



”’A Death of One’s Own’: Narratives of the (Un)Self: American Autothanatographers, 19th-21st Centuries”

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Introduction

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Introduction

Claire SORIN and Sophie VALLAS

Toi, fidèle plume d'or que je veux qu'on enterre
avec moi,
dresse ici un fugace mémorial peu drôle.
Oui, un souvenir d'enfance que je veux raconter
à cet homme qui me regarde dans cette glace
que je regarde.
Albert Cohen¹

- 1 Since the 1980s-1990s, the terms “autopathography” and “autothanatography” have increasingly been used by the theorists of autobiography. Defined by Thomas Couser as “life writing that focuses on the single experience of critical illness,”² autopathography often— but not always—envisions death. The aporic term autothanatography, the writing of one’s own death, has provided a useful framework for the theorists interested in the relationships between writing, the self and death. Much of the theoretical background of autothanatography can be attributed to French thinkers (Jacques Derrida who spoke about his “testamentary writing”, Louis Marin or again Maurice Blanchot, the very embodiment of the modern myth of the writer, according to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who described both Blanchot’s existence and writing as “posthumous”...). Recent works on autothanatography have also drawn inspiration from other European or American writers such as Paul de Man, Jeremy Tambling, Laura Marcus, Linda Anderson, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler or Felicity Nussbaum. Still, a brief overview of recent autothanatographical studies seems to indicate that American writings have not been as thoroughly or systematically explored as European ones.
- 2 The purpose of this collection of essays is to address this void by questioning the evolution, the practices and the perspectives of American autothanatographers between the 19th and the 21st centuries. While not systematically disconnecting death from disease, the following articles consider how one’s own death *shapes* the author’s writing project, turning it into a deathward project actually emerging “from beyond the grave.” The focus, therefore, is not necessarily placed on the process of dying (as it is in autopathographies), but on death itself as at once the starting point and the result of the

writing process. In a 1978 article entitled “The Shape of Death in American Autobiography,” Thomas Couser pointed out that “the form and content of the narratives are often significantly shaped by the writer’s preoccupation with death. A surprising number of our major autobiographers anticipate or offer a substitute for their own deaths; some even point beyond it, offering intimations of their own immortality.”³ While such preoccupation with death is likely to be a common feature among autobiographers in general, this volume seeks to delineate and explore the cultural, religious, racial and gender parameters that could contribute to the specificities of American autothanatography.

- 3 Perhaps most obvious among those parameters is that of race. Because the American nation initially developed through the removal of Native American tribes and the exploitation of people of African descent, the autobiographical works produced by subdued, racially abject subjects are shaped by a fascination with death and the inevitability of death. Thus, Fabrice Le Corguillé argues that 19th-century Native American autobiographies are shaped by a sense of “inevitable, total and pending death,” reflecting but also challenging the genocide of Native American bodies and cultures. Indeed, while Le Corguillé’s study of Andrew Blackbird’s and Francis la Flesche’s narratives explores and confirms the impact of impending death on Native American autobiographical projects, it also points to these texts as shrines, sacred places of memory liable to overcome oblivion and death. Thus, the autothanatographical act emerges as the founding gesture of a re-membering process that proclaims its faith in the existence of a world beyond, be it a memorial or spiritual one. Likewise, Karima Zaaraoui’s analysis of the first autobiographical novel published by an African American woman highlights the shaping influence of death on life writing. The article considers the “autothanatographical occasions” as starting points of the writing process in *Our Nig*. While Harriet Wilson’s 19th-century narrative echoes back to slave narratives, it also challenges its conventions and focuses on the predicament of being a poor indentured mulatto woman in a free state. The novel, argues Zaaraoui, is not so much about the life of Wilson—embodied in the character of Frado—as about “her own death and others.” As a martyr of racial and gender prejudices caught in the web of protracted disease and poverty, the main protagonist witnesses the work of death around and within her, eventually contemplating suicide. Still, the autobio/thanatographical project is primarily construed as a survival strategy in its most literal meaning, as Harriet Wilson hoped that her book would save her and her son from destitution. Although *Our Nig* was not a commercial success, its late 20th-century rediscovery has resurrected Harriet Wilson’s text, securing it a place in the literary landscape of African American autobiographical writings.
- 4 The processes of memory and resurrection initiated by Native and African American autothanatographical narratives are an apt illustration of what “American life writing is doing,” i.e. “[o]ften, and ideally, advocating for minority rights and human rights generally.” (Couser, foreword) Thomas Couser also points to these narratives as a form of “counter discourse [that] helped to destigmatize the illnesses that provoked them.” (foreword) To some extent, all the essays in this issue confirm and qualify this statement. It is indeed possible to suggest that all the American autobio/thanatographical works examined by the contributors constitute counter discourses that highlight and stigmatize the mortiferous power of America, be it in the shape of genocide, racism, sexism, xenophobia, prejudice or blind materialism.

- 5 Thus, Sylvia Plath's autothanatographical poems, which Nicolas Boileau aptly perceives as texts written by an author who literally constructs her "*autothanatos*," also reflect the stifling, conformist atmosphere of the 1950s US social norms that Plath was caught in: melancholia, Boileau suggests, "could be seen as the logical symptom of the 50s and 60s, when normativity and consensual thinking were of paramount importance to safeguard the danger within." Plath's dissonant voice also comes from the fact that she does not simply use death as a central question in anyone's existence, as a subject in which her own melancholia and suicide tendencies feel especially at ease, but as "a violent, linguistic act that effaces the subject." If Sylvia Plath indeed was haunted by death, she wanted to die "*in her own terms*," Boileau brilliantly argues, and autothanatography, in her case, is not simply "the writing of one's own death but the writing of the death one causes to oneself," on the page, because she has discovered "how much language carries death."
- 6 When Yves Carlet takes us back to one of the founding texts in American self-writing, Thoreau's *Walden*, he focuses on the ambiguities of a text which has traditionally been read as a celebration of life and of the regenerating powers of nature, a hymn to life intended to awaken the writer's drowsy contemporaries as well as to oppose "the morbid bent of European romanticism for melancholia and gloom" And yet *Walden*, he argues, is also fraught with sudden allusions to threatening forms of lethargy or torpidity, to rampant disease and decay, to heart-rending and melancholy moments. The fact that Thoreau systematically debunks these passages with humor actually prevents the reader from really noticing them, and yet the dense network of phobic images of suffocation or entrapment that Carlet uncovers reveals a writer who keeps drawing sudden vignettes of himself as running out of breath or dreading to be buried alive—images that can easily be seen as conveying Thoreau's concern about the booming development of his country which he saw as mortiferous. Indeed, several chapters of *Walden* describe both human and American nature as threatened by technology, industrialization and materialism. Thus, Carlet's original reading allows us to consider Walden Pond as the belly of the whale in which the subject experiences rebirth, yes, but only after having tasted utter solitude, the depths of darkness and the whisper of his own, very much American, death.
- 7 Ever since *The Invention of Solitude*, his very first text in prose, Paul Auster has developed his work (whether fictional or not) along what can be seen as an autobiographical project: the figure of the writer sitting alone in a room and watching his life taking shape on the page is recurrent throughout his work. Giorgos Giannakopoulos demonstrates that in *Ghosts*, his metafictional second novel, Auster stages and dramatizes the situation by using the genre of the detective novel and subverting its basic rules. In the course of the plot, indeed, the two characters are quickly interchangeable, becoming specters of each other to the point that they soon only exist in the texts of each other—quite a metafictional metaphor for the individual's isolation and alienation in modern America which urges a man to hire another man in order to feel himself alive, and then dead, in his gaze and in his weekly reports. When, in a dazzling game of endless reflections, the writing of the other and the writing of the self become one and the same, autobiography climaxes in autothanatography, and Giorgos Giannakopoulos' reading of the whole novel in the light of Jacques Derrida's "postal principle" offers a reflection on the complex, potentially morbid circuit of the text in self-writing.
- 8 Finally, in her analysis of Bosnian-born American author Aleksander Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*, Angeliki Tseti casts a light on the way a thanatographical project (the reconstruction of the life and sudden death of Lazarus Averbuch, a 19-year-old Jewish

immigrant and anarchist who, in 1907, was shot dead in Chicago by the Chief of police in mysterious circumstances) branches into an autothanatographical quest for melancholy narrator Vladimir Brick, a Bosnian refugee in 21st-century America: their common experience of war and violence in Europe and then of painful exile and rampant xenophobia in the US triggers off Brick's identification with Lazarus and his sudden going to Eastern Europe where, accompanied by a photographer, he hunts for traces of the boy's life. By using photographs throughout his narrative (both the striking official pictures of Averbuch's corpse and present ones taken during his European journey) Brick both resurrects Lazarus and contemplates his own psychic death, Tseti argues, while also recognizing haunting present pictures of ongoing exactions (Abu Ghraib, for instance) in the prints which he includes in his text. Drawing on the thanatographical power of photography (Barthes), the phototextual novel thus appears as a writing project springing from the other's death and ultimately aiming at echoing the narrator's own.

- 9 Such close intertwining between one's own death and the other's death points to the central and less specifically American question of what autothanatographical texts say and do about the self. For Paul de Man, autobiography casts a light on the fact that there is no subject, and therefore no self-writing: autobiography *disfigures, defaces* the subject, this entity which cannot be represented and is but a voice coming from the bottom of a grave, a manifestation of *prosopopeia*⁴. In the different essays that compose this issue, the narratives focus on different ways a death-driven self turns into an "unself", either because it gets lost in endless reflections, because it becomes fascinated by its own negation, because it contemplates its own disappearance in that of others, or because language becomes the privileged scene of its vanishing. Writing about a philosophical debate that once opposed them, Paul Ricœur wrote about Jacques Derrida that he approached metaphysics "not through the door of birth but [...] through the door of death"⁵, and Derrida was struck by the appropriateness of this assertion as applying to his whole life⁶. "I've always run on death in the same way an engine runs on gas," Derrida—a happy and funny man, according to his friends—was fond of saying⁷, and his whole work testifies to this death-drive which shapes his writing and which culminates, perhaps, in the texts that he wrote to honor his philosopher friends who had just died, in which thanatography and autothanatography are inseparable. Death, then, rather than annihilating the self, exposes its porous boundaries.
- 10 Death itself is both a highly individual and collective affair, in so far as it is meant to be exclusively experienced by the dying body of a subject whose vision and language of death—and sometimes reasons for dying—are strongly shaped by social, historical, and/or political contexts. Narratives shaped by the death of the self weave the threads of isolated voices and of external discourses into bio/thanatographical shrouds that the "subject-to-die" considers as tomb and womb. And on a metatextual level, academic discourses exploring self-narratives of death sometimes weave—however subconsciously—the dying narrator's voice with the scholar's personal history with death. As a case in point, Thomas Couser's backward look into his career shows that just as the personal is political, the personal is also academical. His reflections suggest that it is illusive to dissociate one's intellectual concerns from one's obsession with death (one's own, that of the father and the loved ones in general) and that one's private history with death deeply shapes intimate *and* scholarly writings.

- 11 We are all pregnant with our own death and must give birth to it, by actually dying and/or by aesthetically staging our dying. We hope that this collection of essays will begin to shed light on the way American autothanatographers give birth to a death of their own.
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NOTES

1. Cohen, Albert. *O vous, frères humains*. Paris : Gallimard, 1972, 7.
 2. Couser, Thomas. "Introduction: The Embodied Self." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*. Vol.6, n.1 (Spring 199): 1.
 3. Couser, Thomas. "The Shape of Death in American Autobiography." *The Hudson Review*. Vol.31, n.1 (Spring 1978): 53.
 4. de Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement." *MLN*. Vol 94, n.5. Comparative Literature, (1979) : 919-930.
 5. « Le coup de maître, ici, c'est d'entrer dans la métaphysique, non pas par la porte de la naissance, mais, si j'ose dire, par la porte de la mort ». Mentioned in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida*, Paris: Flammarion, 2010, 644.
 6. Cf. Derrida, Jacques. *Paul Ricœur*. Cahier de l'Herne, 34. Mentioned in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida, idem*.
 7. Benoît Peeters, *Derrida, ibid.*, 636.
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A specialist of American literature, Sophie Vallas is a Professor at Aix-Marseille Université, France. She wrote her PhD on the notions of voice and subject in Paul Auster's poetry, essays and

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