



## Introduction: Beyond Endings – Past Tenses and Future Imaginaries

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In the vein of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the German writer Johann Gottfried Schnabel (1692–1748) wrote a four-volume Robinsonade novel, *Die Insel Felsenburg* [The Island Felsenburg<sup>1</sup>], which was published between 1731 and 1743. Schnabel's novel became extremely popular in Germany, as it tells the story of a group of shipwrecked settlers who, in the spirit of protestant piety, establish an ideal state on the beautiful island on which they are stranded. One day, they discover a hidden cave, where they find a well-preserved mummified man, sitting in a stone chair at a table. On a tin board, this man, Don Cyrillo de Valaro, had engraved important information for posterity: namely that he was born on 9 August 1475, came to the island on 14 November 1514, and recorded his recollection on 27 June 1606. His writing ends as follows: 'I am still alive, however close to death, June 28. 29. and 30. and still July 1., 2. 3., 4.'<sup>2</sup>

By recording every day that he was still alive, Don Cyrillo, the only inhabitant on the island at the time, managed to do what no autobiographer could ever complete: record his death. One could even go so far as to say that his method typifies a life-writing model – documenting the days of one's life in the face of inevitable death. In the context of Schnabel's novel, this episode is remarkable in so far as the most prominent entertainment of the island's inhabitants is to tell one another about their lives. In the evening, when their work is done, they come together – and there is no TV or internet – and tell their stories. Remarkably enough, their

stories are full of sex and crime – aspects of life that are banned from the virtuous island. The story of Don Cyrillo de Valaro and the settlers is fiction, of course. However, it triggers the question as to how ‘real’ autobiographers deal with or even describe their own deaths.

The study of life writing – of autobiography and memoir in particular – and its prominent concepts tends to focus on the genre’s recollection of the past. Philippe Lejeune’s much-contested (and often-cited) notion of the ‘autobiographical pact’ highlights the retrospective character of the narrative; the reliability of memory is a recurring issue in the discussion of life-writing. Thus, and maybe not surprisingly, the notion of the future and futurity is usually not emphasized in the study of life-writing. This is particularly true for the discussion of texts written by autobiographers late in their lives, in the explicit awareness of life’s end, with the autobiographer’s death being the one event that cannot be told but at the same time that which motivates the life narrative: The awareness of mortality, of finiteness, makes life appear more precious and the remembrance of life more urgent; the focus on the past and its recollection thus seems to be the natural choice of focus. The wonderful example of Don Cyrillo de Valaro not only highlights the power of imagination and the porous boundaries between fictional and non-fictional life-writing, but, even more so, it stresses the intimate connection between life-telling and death, the affirmation of present life, by recalling one’s past in the presence of others as witnesses of this recollection; in lieu of immediate witnesses, the future reader steps in, testifying to a life lived. Yet, this example also illustrates the struggle with the structural fact that we cannot autobiographically capture the moment of death; Don Cyrillo de Valaro, we might say, writes his death by eventually ceasing to write, but he cannot, in agreement with James Cox, narrate his own death.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, death, the sense of an ending, as this and countless other examples document, is crucial for autobiography: The knowledge of it often explicitly motivates the recollection of one’s life, and the awareness of mortality necessarily impacts autobiographical retrospective; in fact, it may even be constitutive for it. As a motivation for autobiographical recollection, individual death as an event of the potentially near future can thus be seen not only as past- but also as future-directed. What is more, the autobiographical narrative can be read as implicitly or explicitly aiming beyond its author’s death, for instance, by addressing a future reader; seeking to secure an individual legacy, to justify past actions for future remembrance, or to set an example for future generations; or by passing on historical or cultural knowledge for a transgenerational community.

This special volume sets out to explore the correlation between life writing, future-directedness, and death, focusing particularly on the

question of how imaginations of one's future ('future imaginaries') evolve through autobiography, as based on one's past ('past tenses') and extending beyond one's death ('beyond endings'). Indeed, individual death, while certain, is not the only future relevant to autobiographers and autobiographies, who may imagine an afterlife in religious terms, in the memory of others, or through their children; who may see themselves as part of a larger collective – be it a particular ethnic group, for instance, or 'humanity' – the future of which needs to be most urgently ensured.

How autobiographical writers (or storytellers!) imagine 'beyond endings' varies, depending on autobiographical occasion and individual motivation, cultural conventions of narrating one's life, ideological constructions of subjecthood, or political agenda. For instance, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass' autobiographies are strategically connected to a future vision not just of himself but of that of the United States, as a country to eventually abolish slavery. Metis educator Maria Campbell, in her memoir *Halfbreed*, explicitly envisions her life narrative as being an instrument for working towards a better future for Indigenous peoples in Canada. American writer and humorist Mark Twain begins his recollection of the past by imagining the future of his autobiography as such: 'I intend that this autobiography shall become a model for all future autobiographies when it is published after my death, and I also intend that it shall be read and admired a good many centuries because of its form and method.'<sup>4</sup> Finally, Dutch author Alfred Birney hopes that his autobiography *De tolk van Java* [The Interpreter from Java] will be 'a paper monument' that can give that lying Dutch history (with respect to colonialism) a face. So, life writing, we might say, addresses both death and life in complex ways, beyond the ending that death presents.

Besides the misleading assumption that life writing is mainly if not exclusively about 'life,' there is another truism in the study of autobiography that has been critically questioned: the idea that a life story is a story told by one person, the autobiographical I. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson differentiate between various 'I's, highlighting the inherently plural constitution of autobiographical narrative; concepts such as 'relational selves'<sup>5</sup> or, generically speaking, 'narratives of filiation'<sup>6</sup> pay attention to the fact that, more often than not, a choir of voices can be heard in autobiographies. In *My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father*, Hanif Kureishi writes: 'I feel inhabited by others, composed of them. Writers, parents, older men, friends, girlfriends speak inside of me. If I took them away, what would be left?'<sup>7</sup> The autobiographical novel by the Flemish author Leo Pleysier, *Wit is altijd schoon* [White always fits] is about the death of his mother. The son is talking to his deceased mother – which is not a great surprise – but the mother answers him from her deathbed. She is someone who,

throughout her life, has buried her son under endless talking, and she continues to do so when he arrives at the moment of her death: ‘And please look around, if all is clean, so that no visitor trips over the rubbish. And are my lips well closed, because it’s an awful sight, a dead person with a half-open mouth.’ After a few pages, the voice of the son has completely disappeared, and the text continues as a monologue of the dead mother. It is fiction, or autofiction, of course, imagination, but at the same time this text says a lot about the life of both Leo Pleysier and his mother, while, at the same time, it testifies to the importance of language – in this case, the typical regional language from the center of Flanders – which is one of the main means to represent life after death. This orientation beyond death, therefore, can be individual, familial, or communal, short-term or long-term, hegemonic or resistant.

As the cursory examples across different linguistic traditions illustrate, the relation between life writing, futurity, and endings deserves systematic attention. The contributions to this volume highlight different aspects of ‘beyond endings.’ However, they all agree that neither life nor autobiographies end with the death of the autobiographer. They also demonstrate that afterlives/life beyond endings range from the physical ‘survival’ in archives, where material texts/artefacts bear testimony of real lived lives, over desired futures and prospective scenarios, to fictitious lives and auto-fictional accounts.

In their essay, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose that every person presents their own autobiographical archive and thus consider autobiographical texts as being archival afterlives. An archive, Smith and Watson argue, not only preserves the past but has manifold future dimensions as well. On the premises that autobiographical texts are non-transparent acts of interpretation and that the autobiographical ‘I’ is complex and not stable, the authors turn to eight paradigmatic cases of archival afterlives that arise in autobiographical texts: troubled authenticity in diary eye-witnessing, afterlives of archived feelings and impressions, afterlives of the inscribed past, postmemorial afterlives situated in world-historical events, transtextuality in anthologized lives, afterlives generated in paratexts and re-publication, afterlives threatened by new evidence, and aggregated archives in digital media. Moreover, the article focuses on the notion of archive as being an archive of feeling and sentiment that interrupts processes of normalization as well as media of false authenticity that may be disclosed retrospectively. Yet, Smith and Watson also highlight that the afterlife of an autobiographical text is shaped by editors and translators, as well as by readers, according to previous texts and cultural models.

Starting with the difference between human beings and animals, with respect to their ways of dealing with death and the dead, Mathias Mayer's contribution considers the fact of death as being a basic human experience as well as a 'blind spot' in the study of life-writing. Mayer argues that the awareness of death induces various literary forms of how life may be depicted, pointing at the specific autobiographical logics through which an autobiographer can describe their life, yet never their death. With reference to a variety of autobiographies – including St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Petrarch's life writing, and Fontane's autobiography *Meine Kinderjahre* [Years of Childhood] – the article considers three models of how the literally 'paradoxical' integration of one's own death into the autobiographical text could be possible: a moralistic understanding, an attitude towards the times to come, or a fictitious moment.

Volker Depkat's article sets out to show how political autobiographies serve as a legacy, which is meant to reach beyond the limits of the text, the time of writing, and the death of the author. Depkat analyzes the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and Konrad Adenauer, conceiving autobiography as the continuation of politics by autobiographical means. Instead of reading political autobiography as a justification for political decisions taken in the past, it investigates autobiography as political communication, legitimating the past with a future anticipated at the moment of writing. It discusses the *consciousness of epoch* as being a central category that relates the temporal dimensions of the past, the present, and the future to each other. Depkat perceives Benjamin Franklin as a representative person of the American Revolution whose aim was to construct a politically liberal and democratic order and to protect it from man's destructive passions. His *Autobiography*, therefore, is read as a project of exemplary moral self-perfection that could educate its readers to become perfect republicans. Konrad Adenauer appears as the promoter of Germany's *Westpolitik*, and his *Erinnerungen* are presented as an urgent call for a continuation of Adenauer's *Westpolitik*, a call to continue the process of European integration, even beyond the endings of his chancellorship, his memoirs, and his death.

In her contribution, Marlene Goldman reads Alice Munro's autofictional short stories against the backdrop of the Anthropocene and highlights their poetics of human and geological interdependence. Munro's texts adopt a geological approach and raise questions of ontology and mortality as being inextricably connected to matters of space and place. In vast temporal arcs, the stories perform a pairing of domestic and geographical spaces. Goldman shows that Munro's stories instigate reflections on the deep past. As Munro's life writing often circles backward, it directs the attention to material traces of past life. The author's life-long

preoccupation with the themes of degeneration, loss, and death is connected with the desire to catalogue, narrate, and celebrate that which will inevitably be buried and, potentially, lost. Uncanny elements, catastrophic events, and a sense of wonder open up horizons of time that exceed the personal human lifetime and thus go ‘beyond endings’.

Chiara Nannicini presents and discusses the unusual example of Ippolito Nievo’s *Confessions of an Italian* (*Confessioni di un italiano*), published in 1867. Nievo’s *Confessions* is a historical novel in an autobiographical setting. It pretends that the narrator wrote the text at the age of eighty, whereas Nievo was only 29 when he composed it – and he died at the age of 30. However, the text tells his life as if he had lived for eighty or more years. Nannicini shows the author’s preference for youth and his *Confessions* is a novel of youthful strength and energy, which is striking enough in light of the narrator posing as an old man. Despite the author’s preference for youth, Nannicini argues that the awareness of imminent death is inextricably linked to the figure of the narrator. Death, however, in the view of the text, does not divide the dead and the living, rather, the grave is meant to be a symbol of continuity.

Starting with J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*, which tells about a fictional biographer’s effort to collect information about the dead Coetzee, by interviewing people who have known the author, Melissa Schuh’s essay focuses on late works that display a differentiated treatment of life writing as being suspended between fact and fictionality. It analyses Coetzee’s, Philip Roth’s, and Günter Grass’s portrayals of lateness, as examples of performative contradiction, working to convey difficulty, and paradox as a form of resistance against endings. Drawing on Edward Said’s concept of ‘late style,’ the article focuses on the relation of style and the awareness of problematic identities in novelists’ autobiographies. Hindsight and the malleability of memory are also prominent topics in the novelists’ self-perception that result in different autofictional strategies.

The articles by Smith and Watson, Mayer, and Depkat, therefore, look at specific examples of life writing and their treatment of ‘endings,’ with regard to the conceptual implications this has for our understanding of the genre and the ways in which writing or thinking ‘beyond endings’ is – maybe counter-intuitively so – constitutive for it. The essays by Goldman, Nannicini, and Schuh address the negotiations of human finitude’s constitutive role for life writing in the context of autofictional life writing, probing into questions of how individual lives can serve as a matrix to imagine ‘beyond endings.’ By highlighting these two foci, this volume does not claim to treat the intriguing questions of life writing’s past tenses and future imaginaries comprehensively;

there is a plethora of material and much room for more detailed and diversified discussions, but the contributions in this volume will hopefully serve as a helpful starting point for further explorations beyond endings.

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## NOTES

- 1 The complete German title of the novel, which in fact, provides a summary of the plot reads *Wunderliche FATA einiger See=Fahrer, absonderlich ALBERTI JULII, eines gebohrnen Sachsens, Welcher in seinem 18<sup>ten</sup> Jahre zu Schiffe gegangen, durch Schiff=Bruch selb 4te an eine grausame Klippe geworffen worden, nach deren Übersteigung das schönste Land entdeckt, sich daselbst mit seiner Gefährtin verheyatet, aus solcher Ehe eine Familie von mehr als 300. Seelen erzeuget, das Land vortrefflich angebauet, durch besondere Zufälle erstaunens=würdige Schätze gesammelt, seine in Teutschland ausgekundschaftten Freunde glücklich gemacht, am Ende des 1728sten Jahres,*

*als in seinem Hunderten Jahre, annoch frisch und gesund gelebt, und vermuthlich noch zu dato lebt, entworfen Von dessen Bruders=Sohnes=Sohnes=Sohne, Mons. Eberhard Julio, Curieusen Lesern aber zum vermuthlichen Gemüths=Vergnügen ausgefertiget, auch par Commission dem Drucke übergeben Von GISANDERN. NORDHAUSEN, Bey Johann Heinrich Groß, Buchhändlern. Anno 1731.*

- 2 Schnabel, Johann Gottfried. *Insel Felsenburg. Wunderliche Fata einiger Seefahrer, Teil I & Teil II*. Frankfurt/M.: Zweitausendeins, 1997 (210): 'Ich lebe zwar noch, bin aber dem Tode sehr nahe, d. 28. 29. und 30. Jun. und noch d. 1. Jul. 2.3.4.'
- 3 Cox, James. 'Autobiography and America.' In: *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground. Essays in American Autobiography*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989, 11–32 (13).
- 4 Twain, Mark. *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography: The Chapters from the North American Review*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2009 (3).
- 5 Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Ourselves*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1999 (43).
- 6 Couser, G. Thomas. 'Genre Matters; Form, Force, and Filiation.' *Life Writing* 2:2 (2005) 139–156.
- 7 Kureishi, Hanif. *My Ear at His Heart*. London: Faber, 2004 (55).