



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Homelessness, disability, education, care and therapy in Delphin de Vigan's coming of age narrative *No et Moi*

Citation for published version:

Tribout-Joseph, S 2021, 'Homelessness, disability, education, care and therapy in Delphin de Vigan's coming of age narrative *No et Moi*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, pp. 492 - 509. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqab048>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/fmls/cqab048](https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqab048)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Forum for Modern Language Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Forum for Modern Language Studies following peer review. The version of record Sarah Tribout-Joseph, Homelessness, Disability and Education in Delphine de Vigan's Coming-of-Age Narrative *No et moi*, Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2021., cqab048, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqab048> is available online at: <https://academic.oup.com/fmls/advance-article/doi/10.1093/fmls/cqab048/6449413>.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Homelessness, Disability, Education, Care and Therapy in Delphine de Vigan's Coming of Age Narrative *No et moi*

Abstract

Delphine de Vigan's *No et moi* is a Coming of Age narrative which textually re-enacts the marginalisation of the homeless No as her voice is appropriated into the first-person narrative of the precocious middle-class thirteen-year-old Lou who persuades her parents to offer No hospitality. I argue that the marginalisation of issues about social exclusion is systematically reinforced by the school system. Despite featuring on literature syllabuses for both the baccalauréat in France and 'A' Level in the UK, the text highlights a lack of pupil engagement with the school programme and challenges the privileging of abstract knowledge over self-development and engagement with contemporary social issues. I argue the text makes a contribution to Disability Studies and is representative of Alexandre Gefen's therapeutic turn in 21st-century French literature whereby empathy and care for others can help us overcome our own disabilities and challenges, in this case what presents as autism.

Key terms: homelessness, exclusion, hospitality, disability, autism, therapy, care, Medical Humanities, coming of age fiction, education

In the contemporary French literature landscape, there is a growing interest in tackling social problems. Whereas the 20th century culminated in posthuman experiments in formalism (le nouveau roman) and postmodernism, literary surveys of the 21st century hail the return of human values. Alexandre Gefen, in *Réparer le monde: La littérature française face au XXI siècle*, argues that the 21st century has fostered what he terms the "thérapeutique" de l'écriture et de la lecture, celle d'une littérature qui guérit, qui soigne, qui aide, ou du moins, qui "fait du bien".¹ The therapeutic power of literature allows us to identify with others through a process of empathy and 'en prendre soin'.² Reading, he argues, is 'l'occasion d'un projet de décentrement empathique, d'un exercice de sortie temporaire de soi'.³ Such a refocalisation is therapeutic to the reader who moves beyond his/her own preoccupations and daily life and betters him/herself by caring for others. This process of identifying with others, he argues, is common to a wide-ranging corpus of texts, from Patrick Modiano's accounts of the Holocaust to François Bon's writing workshops with prisoners, and includes a whole swathe of writing on social deprivation in the banlieues. Such marginal figures have risen to prominence in 21st-century French literature: 'Les individus fragiles, les oubliés de la grande histoire, les communautés ravagées sont les héros de la fiction française contemporaine'.⁴ Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, in another compelling survey of contemporary French literature this century, similarly identify the prevalence of néo-humanist values and what they term 'transitive literature',⁵ a literature 'retempée dans son temps et dans son monde',⁶ a literature which takes on the world and serves a purpose:

S'érigeant à la fois contre le *storytelling* et le divertissement, la littérature voudrait faire face au monde, agir, remédier aux souffrances, nous aider à mieux vivre dans nos existences ordinaires: doctrine diffuse, que l'on retrouvera autant dans les

discours sociétaux sur les usages de la littérature que chez les écrivains, et qui s'oppose à un idéal d'intransitivité encore largement dominant à la fin du XX^e siècle.⁷

As such, rather than the abstraction which diverted the previous century, 'la littérature contemporaine se confronte au monde'.⁸ It is in this movement of 'resocialisation of literature' that Gefen sees the empowerment of the writer to intervene in the world, taking the reader with him/her through the development of empathy with the precarity of the real or fictional characters in the texts.⁹

The coming of age novel is a genre which has always lent itself to a critical assessment of the status quo and society's ills. Maria Nikolajeva and Mary Hilton examine what they term 'adolescent' or 'young adult fiction' but which is also often known interchangeably as 'coming of age fiction', 'Bildungsroman', 'roman de formation' or 'crossover fiction'. The emergence from the innocence of childhood into the adult world, makes for a 'powerful literary genre' for taking on societal critique.¹⁰

Through sympathetically portraying the alienated pains and pleasures of adolescence, through enacting adolescence with all its turmoil, writers bring young readers face to face with different forms of cultural alienation itself: the legacy of colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness, and death.¹¹

Roberta Trites summarises this concisely when she argues that 'these texts create a parallel between the individual's need to grow and the society's need to improve itself'.¹² Alison Finch's authoritative assessment of the French Bildungsroman stops short of the 21st century but I will argue here that reading the coming of age novel through the lens of 21st-century's empathic or therapeutic turn, empowers the writer and (adolescent) reader to intervene in the world, in part in *No et moi*, by highlighting the contrast with the seemingly uncaring attitude of adults and a certain inadequacy of the French school programme to confront the real world.¹³ The approach adopted here aims to meet EDI objectives in terms of analysing how we silence or ignore people in certain situations, specifically the homeless but also as I will argue those with disabilities, and how this is systematically reinforced by the education system. In this way, the article will address timely and important questions about the relation between literature and social issues.

In 21st century French literature we witness a renewed interest in the vagrant or homeless figure across the works of writers such as Annie Ernaux, Philippe Vasset, Jean Rolin and Virginie Despentes, to name but a few. Delphine de Vigan's *No et moi* (2007) differs in setting as its objective, not the documentation of homelessness, but rather the examination of how homelessness is perceived in society. The homeless No does not tell her own story; it is instead appropriated into the first-person narrative of the precocious thirteen-year-old Lou who comes from a middle-class home in central Paris. As such, the chosen narrative perspective textually re-enacts the marginalisation that the homeless face

in society and I shall explore how, rather than being a criticism of the book, the sidelining of the homeless figure is in fact most effective in raising awareness. Rather than seeking to understand or explain homelessness, what de Vigan is more interested in is our response to the issue and in particular how it is shaped in the classroom by the school system. I shall begin by considering the question of perspective and disability how it is used to highlight the hidden side of homelessness. This will lead to a discussion of the text's implicit critique of the education system and whether Lou is offered up as an alternative role model for active learning and the need to make education and society more inclusive.

No et moi will I argue makes an important contribution to the Medical Humanities. Compared to her earlier works, *No et moi* and *Les Heures souterraines*, (2009), the account of life on the metro which could be seen as a companion piece to the world of the gare d'Austerlitz in *No et moi*, appear to be more outward looking. I will argue here, however, that *No et moi*, whilst appearing to be about external social issues like homelessness, at the same time continues de Vigan's evident on-going interest in illness as a privileged source material for her (auto-)fiction: from the anorexia of her first work *Jours sans faim* (2001), through her mother's bipolar disorder in *Rien ne s'oppose à la nuit* (2011), to the dementia of *Les Gratitude*s (2019). The increasingly significant academic field of the Medical Humanities is explored here I argue through the disfunctional representation of Lou and her mother and their fragile mental health and that, more importantly, the mutual therapeutic benefits of care giving are promoted in the text as a means of drawing people out of themselves and their own troubles and reintegrating them in society.

It is with *No et moi* that de Vigan achieves the public acclaim that enables her to give up the day job and dedicate herself to writing. Her success seems in part due to the double target audience which gives the book its crossover status in appealing both to an adult and young readership. In 2008 the book won the Prix des Libraires in France and later the International Rotary prize (2009). Asrid Eliart attributes this success in part to the fact that there were high-school pupils 'en troisième', like the titular character, on work experience at the publishing house at the time, who liked and promoted the book.¹⁴ Furthermore, Eliart argues, when parents read the book they recommend it to their children. First published by Lattès, the book has been translated into more than twenty languages and was made into a successful film by Zabou Breitman in 2010 (Diaphana Films). The film bolstered book sales with a shot from the film featuring on the front cover of the mass market *livre de poche* edition. Whilst the book has been very popular with readers, it has achieved little critical attention, although two recent critical articles by Kathryn Robson, on the limits of empathy, and Monique Landais Choimet, on sociocritique, make important contributions.¹⁵ Landais Choimet briefly acknowledges the text as an example of Gefen's therapeutic literature and goes on to argue that reading plays a performative sociocritical role:

l'approche sociocritique se veut performative dans la mesure où elle entraîne un changement du regard que nous portons sur les objets et les phénomènes sociaux et dans le meilleur des cas, un changement d'attitude face aux tabous, aux contradictions, aux inhibitions, aux clichés, aux non-dits, aux préjugés, etc.¹⁶

Notwithstanding these two studies, the lack of critical attention can in part be explained by the book's popular appeal and by the fact that it has been packaged as a high-school exam syllabus text, featuring on the programme for both the baccalauréat in France and 'A' Level French in the UK. The linguistic features of the text make it relatively accessible, notably the absence of the passé simple, a fact which also serves to anchor the text in contemporary society. Likewise, the issues of homelessness and exclusion are approached in a way that is accessible to a teenage audience and Lou's narrative voice textually reproduces colloquial teenage expressions. What I would like to concentrate on here, however, is not what makes this work of popular fiction accessible, but rather the implicit critique in the novel and what makes it a defiantly disconcerting criticism of the school system and adult indifference to social exclusion.

Narrative perspective, Disability Studies and ASD, Absolute Hospitality

From the opening words of the book, we are inside the classroom. Lou's teacher, M. Marin, establishes the framework for the book when he asks her for the subject of her class presentation. Thus as the teacher, he plays the role of facilitator in the classroom, and but also catalyst for the story. Lou announces she will interview a homeless girl for the project. Her response to homelessness can be measured against the adult response of her teacher, her parents, and society more generally, when she goes on to befriend No and persuade her parents to offer No the spare room. For Lou's part, the invitation would appear to be an example of Derrida's Absolute Hospitality, that is, unconditional hospitality whereby the host expects nothing from the guest in return for hospitality, as will be seen. Lou invites No to stay with no conditions attached. Lou's parents on the other hand offer conditional hospitality and turn No out when her drink and drugs habit becomes apparent. No's needs are more complex than hospitality alone; what she needs is a care and support system. At the end of the book, No disappears and the story returns to the subplot of the blossoming romantic involvement between Lou and Lucas, eclipsing No and the theme of social exclusion, and giving greater prominence to the sexual awakening strand in the coming of age genre. The perspective adopted in the book presents No as Lou's (school) project, rather than a character in her own right, with No, as I will argue here, as an enabling device in Lou's self-development.

There are multiple occasions in the book in which the internalisation through Lou's eyes means that we have only a limited perspective on the issue of homelessness. Lou for example does not go inside the soup kitchen rue Clément.¹⁷ After the interminable wait we have no idea what was in the soup or what it tastes like or whether it satisfied No's hunger. Likewise, Lou only puts her head inside the tent where No sometimes sleeps as a last resort and we have no idea how uncomfortable and overcrowded it was or what favours she had to do to secure a place there (pp. 88-89). When No goes to live with Lou and her family she is given a wash and some new clothes to wear. Although in the text the detailed description of the efforts by Lou and Lucas suggests a deep clean, really it is only a surface wash as No trails her baggage after her which would presumably also be dirty and smelly. The text seems odourless and clean after the surface wash. There is little suggestion of deeper health

and hygiene concerns, no rotten teeth (though she is missing one p. 19), no nutritional deficiencies, although it is true that No has only recently begun living on the streets when she turned eighteen and was no longer in the care system. After No is given a bath, she appears restored in Lou's account. A childish simple solution to homelessness seems to have been found.

No has been made socially presentable for Lou's parents, but the clean clothes that Lou's mother gives her are only borrowed and No gives them back. De Vigan's stealthy introduction of residual problems is most effectively carried out whilst maintaining the internal focalisation through Lou. No's first reaction on going to Lucas's house to be cleaned up before being presented to Lou's parents is to be sick but this is given scant treatment in the narrative (p. 112). The incident is dismissed in just one sentence at the beginning of a long paragraph detailing the efforts of Lou and Lucas to clean her up for the parents. In her study of what she terms the 'crossover phenomenon', Rachel Falconer argues that coming of age writing is usually written by adults and often for an adult audience. She refers to this as 'the infamous "double address," where the adult author talks to the adult co-reader over the young reader's head'.¹⁸ Similar to the drink and drugs problem hinted at in the passage above, the suggestion that No has to prostitute herself is similarly treated from Lou's restricted point of view. Lou's reaction to No's complaint that people sleeping outside 'voul[aient] la baiser' (p. 110) is to feel proud that she should use such a word when speaking to her and that her choice of vocabulary reflects her treatment of Lou as an adult. Lou cannot begin to imagine the harsh reality behind the words and they seem to remain just words to her. There are also the unexplained marks on No's body and the discovery of the 50 Euro notes in her pocket that trigger Lucas's realization that she prostitutes herself at the hotel where she has found work, but again as adult readers we understand this (p. 226). The narrator's own perspective on No's problems and those associated with homelessness is limited.

Ultimately though, No defies Lou and the reader by remaining unknowable. Lou is presented as a precocious child that the French school system does not know how to accommodate and consequently she has been moved up a couple of years at school. Lou insists repeatedly on telling us she is top of the class with a thirst for knowledge, facts, and understanding. She also flags up her IQ of 160 (p. 13). As such, the world-weary No thwarts Lou's desire for knowledge and remains radically other. No most of the time seems impenetrable: 'son regard était vide' (p. 19). No defies Lou and the reader, seeming almost to taunt us that whatever knowledge we have about her, it is never the same as living her experience. No one can know what it is like to be homeless unless they have lived that experience: 'ce n'est pas ta vie', as No reminds Lou (p. 93). Homelessness is only knowable first hand, not through narrative. Thus No escapes both Lou and the reader.

No's name is short for Nolwenn, a Breton name which sounds like 'no one'. No's mother was gang raped and she rejects her child. No is looked after by her grandparents but when the grandmother dies she is sent back to her mother before being taken away at the age of twelve for neglect. Her prospects are slim having left school *en troisième* – the class that Lou is in (p. 139). When she turns eighteen the care system turns her out and she finds

herself on the streets. In this *roman de formation* about Lou, we learn her full name on the first page and when she introduces herself to No she uses both her first and family name. No, on the other hand, has been disowned by her family and is never referred to by her family name.¹⁹ It is significant in this book by a female author which looks specifically at female homelessness, through the eyes of a female narrator, that No does not have a patronym as her father is unknown. Without a patronym, No seems to have no place in patriarchal society. It is not until well into the book that we learn that No stands for Nolwenn. She is on occasion defiant and off-hand, when Lou goes to find her at the soup kitchen for example. At other times, she seems to passively submit to Lou and Lucas's attempts to care for her. Her extreme passivity seems indicative of a lack of any real conviction that things will ever change or of the necessary will power on her part. She seems to have accepted that 'les choses sont ce qu'elles sont' (p. 82), the phrase that constantly recurs in the book, the phrase that Lou italicises to distance herself from a cynical adult worldview against which her generation must revolt. As Kathryn Robson says, it is apparent that we 'know very little about No as an individual, that indeed within the textual economy she represents a "loss of identity", an absence', belonging nowhere and 'systematically evicted' from everywhere she has ever lived.²⁰ Ultimately the text is organised around the central aporia that No is unknowable, defiant, resistant to change and difficult to help. Ultimately No is not knowable and this has the effect of refocusing the attention on Lou.

Although labelled as precociousness in the French school system (with independent child psychologists earning their living by conducting IQ tests) and presented as such in the book, Lou's condition actually seems closer to an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis or Asperger's as it is also known. Hannah Thompson's benchmark *état present* of Disability Studies in French literature raises awareness of a neglected field and one which is not institutionally recognised in France.²¹ Nevertheless, it firmly equates disability with physical disability. In an important study in the neglected subfields within Disability Studies, Stuart Murray in *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, laments the invisibility of autism and other cognitive disorders in the emerging field of Disability Studies: 'The centrality that the body occupies in contemporary disability studies that focus on narrative is nearly ubiquitous'.²² He goes on to argue that:

Such evasions and ignorance are odd, for it is increasingly clear that many conditions of cognitive or neurobehavioural difference, autism included, are produced to one degree or another by the physical structuring of the brain [...]. And, of course, seen in these terms the brain is as physical, if not as markedly visible, a part of the body as a limb. Indeed, it is intriguing to think of the seeming indifference paid to autism by disability studies scholars as being a point about visibility, considering the centrality of such a concept to the idea of disability as a whole.²³

Furthermore he argues that autism has a pronounced physical component and often manifests itself through (repeated) body movements and a desire to control the body:

Equally, the life stories of many of those who have autism return to the frequent observation that one of the manifestations of the condition comes in the way in which it produces a need to control the body; the way the autistic body functions in

space is part and parcel of what autism is and how it works – autism is a condition with a strong physical component.²⁴

The word ‘autism’ appears nowhere in *No et moi*. Yet Lou herself feels that she is different from other people and that this difference separates her off from others and inhibits social interaction.

Depuis toute la vie je me suis toujours sentie en dehors, où que je sois, en dehors de l’image, de la conversation, en décalage, comme si j’étais seule à entendre des bruits ou des paroles que les autres ne perçoivent pas, et sourde aux mots qu’ils semblent entendre, comme si j’étais hors du cadre, de l’autre côté d’une vitre immense et invisible. (p. 19)

Christopher Gillberg was one of the lead researchers in the breakthrough identification of genetic mutations involved in autism. His pioneering research in the clinical classification of Autism spectrum produced *the Clinician’s Handbook of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* as a diagnostic tool for ASD and other related disorders. For ASD

The definition is based upon the simultaneous presence of all three of the triad of severe impairment of reciprocal social interaction, severe impairment of reciprocal communication (including but not exclusive to problems with language use), and severe restriction of imagination and behavioural repertoire.²⁵

He goes onto breakdown this triad into further criteria and offer variants such as childhood disintegrative disorder and atypical autism.²⁶ Lou could arguably be seen to meet many of these criteria.

She has no friends at the outset and if she counts No as her friend, we note that on many occasions the friendship does not seem reciprocal. After bidding goodbye to No, Lou leaves the café ‘dans la rue je me retourne pour lui faire un signe à travers la vitre, mais No ne me regarde pas’ (p. 31). Lou suffers from a marked social awkwardness and a classic inability to look people in the eye. When she is invited to Lea and Axelle’s party for insistence, she tells us ‘j’ai dit merci en regardant mes pieds’ (p. 34). If No is aloof, so too is Lou. Like the scientific experiments she conducts to test one brand against another, she observes human emotions from afar. She tells us that she often goes to la gare d’Austerlitz to observe other people’s emotions in farewell and reunion scenes (pp. 15-16). This is the same reason she tells us why she likes watching ‘Qui veut gagner des millions’ on TV. Rather than experiencing emotions directly herself, she sees them played out on television screens or watches from a distance, observing for example the people at the station ‘[qui] se disent au revoir à travers la vitre, d’un petit signe, ou s’évertuent à crier alors qu’on ne les entend pas’ (p. 15). Lou seems to have difficulty processing emotions, and her phenomenological study of them in others breaks the process down to the point where it seems to become pure sign, inaudible and lost in the noisy hustle and bustle of the city.

Lou has a love of compulsively accumulating words cut out of newspapers which is highly suggestive of a form of OCD (p. 29). This hording she tells us is extended to other objects, ‘les étiquettes de vêtements et de textiles’ for example (p. 137), as well as the

compulsive counting of the number of women wearing boots or the number of bulldogs on leads (p. 152), or the desperate search for anything at all to count in moments of social awkwardness (p. 217). Lou goes on to tell us that: 'au fond du placard j'ai une cachette secrète, avec des tas de trucs que je ramasse dans la rue, des trucs perdus, des trucs cassés, abandonnés et tout...' (p. 30). Lou describes No as 'abîmée' (p. 27) and 'abandonnée' (p. 91) and like the junk in the cupboard, Lou 'collects' No off the street and brings her home, another object in her collection. Like the experiments Lou conducts to see which is the longest roll of toilet paper (p. 137), she goes on to describe her relationship with No as 'une sorte d'expérience aussi, de très haut niveau, une expérience de grande envergure menée contre le destin' (p. 151). This presentation of No as an experiment dehumanises No and throws into doubt the nature of their friendship. Lou seems to suffer from heightened anxiety at a lack of control over the world around her. In this respect, she returns obsessively to the idea that she is 'toute petite' in relation to chaos of the world and she desperately tries to impose order, be it by counting, collecting, grammar (p. 179), or other ritualised behaviour. This is combined with a difficulty in carrying out simple practical tasks: 'La vérité c'est que je n'arrive même pas à faire mes lacets et que suis équipée de fonctionnalités merdiques qui ne servent à rien' (p. 191). Lou's description of herself here resembles a robot.

Yet despite being referred to educational psychologists, Lou does not have a diagnosis. The omission of any mention of autism by name is perhaps deliberate for the question of diagnosis is problematic. For some parents and children it can be helpful, for others the labelling can be restricting. As opposed to the clinician's diagnosis, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* argue that literature often offers a 'revisionist version of more conventional accounts of the place of impairment or disability in society' and that 'imaginative literature takes up its narrative project as a counter to scientific or truth-telling discourses'.²⁷ Stuart Murray argues that the 'inability to locate autism properly' leads to it being represented as a 'worry and a fear [...] in which disability disrupts the majority, non-disabled, worldview'.²⁸

As numerous critics and theorists working within disability studies have noted, the disabled body or exceptional mind works to demand explanation or invite correction. Its status as a difference from the norm is itself a 'worry', a clear embodiment of what can and does 'go wrong'. Autism appears as a peculiarly silent and pernicious version of this disruption, an object difficult to identify and too problematic in its range (from the non-verbal to the garrulous, from severe sensory and environmental experiences to small character 'eccentricities') to regulate precisely.²⁹

He goes on to argue that fictional representations of characters with autism are usually measured against characters representing the non-disabled majority worldview, as is the case for example in the two classic autism texts, the film *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988) and the novel by Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2002). In *No et moi* this is not the case. Lou has no diagnosis and is measured against No, who is socially excluded or Lucas, whose parents have abandoned him and who is 'en situation

d'​échec scolaire'. The absence of labelling enables the reader to see beyond the illness and prevents the illness from defining the person. As such it 'destabilize(s) our dominant ways of knowing disability', something which both Mitchell and Murray set out to achieve.³⁰

I will look next at how autism might be being portrayed here as enabling, allowing Lou to think outside of the box. Lou feels indignant about social inequality and exclusion and her solution is simply to invite the homeless No into her own home. Murray warns against 'seek [ing] to unambiguously "rescue" an idea of autism that is uniformly positive, as that runs the risk of replacing one scheme of misrepresentation with another',³¹ but he does argue that disability narratives do not have to be limited to disabilities and understanding autism 'can, and does, lead to conclusions that are on subjects other than autism itself. Like any other disability, autism is not endlessly self-referential'.³² In this way, one of the most important statements *No et moi* makes about autism, or the suggestion of a possible autism diagnosis, is that it is not all about autism.

Whatever the reasons for Lou's beautifully simple answer to homelessness, be it high functioning autism or simply an adolescent's way of challenging an adult worldview, what we are presented with in the book is a thirteen-year-old girl who effectively takes up Derrida's ultimate challenge of offering Absolute Hospitality with no conditions attached. For Derrida, in his reading of Levinas, Absolute Hospitality does not imply reciprocity. It means inviting the stranger into your house with no conditions or expectations in return. Derrida's work on Hospitality, which has formed much of the focus of his later work, offers as Dikeç et al argue, a 'set of attentive, generous, and responsive ways of relating to others'.³³ Derrida revises religious notions of hospitality to make it applicable as they argue 'as an ethico-political framework for analysing the worldly realities of living amongst diverse others', and as such 'it manifests itself at the heart of current debates about immigration, multiculturalism, and post-national citizenship'.³⁴ If Derrida has mainly concentrated on the stranger in the sense of the foreigner or guest rather than the destitute or homeless, and if his thinking has mainly been extended to immigration, there are nevertheless studies emerging which address the realities of homelessness on the ground through the lens of Derrida's moral imperative. In a recent study, Bryan Hogeveen and Joshua Freistadt endorse the case of Edmonton in Canada as an example of Derrida's injunction to 'say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification'.³⁵ They call for a 'new ethic of hospitality', an 'Absolute hospitality [which] would, as much as possible, unconditionally welcome the other and be less concerned with bureaucracy and accountability than with fashioning open spaces of welcome'.³⁶ Lou extends Absolute Hospitality but for her father the offer is conditional.

He repeated discusses No's responsibilities which is in fact a disguised way of setting out his rules and conditions. When No fails to meet these she has to leave. If in Derrida it is a fear that the guest will become a parasite that is explored, here the fear is that she will corrupt Lou. Despite the father's actions and the outcome, Lou's simple gesture of inviting the homeless into her home challenges the reader with the moral imperative to do the same. Why is the child's reaction so simple and not the adult's? Lou despises the hypocrisy when Mouloud, the homeless man in her quartier, dies. Everyone knew him and lights candles in a vigil. The woman from the café even takes his dog in to live with her.

Les chiens on peut les prendre chez soi, mais pas les SDF. Moi je me suis dit que si chacun décidait de s'occuper d'une personne, une seule, de l'aider, de l'accompagner, peut-être qu'il y en aurait moins dans la rue. (p. 81)

Why is it, Lou asks, that people will take a dog in but not a fellow human being? (pp. 81-82)

The text promotes the requisition of the spare room. Many households have one. No is given the spare room that was Lou's baby sister's before she died of what is presented as cot death. The room represents the void in the family that has been left in the wake of her sister's death. The father tries to repair the trauma and re-establish a sense of normality. He takes refuge in the rational world of work, changing jobs and reclaiming the bedroom as his office. Lou's mother, Anouk, remains traumatised and never enters the room (p. 106). The door stays firmly shut (p. 106). In this book with its subplot about mental illness and maternal estrangement, there is also the suggestion that what is presented as cot death may actually have been the result of postnatal depression and that the mother may have shaken the baby (p. 48). As the story is told from Lou's perspective this remains unconfirmed. Within the textual economy, the spare room is also a mental space. The selfless act of helping others can be also therapeutic, just as the boy needs the fox in the parable cited in the text from the *Petit Prince* (p. 186). The mother is receptive to Lou's suggestion that they offer No the spare room. It is to Lou's mother that No opens up most and this in turn draws Anouk out of herself and enables her to re-engage with the world around her and access happy memories that Lou thought were lost. Reaching out to a destitute stranger enables the household to break down the barrier of the closed up room, the site of trauma and confront the world anew.

Lou grows up in an emotional void. This is in large part due to environmental factors, most notably, the trauma of her sister's death and its impact on her mother, but the text also supports the suggestion of developmental disability, with her primary school teacher flagging up 'un comportement anormal' to her father (p. 49). Lou was packed off to a special boarding school for precocious children for four years prior to the start of the narrative and has skipped two years of schooling. She seems like misfit in the school system or perhaps it is the school system that needs questioning and bringing into line with a greater emphasis on identity and our place in the world around us.

Education and social exclusion: traditionalists, alternatives and the promotion of inclusion

Education in France has traditionally been a site of national identity and pride since the 'Ferry laws', culminating in the separation of Church and State in 1905, which enshrined the principles of *l'école républicaine* and the provision of mandatory free secular education. Since the 1990s and Claude Lelièvre and Christian Nique's study in which they proclaim 'La fin du mythe Ferry', confidence in *l'école républicaine* has been eroded. Ferry et al 'were less concerned with producing autonomous, enlightened individuals than with inculcating republican patriotism and maintaining social order. In short, they maintain that Ferry's mission had more to do with moral education than intellectual instruction'.³⁷ Against such a reappraisal, traditionalists and polemicists such as Jean-Paul Brighelli in *La Fabrique du crétin* (2008), nostalgically defend the authoritative aura of the teacher against 'pédagogisme' and

reform and the promotion of child-centred learning. In France there is a growing sense that the education system is in crisis. François Dubet has signalled 'le déclin de l'institution' (2002).³⁸ There is a crippling uncertainty around the teacher's mission and authority, as Frédérique Prot says 'une perte de repères dans l'exercice de leur profession'.³⁹ Many children are neither willing nor able to follow the proscribed programme.

In response, many recent studies advocate a reorientation of pedagogy towards a 'culture de proximité' with the pupils and their world. Rather than imposing a programme on students, the new approach relates what is to be learnt to what interests pupils and in so doing, seeks to gain their cooperation and enable them to become active learners. Magali Bleuse's 'Créativité et proximité avec la culture des élèves', is one such case study which offers practical examples from the classroom. Her point of departure was to redress Kevin's complaint: 'L'école c'est pas la vie. On reste assis sur une chaise à écouter des trucs dont on à rien à f... et le pire c'est que c'est là qu'on passe le plus de temps'.⁴⁰ She judges that 'inventer à partir du quotidien des élèves pour ensuite atteindre d'autres textes plus complexes' is one of the 'missions' of the teacher.⁴¹ In a study which has only just appeared, Rachid Zerrouki brings to the attention of the general public those children who are outside of mainstream school in the SEGPA or special education sector in which he teaches. The school system in *No et moi*, is clearly failing pupils like No and Lucas. No dropped out with no qualifications, Lucas has repeated several years and is entirely unreceptive. Zerrouki documents the realities of those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

Bien souvent, si ce n'est systématiquement, lorsqu'on tire le rideau de ces difficultés scolaires, on découvre des drames, de la précarité, des maladies, des trajectoires de vie marquées par l'adversité et les mauvais coups du sort.⁴²

He examines the difficult role of the teacher between empathy and authority. Zerrouki, also known as 'l'instite sur twitter', without claiming to have the answers, is heading up a media campaign 'pour "ne pas oublier les gamins au fond de la classe"'.⁴³

In France there is a long tradition of works which reflect on the education system. The most influential recent addition has been François Bégaudeau's *Entre les murs*, an autobiographical account of his teaching experience in the 20th arrondissement in Paris, which was published in 2006, the year before *No et Me*. It cannot be a coincidence that the teachers in both works share the same name. As Leon Sachs says, M. Marin in *Entre les Murs* is faced with 'the crisis of the republican school: student lack of motivation and disrespect for the teacher's authority'.⁴⁴ Sachs goes on to argue that the book reconciles the new child-centred pedagogy with the principles of republican schooling and Condorcet's spirit of scientific method and rational enquiry.⁴⁵

No et moi is a coming of age narrative in which the father and the male teacher, M. Marin, double up to play a similar role as rational patriarchal figures, who accept the status quo (Lou's father (p. 82)) and brand Lou as utopian (M. Marin, (p. 165)). M. Marin teaches SES, Sciences économique et sociales. It is telling that when Lou asks No she if she can make her the case study for her SES project, No has no idea what she is talking about 'C'est quoi

ce truc?’ (p. 40). The fact that No does not know what the acronym stands for emphasises the remoteness of the school subject from the reality on the ground.

This ‘roman de formation’, or ‘roman d’éducation’ as the genre is also known, takes place to a large degree in the classroom. M. Marin has the first word in the book and the last. Told from Lou’s perspective, the fifty-five diary-like entries that form the book follow the rhythm of her daily life rather than No’s and as such it is appropriate that the book finishes at the end of the school year. Even on the last day of school, consistent with the traditional mode of learning which still characterises the French school system, the teacher talks and the pupils take notes (or not as is the suggestion): ‘Monsieur Marin vient de terminer son cours, nous avons pris des notes sans rater un mot, même si c’est le dernier jour’ (p. 248). It is significant, however, that at the end of the book we are told ‘L’an prochain Monsieur Marin ne sera plus là, il va prendre sa retraite’ (p. 248). Why is the reader’s attention drawn to the retirement of this teacher, who was ‘la Terreur du lycée’ (p. 32)? Why is the importance of this event heightened by its position at the end of the book, just before the silent epilogue.

M. Marin’s retirement perhaps signifies an opportunity, an end of an era. With his departure, ‘la salle va être repeinte’ (p. 248). Although Lou tells us that her favourite subject is French and her favourite teacher her female French teacher, Mme Rivery, it is the male teacher who dominates the text. The patriarch terrorises the school with his strict set of rules which are set out like the ten commandments with aphoristic insistence in terms of ‘il faut’ or ‘il ne faut pas’ (p. 32). Nevertheless, his rule of terror is somewhat undermined by the humour of the young narrator: there is a burlesque elision of the Historic reference to the reign of Terror and its contemporary application to the trivia of adolescent life, headed up by the fact that he is ‘contre les string’ (p. 32). When Lou announces the subject of her presentation, M. Marin’s approach is purely scientific. Lou’s approach is to offer an eye-witness account, to interview a homeless person, to interview No. M. Marin’s response is to review the statistics. Lou’s sources are first-hand sources; M. Marin’s are limited to secondary print sources. Lou deals with people, Marin with ‘des éléments’ (p. 32). In this book aimed primarily at a teenage audience, Lou seems to go beyond the statistics and the enumeration of the aid agencies, to see the homeless not *en masse*, but as individuals. This is all the more noteworthy as she tries to empathize and surmount her love of the safe world of abstract numbers that she displays elsewhere. This mitigates a clear-cut ASD diagnosis, which after all is a spectrum. It is instead M. Marin who treats the subject from the safe distance provided by statistical overview:

Selon les estimations il y a entre 200 000 et 300 000 personnes sans domicile fixe, 40% sont des femmes, le chiffre est en augmentation constante. Et parmi les SDF âgés de 16 à 18 ans, la proportion de femmes atteint 70%. Vous avez choisi un bon sujet, mademoiselle Bertignac, même s’il n’est pas facile à traiter, j’ai emprunté pour vous à la bibliothèque un ouvrage très intéressant sur l’exclusion en France, je vous le confie, ainsi que cette photocopie d’un article récent paru dans *Libération*. (pp. 33-34)

On several occasions, M. Marin is shown to abuse his position. He deliberately humiliates pupils in front of the whole class. Lucas is asked to draw a zero on the board before being told this is his mark (p. 78). He refuses to recognise Axelle with her new hair style (pp. 126-27). Yet Lou does present M. Marin as having a softer side. Our attention is drawn, in the passage cited above, to the fact that he reads *Libération*, which shows his political tendencies.

Lou receives a high mark of 18/20 for her presentation on homelessness. Throughout the book Lou is described as the top student. It is notable that No never took offense at being reduced to a school project, to becoming somebody else's top mark in the very school year that she herself dropped out of school. Lou is a highly successful pupil, who might even be seen to overachieve. Her extensive knowledge does not make her happy, rather the contrary, it singles her out from the other pupils as being awkward. Although she is ahead of the others on an academic level she lags behind in emotional maturity. Achieving a top mark is not the height of fulfilment for Lou. The sense of accomplishment is undermined by the fact that she falls asleep in class after the presentation.

It seems significant that Lou falls in love with Lucas, the 'cancre' of the class. Although he is retaking the year for the second time and clearly not attaining the academic level required, he is shown to command respect and have many personal merits and a sound outlook on life. Lucas, is perhaps the unsung hero of the book. He befriends Lou and 'l'apprivoit'; the of the fox and the boy in the passage cited from *Le Petit Prince* could be applied to their relationship as well as Lou and No's (p. 186). He takes the risks in sheltering No in his house after she has to leave Lou's. He looks after her on a daily basis. In this sense Lucas, 'the class idiot', is arguably more of a facilitator than M. Marin, the teacher.

Lou's 18/20 for the presentation is in line with all her other marks, as she tells us she averages 18. For Lou therefore the turning point comes half-way through the book when she thinks outside of the box: 'Et si No venait chez nous' (p. 106). When she asks her parents whether No can stay, she sets out for the reader, and for high-school students studying for the bac, a careful tripartite, *thèse, antithèse, synthèse* plan to convince them. In the heat of the moment though, she she gets carried away: 'Je commence à parler et très vite je perds le fil, j'oublie le plan, je me laisse emporter par le désir que j'ai de les convaincre, le désir de voir No parmi nous' [...] (p. 109). Lou's long sentence is rhythmized by the commas where she pauses for breath, with the use of asyndeton reproducing the spontaneous outpouring of her request: '[...] j'ai peur de perdre mes mots alors je parle à toute vitesse, sans rien suivre, je parle longtemps [...]' (p. 109). Her enthusiasm reaches her emotionally-withdrawn mother, who, rather than the father, suggests they should meet No. It is when Lou goes beyond her knowledge-based learning to engage her whole being that she finds a more meaningful sense of purpose and achievement.

M. Marin is shown to engage with Lou's exposé and adapt the lesson to explain useful terms linked to the topic. Elsewhere though, he simply laments the falling standards, without seeking to engage pupils or modify his approach. Indeed, his reproach when he retires underlines the very passivity of the students and undermines his own teaching: 'Il a l'air un peu triste même s'il se plaint que le niveau baisse chaque année, c'est de pire en

pire, il préfère s'arrêter avant de faire cours à des moutons' (p. 248). Furthermore, the book clearly illustrates how the subject-matter based design of the curriculum, with little input from the teacher leads to frustration, with M. Marin, bent over with the weight of all his knowledge (p. 165), and less and less fulfilled in his role. Nostalgia for l'école républicaine has left him ill-equipped to cope with the realities of the classroom in the new century, an old man with odd socks at the front of the classroom (p. 165).

Lou goes beyond her classroom learning and the school programme to think about the world around her. Thinking and acting like a socio-economic scientist leads her to conduct her experiment (p. 151). Lou applies her knowledge of the homeless situation to think independently and offer an action-based plan to intervene in the world around her. It is a call to action, a personal imperative and a modelling of a response for others to follow (p. 81). Lou cannot passively accept the status quo. Abstract statistical analysis is not enough. For Lou 'les décisions sont suivies d'actions' (p. 112). Although her experiment is ultimately unsuccessful, de Vigan nevertheless conveys hope in offering Lou as a role model. It is in this respect that M. Marin's 'Ne renoncez pas' can be ultimately be understood (p. 249). If there is the suggestion that M. Marin has perhaps himself given up or become frustrated by years of working within the pedagogical parameters of the programme that have been imposed on him by external experts, he does nevertheless try to encourage and inspire Lou. In this way, the patriarchal M. Marin can be seen to step aside to allow the next generation to take the lead. If M. Marin, the teacher, is not the role model, Lou on the other hand, is being held up to the reader as a role model. In this way we can see that Lou makes a stance against adult indifference to exclusion. If the adequacy of the French school system to face the demands of 21st century is in question, Lou shows us how to look at the world around us and learn lessons: 'L'empathie est devenue une forme d'éducation à l'autre', as Gefen argues.⁴⁶

The book has received little attention from critics, no doubt in part at least because of its very popularity with the general public. Yet the fact that it has reached a wide target audience lends it importance in shaping the vision of those about to enter adulthood on wider contemporary issues such as social exclusion, and makes it all the more worthy of critical attention. There is a suggestion that Lou is perhaps on the spectrum which leads her to see the world differently, or perhaps, true to its genre, it is the fact that she is a teenager that leads her to challenge the complacent adult vision of the world. Perhaps the education system could be modified to engage adolescents more in the world around them, to notice, like Lou does, the homeless on the streets and the encampments on the outskirts of Paris that her parents do not see when they pass by in the car (pp. 178-79), or from on high in their comfortable fifth-floor flat in central Paris. In this respect, Lou manages to engage Lucas, whereas M. Marin, the teacher, does not. Perhaps a small step to take towards a 'culture de proximité' with pupils would be to introduce such texts which engage pupils in looking at the contemporary world around them earlier on in the programme, before the most vulnerable have already left school, rather than leaving them for baccalaureat or 'A' Level. Lou is 13 in the text; she fears that for No who is 18, it may already be too late (p. 68). If not everyone can be expected to invite the homeless into their own homes like Lou does, or like Derrida's concept of Absolute Hospitality, Lou does succeed in bringing the issue to

the attention of her generation and indeed to a crossover audience. Lou's act of generosity is an example to us. The experience of acting as a carer expands her horizons and plays an enabling function in her own life allowing her to overcome her own limitations and overwriting a narrative about autism. Lou teaches us a lesson in not allowing disability to define us. This further promotes a reading of the text as an example of Gefen's therapeutic turn in 21st century fiction whereby empathy for others, in this case those experiencing social exclusion, can help us better ourselves and surmount our own difficulties.

¹ Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde: La littérature française face au XXI siècle* (Paris: Corti, 2017), p. 9.

² Gefen, p. 150.

³ Gefen, p. 150.

⁴ Gefen, p. 9.

⁵ Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), p. 14.

⁶ Viart and Vercier, p. 18.

⁷ Gefen, p. 10.

⁸ Gefen, p. 10.

⁹ Gefen, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Maria Nikolajeva and Mary Hilton's *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: The Emergent Adult* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

¹¹ Nikolajeva and Hilton, p. 1.

¹² Quoted in Nikolajeva and Hilton, p. 1.

¹³ Alison Finch, 'The French Bildungsroman' in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. by Sarah Graham (CUP, 2019), pp. 33-56.

¹⁴ Astrid Eliard, 'Delphine de Vigan, mi-guépard, mi-hérissou', *Le Figaro*, 2008/07/01.

¹⁵ Kathryn Robson, 'The Limits of Empathy and Compassion in Delphine de Vigan's *No et moi* and *Les Heures souterraines*', *The Modern Language Review*, 110: 3 (2015), 677-693. Robson looks at the difference between compassion, or pity, and empathy and argues that empathy must acknowledge its limits: 'other-oriented empathy is precisely that which we cannot fix, or measure, but can only ever work towards' p. 163. M. Landais Choimet, 'A Sociocritical Reading of the French Contemporary Novel *No and Me*, by Delphine de Vigan', *Anuario De Letras Modernas*, vol 22 (2020), 83-101.

¹⁶ Landais Choimet, p. 90.

¹⁷ Delphine de Vigan, *No et moi* (Paris: Lattès, 2007), pp. 91-93. All references are to this edition.

¹⁸ Rachel Falconer, 'Young Adult Fiction and the Crossover Phenomenon', in *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, ed. by David Rudd (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 28

¹⁹ When she looks up her mother we learn it must also be 'Pivet', p. 167.

²⁰ Robson, p. 690.

²¹ Hannah Thompson, 'French and Francophone Disability Studies', *French Studies*, vol. 71: 2 (2017), 243-251, p. 243.

²² Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 14.

²³ Murray, pp. 8-9.

²⁴ Murray, p. 9.

²⁵ *A Clinician's Handbook of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, ed. by Christopher Gillberg, Richard Harrington and Hans-Christoph Steinhausen (CUP, 2005), p. 448.

²⁶ Gillberg, p. 454.

²⁷ Quoted in Murray, p. 4.

²⁸ Murray, p. 3.

²⁹ Murray, p. 3.

-
- ³⁰ Quoted in Murray, p. 12.
- ³¹ Murray, p. 12.
- ³² Murray, p. 12.
- ³³ Mustafa Dikeç, Nigel Clark and Clive Barnett, 'Extending Hospitality: Giving Space, Taking Time', *Paragraph*, vol. 32: 1 (2009), 1-14, p. 2.
- ³⁴ Dikeç, Clark and Barnett, p. 2.
- ³⁵ J. Derrida and A. Duformantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by R. Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 77.
- ³⁶ B. Hogeveen and J. Freistadt, 'Hospitality and the Homeless: Jacques Derrida in the Neoliberal City', *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology Hospitality*, vol. 5: 1 (2013), 39-63, p. 58.
- ³⁷ Leon Sachs, 'Finding l'Ecole republicaine in the Damnedest of Places: Frangois Begaudeau's *Entre les murs*', *Yale French Studies*, vol. 111 (2007), p. 74. See also *La République n'éduquera plus. La fin du mythe Ferry* (Paris: Plon, 1993).
- ³⁸ François Dubet, *Le déclin de l'institution* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).
- ³⁹ Frédérique Prot, 'Crise dans l'espace scolaire', *Spirale - Revue de recherches en éducation* vol. 60 (2017), 161-171, p. 161.
- ⁴⁰ Magali Bleuse, 'Créativité et proximité avec la culture des élèves', *Recherches* vol. 40 (2004), 201-206, p. 201.
- ⁴¹ Bleuse, p. 201.
- ⁴² Rachid Zerrouki, *Les Incasables* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2020), p. 1.
- ⁴³ Radio interview 11/03/2020 <[Rachid Zerrouki : pour "ne pas oublier les gamins au fond de la classe" \(radioparleur.net\)](#)> [accessed 29/12/2020].
- ⁴⁴ Sachs, p. 78.
- ⁴⁵ Sachs, p. 76.
- ⁴⁶ Gefen, p. 151.