

Rewriting, Rereading *Récidive*

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Curieusement, l'amour des gosses est dans l'esprit lié à l'idée de violence.

Gabriel Matzneff, *Les moins de seize ans*

Toute œuvre nouvelle [...] est, à la limite, la ruine de celle qui l'a précédée.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Du Nouveau Roman à la Nouvelle Autobiographie"

Author of some dozen works of homoerotic fiction, two polemical essays, and recipient of the 1973 Prix Médicis¹, Tony Duvert published his first novel *Récidive* in 1967. Seven years later he rewrote it, ultimately publishing a much shorter version in 1976 — which for reviewer A. Thiher resembles what the prose of Jean Genet might have become were it to have been rewritten by Alain Robbe-Grillet. This disturbing work by one of France's most aggressively homosexual writers, a self-proclaimed "pédhophile" (*L'Enfant* 21), has largely escaped critical attention. In the only study to focus on *Récidive* to date, John Phillips builds on work by Owen Heathcote on the ongoing construction and deconstruction of homosexuality and its environments ("Masochism" 176). Phillips deems Duvert's novel a "homotextuality" and focuses on the mobile nature of homosexual identity in the journey, the quest for sexual experiences pieced together by its shadowy male narrator (*Forbidden* 150, 153, 154). For Phillips, there are three reasons for the lack of critical interest in this work unapologetically promoting pederasty and at times non-consensual sexual violence: modest sales — only 2,000 copies of the first published version and barely 3,000 more of the second; Duvert's reclusiveness — by mailing his manuscripts to Jérôme Lindon, he chose indirect contact with him and his publishing staff at the Éditions de Minuit; and the critical marginalization in general of homosexual writing in France (151-2).

What Phillips describes as a "close reading" (151) of Duvert's work proves short-sighted, however. For in his consideration of the homotextual aspects of this "narrative on the loose" (154), he ignores the 1967 version of *Récidive* for the sake of convenience. His exclusive focus on the second version of the novel alone, which for him was "the only one available" (219), is exclusionary and therefore problematic.

Although the first edition of *Récidive* is no longer for sale in bookstores and as a result more difficult for the general public to acquire than the second, it should not be overlooked. It can be borrowed from academic libraries and can help us better understand Duvert's intentions in rewriting the work — the only one, Phillips reminds us, he considered important enough to rewrite (152). How does the 1967 edition shed light on the 1976 version? What does Duvert's rewriting of *Récidive* reveal about the extent of the simultaneously sexual and textual quest (Phillips 172) it rehearses? Is his privileging of circularity, repetition, and fragmentation in the novel's promiscuous and abusive textuality ultimately more extensive and further reaching than has been assumed?

¹ For *Paysage de fantaisie*. Paris: Minuit, 1973.

Paratextual Preview/s

Besides the surprising 53-page difference in length between the 1967 and 1976 editions of *Récidive*, the most obvious differences between the two texts are paratextual.

While both versions of the work contain as an epigraph an ominous excerpt from the Mayan *Livre de Chilám Balám de Chumayel*², only the second version of Duvert's novel attributes the translation used to Benjamin Péret. With due translational credit given, it thus underlines that this excerpt is only a version of the original celebrated and prophetic Mayan texts³, one step removed from them in the same way that the second version of *Récidive* is a pared-down version of the original.

Both editions are, moreover, divided into four unequal parts. The numbered parts of the second version of the novel (I, II, III, and IV) are further subdivided into paragraphs alone. Besides being named, the four sections of the first version ("EXPOSÉ," "EN FORÊT," "EN CHEMIN DE FER", and "EN VILLE") are more complex.

"EXPOSÉ," the first part of the 1967 version, is composed of seven subtitled sections. Each one is additionally subdivided into paragraphs, and in the case of the fifth section, two sets of paragraphs are divided by a blank space. On the surface, the seven sections appear to be organized sequentially and to span the three months of a French autumn. "*Première narration: octobre*" (11) is followed, and as a result problematized by "*La même, mensongère*" (13); this is followed by the equally enigmatic "*La même, mais qui mentionne un nom véridique*" (15) which itself leads to "*Rectification*" (16), casting doubt on the whole October narration. These first four sections of the first narration are followed in turn by the second and third narrations; they purportedly cover the remaining autumnal months of November and December respectively. Not only are the lengths of both narrations different — with nine-and-one-half pages devoted to "*Deuxième narration: novembre*" (19) and six pages to "*Troisième narration, provisoirement limitée à un épisode apocryphe. Décembre*" (29), but in the second narration a colon separates the noun "*narration*" from the month it purportedly spans — as it does in the first narration too —, suggesting equivalence. On the other hand, in the third narration the caveat in the legal nuance following the noun "*narration*" and the subsequent period sets it apart, highlighting its fragmentation and incompleteness.

Now just as the nuance of the adverb "*provisoirement*" — "*qui est rendu, prononcé ou auquel on procède avant un jugement définitive*" (*Le Nouveau Petit Robert*) — betrays reservations and thus arouses suspicion on the part of the reader, so too the seventh section, "*Rappel succinct de ce qui précède*" (35), is less a reminder or summary for the reader of details that have just been presented in the first section than an effort further to complicate or confuse through deceit. Exaggeratedly succinct, this so-called review of the facts skips over the longest, second narration; it altogether ignores the month of November; and by framing them as questions, the events it revisits are cast into doubt:

En octobre, il part un après-midi, par le train de banlieue. Au terminus — il y est vers cinq heures — il prend la route. Il marche. Quand la nuit tombe, il va dormir sous les arbres. Le lendemain, il reprend la route, et marche encore. Il pleut toute la journée. Le soir, il va s'abriter dans une église déserte. Il s'y endort. On l'y trouve. Le curé rapplique, avec les flics. Par la suite, je suis chez le curé, qui me fait dîner. C'est tout. Pourquoi suis-je parti?

En décembre, je recommence. Je prends le train, par petites étapes. La première me conduit jusqu'à Tours. La seconde, jusqu'à Lyon. C'est la ville

² "Toute lune, toute année, tout jour, tout vent chemine et passe aussi. Egalement tout sang arrive au lieu de sa quiétude, comme il arrive à son pouvoir et à son trône."

³ In his Introduction to the *Livre de Chilám Balám de Chumayel*, Benjamin Péret notes: "Qu'importe, en effet, de savoir que, dans cet ouvrage disparaissent nombre de croyances indigènes, puisque nul n'est en mesure de rassembler ces bribes en un tout cohérent" (35).

où habite Michel. Je passe la moitié de la nuit à y marcher, dans les faubourgs et ailleurs. Puis nouvelle étape : Avignon. Le quatrième jour est un dimanche, le 25 décembre, s'il faut une date. Je descends à Marseille. Puis je remonte à Nîmes. Il a acheté des trucs dans une pharmacie, le type de service les lui a délivrés sans y prendre garde. A Nîmes, la nuit, il a avalé les trucs. Après, l'hôpital silence. Pour quoi faire ?

Voilà. Je n'ai rien vu, rien désiré, rien compris, je n'ai rencontré personne, je ne voulais rien faire de ce que j'ai fait. Ça ne signifiait rien. Mais cela, je ne le reconnaîtrai pour rien au monde.

C'est clair, j'espère ? Alors brouillons les cartes (35-6).

With its ludic and likely false chronology, the "EXPOSÉ" preemptively complicates the three sections which constitute the heart of the novel: "EN FORÊT", "EN CHEMIN DE FER", and "EN VILLE". As the first and most striking example of false advertising or mislabeling in Duvert's text, this ultimately unreliable preview of intratextual recidivism showcases the shifting scaffolding for the half-truths the novel attempts to string together. Like the cards in the loaded deck of a dishonest dealer, each episode, sequence, and section, each character, narrative voice, presence, and strand is shuffled, reshuffled, arranged, and rearranged by the author in an effort to mislead and subvert. Indeed, this novel whose very title collapses repetition and circularity with criminality also exemplifies the formal experimentalism and self-conscious literariness of the *nouveau roman*, showing that literarily speaking, it is not any different from other New New Novels (Robbe-Grillet, "What" 98). Duvert's "texte sans totalité" is thus analogous to the Deleuzian definition of a structure, where as Robbe-Grillet notes, "existeraient des séries parallèles, où il y aurait des manques et du trop et où tout ça bougerait, se déplacerait sans arrêt possible à la recherche d'un sens, car cette instantanéité et cette fragmentation ne sont pas supportables" ("L'exercice" 244).

The fragmentary summaries at the beginning of each section are just as troublesome as the empty promise of "EXPOSÉ" which should — following the definition of the noun — develop a specific and precise subject in methodological fashion.

The first example, the list-like preview of the main elements of the second section ("EN FORÊT") reads: "*cabane, forestier, vieillard, enfants – inventés. Marche, pluie, cure – véridiques. Premier avatar de Michel*" (39). Already alerted to the text's duplicity by the "EXPOSÉ", the reader is well-advised also to treat with skepticism the seemingly facile, clean-cut separation of fiction from fact presented here.

Similarly, the skeletal summary for the third section ("EN CHEMIN DE FER") is revealing only insofar as it subverts the narrative; at the same time as promising, it also pollutes the factual with the fictional and calls into question the logic of character choice and precedence: "*trains, gares, hôtels, tentative authentiques. Propos illusoirs sur ce livre et sur son auteur. Vomissements imaginaires. Avant tout, un marin arabe qui, parce qu'inventé, supplante provisoirement le ci-devant Michel*" (93).

As though this overzealous blurring of the boundaries between the authentic, the illusory, the imaginary, and the invented were not enough, the synopsis of the fourth and final section ("EN VILLE") pushes the limits of the very fiction(s) it previews. It

⁴ The tension established by Duvert in the 1967 version of *Récidive* (but cut from the 1976 version) between these paratextual summaries or divisions and what they purportedly summarize or divide is further played out in the incomplete citation from Alfred Jarry's *Ubu cocu*, which serves as epigraph for the final section, "EN VILLE": "Pour vous prouver notre supériorité en ceci comme en tout, nous allons faire le saut périlleux [...]" (141) While separating this final section from the rest of the novel by virtue of its difference as an epigraph and as the only sectional epigraph, it is also devoid of context. Proclaimed in Jarry's play by Père Ubu to his conscience (which suggests truth and accountability), it is also a reaction to publicity. Père Ubu directly precedes his statement with "Cornegidouille, Monsieur vous faites bien du tapage." Each paratextual summary is a form of false publicity.

recognizes them as such and subverts them upfront: "*Le projet autobiographique de l'auteur est apparemment tourné en dérision par les métamorphoses qui affectent certains événements et personnages de son œuvre. Le marin arabe conclut, après quelques avatars juvéniles*" (143).

What, then, does Duvert accomplish by stripping his text of its paratextual scaffolding in the 1976 edition of *Récidive*? If the slippery signage in the first edition serves the useful purpose of alerting readers to the textual abusiveness it showcases, by removing it does Duvert "dilute" his novel and, as Thiher's 1977 review would suggest, make it "more readable"? To be sure, with less to mislead them, readers of the later version of *Récidive* might be less confused. But because the longer 1967 version also engages and amplifies the textual self-questioning rehearsed paratextually in *Récidive*, by removing the misrepresentative framework scaffolding his novel, Duvert seems also to render it less richly ambiguous. Readers of the second version are not provided false explanations. Neither are they set up, misled by the false advertising of its titles, subtitles, summaries, and signage. Still, the perceived "simplification" comes at a cost: for deprived of this paratextual warning system, readers more quickly fall victim to the text's duplicity.

Recidivist (Re)Reading/s

Whether desensitizing by "dilution" or not, Duvert appears at least to be discounting, deemphasizing, or downplaying the importance of the relationship between texts — intensified in this case in the dramatic tension established between the paratext and the text it frames. Yet to perceive the Duvertian deemphasis of the relationship between texts this way would be to misperceive it. In his rewriting of *Récidive*, Duvert seems rather to broaden his novel's intertextual stage, providing an additional layer, if not the penultimate dimension for the recidivism it rehearses. Whereas Phillips notes the numerous intertextual echoes of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Raymond Queneau, Marguerite Duras, and Robert Pinget within the 1976 version of *Récidive*, the "ironic intertextuality" underlining the novel's status *as text* in a universe of texts and not as reality (161-2) most dramatically extends *between* versions of itself. The plural, shifting, and limited viewpoint, the uncertainties and contradictions, the fragmentation and "self-mutilation," indeed the displacing of moral responsibility and criminal agency "overspill[ing] the boundaries of individual subjectivity" and highlighted by Phillips (156, 164, 169) all also spill over the artificial, temporal boundaries measured in the nine years between successive publications of *Récidive* and represented within the covers of each version.

Perhaps the easiest gauge of the novel's plural, shifting, and limited viewpoint are the changes in personal pronouns it orchestrates. When considered intertextually, changes within the first published version have increased resonance. Symptomatic of the mobility of homosexual identity, which Phillips notes is constantly self-questioning and constructed from fragments of memory and fantasy (154), they complement and thus underline the changes revealed in propriety in the shifts from third- to first-person singular possessive adjectives, "son imperméable" (39) to "mon imperméable" (31) for example, or vice-versa, from first- to third-person, "mon vélo" to "le vélo du cure" (65). A sequence in the third section of the first part of the 1967 version ("EXPOSÉ") shifts, for instance, from third- to first-person singular:

Il se coucha paisiblement. Mais la nuit était trop belle. Il ne pouvait dormir.
C'était la pleine lune — et dans ce cas, même un sceptique croit à la magie.
Donc je me levai et je me remis à marcher, pieds nus, vers la forêt. J'avais
laissé mes chaussures là-bas, je comptais revenir (14).

Rather than restage this pronominal shift from third- to first-person in his rewriting of *Récidive*, Duvert mirrors the shift from "il" to "je" in the shift between versions from "je" to "il":

Il se coucha sur la mousse. Mais la nuit était trop belle, il n'arrivait pas à s'endormir. C'était la pleine lune, qui fait croire à des magies. Il se leva et se remit à marcher, pieds nus, vers la forêt (13).

This shifting, pluralizing of viewpoint in the rewriting of his text is not a collapsing of perspectives to render his text more readable. Rather, it establishes the critical imperative to read both versions in order fully to reveal the richness of the novel's recidivism — both from cover to cover and intertextually, between the covers of each version.

Indeed, the text consistently, obsessively rewrites itself and thus undermines any possibility for stability or finality. It thus precludes any possibility of arriving at a sequence of established "facts" (Smith 349). Just as Thiher sees coherence in the 1976 version in the repetition of various "narrative hypotheses" (249), the two versions of the text cohere by the revisioning of these same narrative hypotheses between texts. Uncertainty, for example, later within the second section over the position in which the young runaway and the older forester will have sexual relations is also reiterated, played out between texts. Just as the runaway shifts from the imperfect to the conditional, he shuffles the possibilities of position in the 1967 version of the text when he asks:

Est-ce qu'il allait le faire debout, ou à quatre pattes par terre, ou couché sur le banc ? Il vaudrait mieux par terre, le banc il me secouerait dessus, le bois me taperait dans les os, le petit bord écraserait mes cous-de-pied (49).

The equivalent and contradictory sequence from the 1976 version shows, on the other hand, that whether in a jeep or on all fours, whether on the ground or standing up, the sexual positioning possibilities are as numerous and the various combinations ultimately only as important as the imagination allows:

Est-ce qu'on allait le faire debout, ou dans la jeep, ou couché sur le banc ? Il vaudrait mieux debout, le banc mes os taperaient contre la planche, le type m'écraserait. Et pas question de le suivre dans sa jeep (38).

Further discounting any logic of finality, the unfinished, fragmentary sequence at the end of both versions of the same section in the novel turns the text's overzealous self-questioning on its head by suspending it and thus subverting it from within. In the 1976 version, the reader's attention is turned from the runaway temporarily to a completely unrelated topic, the narrator's mother:

Mais ce qu'était l'enfant, ce qu'il avait fait, qui il avait rencontré, d'où il venait, quel était son âge, son sexe, qui l'a recueilli, nourri, rendu à sa famille, voilà ce que j'ai oublié, bien qu'il me l'ait certainement dit. Comment attacher de l'importance à des détails aussi futiles ? Parlons plutôt d'autre chose. De ma vieille maman, par exemple ; car elle est fort âgée, presque impotente et, malgré toute sa bonne volonté, elle m'est plus une charge qu'un soutien: aussi serait-il souhaitable qu'on mette à ma disposition une jeune personne plus propre et plus vigoureuse qui (66-7).

The narrator's mother, however, is merely an additional pretext for further fantasizing. But by suspending his description of the younger person he idealizes in her place, the very attributes he desires in this person — and therefore the fantasy itself — are themselves called into question. In his rewriting of the text, Duvert intertextually reiterates this same subversion, for in the first version the desired qualities are not even the same. The comparative of the later version disappears, and a relatively non-descript

adjective is substituted for cleanliness: "il serait souhaitable qu'on mette à ma disposition une jeune personne vigoureuse et amène qui" (90).⁵

The shifts and deemphasis of individual subjectivity and ultimate truth that are played out through the mobility, ambiguity, and contradictions within and between each version of *Récidive* and which, as a result, further destabilize the text, are paralleled in the shifts and deemphasis of proper names and of time, or what Phillips calls the evacuation of the social referent (152). The idealized blond-haired, blue-eyed Michel[s?] of the first version, described as "idéa[s] péde[s] d'un autre genre que le marin" (101), who because of his [their] good looks trouble the social order (102) and need to be killed ("Tuons-les, ils dérangent") is [are] never named nor given permanent, stable physical attributes in the later version. He [They] are at times "le blondinet" (59), "le petit blond" (62), "le blond" (51), "un jeune garçon brun, ou un blond" (14), or merely "votre héros" (93).

Similarly, in the first version cities are named but the specificity of place is also deemphasized: "Le train ralentit, s'arrête doucement. On était à Marseille, ou à Paris, ou à Lyon, ou n'importe où" (120). This occurs between versions too with "Paris" (40) of the 1967 edition becoming "la ville" (32) in the 1976 edition, with "Lyon" (35) rewritten as "sa ville" (27), and with the fourth section "EN VILLE" of the first edition reduced to the Roman numeral IV in the second.

Moreover within the 1967 version of *Récidive*, duration of sequences or specific times are frequently called into question: "Je disais qu'il était six heures. Mais nous n'étions qu'à l'après-midi [...] C'était au milieu de la matinée, décidément, vers dix heures peut-être" (54). All examples of "un temps sans temporalité" (Robbe-Grillet, "L'exercice" 243), they are nevertheless doubled, exaggerated, confused, and rarely equivalent in the 1976 version: "cinq secondes" (51) becomes "dix secondes" (39); "six heures" (54) is increased to "sept heures" (41); "onze heures" (59) is simultaneously and problematically "onze heures" (44) and "minuit" (45); "cinq heures et demie" (61) is reduced to "cinq heures" (46); and "plus d'un an" (66) is greatly increased to "plus de cent ans" (50).

If there is a tendency both within and between versions of *Récidive* to deemphasize and thus call into question the importance of proper names and time, the obsessive recounting and reversioning of sexual exploits and fantasies within the first edition of the novel tends towards more specificity and graphic detail between editions. "Se marrer" (63) becomes "s'enculer" (47), in the same way that "grandes cuisses" (74) reveal a "grande bite" (57) in the later version. Furthermore, sequences such as "aaaahhh toi d'abord chéri, couchons-nous mais non il n'y a pas tant de, couche-toi, secoue-moi nous glissons chéri entre-moi dedans joli garçon travaille nous y sommes tout à fait" (80) are expanded, like the blood-engorged penis they now highlight, to "aaaahhh toi d'abord chéri prends-moi mais non il n'y a pas tant de merde secoue-moi nous glissons chéri entre-moi dedans joli garçon fais travailler ta jolie bite" (57).

While this increased sexual graphicness between versions parallels the movement towards heightened sexual violence within the text — and which encompasses scenes stretching from comparatively simple, albeit illegal anal sex with a minor in a forest, the gang rape of a ten-year-old by youngsters on a river bank, necrophilic fantasies and murder in a partially demolished city building —, it is also framed, contextualized by the intertextual shifting and displacement, the recidivist and ultimately self-mutilatory *Récidive*. Extending the homotextual violence, the promiscuous and abusive textuality within each version to the extratextual stage between both versions in his rewriting of *Récidive*, Duvert cuts scenes, sequences, and ends of sentences in much the same way that in a brutal scene towards the end of the fourth part of the novel, in an effort to

⁵ An intertextual comparison of the idealized younger person is also invited by the fact that one version reads "vigoureuse" and the other "plus vigoureuse."

heighten sexual tension, the narrator positions his idealized sexual partner to be cut up by a rusty barbed wire-entwined bar:

Seul le premier contact est dur, de sa joue à sa cuisse, et tout le long du ventre. Les barbes appuyées, maintenues, peu importe qu'elles effleurent ou déchirent, la douleur est perdue. Mes coups sur lui sauront la rendre nouvelle. Mais je doute qu'il supporte son rêve jusque-là (178; 1967 version).

[...]

Il s'allonge précautionneusement. Son visage est très pâle. La bande de grillage disparaît sous lui. Le premier contact surtout est dur, sa joue, ses cuisses, son ventre. Les barbes appuyées, maintenues, peu importe qu'elles effleurent ou pénètrent: je l'encule. L'étonnante douceur où je me couche me fait oublier quelles épines elle recouvre (128; 1976 version).

In one of the sequences that he cut from the later version of his novel ("*Propos illusoire sur ce livre et sur son auteur*"), Duvert reveals perhaps the most about it and also about his fears as a highly "self-conscious" writer (Heathcote, "Jobs" 176). The reader must be very aggravated, he observes, for when his narrative seems to be moving forward, he intervenes; he cuts, interrupts, shifts attention elsewhere, immobilizing the action, or at best allowing it only to limp along:

[je] l'oblige à boîter pour être sûr qu'elle avance, tant la grâce d'un mouvement suivi ressemble à l'immobilité que je crains, celle des morts et des légendes.

But in painstakingly trying to avoid the immobility that he fears, and also painfully aware of his ability to tell — but reluctance to reveal — true from false, fact from fiction, fantasy from reality, Duvert ultimately finds the continual shuffling and reshuffling of narrative possibilities — so enthusiastically embraced at the end of "EXPOSÉ" — tiresome:

Cette tricherie commence à me déplaire, car je sais exactement ce qui est vrai, et faux, ce qui est faux même dans ce que je donne pour « véridique » [...] Malheur de l'architecte qui construit son labyrinthe autour de soi-même. Après tout, ce n'est pas une cage, on peut apprendre à l'explorer, à y vivre. Puis j'en suis libéré dès le livre fini, il n'y a pas de prison perpétuelle. Enfin, à m'y placer un temps, j'ai découvert certains secours.

If, by finishing his book, the author is free of the labyrinth, the perpetual prison he builds around himself, by rewriting *Récidive* he thus presumably submits to, becomes prisoner of the text all over again. He thereby also betrays the masochistic pleasure he must surely derive from his craft. Only in cutting this sequence from the text in his obsessive, self-pleasurable rewriting of it, in opening his work up by extension of it does Duvert truly free himself from the narrativized nexus of pain, transgression, and exposure, the allegory of violence and violation, of violence through violation (Heathcote, "Masochism" 176) that it is. And with his self-liberation through homotextual (self-) mutilation, he suggests that the reader also might as a consequence be empowered, might reshape the work through rereading it:

Mais je dois compter sur le talent du lecteur, qui sera de se contracter autour de l'œuvre et de lui faire une coupole, ou une poubelle, où contenir, scellé d'un bloc, ce puzzle dont les pièces se refusent l'une l'autre (130-1).

Complementary, but also ill-fitting parts of a recidivist set, containing elements that by definition can be both the same (*récidive spéciale*) and different (*récidive générale*), the

two versions of Duvert's text represent repeat(ed) offenses and extend this puzzle very fittingly.

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