
Introduction to the Paratext

Author(s): Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean

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Introduction to the Paratext*

Gérard Genette

THE LITERARY WORK consists, exhaustively or essentially, of a text, that is to say (a very minimal definition) in a more or less lengthy sequence of verbal utterances more or less containing meaning. But this text rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book. This accompaniment, of varying size and style, constitutes what I once christened elsewhere,¹ in conformity with the frequently ambiguous meaning of this prefix in French²—consider, I said, adjectives like *parafiscal* or *paramilitary*—the *paratext* of the work. Thus the paratext is for us the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public. Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a *threshold*, or—the term Borges used about a preface—with a "vestibule" which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility either of entering or of turning back. "An undecided zone"³ between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits, either towards the interior (the text) or towards the exterior (the discourse of the world on the text), a border, or as Philippe Lejeune said, "the fringe of the printed text which, in reality, controls the whole reading."⁴ This fringe, in effect, always bearer of an authorial commentary either more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes, between the text and what lies outside it, a zone not just of transition, but of *transaction*; the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the public in the service, well or

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badly understood and accomplished, of a better reception of the text and a more pertinent reading—more pertinent, naturally, in the eyes of the author and his allies. It would be an understatement to say that we will return to this action: everything that follows will deal only with this action, its means, its modes, and its effects. To indicate what is at stake here with the help of a single example, an innocent question should suffice; reduced to its text alone and without the help of any instructions for use, how would we read Joyce's *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?

The paratext thus is empirically composed of an assorted set of practices and discourses of all sorts and of all ages, which I incorporate under this term in the name of a community of interest, or convergence of effects, which seems to me more important than their diversity of aspect. The list of contents of this study probably allows me to dispense with a preliminary enumeration, were it not for the provisional obscurity of one or two terms which I will not delay defining. The order of this survey will be, as far as is possible, in conformity with that in which one usually meets the messages which it investigates: exterior presentation of a book, name of the author, title, and what follows as it meets the eye of a docile reader, which is certainly not always the case. The final rejection of everything which I christen *epitext* is probably in this respect particularly arbitrary, for many future readers get to know a book thanks, for example, to an interview with the author—when it is not thanks to a newspaper review or a recommendation by word of mouth. The latter, according to our conventions, do not generally belong to the paratext, which is defined by an intention and a responsibility of the author; but the advantages of this grouping will appear, I hope, superior to its disadvantages. What is more, this general layout is not rigorously binding, and those who ordinarily read books beginning at the end or the middle could apply to this one the same method, if you can call it a method.

Furthermore, the presence surrounding a text of para-textual messages, of which I propose a first summary inventory which is probably in no way exhaustive, is not uniformly constant and systematic: there exist books without a preface, authors who refuse interviews, and periods have been known where the inscription of an author's name, and even of a title, was not obligatory. The ways and means of the paratext are modified unceasingly according to periods, cultures, genres, authors, works, editions of the same work, with sometimes considerable differences of pressure: it is a recognized fact that a "media dominated" period multiplies around texts a type of discourse unknown in the classical world, and a fortiori

in antiquity and the Middle Ages, periods in which texts frequently circulated in their almost raw state, in the form of manuscripts lacking any formula of presentation. I say *almost* because the mere fact of transcription—but also of oral transmission—brings to the conceptuality of the text a certain degree of materialization, whether graphic or phonic, which can induce, as we will see, paratextual effects. Seen in this way, one can probably suggest that there does not exist, and there never has existed, a text⁵ without paratext. Paradoxically, there do exist on the other hand, if only by accident, paratexts without text, since there exist, for example, disappeared or aborted works of which we only know the title; thus numerous post-Homeric epics or classical Greek tragedies, or that *Morsure de l'épaule* which Chrétien de Troyes attributes to himself opening the *Cligès*, or that *Bataille des Thermopyles* which was one of Flaubert's abandoned projects, and of which we know nothing, except that the word *cnémide* should not occur in it. These titles alone are enough to make one dream, that is to say rather more than do many works which are available everywhere and easily readable. Finally, the unequal sense of obligation associated with the paratext is felt by the audience and the reader too; no one is bound to read a preface, even if this liberty is not always welcome to the author, and we will see that many notes are only addressed to *certain* readers.

As for the particular study of each of these elements, or rather of these types of elements, it will obey the consideration of a certain number of features whose examination permits one to define the status of a paratextual message, whatever it may be. These features essentially describe its spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic, and functional characteristics. To put this in a more concrete way: defining an element of the paratext consists in determining its position (the question *where?*), its date of appearance, and eventually of disappearance (*when?*), its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*), the characteristics of its communicating instance, addresser and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*), and the functions which give purpose to its message (*what is it good for?*). A few words of justification are no doubt necessary for this questionnaire, which may appear simplistic but whose correct use defines almost entirely the method of what follows.

An element of paratext, at least if it consists in a materialized message, necessarily has a *positioning*, which one can situate in relationship to that of the text itself: around the text, in the space of the same volume, like the title or the preface, and sometimes inserted into the interstices of the text, like the titles of chapters or certain notes; I will call *peritext*⁶ this first spatial category, which

is certainly the most typical and which will be the subject of our first eleven chapters. Around the text again, but at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance, are all the messages which are situated, at least originally, outside the book: generally with the backing of the media (interviews, conversations), or under the cover of private communication (correspondences, private journals, and the like). It is the second category which I christen, for want of a better word, *epitext*, and which will be the subject of the last two chapters. As should be obvious from now on, the peritext and the epitext occupy exclusively and exhaustively the spatial field of the paratext; in other words, for those who like formulae, *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext*.⁷

The *temporal* situation of the paratext may also be defined in relationship to that of the text. If one adopts as point of reference the date of appearance of the text, that is to say that of its first, or original,⁸ edition, certain elements of the paratext appeared (publicly) at an earlier date: this is the case for prospectuses, advertisements that the book is “forthcoming,” or again of elements linked to a prepublication in a newspaper or review, which sometimes disappear in the volume, like the famous Homeric titles of the chapters of *Ulysses* whose official existence will have been, if I may put it in this way, entirely prenatal—and thus, *anterior* paratexts. Others, the most frequent, appear at the same time as the text: they represent the *original* paratext, such as the preface of *La Peau de chagrin*, produced in 1831 with the novel which it presents. Finally, others appear later than the text, for example thanks to a second edition, like the preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (a four months’ interval), or to a much later re-edition, like that of the *Essai sur les révolutions* (twenty-nine years). For functional reasons to which I will return, it is appropriate here to distinguish between the paratext which is simply *subsequent* (which is the case with the first) and the *belated* paratext (which is the case with the second). If these elements appear after the death of the author, I, like everybody else, would describe them as *posthumous*; if they are produced while he is alive, I would adopt the neologism proposed by my good master Alphonse Allais: *anthumous* paratext.⁹ But this last opposition is not only valid for belated elements, for a paratext can be at the same time original and posthumous, if it accompanies a text which is itself posthumous, as do the title and the generic indication (misleading) of the *Vie de Henry Brulard, écrite par lui-même. Roman imité du Vicaire de Wakefield*.

So if an element of the paratext can thus appear at any moment, it can equally disappear, definitively or not, through the decision of the author or through outside intervention, or by reason of the wear and tear of time. Many titles of the classical period have thus

been reduced by posterity, even on the title page of the most learned modern editions, and all the original prefaces of Balzac were voluntarily suppressed in 1842, when the regrouping called *Comédie humaine* took place. These very frequent suppressions determine the length of life of the elements of the paratext. Some are very brief: the record in this case, to my knowledge, is held by the preface of *La Peau de chagrin* (one month). But I wrote earlier "definitively or not": for it is a fact that a suppressed element, for example at the time of a new edition, can always re-emerge at the time of a later edition; certain notes of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* which disappear in the second edition very soon return; and the prefaces "suppressed" by Balzac in 1842 may be found today in all the good editions. The duration of the paratext is frequently subject to eclipse, and this intermittent character, to which I will return, is very closely linked to its essentially functional nature.

The question of *substantial* status will be here determined, or evaded, as it frequently is in practice, by the fact that practically all the paratexts considered will be themselves of a *textual*, or at least verbal, order: titles, prefaces, interviews, so many utterances, of very differing extent, but which all share the linguistic status of the text. Most frequently then the paratext is itself a text: if it is not yet *the* text it is already textual. But one must bear in mind the paratextual value which can belong to other types of expression: iconic (the illustrations), material (everything which proceeds, for example, from the sometimes very significant typographical choices made in the composition of a book), or purely factual. I call *factual* that paratext which consists, not in an explicit message (verbal or other), but in a fact whose mere existence, if it is known to the public, makes some commentary on the text and bears on its reception. Thus the matter of the age or the sex of the author (How many works, from Rimbaud to Sollers, have owed a part of their renown or their success to the prestige of youth? And does one ever read a "woman's novel" exactly as one reads a novel as such, that is to say, a man's novel?), or the matter of the date of the work: "true admiration," Renan used to say, "is historical"; at least it is certain that the historical awareness of the period which saw the birth of a work is rarely a matter of indifference when reading it. I suggest here obvious matters characteristic of the factual paratext, and there are many others, more futile, such as belonging to an academy (or other glorious body), or obtaining a literary prize; or more fundamental ones, to which we will return, like the existence, around the work, of an implicit context which defines or modifies its meaning in one way or another: the authorial context, for

example, constituted around *Le Père Goriot* by the totality of *La Comédie humaine*; the generic context, constituted around this work and this totality by the existence of the genre called "the novel"; the historical context constituted by the period known as "the nineteenth century," and so forth. I shall not endeavor here to define the nature or measure the weight of these facts, which belong to the context, but let us at least retain the principle that every context creates a paratext. Their existence, as for every type of factual paratext, may be brought to the knowledge of the public or not by a reminder which itself belongs to the textual paratext: generic indication, mention of a prize on a wrapper, mention of age in a cover note, indirect revelation of sex by the name, and so on; but to be known through an effect of "public notoriety" it does not always need to be mentioned: thus, for most readers of the *Recherche*, the two biographical facts which are the half Jewish ancestry of Proust and his homosexuality, the knowledge of which creates an inevitable paratext to the pages of his work consecrated to these two subjects. I do not say that one must know it; I only say that those who know it do not read in the same way as those who do not, and that anyone who denies this difference is making fun of us. The same applies naturally to the facts of the context: to read *L'Assommoir* like an independent work and to read it as an episode of *Les Rougon-Macquart* will involve two very different readings.

The *pragmatic* status of a paratextual element is defined by the characteristics of its communicatory instance or situation: nature of the addresser, of the addressee, degree of authority and responsibility of the first, illocutionary force of his message, and probably some others which have escaped me. The addresser of a paratextual message (as of any other message) is not necessarily the person who actually wrote it, whose identity matters little to us, as if the foreword to *La Comédie humaine*, signed Balzac, had in fact been drawn up by one of his friends: the addresser is defined by putative attribution and by assumed responsibility. We are dealing most often with the author (*authorial* paratext), but we may be dealing just as well with the publisher: unless signed by the author, a cover note usually belongs to the *editorial* paratext. The author and the publisher are (legally as well) the two people responsible for the text and for the paratext, who may delegate a part of their responsibility to a third person: a preface written by this third person and accepted by the author, like that of Anatole France for *Les Plaisirs et les jours*, still belongs, it seems to me (by the very fact of being so accepted), to the paratext—this time *allographic*. There are other situations in

which responsibility for the paratext is in some way divided: thus, in an interview, between the author and the person questioning him, who generally “records” and reports, faithfully or not, his words.

The addressee may be roughly defined as the “public,” but this definition is much too loose, for the public of a book stretches virtually to the whole of humanity, and there is need for some qualifications. Certain elements of the paratext are effectively addressed to (which does not mean that they reach) the public in general, that is to say anybody at all: this is so in the case (I will come back to this) of a title, or of an interview. Others are addressed (with the same reservation) more specifically, and more restrictively, to the readers of the text alone: this is typically the case of the preface. Others, like earlier forms of the cover note, are addressed to critics alone; others, to booksellers; all this constituting (whether peritext or epitext) what we will call the *public* paratext. Others are addressed, orally or in writing, simply to individuals, known or unknown, who are not expected to make the matter public: this is the *private* paratext, of which the most private part consists of messages addressed by the author to himself, in his diary or elsewhere—an *intimate* paratext, by the very fact that it is intended for himself, no matter what its purport may be.

The definition of the paratext involves the necessity that someone should always be responsible for it, whether the author or one of his associates, but this necessity has various degrees. I will borrow from political vocabulary a current distinction, more easy to use than to define—that of the official and of the officious. Any paratextual message for which the author and/or the editor assumes a responsibility which he cannot escape is *official*. Thus everything is official which, whether its source be the author or the editor, is present in the anthymous paratext, like the title or the original preface; or then again commentaries signed by the author in a work for which he takes complete responsibility, like *Le Vent Paraclet* by Michel Tournier, for example. On the other hand, the greater part of the authorial epitext—interviews, conversations and confidences—is *officious*, because the author can always more or less get rid of his responsibilities by denials such as “That is not exactly what I said,” or “I was talking off the cuff,” or “It was not intended for publication,” or even by a “solemn declaration” like that which Robbe-Grillet made at Cerisy, denying holus bolus any “importance” to his “newspaper articles more or less put together in a volume under the title of Essays” and “even more so” to the “oral declarations which I may make here, even if I allow them to be published

afterwards”—a statement which comprises, I imagine, a new version of the paradox of the Cretan.¹⁰ In addition, and perhaps especially, we call officious anything the author says through a third person or allows that person to say, whether allographic writer of a preface or “authorized” commentator; consider the part played by a Larbaud or a Stuart Gilbert in the circulation, which was organized by Joyce but for which he did not take the responsibility, of the Homeric keys to *Ulysses*. Naturally there exist many intermediate or indeterminate situations in what is really only a difference of degree, but the advantage of these nuances is undeniable: it is sometimes to one’s interest that certain things “should be known,” without having (publicly) said them oneself.

A last pragmatic characteristic of the paratext is what I call, borrowing this adjective very freely from the philosophers of language, the *illocutionary force* of its message. Here again it is a matter of graduated status. A paratextual element may communicate pure *information*, for example the name of the author or the date of publication. It may impart an authorial and/or editorial *intention* or *interpretation*; this is the cardinal function of most prefaces, and it is still that of the generic indication placed on certain covers or title pages: *novel* does not mean “this book is a novel,” an assertive definition which is not in the control of any single person, but rather: “Please consider this book a novel.” It may involve a real *decision*: *Stendhal*, or *Le Rouge et le noir*, does not mean “I am called Stendhal” (which is false as far as civil status is concerned), or “This book is called *Le Rouge et le noir*” (which has no meaning), but “I choose Stendhal as a pseudonym,” and “I, the author, decide to entitle this book *Le Rouge et le noir*.” It may be a matter of an *undertaking*: some generic indications (autobiography, history, memoirs) have, as we know, a more constraining contractual value (“I undertake to tell the truth”) than others (novel, essay), and a simple statement like *First volume* or *Tome I* has the force of a promise—or, as Northrop Frye says, of a “threat.” They may have the force of *advice*, or even of *injunction*: “This book,” says Hugo in the preface to the *Contemplations*, “must be read as one would read the book of one dead”; “All this,” writes Barthes at the beginning of *Roland Barthes par lui-même*, “must be considered as being said by a character in a novel,”¹¹ and some permissions (“You may read this book in such and such an order, you may skip this or that”) indicate just as clearly, though by reversal, the capacity of the paratext to decree. Certain elements even imply the power that logicians call *performative*, that is to say the power to accomplish what they describe (“I open the session”): this is what happens with dedications. To dedicate or

to inscribe a book to So and So is obviously nothing else than to print, or to write on one of its pages, a formula of the type: "To So and So"—a borderline case of paratextual efficacy, since it is sufficient to say it in order to do it. But there is already a certain element of this in the imposition of a title or the choice of a pseudonym, actions mimetic of all creative power.

These remarks on illocutionary force have thus imperceptibly led us toward the essential, which is the *functional* aspect of the paratext. Essential, because, quite obviously, and except for limited exceptions that we will meet here and there, the paratext, in all its forms, is a fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, discourse devoted to the service of something else which constitutes its right of existence, namely the text. No matter what aesthetic or ideological pretensions ("fine title," preface—manifesto), no matter what coquetry, no matter what paradoxical inversion the author puts into it, a paratextual element is always subordinate to "its" text, and this functionality determines the essentials of its aspect and of its existence. But in contrast to the characteristics of place, of time, of substance, or of pragmatic status, the functions of the paratext may not be described theoretically, and in a way, a priori, in terms of status. The spatial, temporal, substantial, and pragmatic situation of a paratextual element is determined by a more or less free choice, applied to a general and constant grid of personal alternatives, of which it can only adopt one term to the exclusion of others: a preface is necessarily (by definition) peritextual; it is original, subsequent, *or* belated, authorial *or* allographic, and so on, and this series of options or necessities defines in a rigid way a status, and so a type. The functional choices are not of the alternative and exclusive order of *either/or*. A title, a dedication, a preface, an interview can have several goals at once, chosen nonexclusively from the more or less open repertory proper to each type of element: the title has its functions, the dedication has its, the preface looks after others, or sometimes the same, without prejudice to more narrow specifications; a thematic title like *War and Peace* does not describe its text in the same way as a formal title like *Epistles* or *Sonnets*. What is at stake in the dedication of one copy is not the same as in the dedication of a work. A belated preface does not have the same goals as an original preface, nor an allographic preface those of an authorial preface, and so on. And so the functions of the paratext constitute a very empirical and very diverse object, which must be derived in an inductive way, genre by genre and often species by species. The only meaningful regularities that one can introduce into this apparent contingency consist in establishing these relations of dependency

between functions and statuses, and thus in discovering sorts of *functional types*, and yet again in reducing the diversity of practices and of messages to some fundamental and strongly recurrent themes, for experience shows that one is dealing here with a discourse much more "constrained" than many others, in which authors innovate less often than they imagine.

As for the effects of convergence (or of divergence) which result from the composition, around a text, of the whole of its paratext, and whose often very delicate complexity Lejeune has demonstrated with regard to autobiography, they can only be derived from individual analysis (and synthesis), work by work, at whose threshold a generic study like our own must inevitably halt. To give a very elementary illustration, since the structure in question is reduced to two terms, a titular entity like *Henri Matisse, roman* contains very obviously, between the title in the strict sense (*Henri Matisse*) and the generic indication (*roman*), a discrepancy which the reader is invited to resolve if he can, or at least to integrate, like an oxymoron of the type "to lie truly," and to which perhaps only the text will give him the key, singular by definition, even if the formula is destined to set a fashion,¹² or even become a genre and thus banal.

One last point, one trusts unnecessary; we are dealing here with a synchronic and not a diachronic study: an attempt at a general picture and not at a history of the paratext. This statement is not inspired by any disdain for the historical dimension, but once more by the feeling that it is right to define objects before studying their evolution. In its essentials, in fact, our work consists in dissolving the empirical objects inherited from tradition (for example, "the preface"), on the one hand by analyzing them into more specific objects (the original authorial preface, the belated preface, the allographic preface, and so on), on the other hand by integrating them into larger sets (the peritext, the paratext in general)—and so deriving categories until now neglected or badly perceived, whose articulation defines the paratextual field, and whose establishment constitutes a necessary first step towards setting them in any historical perspective. Diachronic considerations will not however be absent from our study, which deals, after all, with the most socialized side of literary practice (the organization of its relationship with the public), and which will sometimes turn inevitably into something like an essay on the customs and institutions of the Republic of Letters. But they will not be stated a priori as uniformly decisive: each element of the paratext has its own history. Certain are as old as literature itself, others have seen the day, or found their official status, after centuries of "hidden life" which constitute their pre-

history, with the invention of the book, others with the birth of journalism and of the modern media, others have disappeared between whiles, and very often some take the place of others to play, for better or worse, an analogous role. Finally, some seem to have known, and still know, a more rapid or more meaningful evolution than certain others (but stability is a fact as historical as change): thus the title has its very obvious fashions which inevitably "date" by their mere utterance; the authorial preface, on the contrary has scarcely changed, except in its material presentation, since Thucydides. The general history of the paratext, which follows the rhythms of the stages of the technical revolution which gives it means and ways, will probably be that of those endless phenomena of sliding, of substitution, of compensation, and of innovation which assure its permanence and, to a certain extent, the progress of its efficacy over the span of the centuries. To undertake to write such a history, one would have to have at one's disposal a much vaster and more complete study than this, which does not leave the limits of western culture, and indeed too rarely leaves the limits of French literature. What follows then is only a very preliminary exploration, at the very provisional service of what, thanks to others, will perhaps follow it.

ÉCOLE DES ÉTUDES EN SCIENCES SOCIALES

(Translated by Marie Maclean)

NOTES

1 See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris, 1981), p. 9.

2 And probably in several other languages, if one believes this remark of J. Hillis Miller, which applies to English: "*Para* is an antithetical prefix which indicates at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority . . . a thing which is situated at once on this side and on that of a frontier, of a threshold or of a margin, of equal status and yet secondary, subsidiary, subordinate, like a guest to his host, a slave to his master. A thing in *para* is not only at once on both sides of the frontier which separates the exterior and the interior; it is also the frontier itself, the screen which creates a permeable membrane between the inside and the outside. It operates their confusion, letting the outside come in and the inside go out, it divides them and unites them" ("The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. [New York, 1979], p. 219). It is a very fine description of the activity of the paratext.

3 The image seems to strike anyone who deals with the paratext: "an indeterminate zone . . . where there are mixed two series of codes: the social code, in its advertising aspect, and the codes which produce or regulate the text" (Claude Duchet, "Pour une socio-critique, ou variations sur un incipit," *Littérature*, 1 [1971], p. 6); "intermediary zone between what lies outside the text and the text itself" (Antoine

Compagnon, *La Seconde main* [Paris, 1979], p. 328). (Unless otherwise noted, translations of quoted material are my own—tr.)

4 Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975), p. 45. The rest of this sentence shows clearly that the author was intending in part what I here call paratext: “name of author, title, subtitle, name of collection, name of editor, up to and including the ambiguous play of the prefaces.”

5 I say now *texts* and not simply *works* in the “noble” sense of the word: for the necessity of a paratext imposes itself on every type of book even without any aesthetic aim, even if our present study is limited to the paratext of literary works.

6 This notion is close to that of “perigraphy” proposed by Compagnon, pp. 328–56.

7 In addition, one must be clear that the paratext of learned editions (generally posthumous) sometimes contains elements which do not belong to the paratext in the sense in which I define it: thus extracts of reviews written by third persons (Sartre, Pléiade; Michelet, Flammarion, and so forth).

8 I will ignore here the technical differences, (bibliographical and bibliophilic) which are sometimes marked between the first current edition, the original edition, the princeps edition, and so on and will summarily call the first in date *original*.

9 Allais thus describes those of his works which had appeared in an anthology while he was alive. I must also recall that *posthumus*, “coming after the burial,” is a very old (and superb) false etymology: *postumus* is simply the superlative of *posterior*.

10 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Colloque Robbe-Grillet: Analyse, théorie* (Paris, 1976), I, 316.

11 Victor Hugo, Preface, in his *Les Contemplations* (Paris, 1973), p. 27; Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes par lui-même* (Paris, 1975), the quote is from the inside cover of the text.

12 See, e.g., Philippe Roger, *Roland Barthes, roman* (Paris, 1986). “To lie truly” is also a reference to the title (*Le Mentir-vrai*) of another book by Aragon.