

(AUTO)THANATOGRAPHY
OR (AUTO)THANATOLOGY?: MARK C.
TAYLOR, SIMON CRITCHLEY
AND THE WRITING OF THE DEAD

The autothanatographical: what would it, impossibly, be?

“THANATOGRAPHY” IS DEFINED by the Oxford English Dictionary as “an account of a person’s death”. Therefore a thanatology would ordinarily be a report by the living on others’ dying. By extension, the term “autothanatographies” is definable as “the dead’s own accounts of their own deaths”. Autothanatography, therefore, reports an experience that can be rendered possible only through an unthinkable *sur-vivre* which would make it possible to configure a writing *d’outré tombe*. Such writing would depend on the continued conceivability, to itself and to others *and after death*, of an authoring consciousness. It must also overcome the objection that in any autothanatographical account the self-reflexive equivalent of a *Lazare, veni foras* might be pronounced and obeyed, against all the laws of physics, religion and philosophy.¹ Yet, against all law, literature – which Jacques Derrida has famously described as a discourse in which it is possible to say everything² – is remarkably replete with examples of autothanatography. In other words, literature offers a number of instances of a writing affecting to be a writing *from* rather than merely *of* death. Such examples take to an extreme a conceit pointed out by Wordsworth in his “Essay Upon Epitaphs” (1810). In that work, Wordsworth speaks of “epitaphs [which] so often personate the deceased, and represent him as speaking from his own tomb-stone”. Literature’s attempts at the autothanatographical, it must be said, rarely recall those epitaphs’ efforts to present “death disarmed of its sting, and affliction unsubstantialised”.³ Instead they tend to be more ominous, ranging from everything that is unnervingly glimpsed in the enunciation of the phrase “I am dead” in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) – a phrase that necessarily confounds pragmatics – to the disturbing potentialities implicit in one of the opening statements of *Epitaph of a Small Winner* (1880) by the Brazilian writer Machado de Assis: “I am a deceased writer not in the sense of one who has written and is now deceased, but in the sense of one who has died and is now writing [. . .].”⁴ As Susan Sontag remarks, this renders thinkable the impossibility of “[p]osthumous reminiscences . . . written in the first person”.⁵

More recent engagements with the counter-intuitive possibility of narrators and characters who contrive to tell the tale of death’s beyonds, and who improbably struggle with such scarcely otherworldly practicalities as syntax,

punctuation and chapter divisions, include Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002) and Glen Duncan's *Death of an Ordinary Man* (2004). The reference to syntax, punctuation and chapter divisions is hardly trivial. Indeed, what would the grammar of the autothanatographical be? Clearly, questions of grammar and form cannot be ignored here. Autothanatography, which turns on the uncanniest of double genitives – “the writing of the dead” – is necessarily deconstitutive of grammar and shape. It undoes logic and sense, category and genre, matter and form. It is because of that undoing that those narratives of the autothanatographical which fail to transgress the logics of writing and the demands of perspicuity must instil within their readers an impression of inauthenticity. If they are too neat and decorous, if they retain too much of the cadences, shape, idiom and language of the narratives of the living, the memoirs written by the dead in and from their death will disappoint because they fail to convey the absolute challenge to verisimilitude. Of course, this is paradoxical at best, for within ordinary experience no impression of the authenticity and realism of the writing of the dead could be gleaned. There are no living points of reference against which to measure verisimilitude in autothanatography, this most tenebrous and inconceivable of contexts. Nevertheless, the insight that autothanatography must seek to articulate itself in a manner that disarticulates articulation itself, and thereby to challenge the conceivable and the comprehensible, is enough to show why Sebold's very readable *The Lovely Bones*, to take one instance, risks a failure of the imagination. Interestingly, de Assis' novel, which is very self-conscious about its shape and its fastidiously demarcated one hundred and sixty chapter divisions – “Yes, I shall definitely delete this chapter,” the narrator muses at one point (de Assis, p. 151) – absolves itself from that charge through the deployment of a darkly humorous tone. Declaring itself written “with the pen of Mirth and the ink of Melancholy” and seeing itself as “supinely philosophical” (de Assis, pp. 3 and 10), and dedicated “To the first worm that gnawed my flesh”, the narrative is disingenuously precise in detailing the time when the death of the narrator enabled the birth of the narrative: “I expired at two o'clock of a Friday afternoon in the month of August, 1869” (de Assis, p. 5). Additionally, as if to prove Sontag's remark that “Being dead may stand for a point of view that cannot be accused of being provincial” (Sontag, p. xx), it also indulges in some apothegms made possible by the breadth of its deathly experience. Hence, the narrator declares that “frankness is the virtue most appropriate to a defunct”, and proceeds to this unsettling observation: “You who still live, believe me, there is nothing in the world so monstrously vast as our indifference” (de Assis, p. 57).

Much more unsettling than the dark insights of *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, however, are the autothanatographical dimensions of some of the *récits* of Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot's *récits* are more inscrutable, and textualise the indeterminate nature of the autothanatographical in a far more relentless way. They come closer to understanding that the autothanatographical must be a discourse outside language and time that, even if it arises from “the perspective

of maximum consciousness" (Sontag, p. xviii), cannot long hide from the despair of the phenomenology of death: that very phenomenology which, as will be indicated below, appears synonymous with the limits of consciousness. No one, indeed, comes closer than Blanchot to expressing the extreme strangeness of the autothanatographer's language, its co-extensiveness with the Orphic experience, and the horror of any narrating voice that can utter without disingenuousness or irony the phrase found in Derrida's *Circumfession*: "I posthume."⁶ Texts such as *Thomas the Obscure* (1941), *Death Sentence* (1948), *The Step Not Beyond* (1973), and many of the essays in *The Work of Fire* (1949) and *The Space of Literature* (1955), to name but a few, establish Blanchot's prominence within autothanatology's "canon". Unfortunately, there is not the space here to trace in depth the relevance of Blanchot's work to the study of the autothanatographical.⁷ Instead, I should like to draw attention to a study which critiques that thought and that expression – Simon Critchley's *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* (1997). I have chosen to avail myself of the insights of Critchley's study in order better to outline autothanatology's impossibility as I move towards an engagement with Mark C. Taylor's exploration of that very impossibility in his recent "Ghost Stories".

Taylor's text provides the first part to *Grave Matters*, a volume that also contains an impressive array of black and white photographs by Dietrich Christian Lammerts of the resting places of some of the cultural icons of Western modernity. In my reading, "Ghost Stories" acquires a particular significance in contexts discussing the autothanatographical. That significance arises from two considerations. Firstly, autothanatographies institute themselves as arguably the most extreme of boundary-bending and demarcation-transgressing texts: they tremble, after all, at the absoluteness of the division between life and death. Secondly, Taylor has produced a remarkable series of a-generic/multi-generic works. His texts mark him out variously as a theologian, philosopher, theorist and commentator, *inter alia*, on matters relating to architecture and network culture, and he has consistently produced writings very evidently marked by diverse disciplinary connections.⁸ On the basis of these two points, I shall argue that the significance of "Ghost Stories" – itself multi-generic in its affinities with, for instance, autobiography, philosophy, theory and thanatology – arises from a keener indeterminateness: one rooted in the text's troubling and transgression of the borderlines between (auto)thanatology and (auto)thanatology. Before I go on to explain the issues raised by "Ghost Stories", it would be opportune to try to frame the autothanatographical – and, indeed, the autothanatological – in a manner relevant to my argument, and it is here that Critchley's book becomes important.

Scarcely very little on not quite nothing: Critchley and autothanatology

Critchley's *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* is an anthology of "Lectures" that is about more than just autothanatology, but here I should like to focus on its affinities with that theme. An early quotation in that work from Adorno helps to set up an understanding of those affinities and to capture the ultimate despair that is the

autothanatographer's: "Those to whom despair is not mere terminology may ask whether it would be better if there was nothing rather than something."⁹ Indeed, autothanatographers may wish to exit their narrating, to desist by dying ultimately, by proceeding to the nothing beyond all voicing. That wish is rendered all the more pressing by the realisation, which emerges from Blanchot's texts, that "dread is had in the face of existence itself, of being riveted to existence, *the impossibility of death*" (see Critchley, p. 55; italics in the original). It is a dread evoked most terribly in autothanatographical narratives. Critchley, closely following Blanchot's intuitions, observes, however, that even on this side of autothanatography, in a dimension condemned to "the ubiquity of the finite", it is scarcely possible to die in a manner affirming any lesson of how "to die *this* death, *my* death, knowing that there is nothing else after this death – *chacun sa chimère*" (Critchley, pp. 24–5). Hence

the radical ungraspability of finitude, our inability to lay hold of death and make of it a work and to make that work the basis for an affirmation of life. The event of our death is always too late for us. As Blanchot has recently expressed it in a confessional text, "l'instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance." (Critchley, p. 26)

It is telling that at this point Critchley swerves away from an encounter with the quasi-autothanatographical experience recounted in Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (1994), a *récit* that recounts the experience of surviving death by firing squad and from which his last quotation is taken, to immediately spell out instead, in what is a crucial passage, why autothanatography should be impossible:

In phenomenological terms, death is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act; it is not the *noema* of a *noesis*. Death is ungraspable and exceeds both intentionality and the correlative structures of phenomenology, whether the latter is understood in its Hegelian, Husserlian or Heideggerian senses. Thus, [...] there can be no phenomenology of death because it is a state of affairs about which I can find neither an adequate intention nor intuitive fulfilment. Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is best conveyed by the figure of *prosopopeia*, the trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which represents it. (Critchley, p. 26)

"[T]here can be no phenomenology of death [...]. Death is radically resistant to the order of representation" – this is what explains why autothanatography is always a scandal, why it might be articulable only in literature (which can say anything), but definitely not in philosophy, perceived by Critchley as the discourse which might help the acceptance of death (see Critchley, p. 25). Elsewhere, by contrast, Critchley is clearly more than familiar with literature's articulation of the autothanatographical, even if he never uses the term as such. He refers to the work of Maupassant, Poe and Swift in profiling the horror of "the infinity of today, the irremissibility of an existence one is unable to leave" (Critchley, p. 60). Additionally, he draws attention to the possibility of

“an imagination that goes on imagining in the knowledge that imagination has come to an end; in Beckett’s typically antithetical formulation, *Imagination Dead Imagine*” (Critchley, p. 28). Taking his cue from Blanchot’s formulations, he refers also to “the *other* or *essential* night”, in which “one can neither go to sleep nor unto death, for there is something stronger than death, namely the simple facticity of being riveted to existence without an exit, what Blanchot calls *le mourir* in opposition to *la mort*: the impossibility of death” (Critchley, p. 32; italics in the original). Critchley later links this relentlessness of *le mourir* to Levinasian explorations of night, and particularly to the idea of “the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we no longer regard things, but where they seem to regard us: ‘La veille est anonyme. Il n’y a pas *ma* vigilance à la nuit, c’est la nuit elle-même qui veille. Ça veille’” (Critchley, p. 57; italics in the original). But in the early part of the text, in the first lecture, Critchley’s references to Levinas are more concerned with laying the ground for a “minimal *ethics of finitude*” which for him is bound up with “the night of what Levinas calls the *il y a* [...], the infinite time of our dying, our breath panting on in the darkness, a murmur in the mud, the experience of [...] *atheist transcendence*” (Critchley, p. 28; italics in the original). Through this twin engagement with the thought of Blanchot and Levinas, Critchley’s reading can therefore serve to force attention onto another aspect of the autothanatographical: its capacity to probe and write from – and of – that darkness where, in spite of the expectation of nothing, something persists in existence. Certainly, and in contrast to the suggestion of its own title, Critchley’s reading is scarcely very little on not quite nothing.

There are further substantial points in Critchley’s study. His reference to prosopopeia in the last quotation makes it possible to view autothanatography for what it is, or at least for what it could be viewed as: namely a rhetoric standing in, perhaps with more bravado than bravery, for the inadequacy of even prosopopeia in articulating the language of the dead. Prosopopeia, “the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting” (Critchley, p. 73), finds its limits strained to the utmost in autothanatography, which must imagine the earthly absence of the selfsame in terms of a narrating *sur-vivance*, transworldly present to itself as it proceeds both from and to the other. For if it is true, as was remarked by de Man, that prosopopeia is “the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave”, and if “[d]eath is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament”, and if it is also true that “irony is the trope that includes all tropes, or is the trope of tropes”, then autothanatography, as the most extreme instance of prosopopeic discourse – one caught in the predicament of displacement beyond all discourse and thereby all tropology – is also a very ultimate irony indeed.¹⁰ And the irony is, of course, on us. The irony, or pathos, is that in our lives, as much as in all our self-recollections and autobiographies, we have always already been autothanatographical, at least to the extent that “[t]he human being is death in the process of becoming” (Critchley, p. 25). If that is right, then it also follows that all

autobiography is also autothanatology, and that again all autothanatology is also autothanatology. For thanatology, defined by the OED as “the scientific study of death, its causes and phenomena”, but also as “*the study of the effects of approaching death and of the needs of the terminally ill and their families*” (my italics), suggests by implication that autothanatology, in the sense of a study of the impact of death’s *completed* approach on one writing a self-portrait, might contrive to refer with equal purpose to what the term autothanatology transgressively stakes out.

No doubt this perception could have been arrived at via a different route than by sourcing a work on theory like Critchley’s. However, as we shall see, there is a certain inevitability in the links between autothanatology and theory, and Critchley’s text is well attuned to those links. Consequently it would be fruitful to retrace more closely Critchley’s encounter, in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, with Blanchot’s work. Here, however, it is more pressing to come to terms with his understanding that not only is “*Blanchot’s work [. . .] not philosophy*” (Critchley, p. 33; italics in the original), but that

Blanchot’s fiction and criticism reach a point where both undergo fragmentation and pass into one another [. . .]. One way to read Blanchot’s work would be in terms of a movement towards a writing that would result in a certain *Aufhebung* of the distinction between fiction and criticism and the conceptions of form and content implicit in both genres. (Critchley, p. 34; italics in the original)

In other words, we are back to the intuition that autothanatology will always live on the edge, transgressing the borderlines between genres and remaining strangely ambivalent about its own affiliations. Of its work it can almost be said, as of Blanchot’s, that “its central project [is] *the production of literature as its own theory*” (Critchley, p. 34; italics in the original). Necessarily, it seems, the autothanatographical undoes, to re-cite part of the above, “conceptions of form and content implicit in [. . .] genres”. Significantly, too, that undoing can be seen to occur with intriguing frequency in contexts related to “theory”, a discourse which, as has been frequently indicated, is itself very diverse and amorphous. One would consequently expect an a-generic/multi-generic text of theory on the subject of the auto/bio/thanato/graphical to be particularly marked by indeterminateness and indeterminability, as the elusiveness of both theory and autothanatology would meet and coincide within it. What happens, then, when encountering a text like Taylor’s “Ghost Stories” which, loath though it is to be as obviously heterodox and mercurial as some of his other work, may still be regarded as a multi-generic work of theory – one that is very amenable to showing that theory, like literature, can articulate the unsayable disquiet of the autothanatographical? I respond to that question in the section below, where I attempt to deploy the insights afforded by the above consideration of Critchley’s work in a reading of Taylor’s “Ghost Stories”. This is a text which, as I hope to indicate, has a deep understanding of why the writing of the dead can contrive to be both (auto)thanatographical and (auto)thanatological.

Grave matters indeed – Mark C. Taylor’s “Ghost Stories”

Taylor’s “Ghost Stories” is to be found in a context – the book *Grave Matters* – where the most relevant point of reference might well be the study of what Derrida calls “cultures of death”. Derrida’s remark bases itself on the fact that “every culture has its own funerary rites, its representations of the dying, its ways of mourning or burying, and its own evaluation of the price of existence, of collective as well as individual life;” it therefore recognises the pertinence of a specialised field of study focusing on the funerary and on the rituals of memorialisation, one to which the research of scholars such as Philippe Ariès or Robert Pogue Harrison, who have devoted themselves to analysis of “cultures of death”, quite straightforwardly affiliates itself.¹¹ It is a field of study that might well be incorporated within thanatology. Superficially, that kind of thanatology is also the field to which *Grave Matters* seems most straightforwardly to belong. Reflections akin to Critchley’s engagement with the thought of Blanchot or Levinas would on that count seem incongruous where *Grave Matters* is concerned, while the relevance of autothanatology might also appear tenuous. How could autothanatology feature there, when more than half the book contains – very thanatologically, so to speak – black and white photographs of the resting places of some of Western thought’s illustrious dead? The photos follow a chronological sequence, with the first depicting Francis Bacon’s resting place and the last, in a macabre twist that also announces the scope for an analysis in which autothanatology might after all figure, Taylor’s own. Before commenting on that, it is worth mentioning that on the front cover it is the monument to Adam Smith in Canongate, Edinburgh, that is represented, while on the back it is Shelley’s grave in Rome that appears. *Grave Matters* might therefore appear to be a coffee table book with a deathly difference. It is shaped by an intriguing conceit calculated to concentrate the mind on death. In order to understand that conceit and its co-extensiveness with the (auto)thanatographical and the (auto)thanatological better, it will be necessary to understand the rationale of “Ghost Stories”.

It should be noted immediately that “Ghost Stories” is a highly personal text. It is written in the first person, that sine qua non of the autothanatographical. In his opening section, called “Beginning Ending”, Taylor speaks of “a lazy day in the summer of 1956”, in New Jersey, when he discovered a “Family Register” of four pages. One of these, bearing the title “Children’s Names”, listed a “Baby Girl Taylor” and a “Brent Taylor” whom he had never known, and who died on “Nov. 9, 1944” and “May 25, 1954” respectively. “I shall never forget the look in their eyes,” he says of his parents when he asked them “What does this mean?” His father gave him the information he sought, at least in its most sparsely factual form, and Taylor reports that “that moment remains seared in my memory in ways I still cannot fathom. Somewhere in its depths, I suspect, lie the origins of *Grave Matters*.”¹²

Taylor’s text develops in several ways from that point. It recalls a trip with the family to his sister’s burial place in Kankakee, Illinois, and thereafter one made

many years later with his living brother, Beryl, to the grave of his dead brother. The second trip was undertaken just after Beryl and he had finished a house clearance following the funeral of their father. Taylor speaks of his inability to find a daybook he would have dearly loved to trace, one which his mother “had kept during the year before my sister’s birth/death” (Taylor, 2002, p. 9). He recounts an uncanny episode that occurred in his uncle’s house in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the very trip in which the family visited his sister’s grave. There, the extended family was woken up by a State trooper with the news that Taylor’s cousin and his wife had been critically injured in a road accident. His mother, Taylor reports, broke the silence to say: “I had the strangest experience during the night. I was awakened by the sound of church bells. I looked at the clock and it was 2.10.” Later it transpired that the accident, which was to prove fatal for both the injured, had occurred at 2.10. “I [...] still do not know what to say about it,” Taylor remarks of the episode, but clearly death was becoming a haunting interest (Taylor, 2002, pp. 9–10).

Indeed, in what serves as a further explanation of the origins of *Grave Matters*, Taylor explains how he “started doing gravestone rubbings of people I affectionately called my ghosts”. The first was Kierkegaard’s – the word *kirkegaard*, he was to learn, means “churchyard” or “cemetery”. Hegel’s, Melville’s, Poe’s, Sartre’s and Marx’s followed. Soon he “started framing them to hang in [the] living room, where they now cover an entire wall”. He explains:

As the collection grew, I began to imagine the graves of other writers, artists, architects and philosophers. Where were they buried? Did they have grave markers? What was inscribed on their tombstones? Did their graves tell us anything about their lives? While pondering such questions, I started to dream of doing a book of photographs of the graves of the cultural figures who created the modern world. *Grave Matters* is the realization of that dream. (Taylor, 2002, p. 12)

So far, so good, if rather unusual. But what about “Ghost Stories” itself? The personal autobiographical tone, having inaugurated the volume, so to speak, proceeds in thanatological fashion to reflections on death and necropolises, in sections suggestively titled “Inventing Death”, “Displacement”, “Living Dead”, “Impossibility of Dying” and “Place”. It is here that Taylor’s well-known tendency towards the a-generic/multi-generic can be seen to come into play. Other texts by him have dwelt, often within the same covers, on theology, philosophy, literature, and media and network culture. Here the eclecticism is less flagrant, but still very significant for any context discussing “Autothanatographies”. The reason is that “Ghost Stories” is, very clearly, about thanatographies – it carries many accounts of others’ deaths. It is very clearly, too, about thanatology, about thanatologies even, for it carries reflections on cemeteries and on different cultural practices of death. To that extent, “Ghost Stories” is “a writing of the dead” in the more straightforward sense, denoting a writing that is *about* the dead rather than *by* them. It contrives to add the *auto-* dimension, however, by including musings on Taylor’s personal experience of being-towards-death and

towards burial. In that respect it is also an autothanatography in the sharpened sense of offering a highly personalised account of the experience of the passage of the selfsame to death. It thereby proves a point already made above, in the context of the consideration of Critchley's work, that autothanatographies need not only be about narrations from beyond the grave. "Ghost Stories" is, then, autothanatological also, in the poignant sense of offering Taylor's reflections on the provisions for his own burial. Clearly, then, thanatology, thanatology, autothanatography and autothanatology merge in this text, doing so in ways which trouble their respective determinateness and distinguishability. To ask the genre question, then, or to speculate on whether what results is (auto)thanatography or (auto)thanatology, is to miss the salient point that this very particular writing of the dead forever lives – and dies – on borderlines.

In supporting that claim I should like, given the space available, to steer clear of discussion of Taylor's engagements with diverse fictions and theories where "the writing of the dead" is discussed, especially since a study of Taylor's allusions in "Ghost Stories" to figures such as Hegel, Poe, Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Blanchot, to mention but a few, might entail a volume to itself. Instead I should like to draw attention to just two significant sequences. Here is the first:

Cemeteries are where I go to commune with "my" ghosts. The journey to the cemetery is always solitary, even when I am with the people who are closest to me. In the graveyard, the we is dispersed and the I stripped bare. Since death, like disease, cannot be shared, I must always die alone. The solitude of the cemetery, however, is not precisely the lack of community; rather it is what Maurice Blanchot has called "the unavowable community". Citing his dear friend Georges Bataille, Blanchot described this unavowable community as "the negative community: the community of those who have no community". In the cemetery, *we are together as alone in a community without community*. In the solitary community of this negative community, however, I discover that I am never merely myself, but am always possessed by ghosts, who, though other, nonetheless make me who I am and am not. The dead never simply disappear but live on by displacing those who come after them. The graveyard is where we keep the dead *alive as dead*. For those who venture thoughtfully into deadly precincts once deemed holy, the cemetery becomes a place of memory and meditation: memory of what the dead once were and meditation on what I soon will be. (Taylor, pp. 22–3; italics in the original)

I have chosen this long passage advisedly, and am tempted to leave it here uncommented, as the parallels between the (auto)thanatographical and the (auto)thanatological are surely evident. Let me, however, spell out just one point. To write of others who are dead is always to write on oneself being towards death, as the passage quoted well understands. Indeed what distinguishes this passage is its clear-sightedness about that point. It knows that to contemplate cemeteries is to reflect on the difference between the dead, in their multitude, and the solitude of the living. But as the living are also, by definition, those who are dying (one would not require Heidegger's thoughts on being-towards-death to appreciate that), the sense of singularity borne from

that solitude is nuanced by the awareness of proceeding towards a very particular “unavowable community” formed by gregariousness in death: in other words, by the knowledge that one will be dead together with multitudinous others, and beyond all communing. This inescapably compels thoughts – and, in Taylor’s case, a writing – on one’s own anticipated and imagined death: a writing of the dying, in other words, fixed on “meditation on what I soon will be”. Irrepressibly, from (auto)thanatology, (auto)thanatography.

It is therefore scarcely surprising that in the second sequence to which I should like to draw attention, taken from the last section of “Ghost Stories”, Taylor says: “I eventually decided that I could not complete this book without deciding where I will be buried” (Taylor, 2002, p. 38). He decides to forego a perk of his tenure providing him with “a burial plot in the College cemetery”. That would have put him in mind of “some deranged administrator” who “had convened a faculty meeting that would continue for eternity”. Instead he opts for a little-known cemetery “near the foot of Mount Greylock”, in Massachusetts. The site is not far from the place in Arrowhead where Melville, “when completing *Moby Dick* [...] spent long hours gazing at Mount Greylock” (Taylor, 2002, p. 39). Taylor says “I do not know whether I have chosen this place or it has chosen me.” But he is definite about his intentions: “I will be buried at the edge of the cemetery which lies in the shadow of Mount Greylock, on the edge of town” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40). Ever on the edge, even in death, this writer of many genres and disciplines strikingly spells out the lesson: “I have always believed that the edge is the only place worth living on and will not give up that belief in death” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40).

Living on the edge, and lying there in death, is what befits a thinker of many disciplinary affiliations and a writer practised in many genres. Unsurprisingly then, he remains “edgy”. “Of all the words I have written,” Taylor explains, “none has been more difficult than these.” That is very believable, especially when viewed alongside his hope that knowing where he will end “allows me to know my place in a way that makes it possible to go on – at least for a while. If life is affirmed by embracing rather than avoiding death, the gravity of darkness might become the levity of light” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40). These are poignant words, rendered more so by the echo of the earlier realisation that “[g]azing into the dust and ashes of these graves and their images, we learn that *nothing – absolutely nothing – lasts*” (Taylor, 2002, p. 37; italics in the original). Consequently life and death, unlike Taylor’s genres and those of other writer-thinkers, never quite edge into each other. Death, then, remains all too much itself, unmistakable for life.

This resounds with implications for the indeterminateness of the difference between (auto)thanatography and the other discourses with which it enters into a relation. However, we need mention only one to understand that the diverse fictions and affiliations of autothanatography, even when very plurally multi-generic and thereby illustrative of the fact that “[a]long the edge nothing remains fixed” (Taylor, 2002, p. 40), cannot unfix death’s demarcations. That is

perhaps precisely why autothanatographies play so hard with the possibility of a writing proceeding from the non-time and the non-space of the non-proceeding. There, in other words, whence Lazarus proceeded, but without witness; and whence Orpheus returned, to disarticulation and death. Their example, and the work of de Man and Linda Hutcheon, suggest that autothanatography might, *theoretically*, provide the sharpest of irony's edges.¹³ The suggestion is that autothanatography proceeds as if death might be undone and discountenanced by a writing that coincides with death itself. But after the encounter with the very personal parable and mythology of Taylor's "Ghost Stories", we understand that even autothanatography's edging out of the distinctions between mundane and otherworldly discourse cannot quite blunt or blur death's bounds. One therefore suspects that the writing of the dead, despite all its many genres and generations, was in the end – when and where it matters most – always destined to remain understandable according to the more straightforward of the two senses evoked by the double genitive. Even literature's and theory's most extreme autothanatographies fail to overturn that. In other words, and despite the possibilities glimpsed in Poe or de Assis, Blanchot or Levinas, Critchley or Taylor, the writing of the dead resists being understood as anything but the script of the living.

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NOTES

¹ On this theme, see J. Gregg, *Maurice Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 38–45.

² J. Derrida, "Demeure", in M. Blanchot/J. Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford, CA, 2000), p. 29.

³ W. Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs", in: *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Vol. 2, ed. W. J. B. Owen & J. W. Smyser (Oxford, 1974), p. 60.

⁴ M. de Assis, *Epitaph of a Small Winner*, trans. W. L. Grossman, Foreword S. Sontag (New York, 1990), p. 5.

⁵ S. Sontag, Foreword, in: de Assis, p. xi.

⁶ J. Derrida, "Circumfession", in: G. Bennington & J. Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. G. Bennington (Chicago, 1994), p. 26.

⁷ For a fuller consideration of the importance of Blanchot and also that of Derrida to contexts which broach the autothanatographical and the "autobiothanatoheterographical", see my "Comparatism and Autothanatography: Death and Mourning in Blanchot, Derrida, and Tim Parks", *Comparative Critical Studies*, 1:3 (2004), 337–58, and, on the "autobiothanatoheterographical", see Derrida, "Circumfession", p. 213.

⁸ See, for instance, the works by Taylor detailed in the list of References, below.

⁹ S. Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London, 1997), p. 21. See also T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London, 1973), p. 380, but note that Critchley provides his own translation in his text.

¹⁰ See P. de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement", in: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 77 and 81, and also his "The Concept of Irony", in: *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. A. Warminski (Minneapolis, MN, 1996).

- ¹¹ See J. Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, CA, 1993), p. 24, P. Ariès, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris, 1977), and R. P. Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago, 2003).
- ¹² M. C. Taylor, "Ghost Stories," in: M. C. Taylor & D. C. Lammerts, *Grave Matters* (London, 2002), p. 8.
- ¹³ See L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London, 1995).

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