferdinand Céline without being an anti-Semite, the same way one can enjoy reading Marcel Proust without being homosexual. Of course, the former French president's history of problematic remarks about literature is sufficiently well-documented for him not to be taken seriously as a literary critic. Nonetheless, coming from a head of State, such a statement is rather worrying for several reasons. The most obvious one lies in the fact that Sarkozy is here equating a dangerous ideology with one's sexual preference. The first half of the sentence, taken separately, is already contentious, as Sarkozy is touching upon an issue which is concerned with the ethics of reading a text. It is interesting that such a statement should come from a high-profile politician whose power clearly relies on his ability to influence people through discourse. By denying the influence of the negative ideological aspects of his favourite writer, Sarkozy is positioning himself with regards to an unacceptable ideology. That is, he is claiming the right to enjoy reading Céline's novels without being 'contaminated' by the text. This, in itself, is a perfectly arguable position: a reader should be able to keep his/her own integrity. Nevertheless, such a statement clearly denies fiction's impact on the reader's ideology.

Carla Bruni-Sarkozy shares her husband's love for Céline's fiction, and even went on a 'pilgrimage' to Meudon to meet Lucette Destouches, the writer's widow. She also greatly appreciates the work of another provocative writer, Michel Houellebecq, so much so that she invited him for dinner at the Elysée palace shortly after he obtained the Goncourt Prize in November 2010 for his novel *La Carte et le territoire*.⁴ This fact actually betrays a consensus between the controversial presidential couple and a writer who has thrived on creating scandal since the publication of his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* in 1998. Apart from the

⁴ Ariane Chemin and Grégoire Leménager, 'Houellebecq chez Sarkozy: le souper de l'Elysée', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 9 December 2010
<<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20101209.OBS4401/houellebecq-chez-sarkozy-le-souper-de-l-elysee.html>> (accessed: 9 July 2014).

incident of the *Princess of Clèves*, it appears that the Sarkozys' taste in literature mirrored that of the French nation. In 2011, Céline and Houellebecq regularly made headlines, their works were best sellers and are still widely discussed in universities as well as in the media. Arguably, and not unlike the former French president, the two writers have turned provocation and media manipulation into an artform.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq make ideal case studies when looking at questions of ethics of reading, which preoccupy me in the context of this thesis. Both writers have generated intense controversy by expressing right-wing ideologies, but in an ambiguous, playful way. In many ways, they represent the 'unacceptable' in literature, yet occupy a central place in the French literary field of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I am not trying to determine here whether they meant what they wrote, which is finally impossible to know, but rather, the way in which this ambiguity is created and undermines a straight-forward ideological interpretation of their work.

For the purpose of this thesis, starting from the knowledge that 'Céline' and 'Houellebecq' are pseudonyms, and therefore fictional creations, I choose to read them not as double, but triple.⁵ Louis Destouches (1894-1961) took the pseudonym Louis-Ferdinand Céline, as he entered the literary field in 1932 with the publication of his first novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. The first-person narrator, Ferdinand Bardamu, who reappears in subsequent works as 'Ferdinand', then evolves into 'Céline', can be considered to be another alter ego of the writer, which he acts out in interviews. With Houellebecq, the process is quite similar. Michel Thomas became Michel Houellebecq as he published his first work, an essay on H.P. Lovecraft in 1991. Most of his novels are written in the first person, with, again, an ambiguous identification with the narrator (more often than not, named Michel).

I begin with the proposition that Louis Destouches and Michel Thomas are *performers*; and 'Céline' and 'Houellebecq' their *fictional creations*, which are not to be confused with 'Ferdinand' and 'Michel', the first-person *narrators*. Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq both introduce an element of performance between author and text. They become fictional creations by retroactively acting out the main characters created in their novels in the public sphere. The performance

⁵ The idea of a triple identity has been conceptualized by Dominique Maingueneau, who uses a slightly different terminology. It will be discussed at the end of chapter 2.

changes the status of the author and of the text, destabilizes the dynamic between author and text, and puts into question the production of meaning, whereby any attempt at interpretation becomes self-contradictory. This thesis is therefore an attempt to answer the questions: how do Céline and Houellebecq change the way one reads a text? How do they subvert the idea of the ‘author-function’?

In order to elucidate the issues that these questions raise, the nature of the scandal surrounding the two writers, as well as the ideological problems posed by Céline and Houellebecq’s work, need to be contextualized. First, providing a definition of two typically French phenomena, the *rentrée littéraire* and the Goncourt prize, is crucial in understanding the impact of writers on the literary field. In France, most books are published between late August and early November – which explains the term ‘rentrée’, as it coincides with the time of year when students go back to school after the summer break. The *rentrée littéraire* is a strategy used by publishing houses to boost their end of year sales, which can increase dramatically if a book obtains a literary prize, usually awarded between September and November. Important French prizes include the Renaudot and the Femina, but the most prestigious of all is the Goncourt prize. Awarded every year since 1903 to the ‘best and most imaginative prose work of the year’, the Goncourt prize is said to give its laureate celebrity status and boost the book’s sales by up to 350,000 units. In 1932, Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* very narrowly missed the Goncourt, and obtained the Renaudot instead – this decision created an unprecedented controversy in the press, only equalled by the polemics occasioned by the publication of every new novel by Houellebecq since 1998. These two phenomena greatly impact on the reception of literature in France and, as such, they will regularly appear in this discussion.

Part of the controversy surrounding Céline and Houellebecq is based on the fact that both are portrayed as dual entities: their image appears as an unresolvable dichotomy, usually presented in the opposition great writer/unforgivable racist. Henri Godard, one of the most eminent Céline specialists, deplores this state of affairs when he describes his book *Céline Scandale*, as ‘born from the irritation of hearing the same discourse on the writer, over and over again’.⁶ This discourse is qualified as a deadlock, an endless merry-go-round which indefinitely sends the reader, from ‘great

⁶ Henri Godard, *Céline scandale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 13.

writer' (or 'great stylist') to 'anti-Semite', then from 'anti-Semite' to 'great writer', without any of these terms being defined with precision.⁷ The title 'Michel Houellebecq: Drunken racist or one of the great writers?' taken from an article published in *The Independent* in 2002, is another case in point of this phenomenon. Journalist John Lichfield expands on his original question by pondering: 'Prophet; pornographer; fascist; racist; trouble-maker; drunk; nihilist; moralist; self-publicist; misogynist; martyr to freedom of speech; one of the greatest living writers. Which is the real Michel Houellebecq?'⁸ Lichfield is raising here several issues. Can someone be both a drunken racist *and* a great writer? How would literary works be linked to the public behaviour of their author? Finally, does the author have a 'real' identity which can be found by eliminating the 'wrong' adjectives, by making a choice between a list of possibilities? Some attributes refer to Houellebecq's public image and relationship with the media (trouble-maker, drunk, self-publicist), some to ideological problems, intellectual positions held by some characters in his novels (pornographer, fascist, racist, nihilist, moralist, misogynist). 'Martyr to freedom of speech' is a consequence of Houellebecq's adopting some of these intellectual positions as his own, while he was interviewed in 2001. Finally, the juxtaposition of all these adjectives with 'one of the greatest living writers' is what seems to be problematic for the journalist, as he asks the reader to make a choice. Interestingly, all these adjectives (minus the 'drunk' and 'living' epithets) could also be applied to Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

Michel Houellebecq

The critic Olivier Bardolle argues that Houellebecq is the only writer able to reflect the spirit of the times with the same accuracy as Proust and Céline in their own time, to the extent that he has become an embodiment of this spirit.⁹ Yet, one cannot help but wonder why some regard him as such a central writer, when other

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Lichfield, 'Michel Houellebecq: drunken racist or one of the great writers?', *The Independent*, 21 September 2002 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/michel-houellebecq-drunken-racist-or-one-of-the-great-writers-the-jury-is-out>> (accessed: 9 July 2014).

⁹ Olivier Bardolle, *La littérature à vif – le cas Houellebecq*. (Paris: L'Esprit des Péninsules, 2004), backcover.

critics see in his novels nothing more than *romans de gare*, to be discarded after reading on a train journey. Michel Houellebecq's literary career has been marked by a series of media scandals and court cases, all of which have contributed to the high number of sales of his books. The first one was coined *l'affaire Houellebecq* by the French broadsheet *Le Monde* in 1998 and designates 'the unprecedented media coverage surrounding the publication of Michel Houellebecq's second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires*'.¹⁰ By 1998, Houellebecq had already published an essay on Lovecraft; three collections of poems and a cult first novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) (*Whatever*, 1998).¹¹ He had also regularly contributed to several journals such as *L'Atelier du Roman*, *Revue perpendiculaire*, *Les Inrockuptibles*, most of these articles featuring in his collection of essays *Interventions*. What was the reason for this unprecedented media coverage?

One could argue that the scandal can be traced back to the content of Houellebecq's thesis, the disturbing analogy between economic liberalism and sexual liberalism, which already appears halfway through his first novel *Extension*. The narrator, a lonely and depressed computer analyst, comes to the following conclusions:

[I]n societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just as mercilessly. The effect of these two systems are, furthermore, strictly equivalent. Just like unrestrained economic liberalism, and for similar reasons, sexual liberalism produces phenomena of absolute pauperization. Some men make love every day; others five or six times in their lives, or never. Some make love with dozens of women; others with none. It's what's known as 'the law of the market'.¹²

¹⁰ Ruth Cruickshank, 'L'Affaire Houellebecq: Ideological Crime and Fin de Millénaire Literary Scandal', *French Cultural Studies*, 14 (1), 2003, 104.

¹¹ Because I am discussing the reception of Houellebecq's texts within a mostly Francophone cultural context, and because of the delay between the original text's publication date and its translation's, throughout this thesis, I will refer to Houellebecq's novels by using their original French titles, whilst quoting their English translations. References to these novels will be shortened into *W* for *Whatever* (translated by Paul Hammond in 1998); *A* for *Atomised* (translated by Frank Wynne in 2000); *P* for *Platform* (translated by Frank Wynne in 2003); *PI* for *The Possibility of an Island* (translated by Gavin Bowd in 2005) and *MT* for *The Map and the Territory* (translated by Gavin Bowd in 2011).

¹² Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever*, trans. by Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 99.

This extract, regularly quoted in critical assessments of Houellebecq's work, constitutes the basis of a theory which will appear again in his later novels, such as *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Plateforme*. Indeed, the French title, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* [*Extension of the domain of the struggle*] summarizes Houellebecq's bleak vision of the world. The narrator gives the key to a possible interpretation of the text when he states that 'economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and levels of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society'.¹³ Houellebecq's thesis is still present in his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) (*Atomised*, 2000), with its two main characters, half-brothers Michel and Bruno, definitely belonging to the 'sexual paupers' category. In *Les Particules*, to this theory is added another central motif: 'this is a novel about the erasure of humanity as we know it and the creation of a new race of immortal and asexual clones, *Homo cybernicus*', Jack Abecassis explains.¹⁴ Indeed, what appeared in *Whatever* as a left-wing sociological denunciation of a cruel system, becomes clear in *Atomised*. Houellebecq holds the discourse and ideology stemming from May 1968 responsible for the suffering caused by sexual liberalism. Feminist, new-age hippies, and the Left in general, become his targets. These attacks result in two court cases and polemics: the first one from the new-age camping site, L'Espace du Possible, the second from the literary journal *Revue perpendiculaire*.¹⁵ Houellebecq, who had previously collaborated in this *revue*, was expelled from the editorial board on ideological grounds. The press broadcast their dispute, which resulted in increased sales of *Les Particules* and the demise of *Perpendiculaire*.¹⁶

Subsequently, Houellebecq's third novel, *Plateforme* (2001) (*Platform*, 2002) can be read as another application of Houellebecq's thesis - sexual liberalism this time extended to the domain of sex tourism. Surprisingly, this aspect of the book did not shock its readers as much as the anti-Islamist discourse of the narrator, positions reinforced by speeches of several characters in the novel. In September 2001, the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jack Abecassis, 'The Eclipse of Desire: L'Affaire Houellebecq', *MLN*, 115 (4), 2000, 804.

¹⁵ After being ridiculed in the novel, as a new-age holiday campsite, with a clientele of 'karmic slags' and 'ex-gauchistes flippées, probablement séropositives', the owner of L'Espace des Possibles sued Houellebecq and tried to take the book out of circulation. Instead, he obtained the name of the site to be changed in subsequent editions, as well as some unexpected publicity.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the dispute between Houellebecq and *Revue perpendiculaire*, see Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 21-23.

publication of *Plateforme* almost coincided with the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. *The Trouble with Michel*,¹⁷ a BBC documentary directed by Louise Wardle, provides an account of these uneasy and agitated times. In an interview published in the magazine *Lire*, Houellebecq famously declared his ‘hatred’ for Islam, the ‘stupidest religion’.¹⁸ In the same interview, he claimed that he had been suddenly faced with a negative revelation, as he was travelling through the Sinai region, that of a total rejection towards monotheistic religions. Only a ‘cretin’ – he could find no other word to describe it – would believe in one God only, Islam being the stupidest religion of all. Houellebecq considers reading the Coran to be an appalling experience, while the Bible is beautiful, due to the Jews’ literary talent. He is sympathetic towards Catholicism because of its polytheistic qualities. These provocative declarations resulted in a court case for ‘insults’ and ‘incitation to religious hatred’, which he won on October 22nd, 2002.

By the end of 2005, Houellebecq made headlines again, as he changed publisher from Flammarion to Grasset, a transfer and its lucrative contract which was compared at the time to that of a footballer’s. *La possibilité d’une île* (2005) (*The Possibility of an Island*, 2005), his fourth novel, received mostly negative press and again narrowly lost the Goncourt prize. The science-fiction content of *Les Particules*, the end of humanity discourse which frames the book, takes over in *La possibilité*, as half of the narrators are clones of the original narrator, Michel. In 2008, the film adaptation of the novel, directed by Houellebecq, came out and once again received very negative press. The ‘unfair’ treatment from the media and his position as a pariah are some of the central themes of *Ennemis publics* (2008) (*Public Enemies*, 2011), an epistolary conversation between Houellebecq and Bernard-Henry Lévy, an unpopular yet ‘media-friendly’ French philosopher who has suffered similar problems.

In September 2010, the publication of Houellebecq’s latest novel, *La Carte et le territoire* (2010) (*The Map and the Territory*, 2011) was followed by the consecration of the Goncourt prize and a more positive response from the French media. It could be argued that Houellebecq’s adoption of a different strategy in dealing with the press, which involved fewer scandals and provocative declarations, was crucial in the awarding of the prize.

¹⁷ *The Trouble with Michel*, dir. by Louise Wardle (BBC, 2002).

¹⁸ Didier Sénécal, ‘Entretien – Michel Houellebecq’, *Lire*, 1 September 2001 <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq_804761.html> (accessed: 9 July 2014).

In 2005, a BBC journalist asserted on *The Culture Show* that ‘by giving interviews which are more like performance art than normal literary encounters, he can only cement his reputation as the offensive genius of French letters’.¹⁹ Although this sentence characterizes Michel Houellebecq, who at the time had just been promoting his novel *The Possibility of an Island* in the UK, this comment also provides an accurate description of Céline’s reputation and relationship with the media. However, unlike Houellebecq, Céline was never able to separate himself from the aura of scandal surrounding him during his life-time. His literary production is so voluminous and so much has been written about him, that a concise introduction to his work is bound to be reductive. There are various ways to conceptualize Céline’s trajectory, although his work is sometimes unclassifiable and critics disagree on the genre of some of his books. Emile Brami’s framework, developed in *Céline vivant* (2007) has the merit of being clear and will be used as a first introduction to Céline’s œuvre.²⁰

Louis-Ferdinand Céline

Brami divides Céline’s literary production into three parts: the novels, the pamphlets and the chronicles. Each part corresponds to a period of the writer’s life, although they sometimes overlap. In Brami’s classification system, Céline’s novels are listed as *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) (*Journey to the End of the Night*, 1983), *Mort à crédit* (1936) (*Death on the Instalment Plan*, 1966),²¹ *Casse-Pipe* (1949) and *Guignol’s Band* (1944 and 1964). According to Brami, the novels can be read as a long *bildungsroman* of the formation of its first-person narrator, Ferdinand. Loosely based upon Céline’s experience, each novel corresponds to a different episode of Ferdinand’s life, although they do not follow a chronological order. *Mort à crédit* deals with his childhood, *Casse-Pipe* his enrolment in the army, *Guignol’s Band* his years in the backstreets of London. *Voyage au bout de la nuit* covers narrator Ferdinand Bardamu’s adulthood, the horror of war, his trips to colonial Africa and

¹⁹ ‘Michel Houellebecq – Interview (in English) for the BBC’, *The Culture Show*, November 2005 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t97G3gRH_Rg> (accessed: 7 July 2014).

²⁰ Emile Brami, in booklet accompanying *Céline Vivant – Entretiens, Biographie* (DVD), (Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2007).

²¹ 1983 and 1966 correspond to the publication dates of Ralph Manheim’s translations of the novels. However, they had already been translated into English by John Marks in the 1930s. Manheim’s versions insist more on Céline’s stylistic innovations.

the United States until he settles in the outskirts of Paris as a doctor for the poor. An immediate popular success, Céline's first novel was extremely controversial, because of its use of slang, its criticism of war, colonialism and capitalism, and bleak vision of humanity. Although *Voyage* is Céline's best-known and most accessible work, the one which would tend to appear in school curriculae, according to Bami its style is not yet fully 'Célinian'. Céline only starts writing in the style that makes him instantly recognizable – which he calls '*les trois points*', the extensive use of ellipses and exclamation marks, the usual rules of punctuation and syntax turned upside down, so that language follows emotion closely – after 1936 and the publication of *Mort à crédit*.²² At the time, this novel was completely misunderstood and unanimously rejected by the press. Deeply hurt by this reaction, which came as a shock, Céline moved away from fiction and turned to polemical writing. Between 1936 and 1941, he publishes four pamphlets. The first one, *Mea Culpa* (1936), is an attack on Communism, written upon his return from a trip to Stalinist Russia. The book disappointed many left-wing critics, who originally understood the author of *Voyage* to be politically siding with them. Céline then publishes three violent anti-Semitic, racist and pro-Nazi pamphlets, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), *L'École des cadavres* (1938) and *Les Beaux draps* (1941). Placing them within the context of their publication, one needs to understand that these three books were best-sellers, written with the intention to prevent war – as absurd and ironic as it may seem to a reader, nowadays – and that Céline forbade their republication after the war. Two more pamphlets deserve mention here: *À l'agité du bocal* (1947), an attack against Jean-Paul Sartre, and *Entretiens avec le professeur Y* (1955), a fictionalised interview in which Céline defines his poetics and approach to writing. According to Marc Laudelout, the 'literary manifesto' present in *Entretiens* can already be found in *Bagatelles*, which makes this ideologically problematic work difficult to bypass.²³

In 1944, upon the arrival of the Allied forces in Paris, Céline fled France with his wife Lucette and cat Bébert. His life was in danger – had he stayed, he would have been assassinated like his editor Denoël, or tried and executed under charges of collaboration with the enemy, like the writer Brasillach. Céline's aim was to reach Denmark, where he had hidden his savings, but this trip was to take him several years,

²² Emile Bami, *Céline vivant* (Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2007), 11.

²³ Jean Vebret, *Céline l'infréquentable?* (Paris: Jean Picollec, 2011), 113.

with stopovers in Baden Baden, Sigmaringen and Berlin under attack. When he finally reached Copenhagen, he was arrested and spent over a year in prison. However, the Danish government saved Céline by refusing to extradite him. In 1951, after being cleared of accusations and amnestied, he returned to France and spent the last ten years of his life in Meudon, writing the last part of his œuvre, the chronicles. This body of work includes the two parts of *Féerie pour une autre fois* (1952 and 1954) and the three volumes of the German Trilogy: *D'un Château l'autre* (1957), *Nord* (1960) and *Rigodon* (1969), which he finished writing a day before his death on July 1st, 1961. Emile Brami describes Céline's chronicles as '*autofiction avant l'heure*', meaning that they recount a fictionalised, often exaggerated version of episodes of the writer's exile.²⁴ Nonetheless, Céline presents his account as truth, and considers himself to be a victim whose principal aim is to rehabilitate his case.

It can be argued that the shadow aspect of Céline's œuvre, the three pamphlets which cannot legally be republished, yet are easily downloadable on the internet, illuminate the rest of the work. They represent a 'rupture', a breaking point in his literary career. They had such a strong impact upon events in his life that without the pamphlets there could be no German trilogy, for instance. Indeed, one of the main issues which has been preoccupying the media recently regarding Céline can be summed up in this headline from the weekly magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*: 'Faut-il publier tout Céline?'²⁵ When asking this question (should *all* of Céline's work be published?) the journalist implies 'should the anti-Semitic pamphlets be republished?' claiming that it is impossible to make a judgement on this controversial writer without reading the content of these 'cursed' writings. This issue still divides Céline specialists, with two positions epitomized by the most representative of them. On the one hand, Francois Gibault, a lawyer who represents Céline's estate and protects Lucette Destouches's rights, drastically opposes this republication. He claims that, following her wishes, it would be pure provocation, because the pamphlets are circumstantial writings, written within a particular context. On the other hand, Henri Godard, editor of the prestigious Pléiade edition of Céline's works,

²⁴ Brami, *Céline Vivant*, 17. 'Avant l'heure' indicates that these chronicles were written and published before the term 'autofiction' was coined in 1971 by Serge Doubrovsky.

²⁵ Nelly Kaprièlian, 'Faut-il publier tout Céline?', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 27 February 2011 <<http://www.lesinrocks.com/actualite/actu-article/t/60468/date/2011-02-27/article/faut-il-publier-tout-celine/>> (accessed 9 July 2014).

is calling for a carefully annotated edition of all the pamphlets, under one volume entitled *Polemical Writings*.²⁶

Regularly interviewed by *Les Inrockuptibles*, Michel Houellebecq was asked to take position on the issue of a possible re-edition of the pamphlets. His short answer shows a master of manipulation at work. He declared:

I read *Bagatelles*, I quite liked it – nothing more. In principle, I think everything should be published; but in this case, I don't see much interest in it. I was never moved by the age-old drama: "A genius, but a bastard! How complex is the human soul!", simply because I don't see Céline as a genius (unlike Proust, for instance), but a good writer who has been overrated, and who becomes irritatingly mannerist towards the end of his career. I even sometimes wondered if his anti-Semitism was genuine, if all this wasn't simply a form of cynical opportunism to ensure a high status for himself among the German occupiers.²⁷

This quotation is worth examining in detail, as Houellebecq highlights here all the themes of this dissertation. In a few sentences, using a nonchalant tone which renders the content of his remark all the more provocative, Houellebecq dismisses the importance of Céline as a writer, and goes against all the critical discourse about his work. 'I quite liked *Bagatelles*' is not the neutral judgement it appears to be; he is talking here about a book which contains over two-hundred pages of insults against Jews. Not seeing 'much interest' in the question of publishing the whole of Céline's œuvre, he also contradicts a trend in the French media, who repeatedly discussed this issue during the year 2011.²⁸ His characterization of 'the famous drama, genius versus bastard', which has 'always failed to move him' is a scornful way to describe Godard's metaphor of the 'endless merry-go-round' of the academic and media reception of Céline's work. Finally, the last sentence comes across as the most incendiary, yet betrays some hypocrisy on Houellebecq's part. He is unmasking Céline as an opportunistic and cynical collaborator which is, to this day, a highly

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Houellebecq, quoted in Kaprielan, *ibid*.

²⁸ It was also one of the headlines of the Hors série of the magazine *Lire* dedicated to Céline in June 2011. It has also been the topic of several recent articles.

contentious point, as most specialists disagree on this issue, but this is an accusation which has also been directed against Houellebecq himself, with regards to his anti-Islamist discourse.

Although Houellebecq expresses strong feelings of rejection towards Céline, one could say that the two writers illuminate each other's work. The similarities between the two range from the element of scandal surrounding their life and work, the prophetic value attributed to their writing, the adoption of a 'posture' in their public lives, retrospectively creating and performing a character which resembles their fictional creations, and the court cases they went through and won. Céline's case clarifies Houellebecq's relationship with the media, for instance, while Houellebecq helps recontextualize Céline, and further helps to read his anti-Semitism in a different way. Can ideological and intellectual positions be performed as a public act? In what way do Celine and Houellebecq use the media to become fictional characters?

The first chapter of this thesis consists of a review of the criticism on Céline and Houellebecq. The aim here is to analyse the main trends in criticism on Céline's work with the intention of placing them within a historical context and presenting an overview of important critics and critical approaches. The nature of the task differs when tackling the corpus of academic commentary on Houellebecq. As a consequence of the author being alive, this body of work is inextricably linked to events in Houellebecq's life and career.

Chapter 2 is focused on the theoretical discussion of two analytical tools: Gérard Genette's paratext and Jérôme Meizoz's concept of 'authorial posture' as ethos, self-presentation, a specific manner for a writer to occupy the literary field. The first section of this chapter offers an overview of Genette's definitions of the paratext, a concept he first employed in *Palimpsestes* within the context of his theory of transtextuality, then developed in *Seuils*. Paratextuality is the relationship between a text and its paratext, whose location is delimited by the space within which its functions are at work. The paratext presents and makes present a text, and in doing so, its role is to give the text materiality and to adapt it to the evolution of its public. For Genette, the ideology permeating the paratext is that the author knows best what the reader should think of his work. This aspect conflicts with poststructuralism's dismissal of the idea of authorial intention. Nevertheless, this zone is a space used by authors and editors to attempt to control and direct the reception of their work. Genette's work is of major importance in bringing an awareness of this field, largely

neglected by readers and, often, by literary critics. In the case of Céline and Houellebecq, the paratextual and its multiple uses are inescapable – indeed, sometimes foregrounded – factors, producing a destabilization of the conventional relationship between author and text.

The second section of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of the concept of ‘authorial posture’. The posture is both discursive, behavioural and performative. According to Meizoz, as a writer enters the literary field and becomes an author, he automatically creates a fictional character which he performs, in scenarios in which he is fulfilling his author-function. Meizoz divides his concept of authorial posture into ‘external posturing’ (self-presentation within a context in which the person embodies the ‘author-function’, also the domain of the epitext) and internal posturing (construction of the image of the enunciator in and through the text). An analysis of epitextual material – televised interviews, *entretiens*, open letters to the press – demonstrates that Céline and Houellebecq perform the characters created in their novels in the public sphere, and manipulate their image so that the public’s perception of the author/character is blurred. Then, working with elements of internal posturing shows that the process of Céline and Houellebecq becoming fictional characters can also be observed at the level of the text, at an enunciative level. Indeed, these two analytical tools will be used in the next chapters to demonstrate that Céline and Houellebecq use the space of the paratext and the mask of their ‘posture’ in order to influence the reception of their texts. Their strategy is constructed as a performance, elaborated in response to publishers, journalists, and the public.

The notions of authorial posture and paratextuality are then put into practice. Not only does the literary interview feature all the functions of the paratext, it also has a definite postural and strategic role. As such, it is the perfect public setting for a writer to assume his author-function and take position in the literary field. For the author, it is about self-presentation, and when analysing interviews for the purpose of this study, the main focus will be on the writer’s ‘management of discourse’, the relationship between prior ethos and discursive ethos, and ‘public behaviour’.

Entretiens therefore constitute an ideal site to explore this phenomenon at work. Chapter 3 and 4 constitute case studies on Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq, respectively. They both feature a brief history of the relationship between the writers and the press, as well as a review of previous commentaries on interviews featuring them. Meizoz’s own case studies are central to this account, yet

other critics have offered a different perspective. The chapter ‘Céline – “Biography Must Be Invented!”’ represents my own interpretation of the years between the publication of the writer’s first two novels *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à crédit*. This case study is based upon a close reading of the interviews of that period, as well as some extracts from the two novels promoted at the time. ‘L’Affaire Houellebecq’ is a study of Michel Houellebecq’s posture in early interviews, in the years before he reached fame with the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires*. These *entretiens* reveal a strong identification at a semantic, visual and behavioural level between the writer and the characters of his first two novels. This takes the form of two roles, the ‘systems man’ and the ‘omega male’ which will shape and define his self-presentation throughout his career.

Finally, concentrating on two thought-provoking cases, first the evolution of Houellebecq’s ambiguous political stance, then the reception of Céline’s work in the United States, the final chapter of this thesis focuses on the ideological consequences of the performative aspect of the authorial posture.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

Demonstrating a breakdown between ‘author’ and ‘critic’, Michel Houellebecq’s presence at the first conference dedicated to his work completely altered the nature of the event. For the conference participants, knowing that one’s object of study would be listening with attention and *talking back* to one’s analysis must have been quite an unnerving experience, one which might have affected the objectivity of the writing. Furthermore, the writer’s reputation, the aura of scandal that surrounds him, also meant that alongside the fifty academics from fifteen different nationalities who were present at this event, one could also find a team of BBC television journalists, as well as some uninvited French consorts.

Houellebecq’s ability to turn an academic discussion into a media event is not the only astonishing feature of this conference; it is also significant in the way it embodies several key aspects of the academic reception of his work. The conference took place in Edinburgh in October 2005, shortly after the publication of Houellebecq’s fourth novel, *La Possibilité d’une île*.²⁹ The location of the event, as well as the varied nationalities of its participants, highlights the international nature of this reception, unusual in the case of a French writer. At the time, in France, Michel Houellebecq’s work would not have been contemplated as a topic worthy of academia, merely a source of scandal. A day before the conference, Michel Houellebecq reportedly confessed to Gavin Bowd that ‘les études universitaires sont le seul moyen pour moi de survivre à la mort’.³⁰ Claiming that studies by academics are the only chance for his work to survive might seem surprising, but it is actually a response to the negative press reception towards the novel he had just published. Coming from a writer who is very much alive, this assertion contains an element of flattery and manipulation, as he is placing a significant amount of responsibility on

²⁹ Gavin Bowd, organiser of the conference and translator of *Possibility of an Island*, gives a precise account of this event in the ‘Avant-Propos’ of *Le Monde de Houellebecq* (2006), a volume which compiles the papers read at that conference. See: *Le Monde de Houellebecq*, ed. by Gavin Bowd (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2006).

³⁰ ‘Academic studies [meaning here: literary criticism devoted to my work] are the only way for me to survive death’, quoted in *ibid*, xvii.

Bowd's shoulders. Rejected by the press, academia has become essential to the survival of his work.

But is this such an exaggeration? Is literary criticism the only way for a writer's work to reach posterity? Only time will tell whether Houellebecq is right with regard to his own fate. However, in the case of another provocative and controversial French writer, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, this has been verified. Throughout a purgatory lasting several decades, his work was kept alive in scholarly circles, discussed mainly by British and American academics in the 1970s and early 1980s. This situation has been radically reversed since. Looking at the sheer number of newspaper articles, books, television programmes and even theatre plays focusing on the *hermit of Meudon* appearing this year and in France alone, one could say that Céline has never been more popular, yet never more contentious. For instance, in *Céline – Idées reçues sur un auteur sulfureux* (2011),³¹ David Alliot admits that since the year 2000, Céline is the French author, alongside Marcel Proust, who has generated the greatest number of publications; if we were to add them altogether, they would total an average of over one book a month. Pointing out that some writers such as André Gide or François Mauriac, who were very important in the 1960s in France, rarely constitute the subject of studies nowadays, Alliot insists that the posterity of an author cannot last without both a public and critics who maintain a level of interest sufficient to keep their work alive. He concludes: Céline is currently the most studied writer in French universities, but will he experience a decline in interest?³²

Writing a review of the criticism on Céline and Houellebecq necessitates two different approaches, one for each writer. Dr Louis Destouches became Louis-Ferdinand Céline in 1932, as he entered the literary scene with the publication of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. He died in 1961. The production of literary criticism on Céline is therefore spread over nearly eighty years, with most of it published from the 1970s onwards. Because of the controversial nature of both his writing and personality, this body of work is so voluminous that a comprehensive description of it would be impossible – whole books have already been dedicated to this task.³³

³¹ David Alliot, *Céline – Idées reçues sur un auteur sulfureux* (Paris: Ed. du cavalier bleu, 2011). The title would translate as 'Céline – Preconceived ideas about a scandalous writer'.

³² Alliot, 147

³³ See, for instance, Dauphin: 1977.

Instead, the main trends in criticism on Céline's work will be analysed with the aim of placing them within a historical context and presenting an overview of important critics and critical approaches. However, the nature of the task differs when tackling the corpus of academic commentary on Houellebecq. First of all, Houellebecq is still living, and even though he started publishing books in 1991, he only reached fame and international recognition in 1998 with the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires*. The first piece of academic writing dealing with his work appears in June 1999; therefore, the following analysis will only cover a period of fifteen years. As a direct consequence of the author being alive, the academic commentary is inextricably linked to events in Houellebecq's life and career. There are significantly fewer books and articles to comment upon than in the case of Céline, which means that the section on Houellebecq will follow a chronological order and relate biographical, as well as more general world events, to their analysis by academics.

Part 1. Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

‘Since mid-January [2011], Céline has been everywhere. No newspaper, TV channel, radio station etc. has been able to avoid this topic. No matter what happens from now on, 2011 will be known as « l’année Céline ».’³⁴

In January 2011, Frédéric Mitterrand, French minister of Culture, decided to remove Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s name from the list of national celebrations, following complaints from lawyer Serge Klarsfeld that the French republic cannot pay homage to such a virulent anti-Semite. Mitterrand’s reaction sparked so much outrage, that this non-celebration became a media event and resulted in Céline being at the forefront of the news for the following six months. The year 2011 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Céline’s death and has become an occasion for academics to assess the critical discourse on the French writer, as well as the position of his work in the contemporary literary field. In a typically ‘Célinian’ fashion, it started with a controversy. Furthering David Alliot’s claim quoted above, one could say that since mid-January, it is not only Céline who has been ‘everywhere’, but the *céliniens*. Indeed, every important Céline specialist has come into the public eye and updated his/her position on the French writer. This position-taking is sometimes more important than the books published this year. Philippe Roussin, Régis Tettamanzi and Alain Schaffner, organisers of the ‘Céline à l’épreuve’ conference, describe the academic reception of Céline, since the writer’s death, as marked by a double movement, that a *progressive institutionalization*, his work published as part as the Pléiade collection – the ultimate consecration in French literature – as well as the formidable development of the critical discourse dedicated to his work, but also the *inevitable resistance to this recognition*, based upon the refusal of racist positions

³⁴ David Alliot, quoted in Vebret, 39-40.

and the writer's politics during the 1930s and 1940s.³⁵ This analysis seems as relevant to the field of academic studies on Céline in the 1960s and 1970s, as it is nowadays. The following section, divided in two parts, also re-enacts this 'double movement' and aims to provide a guide through the most important critical trends and critics in this field over the past eighty years.

When Joseph Vebret asked David Alliot, the 'youngest and most prolific of the céliniens', how he managed to find his place within this close-knit and relatively inaccessible circle of academics, his reply was simple: by working hard, and making things go forward.³⁶ Alliot also acknowledged his place within a third generation of Céline specialists, describing at length the task already accomplished by his predecessors. According to him, the first generation includes Marc Hanrez, who wrote the first book-length study on Céline, Dominique de Roux and Jean Ducourneau. The product of their research has often been referred to as 'pioneering work,' as it was published throughout the 1960s, at a time when Céline was '*un pestiféré*', avoided like the plague. Frédéric Vitoux describes Céline studies within French academia in the 1960s as 'a completely unexplored field' and De Roux's 1963 and 1965 issues of the *Cahiers de l'Herne* as 'the founding text of literary criticism on Céline'.³⁷ Emile Brami's account of Céline's 'purgatory' during that decade corroborates Vitoux's analysis. In an interview, Brami claims that nowadays, to refer to Céline as a 'cursed writer' (*un écrivain maudit*) is a joke, or a total misconception, as he is the French writer who generates the most academic studies in the world. However, during the 1960s, it was the case. Céline was forgotten and ostracised because of his wartime activities. Acknowledged by Brami as the first important publication about the writer, the two issues of the *Cahiers de l'Herne* are a collection of previously unpublished texts and letters by Céline, as well as testimonials and essays about his life and work.³⁸

³⁵ Partial translation (my emphasis) from 'Céline à l'épreuve (1061-2011) - Réceptions, critiques, influences - Colloque international (25, 26 et 27 mai 2011)', <http://lepetitcelinien.blogspot.com/2010/12/celine-lepreuve-1961-2011-receptions.html> [accessed 25/04/11].

³⁶ Vebret, 28-30.

³⁷ Quoted in Vebret, 170, 174.

³⁸ Two recent publications, the Pléiade edition of Céline's correspondence *Lettres* (2009) and Alliot's *D'un Céline l'autre* (2011), a collection of hundreds of portraits and testimonials by Céline's friends and enemies, could be read as the outcome of the research project started in De Roux's *Cahiers*.

During the last years of his life, Céline relentlessly asked his editor Gaston Gallimard to publish his collected works as part of the prestigious Pléiade collection. He was obsessed with what would have been a consecration for him, a way for his œuvre not to fall into oblivion.³⁹ The first volume was published in 1962 by Jean Ducourneau. In the 1970s, Henri Godard continued Ducourneau's work, as he edited, annotated and introduced the next four volumes, years of research to which he refers as a 'detour of edition and erudition'. The latest addition to this collection was the publication of a volume of Céline's correspondence in 2009.⁴⁰

Henri Godard is part of the second generation of 'céliniens' described by Alliot. His importance in this field has been established by his editorial work for Gallimard, and he has become a mouthpiece for researchers in this field. Generally considered to be one of the most eminent Céline specialists, he wrote the then suppressed notice for his national celebration in 2011. Godard's speech opens with the question 'Should we, can we, celebrate Céline?', a question which is to an extent representative of his approach towards the writer. In a recent seminar organised by Julia Kristeva, Godard describes the two contrary, but equally strong emotions he has experienced when reading Céline.⁴¹ His first encounter with his prose, in *D'un Château l'autre*, acted as a revelation, the experience of something radically new, which he immediately contrasted with the equally strong feelings of disgust and nausea inflicted by the worst pages of *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. He refers to this second experience as a 'crisis' to the extent that, at the time, he nearly gave up his doctoral thesis on Céline, and still tries to avoid quoting *Bagatelles* in his own critical work. Godard also describes his book *Poétique de Céline* (1985) as an attempt to answer the question: what compels us to keep on reading this body of work, despite the 'crisis' of the pamphlets? A question developed further in *Céline Scandale* (1994), with less insistence on poetics. Godard's contribution was also crucial in the 1970s, as he edited the *Cahiers Céline* with Jean-Pierre Dauphin. Between 1960 and the early 1980s, much of the academic work on Céline was focused on uncovering and publishing unknown texts (interviews, manuscripts, letters), each revealing a

³⁹ See 'Hic et nunc! Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Claude Gallimard et la Pléiade', <<http://www.la-pleiade.fr/La-Pleiade/La-vie-de-la-Pleiade/L-histoire-de-la-Pleiade/Louis-Ferdinand-Celine-Claude-Gallimard-et-la-Pleiade>>, [accessed 18/04/12].

⁴⁰ Céline, *Lettres*, (eds) Henri Godard and Jean-Paul Louis. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, 2009).

⁴¹ Henri Godard and Julia Kristeva, 'Lire Céline aujourd'hui', Conférence de Henri Godard (2011) <<http://www.kristeva.fr/jk-seminaire-celine-godard.html>> [accessed 30/07/14].

different aspect of the writer. The result of this type of research helped rehabilitate his work and was published in the aforementioned *Cahiers de l'Herne* n.3 and 5 (1963; 1965), the *Cahiers Céline* (nine issues published by Gallimard between 1977 and 2009) and the *Série Céline*.⁴² Until the early 1980s, the resistance to the institutionalization and recognition of Céline as an important writer took the shape of a disapproving silence. At the time, because of the writer's reputation as an *infréquentable* anti-Semite and racist, no academic in France would have furthered their career by writing about him. However, most of the research on Céline was carried by British and American literary critics, such as Allen Thiher, Bettina Knapp, Stanford Luce, and Charles Krance, to name but a few.⁴³

These academics were provided with a platform for their research to be discussed and published by the Société d'Études Céliniennes, an important organisation whose aim, as the website announces, is to unite people interested in the works of Louis-Ferdinand Céline outside any political passions and contribute to the knowledge of this body of work through stimulation of critical research, organisation of international conferences and the distribution of bulletins and publications.⁴⁴ Starting with the Oxford international conference in 1975, the Société has then organised further international conferences dedicated to Céline's work every two years, followed by the publication of the 'actes du colloque', a compilation of all the papers read at that conference. Since its creation, it has also published six monographs and created the journal *Études Céliniennes* in 2005. This organisation has played a crucial role in the progressive institutionalisation of Céline's work, most importantly in keeping it a relevant topic of research for academics throughout the world.

The Society's president, François Gibault, has been one of the most active participants in this movement. He has worked very closely with Lucette Destouches, Céline's widow, first as her lawyer to help prevent the republication of the pamphlets and protect her estate, and then as editor. Together they deciphered the manuscripts of Céline's last novel, *Rigodon*, published posthumously in 1969. Gibault has also edited and introduced the volume of *Lettres de prison à Lucette Destouches et à Maître Mikkelsen* (1998), an important account of Céline's correspondence during

⁴² Five issues published by *La Revue des lettres modernes* between 1974 and 1988.

⁴³ I would like to thank Peter Dunwoodie for bringing this point to my attention in January 2011.

⁴⁴ Accessed online <<http://www.celine-etudes.org/>>.

his prison years in Denmark, but was criticized for portraying the French writer as a victim and minimising the impact of his anti-Semitism.⁴⁵ Gibault is also the author of a biography, published between 1977 and 1985, whose three volumes and 1,200 pages have been described by André Derval as the main source of primary documents on the topic, as well as the reference in biographical essays on the writer.⁴⁶

Because of their sheer number, biographies on Céline could almost constitute a separate genre within the more general field of studies dedicated to the writer. Indeed, many critics have tried to elucidate the dichotomy ‘literary genius/unforgivable racist and anti-Semite’ by providing an account of the writer’s life. The resurfacing of his correspondence, which, to an extent, sheds new light on his personality, takes part in this biographical trend, which starts, in the US, with Milton Hindus’s *Crippled Giant* (1950), an account of the academic’s visit to Céline during his Danish exile with extracts from his diary. This portrait of Céline has been influential in later academic studies and has contributed towards an analysis of the writer as ‘mad,’ or as a psychiatric case.⁴⁷ Erika Ostrovsky’s *Voyeur Voyant: A Portrait of Louis-Ferdinand Céline* (1971) is the first American biography of Céline and presents the writer in a more sympathetic light. Significant French biographers include Frédéric Vitoux (1978; 1988; 2008), Pascal Fouché (2001), and Émile Brami (2003). Recently, two biographies published in 2011 have become important reference works within this field and changed the way Céline is perceived by the general public: Henri Godard’s *Céline* and David Alliot’s *D’un Céline l’autre*.

Finally, Julia Kristeva, author of *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection* (1980), despite facing attacks from critics such as Alice Kaplan and Philip Watts, has also played an important part in the institutionalization of Céline’s work. As Watts admits, ‘it is perhaps through readings by members of the *Tel Quel* group in France that Céline’s works were first brought back to public attention after World War II’.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See, for instance, ‘Les pamphlets de Céline, entre Histoire et poétique’, in Jérôme Meizoz *Confrontations (1994-2004)*. (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2005), 155.

⁴⁶ André Derval, ‘Bibliographie’, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, special issue on Céline, 505 (February 2011), 83.

⁴⁷ See for instance Albert Chesneau, *Essai de psychocritique de Louis-Ferdinand Céline* (Paris: Minard, 1971) and Isabelle Blondiaux, *Une écriture psychotique: Louis-Ferdinand Céline* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1985).

⁴⁸ Philip Watts, ‘Postmodern Céline’, in R. Scullion, P. Solomon, and T. Spear (eds), *Céline and the politics of difference* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), 204.

Watts then refers to Philippe Sollers's article 'Le rire de Céline' ('Céline's laughter'; 1963) and Kristeva's 'Actualité de Céline' ('Céline's relevance today'; 1977) as epitomizing the *Tel Quel* members' approach to Céline's texts. Watts continues, 'By appropriating Céline – a writer of provocatively bad politics – Kristeva and *Tel Quel* were attempting to shift from the discursive mode of rationalism and political responsibility that had dominated the postwar scene to a discourse about delirium, a decentered subjectivity, schizophrenia, and *jouissance*'.⁴⁹ Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' developed in *Powers of Horror* relies on psychoanalysis and accordingly summarizes Céline as enigma.⁵⁰ Her series of doctoral seminars 'Lire Céline aujourd'hui' – Reading Céline today – at the Université Paris 7, features illustrious guest speakers such as Philippe Sollers, Henri Godard and Bernard-Henri Lévy. Kristeva's seminar, based on a reading of Céline, revisits and updates the theory outlined in *Powers of Horror* by answering the question: 'Is literature as experience of limits still possible today?' However, one should note that although Kristeva's research on Céline is based in France, it appears that the English translation, *Powers of Horror* (1982) has had a greater impact than its original text. Anglo-American critics, discussing Céline's work in the 1980s and 1990s, have quoted Kristeva's book as a seminal text and written in reaction to it. Conversely, most French critics have largely ignored Kristeva's contribution to this field of research. On the other hand, although Philippe Sollers's approach comes from a similar theoretical background, he is regularly referenced in the French media. This fact signals the existence of two different research traditions, one going back to the *Cahiers de l'Herne*, and another one stemming from the work of the *Tel Quel* movement.

Although coming from different critical and theoretical backgrounds, Henri Godard, François Gibault and Julia Kristeva have all contributed to this 'progressive institutionalization' of the writer's work. The Société d'Études Céliniennes's regular international conferences and publications, the work on manuscripts and edition by Godard, Gibault and Dauphin, as well as the seminar run by Kristeva all ensure that academic studies on Céline remain a relevant topic of research. However, as Godard's 'crisis', or Kristeva's theory of abjection demonstrate, it is a reaction to the question of anti-Semitism which eventually informs their whole critical approach.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 205.

⁵⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Céline, ni comédien ni martyr', 2009 <<http://www.kristeva.fr/celine-ni-comedien-ni-martyr.html>> [accessed 5/02/11].

Studies on Céline often contain within themselves a point of resistance to this institutionalization in their tackling of ideological questions. Nevertheless, these issues are almost impossible to avoid when encountering such a problematic writer, and as Philippe Muray explains, anyone approaching Céline's work to analyse or celebrate just his writing, will wake up the anti-Semitic beast asleep within it.⁵¹ In the article 'Les pamphlets de Céline, entre Histoire et poétique' (2005; first published in 2001), Jérôme Meizoz summarizes this problem as an ongoing critical dispute which has at stake the decision whether Céline's first novels can be saved while his pamphlets rejected, *or* whether the anti-Semitic texts have to be considered as a natural follow-up to the novels of the 1930s which share a similar ideology. Meizoz observes that critics have a choice between three possible positions. The first one consists in diminishing, or even disproving, the impact of Céline's anti-Semitism – a position he considers 'untenable' nowadays. Meizoz describes the second position as pretending that the pamphlets were just a mistake in his career, and as a consequence insisting on his literary genius, while neglecting what is outside the text – Philippe Sollers's approach epitomizes this position. Finally, the position Meizoz coins as 'continuiste' is based on accepting the principle that the novels and pamphlets share a common ideology, such as Céline's biological racism. According to Meizoz, since the 1990s, the third position is the most widely accepted by academics.

This intellectual line of thought can be traced back to 1938 with Hans-Erich Kaminski's essay *Céline en chemise brune*. Published only a few months after *Bagatelles*, this essay warns of the consequences of the pamphlet and accuses Céline of working for Hitler's propagandists, an accusation repeated by Sartre in 'Portrait de l'antisémite' (1945). The 'continuiste' stance implies looking at the historical and sociological consequences of the pamphlets as social texts, taking them away from the realm of pure aesthetics, an approach epitomized by the *Tel Quel* group, who contributed to the propagation of an image of Céline as 'pure stylist', created by the author himself as a defence after the war. Meizoz sees monographs such as Michel Bounan's *L'Art de Céline et son temps* (1997) and Jean-Pierre Martin's *Contre Céline* (1997) as continuing and updating Kaminski's work. Bounan's aim is to reveal Céline as a Nazi in disguise who pretends to be an anarchist: 'Comment un libertaire

⁵¹ Philippe Muray, *Céline* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981), 12.

devient-il Nazi?',⁵² Bounan repeatedly asks throughout the book. This idea of unmasking the author as an impostor will also be the theme of several monographs on Michel Houellebecq.⁵³

Indeed, academic debates on Céline in the 1990s were centred on ideological problems, and they were usually accusatory. This wave of anti-Céline essays was paralleled with another wave of denunciatory essays from across the Atlantic. Critics such as Philip Watts have repeatedly presented and argued the case for Céline as a negationist⁵⁴ – an accusation which renders his pamphlets, and the rest of his work even more unforgivable. Watts demonstrates that Céline read Maurice Bardèche's *Nuremberg ou la terre promise* and Paul Rassinier's *Le Mensonge d'Ulysse*, two (in)famous Holocaust-denying essays and further claims that 'these revisionist tracts constitute one of the important ideological intertexts of Céline's postwar novels'.⁵⁵ Studies such as Alice Kaplan's 'Sources and Quotations in *Bagatelles pour un massacre*' (1995; first published in French in 1987), or readers such as *Céline, USA* (1994) and *Céline and the Politics of Difference* (1995) signal a change in focus within Anglophone critics. The emphasis shifts from works centred on biographical aspects and presenting Céline in a positive light to approaches which take into account the contentious politics and ideology behind the text. As Alice Kaplan and Philippe Roussin explain, in the introduction to *Céline, USA*:

The American image of a libertarian Céline endured until the mid-sixties [...] could not have persisted if Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets had been known in the United States. Today, in the American context, a historical interrogation of the pamphlets opens his work to new interpretive questions about the violence of language and the limits of free speech.⁵⁶

⁵² Michel Bounan, *L'art de Céline et son temps* (Paris: Allia, 1997), 65.

⁵³ See Eric Naulleau, *Au Secours, Houellebecq revient!* (Paris: Chiflet et Cie, 2005) and Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé* (Paris: Maren Sell, 2005).

⁵⁴ Philip Watts, 'Postmodern Céline', in *Céline and the politics of difference* (1995) and Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: how literature responded to the postwar trials of writers and intellectuals in France* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

⁵⁵ Philip Watts 1998, 71.

⁵⁶ Alice Yaeger Kaplan and Philippe Roussin (eds), *Céline, USA*. *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93, 2 (1994), 201.

This second wave of American academic criticism on Céline also features essays from a feminist critical perspective, interrogating the place of women and the role of ballet and gender in the text.⁵⁷ These studies are, once again, focused on *Bagatelles*, yet they show that Céline's attitude towards women and the body of the dancer was already present in his early works and informs his poetics as a whole. Céline famously declared in a letter to Milton Hindus that 'all of art is the translation of the lines of the dancer's legs'.⁵⁸ Rosemarie Scullion's study brings forward new interpretations of this affirmation, demonstrating that 'Céline's aesthetic principles and practice are intertwined with the dynamics of sexual difference and domination'.⁵⁹ Similarly, for Felicia McCarren, Céline's ballets belong to the core of his writing practice and require a close reading because throughout them, 'dance is linked to body, hygiene, family, race and nation; to a hygienic ideal and to a pathological racism. Céline will continually link his style to dance'.⁶⁰ At the end of the chapter 'Céline's Biology and the Ballets of *Bagatelles pour un massacre*', McCarren discusses the performative aspect of Céline's method of writing, and touches upon the idea of Céline as the ultimate performer of the ballets.⁶¹ It is interesting that a reading of Céline as a performer is a conclusion that can be reached using very different approaches. For instance, in the booklet which accompanies *Céline Vivant*, a DVD featuring every televised interview the writer ever made, Emile Brami describes the French writer as an actor of genius, trying out different roles throughout his life and hiding behind a succession of masks.⁶² The interpretation of Céline as a performer is, in this case based on an analysis of photographs and television interviews. Fabrice Luchini, a French actor famous for his stage interpretation of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1986-1988), also claims that Céline's genius lies in his constant lying.⁶³ One can find analogies between the idea of Céline as a creative actor/liar and Jérôme Meizoz's work on authorial posture, a concept he

⁵⁷ See for instance, Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies – Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) or Rosemarie Scullion, 'Choreographing Sexual Difference: Ballet and Gender in Céline' in *Céline and the politics of difference* (1995).

⁵⁸ Scullion, 1995, 142.

⁵⁹ Scullion, 1995, 141.

⁶⁰ McCarren, 1998, 179.

⁶¹ McCarren, 1998, 216.

⁶² Brami, 2007, 25.

⁶³ Fabrice Luchini, 'le génie de Céline, c'est le mensonge constant' in *La Grande librairie* émission spéciale Louis-Ferdinand Céline, France 5, 3/03/2011.

has applied to studies of both Céline and Houellebecq and one central to this thesis.⁶⁴ For Meizoz, as a writer becomes a public figure and enters the literary field, especially if this writer adopts a pseudonym, an element of self-creation is introduced. Thus, from this particular position, the literary field can be read as a stage and interviews become performances. Brami and Meizoz both use the lexical field of the theatre to present their ideas, yet Meizoz has developed a terminology borrowed in parts from the field of literary sociology: the concept of authorial posture, which will be the subject of the next chapter of this thesis.

Looking back at Alliot's framework, the three generations of Céline specialists he recognizes as part of this field of research, one realises that his analysis was bound to be limited. First of all, Alliot did not include Anglo-American critics, whose body of work represent significant advances, yet can be easily omitted by French critics, engrossed in their own polemics about national celebrations. Nonetheless, the very concept of *generation* in a field of research not only shows that academics have been active over a significant period of time, but also can be read as a sign of critical renewal. Alliot acknowledges that his generation, in which he also includes the critic Gaël Richard, has benefited from the development of internet and access to documents which were not previously legally available. Alliot then hints at possible work for a fourth generation of céliniens.⁶⁵ Will this generation benefit from bridging gaps between the Francophone and Anglo-Saxon approaches? In the case of the critical reception of Michel Houellebecq's work, the idea of generations of academics seems too premature as the first studies only appeared in 1999. This reception has been of an international nature from the start, and one can already identify some critical trends within this more restricted field of study.

Part 2. Michel Houellebecq

The first two pieces of literary criticism dedicated to Houellebecq's work were published in 1999: Seth Armus's article 'The American Menace in the

⁶⁴ See Jérôme Meizoz, 'Un style "franc grossier": parole et posture chez L.-F. Céline', in *L'Âge du roman parlant (1919-1939)*, (Genève: Droz, 2001); Jérôme Meizoz, *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (Genève: Slatkine, 2004) and Jérôme Meizoz, *Posture Littéraires – Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Genève: Slatkine, 2007).

⁶⁵ Vebret, 2011, 30.

Houellebecq Affaire',⁶⁶ and a special issue of the French journal *L'Atelier du roman* on Houellebecq's *Particules élémentaires*, which featured contributions by renowned critics such as Fernando Arrabal, Philippe Muray and Dominique Noguez. The early academic reception of Houellebecq's work was initiated by a choice to make sense of his second novel and more specifically, the overwhelming media scandal that accompanied its publication in 1998. Analysing the media reception of Houellebecq's novel, Ruth Cruickshank remarks that 'the trend in the mainstream press is to acknowledge *Les Particules* as important, but then to evade textual analysis by reporting coverage-worthy reactions to Houellebecq's contradictory television and press interviews'.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the early academic reception appears to mirror this tendency, in the way a number of journal articles in English tend to analyse the so-called 'affaire Houellebecq' as a phenomenon rather than focusing their attention on the novel itself.⁶⁸ Another striking feature of Houellebecq's early academic reception is its international nature. While French newspapers endlessly discussed *l'affaire*, thus contributing to the phenomenon itself, French academics at first snubbed Houellebecq's first novels and poetry, and most of the critical work on Houellebecq was written in English and published in English-speaking academic journals. The first book-length study dedicated to the French writer, *Das Phänomen Houellebecq* by Thomas Steinfeld (2001) came out in Germany.

The main issue raised by critics at the time was, simply, why *Les Particules*? They were looking for an explanation for the scale of the controversy, which could only be compared to the ones created by the publication of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) or Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). In 'L'affaire Houellebecq – Ideological Crime and Fin de Millénaire Literary Scandal', Ruth Cruickshank argues that

beyond the legal proceedings it precipitated and its trial by media, *Les Particules* represents an important intellectual juncture, not only in terms of the

⁶⁶ Seth Armus, 'The American Menace in the Houellebecq Affaire', *French Politics Culture and Society*, 17, 2 (1999), 34-42.

⁶⁷ Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 117.

⁶⁸ See Armus, 1999; William Cloonan, 'Literary Scandal, Fin de siècle, and the Novel in 1999', *The French Review*, 74, 1 (October 2000), 14-30; Ruth Cruickshank, 'L'Affaire Houellebecq: Ideological Crime and Fin de Millénaire Literary Scandal', *French Cultural Studies*, 14, 1 (2003), 101-116.

future of the French novel in a mass-mediated world, but also in terms of the future of the intellectual paradigm in which the novel is inscribed.⁶⁹

Martin Crowley's analysis in 'The Wreckage of Liberation' (2002) insists on the ambiguity created by Houellebecq himself, through the device of an inconsistent narrative framing of the text. Crowley uses the example of the misogynist and anti-feminist discourse in the novels, whereby ideology is voiced by unstable characters. As he explains, 'the narrative techniques employed in his prose fiction [...] serve to render undecidable the status of these questions in his texts' and this 'undecidability' is 'a kind of pre-emptive closing down of the space of critical dialogue'.⁷⁰ Houellebecq himself cannot be accused of promoting misogyny, or anti-Islamism, yet his stance towards the ideological content of his novel is unsettling. Crowley then exemplifies this 'closing down of critical dialogue' when he states that 'to criticize Houellebecq for the insistent presence of such material in his texts is, however, already to situate oneself in a position which these texts themselves criticize'.⁷¹

Furthermore, it is worth stressing that it is Houellebecq who adds another layer of discourse and confusion to this reception through numerous provocative declarations during interviews. As Cloonan states, 'Houellebecq's gift for the outrageous interview is such that Van Reuterghen [...] quite properly remarks that "instead of asking the writer questions about his work, he is asked questions about the previous interview"'.⁷² Detracting attention from the text, Houellebecq is partly responsible for the scandal created by his novel, and these interviews are to an extent, the cause of the intermittence of the narrative framing of his novels. Houellebecq uses the zone of the paratext to create alternative meanings, to playfully divert interpretations of the original text. The interviews become problematic when Houellebecq repeats the views of fictional characters as his own. This phenomenon is analysed by Jérôme Meizoz in his essay 'Le roman et l'inacceptable'. Focusing on the next scandal, the publication of *Plateforme* in 2001 and Houellebecq's interview in the magazine *Lire*, he explains the reasons behind the ensuing court case.

⁶⁹Cruikshank, 2003, 104.

⁷⁰ Martin Crowley, 'Houellebecq: The Wreckage of Liberation', *Romance Studies*, 20, 1 (2002), 18-19.

⁷¹ Crowley, 2002, 20.

⁷² "plutôt que d'interroger l'écrivain sur son œuvre, on l'interroge sur l'interview précédente" quoted in Cloonan, 2000, 17.

According to Meizoz, the principles of the autonomy of the French literary field have been established since 1830, which means that the literary text is independent from external regulations, whether religious, political, or ethical. However, this ‘immunity’ of fiction was broken in the case of Houellebecq’s *Plateforme* by the writer’s ambiguous position towards his own text: internally, the distinction between author and narrator is blurred; externally, Houellebecq repeats his narrator Michel’s anti-Islamist positions as his own in interviews.⁷³ Meizoz compares Houellebecq’s court case to the one faced by Flaubert after the publication of *Madame Bovary*. This comparison is also the starting point of another essay, Jean-Luc Azra’s ‘Le roman prémonitoire’ (2002), in which Houellebecq’s novels are described as ‘sociological fiction’ and their prophetic quality is analysed. Azra defines the term ‘œuvre sociologique’ as works which announce deep social changes.⁷⁴ They are usually best sellers, and provoke passionate reactions. Azra sees in Flaubert and Houellebecq’s fiction two types of topics; what he calls ‘superficial topics’ such as adultery and anti-Islamism, onto which most of the attention of the public is focalised, and which he opposes to ‘serious topics’ concerned with more ‘significant matters’ such as the breakdown of marriage as an institution and of inter-personal relationships.⁷⁵

Focusing their readings on the sociological aspects of Houellebecq’s work, both Meizoz and Azra were isolated cases in their field of research for the early 2000s. The first two book-length studies in French devoted to Houellebecq appeared in 2003: Dominique Noguez’s *Houellebecq, en fait* and Murielle-Lucie Clément’s *Houellebecq, Sperme et sang*. Noguez’s book is biographical in nature; sympathetic to the writer, his aim is to present Houellebecq, his friend, in a positive light. Indeed, Noguez was one of the most vocal defenders of Houellebecq at the *Plateforme* court case, alongside Philippe Sollers, and Salman Rushdie, amongst others. Murielle-Lucie Clément is one of the most prolific Houellebecq specialists. After her initial 2003 study, she has published *Houellebecq revisité* (2007) and *Houellebecq – Sexuellement correct* (2010), as well as *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (2007), a collection of essays she edited in collaboration with her colleague Sabine van Wesemael, another critic who has published extensively on the French writer.⁷⁶

⁷³ Jérôme Meizoz, 2004, 190-92.

⁷⁴ Jean-Luc Azra, 2002, 3.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁶ See Sabine van Wesemael (ed), *Michel Houellebecq – Etudes Réunies par Sabine van Wesemael* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004); Sabine van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq, le plaisir du texte* (Paris:

Clément and van Wesemael's approaches focus on close reading and topics such as pornography versus eroticism in Houellebecq's writing and the meaning of dreams in his fiction.

The year 2004 marked the completion of the first PhD thesis on Houellebecq, Marie-Lise Devaux's 'L'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq: une observation critique de la société'.⁷⁷ That year, the most important publications are *Michel Houellebecq – Etudes réunies par Sabine van Wesemael* – the first collection of essays dedicated to the French writer – as well as Olivier Bardolle's *La Littérature à vif*.⁷⁸ Bardolle's book is significant because it draws a comparison between Houellebecq, Céline and Proust and by doing so gives his controversial work an important place in the twentieth and early twenty first century French literary fields. According to Bardolle, Houellebecq is the only writer still 'readable' after Proust and Céline's stylistic revolutions.

Late 2005, the publication of Houellebecq's *Possibility of an Island*, a 'cultural tsunami',⁷⁹ was accompanied by a series of studies, both critical and journalistic, seeking to expose Houellebecq's manipulation of the media and the editorial strategies behind his commercial success. While Meizoz, in his essay mentioned above, kept a neutral stance as he discussed the question of Houellebecq's posturing and his relationship to the media, the three books published that year, Eric Naulleau's *Au secours, Houellebecq revient!*, Jean-François Patricola's *Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* and Denis Demonpion's *Houellebecq non autorisé*, dealt with a similar topic, yet they are accusatory; their aim was to denounce and 'unmask' Houellebecq.

For Patricola, Houellebecq is nothing more than a consumerist product – he represents the 'chef d'œuvre of literary marketing'. Patricola points out that the media scandal surrounding the writer and his work's main impact lies in exponential book

L'Harmattan, 2005); Sabine van Wesemael, 'Michel Houellebecq: a fin de siècle for the twentieth century', in A. Durand, and N. Mandel (eds), *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Murielle-Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael (eds), *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007); and Sabine van Wesemael, *Le roman transgressif contemporain, de Bret Easton Ellis à Michel Houellebecq* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010).

⁷⁷ Marie-Lise Devaux, 'L'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq : une observation critique de la société' (Thèse de doctorat, Université de Tours, Département de lettres modernes, 2004).

⁷⁸ Olivier Bardolle, *La littérature à vif – le cas Houellebecq* (Paris: L'Esprit des Péninsules, 2004).

⁷⁹ Jean-François Patricola, *Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* (Paris: Ecriture, 2005), 11.

sales.⁸⁰ Similarly, Eric Naulleau describes Houellebecq as a ‘sociological writer’,⁸¹ but in this phrase implies the consideration that Houellebecq’s choice of themes is the result of a careful market research. According to Naulleau, Houellebecq is a ‘writer of limits’, who knows exactly where those limits are, as far as provocation is concerned. For instance, he gets away with ignorant anti-Islamist remarks, in a country where anti-Arabic racism is popular, yet carefully stays away from attacking Judaism or Catholicism, as fewer people would have been defending his freedom of expression had he done so.⁸² Naulleau compares Houellebecq’s calculated anti-Islamism to Céline’s virulent anti-Semitism in the 1930s, which he sees, in both cases, as the result of a strategic position-taking rather than the expression of authentic opinions. He concludes: ‘I believe that one can discuss Houellebecq’s case as pertaining to a veritable marketing of abjection’.⁸³ This accusation is interesting in the light of the fact that Houellebecq too will describe Céline’s anti-Semitism as cynical and opportunistic, but this time in an effort to distance himself from a writer he has often been compared.

Finally, Denis Demonpion, a journalist for *Le Point*, was commissioned to write a biography on Houellebecq. The book, *Houellebecq non autorisé* (2005), owes its title to the writer’s refusal to ‘authorize’ its publication – a consequence of a former attempt to ‘authorize’ it by offering Demonpion to let him publish the biography on the condition that he could add his own contribution to the book, in the form of footnotes. Demonpion’s book examines the creation of ‘Houellebecq’ as a fictional character. He suspects that the French writer does not want this process of self-fictionalization to be revealed and therefore attempts to use the space of the paratext to regain control of the public’s perception of his persona.

Houellebecq non autorisé could be read as the antithesis of Noguez’s book.⁸⁴ Critics such as Murielle- Lucie Clément and Gavin Bowd are critical of the approaches represented in the three books discussed above. The following comment by Clément illustrates the difference between what she calls ‘journalistic’ and academic criticism on Houellebecq:

⁸⁰ Patricola, 2005, 13.

⁸¹ Naulleau, 2005, 88.

⁸² Ibid, 90.

⁸³ Ibid, 96.

⁸⁴ In ‘Slippery Author Figures, Ethos, and Value Regimes. Houellebecq, A Case’, Liesbeth Korthals Altes compares Patricola and Noguez’s respective approaches.

Rather than limit the critical approach to a study of the reception of the work, rather than analyse the amalgamation between the writer and his fictional characters, then the editorial marketing, and concluding that it has been successful, the present study approaches the novels from the inside, within their literary specificity, focusing on some aspects of ‘houellebecquian’ writing.⁸⁵

Clément’s focus is on a close reading of the texts. Yet it can also be argued that the approaches she rejects constitute an analysis of paratextual elements, which constitute an alternative text, to be found at the margins of her object of study. Because this alternative text influences the interpretation of the original one, it cannot be ignored.

In October 2005 (Edinburgh) and October 2007 (Amsterdam), two international conferences dedicated to Houellebecq’s work took place, resulting in the publication of the collections of essays *Le monde de Houellebecq* and *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*. Gavin Bowd opens the first book by dismissing Demonpion’s work, describing the journalist’s investigation as having given birth to a ‘web of trite remarks’.⁸⁶ Clément and van Wesemael, introducing the second volume, regret that Houellebecq hasn’t yet really stimulated academic research, quoting their own work as the only substantial contributions to the field.⁸⁷ However, this affirmation is contradicted by the fact that by the end of 2007, essays on Houellebecq regularly appear in journals and almost half of these are written in English. Between 2006 and 2008, the completion of three more doctoral theses dedicated to the French writer’s work, could be read as another sign that academic research on Houellebecq was burgeoning at that time.⁸⁸

In 2008, when Houellebecq’s popularity appeared to be at an all-time low, his

⁸⁵ Murielle-Lucie Clément, *Michel Houellebecq revisité – l’écriture houellebecquienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007), 13.

⁸⁶ Gavin Bowd (ed), *Le monde de Houellebecq* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2006), ix.

⁸⁷ Clément and van Wesemael, 2007, 5.

⁸⁸ M Granger Remy, ‘The Posthuman Novel’ (thèse de doctorat, New York University, Department of French, 2006); Ludovic Jean Bousquet, ‘Michel Houellebecq: The Meaning of the Fright’ (thèse de doctorat, University of California, Department of French and Francophone Studies, 2007); Patrick Roy, ‘Une étrange lumière: la déchirure lyrique dans l’œuvre de Michel Houellebecq’ (thèse de doctorat, Université Laval, département des littératures, 2008).

mother Lucie Ceccaldi attacked him in her autobiography, entitled *L'Innocente*. One has to understand that the name 'Lucie Ceccaldi' also refers to a character in *Les Particules*, Bruno and Michel's irresponsible hippy mother. By giving her own version of her life-story, she adds to the blurring of life and fiction, a process already started by Houellebecq in the novel. In 'Houellebecq's Spiteful Carnival', Bulent Diken expands and theorizes this idea when he states that

Similar to reality-TV productions, Houellebecq constantly edits life, deliberately confusing fictive and real figures. Most of his characters are people from real life who can recognize themselves in the books while, at the same time, he quotes his fictive characters in the media. That is, his fictive persons (words without bodies) coincide with factual people denied a say about his representation in his books (bodies without words), a process in which 'society of spectacle' meets biopolitics.⁸⁹

From 2008 onwards, new academic book-length studies on Houellebecq have come out on a yearly basis. Bruno Viard, in *Houellebecq au laser: la faute à mai 68* (2008), reads Houellebecq as a moralist, and his criticism of economic and sexual liberalism as a reaction to the ideology inherited from May 1968. Liza Steiner's *Sade-Houellebecq, du boudoir au sex-shop* (2009) explores the parallels between Houellebecq's main thesis and the Sadeian vision of sexuality. In *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique* (2010), Aurélien Bellanger argues the case for Houellebecq as a romantic writer, influenced by Baudelaire and Novalis. Houellebecq's work seems to now be recognized as a valid topic of research by French academia, and this has been reinforced by another type of recognition, in late 2010: the award of the Goncourt prize, following the publication of his latest novel, *La Carte et le territoire*, which obtained a more positive response from the French media. In the Anglophone world, academic monographs have started to appear recently, such as John McCann's *Michel Houellebecq: Author of Our Times* (2010), shortly followed by studies by Douglas Morrey and Carole Sweeney.⁹⁰ These studies complement Diken's thought-

⁸⁹ Bulent Diken, *Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 123.

⁹⁰ Douglas Morrey *Michel Houellebecq - Humanity and its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) and Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

provoking book, in which the concept of nihilism is approached through Houellebecq's fiction, with its 'most visible leitmotifs, *ressentiment* and spite, an explosive mixture that systematically evolves into a will to self-destruction and destruction of sociality'.⁹¹ Sweeney approaches Houellebecq's work from the angle of his critique of neo-liberalism and anti-May '68 discourse, a fresh perspective which French critics may not have been able to distance themselves from enough to understand and analyse.

Bruno Viard, organising a conference dedicated to the unity of the work of Michel Houellebecq declares in its call for paper that, as theories on the writer's work are multiplying, the time for provocation and polemics is now over.⁹² This conference signals a shift in perception within academia, to which the two international conferences (Edinburgh, 2005; Amsterdam, 2007) and the Goncourt prize consecration of *La Carte et le territoire* have contributed. Although Houellebecq has often been compared to Céline in press articles or in passing comments in monographs,⁹³ a detailed critical study on the two writers has yet to be written. Because of the nature of the issues raised by their work, resulting on an on-going scandal, it has sometimes proven difficult to differentiate between the critical and journalistic reception of both Céline and Houellebecq's fiction. Among all the critics presented in this literature review, four of them have discussed both writers: Philippe Muray, Philippe Sollers, Olivier Bardolle and Jérôme Meizoz. As we have seen, the latter reads Houellebecq and Céline's use of pseudonyms as an indicator of a process of self-creation he calls posturing, seeing both writers as retroactively performing the fictional characters created in their novels into the public sphere. In the next chapter, his concept of 'authorial posture' will be developed and theorized as an analytical tool that I will employ in this study.

⁹¹ Diken, 2009, 13.

⁹² Colloque *L'unité de l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq*, Marseille 2012
http://www.fabula.org/actualites/colloque-michel-houellebecq_42615.php (accessed online 25/04/11).

⁹³ For instance in Jean-François Patricola, 2005, 23 and Eric Naulleau, 2005, 96.

Chapter 2. Paratextuality and Authorial Posture

La Carte et le territoire, Michel Houellebecq's latest novel, was published in France on September 3rd, 2010. Living in London at the time, I could only get hold of a copy ten days later. One could say that, for a short time, my experience of the book was that of a paratext without its text. Indeed, in the space of these ten days, I was able to collect an impressive amount of epitextual and metatextual material about the novel.⁹⁴ I was able to find summaries of the plot, and read what numerous critics thought of the book, I could even watch a video of the author giving a lengthy analysis of his own novel. The only thing I could not read was the text. This anecdote highlights the importance of the function of the paratext. Houellebecq's novels are published surrounded by an apparatus of commentary and polemics, some of it instigated by the press, the editors, some of it by the author himself. While writing this chapter, I was highly aware of this fact, and refused to read the reviews and watch the long interview, wary of how much of this paratextual activity was colouring my appreciation and interpretation of the text.

The first section of this chapter is not about the text, but rather about what the French critic Gérard Genette calls its *paratext*, or 'what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public'.⁹⁵ In some cases the paratext takes over the text, or at least seems to have a significant impact on its interpretation. Because of the aura of scandal and provocation surrounding every publication, L.-F. Céline and Michel Houellebecq's novels in particular suffer from this phenomenon. It therefore becomes crucial to understand the function and effect of these elements in relation to their text. Indeed, Genette closes *Seuils*, his book-length study on the topic, by issuing a warning: '*watch out*

⁹⁴ That is, over 15 reviews of the book, from most French (and English) broadsheets' websites, an interview with Houellebecq on *Les Inrockuptibles*' website, and even more audio visual material: some youtube videos of the writer's appearances in French TV programmes, as well as an impressive 2h18 *entretien* with Houellebecq on *surlering.com*.

⁹⁵ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts – Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997a), 1.

for the paratext!' But what does one have to watch out for, and why? And what is the paratext? What would be the relevance to literary studies of a form of criticism based upon it? The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide a definition of paratextuality, its role and the way it has been used by some literary critics, in order to finally use it as a tool to approach Céline and Houellebecq's works.

The second section will be devoted to the discussion of another analytical tool – Jérôme Meizoz's concept of authorial posture in the literary field. A simple assertion, the fact that L.-F. Céline and Michel Houellebecq are both pseudonyms, is enough to demonstrate the relevance of such a theory to this study. While Gérard Genette defines pseudonyms as the practice, for a 'real' author, of signing his work with a name which is not his legal name,⁹⁶ Jérôme Meizoz, a Swiss writer and academic, goes one step further when he states that Michel Houellebecq, pseudonym of Michel Thomas, is a 'posture', in the same way that Louis-Ferdinand Céline constitutes Louis Destouches's 'posture'.⁹⁷ What is the difference between a pseudonym and what Meizoz calls 'posture'? According to Meizoz, a pseudonym turns the author into a fictive enunciator, a character in its own right, and this process of self-creation occurs through the 'posture' of the author.⁹⁸ As he explains,

'Posture' means the peculiar form used by authors to negotiate their 'position' in the literary field. For example, pseudonymia in the arts that proposes new presentations of self. In the literary field, an author can show different postures. In sociology of literature, 'posture' is a notion that can help to describe both the poetics (by the rhetorical 'ethos') and the social behaviour in literary field.⁹⁹

Meizoz is one of the rare critics to have published journal articles and book chapters on both Céline and Houellebecq. For him, the striking characteristic shared by the two writers is the fact that in the public sphere their behaviour as authors is dictated by the enunciator in their novels, as if they were pretending to be that character,

⁹⁶ Gérard Genette, 1997a, 52.

⁹⁷ Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires – Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Genève: Slatkine, 2007), 27.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

⁹⁹ Jérôme Meizoz's definition of 'Authorial "posture" and literary field' - <<http://www.espace-se.org/en/art-225.html>> [accessed 15/02/12].

intentionally blurring life and fiction.¹⁰⁰ The idea of authorial posture as self-presentation, a specific manner for a writer to occupy the literary field, helps to analyse and understand this process. Working within the field of sociology of literature, Meizoz's writing is deeply influenced by Bourdieu's work, in particular his theory of the literary field. The ideas contained in his theory of authorial posture will then be developed, as these two concepts, posture and paratext, are best illuminated by being analysed alongside each other. In turn, these two analytical tools become very useful when trying to make sense of Céline and Houellebecq's trajectories, when looking at the strategic aspect, the function of authorial control inherent in the creation of a self-conscious posturing.

Finally, the boundaries of the paratext can also be extended by envisaging aspects of self-creation and authorial performances as paratextual elements. Indeed, the last section of this chapter will focus on the paratextual practice of the literary interview and its participation in the elaboration of an authorial postural strategy. Through a discussion of Genette's chapter 'The Interview' in *Paratexts* and Galia Yanochevsky's essay 'L'entretien d'écrivain et la co-construction d'une image de soi' (2004),¹⁰¹ with reference to Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Amossy's work on 'prior ethos' and 'discursive ethos', we will establish that literary interviews constitute an ideal site to explore the notions of paratext and authorial posture at work.

¹⁰⁰ Jérôme Meizoz, *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (Genève: Slatkine, 2004).

¹⁰¹ Gérard Genette, 1997a and Galia Yanoshevsky, 'L'entretien d'écrivain et la co-construction d'une image de soi : le cas de Nathalie Sarraute' in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 273, janvier-mars 2004.

Part 1. Some Definitions of the Paratext.

Genette's understanding of paratextuality seems to be the one that now prevails in literary studies. Essays or books which analyse paratextual elements of texts mostly use the French critic's definitions. If one considers the act of defining to be a question of setting up limits, this section will therefore focus on what Genette chooses to include as part of the concept, and, more importantly, what he decides to leave out. We should note that Genette's work contains an implicit critique of poststructuralism, and throughout the way Genette's 'open structuralism' appears and colours his understanding of paratextuality will be emphasized.¹⁰² This will be achieved by expanding on three simple features of the paratext: first, paratextuality as one of the five categories of transtextuality; secondly, the paratext as a threshold, a limit; finally, the paratext as the most socialized aspect of the practice of literature.

a. Paratext in Context/ Paratextuality as a Form of Transtextuality.

The introduction to *Palimpsests* (1982) is an important landmark in Genette's work, as he pauses to (re)define six important concepts. He starts with *transtextuality*, which he then divides into five categories of possible transtextual relations: *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, *architextuality* and *hypertextuality*. This is the first time Genette mentions the concept of the paratext, in the following definition:

The second type is the generally less explicit and more distant relationship that binds the text properly speaking, taken within the totality of the literary work, to what can be called its *paratext* [...] These provide the text with a (variable) setting and sometimes a commentary, official or not, which even the purists among readers, those least inclined to external erudition, cannot always disregard as easily as they would like to do. [...] this is probably one

¹⁰² Graham Allen defines Genette's 'open structuralism' as 'a poetics which gives up on the idea of establishing a stable, ahistorical, irrefutable map or division of literary elements, but which instead studies the relationships (sometimes fluid, never unchanging) which link the text with the architextural network out of which it produces its meaning.' See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 100.

of the privileged fields of operation of the pragmatic dimension of the work – i.e., of its impact upon the reader, more particularly, the field of what is now often called, thanks to Philippe Lejeune’s studies on autobiography, the generic *contract* (or *pact*).¹⁰³

Several ideas can be extracted from this lengthy quotation. In a literary work Genette distinguishes between the text and its paratext, and ‘paratextuality’ is the relationship between the two. This relationship is concerned with the action of the work on the reader. Since the relation of paratextuality is presented within the umbrella of transtextuality, this raises the question whether this concept has an impact on the way we understand the role of the paratext?

The theory of what Genette coins transtextuality, ‘or the textual transcendence of the text’, is developed in his trilogy *Introduction à l’architexte*, *Palimpsestes* and *Seuils*, defined (approximately) as ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’.¹⁰⁴ Graham Allen’s description of Genette’s ‘transtextuality’ as ‘intertextuality from the viewpoint of structural poetics’¹⁰⁵ suggests that Genette’s theory can be read as a rewriting of Julia Kristeva’s seminal notion of intertextuality, in turn reworked by Roland Barthes and Michael Riffaterre. The Kristevan definition of intertextuality, generally quoted by Anglo-American critics, is taken from the fourth chapter of *Séméiotiké*, ‘Word, dialogue, novel’: intertextuality is ‘a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another’.¹⁰⁶ The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double’.¹⁰⁷ In *Palimpsestes*, Genette explicitly acknowledges Kristeva’s parenthood, yet produces his own definition of intertextuality, which he reduces to the realms of quotation, plagiarism and allusion. Intertextuality then becomes ‘a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts’ and ‘the actual presence of one text within another’.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes – Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997b), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Gérard Genette, 1997b, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Graham Allen, 2001, 98.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Word, Dialogue, Novel’ was written in 1966, published in France in *Séméiotiké* (1969), and translated in *Desire in Language* (1980).

¹⁰⁷ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (London: Blackwell, 1986), 37.

¹⁰⁸ Gérard Genette, 1997b, 1-2.

To make matters even more complicated, Genette then explains that Riffaterre's understanding of intertextuality is closer to his own definition of transtextuality.

Kristeva's idea that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' in a way corresponds to the concept Genette calls 'hypertextuality'. He dedicates his study *Palimpsestes* (1982) to the hypertextual relation between texts, described as 'any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary'.¹⁰⁹ However, as Mary Orr points out, 'electronic media have already rendered Genette's "hypertext" obsolete and challenged the boundaries of the *printed* page, whether in high or low cultural form'.¹¹⁰ Hypertext has been more lately redefined by critics such as Paul Delany and George Landow, and is understood as 'a variable structure, composed of blocks of text (or what Roland Barthes terms *lexias*) and the electronic links that join them'.¹¹¹

Additionally, as Genette was establishing the basis of his theory of transtextuality, he defined architextuality as 'the entire set of general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres – from which emerges each singular text'.¹¹² The transtextual relation of architextuality forms the topic of *Introduction à l'architexte* (1979), and is described by Richard Macksey as 'the relationship of inclusion linking each text to the various kinds of discourse of which it is a representative'.¹¹³ In general, this relationship is implicit, but can appear as a paratextual indication – for instance, the presence of the terms 'novel' or 'essay' on a book cover.

Unlike architextuality, hypertextuality or paratextuality, to which he dedicated book-length studies, Genette does not dwell at any length on the next category of transtextual relations, metatextuality. Yet he defines it as the critical relation *par excellence*, as a relation of commentary which unites a text to another text without necessarily quoting it or even naming it.¹¹⁴ As Richard Macksey

¹⁰⁹ Gérard Genette, 1997b, 5.

¹¹⁰ Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 109.

¹¹¹ Indeed, hypertext criticism is now considered an important branch of literary (and computing) studies, but it is based on Landow's work and Genette has little influence in this field. See Paul Delany and George Landow (eds), *Hypermedia and Literary Studies* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 3.

¹¹² Gérard Genette, 1997b, 1.

¹¹³ Gérard Genette, 1997a, xix.

¹¹⁴ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes – la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), 10.

explains, ‘a systematic discussion of metatextuality would require a comprehensive survey of all literary criticism (whether explicit or implicit)’,¹¹⁵ but it remains in Genette’s work in a dormant state, only a paragraph in *Palimpsests*. A brief discussion of the role of metatextuality will become relevant to this study. Some critics, such as Andrea Del Lungo, questioning Genette’s definition of the paratext, will come across a problem of boundary between the two categories. We will return to this idea in more detail.

Nonetheless, what this problem actually hints at is the *interconnectedness* of Genette’s categories. For instance, in the foreword of the English translation of *Seuils*, Macksey points out that ‘conventionally, the paratextual elements – title or preface – can be enlisted to define an architext’.¹¹⁶ Therefore, an element of *paratext* can be a form of *architext* - a generic indication on the title of a text, *metatext* - a commentary of a text, *intertext* - some quotations on the back cover of a book and *hypertext* - a text in relation with the main text. The paratext is transtextual because it sets the text in a relationship with other texts by mediating it, as Genette would say, by ‘ensur[ing] the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book’.¹¹⁷

In the introduction of *Palimpsests*, Genette defines some concepts such as intertextuality which were articulated in a different way by other critics, and in turn, some of his concepts have become obsolete. It took twenty years for his theory of paratextuality to be challenged. However, before looking at recent criticism of Genette’s work, one needs to understand the numerous definitions of paratextuality provided in *Seuils* (1987), the book-length study he dedicated to this concept. Paratextuality is placed here within the larger concept of transtextuality in order to highlight the fact that it supports Genette’s theory of ‘open structuralism’. Genette was actually writing in reaction to critics such as Kristeva, Barthes and Riffaterre, and this will become important later, when dealing with questions of authorial intention and the ideology of the paratext. The second aspect of paratextuality which will be analysed here is indicated by its prefix ‘para’: the paratext is a limit. What does it delineate and what is implied in this idea of boundary?

¹¹⁵ Gérard Genette, 1997a, xix.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, xix.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 1.

b. Paratext as Limit / The Limits of the Paratext.

To conceptualize the activity of the paratext, Genette adopts the prefix ‘para’, whose meaning he describes as ‘ambiguous’. ‘Para’ conveys an idea of limit, boundary, and therefore of an inside and an outside of both the text and the paratext. What then, are the implications of looking at the paratext as a limit? In *Seuils*, Genette minutely enumerates and analyzes every possible type of paratext he can think of, as well as its function. The paratext is mapped in the book according to the following formula: ‘*paratext = peritext + epitext*’.¹¹⁸ Focusing on Genette’s own boundaries for the paratext in terms of location, his list of what counts (and doesn’t) as paratext will be examined.

First, to clarify the meaning of the prefix ‘para’, Genette begins *Seuils* by quoting the American critic J. Hillis Miller:

‘Para’ is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, [...] something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in ‘para’, moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them.¹¹⁹

Commenting on the above quotation, Genette acknowledges it as a ‘beautiful description of the activity of the paratext’, and by doing so adheres to Hillis Miller’s conceptualization of the prefix ‘para’. Paratext is understood as ‘threshold’ – ‘seuil’ means threshold in French –, or ‘boundary’, ‘margin’. But the ambiguity pointed out by Genette is reflected in Hillis Miller’s qualification of ‘para’ as double and antithetical. When the American critic describes its location as ‘simultaneously this side of a boundary line [...] and also beyond it’, one sees an echo in Genette’s attempt

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

¹¹⁹ J. Hillis Miller, quoted in Gérard Genette, 1997a, 1.

to locate the paratext. The antithesis ‘equivalent in status and also secondary and subsidiary, as guest to host’ also mirrors the power relations between text and paratext: a text cannot exist without its paratext, yet the paratext, as Genette explains, is ‘only an assistant, only an accessory of the text’.¹²⁰

Genette then furthers the idea of paratext as limit by quoting a number of critics, who each use a different formula to qualify the paratext. ‘A boundary’, a ‘sealed border’, a ‘threshold’, a ‘vestibule’, an ‘undefined zone between the inside and the outside’, a ‘fringe of the printed text’, an ‘intermediary zone between the off-text and the text’, a ‘transitional zone between text and beyond-text’, a zone with an ‘undisputed territory where its “properties” are manifested’.¹²¹ Such an accumulation of descriptions gives the reader an impressionist vision of Genette’s concept.

Interestingly, Hillis Miller’s description is placed in the margin of Genette’s text, in a footnote. As the American critic defines in ‘The Critic as Host’ the function of the prefix ‘para’, the quotation therefore cannot be considered to be a definition of the paratext. However, it illuminates an interpretation of Genette’s theory of paratextuality. Its location, alongside Genette’s text, yet not part of it, becomes an echo of Genette’s concept, the power relations described in Hillis Miller’s text being echoed in the ambiguous relation between the footnote and the text.

The notions of location and boundaries seem important to Genette, as is shown by his obsession with mapping and definitions. But the existence of an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ of a text, with paratext as the boundary between the two, has been a problematic one, for critics such as Graham Allen. For instance, he states that ‘various problems lurk behind Genette’s approach here: the establishment with regard to paratextuality of the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the text; [...] the question of authorial intention, its establishment by the reader, and the reader’s own role in the production of meaning’.¹²² Richard Watts also expands on this idea in an essay on Aimé Césaire’s paratexts. He criticizes the notion of the paratext as a border, as he discusses his ‘discomfort with text/paratext distinction’.¹²³ As he explains,

¹²⁰ Gérard Genette, 1997a, 410.

¹²¹ These descriptions of the paratext were found in Genette, 1997a, 1-2 and constitute a medley of quotations from various critics and writers such as Borges, Philippe Lejeune and Antoine Compagnon. The last two quotations are Genette’s own characterisations, at the beginning of the conclusion p.407.

¹²² Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 112.

¹²³ Richard Watts, ‘Translating Culture: Reading the Paratexts to Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*’, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 13, 2 (2000), 30.

‘making that distinction suggests that the text could potentially be experienced in an unmediated fashion. This is only possible within a structuralist’s laboratory’.¹²⁴ A text cannot exist without the materiality of its paratext, but can one find a clear way to decide where the text ends and its paratext begins?

This could be decided by looking at what Genette includes within his definition of the paratext, and what has he chosen to omit. Genette explains, ‘a paratextual element, at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance’.¹²⁵ These two possible locations constitute what he then defines as the *peritext* (within the same volume) and the *epitext* (outside the book). Genette then defines the *peritext* as a spatial category, with the following location: ‘within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes’. Furthermore, the second category, the *peritext*, is constituted of ‘the distanced elements, [which] are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others)’.¹²⁶

The table of contents of *Seuils* can be read as a list of what the French critic considers to be possible categories of paratext and these will be key categories in what follows. Peritextual elements include: book formats and covers, name of the author, titles and subtitles, the editor’s blurb, dedications, epigraphs, forewords, prefaces, epilogues, afterwords, intertitles, and notes. Epitextual elements are divided into ‘public epitext’: open letters, interviews, entretiens, debates, and ‘private epitext’: authorial correspondence, oral confidences, diaries, and pre-texts. However, in the conclusion of *Seuils*, Genette admits that his inventory of paratextual elements was incomplete and that he had omitted three important paratextual practices: translation, illustration, and serialised publication.¹²⁷ Genette seems to regard the existence of an inside and an outside of a text, as well as an inside and an outside of a volume/book as unproblematic, yet the categories of translation and serialised

¹²⁴ Ibid, 30.

¹²⁵ Gérard Genette, 1997a, 4.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 4-5.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 407-08.

publication already challenge this idea. It is through a more detailed look at these categories that critics will start to significantly update Genette's theory.

Paratextuality is a transtextual category, whose limits have been determined by Genette, as well as its status as a limit. The paratext also raises the issue of authorial control, inherent in its role as an 'instrument of adaptation' between the text and its public. What is the function of the paratext and what Genette calls the 'ideology' behind it? Genette closes the debate on the limits of the paratext by deciding that 'however indeterminable its boundaries, the paratext retains at its centre a distinctive and undisputed territory where its "properties" are clearly manifest'.¹²⁸ Therefore, an element of paratext is defined by these 'properties', which correspond to three functions, that will be named here, for lack of generally-accepted terms, 'adaptation,' 'authorial control' and 'screen'.

c. [The Paratext as Instrument of Adaptation / The Ideology of the Paratext.](#)

As Genette insists, 'the most essential of the paratext's properties, as we have observed many times [...] is functionality'.¹²⁹ This is a translation of what he names in French the 'caractère fonctionnel du paratexte', summed up by the verb 'présenter' and its two meanings: *presenting* and *making present* a text. Three elements – the text, the paratext, and the public – enter into relation with one another. In the following quotation, taken from the conclusion of *Seuils*, Genette asserts the roles of those three elements:

Being immutable, the text in itself is incapable of adapting to changes in its public in space and over time. The paratext – more flexible, more versatile, always transitory because transitive – is, as it were, an instrument of adaptation. Hence the continual modifications in the "presentation" of the text (that is, of the text's mode of being present in the world).¹³⁰

Between the text and its paratext is the relation of materiality – the paratext enables the text to become a book. To understand this idea, one just needs to think of a text

¹²⁸ Ibid, 407.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 407.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 408.

without basic peritextual elements such as the book format and cover, or title. Furthermore, the paratext is located between the text, which has an ‘ideal and relatively immutable identity’, and its public, characterised by its ‘empirical (sociohistorical) reality’.¹³¹ The paratext adapts to the changes of the public in space and time as well as nowadays, in terms of materiality, as electronic versions of literary classics can be downloaded. Nonetheless, the presentation of a text is inextricably linked to its reception, and the paratext’s function is to control this reception.

The function of the paratext as *instrument of adaptation* between a text and its public is important in Genette’s theory; however, describing the paratext as an *instrument of authorial control* would constitute a more precise formulation. Initially quoting Philippe Lejeune, who argues that the paratext is ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text’, Genette furthers this idea by presenting it as ‘a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged space of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public’.¹³² Here, the words ‘control’, ‘strategy’, ‘influence’ make clear this second property of the paratext: its role is to make sure the text is received (or, at the very least, that reception is ‘directed’) in a way that complies with the author’s purpose. As Genette explains,

The relevance of the author’s purpose, and therefore to his “point of view,” may seem excessive and methodologically very naive. That relevance is, strictly speaking, imposed by my subject, whose entire functioning is based – even if this is sometimes denied – on the simple postulate that the author “knows best” what we should think about his work. One cannot travel within the paratext without encountering this belief or, in a way, without assuming it as one of the elements of the situation, as the ethnologist does with an indigenous theory: the correctness of the authorial (and secondarily, of the publisher’s) point of view is the implicit creed and spontaneous ideology of the paratext.¹³³

¹³¹ Ibid, 408.

¹³² Ibid, 2.

¹³³ Ibid, 408.

This extract from *Seuils* is crucial, as it reveals Genette's own purpose behind his work on paratextuality. This is an open attack on poststructuralism and theories such as Barthes's 'death of the author'. Indeed, if there can be no text without its paratext, and the author controls (directs) the reception of the text through this medium, then the author – or a version thereof – is always present. This is a highly contentious aspect of Genette's theory. For instance, in *Intertextuality*, Allen criticizes this point by arguing that

Such an emphasis on authorial intention is not only contrary to poststructuralist theory and practice but also runs counter to the major thrust of structuralism, in which system (*langue*) is privileged at the expense of work (*parole*) and thus signification and function privileged at the expense of intention.¹³⁴

Does one have to agree with the 'ideology' that 'the author knows best what to think of his work' in order to analyse a text and its paratextual elements? My argument is that the existence of the paratext does not necessarily imply that the author's point of view is 'correct' but, rather, that it is a sign of the author's presence. Furthermore, it shows that texts cannot be analysed solely as self-contained entities and that literature is a social practice, to the extent that Genette's theory could be used as an analytical tool in research in sociology of literature. Genette's comment that '[his] study, after all, bears on the most socialized side of the practice of literature (the way its relations with the public are organized)'¹³⁵ justifies this argument.

But to whose relations with the public is Genette referring? Who tries to control the reception of the text? As we have seen, the figure of the author emerges from Genette's theory of paratextuality. Nonetheless, one has to insist that this author is not alone. Literary sociologists such as Jérôme Meizoz brand the idea of the 'unique' author a 'fiction', and instead talk about the concept of *auctorialité plurielle* (collective authorship). Meizoz argues that creation is the result of a collective process: author, editor, printer, institutions who provide funding, literary agents... all cooperate so that a text can come into existence; a book is therefore anchored in a process of socialization of discourse.¹³⁶ When referring to the paratext's function, in

¹³⁴ Graham Allen, 2000, 107.

¹³⁵ Gérard Genette, 1997a, 14.

¹³⁶ Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures Littéraires – Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, 2007, 41-42.

the terminology ‘instrument of authorial control’, this conception of collective authorship is implied. As a text becomes public, the figure of the author appears, and in its shadow the figure of the editor and all the other agents involved in the publication of the book.

Finally, the last property of the paratext discussed in this section, the ‘*screen function*’, corresponds to an unwanted effect of the paratext, which Genette mentions at the end of the conclusion of *Seuils*:

The main impediment to the effectiveness of the paratext generally does not arise from a poor understanding of its objectives but rather from the perverse effect (hard to avoid or control). [...] Like all relays, the paratext sometimes tends to go beyond its function and to turn itself into an impediment, from then on playing its own game to the detriment of the text’s game.¹³⁷

Does it mean, then, that the paratext does not always serve the author’s purpose, or that the different agents involved in the idea of the author as plural have clashing intentions? In Genette’s original text, the word ‘écran’, which literally means ‘screen’, is translated as ‘impediment’. One is reminded of Hillis Miller’s definition of the prefix ‘para’ quoted above – ‘the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside’. The metaphor of the screen and its ‘perverse’ effect points one towards the issue of the media and, in particular, the author’s use of the media, which becomes a screen, directing, but also sometimes ‘distorting’, the interpretation of the text. For instance, the Czech writer Milan Kundera felt that he was the victim of a misunderstanding in the French and English editions of his novel *The Joke*. The misunderstanding occurred because the paratext acted as a screen, through the way the text was edited, translated and because of a preface which emphasized the political content of the novel. Interestingly, Kundera has been using the paratext of later editions of this novel, as well as later novels and interviews, to rectify this misunderstanding.¹³⁸

Genette’s paratext is a socialised practice. We have seen that it acts as an instrument of adaptation between the text and its public and that, to an extent, the

¹³⁷ Gérard Genette, 1997a, 409.

¹³⁸ Jørn Boisen, ‘Le malentendu – Kundera et ses paratextes’, *Neohelicon*, 37, 1 (June 2010), 287-304.

existence of the paratext guarantees the presence of the author. For Genette, implied in the concept of the paratext is the creed of the correctness of the author's point of view. However, in the essay 'Seuils, vingt ans après', Andrea Del Lungo questions what Genette calls the 'spontaneous ideology of the paratext' by drawing attention to a conceptualization of the paratext as double, as a space of affirmation and persuasion, but also as a space of denial and decoy.¹³⁹ Del Lungo's article, published in 2009, assesses the legacy of Genette's theory, just over twenty years after the publication of *Seuils*. What has been the general response to this seminal work? Has Genette's theory significantly been updated?

d. [New Perspectives on Paratextuality.](#)

The paratext is an *objet fuyant* (a 'slippery object') which seems to escape clear definition. Indeed, when faced with the task of reviewing the field of paratextual criticism, one realises how difficult it is to determine its limits. Since Genette coined the term in 1982, and following the publication of *Seuils* in 1987, paratextuality as a theory has not been considerably updated, or even discussed. As Andréa Del Lungo points out, Genette's terminology has been readily adopted by academics and students who quote Genette and analyse paratextual elements, yet they do so without questioning the nature of paratextuality.¹⁴⁰ Del Lungo's analysis of the field in the article 'Seuils, vingt ans après. Quelques pistes pour l'étude du paratexte après Genette' (2009), will be discussed, as well as essays from the journal *Neohelicon* whose latest issue (June 2010) was devoted to the poetics of the paratext.

Breaking the critical silence surrounding Genette's theory, Del Lungo's aim is to focus on the status of 'objet fuyant' of the paratext, in order to offer new theoretical perspectives on the topic. She does so by giving her own take on the issue of the limits of the paratext. According to Del Lungo, one of the main difficulties which arise when trying to determine those limits comes from the fact that the epitext is not defined by its location, but tends to be associated with the genre of the authorial commentary; the peritext, on the contrary, is always part of the book.¹⁴¹ In the absence of external limits, the epitext gets lost in the domain of authorial discourse. The

¹³⁹ Andrea Del Lungo, 'Seuils, vingt ans après. Quelques pistes pour l'étude du paratexte après Genette', *Littérature*, 155 (October 2009), 105.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 99.

solution she provides to this particular problem is to set up clear spatial limits: she concludes that we should limit the paratext to the peritext, which would result in a clear distinction between paratext and metatext.¹⁴² Genette includes authorial commentary as part of his notion of paratext, while Del Lungo's restricted paratext is mainly editorial. However, Del Lungo's distinction is not that straight forward, as some epitextual material can later become peritextual in later editions. For instance, some speeches, letters, interviews or essays may become prefaces or forewords.

Del Lungo also points out that critics play an important role in attributing value to a work, sometimes using the space of the paratext to do so. This idea complicates the distinction between paratext and metatext that Del Lungo wants to establish. Genette's categories are interconnected, so in the same way that a paratext sometimes fulfils a function of commentary, a metatext such as a preface can present a book. Returning to the anecdote of the introduction about *La Carte et le territoire*: the publication of the book has generated an impressive amount of reviews, articles and interviews. If one follows Genette's paradigm, the interviews can be considered as epitextual material, but what would be the status of the reviews and articles? They have a function of commentary and try to influence the reception of the book; but so do the interviews. Even if they do not 'count' as paratext, my argument is that they need to be analysed alongside epitextual elements, as they have a similar function and are somewhat interconnected. Houellebecq uses interviews to influence the reception of his novel. He responds to criticism of previous reviews and some of the articles comment upon remarks made by Houellebecq and other journalists.

Del Lungo puts forward another interesting point, as she remarks that the communication between author and reader is constantly mediated by supports such as the book itself, but also by various strategies - editorial, commercial, marketing - or by the presence of the editor. Because of the public and commercial nature of the paratext, which is linked to the publication of a book, one has to take into account the context of its reception, as well as include a study of editorial practices.¹⁴³ Consequently, for Del Lungo, paratextual studies should be placed within the field of sociology of literature. This idea needs more attention and will be developed in the next section of this chapter.

¹⁴² Ibid, 110-11.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 101-02.

Published a year after Del Lungo's article, the June 2010 issue of *Neohelicon* is devoted to 'the poetics of the paratext'.¹⁴⁴ Some of the essays featured in this journal further Del Lungo's comments and explore new trends in paratextual criticism. One of its striking characteristics is that the paratext appears as a cross-disciplinary analytical tool; Genette's theory is relevant even in the domain of accounting, as Jane Davison's essay 'Paratextual Framing of the Annual Report' (2010) demonstrates. Two of the *Neohelicon* articles are concerned with legal topics: Ronald Collins's 'Paratexts as Praxis' is about the digitalization of law course books, and Bethel Erastus-Obilo's 'Liminal Devices of Interpretation' deals with the paratexts of the Supreme Court. Marcin Stawiarski's 'Musicalized Paratextuality in Literature' insists on the intermedial aspect of the paratext, but the argument remains rooted in literary studies.

Genette's theory has been challenged, or developed, in essays which analyse one of the three aspects of paratext that the French critic has mentioned, but not touched upon: illustration, serialization and translation. Illustration as a paratextual device is the topic of essays such as J.J. Long's 'Paratextual Profusion: Photography and Text in Bertol Brecht's *War Primer*' (2008) and Daniel Sipe's 'Parody and Paratext in J.J. Granville's *Un autre monde* (1844)'. Like Stawiarski's essay mentioned above, they highlight the intermedial quality of the paratext and its occasional 'screen' function, adding layers of 'meaning' and possible interpretations to the text. Discussing *Un autre monde*, an illustrated narrative in which the text seems to merely frame the illustrations, Sipe remarks that 'it is not unreasonable to ask where the paratext ends and the "text" begins'.¹⁴⁵ Robert Allen reaches a similar conclusion as he discusses Victorian serialised novels.

Indeed, the issue of serialization is also the occasion for a significant theoretical update to *Seuils*. In 'Perpetually beginning until the end of the fair: The paratextual poetics of serialised novels', Robert Allen criticizes Genette for his synchronic approach to paratextuality, which he wants to replace by a diachronic one. This would add to the equation the notion of time as one of the fuzzy borders across which text and paratext seem to be divided.¹⁴⁶ According to Allen, 'not only is the

¹⁴⁴ *Neohelicon*, 37, 1 (June 2010).

¹⁴⁵ Daniel Sipe, 'Parody and Paratext in J.J. Granville's *Un autre monde* (1844)', *Neohelicon*, 37, 1 (June 2010), 205.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Allen, 'Perpetually beginning until the end of the fair: The paratextual poetics of serialised novels', *Neohelicon*, 37, 1 (June 2010), 183.

term paratext itself saddled with a potentially limitless number of elements, but the way that these elements interact with texts cannot be reduced to a uniform border that applies in all cases'.¹⁴⁷

Richard Watts also disagrees with the synchronic aspect of Genette's approach. According to him, paratexts can serve as instruments of cultural translation.¹⁴⁸ Carolyn Shread is concerned with the cultural translation at stake in linguistic translation and the colonizing effect of the paratext in this process. In 'Decolonizing Paratexts: re-presenting Haitian literature in English translation', she updates Watts's theoretical reflection, and points out that 'as the re-presenter of the text in translation, the paratext is intimately involved in cultural, social, economic, and political negotiations regarding the positioning of the text in relation to source and target cultures'.¹⁴⁹ Watts and Shread's respective essays focus on aspects of reception in the translation of culture, from a postcolonial standpoint. In 'Le malentendu – Kundera et ses paratextes', Boisen deals with a similar issue, but with a slight twist: Kundera's paratexts are authorial and challenge previous editorial paratexts. The epitext then becomes a space where the content of peritextual paratexts, ultimately controlled by the publisher, can be challenged.

The status of authorial self-commentary and its function in controlling the reception of a text is discussed in two essays, Roberta Ricci's 'Morphologies and Functions of Self-Criticism in Modern Times: Has the Author Come Back?' (2003) and Anthea Taylor's 'Feminists "Misreading"/"Misreading" Feminists – Helen Garner, Literary Celebrity and Epitextuality' (2007). Ricci revises Barthes's famous comment on the death of the author by asking: 'Is the return of the author achieved at the cost of the death of the reader?',¹⁵⁰ while Taylor's concern is formulated slightly differently: 'What does it mean to have an author speaking back, or rather against, particular public interpretations of her text?'¹⁵¹ Taylor's question resonates with the focus of my own argument, and some instances of Céline and Houellebecq 'speaking back' and manipulating the media through their mastery of the art of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 182.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Watts, 2000, 29.

¹⁴⁹ Carolyn Shread, 'Decolonizing Paratexts: Re-Presenting Haitian Literature in English Translations', *Neohelicon*, 37, 1 (June 2010), 120.

¹⁵⁰ Roberta Ricci, 'Morphologies and Functions of Self-Criticism in Modern Times: Has the Author Come Back?', *MLN*, 118 (2003), 123.

¹⁵¹ Anthea Taylor, 'Feminists "Misreading"/"Misreading" Feminists: Helen Garner, Literary Celebrity and Epitextuality', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 22, 52 (2007), 73.

interviews will be analysed in upcoming chapters. Taylor focuses on aspects of literary celebrity and media response as they generate authorial paratexts which try to counteract this response. Genette's synchronic approach leaves very little space for the role of the media in the production of meaning and does not insist enough on the dialogue between author, editor, critics and the media which takes place within the confines of the paratext.

What needs to be remembered from recent studies on paratextuality, is that in order to study the paratext, one has to get away from Genette's synchronic approach and instead look at the paratext from a diachronic standpoint. This means that instead of dissecting the different categories of the paratext in order to catalogue their properties, one should always analyse it alongside its text. Recent essays show that Genette's internal and external boundaries need to be reassessed. Text and paratext cannot be distinguished; also, the issue of the epitext getting lost in the genre of authorial commentary needs to be examined in more detail. What is paratext, as opposed to metatext?

Jérôme Meizoz's essay 'Posture et biographie: *Semmelweis* de Céline' (2008) does not mention the word 'paratext' yet uses mostly paratextual elements as analytical tools. Meizoz examines the role of the authorial posture in the elaboration of a biographical discourse,¹⁵² and he does so by analysing the editorial history of Céline's *Semmelweis*, a text originally conceived as a doctoral thesis in medicine. In the various editions of this work, even though the text has not changed, many paratextual elements have evolved, such as the author's name, from Dr. Louis Destouches to Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the editor – self-published in 1924, it was then successively published by Denoël and Gallimard, and the title - most editions of the text have a different title. This is nothing surprising in itself, as we have seen that the paratext evolves with time, in order to adapt to the socio-historical changes of the public. However, what Meizoz highlights is the evolution of the status of the text, from doctoral thesis to literary biography, a change which occurs as Céline becomes an author and adopts a pseudonym. Meizoz calls this process the 're-literarization' of a doctoral thesis in medicine, and explains that four editors and six editions, under

¹⁵² Jérôme Meizoz, 'Posture et biographie: *Semmelweis* de L.-F. Céline', *COntEXTES*, 3 (2008), 3. <<http://contextes.revues.org/2633>> [accessed 30/07/14].

four different titles, were necessary to complete its ‘bibliographical mutation’.¹⁵³ To this analysis of paratextual elements, Meizoz integrates the notion of authorial posture in the literary field. Indeed, the aim of his essay is to demonstrate that, as the status of Céline’s text evolves with the changes of its paratext, Semmelweis, a misunderstood Hungarian doctor, becomes a fictional character with whom Céline identifies. The creation of this character forms the basis of the ‘posture’ he elaborates, as he becomes an author. The paratext constitutes one of the analytical tools which enable Meizoz to explain this complex process, step by step. The next section of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the second analytical tool used by Meizoz in order to understand this aspect of Céline’s work: the authorial posture in the literary field.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 4.

Part 2. The Authorial Posture in the Literary Field

The theory of the field [leads] to both a rejection of the direct relating of individual biography to the work of literature (or the relating of the “social class” of origin to the work) and also to a rejection of internal analysis of an individual work or even of intertextual analysis. This is because *what we have to do is all these things at the same time*.¹⁵⁴

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of Jérôme Meizoz’s work on authorial posture, a theory he has been developing and conceptualizing for the last fifteen years. Understanding this concept will help shed light on some confusing aspects of Céline and Houellebecq’s writing, and lay the groundwork for my own analysis of the two writers. In the title of the definition quoted in the introduction, Meizoz was linking the authorial posture to the position of the author in the literary field, thus firmly placing his work within the contested field of sociology of literature, and in particular Bourdieu’s ‘sociologie des champs’. What are the implications of a sociological outlook on literature, and of a reading based on the theory of the field? What does Bourdieu include in the notion of ‘literary field’? These questions need to be addressed in order to explore and understand Meizoz’s work on posture.

a. Meizoz’s background

In the introduction to *Postures Littéraires*, Meizoz claims that his approach consists in reading literature sociologically, that is, as a discourse interacting permanently with the ‘rumour’ of the world.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, this approach somewhat illustrates Meizoz’s trajectory. After obtaining a PhD in literature, he went to Paris to study sociology and worked alongside Pierre Bourdieu for ten years. Among his main influences, he quotes literary sociologist Alain Viala and linguist Dominique Maingueneau. In order to understand the ideas contained in Meizoz’s authorial

¹⁵⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. R. Johnson (London: Polity, 1993), 9.

¹⁵⁵ Jérôme Meizoz, 2007, 11.

posture, some contextualization is necessary. There will follow an exploration of the field of the sociology of literature, as well as two central concepts, Bourdieu's 'field' and Viala's 'sociopoetics'.

The field of the sociology of literature to which Bourdieu, Viala and Meizoz contribute is just over a hundred years old. In the chapter 'Histoire' of his book *Approches de la réception*, Alain Viala provides an overview of the history of literary sociology, from its beginnings in the early twentieth century as a dialogue between Lanson and Durkheim, to the latest research based on Bourdieu's 'sociologie des champs'.¹⁵⁶ Important landmarks in the history of the sociology of literature include Robert Escarpit's *Sociologie de la littérature* (1958); Lucien Goldmann's *Le Dieu caché* (1956); P.-V. Zima and the movement called 'sociocritique'; works by German critics from the Constance School such as Hans Robert Jauss's *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (translated 1982) and Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader* (translated 1974). However, for Viala, a turning point in the field of the sociology of literature is reached with Pierre Bourdieu's article 'Champ intellectuel et projet créateur', published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1966.¹⁵⁷ Both Meizoz and Viala recognize the debt their own research owes to Bourdieu's work. They both use his terminology, but also question his theories, in particular his concept of 'literary field'.¹⁵⁸

So what do we understand by 'literary field'? It has proved difficult to find a simple definition in Bourdieu's writing. According to the French sociologist,

The literary or artistic field is a *field of forces*, but it is also a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces. Every position-taking is defined in relation to the space of possibles which is objectively realised as a *problematic* in the form of actual or potential position-takings corresponding to the different positions.¹⁵⁹

Viala furthers this explanation when he states that 'the literary field can be defined as the complex set of literary agents (authors, readers, mediators), of their practices

¹⁵⁶ Georges Molinié and Alain Viala, *Approches de la réception* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 159-181.

¹⁵⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Champ intellectuel et projet créateur', *Temps modernes*, 246 (1966), 865-906.

¹⁵⁸ Alain Viala, 'The Theory of the Literary Field and the Situation of the First Modernity', *Paragraph*, 29, 1 (March 2006), 80-93 and Jérôme Meizoz, *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (Genève: Slatkine, 2004).

¹⁵⁹ Bourdieu, 1993, 30.

and the result of these practices (literary creation, readings, books, libraries, literary criticism, etc.) and of the values at stake (aesthetics and ideology)'.¹⁶⁰ From these two definitions one is confronted with two aspects of the idea of 'field': it is a structured system which contains agents who take/occupy positions within a 'space of possibles', and secondly, these agents are constantly struggling to keep these positions, as the field changes with time and new agents come into the system.

Taking the idea of 'literary field' into account changes the way texts can be understood and studied. In the introduction to Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production*, the editor Randal Johnson points out the consequences of such a theory for literary criticism:

Literature, art and their respective producers do not exist independently of a complex institutional framework which authorizes, enables, empowers and legitimizes them. This framework must be incorporated into any analysis that pretends to provide a thorough understanding of cultural goods and practices.¹⁶¹

This means that for Bourdieu and his followers the meaning of a text cannot be found in the text alone, nor in the biography or intention of the author, nor solely in its context. The literary field and all the agents within it - text, author, but also editors, reader, critics - contribute to a process which gives value to a work. As Bourdieu explains, 'the work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art'.¹⁶² He adds: 'it is a question of understanding works of art as a *manifestation* of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated'.¹⁶³ Thus, agents within the literary field are interconnected and the idea that texts are self-contained and autonomous becomes illusory within this conceptual framework.

A similar view can be found in Viala's work, when he states that the fundamental theory of a text as a self-contained entity, independent from social

¹⁶⁰ Molinié and Viala, 1993, 175.

¹⁶¹ Bourdieu, 1993, 10.

¹⁶² Ibid, 35.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 37.

reality perceived as a simple contingency, is made impossible by the social nature of texts, except for one of the stages in reasoning if need be.¹⁶⁴ In *Approches de la réception* (1993), Alain Viala develops an approach he calls ‘sociopoetics’, which Meizoz later emulates in *L’Œil sociologue et la littérature* (2004). Viala’s field is literature and its relation to society (‘la littérature dans ses rapports avec la société’) whereby he understands sociopoetics as the result of a confrontation between literary questions and Bourdieu’s ‘sociology of fields’.¹⁶⁵ Of course, this is a view held by many other schools of literary criticism including Marxism, cultural materialism, and Frankfurt school. However, Viala justifies the relevance of a sociological approach to literature by establishing some simple but clear statements, such as: ‘a text is a social reality’;¹⁶⁶ ‘a text is an object of communication’;¹⁶⁷ ‘literature is a social reality among others’;¹⁶⁸ ‘literary texts and literature are not self-contained entities but instead belong to a chain of phenomena’;¹⁶⁹ ‘a writer is a social character’;¹⁷⁰ and, ‘a text constitutes an act of position-taking within the literary field’.¹⁷¹

The repetition of the adjective ‘social’ and the use of Bourdieu’s terminology anchor Viala’s approach within the ‘sociologie des champs’; however, Viala’s innovation lies in his insistence on questions of poetics within this framework, an aspect which Bourdieu, to an extent, overlooked.¹⁷² Indeed, current research in the sociology of literature seems to be heading in this direction. Critics such as Dominique Maingueneau and Ruth Amossy are developing analytical tools and a new terminology to discuss texts within a framework which resembles that of sociopoetics. Their most recent work can be found in two journals, *CONTEXTES, revue de la sociologie de la littérature* and *AAD (Argumentation et Analyse du Discours)*, to which Viala and Meizoz also contribute regularly.¹⁷³

The first issue of *CONTEXTES* features a collection of papers from a conference entitled ‘Théorie des champs et analyse du discours’. Introducing the

¹⁶⁴ Molinié and Viala, 1993, 187.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 183.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 149.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 149.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 187.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 188-89.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 198.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 216.

¹⁷² Molinié and Viala, 1993, 196 and Dominique Maingueneau, *Le Discours littéraire – Paratopie et scène d’énonciation* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2004), 38.

¹⁷³ *CONTEXTES* : <<http://contextes.revues.org/>> ; *AAD* : <<http://aad.revues.org/>> [accessed 28/07/14].

conference, Jérôme Meizoz observes that the disciplines of literary sociology which, according to him, includes the sociology of the literary field, but also sociopoetics and sociocriticism, and discourse analysis - translated as AD for 'analyse du discours', in French - share common concerns. This conference was a first opportunity to unite critics with what seemed to be very different approaches to texts, but sharing quite close problematics. One can see concrete results from this meeting, as concepts such as 'ethos', 'authorial posture' and 'author's image' have been conceptualised, and have become key elements for a textual analysis which unites these different approaches. This perspective is the focus of the third issue of *AAD*, 'Ethos discursif et image d'auteur' (2009).

We have seen that Meizoz's authorial posture contains elements of Bourdieu's theory of the literary field, but is also deeply influenced by Viala's work on sociopoetics. In the next section, the concept of 'posture' will be compared to two notions close to it: 'ethos' and 'author's image'. Those three notions are still evolving and are the product of a dialogue between Maingueneau, Amossy and Meizoz.

b. Authorial Posture, Ethos and Author's Image.

The 'authorial posture in the literary field' is a theory that the Swiss critic Jérôme Meizoz has been developing throughout his career. He mentions it in many articles and books, notably *L'Age du roman parlant* (2001) and *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (2004), until he dedicates a whole book to this concept. *Postures Littéraires – Mise en scène modernes de l'auteur* (2007) contains two theoretical chapters in which he presents his idea of authorial posture, followed by a number of case studies, on Rousseau, Stendhal, and Céline, to name but a few.¹⁷⁴ In *La Fabrique des Singularités – Postures Littéraires II* (2011), Meizoz updates the previous book by revisiting some of these case studies. The chapter 'Ce que l'on fait dire au silence: posture, *ethos*, image d'auteur', can be considered to be the clearest account of Meizoz's theory, and as the title announces, the concept of 'posture' is discussed in conjunction with the notions of 'ethos' and 'author's image'. Meizoz's concept of 'posture' evolves with time and is elaborated in a dialogue with critics such as Maingueneau and Amossy. In this section, the three concepts will be understood as interconnected.

¹⁷⁴ The title would translate as *Literary 'Postures' – Modern Stagings of the Author*.

According to Meizoz, Alain Viala was the first to conceptualize the notion of ‘posture’, and by this term he meant ‘the particular way a writer occupies a position in the literary field’.¹⁷⁵ Meizoz then explains that Viala considers the authorial posture to be only an element, among others, of the ‘ethos’ of the author.¹⁷⁶ ‘Ethos’ is understood there as the writer’s ‘general manner of being’:

Put into perspective by an analysis in terms of a strategy, facts related to *habitus* and *posturing* can in turn be integrated into an evaluation of the ‘general manner of being’ (attitude) of a writer. This attitude, which subsumes the specificity of the various posturing and *habitus*, will be designated as the *ethos* of the writer.¹⁷⁷

However, pointing out that ‘ethos’ is also a concept used in rhetorics, but with a different meaning, Meizoz further problematizes the concept by stating that what he understands as ‘posture’ is actually what Viala calls ‘ethos’, defined above. Meizoz thus understands ‘posture’ in a larger sense; it includes a rhetorical/textual aspect, as well as a contextual one.¹⁷⁸ This goes back to an idea already present in the definition quoted in the introduction – ‘In sociology of literature, “posture” is a notion that can help to describe both the poetics (by the rhetorical “ethos”) and the social behavior in the literary field’. So what does Meizoz mean by ‘rhetorical ethos’? In ‘Ce que l’on fait dire au silence’, he uses Maingueneau’s definition as a basis for his own framework. ‘Ethos’ then becomes a discursive notion, constructed through discourse; it is not an ‘image’ of the speaker to be found outside speech acts.¹⁷⁹

In *Le Contexte de l’œuvre littéraire – Énonciation, écrivain, société* (1993), Maingueneau devoted a chapter to the notion of ‘ethos’, starting with a definition of a first conceptualization of the term, dating back to Ancient Greece. According to Maingueneau, at the time the term *ethè* designated the characteristics that orators implicitly vested themselves with through the way they spoke: not what they explicitly said about themselves, but *the personality they showed through the way*

¹⁷⁵ Meizoz, 2007, 16 and Molinié and Viala, 1993, 216.

¹⁷⁶ Meizoz, 2007, 16.

¹⁷⁷ Molinié and Viala, 1993, 217.

¹⁷⁸ Meizoz, 2007, 17.

¹⁷⁹ Maingueneau, 2004, 205, quoted in Jérôme Meizoz, *La Fabrique des singularités. Postures littéraires II* (Genève: Slatkine, 2011), 86.

they expressed themselves.¹⁸⁰ Maingueneau later describes ‘ethos’ as an ‘art of life’, a ‘general manner of acting’ which a sociologist such as Pierre Bourdieu would name ‘habitus’.¹⁸¹

In order to understand the difference between the concepts of ‘posture’ and ‘ethos’, Meizoz gives the example of Céline’s doctor scrubs, which he used to wear during interviews with the press at the beginning of his career. Céline’s outfit symbolises this idea of posture: even though it is external to the discourse of the novel he was promoting, and therefore cannot be considered a part of the authorial ethos, it still influences the reception of the book and the way the writer was perceived at the time. Meizoz’s hypothesis is that the ethos constructed by Céline through discourse in his novels influences his behaviour in the public sphere. It becomes a constraint to the public staging of Céline, as author.¹⁸² Authorial ethos and social behavior become interlinked as Céline positions himself within the literary field of his time. His identity as a doctor for poor people, which mirrors the profession of his character Bardamu in *Journey to the End of the Night*, becomes a central element of the posture he created.

Ruth Amossy, another contributor to the ‘Ethos discursif et image d’auteur’ issue of *AAD*, provides another perspective on the idea of authorial ethos. In the article ‘La double nature de l’image d’auteur’, she discusses this notion as part of the concept of ‘author’s image’.¹⁸³ As she explains, the author’s image can be divided into two principal modes: the image of the self/self-representation constructed by the author through literary discourse – the authorial ethos – and the image of the author ‘produced outside the literary work in the discourses of the editor, the critics, etc., or representation of the author constructed by another person’.¹⁸⁴ Amossy’s hypothesis is that the interaction between these two modes of representation has an influence on the reader’s reception of the text and on the author’s positioning in the literary field.

In *Postures Littéraires*, Meizoz describes what he calls the ‘author’s figure’ (‘la figure de l’auteur’). Even though he uses a slightly different terminology, this concept, divided into two different modes, seems to correspond to Amossy’s

¹⁸⁰ Dominique Maingueneau, *Le Contexte de l’œuvre littéraire – Énonciation, écrivain, société* (Paris: Dunod, 1993), 137.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 147.

¹⁸² Meizoz, 2011, 86.

¹⁸³ Ruth Amossy, ‘La double nature de l’image d’auteur’, *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours*, 3 (2009) <<http://aad.revues.org/662>> [accessed 30/07/14].

¹⁸⁴ Amossy, 2009.

‘author’s image’: the author’s figure appears according to two modes: as represented by others (*hétéro-représentée*), or constructed by other agents (biography, eulogy, obituary, etc.); as represented by the self (*auto-représentée*), or constructed by the author himself (autobiography, interviews, diaries, etc.).¹⁸⁵ The difference between the two notions lies in the fact that for Meizoz, the self-constructed side of the author’s figure is the authorial posture,¹⁸⁶ while for Amossy the author only presents himself through literary discourse, through the rhetorical ethos. Indeed, according to Amossy, it is when the author’s image is constructed and taken on by a writer, in a strategy of positioning in the literary field (more or less consciously), that it can be named a ‘posture’.¹⁸⁷ ‘Strategy’ is a key word here; the ultimate aim of the posture is, to an extent, to influence the reception of a text (which leads us back to the function of the paratext).

To recap: the three concepts, ‘authorial ethos’, ‘author’s image’ and ‘posture’ are closely interlinked and result from the encounter of two disciplines: discourse analysis and the sociology of the literary field. Ethos comes from rhetoric and is the verbal image of the self, constructed by the speaker/author through literary discourse. In the case of fiction, it becomes problematic: who speaks? Are we analysing the ethos of the narrator or the ethos of the author? This understanding of the authorial ethos is included in two other concepts: Amossy’s ‘author’s image’ and Meizoz’s ‘posture’. As we have seen, the author’s image contains the authorial ethos as well as the representations of the author which come from outside the literary work and are constructed by people other than the author. Finally, Meizoz’s ‘posture’ includes the authorial ethos as well as the social behaviour of the writer. In the case of Céline and Houellebecq, Meizoz’s studies on the posture of the two French writers would benefit from an added perspective, that of Amossy’s ‘author’s image’, especially the second aspect of it. Posture and hetero-representations of the author complement each other; the author is constantly adapting and readjusting to the reactions of the press, critics and readers, and vice versa.

Moreover, one last concept would help resolve the confusion regarding the authorial ethos when dealing with literary fiction and needs to be included in this

¹⁸⁵ Jérôme Meizoz, *Posture Littéraires – Mises en scène modernes de l’auteur* (Genève: Slatkine, 2007), 45.

¹⁸⁶ Meizoz, 2007, 45 and Molinié and Viala, 1993, 216.

¹⁸⁷ Amossy, 2009.

discussion. Dominique Maingueneau's division of the author's figure into three categories seems particularly relevant to this issue. In *Postures littéraires*, Meizoz explains Maingueneau's idea by using Céline's case as an example:

Maingueneau decomposes the notion of 'author', which is too ambiguous, into three interconnected categories: first, the *inscripteur*, enunciator in the text – for instance, 'Ferdinand' in *Mort à Crédit* (1936); then, the *author*, as classifying principle, legal entity, or public posture – i.e., 'Céline' pseudonym of the author of the same novel; finally, the *person*, the biographical and civil subject – 'Louis Destouches' designates the citizen who is responsible for this novel in the eyes of the law.¹⁸⁸

A similar distinction can be drawn from Houellebecq's situation: 'Michel', the main character of *Plateforme* (2001) is the *inscripteur/enunciator* of the text; 'Houellebecq' is the *author* of the novel, and 'Michel Thomas' the *citizen*.

Meizoz mentions Maingueneau's theory a second time and describes the three categories using a slightly different terminology. The *author* (the second category) becomes the *writer*, an actor in the literary field, a character given to the public, sometimes using a pseudonym.¹⁸⁹ Meizoz claims that most approaches in literary criticism tend to focus on one of these categories at the expense of the others. However, even though his notion of authorial posture is centred on the figure of the author, he makes a point of taking into account the three categories, as constantly communicating, in relation with each other.¹⁹⁰ This distinction is crucial when looking at Céline and Houellebecq's works, as they have both intentionally blurred the boundaries between public and private image, fiction and biography. Throughout this thesis, and in order to reduce confusion, the distinction between the names will be kept, so that Michel/ Houellebecq/ Michel Thomas and Ferdinand/ Céline/ Louis Destouches will not be used interchangeably and will always correspond to the categories defined above.

Indeed, according to Meizoz, studying a posture consists in focusing on the behaviour of the writer – 'writer' understood here as the author-function in the

¹⁸⁸ Meizoz, 2007, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 44.

literary field – the ethos of the enunciator, and the acts of the civil person, and looking at those three aspects as interconnected. To conclude this section, one last definition of authorial posture will be analysed. In ‘Ce que l’on fait dire au silence’, Meizoz summarized the concept of authorial posture in the following words:

I defined ‘posture’ as the self-presentation of a writer, which can be observed through this writer’s management of discourse as well as public behaviour, when assuming his/her author-function. The best equivalent to this notion would be the term *persona*, a Latin word which designates the mask used in theatre. [...] On the stage of enunciation of literature, the writer presents and expresses himself through the mediation constituted by his *persona*, which can be called his ‘posture’ [...] a person only exists as a writer through the prism of this ‘posture’, constructed historically and connected to the rest of the possible positions in the literary field.¹⁹¹

This definition mentions the two key characteristics of the posture, discourse/ethos and behaviour, as well as its framework, the literary field. However, to these aspects is added a new perspective: the idea of the posture as performance. Meizoz uses a terminology borrowed from drama (‘persona’, ‘masque de théâtre’, ‘scène’, ‘médiation’...). The literary field becomes a stage, in which an agent can only become an author if he hides behind the mask of his posture. Entering the stage of the literary field means that a fictional character is created: the author, who according to Meizoz, is therefore 1. an agent of the literary field; 2. a performer; 3. a fictional character.

Highlighting the interactive nature of this concept in *La Fabrique des singularités*, Jérôme Meizoz defines the posture as co-constructed, inside and outside the text, not only by the writer, but also by journalists, critics, biographers and the public.¹⁹² He furthers this point by establishing a connection between paratext and posture. As he explains,

A collective image, the ‘posture’ starts at the publisher’s house, even before

¹⁹¹ Meizoz, 2011, 82.

¹⁹² Ibid, 83.

the publication of the book (which constitutes a first shaping of discourse). We will follow this ‘posture’/image across the periphery of the text, the peritext (presentation of the book, biographical notes, photograph), to the epitext (interviews with the author, letters to other writers, literary diaries). The ‘posture’ is therefore constructed by the author’s interaction with some mediators and as well as the public, by anticipating and reacting to their opinions.¹⁹³

The above remark allows me to redefine Genette’s notion of the paratext with a terminology borrowed from Bourdieu’s sociology of the literary field. The space of the paratext then becomes a field of forces, the site of a power struggle between several agents of the literary field. The author, the publisher, the literary critics and the media are trying to control the author’s image and the reception of the text. Within this framework, the three functions of the paratext still stand. It is still an instrument of adaptation between text and public; still an instrument of control (even though, in this case, the author is plural and includes author/publisher/critics); and still a screen, the interpretation of the text being distorted by the struggle between the agents of the literary field. The final aim of this struggle lies in the attribution of value to a work, and in the question of who decides on the ‘correct’ interpretation, the ‘true’ meaning of a text.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 83.

Part 3. Paratextuality as Performance

La critique déconne, je suis le phénomène et il s'agit de faire le pitre, c'est dans mes cordes vous le savez. Je vais les régaler, bientôt ils danseront la danse du scalp autour de mon poteau. Mentir, raconter n'importe quoi, tout est là Garcin. Il faut donner aux gens ce qu'ils attendent, la vérité n'est plus d'époque — 'Destouches' (lettre à Joseph Garcin, 9 avril 1933)¹⁹⁴

De toute façon, quand une question vous déplaît, ou vous paraît indiscreète, il est toujours légitime de mentir, de se contredire, d'essayer de déstabiliser l'interlocuteur, etc. Je ne suis pas une machine à donner des réponses. Houellebecq, in 'C'est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres'.¹⁹⁵

Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Michel Houellebecq both approach the paratextual practice of the literary interview as a performance. The two extracts quoted above highlight the pivotal function of deception as a central feature of their public persona. They share an openly cynical attitude towards the press and critics, and it is within these power relations that a fictional character is created – the author.

According to Meizoz, the authorial posture is dialogical, constructed by the interaction between the author and some mediators in the literary field. My next step consists in exploring one aspect of this dialogue, the literary interview, and its importance in the constitution of the author's postural strategy. What are the implications of Genette's positioning of this practice within the confines of the epitext? As Céline and Houellebecq blur the distinction between author, person and narrator, whose ethos are we analysing in the *entretiens*? Who is the 'I', the 'author-function' speaking, answering the interviewer's questions? Ruth Amossy and Dominique Maingueneau's work on prior and discursive ethos will be discussed in order to clarify the complex play of forces taking place within the confines of the

¹⁹⁴ 'Critics talk crap, I am the fairground freak, and it's all about acting like a clown – this is something I can easily handle, you know that. They are in for a treat; soon they will be scalp dancing around my totem pole. Lying, telling tall tales, that's where it's at, Garcin. You have to give people what they want to hear, truth is not in line with the spirit of the times...' Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Lettres*, ed. Henri Godard and Jean-Paul Louis (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, 2009), 364.

¹⁹⁵ 'In any way, when a question displeases you, or seems indiscreet, it is always legitimate to lie, to contradict oneself, or try to destabilise one's interlocutor. I am not an answer-providing robot.' (Houellebecq, quoted in Frédéric Martel, 'Michel Houellebecq: C'est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres', *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 548 (1999), 104.

literary interview. Finally, I will focus on Galia Yanoshevsky's definition of this practice as a conflict between the author seeking to present himself and the interviewer wanting to represent him, and will examine the interview as a privileged space for the author to elaborate and perform his posture.

When looking at this practice through a sociological lens, one observes that the *entretien* is instrumental in the way it contributes to the writer's self-promotion in the literary field. Apart from this promotional function, its aim is to reveal the 'man' behind the 'work', as if the author was the answer to the question asked by the text. This is what Lejeune calls the 'biographical illusion': the reader is even more tempted to look for interpretative keys of the work in the author's personality as he expresses it through the media, as the author is someone who, by definition, is absent from the text he has written.¹⁹⁶

Yanoshevsky's essay 'L'entretien d'écrivain et la co-construction d'une image de soi' (2004) deals with the practice of the literary interview and the self-image of the writer constructed within this process by both author and interviewer. However, who is the 'man' revealed behind the work, when this person is already hiding behind the mask of a pseudonym, and placed in a situation in which he is performing his author-function? In the quotation opening this section, Houellebecq claims that within the context of an interview, it is always legitimate to lie, to contradict oneself, to try to destabilise one's interlocutor. What would Houellebecq's provocative assertion add to an understanding of Lejeune's concept of 'biographical illusion'? The idea of 'legitimacy', contrasted with the actions applied to it (lying, contradicting oneself, destabilising) indicate that a power struggle is taking place between the author and his interviewer, and that within this space, different rules apply.

In interviews, Céline and Houellebecq provide fake and contradictory accounts of their lives. These stories cannot be considered to be 'lies', as both are speaking under the mask of pseudonyms. Yet, for instance, what can be made of the fact that Houellebecq always presents himself as two years younger than the citizen

¹⁹⁶ Galia Yanoshevsky, 'L'entretien d'écrivain et la co-construction d'une image de soi : le cas de Nathalie Sarraute' in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, n.273, janvier-mars 2004, 2.

Michel Thomas? Or appears on the cover of magazines, dressed as a scientist, like Michel Djerzinski, the main character of *Les Particules élémentaires*? Similarly, the accounts of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's childhood tend to vary according to the interview; they also, crucially, appear to differ greatly from the story of Louis Destouches's early life, as told by numerous biographers. These examples, developed and analysed in the next two chapters, illustrate the writers' use of biographical illusion in interviews. For, indeed, one cannot take their answers as 'truth' to interpret, but rather, one should look at the play of forces between author and interviewer, and all the different images put into place by both agents.

For Gérard Genette, literary interviews are unquestionably paratextual; more precisely, they belong to the domain of the 'public epitext'. In the section of *Seuils* devoted to an analysis and history of this practice, 'interviews' are defined against 'conversations' (*entretiens* in French), two terms which are often employed as synonyms. According to Genette, an *interview* [designates] 'a dialogue, generally short and conducted by a professional journalist, entered upon in the line of duty on the specific occasion of a book's publication and, in theory, bearing exclusively on that book'.¹⁹⁷ Defining the *conversation*, he then points out some mild differences between the two exercises: the dialogue is 'generally more wide-ranging, taking place after a longer period of time, without any particular occasion ... and often conducted by an intermediary who is less interchangeable, more "personalized", more specifically interested in the œuvre in question, even possibly a friend of the author's'.¹⁹⁸ Insisting on the dialogic nature of both concepts, Genette sees differences in length, occasion, range of topic and interlocutor.¹⁹⁹ In his definition of the interview, Genette insists on the promotional function of this practice, as 'conducted by a professional journalist', 'on the specific occasion of a book's publication' - the object of the interview is the book, while in the case of the *entretien*, because the context and interlocutor are different, the figure of the author emerges.

Genette's analysis of the function of the literary interview is not very thorough, as he is quite critical of a practice which, according to him, is mostly

¹⁹⁷ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts – Thresholds of Interpretation*, 358.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 358.

¹⁹⁹ For the purpose of this chapter, although the material analysed will generally consist of what Genette would designate as 'conversations', I will use the terms 'interview' and the French '*entretien*' interchangeably. The terminology 'conversation' highlights the dialogical nature of the practice, yet does not convey its public and somewhat formal nature.

constituted of clichés and stock answers. However he considers the *entretien*, because of its ‘special relation between the author and his interlocutor’, to be a more useful and consistent source of paratextual evidence; as he explains: ‘the drawback of the genre (its situation of dialogue) turns into an advantage, so that a well-managed conversation ... becomes an irreplaceable form of the paratext’.²⁰⁰ It is worth noting that Genette considers, at first, the dialogic nature of the interview/conversation to be an impediment. In his theory of paratextuality, Genette never fully explores the dialogue between author, editor, critics and the media which takes place within the confines of the paratext. Yet, interviews constitute a privileged space to observe this power struggle between agents of the literary field. Genette is, nevertheless, moving towards this reading when he highlights the social and pragmatic aspect the literary interview, in the following quotation: ‘The “social game” of the interview undoubtedly proceeds more from a need for information than from a need for true commentary: a book has come out, one must make it known and make known what it consists of’.²⁰¹ Going further than a simple ‘need for information’ stated by Genette, one could describe it, rather, as a need for the author to take position within the literary field of his time, which would bring to the practice of the interview an added dimension - its role in the elaboration of the authorial posture.

Genette also remarks that ‘when a writer takes the initiative for an interview – or vigorously seizes the opportunity provided by one – to send the public a message truly close to his heart, the genre may function ... as an advantageous substitute for a preface’.²⁰² He thus hints at the possibility that an interview can sometimes possess the same function as a preface, or become peritextual. This can be the case when interviews, originally published in magazines or appearing in TV programs, lose their original ephemeral context and are published as part of books. For instance, *Cahiers Céline 1 and 2*, in which all the interviews given by the French writer have been collected, provide a different image of the author’s figure, through the juxtaposition of his answers and the portraits written by journalists over the years. Similarly, the choice of the three interviews which appear in Houellebecq’s collection of essays *Interventions 2* is significant, at least in the way they have the author’s approval, or convey a message he wants his readers to access. According to Genette, one of the

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 365.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 362.

²⁰² Ibid, 359.

differences between peritextual and epitextual material lies in the type of public reached; in the case of interviews, for instance, ‘the addressee is never only the reader (of the text) but is some form of the public, including perhaps non-readers of the text’.²⁰³

Insisting on the dialogic nature of the practice, one could define the literary interview as a dialogue between author and interviewer, through which the former is trying to reach a certain public. Within this framework, Chaim Perelman’s conception of the role of the audience, as presented in his article ‘The Social Frameworks of Argumentation’ (1959) and discussed more recently by Amossy (2001), proves useful in understanding the play of forces at stake in the interview. Starting with Perelman’s statement that ‘it is “an essential fact for the sociologist” that ‘all argumentation develops in function with the audience to whom it is addressed and to whom the orator is obliged to adapt himself’’, Amossy insists that, for him, ‘the audience is always a construction of the orator’.²⁰⁴ Amossy then points out another key point of Perelman’s theory, which results from the previous affirmation: ‘the interaction between the orator and his audience is necessarily effected through *the image they form of each other*’.²⁰⁵ As a consequence, the focus of interview analysis presented here, is not on ‘real’ people (either the audience or the author), but is instead a series of images and representations of these agents.

The space of the paratext can be described as the site of a power struggle between several agents of the literary field, and this reading applies to the idea of the literary interview as public dialogue between the author, the media, and literary critics, depending on the choice of interviewer, who can sometimes belong to the latter category. What is at stake is control over the author’s image and the reception of the text. Yanoshevsky describes part of this process in the following way:

The author seeks to present himself the way he wishes to be presented, while the interviewer intends to *represent* him in a way that corresponds to the objective of the interview. He does so through the questions he chooses to ask, and also through the commentary which surrounds the text in the final

²⁰³ Ibid, 345.

²⁰⁴ Ruth Amossy, ‘Ethos at the Crossroads of Disciplines: Rhetoric, Pragmatics, Sociology’, *Poetics Today*, 22, 1 (2001), 5-6.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 6.

edition. The writer, on the other hand, answers the interviewer while trying to take advantage of the questions, so they eventually contribute to the achievement of his own objectives.²⁰⁶

According to Yanoshevsky, an interview is the site of a conflict between the author and his interviewer. Yet, the tension generated by clashing intentions over the (re)presentation of the author's image is only a small part of what she calls a complex 'play of forces' between the two agents. Indeed, as she points out, the interview does not create a single representation of the author; instead, there is a plurality of images at play in the conversation. She continues:

As a result, instead of obtaining what we could have considered as the result and aim of the conversation – that is a (superficial) image of the writer's persona which appears in order to provide keys to interpret his work (which we named earlier 'the biographical illusion'), we are faced with a very rich array of images which are deployed during the conversation as a complex power struggle is taking place.²⁰⁷

In the two extracts quoted above, Yanoshevsky refers several times to 'aims,' 'objectives' and 'results', hinting at the idea that the practice of the literary interview is strategic by nature, and that three different agents (the author, the interviewer/media and the reader/public) have three different, clashing intentions. Added to the idea of (re)presentation is the notion of interpretation; the public is striving to interpret the text through the (re)presentation given by the author. The notion of 'biographical illusion' becomes crucial, because this is where the performative aspect of the practice comes into play. In the struggle between the three agents, the public is most likely to be influenced by whoever takes control of the author's image.

Interviews, then, become a tool with which to manipulate the audience, due to their postural and strategic functions. But what are those conflicting images at play in the interview? According to Yanoshevsky, those representations are all interconnected but work in pairs. The first distinction established by Yanoshevsky is

²⁰⁶ Yanoshevsky, 2004, 11.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 12.

that which exists between ‘prior image’ and ‘discursive image’, presented together in the following way: ‘a discursive image of the person interviewed can only be produced by the conversation, once it confronts the pre-existing image that the public already possesses, (which Ruth Amossy calls the ‘prior’ or ‘pre-discursive ethos’)’.²⁰⁸ The terminology in this extract belongs to the framework of discourse analysis and has been developed in Amossy’s essay ‘Ethos at the Crossroads of Disciplines: Rhetoric, Pragmatics, Sociology’ (2001).

According to Amossy, ‘the public image of the orator intervenes above all when a well-known personality is involved ... The public knows them through what the press and rumour have to say about them, what the media show of them’. She names this image ‘prior ethos’ because it ‘precedes the construction of the image in the discourse (or what Maingueneau prefers to call “prediscursive ethos”)²⁰⁹ This prior image is linked to a representation of the author which the audience already holds – for instance, through knowledge of biographical facts, or through previously published works. Within the space of the interview, the author can only present himself through discourse, through the content of his answers. The prior image is confronted by a discursive image, which ‘integrates and reworks it’.²¹⁰ According to Amossy, ‘the discursive ethos is built at the level of uttering’ and ‘the construction of an ethos in the discourse often aims to displace or modify the prior image of the speaker’.²¹¹ Created during the interview, this discursive image is the one described by Yanoshevsky as the result of the conflict between the image presented by the author and represented by the interviewer. In other words, the discursive image is already the result of a confrontation (between writer and interviewer) and in turn, it confronts the prior image of the writer.

Finally, analysing the whole process played out during *entretiens*, Yanoshevsky describes the following pattern: ‘during the interview, not only pre-existing and discursive image are confronted to each other, as well as the image ‘presented’ by the author pitted against the image ‘represented’ by the interviewer; there are also the numerous images which constitute what we could name “the author’s persona” [*la personne de l’auteur*]’.²¹² This last concept is unclear in her

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 11.

²⁰⁹ Ruth Amossy, 2001, 7.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 9.

²¹¹ Ibid, 20.

²¹² Yanoshevsky, 2004, 11.

argument, it seems to refer to the numerous images the author possesses, which have to do with his 'character' and 'institutional role'. One could interpret this idea using Meizoz's terminology – the author hiding behind a succession of masks, which constitute his persona, synonymous here with his posture. Amossy's reading of this play of forces also lends itself to a postural interpretation. As she explains, 'the construction of the image of self within the discourse has, in turn, the capacity to modify the prior representations and to confer credibility and authority upon the speaker. ... It contributes to the production of new images and helps to transform positions in the field while participating in the field's dynamic'.²¹³ Consequently, not only does the literary interview feature all the functions of the paratext, it also has a definite postural and strategic role. As such, it is the perfect public setting for a writer to assume his author-function and take position in the literary field. For the author, it is about self-presentation, and when analysing interviews for the purpose of this study, the main focus will be on the writer's 'management of discourse' (relationship between prior ethos and discursive ethos) and 'public behaviour'. One can see that all these characteristics fit Meizoz's definition of authorial posture presented in chapter 2; *entretiens* therefore constitute an ideal site in which to explore this phenomenon at work.

What is the purpose of the author's strategy during interviews? For instance, is the author's ultimate aim to alter the public's perception of his image? In Céline's case for instance, one could concede that this was the achievement of his post-exile interviews in the late 1950s. The next two chapters will be devoted to case studies on Céline and Houellebecq. The theoretical framework of the play of forces at stake in interviews will be discussed through a study of their mastery of the art of literary *entretien*. We will focus on specific moments in the career of each writer in order to analyse their use of paratextual material *in relation* to the ethos of the narrators of the books published at the time and promoted in each interview.

²¹³ Ruth Amossy, 2001, 21.

Chapter 3. L.-F. Céline – “Biography Must Be Invented!”

Quand on commencera à parler de Céline je vous donnerai des *interviews que je ne donne jamais à personne*. Vous ferez votre publicité et votre originalité d'un seul coup. Vous pourrez raconter que vous m'avez rencontré à Paris, comme vous étiez désespérée, au bout de la nuit, etc., etc. Il n'en faut pas davantage – Ici le livre se vend toujours énormément – 100 000 – Voici déjà les excités qui m'écrivent. Profitez de ce mouvement si vous pouvez – ‘L. D.’ (Letter to Erika Irrang, early March 1933)²¹⁴

In his private correspondence, Doctor Louis Destouches (‘L.D.’) revealed himself to be rather cynical in his approach to the practice of literary interviews, whose sole purpose for him lied in boosting potential book sales. From this perspective, biography becomes a fiction, and the publicity generated by the story matters more than factual truth. This is the reason why he encourages his lover Erika Irrgang to make up stories and use interviews as a stratagem to gain money and celebrity. This letter was written six months after the publication of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and therefore six months after ‘Céline’ was created by his double Destouches.

In this short extract, three layers of text are mentioned: the book *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, the interviews he gives to the press - his public discourse as ‘Céline’ - and finally his private correspondence - what Jérôme Meizoz calls the ‘hidden text of his posture’. The interaction between those three levels constitutes the focus of this chapter. By analysing the performative aspect of the writer’s public appearances and thus establishing his status as a fictional character within this space, my intention here is to demonstrate that Céline uses the space of the paratext and the mask of his ‘posture’ in order to influence the reception of his texts. This strategy is elaborated in response to publishers, journalists, and the public. Céline performs the character

²¹⁴ ‘When people will start talking about Céline I will give you *exclusive interviews that I won't give to anyone else*. You will make your own publicity and originality in one go. You will tell people that you met me in Paris, when you were desperate, at the end of the night, etc, etc. That should do the trick – here the book is still selling very well – 100 000 units – Here come the excited people writing to me already. Take advantage of this movement if you can –’ Colin Nettlebeck (ed) *Cahiers Céline 5 - Lettres à des amies* (Paris : Gallimard, 1979), 50.

created in his novels into the public sphere, and manipulates his image so that the public's perception of the author/character is blurred. The process of Céline becoming a fictional character can also be observed at the level of the text, at an enunciative level. The ethos of the author-as-character in interviews mirrors that of the first-person narrator in the novels promoted. The corpus of interviews featuring Céline will be analysed in detail, because it constitutes the space in which this performance is taking place.

The fictional creation of Céline as a character can be traced through an analysis of interviews dating back as far as the 1930s. In this body of texts, compiled by Godard and Dauphin in *Cahiers Céline 1* and 2 (1976),²¹⁵ Céline's biography was being invented, with new details and inconsistencies coming up with each interview. The *Cahiers* include transcriptions of radio and televised interviews, but are complemented by the DVD *Céline Vivant* (2004), which includes the only three television appearances of the writer. Godard and Dauphin's editorial work for the *Cahiers Céline* enables us to see the corpus of interviews as a coherent narrative, which can be divided into several phases.

Beginning with a short account of the evolving relationship between Céline and the press, I will then provide an overview of the literary criticism dealing specifically with interviews featuring the French writer. Godard and Dauphin in *Cahiers Céline*, Emile Brami in *Céline Vivant* and Jérôme Meizoz in *Postures Littéraires* all bring forward a different understanding of these *entretiens*. In the last section of this chapter, I will integrate these approaches and perform a close reading of the interviews between the years 1932-1936, in relation to the ethos of the narrators of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à crédit*, the novels Céline was promoting at the time.

²¹⁵ Dauphin, Jean-Pierre, and Godard, Henri (eds.) *Cahiers Céline I – Céline et l'actualité littéraire 1932-1957* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) and Jean-Pierre Dauphin and Henri Godard (eds) *Cahiers Céline II – Céline et l'actualité littéraire 1957-1961* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Translations my own. Abbreviated henceforth as *CC1* and *CC2*.

Part 1. Céline in the Press

Dauphin and Godard's pioneering editorial work in the first volumes of the *Cahiers Céline* documents the writer's relationship with the press, transforming it into a coherent narrative. Dedicated to the topic of 'Céline et l'actualité littéraire' [Céline and literary news], these two books constitute a collection of all the interviews given by Céline from 1932 to his death in 1961, and include some open letters published in newspapers. From this account, one can observe that the media, its presence and sometimes absence, played a key role in the writer's career and sometimes influenced the content of his publications. The following summary of the history of Céline's tumultuous relationship with the press is inspired by Godard and Dauphin's research.

In 1932, Doctor Louis Destouches was hiding under the cover of his pseudonym, yet was found by a journalist from *Paris Soir* on Nov 7th, a month after his novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was published. Then, after twelve months of continuous intervention in the press, he distanced himself from the media while writing his second novel *Mort à crédit*. After the scandal of the Goncourt Prize and the much publicized release of his play *L'Eglise* in 1933, Céline chose to leave France for a short period before the publication of his second novel. He maintained a strategic silence but read the - mostly unfavourable - reviews of *Mort à crédit*. As Godard and Dauphin explain, 'the wound inflicted by this bad reception was deep and heavy in consequences, as the first pages of *Bagatelles* demonstrate'.²¹⁶ Afterwards, between the publication of his first pamphlet *Mea Culpa* in December 1936 and the moment he fled France in June 1944, Céline regularly appeared in the press, although his interventions were not around literary issues, but rather of a political nature. From December 1945 to February 1947, Céline was in prison. Released on parole, he then lived first in Copenhagen, and, until June 1951, in a small house on the Baltic seaside. At the time, he was practically ostracized by the French media. In the rare interviews of that period, he strove to give his pre-war pamphlets and his activities during the Occupation and in Sigmaringen an image as little unfavourable as possible, waiting for his belated trial in France. Afterwards, his contacts with the press during the first six years after his return remained limited, and

²¹⁶ *CCI*, 100.

were insufficient to trigger any renewal of interest around his new books. This is the reason why, at the time of the publication of *Féerie II – Normance*, Céline undertook a long imaginary interview, published in five instalments in the journal *NRF* under the title *Entretien avec le Professeur Y* (1955). The relationship between Céline and the press reached a turning point in June 1957, as the commercial success of *D'un Château l'autre* lifted the ban which was keeping him away from most French broadsheets since late 1944. Because of the events and characters evoked in Céline's 'chronicle', he obtained a success of scandal which left him out of the shadow for good. It was the publication of the long *entretien* with Madeleine Chapsal in *L'Express*²¹⁷ which made him resurface at the heart of the news and ensured that the book had an impact even before its publication. Between 1957 and until his death in 1961, Céline gave an important number of interviews. Godard and Dauphin describe the interviews in the Meudon pavilion as

a sort of ritual or *mise en scène*. The décor, a ramshackle detached house, a waterlogged garden, some howling mastiffs, and Céline's outfit have a lot to do with it, as well as the character he composes, more or less depending on his interlocutor – the part of performance always difficult to evaluate.²¹⁸

Furthering this narrative, three critics have discussed Céline's relationship with the press and analysed his interviews: Godard and Dauphin in the aforementioned *Cahiers Céline* (1976), Emile Brami in the introductory booklet to *Céline Vivant* (2004) and Jérôme Meizoz in various chapters and articles published between 2001 and 2011. To an extent, the evolution of these critics' commentary mirrors the different stages of my argument in the previous chapter. Godard and Dauphin point out the paratextual function of this body of work, although their analysis pre-dates Genette's coining of the term 'paratext'. Brami, in the chapter 'Céline et l'image', while he does not use Amossy's terminology, still insists on the conflicting images of the writer, succeeding each other throughout the years – Céline's example illustrating particularly well a clash between prior ethos and discursive ethos. Finally,

²¹⁷ Madeleine Chapsal, 'Voyage au bout de la haine... avec Louis-Ferdinand Céline', *L'Express* (14 June 1957).

²¹⁸ *CCI*, 12.

Meizoz's work on authorial posture has featured several chapters on Céline, and made ample use of those interviews to demonstrate his theory in practice.

Part 2. Critical Approaches to Céline's Interviews

Since the end of the nineteenth century, and mostly throughout the period between the two World Wars, the development of a literary journalism has provided the author with a new medium of communication with the public. Located besides his work published in book form, the articles he writes for newspapers and the answers he gives in interviews allow him to address a larger audience than that of his readership ... these texts accompany the œuvre ... they intervene in the formation of the writer's image, constructed incrementally by the public. They modify the relationship established between them by previously published works, they shift its centre of gravity ... one will be tempted to add to the œuvre the parallel discourse broadcast in the press, both written and audio-visual.²¹⁹

In the foreword of the *Cahiers Céline*, Godard and Dauphin approach literature as a social practice. The opening paragraph, translated above, reveals that their understanding of the topic was quite ahead of its time. Indeed, their analysis of the function of the interviews in relation to Céline's novelistic production dates back to 1976. Referring to their commentary as a paratextual reading of Céline's interviews might therefore appear to be an anachronism, as the term was coined by Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982). Nonetheless, the opening of the foreword of the *Cahiers Céline 1* brings forward arguments which are strikingly reminiscent of Genette's theory, devised in *Seuils* a decade later. In this lengthy extract, the press, and in particular the 'development of a form of literary journalism', is responsible for the creation of a series of texts which gravitate around the œuvre: the 'parallel discourse' constituted by the interviews and open letters. The paratext is given an active role; 'these texts' are the subject of a series of dynamic verbs - 'reaching', 'intervene', 'modify', 'shift' - which highlight their function in relation to the œuvre. In other words, interviews are paratextual, they 'accompany the œuvre' and allow the writer to take position in the literary field by modifying his prior ethos, as they 'intervene in the formation of the writer's image'. This particular aspect of their analysis also predates Amossy and Yanoshevsky's commentaries.

According to Godard and Dauphin, this 'other Celinian discourse' ('*cette autre parole célinienne*') acts as a 'counterpoint to his novels'²²⁰ and belongs to the

²¹⁹ *CCI*, 9.

²²⁰ *CCI*, 14.

domain of the public epitext; their contribution consists in turning it into a book. For them, the most important function of this group of texts, and the reason why they compiled them together in the first place, resides in the authorial commentary featured in the *entretiens*. Indeed – and this is an argument which also appears in *Seuils* – they see those interviews as possessing a similar role to that of prefaces. For the two critics, interviews and prefaces are both paratextual *and* metatextual. Pointing out that the main mode through which this type of discourse operates is that of commentary, they divide their function as threefold: ‘making known what the author meant to say in the published book, as well as, sometimes, the conditions in which it was written; preventing misunderstandings; affirming his principles and aims’.²²¹ They claim that, nowadays, interviews tend to replace prefaces because of their location outside the text, which enables the writer to reach a wider audience. Dauphin and Godard insist that the role of both interviews and prefaces is to direct the interpretation of the text, therefore going back to Genette’s idea of authorial control, the ideology which permeates any element of paratext.

Nonetheless, unlike Genette who was critical of the literary interview as full of clichés, they give a central importance to this practice. For instance, describing the ‘sudden interest which, in the space of one month, [brought] Céline back to the forefront of the literary field of his time’, Godard and Dauphin state that it had ‘the merit to endow him once more with the ability of commentary and explanation which the press offers nowadays to famous writers’.²²² By insisting on the metatextual function of literary interviews, they already further Genette’s analysis of this practice.

Finally, Dauphin and Godard are aware that the interviews contain an element of performance which in turn has an impact on the author’s image. The following quotation also indicates the possibility of a postural interpretation of the *entretiens* featuring Céline:

[This corpus of interviews] endows the writer with a physical presence: the presence of his body and outfit, the look in his eyes, the intonation of his voice. ... Through these interviews, Céline ceases to be this faceless and voiceless

²²¹ *CCI*, 9-10.

²²² *CC2*, 7.

character; our recent experience of television has taught us the importance of this image which superposes itself over the page we are reading.²²³

Highlighting the existence of an alternative text, an embodied speech which announces the return of the author, represents one of the first steps which renders Meizoz's interpretation possible. Interviews make visible elements of authorial self-presentation; body, clothes, general manner of being become interpretable and add another layer of 'text'. And indeed, Godard and Dauphin acknowledge that the reasons why writers are interviewed go further than a need to comment upon their work. There is also, behind the scenes, the need to take position within the literary field, as they insist on the element of conscious staging (*mise en scène*) in the interviews given by Céline. As they explain, the *entretiens* of Céline's later years are set in the same environment as the books he published at that time, and crucially they feature the same character.²²⁴

The presence of an authorial commentary within the interviews represents the main reason acknowledged by Godard and Dauphin for compiling this scattered body of work. However, they are aware of the element of performance, and the way in which it contributes to the creation of Céline as a character and performer. Their editorial work and commentary is pivotal because it paves the way for Meizoz's studies in the early 2000. Godard and Dauphin were precursors of a type of interpretation, which has also been developed and brought forward by Emile Brami, in his introduction to the writer's televised interviews. His argument in the chapter 'Céline et l'image' (2004) will be summarized here, as it constitutes an important contribution towards an understanding of the performative aspect at play in the interviews.

Emile Brami's introduction to the DVD *Céline vivant*, and in particular the chapter we are concerned with here, draws attention to the way in which the writer consciously manipulated his image throughout his life. The primary material used by Brami to demonstrate his thesis consists in a collection of photographs and televised interviews featuring Céline. In order to bring forward the argument that the writer's future literary image was a carefully planned projection, Brami starts by pointing out

²²³ *CCI*, 11.

²²⁴ *CCI*, 12.

that Céline was obsessed with controlling his image and the way (he thought) he was perceived by others. The same way he would control his manuscripts by revising them incessantly, he would also make sure that he wouldn't deviate from what he had planned to say in interviews. As Bami explains, 'throughout all the *entretiens* he gives to the press to sell his books, he models himself according to his interlocutors, reinvents his biography for them, 'revealing' to them the fake secrets they want to hear'.²²⁵ For Céline, the purpose of these interviews was essentially promotional; especially after the commercial failure of *Féerie pour une autre fois*, he understood that in order to sell his books, he needed to use of the media and publicity extensively. Key words in Bami's quotation are 'models himself', 'reinventing his biography' and 'fake secrets'. Is Céline lying in interviews? – Bami interprets this 'reinvented' biography not as a lie, but rather, a fiction and a performance, dependent upon an understanding of the interviewer (and the audience)'s expectations. This idea is central in Bami's argumentation and this is where he furthers Godard and Dauphin's reading of the interviews. Insisting on the importance of the authorial commentary, they only hint at the idea of a *mise en scène* and the creation of a character. For Bami, this element of performance is pivotal.

Bami, then, perceives Céline as an actor of genius, trying out different parts throughout his life, hiding behind a succession of masks.²²⁶ Bami's terminology relates to drama; the terms 'rôle' [role/part] and 'personnage' [character] are recurrent, as well as the extended metaphor of the stage. For instance, he describes the writer hosting the journalists in his picturesque house in Meudon in the following terms: 'in this attire and setting, like a playactor performing on a vast stage'.²²⁷ The succession of characters performed by Céline throughout his life range from a member of the nobility (he signed his first poems 'des Touches'), to a 'Doctor for the poor' as he published his first novel, to a 'rogue', riding a motorbike during the German Occupation. However, Bami considers his 'last metamorphosis' to be the most important one, and the one he is remembered by – the character he calls 'the hermit of Meudon', an angry and victimised old man, dressed in rags, living in the outskirts of Paris with his dancer wife and a *ménagerie* of howling dogs, cats and a

²²⁵ Emile Bami, *Céline Vivant* (Paris: Montparnasse, 2007), 25.

²²⁶ Ibid, 25.

²²⁷ Ibid, 28.

talking parrot.²²⁸ Brami's conclusion, at the end of the chapter, is that Céline has succeeded in his ploy, stating that in the audience's imagination, 'the character has permanently taken over the author performing it'.²²⁹ By this, he means that the general public's perception of Céline, the image that stuck in people's mind, is that of the 'hermit of Meudon', which is a construction, a performance. Among the succession of author's images (the noble des Touches, the 'good doctor', the rogue in Montmartre) performed by Celine throughout his life, the last one has occulted all the others.

Brami's demonstration of his thesis relies on a close reading of one televised interview in particular. However, he is not interested so much in the writer's discourse as 'text', but, rather, his self-presentation as a performance, his clothes and attitude as signifiers. Brami observes that the first public appearance of his final character dates back to the *entretien* with Pierre Dumayet in the television program *Lecture pour tous* (1957). Brami's analysis, without using Meizoz's terminology, features elements of a postural interpretation of Céline's televised interviews: he describes his outfit and behaviour and what it signifies, and concludes that it is a conscious *mise en scène*. He relates these elements to the audience's perception of the writer. Brami's reading is important because, like Godard and Dauphin's prefaces of the *Cahiers*, it constitutes a general introduction of documents which were originally aimed at the general public. Its purpose consisted in showing the audience that they were skilfully manipulated by Céline. However, in the early 2000s, Brami was not alone in providing an interpretation of the writer as a performer. Jérôme Meizoz, as early as his published PhD thesis *L'Age du roman parlant* (2001), had already devoted two chapters of his book to a postural interpretation of Céline's work. At the time, this was only the beginning of an articulation of his concept of authorial posture. The following quotation illustrates the core of his argument and is reminiscent of Brami's conclusion. After stating that the name "Céline" designates a complex individual who is both 'author, narrator and fictional character', Meizoz argues that:

²²⁸ Ibid, 26.

²²⁹ Ibid, 29.

In order to face this damaged identity, Destouches creates “Céline”; defying sociology, in a space where *the person literally becomes the fictional character he has invented* [là où la personne devient littéralement son personnage]. This new public image/persona is that of an ordinary man, a man of the people. Céline then sticks to this image, to the extent that the fictional enunciation of the narrators of his novels and his public discourse merge together. Destouches then develops this image through an easily identifiable tone, which he uses until the end of his life.²³⁰

The two chapters in *L'Age* already feature Meizoz's main arguments relating to Céline's elaboration of his posture. To do so, in the first chapter, he performs a close reading of *entretiens* featuring Céline, then relates it to some extracts from his private letters. The second chapter is a comparative reading of Céline's posture in both *Mort à crédit* and *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. This time, his analysis relies on a close reading of primary texts; there is no use of paratextual information, which shows that Meizoz can reach similar conclusions without the help of the paratext.

Meizoz develops his concept of authorial posture over a decade and comes back to the topic of the French writer several times after *L'Age*. He has devoted a number of journal articles, as well as several chapters of his studies on authorial posture [*Postures 1* and *2* (2007; 2011)] to detailed readings of Céline – which highlights the fact that he considers him to be a key illustration of his theory. In this short section, Meizoz's arguments in *L'Age* will be presented, followed by a discussion of the evolution of his interpretation in *Postures 2*, ten years later.

The first step of Meizoz's argument relies on the understanding that the name “Céline” stands for a fictional character. More precisely, Céline is at the same time author, narrator, and fictional character.²³¹ Meizoz refers to his accounts of his life, and of his childhood in particular, as a ‘childhood fiction’,²³² or a ‘lived fiction’.²³³ As he explains, ‘within this perspective, Céline already constitutes a fictional character [*un personnage romanesque*]. Only Louis Destouches remains out of the

²³⁰ Jérôme Meizoz, ‘Un style “franc grossier”: parole et posture chez L.-F. Céline’, in *L'Age du roman parlant (1919-1939)* (Genève: Droz, 2001), 417.

²³¹ Ibid, 417.

²³² Ibid, 382.

²³³ Ibid, 382.

equation'.²³⁴ The paragraph quoted above made use of this comparison, adding to it the idea of performance: the 'person' becomes 'his character' through a carefully planned *mise en scène*. In the conclusion of the chapter, Meizoz comes back to this idea once more, as he reminds the reader that the name "Céline" only stands for a construction [*un personnage construit*], adding that 'the writer is the conscious creator of a character, of a sociological fiction, "Céline", to which he has completely given up his primary identity'.²³⁵ Meizoz's use of quotation marks whenever referring to the name Céline are a reminder of the constructed nature of the writer's new identity, marked by his use of a pseudonym. Meizoz then extends the metaphor of Céline as a fictional character by describing the literary field as a stage.²³⁶

Indeed, the next step of Meizoz's argument consists in the following reading: 'when he presents himself to the press, in numerous *entretiens* given from 1932 onwards, Céline imposes to the journalists a self-presentation, or posture, whose function is, first and foremost, to situate him within the literary field of his time, of which he is a newcomer'.²³⁷ This idea was already mentioned in *L'Age*²³⁸ and *Postures Littéraires I*,²³⁹ and one can clearly observe from this repetition, that the main function of the Célinian interviews is very different for Meizoz than it is for Godard/Dauphin (authorial commentary) or Brami (performance). Meizoz is aware of the performative function of the *entretiens*, but he furthers the interpretation by explaining the strategy behind that performance. From this quotation, one can see that Meizoz equates the idea of 'self-presentation' with that of 'posture' and that interviews are one of the spaces in which the posturing is performed. Therefore, *entretiens* need to be analysed in order to understand the mechanics of this phenomenon. This idea of position-taking in the literary field involves a series of possible roles which are performed by different agents. Céline situates himself in relation to other writers and literary movements.

²³⁴ Ibid, 382.

²³⁵ Ibid, 419.

²³⁶ This argument is reiterated in Jérôme Meizoz, *La Fabrique des singularités. Postures littéraires II* (Genève: Slatkine, 2011), 40. Meizoz states: 'I partly consider "Céline", as character, to be a product of the fiction elaborated by Destouches. The pseudonym participates from then on towards a process of self-creation of the writer, and initiates a second life on the literary stage'.

²³⁷ Ibid, 45.

²³⁸ Meizoz, 2001, 383.

²³⁹ Meizoz, 2007, 102.

In the section ‘Versions and Diversions’,²⁴⁰ Meizoz uses lengthy extracts from *Cahiers Céline 1* and executes a close reading of some early Célinian interviews, in order to demonstrate the way in which the writer establishes the grounds for his posturing. First, Meizoz remarks that Céline provides the journalists with very different accounts of his biography - hence the name ‘versions and diversions’ - which leads him to give a particular interpretation of the writer’s loose vision of ‘truth’. Meizoz states, before quoting the interviews: ‘Here are the main public versions of the Célinian autofiction as a man of the people, interpreted not from the point of view of a biographical ‘truth’, but rather, from the standpoint of their contribution to the posture’.²⁴¹ For Meizoz, the factual accuracy of the stories told by “Céline” does not matter as such, as he is, after all, a construction. Meizoz opposes Michel Bounan’s reading, which ‘presents Céline as an impostor and denounces the writer’s lies about his real biography, on the account of his intrinsic perversity,’ as he considers an interpretation of Céline’s discourse as ‘lies’ inadequate.²⁴² Meizoz then remarks that some journalists are not deceived by Céline’s posturing, and notice an element of posing in his behaviour. More importantly, these different versions of the writer’s childhood will be recycled and form the basis of the narrative of his second novel, *Mort à crédit*. He concludes: ‘Céline, by adopting a new name, professes a new identity which he presents to the press and which coincides with the one he attributes to the narrator of his first two novels’.²⁴³

We have seen that three aspects of Meizoz’s reading of Céline are present in every chapter he has published on the French writer: “Céline” is a fictional character; his self-presentation to the press is about position-taking in the literary field; the contradicting accounts of his biography given to the journalists and correspondents in private letters are not ‘perverse lies’, but a crucial part of the elaboration of his posturing, which should be understood as a ‘lived fiction’. In *Postures 2* (2011), Meizoz comes back to Céline once more. In what way has his reading evolved in the space of ten years? The rearticulation of his research question insists on the media’s pivotal influence on the elaboration of the authorial posture. Particularly relevant here, are two of those formulations: ‘what is the impact of the author’s mediatization

²⁴⁰ Meizoz, 2001, 386-89.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 386.

²⁴² Ibid, 386.

²⁴³ Ibid, 388-389.

upon his writing practice and relationship to the public?’ and ‘in what way is the physical body of the writer engaged in their self-presentation?’²⁴⁴ Although it does not constitute Meizoz’s main focus in that particular study, the practice of literary interviews should be a key in understanding the issues at stake, especially the televised *entretiens*, in which the body of the writer and his physical presence sometimes signify as much as his ‘spoken’ discourse. In the chapter on Céline featured in this book, Meizoz goes back to some of the points made ten years beforehand, but furthers it with a detailed analysis of the signature of his private letters. He acknowledges the impact of the authorial posture on the reader’s interpretation of primary material, and also clarifies the relationship between private correspondence and *entretiens*, as well as between the public discourse and the ‘hidden text’ of the posture.

Meizoz’s main arguments regarding Céline are rearticulated in *Postures 2*, but with slight nuances. He asserts that ‘from this perspective, Céline can be considered a *character*, no longer a person, while only Louis Destouches remains out of the game’.²⁴⁵ When discussing the contradicting versions of his childhood given by the writer to the journalists, Meizoz still does not see them as lies, but claims that ‘a postural construction does not worry about truth as such, but rather, about adequacy with the public and with current issues which affect the literary field’.²⁴⁶ This reformulation is interesting because it clarifies the relationship between posturing and this loose understanding of ‘truth’, using literary sociology to justify this process. He later describes it as a ‘creative response to the space of possibilities bequeathed by the literary field’.²⁴⁷ Bourdieu’s theory of the field also validates the strategy behind Céline’s self-presentation. Meizoz states: ‘The process of fictionalization of the self is not solely about aesthetics; it constitutes an integral part of an attempt to impose an author’s image as part of a literary conjuncture – which means, that it can be equated to a positioning within the literary field’.²⁴⁸ Finally, the way in which Meizoz furthers his theory is by recognizing that someone who reads the *entretiens* given by Céline between 1932 and 1936, then comes across his novel, is coerced into amalgamating the ‘beams’ of biographical information. This tendency

²⁴⁴ Meizoz, 2011, 8.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 45.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 48.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 54.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 50.

affects not only ‘ordinary’ readers, but also the ‘professionals,’ academics and critics.²⁴⁹ Meizoz recognizes the impact that this added layer of text has upon an interpretation of primary material. Importantly, he also differentiates between two levels of discourse: the public discourse of the *entretiens*, as opposed to the ‘hidden text of the posture’, which can be found in private letters. Meizoz elaborates on this distinction by explaining that under his pen name, Céline hold a ‘public’ discourse perfectly adapted to the expectations of the literary field, while under his ‘civil’ name, in his private correspondence, he reveals the ‘hidden text’ of his posture.²⁵⁰ This acknowledgement of two levels of texts in interaction with each other illuminates some of the forces at work in the elaboration of Céline’s strategic posturing. However, Meizoz’s analysis relies too much on sociological tools and could benefit from a closer reading of the primary texts. For instance, when he repeats that “Céline” as character is in adequacy with the narrators of his novels, Meizoz rarely quotes *Voyage* to corroborate his argument. *L’Age* does feature a detailed study of *Mort à crédit* and *Bagatelles*, in which the self-presentation of the narrator Ferdinand is analysed in conjunction with the symbolization of his outfit. However, I am interested here in the characterization of the narrators in relation to the self-presentation of “Céline” (as character) in the *entretiens*.

In a chapter of *Postures Littéraires I* dedicated to Céline, Meizoz determined three moments of Céline’s posture at different stages of his career – each posture related to a poetics and, also, to a certain way to act towards the media. The first one deals with the years when *Voyage* and *Mort à crédit* were published (1932-1936). The second section is devoted to the period of the pamphlets and Céline’s wartime public activities (1937-1944). The third section focuses on Céline’s self-presentation while in exile and during the first few years after his return (1945-1956). In this chapter, similar primary material will be used for my own reading, and Meizoz’s findings are crucial; but, due to space and time constraints, I will only be able to perform close readings of interviews published during the first phase of the writer’s career, along with textual analysis from the novels promoted in the *entretiens* – in this case, *Voyage* and *Mort à crédit*.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 49.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 53.

Part 3. Becoming Céline (1932-1936)

And where, I ask you, can a man escape to, when he hasn't enough madness left inside him? The truth is an endless death agony. The truth is death. You have to choose: death or lies. I've never been able to kill myself.²⁵¹

In *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), the reality described by Céline through the eyes of the narrator Ferdinand Bardamu is that of a generation traumatised by the horror of the First World War. His bleak vision of the world and provocative use of slang scandalised his contemporaries. Sentences such as ‘the truth is death – you have to choose: death or lies’ encapsulate this pessimistic outlook. In this section, I want to argue that such affirmations also give clues towards an understanding of Céline’s public persona, established through a series of interviews around 1932-33. Meizoz’s findings will be demonstrated through a close reading of *Voyage* and of the *entretiens* contemporary to the publication of the novel. Meizoz repeats that the name ‘Céline’ corresponds to a fictional character created by Louis Destouches. Consequently, this section will endeavour to dismantle the first step of this process of fictionalization of the author. What are the characteristics of the self-presentation imposed by Céline to the journalists in 1932? How are the fictional enunciation of the narrator of the novels and his public discourse merged together?

In *Cahiers Céline 1*, Godard and Dauphin’s anecdote perfectly illustrates the confusion of Céline’s contemporaries, as the two characters Céline/Bardamu appear to be amalgamated with the ‘real-life’ Louis Destouches:

In February 1933, René Miquel, a journalist working for *Je suis partout* went to see Céline at his workplace, a dispensary in Clichy [...] In order to catch the spontaneous behaviour of the doctor, he didn’t introduce himself as a journalist, but as a patient. He wanted to find out whether, as he apparently read, Céline says ‘tu’ to his patients and speaks to them the same way Bardamu does. He

²⁵¹ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night* [trans] Ralph Manheim (1983), (New York: New Directions, 2006), 173. Hereafter, references to *Journey to the End of the Night* will be given in parentheses within the body of the text using the abbreviation *J*.

doesn't. Doctor Destouches calls him 'Monsieur', addresses him as 'vous' and, after having conscientiously examined him, sends him home with a diet: 'no wine, no coffee, no liquor, very little bread – bread is bad for you'. The journalist leaves 'disappointed' with Céline's politeness and perfectly professional medical behaviour.²⁵²

How could such a misunderstanding have taken place? According to critics such as Meizoz or Brami, Céline's self-presentation to the press was carefully planned and strategic. René Miquel wasn't the first journalist to visit him in the public health dispensary in the Parisian suburbs. Several interviews were set in his workplace, and described at length the writer wearing his doctor's scrubs and treating his patients. This anecdote betrays the fact that when Céline was aware of the presence of journalists, he acted differently; indeed, there is a conscious element of *mise en scène* in every *entretien* we will focus on. The interviews from 1932 and 1933 introduce Céline, at the time a new entrant in the literary field. One could say that they are about the creation of 'Céline' as fictional character. In a close reading of this group of texts, three aspects need to be focused on: the setting of the interviews, and their importance in establishing the writer's posture; the insistence on his double identity (Doctor Destouches and Mr Céline); what Godard and Dauphin call the 'mixture of true and false biographical information' given by Céline in these *entretiens*. 'Céline', as a fictional character, will be compared to 'Bardamu', the narrator of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Both Céline and the journalists consciously try to blur the distinction between the two. Bardamu's characterization in *Voyage* – especially his role as a doctor for the poor – will be briefly summarized, with an aim to demonstrate that clues are given there for the process of fictionalization of Destouches becoming Céline. Finally, we will see that the interviews also contain information about Ferdinand, narrator of Céline's second novel *Mort à crédit*, which was being written at the time. The connection between these two layers of text will be examined.

²⁵² CCI, 43. The article/interview to which Godard and Dauphin are referring is René Miquel, "En consultation chez le docteur Destouches, alias L.-F. Céline" in *Je suis partout*, 117, (18 Feb 1933), 4f. Unfortunately, they do not provide a transcript of the original text.

a. Human Misery – Céline as a Doctor for the Poor

The interviews contemporary to the publication of Céline's first novel have been compiled by Godard and Dauphin in the first section of *Cahiers Céline 1*.²⁵³ At first glance, the striking feature of this group of texts lies in the unusual setting of the *entretiens*: over half of the journalists chose to visit Céline in a public health dispensary in the working class suburbs of Paris where he had been working as a doctor for several years. The descriptions of Céline and his surroundings will be examined in detail, as well as the consequences of the divide of the writer's persona, as Doctor Destouches and Mr. Céline.²⁵⁴

The very first interview featuring Céline merits mentioning because, although very briefly, it sets the tone for all the others and contains most of the themes which will be developed in later *entretiens*.²⁵⁵ As Godard and Dauphin remark, 'there is a mixture of truth and error in the biographical indications given by Céline – a mixture which will remain the rule in every interview'.²⁵⁶ I will come back to these biographical facts when comparing them to the ones provided in the other interviews. Godard and Dauphin also note that Céline insists on placing 'human misery' as a central theme of the novel. 'Literature doesn't matter much compared to the misery upon which we are all choking', he claims.²⁵⁷ Céline makes a distinction between 'real life' (equated here with 'misery') and 'art/literature', and clearly places his work as part of the former category. His longest answer to the journalist Pierre-Jean Launay illustrates his insistence on this particular argument:

'Human misery upsets me, whether in its physical or moral form. It has always existed, I agree; but people used to offer it up to a God, any god. Nowadays, there are millions of poverty-stricken people in the world, and their distress isn't going anywhere. Besides, we live in a time of misery without art, this is pathetic. Man is naked, stripped away of everything he had, even of his self-belief. That is what my book is about.' And Céline went on to depict at length

²⁵³ *CCI*, 21-60.

²⁵⁴ I will mainly focus on texts 2, 3, 5 and 6 in *CCI*, but other interviews might be mentioned when necessary. The interviews to which I will be referring here have been provided in their entirety in *CCI*. I will provide my own translation of the extracts quoted in this thesis.

²⁵⁵ In *CCI*, 21-22. Pierre-Jean Launay, 'L.-F. Céline le révolté' *Paris-Soir*, 3323, (10 November 1932), 8.

²⁵⁶ *CCI*, 17.

²⁵⁷ *CCI*, 22.

some of these acts enticed by misery and cowardice, behaviours he observes on a daily basis.²⁵⁸

This theme is then taken on by other interviewees, not necessarily in Céline's discourse, but as they describe his workplace and patients.

I went to this haven of pain to pay him a visit. I caught him by surprise in the setting and atmosphere, full of lessons, in which he has been practicing medicine for a few years.²⁵⁹

The street of the public health dispensary is still looking for its own soul in the surrounding wasteland. The desolated titanic mass of cheap buildings crushes the communal clinic, built at the feet of the same icy bricks. The pleasure, the pain, the hatred which fill this gigantic structure with life and light in the night, are festering all the way up to the low building with its frosted glass. The long avenue which passes right by it carries towards it, like a large gutter, the misery which oozes and trickles sparsely in this suburb.²⁶⁰

Do you have any idea what a public health dispensary, in a working class suburb, looks like? I know it because I watched the [doctor's appointments] there for eight days. A school of humanity and suffering, moral as well as physical; the bleak and terrible procession of disease marked by the seal of misery; the long and patient queue of poor patients who come every day to show their wounds, repeating their torment over and over again; entrusting their soul to the doctor.²⁶¹

In these descriptions, all the interviewees insist on the pathos of the environment. These extracts mirror the setting of a section of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, in which the narrator Bardamu works as a doctor for the poor in a dispensary in an imaginary working-class suburb named 'Rancy'. Like Céline in the interview with Launay, the

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 21-22.

²⁵⁹ CCI, 23. Originally published in Max Descaves, 'Le Dr Georges Duhamel, Prix Goncourt sous un pseudonyme en 1918, aura-t-il un émule tout à l'heure?', *Paris-Midi*, 2442, 7 December 1932.

²⁶⁰ Bromberger, in CCI, 29.

²⁶¹ Altman, in CCI, 34-35.

journalists place the theme of ‘misery’ as central: ‘this haven of pain’, ‘the misery which oozes and trickles’, ‘a school of humanity and suffering’... Interviews are paratextual; but one could also say that the description/presentation which frames the dialogue between the author and the interviewer constitutes the paratext of the interview, and possesses the same function. Therefore, in this choice of setting (dispensary) and of tone (pathetic) there is a will to emphasize a particular aspect of the novel. Several characteristics of *Voyage* shocked its contemporaries, such as its anti-war message, or Céline’s use of slang. As the title of the novel shows, the narrative is a ‘journey’ divided in four sections - the War, Africa, New York, a Parisian suburb - each one providing a different ideological message. Setting the interview in a public health dispensary, with Céline answering the interviewer’s questions while treating his patients, orients the reader towards a particular interpretation of the text, in this case by drawing his attention to the theme of ‘human misery’ which apparently permeates the novel.

Furthermore, the interview ‘*Chez Céline, le sombre flagelleur de l’humanité*’ provides another example of the setting of an interview contributing to the audience’s amalgamation of Céline with the narrator Bardamu.²⁶² This *entretien* with Victor Molitor is not set in the dispensary, but in the writer’s flat in Montmartre. In the following extract, one can observe a similar intention to identify Céline’s world to that of his novel. The journalist evokes several episodes of the book. Molitor’s description thus reads:

The room in which we stand is full of strangeness. The overpowering smell of medicinal drugs is combined with much exoticism. Colonial memories remind one of a far-away sufferance under a blazing red-hot sun, among other life-threatening dangers. A pen drawing of a war scene creates an instantaneous spell of black madness. This setting is a silent evocation of *Journey to the End of the Night*.²⁶³

²⁶² The title would literally translate as ‘At Céline’s, the dark whip-lasher of the human race’; the interview is provided in its entirety in *CCI*, 38-43, but was published originally in Victor Molitor, “*Chez Céline, le sombre flagelleur de l’humanité*”, *Les Cahiers Luxembourgeois* (1933), 336-342.

²⁶³ Victor Molitor, in *CCI*, 39-40.

In this short paragraph, the interviewer refers to Céline's profession, represented by the medicinal drugs; his travels to Africa ('exoticism', 'colonial memories') and his status as a war veteran ('pen drawing of a war scene'). These features correspond both to moments in the writer's life and to episodes of the novel ('a silent evocation'...), which as a result contributes to the reader equating the public image of Céline to that of the narrator Bardamu. Indeed, if the interviews are trying to recreate the setting of the novel for the audience of the newspaper, what is even more striking is the way the journalists present Céline.

I have argued that when reading the interviews contemporary to the publication of *Voyage* as an ensemble, it becomes clear that the characterization of Céline, in particular the way he is described by the interviewers, is more often than not connected to his surroundings. One can observe a distinct correlation between the choice of setting and some aspects of the novel that both interviewer and author deliberately want to accentuate. This argument also becomes apparent, for instance, when looking at the way Max Descaves introduces Céline at the beginning of his interview in *Paris-Midi*, as he states that

although he did everything he could to remain anonymous, Ferdinand Céline has not been able to hide for a long time that his literary pen name was masking the identity of a consultant physician who practices his profession in a municipal dispensary in the West suburbs of Paris, a place open to misery and human suffering.²⁶⁴

In this sentence, 'Céline', his identity as a 'consultant physician' and the theme of human misery are merged together. The writer is therefore presented in connection with his surroundings. In passing, Descaves points out the postural function of the pseudonym, as a mask. This interview is the one that insists the most on his identity as a doctor, and describes at length the consultations in the dispensary. The topic of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, which was Descaves's reason for visiting Céline in the first place, only represents a small part of the newspaper article. Instead, this text shows Céline at work, and interestingly, the term 'Doctor Céline' which Descaves uses when referring to the writer, to an extent betrays the postural strategy at stake in

²⁶⁴Max Descaves, in *CCI*, 23.

this particular performance. Calling him ‘Doctor Céline’ already constitutes an amalgamation of two identities: the doctor is Louis Destouches, while Céline is the latter’s pen name.

What is at stake in Céline being presented as a ‘doctor who writes’? More specifically, what do the hospital whites symbolise, within the context of Céline/Destouches performing his author-function? In his essay ‘Getting Back from the Other World: From Doctor to Author’, Philippe Roussin touches upon similar questions. As he explains,

The literary identity and public image of the author were constituted, then and for a long time to come, via the construction, perfectly controlled, of a *medical figure* that would impose itself definitively as an essential trait of his *auctoritas*. This medical figure is located *outside* the texts, in what Gérard Genette has called the ‘paratext’; it appears as part of the commentary on the author, orienting the reception of his work and guiding the interpretations of readers during the 1930s.²⁶⁵

Roussin then adds that ‘in the context of the 1930s, the medical figure that Céline invented with his entry into literature must be perceived as an alternative to the literary identities available in the culture at that time’.²⁶⁶ We are indeed in the presence of what Meizoz calls a ‘posture’. Céline makes a point of meeting journalists, therefore being in a situation in which he is performing his author-function, while presenting himself as a doctor – there is a conscious intention behind this particular situation. For Roussin, it results in the writer signifying to the general public that he is ‘not a “literary man”... he is the opposite of the bourgeois writer’.²⁶⁷ Céline’s purpose then lies in granting his discourse - inside and outside his novel - a form of authenticity, which he denies to the rest of his literary peers.

One could argue that Céline is in control of his self-presentation to the journalists - the choice of setting of the interviews constituting an important factor in the first impression he makes upon them. But how is he perceived by the

²⁶⁵ Alice Yaeger Kaplan and Philippe Roussin (eds), *Céline, USA. The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93, 2 (1994), 251-52.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 252.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 252.

interviewers? Following is a long extract from the interview with Georges Altman in *Monde*.²⁶⁸ This quotation does not originally appear in one block; it is made up of various comments by Altman, spaced out between direct answers provided by Céline. However, once gathered together, these descriptions provide a portrait of the writer, and highlight the complexity of Céline as a character.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline is not a professional writer, but a doctor, a doctor for the poor, a doctor who works in one of those dispensaries in a big city of a working-class suburb. [...] He has seen men at war, under the sun in Africa, in America, and in the bleak suburbs of misery, men enslaved by a material world, which has made them enslaved by their own self and their own ugliness. [...] War, Africa, America, and this city in the suburbs which he names Garenne-Rancy: everywhere, the world is against him. ... He has seen England, he has studied, by himself, without going to high school, he has passed all his diplomas and become a doctor by the strength of his own wrists. [...] He is even, we are told, a very knowledgeable doctor – hasn't he been employed by the SDN for some missions in hygiene and medical organisation, a task he fulfilled perfectly? But first and foremost, he is, for us, Louis Ferdinand Céline, the author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, he is a man of rebellion and enthusiasm.²⁶⁹

In the first sentence, the negation of Céline's status as author ('not a professional writer') and insistence on his medical profession remind one of Roussin's argument mentioned above. The word 'doctor' is repeated three times, and one can observe a gradation in the amount of detail given about his profession. What is negated here is the link to his contemporaries, the bourgeois writers from whom he wants to distance himself. Once again, the setting of the interview is linked to this postural choice, and directly related to Céline's position. The next two sentences can be related to episodes of *Voyage*; they follow its plot, more or less directly. In the novel, the narrator Bardamu takes part in World War 1, goes to Africa and the United States, then works

²⁶⁸ In *CCI*, 34-38. Originally published in Georges Altman, 'Les 'Goncourt' avaient un grand livre, ils ne l'ont pas choisi... Rencontre avec L.-F. Céline médecin et auteur du *Voyage au bout de la nuit*', *Monde*, 236, 10 December 1932, 8-9. Céline's double identity, as doctor and author, already appears in the title of the interview.

²⁶⁹ Georges Altman, in *CCI*, 35-37.

as a consultant physician in the working class suburbs of Paris. Starting the sentence with ‘he has seen’ links the plot of *Voyage* to the biographical information given by Céline to the interviewer, thereby adding to the novel’s ‘authenticity’. This list of locations (‘War, Africa, America and this city in the suburbs’) corresponds to a sequence of events, the repetition of which betrays Altman’s insistence on the fact that the plot is a direct transposition of Céline’s experience.

The next sentence, beginning with ‘He has seen England...’ announces the plot of later novels. In some famous episodes of *Mort à crédit*, the narrator, a young Ferdinand – who can be read, to an extent, as an alter ego of the author – goes to a private school in the South of England, whilst *Guignol’s Band* (1944), is dedicated to the (mis)adventures of the same Ferdinand, a young adult at that point, in the backstreets of London. ‘Without going to high school’ constitutes a key element of Céline’s posture, almost as important as the doctor scrubs he is wearing. This argument will be reiterated in many an interview, and will become a pivotal element of *Mort à crédit*, which essentially deals with Ferdinand/Céline’s education. Besides, his approach to writing is directly linked to a rejection of other writers who have been educated at high school and practice a ‘dead language’.

Furthermore, when Altman feels the need to state that Céline ‘is a very knowledgeable doctor’, one could interpret this part of the portrait of the writer as a way to differentiate him from the narrator Bardamu, who never really cured any patients in the novel. I will come back to this point. Finally, the last sentence of this lengthy quotation insists on Céline’s identity as a ‘rebellious’ writer and to an extent contradicts the beginning of the extract. ‘He is first and foremost the author of *Voyage*’ reads as opposite to ‘not a professional writer, but a doctor’. It is as if the interviewer has come full circle in his portrait of Céline, who appears as made up of a prism of identities which take over each other.

b. Doctor Céline and Mister Bardamu – a blurring of identities

In the same interview, an extract from the dialogue between Altman and Céline betrays the writer’s conscious manipulation of his audience. Referring to an episode from *Voyage* in which Bardamu is sailing to Africa, but gradually ostracised and cornered by all the other passengers on board, Altman asks: ‘But, tell me, in your pages on Africa, you express in a striking manner the hatred with which the passengers of the boat were surrounding the non-conformist man, the revolt they

were suspecting within you'. To which Céline replies: 'This hatred is real. It didn't work out, between me and them'.²⁷⁰

The amalgamation between Céline and Bardamu, as characters, occurs gradually. When Altman addresses his interviewee by saying: 'your pages on Africa', or 'you express in a striking manner', he is talking to Céline, the author. But then, his discourse becomes unconsciously directed towards a different interlocutor, as he discusses the behaviour of the passengers of the boat, who are fictional. The interviewer's question is worded as if the episode happened to Céline directly, for instance as he refers to 'the revolt they were suspecting within *you*' (my emphasis). At this point, Céline could have corrected the journalist's misreading and pointed out that they were discussing an episode of the novel involving the narrator Bardamu. But Céline's answer betrays the fact that he is playing along with Altman's misunderstanding. By responding that 'this hatred is real', the writer insists on this idea of authenticity – the novel is a direct product of his experience. However, as he adds that 'it didn't work out, between *me* and them' (my emphasis) a shift takes place. Céline directly participates in the confusion between 'characters'. The boundary between 'real' life and the world of the novel has been blurred.

Finally, one more example of Céline's different identities shifting in a prism-like manner can be found in the interview conducted by Merry Bromberger.²⁷¹ In this case, the blurring of identities takes the form of a literary allusion: 'Doctor X and Mister Céline' which, by reminding the reader of Robert Louis Stevenson's horror tale, endows the writer's public image with a dark undertone. Bromberger thus describes his encounter with the doctor/writer:

The one who is there to heal their suffering is a well-built tall guy, with his hair all messed up, with plebeian features, hugged tight in his white scrubs. His name doesn't really matter. Neither does the name of this suburban area. I came to find the one who hides there, M. Céline, the author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit!* [...] The Doctor X sat down after greeting me, lowered the lamp and crossed his hands in front of him. And all I can see now are Mr Céline's eyes,

²⁷⁰ Ibid, 36.

²⁷¹ CCI, 29-32. Originally published in Merry Bromberger, 'Le Prix Théophraste Renaudot. Le docteur X..., alias M. Céline. Une interview dans une clinique', *L'Intransigeant* (9 Dec 1932), 500.

while he speaks very fast, in a jerky manner. His eyes whose gaze seems to be tensed up, intensely painful eyes, eyes that could make you cry.²⁷²

In the years 1932-1933, most interviews introduce Céline wearing his white scrubs: he is not a professional writer, but a doctor for the poor, in a working-class suburban area. This extract is no exception to the rule and does not fail to include three features, which as a result have become associated with Céline's early public persona – the idea of suffering, the suburban area setting, and the hospital whites, creating a visual representation of his medical profession. Bromberger here insists on the idea of anonymity: Céline's name 'doesn't really matter', he 'hides' and is even referred to as 'Doctor X'. The mention of the writer's 'plebeian features' is rather surprising in this context, as in reality he comes from a much more privileged background; however, it could be read as a sign that Céline has become identified with his patients in the interviewer's eyes. Bromberger alternates in designating him as 'M. Céline' and 'Doctor X'. The obvious allusion is to *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hide*, almost presenting Céline as affected by a split personality disorder. Furthermore, similarly to Stevenson's novel, one identity seems to act as the shadow of the other. The anonymous doctor appears as a blank canvas, while M. Céline ('author of *Voyage*', Bromberger mentions) is characterised by his agitation and to an extent, suffering ('eyes that could make you cry') – as if Céline has become both doctor and patient. In *Voyage*, Bardamu, at that point a recently established doctor in the fictional suburban town of Rancy, claims that 'in the meantime I wasn't getting many patients. ... At the moment the patient was mostly me' (*J*, 207). This sentence encapsulates the reversal of roles within the writer's persona, which the interviewer was trying to express.

Céline's self-presentation to the journalists in those early interviews alludes to the section in *Voyage* set in the fictional suburban town of Rancy. Readers in the 1930s, familiar with both the novel and the interviews, would consequently have a tendency to amalgamate Céline's biography and worldview with that of the narrator Bardamu. In an episode of the novel in particular, Bardamu, a newly-established young doctor, receives a promotion: 'about that time I was put in charge of a small neighbourhood dispensary for tuberculosis. I may as well call a spade a spade, it

²⁷² Ibid, 29-30.

brought in eight hundred francs a month' (*J*, 287). However, at this point, the comparison between 'Doctor Destouches' and his fictional double ends. Luckily enough for Destouches' real-life patients, one can observe important discrepancies in their approaches to the practice of medicine.

For instance, when reading the early interviews featuring Céline alongside the Rancy section of the novel, one realises that the theme of human misery which permeates the first group of texts is presented in a different light in this episode of *Voyage*. In particular, the tone of the chapter which deals with Bardamu's experience in the dispensary is far from pathetic (*J*, 287-292). Bardamu's voice can be quite caustic at times; he describes his patients and surroundings in a dry tone which the interviewers would not dare employing. Bardamu's emphasis is on bringing out people's mediocrity. Far from pitying his patients, his depiction of their misery is laced with contempt: 'My patients were poor and selfish; they were materialists, shrunk to the measure of their sordid hope that positive sputum streaked with blood would get them a pension' (*J*, 289). What is more, Bardamu is also self-deprecating, and more or less presents himself as a failed doctor, who rarely heals anyone. In an ironic twist, curing his patients seems to be the opposite of what is expected of him: 'Little by little I'd broken my bad habit of promising my patients good health' (*J*, 288). The following quotation, taken from the same chapter in *Voyage*, clarifies the reasons for Bardamu's disillusioned and sarcastic outlook on the situation.

In those few months of specialized practice I performed no miracles. Miracles were sorely needed. But my patients weren't at all eager for me to perform miracles, they were banking on their tuberculosis to move them from the state of absolute misery in which they'd been mouldering ever since they could remember to the state of relative misery conferred by microscopic government pensions. (*J*, 288)

This short extract is built on several oppositions. To begin with, Bardamu's 'specialized practice' is pitted against the idea of 'performing miracles'. Thrice repeated, the word 'miracles' comes back like a leitmotiv, and possesses religious connotations. It is presented in a negative form, as well as associated to the idea of performance. On the other hand, the doctor's labour has the depth of years of study and experience. Bardamu's 'specialized practice' is unable to 'perform miracles' –

in this case, treat his patients' tuberculosis. According to him, the reason for his failure is to be found in economics.

Bardamu differentiates between 'absolute misery' and 'relative misery'. As we have seen, this is a theme reiterated later on by Céline and his interviewers. However, the misery described by Bardamu, whether 'absolute' or 'relative', is one that cannot be escaped from. His patients can only choose between poverty and illness. Ironically, it appears to them that their disease can save them from dire poverty, through the medium of a 'microscopic government pension'. The expression 'banking on their tuberculosis' is the key which reveals this warped logic. For his patients, Bardamu's diagnosis is necessary and linked to a form of economic survival. Nevertheless, it is a double-edged sword, a temporary form of survival which will kill them eventually.

When reading the novel and the interviews as two texts responding to each other, one is pushed towards two separate interpretations. The portrait of Céline/Destouches as a doctor for the poor is very different from Bardamu's role when performing the same profession. However, strangely, it appears that the journalists were trying to merge those three distinct entities into one character. As a result, Céline is somewhat equated with Bardamu in the audience's perception, as the journalist René Miquel's misunderstanding demonstrates.

Those early interviews are performances. A close reading of these texts highlights their main two functions: directing the reader towards a specific interpretation of the novel - insisting on the theme of human misery as opposed to the anti-war message, for instance - and creating a character, the writer as a doctor for the poor. In order to achieve this, with every new *entretien*, Céline invents his biography and provides conflicting versions of his childhood. Interestingly, it is as if those interviews acted as an integral part of the writing process of his next novel, *Mort à crédit*. Many of the features improvised in Céline's 'made-up' childhood will in turn characterize its narrator Ferdinand.

c. Céline's Childhood / Ferdinand's Narrative

In *L'Age du roman parlant*, Meizoz points out the discrepancies in Céline's account of his childhood with that of Destouches's life.²⁷³ Meizoz demonstrates that the writer goes one step further in the process of identification/amalgamation with the narrator Bardamu, by fictionalizing his own biography, which will then be used as raw material for the creation of 'Ferdinand'. Meizoz describes these accounts as the 'public versions of the Célinian autofiction as a man of the people' and consciously chooses to move away from a biographical interpretation by focusing on their postural function.²⁷⁴ The term 'autofiction' is a key of Meizoz's interpretation, although it can somewhat be considered to be an anachronism, as this particular process of literary self-creation was not defined until the late 1970s.

The interviews contain information about *Mort à crédit* – Céline mentions several times that he is writing a new book.²⁷⁵ However, the direct references to the novel he is preparing are much less revealing than the mixture of truth and lies in the biographical information he provides when questioned by the interviewers. Both Godard and Meizoz are aware of this point, yet their studies lack a close reading of the opening of *Mort à crédit*, in which the literary metamorphosis of Bardamu/Céline into Ferdinand has come to fruition.

In *Mort à crédit*, the narrator Ferdinand seems to act as an extended version of Bardamu; he also appears to share a lot in common with 'Céline', the character created in those early interviews. The first thirty pages of *Mort à crédit* contrast sharply with the rest of the novel – one could argue that its plot as such does not start until Ferdinand claims 'The last century – I can talk about it, I saw it end...'.²⁷⁶ Up to that point, the reader tries to make sense of his feverish rant. The narrator's profession is announced in the first page of the book, as he provocatively asserts: 'I haven't always practised medicine... this shit' (*DoC*, 3). From the start, Ferdinand is

²⁷³ Meizoz provides a detailed account of Céline's life up to the publication of *Voyage*, based on the work of several specialist biographers: Gibault, Vitoux and Alméras (Jérôme Meizoz, 'Un style "franc grossier": parole et posture chez L.-F. Céline', in *L'Age du roman parlant (1919-1939)* (Genève: Droz, 2001), 380-82. He then quotes the different versions of Céline's childhood provided in interviews, the juxtaposition of which clearly highlighting inconsistencies (386).

²⁷⁴ Jérôme Meizoz, 2001, 386.

²⁷⁵ *CCI*, 30; 33; 37; 42.

²⁷⁶ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on Credit* [trans.] Ralph Manheim (1966) (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2009), 31. Hereafter, references to *Death on Credit* will be given in parentheses within the body of the text using the abbreviation *DoC*.

characterized as both a doctor *and* a writer. This second feature of the narrator appears at the early stages of the novel.²⁷⁷

The reader can never be sure whether this new ‘Ferdinand’ and ‘Bardamu’ - whose first name also happens to be Ferdinand - are to be understood as the same character, and whether *Mort à crédit* acts as a follow up to *Voyage*. The ambiguity is never resolved, and actually maintained by the fact that in *Mort à crédit*, Ferdinand’s last name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. At first, when skimming through the text, one is under the impression that Bardamu’s storytelling skills have developed into a part-time profession. In *Mort à crédit*, Ferdinand even employs a secretary, Old Vitruve. ‘Almost every day when I’d finished with my patients, she’d come up to deliver my typescripts’, he explains (*DoC*, 7). What is more, *Mort à crédit*’s narrator is highly unreliable, and he blames this fact on his suffering from malaria caught in Congo, which is reminiscent of the African episode of *Voyage*, and Bardamu’s recurrent accesses of fever (*DoC*, 28). Because of Céline’s declarations in interviews, *Mort à crédit* is set up to be read as autobiographical (although, as we now know, this autobiography is completely fictional).²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he was careful to add some details within Ferdinand’s characterization, which prevent the text from being interpreted as a straight-forward autobiography, but are close enough to Céline/Destouches’s life to create ambiguity. For instance, the author and narrator’s years of birth do not match, but the contexts are somewhat identical. In *Mort à crédit*, Ferdinand’s birth is accounted for in the following extract:

It was right there on the riverfront, at number 18, that my parents went broke in the winter of ‘92. That was a long time ago. Their business was “Notions, Flowers, Feathers”. There was, as I was often told, only one shop window and all they had in it was three hats. The Seine froze over that year. I was born in May. The springtime – that’s me. (*DoC*, 16)

In the magazine *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, Céline tells interviewer Paul Vialar : ‘I was born in Asnières, in 1894’,²⁷⁹ while his biographers tend to agree that

²⁷⁷ This is made clear by sentences such as ‘At the clinic where I work, the Linuty Foundation, I’ve had thousands of complaints about the stories I tell.’ (*DoC*, 4) or ‘Writing picks me up. I’m not so badly off. Vitruve types my novels’ (7).

²⁷⁸ This argument is also put forward in Meizoz, 2011, 45.

²⁷⁹ *CCI*, 33.

Louis Destouches was born on 27 May 1894 in Courbevoie, and that his parents at the time owned a shop named “Modes et Lingerie”, which went bankrupt three years later.²⁸⁰

In *Mort à crédit*, two other details add to this ambiguity between ‘real life’ and fiction: Ferdinand refers to ‘Rancy’ as a town where he used to live and *Voyage* as a novel blamed for someone’s cocaine addiction. ‘When I moved from Rancy to Porte Pereire, they both tagged along. Rancy has changed, there’s hardly anything left of the walls or the Bastion’ (*DoC*, 8), Ferdinand states. Because Rancy is fictional and only exists in the world of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, one is tempted to read the world of *Mort à crédit* as an extension of the scenography of the previous novel. However, one realises that *Voyage* only exists as fiction in Ferdinand’s eyes, as he tells the story of a pimp called Bébert who ‘ended up on snow. He’s been reading the *Journey...*’ (*DoC*, 21).²⁸¹ Another layer of fiction is added to this ambiguous scenography, under the form of the ‘Legend of King Krogold.’ Ferdinand describes this text as ‘Real marvels they were... bits of Legend, pure delight... That’s the kind of stuff I’m going to write from now on...’ (*DoC*, 7). He obsesses over this lost manuscript, and regularly quotes from it. Céline, in interviews, also refers to ‘a legend he is working on’.²⁸²

In some cases, the interviews act almost as a ‘rehearsal’ of the primary text of the novels. Some extracts are very close in content and sometimes language. For instance, Céline, when asked by Merry Bromberger whether *Voyage* can be read as autobiographical, starts describing himself in the third person:

Mr. Céline – this is the person we are talking about, am I right? – is a sick individual. A war casualty, reformed. And something else too. As I speak to you right now, I have a train in my left ear, a train in Bezons station. It arrives, stops, leaves again. It is not a train anymore; it’s an orchestra. This ear is lost. It only brings me grief. I can hardly sleep.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ See, for instance, David Alliot, *D’un Céline l’autre* (Paris: Robert Lafont, 2011), 7-11.

²⁸¹ In the Preface to the 2009 edition of *Death on Credit*, André Derval interprets this fact as Ferdinand being the author of *Voyage* (*DoC*: v) but I think the sentence quoted above is too ambiguous to make that deduction.

²⁸² *CCI*, 42.

²⁸³ Merry Bromberger, in *CCI*, 31.

In this strange self-portrait, what is at stake in the uneasy transitions between first and third person is the creation of 'Céline' as a character. Destouches is slowly becoming Céline, and establishes his features in front of an audience. He then clarifies the relationship between 'Céline' and 'Bardamu' by stating that 'Céline merely transcribes Bardamu's raving, who in turn tells what he knows of Robinson'.²⁸⁴

Comparing this extract to some passages of *Mort à crédit*, one cannot help but notice that the narrator Ferdinand suffers from a similar condition, as he claims that 'Me, my trouble is insomnia. If I had always slept properly, I'd never have written a line...' (*DoC*, 6). What is more, Ferdinand also refers twice to 'a buzzing in both ears'.²⁸⁵ In the following extract, Ferdinand's description of his ailment acts as an extended metaphor of Céline's account, the 'orchestra' of the interview quoted above becoming a 'tremendous hullabaloo':

Fever or not, I always have such a buzzing in both ears that it can't get much worse. I've had it since the war. Madness has been hot on my trail... [...] She's tried a million different noises, a tremendous hullabaloo, but I raved faster than she could, I screwed her, I beat her to the tape. [...] My great rival is music, it sticks to the bottom of my ear and rots. (*DoC*, 24)

As we have seen, Céline, Bardamu and Ferdinand all complain of the same disorders, a buzzing in both ears due to an injury during the war, also responsible for insomnia, as well as malaria caught in Congo, which causes recurrent accesses of fever. The result of these ailments combined together is a form of 'madness', which translates as 'delirium' in writing. Céline's style is directly linked to this condition. It is an important element of his posturing; he insists on it, and it directly affects the way he is perceived by the public.

Keeping this idea in mind, we can now focus on another postural element which in turn has an impact upon Céline's style: that is, the writer's made up stories about his upbringing. In the first interview for instance, his account is brief, but highly revealing of his strategy. 'I am a man of the people, of the 'real' working

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 31.

²⁸⁵ For instance: 'The fact is that in the days when I had that buzzing in my ears, even worse than now, and attacks of fever all day long, I wasn't half so gloomy...' (*DoC*, 7).

classes. I went through secondary school, and the first two years of high school while working for a grocer's, doing deliveries', he tells Pierre-Jean Launay.²⁸⁶ A few months later, when asked about his childhood, Céline provides Paul Vialar with a slightly different answer: 'I was born in Asnières in 1894. My father, who was at first a professor, then revoked from his position, used to work for the railway; my mother was a seamstress. When I was twelve, I started working in a ribbon factory'.²⁸⁷ Then George Altman, who writes for the left-wing newspaper *Monde*, hears a completely different story:

I can see that you want to hear about my life. Is that right? Let's do it then. It's complicated, but deep down, it's always the same thing. My mom, a lacemaker. My father, the intellectual of the family. We had a small business, we prospected in many towns. It never worked out. Bankrupt. Bankrupt. Bankrupt. I was constantly surrounded by bankruptcy when I was a kid.²⁸⁸

The last narrative starts to resemble the plot and themes of *Mort à crédit*. The professional 'evolution' of Céline's father is worth noting – from a professor dismissed from his function, who then worked for the railway, to the 'intellectual of the family'. There appears to be a need to characterize him as both a worker and an educated man, in the same way that Céline wants his audience to see him as a working class man ('a man of the people'), who had to earn a living from a very young age. The last version of the writer's fictional biography is the closest one to what we know of Destouches's life. It also reminds the audience of Ferdinand's story. Therefore, as Meizoz pointed out, a reader in the 1930s who comes across those interviews, then reads *Mort à crédit*, will tend to interpret the latter as autobiographical.²⁸⁹ Most of the fake biographical information given by Céline are related to class, and the language he uses to describe his childhood is centred on finances and social position. The repetition of the word 'bankruptcy' matches the central theme *Mort à crédit*, which also appears in the title of the book.

²⁸⁶ *CCI*, 22.

²⁸⁷ *CCI*, 33.

²⁸⁸ Georges Altman, in *CCI*, 35.

²⁸⁹ Jérôme Meizoz, 2011, 49.

Indeed, the following extract from *Mort à crédit*, strategically placed before Ferdinand begins the narration of his childhood, clearly articulates those key themes.

My mother is no working woman... She says that over and over again, it's her litany... She's a small-business woman... Our family ran itself ragged for the glory of small business... We're no drunken workers, up to our ears in debt... Oh no! Certainly not!... There's a big difference and don't forget it! (*DoC*, 28)

This quotation is built on oppositions: 'working woman' as opposed to 'small-business woman' and 'ragged' as opposed to 'glory'. But the irony in Ferdinand's description of his background, is that the 'drunken workers' seem to deal with the same financial problems as his family, the only 'big difference' lying in their status. So, once more, what seems to preoccupy both Céline in the interviews and Ferdinand's mother is centred on class and money.

From the juxtaposition of these narratives, one can see that for Céline, a biography is fictional – truth doesn't matter as long as he is perceived by the general public as 'a man of the people'.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, when looking at this particular quote alongside the interviews, one realises how much they prepare the reader for Ferdinand's narrative, and direct its interpretation. As we have seen, the main element of Céline's posture in the 1930s consists of his self-presentation as a doctor for the poor, who had to work throughout his childhood. The accounts he provides in different interviews do not match, but they all tend to exaggerate the struggle and poverty of his upbringing. Céline is also characterized as suffering from insomnia and a buzzing in both ears – traits he shares with the narrators of his first two novels, who are both doctors called Ferdinand.

Another characteristic shared by Bardamu and Ferdinand, is the idea of the function of writing as telling of hatred. Their understanding of human nature comes from observing the misery of their patients in the suburbs. In *Voyage* for instance, Bardamu's function as storyteller is alluded to in relation to his role as a doctor:

²⁹⁰ Meizoz opens one of his chapters with a quote from Céline which encapsulates his attitude towards the interviewers: 'La biographie? Invenitez-la' (Jérôme Meizoz, 2011, 35). However, there is no reference provided, and it transpires that the exact quotation is taken from a letter to Arthur Miller, in which Céline famously wrote that a biography is meant to be invented.

My patients had me in their clutches. Every day they snivelled more, they had me at their mercy. And while they were at it they showed me all the ugliness they kept hidden behind the door of their souls and exhibited to no one but me. The fee for witnessing such horrors can never be high enough. They slither through your fingers like slimy snakes. I'll tell you the whole story someday if I live long enough. (*J*, 210)

This passage mirrors a famous quotation from *Mort à crédit*, in which Ferdinand claims: 'I could vent all my hatred. I know. I'll do that later on if they don't come back, just to kill me, from the ends of the world' (*DoC*, 4). Sadly, this 'telling of hatred' is the aspect of both narrators which will gradually take over Céline's public persona, as we move towards the late 1930s and his war-time writings. Between 1937 and 1941, as he publishes three violent anti-Semitic pamphlets, the writer will readjust his posture accordingly.

A study of Céline's wartime interviews would have plunged us into the heart of this 'telling of hatred'. *Cahiers Céline 7 - Céline et l'actualité 1933-1961*²⁹¹ features some rare *entretiens* from that period and show the writer in the company of sinister politicians such as Darquier de Pellepoix.²⁹² An author's posture can evolve with every new publication; the author adapts to the image created by the media and the public. A change of scenery, from the medical dispensary to Céline's apartment in Montmartre, as well as variations in the tone and register of the writer's discourse demonstrate that a study of the evolution of his posture is crucial to an understanding of the way he is perceived nowadays. Moving away from Céline, the next chapter of this thesis focuses on another controversial French writer, Michel Houellebecq. My argument will follow a similar structure: from the relationship of the writer with the

²⁹¹ Jean-Pierre Dauphin and Pascal Fouché (eds), *Cahiers Céline 7 - Céline et l'actualité 1933-1961* (Paris : Gallimard, 2003). Abbreviated henceforth as *CC7*.

²⁹² Darquier de Pellepoix [1897-1980] was a lawyer and founding member of *La France enchaînée*, a virulent anti-Semitic newspaper. In May 1942, Darquier took over the role of Commissioner for Jewish Affairs under the Vichy Regime and promoted the Nazi policy of the extermination of the Jews. The interview with Darquier, a full transcript of which can be found in *CC7*, 52-54, is one of the most incriminating texts featuring Céline, as proof of the company he kept and the types of political meetings he attended. However, a close reading of the text, alongside with other interviews from the same period, reveals a constant ambiguity in Céline's discourse, attitude and political *engagement*.

press, to a review of the critical commentary on the corpus of interviews featuring Houellebecq, to a case study of the years 1995-1998, in an attempt to decode the origins of 'l'affaire Houellebecq'.

Chapter 4. L'affaire Houellebecq

The opportunity to hear what Houellebecq has to say isn't one to pass up. Maybe he'll extol the virtues of high-class prostitutes, or be horrible about Arabs, or say how much he hates hippies. It wouldn't be the first time. Since the publication of his first novel, 1994's *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (aka *Whatever*), Houellebecq has been the posterboy for literary provocation, his books and his interviews apparently part of a complicated revenge strategy on a world that has ignored and oppressed him and his kind: the ugly, the boring, the ineffectual.²⁹³

Interviews featuring Michel Houellebecq always draw the reader in with an eye-catching title. The extract quoted above is part of a recent interview which is no exception to the rule: Michel Houellebecq: 'I'd have been safer taking LSD'. The French writer has been a 'posterboy for literary provocation' since September 1998, as a series of striking headlines introduced a peculiar character to the French public: 'Danger. Explosive.' (*Les Inrockuptibles*); 'Rappers do my head in' (*Libération*); 'I have little faith in freedom' (*Revue perpendiculaire*).²⁹⁴ Within a few weeks of the publication of his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires*, Michel Houellebecq became a well-known figure in the media. In 'Le procès Houellebecq', Marion Van Renterghem coins a phrase which would in turn be repeated and analysed by numerous journalists and literary critics all over the world. She states: 'Rarely has a novel caused so much ink to flow, incited such passion, outbursts of anger and hate. Houellebecq's novel has become "l'affaire Houellebecq"'.²⁹⁵ In an attempt to make sense of the creation of what she calls a 'societal phenomenon', the journalist then enumerates the following potential factors: literary, ideological, political, and postural. The influence of the latter component has often been mentioned by journalists and critics, yet never analysed in detail.

²⁹³ Andrew Pulver, 'Michel Houellebecq: I'd have been safer taking LSD' *The Guardian*, 19 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/feb/19/michel-houellebecq-kidnapping> [accessed 13/04/14].

²⁹⁴ Bertrand Leclair and Marc Weitzmann, 'En finir avec le désir', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 161 (19-25 August 1998), 17-20; Antoine de Gaudemar, 'Houellebecq, mutant moderne. Les rappers me font chier', *Libération*, 27/08/1998, http://www.liberation.fr/livres/1998/08/27/houellebecq-mutant-moderne-les-rappers-me-font-chier_244460 [accessed 20 January 2014]; Nicolas Bourriaud, Jean-Yves Jouannais and Jean-Francois Marchandise, 'Je crois peu en la liberté – Entretien', *Revue perpendiculaire*, 11 (September 1998), 5-23.

²⁹⁵ Marion Van Renterghem, 'Le procès Houellebecq', *Le Monde*, 9 November 1998, 9-10.

In the same article, Van Renterghem provides the reader with an intriguing portrait of the writer. His figure is presented as ‘lymphatic, slightly disarticulated’, as Houellebecq ‘walks with a submissive gait towards the television studios, the book shops and fairs’. His face is ‘all over the media; [he looks] like a smurf placed there completely by chance, chewing on his cigarette, acting surprised that he comes across as bizarre’. Finally, the journalist mentions ‘his disconcerting rumblings, witty or absurd, funny or downright offensive, often unexpected’.²⁹⁶ Van Renterghem’s portrait constitutes a snapshot of the author’s image in 1998, a perfect starting point for the study of what Jérôme Meizoz would define as his ‘posture’.

The formulation ‘posterboy for literary provocation’ beautifully encapsulates Houellebecq’s status as an iconic writer, together with the challenging ideological content of his work and public declarations and could provide another definition of Houellebecq’s public persona. Furthermore, one could argue that the term ‘affaire’ constitutes a key element of the writer’s postural identity. In the essay ‘Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture?’, Louise Moor analyses Houellebecq’s career from the publication of *Les Particules* as a series of media scandals. As she explains, ‘the omnipresence of polemics not only bears an impact upon the author’s trajectory, but also on the reception of the author’s posture by the recipient-community. As a matter of fact, in Michel Houellebecq’s literary trajectory, it appears to function as a structuring dynamics. This ‘polemical effect’, is often put forward by the media and attributed to the provocative saliencies of the author’.²⁹⁷ Although the year 1998, with the publication of *Les Particules*, was a pivotal moment in the establishment of Houellebecq’s literary persona to the general public, the interviews prior to that date are the most revealing in terms of postural strategy. One can observe and analyse the birth of ‘Houellebecq’ through a close reading of *entretiens* such as the ones published in *artpress* (February 1995) and *Les*

²⁹⁶ Ibid – translated from: ‘Ce qu’on a regardé d’abord, c’est une silhouette lymphatique, un peu désarticulée, se rendant d’une allure soumise sur les plateaux de télévision, dans les librairies et les foires du livre ; c’est un visage photographié dans tous les médias avec un air de Schtroumpf posé là par hasard, mâchouillant sa cigarette, semblant s’étonner d’être bizarre; ce sont des borborygmes déconcertants, brillants ou absurdes, drôles ou franchement déplaisants, souvent provocateurs, toujours décalés’.

²⁹⁷ Louise Moor, ‘Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture ?’, *CONTEXTES*, 10 (7 April 2012), <<http://contextes.revues.org/4921>> [accessed 5 January 2014].

Inrockuptibles (April 1996).²⁹⁸ A comparison with Céline's trajectory is useful in understanding Houellebecq's rise as a celebrity. From the beginning of both writers' careers, visual signifiers are established, which makes them instantly recognizable to the general public – for instance, Céline's doctor scrubs, or in the case of Houellebecq, his parka and cigarette. Then, an amalgamation occurs between the writer and the characters in his novels, the literary interview constituting the space in which this performance is taking place. Some of the interviews act as rehearsals of the content of the fiction, as if the writer is trying out lines and scenes from his future novels. In other interviews, the opposite process can be observed, the performance becomes retroactive as the writer repeats some of the protagonists' positions as his own.

Focused on the case of Michel Houellebecq, this chapter will follow the same structure as the previous one on Céline. Starting with an account of the writer's tumultuous relationship with the French media, I will then discuss some previous commentaries on the interviews featuring Houellebecq. The main section of the chapter will be devoted to an analysis of a series of interviews dating back to the years 1995-98. This will consist in a comparative study of the self-presentation of 'Houellebecq' - the author interviewed - and the ethos of the novels' protagonists, in order to show how both have been inextricably linked as the author's posture was established.

²⁹⁸ Christophe Duchatelet and Jean-Yves Jouannais, 'Michel Houellebecq - Extension du domaine de la lutte', *artpress*, n.199, February 1995, 67-68 ; Marc Weitzmann, 'l'entretien des inrocks: Michel Houellebecq "j'ai plus que des doutes"', *les Inrockuptibles*, 52 (10-16 April 1996), 56-59.

Part 1. Houellebecq in the Press

Monday 8 November 2010 marked a joyful date for Michel Houellebecq, as he acquired the long-coveted Goncourt prize for his fifth novel *La Carte et le territoire*. On this occasion, journalist Daniel Garcia looks back at the writer's career in the article 'Comment Michel Houellebecq a mis douze ans pour décrocher le Goncourt'.²⁹⁹ The twelve years between 1998 and 2010 are divided here in four key stages, which correspond to the publication of every novel since *Les Particules* and the ensuing verdict of the Goncourt jury. The following overview of the writer's career focuses on his relationship with the media. In order to determine the way he established his posture through interviews, I had to create my own 'Cahiers Houellebecq', with an aim to pinpoint which *entretiens* helped define his trajectory. This section is based on Garcia's account, and complemented with Louise Moor's research, as presented in her essay 'Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture?'

The first stage of Michel Houellebecq's literary career is marked by the publication, between 1991 and 1998, of an essay on Lovecraft (1991), three collections of poems and a novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994), which acquires a cult status through word of mouth. By this point, Houellebecq is unknown of the general public, but slowly gains a 'multi-positionality in the literary field', by collaborating in literary journals such as *L'Atelier du roman*, *Revue perpendiculaire*, and writing chronicles for the trendy weekly magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*. This will lead to an interview in *artpress* to support the publication of *Extension*, an interview which will be republished on several occasions.³⁰⁰ In April 1996, a four-page *entretien* with Marc Weitzmann in *Les Inrockuptibles* helps him promote the launch of his collection of poems *Le Sens du combat*. This interview is particularly interesting from a postural perspective, and will be discussed later on in the chapter. According to Moor, the term 'multi-positionality' refers to the fact that by 1998, Houellebecq 'had secured a discreet anchorage in several areas of the field. [...] This

²⁹⁹ Garcia, Daniel, 'Comment Michel Houellebecq a mis douze ans pour décrocher le Goncourt', *Lire*, 3 December 2010 <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/comment-michel-houellebecq-a-mis-12-ans-pour-decrocher-le-goncourt_941494.html> [accessed 20 July 2014].

³⁰⁰ See, for instance, Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) and *Interventions 2* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009). See also *Les Grands entretiens d'artpress – Michel Houellebecq* (Paris: Imec/artpress, 2012).

diffused placement – although solid – allows Houellebecq not to need any strong links to any specific literary movement or group: he is everywhere and nowhere at the same time'.³⁰¹

In 1998, Houellebecq changes publisher, from Nadeau to Flammarion. Raphael Sorin's marketing strategy consists in launching the novel in September, in the middle of the *rentrée littéraire*, supported by interviews in important broadsheets and magazines. The campaign starts with Houellebecq featuring on the cover of *Les Inrockuptibles*, with the striking headline 'Danger. Explosif.' as well as ten pages of reviews and interview on *Les Particules*.³⁰² Houellebecq is also interviewed by *Libération* and *Lire*,³⁰³ amongst others. As mentioned in the introduction, the term 'l'affaire Houellebecq' is coined by Marion Van Renterghem in *Le Monde* (09/09/1998) and refers to 'the unprecedented media coverage surrounding the publication of Michel Houellebecq's second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires*'.³⁰⁴ Garcia states: 'The machine has been launched. Houellebecq is wanted everywhere. Houellebecq can be seen everywhere. No one has read him yet, but everyone has already an opinion on the subject'.³⁰⁵

However, as Moor points out, *l'affaire* was not linked, at first, to the editor's launch strategy, but rather stemmed from an internal dispute between Houellebecq and the *Revue perpendiculaire*, a journal he had been contributing to in previous years. The late August issue of *Les Inrockuptibles* features a short section, 'Perpendiculairement contre', with the following subtitle: 'after a "political-type trial", *Revue perpendiculaire* has excluded Michel Houellebecq from its editorial board'. Journalist Bertrand Leclair reports:

judging Houellebecq's discourse to be unacceptable, or at least incompatible with the political positions defended by the journal, some members of *Revue perpendiculaire* decided in June to provoke a discussion by organising a

³⁰¹ Moor, 2012.

³⁰² *Les Inrockuptibles*, 161 (19-25 August 1998).

³⁰³ Antoine de Gaudemar, 'Houellebecq, mutant moderne: « Les rappers me font chier »' *Libération*, 27 August 1998, <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/1998/08/27/houellebecq-mutant-moderne-les-rappers-me-font-chier_244460> [accessed 30 July 2014] and Catherine Argand, 'Entretien – Michel Houellebecq', *Lire*, 1 September 1998, <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq_802424.html> [accessed: 15 August 2014].

³⁰⁴ Ruth Cruickshank, 'L'Affaire Houellebecq: Ideological Crime and Fin de Millénaire Literary Scandal', *French Cultural Studies*, 14, 1 (2003), 104.

³⁰⁵ Garcia, 2010.

collective interview with Michel Houellebecq, to be published in August, as the novel comes out. [...] The debate became bitter as the discussion unfolded.³⁰⁶

The dispute will also result in the journal being taken out of Flammarion's roster. The contentious interview featuring Houellebecq opens what was to become the last issue of the journal.³⁰⁷ The bitterness and aggressivity of the interviewers' stance seems all the more striking, as the overall tone of the *artpress* interview was nothing but friendly and supportive. What prompted Jouannais and *Perpendiculaire* to radically change their attitude towards their colleague, and eventually exclude him from the editorial board of the journal? Is there a difference in the message conveyed by *Extension* and *Les Particules*? In an interview with de Gaudemar, Houellebecq claims that the hidden reason behind their falling out is that he told Christophe Duchatelet that he had written a very poor novel.³⁰⁸ Bypassing gossips and petty remarks, and going back to the ideological issues brought forward by Houellebecq's novel, Carole Sweeney's interpretation of the *Perpendiculaire* members' reaction and the reasons for the dispute offers a more detached perspective:

Read in isolation, many of his targets in the novel - social alienation, sexual commodification, cultural homogenization, and so on - are those typically attacked by the left, but pieced together in the novel they added up to an ideological panorama sufficiently unsettling to provoke the unanimous condemnation of the editorial collective of *Perpendiculaire* that resulted in Houellebecq's dismissal from the journal's board, an outcome which ignited public controversy. The expulsion provoked a media hue and cry that transported him from the literary pages to front page news.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Bertrand Leclair and Marc Weitzmann, 'En finir avec le désir', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 161, 19-25 August 1998, 17-20.

³⁰⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, Jean-Yves Jouannais and Jacques-François Marchandise, 'Je crois peu en la liberté – Entretien', *Revue perpendiculaire*, 11, September 1998, 5-23.

³⁰⁸ Michel Houellebecq quoted in Antoine de Gaudemar, 'Houellebecq : « Tout cela a été très fatigant », *Libération*, 19 November 1998, <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/0101260598-houellebecq-tout-cela-a-ete-tres-fatigant-entretien-en-forme-de-bilan-avec-l-auteur-controverse-des-particules-elementaire>: 'All my troubles come from the fact that last year, I thought that Christophe Duchatelet's novel was awful and that I had told him so'.

³⁰⁹ Sweeney, 2013, 20.

Extracts from *Les Particules* were published in several issues of the journal before the novel came out, without the editorial board feeling the need to voice any apparent concern in regards to the ideology prevailing in the text. Stand-alone extracts did not challenge the *Perpendiculaire* members; however, the novel taken as a whole paints a much bleaker picture. The dispute with *Revue perpendiculaire* was indeed pivotal because of its role as a trigger for ‘l’affaire Houellebecq’.

In November 1998, Paule Constant’s *Confidence pour confidence* wins the Goncourt prize over Houellebecq’s *Particules*, and as Garcia remarks, Houellebecq’s 1998 Goncourt defeat reminded many of the November 1932 scenario when Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* lost the prize to Guy Mazeline’s *Les Loups*. No one remembers anything about the prized novel, apart from the scandal caused by the choice of winner. Houellebecq vents his frustration in an interview with Antoine de Gaudemar in which he reiterates his accusations against the Goncourt jury as being paid off by publishing houses. When the journalist from the broadsheet *Libération* asks Houellebecq what he thinks of the system of literary prizes, and ventures that he made some precise accusations against them, the writer replies that he ‘didn’t have the impression of having uncovered a sensational scoop. Raphael Sorin and I had decided to keep quiet about it, even though we had been taken off the Goncourt list. You never know, bribed or not, the jury could still have had a burst of independence’.³¹⁰ Houellebecq professes the same accusations against the Goncourt Jury in a talk show with Thierry Ardisson, thereby consolidating his reputation as a *provocateur*.³¹¹

If *Les Particules* was considered polemical enough to become an *affaire*, nothing had prepared Houellebecq and his publisher for the trials and tribulations of the year 2001. Again, the editorial choice was to launch *Plateforme* in the middle of the *rentrée*, accompanied with a series of interviews and reviews in the most important broadsheets and literary magazines. Of these tumultuous months, nothing remains but an infamous interview in the magazine *Lire*³¹² and a highly-publicized court-case. As Garcia points out, Raphael Sorin was busy writing a press release to

³¹⁰ Antoine de Gaudemar, ‘Houellebecq: “Tout cela a été très fatigant”’, *Libération*, 19 November 1998, <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/1998/11/19/houellebecq-tout-cela-a-ete-tres-fatigant_251381> [accessed 13 January 2014].

³¹¹ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvUx3RUTUwM>> Talk show with Thierry Ardisson (1998).

³¹² Didier Sénécal, ‘Entretien’, *Lire*, 1 September, 2009, <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/michel-houellebecq_804761.html>, [accessed 14 July, 2014].

appease the Muslim community, angered by Houellebecq's anti-Islamist declarations in the *Lire* interview, when the news of the attack on the Twin Towers broke out. Houellebecq was defended by Salman Rushdie in an article published in both *Libération* and *The Guardian*.³¹³ On 22nd October 2002, Houellebecq eventually wins the court-case against the Muslim Associations, yet this will taint his relationship with the media and affect the way he approaches the launch of his next novel, *La Possibilité d'une île*.

In 2005, Houellebecq changes publisher and at the same time adopts a very different tactic for the publication of his new novel. He refuses to send *La Possibilité d'une île* to journalists or Goncourt jury members before the official release date, chooses not give any interviews, and consequently magazines such as *Lire* dedicate a whole special issue to the 'Houellebecq mystery'. September 2005 is also the time when three full-length accusatory books are published, denouncing Houellebecq's strategy as pure marketing.³¹⁴ As Moor points out, 'the polemics around Houellebecq's fourth novel is of a different character and scale, as the debate is of a speculative nature and takes place *in absentia*'.³¹⁵ Without any provocative declarations from the author to reignite the controversy, the polemics quickly die down.

With *La Carte et le territoire*, Michel Houellebecq switches back to his previous editor Flammarion and a strategy of omnipresence in the media. First, before the official publication date in September, by giving as many *entretiens* as possible yet keeping the provocation to a minimum. Then, after he obtains the Goncourt prize in early November, he celebrates the event with a second wave of interviews. One of the reasons why Garcia structured his article by following the history of Houellebecq's relationship to the Goncourt prize, his three defeats and his final consecration, is because it also mirrors the writer's relationship to the media and the status quo. As Garcia points out, 'typically, a Goncourt-prized novel is an ideal gift

³¹³ Salman Rushdie, 'A Platform for Closed Minds', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2000, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/28/fiction.michelhouellebecq>> [accessed 2 April 2014], and Salman Rushdie, 'Houellebecq a le droit d'écrire', *Libération*, 3 October 2002, <http://www.liberation.fr/tribune/2002/10/03/houellebecq-a-le-droit-d-ecrire_417288> [accessed 2 April 2014].

³¹⁴ See, for instance Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé* (Paris: Maren Sell, 2005); Eric Naulleau, *Au Secours, Houellebecq revient!* (Paris: Chiflet et Cie, 2005); Jean-François Patricola, *Houellebecq ou la provocation permanente* (Paris: Ecriture, 2005).

³¹⁵ Moor, Louise, 'Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture ?', *COntEXTES*, 10 (2012), <<http://contextes.revues.org/4921>> [accessed 5 January 2014].

to one's mother-in-law, or one's future son-in-law. It has to be consensual rather than trash, if it is to remain the prestigious (financial) institution it represents'.³¹⁶ This explains why, both in 1932 and 1998, despite the commercial success and the passionate reactions of the general public and critics, novels such as *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Les Particules élémentaires* could not get the Prize. Céline was to be at the centre of polemics until the day he died. However, observing Houellebecq's trajectory and the way he finally reached consensus with *La Carte et le territoire*, at the level of the media and of institutions such as the Goncourt, constitutes an exciting development.

³¹⁶ Daniel Garcia, 'Comment Michel Houellebecq a mis douze ans pour décrocher le Goncourt', *Lire*, 3 December, 2010 <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/comment-michel-houellebecq-a-mis-12-ans-pour-decrocher-le-goncourt_941494.html> [accessed 20 July 2014].

Part 2. Critical approaches to Houellebecq's interviews

Although many of his interviewers indicate to have been puzzled, if not upset, by his rather uncommunicative stance, his media presence does suggest strong – if ambiguous – non-discursive clues, on the basis of which critics tend to construct an ethos. Most interviewers mention as characteristic the author's manner of speaking, alternating almost intolerably long silences and bouts of alternatively apodictic and hesitant utterances, his curious way of holding his cigarette, his apparently being under the influence of some kind of sedative, or his apparent lack of decorum (in clothing style, in behaviour).³¹⁷

In the essay 'Slippery Author Figures, Ethos and Value Regimes' (2010), Liesbeth Korthals Althes synthesizes the French media's reaction to Houellebecq's self-presentation. She concludes afterwards that 'in all these interpretations, the ethos attributed to the author, based on extra-literary, non-discursive 'clues', is taken to bear on the aesthetic and ethical value of his work'.³¹⁸ The author's self-presentation to the journalists, then the way this author's image is in turn conveyed to the general public by the media, bears a non-negligible impact on the reception of the work. Three critics have studied the relationship between the mass-mediatisation of Houellebecq's persona and the morally contentious issues raised by his writing. The three essays in question interpret this relationship from a postural standpoint, and all stem, more or less directly, from Meizoz's research. First, in 'Le Roman et l'inacceptable' (2004), Meizoz explains the reasons for the *Plateforme* court-case in relation to Houellebecq's declarations in the *Lire* interview. Then, Liesbeth Korthals Althes's essay quoted above also features a discussion of Houellebecq's authorial posture, this time as constructed both by the writer and by some critics such as Noguez and Patricola. Finally, as we saw in the previous section, Louise Moor's 'Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture?' (2012) looks at the idea of polemics as a structuring dynamics in Houellebecq's trajectory. The theoretical background shared by the three essays is a common understanding of authorial posture as the author's 'personal way of investing or endorsing a role, and even a statute. [...] [as] an author re-plays or negotiates his "position" in the literary field

³¹⁷ Liesbeth Korthals Althes, 'Slippery Author Figures, Ethos, and Value Regimes. Houellebecq, A Case', in G. J. Dorleijn, R. Gruttemeier, and L. Korthals Althes (eds), *Authorship Revisited – Conceptions of Authorship around 1900 and 2000* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 103.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

through different modes of self-presentation'.³¹⁹ Furthermore, Meizoz, Kortals Althes and Moor all refer back to Dominique Maingueneau's definition of ethos and, more importantly, his distinction between three categories: the enunciator of a text, the author as posture, and the person/citizen.

Meizoz's 'Le Roman et l'inacceptable' was a pioneering essay in its approach to the ethical issues raised by *Plateforme* and the court case which followed the novel's publication. Meizoz's essay appeared in *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (2004) as part of his studies on authorial posture, at an early stage of the development of the theory. Meizoz starts by defining the concept of the 'unacceptable in literature' as the 'desacralizing treatment imposed by fiction upon values which a given culture regards as sacred'.³²⁰ His approach is sociological; he begins by providing the context of the 'state of autonomy of the literary field reached in the nineteenth century'. As he explains, from 1830 onwards, political, economic and legal factors have contributed to literature becoming independent from external regulations. This autonomous state had to be conquered from pre-conceptions of writing represented by external ethical judgements from plaintiffs, judges and censors.

In 'Le roman et l'inacceptable', Meizoz is focusing on the *Plateforme* court case, on the reasons why the people who took Houellebecq to court performed an moral reading of the views expressed by the characters of the novel. In their eyes, Michel's provocative views stop becoming fictional as soon as Houellebecq reiterates them, almost word for word, in the *Lire* interview. Meizoz analyses extracts from the novel as if they were taken from a *roman à thèse*, which makes the censors' reasoning understandable. However, he also demonstrates the limitations of this interpretation by reading Houellebecq's interviews and public appearances as *performances*. In the final page of the essay, named 'As a Conclusion: the Author as "Posture"', Meizoz claims that

Houellebecq's posture stages one of the features of the writer in the era of public opinion and mass media ... Indeed, it was only after the publication of *Plateforme* that "Houellebecq" adopted the same opinions as his characters

³¹⁹ Ibid, 96.

³²⁰ Jérôme Meizoz, *L'Œil sociologue et la littérature* (Genève: Slatkine, 2004), 182.

and narrator. ... “Houellebecq” as posture consists in performing within the public sphere, the antihero character (with a socially unacceptable discourse) to whom he delegated the narration of his novels. Through a strange reversal, the fictional behaviour (the narrator’s discourse) precedes in this case the social behaviour (that of the authorial posture) and appears to be generating it. ... This phenomenon appears to be fairly similar to the polemics around Céline.³²¹

This particular essay on Houellebecq appears to act as a key stage in the development of his theory on authorial posture. Meizoz mentions here the parallel with Céline’s case – performing the part of the main character *after* the book has been published, the literary interviews becoming the space of the performance and an extension of the original text. Korthals Altes and Moor accept Meizoz’s conclusions and integrate his findings in their own analyses.

The three essays related to Houellebecq and his posture reach similar conclusions, which will be listed below as well-documented facts, so as not to repeat them in my own case-study. First, following Maingueneau’s work, they all state that ‘Michel Thomas’ the citizen should be differentiated from both ‘Houellebecq’ as author and posture and ‘Michel’ the narrator in *Plateforme*. The lines between these three entities are deliberately blurred, which enables Houellebecq to maintain an ambiguous stance towards the views expressed in his novels. For instance, Moor points out that a transfer occurs between *intra-discursive ethos*, that is, the image constructed through discourse in the novels by the enunciator in *Les Particules* or the narrator Michel in *Plateforme*, and *extra-discursive image*, namely Houellebecq’s declarations in the interviews.³²² In Meizoz’s essay, this argument corresponds to the section ‘Autour du roman: entretiens’. Meizoz’s key finding can thus be summarized: As soon as he suggests that Michel’s opinions overlap with his own, Houellebecq transforms those utterances into factual (as opposed to fictional) position-takings in the public sphere, which means that they can be examined in a court of law.³²³ Ambiguity in Houellebecq’s texts is cultivated on several levels: between author and narrator; author and enunciator; author and character.

³²¹ Ibid, 201-02.

³²² Moor, 2012.

³²³ Meizoz, 2004, 200.

Les Particules is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, sometimes relayed by the character Bruno, who takes over the first-person narration in some chapters. The main character is named Michel Djerzinski. *Plateforme* is narrated in the first-person, by a character also named Michel, whose surname is never mentioned, although we know that he is different from the other two Michels (Djerzinski and Houellebecq). Moor signals the very strong collusion between the discourse and thoughts of the main character – each of Houellebecq’s narratives is deployed through an internal focalization – and that of the enunciator. As she points out, some of the characters may hold very strong views or go through relatively crude experiences, but there is no moral judgement coming from the enunciator, who seems to implicitly sustain the views of the main character.³²⁴

Finally, iconic photos of Houellebecq smoking a cigarette on the front cover of the French edition of *Les Particules*, or in a laboratory dressed as a scientist on the front page of *Les Inrockuptibles*, have been mentioned by Meizoz, Kortals Althes and Moor. They all take it as an example of this playful blurring of boundaries as created and maintained by Houellebecq. Moor states that

This ambiguity, voluntarily staged by the author, can be accentuated by editorial choices, especially in the material presentation of the book itself. ... The spatial contiguity within the peritext between this type of data and the book being presented as a novel on the cover results in the undecidability in the way to approach the work: is it a novel? An autofiction? An autobiography?³²⁵

Meizoz and Kortals Althes address issues related to these questions, when they both associate Houellebecq’s novels with the genre of the *roman à thèse*³²⁶ and conclude that although they appear to possess its characteristics, they should be read, rather, as a pastiche of the genre, or as ‘postmodern *romans à thèse*’.³²⁷ Meizoz concludes:

³²⁴ Moor, 2012.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ According to Susan Suleiman in *Authoritarian Fictions – The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.7, the *roman à thèse* is ‘a novel written in the realistic mode (that is, based on an aesthetic of verisimilitude and representation), which signals itself to the reader as primarily didactic in intent, seeking to demonstrate the validity of a political, philosophical, or religious doctrine’.

³²⁷ Meizoz, 2004, 196; Kortals Althes, 2004, 105.

‘This skilfully-devised pastiche consequently offers the reader two possible interpretations: a common/serious reading of the anti-islamist arguments, or a literary/ironic one’.³²⁸ As a consequence, Houellebecq is, again, able to maintain an ambiguous stance in regards to the opinions expressed in his novels.³²⁹

Louise Moor asserts that ‘in *Les Particules*, the enunciator’s ethos has been entirely confused with that of the writer’s, whilst Houellebecq has not uttered any extra-discursive statement which could have sustained some of the elements present in his novel’,³³⁰ an argument contrasted with the contention that ‘in the case of *Plateforme*, the confusion between *ethos* and extra-discursive speaker was, on the contrary, intentionally accentuated by the author’.³³¹ In the next section, contrary to Moor’s argument, I will defend the opinion that the 1998 interviews contain many postural clues and statements from the author which demonstrate that the ethos of the enunciator and the writer are deliberately ambiguously intertwined. Houellebecq’s strategy at the time of the publication of *Les Particules* parallels his 2001 performance.

Although some critics, such as Cruickshank or Cloonan, have analysed *l’affaire Houellebecq* as a media event and have evaluated its broader significance from a sociological perspective,³³² none of them have looked at the interviews as text, or at their interplay with the novel they were promoting. Using the same tools as Meizoz, who performed a comparative analysis of some passages of *Plateforme* with the *Lire* interview, the next section will be centred on a postural interpretation of a selection of *entretiens* dating back to the years before *l’affaire*. Those interviews form a narrative which sheds light on the way the rest of Houellebecq’s trajectory will unfold.

³²⁸ Meizoz, 2004, 197.

³²⁹ In *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (2013), Carole Sweeney refers to this ambiguous stance as a ‘strategy of disowning’ and exposes two of Houellebecq’s techniques to achieve this effect. The first one is a ‘somewhat crudely executed narrative ventriloquism in which potentially controversial material is thrown somewhere other than the authorial voice’ – for instance, in *Les Particules*, when the character Christiane expresses her contempt toward feminists (A, 173-74). The second technique, also discussed by Douglas Morrey, consists in the writer’s use of free indirect speech, which ‘diverts the omniscience of the narrator into refocalized essayistic asides giving the impression that the ideas expressed are those of the characters and not of the author’. This time, the example provided is the repetition of anti-Islamist comments, voiced by several Arab characters at different stages of the novel *Plateforme* (Sweeney, 2013, 111-12).

³³⁰ Moor, 2012.

³³¹ Moor, 2012.

³³² Cruickshank, 2003; Cloonan, 2000.

Part 3. Becoming Houellebecq (1994 – 1998)

On 19th August 1998, Michel Houellebecq appeared on the front cover of *Les Inrockuptibles*, dressed in a white lab coat, surrounded by flasks and test tubes, bathed in a blue lighting which enhanced the colour of his eyes and his Vichy-printed shirt. The magazine also featured over ten pages of interviews and reviews on *Les Particules élémentaires*.³³³ As the main character in the novel, Michel Djerzinski, is a biologist, the choice of the writer's garment was not left to chance. Page thirteen of the same issue also featured a portrait of the writer, smoking a cigarette and holding a Monoprix bag, a now iconic picture which became the front cover of the paperback edition of the novel.³³⁴ On the book cover, the picture has been cropped so that the reader cannot see the brand name of the French upscale supermarket chain, referred to in the novel as Michel's favourite.³³⁵ *Les Inrockuptibles* launched *Les Particules* with a big bang, as the title 'Danger. Explosif.' suggests. In the choice of settings of the portraits of the writer, one can observe a clear intention to amalgamate Michel Houellebecq with the main character Michel Djerzinski. This fact is pointed out by critic Frédéric Martel, who questioned him about the photo-shoot in a 1999 *entretien* published in the journal *NRF*.

In the special issue of *Les Inrockuptibles* dedicated to *Les Particules*, you accepted to pose wearing white scrubs in a biology laboratory, to mime an experiment with a mouse, and to be photographed with a Monoprix bag under your arm. Why? And after that, how can you say that there is no relation between you and the character you created, biology researcher Michel Djerzinski?³³⁶

³³³ See *Les Inrockuptibles*, 161, (19-25 August 1998), 12-20 and the paperback edition of *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2000).

³³⁴ 'Waitrose, it's a bit like Monoprix' affirms *be a londoner.com* <<http://www.bealondoner.com/fr/au-quotidien/faire-ses-courses/waitrose> accessed online 09/09/2014>. Designed to help French people living in London or visiting the city for a weekend cure their homesickness, the website recommends Waitrose as 'it can be compared to Monoprix in terms of price range and product quality'. There are numerous references to Monoprix in *Les Particules*, which implies a correlated postural function in the *Inrockuptibles* photograph.

³³⁵ See, for instance, *Atomised*, [trans.] Frank Wynne (London: William Heinemann, 2000), 143. 'Though an indiscriminating shopper, he was delighted when his local Monoprix had an 'Italian Fortnight'. This life so well organised, on such a human scale; happiness could be found in this. Had he wanted for more, he wouldn't know where to find it'. All subsequent references to the novel *Atomised* will be abbreviated to *A* and given in parentheses in the text with the page number.

³³⁶ Frédéric Martel, 'Michel Houellebecq: C'est ainsi que je fabrique mes livres', *La Nouvelle Revue*

Although Martel's question is direct and relevant, Houellebecq evades confrontation by remaining playfully ambiguous in his reply:

As a matter of fact, I didn't think it was a very good idea for a photo-shoot; I only said yes to please the people at *Les Inrockuptibles*. After all, two of them had to cut their holidays short to adapt to my diary; it was only normal that I should make some concessions to them. The only thing I refused was to touch the mouse, which means that it almost run away and could have ruined the photo-shoot. Looking back, I think that the cover photo is very beautiful; and in the end, this is what really matters. When one has faith in the photographer's talent, one can accept to do things which at first seemed a bit strange.³³⁷

'Why did you accept?' is implied in Martel's 'why?', and points toward the idea of a conscious choice on Houellebecq's part, his complicity in the establishment of his public image. Houellebecq avoids answering Martel's question by discussing technical and anecdotic details about the photo-shoot, the qualifier 'beautiful' constituting a surprising choice of terminology. If anything, by not directly addressing the question, Houellebecq diverts the responsibility of the creation of his posture to the photographers and the editorial board of the magazine. Both Martel and Houellebecq are aware that in this case, there was much more at stake than a 'beautiful' photo.

As Houellebecq will not provide a definitive answer to Martel's line of inquiry, this section therefore constitutes an attempt to decode the blurring of identities between the author and his protagonists, through a study of the evolution of Houellebecq's self-presentation in early interviews (1994-1998). My focus is not only on 'why', but on 'how' the fictionalization of the author gradually occurred. I will argue that this process had begun years before the photo-shoot for *Les Inrockuptibles*. Houellebecq's performance in early *entretiens* brings out qualities of several protagonists from his novels. In the *mise en scène* pointed out by Martel, what

Française, 548 (1999), 198.
³³⁷ Ibid.

do these characters represent? How does Houellebecq's self-presentation evolve, and which features remain static? Carole Sweeney points out that 'functioning, for the most part, as mouthpieces for essayistic digressions on the human condition, characters in Houellebecq's fiction are, at best, meagerly rendered and it is clear that the narrator of *Whatever*, the two Michels, Bruno and Daniel, are the same character'.³³⁸ Although one can pinpoint three different roles, which correspond to three protagonists – the narrator in *Extension* as the 'systems man'; Bruno as the 'omega male'; Djerzinski as the observer of the end of the human race – because of this process of amalgamation between Houellebecq and his characters, in the eyes of the general public, these three roles have been merged into one single performance: 'Houellebecq' as a fictional character.

For instance, Lawrence Pollard's interview with Houellebecq for the BBC's *Culture Show* in 2005 is an awkward yet comical scene, highly characteristic of the writer's self-presentation to journalists. From the beginning of their encounter, transcribed below, Pollard is dragged into the French writer's performance.

LP: Bienvenue! Welcome to Edinburgh.

H: [silence]

LP: One of the things in your novels that I think fascinates the public for good and for ill is the relationship between Michel Houellebecq and the various narrators.

H: mmmm. [lights a cigarette]

LP: I mean, how much of you is in the narrators?

H: bahhhhhh. mmmmm. mmmmmm. [smokes cigarette]. [The interviewer fidgets awkwardly].

H: Perhaps the mistake is to think of me, in actual fact. mmmmm. [silence]

LP: [voice over] *It was becoming clear that Michel likes to take his time.*

H: I mean by that, that I've never able to talk about my life, actually. As soon as I start talking about my life, I start lying, straight away. To begin with, I lie consciously. And very quickly, I forget that I lie.³³⁹

³³⁸Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 78.

³³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t97G3gRH_Rg> Houellebecq interviewed by Lawrence

By 2005, ten years after his first interview in the mainstream media, Houellebecq has had plenty of time and practice to perfect his role. His chain smoking, long silences and mumblings have become his trademark. His warning to Pollack about his constant lying constitutes another way for him to evade responsibility for his declarations in interviews, which thereby acquire a fictional status.

a. Poetics of the 'systems man'

Houellebecq's first important interview in the mainstream press, '*Extension du domaine de la lutte* – Entretien avec Christophe Duchatelet et Jean-Yves Jouannais' was published in the February 1995 issue of *artpress*, an internationally renowned contemporary art magazine. Both journalists are members of the editorial board of the recently created *Revue perpendiculaire*, a literary journal to which Houellebecq also contributes. Jouannais and Duchatelet appreciate the writer's early work, hailing him as the mouthpiece of a new kind of literature which 'unsettles, surprises and delights'.³⁴⁰ Republished on several occasions, notably in Houellebecq's two collections of essays *Interventions* (1998) and *Interventions 2* (2009), this interview has become an integral part of his body of work. In a review of *Les Grands entretiens d'artpress – Michel Houellebecq*, a small book which compiles three interviews featuring Houellebecq in the contemporary art magazine, journalist Christine Bini comments upon the opening of this first *entretien*. She notes:

From the first question onwards, the word 'œuvre' is emphasized. Houellebecq has already published four books, yet only one novel. 'Œuvre'. The term seems surprising, almost ludicrous, yet it becomes, thus placed in the opening line of the interview, self-evident.³⁴¹

Pollard for BBC's *Culture Show*, 2005.

³⁴⁰ Duchatelet, Christophe and Jouannais, Jean-Yves, 'Michel Houellebecq - Extension du domaine de la lutte', *artpress*, n.199, February 1995, 67-68

³⁴¹ Christine Bini, 'Les Grands entretiens d'artpress: Michel Houellebecq', *La Règle du jeu*, 23 January 2014, <<http://laregledujeu.org/2014/01/23/15372/les-grands-entretiens-d-artpress-michel-houellebecq/>>.

Almost unknown to the general public, Houellebecq enters the mainstream media already consecrated as an ‘Author’ with a capital ‘A’. However, what immediately strikes the reader is the lack of biographical information and description of the author interviewed, neither in the interviewer’s introductory text nor in Houellebecq’s discourse. The small photograph which accompanies the text of the interview does not give away much about Houellebecq’s appearance. He has his back turned to the camera, and looks away pensively at a river and forest. The dialogue between Houellebecq and the interviewers remains on a theoretical level, and the speaker rarely uses the pronoun ‘I’. Most utterances are in very general terms, applying the idea that ‘one must not hesitate to be theoretical – one has to attack on all fronts. The overinjection of theory introduces a strange dynamism’.³⁴² In this sentence, Houellebecq’s discourse mirrors the ethos of the narrator of his first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, in the sense that long passages of the book could be read as pure theory. Although *Extension*’s narrator is highly unreliable, going through a severe breakdown, in this interview ‘Houellebecq’ as author develops the unnamed narrator’s theory, point by point, and reaffirms each concept as his own.

In *Extension*, the narrator’s ‘central theorem’ can be summed up by the formulation that ‘*sexuality is a system of social hierarchy*’.³⁴³ It is first formulated as part of the narrator’s teenage writings, then repeated and developed once more after his colleague Tisserand confides to him that at 28 years old, he is still a virgin. The narrator begins his argument with the assertion that ‘it’s a fact, I mused to myself, that in societies like ours sex truly represents a second system of differentiation, completely independent of money; and as a system of differentiation it functions just a mercilessly’ (W, 99). He then develops this idea by drawing a parallel between the two systems. Built on binary oppositions, his argument is quite repetitive, each sentence mirroring the previous one. The narrator then reaches the partial conclusion that ‘economic liberalism is an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society. Sexual liberalism is likewise an extension of the domain of the struggle, its extension to all ages and all classes of society’ (W, 99). The presence of the novel’s title within this affirmation, placed exactly at a halfway

³⁴² *artpress*, 1995, 67.

³⁴³ Michel Houellebecq, *Whatever* [trans.] Paul Hammond (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 91.

Hereafter, references to *Whatever* will be given in parentheses within the body of the text using the abbreviation W.

point in the narration seems to indicate that this theory constitutes a key to an understanding of the text. When the *artpress* interviewers encourage Houellebecq to expand on this idea, he provides them with the following response:

It's very simple. Animal and human societies have put in place various hierarchical systems of differentiation, which can be based upon birth (aristocratic system), wealth, beauty, physical strength, intelligence, talent... All these criteria more or less appear to me as equally despicable; I refuse them. The only superiority I would grant is kindness. Nowadays, we are shifting through a two-dimensional system: erotic attractiveness and money. Everything else, people's happiness and misfortunes, depends upon it. In any case, for me, this isn't a theory: in effect, we live in a simple society, of which these few sentences suffice to give an all-encompassing description.³⁴⁴

What is crucial about the quote from the interview translated above is that Houellebecq repeats this concept as his own. Instead of the generalizations of the previous answers at the beginning of the *entretien*, he uses the pronoun 'I' repeatedly, in conjunction with terms such as 'despicable', 'refuse', 'superiority' which indicate value judgements on his part. Furthermore, by claiming that 'for [him], this isn't a theory', he takes away the possibility that this idea could be refuted and presents it as pure and simple truth, not up for discussion. His tone is quite close to that of the narrator, who takes the same idea for granted, as fact.

The central theorem of *Extension* is at the heart of Houellebecq's writing and performance as author in the public sphere. Coming across the *artpress* interview, one realizes that Houellebecq seems to synchronize with the narrator in *Extension* at a theoretical and semantic level. Because Houellebecq does not provide many postural signifiers in this *entretien* – one is given very little information about what he looks like, the way he dresses, or speaks – it could easily be bypassed as irrelevant material for a study of Houellebecq's posture. However, the concept of *l'homme réseau* (the systems man) described in the interview will become a key component in the writer's self-presentation over the years.

³⁴⁴ *artpress*, 1995, 67.

When the interviewers ask Houellebecq to ‘talk about this engineer in computer sciences, named the systems man’,³⁴⁵ the latter’s explanation seems somewhat off-topic and over-technical. It is the opportunity for him to present one of his theories, which will become a recurrent theme in future novels and can be thus summarized: only five per cent of the workforce is truly ‘productive’ – they are the technicians and engineers who design and produce manufactured objects. The rest of the active members of the population have a role which is harder to define; they could disappear without the chain of production being disrupted. Houellebecq defines the ‘systems-man’, within the context of the recent explosion in networks of transmission of information, as one of the ‘handful of technicians – a maximum of 5,000 people in France – [who] are in charge of defining protocols and creating the machinery which will allow, in the next decades, the worldwide transportation of any type of information (text, sound, images, eventually tactile and electrochemical signals)’.³⁴⁶

An ‘analyst-programmer in a computer software company’ (W, 13), the narrator in *Extension* is also characterized as a ‘systems-man’. Interestingly, the definition of this role in the novel can be understood as postural rather than technical:

As for me, I’m dressed in a quilted parka and ‘Weekend in the Hebrides’ chunky pullover. I imagine that in the play of roles that’s gradually falling into place I represent the ‘systems man’, the competent but slightly oafish technician who doesn’t have the time to worry about his appearance and is completely incapable of dialoguing with the user. (W, 53)

The key words ‘play of roles’ and ‘I represent’ clearly establish the postural function of this self-conscious portrait of the narrator. The choice of words in ‘quilted parka and ‘Weekend in the Hebrides’ chunky pullover’ is reminiscent of the *3 suisses* and *Nouvelles Galeries* catalogues often quoted or commented upon by Houellebecq’s protagonists.³⁴⁷ The irony and décalé humour of the description lies in the fact that the narrator’s dress code is presented as a conscious choice, yet with the intended

³⁴⁵ *artpress*, 1995, 68.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ See, for instance, W, 123-24 or A, 144: ‘The 3 Suisses catalogue, on the other end, offered a more thoughtful, historically informed insight into Europe’s current malaise. The impression of a society in flux implicit in its opening pages is finally given precise formulation on page 17. Many times, Michel had been struck by the lines that summed up the philosophy of the collection: ‘Optimism, generosity, complicity and harmony make the world go round. THE FUTURE IS FEMALE.’”

effect that he looks like someone who ‘doesn’t have the time to worry about his appearance’. Other aspects of his posture, apparently linked to his dress code, are his competence and lack of communication skills.

Although the narrator describes himself as a technician, he does not ‘define any protocols’ or ‘create machinery’ but, rather, spends most of his time in endless meetings or training suburban secretaries to use computer programs. There is a discrepancy between the way Houellebecq defines the role of the systems man in theory and the narrator’s experience of it as an empty role, a pose. This is exemplified by another reference to the narrator’s posture as the ‘systems man’, a few pages later: ‘He presents me as a “systems engineer”. As if to give credence to the idea I utter a few phrases about Scandinavian norms and network changeovers’ (*W*, 59). Again, formulations such as ‘giving credence to the idea’ reinforce the feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness the narrator expresses towards his social position. However, comparing the two previous quotations to the following description highlights an interesting aspect of the narrator’s worldview. As he admits,

I realize I’m smoking more and more; I must be on at least four packs a day. Smoking cigarettes has become the only element of real freedom in my life. The only act to which I tenaciously cling with my whole being. My only ambition. (*W*, 60-61)

Whilst the systems man’s role feels meaningless, hollow and empty, the act of chain smoking gives meaning to the narrator’s life. The terms ‘real’ and ‘whole being’ can be opposed to the ‘play of roles’ mentioned above. The repetition of the adjective ‘only’, three times in the space of three short sentences, suggests the idea of commitment. An ironic reversal is taking place, as in this new enterprise culture, the terminology he employs to describe his relationship towards this destructive habit corresponds to the kind of dedication and enthusiasm he is supposed to feel about his job.

In the 1995 *artpress* interview, Houellebecq performs the posture of the systems man on a theoretical level. He repeats the narrator’s leitmotivs as his own ideas and endorses his critique of neoliberalism, which manifests in an emotional detachment, even in some cases an intense rejection of the world he lives in, driven

by competition and consumerism. ‘I don’t like this world’, the narrator snarls. ‘I definitely do not like it. The society in which I live disgusts me; advertising sickens me; computers make me puke. My entire work as a computer expert consists of adding to the data, the cross-referencing, the criteria of rational decision-making. It has no meaning’ (W, 82). The image of the ‘systems man’ with its visual signifiers of the parka and the chain smoking comes to represent a dissatisfaction and hopelessness towards the new economic order put in place by neoliberalism. As Carole Sweeney remarks, ‘for Houellebecq’s protagonists, their role in the immaterial labour market of analytic, symbolic and intelligent management of information leaves them feeling useless and redundant; they no longer know how to make anything real or useful’.³⁴⁸ The narrator sees this new information age as ‘a useless encumbering of the neurons’. He concludes: ‘This world has need of many things, bar less information’ (W, 82).

The theory epitomized by the image of the ‘systems man’ as described by Houellebecq in the interview and by the narrator in *Extension* will keep on reappearing throughout the writer’s career. In his fictions, this takes the form of remarks from Bruno in *Les Particules* or Michel in *Plateforme*. The repetition of variations of the same theory across several novels betrays its importance in Houellebecq’s thinking. The ‘systems man’ can be interpreted fully as a posture, in Meizoz’s definition of the term, as it can be observed through discourse, repeated by several characters across Houellebecq’s fiction, but also at a visual and behavioural level, endorsed by the writer in his public appearances.

A year later, in April 1996, Houellebecq finds his way back into the mainstream media, as he promotes his collection of poems *Le Sens du combat* in the ‘j’ai plus que des doutes’ *entretien* with Marc Weitzmann in *Les Inrockuptibles*.³⁴⁹ Still unknown to the general public and in one his first features in a mainstream cultural magazine, elements which later turned Houellebecq into an instantly recognizable icon are already present. The systems man’s dress code and associated behaviour become his trademark; in the full-page photo accompanying the interview, a dishevelled young Houellebecq is wearing a black parka, with pockets large enough to carry a book. He is staring at the camera, holding a cigarette and looking

³⁴⁸ Carole Sweeney, 2013, 83.

³⁴⁹ Marc Weitzmann, ‘l’entretien des inrocks: Michel Houellebecq “j’ai plus que des doutes”’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 52 (10-16th April 1996), 56-59.

unimpressed.³⁵⁰ In this *entretien* with Marc Weitzmann, Houellebecq narrates his difficult first steps in the world of the ‘enterprise culture’ of the 1980s. Newly wed, with a young son, out of work for eighteen months, he tells the interviewer his frustration as he finally found employment in the computer sector. ‘When I found a job, at last, I got horribly bored straight away, and it was obvious. I didn’t like what I was doing, I didn’t like the people around me’,³⁵¹ he tells Weitzmann. In a tone reminiscent of the novel’s narrator, he continues:

I went into a series of bouts of depressions... Well, if one can call it that way. I was systematically diagnosed as ‘depressed’, but after the first few weeks of sick leave, I was getting better very quickly. The sociological explanation made sense straight away. At the same time, I kept on writing. I wrote a lot during business trips, in particular my first texts in prose, amongst which were some extracts from *Extension*.³⁵²

The story told to Marc Weitzmann allows the reader to identify Houellebecq with the narrator of *Extension*. His boredom, existential doubt, diagnosis as ‘depressive’, his tendency to explain the world around him as well as his own emotions in sociological terms, finally his activity as a writer since his teenage years are all traits of the novel’s protagonists in turn become defining features of his self-presentation. In the *artpress* interview, Houellebecq does not mention his profession; only the tone and ideological content of his answers suggests the possibility of amalgamation between author and character. In *Les Inrockuptibles*, Houellebecq’s performance develops on a visual and biographical level.

b. The Omega Male

Interviews featuring Houellebecq are performative spaces, some of them almost acting like rehearsals of future texts, ideas and characterizations. Houellebecq uses *entretiens* to try out different roles and formulations which in some cases reappear, almost word for word, in later novels. One can observe a collusion in terms of voice between the unnamed narrator in *Extension*, the omniscient narrator in *Les*

³⁵⁰ Weitzmann, 1996, 57.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 58.

³⁵² Ibid.

Particules, and ‘Houellebecq’ the author interviewed by *artpress*. Is this enough to conclude that they are one and the same, in terms of authorial voice? Coming back to Moor’s argument,³⁵³ this would be an example of extra discursive statement which would intentionally confuse the ethos of the narrator(s) with that of Houellebecq’s.

For instance, striking similarities can be observed between an extract from the *artpress* interview previously analysed and a passage from ‘The Omega Male’, a central episode of *Les Particules élémentaires*. In this chapter, which deals with Bruno’s traumatic pre-teens years at the boarding school in Meaux, the omniscient narrator presents some horrifying scenes of bullying, together with a detached sociological explanation for Bruno’s experience. The opening sentence of the commentary is extremely similar in tone and terminology to Houellebecq’s previous statement:

Animal societies, for the most part are organised according to a strict hierarchy where rank relates directly to the physical strength of each member. The most dominant male in the group is known as the *alpha male*, his nearest rival is the *beta male*, and so on down to the weakest of the group the *omega male*. (A, 51)³⁵⁴

The narrator then applies this theory to the case of Bruno, one of the main characters in the novel:

Bruno, however, found himself in a less auspicious position. While dominance and brutality are commonplace in the animal kingdom, among higher primates, notably the chimpanzee (*Pan Troglodytes*), weaker animals suffer acts of gratuitous cruelty. This tendency is at its greatest in primitive human societies and among children and adolescents in developed societies. Compassion, the capacity to identify with the suffering of others, develops later; this compassion is quickly systematised into a moral order. (A, 51)

³⁵³ ‘in *Les Particules*, the enunciator’s ethos has been entirely confused with that of the writer’s, whilst Houellebecq has not uttered any extra-discursive statement which could have sustained some of the elements present in his novel’ (Moor, 2012).

³⁵⁴ I am comparing this extract to Houellebecq’s declaration to *artpress* quoted in the previous section.

The opening sentence of the first extract is almost identical to Houellebecq's declaration to the *artpress* interviewers, although in *Les Particules*, the omniscient narrator limits his analysis to 'animal societies' – human societies being discussed later, as he extends the commentary to 'children and adolescents in developed societies' – and only develops the 'physical strength' criteria. This idea is then related to Bruno's situation, who comes to embody the 'omega male', a concept which occupies a central position in the novel. In the second extract, the narrator opposes 'cruelty' to 'compassion', linked to a 'moral order'. In 1995, Houellebecq considered 'kindness' to be the ultimate redeeming quality, but the idea was more or less the same. In *Les Particules*, the writer's theory is fictionalised, this time using the character Bruno as an example.

Interestingly, in a 1996 interview for *Les Inrockuptibles*, Houellebecq goes further in this blurring of ethos and identities between author and protagonists, as he talks about Bruno's experience *as his own*. Two years previous to the publication of *Les Particules*, the writer introduces his own biography as material to be analysed in sociological terms, which means that the content of *Les Particules* is already present in the interviews. Whilst the *artpress* interview is theoretical, the *entretien* with Weitzmann has a more intimate tone, as Houellebecq reveals parts of himself and his childhood – crucially, the reader takes it as truth, yet no one knows how much of it is invented. The interviews can be interpreted as two different performances, the declarations presented as Houellebecq's own views and own life, and through which his posture is established.

In early interviews, Houellebecq's tone and register vary, as if looking for his voice. The main differences appear when comparing the opening paragraph of the interview with its corresponding extract in *Les Particules*. Houellebecq tells Weitzmann:

I started writing around the age of thirteen. I used to buy 288 page notebooks – I remember that number because it was a multiple of 96 pages: 96, 192, 288... So I used to buy 288 page notebooks which I filled in in their entirety. When they were full, I used to go to the nearest river, took sixteen deep

breaths and threw the notebooks in the water. Sixteen seemed like a good number to me; I had the feeling that after that, I would be a new man.³⁵⁵

Houellebecq's first declaration sets the tone of the interview. The writer opens up about his life and childhood memories by telling an anecdote which is troublingly reminiscent of an extract in *Les Particules*, published two years later. The context is different but the two scenes share similarities. The following scene from *Les Particules*, in which a lonely and obese teenage Bruno attempts to 'become a new man' to deal with his weight issues, reads like a transposition of the writer's experience:

He decided to change his life once or twice a week, to take some radical new direction. This is how it went: first, he would take off his clothes and look at himself in the mirror. He had to confront his shame head on, to face up to the humiliating sight of his fat belly, his flabby cheeks and his sagging buttocks. Then, he would turn out the lights and, feet together, arms folded across his chest, he would drop his head forward the better to go into himself. Then he would breathe, slowly, deeply, expanding his chest and his revolting belly, then exhaling slowly, pronouncing a number as he did so. It was essential not to let his concentration waver – every number was important, but the most significant were four, eight, and, the final number, sixteen. He would exhale completely as he reached sixteen; when he raised his head he would be a new man, finally ready to face life, to swim with the flow. He would no longer feel guilty or ashamed; he would eat properly and would behave normally around girls. 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life'. (A, 181)

In the interview, Houellebecq makes no reference to any weight issues, and Bruno's bulimia appears to be a part of the latter's characterization only. This aspect is developed with a lot of detail, insisting especially on self-deprecating comments regarding his body and self-image – his 'fat belly', 'flabby cheeks', 'sagging buttocks', 'revolting belly' linked to feelings of shame, humiliation and guilt. Nonetheless, what Houellebecq shares with the novel's protagonist is an obsession

³⁵⁵ Weitzmann, 1996, 56.

with the number sixteen and the desire to start anew. It reads almost like a method to deal with his suffering, with the image of the river washing it away – in the novel, it corresponds to ‘swimming with the flow’. Reading this interview eighteen years after its original publication, the overall impression is that Houellebecq is trying out stories and formulations, looking for his voice, creating the character of Bruno as he goes along. From 1998 onwards, Houellebecq keeps on reminding interviewers that every time he talks about his life, he is lying. Therefore, the biographical truth of these anecdotes does not matter as such, these stories have a different function.

Indeed, many anecdotes and names of places from the interview reappear in the novel, almost unchanged, the main difference being that Houellebecq talks about them in the first person. For instance, he tells Weitzmann that he was a ‘boarder’ at the school in Meaux from the sixth grade.³⁵⁶ As we saw earlier, the Omega Male chapter is set in a boarding school in the same city, in which an eleven year old Bruno is mentally scarred by the bigger boys’ bullying. Houellebecq continues: ‘I was therefore a young boy in an environment where the older ones gathered in packs with the aim of catching the little ones, to beat them up, torture them, humiliate them’.³⁵⁷ The context and premise of the narrative are the same as in *Les Particules*, the general impression of violence accentuated by the suggestion that the older boys are dehumanised (‘gathered in packs’) and the accumulation and gradation at the end (catch, beat, torture, humiliate). However, Houellebecq ends his own story differently, as he defends himself with a knife and ‘finds some older boys who protect him’.

Afterwards, as Weitzmann approaches the topic of his family situation, Houellebecq’s response is even more troubling:

My parents divorced very early, at the beginning of the 1960s – I can’t tell you for sure that they even lived together. They left me to be raised by my grand-parents, which means that I very seldom saw them during my childhood. In a sense, they were precursors of the global process of disintegration of the family unit [*vaste mouvement de dissolution familiale*] which was about to take place.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Weitzmann, 1996, 56.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

Houellebecq's narrative could be Bruno's or Michel's; the two half-brothers in *Les Particules* were both abandoned by their hippy mother Janine Ceccaldi and raised by their respective grand-parents. The writer's tone, detached and matter of fact, includes some sociological considerations which are reminiscent of the omniscient narrator's approach to the protagonists' biographies. For instance, he introduces the character Janine Ceccaldi, Bruno and Michel's mother, as belonging 'to a different and dispiriting class of individuals we can call *precursors* [...] [who are] merely catalysts - generally of some form of social breakdown - without the power to stamp their authority on change;' (A, 26). Indeed, the vast movement of breakdown of the family unit, and consequently, of human relationships, is one of Houellebecq's central themes throughout his oeuvre. The main culprits for him are the legacy of May 1968 and his mother, the 'precursor' who represents its ideals. In the interview, Houellebecq fleshes out the portrait of his mother by adding some memories from his teenage years:

I went on holidays with her a few times. She lived a dissolute life, wandering from place to place, working very little, earning lots of money, spending her time with groups of beatniks, hippies, that kind of thing. I remember one summer in Cassis, they were busking, after they went swimming naked in the creeks. [...] That was the very beginning of the 1970s, I must have been thirteen or fourteen.³⁵⁹

In *Les Particules*, this is transposed into the following extract:

He saw little of his mother. Twice, he had spent his holidays in the villa in Cassis where she now lived. She regularly entertained hitchhikers and sundry young men passing through. The popular press would have characterised these young men as *hippies*. It was true that they were unemployed and Janine - who has now changed her name to Jane - provided for them while they stayed. They lived off the profits of the plastic surgery clinic her ex-husband

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

had set up – [...]. They would swim naked in the creeks. Bruno always refused to take off his trunks. (A, 69)

Houellebecq speaks in the first person, whilst the omniscient narrator of *Les Particules* tells Bruno's story in the third, but apart from that they offer an almost identical account of the same narrative. A reader of *Les Inrockuptibles* would take Houellebecq's story as fact, and have no reason to assume otherwise, whereas the word 'novel' on the book cover of *Les Particules* immediately points towards a fictional interpretation of Bruno's life. Houellebecq distances himself from the narrative by creating a character; his experience becomes Bruno's, whilst he gives his voice to the 'sociologising' narrator, who employs the same anecdotes and turn of phrases. At this stage, in 1996, 'Houellebecq' has already become a fiction, and so has his mother, whose portrait he is beginning to sketch. Reading these two texts side by side, it appears that the characterization of Houellebecq's mother is extremely similar to Janine Ceccaldi's in the novel. Indeed, an interesting development occurred in 2008, when the 'real' Janine Ceccaldi started talking back to her son's narrative and offered her own version of the story. She published her autobiography, *L'Innocente*, under the name Lucie Ceccaldi in an attempt to 'restore the truth on her family origins and her relationship with her son'.³⁶⁰ In an interview for the magazine *Lire*, Ceccaldi claims that 'in this whole story, built on false accusations, because every single thing he says about me is untrue, he misrepresented everything'.³⁶¹ Ceccaldi is referring here to a novel, meant to be understood as a work of fiction; nonetheless, when the interviewer points out that novelists by nature transform biographical material, she explains her reasons for such a literal interpretation of her son's text and by the same token, with her own intervention, adds another layer of confusion between fiction and reality.

In *Les Particules*, he names and shames me using my real family name, first name, birth certificate, family tree... This is the part I can't forgive him. Had he called me Marie Dupont, he would have been free to tell any bullshit.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ See, for instance, Philippe Delaroche, 'Lucie Ceccaldi: "Ce ne sont pas des aventures, ce sont des emmerdements"', *Lire*, 29/04/2008, <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/ce-ne-sont-pas-aventures-ce-sont-des-emmerdements_813966.html> [accessed 27 August 2014].

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid

At the time of the publication of *Mort à crédit*, Céline made his mother promise never to read his novel, which featured a character named Ferdinand and a caricature of his own mother. The fictional framing set up was quite similar to the one in *Les Particules*, in the way that *Mort à crédit* is presented as a novel but Céline leaves clues in interviews intended to orient the reader towards an autobiographical interpretation of the narrative. As Meizoz points out in *La Fabrique des singularités*, Céline's mother, portrayed in a highly exaggerated and negative light in the novel, could have publicly denied this version and ended the ambiguity of the 'reading pact' put in place by the writer.³⁶³ Luckily for Céline, Marguerite Guilloux kept her promise. Ceccaldi's reaction upon coming across her estranged son's novel highlights the wisdom of Céline's precaution:

She went to a bookshop, picked up *Atomised* and was furious. "I said, 'Fuck, it's not true.' He described me as a kind of whore, kept by I don't know what American. That's slander. All my life I've toiled to earn money for other people. I want him to apologise. If I was law-suit minded, I would have sued him and won."³⁶⁴

Ceccaldi reads *Les Particules* as malicious accusations, punishable by the law. In her outburst that 'it's not true', the possibility of an understanding of the text as fiction is out of the question. Because a character in *Les Particules* shares the same name as her, Ceccaldi interprets the content very literally. She is not the only one. Houellebecq was sued by the owner of the camping site 'L'Espace des possibles' and had to change its name and location in the novel.³⁶⁵ In his biography of the writer, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, Demonpion uses the example of *Extension* and points out that some of Houellebecq's former colleagues are featured in the novel against their will and furthermore, Demonpion insists, 'under their real name, which is

³⁶³ Jérôme Meizoz, *La Fabrique des singularités. Postures littéraires II* (Genève: Slatkine, 2011), 50.

³⁶⁴ Angelique Chrisafis, 'I never left anybody. It was him that left me.', *The Guardian*, 7 May 2008, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/07/fiction.familyandrelationships>> [accessed online 27 August 2014].

³⁶⁵ For more information, see for instance, Hervé Aubron, 'Prise d'Houellebecq', *Libération*, 14 August 1999, <http://www.liberation.fr/portrait/1999/08/14/prise-d-houellebecq_282212> [accessed 31 August 2014].

unprecedented in a fictional work'.³⁶⁶ Houellebecq constantly walks on a tightrope between fact and fiction, playfully cultivating an ambiguous stance; with her literal reading of the work, Ceccaldi broke the 'reading pact', generating some comical and dramatic scenes in the media.

Angelique Chrisafis, who interviewed Houellebecq's mother for *The Guardian*, thus described her: 'Ceccaldi's swearing and her raging prose is so racy and absurd that it actually comes across as pure Houellebecq himself'.³⁶⁷ Houellebecq's mother becomes a fictional character despite her own wish. Martin Crowley, in 'The Wreckage of Liberation', describes Houellebecq's work as 'an œuvre which seems to close down the space of critical discussion by anticipating and ironizing possible objection as it goes along'.³⁶⁸ His essay deals with the intermittent framing devices put in place by Houellebecq, which consequently means that material destined to outrage the audience, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, explicit group sex and so on, is 'mediated through his writings, generally by a narrative structure which serves to render undecidable their status in relation to the texts of which they form such a striking part. But still, there they are'.³⁶⁹ One could extend Crowley's reading by highlighting the presence of a fictional framing, which acts in a similar way as the interpretative framing he reveals. 'Real people' who are featured in Houellebecq's novels as fictional characters and try to break this illusion by talking back in the media, are imprisoned by this framing device. They become caricatures of themselves.

In the interview with Delaroche, Ceccaldi claims that the inspiration for her autobiographical project was a series of *entretiens* she gave the journalist Demonpion in 2005; at the time, he was preparing a biography of the writer which, 'using crossed testimonials, was aiming to give an account as faithful as possible, of Michel Thomas's early life as well as the beginning of his career, his first steps on the literary stage and his metamorphosis into Michel Houellebecq'.³⁷⁰ Demonpion reads 'Houellebecq' as a fiction created by Michel Thomas, and wants to expose him as such to the general public. The journalist bases his investigation of Thomas/Houellebecq's life on similar premises as Meizoz's; however, their

³⁶⁶ Demonpion, 2005, 184.

³⁶⁷ Chrisafis, 2008.

³⁶⁸ Martin Crowley, 'Houellebecq: The Wreckage of Liberation', *Romance Studies*, 20, 1 (2002), 17.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁷⁰ Demonpion, 2005, 18.

intentions and final conclusions are opposite. Demonpion and Ceccaldi offer a reading of Houellebecq's work and performance as deceitful, they close down the text by branding it as a web of lies, whilst Meizoz's theory enables the reader to see past this interpretation.

Nonetheless, two important intuitions shape Demonpion's research: first, that Michel Thomas, as he takes his grandmother's name as a pseudonym, creates a new life for himself.³⁷¹ According to Meizoz, the presence of a pseudonym is a sure indicator of postural creation. As he explains, 'pseudonyms thus participate in a process of self-creation of the writer and initiate a second life, a rebirth on the literary stage'.³⁷² Then, Demonpion's second discovery consists in his realization that as he 'metamorphoses' into Houellebecq, the writer coquettishly subtracts two years from Thomas's year of birth. Demonpion devotes a whole chapter to Houellebecq's miraculous yet discreet rejuvenation and its consequences. The initial finding of his investigation is that 'Houellebecq wasn't born in 1958, contrary to the year of birth that he himself contributed to spread, but rather, two years earlier'.³⁷³ This fact could be interpreted as pure vanity on Houellebecq/Thomas's part; however, these two dates, interestingly, correspond to the two half-brothers' years of birth in *Les Particules*. Houellebecq leaves clues in the novel which enable the reader to calculate that Bruno was born in 1956 and Michel in 1958.³⁷⁴ Houellebecq's self-presentation to the journalists, especially in the biographical clues he sprinkles in interviews, then in his claims that he himself cannot remember which ones are lies, point towards a reading of his biography as a 'lived fiction'. After the initial blurring of identities between 'Houellebecq' as author, the narrative voice of *Les Particules* and the

³⁷¹ Demonpion states: 'The fact that he had chosen to take his grandmother's name, Houellebecq, rather than keep his own, Michel Thomas, was, for me, a topic of questioning. ... In Houellebecq's case, what surprised me was that in the hundreds of articles written about him, this fact was always kept silent. *As if there was a conscious decision to erase his first identity.*' (Ibid, 16, my emphasis).

³⁷² Meizoz, 2011, 40.

³⁷³ Demonpion, 2005, 28.

³⁷⁴ In the original version, although the prologue is set in an undetermined time in the future, the first sentence situates the novel very precisely: 'Le 1er Juillet 1998 tombait un mercredi.' (*Les Particules*, 13). Frank Wynne, translating the English version of the novel, omits the year, although it constitutes a crucial clue given by the author, which enables the reader to deduce the characters' years of birth. From comments such as 'At forty, he was already head of department' (A, 19) or 'He had just turned forty' a few pages later (A, 21), one can conclude that Djerzinski was born in 1958 like Houellebecq, whilst Bruno's year of birth appears to be 1956, same as Michel Thomas – 'Take him, for example - he was forty-two years old', the narrator mentions in passing. As Demonpion points out, the act of pretending to be two years younger is described in the novel in relation to the character David Di Meola: 'He took two years off his age when touring the recording studios ... no one ever checked. Brian Jones had the same idea long before.' (A, 248).

character Bruno, a second ‘rebirth’ happens around the time of the publication of *Les Particules*. With the launch of the novel, Houellebecq moves away from Bruno and identifies myself more and more with the character Michel Djerzinski.

For instance, as discussed previously, on a biographical level Houellebecq presents himself as having been abandoned by his parents, and raised by his grandmother,³⁷⁵ an aspect of his life which corresponds to both Bruno and Michel’s narratives. Houellebecq’s persona is built on this story; this aspect appears almost as crucial as the theory of sex as a second system of differentiation to his œuvre. His mother’s abandonment and his attachment to his grandmother shape his authorial posture. Indeed, the year 1991, which corresponds to the date of publication of the essay on Lovecraft and his official entry in the literary field, marks a rupture. This is the time when the pseudonym ‘Houellebecq’, his grandmother’s surname, becomes public, and when he last speaks to his mother.

The identification between Houellebecq and Djerzinski can also be found in an accumulation of details and clues, which separately cannot prove anything, yet has an unconscious effect on the reader. For instance, in the ‘j’ai plus que des doutes’ interview, Houellebecq tells Weitzmann that he ‘used to live in the halls of residence of Bures-sur-Yvette’,³⁷⁶ whilst in *Les Particules*, Djerzinski goes to university in the same city (A, 102). In the *entretien*, Houellebecq is very specific about location names, and interestingly, all the cities mentioned appear again in the novel. The fact that Houellebecq deliberately did not change them points toward an autobiographical reading of *Les Particules*, yet it is done ambiguously enough so that no conclusions can be drawn from this fact. Furthermore, on a visual level, the 1998 photoshoot with *Les Inrockuptibles* shows the evolution of Houellebecq’s posture; previously sporting a worn out parka and smoking a cigarette, like the narrator of *Extension*, two years later Houellebecq looks less dishevelled, more prim and proper as he poses in the lab dressed as a scientist, or carrying a Monoprix bag. In both photos, the identification with Djerzinski is intentional: Houellebecq performs and embodies his profession, and by extension the announcement of the end of the human race, brought along by scientific research and genetic mutations. Finally, in an interview for the magazine *Lire*, dating back to early September 1998, Catherine Argand asks Houellebecq:

³⁷⁵ Weitzmann, 1996, 56.

³⁷⁶ Weitzmann, 1996, 58.

‘Michel and Bruno both embody a crushing malaise. Which one do you prefer?’ To which the writer replies: ‘Michel, without a doubt. I have a tendency to prefer myself in the mental states which are his own’.³⁷⁷ Far from denying the amalgamation, Houellebecq contributes to it once more by switching from third to first person and equating the protagonist’s thought processes – his ethos, his voice – to something as personal as his own mental states.

³⁷⁷ Argand, 1998.

Conclusion - Updating Meizoz's 'Le roman et l'inacceptable'

Reading Houellebecq's posture through an analysis of his early *entretiens* enables me to update some of Meizoz's findings published in his pioneering essay 'Le roman et l'inacceptable'. The Swiss critic concluded his study of Houellebecq's public interventions in 2001 with the claim that

it was only after the publication of *Plateforme* that "Houellebecq" adopted the same opinions as his characters and narrator. ... "Houellebecq" as posture consists in performing within the public sphere, the antihero character (with a socially unacceptable discourse) to whom he delegated the narration of his novels. Through a strange reversal, the fictional behaviour (the narrator's discourse) precedes in this case the social behaviour (that of the authorial posture) and appears to be generating it.³⁷⁸

This extract from Meizoz's essay is composed of three affirmations, to which I would like to add my own interpretation. First, 'Houellebecq', understood here as author, posture, and fictional character performing within the space of literary interviews, has indeed been adopting the same opinions as his characters and narrators, yet he has been doing so as early as the interviews promoting his first novel. For instance, the *artpress* interview, in which he repeats most of *Extension*'s unnamed narrator's theories as his own, demonstrates that the process of amalgamation between author and characters began in 1995, if not before. Meizoz's second affirmation still applies, although we saw that the 'antihero character' performed by Houellebecq evolves in time with the publication of each novel – starting with the narrator of *Extension*, Houellebecq becomes closer to Bruno, then to Michel Djerzinski. Houellebecq's next role is that of Michel, the narrator of *Plateforme*, as analysed by Meizoz in 'Le roman et l'inacceptable'.

Finally, the observation that in the case of 'Michel' and 'Houellebecq', the narrator's fictional behaviour precedes the author's social behaviour and appears to be generating it, could be slightly revised in the light of our study of Houellebecq's self-presentation in early interviews. In the novels *Extension* and *Plateforme*, it

³⁷⁸ Meizoz, 2004, 202.

appears to be verified; however, *entretiens* such as ‘j’ai plus que des doutes’ in *Les Inrockuptibles*, in which some extracts of *Les Particules* appear almost word for word, demonstrate that the reverse situation can also occur. In some cases, the authorial posture performed in interviews acts as a live rehearsal of texts which are works in progress, and becomes part of the writing process.

Conclusion - Authorial Posture and Ideology

I could have joined the *Front National* - but why bother getting into bed with those stupid cunts? In any case, there aren't any women on the far right, or if there are, they only fuck ex-paras. My article was crazy - I threw it into the first bin I came across. I had to stick to my "liberal humanist" position; I knew in my heart that it was my only chance of getting laid. (A, 235)

I don't believe that ideological standpoints matter, they are the least interesting topic one could be discussing in life.³⁷⁹ (Michel Houellebecq, *Revue perpendiculaire*)

For both Michel Houellebecq and the character Bruno in *Les Particules élémentaires*, ideological standpoints are of no importance. Whilst sex appears to act as an obsessive driving force behind Bruno's thought processes, overriding any concerns about politics, Houellebecq considers that 'politically, people more or less think the same as their environment, and therefore, there isn't much point in discussing it'.³⁸⁰ Unfortunately for him, political and ideological questions precisely constitute the focus of most of the *entretiens* in which he participates. Aware of the writer's reputation as a provocateur, interviewers quiz him on contentious issues such as racism, feminism and eugenics.³⁸¹ Houellebecq's abrasive responses, often taken out of context, are then used as headlines which reveal more about the journalist's tainted interpretation than the writer's actual opinions. The title of the *Revue perpendiculaire* interview 'Je crois peu en la liberté – entretien' (Autumn 1998) constitutes a striking example of this phenomenon. By emphasising the idea that Houellebecq 'has little faith in freedom', the journal's editorial board endows the writer's discourse with a fascistic undertone. However, in the *entretien*, this particular sentence has nothing to do with Houellebecq's politics, as the writer was at the time discussing determinism and Zola's approach to character creation. Similarly, the title 'Les Rappers me font chier' ('Rappers do my head in') from an interview in *Libération* could be understood either as Houellebecq's hatred of hip-hop

³⁷⁹ 'Je ne crois pas que le positionnement idéologique ait la moindre importance, c'est la chose la moins intéressante dont on puisse parler dans la vie.' in Nicolas Bourriaud, Jean-Yves Jouannais and Jacques-François Marchandise, 'Je crois peu en la liberté – Entretien', *Revue perpendiculaire*, 11, September 1998, 14.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

³⁸¹ See, for instance, de Gaudemar, 'Houellebecq, Mutant Moderne. "Les rappers me font chier"', 1998.

music or his contempt for the culture coming from the Parisian suburbs, and therefore a form of reactionary statement. And again, this affirmation is taken out of context as the full sentence actually reads as a Houellebecquian attempt at feminism [sic]: ‘I wouldn’t be against going back to a more matriarchal form of society: fundamentalist Muslims aggravate me, rappers do my head in’,³⁸² he tells Antoine de Gaudemar. The two interviews deal with similar topics, however. Whilst de Gaudemar orients his questions towards packing the interview with as many provocative statements as possible, the *Revue perpendiculaire* members’ aim is quite different.

‘Impressed by this book, we have been confounded by some specific standpoints featured in it, with which we totally disagreed’,³⁸³ explain Bourriaud, Jouannais and Marchandise in the introductory text of the *entretien*. The Perpendiculaire members are aware that they cannot attack Houellebecq for opinions voiced by fictional characters in his novels; however, as soon as he publicly repeats those ideas as his own, he becomes responsible for them. As we observed in the previous chapter, in the *artpress* interview conducted by the same Jouannais, Houellebecq and the narrator of the novel synchronised at an ideological level. Applying a similar reasoning to the one analysed by Meizoz in ‘Le roman et l’inacceptable’, the Perpendiculaire members are trying to trap Houellebecq into replicating the same process. This is exemplified by questions such as: ‘your characters voice problematic ideas, which may outrage the reader, whether political standpoints, racism, exclusion... *To what extent do you share these views?*’³⁸⁴ Politically, Houellebecq projected at the time such an ambiguous stance that journalists read him at opposite ends of the spectrum. For instance, when Marchandise asked him ‘don’t you run the risk to be assimilated to the most reactionnary branch of the Right?’,³⁸⁵ Houellebecq replied:

There are several categories of reactionary right-wing movements. In essence, there are two of them. There are the neo-Pagans, with whom I have no relation whatsoever, who are nasty stupid arseholes [*sales cons méchants*], actually quite close to the Satanists. There are also the traditional Catholics. I quite

³⁸² Michel Houellebecq, quoted in Antoine de Gaudemar, ‘Houellebecq, Mutant moderne: “Les rappers me font chier”’, 1998.

³⁸³ Bourriaud, Jouannais and Marchandise, 1998, 4.

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 9, my emphasis.

³⁸⁵ ‘Ne cours-tu pas le risque d’être assimilé à la droite la plus réactionnaire?’ Ibid, p.12.

like them. But they are the ones who will want to distance themselves from me, since I don't believe in God. This is the key, although like them I am anti-abortion. In the same way that I manifest a deep sympathy towards any Catholic demonstration, compassion is for me a central value. More so than to Catholics, as it stands. This is the reason why I am branching off towards Buddhism.³⁸⁶

In Houellebecq's discourse, one can observe an intentional blurring of the lines between religion, ideology and politics. Interestingly, rather than mentioning the Front National as a type of reactionary right wing movement, he offers instead the example of the Neo-pagans, who represent a less significant group of people. Both traditional Catholics and neo-pagans are linked to a choice of religious belief rather than politics. This example refers the reader back to *Les Particules*, in which the group of the neo-Pagans is represented by the character David Di Meola and portrayed as evil.³⁸⁷ Bruno also spends some time with traditional Catholics in Dijon, and starts writing pro-Pope pamphlets.³⁸⁸ Again, interpreting Houellebecq's response from a postural perspective, one can observe that this is one more instance of the writer identifying with Bruno at an ideological level - although, as he carefully points out, ideological standpoints 'do not matter in the least'.

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that neo-Pagans are not necessarily linked to far-right movements. In an article called 'Who are the neo-pagans?', journalist Marie Monier uses the example of Varg Vikernes who, 'branded as a "neo-Nazi", "*provocateur*", "black metal music fan" [...] would also allegedly be a "neo-Paganism" practitioner' as a starting point for a discussion on this movement.³⁸⁹ Monier characterises Vikernes and his beliefs in much the same way that Houellebecq describes Di Meola in *Les Particules*. She defines neo-Paganism as linked to polytheistic religions, and therefore opposed to Christianity, and as the 'distant heir of European Pagan practices', taking inspiration from druidism, odinism, and helenism, amongst others. Monier then points out that there exists a faction of left-

³⁸⁶ Ibid, 12-13.

³⁸⁷ See 'The Macmillan Hypothesis' chapter in *A*, 241-254.

³⁸⁸ See, for instance, *A*, 207-11 and 216-21.

³⁸⁹ Marie Monier, 'Affaire Varg Vikernes: qui sont les néo-païens?', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 20 July 2013,

<<http://www.lesinrocks.com/2013/07/20/actualite/affaire-varg-vikernes-qui-sont-les-neo-paiens-11410422/>> [accessed 12 July, 2014].

wing neo-Pagans, inspired by Houellebecq's bug bear, the post-May '68 counterculture. As she explains, 'French neo-Paganism is not confined to the far-right, as it has also been embraced by some post-May 1968 counterculture movements. [...] Therefore, it is a largely left-leaning faction which develops in parallel of the original one, and in which are aggregated anti-globalisation supporters, ecologists, sometimes Libertarians'.³⁹⁰

When Houellebecq joined the *Perpendiculaire* committee, the assumption was that he shared the same – left-leaning, to Socialist – political views.³⁹¹ Furthermore, in *Les Inrockuptibles*, although Weitzmann was aware of the conflict between Houellebecq and *Revue perpendiculaire*, he assertively portrayed him as 'a left wing writer. To be precise: an Utopist and Communist writer'.³⁹² A few pages later, Houellebecq admits that he 'likes Stalin [laughs] [...] because he killed lots of anarchists. [laughs]'.³⁹³ Of course, those declarations - and accompanying chuckles - cannot be taken seriously, as Houellebecq stresses in another interview, published a week later: 'on a lot of important topics, I don't really have an opinion'.³⁹⁴ Also intriguing is the fact that the anti-Islam declarations for which Houellebecq was taken to court after the publication of *Plateforme* were already present, word for word, in *Les Particules*, yet did not attract any attention at the time. In the latter novel, scientist Desplechin states, 'I know that Islam - by far the most stupid, false and obscure of all religions - seems to be gaining ground; but it's a transitory phenomenon: in the long term, Islam is doomed just as surely as Christianity' (A, 323). One could argue that this statement, although quite close in terminology and content to the declarations in the *Lire* interview, did not shock anyone because it was uttered by a fictional character, not by the author.

Is the fluidity of the journalists' interpretation of Houellebecq's politics due to the writer's ambiguous stance? Is it due to the fact that to establish himself as a writer, he had first to position himself within left-leaning social circles? Or because, as Sweeney suggests, the far-left and the far-right share similar targets? Interviews act as another framing device, because it could be argued that they are meant to be

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ See for instance, Bourriaud's comments when interviewed by journalist Demonpion in Demonpion, 2005, 214-215.

³⁹² Marc Weitzmann, 'Monoprix pour un maxi livre', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 161, 19-25 August 1998, 14.

³⁹³ Leclair and Weitzmann, 1998, 20.

³⁹⁴ Michel Houellebecq quoted de Gaudemar, 1998.

read as performances and ‘Houellebecq’ as a fictional creation. Therefore, the posture created by Michel Thomas is one of the tools in that framing. However, these framing techniques and ‘strategies of disowning’ cancel themselves out when he repeats the characters’ contentious positions as his own in interviews. The blurring of identities between author and protagonists results in the general public amalgamating all these characters into one, that is, ‘Houellebecq’ as author, a figure who combines their ideological positions and biographies, yet repeats that they are lies. Implying that his public appearances are performances and claiming that there are no ideas and that they do not matter are another way for him to further evade responsibility.

In a 2013 interview with *Les Inrockuptibles*, Nelly Kaprièlan, feigning surprise, tells Houellebecq: ‘I thought you were right-wing...’, to which he replies ‘I can be right-wing and an anarchist at the same time. However, I don’t like right-wing anarchists, their sense of humour doesn’t amuse me’.³⁹⁵ He then explains his anarchist tendencies by the fact that he sees voting as ‘suffering’, that he does not ‘want to elect anybody and would rather people asked him his opinion on any kind of topics, all the time’. In an ironic reversal of the situation, fifteen years previously, this was the opposite of what he wanted, when interviewers wanted to find out and publicize his opinions on a wide range of issues. Houellebecq’s political trajectory in the public eye in some ways resembles Céline’s. This has nothing to do with the type of ideology they embrace, as the difference in context cancels out any possibility of comparison, but rather, in the way their approach to self-presentation in the media subverts the very idea of ideology. At the beginning of Céline’s career, critics mostly read *Voyage* as the work of a left-wing writer, and it was only from 1936 onwards that he openly expressed first his hatred of Communism in the pamphlet *Mea Culpa*, then his fierce anti-Semitism in *Bagatelles*. Like Houellebecq, Céline is now more commonly referred to as a ‘right wing anarchist’.³⁹⁶

One final example, the case of Céline’s reception in the United States as outlined by Morris Dickstein in the essay ‘Sea Change: Céline and the Problem of Cultural Transmission’ offers another perspective on the topic of ideology and authorial posturing. Dickstein studies the French writer’s influence on American

³⁹⁵ Nelly Kaprièlan, ‘Entretien: “la vie ne m’intéresse que si j’écris”’, *Les Inrockuptibles*, 906, 10-16 April 2013, 40.

³⁹⁶ See, for instance, Yves Pagès’s discussion in *Les Fictions du politique chez L.-F. Céline* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994), 32-40.

writers such as Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. He also demonstrates the impact of Céline's antiwar message on Jewish American writers such as Joseph Heller, who published *Catch 22* in 1961. Bearing in mind his political and ideological stance, how could Céline's writing have such an impact on left-wing and Jewish writers? What does Dickstein mean when he refers to a 'process of cultural transmission'? First, he points out that 'French readers could locate Céline, linguistically and socially, as American readers never could',³⁹⁷ meaning that many of his prejudices were somewhat lost in translation as American readers would not be necessarily aware of the writer's pamphlets or his political positioning during World War II. As Dickstein points out,

Céline's stylistic innovations, which were at the core of his shock effect on French writers and readers, had very little impact abroad, especially in the toned-down, rather gentrified translations by John Marks in the 1930s. Céline would make his impact among American readers *as a voice, not a style*.³⁹⁸

He then defines what he calls the 'problem of cultural transmission' as highlighting 'not only the question of language, but the differences between a writer's local and universal appeal'³⁹⁹ and expands on this idea by stating that 'a writer's work is abstracted from its local roots, from the concrete traditions that shaped it, from the writer's own ideas and prejudices. If it survives these transitions, and few works do, it is recontextualized in another culture, another language, another era'.⁴⁰⁰ Translations offer texts the possibility of a new life, by taking them out of their original context. In this process, the role of the paratext is crucial. For instance, Dickstein mentions that Manheim's translation of *Mort à crédit*, *Death on the Instalment plan* (1966) was presented by its publisher Signet 'in a 1960s manner as a banned book', which means that 'the book was thus associated with published-in-Paris titles like *Tropic of Cancer*, *Naked Lunch*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Lolita*, scandalous books that had once been banned or expurgated, not to be published in

³⁹⁷ Dickstein, Morris, 'Sea Change: Céline and the Problem of Cultural Transmission' in Alice Yaeger Kaplan and Philippe Roussin (eds), *Céline, USA. The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93, 2 (1994), 204-24.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 208 (my emphasis).

³⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 207-08.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 215-16.

America until the end of the 1950s, when they contributed to a new wave of transgressive writing'.⁴⁰¹ This is a case in point of the novel's presentation, its 'materiality', from book cover to choice of translator, influencing the audience's perception of the text. Indeed, Mark's and Manheim's versions of *Voyage* and *Mort à crédit* vary so much stylistically, that although they bear the same title, they read almost like two different novels.

The 'problem of cultural transmission' demonstrates that when some ideological aspects are taken out of the equation, when they get lost in translation, some writers have found a way to bypass Céline's anti-Semitism and racism. As Dickstein explains, 'ignoring Céline's politics, these writers invariably saw Céline as a liberator in a decade when "liberation" was an ideological battle cry and paranoia was simply a form of realism'.⁴⁰² Céline's texts were reborn in the shape of transgressive texts such as Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, recontextualized in the era of 1960s America, torn by the Vietnam War. Dickstein demonstrates the influence of *Journey to the End of the Night* on Heller's *Catch 22*, as he claims that 'For Céline as for Heller, war is a form of lunacy, of licenced mass murder, in which heroism and bravery are truly madness, while cowardice and flight are the only forms of sanity'.⁴⁰³ He also establishes the impact of Manheim's translation of *Mort à crédit* (1966) on Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, as he lists the 'striking similarities' between the two novels.⁴⁰⁴

However, this process is not completely straight-forward, and the recontextualization of Céline's text could only influence writers who understood Céline's œuvre as consisting of his first two novels only. As soon as one looks at his whole literary production - for instance, taking into account the German Trilogy - the issue of his anti-Semitic engagement comes back to the fore. Indeed, in the essay 'Rewriting History: Céline and Kurt Vonnegut', critic Philip Watts approaches this topic by explaining the reasons for the 'splitting headache' Vonnegut suffers from every time he tries to write about Céline, in order to settle the literary 'debt' he feels he owes to the French writer. According to Watts, this headache 'is also a symptom

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 216.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 217.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 218.

⁴⁰⁴ Those similarities are 'the masturbation, the shrill, hysterical mother, the father's miserable job with an insurance company - above all, the heightened, farcical tone of the monologue, the sense of pain at the heart of laughter, which had little precedent in Roth's work.' (Ibid, 220-21).

of the problematic nature of Vonnegut's reception of Céline, for what comes out of the relation between these two authors is not only the traditional issue of literary influence, but also the problem of historical revisionism and ideological transmission. Vonnegut's 1969 account of the destruction of Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is to a great extent a rewriting of the war sequences of Céline's 1932 *Voyage au bout de la nuit*.⁴⁰⁵ Vonnegut, at the time writing a preface for the American translation of the German Trilogy, is fully aware of Céline's politics. Watts concludes his essay accusing both Céline and Vonnegut of revisionism, an accusation which was at the core of his argument on previous studies on Céline.⁴⁰⁶

Does the example of Céline and cultural transmission show that, as Houellebecq claims, ideological standpoints do not really matter? And is this, then, the function of the performative aspect of the authorial posture? Within the scope of this thesis, I could only observe this phenomenon and analyse some specific examples, yet the relationship between authorial posture and ideology needs to be explored further. When reading works by Céline or Houellebecq, I found that a way to address the ideological problems inherent in their writing is first to acknowledge their existence, then to try to make sense of the way they are framed within the text, influencing the reader, more or less consciously – but more importantly, by analysing their presence in the text as a performance which takes place both inside and outside the text.

Nonetheless, there appears to be no way out of the endless ideological merry-go-round through which Céline sends his reader spinning, his work containing within itself both the potential for liberation, laced with the splitting headache created by his fierce anti-Semitism, racism and pro-Nazi discourse, never far from view. This is already present in the oxymoronic labels 'right-wing anarchist' or 'rouge brun', which have been used to describe both Céline and Houellebecq. So how do Céline and Houellebecq change the way one reads a text? How do they subvert the idea of the 'author-function'?

⁴⁰⁵ Philip Watts, 'Rewriting History: Céline and Kurt Vonnegut', in Alice Yaeger Kaplan and Philippe Roussin (eds), *Céline, USA. The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93, 2 (1994), 265.

⁴⁰⁶ See Philip Watts, 'Postmodern Céline' (1995) and his full-length study *Allegories of the Purge: how literature responded to the postwar trials of writers and intellectuals in France* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

Louis Destouches and Michel Thomas both entered the literary stage hiding behind the mask of their pseudonym. This initial choice can be interpreted as a rebirth, 'Céline' and 'Houellebecq' becoming their new identities. In this way, then, the author is thus both performer and fictional character and through the establishment of a posture, both Céline and Houellebecq subvert the very concept of ideology by transforming it into a mere performance.

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