

How many deaths? Auto-bio-graphy as death-writing

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Autobiography. Death. Jacques Derrida. Media. Spectrality.

This article concerns various aspects of autobiography as they have been introduced by Jacques Derrida, who himself used the term “autobiographical” to refer to his philosophical writing. Unlike most scholars who stress the link between autobiography and philosophy in Derrida’s writing the article attempts to link it primarily to the “literary”. In this endeavour, most attention is paid to the numerous metamorphoses in which “death” structures and haunts (auto)biographies and our thinking about the genre. Here, the greatest influence, apart from Derrida, was Maurice Blanchot. “Death” and negativity figure at many levels of autobiography, where, unlike in a fictional narrative, they cannot be suspended easily: they can be found in the question about the very usage of language and its relation to the autobiographer, in the construction of the “I”, and in the medial situation of the literary. The article concludes by suggesting a potential transformation of the autobiographical practice brought about by techno-cultural changes and developments regarding both the “archive” and “media”, which are transforming the status of memory, legacy, and the past.

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[...] we are held, forever, between life and death, in a state of non-existence and non-death, from which our whole life perhaps takes its meaning and its reality.

Maurice Blanchot ([1947] 1995a, 252)

I remember. I think. I write. I write to remember. I write to (re)invent some lost or non-existing memories. As I remember, as I invent my memories, I think. Therefore I am. Therefore I die. I become a memory.

Through these (mainly linguistic) acts which are an indispensable part of every autobiography, I am going to outline the distinctiveness of a certain outlook on this type of writing (narrative) act that was most importantly inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida. The opening sentences should indicate, among other things, that what is questioned by looking at autobiography from this point of view is the very possibility of subsuming autobiography under the category of a “literary genre”, while simultaneously questioning the categories both of “literature” and “genre”. “Literature” gets problematized in autobiography by making it impossible to suspend the tension between “fiction” and “reality” (“narrative” and “what really happened”), not even in the act of reading. The ontology of autobiography is unstable, to say the least. There are obviously different primary impulses that instigate the autobiographical narrative act, which are defined by their relation towards language in general and the pre-existing “biography” material. At the same time they pre-define the narrative procedures used in the writing act itself: to narrate an autobiography I can use exclusively those particular events I remember, because I just passively describe what I know (assume to know) has already happened; there can be an excess of information and I want to choose only the relevant ones, thus giving my personal archive a distinct structure; or I can be putting together the narrative because I do not know what happened, so I need to fabricate a memory to “make sense” of the past (and the present) – there is a lack of information and/or understanding and the narrative is supposed to fill these lacunae. The *inventio* (narrative invention) of the “I” (the realm of “auto” in auto-bio-graphy) is at the same time the *inventio* of the other (the text). The body of the text is co-extensive with the body of the autobiographer; the fabric of the autobiographer’s “I” is co-extensive with the fabric of the narrative. As for “genre”, the uncertainty about genealogy (Who am I? Where do I come from?) not only etymologically, but also practically compromises genealogy (Am I using the autobiographical genre? Am I using it justly?).

Unlike Robert Smith (1995), who concentrates on Derrida dealing with and commenting on “philosophical” autobiographies, I am interested more in the relationship of autobiographical writing with the “literary”. It is in many ways a delicate and dangerous liaison – autobiographical writing is capable of testing the mutual interrelations of literature, fiction, truth, narrative, and Self. As Derrida suggests, for this liminal sphere the term “autobiography” is “perhaps the least inadequate name” (Derrida is referring here to his writing occupying the space somewhere between philosophy and literature) “because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open” (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 34). “Philosophy” here is not to be understood primarily

as the academic field of “history of philosophy”, but in its relation to “auto-bio-graphy” it manifests itself specifically as the “art” to live and die properly: “Learning to live should mean learning to die [...]. That’s been the old philosophical injunction since Plato: to philosophize is to learn to die” (Derrida [2005] 2007a, 24). I propose this “problem of life and death” (the realm of “bio” in auto-bio-graphy) to be central to autobiography as well.

Here the strategic position of autobiography in relation to literature can be glimpsed, as if the very grounds of literary theory come to be disputed and laid bare by autobiography. One reason might be that autobiography does not let the reader forget “strategically” about the author and writer of an autobiographical text (to avoid the literary-theoretical heresy of psychologizing interpretation), but on the contrary highlights the position of the writer and the situation of writing (narrating), including the psychological, cognitive, sociological, or unconscious setup of the writer as the privileged starting point of any interpretation. Consequently, the question about the status of the writing subject appears fundamental since autobiography is capable of revealing the precariousness of this position as it always already finds itself in the tension between the (true) life-story (life in general) as opposed to “fiction” (or phantasm) of what is to be formulated by linguistic means. Through the act of writing (the realm of “graph” in auto-bio-graphy) that tension is supplemented by the interdependence of the writing subject and the resulting text (the work). That is the way I understand the insight of Paul de Man:

The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self. The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions. (1979, 922)

Even though I tend to agree with de Man, it has to be pointed out that especially autobiographical writing practice (but the subsequent reading acts as well) is subject to the psychic, existential, and material (biological) economy of human life, which means that not all self-knowledge has to be tropological: cognition might be underlain by tropology but this tropology stems from and inhabits the material corporeal being. Meaning is tropological and embodied at the same time. The psychic economy can also potentially suspend the distinction between fantasy and reality (fiction and knowledge), which become indistinguishable, depending on the action of the psychic apparatus (Sigmund Freud stresses that it is not the goal of psychoanalytic practice to reintroduce the distinction; see [1916] 1924, 382–383).

In trying to answer the question of the relationship between writer and work (albeit in more general terms, not limited by “autobiography”), Maurice Blanchot views it as one that is built upon a specific negativity (Blanchot is making repeated references to Hegel): “before his work exists, not only does he [the writer] not know who he is, but he is nothing. He exists only as a function of the work” ([1948] 1995b, 303). According to Blanchot the “writer” acquires his/her status only through writing the text. Upon finishing the work, he/she as a writer ceases to exist. The suggest-

ed dependence of the authorial being upon the writing process is close to the outlook on autobiography I am proposing. But autobiographical work not only leaves the writer dead behind, it also allows him/her to “live on” or “survive”. Of course, in autobiography it is not so much the problem of “writer” and “work”, but of the “I” and “my life story”. Yet, as autobiographical writing never lets me (both as reader and autobiographer) forget about this substantial link, unlike fictional literature, “the biographical, insofar as it is autobiographical, cuts across both fields in question: the body of the work and the body of the real subject. The biographical is thus that internal border of work and life, a border on which texts are engendered. The status of the text – if it has one – is such that it derives from neither the one nor the other, from neither the inside nor the outside” (Gasché [1982] 1985, 41). (Auto)biographical text then deconstructs the inside–outside/subject–object dichotomies as it constitutes the writer who is simultaneously producing the text.

The inevitability of “death” (in the form of a “natural law” posing a limit to “life” and any “life-story”) positions the autobiographical endeavour, which “is not to be in any way confused with the so-called life of the author, with the corpus of empirical accidents making up the life of an empirically real person” (41) within a horizon that, paradoxically, can never acquire the status of a proper “horizon”, being at the same time inevitable and inaccessible, following the same deconstructive logic Gasché finds in the inside – outside dichotomy. If autobiography narrates a life story, then even before I begin to write, death lurks in the distance, because “to live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life. At the internal border or the external border, it is a heterodictics between life and death” (Derrida [1993] 2006, xvii). In an autobiography, more importantly, this heterology problematizes the status of the “I” and the “other”, because autobiographical writing is built upon an internalized transformation of the “I” into the “other”: the object to be described, understood, analyzed, and remembered. Hence, the heterological situation of autobiography makes unsure not only the division between fiction and reality, inside and outside, but also between the authorial control and that which can be called “myself”, pointing out the narrative procedures present in the construction of the “I” and their intrinsically problematic nature.

Returning to Gasché’s remark on the body of the text and the body of the writer and their relationship to (auto)biography, something needs to be added. We will readily accept the axiom or claim that every human (and animal) life is singular, despite its seemingly universal grounding in the biological that is inscribed in the “universal” language of DNA code. This common ground could then be referred to as bio-graphical. In *Life Death* Derrida tries to problematize this seemingly unproblematic sphere of modern natural sciences, “this graphics of life, this non-phonetic writing that [Georges Canguilhem and François Jacob] claim to be ‘without writing’ and that they are ready to reinvest with all the values linked to logos in its most enduring Platonic-Aristotelian-Hegelian tradition” ([2019] 2020, 23]). The term “auto” does not necessarily refer to that which is mine, i.e. “singular”, as this chance

of singularity is guaranteed exclusively by its grounding in repeatability (hence: universality), that which can be identified, looked back upon, turned into signs: “The identity of the same [...] known as the *auto*, is generated by the very thing – iterability, the power-to-be-repeated – which prohibits its stability and autonomy” (Smith 1995, 100). The “prohibition” Smith mentions is not so much an action of legal authority (like that of a positive “natural law”). Rather, the guiding principle recognized here by Smith is the differential structure of the *auto*. Its imprisonment within the linguistic structures employed leads to the feeling of entrapment in this differential structure that does not belong to language (as that which is “outside”) but splitting the “I” as that which gives it its/his/her identity. Here stems the urge (and possibility) to never stop narrating while simultaneously deepening the gap between the time of narrating and the narrated time (the example of *Tristram Shandy* is illustrative here). The “I”, as the author of “myself” is confronted with the provisionality of the existing linguistic construction, amounting to the provisionality of its “life”, its inability to find its dwelling within the already existing narrative and linguistic structures. “I” is then not to be identified with “ipseity”, as Derrida clearly states, “but in the uniqueness or singularity of a gathering together of its difference to itself” (Derrida [1996] 1998, 68). Rather than prohibiting, iterability guarantees identity as that which is changing (because it always manifests itself anew through singular events: that which cannot be calculated), opened towards the past horizon of memory and the future horizon of death, “Derrida perceives autobiography as a practice aligned with writing in *différance*, the not-here and not-now. [...] Simultaneously gazing to both past and future, Derrida locates the autobiographer in a temporal entanglement that suspends the borders between life and death” (Ergin 2017, 347). The problem is, of course, with Meliz Ergin using the visual metaphor of “gazing”, as human vision is unidirectional (unlike hearing). In metaphorical terms, I would say that the “presence” of human being, as modelled by autobiographical practice, is leaning out towards the past and the future.

More productive than identifying the “universality” of the human situation with the bio-graphy of DNA coding would be analyzing the (biological) body involved in writing, the body invested in the text, and the body as a material carrier of life. That is why Derrida showed such a profound interest in Antonin Artaud, who in his poetry, fiction, diaries, and letters, as well as in his “theoretical” work (*The Theatre and its Double*, 1938) was testing precisely this corporeal sphere of identity in its relation to “life” and “language” (see Derrida [1969] 1978). Derrida “strips naked” the corporeal dimension from a different point of view in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. What especially should not be avoided is the “affective” body together with the question of what the (physiological) affect is able to tell. Arthur W. Frank states that “the body is not mute, but it is inarticulate; it does not use speech, yet begets it” (1995, 27). In autobiographies the most acute memories (if they are not repressed) are often those that are inarticulate and/or inarticulable because they are connected to a specific, often traumatic situation, where the only available response might be the primarily bodily affect that is not, as Derrida suggests, necessarily understandable or meaningful:

We would need to make new inroads into thinking concerning the body [...] in order to one day come closer to what makes us tremble or what makes us cry, to that *cause* which is not the final cause that can be called God or death [...]. What does *the body mean to say* by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, or of saying, of meaning, and of rhetoric? ([1992] 1995, 55)

My mute body talks to me, e.g. through “butterflies in my stomach”, as it is punctured by the affective “punctum”. Yet the affect is not necessarily an “effect” of what has happened, not necessarily a “re-action”, it can also be oriented towards that which is about to happen in however distant a future. The trembling Derrida talks about does not have to be connected to a particular event in the autobiographer’s life (to the “source” or “origin” of the affect). The affect can speak also of that which is not yet there, in anticipation of the future Derrida calls *l’avenir* (as opposed to *le futur*): that which arrives unannounced, cannot be calculated, or predicted using causality, the future which bears witness to the absence of any structure of the future. Another name it can metonymically bear is, of course, “death”:

We tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, a traumatism has already affected us) to a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, but, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely *as* unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached *as* unapproachable. (54)

Returning to the paradox of the (repeatable) sovereign *auto*, and of course to the muteness, and inaccessibility of the (biological, physiological body): autobiography promises to turn this universality into singularity by the usage of (by principle repeatable, general, differential) signs of a linguistic code. Derrida describes the paradox common to all graphic signs illustratively:

To be a mark and to mark its marking effect, a mark must be capable of being *identified*, recognized as the same, being precisely *re-markable* from one context to another. It must be capable of being repeated, re-marked in its essential trait as the same. [...] The ideal iterability that forms the structure of all marks is that which undoubtedly allows them to be released from any context, to be freed from all determined bonds to its origin, its meaning, or its referent. (1984, 16)

In autobiography (and in everyday discourse as well) I can speak or write about what happened to me in the past, I can comment on the present and even speculate about the future or “invent” it. If there was only positive meaning in language and if that positive meaning was what gets repeated, then our lives would not be distinguishable. Rather, so that language can work as the carrier of individualized meaning, there are always already certain forms of negativity at play. There is little positive in language, the positive arises despite language and not thanks to it. Saying “I” does not amount to anchoring my whole being around a firm center of cognition. There is probably not even an “I” before it gets pronounced: it is the act of uttering (in autobiography, at a psychoanalytic sitting, in a soliloquy) that makes the absent (invisible, unheard) language simultaneously with the absent “I” apparent through parole, through an utterance. The written utterance and the usage of voice visibly/ audibly marks language (*langage*) as absent, as negative:

The Voice, as the supreme shifter that allows us to grasp the taking place of language, appears thus as the negative ground on which all ontology rests, the originary negativity sustaining every negation. For this reason, the disclosure of the dimension of being is always already threatened by nullity: [...] the field of meaning of being is originally disclosed only in the purely negative articulation of a Voice. (Agamben [1982] 2006, 36)

The structure of the present in which I use my voice is not an unproblematic (phenomenological) “now”, but it is differentially and deferentially constituted by the past and the future. It is grounded in the nullity Giorgio Agamben refers to (that guarantees iterability). It is not that I can speak despite this nothingness, it is this nullity that allows me to speak. As the mute body teaches me to listen to non-linguistic signs, as I speak thanks to the absence of the language, my present self is affected by its future death that marks it “alive”.

In autobiography “the Voice” is most prominently represented by the pronoun “I”. The articulation of the pronominal shifter not only grounds meaning in the present (performs the “presence” of meaning), but it is also the space-time where the negativity of language makes itself audible/visible: anyone can refer to himself or herself through the personal pronoun “I”, yet by the very utterance this possibility vanishes: I force the linguistic means. I violate them to mean only “me”:

the “I” is always posed autobiographically. It refers to itself. [...] The auto-biographical does not have to occur to an “I,” living or dead, that would come to speak of itself. The auto-bio-graphical derives from the fact that the simple instance of the “I” or of the *autos* can be posed as such only to the extent that it is a sign of life, of life in presence, the manifestation of life in presence, even if the what, or who, male or female, that thereby gives this sign of life finds itself to have passed over to the side of death. (Derrida [2006] 2008, 56)

It can be observed that the relationship Blanchot ascribed to the “writer” and “work” mirrors the relation between “I” and its “utterance”. If this relation conditions the “autobiographical”, as Derrida suggests, it means that it cannot be forgotten, unlike in a fictional narrative, thus presenting a problem as to its “literary” status. Yet things do not stop here. If I point my utterance at the world, at objects in the world, another side of this negating power of language manifests itself. Blanchot states in his “Literature and the Right to Death”:

when I say “This woman,” real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; [...] that deferred assassination which [...] my language is. ([1948] 1995b, 323)

This is the price that ought to be paid for the “ideal iterability” of linguistic signs and the reason Derrida is so attracted to Blanchot. Blanchot ascribes a blood-sucking, vampire-like quality to words. They seem to provide us with a phantasm of “eternal life”, of providing the power to speak to inarticulate mute objects, but they do it at the cost of deadening the objects they aim their power at: “The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being, its nothingness” (322). It is here, in the seemingly unproblematic everyday

language use, that the ethical dimension of being opens up. In autobiography, regarding my attempt to utter my “being”, my “life”, the consequences are similar:

in me, the power to speak is also linked to my absence from being. I say my name, and it is as though I were chanting my own dirge: I separate myself from myself, I am no longer my presence or my reality, but an objective, impersonal presence, the presence of my name, which goes beyond me and whose stonelike immobility performs the same function for me as a tombstone weighing on the void. When I speak, I deny the existence of what I am saying, but I also deny the existence of the person who is saying it. (324)

In autobiography I make myself a sepulcher inside my Self, in exactly the manner Freud talks about the work of mourning. I make myself into an inanimate object that can be described and fantasized about, so that I can see myself and talk about myself as about “that man”. I am not acting as an understanding, compassionate subject even though I killed, buried, and mortified myself, but thanks to that very act. It is in this sense that I understand Joseph Kronick’s remark that “Every time ‘I’ begin to write (the life of) my self, death interposes. Every autobiography is an allegory of the writer’s death, an *autobiothanatography*” (2000, 1014). The fundamental split (which is not only “autobiographical”, but also “psychoanalytic”) between the narrating/telling “I” and the objectified, immobile “I” as a protagonist of “my” story introduces into my understanding the split between the non-fictional (me telling the story) and the fictional (me as the one being narrated). Autobiography instructs me about the psychological basis of my understanding of “fiction”. It makes it visible in a self-referential, specular manner, where “the possibility of fiction has structured – but with a fracture – what is called experience. This constituting structure is destructuring fracture. It is the condition that is common to literature and non-literature, to the passion of literature as well as to this passion *tout court* to which literature cannot not refer. Here, in any case, the border between literature and its other becomes undecidable” (Derrida [1996] 2000, 92). And again, it is also here, in this primarily narcissistic identification, where the ethical dimension of the “other” takes its form, opening the dimensions of responsibility towards the other and towards stories. And if, as Derrida claims, this is the sphere of the undecidability between literature and non-literature, then it is also here where the political dimension of responsibility and debt instigated by the possibility to “say anything” opens:

A part of us is wounded and it is with ourselves that we are conversing in the work of mourning and of *Erinnerung*. Even if this metonymy of the other in ourselves already constituted the truth and the possibility of our relation to the living other, death brings it out into more abundant light. [...] The narcissistic wound enlarges infinitely for want of being able to be narcissistic any longer, for no longer even finding appeasement in that *Erinnerung* we call the work of mourning. Beyond internalizing memory, it is then necessary to *think*, which is another way of remembering. (Derrida [1987] 2007b, 9)

In autobiography I turn the oppositions on their heads: I can make “myself” into a subject by turning “myself” into an object to be studied, described, analyzed, and dissected. Based on this reversal I can remember (those past, dead memories), I can think, I can write to (re)invent lost or non-existing memories (for him/it). This trait, this trace, this breach announces in me the impossibility for the trace or writing to be

positive: it announces the impossibility of trace, of writing. And so, the autobiographical act (thanatographical act) becomes the model of “understanding” self. By burying myself, I free myself from genealogy: “Life, as structurally indistinguishable from death, may be considered outside of genealogy and generation. In other words, life death can pass without relation, without a priori submission to a law of genealogical belonging” (Smith 1995, 150). Life becomes still life.

Yet what happens to this “still life”, this picture, this memory of me? Is there another death relating to this materiality or “mediality” of the “I”? Derrida does not hesitate: “I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, ‘proceeds’ from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing” (2007a, 32–33). It is this death in writing, this offering that allows the Derridean trace/trace of Derrida/Derrida’s trace to “live on”, to “survive”. This answer is made possible by understanding writing as a linguistic performative act (performing simultaneously the “self” and “truth”) resulting in a singular text, text considered as an event. I do not think we can stress this way of looking at writing (as suggested by Culler 2008) without placing it within the more general logic of media. Preceding the passage I have just quoted you can read: “At the moment I leave ‘my’ book [...] I become, appearing-disappearing, like that uneducable specter who will have never learned how to live. The trace I leave signifies at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me” (Derrida 2007a, 32). Derrida accepts the spectral logic offered to him by the medium itself, the spectral logic that is not exclusive to writing or literature but applies to memory media in general.

The spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic. It is in the element of haunting that deconstruction finds the place most hospitable to it, at the heart of the living present, in the quickest heartbeat of the philosophical. Like the work of mourning, in a sense, which produces spectrality, and like *all* work produces spectrality. (Derrida and Stiegler [1996] 2002, 117)

A “still life” can be hung in a gallery, placed in a bank safe, or hung on a wall in the interior or in the exterior. In other words, it requires a place to “store” it and make it accessible (in this respect “bank safe” is not the most appropriate place). The problem of the archive, its accessibility and changes instigated by digitization and digitalization of archived content transform the duration and relevance of the “surviving trace”:

The technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media. (Derrida [1995] 1996, 17)

Today there is the possibility to record, simultaneously stream, and store “everything” down to the most tedious details. And here the problem arises: if nothing can be forgotten, as it is stored just a click away, then nothing must be remembered. The theoretical possibility to record everything is, of course, problematic,

potentially compromising the spectral logic of any legacy, because what can be seen gains its relevance from that which cannot be seen. The spectral oscillation between “appearing” and “disappearing” vanishes. “Total archive” as promised by the Internet and different apostles of a digitized future will follow a different logic, a utopian logic of a potential total digital simulation of the present and past, thus also restructuring human relationship to memories and, consequently, to autobiography.

In a text called *The Ideal Lecture*, Kenneth Goldsmith talks about an “autobiographical” experiment he made that illustrates some of the potential changes:

it reminds me of my book *Soliloquy*, which consisted of every word I spoke for a week in 1997 from the moment I woke up on a Monday morning, until the moment I went to sleep the following Sunday night. I transcribed it, completely unedited. It was about four or five hundred pages long, and I said almost nothing of value. (2018, 8)

The autobiographical “writing” in *Soliloquy* was done by a voice recorder, without any control from the “autobiographer”. Not only does the status of the memory change (nothing that was said can be forgotten, and no new memories can be fabricated) but so does the status of the Voice I referred to earlier as the sphere of the performative where the life-death is manifested. Later, he comments on his endeavour: “It was remarkable that through those words, today I can precisely conjure up events and emotions from over twenty years ago. I think it was the most meaningful week of my entire life precisely because I captured it” (56). The advancing techno-cultural transformations open new dimensions for autobiography, making the “old ways” obsolete. No acts: no remembering, no thinking, no writing, no self. Only signal-to-noise ratio.

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