

## **BODIES ERASED IN HERVÉ GILBERT'S NOVEL: TO THE FRIEND WHO DID NOT SAVE MY LIFE**

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**Abstract:** This essay presents an analysis of the French author Hervé Guibert's semi-autobiographical novel, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990). I argue that, written in the form of diary-like entries, the book underlines the continuum between the processes of dying and writing, treating both the physical body and the body of writing as illegible texts under erasure. I first examine *To the Friend* as an illness narrative, where the narrator's body is taken over by the HIV virus, creating a sense of self-uncertainty. I then demonstrate that the same uncertainty is also reflected in his writing infiltrated by the style of other authors that influenced him. Drawing on compelling parallels between the narrator's contaminated body and impure body of writing, I reveal the tension between originality/authenticity and imitation/contamination in Guibert's work.

**Key words:** Hervé Guibert, illness narrative, writing, autobiography, authenticity, impurity.

### **Hervé Gilbert'in *Hayatımı Kurtarmayan Arkadaşıma* Başlıklı Romanında Silinen Bedenler**

**Öz:** Bu çalışmanın amacı Fransız yazar Hervé Guibert'in *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990; *Hayatımı Kurtarmayan Arkadaşıma*) başlıklı yarı otobiyografik romanının bir incelemesini sunmaktır. Günlük şeklinde yazılmış olan bu romanın ölüm ve yazma süreçleri arasındaki devamlılığı irdelediğini öne sürecek ve insan bedeni ile yazılı eseri silinmeye yüz tutmuş, okunmaz birer metin olarak ele aldığını göstereceğim. *To the Friend* romanını önce HIV virüsünün anlatıcının bedenini ele geçirirerek öznel belirsizlik yarattığı bir hastalık anlatısı olarak ele alacağım. Daha sonra benzer bir belirsizliğin farklı yazarların etkisi altında kalan anlatıcının yazılarında da ortaya çıktığına değineceğim. Çalışmamı, anlatıcının kontamine olmuş bedeni ve yazısı arasındaki paralelliklere ve Guibert'in eserinde orijinallik/otantiklik ve imitasyon/kontaminasyon arası çekişmeye dikkat çekerek sonlandıracağım.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Hervé Guibert, hastalık anlatısı, yazı, otobiyografi, otantiklik, katışıklık.

### **Introduction**

The French author and photographer Hervé Guibert's (1955-1991) semi-autobiographical novel, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (*À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, 1990) is a milestone in contemporary literature. Published two years after Guibert was diagnosed with HIV, *To the Friend* is both an illness narrative and an exploration of the process of writing. The narrator named Hervé finds out that he has AIDS when he suffers from symptoms that resemble those afflicting his friend Muzil. Initially hopeful about receiving a vaccine from his friend Bill, the manager of a pharmaceutical

laboratory, Hervé soon realizes that the vaccine will never arrive and that he has to come to terms with his terminal condition. An astoundingly honest narrative that comprises of a series of diary-like entries, the book underlines the continuum between the processes of dying and writing. I argue that *To the Friend* treats both the physical body and the body of writing as illegible texts under erasure by “foreign” influences. First, I examine *To the Friend* as an illness narrative, where the narrator’s body is taken over by the HIV virus, creating a sense of physical self-uncertainty. I then demonstrate that the same uncertainty is also reflected in his writing infiltrated by the style of other authors that influenced him. Drawing on compelling parallels between the narrator’s contaminated body and impure body of writing, I examine the tension between originality/authenticity and imitation/contamination in Guibert’s work and expose the ambiguity inherent to the performance of the autobiographical voice.

### **Illness Narrative, Contamination and Uncertainty**

Following his diagnosis with AIDS in 1988, Guibert wrote three books focusing on the progress of his illness, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, *The Compassionate Protocol* (*Le Protocole compassionnel*, 1991), and the posthumously published *The Man in the Red Hat* (*L’Homme au chapeau rouge*, 1992). All three works, particularly *To the Friend*, can be read as examples of autothanatography (self-death-writing). The notion of autothanatography has been discussed by several critics in autobiography studies. In *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Susanna Egan uses this term in reference to narratives that focus on the process of dying, paying particular attention to narratives of terminal illness. In “Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography,” K. Nancy Miller notes that every autobiography can also be considered an autothanatography for we live with an awareness of imminent death and prospective nonexistence (1994, s. 12). Similarly, in “Philosophy as Autobiography,” Joseph Kronick observes that “every time I begin to write (the life of) my self, death interposes. Every autobiography is an allegory of the writer’s death, an autobiothanatography” (2000, s. 1014). The term autobiothanatography that Kronick uses is particularly apt for describing Guibert’s book, whose title reveals right up front that the narrator is not going to survive. The text is written with an awareness of his pending death and transient existence; every time Hervé writes “I” in reference to a living self, his death interposes.

The novel begins with an account of Hervé’s illness to set the tone for the entire text: “I had Aids for three months” (Guibert, 1991, s. 1). Beginning the novel with an affirmation of the narrator’s illness is a common strategy used by many European writers from Dostoyevsky to Bernhard that influenced Guibert. The opening line of *Notes from the Underground* is “I am a sick man...” (2009,

s. 3). The very first lines of Bernhard's *Correction* is the following: "After a mild pulmonary infection, tended too little and too late, had suddenly turned into a severe pneumonia that took its toll of my entire body..." (1990, s. 3). Following the footsteps of these writers, Guibert's protagonist Hervé informs the reader of his illness on the very first page of the novel, marking the text with an ambivalence that prevails due to his health problem.

*To the Friend* can be read as an illness narrative where the narrator tries to come to terms with his condition and faces the uncertainties that derive from both medical and social perception of AIDS. The narrator is not only overwhelmed by the indefinite progress of the disease, but also has to shatter the prejudices surrounding it. In *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag writes that "illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds a dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick" (1978, s. 3). She explains how, throughout the history, various metaphors were associated with different illnesses. To give an example, tuberculosis was perceived as the disease of the reckless and sensual whereas cancer was conceived of as the disease of the sexually repressed. Illness has been perceived as sickness of the will and a result of social deviation, while recovery was seen as dependent on the healthy will assuming "dictatorial power in order to subsume the rebellious forces" (Sontag, 1978, s. 43) of the sick will. Hervé confronts the challenge of dealing with similarly problematic metaphors and beliefs surrounding AIDS. At one point, he tells his friend Muzil about the rumours of a new cancer that affects only homosexuals (Guibert, 1991, s. 13), which naturally makes Muzil laugh.

In various instances, Hervé shares with the reader various explanations he receives from doctors regarding his illness before he finds out that it is AIDS. A sense of hopelessness arises in the reader as s/he reads the medical accounts of the doctors, one of whom tells Hervé that he is suffering from a "hatred of deformity" (Guibert, 1991, s. 38). Upon hearing such ridiculous conclusions reached by doctors, Muzil makes the following comment: "They are so fed up with their patients' phleg, and diarrhoea that they start dabbling in psychoanalysis and come up with the most outrageous diagnoses!" (Guibert, 1991, s. 39). As Hervé remarks further on in the novel, "AIDS became the social *raison d'être* of many people, their hope for public recognition and a position in society, especially for the doctors who tried in this way to escape the boring routine of their medical practices" (Guibert, 1991, s. 118). Given the unreliability of the doctors and his "friend" Bill, and confronted by the difficulty of accepting his fate, Hervé begins to feel an ironic distance toward his sick body. He experiences a doubling of his selfhood: Hervé, the sick man, and another Hervé who watches the sick body seeking beauty instead of terror in its appearance. As Ralph William Sarkonak writes in *Angelic Echoes: Hervé*

*Guibert and Company*, Guibert “beholds physical beauty in the person living with AIDS” (2000, s. 150). Challenging the conventions of aesthetic beauty, he often stares at his skeleton on the mirror: “I felt death approaching in the mirror, gazing back at me from my own reflection” (1991, s. 7). Both his pending death and the new aesthetic beauty he locates in his ill body alters his conception of the body and the bios.

Hervé’s initial shock at receiving the news of his illness gradually leaves its place to acceptance. When he goes to visit his friend Muzil, who sees him for the first time after his body begins to get weaker, Hervé explains Muzil’s reaction in the following manner:

I am happy that because of what Jules did, I didn't have to hide my real face, the face of a man who would soon be thirty years old, from Muzil while he was still alive, because that day, after an inner struggle with his first impulse to shrink back from me in fear, he was generous enough, upon reflection, to see me as I really was, to accept this face that was finally truly mine, and to announce that he actually preferred it to the one that had made him love me, or rather, that he now found my face more right, more in tune with my personality than my charming curly-haired-cherub face had been (Guibert, 1991, ss. 80-81).

The emphasis on “real face” demonstrates that Hervé no longer considers this new face unfamiliar or disturbing. In contrast to Bill concealing his face behind a healthy body “Bill is a faker who doesn’t do a single thing out of kindness” (Guibert, 1991, s. 243). Hervé embraces his condition “with the incredible perspective of intelligence AIDS had brought to [his] sudden finite life” (Guibert, 1991, s. 165):

[...] I’d felt my blood suddenly stripped naked, laid bare, as though it had always been clothed or covered until then without my noticing this, since it was only natural, but now something—I didn’t know what—had removed this protection. From that moment on, I would have to live with this exposed and denuded blood [...] My blood, unmasked, everywhere and forever (except in the unlikely event of miracle-working transfusions), naked around the clock [...] (Guibert, 1991, s. 6).

After overcoming the anxiety of being unmasked and exposed, Hervé suddenly begins to find himself more handsome and does not hesitate to do what he admires in Montaigne: the portrayal of the naked self (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 8).

Similarly, the narrator in Guibert’s other AIDS fiction, *The Man in the Red Hat*, often references images from paintings and visual arts to articulate the manner in which he perceives his body. When his painter friend, P.F., decides to draw Hervé’s portrait, Hervé asks him to draw “a little blue death’s head on the cheek” (Guibert, 1995, s. 31), but P.F. decides to paint behind Hervé’s head, “as was the custom in the Middle Ages, a skull that was like an X-ray of the head

on the other side of the picture” (Guibert, 1995, s. 31). In another passage, Hervé visualizes himself as “the skeleton in the red hat” (Guibert, 1995, s. 85). Through such visual imaginings, he gradually comes to terms with his illness and changing physical appearance. The ironic distance he develops to his body is also apparent in his videotaping his own operation. When he finds the courage to watch the video later on, he makes the following observation:

I felt like watching the film of my operation. I cobbled up the connections between my Panasonic and my Sony TV [...] But the image had been self-censored by the violent douche of light over the operating field, which transformed the zone of blood and butchery into a zone of abstraction, incandescence, plunging like a torrent of light that was sending out flashing rays in the region of the neck (Guibert, 1995, s. 25).

The distance Hervé feels to his own body through the video camera points out to an ironic doubling of the self. Hervé is both the patient undergoing surgery and the eye that watches it. The video camera acts as a device that makes self-surveillance possible. He is both the AIDS patient whose body is in decay and the healthy Hervé who, untouched by the illness, is rediscovering his body. Like the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who writes *Ecce Homo*, a semi-autobiographical philosophical work, with the dual perspective of one who feels ill and healthy at the same time, Hervé writes “with one foot *beyond* life” (Nietzsche, 2000, s. 682). As Nietzsche puts it, however, “being sick can even become an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living *more*. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me *now*: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself” (2000, s. 680). Similarly, his illness becomes a venue for Hervé to discover himself anew.

In a way, what Hervé attempts to do in both of these works is to turn himself to a museum, to be the monster on display. He often stares at the reflection of his naked body on the mirror to see how the constant trespassing of the borderline between life and death alters his self-perception. Ultimately, he does not reach a point of self-revelation, but turns into an illegible body becoming more real and more obscure all at once. He settles to an uncertain future that interweaves illness and health, beauty and terror, life and death. As I discuss in the following section, Hervé also projects this new state of mind onto his writing as he creates a monstrous text that both reveals and conceals his true identity. In his autobio(thanato)graphical sketch, he does not ultimately recover a single and independent self, but multiple selves and a monstrous authorial voice.

### **Stylistic Impurity: Writing in the Shadow of Other Authors**

I believe it is by being a reader that one becomes a writer. The writer whom I was reading—his shadow or his ghost—almost became a character and a model. I have never had the fantasy of modernity, of literary invention. I never wanted to

do something brand new, different. I have felt love for various writers and I tried to let myself be supported by them (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 29).

*To the Friend* sheds light on the twofold ambiguity that the narrator experiences: the ambiguity regarding his health and his writing. In fact, the physical uncertainty Hervé feels due to his illness become entirely interwoven with the authorial uncertainty he feels toward his book. While waiting for a solution to his disease from his friend Bill (which, as we know, will never arrive), he also struggles to produce a somewhat authentic autobiography, yet he knows neither how long he will live nor how his account will end: “I can imagine several endings, all of which fall for the moment under the heading of premonition or heartfelt desire, but the whole truth is still hidden from me, and I tell myself that this book’s *raison d’être* lies only along this borderline of uncertainty, so familiar to all sick people everywhere” (Guibert, 1991, s. 3). In fact, later on Hervé admits that he has no authority on the progress of his book: “My companion, my book [...] has already begun to wrest the controls from my hands, even though I might appear to be the captain of this exercise in contact flying” (Guibert, 1991, s. 4). As Sarkonak remarks, “[...] we have the resurgence of a narrator who knows less than the reader” (2000, s. 158):

The boundary between sanity and insanity, nevertheless, turns Hervé’s narrative into a constant disclosure of self-uncertainty. The more he writes, the more his images multiply, making him less visible than ever. There are many biographical facts in this novel, such that the narrator’s name is Hervé and he has AIDS. Guibert uses biographical information as a point of departure but admits that as soon as he writes about himself or his friends, he “fictions,” to translate Foucault’s term, thereby producing an “effect of truth” which outperforms all that is supposedly objective and verifiable (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 216).

Hervé is very much aware that what he writes can just as well be described in quite another way, and that every autobiography is a semi-fictional invention of the self, simultaneously hiding and revealing the writing subject. In *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Paul John Eakin notes that “narrative is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience, while self—the self as autobiographical discourse—does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative” (1999, s. 100). If narrative constitutes identity and if, for Hervé, every narrative is at once contaminated by truth and lie, then it comes as no surprise that he deliberately plays with the notions of truth and falsity, erasing the boundary between these dichotomies. The question of credibility in Guibert’s work thus draws attention to the undecidable boundary between factual/fictional, leading to a conception of “truth [that] remains bound to its spectral relationship with the lie. The co-implication of truth and falsity [...] implies] that truth, like testimony, is a performative act” (Kronick, 2000, s. 1002).

Hervé addresses the intersection of truth and lie by dwelling on the influence of other writers who have contaminated his writing. While articulating how the disease gradually takes over his body, he also observes that his writing is pollinated by the style of other authors that greatly influenced him. Hence there are two narratives running parallel to one another: the narrative of HIV that slowly contaminates his body and the narrative about the influence of other writers casting their shadow on the text. One of the ghosts that is perhaps most visible in Guibert's novels is the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989). Bernhard himself admittedly wrote under the influence of several writers and musicians he admired such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Glenn Gould, and Johann Sebastian Bach. As Hervé takes Bernhard as a model for his literary experiment, he takes part in a network of intertextual relationships, where the work of each writer functions as a mimotext for one another. *To the Friend who did not Save My Life* functions as a "mimotext of Bernhard's novel, which is itself a mimotext of the famous piece of music by Bach" (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 202). Hervé's admiration for Bernhard has the effect of invading and contaminating his writing just as the HIV virus invades and contaminates his body. In many passages, he describes his admiration for Bernhard as both the source of inspiration and a threat to his authorship, "writing a book that is essentially Bernhardian in its essence, a work of imitative fiction that is actually a kind of essay on Thomas Bernhard" (Guibert, 1991, s. 199). "Writing in the shadow of Bernhard, Guibert finds himself imitating the other's style in order to purge himself of it" (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 203).

The resemblances between Bernhard and Guibert derive, in part, from their respective approaches to illness and writing. Like Guibert, Bernhard suffered extensively from lung disease throughout his life and was hospitalized several times. The characters in his novels often write with the dual perspective of living toward death that the terminally ill experience. In terms of style, the two writers also share certain affinities such as long, repetitive sentences. As Bernhard's typically lengthy, meditative, incomplete sentences begin to take hold of Hervé's own writing, "the writing serves to exorcise an author whose influence becomes too threatening. 'T.B.' is 'un diable' ('a devil') who has slipped into the narrator's hold" (Boulé, 1999, s. 202).

Ironically, Hervé's fear of being influenced by others can also be seen as a direct influence of Bernhard. In several works by Bernhard, from *Concrete* (*Beton*, 1982) to *Correction* (*Korrektur*, 1975), we encounter characters who are anxious about being intellectually restrained by the society. In *Correction*, for example, the narrator moves into the garret of a friend's house to organize the notes left behind by his friend Roithamer, who builds a cone-shaped building for his sister in the middle of the Kobernausser forest, which unwittingly leads to her death and eventually to his suicide. The book is both about Roithamer's

idealism and desire to correct his building project *ad infinitum*, ultimately correcting himself out of existence, and about the narrator's attempt at textual correction by sifting through Roithamer's manuscripts. One resemblance between Bernhard's novel and Guibert's work derives from the fact that both Roithamer and Hervé fear living under the immense influence of other people. When starting his building project, Roithamer writes that "a man who no longer thinks his own thoughts but instead finds himself dominated by the thoughts of another man whom he admires [... is] in danger of deadening himself out of existence" (Bernhard, 1990, s. 25). Hervé's desire and deliberate failure to find an authentic voice purged of Bernhard's influence resembles Roithamer's attempt to escape social and intellectual captivation. Yet while Hervé playfully admits the impossibility of recuperating such purity of identity and thought, Roithamer insists on destroying any outside influence that may weaken his intellectual capacity and keep his ideas from reaching their "utmost degree of realization, substantiation, perfection" (Bernhard, 1990, s. 155).

The tension between authenticity and imitation in *To the Friend* is also captured in Hervé's depiction of how the HIV virus spreads in the body. Like Bernhard's influence on him, the virus is described as "diabolical:"

[...] the virus is so diabolical because it splits in two, running a decoy operation that exhausts the body and its immune system. It's the viral envelope that functions as a decoy: as soon as the host organism detects its presence, T4 cells are sent to the rescue; massed on the viral envelope, they're as if blind to the presence of the vital core, which slips incognito through the fray to infect other cells [...] Mockney's immunizing agent is a kind of shrewd double for the virus; by reactivating the immune system and stimulating the production of specific anti-bodies, it functions as a decoder, to teach the body how to detect and foil the destructive program of the viral core [...] (Guibert, 1991, s. 239).

Hervé then draws on an analogy between the way that the HIV virus spreads and the way in which Bernhard's influence invades him. Just as the HIV virus works its way through lie and deception, Bernhard's invisible and deceptive influence on him similarly takes up "all the textual space, infiltrating every sentence" of Hervé's work: "As with the AIDS virus, Guibert can no longer distinguish between what is foreign—Bernhard, HIV—and himself. Thus, it's not surprising that he uses the word *metastasis* to describe the process by which his writing and his body are colonized to the extent that he loses control of both" (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 204). Just as the Mockney's vaccine aims to protect the immune system by detecting the destructive program of the viral core, he wants to detect and outdo Bernhard's infiltration. Yet just as he never gets hold of the vaccine, Hervé is unable to rid his writing of Bernhard's presence.



His somewhat deliberate failure to recuperate an authentic voice and to write a pure text uncontaminated by other authors is also manifest in the fact that *To the Friend* ends up being a narrative revolving around friends like Bill and Muzil. It is not clear whether this genre-defying work is indeed an autobiography, thanatography, elegy, or a letter to a dead friend. Bill has a very unusual presence in the book. Although he proves to be a disloyal friend, as the title suggests, this book is an ironic dedication to him as well as “a textual act of revenge from Bill” (Boulé, 1999, s. 199) for betraying him. Bill’s friendship affects Hervé’s writing through its absence: the absence of a trustworthy relationship and a vaccine, which is never provided. Similarly, Muzil has a strong presence in the book, but with a positive resonance. Named after Robert Musil (1880-1942), the Austrian author and writer of *The Man without Qualities* (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 14), and inspired after Guibert’s friend Michel Foucault, Muzil plays a significant role in the novel. There is a mutual admiration felt by the two friends. According to Sarkonak, this

has much to do with a gay aesthetic: the mutual attraction these two men felt for each other’s company, conversations at once casual and serious, narcissistic betrayals, and the telling of secrets typical of the life of gay bars, as well as the braiding together of life’s daily trials—including illness, depression, and fear [...] (2000, s. 16).

Another, and perhaps more important, reason that brings them together is the common fate these two men share, marked by common disease and death. While writing about himself, Hervé is also describing the last days of Muzil’s illness and death: “I was completely entitled to do this since it wasn’t so much my friend’s last agony I was describing as it was my own, which was waiting for me and would be just like his, for it was now clear that besides being bound by friendship, we would share the same fate in death” (Guibert, 1991, s. 91). Once Hervé goes to the hospital to visit Muzil and realizes that his friend is dying, his work turns into both an elegy to a beloved friend, whose death “would change the face of the world” (Guibert, 1991, s. 95), and an elegy written to himself in future anterior. As Sarkonak puts it, Hervé fulfills “the challenge so many writers have faced of wanting to be able to write a sentence as impossible as ‘I am dead’” (2000, s. 170). As the death of his friend functions as *memento mori*, Hervé writes: “I was Munch’s *Scream*” (Guibert, 1991, s. 92). Yet whose voice is heard in the scream? Hervé’s? Muzil’s? Both?

*To the Friend* turns into an account that blends different literary genres and autobiographical voices. The result is a monstrous narrative where the voice of the writing “I” becomes less and less audible, disclosing the contingency inherent to the performance of the autobiographical voice, which remains obliged to respond to the several voices inflicting themselves upon him. As Sarkonak remarks, thinking of autobiographical writing as a space for play and

invention enables Guibert “to enter the space of the lie–not get at the truth–but rather to *play with the idea of truth* in order to illustrate just how problematic such a notion is in the age of AIDS” (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 160). Coming to terms with his self-uncertainty, Hervé perceives autobiography not as a self-revelation, but rather as a desire to make truth. He loses himself the more he writes, and out of this uncertainty rises the possibility for any creative work. As Hervé’s self-image changes throughout the work along with his changing health condition, he experiments with the multiplicity of selves.

I think the pleasures these children give me are greater than the ones of flesh, which I renounce for the moment out of lassitude, preferring to accumulate new objects and drawings around me, like a pharaoh preparing the furnishings of his tomb, with his own image multiplied over and over to mark the entrance, or on the contrary to obscure it with detours, lies, and simulacra (Guibert, 1991, s. 195).

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Guibert writes these lines about identity and simulacra considering he was a photographer as well as a good friend of the French theorist Michel Foucault. As Hervé mentions multiplied images and detours, one recalls Roland Barthes’ photograph of Michel Foucault standing in the middle of several mirrors multiplying his reflection. One body, one frame of reference is multiplied and projected onto several mirrors reflecting back several images. Such play between originality and simulacra is evident in Guibert’s works as well. In *The Man in the Red Hat*, for example, the tension between the real and the imitation is conveyed to the reader in several instances. One example is Hervé’s painter friend Yannis’ attempt to destroy the imitations of his artworks, although it remains ambiguous whether they are really imitations or Yannis simply wants to get rid of the old paintings he is not fond of. Many other details in the novel remain unexplained, or hinted at and pushed aside, like the question as to whether Lena is the murderer of her brother. Like Hervé’s cheque with a false address, or like the erroneous, incomprehensible biopsy after Hervé’s surgery, many questions remain unanswered, including the truth about the lost paintings and the missing people in the story.

Guibert acknowledges that “if there can be no writing without falsehoods, *a fortiori* there can be no writing about AIDS without lies” (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 160). His work draws attention to the fact that there is a degree of fiction inherent to the performance of the autobiographical voice. Particularly, in his AIDS auto-fictions, writing is a limit-experience for Guibert who declares: “AIDS has allowed me to make even more radical techniques of narration, the relation to truth, the staging of myself beyond what I had ever thought possible” (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 7). The writer struggles to purge himself of the other, which remains an impossibility. However, this impossibility is not articulated as a limitation. Rather, the impossibility of outdoing the other’s influence provides

the writer with the opportunity to transgress the limitations set on the autonomous writer. Through an ironic opening, the narrator remains connected to his double, whether this double is the voice of the other within himself, or another individual out in the social world. Such transgression of authorial identity also complicates the boundaries among different literary genres. It becomes difficult to classify Guibert's works under traditional categories such as autobiography, biography, or novel. The genre of life-writing thus becomes an exercise, a maddening practice, where the distinction between truth and lie becomes indiscernible. The writing "I" spills over the boundaries of selfhood as well as well-defined genres by producing a cacophonous text of colliding, asymmetrical voices.

The fact that *To the Friend* is also written with a sense of urgency affects the narrative structure to a great extent. When Hervé is with Jules, his lover also contaminated by the HIV virus, he makes the following observation:

I felt as though Jules and I had got lost between our lives and our deaths, that this no-man's land, ordinarily and necessarily rather nebulous, had suddenly become atrociously clear, that we were taking our places [...] in a macabre tableau of two sodomitical skeletons (Guibert, 1991, s. 141).

The emphasis on the "skeletons" is noteworthy since it reveals the narrator's thought about his future projected into the present moment, the here and now. The sense of urgency that derives from the desire to catch up with the living and to postpone one's death has a significant impact on Hervé's style of writing. In this respect, he is no different than Bernhard who

can't stop for structured paragraphs or sentences, life is literally too short (what with his lung disease being aggravated by bunglers whom he sometimes has to instruct in the procedures, any treatment could mean the end of him). His writing has become synonymous with his breathing: it is his rescue attempt, trying to save his life, even if it is nonsense to keep struggling against the inevitable, nonsense to record the nonsense of life in the face of death (Wilkins, 1993, ss. 130-131).

For Hervé's, similarly,

There simply was no time (or the desire) to write a "roman bien fait" like a well-wrought play, no time to polish the punctuation, eliminate the repetitions, not that all—or any—should have been removed. This does not mean that the novels are without structure. Rather, the structure is always still evolving, based on a sense of urgency as the writing barely catches up with the living (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 190).

Such urgency "takes the form of what I will call superabundance. One could also call it *excess*, *surfeit*, *immoderation*, *overabundance*, *intemperance*, *overindulgence*, *piling it on*, *going too far*, *saying too much*" (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 174). Due to this excess and overabundance of the narrative, the meaning of

an autobiographical performance remains “in medias res” (Sarkonak, 2000, s. 158) as the “I” never comes to rest, but remains incomplete by the end of this autobiographical account without any closure. Such incomplete perception of the self as well as of the written product calls to mind Guibert’s statement at the end of *The Man in the Red Hat*, where he writes that once more he is able to call this book, like all the others, *The Unfinished* (Guibert, 1995, s. 111).

## Conclusion

In his semi-autobiographical AIDS fiction, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, Hervé Guibert’s narrator confronts the dual challenge of physical and authorial self-uncertainty. Shedding light on the continuum between the process of living/dying and writing, he approaches both his corporeality and book as bodies under erasure by foreign influences. Yet a certain degree of irony prevails in the book as the narrator treats these outside influences as essential to his changing sense of self. His illness enables him to rediscover his own body, thoughts, and writing. Hervé locates his voice in the porous boundaries between life and death, illness and health, and autothanatology and biography. In “Autobiography after Wittgenstein,” Szabados states that “an honest, present day autobiographer begins with mistrust, with the feeling that many people speak through his mouth” (1992, s. 5). In this vein, Guibert’s narrator calls attention to the polyphonic texture of any honest self-narrative, exposing the ambiguity inherent to the autobiographical voice.

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