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## The Other Side of Abortion: The Doctor-Writer in Martin Winckler's *La Vacation* (1989)

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### ABSTRACT

In 1989, physician and author Martin Winckler published his first novel, *La vacation*, in which he introduced the fictional medical practitioner Bruno Sachs. In the novel, the author focuses on Bruno's moves and gestures, his thoughts and feelings as he performs abortions in a French public clinic. In this article I argue that the novel is a complex, metanarrative account of a medical gesture that engenders and reveals conflicting (and conflictual) situations, emotions and experiences. I suggest that through an elaborate narrative form *La Vacation* foregrounds the 'sticky' feelings surrounding abortion—that abortionist doctors are deeply touched and taxed by the procedure, as convinced as they might be of its importance and rightfulness. Making reference to further works by Winckler, such as *La maladie de Sachs* and *Les trois médecins*, this article analyses how the novel's form is crucial to address the complexity of the affective experience. I will show how Winckler's novel problematises the subjects and objects of abortion and I will argue that, in his first literary work, he is inscribing himself into a lineage of doctor-writers who are also activist writers who use their pens as swords.

### RÉSUMÉ

En 1989, le médecin et auteur Martin Winckler publia son premier roman, *La vacation*, dans lequel il introduit pour la première fois le personnage de Bruno Sachs, médecin généraliste. Dans le roman, l'auteur se concentre sur les mouvements et les gestes de son protagoniste, ses pensées et ses sentiments alors qu'il pratique des avortements dans un Centre de planification. Dans cet article, je propose de lire ce roman comme un récit métanarratif d'un geste médical qui engendre et révèle des situations, des émotions et des expériences conflictuelles. Je suggère qu'à travers une forme narrative élaborée, *La Vacation* met en avant les sentiments « collants » entourant l'avortement, et que les médecins avorteurs sont profondément touchés et taxés par une telle opération, aussi convaincus qu'ils puissent l'être de son importance et légitimité. Faisant référence à d'autres œuvres de Winckler comme *La maladie de Sachs* (1994) et *Les trois médecins* (2004), cet article suggère que la forme du roman est cruciale pour aborder la complexité de l'expérience affective de l'avortement.

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L'article montre comment le roman problématise les sujets et les objets de l'avortement et soutient que, dès sa première œuvre littéraire, Winckler s'inscrit dans une lignée d'écrivains-médecins qui sont aussi des écrivains activistes dont la plume devient une épée.

In France, abortion has been officially legal since 17 January 1975, when the second Loi Veil—which followed a first, less acknowledged but as important, 1974 law that liberalised contraception—was voted for by the French Parliament in November 1974.<sup>1</sup> The enactment of the law, unsurprisingly, follows a long and complex political, social, medical and affective *iter* that the law itself only partially materialises. In equal measure, the fluctuating tensions that this law has produced in the last almost 50 years are impossible to summarise, as positions, opinions and debates have extended over a very large and slippery spectrum. And although in France the 'voluntary termination of pregnancy'—as the French IVG, *interruption volontaire de grossesse*, literally means—is currently legal, seeing the 2022 revocation of *Roe vs Wade* in the United States, the hostility towards women's reproductive rights (particularly abortion rights) by many conservative right-wing politicians in Europe, and the aggressive lobbying of certain anti-abortionist groups, many have started to fear a backlash that might include attempts to dismantle the law. A recent French example shows just how insidious anti-abortion advocates can be: at the end of May 2023, an unsanctioned anti-abortion campaign targeted the public bike service of Paris (Vélib') with adhesive labels purposely designed to fit the bike mudguard that read 'Et si vous l'aviez laissé vivre?' and featured a sequence of drawings, from a foetus in the womb, to a crawling baby, to a child on a bicycle (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

In such a reactionary and polarising climate, then, it becomes urgent to leave ideology and simplification—understood as a stubborn binary of anti- and pro—aside and instead to address the lived complexity of the matter. It is essential to bring to the fore the embodied<sup>3</sup> dimension of abortion as well as its affective elements, which are most often enveloped in contradictions. When immediate personal experience is not available, literary and visual representations can be privileged means to convey the nuances and the complexity mentioned above.

In this article I will turn to a literary text that, I suggest, through its innovative form is able to foreground the 'sticky' feelings surrounding abortion. In his first novel *La vacation* (1989), physician and author Martin Winckler turns the attention towards the medical practitioner, his moves and gestures as he performs abortions in a clinic, and at the same time highlights his thoughts and feelings before/while/after the process itself. I understand emotions here as a 'specific manner of apprehending the world' (Sartre 2002, 35) and, following Sara Ahmed (2014), as socially shaping and circulating. In my analysis, therefore, I pay attention to what emotions *do* rather than to what they are. I argue that the novel is a complex, metanarrative account of a medical gesture that engenders and reveals conflicting (and conflictual) situations, emotions and experiences—on both ends of the 'operating table'. Through an elaborate narrative form *La vacation* shows, on the one hand, that women do not choose abortion lightly—'sur le mode du cela-va-de-soi', as Boltanski put it (2004, 35)—and, on the other hand, that doctors are also deeply touched and taxed by such a medical gesture, as



**Figure 1.** The anti-abortion sticker on the Vélib' bike (Le Planning Familial 2023).

convinced as they might be of its importance and rightfulness. If emotions are associated with women and therefore opposed to reason (see Ahmed 2014, 3), Winckler's novel doubly contradicts this stance by staging a male doctor (i.e. a gatekeeper of rationality) who simultaneously expresses both scientific knowledge and emotion, without there being a hierarchy between the two.<sup>4</sup> In the following, I will concentrate on the second aspect put forward by the novel; the focus on the medic's perspective is unusual in a domain largely dominated by patients' voices. Thus, Winckler's novel contributes to broadening the available representations not only of a taboo issue but also of marginal positions. With my analysis, therefore, I hope to contribute to scholarship in the fields of critical medical humanities and reproductive justice beyond their focus on patients' perspectives and particularly on women's voices when it comes to reproductive issues such as abortion.

Hereafter, I will first delineate the novel's historical and biographical contexts: the pathway to the legalisation of abortion in France and Martin Winckler's personal experience as a medical student and young professional in those years. Subsequently, I will analyse the novel *La vacation* with the aim to show that the form chosen by Winckler is crucial to address the complexity of affective experience. Throughout my analysis I will refer to other novels by Winckler, especially to *La maladie de Sachs* (1998) and *Les Trois Médecins* (2004), as well as to Aude Mermilliod's graphic novel *Il fallait que je vous le dise* (2019), which, besides being an autobiographical narrative of abortion, also delineates Martin Winckler's 'coming of age' as a medical caregiver.

## Abortion in history and in Martin Winckler's history

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, abortion was legalised in France in 1975. Its long journey is, quite unsurprisingly, tightly linked to the issue of contraception. Until this date, both abortion and contraception were penalised, as well as 'provocation à l'avortement' and 'propagande anticonceptionnelle' (Pavard 2012, 19). The legalisation of contraception in 1967 (Loi Neuwirth), the movements of 1968, and the new Pompidou government led to a significant shift in the political debate and the demands that took place between 1969 and 1975, whereby 'ce n'est plus l'avortement lui-même qui est moralement inacceptable, mais la loi qui l'interdit' (Pavard 2012, 131).<sup>5</sup> When, in 1974, the freshly elected President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing determined to pursue an agenda of structural, liberal reforms that included the legalisation of abortion, the *ministre de la santé* of the Chirac government, Simone Veil, proposed a project that was the outcome of intense reflection, bipartisan exchanges and public opinion surveys aimed at mediating among differences in order to find an agreeable consensus.<sup>6</sup>

Veil's address to the Assemblée nationale of 26 November 1974 is firmly inscribed in the cultural memory of France. Aude Mermilliod's *Il fallait que je vous le dise* (2019) also remembers it as a landmark moment; in the graphic novel, parts of Veil's speech are reported over two full pages (106–107), either as voiceover next to a marching crowd, as direct speech by Veil herself, or even as witnessed by journalists present at the Assemblée (Figure 2). After January 1975, however, despite its legalisation, the application of the law proved to be so difficult that, at this initial point, the role of militants of local centres of associations like MFPF, Choisir,<sup>7</sup> or MLAC (Mouvement pour la liberté de l'avortement et de la contraception), and that of activist doctors at hospitals and clinics was, therefore, essential (Pavard 2012, 278–279).

In her graphic novel, Mermilliod relates the story of her own abortion and, at two points in the narrative, mentions how Martin Winckler's 2009 novel *Le cœur des femmes*, given by a friend, helped her to overcome her suffering: 'Quand c'est arrivé, enfin ... juste après, en fait ... j'ai lu ton livre *Le cœur des femmes*. Il m'a vraiment rémuée' (12); 'je l'ai lu, et ça m'a fait du bien' (91). A few years later, they meet in Montréal, where they both live. This meeting offers the opportunity to tell Winckler's story as a medical student in the years that led to the Veil laws and, subsequently, as a general practitioner who, in the 1980s, volunteered in clinics that provided a variety of health services to women, including (and especially) abortions. Mermilliod's is a portrait of 'the artist-doctor as a young man' which effectively renders his development within a particular socio-political context. Thus, it provides a privileged point of entry to understand Winckler's trajectory as an activist in his medical practice and as



Figure 2. A landmark moment. Excerpt from *Il fallait que je vous le dise*, Aude Mermilliod (2019, 106–107). © Casterman.

a writer of ‘fictions “engagées”’ (Zaffran 2014, 15).<sup>8</sup> At the question ‘et qu’est-ce qui t’as amené à pratiquer des IVG?’ Winckler answers first by tracing a family lineage of sorts—women who had abortions, a father who practised clandestine abortions<sup>9</sup>—as well as by mentioning an early awareness of women’s reproductive struggles that, as a medical student in 1974, he was privy to. A short sequence of panels, for instance, portrays a woman in her hospital bed, ‘jaune comme un citron’ because of sepsis; the caption explains that she is in that state because of ‘une IVG clandestine’ (105). A member of the editorial board of the militant (and clandestine!) student journal *Corrigé de médecine*, in which the students ‘remetta[en]t en cause la société, l’éducation qu’on y recevait ... On défendait l’euthanasie, le cannabis médical [...]. Mais l’IVG et la contraception, c’était notre cheval de bataille préféré’ (108), Winckler himself, under Mermilliod’s pen, testifies to the unwelcoming climate that followed the legalisation of abortion, and adduces it as a reason to engage in the practice. Indeed, some panels later, we see him writing in his notebook, on 10 March 1977, ‘Un jour, je ferai des IVG’ (111). But what moved him into action, once he finished his studies and opened his practice, in 1982, was the realisation that he could not explain to a patient how the procedure took place. To fill his gap in his knowledge, he was able to shadow a friend who worked at the hospital’s *Centre de planification*; she then asked him to replace her for the weekly half-day *vacation* that would give the title to his first novel.

Winckler’s first steps into the medical world and his professional, as well as human and activist, development fall within the large and intricate historical and socio-political frame pictured above. *La vacation* is the outcome of years of experience as a medical

practitioner who volunteers, once a week, in the local hospital to provide abortions, as he himself writes in *Le patient et le médecin* (2014):

En 1983, j'ai commencé à travailler au centre de planification du CH du Mans; cette activité m'a ouvert aux réalités de l'IVG, de la contraception, de la sexualité et, plus généralement, de la santé des femmes – l'un des motifs de consultation médicale les plus fréquents dans tous les pays du monde. (14)

The alter ego of the author (Lapprand 2012, 50), Bruno Sachs, is a young doctor who, from the first page of *La vacation*, is addressed in the second person singular by the novel's narrator, whose identity the reader will not discover until the last paragraph.<sup>10</sup> At once, the novel presents its singularity: the unusual vocative form, the unidentified narrator, the 'masculine' point-of-view—they combine to create an evocative counterpoint to the typical abortion narrative, in which, habitually, the main character (and/or narrator) is a woman and where her phenomenological viewpoint is usually privileged.<sup>11</sup> Although we will learn, at the very end of the third part, 'Vendredi', that the narrator is, in fact, a woman, thanks to the narrative escamotage of the second person singular, throughout the novel the reader experiences the storyworld through the eyes of Bruno Sachs—a 'soignant' rather than a 'docteur' (Zaffran 2014, 11)<sup>12</sup>—which immediately posits a blurring of (male and female) gazes.<sup>13</sup> This 'tu', as Joel July (2014, 292) argues, is 'totalement superposable à Bruno Sachs' so much so that after the initial bafflement, the reader 'en vient naturellement à l'idée que *tu = je*', for only Bruno himself could tell, for instance, what he does when he is alone in the car. This imbrication of narrative voices is further complicated in the second section of the novel, where Bruno's thoughts pierce the medical acts that are described by the narrator. If the first part sets out the bare medical performance, the second part cuts through the semblance of objectivity to share the subjectivity of the *vacation*.

### Bruno Sachs, from student to *vacataire*

In *La vacation* we meet Bruno Sachs as a young doctor who, in the early 1980s, volunteers in a recently established clinic. But how did he arrive at this point? We discover more about his *années de formation* in another novel: luckily, in fact, after returning to Bruno in *La maladie de Sachs* (1998), Winckler reprised his beloved character once more and went back to his university years with *Les trois médecins* (2004). The novel creates a paternal medical lineage similar to Winckler's own: Bruno's father Bram Sachs, also a doctor, was himself an *avorteur* prior to 1975 (Winckler 2004, 215–217). Besides Bruno's personal 'genealogy', however, the novel provides, perhaps most importantly, another type of genealogy in the portrait of how, in France, militants helped women to get access to safe abortions up until the Law Veil was passed in January 1975. Specifically, the novel invents a likely possibility of transnational knowledge transmission from the UK, where abortion was legal, to France, as well as a realistic illegal abortion scenario.

In 1972 young doctors belonging to the GIS (*Groupe information santé*) and *Choisir* learnt the Karman method, which allowed the carrying out of safe abortions within the first weeks of pregnancy. In the following years, a number of doctors secretly used it to help several hundreds of women (a fact they would make public in the *Manifeste des 331 médecins*, which appeared in the *Nouvel Observateur* on 3 February 1973). As Pavard

(2009) argues, this method heralds a turn in the history of the fight for abortion because it marks ‘le début de la pratique des avortements comme mode d’action’ (81). In the chapter from *Les trois médecins* titled ‘Les militants’, Winckler foregrounds the actions of the GIS and feminists of the *Planning familial*. The scene takes place on 20 December 1974—on the same day the final vote for the Law Veil took place (Pavard 2012, 255)—and stages Bruno’s arrival at a flat where his friends and mentors have just finished performing an abortion. Through focalisation on different characters, the novel reconstructs the process that has led to that moment and some of the complications experienced by the militants. Bruno enters a room that features an examination table, the suction machine, his teachers in white coats,<sup>14</sup> and a woman in a nightgown.

The scene opens on the aftermath of the procedure, when the patient is slowly returning to her senses:

Elle serrait encore la vessie de glace sur son ventre, mais elle s’était redressée, puis assise sur le lit pliant, et elle disait que ça allait mieux. Sonia lui tenait la main, Buck lui prenait la tension. Dans la cuisine, les deux conseillères du Planning nettoyaient les instruments tandis que je préparais l’enveloppe d’antalgiques que la patiente pourrait prendre le lendemain, et les deux dernières plaquettes de pilules. D’habitude, nous leur en donnions trois, mais cette nuit-là nous n’en avons plus beaucoup et j’avais été obligé de les rationner. (205)<sup>15</sup>

The passage stages the confluence between militant doctors and feminist movements and is accurate about the collective nature of the practice whereby, besides the person performing the abortion, it also includes several other people to assist the woman during the process (Pavard 2009, 83, 88). Furthermore, it describes realistic details such as the provision of analgesics and the pill, usually prescribed for three weeks after the intervention but here rationed to two weeks to cope with a lack of stock—a lack that was a recurring issue with illegal abortions. The woman whom Bruno sees upon his entrance might be the last one to enter this place ‘hors la loi’ where, for the past five years, his teachers have practised illegal abortions that they learnt to perform from George Buckley (Buck), a British doctor who has passed on his knowledge as well as smuggled material:

Cela fait cinq ans déjà que tu nous apportes ton expérience, ... que tu nous as expliqué la technique, que tu nous as montré les gestes, que tu nous procures les instruments—en les passant en fraude, s’il le faut—et que tu nous soutiens pendant que nous pratiquons nous-même les avortements. (209)<sup>16</sup>

In *La vacation*, it is no longer a case of clandestine abortions, and instead Bruno safely operates in a hospital clinic. The first part of the novel, ‘Mardi’, is a first-degree narrative of the doctor’s motions and procedures: a factual, precise, ‘clinical’ description of the gestures needed to accomplish the act but also of everything that happens before and after. The novel starts with the following lines:

Tu es en retard.

La voiture dévale la côte, et tu dois freiner pour aborder l’entrée de l’hôpital. La barrière se lève à ton approche. Tu passes à petite vitesse devant la guérite du gardien. Tu lèves la main pour le saluer. Il te répond d’un hochement de tête. (15)

In this passage and what follows, the narrator describes in minute details Bruno’s car journey to the hospital, finding a parking spot, parking the car, locking the car, entering the hospital, greeting his co-workers, changing into a white coat, slipping the pen in the

pocket, going into the examination room, thoroughly washing his hands, reading the patient's record, etc., until he is on his way back home. In quite a pedagogic, list-like mode, the reader then becomes acquainted with every single instrument that is needed for the procedure while Bruno and the assisting nurse prepare them on the table. Finally, Bruno takes his place inside a space carefully delimited by the surrounding objects:

Tu te trouves à présent au centre d'un espace fonctionnel délimité par les éléments qui habitent la salle.

Éléments fixes : derrière toi la paillasse, devant toi la table d'examen, à tes pieds la bassine métallique tapissée d'un sac en plastique noir ; éléments mobiles : la table roulante portant les instruments, le tabouret que tu tires du pied, le scialytique que tu feras descendre et monter dans l'axe de ton champ visuel.

Le corps de la femme est un autre point fixe, et tu en es un autre mobile. (31)

The narrator's gaze is directed to the spaces and objects as much as to the female body and its anatomy:

Tu saisis le spéculum posé sur le plateau, tu trempe son extrémité dans le liquide translucide, tu te penches vers le sexe de la femme *Je vous pose un spéculum* tu écarter les lèvres du bout des doigts, tu glisses les valves métalliques *C'est froid* dans l'orifice, en tournant lentement, en poussant doucement vers le bas *mais c'est pas méchant*. Une fois l'instrument en place tu écarter les valves : tu cherches au fond du tunnel ainsi formé, quelque chose qui ressemble au col utérin, une sorte de petit beignet rond, rose, centré d'un orifice parfois minuscule, parfois béant. (32)

Both the female body and the instruments are the objects of the clinical gaze, broken up into pieces, the smaller components named with scientific accuracy, their functions explained as they are used and probed open. The result is a visually direct description of an abortion—the procedure that, in his real life, the young GP Marc Zaffran had been unable to describe to his patient. And just like Zaffran and his patient at the time, many women and men in the 1980s and 1990s—that is, prior to today's much easier access to information about medical practices on the internet—were unaware of how an abortion took place. In this way the first part of *La vacation*, thanks to its didactic, scientifically detailed chronicle, informed and instructed readers on the proceedings of a surgical abortion. Because of the narrative device of the second person singular, and because of the composed slow-motion narration (a sort of frame-by-frame description), the reader is positioned next to (if not even in place of) Bruno Sachs. Narratologically, the strategy cleverly invites the reader into Bruno's shoes, and therefore we get the sense that we are, too, performing the procedure—cleaning the cervix with a dry compress, disinfecting it, expanding it little by little with the bougies, inserting the Karman cannula, fixing it carefully on the pipe and, finally, giving the order to start: 'La machine se met à gronder' (33–36).

As the noise invades the room ('le grondement emplît la salle') and 'les vibrations du moteur accompagnent tes gestes' (37), in order to reflect the cacophony of noises—the vibrating, the bubbling, the whistling—the syntactic cadence picks up pace, too, through repetitions, unpunctuated verbal succession ('tirant tournant poussant . . . poussant tournant tirant'), nominal sequences ('les grondements . . . les borborygmes, les bruits de suction, les sifflements'), and the alliteration of plosive, liquid and fricative consonants

(37). Indeed, the sense of sound is particularly vivid in this whole section: the ‘grondissement’ of the machine might be the longest and loudest of all, but several other small noises punctuate the passage. While the machine rumbles, suddenly ‘un sifflement remplace les bruits de suction’ (38): something surges out of the cervix and the forceps that grabs it ‘se referme avec un cliquetis métallique’ (38). As soon as it is drawn out, we almost hear the ‘humpf’ sound of the bobbin-like thing falling ‘entre les cuisses écartées, dans le sac en plastique noir, au milieu des compresses usagées’ (38–39). Once the machine stops to rumble, however, noises continue to resonate: the metallic one of the speculum that ‘se referme avec un petit bruit métallique’ and that Bruno ‘laisse tomber ... un peu bruyamment sur la table roulante’ (41);<sup>17</sup> the noise of the water that ‘bouillonne un bref instant dans le bocal’ (41).

Once the interventions are over, the room is cleaned and prepared for consults. Again, the female body is palpated and penetrated systematically and very carefully; similarly to previous pages, clinical terms are employed, and the consult is broken down into its minimal constituents, every new gesture pre-emptively explained by Bruno. At the end of the shift, Bruno goes to check on the women who underwent the abortions earlier and who are recovering in shared rooms. Perhaps portrayed as somewhat paternalistic in this passage,<sup>18</sup> nonetheless, Bruno Sachs’s ethics of medical care is shown to rest on dialogic relationality and on giving women all the necessary information needed to make an informed choice. Indeed, in these last pages of ‘Mardi’ we find the main themes that will return in Winckler’s oeuvre, starting with *La maladie de Sachs* (1998); throughout this and the following novels the reader is reminded of the importance of the relational dynamic between doctor and patient, that the practice of medicine is care, and that the doctor is a caregiver (a *soignant*) (see, e.g. Toombs 1992 (esp. 89–119); Charon 2006; Charon et al. 2017).<sup>19</sup>

### The doctor’s ugly feelings and the *écrivain engagé*

On Thursdays, as the second part of the novel is titled, Bruno does not practise medicine: neither in his surgery nor in the *Centre de planification*. On Thursdays, Bruno writes. The second, and longest, part of *La vacation* is in fact twofold: a first storyline (even chapters) goes back to the first part and reproduces it with the insertion of the affective experience of the doctor; a second storyline (odd chapters) is the *mise-en-abyme* of the writing process itself.

In the even chapters, then, Winckler unpacks the cold, clinically detailed description of the first part by breaking it up with Bruno’s thoughts, thus superposing onto the objective account of the previous pages the ethically challenging lived experience of the doctor who volunteers to perform abortions. The first part, therefore, is here repurposed and rewritten to account for ‘tous les non-dits et []es observations, []es impressions, []es coups de gueule ou []es coups de folie qui s’établissent dans la conscience du praticien’ (July 2014, 295). To understand how this rewriting appears in the text, let us look at the second chapter of ‘Jeudi’, which rescripts the beginning of ‘Mardi’ cited above.

Tu es en retard.

La voiture dévale (toujours en retard de toute façon. Pas moyen d’arriver à l’heure. Faudrait vouloir. Faudrait pouvoir. Quinze bornes, quand-même. Bouffe en catastrophe au dernier

moment, prie que le téléphone ne se mette pas à sonner *Allô Docteur pouvez venir tout de suite, mon fils est tombé dans la cour de l'école visage en sang le recoudre urgent venez*, et pas moyen de répondre *Non Madame désolé (voix suave) maizavortements n'attendent pas !* Bien envie de décrocher quand le steak grésille sur le sel crépitant poêle bien chaude. D'ailleurs, décroche parfois. Occupé ! Pas disponible ! En dérangement ! Parti !) guérite du gardien (demande jamais rien. Bagnole reconnaissable, bien crade de la boue de bouseux sur le blanc d'origine, caducée rouge, fond bleu passé au soleil. Demande rien, lève sa barrière, laisse passer, signe de tête, sait pas où va cette voiture mais sait sûrement que le gonze dedans vient tous les mardis. Enfin, régulier ; tête connue. Même quand il n'est pas rasé ! Mais rare, ça. Se fait pas. Avorteur pas rasé, pas vraiment acceptable. Encore que. Est-ce qu'elles regardent vraiment ?) le long du trottoir . . . (74–75)

As the passage shows, the practitioner's thoughts completely dismantle the text in what July calls 'des monologues intérieurs labyrinthiques' (2014, 296). Winckler himself defined these parenthetical digressions as *pensées parasites* (Winckler 2000, n.p.), which are long sentences placed within parentheses in the middle of the text. According to July, these digressions completely annihilate the 'original' text: they repress and compress it into a few snippets scattered here and there outside of the parentheses as a mere reminder of the chronological development of the day. They also turn the reading experience into a somewhat difficult endeavour, rich in bafflement and confusing moments: an experience that Winckler called 'une lecture acrobatique' (2000, n.p.).

In the excerpt above we can see how the tone of the digressions marks a significant departure from the first part. Whereas the text of 'Mardi' used an economical, precise and neutral vocabulary, here the speech register is spoken and familiar, the lexicon is colloquial, and the writing tries to reflect the change by using a segmented syntax, idiomatic/familiar jargon, and ample use of exclamation marks to signal the speaker's affective fervour. These are, as Winckler writes, 'comme des bulles de sentiment (colère, étonnement, angoisse) qui éclatent à la surface d'un texte apparemment lisse' (2000, n.p.). Indeed, in the even chapters of 'Mardi' we are privy to the (uncensored) intimate thoughts of the doctor—'un sentiment de désordre, de subjectivité, de dégoût' (July 2014, 294) coupled with 'la lassitude, le sentiment de culpabilité, la colère, le découragement, en un mot, la maladie du "bon con de Docteur Sachs"' (297). These emotions are, I would argue, 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2005), the 'rats and possums' (7) that Bruno Sachs experiences on a weekly (if not daily) basis. I say that Bruno's are 'ugly feelings', even when referring to so-called strong emotions like fear, pain or compassion, because in the novel's economy these are weak, durational emotions, lacking a distinct object, bordering on irritation, envy, or anxiety, and therefore persisting in small quantities (so to speak) that do not include violent outbursts. And how could the doctor erupt in anger while performing an abortion? Indeed, as Ngai writes, ugly feelings are 'amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release' (6). At the primary level, synchronous to the unfolding story, Bruno's interior monologues are nothing more than the expression of feelings that, because sticky, wax and wane and return and unsettle him without any opportunity for relief. In this sense there is no immediate catharsis to Sachs's parenthetical breaking of his feelings. While expressing an internal struggle, at the second degree they reveal the moral dilemma within the choice—whether to abort or be the abortionist. Therefore, rather than coalescing into a judgement of the doctor for his affective responses, the novel seems to urge readers to meditate on the grey zones surrounding abortion, underlining

both the distress and the integrity within the making of such a choice; its (emotional, physical) repercussions; the sense of hope accompanied by guilt; the grief and relief. The negative emotions expressed by Bruno are thus productive for the critical lens they offer. Following Ngai (2005) again, Winckler's choice to weave the doctor's emotional stream of consciousness into the clinical portrait can be read as an 'effort of thinking the aesthetic and the political together' (3).

As we move forward in our reading of 'Jeudi', we the readers (but also, at the fictional level, Bruno) are therefore led to question the text of 'Mardi'—that cold and emotionless description of a few hours of work in the abortion clinic—and to reconsider it as an incomplete account, perhaps even insufficient despite its 'scientificity'. I concur with July (2014), who sees the digressive modality as a way to put emphasis on a failure, 'la faillite d'une narration homogène qui privilégie l'événement plutôt que le sentiment' (298). That is, the cold narrative of 'Mardi' is unfaithful and potentially false, for the narrator 'dépouille [le processus de l'IVG] de son ancrage social et psychologique et le vide donc de son essence en le réduisant à une intervention chirurgicale ou à des contrôles de routine' (July 2014, 300): a surgical intervention that is minutely and accurately described so as to 'instruct' the unknowing reader, but wherefrom the affective elements are erased. In addition, the performance of ugly feelings also highlights the failure of the homogeneous master narrative of the abortionist doctor who acts mechanically without any feeling in relation to his practice (much as his patients in relation to their choice). Here I disagree with Lapprand's (2012) interpretation that, although Bruno's and the women's inner trials are acknowledged, nonetheless, the novel maintains that 'la pratique régulière des interruptions de grossesse s'en tient au domaine d'un *exercice jugé nécessaire*, au sujet duquel le médecin s'interdit de prendre position et encore moins de faire des choix à la place des femmes qu'il opère' (49, my emphasis). In his choice to rewrite 'Mardi' into 'Jeudi', Winckler shows precisely that to perform an abortion, notwithstanding how many times one has done it, is not a simple *exercice jugé nécessaire* but, more accurately, a deeply strenuous emotional labour.

Perhaps Lapprand's interpretation is due to the fact that he does not see in the novel any 'discours militant' (49), and that he considers the odd chapters of 'Jeudi'—the metanarrative section relating 'la genèse même du roman en train de se faire' (44)—the novel's real story ('la trame réelle', 44). It is undeniable that the writing process and its meta-reflective chapters are consubstantial to rendering the thematic complexity of the doctor's experience. As a counterpoint to the 'emptying' of women's bodies (or rather, of emptying 'le ventre des femmes'),<sup>20</sup> writing is an act of 'filling' (Lapprand 2012, 45). Unlike Lapprand, however, I do not see this '*remplissage*' in terms of a narcissistic pursuit, but rather aimed at imbuing the cultural space with more narratives, with a variety of experiences, with expanding representations so that the voices of the concerned may be heard and ambiguities made visible. It is not a coincidence that in most of Winckler's novels the narrator is seldom (if ever) one single character but usually there is a polyphony of narrators, each with their own point of view on the subject, and these different gazes interact with one another without being necessarily in agreement. In Winckler's opinion, this narrative multiplicity 'makes you understand why people you are not do things that you think you wouldn't do or you don't understand' (SMHS 2022).

Indeed, to return to *La vacation*, when prompted about its narrative process and the ample use of parentheses, Winckler reflected that 'l'usage de ces procédés de

*réhabitation* du texte résulte peut-être de cela même qui m’a poussé à écrire: faire entendre ma voix au milieu d’un concert d’autres voix, dissonantes, concurrentes, cacophoniques’ (Winckler 2000, n.p.). *Faire entendre ma voix*—not above all the others but alongside all others, whether in agreement or in opposition, or in alternative. In the novel, Bruno himself is seen reflecting on what he is trying to do with his writing, when he asks himself:

... ce que tu tentes d’écrire, as-tu le droit de le porter au jour ?

Les femmes qui se sont allongées sur la table, qui ont ouvert leurs corps pour laisser passer tes instruments de tueur, l’ont-elles fait pour ta gloire ? Ont-elles bu leur honte, leurs remords, leurs regrets à ton seul profit ?

... qui t’autorise ainsi à faire de ces secrets un spectacle ? (159)

We see that Bruno’s approach to his writing is extremely cognisant of its ethical import. He is concerned with his right to write, because he is not only revealing, albeit in camouflage, professional secrets, but also probing the motivations for his act. Yet, the matter is not simply ethical—the section cited above ends with a quotation from the *serment d’Hippocrate*<sup>21</sup>—but also of a political nature, for ‘écrire est un acte de pouvoir’ (164), he admits at the end of the chapter. Therefore, he writes and rewrites trying to find the most suitable form to relay (share) the stories, the lived experience because ‘Ce que tu avais entrepris était trop *important* pour être *composé* comme n’importe quel autre ouvrage’ (134, my emphasis). *Faire entendre ma voix*—finding an arrangement that includes emotions (sticky, ugly, all of them), so as to create a text that is ‘moving’, that generates attachment and connection (Ahmed 2014, 13), that merges the aesthetic with the political: an engaging, and engaged, text, that is, *une fiction engagée* (Zaffran 2014, 15). This writing, therefore, is already political, and the writer is an *écrivain engagé*. Although Winckler himself affirms that literature can certainly move into action and that his novels are a form of militancy, he also concedes that it is the reader who gives meaning to the book: ‘I may put as much meaning as I want but the readers are going to understand it as they want. I cannot control that, but I hope I’m not misunderstood’ (SMHS 2022). Intention, humility and clarity, then, seem to be the triad that guide his work as an activist writer. Whereas the situations he describes are often ambiguous, fraught with tension and ambivalence, there cannot be, according to Winckler, any ambiguity with where the writer stands—hence the obligation to clarity. He takes as an example *La vacation*, where it is clear that during an abortion everyone is in pain, both morally and physically; for the physician, an abortion can be morally painful for reasons they do not always understand. On these grounds, when the novel was published, Winckler’s colleagues feared that it would serve those who took a stance against abortion (SMHS 2022). Yet, this did not happen because it is undoubtedly clear in the text that, despite his moral dilemmas, the physician is supportive of his patients, for his belief in bodily autonomy is stronger than any moral qualm one might pass through. Indeed, precisely because, as a male doctor, he does not have ‘access’ to the process of abortion from within the depth of his flesh, he has more of a duty to make it anything but a necessary medical exercise while serving his patients to the best of his abilities, as this citation from the end of the novel encapsulates:

Rien de tout cela ne te paraîtra réel, rien ne te paraîtra vrai, parce que rien dans ton corps ne gardera la trace de ces quelques minutes. Tu n'auras pas vu le visage penché au-dessus de tes cuisses ouvertes. Tu n'auras pas senti le museau d'acier fouiller ton sexe. Tu ne te rappelleras pas le bruit de la machine. Tu ne sauras jamais ce que déchire la sonde, là, en bas, tout au fond, au rythme de ta main. (213)

## Conclusion

In June 2022 I had the chance to converse with Martin Winckler in the context of an online seminar I co-convened. As he told his audience and interlocutors, from his early years Winckler understood that there is a fundamental physiological inequality between men and women: pregnancy. His consciousness of this problem grew with the years, and he found himself to be in complete solidarity with his female colleagues who condemned the total arbitrariness of the idea that a person, by virtue of having a uterus, should carry a baby even if they do not wish to. This longstanding solidarity and his years as a medical practitioner in women's health have been a great influence and inspiration for his writing. In one way or another all his novels, he said, deal with being a physician and how to care for people; taking care of people, in his opinion, does not happen if you do not listen carefully and empathetically to your patients. This ethics of care—exemplified over and over in his novels through characters like Bruno Sachs, Franz Karma, Jean Atwood—can be seen as closely related to, or even as a forefather of, the practice of narrative medicine, in which radical listening combines with narrative representation whereby 'self and other [are bound] into relationships that support recognition and action' (Charon et al. 2017, 3; see also Charon 2006; Spencer 2020). Just as, in narrative medicine, reading and creative writing have become important tools in a doctor's education and beyond to mend structural injustices, for Winckler 'écrire, c'est soigner';<sup>22</sup> *soigner* by sharing with a wider audience knowledge and experiences, which fiction allows with a certain type of distance from the everyday buzzing of medical practice.

This logic is at the basis of *La vacation*, where 'writing as caring' is also the reason that pushes Bruno Sachs to carve out time on Thursdays to write. As Winckler explains it, the novel is about

a physician who works in an abortion clinic and tries to write about it because he is so preoccupied by the fact that he is a physician, a man who is never going to live what the women are living there but he still has feelings and wants to talk about all this and be respectful and try to find his way in the chaos of those feelings. (SMHS 2022)

Writing becomes here a way to take care of oneself as well as to take care of others. The emotional labour of Tuesday's shifts is mirrored by Thursday's laborious search for a way to convey the lived, embodied (*incarnée*) experience of Tuesday's *vacation*; 'les objets et les gestes, bien sûr, mais aussi les histoires' (110), as Bruno puts it.

As I have argued in this article, the novel's formal features are essential to underline its thematic complexity, to accentuate the thorny reality of abortion, to dismantle the black-and-white stance that opposes those in favour to those against it, without allowing any type of hesitation, of doubt, of nuance. At the same time, with *La vacation*, Winckler clearly brings to life his belief in the political power of writing; thus, he inserts himself not only into a lineage of doctor-writers, but also into a lineage of activist writers who use

their pens as swords, as Sartre put it. Finally, what is at stake in the novel is to highlight an ambivalence that resists binary simplifications, that recuperates the critical scope of emotions and that by choosing a specific narrative form enables the aesthetic and the political to (critically) come together.

## Notes

1. Initially on trial for 5 years, the Law would be renewed in 1979, after a new wave of mobilisations. See Pavard (2012, 275–317). Although on 19 October 2022 the Senate rejected a proposal, in 2023 the right to abortion is on its way to being constitutionalised, which means that the legislator will be prohibited from abolishing abortion or seriously undermining it (see [www.vie-publique.fr/loi/287299-proposition-de-loi-droit-ivg-dans-la-constitution#:~:text=Le%20droit%20à%20l%27avortement,de%20la%20peine%20de%20mort.&text=Cette%20proposition%20de%20loi%20est,sur%20les%20bureaux%20des%20Assemblées](http://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/287299-proposition-de-loi-droit-ivg-dans-la-constitution#:~:text=Le%20droit%20à%20l%27avortement,de%20la%20peine%20de%20mort.&text=Cette%20proposition%20de%20loi%20est,sur%20les%20bureaux%20des%20Assemblées)). In his speech given on 8 March 2023 at the national tribute to Gisèle Halimi, French President Emmanuel Macron confirmed his wish to constitutionalise abortion rights: ‘je veux aujourd’hui que la force de ce message nous aide à changer notre Constitution afin d’y graver la liberté des femmes à recourir à l’interruption volontaire de grossesse pour assurer solennellement que rien ne pourra entraver ou défaire ce qui sera ainsi irréversible.’ (Discours du Président de la République à l’occasion de l’hommage national à Gisèle Halimi, 8 mars 2023. [www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/03/08/hommage-national-a-gisele-halimi](http://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/03/08/hommage-national-a-gisele-halimi)).
2. <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/paris-ile-de-france/paris/une-campagne-anti-avortement-affichee-sur-les-velib-a-paris-2780486.html>; <https://twitter.com/leplanning/status/1661633087401336833>; [https://twitter.com/Anne\\_Hidalgo/status/1661672119858610178](https://twitter.com/Anne_Hidalgo/status/1661672119858610178).
3. The French term ‘*incarnée*’, used by Camille Froidevaux-Metterie (2021), connotes better than its English translation the deeply visceral and affect-laden sense I mean here.
4. Ahmed (2014) acknowledges that even amongst emotions there is a hierarchy and that in a model of emotional intelligence that categorises between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feelings, the cultivation of ‘self-enhancing’ emotions is socially encouraged. One could argue that the doctor’s emotions in *La vacation* serve such an enriching trajectory, for they allow him to turn into a published author; however, as I show later in the article, the physician here is completely aware of, and engages with, the ethical pitfalls of his project.
5. For more information on the historical, social and political background that led to legalisation, see, e.g. Pavard (2012), Pavard, Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel (2012). See also Dominique Carlini Versini’s Introduction to this Special Issue.
6. For a detailed analysis of the Law’s different steps, nuances and the role played by Simone Veil herself in its positive outcome, see Pavard 2012, 233–273.
7. ‘Choisir la cause des femmes’ is the association founded by Gisèle Halimi in 1971.
8. Martin Winckler is the pseudonym under which Marc Zaffran publishes his novels and other non-fiction writings.
9. Winckler has written a book, *Plumes d’ange* (2003), on the life of his father, who was himself a doctor.
10. The second person singular is also a feature of Winckler’s second novel, *La maladie de Sachs* (Winckler 1998).
11. See, for instance, Annie Ernaux’s *L’événement* (2000) and its 2021 screen adaptation by Audrey Diwan, Mermilliod’s previously mentioned graphic novel, *Il fallait que je vous le dise* (Mermilliod 2019), or, for an earlier example, Ken Bugul’s *Le baobab fou* (1982).
12. In *La Maladie de Sachs* Bruno writes: ‘Choisir d’être médecin, ce n’est pas choisir entre deux spécialités ou deux modes d’exercice, mais d’abord entre deux attitudes, entre deux positions. Celle de “Docteur,” celle de soignant. Les médecins sont plus souvent docteurs que soignants. C’est plus confortable, c’est plus gratifiant, ça fait mieux dans les soirées et dans les dîners, ça fait mieux dans les tableaux. Le Docteur « sait », et

son savoir prévaut sur tout le reste. Le soignant cherche avant tout à apaiser les souffrances. Le Docteur attend des patients et des symptômes qu'ils se conforment aux grilles d'analyse que la faculté lui a inculquées; le soignant fait de son mieux (en questionnant ses maigres certitudes) pour comprendre un tant soit peu ce qui arrive aux gens. Le Docteur prescrit. Le soignant pense. Le Docteur cultive le verbe et le pouvoir. Le soignant dérouille' (588–589).

13. For definitions of 'male gaze' and 'female gaze' see Mulvey ([1975] 1999), Brey (2020).
14. The detail of the white coats seems here in contradiction with Pavard's conversation with a MLAC militant, Jeanne Weiss, who expressed the group's aim to 'démédicaliser l'avortement': 'Les locaux doivent être "aussi peu 'médicaux' que possible en particulier éviter tout décor impressionnant et traumatisant évoquant la salle d'opération ... Les médecins qui pratiquent des avortements tentent de 'faire oublier' qu'ils sont médecins, notamment en ne revêtant jamais de blouse ou en ne se présentant pas comme tels'" (Pavard 2009, 87–88).
15. The narrator here is Roland Vargas, Bruno's professor and mentor, as well as a friend (and former student) of his father Bram Sachs.
16. Here the narrator is Sonia Fisinger, the dean's wife and a physician herself.
17. It seems like Bruno puts down the speculum 'un peu bruyamment' rather often: see also p. 51.
18. Indeed, the narrator seems somewhat critical of Sachs's paternalistic attitude towards the patients, e.g. 'tu souris paternellement' (57); 'tu t'emploies avec un luxe d'efforts à démontrer la pertinence de tes conseils, la bienveillance de tes remarques, la sympathie que tu éprouves ... Il faut admettre aussi que tu leur parles bien. ... Tu parles, tu parles, tu parles, comme un père à des petites filles. Tu joues sur du velours' (59). This opinion corresponds, perhaps, to a critique that, according to the story told by Mermilliod, Winckler received at the beginning of his work for the Centre de planification (see Mermilliod 2019, 130–134).
19. I will briefly return to these ideas in the article's conclusion. An in-depth engagement with Martin Winckler's oeuvre and (feminist) theories of care is regrettably beyond the scope of this paper; however, my ongoing research on the French-Canadian author clearly reveals the potential for and importance of exploring further the relationship between care and medicine in his works.
20. This is a nod to Françoise Vergès's book *Le ventre des femmes* (2017), which is a study of the systematic, institutional performance of abortions and sterilisations on Réunionnais women in 1970, a time when, in hexagonal France, women's reproductive possibilities were strenuously defended with the anti-abortion and anti-contraception laws mentioned at the beginning of this article and more extensively in Carlini-Versini's Introduction to this Special Issue.
21. 'Admis à l'intérieur des maisons, mes yeux ne verront pas ce qui s'y passe, ma langue taira les secrets qui me seront confiés ...' (159).
22. Private conversation, spring 2022.

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