Rape Fantasy Redux? Textual Victimhood In and Between Versions of Tony Duvert’s *Portrait d’homme couteau*

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On ne vous nomme meurtrier que si l’on vous attribue un cadavre précis.
--Tony Duvert, “Crime,” *Abécédaire malveillant*

Still only one of a handful of studies of Tony Duvert, the chapter John Phillips dedicates to *Récidive* in his *Forbidden Fictions* misrepresents the late French writer’s first novel. Phillips’ self-described “close reading” (151) of the work is short-sighted. To his credit, however, he is the first to consider the “homotextual” aspects of this “narrative on the loose”: he points to its ongoing construction and deconstruction of homosexuality; and he traces the mobile nature of identity in the quest for sexual experiences that Duvert’s shadowy male narrator pieces together (150, 153, 154). But Phillips problematically ignores the first published version of Duvert’s work out of personal convenience. As a result, his focusing exclusively on the second version, published nine years after the 1967 version, which for him was “the only one available” (219), is exclusionary and simplistic. He overlooks the “promiscuous and abusive textuality” flaunted across both of *Récidive’s* published versions (Kennelly 140). Only in reading both of them can one see that in rewriting *Récidive*, Duvert not only makes his work “more readable,” as reviewer Allen Thiher suggests (249), but that he broadens its scope. In short and by design, Duvert thereby provides his novel a complex intertextual dimension that Phillips and others have overlooked for the recidivism it rehearses from cover to cover as well as between the covers of both of its published versions (Kennelly 138).

Besides overlooking the intertextual complexity of Duvert’s work and thus misrepresenting it, Phillips should additionally be taken to task for failing to recognize the importance of intentional and comprehensive rewriting in Duvert’s early works, what Cathy Jellenik in her study of three contemporary French female novelists deems part of an “aesthetics of reiteration,” indeed a modern “obsession” (Tripartite 294, 32). Despite rightly lauding Duvert as original, as an “important voice in the current debate on both paedophilia” and “the influence of texts on sex” (172), by overlooking Duvert’s obsessive practice of rewriting his texts Phillips mistakenly sets *Récidive* apart: he erroneously and effectively quarantines it from other early Duvertian works. While *Récidive* does have the distinction, as Phillips correctly notes, of being the author’s first published work, it is not, as Phillips misleadingly claims, the only one Duvert “considered important enough to rewrite” (152). Rather the two published versions of the novel are evidence of an aggressively revisionist tactic employed by Duvert in the 1960s and 1970s and which to date has escaped critical notice. Had Phillips more closely scrutinized Duvert’s early works, he would surely have realized that in addition to *Récidive* Duvert rewrote two additional novels: *Interdit de séjour*, published first in 1969 and then in a shorter version in 1971; and *Portrait d’homme couteau*, published—as was *Interdit de séjour*—first in 1969, revisited and reworked, as noted by the author in a parenthesis on its final page, both in 1970 and again in 1974, and ultimately republished in 1978 in a shorter “version très remaniée,” as Gilles Sebhan describes it in his recent quasi-autobiographical study of Duvert (141).

Beyond drawing critical attention to the aggressive revisionism by Duvert in his early novels, our focus here on *Portrait d’homme couteau* will consider the following questions: How does the 1969 version shed light on the 1978 version? What does Duvert’s rewriting of the work reveal about its revision narrative? And how might this
characteristically transgressive work help us better understand textual evolution in the author’s “littérature renversante” (Duvert, “Lecture” 13)?

In a 1969 review of the novel, André Dalmas writes in *Le Monde* that *Portrait d’homme couteau* evokes both past and present, rape and murder:

> c’est la transformation subie par la notion du temps romanesque. Présent et passé, mêlés dans ce récit, sont en réalité, et en même temps, le présent d’hier et celui d’aujourd’hui, le passé d’hier et celui d’aujourd’hui... Le livre est l’évocation du viol et du meurtre d’une petite fille. (“Revue de presse”)

This is an apt description of the first version only. For in the second version, published after Dalmas’ review, the victim in and of the text is a young boy. Besides obvious differences such as this and the fact that the second version is almost exactly half the length of the first, the way victimhood is first evoked is notably different in each. The rape-murder is a *fait accompli* from the start of the second version only. By contrast, from the start of the first version the threat of victimhood is importantly textual and evoked only paratextually. The lexical “portrait” that is established in the work is framed by a haunting epigraph that Duvert borrows from a prose poem by Henri Michaux and from which he takes its title. As a decontextualized fragment from Michaux’s “Il écrit,” one of forty-two “exorcismes par ruse” (*Épreuves* 9), the epigraphic “Couteau depuis le haut du front jusqu’au fond de lui-même, il veille” which precedes Duvert’s text proper proves both menacing and incomplete. Indeed, it is more menacing perhaps because it is incomplete. Here is Michaux’s full text:

> Il écrit...
> Le papier cesse d’être papier, petit apetit, devient une longue, longue table sur laquelle vient, dirigée, il le sait, il le sent, il le pressent, la victime encore inconnue, la victime éloignée qui lui est dévolue.
> Il écrit.....
> Son oreille fine, fine, son unique oreille écoute une onde qui s’en vient, fine, fine, et une onde suivante qui s’en va venir d’un lointain d’âge et d’espace pour diriger, amener la victime qui devra se laisser faire.
> Sa main s’apprête.
> Et lui? Lui, il regarde faire.
> Couteau depuis le haut du front jusqu’au fond de lui-même, il veille, prêt à intervenir, prêt à trancher, à décapiter ce qui n’est pas ne serait pas sien, à trancher dans le wagon que l’Univers débordant pousse vers lui, prêt à décapiter ce ne serait pas « SA » victime....
> Il écrit... (*Épreuves* 117-18)

When re-placed in context, read intertextually and as part of the Michaudian text from which it is excerpted, severed, and which, as Marianne Béguelin notes, could have as its own epigraph “De l’écriture considérée comme un assassinat” (*Henri Michaux* 84), this ominous and appropriated sentence fragment is a paratextual preview of victimhood both in and by the text. The paper in Michaux’s text is transformed through writing, through the metamorphosis of creation, the “torture” of imagination (Stoltzfus, *Postmodern* 45) into the executioner’s table on which decapitation is the fate to be met by anybody other than the intended victim of the unidentified male scribe. Similarly, the prose of Duvert’s novel serves as a stage for and of violation—both imagined and textual.

An early theoretical text by Duvert on his craft positions him very much in allegiance with the practitioners of the *nouveau roman*. If near the beginning of the Michaudian text to which the first version of *Portrait d’homme couteau* owes its epigraph we see a writer already at work writing, near the beginning of this text, titled “La lecture
introuvable,” we see an iconified female writer in front of a blank page, poised to put pen
to anthropomorphized paper:

Solitaire, une femme de trente ans, élégante ou presque, se tient assise à une
jolie table ; derrière elle, une cheminée, qu’orne sûrement un vase de fleurs ; à
sa droite, une lampe; peut-être aussi, sur la table, une tasse de café. Mais
l’essentiel est son regard, lieu dominant d’une triade expressive : les yeux
réveurs, le stylo à la main, les feuililles blanches qui attendent. (3)

But in the same way that the writer’s page in Michaux’s text is transformed and its
victims transposed, this idealized image, which for Duvert “[fait] apparaître la littérature
comme la magie d’un Verbe qui se transforme en or” (3-4), will quickly be dismantled,
distorted. What this writer will produce, what will be narrated in her text will predictably
be unoriginal, repetitive and traditional. Prosaic pastiche, Balzacian balderdash, it will
amount to little more than “ordre, cohérence, décence, hiérarchies, chronologie et
censure[s]... la réplique textuelle de la société et de l’homme qu’elle engendre” (6). Like
many of his contemporaries, Duvert takes issue with this idealized aesthetic mould in
which brainwashed generations of readers believe that in literature “les ratages, les
incohérences, les contradictions, les blancs et les marginalia” have no place, are mere
flaws, symptomatic of “fiction mal faite” (9). In the “acceptable” literary currency of the
time, conformity and a strict adherence to realist norms are de rigueur:

le roman conformiste est conformant et réparateur, il offre à chacun un fictif
qui remet sur pied le réel flottant et le justifie en montrant que tout homme et
tout acte y ont leur place, leur rôle, leur sens, leur récit [... ] [Cela] montre
combien, dans un univers aussi subtilement policé, écrire et lire sont une même
écoute de l’ordre (10).

As did others whose works appeared in print under the auspices of Jérôme Lindon’s
Editions de Minuit, Duvert thought it essential to escape this hackneyed, sterile
“littérature d’instituteur,” which for him was no better than parody: “les succédanés, des
ancêtres ou des fragments du grand récit bourgeois” (6). The process of freeing the novel,
“pierre philosophale [...] [qui] représente la littérature” (4) from its conformist shackles
proves ultimately for Duvert to be two-pronged: unwriting, rewriting: unwriting by
rewriting. For Duvert, writing will therefore ultimately be to undo by redoing:

La première des libérations, et peut-être la seule qui importe, est donc de
déscrire les formes du sujet, de son corps, de son désir, de sa violence, et de
réécrire ce que le langage en a tu—même si ce devait être leur inexistence.
Cette tâche aventureuse peut délivrer la parole et celui qui parle ; « le sexe et la
drogue », comme disent les journaliers, contribuent sans doute à la déscription ;
mais on ne voit que l’art qui réécrira. Double condition pour que le réel social
cesse de demeurer au sein même de celui qui le refuse—en son désir, sa
perception, sa jouissance. (15-16, emphasis added)

The “déscription” at the heart of and cutting a definitive path through Portrait d’homme
couteau is revealed, for example, in the myriad sequences riddling it with unexpected
blank spaces, jarring syntax, sentence fragments, narrative alternatives, ironic precisions,
and editorializing. In typical nouveau roman style, generative themes in this work are
privileged over the conventional literary norms of plot, suspense, and character (Stoltfus
114). In this “rape fantasy redux,” we follow—albeit difficulty—a shadowy older man as
he spies upon and stalks prepubescent girls through windows, doors, and railings,
before—or is it after?—entraping, raping and killing one—or is it several?—of them.
Her (their?) mutilated body (bodies?) is (are?) left to rot in the sun or as carrion to be
devoured by a voracious raptor which in one part of the text falls dead from the sky but,
through the miracle or illogic of textual recombination, is ultimately resurrected. Incoherent, hesitant, starting and stopping, such sequences reveal the “pulverization” of reality in the work (Stoltzfus, “Aesthetics” 108), as well as what Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver have demonstrated elsewhere to be the “complex intersections” of rape and representation (“Rereading” 1).

Despite their being part of an already discontinuous text, one whose logic is violated (Stoltzfus 115) through aleatory associations or subversive bricolages (To loudi s 27), and in which the rape-murder is never actually described but inscribed yet rendered incomprehensible because the “event” is fragmented or scattered (Higgins 308), several obtuse sequences still stand out syntactically in Duvert’s prose. A series of impressionistic images—wind on a knife, dampness in the nighttime air, a broken cup from a young girl’s tea set, and which is one of the thematic codes symbolically representing the violation that has been suppressed from the “story” per se (Higgins 308), evidence furthermore of the work’s “rhetoric of elision” (Higgins and Silver 5)—is, for example, followed by a jarring and triple staccato

des yeux clairs un visage voisin ils étaient là (76, spaces intentional).

It is set apart not only by its odd syntax and because it stands alone on the page but by the spaces between its parts and which punctuate it.

Yet no matter how disruptive, such sequences are still readable. They manage somehow to harbor sense: the face could, after all, be one of many; or the eyes could be his. By contrast, other portions of Duvert’s text resemble the seemingly bombed-out manor that is haunted by the elusive “homme couteau.” Mere lexical ruins, they are fragments cut off from the textual whole, floating signifiers in an already disturbed and disturbing jumble of words.

Take, for instance, the following piece which is also unusually set apart and whose incompleteness is punctuated apophistically. It follows a series of paragraphs that appear to depict in a small garden the essence-less and empty “cardboard figure” (Stoltzfus 111) that is the novel’s anti-protagonist. Whereas an apostrophe typically joins or marries vowels through the omission of one of them, here the apostrophe unwrites, indeed suspends any possibility for marriage:

Assis, les mains jointes entre les jambes, la main
droite recouvre la main gauche, la serre

chaque rue a disparu il est face au mur, riche en
décoration, tableaux, portraits photographiques, gra­
vures, tapissières, étageres à bibelots curieux

This sentence that begins with and emphasizes union—joined, covered, held hands—and ends with rupture—the definite article without the referent—is moreover followed and called into question by the fragment on the page beside it:

ou

cela ne se peut pas (117)

Is the “au-dehors” the referent for the “ou”? Does the demonstrative “cela” refer to what has just been articulated? Or should we understand it in the context of—and thus contradicted by—the possibilities on the page following it, by what appears still to come, to be imagined, sketched, represented: “Cela se peut tracer, représenter encore” (118)?

Like these elusive motifs, these merely “textual” and never “referential” (Smith 348) Duvertian strands, other sentences of the narrative are suspended half-way through then taken up again a paragraph or more after being left in limbo. This sequence, for instance, in which a sentence is suspended dramatically in its middle only to be taken up again one
paragraph later, follows another impressionistic and incomplete image of what may be
the dessicated body of the—a?—rape-murder victim and which, like her partially
decomposed body, is missing a crucial part of itself (“le lourd été lui a volé sa peau, ses
membres, ses organes. Des chemins montants, caravanes, poids lourds, femmes au
chapeau de paille qui ont”, 142):

Il a fait quelques pas suivants une diagonale de la
pièce, qui est totalement vide.
Il a marché vers la table. Elle est à la hauteur de
son entrejambe, appuyée au mur où se dessine la
fenêtre.
Il marche jusqu’au milieu
Il jette par terre la tasse qui se brise; une flaque
de liquide noir, sirupeux. Il approche une main du
 robinet; l’autre main, dessous, tient une tasse. Elle
se remplit d’eau.
de la pièce et s’asseoit au bord de la table; il
allonge les jambes et soutient ses pieds en les posant
sur le divan. (143)

Its fragmentary nature punctuated and rehearsed by the noun “milieu,” which temporarily
and spatially suspends it, this sentence is completed one paragraph later (“Il marche
jusqu’au milieu” joining “de la pièce [...]”).

Other sections of Duvert’s novel reveal sentence fragments with neither beginnings
nor apparent ends, as if suspended. Paragraphs separate them, dramatize their
incompletion and seem sometimes contradictory, sometimes corrective, sometimes
conciliatory. A sequence from the novel’s second-last page is a case in point:

rien d’autre, il n’y a aucune maison au-dessus
plutôt, un édifice de bois, ou bâti avec les maigres
pierres de cette campagne
sur le toit, des ardoises minutieusement imbri-
quées qu’on a fait venir de la Loire
le long des murs, tout contre, de grands arbres
desséchés, effilochés comme de vieilles perches à
haricot

rien d’autre, la même chose, tout semblable (189)

This ironic textual self-correction (“plutôt”) in a text that is characterized by vagueness
and instability proves to be a prosaic ploy that Duvert repeats multiple times. It further
complicates, compounds, if not aggravates the textual self-questioning, the shifting,
uncertain nature of the novelistic whole and proves to be a hallmark of his early
experimental works. Indeed, criss-crossing Duvert’s entire novel are scenes that are self-
contradictory, rewritten as though to undo or “unwrite” what has come before. Suggesting
narrative unreliability or textual instability, such scenes are juxtaposed with
other sequences in which a narrative presence tries to emerge, to suggest at least the
possibility—some semblance of—direction, certainty or precision in an otherwise
unreliable textual wasteland.

In fact, from the very first page of the novel, narrative indeterminacy is established
as a given. This is underlined in multiple ways. First, by a haphazard shifting of tenses,
present to past, back to present: “il tient,” “il lève,” “il a fait,” “il a marché,” “il marche”
(9). Similarly, colors are never fixed: “Il a marché vers la table, de bois blanc, ou
what appears beyond repair is a few sentences further in the text presented, or represented in perfect state: “Ayant sorti la tasse, il la laisse tomber; elle se brise [...] Il approche une main du robinet et, dessous, l’autre main, qui tient la tasse se rempissant d’eau” (9). Moreover, a knife that cannot be stuck in the plaster of a wall is a few paragraphs even further on firmly stuck there: “Il prend ce couteau et le plante dans le mur face à lui, le couteau ne tient pas dans le plâtre, laisse une blessure et tombe; non par terre, mais sur la table [...] Il saisit le couteau et essaie de l’arracher du mur. Il n’y parvient pas, bien qu’il tire sur le manche avec ses deux mains [...]” (10-11). Likewise, a bathtub can at the same time be full and empty: “[...] l’eau coule dans la baignoire [...] le débit du robinet augmente. La baignoire est vide [...]” (12). Or water can be both hot and cold: “L’eau se réchauffe [...] L’eau est froide [...]” (12-13). By the same token, night can be day: “[...] une chute glaciale d’eau nocturne [...] Sous le soleil, plein midi [...]” (22-23). Just as illogically, a door can be missing a handle but also have a handle: “La poignée extérieure a été retirée [...] L’ampoule, brisée aussi, sort deux antennes mortes, tordues, d’un jaune un peu plus soutenu que celui de la poignée de la porte, d’un métal très pâle et poli par les mains [...]” (25).

As though battling with themselves, these sequences of impossibility are further juxtaposed with sequences where reliability, stability seems at least a possibility. Peppering, as though to ground, this “narrative on the loose” (Phillips 154) are adversarial assurances, last-ditch efforts by a quasi-omniscient, but mostly absent narrator to rein things in, to reground the text by unwriting, rewriting it: “précisément” (20), “en vérité” (24), “plutôt” (25), “sans doute” (35, 150), “à dire vrai” (37), “donc” (120), and “certainement” (150).

Of course, many of these techniques are neither unique to this novel nor to Duvvert, who because he is “firmly rooted in the nouveau roman” (Bender son 8), is not, literally speaking, any different from those of the other nouveaux romanciers (Robbe-Grillet, “What” 98). What makes Duvvert’s early novels compelling, however, is how this “unwriting,” how mutilation of and in the work is further complicated by rewriting both within each and across each version of it. Marguerite Duras, his literary contemporary, for example, might compulsively rewrite, rework her texts for different genres; think, for example of Le Square or L’Amante anglaise, which were first novels then plays, or L’Amant, which was a novel in which she rewrote Un Barrage contre le Pacifique, which itself was then adapted for film by Jean-Jacques Annaud, then rewritten, “re-visioned,” as L’Amant de la Chine du nord (Angelini). Whereas Duvvert unwrites and then rewrites his works always for and within the same genre. Sentences and entire paragraphs are copied, transposed, moved, broken up, unwritten, reworked in being rewritten within and between both versions of the novel.

The second version of the work, published, as we have noted, without the Michaudian epigraph, is only 94 pages in length, compared to the first, which is 190 pages. It is narrated in the first person rather than the third person. We have also observed that whereas for much of the first version the rape-murder—or murders?—is only a narrative possibility, obsessively inscribed in but also obsessively erased in the text (Higgins and Silver 2), the rape-murder—one of several?—is a fait accompli from the very first paragraph of the second. The novel opens with the description of a mutilated body of a little boy:

Un corps de garçonnet est étendu dans l’herbe.
Son bas-ventre paraît mutilé, mais le sang qui mouille pénis et testicules vient d’une longue blessure ouverte près du nombril.
Il fait nuit et il pleut. (7)
Besides these obvious differences between the two versions of the novel, there are also similarities between them. Entire sections seem very nearly repeated, preserved in toto. Take, for instance, this sequence in which the mutilated, decomposing body, the corporeal deformation at the heart of the text mirrors the rhetorical and physical disfiguration (Higgins and Silver 4), the self-destructive, self-mutilatory narration contextualizing, framing, and reframing it:

Le corps se déplie et s'étend, ses cellules explo-sent et coulent, il augmente lentement comme un fœtus vient à maturité. Naissance dans l'herbe le cadavre grandit. (83, first published version)

Albeit identically worded, upon closer inspection, however, this sequence that portrays the laid-out body of the—a?—victim is different in an important regard: the way it—as text—is laid out on the printed page. Not only is this body different, presumably the body of the little boy from the opening paragraph in the second version and not that of the little girl of the first, but the way it is presented, represented, unwritten in its rewritten form on the page rehearses its difference. Preceded by the fragment “presque rien à présent” (48) on the same page and above it, the first sentence of the sequence is positioned differently. The verb “exploser” is cut in two by a hyphen as though in the second version further to dramatize visually the breaking apart of organic matter it ostensibly describes:

Le corps se déplie et s'étend, ses cellules explo-sent et coulent, il augmente lentement comme un fœtus vient à maturité. Naissance dans l'herbe le cadavre grandit. (48, second published version)

In addition to incorporating sections very nearly mirroring their original versions, in the second published version of Portrait d'homme couteau Duvert more obviously reproduces sections that he adjusts only slightly. A plural definite article and corresponding plural verb form and adjective, for instance, might substitute for a singular definite article and single verb form and adjective and vice-versa as in the following sequence where “Jour de sommeil. La rue est grisue. Les chiens n’aboiennent pas [...]” in the second published version (35, emphasis added) takes the place of the original “Jour de sommeil. Les rues sont grises. Un chien n’aboie pas [...]” (98, emphasis added). Similarly, minor textual revision can be observed near the end of the second version of the novel. What in the first version reads as

et de lourdes grappes de pucerons, peut-être,
comme un manchon noir, grouillant, au reflet bleu
d’acier, qui enserre la tige des dahlias—ils conti-nuent à jaillir de leurs tubercules, pour personne,
fleur laide ce niais visage de quatorze juillet—le long des tiges, et sous les longues feuilles vertes,
vulgaires, d’immobiles pucerons, le rostre piqué dans les canaux du végétal, là, sur une plate-bande aban-donnée [...]. (189-90, first published version)

is still recognizable in the second:

et de lourdes grappes de pucerons, peut-être, un
manchon d'insectes noirs, au reflet violacé, qui cou-
vre la tige des dahlias
le long des tiges et sous les grosses feuilles vert
cru, des milliers de pucerons immobiles, rostre
piqué dans les canaux du végétal, là, sur une plate-
Here the elimination of a few words, “comme,” “insectes,” “grouillant,” “bleu d’acier,” or the entire “—ils continuent à jaillir de leurs tuberculoses, pour personne, fleur laide ce
nais visage du quatorze juillet—” (189) does not substantively modify the text, however.

Yet in other sections, Duvert seems substantively to rework his text. Beyond the
shift in narrative perspective in the second version and the change of sex of the rape-
murder victim—or victims?—, there are shifts in logic and agent that confirm the work’s
widely ranging and contradictory nature (Smith 347). A bathtub in the first version
becomes a stream in the second. Or a bleeding hand is in the first version of the novel due
to a knife cut, whereas in the second, it is due to a bird:

[... ] Il a jeté ce couteau par terre. Le couteau
ne s’est pas planté, mais s’est heurté aux cailloux
silencieux cette nuit-là. Sous le choc la virole a tourné
et la lame s’est rabattue vers le manche, avec lequel
elle a formé un angle aigu.

Cet angle pince sur un doigt le sang coule [....] (22, first pubHshed version)

becomes in the second version:

La lame de ce couteau peut se replier dans une
rainure du manche; les enfants en gardent tou-
jours un semblable dans leur poche, pour couper
ou tailler des choses, jouer à le lancer sur un
tronc, une porte, ou par terre. Si l’articulation du
manche avec la lame est trop lâche, le couteau a
tendance à se refermer sous les chocs plutôt qu’à se
planter: c’est alors un mauvais couteau, dange-
reux, qui se transforme sans cesse en bec d’oiseau
agressif.

Ce bec pince un doigt et le sang coule. (39-40, second published version)

In the same way that a knife is transformed into the beak of a voracious bird in the
rewritten version, entire sections are transposed, such as the sequence at the start of the
second, revealing the rape-murder of the victim—one of several?—as a given. Other
passages are positioned differently in the sequencing of the text, coming earlier or later in
the second version. But they are broken up. Mutilated textually not only within versions
but across them to come both before and after, they thereby suggest dislocation to be key
within Duvert’s literary project of unwriting and rewriting. Hence a scene in which
the old male pedophile-murderer considers a hair in the first version of the novel is broken up
and decontextualized in the second:

Parmi les herbes brille une mèche de chevaux châ-
tains aux reflets dorés, très fins à caresser. Elle est
lacée d’un ruban bleu et or. Les cheveux sont frais,
mais leur parfum est d’un fond d’armoire: naphta-
line, fleurs de lavande dans un sachet d’étemine,
vieux cuir aux fragrances de bal.

La mèche est souillée de terre par dessous. Il la
gratte de l’ongle, mais une tache humide et mate la
souille encore. (73, first published version)

In the second version, the lock of hair is blond, not chestnut. We also learn earlier on that
it is encrusted with soil. Similarly, it is not only observed by the pedophile-murderer as
we see in this third-person narration, but is picked up by the first-person narrator—his own hair blowing in the wind at the same time:

... parmi les herbes brille une mèche de cheveux blonds, dorés, très fins à caresser; je la ramasse; elle est souillée de terre par dessous. Je me relève, le vent déplace contre mes yeux une mèche de ma propre chevelure. (15-16, second published version)

In the second version, however, Duvert transposes this description with a later one from the first. The lock of hair that in the first version has presumably been preserved from the dead victim is in the second version still on the victim-to-be’s head, still very much part of a whole. As such, it is still to be collected, and the sequence describing it is cut in two, disrupted:

L’enfant a grimpé sur les hautes claies du bûcher. Ses genoux touchent la charpente du toit, sont gênés par une solive où un clou est planté tête en bas. Il tire sur ce clou et le jette au loin, dans les détritus qui parsèment le sol.

Ses cheveux sont frais, mais leur parfum est d’un fond d’armoire: naphthaline, fleurs de lavande dans un sachet d’étamine, vieux cuir aux fragrances de bal. Je les ai mis à l’abri entre les pages d’un livre, comme une fleur séchée—et, comme une fleur, je les respire, les touche, les expose au soleil, les lave d’un ruban bleu; ruban et cheveux forment un objet désuet, singulier, vaguement ridicule, que je range pour ne plus le voir. (34-5, second published version)

Leon Roudiez notes that while shaky, the relationship between text and referent is still recognizable in Récidive. Yet in Portrait d’homme couteau this tenuous relationship is more in conflict with it ("Is" 156). It is clear, though, that in Portrait d’homme couteau Duvert is also repeating many of the textual strategies he employs in Récidive. Indeed, both versions of both novels are foils for a strategy of subversion in which unwriting is a precursor for and basis for rewriting. Expanding upon techniques of the New Novel typically applied within a single version of a work, unwriting in Duvert’s novels is exemplified through rewriting across versions of a work.

But having mastered this technique in and across the versions of his early prose works, Duvert predictably tires of it and changes textual strategies in his subsequent works. Thus the homotextual violence that defines his early prose gives way to a markedly more traditional style of writing. Having observed in his review of the 1979 novel, L’île atlantique, that Duvert used the narrative techniques of the nouveau roman to explore new realms, reminding one of what the novels of Jean Genet might be were they rewritten by the likes of Robbe-Grillet, Thiher notes that in this later and more "readable" novel portraying the world of childhood Duvert has “reverted to fairly traditional modernist techniques.” He wonders whether the novelist has somehow tired of the “excessive experimentation” that characterizes the New Novel, whether in Duvert’s earlier works he ultimately reached a limit and needed to change course (“L’île” 595). Echoing Thiher, Bruce Benderson also points to the “conventional realism” of Duvert’s later novels. Beyond thematic changes, the absence of the sadistic element—raped, tortured, and murdered young victims—in Duvert’s later works underscores what Edward Brongersma surmises to be the author’s coming to terms with his inner pedophilic
tendencies (106). This change in narrative style, from experimental to traditional, is, Brongersma suggests, a result of Duvert’s having written his two unabashedly polemical works of non-fiction, Le Bon sexe illustré (1974), in which he exposes the repressive rhetoric of sexual education in France, and L’Enfant au masculin (1980), in which he argues in favor of the unfettered sexual liberty of homosexual minors:

It’s as if the experience of writing non-fiction has showed him the importance of expressing his ideas as clearly as possible, and as he looked back on his experimental past as a dialogue with himself. From then on, his writings would be turned outward, more overtly political and much more accessible. (9)

Duvert addresses this shift in narratological stance in a 1979 Libération interview with Guy Hecquenghem and Marc Voline. Embracing once more a classical style of writing, rejecting marginalization through, or because of, formal experimentation—“la lecture introuvable” for “la lecture trouvable” or “retrouvable”—Duvert explains:

Je m’intéresse de plus en plus à ce que les choses que j’écris puissent être entendues, je veux dire démarginalisées. Autrement dit, écrivant des choses qui par elles mêmes se sont tout à fait marginalisées par l’idéologie, qu’au moins leur mode d’expression soit tel que ça circule.

More stridently, aggressively militant in his views on childhood sexuality, man-boy relationships, a militant, abusive textuality is no longer the context, the creative avenue Duvert favors in his later works. The means of expression that he invented and perfected for himself—unwriting through rewriting—and which we see showcased in his early prose works such as Récidive and Portrait d’homme couteau is no longer apt for the social criticism on which he embarks in his later years:

je n’y crois plus pour moi-même. Je l’ai fait, oui. Mais mon but a changé, il est devenu beaucoup plus politique, recherche d’une action sur autrui. Mais une action en tant que romancier [...] si j’ai besoin de moyens qu’on peut appeler traditionnels, c’est parce que je parle d’autres choses. Ce ne sont plus du tout les mêmes sortes d’individus; les mêmes sortes de personnages, les mêmes sortes de situations. Et à chaque chose ses moyens. Il est impossible de mettre en scène comme je l’ai fait des petites familles bourgeoises, ouvrières, paysannes etc... tout ça ensemble dans le même paquet, en écrivant comme j’ai écrit Interdit de séjour, par exemple. Ca n’est pas faisable. Mais je ne les ai pas brûlés, mes bouquins d’avant. Ils sont là enfin, pourquoi en faudrait-il en plus? Il y a des très bons romanciers qui se sont contentés d’écrire deux ou trois livres dans leur vie. Moi c’est mon onzième bouquin, je commence à avoir besoin d’une certaine diversité. Pourquoi faudrait-il que je fasse des duplicats? (“Non” 16)

In so moving beyond a mere duplication of the textual strategies employed, “packaged” in his early works, Duvert would appear also to be turning from rewriting of, within, and across versions of his novels. Is this third rewritten work that he chooses to mention, to represent his early literary concern, this work first written after Récidive and rewritten before Portrait d’homme couteau, really “exemplary,” though? Is Interdit de séjour ultimately the lynchpin of a creative cul-de-sac? Or does it with the two other rewritten novels by Duvert mark a turning point for Duvert? With the author’s œuvre—in all of its “diversity”—having been defined by his death in 2008, it seems timely for critics to give these questions, and all of the brash militanism his œuvre flaunts both textually in early years and rhetorically in later ones, the full attention they deserve.
WORKS CITED


