

# Literature as Uncertainty Practice: An Anomaly at the End of Literature

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**Abstract** Literature emerges as an uncertainty practice in the context of today's volatile environments. Considering literary texts as linguistic constructions reprogramming our lifeworld through formal constraints and creative rethinking, from the perspective of cognitive literary studies, Karin Kukkonen proposes an argument for the continued relevance of literature.

## Literatur als »Unsicherheitspraxis«: Eine Anomalie am Ausklang der Literatur

**Zusammenfassung** Dieser Artikel diskutiert Literatur als »Unsicherheitspraxis« im Kontext der heutigen volatilen Umwelten. Karin Kukkonen betrachtet literarische Texte als linguistische Konstrukte, die unsere Lebenswelt durch formale Beschränkungen und kreatives Neudenken re-programmieren, und entwickelt daraus ein Argument für die bleibende Relevanz der Literatur.

Hervé Le Tellier's novel *L'Anomalie* became a surprise bestseller and critical success in 2020 in France and internationally in English translation.<sup>1</sup> Even though the novel was written well before the Covid-19 virus made the headlines and even though it did not represent a scenario of contagion and containment, apparently, the anomalous events in Le Tellier's narrative resonated with readers living through the first year

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<sup>1</sup> Hervé Le Tellier, *L'Anomalie*, Paris 2020.

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of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Le Tellier's *L'Anomalie* tells the story of a plane from Paris that lands in New York twice, once in March and once in June 2021, replicating all the crew and passengers at two different points in time. The narrative plays through the large-scale counterfactual scenario of what would happen if one could jump back in time by three months through the experiences of multiple protagonists. A writer, Victor Miesel, who lands in March, commits suicide before the second plane lands in June, spawning a second Victor Miesel, who can profit from his own posthumous fame for having written a novel called *L'Anomalie* before his death. The pilot from the plane that lands in March dies from cancer, so that the protagonist gets a second chance when he lands in June and is immediately diagnosed (though to no avail). *L'Anomalie* explores how the ripple in time affects an entire network of protagonists including a Swiss assassin and a Nigerian pop star.

When read against the current narrative about the »end of literature« that also informs the editorial brief behind this special issue, namely, heteronomy aesthetics, autofiction and life-writing as dominant forms and decline of literary complexity, Le Tellier's novel again presents something of an anomaly: The novel creates a scenario that could not be further from the authenticity-driven imperatives of the current situation. *L'Anomalie* takes a ripple in reality, which generates doubles of all the passengers and crew on a transatlantic airplane, as its main plot point. Le Tellier uses the constraint of a ripple in reality in order to break apart the expected regularities of our models of the world and to play through the scenario along the lines of a novel tracing the progress of the network of protagonists. Which one of the doubles constitutes the authentic self is an issue that remains entirely on the side-lines, and it has to my knowledge not been raised in reviews of the novel. Authenticity, identified as the governing value of literature moving past its familiar fictional, autonomy-based guise, is not a concern for Le Tellier. What counts is that each of the doubles finds a way to inhabit the radically changed world into which both those protagonists who land in March and those who land in June are thrown.

Le Tellier is himself a prominent member of the literary group Oulipo (Ouvrier de Littérature Potentielle). In the *Esthétique de l'Oulipo*, he outlines the literary principles and values underlying the groups' projects: Oulipo seeks to devise formal constraints, reprogramming everyday language, in order to produce new templates for literary narrative and poems.<sup>3</sup> *L'Anomalie* devises a counterfactual scenario where not language but reality itself is reprogrammed, and the novel evokes the formal playfulness of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as its main reference point.<sup>4</sup> William Marx in *L'Adieu à la Littérature* (2005) identifies Oulipo as the literary enterprise of the twentieth century that foregrounds linguistic form and literary

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a survey on reading materials and habits during 2020 in Norway showed that only few readers actually read texts that explicitly addressed pandemics. See Karin Kukkonen and Ylva Østby, »Readers During the Covid19-Pandemic. Reading Choices, Habits and Emotional Experiences,« *Scientific Study of Literature* 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ssol.22005.kuk> (last accessed 21 September 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Hervé Le Tellier, *Esthétique de L'Oulipo*, Bordeaux 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Le Tellier (note 1), 390. We read about the novelist-protagonist Victor Miesel, »Comme titre il a pensé à *Si par une nuit d'hiver deux cent quarante-trois voyageurs* [...] puis il a voulu en faire l'incipit – et Anna a soupiré. [...] Hélas, *L'Anomalie* était déjà pris«. Calvino himself was a member of Oulipo and considered *If on a Winter's Night* as one of his »Oulipian« works.

intertexts and thereby hastens the demise of the literary author (and literature more generally).<sup>5</sup> According to Marx, literature written under Oulipian constraints remains at the level of conceptual exploration and proves largely »inaccessible à un large public«.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, Le Tellier publishes a bestseller following the constraint-based, formalist tradition of Oulipo, and he does not pursue any activist or authenticity-driven agenda.

By all accounts this novel should have failed to garner as much appeal and relevance as it did.<sup>7</sup> In this article, I propose to treat Le Tellier's success not as an anomaly but as an indication that a case for formally complex, fictional and constraint-based literature can be made also today, if we understand literature as a cognitive practice for engaging with profound uncertainty. Language and literary form manipulate the outlines of storytelling to generate a new configuration that enables Le Tellier to sketch out the experience of living through 2020 for readers.

## I.

Today, not only literature is in crisis, but crisis lies at the core of the experience of the present. The list of crises in the last decade from the legitimacy of democratic processes to global health and climate change is too long and too obvious to be reiterated here. Uncertainty has apparently entered a new level. Philosophers distinguish between three modes of uncertainty in our engagement with the world around us: (1) expected uncertainty, that is, instances where structured knowledge enables us to resolve uncertainty (such as looking up directions on GoogleMaps); (2) unexpected uncertainty, that is, instances where we need to devise new protocols to engage with an uncertain situation, but where we can learn reliably from our mistakes (such as learning how to drive a car); and finally (3) volatility, that is, instances where the environment is not stable enough to learn from mistakes and to devise new, reliable protocols.<sup>8</sup> The crises of the last decades clearly fall under the final category, creating a volatile environment where epistemic strategies to deal with uncertainty fail, because the probabilities of the environment keep changing.<sup>9</sup>

Writing down one's experience offers a means to navigate such volatility, and creating a narrative serves as a means to generate an epistemic environment with some

<sup>5</sup> William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation XVIIe–XXe siècle*, Paris 2005, 152: »L'exhibition de la forme répond symétriquement à une fascination pour le vide et pour la specularité«.

<sup>6</sup> Marx (note 5), 150.

<sup>7</sup> My assessment is informed by the editorial brief for this special issue, Marx's excellent history of the discourse around the end of literature, as well as by Alexandre Gefen, *L'idée de la littérature: De l'art pour l'art à la littérature d'intervention*, Paris 2021 and by Sven Anders Johansson, *Litteraturslut [The end of literature]*, Stockholm 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Miller, Kathryn Nave, George Deane, Andy Clark, »The Value of Uncertainty«, *Aeon Magazine*. <https://aeon.co/essays/use-uncertainty-to-leverage-the-power-of-your-predictive-brain> (last accessed 21 September 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a similar argument may be made for literature of earlier periods. See Stefka Eriksen, »Reading in Times of Crisis. New Interpretations of Stories of the Settlement of Iceland«, *Scandinavian Studies* 94/2 (2022), 143–173.



measure of stability, where uncertainty can be explored and probed for new protocols of meaning-making. Literary texts provide a »scaffolding« for human thought on this account.<sup>10</sup> Language and writing are key for a culture-based response to volatility from the philosophical perspective of extended cognition, because here, »We can take actions designed to break and rebuild the models themselves.«<sup>11</sup> In this context, I propose to reevaluate literature as an uncertainty practice for both readers and writers, that is, a cultural practice particularly suited to inhabit the uncomfortable epistemic space of volatility. Literature on this understanding does not represent reality, but rather provides »designer environments« where probabilities can be re-configured flexibly, for example, through a counterfactual situation, and where the narrative does not need to cohere into a conclusive message.<sup>12</sup> The literature of formal constraints and experiments has a role to play, not because it provides escape and comfort, but because its formal contingencies and blatantly fictional scenarios model what it means to inhabit a volatile environment.

In what sense is the world of *L'Anomalie* volatile? Alongside the exploration of the personal consequences of this anomalous temporal situation, a team of mathematicians, IT-experts, and military specialists attempts to explain in scientific terms what has happened. The most likely (though ultimately not conclusive) hypothesis that emerges is that the world is a computer programme that experienced a momentary glitch. Indeed, the glitch itself confirms this hypothesis about the world as a virtual simulation. »[Jusqu'à] ce jour, j'estimais à une chance sur dix la probabilité que notre existence ne soit qu'un programme sur un disque dur. Avec cette »anomalie«, j'en suis quasiment certain.«<sup>13</sup> The mathematician Adrian engages in a soul-searching conversation with his colleague Meredith about the implications of such a hypothesis for human experience. The simulation hypothesis explains best what had just happened, but because there is no way to invalidate it (as everything could always be explained in terms of another programme), it remains ultimately unproven. Furthermore, based on this hypothesis that our world is essentially a sim-

<sup>10</sup> Regina Fabry, »Narrative Scaffolding,« *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 2021. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13164-021-00595-w> (last accessed 21 September 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Miller et al. (note 8), n.p. Miller and colleagues argue that the added value of literature lies in the possibility to take a (safe) distance from reality, while I am going to suggest that literature enables non-mimetic ways of manipulating these models, which may be more productive in generating flexible modes of engagement.

<sup>12</sup> This suggestion is related to recent arguments about »speculative fiction«, as outlined in Merja Polvinen, »Sense-Making and Wonder: An Enactive Approach to Speculative Fiction« in Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Literary Theories*, Edinburgh 2018, 67-80; or in Elise Kraatila, »Conspicuous Fabulations: Speculative Fiction as a Tool for Confronting Post-Truth Discourse,« *Narrative Inquiry* 29/2 (2019), 418-433. My argument is based on an understanding of literary texts in general as »probability designs« that extend the capacity of the human mind is outlined in detail in Karin Kukkonen, *Probability Designs. Literature and Predictive Processing*, New York 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Le Tellier (note 1), 203. Le Tellier identifies the proposal as »l'hypothèse Bostrom« (200), referring to the philosopher Nick Bostrom. Bostrom puts forward the proposal that if we believe that our descendants will have the computational power to run large-scale simulations (rather than go extinct before reaching this stage), then we also need to entertain the possibility that we ourselves already are an »ancestor-simulation« of a future stage of human development. Cf. Nick Bostrom, »Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?«, *Philosophical Quarterly* 53/211 (2003), 243-255.

ulation, there is no immediate action that the military or government can take nor predict when the next anomaly is likely to occur.<sup>14</sup>

As the novel progresses, also the doubles find different ways to integrate their anomalous selves into familiar protocols, such as both doubles agreeing to live as siblings or the new double finding their own place in the world, after being forced to abandon their previous course of life. Unhappy endings are just as likely, however, as the assassin Blake kills and dismembers his double, as cases of child abuse come to light and as the pilot of the plane dies of cancer – twice. Nevertheless, the novel closes with a passage underlining the vibrant humanity that joins all of the characters readers have met throughout the narrative, before dissolving the letters on the page into an illegible assortment that takes the shape of a trickle down the page.<sup>15</sup> Le Tellier affirms on the one hand the person-like status of the characters, while he underlines on the other hand that they are nothing but constructions of the text, necessary vehicles through which an »anomaly« plays out that ultimately remains within the bounds of the text.

## II.

Literature loses its autonomy at the same rate as one of its key values – creativity – expands into just about any other conceivable social sphere. Creativity has developed into the key imperative in today's society. It is no longer simply the quality proper to the literary writer and artist, but an expectation imposed on everyone.<sup>16</sup> The »end of literature« therefore comes with a paradox: While literacy rates are plummeting, more and more people want to become writers or, in fact, authors.<sup>17</sup> These new authors insist on presenting their experience in written form, placing themselves into traditions of life-writing and inscribing themselves into the singularity imperative where every individual has a story in need of telling.<sup>18</sup> What counts is the authenticity of individual experience, rather than the author's expertise in creating formally complex texts. Literary language comes to be worn down to a transparent window through which experience can be directly transported, or so the argument runs.

The current trend for autobiographical formats can and should be read in dialogue with the sociological trend towards valuing singular, authentic experience and the role the internet takes as a resource providing multiple structures for personalising experience and for performing one's singular (and therefore authentic) experience.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> According to Bostrom himself, if we were actually living in a simulation, nothing »should prevent us from going about our business and making plans and predictions for tomorrow« (254).

<sup>15</sup> Le Tellier (note 1), 397.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität. Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung*, Frankfurt a. M. 2012 provides an accessible sociological account of these developments.

<sup>17</sup> As observed by Johansson (note 7). Johansson makes his case based on statistics from Sweden, but enrolment figures for creative writing courses vis à vis English literature or Comparative literature in English-speaking countries show comparable trends.

<sup>18</sup> On »singularities,« see Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*, Berlin 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Reckwitz (note 18), 247.



Social media and personalisation algorithms that prefigure your search results are »scaffolding« for singularities. Identity and the choices on which it is based become more and more predictable within a certain range of variation. If self-narratives in everyday life depend on such strongly distributed and mediated scaffolding, then what role could remain for literature, especially in a volatile, crisis-ridden environment?

The better an algorithm learns to personalise reading suggestions or proposals for restaurants to our preferences, the less it feels like we are making an autonomous choice following these suggestions and proposals. The »filter bubbles« of social media and personalisation algorithms that support individualism are two sides of the same coin.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, applications are being developed that introduce randomness in everyday life, such as randomly deciding a destination for your Uber chauffeur or a meal to be delivered for dinner. Personalisation algorithms work well in environments of certain uncertainty and uncertain uncertainty, but mostly create »learned helplessness« in volatile environments because they artificially limit the range of available alternative behaviours.<sup>21</sup> In a volatile environment, such as the crisis-ridden present, a broad range of alternative behaviours and epistemic operations enable more flexible responses and may therefore be more productive than the short-term predictability of the personalisation algorithm. Such randomisation applications take the form of quasi-Oulipian constraints on users' personal lives, and arguably, literary texts have the potential to make readers think through a »reprogrammed« version of the world, as their form reshapes the traditional regularities of everyday language and narrativisation.

Le Tellier's constraint works as a plot event that »reprogrammes« the world.<sup>22</sup> The range of possible choices of these characters in the face of an arbitrary situation arguably constitutes the appeal of Le Tellier's characters. In many respects, as also Oulipian literature demonstrates, an arbitrary constraint can give rise to authenticity, first, in the choice of the constraint itself (if that is given) and second in actions one takes to navigate a volatile environment. Marx mentions for example the fiction of Georges Perec, where the arbitrary constraints enable the author to engage with family trauma.<sup>23</sup> Anne F. Garréta's *Pas un jour* is an autofictional account written in thirty chapters over the course of a month, where every »day« the narrator desires another woman.<sup>24</sup> Different reiterations of the same constraint reveal different experiences that yield not the singularity of »authentic« experience but a sense of the range of possible experiences that may well lie outside the »filter bubble« of our immediate preferences.

A literary text is more than just a philosophical thought experiment where decision points are carved out along the line of counterfactuals. Embodied language develops

<sup>20</sup> Reckwitz (note 18), 259.

<sup>21</sup> Miller et al. (note 8), n.p. They present the case of computer programmer Max Hawkins who spent two years letting a random algorithm decide where he lived, what route he took and what he ate.

<sup>22</sup> In the predictive processing framework, this would be called a »prediction error« that leads to new insights into the regularities underlying our world. See Kukkonen (note 12).

<sup>23</sup> Marx (note 5), 150.

<sup>24</sup> Anne F. Garréta, *Pas un jour*, Paris 2007.

»thickened situation models« for readers to inhabit,<sup>25</sup> and literary texts design »consciousness proxies« that enable an intuitive sense of characters' experience against the background of the larger situation model.<sup>26</sup> Adrian's and Meredith's existential troubles over the computer-simulation hypothesis are not resolved by reasoning, but on the dance floor, which enables readers to share their embodied movement and their enjoyment at continuing from an earlier, disrupted attempt at dancing together.<sup>27</sup> These consciousness proxies, however, emerge against the background of their discussion around the possibility that they actually live in a simulation, which leads to the experience of a more uneasy state in readers. Literary texts, an embodied cognitive approach suggests, draw on the human mind's capacity to make meaning from rhythms, resonances between bodies' movement and emotional expressions, as well as the material environment where we are situated. The meaning-making, however, is never conclusive, as literary texts do not reproduce but scaffold creative cognitive work when »reprogramming« reality.

### III.

*L'Anomalie* presents a relatively straightforward constraint: Le Tellier limits the disturbance to a single anomaly and then shows how those affected by the anomaly (passengers of the plane that lands in June) respond to the situation vis-à-vis those not initially affected by the anomaly (passengers of the plane that lands in March). *L'Anomalie* does not continue with further doubles of the plane landing in September and December. The volatile fictional environment is reducible to single counterfactual operation (what if a plane landed twice?) and thereby rendered manageable in Le Tellier's novel. The »reprogramming« that takes place in Le Tellier's novel can be described in terms of what Lorraine Daston calls a »thin algorithm,« that is, an abstract rule with a claim to generality.<sup>28</sup> Daston observes a development from thick algorithms in the early modern period, which were contextualised and specified through a range of examples, to thin algorithms in the modern and contemporary world that aim to »freeze out« context and to dispense with the discretion of those who apply the rules.<sup>29</sup> As Le Tellier writes a novel through the logic of the algorithm, he embeds the »thin« rule into embodied situation model of a literary text.

Not only embodied language »thickens« situation models. Anne F. Garréta, who is also a member of Oulipo, chooses an algorithm to manipulate Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* along with her narrator's actual world as the constraint behind her novel *La Décomposition* (1999). The narrator identifies a character in one of the volumes from Proust's masterpiece, counts how many sentences into the

<sup>25</sup> Marco Caracciolo, Karin Kukkonen, *With Bodies. Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition*, Columbus 2021 provide an outline of an embodied approach to literary texts.

<sup>26</sup> Karin Kukkonen, »Designs on Consciousness. Literature and Predictive Processing«, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Le Tellier (note 1), 242.

<sup>28</sup> Lorraine Daston, *Rules. A Short History of What We Live By*, Princeton 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Daston (note 28), 271.





volume the character appears, then counts the number of passers-by in his/her world, kills that person, and then proceeds to remove the character from a computerised version of Proust's text. Garréta's narrator formulates his/her own constraint and thereby places the ways in which the narrator acts in the fictional world in direct parallel to how the text of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* gets rewritten.

Garréta's constraint, like Le Tellier's, is essentially arbitrary: The killer/narrator consciously avoids any human motivation for his/her actions. »C'est une des tâches de cette poétique nouvelle de rompre la domination des *motifs* sur l'esprit criminel«.<sup>30</sup>

Like Le Tellier on the final page of *L'Anomalie*, Garréta highlights the double status for her protagonists as characters and textual constructs: »Ce que nous appelons personne est un certain lien entre un corps et un nom, lien que forge un complexe système de règles, lequel s'expose par là autant plus à la contingence qu'il prétend la borner, lien fragile et que le meurtrier doit dénouer pour le doubler«.<sup>31</sup> The actions of the author/narrator serve as a »petit programme tueur des noms« in Proust's canonical text,<sup>32</sup> but narrates at the same time strongly embodied encounters in which the author/narrator puts an end to the lives of characters in the fictional world, for example, his/her assassination of »Madame Verdurin«, who appears for the first time on the pages of *Du côté de chez Swann*, during the time it takes an elevator to reach the top floor of her building.<sup>33</sup> Garréta intensifies the tension between characters in a fictional world and the arbitrary operations that govern the language in which they are represented by turning this relationship into the lethal contingency of a murderous constraint. Depending on when in the text these characters appear (the first contingent aspect), they are matched on the passers-by whom the author/narrator encounters (the second contingent aspect) and then executed according to the algorithmic command of the constraint. Only at the very end of the novel, Albertine escapes when the author/narrator makes an attempt on what turns out to be a mirror image and gets killed him/herself.

Garréta states in an interview, »je fais une opération proustienne sur Proust«.<sup>34</sup> Her novel abounds with pastiches of Proust's style in observing other characters through long, complicated sentences (linked to the narrator lying in wait for them before proceeding to the assassination). While Garréta's algorithm is »thin,« like Le Tellier's, it is embedded in a situation model that is not only »thick« with human but also with literary experientiality. She recontextualises the thin algorithm, typical of today's computational mode of bureaucratic and other automatization, and thereby develops it into a paradigmatic algorithm open to manipulation and

<sup>30</sup> Anne F. Garréta, *La Décomposition*, Paris 1999, 23. Italics in the original. Garréta leaves the gender of her author/narrator ambiguous. Gender ambiguity by avoiding the linguistic markers for grammatical gender was the constraint on which she wrote her first novel, *Sphinx*, Paris 1992.

<sup>31</sup> Garréta (note 30), 91–92.

<sup>32</sup> Garréta (note 30), 233.

<sup>33</sup> Garréta (note 30), 220–222.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Baldwin, »On Garréta on Proust,« *French Studies* 70/1, 33–43, here: 37. Baldwin continues to show how Garréta draws on Proust's *35 Variations on Marcel Proust* (1974), as well as on Proust's own experiments in writing pastiches of Flaubert and Balzac.



inviting readers' own judgement. Reading her novel begins with as a simple decoding operation, pursuing the narrator's moves along his/her self-defined constrained, but it gets enriched both through the embodied language of the kills and through the reflections on Proust's modernist masterpiece. Garréta superimposes multiple rule systems: grammatical (the gender of the character in Proust needs to match the gender of the passer-by), police procedures, programming and also the regulation of everyday life in monastic communities.<sup>35</sup> She reiterates the killing algorithm and with each reiteration, different aspects render the coding operation experientially »thick.«

Le Tellier and Garréta achieve not only a thickening of the situation model, but also a thick algorithm by replicating the rule. Le Tellier narrates the basic anomaly through multiple lives of characters that are all connected (though not tightly networked), while Garréta multiplies not only the characters but also the contexts through which she runs the basic narrative constraint. Literature itself serves her as the context that renders her world thus. Moreover, Proust (and literature more generally) becomes what Daston calls a »paradigm« for Garréta, that is, a model to learn from in her own quest for literary writing. The intense intertextuality of literature informs the thickness of its manipulations.

Garréta describes Proust's massive text *À la recherche du temps perdu* in terms of a cathedral that nobody any longer visits. The recent centenary of Proust's death in 1922 was certainly accompanied by the author's prominence in the media, but such media presence and even sales figures do not necessarily translate into readers for the text. Indeed, it may be the case that Proust's *Recherche* serves as a cultural memory that everybody refers to, madeleines and all, but that nobody actually reads, as Pierre Bayard proposes in *How to talk about books that you haven't read*.<sup>36</sup> Literature remains a shared reference point and a resource of experiential »enrichment« at one remove, to be enjoyed in conversations about authors and works, such as for example Radio France's series *Un été avec Proust* (2013), and in experience tourism.<sup>37</sup>

Proust's presence in (social) media does not contradict the observation that reading itself is in decline. In an interview with *Paris Review*, Garréta remarks, »Very few people are willing to undergo the experience of reading a book.«, and she goes on to define that »experience« as »it reorders the circulation of your affects, of your perceptions [...]. It manipulates your desires, your perceptions, your affects in ways that are not predictable.«<sup>38</sup> Indeed, while referring to Proust as a general cultural reference point (in Bayard's sense) tends to be predictable, reading the novel itself is less likely so. Arguably, then, the literary text – Proust, Le Tellier or Garréta – remains necessary for literature to be an effective uncertainty practice.

<sup>35</sup> Garréta (note 30), 227. »Je suis ma règle, bénédictine, anachorète de la littérature«.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres qu'on n'a pas lus?*, Paris 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Luc Boltanski, Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*, Paris 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Anne F. Garréta, Sarah Gerard, »States of Desire. An Interview with Anne F. Garréta,« *Paris Review*, 12/11/2017, n.p.



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It may look like literature is losing ground in the authenticity-driven digitised twenty-first century. Yet literature's strangeness may ensure its survival. Literature itself is an anomaly in the current cultural sphere with its emphasis on fictional constructs, formally refined language and autonomy. These particular qualities enable authors to generate anomalies in their texts, as they model and reprogramme the lifeworld, expanding the range of available behaviours and epistemic templates for readers, even if they do not provide problem-solving, escapism and comfort reads. The potential to work out ways in which to inhabit a volatile environment can also be realised by texts that follow the authenticity imperative and deploy language not marked as literary. However, arguably, the literary features of formal complexity, fictional situation models and intertextual depth, which I have discussed in an exemplary fashion through the Oulipian texts of Le Tellier and Garréta, clearly serve to design texts that, on the one hand, make explicit the thin algorithms through which they reprogramme the lifeworld and, on the other hand, embed these in situational models that are experientially »thick.« Whether authenticity- or estrangement-driven, it is arguably the »experience of reading a book« in Garréta's terms that enables literature to do special cognitive work for its authors and readers. That experience lies in the ways in which literary texts escape predictability, even if they are very famous, once you actually read them. The experience also lies in the ways in which literary texts can introduce anomalies which speak to the current condition without simply representing them, as Le Tellier did in the time of the Covid-19-pandemic. And finally, the experience lies in the ways in which literary texts enable readers to inhabit a world of volatility. For authors and readers – no matter their respective numbers – literature remains an irreplaceable uncertainty practice.

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