

Poetic Perspectives on the Deconstructed First Person: Pierre Alferi and Anne-James Chaton

In his book on Deconstruction, Christopher Norris jokingly argues that '[i]t might seem an act of supreme 'bad faith' to produce [an autobiography] while proclaiming, like Barthes, the 'death of the author' as a wished-for escape from the tyranny of subjectivity. But the reader is soon made aware that Barthes is not to be caught – by anyone except himself – with his textual defences down.ⁱ The ideas that Barthes grapples with when writing his *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* emerge from the same intellectual context as Derrida's theory that Western reality is textual because the West is traditionally logocentric, and that concepts are textual fictions. The concept of 'self' is a composition, the first person singular a story, subjectivity a myth. Derrida famously states that 'there is nothing outside the text.'ⁱⁱ And, Barthes claims that there is not one author to the text, text is inter-textual, '[w]hat comes to me,' he writes, 'not what I summon up; not an "authority," simply a circular memory. Which is what the inter-text is: the impossibility of living outside the infinite text.'ⁱⁱⁱ And so when faced with the opinion that there is something narcissistic in writing about oneself, Barthes answers: '[W]hy should I not speak of 'myself' since this 'my' is no longer 'the self?''^{iv} But rather than writing his 'autobiography' in the first person, he chooses to use the third person. The 'I' implies subjectivity, '[y]et,' writes Barthes, 'today the subject apprehends himself elsewhere' for 'subjectivity [is] deconstructed, taken apart, shifted, without anchorage.'^v

What happens to the first person narrative after post-structuralism and its deconstruction of the subject? Pierre Alferi's fictional autobiography *Le Cinéma des Familles* (1999), and Anne-James Chaton's series of poems *Autoportraits* (2003), both address the conundrum of writing on or in one's deconstructed self. This paper considers Alferi's play with the ontological instability of his topic, presenting the self as an intertextual composition, especially one in which film comes to define the spectral identity of the first person in his familial narration. Chaton sees the self as intertextually spectral too, but also deals with the challenge of writing eighteen self-portraits in a post-Barthesian, post-Derridean era, by avoiding the use of the first person singular, or any other self-referential pronoun. Both writers use self-narrative in attempting to demonstrate that the idea of the integrity of the self is a myth. In Chaton's case, the criticism of the subjective sense of identity implied in the use of the first person singular is also political in essence.

Pierre Alferi and Anne-James Chaton are French post-structuralist writers, writers whose art adopts a deconstructionist stance in form and content. This means that they try to show concepts as constructs, they unweave established text to disrupt readings

that are taken for granted, and hint at a world beyond the logos. For instance, in Alferi's fictional autobiography, the child narrator does not simply retell the story of his childhood, he presents the reader with all sorts of other possible stories, of imagined childhoods, influenced by his readings and film-watching. "Since each of us was several," write Deleuze and Guattari, "there was already quite a crowd."^{vi} The singularity of the subject is not a given anymore, and the child narrator's reality is composed of various fictions, all of which hold equal value, and all of which are his autobiography. These fictions are made of text and as such are intertextual. For instance the narrator borrows from Hollywood to construct one of his identities, that of the orphan. Central to his narrative is a scene from Charles Laughton's 1955 movie *The Night of the Hunter* which the narrator integrates into a "great runaway scene" involving himself and his two siblings. He imagines that the film's two children, John and Pearl, are his brother and sister, Tom and Alice, fleeing danger on a small rowing boat in the midst of a river. Tom and Alice only have intertextual identities in this scene, as their existence is superimposed onto that of the two movie characters. But the narrator is also only present in spectral form, as he places himself behind Laughton's camera and imagines himself to be accompanying the boat on foot along the towpath, outside the screen. Reality in the screen is uncertain, unfixed, in a state of becoming. In the child narrator's imagination, the river becomes in turn the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Ulanga-Bora Riuki, the Ol'man River.^{vii} The journey is described as "full of mirages", and the narrator is not sure of his own perceptions; he *believes* he is seeing a crocodile, he *believes* he is hearing a clamour, but he is *not* certain. He describes the action of the film as a dream, as evanescent, the only real things, he explains, are "the haunting pictures on which it sometimes settles."^{viii} In fact the whole scene appears to be part of his two sleepy siblings' dream. Alice is like a somnanbulist, she seems hypnotised, with misty eyes, and her voice as she sings does not appear to be hers. As for Tom, he does not seem to hear her. "Something," explains the narrator, "was singing rather than someone, the voice of no one coming out of Alice's mouth: a choir of anonymous orphans joined by the murmur of the river bank."^{ix} Desubjectification is intense in this part of the narrative. Alice is not fully present, she does not inhabit her body, or only spectrally, as an anonymous orphan. The narrator refuses to give the two characters a definable subjectivity. Literary critic Jan Baetens writes that in *Le Cinéma des Familles* "the subject is no longer a subject who *is*, but one who *becomes*, without fetters, without certitudes, but also without a curb on its *jouissance*."^x And indeed, in the next chapter, the three children are described as not resolutely human, as they suddenly metamorphose into animals: "Alice sprouted two rabbit ears and stiff whiskers; Tom still slept but would wake up snouted, furry, clawed, elbows and knees at acute angles."^{xi} This becoming-animal in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense is a means of escaping ontological determination. Baetens understands it to be "one of the possible models of this evanescence of the ancient self."^{xii} The spectral identity of the children is neither human, nor animal, it is undefinable. "And what chimera had I become?" asks the narrator, "No longer human, at least, finally we were all three monsters."^{xiii}

Desubjectification is also at play in Anne-James Chaton's works. Several of his self portraits consist in exact transcriptions of the text of various common markers of identity, such as the passport, the blood test, and the genealogical tree. What does Chaton achieve when he refers to the text of his passport, or the written results of his blood test, as a self portrait? First, he makes a point about the textuality of identity. The text is transposed onto the pages of the book. Visually the transcripts are disconcerting, printed in the form of fully justified blocks of text; they draw attention to themselves as text. The text is removed from its context, which also reinforces its textuality. Secondly, he questions the concept of identity itself, by showing it to be an outsider's verbal construct, far removed from the idea of the self portrait as introspective and personal. Thirdly, he suggests that someone's self portrait is nothing other than that construct. Chaton's point is that we are intertextual beings, made of fragments of text written by several writers, such as the state, or the hospital. Individuality is a myth. In his genealogical tree, Chaton inserts the word "alias" in between the names of each of his ancestors, and his own. Everyone is an example of everyone else. In Agambenian philosophy, these are "exemplars", that is to say, "one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all."^{xiv} Exemplars are neither particular nor generic, they are what Agamben terms "whatever singularities", beings that matter as singular beings, but are not defined by an identity.^{xv} Chaton's other self portraits are similarly emphatic of the textuality of the self and of the multiplicity of its authors. It is not necessary to use the first person singular when writing in one's deconstructed self. Chaton uses it only twice in his eighteen self portraits, in two audio poems which consist in a single sentence each, repeated in a loop. The sentences are both about the act of writing: "Je suis en train d'écrire" (I am currently writing), and "Je n'écris pas de poésie" (I am not writing poetry). This could mean that he is engaged in the activity of writing, but he is not himself the writer of his poetry. And certainly, most of the poems are lists of objects, with whatever text is inscribed on them, such as book titles, makes, the text of official letters, of various tickets and other wallet contents, all of which describe a person's surrounding things, but does not allow for an individual voice to come to the fore. Chaton's work is political, first, because it promises the rounded portrayal of a person, but falls short of this by offering only the schematic codings of official identity. The idea is to show identity as an invention which serves the state but says nothing about the singularity of a person. Second, the implied criticism of the concept of individuality is also political. Agamben describes "the hypocritical fiction of the unsubstitutability of the individual, which in our culture serves only to guarantee its universal representability."^{xvi} Chaton questions how individual and how unsubstitutable we in fact are, by showing how far this universal representability underpins particular power relations and mechanisms of social control (the discourses of which in turn encode and articulate that fiction of unsubstitutability).

After Derrida and Barthes, first person narrative loses its subject. The first person always comes from an outsider's voice, because the story of oneself is always written by another one. Once one moves beyond the myth of self-identity, one has to seek the

subject somewhere else, perhaps nowhere, or perhaps amongst Agamben's community of whatever singularities. To quote Agamben once more: "What is most proper to every creature is thus its substitutability, its being in any case in the place of the other."^{xvii}

ⁱ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London : Routledge, 2002), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 163.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York : Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 36.

^{iv} Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London : Macmillan, 1977), p. 168.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London : Continuum, 2004), p. 3.

^{vii} Pierre Alferi, *Le Cinéma des Familles* (Paris : POL, 1999), p. 211.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 213.

^x Jan Baetens, 'Pierre Alferi's "Allofiction": A Poetics of the Controlled Skid' in *SubStance*, vol. 39 (2010), p. 74.

^{xi} Pierre Alferi, *Cinépoèmes & Films Parlants*, (Aubervilliers: Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, 2003), p. 23

^{xii} Baetens, p. 75.

^{xiii} Pierre Alferi, *Cinépoèmes & Films Parlants*, p. 23.

^{xiv} Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis : U. of Minnesota Press), p.10.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 1.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 24.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 23.