

# From Poetry & Autobiography to Poetry & "Autothanatography"

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The project for this issue started in a questioning about the possible bridges between poetry today and Romantic poetry. How to think beyond the now consensual but also constructed oppositions that helped the Modernists define themselves against their anxiety-inducing immediate predecessors? In the line of Marjorie Perloff's *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism*, one is urged to this re-reading of the 19<sup>th</sup> and of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Thus comes to be examined one of the major post-Romantic assessments of Romanticism which foregrounds the centrality of self and the imperialistic posture of the individual. Constructing personal experience into collective wisdom and conferring general relevance to the self's idiosyncrasies are some of the projects and processes underpinning the Romantic autobiographical poem from William Wordsworth's *Prelude* to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Even if such an approach can be (and has been) argued and questioned, this supremacy of the individual, and more specifically of the poetic self, finds itself brought to important consequences with Thoreau and Emerson's ideals of 'self-reliance' and solitary meditation. In Transcendentalism, but not just there, assessing the self in seclusion (or even in confinement with Emily Dickinson) is paradoxically meant to lead to a better, more accurate and more lucid, understanding of the world and man's condition. The self's poetic autobiography would thus coincide with collective destiny and its narrative stand as an allegory for communal fate.

It is precisely this presupposed osmosis between individual experience and general existential issues which lies at the origins of the Modernist ostentatious rejection of Romanticism. The dangers of sentimentality lurking behind the projection of the personal over the collective trigger the claim for impersonality and the attempt to erase the self's marks from the poetic text. The "I," turned into a controlling and dogmatic subject, is literally barred and "barré" by Ezra Pound from T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. And indeed, its obliteration presides over Poundian Imagism as well as Zukofsky's insistence on "sincerity," as the absence of judgment or subjectivization: the Objectivists' poem as "object" would be one of the concrete contingencies that make up the world, not its representation, nor a means to change it. What has generated a re-reading of these poetic manifestoes in terms of neo-Romanticism is however justified by the resulting poems and the aporias of language as the poetic medium.

For instance, Williams's intention in *The Wanderer* is to provide "a mirror to this modernity" (that it to say representation), and Pound's project in the *Cantos* remains "to write paradise" (as a manner of re-creating the world): the Modernist poem systematically raises issues of the interaction between self and world. The "I" emerges from the kaleidoscope of images and references and its history gets inscribed albeit surreptitiously. The subliminal marks of individual choice and personal decision indeed transform the "poem including history" into a poem including "his story." Irredeemably, it seems, the freely-composed poem aspires to autobiography, however coded it might be. The prisms of culture or psychoanalysis can thus be seen as more screens or tools to streamline the self's aggrandizing narrative of itself. Culminating with the confessional mode, the autobiographical poem, both transparent and opaque, to quote the title of Jean Starobinski's study of Rousseau's *Confessions*, appears as post-Romantic poetry's horizon.

As a case for study, Lyn Hejinian's poetic autobiography can be read in the light of Jean Starobinski's interpretation of Rousseau's autobiographical project: in *My Life*, the use of the "new sentence," of procedure, and of complex patterns of repetition sends the reader back to Gertrude Stein's refusals to write narratives of the self, to the assertion of the poetic self's existence only in language and ultimately to what could be a crucial positioning of the poem in the world as an occasional and provisional actualization of thinking processes. As non-

prescriptive and non-descriptive, this poem enacts the “writing of one’s life” as art(ificial) construct. Crucially, today’s poetry defines itself *officially* as in contrast with the past canon of both Romanticism and Modernism, whereas it *actually* pursues similar aims albeit with different, often innovative and experimental, means. To assess this, one can then gain a lot by returning to Jean Starobinski’s analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*: this pre-Romantic text is the reference that visual artist Eleanor Antin mentions in her reflection on autobiographical work for the catalogue of her 1979 exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Contemporary Art. Analyzing autobiography’s claim for truth, she underlines the vanity of this claim, when made by the artist: the contradiction between the documentary enterprise and the artistic project creates gaps that historiographers have now come to see as part of any discourse, thus bringing about the realization of any account’s aporias.

This is an art work because it makes no claim to truth. It is also not autobiographical, although it may count as an autobiographical art work. Real autobiography makes a powerful claim to truth. Autobiographical art works do not. They only make a claim to the idea of autobiography. The substance is a speech made in the first person. (Antin, 81)

Speeches made in the first person abound in Rousseau’s work, as Starobinski underlines it, turning the autobiographical work into one of obsessive repetition, from the *Confessions* on to the *Dialogues* and the *Rêveries* (216). Tentatively and unwittingly, Rousseau demonstrates the impossibilities of the autobiography as anything else than yet another screen between the self and its fantasized truth. Or rather, in his attempt to create the total transparency of an unmediated account of himself, he unveils the traps that are inherent to language: transparency remains a horizon, something to be strived for and worked upon, from within the condition of opacity and mediation. In Starobinski’s words:

Rousseau has discovered these problems and truly invented the new position which will be the position of modern literature, beyond the sentimental Romanticism for which he has been made responsible. One can say that he was the first to enact the dangerous pact between self and language : the « new alliance » by which man becomes verb. (239, my translation)

This is what is to be found brought to explicitness in many contemporary works, including, though this may seem provocative, the works of procedural poetry. The experimental nature of these works turn them into spaces for the exhibition and problematization of issues that in other more conventional or less programmatic works would have remained unspoken. For the sake of this introduction, I will consider Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* here, but the essays in this collection emphasize the relevance of many other works of poetry ranging back and forth along the chronological line from Lorine Niedecker’s texts (Marie-Christine Lemardeley) to John Ashbery’s (Antoine Cazé), Old English poetry (Graham Holderness), and the poetries of John Keats (Caroline Bertonèche), Derek Walcott (Dominique Delmaire), e.e. cummings (Kristen Leatherwood), Sylvia Plath (Laure de Nervaux), Janet Frame (Nicolas Boileau), Anne Carson (Sébastien Ducasse), Ray DiPalma, Ed Dorn or Eleni Sikelianos (Vincent Dussol).

Hejinian’s *My Life* is a long prose poem which has unfolded parallel to other non-procedural work. All of those works question the functioning and malfunctioning of memory, as well as the production of artificial coherence through syntax and rhetoric. This question combines with those raised by the definition of the new sentence as this short, perfectly grammatical unit, which however fails to cohere on a larger level. It induces a reflection on the construction of discourse and the powers at work in logical exposition. With Hejinian, what is at stake is not, as was the case with Rousseau, self-justification and the artificial construction of a fully coherent self to serve the autobiographer’s intentions. On the contrary, the aim is to show memory as working from within language and to show writing as the method to sort out these memories and order them into perhaps coherent, but irreparably fictitious wholes. In *Writing Is an Aid to Memory*, “memory is the girth,” (n.p.) which gathers, compacts and informs the rubble of one’s disordered reminiscences. In an unpublished lecture on *My Life*, Hejinian recognizes this train of thought as part of an overall obsession with the *a posteriori* constructions of a self, whose rewrites of its story are a minor mode of rewriting history. The several versions of the poem, spanning over the years 1980 to 1992, function not so much as a narrative of Hejinian’s life than as a chronicle of the processes of autobiography, underlining the

mutability of the text of one's life and the gaps that cannot be filled between the fragments of remembrance. Literalizing the very etymology of the term "to remember," Hejinian suggests the changing and aging structures of memories obsessively recomposed, re-membered into a series of texts.

Hejinian's autobiography has everything to do with enacting the wider problems of memory, of witnessing and historiography: "What were Caesar's battles but Caesar's prose" (*My Life*, 64), she asks without a question mark, thus turning the question into an assertion of the deceptive nature of narrative. Acts only outlive their moment in and as text. Hejinian's life cannot be retrieved by memory but in the present tense of a poem in progress. The added sentences, from one version of the text to the next, distort the first text almost imperceptibly, enacting the evolution of the rememberer's mind and the ways it affects the autobiographical project. Where Rousseau writes the *Dialogues* or the *Rêveries*, moving slowly through his titles toward a further and further removal from the core of truth but still believing in the possibility of reaching the total account of the fantasized self, Hejinian composes an incremental poem that evidences the layers of discourse deposited over facts in time. Later "my lives" (at 37, at 45, "in the Nineties") are other lives, so many lives which produce so many selves. This self's evolution from one moment of writing to another is what the autobiographical poem models, not just in its increments but in the very procedure that generates them. Each year is de-membered and re-membered by the poet, underlining the artificiality and fictitiousness of the notion of a monolithic immutable self to be accounted for in autobiography. As aging goes on, the poem grows and transforms itself, postponing its end to the time of death.

Autobiography or "autothanatography" then? The alternative defined by Ghyslain Lévy in his study of the autobiographical dimension of Maurice Blanchot's comments on Franz Kafka is at the heart of this issue of *Erea*. Is the autobiographical project a project to write out one's life or to write a memory for the future, a future in which the writing "I" is dead and his or her past life irretrievably lost, and being reshaped by memory and history? Would the autobiographer then be attempting a pre-emptive shaping of his own? Linking poetry and autobiography is a challenge but also a logical development: the poem is indeed often understood as a place where the linearity, intended clarity or at least clarification, and claim to truth, of autobiography need not be maintained, but these demands on autobiographical writing have proved to be expository decoys, defining the forms which we assume to be the forms of truth, but in no way guaranteeing a stable and final truth. What remains might be that the autobiographical text is simply the trace of an absent truth, one that is out of reach, hypothetical, uncertain or unnameable. The poem would then become not just a place in which the presupposed objectivity and sincerity of autobiography hold little currency, but also the very place where the drama of impossible objectivity and radical insincerity can be staged, played out, and systematized. What is at stakes then is not the veracity of open or veiled autobiographical notations, but the ways in which the poem foregrounds the traps and delusions of autobiography, thus formalizing and problematizing the issues of self-expression and self-construction.

As an attempt to inscribe the processes of remembrance and their shortcomings in the text, the autobiographical poem shows itself for what it is: a construct in language, an "art work," to come back to Eleanor Antin's words, whose only claim to truth is a claim to the truth of its fabrication, and in which one's writing about life is but a writing of one's death. This reflection emerged from the reading of Hejinian's *My Life* and from Barrett Watten's *Bad History*, a prose poem about and around the First Gulf War. To Lyn and Barrett, I am especially thankful: their works are incitations to think, and in this respect expand the field of poetics to include ethics. The authors in this issue have accepted to make their own contributions to the expansion of the field to include different times, from the Middle Ages to nowadays, and places, from Britain to Canada, the Caribbeans, and the United States. They turn the Poetry and Autobiography project into a truly collective work, our own "grand piano" to echo the *Grand Piano* of these San Francisco poets' "collective autobiography."

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