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"A word-web woven": Autobiography in Old English Poetry

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by Graham Holderness (Hertfordshire)

> A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on the individual life, in particular on the development of his personality. (Lejeune 193)

Today Philippe Lejeune's concise definition of "autobiography" raises many problems of ontology, psychology and gender. Terms such as "real person", "own existence", "development of (...) personality" could no longer be so innocently employed. Nor would it be legitimate to imply, if only grammatically, that autobiographical interest belongs "naturally" to masculine gender (see for example Marcus, and Stanley). Lejeune himself acknowledged the limitations of the definition, noting for instance that fictional narratives as well as factual ones can be autobiographic. He insisted on only one qualifying condition for autobiographical discourse: there must be "identity between the *author,* the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*" (193). The writer must be telling his/her own story about him/herself.

But this assumption depends on two problematical issues: the status of the writer vis-à-vis the work, and the validity of the writer's intentions. If the writer is, as we now generally believe, no longer sole guarantor of the text's meaning; and if intentionality may be a mere fallacy, at best a distraction; then on this definition autobiography loses its claim to consideration as a distinct literary genre with clear boundaries.

> Poststructuralism ... by positing language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, deposed the author from his or her central place as the source of meaning and undermined the unified subject of autobiography. (Anderson 6)

Paul de Man redefined autobiography as "de-facement". When an author places him or herself in the text, he/she produces a persona that substitutes for, and displaces, the living writer. (de Man 919) The autobiographical "I" is a mask that can purport to realise the author's experience only by fictionalising it. Roland Barthes further and formally destabilised the subject of autobiography by writing a self-reflexive and parodic autobiography of his own, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes.* First, second and third person forms of address are deliberately confused to fragment any sense of coherent subjectivity or consistent identity between writer, narrator and protagonist. Barthes compares the relationship between author and represented "self" to that between a Brechtian actor and his/her character. The actor "shows," without pretending to "be", the character he/she plays.

Barthes, as Sean Burke has observed, was actually conserving the possibilities of autobiography by recreating its form (Burke 189). Jacques Derrida, by contrast, in Linda Anderson's phrase, "scatters autobiography as a motif or theme throughout his work" (Anderson 79) In Derrida's work, the dispersive effects of writing negate any attempt to realise self-presence in a text. But at the same time, since autobiography lies between the writer and the work, "between fiction and truth" (*Demeure* 16) it spills over into textuality, rather than remaining outside to anchor the text in the "real".

Derrida's most significant contribution to thinking about autobiography was to redefine it (not for the first time) as "autothanatography", the product of an author who is already dead. The text carries the author's name, but the name has already survived the "death" of the author:

> In calling or naming someone while he is alive, we know that his name can survive him and already survives him; the name begins during his life to get along without him, speaking and bearing his death each time it is inscribed in a list, or a civil registry, or a signature. ("Ear" 49)

Derrida characterises Maurice Blanchot's autobiographical story *"L'Instance de ma mort"* as a "narrative or testimony — signed by someone who tells us in many ways and according to

Holderness, Graham. "'A word-web woven': Autobiography in Old English Poetry." *EREA* 5.1 (printemps 2007): 25-34. <www.e-rea.org>

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every possible tense: *I am* dead, or *I will be* dead in an instant, or an instant ago *I was* going to be dead". (Derrida, *Demeure* 45) The author, Blanchot (who admitted to Derrida that the incident narrated in the story happened to him) thus finds a way of saying what cannot be said, the impossible, since "I cannot testify to my death — by definition, I cannot say, according to common sense, I should not be able to say: I died or I am dead" (Derrida, *Demeure* 46).

"The dead cannot speak; they cannot attest to their own passing, for death annihilates the first-person witness". (Secomb 33) In the story this "impossible possibility" (Derrida, *Demeure* 46) is made actual. From the moment Blanchot "knew the happiness of nearly being shot to death" (quoted Derrida, *Demeure* 52), "il fut lié a la mort, par une amitié subreptice" (Blanchot 4). "The experience of facing the instant of death means that now he has a death within him awaiting its answering death from without" (Secomb 41). From then on death was always there with him, only deferred, "toujours en instance" (Blanchot 10): "Comme si la mort hors de lui ne pouvait désormais que se heurter a la mort en lui" (8).

These theoretical redefinitions of the autobiographical produce particular problems for poetry, which of all the major literary kinds is traditionally regarded as the most personal and confessional. The "I" of lyric poetry traditionally speaks directly to the "you" of readership, notwithstanding the passage of time and the mutability of history and culture. And certainly, unlike fine wine, poetry travels well. Some of the oldest poetry can still cut the deepest emotional wounds. This is especially so of the ancient laments of heartbreak, exile, solitude. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion." (Psalm 137:1) "Life with its sweetness was ebbing away in the tears he shed for his lost home." (Homer, *Odyssey* 92) But where else, among all the old songs of love and loss, would we look for the most intense personal engagement with the poignancy of deprivation, but to the Anglo-Saxon elegies?

> *Maeg ic be me sylfum   soðgied wrecan* ... (Anonymous 33)
> My self's own story I truthfully tell ... (Holderness, *Craeft* 36)

What else is "autobiography", but "to sing a true song about myself"? *The Seafarer* is presented as an autobiographical drama, which begins both with the self *("sylfum")* and with the promise of true testimony ("*soðgied")*, the benchmarks of all autobiographical writing. Yet we do not know who wrote the poem, or when and where it was written; nor can we define the precise nature of the sufferings lamented (see Holderness, "Exile"). The poem achieves its individual lyric intensity, paradoxically, by constructing an anonymous and impersonal dramatic monologue, a form that facilitates "revelation of character" as well as "interplay between speaker and audience". (Sessions 508) The sorrows described by this compelling voice are not the sorrows of an individual "poet", or even a "seafarer", but the stock sorrows of an age. The sufferings of that sensuously-realised body are the generic sufferings of the body in those historic hard times. If we agree to "honour the signature" of this poet, in Lejeune's sense of trusting to the truth of his testimony (202), then we do so in the knowledge that we are participating in a fabrication, sharing in the literary fiction that is anonymous autobiography.

Who then were the poets of Anglo-Saxon England? Let us name them. The *Beowulf*-poet; the maker of *The Seafarer;* the author of *The Dream of the Rood (...)* These circumlocutions indicate that here the author is baptised in the name of the work: he is secondary, derivative, an author-function. We do not need to invoke Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to realise immediately that in Old English poetry at least, "the author is dead".

 We have no idea who wrote most of the surviving 30,000 lines of Anglo-Saxon verse. The majority of the corpus survives in codices, collections of fair copies made in the monastic scriptoria of England between the 10th and 11th centuries, where the poems stand in beautiful calligraphy, shorn of any indication as to date, circumstances of composition or authorship. As S.A.J. Bradley puts it, "The manuscript texts (...) give rather equivocal guidance as to the age or sequence of composition of the Old English poems" (Bradley xiv).

Although most of the great poems from this period are highly literary compositions, their verse-form and diction derive from traditions of oral poetry within which the poet was a "*scop*", a shaper, an oral performer whose technical skill lay in the versification and musical

rendering of ancient and new material. The word derives from the Old English verb "*scieppan*", to shape, create or form, source of the modern verb "shape". Bradley suggests that this convention rendered the author disposable, since his performative function would simply be taken over by another "*scop*":

> Nor can the names of the poets be used to secure firm association between the extant poems and the age in which they were composed, for it is a natural consequence of the oral conditions of composition and transmission that the original composer of a poem is forgotten as it passes into popular circulation, each singer himself assuming for the duration of the performance the "I" personality through which the action of these poems is so often narrated, and freely recreating the substance of the poem, untrammelled by the existence of a definitive written version of it. (xiv)

A handful of Old English poets are known by name, but virtually none of these can be associated with a significant body of work.

Only Cynewulf, as far as is known, took care to build into his poems an explicit identification of the "I" — speaker of the narrative with himself, the author, by incorporating a signature in runes — and even of Cynewulf no certain historical documentation exists, so we can give him no sure dates. Otherwise, there is no named poet to whom a corpus of extant poetry in Old English can be assigned — neither Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne (died 709), nor Caedmon, recipient, according to Bede, of a miraculous faculty for composing Christian poetry at Whitby between 657 and 680, both of whom have claims to be the first poet to treat Christian subject-matter in the English language (Bradley xiv).

The story of Caedmon the cowherd is told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* In a vision Caedmon is prompted by a mysterious visitor to sing, to compose and perform poetry. The example of his work Bede gives (in a Latin paraphrase) is a verse rendering of the opening lines of *Genesis.* Caedmon thereafter, the story continues, found himself able to make wonderful poetry out of any scriptural source (Bede 248).

Bede thus provides a compelling "myth of origin" for the invention of English religious verse. A simple, unlettered man of humble occupation finds, through divine inspiration, a gift of eloquence, which manifests itself naturally in his own vernacular language, English. It is natural to assume that the poem we have is an authentic version from which Bede made his paraphrase. But the manuscript records of the Old English poem are later than Bede's Latin narrative, so the Old English versions may have been made from Bede's Latin, and Caedmon's poem itself may have been lost in the wonder of his dream.

If Caedmon did really exist, and did really compose poetry, he acted only as vehicle for an activity of paraphrase, a mouthpiece for the translation of grand narratives. There is nothing of himself in his poetry, nothing personal, nothing of the autobiographic. Bede casts him as a character in a great drama, the reinvention of English poetry as Christian literature, where he functions objectively as an author-function, rather than subjectively as the author of his "own" work.

Bede himself also contributed to the very small corpus of "signed" Old English poetry a short lyric known as "Bede's Death-Song".

> *Fore the neidfaerae   naenig uuiurthit*
> *thoncsnotturra,   than him tharf sie*
> *to ymbhycggannae aer his hiniongae*
> *huaet his gaste   godaes aeththa yflaes*
> *aester deothdaege doemud uueorthe.* (Dobbie 57)

> Since no-one's so knowing
> As to deem his departure
> No matter of moment, consider this case
> In advance of your voyage (breeze
> At the back of you, black sky
> Before): how God the good
> And within you the wickedness
> Will weigh at the dawning
> Of death's dark day. (Holderness, *Craeft* 64)

Bede is reported as having composed this poem, shortly before, and in the full knowledge of, his own death: *"'Iam'"*, he is said to have said, quoting 2 Timothy 4:6, *"'tempus resolutionis mee instat, quia cupio dissolui et esse cum Christo"* (Dobbie 125). ("The time of my departure is at hand, for I long to dissolve and be with Christ"). He composed the poem in English, "*canebat (..) in nostra quoque lingua, ut erat doctus in nostris carminibus*" (Dobbie 119-20). ("He sang in our own language, since he was well versed in our poetry").

The poem then is clearly autobiographical, composed for the benefit of others by a dying man, to encode his own thoughts and feelings into the verse-form of his native tongue. Yet the poem itself is highly impersonal and generic. The narrative context derives from the text known as *Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, so the poem appears as part of an obituary. Here autobiography is clearly autothanatography. Life-writing is also death-writing, as Bede struggles to approach in language that moment where language fails: the "absolute singularity" of death "which never gives or presents itself to us, here and now, in any experience, or as such" (de Vries 32). The poem comes down to us incorporated within a formal obituary. It is also linguistically displaced, translated from its specified original English into Cuthbert's Latin. It is a death-bed message, a final homily, a last will and testament: the product of a living voice. But a song of death: Bede's death-song.

The one poet whose name is indelibly associated with a number of complete poems is Cynewulf. We know this because he himself signed them, inserting his name into two poems in the form of a runic acrostic spelling out the letters. But what's in a name? Cynewulf's "signature" is quite different from the name at the foot of the page, or on the spine of a book, that declares authorship. Here the name is built into the text in the form of a puzzle that the reader is obliged to decode. The name is functioning textually rather than contingently, working out linguistic and literary problems rather than pointing beyond the text towards a living author. If the latter was the author's intention, then it met with failure, since attempts to identify the poet with historical Cynewulfs have not succeeded.

But this was apparently not the author's intention. This becomes very clear in Cynewulf's poem *The Fates of the Apostles* in the Vercelli manuscript (Krapp 66-102). The poem invites the engaged, perspicuous reader, the reader who takes pleasure in the poem's artistry, to work out who wrote it:

> *Her maeg findan   foreþances gleaw,*
> *Se ðe hine lysteð   leoðgiddunga*
> *Hwa þas fitte fegde.* (Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, ll. 96-8)

(Here may a wise man who takes pleasure in song learn who composed this lay).

The letters of the name are then encoded into the text, and from them we can decipher it: Cynwulf. But finding the name is not, we discover, the solution to the riddle. The text in which the name is encrypted is an elegy for the world's transience, the evanescence of wealth, finery, pleasure. The earth itself will dissolve in the last days, when the King will reveal his absolute power. Now at last the reader can understand "who" is the true author, whose identity has been revealed in the words of the poem:

> *Nu ðu cunnon miht*
> *hwa on þam wordum waes   werum oncyðig.*
> (Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, ll. 105-6)

(Now you may know in these words he who was unknown to man).

The poet's name is as fragile and temporary as his mortal body: it will be forgotten, just as his physical existence will encounter dissolution. He is going on a long journey ("*Ic sceall feor heonan*" [Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, l. 109]), and will need the kind and loving thoughts of friends ("*Huru ic freonda beþearf/liðra on lade*" [Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, ll. 91-2]). His destination is "*langne ham/eardwic uncuð*" (Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, ll. 92-3): the long home, the undiscovered country (from whose bourn no traveller returns). The true function of his name, then, is not to

identify him, or to claim ownership of property in his work. It is to enable those who read his poem to use his name in prayer, and to understand that the ultimate author of all things, including Cynewulf's poetry, is God. The autobiographical speculation again resolves into autothanatography: Cynewulf wants to hear his soul's name commemorated in intercessions rather than invoked as the name of an author. He is not recording his own life in memories of the past, but writing out a memory for the future. His concern is not with his post-mortal reputation as a writer, but with the condition of his soul as it embarks on the final voyage:

> Nu ic þonne bidde   beorn se ðe lufige
> þysses giddes begang   þaet he geomrum me
> þone halgan heap   helpe bidde,
> friðes ond fultomes … (Cynewulf, "Fates" 59, ll. 88-91).
>
> (I pray to that man who takes pleasure in this song that he may bear me in mind, and seek help and comfort for me from the heavenly host).

Cynewulf's poem *Elene,* also included in the Vercelli manuscript (Krapp 51-4), is an epic that treats of the finding of the True Cross by the mother of the Emperor Constantine, Helena. At the end of the poem Cynewulf introduced a brief "personal" reflection, describing to the reader how his own poetic capacity derived from his conversion to Christianity. The self-definition is that of the writer whose work we are reading, so again appears as an "author-function". Yet the delineation of the self in conversion elucidates the poem, and fleshes out a life for the name he then goes on to disclose.

On this occasion the insertion of the name is part of an autobiographical digression, since it draws a parallel between the poet's life-experience and Constantine's own vision of the Cross. Just as the Emperor found victory by entrusting his fortune to the Cross, so the poet has discovered in the Cross the means to self-discovery and self-liberation. The parallel thus simultaneously differentiates and connects the two visions, and suggests that what has prompted the poet to compose such a historical narrative is his own life-changing experience of religious conversion. The "autobiography" is therefore both inside and outside the poem: it is the catalyst that turns the believer into a maker, and the devotional commitment evidenced by the poetic composition itself. "Cynewulf" is thus the name of an author, and the name of an author-function; it points beyond the poem to a life lived, but also self-referentially back into the poem for evidence and proof of the autobiographical experience.

The poem begins with Constantine facing his enemies across the River Tiber at the Milvian Bridge, waiting on the borderline between defeat and victory, death and life. He comes through the ordeal successfully with the help of the Cross, seen in a vision. The poem then narrates his mother's quest to locate and restore the Cross of the Crucifixion. At the very end of the poem, Cynewulf begins to reflect on his own life and his own engagement with the Cross. The evidence disclosed in the poem of its miraculous power is something he has experienced in his own heart and mind. Old, tired, his body a ruined house "*faecne hus*" (Cynewulf, "Elene" 71, l. 1236), he has nonetheless managed to weave this wonderful tapestry of words, "*wordcraeftum*" (l. 1237), thanks to the liberating and enlightening power of the Cross.

The impact of conversion on the poet's imagination is compellingly dramatised. The Cross bestows on him wisdom, understanding, breadth and depth of thought and feeling. The poem's imagery of liberation, of light dawning, of widening horizons, powerfully conveys an experience of awakening, the ending of ignorance and darkness.

> Me rumran ?eþeaht (...) on modes þeaht,
> Wisdom onwreaht (...) (Cynewulf, "Elene" 71, ll. 1240, 1241-2)
>
> learning unlocked me (...)
> And dealt me in darkness
> The blinding blow of a life unpromised (...) (Holderness, *Craeft*, 49)

At the same time the imagery of durance and confinement giving way to liberty and freedom of movement realises the effect of the poet's absolution from the burden of sin.

The verse is remarkable in its weaving together of separate experiential strands. These include the consciousness of intellectual awakening, a sudden expansion of the mind; the freeing from sin, figured in metaphors of breaking, loosening, physical liberation; the unstoppable flow of loving joy that fills the convert's heart with the force of divine grace; and finally the power of inspired speech, the capability of poetic composition that seems to appear suddenly on his lips and in his hands. Even more remarkable is the dialectical rhythm achieved in the poem's oscillation between confinement and expansion, echoed in the subtle play of assonance and half-rhyme. Under the irresistible impact of God's grace, the mind expands, the body is broken open to admit the influx of the Holy Spirit, the caged heart is freed from its prison, and the power of song is unloosed. But then there is a re-focusing of effort and energy into productive labour. Thus the convert's mind is expanded, almost exploded, but its powers are gathered and re-applied in the service of a new faith. The body is fractured, dispersed, occupied, but then re-formed, as the poet finds himself possessed of the technical capability of making something new.

Previously the poet was dead to life, constricted by the bonds of sin, existing in a kind of living death. Now he is dead to sin, in his resurrected body embarking on a new life in the service of the spirit. Thus we find enacted in Cynewulf's brief autobiographical interpolation nothing less than the great drama of Christian redemption itself: "as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:21) Devotion to Christ means death, the death of my old "self" and the birth of a new. "For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him" (2 Tim. 2:11). The death of Christ on the Cross permanently transvalued both death and life, setting them into a new relation. Christ's death releases us from the death of sin, so that, from the everyday perspective, living towards Christ can appear as a death. "Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him" (Rom. 6:8). St Paul meant this literally. We are "dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world" (Col. 2:20). Paul's own conversion, forcibly cast to the ground and then raised again, cast into the dark of blindness and then restored to the light, offers an exemplary model of the Christian convert's rite of passage from ignorance to wisdom, from darkness to light, from death to new life.

In *Elene* Cynewulf's autobiographical confession proves to be another instance of autothanatography. In speaking of his life, Cynewulf commemorates his death; in testifying to the authentic experience of selfhood he describes a fundamental disjunction between the writing self and an "other" who is no longer here. The subject of autobiography is at once singular and multiple, coherent and fractured, self and other; at once "I" and "you", simultaneously "we" and "he" or "she".

When I made a translation of Cynewulf's autobiographical fragment, published first in the *European English Messenger* (Holderness, "Anglo-Saxon" 36) and subsequently in *Craeft*, I was engaged *prima facie* in a sophisticated literary exercise. In the course of writing a long-delayed book on Shakespeare's history plays (Holderness, *Shakespeare: the Histories*), I found myself brooding on *Hamlet*, and writing a long chapter about the ghost in history. Prompted by these speculations to dig deeper into the *Hamlet* story, I embarked on a fictional sequel to Shakespeare's play, drawing also on the Scandinavian roots of the Hamlet legend. (Holderness, *The Prince of Denmark*) Wishing to provide a cultural context for a Nordic narrative, I returned to some very early studies and began to translate specimens of Old English poetry into modern verse, initially elegiac and epic, later Christian devotional poetry. Some of these translations were incorporated into the novel, others into a separate collection of verse. (Holderness, *Craeft: poems from the Anglo-Saxon*).

This is the version of events that would be supplied by a literary micro-history, were the historian to drill down to so humble a level: source and analogue, imitation and adaptation, tradition and the individual talent. This explanatory narrative however masks the deeply personal, undeniably *autobiographical* dimension of this story. For what prompted me, after 25 years of publishing critical and theoretical writing, to write creatively, was an experience very similar to that recorded in Cynewulf's *Elene*.

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Dawn
Upsprung with a far-flung
Shroud-tearing, chain-shearing
Bond-breaking brightness
Of light's laceration, broke
With a big bang into my
Bone-box, body with spirit
So suddenly filled
To the brim now, full. (Holderness, Craeft 50)
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I would not have written this if it had not happened to me. I returned to those ancient words because I found that Cynewulf was speaking of something I had known, felt in the blood and felt along the heart.

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Grief-grappled, sin-shackled,
Pinioned and paralysed
By fault-fettered manacles
Of my own making,
Till learning unlocked me
And dealt me in darkness
The blinding blow
Of a gift unpromised,
A gift half-grasped,
When freely God's grace
On my dry face dropped
As a dew. (Holderness, Craeft 49)
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I can testify to the authenticity of this experience with all the seriousness and sincerity required for a traditional categorisation of autobiographical writing; I can assure the reader of a complete and indissoluble identity between author, narrator and protagonist.

> A testimony is always autobiographical: it tells, in the first person, the sharable and unsharable secret of what happened to me, to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense and feel. (Derrida, Demeure 43)

And yet notwithstanding the unassailable veracity of the witness, my poem, "The Awakening" is as clear an example of *autothanatography* as Blanchot's *L'Instance de ma mort*. Can this be so in any way but rhetorically, since I so obviously live to tell the tale? Yes: but only by means of the theological truth embodied in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. The "self" I recognise, or remember, as mine, the "self" that entered that labyrinth of translation, adaptation, reconstruction, is now literally, that is to say ethically and linguistically, dead. The "self" that emerged from the labyrinth was a resurrected self, wholly disengaged from its predecessor. The poem is the record of that transaction. But though it was the old, corrupted self that entered the activity of the poem's making, it was only the new self that was capable of making anything at all, since the gift of expression came to that new self, as it came to Cynewulf, as a free gift of grace.

I say "wholly disengaged", knowing that physically and psychologically this cannot be entirely true. The old superseded self can present itself as other, as deceased, as capable of being reinvented to play a role in a retrospective autobiographical drama. Yet that rejected, unwanted otherness remains part of the new self too, as a cry of reproach, a shameful reminder, a wound that can never truly be healed. Derrida suggests that all mourning is doomed to failure since mourning involves the interiorization of the now dead other. Only the living can mourn only the dead, and what is dead is wholly other. Successful mourning however is that which assimilates the other(s), making them a part of us, and thereby destroying their otherness, their "alterity". Such mourning "makes the other a part of us (…) and then the other no longer quite seems to be other". (Derrida, Memoires 35) If, however, that which is other is that which was once me, "my self", "myself", then mourning is an essential distantiation of the living self from its now dead counterpart. Such mourning can succeed only by failure, since to succeed would be to re-assimilate the other, and thereby threaten the achieved viability of the self. Secomb is correct in her paraphrase of Derrida's paradox: "A failed mourning may succeed". (36)

The writers of conversion narratives, writes John Freccero, construct scenarios that are "tantamount to a death of their former selves and the beginning of new life" (25). As Rachel Falconer explains, this narrative self-destruction ironically restores the possibilities of autobiography:

> This quasi-deathly experience bestows a special advantage on the narrators of conversion texts. Most autobiographical narrators have a limited vantage point on the meaning and shape of their own lives because they are still in the business of living them. But the converted narrator sees his or her former self as belonging to a prior life altogether; the pre-conversion past is absolutely closed off from the present and therefore open to being authoritatively interpreted. (Falconer 46)

Jeremy Tambling defines the construction of that pre-conversion self, the old, now repudiated "I", as a "fiction", and links it to the "death of the author". Conversion writing "works by its ability to divide up the self's experiences into those of a past 'I' whose existence may be completed, destroyed, as the death of the author fiction would suggest (...) and the present self" (20).

The writer "must maintain the fiction of a past 'I' for upon doing so the whole fiction of the possibility of conversion rests" (20). But both the death of the author and the reality of conversion are fact, as well as fiction. The context here is a discussion of St Augustine's *Confessions,* a work which is credited with inventing the very form of autobiography. No-one before Augustine, says Karl Weintraub, had "opened up their souls in the inwardness of genuine autobiography" (45). If this is so, then autobiography originated not with the full presence and coherence of a realised self, but with alienation, fracturing, multiplicity, the repudiation of a self now apprehended as wholly other, superseded, dead. When in his garden at Milan Augustine heard the child singing, and eagerly returned to his book (229-30, Book VIII, XII.29), it was to Paul's Epistle to the Romans that he returned: *"induite dominum Iesum Christum et carnis prouidentiam ne feceritis"*. "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh" (Pusey 171; Romans 13.14). "If Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin: but the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Romans 8.10). In an extraordinary passage describing the sensations of conversion Augustine shows unmistakably how labile and iterable was his conception of the self even in the very act of constructing it.

> *(...) tu autem, domine (...) retorquebas me ad me ipsum, auferens me a dorso meo, ubi me posueram, dum nollem me adtendere, et constituebas me ante faciem meam, ut uiderem, quam turpis essem, quam distortus et sordidus, maculosus et ulcerosus. et uidebam et horrebam, et quo a me fugerem non erat. et si conabar a me auertere aspectum (...) tu me rursus opponebas mihi et inpingebas me in oculos meos, ut inuenirem iniquitatem et odissem. noueram eam, sed dissimulabam et cohibebam et obliuiscebar.* (Augustine, *Confessions* [Latin] 219, Book VIII, VII.16)

> O Lord (...) it was you who twisted me round towards myself, dragging me from behind my back, where I had placed myself, unwilling to observe myself, and setting me before my face, where I could see how foul I was, how crooked and defiled, bespotted and ulcerous. I saw, and was horrified; but there was nowhere I could escape to from myself. And if I sought to avert my eyes from myself (...) again you threw me across myself, and thrust me before my own eyes, so I could see my own iniquity, and hate it. I had known it, but I pretended it was not there, winked at it, cast it into oblivion. (Augustine, *Confessions,* my translation)

In this construction of the subject as wholly subjected, the impossible physical contortions and the dizzying shifts of vision show Augustine to be a deconstructionist *avant la lettre.* "Rehearsing long before Descartes", said Jonathan Dollimore, "that most famous proof of subjective being (*cogito ergo sum*), Augustine wrote: *"Si enim fallor sum"'* ('If I err I exist'). In other words, Augustine founds his being upon erring movement" (146-7).

To realise the self it is necessary first to apprehend "the caesura which severs present from past selfhood" (Falconer 1). And here the death of the past self and the death of the author join hands. We know our former selves in the same way as we read texts. We cannot know the past as it knew itself, and we cannot know ourselves as we were at an earlier age. We cannot re-live our past experience, we can only recall it; we cannot recover the past, we can only read it. We are absent from both. Yet memory throws light on present being, and the present consists largely, as T.S. Eliot observed, in reading the past: "For the pattern is new in every moment / And very moment is a new and shocking / Valuation of all we have been" (Eliot 199).

The author is dead, yet lives. I am dead, yet I live. He is dead, yet he lives. Autobiography and autothanatography both "Point to one end, which is always present" (Eliot 190).

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