

# Heterobiography, Hypocriticism, and the Ethics of Authorial Responsibility

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*Arguing that “heterobiography” (fictional autobiographies of historical individuals) places the subject at the centre of complex relationships between the historical, the fictional, the critical, the legal and the ethical, this article discusses some of the crucial questions that these texts raise.*

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In Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* the notorious Australian outlaw Ned Kelly writes two versions of a letter in which he gives an account of his history of poverty and persecution by the police, and then remarks: “Thus were I drawn into this occupation as author” (318). One of these letters is to his as yet unborn daughter, so that she may have the story directly from the voice of her father, and she may know her origins – unlike Ned, whose father’s silence over his history and “the Great Transportation” leaves the children alone and “ignorant as tadpoles spawned in puddles on the moon” (334). The other letter is addressed to Donald Cameron, a Member of the Legislative Assembly who, unlike the law and the police, seemed prepared to listen to his story (he wasn’t). On the one hand, Ned’s authorship would transmit the cultural, historical, and personal memory of his Irish-Australian family to endow his daughter with an awareness of her identity; on the other, having his own story heard by the law would grant Ned himself the legal subjecthood he had been denied (he had been made an outlaw that could be shot on sight by anyone). The first letter binds him *morally* to telling the truth about himself; the second requires that he do so *legally*. We might see this as an only slightly complicated version of Lejeune’s “autobiographical pact”, according to which the author of an autobiography undertakes, in

a kind of legal contract with his reader, to speak sincerely in a referential form of writing and to guarantee the coincidence of author, narrator and character in the proper name printed on the cover of the book (Lejeune 26).

Ned Kelly's first-person words are of course in fact not Kelly's, they are Carey's (even if they are based on letters written by Kelly himself):<sup>1</sup> the (fictional) autobiography is of another, historical individual, and I shall call it *heterobiography*.<sup>2</sup> In the heterobiographical situation, where the author speaks in the first person as someone else whom we recognise as having existed historically, the autobiographical pact no longer applies. However, one effect of heterobiography, precisely because of the impossibility of holding the author (the name on the cover) responsible for the factuality of the first-person narrative (by the narrator-character), is to throw into even sharper relief the link between author and words. Carey's choice of an outlaw as his protagonist further highlights this link in the legal context (which Lejeune's pact also gestures to), where one cannot speak as another, take on another's first person voice, and assume the responsibility of the other's words. In law, the relationship of identity and the tie of responsibility between a subject and his/her words is direct, exclusive, and based on intention. Impersonating another may thus be seen as both legally and morally reprehensible, except in licensed situations (such as the theatre, art). It is the interaction between the legal and the ethical in relation to authorship and authorial responsibility, especially as they concern literary criticism, that I am concerned with here.

One of the strongest objections to Lejeune's autobiographical pact is surely Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-facement". De Man accuses Lejeune of stubbornness ("and I call his insistence stubborn because it does not seem to be founded in argument or evidence,") (71) in considering the reading pact as a legal, cognitive, and "representational" one, continuously leaping from the "contractual" to the ontological plane, disregarding the fact that language is a system of tropes ("The name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority,") (71). It is in this context that de Man arrives at what may be his most famous – even notorious – statements on the subject. He attacks the notion of a "simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis" that autobiography would possess over fiction, and asks: "But are we so certain that autobiography depends on reference [...]?" On the contrary, in the most striking apparent reversal of logic, he argues:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of its medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (68–69)

As we know, Paul de Man's biographical link of responsibility to his own words came back to haunt him posthumously with the discovery of the collaborationist newspaper articles he had written during the Nazi occupation of Belgium.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, de Man's illustrations of his theoretical considerations in "Autobiography as De-facement" through a close reading of images of disfiguration and mutilation in Wordsworth, as well as the frequent appearance of figures of violence and dismemberment in his writing, were then taken by some critics (for example, Corngold) to be the index of de Man's continued violent, fascist mindset. It isn't surprising thus that de Man – the ironically unwitting protagonist of this paradoxical return of the biographical author "back to centre stage" (Burke 1) and of what some may see as a very apt example of modern hubris and downfall – has become the more or less veiled subject of, or occasion for, several fictions hinging on crime and academia, such as Gilbert Adair's *The Death of the Author* (1992) and John Banville's more recent *Shroud* (2002).

The former in particular enacts and literalises, within the structure of a parodic detective novel, the paradoxical condition of the "death of the author" (the reference is of course to Roland Barthes's famous essay by that title). Its protagonist Leopold Sfax, thinly disguising Paul de Man, writes autobiographically about his youth (in France rather than Belgium), his collaborationist writing under Nazi occupation, his post-war emigration to America, his academic career, his anxiety of being discovered, his denial of the tie between author and words (in the novel, the "death of the author" is a theory intentionally and specifically invented by Sfax as post-facto alibi), the type of language used, including some direct citations, and how it may give rise to accusations of violence (Sfax comments on his own "intemperance of language" which "more than one hostile commentator" describes as "fundamentally fascist in nature, shot through with ideological nihilism and amorality," 102). Killed by one of his students, Sfax continues to write after death, making the "death of the author" a "literal" event biographically as well as theoretically.

There are a number of questions arising from all this which would be interesting to pursue but which I can only sketch briefly here. One would concern the fraught debate on whether the biographical revelations on de Man simply exposed, once and for all, the fundamental ethical vacuity, critical hypocrisy, and theoretical equivocations of the deconstructionist project; or, conversely, whether de Man's critical writings over several decades following the war elaborated in fact a difficult reflection on his early journalistic pieces (a reflection on the relationship between language and ideology), without the solace of the act of public confession and the rite of abjuration and denunciation of earlier mistakes which would expose guilt, but whose function, ultimately, would be to cleanse and exculpate. A related question would be whether those critiques that seized on authorial biography to condemn a theory of radical linguistic and literary autonomy were engaging in some form of self-righteous academic scavenging (gloating, hypocritical criticism, or, we might say, *hypocriticism*: criticism aimed at reiterating and promoting one's own cause in what could be seen as opportunistic exploitation of someone else's disgrace<sup>4</sup>); or, otherwise, whether such critiques were simply pointing to the ineluctability of an ethical link of responsibility between the author and his/her words, and therefore to the inescapable impasse or even bankruptcy of theoretical positions that deny this. Another, related question would thus be whether it is possible to dissociate literary criticism (exercised exclusively on the text) and biographical questions (this is the context of de Man's controversial assertions that "considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint" ("Form and Intent" 35), and that "death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" ("Autobiography as De-facement" 81)); or whether this disjunction is at all possible. This in turn raises two more questions: whether the validity of a theory of reading depends on the moral stature of its proponent; and, as is crucially brought into focus by the heterobiographical situation, whether an author ever has a right (a right based on biographical fact) to speak as another historical being: to "usurp" someone else's voice and words – at best, to give voice to another, as if that voice (one's own) were the other's. Taken together, the biographical link to one's words and the requirement of morality for the author risk leading to various forms of essentialism (can Pound be a good poet if he was fascist? can a white writer represent the voice of a negro slave? – see for example the controversy around William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*); but then one would also have to ask: what when a subject had no chance of self-representation in his or her own life, in his or her own voice – the slave, the illiterate, the outlaw whose voice is not allowed to be heard by the law? What if it is only through the voice of

the other that theirs can be heard, even if only as the reverberation of an echo?<sup>5</sup> Carey speaks as Ned Kelly – fictionally – because Kelly wasn't able to get his words listened to – historically, legally.

The theme of the requirement of the author's assumption of moral responsibility will also bring to mind Sartre's demand in the immediate post-war period that writers be committed; that they ask, what would happen if everyone read my words? (14) and act accordingly. Words are loaded pistols (15); they are not innocent, and their effect is the author's responsibility just as much as the shot is the responsibility of the one who pulls the trigger. Far from de Man's insistence on the unbridgeable gap between word and world, Sartre invites the writer to restore a meaning, truthfulness and integrity based in reference to the words corrupted by the propaganda of war (216–19). It is this correspondence between word, world and authorial intention that grounds – in what we might call a Sartrean “pact” – the writer's necessary commitment.

The two cases of heterobiography that I am using here are very different, but they mirror each other in significant ways: an outlaw condemned and executed for his historical, factual criminal acts and whose autobiographical words of justification were disregarded in life by the law, but have later made him an official national hero in Australia (refusal to listen to him in life, sanctification in death); a critic whose written works were highly regarded during his life until his words came back to haunt not only his reputation, but also the validity of his critical theories and the motivation of the writings he authored. In both cases, there is a silence: in one case, that of the author (de Man never “confessed”, at least in public, though he wrote on confession (*Excuses (Confessions)*), and it is the public silence, more than the fact of having written the articles, that appears to many as the greater guilt); in the other, in the gap between author and addressee, when Ned's words fall on the deaf ears of the law. It is out of this silence that Adair and Carey write, lending a voice (parodic in Adair's case) to the historical person-narrator-character, and it is the silence that generates the heterobiography and the ethical questions that the genre poses. It appears thus that the heterobiographical first person is located at the point of encounter of the literary, the historical, the fictional, the critical, the theoretical, the legal, the ethical, and that it raises questions about all these, and their interrelations.

Adair's *The Death of the Author* was received by many as a mocking attack on de Man and deconstruction; the quotes on the back cover describe the book as “a brilliant black satire on cultural cultishness” (Philip Howard, *The Times*), “a serious critique of a dodgy intellectual movement” (Lucasta Miller, *Financial Times*), and a “dazzling satire of literary-critical

pretension” – the pretension, that is, of deconstruction, a “fashionable technique” which assumes that “text means anything the reader wants it to mean, the author’s intentions are nothing, text does not really have authors” (Anthony Quinton, *The Evening Standard*). Yet the intricate, acute, stylish slipperiness of the novel seems to have taken on board much of the lesson of Paul de Man and of deconstruction – about undecidability, about aporia, about the self-voiding nature of literary and critical writing.<sup>6</sup> Right at the end, undercutting any pretension to seriousness that might have lingered, Sfax (who, in a blatant literalisation of the “death of the author”, continues writing despite the fact that he has been killed) calls the book “mendacious and mischievous and meaningless”. We may wonder: should we refer these adjectives metatextually to the book we have just finished reading (Adair’s), or to the tale-within-the-tale (Sfax’s autobiography)? Or maybe even to the key of this *roman à clef* (de Man’s biography)? Is Adair’s book a stand against deconstruction and the person of de Man, or a joke perpetrated upon the attacks that have been levelled at them? Or, more neutrally, simply (in fact not so simply at all) an amusing, witty tale on the serious question of the possible implications of the theory and on the polemical debate which raged around the “de Man affair”? In seeking an answer to these alternatives, the question we are asking, in effect, concerns the personal position of the Author Adair – and I use “Author” in the sense in which Barthes uses it, which would be equivalent to asking: what is the “true meaning” of the book, what do the book and its Author “mean to say”? (Let us not forget that Barthes didn’t “kill” the author as such, but only as a particular construct of a certain, mainstream, traditional type of academic criticism that sought to authorise itself and its interpretations through the authorial *vouloir dire*.) Whichever personal position we decide to ascribe to the Author Adair, if we want to ascribe one at all, this short novel does bring to the fore the ethical aspect of the authorial function, the question of the writer’s responsibility towards his/her own writing, and it does it by exploiting those very techniques that are, or at least appear to be, under attack, such as the construction of textual aporias, the intricate weaving of intertextual webs, the reversal of causality whereby the first murder in the novel is shown to be the consequence of the second and “why” and “because” are used interchangeably (48–49, 59, 129).

Have I any posthumous last words? Not really. As I have discovered to my disappointment, death *is* merely the displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and I rather feel like asking for my money back – as perhaps you do too, Reader, on closing this mendacious and mischievous and meaningless book. (135)

Is it us, the readers, that have misjudgedly parted with a five-pound note (the price on the cover of my paperback edition of *The Death of the Author* is £4.99), to get in exchange a penny and a cheap, worthless book? Should we ask for our money back? Was all the fuss worth it? Or aren't the values at stake worth at least the market value of the book? (*The Death of the Author* has been out of print for several years now, clearly considered by its publishers not to be worth reprinting; the online price of a second hand copy at the time of the conference at which this paper was presented (*The Author: Who or What is Writing Literature?*, Slovenia, September 2008) reached £188.51; the Reader that had initially bought it and was now prepared to sell it had clearly done well not to ask for the money back.) There seems to be more than tongue in cheek here. Have we been framed in what Derrida, referring to the indecency of hasty condemnation and even jubilation by some when the “de Man affair” broke out, calls the *petit jeu médiocre* of detective fiction (“Comme le bruit” 214), a genre, almost by definition, based on a structural and narrative bad faith? Has the real crime been perpetrated – by Adair – against our sensibilities? Writing about Poe’s *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (one of the stories woven into the rich intertext of Adair’s novel) Shawn Rosenheim argues that the story may be taken

as an index of a deeper bad faith on the part of the whole genre, in its frequent imbalance between the detective story’s protracted narrative setup and its often unsatisfying denouement. Some readers of detective fiction have an embarrassing feeling that its typically gothic revelations are incommensurate with the moral weight suggested by the genre’s narrative form. In this sense, too, Poe’s orangutan is an emblem of the story’s readers, who – their attention solicited by an unworthy narrative dilemma – find the real crime has been practiced on their sensibilities. (68)

What, then, is the real “crime”? Is the book itself cheating us? Both the criminal and the critical (etymologically cognate words<sup>8</sup>) involve judgement, evaluation, choice, ability to discriminate – Ned Kelly asks, precisely, for the law’s discrimination before it chooses to incriminate. Doesn’t “criticism” – intended as a literary, aesthetic and ethical activity performed on the words of another – demand less haste on our part, better care and rigour in the avoidance of *hypocriticism* (criticism with a hidden agenda – something that critics of Paul de Man were ready to attribute to him)? In other words, what is our role and our responsibility, as critics? (Derrida writes of how even the most reductive readings are carried out in the name of “ethics”, without regard for the most elementary rules of discussion: “la lecture différenciée ou l’écoute de l’autre, la preuve, l’argumentation, l’analyse et la citation.” (“Comme le bruit” 225))

Let us turn again to Ned Kelly: words may be loaded pistols, as Sartre says, but what if they miss, and no one hears the shot? Ned does try autobiography, but when the law refuses to listen to his words (indeed, when the law, by decreeing that he should be shot on sight, legalises the possibility of his words not even having the chance to be uttered), his recourse is finally, and literally, to the loaded gun. In this failure of listening lies perhaps the crux of the matter: that the author's autobiographical responsibility for his words risks failure – a literal falling on deaf ears – if the other to whom the words are addressed refuses to listen, to accept, evaluate, discriminate in the plurality of their possible meanings – and, yes, in the manner of their possible links to the biographical person, finally to reach a decision that will inevitably be personal, contingent, and has the inherent possibility that it may not be correct, but which must seek not to be *hypocritical*. The tie of responsibility, that is, is located not (not only) on the author's side of the autobiographical pact but (also) equally binds the reader/listener/critic.

This may appear – and in several ways it is – as an elaborated version of the “birth of the reader” that for Roland Barthes is generated by the “death of the author”. In Barthes's rethinking of the relationship between Author, Text and Reader/Critic, the Author (now author, or better: scribe) no longer controls the meaning of his writings, and the Critic (now simply “reader”) no longer decrees the worth and value of the Work (now Text), but is free to play with its productive polysemy. In heterobiographical texts, hinging as they do around the historicity of their protagonists, the consequence of reintroducing the centrality of “responsibility” is that the *requirement* for the reader/critic to engage with the polysemy of the text concerns not only its meaning (its *vouloir-dire*), which must remain open, but, more widely, what Barthes had excluded: the complexity of the historical and ethical situations that both writers and readers respond to. The very etymology of the word “responsibility” (from the Latin *respondere*, to answer, respond, promise in return) entails a responding, an answering (for), thus a dialogue and a sense of obligation. As readers, we too are asked to accept our own productive and dialogic responsibility.

Thus accepting the weight of authorial responsibility also requires a complementary burden of responsibility for the reader. This is a requirement in which we may well hear echoes of Derrida's argument that it is the “ear of the other” that signs the autobiographical (*The Ear of the Other* 51), an ear that must lend itself, must not play deaf. Adair's *The Death of the Author* is dedicated to “the Reader”. On the one hand the dedicatee may be the non-biographical, depersonalised entity that is supposed to be born from the death of the author; on the other, however, given the French/Belgian

critic's difficulty with the pronunciation of the fricative dental sounds "th" [θ] and [ð], which become [t] or [d], "the reader" is turned into [de'ri:da], i.e. the Anglicised (mis-)pronunciation of Derrida's name, effectively dedicating the book to the French deconstructionist philosopher.

If reasserting the notion of authorial responsibility (against such prescriptions as de Man's conclusion that "considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint", or Barthes's de-historicising the writer/reader) places an equal burden on the reader/critic (against such simplistic positions that would limit this to "the author must tell the truth and be held to his words"), it would appear then that we reach a kind of aporetic predicament, and that the issue cannot be resolved through a simple notion of integrity.

For the two heterobiographical texts discussed here, we may encapsulate the aporias as follows: in the case of Adair/Sfax/de Man, the reserve and silence of the culprit that does not want to *cheapen* his guilt through the easy relief of public confession may turn out to be the best way to hold on to one's own integrity, and it may be the result of a continued inner debate over one's morally troubling past — or it may not, it may simply be a case of trying to escape undetected: we shall never know for sure. Conversely, in the case of Carey/Ned Kelly, integrity may reside in pretending to be another — a criminal — and speaking in their voice, on the one hand taking on the responsibility to give them a voice while, on the other, abdicating the responsibility to be answerable for the accuracy of their first-person narrative, even at the risk of appropriating their story, substituting a truth with another; where responsibility, that is, would reside in the integrity of a fiction that, insofar as it is fiction, makes it impossible for the author to guarantee the truthfulness of his words — which doesn't necessarily mean lying or misrepresentation of the truth, but it may: we shall never know for sure.

It is on this insoluble double either/or, ending in "we shall never know for sure", that I am going to conclude these thoughts on "this occupation as author", because I cannot offer any definitive way out of the impasse of authorial or reader responsibility (it would be impossible), and can only point to the inescapability of the aporias that prevents an easy solution (ethical and aesthetical) to such thorny and varied issues as the legal, epistemological and ontological implications of the "autobiographical pact", the traditional assumptions of superiority of truth over fiction and of confession over silence — all aspects that may seem to be heterogeneous to one another, but which the heterobiographical text brings together. "We shall never know for sure": this shouldn't make us give up in despair, or gladly abandon, the notion of responsibility, but make us see it as even more crucial and more central to our activity as literary critics.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These are the letter to Donald Cameron MLA (who had opposed in the Legislative Assembly the Felons Apprehension Act) to ask for redress of the injustice Kelly claimed was being perpetrated against him and his family, but which was not published in the papers, as Kelly had hoped; and the 58-page long Jerilderie letter, which he planned to have privately printed in Jerilderie, where he robbed the local bank (this plan failed too, as the printer managed to escape and the letter was later handed in to the police). The autograph of the Cameron Letter has been lost, and it only exists in a copy made by a clerk. The original of the Jerilderie Letter is in the State Library of Victoria (where Kelly's famous armour is also held). A facsimile with transcription is at <http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/collections/treasures/jerilderieletter/jerilderie00.html> (accessed 2.2.2009). A list and transcription of all of Ned Kelly's known letters and notes can be found at <http://www.ironoutlaw.com/html/writings.html> (accessed 2.2.2009).

<sup>2</sup> I have used this term before, for example in "Allowing it to speak out of him": The Heterobiographies of David Malouf, Antonio Tabucchi and Marguerite Yourcenar".

<sup>3</sup> These can be read in de Man, *Wartime Journalism*. The companion volume *Responses on Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, eds. Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan, gathers several reactions to these pieces, both supportive and accusatory of their author.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida denounces: "il s'agit toujours de sauter sur une occasion [...] On ne résiste plus à la tentation d'exploiter à tout prix une aubaine" ("Comme le bruit" 220).

<sup>5</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar describes *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (another example of heterobiography) as "portrait d'une voix" (527).

<sup>6</sup> The biographical fact that Adair is the translator of Georges Perec's *La disparition* (as *A Void*), further demonstrates his interest in complex and challenging ethical, literary and technical questions.

<sup>7</sup> The highest price found online at the time of writing this is £59.10, still a significant gain on the initial cost.

<sup>8</sup> "Crime," Latin *crimen-criminis* (judicial decision, charge, indictment), from the base of *cernere* (cf. p. p. *cretus*) (to sift, distinguish, decide); "critic," Greek *κρίνειν* (from which *crinein*, to separate, decide, judge), both from the Indo-European root \*(s)q(e)rei. See Orons, *s.v.*

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