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IN SEARCH OF "THE ALEPH OF THE OTHER"

Photographic Archive and Narrative Structuring
in the Biographic Prose of Édouard Levé

ABSTRACT: This paper analyses how, through a transposition of photographic methods to literary composition, Edouard Levé (1965-2007) reconfigures the literary genre of the portrait, and situates his work at an unstable threshold from which he explores the border between the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable, existence and essence. The photographic archive that lends its shape to the text implies an externalization of the definition of identity, which thwarts any ontological discourse that would explain subjective essence as the source of identity and reality. Identity becomes a panoptic collection of the self, which points to the invisible mystery of identity and meaning beneath the surface of the visible.

KEYWORDS: Édouard Levé, Photographic Archive, Photoliterature, Autobiography.

> En ese instante gigantesco, he visto millones des actos deleitables o atroces ; ninguno me asombró como el hecho de que todos ocuparan el mismo punto, sin superposición y sin transparencia. Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges

Edouard Levé started his artistic career as a visual artist and photographer before becoming a writer. Oscillating between a literary and a photographic practice, he blurs the boundaries between the arts. Not in the sense that he would insert images within his texts, or write captions that would serve as literary accompaniment to his pictures:[1] he rather transposes the features of a literary aesthetics to his photographic approach, and vice versa. The literary category of "fiction" becomes a matrix for his photographic series, just as the photographic method shapes a poetics based on reference, instantaneity and the montage of discontinuous elements. Indeed, most of Édouard Levé's writings are structured as collections of fragments whose articulation does not obey any narrative or even discursive logic, whether temporal or spatial. On the contrary, everything

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[1] With the notable exception of *Fictions* (2006), a photoliterary collection, where photographs in black and white are set against short poetic fragments on the opposite page.

happens in these texts as if the sentences were collaged just as photographs would be stored in an album or a photo-montage frame, indiscriminately according to their order of arrival. His *Autoportrait*, published in 2005, is an accumulation of juxtaposed, often extremely brief sentences describing facts relating to the author in the present tense. In his last text, *Suicide*, published posthumously in 2008, Levé compiles without chronology a series of paragraphs describing facts relating to the life of a childhood friend who committed suicide at the age of 25, whom the text addresses directly in the second-person singular.

Focusing on this (auto)biographic prose,[2] I propose to show how Édouard Levé transposes modalities of the photographic archive to literary narration, and how such a transposition leads to a reconfiguration of the literary genre of the portrait. I will start by analysing the modalities of such reconfiguration and its effects on the narrative organization of space and time, before exploring its consequences for the definition of identity.

Towards an Archival Structuring of the Portrait

Whether they retrace the story of a vocation, highlight the development over time of various aspects of a personality, or offer an external description of physical or moral features, biographical genres usually obey a narrative structure that progresses chronologically and linearly. Admittedly, Michel Beaujour, in his book *Miroirs d'encre* (Mirrors of Ink, 1980), contended that the "rhetoric of the self-portrait" differs from the canonical definition of autobiography (that of a "retrospective record in prose" that a real person makes of their own life, with special emphasis on the history of their personality; Lejeune 1975, 14). The literary self-portrait would be organised thematically rather than chronologically (Beaujour 1980, 8). However, such a thematic organization still requires a minimal amount of narrative organization, which Édouard Levé abandons altogether. His texts do not follow a narrative sequence, their fragments are not arranged according to thematic groupings. Rather, they present an uninterrupted flow of sentences or paragraphs.[3] In particular, *Autoportrait* consists in a juxtaposition of assertions relating to the *I* who utters them, without any hierarchy between heterogeneous elements simply laid end to end, as we can see in the following passage, arbitrarily selected:

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[2] Determining whether the status of *Suicide* is biographical or autobiographical (which would deserve a full article of its own) is not the focus of this essay. I will rather focus on the numerous indications that shed light on its author's aesthetics.

[3] Levé writes in *Autoportrait*: "I do not write memoirs. I do not write novels. I do not write short stories. […] I do not write science fiction. I write fragments" (2016; 2013, 75). Among his texts, *Suicide* is the most "narrative": some paragraphs unfold anecdotes or descriptions over the course of several sentences. However, the book presents no linear chronology.

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I drink red wine when I eat, and sweet wines by themselves. I often remember that there is something I'm forgetting, but what? I prefer beginning to ends. I do not scorn the teachings of my mother. I have not managed to describe the pain of a powerful electric shock. […] When I lived rue Legendre I often saw a woman in her sixties who was a mass of nervous tics, I wondered how she managed to smoke without burning herself. Three things make pools unpleasant: the locker rooms, the fluorescent lights, the smell of chlorine. I have no financial woes. I wait to sort my mail. My life is nothing like a hammer. I wish there were one-liter bottles of wine. In an abandoned factory, I smelled a mixture of dust, grease, old floorboards, and fossilised sweat. I think the rich are wickeder than the poor. "I love you" can be a form of blackmail. I do not force myself to be enthusiastic, even with people who are. I have spoken with several American Indians. I have spoken with several Indian Indians. I have spoken with at least a thousand Americans. I have no obese friends. I have no anorexic friends. I cannot integrate myself into a group of friends who already know each other, I will always be the latecomer, I like groups of friends formed all together at the same moment. I do not know what I expect from love. (2016 [2013, 77-78]).

Sentences are juxtaposed without head or tail. As soon as a thematic coherence seems to emerge out of a sequence of a few sentences, the train of thoughts shifts again in a completely different direction, with no apparent motive. In an interview, Levé confided that he wrote this text beset by a feeling of urgency, with the aim of leaving a trace behind, and defined this accumulation of "sentences fired like arrows" as "an imprint of [his] brain, obsessional and spontaneous" [*obsessionnel et primesautier*] (Morice 2007). Such writing could of course be compared to a stream of consciousness obeying a technique of free-floating attention akin to that of psychoanalysis. In the passage quoted above, several modalities of textual progression can be observed. The succession of two sentences can, for example, be triggered by the naming of opposites (obese/anorexic), by the exhaustion of a list (American Indians/Indian Indians), or the association of an object with one of its stereotypes (American/obese). But the overarching goal of such associations is not to achieve a higher truth or identify a neurotic source that would provide a key to explain or interpret the subject's life. The sum of these enumerated assertions, sometimes trivial, sometimes intimate, constitutes a strictly superficial and non-hierarchical collection, whose aim is neither to trace a path that would allow to establish a causality of past events, nor to reveal an ontological depth. In short, *Autoportrait* does not create a discourse, fragmented as it may be, that would combine linear and associative means of articulation to retrace the history of a subject. Its goal is not anamnesis, but archiving.

Indeed, from the very first lines of *Autoportrait,* the author states laconically: "I archive" (2016 [2013, 7]). In lieu of documents, the book collects statements. *Autoportrait* is therefore not a *bio-graphy* in the strict sense of a linear or thematic tale of a life allowing for a retrospective coherence to emerge, but rather a portrait of words, erratically established. The text juxtaposes fragments of reality that have been captured and recorded at a given moment.[4] Just as

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[4] Shedding light on the photographic "aesthetics of the instant" in Barthes' works, Magali Nachtergael argues that "the biographeme [*biographème*] constitutes a type of fragment that is

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photography (at least unretouched analog photography) can serve as a proof of the real existence of an object (a function that Barthes famously described as the "it has been" of photography, which Levé adopts and transforms for his own practice), each sentence in *Autoportrait* documents the truthfulness of a series of physical or moral qualities of its author, who states: "Everything I write is true, but so what?" [*Tout ce que j'écris est vrai, mais qu'importe?*] (2016 [2013, 82]). *Autoportrait* does not organise its author's life discursively: the book's essential aim is rather to attest to its reality, by forming the archive where the integrality of the traces of his existence will be conserved. But what are the stakes and the scope of this archival structuring of narration? Why this superficial, non-hierarchical collection of sentences?

Many figures of collectors and archivists are disseminated in Levé's texts. In *Suicide*, he reports the following anecdote:

> You marvelled at the story of this Parisian entrepreneur whose obsessive hobby consisted in documenting his daily existence. He saved letters, invitation cards, train tickets, bus tickets, metro tickets, tickets for trips by planes or by boat, his contracts, hotel stationary, restaurant menus, tourist guides from countries visited, programs from plays, day planers, notebooks, photographs… A room in his house, lined with file cabinets, served as the receptacle for his archives, always being expanded. At the centre, organised in a spiral, a chronologically oriented plan indicated Paris, France, or abroad, continents, seas, months, days, in different colours. With a glance, the man could visualise his entire existence. He had made a collection of himself [*il s'était collectionné lui-même*] (2011 [2009, 59-60]).

Each document in this man's collection refers to a specific experience of his existence, precisely located through indications of places and/or dates. Not each of these documents is nominative (such as, for example, restaurant menus or tourist brochures), but their inclusion in chronological order in the personal collection of a singular individual links them to his personal experience, by an effect of this collection's seriality. Each article constitutes a trace, a proof of his passage, each article says: *it has been*, and, by extension, *"I" have been*. In gathering around himself the evidence of his life, it is as if the entrepreneur would attempt to secure his own existential cohesion and continuity across time and space, by archiving a series of items whose material and referential nature

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somewhat equivalent with photography, just like the haiku" (2012, 167, translation mine). Barthes, like Levé after him, would thus have composed his self-portrait (or his "individual mythology") by conferring to a sentence/fragment the same value than a photograph. Biographemes would be like a series of snapshots (what is not captured in the frame falls into oblivion). Comparatively, in Levé, such "snapshots" have an exacerbated referential and cognitive function. Additionally, unlike Barthes' fragments, Levé's fragments are not separated by thematic demarcations, but are carried by the flow of sentences described above with no distinction. Barthes imagined that his "biographemes" could, after his death, escape any sense of destiny to present his life in a fragmentary fashion thus escaping any articulated totalization (see Barthes, 2002, 706). On the contrary, Levé, through his accumulative compulsion, seems to collect fragments in the hope of a concretion (however with no hope or even mention of fate, articulation or totalisation).

would make their truth impossible to deny. This archive forestalls any falsification *a posteriori*—no matter whether this falsification might be caused by oblivion, nostalgia, or bad faith. Indeed, as Derrida has shown, while its recording power endows the archive with a function of unification, identification and classification, any impulse to archive, to conserve, is however inevitably inseparable from an opposite impulse to destruct (1998, 3-4). According to Derrida, "there would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression" (1998, 19). There would be no inscription without a fear of disappearance, no collection without a fear of fragmentation. The anecdote of the Parisian entrepreneur shows that the role of a collection is to unify into a coherent whole items that would otherwise remain scattered. "Collecting" amounts to establishing a link of belonging between each item in the collection and its overarching category, whose cohesion, in turn, is thereby reinforced. *Collecting* the traces of an individual's existence must then be understood in this strong sense where the work of gathering scattered pieces is a preliminary and necessary process toward the unification of this individual. (According to the same logic, the archival structuring of *Autoportrait* would then assume, for its author, an existential function.)[5] However, such a unification remains mysterious: how can such a formless accumulation, bringing together traces of disseminated events, distant in space and time, be endowed with such a unifying power?

Archive and Aleph[6]

The originality of the entrepreneur's collection lies the mode of its presentation. The existence of this man is represented as a panoramic chronological frieze combined with a system of geographic indications. The device of the orientation table situated at the centre of the room also allows for a synchronic perspective on his existence. Traversing chronology, it allows navigating it in all directions. Placed at the centre of the device, the entrepreneur overlooks the collected evidence of his existence, which is also, in a way, its duplicate, its re-presentation. It provides him with a visualisation of his referential cohesion and existential continuity across time, but also perhaps with a certain ontological confidence. For the panoptic device also compresses duration as it unwinds it spatially in a spiral, and condenses it into the single point at the centre of the room. The entrepreneur, posted at his orientation table,

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[5] As such, the text would be a literary counterpart to an artistic engagement with the archive as medium, which Cristina Baldacci identifies as "an obsession of contemporary art". Concerning these *Impossible Archives*, she shows in particular that, among multiple functions, the archive compulsion can correspond to a need to "recompose the self" (2016, 117-124).

[6] A preliminary version of this reflection on the aleph and the impossible totalization of identity was published in French in the context of a larger reflection on fiction and virtuality in the works of Edouard Levé (Gaillard 2014, §§19-23).

can say: "it is true to say that I have been to all these places." He can thus fold the plural fragmentation of spaces and times back onto one basic reference frame, i.e. this centre of the spiral, at the exact moment when he stands there.

However delirious and illusory this device may seem, it nevertheless opens onto a seminal aspect of Levé's writing. It provides a key to think how the author organises the impossible encounter of instant and duration in an aesthetics influenced as much by the visual arts as by the arts of time. This anecdote indeed describes the architecture of a panoptic observation centre of an individual, which Levé elsewhere compares, borrowing the title of one of Borges' short stories, to an "aleph." Borges defines this device as a unique and fixed point in space where all the places of the universe can be seen simultaneously.[7] An aleph resembles a portal of science fiction that would provide a view of all the other points of the universe, not by an effect of transparent succession or superimposition, but seen *at the same time from all angles*. Such an object is of course impossible, except as a thought experiment, after an immense effort of abstraction.

The centre of the entrepreneur's archive is but one instanciation of this ideal, impossible point of observation and convergence, which is a recurring motif in Levé's artistic and literary research, and contributes to give their shape to his texts. For instance, in the following passage of *Suicide*, the aleph orients a certain attitude towards narratives, involving a reconfiguration of traditional narratives and their chronological structure:

> As you did not believe in narratives, you would listen to stories with a floating ear, in order to lay bare their bone. […] You would reconstitute accounts in an order different from that which they'd been given. You would perceive duration like others would look an object in three dimensions, moving yourself around it so as to be able to represent it in all its aspects at once. You looked for the instantaneous halo of other people, the photograph that would, in a second, capture the unfolding of their years. Your reconstituted their lives as optical panoramas. You brought together distant events by compressing time so that each instant stood side by side with the others. You translated duration into space. You searched for the aleph of the other. (2011; 2009, 38, translation slightly modified).

Inspired by photography, this attitude disarticulates biographical accounts in order to create a synthetic approach to narrative data. Narrative chronology is torn apart, reconfigured and condensed *a posteriori*. Similar to the way cubist painters unfold the multiple perspectives from which a three-dimensional object can be observed and present them all together onto one single flat surface, the character ("you"), listening to the linear sequence of stories, seeks to collect, into

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[7] In this short story, a fictional double of the author, also named Borges, has the opportunity to contemplate an aleph in the cellar of Carlos Argentino Daneri, who uses this observation point to write an epic poem exhaustively describing the planet (we recognise a mocking evocation of Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*). But the entire story consists in a network of considerations on grief, portraiture and forgetfulness. We may contemplate the vast universe and want to capture it in representation, nothing—not even their many portraits—will prevent the memory of loved ones from fading away.

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a unique point of space, elements that belong to heterogeneous temporal perspectives, in order to extract their "instantaneous halo." This point of identity is not an abstract entity. The object of the search is not a "substantific marrow," but a "bone"; not a "being," but a "halo." Identity does not derive from a unifying interiority, from an ontological source with a constant flow, but from a structure, a very concrete framework that can only be apprehended from the outside, as a condensation of several properties belonging to the same individual at various times and places in their life. The aleph of the other is not their essence, but the snapshot that contains literally all aspects of their existence.

Like these biographies are disarticulated and re-condensed by the character of *Suicide*, the narrative can spatialise duration and tie it to a panoptic point of reference, absorbing the unfolding of time within a single instant that compresses it. Édouard Levé creates most of his literary works according to a strictly symmetrical approach. In the sequence of erratic entries of *Autoportrait*, "time doesn't exist" (2011; 2009, 38). In order to be able to observe all the sides of an object simultaneously, time must be abolished, the instant frozen, the infinite multiplicity of perspectives bound to the uniqueness of a point of view. What is this point of view, this aleph that allows to embrace panoptically the totality of the assertions collected in *Autoportrait*? What, if not the only fixed point of reference: the proper name of the author placed on the cover to which each "I" refers? *Autoportrait* would thus function as a display of the myriad descriptions that can be attached to the proper name to which the pronoun "I" refers, descriptions whose multiplication would allow a panoramic grasp of the referent, i.e. the person of the author. Accordingly, the text would correspond to Philippe Lejeune's canonical definition of the autobiographical pact, as that which attests that character, narrator and author are one and the same person corresponding to the enunciating "I" and to the proper name appearing on the book jacket (Lejeune 1975, 22). The proper name, because it is the hinge that attracts and gathers all possible utterances about its referent, would be the aleph of an individual, containing all possible points of view about that individual not only in synchrony, but also in diachrony.

The Aleph, Postmortem

However, nothing is more mysterious than this correspondence of a given individual to their own name. As Descartes already suggested: between two moments when I am certain to think, it is not certain that I am, that I exist (Descartes 1996, 17). What about the moments that escape my mind? My conscious perception? My memory? What about the existence of the entrepreneur, in the chronological series of his collection, between two documents? Even if the archive assembles proofs of their existence, characters, in the works of Edouard Levé, can always doubt that they exist. *Suicide*, for example, states: "You kept your day planners from previous years. You reread

them when you doubted your existence. […y]ou worried about not remembering what happened in between the things you wrote down. You had lived those moments too. Where had they gone?" (Levé 2011 [2009, 29]) The proper name "Édouard Levé," printed on the book cover, seems to function *in theory* like an aleph, gathering virtually, synchronically in one single point, all the assertions that can be attached to an individual; however, this aleph can *in fact* only be imperfect.

Indeed, because the enumeration of sentences in *Autoportrait* no longer obeys the logical causality of a narrative, it is potentially infinite. The series of "I"s referring to the proper name of the author is federated through the unicity of an enunciative voice. This convention guarantees a minimal and necessary fixity of the bind between the name and its referent, yet identity is always missed, because it is not the sum of conscious, describable moments. It is also the sum, impossible because virtually infinite, of all that is not said, not done, not accomplished, not perceived, not preserved by memory, not yet happened. As Nicolas Bouyssi states, "Édouard Levé suggests that the proper name is not the unifying factor of a being, and even less of an existence" (2011, 16; translation mine). A unified identity is a mirage. And, if an individual's identity can be given as an "instantaneous halo," as a "photograph that [summarises] in a second the unfolding of their years," as Levé imagines in *Suicide*, this can only be in the sense in which Barthes said of the famous photograph of the Winter Garden, inaccessible except to himself, representing his mother at the age of five, that "it achieved for [him], utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*" (Barthes 1981 [1980], 71). If the aleph of an individual is accessible only from the outside, in a utopian and highly singular way, it is also related to death. Only death would stop the proliferation of the archive of the traces of existence of the self, the infinite multiplication of the descriptions accumulated in *Autoportrait*.[8] Then, and only then, does this proliferation of possibilities come to a standstill, and can be subsumed in an attempt to reconstruct a coherent trajectory after the event. As Levé writes in *Suicide*:

> Only the living seem incoherent. Death closes the series of events that constituted their lives. So we resign to finding a meaning for them. To refuse them this would amount to accepting that a life, and thus life itself, is absurd. Yours had not yet attained the coherence of things done. Your death gave it this coherence. (2011 [2009, 23]).

A life can be summarised, *a posteriori*, and be ascribed a meaning as a coherent trajectory. But its character of "instantaneous halo" can only be approached through the affective, oblique and spectral force of the *punctum*, which befalls the viewer and illusorily restores the presence of the lost being,

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[8] Similarly, Philippe Lançon notes that the inventory of the self-presented in *Autoportrait* "could be endless: one is never done dealing with oneself; but it soon stops: one perhaps ends with the desire for oneself". In "Le Moi se meurt : par Edouard Levé, un 'Autoportrait' sans égotisme", *Libération*, 19 Mai 2005, translation mine.

whose *air* they believe to recognise. Levé's fantasy, as it appears in *Autoportrait*, seems to be that of a totalizing and unifying collection, which would not summarise his life, but which would re-present each facet of its identity in one single glance. Yet, logically, such unity can only be achieved *post mortem*. With *Autoportrait*, Levé thus brings together, under his own name, the archive of his existence, however incomplete it necessarily has to remain. In 2001, when asked by the magazine *Les Inrocktuptibles* under which form he would like to come back after his death, Levé answered: "Borges' aleph." Writing *Autoportrait*, Levé constructed an archive of himself that would turn his name into an aleph.[9]

Conclusion

Thus, through this break with the conventional narrative structures of biographical genres and this turn to an eminently photographic and documentary aesthetics, Levé situates his work at an unstable border at the threshold of the visible and the invisible, the knowable and the unknowable, but also of existence and essence. By renouncing chronology in favour of referentiality, by substituting an archival matrix to discursive structuring, i.e. by situating his writing strictly at the level of a superficial description of the visible, Levé ultimately opens onto an impossible, invisible dimension: that of a phantasmatic totalisation of existence compressed into a single point of view. Like Barthes' *punctum*, this dimension is eminently singular. Like the Winter Garden photograph, it must—not by a choice of the author, but by an intrinsic necessity—remain invisible. Like Barthes' mother, this superficial yet singular essence, this air, or this halo, can only be given definitively after the death of the person who left this imprint: returning from the depths of the archive to haunt the present of the living.

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[9] In the context of a questionnaire initiated in 2001 by French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* (November 2001).

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