

FEMINIST AUTOTHANATOGRAPHIES: ALICE JAMES AND SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Prof. Dr. Velga Vevere
University of Latvia, Latvia

ABSTRACT

Feminist autobiography is a genre with long-standing literary and philosophical tradition, still some aspects, like, autobiography as “death writing” have come to scholarly attention as of relatively recent. The conceptual framework hinged on the concepts of “tanatography” (defined as an account of a person’s death) and “autotanatography” (defined as an account of one’s own death) makes it possible to take a fresh look into feminist writings from 19th and 20th centuries (Alice James and Simone de Beauvoir). Among the questions for the critical reflection we can mention the following ones: issues of memory and forgetting, of death of the significant other, of aging, of suicide, of literary death (ending the writing career path). Autothanatography is self-death-writing, instead of self-life-writing, even if death is an experience that cannot be had for oneself. The current article takes a look into the auto-death-writing of two women writers: Alice James (1848-1892) – a sister of William and Henry James and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). Although both women’s lives are set almost a century apart and none of them define herself as a feminist writer, their memoirs are written from the vantage point of imminent death. In the first case (James’s) we can speak of her posthumously published diaries, especially their second part written after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Whereas in the latter (Beauvoir’s) case the autothanatological vibe is felt throughout the whole series of her memoirs (“Memoirs of a dutiful daughter”, “The prime of life”, “Force of circumstance”, “A very easy death”), but especially in the oeuvre “All is said and done” – the writing in anticipation of one’s death. The aspect that is common to both writers is that their memoirs exhibit the strategy of recollection, of re-reading their life events anew in the wake of the end (physical and/or authorial).

Keywords: *autothanatography, biographical writings, Simone de Beauvoir, Alice James, feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Marcel’s philosophical essay “My death” is devoted to the relation of people to their own deaths; he concludes that this relation can be only of the existential mode. “What is in question is beyond the grasp of every possible inquirer. And the question here is not about man’s describability, but about man insofar as he exists. I cannot separate the existing being from the relationship he has with himself, from the fact that he is concerned with himself.” [1] It is possible, according to Marcel, to look at this problem from two sides – death as

something implied as being in the world (the very existence is measured against the fact of death) or a manner of dying (the dignity of existence being exposed at this moment), at the same time the death in itself cannot be reduced to an event. It is rather a fact that constitutes one's life meaning, showing a new perspective from which to look at past and future happenings. But how to survive death and testify about this experience? Jacque Derrida investigates the possibility of experiencing and living death through a reading of Maurice Blanchot's "The instant of my death". He classifies such autobiographical fiction as autothanatology – a story set against the background of imminent death. [2] But what if one rewrites his/her autobiography over and over again offering a different perspective upon the same events? But what if one writes a diary of the events that would have happened, if he or she lived long enough to experience them for real? In the following sections of the paper there will be a description of two models of the autothanatographic texts written by women set apart by their time of living (accordingly, the 19th and 20th centuries), life course (solitariness/isolation and public involvement), literary heritage (a single set of two-volume diaries published long after the author's death and a whole library of works).

There are two facts that have particularly triggered the research interest in the realm of the autothanatographies. First, Alice James wrote the second volume of her diaries, inspired by her terminal diagnosis as life cantering event; second, Simone de Beauvoir in 1972 published an autobiography "When all is said and done" where she took a new and different look at the events described in the four three autobiographic volumes, i.e., *Memoirs of a dutiful daughter* (1958), "The Prime of Life" (1960), "Force of circumstance" (1963), "A very easy death" (1964).

DIARIES OF ALICE JAMES AS WRITING TOWARDS DEATH

As a first model of autothanatology to analyse is the life-story of Alice James (1848-1892) – the younger sister of the famous psychologist and philosopher William James and the great American English novelist Henry James. Alice as a girl of the typical New England Victorian family setting didn't receive the formal school training (in a sharp contrast to her four brothers), all her life she was living in the shadow of the male members of her family, staying home, being constantly sick and to be cared for. At the age of forty Alice started her diary, keeping it in secret from her brothers. The diary consists of two different parts, sharply divided by the news of her breast cancer and forthcoming death. The motivation to start this belletrist exercise could be comprehended as her way of understanding herself and her vocation in the world, as it was stated in the very first entry on May, 31, 1889. "I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me. My circumstances allowing of nothing but ejaculation of one-syllabled reflections, a written monologue by that most interesting being,

myself, may have its yet to be discovered consolations.” [3] In the news of her terminal diagnosis – breast cancer. In her malady she acquired the missing point of reference – the imminent death, that allowed her to restructure her life in past (to assign some meaning to previous actions leading up to this point) and have flashes forward (memories of the future never to come). “How amusing it is to see the fixed mosaic of one’s little destiny being filled out by the tiny blocks of events, the enchantment of minute consequences with the illusion of choice weathering it all! Through compete physical bankruptcy, I have obtained mu “ideel,” as Nurse calls it..” [4] The death in her life played a role of life affirmation, as well as of finding her personal voice. „It is the most supremely interesting moment in life, the only one in fact, when living seems life, and I count it as the greatest good fortune to have these few months so full of interest and instruction in the knowledge of my approaching death. It is as simple in one’s own persona s any fact of nature, the fall of a leaf or the blooming of a rose, and I have a delicious consciousness, ever present, of wide spaces close at hand, and whisperings of release in the air.” [5] Alice James here letter dwells upon themes of her upcoming death as a possibility to assign meaning to her life, of women’s destiny in the society and of her family full of strong willed male characters and inability to thrive intellectually in this particular environment. Does it mean that Alice look forward to her sufferings in a somewhat masochistic way and hatred for her family? No, far from that, she exhibits reflections on much deeper philosophical level about life, destiny, human predicament and creative abilities. The theme of memory and remembrance is of a special interest to us, since her reflections were not mostly about documentation of events, not about writing down fleeting past experiences and feelings, but rather she developed an original conceptions of remembrance (directed towards past) and forth-memembering (aimed at future). It was Alice’s attempt of a “being-against-death,” the attempt of the meaningful existence. “Alice James’s diary was her dialogue with the future. It gave form to her sense of ironic detachment.” [6] She wrote: “I have seen so little that my memory is packed with little bits which have not been wiped out by great ones, so that it all seems like a reminiscence and as I go along the childish impressions of light and color come crowding back into my mind and with them the expectant, which then palpitated within me, lives for a ghostly moment.” [7] The next question Alice asked in her diary was about the selectiveness of memory. “I wonder what determines the selection of memory.. The things we remember have a first-timeness about them which suggests that that may be the reason of their survival.” [8] This observation is very significant as it brings forward the understanding of memory as reordering past events and their ever new perception. It was the terminal diagnosis that challenged this “floating-particle sense” and immersed her in the flow of life. Therefore, the following statement wouldn’t come as much of surprise. “To him who waits, all things come! My aspirations may have been eccentric, but I cannot complain now, that they have not been brilliantly fulfilled. Ever since I have been ill, I have longed and longed for some palpable disease, no matter how conventionally dreadful a label it may have..” [9] So the experience of dying turned to be for her the necessary dosage of reality, the sense of herself as indestructible quantity. In

Alice's case it was not a self-deception as she understood pretty well what pain and suffering was about to come but for her this experience was of a great value. If there is little to come ahead then each and every event, a little fact gains a double significance, for one becomes suddenly interesting to oneself, and one's individuality stands out with a crowd. The inevitable and fast approaching death made it possible for Alice to see herself through her own (not father's, not brothers') eyes for the first time in her life and to acknowledge her intellectual worthiness. From this point on she could envision what her life could be in future; the term appropriate for this type of perspective thinking is "forth-membering". The difficulty, apart from the obvious physical pain and bodily deterioration, was her inability to share her experiences with others adequately, as their perception of Alice was largely unchanged. "This long slow dying is no doubt instructive, but it is disappointingly free from excitements: "naturalness" being carried to its supreme expression. .. I take satisfaction in feeling as much myself as ever, perhaps simply a more concentrated essence in this curtailment." [10] Alice James died on the 5th of March, 1892, her last diary entry just a day before still exposed a very strong person, strong not by virtue of being the one of the James's, but by virtue of being herself – the ultimate James.

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOR AS REVERSED PERSPECTIVE

Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most prolific feminist writers of the 20th century, she has left her trace also in the genre of autobiography, publishing ,not one, not two, not even three or four, but five altogether autobiographies, four of them depicting the life events in their due course (chronologically) – "Memoirs of a dutiful daughter" (1958), "The Prime of Life" (1960), "Force of circumstance" (1963), "A very easy death" (1964). While the fifth one ("When all is said and done", 1972) takes a completely different approach – here the life events are recited anew not exactly backward, but in a different order, assigning the a different significance to them. In a sense she was performing a kind of phenomenological analysis – description of the same phenomenon from the differing angles. In reading Beauvoir's last autobiography we at once see some areas of interest in the context of the current theme of feminist autothanatologies. Let us enumerate and briefly discuss them.

First, the text in itself is an achronological narrative, i.e., the story of her life is being cut in pieces, rearranged and put together as a puzzle with seemingly wrong fragments sticking out in different directions, that nevertheless exhibit a wholeness (but of what?). In other words, the chronology is interrupted by the flashbacks, visions from the future, repetitions, dedications, etc.): "So now I do not have to take the passage of the years as my guide: to some extent I shall follow their sequence, but it is around certain given themes that I mean to group my recollections." [11]

Second, the pace of the text is arrhythmic; the style is part documentary, part fiction (one part follows the other in no particular order). “By imprisoning in words, my account turns my history into a finite reality: and it is not a finite reality. Yet at the same time it scatters it abroad, breaking it up into a string of set, distinct moments, whereas in fact past, present and future were inextricably bound together in each one of them.” [11]

Third, the text offers a new account of the events, feelings, and thoughts depicted earlier in a somewhat detached manner, the facts being devoid of life, reduced to the flatness of a never-ending present. Fourth, the text exhibits the detachment of a narrator from her own text, (a view from aside), it is a voice behind the scenes. According to Beauvoir, this last attempt at autobiography is meant to provide her with an idea of her place, her locus in the world – being French, being a woman, being a writer, being sixty years of age.

Fifth, this text is a new take on the process of aging, since it brings forth the question of the possible future, relationship with it. Paradoxically enough, because of the lack of bodily presence in the text of Beauvoir herself, it can be read of the testimony of the aging of others, rather than herself. (for example, a memory of her lifelong friend suddenly appearing on the doorstep in the shape of a very old woman, unrecognizable almost).

Sixth, there is always a presence of death. It is not surprising that this volume ties together with her other works “A very easy death” (on her mother’s death from the intestine cancer) and “Adieu: A farewell to Sartre”.

Seventh, Beauvoir acts as a reader of her own texts and life: “I have not brought the shimmer of feelings back to life nor caught the outer world in words. But that was not my aim. I wanted to make myself exist for others by conveying, as directly as I could, the taste of my own life: I have more or less succeeded, I have some thorough-going enemies, but I have also made many friends among my reader. I asked no more. This time I shall not write a conclusion to my book. I leave the reader to draw any he may choose.” [12] She leaves the ending open.

These aforementioned themes bring us to the point of discussion of the strategy of the reversed perspective in literature. The notion of the reversed perspective was in 1919 by the Russian theologian Pavel Florensky in relation to visual arts and iconography. The reversed perspective, according to him, offers a different vision of the ordinary things, it introduces various points of view simultaneously, distorts the forms and shapes. P. Florensky asks in relation to the essence and limitations of the reversed perspective: “Does perspective in actual fact express the nature of things, as its supporters maintain, and should it therefore be always and everywhere viewed as the unconditional prerequisite for artistic veracity? Or is it rather just a schema, and moreover one of several possible representational schemas, corresponding not to a perception of the world as a whole, but only to one of the possible interpretations of the world, connected to a

specific feeling for, and understanding of, life? Or yet again, is perspective, the perspectival image of the world, the perspectival interpretation of the world, a natural image that flows from its essence, a true word of the world, or is it just a particular orthography, one of many constructions that is characteristic of those who created it, relative to the century and the life-concept of those who invented it, and expressive of their own style - but by no means excluding other orthographies, other systems of transcriptions, corresponding to the life-concept and style of other centuries?" [13] In Florensky's view, the world the icon is trying to depict is considered to be more real than this world, ontologically larger, we might say. Thus, the use of reverse perspective helps communicate this truth. As we stare into the icon the world we are looking into isn't shrinking or vanishing. Rather, it is expanding and growing. The focal point sits upon the viewer. This changes the power relations between the icon and the viewer. In linear perspective we look at the icon. The focal point is "inside" the icon. In reverse perspective the icon is looking at you. You are the focal point. This reversal mirrors what was said earlier: The world of the icon is more real than this world. A final related point is how the reverse perspective marginalizes the viewer. In linear perspective, the viewer is the centre of the cosmos. All horizons move out from him, the visual reference point. But with reverse perspective the individual is placed on the edge. But can the principle of the reversed perspective can be applied to the autobiographical text? According to Samantha Harvey, the reversed perspective in literature can be best described as so-called backwards narrative, it traces back what is seemingly untraceable, puts a different emphasis onto things, facts and memories. It has a some kind of forensic quality. "Yet, although the backwards narrative is fiercely alive in this respect, it isn't alive with possibility, as with most stories, but with impossibility. There is no future available; there might be hope, but nowhere for that hope to land and take seed. When we ask And then?, we look to the thing that comes next and find that what's next has already been. The "next" is never a new thing, something that can change the course of events. It can only elucidate events. In that dead-endedness is what I experience as a kind of melancholy; the next moment or happening has no creative, generative power, only a power to retrace and reflect. The reader is part-detective, part-archaeologist, part faithful witness to a series of events that can no longer be influenced. Everything we come to understand is understood too late." [14]

In our opinion, the reversed perspective in Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography is manifested by the reversal of the writer/reader position – the writer has become the reader of her own texts; the focal point of the text is placed with a reader, while the vantage point – the fact of imminent death lurking behind. The story is full of the accidental elements – persons who appear and disappear, important facts that lose their significance, the stretches of time that dominate over others, et., etc. So, the reversed perspective in the autobiography becomes the autothanatology – the backwards narrative on its own rights.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present article was to analyse two modes of the feminist autothanatographies – autobiographic writings that take into account the fact of death. The first mode was represented by Alice James's diaries, especially the second part of them written while she was terminally ill. The latter diaries depicted events, present and past with a different meaning, moreover, James wrote about the future events that would never take place since her life soon would be over. On the other hand, Simone de Beauvoir during rewrote her previously written autobiographies, not to correct the facts, not to conceal some unpleasant truths (she had been quite blunt all her life), but shed a different light upon facts, events and people and, the most important, of herself. She acted as a reader of her own life employing strategy of the backward narration as the reversed perspective.

REFERENCES

- [1] Marcel G. Tragic Wisdom and Beyond Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, p 120, 1973.
- [2] Derrida J. Demeure. Fiction and Testimony, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- [3] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, p 25, 1999.
- [4] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, p 181, 1999.
- [5] Yeazell R. B. The Death and Letters of Alice James, Los Angeles, London, Berkley: University of California Press, pp 186-187, 1981.
- [6] Strousse J. Alice James. A Biography, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, p 275, 1980.
- [7] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, p 34, 1999.
- [8] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, pp 127-128, 1999.
- [9] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, p 206, 1999.
- [10] James A. The Diary of Alice James, Boston: Northeastern University Press, pp 229-230, 1999.
- [11] Beauvoir S. All is Said and Done. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Prologue, 1974.
- [12] Beauvoir S. All is Said and Done. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Prologue, 1974. p 463.

NORDSCI Conference

[13] Florensky P. *Beyond Vision. Essays on the Perception of Art*, London: Reaktion Books, p 207, 2002.

[14] Harvey S. When a Story is Best Told Backwards. Samantha Harvey on the Melancholy of Reverse Narratives, Literary Hub, 2018. Available at: <https://lithub.com/the-melancholy-of-reverse-when-a-story-is-best-told-backwards/>