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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identitary politics of *amour fou*. Hervé Guibert's *Fou de Vincent*

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

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v1 **First published:** 07 Aug 2025, **5**:227
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20788.1
Latest published: 07 Aug 2025, **5**:227
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20788.1

Abstract

In 1989, Herve Guibert published *Crazy for Vincent*. Described, among other things, as autofiction and a sort of inverted diary, it tells the story of a love affair between the narrator/author and a young boy. This paper problematises the autofictional, narcissistic aspect of the novel (prefix *auto*-) in its relation to the politics of and reasons for thinking identity practices. It draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's *Sexistence* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Echo) in order to disclose a mythical/mythifying structure of identity construction at work in the text.

Keywords

autofiction, sex, novel, identity

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ✓

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version 1 07 Aug 2025	✓ view

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This article is included in the The Political Novel Through the Lens of Gender collection.

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Author roles: Ivić N: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No. 101094658 (CAPONEU. The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe).

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How to cite this article: Ivić N. **Identitary politics of *amour fou*. Hervé Guibert's *Fou de Vincent* [version 1; peer review: 1 approved]** Open Research Europe 2025, **5**:227 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20788.1

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… le rapport sexuel ne peut pas être écrit.

Jacques Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*

οὐκοῦν ὁ τέχνην οἰόμενος ἐν γράμμασι καταλιπεῖν, καὶ αὖ ὁ παραδεχόμενος ὡς τι σαφὲς καὶ βέβαιον ἐκ γραμμάτων ἐσόμενον, πολλῆς ἂν εὐηθείας γέμοι…

He who thinks, then, that he has left behind him any art in writing, and he who receives it in the belief that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person…

Plato, *Phaedrus 275c*

L'insaisissable amour que tu me vins promettre

Passe, et dans un frisson, brise Narcisse, et fuit…

Paul Valéry, *Fragments du Narcisse*

Fou de Vincent is a short narrative by Hervé Guibert. Presented in the fragmentary form of the reverse diary (which begins with the death of Vincent), it narrates an obsessive love affair of the principal character with a young boy. "*Fou de Vincent* is the most important of Guibert's works in which Vincent appears. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this little book – eighty pages – is the key to the entire *œuvre*, underscoring the link between love and writing, insanity and fiction, the unreality of obsession and the materiality of language" (1 on page 94). The bashfulness of the critic is telling; others see it in broader terms: "creation of the self, at times morbid fascination for the body and its degradation, hard sexuality, cruelty of human relations and the link between fiction and reality" make the "stylistic and thematic coherence" of Guibert's *œuvre* (2 on page 232). *Fou de Vincent* is first and foremost about sex; it is through sex that it engages love, writing, obsession, desire, fiction, language and genre. It is sex that tells the truth that *folie* is capable of: the "subject" – at this juncture, the subject of the book and the subject in the book – "perhaps occurs there where the two [sex and language] intersect: a point where sex is named (presented) and where language is engendered as proper (I speak 'in my name')" (3 on page 32). As if against the affirmation that sexual act cannot be written because it "liberates the power of the impossible" (4 on page 46), Guibert's narrative attempts, through multiple fragments, to name sex by engendering a proper language for it and, along these lines, to constitute himself as a subject: to paraphrase Serge Doubrovsky, he entrusts the language of sexual adventure to the adventure of discourse on sex.

At the start, even before the beginning of the story, there is a quadruple inscription of the title. *Fou de Vincent* in French[5]. The English translation, *Crazy for Vincent* (2017, 6), is restrictive. The meaning of the genitive *de* is ambiguous in French: the title can mean crazy about Vincent, that is, in love with Vincent, obsessed with Vincent, as a descriptive genitive; it can also be quite normally understood as possessive genitive: Vincent's madman, or Vincent's fool, with the idea of belonging to someone, or being duped by someone, where this belonging defines madness. On the one hand, *fou* and *folie*, which can be rendered as craziness, madness, insanity, or perhaps even folly, evoke a venerable literary tradition of *amour fou*, obsessive attachment to somebody; on the other hand, the name Vincent, derived from the Latin *vinco*, to triumph, inscribes itself in the long tradition of Christian saints, all, no doubt, triumphant in their religious glory or reason. Belonging and obsession, madness and reason, defeat and triumph, and their unsaturable historical, overlapping contexts, from Christan heritage to romantic love: from this cryptic, multiple inscription of putative exclusion and inclusion, belonging and possession, madness and reason, a question arises: is *Fou de Vincent* a triumph *of* madness or the triumph *over* madness? Or, to put it in somewhat inflected terms, but in accordance with the possibilities of reading, is it madness or reason that triumphs in the text? And what is defined by triumph or by madness? The ever-growing multiplicity of questions, and, to a certain point, the impossibility of giving unambiguous answers to them, is crucial, releasing as it does the text from the grip of the author and dispelling the autobiographical illusion.

The ambiguities of the title delimit a certain field, or a borderline, or a series of vortices, where the origin of the text, the lived obsession with Vincent, whirls at the same time as the writing of the narrative; the origin here does not precede, it is not anterior to the text, presumably buried in the past, but always contemporary, creating and being created by the text. "What was it? Passion? Love? Erotic obsession? Or one of my inventions?" (5 on page 8; all translations are mine): if life is not always the meaning of the text, the text always wants to become an invention of life.

"This borderline, – […] *dynamis* because of its force, its power, as well as its virtual or mobile potency – is neither active nor passive, neither outside nor inside. It is most especially not a thin line, an invisible or *indivisible* trait lying between the enclosure of philosophemes [or literature and its movements of thought], on the one hand, and the life of an author already identifiable behind the name, on the other. This divisible borderline traverses two 'bodies,' the corpus and the body, in accordance with laws that we are only beginning to catch sight of" (7 on page 5–6). The laws of the borderline that traverses the corpus of the author and the body of Hervé Guibert are not the all-encompassing laws of transposition, but movements, positions and slants particular to writing and to the body, that "permit the continual engendering of the self and testify, on the epistemological level, of an identity always in motion and constructing itself" (8 on page 215).

The relation between literature and thinking, philosophical or critical, is neither simple nor straightforward; words and concepts are in a constant state of war of attrition. They undermine and destabilize each other. "Madness," wrote Jacques Derrida in *Points*, "must keep a lookout over every step, and finally watch over thinking, as reason does also" (9 on page 363): there is no folly or madness without reason and vice versa; the reason undermining madness is always a madness unhinging reason. "Those that don't write are not *fou*" (10 on page 328):

for Guibert, undermining and destabilization are consubstantial to writing: "the typed page, with few corrections, is already a doubtful page" (10 on page 43). By affirming madness and doubt, writing exhibits its own reasons of which reason is ignorant: it thinks in its own way. Or, to put it differently, when thinking becomes powerless and afraid of its own impotence but still wants to reach out, writing thinks.

What is thinking afraid of, what fear can be overcome by literature or exposed by writing, so writing can think, reach out to a meaning not yet known and enjoy its own reason? What is thinking when it cannot be related to a stable concept, when *folie* – madness, insanity, craziness, obsession, whim, folly – is a theme, an incitation, an engine, a *ductus* of writing, when it simultaneously endangers, destroys and permits the writing itself?

Guibert's "favourite mode of writing [is] fictionalized autobiography or autofiction" (1 on page 84). The critic affirms that "Hervé is conscious of the link between his addictive love for Vincent and the fictionality that is part and parcel of the tale he is both living and telling" (1 on page 94). What does this conscience mean in writing? "When writing a book, the narrative is for me at its most fictional when it acquires the form of a diary" (10 on page 410): can writing, and its presumed folly or madness, watch over, look after fiction, in particular fiction as the politics of thinking one's own identity, in the text (autofiction) and of the text (novel), when one can never be certain of the complicated relations between the life as lived and the life as written, between autobiography and fiction, diary and novel, madness and reason, eros and writing, both generally and particularly, in the text that presents itself simultaneously as a diary of an obsession and an "invention of love" (5 on page 74)? "When the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and the necessary fiction transpires"; Greeks recognized it as Eros that Sappho called μυθοπλόκον, "weaver of fictions" (11 on page 170–171); contemporary literature recognizes it as autofiction.

"When reading the autobiography of Adamov, I was surprised how little my history matches History" (10 on page 316). Mindful of this gap, Guibert maintained that for him, to write "is to inscribe himself in the history of men, to testify to that history" (12 on page 22). The affirmation offered in the interview merits careful reading. In French: « s'inscrire dans l'histoire des hommes, témoigner de cette histoire ». First, *s'inscrire*, to inscribe oneself: it might be a fashionable and commonplace critical term, but it also reveals a fundamental point: writing is simultaneously inside and outside life, if life is to have some meaning, it must be written, but if writing is to have some meaning, it must be lived; writing belongs to this divisible borderline that traverses the corpus, the text and the body: "I am as always, in writing, simultaneously the savant and the rat he eviscerates in order to study it" (5 on page 52). Second, *histoire des hommes*: ambiguously, a commonplace term that can refer to the history of humankind and also to the history of men, opens itself to the plurality of meanings: history of men as a homogeneous majority or history of men as a heterogeneous minority, as history of homosexuals, of gays, not of homosexuality as a cultural phenomenon but of actual men, individual historical figures engaging in relations with other actual figures, body to body, corpus to corpus. Third: *témoigner de*, to become a witness, to testify: the scheme of exemplarity of historical figures presupposes testimony (cf. 13 on page 97): witnessing implies simultaneously participation (to be part and parcel of that history) and distance, possibility to make sense of it by narrating it, by constructing one's own poetics, one's own narrative identity by transforming it into history. Fourth: *l'histoire*: in French, it is not an Aristotelian *pros hen*, it refers both to history as *Geschichte* and as *Historie* in German, it is both a master narrative of events and a story, plot, imagination, fiction and literature, a field of opposed poetics, the one – history – with the privilege of *adeaquatio intellectus et rei*, and the other – story – at least in principle free from the constraints of things, of *res*, of reality. Fifth: the first-person singular implied by the reflexive *s'inscrire*, to inscribe oneself, that makes all those meanings whirl together, in a sort of vortex, that is simultaneously origin and authorship, reality and fiction, fixed, for the moment, as an insect, in the semi-transparent amber of the autofictional text. Yet, "wherever corpus declares (itself) as "ego," ego enters into contrariety, being countered by a self that confronts its self, with corpus becoming the matter-obstacle of this contrariety (and the very site of its declaration)" (14 on page 29).

"Play with narrative time and blatant intertextuality both work to lift this diary from the plane of the quotidian, making it into a literary text" (1 on page 64): on the one hand, there is an obvious, contractual relation between life, body, and the corpus of writing; on the other, in the corpus, allusions to other texts are conspicuous: Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* are presented as a sort of blueprint, not only for the fragmented story, but also for its subject; written life, even when it is, as in the lived relation with Barthes, full of ambiguities and nuances (*cf.* 15 on page 35, 66), always imitates art. As his biographer justly remarks, Guibert "does practice a truncated autobiography, intimate diary, but the principal character is fictional" (12 on page 33). But who is the principal character in *Fou de Vincent*? Between the narrator diarist and Vincent, who is the more fictional one? This tension between fiction and autobiography cannot be resolved by any form of transposition, of fictional reworking of the real, by "the poor made precious" that the text deems "ordinary" (5 on page 50). Everything happens along the borderline traversing both the corpus and the body whose trajectory, as in Greek love poems "moves out from the lover toward a beloved, then ricochets back to the lover itself and the hole in him, unnoticed before" (11 on page 30). This ominous, erotic and erratic movement of the reflexive self or *autos* works through life and text, elicits scenes from thoughts and simultaneously negates and affirms any possible identification of life with text.

"One day a young boy will appear in my life and it will be a trap" (10 on page 327). When Vincent masturbates the narrator and the narrator utters a cry, Vincent remarks that his "orgasm is really a big story" and the narrator continues: "he does not

want me to make him ejaculate, he says that he is impotent" (5 on page 52). On the one hand, Vincent, an agonist in that story, returns to the narrator exactly what the narrator does himself; on the other, what the narrator does, that is, tells the story, makes Vincent, as a character in the story, impotent, deprived of his own will and desire: the telling of the story quashes the agonist. That is why the story begins with the fictional death of Vincent: the story is not a sort of *travail de deuil*, a work of mourning or reminiscence of some sensual, vaguely Proustian, paradise lost; neither it is only a result of "a need for Guibert to write *Fou de Vincent* so as to put to death this character swamping the diary and his other books, to finish with him once and for all, to expel him through literature, to stop being obsessed with Vincent" (12 on page 168). Literature is not a cure and, as Plato makes Socrates observe in *Phaedrus*, "as such a boy is most delightful to his lover just where he does most damage to himself" (*οἷος ὢν τῷ μὲν ἥδιστος, ἑαυτῷ δὲ βλαβερώτατος ἂν εἴη*, *Phaedrus* 239c). Vincent must be dead, executed, for a story to unfold and desire to continue, unbridled. Damage presides over art and literature. By dying, Vincent succumbs to it: as in Huysmans' *Against the grain* (*A rebours*), art kills life: Vincent is des Esseintes' dead turtle studded with diamonds.

The story unfolds through a series of bodily contacts, sexual intercourses described in detail. In a certain sense, they are all simultaneously accomplished, attempted, failed, unable to quench or satisfy desire. Paradoxically, this failure turns into a possibility, constantly rekindling its fire. Folly or madness that the narrator appropriates for himself, his obsession springing from desire, is not a clinical case, a sort of disease that comes from the outside and endangers reason, like Greek erotic *μανία* or Racine's *passion*. It is an inside job, an autocombustion, a disposition of the mind, or spirit, that has more to do with "loosing yourself in an all-important project, putting other things in front of your ego" (16 on page 96 interpreting Michael Warner). Guibert puts literature in front of his own ego: "It is towards literature that I want to go, or towards death, or is it the same thing?" (10 on page 297). To become literature, he chooses self-immolation in life-as-death. His ego is no less literary, a narrative construction; his posture resembles more the tragic Roman fury or *furor*, a sort of general blinding of the spirit, *mentis caecitas*, resulting in the impossibility to control oneself (*cf*. 17 on page 72–79): "is not this furious envy [desire] of cocks, that must be more general, of sexes, of cunts (I heard Vincent dream aloud the other night when I gave him a blowjob), as abstract, as primordial, as a desire of a book, of a painting?" (5 on page 82). "I begin to type an article with my right hand and to warm my left hand around the swelling of my organ" (10 on page 82): writing equals masturbation, solitary pleasure where social norms of truth and falsehood do not apply. Obsessive conflation of writing with masturbation carries with it a sort of moral solitude that excludes furious ones from society. However, contrary to madness, his is a voluntary mode of behaviour (*cf*. 17 on page 82): the narrator diarist knowingly becomes a solitary monster of his will to write.

Fou de Vincent is replete with "deviations and excesses" (15 on page 66). Bodily contacts go on and on. The pornographic details – "the description of sexual acts in explicit and crude terms" (18 on page 370) – are not aimed at degrading sex or shocking the reader. They are a means of aestheticisation that works in two directions. "Yesterday evening, Vincent's cock had the taste of the new paper of the Bibliothèque Verte" (5 on page 38): like the diamonds of des Esseintes' turtle, their excess (measured by the pornographic norm of the day) aestheticise the story, to be aestheticised, in their own turn, by the putative excess of the story itself: "were I not fixated on Vincent, I would desire the whole earth" (5 on page 41). Failure and repetition concur in exposing "the excess" as "an access to the inaccessible" (19 on page 40). Excess "really accedes – but it is the inaccessible that it does and does not attain. Its glare, its trance, its jerk is in itself its absolute – at the same time attained and returned to its absolute detachment" (19 on page 40–41). Pornographic detail aestheticises the absolute of *jouissance* (glare, trance, jerk) which in his turn aestheticises pornography: this circular movement, is in itself an arabesque of the erotic trajectory of the reflexive moment constitutive of the self, the *autos* of the autofiction, a sort of carnal, sensual substitute of cartesian cogito. It is also a supreme form of reaching for the other. "When I type a text, it happens that I suddenly take a page from below, with my left hand, and continue to type with my right hand, as one holds a head of a friend in bed who needs a drink" (10 on page 71): in the fiction of writing, typing is indistinguishable from bodily contact, corpus from body, thought from a scene, and the hole in oneself from the text, as if the concrete, solitary, physical act of writing were a fundamental form of communion.

"Every hunting, hungering lover is […] wooer of a meaning that is inseparable of its absence", notes Anne Carson about Greek erotic poetry (11 on page 75). The narrator of the *Fou de Vincent* can be seen as a hungering lover who chases his beloved by writing. "Writing on him is an assuagement" (5 on page 41), notes the narrator about Vincent. *Assouvissement* in French can be used both for thirst and sex, concretely and abstractly: assuagement, conducive to fulfilment, presence and attachment, simultaneously becomes a mark of failure and detachment, a road to solitude, a "distancing from the false presence" (5 on page 41), conjured by the photo or the text. The *perpetuum mobile* of repetitive sex as attachment and presence, is also the engine of distancing and absence. Vincent always arrives bringing his own absence with him.

Guibert's "vision of the literary exercise is narcissistic" and his "only pleasure is the contemplation… of himself" (15 on page 28). The eternal return of the *autos*, the reflexive movement accomplished by writing, makes sense of the inscription and of the inscribed by identifying the ego as a writer: "not to become a bad writer: never the maker of himself" (10 on page 308). In Guibert's autofiction, his narrative identity is negative. Like "in Greek poets it is a knowledge of self that begins to come into focus, a self not known before and now disclosed by the lack of it – by pain, by a hole, bitterly" (11 on page 66), a gesture of auto-interpretation of the suspiciously faltering body by and in the uncertain corpus. "But the gesture that tries to refind *of itself* distances, it distances itself again": identifying

itself as being elsewhere, in fiction, as corpus, amounts to "a difference to itself, a difference with/of itself. Thus with, without, and except itself" (9 on page 314). Difference from literature and difference in literature: contrary to the usual meaning of the autobiographical pact, the ego of the narrator accomplishes himself in the perennial distancing of writing, in the perpetual scriptural disjoining that "constitutes the very form of resistance" (9 on page 314) to life and reality. "Sometimes I fear the necessity of the notation, […] but writing instantaneously brings down that what announces in itself as tortuous: the unsayable" (5 on page 46). Barthes lurks behind that phrase: the term notation alludes, perhaps, to the Barthesian *notations insignifiantes*, indispensable in the realistic description, to achieve the reality effect of the text. The autofictional ego is all in this affirmation of reality conjured by the text and, by this conjuration, distanced from it: "the eyes of love are troubled by reality" (5 on page 63), on the one hand, and, on the other, "impossible to blend him in the ordinary life, not to want to reconstitute him, but to see, to see him" (5 on page 57). This distancing in writing and of writing, achieved by the reflexive movement of the *autos,* engages the relation of autofiction to reality, engaging simultaneously obsession, folly, insanity and reason. "I have a need for faithfulness (it is an obsession) because my lovers and my friends are my characters; faithfulness is my novelistic coherence" (10 on page 357): the coherence of unfaithful autofiction is the ultimate faithfulness to the unsayable reality of the self.

The ego, in its irreducible particularity and generality of the character in the narrative, is a trap that surreptitiously politicises the discursive zone that, because of its thematic, can be called gay literature. The I of the narrator is literally at the same time crazy about Vincent and Vincent's fool, his identity "structured by the alterity in himself" (13 on page 108). The alterity is the alterity of literature figured by Vincent, who "must be afraid to confront me: *le trac*, stage fright of becoming my character" (5 on page 34). Contrary to the ideal of Proust, constantly evoked as one of Guibert's models, the alterity of literature figured by Vincent can never be appropriated because it fails to address the alterity of sex in language and language in sex. That is why that "I is in itself in the state of auto-destruction, of dislocation" (13 on page 108): "Like a luminous fish, he who irradiated the whole evening, at the end of the road fades away, to flee my caresses: I direct my lips toward a black hole" (5 on page 35). The black hole, with its whirlwind, or vortex of equivocal sense – from female sexual organ, male or female anus, to astronomical phenomenon – "is an abyss, demolition of the entire construction of my life, erasure of identity, at the threshold of madness" (5 on page 75). Ego is, indeed, a hole. The fading away of the object of belonging belies identification conducive to any sort of identity of the text (as gay literature) and in the text (as gay love).

In the narrative, the "relation with Vincent can only pass through drugs" (5 on page 75). Drug, *la drogue* in French, is not only a real object, ecstasy, taken with a friend, or opium or cocaine, taken with Vincent to enhance the experience. Neither it is only a deadly weapon that kills Vincent. "I would like to narrate this love with the solemnity of the sacred, as one of the great religious mysteries" (5 on page 77): it is also *ekstasis*, literally, "standing outside of oneself" accomplished by writing, a sacred experience of initiation to literature. Drugs, *drogue*, *pharmakon*, simultaneously, the cure and poison of life, confirmation and negation of identity, madness and reason watching over literature, literature reasoning obsession, paradise hovering over artifice: in its unreal concreteness, artificial, "super-false" and "apocryphal" Vincent (10 on page 330) and his body is a *phantasma* of writing itself. "Obsession: always Vincent's cock, as madness, as fiction" (5 on page 79): the *phantasma* of writing traverses the corpus and the body and makes the fictional Vincent "a diagnostician of our relationship" (5 on page 56). This "our" is deceptive. The apocryphal Vincent is not only of doubtful authenticity, excluded from reality, he is also, as the Greek word shows, kept hidden. What is kept hidden by the spuriousness of this diagnostician invested in the initiation to literature? Through the fictional and written relationship with the narrator, Vincent makes the autofictional autobiographer step out from himself to reveal the relationship of the author to his *œuvre*: literature, not life, is the only initiation to literature.

If Guibert's universalist stance politicises the discursive zone of gay literature by inventing its subject, it does so obliquely: gay "is a word that never had a relation with me, yet, bizarrely, obviously having one with me, I don't see things like that, it is not the way I feel myself, I have the impression that I am elsewhere, in those…" (12 on page 32). Guibert does not apprehend it by a "variety of *queer* terms […]: *non standard* means and *homosexually inflected* means" (16 on page 103), he uses standard means, crude, pornographic description, similar to Renaud Camus' *Tricks* and Pierre Guyotat's *Eden, Eden, Eden*, and, later, with the onset of A.I.D.S., the "French literary tradition of egocentric introspection with respect to the illness" (2 on page 233) and inflects them as his own homosexual experience, "without compromise or false modesty" (2 on page 232), to affirm his subject as rightfully belonging to literature: his gay identity is first and foremost, literary. "What warrants identity is and always was a public act, birth certificate, identity card, concordant testimonies of porters and neighbours. […] This means that the human person *exists only on paper*, in all the meanings of the word: it does exist, but 'on paper,' it is noticeable from without only theoretically, as a more or less plausible possibility" (20 on page 73): literature, in this perspective, is seen more as a *paperasserie*, a *patrie littéraire*, a broad literary homeland of more or less plausible possibilities, spanning ages, nationalities and cultures, than a particular moment or movement of queer or gay literature, focused on specific, gay experience. As his journal *Le Mausolée des amants. Journal 1976–1991* shows, Guibert was a voracious reader; as an author, he identifies himself by belonging to this vast literary land of promises of the books he has read. Vastness implies desolation and dreariness. As his writing makes obvious, the act of writing about Vincent, of inventing him as literature "presupposes that the belonging does not exist, that people that want to be this or that, are not that" (13 on page 35), neither Vincent's fool nor crazy about Vincent. "There is no

identity; there is identification, identification towards belonging" (13 on page 35): this is the trap that the triumph, implied in the proper name of Vincent, lays. To be crazy about literature is ultimately to be literature's fool.

What then does it mean to be a literature fool? The repetitive movement of the sensual reflective moment constitutive of the self steps off in absolute solitude of writing. Intercourse turns to hands free masturbation as supreme *jouissance*: "searching for my dick to piss, after writing the second chapter of *Hombres*, I find it, with surprise, slippery and covered with semen: extraordinary complicity of body parts" (10 on page 357). Complicity of the narrative body in the corpus and of corpus in the carnal body, and not the transposition of bodies into corpus: for Guibert, in order to come to terms with his own experience, writing does not deal with reality, with bodies that are outside the text, to which the text can refer as more or less accurate or fictional rendering. Writing deals with itself, with the body as a carnal, sexualised text and the text as a phantasmatic, literary body. If "the most direct relation of the consciousness to the real is a relation of pure and simple ignorance" (20 on page 112), autofictional invention probes the limits of ignorance of the real and presents itself as means of coming to terms with the foolish complacency of self-knowledge.

"When I write for myself (rarely), when I sense that it comes, I have the impression of a certain resistance, certain rebelliousness, and a special pleasure of betrayal: I betray my race, I double my journalist brothers, (and I double myself)" (10 on page 184). *Fou de Vincent* works with itself, inventing in Vincent its own double. For all his diagnostic skills, his fear to become a character, his mood swings, refusals and bursts of emotion, displayed in all their realistic glory by the text, Vincent is dead, doubly dead, as a person and as a character: he is an agonist deprived of agency. In the solitary universe of storytelling, he constitutes a narrative closure. In a certain sense, as a character, he is punished for being alive, for being a body, a speaking body, *être parlant* outside the text. His punishment is reminiscent of the tale deeply buried in the past of Guibert's literary homeland. It was told a long time ago in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in the tale of Narcissus and the nymph Echo, punished by Juno for her endless talking: *huius* […] *linguae, qua sum delusa, potestas parva tibi dabitur vocisque brevissimus usus* (*Met*. 3.363–365): "Your tongue, so freely wagged at my expense shall be of little use; your endless voice, much shorter than your tongue" (trans. Brookes More). Echo is deprived of free use of language and constrained to repeat the words of others; talking to Narcissus, the nymph becomes his double, "a distant agent, destined to propagate [his] identity in the surroundings" (20 on page 416).

Real Vincent talks too much and variously; literary Vincent is punished for that; that is the price to be paid for his becoming literature. To the Narrator's Narcissus, Vincent is the Echo of his own invention. Vincent is the double of the ego, the medium, the space of deployment of the reflexive movement. The narrator identifies himself by belonging to this double of his own creation that returns his voice. The invention of the double is the strategy of identification; its goal is to achieve a coincidence of the naming of sex and engendering a proper language of it, and thus to identify himself as a good writer. In Foucauldian terms, the text stages a situation, or scene, of *assujettissement*, of subjugation of the narrator to his invented double, to become himself, to appear as the subject: the corpus must belong, must be subjugated to the body in the corpus it invents in order to become literature.

This scene of *souci de soi* hopefully productive of a certain literary subjectivity works in two opposite directions. If the narrator is subjugated to his double, his double is also subjugated to him. However, the double is not a perfect match: there is no absolute complicity between the corpus and the body in the corpus. Just as the novel repeats Guibert's autobiography in a truncated form, Vincent the double seems condemned to repeat what the narrator imagines to be their interaction. Vincent repeats the narrator's words in a truncated form: like Echo, that *ingeminat voces et audita verba reportat* (*Met*. 3.369), "[he] doubles the sounds of [his] voices and returns their final words". Truncated words, as truncated autobiography, once returned, do not have the same meaning. The double's "voice […] has gone to the enemy, or to the other, which perverts [the narrator's] own voice instead of returning him his fac-simile" (20 on page 416). The double is a traitor. The stage set up by the text is a trap of the *alterna imago vocis*, an alternate voice resulting in pseudo-dialogue (*Met*.3.385). "I caressed him, and, it was always the case, I was sure that he thought: nobody caresses me like that" (5 on page 23): sex provokes imaginary dialogue where the phrasing of the action is returned by its final words, omitting the *I thought* that, by shifting focalization and changing the mode of relative to apodictic, marks its solitary, phantasmatic, autofictional character. The thought is returned in the text as a scene of exchange of words, fixed by "I was sure". This certainty marks the fleeting moment of appearance of literature: the treacherous complicity of the narrator and his double, achieved on paper, by writing, is the only possible, yet uncertain, certainty that literature is capable of.

Vincent is an Echo full of fear. "He is afraid of entrusting his cock to my mouth, for fear that an instantaneous access of madness would make me devour it" (5 on page 40): literature devours reality just as language devours sex. The narrator projects his own fear and madness (*folie*: insanity, madness, craziness, whim, folly) and makes his double repeat it; the repetition, though, also deprives the narrator of his beloved double: his craziness, his madness, his obsession is tainted with the fear of the other, of the *with*. The other is excluded by the solitary, masturbatory act of writing that erases the genitive of belonging, because "'with' is never a thing, a substance, or a subject. It is the element of sense alone, in all of its senses—that is, in all the ways of sensing, of receiving, or of repulsing an outside, of not being 'inside' without this outside that comes and that distances itself" (3 on page 29). *Withness* is the borderline of nonsensical sense that thinking is afraid of and still wants to reach, the certainty of the uncertain on which literature thrives. Trying to grasp, in his tragic *furor* of miserly measurings, the reality of sex as his foremost

characteristic as a lover, the narrator grasps only the whimpering and simpering reality of language that makes him love. He cannot disappear into the telling of his love to make place for the beloved. Sex, even aestheticised, eludes him, because sex is, like the real, "by definition devoid of definition, or at least, devoid of any other definition but the repetition of its' own fact" (20 on page 334).

The double is a figure of the Other. The obsession with Vincent is a scene, a figuration of desired complicity of sex and language, of body and corpus. The impossible *with* – sex with language and language with sex – in Ovidian terms, the *potestas parva* of sex in relation to language, and *vocisque brevissimus usus* (*Met*. 3.364-365) of language in relation to sex: love as sense is *adaequatio sexus et linguae*, an ill-fated "exchange of tongues [*langue* in French signifies both language and the body part] doubling adroitly the kisses" (10 on page 139). In *Fou de Vincent*, the invention of literature as *withness* incarnate: the impossible, unsayable truth of perfect intercourse, the ideal match of lover and beloved. This joining of parts in the whole that fills the hole in oneself is sought in the repetition of sex that, like a throw of the dice, will never abolish chance. Writing is a wager of the *other* on *with* and *now*.

We should read ancient authors, because, as Luciano Canfora pointed out, they remind us that "problems that they were incapable of solving remain insoluble also for us" (21 on page 62). Any literary text, even if it speaks about or proposes a certain identity, trying to establish or salvage it from oblivion or erasure, ironically questions identity by asking his double, implied in the text: "What is identity?" And treacherous Echo, cunningly returning this question, only repeats the final word: "Identity".

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔

Version 1

Reviewer Report 13 October 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22492.r61910

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The article provides an in-depth analysis of Hervé Guibert's short narrative *Fou de Vincent*, emphasizing its exploration of obsessive love, sexuality, identity, and the interplay between writing and desire. The work engages extensively with autofiction, depicting Guibert's attempt to create a literary language capable of naming sexual experience while simultaneously constituting his own subjectivity.

The article provides an insightful and original examination of Hervé Guibert's *Fou de Vincent*, highlighting its literary, philosophical, and cultural significance. It demonstrates a strong engagement with secondary literature and theoretical methodologies, presents a cogent and persuasive argument, and contributes meaningfully to the understanding of sexuality, identity, and literary creation in French literature. Its focus on the intersection of obsession, writing, and selfhood offers a unique perspective, making it a valuable resource for scholars of literary studies, queer theory, and autofiction.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

No source data required

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Cultural Studies, Contemporary Literature, English Language Teaching, Ecocritical Studies and Anthropological Studies

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.