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Describing the self through the photographic medium: the autobiographic fictions of John M.Coetzee, Roland Barthes and Edward Said

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The literary genre of autobiography has recently proved a much disputed subject-matter especially in the fields of postmodern and postcolonial studies. The reason for such a debate has been the essentialistic, one-sided and dogmatic nature of the discourse carried on by an author upon him/herself. Some have argued that being the genre of autobiography necessarily bound to a type of 18th-century, humanistic *Weltanschauung*, the best way to define the action of describing the self nowadays is that of life-writing. Nevertheless, the issue is still quite complicated and far from an ultimate solution. What is more, postmodern and postcolonial writing practices have not yet come to terms with their respective fields of enquiry and with the possibility of a collaboration between the two. Autobiography, or life-writing, is one of the terrains where they fight their battle for recognition and legitimacy. Through the case studies of John M. Coetzee, Roland Barthes and Edward Said, I would like to give a suggestion about how this kind of collaboration is attainable: not only is an interchange of writing strategies possible but also the general attitude associated to either field can be adopted by the other. In particular, I would like to analyse how this collaboration takes place in one of the side aspects of autobiography, that is the photographic testimony that usually comes with it.

A possible example of a postcolonial subjectivity in a postmodern framework is that of John M. Coetzee in his "fictional autobiography" – so the volume is described on the back cover of the Vintage edition – *Boyhood*.

The postcolonial subjectivity is his own, the one of a young white boy living in South Africa but at odds with his nationality (he is now an Australian citizen living in South Australia): "They are of course South Africans, but even South Africanness is faintly embarrassing, and therefore not talked about, since not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African." (Coetzee 1998: 18). Coetzee's family, descended from early Dutch settlers dating to the 17th century and with also Polish roots from a great-grandfather, are themselves ill-at-ease with their own background and prefer to stick to an English heritage and code of behaviour. The boy Coetzee feels constantly out of place whenever he finds himself in society either surrounded by other white boys or by black boys. He feels he simply does not belong. The postmodern framework is provided by Coetzee's writing strategy with the use of the third person and the present tense all along the narration. Moreover, as the subtitle *Scenes from Provincial Life* also suggests, the narration is not a linear but an elliptical one, where only 'selected' bits of memory are presented. Each chapter is written impersonally since the family's names are seldom mentioned: the boy Coetzee is referred to as "he", the mother as "she" or "his mother", and so on for all the members of the family. The (im)personal pronouns and the present tense convey the stillness of a photograph, a 'scene' fixed in time and memory:

> They live on a housing estate outside the town of Worcester, between the railway and the National Road. [...] He plays with the vacuum cleaner, tearing up paper and watching the strips fly up the pipe like leaves in the wind. He holds the pipe over a trail of ants, sucking them up to their death. (Coetzee 1998: 2)

The protagonist is not even introduced and the first "he" is the simple marker of his presence in the story. Philippe Lejeune's criterion to define autobiography in *Le Pacte Autobiographique* is the equation author = narrator = protagonist which specifically interposes the narrator between the author and the protagonist. It is exactly on this latter point that Coetzee disrupts this equation. While the author and the protagonist can be at a certain point identified as the same person – there is a hint at the protagonist's father hanging a doorplate with "Coetzee" written on it – the narrator remains an 'other'. The most famous example for this stratagem is Roland Barthes's autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* also written in the third person. His reason for doing this was that the narrating subject in the present and the narrated subject in the past could not possibly be the same. The awareness that the narrated subject is a construction and a projection of the subject that remembers and narrates makes it impossible for him to claim sameness of subjectivity. Barthes disperses the narrated subject in several positions and pronouns, and continuously defers any identification of it with himself. Similarly Coe-

tzee treats his narrated subject 'at a distance', observes and analyses him and sometimes comments on what happens. What actually might seem the boy's considerations are in fact the author's interventions in disguise: perplexity as regards the veridicity of truth or doubt about the truth claims of history can hardly be a ten-year-old boy's but more likely the author's as an adult.

Reading the paratexts is useful to understand the way a book is received and perceived. Coetzee's *Boyhood* has been labelled at times under the headings of "fiction" or "fictionalized autobiography". The third-person narration no doubt adds on to the embarrassment of having to position Coetzee's work, which is overtly based on experience. Tobias Döring reminds us of the way the Palestinian philosopher Edward Said's autobiography *Out of Place* was made the object of investigation and unfavourable campaigning from journalist J.R. Weiner to demonstrate that what Said was reporting were not genuine facts but fictitious and biased narrations with a political intent. On the other hand, Roland Barthes's text is paradoxically the only one that has been tagged as "autobiography", when its actual purpose is that of being an 'anti-autobiography'. In a way, to further add on to the paradox, Barthes's text actually needs, or at least benefits from this label in order to fully accomplish its playful and subversive task. To sum up, the distinction between fact and fiction is one that the genre of autobiography cannot come to terms with, in spite of the assumptions of veracity and earnestness on which it acts. This is the reason why the term life-writing has been deemed a more open and a less compromising one [1].

The discourse on photographic documentation takes us to analyse the function of a medium that is usually an aside of autobiography and sometimes of life-writing too. Photographs usually accompany autobiographies to testify the truthfulness of what the author writes about him/herself. In some life-writing narratives pictures are not brought up as simple evidence but have most of the time the more challenging purpose of contradicting what is written and creating a tension with it. In some cases, photographs do not even appear but are evoked or alluded to, and in others they make up for missing pieces of narrative. All in all, what is interesting is the way the subject's visual memory, be it in the form of an actual snapshot or a 'narrated' picture, powerfully triggers and affects his/her historical memory. With the intent of challenging the assumptions of autobiography, Paul de Man asks: "Are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference, as a photograph depends on its subject or a (realistic) picture on its model?" (De Man 1979: 920). Hence, he says, photogra-

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[1] For a wider discussion on the distinction between autobiography and life-writing and their aptness for postmodern and postcolonial practice, see my article "The limits of postcolonial autobiography and the empowering capacity of life-writing for the postcolonial subject", *Linguæ &*, 1/2009: 47-63.

phy, as opposed to writing, is a referential medium where signifier and signified come together in a self-evident way and it may be that it is exactly this certainty of reference and subject that helps pin down what writing cannot.

Postcolonial narratives often take their cue from photographs of past homes and ancestors: Salman Rushdie describes in *Imaginary Homelands* how he drew inspiration for *Midnight's Children* from a black-and-white snapshot of his childhood's house. It is the presence of the picture that makes him reverse L.P. Hartley's line "The past is a foreign country" by saying that it is his present that is foreign and the past is home. Even in the awareness that "we will not be able of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost" and that what will be recovered is "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands" (Rushdie 1991: 10), the picture hangs in a frame in the room where Rushdie works (or so he claims) as the reminder and the target of his quest backwards into the past: "the photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically" (9). The visual image, whose value as a sign is that of having a referent which is not arbitrary, makes up for the instability of the verbal medium. This might also be the reason for Coetzee's frozen images in *Boyhood*, where (im)personal pronouns and present tense sentences are used to convey an impression of stillness and immobility of the past, in spite of the fact that such childhood memories are the conscious product of the author's recollection. In both cases, the writers are aware of the dichotomy between the writing self and the 'written' one and do not claim sameness of identity between the two. The visual medium that is given in support of the written self nevertheless helps them focus the target of their act of remembering.

Edward Said's memoir too benefits from a welter of photographs where he is most of the time the central subject and which are accompanied by a caption that specifies the precise time and place of the snapshot. The progression of the images from infancy to adulthood registers the continuous changing of places where Said lived throughout his life, thus witnessing a story of instability and migration. Photographs in Said's memoir then have the value of personal, but also national documentation. One of the titles states: "A family shot of Saids and Mansours, my father's second cousins, photographed for the last time before everyone dispersed, Mansour House, 1946-47", which means that, after that moment, fragmentation proved irreversible. The past is a still image that draws the threads of memory together in an attempt to recover what that image stands for, but the fact that the target is apparently clear does not mean that the process to get to it will be an easy one. Despite Said's life-long attempt to come to terms with it, he finds himself in the end just as fragmented and unsteady as he was at the beginning

of his quest. Nevertheless, he finds out that this condition actually suits him better: "With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place" (Said 1993: 295). We may add to it: out of focus.

It is interesting at this point to compare the use of photographs in a postcolonial and in a postmodern framework through the different approaches of Said and Barthes. The latter is famous for his theory of photography outlined in *Camera Lucida* but this text was written in 1977 as a consequence of his mother's death and therefore is profoundly affected by it. Barthes's concept of photography in his playful 'autobiography' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, published in 1975, is a more detached and de-constructivist one. Two points are especially interesting in the "Forward" that introduces the pictures: first of all, Barthes is at pains to underline that the subject portrayed is 'not' him; just like his memoirs are written in the third person in order to distinguish the present writing subject from the past 'written-upon' subject, Barthes claims that "the photograph is not of 'me'" (Barthes 1975: i). As I said, something similar happens with Coetzee: the boy who plays with the vacuum cleaner and sucks up the ants is not 'him'.

Similarly, Said too uses the photographic medium to emphasize 'difference': all along the account of his childhood he remembers how at times he felt another self taking over the image of the 'Edward' that his parents were constructing. Underneath a name he does not feel at ease with, "a foolishly English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakeably Arabic family name Said" (Said 1993: 3), there lies another identity "gifted and unusual", "in contrast to the 'Edward' that failed at school and sports, and could never match the manliness my father represented" (56). Said's uneasiness at his father's authoritarian stance is expressed through the image of the latter's "unforgiving optical grid", his careful documentation of every moment of family life that "must also have been [his] way of capturing as well as confirming the ordered family domain he had created and now ruled" (76). In the light of this, the referential nature of photography is in fact a strait-jacket for the subject that is captured by the optical – and behind the optical, the paternal – gaze. For the subject that is captured and fixed forever in a still image, there is no opportunity for appeal. The pictures that accompany Said's childhood narration then portray an 'Edward' that in fact is not the one he identifies with: what can be seen and visually represented is just the surface [2].

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[2] Something similar happens with Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldúa, whose narration of childhood memories begins with the description of a snapshot: "I have a vivid memory of an old photograph: I am six years old. I stand between my father and my brother, head cocked to the right, the toes of my flat feet gripping the ground. I hold my mother's hand. To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength

It is on this point that Barthes's and Said's concepts of self and difference diverge: although both challenge the illusion and deceitfulness of photographic fixity, the former does so on the abstract, theoretical basis that the speaking self and the spoken one cannot possibly be the same, while the latter in a more pragmatic vein argues that the 'surface' self of photographic representation does not correspond to the 'authentic' self underneath. Barthes's photographs are not there for documentation but as "the author's treat to himself. His pleasure is a matter of fascination (and thereby quite selfish). I have kept only the images which enthral me, *without my knowing why* (such ignorance is the very nature of fascination, and what I shall say about each image will never be anything but…imaginary)". Therefore, his choice is overtly an arbitrary, whimsical and playful one. Barthes's use of the written and photographic medium is not an attempt to discard the surface, on the contrary he willingly plays with it: "I had no other solution than to *rewrite* myself – at a distance, a great distance – here and now… Far from reaching the core of the matter, I remain on the surface" (Barthes 1975: 142).

What Said does instead is uncovering the surface to find a more 'authentic' self. Despite the fact that the concept of 'authenticity' has usually been the object of deconstruction on Said's part, he cannot help longing for some form of 'true' self, free from counterfeiting. What is more, Said's autobiography is part of what he calls 'worldly' texts – as opposed to what for Barthes are solely '*word*-ly' texts – that is texts that "to some degree are *events*, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, of human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (Said 1983: 4). In a way Said puts forward once again, this time as the author of his autobiography, the paradox he has had to deal with as a critic: on the one hand he promotes the culturalist, poststructuralist analysis of the means of representation and meaning-making as the tools regulating power relations; on the other he acknowledges that the actual battleground is that of land and territory, hence his late militancy for the Palestinian cause. Whereas for Barthes, at this point of his life, the world is a playground and the keyword is therefore the imperative 'play', for Said it is not so in virtue of the continuous and obstructed struggle for self-determination of his people and therefore of himself. The postmodern attitude of

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to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra*, *mi gente*, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me." (Anzaldúa 1987: 15). Here, even more than in Said, the relationship with one's family and origins is felt as tender and oppressive at the same time; but while in Said the uneasiness is caused by his family's colonial past and his father's mimicry of the oppressor, Anzaldúa throws the blame on Chicano culture and on her family for conforming to a logic of male chauvinism.

the former, which has been deemed at times as cynical, reckless, and nihilistic clashes with the 'postcolonial humanism' enacted by the latter, who chooses to set aside his poststructuralist convictions in order to pursue his 'real', inner self.

Nevertheless, even for Barthes there comes the moment when the game is over: this happened, as I said above, after his mother's death in 1977, which radically changed his attitude towards life and inspired the work *Camera Lucida* to testify it. This is at the same time a study into the nature of photography and a homage to Barthes's late mother. The genesis of this work took off from a black and white photograph of his mother as a child: after her death Barthes started going through family pictures searching for the 'true' her and at last he settled on a photograph from her childhood. His reaction to the picture was that for the first time he saw his mother as he had never seen her when she was alive. Curiously he does not reproduce the picture in the book, claiming it would be uninteresting, but gives a description of it: "My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother was seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing... she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera...she was holding one finger in the other hand as children often do, in an awkward gesture. The brother and sister had posed, side by side, alone, under the palms of the Winter Garden...I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother" (Barthes 1977: 7). The book therefore investigates the effects of photography on the spectator: in a deeply personal discussion of the lasting emotional effect of certain photographs, Barthes considers photography as a-symbolic, irreducible to the codes of language or culture, acting on the body as much as on the mind. The book develops the twin concepts of 'studium' and 'punctum': 'studium' denoting the cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph; 'punctum' – which will later find further theorization as the 'third meaning' of a picture, beyond 'the material' and 'the accidental' – denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it. Beyond the theoretical treaty on photography that *Camera Lucida* develops on the surface, it remains 'at core' a work full of tenderness and regret.

Paradoxically, more than in his 'autobiography', it is in *Camera Lucida*, this time written in the first person, that Barthes deals with issues of subjectivity, selfhood and self-representation, shifting from the previous interest in the dialectical and the theoretical to a more personally engaged stance. The whole discussion on the photographic medium can actually be taken as a metaphor for the autobiographical one. This text is quite surprising for the change in attitude that Barthes goes through, which actually seems to deny what his philosophical stance had been up to then. The self, be it the 'photographed' or the 'written' subject, is made the centre of meaning and un-

derstanding: since he is unable to see from the point of view of the photographer, Barthes decides to make himself "the measure of photographic knowledge […] as mediator of all Photography. Starting from a few personal impulses, I would try to formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography." (Barthes 1977: 8-9). This should be read in the light of the fact that terms like 'fundamental' and 'universal' had always been the target of criticism and the object of deconstruction on his part. Barthes then goes on tackling the issues of posing and portraiture where he yields to the temptation to "lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing, but this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality". Barthes unmasks the artificiality of posing, hence of self-representation through the photographic medium, but participates in it, in the awareness of this inconsistency:

> What I want is that my (mobile) image, […] should always coincide with my (profound) self; but it is the contrary that must be said: 'myself' never coincides with my image; in front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am […]: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, the Photography represents the moment when I am neither subject nor object, but a subject who feels he is becoming an object. (Barthes 1977: 11-14)

Two things are noteworthy in Barthes's radical change of direction: his previous preoccupation with a linguistics-based, dialectical inconsistency leaves way to a more 'social' uneasiness and Lacanian self-consciousness when it comes to representing himself in front of the others; what is more, the impossibility of self-representation, which engenders feelings of inauthenticity and objectification, becomes a problematic issue and a source of anguish and uncertainty. Barthes, after proclaiming the 'death of the author', is this time frustrated with the 'death of the subject' and terms like 'individual essence' and 'authenticity of the self' that used to be the target of his criticism are now the source of his complaint.

In general, differences between postmodern and postcolonial writing can be described in terms of strategy and attitude, even more than sheer content: the inward 'self-critique' of postmodernism as the flip side of the dialogue 'Self/Other' promoted by postcolonialism; the 'humanism', intended as empathy and trust in the human race, of the latter as the counterpoint to the latent 'nihilism' of the former. But these schematic distinctions can hold only to a certain extent: these strategies and attitudes are not just 'complementary', because they deal with different aspects of the same problem,

like the making of subjectivity; they are also 'interchangeable'. Coetzee, for instance, has taken advantage of the same strategy used by Barthes to signal the deferral in reference of the writing subject with the subject which is 'written upon' in autobiography, that is, the third-person autobiographic self. Barthes, on the other hand, has disclosed his stringent dialectics to a more humanistic, profound stance. Also, like Said, he has had to deny some of the tropes of the theoretical apparatus he has helped to form: issues of authenticity, essence, truthfulness that used to be the object of their criticism have turned into conditions whose impracticality they regret. When these exchanges and retractions take place it becomes more and more difficult to tell apart the postmodern from the postcolonial, but in a way it also becomes no longer necessary. Paradoxically, even categories like postmodern and postcolonial can after a while become too narrow and 'essential' if the one starts excluding the other and founds its ontology on such an exclusion. Keeping each to oneself without any opportunity for interaction can take one's problematics to their extremes: on the one hand, blind self-critique can turn latent nihilism into chronic pessimism; on the other, 'collective' writing at all costs in the name of 'postcolonial humanism' may hide a will to representativeness that ill-suits the needs of those who are being represented. The collaboration between the two theories and especially between the two practices of postmodernism and postcolonialism is necessary in order to prevent any stiffening of their positions. In a sense, continuous overflowing of the one into the other is a necessary condition not so much for their survival as for their dynamism and liveliness, that is, their actual *raison d'être*. Chronicity – hence, canonicity – is actually what would kill these two practices, whose point is to remain open and dialogic.

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the different approaches to autobiography of three writers – John M. Coetzee, Edward Said and Roland Barthes – who are divided by background and historical circumstances but share the terrain of postcolonial and postmodern theory. In particular, the focus is on the use they make of photographs – real or evoked – that accompany their personal accounts. Using photography as a counterpoint and a parallel to autobiography, they all try and come to terms with issues of subjectivity, representation and authenticity. As a result, their life-long convictions will be challenged by the power of memory, leaving way to a renewed sense of self.