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Configurations of Cultural Amnesia



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The salient purpose of this article is to bring to light, via a reading of a novel by French writer Hervé Guibert, who died in 1991, some of the ways in which motifs of amnesia and effacement may be employed both as themes and as formal literary devices. There is more at stake here, however, than the straightforward indication of literary themes, since writing *about* effacement and *as* effacement, and the active practice of forgetfulness also resonate with the theories of writing emergent from France in the 1960s, which to a large extent inform our current critical paradigms. Guibert's novel fictionalises these theoretical figures, suggesting that in the intellectual history of post-war France what occurs first as theory is subsequently repeated as fiction. Reading Guibert's novel can therefore suggest a reassessment of the relation between theory and fiction, and rejuvenate critical thinking about French literature after the Nouveau Roman, which to all intents and purposes, with major exceptions, of course, appears moribund.

For Maurice Blanchot, the horizon of literature's search for its essence is death, disappearance.¹ For Blanchot, literature is Orphic in nature, involving intimate contact with an experience of radical personal dispossession and a movement towards writing as the exercise of an impersonal voice. Blanchot's diagnosis in 1958, of the orientation of literature towards disappearance, proposed in the aptly titled *Le Livre à venir* (1958), was arguably realised in the textual practice of the *Tel Quel* group in the 1960s and 1970s. The novels of its principal animator Philippe Sollers (*Drame*, 1965; *Nombres*, 1968), and associates Jean-Louis Baudry (*Personnes*, 1967), Jacques Henric (*Archées*, 1969), or Jacqueline Risset (*Jeu*, 1971), abandoned the usual supports of fiction—plot, psychology, named characters. Narrative temporality, in the sense of the linking together of events in a meaningful often teleological way, was also eschewed in favour of a writing which tended to focus the reader increasingly on the present, often on the act of writing itself, in process. In Sollers's *Nombres* (1968), the difference between the tenses of the imperfect and the present allows the reader to distinguish between numbered sections in which the weight of history and ideology are felt, and the scene of the present, proposed as a transgression of this determination. Figures of consummation, expenditure, burning and effacement punctuate the writing, signalling the relation between the past and the present that is at stake.²

While to some extent these motifs reflect the influence of the thought of Blanchot's friend Georges Bataille, transposed from the dimension of philosophy into that of textual practice,³ the practice of the *Tel Quel* writers was more topically associated with the contemporary theorisation of writing proposed by Jacques Derrida, whose early articles and books were published in and by *Tel Quel*. Derrida's strategic affirmation of the disjunctive effect of writing on the metaphysics of presence, in which writing was proposed as a practice of the *trace*, undermining the stability of meaning through an active *dissemination* of sense, and unsettling orthodox understandings of temporality through the differential play of the signifier,⁴ were appropriated by *Tel Quel* in an aggressive criticism of the literary ideology of representation, and a militant textual or materialist practice, as described above. The apparent culmination of this endeavour was Sollers's novel *Paradis* (1980), an extensive unpunctuated epic, in which the multilingual and multilayered plurality of Joyce informs the same affirmative focus on the act of writing, as an end in itself, and as a transgressive and potentially redemptive break with literary history. After *Paradis*, however, Sollers was to return to apparently more recognisable novelistic forms (in *Femmes*, 1983; *Portrait du joueur*, 1986), which intensified the comic mythologisation of the author himself already evident in *Paradis* (the oeuvre of Phillip Roth might be a useful point of comparison here). Other *Tel Quel* writers also either ceased or changed direction. The purging of narrative fiction preached and practiced by *Tel Quel*, which was in France the last identifiable literary 'movement' of the twentieth century, thus led to the disappearance enigmatically foretold by Blanchot in 1958.

That the liminal site of this disappearance was Sollers's *Paradis* permits the not entirely arbitrary introduction of the principal subject of this article, Hervé Guibert's novel *Le Paradis* (1992). For both Sollers and Guibert, the motif of paradise represents a horizon beyond the phenomenal, a limit where worldly discourses cease. Both novels feature a narrator ambivalently close to the author, without being straightforward autobiographies. Where the texts differ, and where Guibert's novel may in

comparison seem to rejuvenate the practice of fiction, is in the position of the author, and in the irony and self-parody evident in Guibert's text. While in *Paradis* the autobiographical subject Philippe Sollers seems entirely subsumed in the myth of the writer, in *Le Paradis* there is a far less stable relation between fiction and world, writer/narrator and author. While Sollers is present in *Paradis*, in the mythical figure of the writer, the embodiment of exceptional literary heroism,⁵ Guibert is present in *Le Paradis*, paradoxically, in his very literal disappearance—a much less heroic 'ascension'—and in his ironic undermining of his egocentric presence, partly through the motif of amnesia. Without wishing to labour the play on words excessively, there is in *Le Paradis*, an element of parody that is lacking in Sollers's text, a parody which mocks the pretensions of its narrator to heroism, or even to ontological consistency, and opens the text out to the banality, and the horror, of the real.

In Guibert's *Le Paradis* then, this equation between writing and death is taken literally—the novel was written in the summer preceding his death, but it is also reversed: the death of the writer becomes the essence of writing. Literal, and imminent, death is already there on the horizon, as a limit towards which the writing is inexorably moving, and this proximity and imminence leads to a disinvestment from what is dispensable and a focus on what is essential: the act of writing itself. For many readers of the time, however, there was much to distract from this: Guibert's death from AIDS was spectacular, and mediatised, determined by his appearances on French TV and by the self-authored video of his own body almost visibly retreating before the virus.⁶ The spectacle of Guibert's body, already as if *given over* to death, threatens to block the reading of *Le Paradis* itself and to overdetermine any transference engagement with the text; to throw it open to the multiple contexts of a reading of the 'cultural' phenomenon of 'Hervé Guibert' or of HIV in the wider context. By offering his body as a spectacle, Guibert paralyses the contract of fictional reading which ostensibly requires a suspension of these contexts, a closure within the frame of narrative rather than a pretension to 'be everything' (*être tout*) and to say everything (*tout dire*). Such a totality—being all, or saying all—marks, as it were, the impossible limit of experience, and of discourse. Part of what I wish to show in this article is that Guibert's novel engages with precisely this crux; *Le Paradis* implies a consciousness which is already aware of the tension between the reading of this particular fiction and the extra-fictional context in which the author lives and is poignantly to die. Any reading of *Le Paradis*, a reading with death on the immediate horizon, must engage with this pretension, the desire to be everything. To read *Le Paradis* is to experience a tension between the closure of the narrative frame and the opening of the text to the 'scene of writing,' where death and the desire to be everything emerge.

This opening of narrative closure is part of the reading of the text; for that reason, this article begins with the decision to suspend any reference to biography and to the intertexts of Guibert's other works, and to the works of other writers, a decision all the more arbitrary and unjustified since the coefficient of determination by other works and other writers seems particularly marked with Guibert. Yet this suspension of contexts and intertexts is necessary in order to engage in the reading of the text, at least at first. The article begins with this decision, but the reading process inevitably causes it to crumble. As the reading approaches the end of the book, it becomes increasingly difficult to ward off the spectre of biography and of intertextuality. The horizon of death gets closer. The final full stop is the point of crisis, where reading cannot be enclosed, desires to become everything, to say everything, to ascend, so that one can say that this is a novel written, and read, as a function of its end, and as a movement towards that end. Guibert's *Le Paradis* seems to imply a reading oriented inexorably towards the physical termination of the text, which is implicitly tied in to the literal death of the narrator/author. This end is both a summation, a point of impossible totality, and nothing, a simple termination, or fading away. In both senses, the inexorable forward movement towards the end goes hand in hand with an effacement of the past. Amnesia, as we will see, is a theme exploited by the novel; at a formal level, the absence of narrative coherence, or of a consistent account of events depends on a writing of forgetfulness, which erases its traces as it goes along. Both psychologically, and textually, this forgetfulness is thematised as a liberation from the constraints of the past.

The narrative is, nevertheless, complex and non-linear, moving between different locations: Martinique, Mali and France. Situated ambiguously between fiction and autobiography, it begins with a fictional death and ends with a real one: Jayne, the narrator's lover, is killed in a swimming accident in the Caribbean, her body ripped open on a coral reef. Their trip to the Caribbean follows, in the real time of the fiction, a crisis in which the narrator falls into a coma and loses the memory of a previous trip to Mali with Jayne. Put as simply as possible, the narration follows the narrator's attempts to reconstruct the past, and Jayne's past, from fragmentary evidence, attempts which are continually frustrated by the unreliability of his memory and the effacement of sources of information about the past. Amnesia functions here as a theme which motivates the narrative: the incapacity to remember necessitates a search, and a constant movement of displacement from one faulty memory to the next.

Le Paradis is a text in which the intelligibility of narrative, the codes by which it is understandable, are undermined, not through a deliberate formal strategy, but through an indifference or a nonchalance in relation to these codes, complicit with an indulgence in the pleasure, or the necessity, of writing. Both on the level of the organisation of the narrative in 'real time' and geographic location, and on the micro-level of the images, the novel complicates any straightforward readability through the interweaving of focal points, the location of the narrative 'je' in time and space, and a tendency for images or descriptive themes to proliferate in the manner of a virus, and to reappear in different and seemingly unrelated points of the novel. Reading, I am tempted to seek for coherence, willing to accept the temporary delay of a formalistic complication of narrative codes and accepting the repetition of figures as a formal device. *Le Paradis* frustrates this desire for coherence through an indulgence in the enjoyment of writing, *la jouissance de l'écriture*, a *jouissance* apparently intensified by the imminence of death, since the fragmentary nature of the text, and the friction of the codes of literary fiction and autobiographical confession, a key element of this textual *jouissance*, are most apparent towards the end of the text.⁷

The text systematically refuses to yield symbolic meaning. The possibility of metaphors to open a space pregnant with meaning is constantly undermined through the displacement of images and their repetition in distinct contexts. The reading of metaphorical figures becomes problematic, since the images tend to repeat themselves and to *infect* other unrelated contexts. For example, the wound opened in Jayne's body by the coral reef at the beginning of the text is aestheticised and eroticised by the narrator as "une vulve tailladée par un sadique sur toute la longueur du tronc."⁸ The symbolic rape by the coral is displaced onto a fear of infection by the coral flower which, the narrator is told, "a poussée dans son ventre après sa mort" (53).⁹ The eroticised wound then reappears on the body of the narrator's aunt, whose internal organs have been removed for science: "une immense cicatrice hâtivement recousue traversait tout son corps, de la trachée au pubis" (111).¹⁰ The displacement of metaphors in the text intensifies the promise of symbolic meaning—we feel that wounds and wounding are an important thematic seam in the novel—yet this promise remains unfulfilled. On a more general level, Guibert's writing constantly breaks down the promise of its aestheticisation of experience into banality: the champagne the narrator and Jayne drink in the Caribbean is a fake bottle from South East Asia, the pistol Jayne has tattooed on her shoulder is a banal caricature, as if from a "bande dessinée" (79), the narrative as a whole is dedicated to "Miss Simpson", from the TV series (9), the African episode is associated with Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* (85).

While the text inconsistently scrambles symbolic meaning, it also features recurrent motifs of amnesia and unreadability. The Cocteau Twins and Siouxsie and the Banshees CDs Jayne was always listening to are found, after her death, to be blank (34). The police report that, according to Interpol, she does not exist. The pages of her books are uncut. The narrator's brain scan reveals "white constellations" unreadable by the doctors (132). The narrator loses his memory and cannot remember any of the names of flowers or birds that they saw in Africa. Through these figures, the novel proposes the unreadability of the narrator's experience and the progressive influence of amnesia. This unreadability and amnesia then come to affect the reader's own engagement with the text, with the effect that—in the absence of consistent, or serious, thematic, psychological or narrative points of reference—the sole

focus of the text becomes the writing and reading of the sentences, the physical act of reading. Narrative continuity is ruined by this demand for a reading which is also a proffering of unreadability, and this dynamic is imbricated with the horizon of death.

The capacity to remember and to constitute the past according to a temporal structure, however convoluted, is a necessary condition of narrative. Such a memory becomes increasingly problematic in *Le Paradis*, as the Caribbean, African and French episodes are indiscriminately interwoven, often without an indication of focal point. Spurious mini-narratives are inserted. Different episodes bleed into one another. This ostensibly modernist subversion of orthodox narrative temporality is thematised as a psychological and almost physiological incapacity on the part of the writer, who suffers from an amnesiac inability to impose temporal order on the past. He writes:

Je me souviens de mes livres, c'est la seule chose dont je me souviens précisément. Mais comment ordonner un livre? Le dater? Je ne me souviens plus de la date d'aujourd'hui... quel intérêt de dater ou de numéroter ces pages, sinon pour que le dactylo s'y retrouve. Toute la Martinique réafflue dans ma mémoire... (115)¹¹

The temporal order of the narrative is only of interest for the typographic construction of the book, and the narrator's interest is focused only on the present of the writing itself, the *now* of writing. Linear temporality is effaced behind the forward movement of the writing. This effacement of the past thus affirms the scene of writing as the plane on which experiences, of the present or the past, are written and read. Amnesia as a writing strategy displaces any other readability other than that of the sentences in their movement forward, towards the ultimate horizon of *the last sentence*. The style of Guibert's sentences has the same effect. Their extended length, using an uncomplicated syntax which piles clause upon clause, is closer to Thomas Bernhard than to Proust.¹² This extension of the sentence moves towards an abandonment of its formal closure and an indulgence in the possibly infinite proliferation of clauses. The logical conclusion of the extension of sentences through the piling of clauses upon one another is an infinitely long sentence which would have divested itself of the need for syntactic closure.¹³ The writing, then, is one which tends towards the abandonment or effacement of structure, ultimately towards its own effacement, the 'disappearance' which for Blanchot is the ultimate horizon towards which literature tends.

Amnesia is a local, thematic figure within the fiction and in the psychology of its narrator. Although Guibert's amnesia might be said to be partial and selective (he 'remembers' his amnesia, for example), it also extends beyond the level of a theme to become a figure for the text as a whole: "je suis devenu amnésiaque en une nuit. Je suis allé en Afrique pour trouver l'oubli et pour m'oublier moi-même" (114).¹⁴ The heart of the novel, the period immediately following the coma, is the symptomatic point where the narrative breaks down, to be focused only on the scene of writing. The geographic focal point of this section is undetermined; the *origin* of amnesia is also lost. This effacement of everything except the present of writing goes so far as to doubt the indexical evidence of the photograph, an "image fantôme"¹⁵ which paradoxically reveals the non-existence of its subject: "je regarde les photographies de l'Afrique et je vois bien qu'elle n'existe pas" (140).¹⁶ The unreadability of technologically reliable, indexical evidence: the blank CDs, the brain scan, the photograph, are indices of the effacement of memory and experience, progressively emptied behind the forward movement of the text. The ability to reconstruct a life is reduced to the present of the writing and this therefore assumes the whole weight of existence, becomes the only support of existence: "Quand je n'écris plus je meurs" (116).¹⁷ But the prosthetic support of writing is also threatened by this pervasive amnesia:

Laisser courir. Ne plus savoir écrire. L'écriture est aussi un réflexe moteur qui se transmet du cerveau à la main, j'ai disjoncté cette nuit. Mes souvenirs sont de la bouillasse et il n'est même pas sûr que je puisse continuer à tenir ce stylo, le mien, convenablement, pour continuer, pour me raccrocher à ça, au moins. (115)¹⁸

Writing is represented here as a reflex of the body and as a kind of life support system. But a contradictory proposition is also entertained, that writing should cease to have need of the body, of the physical apparatus, and liberate itself from the phenomenal domain:

Je suis un être double, écrivain parfois, rien d'autre les autres fois, je voudrais être un être triple, quadruple, un danseur, un gangster, un funambule, un peintre, un skieur, j'aimerais faire du delta-plane et me jeter dans le vide, foncer comme un bolide sur des pistes dont la neige serait de l'héroïne. (117)¹⁹

With the snow here functioning as an index of effacement, writing is made equivalent and interchangeable with other forms of play and ascension, which have in common a mobile and parodic relation to the real, a refusal to be taken seriously which may be the defining feature of Guibert's fiction.

This nonchalance is characteristically double-edged, however. Initially, amnesia and the disinvestment from the vestiges of narrative structure seem to result in aphasia: "j'ai ouvert la bouche, mais rien ne sortait, je ne pouvais plus parler" (114).²⁰ The positive result of this, however, is to allow other texts to speak. The narrator's localised amnesia results in a greater porosity with regard to other texts and contexts beyond the fiction. The arbitrary structure of the narrative falls away to allow an opening to the experience of the writer as he writes, an experience of his body, and to the way this writing body relates to literary history, to the body of literature. Rimbaud, Roussel and Eugène Savitzkaya appear as explicit examples in which the *trope* of Africa is evoked, on the one hand, and Nietzsche, Strindberg and Artaud appear as examples of the trope of literary madness, the limit of intelligibility on the other (117). In Roussel and Savitzkaya, as the narrator affirms, Africa exists only as a trope; it does not exist as an experience of the real—neither author ever visited Africa and their texts are not intended as descriptive, nor as travel documents as their titles suggest, but as highly figurative and ludic exploitations of Africa as a literary stereotype. The literary trope of Africa (the projection of an image onto it) effaces the experience of having been there:

Je n'arrive plus à croire que je suis allé en Afrique... Tout s'est effacé. Je ne suis pas fou. Où était-ce déjà?.. J'ai déjà inventé des fictions de ce genre, raconté des voyages que je n'ai jamais faits, comme Eugène Savitzkaya pour sa *Traversée de l'Afrique* ou Raymond Roussel pour ses *Impressions d'Afrique*, deux livres que je vais relire pour retrouver l'odeur et la couleur d'Afrique... (126)²¹

At this point in the narrative, where its effacement through writing has a retroactive effect on the narrative, phenomenal experience of the past is in doubt. The more pertinent reference is to Rimbaud's experience in Africa, since, as he understands it, it is an experience of the effacement of the self:

je suis allé en Afrique pour trouver l'oubli et m'oublier moi-même, Rimbaud pour effacer son passé en devient chasseur d'éléphants... (116)²²
Rimb. ne m'a rien appris sur l'Afrique, sinon qu'on y va pour s'abîmer, pour se perdre, pour s'effacer de la carte, pour s'y griller, pour s'y ruiner, pour y être oublié, pour s'ennuyer d'un ennui mortel. (140)²³

Guibert taps into the literary motif whereby 'Africa' stands for an experience of effacement of the European self, a myth exploited by Gide, Conrad, Céline, and in Guibert's (imaginative) account, Rimbaud.²⁴

This opening to other texts also introduces the spectre of biography, so that there is a blurring of the dividing line between the narrator in the fiction, and the author, Hervé Guibert, writing the fiction. The name appears only once, in the context of a psychiatrist's report on the health of his patient, "Monsieur Guibert Hervé" (122). Already, the horizon of death, the real death of the author, is signalled by the amnesia and exhaustion apparent in the writing. This reading is moreover programmed by the spectacular apparatus around the text. The *quatrième page de la couverture* tells us :

*Hervé Guibert est né le 14 décembre 1955 et mort le 27 décembre 1991. Ce roman a été écrit pendant l'été 1991.*²⁵

The suggestion, all the more explicit because understated, is that *this is Guibert's last book and he was writing it just before he died*. With the narrative more or less abandoned, the biographical spectre becomes overdetermining of the reading. We know that this writing takes place under the shadow of imminent death. The text's play with effacement and amnesia is an index of this imminence, which also extends to the spectre of AIDS. We are told that neither Jayne nor the narrator is affected, yet the use of figures of infection suggests it, setting up another unfulfilled promise of meaning. AIDS is moreover imbricated with the trope of Africa as the mythical origin of the disease:

les singes verts m'ont fauché en Afrique mes cotons-tiges pour se les fourrer Dieu sait où. Un singe avec un coton-tige, vous voyez un peu le tableau. Un singe avec une mitraillette qui tire dans la foule les yeux bandés. (120)²⁶

The narrator hallucinates « mon singe vert empaillé qui a transmis le sida à l'homme s'est mis à bondir vers moi » (121).²⁷ For a psychoanalytic reading, the novel is a palimpsest on which the anxieties of the writing consciousness are represented as fantasies which depend upon the repression of the traumatic content: AIDS and imminent death. But Guibert's titling of the novel *Le Paradis* suggests a different option: that he is constructing a different kind of death, an ascension through writing, willfully effacing the past and the continent of Africa as the origin of the disease. This ascension through writing tends towards its limit, the end of writing, which can be read in the novel as the risk of two different kinds of aphasia. Roman Jakobson, in an important article, suggested that aphasia, the incapacity to construct meaning, followed two axes: the syntagmatic axis (the ability to relate one word to another on the horizontal plane of syntax) and the paradigmatic axis (the incapacity to choose the right word on the vertical axis of meaning) (115-33). If the incapacity to construct meaning syntactically is prefigured in the fragmented form of the narrative and the incapacity to date and number pages, the inability to construct meaning paradigmatically is foreshadowed when the narrator writes of Rimbaud that he fled to an Africa,

loin de ses frasques de jeunesse et de son écriture d'antan. Les mots sont de plus en plus doubles, j'ai failli écrire enfant, ça sonne pareille et la dactylo n'aurait pu rétablir ce mot une fois que je serais incapable de me relire et de me corriger, et à quoi bon tout ce tintouin pour un mot qui n'est pas un contresens de surcroît. (115)²⁸

The tendency to confuse one word with another moves away from the specificity of this word, this narrative, and towards the horizon where no words are possible, but where, at the same time, all words are possible. This aphasia is fantasised as a different kind of death, an effacement of the limits of the individual and the assumption of that discontinuity into a continuity, into the possibility of all words, all language. The end of the writing, instead of the collapse of physical decrepitude, is represented as a final effacement of the past and of the discontinuity of experience behind the present instant of writing; the final full stop is not a closure but the opening out of the writing to 'everything' and to the potential infinity of its reading. The novel ends with the following sequence:

L'Afrique ne coïncide pas avec la Martinique. Tout exotisme en Afrique est déjà calciné en lui-même. À mon retour du Mali, j'avais cru comprendre que l'homme n'était rien ni personne. Et j'aurais pu aussi bien dire qu'il était tout. (140-41)²⁹

The desire to be all projects the writing into totality and continuity and negates the death of the individual as such. This assumption into totality, not unlike the end of Cyril Collard's film *Les Nuits fauves* which ends with the viewpoint literally taking off into the sky, is, perhaps, the response to the imminence of death; a desire to be assumed into writing, to the *paradis* of the projected totality of readings.

The novel, then, enacts a process of exhaustion and effacement of its narrative and an indulgence in writing as a pleasure, but also as a necessity, a survival, moving towards the horizon of the end of writing as an assumption to 'paradise.' Reading it becomes an experience of the frustration of a desire

for coherence on the level of the narrative, and a corresponding intensification of the engagement of the text with biography. Narrative structure becomes increasingly difficult to grasp as the text assumes an 'unbearable lightness,' almost not significant, almost not meaningful, almost indifferent to its reading; Guibert's style might be said to reside entirely in the space of that *almost*. This margin is, however, what allows the text to have some purchase on the real, rather than being entirely subsumed into the articulation of a theory of writing or the expansion of the myth of the writer as exception.

¹ Cf. Blanchot, «La littérature va vers elle-même, vers son essence qui est la disparition,» *Le Livre à venir*, 289.

² See ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel* and Forest for accounts of *Tel Quel*.

³ See ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* for an account of the influence of Bataille on the *Tel Quel* group. The motif of expenditure, in particular, resonates with Bataille's 'heretical' economics, as proposed in "La Notion de dépense."

⁴ See Derrida's *L'écriture et la différence* for an initial elaboration of these *topoi*. It is in an article on Bataille, included in this collection of essays, that Derrida links the *trace* of writing with the economics of expenditure. See «De l'économie restreinte à l'économie générale » in *L'écriture et la différence*.

⁵ Sollers's collection of essays, *Théorie des exceptions*, proposes a celebration of the writer as exceptional with regard to the norm.

⁶ Guibert was interviewed by Bernard Pivot on the French TV show *Apostrophes* on 16th March 1990. The film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* was shown in 1992 shortly after Guibert's death. Determined also by the 'revelations' of Guibert's autobiographical fiction *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* this spectacular dimension may now not be so prevalent. See Boulé.

⁷ See Barthes.

⁸ 'a vulva ripped open by a sadist the whole length of her torso'. Guibert, *Le Paradis*, 11. Further references to the novel will be in parentheses following quotations. All translations are my own.

⁹ 'grew in her womb after her death.'

10] 'a massive and hastily sewed scar ran across her body from the throat to the pubis.'

¹¹ 'I remember my books, it's the only thing I remember precisely. But can a book be organized? By dates? I don't remember today's date...what would be the point in dating or numbering these pages, except if it is so the typist can find her way. All the time in Martinique merges into one in my memory.'

¹² The narrator refers to a novel by Thomas Bernhard (*Concrete*) about a writer's incapacity to assemble notes into a coherent structure. *Le Paradis* 59.

¹³ Philippe Sollers's *Paradis* and *Paradis II*—titles to which Guibert undoubtedly intended reference with his own—perhaps serve Guibert with a quasi-mythical reference point. Sollers's novels include no punctuation, and, since the text continues serially in certain issues of the review *L'Infini*, it may end only with the death of the author. The difference between the two novels may be explored in the relative positions accorded to the writer-narrator figure. If Sollers fosters, so to speak, the cult of his own personality and the expansion of the ego, the predominant motif in Guibert's text is of dissipation, and, as suggested above, the parodic undermining of the persona of the author.

¹⁴ 'I have become amnesiac in one night. I went to Africa to find oblivion and to forget myself.'

¹⁵ 'phantom image.' The motif of the phantom image is a recurrent trope in Guibert's writing on photography, and indeed in his own photography. See *L'Image fantôme* 16.

¹⁶ 'I look at the photographs of Africa and I can see perfectly well that it does not exist.'

¹⁷ 'When I am not writing I die.'

¹⁸ 'Let it run on. No longer to know how to write. Writing is also a motor reflex which is transmitted from the brain to the hand. Last night I disconnected. My memories are mush, and it is not even certain that I can continue to hold this pen properly, my pen, so as to, at least, hold on to that.'

¹⁹ 'I am a doubled being, sometimes a writer, nothing the rest of the time, I would like to be a triple being, quadruple, a dancer, a gangster, a tightrope walker, a painter, a skier, I would like to do snowboarding and throw myself into the void, to push off like a bobsled on snow slopes made of heroin.'
[20] 'I opened my mouth but nothing came out, I could not speak.'

²¹ 'I have come to the point of no longer believing that I went to Africa... Everything has been effaced. I am not mad. Where was it again? I have already invented fictions of this kind, narrated trips I never made, like Eugène Savitzkaya for his *Crossing Africa* or Raymond Roussel for his *Impressions of Africa*, two books I am going to read again to find the smell and the colour of Africa...'

²² 'I went to Africa to find oblivion and to forget myself, Rimbaud became an elephant hunter to wipe away his past.'

²³ 'Rimb. Taught me nothing about Africa except that you go there to go to hell, to get lost, to wipe yourself off the map, to get burnt, to be ruined, to be forgotten, to get bored to death.'

²⁴ Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902), Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (also 1902) and Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) all feature white European protagonists whose journeys into Africa involve them in experiences of physical, moral and rational crisis. For a less mythified version of Rimbaud's experience in Africa, see Borer or Robb.

²⁵ 'Hervé Guibert was born on the 14th of December 1955 and died on the 27th of December 1991. This novel was written in the summer of 1991.'

²⁶ '...the green monkeys filched my cotton buds to stick them God knows where. A monkey with a cotton-bud—you get the picture. A blindfolded monkey firing into the crowd with a machine gun.'

²⁷ '...my stuffed green monkey who gave AIDS to humans running towards me.'

²⁸ 'far from his youthful indiscretions and his former writing. Words are more and more double, I almost wrote child, it sounds like it and the typist would not have been able to correct it when I become unable to read and correct my own stuff and what is all this racket for a word which is not another misnomer.'

²⁹ 'Africa does not coincide with Martinique. Any exoticism in Africa has already calcified inside. After coming back from Mali I thought I understood that man was nothing and nobody. And I could equally well have said he was everything.'

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