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## Ethics of Writing—From Autobiography to Hetero-Thanato-Biography; A Reading of Derrida's *Circumfession*\*

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### Abstract

Autobiography as a genre has been the locus of debate since Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. This paper sketches shifts of focus the term autobiography undergoes in different periods, before examining how Jacques Derrida regards the term in the light of ethics. During the discussion, thoughts on life, death, language, community and writing from certain deconstructionists, including Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Paul de Man will be introduced to complicate Derrida's ideas. Even though autobiographical interpretation goes through the transformation of focus from *bio* to *auto* and

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to *graphy*, this paper, with Derrida's thoughts in the foreground, contends that autobiography indicates the intense relation to *bio* that writing is. In the final section, Derrida's *Circumfession* serves as an example of how autobiography is always already hetero-thanato-biographical writing with the other, for the other and by the other. Directed towards the affirmation of ethical writing, the narrative of the self is preempted by the writing of the other's death under the other's name.

**Key Words:** Singular, trace, signature, survival,  
*Circumfession*

## I. Prologue

I have always been interested in this theme of survival, the meaning of which is *not to be added on* to living and dying. It is originary:<sup>1</sup> *life is living on, life is survival* [la vie est survie]. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live *after* death.

—Jacques Derrida (2007: 26)

This paper, instead of scrutinizing in detail the theorization of autobiography, intends to discuss the ethics of writing mainly through the lens of Derrida's examination of autobiographical writings. In the first part, autobiography as a term is divided into three roots so as to basically chart the course of its transitions from the historical basis of the life of oneself, to the affective and introspective assessment of the egoistic individual, and finally to the language-guiding view of the narrative of *whoever* writes. In this last shift, Derrida's and Paul de Man's criticisms of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* remain the focus. What follows considers how the deconstructionist linguistic perspective of autobiographical study is moderated by Derrida's return to *bio*, which can only be understood in terms of the name of the other. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's discussion of funeral eulogy in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* and Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of inoperative community and being singular plural also serve as supportive arguments for the idea of hetero-thanato-biography in this paper. The final part analyzes Derrida's autobiographical writing *Circumfession* in the light of his concept of circumcision, signature, and survival.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "originary" is used by Derrida to distinguish it from the word "original," as he continues after this paragraph to carry on his remark on "originary mourning," "a mourning that does not wait for the so-called 'actual' death" (2007: 26). Another example appears when Jean Birnbaum raises again the issue concerning survival at the end of the interview. Derrida answers, "I maintained that survival is an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will" (51). See also note 14.

I have begun with the quote from Birnbaum's interview with Derrida, conducted not long before Derrida's death, later collected in the book titled *Learning to Live Finally*. At the time Derrida was conscious of his approaching death. What does it mean to learn to live during the drop scene of one's life? The term "finally" is not used in the sense of the commonsensical concept of time. Instead, it is the ethical promise of the future deferred without end, a faith requiring one to live, *finally*, as a survivor. Being a survivor is indicative of being an inheritor of the debt left not only by those who came before, but also by those now alive and those yet to exist. The idea of living after the death of the self and of the other crucially constitutes Derrida's lifelong contemplation of writing. This conception of what Derrida calls survival is algorithmically deducted from, rather than "added on to," life and death, because to survive always indicates one's sense of lack and thus triggers his or her desire to involve the relation with the other *per se*, as well as the other in the self. For Derrida, the sense of the insufficiency of the self is the goad to the ethical. The writing of the self best presents the way in which survival is considered because it posits itself under the condition that the trace of the other intervenes. This is where ethics of writing happens.

## II. From *bio*, *auto*, to *graphy*

In what way should one begin with the criticism of hetero-*thanato*-biography, a writing of one's *life* with regards to the *death* of the other? Or, why should one's life's record and experience rendered into words in autobiographical writing be always already bound up with his or her discourse on *la mort de l'autre*? Let's start with the term and trace its development. Generally speaking, autobiography is itself undergoing a shift of emphasis from *bio*, to *auto*, and to *graphy*.<sup>2</sup> It is first regarded as a sub-type of

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Derrida and Autobiography*, Robert Smith divides the third section of his

biographical writings, in which the self should be enveloped in the broader perspective of history. This includes theological history, with Saint Augustine's *Confessions* being the point of departure as well as the apogee. Life (*bio*) is always, in its archaeological and developmental sense, embedded in the macrocosm, interpreting one's relation either to God, the superior form of existence, or the unstoppable flow of history. Between the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the advent of Romanticism, and later Darwinism and Freudian psychology,<sup>3</sup> the stress on individualism reaches its zenith in human history. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>4</sup> and Rousseau, in *Poetry and Truth* and *The Confessions* respectively, demonstrate how *auto* plays the most crucial part in autobiography: conjunction of affective and

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book into "*auto*," "*bio*" and "*graphy*," which gains the status for writing since it has been lost in the works of the "humanist-existentialist" (1995: 55), Philippe Lejeune and James Olney, for instance. Lejeune and Olney share the humanist view of regarding the author/self as one of the central points of reference when it comes to autobiography, even though they realize that there are problems with the concept of autobiography. Under such circumstances, Lejeune, for example, brings forth the idea of "autobiographical contract," which is discussed pages later, while Olney, who himself champions the individualistic and Romantic perspective in autobiographical writing (see especially his early work *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* [1972]), admits that the task of defining the genre of autobiography is out of the question (1972: 38).

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis not only propels the pursuit of human egoism in modern literature but also influences poststructuralists' and deconstructionists' stress on the instability of memory, which seriously questions the credibility of autobiography.

<sup>4</sup> What is worth noting is that though Goethe also follows the Romantic trend of stressing the self and his or her feelings, he, nonetheless, is very conscious of the retrospective truthfulness an autobiographical writing surely brings. That is, unlike Rousseau, Goethe doesn't assert that what he writes is the veracity itself since the past retrieved in the writing of the present is inescapably rendered impure by the intervention of imagination. Thomas Carlyle's introduction to *The Autobiography of Goethe* demonstrates how imagination works in Goethe's writing: "Everything has form, everything has visual existence; the poet's imagination *bodies forth* the forms of things unseen, his pen turns them to *shape*. This, as a natural endowment, exists in Goethe, we conceive, to a very high degree" (2008: 33; emphases in original).

cognitive aspects of personal experiences permeating the entire work. Rousseau in *The Confessions*, for instance, regards feeling above God as far as the knowledge and understanding of the self is concerned. Besides, God or Supreme Being no longer provides the ultimate guidance on truth for the speaker/writer as secularity offers a new direction for positing mankind's "authentic" affect in autobiography. Or, as Michael Mascuch, in his study of autobiographical practice in early modern England remarks, autobiography in the last decade of the eighteenth century manifests "the individualist self—the identity of the egocentric person who . . . regards himself as his own telos" (1996: 8). Although the historical effect is still at work, the turn towards the interior of the self goes so far as to bring forth the illusion<sup>5</sup> that the whole world, as well as the entirety of human history, revolves around the self. Rousseau even claims in the beginning of *The Confessions* that

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself. (1953: 17)

Autobiography reached the unprecedented level of transparency of self-inquiry when Rousseau's *Confessions* was published in 1782.

Nonetheless, soon after, this trend of accentuating one's individuality yields to the post-structuralistic claim of the death of the subject. Roland Barthes's 1967 theoretical essay "Death of the Author" and his 1975 *Roland Barthes Par Roland Barthes* serve as exemplars of diverting the emphasis of autobiography from *auto* to

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<sup>5</sup> By "illusion" I mean to mention beforehand what follows in my discussion: the problematic of the autobiographical writing based on *auto*, or self. Poststructuralists and deconstructionists are especially concerned about how illusion works in the process of writing. Yet Freud's theory on the unconscious has already rendered unreliable the representation of the self.

*graphy*. Rousseau's *Confessions* again draws attention, but this time it becomes the locus of deconstruction. The second chapter of Part Two in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is mainly dedicated to the discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Emile*. Rousseau prefers speech to writing, and thus the natural to the unnatural. To hold the presence of speech, as he is aware, one has to resort to the supplement of words, which Rousseau calls "that dangerous supplement," the very phrase Derrida employs as his chapter title. As is well-known (or perhaps notorious) in *The Confessions*, the chain of the supplement includes as examples masturbation, substitute mother love, and school education, which are respectively opposed to what Rousseau considers natural: sexual intercourse, love from a real mother and children's innate dispositions. In his reading, Derrida specifically notices the paradox hiding in Rousseau's texts: in *Emile*, Rousseau asserts that "there is no substitute for a mother's love" (qtd. in Derrida, 1976: 145), yet in *The Confessions* Madame de Warens and Therese both become substitutions for a real mother. Derrida reads *Emile* against *The Confessions* because instead of seeing the latter as a true confession or affective monologue, he deems it as a text like any other: "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" (1976: 158). Consequently, any effort, on Rousseau's part, to stress that everything he confesses is genuine ("My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself" [1953: 17]) and, on the biographical researchers' part, to verify the truthfulness of the autobiography, essentially fails to realize that, in actuality, it is the dangerous supplements that shape *The Confessions*, and that the trace in signification plays the main role in what Rousseau thinks he has built up as the first person narrative of his own life. Derrida puts it clearly in the following:

[T]here has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of

differential references, the “real” supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like “real mother” name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (1976: 159; emphases in original)

In the deconstructive reading of Rousseau’s text, Derrida tries to claim that Rousseau does not manage to write what he means. Rather, he is able only to bring forth supplements, which are used to add to the natural that Rousseau considers “once” original, present, and self-sufficient. That self-sufficiency needs supplements is itself a paradox, and the same goes for the attempt to claim the origin and completeness of one’s life narrative, of the kind with which Rousseau begins *The Confessions*. Thereby the more the autobiographer tries to present the self, the greater distance he or she is from the intention. This distance of proximity shows itself in the very beginning of Rousseau’s text. Up to this stage, autobiography is completely brought into foregrounding *graphy*.

This last phase of transformation of what stands out as the chief focus in the term autobiography calls into question the demarcation between autobiographical writings and fiction. As writing becomes the hub of attention and attraction, it cannot be totally dissociated from the situation of “inventing” the truth, which is what the first step of autobiographical writing, *bio*, endeavors to get rid of and what the second one, *auto*, tries to avoid even though a great amount of emotion and personal epistemology is involved. That is to say, the line used seemingly to separate autobiography from fiction becomes blurred. Paul de Man in his “Autobiography as De-facement,” a reading of William Wordsworth’s critical text *Essays upon Epitaphs*, even goes so far as to pose the rhetorical question:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? (1979a: 920; emphases in original)

De Man supposes that “we can,” and this is also where post-structuralism directs our understanding. To specify this, de Man focuses upon the indecisiveness of the reference and figuration in autobiography; that is, upon the question of whether the former produces the latter, or the other way around. In a text, according to him, a reader is never able to distinguish fact from fiction as every text is under the law of “topological substitution” (1979a: 922). Evolving from this conceptualization is the idea that one remains in *aporia* trying to separate fiction from autobiography, and that to regard autobiography as a genre is anything but tenable. In actuality, the abovementioned paragraph challenges all the traditional autobiographical studies on the verification and trustfulness of the author. Philippe Lejeune, one of the most eminent scholars on autobiography, famously defines the concept of autobiography as the following: “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (1989: 4). Yet Lejeune himself notices the inadequacy of such a definition and raises the idea of “autobiographical contract” to supplement it. The intention in general is to secure the existence of the authority of an author, even though such a contract or pact involves the reader’s trust in the author’s credit. The sustainability of the trinity of the narrator, the protagonist and the author remains at issue here. De Man tries to state that instead of serving as a means of tenable narrative (e.g. of human understanding and cognition of one’s life), autobiographical writing is susceptible to the characteristic of

tropological substitution in language, which has the ability to disfigure what is constituted as the totalizing feature of autobiography.

Like Derrida, de Man also thinks that Rousseau's *Confessions* is not a confession that simply reveals all the truth. In "Excuses (*Confessions*)," de Man focuses on the stolen ribbon event and points out that Rousseau's excuses for his imputing the stolen ribbon to Marion actually drive his text apart from the intention to confess, since, according to him, true confession doesn't need any excuses. To put it in another way, one can declare that excuses demolish the honesty and truthfulness of confession. De Man, nonetheless, does not blame Rousseau for not making the confession because, as we have discussed above, language's indeterminacy (and its de-facement) lies in its nature to go beyond what is referential: "language is entirely free with regard to referential meaning and can posit whatever its grammar allows it to say" (1979b: 293). That is, language is not controlled by its "users" because it is a chain of signifiers which always slip. Under such circumstances, even though Rousseau might be telling the truth when trying to exonerate himself from his shifting the blame onto Marion, which we will never know, what de Man cares about is "not the sincerity of the speaker or the gullibility of the listener"; rather, it is "the verbal or nonverbal nature of the evidence that makes the difference" (281), which goes back to what de Man has earlier differentiated between, "the confession stated in the mode of revealed truth" and "the confession stated in the mode of excuse," with the former concerning the evidence which is "referential" or nonverbal, and the latter regarding the evidence which is "verbal" (280). To draw the stolen ribbon event into this analysis, we can clearly notice the problematic lying in Rousseau's autobiographical project. The ribbon actually indicates the event happening *in reality* and its reality is capable of proving by the witnesses, if there are any. This is what de Man calls "a referential reading-moment" (278) at the very beginning of the essay. This step of reading Rousseau's *Confessions* is what one expects with regard to Lejeune's autobiographical contract, yet de Man reminds

us not to forget that the ribbon also appears in the linguistic form in the text. And the excuses carrying “*sentiment interieur*” (280) lose themselves in the labyrinth of what de Man in “Autobiography as De-facement” calls “tropological substitution” (1979a: 922), which, unlike “a referential reading-moment,” cannot be proved at all. In short, there lies the discrepancy of event and the interpretation of it, the latter of which pertains to the play and performativity of language.

Here comes a crucial question: if all the texts inevitably involve the play of language, how could one differentiate, for example, fiction from autobiography? Or, in de Man’s word, is the difference between the two “undecidable” (1979a: 921)? His conclusion is positive, even if he refuses to state that the two are the same. In other words, although de Man doesn’t think *The Confessions* tells the truth, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it is fictional. On the other hand, the distinction between fiction and autobiography seems to be workable, if not decidable, only if we all (readers and writers) agree that autobiography leans towards referring to the reality of the lives of those who live the narrative experiences, and that fiction aims to construct a world which can be anything *but the reality itself*. Under such terms and conditions, autobiography chooses to write events from what really happens. Accordingly, what is told in autobiography follows reality, while that in fiction exists outside reality. This mode of distinction, working only under what is similar to Lejeune’s “autobiographical contract,” falls into what Derrida in his eulogy for Barthes calls “naive and ‘realist’ referentialism” (2001a: 61), as we have seen in Derrida’s and de Man’s criticisms. Regarding the dilemma, Derrida prefers to remain open as far as the demarcation of genres<sup>6</sup> is concerned:

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<sup>6</sup> As far as genre is concerned, Derrida’s following claim is also crucial: “In literature what always interests me is essentially the autobiographical—not what is called the ‘autobiographical genre,’ but rather the autobiographicity that greatly overflows the ‘genre’ of autobiography” (Derrida, 2001b: 41).

a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. (1980: 65)

In this view, autobiography is consequently not simply autobiographical. It, like fiction, memoir, or diary, is porous, is “an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general” and “keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself” (65). Although his early texts, such as his discussion on Rousseau, show his impression of deconstruction’s force of dismantling without re-construction in the light of the play of language, in his latter works, Derrida vindicates the affirmativeness of deconstruction. My argument here is that Derrida does not intend to accentuate unlimitedly the post-structuralistic basis of non-avoidance of language in writing, to which he is always linked. In his later works, especially from the eighties onwards, *bio* is actually being retrieved from the takeover of *graphy*. In the interview “I Have a Taste for the Secret” collected in *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida asserts that “I would say that for me the great question is always the question *who*. Call it biographical, autobiographical or existential, the form of the question *who* is what matters to me . . . .” (Derrida, 2001b: 41; emphasis original). This “who” here does not refer to the subject *who* in reality writes; rather, it concerns what is really this “who” *which* writes. Is any agent writing on behalf of the who? In fact, Derrida’s claim of “who,” instead of trying to manifest the writing subject or authorial figure, directs us towards an intervention on the part of the other. Derrida’s return to *bio* is based on one’s realization that life comes always after mourning. Specifically, owing to the lack in life *a priori*, life of the self is first and foremost algorithmically deducted from the assumption of a complete and totalized life. The re-direction of *auto* to *hetero* and *bio* to *thanato* essentially defines how Derrida sees the working of writing itself in the process of “writing-with.”

### III. From Autobiography to Hetero-Thanato-Biography

To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death.

—Jacques Derrida (1994: 18)

Derrida doesn't actually use the term "hetero-thanato-biography" in any of his works, but he does employ some similar terms.<sup>7</sup> Refuting deconstructionist negativist label, Derrida claims *otherwise*. In what we call the post-structural era in which the subjectivity of the self gives in unreservedly to writing, his concepts, nevertheless, present affirmation of life. Although laying emphasis upon writing and text, Derrida re-connects them with one's life, only under the condition of, paradoxically, being with and mourning for the other.

Hetero-thanato-biography becomes a term by which to understand Derrida best, not only because all his crucial ideas are amalgamated and hyphenated in this coined word, but also because "hetero" (other) and "thanato" (death) are concentrated first and foremost in the term before one's life-writing comes to the fore. *Auto* is purposely omitted to fit into Derrida's philosophy of ethics. Besides Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, a French philosopher whom he admires, raises another term "allothanatography" in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*. Discussing Theodor Reik's<sup>8</sup> *The*

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<sup>7</sup> "Otobiography" in *The Ear of the Other*; "autothanatography" and "heterothenatography" in *The Post Card*; "autobioheterothenatography" in *Circumfession*; "autobiographicity" in "I Have a Taste for the Secret"; "zootobiography" in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*; "Autobiophotographies" in *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*.

<sup>8</sup> Reik (1888-1969), trained among the first students of Freud, was born into a Jewish family in Vienna, and later became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

*Haunting Melody: Psychoanalytic Experience in Life and Music*, Lacoue-Labarthe concludes that Reik's autobiographical writing, opening with the demise of Abraham, is abortive since it is generally composed in the form of "funeral eulogy" (1998: 179), which Lacoue-Labarthe later links to Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his *Ecce Homo* also begins with death: "The fortunateness of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality: to express it in the form of a riddle, as my father I have already died, as my mother I still live and grow old" (Nietzsche, 2006: 502). To be in trace of the self, he or she first has to be in a relation with the other (Reik the student overshadowed by Freud the master). Thereby Lacoue-Labarthe remarks that

Every autobiography is in its essence the narrative of an *agony*, literally. This is why (among other reasons) it is not incorrect to substitute "thanatographical" for "biographical": all autobiography, in its monumental form, is *allothanatography*, if not *heterothanatography* (if the figure is never just one). *Sub specie mortis*, as Reik says. (1998: 179)

The relation with the other is to contest (*agōn*) it, but paradoxically the act of writing in the process and in the end makes the writer become the hostage<sup>9</sup> held by the other. Autobiography inevitably

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<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas's interpretation of the term "hostage" could be supportive to my view on Lacoue-Labarthe here. For Levinas, there are two extreme ways of relationship with the other; that is, the extreme choices of letting him live or killing him. The other triggers my desire to murder: "The other is the sole being I can wish to kill" (1979: 198). As in the conversation with Philippe Nemo in *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas describes the face of the other as "exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (1985: 86-87). It appears before us naked, without the slightest defense. Even a careless glimpse from us hurts him or her. A glimpse is made possible only via light, which is an accomplice of my murder. On the other hand, since the other presents himself or herself as something far from my grasp, which makes me even more want to approach. Nevertheless, every approach of the other, or to be more specific, any attempt to approach the other, is a try to kill him or her, in the most radical sense of ethics. This desire to kill derives from my wish to draw the

turns itself into the funeral eulogy for the other, becoming writing/being-with-the-other('s death). *Sub specie mortis*, in the shadow or under the guise of death, is exactly the situation in which autobiography is set. It is a monumental "tomb" (179) intended for the self, yet ending up with the takeover by the other. One has to notice that the other is not literally an enemy against the self. Lacoue-Labarthe uses "literally" to emphasize, and at the same time, aporetically, to counteract *agony's* literalness. The other is *agonistic* not in the sense that it is any ferocious foe endangering the life of the self, but that it is an imperative impervious to any challenge, especially the defiance from the protagonist's self. In the later part of the quote Lacoue-Labarthe seems to imply that the death of the other is not merely a single but a singular one, which I choose to understand as related to Nancy's idea of being singular plural.

As one might notice, being singular plural is the title of one of Nancy's<sup>10</sup> books. Here I would like briefly to raise Nancy's

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other under my comprehension. This act of killing is paradoxically passive. The "can" in the abovementioned "I can wish to kill" is always already a response I have no choice but to give, when the other encounters me. I am always already "subject" to the other, who arouses my feeling to attack. "Hostage" is the term Levinas employs to describe the asymmetrical relationship between "I" and the other. Actually, this invitation to kill the other is owing to the assumption that I can never be responsible enough to him or her, who appears as the old, the weak and the wounded before me, calling out "Thou shall not kill."

<sup>10</sup> Nancy happens to be Lacoue-Labarthe's closest academic associate since their cooperation at the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political between 1980 and 1984. Together, they edited *Les Fins de l'homme: A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (1981) and *Le retrait du politique* (1983), and co-write *Retreating the Political* (1997, edited by Simon Sparks). Derrida was a friend, as well as a mentor, to both of them. Oliver Marchart mentions in passing in his discussion of Nancy that "Jacques Derrida's text 'Fins de l'homme' ('Ends of Man'), which took place shortly before the Centre's opening in 1980, is usually considered to be the prelude to, or even the starting point of, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's later work on the political" (2007: 62). In fact, the three wrote to, and influenced, each other. Derrida writes a long introduction to Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, and dedicates a whole book titled under Nancy's name: *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*. Besides

thinking about being singular plural, which co-appears, to borrow his own term, with Derrida's concept of the Other. Nancy's is a philosophy of ontological difference. To wit, he returns to Heideggerian discussion of Being in *Being and Time*, yet with his "ambition of redoing the whole of 'first philosophy' by giving the 'singular plural' of Being as its foundation" (2000: 15), and "[i]n his analytic of *Mitsein*, Heidegger does not do this measure justice" (82). What Nancy tries to point out is that despite rightly arguing that the essence of *Dasien* is being-toward-death, [Martin?] Heidegger is insufficient in this. For Nancy, "being-with" is way much more fundamental (even though Nancy's thinking is a post-foundational one)<sup>11</sup> since "the self knows itself principally as other than itself . . . . And yet, the logic of this constitution is paradoxical, since it involves simultaneously the opening of the self to the other *and* its closure" (77; emphasis in original). This is why Nancy mentions earlier on in his discussion of community that a true community is inoperative. Nancy puts stress on the significance of the singular instead of the individual because the latter, with the concomitance of a subject's self-identity, signifies that people believe in the existence of community. Community is deemed, from Rousseau onwards, to be several times ruptured in human history and to be desperately in need and capable of restoration. Nancy's community, nonetheless, is the one which is dis-located and un-worked because instead of as bound together

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the omnipresent presence of Derrida's thinking in Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's oeuvre, Nancy wrote one of the collective eulogies in memory of Derrida, who passed away in 2004, in the book *Adieu Derrida* (edited by Costas Douzinas), summing up (which is itself impossible) Derrida's lifelong care for the other in light of the famous debate on reason and madness between Derrida and Michel Foucault. Nancy's "Elliptical Sense," collected in *A Finite Thinking and Derrida: A Critical Reader*, begins with "there is too great a proximity between us [Nancy and Derrida]." Yet he soon appends that his writing on Derrida is indeed in an elliptical sense, which "falls short of being identical" (1992: 37), and this could be seen as another gesture of being singular plural.

<sup>11</sup> One might want to refer to Marchart's book *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*.

and sharing selves of a collective from the perspective of individual subjects, community, if there is any, is to be envisioned “*in the wake of [à partir de] society*” (1991: 11; emphases in original). One has to wait for it to happen in the days to come, and it definitely won’t be like any of the communities ever existed. The “simultaneously” and “and” in the abovementioned quote speak of the *aporia* of the nature of Nancy’s idea “we,” which “is ‘someone’ each time, just as ‘each one’ is someone” (2000: 75-76). In other words, “self” and “other” share in this “we,” yet this circumstance is based on the recognition of their division, and thereby of the community as what I would call *sépartageation*, the separation pertaining to sharing, or a sharing constitution being impossible to share. Nancy, in *The Inoperative Community*, once remarks “[A] thinking of the subject thwarts a thinking of community” (1991: 23). Borrowing Georges Bataille, Nancy revokes any attempt to understand subjectivity as a totalized and tenable identity. He therefore asserts that community is to be reckoned as sharing only with regard to the death of the other, which is two removes from, and an absolute cancellation of, identity as well as subjectivity. For Nancy, being is always a being-with and being-together, which renders plural the concept of the singular. Nancy’s idea of community is related to the cognition of hetero-thanato-biography perceived by Derrida concerning the relationship between the other and the self. That is, only when the inoperativeness comes into the figurative system of human knowledge, to which the idea of operation is always “added on,” inclusive of the absorption and assimilation of the other into the self, will the days of ethics really arrive. This inoperativeness here becomes a correlative of the other, death, and the death of the other, in comparison with the life of the self. Paradoxically, it is the force of inoperativeness, like the concept of mourning we will shortly turn to in the next section, that brings a person to the ethical because it is productive rather than depleting, affirmative rather than negative.

Both Lacoue-Labarthe’s discussion of “funeral eulogy” and

Nancy's concept of being singular plural are manifest also in Derrida's study of autobiography. Derrida in an interview, later titled "A 'Madness' Must Watch Over Thinking" and published in the 1991 volume of *Le Magazine littéraire*, remarks upon how significantly the idea of trace is associated with and serves as a revisionary device to autobiography:

Why is it that the trace (neither presence nor absence, beyond being, therefore, even beyond Being—which is the whole border of negative theologies that has always interested me, notably in "How to Avoid Speaking?") "is" that which puts philosophy into motion and thereby refuses itself to philosophy, resists *properly ontological, transcendental, or philosophical comprehension* in general? Without being foreign to philosophy, this attempt was neither philosophical nor solely theoretical or critical; it *promised* (it was this very promise itself), it engaged new bodies of writing, pledges of other signatures, new bodies in which neither philosophy, nor literature, nor perhaps knowledge in general would reassemble their image or their history. "Autobiography" is certainly just an old name for designating one of the bodies thereby pledged. (1995: 346-347; emphases in original)

The importance of the concept of trace for Derrida is that it *is* in the sense of the spectral which occupies nowhere, always situating itself in an interstitial space. Derrida once considered autobiography<sup>12</sup> as the most suitable term when facing the

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<sup>12</sup> In "This Strange Institution Called Literature," Derrida says that "[w]hat interests me today is not strictly called either literature or philosophy . . . 'Autobiography' is perhaps the least inadequate name, because it remains for me the most enigmatic, the most open, even today" (1992: 34) and in another interview he is more unreserved: "philosophy, or academic philosophy at any rate, for me has always been at the service of this autobiographical design of memory" (Derrida, 2001b: 41). The next section dealing with Derrida's *Circumfession* will have discussion on the connection of memory and autobiographical writing (and at the stage of discussion here, hetero-thanatographical writing).

dilemma of choosing between philosophy and literature, to both of which he never fully leans. Nevertheless, as the quote here shows, autobiography is anything but what it traditionally designates itself: the writing of one's past self in the present. It, most importantly of all, also refers to the future. Autobiography is not the writer's remembrance of things past, but how he or she regards the past in the present. One should add that the future is also involved in the process of autobiographical writings. Writers narrate their past because the present needs it and the future demands it. It carries the speech act of promising, a still to-come gesture which exceeds what autobiography itself could promise. This accounts for why the trace, which Derrida specifies first before the mention of autobiography, doesn't simply evade but "resists *properly ontological, transcendental, or philosophical comprehension.*" By adding trace as the supplement to autobiography, Derrida points out the *a priori* insufficiency of the idea of autobiography, which in turn draws attention to the potentiality of ethics it can bring forth. To get to this potentiality, it is necessary to track down all "traces" of it. The concept of trace permeates Derrida's work, yet it is earlier discussed in the context of Saussure's theory of language as a signifying system. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida laments that

All dualisms, all theories of the immortality of the soul or of the spirit, as well as all monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar, are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive toward the reduction of the trace. (1976: 71)

Now Derrida, paradoxically bringing the trace's absence into presence, stops this reduction and endeavors to stress its inevitability in any form of writing as well as in the history of philosophy. Always already in the process of *différance*, trace, or what Derrida in other circumstances calls remains, cinders<sup>13</sup> or

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of cinder might be the most "materialistic" delineation of the concept of trace. First of all, cinder *is* itself a trace, a remainder of something which no

even supplement, (dis)appears in every text, indicating that there is no origin of meaning and that signification is never complete, owing to the everlasting activity of deferment and difference. When discussing Rousseau's *Confessions*, Derrida points out that Rousseau's work to capture the meaning of his life is helplessly supplemented by its incompleteness. He turns out to be writing a confession which is to certain degree against what he thinks he is capable of confessing, because writing always leaves trace, which not only cancels the presence of the writer but also brings the other. In other words, the attempt to be in trace of the self is ineluctably first and foremost supplementary to the trace of the other, the latter of which becomes the originary<sup>14</sup> of every origin such as signs and signifiers. Trace is thus a departure from the understanding of the ethics of the other since it activates the writing on life and the life of writing.

#### IV. In Trace of the Self in *Circumfession*

Derrida in *Circumfession* claims that he is "working at the delivery of literary confessions, i.e. at a form of theology as

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longer exists. It *is*, and it *is not*. Secondly, it also stands for (to avoid the use of the word "represents") what is oppositional to the Platonic light. Cinders are what remain after the blazing flame, and therefore the surviving substances of the burning fire. They finally survive the light. This can be an allegorical exegesis to how deconstruction has toppled down the traditional metaphysics, but the most crucial perspective of cinder is that it becomes a palimpsest-like writing plate, upon which the reiterative act of writing is allowed while evading the settlement of signification. Probably Ned Lukacher's introduction to Derrida's *Cinders* best summarizes the absent presence of the a-concept: "Cinder is at once the best name for the absence of a truly proper name for that which holds all beings and entities in presence, and by the same token just another name that cannot begin to assess its distance or proximity to the final proper name (or names) of the truth of Being, whose very existence remains undecidable" (1991: 1).

<sup>14</sup> The originary here is not to be understood as the original in metaphysical sense because trace is, like Derrida's other major "concepts," "aconceptual" (1988: 118) and thereby carries the intention of escaping any epistemological assimilation and totalization. To see the use of the term in Derrida's text, please go to note 1.

autobiography” (1993a: 86-87) and ends in the final section of fifty-nine with “*Everybody’s Autobiography*” (311; emphasis in original). John D. Caputo in his book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* indicates that *Circumfession*, like Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*, is “highly autobiographical” (Caputo, 1997: 309) on account of both the two texts being “so very close to myself” (Derrida, 1993b: 3), as Derrida “confesses.” Caputo here chooses to suspend his disbelief since he is conscious of the dilemma attached to any criticism of autobiographical writings. As he makes clear, “there is the difficulty of highly private allusions in which Derrida makes reference to matters in his personal life that we cannot possibly make out” (1997: 285). What is worth noting is how Derrida could escape de Man’s and his own deconstructionist reading of a text such as Rousseau’s *Confessions*. Derrida’s solution is that he mediates between what he calls “naive and ‘realist’ referentialism” and what critics have often labeled the nihilistic deconstructionist stance of language in autobiographical writings, by illustrating these writings in the way that *graphy* has always come with and aporetically after *bio* and *thanato*, while *hetero* has always already been substituted for *auto*. *Circumfession* is employed as an exemplar here.

*Circumfession*, Derrida’s bottom-column juxtaposition to Geoffrey Bennington’s book on Derrida, best presents how autobiography is under-structured by trace and thus transformed into hetero-thanato-biography, all through the embodiment of autobiography as one of the “bodies of writing,” as we learn from the quote from “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking” above. For autobiography to be initiated into the bodies of writing, it requires “pledges of other signatures” (Derrida, 1995: 347). Derrida chooses Augustine’s *Confessions* as the antithesis to his *Circumfession* not only because it is the first autobiographical writing after which all other kinds follow, but also because it carries what Derrida believes innately belongs to autobiography: the *hetero-thanato* aspect of one’s life writing. Even though seen as

the first well-known autobiography in the history of writing, Augustine's *Confessions* is controversial both in content and form. "You" (God) and "he" (Saint Paul, Verecundus and Nebridius, for instance) or "she" (mainly Augustine's mother, Monica) dominate the whole work instead of the "I." Besides, Augustine was not trying to detail his own life experience. In fact, in *The Confessions* there are only nine books concerning "his life," while the rest of the four books, which take the proportion of almost half the entire work, are principally dedicated to theological musing, namely, to God. To be specific, there is a clear narrative disjunction beginning in Book Ten. Augustine obviously turns this book into a discourse of catechetical contemplation,<sup>15</sup> differentiated from the prayers to and praises of God embedded in the narrative of life experiences in previous books. Derrida in *Circumfession* goes further to "undermine G.'s 'theological program,'" as Martin Hägglund also points out in his *Radical Atheism* (2008: 153). G. here refers both to God and Geoffrey, concerning the issue of "making the truth" from Augustine to God and Geoffrey to his readers. If God knows everything, what is the use of confessing all to Him/Her, especially when telling everything is impossible? To parallel this, Derrida sheds light upon the contract that he and Geoffrey have made: his text is intended to surprise and consequently survive Geoffrey's text on him. What could Derrida confess in the text he is about to write when he presupposes that Geoffrey has exhausted all of what he says and writes? Not to mention his assertion that "I am not confessing myself, rather I'm confessing the others for the imponderable and therefore so heavy secrets I inherit unbeknownst to myself" (1993a: 187). One has to notice that by undermining

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<sup>15</sup> The catechism here includes inquiries such as "And I directed my thoughts to myself, and said, 'Who art thou?' And I answered 'A man'" (Augustine, 1950: 192); "What then shall I do, O Thou my true life, my God? I will pass even beyond this power of mine which is called memory  
may proceed to Thee, O Thou sweet Light" (204); "Whom could I find to reconcile me to Thee? Was I to solicit the angels? By what prayer? By what sacraments?" (230).

the theological program Derrida does not mean to secularize his text, even though the debate of his atheism is scattered in several interviews and essays.<sup>16</sup> What Derrida endeavors to do is to bring to the fore the problematic raised by one's telling the truth to God. Because of the obvious ontotheological flaw in the claim of "telling the truth" in Augustine's *Confessions* and succeeding autobiographical writings, Derrida sticks to Augustine's own phrase "making the truth" (47-48) to reveal the self-implosion element of every autobiography. On the one hand, Augustine's self-written biography has to be called up by God the other, which puts autobiography as the writing of the self in question. On the other, confessants always fail because the undecidability of language and the porousness of autobiography as "a genre" all account for the impossibility of, for example, Augustine's theological program in autobiography.

In her seminal essay "Circumcising Confession," Jill Robbins, after positing Derrida in the line of Judaical tradition of Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas, claims that "Circumcision is singular; it is the event of the singular" (1995: 32). "Circumcision" is a term Derrida coins to combine circumcision and confession. Circumcision is simultaneously the most secret and the most public act because the cutting of the male's foreskin, which is absolutely individualistic, after the eight days of birth, also means mankind's covenant with God, which requires absolute obedience and is based in a sense of the communal. Thus asserting that circumcision is singular is always already to summon the singular-plural aspect of it. To confess, on the other hand, as Derrida's discussion of Augustine demonstrates, is in a dilemma to reveal the secrecy kept only to oneself while also unveiling the things God

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hägglund's *Radical Atheism* (2008), Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), "Confessions and 'Circumfession': A Roundtable with Jacques Derrida" and "Response to Catherine Malabou" in Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism* (2005).

already knows.<sup>17</sup> The reason for the bringing together of the above contradictory conditions is that Derrida believes the marks on the body, or the body of writing, substantiates, if not literally visualizes, the concept of trace. To substantiate it here, as Derrida tries to with the idea of cinder, does not necessarily mean to make it exist physically, but instead to get it to work, namely to usher what is beyond delineation into temporary presence. This is, later in the conference arranged under the discussion of postmodern Augustine, why Derrida explains circumcision with his idea of “event”:

The event is absolutely unpredictable, that is, beyond any performativity. That’s where a signature occurs. If I so much insist on circumcision in this text, it is because circumcision is precisely something which happens to a powerless child before he can speak, before he can sign, before he has a name. It is by this mark that he is inscribed in a community, whether he wants it or not. This happened to him and leaves a mark, a scar, a signature on his body. This happened before him, so to speak. It’s a heritage that he cannot deny, whatever he does or he doesn’t do. (2005: 21)

Of course Derrida here doesn’t simply try to deny any definiteness of his identity (a Jew, or a North African, an Arab, a Frenchman). More crucial is the recognition of the other living in me by the form of a proper name. For Derrida, “Only the name can inherit, and this is why the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man’s name, a name of death” (1985: 7). The name, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father, haunts the living with unspeakable secrecy, but at the same time, seeks to reveal the secrecy by keeping it as one’s own-ness. This shared secrecy, itself as an aporetic concept, is the very nature circumcision stands for. As Derrida responds to Hent de Vries, circumcision is “absolutely unique” to oneself yet it is, beyond the limitation under the Jewish,

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida quotes Augustine as stating “Why we confess to God, when he knows (everything about us)” (1993a: 8).

also “exemplary” (de Vries & Derrida, 2005: 89). In other words, the monumentalization of the self is never of pure secrecy because on the one hand writing de-subjectivizes *whoever* does the writing, and more essentially on the other hand, as both de Man and Derrida assert, the slipperiness of language dictates the desubjectivization in all the writing. Nonetheless, Derrida, in spite of his employing the linguistically determined terms “proper name” and “signature,” posits the self’s relation with the other as the pre-original as well as non-original. As Bennington has pointed out, proper name “is a moment that escapes [Derrida’s] famous textuality, and which gives that textuality a grounding which limits the excessive importance he attempts to give to *différance*” (1993: 105). This provides a space for the dialectic of life and death to enter. Both one’s signature and circumcision “happened before” him or her in the sense that the name of the dead is presupposedly ushered in with writing. If one’s narrative of the self is determined by mourning for the other, both living and dead, or if one’s self-accounting necessarily involves the memory of the other, then the act of circumcision is best associated with autobiographical writing. The circumcision or the cutting wound on the body is associated with the incision in the text, echoing Derrida’s analogy between pen and syringe in the beginning of *Circumfession* (1993a: 10). The wound is that which is enforced upon the self, since it is inscribed as the memory attached to the self not long after his or her birth.

In one of the four chapters dedicated to the memory of de Man, “Mnemosyne,” named after the Titaness who is goddess of memory and mother of the Muses in Greek mythology, Derrida interweaves memory, mourning and autobiography by referring the work of mourning to “a meditation in which bereaved memory is deeply engraved. Funerary speech and writing do not follow upon death; they *work upon life* in what we call autobiography” (1989: 22; emphases added). Circumcision becomes a medium to re-member an unreliable memory, which also allegorizes the

impossibility of writing the true self in autobiography. Yet, even though memory is indeterminable owing to its always already being deprived, it is the source of the affirmativeness of life Derrida so much stresses. The “bodies of writing” work upon life under the condition that it is “not our empirical concept of writing” (Spivak, 1976: 39), and thus not what Derrida calls “‘realist’ referentialism.” As Spivak notices of Derrida’s borrowing of the phrase “space of writing,” writing is “the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace” and it involves “the entire memory-work of the psyche” (39). In fact, trace is not simply the remains of memory; rather, memory is trace itself since the consolidation of the acknowledgement of the self, intervened by the other, no longer exists. Autobiographical writing is an act of conjuring up the spectral trace of memory. It is by stressing the trace-effect of memory in the process of writing that Derrida asserts the significance of ethical writing reached by the care of the other. No matter whether it is the space of writing or bodies of writing, what Derrida tries to imply is how memory-texture goes beyond what is referential: instead of sticking to the faith that one’s life comes before the writing, which to a certain degree depends on the information of life experiences provided by memory, it demonstrates that writing also generates how life is lived through, in which hetero-thanato-biographical writings affirm the life of the self through the promise of the memory in the future. The affirmativeness of life requires a repetitive *yes*, which “must promise itself to itself; it must bind itself to memory for memory, if anything is ever to come from the future” (Derrida, 1989: 20). For Derrida, this repetitiveness of *yes* itself, the act which affirms life, bears double-edged meanings, which are contrasts as well as complementariness: it confirms that which comes before the moment when this *yes* is announced, and it also promises a not-yet arrival of moment which can only be inscribed on the memory directed towards future. As a cogent exemplar of hetero-thanato-biographical writing, Derrida’s *Circumfession* is dedicated mainly

to the memory of his mother, Georgette, and crucially it is also the mourning of the (m)other even when she is still alive, which is in a sense a mourning from the future. Derrida's feeling of being captivated in his care of the other can be detected in the following paragraph, which shows his anxiety of falling into any totalization during the narrative of his own life story: "from what wound is it waiting for me, me who, among other remorse with respect to my mother, feel really guilty for publishing her end, . . . and . . . would I not feel as guilty, and would I not in truth *be* as guilty if I wrote here about myself without retaining the least trace of her . . . ." (1993a: 36-37; emphasis in original). This affection of feeling unable to care "enough" for the other reminds us that, during an interview, he sees circumcision as a "submi[ssion] to in absolute passivity"<sup>18</sup> (1995: 341). To pre-mourn the other means for Derrida to advance the time of the futuristic mourning in the present. This is not something which can be done in reality, but an ethical gesture, Derrida reminds us, which can only be approached in writing.

Each of the fifty-nine sections ("59 periods,<sup>19</sup> 59 respirations, 59 commotions, 59 four-stroke compulsions" [1993a: 127]) in *Circumfession* monumentalizes every cutting mark in his writing as well as on his body. Fifty-nine is also the age Derrida finishes his response to Bennington, but it is more than a chronological chronicle of his life. It also serves to indicate the repetition in difference through which Derrida pays his homage to his autobiographical counterpart Augustine, as both of the writers are born in what is today Algeria, and the deaths of their mothers are so purposely interchangeably delineated that they are hardly

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<sup>18</sup> See also note 9 for the discussion of Levinas's thinking about hostage and the other.

<sup>19</sup> Every section in *Circumfession* contains only one period. Derrida's run-on sentences demonstrate his intention to survive the words or even death confronting himself and his mother. Yet realizing the impossibility of such an intention, Derrida is soon to assert "*already I am dead*" as the basis of an "Augustinian *cogito* which says *I am*" (1993a: 127-128).

dissimilated from each other. Derrida's pre-mourning of his mother and himself with the left side of his face paralyzed in 1989, and his mother's pre-mourning of himself because of the traumatic experiences of the premature death of Derrida's two brothers Paul-Moïse and Norbert Pinhas, as well as his conjuring of Augustine's mourning of Monica, bring forth this sort of Nietzschean return of life force in iteration. For Derrida, life and death co-exist and this is best captured in the short yet strong pronouncement in *Circumfession*—"I posthume<sup>20</sup> as I breath" (26). When one is alive, he or she already lives with death. To live as if one is already dead means to survive not only those who are deceased but also the self, and this is revealed in Derrida's accentuation of "the intense relation to survival that writing is" (191).

## V. Coda

Autobiography concerns autograph, a word from Greek *autographon*, neuter of *autographos*, which means "written with one's own hand." The omission of *bio* in autograph, compared to the word autobiography, provides an interesting point to further investigate hetero-thanato-biography with Derrida's concept of signature: writing with one's own hand and always beginning with the other's life/death (like Lacoue-Labarthe's analysis of Reik's life/death). Nevertheless, this is not to say that life ceases to *be* owing to death; instead, Derrida intends to stress that the writing of one's name by the other continues to survive after one passes away. Signature always survives the signatory and crucially it is countersigned by the name of the other: "It follows that any signature is a signature only on condition that it call or promise a countersignature" (Bennington, 1993: 157). Autograph, or what Derrida calls "signature," is to sign by the name of nature, if I am

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<sup>20</sup> "Posthume" means "posthumous" in English. It is here syntactically transformed as a verb.

allowed to play with the word. Signing in the name of nature means to return to the death of the ultra-other which, for Derrida, expresses the originary of the original ethically preempting the life of the self which dominates the most traditional perspective in autobiographical writing.

The only way to underwrite hetero-thanato-biography is to write under the other, not literally, but ethically. In other words, writing is not to obliterate the inscription which is on the top.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, it is (un)willingly to be held beneath as a hostage and so to manifest the other. Additionally, writing always engulfs reading, with the latter countersigning the former. The act of reading comes both from the other and the other in the self. Specifically, even though *Circumfession* is the writing text signed by a man named Jacques Derrida, it is never as pure as it seems, since not only the reading act of the other (it could be the general reader, Geoffrey Bennington, or even God) but also the signatory himself, out of the contract he promises the other, countersign this very text. This is what explains that for autobiography to really work, it should be on the condition that it is the ear of the other, to borrow from Derrida, which makes autobiographical writing possible. In other words, the politics of signature is also the politics of ethics since signature is produced by the receivers' side, and heard by the ear of the other. Besides, the ear of the other to the greatest extent indicates the demise of the writing subject as well as the other *other than* the self on account of the demand of ethical responsibility Derrida so assigns to writing. Biography and autobiography concern the writing with regard to the living object. Yet they do not repel death, which is often regarded as opposed to the idea of the living. Autobiographical writing is hetero-thanatographical writing, and Derrida's quote from Nietzsche remarking the latter's assumption of both the role of his father and mother, one always dead, the other forever living, echoes his parallelism of

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<sup>21</sup> Also cf. note 13 for the discussion of cinder.

the life still breathing and the self as other after death: “I posthume as I breath.” What draws attention in the word “posthumous” is that it means “born after the death of the originator” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.), and it is evident that to be born after the father’s demise implies being the last. Writing, or the whole text to which signature is connected, is the last, the remains, the survival and the trace of the authorial father figure. The surviving mother in *Circumfession* becomes the locus from which Derrida generates the momentum to keep life running, only under the shadow of death. The fifty-nine relays of narrative goad the life, both outside the text as well as within the experience of the narrative, to run on and on. As one of Derrida’s best friends, J. Hillis Miller, once remarks in his threnodial essay dedicated to the memory of Derrida, “Derrida has so much to say, and he wants to say it all before it is too late” (2007: 148). This remark by Miller mainly refers to the late works of Derrida and also cogently agrees with *Circumfession*. Derrida composes *Circumfession* from 1989 to 1990, during which time his mother is still alive (Georgette passes away on December 5, 1991). Derrida’s *Circumfession* and his other mourning texts always pre-mourn subjects before their end because “The words spoken against death, out of mortal fear of death, speak of death, speak death. They anticipate a death that has already come, that is already belated, a thing of the past. I am already living a posthumous life/death. Derrida always already speaks as the late Derrida” (Miller, 2007: 148).

Like Nancy, Hélène Cixous also claims her proximity to Derrida, whom she considers as her other (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997: 80). And in another text written after the death of Derrida, she confirms Derrida’s “originary affirmation” of his lifelong pursuit of “living on” (2007: 93). To begin with the quote from *Learning to Live Finally*, and to end this paper again with his words in the same text, means not only to show the homage to Derrida. It is also a demonstration of how his works survive, today as well as in the future, the philosopher passing away on October 9,

2004. Though talking about mourning and death in most of his late writings, Derrida claims that “deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life” (2007: 51). Indeed, what could reveal more about the life of the self if not from the side of the other and its death? What is crucial is not to deem death as belonging to the past and oppositional to life. As discussed above, writing the death of the other leads to the promise of the future. Autobiographical writing is already hetero-thanatobiographical writing because it promises the future by the name of the other. It is the future one might fail to grasp, but it leaves the trace he or she can expect to track. In the end, hetero-thanatobiography leads to the understanding that what is barely autobiographical in the light of language is exactly how it is so autobiographical, with *bio* resuscitated from “*Sub specie mortis*.”

Everything I say . . . about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving to death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible. (51-52)

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書寫的倫理：  
從自傳到異死書寫，  
以德希達《割禮告白》為例

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摘 要

自奧古斯丁的《懺悔錄》以降，自傳作為文類以來一直都備受爭議。本論文首先勾勒出自傳在不同時期的殊異，進而深入探究德希達如何將倫理關注帶入自我書寫之中。討論過程中將借用南西·拉庫·拉巴特以及德曼等解構主義學者對於生命、死亡、語言、共同體與書寫的思索來深化德希達的相關概念。即便自傳的詮釋史歷經了從生命到自我乃至書寫的轉變，本文欲藉由德希達的理念指出，自傳始終呈現了書寫在與生命的親緣關係之中所能展演的力道。文章的最後一部分將以德希達的《割禮告白》為例闡述何以自傳總是異死書寫這一命題。對於自我的論述終將不離以他者之名書寫他者之死的命運。與悲觀主義正相反，此般倫理書寫反倒是對生命的肯認。

**關鍵詞：**奇異、蹤跡、署名、倖存、《割禮告白》