Facing It
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This is an essay about witnessing and the authority it borrows, in Walter Benjamin’s stately and capacious phrase, from death. Because witnessing is mediating, we cannot say, as perhaps one might wish, and certainly not in a simple and straightforward sense, that its authority derives from the truth, itself always a mediated construct. Rather, I want to propose that it derives from the death of the author, in a sense that currently has an accustomed theoretical resonance but is also, in the case of AIDS diaries, sadly literal. I make no apology for starting with what some will feel is a theoretical detour; readers unaccustomed to theoretical concepts and exposition are asked to be patient for the space of a few pages. It will be enough to grasp the “gist” of my argument here; a degree of abstraction is the price of combining precision with economy, and my goal is to be brief.

Truthfulness, then, is itself a rhetorical product, an effect of mediation, and it entails two factors. The sentence (in Benveniste’s linguistics, the énoncé) should be literal, and the utterance (Benveniste’s énonciation) should be sincere. (My discourse can be literal, but if it is not also sincere [I may be self-serving, hypocritical, ironic, lying] it is not truthful; and, equally, a sincere utterance that is not simultaneously literal [I may be allegorizing or fictionalizing] cannot be truthful either.) Literality is a function of reference, a relation to the context of the sentence [what it is “about”) such that the subject of the sentence is exhausted in its predication. Sincerity, on the other hand, is a relation to the context of enunciation [the circumstances in which the discourse is proffered] in which, by comparison with utterances that are, say, ironic or ambiguous or unconsciously revealing, the discourse in question exhibits zero-degree readability [interpretability]: what is said exhausts what is signified.

When these two conditions are met, a third is held to be satisfied:
the conformity of the discourse, as report, to a supposedly nondiscursive actuality. This condition extends the literality of the énoncé, pragmatically, to the relation of the discursive to a supposedly nondiscursive world; the prestige in which it is held accounts for the long tradition by which, in witnessing (a matter in which truthfulness and lying are of the essence), an “eyewitness” account is held to be superior, as evidence (the witness was there and saw it happen), to so-called hearsay evidence, which may well be a sincere and literal report but is not “grounded in experience,” that is, in some supposedly unmediated perception of the reality of things.

The veracity of witnessing thus entails sincerity, literality, and “first-handedness” of experience and report, without there being a break in the chain of testimonial factors: I sincerely report, in a literal way, what I have directly experienced. But what happens, as Lyotard (1983) asks of the Nazi gas chambers, when there are no eyewitnesses and no possibility of direct report of experience because (killed in the experience) the witnesses are dead? AIDS journals, in their turn—although they do not have the status of legal evidence, as Holocaust witness sometimes does—are similarly a form of testimonial writing whose subject is dead. In them a mortally afflicted individual (in almost every instance known to me a gay man) gives a firsthand report of the process of his own demise. But they cannot and do not, literally and sincerely, say: “I am dead.” It is only in the reading situation, their context of enunciation (and so by anticipation in the writing situation), that they can signify “I am dead” by means of an énoncé [statement] that says (in brutal summary): “I am dying.” “I am dying,” then, is said literally [as énoncé] and sincerely [as énonciation]. But when “I am dying” becomes an énoncé whose enunciative signification is “I am dead” [or more accurately, since the reader’s point of view is determinative: “I is dead”], what is the status of such an utterance, one that cannot be said but only signified but on which—as in the case of the Holocaust—the whole crux of the witnessing act bears? What is at stake in witnessing when it becomes subject to reading? And what onus is on the reader upon whose act the witnessing depends, at the price of a decease?

I take it as axiomatic that sincerity, literality, and first-handedness are themselves convenient fictions. Sincerity, as a concept, is suspect if only because of the evidence of unconscious motivations [I may be sincere in saying “I love my boss,” but who is to say the assev-
eration isn’t unconsciously self-serving or a displacement of hostility?). Literality falls victim to demonstrations of the figurative status of language (with catachresis as the key figure: if the “arm” of a chair is figurative, but there is no “proper” term, who is to say that my own arm is not figurative too?). But, if sincerity and literality are dubious characteristics of discourse, it follows that no report of a nondiscursive actuality can be fully transparent or firsthand, irrespective of whether “experience” itself can be unmediated (it cannot). These are the kinds of reasons, one might surmise, that underlie Benjamin’s substitution, in my epigraph, of the concept of authority for the concept of truthfulness: sincerity, literality, and firsthandness of report aren’t so much the causes of discursive authority as they are its products. But what, I’ve often asked myself, leads him to refer to discursive authority—the authority of “telling” (erzählen, a cognate term)—as “borrowed from death”? This insight, poignantly relevant as it is to the telling of the AIDS story in first-person witnessing accounts, is more intuitively satisfying than it is immediately clear.

The best theoretical account of its import I can give at the present stage of my reflections is as follows. If authority is an enunciative phenomenon [a product not of speech alone but of speech in a context of enunciation], and if enunciation, therefore, cannot be directly aligned [as “sincere”] on the énoncé [as “literal”], then there is a split between the two that can be interpreted as a gap. The split is such that it is necessary for the [grammatical] subject of an énoncé [whether first-person or not] to “die”—that is, to fall out of direct one-on-one relation with the enunciative situation—in order for the [interpreted] subject of enunciation to achieve, instead, authority, an authority that cannot now be a matter of veracity [a direct relation to “experience” via the referent of the énoncé] but, rather, one of credibility, that is, a matter of reading [a relation between two discursive subjects such that one must now produce the other through a practice of interpretation]. That is, the story told must yield its authority [the authority of “experience” and of truth] to the telling of the story, a rhetorical phenomenon; and the “hero” of the narrative, let’s say [whether a first-person subject or not], must figuratively “die” for the storytelling itself to attain authority as a narrational achievement. In the case of AIDS diaries the “hero” of the story told is an author, subject of the énoncé summarized [brutally] as “I am dying” but whose text becomes readable, in the context of enunciation, as signifying
"'I' is dead," by virtue of a realization of the énoncé’s prediction (either known to or surmised by the reader). The situation in which the diary is read is thus a literalization of what, according to Benjamin, as I understand him, is theoretically the case in all acts of telling: “you are no longer the hero of your own story, no longer even the narrator” (Brodkey 64). The authority of AIDS diaries is not so much “borrowed” (as a matter of theory) as it derives from the actual death of an actual author—an event on which the transformation of “I am dying” into “'I' is dead” hinges. (In this they are like the legal texts known, not coincidentally, as last “wills” and “testaments”: their authority is nearly absolute, but the author can no longer participate in adjudicating their significance.)

But one might say, then, that the telling of the story survives the story that is told, even or particularly when that story is that of the author’s demise. The author, as subject of the énoncé “I am dying,” is offered in this way a certain mode of transfiguration or transsubstantiation, and hence of survival through an act of writing that will become readable (and enjoy authority) as a result of the author’s death. For, just as it is a rule that there is no énoncé that is not also, and simultaneously, an enunciative act, so there is no énonciation that is not tied to an énoncé: the signification “I am dead” (in the form “'I' is dead”) is available only through the vehicle of the statement: “I am dying.” Thus, the act of witness performed by the readable text (as enunciation) is in part detached from, but also in part continuous with, an énoncé that bears witness referentially to the reality of an experience, the experience of dying and, in the case of AIDS, of a particularly distressing manner of dying. So the gap between subject of the énoncé and subject of the enunciation—the gap introduced by the death of the author—is not a gulf but only a split. As a result, the scenario that I find repeated, sometimes barely hinted at but at other times quite carefully developed, in AIDS diaries, notably the three I aim to read closely in this essay,¹ is a sce-

¹. My corpus of diaries consists of: Barbedette, Dreuilhe, Duve, Fisher, Guibert 1992 and 1992a, Jarman, Joslin and Friedman, and Michaels 1990. For other important writing of AIDS witness, see Duquénelle, Guibert 1990, 1992, 1992b; Monette 1990, 1994; Wojnarowicz. I wish to thank David Caron for his invaluable help in identifying and locating certain of these texts, Jean Mainil for introducing me to Pascal de Duve’s Cargo Vie, and John Frow for pointing me toward Jarman’s Modern Nature.
nario of survival, which I interpret as survival across the split that separates the statement “I am dying” from the readable utterance “‘I’ is dead.”

In this scenario the recourse to writing (or, since two of the diaries are in video form, to technologies of representation), that is, the act definitional of an author—and more specifically the recourse to writing in the form of autobiography, the autobiography of a dying—functions, as it were, prophylactically. On the condition of the death of the author (as subject of the énoncé) something is preserved from the effect of death: an occasion of survival is offered and even a mode of posthumous action, through the authority a text can enjoy, by virtue of its readability, “beyond” the extinction of its author. Beyond the author’s death as in following that death (writing outlives the writer) but also as its consequence, since reading is predicated on the unavailability of authorial authority, as controlling agent of textual meaning, and on the substitution of a form of authority that is predicated on interpretability, and so, as Benjamin says, is borrowed from death. Writing is prophylactic in this sense because it combats death, although it does so at the price of a transformation of authority—from that of truthfulness to that of credibility—that is itself predicated on the author’s demise.

I’ll come to another sense in which the writing of AIDS diaries is prophylactic later (see chap. 2).

As witnessing discourse, AIDS diaries challenge some conventional understandings of both the diary form and the genre of autobiography. A diary explicitly and openly conceived with a view to publication—having publication as its essential finality—does not exclude the practice of intimate self-analysis associated with the journal intime, but it radically changes its orientation and significance by questioning the public-private dichotomy by virtue of which the “personal” diary is defined. And an autobiography that gives priority to a witnessing impulse over the memorializing function—the retrospective construction of a “life” in its narrative configurations that might be thought characteristic of classical autobiographies—seems a departure from the genre’s defining origins, while, finally, the immediacy of reporting and the episodicity of form that AIDS diaries (like other diaries) espouse simultaneously distinguish them formally from the narratives of witness, such as Holocaust accounts or testimonios.
from Central America, that have been the object of most recent critical attention.

We might wish, though, to reconsider the nature of autobiography in light both of autobiographical narratives of witness and of the witnessing orientation of AIDS diaries. It may simply be an error of perspective that leads us to read autobiography in the register of memory when the classics of the genre—Augustine or Rousseau, for example—wrote autobiographical texts that are only in part memorializing and in fairly large part also about standing up to be counted. And if memory is recruited in the autobiographical constructions of “myths to live by,” as Marie Maclean puts it, the same author points out that these are in essence indistinguishable from the “myths to die by” one might wish to associate with acts of witness. For memory is as much a response to forgetting, existential complexity, and the effects of time as witnessing seeks to overcome the fact of trauma and death, and memorializing autobiography, setting out to answer the question: what did this life mean? can easily stumble on more refractory questions (what was it like, how did it feel, to live my life? what pain has it entailed?) that are closer to testimonial. Meanwhile, witnessing writing, for its part, is constantly and symmetrically brought up against a problematics of memory, if only because the attempted representation of pain entails acknowledgment of its impossibility: trauma interrupts all continuity and coherence; it challenges discursive treatment because it inhibits memory and produces amnesia. Witnessing narrative and memorializing narrative both seek, then (albeit with different emphases, perspectives, and orders of success), to create coherence and sense out of discontinuity, incoherence, and disintegration.

That said, and these affinities being acknowledged, AIDS diaries are “nonnarrative texts” of autobiographical witness because in them the retrospective orientation of memory, the question: what did this life (or these events) mean? and the need to construct significance through discursive ordering are far less urgent than a need to answer the question: how does it feel to be dying of AIDS? and a desire to make available to others, with some directness, the sense of disintegration the experience entails. For the narrative syntax of beginning, middle, and end they thus substitute the structure of chronicle, with its greater immediacy: a simple \textit{taxis} (arrangement) of now this, now that—a contiguous rather than a cohesive series of dated “entries”
having the loose character of a list. They do so for obvious reasons having to do with respect for the dailiness to which the severely ill are condemned (the simple wisdom of “taking each day as it comes”) as well as acknowledgment of the impossibility of closure that stems from the disease’s notorious unpredictability (in all respects other than its final outcome). But the diary form relates also to a sense of the necessary open-endedness of the witnessing project, understood as the acknowledgment of trauma, of life’s refractoriness to ordering, narrativizing, and sense-making gestures: it defers and delays the responsibility of making sense, transmitting it onward in a way that has been poignantly described by Felman and Laub. AIDS journals are thus not oriented retrospectively, like the énoncé of classical autobiography and even “narrative” texts of witness; they look forward as enunciations to a future in which they will be read, and the open-endedness of their chronicle structure implies this prospectivity as much as the thematics of survival does.

Such diaries always come to an end, of course, but they do so without concluding: there is just a final entry, followed by a white space (and usually, in front- or backmatter, an account of the author’s death). Thus, their end, in spite of the author’s death that it signifies, remains suspended, as if another entry were always possible and as if to propose, therefore, some possibility of continuation. The effect, as a result, is not unlike that of a relay, and it has something in common, therefore, with the narrative structure of relay that is characteristic of the genre of AIDS narrative that might be called “dual autobiography,” in which—Paul Monette’s trilogy is an instance—the writer who records another’s death from AIDS is himself infected and may go on to record his own living out of the same scenario. This is the structure of Tom Joslin’s video diary, Silverlake Life, which was finished by Peter Friedman but concerns both the death of Tom Joslin and the ailing survivorhood of his lover Mark Massi (see chap. 4). And the relay effect is explicit in Bertrand Duquenelle’s L’Aztèque, in which the author writes, on the death of Jean-François, “A. Mon. Tour. [My. Turn. Now.]” (49).

In AIDS journals “Your. Turn. Now.” or “Over. To. You.” is the implicit message for the reader whenever the suspension of a diary on its author’s death is perceived to transmit an obligation to continue the work of witness, work that is begun by the author as a matter of writing but, interrupted by death, requires realization if not comple-
tion through an act of reading, the nature and quality of which is thus crucial. The very first effect of a textual authority derived from (the author’s) death is thus to transmit a responsibility and, as it were, an obligation, and the fact that a reader may perceive this relay structure of address, inherent in the diary’s open-ended incompleteness, as a metaphorical passing on of infection is surely not accidental. A virus has been transmitted: not HIV but the virus of writing and reading as what I called a prophylactic practice with respect to death and as a mode of confrontation, therefore, with what cannot rightly be either said or contemplated. “How can one understand something about death unless they really die?” asks David Wojnarowicz (217). The relay of writing by reading, across and beyond the brute ungraspable fact of death, bears witness to a desire somehow to understand, or to make significant, the phenomenon that interrupts all intelligibility and all possibility of comprehension and structures witnessing, therefore, as the transmission of an obligation to face the fact of death and so to fail in one’s responsibility even as one accepts it.

The (mediated) immediacy of the AIDS diary but also its “suspended” dependency on reading and the relay structure of its witnessing suggest a sense in which it may be fruitful, especially in view of the use of video technology in Guibert’s La pudeur ou l’impudeur and Joslin’s Silverlake Life, to relate the diary form to the mode of televsual broadcasting known as the “live.” I would argue that the category of the live is defined as much by a certain self-consciousness with respect to the technology of representation as by its relation to the living: it is the fact of its being represented, per medium of the camera, that turns the living into the live, suggesting therefore—according to a venerable if logocentric understanding of technologies of representation—that in the live the living has undergone a process of “reduction” (e.g., of three dimensions to two) that identifies repro-

2. What, one might ask (assuming what is itself a dubious proposition: that a written diary is easily recognized), constitutes a “video diary”? In what follows I assume, in addition to the effect of liveness (which does not preclude editing), three criteria: two on the plane of representation, an autobiographical relation between the holder of the camera and its object, a structural preference for chronicle grammar (discontinuous, episodic structure) as opposed to story grammar, and some generic reference, through setting or by quotation, for example, to “home movies” (or another indicator of domestic, intimate and/or personal discursive register). These three criteria distinguish diary from documentary, with which witnessing diaries share an informational project.
sentation as a mortifying process, in the etymological sense of that term, and endows it, therefore, with an authority “borrowed from death.” AIDS journals thus not infrequently associate the fact of representation with the wasting of the body produced by the effects of disease, figuring the former by the latter while suggesting, in an extension of the metaphor, that living with AIDS is less like living than, as an existence already marked by death, it has the “reduced” characteristics of the live. Eric Michaels, the author of Unbecoming, thus writes of AIDS sardonically as a slimming process, or “cosmic personal reducing plan” (98/57). But representation is also the means whereby, through the possibility of reading it opens up, a dying subject can anticipate the possibility of a certain form of textual survival, the condition of which is, as we’ve seen, the death of the author; so the live, understood now as a representation that implies—as all mediation does—readability and so an orientation toward readership, can thus come to figure something like the condition of survival that determines the AIDS diary’s ability to prolong its act of witnessing beyond the author’s demise.

Yet the live is also defined—and from this it derives its effect of immediacy and spontaneity—not only in opposition to the living but also in opposition to the formal perfection of the “canned.” The marker of the live thus tends to be a certain proneness to accident and error. This may be due to the incursions of the natural into the live as a performance, in the form of technical hitches, fluffed lines, and botched business (even disasters, such as the interruption of a televised baseball game by the San Francisco earthquake some years ago). Or it may—as it does in a surprising number of instances—arise from the accidental (or sometimes perhaps, not so accidental?) foregrounding of the technology of representation itself: cameras, crew, trailing cables, banks of lights, or microphone booms caught in the frame of the image. The live can thus be said to cultivate a certain kind of “messiness” as the very sign of its liveness, and this messiness can again be read polyvalently, functioning simultaneously as a figure of disorder, entropy, and communicational “noise” (and, so, a signifier of death), as a marker of the live’s privileged relation, as mediation, to the living, and, finally, as a factor of readability resulting from informational complexity, self-reflexivity, and—in Paulson’s sense—“noise in the channel,” a readability that signifies survival. Thus, Pascal de Duve records in Cargo Vie (84) that he never rereads what
he writes and is aware of making many contradictory statements—but he lets them stand. And in *Unbecoming* Eric Michaels (who edits his writing carefully) develops a theory of tidiness, epitomized by the hospital, as the social order that is killing him and thus implies that the looseness and disunity of the diary form—its lack of formal cohesion—is part and parcel of an overall tactics of untidiness as a mode of resistance to the forces that would like to tidy AIDS patients, gay men (and members of other stigmatized “risk groups”), out of sight, out of mind, and out of existence. It is part, that is, of a project of survival.

As for the video journals, both Guibert’s *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* and Joslin’s *Silverlake Life* have qualities reminiscent of home movies, a genre Guibert specifically quotes. They are shot in rooms that have a lived-in look, ranging from the incipiently untidy in Guibert’s apartment to the frankly cluttered appearance of the Silverlake house, rooms that therefore contrast markedly, and significantly, with the sterility and coldness of doctors’ offices and hospital equipment (which nevertheless share with the lived-in spaces a quality that makes it impossible to refer to them simply as “settings” or decor). Unexpected objects sometimes invade the frame: most memorably, perhaps, in *Silverlake Life* a cat is curled, comfortably snoozing, on the very ordinary (not hospital style) double bed in which Tom Joslin lies dying. Camera technique is quite rudimentary in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, and in *Silverlake Life* it is professionally informed but supremely casual: video equipment and the practices that pertain to it are foregrounded, both intentionally and accidentally, but treated always with a kind of artisanal informality. They display the video’s own thoughtfulness about its status as representation, a thoughtfulness that is made even more explicit in Guibert, but they do so as part of the everyday of Silverlake life, with again a contrast with respect to the technologically impressive, but scary, CAT scan equipment (another mediator of vision) that we see in operation at the beginning of the video. It’s as if the authors are using what comes to hand, the skills and equipment they happen to have, and using it in a sem improvisational way—as a Certeauesque *art de faire*, or “making do”—in response to an emergency: a life crisis that, like a personal San Francisco earthquake, makes it an immediate and urgent necessity to find the means of witness but also of survival.
The category of the live, and in particular the immediacy of its representation of the author’s dying, brings me now to what is arguably the central trope of AIDS diaries, and perhaps of AIDS writing in general. This is the trope that identifies the physical symptoms of AIDS (and most particularly the visible lesions of Kaposi’s sarcoma) as writing—the writing of the AIDS-infected body, of which the authorial writing of the diary, as verbal text, is a sort of more or less direct transcription. There are next to no diaries of seropositivity;³ it is with the onset of symptoms that the emergency becomes palpable and authors turn to their cameras and word processors and start a journal. That this connection between the appearance of symptoms and the writing of a journal is overdetermined seems obvious, and I shall return to the point, but one important way in which it is significant lies in underscoring the sense of equivalence between AIDS, as the writing of the body, and the textual production whose agent is the author—the author whose death is announced by his passage from the asymptomatic stage of positivity to the symptoms that indicate a diagnosis of AIDS. Thinking of the inscription on the tomb of Keats, Paul Monette writes: “AIDS has taught me precisely what I am writ in, blood and bone and viral load” (1994, 114); and, addressing the virus, Pascal de Duve writes (13): “VIH, c’est un peu toi qui écris ici [HIV, it’s pretty much you who are doing the writing here].” (The gesture of turning over authorial authority to one “borrowed from death” is palpable in this last quotation.) In turn, the opening lines of Unbecoming identify KS lesions as linguistic units (“morphemes”) and cast the author as one whose role is to be their interpreter, “stringing them together” into sentences that form a narrative:

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I watched these spots on my legs announce themselves over a period of weeks, taking them as some sort of morphemes, arising out of the strange uncertainties of the past few years to declare, finally, a scenario. As if these quite harmless look-

³. The [partial] exception being Jarman 1994: Modern Nature is a gardening diary started in, presumably, symbolic response to seropositivity, which becomes an AIDS diary in its later pages. [The early part of Gary Fisher’s diary, in Gary in Your Pocket, might also be regarded as a seropositivity diary.]
ing cancers might, when strung together, form sentences which would give a narrative trajectory, a plot outline, at last to a disease and a scenario that had been all too vague.

[Michaels 23/3]

It’s important, perhaps, to stress that the trope of “the writing of AIDS” as a figure that blurs into some sort of identification the writing of the body and the authorial text is just that: a trope, a figure. The writing of AIDS is a product of representational practices of writing tout court, and the body itself, although it is discursively significant, does not write. For that reason in my readings of La pudeur ou l’impudeur, Silverlake Life, and Unbecoming (chaps. 3, 4, and 5, respectively), I will be focusing on representations of the body in each text and taking the body not as an agent of writing on its own behalf but as a vehicle of textual self-figuration, a figurative means whereby texts indicate their enunciative situation as objects of reading, according to understandings that have been elaborated in some of my previous work (Chambers 1984, 1991, 1993). But this trope is nevertheless essential, for two related reasons. One is that it suggests a degree of complicity between the dying writers and the AIDS that is inspiring their writing: “Minuscules petites bestioles [tiny beasties],” Duve writes affectionately in addressing the virus (13), and a refrain of “Sida mon amour [AIDS my beloved]” runs through his book. Why this complicity? Against what forces is it formed? The other reason is that, as the quotation from Unbecoming makes clear, the writing of AIDS entails a scenario, “a narrative trajectory, a plot outline.” Although Michaels is unspecific here about the narrative he foresees, it is hard to imagine that it might be any other scenario than that of the death of the author, presupposing the survival of textual authority that the author’s death entails. It is as if the transcription of the writing of the author’s body that is AIDS into the textual form of the diary represents a kind of relay operation that provides an initial model for the scenario of survival—a myth to “live by” as well as to “die by”—on which the text itself will rely in its appeal to be read. For the writing of the body will die with the body but survive in the writing of the diary.

There is another scenario of the death of the author, however, to which the trope of the writing of AIDS is also highly germane. This is
a scenario not of survival beyond death but of death itself as a kind of
grandiose apocalypse, or, in Duve's term, a "flamboyancy" like that
of the setting sun. In the corpus of AIDS diaries known to me, Duve's
Cargo Vie is clearly the locus classicus of this alternative myth, but
this text itself has its roots in a long history of French thinking about
the concept of écriture. In Artaud, most notably, the writing of the
body as a kind of affective athleticism is a major figuration of the
desire for there to be a writing not subject to the constraints of dis-
cussivity, of linguistic interchange, and the ideological construction
of personhood, and Artaud's corporeal writing has migrated, more
recently, both into Hélène Cixous's understanding of écriture fémi-
nine as "writing with the body" and into Deleuze and Guattari's elab-
oration of the "body without organs." In this tradition writing is
understood as a vehicle of sublimity—of transcendence, rapture, and
what Bataille calls "sovereignty"—more than it is concerned with
readability or the desire for continued social participation beyond the
author's disappearance.

It is not that Duve is not conscious of his text's witnessing func-
tion and of its relation to the discursive authority that derives from
death: he writes specifically that "Ceci est un testament—au sens
étymologique, un témoignage [This is a last will and testament—ety-
mologically, a testimonial]" (46), and at one particularly striking
moment he notices that the word survie (survival) is a near anagram
of virus (14). But he is more conscious of the privileges of insight, sen-
sitivity, and intensity of sensation accorded his dying self than he is
attentive to the very real suffering (which he fully acknowledges and
records) of the AIDS-infected body, and he is less anxious about the
survival through reading of a textual subject than he wishes to
demonstrate in the process of his disappearance a certain form of
heroism:

Regarder la mort en face sans baisser les yeux, mais au con-
traire en les gardant plus ouverts que jamais, mélange de défi
et d'émerveillement, voilà peut-être une modeste mais
authentique forme d'héroïsme, un héroïsme de poche auquel
en toute humilité [. . .] j'aspire. (15)

[To look Death in the face, not only with open eyes but with
eyes more open than ever, with a mixture of defiance and
wonderment—perhaps there’s a modest but genuine form of heroism in that, a pocket-sized heroism that in all humility I aspire to. . . .

Words like wonderment, phrases like “with eyes more open than ever,” signal a somewhat grandiose philosophical and aesthetic project behind the vocabulary of humility, and in fact Duve is contrasting his “héroïsme de poche”—not accidentally reminiscent of a famous paperback series, in which his diary is now published—and contrasting it favorably, as the heroism of writing, with public, socially oriented heroism, which he calls “zeroism.”

The pattern of AIDS is different for every sufferer, and in Duve’s case the symptoms declared themselves at an already advanced stage, through evidence that the virus had crossed the blood-brain barrier and was already in the process of destroying his brain cells. There is thus something almost literal in his belief that it is the virus, not he, that is doing the writing: “Minuscules petites bestioles, liguées par millions, vous occupez mon cerveau et vous vous en occupez. Mais avec quelle flamboyance! [Tiny beastsies, banded together by the millions, you’re occupying my brain and taking good care of it. But how flamboyantly you do so!]” (13). The flamboyancy of the writing in Cargo Vie, its romantic style but more particularly the luxuriantly proliferating wordplay and punning that largely elude translation, is adduced simultaneously as evidence of the invasion of Duve’s brain, its investment by parasites, and as a demonstration of Duve’s contention that the ordeal of dying by AIDS is not necessarily a completely negative experience, or, as he writes in a brilliant portmanteau word that signifies both ordeal (épreuve) and appalling, something completely “éprouvantable” (64). Invoking the French sense of the word parasite, in which it refers to interference or static, “noise” in the channel of communication, we can say that AIDS is celebrated in Cargo Vie (“Sida mon amour”) as productive of a language that is itself, like Duve’s brain, richly parasité, a writerly language traversed by multiple effects of signification that are not necessarily compatible or reducible to the consistency that permits coherent interpretive reading. The point, indeed, is rather to block such recuperative reading—for example, by allowing contradictions to stand—with a view to transforming the disintegration of sense into a certain flamboyancy.
Many writers of AIDS witness have moments in which they praise AIDS or receive it as a gift, and Duve is in this respect exemplary. The myth of the “writing of AIDS” as the subjection of authorial authority to the writing of the body is a version of something that has been celebrated, especially in France, since Mallarmé: the death of the author as the subjection of authorial agency to the production of textual effects. But there is a significant difference of emphasis between Duve’s insistence on authorial dying as a moment of flamboyancy in its own right and the orientation of the written AIDS body toward reading that is characteristic of the diaries whose collaboration with AIDS as an act of witness has a more immediately political sense, notably the work of Guibert, in France, as well as of English-speaking writers such as those I address in this essay. In this respect Michaels—who, beyond his initial acknowledgment of the trope of the writing of AIDS, situates AIDS as the enemy, or as a manifestation of the enemy to be opposed through writing—is (with Dreuilhe) at the opposite end of a certain spectrum from Duve and his “Sida mon amour.” But Michaels shares with Guibert and with Joslin also the combination of a more trivial sense of the “messiness” and disintegration entailed by living with AIDS—the messiness that I associated with the live and with the dailiness of journal writing—with a mode of heroism that, without being zeroism, refers less to an ultimately impersonal “sovereignty” than it has to do with stoicism and defiance and the refusal to be a social victim, an attitude less oriented toward wonderment and a sense of the sublime than toward witnessing in a historical here and now and on into a textual future that will survive the death of the author.

The political meaning of this emphasis that is shared by Guibert, Joslin, and Michaels derives, I believe, from an act of choice: the decision (sometimes explicit, sometimes implied) to live with AIDS and to bear witness to the ordeal it entails, in preference to the temptation of a fast and relatively easy death, through suicide—a death that is, of course, appealing but for gay men always open to homophobic (mis)interpretation, as a sign of self-hatred. Facing down that temptation, I’ll suggest in the next chapter, is a matter of facing up to the social reality of homophobia (including one’s “internalized” homo-
phobia, and doing so provides, as I’ll try to demonstrate in later chapters (especially in chap. 3, on Guibert), a first model of the textual dépassement of death, whose scenario will then be repeated, in a new mode, in the writing of witness itself, as a bid for the survival and continued social efficacy of a certain textual subject.

But this means that ultimately it is necessary to read all AIDS diaries—the very existence of which signifies the choice to live one’s death and to write it, as an alternative to throwing in the towel, and which are always marked by the author’s consciousness of the homophobic context of their enunciation—as profoundly and deliberately political acts. They all signal a refusal on their author’s part—and this is as true of Duve, in his way, as it is of the other authors—to play the role of victim that is marked out for AIDS patients. Their oppositionality espouses a certain way of dying and of bearing witness to that dying, one that is anything but easy, as a response, and a reproach, to those who, at the best of times, would like to see gay people (as well as the members of the other so-called AIDS risk groups) just give up and disappear. Autobiographical writing more oriented to the open-endedness of witness than to memory, an aesthetic of the live that espouses the living while inviting the “relay” of reading, a discourse of the body whose very disintegration is productive of further signification: these are the formal markers in such texts of something that is much more of the order of the political than of merely aesthetic choice, a refusal to give in and a willingness, to that end, to recruit the authority that only death, alas—the death of the author—can confer.