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Contemporary First Person Narrative and the Democratic Practice of Reading

Vanessa Doriott Anderson

1 For contemporary Western nations like France and the United States, democracy is currently considered the best, most enlightened form of government available by the majority of citizens and political actors alike. I begin this discussion of literature and democracy, then, from the premise that democracy, as both an ideal and a practice, is a central thread in the cultural and political fabric of these nations;
that, while the "true" or "right" form of democracy may be continually contested by various constituents, the principle of democracy contains significant value in such societies. Because of the varied (and sometimes opposing) political, cultural, and social uses to which it is applied and adapted, *democracy* is a slippery term, one that has acquired new meanings and connotations over time. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following as its primary definition of democracy:

> Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In mod. use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege.[1]

2 Embedded in democracy, then, are notions of power, equality, representation, and the actions of individuals as well as communities. From my perspective, these are also precisely the issues with which literature is concerned. More precisely, they are the issues that haunt contemporary French literature.

3 Given this broad political and social definition of democracy, we might choose to define democratic literature in a number of different ways. We might, for example, emphasize the law of the marketplace (bestselling books are democratic), or the broad range of distribution schemes (books promoted by talk show hosts are democratic). We might consider that diversity of either authors or readers are markers of a democratic literary marketplace (multicultural or globalized literature is democratic), or that increased

accessibility to the written word constitutes a kind of popular and therefore democratic literary sphere (self-published, digitally published, and free books are democratic). All of these approaches to defining democratic literature provide us with a quantifiable means of measuring the relationship between books and their public through the interplay among authors, markets, and consumers. As such, they constitute essential parts of the life of a text, but they nevertheless remain *outside* of its covers. In this article, I would like to propose a definition of democratic literature that is also characterized by the narrative strategies employed by the author, and the interpretive strategies employed by the reader. In my view, then, democratic literature can be defined as a literature that requires the reader's direct participation in order to succeed. It is a literature that interpellates its readers, challenges them, creates a space for them within the narrative and demands a response. As critics, we routinely acknowledge the fact that texts rely on the attention, if not the benevolence, of their readers in order to survive the vicissitudes of time and opinion. The democratic literature that I am imagining overtly exposes this life-or-death relationship between the text and its reader.

4 In my conception of a democratic literature, then, the relationship between the author and reader as mediated through the text is paramount. For this reason, I consider that first person narrative offers particularly exciting opportunities to achieve "a more perfect union" between author and reader, and therefore contains the potential to embody a democratic approach to literature. In this article, I will explore contemporary first person narrative as a potentially democratic literary phenomenon; while my field of study is French literature, I refer also to the American literary landscape as it has informed my own readership of the texts under discussion here. By discussing the preconceptions and red herrings associated with the interpretation of first person narrative through time, I will suggest an alternate strategy for reading the most challenging and therefore potentially rich of these texts. Finally, I will analyze in greater detail an author, Hervé Guibert, who crystallizes many of the concerns laid out here, arguing that the misconceptions, misreceptions, and red herrings associated with his work prevent us from fully grasping its democratic – and therefore political – potential.

5 My suggestion in this article is that first person narratives offer both authors and readers a privileged location from which to read and write democratically. This is not to say, of course, that other narrative forms, such as third person omniscience, are inherently undemocratic; rather, it is to insist on the special relationship between author and reader that first person narrative is positioned, almost by default, to offer. I consider this relationship to be one of interpellation: the "I" of the text necessarily implies a corresponding "you." This space of readerly otherness can be alternately embraced or diverted by the author, and similarly accepted or denied by the reader; nonetheless, the potential for a "you" to join the "I" in a first person narrative text constitutes one of its defining characteristics. I refer to the *potential* presence of this space for readerly otherness in the first person narrative text precisely because some first person narratives utterly subvert this dialectic. I am thinking here of a text like Albert Camus's *La Chute*, in which the reader's textual space, the "you" that corresponds to the narrator's "I", is doubled by a fictional interlocutor who only exists through the narrator's commentary. The questions that the narrator answers, the comments he makes about his interlocutor, are in actuality directed to the reader, making us all into masculine, bourgeois lawyers in the image of Jean-Baptiste

Clamence. This narrator, who continually doubles himself to the ultimate exclusion of the reader, displaces us from the text even as he calls us to it. I suggest, then, that this text is not only undemocratic, but tyrannical in its interpellation of the reader – which is exactly the point of the novel. Clamence's textual dictatorship serves as a literary response to the public feud with Sartre that challenged Camus's ability to define himself as a thinker and writer in the public sphere. *La Chute* enacts the very powerlessness of the overdetermined reader in this feud, which was itself conducted through a series of publications[2].

6 Autobiographically inflected first person narrative has often been read through a lens of suspicion since the acknowledged – if occasionally disputed – founding of the genre in its classical form with the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in the late eighteenth century. While we may well associate the fragmented, infinitely malleable and multiplied subject with postmodernism, I suggest that contemporary suspicions about autobiographical narrative – implying, in their most extreme versions, that it is a narcissistic hodgepodge of singularly unimaginative lies and even worse, completely unclassifiable – began with this complex and controversial text. Rousseau's *Confessions*, written by a man who had been exiled from his beloved Geneva and considered himself marginalized by mainstream society, embodies the many anxieties and contradictions that underpin both the production of autobiographical texts and their reception. The political, social, moral, and literary stew that gave rise to *The Confessions*, as well as Rousseau's other hybrid texts, has contributed to the particular challenges they pose for critics and readers alike. As E.S. Burt has noted, "In earlier receptions of Rousseau's work the presence in the philosophical texts of a fictional, rhetorical surplus and in the fictional texts of philosophical or historical leftovers was judged evidence of contradictions in the political theory, of bad art in the novel, of outright lying and delirious self-obsession in the autobiographical works – and that at the very moment when it was recognized that Rousseau had shaken the grounds of the state as of the literary world"[3]. In the wake of Rousseau, autobiographical writing has prompted critics as well as general readers to focus on questions of sincerity and deception, even compelling authors to enter into legalistic contractual relations with their readers within the very pages of their texts[4]. In an effort to define the limits of a genre that has constantly threatened to exceed them, Philippe Lejeune famously theorized the "pacte autobiographique" in the late 1970s, at a time when authors like Serge Doubrovsky were experimenting with new ways of recounting the self, and a proliferation of first person narratives emerged from unexpected sectors of postcolonial francophone society. The influence of Barthes and Foucault's conceptualization of the author's theoretical death coincided at precisely this moment with a new generation of writers who adopted the first person as their primary means of literary expression.

7 Of the many critical and popular approaches to contemporary autobiographical writing, I propose to immediately exclude three of the most widespread from this discussion of its democratic potential. Paradoxically, however, this exclusion requires a preliminary explanation and, appropriately enough for any discussion of first person narrative, a justification. The first approach views autobiographical writing as a literary form in which the reader is particularly susceptible to being duped by an unethical author. Indeed, first person narrative with an autobiographical component lies on the other side of a fluid line that separates good duping from bad duping in literature – the desirable mimesis of the traditional third person, "purely" fictional

novel and the undesirable mimesis that makes public truth out of private lies told in the first person. Given our interest in the democratic potential of first person narrative, here we might draw a parallel between this anxiety over the legitimacy of the *voix* (voice) in first person narrative, and a similar anxiety over the legitimacy of the *voix* in its political form, the vote. Suspicions of fraud in both the literary and political realms are at once ever-present and cause for public outcry. At its most extreme, the demand for truth in autobiography (or autofiction, or memoir, etc.) has led to threatened or actual legal action. In 2006, most notably, American author James Frey and his publisher were the subjects of successful litigation due to their decision to market his novel, about a reformed drug addict, as a memoir. Readers who considered themselves defrauded according to the standards established by the court in its ruling were eligible to apply for a refund. In France, meanwhile, skeptical readers have proffered more temperate responses, but the question of how the truth is to be used when it relates to third parties in the autobiographical text has been raised on multiple occasions by authors and their subjects as well as lawyers[5]. The right of individual citizens to privacy has been invoked to block or amend the publication of texts that are considered particularly damaging. First person narrative as a general phenomenon, then, is embedded with issues of both accuracy and privacy, marking a space that lies somewhere between the public and the private, the literal and the literary. It is precisely this location at the very margins of life and literature – "life writing" in the Anglo-American vernacular – that gives rise to the challenges as well as the rewards associated with these texts.

8 The second approach that must be excluded here considers autobiographical writing in relation to the scandals that it records or accompanies. Frey, for example, was not only on the hook legally for his literary deception, but was also compelled to confess his dupery via an infamous interview with the American talk show host Oprah Winfrey. In France, meanwhile, many active contemporary novelists have produced works that were victims, or victors, of their own potential for scandal. The release date of Patrick Modiano's incendiary first novel, *La Place de l'Étoile*, had to be postponed due to the social unrest of May 1968. In his later works, Modiano largely abandons a fleshed-out alter ego like Raphaël Schlemilovitch in favor of a more enigmant, less personal, and yet strangely similar "I" that shares many of the author's best-known characteristics. He is now credited as one of the instigators of a literary, cinematic, and historiographical movement that ultimately compelled a wide-scale reevaluation of France's role in the Occupation[6]. Annie Ernaux's career has spanned decades in which her first person narrators have revealed an abortion, failed relationships, and family secrets. Yet it could also be argued that these secrets have served to expose deeper issues, infinitely more controversial because they cannot be dismissed as prurient: women's sexual and gender roles in the wake of May 1968, the oppressiveness of social class structures that discreetly pervade every aspect of French society. Assia Djebar, meanwhile has chosen to write in the language of empire and colonization; her first novel in a very long career, *La Soif* (1957), was dismissed as a light, easy piece of what we would now call "chick lit." This first novel, however, prefigures the future work and career of an Algerian author who selected a pen name designed to protect her family from the shame of a daughter who wrote publicly about Muslim women's intimate concerns.

9 The third and final approach to autobiographically-inflected first person narrative that we must reject here is one of accusation: are first person texts mere exercises in

narcissism? Are they nothing more than vulgar commodities designed to reap the greatest possible financial benefit? Neither of these accusations aligns with my strategy for reading the democratic potential of these texts. Quite simply, such accusations have a tendency to reduce the reader's power to respond to the text; furthermore, I suggest that charges of "narcissism" and "lucre" arise from a similar place of anxiety in literary culture today: anxiety about malleable or even disappearing distinctions between different taste cultures within the literary and cultural field. Increased access to higher education, that is to say a more diverse student body, has arguably led to a more equal and therefore more democratic distribution of the kinds of cultural knowledge and know-how that were once reserved for an elite class of people. The one-to-one approach of the kind of first person narrative I consider here might be said to reduce the barrier between the author and the reader, making it more approachable on a personal level. Such approachability may well be perceived as an attack on the inscrutability of high art and the elite readers whose strategies are required to decode it properly. This tension – between the popular and the literary, the highbrow and the lowbrow, the elite and the masses – has been vividly described by Jim Collins in his discussion of the American literary landscape[7]. Indeed, he frames the debate at least partially in terms of the conflict between elite practitioners of high (French) theory and the common (American) reader. It is not so surprising, then, that the question of highbrow and lowbrow cultural art forms, for which autobiographical narrative has served as a lightning rod in both France and the United States, is bound up with questions of legitimacy, national and community identity, politics, economics, and taste[8].

10 As a reader, I reject these approaches to first person narrative (reading through the lens of suspicion, scandal, or narcissism) because all have attached themselves – wrongly, I think – to the reputation of Hervé Guibert's first bestselling novel, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. This autobiographical or semi-autobiographical work, released in 1990, occupies a key position in Guibert's career, one that marks a clear *before* and *after* despite the fact that it picks up many of the strands that had come to characterize its author's body of work. At the same time, it marks both a radicalization and a democratization of Guibert's project[9]. For example, while Guibert had already expressed a strong preference for writing in the first person, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* stands out from his other texts because the high drama, the obviously fictive aspects of his previous first person texts here becomes modulated, making the narrator appear nearly indiscernible from the highly visible public persona that Guibert revealed on *Apostrophes*. In this sense, *A l'ami* marks a new wager between the author and his public: by purporting to reveal publicly what he has in some cases refused to confess privately, the author is opening himself up to public scrutiny in ways that he had not done previously. The image that would result – of Hervé Guibert, emaciated yet hauntingly beautiful, called to account for his literary-ethical decisions on the set of *Apostrophes* – still serves as his best-known image as well as a cultural touchstone for the AIDS crisis in France. In fact, for new initiates to Guibert's work, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* might well be taken at face value, without the suspicion that previous iterations of his first person narrator easily inspires. Think, for example, of the narrator of *Mes Parents*, who opens the tale of his childhood with an arranged marriage, an affair between his mother and a priest, a love child, a death premonition, his aunt's revelation that he is both Jewish and circumcised (he isn't), and the burning of secret family documents that would have proven all of the previous points.

11 *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* constitutes a privileged moment in Guibert's career for a variety of other reasons, sociopolitical as well as literary. It marks the moment at which his long-term publishing relationship with the Éditions de Minuit ended and his partnership with Gallimard was solidified. It marks the author's transition from writer-and-journalist to mediatized celebrity author. It marks Guibert's new ascension of the bestseller lists, and hence the diffusion of his work to broader and more diverse audiences, most notably women. Guibert embraced this explosion in the size and diversity of his public : "J'étais parvenu à mes fins, dans tous les sens du terme : me faire entendre, et faire lire mes autres livres, faire lire tous mes livres à la fois comme la plupart des lettres en témoignaient, communiquer avec le maximum de gens, des jeunes, des vieux, des pédés, des pas pédés, et rencontrer enfin le public des femmes, que j'étais heureux de toucher à ma manière"[10]. Whereas the pre-1990 Guibert has been described as an "écrivain confidentiel", or an author with a very restricted base of connoisseurs, the post-1990 Guibert is a writer for the masses, a writer experienced not only through his words but also through the words and images of the media campaign that accompanied his rise to fame. *A l'ami* was therefore not experienced solely as a literary event, but as a television event (he gave interviews to *Apostrophes* and *Ex Libris*; his film, *La pudeur ou l'impudeur*, was broadcast posthumously after several delays related to its "explicit" subject matter) and a journalistic one (his decision to describe Michel Foucault's AIDS-related death in *A l'ami* made headlines and inspired controversy). Guibert was clearly conscious of the ways in which *A l'ami* propelled him to fame, not simply as an author (or not even as an author), but as a compelling media figure. In his sequel, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, he writes,

> J'avais dit à la télévision que je n'écrirais plus. Cette phrase, sur le public – les centaines de lettres en témoignent –, cette phrase associée à ma maladie a fait un véritable malheur, derrière lequel je me suis protégé. Des gens qui ne me connaissaient ni d'Eve ni d'Adam, qui n'avaient jamais lu un livre de moi, des hommes et des femmes de tous les âges et de tous les milieux sociaux comme on dit, me suppliaient de continuer d'écrire, pour que je reste en vie, puisque c'était ma vie l'écriture.[11]

12 Further reflecting on the ways in which he has become visible as an author, media figure, and face of the AIDS crisis following his appearance on *Apostrophes*, Guibert describes the fervent fans who admit to never having read a single one of his books. In a surreal episode at the end of *Le Protocole compassionnel*, the narrator jets off to Morocco on the promise of a cure from one of his supporters, an anonymous "mauvais écrivain" who had seen him on television and written him an extraordinary letter. Once in Morocco, the man brings the narrator to a mysterious Tunisian healer who had also been deeply affected by the *Apostrophes* interview, saying "Je n'ai pas lu ton livre, tu sais, je ne sais même pas comment tu t'appelles. Mais je t'ai vu à la television, et maintenant tu es mon fils"[12].

13 It could be argued that all of Guibert's succeeding visibility, the regular release of new works and retrospectives "from beyond the grave", and his tenuous place in undergraduate and graduate literature programs all stem from this one novel that made him first and finally accessible to all. Anecdotally and on a more personal note, I can report the special, almost magical role that this novel has played for my admittedly small sample of undergraduate students who have read it in class, compared to other first person narratives as well as Guibert's sequel, *Le Protocole compassionnel*. While no sweeping declarations can be made on the basis of a mere two courses, I remember my

astonishment when a third or more of my undergraduate students abandoned existing research projects in order to write about Guibert once they had read his novel at the end of the semester. Further, to them he was not "Guibert" but rather "Hervé", the author who had reached out to them by name as though speaking with them personally. I describe my reaction as astonishment not because I didn't expect the novel to affect my students, but rather because I had just discovered a community of like-minded readers in my course, readers who were just as giddy, angry, guilty, charmed, bewildered, and challenged as I have always found myself in the face of this text.

14 What is it about *A l'ami* that makes it so difficult and yet so accessible for so many people, both at the time of its release and now, for his contemporaries and ours? I suggest that Guibert's novel reaches out to the reader in a variety of ways, making concessions to its audience that a text written under "normal" conditions would not have needed to make, and which Guibert in fact did not make in the novels he wrote and published before his AIDS diagnosis. In essence, it exceeds the bounds of the "purely" literary in ways that Guibert's previous, and even several of his later texts were not compelled to do. The title of the text announces this new, outward-facing project. As Ralph Sarkonak has argued, the friend to whom the title is dedicated, the *ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, can be read not simply as the perfidious Bill who appears within its pages, but also as Muzil/Foucault, Jules/T., the book itself, or even the reader[13]. Guibert underlines this potential connection between the friend of the title and the reader as that friend by describing the increasing solitude of his first person narrator, and that narrator's attempts to fill the solitude with "un compagnon, un interlocuteur, quelqu'un avec qui manger et dormir, auprès duquel rêver et cauchemarder, le seul ami présentement tenable"[14]. These words are meant to describe the book that he is currently writing ("mon livre, mon compagnon"), which, in its purported equivalence to the book we are now reading, draws us into a strangely intimate relationship with its author. From the title of the novel, then, we are confronted with a kind of challenge; if we choose to see ourselves in the role of this potential friend, we must acknowledge our *responsibility* with respect to this text, which is mirrored by a sense of responsibility toward the reader that Guibert made explicit in *Le Protocole compassionnel*: "Après ce livre-là et son accueil, je ne pouvais pas écrire une pochade, je me sentais une responsabilité par rapport à ces inconnu(e)s que j'avais ému(e)s"[15]. Despite the relationship of responsibility that Guibert demands, however, the price of admission into his first bestseller is low: he is looking for an interlocutor with whom to eat and sleep, both basic functions of human life. The text that he is writing apparently before the reader's eyes, then, becomes the liminal space where the living reader encounters the dying author. We become Guibert's contemporary in the moment of reading, as well as his survivor. We know, with the benefit of hindsight, that *nobody* could have saved Guibert's life at the time he wrote *A l'ami*, at least not in the ways that Guibert suggests (e.g. vaccinations, clinical trials); yet, through his literary sleight-of-hand, we may very well believe that we, along with Bill or any number of other friendly characters portrayed within the pages of the text could have done so. Still, despite our inability to save him, the narrator of this text chooses to confide in us. He reveals a number of secrets *as secrets* within the pages of the novel, telling us the very news that he refuses to announce to his parents or a number of his friends. "Je ne l'ai pas avoué à tous", he writes of his AIDS diagnosis. "Jusque-là, jusqu'au livre, je ne l'avais pas avoué à tous"[16]. The stakes of such a revelation would be high – *would be*, as

Guibert makes clear : "L'avouer à mes parents, ce serait m'exposer à ce que le monde entier me chie au même moment sur la gueule, ce serait me faire chier sur la gueule par tous les minables de la terre, laisser ma gueule concasser par leur merde infecte"[17]. We, the nameless, faceless reading public, are entrusted with a now open secret; we are not the "minables de la terre", we are the friend, the companion, always present at the intimate rendez-vous constructed by the text.

15 Here, then, we are faced with a paradox: for the present-day reader who accepts her complicity and therefore her responsibility with respect to the author's *literal* death knows at the same time that she *cannot now* and most likely *could not then* have prevented that death. Why, then, does such a reader accept responsibility? Why is she drawn into this tragedy that lies at the very border of literature and reality, fiction and politics? If Guibert's novel is a cry to be saved, it has arrived, now, far too late for any potential witness to intervene and provide a cure[18]. The author is dead not only to his novel, not only theoretically, but to the world. I suggest that this collusion between fiction and reality actually heightens the potential for a relationship between author and reader, the sense that *reading is an act of salvation* and therefore that the reader has real power to influence the outcome of the text. Guibert creates the conditions necessary for this suspension of belief, which is common to literature but entirely illogical in the case of a text that so exceeds the boundaries of fiction; he does so by announcing, in the very first line of the text, "J'ai eu le sida pendant trois mois"[19]. In so doing, he announces an affiliation with Proust ("Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure") while also subverting the allusion[20]. Proust's first sentence is a grammatical riddle, a linguistic conundrum that exists due to the placement of incongruous elements (longtemps, je me suis couché) within the same phrase. Guibert's first sentence, meanwhile, is perfectly grammatically correct; it is due to the collision of the text with the extratextual that we judge the statement nonsensical. In other words, while it is grammatically, linguistically, and therefore literarily possible for Guibert's narrator to have had AIDS for three months only, it is physically, biologically, and therefore literally impossible for Guibert himself, who died in 1991, to have been cured after the same amount of time. The irony of Guibert's text, then, flies in the face of the formalist experiments that came before it by directly gesturing toward that which lies outside of it – the social, the political, the historical, the reader – while still respecting the conventions of (formalist) literature through allusion, stylistic experimentation, and intertextuality.

16 This gesturing toward the outside of the text is anything but self-evident for Guibert. As I have argued previously, Guibert's autobiographical novels, including *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, are deeply invested in their own literariness, their own positioning within a much longer literary history[21]. His texts are interconnected, and they also refer self-consciously to other texts, to the resolutely, even perversely singular *enfant terrible* that has haunted French literature from Vallon to Genet *en passant par* Rimbaud, "Sade in jeans" as Edmund White once described him[22]. *A l'ami* marks a turning point in, as well as a continuation of, Guibert's overarching literary project because it marks the moment at which the reader becomes essential to that project. Guibert's remarks in *Le Protocole compassionnel* show that he was well aware of this new relationship between author, text, and reader. He dedicates the novel "A toutes celles et à tous ceux qui m'ont écrit pour *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. Chacune de vos lettres m'a bouleversé." Admitting that he hasn't had the time or energy to respond to the massive quantities of mail he now receives each day – so voluminous that his concierge sends a

new load up to his apartment in the elevator every morning – he self-consciously writes this novel as its own kind of response. Where *A l'ami* offered the reader a liminal, life and death space in which to interact with its author, *Le Protocole compassionnel* cements that relationship through direct address of a loyal reader whose interpretative work is essential to the decoding of both author and text: "Aujourd'hui j'aimerais travailler sur une table de dissection. C'est mon âme que je dissèque à chaque nouveau jour de labeur qui m'est offert par le DDI du danseur mort. Sur elle je fais toute sorte d'examens, des clichés en coupe, des investigations par résonance magnétique, des endoscopies, des radiographies et des scanners dont je vous livre les clichés, afin que vous les déchiffriez sur la plaque lumineuse de votre sensibilité"[23]. Indeed, we might view Guibert's approach to the reader in *Le Protocole compassionnel* as his own study in the reception of his novel. In a chapter on fan mail, Guibert identifies two major responses to *A l'ami*:

> Les plus nombreuses [lettres] disaient : 'Vous n'allez pas mourir, parce qu'on ne le veut pas, et parce que vous ne devez pas y croire vous-même, vous allez vous en sortir, on va trouver le remède à temps, et en attendant faites un autre livre, on pense à vous, on vous aime.' Les autres lettres disaient : 'Vous allez mourir, ça c'est sûr, mais c'est formidable, parce qu'il y a une logique extraordinaire dans cette mort par rapport aux livres que vous avez écrits. N'oubliez pas, au moment de mourir, que je continuerai toujours à faire connaître vos livres autour de moi, et que ça fera une grande vague pleine de répercussions'.[24]

17 In other words, these letter-writers fall into two camps, apparently diametrically opposed. The first camp reads *A l'ami* from a perspective that we might define as extraliterary. They are clearly concerned with Guibert's actual health and take his novel literally. The second camp reads *A l'ami* in a more properly literary way, as part of a Work that will survive its Author. For them, the stakes of Guibert's personal fight against the AIDS virus are of relatively little importance. Although we might well assume that the approach of the second camp will become increasingly dominant as the AIDS crisis in France recedes into the ever-more-distant past, we should not discount the permanent presence of Guibert's narrative voice as a means of investing the reader with a sense of urgency, of a need for action. In any case, both camps are clearly united in one respect: as readers, they consider their activity essential. The first camp believes that they have the power to quite literally save Guibert by force of concentration, and by their urges for him to continue writing texts that they would then read, as though Guibert were a modern-day Scheherazade[25]. The second camp believes that they have the power to save Guibert, also, by preserving what they consider the most eternal and therefore most important body that belongs to him: the textual body that will surely survive us all[26]. They, too, believe that through the act of reading and disseminating Guibert's works, they will play a role in his salvation.

18 Guibert never says whether he agrees more with one approach or the other; he simply observes the tendencies, and contents himself with reporting his friend Vincent's judgment of his readers: "*Forcément, ton livre a du succès, les gens aiment le malheur des autres*"[27]. But the relationship that Guibert describes between himself and his readers doesn't suggest the kind of rubbernecking Vincent cynically assumes. When he refers to his readers, Guibert displays a kind of appreciative respect, indeed a kind of compassion that echoes the novel's very title. Guibert's straightforward description of his reader mail in all its bizarre manifestations offers a good example of this compassion which is underpinned by an acceptance of the specific way in which each reader responds to the work. He enumerates their offerings : "des cassettes, des

disques, un gilet de cashmere beige, une bouteille de parfum, des ex-voto, un petit cœur *pour continuer à aimer*, un petit livre *pour continuer à écrire*"[28]. He lists their personal responses, almost entirely without commentary, describing a female doctor who begs him to accept her blood and bone marrow, priests who promise to pray for him, a woman who offers to rent him a seaside house, a man who claims to have cured himself of AIDS by analyzing his urine and offers the same treatment to the narrator, "un autre fou aimable" who suggests that he lower his temperature in order to kill the virus, many readers who suggest various therapies, a woman who invites him to live in her comfortable home and even provides him with an attractive photo[29]. While he refers to "ces lettres plus ou moins folles", he also stages himself as a reader, one who is potentially willing to buy into the madness, especially when it comes to the letter from Morocco: "je m'exerçais à la relire pour la trouver totalement raisonnable." And similarly, despite the madness of the letters, he cites their authors at length, integrating their voices into his own narrative in a kind of delayed conversation. These readers – the woman who offers up her blood, the priests who offer up their prayers, and even the man who offers up his talent for urinalysis – are equally worthy of mention in his text. Perhaps more importantly, their inclusion in *Le Protocole compassionnel* indicates that they merit the process of reading as well as the process of responding, albeit obliquely in a novel rather than directly in a private letter.

19 Hervé Guibert once eloquently described his readerly and writerly relationship to the authors that predeceased him : "Les écrivains morts faisaient la ronde autour de moi, une sarabande où ils m'entraînaient gentiment en me tirant par la main, le tourbillon de mes fantômes chéris"[30]. This is a vision of writing and reading that collapses the distinction between writer and reader, turning the writer into a reader and the reader into a participant in the "tourbillon", the "ronde" that seems to begin with the author's death but culminates in his eternal (literary) life. By choosing to set aside readings that are formulated through suspicion, scandal, or narcissism, we as readers open ourselves up to the power that we are granted within the text – the power not just to accompany the narrator on his journey, although this is certainly important, but also the power to resuscitate the debates raised by the novel over twenty years after its first publication. By casting aside a reading founded on the scandalous nature of the novel's revelations, or on its author's narcissism, we are able to separate the "false" scandals, the tempests in a teapot, from the narrator's underlying, biting condemnation of government policies and social attitudes toward AIDS that were fueled by misinformation and inequality. When we choose not to focus on the potentially duplicitous nature of first person narrative, we awaken to the possibility of a truth created democratically by author and reader, working in tandem.

NOTES

1. "democracy, n.". OED Online. June 2013. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy. wartburg.edu/view/Entry/49755 ?redirectedFrom =democracy& (accessed July 07, 2013).

2. See Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

3. E.S. Burt, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau", in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 811.

4. For more on the relationship between autobiographical writing and the law, see Simon Stern, "Sentimental Frauds", *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 83-113.

5. For a discussion of the legal issues that pertain to the genre of autofiction in France, see Emmanuel Pierrat, "Le Péril autofictionnel (droit et autofiction)", in *Autofiction(s): Actes du colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle*, edited by Claude Burgelin, Isabelle Grell, and Roger-Yves Roche (Lyon: PUL, 2010): 483–94.

6. See Maryline Heck, "Seule l'écriture est tangible", *Le Magazine littéraire* 490 (October 2009) : 63-68.

7. See Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

8. See Vincent Dubois, "Lowbrow Culture and French Cultural Policy: The Socio-Political Logics of a Changing and Paradoxical Relationship", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 17, no. 4 (September 2011): 393-404.

9. Jean-Pierre Boulé provides an interesting reading of *A l'ami* as a radicalization of Guibert's project in *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), and as a radicalization of Sartre's writing project of existentialist engagement in "Guibert ou la radicalisation du projet sartrien d'écriture existentielle", *Le Corps textuel d'Hervé Guibert*, ed. Ralph Sarkonak, *Au jour le siècle* 2 (1997) : 25-42.

10. Hervé Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), 196.

11. Ibid., 195.

12. Ibid., 228.

13. See Ralph Sarkonak's analysis of the title in *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 195-199.

14. Hervé Guibert, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (Gallimard : Paris, 1990), 12.

15. Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 195.

16. Guibert, *A l'ami*, 15.

17. Ibid., 16.

18. See Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), for his discussion of a haunted reader who awakens to the pain of AIDS testimonial.

19. Guibert, *A l'ami*, 9.

20. For an analysis of the ways in which contemporary French writers respond to Proust as an unavoidable yet inimitable reference, see Dominique Rabaté, "Après Proust: Stratégies de la mémoire aujourd'hui", in *Marcel Proust: Écriture, réécritures: Dynamiques de l'échange esthétique*, edited by Lourdes Carriedo and M. L. Guerrero (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010), 285-298.

21. See Vanessa Doriott Anderson, "Subjects of History: Identity and Memory in the First Person Narratives of Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2012).

22. Edmund White, "Hervé Guibert: Sade in Jeans", in *The Burning Library: Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 355-366.

23. Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 94-95.

24. Ibid., 204-205.

25. I am grateful to Alexandra Wettlaufer for alerting me to this parallel.

26. See Sarkonak, ed., *Le Corps textuel d'Hervé Guibert*.

27. Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, 123.

28. Ibid., 204.

29. Ibid., 206-207.
30. Hervé Guibert, *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* (Paris : Gallimard, 1992), 85.

ABSTRACTS

Dans cet article, je propose que les récits contemporains à la première personne prêtent à une pratique de lecture démocratique, malgré l'ambivalence qui accompagne souvent leur réception de la part des publics français et américain. Je définis cette pratique de lecture démocratique comme une fonction du rapport entre l'auteur et le lecteur, qui peut s'établir grâce à l'exclusion de trois optiques à partir desquelles les récits autobiographiques ou autofictionnels sont souvent lus : le doute, le scandale, et le narcissisme. Pour conclure, je relis le roman controversé d'Hervé Guibert, A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie comme emblématique de ce rapport qui crée un espace privilégié d'interaction entre l'auteur et le lecteur et en ce faisant, donne à ce dernier un certain pouvoir sur le texte.

INDEX

Mots-clés: récit à la première personne, autobiographie, autofiction, démocratie, lecture, Hervé Guibert

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