

Reading and misunderstandings : the fiction monologue.

In 2007 I published a novel called *Tom is dead, Tom est mort*. Recounted in the first person, it was the story of a mother who loses her second child, Tom. The novel is set in Australia, and Tom is 4 when he dies; he has an elder brother and a younger sister. The mother is a French housewife, her husband is an Englishman who works abroad on construction sites.

For personal reasons that I'm prepared to discuss with you, I had a need to "deterritorialise", as Deleuze would say, some autobiographical material from my own childhood, and craft a novel from it. As my publisher was later obliged to make precise to journalists, I had, very fortunately, not lived through this experience myself - all of my 3 children being alive.

The novel was well received, except by another writer, Camille Laurens, who accused me of "psychic plagiarism". This new concept was instantly taken up by the French media, who were eager to find a new way to enliven the traditional "rentrée littéraire". Camille Laurens had lost her first baby in childbirth and written an account of it in 1992, *Philippe* —a memoir that I had publicly praised. She now persuaded herself that I had stolen, not only her story, but her grief and, as she put it, "her identity", even finding sentences in both books that "looked alike". She wrote a lengthy article about it, and gave interviews explaining that I had no right to write, *in the first person*, about feelings that I couldn't even imagine. Camille Laurens writes what is called in France "autofiction", a 1st person genre that's on the border between autobiography and fiction. I myself happened to study this genre in the books of Hervé Guibert in the beginning of the 90's for my Ph.D thesis. Camille Laurens and I shared the same publisher, POL, so all the ingredients of a *scandale littéraire* were there.

I found myself summoned to justify my love for fiction in the first person, and my desire and need to write fiction this way, even when dealing with the most nightmarish subject-matter. All this led me to a lot of thinking about fiction and the way we read it. I wrote an essay about it, *Rapport de Police*, and I'll try to summarize a part of it here.

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WE KNOW THAT A PRIMORDIAL judgment weighs heavily upon fiction: the condemnation pronounced by Plato.

Despite "an awe and love of Homer" that he has had "from [his] earliest youth," Plato feels he must address the strict rule required in a just city: the complete "rejection of imitative poetry"—in other words, fiction (1). Fiction

speaks, he says, in the place of “those who have gone to war”: the real people, who have suffered in their flesh, who actually know the weight of words and the burden of the dead. 2,400 years ago, the idea that fiction could present a vision of reality as accurate as—or even truer than—a factual account was already subversive.

I am a writer of metaphors, and of fiction; indeed, I have no choice. I write with familial mantras that are like damnations, but above all, I write with my *imaginaire*: my imaginary. If there is a particular strength to my fiction, which has been described as “empathetic,” it is that this writing offers a textual locus of identification. It’s astonishing, the power of the real-effect, which can provoke confusions, sensitivities, and outbursts, even the accusation of “psychic plagiarism” in the case of my latest novel. This accusation sprang from the idea that to write in the first person about a period of mourning, one must have endured such an ordeal oneself. Otherwise, this narrative is of necessity usurped, or even copied outright. As if fiction were never anything but the plagiarism of a factual account.

My books are almost always—and deliberately—fiction. As it happens, the violent polemic that followed the publication of *Tom is dead* in France compelled me to make public certain autobiographical facts to justify my having written a work from my *imaginaire* in the 1st person. I never thought I would HAVE to do that in my life as a writer.

There have been several attacks recently in France against other first-person novels described as “extreme fiction.” In 2007, Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat accused Jonathan Littell of “plagiarizing the dead” and “plagiarizing the Nazis” for *The Kindly Ones* (3) In late 2009, Claude Lanzmann accused Yannick Haenel of usurpation and plagiarism because the novelist presented his own version of a historical figure, Jan Karski (interviewed by Lanzmann in *Shoah*), and did so by speaking for the character of Karski in a fictitious monologue (4). In March of 2010, Régis Jauffret’s usual publisher decided not to publish his latest novel, *Sévère*, because this fictional monologue resembled “too closely” a sensational news item involving a well-known banker.(5) Régis Jauffret found another publisher later, and a movie is being made from his book (but movies are never really set in the 1st person ; that's why movies, though they look more realistic, are not subjected to the same accusations of "psychic plagiarism").

In all those examples, the first-person novel was either too true, or too untrue. This form of fiction, albeit a traditional one, seemed to be upsetting the contemporary practice of reading, which has become confused with the exercise of legality and morality.

Consider also, as a sociological phenomenon, the prizes given in France for this *rentrée littéraire* 2011 : *all of them*, which are supposed to go to novels, were given to novels dealing with history, current affairs, or historical characters. (See the Goncourt Prize awarded to Alexis Jenni for his novel about France’s colonial wars, or

the Renaudot and Femina Prizes given to biographies of real characters, or the Interallié prizewinner about a French street gang, etc.). Our times are very platonic, perhaps because of the level of anxiety reached by our western societies. Or perhaps economy drives and cost-effectiveness are to blame: don't waste your time, read about facts, learn the true truth! Forget fiction, forget novels !

So long after Plato, in our times, truth is all the rage, a truth identified with the Good. What seems to be disappearing at the moment is the very possibility of reading and understanding what a novel is.

Plato and imitation, or on the origins of terror in literature

For Plato, objects in the real world are already copies of an Idea. Thus the bed made by a craftsman is a copy of the Idea of a bed. Fiction ("imitative poetry") is a copy of a copy, one "thrice removed" from truth. For poets "cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence." (6) Morally, this is intolerable; politically, it is dangerous: we no longer know who is speaking.

Since we cannot regulate the imitative power of fiction, we must get to the root of the evil by banishing the authors, especially the good ones. A "good poet," says Plato, is precisely someone who has no need to know what he's talking about to write about it. This dangerous talent is tailor-made to deceive honest people—and children, adds Plato.

Homer is then put on trial: has he "in private or public life" led armies in war, cured men of illnesses, governed cities, he who in his work speaks of these things as if he were familiar with them? No. Homer was not able "to educate and improve mankind" because he did not possess knowledge and was "a mere imitator."(7) Able to create a perfect simulacrum of what he has neither experienced nor been familiar with, he is a charlatan, like all authors of fiction, those poets who see things only through "words and phrases." "Imitation is only a kind of play or sport" (Plato X, 371).

The most reprehensible usurpation, for Plato, is the fictitious narrative in the first person. When Homer contents himself with remaining Homer, i.e. when he "never conceals himself" behind the voices of his characters, Plato considers his third-person narratives tolerable. He gives as an example this passage from *The Iliad*: "And he prayed all the Greeks, but especially the two sons of Atreus, the chiefs of the people." Commentary: "The poet is speaking [here] in his own person; he never leads us to suppose that he is anyone else. But in what follows he takes the person of Chryses, and then he does all that he can to make us believe that the speaker is not Homer, but the aged priest himself" (Plato III, 93, 92). *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are condemned in their entirety because of speeches in the first person.

And now Plato rewrites for us, in the third person—which is to say, legitimately—the priest's entire monologue! "In this way the whole becomes simple narrative" (Plato III, 94).

I will take the time to read the passages with you. It's really amazing. This is the "illicit" passage from the Iliad, the very first lines. Chryses gives a direct speech :

"Sons of Atreus," he cried, "and all other Achaeans, may the gods who dwell in Olympus grant you to sack the city of Priam, and to reach your homes in safety; but free my daughter, and accept a ransom for her, in reverence to Apollo, son of Jove."

On this the rest of the Achaeans with one voice were for respecting the priest and taking the ransom that he offered; but not so Agamemnon, who spoke fiercely to him and sent him roughly away.

"Old man," said he, "let me not find you tarrying about our ships, nor yet coming hereafter. Your sceptre of the god and your wreath shall profit you nothing. I will not free her. She shall grow old in my house at Argos far from her own home, busying herself with her loom and visiting my couch; so go, and do not provoke me or it shall be the worse for you."

The old man feared him and obeyed. Not a word he spoke, but went by the shore of the sounding sea and prayed apart to King Apollo whom lovely Leto had borne.

"Hear me," he cried, "O god of the silver bow (that protectest Chryse and holy Cilla and rulest Tenedos with thy might) hear me oh thou of Sminthe. If I have ever decked your temple with garlands, or burned your thigh-bones in fat of bulls or goats, grant my prayer, and let your arrows avenge these my tears upon the Danaans."

Here is what Plato does with this passage - he transposes it from imitation to acceptable simple narration :

The passage would have run as follows (I am no poet, and therefore I drop the metre), 'The priest came and prayed the gods on behalf of the Greeks that they might capture Troy and return safely home, but begged that they would give him back his daughter, and take the ransom which he brought, and respect the God. Thus he spoke, and the other Greeks revered the priest and assented. But Agamemnon was wroth, and bade him depart and not come again, lest the staff and chaplets of the God should be of no avail to him --the daughter of Chryses should not be released, he said --she should grow old with him in Argos. And then he told him to go away and not to provoke him, if he intended to get home unscathed. And the old man went away in fear and silence, and, when he had left the camp, he called upon Apollo by his many names, reminding him of everything which he had done pleasing to him,

whether in building his temples, or in offering sacrifice, and praying that his good deeds might be returned to him, and that the Achaeans might expiate his tears by the arrows of the god,' --and so on. In this way the whole becomes simple narrative.

All these dialogues in the first person - Plato "translates" them or transposes them entirely in the third, as narration, more acceptable than the scandalous imitation of the fictive monologue.

The idea is to replace a text with another, more acceptable one (and this idea is still very alive today).¹⁰ For Plato, the worst offenders are fictive passages in the first person dealing with grief.

"Then we will once more entreat Homer and the other poets not to depict Achilles, who is the son of a goddess, first lying on his side, then on his back, and then on his face; then starting up and sailing in a frenzy along the shores of the barren sea; now taking the sooty ashes in both his hands and pouring them over his head, or weeping and wailing in the various modes which Homer has delineated. Nor should he describe Priam the kinsman of the gods as praying and beseeching,

"Rolling in the dirt, calling each man loudly by his name."

Still more earnestly will we beg of him at all events not to introduce the gods lamenting and saying,

"Alas! my misery! Alas! that I bore the harvest to my sorrow."

Note the shift here from the 3rd to the 1st person. And Plato goes on and on, forbidding and transposing. *"And we must beg Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we strike out these and similar passages."*(11) Such is the power of the 1st person imitative monologue. For these "psychic plagiarisms" before their time, if I dare say, demoralize brave citizens.

Aristotle, the "feeling of humanity," and the first person

Unlike Plato, Aristotle praises the imaginary. The *Poetics* cannot really be called prescriptive. Aristotle defines and describes, and never condemns. "Especially," he says, "since it is the modern fashion to carp at poets" (Aristotle XVIII, 71). (This was in 330 B.C) Be it a tragedy or an epic poem, what he praises in fiction is that it inspires "a feeling of humanity." Delicate to translate, shifting slightly in meaning in different passages, this idea consists basically of compassion for human suffering.(13) Fiction will thus be judged (but not solely) by its capacity to unleash this "feeling of humanity," best awakened by situations our moralizing critics would find, at the very least, shocking: "When for instance brother kills brother, or son father, or mother son, or son mother—either kills or intends to kill, or does something

of the kind, that is what we must look for” (Aristotle XIV, 51).

But—the right-thinking among us will protest—have the authors experienced these dreadful situations? Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides: did they even take the victims into account? Yes, I dare say they did. Because it is thanks to them that we still suffer with Antigone, with Oedipus, with Clytemnestra, with Medea. Mimesis does not copy the suffering of a particular individual; on the contrary, it invents a story based on common ground, with typical characters, who will later take on the Christian personae of the Mater Dolorosa, the Madeleine, the Judas, or the Prodigal Son. Aristotle doesn't forbid any form, 3rd or 1st person, on the contrary. As you know he insists on the catharsis, the purgative power of tragedy, full of violent monologues. I'll leave that aside.

I'll also leave aside the fact that nowadays, Euripides would be accused of plagiarizing Sophocles, and Sophocles, Aeschylus.

What do the characters do in tragedy ? They shout *I! I! I!* —mourning sisters, incestuous sons, mothers murdered or bathed in tears. Fiction, for Aristotle, is the “as if.” He says so several times: “In constructing the plots [the fiction] and completing the effect by the help of dialogue the poet should, as far as possible, keep the scene before his eyes [through imagination]. Only thus by getting the picture as clear as if he were present at the actual event, will he find what is fitting.” (Aristotle, XVII, 65; XV, 57; XVI, 63; VI, 23). This shock of recognition, taking us out of ourselves, allows us to embrace a larger “feeling of humanity,” the only way to understand another person.

It goes without saying that what Aristotle called *mimesis* was the height of psychic plagiarism.

The novel, especially in the first person, is for me the continuation of that mimesis. And I am quite convinced that imagination is in fact a form of humanism. Aristotle has praise for hysteria, praise for those who know how to invent lives for themselves and take on fictional characters. Because what is important here is not to have experienced an emotion in order to express it, but to find a way of expressing it that speaks to *all of us*: “A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could or would happen.” (Aristotle IX, 35).

Indeed, why “imitate” instead of writing true-life narratives, which we know can also speak to all of us? Aristotle answers this question at the very beginning of the *Poetics*. He explains that the sight of real suffering is too difficult to bear. And yet, we must still have some idea of it in order to experience the feeling of humanity, and by studying “accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses,” we can learn—to our horror—that “we enjoy looking at” them (Aristotle IV, 15). Aristotle's *Poetics* relies in its entirety on the distinction between the real

(unbearable) and fiction (whose imitative role allows us specifically to bear the real world). It would be against nature to delight in the sight of real suffering, but the “natural” pleasure we take in violent tales has a pedagogical function based on catharsis, a purgation of libidinal energy. Those who today speak of crime in criticizing a ‘pedophilic’ novel, for example, would do well to read the *Poetics*, in which Aristotle never confuses a phantasm with the acting out of a fantasy. On the contrary, the representation of the phantasm would allow one to avoid acting it out: fiction civilizes; it dissuades and diverts us from the orgiastic horrors of reality.

Morality and fiction

Reproaching fiction writers for doing what they know how to do, for imagining without necessarily knowing, or experiencing... You’d think such accusations had long since gone out of fashion. These days, apparently, no one attacks the mode of fictional representation as such anymore. But in fact the suspicion of usurpation continues to express itself via a phantasm such as “psychic plagiarism,” which prolongs the Platonic accusation: the objective is still to set norms and boundaries for fiction (9). Moralizing critics seek refuge these days in supposed limits, around a sanctification of personal pain delivered through conventional but contradictory pronouncements: pain cannot be imitated; imitating pain is immoral; to write a novel in the first person is perceived as a lie, it mimics the authentic cry of the autobiography. Fundamentally frivolous, a usurper and plagiarist: that is, *in fine*, the novelist.

And so, according to Camille Laurens, to have earned the right to take on serious subjects in the first person, “the author, in the pink of health and the bosom of a happy family,” must have first “paid the debt” of suffering. She specifies the themes she considers off-limits: HIV, cancer, concentration camps, and even—yes—death. (21) “*We can predict that the future will bring a host of novels in the first person—but not autobiographical ones, oh no!—in which the narrator will struggle with cancer, AIDS, concentration camps, death, in an orgy of terrifying detail, while the author, in the pink of health and the bosom of a happy family, perched on books by Hervé Guibert or Primo Levi, their pages all heavily annotated in fluorescent marker, will get off on and get others off on suffering for which he has not yet paid the debt*” (Laurens). Following this reasoning, only a murderer can write that he has killed, and only a victim can write about her pain: all of fiction falls to pieces as a genre. Any real experience could deny the author’s right to a novel, perceived as ‘less true’ than lived life or even as usurping it. (22)

Plato’s anathema is still in force, against first-person fiction as the very root of troubling subjectivity.

Autobiography, however, is no less ‘imitative’ of reality—if one insists on using that term—than is the novel: the *moi*, the *self*, is a fiction, and to write

down one's life is to "compose a persuasive simulacrum in writing." (Ricoeur, 23) Autofiction is a "fiction of strictly real events and facts." (Dobrovsky, 24) Every narrative is a form that brings order out of chaos thanks only to a tacit agreement between human experience and human speech, an agreement complicated by everything that has already been written. Thus the aesthetic categories of mimesis and representation are no longer operative, as opposed to those of figure and structure: a literary text imitates nothing, it carves into language a space that until then did not exist. Indeed, 'stories' do not exist before their formulation. Ricoeur repeats this all through *Time and Narrative*: "Fiction does not illustrate a pre-existing phenomenological theme; it actualizes the universal meaning of this theme in a singular figure." (25)

And yet many people still wish to believe that fiction imitates a singular (his)story: that's thinking upside down. The 'fiction/autobiography' confusion at work in an attack like the one protesting "psychic plagiarism" seems to me a perverse effect of the practice of autofiction, as if one of its avatars were refusing pointblank to countenance the writing of *imagination*. This avatar, largely abetted by newspaper critics, tips autofiction toward autobiography, thereby forgetting the etymology of the word. In autofiction, there is *fiction*, not *bio*, as well as the suggestion of an automatism founded initially on the psychoanalytical principle of free association, à la Dobrovsky.

In my doctoral dissertation I defined autofiction, in a non-exclusive way, as a practice in which words invent life, in the first person of an author-narrator and in his/her name, with studied effects of improbability meant precisely to underline *what a text is*—including an autobiographical text—with regard to lived experience. (26) *The Divine Comedy* would be the model here, while other examples would include the books of Blaise Cendrars, of Pierre Loti and Hervé Guibert ("Only phony things happen to him," remarked Foucault). It is first-person writing, therefore, *une écriture du "je,"* that lays claim to a status both autobiographical *and* imaginary.

For Käte Hamburger, the pivotal element in the separation between fiction and factual narrative is precisely the first-person pronoun: the *I*. The first-person novel is in no way different from autobiography: it offers the pretense (*Schein*) of an autobiography, by positing a fictitious "I-Origin." (27) The difference between a fictional narrative in the third person and an assertive narrative in the third person can be seen and heard; if you consider the verbal tenses used by a fictional narrator in the third person, for example, you wind up with indirect discourse. In the first-person novel, however, such markers are no longer apparent. According to Hamburger, the invention of "emanation-points of thought" is the sign and seal of fiction, which reproduces nothing less than the work of consciousness. See also Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1984), on the question of the pronoun as "check point" between fiction and factual discourse.

Well, 'to mimic' an assertion seems to pose a strange problem for many literary thinkers. As though the fictional monologue, that literary practice older than Plato, could only be apprehended morally. (28)

What distinguishes *Tom is Dead* from a lived narrative? Nothing, actually, unless it's the explicit word *novel* on the front cover... and the absence of all biographical or onomastic byplay. My heroine is not me, but definitely someone else, an imaginary other. Rimbaud's "I is another" has always been, ever since *Truismes*, my vision of fiction and my way of writing (29). So having to stake my claim now to a *right to fiction*, and even a *right to a character*, perplexes me no end.

Fiction in the first person seems to anger certain readers as much as if they'd been deceived. In this form, the referential illusion can be so strong, in fact, and the identification so powerful, that the reader—to use Plato's parlance—becomes temporarily "enslaved" to it and then irritated with the author (who is quite often confused with the narrator). "We react to these fictions as we would have reacted to real experiences," writes Freud after reading Schnitzler's *The Prophecy*. "By the time we have noticed the trick it is already too late, the author has achieved his goal, but I maintain that he has not achieved an untarnished success. A feeling of dissatisfaction leaves us with a kind of grudge against the attempted deceit." (30, Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny") And after reading *The Stranger* by Camus, Sarraute spoke of "the emotion to which we utterly abandon ourselves": "We can't help feeling a certain resentment: we're annoyed with him for having led us astray for too long." (31)

The imagination exists *for real*, as a force of the mind. The imagination does not imitate the world; it creates an artifact, a textual equivalent, transfusable in language into our skulls. For when it comes to someone-else's really-real with little bits of true stuff inside, we'll never know a thing. The audacity of the imaginative writer who smuggles text across the border between brains, this melding of the imagination and the first person, will always strike the defenders of *literature-as-reflection* as an illegal act.

The fictive first person is one of the exploratory areas of literature. As such, producing a form that cannot be distinguished from a lived narrative, it upsets categories which, no longer in force, mutate into moral condemnations. (32) As if, in criticism, every conflict should be resolved through the more or less loudly proclaimed exclusion of one or the other genre, way of writing, or writer. A novelist is not (and does not claim to be, and does not want to be) a historian or an autobiographer. The novelist's place in common language and literary expression is elsewhere. And the novelist *also* tells the truth, *also* bears witness to the human experience. *Tom is Dead*, narrated by one Mrs. Winter living in Australia, never claimed to be an autofiction or a game with my biography.

On the contrary: it is also because I am *not* impinging on the private life of those close to me (or my own) that I feel infinitely more true, and free, in fiction and the imaginary, and even in fantasy.

Literature was never made to save the world, but to describe it in passing, in passing through it, in presenting it for a fresh viewing, through hitherto unopened windows. To describe it not in its “reality,” but in *all* its realities: the novel must create a world, said Hermann Broch, in order to account for the world. And it’s precisely because it must be, not a mirror, but “the mirror of all visions,” that “no human action should be withheld from it.”(33) We’ve known at least since Sarraute and *The Age of Suspicion* that a narrator is an instance just as problematic as any character. Why are we even talking about illicit narrators today? For Sarraute, the only crime, in literature, is to have neither a grand plan nor an original way of looking at things. She quotes Flaubert: “The deepest obligation of the novelist is to discover something new, while the worst crime would be to repeat previous discoveries.”(34) Writing a useless book, a book that seeks nothing: that’s what’s bad in literature. Because literature renders justice neither as judge nor as historian.

In praise of imaginary skins

Today it is as if it were forbidden to write by slipping into someone else’s skin!
Do not imagine other lives, other worlds, other dreams, other nightmares!

“We breathe dereliction of duty in through our pores.” [*Poésies* I] *The Songs of Maldoror* are first-person fiction purporting most unconvincingly to be an Autobiography. (35) The narrator, alternating blithely between *I* and *he*, remembers “having lived for half a century, as a shark, in the undersea currents that hug the coast of Africa.” Isidore Ducasse, in the skin of Lautréamont, or Maldoror, or an octopus or a louse, watches the debauched antics of a hair from God’s head, pines for an amphibian, and couples with a female shark: “I was facing my first love!” “It was all real, what happened that summer evening.” And the last sentence of the *Songs*: “Go and see for yourself, if you don’t believe me.” If anyone ever actually *read* Lautréamont, that jolly classic of assigned reading in school would be sold in a plain paper wrapper, like Robbe-Grillet’s controversial last novel. Because besides coitus with sharks, the *Songs* feature the rape and torture of little girls, and goody-goody children driven to suicide. Isidore Ducasse, that murderer.

Are there ethical limits to speaking out in fiction? The subtitle of *Jane Eyre*, published in 1848, says it is “an autobiography,” and this first-person novel, full of magnificent Sturm und Drang, has plenty of pathetic deaths and madness. Would this subtitle be a provocation today? Is it forbidden to write *fictitiously* about suffering in the first person? Is it forbidden to write about misfortune in a monologue novel? And in epistolary literature? Must we

reproach Guilleragues for having been so believable, in his *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, that these wrenching supplications were taken for real letters? Or even Ovid, the inventor of the genre of the "Heroids", those fictitious monologues of passion and forlorn lovers ? Penelope's to Ulysses, for example, Medea's to Jason, or Hermione's to Orestis.

In *The Red Crown*, the narrator, who introduces himself autobiographically as Bulgakov, is visited by his brother Kolya, who's been killed by a bursting shell during the civil war. "If he's wearing the crown, that means he's dead. And there he was, talking, moving his lips sticky with blood!"(36) This indecent autofiction no doubt cried out for censure: Bulgakov's brother, the real Kolya, in real life, was still alive! Should Bulgakov be denied this hallucinatory expression of his fraternal terror? Stalin was on the job: *immoral, not realistic enough, politically suspect*. All those who by the millions had lost their brothers and sons *in real life*—did this book insult them, or hold out its hand to them? And how does one explain the fact that years later in the Soviet Union, this narrative became the symbol of murdered literature, the literature whose lips, somehow, still move? (37)

Yes, it's safer this way: fratricidal terrors, fictitious mourning, phantasms of death, and un-lived novels must be forbidden. Fiction in the first person, that immoral falsehood of the imaginary, must be outlawed... because it might speak to human beings.

When people ask me where my ideas come from (a recurrent question), their tone is one of either admiration—*That's some imagination you have!*—or reproach—*That's some imagination you have!* Changing oneself into a sow, imagining that one's husband vanishes or one's son dies, in the 1st person, especially when one is a woman, a wife and mother, is illicit imagination.

And yet, everyone thinks about such things. Everyone dreams or has nightmares about changing skins, about the death of loved ones. A novel is a phantasm that has no other acting out except writing. As Freud put it, there is no difference between the fantasy of hysteria, and the fiction a writer writes : it's an imaginary speech. A novelist is someone who finds words for his or her phantasms, to the bitter end. It's not the novelist's ideas that should occasion any astonishment, but perhaps the stubbornness required, and the patience. *Write?* Why? If there's anything 'bad' in literature, perhaps it's to shy away beforehand, to recoil from the phantasm, and be afraid of it.

Tomb of a Young Person is the title of a sculpture by Louise Bourgeois. "These attentive pillars," she has said, "express fear, a kind of protective exorcism for the health of my children."

I wrote *Tom is Dead* in the same spirit of exorcism. And the why of my writing, of my personal witchcraft, is nobody else's business. As Louise Bourgeois put it : "Exorcism is a healthy thing. Cauterizing, burning in order to cure. It's like pruning trees. That's my talent. I'm good at all that." (38)

Marie Darrieussecq

Notes

1. Plato, *The Republic*, Benjamin Jowett, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), book X, 360, 361, 378. "Poetry" is contrasted not with prose, by Plato, but with assertive discourse and philosophy (theirs is "an ancient quarrel"), and with history by Aristotle, whose two great examples of poetry are the epic and tragedy.
2. Marie Darrieussecq, *Tom est mort* (Paris: P.O.L., 2007); *Tom is Dead*, Lia Hills, trans. (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2009).
3. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, *Holocauste ordinaire: histoires d'usurpation—extermination, littérature, théologie* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), 63, 72.
4. Yannick Haenel, *Jan Karski* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
5. Régis Jauffret, *Sévère* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2010).
6. Plato, X, 36, 363.
7. Plato, X, 367, 368. In 380 B.C.E. writers were already being judged according to their private life.
8. Plato, X, 373-74. See also the beginning of III.
9. Camille Laurens, "Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou," *Revue littéraire*, 32 (September 2007). The author expounds on her "feeling of having [her] identity stolen."
10. Octave Mannoni, "Le Besoin d'interpréter," *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1969), 203. This provocative article considers Faurisson's rewriting of Lautréamont and Rimbaud, as well as the mechanisms of censorship intended to replace the literary text with another text considered "more satisfying for one reason or another."
11. Plato, III, 83. This in regard to the lament of Thetis at the death of her son Achilles.
12. Aristotle, *Poetics*, W. Hamilton Fyfe, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1960), XVII, 65.
13. See the notes of J. Hardy on this point in Aristotle, *Poétique*, J. Hardy, trans. (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 147.
14. The reproof is aimed at Littell by Dauzat.
15. On this point see the thoughtful article by Rüdiger Bubner, "Historiographie et littérature," in Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz, *Temps et récit de Paul Ricoeur en débat* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 39-55. With regard to the role of chance in factual and fictional narratives, Bubner emphasizes how dangerous it would be to read fiction according to the same criteria we apply to History: "In that case

comprehension would be guided by morality, and the universality of literary creations would be melded insensibly into the concrete character of historiography.” 80

16. Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, 3 vols. (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983-85), 3:278. *Time and Narrative*,

3 vols., Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, trans. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984-88), 3:192.

This is precisely what Jonathan Littell did in *The Kindly Ones*. The narrator, an executioner who has survived a serious head wound, is haunted by visions of past murders and those yet to come, and living in ruins he can no longer distinguish from his nightmares. He shows us his war with a hallucinatory power that does not undermine but strengthens our knowledge of the Second World War. “Without fiction, memory dies,” Jorge Semprun has said about this novel.

17. Ricoeur, *TR*, 2:129; *TN*, 2:86.

18. Ricoeur, *TR*, 3:273; *TN*, 3:187-88. Ricoeur’s observations will be developed by Pierre Vidal-Naquet in *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1995).

19. Ricoeur, *TR*, 3:274; *TN* 3:188.

20. Perhaps because writers are artists whose material belongs to everyone: language and narrative. It’s difficult to “unhook” reading from representation.

21. “We can predict that the future will bring a host of novels in the first person—but not autobiographical ones, oh no!—in which the narrator will struggle with cancer, AIDS, concentration camps, death, in an orgy of terrifying detail, while the author, in the pink of health and the bosom of a happy family, perched on books by Hervé Guibert or Primo Levi, their pages all heavily annotated in fluorescent marker, will get off on and get others off on suffering for which he has not yet paid the debt” (Laurens). Following this reasoning, only a murderer can write that he has killed, and only a victim can write about her pain: all of fiction falls to pieces as a genre.

22. Pain today is sanctified, therefore religious. And I am *resolutely* in favor of a secular approach to History and the novel.

23. Ricoeur, *TR*, 2:25; *TN*, 2:13.

24. Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977), jacket copy.

25. Ricoeur, *TR*, 3:193; *TN*, 3:134.

26. Marie Darrieussecq, *Moments critiques dans l’autobiographie contemporaine: l’ironie tragique et l’autofiction chez Serge Doubrovsky, Hervé Guibert, Michel Leiris et Georges Perec*, Diss. Université Paris VII 1997.

27. Käte Hamburger, *Logique des genres littéraires*, Pierre Cadiot, trans. (Paris: Le Seuil,

1986). [Hamburger’s *Logik der Dichtung* was first published in 1957. Marilyn Rose’s English translation, *The Logic of Literature*, published in 1973, was based on the revised second German edition (1968); Cadiot’s translation was based on the third edition of 1977. —Translator’s note.] The difference between a fictional narrative in the third person and an assertive narrative in the third person can be seen and heard; if you consider the verbal tenses used by a fictional narrator in the third person, for example, you wind up with indirect discourse. In the first-person novel, however, such markers are no longer apparent. According to Hamburger, the invention of “emanation-points of thought” is the sign and seal of fiction, which reproduces

nothing less than the work of consciousness. See also Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1984), on the question of the pronoun as “check point” between fiction and factual discourse.

28. Pretend, feign, simulate: the critical vocabulary reveals a tendency to compare fiction, an aesthetic category, with a lie, a moral category. Thus Ricoeur says that the first-person novel “simulates a memory, which is in truth fictitious” (*TR*, 2:134; *TN*, 2:89). Gérard Genette uses the same tone: the first-person novel is “an act of language that mimics an assertion, all the while announcing that its distinguishing characteristic is fiction.” *Fiction et diction*

(Paris: Le Seuil, 1991), 44-45; *Fiction and Diction*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 2009).

29. Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (Paris: P.O.L., 1996); *Pig Tales*, Linda Coverdale, trans. (New York: The New P, 1997).

30. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 volumes, James Strachey et al., ed. (London: The Hogarth P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-74), 17:219-56.

31. Natalie Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 27; *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*, Maria Jolas, trans. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

32. For a more complete narratological analysis, see my article “L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux,” *Poétique*, 107 (1996): 369-80. If we're guided by the criteria established by Käte Hamburger, autofiction would be—like all first-person novels—a “feigned statement of reality”: it mimes an act of language, in this case autobiography, which runs counter to the whole tradition of autobiographical “sincerity.” Writers of autofictions who do not content themselves with narrating their lives (I'm thinking in particular of Hervé Guibert) often send all paratext packing and go elsewhere, rendering null and void any mimetic logic. As we know, neither the *pretense* of Hamburger nor the early works of a Philippe Lejeune, [an academic specializing in autobiography —Translator's note] could completely explain autofiction, which has latched onto this feigned “I” precisely in order to escape all such categorization.

33. Hermann Broch, *Création littéraire et connaissance*, Albert Kohn, trans. (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 241.

34. Sarraute, *L'Ère du soupçon*, 79.

35. “If you insist, what book—I ask you—what modern novel, what mongrel cross between autobiography and fiction, could ever be more *lived* than the screams and lamentations of this tortured soul?” Léon Bloy, *Belluaires et porchers* [Gladiators and swineherds] (Cabris: Éditions Sulliver, 1997), 64.

36. Mikhail Bulgakov, “The Red Crown,” *The Terrible News: Russian Stories from the Years Following the Revolution* (London: Black Spring P, 1990).

37. This is one of Mandelstam's most famous verses: “You didn't take from me these lips, still moving.” From the last line of “Prison Poem #11”: “You Stripped Away the Sea...”

38. Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 54.

The Republic By Plato is translated by Benjamin Jowett, Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

This speech by Marie Darrieussecq was originally published in *L'Esprit Créateur*, and translated by Linda Coverdale (*Fiction in the First Person or Immoral Writing*, Marie Darrieussecq, *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Fall 2010), then reworked and adapted by Darrieussecq for the University of London.