

Chapter 2: Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Autobiography

Post-human-ism

As the posthuman gets a life, it will be fascinating to observe and engage adaptations of narrative lives routed through an imaginary of surfaces, networks, assemblages, prosthetics, and avatars.¹

The official (auto)biography of the posthuman and its posthumanism might run something like this: traces of proto-posthumanist philosophy can be easily found in Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud and Heidegger and their attacks on various ideologemes of humanism. This critique was then taken further by the (in)famous antihumanism of the so-called '(French) poststructuralists' (Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, Kristeva, Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida...), who were translated, 'homogenised', received and institutionalised in the English-speaking world under the label '(French) theory' and added to the larger movement called 'postmodernism'. At the same time, the impact of new digital or information technologies was being felt and theorised in increasingly 'interdisciplinary' environments in the humanities and '(critical) science studies'. Two foundational texts are usually cited here, namely Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985 [1991]) and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Both of these texts (Hayles's explicitly, Haraway's implicitly), from a theoretical point of view, function according to the formula: posthumanism = poststructuralist theory + technics. The temptation has therefore been to see posthumanism as the 'natural' successor – in analogy with the popular idea that AI, cyborgs or digital machines function as the obvious successors to the human species – to the still too humanist postmodernist-*cum*-poststructuralist paradigm. Which means of course that the poststructuralist theory responsible for the birth of this posthumanism supposedly merely has a 'midwife' function and thus needs to be 'overcome'.

This line of argument, however, seems rather simplistic and deterministic for what one might call *critical* posthumanism (CPH), which has been contesting this story in a number of ways. First, there is a rampant technological determinism in what often passes for posthumanist thinking. The inevitability of the technological drive of a historical teleology one could call 'posthumanisation' is usually just taken for granted. Since technology is what makes us human and since 'anthropotechnics'² is

¹ Sidonie Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", *PMLA* 126.3 (2011): 571.

² Anthropotechnics, in general, is based on the idea that humanness is defined through the use of specific tools or techniques. The term has been used by Peter Sloterdijk, however, in his project of a 'prophetic anthropology', to characterise humans as those beings who develop techniques that are designed to act upon humans themselves, namely in the form of a 'self-taming' or 'self-engendering' process (cf. Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27 (2009): pp. 12-28; *Das Menschentreibhaus – Stichworte zur historischen und prophetischen Anthropologie* (Weimar: VDG, 2001); *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013)). Similar accounts of how humans are

virtually synonymous with hominisation, technological innovation must by definition be the motor of history. While the first part of the thesis is certainly true, the second as I would argue is merely an ideological construction.

There is thus a need for a 'posthumanism without technology', in the sense that, following the Derridean logic of supplementarity, since the original *technē* deconstructs the metaphysical idea of humanism (i.e. human nature) – namely that humans can somehow know and experience something like an essential humanness that defines 'us' (or 'our' humanity) as a species – the human is always already inhabited by something other than itself, something 'inhuman', which nevertheless *necessarily* defines the human. Digital or high-tech, from a historical point of view, would thus be one possible form or maybe a period, or the latest, possibly last, stage of '(post)hominisation'. To counter the ambient technological determinism or the techno-teleology of many popular post- or transhumanisms one strategy of CPH has been to focus on 'prefigurations' and 'anticipations' of the posthuman (as a figure), posthumanism (as a discourse) and posthumanisation (as a process) and has argued that only a historically and theoretically aware thinking about these should deserve to be seen as 'critical'.³

In what follows I would like to go back and reconnect a few things that may have become somewhat disjointed in the autobiographical sketch of posthumanist theory outlined above. In particular, the points to revisit are: the poststructuralist critique of the subject, the postmodernist approach to autobiography and the notion of the posthuman itself. I will briefly return to Haraway and Hayles, before setting out the relationship between the often proclaimed 'death of the subject', postmodern autobiography, and a few examples of what might be termed 'posthuman autobiographies'.

Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' (1991 [first 1985])⁴ sets out what has proven to be a serious contender for a new (post-postmodern) 'techno-metanarrative'. Here are, arguably, the central passages that have given birth to the currently dominant discursive form of posthumanism (even if Haraway has always disavowed the label):

'originarily' connected to technology can be found in Bernard Stiegler's work (Cf. *Time and Technics, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. George Collins and Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

³ Cf. Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus – Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009); and Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What's Wrong with Posthumanism?" *Rhizomes* 7 (2003; special issue "Theory's Others"), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue7/callus.htm> (accessed 7/11/2023); "The Latecoming of the Posthuman, Or, Why 'We' Do the Apocalypse Differently, 'Now'", *Reconstruction* 4.3 (2004); "Critical posthumanism or, the *inventio* of a posthumanism without technology". *Subject Matters* 3.2 and 4.1 (2007): 15-30; "What is a Posthumanist Reading?" *Angelaki* 13.3 (2008): 95-111; Herbrechter and Callus, eds., *Discipline and Practice: The (Ir)Resistibility of Theory* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004); *Cy-Borges: Memories of the Posthuman in the Work of Jorge Luis Borges* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2009); *Posthumanist Shakespeares* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

⁴ In Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-181.

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation (...). By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks – language, tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And many people no longer feel the need for such a separation; indeed, many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures.(...) The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine. (...) The third distinction is a subset of the second: the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us.⁵

I want to highlight a number of questions these two passages raise and to which I will return in this essay: who is speaking here? Who is the narrator of this narrative? Who or what is left 'outside' this story? Where and when is the point of narration? I would argue that these questions play an important part in reading Haraway's text as a kind of autobiography (cf. her statement "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess").⁶

The second seminal posthumanist text is N.Katherine Hayles's, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). The most frequently quoted and most programmatic passage is this one:

What is the posthuman? Think of it as a point of view characterized by the following assumptions. [...] First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman considers consciousness [...] as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-152.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 2-3.

This is preceded by her main argument for an “embodied information politics”, after Turing:

What embodiment secures is not the distinction between male and female or between humans who can think and machines which cannot. Rather, embodiment makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it. This realization, with all its exfoliating implications, is so broad in its effects and so deep in its consequences that it is transforming the liberal subject, regarded as the model of the human since the Enlightenment, into the posthuman.⁸

It thus seems that the posthumanisation process for Hayles is a reinscription of embodiment under new conditions, a new understanding of (post)human *autobiography*, in which the subject of inscription and the inscription process itself with all its forms of materiality might no longer be controllable by a “liberal humanist subject” and instead will lead to new forms of (posthumanist) agency. The implications of this process will be dealt with in the last part of this chapter.

The Death of the Subject and Autobiography

It is worth reiterating that the ‘liberal humanist subject’ has been the main target of poststructuralist theory since the 1970s. But even before that, the subject had already been declared dead by European structuralism, and has been living a kind of ghost or zombie existence ever since. The fact that the subject’s death has been enacted and repeated so many times, with its resurrection invoked on a regular basis, proves that the subject has always had the ontological (or rather hauntological) structure of a ghost⁹ – it is, in fact, an at once impossible *and* necessary conceptual device or “*dispositif*”.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁹ On the ‘inevitability’ of the subject see Herbrechter and Callus, “Introduction: Posthumanist subjectivities, or, coming after the subject”, *Subjectivity* 5 (2012): 241–264, and its discussion of Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991) in particular.

¹⁰ As far as the notion of ‘*dispositif*’ (or ‘apparatus’) is concerned, this originally Foucaultian term has since been taken up by Giorgio Agamben, who sees the apparatus as “rooted in the very process of ‘humanization’” (cf. Agamben, “What Is an Apparatus?” *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 16). According to Agamben, Foucault has shown “how, in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create – through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge – docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their ‘freedom’ as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification” (pp. 19-20). What has changed under the current (arguably posthumanist) condition is that apparatuses “no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification (...) what we are now witnessing is that processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to become reciprocally indifferent, and so they do not give rise to the composition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form” (pp. 20-21). Agamben’s overly pessimistic view is of course echoed in what follows;

This is more or less the lesson (postmodern) theory has learned from a combination of Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Levinas and Derrida.¹¹ It is also that which has made the concept of autobiography so complicated but also so popular a genre in recent times. The very idea of autobiography relies on a subject (or a narrator) who is capable of remembering, interpreting and identifying with his or her life story. It is a very specific form of embodiment that usually conveys trust in the impression that the subject of the narration is identical to the subject of the narrative. This is, in fact, what guarantees self-sameness, i.e. an assurance that 'I *am* (or this *is*) 'me'. Many complications trouble this model of autobiographical consciousness, usually referred to as basically 'Cartesian': there are, first of all, the earlier blows against this self-conscious 'I' from the figures referred to earlier (whose work is sometimes grouped under the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion'). Nietzsche critiques the objectivity and the truth of the subject through his notion of the 'will to power'. Freud's main claim is that the ego is not the master in its own house, i.e. the autobiographical 'I' cannot be trusted with its own story because it is partly written by other, namely unconscious, forces, under the influence of protective mechanisms, censorship and unconscious desires. Marx adds the idea that a subject is in fact subject to ideologies and is therefore not fully aware of its implication in larger political schemes, i.e. one could adapt Marx's famous dictum and say: humans write their (autobiographical) stories but not under the conditions of their own making. Darwin, of course, detects another logic at work in human undertakings. There are at least two versions of autobiography in every human subject – the (psycho)*individual* biography and the (genetic) autobiography of the *species*, which stand in a kind of dialogue with each other and which are largely determined by biology, genetics and evolution.

Poststructuralism radicalises these forms of suspicion, all directed against the idea that subjects are free and competent to give an accurate account of themselves, by further problematising a number of aspects, many of them related to the specific understanding of language (as based on Saussurean linguistics), namely that language is an abstract and culturally constructed system of (often binary) differences: Lacan rereads Freud in terms of linguistics and differentiates within each subject between an imaginary (narcissistic), symbolic (social) and real (unconscious) order. The conscious subject, for Lacan, is the effect of a double misrecognition – a narcissistic misrecognition of an identification with an idealised other and a social misrecognition based on the equally narcissistic illusion of being able to master language. Both identity and language, however, come from an other, which means that the subject *is being* identified and spoken rather than actually being in control of his or her auto- (or, rather, auto-hetero-) biography.

but as I would argue, there is also a more positive potential for posthumanist forms of auto-bio-graphical subjectivities as long as they are understood as 'postanthropocentric' (cf. below).

¹¹ For a good introduction and reader of the main texts in question see Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, eds., *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, 2nd ed (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004).

Althusser brings together Lacanian psychoanalysis, a Marxist understanding of ideology and aspects of (Saussure's and Benveniste's) linguistics. For him, the subject is fundamentally an addressing device, a pronoun shifter that allows to connect between a 'you' and a 'me/I/we' and to switch between these, through the mechanism of hailing (or interpellation, address). It is because subjects can be subjected to an address (by other subjects) that they can become subjects in the first place. A subject is therefore first and foremost a position or positioning, or a vulnerability in terms of lacking awareness about the very fact of being positioned (hence the ideological misrecognition of the liberal subject as being interpellated as 'free'). The necessary but unacceptable position of the subject of autobiography would lie in the fact that 'I' write about my 'self' as the 'free' subject of my own (life) narrative, or 'I' 'am' the main character in 'my' 'own' life story.

Foucault adds to this an analysis of the larger discursive power structures that work as much at a micro-, or, individual, level as on a larger, societal, or macro-level. Instead of oppression, modern societies rely on self-disciplining through processes of biopolitics, subjectivity and embodiment. A subject for Foucault is a subject of (i.e. both exercising and receiving) power who adapts to socio-political pressures by working on 'it(s) self'. An autobiography in the Foucauldian sense can therefore only be the inscription of biopolitics (a politics that seeks to govern 'life itself', hence the conceptual shift towards 'life-writing') into a narrative by a more or less empowered self as subject.

Both Levinas and Derrida stress another structural contradiction, or indeed an aporia, at the heart of the subject that is also constitutive of autobiography. There is a temporal and spatial delusion at work in the idea of a subject's self-presence. The subject is the effect of a radically 'other' (who, in Levinas's theological model, is ultimately God as experienced in the face of another human; in Derrida, this other is an unknowable who has the structure of a trace or of '*différance*' – a 'non-present' presence that can never be made present as such because it is always deferred and thus always differs from itself, like a trace). This other always precedes and gives rise to the subject's impression of self-presence and identity – an identity which is, in fact, always merely an identity which comes to 'me' from an 'earlier' but ultimately 'unknowable' other.

In short, as necessary as it may be to remain sceptical of any notion of the subject and as desirable as it may be to speculate on "who comes after the subject?" (cf. Cadava et al. (1991)), poststructuralism and deconstruction never really proclaimed the actual 'death' of the subject, simply because anything human (including the post, trans or inhuman) is (literally and *letterally*, i.e. through and *in* language) unthinkable without a notion of subjectivity. With this complicated (necessary *and* impossible, necessary *because* impossible) notion of the subject in mind, I can now return to the question of posthumanism and autobiography.

Addressing the Posthumanist Subject

Narrating lives intersects with theorizing the posthuman, as the very concepts of memory and embodiment, at the heart of life writing, are put under pressure.¹²

Nobody will seriously contest the challenge that some of the new and ongoing technohistorical developments (informatisation, digitalisation, cyborgisation, cognitisation etc. which can be grouped under the term 'posthumanisation') pose to a traditional (liberal) humanist understanding of what it means to be 'me' and 'human'. There is, understandably, an apocalyptic tone in many writings about the posthuman. However, the task is to critically examine posthumanism – its challenges and potential – through the actual subject positions it provides, affords, or constructs. There is no reason why Althusser's basic conception of the subject should not apply under posthumanist or even posthuman conditions, provided one remains aware of Althusser's antihumanist blindspot. While Althusser seems to have an ideal addressee in mind in his description of his "little ideological theatre" (namely a French-speaking, probably white, male) who is of course, by default, assumed to be 'human', alternative and less ethno- and anthropocentric scenes of interpellation under posthuman(ist) conditions are imaginable and have indeed been occurring on a daily basis.¹³ The interpellation mechanism is by no means suspended under new technocultural conditions. However, humans can of course be interpellated by a whole variety of social actors: machines, animals, things, etc. These machines, animals, things, etc. can also be addressed by humans and, provided they can somehow 'embody' these positions these can all also be attributed with subjectivity, which means that when machines address machines, animals, things, etc., or when animals address... etc., (at least some) aspects of subjectivity may be involved. Therefore, far from any end or death of subjectivity, posthuman(ist) conditions rather imply a proliferation of subjectivities, as well as ideology, address or forms, and instances of interpellation.

Although the posthumanist critique of humanism usually refers to seemingly overwhelming and disarming scientific and technological challenges, there are conceptual aspects that apply even 'without' technology. The major conceptual challenge is the idea of a post- or non-anthropocentric worldview that a *critical* posthumanism (CPH) implies. Seeing the world and ourselves no longer as the central meaningful entity in the universe, and challenging our ingrained habit to anthropomorphise everything that comes into human view – these are the main targets of CPH, which looks for points of articulation outside a necessarily human-centred discourse like humanism. This has several implications for autobiography and subjectivity. One is that autobiographies by subjects other than humans become literally thinkable (i.e. outside the typical anthropomorphism in which a human subject merely takes on the identity of a fictional nonhuman actor). Another is the proliferation of human and nonhuman forms of interpellation, subjectification and embodiment mentioned above.

¹² Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", p. 570.

¹³ Cf. Easthope and McGowan, eds., *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, pp. 42-50; see also Suzanne Gearhart's critique in Herbrechter and Callus, eds., *Discipline and Practice*, pp. 178-204.

To start with the latter, we can look again towards Donna Haraway and her more recent work on companion species, which provides us with the beginning of a theoretical framework for non-anthropocentric posthumanist forms of address and subjectivities. In her *When Species Meet* (2010), she explains that: “human beings are not uniquely obligated to and gifted with responsibility; (...) animals in all their worlds, are response-able in the same sense as people are”.¹⁴ Haraway’s notion of ‘response-ability’, which she, in this context, restricts to the interaction between companion species (i.e. human and nonhuman companion animals) and the proliferation of subjectivities this implies, poses a number of political and ethical challenges. Haraway’s suggested framework for dealing with these challenges is “multi-species flourishing”:

Now, how to address that response-ability (which is always experienced in the company of significant others, in this case, the animals)? (...) multi-species flourishing requires a robust nonanthropomorphic sensibility that is accountable to irreducible differences.¹⁵

Haraway’s answer to this challenge lies in a new (posthumanist, post-anthropocentric) ‘ecology’, when she writes: “We are face-to-face, in the company of significant others, companion species to each other. That is not romantic or idealist, but mundane and consequential in the little things that make lives”.¹⁶ One might therefore argue that, from a CPH point of view, Haraway’s ecology should probably be extended to all kinds of social actors (human, animal, machine, collectivities and network).¹⁷ The resulting complexification of such a ‘postanthropocentralised’ environment has obvious implications for the genre of autobiography.

Posthumanism and Autobiography

Embodiment as the ground of autobiographical acts and practices is changing radically...¹⁸

The autobiographic genre thus ‘faces’ further proliferation and fragmentation as a result of a posthumanist and postanthropocentric ecology. Every component of the term ‘auto-bio-graphy’ is being challenged afresh by posthumanism: in short, the *auto-* in *autobiography* is seen as an instance of auto-affection, which relies on an inappropriable (inhuman) other. The *bio-* in *autobiography* is exposed to the challenge as to what might constitute the *biological* element in every narration of (a)

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁷ This is in a way what Latour argues for under the banner of ANT, cf. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Smith, “Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries”, p. 570 (my italics).

'life' (the now often preferred term of 'life writing' for autobiography remains, in terms of subjectivity, quite ambiguous: i.e. is the 'life' in 'life writing' a subjective or an objective genitive?);¹⁹ finally, the question of writing in *autobiography* is being raised again with more urgency by new forms and media of inscription. It is, for example, worth remembering that the Derridean notion of the trace, mentioned above, was from the start never restricted to any human logic of writing, or to forms of inscription exclusively effectuated by human subjects.²⁰

Under these conditions, it is no surprise that as the forms of subjectivity proliferate the genre of autobiography becomes more and more fragmented and subdivided into subgenres like *autofiction*, life writing, memoir, *autobio(s)copie*, etc.²¹ To somewhat counterbalance this trend I would like to return to a crucial moment in the conceptual life of our understanding of autobiography, namely Paul de Man's "Autobiography as Defacement", in which de Man argues that the most fundamental, underlying aspect that holds for everything autobiographical (and which could thus serve as a point from which to critically evaluate the current posthumanist explosion of the genre) is a certain play of figures and figurations.

Autobiography, de Man writes, "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. The structure implies differentiation as well as similarity, since both depend on a substitutive exchange that constitutes the subject. This specular structure is interiorized in a text in which the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding, but this merely makes explicit the wider claim to authorship that takes place whenever a text is stated to be *by* someone and assumed to be understandable to the extent that this is the case. Which amounts to saying that any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical.²²

Every text articulated by some *one* (i.e. a subject) has the autoaffective characteristics de Man describes and is therefore at least at one level autobiographical. However, as de Man continues: "The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it

¹⁹ Cf. also Herbrechter, "Narrating(-)Life – In Lieu of an Introduction, in: Herbrechter and Elisabeth Friis, eds., *Narrating Life – Experiments with Human and Animal Bodies in Literature, Art and Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 1-13.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 9; cf. also Laurent Milesi, "Derrida and Posthumanism (III): The Technicity of the Trace", *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (2020); available online: <https://criticalposthumanism.net/derrida-and-posthumanism-iii-the-technicity-of-the-trace/> (accessed 7/11/2023).

²¹ Cf. for example Philippe Lejeune, *Les Brouillons de soi* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

²² Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 70.

demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions".²³

Even if one does not follow Paul de Man's rhetoric-centred understanding of deconstruction to its textualist extremes, his understanding of 'prosopopeia' as the central autobiographical trope remains central for any analysis of the autobiographical including its current posthumanised forms:

Prosopopeia [*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)] is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name... is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.²⁴

Giving a face to, or the opposite, taking a face away from, a narrated experience constitutes the fundamental rhetorical device of figuring and disfiguring, or autobiographical subjectivity as 'mask'. However, de Man's rather pessimistic conclusions might not be the only possible understanding of this 'un/masking' process at work in the autobiographical. In fact, it is probably the underlying, non-articulated anthropocentrism and humanism in de Man's model that explains the barely veiled cynicism in the following passage:

As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding. Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.²⁵

A rather more neutral evaluation becomes possible by assuming that the metaphorical figuration and disfiguration (together with its 'real' epistemological, ontological and material effects, of course) at work in any (autobiographical) instance of writing also applies to nonhuman subjects and to interactions between a whole variety of human and nonhuman agents, and within a variety of analog, digital, social etc. networks.

Further assistance with articulating this new framework for postanthropocentric and posthumanist autobiographical writing comes from Jacques Derrida, who problematises the genre and its laws by referring to it as "auto-bio-hetero-thanatography"²⁶ and by picturing it as a specific 'scene of writing'. In *Circonfession*, Derrida

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Circonfession", Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 198.

refers to the fundamental disjuncture at work in autobiography as: “the uninterrupted auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphic work, the only confidence that has ever interested me, but for whom?”²⁷ Indeed, one might ask, who is the ideal addressee of one’s autobiography? For whom does one write one’s autobiography? Derrida explains the impossibility of autobiography on the basis of a number of aporias (i.e. ‘necessary’, or unresolvable contradictions). There is, first of all, the problem of self-identity and the name, i.e. “Am I that name?” and the question of who is behind the figure of figuration, the defaced behind the face? Judith Butler’s explanation, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is helpful here:

The ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one’s own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge.²⁸

Derrida articulates the problematic desire behind the autobiographical impulse through the relationship between auto-affection and death, i.e. the autobiographical ‘scene of writing’ necessarily passes through death. In an interview entitled “As If I Were Dead”,²⁹ Derrida describes the im/possibility at the heart of externalising one’s autobiographical experience:

But what does it mean to be dead, when you are not totally dead? It means that you look at things the way they are *as such*, you look at the object *as such*. To perceive the object as such implies that you perceive the object as it is or as it is supposed to be when you are not there... So, to relate to an object *as such* means to relate to it as if you were dead. That’s the condition of truth, the condition of perception, the condition of objectivity, at least in their most conventional sense. (...) What is absolutely scary is the idea of being dead while being quasi-dead, while looking at things from above, from beyond. But at the same time, it is the most reassuring hope we have that, although dead, we will continue to look, to listen to everything, to observe what’s going on. (...) I think it is bearable only because of the *as if*: “as if I were dead”. But the *as if*, the fiction, the *quasi-*, these are what protect us from the real event of death itself, if such a thing exists.³⁰

If I necessarily have to write my autobiography ‘as if I were dead’, my auto-affection also necessarily risks turning into ‘auto-infection’ and ‘auto-immunity’:

Autobiography, the writing of the self as living, the trace of the living for itself, being for itself, the auto-affection or auto-infection as memory or archive of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, my translation.

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 37.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, “As if I were dead” – *An Interview with Jacques Derrida* [1995] (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2000).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 20, 22.

the living would be an immunizing movement (...), but an immunizing movement that is always threatened with becoming auto-immunizing, as is every *autos*, every ipseity, every automatic, automobile, autonomous, autoreferential movement. Nothing risks becoming more poisonous than an autobiography, poisonous for itself in the first place, auto-infectious for the presumed signatory who is so auto-affected.³¹

An autobiography is therefore, strictly speaking, 'deadly' or if not quite 'posthuman' then 'posthumous', in the sense that it requires a self-positioning based on an identification with another, objectified, or 'dead', me – a relation to me as other that is regulated by unpredictable because unconscious processes of auto-immuno-in/affection.

An additional complication here is the Derridean play on 'zoography' (or, the involvement of the 'animal autobiographique').³² What part does 'my' animal/life (i.e. the human body or embodiment as such) – the *zoe* as opposed to the *bio* of any 'me' – play in 'life' writing or autobiography?³³ There always seems to be an elusive zoographical trace underneath and a zoo-ontological other who precedes and 'writes', each biography. As Judith Butler explains: "To be a body is, in some sense, to be deprived of having a full recollection of one's life. There is a history to my body of which I can have no recollection".³⁴

The indispensable writing body has its own zoographical ways of inscription that may not be articulable in traditional forms of autobiographical writing and works against the idea that autobiography as a genre usually relies on the authenticity of (bodily) experience, as Butler goes on to argue:

If there is, then, a part of bodily experience as well – of what is indexed by the word exposure – that cannot be narrated but constitutes the bodily condition of one's narrative account of oneself, then exposure constitutes one among several vexations in the effort to give a narrative account of oneself. There is (1) a non-narrativizable exposure that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) primary relations, irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my partial opacity to myself. Lastly, there are (4) norms that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity. This last dispossession in language is intensified by the fact that I give an account of

³¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), p. 415.

³² Autobiography, according to the logic of the auto as becoming other (auto-heterobiography) outlined by Derrida, in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", p. 415) and referred to above.

³³ For the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

³⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 38.

myself to someone, so that the narrative structure of my account is superseded by (5) the structure of address in which it takes place.³⁵

There is thus always an experience of dispossession (or desubjectification) at work, which is experienced (or inscribed, registered) at a material, bodily level, and which is the necessary precondition for auto-affection to arise in the first place, but which can never be narrated as such. The body who experiences (or is materially inscribed with) the *autobiography* can never *be* the body who narrates the *autobiography*. There is, in fact, a disjuncture between bodies at work within the autobiographical process: material, somatic, phenomenological, narrating and narrated, to name but a few.

In terms of the narrated body, Butler's last two points coincide with a problem highlighted in Derrida's notion of *plus d'une langue* (in his own autobiographical 'language memoir',³⁶ which in terms of autobiography raises the question: what language constitutes the 'me' of an autobiography, given that (1) there is always more than one language at work (even within a/one language), and (2) there is never one (whole) language that can be made 'present' and thus guarantee the integrity and authority of a speaking subject? Derrida's *plus d'une langue* is thus part of an explanation for the proliferation of the 'language memoir' as an autobiographical subgenre, but it has of course also a bearing on the more general question: what language(s) would a nonhuman subject write its autobiography in? Digital code? Biosemiotics? In "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2002), Derrida articulates the more dangerous aspects these questions might have. Placed within the context of an inflation of seemingly innocuous autobiographies and autobiographical subjects outlined above, the danger becomes manifest if we return to the other side of posthumanism – the possibility of a literal defacement and disfiguration or disappearance of the human and the human species, including the whole human and nonhuman ecology that is affected or auto-affected by this. Derrida hints at this when he refers to "the autobiography of the human species" (with its underlying "carnophallogocentrism"):³⁷

It will not be a matter of attacking frontally or antithetically the thesis of philosophical or common sense on the basis of which has been built the relation to the self, the presentation of the self of human life, the autobiography of the human species, the whole history of the self that man recounts to himself, that is to say the thesis of a limit as rupture or abyss between those who say "we men," "I, a man," and what this man among men who say "we," what he *calls* the animal or animals.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁶ Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

³⁷ cf. Derrida, "'Eating Well', or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in: Eduardo Cadava et al., eds, *Who Comes After the Subject?* Pp. 96-119.

³⁸ Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)", p. 398.

What holds for animal nonhuman others might again be extendable under posthumanist or postanthropocentric conditions to other nonhuman others and their interactions between themselves and others.

Posthuman(ist) Life Writing

In the future, surgically, genetically, or digitally altered models of embodiment will surely inform the tropes, narrative arcs, subject positions, and affective charges of life writing. What new stories will we be telling of embodiment, simultaneously organic and technological, as emergent experiments in inhabiting bodies unsettle boundaries between species and species, human and inert, human and quantum?³⁹

So are there specifically posthumanist forms of life writing or autobiography that are aware of and address the issues raised above (and reflected in the epigraphs taken from Sidonie Smith's MLA presidential address on the theme of "narrating lives")? I can only give the very briefest of sketches of some examples of what kind of posthuman and/or posthumanist are envisageable.⁴⁰

It seems obvious that once the writing of (a) life, life writing, narrating lives, testimonies of lives etc. are no longer (exclusively) done by human subjects new autobiographical forms become thinkable. However, this development of course also reflects back on the generic markers of human and humanist autobiographies as such. Some generic changes are due to changes in (old) media (i.e. 'retrofitting' or 'remediation' of the genre), others lie in the development of 'new' media platforms. Again other changes are due to more invasive technologies and processes of 'cyborgisation' or 'prosthesisation' (i.e. new forms of techno-embodiment and their experience). Conceptual and/or social changes in our relationships to nonhuman others (animals, things, machines, etc.) also lead to new forms of autobiography. In the context of an apocalyptic posthumanism already mentioned, the auto-hetero-thanatology of the human or of the entire human species becomes a subgenre of its own. Examples can be found from the Romantic period onwards, and have become prevalent in science fiction (where this seems to have become a major trope, i.e. humanity telling the story of its own replacement by machines, cf. *Bladerunner*, *Terminator*, *Matrix...*), as well as the rise of 'docufiction' programmes articulated from a fictional posthum(ane)ous position, on how the world would look 'without us' (cf. *Life After people* or *The World Without Us*).⁴¹ The fundamental posthumanist question that all of these (postanthropocentric but, of course, not

³⁹ Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", p. 571.

⁴⁰ Posthuman and posthumanist are by no means identical in this context: e.g. humanist autobiographies of posthumans are significantly easier to imagine than posthumanist autobiographies of humans.

⁴¹ Both based on Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martins, 2007).

postanthropomorphic) 'scenes of writing' gesture towards would be: is there writing 'outside' (before and after) the human?⁴²

New (arguably, posthuman) subjectivities are increasingly constructed in the form of what could be called the 'tech-memoir'. A well-known almost classic example by now is Kevin Warwick's *I, Cyborg* (2002), in which he narrates his experience of having a microchip implant. Since Warwick (at least at the time) was also a professor of cybernetics his motivation in writing an autobiography from the point of view of becoming-other or becoming-(one-with-the)-machine, however, was both personal (i.e. autobiographical) and technoscientific. His memoir could therefore be described as an 'auto-hetero-techno-bio-graphy'. He begins *I, Cyborg* by stating that:

This book is all about me. One problem, when writing about oneself, is that it is extremely difficult to be objective. We tend to think we are in the right even when it is obvious we are in the wrong. When we win, well it was obvious, we were better than the other fellow. When we lose, then there was an obvious mistake, the referee was biased, or, failing that, we may have lost, but how we performed in doing so was in a much better way than the other guy. When looking at a situation from a human standpoint, it is just as difficult for us all to be objective. If we look at our abilities in comparison with other creatures it can be impossible for us to concede defeat on any point. At length we may concede that some creatures are faster or stronger, but at least we can fall back on the undeniable fact that we are obviously more intelligent than they are.⁴³

This becomes even more complicated once we start taking the phrase 'artificial intelligence' seriously, as Warwick continues:

Unfortunately, since the advent of machine intelligence, even this stalwart reasoning has come into question. When we can clearly witness a Computer performing feats that we consider important aspects of intelligence — such as mathematical equations or fact retrieval — and easily outperforming humans in doing so, we try to find some excuse. (vii) We say, well, it's not really an intelligent act. Or, it's not doing it in the right way. Or, it's not conscious like we are. Or, worst of all, it's not conscious at all — how can it be, it's a machine.⁴⁴

Warwick's motivation, or his ethics and politics, is to overcome the antagonistic (humanist) stance and fully embrace or even 'become' the machinic other:

What matters is performance. Whether we like it or not, we know that machines can perform aspects of intelligence with a performance that outshines those of humans. The question we can then ask ourselves is, okay,

⁴² See also Herbrechter, *Before Humanity: Posthumanism and Ancestrality* (Leiden: Brill, 2021)..

⁴³ Kevin Warwick, *I, Cyborg* (London: Century / Random House, 2002), p. vii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

rather than admit defeat, can we join forces? After all, partnerships and alliances are often the most powerful combinations of all. In this instance, can we upgrade the human form, directly linking with technology to become cyborgs?⁴⁵

In perfect analogy to de Man's logic of de/acement, figuration and disfiguration outlined above, the experiment on himself, or rather his self, allows Warwick thus to put himself into the privileged position of writing about his experience and what it might mean to become cyborg:

This is the story of my own attempt to push someway in that direction. Why should I want to do that? What led me to it? Why is it important to me? Most of all though, why do I think it is the most important topic facing the human race at this time? In reading these pages I hope that you will find answers to these questions and more. But please forgive me if you I feel [*sic*] that I am only indicating my own point of view. Although I am writing this as a cyborg, I still suffer from that human frailty of a lack of objectivity, particularly when it is myself in the dock.⁴⁶

What starts as a serious attempt at writing from a postanthropocentric or posthumanist point of view, however, quickly falls back on the old idea of human perfectibility and thus rejoins the humanist grand narrative.

Somewhat more circumspect and uneasy is Jean-Luc Nancy's short philosophical memoir about his experience of becoming a kind of cyborg, having been fitted with a pacemaker. In *L'Intrus* (2002), Nancy writes his version of an 'auto-hetero-techno-bio-graphy' from the more metaphysical or phenomenological perspective of becoming inhuman or, at least, 'differently' human:

What a strange self! It's not that they opened me wide [*béant*] in order to change my heart. It is rather that this gaping open [*béance*] cannot be closed. (Every x-ray moreover shows this: the sternum is sewn through with twisted pieces of wire.) I am closed open. There is in fact an opening through which passes a stream of unremitting strangeness... It is thus my self who becomes my own *intrus*...⁴⁷

It is interesting to note, however, that Nancy, almost inevitably, employs the analogy of the "cyborg" (science fiction) or the "zombie" (horror movie): "I am becoming like a science fiction adroid, or the living-dead, as my youngest son one day to me".⁴⁸ It is as if the only (techno)cultural imaginary available here was that of science fiction

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'Intrus", trans. Susan Hanson, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2.3 (2002): 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

horror.⁴⁹ This returns me to the question of technological determinism and posthumanism that I started with, and also to the role that science fiction might play in the contemporary cultural imaginary and its repertoire of tropes regarding the currently available forms of 'constructions of the future'.

Post-Script: De-Facebook

The human relation to remembering is being reconfigured by the capacious, constantly updated and updatable archive that is the Internet. Every ort and fragment of digitalized life posted on a *Facebook* wall, on a blog, or in a tweet remain retrievable. This is an archive without an archivist, without rules of collection, and seemingly without rules of privacy. Far from encouraging purposeful self-representation or self-invention, this vast memory machine may well constrict life writing.⁵⁰

One final note on the potential of new (increasingly global or globalised social) media networks, which are having a substantial impact on autobiographical practice and conceptualisations of the autobiographical. Gillian Whitlock, in *Soft Weapons* (2007), analyses the relationship between the 'virtualisation' of autobiography within digital environments, on the one hand, and the power shifts which a global medium like the internet affords previously 'liminal' forms of autobiography. Increasingly, as she argues, autobiographical narrative is used as a "soft weapon" by individuals but also powerful lobbies in their fight for recognition:

It is now a given in autobiography criticism that the "I" of autobiography and memoir has never been anything but virtual. (...) Any snapshot of the transits of life narrative must engage with the work of contemporary autobiography as it moves across cultures in conflict. Autobiography circulates as a "soft weapon." It can personalize and humanize categories of people whose experiences are frequently unseen and unheard.⁵¹

As promising as some of these aspects of new social media might seem, it is nevertheless worth spelling out, as Sidonie Smith does,⁵² that there is a problematic side to this fragmentation and virtualisation. The phenomenal success of social

⁴⁹ While organ transplantation always seems to involve an experience of the body as a "stranger to itself" this of course, by no means, inevitably leads to the use of techno-scientific metaphors (cf. Margaret Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: Sage, 2002)). Cf. also Francisco Varela's account of his liver transplant (Varela, "Intimate Distances: Fragments for a Phenomenology of Organ Transplantation", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8.5-7 (2001): 259-71), which also discusses Nancy' "L'Intrus").

⁵⁰ Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", p. 570.

⁵¹ Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, pp. 1, 3.

⁵² Cf. the epigraph to the Postscript above, Smith, "Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries", p. 570 above.

networks like *Facebook* certainly proves the new powerful alliance between autobiographical desire and the connectivity and interactive possibilities of digital media. However, it also raises the economic and ideological investment of digital capitalism in these emergent (and, arguably, 'posthumanist' if not at least partly 'posthuman') communities and new subjectivities. The new kind of subjectivity that digital environments like *Facebook* promote, sometimes referred to as the 'prosumer' (i.e. the (self)producing consumer of digitalised 'information'), seems nevertheless to thrive on the traditional (humanist) narcissistic urge of the Cartesian subject. The autobiographical tropes of figuration and disfiguration (taking on avatars and an increasing variety of web-(inter)-faces in order to find (old and new) 'friends' or merely to stay 'in contact' in an increasingly fragmented and virtualised environment) are being used ever more frantically (some would undoubtedly say 'enthusiastically') in an attempt to integrate, control and empower a *private* self with an inevitably and irrecoverably *public* face. This extended and accelerated mechanism of online identity work may feel empowering but it also plays into the hands of the ubiquitous capitalist logic driving the increasingly commercialised web with its harvesting of 'big data', which constantly attempts to exploit the ambiguous space between self-identity and autobiographical defacement. It is thus worth remembering that digital new media as well as sites and social networks like *Facebook* do not *automatically* lead to new 'empowered' forms of autobiography.

The 'posthuman condition' under which autobiographies are increasingly being produced have thus, on the one hand, greatly enhanced the opportunities for "giving an account of oneself" to use again Butler's phrase, which means that the potential for new post- or nonhuman subjectivities has also greatly increased. However, so has the deeply problematic proliferation of auto-affective and auto-immunitarian side-effects of the *dispositif* of posthumanist or postanthropocentric subjectivity, to return to Agamben's diagnosis of contemporary capitalist society.⁵³

⁵³ Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?", p. 20.