

# Part o' th' Tradition

A look at the way the search for the Self is shown in *S.* and how this novel  
inspires the search for the Self in its readers

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## Introduction

The *I Ching*, containing its own rules and requiring the reader to puzzle and calculate, is one of the earliest examples of a text that invites its readers to participate in it rather than simply experience it the way they would with a regular novel. Texts like this have become more common, especially in the past century. A few examples of this are Dennis Wheatley's *Crime Dossiers*: a series of 'whodunits' that came with physical clues and a sealed envelope containing who the murderer was, Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: a poem with footnotes so extensive and a story so intricate that the reader had to make an effort in order to follow what was being told and find out what was 'real' and what was not, and Mark Z.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves*: a complex book with several layers of narrative and a layout that kept the reader flipping through the pages and turning the book this way and that to be able to read the words. A relatively new book in this tradition is *S.*, which is written by Doug Dorst in collaboration with J.J. Abrams, the creator of films and TV series such as *Lost*. After breaking the seal on the slipcase bearing the title and the authors' names, what you will find is a library book. This is *Ship of Theseus* by the fictional author V.M. Straka. The book looks old and used, complete with a library sticker on the spine and date stamps on the inside of the back cover. The novel itself in turn contains indirect information about the lives of the mysterious Straka and his translator and editor F.X. Caldeira, who has also written cryptic footnotes to the novel. In the margins of *Ship of Theseus* you will see numerous notes written by two people, Jen and Eric. Aside from these margin notes they have left several items for each other between the pages, such as post cards, letters and pieces of 'evidence'.

The Self is mainly a philosophical topic, although it has been tied to literature in different ways as well. To give an example that is relevant here, it is said that "reading alters

a reader's sense of self" (Sumara 205) and that a reader's personal identity influences the text's meaning. The notion of ergodic literature is about the form of a text: "[i]n ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1), so the reader needs to be more involved. The subject of identity and the Self in fiction and the subject of ergodic literature may seem like entirely separate discussions. My argument, however, is that there is indeed a connection between these two subjects: the reader can use ergodic literature as a tool in the search for the Self. So, this connection will not be found in the novels or theories alone, but in the realm of the reader. *S.* is a novel through which this connection can be illustrated, because it shows itself in the text of *Ship of Theseus*, in the margin notes by Jen and Eric, and in the way its readers handle the book. The content relates to the question of identity and the form is related to ergodic literature, and *S.* intertwines these two subjects. In order to show this, I will examine each of the aforementioned three layers in separate chapters.

In the first chapter I will discuss the way the search for the Self is shown in *Ship of Theseus* itself. A major theme in this novel is that of the search for the Self. The character *S.* is trying to find out who he used to be before he lost his memory, but because he cannot, he needs to reinvent himself completely. Nobody is able to give him any answers and he cannot find any answers himself, so he needs to rely on his instincts and moral sense. It is not until he starts writing that he is able to find some insight into his Self. Writing allows *S.* to enter a sort of lucid state in which he experiences pieces of his old and true Self. The new identity he creates is also strongly derived from other people such as Sola, Vévoda and the ship and its crew. To analyze *S.*'s memory loss and the way he tries to regain his memory and create a new Self, I will use theories from the field of psychology that deal with the dissociative fugue, by Philip M. Coons and by Jack Howley and Colin A. Ross, and with the

construction of the Self, by Jerome Bruner. I will also use philosophical theories about the Self from the field of philosophy, by David Hume, Daniel C. Dennett and Jerrold Seigel.

In the second chapter I will look at how Jen and Eric use *Ship of Theseus* to analyze Straka's life and how this experience changes them and their definition of their Self. While S. is trying to (re)construct a Self from nothing, they each have a search of their own. They too delve into the world of *Ship of Theseus* and Straka and spend a large amount of time researching it, not simply because they find it an interesting subject, but because it touches upon something deeper for them. Jen's and Eric's work inspires them, influences them and changes them, because they relate to the characters in *Ship of Theseus* and even more to Straka's personal life. They are not just analyzing the novel but themselves along with it. Jen is close to graduating from the university and is trying to decide what she is going to do next. She becomes very passionate about working on *Ship of Theseus* with Eric, but it makes her doubt what she wants, who she is, and who she wants to become. In the end this experience gives her a clearer purpose and stronger sense of identity. Eric, on the other hand, knows very well that what he wants is to study Straka and publish a book about his research. He has been working on this for a long time and has become more and more obsessed with it. Researching Straka and *Ship of Theseus* has defined him and given him a purpose since his teens. Working with Jen and finding out Straka's story teaches him that there is more to life than this mission. Their project changes who Jen and Eric are and how they define themselves. To analyze this effect of literature upon readers I will use texts from the field of literature and studies on reading and writing, by Dennis J. Sumara and Keith Oatley.

In the third chapter I would like to look at why a book like this gets so much attention and time from its readers and how this relates to these readers' search for the

Self. The intention of the writers was to let the readers of *S.* decipher the rest of Filomena's clues and complete the story of Straka as well as that of Jen and Eric. Aside from this, there is an Alternate Reality Game (usually abbreviated to ARG) element to it. There are websites containing clues about the novel and perhaps even real life clues yet to be found. J.J.

Abrams has used ARG's before with his TV series and films. The idea of an ARG is that there are hints to be found and clues to decipher, which in turn leads to other hints and clues, and so on, which leads to a way to find the 'truth' – or at least the scenario that the creators had in mind. To solve these puzzles, the readers need to work together. Several websites have been created that contain extensive amounts of information about *S.* and have comment sections in which readers can and do collaborate and help each other. I believe that this element of interaction is something that suits people especially well in this day and age, because it can help them to find a place for themselves in an (online) community. In this chapter I will discuss the form of *S.* using theories from the field of literature such as Espen J. Aarseth's work on ergodic literature and cybertext, as well as the interaction between readers, using theories from the field of media studies such as Henrik Örnebring's text about Alternate Reality Gaming.

Through this process I wish to explore how the search for the Self shows in Abrams and Dorst's *S.*, both in the novel and in the margin writings, and how the form of the book inspires and helps readers in their own search for the Self.

## Chapter 1: The Ship of Theseus

The title of the novel, *Ship of Theseus*, is a reference to an ancient thought experiment about identity and the Self. It is about a ship that goes through many repairs in which parts are replaced by new ones, one by one. The question is, if at a certain point each and every one of the parts is replaced and the ship therefore contains none of its original parts anymore, is it still the same ship as it was in the beginning? When one plank is replaced, most would agree that it is still the same ship and this would be the same after two or three new planks. But what is the point at which this changes and one could say that it is not the same? A different version of this story even involves a second ship that is built from all the old parts of the first ship. In this case, which of the two ships would be the real ship of Theseus? Similar thought experiments are known under the names 'my grandfather's axe', about an axe of which first the handle is replaced and later the head, and 'Locke's socks', about a pair of socks with so many patches that the original material of the sock is gone. The same idea can be applied to people: a person's body, mind and Self change continuously, so does someone stay the same person or do they change into someone else? And if they change, what is the point at which you can say they have changed, if the process is so gradual? This question of identity lies at the heart of the novel and of the stories that are – quite literally – built around it. *S.* asks and explores what defines a person, how people see themselves and others, and how and through what they change. In this thesis I will argue that people can and do use literature to define and change themselves, and in this first chapter I will focus on the search for the Self as it is shown in the novel *Ship of Theseus*. Since the Self is a broad and complex subject I will bring together different fields here, among which are psychology and philosophy.

The character S. can be argued to be like the ship of Theseus. Because he has lost all of his original 'parts' – his memories and his personal identity – as a result of his fugue, he needs to rebuild himself with new parts, only he has no way of knowing if these new parts are original, replicas or completely new. As Jen and Eric find out, the character of S. is a stand-in for the author V.M. Straka. Straka's true identity is unknown and it is suggested that he was not one man, but a name used by a group of writers called 'the S', in order to be able to collaborate in writing politically involved works. Straka can then also be compared to the ship of Theseus; he is both a collage made up from different parts, old and new, and at the same time a constructed character that is its own whole. Whether he is Straka or a mix of other authors is not just a matter of what one believes is the truth about him, but also of how one views the matter of identity: can something that is made up of different parts be seen as one entity or will it always be a collection of separate entities?

### **The Self**

When discussing the subject of the Self the question arises: what is a Self? This question is a very philosophical one which does not have one true answer. Put shortly, "[b]y 'self' we commonly mean the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be" (Seigel 1). Knowing this Self is important because it gives a person their identity and gives shape to their life. Knowing *what* this Self is, is a more problematic question about which there are many different theories. I will discuss some theories that are relevant to *Ship of Theseus* and S. and represent the Self as it is used here.



The arguments made by Hume are related to the ship of Theseus paradox. He has said that the Self is made up of parts which change all the time, but that people are inclined to see them as one coherent Self nonetheless. Because these parts change gradually, we see it as a continued object with a constant identity. When something happens that interrupts this continuity, we need to “yield to it, and boldly assert that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation” (Hume 1.IV.vi). This new principle is the Self. Hume also sees memory as an important source of the Self, because it is necessary to see the continuity of the parts: “Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person” (Hume 1.IV.vi). This theory connects strongly to *The Ship of Theseus* and to the character of S..

Dennett’s arguments tie the Self to narration. He compares the Self to a center of gravity: both undeniably exist, although they are not in any way physical things that can be measured or shown. This means that they are, in a sense, like fiction: “They have only the properties that the theory that constitutes them endowed them with” (Dennett). Like fiction – and unlike history or physical things – the Self has no ultimate, definite truth. Because of this, “it is also possible for a person to engage in auto-hermeneutics, interpretation of one's self, and in particular to go back and think about one's past, and one's memories, and to rethink them and rewrite them. This process does change the "fictional" character, the character that you are” (Dennett). As I will explain later in this chapter, S. also writes himself as a character, a narrative. Like Hume, Dennett argues that the Self is not one entity, but that “we are somewhat disunified. Our component modules have to act in opportunistic but

amazingly resourceful ways to produce a modicum of behavioral unity, which is then enhanced by an illusion of greater unity” (Dennett).

Seigel differentiates between passive identity (e.g. an inanimate object which is always more or less the same) and active identity (something which changes, like a river). “[T]he issues multiply as we move to ... humans whose identity is not only natural but also cultural and social” (Seigel 15-16). The active identity is much more complex, because it does not stay the same. Therefore it can be argued that its identity, its Self, does not stay the same either. The question of the multiplicity of the Self versus the Self as a stable unity is one that has no true answer and one that I will not try to answer. I will, however, show how this question is brought to the reader’s attention by S..

To continue discussing the search for the Self in *Ship of Theseus*, first I will give a short summary of what happens in this novel. At the start of *Ship of Theseus* we meet S., a man who is roaming streets that are not only unknown to us, but also to himself: “The man suspects this is a city in which even life-long residents find themselves lost. He does not know whether he is such a person, though. He does not know whether he has ever been here before. He does not know why he is here now” (Abrams and Dorst 4). He cannot remember how he got here and the only thing he knows is what he can gather from his clothing and his body. He is soaking wet, but he has not even an idea of how he got this way. He is “[a] mystery to himself” (Abrams and Dorst 6) and all he has are a piece of paper with a distinct S-symbol<sup>1</sup> on it and a feeling that he has fallen from a great height. He finds a tavern that bears the same symbol and there he meets a woman called Sola. Shortly thereafter he is kidnapped and taken aboard a strange ship with a crew that has a bluish skin tone and mouths sewn shut with black thread, where time moves slower than on land.

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<sup>1</sup> S

The leader of the sailors, whom S. calls Maelstrom, is the only one who can speak. He is taken to mysterious islands, meets a group of factory workers fighting against a powerful weapon manufacturer called Vévoda, and is instructed to assassinate Vévoda's handymen. All the while he is trying to find out who he is now, who he used to be, and where he can find Sola again. Along the way he does see her a few times, but he never gets the chance to speak to her. After he has assassinated all his targets, he is living in a place called Winter City, where it is always cold and nobody sees or speaks to each other. He then gets a note, telling him to go to a place where he finally meets Sola again and she takes him back to the ship to confront Vévoda himself. Several different versions of the last chapter have arisen online recently, but since it has not been confirmed if these are official, I will limit my discussion to the version that is in the book. I will, however, say more about this subject in the third chapter.

### **(Re)creating the Self**

When S. wakes up, it does indeed seem like he experienced a fugue state, or psychogenic or dissociative fugue, as it is also known in the field of psychology. He even suggests it himself, when he says he has no memory of before "he awoke – from what? a dream? a fugue state? a borrowed life? – and began wandering the Quarter" (Abrams and Dorst 11). Contrary to what he thinks, though, he seems to be still in this state. As Coons explains, "[d]issociative fugue ... is characterized by amnesia coupled with sudden unexpected travel away from one's home or place of work. There is confusion about identity and sometimes new identity formation, either partial or complete" (Coons 881). The amnesia that occurs during a fugue state is not just a loss of memories, it is a loss of *all* memory, even that of personal identity. Usually this occurs after a traumatic event or a period of severe stress, but, like S., we have

no way of knowing what has happened to him before he 'woke up'. Howley and Ross have done research on dissociative fugue and encountered a woman who had symptoms very much like S.'s. This woman woke up in a hotel room and "realized that she did not know her own name, where she was, or how she got there. She did not recognize herself in the mirror" (Howley and Ross 110). As far as she knew, her life had only just started and although she did not remember anything about her life or herself before this moment, her mind was clear and she did not have any mental problems aside from this. During a fugue state "procedural memories survive intact" (Coons 881), meaning that she could still do anything she could before and was not disoriented or distressed about normal aspects of life around her. She had driven to the hotel, checked in, and gotten rid of her personal belongings. "During her fugue, Joan abandoned her identity and then forgot that she had done so" (Howley and Ross 118). It seems that S. has had a very similar experience.

Another symptom of dissociative fugue is the sudden need to travel. As Howley and Ross explain, there are two sub-stages in the period of fugue: "the actual period of travel was the first stage, while the second was the period of identity loss, confusion or new identity creation in the new location. ... Typically, in the second, the subject has no memory for the first stage, but in several instances there was a spotty memory for it. Usually the patient remembers accurately the second stage while it is in progress, and the events of this stage may constitute the sum total of his memories" (Howley and Ross 121). Considering that S. finds himself in wet clothes in a city where he does not even recognize the used currency, it seems likely that he has been through the first stage and is now in the second. The only memory he has of his travel period is the feeling that he has fallen and the realization that he is covered in bruises, cuts and scars. A fugue state like this generally lasts from a few hours up to a few weeks, but for S. it does not end. This may explain why he

keeps feeling the need to travel: whether he is on the ship on or land, he continually feels like he is in the wrong place and must keep searching. Without any sense of identity, his fugue state is what makes his identity and dictates his behavior and concept of Self.

### **The self through others**

When there is no Self to rely on, a personal identity can be created in reaction to others. “If our Self-concept cannot be constructed by assembling and conceptualizing instances of our own agentive acts, then it can be constructed according to the same principle by attributing it to the agency of *another*,” Bruner says. “According to this view, we construct a victim Self, by reference to memories of how we responded to the agency of somebody else who had the power to impose his or her will upon us directly, or indirectly by controlling the circumstances in which we are compelled to live. And by this maneuver we create a kind of “reactive agency” – as rebel, resistance fighter” (Bruner 41). This is exactly what S. does when he comes into contact with Vévoda. This is a figure who can exercise power over everything and everyone, and S. quickly finds himself in the role of victim. Vévoda’s agents seem to notice him and maybe even recognize him, which is so threatening even his body reacts: “The browncoat seems to meet his eye directly, may even have brushed the brim of his fedora and nodded in his direction. S. feels his stomach tighten” (Abrams and Dorst 83). He does not want to be this person affiliated with Vévoda and his agents, so he brushes it off and responds by joining the group of factory workers leading a protest against Vévoda, assuming the role of resistance fighter Bruner talks about. It is not just a way of taking control into his own hands, but also a way to create a goal and an identity for himself. Since he does not know who he is, this way he can at least be someone in relation to someone else.

## Sola

After he wakes up, S. immediately starts to rely on his instincts to tell him who he is and what he should do. When he finds the tavern with the same S-symbol as on the piece of paper in his pocket, he is more than simply curious: “*This is it*, he thinks. He may not know what the symbol means, but its reappearance makes a kind of sense. This is where he is supposed to be” (Abrams and Dorst 14). And later: “He must have some history in this establishment, or some other purpose for being here. The symbol must mean something; his intuition must have a basis” (Abrams and Dorst 18). He does not see the results of this instinct as simply a hunch, but as facts. Whenever he is in a situation where he is unsure what to do or think, he draws conclusions based on his gut feeling and accepts them as truth. A good example of this is Sola. When S. is taken aboard the ship and asks the leader, Maelstrom, to whom he is being taken, the only answer he gets is: “*Landways voxin tha’ Sola gotter shine wi’ ye*” (Abrams and Dorst 39). Solely from this answer he gradually concludes that Sola is the name of the woman he has met in the tavern and that she is the one he needs to find, because she knows who he is and what he is supposed to do. Sola becomes his main goal, his inspiration, his destination – she is the only constant in his life, even though he knows practically nothing about her.

Just as Vévoda is as an ‘other’ through whom S. can find his Self, so is Sola. His identity comes to hinge on hers, so finding out who she is will help him to find who he is himself. He is who he is and does what he does because of her. It is the only belief he has and he clings to it even though he has no reason to be certain of anything it is based on. When he is running from Vévoda’s agents he realizes that he “has been assuming for these last weeks, if only subconsciously, that if he would soon be facing death with anyone, it

would be with Sola. The idea – the certainty of it – is churning through his blood. It’s what was supposed to happen” (Abrams and Dorst 196). Everything he knows of Sola is based on his instinct and a few little bits of information that he has taken and molded into certain knowledge in his mind. The connection he believes he has with her even goes so far that he is certain that someone cannot know one but not the other. When he meets Osfour, who seems to know about S., he asks him about Sola too, but Osfour says he does not know anything about her. ““I don’t believe you,”” S. replies. ““If you know about me, you know about her””” (Abrams and Dorst 229). As far as S. knows, he and Sola are inseparable; you cannot have one without the other, therefore he cannot *be* anything without her.

Whenever S. writes on the boat, both in his cabin and in the orlop (the lowest deck of the ship), he somehow feels Sola. He senses her presence and hears her speaking to him “from the margins” (Abrams and Dorst 380) like she is his guide. The first time they meet in the tavern she expresses a belief in him. When she comments on his wet clothes and S. says that “[i]t appears to be [his] most salient characteristic,” she answers: “Surely there’s more to you than that. You must be *someone* when you’re dry” (Abrams and Dorst 20). Since she is the only one who even notices him, he thinks that she must know who he is. As I said before, without actually knowing anything about her, S. becomes convinced that she is someone special and that they have a strong connection. This gives him a reason to keep looking for her. He thinks he sees her in several places throughout the novel, but they never talk. She also ages faster than he does and looks different each time, making it unsure whether it is actually the same person, but this does not faze him. After a while he starts to wonder: “is he really seeking her just because he suspects she might know something about him? Is there not an attraction, too, either to her, or to the mystery of her? Is this a search for his identity, or some sort of atavistic pursuit of... of what? Love? Something as banal as

love?” (Abrams and Dorst 183). S. appears to be drawn to the mystery of her, just as he is intrigued by the mystery of his own identity. Like S., readers can also use the process of solving an external mystery to find out more about themselves, which I will show in the next chapters. It should also be noted that S. is a representation of Straka and Sola is a representation of Filomela Caldeira, and this question of love proves to be a central one in their story. This is also something I will come back to in the next chapter.

### **Writing the Self**

S. writes in order to find Sola, but also in order to find himself. According to Bruner a person’s identity consists of stories: “[t]he Self is “storied,” or narrative, in structure. When you ask people what they are really like, they tell a great many stories involving the usual elements of narrative” (Bruner 43). Which stories you tell and how you tell them depends on whom a person is telling it to: “Self is also contingent on the role one is playing, or more properly the multiple roles one plays, not all of them being amenable to simultaneous performance” (Bruner 43). A result of this is that different parts of the Self are known to different other people, and that a person has to know which role he wants or needs to play and who they want to be to the people they are telling their stories to. This means that a person needs to have stories to tell about himself, first of all, but also that he creates a definition of his Self using others, as I discussed before. According to Sumara “identity emerges from remembered and lived experiences” (Sumara 203). These experiences are the stories Bruner talks about. In the case of S. this is important, because he does not have any experiences or stories at the start of *Ship of Theseus*. However, the more experiences he has, the more stories he has to tell and write about and the more his identity emerges. Instead of telling these stories, one could also write them down. Sumara argues that “the



identities we continue to shape are no less fictitious than the characters about whom we read" (Sumara 205), but this statement can also be seen in another way. If a person's identity is as real as characters in a novel, then the characters one writes into existence can be as real as a person. If a collection of stories makes up the identities of both characters and people, creating a Self is just like creating a character. Therefore, S. can create his own identity through writing.

S. soon realizes that writing is an important tool for finding his identity. When he first reaches land again, he tells himself to "find paper and pen. Write down what you know, and what you suspect, about yourself – even if that won't yet fill a single page. And then, maybe then, start piecing together who you are" (Abrams and Dorst 77). He does not, however, get the chance to write until he is back on the ship and finds a nail he can use to carve words into the walls of his cabin. What happens when he starts to write his story is strange: "The words on the wall are not the words he thought he wrote" (Abrams and Dorst 207). The more he tries to pay attention to what he is writing and to correct the words he did not mean, the more the written text differs from his intention. The flow and the sound of the text is similar to what S. meant, but the words are different. To give an example: 'I was rowed to shore' becomes 'I raged at the sun', 'Agents hid among us' becomes 'angels bade us adieu' and 'The repository is no more' becomes 'Le repos est la mort!' (Abrams and Dorst 259-260). The written text is hard to understand, but it seems darker, heavier and more poetic, containing words like 'cenotaph', 'damned' and 'punished'. There are two possibilities; either S. does not succeed in writing about himself – because he does not know himself – and therefore cannot find his identity, or he unintentionally uncovers a subconscious part of himself while he writes. In either case, if S.'s identity is revealed through his writing, this shows the instability of his Self.

From the moment S. starts writing, this practice comes to play a very important role in S.'s life. During the first period he was on the ship he had noticed that the crew members would go below deck for 3 hours and come back up looking exhausted. What they did there was a big secret. After a long time he finally decides to go down to the orlop when everyone else is on land. What he finds are crates full of paper that has been written on and a table with clean paper, an hourglass, ink, and a pen. He sits down and starts to write, and "here, unlike in his cabin, here he feels no division between his mind and his hand, no errors in translation or static in the transmission: the words appearing on the page are the ones he has intended to put there, the images match the scenes in his mind, the sensations the very ones that warm his chest, prickle his scalp, push against his eyes" (Abrams and Dorst 296). The fact that he needs to go to the orlop, the lowest deck of the ship, seems to be symbolic for going down into the deepest part of himself, and this gives him the release he has been searching for. Here, he is finally able to really put himself down in words and while he is writing he loses track of time and everything around him. Sensations from his past come over him, memories of his parents and his childhood, and he feels a sense of euphoria. After this, S. has to sew his mouth shut like the other sailors and becomes "part o' th' tradition" (Abrams and Dorst 216). He takes turns with the other sailors to spend his three hours in the orlop pouring parts of himself into the writing – and finding parts of himself back in return. The custom of sewing the sailors' mouths shut when they start to write, indicates that their writing has become the most important form of expression. From this moment on, they *are* their writing and it is all they need. It also indicates that they have now become an initiated part of the group, giving them a home. As I said before, writing also allows him to create the character of Sola. Since he cannot know himself unless he knows her, creating her identity is as important as creating his own.

At the end of the novel S. is living alone in a place called Winter City, where he continues to write. He uses the daily newspaper and fills “thousands of pages, writing in the thin white spaces between the lines of type, superimposing his words over the printed ones when he runs out of margin. Palimpsests atop palimpsests” (Abrams and Dorst 379). It is interesting to note here that he is writing in the margins of the printed text, similarly to what Jen and Eric do in the margins of *Ship of Theseus*. The margins are also the place where he finds Sola, where Straka finds Filomela and where Jen and Eric find each other. This is something I will come back to in the next chapter.

### **S. as the ship**

The ship S. travels on is precisely like the ship of Theseus. S. notices that every time he sees it, there are new planks to replace old and rotten ones, and even though he recognizes it as a xebec design, it is an assembly of different ships. S. sees it getting destroyed more than once, either torn apart by a severe storm (Abrams and Dorst 65) or blown up by a chemical bomb, leaving only “the bombed, burned remains of it not far offshore: scraps of charred planks and masts, canvas and crates, rope and wire” (Abrams and Dorst 371) and the bodies of Maelstrom and the other sailors floating around it. After the storm, when S. is back on the ship, he asks how it is possible that the ship still exists and Maelstrom answers: “Yer makin’ ‘sumptions, Sunshine” (Abrams and Dorst 211). This implies that the ship does not in fact exist anymore – that this is another ship – but S. says that his cabin is mostly the same as when he last saw it. When S. is visiting a woman on an island he is shown a thick book with the S-symbol on its cover. On its thousands of pages is the history of the ship as it has evolved over a long period of time, from a new xebec ship to the monstrous thing it is now. S. wonders: “Are they the same ship? Intuition tells him they are, though perhaps he is

being influenced by the fact that the pages are all held together within the same covers” (Abrams and Dorst 292). Still, at the very end of the novel, when S. sees the ship again after a long time of living in the Winter City and after the ship was shattered by the bomb, he recognizes it at once. It looks like a shabby patchwork, making him ponder the ship of Theseus paradox again, though this time more explicitly: “It is entirely possible, S. realizes, and in fact seems quite likely, that not one plank or hatch or cleat or peg or bolt or nail or rope remains from the night he was first taken aboard. And yet: this is the ship”. Sola, who is with him, agrees, saying that “[i]t takes more than destruction to destroy a ship like this” (Abrams and Dorst 396). Whether the ship is actually still the same or not, does not even really matter to S.; the ship is comforting to him now and regardless of whether it is the same or not, it is the only true home he has ever had. If S.’s opinion on the question of the ship of Theseus paradox is that yes, it is indeed the same ship, even after everything, then this may be a consolation for him on the question of his own identity. Maybe he is, after all the loss and reconstruction of his Self, still the same man he was before he woke up in the Old Quarter. Although his Self is constructed with several tools – travelling, other people, writing, narrating – he may still be a whole person housing a core Self as well.

## Chapter 2: The Marginalia

Reading can change a reader, either for a short period of time or forever. Sumara explains how an identity is constructed from experiences and memories, and that what a person reads adds to these because a reader identifies with the story and the characters. “As readers come to identify with characters who are not themselves, and become involved in plots that are not their own, they must ... form alliances between their own experiences and those of the characters”, which is why “literature contributes to the ongoing restructuring and reconditioning of the reader’s identity” (Sumara 206). In return, the reader also influences the text: “[i]n order for meaning to be created, the reader must not only identify with the characters, she or he must ... fill in the “gaps” that always exist in between the words the author has selected” (Sumara 206). Because the reader plays such an important part in creating the text’s meaning the identity of the reader is important as well. This is why a text can have different meanings to different readers and why its meaning can change over time. During a second reading of the same text, the reader’s knowledge – of the text, but also in general – has changed and “they respond to the text differently and, as a consequence, generate new knowledge and alter their reading identities” (Sumara 207). What affects this second reading is both the meaning the reader made during the first reading and the experiences and changes the reader has gone through in the meantime. In this chapter I will look at the effect that reading and analyzing *Ship of Theseus* has on Jen and Eric, for which I will first give a short summary of their story.

Jen is an undergraduate who finds a copy of *Ship of Theseus* in the university library. In it she finds writings by Eric and she decides to write back. This starts off an exchange of notes which then leads to a conversation and collaboration. Eric has been working on Straka

and his novels since his teens. He used to work on this together with professor Moody to get his PhD, but they had a falling out which got Eric expunged from the university. Moody is continuing the work with Ilsa, Eric's former lover and Jen's teaching assistant. Eric is also continuing his work – in secret, using a fake name to get into the university – and Jen ends up helping him analyze *Ship of Theseus*. This novel, Straka's last, appears to be semi-autobiographical, with S. representing Straka, Sola representing Filomela, Vévoda representing Bouchard – Straka's adversary – and other characters representing members of 'the S', a group of writers Straka was a part of. Jen and Eric find out that F.X. Caldeira, Straka's editor and translator, who everyone thinks was a man who passed away years ago, is a woman called Filomela and that she and Straka were involved romantically. They also find out which other writers were in the S, who was a traitor to that group, and piece together a theory of who Straka was. They believe he was Vaclav Straka, a young Czech factory worker who was thought to have died, but was actually rescued by members of the S and was kept a secret throughout his entire life. Eric travels to Brazil to meet Filomela in person, who can confirm many of their suspicions. While Jen and Eric's research develops, they become closer, meet each other and fall in love. They also find themselves in danger, being followed and Jen's house is set on fire. They eventually travel to Prague together, but it is unclear whether they have found safety there or not. In the notes they write in Prague, they frequently mention the freezing cold, echoing S.'s Winter City.

### **Meetings**

Jen, at the start of the book, is close to graduating but having trouble doing the work needed to get her grades. This is partly because of her preoccupation with the Straka novel, but mostly because of her lack of a clear sense of Self. She is having doubts about why she

chose this field of study, what she is going to do with her life and who she is and want to be. She is envious of Straka and Filomela and of Eric for having something to have faith in: “I don’t have anything like that. That’s what I expected to find by now. You have one – it’s about you being an outstanding scholar.” Eric responds by saying there has been “a bit of a bump in that road”, but she says: “At least you still have a road. ... You still believe in what you can do” (Abrams and Dorst 313). At the same time she is having problems with her family, her friends and her ex-boyfriend, so she is secluding herself more and more. Eric’s biggest struggle is that he does not know whether all his work has been worth it: “I spent a decade studying this stuff, + it turns out it was for nothing. No payoff. No satisfaction. No career. And how the hell do you start over? How do you reinvent yourself?” (Abrams and Dorst 384). He has had a clear self image for most of his life, but worries that it will not be sustainable in the future and if that proves to be true, he will have to create a new identity. During their collaboration Jen is able to let go of her worries about her future Self and learns to focus on the project and live in the present. Eric slowly opens up and finds new inspiration to finish his research because of Jen’s new insights. They also find each other, which gives them the support and trust they need to take their lives in their own hands.

Oatley explains how a ‘meeting’ with a fictional character in a novel is both similar and dissimilar to meeting a person in the real world. Like Sumara, he states that “the novel is the very place of dialogue, both among characters and between the reader and the characters, or between the reader and author” and that “[s]uch meetings are in some ways like those that occur in everyday life. But in other ways they are unlike” (Oatley 444). One of the biggest differences is that the reader is only ‘seeing’ the fictional characters and not vice versa, but that the reader also knows more about these characters than they would about real people they meet – they can often literally read their thoughts. “The meetings are one-

way affairs, in which we have no influence”, says Oatley, “[b]ut at the same time we certainly feel emotions in our meetings with characters of the story world, perhaps most especially the emotions of sympathy” (Oatley 445). In the case of *S.*, this means that the direction of information can only go from the novel *Ship of Theseus* to the footnotes to the marginalia. Straka was speaking to Filomela in his novel and did so through fiction, making it possible for her to look inside his mind and know his feelings through the fictional characters he wrote. Filomela could only hope that Straka was still alive to read her replies. But, because she did not write in fiction, the readers – Jen and Eric as well as us – could not know her in the same way. They can, however, still feel sympathy as a result of getting to know both the characters in the novel and Straka and Filomela.

### **The book as medium and message**

As I explained using Sumara’s article, in order for a personal development to take place through reading literature, the readers must have this feeling of sympathy with what they are reading. Jen and Eric have this connection very strongly, which I will show with two examples. Firstly, they identify most with Straka and Filomela’s story. The writer and his editor were in love even though they had never met and only communicated through Straka’s books, which is a very similar situation to that of Jen and Eric at the start of their relationship. Their story is an example that shows what could happen to them, too, which drives them to not make the same mistakes as Straka and Filomela did. This makes them decide that they do need to meet each other in person, but also that they need to have something to connect them other than Straka’s novels. Because, as much as the book helps them, it also stands between them at times. In *Ship of Theseus* S. talks about a dream he had about him and Sola: “they sit there, sit there, sit there, ever in silent anxiety, toothless and



still". Jen has underlined this and writes: "I don't want us to let this happen ... We can't just sit around being all passive + waiting to see if there's anything between us", to which Eric answers: "Don't you think there is?" "But how much?? Apart from our Straka project, I mean," Jen writes (Abrams and Dorst 277). The reason for this doubt is that the first few times they meet, all they can talk about is their work on the novel, even though they have agreed several times that they would let their meeting be about "NOTHING BUT US" (Abrams and Straka 277). Together with a problem, the novel provides solutions as well.

Although Jen and Eric relate most to Straka and Filomela's story, they mirror the characters of *Ship of Theseus* occasionally as well – not strange, considering these characters are a representation of what for them are 'real life' characters. A good example of this is the following passage in the novel: "'I'm right here," he says. "I am, too," she says". Eric then writes: "I'm right here," and Jen replies: "I am, too". A while later they both write "Still" under this (Abrams and Dorst 193). They use the book to find the words they want to say to each other, showing how much the book has integrated into their lives and selves; they not only communicate *in* the novel, but *through* it as well. Just like many passages in the novel are an indirect communication between Straka and Filomela it becomes this for Jen and Eric, even when they do not explicitly point it out. Many things that characters in *Ship of Theseus* and Straka and Filomela say to each other, can be read as a conversation between Jen and Eric as well. This shows how deeply they feel connected to the book and according to Sumara, as I have explained at the start of this chapter, this involvement is of great importance to the development of the Self because it causes the reader to grow through the experiences they read about, as if they were their own. Jen and Eric find themselves in *Ship of Theseus* in two ways. On the one hand they learn about themselves and find what they need to create their identities. On the other hand, the way they identify

with Straka and Filomela – and the characters that represent them – also shows that they have found themselves in the novel more literally. To them, Jen and Eric *are* in this novel, albeit under different names and personalities.

This level of connection and empathy with characters in a novel or with the author is one “in which we do not merely sympathize with a person, we become that person. But again there is a contrast with ordinary life, in which we remain steadfastly ourselves, while the person we meet, and with whom we empathize, remains himself or herself” (Oatley 445). This is clear when Jen and Eric lose sight of the difference between themselves and Straka and Filomela, because their situation is almost exactly the same: “That’s the thing – even though Straka + Filomela never met (not knowingly, anyway), they were close. She loved him. And if she was the one person he trusted to work on his books – + for such a long time – then he definitely felt something deep for her”, Jen writes. Later she adds: “Did they love each other? Were words enough? Would words have been enough, if he’d at least been willing to show himself? Or did they need more?” (Abrams and Dorst 196). Here, she is speaking of Straka and Filomela while she actually means the relationship between herself and Eric. She treats them as one and the same. Oatley also says that in a real life meeting both people involved will remain themselves, but Jen and Eric get to know each other through their writing first. Because of this, they meet each other the same way they would meet a character, allowing for a stronger connection between them as well.

### **Changing text and reader**

As I explained at the start of this chapter, the meaning of a text changes when a reader reads it more than once or when there is time in between these readings. In *S.* this process becomes very visible through the margin notes that Jen and Eric write. It is now possible to

see exactly which part of the text has brought on which thought or change and how both of them have different interpretations of the same text. Because they re-read the novel several times and use different colors for each round, it also becomes visible how their interpretations change over time and that new knowledge influences their reading. Eric acknowledges this: “It’s extremely cool how the words can stay the same but their meaning can change.” Jen agrees: “Because the reader changes.” “Exactly” (Abrams and Dorst 434). Each time they go through the book, they find new things to underline and comment on, either because their Self has changed or because their knowledge has changed in the meantime. This occurs several times with deciphering Filomela’s codes, when Jen suddenly does see a pattern that she did not see before, or when she and Eric find connections between *Ship of Theseus* and Straka’s life. Re-reading not only the novel but their own notes as well makes this effect stronger.

In conclusion, the readers – Jen and Eric – feel a strong connection to the novel they are reading because their own lives and selves are similar to the ones they read and learn about. This connection grows through empathy, but also because they *become* the characters. Because “[a]utobiographical memories are prompted by reading, ... reading can prompt reflective thought” (Oatley 446), which allows them to reflect on themselves by reflecting on the characters and Straka’s and Filomela’s lives. It is through their marginalia that we, as readers of *S.*, are able to follow this development and also the development in *how* they read and understand what they read. This process occurs in readers in general, but this book makes it explicit and *shows* us this reading process. It also shows us how a reader can use literature to help them find and change their Self and how “the reader is created through the act of reading” (Sumara 206).

### Chapter 3: Ergodic Literature and the ARG

Because of its form, *S.* falls into the category of ergodic literature. According to Aarseth, who coined the term 'ergodic literature', it is very similar to cybertext (digital, interactive fiction): "it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theories would claim". He explains how a reader of 'normal' literature works with the novel only in their mind, while here they have to perform in an "extranoematic sense" as well: their interaction with the novel goes beyond thought and into the physical world. "[T]his selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call *ergodic*" (Aarseth 1). So cybertext and ergodic literature make the reader do more than just read; they are put to work. It should be said that even though Aarseth speaks about cybertext and (text-based) computer games often to illustrate his points, he does not limit himself to these types of text. Many of his examples of the ergodic are "paper based rather than computerized, yet they behave in ways that many theorists would reserve for electronic texts" (Aarseth 66). An ergodic work of literature such as the aforementioned *House of Leaves*, *Pale Fire* or, of course, *S.* allows its reader to make their own path through the text, to decide which parts to read when and how, and to influence or add to it by performing certain actions, which is what a cybertext also does. *Ship of Theseus* can only be called an ergodic novel insofar that the reader can solve ciphers and do research to find out about Straka's life. The difference is that this was not intended; the hidden messages were only meant to be found by Straka or Filomela, respectively. *S.*, however, is an ergodic novel. Here, the reader is meant to get involved.

What *S.* has also incorporated for this is an Alternate Reality Game. Örnebring borrows a definition from McGonigal, saying that “an ARG [is] ‘An interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem ... that would be absolutely *impossible* to solve alone’” (Örnebring 446). When a curious reader does an online search for specific names or terms from *S.* they will find several websites that treat the fictional world of the novel as if it is real. For example, there is a website called Radio Straka (RadioStraka.com, created by the British publisher) that contains a series of broadcasts with background information on Straka’s life, there are Twitter accounts for Jen and Eric (@JenTheUndergrad and @EricHusch) on which they communicate only with each other, and there are photographs of different versions of the last chapter of *Ship of Theseus* on different other websites. Websites that tie in more with the ARG are WholsStraka.com, for which the user needs to access the source code and find a key to enter, and EotvosWheel.com, which is a blog by an unknown person (written before the book was published) who is trying to find out the truth about Straka’s life. There are also several websites on which readers have made a sort of encyclopedia containing all the information about the characters, the margin notes and the puzzles, as well as timelines of the novel’s storylines and the ARG. On these fan-made websites are blogs and comment sections in which readers discuss their findings and their opinions, helping each other analyze the novel and find answers. Doug Dorst has said that he is responsible for some of the additional components on the internet, but that there are many of which even he does not know who made them (Dorst, “Doug Dorst on Writing”). Aside from the things that can be found online, Dorst has hinted at the existence of things yet to be found in the physical world. In this chapter I will argue that *S.* can help its

reader in their search for the Self, because its form allows for a stronger connection between reader and text and encourages the reader to participate and collaborate in the ARG to find answers.

### **Materiality matters**

A lot of thought has gone into the way *S.* looks. Besides the importance of keeping the authenticity of the fictional story for the sake of immersion, as I will explain later, the materiality of the book is important. This book could not have been made the same way in any other medium. There is an e-book version available, which has the benefit of being able to turn the margin notes on and off, but it lacks the freedom and intimacy of the print version. Not to mention the inserts, or so called 'feelies', lose much of their detail and "they also possess a physical, *tactile* aspect" (Karhulahti 6). This tactility is important, partly because people generally tend to feel more attached to things they touch rather than just see. Aarseth makes a very good comparison when he says that the difference between digital and paper can be "compared to the different experiences of traveling a scenic route by car or by bicycle. To claim that the text stays the same is to ignore the material conditions that make the text culturally and aesthetically possible" (Aarseth 170). While what is observed is not changed by the medium, the way it is observed is. As I have said in the first chapter, the way a text is perceived and interpreted is dependent on the identity and knowledge of the reader, but "[s]ometimes, a reader may influence the text for other readers, even if all the "marks on the pages" stay the same" (Aarseth 19). This influence of others is even stronger if the marks on the pages do *not* stay the same: Jen's and Eric's margin notes change the way they read the novel, both for themselves and for each other.

The different colors that have been used to show the different times in which Jen and Eric have written these notes are another example of the importance of the materiality of *S.* Although there is a certain practicality in the choice of different pens, there are other ways imaginable in which the different times periods could have been shown. The use of these colors, however, makes the readers figure it out for themselves. They will notice the colors immediately and wonder why they are there. Instead of marking the notes with dates, for example, this makes them aware of the paper in their hands. It takes them out of the story world and into the real world, while keeping the suspension of disbelief intact. The same can be said about the inserts. Karhulahti says that these extra items, when found with games, “do not function in the same way as the digital part of the game: they are purely representations of the story world, and configuring them has no direct effect on it” (Karhulahti 5-6). In the case of *S.* this is not true: they are not just representations, they are part of the narrative and using them can help in solving some of the novel’s puzzles.

### **Feelies and immersion**

As I have said in the introduction, *S.* comes in a slipcase that contains the novel *Ship of Theseus*. This is supposed to be the actual copy that Jen and Eric used, so it looks old and used – there are library stamps and stained pages – and all of their communications are still in it – the margin notes and all the items they left for each other between the pages.

Although it is rare to find feelies in a book, it is not a new invention. Infocom, the game company that coined the term ‘feelies’, used additional items that came with some of their interactive fiction games to enhance the experience of the game. One of these games was *Deadline*, which had “secondary texts, accompanying materials that Infocom packaged with the game diskette (maps, lab reports, transcripts of interviews, instructions for the player,

etc. ...)" (Aarseth 117). It has been argued that "the tactility of feelies may also function as a disintegrating element for the player's imaginative immersion" (Karhulahti 7), because shifting the attention from the game to the feelies and back can pull the player out of the text-world and cause the player to lose the connection they feel to the narrative. The difference between a computer game and a book is that a reader is already holding a book in their hand and turning pages. They are aware of the materiality at all times, which is why the inserts are not a distraction in this case. The items and the materiality of the book are also integrated in *S.*'s narrative. Because the library book is supposed to be real, they actually strengthen the immersion.

Since the reader does not just experience the novel in their mind, like they would with non-ergodic literature, it is important that the extranoematic experience is as real as possible. The same goes for the ARG elements such as the websites I mentioned earlier. As Örnebring explains, "[m]aintaining the integrity of the fictional universe in which the ARG is set is normally viewed as very important (indeed, one of the informal taglines of the ARG subculture is *This is not a game*, highlighting the requirement of suspension of disbelief while playing)" (Örnebring 449). The inserts, the handwritten notes and the way the book looks all contribute to this experience. Through this, it is made as easy as possible for the reader to suspend their disbelief and erase the border between the fictional universe and their own – Jen, Eric, Straka and Filomela are as real to them as they are. This allows the reader to be much more immersed in the novel and to sympathize more with the characters. As I have explained in the previous chapter, this gives them the opportunity to have experiences through these characters, which helps them shape their Self.

The puzzles, codes and mysteries left for the reader to solve also enhance the opportunity for immersion. Usually a reader is like a voyeur, observing without any risk –



they cannot influence the novel and it cannot influence them. In an ergodic novel like this one, the reader is not merely a reader. “The cybertext reader [and also the reader of ergodic literature], on the other hand, is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. ... The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is an investment of personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure” (Aarseth 4). The reader has more responsibility in this case, because they can influence the text by deciding what to read when and by ‘unlocking’ extra content. The reader has to engage with the text on a more personal level, thus becoming more involved. The “intimacy or failure” Aarseth talks about means that there is a risk of failure or success, depending on what the reader does. Because of this personal involvement and this risk, the stakes are raised and there is more to lose or gain. This is also what makes this kind of experience challenging and exciting. Generally, “when we feel that there is nothing more to be discovered, we eventually lose interest” (Aarseth 114). The challenge and the reader’s personal involvement are what keep the reader interested for as long as it takes to solve the mystery.

### **Reader influence**

As is the case with many art forms, the work of art is nothing by itself: a “beholder is needed to “make sense” of the work of art” (Aarseth 178), just like a reader is needed for the text to be more than ink on paper. In the case of ergodic literature, this goes further; a reader is needed to *do* something to make sense of the text. Aarseth makes a comparison between a mystery novel and ergodic literature, saying that “[e]ven if the reader engages in the activity of trying to solve the case, this in no way influences the outcome of the novel” (Aarseth 181). In *S.* the reader’s effort does have an effect. Of course it does not physically change

the words on the page, but it does change what can be read on the page. By choosing the order in which to read the novel (first reading *Ship of Theseus*, then the footnotes, then the margin notes, or reading everything on one page before going to the next one, for example), by reading the inserts, or by solving the puzzles, the meaning of the text can be changed greatly. Since knowledge affects interpretation, as I have explained in the previous chapter, the order in which the reader gains this knowledge makes a difference in how they read the text. Solving the puzzles or ciphers and looking for additional information on the internet also unlocks new content which changes the story.

Where normally the author would have complete control of what the reader learns and when, here the reader controls the text. This “reader control puts the creative initiative on the users, who must assemble the available building blocks and make artistic sense according to their individual preferences” (Aarseth 56). This also means that the identity of the reader becomes more important. It could be argued that what each reader reads is tailored to who they are, since their personality dictates the way they handle the text. This notion brings back the ship of Theseus paradox concerning the identity of the text: if the text and its meaning depend on the reader and each reader is different, does that mean that the text changes, or is it always still the same text? In cybertexts, where readers have to make choices that decide which part of the story they will read next, there are many different orders in which they will read the full story. However, “when two readers approach a text they do not have to encounter the same words and sentences in order to agree that it probably was the same text. And this is not new: it is a classical feature of reading, as Roland Barthes points out in his comment on *tmesis*” (Aarseth 74). In a cybertext the choices are set by the author, so even though there are many different possible outcomes, these outcomes are limited. In a more linear and non-digital text like a novel, a

reader has more freedom. “For Roland Barthes, tmesis is the reader’s unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages, a fragmentation of the linear text expression that is totally beyond the author’s control” (Aarseth 78), which means that they are able to skip or re-read passages or flip through the pages when and as often as they like, without having to be strategic in their choices. Karhulahti explains how the built in limits of a narrative game can also lessen immersion, because there is a “clash between what the player may want the character to do and what the author has scripted for the player. Whereas limiting the variety of available choices and actions directs the player to implement the specific choices and actions that advance the story, these limitations simultaneously threaten the player’s identification with the player character and so also her or his sense of acting in the story situation” (Karhulahti 2). This situation is different with ergodic literature: since there are no given options, the options for the reader become limitless. This makes it possible for the reader to have complete freedom and thus immerse themselves in the text and identify with the characters. They will therefore feel more personally involved, heightening the connection to the Self.

### **Collaboration**

The reader of ergodic literature is more than a reader; they are “a player, a gambler; the cybertext *is* a game-world or world-game; it *is* possible to explore, get lost, and discover secret paths in these texts, not metaphorically, but through the topological structures of the textual machinery” (Aarseth 4). The view of a reader as a player is especially applicable to the reader of *S.*, because of the connected ARG. There are two ways in which the ARG element is connected to the search for the Self: through the role that the reader or player has in it and through the way these readers or players collaborate to solve it.

ARG's are a relatively new type of game, gaining popularity with the expanding importance of the internet. "Many researchers implicitly or explicitly view ARGs as an exciting new medium, a genre that blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer and that fosters a more participatory popular culture" (Örnebring 448-449). This participatory culture has also been growing – media consumption has become less passive over the years and consumers are more used to being actively involved in media (e.g. voting in TV shows or 'live tweeting' during events). Of course reading a novel and interpreting it is always active, but this also "enables an affiliative joining of reader and author, or reader and characters" (Oatley 452). Because the reader is now a part of the creation of the narrative, there is less distance between him or her and the characters or the author. In a culture of convergence and participation, "fan audiences increasingly feel that they have (or ought to have) some measure of *ownership* of a text" (Örnebring 458). *S.*'s ARG fits into this culture perfectly, because it allows the reader to not only be active in reading the novel but also participate in the creation of the narrative. This power and responsibility makes the reader more invested and more personally involved. The strong connection between the reader and the novel, as I have said before, has an effect on immersion and therefore on the way the novel can influence or even create the reader's identity.

The readers of *S.* are not just actively involved with the novel and the ARG, but also with each other. There are several websites made by readers (most notably [sfiles22.blogspot.com](http://sfiles22.blogspot.com) and [ladansedusinge.wordpress.com](http://ladansedusinge.wordpress.com)) which serve as a meeting point for interested readers. They contain a lot of information on many subjects related to *S.* and Straka, as well as detailed theories based simply on ideas or sometimes on extensive research. Readers follow and build upon each other's work, help each other to solve mysteries and work together very actively. The core of this group consists of – to my guess –

between 10 and 20 people, but there are many more participants. Similarly to a reading group, it is a “meeting, with friends, around a shared cultural object which, during a reading, has become personal. ...They actively [construct] meanings together, sometimes in joint streams-of-consciousness, based on such issues as character, identifications, and the moral qualities of the books as they [relate] to the members' own lives” (Oatley 452). This is just like the meeting and collaboration between Jen and Eric, though on a much larger scale. On the other hand, “ARGs teach participants how to navigate complex information environments and how to pool their knowledge and work together in teams to solve problems. ... A well-designed ARG reshapes the way participants think about their real and virtual environments” (Örnebring 449). The participation in a collective project to analyze *S.* and solve its puzzles influences the readers personally. Firstly they are inspired to talk about their personal experiences with the book and thereby they are exploring their Self, while secondly they learn to work together and acquire a place within a group. Because this meeting with other readers is online, they can create their own persona separately from their everyday life. Like *S.* in *Ship of Theseus* they can create themselves like a character and create a new identity. Aside from this, they can sympathize with and learn from the experiences of the other readers, just as Jen and Eric do when reading the novel. Also like Jen and Eric, working on a project with others can give readers a goal and a place in the world. They can identify themselves as a part of a group, an intelligent and resourceful puzzle solver, an inspiration to the others, or a leader.

## Conclusion

Since *S.* was published quite recently, on October 29<sup>th</sup> 2013, it has not yet been discussed in any academic works – at least, none that I could find. Thus, aside from being labeled an ergodic novel, it has not yet been associated with or placed within any academic frameworks. As I have shown in this thesis, *S.* fits into many fields, though most of all it connects with identity. This theme comes through in all layers of the novel and even extends beyond it. By bringing together different fields like psychology, philosophy, literary and narrative theory and media studies, I have shown not only how the search for the Self is shown within *S.* but how this book can stimulate readers in their search for the Self as well.

In the first chapter I discussed how the primary novel, *Ship of Theseus*, shows how a Self can be (re)created. The character of *S.* has experienced a dissociative fugue which has led to the loss of his memory and personal identity. He then needs to create his identity by listening to his instinct, by reacting to others, and by writing. He also creates the character of Sola, which gives him a goal and a sense of certainty – if she is connected to him, then knowing about her will let him know about himself. Writing is the most important climax for *S.*; it is a way to find himself, by remembering his past, but most of all it is a way to tell the stories that together make up his identity. What these stories are about, however, is not as important as having stories in the first place. A Self is narrative, so writing himself as a character allows him to create his own identity and to get to know himself.

In the second chapter I have shown how the characters of Jen and Eric are influenced by *Ship of Theseus* and the lives of Straka and Filomela. For them, writing and reading are important tools in the search for the self. Working together on this project gives them a goal and a place in the world, but it also changes them personally. Both characters are

questioning their identities and they are able to explore the big questions about their lives by focusing on the questions about Straka's life. By analyzing the novel and the – for them real – lives of Straka and Filomela, they can analyze themselves as well. Because they feel so connected to the subject of their project, they are able to sympathize with the characters and thereby learn from their experiences. Jen and Eric's contact with each other and their collaboration also influence them. Because they get to know each other only through their marginalia, they find each other in the novel in a literal sense – they find each other's notes – and in a more metaphorical sense – they find a connection, even love, through their writings. They also find themselves in the novel in two ways: because their own lives are very similar to those of Straka and Filomela they see themselves in them, and working with the novel helps them to find their own Self as well.

In the third chapter I discussed the way *S.* connects with its readers through its materiality and the ARG connected to the book. Because the book is made to look like it is the actual copy Jen and Eric used, it is important that nothing could break this suspension of disbelief. This is why there is no reference to the real world – like the names of Abrams and Dorst or the publisher – anywhere on the book, and it is made to look as authentic as possible. The inserts contribute to the immersion into this fictional universe. The reader not only experiences the novel in their mind, like with most novels, but also in an extranoematic sense. They are able to extend the belief that they are within the fictional universe to the real world, even when they are not reading. The reader is even able to explore the fictional world outside of the novel, because of the ARG. This world is present also on the internet and perhaps even in the physical world – books under the name of V.M. Straka have been found in a New York library, for example. The reader is urged to continue Jen and Eric's work in solving the mystery of Straka by solving cyphers and puzzles. In order to do this, they

need to combine their knowledge and work together. This creates a community in which the readers can find a place and a purpose for themselves in the world. Because this collaboration happens on the internet, they can also create their own identity outside of their normal life. Like *S.*, they can write themselves as a character and like Jen and Eric they can find their Self through the novel and through collaboration.

As I have said in the first chapter, the Self is a complex concept that raises many questions which have no true answer. The way it is portrayed in *S.* shows that it is a fictional entity and that the Self is fragmented. The Self appears as a way to give one identity to a collection of parts, even though it is constantly changing. There is a strong connection between the search for the Self and narrative fiction, and this connection goes both ways. Since the Self is fictional, it can be constructed through narrative and therefore through language. In return, parts of the Self can be found in and through narrative fiction.

I will argue that people are drawn to mystery and that this is shown in this book: *S.* is drawn to the mystery of Sola and his own identity, Jen and Eric are drawn to the mystery of Straka's life and each other, and the reader is drawn to the mystery of the unsolved puzzles and the answers that may be found through the ARG. This tendency is likely to be connected to the mystery of the Self. By working on solving mysteries that are indirectly linked to the Self in a playful way, the bigger questions of the Self may be answered in the process. Especially in this day and age, where consumers of media expect to be able to play a more active role and are used to the convergence of different media, a book like *S.* is the ideal way to achieve this. And even if the reader does not participate, but only reads the novel, the connection to the Self and its mystery is not lost. If anything, the novel raises many questions about identity, writing and reading, and about the connection between them. As Doug Dorst himself has said: "the book is in many ways about storytelling and about the



narratives we create to make sense of ourselves and the world we live in" (Dorst, "Ask me anything"). Since the questions raised by *S.* may never be truly answered, the mystery of the Self might very well be an unending one.

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