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## *Inaccurate Autobiography – the ‘true-invention’ of a life*

### *Abstract*

*This paper takes the Aristotelian binary of praxis and poesis and approaches the process of autobiography via its double lens. Drawing on a reading of Hannah Arendt done by Julia Kristeva, it considers the question of whether the activity (that is: praxis) of making-narrative might constitute an activity that is particularly ‘human’. It is framed by the playful and serious challenge offered by Derridean deconstruction to think two things at once, and to practice an inhabiting of binary ultimatums. Given this, it goes on to suggest that making in an autobiographical fashion, rather than involving anything primarily representative or documentary, is more paradoxically akin to the invention of what is most true about that which we are in the habit of calling ‘our life’. Indeed, it can be argued that this praxis invents that very ‘life’ – the latter being an entity or category that logically does not precede the same writing that purports to describe it, but rather arises with its activity. This self-reflexivity (a manoeuvre that at once describes and invokes the very thing described) coincides with Derrida’s explication of invention’s mechanism.*

*Keywords: autobiography, life, death, Aristotle, Kristeva, Arendt, narrative, Derrida, writing, invention, praxis, poesis, Badiou, ontology, the hinge, self-reflexivity, truth, play*

‘The chief characteristic of this specifically human life,  
whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events,  
is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a  
biography;  
it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from *zoe*,  
that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of *praxis*.”’  
– Quoted by J. Kristeva in *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, 8.

In his seminal work, *Of Grammatology* (1997), Derrida brings to the reader’s attention the word ‘hinge’ [*la brisure*] as a possible aid to the thinking of two things at once. Deconstruction, the notoreity of which is often attributed to and associated with Derrida, challenges us – among other things – to withstand the discomfort of thinking two incongruent concepts simultaneously and to resist the urge either to collapse them swiftly into a hierarchy, or to cancel out one with the other. This, I propose, constitutes a kind of practice, a practice of thought and expression, and is a possible hint for engaging with philosophy’s implicit question – *how to live?*

The term ‘hinge’, borrowed by Derrida from Roger Laporte (French author and critic) will, according to the former, open the possibility for ‘designating difference and articulation’. Here the former quotes the latter:

This word is *brisure* [joint, break] ‘ –broken, cracked part. Cf. breach, crack, fracture, fault, split, fragment, [*brèche*, *cassure*, fracture, *faille*, *fente*, fragment.] –Hinged articulation of two parts of wood- or metal-work. The hinge, the *brisure* [folding-joint] of a shutter. Cf. joint.’ (Derrida 1997: 65)

The term ‘hinge’ would assist, also then, in Derrida’s broader agenda to think that which would eschew the metaphysical absolutes of presence or absence. A hinge will be an *almost* broken part that functions not *despite*, but *thanks to*, its instability. Not able to be relegated to the simple category of wholeness, it does not designate any kind of definitive, non-relational break. A hinge is the mechanism that facilitates the changing relationship between two surfaces or planes. It creates the possibility of gradient, as well as openings and closings. A hinge accompanies a door – that which welcomes and/or excludes. This image of a doorway is also an ontological one, since doors, entrances and thresholds speak to our ability to conceptualise beginnings, and therefore origins. One is either shut-out, or already within time, the journey, the happening, etc. To think, however, the trembling at the fulcrum of *the beginning* is to think a doubling, or an *at oneness*, that is difficult to accommodate within a calculated binarising or arithmetic thought (on this point, see Pont 2009). Derrida’s sincere commitment to rethinking ‘presence’, or deconstructing its function within copious textual examples, might – I contend – relate to broader concerns about totalitarianisms – within thinking, aesthetics, politics, and then the possible practical consequences of these in recent 20th century history. To long for presence, in a naïve way, I read Derrida to be cautioning, risks a kind of striving for perfection and wholeness that itself can drive towards the exact opposite of what is phantasised: orchestrated disintegration, terror and radical deconstitution of living beings.

This paper, then, will attempt to perform a hinge-like function. That is to say, rather than only *saying*, it will also *do* something. The central concern of the writing here, then, involves the threshold between description and action/creation, and attempts to perform the complicitness of this oscillation via the praxis of describing it. In other words, we will inhabit a space that is concerned (but not solely) with the abstractly ontological, but which also teeters on the thought of *praxis*, life, ethics and the pragmatic.

## Writing: Praxis or Poiesis

Let us take up Kristeva’s helpful framing of the notion of *praxis*, accompanied by Aristotle’s writings. In her reading of Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, Kristeva summarises:

[Arendt’s] reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* leads her to distinguish... *poiesis*, an activity of *production*, from *praxis*, an activity of *action*. Arendt alerts us to the internal limitations in the production of works: labour and ‘works’ or ‘products’ ‘reify’ the fluidity of human experience within ‘objects’ which we ‘use’ as ‘means’ with a view to a given ‘end’; the seeds of the reification and utilitarianism to which the human condition succumbs are already within *poiesis* understood this way. (Kristeva 2001: 14)

*Poiesis*, then, would have as its teleology a specified thing and a thing of substance, at that; or in the case of labour, the completion of a necessary task (doing the dishes, bathing the children). Wood-working will lead to a useful table, and what matters is the usefulness, the utilitarian value of the table.

Kristeva then goes on to speak of *praxis*:

Conceptualized with the notion of *energeia* (actuality) by Aristotle, *praxis* includes activities that are not orientated towards a specific goal (*ateleis*) and leave behind no created work (*par'autas erga*), but instead 'are exhausted within an action that is itself full of meaning.' (2001: 14)

*Praxis* would actualise itself, as itself, and not necessarily as a means to something else. Its only trace, dare we state it this way, is a relational – rather than a substantial – one. This would be the art of the artist (perhaps Woolf's writer with a room of her own). It would be the practice of placing paint on the canvas, or moving the body around the dance studio, but not in order to produce a work that could sell, nor a video documentation of the choreography. For Arendt, it will relate to the life of the *polis* and that which she defines as specifically human: narrative.

There is a way in which quotidian writing (or the *making* of texts, and texts themselves as written artifacts) can, as one possible mode for narrative (and not the classical one, which would be theatre, favoured by Aristotle), be analysed using the lens of these two terms. What, in the first instance, would the features or attitude of a writing that conformed to the notion of *poiesis* be?

It might – hypothetically – involve a writing that was specifically oriented in its production goal and directed towards an outcome that could be known in advance. For a writing conforming to *poiesis*, the action (verb) of the writer would mean little aside from its needing to generate the outcome such as the published artefact, fame or royalties, for example. Or even just an accurate shopping list.

On the other hand, *praxis* might be at play in various and unidentified ways in the daily activity of many types of writers. This reminds us of Rilke's confidence to his young poet that one probably should only write if one absolutely has to (see the first letter, Rilke 1954). Such writers, who *have* to write and *are compelled* to engage in this process, are possibly less motivated by the tangible outcome and therefore more aligned with the *praxis* side of Arendt's binary.

It is obvious, however, that there is no pure example of either *praxis* or *poiesis*, but that they hold varying degrees of sway in the process of writing, which is both a kind of object-making and an experience *in and of* itself. The lens, however, offered by Aristotle, does do a particular work for thinking, allowing an analysis of motivations and subtle differences in approach to be identified and somehow rigorously described.

An overly dominant *poiesis* approach might, as Arendt seems to suggest, tacitly lead in the direction of totalitarianism, where 'men' themselves become tools for outcomes alone, and that no-one's life, including that of the 'totalitarian man', holds any meaning or worth at all (Kristeva 2001: 4). This is the possible unfolding at the extreme end of *poiesis*' spectrum. Similarly, there would be a point where the emphasis on *praxis* (on action or the activity itself) becomes unhelpfully hyperbolic. This might be at work in the disdainful artist who, fearful of the threat of *poiesis* contaminating the purity of her process, cannot deign to allow anything to come to fruition in a substantial or saleable form.

This, among other factors, may lead to starving artists and a particular kind of artistic elitism or ghettoisation (and is a defining aspect of clichéd Bohemianism [see in general Wilson 2003]).

Without sliding towards a fundamentalism, a *praxis*-inflected approach can take the pressure off obsessing about *where* everything's going and *what* is going to come, and focus instead on the quality of process, the pleasure (or not) of the activity, and perhaps afford a certain 'integrity' to the final work itself, which arguably may store traces of this approach in the tangibility of its form. This is a highly debatable notion, with opinions ranging from the sternly sceptical to the archly certain. A simple explanation for the latter position may be that, as humans, and as human-consumers of products, objects and services, that we engage differently with these when we know something of their history and 'story'. Less alienated from the process of their coming-into-being, we may have a particular kind of relationship that overflows the bounds of the object's pure use value. Since no-one in this historical moment can claim that consumer desire operates in any kind of straightforward manner in relation to the pure utility of the object, this filtering of the question via the lens of *poiesis/praxis* is barely a surprising, nor even unusual manoeuvre.

What is helpful, I would suggest, is that Aristotle's distinction highlights a grammatical aspect relating to work, making or the creative in general, which is that *poiesis* operates nominally – that is, in relation to resulting substance, or thingness. *Praxis*, in contrast, is an approach that forces the verb into view. Rather than solely noticing *what* comes, the emphasis is shifted to the *how* of activity.

The movement of process art, around the 1960s, for example, shows its clear debt to the thinking of *praxis*. This movement emphasised 'the "process" of making art (rather than any predetermined composition or plan) and the concepts of change and transience' (Guggenheim 2001). Concerned with the actual *doing* (and simultaneously with a refusal to produce a trace that would be exploitable by capitalism [see Wilson 2003]) the work can be apprehended as a species of performance, or analogously as a kind of rite or ritual. Artists of this movement might also explicitly state the motivations for the work or its rationale and intentionality. Also interesting is that for process art, there is often curiosity concerning the ephemerality or insubstantiality of objects and final products. It is not surprising to note that this movement, as it was enacting its own identity, was practising in parallel to the growing thought of post-structuralism, and its broader questioning of the category (or force) of *Presence*.

### Narrative as 'Human' Activity

Kristeva will identify in Arendt the idea that the capacity for, and engagement with, story-making is what renders the so-called human, specifically *human* (2001: 7). The French term *récit* might also bring us closer to the *act* of telling, than perhaps its English translation as 'narrative' might do. If we treat playfully this very deconstructible bifurcation, we get the question: is this a matter of *praxis* or *poiesis*? There will be, for Arendt, a difference between 'mere' *zoe*, and *bios* (see header quote). The making of the events of life into a story, into a biographical entity – through a process of identifying where life (the story) begins and ends – is what will be particular to the category called 'human'. Kristeva writes:

... *the possibility of narrating* – grounds human life in what is specific to it, in what is non-animal about it, non-physiological.

While implicitly evoking Nietzsche, who sees ‘the will to power’ as a normal desire in life, and also invoking implicitly Heidegger, who steers Nietzsche’s biologism towards the ‘serenity’ of poetic expression, Arendt rehabilitates the *praxis* of the narrative. (Kristeva 2001: 8)

It is uninteresting, for the thrust of the overall argument here, to submit to Arendt’s apparently ‘natural’ distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. Like the *praxis/poiesis* pair, the positing of such a clear demarcation may serve mostly as a lens for applying thought to *tendency*, thereby making use of a purely theoretical opposition as a frame of reference, but one that nevertheless *cannot stand*. One of the difficult contributions from the deconstructive advent in philosophy might pertain to this issue of how to approach classical binary distinctions, that when placed under pressure fall asunder. Derrida has been clear (1997) that it can’t be a matter of abandoning this legacy, but rather that the task for thinking is to inhabit it carefully, and with an understanding of its ‘hydraulics’ (my term), that is, an ability to appreciate the practicality of such framings in particular instances, yet also to understand their mechanism at various levels of abstraction. It could be summed up, perhaps, as a kind of playful caution that includes and complicates.

So, it is the *process of the activity* of narration that interests Arendt, it seems. While also speaking of what makes a good story, and so forth, at this juncture in her writing, what is at stake is something that humans *do*, which for her is ‘non-physiological’, that is, it has no obvious utilitarian or survival-related purpose, apart from the fact that the activity of making-narrative valorises life, in a way that offsets a totalitarian trajectory.

I do not agree with Arendt’s positioning of the human and the so-called animal in such a presumptuous and easy manner. (It would be worthwhile, but beyond the scope of this current paper, to investigate available theory engaging with this *also* very metaphysical division. One obvious text, however, is Derrida’s ‘The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’ (2002) in which it is argued that an obvious violence done to ‘animals’ is the fact of our naming them, so to speak, *en masse*, thereby obliterating their differences between themselves, and also choosing this bulk name on their behalf). However, if we forgive Arendt her complicity with anthropocentrism, then we can perhaps take up her notion of narrative, which despite being almost excessive [1], presumed to contribute little to the ticking over of breathing beings, remains one which nevertheless allows the beings that engage in it, a particular kind of quality, and one that might be desirable politically and perhaps not so dispensable at all. If story matters politically, then one should not dismiss so readily its relevance for the ‘mere *zoe*’ of continuous survival.

Story, in other words, has a force in relation to the *between* of humans, but not as obviously in terms of their crudest tangible economies, or the human as mere-life. Kristeva points out that between-two is the root for the word interest: *inter-esse* (2001: 14). One could speculate about whether this term/notion might speak to something of the Heideggerian thought of *care*: ‘care as the Being of *Dasein*’ (1962). Heidegger will say that:

As one of *Dasein*’s possibilities of Being, anxiety – together with *Dasein* itself as disclosed in it – provides the phenomenal basis for explicitly grasping *Dasein*’s primordial totality of Being. *Dasein*’s Being reveals itself as care. If we are to work out this basic existential phenomenon, we must distinguish it from phenomena which might be proximally identified with care, such as will, wish, addiction, and urge. Care cannot be

derived from these, since they themselves are founded on it.  
(Heidegger 1962: 227)

*Care* becomes the way to grasp the structural whole of Dasein's everydayness in its totality, and relates to Heidegger's seeking of an ontological foundation for this entity. If that which, according to Arendt, makes the human specifically-human is this facilitating of a *between* (in narrative practice) or an *inter-esse*, narrative would seem to intimate itself as something at least somehow relevant to the so-called *ontological*.

The possibility in Greek of speaking of 'life' using two different terms, points to a deficiency in thought for an English (as mother tongue) speaker, like myself. What is the 'mere *zoe*' mentioned by Arendt, compared to the *bios*, of 'biography', that would be aligned with this something that is 'specifically human'?

Kristeva will bring us to the notion, crucial to narrative practice, of the ability to identify when a story begins and ends. Kristeva informs us that Arendt does not make central the cohesion or plot of narrative, so much as:

...firstly to recognize the 'moment of ending or closure,' and secondly to 'identify the agent' of the story. The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time...  
(2001: 17)

In the dovetailing of the threads of our discussion up until now, we find something curious emerging. Arendt will place emphasis on the *inter-esse*, on narrative-as-activity, and on the decision of where a 'story' begins or ends. Derrida, with his famous and quicksilver offering of *différance* (that which is a species of non-concept) will imply that the latter 'is' a non-originary-originary 'operation' that precedes the nominal. *Différance* tries to gesture towards that which would permit difference itself to appear, that 'movement' which would logically precede the arising of categories, names, and the edges of the thinkable/sayable. We also note in Hegel, the present (*Gegenwart*) viewed as a kind of limit (*Grenze*), 'the absolute *this* of time' (Derrida 1982b: 40). Heidegger, too, may contribute to this thread in his emphasis on the meaning of the Being of Dasein as *care*, an *interested-state* that generates the possibility of Dasein in an *a priori* fashion.

What I would like to suggest, or glean from these thoughts, is that the basic, structural operation, that permits what we identify as story to emerge, has something in common with the very workings of Derridean *différance*, and that this structural operation – of designating beginnings, endings or protagonists (that is, point-of-view, to some degree) involves the movement of the trace, the marking – if you like – of the edges that permit appearance to appear. I only have a love story, for example, if I mark out within the multiplicity of minutiae of days and months, conversations, and the rubrics of bodies and landscapes the kind of 'cut' which brings forth that emphasis. The 'same' minutiae of detail could let arise a tale of economics, of domesticity, of friendship, and even allow a different protagonist to 'appear'.

If this be the case, and that means if the two structures – of Arendtian story-making and *différance* – can be even analogously laid alongside one another, and if we take up Arendt's offering that narrative makes distinct 'life' (*bios*) from the continuous 'mere life' (*zoe*), then to write of a life (which would include speaking, as something included in an expanded notion of writing) would amount simultaneously to making that life – to *inventing* life, so to

speak. And not just one sole life, but *many*, always already – a single, definitive life never being possible.

Even if in English, we don't distinguish between the fiction of this raw life, or continuous 'flow of time' which consequently is eventless [2], and the 'life' that we live, or that makes 'us' as subjects or humans appear to ourselves, we seem to be able to almost imagine this difference, to know that there may be a qualitative difference between our life – characterised curiously by a creative arising-out-of-brokenness: 'the hinge' – and things just rolling onwards. I read Arendt to be suggesting that such a 'valuing' and 'perceiving-inventing' is what makes the category human mean what we assume it to mean.

### Oughto- or Ought-not-Biography [3]

Le biographique, en tant qu'autobiographique, traverse plutôt les deux ensembles en question,  
le corpus de l'oeuvre et le corps du sujet réel.  
Le biographique est alors cette bordure intérieure de l'oeuvre et de la vie,  
bordure d'où s'engendrent les textes...  
[The biographical, as the autobiographical, traverses rather both configurations in question,  
the body of the oeuvre and the body of the real subject.  
The biographical is then this interior border between the work and life,  
the border at which texts engender themselves.]  
– R Gasché in Derrida, *L'Oreille de l'Autre*, 59.

The so-called self/life/writing (*auto-bio-graphy*) is a shifting, slippery entity or undertaking, composed, as it is, of a trio of semantic components that are philosophically loaded and debatable.

Firstly, the notion of *self* may be said to be a relatively recent phenomenon for thought. It is difficult to ascertain what possible notions of self might have been dominant at other historical times, but we are cautious enough in our current epoch to hesitate before assuming that the content of 'self' has been either explicit or constant for different moments and eras, for diverse cultural and political milieus. On this point de Man reminds us that many scholars debate whether it is possible to speak of autobiography at all prior to the 18th century (de Man 1979). For Rousseau – that famous autobiographer, masturbator and advocate of the notions of childhood *and* education – the question of self was not presumed volatile. As he so charmingly (to our contemporary eyes) writes in his *Confessions*:

This is the only portrait of a man, painted exactly according to nature and in all its truth, that exists and will probably ever exist. Whoever you may be, whom destiny of my trust has made the arbiter of the fate of these notebooks, I entreat you, in the name of my misfortunes, of your compassion, and of all of human kind, not to destroy a unique and useful work, which may serve as a first point of comparison in the study of man that certainly is yet to be begun... (Rousseau 2000: 3)

For Rousseau here, not only is a portrait able to be 'natural' and 'true', but *what* a portrait might *be* is taken to be obvious. In the well-documented paranoia that marked this period of his life, it would appear that he is 'unique' in his commitment to record so honestly his character in this activity of portraiture that is, to his mind, rare and unlikely to be repeated.

Rousseau will, while explicitly arguing the contrary, unwittingly uncover the wobbly edges of self-representation, the woes of speech and consolations of writing (which Derrida will take up in *Of Grammatology*), but he does not intentionally interrogate the actual category of *self*. In Derrida's reading of Rousseau, we find the following, now renowned, observation:

... the praise of living speech ... is faithful to only one particular motif in Rousseau. This motif comes to terms with and is organized by its contrary: a perpetually reanimated mistrust with regard to the so-called full speech. In the spoken address, presence is at once promised and refused. The speech that Rousseau raised above writing is speech as it should be or rather as it *should have been*. And we must pay attention to that mode, to that tense which relates us to presence within living colloquy. *In fact*, Rousseau had tested the concealment within speech itself, in the mirage of its immediacy. (Derrida 1997: 141)

The term 'mirage' alerts the reader to something that appears, but does not deliver. It is, in other words, ghostly. Speech will have a reputation for fullness that Rousseau attempts to carry further and mobilise, but what he ends up 'testing', Derrida asserts, is the fact that speech *should have done* this, but in fact does not.

In terms of the convergence of matters of self and matters of speech, the end of the nineteenth century in Vienna will prove unsettling again for this pair speech/writing, and the 'self' that would engage with either of them. When considering the intentionality of the telling or writing of *self*, Freud's emphasis on that non-conscious something – that 'register', or *that-which-does-not-have-time* (Fenichel 1943: 434-5) – will be a turning point for the so-called unicity or reflexivity of the human subject. Badiou, in this regard, has the following to say:

... what Freud introduced with the idea of the unconscious was the notion of a human subject that is greater than consciousness – which contains consciousness, but is not restricted to it; such is the fundamental signification of the word 'unconscious'. (Badiou 2005)

Ever since Freud's scholarship, this non-simplicity of how to think, approach or write the *auto-* of biography has disseminated itself – folding, splitting, echoing through the (modernist and post-modernist, and the so-called fictional and non-fictional) literature of the twentieth century.

Next, we find ourselves – via this quotation – opening the aspect of the trio pertaining to the *-graphy*. Rousseau, despite his 'praise of living speech' is a *writer* (in the colloquial sense), a practitioner of the word on the page (and in his *Confessions* he speaks about his actual experience of writing (see for example Rousseau 2000)). Writing, to simplify, appears an easier medium for Rousseau's experience of 'truthfulness'. He struggles in 'living speech' to come up spontaneously enough with either insults for Parisian shopkeepers, or appropriate conversation with society-ladies. Writing will enable him to present himself, to his mind, authentically, and this only through his physical *absence* (from society, family, in the solitude of his work space). Poor Rousseau! In terms of his expected categories of speech = presence, and writing = absence, everything will be coming up a-jumble. For this relentless documentation of his confusion long ago, Derrida however will applaud him.



Finally, what of the *bio-* of this trio (auto-*bio*-graphy)? We know, for Arendt, that *bios* can be read as designating a kind of excess over and above mere *zoe*, and – I would contend – something marked by finitude as opposed to a ‘bad infinity’ of ever-onwards. *Bios* constitutes something that can be called forth from a living-ness, a kind of *epokhè* – if you like – that separates out from a so-posited featureless (non)experience, something that can be told, recalled, identified. Whether we accept this split or not, we note the subtlety that it allows us to think. Narrative and life would have a more extensive relationship than that simply afforded by the specificity of the explicitly autobiographical endeavour.

And what of life compared to death, a central motif in Derridean texts? Is this a way to think the *bio-* of autobiography? If we take our cues from the thought of Derrida that we so far know, it is unlikely that he would allow the pair life/death to rest in its simple opposition, taken as dialectical, hierarchised and ‘true’. More probable is that for Derrida, death cannot be situated as the accident that befalls the fullness of life, and rather that the two are the minimal dyad, one never appearing or thinkable without the other. This calls us to the necessity of thinking the ghost, or the spectral aspect always of what it is to be alive. Unlike Heidegger, Derrida will not advocate Being-towards-death, reframing this constellation of finitude as life with the aphorism: *learning to live finally* (see in general Derrida 2007). Rather than prioritising death and its horizon as definitive for the subject, which is more Heidegger’s manoeuvre, Derrida will encourage us to think life *and* death, a simultaneity of relation which acknowledges finitude, but also affirms the possibility of the impossible (a leap as the infinite, opposed to an ever-onwards). Autobiography, in this way, might always be an auto-*thanato-bio*-graphy (*thanatos* meaning ‘death’ in Greek), since – as Arendt points out – to write narrative is to know both when and where the story begins *and ends*, and then who the characters are.

### A Murder of Woes & Inaccurate Autobiography

Following Arendt’s suggestion, it would seem then that humans – and this for her implies the possibility of humanity itself – *do* something to life in general (*zoe*) but presumably also to their own singular lives, by embarking on the labour of telling [*l’écrit*]. If life, as Buddhism teases us, *is* suffering, then narrative (personal, autobiographical, fictional etc) might have a certain consequence for this quality, and make life, or lived experience of various kinds, something *else*, while also – *at once* – leaving it the same.

In fact, it would seem that the transformative consequences for this *mere* life may be greater sometimes, the more closely the narrative accompanies the bare and excruciating detail of the former. Toni Morrison will speak of this ‘accompanying’ (my term) that is narrative practice, not in terms of *fact*, but in terms of an ‘integrity’ that leads to what she considers *truth*, which is the guiding preoccupation of the ‘literary archeolog[ist]’ (see generally Morrison 1995).

This leads me to the term ‘inaccurate autobiography’, which both plays on the assumptions carried in the public’s perception of the autobiographical as *factual* entity (in publishing, reality TV, the tradition of the diary or journal, to name several), while almost oxymoronically destabilising this simplistic assumption with the preceding term ‘inaccurate’. Rather than using the double-barrelled *creative autobiography*, which to my mind, might be trying to convey an ornamenting or augmenting excess, over and above the humble ‘memoir’, ‘inaccurate’ as intimating the broken and always already contaminated notion

of not-being-able-to-get-it-right is, to me, preferable. In other words, *inaccurate* autobiography may turn out to be *truer* (in Morrison's or even Badiou's sense) than if it had attempted and limited itself to so-called 'accuracy'.

The charge of indulgence is one with which the writer of autobiography (inaccurate or otherwise) must regularly contend. (The charge may also, for a wide range of reasons, be an observably gendered one.) The accusation functions both at the level of *poiesis* and of *praxis*.

In terms of the former, if the autobiography is asked to function as a product, then it is asked to *produce something*, rather than being acknowledged as the trace of a particular *doing*, in and for itself. The autobiography-as-product may function due to its entertainment value, its political impact, or its pedagogical capacity. In the case of narratives of shared trauma in relation to world events, tales of the holocaust (for example Primo Levi's *If this is a Man* (Levi 1987)) or the slave narratives discussed by Morrison, it is more straightforward to understand the potential benefits of this disclosure and exploration.

Paul de Man acknowledges the charge of indulgence, and partially explains it in terms of autobiography being framed as a literary genre itself, attempting to compete for import and aesthetic relevance within the canonical hierarchy. He writes:

By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir [...] This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values. (de Man 1979: 919)

This approach, noted by de Man, but which is not his view, highlights for our analytical purposes, the work (of writing-life) as *product*. Perceived in this manner, autobiography is determined as such by whether it – as narrative-outcome – correlates to lived detail that might be verified, and whether this document, or example of literary production can be compared on the wider scale of literary values.

If we read, however, autobiography through the lens of *praxis*, framed as a more generalised form of practice-based work, self/life/writing (as a grammatically verbal construction) can be framed as a kind of discipline, the products of which *might or might not* be interesting for a reading public, for historical purposes, or for a specific community, literary or otherwise.

### **Inevitably Auto-thanato-biographical?**

The question, then, is whether there is an *elsewhere* to auto-thanato-biography, that is, whether humans (irrespective of whether they put it to paper or screen or not) would not at a certain level always and anyway be telling their life/death. This would implicitly question the binary that Arendt so confidently affirms (*bios/zoe*). The explicit craft of the autobiographer, in other words, may have more to do with profession, artistry or simple priorities, and can be seen as an intentional taking up of something that in its expanded notion is not unusual at all. Autobiography (in this *praxis* sense) then would be widespread, and may be unavoidable.

De Man, curiously, makes a very similar point to the one we are distilling from Arendt. He raises the question of whether it is assumed that life (that purportedly knowable referent) *produces* autobiography, or whether autobiography produces what is called *life*. He puts it this way:

And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity. (de Man 1979: 920)

This subtle point corresponds to our broader question. It necessarily extends a suspicion regarding cosmologies of referentiality, and deepens the gradual sleuthing work in the wake of the Saussurian undertaking. It says: our perception of causality's operation may be skewed, along with our understanding of referentiality. Or causality itself (and ontology as the form of causal thought interested in beginnings) may be a concept that requires complete reassessment, or at least a Derridean complication. Autobiography – that commonly accepted repercussion of certain lives – may turn out to generate that which we identify as the category of life – or living – itself.

To return to Arendt, the identification of character, framed as being crucial to good story, and the distillation of the 'exemplary moment' (Kristeva 2001: 17) extracted from the flow of time, as a human-acknowledged event, are both relevant to psychoanalysis and to the explicit crafting of tales. To understand who we are, what kind of 'life' we are in, and who our loves, friends and enemies might be, demands that we have always-already embarked upon such decisions. Derrida, in this regard, reminds us of what he calls the 'hyper-ethical sacrifice' in his later work *The Gift of Death*:

What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is Abraham's hyper-ethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages. (Derrida 1995: 71)

In having been bequeathed this plight of the obligation to sacrifice something for something else, always and into the future (as the very making of 'future'), it could be said that we all practice auto-thanato-biography. We cannot help therefore to be *active* in this register. In fact, this register may be viewed as that which generates 'we-ness' itself.

What we are attempting here is to walk the thinkable threshold between that which would be active and passive, or perhaps the constructed boundary between the intentional (or so-called *conscious*) and its other.

It would seem that I am conceding, following on from Arendt's offering, that there is something important in the *praxis* of narrating life, something that has a force, if not a product, and which may be as intangible as the difference between a so-called natural tendency and the *action of accompanying* the same tendency (without interference). Now, *this* is the junction where we would most likely tumble into reliance upon a notion of consciousness or so-called awareness (for example: who or what would do the accompanying?). At this

point, this ideological concept – consciousness, which is akin to presence, as we know – comes to our presumptuous and tongue-tied rescue. I do not wish to mobilise this term, however, and also acknowledge that I cannot do anything else. This term ‘acknowledge’, of course, brings the argument back around to the human-subject-who-acknowledges and is therefore deemed to have ‘consciousness’.

(And so, I approach the form of my question. I say what I don’t mean to say, and *know this*. And who would be this ‘knower’, and what is this ‘this’?)

We always already narrate, even if it is not through speech, or with the colloquially understood tool of writing. This expanded idea of ‘narration’ comes to us with Arendt’s assistance, while also unfolding logically out of our earlier discussion. Narration generates, *and decimates*. And something subtle about its notion might be further developed out of a thinking that has grappled with *différance*. We could, in other words, approach narration as the operation that produces *lifefrom life* – broken, out-of-joint, inadequate, nonsensical, impossible life. Narration would be that odd kind of activity, that the human subject would appear to ‘do’ [*machen*], but which in fact ‘makes’ [*machen*] the human subject, as Arendt is framing it.

Narration is, for me (and perhaps in this manoeuvre I careen away from Arendt) an encounter with the impossibility of any foundational totality. To narrate is always already to supplement a life that *isn’t* whole (in any way that we understand this inconsistent designation), to labour impossibly towards making it whole, to giving it conceptually digestible edges. And these efforts always fail, partially, but succeed also in their unendedness. The stories we tell to try to make something of the deferrals and dis-articulations of ‘our experience’ – their aporias, if we take up Derrida’s paradox (see Derrida 1993: 15) – are by definition a kind of gracious failure. It is as if we would attempt to circumscribe our multiplicities, to strangle ourselves with the edges of the known and pre-empted, but that something within writing, within the *praxis* of narrative itself, offers us the *impossibility* of this as a kind of secular blessing. The circle in Derrida is never closed, contamination is always already there.

We narrate life in order to invent it, and to fail continually at inventing it *once and for all*. There will be no definitive definition of any experience, and this is both infuriating (when what we think we seek is closure and certainty) and also what would save us, and allow the future to remain open. It gives us options other than the *worst*. Quoting Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, Derrida reminds us about the enduring paradox of *telling* about the world, our worlds: ‘How goes the world? – It wears, sir, as it grows’ (Derrida 1994: 97).

## Lifes

Life and life. Purportedly *bios* and *zoe*.

We can see even syntactically that the difference between these lifes, despite Arendt’s slightly more pragmatic take, (when pushed to the edge of its logic) is *nothing*. This thought of nothing, however, admits that nothing might *work*, even if it doesn’t *exist*. (This recalls us to Derrida’s early statement that ‘the difference between the signifier and signified is ‘*nothing*’ (1997: 23). Derrida will reiterate that there is no outside of metaphysics, like the uncanny Heart Sutra of zen that declares that there is *no* end to decay and death and *also* an end to decay and death (*Daily Zen Sutras* 2004). Knowing this, however, and watching in the direction of this impossibility will, nevertheless, exert a kind of

force. I don't know what this knowing, or watching, or reading is. It pertains to deconstruction, I suspect. It is not the same as calling on presence or consciousness. It is not sovereign, nor does it exercise control, but it takes responsibility.

It could be said that life/death is always already trembling on a threshold that constitutes it. Life/death, or *bios*, with its karmic momentum, is always also an extraction of detail, character and time, and this labour or compulsion of distinguishing may constitute human nature, as such. Structurally, this calls to mind the memorable dialogue between Derrida and Paul de Man concerning the autobiographical/fictional opposition. De Man will say:

... the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but ... it is undecidable. But is it possible to remain, as Genette would have it, *within* an undecidable situation? ... it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case, since this whirligig is capable of infinite accelerations and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous. [...]

Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. (1979: 921)

As a thinker of deconstruction, de Man reminds us not to get stuck in approaching these signifiers through polarity, since this eschews the complexity of the matter and their relation. Rather, the situation is 'uncomfortable' and 'undecidable', and neither reader nor writer can settle into a mode of either autobiography or fiction, since these 'modes' are oscillating at an infinite pace, determined relatively by the never-still interplay between reader/writer. In the example of Proust, it is difficult to say, cites de Man reading Genette, whether metonymy provides the ground for metaphor to emerge, or whether metaphor is generated and metonymy only appears to have been there providing a means towards this teleological end (de Man 1979: 921).

This ties our argument back to both Kristeva's reading of Arendt and Derrida's deconstructive reading of the thinking of space and time. In terms of autobiography's operating as the fictional practice of inventing life, this fiction is *real* life. It is a true or accurate version of the *bios*, since beneath this fiction, there would be nothing more 'naturally true' that would constitute the version. The poles of autobiography and fiction, then, operate more as a frame for thought, and it would be *between* these poles – in oscillation! – that the activity of *thinking* proper would occur, and where that which is deemed life/death (*bios-thanatos*) would unfold.

I contend that this might arguably situate the generation of narrative in a register analogous to the *ontological*. Writing, in both an expanded and colloquial sense, does not model itself on a prior existing *life*. This practice of writing is *the inventing of life*.

## Conclusion

Let us conclude with Derrida's clarification of invention:

What is an invention? What does it do? It finds for the first time ... Finding is invention when the experience of finding takes place for the first time. [...]

But in the two cases, according to the two points of view (object or act), the invention doesn't create an existence or a world as an ensemble of existences, it is not the theological sense of creation of existence *ex nihilo*. It discovers for the first time, it reveals what was already there... (Derrida 1987: 35, my translation)

Writing cannot be said to generate *zoe*, within Arendt's thinking. This might, in Derrida's scheme amount more to a creation *ex nihilo*, the stuff of theology. Rather than make this assertion (a larger, and more intricate claim, indeed), one can, with more certainty contend, that autobiographical *praxis* may *invent*, in the sense of finding for the first time that which was already there. The elements of life, in other words, may well have been findable, but until they were *found*, and, therefore, invented, then there was no *life* (*bios*) of which to speak. Since this reading of the autobiographical hinges on inventiveness – the stuff of so-called fiction – we find that autobiography may well amount to the *true invention* of a life. [4]

It seems that the 'life' that we endure and in which we participate is at once *bios* and *zoe* – an infinite thing, endless, which preceded us and will outlive us, but is somehow also alive to us *as ours* in its brokenness, in its quality as *brisure*, creaky and insistent. I have argued that this difference may open onto an ontological register. Thus framed, it can be said to evince a *praxis*, the very same praxis of narrative which allows its binary to function and be generative. Binaries like *praxis* and *poiesis* are invitations to *play*, to practice that which is at the heart of narration: naming nuance and character, deciding/describing breaks and shifts, endings and connections. Such an engagement may encourage a wider understanding of what it is to live and to participate – actively and with all our bafflement – as that rare species of the dead: the living. [5]

## Notes

1. On this notion of excess, see Brophy 2009. Brophy makes the claim that although the category of 'art' is what is often mobilised to separate the human from the non-, that in fact both art and evolution are themselves marked by a radical excess that would paradoxically make creativity something that is inherent in the broadest category of life and its movement, thereby including but also subsuming the human. return to text

2. See generally Badiou 2007. In this work, Badiou links the possibility of the subject at all with its ability to recognise the occurrence of events and then to respond to them, making a change to the status quo (the 'State') as a result of this witnessing, and the subsequent process of fidelity. In the second volume of this work (Badiou 2009) Badiou will specifically define the subject in a formal way as '[t]he mode according to which a body enters into a subjective formalism with regard to the production of a present. Accordingly, a subject has as its effective conditions, not only an event (and thus above all a site)...' (Badiou 2009: 594). (Note that the terms 'body', 'formalism', 'event' and 'present' are quite specifically defined in this work, and should not be read in their pedestrian sense.) return to text

3. This is not a reference to Derrida's notion of otobiography, where he takes up Nietzsche's critique of a culture of pedagogy where the student is only a listening ear to the institution that pours in its indoctrination. See generally Derrida 1982a. Naturally, however, my play on words takes its cues from the lineage of Derrida and others in this play between the so-called phonetic and the inscribed. return to text

4. This dovetailing of truth and invention (as work of finding) in Derrida and de Man merits a comparison with Badiou's thinking of the Truth Procedure that follows on from events (in Badiou 2007). Being haunts the situation, and is always there (as Void), and the potential subject perceives the gap in the situation in the instance of an event. This is arguably akin to finding something which was always already there (in Derridean terms). Likewise for Badiou the true will not be a fixed a priori category but rather something that emerges from the subject's process of engaging with the event's rupture. Likewise, the subject itself (as a site for 'life' perhaps) emerges from the work of 'finding' and does not exist prior to this. return to text
5. Obviously referring to Nietzsche's famous statement. See Nietzsche 2001. return to text

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## TEXT

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