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Writing the self as other: Autrebiography

Abstract
According to Roland Barthes, the autobiographic act of remembering and reclaiming the past commits the fallacy of conflating the author, narrator and protagonist, and giving the first two power over the latter. The past self is a fictional 'other', and the writing of memoir is a reading of the past self as a text. JM Coetzee therefore calls his meta-autobiographies (the three-part Scenes from a Provincial Life*) autrebiographies, or 'other-life-writing'. In this paper, I discuss the need for writers of memoir and autobiography to construct a past self as 'other', and argue for the impossibility of any kind of authentic representation of the 'self' in memoir or autobiography.*
Keywords: autrebiography. autobiography, JM Coetzee, Roland Barthes, Philippe LeJeune, méconnaissance, biographemes, autobiografiction, autobiographics

Introduction

This paper arose out of discussions in a Master of Creative Writing class on writing memoir and autobiography. In this age of so-called 'fake news', students felt that it was imperative to 'fact-check' texts for inaccuracies in order to avoid James Frey's fate at the hands of Oprah when he was exposed for making up much of his so-called memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (Wyatt 2006). Students scrutinised the truth claims in the texts studied, and when they found incongruence, they felt 'betrayed' because the writer had broken the reader-writer contract where a text claiming to be a memoir or autobiography was found to be riddled with fictions. As memoirists/life writers/autobiographers, the class maintained we are compelled to write the 'truth' about 'ourselves'. But we discovered that such a position is untenable and asks an impossible task of the writer in that it demands an unproblematic rendering of 'fact', 'truth' and 'identity' or 'self'. Arising from such discussions, we selected autobiographical texts that problematise these concepts rather than mask them, such as Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), JM Coetzee's trilogy of 'autobiographies' *Boyhood* (1998), *Youth* (2003) and *Summertime* (2009), and Roland Barthes's autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) to see if we could 'bowerbird' some narrative techniques which would serve to resolve this dilemma and find a bricolage of strategies for writers attempting to present 'truth' in this way.

Author, narrator, protagonist

Philippe LeJeune argues that 'in order for there to be autobiography the author, the narrator and the protagonist must be identical' (LeJeune 1989: 4). This collapsing of author, narrator and protagonist assumes and enforces in the mind of the writer and reader that the writing self and the self being written about are 'one single stable identity'. The 'I' in autobiography or memoir is the author. LeJeune also claims that autobiography is 'a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his [sic] own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality' (LeJeune 1989: 2). And it is this contract to which readers hold authors accountable.

But it is well established that language does not describe the world-as-it-is and does not elicit truth: 'language should not directly name or identify truth which would make it a form of identity logic, but surround truth' (Lee 2005: 64). Nor can it accurately represent the past in retrospective prose: 'it is through language that we create the world … we do not describe the world we see, but we see the world we describe' (Jaworski 1996: 178).

Paul de Man redefines autobiography as 'de-facement'. When authors place themselves in the text, they produce a persona that substitutes for, and displaces, the living writer (de Man 1979: 919). If the autobiographic 'self' constructed in autobiography is not synonymous with the subject writing that self, this creates an immediate dilemma for the writer who must confess that what is written cannot be the truth, even though intended to be, but rather a fictional construction. And the 'autobiographic pact' the author has implicitly made with the reader is broken the moment the 'author' writes a word on the page about their 'self'. That pact is broken the moment a writer chooses one 'fact' over the other.

> Autobiography is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fit in with your evolving purpose. (Coetzee 1992: 18)

Eggers acknowledges this contradiction in his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), arguing that the self written about is a lie, that the writer has ridden roughshod over a delicate and complex history of their 'self' in one smooth Grand Narrative that subsumes and consumes and writes over 'real' past lives:

> There is, intrinsic to the process of a memoir, the resulting destruction of one's former self. Writing about those years, and being as cruel to who I was as I could be, implicitly means that you are killing that person … overall you are saying: This was me then, and I can look at that person, from the distance I now have, and throw water balloons on his stupid fat head. (Eggers 2000: iii)

Eggers admits that his present 'self' with all its so-called wisdom of hindsight has taken some kind of moral high ground, imposed an often arrogant view of his past 'self', based on certain assumptions and premises from a so-called 'superior' vantage point – the present. Instead of portraying 'the past', he has retroactively clothed his past self in twenty-first-century fashion.

Biographemes

Roland Barthes too challenges LeJeune's conflation of author, narrator and protagonist as one identity both in his theoretical treatises and in his creative work. In spite of the playful and perhaps ironically provocative title, Roland Barthes's 'autobiography' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977) makes clear that there is only a tenuous connection between author and textual protagonist. Barthes consciously distinguishes between these two entities and argues that the former should not have authority over the latter:

> What I write about myself is never *the last word* … my texts are disjointed, no one of them caps any other; the latter is nothing but a *further* text, the last in the series but not the ultimate in meaning… What right does my present have to speak of my past? Has my present some advantage over my past? (Barthes 1977: 120 italics in original)

Barthes begins his autobiography with the claim that 'all this must be regarded as told by a character in a novel' because people have a 'different knowledge today than yesterday' (Barthes 1977: 120), thus severing the link of self-knowledge by an author over his or her textual self. Biography is 'the history of a body and what it has produced' and every 'biography is a novel that dares not admit it (Barthes 1977: xiii). And further, he argues that the past self that authors write is not continuous but made up of memory-images of themselves which are pieced together: 'What actually belongs to me is my image-repertoire, my phantasmatics (Barthes 1977: 153). *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*is not a retrospective narrative about a continuous and contiguous self called Roland Barthes, but a series of competing constructions with equal power over their meaning. The act of writing autobiography for Barthes is an act of reading the past Roland Barthes as text with all its codes and Lacanian mirror images. 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 they play.

The Masters students writing memoir and autobiography found it useful to examine the various narrative techniques Barthes uses in order to read the self as other, or the other as self. We noted that:

1. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*is comprised of 92 narratives, arranged alphabetically, not chronologically, and called a 'circle of fragments'. This is an example of what Lyotard calls '*petits récits*', eschewing grand narratives for glimpses or provisional sketches or impressions. In this way there can be no mistake that there is a 'last word' or final truth about the self apprehended in the act of writing and reading. Barthes has coined the term 'biographeme', meaning 'the short note, the brief sketch' (Barthes 1975: 189) to describe these fragments, which he wrote on index cards in order to reveal how the autobiography is constructed in shards that are interchangeable and can be shuffled around.. This reinforces the notion that his texts are 'disjointed, no one of them caps any other' and that each is a 'further text' (189) which avoid a hegemonic grand narrative.
2. Barthes writes 'aslant' (one of the fragment titles of his 'autobiography') and thus prioritises silence, marginality, 'interpolations' and 'parentheses' (Barthes 1977: 73). In a previous work, Barthes has suggested that 'writing must go hand in hand with silence', and that 'the author never produces

anything but presumptions of meaning, forms, and it is the world which fills them' (Barthes 1972: xi).

3. Barthes uses various innovative experimental narrative techniques to disrupt the flow of 'natural' discourse and to prevent the reader conflating author, narrator and protagonist: photographs intersperse the text, as do lists, doodling signatures, and the reader (including Barthes himself) is then invited to construct 'Roland Barthes' with these building blocks.
4. Barthes's narrative voice alternates between first and third person, thus distancing the writer from the false assumption that there is no distance between author and character: 'I had no other solution than to rewrite myself – at a distance, a great distance – here and now. [I] remain on the surface' (Barthes 1975: 142). To write about oneself in the third person implies a disconnect between the person writing and the person written about. And then to insert the subject 'I' in the narrative serves to forefront the metanarrative necessary to demonstrate that the self is being constructed subjectively and provisionally. To write in the third person about oneself, as Barthes does, is not new. Andrei Codrescu's *The Life and Times of an Involuntary Genius*, for example, uses the third person in order to create distance and in order to view the 'self under construction' (Codrescu 1994: 24). LeJeune argues that when an author chooses to use third person, 'he pretends to speak about himself as someone else might … or invent[s] a fictive narrator to present the author's point of view or tell his life story' (LeJeune 1977: 27) without breaking what he calls the 'autobiographic pact' (author = narrator = protagonist). But to use the third person to make the point that the self written about is 'other', ie is not the author, appears to overturn the very premise of *auto*biography.

Autrebiography

JM Coetzee's series of 'autobiographical' works, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, is published under the titles *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009), and has surprised many readers as the author was (and still is) a very reclusive figure not known for volunteering personal information about himself. The series attracted great interest because of its promissory autobiographical nature: 'This is the book many admirers have been waiting for, but never could have expected' states the back-cover blurb from *Boyhood*. But on reading the series, many may have been disappointed that the reader/writer contract was not fulfilled. They should have been cautioned by Nabokov's warning: 'it is childish to study a work … in order to gain information about … the author' (de la Durantaye 2016: 184).

But in a book claiming to be memoir or autobiography, readers are entitled to have that expectation. Initially publishers and critics found difficulty in categorising these so-called autobiographical works. Were they autobiographical fiction (Lenta 2003: 157), or novels (Attridge 2004: 156), or fictional autobiographies (such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which uses the third-person voice as well as renaming the 'other' self as Stephen Daedalus)? '[In] a larger sense', JM Coetzee tells Atwell in an interview, 'all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction' (Coetzee 1992: 17). Marketed as memoir in the UK and as fiction in the USA, these 'autobiographies' deconstruct the reader/writer contract and the fundamental premise of autobiography as window into received truth.

> Getting to the core of yourself may not be feasible ... perhaps the best you can hope for will not be the history of yourself but a story about yourself, a story that will not be the truth but may have some truth-value, probably of a mixed kind – some historical, some poetic truth. A fiction of the truth in other words. (Coetzee 1999)

If autobiography is necessarily fictional, and fiction is autobiographical, the way we construct the world through narrative implies that the binaries we have created to shelve our books (fiction/non-fiction) are perhaps fallacious.

In an interview with David Attwell predating these autobiographies, J M Coetzee coined the term '*autre*biography' for a narrative that interrogates self as other:

> DA: When one tries to put the historical self into writing, what emerges, inevitably, is a substitute for that self. Would you agree that at a basic representational level, all autobiography is *autre*biography? If so, is your decision to write autobiography in the third person a case of making this process explicit?
>
> JMC: Yes, all autobiography is *autre*biography, but what is more important is where one goes from there. With regard to my own practice, I can only say that to rewrite *Boyhood* or *Youth* with 'I' substituted for 'he' throughout would leave you with two books only remotely related to their originals. This is an astonishing fact, yet any reader can confirm it within a few pages. (Coullie et al 2006: 216)

*Autre*biography takes Barthes's work seriously: a memoirist/autobiographer can only read a past self as an '*autre*', and make explicit to the reader that they are writing about an 'other' who is not author, not narrator, not necessarily protagonist even, but character.

Autobiografiction

In *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), Max Saunders argues that such binary genres as fiction/non-fiction, fiction/memoir are unstable, and that a number of modernist and postmodern novelists are in fact writing a kind of autobiography in their novels, a genre he coins 'autobiografiction', concluding that the relations between autobiography and fiction have always been unstable in their representation of the 'self'.

The narrator of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for example, claims that 'It's the truth even if it didn't happen' (Kesey 1963: 13). Philip Roth also undermines the simple binaries of truth and fiction by stating that 'memoirs lie and fiction tells the truth' (Drabble 2010: 110). And when interviewed about autobiography's relation to truth, JM Coetzee responds with a similar paradox:

> Everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, the enterprise of self-construction ... does it yield only fictions? Or rather,

> among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself? (Coetzee 1992: 17)

At the very least, this allows writers to play with interesting experiments in form. Barthes plays with the notion of writer as reader of the self as other; Coetzee plays with many counter-selves (see below), Nabokov refracts a writer self into doubled and mirrored characters, and contemporary writers attempting autobiography are freed to play the game of 'self-construction' (Nabokov 1990: 23).

Boyhood, *Youth* and *Summertime* are part autobiography and part fiction, or as some critics point out, contain deliberate 'factual inaccuracies'. In *Boyhood*, Coetzee has changed some historical names (Attridge 2004: 149) and in *Youth* there are some glaring incongruities and obvious 'non-facts', for example, the protagonist is single, yet it is common knowledge that Coetzee was married at that time. J M Coetzee 'has woven fictional episodes into a framework of autobiography' (Attridge 2004: 160).

JM Coetzee the author is not 'John' the character, the 'boy' or the 'youth'. This is apparent because not only does the narrator speak of his past self in the third person, but in the grand finale of the trilogy, *Summertime*, the othered self, 'JM Coetzee', is deceased. The 'biography' is written posthumously, in disjunctive and often contradictory fragments, deferring and deflecting the construction of a continuous self altogether, a self that becomes increasingly illusive. So 'How do I know when I have the truth about myself?' What is the truth about oneself? Perhaps that 'autobiographies' expose the grand lie of autobiography, that the 'truth' is but a 'fiction of the truth'.

***Boyhood*: writing degree zero**

The first book of the trilogy deconstructs boyhood, laying bare the lie of idyllic childhood: childhood is not 'a time of innocent joy', but rather 'a time of gritting the teeth and enduring' Coetzee 1988: 14). It describes the gawky self-conscious John Coetzee in unsentimental third person:

> It's a good thing that we should grow fond of the self we once were … we should not be too strict with our child selves… Nevertheless, we can't wallow in comfortable wonderment at our past. We must see what the child, still befuddled from his travels, still trailing his clouds of glory, could not see… Forgivingness but also unflinchingness: that is the mixture I have in mind, if it is attainable. First the unflinchingness, then the forgivingness. (Coetzee 1998: 29)

The boy John struggles with his identity, recoils against the patriarchy of his society, yet is complicit with it, and his narrative consists of 'unravelling contradictions in the context of a culturally racially conflicted society' (Jacobs 2011: 43).

Boyhood is pieced together in fragments of memories, selected by an author who is reading his past as text. If autobiography is about the past, one would expect it to be written retrospectively, in the past tense, from a present vantage point. Yet *Boyhood* is written in present tense, the 'writing degree zero' that Barthes

describes as giving immediacy to the action and enacting its creation in the moment, rather than being at a reflective distance from it. What Barthes means by 'writing degree zero' is this:

> [A] colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language … the existence of a third term, called a neutral term or zero element… Writing at the zero degree is basically in the indicative mood, or if you like, amodal … the new neutral writing takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgments, without becoming involved in any of them; it consists precisely in their absence. But this absence is complete, it implies no refuge, no secret; one cannot therefore say that it is an impassive mode of writing; rather, that it is innocent. (Barthes 1967: 76-77)

Coetzee's absent, degree zero writing style serves to separate LeJeune's author/narrator from protagonist and allows the narrator to perform a 'neutral' reading of his younger self by allowing no refuge in a naïve collapsing of identity. The past self is constructed, and seen to be constructed – enacted, performed, indicative – and the self presented is fragmentary, illusory, and damaged:

> He knows that he is damaged. He has a sense that something is slowly tearing inside him all the time: a wall, a membrane. He tries to hold himself as tight as possible to keep the tearing within bound. To keep it within bounds, not to stop it: nothing will stop it. (Coetzee 1998: 9)

Youth: the 'testing of the soul'

In the second of the series, the autobiographical character John moves from his provincial hometown and encounters the world as a South African, first in Cape Town and then in London. The past self is tested, and provisional identities are negotiated:

> It is not a good time to be a South African in London... They would be content if South Africa would quietly vanish over the horizon. They certainly do not want forlorn South African whites cluttering their doorstep like orphans in search of parents. (Coetzee 2003a: 86-87)

Just as *Boyhood* (1998) plays off Tolstoy's *Boyhood* (1854), *Youth* (2003a) is a palimpsest of both Tolstoy's *Youth* (1857) and Joseph Conrad's 1898 autobiographical tale 'Youth'. The subject matter is thematically similar (immersion in a foreign culture), but it is the style of Conrad's tale that J M Coetzee uses to full effect:

> The technique of both novelists depends on that 'nice ironic distance', a discrepancy between the manifest and latent content of the words on the page, a way of saying without asserting. In the deep structure of this book, that gap works as a kind of negative theology. Nothing like redemption oscillates in the space cleared by ironical distance. (Foden 2002)

For example, JM Coetzee achieves this effect in a passage where John, now a 'youth', ruminates about art – nothing is explicitly asserted, but in the gap of ironic distance, a truth oscillates:

> the artist must taste all experience from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as the artist's destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious. It was in the name of experience that he underwent London – the dead days of I.B.M., the icy winter of 1962, one humiliating affair after another: stages in the poet's life, all of them, in the testing of his soul. (Coetzee 2003a: 164)

Youth echoes with cadences from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (2000 [1916]). But whereas Joyce uses narration and broken images to build a coherent artist-self, a 'priest of the imagination', John's identity is not reconstructed, or narrated, but rather posited and tested, with selves tried on and discarded like clothes. At the end of *Youth*, the remaining self is an abandoned shipwreck. He is not a poet, not a writer, not an artist, but an ontologically isolated exile.

***Summertime*: autobiographics**

Summertime (2009) further disrupts the autobiographic pact with the reader who is no longer able to seamlessly connect an author's reminiscences of a past 'other' self. In *Summertime*, readers discover to their surprise that JM Coetzee is dead and the book is a fragmentary collage of reminiscences and biographical investigation into the life of this 'other' by tangential sources. The Barthesian author is literally dead here, and it is the absences and silences in the text that allow various readers to construct and determine the dead author's identity without any pesky autobiographic intrusions from the author himself. Yes, *Summertime* is bookended with fragmented entries of a notebook written by 'Coetzee', sandwiching a series of interviews by an English biographer, Mr Vincent, whose task is to create a biography of the deceased author, but these are deemed unreliable. Mr Vincent gets 'I' wrong, and some of the interviews are clearly inaccurate, biased, and disparage more than glorify the dead author. This is a parody of an autobiography, a deconstruction of the way memoirs are written. In *Summertime*, that past *autre*-self is elusive, and constructed out of the biased and unreliable accounts and memories of the survivors. How has Coetzee achieved this?

Leigh Gilmore's 'autobiographics' may be helpful here. Gilmore argues that in order to accurately represent 'the shifting sides of identity', we need to acknowledge that the 'self' is not a monolithic, ahistorical 'I', but 'is multiply coded in a range of discourses' (Gilmore 1992: 42). The notion of 'autobiographics' is concerned with 'interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation' (42), and welcomes contradictions and multiple angles. *Summertime* is 'autobiographic' in this way as it contains 'polarised and discrepant interviews conducted with Coetzee's lovers, family and friends' as well as contradictory and often factually inaccurate narratives (Kusek 2012: 112).

Summertime breaks the assumption that the autobiographic pact is controlled by an authority figure (the author, or narrator) and that they have jurisdiction over the

facts used to construct the identity of the protagonist. The autrebiography comprises what would now be called a blend of fact and 'fake news', an unreliable account of the author's life story, which is incoherent, fragmentary and at times contradictory to our public knowledge of J M Coetzee. If Nabokov is the 'perfect dictator' over his characters (Nabokov 1990: 69), here the 'author' is much like the impotent 'author' in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), who has lost his authority over his characters: 'I [the author] ordered him [the character] to walk straight back to Lyme Regis. But he gratuitously turned and went down to the Dairy' (Fowles 1992: 81).

What is unsettling about *Summertime* is that the 'dead author' JM Coetzee's life story has been hijacked and appropriated by the voices of others. If as Lacan suggests, the self is a fiction construed by others, here is an autobiography where the author is also an *autre*, told by others, refracted and distorted through the lens of the devices used by biographers and autobiographers to get to the 'truth'. What truth is found in this autobiography? That there is no fixed, monolithic self in autobiography, only constructed discourses in which several (fictitious) versions of 'I' reside, and whoever has power over the narrative gets to tell the 'truth'.

Counter-selves and periautobiography

JM Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003b) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) are not considered autobiographical, yet they use the same *autre*biographical devices.

In 1997, JM Coetzee was invited to give a paper at an animal rights conference in the USA. The paper he delivered was the story of an academic, Elizabeth Costello, who gives a paper at an American conference on animal rights – published as a chapter in *Elizabeth Costello* but also as 'The Lives of Animals' (1999), a metafictional novella and a collection of responses by Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger and Barbara Smuts. The novella delivers us an 'aslant' version of JM Coetzee but also an oblique critique of this version of himself, the story narrated by Costello's estranged, ageist, and somewhat embarrassed son. Costello fails to win the audience over, and the autobiographic *autre*-self is presented as fictional, and contextualised.

Similarly, *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is the narrative of an academic closely resembling J M Coetzee who has moved to Adelaide in Australia, has written *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and is editing a collection of his 'Strong Opinions' for publication (echoing Nabokov's 1973 collection of essays *Strong Opinions)*. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, JM Coetzee constructs his *autre*-self as a naïve, out-of-touch academic called Signor C who is exploited by his secretary and her boyfriend, who hope to take advantage of him and the money he has received from a recent award. (JM Coetzee the 'real' author had recently won the Nobel Prize). In the novel, the protagonist Signor C's strong opinions are presented in context (*in situ*), deconstructed, and ultimately undermined by the counter-narratives which (literally) run parallel on the page.

These two novels refuse to allow one narrative to dominate: Costello's paper on 'The Lives of Animals' and Signor C's 'Strong Opinions' are always undermined and mediated, even appropriated and written over by the narrators of his/her life. Again here is *autre*biography where the author is an 'autre', told by others, and the 'self' disarmed of its 'author'ity. James Olney's term 'periautobiography'

(meaning 'writing about or around the self') is maybe more appropriate in describing the problematic task of representing the self (Olney 1998: 35).

Unwriting the self: *méconnaissance*

The 'self', Lacan suggests, is fictively constructed of language, and even prelinguistically when a baby sees itself in a mirror, it constructs the (false) notion of the self as a 'whole, unified body', a misrecognition, or '*méconnaissance*' (Lacan 2001: 1285). For Lacan, the self is shaped by its relation to others, by the desires of others, by social expectations and prohibitions (or as Freud calls them, the superego and id). Our self is determined by pre-existing language, and our so-called unique individual identity of self has been pre-established.

Barthes and JM Coetzee expose this 'whole, unified self' therefore as a mere fiction, and demonstrate that any attempt at autobiography either perpetuates this illusion of self or exposes it for what it is, not a Cartesian 'I' (autonomous, pure consciousness separate from the 'other'), but an 'ego' built with the pre-existing Lego blocks of language and through our relations with others. If we are conscious of the making of such a pastiche of perceptions 'infected' by language, the act of writing autobiography should be the act of unwriting that self, deconstructing hardened notions of identity and revealing that the self is a heap of broken images (Eliot 1922: 19) cobbled together like some passable ghost (McCarthy 2006: 49).

The autobiographical text therefore becomes the site where 'the subject unmakes himself [sic], like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web' (Barthes 1975: 64) and a new self emerges, 'like the ashes we strew into the wind after death' (Gallix 2015).

Performing autobiography as an act of genre

We do not write autobiography or memoir, but perform 'the act of autobiography'. The 'autobiographies' discussed in this paper are not 'autobiographies' as such, and maybe not even '*autre*biographies', nor are they genres, but 'acts of genre ... at once contrived, duplicitous and yet agential' (Hayes 2010: 2).

Miranda Doyle's 2017 'memoir' *A Book of Untruths* (Doyle 2017a), performs this 'truth' well. On the cover, the name of the book and the author's name are scribbled out (under erasure), and the selves constructed within its pages are pastiches of false memories. 'This life, told through its lies', she explains, 'is an attempt to make explicit the debauchery we're dealing with when we talk about memoir' (Doyle 2017b).

We inhabit autobiographical writing as a hermit crab inhabits a shell, using it as a temporary home for a provisional self. To write autobiography is to acknowledge that language performs not one's fixed self but a myriad of possible selves, where the 'self as other' is 'eternally written here and now' (Barthes 1972: 142), first by the scriptor, and then by the reader.

Conclusion: autobiographic strategies for writers

Writers are expected to establish a reader expectation of honesty, openness and 'truth'. But writers are no longer the sole guarantors of the meaning of their texts. Post-structuralism, 'by positing language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, [has] deposed the author from his or her central place as the source of meaning and undermined the unified subject of autobiography' (Anderson 2011: 6). Derrida has dismantled autobiography as 'autothanatography', the product of an author who is already dead (Derrida 1998: 49). Knowing this, how can autobiography be written?

The Masters class decided that in light of such 'bowerbirding', there is no naïve autobiography possible anymore, no turning back: we must be aware that any act of remembering and reclaiming the past commits the fallacy of conflating the author, narrator and protagonist, and that this act gives the both author and narrator power over the protagonist. What right do we have to impose a modern consciousness onto a past self which has been historically determined by factors prior to our own historiographical sensibility? Rather we need to see this self as other, read the textuality of such an 'other', and lay bare the process of constructing this past self, write autrebiography, or perhaps meta-autobiography, or 'other-life-writing'. The self is a 'living principle', disrupting the status of the written text, transgressing such genres as autobiography, biography, fiction and history (Attridge 1992: 229). When we write autobiography we perform 'autothanatography', and in this way survive the 'death' of the author.

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TEXT
Vol 23 No 2 October 2019
http://www.textjournal.com.au

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