

## Writing under Influence: Rick Moody's Stereophonic Autobiographies

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Stereophony is a term that originally belongs to the field of music and defines a system in which sound is reproduced in a three-dimensional effect. The word “stereophony” and the reproduction of sound it entails provides American author and critic Jonathan Lethem with a forceful metaphor to describe much contemporary fiction as a sum of echoes and reverberations. Lethem coins this concept in a text whose title “The Ecstasy of Influence, A Plagiarism” reads like a variation on Harold Bloom’s canonical essay, *The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry* but also draws on Roland Barthes’ conviction that texts are necessarily composed of already read citations: “Any text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (Barthes quoted in Lethem, 68). Lethem takes Barthes’ notion of “stereophony” to its paroxysm and composes a ten-page manifesto which is entirely made up of sentences he borrows from multiple sources. The essay is followed by a four-page guide which exposes the complete list of references Lethem plundered to create this cut-up. At stake here is Lethem’s ambition to dispute Harold Bloom’s theory according to which “influence is *Influenza*” (Bloom 97). Lethem embraces the opposite stance arguing that influence is not a disease from which writers should recover from. On the contrary, contemporary novelists should not give in to the pressure of influence but rather indulge in unlimited appropriation and plundering. To him, contemporary fiction cannot be original without largely dwelling on plagiarism: “The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all

human utterances—is plagiarism.” (Lethem 68)<sup>1</sup> In this essay published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 2007, Lethem calls for an ecstatic relief and liberation from centuries of literary heritage and urges writers to steal freely. He defends the random pillage of texts and claims that plagiarism has become the twenty-first-century writer’s condition. Indebtedness to the canon necessarily implies usurpation.

Lethem’s short essay strongly resonates with the strategy adopted by American novelist and short story writer Rick Moody whose approach to literary influence is resolutely free from any form of anxiety. When interviewed by David Ryan about literary tradition, Moody declares “since everything is exhausted, everything is permitted.” (Ryan 2001) Pushing John Barth’s concept of exhaustion to the next level, Moody’s writing largely feeds on lavish appropriation and loose borrowing, which causes generic volatility particularly for books which have an autobiographical dimension. The array of voices and sources summoned often cloud the text and hinder the attempt at unveiling the self. Because they are profoundly stereophonic, Moody’s autobiographical texts are to be read as fiction for they are fraught with references that eclectically range from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Jacques Derrida or from Kurt Vonnegut to Jose Luis Borges. Rick Moody often pledges allegiance to prominent literary figures, whether it is made explicit in the preliminary dedications,<sup>2</sup> in the very title,<sup>3</sup> or in an appended bibliography<sup>4</sup> that reads like a coda. Influences and sources are exposed in a transparent way and somehow provide a ready-made critical apparatus which contributes to shaping a literary persona that results from a sum of miscellaneous influences. Texts advertised as autobiographies are supported with ample critical references—therefore, the genuine and intimate project of the autobiographical quest forever seems to be thwarted. The extensive list of primary sources or references muffle the writer’s voice. At stake, here, is a reflection on the very possibility for autobiography to subsist when writing primarily relies on echoes, reverberations, and cross-referencing, in other words, stereophony. If Moody’s writing

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<sup>1</sup> Lethem explains that this sentence derives from a letter written by Mark Twain to writer and activist Helen Keller (1880-1968) as she had been accused of plagiarism.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven* is a collection of stories published in 1995 and dedicated to John Hawkes.

<sup>3</sup> Rick Moody published in 2002 a memoir entitled *The Black Veil*. The title is a direct reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Minister’s Black Veil” which is to be found in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837).

<sup>4</sup> This is the case in *The Black Veil*. Rick Moody, at the end of the text, provides a long list of sources that he supposedly consulted to retrace the story of the Moody family. The title of this section, “Selected Bibliography,” is quite ironic for it stresses the non-exhaustive character of this five-page list and suggests that the writer’s system of referencing is meant to be incomplete.

feeds on plagiarism, doesn't it challenge the very genre of autobiography and force it to adapt and transform?

Such ambiguities lie at the core of two Rick Moody texts which are both presented as autobiographical though they are radically different in terms of length and structure. Moody's first attempt at unveiling the self takes the form of a non-narrative short story entitled, "Primary Sources," which is to be found in the collection *The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven*, published in 1995. It entirely reads like a ten-page bibliography composed of forty-eight entries and augmented by thirty footnotes which present the reader with a substitute for autobiographical material. From Plato to American-rock band The Feelies, from Montaigne to Stanley Elkin, the short story shapes the life of the writer according to a wide-ranging selection of books and music albums. Each page is divided into two different levels: the very blunt list, on the one hand, and the corresponding footnotes, on the other, in which Moody offers rambling comments about his life and sometimes insight about the selected works. Seven years later, Moody transforms his autobiographical sketch into a book whose ambition is to trace the history of the Moody family in a memoir entitled *The Black Veil, A Memoir with Digressions*. Similar use of lists is noticeable at the end of this book—in lieu of a coda, a sixty-five-entry bibliography runs on five pages and presents the reader with a selection of sources that the writer claims to have consulted to write his memoir. The bibliography primarily aims at making up for the erratic system of referencing that characterizes the book as Moody liberally appropriates words or phrases from writers without using any inverted commas or quotation marks. The whole memoir is built on an influx of references that subdue Moody's voice and obstruct the attempt to confess. As a result, literary influence operates, in both texts, as a chorus of voices that keep Moody silent and forever push Moody's voice to the margins. The *Black Veil* reveals that the author is an expert in the art of forging while "Primary Sources" only delineates a literary persona.

When *The Black Veil* first came out in 2002, it was subtitled *A Memoir with Digressions*. However, Rick Moody himself quickly decided to alter his original title and asked his publisher to remove definitively the subtitle of the book for the future editions. Such a change has a major consequence on the very nature of this work as it obviously increases its generic variability. The book was initially labeled as non-

fiction and unquestionably belonged to the genre of autobiography.<sup>5</sup> Yet, by removing the original subtitle, Rick Moody willingly turned his memoir into a work of fiction. Besides, from its very title, the book summons Nathaniel Hawthorne's ghost in the obvious echo it creates with the short story "The Minister's Black Veil" published in 1837. This joint authority raises questions as to who is telling the story for Hawthorne's spectral shadow is visibly cast throughout Moody's text. *The Black Veil* stands as a contemporary variation on Hawthorne's tale and at times reads like a two-handed piece of writing. Hawthorne's text is being plundered and fragments from many of his works are to be found in explicit quotations, brief allusions, or sometimes unacknowledged borrowing. Hawthorne is being so vocal that he sometimes silences Moody's voice, the text making confession more and more opaque. As Moody's and Hawthorne's sentences interweave, the text takes on a three-dimensional aspect. Indeed, "The Minister's Black Veil" is to be found in Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, a title which itself hints at an expression from *The Life and Death of King John* by William Shakespeare<sup>6</sup>. While Hawthorne borrows from Shakespeare, Moody subsequently borrows from both writers and, doing so, redesigns some thrice-told tale.

As Moody's and Hawthorne's voices compete, autobiographical material is pushed to the background. Therefore, the whole project of the memoir rests upon a manipulation, a hoax, that consists in substituting Nathaniel Hawthorne's reconfigured plot for Rick Moody's intimate life. The maneuvering at work in this book is intricate and requires some clarifications. Moody's first-person narrator embarks on a quest for an alleged ancestor, Reverend Joseph Moody, whose life and story have inspired Hawthorne with the character of Reverend Hooper, the fictional protagonist of his tale. So, Moody's fictional autobiography derives from Hawthorne's first footnote to his tale, which authenticates the existence of an actual clergyman named Mr. Joseph Moody<sup>7</sup>. This Puritan minister (1700-1753) provides Moody with fictional material for his mock autobiography—what sets the autobiography in motion is the belief that, somehow, the Moody family is related to this reverend whose potential for

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<sup>5</sup> *The Black Veil, A Memoir with Digressions* was labeled as "non-fiction" on the series title page of the 2002 edition.

<sup>6</sup> "Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale, / Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man". William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John*, Act III, scene IV, 113.

<sup>7</sup> "Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper" (305). This quote is the first footnote of "The Minister's Black Veil" which is entirely reproduced at the end of Moody's book.

fiction was developed by Hawthorne. This inaugural footnote provides Moody with a plot that diverts him from genuine confession as the whole point of the text is to lead the readers astray. The final epiphany reveals that the connection with Joseph Moody proceeds from lies that have been repeated from one generation to the next: “[T]he Moodys of my line had no conclusive relation to the Moodys of Handkerchief Moody’s line, unless I was willing to make up one (...) *Therefore, my line, for some hundred years or more, had been liars about our lineage*” (284). Autobiography seems to be a promise that can never be kept as confession only fuels further obfuscation and leads to the construction of a fictional self. The genealogical quest leads the reader to a dead-end and serves no other purpose than celebrating the power of making up stories. However, the anxiety to document this hoax reveals the irony on which the whole novel is built. As a coda to his text, Moody publishes the original short story by Hawthorne to which he attaches a selection of references he consulted to conduct his family research. This final compilation does not illuminate the autobiographical quest as the more sources are made explicit, the less Moody’s life can be apprehended. Critic Joseph Dewey aptly compares Moody to an embroiderer who spins veils:

Like the Surveyor who invites his readers to embroider their own tale of Hester Prynne, here Moody helpfully appends to his ‘memoir’ the entire text of Hawthorne’s story and a bibliography of critical sources—an invitation to do your own riff on the text. Here, you see, threads spin veils” (Dewey 44).

The whole book feasts on borrowing, stealing and plagiarizing material from Hawthorne. Therefore, quotations are cryptically incorporated into the text and only part of them is decoded at the very end, when references surface and abound in the extensive bibliography. Yet, throughout the novel, we can note that the use of italics is almost always Moody’s while Hawthorne’s words are left unidentified by any typographical markers. Quoting immoderately from “The Minister’s Black Veil” but also from the complete works of Hawthorne, Moody gives birth to a multi-layered body of texts engendered by multiple authorities. The preamble to the bibliography stands as one of the most ironical passages of the book since it reads like a confession but what Moody unveils is the very fact that his strategy has been, from beginning to end, dissimulation:

My style of quotation in this book sometimes asks the reader to suspend the question of who exactly is doing the speaking. A dangerous undertaking, to be sure, and one that I seek to redress here. The aspiration concealed in this strategy is one of which, hopefully the literature present will properly appear to be

quilted together from the texts of the past, sometimes consciously, sometimes less so. For the sake of completeness, however, please note the following: the vast majority of uncited quotations in these pages, as well as all the chapter titles, come from the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. There are also some phantom observations from Herman Melville, as well as Cotton Mather (chapter six), Roland Barthes (chapter seven), Robert Held (on firearms, in chapter nine) ... (Moody 319)

The organizing principle of the novel is mostly based on concealment, a longstanding strategy adopted by the narrator as various episodes of his childhood testify: “Don’t draw attention” (17) was his motto at school where he enjoyed being “spectral”, adding “[K]ids pushed past me as though I were spectral. My camouflage was perfect” (17). This wish to be invisible partly accounts for the strategy of opacity at work in the novel. The habit of keeping silent can justify the writer’s wish to be literally written through or spoken through.

In an essay about phantom voices and cryptic texts, French critic Marie-Ange Depierre<sup>8</sup> uses the concept of ventriloquism to name the process through which a writer’s voice can channel another. She describes this vocal palimpsest as a mechanism through which voices overlap, compete and constantly chase one another. If ventriloquism necessarily implies the receding of one’s voice in favor of another, we can argue that it relies on a double movement: withdrawal goes hand in hand with re-appropriation. The ventriloquist changes his own voice to pretend it comes from elsewhere, but by relocating words that come from another source, he creates an unprecedented production of sounds. Moody’s table of contents largely draws on this technique. Indeed, the very long, narrative titles of the nineteen chapters that compose *The Black Veil* are unacknowledged borrowing from various novels and journals written by Hawthorne. Read end-to-end, we notice that the contents section sounds very much like the beginning of the “Minister’s Black Veil”, especially when we read the titles of the first eight chapters which impart obvious Hawthornian motifs like the children, the Puritan community, or the veil.

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<sup>8</sup> Marie-Ange Depierre’s essay privileges the examination of the figure of the haunted over the haunting figure. She analyzes the *fantasmophore*, someone who is haunted by voices, and the multiple strategies of erasure thus adopted by writers. Among them is the two-hand technique, a vocal palimpsest, that results in a constant chasing of the writer’s voice. She argues: “L’écrivain hanté par l’œuvre d’un prédécesseur pourra-t-il trouver sa voix dans cette écriture syncopée – cet arrêt de soi pour livrer passage à l’autre –, cette écriture fuguée qui s’écrit à deux mains comme un palimpseste vocal où les motifs se répètent, se fuyant et se poursuivant l’un l’autre ?”(12)

Children, with bright faces, tript merrily beside their parents,  
or mimicked a graver gait...11  
The old people of the village came stooping along the  
street...26  
The topic, it might be supposed, was obvious enough...42<sup>9</sup>  
Customers came in, as the forenoon advanced, but rather  
slowly... 54<sup>10</sup>  
Stooping somewhat and looking on the ground as is customary  
with abstracted men...68  
The deep pause of flagging spirits, that always follows mirth and  
wine... 76<sup>11</sup>  
In his case, however, the symbol had a different import...89  
It takes off its face like a mask, and shows the grinning bare  
skeleton underneath...104<sup>12</sup>  
(Moody, Table of Contents)

On closer analysis, it appears that the table of contents freely plagiarizes various texts by Hawthorne. This generates syntactical alterations, chronological disruptions, but also loose borrowing from a wide range of stories, novels and journals that sometimes have not even penned by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Rick Moody freely composes a text which sounds Hawthornian but actually is not. Hawthorne speaks through Moody, thus creating a unique palimpsest of voices, offering a variation on a recognizable Hawthornian tune as well. Doing so, he composes here an alternative version of the tale, and, as he dispossesses Hawthorne of his words, he gives birth to a text which is both familiar and unfamiliar: words indeed do not belong to the right story. Moody relocates Hawthorne's words into a new textual body that creates an original piece. The table of contents reads like some stereophonic preface announcing a complex system of echoes. So, from the beginning, it is made clear that Moody's autobiography will be built on acoustic reverberations that may resist identification. The five-page bibliography that supplements the narrative is highly ironical for it documents a lie, a hoax, and reveals the counterfeit quality of the project while the list of references reads like a parodic attempt to be transparent and accountable.

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<sup>9</sup> The first three chapters are borrowed sentences that come from "The Minister's Black Veil." We can notice that Moody slightly changed the order of the first two sections as the original text reads: "The old people of the village came stooping along the street. Children, with bright faces, tripped merrily beside their parents, or mimicked a graver gait, in the conscious dignity of their Sunday clothes". (Moody, 305)

<sup>10</sup> "Customers came in, as the forenoon advanced, but rather slowly". The quote is to be found in *The House of the Seven Gables* published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851.

<sup>11</sup> "At length, however, there was a pause—the deep pause of flagging spirits, that always follows mirth and wine". This quote belongs to *The Scarlet Letter* published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850.

<sup>12</sup> This quote is not a quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne for it is taken from *Nathaniel Hawthorne and his Wife*, written by the son of the writer, Julian Hawthorne, in 1884.

Moody's response to the constant tension between fiction and non-fiction largely consists in laying bare the frontiers between genres and categories. Untraceable quotations ironically mix with exhaustive bibliographies that often result in a pointless system of references. Supporting a fictional narrative with a vast number of historical sources is a paradox that Moody enjoys pushing to its limits just as he takes pleasure in documenting the creation of his literary self. Indeed, in the short story entitled "Primary Sources," Moody piles up random names of albums and books that have shaped his life and promises the reader some transparent confession as early as footnote number one:

1. Born 10.18.61 in NYC. Childhood pretty uneventful. We moved to the suburbs. I always read a lot. I did some kid stuff, but mostly I read. So this sketchy and selective bibliography – this list of some of the books I have around the house now – is really an autobiography. (Moody 231)

The note makes it clear that the primary sources listed must be read like a substitute for personal confessions. Moreover, the pleonastic use of the adverb "really" is meant to dissipate any possible doubt and confirms the autobiographical project. However, if the birthdate is Moody's, the personal material presented remains evasive as the succession of paratactic sentences shows. The footnote actually opens on a reluctance to confess. The author's childhood is said to have been "uneventful"; "the suburbs" are not precisely located while "kid stuff" does not evoke any precise activity. Besides, in other footnotes, autobiographical episodes are arbitrarily juxtaposed with some literary anecdotes but the two often prove to be loosely connected. Footnote number 22 is a telling example of such disjunction: "In 1987, I institutionalized myself. At that moment, Thurber and Groucho Marx and anthologies of low comedy seemed like the best literature had to offer. I thought I was going to abandon writing—something had to give—but I didn't. I felt better later" (238). The blunt statement "In 1987, I institutionalized myself" remains highly elliptical and only randomly connects with the following comments.

Throughout the story, most autobiographical episodes are cryptic and diluted in literary remarks. It is as if the bibliography alone were to speak for itself. The annotation effort is left incomplete. A third of the book entries is not even commented as if titles of novels, essays, or music albums were enough for readers to get a clear understanding of Moody's personality. A soundtrack and a book-track provide a substitute for the promised autobiography as Moody literally shapes and imposes on



us a selection of critical references that construct his persona. Some footnotes are entirely made up of quotations that can be found in *The Black Veil* as well. Cross-referencing can be spotted in both bibliographies. Footnote number 19 in “Primary Sources” is a quote from “The Minister’s Black Veil” which is in turn to be found in *The Black Veil*, itself being somehow an extended footnote to Hawthorne’s short story.

Both texts create a system of echoes and correspondences which completely muffle the voice of a writer who is literally written and spoken through. They engage us to reflect on the quintessentially stereophonic quality of Moody’s writing, which mostly rests on an interactive and cumulative process. The writer becomes an embroiderer, or to put it again in Joseph Dewey’s terms, “an editor and arranger of words” (46). This cut-and-paste poetics necessarily impacts narratives of the self as plagiarism and free borrowing transform their very nature and purpose. The attempt at self-definition morphs into an openly collaborative project relying on intertextual practices and rhizomatic connections with past writers. As *The Black Veil* organically grows from Hawthorne’s tale, the autobiographical material assumes a fictional potential. The individual self is superseded by the delineation of a collective self, characterized by hyper-connectedness. It is thus not surprising that the narrator of *The Black Veil* constantly alternates between “I” and “we;” not only does it reveal the instable and plural nature of the self, but it also underlines the intrinsic fictional quality of Moody’s autobiography. The genealogical paradigm is revised as the autobiographical subject feeds on multiple layers of influences. Sources abound the better to expose, paradoxically, an ever-elusive self whose very speculation demands storytelling. Drawing on cut-up techniques, Moody’s fiction is not just making it new to challenge forms and structures, it calls for liberal plagiarism and a renewed relationship to the canon that both liberates from literary tradition and subverts the unique source of authority.

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