



## I Problems: Blindness and Autobiography

Dennis Schep

Friedrich Schlegel Graduiertenschule für literaturwissenschaftliche Studien,  
Freie Universität Berlin/Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

### ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The literary genre of autobiography dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when philosophy became a type of anthropology, archives and case histories strengthened the hold of discourse over life, and modern authorship and hermeneutics led to new modes of reading and writing. Nietzsche and so-called French theory have put significant strain on this constellation in their critique of language, subjectivity and authorship – a critique that makes traditional autobiography all but impossible. Needless to say, this has stopped neither Nietzsche nor a number of postmodern theorists from writing their own autobiographical texts. Interestingly, blindness is a recurring figure in many of these texts; and in this article, I argue that this figure allows us to trace the generic upheaval generated by the problematization of the discursive constellation that fostered modern autobiographical writing. By means of a brief introduction into the history of optics and a close reading of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and Cixous' 'Savoir,' I show that the malfunctioning eye is one of the figures employed to deinstitutionalize both the philosophical and the autobiographical tradition, allowing us to grasp what became of autobiography after philosophy pronounced the death of man, the subject, and the author.

### ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

Autobiografie bestaat als literair genre sinds de 18<sup>e</sup> eeuw, toen filosofie een soort antropologie werd, medische en juridische archieven de macht van discours over het leven versterkten, en de geboorte van de moderne auteur en de hermeneutiek tot nieuwe vormen van lezen en schrijven leidden. Nietzsche en *French theory* hebben deze constellatie met hun kritiek op taal, subjectiviteit

en auteurschap onder spanning gezet – een kritiek die de traditionele autobiografie vrijwel onmogelijk maakt. Maar dit heeft Nietzsche noch een aantal postmoderne theoretici ervan weerhouden hun eigen autobiografische teksten te schrijven. Blindheid is een terugkerende figuur in veel van deze teksten en in dit artikel argumenteer ik dat we de generische opschudding, ontstaan door de problematisering van de discursieve constellatie waaruit de moderne autobiografie ontsproten is, scherper in beeld kunnen krijgen door te kijken hoe blindheid in deze teksten functioneert. Aan de hand van een korte introductie in de geschiedenis van de optiek en een analyse van Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* en Cixous' "Savoir" laat ik zien dat het "haperende oog" door Nietzsche, Cixous en anderen wordt ingezet om zowel de filosofische als de autobiografische traditie te deïstitutionaliseren. De figuur blindheid en de door deze figuur ontkende retorische effecten bieden een kijk op wat er van autobiografie geworden is nadat de filosofie de dood verklaarde aan de mens, het subject, en de auteur.

## 1. AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* is often taken as the starting point of modern autobiography (Eakin 1992, 5; Burt 2009, 11). In fact, Rousseau himself propagated this view long before it became scholarly consensus – in the opening lines of the *Confessions*, he underlines the unprecedented nature of his enterprise. Yet while each story needs a beginning, this author-centered approach to literary history may prevent us from seeing the epistemic constellation that fostered modern autobiographical writing. Self-description has existed as long as man can write, and Georg Misch had his reasons for starting the history of autobiography in 3000 BC, when the graves of Egyptian pharaohs were inscribed with biographical data written from a first person perspective. Nevertheless, it remains undeniable that somewhere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this history took a decisive turn, and self writing became the literary genre of autobiography. While it would require a much longer study to adequately deal with the historical context that allowed for this generic condensation, I believe the following three developments are essential:

1. The epistemological centrality of man. Following Michel Foucault's account in *The Order of Things*, the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the century in which man took his place at the center of the episteme. While the Cartesian cogito was a transcendental point without extension, surveying the world from the outside, the figure of man that emerges in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is embedded in the world. Yet precisely because it is part of the world, this figure provokes an epistemological displacement; man is no longer simply a subject of knowledge, but also an object of investigation. Insofar as the conditions of knowability manifest themselves in man (Foucault 2005,

347), his identity becomes a philosophical issue; this is the reason Foucault saw Immanuel Kant's lectures on anthropology as the shadow-side of his transcendental critiques (Foucault 2008). Kant himself subsumed all of philosophy under the question of man; noting the field of philosophy can be reduced to the four questions: What can I know?, What ought I to do?, What may I hope?, and What is man?, he states: "*Metaphysics* answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this as anthropology, because the first three questions relate to the last one" (1992, 538). Here, philosophy becomes anthropology; and together with history, theaters and novels, biography is one of the means to inquire into man's nebulous identity (Kant 1833, xv).

2. The emergence of a number of administrative apparatuses in which the life of the individual inscribed itself into discourse. As Foucault writes in his short text "Lives of Infamous Men," from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the religious confession was replaced by a governmental apparatus that recorded the clashes of individuals with power (1979, 76–91). Through petitions, magistrates and archives, an endless number of discourses pervaded and took charge of daily life, stretching nets of power over even the most banal arguments and altercations. These documentary methods would give rise to the juridical and medical *Fallgeschichte*, or case history; a genre whose roots can be traced back as far as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but that was popularized by the 20 volumes of François Gayot de Pitavals *Causes célèbres et intéressantes* published between 1734 and 1743 (Košenina 2009, 282–287). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a reconfiguration of the mechanisms of penal justice and surveillance would produce a particular kind of "soul" to regulate the field of aberrant behaviors mapped in the juridical case history – a field that would be increasingly colonized by psychiatry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While many scholars have insisted on the continuity between religious confession and secular autobiography, the new web of relations between discourse, power and life that emerged in this field of disciplinary techniques, of which the case history is but one manifestation, played a fundamental role in lowering the threshold of describable individuality so that the ordinary events of life became worthy of recording (Foucault 1977, 190–194). The soul that emerged here would become the privileged object of autobiography, and the double constraint of candor and veracity tied up with this medico-juridical context is easily recognized in the programmatic gestures of early autobiographers. As Rousseau writes: "I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behaviour was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so. I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being! So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather round me, and hear

my confessions. Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds” (Rousseau 17).

3. The widespread alphabetization and the development of the book market in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 18<sup>th</sup> century is the century in which government schooling led to a dramatic increase in literacy throughout Europe. While in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the majority of printed books had been of a religious nature, the 18<sup>th</sup> century saw an increasing popularity of secular and scientific books; this is the age of Enlightenment, of a *Gelehrtenrepublik* that for the first time began to write in its own language rather than Latin. Of course, this also led to a new notion of authorship. Where the Renaissance writer was nothing but a relay operating an ensemble of rhetorical techniques or the mouthpiece of a transcendental being that spoke through him in moments of inspiration, 18<sup>th</sup> century writers developed a new conception of the author by minimizing the element of craftsmanship and internalizing the source of inspiration (Woodmansee 1984; cf. Rose 1993). Here, we witness the birth of the modern author, typically a white male genius; and accompanying him, the rise of hermeneutics as the quest for the “soul that the author cannot speak” behind the words he put on paper (Kittler 1990, 162). The ensuing author cult is a third element of the historical context in which autobiography became a literary genre.

These are the broad outlines of a constellation that fostered the likes of Goethe and Rousseau – a constellation that is essential to any history of autobiography that purports to be more than a history of works and authors. But since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and especially since so-called postmodernism, several elements of this constellation have come under attack. Theorists tell us that man will disappear “like a face drawn in sand,” that the subject is an effect of language, that the author is dead already. The self is no longer taken for granted, and writing no longer conveys a reality that pre-exists it. The ensuing conceptual turbulence is registered by a proliferation of terms that, while not simply dismissing autobiography, indicate a critical awareness of its theoretically problematic nature: self writing, autofiction, autography, otobiography, heterobiography, autogynography, meta-autobiography, autobiography after the subject.

Be that as it may, the death of the subject did not keep Nietzsche from writing *Ecce Homo*, just like the death of the author did not stand in the way of Roland Barthes *par Roland Barthes*. Autobiography has survived the attacks of postmodernism; but if the *autos* (self) is disowned by a *graphie* (writing) that proves powerless to represent its *bios* (life), then autobiography must have become something different than it was in the age of Rousseau. My hypothesis is that this becoming-other or – as Ansgar Nünning might say – this *Metaisierung* of autobiography is, in a number of texts by

Friedrich Nietzsche and H el ene Cixous (among others), negotiated by the figure of the malfunctioning eye.

## 2. OPTICS

Above, I indicated that the new-found epistemological centrality of man forms an integral part of the constellation that allowed modern autobiography to establish itself as a literary genre. The central references in this line of argumentation are Kant's *Logic*, where practically all of philosophy is subsumed under anthropology insofar as all philosophical questions finally refer to the great anthropological question: "What is man?"; and Foucault, who expresses the ambiguous nature of this human figure in his notion of an "empirico-transcendental doublet": a figure that serves as a subjective ground of knowledge, but also as an object of experimental inquiry; that reads itself, writes itself, and observes itself observing.

If, after Kant, all knowledge begins in man, we must know what man is if we are to establish a solid foundation for knowledge. This realization urged 19<sup>th</sup> century scientists to investigate the "anatomy-physiological conditions" (Foucault 2005, 347) of human perception. Lecturing in K onigsberg at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kant's inaugural dissertation, Hermann von Helmholtz presented his empiricist theory of vision as part of this undertaking – though his attempt to reconcile philosophy and the natural sciences would require him to privilege the practical Kant of the third critique over the transcendental Kant of the first (Helmholtz 1855; Lenoir 1993). Through 19<sup>th</sup> century experiments on the senses, Kant's Copernican revolution – begun as an exercise in transcendental speculation – acquired empirical substance, leading to a fundamental shift in our understanding of vision and the eye.

From 1600 to 1800, the primary scientific model of the eye was the camera obscura, a darkened chamber with a small hole in one of the walls, fitted with a lense and a screen on which an inverted image was projected. In the words of Ren e Descartes – echoing those of preceding thinkers – : "...this chamber represents the eye; this hole, the pupil; this lens, the crystalline humour, or rather, all those parts of the eye which cause some refraction..." (91). For our story, it is essential that this model advanced a radically disembodied understanding of vision: the eye as a completely transparent mechanical device, operating strictly according to the laws of physical optics. Our image of the world was truly a representation, a painting of light on the concave surface of the retina. As Svetlana Alpers says about Johannes Kepler's 1604 theory of optics: "The power of his strategy is that he deanthropomorphizes vision. He stands aside and

speaks of the prior world picturing itself in light and color on the eye. It is a dead eye, and the model of vision, or painting if you will, is a passive one" (1983, 36–7).

The camera obscura was not just an optical paradigm, but also an epistemological model explaining how observation leads to inferences about the world. This model found its philosophical correlate in the Cartesian *cogito*. What the camera obscura eye and the Cartesian *cogito* shared was that their claim to certitude was grounded in an erasure of the body and its distorting effects. The camera obscura eye is a disembodied eye, like Descartes' subject is a subject without extension. But in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, optical theory moved away from this paradigm, and the eye became a biological rather than a mechanical entity. The very body that was excluded from the camera obscura model now came to be seen as "the active producer of optical experience" (Crary 1988, 4). The resulting material opacity appears clearly in the following passage from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colours*:

---

Let a room be made as dark as possible; let there be a circular opening in the window-shutter about three inches in diameter, which may be closed or not at pleasure [this is, of course, a description of a camera obscura – D.S.]. The sun being suffered to shine through this on a white surface, let the spectator from some little distance fix his eyes on the bright circle thus admitted. The hole being then closed, let him look towards the darkest part of the room; a circular image will now be seen to float before him. The middle of this circle will appear bright, colourless, or somewhat yellow, but the border will at the same moment appear red. (16)

---

"The hole being then closed..."; Goethe closes the aperture, but the room does not turn dark. This is a dramatic moment in the history of optics and epistemology. The camera obscura model that saw the eye as a passive recording device was unable to account for Goethe's circles without referent. Forced to relinquish this model, Goethe rethinks vision starting from the retina, changing optics from a physics of light into a physiology of the eye. From now on, the eye is no longer a machine, but an organ; an act of perception accompanies every perceived event (Vogl 115). With this shift, the optical illusion became the center of attention: where 17<sup>th</sup> century optics had dismissed everything that threatened the transparency of vision as a mere accident, for Goethe, the very opacity of the seeing body conditions sight. Anatomy replaces geometry in what might be described as an *incarnation of perspective*. In the following decades, the mapping of the eye and the optical nervous system by means of quantitative research – carried out by scientists like Jan Purkinje, Johannes Müller and Hermann von Helmholtz – would come to dominate the study of vision, while

the study of light and refraction would be relegated to the realm of physics (Crary 1988, 9). Relating this to our earlier discussion, one could say that the colored circles that refuse to dissolve into darkness mark the appearance of *Man* in the field of optics, merging Kant's anthropological question with the history of the eye. From this point onwards, vision is an object as well as an instrument of knowledge.

### 3. NIETZSCHE

It is this historical background which allows the figure of blindness to register a series of philosophical concerns in Nietzsche's work: it becomes a trope by means of which anthropological and epistemological questions are negotiated. In the Foucauldian trajectory outlined above, Nietzsche marks the end of the anthropological sleep that set in with Kant: "The trajectory of the question *Was ist der Mensch?* in the field of philosophy reaches its end in the response which both challenges and disarms it: *der Übermensch*" (Foucault 2008, 124). And indeed, Nietzsche's philosophy explicitly stages itself as a break with the Kantian tradition (1954, 485–486), declares the subject an effect of grammar (455), truth equivalent to appearance (448–450) and man a species to be overcome (124). It is hard to imagine what an autobiography that incorporates this philosophical program would look like; yet at first sight, Nietzsche's final work *Ecce Homo* looks a great deal like a work of autobiography.

A closer inspection reveals the singular taxonomic difficulties posed by this text, and before turning to the figure of blindness, we should briefly look at the question of genre.<sup>1</sup> In part, the complexity of this question is due to the generic impurity of a work that meanders between autobiographical (or hagiographical) account, philosophical digression and a glossary-like overview of Nietzsche's past production. Another reason is that, long before Paul de Man proclaimed that "any book with a readable title-page is, to some extent, autobiographical" (70), Nietzsche disintegrated the very genre of autobiography by stating that every great philosophy is "a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir" (2002, 8). There are, however, more essential reasons: more than merely mixing genres, *Ecce Homo* seems to subvert the presuppositions of autobiographical writing from within.

In *Touching the World*, Paul John Eakin suggests that if "the bravado of Rousseau's pledge – 'I have displayed myself as I was' – can be taken as the foundation of two hundred years of modern autobiographical practice in the West" (1992, 5), Roland Barthes' "anti-autobiography" *Barthes par Barthes* turns this tradition upside down. From a historical perspective

(although it is not quite clear whether the claim is historical), Eakin clearly fails to mention a number of autobiographical works that subverted the so-called Rousseauist tradition long before postmodernism: aside from Rousseau's own *Dialogues* from 1776 (see Foucault 1998, 33–52), these works include Stendhal's *Life of Henry Brulard* from 1835 (see Lang 1982, 12–15), Gertrude Stein's 1933 *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and indeed, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888. An indication of the displacement this last text represents in relation to Rousseauist autobiography – a practice of subjective self-exposure under the double constraint of candor and veracity – can be found by comparing the programmatic utterances opening the *Confessions* and *Ecce Homo*. Where Rousseau promises to display himself as he was (“Je me suis montré tel que je fus”), constructing an implied reader that judges the man after his self-description, Nietzsche introduces his life story with the following passage:

---

On this perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grapes are turning brown, a shaft of sunlight has just fallen on my life: I looked backwards, I looked ahead, I never saw so much and such good things all at once. Not for nothing have I buried my forty-fourth year today; I was *entitled* to bury it – all the life that was in it is saved, is immortal. The *Revaluation of All Values*, the *Dionysus Dithyrambs*, and, by way of recuperation, the *Twilight of the Idols* – all of them gifts of this year, even of its last quarter! *How should I not be grateful to my whole life?* And so I tell myself my life.

---

“*Und so erzähle ich mir mein Leben*” – “And so I tell myself my life.” This sentence eloquently marks Nietzsche's departure from the tradition that sees autobiography as a type of self-exposure. Autobiography had always been addressed to the other – whether it be Augustine's God, Rousseau's posterity, or the “friend” that requested Goethe to write a book about his life to clarify the links between his published works (the fabricated letter of this friend opens *Dichtung und Wahrheit*). But Nietzsche addresses himself neither to God (who is dead) nor to his readers (who never understand him anyway): he himself is his narration's destination.

This short-circuit is not without poetological implications. First, the fact that Nietzsche addresses himself to himself presupposes a minimal distance separating him from himself. Nietzsche can tell himself his life only because Nietzsche is not one. Where Goethe wrote his autobiography to establish a principle of unity (the Author) to tie together a distinctly heterogeneous corpus, Nietzsche's address presupposes an absence of unity for which there is no recuperation. But – and this is the second implication – it is this absence of an implied reader to ratify the autobiographical pact that releases Nietzsche from the double constraint of candor and veracity. Not bound by any criteria of historical accuracy



or psychological sincerity, Nietzsche is free to constitute his own truth in writing;<sup>2</sup> to become what he is, to paraphrase the book's subtitle.

This is not the place to go into the play of masks that follows from this paradoxical pact (for an excellent discussion of Nietzsche's histrionics see Langer 2005, 131–175). Suffice to say that the subjective multiplicity ("Subjekts-Vielheit") Nietzsche opposed to the Christian soul in *Beyond Good and Evil* here gives rise to a series of strategies that stalts any identitarian logic. And while every autobiographical work contains a philosophical substrate that is condensed in certain narrative forms and tropological constellations, in *Ecce Homo* this substrate becomes the actual subject of the work, making its author disappear behind a proliferation of masks and substitutions. *Ecce Homo* is not a book about Nietzsche, but a book that marks the end of subjectivity and self-representation "while imitating the traditional genre of autobiography" (Gasché 1981, 287).

Now we should be in a position to answer our main question: what is the function of blindness in *Ecce Homo*?<sup>3</sup> Note that, considering Nietzsche's departure from autobiography as subjective self-exposure, this question should not be referred to his own blindness. One need but look at his letters to realize that the Nietzsche painted in *Ecce Homo* has very little to do with any Nietzsche made of flesh and blood. Accordingly, while Friedrich Kittler may be right to argue that Nietzsche's typewriter (originally an instrument for the blind) caused him to move "from arguments to aphorisms, from thoughts to puns, from rhetoric to telegram style" (1999, 203), this hardly explains how the figure of blindness functions within Nietzsche's text. Describing the period of illness that led him to take his leave from the university,<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche writes:

---

*Illness slowly released me: it saved me from making any break, from taking any violent, offensive step. I lost no one's good-will at that point, and indeed gained many people's. Likewise illness gave me the right to completely overturn all my habits; it allowed me, compelled me to forget; it bestowed on me the gift of having to lie still, remain idle, wait, and be patient... But that is what thinking is!... All by themselves my eyes put an end to all bookwormery, otherwise known as philology: I was released from the 'book', and read nothing more for years – the greatest favour I have ever done myself! – That nethermost self, as if buried alive, as if made mute beneath the constant need to pay heed to other selves (–which is what reading is!) awoke slowly, shyly, hesitantly – but finally it spoke again. (2007, 58)*

---

In this passage, blindness functions as a vector of deinstitutionalization that drives Nietzsche out of the academy and out of philology – one of the three human sciences according to Foucault. The universe of man is not the right place for an *Übermensch*, and where Foucault had identified Kant

with the onset of an anthropological sleep, he sees Nietzsche as its post-human awakening. Moreover, the fragmentation of Nietzsche's subjectivity reaches all the way down to the text's syntactical structure, dominated by a decentralization of the I: *illness* released him; *his eyes* put an end to bookwormery; *that nethermost self* awoke slowly, shyly; but finally *it* spoke again.

While the book's subtitle – *wie man wird, was man ist* – deceptively suggests a narrative about the heroic assumption of one's destiny, it quickly becomes clear that *was man ist* is a rather complicated matter. As it turns out, even when Nietzsche seemed to write about Zarathustra or Dionysus, Schopenhauer or Wagner, all along it had always really been about himself (53). Nietzsche's corpus is unveiled as an endless prosopopoeia; and while one may read *Ecce Homo* as a last attempt to bring all masks together under one name, this attempt ultimately gives way to a principle of deindividuation that allows Nietzsche to stage himself as a depersonalized "destiny" (80; cf. Langer 2005, 173–175; Kofman 1992). There is no identifiable unity that goes by the name of Nietzsche – his identity disappears behind an endless play of masks, as his subjectivity is lost in grammatical dispersion. In *Ecce Homo*, the narcissism that underlies every act of autobiography coincides with a profound schizophrenia that finally prevents us from seeing it as part of the anthropological episteme that spawned modern autobiographical writing. *Man* has once again dissolved – not like a "face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (Foucault 2005, 422), but like the "misshapen and distorted images" on Nietzsche's right retina (Dr. Eiser 1877, quoted in Kittler 1999, 200).

#### 4. CIXOUS

The second author I want to discuss here is H el ene Cixous. Like her late friend and collaborator Jacques Derrida, Cixous inhabits the milieu of 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy; a milieu whose anti-ocularcentric tendencies have been described at length in Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes*. And like Derrida, she often privileges the ear over the eye, mobilizing its receptive qualities to counter the supposedly penetrative nature of sight. To indicate the sensory coordinates of her work, I quote from a 1982 interview:

---

I think that many people speak a language that has no rapport with the body. Instead of letting emerge from their body something that is carried by voice, by rhythm, and that would be truly inspired, they are before language as before an electric panel. They choose the hypercoded, where nothing traverses. But I think, and everybody knows, that there are other possibilities of language, that are precisely *languages*. That is why I always privilege the ear

---

over the eye. I am always trying to write with my eyes closed. What is going to write itself comes from long before me, *me [moi]* being nothing but the bodily medium which formalizes and transcribes that which is dictated to me, that which expresses itself, that which vibrates in almost musical fashion in me and which I annotate with what is not the musical note, which would of course be the ideal. This is not to say that I am opposed to meaning, not at all, but I prefer to speak in terms of poetry. (Cixous in Conley 1991, 146)

---

Cixous was in fact extremely myopic until her eye operation in the 1990s; an operation she wrote about in a short text called ‘Savoir,’ published together with Derrida’s ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’ in the volume *Veils* (2001). Cixous’ title is untranslatable and – fortunately – left untranslated: *savoir* is not only French for ‘to know,’ but also incorporates *avoir*, ‘to have,’ and *voir*, ‘to see.’ Moreover, the French term for the Freudian id is *ça*, which is homophonic with *sa*, the feminine declension of the possessive article. Hence, Cixous’ title not only means ‘to know,’ but also evokes registers of vision, possession, psychoanalysis and an elusive femininity. Although the words that can be recognized in the title have different etymological origins, their association is established on a phonic rather than a lexical register – various registers of sound and meaning “[vibrate] in almost musical fashion...”

The text itself is a curious mix of conversion narrative and medical case history: it begins with the description of the protagonist’s myopia, moving on to an “appointment with the surgeon” (7) which leads to an eye operation in which the problem is resolved. This narrative structure closely follows that of William Cheselden’s famous account of a cataract operation on a thirteen year old boy that led to a recovery from blindness (1727). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this report was drawn into the rationalism/empiricism debate where, depending on the reader, it either proved empirically that all knowledge derives from the senses, even our knowledge of using them (Locke, Berkeley, Voltaire, the late Condillac); or it was reasoned away in order to retain the notion that some abilities are innate (La Mettrie, Diderot, the early Condillac; for an extensive discussion of philosophical responses to the Cheselden report, see Degenaar 1996).<sup>5</sup> Without discussing these matters at length, it is important to underscore that blindness served to negotiate philosophical problems long before Nietzsche and Cixous.

The dramatic moment in Cheselden’s text is the moment when the boy recovers his sight but – as it turns out – still has to learn to see:

---

When he first saw, he was so far from making any judgment of distances, that he thought all object whatever touched his eyes (as he expressed it) as what he felt did his skin, and thought no object so agreeable as those which

were smooth and regular, though he could form no judgment of their shape, or guess what it was in any object that was pleasing to him: he knew not the shape of anything, nor any one thing from another, however different in shape or magnitude... (448)

Cheselden's patient at first moves through the same veiled world inhabited by Cixous' myopic protagonist. In both cases, it takes time for the world to gradually appear "out of its distant reserve, its cruel absences" (Cixous 2001, 8) – seeing slowly emerges out of non-seeing, leading to a moment of jubilation as contours become clear. Moreover, the equation of sight and touch in the Cheselden report ("...he thought all object whatever touched his eyes ... as what he felt did his skin...") finds an equivalent in Cixous' haptic metaphors: "She hadn't realized the day before that eyes are miraculous hands, had never enjoyed the delicate tact of the cornea, the eyelashes, the most powerful hands, these hands that touch imponderably near and far-off heres" (9).<sup>6</sup>

But whatever the narrative and thematic congruencies, Cixous' text also deviates from the Cheselden report and from the genre of the case history as such. While case histories are written by doctors, 'Savoir' is written by the patient. This change in perspective allows for extensive meditations on the existential ramifications of myopia – meditations in which the question of failing eyesight is moved from the medico-epistemological register it inhabited in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to a primarily ethical one. In 'Savoir,' myopia is not a lack, but a gift; neither seeing nor not-seeing, it describes an in-between state that leads to a virulent uncertainty: "She and Doubt were always inseparable: had things gone away or else was it she who mis-saw them? She never saw safely. Seeing was a tottering believing. Everything was perhaps." (6) Clear sight is associated with an ethically pernicious logocentrism,<sup>7</sup> while myopia figures as the physiological substrate of a positively connotated state of hesitation. The eye operation marks a break with this state, the conversion from a world with fuzzy borders to a world where everything is clear. But the ethical ambiguity of this "redemption" (13) is affirmed with a certain pathos when, after the operation, the protagonist engages in a dialogue with her vanishing myopia in which she promises never to dismiss doubt: "I shall always hesitate. I shall not leave my people. I belong to the people of those who do not see." (13)

In a parenthetical remark, Derrida calls Cixous "(she who almost never says 'I' for herself)" (34); and indeed, 'Savoir' is almost entirely written in the third person. Philippe Lejeune sees the identity of author, narrator and protagonist sealed by the use of the first person as one of the most common generic features of autobiography (1975, 23–24). While

he admits there is such a thing as a heterodiegetic autobiography, this is a paradoxical type of text in which “he” or “she” really stands for “I” (1977, 27). At first sight, ‘Savoir’ seems a member of this category; knowing about Cixous’ myopia and her poetics, we hear the “I” resound underneath the “she.” This identificatory resolution is frustrated, however, when a few pages into the text, the narrator does say “I”:

---

Myopia mistress of error and worry.

But it also reigns over others, you who are not myopic and you who are myopic, it was also tricking you, you who never saw it, you who never knew that it was spreading its ambiguous veils between the woman and you. It was always there the invisible that separated the woman forever. As if it were the very genius of separation. This woman was another and you did not know it.

*I too was myopic. I can attest to the fact that some people gravely wounded by myopia can perfectly well hide from public gaze the actions and existence of their mad fatality. But one day this woman decided to finish with her myopia and without delay made an appointment with the surgeon. (7; emphasis mine)*

---

While the word “I” appears several times in the text, the only time it appears without being cited or focalized is in the penultimate paragraph of this quotation. This might suggest the appearance of an autobiographical pact of sorts, finally establishing the identity of narrator and protagonist. But in ‘Savoir,’ the appearance of the “I” thwarts this interpretation in three ways:

1. “I too was myopic.” The use of the word “too” indicates a non-coincidence of narrator and protagonist: if they were the same, “I was myopic” would have been a more logical formulation. The addition of “too” suggests that the narrator, who is *not* identical to the protagonist whose life has been described up to this point, moves from a descriptive to a confessional mode in order to verify some of the text’s prior claims.

2. “I too *was* myopic.” That is: I *was*, but *am* no more. The protagonist is blind, but the narrator can see, undermining the identity of narrator and protagonist that underlies most autobiographical writing. In the following paragraph, the protagonist will decide to “finish with her myopia” – allowing the reader to assume that narrator and protagonist are the same legal person, before and after the operation. But nothing within the narrative confirms this supposition.

3. “I *can* attest...” Aside from a number of more general observations without a clear subject, this is one of the few sentences written in the present tense. The use of the present tense suggests a temporal distanciation to corroborate the grammatical distanciation embodied by the word “too.” The rest of the narrative is written *ex post facto*, but in this one

sentence, the narrator – one would be tempted to say the *author* – intrudes into the narrative fiction. And this narrator can *see* – explaining the curious self-certainty of the verb “attest.”

Cixous almost never says “I,” but when she does, her “I” does not follow the autobiographical convention of concealing the distance between the subject of the statement and the subject of enunciation; it rather marks a gap between the two. Where the autobiographical I traditionally serves to unite narrator and protagonist under the author’s proper name, the entrance of the I in ‘Savoir’ raises the question where “she” ends and “I” begins. Transferring her blindness from a first person in the present to a third person in the past, the subject of ‘Savoir’ starts seeing only by separating herself from herself – a separation that moves from the temporal into the ontological, from a split between before and after to a gap between “I” and “she.” In this medical case history become conversion narrative, an eye operation marks a discontinuity so fundamental that it fails to be recuperated by a unified autobiographical subject. Precisely the appearance of a seeing and knowing, self-seeing and self-knowing I upsets referential certainty: it remains undecidable whether “she” refers to a fictional character, to a fictionalized version of the author, or to a past self whose distance is inscribed in grammar. Ironically, the very assurance of the “I” thwarts the hermeneutical quest for autobiography’s transcendental guarantee: an instance behind the text that serves as the unifying principle of its contents.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

One could easily extend this duet between Nietzsche and Cixous to a trio with Derrida,<sup>8</sup> a quartet with Roland Barthes, or even a quintet including Jorge Luis Borges. Each of these authors has written autobiographical texts in which blindness – whether real or allegorical – serves to problematize important components of the philosophical constellation that spawned autobiography. Yet the question remains: why is the malfunctioning eye virulent in these texts? Why is blindness such a cogent trope capable of tying together the problematic of autobiography with the philosophical destabilizations these authors represent?

To begin to answer these questions, we ought to consider the deep-seated ocularcentrism of western culture. In Martin Heidegger’s words, “the tradition of philosophy has been primarily oriented from the very beginning toward ‘seeing’ as the mode of access to beings *and to being*.” (1996, 138) The history of epistemology is largely dominated by the history of what offers itself to sight, and this domination left ample traces

in our language: the words *theory*, *speculation*, *evidence*, *idea*, and even the German *Wissen* (knowledge) are all derived from visual terms. At least since antiquity, the semantic field of knowledge has been mapped onto a metaphoric of sight, and ignorance has been equated with blindness. It is hardly a surprise that within this constellation, the eye became a privileged figure for the negotiation of epistemological problems.

Secondly, we should recall the classificatory problems surrounding *Ecce Homo*. These problems are virulent in so-called French theory, a form of writing Avital Ronell described as “a way of avoiding having to decide or tell between literature and philosophy” (282). While ‘Savoir’ contains a philosophical problematic, it is not exactly a work of philosophy; and while it describes a moment in the author’s life, it is not exactly an autobiography. Rather, it seems to mobilize the autobiographical as a means of deinstitutionalizing philosophical discourse. It is commonly assumed that, insofar as philosophy speaks the truth, it doesn’t matter who speaks it; accordingly, the subject of philosophy is ideally a nameless subject. Nietzsche, Cixous and others break with this conception of philosophy, and autobiography provides them with a vehicle for this rupture – a rupture that allows personal bodily afflictions to appear in texts whose contents are primarily philosophical.

But – and this has been my main argument – while negotiating philosophical problems through autobiographical writing, these authors also break with the conventions of Rousseauist autobiography. If autobiography is indeed shaped by (1) the epistemological centrality of man, (2) the discursive colonization of the private by archives and case histories, and (3) the co-emergence of modern authorship and hermeneutics, Nietzsche’s death of man, Cixous’ paradoxical case history, and their shared rejection of a being outside the text that drives the hermeneutical desire thoroughly upset the conventions of the genre. One of the sites in which this upheaval can be traced is the trope of blindness: a figure that drives Nietzsche from the universe of man into an inhuman masquerade, and that drives a wedge between narrative instances in Cixous’ ‘Savoir.’

Blindness and myopia are no mere bodily crises, but epistemological ones. In ‘Savoir’ and *Ecce Homo*, malfunctioning eyes generate a layer of veils and masks that bar access to a unified authorial subject while multiplying its intra-textual representatives. Hegel saw the eyes as the place where the soul manifests itself (1975, 153); but when the soul cannot be seen in eyes that do not see, blindness subverts the dispositive of modern autobiography. The unity of the I is lost in a discourse that does not express the inexpressible soul of the author, but leads to a proliferation of textual selves the autobiographical subject never manages to recuperate. Blindness not only clouds vision; the blind himself becomes opaque.

These speculations are confirmed in a 1975 poem by the blind librarian Jorge Luis Borges:

---

A Blind Man

I do not know what face is looking back  
 whenever I look at the face in the mirror;  
 I do not know what old face seeks its image  
 in silent and already weary anger.  
 Slow in my blindness, with my hand I feel  
 the contours of my face. A flash of light  
 gets through to me. I have made out your hair,  
 color of ash and at the same time, gold.  
 I say again that I have lost no more  
 than the inconsequential skin of things.  
 These wise words come from Milton, and are noble,  
 but then I think of letters and of roses.  
 I think, too, that if I could see my features,  
 I would know who I am, this precious afternoon. (2000, 357)

---

## WORKS CONSULTED

- Alpers, Svetlana. *The art of describing. Dutch art in the seventeenth century*. Chicago, 1983.
- Barthes, Roland. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Selected Poems*. New York/London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- Burt, E.S. *Regard for the Other; Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire, and Wilde*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.
- Cheselden, William. "An Account of Some Observations Made by a Young Gentleman, Who Was Born Blind, or Lost His Sight so Early, That He Had no Remembrance of Ever Having Seen, and Was Couch'd between 13 and 14 Years of Age." *Philosophical Transactions* 35 (1727–1728): 447–450.
- Cixous, Hélène and Derrida, Jacques. *Veils*. Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Conley, Verena Andermatt. *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine. Expanded edition*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.
- Crary, Jonathan. "Techniques of the Observer." *October*, 45 (Summer 1988): 3–35.
- Degenaar, Marjolein. *Molyneux's Problem; Three Centuries of Discussion on the Perception of Forms*. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Memoirs of the Blind; The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Derrida, Jacques. *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*. Trans. Paul J. Olscamp. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001.
- Eakin, Paul John. *Touching the World; Reference in Autobiography*. Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.



- Foucault, Michel. *Power, Truth, Strategy*. Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979.
- Foucault, Michel. *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Trans. Robert Hurley and others. New York: The New Press, 1998.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things; An archaeology of the human sciences*. London/New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel. *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*. Trans. Roberto Nigro and Kate Briggs. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. "Autobiography as Gestalt: Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*." *Boundary 2*, 9.3 (Spring–Autumn 1981): 271–293.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Theory of Colours*. Trans. Charles Lock Eastlake. London: John Murray, 1840.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2000.
- Hauthal, Janine, Nadj, Julijana, Nünning, Ansgar and Peters, Henning (ed.). *Metaisierung in Literatur und anderen Medien*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.
- Helmholtz, Hermann von. *Ueber das Sehen des Menschen; ein populär wissenschaftlicher Vortrag*. Leipzig, Leopold Voss, 1855.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*. Leipzig: Immanuel Müller, 1833.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Logic*. Trans. J. Michael Young. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens. Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Kofman, Sarah. *Explosion I: De l'Ecce Homo de Nietzsche*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1992.
- Košeniina, Alexander. "Fallgeschichten. Von der Dokumentation zur Fiktion. Vorwort." *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 19 (2009): 282–287.
- Lang, Candace. "Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism." *Diacritics* 12.4 (Winter 1982): 2–16.
- Langer, Daniela. *Wie man wird, was man schreibt; Sprache, Subjekt und Autobiographie bei Nietzsche und Barthes*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2005.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Autobiography in the Third Person." Trans. Annette Tomarken and Edward Tomarken. *New Literary History* 9.1 (Autumn 1977): 27–50.
- Lenoir, Timothy. "The Eye as Mathematician: Clinical Practice, Instrumentation, and Helmholtz's Construction of an Empiricist Theory of Vision." Ed. David Cahan. *Hermann von Helmholtz and the Foundations of Nineteenth-Century Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 109–153.
- Man, Paul de. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Misch, Georg. *Geschichte der Autobiographie, erster Band, erste Hälfte: Das Altertum*. Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1976.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*. Trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York/London: Penguin Books, 1954.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Trans. Duncan Large. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Ronell, Avital. *Stupidity*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

- Rose, Mark. *Authors and Owners; The Invention of Copyright*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Confessions*. Trans. J.M.Cohen. New York: Penguin Books, 1953.
- Vogl, Joseph. "Bemerkung über Goethes Empirismus." Eds. Sabine Schimma, Joseph Vogl. *Versuchsanordnungen 1800*. Berlin: diaphanes, 2009. 113–123.
- Woodmansee, Martha. "The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the 'Author.'" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17.4 (Summer 1984): 425–448.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Schep (born in the Netherlands in 1985) holds two MA degrees; one in Media and Communications from the European Graduate School in Switzerland, and one in Intercultural Communication Studies from the European University Viadrina in Germany. He is currently a doctoral candidate in Literary Studies at the Free University of Berlin, where he is writing his dissertation on autobiographical fragments in theoretical texts under the supervision of Professor Joseph Vogl. He is the author of *Drugs: Rhetoric of Fantasy, Addiction to Truth* (Atropos Press, 2011), which examines contemporary drug discourse in relation to the suppression of irrationality in the age of reason. He has published papers on tourist photography, ghosts and technology, and performativity, and frequently publishes political texts in several Dutch media.

## NOTES

- 1 This question has troubled a range of commentators from Martin Heidegger to Pierre Klossowski and from Hugh Silverman to Rodolphe Gasché.
- 2 Indeed, *Ecce Homo* is riddled with factual inaccuracies (see Duncan Large in Nietzsche 2007, xviii).
- 3 If this were an article about Nietzsche's philosophy, I would be tempted to place this question in the context of perspectivism – a doctrine that Alexander Nehamas practically identifies with Nietzsche's philosophy. But this is not an article about philosophy, and the reduction of Nietzsche's philosophy to perspectivism is a vulgar misreading of his work's complexities. Moreover, Nietzsche rarely uses the term perspectivism himself, and the notion of perspective had already been brought into philosophy by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and developed by Nietzsche's former colleague at Basel, Gustav Teichmüller.
- 4 Due to his illness, Nietzsche was able to retain his pension for the rest of his life. It seems significant that he was never financially dependent on his book sales.
- 5 The problem at the center of these debates was the so-called Molyneux problem, popularized by John Locke, and first formulated by William Molyneux in 1688 in the following terms: "A Man, being born blind, and having a Globe and a Cube, nigh of the same bignes, Committed into his Hands, and being taught or Told, which is Called the Globe, and which the Cube, so as easily to distinguish them by his Touch or Feeling; Then both being taken from Him, and Laid on a Table, Let us Suppose his Sight Restored to Him; Whether he Could, by his Sight, and before he touch them, know which is the Globe and which the Cube?" (Degenaar 1996, 17)
- 6 Note that the late Derrida also moved from a critique of ocularcentric intuitionism to an emphasis on the haptics of sight: "As the noun might indicate, we know that intuition

gives a privilege to vision. But it is always to reach a point there, where the fulfillment, the plenitude, or the filling of visual presence touches contact, that is, a point that, in another sense, one could nickname blind spot; and there the eye touches and lets itself be touched – by a ray of light, unless it is (more rarely, and more dangerously) by another eye, the eye of the other. At least since Plato, no doubt, and despite his indebtedness to the eye that looks, intuitionism has also been a metaphysics and tropology of touch – a metaphysics as hapto-tropologic.” (2005, 120)

- 7 In his book about anti-ocularcentrism in French philosophy, Martin Jay coins the jaw-breaking term “phallogocularcentrism” (493) to indicate the association between phallocentrism, logocentrism and ocularcentrism.
- 8 See especially Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*. For an extensive discussion of blindness and autobiography that includes Derrida, I refer the reader to my forthcoming dissertation (if he/she can wait three to four years).