

Narrative Models for *Unselfing*

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Twentieth century French and Francophone literature is marked by an abundance of first-person testimonies relating the intimate physical and psychological realities of unusual self-experiences. This is true of both desirable and undesirable experiences; such as, on the one hand, accounts of mystical transcendence, sexual ecstasy and drug-induced visions and, on the other, debilitating thirst, traumatic pain and incapacitating fear. Texts relating the “what it’s like” that is, phenomenological accounts, of altered states abound in the French-language during this period across diverse cultural contexts.

If we think of Saul becoming Paul as a canonical example of the *conversion* model for *unselfing* (broadly understood as either self-transcendence or self-loss) I identify and analyze four other models that take hold during the twentieth century: *disruption*, *mutation*, *fragmentation* and *destruction*. In the absence of a shared vocabulary for the unselfing that occurs at the limits of experience, the writers I discuss develop these models for relating the peculiar knowledge of altered states of selfhood.

Does the reduction of a self-concept during *unselfing* experiences have an effect on intersubjective relationships? While some writers like seek altered states of selfhood precisely to reduce the claims of the self and get closer to others, other writers like Auschwitz-survivor Charlotte Delbo refer to this type of radical empathy as “useless.” Studying self-inflicted altered states alongside imposed ones not only underlines unexpected convergences in the poetic strategies used to testify to the extremes of human experience but points to the need for a rigorous examinations of the philosophical status of the self in concepts such as *empathy*, *altruism* and *intersubjectivity*. The fundamental conflict between these writers' radically opposed interpretations of *unselfing* suggests that there is more to altruism than reduced self-interest, and that there might be a price to pay for empathetic experience.

These writers include Paul Valéry, Charlotte Delbo, Henri Michaux, Yolande Mukagasana, George Bataille, Simone Weil, Abdelkébir Khatibi and Hélène Cixous. My work is interdisciplinary in nature and makes use of discussions in philosophy, psychology and cognitive science while exploring the concept of “the self” and “the other” in literature.