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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY BETWEEN TEXT AND
IMAGE**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 0.1. The discovery of the « self »: between portrait and posture
- 0.2. Aims and objectives of the research
- 0.3. Methodological approach
- 0.4. Selected corpus and structure of the thesis

PART ONE CRITICAL MIRRORS TO AUTOBIOGRAPHY THE RHETORICS OF OBJECTIVITY

INTERMEDIARY INTRODUCTION

I. INSTITUTIONNALISATION OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GENRE

- 1. Questions of terminology
- 2. Ripostes and omissions
 - 2.1. Creative ripostes
 - 2.2. Critical ripostes
 - 2.3. Alternative Terms
- 3. Exploratory Genres
 - 3.1. The theoretical autobiography
 - 3.2. The undecidable narrative
 - 3.2.1. Intertextual undecidability
 - 3.2.2. An autobiography of the text?
 - 3.3. The non-literary autobiography

II. AT THE LIMITS OF LITERATURE

- 1. Image and iconotext
- 2. From page to screen: the mediamorphosis of autobiography
- 3. Photography and writing
- 4. Representations of time and absence

III. GENERIC HYBRIDATIONS

- 1. Narratological perspectives to film and literature
- 2. The language of images
- 3. Literature and cinema
- 4. *Homo cathodicus*
 - 4.1. Contracts of visual representation
 - 4.2. The image of the author in the media
- 5. From posture to authorial iconography
 - 5.1. Media postures
 - 5.2. The technical device
 - 5.3. Autobiography in the age of intermediality

INTERMEDIARY CONCLUSION

PART TWO
SELF-REFLEXIVE POSTURES AND IMPOSTURES
THE POETICS OF SUBJECTIVITY

INTERMEDIARY INTRODUCTION

I. MODES OF (SELF-) WRITING AND (SELF-) TELLING

1. *Les Mots* and the posture project

- 1.1. The dismissal of literature
- 1.2. The body of language
- 1.3. The linguistic being
- 1.4. Taming the language - plagiarism and writing

2. From the body to the body of works

- 2.1. The mythical body
- 2.2. The body of stone
- 2.3. The body metamorphosis
- 2.4. Intertextual mimodramas

3. Marguerite Yourcenar and the labyrinth of the work

- 3.1. The “self” under construction
 - 3.1.1. The “I” with no intermediary
 - 3.1.2. Spectral presences
- 3.2. The immobile reflection
 - 3.2.1. Photo(bio)graphic postures in *Le Labyrinthe du Monde*
 - 3.2.2. From the funerary mask to the neutral voice
 - 3.2.3. The author behind the camera
 - 3.2.4. The photographic portrait – mirror of a “self” without the “I”
- 3.3. The mobile reflection
 - 3.3.1. The intermediaries of the “self”
 - 3.3.2. From page to screen
 - 3.3.3. The impossible disclosure

II. DECONSTRUCTING THE WRITING, CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE

1. I by myself

- 1.1. Trading the game
- 1.2. The image before the text
- 1.3. Photographic readings

2. The specular device

- 2.1. Book covers and the autobiographical pact
- 2.2. The drafts of the self – graphic fictions
- 2.3. Pseudo-graphy
- 2.4. A conceptual autobiography?

3. I by my other self

- 3.1. The law of the confession
- 3.2. The deconstruction of the page and the multiplication of readings

4. (This will (not) (have) be(en) Derrida)

- 4.1. A confession in multiple voices
- 4.2. The secret name and the bodyproof image

III. THE OTHER SIGHT

1. The transgression of the genres

- 1.1. Writing against the others
- 1.2. A plural artistic practice
- 1.3. Hervé Guibert's imaginary museum

2. The pictures of the work

- 2.1. Snapshots of writing
- 2.2. Supplying the reader with « imaginary scissors »

INTERMEDIARY CONCLUSION

**PART THREE
BEYOND THE MIRRORS
THE INTERMEDIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SPACE**

INTERMEDIARY INTRODUCTION

I. REINVENTING THE SPECULUM – UNCROPPING AND ECHOLALIA

1. On the edge of the in-between: intermediality and hybrid identities

- 2. Sartrean transfigurations: from the author to the intellectual
 - 2.1. The trajectory of the intellectual
 - 2.2. From one autobiography to another

3. *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* – the film as an intermedial corpus

- 3.1. The film and the pursuit of legitimacy
- 3.2. The page as a film surface
- 3.3. The film as a photographic surface

4. How to film the spectre?

- 4.1. Autobiography in the mirror of generic stratagems
- 4.2. Construction and editing
- 4.3. (D)enouncing the device
- 4.4. Spectres and archives on display

II. THE INTERMEDIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1. The return of the Author

2. Text and image – reversed hard lines

3. The transitive work

INTERMEDIARY CONCLUSION

GENERAL CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX

GLOSSARY

INDEX TERMS

INDEX OF CITED AUTHORS

Key words: *intermediality, transposition, photography, cinema, media, self-figuration, self-representation, self-narrative, interview, visual pact, literary posture, iconography of the writer, literary institution, legitimization, signature, sight, face, screen, mirror, projection, deconstruction, spectralization.*

1. Argument

During the second half of the 20th century, after the death of the Author and the iconoclastic drifts of structuralism and semiotics, a new “self” emerges at the core of literature. The decomposed subject, founded on fragments and pieces gravitating around language and writing, relinquishes its claim of the plenitudinary and consistent rousseauist self. In the works concerned by our research the authors are more inclined to transcribe the remains of a past preserved solely at the outskirts of memory or to voice the disjointed reflections of their inner life. The myth of the total adhesion of the self to the self is progressively relegated as authors break the cycle of the centuries long literary and philosophical tradition attached to self-representation. As chiselled as it may seem, the autobiographical writing of Jean-Paul Sartre, Marguerite Yourcenar, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Hervé Guibert produce formal and generic mutations that are unaccommodated for by the austere architecture of the autobiographic model as proposed by Philippe Lejeune. At the same time, photography, cinema and the media become new spheres of self-figuration likely to federate the dispersed images of the self. In response, the institutional field, designed to provide legitimacy, governed by isomorphic logics and competition dynamics showed little if no tolerance for these emerging areas that challenged the autobiographic canon. Consequently, the set of questions formulated by our thesis confronts this precise moment of juncture of the textual and visual self-figuration modes.

2. Aims and objectives of the research

It has been our main objective to re-evaluate the relationships between literature, photography and cinema in the specific case of autobiography and to question the theoretical and generic

delimitations that are commonly assigned to this particular subject matter. Firstly, we focused on the transition of the literary autobiographical discourse towards the sphere of the media and on the impact of this visual turn and, secondly, we addressed the issue of medium transformations of a work of art, be it textual or visual. Moreover, we investigated the mutations in broadcast and audience reception formulas largely affecting both the status of the Author, of the narrator and that of the subject and the diversification of self-representation mechanisms. We attempted to confront the increasingly limitative autobiographic theory consecrated by Lejeune during 70's, to expand its coverage and draw a more comprehensive vision on autobiography, no longer conceived as a unique and monolithic set of works compelled to the area of literature but rather as an intermedial corpus situated at the intersection of text and image.

In our discussion on autobiography, we argue that the centrality of the image is key to any evaluation of the contemporary autobiographical practices. Thus, we paid special attention to phenomena like heterogenericity, transfer and transposition and we analysed their implicit effects on the literary field. Also, we have called into question the traditional postulates referring to the creative act and to its reception and we emphasized the necessity of a new hermeneutic frame likely to replace the logocentric ascendancy of literature and to acknowledge the agency of a new space of tensions: the intermedia.

3. Methodological approach

Situated at the junction of text and image analysis, our research transcends a single-discipline perspective and corroborates methods pertaining to film historicisation and the cinematographic “ontological theory”¹, to the Bourdieusian “theory of the literary fields”² and converges on practical frames and theoretical solutions developed by interdisciplinarity studies. In order to illustrate our arguments more pertinently we recurred to the critical tools of narratology, of media and cinema studies. Such an integrated approach highlighted the genuineness of our demonstration and it has helped us provide ample evidence and shed sharper insight on the issue of a transgeneric and intermedial autobiography.

¹Francesco Casetti, *Théories du cinéma depuis 1945*, translated by Sophie Saffi, Paris, Fernand Nathan, 1999.

² Pierre Bourdieu (ed.), *Les Règles de l'art, Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, « Essais », 1998.

4. Presentation of the thesis

The authors included in the corpus of our thesis are all widely known for publishing volumes of autobiographies and also for having partially transposed their autobiographical work under the form of filmic or photographic oeuvres: in 1964 Jean-Paul Sartre publishes *Les Mots*³ and one decade later, he features in the movie *Sartre par lui-même*⁴, directed by Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat. Between 1974 and 1987 Marguerite Yourcenar composes the three volumes of *Labyrinthe du monde*⁵: *Souvenirs pieux*, *Archives du Nord* et *Quoi ? L'éternité* and continues to expose her projects in numerous filmed interviews like “Dans l'île du Mont-Désert chez Marguerite Yourcenar”⁶ or “Apostrophes”.⁷ Roland Barthes assembles a fragmented self-narrative by making use of family photos in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*⁸, and on his footsteps Jacques Derrida writes “Circonfession”⁹. The deconstructionist philosopher takes this attempt even further and features in the movie *Derrida* directed by Amy Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick in 2002.¹⁰ Last but not least, Hervé Guibert, whose work is an unrelenting mirror to his existence, provides in *Mes Parents*¹¹ an autobiography of his youth and confronts the reader with his struggle against AIDS in *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*¹², *Le Protocole compassionnel*¹³, *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*¹⁴ and the film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*.¹⁵

Over the latter half of the 20th century, between 1964 and 2002, literary history was profoundly influenced by the authors of our corpus and the autobiographic genre underwent drastic mutations. After the Second World War, Sartre re-evaluated the role and the functions of literature in the context of a surfacing crisis of society at large. As a literary outcome of the doctrine of engaged literature, *Les Mots* also became a dismissal of literature mainly centred

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.

⁴ *Sartre par lui-même* [1976], directed by Alexandre Astruc and Michel Contat. Distribution : Éditions Montparnasse, Paris, 2007 2 DVD, 3h 07 min.

⁵ Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le Labyrinthe du monde I. Souvenirs pieux* [1974], *Le Labyrinthe du monde II. Archives du Nord* [1977] and *Le Labyrinthe du monde III. Quoi ? L'éternité* [1988], in *Essais et mémoires*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1991.

⁶ Philippe Dasnoy, « Dans l'île du Mont-Désert chez Marguerite Yourcenar », television show directed by Jean Antoine, RTBF, broadcast April 16th 1975, 47 min.

⁷ Bernard Pivot, *Apostrophes*, « Spécial Marguerite Yourcenar », television show directed by Nicolas Ribowski, Paris, Antenne 2, broadcast December 7th 1979, 1h 10 min.

⁸ *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, Seuil, coll. « Écrivains de toujours », 1975.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, « Circonfession » [1991], in Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

¹⁰ *Derrida*, film by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, John Doe Films, 2002, 1h 25 min.

¹¹ Hervé Guibert, *Mes Parents*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986.

¹² Hervé Guibert, *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

¹³ Hervé Guibert, *Le Protocole compassionnel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

¹⁴ Hervé Guibert, *L'Homme au chapeau rouge*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

¹⁵ *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, film by Hervé Guibert, broadcast on TF1, January 30th 1992, 1h 02 min.

on scrutinizing the status the writer. Renewing his 1948 allegations, Sartre considers that the starting point for the survival of literature was its adherence to ideological imperatives. Three decades later, in the movie directed by Astruc and Contat, Sartre launches his final attack on the status of the writer that meaningfully coincided with the structuralist repertoire revolving around the death of the Author¹⁶. If Jean-Paul Sartre placed the author, reinvented as an intellectual, at the service of the masses and of the social movements, Roland Barthes had a distinct vision. For him the identity of the writer was merely a form of displacement, both at the level of a fragmented writing and at the level of another art like photography, able to mobilise visual and linguistic resources and to merge the real with the imaginary. Marguerite Yourcenar's work joins these two attitudes in their endeavour to forge the identity of the self by canvassing the history of her ancestors and by constantly referring to official documents and family photos in order to anchor her narrative. Although the Belgian writer is known for her discreteness, equally manifested in her writings or in her involvement in the literary milieus of the time, her self-imposed exile becomes a postural trademark and transforms her in an attractive figure for the media. Echoing Yourcenar and Barthes, Derrida attempts to overcome the challenges of self-reflection in *Circonfession*, a narrative of mourning that unfolds around the loss of the maternal figure and posits him in the proximity of his own death. For Derrida, the act of writing is viewed as a transfiguration of identity and as a process of dislocation. In his photographic accounts or in his essays on the impact of the televised reality on the individual and especially in the film *Derrida the spectralization*¹⁷ of the self becomes an unquestionable coordinate of his system of thought. At the same époque, at the beginning of the 90's, Hervé Guibert records the most intimate events of his life aiming to transcend the corporeal self and to reinstate it in a textual, photographic or filmic form that would counteract the slow degradation of his body. In *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* Guibert orchestrates a disquieting testimonial of the last few months of his life, achieving a synthesis of the underscoring themes of his work and a signifying inflection in the evolution of the autobiographical genre. Hervé Guibert's film marks the apparition of a new type of self-narrative, a specific association of literature and photography, of music and image, of truth and illusion that we call intermedial autobiography.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, « La mort de l'auteur » [1968], *Œuvres Complètes*, new edition edited by Éric Marty, t. II, Paris, Seuil, 2002 ; Michel Foucault, « Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ? » [1969], in *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, 1969, p. 85, and *Dits et Écrits*, t. I, Paris, Gallimard, 1994.

¹⁷ « Nous sommes déjà les spectres d'une 'télévisée' ». Jacques Derrida, Bernard Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision. Entretiens filmés*, Paris, Galilée-INA, 1996, p. 131.

5. Structure of the thesis

In spite of the considerable amount of studies consecrated to the work of the francophone authors concerned by our thesis, up to the present moment, no critical debate has ever taken them into focus in this particular configuration. If their names are summoned to credit the development of a set of arguments built around a distinct topic, the majority of these discussion prefer the comfort zone of comparative rapprochements between their works and obscure the far more important problematic of the transposition of an autobiographical discourse in different artistic formulas.

The first part of our thesis, “Critical mirrors to autobiography. The rhetorics of subjectivity”, is a synthesis of the contemporary perspectives that revisit, reinforce or even swirl controversy around the theory of the autobiographical genre illustrated by Philippe Lejeune. We have investigated mainly the rhetoric of this system of categories pertaining to the field of narratology and to contemporary ontology and, in addition, we have critically addressed the position takings of the authors of self-narratives concerned by the intermedial approach, like Serge Doubrovsky, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and William Cliff. We have also staked out recent responses and counter-reactions to the theory of intermediality and we have underlined the span of influence of competing alternative terms to autobiography, such as “auto-mytho-biography”¹⁸, “ego-literature”¹⁹ or “self-narration”²⁰, analysing the limits of a genre ranging from “indecidable narratives”²¹ to theoretical autobiographical formulas, which is permanently “under construction”. The evaluation of the theoretical, institutional and media context has allowed us to have a better understanding of the premises and of the set of motivations foregrounding the transfer of the autobiographical narrative to the screen. The main challenge to this endeavour came from the authors and the directors themselves, as an important part of their referential stratagem consisted in relegating any evidence linking them to the self and in espousing heterogeneous, hybrid discourses. We also needed to consider a second difficulty that regards the incorporation of such discourses in a taxonomic structure and the resistance of the literary institutions disinclined to accommodate any interference coming from the area of photography, film or the media. Thus, while taking into account alternate perspectives and counter interpretations, we conducted our

¹⁸ Claude Louis Combet, « De l'automythobiographie », in *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, n° 263, 2001, p. 69-75.

¹⁹ Philippe Forest, *Le Roman, le réel et autres essais*, Nantes, Cécile Defaut, 2007.

²⁰ Cf. Arnaud Schmitt, « La perspective de l'autonarration », in *Poétique*, n° 149, 2007, Paris, Seuil, p. 15 and passim.

²¹ Bruno Blanckeman, *Les Récits indécidables. Jean Echenoz, Hervé Guibert, Pascal Quignard*, Ville-Neuve d'Ascq, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2000.

demonstration in accordance to recent interdisciplinary research that include the iconography of the author to the literary field and we drew a compelling argumentation frame with reference to the transformation of literary contents into visual contents. Eventually, we gave prominence to the most important conceptual modifications of such categories like “the Author”, “the work”, “the narrative” and we synthesised the major constitutive axes of a new autobiographical space.

The second part of our research, entitled “Self-reflexive postures and impostures. Poetics of subjectivity”, was devoted to a transversal analysis of our corpus of literary, photographic and filmic works. In the first chapter we followed the progress of the Sartrian deflected identities in *Les Mots*, motivated by the use of intertextual mechanism and by reworking photographic and cinematographic references as existential impostures. The corporeal metamorphosis of the protagonist subversively aims to transform the body into a body of works and to support a narrative that circumvents the Sartrian doctrine of absolute unveiling of the world and of the transparency of language. Despite its canonical aspect, the autobiography of the existentialist philosopher is a visible indicator of a radical change affecting his authorial posture.

Situated at the antipodes of the Sartrian experience, Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Le Labyrinthe du monde* stands out as a defacement of the authorial “self”, notwithstanding the numerous photographic descriptions that punctuate the text and undermine its referential reach. Yourcenar’s autobiographical work is a recreation of her family line of descent extended to the scale of humanity and a subsidiary evocation of the “universal singular” also debated by Sartre. Self-exiled in the United States, the author transforms her insular position in a most effective postural strategy, mainly visible in the interviews filmed at her North-American home. Therefore, not only does the visual discourse coincide with the literary text but they also function as complementary modes self-representation.

If in the case of Jean-Paul Sartre and Marguerite Yourcenar we identified a chronological discord secondary to a medium disparity concerning the formal choices the authors have made to account for the “self”, Roland Barthes is the first autobiographical author who manages to reunite the text and the image in a single unit.

In the second chapter of the second part of our thesis, “Deconstructing the writing. Constructing the image” we applied an intermedial reading frame to *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* in order to determine the patterns of authorial resistance to an alleged referential narrative. In spite of the visual and nominal pact stated on the cover of the book, the pronominal split of the “I”, the use of fragmentary writing, the presence of photographic

reproductions of manuscripts along with photos from the family album, transform the Barthesian text in a negative autobiography of an imaginary subject.

Following the pathway inaugurated by Barthes, Derrida multiplies the constraints imposed by the “law of the genre” and sets up a theoretical and philosophical autobiography. Hence, “Circonfession” amalgamates the authorial stands, makes use of various styles of writing and constantly resorts to references issued in prior works. Although such authorial reflexes can be interpreted as side effects conditioned by Derrida’s deconstructivist approach to literature and to the Western philosophical system at large, we indicated, on the one hand, that the Derridian use of photography is in fact a philosophical engagement and, on the other, that the legends accompanying each photo, despite their poetic tone, translate a linguistic engagement and a preoccupation for the possible interplay of words. We also highlighted the relationship between the hermeneutic structures of the book, visually transposed in the page layout that combines textual fragments, manuscript reproductions and descriptions of family photos, and the multiplication of reading trajectories.

In the last chapter of the second part of our thesis, “The other sight”, we addressed the issue of self-representation viewed as plural artistic practice and we envisioned it as a point of departure for a transversal analysis of Hervé Guibert’s AIDS trilogy. Firstly, we took into account the progressive literary formatting of an iconographic corpus, and, secondly, we underscored the textual patterns of photographic images. In so far as the first category of transpositions is concerned, it is our opinion that Guibert treated photography as text and used the pictorial references to counteract the loss of corporeal autonomy. Between the real stream of events and their literary transcription, the author interposed a series of mirrors and screens, especially visible in his constant use of the first person *ekphrasis*. From behind the camera, Guibert makes freeze frames of his working table in an attempt to show his writing at a standstill and to transform the surface of the image in an *analogon* of the page. Consequently, placed at the confluence of text and image, the Guibertian work elicits the perspective of the other, so as to make the act of reading interchangeable with the exercise of contemplation.

If the first two parts of our thesis have explored the metamorphosis of the written form into a visual form, advocating for the need of an interrogative stand when addressing the relationship between the Lejeunian theoretical formula of autobiography and the transgressive autobiographical projects revealed by our corpus, the third part of our research is mainly concerned with filmic oeuvres like *Sartre par lui-même*, *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* et *Derrida*.

As titles indicate, these films represent a separate component of the autobiographical project, although they are not completely detached from the textual medium, being the

outcome of a transfer of contents, discourses, themes and images that shift from the page to the screen. Behind the cameras, Sartre renews his dismissal of literature, introduces himself as an engaged intellectual and, by the agency of the two directors, Alexandre Astuc and Michel Constat, he accomplishes a second autobiographical act, a manifest continuation of *Les Mots*. In exchange, Guibert takes the camera himself and records the last remaining months of his life. In the role of a film director, Guibert overlaps photographic and filmic images and he uses the act of writing as a soundtrack of his recordings in order to operate a synthesis of his creation and to commit to a second corporeal existence, a spectral figure likely to survive his imminent death.

The visual autobiography of Derrida attempts to capture the personality of a nomadic philosopher and the presence of a consciously disseminated subjectivity that refuses to unveil his interiority in front of the camera. The detailed analysis of intergeneric references pertaining to autobiography, the methodological perpetration of the figure of the “double” and the recurrent inputs of the deconstructionist philosophical system, credit us to view *Derrida* as a filmic body intimately interwoven to the textual one. This relationship is in fact a bystander of the traces of the Derridian subject who refuses the conventions of the genre only to further postulate the existence of a liminal “self” that becomes visible “in between” the media.

Eventually, the present doctoral research has enabled us to argue for the complementarity of different forms of self-narrative and to highlight the coordinates of an intermedial autobiography: the circulation of themes and procedures pertaining to literature, photography and film, the negotiation of the authorial status between the writer, the director(s) or other parties involved in media production, the generic transfers and transpositions, the status shifts of the reader and, last but not least, the existence of an autobiographical project.

6. Conclusions

As indicated by the structure and the argumentative frame of our thesis, our research was not configured as an exhaustive inventory of the contemporary autobiographical formulas, nor did it aim to elaborate an alternative theoretical system that would usurp and replace the canonical perspectives presently in effect in the francophone critical and academic milieus. Nevertheless, we prospect to have filled a theoretical and analytical gap with reference to a phenomenon constantly “under construction” and, thus, highly unpredictable and opaque to classifications. In this context, we have demonstrated that the textual form is barely the initial stage of a process of mediamorphosis with no real terminus, in which the subject is engaged

to tell the others his undisguised truth. As an identity transformation process, intermediality relegates the truth-value traditionally ascribed to the autobiographical act and privileges the existence of a truth of the artwork. For this particular reason, we firmly believe that the intermedial form of autobiography is both an autographic and an allographic construction, the creation of the writer and a fictional formula of the “self”. The authors’ involvement in the construction process of their own media replicas eventually leads to their transformation into literary works and acts as a stepping stone to a transgressive autobiographical corpus discharged of its generic attachments.

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