

Christian Oster's Picnic

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With eight novels published by the Editions de Minuit in the last decade, Christian Oster has established himself as one of the most interesting figures in a cohort of new French writers who are gradually redefining the novel as literary form. Many of these writers are Oster's stablemates in the Minuit stud, while others are affiliated with publishing houses such as Gallimard, Le Seuil, and POL.¹ Their experiments involve a profound questioning of conventional narrative protocols, a dramatic recasting of the reciprocal articulation of writers and readers, and a sustained meditation upon the uses of fiction. All of Christian Oster's novels are interesting texts in such a perspective, but I shall focus here on *Le Pique-nique* (1997), his fifth novel, for I find that it exemplifies most broadly the various themes, techniques, and writerly idiosyncrasies that characterize his work as a whole.

Le Pique-nique is the story of a man and his child who set off on a picnic in the Sénart Forest, near Paris. The incipit of the text stages a curious effect of narrative uncertainty:

The man to whom I would like to give some importance here, I shall call him simply Louis. Or Charles. Or Julien. Around noon on a Saturday, then, Louis, I think that this time he'll be Louis, I prefer Louis, was walking at a necessarily slow pace beside Pauline, his daughter, five years old, in a forest near Paris, in a season which one will choose to be still mild, the end of summer for instance, or the very beginning of autumn, so that in the trees the shape of the leaves, and not the nuances of their colors, should assume a characteristic turn. (9)²

Describing the landscape, the narrator warns us not to look for detail: "Such a sketch, however, will remain mostly vague" (9). That's a point well taken, for what is true of the landscape is also true of this novel, whose narrative contract is dominated by indeterminacy, where logic and causality are blurred, and wherein the reader—like the protagonists—may well become lost.

We know very little about Louis. He is about forty years old and lives with his five-year-old daughter, Pauline, in Paris. His wife is alluded to, briefly, on a couple of occasions when Louis nostalgically evokes her memory. Clearly, she no longer figures in Louis's life, but we are never told what became of her. That refusal to tell is merely one integer in a literary algorithm that wagers heavily on irresolution and doubt, paving an indistinct narrative highway littered with lacunae and very largely denuded of traditional signposts. Louis himself is sad, passive, and utterly bemused by life; he is moreover a *singular man*, "not quite like other people, and who in an already long life has nevertheless succeeded in not doing very much" (185). Louis has no friends, except for three army buddies whom he has not seen for twenty years, and whom he is supposed to meet in the forest for a picnic. He doesn't like men very much, we learn. All things considered, he prefers women—but, by his own admission, he doesn't know many women. That he and Pauline should become lost in the forest is inevitable, for Louis is constitutionally lost in the labyrinthine meanders of his life: "At that moment, once again, he didn't know what to do in this forest, where henceforward nothing recalled communion, solidarity, the particular species that humans represent" (48).

Louis cannot find his own way out of the forest, but, felicitously enough, others find *him*. First, a young woman forest ranger, euphoniously named Blanche Hazanavicius, whose beauty seduces Louis as much as her competence. Then Dujardin, one of his army buddies, a man as alienated and friendless as Louis himself. Once outside the forest, however, it becomes clear that Louis is still just as lost as he was before, and that his literal situation in the forest was merely a simulacrum of a far more distressing existential condition. He is bewildered by the conventions of soci-

ety, and unable to decipher its arcane codes. He finds that he has nothing to say to Dujardin after twenty years, and when he tries to understand Dujardin's social gestures, he loses himself in his interpretive efforts, each more convoluted than the one preceding it. He realizes that Dujardin needs his friendship, but all Louis can think about is Blanche, who may or may not be thinking about him.

In short, Louis is a wanderer—but not by choice, it is important to note. On the contrary, he is constantly looking for the way out of his aimless state. Indeed, it's that very possibility of egress that he sees in his reunion with his former friends: "Louis imagined precisely the meeting with Christian, Philippe, and Dujardin, now, as a break in the indifferent order of things, a fractal event which might coax him out of himself and his solitude" (33). The problem is that the landscape confronting him is one that is undifferentiated; it presents very few asperities, and those, upon close inspection, prove to be for the most part illusory. The narrator's description of the forest, for example, suggests just the sort of smooth, flat surface that Louis encounters wherever he turns: "in forests, each leafy formation, seen from a distance, presents merely a silhouette which is blurred by its intrication with others, offering to the stroller, should he or she stop to gaze at the branches, merely an approximative profile" (9-10). That passage, along with others like it in *Le Pique-nique*, should properly be read on another level as well, that of metaliterary discourse. For it may also be seen to encode a set of ironic reading instructions that Christian Oster proposes to his reader in order to help him or her find a path through a novel which, on the face of it, presents a panorama of bleak indirection. In other words, Louis is not the only wanderer in this story, not by a long shot. Like him, the narrator seems to wander in the telling of the tale, adrift in narrative possibility and a generalized irresolution of voice. The reader looks in vain for traditional diegetic cues that might adumbrate an identifiable narrative itinerary; in this book about being lost, the reader may have the impression, in the early going especially, of being at a loss.

I believe that such is precisely the impression that Oster seeks to project upon his reader. It is useful, moreover, to examine the notion of what it is to be “lost” that serves as the motor of this novel, both in the dynamic of production and that of reception. For Oster uses that notion in several different ways, turning it this way and that, exploiting its various possibilities, vexing literal meaning against figural, and ultimately revealing his novel as a playful agonistic of writing and reading. First and most obviously, Oster deploys that idea in a literal register. He points out that being lost is a contingent notion, for it is only when Louis *recognizes* that he has lost his way that he truly becomes “lost”: “If he felt himself to be lost, it was quite simply because he *was* lost” (36). Approaching that same idea from another angle, Oster asks us to consider what it means to “lose” someone in a literal sense. When Louis awakes from a short nap in the forest, he finds that Pauline has wandered off, and all of his efforts to find her prove fruitless. It is here that Oster engages the second level of his meditation, a figural one where the notion of being lost is cast as an existential condition. He suggests that Louis’s solitary, alienated state is long-standing and indeed constitutional. The fact that Louis has “lost” his wife—though we don’t know how, nor in what sense of the word—weighs heavily upon him, and seems to inflect upon his every gesture; he blunders through his life just as he blunders through the forest. When Pauline disappears, the idea of his own “lostness” comes home to Louis in resounding terms, both literally and figuratively, for he recognizes that he has become “a man who, since the disappearance of his daughter, knows that he is utterly lost, and in whom the apprehension of space, as if by itself, has become a dead function” (63). The anguish that this recognition inspires in Louis is massive, and he understands that it is in fact merely the crystallization of a sentiment that has haunted him for many years: “A sadness possessed him, which he quickly recognized. He knows this sadness, he has already experienced it. It is his. It has accompanied him for a long time, discreetly, but under reproof it sharpens. And, in the pressure of fear, it changes skin” (69). The crisis of this novel comes at the very moment when Louis is forced to confront the central fact of

his existence, that he is utterly and radically estranged from the world in which he lives.³ Finally, Oster interrogates the idea of being lost on the metaliterary level, asking his reader to reflect on the reading of *Le Pique-nique* as a model of certain very basic literary functions. Upon first consideration, the reader is faced with an apparently indeterminate narrative, one whose twists may seem largely aleatory and unmotivated. One can lose one's direction in the intrigue of this novel; just as certainly, one can become lost in individual sentences, whose syntax is often a wandering, tortured sort. I feel, however, that Oster is asking his reader to consider whether such a process, closely inspected, might not explain some kinds of pleasure that we take in some kinds of texts; and that perhaps our pleasure is in losing ourselves in order eventually to find ourselves again, within the safely defined limits of fiction.

For if in the first instance Louis stands in for the reader, mediating his or her experience of this novel, so too, later, does Blanche Hazanavicius, the forest ranger. In contrast to Louis, Blanche knows the forest: "She was attached, moreover, to this forest. Her duties linked her to its trees, quartered her on its paths. This forest was her station" (106). She makes her way through the forest superbly, on horseback, godlike. That which seems labyrinthine and hopelessly intricately to Louis is clear to Blanche, for she is completely at home in the forest. Louis's panic contrasts with Blanche's cool serenity; his befuddlement is opposed to her lucidity; he is inert and paralyzed by events, whereas she is a person of action. Most importantly, Blanche knows how to *read* the forest. She is not duped by its apparent meanders, nor is she intimidated by its vastness. The paths that lead through it are, for Blanche, as clearly traced as the Autoroute du Sud. She is able, in short, to interpret the forest's signs—while Louis himself is incapable of even recognizing those signs as such. She will lead Louis out of the Sénart Forest; and she may eventually offer Louis a way out of his solitude as well. In analogous manner, if the reader is willing to follow Blanche's example, he or she may be able to find a way out of this novel.

Blanche intervenes in the story when everything seems lost, just at the moment when Louis has despaired of finding Pauline. That sense of lostness pervades the thematics of the novel, as I have suggested, and it is also inscribed in the novel's structure. The chapters in *Le Pique-nique* are numbered from one to thirty-four, but there is no thirteenth chapter; that is, chapter twelve is followed by chapter fourteen. That particular lacuna (among the many lacunae one notes in this text) is invested with a great deal of meaning, "negative" meaning as it were, and I should like to examine it here in some detail. Chapter twelve ends with Blanche setting out to find Pauline; in chapter fourteen Blanche brings Pauline back to Louis. What would seem to be a key event in the narrative, the moment when Blanche finds Pauline, has been elided here, and Oster seems to suggest that the chapter in which it is recounted has itself been lost. It is an example of what Gerald Prince has called the "unnarrated" or "nonnarrated."⁴ Analogous examples of this phenomenon may come to mind: the "caves" scene in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*; the blank page in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*; the map of the ocean in Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*; the empty book Voltaire evokes at the end of "Micromégas"; and, perhaps most directly, the elision of the fifth chapter and the fifth part of Georges Perec's *La Disparition*.

If the absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, it is important to read this lacunary moment as a privileged signifier in the economy of the novel as a whole. In an early essay on Edmond Jabès, Jacques Derrida argued that the figure of ellipsis should be understood as pointing toward the book itself as a construct or an idea.⁵ That seems to me to be perfectly characteristic of the "lost" chapter of *Le Pique-nique*. In this book about losing and becoming lost, many things go missing, and this elided chapter encapsulates that topos efficiently, marked as it is by the sinister number thirteen. The lacuna interrupts the narrative in a radical, inevitable manner; yet that very process of interruption may, upon reflection, allow us to understand this text more fully.⁶ Louis has tried and failed to find his daughter. Blanche succeeds where Louis fails, but Louis has no earthly clue how she achieves that. And neither, crucially enough, does the reader of *Le Pique-nique*.

Just as nobody knows precisely what M. Grandet does when he repairs to his counting-house (even the narrator of *Eugénie Grandet*, otherwise omniscient, declares himself ignorant on that issue), so it is impossible to know how and in what circumstances Blanche finds Pauline: some things, clearly, are beyond the ken of common mortals. Yet it is also human to wonder about things we are not told, and Christian Oster plays savantly upon our readerly curiosity in this moment of his text. He encourages us to speculate on various narrative possibilities, to draw inferences from the narrative logic surrounding this missing chapter. Briefly stated, he is proposing this moment of his novel as a highly exaggerated instance of the sort of interrogative process that any reading entails.

Readers are curious people, and one of the reasons we read is to satisfy our curiosity. Texts prompt us to ask questions, and we are deeply pleased when those questions are answered. Yet no text answers every question we might put to it. In certain cases, the questions themselves are illegitimate ones, since they fall outside of the limits the text establishes for itself; one cannot ask, according to the classic example, what name Achilles used when he hid among the women. In other cases, however, our legitimate questions are met by a text's refusal to tell. That is the phenomenon which Oster puts on display so ostentatiously in *Le Pique-nique*. It should be recognized that he does this not merely anecdotally, but rather as part of a generalized pattern of narrative taciturnity, one which is deeply embedded in his authorial strategy. When Louis thinks about his wife, for instance, Oster is quick to suggest that he will not provide any additional information about her, however eager the reader may be to hear it: "Of course Pauline wasn't born with that sense of the comic, just like that, in spite of the fact that her mother was also a humorous person, and moreover, but that's another story, Louis reflects now" (97-98). We may wonder whether she died, whether she left Louis for another man, whether she joined the Foreign Legion—but we will wonder in vain, because Oster very deliberately stages that problem as belonging to the domain of the unknowable.

In a real sense, then, *Le Pique-nique* is dominated by a carefully elaborated uncertainty principle that Oster exploits for aesthetic effect. In the way it functions, the “missing” chapter of the novel can be usefully compared to the Lucretian *clinamen*, since like the *clinamen* it interrupts the scheme of things surrounding it, and by very virtue of that interruption declares its own significance. In *De rerum natura*, Lucretius postulates the *clinamen* as a locus of free will, and uses it to refute the deterministic atomic theory of Democritus, arguing that a swerve away from linearity may call a whole chain of causality into question. In similar fashion, Oster suggests in his novel that unanswered questions provide the reader with room for maneuver and a kind of creative freedom that may allow him or her to negotiate the labyrinth of this text with some degree of success. Once again, the key figure here is Blanche. She intervenes in Louis’s story just as the *clinamen* intervenes in the fall of the atoms, in an aleatory manner, unexpectedly, and without explanation. Louis himself cannot account for her, and his friend Dujardin, who happens by just as Blanche is about to leave, doesn’t appear to notice her. Yet Blanche’s agency in this novel is a capital one, through the role she plays in the drama of lost-and-found. Having found Louis, having found Pauline, Blanche writes the number of her cellular telephone on a piece of paper and gives it to Louis before riding off, to be used “If you should ever get lost again” (80), a kind of ultramodern Ariadne’s thread.

When Dujardin finds Louis, he leads Louis and Pauline out of the forest and takes them to his own house in a Parisian suburb. Oster describes the surroundings as utterly familiar ones, yet Louis experiences those surroundings as strange and incomprehensible, both inside and out. A superhighway howls its “superhighway horror” (147) next to Dujardin’s yard; the kitschy furnishings of Dujardin’s home appall Louis; paralyzed by timidity, Dujardin has nothing to say to Louis, and Louis finds nothing to say to him. When Louis puts in a telephone call to Blanche, he tells her that he is not lost this time, though all of his rhetoric proclaims the contrary; and Blanche, with her characteristic astuteness, is quick to recognize that:

You're not bothering me, she says however. So, you've got yourself lost? Louis answered no, then he said something. It was a question of finding one's bearings [*se retrouver*], of finding oneself [*se retrouver soi*], he began awkwardly, he became confused, he decided to speak about his car, that was more reasonable. (174)

Fumbling his words, Louis cannot articulate his wishes. But Blanche reads him correctly and, granted the thematics of lost-and-found that Oster has elaborated, piece by piece, in his novel, so do we. Through Louis's maladroitness, Oster plays on the verb *se retrouver*, which can mean "to meet" when the context is plural, but which literally means "to find oneself again." As Louis stumbles over his syntax, the possibility that first suggested itself to him in the forest, dimly, becomes finally clear: to find Blanche once again, in order eventually to find himself.

That passage is emblematic of a broader ludic strategy which colors *Le Pique-nique* from beginning to end, furnishing this otherwise dark tale with welcome highlights. In the forest, Louis is caught up in a ludic dynamic that he cannot fathom, like a rat in a maze. Wherever he turns, Louis encounters the same sort of dilemma: constrained by circumstances that are beyond his understanding, he is called upon to play a game whose rules are arbitrary and obscure. Faced with such a situation, Louis nonetheless recognizes that one of the uses of play is to enable one to pass the time, when all else fails: "One must wait. One must play. One must occupy oneself" (175). He is moreover a man who knows how to play certain other kinds of games, and most especially (despite his awkwardness on the telephone) language games. He plays a kind of riddle game with Pauline for instance, something the French call a *charade à tiroirs*:

Not daring to begin a game with Pauline that would be so engrossing that he would be unable to break it off in order to answer the telephone, Louis stayed near the phone, suggesting to his daughter that they play riddles together, an exercise that this child, already attentive to the fascinations and surprises of language, had recently mastered. My first one, began Louis, is red and white, with a little green tail, and is sometimes eaten at dinner as an appetizer. My second one is the opposite of slowness.

My third one is something that can be read, when somebody is a little bit older than you, on the faces of watches. My entirety allows one to be warm in wintertime, at home. (169-70)

It is important to note that there are two levels of play going on here simultaneously. Just as Louis proposes this game to Pauline, so too does Oster propose it to his reader, furnishing the answer to the first question, *radis* [radish], but letting the reader guess *hâte* [haste], *heure* [time], and the solution to the riddle, *radiateur* [radiator]. In addition, Louis's sense that Pauline is already intrigued by language is clearly reciprocated in Oster's hope that his reader will share Pauline's delight in the "fascinations" and "surprises" that language provides.

That passage, and others like it in the novel, may be seen to emblazon a function that is broadly distributed throughout the text, and it may be read as a parable of the novel as a whole. Appearances notwithstanding, *Le Pique-nique* is a comedy wherein various levels of play are continually vexed one against the other, sometimes in a straightforward manner, at other times ironically—but always in mutual articulation. In many ways, *Le Pique-nique* is a centrifugal text, as Louis's constant wandering and the "missing" chapter thirteen suggest. Yet Louis's aspirations, however he frames them (to find Pauline, to reconnect with his friends from the army, to get out of the forest, to find some kind of emotional solace with Blanche), clearly constitute a quest toward the center of things, and that quest is essentially ludic in character.⁷ The same is true of Oster's own quest, for he seeks to establish a ludic contract with his reader, a contract whose terms are mediated and exemplified by the actions of the characters in the novel. That is, Oster is inviting us to engage in a game that is based on literature and its conditions of possibility, a game that he proposes as pleasurable and amusing, but which does not lack seriousness of purpose and import.⁸ Through the story of Louis and his trials, Oster is asking us to think about how stories come to *be*.

In the late 1930s, Johan Huizinga, the distinguished medievalist, postulated a bold theory of aesthetics in which he argued that all culture arises in play. I shall not test that vast and seductive thesis here, but the fundamental claim he stakes for literary

culture, that *poiesis* is a play-function (Huizinga 119), seems particularly apposite in the case of *Le Pique-nique*. Closely examined, Oster's novel may be seen as a set of carefully imbricated games played out on various thematic, syntactic, and metaliterary stages. Oster encourages us to play, for instance, with the distinction we habitually draw between fiction and reality. On a first level, the forest serves as a metaphor of fiction, and, more precisely, *this* fiction, where Louis's disorientation recapitulates our own. Even within the forest, however, certain events seem to Louis more unreal than others. His initial encounter with Blanche is a good example of that. She appears out of nowhere, and inscribes herself on Louis's horizon of consciousness like a vision. Oster abstracts that event from its context and deliberately frames it in a manner that is different from everything that precedes, suggesting that the scene might constitute "a vignette, an old engraving entitled *The Meeting in the Forest*, whose publisher might have wished to modernize its aspect and flesh out its meaning by adorning it with a bit of dialogue intended to seduce the potential buyer and satisfy his or her curiosity" (58). His tactic is a canny, subtle one. In one apparently simple gesture, he designates that encounter as a fiction embedded in a fictional register that suddenly seems somewhat more "real" by force of contrast; he puts on display the process of embellishment that fiction relies upon; he alludes to the profound hermeneutic impulse that motivates readers; and he reminds us that fiction is a commodity circulating in an economy and directed toward potential consumers—in point of fact toward us. In other words, Oster is playfully directing our attention to the dynamic of textual production that is occurring before our eyes, and that readers, lost in fictions, tend quite naturally to forget.

Once out of the forest and dubiously ensconced in Dujardin's house, Louis wonders why Dujardin didn't seem to notice Blanche in the forest, though she was right before his eyes—or was she? In retrospect, Louis is forced to admit that his perceptions in the forest may have deceived him at times: "Though he himself, Louis, during his wanderings in the forest, had felt several times that he was seeing or believing things that were not there" (142). Else-

where in the text, too, Louis meditates on the problematic distinction of the real and the unreal, casting those categories explicitly in literary terms:

In fact Louis knows exactly what he intends to do, or what he would like to do, now that he has found his daughter, or rather now that the loss of his daughter has been revealed as pure fiction, at the most his daughter inexplicably wandered off for a few long moments, but surely wasn't lost, what Louis wants to do now is to be alone with his daughter and with this piece of paper that is not a fiction, no, and which, in the bottom of his pocket, constitutes the sole trace of this woman rider's brief appearance in his life. (96-97)

If the experience of having lost Pauline, viewed after the fact, seems like a "pure fiction" to Louis, he nevertheless regards the piece of paper with Blanche's telephone number on it as the material guarantor of an encounter that he might otherwise be compelled to interpret as fictional. That is an issue that can only be adjudicated empirically, of course; and Louis's hesitation in placing a call to Blanche is founded in his dread of discovering that he imagined the entire encounter. That hesitation furnishes yet another locus of play for Oster and his reader, for if we disentangle ourselves from the multiple layers of fancy that he interweaves here, we realize that in fact the encounter *is* a fictional one, imagined by someone in the broader imaginary landscape of a novel. Moreover, fiction "works" in just that way, by imaginings through imaginings.

The little piece of paper with Blanche's phone number may be taken as an objective correlative for the novelistic intrigue itself—here both romantic and *romanesque*. Oster focuses our attention on it closely, because, more than anything else, it is the thing that links Louis's imagination, Oster's, and our own. Louis's narrative imagination is relatively naive, but the pleasure he takes in stories of his own making is abundant. Alone with his daughter at Dujardin's house, he tells Pauline a story: "he introduced a happy ending to which, as a grand finale, he added a party with all her little friends, represented at a moment's notice by some forks and spoons that Louis found in the kitchen" (163-64). Left to his own devices, that is, he will end his tales happily; and clearly he

hopes that the story of Louis and Blanche will end as felicitously as the story he shares with Pauline. The narrative imagination that Christian Oster deploys, however, is somewhat more sophisticated. He plays ironically on Louis's storytelling; and he plays tensively on the reader's sense that something must happen in *Le Pique-nique*, one way or the other. There is a battle of narrative wills at work in this text, an agonistic that is ludic in nature, and one which is largely unresolved. The promise that the little piece of paper represents will find its confirmation (Blanche *will* answer Louis's call, she *will* come to his rescue once again, at Dujardin's house, just as she did in the forest); but the question of whether this novel ends "happily" or not will be left nonetheless very much open.

Another site of ludic exchange in *Le Pique-nique* involves syntax. Oster proposes a meditation on two levels, local and global, involving on the one hand the syntax of the individual sentence and on the other hand that of the novel. His intent is to make us realize the reciprocal affinities that play between those levels, and that may account for what we know as "style." Often, especially when recording Louis's thoughts or speech acts, Oster constructs his sentences according to a principle of aggregation, with little or no coordination, piling clause upon clause until the whole edifice threatens to collapse, as in this passage where Dujardin calls a friend on the phone, using its automatic dialing function:

Dujardin was perhaps not so solitary after all, mused Louis, and maybe he was acquainted with more people than he was willing to admit, who knows, unless on the contrary, knowing only a very few people, he wished piously to remember them in that ebonite hollow, close to his hand or to his bosom, where, in order to embrace them symbolically, he might think that an index finger would suffice, his own, with a fingernail at its end, rather than the telephone index that one usually leaves next to the phone, an index rendered obsolete by that absolutely modern device. (130)

There are several moves in the game here. Most obviously, Oster wishes to persuade us that Louis's "lostness" is more than anything else a state of mind; Louis's thoughts wander, just as he

himself wanders in the forest, without any apparent direction or clear goal. The syntax of the sentence is tortured, just as Louis himself is tortured by his solitude and his sense of being apart from the world in which he lives. The syntactic indecision one notes here, the recursive gestures, and the evocation of multiple interpretive possibilities are all closely reflective, in microcosmic form, of *Le Pique-nique*'s structure. That is, this passage, like the one describing the riddle game, may be viewed as a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel as a whole. Finally, the passage effectively projects Louis's own wandering upon the reader, for we become lost in the errant syntax of this sentence, looking ahead for some way out, looking back to see where we went astray.

That last phenomenon is particularly evident when Louis tries to unburden himself to Dujardin. Whereas Blanche is a gifted interpreter who knows how to decipher Louis's conversational maunderings and identify what the poor man is *trying* to say, Dujardin on the contrary is utterly baffled by Louis's language, which leaves him virtually speechless:

Me, Louis suddenly said, I don't have many friends.

Ah, said Dujardin.

No, said Louis, surprised at himself, but who said nonetheless, thus, I have a few friends, of course, but not very many, but it's difficult, he admitted to his own astonishment, I like women too much, even though I don't know many women. Above all, I don't like men very much, he added, properly stupefied, or rather I didn't use to like them, I'm only beginning to appreciate them as time goes by, but at present I lack them, I lack men, men friends. And moreover, he forced himself to conclude, decidedly astonished that he could confess such things to Dujardin, then accepting, after all, that he could open himself a little bit to this sort of friend, feeling that, even if he couldn't hope that Dujardin would receive his confession in a positive manner, he was sure that he wouldn't hold it against him, moreover, I'm thirsty.

There, that's a thought, said Dujardin, suddenly almost mirthful, I'll get us something to drink. (121-22)

Both Blanche and Dujardin can be seen as mediative figures of the reader in *Le Pique-nique*. But Blanche is the reader at his or her best and most resourceful, while Dujardin serves to mediate those moments in the text when the reader, like Louis himself,

becomes miserably benighted. Moments of tortured syntax recur insistently in *Le Pique-nique*, and indeed the syntax of the novel as a whole is closely analogous to that of the passages I have quoted. For *Le Pique-nique*, too, meanders maddeningly, unstably, indecisively, and its direction is obscure. It is difficult to assign pertinence to narrative event here; narrative prominencing seems to have been flattened. The few, sketchy adumbrations of teleology function parodically rather than frankly, pointing toward narrative possibilities that either result in dead ends or lead us back to where we began. The errant itinerary we follow in this novel obliges us necessarily to reflect upon Oster's narrative technique; and we may come to realize that what is going on in *Le Pique-nique* is the elaboration of a model, exaggerated for parodic and ludic effect, of certain very essential narrative conventions. In that regard, the image of the forest assumes capital importance. Like Borges's labyrinth, like John Barth's funhouse, like Georges Perec's jigsaw puzzle, Oster offers the forest to us both as an image of his own text and as a master image of the broad literary tradition out of which *Le Pique-nique* arises.

Such considerations dawn progressively upon the reader, as it slowly becomes clear that Christian Oster is proposing the story of Louis and his problems as a parable of yet another story, whose protagonist is the reader; and therein lies the final move of Oster's ludic strategy. As I have suggested, our reading experience is very largely mediated through the characters in this novel. From time to time, Oster provides us with reading instructions, wryly encoded in his description of the characters' situation, for instance when Louis is searching for his friends, early on in the novel: "Louis felt that, along with Pauline, he must explore the forest with more rigor from now on, in order to find them" (27). The "rigor" that Louis has to apply if he is to be successful is the same sort of quality that we must bring to our reading, according to Oster. More generally speaking, the actions of the characters in *Le Pique-nique* reflect the kinds of reading protocols we test one after the other—with varying degrees of success—as we make our way through the novel. Sometimes those reflections are flattering to us, sometimes they are distinctly unflattering. At certain mo-

ments, the reader is bound to feel as lost as Louis, or as non-plused as Dujardin; at other moments, he or she may feel as incisive as Blanche. One thing is certain, however: our reading of *Le Pique-nique* is constructed through those “others” in a playful dynamic of reciprocity. We see ourselves through those others, we look at ourselves looking at them; and, through that process, we may recognize a projection of ourselves, that figure who may very well be, as Sander Gilman has suggested, the real “other” whom we seek as we read.⁹

It is in just that perspective that one may interpret *Le Pique-nique* as an irredentist fable. But it is one with a distinct twist. Oster tantalizes the reader with the expectation that Louis will “find himself” at the end of this story. As Louis drives off with Blanche, however, that issue remains undecided: “Then Blanche turned toward Louis and asked him if, now, they could leave. And then Louis looked her in the eyes. And then it was like always, he didn’t see anything, he didn’t learn anything at all, but he said Yes” (189). On the one hand, the lack of resolution is right and proper, granted the general economy of *Le Pique-nique*; like all of Christian Oster’s other novels, and like much of contemporary literature as well, this is a text which argues that questions are infinitely more intriguing than answers.¹⁰ On the other hand, Oster wishes to persuade us, I think, that the import of *Le Pique-nique* is elsewhere, residing closely in our own experience. That may explain why Oster places so many obstacles in our way, frustrating our attempts to deploy familiar reading strategies in order to come to terms with the novel. Encountering those obstacles, we are continually confronted with our efforts to surmount them. In other words, as we read *Le Pique-nique*, Oster incessantly leads us, sometimes gently, sometimes brutally, back to our own reading. That reflexive gesture, of course, is precisely the kind of move that Oster himself makes, over and over again, in the telling of this tale. Moreover, it announces the principal claims that Oster intends to stake here concerning writing and reading. If one accepts the hypothesis that *Le Pique-nique* is a story about the fundamentally recurvate shape of literature, certain other considerations become clear. Readers do get lost in novels, Oster suggests,

whether that novel be *Eugénie Grandet* or *Dans le labyrinthe*. So do writers, for that matter, who are faced with a bewildering array of narrative possibilities, a garden of forking paths that lead not outward, but rather *inward*. And indeed, in Christian Oster's opinion, it is just that itinerary of inward, reflective wandering which accounts for the pleasure of the text, both for the writer and for the reader.

Notes

1. The Minuit writers I'm thinking of are François Bon, Eric Chevillard, Patrick Deville, Jean Echenoz, Christian Gailly, Eric Laurrent, Marie NDiaye, Yves Ravey, Marie Redonnet, Eugène Savitzkaya, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Antoine Volodine. Among other writers, one might mention Emmanuèle Bernheim, Emmanuel Carrère, Marcel Cohen, Annie Ernaux, Jacques Jouet, Leslie Kaplan, Isabelle Lévesque, Danielle Mémoire, Pierre Michon, Alina Reyes, Patrick Roegiers, and Olivier Targowla.

2. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

3. See Jacques Roubaud's eloquent formulation of that feeling of radical alienation, in another meditation upon loss, *La Pluralité des mondes de Lewis* (1991): "For no world, in fact, is ours, that's what the constant functioning of our mind, against every inclination toward hope, tells us" (105).

4. See Gerald Prince's *Narrative as Theme* (1992): "We are also familiar with another, closely related category that may be called the unnarrated, or nonnarrated. I am not thinking of what is left unsaid by a narrative because of ignorance, stupidity, repression, or choice. Rather, I am thinking of all the frontal and lateral ellipses explicitly underlined by the narrator ('I will not recount what happened during that fateful week') or inferable from a significant lacuna in the chronology or through a retrospective filling-in: given a series of events $e_1, e_2, e_3 \dots e_n$ occurring at time t or at times $t_1, t_2, t_3 \dots t_n$ respectively, one of the events goes unmentioned" (30).

5. See Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1978): "Thus understood, the return to the book is of an *elliptical* essence. Something invisible is missing in the grammar of this repetition. As this lack is

invisible and undeterminable, as it completely redoubles and consecrates the book, once more passing each point along its circuit, nothing has budged. And yet all meaning is altered by this lack. Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has the same center, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. But within the *ellipsis*, by means of simple redoubling of the route, the solicitation of closure, and the jointing of the line, the book has let itself be thought as such" (296).

6. See Maurice Blanchot's "L'Interruption" (1964), where he argues that "Interruption is necessary in every sequence of words; intermittance enables the becoming; discontinuity guarantees the continuity of understanding" (870).

7. See Derrida: "But is not the desire for a center, as a function of play itself, the indestructible itself? And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us? It is here that the hesitation between writing as decentering and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite" (297).

8. On the notion of "serious play," see Thomas Mann's remarks about *The Magic Mountain*: "Goethe once called his *Faust* 'this very serious jest.' Well, my preparation was for a work of art which could only become a jest—a very serious jest—by dint of unburdening myself of a quantity of material in the polemical and analytical piece of writing. 'This very serious jest.' It is a good definition of art, of *The Magic Mountain* as well. I could not have jested and played without first living through the problem in dead, human reality. Only then could I rise, as an artist, above it" (721).

9. See *Inscribing the Other* (1991): "The fictive personalities we are constantly generating are rooted in the internalized dichotomy upon which we construct our world. Thus there is always an Other for us, no matter how we define ourselves. The ultimate Other is the doppelgänger, the Other which is our self, but a self projected into the world" (14).

10. See Gayatri Spivak's remarks about postmodern literary discourse: "Whereas in other kinds of discourses there is a move toward the final truth of a situation, literature, even without this argument, displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it. In the general discourse of the humanities, there is a sort of search for solutions, whereas in literary discourse there is a

playing out of the problem as the solution, if you like" (*In Other Worlds* 77).

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