

Pierre Michon: Artistic Creation and the Artist's Identity

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Pierre Michon is one of those writers who, although not particularly well known to the general reading public, has acquired a reputation among critics and "has inspired many young writers who see him as a living reference."¹ This is not surprising when one considers that he deals, in almost all that he has written, with some of the most fundamental questions with which all writers (including literary critics) have to contend. His novels and *nouvelles* examine the artist's (and particularly the writer's) struggle to create, the frustrations, failures and doubts encountered in this struggle, and the few glorious moments of fleeting success. At the same time, Michon's work demonstrates that, at the heart of this struggle to create, lies the artist's search for an identity.

Michon's first published work, *Vies minuscules* (1984)², tells of the lives of various humble and unimportant people whom the narrator has known or of whom he has heard, but behind their lives is the narrator's

1. Elizabeth BEYER, « Pierre Michon : *Mythologies d'hiver* », *Times Literary Supplement*, no 4932 (October 1997), 25. For more comments on Pierre Michon's marginal status and his reputation among critics and other writers, see Michel BEAUJOUR, « Pierre Michon biographe » in BRAMI, Joseph, Madeleine COTTENET-HAGUE et Pierre VERDAGUIER, eds., *Regards sur La France des années 1980. Le Roman* (Anma Libri : Saratoga [Caloifornia], 1994), 179-183.
2. All the texts by Michon quoted in this article are published by Verdier at Lagrasse, with the exception of *Vies minuscules* and *Rimbaud le fils*, both of which are in the Folio edition (Paris). The date of publication follows the first mention of the title in the main body of the article. I have also quoted frequently from the following interview with Michon : Thierry BAYLE, « Pierre Michon : Un Auteur majuscule », *Le Magazine Littéraire*, no. 353 (avril 1997), 97-103. Page references to this interview are inserted in the body of the article.

own unsuccessful struggle to become a writer. *La Vie de Joseph Roulin* (1988) is the story of a postal worker who becomes the friend of Van Gogh, sits for a portrait by him, and is amazed when, much later, this painter becomes famous. Attalus in *L'Empereur d'occident* (1989) is a musician and player of the lyre who serves the Visigoth general Alaric. When Alaric captures Rome, he makes Attalus puppet Emperor, but the latter is always more concerned with his art than with political or military affairs. In *Maîtres et serviteurs* (1990), Michon imagines the struggles of three painters — Goya, Watteau and Lorentino (a minor disciple of Piero della Francesca) — to paint the masterpieces that alone will satisfy them. *Rimbaud le fils* (1991) attempts to reconstruct Rimbaud's discovery of Poetry and of himself as a poet. *La Grande Beune* (1996) is the tale of a young man who takes up an appointment as a teacher in a remote village in the Dordogne, where he becomes obsessed by the beautiful Yvonne, owner of the local *tabac*. Although not an artist himself, the teacher is very aware of the primitive cave paintings in this area, and he is keenly interested in what inspired the artists to create them. Gian Domenico Desiderii, the narrator of *Le Roi du bois* (1996), is a swineherd who wants to achieve power and wealth (particularly to possess women like the aristocrat's plaything whom he observes one day urinating beside a woodland road). To this end, he becomes a disciple of Claude Le Lorrain, one of the many painters who have acquired wealth and access to noble homes, but he fails as a painter, returns to being a rich man's servant, and contents himself with power over his master's domain (including this man's wife). *Mythologies d'hiver* (1997) recounts three Irish myths, then goes on to examine how the life of Saint Enimie becomes, over the years, a legend that is finally fixed and given official status when a scribe writes it down. *Trois Auteurs* (1997) imagines how two writers (Balzac and Cingria) came to create and believe in themselves. It is followed by an interview in which Michon explains what writers he feels are closest to his own preoccupations.

One important aspect of all these texts is the « oblique » approach adopted by Michon, for behind the lives and concerns of certain characters are those of other characters, and, behind these, the life and concerns of Michon himself. The example of *Vies minuscules* is, in this respect, particularly instructive. The narrator of this novel does not hide that he sees reflections of himself in the individuals whose lives he describes. Referring to André Dufurneau, who goes off to Africa in search of something that he cannot find in his writing, the narrator declares : « Mais parlant de lui, c'est de moi que je parle » (19). He comments on the failure of Roland

Backroot, whose discovery of great literature haunts him and makes his own life seem pointless, « je le sais, pour être lui » (125). When confined to hospital, he meets le père Foucauld, a humble man who refuses to go to the Paris hospital where his cancer can be cured because he is illiterate and would have to face the shame of not being able to fill up all the necessary forms. In this man's illiteracy, he sees a reflection of his own failure to produce texts, and he comments : « J'étais en quelque façon "illettré" ; les éditeurs me seraient ce qu'auraient été au père Foucauld les implacables dactylos » (157). In fact, he concludes : « Le père Foucauld était plus écrivain que moi : à l'absence de lettres, il préférerait la mort » (158). The abbé Bandy, who abandons his fine sermons and turns to alcohol because they do not provide him with the perfection that he seeks, is also a double of the narrator, who refers to « notre fraternité » (180).

The reader of *Vies minuscules*, and, indeed, of any of Pierre Michon's texts, soon suspects that it is not just the narrator of this first novel who is telling his own story through that of the characters. The vibrant tone of involvement, almost of confession, creates the suspicion that Michon is describing his own experiences as a writer, and several critics have, in fact, declared that these works contain a major autobiographical element, referring to *Vie minuscules* as « une manière d'autobiographie » and « une autobiographie à la fois réelle et imaginaire », and to his work as a whole as « oblique autobiography. »³ Michon himself admits that, while not representing himself directly and unchanged in *Vies minuscules*, he has put an important part of himself into it, and especially into the narrator, who is « cet écrivain-qui-n'écrit-pas, et que j'étais » (Bayle, 101). Although he is not an introspective individual, he goes on, he naturally puts elements of himself into his work because « je suis la personne du monde que je connais le mieux » (Bayle, 102). Since the rest of Michon's fiction continues the examination of artistic endeavour and failure that he points to as largely autobiographical in *Vies minuscules*, it is legitimate to see this element of his other works as based on his own experiences too.

The exploration of artistic creation begins with the problem of what actually inspires the artist to create. The narrator of *La Grande Beune* wonders what made the artists of Lascaux create their paintings, and why,

3. Quotations taken from, respectively : Jean-Louis HUE, « Les Nains aussi peuvent être grands », *Le Magazine Littéraire*, no 205 (mars 1984), 56; Dominique AUTRAND, « Le Monde et les mots », *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, no. 414 (1-15 avril 1984), 8; John Taylor, « Pluvial Périgueux ». *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4879 (4 October 1996), 28.

at the moment of creation, « des dieux cléments et insatiables les regardent, respirent par leur bouche, ont leur joie, et vont tout à l'heure les jeter avec cette joie contre ces murs » (70). In *Rimbaud le fils*, Michon imagines Rimbaud's early life and tries to decide what it was that turned this youth into a poet, what it was that Banville, reading Rimbaud's verse, recognised as « l'inlassable présence de ce qu'on n'appelle plus Dieu » (50). Michon examines all the people and events that might have contributed to the making of a poet, but he can only conclude with questions : « Qu'est-ce qui relance sans fin la littérature? Qu'est-ce qui fait écrire les hommes? Les autres hommes, leur mère, les étoiles, ou les vieilles choses énormes, Dieu, la langue? » (110).

In some cases, there are immediate and superficial reasons. Desiderii, for example, wants power and influence, and he gives his reason as : « J'ai peint pour être prince » (*Le Roi*, 13). Goya too is depicted, in his early career, as impelled by social ambition and the desire to succeed. What Goya and Desiderii both learn is that, in order to become a true artist, the individual must need to create something that is unique, perfect, an absolute in itself. Bertran, the scribe who writes down the life of Sainte Enimie, knows this, and he seeks in his writing to capture « l'absolu et le visible, l'absolu caché mais clair au cœur du visible » (*Mythologies*, 69). Attalus, the musician who becomes Emperor of Rome, has no interest in political power because he seeks another kind of absolute that lies at the heart of music. André Dufurneau, the orphan whose life is described in *Vies minuscules*, senses in the books that he reads a kernel of perfection that he later pursues when he sets out for Africa. The story of Dufurneau recalls, of course, the life of Rimbaud, who is also depicted as seeking in poetry, and later in Africa, some pure essence of perfection that he refers to as « le Nom ineffable » (*Rimbaud*, 20).

Michon admires those artists and writers who have achieved this absolute in their work, and who have consequently changed their art and pushed it as far as it can go in a particular direction. He quotes Rimbaud, Proust, Baudelaire and Falukner as being among « ceux qui mettent leur briquet comme si c'était de la dynamite, en se disant : cette fois l'édifice va péter » (Bayle, 99). His own goal is to achieve a similar perfection that will make further creation unnecessary, since he will have reached the summit of his art : « Mon ambition suprême [. . .] serait d'écrire un texte si définitif que je pourrais m'arrêter d'écrire — et attention : m'arrêter d'écrire avec bonheur » (Bayle, 99).

Whatever the motivation and ambition of the artist, there still remains the supreme mystery of what actually converts the will to create

into the work of art. In the lives of artists as Michon depicts them in his fiction, there comes a moment of inexplicable inspiration in which the artist becomes the creator of the absolute. Goya, for example, is shown looking at the paintings of various masters when he is suddenly seized by the knowledge that there is something in them that escapes rational analysis. He is then able, for reasons that he cannot understand, to seize this something in his own work. Lorentino, the mediocre Florentine, painter is executing a small commission to paint Saint Martin, when he is suddenly visited by a vision of the Saint, and creates the sole masterpiece of his career. Rimbaud too is suddenly transformed from a creator of verse into a poet of genius.

Michon is clearly depicting, through these artists, a personal experience. He explains in an interview that his own life was suddenly changed by the inspiration that produced his first published text. This was, he says, « la délivrance inqualifiable d'un bon à rien attardé devenant auteur, » a moment when « j'entrais dans le devenir après être si longtemps immobile. » But he cannot explain this change any more precisely than to say : « Ce n'est que la vieille histoire de l'inspiration. » and to refer to such moments as « miracles » (Bayle, 98). They are, in fact, depicted as almost religious experiences, as moments of grace. The narrator of *Vies minuscules*, who also spent years of fruitlessly seeking inspiration, refers to himself as « quémandeur de Grâce diffuse » (205), while Rimbaud, as he writes *Une Saison en enfer*, is suddenly visited by Grace (*Rimbaud*, 106). In the lives of artists and poets as Michon recreates them, one critic points out, « l'important est que l'individu ait été touché avant de mourir par la grâce. » Another refers to the “Jansenist” overtones of this view of inspiration, and yet another describes his characters as « figures tutélaires en attente d'une grâce. »⁴

Grace is, of course, inexplicable : it visits some and not others. Artistic inspiration is similarly capricious. Why, for example, should the undeserving and rebellious Rimbaud be inspired, while Georges Izambard, who also showed promise as a poet in his youth, can achieve no more than pedestrian verse? « La Muse l'a floué », is the rather unsatisfactory conclusion (*Rimbaud*, 25). Likewise, André Dufourneau in *Vies minuscules* is tormented by the desire to find the absolute that he sees in certain writers, yet he disappears in Africa without ever having achieved it. Roland

4. Marc KOBER, « Au nom du fils », *NRF*, no 40 (janvier 1993), 93 ; Jean-Pierre RICHARD, « Servitude et grandeur du minuscule », *NRF*, no 424 (mai 1998), 71 ; Richard MILLET, *Accompagnement* (Paris : POL, 1991), 161.

Backroot in the same novel never finds the perfection in his own life that his favourite writers have put into their novels.

The flashes of inspiration are not only inexplicable, they are shown in Michon's work as being rare. Indeed, they are set against a background of failure, a sense of hopelessness and despair. By his own admission, Michon sees the artist as « entièrement gagé sur la réussite esthétique et sans cesse y échouant. »⁵ A critic of *Vies minuscules* says this novel is « placé sous le signe de l'échec, de l'absence et de la perte, »⁶ but the same might be said of much that Michon has written. Watteau, for example is depicted as haunted by failure, for « son exécution était inférieure à ce qu'il prenait pour ses idées » (*Maîtres*, 64). Laurentino is also aware that his paintings fall short of his ideal, and in moments of despair he hears « les cloches noires de l'enfer » (*Maîtres*, 110). Try as he might to imitate the masters, Desiderii is never visited by the inspiration that would turn his work into true art, and, he says, « je tendais largement le bras nu vers un quelconque point de l'horizon et j'essayais de m'y intéresser longtemps, la tête penchée sur le côté, concentré et très stupide, mais rien ne me venait » (*Le Roi*, 39). The abbé Bandy attempts to capture the very essence of the Divine in sermons that impress the narrator. But this priest realises that he has failed, and ends his life as an alcoholic, « dans la faillite du verbe » (*Vies*, 209). Bandy is a reflection of the narrator, for the latter also seeks vainly to produce texts that encapsulate his idea of perfection, and he compensates for his failure by drinking, abusing the woman with whom he lives, and insulting others.

The perfect text is shown in *Vies minuscules* to be an impossible ideal and as much a barrier to fulfilment for the narrator as an inspiration. The cover picture of the Folio edition of this text shows Velasquez's painting of Saint Thomas, the very figure of doubt, clutching a book in his hands. Michon explains : « Ce Tomas de Velasquez me paraît l'image même de la voix qui parle dans les *Vies minuscules*. Il est cramponné au livre de toutes ses forces comme si le livre allait le sauver, mais le livre devant lui comme une barrière est en même temps un obstacle » (Bayle, 99). It is clear that the problem of the perfect text as an obstacle is also part of Michon's own experience. He too spent many years of blank despair, unable to create a work of art that captured his ideal. An admirer of the best in contemporary

5. MICHON, « D'abord contemporain », *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, no 532 (15 au 31 mai, 1989), 18.

6. Autrand, 8.

writing, and profoundly influenced by theorists such as the Tel Quel group, the formalists and the structuralists, he constantly fell short of such models, which became a barrier to creation. He writes that « les exigences de cette modernité étaient si rigoureuses, si janséniste le tribunal intérieur devant quoi elle nous convoquait, si contradictoires ses postulations, que je demeurais paralysé. »⁷ He was like the characters of *Vies minuscules*, who consistently fall short of the ideal that they set themselves, and of whom he says : « J'ai appelé minuscule tout homme dont le destin n'est pas tout à fait à la hauteur du projet » (Bayle, 102).

At the very centre of the despair felt by such characters, hinted at and sometimes explicitly stated, is a sense of loss of self, of total lack of identity. Writers or artists who cannot create obviously have no identity as artists, or, indeed, as individuals, since they base their lives on the creation of art. Hence, characters such as the narrator of *Vies minuscules* feel an emptiness at the centre of themselves. Desiderii is also devoid of identity since he never enters the world of artists and never fully reintegrates himself into life as a servant.

Because they lack identity as artists despite their ambitions, many of these would-be artists and writers are presented in Michon's work as figures of pretentious bombast. Desiderii soon realises that there is nothing but pointless posturing in the painters whom he observes, nothing behind « leur petit bazar » (*Le Roi*, 35). The narrator of *Vies minuscules* is conscious of his own empty pretence, and, when he encounters a man in a bar who produces mellifluous phrases and posturing in order to impress some women, he reacts violently against him because he sees a reflection of himself, of what a critic of this work calls « l'inanité grimaçante de sa figure. »⁸ He is shamed by the old man who prefers to die rather than admit that he is illiterate because he sees in this man someone who has at least accepted his own powerlessness over words and the consequences of that powerlessness.

Beyond these examples of failed artists, there is a sense in which all artists, but especially writers, are impostors. Michon points out that, from the time of Flaubert and Mallarmé, when literature is posited as an end in itself, with no justification outside of itself, writers have only themselves as the ultimate authority. We have only their word on which to judge the work of art and their identity as creators, and « à partir de ce moment, tout

7. MICHON, « D'abord contemporain », p. 17.

8. MILLET, 161.

écrivain a été un imposteur puisqu'il ne pouvait s'autoriser que de lui-même » (Bayle, 100). In this respect, Rimbaud is « cette figure exemplaire, fantasmatiquement exemplaire » (Bayle, 101) because he realised that poetry could not be justified by any ultimate authority, so he abandoned it. As he is depicted in *Rimbaud le fils*, he is filled with « la conscience aiguë de la vanité d'une réputation » (81).

The problem of identity is further aggravated in the case of many of Michon's characters by the fact that they have no father to confer on them a lineage, a past, and, therefore, some kind of personal identity. Rimbaud feels keenly the absence of a father who has abandoned his family for the army, and much of his life is a reaction against « l'ombre du Capitaine » (*Rimbaud*, 15). His father is merely a distant figure, described as « lointain comme le Tsar et peu concevable comme Dieu » (70). The narrator of *L'Empereur d'occident* is a young prince whose father gives him as hostage to various barbarian courts in order to cement political alliances. « Ma vie », he says, « était suspendue à cette parole paternelle » (14). He finds himself dependent on an absent father, temporarily treated as a son by various foreign princes, and, in fact, the son of none of these. His need of a father is clearly seen in the temporary relationship that he forms with the older Attalus (who himself compensates for the lack of a father in his relationship with the conqueror Alaric, who "creates" him as Emperor of Rome). Significantly, this tale is set at the time of the Ayrrian Heresy, when the relationship of the Son to the Father is a matter of much debate. The heretics argue that the Son is subordinate and owes His very identity to the Father, and they preach « la lumière empruntée du Fils, du plus grand éclat et de la plus grande antiquité du Père. » (15). In human terms, this would mean that both Attalus and the narrator owe their identity to an absent father, and that they are, therefore, practically without identity. The orthodox view that Father and Son share the same power and are contemporaneous seems, in the case of these two men, to be contradicted by the facts.

It is the narrator of *Vies minuscules* who shows the most obvious loss of identity through the absence of a father. His father abandoned him and his mother, leaving him with the feeling that he is « ignorant, douloureux et incomplet, infiniment »(81). The father becomes a kind of ever-present absence in his life. The rest of the family behave as though this man were dead, and, when they gather together, it is as though « on veilleit un mort » (80). When the narrator's mother looks at him, she does not seem to see him, but appears to be looking for his father in him. He says : « Elle

fouillait au-delà de mon visage d'enfant, à la recherche des traits du faux mort, mon père » (72).

Many of Michon's characters look for a new father by entering into a master-disciple relationship : Desiderii becomes a pupil of Le Lorrain, Lorentino an apprentice of Piero della Francesca, and Goya follows whoever is in vogue. The relationship that the narrator of *L'Empereur d'occident* develops with the old lyre player is also akin to that of a son to his father, while the latter sees a kind of father in Alaric. Rimbaud looks further back for antecedents, finding in Hugo, Racine, Malherbe and Baudelaire « les grands-pères, les phares comme on disait » (*Rimbaud*, 20).

In much the same way, Pierre Michon seems to have found a kind of father in Faulkner, a writer whose work he greatly admires and whom he credits with having provided the inspiration to begin writing *Vies minuscules* and several subsequent tales. In an interview appended to *Trois Auteurs*, he writes of Faulkner : « Il est le père de tout ce que j'ai écrit » (81), and he describes him as « quelque chose comme *le père du texte* » (81. Italics in original). The problem is, however, that this paternal influence can also become crushing and can stifle creativity, and Michon explains that he had to take great care to avoid slavish copying : « Les fils dont le père est trop grand font tout pour ne pas leur ressembler, n'être pas épigones. Ils se nourrissent de la force du père mais la dissimulent et, la dissimulant, il arrive qu'ils gagnent une force dont on dit qu'elle est leur » (82). As we have already seen, Michon had considerable difficulty breaking free from the influence of the avant-garde and certain literary theorists in his early career. These were, for many years, "fathers" who prevented him finding his own identity.

Once the writer finds his own voice and uses such influences for his own purposes, he creates a text that becomes the means of forging an identity as a creator in his own right. When Antoine, Toussaint Peluchet's son in *Vies minuscules*, leaves home, his parents are left bereft, but, by imagining a new and exciting life for their son in America, they create anew an identity as parents of this "text". Fiefé, the simple-minded young man who becomes Toussaint's helper, repeats these stories of Antoine's new life, embroidering them in the process. He not only creates in this « text » a new identity for Antoine, but also one for himself as an "interesting" person to whom people in the café listen. Thus, the individual who lacks an identity gains a new self as an artist and a creator, and, as creator, he needs no father. Michon writes : « Écrire, c'est se justifier en quelque sorte » (Bayle, 100), and this justification is found when the individual creates himself or herself as an artist by producing the work of art.

There are also other ways in which the text confers identity. We all see images of ourselves in others, particularly in our children. Aimé and Felix in *Vies minuscules* see themselves in their daughter, for « le monde [. . .] n'est pour nous que la garde-robe où vêtir notre image » (240). This is also the case when a writer creates characters, for he or she inevitably puts some of himself or herself into them in much the same way as parents create « images » of themselves in their children. The narrator of *Vies minuscules* thus produces doubles of himself, and an identity, within his text. In the words of one critic, he creates « miroirs où il *invente* lui aussi sa propre figure parmi des reflets. »⁹ When Toussaint invents stories about his son, he often puts himself into these stories, becoming almost one with the “character” that he creates. « Il avait rejoint le fils », the narrator comments (*Vies*, 68).

This has obvious applications to Michon himself, since, as we have seen, his work contains a major autobiographical element, and his characters are very close images of himself. He projects himself into his texts, creating himself anew and forging an identity in his characters. His constant querying of what constitutes an artist, of what circumstances surround the creation of a work of art, is an examination of himself as an artist. His questions, doubts and despair thus become a part of the identity that he makes for himself in the text. The emptiness and sense of negativity are filled by the very depiction of these things.

The work of art, especially the literary text, as well as being the creation of the artist, is also, in a sense, the creator of the artist's identity. It thus becomes a replacement of the father as the source of the artist's being. In *L'Empereur d'occident*, the whole problem of whether the Father takes precedence over the Son and therefore confers identity on the latter is resolved by the fact that it is really music that creates the musician's identity. Attalus argues that, in the Holy Trinity, it is actually the Spirit that takes precedence, and it is clear that, for him, music is the equivalent of the Spirit. It is « la chanson qui vous est toujours soufflée [. . .] qui finira avec ces histoires de Père et de Fils » (60). The father figure Alaric, who “creates” Attalus as Emperor of Rome, is less important than his music, which is what makes him what he is. As for Alaric himself, he too is really subservient to and dependent upon Attalus's music, which he needs in order to make his life bearable. In the end, this music becomes his father too.

9. MILLET, 161 Italics in original.

The narrator of *Vies minuscules* replaces his father by producing a text that creates him. He believes at first that, by writing about his grandparents, his goal is « reporter l'image paternelle sur l'échelon antérieur, grand-parental » (75). But the source of his identity is not so much his grandparents as the text in which he evokes them. The same is true of Michon himself, who obviously sees the source of his being as an artist in the texts that he finally created. Indeed, the title of an unfinished story by Michon suggests that the text replaces the maternal element in the creation of his identity to. This work, like Courbet's famous painting, is entitled « L'Origine du monde. »¹⁰

By producing a new "father" in the text, the writer also becomes dependent on that text for an identity, just as any individual is dependent on the father for existence. The text thus becomes the nexus of a complex web of relationships, for it is the product of the writer, yet the source of the writer's existence too. There is, however, yet another element in this relationship, and that is the reader (or the audience of any work of art). The importance of this link in the chain is demonstrated by the example of the abbé Bandy, who produces beautifully crafted sermons that he hopes will stand on their own « par la seule forme achevée des mots » and which cause the narrator's grandmother to exclaim : « Il s'écoute parler » (*Vies*, 185). He uses words in such a way that « sa propre parole, il la tenait à distance de lui-même comme, du bout des doigts, il le faisait de sa cigarette » (188). Unfortunately for Bandy, this kind of discourse proves of little interest to his parishioners, who simply do not listen. Frustrated by the incomprehension of his audience, he abandons his fine speech and ends his life an alcoholic.

Another example of the need of an audience is provided by the narrator of *Vies minuscules*, who relies on the woman with whom he lives as an audience for his ideas, obsessions and projects, and as an imaginary reader of the texts that he plans to produce. When she leaves him, he realises this need. « Je ne pouvais tolérer la perte de ce lecteur fictif », he admits (174). In the same novel, Fiefé's stories exist only as long as the other customers in the café listen to him, and he loses his power as a creator when they turn away or make fun of him. Even Lorentino's only masterpiece is rendered pointless when it is finally used to repair a hole in a

10. MICHON, « L'Origine du monde » in Pierre BERGOUNIOUX *et al*, *Companies de Pierre Michon* (Lagrasse : Verdier ; Orléans : Théodore Balmoral, 1993), 151-168.

church wall and nobody looks at it any more. In *Mythologies d'hiver*, Bertrand has to put the life of Saint Enimie into the vernacular so that it has an audience and the legend can be fixed in the minds of ordinary people.

The reader thus becomes a presence behind the text and the final "creator" of that text, which has no existence without this presence. When the narrator of *Vies minuscules* is abandoned by the woman who had listened to him, he realises that « s'enfuyant [. . .] la petite bête avait emporté avec elle les livres, les lutrins et l'écritoire, avait dépouillé de sa pourpre hautaine et de son camail noir le patriarche érudit » (175). The reader is, as it were, the "father" and creator of the text, almost the ultimate Father : God. In his fine sermons, Bandy seeks « les suffrages du Grand Lecteur d'en haut » (*Vies*, 210). In much the same way, the writer seeks the presence of the reader as the ultimate justification of the text and the provider of an identity. The reader, in his or her turn, depends on the text to exist as a reader and to acquire identity. There is, therefore, a complex of mutual dependence and relationships that confer an identity on each element (writer, text and reader; or, more generally, artist, work of art and audience).

By bringing before the reader his own struggle to create, seen through the lives of characters, Michon produces from the depths of despair works of art that bring him, as a creator, before the reader. Writing of Faulkner's life and his struggle to create, Michon describes them in words that apply equally to his own work. They are, he says : « La part noire sur laquelle, contre laquelle, et grâce à laquelle, éclate la gloire de l'écrit » (Bayle, 102).