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The Elusive Embrace: A Gay Man's Bi-passing the Fantasy of Oneness

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Daniel Mendelsohn's debut memoir seemingly lays bare the most intimate part of his life: it opens on the account of his sex life as a gay man living in the centre of the City, while he leads a more conventional life raising a kid in the suburbs of New York. The promise (or pact?¹) of the text is that Mendelsohn will tackle the "most interesting and yet always suspect topos in the ongoing debate about gay culture and identity," namely that "there is such a thing as 'gay identity' at all."² The focus on gay life is not followed up throughout, and will upon reflection sound more like a concession made to gay literature than the objective of the text *per se*: for the book is as much an essay on gay memoir writing as an account of the author's own personal, singular journey into his adult self. Mendelsohn is a self-confessed non-fiction writer³ and the genre he chooses is connected to his attempts at interweaving stories of intimacy and personal reflections with abstract ideas revelatory of a background in Classicist studies, erudition and debate⁴. The text seems to lend itself to a queer interpretation because the author's partners are all male but the text reveals a tension with this version of identity, more than an adherence to it, in true analytical fashion. Yet, Mendelsohn resists the inclusion into queer identity or a queer literature as this inclusion is precisely put into question and constitutes the very organising principle of the text itself. The scenes of gay love that the text starts with can be ranged alongside a number of other illustrative elements that form part and parcel of what is indeed a larger quest of the origins—a series of repeated encounters with his own self-definition, in which his being gay is only one part of a more complex endorsement of an identity⁵—as revealed in his now repeated attempts to make sense of his own life story⁶. Therefore, if Mendelsohn himself challenges the very notion of a "gay identity," as the inverted commas in the quote above make only too obvious, he also challenges our vision of

love, sex and identity in their traditional acceptance as a desire for oneness and unity. He thus shows through his own life choices how the presence of an other that is not entirely reducible to the apparent signs of the subject's distinction can be located. He also criticises certain visions of identity, instead of embracing unquestioningly intersectionality, by questioning the possible hyphenation of the following characteristics: Jewish, Father, gay and Greek-American author.

This challenge to the way identity is sometimes construed is evoked in the very title. *The Elusive Embrace* cannot but refer to the tragic understanding of love as a failed, even if transiently successful, union towards harmony that works in mysterious ways, and which the author here tries to disentangle through the reconstruction of his own life. Placed within the context of defining sexual identity, it also very much evokes the well-known terms of an ongoing debate between psychoanalysis—which is accused of promoting a binary vision of sexual identities⁷—and gender theories—which are seen as negating the existence of unconscious drives that necessarily imply two sexes, or rather the existence of an other sex⁸. This debate will allow us to raise the question of whether, instead of grappling with his own gay-ness, Mendelsohn is indeed focused on homosexuality as a cultural injunction, a gendered reading of the text that signifies that where the word suggests love for the same, Mendelsohn reinstates the *other* of his own identity, so as to have it both ways, so to speak. This is why I want to look at the function of the number 2 in Mendelsohn's text, which is a gateway to his vision of love, union and identity formation, however elusive the embrace may turn out to be. It is a figure that immediately resonates with the notions of subjective division, split, and the way it challenges traditional visions of love as union⁹.

This paper shall therefore investigate how Mendelsohn's memoir offers a counter-discourse to those who would like identity to be construed as one and the same. It will also be the opportunity to interrogate the notions of duality (the double, binary or division) that is

central to psychoanalytical theory of sexual identity, because here, surprisingly in the doxa of queer thinking, these notions are not perceived as sources of a strict distribution of power relations and phallogocentric thinking, but as ways for the embrace between the two halves of oneself to remain forever elusive: “I look at these men, who probably assume about me what I assume about them, and I think, No. Oh no. I’m not one of you.”¹⁰

Division and Binaries

The text starts with the milestones of the “gayest enclave of the gayest city in the world”¹¹: the author describes a 1980s’ gay lifestyle based on cruising, promiscuity, camp aesthetics, pop consumerism and a fascination for the body. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the body of the others—the random people he sees around him or his partners—is a source of fascination but also the site of a reflection for Mendelsohn: his gay gaze is explained in the terms of difference, as if sexual preferences had narrative consequences and as if it was the from that vantage point that the author could be situated at the intersection of the two.

Because I am a gay man, and prefer to think of the hard flat strong bodies of other gay men, which seem to me always to be a matter of protuberances and convexities, rather than the soft and mysterious bodies of women, **it is not always an awareness I am comfortable with.** I find myself trying to conquer my uneasiness by being clinical, by trying to think of how I might describe her body in writing.¹²

Time and again, male partners and passers-by are reified as bodies whose flesh and shapes are described for their physicality and their anonymity, reduced to built-up bodies of a certain type of gay culture. The analysis of the function of the body would deserve an article in itself as it is the site of resemblance as much as dissemblance; it is animated as much as imagined; it is

the object of fascination and sarcasm¹³. However these outward signs of a camp way of life are observed rather than experienced and Mendelsohn's stance is very much that of the critic who observes from a distance, and not that of the memoirist. The author lays the emphasis on his dual belonging, which is another way for him to remain distant from these markers of gay lifestyle, and to structure an account that seems to progress logically rather chronologically, as perhaps would be more conventional for a "memoir."

The memoir opens on the notion of exclusion. Mendelsohn pictures himself as only a part-time gay city-dweller, or rather a city *flâneur* in a gay city centre: Mendelsohn takes the readers on a tour, inviting us to follow him in the simple grid of the American city pattern, perhaps therefore imagining a readership that is mainly straight and needing the tour guide, or gay but from less central places. The purpose of this visit is to establish that if he may be situated in the centre of gay life, he is not entirely attached to this identity. The division into two—places, lifestyles, occupations—is a structuring principle because the author seeks to track down the possibility of being "never wholly in a thing or place or experience,"¹⁴ something which recalls Lacan's definition of the feminine position as "not whole" in relation to *jouissance* and which I shall return to in this article when addressing the "riddle" of identity¹⁵. If *The Elusive Embrace* is simply read as a memoir by a gay man, readers are likely to be disappointed. For the text never deals overtly with the gay cause without ever contributing to it. In fact, the acceptance of gay identity is never questioned and the "topos" he opts for bypasses most expected tropes: Mendelsohn lives in the centre of gay life and seems to raise none of the expected questions about this aspect of his identity. It could be expected for example that the memoir seeks to unravel the ways in which Mendelsohn became gay, but the coming-out moment is not recounted and the opening of the memoir could be regarded as precisely a way of placing the author as gay and therefore working out not his becoming so, but the impact of this on his own life choices. There is no reference to the secret and coming-

out of his sexuality when he was a young boy, and the story of his first gay experiences is recounted for another purpose. The text takes it for granted that gay sex is commonly accepted and needs no disclaimer; it does not seem to have constituted a hindrance in the life of the boy; it is very tempting to read the memoir as if gayness was in fact a negligible aspect of the author's life. Thus, the text is written from the point of view of those that live in the "Village"¹⁶: the neighbourhood is a settlement of newcomers who all share similar tastes and wishes, a place characterised by same-ness in practices, habits and tastes; and no heritage or past, something fairly ironic in an author's memoir. It is noticeable that after remembering the place where he grew up as one of "houses that are identical," he then imagines how other gay youths might have been tempted to dream of another place of conformity, as suggested in the use of an anaphoric expression: "Like me, they may."¹⁷ The effect of the anaphora is to reproduce in the chiasmatic syntactical structure the parallel between himself and others, in a relationship that is said to be similar. Identity is thus grounded on identical presence and images, and random partners that are never turned into long-term relationships.

This is what Mendelsohn painstakingly deconstructs in the rest of his text, by placing himself in relation to the community as different: the openness about "cruising,"¹⁸ a practice of promiscuous sex with random strangers met in the streets to that effect, shows that Mendelsohn is not interested in the acceptability of his choices or the look of others; what matters more, it seems, is the presence within this initial perfect picture of a gay man's odyssey in one of the most progressive cities in America, and surely in the world, of an other within: the straight-like life led in the suburbs which incidentally, Mendelsohn only fully discloses later in his account, despite the heavy stress laid on his "two geographies." The looming presence of a deferred otherness seems to indicate that the author's presence in this world is only partially conform.

Chelsea ultimately is viewed as a “ghetto”¹⁹ of sameness, which young Daniel misreads as an injunction to oneness and which enables him to knot two aspects of his identity, gayness and Jewishness. In opposition, he defines himself as situated on the margins of this place and its identity. His approach is also slightly off the typical gay man he describes, as revealed by his attraction to a man based on his nose that “made me think that he could have been one of my Jewish relatives.”²⁰ Instead of evoking the physical attraction of the stereotypical camp man of central New York, which he describes in the first pages of the memoir, Mendelsohn follows in the footsteps of Proust by showing that the sexual encounter is a moment of awakening about a more complex past, one that is not entirely contained in sexual normativity:

When I read *Swann’s Way*, it wasn’t any specific description of homosexual desire that touched me... but something much more general, the novel’s description of unreciprocated desire and, above all, the astounding revelation, or perhaps confirmation, for me, that desire can’t endure its own satisfaction.²¹

In his memoir, gay lifestyle is not told, or observed, but it is analysed, as if the narrator/author wanted to remain aloof, remote, at a distance from its centre, if not its quintessence: the critic he claims he wanted to be when he started writing²² and the critic he positions himself as when he asserts: “I am always writing as if everything has been over for two thousand years.”²³ His own *bisexual* life—gay when he is in the centre of the city and a surrogate father when he is in his suburban home—makes him reflect upon this ambivalence of sexual positions and upon notions of similarity, oneness and other “riddles” of identity.

Sameness as Difference

If it is true that homosexuality has often been regarded as a psychological attraction for sameness, for an other that is alike, sometimes even to a fear of an Other that would precisely be dissimilar and frightening as a result, Mendelsohn's understanding of this identity is a search for an other—a very hetero-like attraction for men. It will escape nobody that although the text opens on cruising and promiscuous relationships, without ever suggesting that any of these random sex partners were ever around for more than intercourse, there are some landmarks of gay culture that Mendelsohn does not touch upon: some have noted the absence of a reference to the AIDS epidemic that on many levels was part and parcel of gay life in the end of the 20th century; social interaction seems to be limited to his walking past gay bars, restaurants, clubs and back rooms; he does not seem to have a cult for his own body, despite his attraction to the perfection of other people's. Instead of this camp lifestyle that makes of Chelsea both a hotspot of gay culture and a limited version of it, it is his own trajectory towards the acceptance of gay love that he turns to, finding in his education the roots of a certain way of relating with the other, or embracing others, so to speak.

The queering of the memoir therefore stems from its non-conformity to the expectations one may have of a text that is overtly gay in a world that is predominantly heterosexual and patriarchal. Mendelsohn is well versed in queer theory, even if he does not quote anyone specifically in that field. Yet, he seems to disagree somehow with it: “queer ideology is a kind of Narcissus's tale, in which an important sameness keeps getting overlooked because of an insistence that there is only difference; while the 'assimilationist' creed reminds you of Echo's story, in which a crucial, perhaps irreducible difference gets covered over by an apparent sameness, a voice that seemed to be saying, 'I am you, I am you, I am you.'”²⁴

The emphasis laid on division pervades the whole memoir as in this very unexpected assertion of identity in difference. When he tells how he came to the decision to go to university in the South, another example of these divisions that structure his life, the author underlines that the south is “hostile to Jews” but nothing is mentioned of an hostility to gay people, despite the fact that he clearly shows that his decision was linked to a boy he had a crush on. It gradually becomes clear that the building of his story revolves around that question of subjective division and the understanding of the articulation between difference and the same.

What is striking however is how the reminiscence of this episode –his first crush, as well as previous stories– is irretrievably the occasion for an analysis and a parallel with Greece and with its civilization at large. The graveyard scene for example is essentially presented as the first physical encounter between young Daniel and a young college boy, but Mendelsohn certainly does not revel in the details of gay sex, the difficulty of such an encounter, or the feelings they caused because he has other narratives to relate this to: Greek culture and texts. As he says, “clearly it was much earlier, before my taste for the classics or indeed for other men had budded–the two are intertwined in my mind, the pagan culture and the pagan acts–that I first knew the allure that clings to the histories of beauty and loss.”²⁵ Gay culture and Greek texts are therefore intertwined, which is not unusual given the different practices of love in Greece, but these references are meant to refresh what’s become topical in the question of gay identity, against which Mendelsohn seems to be very vocal. Again, harmony is achieved through the combination of difference rather than similarity, in a renewed observation of the division between two.

Thus his inclusion of Freud in the discussion of his memoir and in relation to the question of sameness is likely to infuriate many. It has become customary to regard Freud in America as, at best, a historical figure that modelled our way of thinking in the early days of

the twentieth century and at worst a charlatan whose reflections were based on hetero-normative, reductionist visions of mankind.²⁶ Queer theory in particular would like to make do without Freud, because this is another grand narrative associated with heteronormativity that queer theory refutes: Didier Eribon in France has repeatedly argued in favour of the necessity to stop referring to psychoanalysis, dedicating one of his books to this.²⁷ In his memoir, Mendelsohn does not quote any specific text and his reference to Freud's "narcissistic" model of male heterosexuality as "inaccurate" is made in passing to reflect on the binary culture of those that are "ghettoized"²⁸: Mendelsohn derives from the context of queerness to a more general reflection on the hyphenated culture of American people, raising doubts as to a perfect equilibrium between the two "parts" weigh more: "Can balance be maintained?"²⁹ All these examples serve one purpose, to question "that there is such a thing as 'gay identity' at all."³⁰ Before delving into Mendelsohn's understanding of this dualism, it is necessary to remember that Freud indeed posited the bisexuality of all people, a bisexuality that is only disturbed by the fate of the unconscious drives that inevitably lead to a choice of object. In his early elaborations, Freud tried to account for homosexuality by seeing it as a failure of the Oedipus stage: homosexual men are said to have been the ideal of their mother's love to the point that they cannot conceive of love outside the duplication of their own selves.³¹ By referring to psychoanalysis and offering it as a discourse that queers, so to speak, the accepted vision of homosexuality, Mendelsohn takes on a form of brazenness in the current queer debate, and again excluded himself from the centre stage.

Queer theory has by now a long history and it would be as much of a shame to regard it as a monolithic school as people are wont to do with psychoanalysis: "Of course psychoanalysis does not exist."³² However, one could certainly say that gender theory thinks of a way out of the binaries offered by heteronormativity, and has tried to fight the general tendency of earlier gender critics to reinforce, rather than suppress, the binary of two sexes or

genders,³³ instead of envisioning gender identity as plural, manifold, irreducible to the culturally constructed division between men and women, or the masculine and the feminine: “The Institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term.”³⁴ From this moment onward, queer critics have tried to account for a reality that would no longer be relational, therefore not constituted on the duality or couple that heteronormativity is said to institutionalise. Jacques André underlines that this can be understood as the fundamental, essential fantasy of gender theory, or rather of its theorists: after discussing Butler’s understanding and objection to Freud’s concept of bisexuality, he highlights that Butler does not explicitly state that what she blames Freud for is “the non-recognition of a homosexual desire which would owe nothing to anyone, or rather which would owe nothing to the *other sex*.”³⁵ In other words, even homosexuality is concerned with an other, another sex, another gendered individual and sometimes, an other that causes anxiety even if only in the negative, as that which subjects do not want to account for.

Mendelsohn’s memoir sits uncomfortably on the margins of this theoretical framework. It is indeed built on this paradox that while some pages testify to this narcissistic picture of gay culture where the Imaginary weighs heavily on people’s lives, as reflected in their phallic bodies, bars and places, it is the realisation that none of this is good for the author that has prompted the account, because he is very much aware of a dialectics between the same and difference: “I thought I had to kill myself because I thought I had to be a thing, a man who could wholly possess the thing he wanted in a way that was continuous with who he was. And this, it was clear, was impossible.”³⁶ This is a clear-sighted definition of Narcissism, because narcissism only works partly. It is therefore no coincidence that the author should turn to Ovid’s version of Narcissus at the point when he criticises queer theory’s all-encompassing definition of sameness: “For the story of Echo is nothing if not a story about

difference mistaken for sameness.”³⁷ It seems that this judgement applies to homosexual life as well. Mendelsohn’s memoir is embedded with a story of difference which deconstructs the apparent sameness in the question of duality and the double (the couple?) of the self’s relation to images.

Himself Beheld: Mirrors and Bodies vs One’s Body

The second part of the memoir underlines Mendelsohn’s foregrounding of plurality, which somehow gives an answer to the riddle of identity. The plural in “Multiplicities” almost is redundant as the meaning of the word would suffice to infer this notion of endless repetitions. Mendelsohn thus homes in his point that identity is indeed plural, varied, changing, but this discovery, he shows, originates in duality. In other words, his memoir shows that binaries are inescapable but they are not necessarily conducive to conformity or one norm only. He adds to the critical exploration of his past a literal, as well as more abstract, reflection: mirrors take centre stage and force us into another analysis of homo and auto-eroticism. The looking-glass this time foregrounds the scopic drive related to the image, that is to say the desire contained in the act of looking or rather of *be-holding*. Lacan has analysed the presence in the image reflected of a blind spot that corresponds to the structural place of the gaze as that which is ineffable and conveys the subject’s desire³⁸: “It is important to insist on the fact that the gaze is an object, because the illusion of the consciousness of seeing oneself seeing it often makes us overlook it and deludes us.”³⁹ This is a complex aspect of Lacanian theory that is explained by Jean-Claude Maleval like this: as the Other precedes the subject, since everyone is born into a world that is already constituted, already organised by the law of language, the subject can be said to be built/ formed in a world that looks at him/ her: the subject is an object of the gaze of the Other, before becoming a subject.

Therefore there is a distinction to be made between the eye that sees and the gaze which is that by which the subject is being seen.⁴⁰ One may bear in mind that the etymology of behold, just like the French word *regarder*, refers to the act of holding, of possessing; thus beholding means transforming something into an object of the gaze. The second chapter of Mendelsohn's memoir places the looking-glass as a metaphor of lineage and heritage, a site of negotiation of life choices for the little boy he was, and ultimately as that which reveals a subjective position with regard to one's image: he thus compares his usage of it to that of his family members (father, grand-father, mother). The boy is said to observe various parts of his own body (never his body as a whole it seems) from various angles and he derives pleasure from the repetition of beholding the same body parts that become estranged and familiar in the serialisation of his image. His eyes interpret the world again, mixing experience and critical analysis: in the way his father, "the mathematician," ties his tie in the mirror, the young boy concludes that he "has been oblivious to the mirror and what it tells him," while he sees his mother as "rel[ying] on it."⁴¹ Notwithstanding that these are assumptions that matter more in terms of how the boy builds his subjectivity in this truth, than for the absolute value of the interpretations that cannot be checked, the author comments:

But for the boy the mirror is something else altogether. He never thinks of what he sees there as a surface, but rather as something more like a door, as though the boy who stares back at him from the mirror's surface is in fact *behind* it, somewhere else, someplace that has its own depth, its own reality.⁴²

With this quote we are back in the two geographies that the memoir started with: the place of the other is the self itself, once separated from one's image. The looking-glass is a door open onto his desire as a child, a place of drives, impulses and desires. To use one of Freud's metaphors, the looking-glass is the other scene in which young Daniel reflects upon his subjective position, which is necessarily split between his sense of being and his self.

The chapter also revolves around the anecdote of the chicken-pox. The author wants his body covered with chicken-pox spots in imitation of his brother. This is one example in a series of ways in which looking is an experience in existing and an occasion for analysis. The boy faints and when he “comes to, he cannot remember who he is.”⁴³ The anecdote is interesting in its suggestion of existential if not ontological awakening, but it is made even more so by the wording which suggests that there would be a definite answer to the question, “who am I?” This is especially striking that at such an early age the boy discovers the question of who he is as already essentially marked by a lack, something missing even before it has been instated. The suspension of knowledge is solved when the image comes together again: “Everything is clearly amiss, and yet he senses that it will come right again – just as his features had, in the end, reassembled themselves into something recognizable, so would the rest of him.”⁴⁴ The logic of the imaginary is at play here: a sense is articulated through the relation between the reflected image and the subject, who incidentally recalls the anecdote in the third person. This narrative choice acknowledges the absence of a constituted “I” in these early stages—the boy is 9!—, finds himself only when the mirror reflects him back. It is almost as if the looking-glass had designed a language of the self for Mendelsohn and could account for his reflective attitude, which tends to see in each and everything its separated double: “How delicious to play hooky from yourself. It can make you giddy, this staring into a corridor of mirrors and not knowing the identity of any of the infinity of boys who can, after all, do nothing but look back at you.”⁴⁵

Because the reflection of his own self is one of mis-recognition or even lack of recognition, the author is tempted to delve deeper into the rift created by the identification to the image and the feeling of estrangement that is concomitantly felt. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the elevation of the looking-glass to the status of an operator of difference—between himself and others, but also the sign of the presence of an other within—seems to take

the function of a symptom; it is that which orients the subject's desire, making him suffer in its repetition, and experience extreme bouts of pleasure for the compensation it offers to the ontological lack. The plural of the titles of each chapter gradually becomes coherent with a relentless insistence on repetition: from the random cruised men of his sex lives to the millions of people that form part of his communities, from the bodies of gay men in the Village to the various scenes in cemeteries, scenes repeat like images of the self, without necessarily giving the sense of a core of being. In the poem that immediately follows the looking-glass scenes, looking is once again central and Mendelsohn's conclusion reads:

So the mirror creates a mixed pleasures. On the one hand, it creates inexhaustible multiplicities, corridors-within-corridors filled with infinitely repeating images; and yet the images it offers are doomed to fail (with a kind of stunning exactitude) to do what they are supposed to do, *which is to show you what you look like.*'

(emphases mine)⁴⁶

The conclusion returns to the question of Narcissus and its enigmatic meaning of being both resemblance and difference, a question with which Mendelsohn had started his account. He thus shows that a sense of self that heavily relies on external reflections, images and construction will inevitably fail to give more than an elusive sense of a solid anchorage of one's subjectivity. Images multiply all the more so as they fail to show the subject's desire which constitutes his/her core of being.⁴⁷

Precisely, after turning to a description of his masturbatory practice, a form of auto-eroticism that is not foreign to the psychoanalytical understanding of Narcissism, touching on the notions of drives and compulsions, Mendelsohn questions sameness as being the artificial (or rather illusory?) core of identity:

In my desire for men there is always repetition, the hunger for a return to something I first saw and wanted, which was itself a reminder of something

earlier; this is how it is with boys who want other boys, the mirror placed before the other mirror, the infinite passage of sameness produced so many times it creates the illusion of multiplicity and choice, and finally of difference.⁴⁸

Would repetition be something different from the notion of the same? Can we repeat with a difference or is repetition the relentless return of the same? The story of the author's coming out could therefore be tracked down as a moment of realisation that the self is multiple, where repetition seems to produce sameness. And this is what surprisingly sets him apart from both the gay community he lives in as he interprets it, and on the other hand his own father: "What is important in Chelsea is the same thing that was important for my mother's father: that everyone look the same, that they fit an undefined but readily identifiable template of beauty."⁴⁹

Beauty and love, which are usually thought as central themes to Narcissism, are thus conceived as neither related to the notion of the same nor to the entirely different, but as a capacity to be split into two parts that elusively embrace: it seems that the title and first part of the memoir were misleading because the same is, in the text, turned into an instrument designed to highlight the presence of the other, the *men* and *de*, within each life: "Sex between men dissolves otherness into sameness, *men* into *de*, in a perfect suspension: there is nothing that either party does know about the other."⁵⁰ Mendelsohn finds in his knowledge of Greek language and in particular the use of *men* and *de*⁵¹—a combination of conjunctions that in Greek expresses alternation or oscillation in thought—a linguistic, elusive embrace that articulates a metaphor of identity and desire. The use of terms of logic relates the sexual act to his sublimated critical version, deciphering the logic at play behind the random sexual encounters that Mendelsohn lived as ways of being incorporated into a culture, and which he now sees as modes of finding a balance between his heritage and his impulses; his family injunctions and mysteries; his multiplicity and fear of sameness; etc. Mendelsohn's memoir

could therefore be a way of seeking to witness the process of embracing the other behind the mask of sameness, a method that he advocates himself as being at the origin of his reflection upon identity and as having emerged from practice:

And at the same time that I was unconsciously pursuing the figure of my dead and beautiful Jewess in pagan texts transmitted first by Alexandrian scholars and then by Greek Orthodox monks, I'd begun writing about gay culture, too, and so would spend a great deal of time looking at images of, and reading texts by and about, young people, mostly men, who had died to soon.⁵²

Conclusion: "We're always two things at once."⁵³

In this memoir, no critical analysis seems to exhaust the author's questioning of the nature of the self he intends to portray, even before this self comes into full view. One thing that is certain is that gayness is not envisaged as a plea for oneness, but a revelation that oneness is an illusion that repetition alone gives a sense of. The first line of the memoir resonates with such an approach. Reminding us of "For a long time I went to bed early" that opens *Remembrance of Things Past*, the Proustian phrase: "For a long time I have lived in two places"⁵⁴ creates a chamber of echoes, like in Narcissus' story, in which the voice of the author constantly seems to take pride in sidestepping our best intentions at making his life cohere. It is as if the repetition inscribed within the expression only gave way to otherness, rather than sameness. Mendelsohn thereby combines critical discourse and practice. As an opening warning that identity was wrongfully perceived as a notion that could be reduced to symbols and approached logically, Mendelsohn writes: "In many ways we are a city of people who prefer numbers to names."⁵⁵ He therefore underlines the logic at play in ciphering the world, connecting it to a logic that anyone in search of an identity would obviously regard as

a deceptive method: the name, like the letters of the writer, is that which has no referent and founds a logic of deception and differed meaning. Language equivocates where numbers account for a reality that would be circumscribed and rational.

Logic and identity are intermingled in a way that somehow defines Mendelsohn's trajectory as an author, reverting and borrowing from his analyses of the grand narratives life lessons about his own choices. Reading the memoir from the perspective of this number two that he sets up as a starting-point of his reflection upon his life choices, one gradually understands that it enables him to play on the multiple choices between other and sameness this number offers instead of following in the footsteps of theories that might claim the number two to be entrapping or a sign of a binary structure that cripples the individual. Countering these discourses, Mendelsohn suggests that each of us is in fact made multiple or multi-faceted thanks to the paradox within, which is not abolished, even in those that seek sameness: "A reflection is irresistible because it is a paradox: an opposite that is the same, an other that is also clearly yourself."⁵⁶ He is therefore a paradoxical author, both memoiralist and essayist, both classic and contemporary, both direct and indirect, situated both at the centre of gay and straight lives, therefore marginal to both gay and straight lifestyles: "And even here, in trying to articulate this error, I find that I can't help rewriting to the *men* and *de* of my own identity."⁵⁷ The logic he uncovers for his own desire is a logic of supplementation rather than harmony, a sort of dialectic that two conjunctions from the Greek language and used in academic demonstrations, resolves in a way, by becoming master-signifiers of his life choices and route. Thereby Mendelsohn testifies to the possibility of queering the queer narrative itself by refusing any pre-conceived or pre-reflected discourse on his identity and showing how subjects define their identity in their living on the edges of norms: "You find a way to compromise. [...] You find the spaces in between, and you live."⁵⁸ In so doing, Mendelsohn constructs a narrative in which ultimately, the sexual partners are but random

strangers for the construction of the self as itself double, containing and pertaining to the nuance and opposition; he thus presents love partners (or sexual partners) as elusive relationships that consolidate the way he manages to embrace his own contradictions: “You are, after all, the one whose name unfolds the mysteries of *men* and *de*, of repetition that is also opposition, of one thing that can also be two. This is who you are; this is the grammar of your identity.”⁵⁹ With this logic, Mendelsohn shifts the question of duality away from a mere understanding in sexuated terms and works with it in order to reflect upon ways of going beyond.

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¹ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

² Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace. Desire and the Riddle of Identity* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 31.

³ Daniel Mendelsohn, "Daniel Mendelsohn: By the Book," *The New York Times*, January 4, 2018.

⁴ Daniel Mendelsohn, "Critical Thinking #4: Daniel Mendelsohn," interview by David Wolf, *The Prospect*, December 5, 2013.

⁵ Glen Bowerscock, "GWM Seeks Classical Greece, Sex, Jewish Roots, Paternity," *Observer*, June 14, 1999, p.30.

⁶ Mendelsohn's autobiographical elements in his works can be found in most texts, but more recently in *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic* (London: William Collins, 2017).

⁷ See Didier Eribon, Judith Butler, or Fabrice Bourlez.

⁸ Jacques André, "L'inconscient est politiquement incorrect," *Filigranes, Écoutes psychanalytiques*, vol. 28, n°1, 2019, 15-32.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XX, Encore* (1972-73), edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p.39-48.

¹⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 135.

¹¹ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 5.

¹² Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 118.

¹³ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 124.

¹⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 30.

¹⁵ Perhaps it is worthwhile reminding readers here that Lacan's sexuation is based on the observation of the binaries inherent to unconscious principles and that the feminine position designates not the jouissance of women but the existence of a *jouissance* that is not entirely indexed on phallic *jouissance*. This subjective, unconscious position can be endorsed by men and women alike. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XX, Encore*, p.73.

¹⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 4.

¹⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 5-6.

¹⁸ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 11.

¹⁹ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 27.

²⁰ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 11.

²¹ Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Discovery of Oneself: An Interview with Daniel Mendelsohn," interview by Ionna Kholer, *Paris Review*, July 1, 2014.

²² Daniel Mendelsohn, "A Critic's Manifesto," *New Yorker*, August 28, 2012.

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²⁴ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 37.

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- ²⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 23.
- ²⁶ Daniel Burston, *Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Postmodern University*, chapter “Freud in America: The Golden Age, the Freud Wars, and Beyond” (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For example, “Needless to say, the patriarchal assumptions underlying Freud’s social psychology are quite striking in retrospect,” p.20.
- ²⁷ Didier Eribon, *Échapper à la psychanalyse* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005).
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- ³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Trois essais sur la théorie de la sexualité*, Paris, Gallimard, Idées NRF, p.19-31.
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- ³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York : Routledge, 1990, 22-23.
- ³⁵ Jacques André, “L’ inconscient est politiquement incorrect”: “Même si l’ inacceptable n’ est pas explicite, il paraît bien résider dans la non reconnaissance d’ un désir homosexuel qui ne devrait rien, sinon à personne, en tout cas rien à l’ autre sexe,” p.26. Translation mine.
- ³⁶ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 203.
- ³⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace*, 37.
- ³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XI, Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1963-1964), edited by J.-A. Miller, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, “Points Essais”, 1973, p.77.
- ³⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre XI, Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1963-1964), 1973, p.77
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