

Knut Ebeling

Headless writing: autotheory between reflection and resonance

In September 2019, I did a meditation retreat after having just returned from a conference where I had a dialogue on *Acéphale* – the secret society at the end of the 1930s whose emblem is a Leonardsque human body without a head, drawn up by André Masson. With the conference still in my mind, haunting me, I made every effort to repress reflection on it, instead trying to ‘clear my head’ for meditation. Not only was this an operation in the sense of *Acéphale*, a group that expressed its interest in ‘beheading’ and deconstructive practices, but this was also a model situation of maintaining a balance between reflection and resonance. What follows after the retreat is an engaging writing which lead to a series of experimental texts not only on meditation (including Georges Bataille’s *Méthode de méditation*), but also on care and sorrow, dying and mourning.

What connects this corpus of texts of great importance to me is less the fact that they were initially written as entries for a dictionary of alternative knowledge (»das andere Wissen«) of the DFG-network with the same title.¹ Rather, it was the general question of a neutral and non-reflexive, a post-anthropocentric and somewhat ‘headless’ writing, that links the rejection of the subject’s writing authority to writing and knowledge practices that also attempt to relativize the role of the writing subject. While the writing subject’s knowledge is challenged – one might think about Bataille’s notion of *contestation* – questions of a post-anthropocentric writing arise in this mode of writing which grants as much authority to things and their agency, to matter and materiality, and finally to discriminated and disabled bodies, as it does to unhindered speaking subjects.

In accordance with the ‘episteme of men,’ subjects tend to write like machines in order to gain a better view or insight into the non-human and material world from this trans-human and post-anthropocentric perspective. While human knowledge was traditionally conceptualized as a transcendental *knowledge of* the world that hierarchically subordinated the known world, the attempt to write neutrally (of living, dying, meditating, etc.) shifts the focus, allowing practices, procedures, and operations to connect the writing actant *immediately* to the world instead of reflexively separating themselves from it. The knowledge *about* becomes a *knowledge with*, a *being-with* in the sense of Jean-Luc Nancy. While in Nancy’s works the subject stands in its own light so that achieving knowledge of the world becomes nearly impossible, headless writing involves experiences and sensations that emerge in encountering and that can be recorded machinelike and without taking a detour via (mindful) reflecting.

In the context of this writing, the autobiographical diary dealing with the death of my mother appears on an equal footing with current autobiographical theories – one could name them ‘autotheories’ – which systematically include the autobiographical along with theoretical writing. Examples of this (new) hybridization can be found in Hélène Cixous, Roland Barthes,

¹ <https://www.andereswissen.de/de>

Maggie Nelson, Chris Kraus, Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, as well as in the writings of Simone Weil. As the name suggests, autotheory emerges at the conjunction of autobiography and theory: in cutting together (and/or apart) different voices, and in merging texts and ideas, a polyphonic writing assumes a shape. By giving up and deconstructing one's own position as speaker – an integral part of what I deem *autotheory* – an alternative approach seems possible, one which is more sensitive, more porous, more empathetical, and one that no longer relies on the hierarchical conception of making statements *about* the world.

In 1947 after failed attempts at meditation, Bataille (Weil's contemporary and a critical reader of her texts) wrote *Méthode de méditation*. Instead of developing a theory *about* the practice of meditation, his 'theory' unfolded from *within* his practice; his is not theoretical discourse, but rather practice-based research that radically dissolves the boundaries between theory and practice.

But how is such writing possible? Isn't one always writing *about* something? Is it possible to 'write meditation' as neutrally as an EKG? And how can one write about something without constantly (re-)establishing a transcendental relationship or axis between oneself (as subject) and the object? How do you 'write therapy', 'write worrying', or 'write caring'? How do you 'write care' without depriving or even touching the autonomy and dignity of the person you care for? How do you 'write dying' if you cannot write while dying?

While the phantasm of direct and immediate writing was spread in the 19th century by post-romantic phonographs and Chladnian sound figures that projected an autopoietic writing of self-resonances, in the 20th century the post-Nietzschean historical avant-gardes in fine arts and literature 'followed' in using methods such as *Ecriture automatique* to realize a writing without the detour of the subject. Currently, the notion of a 'self-writing' of processes can be found in a post-anthropocentric New Materialism, wherein matter is regarded as enabled to write itself, as well as in Artistic Research, wherein works of art express or at least demand their own epistemological status. In current feminist discourse, subjective affects and a "politics of sensitivity" (Hubert Fichte) are entering theory via keywords such as "exposure" and "vulnerability".

What these various writing practices have in common is the interruption of a transcendental speech *about*, which had accumulated in the pronunciation (or writing) of a homogeneously conceived interiority as well as the writing of an interruption, a crack or an epistemic fracture, which exchanges a subjective knowledge for a neutral non-knowledge (non-savoir). In this sense, the practices of a 'headless writing' lead to a "kind of absolute and absolutely neutral interruption" [une interruption en quelque sorte absolue et absolument neutre], as Maurice Blanchot put it in 1964 in *L'interruption*. An interruption that is "no longer internal to the sphere of language, but external and anterior to all speech and silence" [non plus intérieure à la sphère du langage, mais extérieure et antérieure à toute parole et à tout silence].²

² Maurice Blanchot, L'interruption (comme sur une surface de Riemann), in: ders., *L'Entretien infini*, Paris 1969, 111. translation K.E.

That which is “anterior to all speech and silence” is, for example, poetic acts, interruptions and fissures in the relationship between language and action, as well as subjectivating experiences – experiences that *are* or stay *out of* language in a certain sense of withdrawal. Like trauma or the corresponding therapeutic practices that are, for that reason, of particular interest to the project at hand. A good example can be seen in Giorgos Lanthimos’s 2011 film *Alpis*. Also of interest are psychoanalytical ‘excavations’ that link the verbalization of pre-language (*vorsprachlich*) traumas to an experimental therapeutic setting. Granting this therapeutic setting a language and ‘writing the therapy’, for example by describing the ego’s psycho-archaeological ‘excavations’ (i.e. a kind of self- or auto-archaeology), is one of the project’s major foci.

In other words, if ‘empirical knowledge’ is incorporated in theoretical writing, it is not to nurture the illusion or suggest a proximity to the immediacy of experience. On the contrary, writing, in the words of Blanchot, requires a “rupture with thought when it gives itself for immediate proximity”, as well as a “rupture with all *empirical* experience of the world” [La coupure exigée par l’écriture est coupure avec la pensée quand celle-ci se donne pour proximité immédiate, et coupure avec toute expérience empirique du monde].³ As Blanchot writes in *L’Entretien infini*, “In this sense, writing is also a rupture with all present consciousness, being always already engaged in the experience of the non-manifest or the unknown (understood in neutral)” [En ce sens, écrire est aussi rupture avec toute conscience présente, étant toujours déjà engagé dans l’expérience du non-manifeste ou de l’inconnu (entendu au neutre)].⁴

Various undertakings practiced experiencing this “rupture with all present consciousness” as well as the experience of the unknown and neutral about which Blanchot speaks. The *Acéphale* was one such group, a collective in which Blanchot did not participate but which did enormously fascinated him. The *Acéphale* group explored these practices of the “rupture with all present consciousness” that seeks to trace or come close to the unknown. Finally, “the activism of Bataille”, as the dialogue in the beginning was titled, included not only his well-known nocturnal meetings in the forest, but also his less-known meditation practices. They continue in his 1947 book *Méthode de méditation*, a text in which Bataille accepted the challenge to ‘write the meditation’ – considered an impossible task – and at the same time folding this writing into far reaching theoretical considerations of an a-theological thinking which had to sacrifice the speaking transcendental subject.

³ Maurice Blanchot, La coupure: l’écriture hors langage, in: ders., *L’Entretien infini*, Paris 1969, 391. translation K.E.

⁴ Ebd.