

## ***To nobody... Guibert's Mes parents: Love Letter or Hate Mail?***

**Abstract:** This article compares aspects of the autofictional modes of self-representation at play in Genet's *Journal du voleur* [*The Thief's Journal*] and Hervé Guibert's *Mes parents* [*My Parents*]. Despite their different historical periods of production (1949 and 1986 respectively), each text deploys key aspects of the seemingly autobiographical text (recounting the event of birth, significance of the family name, dawning sense of sexual desire and identity) in order to portray a sense of being at odds with prevailing strictures of belonging and good taste.

Despite foregrounding a sense of 'misfitting' which is primarily located in experiences of, and related to, gay sexuality, the texts also testify to the enduring appeal and imposed potency of the socially sanctioned desire for straight forward autobiographical selfhood. Taken together, the texts suggest a reading which foregrounds shifting textual pluralities of reimagined, transitory, textual forms of selfhood rather than a named singular self.

**Keywords:** Jean Genet, Hervé Guibert, *Journal du voleur* [*The Thief's Journal*], *Mes parents* [*My Parents*], sexuality and self-representation, life-writing.

'Je hasarde une explication: écrire c'est le  
dernier recours quand on a trahi.' (Genet 1977)

['I will venture an explanation: writing is the last  
resort when you have betrayed.']

I develop here an intertextual reading of Hervé Guibert's unusual 'autobiographie de jeunesse' ['youthful autobiography'] *Mes parents* (1986), drawing some interpretative and speculative lines of inquiry from its potential relations to Jean Genet's *Journal du voleur*

(1949). The relationship posited between the two texts is not ‘obligatory’, Guibert’s text does not explicitly quote from the Genet work nor make an overt gesture of inviting a comparative reading between the two texts, even if it does explicitly reference Genet as a figure on at least one occasion. The two texts, nonetheless, share an interest in engaging fruitfully with the appeal of the genre of autobiography in order to creatively engage with the imaginative process of writing the self. For each text, this involves casting doubt on the supposed objectivity and veracity of the autobiographical endeavour, each resulting in heightened textual self-referentiality. Although there is no necessary linkage between the two texts discussed, I use them here to suggest that they can be viewed as foregrounding a potential line of continuity, from Genet through to Guibert (and beyond), in stressing the importance within writing a (queer?) self which is far removed from the supposedly increasing acceptance of modes of affirmatory gay self-identification.<sup>1</sup> Michael Lucey’s recent work, *Someone* introduces the notion of a ‘misfit sexuality’ for a sexual self which does ‘not exactly correspond to any of the names for sexualities that we most commonly use’ (2019: 1). Such a notion is helpful here and is apt for both Genet and Guibert. Indeed, Lucey includes ample discussion of both writers in his book. Although he does not directly juxtapose the two figures, preferring to situate Guibert alongside Leduc (‘doubtless an odd couple’, he tells us [2019: 5]), Lucey foregrounds in each writer, through discussion of Genet’s *Querelle* (1947, revised 1953) and Guibert’s AIDS writings, textual representations of social precarity linked to the sexual domain. Talking of Guibert’s ‘idiosyncrasy’ (2019: 200), Lucey writes that HIV/AIDS made him (his textual self) ‘consistently refractory to certain forms of social integration’ (2019: 200). My purpose here in juxtaposing the most obviously autobiographical offerings of both Genet and Guibert is to think through how the(ir) autobiographical text, writing the(ir) self, is always-already to be in the position of ‘misfit’, to suggest that the self (itself) is misfitting and in relation to Guibert to also ponder the extent to which his writing

had always, long before the advent of HIV/AIDS, grappled with the creative potentiality of not quite fitting in. While much of what I want to claim about the two texts under discussion might reasonably be held to hold for much post 1945 literary autobiography, I hope (in the spirit of Lucey's wonderful *Someone*) that the *Journal du voleur* and *Mes parents* might prove to be what Lucey calls 'an analytically productive pairing' (2019: 5).

Genet was undoubtedly an important precursor for Guibert, a figure that represented according to him 'la liberté absolue' ['absolute freedom'], a kind of textual exemplar, an influence Guibert viewed as 'déterminante' (Eribon 1991: 74) ['decisive'], and who exonerates Guibert from the potential putative guilt of writing that which should not be said or which cannot speak its name. Both writers share an interest in writing about and through the poetics of shame and betrayal, in giving shape to an identificatory fiction which is sustained through the textual deployment of the conceit of an autobiographical, or autofictional, mode, to creatively indulge in what Sarkonak describes (talking about Guibert's writing) as 'the tricky zone where life and fiction meet' (2000: 15). While Sarkonak analyses superbly Guibert's relations with Barthes, Foucault and (Renaud) Camus, he does not discuss Guibert and Genet in detail. These latter two do each stress, however, the textual creation of a self which both is and can not be the *sujet de l'énonciation*, the *writing self*. In their shared foregrounding of the primacy of the mode of narration over the narrative of self, both writers in these two texts offer an urgent reminder that an identifiable self is but a mere textual construct, a *sujet de l'énoncé*, a *subject of* (in and through) *writing*. Equally, and notwithstanding the previous sentence, their texts aptly and urgently demonstrate what is at stake in the trace of a textual gesture which necessarily confuses and confounds the extent to which the *sujet de l'énonciation* and the *sujet de l'énoncé* can clearly be distinguished, a productive confusion which is the very stuff of much literary autobiography. Both texts deliberately confuse the extent to which the writing subject is or can be the subject created in

and through writing, that confusion, indeed, *is* the textual gesture of these autofictional texts. The added ethical urgency surrounding the procedures developed to raise this issue revolves around the shared sense in which each text posits sexuality, and especially particular senses of homosexuality (as both an identity and a form of activity), as a favoured and privileged site which *seems* to both reveal truth and invite and invoke identificatory judgements, especially within the realm of an individual's most intimate *milieu*.

For Genet, in *Journal du voleur*, within the realm of the family, the realm of writing (about) family, writing and betrayal go hand in glove, rather than the former being a subsequent reaction to represent and perhaps work through the latter, as the epigraph to this piece might suggest.<sup>2</sup> Writing becomes, or just is, a form of betrayal and the family is, or becomes, a privileged locus, for Genet's narrator (partly due to its absence), of the realization of writing betrayal. Not surprisingly in a semi-autobiographical fiction like *Journal du voleur* the family is also a highly contradictory and ambiguous space of emotional complexity and conflict, as it also is – in different ways and for different reasons – in Guibert's text. As Loraine Day has remarked, with reference to Ernaux rather than Genet, 'it is within the family that many of our most intimate experiences occur' (2007: 121). For Genet's Jean, the 'family' requires the graphic markers of inverted commas, so unconventional and problematic (for others, morally and legally) are the intimate experiences which that text recounts, and so unconventional is the sense of family which the text might suggest. While, contra Day's comment, the intimate experiences of Genet's text might not occur 'within the family' in any conventional sense (and much less obviously so than is the case with Guibert's text) the family and some of what it might figure (structure and order, a sense of belonging and named identity) still figure large as a backcloth to Genet's textual creation of self. As a literary autobiography which seems at sustained pains to dispel the seemingly objective authenticity of the genre of autobiography to recapture a life already lived, Genet's text imagistically

delays and defers any sense of conventional autobiographical opening. Instead, the reader is plunged into a highly imagistic, opaque and ‘disturbingly under-referenced’ (Houston Jones 2004: 12) passage which fuses images of/from reality (the French penal colony in Guiana which closed in 1945) and abstract imaginative images of such realities (the personalized significance for the narrator of the now fantasized penal colony). Linguistic representation alters, disfigures, refigures and recreates the object of its representation just as an abundance of flowers buries a criminal and allows him to re-emerge ‘autre, géante, nouvelle’ [‘a gigantic and new one’], and note that the masculine nominative ‘un forçat – ou un criminel’ (Genet 1949: 9) [‘a convict – or a criminal’ (Genet 2019: 7)] re-emerges, through these adjectives, in the French original as a pronominalized flower marked as feminine. The opening of the text is deliberately disturbing and disorienting for the reader in that it does not offer the usual reassuring markers we might expect in an autobiographical work or, indeed, a novel. This is an early hint at the attitude of the text toward the reader: the reader is insulted and attacked by and in the text but the reader’s active participation is also required for the text to function as a personalized celebration of criminality and marginal sexuality (which are presented rhetorically as not being the values of the reader or values acceptable to the (bourgeois) reader figured within the text’s own functioning). Lucey makes a key point in this regard: that Genet also figures in his texts his own preferred family, his own preferred audience and readers – what Lucey calls his ‘counterpublic’ – who are everything but bourgeois respectability. This glorified cast of Genet misfits (queers, thieves, outlaws) are captured in luxuriant prose which makes poetry of the abject, this very poeticization itself producing ‘a certain kind of illegibility for many of those to whom his “love” itself is directed’ (Lucey 2019: 62). This sense of the contradiction of using writing and certain literary forms, an ability to marshal which suggests a certain sense of place and status, to exemplify an outside of cultural

belonging (Lucey's misfittedness) is evident in both Genet's *Journal* and Guibert's *Mes parents*.

If the immediate opening of *Journal du voleur* performs an early betrayal of the generic codifications of autobiography or the *journal intime*, we do eventually (some 40 pages into the text) get a kind of parodic conventional autobiographical start point. This conventional and formulaic autobiographical *ouverture* offers the birth of the narrator Jean as being on 19 December 1910 at 22 rue d'Assas. This is indeed Genet's date of birth but the place given by Stephen Barber's biography is 89 rue d'Assas, not 22 (2004: 15). The very brief details of the birth given in *Journal du voleur* make it an event ripe for interpretation and imagistic recreation within the text: 'l'indécision de mon origine me permettait de l'interpréter' (Genet 1949: 97) ['the uncertainty of my origin allowed me to interpret it' (Genet 2019 : 77)]. Guibert's text will, likewise, use different textual means (of storytelling and believability thereof) to undercut the structural and grounding significance of the birth as a key marker of the autobiographical narrative. In Genet's *Journal*, the conditions of Jean's birth are, on occasions, blamed for a solitary childhood which made him feel like an outcast, a position he came to actively seek through internalizing and incorporating the rejection he felt at birth (Genet 1949: 277). The book as a whole, once critic remarks, 'weaves a complex tapestry of fantasy and romance from a poverty of facts pertaining to childhood' (Marson 2001: 29). Indeed, the details of the birth given here send the text off on a shifting consideration of the significance of names and naming (Genet → genêt → Gilles de Rais → Cocteau). When Guibert's novel problematizes its narrator's birth, the questioning of the name, *le nom propre* ['the proper/family name'], is a recurring device deployed. Language and naming can create understandings, meanings, identities and alter pre-existing ones. On the thematic level this is significant in terms of the lack of a paternal surname for the son of Gabrielle Genet (Genet 1949: 48). This recording of the absence of a name (the Jean in the

book is not named explicitly as Genet in the space of the book) leads to a rumination on the process of naming itself, in relation to ‘genêt’ [‘broom’ (Genet 2019: 38)], (a crop and a phonetic reference also to ‘Genet’) and its evocation of Gilles de Rais, a renowned and evocative name (representing amongst other things murder, paedophilia and confession). The plant ‘genêt’ also recalls that ‘Jean Cocteau me *nomma* ...’ (*my stress*, see footnote 1, Genet 1949: 49) [‘Jean Cocteau called me’ (Genet 2019: 39)], raising also the question of influence, patronage and textual paternity. Language in this context provides an approximation of what it represents but cannot be reduced to the thing itself: ‘Or, c’est obtenir un simulacre’ (Genet 1949: 237) [‘But this is to achieve a mere semblance’ (Genet 2019: 186)]. The text thus provides a series of simulacra, linguistic simulations of things which are outside the text but only accessible in and through the linguistic creation of the text. As such, the self of, and in, the text is but a potential simulation of another self outside the text (that of Genet who is both named and not named in the text, that of the reader who both reads the text and is figured within the text through a rhetoric of exclusion). The text starts with words and from there creates images, simulations within a narrative structure which can be named (a process which occurs with a vague notion eventually named ‘sainteté’ [‘saintliness’], for example) and given further significance through the process of conferring a name and its ability to be identified by said name. Such a process extends also to place and Guibert identified Barcelona (in reality, the city in Spain) as a place he chose to visit due to his own reading, in Genet’s *Journal*, of the Barrio Chino. The invocation of a written place which can be named (Barrio Chino) was the impetus to visit the real place (Barcelona), outside the text, which in turn becomes an impetus to recall the textual reading. Life and reality are enriched by the sustenance of textual memory which can prefigure the same reality: ‘On va à Barcelone pour le souvenir du Barrio Chino décrit par Genet dans le *Journal du voleur*’ (Guibert 2008: 89) [‘You go to Barcelona for the memory of the Barrio Chino described by Genet in *The Thief’s Journal*.’] For Genet’s

and Guibert's readers today, the important thing is not so much to yearn to ascertain with certainty what is true and real and what is made up and false (within the text) but to relish the relations between writing and reality and to consider the potential for writing and reading (the self) to be processes which can free us from the imposition of truth, identity and placement. Such an imposition, in some cases, and for Genet and Guibert as (misfitting) gay men, can be experienced as a form of silencing, a marginalization which situates the experience of selfhood as being stifling (and hence the prompt to creativity). They share in their autofictional endeavours a political and ethical urgency (expressed differently at different historical junctures and from within different social *milieux*) to experiment with the possibility of being other than who/what we are, different from what we are told, taught, cultured to be, an alluring endeavour which is all the more urgent for the experiences of violently imposed marginality which are visited on, and celebrated by, each of them. If there is a textual lineage from Genet to Guibert in this regard, it is also one which could be seen to continue beyond Guibert into the contemporary autofictional endeavours of Edouard Louis whose own debut novel traces the structural, linguistically enshrined and historically grounded homophobia of working class Picardie at the turn of the millennium (Louis 2014).

Before readers would (re)turn to Guibert's youth and the environment of the family from which he would emerge, if not exactly come out, with a confident articulation (post *Mes parents*) of writing selfhood as an on-going project of change and constant rearticulation, Guibert first had to assert a recognized authorial presence. In a bold declaration, Bersani has pointed out that 'nothing has made gay men more visible than AIDS... it is because AIDS has made us *fascinating*' (Bersani 1995: 19). So it was with Guibert who, upon the publication of his fourteenth work, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (Guibert 1990), was subjected to a prolonged and spectacularizing cultural and critical gaze. This previously little known writer and ex-photography critic of *Le Monde* (a position created specifically for him which he held

from 1977-85) was suddenly, during 1990 and 1991, the object of fierce discussions about his fictionalized portrayal of the agony and death of his long standing friend Michel Foucault. Guibert was even taken to task over the matter on national television, by Bernard Pivot, during an edition of *Apostrophes* aired on 16 March 1990 (Boulé 1995: 1-6). As Milan Kundera has forcefully argued in relation to the Rushdie affair and *The Satanic Verses* (1988), the organs of virtual literary criticism and appreciation (Guibert describes *Apostrophes* in *A l'ami* as 'l'émission de variétés intellectuelles', [Guibert 1990: 35]) ['the intellectual variety show'] have a tendency to erase text. 'Of course,' Kundera comments, 'no one any longer doubted that Rushdie actually had *attacked* Islam, for only the accusation was real; the text of the book no longer mattered, it no longer existed' (Kundera 1993: 25).<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that the novel of 1990 became a big seller in French and subsequently in various translations (and so was presumably widely read, a point which Kundera doubts in relation to Rushdie's novel), the tenor of what was to become the reputation of Guibert and his work was always-already set. Treachery and betrayal became, for this inheritor of the mantle of Genet as the *poète maudit* of his (AIDS) generation, the early critical tropes of responses to Guibert and his work. Not unlike the myth making which surrounded the publication of Genet's *Journal du voleur*, whereby the supposed pardoning of Genet from a life-prison sentence (issued in absentia) paved the way, prior to readers encountering the text itself, for the *Journal* to be viewed as the confessional life-writing of the criminal poet *par excellence*. As Lawrence Schehr has argued, the fact that Guibert's wider body of work became known to most people (myself and Schehr included) only after the publication and controversial reception of *A l'ami* has coloured the ways in which readers and critics alike have chosen to (or perhaps simply can) approach the rest of Guibert's substantial body of work (Schehr 1995: 155-96). Writing in *Révolution* in March 1992, Achmy Halley summed up this situation in the following terms:

Il n'est pas facile d'évoquer l'écrivain Hervé Guibert tellement les images sensationnelles, touchantes ou impudiques collent aujourd'hui à la mémoire de l'auteur du trop fameux *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (Halley 1992: 17) ['It is not easy to invoke the writer Hervé Guibert since sensational, moving and immodest images today overlay the memory of the author of the excessively famous *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*']

With the subsequent publications of *Le Protocole compassionnel* (Guibert 1991), which in its epigraph invites readers to consider it as the sequel to *A l'ami*, and *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* (Guibert 1992), the publishing industry lost no time in constructing the myth of an AIDS trilogy and a frank three volume autobiography of Guibert.<sup>4</sup> Textual corruption in subsequent reprints, dropping the designation 'roman' ['novel'] from the folio editions of *A l'ami* and *Le Protocole compassionnel*, added to the sense that Guibert was writing, and perhaps always had written, autobiography. Indeed Guibert had, from his first published work of 1977 (the now seemingly ironically, self-knowingly titled *La Mort propagande*) through to the posthumous screening of his video-diary *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* (recently released commercially on DVD), attempted to leave a self-constructed posthumous image of that self.<sup>5</sup> Given the collective process of commissioning and editing the video-diary, as well as the rather strange circumstances of its airing on French TV with a recorded interview with a medical professor used as a coda and the later release of his diaries (*Le mausolée des amants*, 2001), repackaged and structured for publication by his own literary estate, Guibert himself perhaps ultimately lost control over his own ability to leave a self-fashioned posthumous image. Guibert, posthumously, became largely a figure of the publishing industry and organs of reception. The attempt, at least, on Guibert's part to control his own after-life image is stressed in the first line of the obituary to Guibert published in *L'infini*: 'Choisie cette vie-là, pour être tout-à-fait sûr de ne pas subir une autre – jusqu'au tout dernier moment' (Michelena

1992: 126) [‘This particular life was chosen so as to be sure not to be subjected to a different one – right until the final moment’]. In the short story written in 1984 shortly after Foucault’s death, ‘Les secrets d’un homme’, an important pre-text to the subsequent novel *A l’ami*, Guibert’s narrator claims that the truth of the philosopher’s death had been stolen from him, ‘lui qui avait été le maître de la vérité’ (Guibert 1988: 108) [‘him who had been the master of truth’]. Constructing his own autofictional life in words, Guibert would return to Foucault (through the prism of Muzil, a coded reference to Robert Musil) his, Guibert’s, own version of the truth of the latter’s death. He would also ensure, or try to, that he was himself the master of the relating of his own life and death through his own written and visual images and the ‘thanatological fate’ which Guibert shared with Muzil in *A l’ami*.

With his name established through *A l’ami*’s *succès de scandale*, readers return to *Mes parents*, Guibert’s short text of 1986, described by Edmund White as Guibert’s ‘best book’ (White 1994: 360), to look for some detail of the writer’s earlier life. The book was described in the *Guardian* as ‘Hervé Guibert’s autobiography’ (Kellaway 1994: 20) and indeed it is the only text by Guibert published in the Gallimard *collection blanche* which does not carry the paratextual designation *roman*. On the back cover of this edition of the text, the reader finds the usual publisher’s blurb, which declares that ‘Hervé Guibert devient un personnage de son livre, le temps d’une autobiographie de jeunesse’ [‘Hervé Guibert becomes a character in his own book, the time frame of a youthful autobiography’]. Paratextually, at least, therefore, this is the only book by Guibert which is presented as a potentially straightforward autobiography in terms at least of content. *Mes parents* fits reasonably comfortably with the working definition of autobiography given by Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (‘récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité’) (Lejeune 1975: 14) [‘A retrospective prose text which a real person makes of

their own existence, when s/he stresses their individual life, especially the history of their personality’]. Equally, Guibert’s text would fit with Lejeune’s insistence on the importance of *le nom propre* of the author and protagonist of the text being the same in order that the text be classed as autobiography. Boulé argues that *Mes parents* ‘constitutes an important milestone in the evolution of the voices of the self’ (1999: 147) for Guibert, and that its significance as a text is marked not by its content but by its form, its reappropriation of the childhood past for the purposes of the narrative present (1999: 152) and the ways in which that project allowed Guibert to use the ‘je’ pronoun to lead to ‘the fictionalization of the self as a chief character’ (1999: 156). It also demonstrates that the hallmarks of Guibert’s fiction, including the struggle with the ways in which one could represent the formative misfitting self in a culture which so demands that one fit in, was an essential part of his work prior to the renewed necessity of fighting this very battle when threatened with AIDS identity. Despite various formal aspects of the text being akin to conditions which might establish a reading contract based on the assumption and expectation of autobiography, *Mes parents* never ceases to undercut the autobiographical imperative of its paratextual self-presentation. The very title is in no small measure short-circuited as a possible conduit of the reader’s identification of the subject of the book as the ensuing dedication ‘à personne’ [‘to nobody’] would appear to contradict the sign posting from the title to the book’s actual tone and content. A similar technique of frustrating the generic use of dedication and title is used in the later *A l’ami*. A title which is itself a form of dedication and yet one which is framed negatively and potentially ironically in relation to the various possible *destinataires* of its dedicatory form and function, the definite article of ‘l’ami’ also being compromised by the lack of certainty with which the reader is able to isolate definitively who or what is (as opposed to might be) the friend.

From the dedication forward through the text, the reader’s expectations of *Mes parents* are constantly frustrated. The book, common to much of the work of Guibert, does not have a

linear chronology from start to finish, has various and shifting focalizations of narration and presents certain situations from multiple and incompatible, or at least contestatory, perspectives. The dedication is once again a case in point. While it bluntly and starkly opens the text on a note of bitterness, the penultimate entry of the text sends the reader back to the dedication by stating that '[L]a haine de la dédicace du livre, *bien sûr*, était fictive' (Guibert 1986: 169, *my stress*) ['[T]he hatred of this book's dedication was of course fictitious' (Guibert 1993: 156)]. Not only does this enclose the text within a contradictory declaration of the intended tone of the narration but equally undermines any possibility of accepting at face value the supposed veracity or honesty of the narratorial voice. The use of 'bien sûr' ['of course'] in this penultimate fragmentary utterance can surely only be understood as being ironic as the reader has not encountered within the text a sufficiently stable amount of evidence to support its claim of certainty. Indeed it is certainty at every level and in relation to the majority of the incidents encountered within the text which is consistently undermined.

The text opens with an introductory section narrated from the point of view of Guibert's Aunt Suzanne (a recurring character within his corpus from *Suzanne et Louise* [roman-photo] through *Les Gangsters* to several appearances in *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*). Within this section the family history, racial background and *nom propre* of Guibert (the narrator and character within the text who both is and is not the writer of the text) are problematized as Suzanne recounts to Guibert (the narrator, who recounts this recounting to us through the text) the truth of how his parents came to be married. Suzanne claims that Guibert's mother had a sexual relationship with a priest resulting in her pregnancy with Guibert's elder sister. Consequently the parents of Guibert's mother arranged for their daughter to marry Hervé's father in order to avoid a family scandal. The urge to avoid family scandal is ironically situated at the early stage of this text which, given its play with autobiographical truth, incited scandal in its readers (Sarkonak 2000: 4). As such this story

proleptically prepares the reader for the potentially shameful events and attitudes which the young Guibert himself will present to his own parents, again within the sexual domain. Suzanne also tells Guibert that he is actually Jewish, is not really called Guibert and is circumcised. Not surprisingly, Guibert thinks about his own body and states laconically that '[Q]uelque chose cloche dans cette histoire' (Guibert 1986: 17) ['Something about this story is not right' (Guibert 1993: 6)]. Later in the text we learn that Hervé has an infected foreskin (Guibert 1986: 58-9; Guibert 1993: 47-8), thus dispelling one aspect of Suzanne's version of events. As with Genet's *Journal*, the incident of the birth, a programmatically important structuring device within the autobiographical narrative, is subject to imaginative undercutting. Rather than being presented as a grounding event which confers certainty, name and heritage, in both texts it is used to present a lack of certainty, feelings of unbelonging (couched perhaps within the persistent societal desire that we should want to belong) and to take on a pivotal function as a reimagined event which casts doubt over the solidity of the notion of family within understandings of the self. Having problematized the family history, presenting it instead as a barely believable back story, the narrator foregrounds in the narrative present his own birth, clearly an event from the past. In so doing, he uses the present tense 'Je nais' (Guibert 1986: 20) ['I am born' (Guibert 1993: 10)], rather than the more usual *passé composé* (Je suis né). This grammatical choice draws extra attention to itself in order to remind us of the birth in the autobiographical text as always being a linguistic construct. In this instance, the declaration 'Je nais' (Genet?) is also, perhaps, a homonymic reference to Genet ('Je nais'), suggesting that the autobiographical birth of the self is always presented as a grounding event but is also one which is subject to the presence of the other (others' recounting, such as Aunt Suzanne's, and the later self's retrospective understanding and textual recreation of its own birth, figured partly through reading others, for example, here, Genet/'Je nais'). This recounting of the birth is, also, excessively brief. Within the space of a

single paragraph the narrator is born and in the space of a few lines separated from the initial comfort blanket which he recalls with deep affection. The concision of narrative time here is used to foreground the birth as marking an initial feeling of loss, of being subject to strictures which impose the curtailment of the self's desire and for the suggestion that early life is formative due to an acceptance of painful inauthenticity: to be, as it were, is to (be) misfit. This is played out here in relation to the brief recounting of the comfort blanket being thrown away and tricking the narrator into believing that it had merely been sent to be laundered. The narrator is being duped into accepting a new comfort blanket (when the old one is thrown away) without realizing, and in so doing, being told he can collect it himself, freshly cleaned, making the self an accomplice in its own duping. Throughout the brief passage the agency assigned to the scam is not his parents. Instead the text uses the inclusive and impersonal 'on' ('on l'a jeté' [Guibert 1986: 20]) ['thrown down' (Guibert 1993: 10)], suggesting that there is a wider societal desire to control and manipulate the narrator through what might seem like innocent processes of socialization which are, however, recounted and re-presented as being initiatory experiences of marginalization. The laundry worker is, somewhat strangely, named, Mme Hélène... how many would remember the name of a laundry worker from early childhood? The naming of her (and her description as a 'complice' [Guibert 1986: 21]) ['in on the plot' (Guibert 1993: 11)], party to the game, an accomplice in the process of passing fiction off as truth) suggests here she is more a role player in this story of what the text calls the 'simulacre' (Guibert 1986: 21) ['fake' (Guibert 1993: 11)] of the new comfort blanket. The stage, however, is set for the central aspects of the book where the narrator Guibert will reexamine and remember his childhood and his relationship with his parents in order to reestablish (and write again in the narrative present of his book) his name, his past and his body. He will strive to ascertain whether or not, or to what extent, Suzanne's version of the past might be the truth. In so doing, the major sections of the text after this introduction and

before Guibert will slip during the closing section (about the final third of the text) into shorter fragment-like diary snippets, will be his attempt to create and write his changing and developing sense of his own self both in relation to and in conflict with the image which his parents have of him or desire for him. The text thus stages the revisiting of the dramatic on-going process of identity acquisition (a clear part of which might be the rejection of identities) while incorporating into that narrative the formal and self-consciously textual experiment with how best to achieve that end.

Guibert's desire to live, read and write his own increasing sense of autonomy will bring him into conflict with his parents on a range of issues, but perhaps most notably in relation to his sexuality. While for Guibert his own realization of his dawning sexual attraction to other men is a period of exhilaration to be explored and enjoyed rather than explained or analysed (a narratorial voice in a snippet of *L'Image fantôme* remarks that with regard to sexuality 'je ne milite pas' ['I'm no activist'], agreeing with his simulated interlocutor that his texts 'suintent l'homosexualité' [Guibert 1981: 89] ['ooze homosexuality']), it provides for his parents a renewed occasion to attempt to (re)assert their influence over him and to begin to police with added urgency his behaviour and perceived desires. The father comes to be jealous of Guibert's close friends and Guibert's mother, in an ironic outburst given Suzanne's opening account of Mme Guibert's own possible sexual indiscretions in her youth, expresses outrage and incredulity that she has a daughter who is pregnant at the age of 17 and a gay son to boot. Such conflict sours their relationship, causing the young Guibert to want to escape from the family home, moving to Paris to live away from the family when he would be 17. While his parents want and expect Guibert to conform to a model of masculine adolescence which will facilitate maturing into an upstanding proponent of reproductive futurity – seducing young women rather than being seduced by young men, remarks the father – Guibert himself is attracted to the performativity of theatrical spectacle as

a verbal and gestural arena in which he can explore and perform his desires. For the young Guibert, sexuality becomes a performance which is not only pleasurable but has the added delight of being an activity which marks his difference and increasing independence from his parents. His rehearsals with a local theatre troupe (before he leaves for Paris) allow him the opportunity to get to know Phillippe, his first love and to repeat, rehearse and refine the practices of mutual affection and attraction which they feel: ‘séparés de nos personnages qui étaient nous-mêmes nous avons dû inventer notre propre texte’. (Guibert 1986: 82)

[‘separated from our characters, who were ourselves, we have had to invent our own lines’ (Guibert 1993: 70)]. The interconnection between literary exploration and the allure of performing one’s own selfhood independently of parental rules is also figured erotically and explicitly by Guibert in relation to Genet. Waiting one rainy afternoon at the theatre café for Philippe, with whom the young Guibert has become infatuated, the latter’s arrival is marked by his pointing out to the young Guibert a line of poetry which he reads: ‘Suce mon membre dur comme on suce un glaçon’ (Guibert 1986: 89) [‘Suck my member hard, like you suck an ice cube’ (Guibert 1993: 77)]. The text notes (information which is likely a reflection of the adult, authorial Guibert remembering back) that the book in which this is read is an edition of Genet poems published by L’Arbalète. The narrator observes ‘[l]a phrase a fait flèche’ (Guibert 1986: 89) [‘The words have struck home’ (Guibert 1993: 77)]. Reading, for the young Guibert, is recounted, then, as an erotic experience which led to bodily affect. Some kinds of literature, Genet for example, can break taboos and evoke an experience outside of normal expression in polite family settings. Reading Genet pierces the young consciousness of Guibert (author and narrator) such that his own recounting of his own life will come to be coloured by, paying homage to and situating itself within a lineage linked to Genet. Achieving his declared aim to break free from the family home and live in Paris (an emergent archetypal journey for a young gay man to make in much French gay fiction, often – post Guibert –

completed by associations with the desire to live in the Marais, have lots of sex and graduate to become a fully paid up gay man, living with HIV [Schehr 2007: 193-209]), Guibert finally has the chance to ‘invent his own text’. He has his autonomy and can now exercise his freedom independently of his parents’ interference, and free from his own past, whatever the truth of that may be. For him, it is now the future, the creative process of his own textual becoming, which has the potential to take centre stage. What is, however, equally clear is the persistence of the normative life-cycle to which the narrator is judged and against which he sets himself (the significance of the birth, the tumultuous first-love, initial sexual encounters, leaving the family home... all archetypal rites of passage of a normative and normalizing autobiographical text). As with Genet’s *Journal*, wherein a non-homophobic and creative exploration of gay sex can only be presented within a language which is always-already shot through with stigmatizing, criminalizing homophobia, Guibert’s re-imagining of his youth from the position of the writer’s adulthood takes place from a re-imagining of being within the closeting confines of family life.<sup>6</sup>

The book is now dominated by two further sections: one, a series of self-plagiarisms wherein the text of *Mes parents* becomes a patch-work of previously published snippets from a range of earlier works, and; two, the final section which is formally represented as a series of diary like transcriptions and in which Guibert’s father counters the opening story telling of Suzanne and affects a level of reconciliation with his son, a process shadowed by the narrator’s own exploration of his self-delight and disgust at his emotional response to his mother’s breast cancer and subsequent mastectomy. Ironically, then, just as within the diegesis Guibert achieved the position and freedom to create his own sense of written self and finally fully express his own autonomy he seems to rapidly lose his own voice, lapsing into repetition, re-transcription and self-recycling, the narrative line withering and fragmenting to be replaced by disjointed ramblings, an aesthetic of narrative emaciation which would recur in

other Guibert texts (perhaps most notably in *Le Paradis* and most stunningly in the visual domain in the video-diary *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*).

In the final third of the book, as Guibert grows older and as the narrative fullness diminishes, his relationship to his parents remains difficult to categorize and describe. He is, at times, coruscating in his comments about both parents and yet when he falls ill, he feels that only physical proximity to his parents will lead to recovery (even if the attempt to keep the writing metaphorically close to his parents does not lead to a return to narrative good health). Equally, while he feigns to shock himself through his immediate reaction to his mother's breast cancer, writing to tell her that he loves her while admitting to the reader of the text that what that means is that he will love her so much more were she to die, he also describes the physical, corporeal reaction which he has when his mother goes under the knife. Such is the complex, contradictory mix of emotions which Guibert describes in relation to his parents. It seems apt, therefore, that the text formally mirrors this confusion in its own structure and generic undecidedness, between autobiography and novel, narrative prose and disjointed fragments. Freed from the shackles of his parents' disciplinary eyes, Guibert is free to create and yet is unable to do so other than in relation to the parents and the past from which he has striven to escape and which form the first two thirds of the book, just as Genet is only able to express a non-normative stance through the assumption of normative structures and languages turned back on themselves. The final third of Guibert's text is also, then, a coming to terms with the dawning failure of being able to create anew, an increasing sense that the full expression of the new found freedom will have to be deferred to other texts.

When Guibert appeared on *Ex-Libris* in 1991 after the publication of *Le Protocole compassionnel*, Patrick Poivre d'Avor, a sympathetic reviewer and interviewer of Guibert and one who seemed to realise (unlike Pivot on the earlier *Apostrophes* aired after the publication of *A l'ami*) the mileage in flattering Guibert's ego in the formulation of questions, was at

pains to establish why Guibert had been so cruel to his parents in this book when they were still alive at the time of its publication. Poivre d'Avor expressed incredulity at the sheer *dureté* of some of the insults which Guibert included in the text. Guibert responded with comments which seem to me to reflect what his text so successfully achieves in communicating by *not saying*: first, that his parents, *mes parents*, are not simply real live people of flesh and blood but are also now the creations in ink on paper of Guibert's textual practice, and second; that while he loves his parents (a fact which, interestingly, he takes to be 'évident') he also had, and continued to have, both a desire and a need to recognize the fact that they are a part of him, as he is of them, while also continually creating and expressing his own sense of the differences between them, differences which constitute their relationship while equally fracturing it.

As narratives of self which wish to demonstrate the allure in dispelling the tyranny of an imposed sense of self, it is not surprising that both Genet's *Journal* and Guibert's *Mes parents* close with a heightened sense of explicit self-reference. Each text endeavours to cast doubt on their own narrative fullness, suggesting that each is less than whole, merely part of an on-going process, the autobiographical self merely a textual conceit adopted for the purposes of unveiling the self itself as an awkward imposition. Genet's text names itself, within itself, about 100 pages in: 'Ce livre «Journal du Voleur»: poursuite de l'Impossible Nullité' (Genet 1949: 106) ['This book, *The Thief's Journal*, pursuit of the Impossible Nothingness' (Genet 2019: 84)]. This *auto-référentialité* is highly ludic in that it is unclear how the reader is to respond to it. As Sheringham (1988: 289-306) has argued, in this instance, the book's mentioning of itself within itself short-circuits the self-referential game being played in seeming autobiography, such that dissolution of self takes precedence. In the passage following the mentioning of the text's name, the narrator goes on to describe the self-other relationship as he conceives it within his book: others are mere pretexts for elaboration

of himself; others are merely his own projection of them but also he is a projection of these same others. The self-other relationship is both mutually re-enforcing and constructive of identity but also mutually self-effacing and nothing more than a trick of the textual light. As Sheringham rightly observes in this regard: ‘The “crepuscular” self – or sense of self – has no identity: it flickers at the edge of consciousness as Genet imagines existing only in the gaze of beings who are of his own invention but who retain a tangible sense of otherness’(1988: 113).

The ending of the *Journal*, its final 10 or so pages, suggests a written futurity in a second volume which never appeared, but also strongly refers back to the beginning in that at both start and end we have figured two real places, both feminine nouns (la Guyane and L’Espagne) evocative (in their exploration in the *Journal*) of men, and turning more into fantasized places of the narrator’s imagination. Both fuse real and unreal, male/masculine and female/feminine, self and other, strength and weakness (figured at the end of the text via the mini-narrative of Stilitano, often a physically strong character, in a moment of weakness being rescued from a hall of distorting mirrors by Robert). The language used to describe Spain as a part of the self (Genet 1949: 306; Genet 2019: 240) recalls strongly the language previously used to refer to Guiana at the book’s opening (Genet 1949: 16; Genet 2019: 13).

The book thus ends with a strong evocation of its own beginning. The text stops/ends and comes into being as a finished work through internal self-reference. At one and the same time, Guiana and Spain turn from real places to rhetorical aesthetic tropes of the self-in-text and, moreover, in all its playfully disturbing ambiguity, of the self-as-text. We have already seen that in Guibert’s case the dedication of the text (at the start of the reading experience) is explicitly alluded to in the penultimate entry, thus enclosing the text, as with Genet’s *Journal*, in a circularity of self-reference and self-questioning. Even more explicitly, about 15 pages before the end of *Mes parents*, the text includes a brief mention of a novel, ‘un roman qui s’appellerait *Mes parents*.. qui commencerait ainsi: Maintenant que mes parents sont morts,

enfin (mais je mens), je peux bien écrire tout le mal que je pense d'eux...' (Guibert 1986: 153) ['a novel to be called *My Parents*... which would begin thus: Now that my parents are dead thank God (but I'm lying) I am able to write everything bad that I think of them' (Guibert 1993: 140)]. As the use of the conditional suggests, this mention in the book called *Mes parents* of a novel called *Mes parents* highlights that the text we are nearly finished reading is other than the imagined novel which would share its name. The text here raises again the issue of generic labelling and alludes to its own self-erasure as the novel which would begin with the death of the parents is not the book which we have read. Described by Darrieussecq as 'le tournoyant jeu de miroir' (1997: 125) ['the swirling game of mirrors'] the text's *mise-en-abyme* here forces a questioning of the truth of what we may have read, suggesting that the self is potentially a reflected distorted image in, and of, a story that might be told several ways.

In appealing to the autobiographical script and inviting their readers to imagine an encounter with a self (Genet? Guibert?) while equally disrupting the confidence with which we can identify that self, these autofictional texts each by their self, and each with the other, enjoin us to imagine the very possibilities of self as a series of shifting textual iterations rather than a singular (family) name.

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**Notes:**

1. In *Queer French* (2007), Provencher discusses how Genet's works engage with homosexuality as sexual activity but 'generally skirt identity issues' (65) in situating both Genet's texts and the phenomenon of 'Genet' (a range of cultural associations linked to his

name, including but also moving beyond the texts themselves) as a key reference point for French queer articulation. While Provencher traces the lineage forward to Cyril Collard, he notes Guibert but does not include discussion of his works (69-72).

2. Genet's comment was made during a television interview of 1977. This quotation is used as an epigraph to Annie Ernaux's autofictional novel *La Place* (1983). The use of Genet as epigraph by Ernaux is clearly ironic in a text (*La Place*) about the narrator's vexed relationship with her dead father and the role and process of writing in refashioning some connection between father and daughter. Ironic since Genet never knew his own father and since Genet became a literary figure who would have been outside the knowledge base of Ernaux's narrator's father. As such the choice of Genet indicates the chasm between narrator and father rather than the promise of *rapprochement* through writing. Genet's own autofictional *légende* of 1949 *Journal du voleur* offers little sustained sense of writing as a mode of *rapprochement* to estranged, unknown and unknowable parents.

3. Kundera also mounts a vociferous defence of literary criticism, demonstrating that the object of his criticism is the low-brow literary gossip of popularising cultural criticism (such as *Apostrophes* in the context of the reception of Guibert's *A l'ami*).

4. *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* was published posthumously, the *quatrième de couverture* of the *collection blanche* edition boldly declaring that '*L'Homme au chapeau rouge* représente le troisième volet de cette histoire personnelle du sida amorcée par *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, et poursuivie dans *Le protocole compassionnel*' [*The Man in the Red Hat* is the third constituent part of this personal history of AIDS initiated by *To The Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, and continued in *The Compassion Protocol*']. Paratextual notes on many of Guibert's texts in both their French and English editions should be treated with some caution.

5. For Guibert's own discussion of his desire to construct a posthumous image mediated by images of Rembrandt (opening another *rapprochement* back to Genet, who also wrote on

Rembrandt), see Guibert's *L'Image fantôme*, where he declares that 'je délimitai une image posthume' (Guibert 1981: 65) ['I set out a posthumous image'].

6. Owen Heathcote (2007: 105-19 [113]) notes the proliferation early on in *Mes parents* of forms of closets (drawers, cupboards, hiding things behind books etc) in the textual reconstruction of Guibert's early childhood. Such closets foreground practices of concealment which the text sheds light on.

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