

Finding the first-person voice in contemporary narratives of suicide and bereavement in French

In spite of the rather optimistic title, this paper does not aim to ‘find’ the first-person voice in narratives of suicide and bereavement, but will, rather, raise questions as to whether this is even a feasible goal. The paper draws on ideas from the early stages of a new project I am developing on narratives about suicide published in French in roughly the last twenty years. It will first outline – briefly – the parameters of the primary corpus as it is currently conceived, and then focus on a particular trend within that corpus that raises some interesting methodological questions. My main goal at this stage is to suggest some possibilities for a way of reading this type of text which, in keeping with the spirit of the conference, I shall argue demands an interdisciplinary approach.

Firstly, then, why suicide narratives and why since the 1990s? Suicide is, of course, not a new theme in literature (whether in French or any other language). However, what I think can be identified in recent literature is a much more overt focus on suicide as the central concern of the texts in my corpus. The project will look at a range of genres from non-fiction – memoirs and testimonial accounts of suicidal depression or bereavement due to suicide – to young adult fiction, genre fiction such as thrillers and romances, and literary fiction. By a more overt focus, what I mean broadly is that suicide is signalled from the outset as the central and most important theme of the book, often before you pick it up. Madame Bovary commits suicide at the end of Flaubert’s novel, but if I were to ask a reader to sum up the text in a couple of sentences, s/he would probably not immediately say ‘it’s a novel about suicide’; by contrast, many of the texts in my primary corpus indicate in their titles¹ or their opening lines, or both, that the focus will be on suicide. For instance,² Pierre

¹ Examples from various genres include Édouard Levé, *Suicide* (Paris: POL, 2008), translated by Jan Steyn as *Suicide* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011); Jean Teulé, *Le Magasin des Suicides* (Paris : Julliard, 2007), translated by Sue Dyson as *Suicide Shop* (London: Gallic Books, 2008); Agnès Favre, *L’Envol de Sarah. Ma fille : sa vie, son suicide* (Paris : Max Milo, 2006), literally ‘Sarah’s flight. My daughter: her life, her suicide.’

² As the project is still in the early stages of development, these should be taken as representative examples rather than a comprehensive survey. Published translations are cited where they exist; otherwise all translations given are mine.

Ahne opens his 2009 novel *Dernier amour avant liquidation* (*Final love story before liquidation*) with ‘Ayant décidé de mettre fin à mes jours j’ai pris le train’ (‘Having decided to end it all I got on a train’),³ while Thierry Cohen’s 2007 metaphysical thriller *J’aurais préféré vivre* (*I would have preferred to live*) opens with an account of the protagonist’s suicide in the first person:

Les cachets, le whisky, l’herbe. M’allonger. Je sais ce que je fais. Ne penser qu’à la méthode. Ne penser qu’aux gestes. Ne penser qu’à moi, ici, dans ce salon, à la bouteille, aux cachets. Juste moi. Le bouchon. Le tube. Ouvrir la bouche, poser les cachets sur ma langue, porter la bouteille à mes lèvres. Avaler.⁴

(The pills, the whisky, the weed. Lie down. I know what I’m doing. Only think of the method. Only think of the actions. Only think of myself, here, in this room, of the bottle, the pills. Just me. The cork. The tube. Open my mouth, put the pills on my tongue, raise the bottle to my lips. Swallow.)

A common approach in such texts is to begin the narrative with an account of the suicide, and then either to go back in time to explain the circumstances leading up to the death, or to narrate the process of mourning undertaken by those left behind, or both. I’ve said that these texts are from a range of genres; they are also being produced by established novelists, first-time writers, large and small publishing houses,⁵ suggesting that this can, as I claim, be seen as a trend in French publishing rather than being limited to a couple of publishers or to non-fiction, testimonial narrative lists. Although it is too early to draw conclusions about why this trend is emerging now, it seems likely that a kind of democratisation of publishing could be at least one factor. For example, Laurent Fialaix’s autobiographical novel *Nos bonheurs fragiles* (*Our fragile pleasures*, 2009) began life as a blog before being adapted for publication,⁶ and the possibility of online publishing is also interesting in this context because of the greater potential for reader input; comments on blogs that become books can feed into the final result, plus online reviews of texts mean that it’s easier than ever as a reader to contribute to a public debate.

³ Pierre Ahne, *Dernier amour avant liquidation* (Paris : Denoël, 2009), p. 7.

⁴ Thierry Cohen, *J’aurais préféré vivre* (Paris : Plon, 2007/Pocket, 2008), p. 9.

⁵ It can be noted that the examples I cite are all issued by different publishers, with the exception of the texts by the Poivre d’Arvor family.

⁶ Laurent Fialaix, *Nos bonheurs fragiles* (Paris: Melville Léo Scheer, 2009).

This raises new questions for the literary critic, especially when dealing with a field like suicide narratives, where many readers and writers may be drawing on their own experience. Coming from a primarily literary background, it seemed obvious that I might need to adapt my methodological approach if I were to deal adequately with testimonial accounts rather than exclusively with literary fictions, perhaps drawing on approaches from health humanities and focusing to a greater extent on reader responses, or the possible role of such texts in clinical contexts. In any case, the highly personal and often difficult nature of the subject matter and the need to do justice to the real suffering experienced by individuals in the real world meant that while considerations of literary merit and significance were still relevant, a broader approach might be called for which would consider the texts, their source material, their possible impact on readers, and their contributions to the wider discourse on suicidal depression.

What I want to focus on for the rest of this paper, though, is a slightly more complex relationship between non-fiction testimonials and literary fiction: not just ambiguities in positioning individual texts, but a dialogue or debate taking place across genres, which I shall argue re-establishes a role for traditional literary criticism within an interdisciplinary framework. I want to sketch the outline of a discourse surrounding suicide and its narration, and suggest that a public debate can be identified which crosses boundaries of genre – testimonial accounts, young adult fiction, popular and literary fiction – about what is at stake in storytelling about suicide, and also that some of the most critical and interesting contributions to this debate are occurring precisely in the realm of literary fiction, rather than testimony.

The origin of this trend in France can be dated back to 1993 with the publication by the writer and broadcaster Patrick Poivre d'Arvor of *Lettres à l'absente* (*Letters to an absent daughter*).⁷ These were letters written by Poivre d'Arvor to his teenage daughter Solenn, who

⁷ Paris: Albin Michel, 1993.

suffered from anorexia nervosa and was at the time hospitalised and in voluntary isolation. The letters were addressed by the father to his daughter but were not read by her until after her release from hospital, at which point she gave permission for them to be published. Despite this consent, critical opinion was divided; some commentators felt that it was courageous and honest of Poivre d'Arvor to publish them and helpful to similarly afflicted families, while others felt it was inappropriate and potentially even damaging. Two years later, following Solenn's suicide in 1995 at the age of 19, Poivre d'Arvor published a second volume of letters, again written in the second person and addressed to his absent daughter, titled *Elle n'était pas d'ici* (Literally: *she was not from here*); eight years later his former wife Véronique published her own text addressed to Solenn.⁸ These texts can clearly be situated in the realm of non-fiction; they are testimonies of real suffering and written by someone very much in the public eye: as well as publishing both fiction and non-fiction, Poivre d'Arvor is perhaps best-known for presenting the main evening news programme on a major television channel for over 20 years.⁹ This is perhaps the least private act of mourning one could imagine, and Poivre d'Arvor is not unaware of the potential for controversy in his writing. He deals both with anticipated critical responses and actual criticism of his earlier book explicitly, acknowledging that writing to Solenn in both cases was primarily for his own benefit rather than hers: he states that 'écrire va peut-être me soigner. *Lui* écrire surtout.' ('writing might help me recover. Most importantly, writing *to her*'),¹⁰ and responding in more detail to specific criticisms of his earlier publication:

Je sais bien qu'on va me prendre pour un fou. On écrit peut-être à une absente, pas à une disparue. Mais « nous, c'est pas pareil », me disais-tu toujours. Nous, c'est nous. Je t'écrivais, tu ne me répondais que rarement. Alors, je t'ai écrit des lettres ouvertes, exposées à tous les courants d'air. Tu les as regardées avant publication, elles t'ont plu, tu m'en as fait gommer quelques passages, et tu m'as dit : « Vas-y, fais-en un livre. » Des amis bien intentionnés m'ont mis en garde : « Ne le fais pas, ne publie qu'à deux exemplaires, un pour elle, un pour vous. » D'autres ont rétorqué : « Fais-le,

⁸ Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, *Elle n'était pas d'ici* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995/Le Livre de poche, 1997); Véronique Poivre d'Arvor, *À Solenn (To Solenn)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

⁹ Poivre d'Arvor presented the *Journal télévisé* on TF1 from 1987 to 2008.

¹⁰ *Elle n'était pas d'ici*, p. 14.

si tu sens que ça te fera du bien », puis me critiquèrent dans mon dos. J'ai l'habitude. D'autres, enfin, ont dit comprendre. Certains y voyaient d'abord ma propre thérapie. Ils n'avaient pas tort. Nous sommes tous égoïstes. Écrire pour ne pas mourir, pour survivre, pour se libérer d'un poids oppressant...¹¹

I know perfectly well that people will think I'm crazy. You might write to an absentee, but not to someone who's passed on. But 'it's not the same for *us*', as you always said. We're just us. I wrote to you; you only wrote back occasionally. So I wrote you open letters, exposed to any passing breeze. You looked at them before they were published, you liked them, you made me erase a few passages, and you said: 'go on, make them into a book'. Well-intentioned friends put me on my guard: 'don't do it, only publish two copies, one for her and one for you'. Others said 'do it, if you think it'll help you', then criticised me behind my back. I'm used to it. Finally, some people said they understood. Some of them saw it as primarily a kind of therapy for myself. They weren't wrong. We're all selfish. Writing so as not to die, to survive, to free ourselves from a weight that oppresses us...

Reception and criticism here go both ways, from the reading public to the author and back again, as in Poivre d'Arvor's text letters and comments about the first book from both detractors and well-wishers are taken up in the second book. Thus as well as being addressed to a narratee (Solenn), the text is also responding to public responses. It is both a testimonial and a dialogue, albeit one in which the nominal addressee's voice remains largely silent. Various later texts use similar narrative structures, being addressed in the second person to an absent narratee but including information that seems more plausibly directed to an implied reader.¹²

However, some ethical issues remain with this idea of public mourning, in particular with the representation of suicide and the suicidal person. When Poivre d'Arvor's first book was published, Solenn was available to give permission, and now she isn't. Her personality, her life *and* her death are mediated through her father's perception and his account; she cannot speak for herself. Furthermore, in the quotation above, he even co-opts her voice in his defence, citing her claim that 'it's not the same for *us*'. So while the suffering of Solenn's

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 19.

¹² A key example is Édouard Levé's *Suicide* (2008).

family is undeniably tragic, and testimonial accounts like this one may also have a role in understanding suicide in general and supporting other people affected by it, one cannot help also being left with a sense of unease. In response to this, I shall conclude by suggesting that if we want to ‘find’ the first-person voice of the suicidal individual, as I claim in the title to this paper, perhaps the place to look is not in testimonial accounts, even if they might initially seem more grounded in reality, but rather in fiction.

To sum up, I’ve talked about testimonial narratives of suicide written in the second person, in which the first-person voice belongs to a survivor: a relative, partner or friend of the person who has died, with the latter being addressed as the narratee. Evidently in this rather one-sided ‘dialogue’ both parties are suffering; the first-person narrators have experienced a bereavement and are left attempting to make sense of what has happened both to their loved ones and to themselves. But I’ve also expressed a concern that this type of text tends to silence the voice of the absent narratee, appropriating and reinterpreting his or her actions and choices into a version which stands as definitive because it cannot be challenged. Although I cannot analyse them in any detail here, I shall end by touching on two recent novels that address precisely *this* problem, by moving even further away from the genre of the ‘témoignage’ (testimonial account),¹³ and firmly into the domain of literature: Régis Jauffret’s *Lacrimosa* (published in 2008 and recently in English translation) and Nina Yargekov’s *Vous serez mes témoins* (*You shall be my witnesses*, 2011).¹⁴

Lacrimosa could indeed be seen as a direct riposte to Poivre d’Arvor and similar texts; addressed to a woman, purportedly the lover of the male narrator (who bears some resemblance to Jauffret himself), in the second person, it begins by informing her that she

¹³ This genre in France is broadly equivalent to the English ‘true life story’, or, as one major UK high street book chain puts it, ‘tragic life stories’.

¹⁴ Régis Jauffret, *Lacrimosa* (Paris : Gallimard, 2008), translated by Vineet Lal (London: Salamambo, 2011); Nina Yargekov, *Vous serez mes témoins* (Paris : POL, 2011)

committed suicide (something she might well be expected to know), before going on to provide an extravagant and increasingly fanciful account of the circumstances:

Chère Charlotte,

Vous êtes morte sur un coup de tête d'une longue maladie. Le suicide a déferlé dans votre cerveau comme une marée noire, et vous vous êtes pendue. (9)

Dear Charlotte,

You died on a sudden whim from a long illness. Suicide gushed through your brain like an oil spill and you hanged yourself. (7)

However, the by-now-familiar model of letters to an absent addressee is unsettled in the second chapter, when Charlotte *writes back* from beyond the grave, questioning details of the initial narrator's account and complaining about the way she is portrayed, in particular the narrator's decision to name her after a pudding:

Mon pauvre amour,

Le néant raconte au vide de bien étranges choses. On dit qu'il lui a confié dernièrement un ragot dont je serais le dindon. Un ragot d'où on pourrait conclure que moi et les miens aurions vécu dans une [de] ces dégradantes histoires où tu aimes à ridiculiser les pauvres gens tombés sous la coupe de ton cerveau démantibulé. La vergogne n'étouffera donc jamais ton imagination? Tu préféreras toujours aux gens l'extravagance?

Il paraît aussi que maintenant tu me vouvoies comme une passante. Je suis devenue si lointaine? Et de quel droit me donnes-tu un nom de gâteau? (27)

My poor darling,

Nothingness had been telling emptiness some very odd things indeed. Word is they recently exchanged a juicy bit of gossip where I was the butt of the joke. Some piece of idle chit-chat about me and my family, which might lead us to think we're in one of your demeaning stories where you love to mock the poor people who've fallen prey to your twisted mind. Can shame never stifle your imagination? Will you always prefer extravagance to people?

It also seems you're now addressing me in the tone you'd use for a passer-by. Have I become so distant? And what gives you the right to name me after a pudding? (25)

As the narrative progresses, details are revised and reinvented, but the reliability of the suicide's first-person narrative also appears questionable; she changes her story at least as much as he does, and both voices constantly draw attention to the fictional construction of their narratives.

Yargekov's novel also deals with the suicide of a young woman, ELODIE, from the perspective of her best friend, who shares a name and various other characteristics with the author. To an even greater extent than *Lacrimosa*, though, this novel also employs a range of different voices and perspectives on the suicide, and constantly foregrounds its status as fiction. The protagonist, Nina, is attempting to deal with her grief at Élodie's suicide at the same time as being put on trial for 'escroquerie au deuil' (10; 'impersonating a bereaved person'); the other voices in the text include eyewitnesses, independent experts, prosecutors, and various outraged or concerned advocacy groups such as the *Ordre français du Deuil légitime* (11; French Society for Legitimate Mourning) and the 'Syndicat professionnel des Meilleures Amies' (11; Professional Union for Best Friends), all challenging Nina's account. The voice of the suicide is still absent, but replaced by a range of people who claim to speak for her, her family, her 'real' best friends and so on, and who are shown to do so with varying motivations and degrees of good faith. It is thus both an account of the mourning process, and the guilt felt by survivors, and an – often very comical – staging of the ways in which various parties try to establish ownership of the suicide.¹⁵

In conclusion, Jauffret's and Yargekov's novels can both be read as interventions in a debate that was initiated by writers of testimonies like *Poivre d'Arvor*, which has also taken place in the public sphere through reviews and reader responses, and is now being continued in literary fiction. Both novels hint at autobiographical foundations – notably through the names and other characteristics of their narrators – but by nonetheless placing their texts firmly into the domain of literature through the use of more challenging narrative structures, an insistence on their fictional status, and a wider range of different voices, Jauffret and Yargekov are both able to be critical of the discourse in which they are participating.¹⁶ Both

¹⁵ It also addresses comparable questions to those discussed by Marie Darrieussecq in her paper concerning the 'ownership' of grief and suffering and the strong reactions that attempts to articulate suffering can elicit.

¹⁶ It could also be argued, especially in the case of Yargekov, that these writers adopt a self-consciously experimental and above all overtly fictional style as a response to the type of debate that occurred following

novels through their plurivocal structures can articulate the need to commemorate, bear witness or work through the experience of a loved one's suicide, while also remaining critical about the methods and power structures involved in speaking for or about another person.

From an academic perspective, the fact that different types of text and their readers (who may or may not be the same people) can all be shown to be participating in a wider discourse about suicide and bereavement *and its representation*, suggests that literary criticism of the type that pays attention to aesthetic devices and how literary representations work is essential to understanding the implications of the whole debate. However, the multiple other issues at stake with respect to real-life suffering, the wide range of possible reading and writing perspectives, and the relevance of clinical expertise mean that such criticism needs to be at least as open to approaches from other disciplines as the novels it studies can be seen to respond, intertextually, to other genres.

Darrieusseccq's publication of *Tom est Mort* (Paris: POL, 2007), using a range of distancing techniques alongside autofictional elements to play on the ambiguities at stake while emphasising their fictional status.