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Autofiction on Violence

The Ethics of Storytelling and the Symbolic Role of Language

This article explores the representation of violence in autofiction and its ethical implications. Through an analysis of Édouard Louis's autofiction, with additional references to contemporary Russian and French authors such as Christine Angot, Egana Jabbarova, Neige Sinno, and Oksana Vasyakina, the article examines how narratives mediate trauma and construct a "victim narrator." The study highlights the narrative tension between testimonial authenticity and ethical concerns over victimization. Special attention is given to the symbolic role of language in shaping trauma narratives, with a focus on indirect storytelling techniques. The case of *History of Violence* by Édouard Louis is analyzed to illustrate how autofictional narratives blur the boundaries between narrating 'I' and experiencing 'I,' reinforcing the narrator's vulnerability. The article argues that autofiction functions both as a form of literary resistance and as a space for negotiating the ethics of storytelling in the face of violence.

1. Introduction

In Oksana Vasyakina's autofiction *Wound* (2023 [2021]), the protagonist carries an urn with her mother's ashes from a small town on the Volga River to Siberia in order to bury her in her hometown. The journey home becomes a dual voyage: a physical one, involving movement through space, and a metaphysical one, allowing the protagonist to rethink her past and process the trauma of loss through writing. As she immerses herself in memories, she reconstructs the complex and traumatic relationship with her mother.

The narrative of this mourning journey is interwoven with references to other artistic, autobiographical, and theoretical texts, and the protagonist frequently engages in dialogue with feminist thinkers such as Louise Bourgeois, Hélène Cixous, and Susan Sontag. Additionally, the text contains embedded narratives that allow the protagonist to mediate and reinterpret her experience. In one chapter, she turns to the myth of Philomela, which becomes a kind of *mise en abyme* of her book. In this myth, Philomela, raped by Tereus and deprived of speech, finds a way to tell her sister Procne about the assault by weaving a tapestry that depicts what happened to her. By reinterpreting this myth through the lens of feminist theory, Vasyakina reflects on metamorphosis, violence, and, most importantly, language – the way it finds indirect modes of expression and bears witness to lived trauma, even after being silenced (284–287).

The myth of Philomela is an emblematic narrative in trauma studies, where one of the central questions remains the relationship between trauma and narrative. A major challenge in trauma theory is the issue of the representability of traumatic experience (Caruth 1996, Stampfl 2014). One productive way to address this problem is the hypothesis that, while direct articulation of trauma may be impossible – whether in an ontological or axiological sense – literature provides an indirect means of expressing it. Geoffrey Hartman, addressing this issue, presents the myth of Philomela as an analogy for indirect testimony about trauma. When ordinary language fails to convey traumatic experience, literature becomes capable of doing so – just as Philomela tells her story not through speech, but through an indirect mode of communication: her embroidery, which serves as a metaphor for art (Caruth / Hartman 1996, 641–642). Beyond its metaphorical significance in trauma studies, the myth of Philomela also serves as an illustration of violence and the possibility of overcoming it through literary practices. Vasyakina's text is one of many examples of contemporary autofictional literature that seeks to develop a language to articulate experiences of violence.

This article examines the problem of representing violence in autofiction. The central question is how autofiction about violence narratively engages with the ethical tension between processing trauma and avoiding accusation or re-traumatization and how it shapes narrative strategies. The study draws on texts from contemporary Russian and French autofiction. The article is structured into three parts. The first section, "On the Problem of Representing Violence in Autofiction," explores the theoretical and philosophical dimensions of violence representation, distinguishing it from trauma representation. The second section, "The Victim Narrator," delves into the ethical contexts that define the narrator's role in autofiction about violence, focusing on a specific type of autodiegesis. Finally, the third section, "Practices of Representing Violence," presents a case study of Édouard Louis's *History of Violence* (2018 [2016]), analyzing its narrative mechanisms and ethical implications.

2. On the Problem of Representing Violence in Autofiction

2.1. Representing Violence in Contemporary Culture

If our culture can be described as a "trauma culture" (Kaplan 2005), then it is also, to a significant extent, fascinated by representations of violence. The cultural interest in violence is primarily shaped by genre conventions. Thrillers, action films, horror, body horror, true crime, and detective fiction aestheticize and commercialize violence by presenting it in forms specific to their respective genres. Meanwhile, media and television mediate violence by shaping the news agenda – either to inform or to warn citizens of potential dangers. Documentary films and photography bear witness to violence, asserting its reality and offering viewers an opportunity for empathy or compassion.

Alongside traditional genres, new or hybrid genres – such as autofiction, exofiction, and docufiction – also engage with violence by blending different narrative conventions. This growing interest is linked to the contemporary cultural turn toward documentary practices. Whereas fiction once dominated representations of violence and documentary testimonies were pushed to the periphery (see Sontag 2004), today, genres that emphasize the authenticity of violent experiences have come to the forefront. Simultaneously, these genres explore experimental aesthetic strategies for representing violence. This shift – described by some critics as the "archival turn" and by others as the "documentary turn" – has been widely discussed in recent scholarship.[1] On the one hand, we see a departure from traditional modes of engaging with reality through investigative narratives, archival research, and documentary testimonies. On the other hand, literature continues to experiment with reality through aesthetic and narrative means. In doing so, it borrows techniques from fictional genres (such as unreliable narration), while also developing new strategies to represent nonfictional reality – including real acts of violence.

One of the central genres embodying this shift is *autofiction*. As a contemporary form of autobiography, autofiction borrows methods and techniques from the practices of the "documentary turn" – ranging from the transmission of authentic experience to the experimental use of media, particularly photography – thus establishing its own distinct rules of narrative representation. Autofiction about violence operates in a delicate balance between two forces: the desire to depict violence as a source of trauma (and to assume the testimonial function of bearing witness to lived experience) and the ethical frustration and anxiety surrounding the appropriation of the victim's status, as well as the designation of the aggressor as the perpetrator. Narrative representation thus becomes both a legitimization of testimony from the victim's perspective and an act of accusation and condemnation. This ambivalence is reflected at the level of narrative strategies.

In twentieth-century and twenty-first-century philosophy, multiple approaches were proposed to conceptualize the concept of violence. Philosophers have examined not only physical violence but also structural, symbolic, and institutional forms of violence. Violence is often analyzed as an inherent part of power relations. In her book *On Violence* (1970), Hannah Arendt distinguishes between violence and power. While power is a collective action based on consent and cooperation, violence is an instrumental means used when power has been lost. According to Arendt, violence is always instrumental – it is directed toward achieving specific goals but can never replace power itself. She also emphasizes that excessive reliance on violence ultimately leads to the destruction of power. Michel Foucault links violence to mechanisms of power, which manifest not only in physical forms but also through discursive practices. In his works, such as *Discipline and Punish* (1977 [1975]), he examines how power structures society through control, discipline, and punishment. Foucault argues that violence can be institutionalized and concealed, manifesting itself in educational, medical, legal, and other systems. René Girard, in *Violence and the Sacred* (2013 [1972]), highlights the connection between violence and mimetic desire. According to him, violence arises from rivalry and is resolved through sacrifice, which serves to stabilize society. In this process, the victim transforms from a fictional construct into a sacred figure, while new taboos and boundaries are established within society. However, violence itself remains continuous, and sacrifice exists as a mechanism to halt violence and maintain social order. Finally, Slavoj Žižek conceptualizes violence not only as an explicit physical act but also as a structural phenomenon. In his book *Violence* (2008), he distinguishes between "subjective violence," i.e., direct, visible acts of aggression; "objective violence," which is embedded within political and economic systems; and "symbolic violence," i.e., the violence of language and cultural norms.

One of the recurring ideas in the works of philosophers is the transition from overt forms of violence to concealed ones, characteristic of modern Western societies. René Girard (2013 [1972], 1986 [1982]), while deconstructing myths and rituals to reveal the structural mechanisms of ritualistic violence, simultaneously describes it as an exhausted and superseded phenomenon in the contemporary world. In our societies, the function of regulating violence is no longer performed by sacrifice but by the judicial system. However, real or subjective violence (Žižek) has not disappeared from our lives. First, military conflicts, totalitarian regimes, and repressive mechanisms continue to enact explicit acts of physical violence against individuals, despite the illusions of the late twentieth century. Second, violence persists at the interpersonal level as an intrinsic part of human relationships. Third, violence remains embedded within social structures, manifesting itself through gender, class, ethnic, and religious domination – wherever the principle of the 'crisis of differences' operates.

As the French writer Édouard Louis notes in his autofiction *Qui a tué mon père* (2018), the tragedy of his family stems from "male domination, hatred of homosexuality or transgender people, class domination, all forms of social and political oppression" ["la domination masculine, la haine de l'homosexualité ou des transgenres, la domination de classe, tous les phénomènes d'oppression sociale et politique."](Louis 2018 [2016], 11, translation mine). Real violence continues to shape social, psychological, and political reality, and its persistent presence in everyday life – despite the expectation that crises of subjective violence would be overcome and resolved in democratic societies – remains a source of frustration. This issue finds its reflection in the narrative experiments of autofiction.

2.2. Trauma vs. Violence in Autofiction

Autofiction is most commonly understood as a hybrid literary genre that blends factual and fictional elements in first-person narration (Gronemann 2019, 241;

Zipfel 2008 [2005]). Standard definitions emphasize its dual nature as both autobiographical and fictional, often referring to it as a "paradox" (Gronemann 2019) within traditional genre classifications. This hybridity is also marked by a particular narrative device – the use of the 'I' – which serves both as the author and a fictionalized character. However, contemporary autofiction frequently subverts even these basic characteristics: it may not always employ first-person narration (think of the work by Annie Ernaux or Olivia Laing), nor does it necessarily rely on *fictionalization* in any conventional sense. In practice, contemporary autofiction often privileges sincerity, authenticity, and affective truth over any formal commitment to genre boundaries.

For a long time, autofiction theory developed with the aim of explaining the genre's "hybrid nature" and its strategies for disrupting the "reader's pact."[2] However, in recent years, a growing gap has emerged between theory and practice: debates focused on autofiction's hybridity have increasingly failed to account for the genre's evolving capacity to engage with individual and collective trauma, cultural memory, and its function as a narrative practice of testimony. This shift in focus signals a broader reconceptualization of autofiction – not merely as a formal or genre-bending experiment, but as a mode of writing deeply entangled with processes of remembering and witnessing.

One way to address this paradox is to reconceptualize fiction as an integral part of autofiction. In this context, fiction serves less as an artistic device and more as a psychoanalytical tool; it becomes an instrument for working through personal memory and representing trauma (Muraveva 2023). Following Marjorie Worthington (2018, 127), fiction functions as a "membrane" between the author and the character, allowing the writer to maintain authenticity while simultaneously establishing a protective distance between experience and writing. Thus, autofiction enables the articulation of the inexpressible for the reliving and reworking of painful memories. In this genre, the primary criterion is not factual accuracy but the authenticity of emotions and experiences. As Catherine Cusset (2012, 2) emphasizes,

> [a]utofiction is not about factual accuracy, because writing sometimes requires a concentration of facts not to be repetitive and also because memory is not accurate. But the writer of autofiction has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible, and to go as far as possible in his/her quest for truth.

This pursuit of authenticity reflects the ethics of contemporary literature, where trauma and personal experience serve not only as the foundation of the narrative but also as its moral compass.

It appears that the connection between autofiction and trauma may also account for its recurring engagement with various forms of violence. Autofiction increasingly serves as a testimony to individual or collective trauma, liminal experiences, or acts of violence endured (see Dix 2023; Muraveva 2025). While the features of autobiographies/autofiction that depict traumatic experiences have been extensively studied,[3] autofiction about violence as a subgenre remains largely unexplored from the perspective of narrative theory. The specificity of autofiction about violence lies in the distribution of intersubjective relations between the victim and the perpetrator, which shape the narrative structure and establish a mode of indirect representation. In this mode, language is reinterpreted as a symbolic tool for resisting violence. However, the use of this tool also requires ethical boundaries.

If we reflect on the distinction between violence and trauma in autofiction, the key difference seems to lie in the agent structure and intentionality of the event. Unlike trauma, which can result from a variety of subjective or objective factors, violence predominantly presupposes an agent (intersubjective) structure within which it occurs. The subject experiencing or enduring violence is deprived of agency and freedom – often accompanied by physical, moral, or psychological harm or damage. However, violence always has an identifiable source. This source is directed toward the subject, which gives violence its intentional character.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955 [1920]), Sigmund Freud describes trauma as the result of a sudden and intense external stimulus that overwhelms the psyche's protective mechanisms. He notes that trauma occurs when external excitations are so powerful that they break through the mind's defensive barriers, depriving it of the ability to prevent an overload of stimuli and effectively process them. Freud accordingly defines trauma as a state caused by an unexpected and overwhelming external impact that breaches the psyche's defenses, leaving the individual unable to adequately cope with the resulting excitation. His emphasis is placed on the state of the individual's psyche rather than on the nature of the external stimulus itself (7–64).

The nature of violence, however, is fundamentally different. As René Girard (2013 [1972], 278) writes, the essential dimension of any crisis lies in its impact on human relationships. An initial external trigger sets off a process of "reciprocal violence," which then becomes self-sustaining and no longer requires external causes to continue. Thus, while Freud defines trauma as the breach of the psyche's protective barrier (which may be triggered by an external stimulus, though the key factor is the rupture of the mind's defense mechanisms rather than the stimulus itself), violence is externally localized in relation to the subject, is intentional, and is rooted both in human nature and social structures.[4]

The representation of violence, unlike trauma, is characterized by a reciprocity principle (Girard), which fuels society – whether through mechanisms of persecution or the phenomenon of blood revenge. Consequently, autofictional narratives about violence tend to depict a specific form of intersubjective relations, in which roles are distributed between subject and object, aggressor and victim, perpetrator and survivor, activity and passivity. In autofiction, the agentive structure of characters serves as an analogue to the social reality that generates violence.

2.3. Shock, Sensation, and Empathy in Autofiction

Genres based on lived experience require a fundamentally different reader response and employ distinct forms of violence representation, unlike those institutionalized in mass culture. As Susan Sontag (2004, 23) observes, "In a culture radically revamped by the ascendancy of mercantile values, to ask that images be jarring, clamorous, eye-opening seems like elementary realism as well as good business sense." At the same time, an image of violence that loudly asserts its authenticity amplifies its shock effect.

Reflecting on why violence has long remained a marginalized subject in academic research, Steve Choe (2022) argues that brutal and extreme material has been implicitly tabooed as an object of scholarly inquiry. This is largely due to the sensational and shocking effect that violence produces on audiences – whether through violent corporeality in contemporary French extreme cinema, Russian "chernukha" films, sexual abuse on digital platforms, or video games. These marginal narratives suggest that modern media environments are becoming increasingly dangerous and unpredictable in their dissemination of various forms of representational violence. Moreover, the 'sensational' effect of violence is significantly shaped by the media specificity through which it is conveyed.

However, media specificity is not the only factor at play. Alongside the ontological properties of certain media that amplify the sensational effect of violence, the explicit indication of its real nature further intensifies this effect. The audience's awareness that the depicted story of violence actually happened has a much stronger impact, evoking a more complex range of emotions. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Susan Sontag reflects on the affective power of documentary photographs that capture the horrors of war. Comparing them to paintings, she argues that it is precisely the ontological connection to the referent that provokes in viewers more complex, contradictory, and morally charged emotions:

> To shudder at Goltzius's rendering, in his etching *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588), of a man's face being chewed off his head is very different from shuddering at a photograph of a First World War veteran whose face has been shot away. One horror has its place in a complex subject – figures in a landscape – that displays the artist's skill of eye and hand. The other is a camera's record, from very near, of a real person's unspeakably awful mutilation; that and nothing else (41–42).

Sontag's reflections on the nature of photography leads her to the idea of a close relationship between documentary authenticity and ethical function. She argues that confidence in the non-staged nature of war photographs – such as those from the Vietnam War – was crucial to their "moral authority" (57).

Beyond research in photography studies, it is also worth considering findings from cognitive narratology and theory of mind, particularly those focused on reader empathy. These studies offer divergent perspectives on how we experience empathy depending on whether the target is fictional or real. However, some of their conclusions can be applied to the study of violence in narrative representations and the degree of its impact on readers.

Richard J. Gerrig, in his book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* (1993), explores how these experiences influence readers' perception of reality. He introduces the metaphor of "being transported," describing the process in which readers become immersed in a narrative, temporarily detaching from their immediate surroundings. Gerrig argues that readers can experience strong emotional reactions and empathy toward both real and fictional characters, provided that the narrative facilitates deep immersion. He emphasizes that the degree of empathy does not depend so much on whether a character is real or fictional, but rather on the text's ability to create a sense of presence within the narrative world, which is achieved through specific narrative techniques. In particular, Gerrig argues that empathy is connected to the structures that generate suspense (80–81), and that "it would be extremely unparsimonious to hypothesize different cognitive mechanisms underlying fictional and nonfictional […] suspense" (169).

Similarly, in her book *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), Lisa Zunshine examines how our ability to attribute mental states to others – known as "theory of mind" – influences our perception and understanding of literary works (see also Kidd / Castano 2018). She argues that reading fiction engages and enhances this cognitive ability, allowing us to better understand and empathize with characters, even when they are fictional. Zunshine emphasizes that by immersing themselves in the thoughts and emotions of fictional characters, readers train their ability to comprehend and interpret the mental states of real people in everyday life (Zunshine 2006, 16-26).

However, there are also opposing approaches that do not necessarily challenge the idea that we can empathize with fictional characters (an argument once criticized by Noël Carroll [2001], though later refuted [see Coplan 2004]). Instead, these perspectives offer a more nuanced view of empathy based on the ontological status of the subject. A study by Francesca De Vecchi and Francesca Forlè (2020) suggests that empathy toward real people is generally more vivid and intense compared to fictional characters. The authors argue that while both involve direct engagement with another's experience, the qualitative difference stems from the ontological status of real individuals. Similarly, Christiana Werner (2020) distinguishes between two modes of affect recognition: "perceptual affect of recognition (PAR)" and "affective affect recognition (AAR)." She asserts that when engaging with fictional characters, readers lack direct perceptual cues present in real-life interactions, which can lead to differences in the degree of empathetic involvement in a narrative. Thus, despite the widely accepted consensus that we can experience empathy toward fictional characters, contemporary research emphasizes that our empathetic responses toward real individuals tend to be more intense and profound.

Applying these arguments to the issue of representing fictional or real violence, we can argue that the degree of empathetic engagement in a narrative depends on two overlapping factors. First, it is shaped by the reader's awareness of whether the experience being depicted is fictional or authentic. Second, it is influenced by the narrative mode of representation, which determines the level of immersion the text creates. On the one hand, a disclaimer stating that a story is "based on real events" serves as an important signal, shaping the way we read a story or watch a film and preparing us for potential emotional risks. Narratives grounded in authentic experiences of violence, and incorporating them structurally, provoke a broader spectrum of emotions, including compassion and disgust, empathy and rejection, horror and pain. However, this does not only apply to affective states – watching the suffering of others or reading about violence also involves an ethical challenge. If we read a fictional account of violence, we may remain in the position of a voyeur, with the ethical justification being precisely our awareness that the story is fictional. Trauma scholars have noted that fiction serves as a kind of 'protective membrane,' helping writers convey unrepresentable experiences (see Gilmore 2001, Whitehead 2004, Worthington 2018). This also applies to readers, who may use fiction as a shield against the direct experience of violence. But is it ethically possible to remain a mere voyeur when reading the real testimonies of Gulag prisoners or Auschwitz survivors?

On the other hand, the narrative structure itself can enhance reader immersion, thereby increasing empathetic engagement. The rhetorical effects of techniques that encourage readers to sympathize with 'bad' characters have been extensively analyzed by narratologists (see Booth 1983 [1961], Phelan 2005). However, applying these techniques to a real-life account of violence, as often happens in autofiction, creates particularly problematic cases. As Neige Sinno asks: "Is creating beauty from horror not simply creating horror?" ["Faire de la beauté avec l'horreur, est-ce que ce n'est pas tout simplement faire de l'horreur ?"] (2023, 253; translation mine).

Perhaps one of the most radical experiments in this area was undertaken by the French writer Christine Angot in her autofiction *Une semaine de vacances* (2012). The text, which provoked a strong critical reaction, is about incest or, in Angot's own words, an attempt to take incest out of the category of an abstract concept and make it concrete. Some critics saw in this text a continuation of her novel *L'Inceste*, written thirteen years earlier. However, what in the first text was given half a hint, in the second text "unfolding in the present is a pure exercise in cruelty, whose stark description, occupying the entire duration of the book, is entirely self-sufficient" (Forest 2012, n. pag.). Indeed, in *Une semaine de vacances*, Angot uses the most concrete, visual techniques possible to tell the story of a father performing sexual acts with his fifteen-year-old daughter. Readers of Christine Angot's previous texts cannot help but recognize in these characters the writer herself and her father. Critics have already noted the "immersive nature" of the text (Jordan 2019, 11) and its "highly visual, almost cinematic nature" (13). The text is organized in such a way as to trigger, through the visuality of the descriptions of violent scenes, the very "perceptual recognition of affect" (PAR), as if we were peeping at the action, and thus stimulate empathic engagement with the narrative. However, in this autofiction, Angot uses a subversive strategy to criticize and condemn the violence described. Notably, the autofictional narrator in the text is presented in the third person ("she") and is deprived of a voice. This narrative choice serves as a deliberate replication of the domination described in the text at the level of narrative structure. What truly distinguishes this text, though, is its intentional overlap of the two criteria discussed earlier: the narrative strategy that ensures the reader's immersion in the depicted world and its authenticity, or its connection to the narrator's personal experience (despite being conveyed through a protagonist referred to in the third person). The intersection of these criteria confronts the reader with ethical responsibility: to resist the temptation of sensationalist sexual material, avoiding the unhealthy position of a voyeur, and instead to perceive it as a story of violence that took place in the real world.

Admittedly, the rhetorical approach adopted here represents a deviation from the dominant tendencies in autofiction, where authors typically eschew immersive effects and rely less on traditional narrative conventions. Instead, they employ narrative strategies that bring to the surface the author's ethical frustration and anxiety, as well as their uncertainty about how to narrate violence. Thus, practices of representing violence are often ambivalent. They may combine "shocking images" (Sontag 2004, 22–23) or immersive narrative structures with the ethical challenges they inherently contain. Stories of violence – however diverse they may be – can be told in different ways and become part of various representational systems, which, in turn, are shaped by ethical coordinates. As James Phelan (2005) observes, narrative representation influences how the audience interacts with a story cognitively, emotionally, physically, and ethically. He argues that a rhetorical approach to narrative analysis

> not only includes both form and ethics but also sees them as interconnected: the formal logic of character narration has consequences for our emotional responses to character narrators, and these emotional responses, in turn, have consequences for the ethical dimension of our engagement with them and with the narratives in which they appear (5).

This is particularly significant for examining how autofictional narratives represent violence and how narrative structure shapes cognitive, emotional, and ethical modes of engagement. To deepen this understanding, the next section of this article will address *the victim narrator* and its *ethical implications* in autofiction.

3. The Victim Narrator

3.1 Being a Victim and Talking About It

In the autofiction *Triste Tigre* by Neige Sinno (2023),[5] the narrator recounts the violence she endured at the hands of her stepfather throughout her childhood. She begins her story by attempting to construct a portrait of the perpetrator:

> Car à moi aussi, au fond, ce qui me semble le plus intéressant c'est ce qui se passe dans la tête du bourreau. Les victimes, c'est facile, on peut tous se mettre à leur place. […] Le bourreau, en revanche, c'est autre chose.

> [Because, deep down, what seems most interesting to me too is what happens in the executioner's mind. Victims are easy; we can all put ourselves in their place. […] The executioner, on the other hand, is something else.] (Sinno 2023, 9, translation mine)

However, this attempt at empathetic projection ultimately fails. Throughout the book, the narrator is unable to fully assume the perpetrator's position or place him at the center of the narrative. By the end, she reaches the following conclusion:

> Le héros de ce livre n'est donc pas le violeur. Comment écrire à sa place ? […] Le véritable héros, c'est l'héroïne, c'est encore moi, moi et les miens, des héros sans grande pompe, peut-être même des antihéros, qui défendent leur petit espace vital, ce qui leur reste de dignité.
>
> [The hero of this book is therefore not the rapist. How could I write in his place? […] The true hero is the heroine, it is still me, me and my own, heroes without grandiosity, perhaps even antiheroes, who defend their small vital space, what remains of their dignity.] (267, translation mine)

Similarly, in the autofiction *The Hands of the Women in My Family Were Not Meant for Writing* (2023) by Russian-speaking Azerbaijani writer Yegana Jabbarova, the central metaphor of the narrative revolves around the complex of the eternal victim. The story is told from the perspective of an autobiographical heroine who grows up in a patriarchal diaspora, where her female body absorbs the taboos and prohibitions imposed upon the collective female body of her family. Balancing between autobiography and mythopoetics, Jabbarova constructs a narrative in which the dominant voice is marked by the stereotype of victimhood, while simultaneously attempting to break free from it. This stereotype, rooted in religious consciousness, is reproduced from generation to generation within her family:

> Каждое обращение отсылало к древнему соглашению племени: qurban olum – *позволь мне стать твоей жертвой*. Когда-то племя решило, что любовь – это способность принести себя в жертву, оно решило, что отказ от собственного тела – гарантия благополучия членов общины, оно решило, что только нож, вонзенный в плоть, свидетельствует о любви. Слова не имели отношения к любви человеческой, они были нужны, чтобы демонстрировать свою любовь к Аллаху, Милостивому и Милосердному.
>
> [Each invocation referred to an ancient tribal agreement: qurban olum – *allow me to become your sacrifice*. Once, the tribe decided that love meant the ability to sacrifice oneself, that renouncing one's own body was the guarantee of the community's well-being, that only a knife plunged into flesh could serve as proof of love. These words had nothing to do with human love; they were meant to demonstrate devotion to Allah, the Most Gracious and Most Merciful.] (Jabbarova 2023, 34, emphasis and translation mine)

Finally, in Édouard Louis's autofiction *History of Violence* (2018 [2016]), which I analyze in the third part of this article, the narrator experiences violence and an attempted homicide, events that he later recounts to different people: his sister, his friends, and the two police officers conducting the interrogation. His interlocutors praise him for his bravery (*courage*), yet he disagrees: "the idea of bravery struck me as utterly out of place, as alien to that night" (11). The narrator is a vulnerable subject, and he constructs this position of vulnerability not only through lexical choices but also through narrative strategies.

These examples could be extended further – we have limited ourselves to only a few texts here. The autofictional subject is often marked by descriptors such as "victim," "vulnerable," "sensitive," "weak," "without grandiosity," and "antihero." In most cases, this is a subject who has undergone a traumatic experience or an experience of violence, and has lived through it as a victim. Thus, the autofictional narrator is a *victim narrator*. Why is this the case, and how does it shape the narrative strategies of representation?

A possible answer to this question is offered by the French historian François Azouvi. In his work *Du héros à la victime : la métamorphose contemporaine du sacré* (2024), he examines the post-secular "metamorphosis of the sacred," analyzing the ethical, social, and cultural consequences of this paradigm shift through its historical evolution. According to Azouvi, contemporary society has undergone a radical transformation of values: whereas the hero was once the dominant model and ideal, today the victim has taken center stage. Azouvi defines the beginning of this transformation in 1914, arguing that the outbreak of World War I marked the culmination of the heroic model (23). Historically, Western society venerated heroes, a tradition inherited from Greco-Roman culture and perpetuated through narratives of heroic lives. Christianity, while integrating the concept of the martyr as a sacrificial witness, represented a departure from classical heroic ideals. However, World War I was a turning point: the brutality of the conflict deeply undermined the heroic ideal, even though the concept of nationhood retained a certain level of prestige (23–48).

After World War II, the Holocaust played a central role in the "sacralization" of victims and the transformation of their status. Jewish victims of the Final Solution were the first to crystallize this shift. Literature played a particularly crucial role in this process. In post-Holocaust literary testimonies, an "ethics of vulnerability" emerged, sharply contrasting with the traditional morality of heroism (63–100).

Finally, Azouvi describes the emergence of a "society of victims," in which the status of the victim is both legally and ethically protected. This dynamic is fueled by the growing demand for the recognition of victims' rights, leading to an increase in claims to victimhood, which often compete with one another. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, expands the framework of victimhood (133–156).

Azouvi's concept of the historical transformation of the hero into the victim finds direct parallels in literature. A clear example of this is contemporary autofiction, where the narrator, unlike the narrator of classical autobiography, is a vulnerable subject. While the narrator of a classical autobiography adheres to traditional heroic morality, presenting their life as an exemplary model, the autofictional narrator aligns with the victim model, recounting their life from the perspective of a survivor of traumatic experiences. As Azouvi notes, the modern status of the victim is rooted in the ethics of care, which prioritizes vulnerability and empathy. Since autofiction largely inherits this ethical doxa, emphasizing attentiveness to the Other, its narrative practices likewise prioritize the representation of vulnerability – a concept that is, in turn, undergoing transformation in contemporary culture.

The concept of the "vulnerable subject" has been most thoroughly examined by G. Thomas Couser in his book *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (2004). According to Couser, vulnerable subjects are individuals at heightened risk of harm or exploitation due to their social, physical, or psychological circumstances. These vulnerabilities often stem from factors such as illness, disability, age, economic hardship, or lack of autonomy. However, Couser's approach emphasizes the Other, i.e., the subject about whom writers narrate in biographies or autobiographies. He insists that a writer's responsibility toward vulnerable subjects lies in ensuring that their representation is not exploitative or distorted.

In contemporary autofiction, however, it is the narrating subject themselves who becomes vulnerable. As Nancy Miller (2004, 159) points out, "When we expose the narratives of our lives to others through the forms of life writing, do we not all become vulnerable subjects?" (Miller 2004, 159). The autofictional narrator consequently embodies multiple ethical paradigms, which are inherently in conflict with one another. As a victim of violence, the narrator asserts their victimhood as a central element of their narrative. At the same time, being attuned to the ethical doxa of care for the Other, which emphasizes attentiveness and empathy, the narrator experiences ethical frustration when confronting perpetrators and agents of violence. Representing them as executioners would violate the principle of care for the Other and would require the narrator to adopt a position of active agency, aligning more closely with the heroic model rather than the victim model. This ethical conflict becomes a subject of reflection and narrative experimentation in autofiction. It is particularly evident in the structure of *autodiegesis,* specifically in the relationship between the *narrating 'I'* and the *experiencing 'I.'*

3.2. Narrating 'I' and Experiencing 'I'

I argue that the autofictional narrator is characterized by a distinct form of autodiegesis. In autofiction, the narrator reconfigures the relationship between the narrating 'I' and the experiencing 'I,' not by clearly separating them, but by deliberately collapsing their opposition (Stanzel 1986). While Stanzel's experiencing 'I' was initially conceptualized as a formal element of narrative typology, autofiction refunctionalizes it as an ethical and experiential mode, privileging immersion over narrative control. Through this narrative strategy, the narrator emphasizes the passive, affective dimension of subjectivity and the immediacy of re-lived experience.

Gérard Genette (1980 [1972], 245) introduces the term "autodiegetic" to describe a narrator who is also the protagonist of the story. This structural position, however, entails a temporal and perspectival split between the narrating self and the self as character – what postclassical narratology refines as the distinction between narrator and experiencer. In Genette's classical model, the narrating 'I' possesses relative stability and authority, functioning as the organizing subject of the narrative, while the narrated 'I' appears as a character, temporally distanced and subjected to interpretation.

As Martin Löschnigg (2010; 2019) points out, this opposition was developed by Genette primarily in relation to homodiegetic fictional texts and reflects the retrospective logic of traditional autobiography. However, he argues that this structuralist split ultimately weakens the unity of experience as embodied in autobiographical writing. Instead of emphasizing the duality of narrator and experiencer, it may be more appropriate, especially in autofiction, to regard the autobiographical act as an experiential site – a re-living of experience rather than an interpretation of the self as object. As Löschnigg writes:

> Instead of emphasizing the duality of narrator and experiencer, it might be more appropriate to regard the autobiographical act as an experiential site, as a re-living of experience rather than as an attempt by a detached subject to interpret itself as object. This is because autobiography, as has been indicated at the beginning, may no longer be viewed in terms of a retrospective rendering of an already formed self, but should best be regarded as an act of identity-construction. (2010, 259)

However, while for Löschnigg the reconceptualization of autodiegesis and the transformation of the opposition between the narrating 'I' and the narrated 'I' are part of a methodological approach linked to the development of cognitive studies within postclassical narratology (Fludernik 1996, Caracciolo 2014), it can also be argued that this transformation is what distinguishes classical autobiography from autofiction.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, autobiography has been governed by strict genre conventions and a specific narrative structure. It is an autodiegetic first-person narrative based on the narrator's memory work as its fundamental semantic principle (Schwalm 2014). The twentieth century, however, significantly altered approaches to the representation of autobiographical material. Unlike classical autobiography, autofiction gravitates toward an unfinished representation of experience. It constructs the identity of a subject who relives and processes their traumatic experience through the act of writing. While the narrator of classical autobiography maintains control over the narrated 'I' – much like a narrator exerts power over a character – autofiction collapses this distinction. The autofictional narrator blurs the boundary between narrating and experiencing 'I,' favoring an enunciative mode that re-enacts perception rather than interprets it.

Similarly, James Phelan (2005), in his analysis of Kathryn Harrison's memoir *The Kiss* (1997), describes a "dual focalization […] in which the narrating-I's perception includes the experiencing-I's perception, and, indeed, in which the experiencing-I's perception is foregrounded" (137). This principle has since become highly productive for a wide range of autofictional texts, in which the narrator re-experiences past events in the present moment through the act of writing. A similar privileging of the experiencing self has been observed in nonfictional trauma narratives. As shown in a study of women's testimonies of trauma (Kowalska et al. 2022), narratives that center on the immediacy of perception and fragmented memory often suppress the stable, organizing function of the narrating self in favor of raw experiential presence. This narrative configuration, even in nonfiction, reflects the same epistemological shift seen in autofiction: the emphasis on reliving over retrospective meaning-making (see Kowalska et al. 2022).

In autofiction about violence, this type of narrator aligns with ethical imperatives for representing vulnerability and sensitivity. At the same time, such a narrator struggles with representing the Other and with granting subjectivity to the aggressor, perpetrator, or executioner. The dynamics of intersubjective relations and their ethical limits are explored in further detail through a specific case study in the third part of this article.

4. Practices of Representing Violence in Autofiction: Edouard Louis's History of Violence (2018 [2016])

In 2016, the French writer Édouard Louis published the autobiographical text *History of Violence* [*Histoire de la violence*]. Critics have interpreted this work as the second part of a diptych on social transgression (Blanckeman 2017, Delodder 2021). As in his first novel, *The End of Eddy* [*En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014)], Louis addresses questions of social, class, and sexual identity. However, unlike his first autofiction, which largely follows the coming-of-age novel tradition, this second text is a narrative of trauma – a way of both processing and overcoming it. Although emblematic for this study, *History of violence* will be examined here in isolation from the first part of the diptych, despite some critics considering Louis's first two autobiographical texts to form "a single novel" with the same central protagonist.

History of violence focuses on a single traumatic event. Returning home after spending Christmas Eve with friends, the narrator meets a man named Reda on the street, and they go back to Edouard's apartment. After spending some time together, Reda attempts to steal Édouard's phone and iPad and then, at gunpoint, commits an act of sexualized violence. After Reda leaves, the narrator recounts the event to several people: his sister, two police officers, his friends, and a colleague at a café. These stories overlap, distort one another, and reveal disruptions and contradictions within themselves. Moreover, these multiple narratives of violence no longer belong exclusively to the narrator. Violence spreads through the discursive fabric of the novel, expanding in unexpected ways. The core of the novel is not simply the event itself, but rather the layers of its variations and interpretations. What, then, is this text? A way of approaching the reality of violence? A means of reliving it through the narrative act? Or a gesture of appropriating a lived experience?

"Everything in this book becomes violence," writes Bruno Blanckeman (2017, 155) in his essay on Édouard Louis's autofiction. Indeed, the narrative communication in *History of violence* is structured in a particular way: it amplifies and underscores the violent dynamics between subjects. The text incorporates multiple voices that recount the same story. First, there is the autobiographical narrator's account of the violence, but his voice is not dominant. Instead, he adds or clarifies certain episodes or details rather than asserting full control over the narrative. The second voice, which is equally significant, belongs to his sister. While staying at her home, the narrator hides behind a door and eavesdrops on her conversation with her husband. The sister retells the story of the violence that happened to her brother, which she herself learned from Édouard. Thus, the narrator receives his own story 'second-hand,' filtered through another voice and in a distorted form.

This double mediation has, above all, an ethical function: it relieves the narrator of the responsibility of being the primary narrative authority. Instead of narrating, he eavesdrops and makes mental comments on what he hears. The text begins with the words:

> Je suis caché de l'autre côté de la porte, je l'écoute, elle dit que quelques heures après ce que la copie de la plainte que je garde pliée en quatre dans un tiroir appelle la tentative d'homicide, et que je continue d'appeler comme ça, faute d'autre mot, parce qu'il n'y a pas de terme plus approprié à ce qui est arrivé et qu'à cause de ça je traîne la sensation pénible et désagréable qu'aussitôt énoncée, par moi ou n'importe qui d'autre, mon histoire est falsifiée, je suis sorti de chez moi et j'ai descendu l'escalier. (Louis 2016, 7)

> I am hidden on the other side of the door, I listen, and she says that several hours after what the copy of the report I keep twice-folded in my drawer calls the *attempted homicide*, and which I call the same thing for lack of a better word, since no other term is more appropriate for what happened, which means I always have the anxious nagging feeling that my story, whether told by me or whomever else, begins with a falsehood, I left my apartment and went downstairs. (Louis 2018 [2016], 1)

The discursive scenography of this text is structured in such a way that the entire story of violence "grows" out of a static scene, taking shape through interwoven, overlapping voices. A scene implies a performance, and indeed, the story told by Édouard bears performative traits. The narrative gravitates toward the performative, toward being re-enacted here and now. The desire to structure the narrative as a performance corresponds to the traumatic nature of writing: the narrative acts out the experienced event again and again, spreading across the text without leading to catharsis or resolution. The narrator admits that his story – both repelling and compelling – holds power over him, and he has no desire to relinquish it:

> Elle ne pourra jamais comprendre que mon histoire est à la fois ce à quoi je tiens le plus et ce qui me paraît le plus éloigné et le plus étranger à ce que je suis, qu'à la fois je la serre de toutes mes forces contre ma poitrine de peur qu'on vienne me l'arracher mais que je ne ressens que du dégoût, le plus profond dégout si on s'approche de moi pour me susurrer qu'elle m'appartient, qu'aussitôt qu'on me la rappelle ie voudrais la jeter dans la poussière et m'éloigner. (Louis 2016, 184–185)

> She will never understand that, as much as I cling to my story, it is also the thing that seems furthest from me and the most foreign to what I am; she can't understand that I clutch it to me for fear it will be taken away, but that all I feel is disgust, the deepest disgust, if someone comes to me and whispers that it's mine; the moment they remind me, I want to cast it into the dust and leave it behind. (Louis 2018 [2016], 155–156)

Apart from the voices of the narrator and his sister, the text also includes the voices of other characters involved in the story of violence. All of them exert an influence on the narrator. Unintentionally, they limit his freedom and retraumatize him. For example, the narrator's closest friends, Didier and Geoffroy, pressure him to go to the police and report Reda, who committed the act of violence. Édouard does not want to go to the police because, on the one hand, he fears retaliation (178), and on the other hand, he is afraid of taking responsibility for Reda being sent to prison. Ultimately, he compares his friends to Reda, practically equating them as agents of violence:

> Didier et Geoffroy, ils n'étaient plus ces deux personnes qui m'avaient sauvé la vie tellement de fois, ils n'étaient plus, et je pensais: *Ils sont comme Reda. Ils sont Reda. Si Reda est le nom du moment où tu as dû vivre ce que tu ne voulais pas vivre, si Reda est le nom de la privation, du silence, de ton absence, le nom de l'instant où tu as dû faire ce que tu ne voulais pas faire où tu as dû traverser ce que tu ne voulais pas traverser être ce que tu ne voulais pas être alors tu as beau chercher, j'ai pensé: J'ai beau chercher je ne vois pas la différence, je ne vois rien d'autre, ils prolongent Reda, ils sont Reda.* (Louis 2016, 189; italics in the original)

> They were no longer Didier and Geoffroy, they were no longer the two people who had saved my life so many times; those two had ceased to exist, and I thought: *They're just like Reda. They are Reda. If Reda is a name for the moment when you had to endure what you never wanted to endure, if Reda is a name for deprivation, for silence, for your disappearance, if Reda is a name for the time when you had to do what you never wanted to do, to cross a line you never wanted to cross, to be what you never wanted to be, then you don't see the difference, try as you might, I thought, I don't see the difference, try as I might, they are only extensions of Reda, they are Reda.* (Louis 2018 [2016], 159–160; italics in the original)

In the quoted passage, the definition of the perpetrator draws attention: Reda becomes more than just a person. He becomes "*the name for the moment*," etc. His name takes on a symbolic role in defining violence in all its forms, marking the inexpressible traumatic experience. Moreover, the text includes the voices of the police officers, who are not prepared to accept the story as Édouard presents it:

> L'agent de police voulait à peine y croire […] il ne pouvait pas penser que c'était la fin de l'histoire, la fin ne pouvait pas être aussi plate, pas aussi anecdotique et aussi décevante et il a dit: « Ensuite? » comme s'il devait à tout prix y avoir une suite. (Louis 2016, 160–161)

> The policeman could hardly believe it […] he couldn't believe that was the end of the story; the end couldn't be so flat, so anticlimactic and disappointing, and he asked me, 'What happened then?' as if there had to be something more. (Louis 2018 [2016], 133)

This heteroglossia[6] becomes an ethically marked element of the narrative. Certainly, literature provides examples of polyphonic narration, as well as texts that create a counterpoint by having the same story told by different characters. However, this technique is generally uncharacteristic of either autobiography or autofiction. On the contrary, these genres are typically dominated by the narrating 'I.' The choice in favor of heteroglossia underscores the ethical and political aims of Louis's autofiction about violence – his attempt to imbue the narrator with victimhood and vulnerability.

The text is permeated with a metareflexive approach to storytelling. The central problem of the text is the impossibility of symmetrical relations between experience and narrative. To tell a story about violence is to distort it, and this inevitably leads to the multiplication of violence. Édouard states:

> C'est faux, c'est faux, il sait que c'est faux et ils veulent t'enfermer dans une histoire qui n'est pas la tienne, ils veulent te faire porter une histoire que tu n'as pas voulue, ce n'est pas ton histoire, et c'est ça qu'il te disent depuis tout à l'heure, c'est ça, c'est ce qu'ils te répètent: porter plainte, ils veulent que tu la portes, que tu portes la plainte sur ton dos et tant pis si je marche courbé pendant des mois, tant pis si je m'en brise le squelette, tant pis si l'histoire est trop lourde et qu'elle m'écrase les côtes, qu'elle me fissure la peau, qu'elle me rompt des articulations, qu'elle me compresse les organes. (Louis 2016, 188)

> That's not true and he knows it, they want to lock you up inside a story that's not your own, they want you to carry around a story you never asked to have, it's not your story, and that's what they've been telling you since you sat down, that's what they keep saying: file a report, because that's what they want, they want you to bear witness, they want you to bear it on your back and if you spend a few months bent double under its weight, tough luck for you, tough luck if it breaks your bones, tough luck if this story is too much to bear, tough luck if it cracks my ribs, splits my skin, tears my joints, and crushes the organs inside me. (Louis 2018 [2016], 159)

The narrator embodies the classic image of a victim: he comes from an underprivileged social background, having spent his childhood in Picardy under rigid class structures and traditional values that shaped a closed, aggressive environment. As a homosexual, he faced homophobia from an early age, making him vulnerable to various forms of violence – not only physical but also social, psychological, and political. In this sense, his story is not merely an individual case but takes on a broader, structural dimension. Violence here is not just an isolated act but a symptom of a deeper social reality in which oppression is embedded within economic and cultural mechanisms. This is precisely what Louis addresses as an *écrivain engagé*: his autofictional works do not merely recount personal stories but serve as a critique of the system, exposing class, gender, and sexual forms of oppression.

Violence in autofiction ripples outward, permeating different levels of experience and interpretation. It manifests not only as a physical act but also as coercion to narrate, as social and psychological aggression. At the core of the story lies a real act of violence – Reda's assault on Christmas night. However, this moment becomes merely the starting point for a complex chain of meanings and interpretations.

The ritualistic dimension amplifies the symbolic significance of the event. The violence occurs on Christmas Eve, a key holiday associated with birth, renewal, and the possibility of salvation. Yet, when a psychiatrist interprets the protagonist's story, he tells him that he has experienced a *petite mort* – a "little death." In this statement, Christmas night no longer carries hope but instead becomes a point of destruction. However, for the narrator himself, the experience of violence is a rite of passage, a symbolic sacrifice that leads to his rebirth and transformation as a subject.

This metamorphosis is largely achieved through Louis's use of a distinctive type of autodiegesis: the experiencing 'I' dominates over the narrating 'I.' The narrator does not maintain a stable position in relation to his own story – he *lives* through it (in the most literal sense) in the process of telling it, which escapes his control. Let us examine a concrete example of how this is realized in the narrative:[7]

> Je ne reconnaissais plus ce que je disais. Je ne reconnaissais plus mes propres souvenirs quand je les racontais; les deux policiers me posaient des questions qui me contraignaient à exposer la nuit avec Reda autrement que je l'aurais voulu et je ne reconnaissais plus ce que j'avais vécu dans la forme qu'ils imposaient à mon récit, je me perdais, je savais qu'une fois avancé dans ce récit, par ce qu'ils me demandaient ou par les directions qu'ils me faisaient prendre, il était trop tard pour revenir en arrière, ce que j'aurais voulu dire était perdu, je sentais que si une chose n'était pas dite au moment où elle devait l'être elle disparaissait, sans possibilité de retour, irréversiblement, la vérité s'éloignait, s'échappait, je sentais que chaque parole prononcée devant la police rendait d'autres paroles impossibles l'instant d'après et pour toujours, je comprenais qu'il y avait certaines scènes, certaines choses qu'il ne fallait pas dire pour me souvenir de tout, qu'on ne peut se souvenir qu'en oubliant, et que si la police me forçait à me souvenir de ces choses-là alors c'était tout que j'oublierais. (Louis 2016, 99–100).
>
> I no longer recognised what I was saying. I no longer recognised my own memories, when I spoke them out loud; the questions I was being asked by the police made me describe my night with Reda differently than I'd have chosen, and in the form that they imposed on my account, I no longer recognised the outlines of my own experience, I was lost, I knew that once I went forward with the story, according to their cues and directions, I couldn't take it back, and I'd have lost what I wanted to say; I felt that once the right moment to say something passes, it disappears for good and can never be retrieved, the truth slips away and out of reach; I felt that whenever I spoke a word in front of the police, other words became impossible, now and forever; I understood that there were certain scenes, certain things, I must never discuss if I wanted to remember all that had actually happened; I understood that the only way to remember was to forget, and that if the police forced me to talk about those things, it would mean forgetting everything. (Louis 2018 [2016], 82–83)

In this excerpt, the experiencing 'I' dominates over the narrating 'I' through a series of narrative and linguistic techniques that create the effect of directly living through the experience rather than reflecting on it. First, this effect is achieved through the choice of temporal perspective. The passage is written in the *imparfait* tense, which creates a sense of prolonged, almost viscous experience in which the protagonist's consciousness becomes entangled and lost. Instead of a clear retrospective structure (which is characteristic of the narrating 'I'), there is an effect of an extended present, in which the past is not distantly analyzed but continues to be relived in the now. The repetition of "je ne reconnaissais plus" highlights the process of losing control over memories rather than retrospectively understanding what has happened. Second, the passage is dominated by a focus on bodily and mental sensations. Feeling, rather than understanding, plays a key role. The narrating 'I' typically analyzes and reflects, whereas the experiencing 'I' undergoes events in real time. The narrator does not examine events through the lens of past experience but instead sinks into his current emotional state – he becomes lost in memories and feels the irreversibility of losing control over his lived experience (e.g., "Je me perdais" and "Je sentais que chaque parole prononcée devant la police rendait d'autres paroles impossibles l'instant d'après et pour toujours"). Third, the syntactic structure of the text mimics the narrator's disorientation: sentences become long, break off at key moments, and create an effect of being unable to pin down thoughts ("Je savais qu'une fois avancé dans ce récit, par ce qu'ils me demandaient ou par les directions qu'ils me faisaient prendre, il était trop tard pour revenir en arrière, ce que j'aurais voulu dire était perdu."). The rhythm of the text heightens the sense of panic and helplessness. Finally, the narrator encounters the fact that language is not merely a tool for remembering but also a means of erasure. The police force him to frame his story within specific constraints, distorting the essence of his lived experience ("Je comprenais qu'il y avait certaines scènes, certaines choses qu'il ne fallait pas dire pour me souvenir de tout, qu'on ne peut se souvenir qu'en oubliant."). Thus, this excerpt illustrates that the narrator is not merely recounting the past but instead reproducing the process of losing control over his lived experience in real time. This makes the experiencing 'I' the dominant component of the autodiegetic narration.

At the level of language and narration, violence manifests itself through coercion to speak. The police, conducting their interrogation, expect a convenient and comprehensible version of events. The psychiatrist translates the protagonist's personal experience into professional terminology. The narrator, for his part, is not entirely passive – he monopolizes speech (35), appropriates the stories of others, interprets them, and imbues them with fictional dimensions. However, perhaps the most significant exception is Reda himself. As the source of violence in the story, he is the only character deprived of a voice in the narration. His story is always interpreted by someone else, sometimes even through imagined scenes that may not have happened at all (for example, the narrator envisions an episode from Reda's school childhood, which in reality happened not to him, but to the narrator's cousin).

The ethical question of the appropriation of experience in autofiction remains open. Who owns a story? How can someone convey another person's experience without appropriating it? In one of his interviews, Louis states:

> I don't believe in the idea of appropriation because I don't believe in property. […] But symbolic goods, such as language, don't work the same way that money or land do. If I take fifty euros from you, or if I take your land, you don't have it anymore. But if I take your story, you still have it. (Louis 2024, n. pag.)

Nevertheless, this leftist idea collides with the reality of narration: language always defines the boundaries of what can be expressed, and, consequently, who is allowed to speak and be heard. The narrative features an effect of a 'floating relay,' where the right to speak constantly shifts from one character to another. The narrator, his sister, the police officers, the psychiatrist – each interprets the event in their own way, yet among these voices, Reda's is absent.

How can the problem of appropriation be addressed? One possible solution is the rejection of a linear, unambiguous narrative. This is precisely what the protagonist does: his storytelling is complex, contradictory, and digressive. He gives space to other voices while simultaneously intruding upon them. The story becomes a space of mutual entanglement, yet it never loses its asymmetry: ultimately, someone is always left outside the narrative.

Can it be said that Reda's absence of voice is a form of symbolic retribution within the act of narration? Perhaps. However, in the end, the narrator himself is not only the bearer of the story but also its prisoner. The more he tells, the more he becomes entangled in an endless process of interpretations – interpretations that not only distort meaning but also multiply the cycles of violence.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how autofictional narratives engage with traumatic experience, developing indirect ways of speaking about violence and employing specific narrative strategies. Autofiction enables an articulation of violence that balances authenticity with artistic mediation, navigating the tension between documenting victimhood and the ethical challenges of appropriating it. Language plays a crucial role as a symbolic tool in the struggle against violence. In contemporary autofictional texts, the narrator consciously constructs themselves as a vulnerable subject, reflecting broader cultural and social shifts that prioritize the victim over the hero. To achieve this, autofiction often employs a distinctive structure of autodiegesis, where the experiencing 'I' displaces the narrating 'I.'

Ultimately, autofiction about violence navigates a complex web of ethical dilemmas. How can one speak of trauma without perpetuating violence? How can authenticity be preserved without veering into sensationalism? How can the self be constructed in writing without either accusing the Other or appropriating another's experience? These narratives do not provide definitive answers but instead open up a space for critical reflection. By foregrounding the tension between testimony and interpretation, vulnerability and agency, autofiction not only bears witness to violence but also interrogates the very act of narration itself. In doing so, it compels both the narrator and the reader to confront the ethical stakes of storytelling.

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[1] See Foster 2004; Ruffel 2012; Samoyault 2012; and Zenetti 2014, 2017.

[2] See, e.g., Lejeune 1975; Colonna 1989; Darrieussecq 1996; and Gasparini 2004, 2008, 2016.

[3] See Gasparini 2004, 2008, 2016; Gilmore 2001; and Worthington 2018.

[4] Comparing the ideas of Freud and Girard presents certain challenges, given the French philosopher's critical stance toward Freudian theory. In particular, Girard argues that Freud fails to account for the complexities of mimetic desire, and contests his interpretation of myths. However, in the context of analyzing the symptoms and manifestations of violence, as well as their relationship to the narrative structure of autofiction, it is productive to examine Freud's concept of trauma alongside Girard's concept of violence, while remaining mindful of the theoretical assumptions involved.

[5] *Triste Tigre* by Neige Sinno was published in 2023 by P.O.L. and received numerous awards, including Prix Goncourt des lycéens 2023, Prix Femina 2023, Prix littéraire Le Monde 2023, Prix Les Inrockuptibles 2023.

[6] Heteroglossia is a concept developed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin to describe the multiplicity and social diversity of languages, registers, and discourses that a speaking individual actually uses. In this view, language is understood not as an abstract system of norms, but as a dynamic collection of speech practices that are historically shaped and tied to various social groups, ideologies, and power structures (see Bakhtin 1981 [1934/35], Tjupa 2013, §1).

[7] For the purposes of analysis, I examine this example in both its original and translated versions.