



The Limits of Autobiographical Logic: On the Impossibility of Narrating One's Death

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ABSTRACT

The practice of life writing seems to exclude the incorporation of the writer's death. How can autobiography come to terms with this blind spot? Are there any strategies that enable the horizon or end of the writer's life ('bios') to be integrated into his or her reflections thereof? How can the impulses that are given within the scope of the writer's contemplation of her/his transience be characterized – and how are they important for 'life writing'? This contribution examines the autobiographical works by Saint Augustine, Petrarch, and Fontane to illustrate three different models of how life writing sets out to address the different roles that death – or rather, the awareness of human finitude – plays for the genre.

Keywords: Petrarch, Augustinus, death, autobiographical logics, paradox

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG AUF DEUTSCH

Das eigene Leben selbst zu beschreiben schließt es aus, darin den eigenen Tod zu berichten. Welche Bedeutung hat dieser blinde Fleck für das autobiographische Schreiben? Welche Möglichkeiten stehen zur Verfügung, um den Horizont oder das Ende des eigenen Lebens in diesen Prozess einzubeziehen? Inwiefern kann das Bewusstsein der eigenen Vergänglichkeit die Strategien des Schreibens beeinflussen? In diesem Beitrag werden am Beispiel von Augustinus, Petrarca und Fontane, vor dem Hintergrund eines philosophischen Ansatzes vom 'Vorlaufen in den Tod', drei prominente Ansätze diskutiert, wie der Tod bzw. das Wissen um die menschliche Endlichkeit den Horizont der Autobiographie prägen können.

Keywords: Petrarca, Augustinus, Tod, autobiographische Logik, Paradox

1

The treatment of remains and bones constitutes a boundary between humans and animals, as the burial of bones indicates that they once belonged to a human being. After all, attending to the bodies of the deceased is one of humankind's most distinctive practices. Awareness of our own mortality is directly connected to our understanding and perception of the world, regardless of whether they are religious. As human beings, we are destined to contemplate our temporality as well as the finality of our individual existence. We have therefore developed different perspectives that enable us to come to terms with this rather tragic and traumatic circumstance, which can usually be tested by witnessing the deaths of other people. On the one hand, there is an extremely wide spectrum of religious interpretations, which range from the certainty of another existence that will ensue after one's passing to the more – perhaps entirely material – conviction that death marks an absolute cessation of existence. On the other hand, philosophical approaches can be used as a means to accept one's finitude. The ancient philosophers have taught us that philosophy is nothing other than reflecting on death: 'Tota enim philosopharum vita [...] commentatio mortis est' [The life of the philosophers is nothing other than a commentary on death].¹ According to this argument, it is necessary to decide whether to regard one's own death as the end of one's physical life or as the commencement or completion of one's spiritual life. Two particular paradigms must therefore be taken into account.

A decisive part of the *Phaedo* has been characterized as the intellectual autobiography of Socrates.² Socrates himself elucidated that the song of dying swans should be taken as a symbol for their shared philosophical disposition of longing to return to god Apollo, the god of all philosophers.³ Hence, his appeal to think about death – especially when confronted with the end of one's own life – is not particularly surprising: '[M]aybe it's specially fitting that someone about to make the journey to the next world should inquire and speculate as to what we imagine that journey to be like; after all, what else should one do during the time till sundown?'⁴ In this sense, the Platonic dialogues are filled with the imagery of final judgement in the other world in which the naked soul has to defend its innocence, as for example in the *Gorgias*-myth of the underworld process of judgement. However, the fundamental underlying theme of those narratives can also be found in the *Phaedo*: 'Well now, it really has been shown us that if we are ever going to know anything purely, we must be rid of it, and must view the objects themselves with the soul by itself; it is then, apparently, that the thing we desire and whose

lover we claim to be, wisdom, will be ours – when we have died, as the argument indicates, though not while we live.’⁵ Death may be described as an instrument of self-awareness, as a philosophical horizon of utmost importance for any autobiographical exploration.

The chronological structure of Plato’s argument, namely, that it is the end of our life that will enable us to understand may very well account for the wide range of Neoplatonic-Christian readings that view death as the door to eternity. However, one might also argue that it is impossible to overlook the threat of imminent finality, which is ever-present throughout our lives. This can be characterized as a more or less existentialist point of view: To perceive death as a horizon that we are approaching is much more profound than merely thinking about death. Heidegger’s notion of *Vorlaufen* or leading up to death⁶ may be elucidated using yet another angle.

Death is not only an empirical experience. On the contrary, it is part of our experience; it even structures it. In this sense, death belongs to the very essence or centre of the experience of life.⁷ As Scheler argues, this direction may be described as a tendency towards ‘lessness,’ or the reduction of life, which may still be lived, because the part of life that has already been lived is increasing. This means that everything that has happened will grow stronger and that the extent of future possibilities will be permanently reduced, resulting in crucial implications concerning our awareness of the increasing dimension of the past. In this respect, living means to approach one’s own death, not only as a biological matter of fact but also as a psychological problem.⁸

With regard to autobiography, one might argue that narratively relating one’s life always revolves around the awareness that time is continuously progressing and that elapsed time is increasing, while the time ahead is decreasing. Becoming aware of this shifting emphasis from future to past is an essential part of our very existence.

If we accept the idea that our interpretations of our identity are dependent on our views on death, it is not surprising that this is the case for other aspects of culture, most notably the arts. Is it possible, within the scope of literary forms, to define such forms according to their relationship towards death? Although detective or crime novels are the only genre that habitually begin with the violent ending of someone’s life, many other genres tend to conclude with the death of the protagonist: Such texts display a strong affinity towards tragic *sujets*. No specific or decisive logic of literary forms can be found in any of these cases, despite the fact that we have become accustomed to the expectation that a detective story will commence with a crime that has already occurred or that a tragedy will end with the death of the main character. Turning to the novel, it is

also possible to differentiate between plots that are closer to the detective story or tragedy: In the most prominent cases in point, namely *Don Quijote* and *Anna Karenina*, it is inevitable that the protagonists must die, albeit for different reasons. Nevertheless, the fact that there are literary paradigms that are open-ended in the novel must be taken into account, as we are confronted with the development of the protagonist's life from the beginning until his or her integration into society. The model of the German *Bildungsroman* might be of interest, because it displays a certain affinity to life writing, following the laws of fiction and, usually, of third person-descriptions. Nevertheless, the line that separates the fictive *Bildungsroman* from autobiographical life writing is very thin.

We will approach our topic accordingly. Given that they are integral aspects of everyday life that include acts of introduction as well as informing another person where one is from, autobiographical logics seem to be exceptionally open and malleable. However, specificities which define the boundaries of autobiographical texts also exist.

2

The aim of this essay is to present a line of argument, which is likely to be of interest to those who enjoy paradoxes, especially if those paradoxes reveal connections between life and literature that usually remain hidden. If we assume that literary forms not only reflect factual life, but are also creative areas which have developed because their creation is essential, autobiographical texts may be viewed as modalities of our self-experience. The impressive studies of Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf have illustrated the many perspectives and possibilities that have been tested over the centuries in order to differentiate the so-called 'ego-documents.' For a long time, Philippe Lejeune's characterization of the autobiography as a retrospective return to the narrator's own life appeared to represent an Archimedean point in the discussion of autobiographical texts. Even if the reliance on the idealistic stability of the I, the narrated I as well as the narrating I, has come under suspicion; even if we may have to accept that we are now at a point of producing autobiographies after 'autobiography,' or that docu-autobiographies have caused us to question our conventional definitions: Autobiography's inability to narrate the narrator's and protagonist's death may nevertheless still be characterized as a Cartesian *fundamentum inconcussum*, as the Lejeunian identity of the three units of author, narrator, and protagonist renders it impossible to relate one's own death. There have been further explorations into the connection between literary forms and death within the scope of autobiographical

writings, concerning the trope of prosopopoeia⁹ as well as the tradition of the epitaph.¹⁰ The term ‘autofiction’, which was introduced by Serge Doubrovsky, points to the problem of differentiating between fact and fiction as well as between past and future. As one can neither classify one’s own death as a fact in advance nor classify it as fiction, ‘autofiction’ seems to be a key instrument to characterize this logical dilemma.¹¹ Hybrid forms of autofiction have even been discussed as projections of utopian narratives as well as aspects of ‘metaity’ and liminality.¹²

From another point of view, experiences of death are of utmost importance for the development of any individual and as well as for the majority of autobiographical texts. Generally, the death of either the protagonist’s mother or father marks a decisive change in the protagonist’s life. The final conversation between Saint Augustine and his mother that takes place in Ostia just before her death – which Augustine placed at the centre of his *Confessions* – is probably one of the most impressive scenes that exist within the scope of autobiographical texts. Apart from these existential experiences, however, a logical limitation exists within the paradigm of autobiography, namely, that the end of the protagonist’s life cannot be found within the text. While this could be seen as essential to the logic of autobiography, it could also be considered to be trivial and uninteresting, especially if logical and moralistic propositions are in conflict with one another. A famous and highly controversial sentence can be found in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: ‘Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death.’¹³ Jorge Semprún strongly resented and rejected this formulation as he obviously misinterpreted it to be a moral proposition. As a survivor of the Nazi camps, he was upset by the notion that it is not possible to take part in the dying of another person. As a result, he insulted Wittgenstein by calling him an ‘idiot’ on the grounds that he himself had not only experienced but also suffered from the death of his friend Morales. He ‘had experienced Morales’ death, I was about to experience it.’¹⁴ This incrimination was nevertheless erroneous, as Wittgenstein’s was not a moral, but a logical proposition. No one will ever be able to describe his or her own death, unless we choose/wish to accept the ‘undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.’

We must, however, acknowledge that in addition to the laws of autobiographical logic, other perspectives that do not adhere to these rules also exist, which must be defined as paradoxes in the literal sense: Truths lie beyond ordinary belief, para-doxes. We must therefore also respect that there are many ways and aspects in which the reality of one’s own death can be incorporated into the process of writing an autobiography. Hence, I would like to point out a blind spot and address the logical impossibility of narrating one’s own death as a fundamental chance of this literary

form. In a nutshell, death is a type of aporia of autobiographical writing; it is as impossible as it is inevitable. In what follows, I will explore the modalities by way of which death can be simultaneously described as a logically irrelevant yet existentially and aesthetically decisive moment of autobiography. If we accept these preliminary considerations, we have to concede that something has changed in our object: when conceived as a construct that is situated at the logical centre of life writing and the periphery of integrating death, autobiography has ceased being a form of literature and has instead become a hybrid form *between* literature and philosophy.¹⁵ It is therefore inevitable to shed some light on philosophical predispositions of autobiographical writing. Viewed as being situated between literature and philosophy, the act of writing an autobiography can be seen as being both an attempt to overcome common delusions concerning one's own life as well as an approach towards philosophical self-discrimination. In other words, autobiography would be an endeavour to approach knowledge, that according to Plato's *Phaedo*, cannot be reached during one's lifetime. According to J. G. Herder's insight, the potential autobiographer must therefore imagine him- or herself as dead.¹⁶ Understood in this way, autobiography is not only about looking back but also about looking forward. Philip Gilbert Hamerton, who was not able to complete his autobiography, 'strikes a characteristic tone in a preface'¹⁷ when he wrote:

The notion of being a dead man is not entirely displeasing to me. If the dead are defenceless, they have this compensating advantage, that nobody can inflict upon them any sensible injury; and in beginning a book which is not to see the light until I am lying comfortably in my grave, with six feet of earth above me to deaden the noises of the upper world, I feel quite a new kind of security, and write with a more complete freedom from anxiety about the quality of the work than has been usual at the beginning of other manuscripts [...] In thinking of ourselves as dead we instinctively adopt the survivor's point of view.¹⁸

Hence, the issue concerning the blind spot can be interpreted as external to the actual autobiography, as the writer uses the wisdom and fear of his or her own death as a source of motivation without integrating it into the text. As we know from Gellert and Darwin, among others, they began writing their autobiographies when they sought to confront their fear of death.¹⁹ As Darwin explained, 'I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life. Nor have I found this difficult, for life is nearly over with me.'²⁰ Even in the case of Goethe, one of the most passionate deniers of the power of death, it is important to bear in mind that he

began planning his autobiography after having been confronted with the deaths of Schiller, the duke's mother, Anna Amalia, and his own mother. Hence, his great book *Dichtung und Wahrheit* can – at least to a certain extent – also be read as a necrologue that he himself wrote.

3

One could outline three different ways of integrating the blind spot of one's own death into the autobiographical text. These perspectives can be described firstly, as a moralistic understanding (which will be outlined in this section); secondly, as a judicial attitude towards the times to come (which will be outlined in section four of this essay); and thirdly, as a fictional moment (which I will turn to in section five).

First of all, it is necessary to point out the moral obligation of respecting one's own ending when writing an autobiography. Although Plato may be described as a sophisticated player of the autobiographical game of hide-and-seek, as he only made a few appearances as a historical person within his own texts, thus indicating 'Plato, I mean, was sick' during the last hours of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, Saint Augustine is in fact the great-grandfather of the autobiographical genre. Even if the Socratic view of the end of life functions as a decisive parameter for autobiographical writing, there is yet another horizon that needs to be taken into consideration. In order to further explore this issue, we can productively turn to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a text that has been described as the foundation of the autobiographical genre. The structure of the *Confessions* is very complex, given that only nine of the thirteen books deal with the account of the author's personal development, whereas the others concentrate on the discussions of memory, time and the creation of the world. But already at the beginning of the overall text, one encounters a reflection of what cannot be reconstructed: 'What is it that I would say, O Lord my God, but even this: that I know not whence I came hither, into this, a dying life (shall I call it) or a living death rather?'²¹ Important and frequently repeated formulations highlight the absence of memory, 'non enim ego memini' [I myself cannot remember it],²² 'nam ista mea non memini' ['For these things of myself I remember not']:²³ 'In contrast to biographies and fiction, the beginning (birth) and the end (death) of the autobiographical account are (usually) not at the disposal of the writer.'²⁴ What is called the 'oblivionis meae tenebrae [darkness of my forgetfulness],'²⁵ later in the text, obviously has two dimensions. Being forced to reconstruct our own beginning based on the perceptions of others who we can, in turn, observe, is indicative of a biological and psychological

disposition. But what is much more important for Augustine is the fact that a superficial default is rooted in a religious problem. In addition to demeaning his parents as ‘parentes carnis meae’ [the parents of my flesh],²⁶ he is also interested in the more fundamental question of origin, namely the question of prenatal existence, which cannot be answered outside a religious framework. Yet, even the impossibility of answering this question within the logics of the *Confessions* presents – in itself – an argument of utmost importance, which leads to an understanding of the trans-biological and trans-rational, the exclusively religious creation of our existence. ‘Tu itaque, domine deus meus, qui dedisti vitam infanti et corpus [Thou therefor, O Lord, my God, who hast given both life and body to the infant].’²⁷

Three aspects have to be considered in order to grasp the pivotal role of the *Confessions*: They are presented in the form of a dialogue that does not adhere to the Platonic tradition, but instead focuses on the exchange between the individual and God through prayer, as outlined in the Psalms of the Old Testament. Throughout all thirteen books of Augustine’s *Confessions*, one can find many quotations of and allusions to the five books of Psalms. Therefore, Augustine’s narration of his own life is invariably an essential element of an address to God, which once again illustrates an absence of any independent psychological or literary claim. In terms of the psalmist’s speech, God is always present and increasingly addressed as the eternal judge, whereas the unity of the narrator, the protagonist, and the author assumes the role of the delinquent. Confessions of guilt and shame can be found throughout the nine books that are part of the autobiographical disposition. We can therefore conclude that each and every aspect of this form of life writing falls within the framework of the four last things (namely, death, the last judgment, heaven, and hell), that we are not – at least not exclusively – allowed to read in the mode of a modern ‘autobiography.’ Above all, the awareness of his own faults makes Augustine’s ‘I’ a representative of the mortal self of every human being: He lacks the ability to remember where he came from as well as the capacity to know what will be the end of his days. Moreover, he cannot know whether he will be condemned or find mercy. Thus, the *Confessions* can be read as a declaration of human mortality and guilt, so that any reminder the development thereof must be seen as an expression of the life’s finality. In this respect, the facets of physical and theological death are not independent of one another.

The second consequence that arises from the first may be characterized as the coexistence of materialistic and idealistic, immanent and transcendent, and biological and theological attitudes towards death: To some extent, even Augustine is not able to escape the rules of autobiography

as defined by Lejeune, namely, that it is not possible to recount one's own death. Considering the connection between the biological and the theological dimension, however, one might argue that, even though the reader does not witness Augustine's biological end, much energy is devoted to the description of the theological form of each human being's death: The main focus is not an interest in the end of mortal life, but rather – in accordance with the religious dimension of the entire work – the attention given to the end of mortal life and the beginning of spiritual existence. The structure of the *Confessions* can thus be seen as anchored in the principle of rebirth; when Saint John (3.3) indicates that no one is able to see God's country unless they are born a second time in order to overcome Adam's original sin, autobiography can serve as a way of being reborn in a moralistic-religious perspective. One could conclude that death is not only present in the *Confessions's* direction towards God and his ultimate judgment of our life, death is present, and this is the main point, as the result of living in guilt and shame; and it is not until the famous scene in the Milan garden and the well-known exclamation 'tolle, lege!' [take up and read] that Augustine reaches the point where he can differentiate between his former life in sin and the decision to be baptized and become a holy man. Thus, the death of the old Adam of sin is connected to the rebirth of a new man who has the opportunity to live a life according to the expectations of God. For Augustine, death is therefore, less of a biological category than a theological event, marked by a shift from mortality and sin to eternity. This is of course important for the structure of the entire book: Due to its theological scope, it is not possible to regard it as a personal autobiography in the modern sense; we might say, the 'sinful' life that is covered in the first part of the text comes to an end with the end of book IX, and what follows cannot be regarded as belonging to an individual development, given that the old Augustine 'dies' at the end of book IX, and is reborn to give testimony to his life. Moreover, without this transformation into the spiritual 'I' the writing of the *Confessions* would not have been possible.

Finally, the third consequence has to do with the overall scope of the text: If one accepts the proposition that the work focuses on the process of theological recognition – that is the death of the old and the rebirth of the new, religious 'I' – rather than on individual development, the *Confessions* make sense only as a religious text – namely as a document of moralistic development from life (and death) to the eternity of the spirit. It is important to bear in mind that the moral discourse inherent in the *Confessions* overpowers all of the magnificent psychological and aesthetic details that might impress readers of text. It is the morality, rather than the biology of death, which makes Augustine's book unique. By and large,

this model has significantly influenced the genre of autobiography as it makes conversion a trope of autobiographical writing.

There are, of course, other examples of the moralistic paradigm that link autobiographical writing and one's own death. Johann Henrich Reitz (1655–1720) was the famous editor of seven volumes of the *History of the Reborn* [*Historie der Wiedergeborenen*], 1698–1745.²⁸ Many of these pietistic documents possess a cyclical structure, beginning with the end and narrating towards the end.²⁹ One of the most exciting examples in German literature, which illustrates the moralistic dimension of the connection between autobiography and death particularly well, is Adam Bernd's *Eigene Lebensbeschreibung* from 1738. The author, who describes himself as a Protestant preacher in the frontispiece, is deeply unsettled by his suicidal tendencies. Right at the centre of his book, there is a digression on suicide, which can be understood as the central point of the whole book. In addition to other episodes, there is also the reminiscence of a pious woman, who was 'of great knowledge in religious affairs,' [*von großem (!) Erkenntnis in Religions-Sachen*].³⁰ In her suffering, she felt quite certain that as human beings, we have to come as close to Christ as possible: 'and given that in her suffering she had felt little resemblance to him so far, she decided to follow him more directly. Since Christ had been crucified, we too had to crucify our collective existence as the old Adam. She had taken literally what could have only be understood metaphorically; in other words, she had already been looking for a nail on which to hang herself.'³¹ His fear of committing suicide, his tendency to come back to it by means of such examples, as well as his melancholic disposition accompany Bernd throughout his book, and his autobiography seems to prove that it is possible to combine the pietistic credo of self-extinction with the decision to write about one's life instead of putting a violent end to it. Adam Bernd therefore practices what could be described as the 'dialectics' of autobiography: He follows the example of Augustine by linking the preservation of the sinful life with the awareness that it is not the narrated life itself that makes it worthwhile for the tradition, but only its religious perspective.

4

Whereas in the cases discussed in the previous section a moralistic perspective on life's ending presented the prevalent starting point of autobiographical writing, there is also another model in which the preservation of a life's legacy and an orientation toward the future are dominant features. The most impressive example of this approach, as well as the

potential problems it poses, may be found in Petrarch. When reading his most famous texts, the sonnets of his *Canzoniere*, it becomes obvious that it is necessary to take his melancholy into account. Three texts need to be mentioned concerning the autobiographical aspects of his work. First of all, there is the famous letter about his ascent of Mount Ventoux,³² which can be read as an intertextual dialogue with the *Confessions*. Petrarch's moment of fully becoming himself coincides with an overwhelming scene of his reading of Augustine's autobiography which he imagines to have taken with him. Petrarch's letter indicates a replacement of Augustine's 'tolle, lege!'-imperative of reading the Bible with an impulse of writing his own life as 'tolle, scripse!'

Apart from this letter, which has been discussed as a document of highly concentrated and stylized autobiography, there are two other documents in which he attempts to describe his own life. The second document of his autobiographical project is the so-called *Secretum*,³³ which revolves around three imaginary conversations between Petrarch and the apparition of Saint Augustine. Based on the medieval dogma of 'confession' as a *mediatio mortis*, we witness a confrontation between two realms. Whereas the Church Father insists on the erasure of one's own identity for the sake of a transcendental existence by focusing on death as the utmost deadline of all thought and action, it is quite fascinating to observe how Petrarch portrays himself as unable to follow his master's instructions, despite the fact that he is aware of his own shortcomings, his 'acedia,' his melancholy. For Petrarch, Augustine's insistence on a moral obligation to focus on death is no longer acceptable; he not only declares that he does not follow the principle of *memento mori*, but also asserts that he will strive for his life to be remembered, and his reputation to be secured, as transient and vane as this may be.

The third text, the so-called *Posteritati*,³⁴ addressed to those who will follow him into the future, is thought to be a kind of 'last will,' written as the last of his letters of old age in 1370, four years prior to his death. In this text, Petrarch confronts his readers with three possible motivations that were decisive for his writing this letter, all of which are directed towards the future. First of all, he is convinced that without it, his name will not be known in the era to come; secondly, he assumes that future readers may like to know more about him; and thirdly, it will be difficult to reconstruct the truth about Petrarch's life if readers are forced to make up their minds based on conflicting documents. Hence, Petrarch sets out to be his own historiographer, because – in view of his own finitude –, no other person could be an adequate witness to his life once he is gone. Only Petrarch himself can warrant the authenticity of his life writing. So it is once more the prospect of death, the Heideggerian *Vorlaufen* into the

end, which constitutes the core of this text. However, while Petrarch is still oriented towards the moral dimension of Saint Augustine in his letter about Mont Ventoux, another model is at work in the *Posteritati*. Although the author is obviously aware of his status as a mortal being, the text does not convey this awareness in the fashion of Christian moralistic humbleness and instead falls back on the ancient '*vita*'-model, that reminds the reader of what the protagonist did throughout his life-time. In accordance with the ancient ideas of *virtus*, *fortuna* and *voluntas*, Petrarch interprets himself as a model and an example of human finitude, albeit not in a moralistic sense. In so doing, he positions himself exactly in the middle between Augustine and the Renaissance, reminiscing about his mortality yet no longer solely interpreting it in terms of Christian piety. As a central experience of old age, vis-à-vis his death, Petrarch expresses that self-knowledge is far more significant than the ancient model of the *virtus* of *virī illustres*. This may be interpreted as a form of self-legitimation of the autobiographical genre, because the act of writing an autobiography combines being confronted with death, accepting moral obligation, and protecting the fragility of one's life.

This second attitude – as described by Petrarch – is less theological and more humanistic; its purpose is to remember, preserve, and project biographical circumstances for the future – which leads to the decision to write an autobiography. Throughout time, we will find people who seek to record their life because of their particular motivation to remind themselves of its finitude. There is an insurmountable desire to justify what one has accomplished in the course of one's life, as for instance in autobiographical texts of the humanists in the early modern period. Petrarch's organization of his afterlife has become a model for many humanists who also sought to ensure the survival of their name by writing their own life.³⁵

This attitude is not unlike writing one's will, as Ulrike Vedder illustrated in 2011. Petrarch's autobiographical texts lean towards a final legacy. It is not limited to literary practices but can also be found in other autobiographical modes: the desire to extend one's life into the future by addressing a future readership can be found in the practices of Emperor Charles V who became an expert in describing his life in a series of last will-documents.³⁶ He wrote his first testament at the age of 22, and in the following years, produced a series of further documents. In these texts, he set out to organize the place where he wanted to be buried. Additionally, the testaments also embrace a broad spectrum of political and private considerations and (even legal) self-justification, which lead to political instructions addressed to his son. As different as these texts are, they display an attitude towards things to come that is judicial in the sense

that they seek to secure and control their legacy beyond death as bindingly as possible.

5

Last but not least, we need to look at those autobiographies that develop a more artistic or ironic view in the logics of this form. One example is Jean Paul's *Konjektural-Biographie* from 1798, which is a prospective sketch of his life to come, and includes a vision of the end of his life in the last epistle of the book: 'Among all epistles there is only this one which can rely on the truthfulness of the hours described. All the others may lie, this one will be true.'³⁷ – A quite different aesthetic strategy to incorporate the blind spot of one's own death into the dynamics of autobiography can be found in Theodor Fontane's *Meine Kinderjahre*. Here we can refer to Marilyn R. Chandler's *A Healing Art. Regeneration through Autobiography* from 1990. Even though she focuses on texts that were written between World War I and 1975, it is significant that she speaks of a 'post-Freudian awareness,' a specific 'degree and kind of self-consciousness (that is) only possible in an 'age of irony' – a time of radical doubt that subjects all conventions to question.'³⁸ Despite the temporal distance, Chandler's historical perspective – originating in the twentieth century – also applies to Fontane and can therefore be applied as a structural index that focuses on the difference between introspection, retrospection, and transformation. One prominent example may suffice to illustrate the usefulness of this model.

Theodor Fontane turned to the recollection of his life during a crisis of productivity, at a time when he was not able to complete his novel *Effi Briest*, which he had begun writing three years earlier. Fearing death, he also fell into a depression: Fontane's father had died at the age of 72, and now he, the son, had reached the same age and he was afraid that he might follow his father's suit as if he were a facsimile of his father. But pushing against what he considered to be the mighty shadow of his father's life, he decided to write the story of his childhood (*Meine Kinderjahre*), which ultimately enabled him to announce that he had 'written himself back to health with this book.'³⁹ Even though it exceeds the confines of his childhood, Fontane narrated his father's death an essential component of his own existence. Entitled 'Forty Years Later,' chapter sixteen represents a chronological prolepsis or exception within the book, but it also offers Fontane a way out of his crisis. Fontane subsequently declared his autobiography to be an 'autobiographical novel' in the subtitle. It is his father who – in his stead – dies in the book. This is the scheme that

allowed Fontane to heal himself and overcome his fear of death by writing his autobiography.

What is conceived as autobiography, as life writing, seems to depend on what could be summed up as the confluence of a logical necessity and an emotional dilemma: The fact that the reminiscence of one's life is overshadowed by the knowledge or the fear of its impending end, which at the same time, can never be part of its narration.

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- 2 Plato. *Phaedo*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975 (Phaedo 95e-99d; 47–51). See also Horn, Christoph (ed.). *Platon-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2009 (373).
- 3 Idem (Phaedo 84e-85b; 34f.).
- 4 Idem (Phaedo 61e; 5).
- 5 Idem (Phaedo 61e; 11).
- 6 Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977 (260–267).
- 7 Scheler, Max. 'Tod und Fortleben.' In: Maria Scheler (ed.), *Scheler, Schriften aus dem Nachlaß, Bd. 1: Ethik und Erkenntnislehre*. Bern: Francke, 1933 (16).
- 8 Scheler writes: 'Und diese Richtung ist stetige Aufzehrung des erlebbaren, als zukünftig gegebenen Lebens durch gelebtes Leben und seine Nachwirksamkeit. Die Richtung ist also Wachstum des Umfangs des Vergangenseins auf Kosten des Umfangs von Zukünftigein und ein steigendes Differenzbewußtsein dieser beiden Umfänge zugunsten des Vergangenheitsumfangs. In dieser Wesensstruktur jedes erfahrenen Lebensmomentes ist es nun das Richtungserlebnis dieses Wechsels, das auch Erlebnis der Todesrichtung genannt werden kann.' Scheler, *Schriften*, 14.
- 9 Block, Richard. 'Prosopopoeia.' In: Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction: Volume I: Theory and Concepts*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019, 378–383.
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- 14 Original: 'hatte den Tod von Morales erlebt, ich war im Begriff ihn zu erleben.' Semprún, Jorge. *Schreiben oder Leben*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995 (230). Transl. M.M.
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- 21 Augustinus, Aurelius. *St. Augustine's Confessions: in Two Volumes*/I. W. H. D. Rouse (ed.), Trans. William Watts (1631). London, Cambridge & Massachusetts: Heinemann, 1968 (I, 13).
- 22 Ibidem.
- 23 Idem, *Book I*, 15.
- 24 Malinar, Angelika. 'Genealogy.' In: Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, 293–299 (294).
- 25 Augustine, Aurelius, 1968, I, 23.
- 26 Idem, *Book I*, 13.
- 27 Idem, *Book I*, 23.
- 28 Cf. Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina. *Autobiographie*. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2005, 151f.
- 29 Cf. Müller, Klaus-Detlef. *Autobiographie und Roman. Studien zur literarischen Autobiographie der Goethezeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976 (55).
- 30 Bernd, Adam. *Eigene Lebensbeschreibung*. München: Winkler, 1973 (187).
- 31 Original: 'und weil sie bisher im Leiden noch gar wenig ihm ähnlich worden, so müßte es nunmehr geschehen. Christus wäre gekreuzigt worden, und wir müßten den alten Adam auch ans Kreuze schlagen. Diese, was verblümler weise zu verstehen, hätte sie in der Dummheit und Raserei proprie verstanden, und vermeint, sie müßte sich selber

- henken, wäre auch schon aufgestanden, und hätte sich nach einem Nagel umgesehen.’ Bernd, *Eigene Lebensbeschreibung*, 188. Transl. M.M.
- 32 Petrarca, Francesco. *Prose*. G. Martellotti, et al. (eds.). Milano/Napoli: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1955 (830–844).
- 33 Idem, 22–215.
- 34 Idem, 1–19.
- 35 Velten, Hans Rudolf. *Das selbst geschriebene Leben. Eine Studie zur deutschen Autobiographie im 16. Jahrhundert*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1995.
- 36 Karl V. *Rede vor den Generalstaaten der Niederlande am 25. Oktober 1555*. In: Mathias Mayer (ed.). Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2001.
- 37 ‘Unter allen Episteln ist keine ihrer beschriebenen Stunden so gewiß als diese meiner letzten. Ja die andern können lügen, nur diese nicht.’ Jean Paul. *Selberlebensbeschreibung. Konjektural-Biographie*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1989 (136). Transl. M.M.
- 38 Chandler, Marilyn R. *A Healing Art. Regeneration through Autobiography*. New York: Garland, 1990 (9).
- 39 Original: ‘an diesem Buch wieder gesund geschrieben;’ (translated by the author) Fontane, Theodor. *Meine Kinderjahre. Autobiographischer Roman*. In: Christian Grawe (ed.). Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986 (246).