

How to Read Autofiction

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
1. Theory, Part 1: Establishing the Rules.....	13
2. Hervé Guibert.....	24
3. Chloé Delaume.....	49
4. Theory, Part 2: Resisting the Rules.....	76
Conclusion.....	92

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A Note on Translation:

I have translated most of the quotations in this thesis with the help of Professor Catherine Poisson. I included the original French passages as a reference, in case something was lost in translation, especially because several of the authors use puns and subtle linguistic humor in their works.

However, I found and quoted complete translations of the following books:

Mes Parents by Hervé Guibert,
translated by Liz Heron as *My Parents*

Pour une théorie de la production littéraire by Pierre Macherey,
translated by Geoffrey Wall as *A Theory of Literary Production*

Poétique du récit by Roland Barthes,
translated by Stephen Heath as *Image-Music-Text*

Additionally, quotations drawn from *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self* by Jean-Pierre Boulé were translated by the author. I provided both the French and English here, just as he did in his work.

Full bibliographic information is available at the end of the thesis.

Introduction

The word “autofiction,” was officially created in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel *Fils*¹ (Threads / Son). Doubrovsky imagined a genre between fiction and autobiography in which the author, protagonist, and narrator share one identity.

He explained the idea on the back cover of *Fils*:

Autobiographie ? Non, c’est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d’évènements et de faits strictement réels ; si l’on veut autofiction, d’avoir confié le langage d’une aventure à l’aventure d’un langage en liberté, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, fils de mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d’avant ou d’après littérature, concrète, comme on dit musique.²

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music.

Doubrovsky’s description of the differences between autobiography and autofiction has inspired debate among literary critics, journalists, and authors in France over the past three decades. Many have questioned whether autofiction is in fact different from autobiography, criticizing Doubrovsky’s assertion that autobiography is “reserved for the important people of this world.” Nevertheless, “Fiction, of events and facts strictly

¹ In French, “Fils” mean “son” if the speaker pronounces the “s,” but “threads” if the “s” is silent; even the title of Doubrovsky’s work invites interpretation from the reader.

²Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils*, Collection Folio ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 10.

real” has become the working definition of autofiction, and the “adventure of language” has come to describe its innovative style.

However, the definition also invites further interpretation. It is a paradoxical, complicated explanation of a genre that continues to elude classification. Similarly, other attempts to define autofiction often avoid forming strict boundaries for the genre. Autofiction.org, for instance, defines the style as:

Notion subtile à définir, liée au refus qu'un auteur manifeste à l'égard de l'autobiographie, du roman à clés, des contraintes ou des leurres de la transparence, elle s'enrichit de ses extensions multiples tout en résistant solidement aux attaques incessantes dont elle fait l'objet. Elle vient en effet poser des questions troublantes à la littérature, faisant vaciller les notions mêmes de réalité, de vérité, de sincérité, de fiction, creusant de galeries inattendues le champ de la mémoire.³

Subtle notion to define, tied to the author's apparent refusal of the autobiography, roman à clés⁴, of the constraints or delusions of transparency, enriched by its many extensions all while solidly resisting the incessant attacks of which it is the object. It comes from posing questions that challenge literature, shaking notions of reality, truth, sincerity, fiction, plowing through the unattended galleries in the field of memory.

Autofiction.org features articles that discuss the genre, specific works of autofiction, and contemporary French authors. The site's editors call attention to the multifaceted nature of autofiction, its indefinable qualities, and its task of resisting preconceived notions of how to narrate “reality, truth, sincerity, fiction.” This resistance, I argue in the following chapters, is the most profound link among works of autofiction.

³ Arnaud Genon and Isabelle Grell, "Présentation", autofiction.org <http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?category/Accueil> (accessed 3/21 2011).

⁴ “Roman à clés” refers to a novel with real people appearing as fictional characters with fictitious names.

My analysis of autofiction focuses on the questions that the works raise about the way that we read, write, and understand genres. I analyze texts by two authors, Hervé Guibert and Chloé Delaume, who each blend traditional notions of fiction and reality. I also discuss the works of certain literary critics, including some who have addressed autofiction specifically, and others who have written broader critiques of literature and its structures. I have found these authors engaging because of their attention to the ways that words, sentences, and works of literature interact with one another and with the reader. They are self-conscious in their technique and self-reflective about their results. In that spirit, I would like to explain the logic behind the order of the chapters that will follow this introduction.

I first encountered autofiction through Chloé Delaume, when her autofictional essay *La Règle du Je* (The Rule of I) was released in 2010. I was studying in France at the time, working as an intern for an online literary review, and the essay was the subject of a recently published article. The work was a useful introduction to autofiction, since Chloé Delaume analyzes its merits and also demonstrates the way that it functions, presenting herself in the essay as a narrator and as a fictional character. She uses character development, intertextual references, and, vaguely, a plot, to argue for the legitimacy of the genre; however, while her blend of theory and narrative drew me to her work, I ultimately found that I was not fully convinced by her effort to establish autofiction as a new genre, separate from autobiography and from fiction. Therefore, I turned to literary theory that addresses autobiography and autofiction, specifically to those theorists whom Delaume quotes in *La Règle du Je*: Philippe Lejeune and Philippe Gasparini.

I read criticism about autobiography, including Philippe Lejeune's argument for its implicit pact in *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (The Autobiographical Pact), and analyses of autofiction's response to autobiography's rules. I traced autofiction's historical roots to Serge Doubrovsky, and read Philippe Gasparini's *Autofiction: Une Aventure du langage* as (Autofiction: An Adventure of Language) an explanation of autofiction's development in contemporary French literature. Then, I wrote a term paper that discussed autofiction's historical development, its reception by critics and readers, and analyzed *La Règle du Je* as an example of a work of autofiction. I concluded that because autofiction does not abide by the autobiographical pact, it needs a new pact that articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but is sincere; he will lie, but will attempt to reflect the world with justice.

It is interesting to note that at this point I had read few real works of autofiction, focusing instead on literary criticism. This initial work has been instrumental for my personal understanding of autofiction, but I ultimately found that neither a historic (like Gasparini's *Autofiction: Une Aventure du langage*) nor a genre-based (like Lejeune's *Le Pacte Autobiographique*) approach to autofiction focuses on the work that the texts do in the way that I wanted them to: by analyzing their themes, arguments, and interactions with the reader. Therefore, over the past year, I have concentrated on the texts, reading novels by Hervé Guibert, who distorts his autobiography in fictional novels, and more works by Chloé Delaume, who explicitly writes autofictions.

Finally, I reconsidered my initial questions, now exploring the effects of resisting prescribed approaches to literature. I returned to literary criticism, readdressing Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact. While reading texts by Guibert

and Delaume, I had concluded that works of autofiction aim to unsettle the autobiographical pact, encouraging readers to notice common structures rather than blindly accept them. As I re-approached literary theory, I pursued the subject of active versus passive reading, turning to literary critics Pierre Macherey and Roland Barthes, who have each addressed the relationships between readers, writers, and text. I moved away from my first attempt to find autofiction's place in contemporary literature and to define its pact, now exploring instead the implications of the rules of reading and writing. What rules exist? Are we aware of them? Can we break them? How, why, and why not?

The chapters that follow mirror my own relationship with autofiction. Chapter One introduces theory that discusses the state of the genre. I argue that theorists who attempt to neatly categorize autofiction miss an important point about the objectives of the authors and their subversive project, just as I did in my first attempt to understand the genre. In Chapter Two, I analyze texts by Hervé Guibert, a French writer who did not associate himself directly with autofiction but who nevertheless explored the distinctions between reality and narrative, fiction and truth, and types of linguistic codes. In Chapter Three, I discuss works by Chloé Delaume, arguing that through self-proclaimed autofictional writing, her texts challenge conventions and imagine new forms of writing. Finally, in Chapter Four, I return again to theory. I discuss the autobiographical pact in greater depth, and analyze the ways in which Guibert and Delaume each question this pact, making us uneasy, self-conscious, and active readers as a result.

Of course, the whole point here is to question the givens – so, to what extent do you believe in my narrator? Has she constructed this story to justify a weird order of her chapters? Does it matter?

Theory, Part I

The Adventure of Genre

Autofiction is a literary puzzle. It was created deliberately, as a self-consciously *new* genre, to occupy the space between autobiography and fiction; its texts are often self-aware and self-critical of their statuses in this new category. As a result, many authors and critics who have addressed the differences between autofiction, autobiography, and the novel have made efforts to define and distinguish autofiction from other forms of writing. They have introduced a debate about whether autofiction is truly new and have pursued its potential place among traditional genres.

The definition of autofiction is not self-evident; this ambiguity presents unexplored terrain for critics, and perhaps even an opportunity to construct a new genre and to explain its boundaries to future readers. Critics who have participated in these conversations include Philippe Lejeune, Philippe Gasparini, Jacques Lecarme, Philippe Vilain, Isabelle Grell, Arnaud Genon, Gérard Genette, and the writers of autofictions themselves, including Serge Doubrovsky and Chloé Delaume. Their debates highlight common points among authors' approaches to autofiction and explore the genre through historical, intertextual, and generic lenses.

However, ultimately I argue that the attempt to define autofiction as a genre ignores the work that the texts do to disrupt assumptions about literature. The most

interesting quality of Guibert's and Delaume's works is not the still-undefined pact that each author establishes with the hypothetical reader, but rather the fact that they break the predefined pact. As a consequence, they introduce an uneasiness that forces us to be actively aware of reading. In the end, I find that the limits of genre-oriented criticism point to the questions that I will explore in the rest of this thesis. Critics have trouble categorizing autofictions; I explore the reasons for and the consequences of the texts' resistance to classification. I begin with an analysis of the works of two critics, Philippe Gasparini and Serge Doubrovsky, to illustrate an alternative approach to the one that I later take. In the end, however, I suggest that the shortcomings of this type of analysis indicate provocative qualities of autofiction. In my analysis, I use autobiography as a starting point to note established rules, and then discuss the ways that autofiction breaks them, rather than attempt to establish a new genre or a new pact.

Philippe Gasparini's Descriptive Analysis

Many critics who have approached autofiction over the past thirty years have analyzed it as a genre, in relation to literary history and to other genres. In this style, Philippe Gasparini's work *Autofiction: Une aventure du langage* attempts to solidify autofiction's place among literary categories such as autobiography and fiction. He analyzes its evolution from a historical perspective, explaining the context in which Doubrovsky created the neologism, the critics that analyzed the new style, and the impact that autofiction has had on the public's understanding of *l'écriture du soi*. He

concludes that autofiction is a complex form of writing and therefore hard to define, that it lacks a necessary pact between the reader and the writer, and that its innovative style is a product of our evolving understanding of the self, psychology, and modern aesthetics.

Gasparini provides a working definition of autofiction, with the disclaimer that “Il ne s’agit en aucune manière d’une théorie définitive car les lignes bougent, les textes qui paraissent remettent les certitudes en question, le phénomène est loin d’être circonscrit.”⁵ (“*This is not a definitive theory in any way because the lines move, the published texts put certainties into question, the phenomenon is far from controlled.*”)

Despite this uncertainty, Gasparini proposes the following definition:

Texte autobiographique et littéraire présentant de nombreux traits d’oralité, d’innovation formelle, de complexité narrative, de fragmentation, d’altérité, de disparate et d’autocommentaire qui tendent à problématiser le rapport entre l’écriture et l’expérience.⁶

Autobiographical and literary text that features numerous oral qualities, formal innovation, narrative complexity, fragmentation, separation from the self, disparateness and auto-commentary, which tends to problematize the relationship between writing and experience.

Gasparini’s definition highlights qualities in common among autofictions. It takes a descriptive approach, noticing typical themes and styles, and then points to conclusions about these traits, that they “problematize the relationship between writing and experience.” It is also significantly more accessible than Doubrovsky’s definition, “Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the

⁵ Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: Une Aventure Du Langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), 297.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

language of an adventure to the adventure of language,”⁷ which is, perhaps purposefully, self-referential, paradoxical, and linguistically complex.

Gasparini suggests that defining autofiction lays the groundwork for it to occupy a place among recognized types of literature. He writes:

Encore faudrait-il, pour dépasser le phénomène de mode, cerner ce concept le décrire, et savoir de quoi on parle, ce qui est loin d’être le cas actuellement [...] J’espère que ce parcours permettra de définir plus précisément la position que pourra occuper l’autofiction dans notre système des genres.⁸

Again it is necessary, for it to become something more than a fad, to define this concept, describe it, and know what we are talking about, which is not the case now [...] I hope that this path will permit us to more precisely define the position that autofiction will be able to occupy in our system of genres.

Gasparini’s work strives to situate autofiction in “our system of genres,” to define its boundaries, and to make “this concept” more easily recognizable and comprehensible, much in the way that other types of stories are widely understood and predictable in content, style, and reading method.⁹ However, he also notes that autofiction is “far from being controlled”; autofiction’s nature as a resistant form of writing makes its categorization and definition a difficult task.

⁷ Doubrovsky, Preface.

⁸ Gasparini, 7.

⁹ Take the folk tale as an example. Vladimir Propp was able to write *A Morphology of the Folktale*, detailing the defining characteristics of this type of story because each tale followed a predictable and now familiar formula to address the reader, develop the plot, and narrate the story. Gasparini takes a similarly descriptive approach to autofiction, as he analyzes qualities in common among many texts within the genre. However, autofiction poses a problem that the folktale does not: autofiction is self-consciously resistant to predictable forms, while the folk tale thrives on illusion and familiarity.

Gasparini also summarizes the debates between other critics who have analyzed autofiction over the past thirty years. He suggests that literary criticism played a pivotal role in autofiction's development: "...ce qui était sans doute la condition de son succès, [autofiction] a leurré la critique."¹⁰ ("... *that which was without a doubt the necessary condition of its success, [autofiction] allured criticism.*") He suggests that because critics took interest in the genre, as either a new and innovative form of writing or as an illegitimate form of autobiography, autofiction became a more widely recognized and even successful category of literature. According to Gasparini, the genre relied on the attention of literary critics because its definition is not obvious and because readers would not know how to approach the texts without a key.

Gasparini's critique addresses autofiction as an "object" that can be, but has not yet been, systematically described and then defined. He writes, "Pour être analysé, l'objet devait d'abord être nommé, identifié."¹¹ ("*To be analyzed, the object had to first be named, identified.*") He suggests that identification is the necessary precursor to analysis; however, while finding similarities between autofictions could indeed be useful for indicating trends, interests, and styles, if the common point among these texts is their resistance to prescribed forms, perhaps the attempt to concretely define the genre is not in the spirit of autofiction.

Serge Doubrovsky: Autofictionalist and Critic

¹⁰ Gasparini, 295.

¹¹ Ibid., 321.

Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* recounts the true events of the author's life in the first person, but disrupts the traditional autobiography by using unconventional syntax, chronology, and perspective. He claims that recounting his life is fictionalizing his life; the influences of psychology, an often-unreliable memory, and the writing process itself each make it impossible to understand *Fils* as a factual account of reality. As a writer of autofiction, Doubrovsky explores many of the questions that Guibert and Delaume both address in the works that I analyze in the following two chapters. He also participates in the critical development of autofiction, by attempting to define the genre and to explain it. Ultimately, I argue that Doubrovsky's creative writing demonstrates the potency of autofiction more effectively than his auto-criticism does; as a critic, he, like Gasparini, attempts to find a place for autofiction in contemporary literature, while autofictions resist this sort of stabilization.

Fils reflects not only what happened in Doubrovsky's life, but also his psychological perception of those events. He uses alliteration, repetition, and unusual grammar to mirror his thoughts. For example, he opens a scene in New York by writing:

autos autos autos le bus fonce carré comme un car
carreaux en hublots le conducteur dans le gros œil transparent carlingue
de tôle ondulée pilote me frôle arrêt au coin bouche la voie m'obstrue
j'attends¹²

cars cars cars the bus tears along squared like a tiled
coachbus windows like portholes the conductor in the large clear eye
cabin made of undulating iron pilots brushes me stop at the corner
obscures the way, obstructs I wait

¹² Doubrovsky, 91.

In this passage, Doubrovsky disrupts standard grammar and vocabulary rules as his writing mimics the rhythm and chaos of a New York street instead of a traditional sentence. He attempts to recreate the protagonist's experience by illustrating the sensation of a stressful, fast-paced setting through language. He repeats, for instance, the word "cars," inviting us to imagine a stream of cars passing him, and uses imagery and puns to connect the image of a bus on the street to a ship with portholes on the sea.

Additionally, Doubrovsky distorts standard chronology in *Fils*. His mind wanders from present to past, from the streets of New York to speculations about his relationships, and back to the same moments that he has already remembered; so does his writing. Certain moments of his life remind him of the holocaust and his experiences during the German occupation of France, while others remind him of places in Paris. His texts mimic the sometimes scattered, illogical, impulsive or flustered rhythm of his mind. As a result, *Fils* subverts the form and style of conventional autobiographies, proposing instead an alternative form of literature that suggests that writers do not need to cater fully to the expectations of their readers.

Doubrovky's creative writing is closely linked to literary theory; *Fils* was self-consciously a response to a theoretical gap in Philippe Lejeune's description of autobiography. In *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune asked, "Le héros d'un roman déclaré tel peut-il avoir le même nom que l'auteur? Rien n'empêcherait la chose d'exister, et c'est peut-être une contradiction interne dont on pourrait tirer des effets

intéressants.”¹³ (“*Could the protagonist of a novel, declared as such, have the same name as the author? Nothing would stop such a thing from existing, and it is perhaps an internal contradiction from which we could notice some interesting effects.*”)

Doubrovsky responded to Lejeune’s question with his autofictional work, *Fils*, and with a letter to Lejeune explaining his endeavor:

... j’ai voulu très profondément remplir cette « case » que votre analyse laissait vide, et c’est un véritable désir qui a soudain lié votre texte critique et ce que j’étais en train d’écrire, sinon à l’aveuglette, du moins dans une demi-obscurité...¹⁴

...I wanted very seriously to fill the space that your analysis left empty, and it is a true desire that suddenly linked your critical text to the one I was writing, if not blindly, at least in half-darkness...

Doubrovsky explains that his autofiction explores a relationship between the author, protagonist, and narrator that did not yet exist in literature. *Fils* is a text that produces what had previously been only a theoretical possibility.

However, as a critic, Doubrovsky participates in conversations that aim to classify autofiction, suggesting that for the genre to be legitimate or perhaps even comprehensible, literary criticism needs to explain it. Initially, his definition of the genre, “fiction, of events and facts strictly real,” presented its own paradoxical qualities. For this reason, this definition serves better as a description of Doubrovsky’s writing style than as a binding definition of autofiction. He stresses that autofiction exists “outside of the syntax of a novel, traditional or new,” and does not provide alternative requirements for autofiction, but instead notes some of the linguistic tools that writers

¹³ Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 31.

¹⁴ Letter from Serge Doubrovsky to Philippe Lejeune, 17 October 1977. Philippe Lejeune, *Moi Aussi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 63.

use to fictionalize the real facts of their lives. He also notes that autobiographers use certain codes to establish the autobiographical pact with their readers, which he will disregard.

As literary critics in France took a greater interest in autofiction as a potentially new genre, Doubrovsky participated in the debate surrounding its legitimacy. Over time, his definition has evolved and become more precise. In fact, Philippe Gasparini describes Doubrovsky's commentary on autofiction as a factor that helped to stabilize the genre. Referring to interviews and articles that Doubrovsky has written in the past decade, Gasparini writes, "ils permettent de connaître la définition désormais stabilisée, fixée : les critères, les formules, les anecdotes, les exemples y reviennent avec régularité, dans les mêmes termes."¹⁵ (*"They allow us to recognize the definition, which is becoming stable, fixed: the criteria, formulas, anecdotes, examples that regularly reappear, in the same terms."*) Furthermore, Gasparini summarizes the criteria that Doubrovsky articulates:

- 1- l'identité onomastique de l'auteur et du héros-narrateur ;
- 2- le sous-titre : « roman » ;
- 3- le primat du récit ;
- 4- la recherche d'une forme originale ;
- 5- une écriture visant la « verbalisation immédiate » ;
- 6- la reconfiguration du temps linéaire (par sélection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, brouillages...) ;
- 7- un large emploi du présent de narration ;
- 8- un engagement à ne relater que des « faits et événements strictements réels » ;
- 9- la pulsion de « se révéler dans sa vérité »
- 10- une stratégie d'emprise du lecteur.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gasparini, 202.

¹⁶ Ibid., 209.

- 1- *onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator;*
- 2- *subtitle: “novel”;*
- 3- *primary importance of the narrative;*
- 4- *pursuit of an original form;*
- 5- *writing that aims to “immediately articulate”;*
- 6- *reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation);*
- 7- *a significant use of the present tense;*
- 8- *an effort to only tell “strictly real facts and events”;*
- 9- *the urge to “reveal one’s self truly”;*
- 10- *a strategy that aims to require active engagement from the reader.*

Doubrovsky’s ten points do indeed describe much of autofictional writing. As I will discuss in Chapters Two and Three, both Guibert and Delaume encourage active reading (#10), manipulate linear time (#6), and call attention to narrative form (#4). As a description of similarities in autofictional writing, rather than as a prescriptive definition of the genre, this list is useful. However, considering the approach that Guibert, Delaume, and even, initially, Doubrovsky each take to literary genres and rules, this list seems out of place. Each of these authors disrupts literary tradition rather than subscribing to prescribed methods of writing.

Both Doubrovsky’s and Gasparini’s critical work to name and identify the genre of autofiction are interesting because they fail to pin it down in a succinct, comprehensive category. They encounter problems defining a genre, which, I suggest, actively resists categorization. For instance, Gasparini hesitates to define autofiction because “the texts that are published put certainties in question.” Ultimately, however, he notes this pitfall and, despite this indefinable quality, he provides a definition. Likewise, he describes the frustrations of literary critics like Lejeune and suggests that in response, the genre needs an understood pact.

As a result, after noticing these difficulties, I have chosen to not try to create my own definition of autofiction or of an autofictional pact. My analysis focuses instead on these absences as defining qualities of autofictional writing, which cannot be neatly defined because it questions the definitions of genres. It cannot have an understood pact between the reader and the writer because it calls attention to the way that pacts encourage passive reading. Gasparini's approach searches for the answers to the questions that autofiction poses; mine looks at the questions themselves. In my next two chapters I explore how and why these texts make their readers uncomfortable. Delaume and Guibert each unsettle the reader's expectations; rather than find a way to make the reader more comfortable, I want to know how they do this, and to what end. I conclude that they take conventional ideas of genre, pacts, syntax, time, and ideology, and demand that the reader question these boundaries. They resist definition because rigidly sorting types of writing into categories limits creativity.

Chapter 2:

Hervé Guibert

Hervé Guibert was a prolific French author, journalist, and photographer who died of AIDS in 1991 at the age of 36.¹⁷ His works are controversial and provocative accounts of life that move rapidly from fact to fiction, from ruthless portrayals of his friends to appeals for art and love, and from self-absorption to insightful social analysis. In this chapter, I focus on the relationship between truth and narrative in his autobiographically-charged fictions, suggesting that his writing style reveals key concepts to understanding his larger social critiques. According to his texts, creative writing is an exchange between fiction and life; each influences the other. His characters are drawn from people he knows and from his own experiences, and his writing, in turn, influences the way that he understands the world.

Guibert reflected on the interaction between writing and life in an interview with

Le Nouvel Observateur:

Il y a l'expérience de l'écriture, et c'est le moment où je redeviens Hervé Guibert comme personnage de mes livres. J'ai souvent l'impression de mener une double vie. Quand des gens me demandent dans la rue: « Vous êtes Hervé Guibert », j'ai envie de répondre: « Non, je ne le suis pas en ce moment. » Parce qu'à ce moment-là je ne suis pas dans une vague d'impudeur, dans cet étrange rapport qu'il y a entre l'expérience et l'écriture.¹⁸

¹⁷ Evene.fr, "Hervé Guibert: Ecrivain Et Journaliste Français"
<http://www.evene.fr/celebre/biographie/herve-guibert-16872.php> (accessed 3/29 2011).

¹⁸ Didier Eribon, "'Hervé Guibert Et Son Double'", [herveguibert.net](http://www.herveguibert.net)
<http://www.herveguibert.net/index.php?2006/05/30/41-herve-guibert-et-son-double>
(accessed 3/9 2011).

There is an experience of writing, and it's the moment when I become Hervé Guibert again, as a fictional character in my books. I often have the impression that I lead a double life. When people ask me in the street: "You are Hervé Guibert," I often want to respond: "No, I am not him at the moment." Because at that moment, I am not in a wave of shamelessness, in that strange relationship between experience and writing.

Guibert describes his writing as a raw craft that can expose certain truths about life. He refers specifically to his own vulnerability as he makes himself "shameless" through fiction. Guibert does not describe himself as an autofictionalist, but he is also neither a fiction writer nor an autobiographer; rather, he is an artist who uses words to reflect the world, and whose reality is in turn transformed by his craft.

In his writing, Guibert explores linguistic rules and the consequences of breaking them; he also notes certain limits of creative writing, focusing particularly on the importance of comprehensibility in narrative and the constraints that this imposes. He features, for example, a character named Kipa, who reveals that tone and connotation can influence the audience's reception of a narrative as profoundly as the explicit words in the text. Similarly, Guibert reflected on the consequences of style in relation to fiction and non-fiction:

Parfois, là où on croit à la fantasmagorie, c'est du documentaire et là où on peut croire à du documentaire, c'est une pure affabulation que la vérité démentirait. Ça c'est un jeu qui m'intéresse plus que jamais dans ce que je fais, ces moments d'équilibre ou de déséquilibre entre la vérité et le mensonge.¹⁹

Sometimes, where one thinks it is phantasmagoria, it is documentary and where one could imagine it is documentary, it is a piece of pure fabrication belied potentially by the truth. In what I do this is a game

¹⁹ Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 126.

that interests me more than ever, these moments of equilibrium or disequilibrium between truth and falsehood.

Guibert notes that different styles, such as the style of a fantasy or of a documentary, influence the reception of a text, independent of its content. In many of his works, Guibert self-consciously explores the effects of distorting conventional styles, as well as distorting the truth.

Guibert's texts suggest that writers can freely cross boundaries between truth and fiction, but that their narratives must nevertheless be believable. When asked which of his books he preferred, Guibert responded, "Je préfère celui que les gens aimeront le plus. Celui qui sera le plus vendu. Parce que, pour moi, écrire, c'est une tentative de communication."²⁰ ("My favorite is the one that people will like the most. The bestseller. Because, for me, writing is an attempt to communicate.") As he strives for a form of writing that transforms rules and expectations, Guibert recognizes that, to be powerful, writing must be legible, on the levels of both language and logic. He stresses the importance of the exchange between the reader and the writer of a book; for a message to have an impact, it must be received and understood by an audience.

In the following chapter, I discuss three books by Guibert: *Mes Parents* (My Parents, 1986), *Des Aveugles* (The Blind, 1985), and *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (To the friend who did not save my life, 1990). In each of these works, Guibert explores the possibilities of creative writing by challenging the boundaries of defined genres. He draws attention to style and form, and defines writing as a craft rather than a true portrayal of life. He distances his writing from the limits of either an

²⁰ Eribon.

autobiographical or a fictional pact with its reader, as he challenges expectations and defies stereotypes. At the same time, he also notes the rules that writers must acknowledge if they intend to create a comprehensible work; unlike Doubrovsky, he does not claim to write completely “outside of the syntax of the novel,” but instead respects some of its structural rules and transforms others.

I begin my critique with an analysis of Guibert’s style in his novel *Mes Parents*. In this first section, I establish several questions that will be important throughout my critique, namely: according to Guibert, what freedom do writers have, and how does such liberty affect his narrative voice? Then, through analyses of *Des Aveugles* and *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*, I pursue the implications of Guibert’s experimental style as he takes on controversial subjects, noticing the way that he expands his critique of literature to broader social themes. I suggest that Guibert aims to unsettle the reader’s assumptions not only about literature but also about blind people, diseased people, and homosexuals. He uses narrative to challenge conventions in both academic and social spheres.

Mes Parents (My Parents²¹)

Mes Parents highlights the productive nature of writing by exploring the impact of style on the reception of a text. Guibert contrasts writing with other art forms, such as theater and photography, highlighting the particular characteristics of writing’s medium: language. He describes his experiences as an actor and as a photographer, and

²¹ Passages in this section were drawn from *My Parents*, the translation of *Mes Parents* by Liz Heron.

comments on the ways in which these art forms influenced him. Ultimately, however, he notes limits of both the theater and the visual arts that do not bind writers. Specifically, while both actors and photographers are limited by time and space, writers can move across temporal boundaries, restructure settings and chronology, and re-imagine past moments that otherwise would exist only in memory. Writers, Guibert suggests, not only represent life but also recreate it.

Mes Parents tells the story of Hervé Guibert, an adult who hears strange news of his family and who reflects upon his past. By recounting his memories, Guibert explores his development as an artist, his attraction to writing, and his problematic relationships with his parents. Stylistically, he engages the reader as he narrates moments from his childhood in the present tense, giving the scenes a sense of immediacy and suggesting that they have relevance for the narrator's adult life. In addition to being a compelling narrative voice, this style also invites the reader to acknowledge the fictitious nature of autobiographical writing since Guibert creates the illusion of occupying two different spaces at once.

The issue of tenses is particularly interesting here, in a book written originally in French but translated to English. Both *Mes Parents* and its translation use forms of the present to recount the story; however, in French, the *présent historique* is a common linguistic tool. In English, since stories are more often told in the past tense, the consequences of the narrative voice are perhaps more obvious and feel more unsettling to the reader. Nonetheless, in both languages, the immediacy of the discourse pulls the reader into the moment of the story, creating the effect that the narrator is experiencing and recounting the events simultaneously.

However, as Guibert narrates these stories, he sometimes chooses to distance himself, critically analyzing his own behavior. For instance, describing the pain that he felt at the betrayal of a boyfriend, he writes, “I have no way of fighting back and no hatred; I suffer but don’t yet recognize jealousy.”²² Guibert’s assertion that he did “not yet recognize jealousy” reminds the reader that the narrator represents an older, wiser version of “Hervé Guibert.” The narrator has an emotional vocabulary that the protagonist, his younger self, has not yet learned. Ultimately, this alternation between immediacy and distance allows the reader to access the narrator’s childhood memories in a similar way as Guibert’s adult self does. He places us in the position of a self-reflective man, reliving moments of his childhood, particularly those agonizing moments that have influenced his identity as an adult.

Guibert is also deliberate and reflective about his medium. To illustrate the productive nature of writing, he places it in contrast with theater and then with photography. At first, Guibert describes the influential role that theater played in his life, suggesting that his time on stage had real consequences for his life after acting. For example, he had a particularly significant experience with a fellow actor, who consequently became his first love. He suggests that, “a real love was conjured and given body in the scene whose words we can no longer speak again; separated from our characters, who were ourselves, we have to invent our own lines.”²³ Guibert suggests that when the two boys embodied fictional characters, their staged interactions inspired genuine emotion in their “true” characters, outside of the theater. He stresses, “we were ourselves” as characters, but also acknowledges the different behavior that interacting

²² Hervé Guibert, *My Parents*, trans., Liz Heron (London: Serpent's Tale, 1993), 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 70; *ibid*; *ibid*; *ibid*.

off-stage required of them. However, though Guibert highlights the close ties between art and life, he also recognizes that the theater exists only within a particular space and time. As an actor, he was limited to the words provided to him by a script, and by the time allotted to each particular play. Once the curtain falls, the lines become “words [he] can no longer speak again.” Therefore, while theater profoundly influences reality, it is only immediately creative within the constraints of time and space.

Similarly, Guibert describes photography as an art form that allows him to capture moments of life but does not grant him full artistic liberty. He discusses the inspirational power of photography as well as its creative limits as he reflects upon a period when he was apart from his family:

The only memory I can have of those three years of family spent without me is through the sixteen millimeter black and white films my father shot with his Uncle Raoul’s Paillard camera, which I still have. My sister has a slightly hooked nose and with her tomboyish ways it isn’t long before she splits her forehead on a stone balustrade; she will always have that vertical scar, right between her eyebrows, which she will hide with her fringe.²⁴

While looking at pictures taken in his absence, the narrator recalls personality traits of his sister and her behavior at a moment after “those three years.” His imagination, inspired by the photograph but not limited to its depicted scene, allows him to roam through moments in time, not constrained by common conceptions of chronology.

However, while photography invites creativity from the viewer, it cannot reproduce an image from a moment in the past. As Guibert learns when he develops a blank roll of film, a camera can only capture a scene as it happens. He can frame a shot

²⁴ Ibid., 9.

that evokes certain emotions, but he cannot use the medium to create a scene that does not exist. For example, Guibert describes a touching moment with his mother, which escapes his film:

I get rid of all the fuss of her clothes and hairdo, wet her hair under the tap, have her put on a simple slip and tell my father to leave us alone. She's sitting in the light, I circle around her, and it's a moment of love and completeness that stops time as if we were waltzing together in some great ballroom flooded with brightness. When my father comes back we set ourselves up in the bathroom to develop the film; we're dumbfounded when we see that it's blank from end to end, that it hadn't caught properly in the camera. The light has gone, my mother has got dressed again and we know that in any case we can never replay this episode, that it has already assumed the helpless weight of regret. And that now this ghostly image strains towards something other than the image: towards narration.²⁵

As the narrator describes, the photographer has control over certain elements of the photo shoot, such as the subject's hair, her wardrobe, the lighting, and the audience. However, even though the process gives the illusion of "love and completeness that stops time," when his father re-enters the room, the moment passes and the image is lost. Guibert cannot authentically recreate the scene, since the second roll of film would inevitably be a shadow of the first moment, laden with the "helpless weight of regret." Rather than the raw, emotionally loaded setting, he would photograph an artificially produced scenario that pointed to a memory.

However, while images are bound to certain moments in time, narration, in contrast, can escape the linearity of past, present and future.²⁶ Theater and photography

²⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶ Guibert develops this theme in some of his other works as well. For instance, in *L'Image Fantôme*, Guibert describes photographs through writing, indicating on the back cover that "l'écriture aussi est une production d'images" ("*Writing is also a*

inspire real emotions and have real consequences for people, but actors are limited by their scripts and stages, and photographers by the moment that they capture (or fail to capture, in the scene that Guibert describes). Writing, in contrast, produces its own setting and structure. Through narration, the reader can access the psychology of both a 29-year-old narrator and a small boy, without breaking logical laws of temporality or geography. The writer can re-imagine a scene that a photograph failed to capture and document a fragile atmosphere that would otherwise be lost in time. By contrasting writing to theater and photography, Guibert stresses that writing produces something new, and explores the ways in which narrative can reconstruct conventional notions of linear time and space.

In some of his other works, including *Des Aveugles* and *À l'ami*, Guibert recognizes that writing, like theater and photography, also has certain limits. Nevertheless, *Mes Parents* provides an exciting view of language as an open medium, which can transform according to the imagination of the writer and the risks he is willing to take with conventional discourses, temporal structures, and non-fiction.

Des Aveugles (The Blind)

Guibert explains on the back cover of *Des Aveugles* that the book emerged from research that he conducted for an article written for *Le Monde* in 1983.²⁷ He also describes the book, which Gallimard published with the subtitle “novel,” as a “récit

production of images”). Writing produces in a way that photography cannot, and vice-versa; both art forms are limited by their media in different ways.

²⁷ Boulé, 125.

d'épouvante"²⁸ (*"horror story"*). However, like many of his works, the book eludes generic categorization. Guibert himself reflected that "there are in short two intermingled stories: that of the blind people... and then, the one that I myself conduct with the narrative."²⁹ Loaded with intertextuality, autobiographical references, and dark social critiques, *Des Aveugles* illustrates Guibert's ability to move between genres and to make his writing socially poignant.

Like *Mes Parents*, *Des Aveugles* features an unusual narrative perspective that allows Guibert to investigate the degree of control an author has in creating a fictitious world. However, while *Mes Parents* focuses on the freedom of fiction, characters in *Des Aveugles* more often find themselves bound by requirements of language and structure than free to explore its creative possibilities. In *Des Aveugles*, Guibert creates a world riddled with deception; nearly every character either lies or falls victim to a trick. In my analysis of *Des Aveugles*, I explore which characters are deceived, which ones do the deceiving, and, finally, how the author and the reader both participate in a similarly insincere rapport. Ultimately I suggest that Guibert relates the handicap of blindness to the creative limits of fiction that restrict both the author and the reader.

Set in *l'Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles* (National Institute for Blind Youth), *Des Aveugles* develops a story of interpersonal relationships at a school for the blind. The main plot features three characters, Robert and Josette (a married couple), and Taillegueur (Josette's lover), who are involved in a love story, a murder plot, and a pedophilic scandal. Additionally, Guibert develops a character named Kipa who pretends to be a sighted person, adding more deception and insincerity to the

²⁸ Hervé Guibert, *Des Aveugles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985). Back cover Back cover.

²⁹ Boulé, 132.

community. The narrator also enters the plot as “Hervé Guibert,” a volunteer reader at the institute who attempts to deceive his listeners. Even the reader is involved in a sort of ruse, a relationship with the author in which we sacrifice truth for a compelling story. I suggest that Guibert establishes the vulnerability of the duped through Josette, illustrates how to successfully lie through Kipa, and then relates the two characters to the writer and reader of fiction through the behavior and self-reflection of the narrator.

Initially, the characters, particularly Josette and sometimes Robert, seem absurd because although they cannot see, they have the same reactions and priorities as sighted people. Early in the book, after describing Josette and Robert as children, the narrator interjects, “Par quelles travers ces enfants mystérieux étaient-ils devenus, en apparence, d’aussi triviaux adultes?”³⁰ (“*Through what failing did these mysterious children become such apparently trivial adults?*”) As Josette matures, she becomes ashamed of her naked body. Her reaction mimics the coming of age of a person who can see, but her blindness makes her embarrassment seem irrational. For instance, she says, crying, “sans mon manteau je me sens comme une chienne chauve du Mexique, pelée, galeuse, mouchetée, rose et blanche, albinos, une sale bête quoi.”³¹ (“*Without my jacket I feel like a bald Mexican dog, hairless, mangy, spotty, pink and white, albino, a dirty beast.*”) Josette’s comparison of her body to a bald, mangy animal is strange, since she can see neither the pink and white skin of a naked dog nor her own skin. She assigns value based on a sense that she cannot experience, according to social norms that are perhaps themselves absurd and irrational. Her bizarre reaction highlights the profound influence that social pressures have on individuals’ priorities.

³⁰ Guibert, *Des Aveugles*, 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

Another character, Kipa, is blind but claims to be able to see. He arrives at the Institute and orchestrates an intricate plot of deception, offering to act as a guide for the others and to describe their surroundings. He acts as an “informant” for the students, allowing them to imagine the world that is otherwise hidden from their view. He creates a credible narrative using the descriptions of rooms and hallways that his listeners expect to hear. As a consequence, although he has no actual authority to act in this role, his narrative voice makes him a convincing and seemingly authentic source of information. Interestingly, while this behavior casts Kipa as a subversive character, his actions resemble those of a fiction writer.

Kipa provides us with an opportunity to discuss the methods that writers use to create fictional worlds because his character illustrates the influential nature of language, tone, and trope. In one scene in particular, when Kipa “reads” a letter from Josette’s mother, he illustrates the process of crafting a narrative. The narrator describes Kipa’s need to “inventer de nouveaux incidents, des maladies bénignes, mais il devait aussi ne pas oublier de ne jamais s’écarter d’une certaine monotonie provinciale, et d’user des mêmes répétitions dans les formules d’affection.”³² (“*invent new incidents, mild illnesses, but he also could not forget to never stray from a certain provincial monotony, and to use the same repetitions in formulas of affection.*”) To make his narrative believable, Kipa incorporates elements of the reality that is familiar to Josette, or one that he suspects will be familiar to her, including, for instance, her mother’s “provincial tone.” As he spins his tale, Kipa creates a set of codes that Josette ultimately associates with her home, even though they originate in Kipa’s imagination.

³² Ibid., 49.

Then, his use of repetition makes her comfortable with the codes, or “formulas of affection.” Furthermore, as he refers to his previous stories the way that writers use intertextual references, he constructs his own library, and consequentially creates an illusion of authenticity as a narrator. He develops a story featuring Josette’s mother as a protagonist; she becomes a character in his fiction. His storytelling parallels the process of a creative writer, who must choose particular language and codes to convey a comprehensible message to the reader. He also parallels Guibert in particular, as he transforms real people into fictional characters through storytelling.

The narrator of *Des Aveugles*, the fictionalized “Hervé Guibert,” raises similar themes of self-reflective storytelling and deception. Guibert enters the Institute as a volunteer reader and immediately establishes his intention to test the limits of his position as a reader, as a sighted person among the blind, and as a writer. Referring to his audience, he writes, “je me plains d’abord qu’ils ne soient pas des aveugles de naissance, ils n’avaient perdu la vue que quatre ans plus tôt et je sentais qu’il serait plus difficile de les tromper [...] ils voulaient que je leur lise des articles de journaux, mais je ne lisais aucun journal.”³³ (*First, I complained that they were not blind from birth, they had only lost their vision four years earlier and I sensed that it would be more difficult to deceive them [...] They wanted me to read articles from the newspaper to them but I was not reading the newspaper.*) The narrator suggests that those people who have seen the world would be harder to deceive, because they are already familiar with the reality that Guibert will describe to them. Additionally, his listeners ask for readings from newspapers, limiting his creativity further because his audience will expect a

³³ Ibid., 66.

journalistic tone and the content of a news story. Therefore, while Guibert enjoys certain liberties as he creates a fictional world, he still must work with to the expectations of his audience and create a faithful representation of a newspaper if he hopes to establish a credible narrative voice.

Guibert's sessions as a reader differ from his process as a writer, however, since the Institute members' perceptions are limited to sound, smell, touch, and taste. In response, he uses this opportunity to further explore the way that narrative is received in various mediums, by changing the sound of his voice or the smell of his breath to alter his listeners' perception of the narrative he delivers. For example, he describes, "J'avais changé ma tactique, je m'asséchais maintenant la bouche avec du gros sel pour torturer la lecture."³⁴ ("I was changing my tactic, now drying out my mouth with rough salt to torture the reading.") Here, Guibert experiments with form. Visually, a writer can manipulate the structure of a text by maneuvering its lines, paragraphs, and chapters. Aloud, Guibert changes the sound of his voice, which allows him to modify his character by controlling the way that his listeners experience him.

The parallels between Kipa and the narrator are relevant to our own relationship to the text as readers. By reading fiction, we have participated in what Jean-Pierre Boulé names the "pacte du leurre"³⁵ (*pact of delusion*), willfully believing in a fictitious world and often forgetting the illusion.³⁶ Guibert illustrates this idea when Josette and Taillegueur exit the Institute. She asks a young man to describe Taillegueur's face to her, and the young man responds:

³⁴ Ibid., 67.

³⁵ Boulé, 12.

³⁶ Boulé writes that in Guibert's texts in particular, the author "does not seek to tell the truth and check places and dates, but rather to *disguise* them" (11).

Moche comme un fruit écrasé, dit le jeune homme, son visage est à faire peur, vous ne l'avez donc jamais touché ? [...] Mais ce visage n'est pas froid, dit le jeune homme, il brûle au contraire, et il palpite, on dirait plutôt un organe qu'un visage, un cœur...³⁷

Ugly as a crushed fruit, said the young man, his face is frightening, have you never touched it? [...] But the face is not cold, said the young man, in fact it burns, and it throbs, more like an organ than a face, a heart...

This moment is the first time that Josette has heard a description of Taillegueur's face; it is also the first time that we have read one. By omitting a specific description of Taillegueur's face until this point, Guibert reveals that the reader builds an image of the described world when reading fiction. Yes, each of us may be able to see in real life; however, we cannot see Josette's world any better than she can. If we feel familiar with an image of the Institute or with the characters in the story, those images are *creations*, produced through language and imagination, rather than observations.

Upon its release, *Des Aveugles's* audience included both sighted readers and blind listeners. Nevertheless, the author makes no attempt to be politically correct. Rather, his blind characters prove to be just as greedy, lustful, and disingenuous as some non-handicapped characters in his other works. Guibert reflects, "Je ne me suis pas privé, donc, de faire commettre par mes aveugles toutes sortes de vilenies: ils se trompent, se volent et se tuent."³⁸ ("*I made no bones about making my blind people commit all kinds of wickedness: they betray, rob and kill each other.*") Because Guibert involves the reader in the text by exploring the limits of human perception and by drawing a parallel between the sighted reader and the blind characters, *Des Aveugles's*

³⁷ Guibert, *Des Aveugles*, 106.

³⁸ Boulé, 130-131.

brutality is not merely a portrayal of blind people's imperfection. Rather, his characters, with all of their faults, are familiar and human. They also serve as a model for a reflection on the interaction between writers and readers of fiction.

Earlier, I cited Guibert's reference to the book's two plot lines, one among the blind people, and one between himself and the narrative. I suggest that both stories involve acts of deception, or of coded fictionalizations. Within the story, among other ruses, Kipa deceives Josette using linguistic conventions, and the narrator deceives his blind listeners using alterations in sound. Similarly, the reader becomes the target of Guibert's fictionalization of the Institute, communicated through mutually recognized linguistic signals. The similarities of these fiction-based relationships connect the sighted and the blind. Both groups of people experience limited perception of the world, and both can be vulnerable to, or even be conspirators in, their own deception.

A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie (To the friend that did not save my life)

À L'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie is a first person account of the end of Hervé Guibert's life. In the novel, Guibert presents himself as the narrator and the protagonist, diagnosed with and dying from AIDS, a disease that was at the time mysterious and highly stigmatized. The novel addresses sensitive issues of sexual identity, personal infection, and the contamination of the homosexual community. The discourse resembles *Mes Parents*, since we receive the story through the limited

perspective of the narrator's individual point of view. This textual design allows us to access the psychology of a patient diagnosed with a fatal illness, making the book an intimate account of one character's acceptance of his mortality. And yet, through the viewpoint of a particular character, we are ultimately given an opportunity to glimpse the struggle of a larger population facing similar circumstances.

À l'ami, like *Mes Parents* and *Des Aveugles*, focuses on the ways in which human knowledge is limited, in this instance suggesting that ignorance breeds fear in the gay community. Guibert explores the idea that verbal recognition of a concept (of AIDS in particular, but also of life and of death) makes an abstract notion suddenly real. While the narrator consistently supports this assertion that words can create reality, the text ultimately suggests that while fiction does indeed influence reality, writers have a limited ability to control the real world. Ultimately, ignorance does not shield a diseased person from illness, and Guibert's life does not end when the narrative does.

Since the narrator shares the name of the author, the text invites the reader to consider the similarities between Guibert's life and the content of the book. However, the author insists that the book is a work of fiction:

Ce livre n'est pas un testament, mais c'est un livre qui donne des clés pour comprendre ce qu'il y avait dans tous les autres livres et que parfois je ne comprenais pas moi-même. Le sida m'a permis de radicaliser un peu plus encore certains systèmes de narration, de rapport à la vérité, de mise en jeu de moi-même au-delà même de ce que je pensais possible. Je parle de la vérité dans ce qu'elle peut avoir de déformé par le travail de l'écriture. C'est pour cela que je tiens au mot roman. Mes modèles existent, mais ce sont des personnages. Je tiens à la vérité dans la mesure où elle permet de greffer des particules de fiction comme des collages de pellicule, avec l'idée que ce soit le plus

transparent possible. Mais il y a aussi des grands ressorts de mensonge dans ce livre.³⁹

This book is not a testament, but it is a book that provides clues to understand what's in all of the other books, which I sometimes did not understand myself. AIDS allowed me to radicalize certain systems of narration a bit further, in relation to truth, to the placing of myself in the fiction even further than what I had thought possible. I speak of truth in terms of how it can be deformed by the writing process. That is why I held on to the title of novel. My models exist, but these are characters. I hold on to the truth to the extent that it allows me to graft particles of fiction like montages of film, with the intention to make it as transparent as possible. But there are also large resorts to lies in the book.

Guibert explains that he uses the “real facts” of his life but integrates elements of fiction into his work. Like Doubrovsky, he claims that writing “deforms” reality. Additionally, he articulates a project to clarify reality through fiction, presenting a narrative both “transparent” and “radical.”⁴⁰ In the following section, I will explore the consequences of Guibert’s narrative voice, concentrating specifically on the role of AIDS in the narrative. Ultimately, Guibert cannot escape AIDS through writing; he finds a limit on his ability to control reality through fiction as he struggles with his infection.

The narrator in *A L’ami* plays a prominent role in the novel, resembling the narrator of *Mes Parents* as we receive the story entirely through the perspective of Guibert. As a consequence, we do not have access to other characters’ thoughts, and must interpret their actions through the filter of the narrator’s reactions to them. In the

³⁹ Antoine de Gaudemar, "La Vie Sida," *Libération* 1990.

⁴⁰ This position led to a controversial reception of *À l’ami*, since several of Guibert’s characters resemble his famous friends, and he portrays parts of their lives that would otherwise remain private. Specifically, he develops a character named Muzil who is widely recognized as a thinly veiled portrait of Michel Foucault. Guibert’s description of Muzil’s death from AIDS contradicted the public explanation of Foucault’s diagnosis with cancer. However, Guibert defends a certain freedom to choose his subjects by explaining that his works are fictitious.

book, the narrator's relationships with his friends and with AIDS transform over time. He witnesses the death of a close friend, Muzil; he isolates himself from the infected community and then embraces his infection as at least consistent and definitive; he finds hope in an experimental drug, but then tragically realizes that it is ineffective and accepts that he has little time left to live. As readers, we observe this progression through the eyes of one man among many individuals in Guibert's circle of friends that have been diagnosed with AIDS. The point of view allows us initially to connect with a personal story and then later to broaden that understanding to a more expansive group of people infected by the same disease.

Guibert immediately establishes his point of view when he reflects upon his diagnosis, writing, "J'ai eu le sida pendant trois mois. Plus exactement, j'ai cru pendant trois mois que j'étais condamné par cette maladie mortelle qu'on appelle le sida."⁴¹ ("*I have had AIDS for three months. More precisely, I have believed for three months that I was condemned by this fatal illness that we call AIDS.*") Guibert distinguishes between having AIDS and believing that he has AIDS, acknowledging that he was probably infected before he was aware of his condition. With hindsight, he analyzes his delayed psychological recognition of his sickness, indicating that he initially chose to ignore the disease. He therefore deals here with a theme that he addresses in both *Des Aveugles* and *Mes Parents*: we each have a limited ability to understand the complexity of the world. Ignorance, because of limited sense perception (*Des Aveugles*), youth (*Mes Parents*), or simple unawareness (*À l'ami*), constrains characters' abilities to fully comprehend reality. Furthermore, by establishing the ignorance of his characters and

⁴¹ Hervé Guibert, *À l'ami Qui Ne M'a Pas Sauvé La Vie* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 1.

then limiting the reader's omniscience to the point of view of a single character, Guibert reminds us that we, too, have restricted perceptions.

In *À l'ami*, the reader receives only the information that Guibert reveals to us through his narrator. Meanwhile, the narrator exists in a similarly limited world, where reality is interpreted by his own perception of the truth. He writes, "dire qu'on était malade ne faisait qu'accréditer la maladie, elle devenait réelle tout à coup, sans appel, et semblait tirer sa puissance et ses forces destructrices du crédit qu'on lui accordait."⁴² (*"Saying that one was ill only validated the illness, it suddenly became real, without warning, and seemed to derive its strength and destructive force from the credit that one gave it."*) Furthermore, he notes, "tout le monde se ment toujours à propos de la maladie."⁴³ (*"Everyone lies to himself all the time about the disease."*) The narrator first suggests that verbal recognition of the disease gives it strength, highlighting the connection between words and actions, and justifying his willful ignorance of his status as HIV-positive. However, the second quotation indicates that Guibert, like many other individuals, "lies to himself all the time about the disease"; he invites us to question his earlier argument for not acknowledging AIDS as perhaps a rationalization driven by fear. He also establishes himself as an unreliable, even self-deceiving, narrator.

Our skepticism toward the narrator mirrors the narrator's caution with other men in his community. Because "everyone lies to himself," anyone could be infected, and as a result, everyone is a threat. Even those men who do not think that they are infected could pass on AIDS; the community's self-deception, and the rationalization that the disease "derive[s] its strength and destructive force from the credit that one

⁴² Ibid., 175.

⁴³ Ibid., 185.

gives it” result in constant distrust and fear. For instance, Guibert describes his friend Muzil’s refusal to acknowledge that he had AIDS:

On ignorait encore si Muzil avait été conscient ou inconscient de la nature de la maladie qui l’avait tué. Son assistant m’assura qu’il avait été en tout cas conscient du caractère irréversible de cette maladie.⁴⁴

We still did not know whether Muzil had been aware or unaware of the nature of the illness that killed him. His assistant assured me that he had at least been conscious of the irreversibility of the disease.

The narrator expresses doubt about Muzil’s awareness of the nature of his illness, but not about whether Muzil was in fact infected with AIDS. Muzil recognized that he had a fatal disease; however, if he denied the fact that he had contracted a sexually transmitted disease, by implication he also denied the fact that he could pass on the infection. As a result, Muzil becomes a threat to his sexual partners, even if, and perhaps especially if, he is oblivious to the danger.

Guibert also describes his own recognition that he and his lover, Jules, have both contracted AIDS. The realization has consequences not only for Guibert and Jules, but also for Jules’s children and his wife, Berthe. Not wanting to confront his wife or acknowledge that she is probably also infected, Jules suggests that she should remain ignorant of the situation:

Jules me dit au téléphone qu’il avait bien réfléchi, et que faire faire le test à Berthe serait un suicide, qu’il fallait par tous les moyens, lui et moi, l’empêcher de faire ce test ; en évoquant le destin soudain

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31.

affreusement soudé de ses deux enfants, de Berthe, lui et moi, il nous surnomma le Club des 5...⁴⁵

Jules told me on the telephone that he had thought about it, and that to make Berthe take the test would be suicide, and so the two of us must stop her from taking the test; evoking the suddenly horribly fused fate of his two children, of Berthe, him and me, he named us the club of 5...

Here, Guibert and Jules deliberately deceive. They protect themselves at the cost of spreading AIDS, and their actions indicate that silence can be as powerful and as harmful as verbally recognizing the disease. Guibert reflects, “Je me demandai si nous n’étions pas devenus, Jules et moi, un couple d’assassins sauvages, sans foi ni loi.”⁴⁶ (“*I wondered if Jules and I had become a couple of savage assassins, with neither faith nor law.*”) Guibert’s use of the word “assassins” is particularly poignant; his behavior is deadly.

Guibert further explores the ways in which the disease influences his life and his writing, reflecting upon the creation of the novel. As he notes, “Il fallait que le Malheur nous tombe dessus. Il le fallait, quelle horreur, pour que mon livre voie le jour.”⁴⁷ (“*It was necessary for tragedy to fall upon us. It was necessary, how horrible, so that my book would see the light of day.*”) AIDS gives Guibert a reason to write and also gives us a reason to read. In the novel, Guibert first situates himself as a writer reflecting on his illness, on December 26th, 1988, in Rome. He then moves through the death of a close friend, to his own diagnosis, and then to the period immediately before his death. The disease determines every twist of the plot, and finally necessitates a conclusion when the author can no longer write.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 237.

Although it ultimately ends his writing career along with his life, AIDS also allows Guibert to write, by giving him a subject matter. He highlights the paradoxical dynamic between his writing and his illness, reflecting, “le livre lutte avec la fatigue qui se crée de la lutte du corps contre les assauts du virus.”⁴⁸ (*“The book fights against the fatigue that emerges from the struggle between the body and the assaults of the virus.”*) Writing, inspired by the disease, allows Guibert to resist the fatigue created by that same disease. It also imposes its own timeline on his work: “c’était une maladie qui donnait le temps de mourir, et qui donnait à la mort le temps de vivre, le temps de découvrir le temps et de découvrir enfin la vie...”⁴⁹ (*“It was a disease that afforded time to die, and that gave time for death to live, time to discover time and ultimately to discover life.”*) Death is alive and powerful in Guibert’s writing, driving both the book’s creation and its ultimate end.

However, while fiction (his narrative) and reality (the disease) are evidently closely related for Guibert, ultimately AIDS is more potent than writing. He notes:

La mise en abîme de mon livre se referme sur moi. Je suis dans la merde. Jusqu’où souhaites-tu me voir sombrer? [...] Mes muscles ont fondu. J’ai enfin retrouvé mes jambes et mes bras d’enfant.⁵⁰

The *mise en abîme* of my book closes in upon me. I am in a shit hole. Up until what point do you wish to see me sink? [...] My muscles have melted. In the end I have rediscovered my childhood legs and arms.

Ultimately, the disease wins the “struggle between the body and the assaults of the virus.” It strips him of his strength, rendering him incapable of writing. The disease was

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 284.

present before he was aware of it and before he gave it credit, despite his claims that verbal acknowledgment dictates reality. It will also determine his death, regardless of his attempt to control life through writing.

AIDS also has a defining influence on our experience reading *À l'ami*. When the disease kills Guibert, the book ends for both the writer and the reader. Because *A L'ami* is told from a first person perspective, we cannot see past the death of the narrator / writer / protagonist. Therefore, through his self-conscious narrative voice, Guibert describes the struggle of one man to live and to write while infected by AIDS, constantly fighting his looming death. Additionally, his use of an unreliable narrator illustrates the distrustful atmosphere of a community infected with AIDS. If everyone constantly lies to himself and to each other, every person is a threat and every person is a potential victim. Ultimately, in the struggle between the creativity of writing and the destructive forces of AIDS, AIDS wins. As *À l'ami illustrates*, narrative can produce images, can clarify reality, and can alter our perceptions of real life; however, it has a limited ability to change the course of real events.

* * *

In his critique of Guibert's works, *Voices of the Self*, Jean Pierre Boulé writes, "it is precisely this *blurring* of the dividing line between the true and the false that the writer Hervé Guibert seeks to achieve."⁵¹ From a formal perspective, this "blurring" raises interesting questions about genre, the role of the narrator, and the distinction

⁵¹ Boulé, 194.

between fiction and non-fiction. Thematically, Guibert's works also scrutinize the lines between cultures, between demographic groups, and between the present and the past. Through both the structure of his writing and the subjects that he chooses to investigate, Guibert questions the givens. He challenges expectations about literature and about people, and demands that the reader participate in his critique.

Chapter 3:

Chloé Delaume

In the following chapter, I analyze several works by Chloé Delaume (b. 1973), a contemporary French writer who defines herself as an autofictionalist and who self-consciously explores the implications of creative writing through both her content and her style. I provide a critique of three of her works: *La Règle du Je* (The Rule of I⁵², 2010), *Le Cri du sablier* (The Cry of the Hourglass, 2001), and *J'habite dans la télévision* (I Live in the Television, 2006). In each, Delaume uses her own life as her subject and presents herself as both the protagonist and the narrator. I discuss *La Règle du Je* first because in this autofictional essay she explicitly and self-reflectively discusses her writing style, biography, and approach to autofiction. Then I analyze two of her autofictional novels. First, in *Le Cri du sablier*, she weaves a narrative about her childhood with one about her time in a mental institution. Next, in *J'habite dans la télévision*, she conducts an experiment and records the effects of perpetual television watching.

In each of these works, Delaume argues that creative writing empowers individuals to resist the influence of external forces that would otherwise undermine agency. Delaume uses the fictionalization of real people, most notably herself, to illustrate that individuals who *create* can cause change. She suggests that people can either engage in the world through active reading and writing, or have stories thrust

⁵² “La règle du je” is also a play on the phrase “la règle du jeu.” The phrase means “the rules of the game”; it was also the title of a film in 1939 by Jean Renoir.

upon them. Delaume illustrates this difference through her characterizations of herself in her books: in *Le Cri du Sablier*, she transforms from a secondary character in her father's plot into the protagonist and narrator of her own story. In *J'habite dans la télévision*, in contrast, she loses her agency as she submits to the *mémoire collective*⁵³ imposed upon her by the television. Moving from an individual analysis of her relationship with her parents to a cultural critique, she ultimately suggests that both in personal relationships and as an individual in society, self-definition requires constant resistance to other people's narratives. With this in mind, my analysis of Delaume's works will address three main questions: how is creativity empowering; in what form does creativity manifest itself in Delaume's writing; and what are the limits of her ability to express herself?

In my analysis, I find that Delaume's works, like Guibert's in the last chapter, explore the degree to which creative writers have freedom within their medium to challenge our expectations about literature. She uses unusual writing styles, subject matters, and perspectives to call attention to the reader's relationship with the text and urges us to be self-conscious about the ways that we approach narratives. However, she also must respect certain limits to her freedom of self-expression, including the codes that she uses to communicate and the cultural context in which she writes.

⁵³ "La mémoire collective" is a concept in French that refers to the collective cultural perceptions of the past, which are generally acknowledged and understood. It includes familiar stories, jokes, images, songs...etc. It has perhaps similar consequences as "ideology" in terms of a hegemonic set of ideas that influence culture, but I do not think that ideology quite expresses the same sentiment as *mémoire collective*, so I will continue to use the French phrase in the rest of this thesis.

La Règle du Je (The Rule of I)

La Règle du Je presents writing as a form of resistance, suggesting that agency comes from writing one's own life. The essay is simultaneously an auto-critique, a generic critique, and an introduction to Delaume as a "fictional" character. It serves as a key to understanding both Delaume's life and her view of autofiction, as it uses autofictional techniques to clarify some of her biographical information. As a result, *La Règle du Je* is also an example of autofiction in action: Delaume involves the reader in a self-conscious exercise in autofiction and asks that we notice our reactions to the text. The essay calls attention to the way that we read, the expectations that we bring to books, and the potential for creativity in fiction.

The first two chapters of *La Règle du Je* detail the events of Delaume's life. Chloé Delaume is the pseudonym of Nathalie Abdallah, born in 1973 to a French-Lebanese couple. At age seven, her family dropped the name "Abdallah," which "veut dire certainement pas français"⁵⁴ ("means certainly not French"), and adopted the name "Dalain," which "ne veut rien dire, et quelle que soit la langue."⁵⁵ ("Doesn't mean anything, regardless of the language") Three years later, she witnessed her father murder her mother and then immediately kill himself. Delaume describes this moment in several of her texts, posing it as a pivotal moment in her life and as profoundly influential for her self-definition. Eventually, she attended the University of Paris X, received a Master's degree, and found work after graduation as a bartender. She

⁵⁴ Chloé Delaume, *La Règle Du Je (Autofiction: Un Essai)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

describes this period of her life in a tone of despair, but notes that these years marked the beginning of her career as a writer:

Je ne sais quoi faire de ma vie, à part que je ne veux pas la perdre à la gagner. Je me prostitue dans un bar du XVI^e arrondissement, fauteuils club et épaisse moquette, service sur place ou à emporter. J'écris.⁵⁶

I don't know what to do with my life, other than that I don't want to lose it trying to make money. I prostitute myself in a bar in the sixteenth arrondissement, club seats and deep carpet, service here or to go⁵⁷. I write.

During this period, Delaume was writing her first novel, *Les Mouflettes d'Atropos*, released in 2000; it was the first work that she wrote under the name Chloé Delaume.

Delaume describes her transformation from Nathalie Dalain to Chloé Delaume as a pivotal moment in her life, even as a rebirth, and revisits the episode repeatedly in both *La Règle du Je* and *Le Cri du sablier*. She describes the moment when she began writing autofiction as the birth of her “fictional character,” Chloé Delaume, because at this moment she became the protagonist of her own story. She writes: “Rimbaud: *Je est un autre*. J'ai suicidé mon Je afin d'y arriver. Je suis devenue une autre.”⁵⁸ (“*Rimbaud: I is an other. I suicided my I so that I could arrive there. I became an other.*”) Citing French avant garde literary tradition through Arthur Rimbaud, Delaume establishes herself among a group of artists who resisted mainstream society. She explains that she rid her body of her former self and began to view herself as an “other,” a fictional character in a novel, which she claims ultimately allows her to be self-reliant.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁵⁷ “*service sur place ou à emporter*” refers to a restaurant menu that indicates that the customer can choose to eat in or take out. At the same time, in this context she is talking about prostitution... you do the math.

⁵⁸ Delaume, 13; *ibid.*

In other biographies, Delaume refers to her life before she began to write in more cryptic terms. For instance, the biography on her website reads:

Je m'appelle Chloé Delaume. Je suis un personnage de fiction. J'ai pour principal habitacle un corps féminin daté du 10 mars 1973. Conception franco-libanaise, le néant pour signe particulier. Les locaux étaient insalubres lorsque j'en ai pris possession.⁵⁹

My name is Chloé Delaume. I am a fictional character. I have as my principal habitat a female body that dates back to 10 March 1973. Franco-Lebanese conception, nothingness for my birthmark. The place was unfit for habitation when I came in.

Delaume's self-definition, somewhat like Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction, is paradoxical and invites interpretation. She describes her "principal habitat," which remained constant as she transformed from Nathalie Dalain to Chloé Delaume. However, she does not mention Nathalie Dalain, suggesting that she is a different, fictional, person now. She also notes, "the place was unfit for habitation when I came in," but does not specify whether she refers to her first birth in 1973, when she came into her body, or her second birth in 1998-1999, when she repossessed her body from her former self. This biography makes little sense unless taken alongside Delaume's novels; she does not describe herself using familiar terms, and is therefore incomprehensible until she illustrates exactly what she means by "I am a fictional character."

Delaume also includes an "Annex" at the end of *La Règle du Je* that chronicles her life as a fictional character. The biography starts in 1998-1999, at age 25. She describes her "birth" as a fictional character when she began writing, and then a period

⁵⁹ Chloé Delaume, "Bio" <http://www.chloedelaume.net/bio/index.php> (accessed 2/18/2011 2011).

of “enfance”⁶⁰ (“*childhood*”) in 2001, as she began to experiment with autofiction, becoming familiar with herself as a fictional character and with her writing style. Furthermore, she explores the consequences of her “suicide,” wondering, “le Je réel et le Je fictif sont-ils capables de cohabiter?”⁶¹ (“*Are the real I and the fictitious I capable of living together?*”) Finally, she describes her “Je” as a “Je élastique”⁶² (“*elastic I*”), which she can manipulate, transform, and, most importantly, control through the medium of autofiction.

However, these two alternative autobiographies that Delaume presents point to a limit of creative writing that she does not explicitly address. While Delaume claims to have “suicided her I,” reinventing her character from Nathalie Dalain to Chloé Delaume, her biographies are still tied to her previous self. Although she claims to have been reborn, her “principle habitat” has endured through both stages of her life; these two periods are not independent in the way that her fiction suggests, and her efforts to rewrite her life cannot rid her of her past, despite her assertion that her life began in 1998-1999.

In addition to her reflection on her own life and her relationship to writing, Delaume includes a discussion on the identity of autofiction as a genre and the relationship that works of autofiction establish between the writer and the reader. In the essay, she proposes an autofictional pact that contrasts Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical one. In the traditional autobiographical pact, she explains, the author is sincere and the audience sympathetic; in autofiction, the pact changes because the

⁶⁰ Delaume, *La Règle Du Je (Autofiction: Un Essai)*, 84.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 93.

author no longer claims to write truthfully. Consequentially, an autofictionalist cannot be sincere in the same way as an autobiographer. Delaume writes:

L'autofiction implique un pacte extrêmement particulier entre l'auteur et le lecteur. L'auteur ne s'engage qu'à une chose : lui mentir au plus juste. Lui transmettre par le ressenti, *concrètement*, sa propre expérience, « hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau ». Du vrai, du faux, de la parole. La sienne et celle du monde. Cette dernière par nature se déploie cacophonique.⁶³

Autofiction involves an extremely peculiar pact between the author and the reader. The author only intends to do one thing: lie to the reader, as truthfully as possible. Transmit to the reader, concretely, his own experience, "outside of the wisdom and outside of the syntax of the novel, traditional or new." True, false, speech. His own speech and the speech of the world. The latter naturally displaying itself cacophonically.

Delaume claims that she cannot participate in any previously existing literary pact because her writing cannot be categorized in any previously defined genre. She is preoccupied with "une fictionnalisation du soi, lucide"⁶⁴ ("a lucid fictionalization of the self"), so her audience should not believe, as they do with autobiography, that she is sincere, or even truthful. Instead, the reader should understand that Delaume represents the world in a *just* manner, as opposed to a "true" one. She claims that her writing will lie with justice, as truthfully as possible but not truly, to best represent life through the artificial medium of narrative.

Delaume illustrates this idea through a conversation that she presents between the narrator and her lover, Igor. In their dialogue, Igor questions the legitimacy of autofiction and highlights its theoretical weaknesses, suggesting that autofiction is not new and that autofictional texts are merely badly written autobiographies designated

⁶³ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

with fancy name.⁶⁵ In response, Delaume argues that autofictionalists attempt to create an inexact but representative portrayal of the world. Furthermore, she argues, the genre is an active *experience* for both the reader and the writer and therefore represents real facts and events in a way that traditional narration cannot.⁶⁶

The conversation between Chloé and Igor is a reprise of the issues that Delaume addresses throughout her essay. In fact, their dialogue introduces little new information to the narrator's discussion of the genre; however, the scene serves another purpose: at the end of the conversation, Delaume redirects the reader's attention to the role of the dialogue in her larger discussion about autofiction. She writes:

Reprise. Problème du pacte. Un exemple. Ici est un essai autofictif. Existe-t-il un pacte entre auteur et lecteur, à quel point me croyez-vous ? Un essai, vous vous dites, juste des informations. Mais pour vous expliquer tout ça de l'intérieur, je n'ai pas d'autre solution. À quel point me croyez-vous ? [...] Le pacte autobiographique est fondé sur la sincérité de l'auteur, et la croyance du lecteur en celle-ci. Qu'en est-il du pacte autofictionnel?⁶⁷

Once again. Problem with the pact. An example. Here is an autofictional essay. Does a pact exist between the author and the reader, and to what degree do you believe me? An essay, you tell yourself, simply information. I have no solution other than your own explanation. To what degree do you believe me? [...] The autobiographical pact is based on the sincerity of the author, and the reader's belief in that sincerity. What of that remains in the autofictional pact?

The narrative voice changes between Chloé's conversation with Igor and her analysis of the passage; she turns from describing her interaction with another character to directly address the reader. She invites us to doubt whether she has described a conversation

⁶⁵Ibid., 57.

⁶⁶Ibid., 62.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 63.

that actually happened, a “true fact” of her life. Furthermore, she indicates that the conversation could merely be a literary device that forwards her argument, and that truthfully, she could not have recounted the conversation in real time and capture every word. Ultimately, however, perhaps it does not matter for us whether she and Igor did have this conversation; in both cases, we receive and understand the same message from the narrative.

Delaume describes autofiction as a genre that gives writers complete freedom.

She writes:

L'autobiographe écrit *sur* sa propre vie. L'autofictionnaliste écrit *avec*. L'usage de la fiction lui impose une totale liberté [...] L'autofiction est un genre expérimental. Dans tous les sens du terme. C'est un laboratoire. Pas la consignation de faits sauce romanesque. Un vrai laboratoire. D'écriture et de vie.⁶⁸

The autobiographer writes on his own life. The autofictionalist writes with it. The use of fiction gives him total liberty[...] Autofiction is an experimental genre. In all of the senses of the term. It is a laboratory. Not the recording of facts with a novelistic sauce. A real laboratory. Of writing and of life.

Delaume claims that she has complete freedom because she is not bound by either the autobiographical pact or the fictional pact. She poses autofiction as a creative setting that “experiments” with the materials available to it, such as words, syntax, and structure, and finds new approaches to conventional ideas about literature and life.

However, her self-reflection fails to consider certain limitations of writing.

While she may escape generic expectations that influence our approaches to autobiographies and novels, she cannot write outside of all linguistic rules. For instance, she must use either established words, or invented ones that are nonetheless

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20.

comprehensible because of their relationship to common language.⁶⁹ Similarly, she must use a narrative structure that is familiar enough to be comprehensible. She cannot remove herself from universal “grammars” and still communicate effectively; as Guibert illustrated in *Des Aveugles*, no author writes with “total liberty.”

Delaume furthers her discussion of the pact between a reader and a writer by citing a conversation between herself and Philippe Gasparini. The discussion focuses on the difference between the fictional and autobiographical pacts, and the place of autofiction between the two. In the quotation, Gasparini calls attention to linguistic codes and suggests that speakers imply meaning through tone of voice, register, and style:

On voit tout de suite que les deux pactes ne sont pas exactement inverses : la majeure partie des faits rapportés par l'autobiographie ne sont pas vérifiables tandis que de nombreux éléments de la fiction pourront être imputés à l'expérience et à la sincérité de l'auteur. Cependant, cette notion de contrat de lecture permet de distinguer deux modes de communication tout à fait différents, dans la littérature comme dans la vie de tous les jours. “Je vais te raconter comment je me suis fait virer” n'induit pas la même écoute que “tu connais la dernière blague sur Sarkozy ?”.⁷⁰

We see immediately that the two pacts [fiction and autobiography] are not exactly opposite: the majority of reported facts in autobiographies are not verifiable, while many elements in fictions can be accredited to the experience and the sincerity of the author. However, the notion of a contract with the reader permits us to distinguish two different modes of communication, in literature as in daily life. “I am going to tell you about how I was fired” does not indicate the same tone at all as “have you heard the most recent joke about Sarkozy?”.

⁶⁹ Take the term “autofiction,” for instance. While it did not exist before 1977, and we are still in the process of defining its precise meaning, the term is comprehensible because “auto” and “fiction” are understandable on their own.

⁷⁰ Delaume, *La Règle Du Je (Autofiction: Un Essai)*, 42.

Gasparini notes that audiences bring certain expectations to literature based on the register of the language in question. It is not only the editor's distinction between "novel" and "autobiography" but also the author's tone which influence the reception of a text. As Guibert illustrated in *Des Aveugles*, even fiction writers are bound to certain codes, because ultimately the goal of writing is to communicate with a reader. Delaume presents this argument through the voice of Gasparini, but ultimately does not acknowledge the implications of this limit for her own writing. Instead, she emphasizes the liberty that writers enjoy, expressing limits only through other characters' voices or in her own writing style. She does not explore the requirement that writers face to use linguistic tools that are mutually understood between the reader and the writer.

Nevertheless, Delaume's effort to liberate writers from the boundaries of creative writing is powerful because it calls attention to our presuppositions about literature. She explains that she understands writing as a form of resistance, against her former self, against her father, and finally against the *mémoire collective*. She argues that writing gives control to the artist, who can create a world, direct its narratives, and define its terms. She describes herself as, "Personnage de fiction, statut particulier. Maîtriser le récit dans lequel j'évolue. Juste une forme de contrôle, de contrôle sur ma vie. La vie et l'écriture, les lier au quotidien."⁷¹ ("*Fictional character, peculiar status. Master the narrative in which I evolve. Just a form of control, of control over my life. Life and writing, link them to the everyday.*") Here, Delaume stresses the power that creative people have to transform their lives. She involves us as readers, demanding

⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

active reading and suggesting that passive people get scripted by others' narratives. She writes, "Écrivez-vous vous-mêmes si vous n'êtes pas contents."⁷² ("Write yourself if you are not happy.") She suggests that each of us must constantly redefine the terms of our own narratives, make ourselves the protagonists of our own stories and self-consciously notice the fictions imposed upon us.

Le Cri du sablier (The Cry of the Hourglass)

As Delaume explains in *La Règle du Je*, her childhood was extraordinarily traumatic. At age ten, she witnessed her father murder her mother and then kill himself. In *Le Cri du sablier*, Delaume reflects on her childhood, flashing back to memories of her parents, the murder, and the consequences that the moment has had on her adult life. She uses the setting of therapy to frame her discussion and the medium of fiction to experiment with the possibilities of representing herself. She uses narrative structure to illustrate power dynamics, presenting herself as the narrator, her father as a protagonist, and her mother as a minor character. Furthermore, she works outside of a chronological narrative, using a structure that reflects her psychology rather than the strict events of her life. She attempts to free herself from the destructive influence of her father, to realize her own power as an artist, and in turn to attain agency through writing, a creative medium that allows her to define the terms of her own life.

⁷² Ibid., 69.

Delaume describes her father as an overbearing force that controlled her while he was alive and profoundly influenced her even after his death. Ultimately she suggests that she needed to exorcise his presence from her narrative to realize her own agency. Before reaching that level of self-awareness, however, she describes the influence that he had over her life and her self-esteem. For instance, she defines herself as an unwanted child: “L’enfant sentit que sans sérum le père disait la vérité [...] Jamais tu n’aurais dû naître. Jamais.”⁷³ (“*The child sensed that without the serum the father was telling the truth [...] You should not have been born. Never.*”) Similarly, after describing a scene between father and daughter on Christmas Eve, she writes from his perspective, “Tu n’aurais pas dû naître. Un jour je vais te tuer.”⁷⁴ (“*You should have never been born. One day I will kill you.*”) Delaume indicates that she felt undesired and like a burden when near her father. Furthermore, his opinions are so influential over her understanding of herself that she adopts his perspective as she narrates; he owns the story, dictating its terms, plot twists, and character development.

As Delaume’s father holds all the power in the family, both the narrator and her mother repeatedly submit to his force:

Le père aimait beaucoup exercer son pouvoir. L’enfant était si jeune. Elle le croyait immense et sa peur se bleulait [...] La mère fut négligente. On ne sut jamais pourquoi. Certains dirent par amour. D’autres invoquèrent l’orgueil.⁷⁵

The father loved to exercise his power. The child was so young. She believed him to be immense and her fear was becoming bluish [...] The mother was negligent. We never knew why. Some say out of love. Others invoke selfish pride.

⁷³ Chloé Delaume, *Le Cri Du Sablier* (Tours: Farago, 2001), 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

Delaume repeatedly characterizes her father as forceful, frightening, and all-knowing. The murder of her mother is evidently his final act of complete control, since he determines his wife's fate; it is also a profoundly influential for his daughter, whom he does not kill. She writes, "Le père l'avait visée mais il ne la tue pas. Le père savait sûrement que le meilleur décès qu'il pouvait lui offrir consistait en ce legs ce lien inaliénable. Le père sait toujours tout."⁷⁶ ("The father had aimed at her but did not kill her. The father surely knew that the best death⁷⁷ that he could offer her consisted of this legacy, this inalienable connection. The father always knows everything.") In her relationship with her father, Delaume, like her mother, is the object of his actions, illustrated through both plot and syntax. He has agency, while she suffers from the consequences of his decisions. He is the protagonist in both his own story and in hers.

In contrast, Delaume describes her mother as both "negligent," and later as the "pédagogue" ("teacher"), a damaging combination for her daughter. She writes about a scene where her mother took advantage of the child's ignorance:

Un jour l'enfant entendit un garçon adresser « enculé » sur son vélomoteur à un automobiliste quelconque. De retour au foyer elle s'enquit à la mère de ce mot inconnu même du Petit Larousse Illustré. La mère lui répondit c'est un truc de tata en agitant la main car la mère était pédagogue. Lorsqu'un dimanche la soeur de la mère vint pour le thé l'enfant lui dit bonjour enculée. La mère se mit à rire et la tante se fâcha. La mère expliqua à sa sœur car elle était pédagogue. La tante haussa les épaules et dit à la mère tu l'élèves bizarrement.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁷ The French word "décès" can mean either "death" or "demise"; the double signification is important for an interpretation of this passage, and Delaume's metaphorical death, which she claims was as damaging as a real death.

⁷⁸ Delaume, *Le Cri Du Sablier*, 52.

One day the child heard a boy call out “dickhead” on his moped to some car driver. Once she had returned home, she asked her mother about this word, unfamiliar even to the Illustrated Larousse [Dictionary]. Her mother told her that it’s a word you use for Aunt⁷⁹ waving her hand because the mother was the instructor. One Sunday, when the mother’s sister came for tea, the child said hello dickhead to her. The mother started laughing and the aunt became angry. The mother explained to her sister because she was the instructor. The aunt shrugged and told the mother you are raising her strangely.

Delaume continues later, “l’enfant demandait souvent à la mère de lui expliquer les mots nouveaux.”⁸⁰ (“The child often asked the mother to explain the meaning of new words to her.”) In these scenes, Delaume’s mother is an unreliable source of information and as a consequence is not a trustworthy authority figure in her daughter’s life. Furthermore, her mother’s decisions have real consequences for Delaume’s actions, self-perception, and relationships. Here, she is a minor character in her mother’s plot rather than her father’s; both situations are profoundly destabilizing for Delaume as an adolescent.

Through a discussion of her relationships with her parents, Delaume explores the question, “who knows what, and when do they know it?” In response, she finds that her father must “always know everything” because he is the one who determines the next event. He controls the plot, and therefore has unrivaled awareness of the future. Meanwhile, her mother finds power by manipulating language and controlling information. Delaume indicates that because her parents are more powerful and better informed than she is, she is vulnerable to losing agency and self-definition.

⁷⁹ Delaume includes a pun here: “tata” means both “aunt” and “fag” depending on context.

⁸⁰ Delaume, *Le Cri Du Sablier*, 51.

Therefore, in her development as an individual and as a writer, Delaume must find an independent identity. In *Le Cri du sablier*, Delaume's self-awareness as a narrator reflects her process of self-discovery, and in turn she illustrates this process through her sentence structures. She initially views herself as intimately connected to her infancy, both stages being described through the first person, "je." Then, she distances herself from her experiences, viewing herself in the third person as a character, only tangentially related to her adult self. For instance, she writes, "Elle se retiendra de pleurer. Elle se retient presque toujours. C'est pour ça que je pleure autant."⁸¹ ("She will keep herself from crying. She holds herself together almost all the time. That's why I cry so much.") She relates these two ostensibly separate characters in a causal relationship: "her" behavior as a child led to "my" behavior as an adult. Rather than connect them in a direct way by using the same pronoun for both, she maintains distance between the characters, suggesting that her perspective as a narrator is separate from her adolescence. Finally, she bridges that gap, explaining how those two personalities could be separate: her metaphorical suicide. She "suicides" the initial "je," "le vieux soi"⁸² ("the old self"), to reinvent herself, exorcising her father in the process. As a result, she reclaims her identity as she moves from first person to third person and back again to a new first person.

The pivotal moment in *Le Cri du sablier* explores the narrator's transition from "elle" ("she"), "l'enfant" ("the child"), to the new "Je" ("I"). She explains that she has taken control of her identity, adopting a new name and, with it, agency as a first-person. She describes the moment:

⁸¹ Ibid., 40.

⁸² Ibid., 117.

Et puis un jour le Je. Le Je jaillit d'une elle un peu trop épuisée de se radier de soi [...] Comment nommer le manque qui n'est plus mal de lui. Qui n'est même plus l'absence. Qui n'est plus que.⁸³

And then one day the I. The I burst out of a she a bit too exhausted to rid herself of the self [...] How to name the emptiness that is no longer a sickness of him. Which is not even an absence anymore. Which is only.

Delaume contrasts her new self with the old, suggesting that the new “Je” can act and cause change, where the other was passive and exhausted. Furthermore, she writes, “Mais il ne s’agit plus de vivre, mon père, ma belle charogne, maintenant il faut régner.”⁸⁴ (“*It’s not enough anymore just to live, father, my beautiful carrion, now it is necessary to reign*”). Again, she emphasizes her newfound level of control over her own life; she is no longer merely influenced by the decisions of others but has now adopted the position of the protagonist in her own story.

In all three of Delaume’s works, writing plays an important role in her development. In *Le Cri du sablier*, her self-awareness develops along with her education in language. First, she is obsessed with new words, pouring over her *Petit Larousse Illustré* to discover new terms, and making (often faulty) connections between the words that she discovers and the world around her. For instance, she connects Arabic numerals to the Arabic language and then to the heritage of her father; as a consequence, because she is scared of her father, she begins to fear numbers and to fail at math. She writes, “Ne sois pas crétine gronda la mère, ce sont des chiffres *arabes*.”

⁸³ Ibid., 112.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 131.

L'enfant comprit alors. Les chiffres appartenaient à la langue du père.”⁸⁵ (“*Don't be a moron grumbled the mother, those are Arabic numerals. So the child understood. Those numbers belong to the language of the father.*”) In both this moment and the passage when she misuses “*enculé*,” Delaume misunderstands certain connections, as all children do, but she has no sympathetic mentor to help her understand the world. Her relationship with language, her eagerness to learn, and the absence of guiding figures in her life illustrate her vulnerability as a child.

Similarly, as an adult, during her time at a psychiatric hospital, Delaume’s ability to express herself parallels her growth as an individual. For instance, she refuses to speak for nine months:

Mes neuf mois sans paroles [...] On me faisait ouvrir cent fois par jour la bouche en espérant y voir une bestiole légendaire qui tapie à l’orée [...] Si la petite reparle pour dire ce qu’elle a vu il y a des chances ma chère qu’elle nous relate le drame. Leur menton tremblota la grand-mère soupira je ne veux rien savoir mieux vaudrait qu’elle se taise.⁸⁶

My nine months without speech [...] they made me open my mouth a hundred times a day hoping to see some legendary bug hiding on the edges [...] If the little one started talking again, to say what she saw there’s a chance my dear that she would recount the drama to us. Chin trembling the grandmother sighed I don’t want to know anything better that she stays quiet.

In this passage, Delaume moves from a first person narration at the hospital to a third person account of her silence as a child. The two scenes, both described in the same paragraph, present a contrast. In her youth, Delaume was silenced by others’ fear. Without a sympathetic audience, she could not retell the events that she had witnessed,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 17.

because the people around her, and particularly the adults in her life, preferred to remain ignorant, saying, “better that she stays quiet.” As an adult, Delaume chooses to silence herself, defying the staff at the hospital that would make her “open her mouth a hundred times a day.” Her decision to remain mute for nine months has particular potency from the child that should “never have been born”; her silence represents her deliberate rebirth rather than an unwanted pregnancy. As an adult, she controls the language that she uses, and finds agency in her choice to express herself or to keep silent.

Le Cri du sablier is an important key to understanding Delaume as a writer and as a “personnage de fiction”⁸⁷ (“fictional character”). This book in particular details the traumatic events from her childhood that necessitated her metaphorical suicide, and explains her transition from Nathalie Dalain to Chloé Delaume. She uses the plot and the interactions between characters to illustrate power dynamics in her family and to change them, giving herself more weight in the narrative and a stronger voice by the end of the work. She effectively uses the book both as a vehicle to communicate her story and as a representation of her life, showing that the protagonist defines the trajectory of the plot and therefore has agency and controls power.

J'habite dans la télévision (I live in the Television)

In *Le Cri du sablier*, Delaume suggests that writing can be a form of resistance on an individual level; in *J'habite dans la télévision*, she presents writing as a form of

⁸⁷ Delaume, "Bio".

resistance to cultural influences as well. Here, Delaume examines the physical and psychological effects of constantly watching television, presenting the story as a study and herself as the subject. She narrates in the first person, giving the reader omniscient access to her psychology as she watches TV. She discusses our desire to separate “TV reality” from real life and argues that there is no difference between the two; TV, just like interactive conversations, can influence the way that we think and the narratives that script our lives. On a formal level, Delaume’s point of view as a self-conscious first person narrator highlights the writer’s role in creating fictions. It also allows her to demonstrate the difference between writing a narrative and being written by, or influenced by, an external narrative. She suggests that through creative engagement in the world, we can notice and change the plots that culture imposes upon us.

Delaume immediately addresses the presuppositions with which the reader approaches a novel about the television, or at least those presuppositions that she assumes influence the reader. She calls attention to the distinction that audiences make between reality and television, writing, “Vous assurez: je suis dans le réel et le réel est tout sauf la télévision.”⁸⁸ (“*You confirm: I am in reality and reality is everything other than the television.*”) In a direct address to the reader, Delaume writes that *you*, like everyone else, convince yourself that your life is separate from the TV, and that reality has consequences, while the plots and decisions of characters on television exist only in this alternate, ostensibly inconsequential universe.

⁸⁸ Chloé Delaume, *J'habite Dans La Télévision* (Paris: Verticales, 2006), 10.

Furthermore, the narrator asserts that audiences tend to approach television programs as fictions, regardless of content. Viewers understand even reality shows in terms of characters and plots rather than real people and real interactions:

Mise en fiction. Les candidats très vite devnient des personnages, les profiles sont les memes, chaque année on le sait. Le casting est établi en panel d'archétypes, je mise sur les interactions probables, les alliances et les désamours.⁸⁹

Fictionalization. The candidates quickly become characters, with the same familiar profiles every year. Casting is established in a panel based on archetypes, I bet on likely interactions, and certain alliances and disenchantments.

Delaume claims that both series creators and audiences contribute to the fictionalization of all content broadcast on the TV. Casting directors use familiar archetypes to evoke common narratives that audiences use to understand the “plot,” regardless of whether the series is explicitly fictional or claims to be “reality TV.” Audiences consequentially participate in and perpetuate a *mémoire collective*; they read content according to the terms that culture has defined and in turn regenerate the familiar legend.

Delaume manipulates a trope from the *mémoire collective* within her novel to highlight the power of common narratives. She introduces the “Ogre” as a narrative line and as a character:

Il était une fois un vieil Ogre dont tous les sens n'étaient qu'un tonneau Danaïdes. Sa paroi stomacale, un palimpseste, aucune goutte de sans n'avait le temps de sécher. Il était une fois un vieil Ogre qui en se nécrosant ne se nourrissait plus que de cerveaux humains, en gobant aisément une de leurs trois parties.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibid., 135.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.

Once upon a time there was an old Ogre whose senses were only a barrel of Danaïdes. His stomach wall, a palimpsest, no taste without the time to dry. Once upon a time there was an old Ogre who by putting himself through necrosis nourishes himself with human brains, easily swallowing one of their three parts.

“Il était une fois un vieil Ogre,” like “once upon a time, in a far away land...,” is loaded with meaning beyond the immediate introduction of place and time. The phrase evokes familiar fairy tales and defines a set of expectations with which the reader will approach the text: we suppose that the author will describe a fictitious story, present a contrast between a “bad guy,” the ogre, and a “good guy,” probably a prince, or a knight, or another archetypal character. The plot will demonstrate the triumph of good over evil, the characters will get what they deserve in the end, and the tale will conclude with the restoration of order to the world. Of course, those expectations assume that the author follows a traditional narrative path; she could, instead, use the clichéd expectations of the reader to transform the familiar fable, inverting the roles of the characters or highlighting an unintentional consequence of the prince defeating the Ogre.⁹¹ Nevertheless, in both of these cases, whether the writer works within the given archetypes of the *mémoire collective* or transforms them, her work is essentially linked to the framework’s existence. Without a common understanding of those expectations, the work would lose much of its potency.

Therefore, Delaume suggests that the *mémoire collective* is inescapable. It influences the audience’s perception of entertainment, like television, but it also,

⁹¹ For instance, for a similar case in American culture, see Dreamworks’s *Shrek*, which presents the Ogre as the protagonist, the princess as an Ogre, and Lord Farquaad, the future King, as a cowardly but lovesick antagonist.

perhaps less obviously, influences reality. Common narratives teach us how to read ourselves, to understand the roles that we play in society, and influence interactions between individuals. If we are not aware of and in control of them, they can script our lives and transform us into archetypal characters. Delaume writes, “la fiction collective existe: c’est en elle que vous habitez. L’Ogre y aura toujours raison puisqu’il en écrit les chapitres.”⁹² (“*Collective fiction exists: that is where you live. There, the Ogre will always be right because he’s the one who writes the chapters.*”) According to Delaume, the “collective fiction” is the lens through which passive audiences understand narrative. Her argument here parallels her relationship to her father’s plot in *Le Cri du sablier*: if you do not create your own narrative, you will be a minor character in someone else’s “chapters.” In *Le Cri du sablier*, the chapters initially belong to her father; here they belong to the Ogre. She suggests that unless you engage in self-conscious criticism of what you watch, you will live within the boundaries of that fiction just as characters in a television show live within the boundaries of archetypal interactions.

Therefore, if the *mémoire collective* influences the way that audiences understand both fiction and nonfiction, the bright line that distinguishes genres is artificial and deceptive. Delaume writes:

Alors vous consommez un document-fiction. Vous dites: dedans c’est pour de vrai; vous dites: enfin pas tout en fait; vous dites: c’est le réel mais raconté. Vous conviendrez que la migraine ne pouvait vous être épargnée.⁹³

⁹² Delaume, *J’habite Dans La Télévision*, 153.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

So you consume a documentary-fiction. You say: this is true; you say: well, maybe not entirely; it's real but retold. You admit that you cannot be spared from a migraine.

Delaume notes the crossover between fiction and non-fiction, true and false, the real and the retold. She describes the audience's "consumption" of a document-fiction; the term "consume" is an active verb that suggests that something within the narrative becomes a part of the audience when the consumer has watched / understood / eaten it. Delaume suggests that separating fiction from reality establishes an artificial distinction between the two and that, in fact, all narratives are constructed, and all fictions can have a real impact on the "non-fictional" world. This separation and consequent dismissal of fiction as unreal leads to passive viewers who indiscriminately "consume" narratives, not realizing their consequences.

Delaume claims that the greatest danger of viewing the world in genres that distinguish between the real and the fictitious is this illusion that fiction has no impact on reality. She writes that "Le réel ne disparaît pas dans l'illusion, c'est l'illusion qui disparaît dans la réalité intégrale."⁹⁴ (*The real doesn't disappear into illusion, it's the illusion that disappears into unabridged reality*) Reality incorporates narrative threads that are constructed by fictions, and often fails to acknowledge the illusion that they create. The time that we spend watching the television, for instance, does not exist outside of real time. Delaume comments:

... Aucune différence entre vivre et regarder la télévision mais la télévision nous vit et nous regarde [...] La télévision vit, mais ne pense plus du tout. Ce n'est que l'exécutrice, infirmière libérale, pause aux

⁹⁴ Ibid., 109.

messages préparatrice, veine bleutée flux tendus. À présent répétez: j'ai la mémoire qui flanche.⁹⁵

... No difference between living and watching television but the television lives for us and watches us [...] the television lives, but it doesn't think at all. It is merely an executor, a liberal nurse, pause at prepared messages, bluish flowing vein held out. Now repeat: I have memory that cracks.

By passively watching TV we allow it to determine the way that we think, allow it to act as an “executor,” and forget to reflect on the “prepared messages” that it injects into our minds. This influence is particularly damaging since there is “no difference between living and watching television”; while the viewer is watching the screen, he is also living.

Delaume argues that the distinction between active and passive reading is more important than the deceptive distinction between truth and fiction in narrative. She notes that a television viewer participates in a relationship between himself and the screen, watching the characters' interactions as a third party and separated from the direct consequences of their decisions. For instance, a viewer might watch the prince in the “Ogre” narrative successfully save a princess from harm. His life does not change immediately. He is not a character in the plot and has not been rescued from danger; he turns off the television and his life is no different. However, during the time that he spent watching the Ogre narrative, he did in fact experience something, even if only from a distance, since the story now affects the way that he thinks. It could influence his understanding of individuals' roles in society, of gender relations, of political power, and so on. Unless he is active and resistant to its influence, he will unknowingly submit himself to participate in the plot that the television wants to tell.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 155.

As her own subject, Delaume places herself at the mercy of the television, submitting completely to its plot. She writes:

Je suis déjà, je sais, dans la télévision. Je suis en elle à elle, ma ritournelle est engloutie je suis dans le ventre de l'Ogre... Je n'ai plus aucun territoire, je ne suis plus rien sinon une ligne ou un chapitre, de la fiction collective un fébrile prolongement.⁹⁶

I am already, I know, in the television. I am in her and I am hers, my ritornello is swallowed up I am in the stomach of the Ogre... I don't know the territory anymore, I am no longer anything only a line or a chapter, of this collective fiction a prolonged fever.

Instead of interacting with and reacting to the television's storylines, the narrator claims that she has become entirely a part of its reality. She imagines the most extreme version of a passive audience; the TV is no longer one factor that influences the way that she reads the world, but now entirely determines her reality. She is no longer the protagonist of her narrative, but is now subordinated to a single "line or chapter" in someone else's story.

Of course, we are reading an *autofiction*. If Delaume had in fact fully submitted to the television, if that is even possible, she would not have been able to reflect on the experience. She recognizes this paradox and claims that it is the act of writing itself that has allowed her to control some element of her self, and to resist domination by collective fictions. She continues:

Je ne suis plus qu'une parcelle. La fiction collective sait imposer des cartes en guise de territoire, c'est même à l'Ogre qu'on doit l'idée. Je n'ai pas su protéger mon cerveau, son temps est aboli, il n'est que disponible. Mais au moins, voyez-vous, j'ai ma narration propre. Sachez sauver la vôtre avant qu'il ne soit trop tard.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 156.

I am no longer anything but a plot of land. The collective fiction knows how to impose its maps, in the disguise of a territory, we credit the Ogre with the idea. I no longer know how to protect my brain, its time is abolished, it is now only available. But at least, you see, I have my own narration. Know how to guard yours before it is too late.

Delaume suggests that resistance to collective fictions requires acute awareness of the narratives that culture imposes on “reality.” She emphasizes the importance of narrating one’s own life, recognizing the influence of pervasive fictions and the self-conscious acceptance or rejection of their themes. She suggests that living in front of the television is not different from living, and that the separation of television from reality, and the resulting separation of television from something that can influence the viewer’s perception of reality, promotes the unconscious incorporation of illusion into what we consider real life. By submitting to *la mémoire collective*, passively and without self-consciousness, we lose the ability to make choices and therefore become actors in other people’s plots.

Chapter 4:
Theory, Part II
Resisting the Rules

In my analyses of Hervé Guibert and Chloé Delaume, I describe the ways that both authors self-consciously question literary rules. Using the creative medium of fiction, they each explore, in different ways, the interaction between fiction and reality, and the constitutive potential of creative writing. They use first person narrators that resemble themselves to illustrate that lines between fiction and reality can be blurred. Ultimately, both authors call attention to the assumptions that typical readers bring to literature as they break implicit pacts, blend genres, and manipulate the expectations of their audiences.

However, works by Guibert and Delaume also present major differences in the two authors' writing styles; it is not clear that they write within the same genre. While Delaume explicitly defines herself as an autofictionalist, and even as a fictional character in her own plot, Guibert writes fiction that is clearly influenced by the events of his life. Delaume places herself as the subject of a scientific study; Guibert, already the patient, describes his life with AIDS. Delaume consistently reminds the reader to be self-conscious about the fictionalization of her life, while Guibert subtly draws us into the illusion of the narrative and then calls attention to the deception. Nevertheless, despite their differences, the two writers explore the same questions, including, to what extent can writers be creative in their works, and what constrains that freedom? How does the reader's reception of the text influence the writer's ability to challenge literary

rules? And how does language itself simultaneously free and constrain the artist? I suggest that these questions, more than a specific pact or genre, unify the generation of writers that have used autofictional techniques.

Guibert and Delaume are not the first to raise these questions about narrative truth and the reader's relationship to the text; many literary critics explicitly address these questions in their analyses of genre, discourse, and narrative. In this chapter, I analyze several critics' responses to these questions. To start, I discuss autobiography, which established the rules that autofiction challenges. Autobiography provides a defined genre, with a familiar relationship between the reader and the author, as well as an expected style. It makes autofiction possible, by providing conventions to challenge. Then, I address the ways in which autofiction proposes to change these terms, by unsettling the pact, the style, and the linear chronology of traditional autobiographies.

Ultimately, however, I move away from a critique of genre, choosing to focus instead on the questions that this group of writers poses. Delaume and Guibert both challenge defined genres, so placing them in a new, neatly defined category ignores their work of confronting preconceptions. Furthermore, these writers breach boundaries that appear to constrict writing in general, outside of the distinctions between autobiography and autofiction. Therefore, I will look to broader criticism, particularly *A Theory of Literary Production*⁹⁸ by Pierre Macherey and *Image - Music*

⁹⁸ Pierre Macherey *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, trans., Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 2006)

- *Text*⁹⁹ by Roland Barthes to discuss these questions that influence writers and critics across genres.

What are the rules and how are they broken?

Philippe Lejeune, a French literary critic who has written extensively on *l'écriture du soi*, defines autobiography from the perspective of the reader in *Le pacte autobiographique*. Lejeune's work on autobiography does not serve as criticism of autofiction but it does describe the traditional autobiography that writers of autofiction will later transform. He discusses the typical reader's approach to an autobiographical text, suggesting that these expectations influence the reception of the text, regardless of whether the reader is aware of them. In *Le pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune makes the rules of the game explicit by describing the implicit trust established between the author and the reader, founded on the reader's belief that the author is sincere. These are the rules that Guibert and Delaume each explore, investigating which ones are necessary to make a text comprehensible and which ones can be bent or broken.

Lejeune notes that autobiography could be analyzed using several frameworks but justifies his choice to approach the genre as a reader:

Ce qu'on appelle l'autobiographie est susceptible de diverses approches: étude historique, puisque l'écriture du moi qui s'est développée dans le monde occidental depuis le XVIII^e siècle est un phénomène de civilisation ; étude psychologique, puisque l'acte autobiographique met en jeu de vastes problèmes, comme ceux de la mémoire, de la construction de la personnalité et de l'auto-analyse. Mais

⁹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Poétique Du Récit*, trans., Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

l'autobiographie se présente d'abord comme un *texte* littéraire : mon propos, dans les études ici réunies, a été de m'interroger sur le fonctionnement de ce texte, en le faisant fonctionner, c'est-à-dire en le lisant.¹⁰⁰

What we call autobiography could be susceptible to many types [of criticism]: a historical study, since the writing of the self as it has developed since the 18th century is a phenomenon of civilization; a psychological study, since the autobiographical act raises vast problems, such as those of memory, of the construction of the personality, and of the self-criticism. But autobiography presents itself first as a literary text: my proposal, in the studies presented here, has been to explore the function of this text, by making it function, that is to say by reading it.

Lejeune immediately situates us in his approach to literary criticism. He notes that historical and psychological criticism could each reveal interesting qualities of the text, and acknowledges potential pitfalls of his own text-oriented critique. Nevertheless, he argues that the primary function of a book is to convey a message to a reader. He therefore argues that the defining quality of an autobiography is the implicit contract established between the reader and the writer. He suggests that “ce genre se définit moins par les éléments formels qu’il intègre que par le ‘contrat de lecture’.”¹⁰¹ (“*the genre is not defined by its integral formal elements so much as the ‘reading contract’.*”). As a result, Lejeune’s critique remains close to the text but also observes its interaction with reality. Furthermore, because his analysis focuses specifically on autobiography, his critique describes ground rules for *l’écriture du soi* that autofictional writers later challenge.

¹⁰⁰ Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, 7.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Lejeune notes that autobiographies always feature an author, narrator, and main character that share one identity.¹⁰² The narrator, Lejeune stresses, must not simply resemble the voice of the author, but must directly express his point of view. Furthermore, the reader must understand that there is no difference between the three perspectives.¹⁰³ According to this definition, works of “fiction” in which the experiences of the author influence but do not determine the trajectory of the book (*Mes Parents*, for instance) are not autobiographies because the narrator does not entirely share the perspective of the writer; the pact is broken because the reader cannot trust that the author is sincere. Regardless of the similarities between the author’s real life and his subject matter, the work is not an autobiography unless he means for the reader to approach the text as a retelling of his life. Likewise, if the reader approaches a text assuming that it is, even partially, a fiction, the autobiographical pact no longer applies. The introduction of doubt subverts the project and introduces a different relationship between the reader and writer (and therefore, Gasparini and Doubrovsky will later argue, a different genre).

At the same time, Lejeune suggests that once the writer establishes his sincerity through the autobiographical pact, he can manipulate certain other requirements of autobiography. For instance, he cites autobiographies that adopt a third person perspective and argues that despite the evident fictionalization of the enunciation, the work maintains its definition as an autobiography because the narrative does not intend to deceive.¹⁰⁴ For instance, the author might use a distanced perspective out of “orgueil”

¹⁰² Ibid., 15.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 17.

(“*pride*”) or “*humilité*” (“*humility*”).¹⁰⁵ In both cases, the work is an honest attempt to represent the events of the author’s own life and the reader understands it as such; the voice of the narrator and author are implicitly the same, even if “*établie indirectement*”¹⁰⁶ (“*established indirectly*”), despite the author’s writing style, which is merely an artistic tool.

Lejeune claims that this pact articulates the expectations of a reader who approaches autobiography, and that those expectations are determined by historical context. He writes, “C’est un mode de lecture autant qu’un type d’écriture, c’est un *effet contractuel* historiquement variable.”¹⁰⁷ (“*It’s a way of reading as much as a way of writing, a consequence of a contract that varies with history.*”) The contract, according to Lejeune, determines the way that the reader will approach the book and the way that the writer will construct it. Furthermore, the contract is the essential quality of an autobiography; other rules can be broken, such as the perspective of the narrator or the writing style, as long as the pact remains in tact.

Such a systematic definition and critique of autobiography is useful as a starting point to determine the preconceptions that autofiction challenges. Lejeune answers the question, “what are the rules of autobiography?” as he lays out in neat tables and graphs the relationships between the author and the reader of such a text. For instance, he provides the following table:

1. Forme du langage:
 - a. Récit
 - b. En prose.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 45.

2. Sujet traité : vie individuelle, histoire d'une personnalité.
3. Situation de l'auteur : identité de l'auteur (dont le nom renvoie à une personne réelle) et du narrateur.
4. Position du narrateur :
 - a. Identité du narrateur et du personnage principal,
 - b. Perspective rétrospective du récit.¹⁰⁸

1. *Form of language:*
 - a. *Narrative*
 - b. *In prose.*
2. *Subject matter: individual life, personal story*
3. *Author's situation: identified with the author (whose name is the name of a real person) and with the narrator*
4. *Position of the narrator:*
 - a. *Identified with the narrator and the protagonist.*
 - b. *Retrospective perspective of the narrative.*

He notes that classic autobiography follows these descriptions, and then he outlines the neighboring genres and the ways that they differ: a biography, for instance, violates #4a because the position of the narrator is not the same as the position of the main character.¹⁰⁹

This classification provides a useful tool to understand the way that Guibert and Delaume each challenge the autobiographical pact. For example, Delaume does not use prose as her psychological state “deteriorates” in *J'habite* (violation of #1b). Guibert does not recount the events of a personal story in *Des Aveugles*, and yet, the novel has clear references to his real experiences (#2). In *Le Cri du sablier*, Delaume transforms her narrative from a third person account of the childhood of a “real person,” to a first person account of a fictional character (#3, #4a). Guibert uses the present tense in *Mes*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 18.

Parents to situate the reader simultaneously in his psychology as an adult and in his memories of the past, making his narrative not retrospective in either state (#4b).

By breaking the pact that Lejeune articulates, Delaume and Guibert call attention to it and consequentially unsettle the expectations of the reader. Lejeune's specific autobiographical pact does not succeed in works by Guibert or by Delaume because both authors introduce doubt about the truth of their works and about their own sincerity. The authors, therefore, treat the reader's expectations differently than an autobiographer would: autobiography is "a way of reading as much as a way of writing," un-self-consciously produced by the historical context of its publication. The authors that explore the implications of autofiction, in contrast, put this "way of reading" under scrutiny, demanding that the reader pay attention to the contract and actively approach the text with a critical eye towards implicit meaning.

The Limits of Creativity

However, while Guibert and Delaume do challenge several tenets of the traditional autobiography, they are still bound by the need to make their books legible. Authors can only work to transform our expectations if they maintain a relationship with us; the narrative must compel its audience to continue reading. A writer of autofiction may not establish a traditional pact with the reader, but he nevertheless must respect common approaches to reading to a certain degree. In my analyses of Guibert and Delaume, I identify two major constraints on creative writers: language and the *mémoire collective*. The writer cannot simply use language however he pleases; without

some use of an understood vocabulary, syntax, and narrative structure, the story would be incomprehensible. Furthermore, ideology influences language, loading it with several layers of significance, which writers must acknowledge as they express themselves. Therefore, while creative writers have a certain freedom to challenge the specific conditions that Lejeune articulates, they are still forced to respect some limits on their creativity.

I discuss the limits of language in Guibert's work because he specifically explores its implications, and the influence of the *mémoire collective* in Delaume's work for the same reason. Needless to say, both authors write with words and create in a cultural context that produces ideologies and *mémoires collectives*. By analyzing specific examples I hope to illuminate constraints of writing and reading more broadly. I relate their writing styles to *A Theory of Literary Production*, the work of French philosopher and literary critic Pierre Macherey, which suggests that ideology always influences creativity, and that language is necessarily and inescapably linked to ideology. I also discuss Roland Barthes's *Image-Music-Text*, which explores the way that words express meaning simultaneously through both denotation and connotation.

The manipulation of language gives Guibert creative power. In *Mes Parents*, for instance, he manipulates time, presenting a non-chronological narrative that moves from present to past and back again. However, as he illustrates through the characters of Kipa and the narrator in *Des Aveugles*, language also constrains his liberty, since he must use certain linguistic conventions to convey his message. Writing about literature more broadly, Macherey suggests:

To explain the work is to show that, contrary to appearances, it is not independent, but bears in its material substance the imprint of a determinate absence which is also the principle of its identity. The book is furrowed by the allusive presence of those other books against which it is elaborated: it circles about the absence of that which it cannot say, haunted by the absence of certain repressed words which make their return.¹¹⁰

Language is not a pure, new medium. Rather, it is a system of familiar structures, mutually understood between speakers and listeners or writers and readers. Words express a direct meaning, denoting specific actions or descriptions; however, that meaning is not “independent.” In this passage, Macherey refers to the fact that words have implied intertextual significance. The vocabulary that a writer uses has been used before and therefore refers to its previous uses without ever explicitly noting the connotative significance of language.

Guibert illustrates the same phenomenon in his description of Kipa: for Kipa’s fictive letter to be credible, he must convince Josette that it was written by her mother in the country. Therefore, he “could not forget never to stray from a certain provincial monotony, and to use the same repetitions in formulas of affection.”¹¹¹ This “provincial monotony” has been defined before Kipa uses it, by the dialect of the region, by “those other books against which it is elaborated,” and by Josette’s expectations. In his effort to recreate the real world that Josette once knew, Kipa acts like a realist writer, using narrative to create a world that gives the illusion of reality. His tone connotes an atmosphere of the country regardless of his explicit references to the setting, indicating that style is extremely important for the reception of a text.

¹¹⁰ Pierre Macherey, *Pour Une Théorie De La Production Littéraire*, trans., Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 2006), 89; *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Guibert, *Des Aveugles*, 13.

The realist novel, according to Macherey, is more profoundly dictated by cultural codes than any other genre. He writes:

The work may indeed be implausible, weak, or gratuitous, and obviously these are three separate possibilities; but it cannot be transcended, and within its own limits it remains true, for otherwise it would actually be unreadable, a fake. This irreducibility, the guarantee of readability, defines all forms of writing – the fantastic, the poetic, or the realist. It might even be said that ‘realist’ writing, in its oft-proclaimed ambition to give a true equivalent of the real, finds the greatest difficulty in not over-reaching itself, so pursued is it by an ideal of conformity.¹¹²

The realist writer faces the “greatest difficulty” in producing a credible narrative because the text must reflect reality. Macherey argues that each work sets up its own limits, which “cannot be transcended.” If they are transcended, the story no longer compels reading. Kipa’s endeavor, for instance, requires that he conform to the codes dictated by the way that real people speak. If he is successful, his narrative will communicate on several levels: first, through content, as he denotes the story’s events and dialogue. Simultaneously, the provincial tone will indicate, implicitly, that the speaker lives in the country and is a friend. To establish credibility and apparent authenticity, Kipa must be faithful to the requirements that his text has set up, on both denotative and connotative levels. Furthermore, Macherey writes, “there is no first, independent, innocent language.”¹¹³ An author cannot choose to write without connotation or implied significance; there is no way to simply denote facts. Writers must use codes because no language is “innocent.”

¹¹² Macherey, 52-53; *ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

Although I have discussed discourse as a limit that writers must face as they create new texts, it is not an entirely negative influence over creative writing. On the contrary, codes enable communication simultaneously on several levels and therefore provide writers with a sophisticated and complex tool. Macherey writes, “literary production is conceived of as the secondary elaboration of a pre-existing system, something already shared between author and reader which alone makes communication possible.”¹¹⁴ We already, necessarily, communicate according to a system of significances, using codes and discourse. This does not necessarily corrupt a text, and could in fact enrich its message.

Nevertheless, the necessity to communicate using codes does impose certain limits on the writer’s freedom; he cannot produce a text with comprehensible “internal coherence”¹¹⁵ unless he caters to the reader’s expectations. Furthermore, with codes come ideologies, and, as Delaume explores in *J’habite dans la télévision*, ideologies can undermine an individual’s independence and agency. Macherey identifies the cyclical nature of ideology, suggesting that language comes from ideology and also reproduces it. He writes, “Specific linguistic practices produce ideologies, mythologies, literary works, scientific knowledges, and explicit systems of social representation (which we shall call *codes*).”¹¹⁶ Guibert and Delaume do not imagine writing outside of ideologies; instead, their texts self-consciously reflect on the work that connotation does for the reader.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 164.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 154; *ibid.*

Delaume suggests that writers and readers communicate by reproducing the *mémoire collective* and that the passive observer will have no control over which ideologies he accepts. Her criticism of the *mémoire collective* is most evident in *J'habite dans la télévision*, where she claims that the “Ogre” dominates her mind except when she actively resists it by writing. She notes, “Collective fiction exists: that is where you live. There, the Ogre will always be right because he’s the one who writes the chapters.”¹¹⁷ Delaume’s Ogre is a code that communicates certain significances to the reader. Typically, the Ogre is the villain: he eats people, especially princesses, and he creates tension that motivates the story to progress, and the reader to continue reading. In Delaume’s work, the Ogre is also the personification of the *mémoire collective*, which she resists through creative writing.

In *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes explains the use of codes in oral traditions:

...here the ‘author’ is not the person who invents the finest stories but the person who best masters the code which is practiced equally by his listeners: in such literatures the narrational level is so clearly defined, its rules so binding, that it is difficult to conceive of a ‘tale’ devoid of the coded signs of narrative (*‘once upon a time’, etc.*).¹¹⁸

Oral storytelling relies on familiar codes to make the narrative comprehensible to the listener. Barthes argues that the heavy use of codes counteracts the author’s ability to invent a story; he must choose from a predefined set of “coded signs.” Because the story must remain “within its own limits [...] for otherwise it would actually be

¹¹⁷ Delaume, *J'habite Dans La Télévision*, 153.

¹¹⁸ Barthes, 114-115.

unreadable, a fake,”¹¹⁹ and because the “limits” of oral narration consist of rigidly defined codes, the creator of the story has little freedom to truly “invent the finest stories.”

Obviously, Delaume’s style differs from the oral tradition since her work is clearly and deliberately written. She uses unusual spellings, spacing on the page, and divisions in chapters to set a pace and a tone for her narrative. The manipulation of tone could also be achieved aloud, using different techniques.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, her exploration of the consequences of using coded language arrives at a conclusion similar to Barthes’s analysis above. Barthes refers to “once upon a time”; Delaume uses the symbol of an Ogre. Each sign connotes a set of significances understood by both the reader and the writer. Furthermore, each dominates the narrative to the point where the author has little freedom to control the trajectory of the narration, because when one writes completely within given codes, the self-defined limits of the narrative, which make it believable and readable, are strict.

Macherey indicates that the folktale is also a coded form of storytelling on the level of structure:

It has been shown that the folk-tale, the most naïve and least self-conscious kind of narrative, begins from a rigid convention without which it would be amorphous and impossible. The simplicity of the tale is the *effect produced* by a chain of invariable units which give the text its internal coherence.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Macherey, 52-53.

¹²⁰ In fact, as I describe in Chapter Two, Guibert explores these methods in *Des Aveugles* through the character of the narrator, who gives readings to the blind. The narrator makes his voice hoarse, for instance, to set a tone.

¹²¹ Macherey, 45.

Macherey refers to Vladimir Propp's study of the structure of the folktale, which finds that the genre follows strictly defined rules. For the text to be comprehensible, to preserve its "internal coherence," the author of a folktale has little liberty to manipulate the progression of the narrative beyond certain permitted units. Furthermore, Macherey's analysis of Propp's study calls attention to the genre's naïveté. The folktale exists in illusion; authors do not reflect on the structure that dictates the story's progression.

Delaume suggests that self-consciousness of these structures is a form of resistance to the ideologies that inevitably influence writing. As she poses it, creative writing is a liberating exercise, which allows the author to create an alternative world and to dictate its own terms. She argues that *la mémoire collective* is dangerous if we forget that it exists: "The real doesn't disappear into illusion, it's the illusion that disappears into unabridged reality."¹²² If the illusion disappears into reality, the *mémoire collective* seems natural and permanent, rather than constructed and open to manipulation. In response, Delaume ceaselessly reminds the reader to pay attention to the words and discourses that we receive. If we forget that the illusion is not real, we lose our ability to change it. She does not suggest that the world would be rid of ideology if everyone were a creative writer, but rather that each individual would be able to choose whether the codes that he used were appropriate and empowering.

Furthermore, Barthes notes that discourse and ideology influence every work of writing:

¹²² Delaume, *J'habite Dans La Télévision*, 109.

It is hardly possible any longer to conceive of literature as an art that abandons all further relation with language the moment it has used it as an instrument to express ideas, passion or beauty: language never ceases to accompany discourse, holding up to it the mirror of its own structure – does not literature, particularly today, make a language of the very conditions of language?¹²³

He argues that language is not merely a vehicle to communicate an idea; it leaves its own mark as the idea expresses itself through linguistic codes. With language comes discourse, inevitably. And yet, language, discourse, and ideology enable communication. They allow us to write, to interact, and to express implicit meaning. Using multiple levels of significance invites puns, implied meaning, irony, and sophisticated storytelling.

Guibert and Delaume, by noticing the structures that dictate narratives and by inviting readers to notice our own approaches to autobiographical texts, defamiliarize the codes. They make writing seem less predetermined, and therefore highlight the opportunity that writers have to reconstruct meaning, ideology, and the codes that are considered natural. Writers are limited by discourse and ideology because they cannot be entirely uninhibited and also be comprehensible. Nevertheless, both authors' self-awareness about writing and its boundaries allow them to explore the implications of those limits. They control the messages communicated on several levels of significance.

¹²³ Barthes, 45.

Conclusion

Both Hervé Guibert and Chloé Delaume discuss writing's powerful ability to inspire us to imagine a different world. They do so by reflecting on writing as an artistic endeavor and by challenging the expectations that we bring to texts, particularly to autobiography. By calling attention to these expectations they distance us from the narrative's illusion, making our presuppositions, especially those based on the autobiographical pact, an object of criticism rather than an intrinsic, definitive way of reading. They de-familiarize conventional approaches to literature, suggesting that active reading, which resists tradition and passivity, is empowering. Narrative can manipulate time, truth, and power. It enables the writer to define his own terms and to construct a story that reflects his priorities. It is a craft, with its own creative freedoms and limits.

Hervé Guibert suggests that the conversation between the writer and the reader, which involves comprehensible writing and productive reading, can recreate the past or invent new moments. In his book *L'Image fantôme*, a series of essays on photography, Guibert wrote:

Ce qui a déclenché l'écriture, c'était le regret de photos ratées en fait, de photos que je n'ai pas pu faire, de photos qui se sont révélées invisibles, fantomatiques et donc j'ai essayé d'écrire pour retrouver le sentiment que j'avais voulu donner avec ces photos. J'essaye de photographier les gens que j'aime bien ou de faire des photos quand je suis en voyage, un peu comme tout le monde, mais je suis plutôt mauvais technicien donc je rate beaucoup de photos, et j'ai essayé souvent, enfin par l'écriture, de rattraper ce que je n'avais pas réussi avec la photo.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ "Interview on the Publication of *L'Image Fantôme*," (France: France Culture, 1981).

It was the regret of losing photos that actually prompted the writing, the loss of photos that I could not produce, of photos that developed invisible, ghostly and so I tried to write to bring back the sentiment that I had intended to communicate through these photos. I try to photograph people that I love or take photos when I am on vacation, sort of like everyone does, but I am such a bad technician, so I mess up many photos, and I often tried, ultimately by writing, to save what I could not successfully produce through photography.

Guibert describes writing as a process that creates scenes, evokes images, and develops characters through language. It produces something in the world that did not exist before, through a medium that grants the artist license to imagine a setting and a time that does not depend on reality. Guibert poses this productive nature of writing as a method of reconstructing what was lost, noticing that written words create something new with every reading.

Chloé Delaume, then, discusses reading and writing as forms of control. She urges us to actively participate in our exchange with the text, notice the story and deliberately accept or reject its premises. She reflects:

L'écriture comme la lecture font partie des rares activités qui me paraissent concrètes et auxquelles j'accorde de l'intérêt. Écrire est probablement le seul moyen que j'ai trouvé pour agir sur quelque chose, de manière ludique : toucher physiquement à la langue, la manier voire la manipuler.¹²⁵

Writing like reading is one of the rare activities that seems concrete to me, and in which I am interested. Writing is probably the only way that I have found to act on something, like a game: physically touch with the tongue, handle it, even manipulate it.

¹²⁵ ""Interview De Chloé Delaume"", livres.fluctuat.net <http://livres.fluctuat.net/chloe-delaume/interviews/445-noel-en-novembre.html> (accessed March 14 2011).

Delaume encourages readers to be writers, to control their own plots and to decide whose story gets told. She views writing as a malleable medium that can transform and even play with the imagination of the reader and the writer. Like Guibert, she argues that language is powerful because it can “act.” Words affect change in the world.

Meanwhile, however, language’s power depends on its reception. Words spoken to no audience make no difference. Therefore, writers must respect certain expectations that the reader brings to the text, common structures and significances that make the work legible. Guibert focuses on this constraint more explicitly than Delaume; especially in *Des Aveugles*, he explores the implications of tone and of multi-layered significance. Delaume, in contrast, poses writing as a liberating process for the writer. She focuses on her own empowerment through language, and encourages us to write our own lives, but does not focus as directly as Guibert does on our reception of her words and the effect that our expectations have on her writing. Nevertheless, she does write within the boundaries of comprehensibility. She uses puns, creates new words, and transforms the meaning of terms, but nevertheless starts from a commonly understood vocabulary, implicitly recognizing that puns are not funny unless the reader understands the two meanings in play.

Language is most powerful when approached by an active reader, who notices the work that it does on several levels: what it directly says, what it implies through discourse and tone, and how it interacts with other texts and the real world. Guibert and Delaume both present texts that reward those readers who analyze writing on these multiple levels. They challenge us to pursue questions such as, what expectations did I

bring to the text? How are they fulfilled or unrealized? How and why does the text do this?

I suggest that autofiction asks these questions of autobiography, and of the expectations that readers bring to traditional autobiographies about style, form, and content. Works of autofiction highlight our expectations by refusing to fulfill them. They do this by presenting the narrative in an unconventional manner, and consequentially expose the reader to alternative ways of thinking about the self, about life, and about writing. Taking into consideration the effects of psychology, ideology and the writing process itself, autofictional writers suggest that narration is not objective, natural, or stylistically permanent. Ultimately, there can be no “how to” guide for reading an autofiction because the texts disrupt preconceived approaches to reading. They question the givens, and challenge their readers to do the same.

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