

‘Je est un Autre’: Writing and the Otherness of the Self —A Response to Atsuko Tsuji

ANNA STRHAN

Institute of Education, University of London

I begin with two quotations, which express how writing can draw attention to the strangeness and unknowability of the self:

I have become a problem to myself, like land which a farmer works only with difficulty and at the cost of much sweat. For I am not now investigating the tracts of the heavens, or measuring the distance of the stars, or trying to discover how the earth hangs in space. I am investigating myself, my memory, my mind. There is nothing strange in the fact that whatever is not myself is far from me. But what could be nearer to me than myself? Yet I do not understand the power of memory that is in myself (Augustine, [1912] 1961, p. 223).

For I is an *other*. If brass wakes as a bugle, it is not its fault at all. That is quite clear to me: I am a spectator at the flowering of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it: I draw a bow across a string: a symphony stirs in the depths, or surges onto the stage (Rimbaud, [1967] 1994, p. 275).

These quotations illustrate the experience of the writer: in the act of writing, the self appears to the self as strange, as other. Augustine, in the writing of his autobiography, reflects upon the power of memory, and realises that it is beyond comprehension. Thus in trying to articulate what he is and has been, he becomes a question to himself, something he cannot understand. He states that although there is nothing nearer to him than himself, in writing he comes to see the knot of his own subjectivity as a problem that cannot be untangled and appears as strange. Thus, he goes on to question the nature of the self, as represented to himself in writing: ‘What, then, am I, my God? What is my nature? A life that is ever varying, full of change, and of immense power’ (Augustine, [1912] 1961, p. 224). For Rimbaud likewise, in the act of writing, the I is an other; he sees himself as a stranger whose thought he watches and listens to.

The idea that in writing about experience we attend to otherness is provocative and opens up many questions about the relationship between the alterity of the self, of other people, of material objects and of language. In responding to Tsuji’s paper, I will consider how the bringing to presence of the self’s otherness is related to the self’s relation of responsibility to other people, with particular reference to Emmanuel Levinas.

UNABLE TO GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

In writing autobiographically, the only account I can give of myself is partial. I can only bring myself to presence in language as hidden, a fragment of myself, and this fragmented, opaque account makes 'me' into a question and draws my attention to my own unknowability, that I will always be an other to myself. This is so in writing and in any attempt to represent the self. In the case of the photograph, for example, Versilov in *The Possessed* compares the human's lack of permanent identity with an actual portrait: 'Photography seldom shows real resemblance; that is, of course, quite natural because the original, we ourselves, is seldom the same' (Dostoevsky quoted in Hubben, [1952] 1997, p. 63). Tsuji suggested that in writing we 'can be attentively responsive to an otherness to ourselves', but how does this otherness relate to the otherness of others? Levinas's writing on subjectivity provides a helpful way of thinking about the relation between the otherness of self, neighbour and language.

Emmanuel Levinas describes the strangeness of the self in its relation to the neighbour thus:

'I am an other', but this is not the alienation Rimbaud refers to. I am outside of any place, in myself, on the hither side of the autonomy of auto-affection and identity resting on itself... The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others, unlike the certainty of the ego that rejoins itself in freedom (Levinas, [1974] 1998, p. 118).

Thus, while Rimbaud suggests that the I is an other, in that in writing I can see it as something other, as strange, in the same way that I see others, for Levinas, the strangeness of the I is found in its relation to the neighbour. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the way the subject is found only in its relation of responsibility to the Other. I am always turned towards the outside, passive to the approach of the Other, who elects me to responsibility. The face of the Other in its vulnerability addresses me and looks for my response. I am thus called to a position of responsibility and I am thereby called to my identity as a unique subject: I alone can respond to the address the Other presents to me, and this is my subjectivity. It is through being receptive to the address of the Other and the meaning they invest in my response that I can have language. In being thus called to this position of responsibility, I am outside of any 'place': responsibility is a null-site, an act of exposure to the Other who addresses me. I therefore cannot possess myself in reflection or writing because I am always in movement towards the Other who is ever beyond me, assuming my responsibility for them.

For Levinas, responsibility means that I am 'in myself', but to be in my own skin in this way means to be 'under the weight of the other', exposed, rather than an ego free in-itself and for-itself. As a subject, I am in exile, de-posed from my place, withdrawn from manifestation, strange to myself as always 'on the hither side of ... auto-affection'. Thomas Carl Wall describes how as always for-the-other, surrendering itself to the other, subjectivity 'is nothing but a primordial delay behind the Other. This is *absolute* passivity... The subject would be forever devoted to an obligation that would forever exceed it' (Wall, 1999, p. 40). The subject then is always strange, in its exile outside of its own place, through the responsibility to which it is summoned by the other, and any representation of the self in the act of writing draws attention to the fact that 'I' am already different to the writer of those words, as a self always in movement.

Levinas describes that relation to the Other as a relation in which I am taught, further

emphasising the idea of the self in a state of perpetual transformation through its relation with alterity, always being extended, as in this much-quoted passage:

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the Capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or conversation, is a non-allergic relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching [*enseignement*]. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced (Levinas, [1969] 2004, p. 51).

The self, for Levinas, is always passively formed through the Other's approach, which 'brings me more than I contain'. Thus, it is only as one receptive to the Other's approach that I am and can be one possessed of language. This notion of language is, for Levinas, intimately bound up with what cannot be represented in language. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas suggests that language is both the Saying and the Said. The Saying is the address, the offering of signs to another. It is thus described by Levinas as signification, the source of all meaning, but beyond meaning, and radically different from thematization.

The Said is the thematization that takes place in language. The Saying, the very opening of the address, cannot be written. As an example of a written text, *Otherwise Than Being* is particularly provocative as an attempt to draw attention to the Saying. The ethical language of *Otherwise than Being*, its disturbance of its own said through a textual performance which often endangers meaning and comprehension, can be seen as an attempt to exemplify this idea of a saying which itself slips through comprehension. There are similarities between writing as performance and the idea of writing as gesture. In the text of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas is gesturing to his reader, drawing their attention to the knot of subjectivity, to the strangeness of the other and the strangeness of the self: the saying of the text interrupts the said and remains beyond the content exposed in the said. *Otherwise than Being* thus draws the reader's attention to the tension always present within language, both thematizing the saying, whilst also showing its trace that must always remain beyond the said. On this interruption of the said, Levinas states:

And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all discourses are stated, in saying it to the one who listens to it... In the writing the saying does indeed become a pure said, a simultaneousness of the saying and of its conditions. A book is interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks (Levinas, [1981] 2004, pp. 170-171).

Writing therefore is only possible because of the self having been addressed by the Other and been given the possibility of language and meaning through that address, and all writing is in turn a form of address to an other.

The question of writing, and particularly writing about the self, as raised by Tsuji, turns the question of otherness back towards the self. There is almost a triangulation in writing about the self and experience, of a self formed in relation to the Other, then reflecting upon itself as brought to subjectivity by the other, in a text which is also addressed to an other. Augustine's *Confessions*, one of the most important texts in the history of the development of autobiographical writing is particularly indicative of how this intimates to us the limits of knowledge. The *Confessions* is written as in many

ways a prayerful address to the divine, a text in which Augustine reflects upon what he is, and how through his relations with others he has become the person he is at the point of writing. In writing he draws attention to the fact that that text is addressed to an Other (for him, God is the ultimate unknowable Other), and also that he sees the self as existing only as one in a movement of desire for the Other, a desire for one who is beyond language and knowledge. As a self who is always changing, always becoming through that desire and movement towards the beyond Being, he recognises that he is always fragmented and beyond representation and paradoxically it is writing that draws attention to that. The writing of (anti-)autobiographical texts must therefore be seen, as Atsuko suggests, as educative in a very profound sense. Such texts allow the self to attend to the invading otherness that leads to the changing nature of the self and thereby allows us to consider the conditions that have led to the particular discourse of which I am now part. In attending to these conditions, I see something of the others and the discourses that have brought me to this conversation, but I cannot give a full account of these: I can never fully narrate the conditions of my subjectivity. My writing can only give a partial account of myself and that account, in its fragmented nature, will always seem strange and a failed reflection of my own experiences. It is only as a self formed in relation to the otherness of other people that I can write and attend to the refracted otherness of myself in my writing. So it is only as one who is in movement towards an Other, in a dizzying position of ethical responsibility for the Other than I am a subject, beautifully expressed by Kristeva when she writes, in *Tales of Love*, 'I am, in love, at the zenith of subjectivity' (Kristeva, [1983] 1987, p. 5).

In relation to Tsuji's paper and the question of the otherness of the self in writing, the following points also occur to me as related to the theme of the otherness of the self and the otherness of experience in writing.

JUDITH BUTLER'S 'GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF'

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler explores the question of the opacity of the subject, through dialogue with the writings of Levinas, Foucault and Adorno. She demonstrates in this work that any aspiration to self-knowledge must acknowledge the impermeability of the self, yet at the same time, holds onto the notions of autonomy and agency, which are considered so important as pedagogical aims. Butler extends Levinas's writing on the otherness of the Other via a Foucauldian interpretation to consider how social discourses, beyond the self, create the self. At the same time, the self is always being addressed and thereby called to a position of ethical responsibility, called to give an account of itself, to answer for its actions and words, even if a full articulation can never be given. Thus she considers how in the mode of address, we can transform ourselves and re-draft ourselves in the act of taking responsibility, which has significant implications for a notion of subjectivity in education in which a subjectivated self still retains the power of autonomy. The following paragraphs from *Giving an Account of Oneself* illustrate this idea:

The self at issue is clearly 'formed' within a set of social conventions that raise the question whether a good life can be conducted within a bad one, and whether we might, in recrafting ourselves within and for another, participate in the remaking of social conditions....

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves

precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance-to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted, to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven (Butler, 2005, pp. 134-136).

Linked to this more Foucauldian paradigm, it might be interesting to consider the question of the otherness of the self in relation to the idea of self-reflexivity and the practices of the care of the self.

HEIDEGGER, BENJAMIN AND ADORNO ON THE OTHERNESS OF LANGUAGE

Tsuji's paper touched on the otherness of language in its mimetic function. This could be explored further in relation to Heidegger and Adorno's writings on the nature of language. Heidegger's later writings on the nature of language suggest that language is poetry in its purest form, and that language brings things to presence and reveals their nature as unsayable. Thus he states that language 'names', but the naming is not a designation: 'This naming does not hand out titles. It does not apply titles, but it calls into the word. The naming calls' (Heidegger, [1971] 2001, p. 196). The naming calls that which is concealed to come to language as unconcealed, thus instituting Being. We can see this idea in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: 'Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being *from out of* their being' (ibid., p. 71). We could see here a sense in which the notion of *poiesis* as not just the art of poetry, but also the act of making or forming is suggested by this sense of poetry as the bringing to Being. But this bringing to Being through language also means a bringing to being as in some sense *beyond* speaking, as unsayable. Thus Heidegger writes: 'Projective saying is poetry... Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is... Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the unsayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable *as such* into a world' (ibid.). This is why poetry is language in its purest form. It shows the unsayable as such, revealing it to be other than the word, in a sense beyond language even while being brought to presence as hidden by language. Thus the unsayable-ness of what is can never be said in language, even while this is revealed precisely through language.

There are similarities with Benjamin's view of language: 'In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized' (Benjamin, [1968] 1999, p. 80). This idea of language bringing to presence the unsayable has implications for how we view the nature of language in learning. In particular Adorno's writings on the mimetic and identitarian functions of language and the way that identity thinking can lead to an attitude of domination might be considered in relation to this idea of an attitude of attentiveness and ethical responsibility towards otherness. All of these views highlight the impossibility of writing to 'capture' experience, as Agamben suggests, 'experience [is] the transcendental limit of language [and thus] rules out language as being in itself totality and truth' (Agamben, 1993, p. 51). Thus, their writing can help us attend

further to the opacity and strangeness of experience, the way it slips through language and draws attention to the limits of language and knowledge and the strangeness and opacity of the self as one who has and narrates experience.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1993) *Infancy and History*, L. Heron (trans.) (London and New York, Verso).
- Augustine [1912] (1961) *Confessions*, Loeb Classical Library Edition, R. S. P. Coffin (trans.) (London, Penguin Books).
- Benjamin [1968] (1999) *Illuminations*, H. Zorn (trans.) (London, Pimlico).
- Butler, J. (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, Fordham University Press).
- Heidegger, M. [1971] (2001) *Poetry, Language, Thought*, A. Hofstadter (trans.) (New York, Harper Collins).
- Hubben [1952] (1997) *Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Kafka* (New York, Touchstone).
- Kristeva, J. [1983] (1987) *Tales of Love*, L. S. Roudiez (trans.) (New York, Columbia University Press).
- Levinas, E. [1969] (2004) *Totality and Infinity*, A. Lingis (trans.) (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers).
- Levinas, E. [1981] (2004) *Otherwise than Being*, A. Lingis (trans.) (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers).
- Rimbaud, A. [1967] (1994) *Poems*, P. Schmidt (trans.) (London, Everyman's Library).
- Wall, T. C. (1999) *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany, State University of New York Press).