



On the Limits of Autobiography and Not Getting to Age: How Hervé Guibert did not Go Gently in *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and *Cytomégalovirus*

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Abstract

This paper discusses two works by Hervé Guibert, a French author who was an influential voice in the public debates surrounding AIDS in the early 1990s. It examines how his post-diagnosis novels play with the autobiographical genre, rejecting the conception of autobiography as a monument to the aged man, a stable subject reflecting on

and recasting his life as purposeful and fulfilled. Instead, Guibert highlights his lack of control or authorship over his life and confronts his own youth mainly through the anti-theoretical way he portrays his friend and mentor, Michel Foucault, reclaiming subjectivity in a series of political texts.





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When he was diagnosed with AIDS in January 1988, Hervé Guibert started a series of autobiographical works, novels, photographs and a film, *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1992), recording the effects of the disease on his body, mind, mobility, and social life. His major literary publications of this period are *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) and *Le Protocole compassionnel* (1991), published during his lifetime, and *Cytomégalo-virus: journal d'hospitalisation* and *L'homme au chapeau rouge*, which were published posthumously (1992). In these works, Guibert rejects the autobiographical work as a retrospective monument to the self as it is conceived of in classic Western humanist conceptions, in which: “[i]n recounting my life, I attest to myself beyond my death, in order to conserve this precious capital that must not disappear” (Gusdorf 106);¹ instead, he chooses to devote his final creative energy to exploring and sharing publically the disintegrating self.

Guibert's work was important in opening up the public discussion of AIDS in France (cf. Caron, Chambers) and has also been read as a form of therapy to “fulfil the function of reconciling the self with its body” (Boulé 208). However, these frameworks of analysis, focusing on Guibert's victimhood rather than his agency, cannot account fully for the power of Guibert's creative act. This paper focuses on *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and *Cytomégalo-virus* to consider Guibert's subversion of the traditional genre of what may be called, in short-hand, the “monumental autobiography” containing a representation of a unified self as theorised by Georges Gusdorf. Through sharing intimate details of his illness and struggle, Guibert portrays himself as unable to control his own life or writing, whereas monumental autobiography is an exercise in authorial control. Throughout the text, Guibert playfully confronts the fact that he will not survive past youth and will not experience the ageing that is a requisite of monumental autobiography. This is especially apparent in the way in which he contrasts his story with that of his close friend Muzil, who was upon publication widely recognized as the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Where Muzil, true to the role of older mentor that he fulfils in

1. “En racontant ma vie, je m'atteste par delà ma mort, afin que se conserve ce capital précieux qui ne doit pas disparaître.” Translations in this article are my own.





the text, curates his living legacy, Guibert's untimely death does not allow him to write the autobiography that is the property of the "ageing man who wonders if his life has not been in vain" (Gusdorf 15).² Guibert revolts against this conception of autobiographical legacy, inverting its basic premise; instead of creating a unified representation of self, Guibert chooses to express his subjectivity through what may be termed, using one of his own metaphors, a "phagocytical" writing process. Ross Chambers has considered how AIDS diaries offered authors "a certain mode of transfiguration or transubstantiation, and hence of survival" (4), but the radical nature of Guibert's project becomes more apparent when read as a curse and a rejection of legacy and survival. It is not any representation of the author that survives in these works, but the illocutionary power of the writing that stays in effect, like a curse—a power which does not rely on the illusion of a stable subjectivity: the normative requirement of autobiography which AIDS victims were disallowed.

"J'étais le Cri de Munch":³ loss of control, loss of self

In *À l'ami*, Guibert describes the disastrous effects AIDS has on the gay community he belongs to⁴ and his desperate failed attempt to get access to a cure through his manipulative and ultimately deceitful acquaintance, Bill. Despite being the ostensibly non-fictionalised journal of a hospital stay in which Guibert records his thoughts and experiences, *Cytomégalovirus* can be read as the furthest extension of the project started with *À l'ami*. The works perform the same gesture of phagocytical subjectivity, in which the subject is not defined by its life history or any individual essence, but by its present reaction to its surroundings: the force of resisting becoming the object of a medical gaze.

Guibert's texts rehearse the lack of control the subject has over itself and its surroundings on a thematic level as well as stylistically. In

2. "d'un homme vieillissant qui se demande si sa vie n'a pas été vécue en vain"

3. *À l'ami* 104.

4. Guibert-narrator. However, because Guibert refers to himself by his proper name in the narrative and purposefully obfuscates the divide between fact and fiction, I will refer to both the writer and the character as Guibert, relying on the establishment of the autobiographical pact theorised by Philippe Lejeune.





À *l'ami*, he describes his powerlessness during the AIDS crisis, both to save his infected friends and to govern his own fate, which he feels to be fully in the hands of his acquaintance Bill, who falsely claims to have access to a miraculous cure. Guibert is constantly moving between medical institutions spiritually, as he craves more certainty about his fate, and physically, as he has to travel all over town to give blood. As the most intimate facets of his life become the common property of doctors, Guibert suddenly finds himself in the position of the old and infirm. He is no longer in possession of himself, as is symbolised in the frequent musings he has about the significance of doctors taking his blood: “I felt my blood suddenly discovered, laid bare [...] I had to live, now, with this naked and exposed blood, like the unclothed corpse that has to cross [a] nightmare” (14).⁵ This alienation from himself and his identification with youth, beauty and vitality results in an apprehension about his image in front of medical staff and his friends. He muses: “The trouble is not so much with retaining a human look as it is with getting a look that is too human, like those prisoners in *Nuit et Brouillard*, the documentary about the concentration camps” (14).⁶

Guibert’s physical and emotional mobility are mirrored in the long meandering sentences he frequently employs. An example of this occurs in fragment 18, of which the first sentence spans three pages, describing a harrowing trip to an abandoned hospital “to have an astronomic quantity of blood drawn from me, my blood stolen from me in that institute for public health for purposes I do not know [...]” (49).⁷ In a style resembling stream-of-consciousness, the sentence migrates from the present to a future phone call to Dr. Chandi, to the past trip to the hospital, to the possible uses of his blood, etc. This dazzling enumeration within a single sentence echoes the disorienting effect the medical world and the mobility required to navigate it have on Guibert. It also conveys the speed of writing that

5. “j’ai senti mon sang tout à coup découvert, mis à nu [...] Il me fallait vivre, désormais, avec ce sang dénudé et exposé, comme le corps dévêtu qui doit traverser le cauchemar”
6. “Le souci n’est plus tant de conserver un regard humain que d’acquérir un regard trop humain, comme celui des prisonniers de *Nuit et brouillard*, le documentaire sur les camps de concentration”
7. “pour me faire soutirer une quantité astronomic de sang, voler mon sang dans cet institut de santé publique aux fins de je ne sais quelles expériences”





Guibert feels is integral to finishing his project – early in the narrative he announces he will only give himself seven days to finish his story (48). This sense of urgency, too, stems from his lack of control: the course of *À l'ami* follows the countdown of Guibert's T4 count, the diminishing of active antibodies in the bloodstream characteristic of AIDS. His T4 count is integral in propelling and raising the stakes of the narrative and as a deciding factor in the plot: determining whether or not he is eligible for the experimental medication Bill claims to have access to.

À l'ami's neat organization into one hundred short fragments contrasts with the complex composition of the book. Guibert jumps around between the time of writing, the unfolding of the AIDS panic that culminates in Muzil's death and memories that date much further back. The characters that enter his story, as well as the timeline of the backstory, are determined by their relation to Guibert's disease rather than their relation to the author himself, as is more characteristic of monumental autobiography. Declining to take up the privileged hindsight of a "finished" life, he condenses his life into a "chronology which marks and signposts the augurs of the disease [...] which becomes my schema, except when I discover that the progression is born from disorder" (59).⁸

In many respects, *Cytomégalo*virus is a mirror image of the mobility of *À l'ami*. Guibert has by that point lost physical control over his life, tethered to an IV drip with a broken foot, confined to his room. Having lost all vitality, by this point he no longer has his own property or any say in the rhythm of his day. The main concern of the work is whether he will go blind. The sentences are short and often fragmented, reflecting the toll writing now takes on the author. Free association is a major compositional strategy, again underlining a loss of control, bringing in poetic images by literalised metaphors and memories of his former life. An instance of this is the transition in which he links a mundane sound to the moving personal memory of a cherished holiday: "the helicopters [...] land on the roof of the hospital with their seriously injured. It's been somewhere between fifteen

8. "chronologie qui cerne et balise les augures de la maladie [...] qui devient mon schéma, sauf quand je découvre que la progression naît du désordre"





days and three months since I took the helicopter, in good shape, to Bora Bora” (31).⁹

*Cytomégalo*virus’s free association compositional strategy is the final extension of a loss of grip over the narrative’s course that is set up in the first few pages of *À l’ami*. Initially, Guibert tells the reader he began the book because he believed he would miraculously escape death. In the first section, he writes: “an extraordinary coincidence made me believe, practically assured me that I could escape this illness that the whole world still considers incurable [...] I would become, thanks to that extraordinary coincidence, one of the first survivors of that inexorable disease” (9).¹⁰ If this escape had manifested it would have given Guibert’s tale a more conventional narrative structure, casting Guibert as the neat subject of the AIDS survivor, one of the extraordinary men that merit monumental autobiographies. The next section, however, already brings into doubt the idea that the narrative will unfold as planned: “I don’t know whether this salvation is a lure that has been laid out before me to trap me into appeasement, or whether it is truly a science fiction of which I will be one of the heroes—I don’t know whether it is ridiculously human of me to believe in this grace and miracle” (10).¹¹ Even after acknowledging that “this book has its *raison d’être* only in the fringe of uncertainty, which all the sick of the world have in common” (11),¹² he still expresses his surprise when the story goes in unexpected directions: “My book, my companion, has already begun to lead me by the nose” (12).¹³

9. “les hélicoptères [...] se posent sur le toit de l’hôpital avec leurs blessés graves. Il y a entre quinze jours et trois mois je prenais l’hélicoptère, en bonne forme, à Bora Bora”

10. “un hasard extraordinaire me fit croire, et me donna quasiment l’assurance que je pourrais échapper à cette maladie que tout le monde donnait encore pour incurable [...] je serais, par ce hasard extraordinaire, un des premiers survivants au monde de cette maladie inexorable”

11. “je ne sais si ce salut est un leurre qu’on a tendu devant moi comme une embuscade pour m’apaiser, ou s’il est pour de bon une science-fiction dont je serais un des héros, je ne sais s’il est ridiculement humain de croire à cette grâce et à ce miracle”

12. “ce livre n’a sa raison d’être que dans cette frange d’incertitude, qui est commune à tous les malades du monde”

13. “Mon livre, mon compagnon [...] a déjà commencé à me mener par le bout du nez”





**“Comme Muzil, j’aurais aimé avoir la force”:¹⁴
contrasting Muzil and Guibert**

Guibert’s prolonged ambivalent engagement with the simultaneous loss of his youth and the prospects of old age is reflected in frequent contrasting references in the works. In *À l’ami* he decides to cut his “cherub’s” golden locks, making him look much older and resemble more closely his bitter self (89). At the end of *Cytomégalo* Guibert remains placid at the discovery that none of his doctors have informed him that his medication renders him sterile, unable to occupy the role of parent, hallmark of adulthood (“Whatever fucking good would fucking do me now anyway?” 92).¹⁵ *À l’ami* ends with the observation that “the *mise en abîme* of my book now closes on me [...] my muscles have melted. I have finally found again the legs and arms of my childhood” (267).¹⁶

Guibert’s friend Muzil embodies the connection between monumental autobiography and age that is of structural importance to Guibert’s project; Guibert contrasts his maturity with his own youth, as becomes clear from his surprise when he first sees the athleticism of Muzil’s uncovered body (98), and the affluence of his childhood home (113), aspects of Muzil’s youth that formed no part of the way Guibert knew him.¹⁷

The reticent way Muzil deals with his illness contrasts with Guibert’s urge to write about the effects of the disease. Muzil adheres to the strict separation of his work and his private life and keeps full control over his public image. Muzil develops an obsession with obliterating his own name; he no longer wants to write under it, and does not want any posthumous publications of his work, beseeching his friends to destroy his manuscripts after his death (29). Eager to continue work on his current project, Muzil’s only response to his diagnosis was to ask: “How much time is left?” (32), as “[t]hat was the only question of importance to him, for his work, to finish his book” (32-33).¹⁸

14. *À l’ami* 15.

15. “Je lis [...] que le DHPJ, l’antiviral que l’on me perfuse tous les jours, bloque de façon irréversible la reproduction de sperme, mais qu’est-ce que j’ai à foutre de foutre à présent?”

16. “La mise en abîme de mon livre se referme sur moi. [...] Mes muscles ont fondu. J’ai enfin retrouvé mes jambes et mes bras d’enfant.”

17. On Guibert and Foucault’s relationship, see Miller.

18. “Combien de temps?” avait-il demandé. C’était la seule question qui lui importait, pour son travail, pour finir son livre”





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Muzil excises an a-temporal version of himself from the realities that surround him, attempting to create what Gusdorf calls a “unity of a life across time” in his work (117). His stoic control is antithetical to Guibert’s project of openness. Guibert is aware that Muzil would strongly object to him sharing the intimate details of his illness “like a spy, like an adversary” (98).¹⁹

It becomes clear that this text is not just an example of the “dual autobiography,” a pattern of representing another’s death before one’s own, which Chambers discerns in many AIDS narratives (7). Despite their shared experience of suffering from AIDS, Guibert does not live out the same fate, or have the same response, as Muzil. Where Muzil says, “One always believes that there would be something to say about such a situation, but there is precisely nothing to say” (94), Guibert starts to record his surroundings.²⁰ In the face of dehumanising medical and media discourses, Guibert chooses not to create a unified representation of himself as an artist and intellectual to comply with normative expectations, but instead asserts his subjectivity by capturing his momentary responses to what happens to him.

*“Écrire dans le noir? Écrire jusqu’au bout?”*²¹

Speaking of *Cytomégalovirus*, Clara Orban suggests that “Guibert is obsessed with recording everything that happens around him, which will allow him to retain his dignity in the face of the humiliating circumstances in the hospital” (83). Even though he is sharing intimate personal and physical details, Guibert retains his dignity by asserting his subjectivity on his own terms, since “[i]f one does not resist, does not run, one is crushed. It is better to stay a human being than a cake of boiled blood” (24).²²

In an influential interview Guibert gave with the television program *Apostrophes*, he expressed his experiences with AIDS in terms of

19. “comme un espion, comme un adversaire”

20. “On croit toujours, d’un tel type de situation qu’il y aura quelque chose à en dire, et voilà qu’il n’y a justement rien à en dire”

21. *Cytomégalovirus* 93.

22. “il vaut mieux rester un être humain qu’une galette de bouillie de sang”





phagocytosis, the manner in which a cell engulfs pathogens floating in the body in order to neutralize them: “Such a colonization was like a phagocytosis of my own writing, with moments in which I defended myself” (*Apostrophes*).²³ The notion of phagocytosis is also productive for looking at the act of Guibert’s writing.²⁴ Through the active witnessing, processing and making outside factors part of his self-portrait, Guibert neutralises objectifying forces that render him merely “Other and sick” (Caron 113). Even medical terms (“I adore using jargon!” *Cytomégalovirus* 15) are appropriated and toyed with, for instance when he plays on words describing candida, which was a frequent symptom of AIDS: “One could draw up a humorous dictionary of AIDS terms: the candidate [*le candidat*] is a fungus [*champignon*] who declares his candidacy for taking over power in your throat, your oesophagus, your stomach” (21).²⁵ There are no objective facts to govern Guibert’s story; they are subsumed and neutralised by the subject in writing.

Susan Hekman has suggested that “the question of agency is inseparable from the question of creativity. Agents are subjects that create, that construct unique combinations of elements in expressive ways” (203). Guibert’s agency, then, is located in the subjectivity he expresses in writing. David Caron has observed that Guibert avoids representing himself along the lines of popular cultural schemata such as that of the “repentant son” (Caron 120) and that this is part of a project of redefining “subjectivity, no longer in terms of the wholeness and health that had defined the modern subject, but rather in terms of disease” (113). This reading resonates with Pierre Boulé’s suggestion of placing Guibert’s work in a newly coined genre of “existential thanatography” which aims to get as close to death as possible (226). The notion that Guibert reinvents subjectivity, however, can be further radicalised: Guibert’s presence in the

23. “cette colonisation comme ça, c’était comme un phagocytage de ma propre écriture avec aussi des moments quand je me défendais”

24. See also Noémie Christen, who focuses similarly on the self-reappropriating function of Guibert’s art when she coins the term “automédiation” for his various autobiographical representations, to rhyme with “automédication” (40).

25. “On pourrait dresser un dictionnaire humoristique des termes du sida: le candidat est un champignon qui pose sa candidature pour prendre le pouvoir dans votre gorge, votre œsophage, votre estomac”





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writing is not that of the diseased subject robbed of his former youthful glory, but instead that of a vindictive reactive agent, who haunts through the lasting power he exerts over his surroundings.

*“Pends-toi Bill!”*²⁶

Guibert’s phagocytical appropriation is most forceful when it concerns other people. In *Cytomégalo*virus, many of his frank comments regard hospital personnel and his fellow patients. For instance, he blatantly disapproves of a particular nurse with an Asian appearance and records a humiliating rant including insults like “she has turned very yellow and rigid [...] I said, ‘You must have been speaking Chinese (the yellow of her skin?), and I some completely different language, that’s why we didn’t understand each other’” (42-3).²⁷ In *À l’ami*, a main thread of appropriation can be found in the details he shares about his friends’ lives, most notably in his portrayal of Foucault and actress friend Isabelle Adjani (“Marine”). The manner in which he discusses Foucault’s illness has often been considered a “betrayal” of the philosopher’s memory (cf. *Apostrophes*, Caron, Boulé), especially as it was not widely known he had died as a result of AIDS. The discussion of the unidentified figure of Bill, to whom the book is ostensibly dedicated, stands out as the most aggressive appropriation. In the *Apostrophes* interview, Guibert declared that “the book was [his] instrument to kill him.” He makes public all Bill’s unpleasant characteristics and his ultimate betrayal when he does not supply Guibert with the medication he promised, giving him a peculiar power of revenge over the American.²⁸

À l’ami ends with a literal curse: “I am in deep shit. [...] Fuck you, Bill!” (267).²⁹ Equally, the whole project may be read as a curse. As an ill-wishing with a mandate exactly contained within its wording, the curse is a performative utterance which affects lives beyond the confines of one’s own direct sphere of action. As has been established earlier, the writer stages

26. *À l’ami* 267.

27. “Elle est devenue tellement jaune et tellement figée [...] j’ai dit: ‘Vous avez dû parler chinois (le jaune de sa peau?) et moi une tout autre langue, c’est pour ça qu’on ne s’est pas compris’”

28. “le livre est mon instrument pour le tuer”

29. “Je suis dans la merde. Jusqu’où souhaitez-tu me voir sombrer? Pends-toi Bill!”





an explicitly discursive subjectivity, an errant presence that is bound by the facts of his illness, different medical institutions and discourses, social spheres, acquaintances, and literary influences. However, this changeable position in no way implies any reduced authority in the voice of the author; his ability to reveal details about or slander specific people, his powerful uncovering of the inner workings of dehumanising institutions like the hospital, and his permanent capture of the different states of his thinning body under siege, do not contribute to the survival of Guibert as a stable subject, but carry the illocutionary force of the curse that survives through the text. Ross Chambers suggests that, in their act of witnessing, writers survive through their AIDS diaries as “the telling of the story *survives* the story that is told [...]” (4). Attention to the way in which the text exerts agency that is not bound to any particular conception of self allows this thesis to be made more radical; it is not any particular image or representation of the author that survives, as it does in the autobiography of the “ageing man,” but rather the force of the text proper that remains, quite literally, to haunt the living, to harm those that Guibert feels have harmed him.

Conclusion

ACT UP-Paris, a French organization for the relief of AIDS, took a severe dislike to Guibert’s writing, which they considered an a-political, self-aggrandizing universalization of a socially and politically specific crisis (Caron 112). His texts, however, can be read profoundly politically. By not becoming an accessory to the fiction of the unified subject which is at the foundation of the monumental autobiography and is the property of ageing men, and choosing instead to construct a discursive subjectivity, Guibert subverts canonical (hetero-)normative conceptions of what valorises self-expression. The way in which Guibert contrasts his youth with Muzil’s perceived maturity, highlighting the contrast between Muzil’s control and his own relinquishing and rejection of autobiographical control forcefully drives this message home. By phagocytically subsuming the surroundings he and his writing are at the mercy of, Guibert is able to powerfully





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appropriate alien forces that would otherwise force him to be no more than a name on a vial of blood, and constructs a voice that will continue to haunt undiminished after the author's passing.

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Biography

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