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Pierre Lecuire: assessing the coexistence of the material and the virtual in his Modernist publishing project

Pierre Lecuire, who died in 2013 at the age of 91, occupies a distinctive, if little known, position in the French literary and artistic world. For over half a century, he collaborated on books with contemporary artists including Nicolas de Staël, Zao Wou-ki, and Geneviève Asse, and invited composers, such as Pierre Boulez, to contribute to book and performance projects. Many libraries and museums, from the Library of Congress in Washington to the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, possess all of his books, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France dedicated an important exhibition to his work in the Galerie Mansart in 2001. Yet Lecuire refused to be part of the traditional publishing world; he may have followed some of the conventions of the luxurious French *livre d'artiste* [artist's book¹], with its limited print runs and considerable editorial participation, but he differed radically from this tradition in that he devoted himself entirely to publishing his own work. In this respect, he is close to the American artists' book tendency of the 1960s, which included creators such as Ed Ruscha and Dick Higgins, who wanted to take full responsibility for their books, although the respective finished works are very distinct in terms of content and form. Furthermore, Lecuire's work cannot be found outside his own publications, which is unusual for any writer trying to establish him/herself in twentieth-century Paris. Lecuire described himself as an 'architecte du livre' [book architect], and his own description of Iliazd, a contemporary artist's book creator and publisher, as a 'maître d'œuvre' [project manager for building or engineering construction], applies particularly well to his own publishing projects.² In a catalogue for an exhibition of his

books at the Grolier Club in New York, he is quoted in English, continuing this architectural metaphor: ‘I want to write the poem and build a house for it.’³

Lecuire is an important figure in the world of artist’s books, as attests the inclusion of a chapter dedicated to his work in François Chapon’s seminal work on the subject, *Le Peintre et le Livre: L’âge d’or du livre illustré en France 1870–1970* [The Painter and the Book: The Golden Age of the Illustrated Book in France 1870-1970].⁴ His output can therefore teach us much about collaboration between writers, artists and musicians, and the ensuing interactions of textual and visual forms within the pages of a book. In this article, we will explore Lecuire’s publishing endeavours, examining his well-established interest in the materiality of the book form, which could be said to lead to a notion of an ideal book. But we would like to suggest that this emphasis on the material is, rather, inseparable from the virtual once unfinished and absent books and associated documents also created by Lecuire are taken into account. We argue that the unfinished plays an essential role in his work which places it within a broader Modernist project and suggests unexpected affinities with writers such as Blaise Cendrars, whose *La Légende de Novgorode* had never been seen until recently despite appearing in Cendrars’ bibliographies, and Henri Michaux, who had planned the publication of an atlas including images to accompany his account of imaginary travels, *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*.⁵

Critics generally agree that Lecuire’s interest in book form is a predominantly material one.⁶ Lecuire repeatedly tells us that he aspires towards a Mallarmean ‘livre total’ [total book], which can be looked at, but also touched; smelled, but also heard. He does not want his books to be read, however: ‘Je ne veux pas qu’on lise mes livres mais qu’on les voie’ [I don’t want my books to be read, but rather seen].⁷ His books are monumental in ambition, as is his entire project. There is no doubt that this is a creator who has a great attachment to the book form itself,

to the tactile and deeply intimate experience of reading a book, not in a nostalgic sense, but rather in the sense of the book having some sort of mystical, transcendental power. It provides a structure through which meaning can emerge:

La démarche du poète dans le livre tend à enfermer les forces du monde à l'intérieur d'un ordre et d'un modèle. C'est donc une réserve, un réservoir de vie qu'il forme, un vivier de mots auxquels s'appliquent les règles du Verbe. [...] le Livre est une colonne de cristal qui avance à travers les déserts, reflétant les perspectives et les théorèmes du monde, si transparente que le Nom qu'elle reflète se volatilise et jaillit en millions d'éclats dont chacun à son tour réforme la Lumière.⁸

The poet works within the Book toward locking the forces of the world into an order and a model. Thus he builds a reserve, a reservoir of life, a pond stocked with words subject to the rules of the Verb [...] the Book is a crystal column crossing deserts, reflecting the perspectives and theorems of the world. It is so transparent that the name it reflects becomes air and bursts into a billion sparks, each of which becomes Light.⁹

This airy transparency is present, for instance, in a book entitled *L'Air* [Air], published by Lecuire in 1964, with a poem by him and 12 dry-point engravings by Geneviève Asse. The book was set by the typographers, Marthe Fequet and Pierre Baudier, with whom Lecuire worked from 1953 to 1982. Here content meets form as the book strives to represent its subject matter through its own materiality. As is noted in The Grolier Club catalogue:

Air, the theme of the poems, is present in the double folds of the ultra-light China paper, the pale layout of the Elzevir type on the page, the blank spaces of the drypoints, the balsa wood of the box, the elliptical 'R' (pronounced 'air' in French).¹⁰

Asse's delicate, geometrical dry-points, similarly to those contained in *Art poétique* [The Art of Poetry, 1995], another collaboration between Asse and Lecuire, are so restrained as to be barely visible.

Lecuire's foregrounding, in this case accompanied by Asse, of all that is absent and ephemeral through the use of blank space is characteristic of a certain type of poetic and visual production during the twentieth century. The forefather of this output is Stéphane Mallarmé and it has often been argued that Lecuire's reflections on the book form recall Mallarmé's ideas on the book as a spiritual instrument: 'tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre' [everything, in the world, exists to end up in a book].¹¹ Boulez, on receiving *Le livre des livres II* [The Book of Books II], commented that:

Votre livre fait penser à ce que Mallarmé dit du Livre; un objet très courant sur lequel on a perdu l'habitude de s'étonner, de réfléchir redevient un mystère plus ou moins déchiffrable, ou, du moins, dont le déchiffrement nous arrête et nous fait trébucher sur la notion même de ce qu'on déploie plus qu'on ne feuillette.¹²

Your book calls to mind what Mallarmé said about the Book. A very common object, which one has lost the habit of reflecting about and being surprised at, once again becomes a more or less decipherable mystery, at least to the extent that its decipherment

arrests us and makes us stumble on the very concept of what one is unfurling – rather than leafing through.¹³

Lecuire’s books make us reflect on the book itself and representations of it, reminding us of the sacred, religious implications of this form. Indeed, reflection in all its senses is central to Lecuire’s concerns. Different forms, both visual and verbal, reflect different interpretations and representations within these books. Certain books reflect other books: *Le livre des livres II*, as implied by its title, is preceded by *Le livre des livres*. Lecuire writes at the beginning of the first *livre des livres*:

LE LIVRE DES LIVRES HOMMAGE AU LANGAGE
SIMULTANÉ
DE LA PAGE ÉCRITE ET GRAVÉE
MIROIR DU LANGAGE DANS LE POÈME
ÉCLATÉ MIROIRS MULTIPLIÉS
D’UNE GRAVURE UNIQUE¹⁴.

THE BOOK OF BOOKS HOMAGE TO SIMULTANEOUS
LANGUAGE
OF THE WRITTEN AND ENGRAVED PAGE
MIRROR OF LANGUAGE IN THE EXPLODED

POEM MULTIPLE MIRRORS
OF A SINGLE ENGRAVING

This ‘homage’ calls to mind Cendrars’ ‘livre simultané’ [simultaneous book], *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France* (1913) [Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France], which, through its epigraph, ‘dédié aux musiciens’ [dedicated to the musicians], its inclusion of sumptuous images by Sonia Delaunay and the typographical experimentation throughout Cendrars’ written text, attempts to render the multiple experiences and dynamism of modern life.¹⁵ In a similar way, the artistic mirrors in Lecuire’s text reflect the multiple creative possibilities of Hercules Seghers’ etching of three books, on which it is based, and pay tribute to the book form in every possible way as well as underlining the difference between the written and the engraved (or etched) page. There even exists a book called *Le livre réfléchi* [Reflected Book], which contains Lecuire’s reflections on the book form as well as signs by Zao Wou-ki. This book is printed in gold dust on rare Mexican bark paper – which makes deciphering the texts and signs remarkably difficult – with the poem at its centre and a text in prose ‘hidden’ at the back in the outside wrappers. Unsurprisingly, four of the signs that Zao Wou-ki uses are ideograms that represent ‘the book’ and ‘a gathering of books’. The book, then, is essential to Lecuire’s creative *œuvre* in terms of both form and content. It seems that a body of work could hardly be more self-reflexive or more reliant on its material support.

We would argue, however, that the relationship between material books and books that do not exist is not just one in which those material books point to an ideal absent book. Rather, in the cases that we will go on to examine, non-existent, virtual, but particular absent projects are given material form by Lecuire in two ways: he transforms elements of uncompleted projects

into new ones, and he produces supplementary material surrounding the production of the works. In this way, we are considering his project as process. In their introduction to *The Art of the Project: projects and experiments in modern French culture*, Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham argue that ‘the “work” made available to the reader/viewer is [...] very often an account of the conduct of the project or experiment, the record or trace of its success or failure, its consistency with or deviation from its initial premises.’¹⁶ Lecuire’s supplementary material constitutes ‘epitexts’, a subcategory of Genette’s ‘paratexts’; either contemporaneous with a book’s publication, or produced subsequently, and either public or private, epitexts are associated with a book rather than being integral to it (Genette gives examples including correspondence and interviews).¹⁷ They shed light on the book or the processes of its production, and all paratexts are to a greater or lesser extent intended by the author to influence its reception.¹⁸ We shall argue that Lecuire does direct the interpretation of his work. The remainder of this article will examine two of Lecuire’s early collaborations with Nicolas de Staël that never came to fruition in the forms that had been envisaged for them: a collaborative work to be called *Tombeau d’Hercules Seghers* [The Tomb of Hercules Seghers] and a series of ballets for which Lecuire and René Char would write the scenarios. Material that had been prepared for those projects was not abandoned, and we will trace its various afterlives, thereby demonstrating how the provisional, unfinished and indeed unwritten work can be not only a legitimate foundation for literary and artistic creativity, but also enable a redefinition of his project.

The collaboration between de Staël and Lecuire was that of an older, more experienced artist who was admired greatly by the younger Lecuire, still a student when they met in 1945.¹⁹ Lecuire published de Staël’s letters to him in more than one edition, and the letters outline the artist’s engagement with what Lecuire was thinking and writing about him.²⁰ Lecuire wrote *Voir*

Nicolas de Staël [Looking at Nicolas de Staël] in 1953, a substantial work of *poésie critique* [poetry-criticism] of over 100 pages that went through several versions as he sent drafts to de Staël, who then offered reflections on them.²¹ This process is examined in a recent article, which outlines the extent to which Lecuire was in the shadow of de Staël, but then argues that he emerged from it, though obviously marked by their friendship, and that de Staël in turn was affected by Lecuire's response to his work.²² He also produced a text called *L'Art qui vient à l'avant* [Art which goes before], which began as an exhibition catalogue essay that was never published. Lecuire published it in book form after it was returned to him anonymously in 1965.²³

The letters trace the development of *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* and their gradual realisation that the book would never be made. According to Genette, correspondence 'peut [...] témoigner d'une non-naissance : œuvres avortées dont ne subsistent parfois que ces traces indirectes, et quelques ébauches'²⁴ [can bear witness to a non-birth: aborted works of which sometimes only these indirect traces remain, and some drafts]. Lecuire and de Staël both admired the work of the seventeenth-century Dutch engraver Hercules Seghers. Lecuire drafted a text on him which he gave to de Staël, who planned to produce etchings for a collaborative book to be called *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers*. According to Lecuire's comments on their correspondence, de Staël was due to begin work on the etchings in April 1953, having received Lecuire's draft text the previous year. But by May 1953, doubts had already set in about the possibility of completing the book. For instance, de Staël wrote on 31 May 1953: 'Oui mon cher, j'annote votre "Tombeau", mais je vous assure que si le texte n'est pas aussi vide que les gravures, cela n'ira pas'²⁵ [Yes, my friend, I'm annotating your 'Tomb', but I promise you that if the text isn't as empty as the engravings, it won't work]. He goes on to compare the effect they should be aiming at to the dancing of Alicia Markova, the last dancer still active at the time from

Diaghilev's Ballets russes, whom de Staël and Lecuire together saw dance at the Palais de Chaillot in January 1954.²⁶ He saw in her dancing a weightlessness he compares to 'un oiseau en plein ciel, sans ailes, sans pectoraux, sans oiseau en somme' [a bird high in the sky, without wings, without pectoral muscles, without a bird in fact], and he continues: 'Travaillez le vide jusqu'à la limite.' [work emptiness to its limit.]²⁷ The etchings by Seghers from which they took their inspiration are not, at first glance, at all empty [see Figure 1] [insert Figure 1 about here]. But de Staël saw in them an airiness created by the fine lines, which, he wrote, appeared to have been produced by just a blade of grass.²⁸ De Staël's own etchings were indeed dominated by white space, but it did not seem possible to arrive at a satisfactory whole.

After the project was abandoned, some of the etchings de Staël had produced in preparation for *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* were incorporated instead into *Ballets-minute* [Minute-Ballets] (Paris: Pierre Lecuire, 1954) [see Figure 2] [insert Figure 2 about here] and the accompanying *Le livre de ballets* [Book of Ballets] (Paris: Pierre Lecuire, 1954). Lecuire's enthusiasm for Seghers also persisted in his basing of the monumental *livres des livres* [book of books] numbered I and II on the single etching by Seghers of three books, unusual in a body of work that consists principally of landscapes. In *Le livre des livres I* artists interpret this image [see Figure 3] [insert Figure 3 about here], and their engravings are interspersed with text by Lecuire whose layout is a constellation that calls to mind Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* [A Throw of the Dice will never Abolish Chance]. In *Le livre des livres II* further artists were invited to do the same, along with the composers Boulez, Stockhausen and Ligeti. They drew fragments of scores which are incorporated in the same way as the artists' illustrations (Boulez's is a fragment from *Répons* (1981-85))²⁹. The limited text is different this time, though, taking the form of intersecting lines that resemble architectural shapes. Even the

contributors' signatures are laid out in this way. A striking absence from *Le livre des livres II* is Seghers' own etching, which perhaps echoes the virtual *Tombeau* that was at the origin of the enterprise. In another instance of the virtual, these two books were supposed to be followed by *Le livre des livres III*, which was never produced.

The *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* had a further afterlife. Issue 4 of the journal *L'Éphémère* [Ephemeral], whose 20 numbers appeared between 1967 and 1972, included a dossier devoted to Seghers that was edited by André du Bouchet.³⁰ It incorporated a number of his etchings, along with some by de Staël [see Figure 4] [insert Figure 4 about here] and a letter by de Staël to Lecuire in which he comments on one of the drafts of Lecuire's text.³¹ Lecuire had published annotations by de Staël on the text in a luxury edition in May 1966, and Du Bouchet knew of this from reading *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire*.³² This instance of a published epitext is more complex than the categories outlined by Genette. The annotations – comments in the form of the letter – are made central and the source text appears in marginal fragments. There is no introductory explanation or commentary, but there are texts that can best be described as *poésie critique* by André du Bouchet and Jacques Dupin, two of the editors of *L'Éphémère*, and one by Anne de Staël, the artist's daughter. Each of these textual and visual elements responds in some way to the others, and it is not quite clear where the origin of the dossier resides. It might be in Seghers' etchings, or the absent *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers*, which is the focus that best links all the pieces, without its having ever properly existed. Yet there is no sense of a void at the centre of the dossier. Rather *L'Éphémère*, whose editors shared Lecuire's insistence on the book as tactile material object and paid similarly close attention to layout and typography, is an enduring material response to a virtual source. Despite its publication of epitextual material in this dossier, *L'Éphémère* always resisted comment. After an

initial *prière d'insérer* (a form also discussed by Genette³³), no further editorial comment or introduction was provided to the twenty issues. The marginal is here given solid form and first position in the issue.

The dossier is unusual in that Lecuire's words for *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* appear in a text not published by him, and are interpreted by de Staël. The editors chose as title for de Staël's text the beginning of its opening line, 'La coupe de la phrase bonne lame' [The division of the sentence good swordsman]³⁴. That line continues: 'simple guillotine à penser' [simple guillotine for thought]. It appears that de Staël the writer, by combining evocations of blades and violence with references to language, thought and poetic prosody in 'la coupe de la phrase', wished to emphasise that thought can be disrupted or arise from disruption. De Staël's text is full of questions, or propositions followed by an insistent 'Non'. He disagrees with what Lecuire has written at times: for example, a marginal extract from Lecuire's text reads 'D'une plus authentique certitude que les paysages de Rembrandt' [of a greater certainty than Rembrandt's landscapes]; de Staël, on the other hand, insists: 'Superbes, les Rembrandt. / Autres choses. / Lui, il est incertain, hésitant' [The Rembrandts are superb. Something else. He is uncertain, hesitant]. The form of the letter's annotations, listed against the page numbers of the Lecuire text to which they are responding, adds to the sense of disruption it produces; it is Modernist in its incompleteness and simultaneity.

Disruption is evident throughout the 'dossier,' both in the intrusion of blank space into de Staël's sparse etchings, which exaggerates the spaces in the Seghers plates to which they respond, and in the language of the poetic responses. André du Bouchet, for example, in a text entitled 'Fragment de montagne' [Mountain Fragment] incorporates space in his text through layout and by including punctuation marks – specifically the em-dash – that themselves suggest

pauses of indeterminate length.³⁵ The texts by Du Bouchet and Jacques Dupin, in common with the poetry for which they are well known, concentrate on the solid materiality of the elemental world, and this predilection is in tune with their interest in Seghers' mountainous landscapes. Dupin writes: 'le trait se brise sur la feuille' [the line shatters on the page], conveying the energy of one of de Staël's drawings,³⁶ and continues:

s'éparpille en tisons qui gravitent et s'ordonnent selon un nouveau magnétisme.

Projectile écrasé de la touche, ligne éclatée qui crible la surface...

Comme si l'espace ne se livrait qu'à l'effraction, ne répondait qu'à la rupture et à l'émiettement du trait, à la libre circulation du vide entre les fragments, par tous les interstices des formes disjointes et des éléments séparés.³⁷

scatters in embers that gravitate and order themselves according to a new magnetism. A crushed projectile of a mark, shattered line that riddles the surface...

As if space would only give itself up to force, only answer to rupture and the crumbling of the line, to the free circulation of emptiness among the fragments, through all the gaps between disjointed shapes and separated elements.

This is the very opposite of the total, or ideal book, and it reflects both Dupin's interpretation of Seghers' etchings, and the paradoxical nature of the contemporary responses to him. The 'dossier' in *L'Éphémère* acquires coherence through the editors' responses that are directed at one another, at de Staël and Lecuire, and at Seghers' etchings, despite the absence of direct editorial comment on its composition. But the contributions themselves emphasise

fragmentation: Lecuire's text is present only in fragments, some of de Stael's etchings reproduce only details of Seghers' 'originals', and the imagery developed by Du Bouchet and Dupin is that of the fragment. In this way, they correspond to Lecuire's own valuing of the fragments remaining from the abandoned project.

Ballets-minute, by Lecuire and de Staël, has been described (most probably by Lecuire himself) as 'one of the masterpieces of the French illustrated book in the twentieth century.'³⁸ It met with little success on its publication in 1954, however. This book is the product of two failed or abandoned projects: the *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* and also a ballet. There have been many attempts by poets and artists to capture the instantaneous, gestural nature of ballet; Edgar Degas' series of paintings of dancers and Henri Matisse's *Dance Murals*, for example.³⁹ Through pictorial, sculptural and textual representations, ballet offers a subject in which the body, even in its absence, dominates. The dancer is transformed in his/her own performance, and through representation, into a virtual realm of imagination and expression beyond the physical body.

Lecuire and de Staël shared an interest in ballet as an artistic form but they agreed that it needed updating. Both were keen to 'réover un art empoussiéré'⁴⁰ [renew a dust-covered art], so they decided to create their own ballet. In their ballet project, de Staël and Lecuire seem preoccupied with the passage of time. In *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, an epitextual book accompanying this project written in 1995 for the Bibliothèque Méjanès in Aix-en-Provence, Lecuire expresses impatience with the length of time it takes for a ballet to develop its narrative:

Le déroulement d'un ballet exprimant une histoire est trop lent pour nos sens impatients.
Pourquoi, par resserrement, ne pas aller plus vite à l' 'apparition,' je veux dire à sa
création d'un acte illuminant, bref, étincelant, d'autant plus éblouissant que les gestes du

danseur, avançant comme des spasmes et soubresauts, brûleraient les étapes auxquelles se complait ce que j'appellerai la 'danse du développement'.

Une vie se traduirait dans le temps d'une minute. Un amour brûlerait dans l'espace de quelques instants. Entre chaque acte, le noir, la nuit. 'Le ballet-minute' ne s'enchaîne pas. Il explose d'évidence. Il avance par soubresaut vitalisant.⁴¹

A ballet's unfolding story is too slow for our impatient senses. Why not tighten it up, go more quickly to the 'apparition,' and by that I mean its creating of an action that is illuminating, brief, shining, all the more dazzling in that the dancer's movements, progressing by spasm and jerks, would destroy the stages that what I would call the 'dance of development' takes pleasure in elaborating?

A life would be transposed in a minute. A love affair would burn in the space of a few instants. Between each act, blackness, night. The 'Minute-Ballet' does not follow on. Obviously it explodes. It progresses by revitalizing jerks.

The poet and artist were interested in capturing an experience, an emotion, even the unfolding of a whole life, in brief instances of dance: they would use the ephemeral nature of dance and its suggestion of an absent body with abrupt, verging on violent, gestures and spasms, creating works which were not to last more than one minute.

Lecuire relates the incidents that occurred once they had decided on this artistic venture together in *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, including their almost comical advances to established composers to write the musical score for their ballet. Lecuire describes an extremely awkward evening in Florence where de Staël, his wife and Lecuire travelled by train on a seemingly spur

of the moment decision to ask Luigi Dallapiccola to write the music for their ballet. According to Lecuire's account, Dallapiccola was expecting Nabokov, his wife and a young poet that evening and no-one dared ask anyone anything.⁴² A similar misunderstanding took place when de Staël approached, in Lecuire's interpretation of events, a rather dollar-obsessed Igor Stravinsky in New York:

Stravinsky : Nicolas, vous me parlez de musique de ballet. Mais de combien de dollars disposez-vous ?

Staël : J'ai mon billet d'avion pour le retour à Paris.

Stravinsky : S'il n'y a pas de dollar, il n'y a pas de musique...⁴³

Stravinsky: Nicolas, you're talking about ballet music. But how many dollars do you have?

Staël: I have my plane ticket back to Paris.

Stravinsky: If there are no dollars, there's no music...

Nothing came of these ideas and *Ballets-minute* was never actually produced as a ballet. Lecuire comments wistfully on this period and his and de Staël's youthful arrogance: 'Nous agissons comme des petits fous, comme des écervelés. Qu'était ce qu'une tentative si mal menée, sans ressources, sans arrières ? Nous étions riches de projets et d'orgueil.' [We were acting like mad things, like scatterbrains. What a badly managed attempt it was, with no money and little thought. We were rich in plans and in pride.]⁴⁴

The traces of this (pride and) project can be found in two ‘ballet books’ by Lecuire: *Ballets-minute* with twenty etchings by de Staël and *Livre de ballets*, which was published without images one month after *Ballets-minute* (although both books were conceived at the same time) as well as in the later *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*. Lecuire is reusing and recycling their work, thereby highlighting the stages of development of a finished product and questioning the value and indeed the possible existence of an authentic, original work. *Livre de ballets* contains the same texts as *Ballets-minute*, with five additional ‘ballets-minute’ and seven longer ballet stories. One of these stories is dedicated to the aforementioned Markova. A later version of *Livre de ballets* (1993)⁴⁵ contains two engravings by Geneviève Asse and in some copies ‘à la marionnette’ [with clown], a third ‘gravure “refuse”’ [additional engraving] [see Figure 5] [insert Figure 5 about here]. This last engraving where the feet of the clown have been scribbled out seems to stand in stark contrast to Lecuire’s other ‘ideal’, perfect, pared down productions. Like the fragments of the *Tombeau* or the mirror to the *Ballets-minute*, the inclusion of these scribbles attests to the making of the book, and to the project itself; they do not correspond to a Beckettian valuation of failure.

The absent projects that were never completed became part of the narrative Lecuire told around his work. *Tombeau d’Hercules Seghers* appears in a box of dotted lines in his web of connected works [see Figure 6] [insert Figure 6 about here]⁴⁶ and, in a dossier produced in a single copy entitled ‘« Tombeau d’Hercules Seghers ». Reliquiae’ [‘Tomb of Hercules Seghers’: Relics] he brought together what was left of the project: a few trial pages, an incomplete typescript of the text, reworked and corrected in 1979 and 1989, and the letters Lecuire and de Staël exchanged about their plans. It also led to a manuscript called *Métamorphose* [Metamorphosis], produced for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2000.⁴⁷ The importance

accorded not only to telling the tale of works that did not take their original planned form, but also to the extraneous material itself, suggests that the non-existent *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers* and the ballets that were never performed are nevertheless central to Lecuire's work as virtual productions. Lecuire's use of the term 'relics' is in line with his understanding of the book as mystical, but, in addition, implies that the material surrounding the *Tombeau* is to be venerated. The material is valuable because of its existence as part of a former project. Relics are material objects whose status comes from their supposedly being actual parts of a venerated saint; in this they differ from icons, whose power resides in their ability to call to mind an absent figure.⁴⁸ In turn, the *Tombeau* would have been an homage to Seghers while referring at the same time to a tomb that contains bodily remains. Lecuire's 2008 copy of his letters from de Staël including his own handwritten commentaries adds a further layer to the material records of collaborative projects. The correspondence in itself constitutes an epitext that is read to aid understanding of their relationship; Lecuire's comments added after de Staël's death are therefore an added layer of paratextual material. The book resembles a *livre d'artiste* and its cover is a collage by de Staël that, in another marrying of the virtual and the material, had been intended as a book cover. The letters demonstrate tension as de Staël acknowledges the failure of *Tombeau d'Hercules Seghers*. Lecuire comments that they were both wondering who was at fault, and suggests that the writing of *Voir Nicolas de Staël* might have interfered with it because they were working on the two projects in parallel. In any case, he claims to have been convinced that their new proposed collaboration, *Ballets-minute*, would make up for its loss, and states that he has already moved on from the *Tombeau*.⁴⁹

While the function of some of the comments in *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire* is factual and explanatory, overall they aim at imposing Lecuire's interpretation of his

relationship with de Staël and, in particular, the impression of his own achievements that he wishes to convey. They have persuasive force and demonstrate the authorial control that the epitext can be used to assert.⁵⁰ For example, Lecuire presents their relationship as predicated on combat, commenting on one of the earliest letters, dated 18 November 1949: ‘Ici commence une JOUTE avec Pierre Lecuire de laquelle naîtra un poète’ [Here begins a JOUST with Pierre Lecuire from which a poet will be born].⁵¹ This is typical both of his insistence on his own trajectory as a unique poet and book producer, and of his habit of referring to himself in the third person. The image of the joust is pursued, and, in a change of metaphorical field in comments related to letters of November and December 1952, he employs the vocabulary of the Catholic mass:

Le temps est venu d’engager la liturgie qui annonce la naissance d’un livre (45) ; Faire un Livre, c’est comme dire la Messe. Il y a le Rituel et l’au-delà du Rituel. En principe, l’un mène à l’autre. (47) ; A-t-il [de Staël] cru un moment avoir trouvé avec moi un simple thuriféraire, comme tous les peintres en cherchent ? Il comprit vite son erreur. (48)

The time has come to undertake the liturgy that heralds the birth of a book [...]. Making a Book is like saying Mass. There is the Ritual and what is beyond the Ritual. In principle, one leads to the other [...]. Did he [de Staël] believe for a moment that he had found in me a simple thurifer, as all painters look for? He quickly understood his mistake.

These comments reveal the need to emphasise the importance of his own role, in contrast to the position of acolyte that he accuses de Staël of ascribing to him. They also suggest that the ritual

of undertaking a book might be more important to him than the finished product. The process is the project, and carries illocutionary force. In a note to a letter of January 1954 in which de Staël suggested they begin work on the book *L'Atelier* [The Studio], which was never produced, he writes:

‘L’ATELIER’ est ce livre fantôme qui navigue entre le non-être du Seghers et l’être absent du ‘PONT’ suspendu au-dessus des eaux de la Durance. Mais ‘L’ATELIER’ n’aura jamais d’existence propre. (87)⁵²

‘STUDIO’ is the ghost book that navigates between the non-being of Seghers and the absent being of ‘BRIDGE’ suspended above the waters of the Durance. But ‘STUDIO’ never existed in its own right.

This failure of this further virtual book does not appear to concern Lecuire. It is clear, therefore, that the image of Pierre Lecuire as the architect aiming at an ideal book must be nuanced. His architectural project, with its rigorous attention to typography and layout, and organisation – often retrospective – of all his works into an interconnecting whole, demonstrates his wish to control not only the whole process of book production, but that of his entire œuvre and its reception. This wish is further compounded by the notes that accompany the donation of all his works to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1999. There is no doubt that, as Mauricette Berne states, ‘Les commentaires ajoutés par Pierre Lecuire au moment où il a préparé la donation, en 1999, seront un guide précieux pour le lecteur-spectateur [...] fondamental pour le chercheur.’⁵³ [The commentaries added by Pierre Lecuire when he put together the donation in

1999 will be a valuable guide for the reader/viewer [...] and essential for the critic.], but we would also suggest that this overt directing of critical response threatens to distort readers' engagement with his work.

While luxurious in their material aspects, Lecuire's books are not lavish. He often limited the text in a book and worked with artists, such as Geneviève Asse, whose style is to pare down images to the minimum suggestive forms. But this reduction is combined with a privileging of the material rather than a search for the absolute. A later work, *Poèmes Xi*, was produced on plexiglass, both transparent and entirely solid. This ephemeral work, which is perhaps closer to an artistic installation, has been presented just once: in 1975 at an exhibition of books by Pierre Lecuire at the Villa Arson in Nice.⁵⁴ It takes more tangible form in its accompanying dossier, another epitext, which contains a handwritten description that insists that it 'EST' [IS] and that it produces "'APPARITION" du Poème pour échapper au "déchiffrement" de la lecture' [the 'APPARITION' of the Poem in order to escape from the 'deciphering' of reading].⁵⁵ Also included are designs on tracing paper for that installation and possible further ones, and three photographs of the object. In one of these a man can be seen through the glass as he sits behind it. Lecuire has written on the back: 'Le Poète "pris dans les glaces" du Poème' [The Poet 'captured in the mirrors' of the Poem], thereby incorporating an image of himself into the material surrounding the work. Once again, the material surrounding the work appears vital to the extent of constituting relics of a work that otherwise only has virtual existence outside the installations, and those relics proliferate, in contrast with the pared-down published books.

In transforming elements from abandoned projects into new books, Lecuire neither forgot those projects nor kept them as untouched, non-existent ideal books. Rather, the new books testify to the virtual existence of the abandoned ones in resolutely material form. In the same

way, his production of notes, dossiers and annotations designed to direct interpretation of the books reinforces the importance he accords to the books through their status as ‘relics’ of them, as well as taking a form that is both material and apparently mystical. Unlike the poets and editors of *L’Éphémère*, who refused to explain their approach, and whose texts deliberately avoid describing the engravings that inspired them, Lecuire’s need to add material surrounding his otherwise rigorous books with their pared-down illustrations testifies to a distinctive relationship to the material that sets him apart from de Staël and from his contemporaries in the literary and publishing world, but suggests potential parallels with writers such as Michaux and Cendrars. Michaux published paratexts to several of his works, including ‘Postface’ to *Mouvements*⁵⁶, the first book containing experimentation with signs, and the preface to the 1963 edition of *Un barbare en Asie* which directs the reader towards a more nuanced understanding of these potentially controversial texts.⁵⁷ Cendrars’ experimentation with rewriting and intertextuality is close to Lecuire’s recycling and reusing texts and artistic works although Cendrars is far more playful in his approach. His ‘Avis aux chercheurs et aux curieux!’ contained in *L’Homme foudroyé*⁵⁸ is a ludic nod in the direction of the plagiarised material to be found in *Kodak (Documentaire)*, a collection of poems published in 1924. However, neither of these creators published epitexts. Lecuire’s work is above all important for us to consider in terms of the interaction between text and image; his collaborations with various artists and musicians and, in particular, de Staël, are richly instructive with regard to aesthetic processes and the relationship between the poet, the artist and their work more generally. His foregrounding of the material helps us to understand how representation works within the pages of the artist’s book. But it is ultimately his constant return to the provisional fragment, a broadly Modernist concern, which teaches us the most about his creative project.

List of Illustrations

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Figure 2. Nicolas de Staël, engraving for Pierre Lecuire, *Ballets-minute* (Pierre Lecuire, 1954) (photo Nina Parish)

Figure 3. Jean Messagier, engraving for Pierre Lecuire, *Le Livre des Livres I* (Pierre Lecuire, 1974) (photo Nina Parish)

Figure 4. Nicolas de Staël, engraving reproduced in the journal *L'Éphémère* no. 4 (1967)

Figure 5. Geneviève Asse, engraving for Pierre Lecuire, *Le Livre de ballets* (Pierre Lecuire, 1954) (photo Nina Parish)

Figure 6. Pierre Lecuire, diagram of his works reprinted in *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, ed. by Pierrette Crouzet (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2001), 15 (photo Nina Parish)

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) for our research network on contemporary French poetic practice and its interdisciplinary connections and, as a result, this article.

¹ All translations are our own, unless otherwise indicated.

² Mauricette Berne, 'Avant-propos,' in: *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, ed. by Pierrette Crouzet (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2001), p. 12. As would be expected, Lecuire also contributed to the conception of this catalogue.

³ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire from the Collections of the Library of Congress* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1994), p. 10.

⁴ François Chapon, *Le Peintre et le Livre: L'âge d'or du livre illustré en France 1870-1970* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), pp. 241-49.

⁵ Henri Michaux, 'En marge d'*Ailleurs*,' in: *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, ed. by Raymond Bellour, with Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,' 2001), pp. 133-45 (p. 133).

⁶ See, for instance, Anne Mary and Sarah Barbedette, 'Architecture du livre, leçons d'espace et de rythme : Pierre Lecuire à l'école de Nicolas de Staël,' *Revue Recto/Verso*, 3 (2008), 1-13. The authors discuss Lecuire's desire to create objects (5-7) and argue that the importance of materials increased as his career advanced (9).

⁷ Cited in Mauricette Berne, 'Avant-propos,' in: *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 12.

⁸ Pierre Lecuire, 'La démarche du poète,' Manuscript, 1976, in: *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 64.

⁹ Adapted from *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 70, translated by Astrid Ivask.

¹⁰ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 27.

¹¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*, in: *Divagations*, in *Œuvres complètes II*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,' 2003), pp. 224-28 (p. 224).

¹² *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 69.

¹³ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 70.

¹⁴ Cited in Ségolène Le Men, 'Le livre comme absolu,' in: *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, pp. 66-67 (p. 66).

¹⁵ Blaise Cendrars, *Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*, in: *Poésies complètes*, 15 vols, ed. by Claude Leroy (Paris: Denoël, 2001), Vol. I, pp. 17-34.

¹⁶ Johnnie Gratton and Michael Sheringham (eds), *The Art of the Project: projects and experiments in modern French culture* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005), p. 1.

¹⁷ Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), pp. 316-70.

¹⁸ Genette, *Seuils*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Pierre Lecuire, *Journal des années Staël* [Diary of the Staël Years], 27 November 1947.

Lecuire transcribed parts of his diary relating to de Staël and these are held in manuscript form at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. See Mary and Barbedette, 'Architecture du livre, leçons d'espace et de rythme : Pierre Lecuire à l'école de Nicolas de Staël,' 10, for more details. A significant amount of artwork, text and context relating to these years and the relationship between Lecuire and de Staël is assembled in 'Les Années Staël,' *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, pp. 33-59. De Staël's death by suicide in March 1955 and Lecuire's subsequent decision no longer to show his texts to his artistic collaborators should not be forgotten in a discussion of this kind, but does not contribute to our argument in this article.

²⁰ *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire* [Letters from Nicolas de Staël to Pierre Lecuire] (Pierre Lecuire, 1966). A new edition was published in 2006, and in 2008 Lecuire added handwritten commentaries to a copy held at the Bibliothèque Méjanès in Aix-en-Provence.

²¹ A peculiarly French phenomenon, *poésie critique* has its origins in the art criticism of Baudelaire, and of Diderot before him, and constitutes a literary response to a work of art that offers a passionate, subjective, creative piece of writing rather than setting out an objective or connoisseur judgment.

²² Mary and Barbedette, 'Architecture du livre, leçons d'espace et de rythme : Pierre Lecuire à l'école de Nicolas de Staël.'

²³ See Mary and Barbedette, 'Architecture du livre, leçons d'espace et de rythme : Pierre Lecuire à l'école de Nicolas de Staël,' 2.

²⁴ Genette, *Seuils*, p. 344.

²⁵ *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 48.

²⁶ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 21.

²⁷ *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire*, 21 April 1953, p. 60.

- ²⁸ Alain Mascarou compares various responses to Seghers' work, contrasting de Staël's view of him as an 'ingénu' with Carl Einstein's representation of his work in *Documents*, 4 (1929) as demonstrating repressed creativity: Alain Mascarou, 'Hercules Seghers ou la déposition du peintre,' in: *Territoires de la poésie contemporaine : Mélanges offertes à Marie-Claire Dumas*, ed. by Nathalie Piégay-Gros (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), pp. 73-82 (pp. 79-80).
- ²⁹ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 38.
- ³⁰ *L'Éphémère*, 4 (1967), 3-41. Du Bouchet had already published a text on Seghers in issue 2 of the journal (1967): 'Notes devant Seghers,' 78-88.
- ³¹ *L'Éphémère*, 4, 3-8; *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire*, 1 June 1953, 69-73.
- ³² Anne de Staël to Alain Mascarou in letter of 3 November 1993, cited in Mascarou, *Les Cahiers de «L'Éphémère» 1967-1972. Tracés interrompus* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), p. 37.
- ³³ Genette, *Seuils*, pp. 98-109.
- ³⁴ As well as meaning 'cut', 'la coupe' refers to the arrangement of breaks in a sentence or line of verse. 'Bonne lame' literally translates as 'good blade', but 'c'est une bonne lame' means 'he is a good swordsman.'
- ³⁵ *L'Éphémère*, 4, 15-25.
- ³⁶ Materiality, here, is of the most concrete kind, and these authors see no contradiction in conveying that through a focus on the physical material of the page and even by breaking up an inked line on paper. This is not the same use of the term 'material' as the more everyday use we make of it to designate the epitextual documents Lecuire produced, of course; nevertheless, in many instances, Lecuire's own interest in the material of his books was matched by a similar care and attention to the production of accompanying documents.
- ³⁷ *L'Éphémère*, 4, 35-36 (35-36).
- ³⁸ *The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 20.
- ³⁹ For example, see plates 225 and 226, *Danseuses évoluant* (1906-1908) and *Danseuses sur la scène* (1906-1908), in Götz Adriani, *Edgar Degas: Pastels, Dessins, Esquisses* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1985) and also Jack Flam, *Matisse: The Dance* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1993), p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ Pierre Lecuire, *Miroir des Ballets-Minute* (1995), unpublished manuscript consulted at the Bibliothèque Méjanes, Aix-en-Provence, p. 11.
- ⁴¹ *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, p. 53. The vocabulary here recalls that employed by Dupin in his assessment of Seghers' work.
- ⁴² *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, p. 46.
- ⁴³ *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, p. 50.
- ⁴⁴ *Miroir des Ballets-Minute*, p. 50.
- ⁴⁵ For more information about *Livre de Ballets*, see *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 175.
- ⁴⁶ *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 15. The only other work to appear in dotted lines is the *Livre de musique*, another work that was never completed; Lecuire discussed it with Boulez in Baden-Baden in 1967. (*The Books of Pierre Lecuire*, p. 38).
- ⁴⁷ For more information, see *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 231.
- ⁴⁸ 'In Christian usage the word is applied most commonly to the material remains of a saint after his death, as well as to sacred objects which have been in contact with his body. [...] The veneration of relics is found in many religions, eg. popular Buddhism, and is based on the natural instinct of men to treat with reverence what is left of the dead they loved.': 'relics', in: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1379; 'Icons are flat pictures usually painted in egg tempura

on wood [...] to represent the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or another saint, which are used and venerated in the Eastern Church. [...] As it is believed that through them the saints exercise their beneficent powers, they preside at all important events of human life': 'icons', *ibid.*, p. 815.

⁴⁹ Comment on letter of 13 May 1953, p.65.

⁵⁰ Genette, *Seuils*, p. 15.

⁵¹ *Lettres de Nicolas de Staël à Pierre Lecuire*, p. 11. Subsequent references in the text.

⁵² This book is conspicuous by its absence in the diagram of books reproduced in *Livres de Pierre Lecuire* (p. 15). This leads us to believe that, beyond this suggestion, very little, if any, work on this book took place.

⁵³ *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ *Livres de Pierre Lecuire*, p. 227; p. 229.

⁵⁵ *Dossier Poèmes Xi*, held at Bibliothèque Méjanes. Aix-en-Provence. The status of the dossier is, ironically, an interpretation of that apparition.

⁵⁶ Henri Michaux, 'Postface' to *Mouvements*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. II, pp. 598-99.

⁵⁷ Henri Michaux, *Un barbare en Asie*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, ed. by Raymond Bellour, with Ysé Tran (Paris: Gallimard, Collection 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade,' 1998), pp. 275-408.

⁵⁸ Blaise Cendrars, *L'Homme foudroyé*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, 15 vols, ed. by Claude Leroy (Paris: Denoël, 2002), Vol. V, p. 186.