Confronting It: *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*  
and the Phantom Image

In 1981 the first rumors of a supposed “gay cancer” began to circulate in New York. That year, in Paris, Hervé Guibert published a book about photography, his passion: the book was entitled *L’image fantôme*, which might translate either as “The Phantom Image” or “Phantom Imagery.”¹ It is, idiosyncratically enough, a book about photography that contains no photographs: writing is the phantom—“un négatif de photographie” (123)—that substitutes here for images that themselves are sometimes real but equally often imaginary or fictional, unless they are photos taken but undevelopable, desired but unobtained. The photographs referred to but not presented in *L’image fantôme* thus have a quality of absent presence that signals a problematics of survival and of survival through representation: they have “died” into writing, but in the writing they survive as ghostly images. That is a reason why *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, the video AIDS diary Guibert made in 1990–91, can be regarded, uncannily, as the necessary photographic illustration, missing from the book, of the concept of phantom imagery, an illustration that came to exist only ten years later, as a result of the epidemic whose virulence no one in 1981 could have suspected.

For, if at the start of the 1981 volume, writing is defined as the site and medium of phantom imagery, the book is so constructed that, by the end, it is photography itself that finds itself so defined. Like writing, photography is a technology of representation that produces absent presence (or present absence); it simultaneously reduces

¹ I had written this sentence before the English translation, *Ghost Image*, appeared [see Guibert 1981]. I retain *phantom*, though, because I wish to link this chapter with Emily Apter’s pioneering article “Fantom Images,” on *A l’ami (The Friend)*. My Webster’s *Unabridged* says that *phantom* “is also spelled *fantom*.”
Facing It

its object to a state of ghostliness and, in so doing, ensures that the object survives the “death” (into representedness) that it undergoes as a very condition of that survival (since otherwise it would die absolutely). Thus, the final piece in the volume, entitled “L’image cancéreuse” (The Cancerous Image), tells the story of a photograph representing an attractive young man—a photograph that, or a young man who, after seven years of being admired and desired by the narrator, is attacked by “cancer”: a chemical reaction produced by the glue on the photograph’s back destroys the image, as cancer might eat away its human subject. “L’image était cancéreuse. Mon ami malade [The image was cancerous. My friend ill]” (167). (Thus, as in the case of “the writing of AIDS,” the representation and its object are equivalent here.) But the cancer gives a new intensity to the image’s eyes: “un léger accident chimique fit qu’il se mit à me regarder, à me voir alors qu’il ne m’avait jamais vu. Et je ne pus supporter ce regard qui se faisait, en même temps que la bouche, toujours plus suppliant [As a result of a slight chemical accident, he began to look at me, and to see me although he had never seen me before. I could not withstand his look, which, along with his mouth, became ever more supplicant]” (168). In an attempt to escape this confrontation with the demand of a dying subject, then, the narrator takes to wearing the photograph against his body, “comme un second frère mort attaché à moi [like a deceased second brother attached to me],” only to discover in due course that the photo has become blank, its image having been transferred to the narrator’s own body, each pigment, as he puts it, finding a place in one of the pores of his skin. Far from his having eluded the image’s demand, a transfer has occurred that is exact and total. “Le transfert l’avait délivré de sa maladie [The transfer had freed him of his disease]” (169).

This narrative of confrontation, transfer, and survival thus reveals itself to be an allegorical reflection on the conditions and consequences of representation, understood as a mode of deliverance for beings subject to death but conditioned on a rule of communicability. By inflicting death on its object, representation simultaneously forces the observer it implies to face up to the dying object and experience the intensity that emanates from it, so that, “freed” of its own disease, the object comes to survive, through a relay effect and as the result of the transfer of its image to another, who becomes its bearer. The narrative is simultaneously an allegory of reading, then, as a sur-
vivor’s act that, even in attempting to shun the confrontation with an image of death in the form of representation, nevertheless ensures the survival of that image and of its dying subject—a subject whose death it is that, by the intensity it confers, makes the image a haunting and so, for readers, an inescapable one. Photography, like writing, is—in the words of a slightly earlier fragment of *L’image fantôme*—“au plus près de la mort” [as close as one can get to death]: working in alliance with death, it imposes on the viewer a confrontation so intense as to be “indecent” (150), one that one might wish to turn away from but which proves irresistible, exerting a perverse fascination, a *hantise*.

C. R., à qui je dis [. . .] mon désir de photographier l’acteur M. L. avec sa mère, paralysée, et sa tante, trouva ce mot pour qualifier ma demande, de “vicelarde.” (150)

[C. R., whom I told of . . . my desire to photograph the actor M. L. with his paralyzed mother and his aunt, came up with the word “kinky” to characterize my request.]

Remember that word *vicelarde* (kinky): in less slangy form (*vicieux*) it will return, ten years later, in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, in a context that confirms that the video is designating itself as an experiment in indecency, a representation that goes *au plus près de la mort*.

But the question there will be how to go about producing a representation that will “haunt” a television audience: how to get such an audience to support a ghostly representation, in the sense of tolerating its indecency but also—it is the same question—how to get it to act as the support, in the sense of bearer, that will ensure the relay effect by means of which the representation becomes a means of survival. And again Guibert will have recourse, as in “L’image cancéreuse,” to an allegorical narrative that itself figures—as a *mise en abyme* of the text’s illocutionary situation—the dynamics of survival through representation and “transfer.” But he will now use his own AIDS-wasted body as a figure for the mortifying effects of representation and the ghostly image it produces and substitute the photographic representation of his own experiment with suicide, and his survival of that suicide, as the riveting equivalent of the glance of irresistible intensity that the young man of “L’image cancéreuse” acquires in his dying, a figure for the confrontation with death that
the video’s audience is invited to take part in by watching the video (and which it cannot escape even by attempting to elude it).

The issues that predominate in La pudeur ou l’impudeur are, therefore, rhetorical ones. They concern the video’s address to its audience, given the indecency of a representation that gets as close as is possible—which also means as close as is permissible—to death: what are the limits of permissibility? how does the video ruse with them in order to get its audience’s attention and achieve the desired effect of haunting? But they also concern, therefore, the inevitable fakery of a representation that, in figuring death, can only get “au plus près,” as close as possible/ permissible to its object, while inevitably falling short of its actual object, death itself, with the result that, in making its indecency acceptable to its audience, it permits us also, therefore, to blink at the confrontation and to elude in some sense or in some degree the gaze of death. Guibert, as an inventor of the genre of factual fiction in its autobiographical form—what Edmund White has dubbed “autofiction”—is a past master in the art of representation as an (authentic) faking of the facts, and again L’image fantôme, some time before La pudeur ou l’impudeur, had laid out the problem. In “Le faux” (The Fake) the narrator dreams that he has bought one of his favorite photographs, Alvárez-Bravo’s chilling image of a young worker killed in an uprising, but discovers that Alvárez-Bravo has himself faked this representation of death, by means of a plastic mask or wrapper: it is the photograph of a living person made to look like a corpse. Although the narrator is furious at the deceit, his friend T. makes the necessary rhetorical point by reminding him of the force the photo had before he removed the telltale plastic cover. “Elle était parfaite, tu n’aurais jamais dû l’extraire de sa pochette de plastique [It was perfect, you should never have removed the plastic wrap]” (141). There is no witnessing that does not entail effects of mediation, some sort of “pochette de plastique.” My reading of La pudeur ou l’impudeur will therefore necessarily be a reading of the video’s rhetoric, of the plastic wrapping that makes it—with its “decent” structures of address and its representational fakery—an exemplary representation, “au plus près de la mort,” of the dying of an author and so, for the reader (viewer), a site of confrontation with death. But it is intended as a reading also of the demand for survival that is made, as in “L’image cancéreuse,” by the deliberately toned-down and partially faked representation of that dying. For the suicide represented
La pudeur ou l’impudeur is more accurately an experiment in suicide, not exactly a piece of fakery (although it may also be faked) but a sort of dicing with death that ensures the author a 50 percent chance of eluding death and so is isomorphic with representation itself, as a way of approaching death au plus près that is simultaneously an agent of survival. There is thus an authorial confrontation, through representation, that precedes and prepares that of the video’s viewer.

I emphasize the video’s rhetoricity, then, only because I wish to establish its status as an act of witness, an act inevitably bound up with the politics, the poetics, and the aesthetics of representation, because representation is a means of survival, and so of prolonged efficacy for the witnessing act. In opting to represent, I have said, and thus to perform an act of witness, the authors of AIDS diaries are implicitly choosing to die writing, as a politically desirable alternative to their simple disappearance from the scene, which could be brought about by an act of suicide. But Guibert, in La pudeur ou l’impudeur, in choosing to represent death in conformity with an aesthetics of photography as an art “as close as possible to death,” simultaneously chooses to represent, in addition to his lengthy dying, something like his own suicide, and his survival of that suicide. By means of this bold move he is enabled to make explicit the temptation of suicide as that which would be inimical to his witnessing project by putting an end to it, while also taking suicide as a privileged object of his representation of death—that is, of the witnessing project itself, understood as an effort to force a confrontation with death on the part of its audience and so to ensure a certain “transfer,” a certain survival of witnessing subjectivity. In this way he joins into a single episode what might otherwise be regarded as a double thematics, that of (the rejection of) suicide and that of (the representation of one’s) dying as a mode of survival. He performs this telescoping by choosing in circular fashion to represent suicide itself but also by representing it as a mode of death that one experiences as a temptation, a temptation one survives, however, and that one survives, precisely, by representing it (with all the “fakery” representation involves).

In other authors engaged in the writing of their death, the temptation of suicide tends to remain implicit or to be barely hinted at; in my own analysis (chap. 2) the option of suicide and the option of witnessing were distinguished, for expository reasons, as an initial condition (the rejection of suicide) and a subsequent choice (the decision...
Facing It

to write one’s death) that jointly subtend the writing of AIDS diaries as acts of witness. But Guibert is explicit about the temptation of suicide, and also about the prophylactic value of the representation of one’s dying as an alternative to suicide, signifying the choice of survival. In presenting them together, he also makes it necessary, then, for us to understand something my earlier analysis obscured, that the attraction of suicide is not something one puts behind one, once and for all, in order to write but a permanent temptation that continuously underlies, and so continuously valorizes, the choice to die writing. Guibert authorizes me to say that suicide is what underwrites the writing of AIDS in gay AIDS diaries.

Hervé Guibert was a respected but little-read writer in France until he wrote an AIDS autofiction, *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*, his first and still most famous and widely read text of AIDS witness. Invited on this occasion to appear on a much-watched literary TV show called “Apostrophes,” Guibert—a good-looking but already visibly frail young man, who handled the difficult emotional and rhetorical circumstances gracefully (Boulé)—became an overnight celebrity. His book achieved large sales and was widely translated. One can readily surmise that, in making his video journal, *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, the author of *L’image fantôme* understood both that the medium of television was open to him by virtue of his fame and that the condition of his reaching a mass audience would be rhetorical, a matter of address, and specifically of tact and discretion, if not fakery, in the representation of “indecent” subject matter. The video was made between June 1990 and March 1991 and shown on TF1 (a general audience channel) the following year, shortly after Guibert’s death on December 27, 1991, with framing remarks provided by the programmers that ensured it would enjoy an authority “borrowed” from its author’s demise. But it is a concern with address that is readable not only in the video’s title but in a visual thematics of thinness, and of absent presence, that centers throughout on the representation of the author’s own emaciated body.

Perhaps the best commentary on *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* would be a sentence from Gilles Barbedette’s *Journal d’un jeune homme devenu vieux*: “La seule idée d’avoir à rendre compte, heure par heure, minute par minute, de son existence donne à celle-ci un curieux aspect fantomatique [The very idea of having to give an hour-
by-hour, minute-by-minute account of one’s existence is enough to make it seem oddly ghostlike] (115). In *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* it is the thinness of a body approaching “as close as possible to death” that literalizes this “aspect fantomatique,” figuring AIDS as a writing of the body that makes death legible (in the visibility of bone structure beneath the skin, for example) but suggesting also, I think, not only a certain thinness of the medium of representation itself but also the careful and deliberately toned-down rhetoric that is, for an author seeking the wide audience Guibert has in mind, a necessary condition of the writing of AIDS as a discourse that speaks of death. The *pudeur* (pudicity) with which the *impudeur* (impudicity) of the video’s representational gesture is effected produces, on the one hand, a certain effect of perversity (the video’s kinky, “vicelard” aspect underlying the inadequacy of representation to its object, death) but, on the other—and perhaps especially for viewers/readers accustomed to the robust realism and frankness of a video diary like *Silverlake Life* or a written journal like *Unbecoming*—a sense of rhetorical restraint for which “thinness” seems an appropriate metaphor. These terms (*pudeur* and *impudeur*), literally translated as “pudicity” and “impudicity,” are famously untranslatable, if only because the corresponding English words are so rare, whereas the concept of “pudeur,” with its close cousin “discrétion” (discreetness), is central to middle-class social relations in France. Where *discrétion* entails respect for another’s privacy, *pudeur* is a corresponding form of reticence with respect to one’s own self-presentation, an unwillingness to impose on others one’s emotions, one’s body, one’s sexuality. The “indecent,” *impudique* spectacle of a body marked by disease and death thus implies as its compensatory and euphemizing rhetorical counterpart—a kind of trade-off—visible and unmistakable discursive compliance with an ethics of restraint, a tactics of understatement for which, in France, the *bienséance*, or decorum, practiced by seventeenth-century French neoclassical writers continues to provide, especially for (dominant) middle-class taste, an appropriate model.

We watch gross realities in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* (Guibert on the toilet seat, suffering from diarrhea, for instance) and intensely charged events (his experiment with suicide). The understated rhetorical effect, the thinness of the verbal and visual writing with relation to what it represents, is at first disconcerting, like an unexpected and inappropriate perversity, and it is only with time that its efficacy
becomes apparent, even to viewers of non-French culture, as images linger in the mind and indeed refuse to be forgotten, eluding one's wish to escape their impact and inviting careful and reflective interpretation. They become haunting, in other words, and the haunt is as much due to rhetorical discretion as it is to the power of images and words that are au plus près de la mort. The thinness of Guibert's pale and wraithlike body, making death readable as a kind of skeletal reality, is a key figure, therefore, for this strange effect of combination. But it is figured also by one of the video's two most striking narrative episodes.

Guibert is to undergo an operation, under local anesthetic, to remove “a kind of ganglion” from his neck (this description being itself a perfect example of pudeur, since we learn from other sources that it was a suspected lymphoma). He asks his doctor about videotaping, but she is adamant: because of the draping of sheets to define the “champ opératoire” (space of operation), nothing would be visible. But Guibert politely persists: supposing he were to hold up a mirror? Her response—“Vous seriez bien vicieux [That would be kinky of you]”—is amused, affectionate, vaguely self-ironic, but dismissive. It is clear that she is voicing a social taboo: there are things one just doesn’t show. Perhaps she doesn’t know that in the lexicon of Parisian gay subculture vicieux is not necessarily a pejorative term (it frequently figures as a come-on in personal ads, for instance). In the event, although the operation is taped, there will be no kinky, mediating, hand-held mirror: one sees, as predicted, only Guibert’s draped body and the movements of the operators. A compromise has been worked out, it seems, between impudeur and pudeur, somewhat, in this instance, to the advantage of euphemism. But it happens—this is one of those strokes of luck that can arise in live filming—that at the very site of the operation (the champ opératoire, if you will), an intense light source trained on the incision produces an eerie glow so bright that, in the video, one sees only the light itself, not the wound or even the hands of the surgeons. And Guibert comments in voice-over: “Cette lumière chaude, irréelle, bleue et sableuse [. . .] transiforme ce qu’elle touche en source de lumière incandescente [this
grainy, blue, eerie, warm light . . . transforms what it touches into a source of glowing illumination].”

This transformation of the visual object into a blue glow—a sort of phantom image—can obviously stand, on the one hand, as a figure for the video’s own restrained and euphemizing manner in its presentation of scenes that signify the indecency of death. But, on the other hand, it also suggests a certain calculus of enlightenment, the pursuit of thoughtfulness and intelligibility that is exemplified in the video itself by Guibert’s reticent but slightly didactic voice-over commentaries, the precision of which is underscored by a perceptibly flat intonation that suggests he is reading a prepared text. Like the blue glow, they issue an invitation less to see graphic visual material directly than to respond reflectively and in mediated fashion to its indirectly suggested presence (an absent presence, or, in the metaphor for writing that underpins *L’image fantôme*, “un négatif de photographie”). And finally, then, the light that “transforms what it touches into a source of glowing illumination” suggests an underlying narrative scenario, the story of a transformation and perhaps, indeed, of a transcendence that might be achieved through the indirection of representation. As the indecent raw material of Guibert’s bodily existence, of his dying, is transformed into a certain readability through the intervention of representational technology (it requires both the camera and the operator’s light to produce the glow that becomes visible only on the tape), so a dying subject, through facing death—confronting it as close as representation will permit—might hope to outlive that experience, like the subject of the “cancerous image,” through a transformation of subjectivity (from authorial to textual, say), that is, through a becoming other, a relay of which readability is the vehicle.

If that is so, we can extrapolate from this episode, as a *mise en abyme* of the video as a whole, that Guibert is relying heavily on the nature of his medium itself, both to signify the profound impudeur that the pudicity of his careful rhetoric of address simultaneously disguises and intensifies—that is, to produce for his audience the confrontation with indecency they might otherwise prefer to elude—and to produce for himself, as its initial viewer, a face-to-face with mortality that might be transformative in a personal sense (“enlightening” his understanding of death) before producing the aesthetically transformative effect of relay through which textual survival
becomes possible. And, indeed, he draws attention to his medium in the final voice-over of the tape, describing video as a link between photography, writing, and film and adding, by way of explanatory comment, a somewhat sybilline statement: “L’instant présent a aussi la richesse du passé [The present instant also has the wealth of the past].” I’ll return later to this statement, which I take to imply the transformative power of representational media: its suggestion is that the significance of representation is, so to speak, prospective-retrospective. One makes a video (writes a journal) now so that in the future, when the death of the author will have intervened as a theoretical and eventually also a literal event—a future that will have become a present moment in its turn—a certain richness can emerge, like an unexpected “glow” on the tape, from the initial now, which will itself have become a representation of the past. But let us begin by concentrating on the power of the media—writing, photography, film, video—to mediate confrontations with death, that is, to produce phantom images and ghostlike effects through their “reduction” of the living. For it is here that the thematics of thinness emerges as most obviously apposite, and here too that thinness shows its power to suggest another life, a transformative possibility.

From the logocentric perspective all Westerners have inherited, what the media of writing, photography, film, and video have in common is the diminishment they bring about, their representational inadequacy, with respect to living reality. Writing is an impoverished, or “thin,” representation of speech and, as such, fatally removed from spontaneity, directness, and firsthandedness, the site of an absence. Photography has been considered a “spectral” medium from its invention: its subject is reduced to two-dimensional flatness and frozen into preternatural stillness. Film and video restore to the photographic image the movement of life, but it remains ghostly, however, because it is still thin; it is as if the ghost itself were walking and talking, neither fully dead nor yet quite living. All these technologies function as signifiers of death, then, because, like AIDS, they impose a “reducing plan” on the living (Michaels 98/57). Yet—since the living body dies while its representation lives on—they are also suggestive of the ways in which technē, by reproducing physis in a form that is remote from natural constraints and laws, can offer an image of survival while forcing us to confront our own death.

Their archetype, in this respect, is the reflection, or mirror image,
and it is characteristic, for example, that Guibert thinks of photographing his operation in a mirror. Even more striking is the moment, early in the video, when he shows his own daily confrontation as he stands naked in front of the bathroom mirror, contemplating the death that has become visible in his wasted body: “J’ai senti venir la mort dans le miroir. [. . .] Cette confrontation de tous les matins a été une expérience fondamentale [I felt death approaching in the mirror. . . . This confrontation each morning was a primal experience].”3 Where Guibert contemplates in the mirror his own emaciated body and his own death, the viewer contemplates, in turn, the startling thinness of another’s body, replicated in the luminous, two-dimensional photographic image of the video, a kind of phantom in its own right, so that Guibert becomes the figure of a more generalized death that the video invites us to face, and to face doubly: in the image and in what the image represents. As in a mirror, we watch this frail body—often seen in movement: doing cautious calisthenics, dancing to rap without moving the feet, or just standing in the apartment, swaying rhythmically to music—living a reduced life in the flatness of its representation. Painfully gaunt, it is in other respects, however, a beautiful body: the face spiritualized by the visibility of its bone structure, a shoulder recalling the angularity of certain Picasso figures, no lesions visible. In combination with Guibert’s obvious youthfulness (belied only by his cautious movements), that is a reason, perhaps, why the thinness that signifies the approach of death—the representational thinness and the thinness that is represented—comes simultaneously to suggest in addition to the approach of death a certain intensification of life, in the way that a mirror image reduces existence to flatness but can simultaneously offer an image of life transformed.

In describing Guibert’s understanding of photography as a device to “absenter le réel” (make reality absent / introduce absence into reality), Buisine is right, therefore, to think of Mallarmé (39). Absence is signified in the video not only through the thematics of thinness but also, more directly, in the repeated shots that explore the layout and furnishing of the apartment, as if its occupant were elsewhere and the apartment empty, and these shots focus with particular emphasis on a writing desk strewn with books, papers, objects, and imple-

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ments. This, it is easy to deduce, is a figure of the author’s death in both its theoretical and its literal sense. But such absence, in the viewer’s experience, is the contrary of a discursive void, because it is haunted and inhabited. It speaks only of what has disappeared, of the disappearance that has made it eloquent, as in a poem like the “sonnet en -yx” (“Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx”): the “Master” disappears that the poem itself may speak and scintillate, more freely, more fully, more profoundly. In these moments it is, then, as if we were watching a visual image of the very authority that writing borrows from death and specifically from the death of the author: they are moments in which the attenuation, to the point of disappearance, of physical presence implies an intensified and heightened eloquence that itself owes everything to that disappearance. For an “illocutionary disappearance,” in Mallarmé’s famous phrase, is not mute; rather, it stages death as a discursive event, productive of significance.

Thus it is that to face death in the form of the mirror image that representation makes available is also to glimpse, in the very reduction of the image, the possibility of another form of life. But it is also to understand how it is that a rhetoric of attenuation, restraint, and understatement—a discourse of thinness traversed, as it were, by a future absence—may be one of the most prodigious and powerful devices at the service of a textual afterlife.

Where the kinkiness of representational indecency, its impudeur, is somewhat toned down in favor of euphemism in the representation of Guibert’s operation, his investment in the vicieux and in the quality of “fakery” that accompanies acts of representation, and in particular the representation of death, is fully manifest, however, in the second of the two major episodes in the video, in which the power of representation to approach au plus près de la mort without its being ever able to quite capture “death itself” is specifically thematized. Yet this episode is central not only to the video’s self-reflexive interest in the conditions, effects, and limitations of representation but also, and simultaneously, to its narrative structure, as an account of the transformative outcome of the act of facing death, in the double sense of

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4. Mallarmé’s word is élocutoire: “L’oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l’initiative aux mots” (“Crise de vers”).
Confronting It

facing up to the fact of personal obliteration (and social expendability) but also of facing those things down so as, in some sense, to “survive” them. And so it finally demonstrates the sense in which this act of “facing it,” as a figure for the author’s option to die as a writer, functions as prophylaxis—a way of resisting the contagion of homophobia—because it is a choice of self-survival through writing (albeit at the price of the author’s death) over submissive self-destruction.

The episode in question is that of Guibert’s suicide, or more accurately his suicide experiment, and the key to its complex and manifold significance lies, on the one hand, in his identification of suicide as a pharmakon, that is, as he puts it in the video, a “contrepoison” (counter-poison or antidote)—a way of countering the despair induced by AIDS and its attendant social suffering, notably that produced by homophobia—and, on the other hand, in an association that remains implicit in the structure of the video but is thematically explicit in both _A l’ami_ and _Le protocole compassionnel_. Through this association the availability of an experimental drug (and so access, legitimate or not, to the experiment itself) is identified repeatedly as the condition of continued survival on the part of the author and hence of his continued ability to write (i.e., to survive as a textual subject through the act of dying but of dying writing and writing one’s dying). Thus, in _A l’ami_ the narrator, Hervé, as a figure of the author, blackmails Dr. Chandi into fudging his test results so as to obtain AZT by threatening suicide (60, 215), and it is AZT that makes it possible for him to write the story of betrayal through which access to the vaccine that would supposedly have cured him altogether is denied (a betrayal that therefore symbolizes all the ways in which an indifferent or dismissive social order signifies to the gay PWA his expendability). Similarly, in _Le protocole compassionnel_, which covers approximately the same time period in Guibert’s life as _La pudeur ou l’impudeur_, it is ddI (also referred to obliquely in the video) that gives the narrator strength to write another episode in the history of his, and the author’s, dying. But in _La pudeur ou l’impudeur_ the drug that, so to speak, underwrites the “writing” of the video is not an experimental antiviral but Digitaline, a proven cardiac medication that is mentioned in _Le protocole_ although its name is cautiously blipped from the soundtrack of the video, presumably by TF1. As is well known, an overdose of digitalis is fatal. Digitaline, then, as a sure means of committing suicide, is the _contrepoison_ to despair—a medicine of the
“heart”—in the way that AZT and ddI are, for their part, medications whose toxicity is able, for a time, to hold the virus itself at bay. But, although Digitaline thus stands for suicide itself as a pharmakon, it also forms part of a paradigm of drugs that includes the antivirals, drugs that are understood as antidotes to the temptation of suicide because they offer a measure of survival and the possibility of writing.

This is because Digitaline, in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur*, permits not suicide itself but an experiment in suicide and one that is deliberately modeled on the “double blind” principle that governs clinical drug tests. Consequently, what the drug comes to figure is less suicide as the choice of oblivion than the representation of suicide as a mode of writing (specifically, video writing), an “experimental suicide,” if one will, that has a quite different valency, because it is a metaphor for writing, than suicide “proper.” As such, it can be viewed as both a riposte to the social forces that would simply have the author disappear without trace and a bid for the textual survival of an author who dies writing, a survival the aleatory quality of which (the fact that it necessarily escapes the author’s control) is signified by the implied reference to double-blind testing, in which neither the experimenters nor the subjects are aware of who is being given the actual drug and who is being given a placebo. For the point of the suicide represented in *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* is both that it is set up as an experiment (in which the experimental subject has a fifty-fifty chance of survival or death) and that it is filmed (so that the act of representation splits the author into a filmed subject exposed to death and a filming subject whose survival is assured). In two concordant ways the episode signifies both the choice of death and the option of survival. But it is quite significant, also, that in *Le protocole compassionnel* (139–40) the narrator specifies that he deliberately did not take his camera and “forgot” to take his Digitaline on the vacation to Elba that is the occasion of the suicide experiment represented in the video, a vacation during which, in *Le protocole*, the visit of Djanlouka (183–85)—who goes unmentioned in the video—reactivates a thematics of transmission and survival reminiscent of “L’image cancéreuse,” the early story that can be seen as the prototype for all these narratives. Djanlouka, drawn by the desire both to see (“il voulait...”

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5. My thanks to Alexandre Dauge for pointing this out to me. On the double blind, see Guibert 1990, 167–69 (trans., 142–43). For a slightly longer exploration of this question, see Chambers (1997).
tout voir [. . .] [se rincer] l’œil du spectacle de mon squelette”) and to
fuck the desperately ill Hervé, has brought a condom, even though he
says he wants to “risquer la mort” (risk death); it is as if he were giv-
ing himself a fifty-fifty chance in an experiment of his own. We are
thus invited to read *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* and *Le protocole com-
passionnel*, in this respect, as complementary versions of the same
facing-it or dicing-with-death narrative, with emphasis on a themat-
ics of witnessing and transfer in one case (that of the written narra-
tive) and in the other (that of the video) on an agonistics of facing
death but in which each emphasis, in the final analysis, implies the
other as its own un(der)stated corollary.

In the narrative structure of the video a long opening section pre-
cedes the suicide episode. It is ostensibly devoted to the representa-
tion of Guibert’s daily life as a PWA while gradually and almost
imperceptibly introducing the cognate motifs of vulnerability and
despair, as if these were to be understood as a half-unconscious
accompaniment to the performance of everyday tasks like taking
medication and reading mail, eating, exercising, resting, or talking on
the phone. Thus, we see a vulnerable-looking body subjected to diar-
rhea, manipulated by a physiotherapist, having blood drawn (an ema-
ciated arm extended toward us in a gesture that seems half-suppli-
cating), undergoing medical examination (auscultations and bizarre
tests), and, of course, extended on the operating table. We watch this
same thin body struggling up from bed, dressing painfully and care-
fully, inserting itself laboriously into a jacket; we sense its frailty and
reduced ability to resist; and we begin to realize the extent to which,
for Guibert, even the most elementary procedures of existence—let
alone the humiliations of the disease and the encounters with medi-
cine and its torments—have become an occasion of daily struggle. It
is then that we notice the first, barely perceptible signs of his dis-
couragement. He sits, once naked and once clothed, on the toilet seat,
head in hands; he lies in bed, staring upward, hand to forehead. He has
commented already on the sense of exposure his tainted blood gives
him, but this sense of his vulnerability now shades, for us as for him,
into an awareness of his despair.

So the realization that he is contemplating suicide, when it
comes, does not come unexpectedly. The thought is specifically trig-
gered in him, it seems (according to the logic of post hoc ergo propter
hoc that is proper to the paratactic, chronicle-like form of the diary),
by one particular event: the receipt of a letter. A woman Guibert knows socially (she is not otherwise identified) writes—in painfully cautious terms and long, formally constructed sentences—to apologize for a conversation in which she may not have been tactful and offers to pray for him. But (in cauda venenum) the offer is conditional, and the condition is that he renounce homosexuality, “si contraire à l’Evangile” (so contrary to the Gospel). It is soon after this homophobic attack that Guibert approaches the oracles, in the form of his two elderly aunts, Tante Suzanne and Tante Louise, both familiar to readers of Guibert from a number of other texts (beginning with Mes parents). Suzanne, approaching her ninety-fifth birthday, is being fed by a companion as she visibly struggles to articulate responses to Guibert’s questions. Louise we have met already: an alert and hale octogenarian, she has given apposite counsel: “C’est ça qu’il faut soigner, c’est le moral [It’s your morale you need to take care of].” But Guibert now comes to them both with a question: is suicide acceptable when one is suffering? Suzanne’s response is clear but monosyllabic: “No,” and when he pursues the issue—“Why should one continue to live?”—he gets an answer that is truly oracular because it is indecipherable. Louise, on the other hand, is more articulate: it’s important for him not to give up, for the sake of those who are coming after him (she means fellow sufferers who might benefit from the medical knowledge to which his continued existence would contribute). “Would you hold it against me?” he asks. No, she would understand—but she would be desperately sorry (“désolée”), and her conclusion is firm: “Non. Ne fais pas ça. On n’a pas le droit [No. Don’t do it. We have no right].” In all this there is no mention of experimentation or of filming: suicide is the choice of death in the face of life’s suffering.

But it is August, and the locale now shifts to the sunshine and Mediterranean landscape of Elba (not so identified in the video), where Guibert’s hesitation at first continues. He sits on the terrace, reading aloud from Walter de la Mare (credited as Miss M., Editions Losfeld), a passage expressing a sense of fusion with the things of nature: “les nuages, l’eau, les insectes, les pierres [clouds, water, insects, stones]” but concluding abruptly with an unexpected judgment: “Quel nain égocentrique j’étais [What an egocentric dwarf I was],” as if to imply something like Louise’s negative judgment on his desire for death. Momentarily, though, the simple hedonism of a
vacationer’s existence—siesta on the terrace, “a moment of pure enjoyment of life”; a juicy peach; a clean shirt donned after a cooling shower—seems to tip the balance in favor of living. Guibert contentedly hums the jaunty andantino from *Peter and the Wolf*, which has already been heard accompanying the video’s “home movies” segment relating to his boyhood. In Prokofiev it is walking and continuity music; here (it becomes something like the video’s leitmotiv) it signifies the will to carry on, to survive, to live. The weather turns gusty, however, and a large butterfly appears, interpreted by Guibert as a signal that Tante Suzanne has died (“Quand on me demande si je crois à la métempsychose, je dis non [When I’m asked if I believe in metempsychosis, I say I don’t]”). Again diarrhea strikes, and he sits, hands covering his eyes. And we learn of the existence of the carefully hoarded antidote, the *contrepoison*: seventy drops, says Guibert, constitute a fatal dose. His face impassive, he now sits at a table, slowly and deliberately opens the vial, pours a glass of water, then another, and transfers the drug with a dropper into the right-hand glass. “Deux verres,” he intones, “que je tourne, les yeux fermés [Two glasses. I twirl them, with my eyes closed].” Then, having thoroughly mixed up the two glasses, he raises one of them, toys with it thoughtfully, and finally drinks, emptying it. If it is the right-hand glass, we are watching a suicide, live.

It is not a suicide we watch, however, but an experiment in suicide, specifically modeled on the analogy of experimental drug tests and so linked to the antivirals that, to Guibert, signify the hope of survival and the possibility of writing. What is the antidote to despair? One may hesitate over the answer and seek “experimental” elucidation. Is it the “easy death” of suicide or the harder option of survival—survival in order to write and writing in order to survive? The “double-blind” structure of the episode suggests that such a suicide experiment will be a fifty-fifty proposition, but the experiment also concludes in favor of survival. After a shot of the windy terrace for continuity we see Guibert sprawled in his bedroom armchair, apparently asleep, and hear his heavy breathing, like a sigh. Then suddenly he is awake, staring. The voice-over comment, at this point, is doubly significant, emphasizing first the transformative effect of what has transpired—“Je suis sorti épuisé de cette expérience, comme modifié [I emerged exhausted from this experience/experiment, and as if modified]”—and then the role of representation in producing the
transformation: “Je crois que filmer ça a changé mon rapport au suicide [I believe filming it has changed my relation to suicide].” Representation, figured as an experimental, filmed suicide, must therefore be understood as a means of facing it, of producing the mirror image in which death can be contemplated, as Guibert saw death approaching daily in his bathroom mirror but also as the viewer of *La pudeur ou l’impudeur* can read it, in turn, in the absent presence, the thinness, of the video’s images. And the effect of representation, thus understood as a means of confrontation, is a change of perspective with respect to suicide. Suicide no longer beckons as an escape from despair but becomes a figure for the confrontation with death, the approach *au plus près de la mort* that makes writing, photography, film, and video the instruments of a certain survival. For, even if Guibert had died in the suicide experiment, a certain “Guibert” would have nevertheless survived as a textual subject and as a product of the filming, that is, of the death of the author captured live.

But the ability to write, that is, to capture the death of the author live, is, of course, exactly what the Guibert of *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* represented, not as suicide but as the alternative to suicide, an alternative itself dependent on access to experimental medication. The author’s changed attitude to suicide, the modification of subjectivity that occurs in *La pudeur*, thus signifies the rediscovery of writing itself as both the real counter-poison to despair (figured, in this case, by Digitaline) and the agency of a certain mode of survival that itself depends on facing death. In *A l’ami* a conception of writing as the act of describing one’s own dying is an implication of the novel’s “dual autobiography” structure: “ce n’était pas tant l’agonie de mon ami [Muzil] que j’étais en train de décrire que l’agonie qui m’attendait, et qui serait identique” (107) (“it wasn’t so much my friend’s last agony I was describing as it was my own, which was waiting for me and would be exactly like his” [91]). In *La pudeur* the description of one’s own dying, as a definition of writing, is what constitutes the difference between a filmed suicide experiment—corresponding structurally to the *vicieux* filming of the operation on Guibert’s neck—and suicide “proper” (from which the element of “description,” or representation, is absent). The modification of the author’s relation to suicide that is declared to be the outcome of such an experiment can thus only refer to a confirmation of his vocation as a writer, threatened by the temptation of suicide proper—the voca-
Confronting It

tion to die writing and to write one’s dying. And it is to this transfor-
mation of the author into a subject of writing, a transformation of
subjectivity that simultaneously amounts to a modified relation to
death itself, that the final minutes of the video are devoted.

Guibert first goes to the sea and bathes, as if in celebration of a
new self, emerging from the water to be carried to the beach in the
arms of a companion, whose appearance in the video (not counting
doctors’ visits, interviews with the aunts, the occasional phone call,
and a successful author’s voluminous mail) is the first real sign of a
break in the relentless solitude of Guibert’s existence, the sense of
having to make it on one’s own that has been conveyed throughout,
as the essence of what it means to live with AIDS. This brief allusion
to the friends who figure prominently in Guibert’s written texts but
are virtually absent from the video perhaps signifies the return of a
sense of community that might be connected with renewed faith in
writing (which implies the address structure of witnessing as an
appeal to readers). In any case, back in Paris, life appears to resume
much as before: another doctor’s visit, another conversation with the
oracular Tante Suzanne: “C’est dur d’être si vieux? [Is it tough to be
so old?].” “Oh, yes.” “What gift would you like for your ninety-ﬁfth
birthday?” “To survive a bit longer [De vivre encore un peu].” But
thus the motif of the will to survive is recalled, and Guibert’s own
overcoming of the threat of death is suggested now in the passage he
reads from a war novel, credited as Moreau de Klabund (Editions Le
Temps Qu’il Fait-Cognac). “Moreau regardait maintenant la mort en
face sans ciller,” it begins (“Moreau could now look death in the face
unblinkingly”), and it goes on to explain that Moreau is no longer
troubled by the deaths of his military comrades, which have come to
seem normal, while he is moved instead—a bit like the moment on
Elba authorized by Walter de la Mare, when Guibert took pleasure in
and identiﬁed with the simplest manifestations of nature—by a dead
hedgehog, which he buries with some ceremony and supplies with an
epitaph: “Ci-gît un hérisson [Here lies a hedgehog].” Looking death in
the face does not entail insensitivity or callousness, then, although it
makes death seem normal, but neither does it entail the judgment of
egocentricity [as suicide did]. Rather, one emerges into a new sense of
survival, which produces a certain objectivity and a sort of equanim-
ity, together with a sense of the oneness of nature.

A similar detachment from the mortal affairs of humans is evi-
dent in the following scene, the only one in which, by contrast with his earlier signs of despair, we see an amused Guibert, who even demonstrates a capacity for laughter. He is in bed, describing to a friend the scene at the lawyer’s office, Tante Suzanne having died, when the family, which has gathered rapaciously from all over France to hear the will, learns that she has left all her money for cancer research. (He adds, more thoughtfully: “I saw a face of my father I didn’t know at all.”) Suzanne’s message from the grave (recall the butterfly) reads like a message of affection and solidarity with Guibert, at the same time as it comments ironically, from the perspective of death, on the pettiness of mortal preoccupations such as money. And the final images of the video, each of them a key moment referring back to earlier images and resituating their significance, now articulate his attainment of a certain resolve, a certain faith in writing, and a certain understanding of textual survival that relativize, if they don’t assuage, the pain of the author’s own approaching death.

Through a doorway we see obliquely into the bedroom. An alarm goes off; a light is turned on. Pause. Two spindly legs thrash the air, and Guibert comes into view, now sitting upright on the edge of the bed. He sits, looking away from the camera, then turns his head to look upward in the other direction. The suggestion is still one of struggle but not now of despair (head in hands): instead, a certain firmness of resolution, the desire to battle on, is conveyed. And so, in a second sequence, we see him at his desk, word processing—an image that countermands an earlier image of the empty desk, strewn only with books and writing materials, and more particularly one (with the lamp alternately turned on and turned off) that signified Guibert’s hesitation over suicide (to write or not to write). Correlatively, the final image of the video will be of the desk again but with Guibert absent once more, in an unmistakable figuration of the author’s death. This image of absence is now so framed, however, that we see it as if presided over by an almost anthropomorphically shaped, if skeletal, lamp, one that was associated, in a carefully composed earlier image of Guibert exercising, with his own thin body. This lamp is thus something like a phantom image of the absent author, whose spectral survival and absent presence in his writing it thus signifies, even as it serves, more dis-
tantly, as a reminder of the incandescent glow that transformed the surgical operation, as a result of its representation, into a source of light.

Mallarmé is certainly in the intertext here:

Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L’Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral . . .

[Dedicating on high the onyx of her nails
Anguish, this midnight—a lamp-bearer—supports
Many a vesperal dream . . .]

But in the soundtrack it is Prokofiev we hear, the andantino again. For it is clear now that, Peter having faced down the Wolf, the music can continue.

Guibert has freely admitted, in *A l’ami* (159 [135]), to a lifelong fascination with death; and it seems that the “feeling” of death, as he calls it—“la peur et la convoitise” (fear and desire)—impregnates his writing from the start. Before they knew themselves to be infected, he and his friend Jules regarded AIDS as a “wondrous” disease, therefore—“une maladie merveilleuse” (*A l’ami* 192)—because it permits life, so to speak, to observe itself dying, while concomitantly death gains access to, and comes to inhabit, the world of the living. “C’était une maladie qui donnait le temps de mourir, et qui donnait à la mort le temps de vivre, le temps de découvrir le temps et de découvrir enfin la vie [It was a disease that gave one time to die, and gave death time to live, time to discover time and in the end to discover life]” (164; trans. modified). And the writing of AIDS, in Guibert, as an intensification and specification of his long-term association of writing with death, in which textual writing models itself, as phantom imagery, on the writing of a body reduced to spectral thinness, functions in turn like AIDS itself. It brings life as close as it can come to death (by giving one time to die) while simultaneously making death an inescapable presence in life (by giving death time to live), the first experience, that of drawing closer to death, being more particularly that of the author as he writes his dying, while the second, that of
receiving death as a visitation in life, is more characteristic of a reader or viewer in the presence of a writer’s text [a text whose significance derives from the death that is its readable subject, both in the sense that it is about dying and in the sense that death is therefore what speaks in and through it].

But by the same token AIDS does introduce a new moment into Guibert’s long-term fascination with death. For his writerly complicity with a disease that makes it possible to write one’s dying, and thus to make death readable, also implies a scenario of survival, the kind of scenario to which he refers in Le protocole compassionnel: “Je suis dans une zone de menace où je voudrais me donner l’illusion de la survie, et de la vie éternelle. Oui, [. . .] j’ai horriblement envie de vivre [I’m in a constantly threatened zone in which I would rather allow myself the illusion of survival, of eternal life. Yes, . . . I have a horrible yearning to go on living]” (143). What I want to suggest, then, is that it is the grafting onto the writing of death of various scenarios of survival, whose prototype, I have suggested, is the story of “L’image cancéreuse” in L’image fantôme, that most strikingly characterizes the writing of AIDS in Guibert’s hands, whether it be that of the prose trilogy (À l’ami, Le protocole, L’homme au chapeau rouge) or that of the video diary, La pudeur ou l’impudeur. And what this scenario turns on, in the video, is a dynamic of confrontation that is structured precisely as an author’s experience (bringing life as close as possible to death) and a reader’s or viewer’s experience (bringing death within the purview of life) but is in each case bound up with the power of technologies of representation. In choosing to represent his own dying (filming a biopsy operation or a suicide experiment, for example), the author is led first of all to face his own death, like Guibert in the bathroom mirror. Thus, the only close-up shot of a face in the whole video captures the intensity of Guibert’s looking while he watches on the monitor the images of his operation and observes the eerie blue glow that emanates from them. But the existence of a representation of the author’s dying, together with the split authorial subjectivity such a representation implies [a represented subject who dies but a representing subject, or more accurately a subject of representation, that has a chance to survive] is, in turn, the condition of a viewer’s ability to confront death in the author’s text and, consequently, of the survival of the subject of representation that exists only as the object of reading. The suicide experiment in La pudeur ou l’impudeur, under-
stood (as I’ve proposed) as an allegory of representation, appears to estimate the chances of such a survival through representation at 50 percent.

For the responsibility, ultimately, is out of the hands of the author who is to die, since it depends on the indispensable cooperation of a viewer with the sensitivity to read the writing of death, the phantom images that the text itself can only propose. The status of the reader or viewer as a survivor of the author’s death—the reader’s survivorhood, that is—does not necessarily guarantee the survival the text demands. Rather, the whole problem lies in the difference between those two words. How can the reader’s survivorhood be parlayed into textual survival? That problem underlies the appeal for reading that is implicit in the final voice-over commentary of the video, accompanying the spectral images of the empty desk and the lighted lamp. Ostensibly, the commentary is a meditation on the powers of representation:

Il faut avoir déjà vécu les choses une première fois avant de pouvoir les filmer en vidéo. Sinon, on ne les comprend pas, on ne les vit pas: la vidéo absorbe tout de suite, et bêtement, cette vie pas vécue. Elle peut aussi faire le lien entre photo, écriture et cinéma. Avec la vidéo, on s’approche d’un autre instant, d’un instant nouveau, avec comme en superposition, dans un fondu-enchaîné purement mental, le souvenir du premier instant. Alors, l’instant présent a aussi la richesse du passé.

[One needs to have already lived life in order to be able to video it. Otherwise it can’t be grasped, it can’t be lived: the video absorbs this unlived life immediately and unintelligibly (banally). It can also link photography, writing and film. With video, you can approach another instant, a new instant, which is superimposed as in a purely mental dissolve shot, on the memory of the original instant. Then the present instant also has the wealth of the past.]

What is said here seems to mean that the power of video (of representation) depends on its ability to introduce deferral, and hence a certain distance, into the unintelligible spontaneity of “unrepresented” liv-
ing. Such deferral, to extrapolate, is at one and the same time the discursive sign of death and a necessary condition of signification ("life" must be mediated in order to be what we call life). But it implies also, in Guibert’s analysis, a second deferral within the first, a two-stage operation that I’ve already called prospective-retrospective and which is where the appeal to reading comes in. For the living must become the live in order to achieve significance, intelligibility, and life—that is the prospective stage. But the (potential) readability of this live representation, if it is to produce the fondu-enchaîné effect of survival, by which a present moment can acquire, across time, “the wealth of the past,” must in turn be realized. That is, it must be subject to an act of reading, which constitutes the stage of retrospective interpretation. Thus, the whole analysis culminates in an implicit appeal for the video to be read.

What gives this appeal its urgency, though, is the further implication that there is an intervening moment that differentiates the prospective stage of representation—a stage subject to authorial control but in which the living, in order to become (potentially) significant, is reduced to the live and thus undergoes a form of death—from the retrospective stage of interpretive realization: the enrichment that realizes the potential inherent in the live, a stage that is beyond the author’s control because it implies the involvement of an agent of reading. This intervening moment can be pinpointed as the moment of the author’s death. But it is therefore a moment beyond the reach of discourse, a moment that [unlike the author’s dying] cannot be represented but, equally [unlike the text that survives the author’s death], cannot be interpreted. There is only, on either side of the prospective-retrospective process that is structured by the writing-reading relation, a double and complementary experience not of death “itself” but of approach and confrontation. There is only the au plus près de la mort experience of representation, or of reading, as facing it, one that gets as close as possible to, but is not identical with, the unrepresentable, unsayable, unreadable reality. Thus, an author must confront death in the process of dying so that a reader, defined by the status of survivorhood, can in turn confront death in the textual representation of the author’s dying and so produce a kind of survival that links the moments of before and after—technically, the text as énoncé and the text as énonciation—across the chasm of death “itself.” But death itself divides them,
defines an unbridgeable difference (the difference of deferral) between author and reader, and thus inevitably questions the quality of textual survival. The reader is asked to countermand the effect of something that is insurmountable: the interruption that is death.

I read the phrase “la richesse du passé,” and the idea of the wealth of the past enriching the present instant of reading, as an enticement to a certain readership that we must understand, in the first instance, as a TV audience unlikely to be predisposed to welcome the impudeur inherent in the writing of AIDS, let alone the task of compensating for the effects of death. It is a comfortable idea and one that corresponds to traditional understandings of reading as the enrichment of reader by text and/or text by reader. There is something familiar and middle-class about it. Other texts, such as Silverlake Life and Unbecoming, to which I am about to turn, position the reader as survivor less comfortingly, and indeed in considerably bleaker terms, as the site not of an enrichment but of mourning. What remains fundamental in Guibert’s video, though, and gives it, along with the corpus of texts in which it is embedded, a primary place in my investigation of the relation of reading to the responsibilities of survivorhood is that—prior to the question of the nature and quality of readerly response—its understanding of writing as phantom imagery, and of the haunting of a reader to which such writing therefore gives rise, implies the very necessity of responsive reading. According to traditional understandings of the spectral, a ghostly visitation is one that, by virtue of the uncanny ability it demonstrates to cross the supposedly absolute boundaries assigned to death and to life, cannot be ignored. It makes not just a request of the living, whom it positions as survivors, but a demand. It requires of them that they attend.

The rhetoric of discretion, the spectral imagery, the thematics of thinness in Guibert—his haunted writing and his poetics of haunting—thus link with something fundamental about witnessing discourse in general and the witnessing of AIDS in particular, in that they define the responsibilities of survivorhood in terms of a requirement of response. But, when all is said and done, the response required by a haunt is less likely to imply enrichment than to entail the duties of mourning, and the question of the readerly attention that is due to phantom imagery tends to resolve, therefore, even in Guibert, into a question concerning the nature of mourning and the sense in which a reader might be said to be a mourner. A spectral vis-

Confronting It
itation is traditionally held to convey a demand that the soul of the departed be permitted to rest. But how does that square with the appeal for survival—that is, for a lengthy discursive afterlife—that, as we’ve seen, a text, as the site of its author’s death, makes on the reader? Can mourning, and can reading as mourning, ever be brought to resolution? Or is it, rather, that mourning and reading are necessarily processes both terminable and interminable, processes that defy resolution, therefore, given the contradictory desire that seems inherent in both: to lay the dead to rest but also to ensure their endless survival? It is questions such as these that, as I’ve said, one may expect to resurface as my investigation proceeds; they hover, wordlessly in one case but almost explicitly in the other, at the horizon of the scenarios of confrontation and survival that are readable in both Silverlake Life and Unbecoming. But they are already implicit in Guibert’s definition of writing, and of the writing of AIDS, as phantom image.