

Life as a dropout and colonial soldier

Halfway through *Idiocy*, the final volume of memoir by Pierre Guyotat, the avant-garde writer reminds us that “nothing is pure”. These words might serve as a credo for all his work, in which brutality is the essence of all things. First published in French in 2018, two years before the author’s death, and now translated for the first time by Peter Behrman de Sinéty, the book confirms Guyotat’s renegade status as heir to the transgressions of Georges Bataille and Jean Genet.

The child of a country doctor, Guyotat ran away from home when he was eighteen. He spent two years on the streets of Paris before being conscripted into the Algerian War in 1960. The death of his mother (in 1958) prompted his first novel, *Sur un Cheval* (1961), about a motherless wanderer, and, after notes for the second were discovered in his barracks, he found himself accused of “complicity in desertion”, interrogated and imprisoned for three months.

On his return to France, Guyotat joined the French Communist Party and his thinking became aligned with the Maoist leanings of *Tel Quel* magazine, whose contributors included Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes. Guyotat worked as a journalist and used his wartime experiences as a basis for literary exploration. *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats* (1967; *Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers*, 2003), with its frank descriptions of war and sexual depravity, thoroughly unnerved the establishment, but it was Guyotat’s fourth novel, *Éden, Éden, Éden* (1970; *Eden, Eden, Eden*, 1995), that cemented his reputation as a *provocateur*. Written as a single labyrinthine sentence, it tracked the exploits of Wazzag, who sells his body in a Saharan brothel frequented by French soldiers and nomads. For 200 pages, the reader bears witness to every kind of sexual aberration. On publication – and despite support from intellectuals including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – *Éden, Éden, Éden* was condemned as “pornographic” by the French government and its sales were severely restricted.

Idiocy describes Guyotat's coming of age between 1958 and 1962. Like the previous volumes of autobiography – *Coma* (2006; 2010), *Formation* (2007) and *Arrière-fond* (2010; *In the deep*, 2014) – it is more conventional in form than his experimental writing, though it still bears traces of that scurrilous early style. A description of the author's dropout years in Paris has him sleeping in a tent that "covers the cobblestones between two flows of piss". There is no option, Guyotat says, but to "fling yourself into filth, approach it, touch it, handle it; to live at last as a man [through] this partaking of misery". Later, the Seine becomes festering and nightmarish: "Boat lights shine against the black undersides of the arches; the water slaps at stone – drowned corpses, carcasses of beaten dogs". All of Guyotat's preoccupations are here, but in particular his fascination with the processes of the body, captured in sentences that somehow purge themselves and overflow the page.

We pursue the young Guyotat in his delinquency: stealing banknotes from the family money box, feeling condemned in the eyes of an all-seeing Catholic God. We glimpse the growing awareness of his bisexuality ("Does she only want me with him as well, wanting me to want her since he wants me?") and witness his spiritual hunger for transformation through art: "I ... have the future before me, which I have to fill with deeds, acts, new works; a body for doing". Each of the book's short chapters moves to its own shellshocked rhythm. Guyotat summons the "spell of stupidity" that reigns over life in the army, where rebellion ends only in violence and humiliation: "The officer withdraws; his aides strike me with their belts; my eyelid bleeds; blood runs from my split lip; I want to drink it but as I stick out my tongue the strap chokes me".

The climax arrives when a colonel finds a copy of Guyotat's first book, as well as the notes he has been taking for the next one – notes that describe the "physical misery of the troops: fatigues in tatters, filthy bodies, vermin, rotten food". To survive the interrogation that follows, Guyotat disassociates himself into the memory of art: "I slip into large and less large paintings in the Louvre, lay my hand on the draperies, the cloths that hang from Veronese's tables". Condemned to solitary confinement, and listening to the jackals in the desert,

he feels only sympathy for the people he's supposed to be subjugating:

all of this confirms my faith in Algerian independence: the magnanimity of the Algerian people that distinguishes its torturers from the France and the French that it loves – we, the French, wouldn't be capable of a quarter of it.

But he avoids self-exoneration. The "I" of *Idiocy* dwells in ambiguity. Every "fixed idea", including that of the self, is rejected as a "shattering apart of the real". His wartime experiences have taught him to "comprehend the political monster, the monster of the camps (culture didn't prevent the [vilest] dehumanization)". And every moral and cultural shibboleth is shot down by flights of delirious logic, until only the bare facts remain.

Idiocy's last section traces the end of the war and the writer's journey back home, where "freedom" is imprinted with the memory of violence: "Me, my army mate too, we've emerged from underneath the jets whose war machinery we clean; twenty-months of communal life, servitude, nights in 'meatsacks,'"". He ends up in a brothel, where predatory images – dogs eating scraps of meat, a cat that catches a swallow – become a microcosm of the world. The machinery of war and colonialism devours every claim to "civilisation", yet Guyotat salvages the hope that things can be otherwise. "I still believe, a little," he writes, "in that God of humanity alone."

Daniel Culpan is a writer based in London.

Notes

The article uses an analogy to discuss life as a daemon or divine spirit, say, plato's guardian class but there not quite a "general," but more than man, who are forced to come back down into the cave, enter a human, and lift them up by virtue and goodness. Of course, the process is messy and a lot can go wrong.

