Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree in European,
American and Postcolonial Languages
and Literatures

Final Thesis

LIFE ON THE VERY EDGE OF FICTION

The Deconstruction of
Autofictionalization
in Ben Lerner's Trilogy

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Pia Masiero

Assistant supervisor
Ch. Prof. Simone Francescato

Graduand
Husein Dulovic
882517

Academic Year
2021 / 2022

Acknowledgments

A lot happened during the course of three years, more or less, during my stay in Venice. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my family, my grandfather, grandmother, mom and uncle who pushed and encouraged me the whole time during my studies. Without them, I wouldn't have gained the knowledge, made precious friendships and had a life experience on this magical island.

I would like to thank Margherita Melotti and Mattia Sandrin with whom I have spent unforgettable time together. From the moment I have walked into, what we would name Ca' Rmango, you have accepted me heartedly and brought me into your circle of friends and family. I thank you for teaching me the language and for making me feel as at home. Marghe, Mattia, Annalisa, Yasmine, Maik, Edo…fioi, vi voglio bene.

Next, I would like to thank Alia Elsaady, with whom I became close friend since our first "Welcome Day". What were the odds that you would sit exactly next to me on that hot September day? Our friendship since then, only strengthened through time and I am thankful for all the help and good moments we shared together.

I would also like to thank Venice Basketball Club Crabs, with whom I played for an entire season. Being part of the team, traveling around Veneto, winning and having late night celebrations after games is something that will always stay in my heart.

I thank all of my roommates with whom I shared apartments, many friends I met and wonderful colleagues with whom I shared exceptional classes. I thank Ca' Foscari university and professors for all the knowledge I gained from them and special thanks to professor Pia Masiero who has been my mentor and who introduced me to the world of autofiction. Last but not least, I would also like to thank professor William Boelhower with whom I had some memorable and invigorating conversations together, whose encouragement and motivation meant a world to me during my studies.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Part One: Genealogy And Theory

Genealogy

Theory

Part Two: The Prism Between Two Worlds

Conclusion

Works Cited

Introduction

"It is I and it is not I"

— Gerard Genette

"I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is"

— Ben Lerner

The first quote explains to us, in a most simplified way, what autofiction is. To an average reader, such definition might sound rather odd, more puzzling than defining. Autofiction. A word that is not used frequently in everyday literary discourse. Is it autobiography? Or is it fiction? And at the same time, what does literary scholar Genette mean by "I" and "not I"?

The genre of autofiction has a history starting long before its official term came into being. This phenomenon is related to works such as the *kunstlerroman,* or artist's novel, but there is a slight, yet important finesse unique to the works of autofiction. Defined narrowly, central characters of these texts share the name of the author. Addressing the aforementioned question, the "I" suggests that the author of a novel both is and is not a narrator, protagonist and a main character of the novel. The "I" refers and does not refer to the author. This metafictional line is blurred within the works of the autofiction because of the elision of the distance between the author and the author-character. This hybridity makes it more gripping because it distorts reality and textuality and draws attention to the "impossibility of fully delineating the difference between fiction and nonfiction" (Worthington 2).

This trend has grown popular in recent decades, and the proliferation of the genre can be perceived in works such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* (1993) Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2* (1995), Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* (1998),

Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001), Will Self's *Walking to Hollywood* (2010), Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series (2009-2011), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be* (2013), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). A broader definition of autofictional works, which will be addressed in this thesis, allows for more freedom, including the creation of a protagonist with a different name but nevertheless containing *autofictional* references to an extratextual person — that is, to the author.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will explain what autoficition is from a theoretical point of view. The paper will start by addressing the early years of this concept's formation and how Philippe Lejeune's highly influential essay on autobiography raised certain questions in a time when literary criticism turned its focus ultimately on the text itself. What became of the utmost importance was not the *why* of autobiographical and historical reality but the *how* of the narration. It was a time when structuralist and poststructuralist, text-oriented and affect theories were marking their course in narratological debates.

Doubrovsky's interpretation of Lejeune's essay made him coin the term autofiction. He saw a categorical impracticability in his model of autobiography. The author, narrator and the protagonist, may not be one and the same. The experimentation with the "I" made Doubrovsky realize that it can refer and not refer to the author. This became an essential element of what autofiction is. Ultimately, what autofiction presents is imaginative probings with autobiographical facts. The blend brought up new and provocative questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.

After the historical background is established, I will discuss the other essential element of autofiction — that of the onomastic connection between the author and the narrator. In the major-

ity of autofictional texts, these connections typically include the name-sharing between the author and the so called *author-character*. However, as it is the case with Ben Lerner, there are other "identification operators," to use Gasparini's term, that are noticeable and even more important concerning the author and author-character. I will also explore the concept of the author developed by poststructuralist scholars and shed some light on how autofiction rejects the "death of the author." Namely, I will present structuralist and poststructuralist theories on the concept of the author and explain how autofiction developed in response to them. As we will see, this phenomenon is crucial to our understanding of autofiction's growth and popularity as well as how it established itself within the postmodernist paradigm.

The following chapter will discuss the relationship between the reader and the autofictional text. Being a hybrid genre, there have been ongoing debates regarding its literary categorization. For these purposes, I will discuss studies taken from interdisciplinary approaches in neurology and cognitive theories. However, as I will explain, such theories notwithstanding, the problems readers face in attempting to domesticate an autofictional text remain unresolvable. This is largely because individual readers tend to perceive the text the way they want to, no matter what the paratextual apparatus might tell them. In this respect, I will closely explore the similarities between memoir and autofiction in order to grasp why readers are inclined to interpret the works of autofiction as memoirs.

The first part of the paper will conclude with the examination of the rise and popularity of hybrid genre narratives — particularly autofictions— and how this phenomena present a new frame in contemporary literature that reflects the current literary movement towards a new dominant. As the postmodern logic only recognized fiction, the autofictional logic insists on creating

reality by making fictions experienced as facts. Numerous intertextual references to the real world outside the text enhance the reality-effect that these texts produce. Ontological indecipher-ability and intertextual clashes induce a reassessment of autofiction's fictional/referential states. In order to explain how contemporary autofiction is situated, I will use the concept developed by Gibbons, Vermeulen, and Akker known as "metamodernism" to explain today's dominant cultur-al logic, connect it to the prose works of Ben Lerner and argue the value of his writing in terms of contribution to what a metamodern text is about — making fiction be perceived as reality. stripping away the reality to its core.

In the second part of the thesis, I will focus on the shift from postmodernism to meta-modernism through the works of Ben Lerner, namely in his three novels: Leaving the Atocha Station (2011), 10:04 (2014), and The Topeka School (2019). It is through Lerner's work that we can find the essence of contemporary autofiction in addition to other factors that are currently contributing to a shift in cultural tendencies. Autofictional texts are a paradigm of the metamod-ernist logic. The metamodernist zeitgeist advances toward what Sturgeon defined as "reasserting the self." In the postmodern world, the self was presented as an unstable identity, lost in the world of disinformation and self-referentiality. On the other hand, the self in metamodern texts seek to "locate that self in a place, a time and a body" (Gibbons 118). The self in autofiction is the self that sees the life of the author as a guiding idea. These novels ultimately "redistribute[] the relation between the self and fiction" (Sturgeon). Fiction in autofiction does not convey a classical meaning of inventing. Instead, it embraces the narratives we tell ourselves. These narra-tives are fictitious and writing about the self is fictitious, but in autofiction, the reality itself is seen to be colored by fiction.

Other than "reasserting the self," metamodern texts embrace real world concerns and crises. This engagement with larger sociopolitical events is used to thematize the different dimensions of a life. Lerner embraces this metamodern sentiment by combining facts with fiction in his novels. By exploring the ontological reality of the extratextual and narrative world, Lerner engages earnestly with real-world problems and shows the connectedness and importance of fiction within our lives. His three novels thrive on the honest value that fiction has in our contemporary society. Furthermore, Lerner, as one of the prime examples of today's autofictional authors, passed through the relativism of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. He conceded to them and went beyond, using postmodernist and poststructuralist techniques to a different end. A central segment of autofictional texts is that they tell a story of maturation, from growth to maturity, where the readers accept the author's life, body, and work, coalescing between autobiographical facts and fictions.

Lerner's three novels do not represent a trilogy in the traditional way how we might define a trilogy. In his first novel, Leaving the Atocha Station, we are introduced to Adam Gordon, who is a young poet in his mid-twenties, writing poems and questioning the value of poetry in today's world in a time when Madrid faces a terrorist attack. His second novel, 10:04, describes an unnamed narrator who is a successful writer and poet in New York City, surrounded by two superstorms, writing the current novel. Lastly, in The Topeka School, we are reintroduced to Adam Gordon, this time covering his childhood and adolescent years in Topeka, Kansas.

It is worth mentioning that Lerner, as a novelist, is unpredictable. What would become a trilogy was not intended from the beginning. After each novel, Lerner would imply that he is a

poet and that he will return to writing poems. However, after writing the third (and maybe the last) novel, he began using the word "trilogy."

This trilogy is unconventional because the novels do not follow Adam Gordon's life chronologically. The novels jump from one period in Adam's life to another and provide a full picture of him by the publication of the last novel. In this respect, the trilogy represents what Doubrovsky explained as "a postmodern version of autobiography" (2). What is more, all three books share a focus on the process of writing and shaping the very texts we are reading. This metafictional line is visible quite strongly in 10:04 l, but it appears subtly in the other two books as well. I will next delineate the three formal and thematic interconnections that appear visibly in all three novels.

First, there is a strong emphasis on memories in each novel. Lerner, in writing about his fictionalized version of himself, seems to be questioning how memories operate and how they constitute the character of Adam Gordon. Moreover, Lerner reminds us how unreliable they can be. Second, in all books, there is a strong use of metalepsis — that is the intrusion by the extra-textual narrator in which the narrative frame breaks, generating a particular experience of reading the text as a reality not as fiction. "[I]nstead of entering the world to declare it is a trick, [Lerner] stands inside as a witness — vouching for its authenticity" (Huber 58). Lerner's narrative voice here is asserted in the act of exposing authenticity and sincerity. The continual reminder of the author's presence is one of the core values of autofictional works. Finally, the third thematic interconnection regards the allusion to various art mediums in his prose. Lerner, who is after all a poet, rigorously mentions poems and poetry in every novel. Besides poetry, we can find other

artworks and movies that contribute to broaden his reflections on the difference between reality and imagination.

Thus, this returns us to what Lerner's project is all about. The trilogy is ultimately is a novel of the artist — a kunstlerroman —by an artist who uses his life as a source for writing a fictional autobiography. Lerner uses Adam to thematize about different dimensions of a life — ontological and sociological — and questions his own self throughout the different stages of his life. Lerner's masterful handling of intertextual references to real-world texts increase the reality-effect. These gestures and many others make the fictional world appear real. The many referential proximities add to the so-called "metamodern depthiness," and,following the theory of autoficiton, I will expand and expose Lerner's unique way of using autofiction in his texts and explain how his trilogy explicates a paradigm of metamodernist aesthetics in the twenty-first century.

Finally, his prose shows us how today's reality consists of a constant shifting between the true and the made-up — or as he says: "My concern is how we live fictions, how fictions have real effects, become facts in that sense, and how our experience of the world changes depending on its arrangement into one narrative or other" (Lin, 2015). This unique way of looking at reality is what differentiates Lerner from other autofictional contemporaries, such as Karl Uve Knausgaard, Sheila Heti, or Tao Lin. Ultimately, Lerner's autofiction rekindles a different kind of relation with his readers. What Lerner is striving for is to write in a manner so as to present his prose in a style so realistic that we are not able to differentiate it from reality. It is a reality exposed to and by fiction.

Part One: Genealogy And Theory

Genealogy

1.0 Blurred Lines: The History and Uniqueness of Autofiction

Etymologically, autofiction is about combining the self and fiction. While this seems clear enough, a backward glance at its history reveals a long and tumultuous genealogy. Despite being one of the most popular literary modes in the last few decades (Gibbons, Worthington, Sturgeon), autofiction has surprisingly received little in-depth analysis among scholars. Since this thesis will focus on autofiction *per se*, a full understanding of the concept is essential. Thus, Part One of the thesis will present a historical overview of the term and its various interpretations among literary critics. Hence, this section will talk about the unfolding of the concept, with its origins in France, and the challenges that this literary mode addresses. First and foremost, discussions of it are extremely muddled. The basic designation of the term *autofiction* suggests a combination of autobiography and fiction. However, the fact/fiction binary has itself proven questionable. Since autofiction is often at odds with theories of fiction and autobiography, my purpose here is to shed light on the contribution of this genre to the literary world through discussing the concept's evolution over the years and indicate in which terms its various salient features have changed. Locating the fictional in the autobiographical and vice-versa effectively alters the territory of how we define autofiction.

Although this thesis draws on the theoretical contributions of scholars such as Marjorie Worthington and Alison Gibbons, I will seek to provide a critical overview and assessment of what exactly *autofiction* is, what its limits are, and why it is so popular today.

It may be argued that one of the reasons autofiction, as a specific literary genre, has struggled to gain widespread recognition is because there has not been a clear and encompassing definition of it (Dix 2). In addition, the concept has regularly received negative criticism throughout its history, especially at the very beginning of its emergence. Autofiction was accused of being "a cynical loophole," a "lucrative marketing plan through which to sell books," (Jones 3) and a "theoretical soap opera" (Jeannelle and Viollet 18). It was even characterized as "unserious" and "litigious" (Grell 20).

The concept of autofiction first arose in France, where writers and critics such as Philippe Gasparini, Gérard Genette, and particularly Serge Doubrovsky—who coined the term—were constantly revising, deepening and refining its meaning. Over several decades, these scholars continued to discuss this literary mode amongst themselves, and in the process, the concept of autofiction became both narrower and more specific. Since all of the aforementioned critics provided relatively coherent and well-constructed definitions, I will refer to them throughout the course of this thesis. However, the insights of Serge Doubrovsky, the creator and chief advocate of the term, deserve special mention, as does the work of Philippe Lejeune. Their work best illustrates the initial stakes of autofiction and how the concept arose from the unsolvable riddles of autobiographical narration.

In the 1970s, Philippe Lejeune published his seminal essay "The Autobiographical Pact" (1973), in which he attempted to define what it means to write an autobiography. In the essay, he describes the author of an autobiographical text as follows: "Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two. The author is defined as a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse" (Lejeune 11). Lejeune argues that one can

speak of autobiography only when we have the following conditions: an "*identity of name* between the author (such as he figures by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about" (12). Thus, a strict correlation between the narrator, the protagonist, and the author is *crucial* and these three together make up the autobiographical pact. According to Lejeune, this tripartite pact explains what differentiates autobiography from other works of prose where the first-person pronoun "I" is used: in an autobiographical text, the "I" is referential and not fictional. The inner- and extra-textual worlds must overlap. This "reference to an extra-linguistic reality is generally assumed by both writers and readers as a precondition of autobiography" (Strätling 386). In other words, the reader's expectation plays an important role. We, as readers of autobiography, are led to believe that what we read is true. The reader expects that the author of an autobiography is making statements that are true and sincere. Thus, this 'referential pact' disposes the reader to read the text in a certain manner. As a result, "autobiography, in this view, is seen as a communicative act between writer and reader. Through the text (and paratext) the author gives signals to the reader, in order to make clear in which way the text is to be understood" (Missinne 223). The goal of the story is simply meant to be a snapshot of past events or experiences, and what the author narrates must be an "accurate representation of one or more prior events" (Dix 5).

Lejeune links questions about referentiality to grammatical and pragmatic theories of discourse. While referentiality is key in autobiographical texts, it also poses some questions. If what one claims to be a factual representation of one's life is written on a sheet of paper, does that mean that one has written about one's "life" and *reinterpreted* their experience of what happened? By putting our "life" into words, do we not also shape it by choosing which details to re-

count and which to suppress? How do we know if it is an objective rendition of something un-ambiguously documented or rather a personal interpretation of that something? These are the type of questions that linguists and philosophers, particularly poststructuralist have also dis-cussed in the very same years, debating the status of factual representations of the self and writ-ten narratives. Lejeune's highly influential theory of autobiography anticipated major issues that helped to define the poststructuralist era of deconstructionism and other text-oriented and lin-guistic perspectives (Jacques Derrida, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Gadamer, etc.). Poststructural-ist lines of thinking, as we will see later, play an important role in the theoretical elaboration of autoficition.

The deconstructionist literary critic Paul de Man challenged the idea that autobiography can be considered a distinct genre. His argument is that autobiography is more broadly a form of discourse. What we take to be an autobiographical text is really just a question of rhetoric and does not depend on a special form of extra-textual referentiality. Autobiography is a form of dis-course—a linguistic process—and reference is an illusion, "a correlation of the structure of the figure" (920). In his view, autobiography relies on a repertory of tropes and rhetorical figures which ultimately determine both the possibility and impossibility of self-representation (923). The ontological (or so-called referential) subject does not exist. It is constructed autobiographi-cally. This is DeMan's core attack on autobiography. I am obliged to use the full quote, which states:

> We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but
> can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself pro-
> duce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the

technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium? And since the mimesis here assumed to be operative is one mode of figuration among others, does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (De-Man)

He further points out that the referent, writing about him/herself, is essentially required to use "tropological substitution", that is, one must use tropes if one ones to write about oneself, which, are inherently fictitious. Thus, autobiography cannot be seen as a referential genre "regulated by the idea of mimetic verisimilitude but as a tropologically structured, self-referential textual system of self-construction, self-fashioning and self-invention" (Depkat 283). Starting from different research premises, the cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner argued that we have no other way of describing "lived time" than in the form of narrative. According to him, "life" and narrative go hand in hand because the former "is constructed by human beings through active ratiocination, by the same kind of ratiocination through which we construct narratives" (Bruner 692).

Taking the above statements into account, we can see here that representations of the self rendered through language never amount to a simple representation of reality; rather, they are a discursive and narrative portrayal of emotions, experiences, and ultimately one's worldview. Bruner puts it bluntly: "a life is not 'how it was but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner 708). In short, these scholars view the presentation of life on a sheet of paper as a highly mediated process. The mainstream position of today posits that we humans are tellers

of our stories, and composing them is a highly constructed and artificial process. In his autobiog-

raphy, Jean Paul Sartre succinctly addresses this notion when he writes, "a man is always a teller

of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything

that happens to him *in terms* of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting

it" (Sartre 39).

In the context of poststructuralist cultural theory, Doubrovsky saw an opportunity to

present something anew. While himself actively engaged in the intellectual climate of the mid-

twentieth century—grappling with theories of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and existential-

ism—he started experimenting in his own works and novels. In particular, after writing his third

novel *Fills* (1977), he presented a theory that he would coin as *autofiction.* In particular, he saw a

flaw in Lejeune's autobiographical pact,[1] and argued that there was a way in which the author,

the narrator, and the protagonist, while sharing a name, may not otherwise be one and the same.

The narration itself need not be entirely referential. He demonstrated this by experimenting with

the "I," which could *refer and not refer* to the author. Originally, Doubrovsky explained his

method as follows: "Fiction of facts and events strictly real, if you prefer, *autofiction*, where the

language of adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom"

(Doubrovsky i). According to his project, being "entrusted to the adventure of language" be-

comes a quest of creative self-exploration by combining imaginative probings with autobio-

graphical facts. It indicates that autofiction is a type of autobiographical narrative with an unde-

niable connection to the extra-textual world but, at the same time, a narrative that orchestrates

---

[1]In a letter to Lejeune, Doubrovsky explained his endeavor: "… I wanted very se-
riously to fill the "space" that your analysis left empty, and it is a true desire that suddenly linked
your critical text to the one I was writing, if not blindly, at least in half-darkness…" (63).

those facts in a purely creative way. Thus, autofiction lies at the intersection of autobiographical referentiality and fiction (or the imaginative exploration of the author's subjectivity).

Keeping in mind poststructuralist arguments about the nature of language, Doubrovsky indicated that autofiction also presents a new way of looking at the self where the author is afforded the liberty and opportunity to alter certain events in his or her life and, by doing so, can further explore the "real" identity of the protagonist—or the author as character. Doubrovsky expanded his view in an interview as follows:

> The meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call autofiction…*Fils* is an attempt to write, not an account of, but an experience of analysis within one day of the narrator's life. It is obviously fictitious, because it is a forced totalization, it is totalized only by the text, it is not a recapturing of my whole life in one day. So the essence of the book is already fictitious although all the details in it are strictly correct and referential as we would say.
>
> (Doubrovsky quoted in Celestin 400)

His statement highlights the constructive role of imagination and the invention of self in autofiction. It is in fact an invitation for a new literary mode of *life-writing*—one which opens up the space for authors to express a new range of experiences and emotions in a personal yet detached manner. Catherine Cusset writes that the "writer of autofiction has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible, and to go as far as possible in his/her quest for truth" (2). Events from one's life are subjected to creative reflection for the sake of achieving a "symbolic meaning" instead of serving as a "revelation of empirical fact" (Dix 13).

In this way, autofiction suggests that truth is subjectively constructed. Doubrovsky aimed to present a way of writing about the "self" that would be truthful and intensely intimate yet would go hand-in-hand with the poststructuralist line of reasoning that writing about the self will never be complete nor fully credible, as it is always blurred by subjective memory (Worthingon 9). Worthington explains that autobiography for Doubrovsky "retracts a *life*," while "autofiction presents a self." Because the postmodern construct of self is neither logical nor orderly, "Doubrovsky's autofiction aims to represent the self truthfully, even if doing so requires taking liberties with pure referentiality" (9-10).

The search for the truth *via* fictionalizing the self has, in Doubrovsky's view, a psychotherapeutic dimension as well. He writes, "Autofiction represents the fiction that I have decided, as a writer, to make of myself and for myself, incorporating therein, in the fullest sense of the term, the experience of analysis, not just thematically but in the very production of the text" (41). Given the premise that life-writing is itself highly subjective and elusive, autofictional writing is synonymous for "exploring the different layers of the *Self*" (Hubier 125). In this way, rather than representing a step away from truth, the autofictional author will produce texts that are "not truer, but richer" (Jones 3). The theorist and critic Celia Hunt argues that the autofictional writing "reveals itself to be a cognitive-emotional tool with, potentially, very powerful therapeutic benefits" (193). In the end, by creatively examining the self, the imaginative component of an autofictional work brings a universal power—namely, that fiction can portray truths that nonfiction cannot.

The elements discussed above are the key components by which autofiction is characterized within French literary studies. Since the concept was officially coined in France, autofiction

is directly related to the narratives that "foreground the process of invention in self-narration, or the discursive construction of the self" (Srikanth 348). I have suggested above that these early conceptions of autofiction are closely aligned with the poststructuralist view about representations of the world and the self. Doubrovsky himself was fully versed in the poststructuralist line of thinking while writing his third experimental novel. Shirley Jordan explains that within poststructuralism "selves are most productively explored when distinctions between "truth" and "fiction" are shattered" (76). She adds that the poststructuralist consensus around self-narration[2] "is appropriate to the unsettled post-Freudian subject whose confidence is placed in the 'act-value' rather than the 'truth-value' of narrative" (77). This account of autofiction concerns the process of self-invention. Other theorists such as Dervila Cooke see French autofictional writing as "stressing the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the self and also, importantly, the *constructed* nature of the self"(82). Cooke's and Jordan's views arguably advance the poststructuralist line of thinking: autofiction is a mode of writing in which the self can only become knowable through a process of fictionalization or imaginative probing. Therefore, perhaps the first maxim to be derived from Doubrovsky's coinage might be that autofiction is a mode of "self-writing that uses literary techniques of generic fiction to arrive at forms of knowledge about oneself that are not traditionally the province of autobiography" (Srikanth 349).

Early theorists and narratologists have suggested that French autofiction"is best read as a critique of autobiography, as a genre formed in and through that critique" (Srikanth 350). As we

---

[2] Here the term self-narration is used as a synonym for autofiction, as several scholars use it as such (Gibbons). Furthermore, literary scholar Arnaud Schmitt addresses it as an appropriate term for contemporary autobiography. He describes it as "a post-postmodern form of personal expression based on reader's decision to give a text the benefit of the doubt and open a dialogic interaction with a potentially empirical person through a literary text" (135).

have seen above, Doubrovsky sought to experiment with autobiography and describe a particular

literary practice that occupies the spaces between fiction and autobiography. His own conception

of autofiction as "fiction based on strictly real events and facts" remains close to autobiography.

Coupled with the "psychoanalytic dimension and a focus on linguistic adventure" (James 43),

this view of autofiction leans more on the *auto-* than on the *fiction* part. But what about the other

way around? How should we classify or inflect the two terms when combined? Is it possible to

classify it? Maintaining both fiction and facts (autobiographical but creative self and world), the

concept becomes reciprocally invalidating. Moreover, several critics have placed autofiction in

the special category of "undecidable"[3] texts. I would argue that it remains important to specify

the borders and not account for it as merely undecidable. Here, theories of fiction, autobiography,

and narratology will help us understand the uniqueness of autofiction. After presenting an overall

history of this relatively new literary mode, I will then explain the constituent elements of aut-

ofiction, namely the *auto* and the *fiction* elements, and how, mixing these two into one, autofic-

tion becomes a unique hybrid.

1.2 (Auto)-(Fiction)

Donald E. Pease succinctly writes: "from the fifteenth century through the first half of the

twentieth century, the term 'author' [fiction writers] enjoyed a more or less constant rise in social

prestige" (Burke 266). Autobiographical writings in general started to gain influence only in the

20th century, as the genre "lends itself easily to the ideology of egalitarian individualism" (Eakin

---

[3] See Bersani, Lecrame, and Vercier 1982

113). The shift from autobiography to autofiction happened in the later part of the 1970s, and from that time onwards an increasing number of authors, theorists, and critics began to attack it or defend it. However, once we confront this genre with the theoretical perspectives of poststructuralism, autobiographical texts suddenly become more complicated. For many poststructuralists, narration itself is a fictitious or at least constructive process. Narratological issues aside, the core of autobiography is "distilling within the text some personal facts that the reader can identify as such, thanks to biographical data available in the paratextual world" (Schmitt 123). The question here is not what it means for a reader to be *presented* with these personal facts. Rather, what kind of self-narration does the author deploy in presenting them. Or, as John Paul Eakin asks, "What is expected of this individual, as manifested in this self-narration, for him or her to 'count as' a person?" (114). According to Eakin, every time a person performs first-person self-narration, he/she inevitably enters into a process of self-invention, bringing into play imagination and memory. He sees autobiographical texts as an integral part of a "lifelong process of identity formation" (114). Self-narrating, he says, "is not merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience" (115).

What about autofictional texts? What happens when we apply Eakin's criteria to autofiction? One could argue that autofiction is a loose form of autobiography because it operates according to the same tripartite pact. Furthermore, it is a literary mode in which the writer necessarily undertakes self-examination and reflects on his or her life. Therefore, psychoanalytical process is inevitable. For Doubrovsky, fulfilling these three criteria are necessary conditions. Therefore, one might ask, is it possible to distinguish autobiography and autofiction? There is, indeed, a liminal connection between the two, but we still cannot say that they are one and the

same. One of the ways in which critics try to differentiate the two is by casting a light on specific issues such as the truth aspect. Lejeune's pact confines the reader to believe that what is written is true. But even here, we have seen that autobiographical texts have certain limitations. This is largely because human memory is fallible and highly selective. Providing an accurate reconstruction of the past always requires a certain amount of imaginative construction.[4] The autobiographer must become a narrator—s/he creates storylines, shapes the text chronologically, uses metaphors and imagery, marks certain events as of the utmost importance, dramatizes and reports statements and dialogues which never actually occurred the way they are depicted. Therefore, writing about the past self is "less an allegiance to factual record…than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one's self" (Eakin 125). The fallibility of memory remains the primary problem for autobiographical texts. Kerreira-Meyers observes that the "autobiographer often looks to even do the opposite by saying that s/he tells the truth without recognizing the gaps that always exist in memory" (213).

What is autofiction's legitimacy then, and where therefore is the difference between autofiction and fiction? To answer this, I will use the definition by French autofictional novelist and theorist Marie Darrieussecq. In her doctoral dissertation she gives the following explanation:

I would say an autofiction is a story in the first person, it makes itself appear as fictional (often, one can find "novel" on the cover), but in which the author appears homodiegeti-

---

[4]See Paul John Eakin *How Our Lives Become Stories (1999)*; Roy Pascal *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960).

cally under his own name, and where likelihood is a stake held by multiple 'effects of life' (Darrieussecq 369-370)

By emphasizing one specific element, she comes to this conclusion:

"The fundamental difference between autobiography and autofiction is just that the latter will *voluntarily* assume that the reduction of autobiography to a statement of fact, to a biographical statement, a scientific, historical, clinical, in short, 'objective' statement, is impossible; autofiction will voluntarily—hence structurally—assume this impossible *sincerity* and objectivity, and integrate blurring and fiction in particular due to unconsciousness" (Darrieussecq 377)

For the purposes of this thesis, these definitions can give us a clear enough distinction between the two genres. I mention, once again, that the very act of using and relying on memories, shows the frailty of autobiography as a genre. "Writing and remembering are creative processes that occur synchronically" (Schaser 346). When one creates, one necessarily imagines. There are, as we have seen, limitations and imperfections distilled within the genre per se.[5] In the end, the power of autofiction over autobiography lies in the other constitutive element, -*fiction*. Here, I return to my initial question. Blending the two, what kind of literary creation do we obtain? If it is neither autobiography nor fiction, what is it?

After the elaboration of autofiction's original conception in the 1970s, there were new developments outside France. In the United States, for example, concepts such as *surfiction, fic-*

---

[5]Even staunch believers of autobiographical writing were able to recognize that inside autobiography there are elements of autofiction. Paul John Eakin writes in *Fictions in Autobiography,* "the self that is at the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (25).

tion of facts, factual fiction, faction, and still others evolved, in an attempt to define, redefine, and catalogue that kind of texts that deal with the dichotomy between the fictional and the factual. The many efforts to pin down a workable definition of autofiction is itself notable. All these efforts to provide a definitive definition for the term suggest how flexible and various this literary mode remains. Over the years, it has meant different things to different authors. As Colonna reminds us, "Since there is neither a codified genre, nor a simple form, but a sheaf of joined and joining practices, a complex shape, nobody is altogether wrong: each grabbed a "piece" of autofiction, a blow of the great whirlwind that inspires him or her" (15). This indicates that some authors are inclined to be more factual than fictional, while others opt for the contrary. This open narrative spectrum creates even more ambiguity and has raised further theoretical controversies.

Regardless of how much the factual prevails, an element of fiction is needed to characterize the genre. But how do we theorize fictionality? And what makes fiction distinct from other literary and discursive genres? In *The Distinction of Fiction* (2000) Dorrit Cohn defines fiction as "literary nonreferential narrative" (12). Her point is to make a clear distinction between referential and fictional discourse. Cohn suggests that fiction is not necessarily committed to real-world accuracy even if it uses real-world details. Fiction, she argues, does not "refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text" (15). Like Lejeune, she acknowledges that "nominal signpost[s]" (31) are crucial and that the texts revolves around the "pact" between reader and author. However, as noted above, the concept of the autobiographical pact indicates major flaws. Her distinction between referential narratives as "verifiable and complete" and non-referential narratives as "unverifiable and incomplete" (16) posits verification as the basis for referentiality. However, in practice, it is not possible to verify every reference in referential texts. Scholars like Cohn who

aspire to make a clear separation between both literary modes acknowledge that at times it is impossible to tell them apart.[6] Despite the uniqueness of autofiction, she associates it with other "crossbreeds" that "adopt the contradictory practice by naming their fictional self-narrators after their authors, thereby effectively ambiguating the distinction between fiction and non fiction for self-narrated lives" (94). For Cohn the key to autofiction is hybridity. Likewise, other scholars[7] indicate hybridity as a core characteristic. Ferreira-Meyers stresses that "autofiction can only exist as an independent literary category if it exemplifies hybridity" (206).

Where does this leave us? Intertwining the fictional side with the factual leads to a situation in which it becomes impossible to decide which of the two prevails. Gasparini in his work *Autofiction: An Adventure of Language* also concludes that it is extremely hard and convoluted to define his subject. He writes, "This is not a definite theory in any way because the lines move, the published texts put certainties into question, the phenomenon is far from controlled" (297). I would argue that despite many factual references, an autofictional work is still a *novel*.

Indeed, how we read a text shapes the way we understand and interpret it. The paratextual information often indicates that a work ought to be read as a novel, the word novel often appearing on the book's cover or as a subtitle. Therefore we should read it like one. Still, as I will explain in the next section, readers are inclined to interpret autofictional texts as autobiographies, which creates further confusion between the reader and the text at hand. Literary theory has historically overcome the difficulty of hybridity. At the very least, we have the necessary tools to tackle the problem. In short, autofiction exists in a strange realm where both fiction and facts

---

[6]She devotes a full chapter on such an impossibility by writing about Proust's *La Recherché du Temps Perdu* , naming it a "hybrid creature" (67).

[7]See Darrieusseq (1996); Wagner-Egelhaaf (2008); Zipfel (2009)

make up its core elements. To argue that it is more *auto* than *fiction* or vice versa is a useless exercise. Autofiction, as Marion Sadoux notes, is "perhaps more of a mode than a genre" (176). It is "fundamentally and willingly ambiguous" (176) in that it utilizes both factual and fictional elements. First and foremost, autofiction is a narrative. It operates under the same tripartite pact as autobiography (author, character, narrator are one and the same), and it is fiction because of its paratextual information, often falling under the rubric *roman/novel*.[8] The discrepancy between the two brings a new light to how we might define *autofiction*.

In this general overview, there are several conclusions one can draw. First and foremost, the concept was created as a direct response to Lejeune's theory of autobiography. Autofiction was born through experimenting with the autobiographical pact. Doubrovsky's intention was to show that despite the onomastic relationship between the author and the protagonist, the narrative itself may not be entirely referential. This created confusion among literary scholars. It made classification nearly unattainable because it stood as a reaction to prevailing theories of fiction and autobiography. In the end, autofiction's apparently distinctive ingenuity emerged from the fact that it was impossible to define. The best we can do is say that it is an aggressive challenge to conventional autobiographical conceptions of the self and underscores the ontological instabilities of the postmodern subject. In this regard Kerreira-Meyers writes, "In fact, if you look at the evolution of the term, it appears as if the word autofiction appeared in time to translate and crystallize the many doubts raised since the beginning of the twentieth century, with regard to concepts of subject, identity, truth, sincerity and self-writing" (205). Arguably, autofiction was born

---

[8] However, I would add here that in the case of autofiction, the name of the author-character may be different from the name of the author. In part II of the thesis, I will further explain this by focusing on Ben Lerner's work.

out of an inevitable desire of the contemporary writer (Lecrame). Using the onomastic "I" within the self-fictionalized world, autofiction establishes its uniqueness. It is, in particular, a rejection of conventional autobiographical genre. This unsettling of the fact/fiction divide is what makes it so captivating. By constantly blurring and shifting between the referential and the fictional, autofiction becomes both provocative and, at the same time, gripping.

Before we continue with the exploration of autofiction, the question of readerly commotion arises. How should autofictional texts be perceived and read? Making the lines between fiction and fact almost imperceptible, the reading process resembles a kind of puzzle solving. Despite the paratextual information, there is a strong tendency on the part of the reader to believe that what is written is entirely true. In fact, some authors toy with their text by using more autobiographical than fictitonal elements. In the next part of my thesis, I will explore the vexed position of the reader within autofictional works. What position does autofiction assume in the eyes of the reader? I have already acknowledged that autofiction's position is best understood if we see it as a form of literary hybridity. However, from the reader's point of view, how does s/he perceive this hybridity?

2.0 Author-character and Intrusions

After presenting the general history of autofiction—its beginnings and developments—we have come to the point of recognizing what the basic constituents of this concept are. As argued, it is, in essence, an extravagant way of life-writing. Indeed, it is part autobiographical and part fictional. It blends these two modes together, forming a new way of looking at the self. One

of the salient features of autofictional works is that there are undeniable recurring references to the author. Consequently, this blend raises the question of referentiality. A key element of autofiction is the author's liberty to play with his/her biographical information. Indeed, it is exactly this freedom of combining imagination and facts that makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish which items belong to reality and which belong to invention. Thus, the difficulty in differentiating between facts and fiction becomes a dilemma over which the reader constantly broods.

Another crucial aspect characterizing an autofictional work concerns the coincidence between the name of the author and the name of the protagonist. This is an essential element of the autofictional narrative strategy. And we have already seen that the single identity of author, narrator, and character represents a fundamental condition for autobiographical texts. However, in autofiction there is a break or at least a divergence: despite sharing all of the above, the narration might not always be entirely referential (Worthington). This is why I have sought first to explain the vexed problem of referentiality in the context of a poststructural reading of auobiography, which at its core is impossible to determine. I will now move forward to explore the problem of name-sharing.

The majority of autofictional texts are recognized by this representational strategy. Central characters, in most cases, share the name of the author—thus the autobiographical pact—but the difference lies in the representation of the author. Conferring the author's name on the protagonist is the starting point of autofictional narratives. In his book *Fiction and Diction* (1993), Genette attempts to describe 'voice' in autofictions. Through a series of diagrams, he maps out different relations among narrative voices, designating the name of the protagonist as the initial principle of autofictions. But he also adds that the discursive proposition of autoficion is "It is I

and it is not I" (77). In particular, he describes "the intentional contradictory part of autofiction." Using Dante as an example, he explains the problem that arises when the author shares his/her name with the character, thus implying that the work has a referential reality even though the text is a work of fiction: "I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me" (78). Genette then explains the "contradictory part" by stating, "It is no doubt the most difficult relation to pin down (thus providing a bone to pick for narratologists), and is sometimes the most ambiguous, as is, after all, the relation between truth and fiction" (79). Conventionally, autobiography and memoir share the so-called autobiographical pact according to which the author is depicted in a purely referential way. However, what distinguishes autofiction is the fact that the author is presented both imaginatively and referentially. Starting with the name, the authors of autofiction project a narrator who is very similar to them but who undoubtedly inhabits a fictionalized world. Correspondingly, Gasparini observes that autofictional texts are "saturated by conjunctional and disjunctional signs between the two instances [facts and. fiction]" (13). In addition, Schmitt says that this immediate onomastic connection draws the reader's attention and installs a certain kind of "closeness," "proximity," and "similarity that might not be apparent otherwise" (87). By projecting oneself into a fictional world, an author inside the text is no longer *the author* but an *author-character*. It is no wonder that many theorists regard this onomastic criterion as one of the defining features of the genre. For Colonna, it is even *the* defining one (Colonna 2004). Sharing the name between author and narrator by incorporating frequent references to the author's biography is an archetypal feature of autofiction.

Continual references to the author in a highly fictionalized world leaves the reader bewildered as s/he is confronted with a text that is fictional but rooted in reality. Given the fact that

there exists a person outside the text, the reader is inclined to believe that what is written might in some sense be true. This extra-textual reference, starting with the name, is a subtle but powerful strategy that pivots on the author's mercurial presence. As a result, the reader is not in a position to distinguish what is fictional and what is factual. From the very beginning, the reader inevitably tries hard to draw parallels between the author and the author-character. In short, we might say that the reader keeps the author in mind throughout the text, from beginning to end.

In her chapter "Rage against the Dying of the Author" in her book *The Story of 'Me'* (2017), Majorie Worthington restates the trajectory of how the authorial figure has been portrayed over the years. A genealogy of autofiction shows how structuralist and poststructuralist ideas—best represented by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault—made the author invisible and how the theories of autofiction arose as a reaction, precisely by constructing an authorial persona in the face of cultural forces that threatened to erase that role.

"Rage against the Dying of the Author" begins by giving a picture of how and why the author appeared inside the text. Indeed, when literary schools first evolved, each advocated a specific way of looking at the author in a narrative text. In particular, the New Critics focused solely on the text and excluded the all-powerful author in discussions of it. This was one of the initial schools of thought that was primarily interested in the concept of removing the author. Subsequent decades saw the rise of poststructuralist theories and the complete debunking of the author. Worthington underlines that while New Critics "attempted to remove the figure of the author from analytical consideration, the poststructuralists set out to destroy the very concept of the author as a uniquely gifted and unitary subject" (62). She explains, "Whereas the New Criticism embodied a philosophy of how an author should write literature as well as how a critic

should analyze it, the tenets of poststructuralism disassembled the very notion of the conscious creative power of an individual, reducing the author to an author-function and a text from a work of literature to a cultural artifact" (63). Worthington helps to explain how the author inside the poststructuralist line of thinking came to be a nonexistent figure both inside and outside the text.

Perhaps the best way to explain this concept is by providing a short introduction to a few structuralist and poststructuralist ideas. This introduction necessarily begins with structuralist linguistics, particularly Saussurean ideas of language. Structuralists declared that "language can be thought of as a paradigm for all cultural systems of signification, including literature" (Attridge 59). To understand literature, we must therefore first understand language, since literature is composed of language. As a signifying system, the fundamental principle of any language is the association of a word with a thing or an idea. Breaking down a linguistic unit into the concept and the sound image, structuralists argued that "meaning is not immanent in a sign or linguistic unit but is rather a product of the relations of different units to one another" (Gibson 38). Using the example of the word 'tree,' structuralists argued "there is no intrinsic reason why the aural possibilities of the human vocal apparatus should be classified in any particular way; and there is no intrinsic reason why the conceptual possibilities open to the human mind should be classified in any particular way" (Attridge 64). Meaning, therefore, is produced by radical arbitrariness. It is made possible by "different relations" rather than "isolated matches between words and items in the word" (Gibson 39). In structuralist doctrine, meaning is difference.

Poststructuralists accepted this notion. However, since meaning is relational, poststructuralists concluded that despite the arbitrariness of signs, "there is no firm or fixed relationship between signifier and signified and so no genuine stability of meaning" (39). By being immersed

in language with no "genuine stability of meaning," they argued that reality itself is determined by the structure of language. Meaning is found not in an individual's mind, experience, or being, but in the "sets of oppositions and operations, the signs and grammars that govern the structure of language" (Klages 50). Language, therefore, speaks us. We become its product.

Building upon structuralist theories, Barthes and Foucault subsequently used language to explain how the author disappeared. In the provocatively-titled essay "The Death of the Author," Barthes challenges the idea of seeing an *auteur* as a creative genius with a vision. Our obsession with the author is a curiously modern phenomenon. It is common to give credit to a single person as the creator of a masterpiece, but Barthes opposes this vehemently when he declares that works of literature are not original. Writing, he boldly states, is a "destruction of every voice" (Barthes 143). From a poststructuralist point of view, we exist only in the realm of language. Arguing that writing destroys every voice and point of origin, the real origin of a text is therefore not the author but language. Accepting this conclusion, an author would seem to write with a certain degree of impersonality, as if it were his or her epoch that is producing the text. In the end writing is merely a performance that only exists while we read the words on paper. In that moment, the meaning is provided by us, the readers. "Death of the Author" makes several bold but important claims about how we arrive at the meaning of a text. Barthes argues that it lies "not in its origin but in its destination," which is a reader. Texts do not have a single meaning, but rather multiple meanings, and those meanings are focused on the reader, who is a linguistic construct, not a psychological person. Barthes declares: "Language knows a 'subject' not a person" (145).

The author, on the other hand, is a *scripteur*, a copyist, who collects preexisting quotations, because literary texts "blend and clash" a host of influences, allusions, and quotations. He

asserts that none of these are "original" and the text is just "a tissue of quotations" (147). The *scripteur* cannot be seen as a craftsman because there is nothing to be invented. By using language, the *scripteur* utilizes familiar words, words that are already available. Therefore, nothing is really original. Barthes presents a radically new way of seeing the relationship between writer and text. Instead of seeing "the Author" as someone who conceives the text (as a parent conceives a child), he radically declares that the writer and the text are born simultaneously. He states further, "there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here* and *now*" (145). Authorial prowess, then, is an "illusion," and "a text's meaning and power (if they exist at all) are fleeting and arise purely from the readerly context in which a text is received" (Worthington 69).

In his essay "What is An Author," Foucault similarly dissects the author. He reminds us that the author is a relatively new figure that has given rise to a classification system. He differentiates between an author's name and what he famously proclaimed as the "author-function." The latter is the set of beliefs and a commercial value that associates a body of texts with the name of the person who produced them. Alongside the value of the author's works, Foucault includes the concepts of discourse and discourse community. While Barthes wrote that the meaning of a text is not inherent in the text but rather determined by the reader, Foucault declares that it is a "discourse community" that accounts for the author's original idea and interprets it according to a particular time and place and the demands of society. "The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each" (Foucault 117). For both of Barthes and Foucault, therefore, a "text's meaning is

subject to change with times, as is the cultural valence afforded to the figure of the author, both

as an individual and as an abstract concept" (Worthington 70).

Where Barthes differentiates between the author and the "*scripteur,*" Foucault differenti-

ates between the author and the actual "writer." To make his distinction, he asks, "What is a

work? What is this curious unity which we designate as work?" (Foucault 103). With the exam-

ple of a text written on a wall, he argues that this text probably has a writer but not an author. For

him, the author becomes a sort of "symbolic entity," to use Worthington's words (70). This

"symbolic entity" writes texts that are later classified as literature by the "discourse" surrounding

the author.

Converting the author into a classification system, Foucault asks, how does the name in-

fluence what was written? He explains that the author-function is not connected with the name of

the author who wrote the text. Rather, the author-function, as a cultural image shaped by the

"discourse community," connects the texts by a particular person to that writer's name. The ar-

gument is that a proper name "works differently when applied to an actual person" rather than to

the "author function, which is not a person but a symbolic entity" (Worthington 71). For a per-

son, the discourse community connects the name to the "real person outside who produced it"

(Foucault 123), while the name of the actual author "serves as a sort of classificatory purpose,

corralling particular texts under its umbrella and keeping others out" (Worthington 71).

Ultimately, Barthes and Foucault erased the concept of the author entirely and conceived

the text as independent from its original source. Both of them, Worthington writes, "negate[d]

the actual person of the author as a source of meaning for a literary text" (64). According to the

literary critic Claire Boyle, "A central tenet of poststructuralist thought is precisely to deny the

possibility of establishing via the text any connection with its flesh-and-blood originator beyond the text" (Boyle 23). But as we will see below, autofictional texts closely combine the fictional-ized self with the real self and completely overturn the above poststructuralist positions.

The problem with Foucault's author-function is that it must evoke the proper name of the writer, which signifies that the "real person outside" exists and has a name. This further means that the onomastic connection between the author-function and the actual writer's name is in-evitable. We can easily see that this difference between Barthes' *scripteur* and the author, or Fou-cault's writer and author-function is "not as definitive and easily achieved," as Worthington notes. Autofiction rests upon this "*equation*" of onomastic connection. (71). My claim that the author and author-character are, fundamentally, one and the same, is grounded on Worthington's explanation of what autofiction posits. She writes:

> By including eponymous author-characters, autoficiton explores, exploits, and sometimes explodes the distinction between writer and author, because the author-character simulta-neously evokes the proper-name designation of the actual person and the symbolic desig-nation of the author. The result is a novel that makes constant metafictional reference to the extratextual existence of its author, who is portrayed within the text as a character, possibly giving the lie to the idea that the author is dead or irrelevant to the text. (Wor-thington 71)

Indeed, autofiction stands in stark contrast to the notion that the author is dead. The designation of the real person and the "symbolic" one inside the same text brings a level of authenticity to the actual writer and a reification of the author as a creative genius, endowed with the power to in-spire. Furthermore, Worthington sees autofiction as an "ideal conduit through which to examine

contemporary views of authorship" (65). In other words, intrusive authorial characters in autofiction "revolt against the idea of their 'death' by overtly asserting authorial power within their works, often through the use of autofictional characters" (66). The fictitious version of the author serves as nothing more than a reassertion of the author's authority in an era when the role of the author is under question. By sharing the same biographical information and name, these author-characters point to their authority in two ways: inside and outside the text.

Moreover, by showing their authorial personae, namely by conferring their name on the name of the character, autofictional authors create a distinct readerly position within their narratives. Indeed, after fully debunking the author, Barthes famously announces the "birth of the reader" (148). Likewise, Foucault's "author function" also embraces the role of the reader. The reader, all of a sudden, becomes one of the key theoretical elements in poststructuralist literary theory. Thus we go from solely analyzing the text to analyzing how it affects its readership. Worthington argues that the rise of "Reader Response Theory" had a crucial effect on the "autofictional impulse" that was born exactly out of the "perceived diminishment of authorial importance fomented by the rise of poststructuralist theory" (Worthington 65).

Here it is important to note that ideas that were central to New Criticism and poststructuralism continued to have a far-reaching impact on postmodernist and post-postmodernist literature. As Worthington observes: "[I]t is undeniable that, whatever interpretative stance one takes, the trend of literary criticism for the past several decades has been characterized by a decided shift *away* from considering the author as a source of meaning" (65). Due to the advent of new media, particularly the invention of the internet, Liebeth Korthals Altes notes that, "public media, talk shows, photo shoots, interviews, blogs, Facebook, and live performances" have all become

"sites of fabrication of a work's meaning and literary or other value" (157). This has led, as a consequence, to the fact that anyone can become an author. For this reason, the notion of the author as a creative genius has generally been negated and deemphasized.[9] Jonathan Franzen's famous 1996 *Harper's* essay "Why Bother" outlines his lament of the loss of authority of the author and its increasing obsolescence in contemporary society as a result of "the banal ascendancy of television, [and] the electronic fragmentation of public discourse" (58). To compound the problem, the idea of the omniscient narrator was rejected during the modernist and postmodernist era. As Paul Dawson notes, it is fascinating that critical debates about omniscience have recurred in the first part of the new millennium. He says that the contemporary revival of omniscience represents "a further development and refinement of some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction" (144). Dawson's description for the omniscient narrator in contemporary fiction builds upon heterodiegetic narrators (narrators who are not characters in the story and in a way hover above it and know everything about it) and their "authority to pass judgment on the fictional world" (146). He suggests that in contemporary fiction omniscience and authority obtain when the author imagines a personalized "second self" to narrate their story. The omniscient narrator is then described as creating a type of narrative where the "heterodiegetic narrator, by virtue of being an authorial proxy, functions as an extradiegeitc character" (149). I would say that for autofictional texts, a personalized second self is not necessary because the narrative voice already depends on author-characters who are protagonist, narrator, and character in the text. This makes them *autodiegetic* narrators who self-consciously claim to be authors of their work and

---

[9]Arguments for casual link between a perception that the novel and author are dead due to the infringement on print culture perpetrated by digital media in postmodern culture have been made, respectively, by Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Robert McLaughlin.

narrators who tell rather than show (Genette). Along with that, it is worth mentioning, as long as the focalization is concerned, in autofiction, author-characters *usually* are written in the first-person narration who, supposedly, tell a true story. We, as readers, witness their (fictional) world through the eyes of the protagonist. The question of authorial privileges, that is, whether he/she is omniscient is put into question.

The literary power of autofiction is conveyed exactly through autodiegetic narrators "who serve as a proxy for the author" (146). It is not surprising to see the proliferation of autofictional texts and author-characters as voices that seek to assert their power and highlight their suffused textual presence. Richard Walsh in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* aims "to vindicate rather old fashioned ideas in new terms" (1). He believes that all fictional narratives are narrated either by the author or by a character. He argues, "'Omniscience', I would suggest, is not a faculty possessed by certain class of narrators but, precisely, a quality of authorial imagination" (73). Autofiction, then, is all authorial imagination. This admonition of establishing the author as a homodiegetic character is precisely the literary power that autoficiton wields.

2.2 Autofiction as Metafiction

I have previously argued that autofiction is an experimental way of writing about the self. It is difficult to provide a concise definition of the term postmodern, given the amount of critical debate around it. Let me therefore include several definitions and metafiction from two theorists who have helped to clarify the role of postmodernism in fiction. For Linda Hutcheon, postmodern fiction is at once metafictional and historical in the way that it presents texts and contexts of

the past. It is self-referential and self-reflexive and at the same time preserves some realist values and a radical critique of them (40). According to Brian McHale it is a new type of fiction where a new dominant, or "the focusing component of a work of art" (6), changed from epistemological to ontological. Metafiction, in postmodernist literary works, is the "main technical device" (Nicol 35). Patricia Waugh begins her book *Metafiction* by pointing out a brief description of the basic characteristics of metafiction. It is a type of writing which "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). It also celebrates the power of creative imagination and explores "possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (2). As a form experimental writing, autoficitonal texts, are an instantiation of postmodern fiction and deploy explicitly metafictional strategies. Many critics have defined autofiction as a "highly metafictional genre" (Worthington 13). According to Mark Currie, metafiction traffics in "these undiscernible things best thought as moments of critical vertigo in which the relations between real life and representation are no longer clear, either within or beyond the fiction." (21). We can apply this observation to autofictional texts as well. Autofiction, as we have seen, introduces into the narrative text a strategic notion of puzzlement because the reader is not able to differentiate between relations that are real and those that are fictional. Moreover, what is noticeable about both metafiction and autofiction is the level of authorial intrusions developed by its authors. These intrusions, in narratological sense, is what Genette identified as *metalepsis*, a paradoxical position between the world of the telling and the world of the told. He described it as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.) (234). For metafiction particularly, Waugh claims that these intru-

sions "begin with the view that both the historical world and works of art are organized and perceived through such structures or 'frames'" (28). Although narrative frame is a technique used to contain an embedded narrative (a story within a story), frames in the context I will use, mirrors Genette's *metalepsis*. Frame's thus, might be best explained as the actual frame in a realist painting. The function of the frame is to show what is presented inside a picture. In fictional texts, the frame is the narration of the text. Narrative framing serves as a kind of portal between fictional world and real world. One of many ways in which an author can break the "frame" is by appearing in the text as a character. As I will discuss below, such intrusions "expose the ontological distinctness of the real and the fictional world" and "expose the literary conventions that disguise this distinctness" (32). What the authors of metafiction aim to do is to "*destroy* the illusion of reality," to "*expose* levels of illusion" and to recall that our real world "can *never* be the 'real' world of the novel" (32-33).

Similarly, autofictional texts produce quite the same illusions as their metafictional counterparts. The only difference might be that in metafictional texts usually the author appears occasionally, whereas in autofiction this presence is constant. One could argue that in metafictional texts there are autofictional elements. There are indeed countless examples of this. In recent decades, this trend has grown significantly popular. Its rise, however, can be traced long before. It is impossible to determine the exact genesis of autofictional writing strategies,[10] but one early example in the 20th century is Borges's *Borges and I* (1960), with his famous opening: "I don't know which one of the two of us is writing this page." This is a good example of authorial intru-

_____

[10]There are theorists who argue that works with autofictionality could be traced back to the works of ancient Greece, such as in Hesiod's *Works* and *Days*. See Jonathon Sturgeon (2014).

sion in which the author is explicitly foregrounded. Many other authors later adopted a similar technique and openly declared their presence within their texts.

Right around the time Barthes voiced his proclamation that "The Author is Dead," on the other side of the Atlantic, John Barth published his seminal postmodern essay "Literature of Exhaustion*"* (1967). In it he argues that the author has indeed gone astray due to the proliferation of "intermedia arts"[11] but also that we need more than ever a concept of the author as creative genius. Barth emphasizes that traditional forms of art are "exhausted" and that the "novel's time as a major art form is up" (Barth 71). Inflicted by a state of "literary and fictional exhaustion," we need to resurrect "the concept of the author as an unusual talent and unusually brave soul"— or simply, to use Barth's terminology, we need the "Thesean hero" (66). Altogether, John Barth is in stark disagreement with Roland Barthes. Arguing that the image of the artist should be that of a creative genius, this image provides postmodern literature with its true hero. According to Barth, one becomes so by appearing as a character within one's work.[12] While arguing specifically about postmodern literature, Worthington says that Barth's theory can be useful here since autofiction works on the same principle as the metafictional work of Barth. Admittedly, autofiction is not metafictional per se, even though they have overlapping tendencies. As noted above, creating an author-character who shares biographical information with the author and who also appears as a protagonist in a highly fictional world is a powerful strategy for constructing a

---

[11]By intermedia art, Barth means forms of art that have a "tendency to eliminate not only the traditional audience…but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect; in other words, one endowed with uncommon talent, who has moreover developed and disciplined that endowment into virtuosity" (Barth 65).

[12]Barth showed this in his famous *Lost in The Funhouse* (1969).

strong authorial presence and engaging with readers. We have here yet another similarity in which autofictional works deploy a component of metafiction. Blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction also highlights the creative power of the author. According to Barth, authorial intrusion "becomes the means by which the author can have a hand in shaping the interpretation of his story" (Worthington 75).

As we have seen, it is not just the author's name that is being shared but a lot more. Regarding this onomastic connection Gasparini asks, "Why not admit that, besides a family name and a first name, a whole series of hero/author identification operators exist: their age, their socio-cultural background, their profession, their aspirations, etc.?" (Gasparini 25; *my translation*). As we shall see below, in Ben Lerner's novels, we encounter all of the above. As Schmitt points out, "Indeed, a stronger case can be made for labeling a text as autofiction when there is a certain resemblance between narrator and author based on similar biographical features than when the only conjunction is the name" (Schmitt 88). In the case of Lerner all these perceptible gaps and "identification operators" are further examples of the autofictional blueprint that he employs in his novels. Once the reader accepts this premise, it becomes impossible for him or her to distinguish between fact and fiction or disregard the presence of the author. This readerly challenge, Worthington observes, is part of the point: "authors of autofictions are consciously eliding reality and fiction when they construct a fictional narrative around a character who is named for an author who has a real-life public experience" (473).

We have seen that autofiction "is not only a literary genre, but also a reading strategy" (Gibbons 411). This strategy involves a reader paying close attention to multiple layers, metatextual references, paratextual information and the author's biography. That being said, there is also

another strategy the author uses in which he or she strives to be noticed and be present in the narrative. After being downplayed by poststructuralist theorists, there appeared a "pervasive demand for [authorial] presence and concreteness" (Korthals Altes 156). This is achieved, as we have seen, by "identification operators" and provides a "reading experience in which [readers] are constantly forced to adjust and readjust [their] relationship to the text, for some of the information provided about the author-character might match the actual biographical history of the author" (Worthington 76). For this reason, the combination of imagination with referential facts, together with name-sharing, becomes the salient feature of autofictional texts. The pleasure on the part of the reader comes from "the fleeting idea that the fiction might be a fact, even as readers usually understand the difference between the author and the author-character" (Worthington 79). Indeed, it is exactly this flicker where the nonfictional and the autobiographical collide that sparks curiosity. The referential "I" becomes the "site of fictionalization" that is "maintained to a greater or lesser extent" (James 56). The world of autofiction is a world where boundaries are often erased, and these works "bring new attention to the interactions of the factual and fictional" (James 58). Thus, authorial intrusions shed light on our understanding of the theory of fiction while presenting a new way of answering the question regarding the self's authenticity. In the next part, we will see how Lerner's novels imply a different type of reading and how in a particular way, he holds his authorial character throughout the books.

Theory

3.0 Reading Autofiction: The Reader's Confusion

How does the reader perceive autofiction and categorize it? For a narrative to be labeled an autofiction, the reader must take a position. In effect, autofiction has by now become a "cultural artifact in and of itself" (Effe, Gibbons 61). Nevertheless, the reader's task remains as hard to pin down as the concept itself. In order to come to terms with this difficulty, I will review studies taken from interdisciplinary approaches in neurology and cognitive theories. Ultimately, however, in spite of such theories, the problems readers face in attempting to domesticate an autofictional text remain unresolvable. This is largely because individual readers tend to perceive the text the way they want to, no matter what the paratextual apparatus might tell them.

As readers, we use literary categories as guides to assist us in our reading. The variety of existing genres can help us to understand and interpret the text in different ways. When reading

fiction, the text is not being perceived in the same way as when reading non-fiction. The brain searches for different cues when approaching a poem versus when approaching an autobiographical text. In the former, the reader is more likely to pay attention to metaphors, rhyme schemes, and diction than to factual statements.

This is best explained by the autofictional scholar Alexandra Effe and her team in Norway when they try to combine methods from literary studies and cognitive psychology to find connections between literature and the human mind.[13] She argues, "People process texts differently depending on whether they think they are factual or fictional" (Lilleslåtten n.p.). Effe and her team seek to explore what happens when one reads an autofictional text. Namely, do we read it through the lens of *auto* or *fiction*?

Starting from the fact that autofictions are almost always labeled as novels, they are nevertheless rooted in reality. In seeking to explore the self subjectively, the authors of autofictions, as Effe points out, "tell their subjective truths that are not verifiable" (Lilleslåtten n.p.). She notes further that questions about reality are questions about ethics. In effect, autofiction often invites readers to critically reflect "on what truth is and on who gets to tell their story" (Lilleslåtten n.p.). When speaking about ethics and literature, autofictional authors are in some sense more secure than others. Despite using more facts than fiction, one of the ethical benefits of autofiction, in contrast to autobiography, is that by labeling it as fiction, the writer is protected from directly

---

[13]Further researches could be found on their website: *https://www.hf.uio.no/english/ research/strategic-research-areas/lce/*

violating the privacy of others.[14] Annie Ernaux, a French writer and scholar, outlined the benefits of autofiction over autobiography. One of them, she explains, is located in the very paratext — or what she calls the "interior censorship" — which, designated as novel, protects the writer from "committing the indiscretions about other 'character' (that is to say, real people, who lived in the same society and at the same time as the central character) of an autobiographical text" (quoted in Kerreira-Meyers 220). Thus, by protecting themselves, the authors of autofiction seem to have a clear advantage when it comes to speaking the truth. One is able to "confess without exposing others" (Kerreira-Meyers 209).

Returning to the research conducted by Effe and her team, psychological experiments have revealed how a reader approaches fiction versus facts. In one observation, a group was asked to read "a text from a history book or a newspaper and another group reads the same text, but is told that it is an expert from a novel" (Lilleslåtten). Her findings demonstrate that readers perceive and approach the same text differently when it is labeled differently. Furthermore, this highlights the impact of the emphasis we as readers place on generic conventions. If we empha-size the *auto* in autofiction, "we will read texts very differently from the way we read most nov-els. We will take their narrator's statements at face value and pay less attention to the way that symbols and metaphors make meaning across the text" (Van Laer). On the other hand, if we em-phasize exclusively the *fictive* dimension, "we will read them as fiction, looking for the way the text makes meaning without relying so much on the narrator's word" (Van Laer).

---

[14]It is useful to mention how did reading public respond to many literary hoaxes that appeared after the boom of autobiogrpahical/memoir boom in the 1980s onwards. See John Paul Eakin *Touching The World Reference in Autobiography* (1992); *Autobiographies and Changing Identities* (2001).

Gasparini in his *Est-il Je?* (2005) studies the way autofiction, as a hybrid genre, effects the reader's psyche. While reading an autofictional text, we as readers might be in a position to alternate between a referential and a fictional understanding. This might depend on the reader's own peritextual knowledge of the author's biography as well as on various textual clues. But Gasparini denies this "alternative approach," arguing that it is too challenging for the reader and brings too much tension to the act of reading. Instead, he proposes "simultaneous double reading" (26). He takes for granted that readers are aware that an autofictional narrative is both referential and fictional at the same time. But there is a drawback to this reasoning. According to Schmitt, it is as if someone were to say, "I know that what the text refers to here probably never happened but is also very likely to have happened." Schmitt finds this simultaneous double reading implausible and of dubious value.

In a recent study, Effe and Gibbons have tried to provide a solution to precisely this desire on the reader's part to have it both ways. Indeed, like Gasparini, they suggest that autofictions should be read as "simultaneously fictional and factual" (63). They approach the problem by using the so-called "cognitive schemata," a specific kind of knowledge "gained from experiences about objects and situations" (63). They apply this theory to reading and readers and explain that, in fact, there exists two kinds of readerly cognitive schemata: one for factual texts and one for fictional texts. Using neuroimaging studies, they show that there are different "neural patterns" when reading about real people as opposed to fictional characters (for the latter, they find that emotional engagement is higher).[15] For hybrid modes such as autofiction, they suggest

---

[15]A similar analysis was done by Deborah A. Prentice and J. Gerring (1999): they concluded that readers process factual texts more systematically than those of fiction and that for the latter are more prone for sentimental engagement.

that readers read "with two overreaching schemata, either in combination or in quick oscillation, and in which they often experience moments of tension or uncertainty about the communicative tension (fictionality/factuality) and/or ontological status (fictive/real) of entities and elements" (65). The "factual schema" is used for the reader to catch up on information about the real author and evaluate his or her truthfulness. The "fictional" schema encourages readers to enjoy and to approach the text for "diversion and aesthetic pleasure for indirect knowledge and general truths" (66).

While some scholars, such as Schmitt, agree that readers always make choices — either we "make one definite choice and stick with it, or occasionally change our minds while reading a text" (128) — I would argue that the position of the reader seems delightfully or perhaps harrowingly unresolvable. We know that autofiction discusses real, existing people, otherwise it would not be autofiction. In this day and age when we have, as Worthington notes, "accepted the post-structuralist notion that narrative is a construction, not a transparent representation of events" (26), we seem to accept the contradictory idea of autofiction as both fictional and factual. This means that readers cannot read autofiction as a 'standard' autobiographical text. At the same time, they cannot read it as a traditional work of fiction. Either we make choices or we have alternative or perhaps simultaneous readings in which both the autobiographical element and the fictional element hold our attention in tandem.

Autofictional ambiguity often leaves the reader more inclined to believe that what is written in the text is true despite its paratextual categorization as novel. Genette in *Paratexts Thresh-*

olds of Interpretation (1997) says that the paratext[16] finds itself "around the text" (4) and is both extradiegetic (therefore, not narrative) and diegetic. For him, the paratextual apparatus only "*contributes* its specific share to the complex framework of the main text" (qtd. in Bode 365). This implies that the status of paratextual elements is itself ambiguous. It can be seen as a game the author sets up for his or her readers. It functions as an "authorizing method" and "claims or refutes referential authenticity." The author therefore can confirm "fictional or nonfictional reading, depending on whether frame is congruent with the main text or not" (Bode 365-366). However, in the very act of reading, even Genette finds that readers' perception evolves, or even changes, in autofictional texts because of its referentiality. The facts remain facts and are often viewed as a mirror of an extratextual reality. Indeed, as Worthington argues, "by purposefully and metafictionally gesturing outside itself to the extratextual author, autofiction renders narrative suture impossible, as it constantly reminds the reader of the '*real*' world outside the text, even if only to demonstrate its own imminent departure from that reality" (22).

In the end, we might ask where is the pleasure in reading such texts? One might argue that it stimulates an intense mental activity. For Alex Hughes, autofiction denies pleasure and is therefore a "bastard narrative" (112). I would argue that autofiction's ingenuity is what makes it especially enjoyable. While readers might recognize that some events depicted in an autofiction did not take place, nevertheless a "flexible reading stance that shifts between the different expectations inherent in reading fiction and nonfiction " is required. (Worthington 473). In general, we as readers are inclined to be more emotionally invested when reading about a real person, mainly

---

[16]Paratextual elements, according to Genette include: the author's name, the title, intertitles (inside the text); cover texts, dedications, prologue notes, public and private epitexts.

because identification with the character comes more natural in such context. In autofiction, therefore, the author's looming presence is of the utmost importance. We can appreciate *literariness*, and at the same time recognize the existence of the author. In this way, as Effe says, we can enjoy "the best of both worlds".

3.1 An Ironic Representation of Memoir

It is possible to detect a number of similarities between memoir and autofiction. To name a few, both are about life, both use real-life references, and in both, the real-life author appears in the text. These three similarities may be sufficient to explain why so many readers may interpret works of autofiction as memoirs. Moreover, during the recent memoir boom that started in the 1980s, the authors of memoirs have adopted similar autofictional techniques. In their book on autobiographical and memoir texts, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out that "many contemporary writers deliberately blur the boundary between life writing and the kinds of stories told in the first-person novel that some call 'faction,' others 'autofiction'" (10). Furthermore, they posit that many contemporary memoirs have adopted postmodern literary techniques such as self-conscious narration and even metafictional features: "The categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author's standing as a professional writer with the work's status as an authentic object" (4).

In effect, memoir texts often adopt referential elements that may "at times venture into narrative that borders on—but does not quite become—fiction" (Worthington 472). This is yet another important resemblance of memoirs with autofictional works, and it thus generates further challenges in distinguishing the two genres. We have already seen that autofictions are *not* pure fictions. However, autofictional authors are able to blur the line between fiction and reality for their readers. By constantly reinforcing the presence of the author and including direct references to the author, they become deceptive. In discussing autobiographical elements in his works, Doubrovsky says that autofiction often "assembles [events] in a radically altered presentation disorderly or in an order which deconstructs and reconstructs the narrative according to its own logic with a novelistic design of its own. It can recount, and I personally do so constantly, past events or feelings, long gone situations, in the present state, as if they were just happening" (i). These elements thus straddle both genres. However, a particularly acute problem arises when memoir texts—taken to be highly referential— embed fictitious elements.

It is important to further analyze the two genres in order to fully understand the difference. Memoir is generally seen as a kind of autobiographical narrative. However, a specificity of the memoir genre is that it "characteristically involves insetting an individual life story into a larger context of public or historic consequence" (Lahusen 626). Therefore, the main difference is that while autobiographies usually cover an entire life, memoirs generally address a particular story— "*one* person's side of *one* story" (Worthington 148). Crucially, memoirs still rely on referentiality as well as historical facts. This therefore indicates the main difference between autofiction and memoir—the former is highly fictional, with more or less referential elements; while for the latter, referentiality is of crucial importance, even if it sometimes ventures into fictional-

ization. For both, the protagonist, the narrator, and the character are one and the same, but aut-ofiction depicts the *author-character* in a highly fictional style. In autofiction, it is exactly this onomastic connection that baffles the reader and causes the confusion with memoir. For Wor-thington, this confusion is part of the point:

> "Authors of autofictions are consciously eliding reality and fiction when they construct a fictional narrative around a character who also has a real-life, extratextual existence. Readers of these auto fictions are faced with questions about whether the depiction of the author-character also represents an accurate portrayal of the real-life author…the mere fact that the narrator/protagonist shares a name and some biographical characteristics with the author necessitates a different kind of reading process than one would undertake with a a purely unreferential fiction." (Marjorie Worthington)

Moreover, despite the fictionalized narrative and paratextual information in autofictional texts, there is still an undeniable connection between the real-life author outside the text and the one represented in the text. The level of referentiality is thus not as important. By sharing even the slightest biographical information, the author is able to trick even the most vigilant reader. Read-ers have the tendency to believe that what is written could be true. By sharing even the slightest biographical information, the author is able to trick even the most vigilant reader. Readers have the tendency to believe that what is written could be true, and autofiction therefore appears to be manipulative in serving the readers with memoir writing taken to the extreme through "exploit-ing [it] for fictional ends" (151). As I previously argued, poststructuralist narrative conceptions—according to which any process of narration is itself a fictionalization—had achieved a general public acceptance. This leaves us with a question about the degrees of fictionality within mem-

oirs. If, as Ronald Suckenick says, "All accounts of our experience, all versions of 'reality,' are of the nature of fiction" (quoted in Cohn 8), then how much fictionality is there in memoirs? Is it all fiction?

Memoir comes from the latin word *memoria*, which means memory and remembrance, and, as I have discussed above, memory when applied to writing may become untrustworthy. One could argue that memoirs are thus similar to fiction.[17] In the middle of the twentieth century, several theorists notoriously took issue with autobiography (including memoirs), by deconstructing it. Instead of examining the genre's referential truth and falsity, they analyzed its narrative styles. It had been largely ignored because "narratologists and literary critics who considered the concept of truth a non-issue because literature was supposed to be about language, not about external referents" (Ryan 1). This means that the referentiality factor was left aside for a long time. However, negating this question was impossible. Christiane Lahusen points to this when she writes, "Referentiality and textuality do not contradict each other — pointing to the ways in which the world is bounded by language does not make reality disappear, but instead merely dispenses with the illusion that it is possible to gain direct access to reality outside of language" (633). Moreover, even though the memoirist strives for a truthful account of the extratextual world, the narrative is, nevertheless, fictive. This is because the story, or the emotional experience of what the memoirist has to say is not achieved by recital of actual events. No one denies the existence of outside Truth. as David Shields, in *Reality Hunger* emphasizes, Truth in memoirs is achieved "when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with

---

[17]See Marie-Laure Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) and her phenomenon of *panfictionality* and Paul De Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979).

the experience at hand. What happened to the writer isn't what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that, the power of a writing imagination is required" (42).

What is specific in autoficiton is precisely that they pretend to be memoirs in spite of the author's imagination and construction of a highly fictionalized world. Worthington clarifies this distinction by arguing that "memoir involves the creative construction of a narrative in order to relate to events that actually took place, rather than the fictional invention of events that did not" (153). For a less vigilant reader, this means taking what is written to be evidence of what happened. This is why, according to what Worthington notices, autofictions *are ironic representations of memoirs* because "few readers actually mistake these novels for genuine memoirs" (153).

Continuing with *Reality Hunger*, Shields offers important commentary contemporary literary styles: "Every artistic movement since the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art" (3). He also posits a list of "key components" for today's contemporary writers.

A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional…[r]andomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; plasticity of form, pointillism; criticism as autobiography; self-reflexivity, self-ethnography, anthropological autobiography; a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real." (David Shields)

All of these components, I argue, are more in line with contemporary autofiction. In this way, they mimic memoirs but still expose how important fiction is for our understanding. It thus seems that combining truthful accounts with extra-textual references and some form of fictionality provides the basis for the recent popularity of autofiction and memoirs. Moreover, as both genres focus on particular episodes of an author's life, it is in these instances of particular life episodes that readers find a "sense of access to the 'truth' they crave, while evincing an awareness that such truth is not universal or eternal, but fleeing and in the eye of the beholder" (Worthington160).

However, I posit that it is only through a hybrid genre such as autofiction that readers can "embrace narratives depicting 'true' experience while at the same time recognizing the impossibility of language to convey the whole truth of any experience" (161). At the heart of this contradiction lies the power of referentiality that autofiction delivers. This comes in the realization that while much of the story might be invented, there is still at least some component that is not. In autoficitons, a particular the author at the heart of the story is confessing something. That confession is something that is taken from a real life and put into words. The basic onomastic connection—the relevance to the author— is enough to make readers wonder if the two are the same person. Whether this is depicted purely referentially or purely imaginatively, we as readers might never know and can only guess. However, that guess marks the difference. This is where the specific value factor of autofiction enters. By including that element of extratextual reference, the story has a greater worth than if the same story is written in a purely fictional way (Worthington, Couser, Gibbson). Autofictional texts have a specific narrative effect; they "gestur[e] outside themselves to a *supposed* nonfictional reality" (Worthington 472). The onomastic connection

blends the worlds of fiction and reality into one that makes us as readers think the story we are reading might be "true."

In the end, autofiction does resemble memoir in shape and in form. At their heart, autofictions intrigue and excite their readers. They are ironic representations of memoirs because, as Worthington observes, "the louder the truth claims, the more explicit the invitation to compare the fictional truth claims with the extratextual facts" (168). The intriguing part is that the reader always wonders how much of it is true. At the same time, autofictions make both extratextual and intertextual worlds connect and separate at the same time. Perhaps much of it did happen. Perhaps it did not. Perhaps all of it is "true," but we will never be able to fully know. In this respect, today's the notion of truthfullness takes another form in our post-truth world, and autofictional novels add another flavor to it. Readers yearn for some sort of "truth", despite the acknowledgement that narrative is an inherently imaginative process.

After gradually outlining a contemporary understanding of autofiction, this work will next explain how autofiction, as an instantiation of postmodern fiction, has contributed to the current shift in which hybrid genre narratives—with a blurring of discursive distinctions— and a postpostmodern sincerity present a new literary dominant.

4.0 Autofiction Today

There is an increasing belief among theorists and critics that postmodernism is, as Hutcheon declares, "a thing of the past" (165). For many, it ended sometime either in the late 1980s (McLaughlin 212) or after 9/11 (McHale 175). Simultaneously, the period succeeding postmodernism has yet to be decisively labeled. Suggestions are myriad, including "hypermod-

ernism" (Lipovetsky); "digimodernism" (Kirby); "post-postmodern realist ethics" (McLaughlin); "cosmodernism" (Moraru); "Anthropocene" (Trexler); and so on. All the same, the legacy of postmodernism "still has a persistent influence" on contemporary literature, as David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris argue (xiv). McHale agrees with this assessment and points out that "literary historical change rarely involves the wholesome replacement of outmoded features and values by new ones," adding that it "involves a reshuffling of existing features in the light of a new dominant function" (457).

In recent decades, the pervasiveness of sincerity has been noted by many critics and theorists. Adam Kelly argues that "in popular usage, the contemporary turn to sincerity tends to be regarded as a sturdy affirmation of nonionic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words" (198). Combined with the rise and popularity of *hybrid genre narratives*, including autofiction, these narratives present a new frame in contemporary literature that reflects the current literary movement towards a new dominant.

In order to understand what today's literary dominant is reacting to, it is necessary to make a few observations on postmodernist fiction and what it stood for. One of the particularities of postmodern fiction[18] was a specific dissatisfaction with 19th century realism[19]. In defining postmodern fiction, Bran Nicol in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* adapted Lyotard's famous statement and put it in a slightly different way by saying:

---

[18]And modernist fiction for that matter. Ezra Pound's command *make it new* brought literature in another direction.

[19]A realist novel often depended on the so called practice of *mimesis ,* brought to us by Aristotle, which is the idea that created art should be analogous to our own world. For more on differences between realist fiction and postmodern fiction see Bran Nicol's *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernist Fiction.*

We could define postmodern fiction as writing which is shaped in some way by an in-

credulity towards realism – a state of mind which does not necessarily conclude that rep-

resenting the postmodern world accurately, *realistically*, is no longer desirable, but is

convinced that the act of representation cannot be performed as unselfconsciously and

wholeheartedly as it was in the nineteenth century. (Nicol)

All of a sudden, experimental novelists were born, and one of their pivotal transformations was a

shift *from confidence to suspicion*, both on the reader's and the writer's part (Sarraute). Novelists

developed new approaches to building a character's psychology. One feature is anonymous first-

person protagonists who are defined as "everything yet nothing" and other characters who are

"deprived of their own existence" (58). As a result, readers became unable to identify with the

characters in the book. Nicol says, "This results in a new relationship between reader and author,

as the reader is no longer able to rely on the author to guide him or her around the world of the

novel. In fact, it seems as if the author himself is exploring this world for the first time" (20). All

of a sudden, the created world exists as if it is ready to be explored for the first time, both for the

novelist and the reader. It becomes a new, unexamined territory. This was accomplished in large

part by a specific linguistic turn. Alain Robbe-Grillet observed that for postmodernist writers

"construction" became more important than "inscription." The construction of the world in fic-

tion was represented "not as plentitude of things but as plentitude of words."

In postmodernist literature, "multiplicity was taken to be a condition of language" (Con-

nor). Poststructuralist theory showed how narratives are a complex structure, subject to potential-

ly infinitive interpretations and expansions. Furthermore, having demonstrated that humans are

nothing more than products of language (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes), postmodernism

embraced this condition and applied it to narrative structures, showing that constructions of the world and of characters are nothing but linguistic constructions made up of words. Postmodernism was, as Steven Connor says, about celebrating "wordedness in the form of wordiness" (Connor). Ultimately, the thread that runs through literary postmodernism was the increased skepticism towards realist fiction. What was once celebrated—the link between the text and the world—was now cut by postmodernist writers.

An exemplar of this trend can be found in John Barth's three essays—*The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967), *The Literature of Replenishment* (1980), and *Postmodernism Revisited* (1988)—which are generally regarded as *manifestos* for the meaning of postmodernism in literature. These three essays reflect on various concepts, including the disconnection of language, self-reflexive inquiry, and the conception of the self in postmodernity. One of the tasks for the postmodern writer, according to Barth, is the excessive usage of irony, parody, and self-reflexiveness.[20] This last component, for Barth, was a crucial aspect. Using poststructuralist language theory,[21] he explained the referential function of language. For him, as Marshall Boswell observes, "words—and for that matter, novels as well —have no direct connection to the objects they would ostensibly name. Rather, in Barth's view, language always *replaces* the reality that it seeks to articulate" (31). The words "achieve their meaning by virtue of their proximity in the sentence to other words…To put it another way, language for Barth is inherently self-referential, which is to say it always refers back to itself rather than to the world" (26-27). Perhaps the best way to understand postmodern self-referentiality, as Robert McLaughlin suggests, is "not as a

---

[20]Particularly Derridian concept of *Différance*. See Marshall Boswell (2003).

[21]See Umberto Eco's explanation of *The Literature of Exhaustion.*

denial of language and literature's connection to the world but as their self-consciously pointing to themselves trying to point to the world" (58). This self-referentiality and successive use of irony will become, for Hutcheon, one of the most significant ways to differentiate postmodernism from what came before. She explained the poetics of postmodernism as "intensively self-reflexive and parodic, yet it also attempts to root itself in that which both reflexivity and parody appear to short-circuit: the historical world' (x).

A sense of irony, deliberate self-referentiality, instability of identity, omnipresence of information, metafictional techniques, wordplay for the sake of wordplay, and questions of ontology are crucial aesthetic features of postmodernist art. These techniques were used and overused to the point of total exhaustion. Gradually, writers' continuing engagement with postmodernist ideas came to the point of exploring other possibilities and paths that went beyond postmodernism. Several critics started to ask whether it is even possible to go beyond postmodernism. Robert Rabin at one point asked, "does not postmodernism itself connote a kind of finality, 'the end of things' — not least of which would be the end of innocence with regard to language and mimesis? Does not the term refer to a period of time we are still, demonstrably, in?" (7).

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1990s, two writers expressed their discontent and critique of the ideology of their time. They felt compelled to issue a call-to-arms against the postmodernist ethos of ironic self-referentiality and proposed a shift that would have a major impact on future writers. This is generally attributed to David Foster Wallace's critique of the televisual appropriation of irony and Jonathan Franzen's despair at being a novelist in a world of constant technological consumerism. In Wallace's seminal essay *E Unibus Pluram*: *Television and U.S. Fiction* (1993), he saw an inextricable link between American fiction and television. In

his view, television appropriated irony that early postmodernist writers employed. In order to destabilize this myth, Wallace writes:

> By offering young, overeducated fiction writers a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the U.S.A. saw itself circa 1960, early television helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world. For irony—exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are—is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy. (David Forster Wallace)

As irony and self-referentiality entered the literary mainstream, television slowly incorporated the heavy usage of irony, becoming its dominant mode of operation. The predominance of irony in television was used to the extent that "TV can ridicule old-fashioned conventions right off the map, it can create an authority vacuum. And then guess what fills it. The real authority on a world we now view as constructed and not depicted becomes the medium that constructs our world-view" (62). In order to find a path beyond self-referential irony, Wallace's suggestion to the new generation of writers was to "dare back away from ironic watching" and to "endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles [w]ho treat old plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (81). His own sincere assertion amidst a culture where language is hyperaware of itself reveals that "You've got to discipline yourself to talk out of the part of you that loves the thing, loves what you're working on. Maybe that just plain loves… sappy or no, it's true " (Wallace).

On the other hand, Franzen outlined his concerns in his 1996 essay "I'll Be Doing More of the Same", in which he expresses how being a novelist in an age when technology has become

an ubiquitous medium that provides culture with continuous smooth entertainment leaves novels to the side, given their comparative difficulty. Franzen writes, "'mystery' (how humans beings avoid or confront the meaning of existence) and 'manners' (the nuts and bolts of how human beings behave) have always been primary concerns of fiction writers. What's frightening for a novelist today is how the technological consumerism that rules our world specifically aims to render both of these concerned moot" (68). The crisis the modern novelist is facing is how to say something important when we are living in a culture in which people have "less and less time to read: Where to find the energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture" (65). In his essay "Why Bother" (1996), Franzen recalls that the point of fiction is not to find a cure for the "Disease." Novelists and novels aren't supposed to "change anything, but that [they] can *preserve* something." He explains, "Whether they think about it or not, novelists are preserving a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpretation; maybe a mystery, maybe manners" (90).

The origins of the current literary movement can be largely attributed to these two writers. Wallace and Franzen served as two of the earliest voices who prophesied a new literary generation, to use Wallace's term, of "anti-rebels." Indeed, the recent tendency in contemporary literary engagement has generally been identified as a shift towards sincerity and a return to realism. This new aesthetic has been identified by numerous theorists and critics. Thomas Claviez suggests that a "change has occurred within the landscape of American literature—or so it seems. The fabulators of postmodernism are on the demise and about to be displaced by a literary mode and generation that have become known as Neo-Realism and Neo-Realists respectively" (5).

This 'Neo' implies a return to what has been done before and a diminution of postmodernist aesthetics. One of the notable characteristics of today's writing is not the abandonment of postmodernist aesthetics but its attempts to "forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis" (Rebein 20). The ongoing shift acknowledges the postmodernist constructions of language, and the task of the new writer is to go beyond this.

In order to be successful, the Neo-realist goal in literature is no longer concerned about the quest to find epiphanic moments; rather, it focuses more on "accidental occurrences in a de-hierachized sequence of daily events" (Fluck 72). This indicates the complete opposite of the Victorian omniscient narrator, as truth claims are "fragmented ones of an entrenched, involved and subjective sincerity of first-hand experience" (Huber 27). Furthermore, "the authorial subject is here reinstated," writes Huber, "not as an interpretative authority controlling the meaning of the text but as a *guarantor for the sincerity of the act of communication*" (27 my emphasis). The scholar Adam Kelly also explored the new "turn to sincerity" dynamic by drawing on a study by Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Trilling says that sincerity[22] is "the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self " (5). His essay illustrates the decisive shift that is at stake here. He adds that sincerity "places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others" (Kelly 132).

––––––––––––––––––

[22]His theory is that up to 20th century sincerity, characterized as "truth to the self is conceived as a means of ensuring truth to the other" has been definitive characteristic of Western culture. In the 20th century, that is superseded by the ideal of authenticity "which conceives truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means" (Kelly 132). Interestingly, Trilling observes that the notion of sincerity in the 20 century would be used "with either discomfort or irony" (6).

But in what way did autofiction, growing out of postmodernism, employ many of the latter's practices, albeit in a different manner? Niall Lucy in her *Postmodern Literary Theory* (1997) argues that one notable trait in the postmodern era has been the tendency to undermine strict genres (84-85). This aligns significantly with autofiction, as these texts play with established categories of literature by combining two unrelated genres into one. In this regard autofiction is "underpinned by ontological tenants that show allegiance with postmodern thought" (Jones 256). In spite of employing metatextuality and ontological ambiguity, a constant blurring between fact and fiction, autofictional texts produce the 'reality affect.' As postmodern logic only recognized fiction, autofictional logic insists on creating reality by making fictions experienced as facts. Numerous intertextual references to the real world outside the text enhance the reality-effect that these texts produce. Ontological indecipherability and intertextual clashes induce a reassessment of autofiction's fictional/referential states. In order to explain how contemporary autofiction is situated, I will use the concept developed by Gibbons, Vermeulen, and Akker known as *Metamodernism* to explain today's dominant cultural logic and connect it to contemporary autofiction. Literature for Wallace and Franzen meant finding ways to be human and connect with one another. In this sense, contemporary autofiction, in McLaughlin's words, makes the reader "newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us—because we live in a culture where we're encouraged to forget—that other realities are possible" (67).

4.2. Autofiction is Metamodern

The postmodern is incrementally but steadily shifting into something new. The way in which affects and subjectivity are depicted in contemporary literature explains how we have left behind postmodernism's abandonment of the real. Looking back, major cultural theorists of postmodernity (Baudrillard Jameson Lyotard) saw postmodernism as a shared inability to experience the real. In today's cultural climate it is not a coincidence that theorists acknowledge and welcome yet another change. This work has explained how the project of sincerity marked a clear end with the postmodern feeling of superficiality in literature. Today, there appears to be a so-called "affective turn."[23] Brian Massumi, in his *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), expands this idea and critiques Jameson by saying:

> There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered. Fredric Jameson notwithstanding, belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it." (Massumi)

He is not alone in this assessment. In *The Forms of the Affects* (2014), Eugenie Brinkema outlines ten points about the contemporary moment by asking, "Is there any doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect? Must one even begin an argument anymore by refuting Fredric Jameson's infamous description of the "waning of affect" in postmodernity" (xi). By repositioning our environment contrary to poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, this "turn

---

[23]See Massumi (2002); Clough (2007) and Pelegrini and Puar (2009).

of affect" is part of a "larger reawakening of interest in problematics of embodiment and materi-

ality in the wake of twentieth-century Western theory that, for many, was all semiotics and no

sense, all structure and no stuff" (i). Today's "structure of feeling" she says, "oscillates between

modernist stabilizes and postmodern relativisms"(ii).

And yet, there is one thing scholars seem to agree upon: postmodernism has not been left

behind. Emphasizing again McHale's words: "literary historical change rarely involves the

wholesale replacement of outmoded features and values by new ones," and instead what happens

is "a reshuffling of existing features in the light of a new dominant function" (457). This leads us

to contemporary life-writing—particularly autofiction. The autofictional mode became popular-

ized over the last several decades in particular as this shift suffused literary culture. As an instan-

tiation of postmodern fiction, autofiction utilizes several postmodernist practices, but it is struc-

tured around the post-postmodernist syndrome. It primarily focuses on a new way of seeing the

self, and its framework is gathered around feelings. Moreover, it concerns longing for subjective

truth instead of finding universal truth. An impulse to blur the lines between fiction and reality is

one way that contemporary writers use to "tell the truth about themselves, in fiction" (Mortimer

24). The motivation for nonfictional life narratives to venture into fiction, according to James

Phelan, is to "express subjective truths within a representation ultimately bound by reference to

actual people and events" (25). The use of fiction, he adds, does not "provide a denial or an es-

cape from the actual but rather a richer, more nuanced way of both representing and dealing with

it" (25).

Positioning autofiction in this post-postmodern environment, this work will use what Ali-

son Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van der Akker have defined as *metamodern*. The

Greek root 'meta' means both 'after' and 'with.'[24] Their definition is in line with what other cultural and literary theorists have pointed out—namely, that postmodern practices are not abandoned "but neither is their presence evidence that postmodernism is still alive and well. Rather, postmodernist devices are put to new use, *reterritorialised*" (173). Arguing that postmodernism has been replaced by a new cultural logic, they state that "metamodernist texts instead produce a 'reality effect' — a performance of, or insistence on reality" (174). This is where autofiction differentiates itself and becomes metamodern. The aim of autofiction is to show relational emotions and connectedness between humans. As explained before, realism once again plays a central role in literary fiction, as it has created a new dominant literary logic. Leaving behind McHale's theory about ontological and epistemological uncertainties, autofiction is constructed around earnestness and connections with others and the realities we live in. What is compelling about autofiction is its ability to convince readers that what is happening is really happening. By writing about the realities we are living in— the realities of the world we are all living in—the reader is able to relate to "an author who writes 'from life' rather than an author who writes from elsewhere" (Thomson). This is why narratives of autofiction are usually narratives about complex and ever-shifting crises —either the author's or the world's—and this enhances the realistic dimension of the story (Gibbons).

Narrative, Phelan tells, is "not a structure but an action, a teller using resources of narratives to achieve a purpose in relation to an audience." It is a communicative act between "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened" (ix). By intentionally writing about particularities of personal life stories that operate on a more

---

[24]I would add that it means also 'beyond'.

70

global level, readers are in a position to see the "purposive design" (203) and relate to the author behind the text. This relatability to author-characters is yet another reason for autofiction's popularity in post-postmodern literary culture. Rebeca Meads, in her essay for *The New Yorker, The Scourge of 'Relatability'* (2014), discusses how degrees of identification in contemporary literature have become so valuable over the last two decades. She writes "A hundred years ago, if someone said something was 'relatable,' she meant that it could be told—the Shakespearean sense of 'relate'—or that it could be connected to some other thing" (Meads). Nowadays, however, being relatable means that we can identify with the story. And relatability has become an axiom of today's aesthetic judgment. Similarly, Gavin Andrew Thomson, in his essay *More Life: On Contemporary Autofiction and the Scourge of 'Relatability,'* writes that what made autofiction popular is "how in our ethos in the age of social media, privacy is passé and the personal is public, many readers want from their authors what they want from their friends on Facebook: personal transparency.[25]" The appeal of autofiction today is because: "relatability, nowadays, means readability" (Thomson).

The affective turn, according to Brnkema, "is resonant with broader strains in what has been dubbed "metamodernism" as a "structure of feeling" that oscillates between modernist and postmodernist relativisms (xii). Having to cope with a world of constant change, autofiction, as a paradigm of a metamodern text, often deals with diverse and ambivalent themes. Readers or viewers are "positioned to engage with these themes not as fiction but as real-world instantia-

---

[25]There are two important essays on the relationships between social media and today's autofiction. See Sian Petronella Campbell *Personalising Crisis in Contemporary Autofiction: The Apocalypse as Metaphor in Michelle Tea's Black Wave* (2019) and Virginia Pignagnoli *Changing dominants, changing features? The Fiction/Nonfiction Distinction in Contemporary Literary and Instagram narratives* (2019).

tions" (Gibbons 176). Sadoux claims that "it is undeniable that *autofiction* … is a resilient attempt to deal with notions of self and subjectivity in wiring in an age of multiple crisis" (177). These crises are apt to make one explore him- or herself in a way that shows "meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today's social situation in which another affective modality has substituted yesterday's fragmented and fragmenting euphoria" (Akker 234).

This is why the affective turn informs autofictional texts. In essence, contemporary autofiction does not write about the "postmodern waning of affect but rather a revival of affect" (Gibbons 120). Above, I have tried to demonstrate how autofiction as a postmodern instantiation became what Gibbons and others have framed as metamodern. The turn of the century marked a stark difference from the postmodern, but the postmodern is still with us. Postmodern literary techniques are still widely used, but their purpose is not to fragment the subject and refract reality into language games. These texts on the other hand display a particular kind of affect which is, as Gibbons notice, "ironic yet sincere, skeptical yet heartfelt, solipsistic yet desiring for connection" (130). Besides narrativizing the self, autofictions also thematize broader components of one's personal life. Especially, they question sociological and phenomenological dimensions of the author-character's life in such a way that they thematize how "identities relate to social roles, how time and space are lived and how experience is often mediated by textual and/or digital communication" (130).

Today's cultural climate shows a renewed engagement with others and a revival of realism. This rearrangement centers on sentiment that is beyond the postmodern episteme. Emotions, sincerity, and being earnest are the themes of metamodern texts. In a world in which reality is always fabricated, autofictional writers tend to use fiction as a "privileged space to engage with a

reality represented through subjective truths and intersubjective author-audience relations" (Pignagnoli 235).

In the end, it is not a coincidence that critics indicate autofiction as *the* paradigm of today's life-writing texts. Mortimer polemically proclaims, "Autofiction is front and center right now and shows no sign of giving up its ostentatious primacy, both among creative writers and critical interpretive theorists" (22-35). Similarly, the literary journalist Phillip Hindahl states, "A specter is haunting the literary world, and its name is autofiction." And the literary critic J. Sturgeon declares further, "We're witnessing instead the induction of a new class of memoiristic, autobiographical, and metafictional novels — we can call them autofictions — that jettison the logic of postmodernism in favor of a new position" (2014). He contends that autofictions "redistribut[e] the relation between the self and fiction." Readers should not look at fiction as something false, since fiction has always been anchored in reality. Fiction, he adds, "includes the narratives we tell ourselves, and the stories we're told, on the earth between birth and death" (2014). Another literary critic and a writer, Daniel Mendelsohn, writes, "the question isn't why serious writers have turned to the memoir-novel (read autofiction), but how they could be writing anything else?" (Mendelsohn). Thus, autofiction, as Sturgeon concludes, "eschews the entire truth vs. fiction debate in favor of the question of how to live or how to create" (2014).

Part Two: The Prism Between Two Worlds

5.0 Ben Lerner and Autofiction

After providing a general history of autofiction, the theories that map its territory, its misconceptions, and its current popularity, this thesis will next turn to Ben Lerner and his three novels: *Leaving The Atocha Station, 10:04, and The Topeka School*. Lerner published these novels, all characterized as works of autofiction, over the course of a single decade, in 2011, 2014, and 2019, respectively. He won a Fulbright Scholarship as well as Guggenheim and MacArthur "genius" grants, was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Award, and was described by the *New York Times* as the most talented writer of his generation. Providing a critical appreciation of Lerner's three novels would be impossible without the previous explanation of autofiction and how it relates to contemporary writing, as Lerner utilizes all the affordances of autofiction throughout his texts.

After having identified the most important elements of autofiction, I will now analyze Lerner's oeuvre and what autofiction means to him and his readers. The overall analysis of his three novels — more accurately, his trilogy — will highlight their unique combination of his life and fiction and their links to today's literary (and cultural) metamodern moment. By using the definitions I provided above, my aim here is to understand Lerner's unique voice in today's literary world. Read separately and in no particular order, his novels do not seem to share anything in common, and a casual reader would probably not consider them a trilogy — aside from the name of the protagonist of the first and third novel. Moreover, the average reader might not even perceive any connection to the extratextual author. Nevertheless, beginning with the smallest biographical detail, this work will demonstrate how, taken together, Lerner's trilogy provides an exceptional example of a highly metafictional, autofictional, and metamodern text. Lerner's

metafictional ingenuity comes from the fact that he made his life intrude into his fiction and he made his fiction intrude into his life. In order to provide an overview of his writings and his aims, this chapter will draw upon the three novels in a non-chronological order, as they all contain references to one another.

Born in Topeka, Kansas in 1979, Lerner began his literary career as a poet. After writing three collections of poetry — *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004)*, Angle of Yaw* (2006), and *Mean Free Path* (2010) — he turned to writing prose and wrote the aforementioned works. This is an important fact because, unlike other novelists, Lerner's original sense of creative writing come from the medium of poetry. As we will see, the style Lerner employs in his prose is similar to that of his poetry. In his numerous descriptions of everyday life, one can glimpse his sophisticated use of poetic language. In the world of poetry — differently from the world of prose — facts, fiction, truthfulness, and falsehood constantly coalesce. Poetry, in general, is always categorized as poetry.[26] This is important to grasp because Lerner's autofictional project might be described in the following line from *The Lichtenberg Figures*: "My hybrid form has become a genre" (Lerner). Time showed this early statement to be true. From his first novel onwards, Lerner has blended personal facts and fiction in his work, up to the point of making it impossible for readers to recognize which is which. His entire oeuvre consists in what the narrator of *10:04* describes as "a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them" (find).

Moreover, Lerner consciously and regularly breaks the narrative frame, by using metalepsis, — particularly in *10:04* and *Topeka* — when he, the author, appears in the present moment and discusses the process of composing and revising the text itself or retrospectively remi-

---

[26]What I have in mind is the way poetry is categorized in bookstores and libraries.

nisces about experiences he (or Adam) had. In both cases, these breaks depict the author becoming aware of his/Adam's past mistakes. However, the effect of this technique is not to reveal his process of actual writing — something postmodernist authors used to the point of exhaustion — but to show his authenticity and honesty. The books, when combined, have an aim to "work [his] way from irony to sincerity" (10:04 4). Indeed, it is by using these postmodernist techniques that his autofictional project becomes visible and shows emotional experience and sincerity instead of ironic cliché and self-referencing for the sake of self-referencing. These narrative intrusions, among other things, create a 'reality effect' which in turn makes his novels belong to a metamodern period. As highlighted above, the purpose is to experience fictions as facts. In Lerner's oeuvre, this reality effect is revealed from early on.

By focusing on Lerner and his three novels, this thesis aims to answer the following questions: in what unique way does Lerner use autofiction to write about his life? How much autobiographical information does he use? What is the role of fiction and imagination in his novels? How do his novels talk about broader sociopolitical movements, and is this relevant to today's post-postmodernist (metamodern) literary trend? Bearing these questions in mind, a combined study of all three novels will provide a clearer picture of Lerner's key question: "how do we live fictions and how do fictions have real effects in our lives?" (Caners).

As a general rule, one handles trilogies by starting from the first book and ending with the last. For Lerner, this does not to be the case, nor will it be so for me. His highly metafictional books are structured in such a way that in order to analyze the metamorphosis of his character — his alter ego — I am obliged to move back and forth, from one book to another. Aside from novels, I will also include essays, one monograph, and interviews that Lerner has offered in the past.

This will help us disentangle the spatiotemporal structure of each book. Analyzing the three novels contemporaneously, at times it will seem as if these novels are indeed a work of autobiography. Each book, however, deals with a specific issue unique to Lerner. In *Atocha* young Adam broods over the fact that poetry has lost its power as an art medium that is able to have an impact in the world; *10:04* — despite being a plotless book — effectively explores anxieties Adam has about his future and the future of the world which has become susceptible to many climate disasters; and finally, *Topeka* talks about present day Adam reflecting about his past and his childhood in order to understand the roots of the far-right rhetoric that pervades today's political discourse. These are presented as underlying themes in each novel, and I will use them to sort out the metamodern dimension in Lerner's books.

In the next sections, I will provide a 'map of the territory' by reviewing multiple analyses and interpretations by other scholars and writers. By doing so, I will discuss the complexity of both Lerner as a writer and autofiction as a mode of writing. Then, after considering these interpretations, I will explain how they help us to better understand Lerner's writing. In short, this dissertation will show how autofictionality in Lerner's novels stand as an example of metamodernist text. The ambiguity of autofiction — that is, the dichotomy between fiction and non-fiction — causes an ontological collapse, further creating a continuous "reality effect," and as such presents the core value of today's contemporary metamodern text. Tellingly, as Lerner's depiction of his own life is through the creation of fictionalized version of himself — Adam Gordon —, the three novels are also Lerner's personal explorations of the complexity of living in the Anthropocene. These writer's attempts to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of the world as it is

are mirrored in the main themes in each books as Adam engages earnestly with the real-world problems.

Autofiction implies the creation of a fictionalized version of the author. Lerner has done precisely this by creating an alter ego who serves as the main protagonist in all of his novels. The creation of Adam Gordon marks the beginning of Lerner's trilogy. Adam, the main protagonist in all three novels, shares almost all of his biographical profile with the author himself. Both grew up in Topeka, Kansas, studied on the East Coast, lived in Madrid, write poetry and novels, and are the father of two girls. In fact, at times Adam is indistinguishable from the real Lerner. However, one must be careful because we, as readers, will never know for certain if some of the events described in the book really happened in the same way in Lerner's life. All the same, it is all too easy to believe that what is written is absolutely true. This ambiguity, however, is the core strength of autofiction and of Lerner as a writer. His prose and the facts about his life that he has shared in interviews — combined with general biographical information — leads readers to believe that what is written is a true description of his life. However, Lerner *is* a poet and a novelist and, as he noted, uses the fact/fiction divide exclusively as a "therapeutic frame" (Haas).

Lerner's specific autoficitonal style of writing might be summed up best in the opening epigraph of *10:04* — a passage he took from Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* that Agamben attributes to Walter Benjamin (and Lerner attributes to Benjamin as well):

The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this

world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.

(Agamben 53) (Lerner 1)

The statement "Everything will be as it is now, just a little bit different" succinctly captures the thematic interconnections that can be found in each of Lerner's books. Together with biographical information, his prose becomes a site for the exploration of his own life and his own artistic authenticity. What distinguishes Lerner from other contemporary autofictional writers — particularly Karl Uve Knausgaard and Sheila Heti — is the way he applies the component of fiction. Unlike Heti, who uses tape recordings and a memoirist-style of writing, or Knausgaard, who chronicles his experiences in diary form and obsessively tries to evoke and describe his every memory, Lerner places an emphasis on *fiction.* His novels are enmeshed in fiction, and it is through fiction that we can understand the statement; "Everything will be as it is now, just a little bit different". For Lerner, fiction cannot be separated from reality. It is an intrinsic component of it, since fiction writing feeds on lived experience. Speaking about his work as autofiction in an interview for the podcast *The Public*, Lerner said, "I am interested in a way experience becomes fiction and the way we live fiction, how fiction can have real effects on our lives." He added: "I want to explore the scene between reality and fiction and make that explicitly part of the work… the way we live reality is always a fiction in how we organize a massive experience into a meaningful whole" (Caners n.p.).

One interesting aspect of this statement is that Lerner does not substantively differentiate reality and fiction. Thus, one is inclined to see Adam not only as a fictionalized alter-ego but also as a substitute for the author himself. Therefore, my starting point is to disentangle Lerner's autofictional quandary by interpreting Adam Gordon's genealogy through his novels. Each novel

introduces powerful motifs that the author considers important. His three books offer not only a better understanding of Adam Gordon but also an understanding of Lerner's vocation as a novelist. In order to disentangle Lerner's trilogy, it will be necessary to discuss his essays and projects. This will provide a better picture of how his entire oeuvre can be seen as a unique thread — a form of unique consciousness — that he brings into collision with his broader themes — above all, how reality can become fiction and how fiction can become reality. In the end, what this analysis will show is that Lerner's trilogy is a paradigm of an autofictional text.

Here I will explore these three novels through an autofictional lens and examine the author's biographical information and its thematic interconnections in the novels. Taken together, they make up what we might call Lerner's unique autofictional project. These thematic interconnections explore the field of memories, realism and art. I will discuss the role of each and through all of them taken together, we will come to an understanding of Lerner's autofictional project.

Topeka is the starting point from which the other two works evolve. Even if it is the last book in the trilogy, it stands as a prequel, "a prehistory…the unconscious of the other two," according to Lerner (Bright, Carrie). This work will weave in explanations of autofictionality and initiate the web of interconnections suffused in the other two novels.

5.1 "Everything will be as it is now, just a little bit different"[27]

The poet William Stafford wrote of the "treasured unimportance" of Kansas, but for Ben Lerner, Kansas — and Topeka in particular — is of "treasured" importance. This Midwestern capital was the home of his childhood and adolescence and is mentioned frequently in all his novels and poetry collections. This, to say the least, is no coincidence, because it is precisely the author's adolescent years that we must come to terms with in order to understand the trilogy. Before disentangling the Ben/Adam distinction and showing how the author invests in autofiction, it is important to highlight the chronological timeline in which the novels appear. *Topeka,* the third book, shifts between various perspectives and flickers between the late 90's, depicting Adams young adulthood, the 70's when his parents meet, and the present moment. Then, in *Atocha* Adam goes to Madrid on a study-abroad program. As for *10:04,* it is set in present-day Brooklyn, where Adam is now an adult and an established poet. It is important to highlight that there is a prolepsis in the last chapter of *Topeka* that functions as an extension of *10:04*, when Adam lives in Brooklyn with his two young daughters and wife.

---

[27]Title taken from an epigraph of *10:04* (2014).

Lerner alluded to his main theme in *Topeka* seven years before its publication in an essay for *Harper's*, titled "The Contest of Words". A brief introduction to this text is useful by way of a comparison between Adam and Ben. Lerner would later make his alter ego use particular details and moments from the essay and apply them directly in *Topeka*. This is just one of the numerous techniques that make the Lerner/Gordon nexus complicated. To further complicate the matter, Lerner usually speaks of Adam as a specific character and persona despite many resemblances. As written in the first part, autofiction posits that author-characters are typically fictionalized versions of the author. However, the level of character fictionalization can vary and in Lerner's novels, at times it is almost missing. In Lerner's novels, I argue that Adam is a substitute of Ben and that the only thing that separates the two of them is their different names. Moreover, even the name, that is the initials AG, derive from Lerner's admiration towards a poet Alan Grossman (Rogers). Nonetheless, throughout the trilogy, we witness Lerner's continuous efforts in making the reader believe that Adam is a fictionalized character living in a fictionalized world, which adds to the complexity of the fact-fiction (Ben Lerner-Adam Gordon) relationship.

Lerner begins his essay "The Contest of Words"[28] by reminiscing about his appearance as a seventeen-year-old high-school student in Topeka:

> My hair would be drawn into a ponytail (though the sides of my head were shaved, a disastrous tonsorial compromise between skinhead and hippie that can perhaps stand for the irresolvable tension between the household of my lefty, loving, Jewish psychologists parents and the very red state in which they'd raised me.

---

[28]From now on, when not specified, the quotations will refer to "Contest of Words*"*.

Lerner explains that he would become a four-time state championship debater. He was considered one of the best debaters in the nation, although he never really competed on a national level. He says he was not ready for "endless hours of research," "summer institutes," and a "committed partner." This is because, around that time, his interest in poetry became an obsession. He recalls, "I was nevertheless more in the realm of poetry than of prose, my speech stretched by speed and intensity until I felt its referential meaning dissolve into pure form, until I was singing the oldest song, singing the very possibility of language." Lerner explains that he would spend Saturday evenings with his friends — partying, drinking excessively, and "freestyling" — while Sundays would be reserved for debates. He would, as he describes, regularly transition "from one contest to another" until it became a habit.

Lerner provides surprising and vivid descriptions of the debates when he was merely an adolescent. In the empty high schools across Topeka, these debates, he writes, "would not appear to you […] as an academic subject but as a full-bodied glossalalic ritual." He continues, "what is nominally an exchange of ideas [was reduced] to an athletic display of unreason." This "athletic display of unreason" is a type of debating technique known as "the spread" — a strategy in which the arguments are presented as fast as possible to make it difficult to respond to all of them. The rule for "serious debaters," Lerner explains, is that a "dropped argument," no matter its importance, is a strike, and the more the arguments presented, the more likely they are to be dropped by other competitors. He describes the debates as follows: "The first few seconds of a speech might sound more or less like oratory, but soon the competitors will be accelerating to nearly unintelligible speeds, pitch and volume rising, spit and sweat flying as they attempt to 'spread' their opponents." As for his own competitiveness and style of argumentation, Lerner

says that "in all my adolescent awkwardness, [he] would be seized, however briefly, by an experience of prosody."

Seven years later, Lerner would write his third novel, and as in the previous two, we find Adam, who, like Lerner, is a high school champion debater, the son of two psychologists and a burgeoning poet. From the very beginning of the novel, the two will become indistinguishable. In fact, Lerner copies whole paragraphs from "The Contest of Words" and offers autobiographical descriptions of himself. Seventeen-year-old Adam has the same hair — "drawn into a ponytail while the sides of his head are shaved" and would debate in high schools across Topeka (Topeka 27). The debates, Adam writes, "would appear less competitive speech than glossolalic ritual" (23). Competing in both "Policy debate" and "Extemporaneous Speaking," Adam (like Ben) would become a champion and experience a kind of "prosody" while debating. Saturday nights are reserved for partying and "freestyling" with friends and he too would jump from one activity to other until it became a habit.

This is the beginning of the Ben Lerner/Adam Gordon-fact/fiction quandary. As we slowly progress and meet other characters in the books, we see how all the novels "flicker" between fact and fiction in a subtle and powerful way. *Topeka* is the story of the Gordon family and Adam's adolescence. His parents, Jonathan and Jane Gordon, are psychologists who work at "the Foundation" — modeled on Topeka's Menninger Foundation, where Lerner's parents worked. The Foundation is "a world-famous psychiatric institute and hospital" (Topeka 50). Jane Gordon, Adam's mother, is a psychologist who would gain national influence after writing a feminist critique on women's anger. She would also make an appearance on *Oprah.* The book would bring her success but also notoriety because the book spurred various men to make obscene phone

calls and blame her for the breakup of their marriages. The character of Jane is modeled on Harriet Lerner, Lerner's mother, who is a successful author, and, who in 1985 published a bestselling book *The Dance of Anger*. Harriet, a staunch feminist, appeared on *Oprah* and, in a recent interview with her son, explained that the phone-call scenes from the book were real (The Cut). Lerner's father, like Jonathan in the book, created an adaptation of Hermann Hesse's story *A Man by the Name of Ziegler* (Smallwood). These strikingly parallel biographical details create a different kind of reading of the three novels as alluringly autobiographical. In fact, the fictions Lerner creates are to be experienced as facts. In the end, they achieve truth status. The examples below will provide just that I will pinpoint the moments of uncertainty in which Lerner shows communicative tensions between fictionality and fact and ontological tensions between fictive and real. Overall, the result of his autofictionalization is the ambiguity for the reader, who is inclined to believe what is written is true despite the paratextual categorization.

5.2 The Role of Memories

The role of memories is the first thematic interconnection that I find to be important in Lerner's prose oeuvre. Memories and talking about the past, in general, is a theme thoroughly explored in autofictional novels. Combining first and third person narration in his novels, Lerner problematizes the dynamics and effects memories can have in shaping the present. This fracture between remembered experience and present-day reality is a theme that will be thoroughly explored. In *10:04* the narrator, already "a published author" (11) whose "previous novel, despite

an alarming level of critical acclaim, had only sold around ten thousand copies"[29] (154). The

novel *10:04* does not have a named protagonist (and therefore named narrator). The unnamed

protagonist highly resembles the author himself, who never states that Adam is the character of

this book, but, paradoxically he considers it a part of the Adam Gordon trilogy. Interviewing Ben

Lerner, Ocean Vuong calls the protagonist of *10:04* Adam Gordon, to which Lerner had no ob-

jections (Vuong). As we will see, this is just another part of the metafictional/autofictional

scheme Lerner deliberately employs in making the boundaries between reality and fiction tenu-

ous. In an interview for *The New Yorker* Ben acknowledges, "I never thought about this narrator

being named Ben Lerner" (Leyshon). Many critics regard this novel as a paradigm of autofiction

(Gibbons, Effe, Lorentzen, Worthington). In the novel's opening lines, there is a statement that is

evocative of Genette's attempt to formulate voice in autofictional books: "We sat and watched

the traffic and *I am kidding and I am not kidding* when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence,

felt the subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly

speaking, belong to me" (3, my emphasis). As in Genette's statement on the intentionally contra-

dictory nature of autofiction — "*It is I and it is not I,*" where the problem seems to be that of us-

ing the first-person narration — the work necessarily implies a referential reality, but the book is

classified as fiction. Lerner pushes the contradictions of autofiction to the extreme in this novel.

   Although predominantly written in the first person, *10:04* shifts narrative voice in the

second chapter, where Ben Lerner includes an already published story "The Golden Vanity." The

story originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. This is reminiscent of the example I have indicated

---

[29] *Leaving The Atocha Station* was published by small independent *Coffee House Press*, whose greatest success was brought actually by Lerner's debut novel. After "an initial 3,500-copy print run*, Leaving the Atocha Station* went into two more print runs. Of the 12,000 copies in print, 7,500 have sold to date" (Kirch). I am drawing a parallel here. The similarities are noticeable.

at the beginning of theAdam/Lerner quandary. This chapter — highly metafictional as the novel itself — "would involve a series of transpositions" (10:04 54). The unnamed narrator, who (many critics say) is Lerner himself, would make deliberate changes, or, as he says, "I would change the names: Alex would become Liza" and "the protagonist—a version of myself: I'd call him 'the author'" (10:04 54-55). In effect, what we have here is a blend between 'the author' and Ben, who will, in the second chapter, write about himself in the third-person. As we will see, it is in those exact moments that the author will realize the fleeting structure of memory.

At the very end of the second chapter, 'the author' writes, "He realized: I do remember the drive, the view, stroking Liza's hair, the incommunicable beauty destined to disappear. I remember it, *which means it never happened*" (81 my emphasis). This is one of the many episodes where remembering is called into question. The syntactical construction in "I do remember" highlights the certainty of the process of recollection. Apart from this, the pair of definite articles (the drive and the view) foreshadows the imagined certainty with which 'the author' recalls these experiences. However, the power of the imagined experience defeats the reality of it, as the author would realize ("it never happened"). Not long after, there is another instant of the memory's disposition. Wandering around New York City, he writes, "Whenever I walked across Manhattan Bridge, I remembered myself as having crossed the Brooklyn Bridge" (10:04 134). In the same paragraph, he admits that even crossing the Brooklyn Bridge seemed as if it slipped out of his mind. "I was starting to misremember crossing in the third person, as if I somehow watched myself walking beneath the Brooklyn Bridge's Aeolian Cables" (10:04 134-135). Notice the "I remember myself," a clause that uses the first-person both as a subject and an object of the proposition. This is one of the effects that, as Rajan argues, the real-world author constructs: a "subdi-

vision of themselves referred to by the pronoun 'I'" (221). Here Lerner separates the self — 'I' and 'myself' — both linguistically and metaphorically (Gibbons 88). The inclusion of this chapter —and the one mentioned earlier — in the book is yet another metafictional reference and a means of playing with the ontological zone between Adam's world and the real world of the real author.

In an interview with writer Tao Lin, Lerner explains that the original story being placed in the novel changes its validity and its originality, "*like a world to come*," he describes, where these already published texts are "no longer [a work] that preceded the novel. […] they're decontextualized […] and while they're materially identical—every word is the same—they're utterly transformed" (Lin 2015). What Lerner implies here is that we should read these texts as separate objects, written by Adam Gordon. The effect of the diegetic presence of both *The Contest of Words* and *The Golden Vanity* is that Lerner revokes entirely their self-referentiality and places them in the "fictional" world of Adam Gordon. This self-referential metafiction allows Adam to move closer to Ben, in a way that makes "the narrator and the protagonist the same person, just separated in time" (Sheu 149). Effectively, this autofictional trick is intended to numb the divide between real life and life in the novel. Even though Adam is a fictionalized version of the author himself, the ontological boundaries between extra-textual and in-textual world seem to be one and the same. Over and over again, the reader is led to believe that Adam is Ben Lerner despite the paratextual designation of the book. Reading the books separately, they have an aura of a fictional memoir and reading them like a trilogy, they leave an effect of an autobiography due to the asynchronous yet clear chain of events making one's, that is, Adam Gordon's, lifetime.

In *Topeka*, Lerner explores the dynamics of memories concerning a personal traumatic experience. These scenes make *Topeka* different from the other two novels because Lerner employs multiple narrative situations. The use of metatextuality — an intertextual critical commentary concerning the text itself — adds to this layered narration. The novel is divided into multiple chapters that employ multiple focalizers. The book opens in the distant third person with Adam who acts as external focalizer. In the three chapters where Adam is narrated in the distant third person, there are occasional intrusions on the authorial narrator's part, that at times verge on metalepsis, through which the author draws a "deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told" (Genette 234). It is not until the last chapter, which I will go thoroughly later, that a shift occurs, from third to the first in which the narrator Adam becomes a character Adam, an autodiegetic narrator.

Jane's and Jonathan's chapters, on the other hand, are in the first person, and the chapters at times seem to resemble interviews. This effect is visible when, all of a sudden, a question is asked, presumably by Adam himself. Jane and Jonathan are characters with first person narrative voices and at the same time they are also internal focalizers. The same events are narrated multiple times, each time through Jane and Jonathan's character. *Topeka,* overall presents each character's background, history and youth. It is also an attempt to write an intergenerational family biography. This is why for Lerner it was important to use different narrative voices. Jane and Jonathan, in particular, share their family stories and we read the chapters through their perspectives as internal focalizers. Each character goes through his/her own memories and past in order to develop a picture of the present moment. Each character also suffered a trauma. The motif of personal traumatic experience is evident particularly in the character of Jane, who, as we later

find out, has been abused as a child by her father. Jonathan's usage of heavy drug left a trace of trauma and Adam's childhood and adolescent period is marked by repeated episodes of bullying and harassing. Again, as in previous novel, in order to effectively show the unreliabilities of remembering the past, Lerner's characters remember themselves in the third-person. In a scene, during a bad acid trip in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jonathan recalls, "I remember the next several hours of the Episode in both the first and third person, probably because I've depended heavily on Jane's account" (49). Jane also combines first and third person narration as she recounts her experiences of abuse during childhood: "Now I remember that night in the third person, like I'm looking into the living room from Sima's vantage on the porch swing — I misremember that moment as the moment I started to recall more fully what had happened but it wasn't." (82) Using the third-person singular voice provides Lerner with the appropriate distance he needs to explore the alienation and doubleness each character feels.

What Lerner demonstrates in the examples above is the unreliability of personal remembrance. Taken together, this is an underlying theme in all three novels. By using the "third person" voice, Lerner is able to analyze memories which seem as if they were imagined. The act of misremembrance, in the case of Jonathan and Jane, initiates the disjunction between fiction and reality. A man crossing a bridge ruminates and realizes that he, in fact, is the third person – thus the very occurrence never took place in the reality. What this suggests is that the extratextual author, Lerner, through Adam's transition from the narrator to the narrated, by questioning the validity of memories, explores his self through a process of autofictionalization As expounded above, the sole processing of memories is fictitious. Here we come to the core of autofiction. As already suggested in the epigraph "everything will be like now just a little bit different," Lerner

shows how writing about the past and about memories follows the same rule, but due to the fallible nature of remembrance, these explorations are subjected to different degrees of fictionalization.

Despite the discrepancy between real-world experience and fiction, once the present moment has passed, this line is blurred. Just like imagination, memories are fictitious. They are selective interpretations. Memories turn into stories through which we understand ourselves and each other, just as fiction serves to help us grasp the world around us and the world within us. Memories are unreliable, and it is therefore important to question their validity. Henri Bergson wrote, "The pure present is an ungraspable advance of the past devouring the future… In truth, all sensation is already memory" (126). All characters, including Adam and Lerner himself, turn to their pasts in order to establish their own selves and make sense of life as it is. Therefore, and as I argue through this paper, Lerner's autofictional project is an attempt to historicize his identity. Lerner problematized this notion in *Topeka* by writing about the process of recollection in the third person. In fact, one of the recurring themes in Lerner's novels is the way he explores "how [Lerner] inhabits memories and how memories are transmitted from generation to generation" (Smallwood). According to Gibbons, by using the third person, Lerner "exploits a distanced narrative perspective — in contrast to the immediacy of first-person point of view — as a means of representing the ways in which memories alter and are misremembered, falsified and even fictionalized" (Gibbons 3). It is important to remember that the validity and intensity of memories are two of the most salient features of autofiction. Lerner here adds another characteristic — he sees recollection and experiencing as themselves a sort of fictionalizing process. Dyx argues that "lived experience is itself subject to the distortions of the imagination and the act of

fictionalizing affects the content of the memories" (6). In response to a question about how memories work in his novels in an interview for *The Yale Review, "*The Poet and Novelist Goes Home," Lerner answered: "In the novel—as in life?—some memories are in the first and third person simultaneously, especially childhood memories, in part because they are so inflected by the stories others tell about what we experienced. They are collaborative productions" (Barnett n.p.).

One of the subtle ways in which the three books are interwoven in a single macrotext— and therefore present the life of Adam Gordon and his family—is the way asynchronous scenes from each book are fused into a coherent whole. In the following examples, I will analyze Lerner's art of connecting the seemingly separate, asynchronous narrations in order to complete the puzzle and tell the whole story. At the same time, once connected and united, we can observe the underlying thread of memories and remembering. In *Atocha,* after Adam receives a "prestigious fellowship" (Atocha 53) and moves to Madrid[30] as an aspiring poet, he tells one of his girlfriends that his parents are "both psychologists" and that his "mom is a well known feminist" (Atocha 60). Earlier in the novel, in the aftermath of Adam's lie about his mother's death for the sake of impressing one of the girlfriends, he expresses the remorse.

> I begin to imagine my mom, how she would feel if she knew what I had done, my self-disgust giving way in turn to the fear that somehow this lie would have material effects, would kill her, or at least that, when something did in fact happen to my mother, as happen it must, I would always feel and be at least in part responsible, that whatever she suf-

---

[30]Lerner, as mentioned above went in Spain on a Fulbright scholarship. He was also awarded a Howard Foundation Fellowship.

fered would be traceable in some important sense to this exact moment when I traded her

life for the sympathy of an attractive stranger (Atocha 29).

This paranoia concerning this episode, Adam would carry with him later on. In *10:04* the narrator explains how this story about his mother had repercussions in writing the aforementioned novel. In a highly autofictional mode, Lerner writes, "In my novel the protagonist tells people his mother is dead, when she's alive and well. Halfway through writing the book, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and I felt, however insanely…that having even a fictionalized version of myself produced a bad karma" (10:04 138). Lerner then connects the dots when at one point he realizes how "the lie about *his* mom is really about my dad…or about my dad's mother, my grandma, whom I never met"(138). The pronoun "his" indicates that he is talking about Adam's mom (who, we assume, to be also his own mom). Here the space between fact and fiction fuses. Later, Lerner recounts to his friend Alex how one day his father picked him up from the airport and on their way to Topeka, he shared the news of his mother's death In *Topeka* this episode appears again, only now recounted by Jonathan himself in the first-person singular. "Rachel and I wouldn't have lasted regardless," says Jonathan. "[W]e got married the year before I started grad school, after we both, within the space of a few days, lost a parent: my mom finally succumbing to breast cancer, her dad dropping from a coronary" (Topeka 42). What began in *Atocha* as a reckless flirting with an unknown girl, was then reflected in *10:04* only to be made clear in *Topeka*. Taken together, these bits are part of the family's intergenerational memory. I imply that the full connection of the three novels is possible only when we look at them as a whole. The protagonist may have failed to grasp the connection in the present moment of flirting that the story he shared of his mother is in fact about his father's mother. Once he gets older, he reflects on this

moment and connects the dots between the lie he told and the true occurrences, and finally the story becomes validated in the last book (which is the beginning if we look at it synchronously). Along these storytelling lines , Lerner ties the three books together. This scattering of episodes demonstrates Lerner's unique way of writing and weaving the texts together into a trilogy. However, the books are not necessarily read or perceived as a whole. Taking this into consideration, characterization as a continuing process — which Palmer states to be at the center of the construction of fictional personality — is challenged both when reading books separately or as a trilogy (Palmer qtd. in Masiero 6).

Thematically speaking, the three novels are not interconnected, at least not to extents to argue consistency in characterization and story world creation. However, none of the three texts when consumed separately provide the reader with a consistent and coherent characterization, that is, as phrased by Masiero, a "continuing characterization frame" to work with from the initial pages to the end of the novel (7). On the other hand, when perceived as installments, it can be argued that Lerner creates, refines and provides various data, both intra- and extra-textual, to his readers to be able to decide whether to keep, re-pattern, or discard the initial frame.

Despite the fact that Lerner toys with the story timeline, he suggests the interconnection by keeping the protagonist's name in the first and the third installments of what we address as a trilogy, and therefore provides the readers with the continuous characterization to be challenged and interrupted at times, both by himself and by the readers lacking or receiving inadequate data from the texts. Tellingly, this frame interruptions further disclose the fiction-fact gap and overlap, as Adam Gordon's transition from growth to maturity is mirroring Lerner's struggle in grasping his own identity and history, his self as an emerging poet.

Lerner deliberately uses asynchronous, scattered episodes to link the three novels together. This notion occurs repeatedly, sometimes between the two books. In *10:04* while walking in an empty school in New York, Adam becomes immediately captivated by his "entire childhood in Topeka" (10:04 14). He writes, "[D]o you know what I mean when I say that when I reached the second floor and disposed of the wax paper, I was in Randolph Elementary School?" (10:04 14-15). In *Topeka* this school is repeatedly mentioned as a place where Adam used to debate. If we recall, the debates were held in elementary and high schools across Topeka. In *Atocha*, at a party, Adam accidentally pours himself a glass of tequila, triggering vivid memories of his adolescence:

> At seventeen I had made myself violently ill drinking tequila and had never had it again… I thought back to that night in Topeka, vomiting for an hour near a bonfire then sleeping in the bed of a pickup in the middle of the winter. I could smell the campfire and felt cold and a little dizzy (Atocha 140)

In *Topeka* there are frequent scenes where Adam would excessively drink with his friends at various places. At the same time in *The Contest of Words* Lerner describes the endless drinking games, an"inebriation" to the point of "passing out". These examples trigger past experiences so vividly that they seem phenomenologically real. "Adam experiences the sensation of being drunk by the campfire whilst Ben seems to walk into his past or, at least, the school that the fictional Adam Gordon and the real Ben Lerner attended" (Gibbons 3). Furthermore, these examples show how each character's memories are recalled asynchronously. From one episode to another, these connections develop into a coherent structure in understanding the life of Adam Gordon, whose details invite us to reflect on the autobiographical and autofictional components of these

texts.. And not just that, Lerner, through his alter ego shows what it means to be alive. Creating Adam, he showed that, using Shields words "to be alive is to travel ceaselessly between the real and the imaginary" (Shields).

5.3 Author Here: Breaking the Frame and Usage of Metalepsis

What underlies the transition from postmodern to post-postmodern fiction is the way the latter appropriated ideas from the former, only to a different end. One of those ends, is the rein-forced commitment and engagement with realism. This new poetics gradually displaced post-modernist paranoia by attempting to present the fictional world as coextensive with ours. Typical postmodernist strategies, such as metatextuality and ontological ambiguity, are no longer used as a means to create illusion, but to authenticate the authorial voice. Contemporary autoficiton, and particularly Lerner's version of it, is essentially a paradigmatic example of the post-postmod-ernist poetics — an example of the drive to represent reality.

One of the characteristic features of Lerner's work is his distinctive mode of establishing a reality effect through a continuous reminder of the author's presence — not through the narra-tion interruptions he skillfully uses — but in the character himself. On the one hand, the author's interventions and transitions from Adam as a narrator, through Adam as the narrated, to Adam as the potential author of the text, can easily draw the reader to experience the opposite of the real. In addition, the frequent use of the second person singular "you" to indicate an extratextual ad-dressee may attract the reader's focus on the wall standing between the worlds within and outside the story, and hence draw the attention to the text's artificiality rather than its realism. However,

on the other hand, this direct address also encourages readers to re-conceive the fictional story-world as their own, particularly when combined with the aforementioned presence of the author in the protagonist, his character, his memories, and ultimately his faultiness in remembering, narrating, and living. Therefore, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction becomes repurposed: firstly, to accentuate a reality effect, and secondly, to connect the content of the fictional world with that of our own. This self-referential metafiction, as I will show, is particularly exploited in *10:04* and the last chapter in *The Topeka School.*

In one passage in *10:04*, in the wake of a second storm,[31] the city loses electricity and the narrator returns home on foot with his girl friend Alex from upper Manhattan to Brooklyn. The two of them reach "the threshold of electrification" and, after a paragraph break, the narrator explains, "reader, we walked on" (234). This adaptation of the vocative case, directly addressing the reader while Lerner is in the process of writing the book, recurs throughout the novel. Not long after, the narrator again abruptly interjects, "A reporter was filming a segment nearby and I walked within range of the camera and tungsten lights and waved; *maybe you saw me*" (235 my emphasis). The hypothetical "maybe you saw me" becomes a possibility. Maybe the reader really saw the narrator[32] on the news story about the consequences of Hurricane Sandy. This invites readers into the same ontological territory as the author. These metatextual intimations generate nonfictional effects. We are asked to experience what we read as reality and not as fiction.

---

[31] The storms are modeled on Hurricane Irene and Hurricane Sandy. The book takes a span between these two storms. From the summer of 2011 when Tropical Storm Irene happened (the same year Atocha was published) to the autumn of 2012 and aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

[32] I am inclined to state Lerner himself.

Correspondingly, in another scene when on their way back to Brooklyn, once the electricity has gone off due to the aftermath of the storm, the narrator and his friend Alex notice a glimmer of light in one of the buildings in completely dark Manhattan:

Later we would learn it was Goldman Sachs, see photographs in which one of the few illuminated buildings in the skyline was the investment banking firm, an image I'd use for the cover of my book—not the one I was contracted to write about fraudulence, but the one I've written in its place for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction (236-237)

Declaring both 'for' and 'to' enhances the reality-effect to the extreme. Lerner "shifts from protagonist to narrator, and he describes the text-object he is writing as being written 'for you, to you, on the very edge of fiction'" (Shea 153). This evokes the narrator's intent to speak directly to the reader and present the immediate reality. In doing so, realism is enhanced and makes the book appear autobiographical. In *Topeka*, likewise, the use of the second person singular creates the same effect. In conversations with his mother, the second person often breaks the narrative frame. This break shows that Jane's first person monologue becomes a sort of interview. In a humorous scene, Jane pauses while addressing her son, because what she is about to recount could be embarrassing for him[33], saying: "I bet you wont't put this in your novel" (Topeka 94). In another example, Adam interrupts and responds:

I could go on. This is the backdrop against which Sima and Dad's own relationship got out of hand, but you'll have to ask him —

—*If I want details.*

---

[33]In an podcast Episode, Harriet Lerner confirmed the embarrassing story true.

If you want detail. I'm interested in how you remember the trip to New York. Looking

back, it was a horrible idea. I was doing an even at the Ninety-Second Street Y, a kind of

public conversation about my work … (Topeka 103, my emphasis).

As we see, these stylistic interruptions further enhance the novel's realist effect. Jane's first person narration transforms into a dialogue, which results in a sort of a lengthy confession. Ultimately, what this provides is the illusion of reading a transcript with real testimonies, with Lerner only substituting the characters' names.

The last chapter in *Topeka,* titled "Thematic Appreciation," provides another example in which Lerner seems to admit that he is in fact only changing names and the rest is real.The aforementioned self-referential metafiction, which Lerner applies in 10:04, is explicitly demonstrated in this chapter. The fact/fiction distinction in this chapter completely breaks. To begin with, however, there are two important shifts to notice. The first is the spatiotemporal return to present-day Brooklyn, and the second is the return to the first-person narrative voice. This return to the first person, brings Adam closer to Ben and further generates the impression that they are one and the same, only separated by time. It is in this chapter that we come to understand the fact that it was Adam who was writing across time all along. Here, Adam, like Lerner, lives with his wife and two young daughters. He describes how the four of them are in New York City and they walk to the playground. At that point, Adam suddenly asks, "(why does it feel dangerous to fictionalize my daughters' names?)"[34] (265). The usage of sudden parentheses indicates that Adam is not only the first person narrator but also the author himself. This seemingly external interruption is a result of digression from narration and dive into the authors consciousness. First and

---

[34] Not to forget that he also gave a fictionalized name to his wife: Natalia.

foremost, I argue that the reader senses Lerner's own fears here, and second, Lerner openly admits that he may have been speaking the truth throughout the narration.

I see "Thematic Appreciation" as an extension of *10:04*. The usage of prolepsis — a storytelling technique involving sudden revelation of the future event, ie. a flash-forward occurrence in the story — , present in the last chapter explains how Adam is writing from a vantage point of present-day New York. Here Adam is with his family as they participate in an #Occupy-ICE demonstration at the Jacob Javits Building in Manhattan. We know this because of the slogans and chants that appear in the chapter — "FAMILIES AND CHILDREN, we yelled, then the others: DESERVE TO BE SAFE" (279). In June 2018 in New York City, there was a protest against the "zero tolerance" immigration policies of the Trump administration, by which children were separated from their parents (Kalambacher). By including a prolepsis in the final chapter, Lerner frames Adam's perceptual and temporal shifts: from third-person writing in Topeka, through 2004 Madrid and 2011 New York, up until the first person in 2019.

Ontological details and narrative voice in *Topeka* indicate that this present-day, Trump-era America in which Adam is walking with his wife Natalia is the same as that in which Adam is walking with his girlfriend Alex in *10:04*. In addition, there is another important commonality and parallel to include. At the beginning of *10:04*, we learn that Adam has "Marfan" syndrome, a "genetic disorder of the connective tissue," which can lead to 'fatal tearing of the aorta" (5). Similarly, by the very end of the respective chapter in *Topeka*, we discover that Adam is "monitored closely by doctors for signs of a genetic syndrome I prayed nightly I had not bequeathed to my

girls, tracking the dilatation where the aorta meets the heart"[35] (270). Critics have pointed out

how Lerner masterfully blurs the line between fact and fiction. "His novels are a work of

fiction," writes Alex Preston from *The Guardian*, "that never belong to the field of fictitiousness,

novels who fail again and again at being novelistic." Failing to reach the "novelistic" standard in

terms of delivering a clear plot line, strict protagonist-antagonist distinction, and somewhat de-

tached viewpoint, it can be argued that Lerner utilizes fiction for a different cause. This recalls

the opening epigraph from *10:04*. The inventive reality thus becomes almost indistinguishable

from the reality that we are in. The metalepsis destroys the illusion of fictionality and exploits the

different degrees of reality. Furthermore, this explains that the ontological territories in Lerner's

novels become nearly one and the same as ours.

However, the interruptions that periodically occur in the novels are of various kinds.

There is yet another technique Lerner uses — not to address the readers by using the second-per-

son plural — to interrupt the course of the story by the voice in the parentheses where we come

with the realization that the whole text is the product of Adam's consciousness, that is, his

process of writing. For example, while the narrator is in his apartment writing letters, a pigeon

appears on the window. He writes:

> I tapped and then banged on the actual window to try to dislodge the stout-bodied passer-
>
> ine—I always felt like I was interacting with the same bird no matter where I encountered
>
> in the city—but it only preened and repositioned itself a little. (I just Googled *pigeon* and

---

[35] In a podcast interview with Marc Caners, Ben acknowledges that he had some med-
ical problems that he "will not go into now…" (Caners).

learned they aren't true passerines; along with doves, they constitute the distinct bird

clade *Columbidae*.) (10:04 213).

Again, the use of parenthesis indicates a total break from the narrative frame. The author appears

in the present and mentions "just" as if to tell the reader that he is actually doing this at the time

of writing. The protagonist suddenly seems removed from the action of the novel. Adam is in the

parenthesis, and this interjection will have consequences later in the novel. These moments are

evocative of Barth's Thesean Hero, where, as we recall, an author can have a hand in shaping the

interpretation of his story. Near the end of the book, the narrator states, "There was nothing in the

speech or laughter or arguments I overheard to indicate crisis or emergency, no erratic behavior

among the squirrels or *Columbidae*" (10:04 234). The narrator updates the corresponding refer-

ence and highlights how the narration has "more to do with the narrator's rhetorical choices than

with mimetic representation" (Shea 151).

Another example appears at the beginning of chapter four when the narrator describes the

environment of Maria, Texas, and mentions the address where he will stay. He adds, "I remember

the address (you can drag the 'pegman' icon onto the Google map and walk around the neigh-

borhood on Street View, floating above yourself like a ghost; I'm doing that in a separate win-

dow now)" (10:04 163). This has the same effect as in earlier example. He is placing the narrator

of the book writing on his computer in the actual moment of writing and describing the environ-

ment. At the same time, it feels as if the author is procrastinating, rather than writing the novel,

by spending time on Google Maps.

In *Topeka*, Lerner again uses this technique. Reflecting on conflicts during his high

school period, the narrator asks, "Where were the parents?" And in ruminating about possible

examples, he adds, "Some were drinking gin and tonics in Taipei and *some were writing this in Brooklyn while their daughters slept beside* the and some were coming back on trains in dreams and some were at Rolling Hills in twilight states, mechanical beds" (Topeka 123-124, my emphasis). Again, we are led to believe that the author is in the process of writing the very novel we are reading. Moreover, this little interruption accentuates the reality to the point that readers are positioned to engage with these interruptions not as fictions but as real-world instantiations, that is, as they are both the products and the presences in the novelist's life. In another example, we are told by the narrator about Adam's high school period when he used to buy protein shakes to build on muscles. The narration is interrupted abruptly, not by the narrator, nor Adam, but an extratextual narrator, — "Wikipedia says it was probably damaging their kidneys" — before moving forward with the narration about Adam in the third person. We have here yet another narrative break and an appearance by the author himself in the act of writing. Adam mentions his "younger brother, who would prefer to be left out of a novel" (Topeka 43). In fact, Lerner also has a younger brother, whom he never mentioned in all three novels, despite mentioning his fictionalized mother and father.

In addition to enhancing the novel's realism, these interruptions serve as a means to emphasize the constant presence of the author. The reader may fall into the narrative story of Adam Gordon and his world, but, every now and then, the author appears in parenthesis, reminding the reader of his presence. Such interjections appear to narrativize the self, not in an ironic manner but to show how the lines between fiction and reality are fragile. The use of parentheses and the narrativization of the self — in essence a postmodern technique — in the above examples indicate the "sincere use of an ironic form" (Shea). It is used, first and foremost, to enhance the nov-

els' realism and blur the line between fiction and reality. Combined together, his use of self-referentiality and ontological indecipherability makes these interruptions a paradigmatic example of a metamodernist text. In addition to that, the active presence of the extra-textual author in form of intertextual interruptions provides the text with an autobiographical tone, even though it is fictional. The metatextuality in the end renders the creative power of the author and explains that the storyworld is one and the same with his own.

5.4 Actuality of The Visual - Virtuality of The Literary

"I have spent a lot of time being jealous of artists who work with something other than words," so reflects Ben Lerner in his essay titled "The Actual World". He continues, "[m]y jealousy has various sources, but one is the unsophisticated yet unshakable sense that a work of visual art — even a photograph or film installation — is more real, more actual, than a machine made out of words" (Lerner). The trilogy makes a great number of references to various art mediums and poetry. Every novel has episodes where art and artworks are discussed in a highly critical way. First of all, Lerner's implementation of art works into his novels shows how important they are to him. It is almost impossible to write about Lerner and his project and not to mention art and poetry. Paintings, including Duccio's *Madonna and Child,* Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc*, and Rosier van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross*, movies such as *Back to the Future* and Christian Marclay's *The Clock,* and poetry by John Ashbery, William Bronk, and Walt Whitman all play a direct role in the way Lerner comprehends reality around him.

Thus, the last thematic interconnection that I will be writing about, deals with the role of art works and poetry in his texts. It is worth mentioning, before going deeper into examples, that Lerner himself is an art enthusiast and critic. The myriad allusions to artworks in his novel are there for a couple of reasons. First they show, how, when put into the medium of the novel, the art works transcend their actuality and become an object to be further explored. Lerner writes, "I think of the novel as a fundamentally *curatorial* form, as a genre that assimilates and arranges and dramatizes encounters with other genres: poetry, criticism and so on" (Lerner). Secondly, they serve as a source of inspiration to further dwell into the space between reality and fiction, something that Lerner's ultimate project is about. Virtual art (most notably Christian Marclay's *The Clock* and Ashbery's poetry) becomes an obsession for Lerner. As I will explain in the end, it is through them that Lerner's project ultimately gets its unique shape.

Critic Christian Lorentzen notes that the unique achievement of Lerner's novels is the "integration of [art] criticism with the fiction (Lorentzen). Through all three books, Lerner makes his characters (Jane and Jonathan besides Adam) spend time either at the cinema or in important museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Prado, and the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. "The novel is an art work in which you can embed other art works — real or imagined — in a variety of thickly described artificial environments in order to test a character's responses," explains Lerner. In *Topeka* Jonathan recalls when he and Jane were wandering around the Metropolitan and came across Duccio's *Madonna and Child*. "Old paintings usually bored me; this one stopped me cold" he says. The expression of the Madonna is described as if "she could anticipate a distant recurrence." What follows presents some musing on the painting's frame and on the space between reality and fiction:

But the burns were like the fingerprints of an older time … I decided that's what the

painted mother foresaw, that she was saying farewell to candlelight, that she knew she

was trapped inside a painting addressed to the future, where it could only be, however

great, an instance of technique. New cracks spread across the surface as I stared. Tears

start in my memory (46-47).[36]

This is the first example in which Lerner shows his way of writing about art works. The immediate experience and awe of the artwork left in Jonathan a particular trace that entered into his memory. The effect is that the artwork seemed dazzlingly real, as if the Madonna was indeed trapped inside the frame. The reality of the picture was connected with glimmers of fiction. Correspondingly, in *10:04*, again at the Metropolitan, the narrator stands with his friend in front of Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc,* their gazes paralleled as they "coconstructed the literal view before us" (10:04 8). "Coconstruction" is an important word-choice. Lerner uses the novel, "a great vehicle for art criticism," as he describes it, as an instrument to further dramatize and arrange the work of art (Lerner). The following excerpt is the coconstruction of the painting mentioned above.

They have just summoned Joan, who has been working at a loom in her parents' garden,

to rescue France. One angel holds her head in her hands…Instead of grasping branches or

leaves, her hand, which is carefully positioned on the sigh line of one of the other angles,

seems to dissolve. The museum placard says that Bastien-Lepage was attacked with the

realism of the future saint's body, but that "failure" is what makes it one of my favorite

[36] In the acknowledgment section at the end of *Topeka*, Lerner writes that the painting served as an inspiration to explore the divide. He writes how "its anachronistic appearance throughout *The Topeka School* can stand for the unstable mixture of fact and fiction."

paintings.[37] It's as if the tension between the metaphysical and physical words, between two orders of temporality, produces a glitch in the pictorial matrix; the background swallows her fingers (10:04 page number).

In the world of poetry, in order to transform the visual into the verbal, poets usually employed what is called *ekphrasis*. It is a rhetorical device in which a poet engages with a painting, sculpture, music, and other visual art. What Lerner does with artworks is a type of *ekphrastic* prose. In the descriptions above, the narrator, Adam, is giving life to the visual. He engages and transforms. Lerner makes Adam describe it and makes the artwork enter the memory of his characters. The descriptions transcend the actual world. "For me," Lerner says in an interview, "the novel, not the poem, is the privileged form for the kind of virtuality I'm describing…[w]riting is particularly suited to figuring what we can desire or fear but can't (now) make, especially relative to those arts that depend on seeing" (Smith).

In continuation with the actuality of the visual in *10:04,* this time referencing a movie, Lerner delves into the border between fact and reality again. At the end of the first chapter, the narrator goes to see Christian Marclay's *The Clock.* It is an experimental project — a twenty-four hour video depicting real time and showing a clock telling the time or showing a character stating the precise time. It is a work of art that is designated to "obliterate the distance between art and life, fantasy and reality" (54). At one point, while watching the movie, the narrator picks up a phone to check the time, not realizing that the movie itself is presenting time in real life. In this precise moment, the narrator has an epiphany:

---

[37] On several occasions, Lerner has stated that *Joan of Arc* is his favorite work of art.

As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of this found footage, I felt actually how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction. When I looked at my watch to see a unit of measure identical to the one displayed on the screen, I was indicating that a distance remained between art and the mundane. (54).

Once again, as before, an artwork, this time a movie, serves as an inspiration for the narrator to further explore the prismatic relation between fiction and reality. After seeing the movie, the narrator declares, "I decided to write more fiction" and that he "would shift [his] medical problem to another part of the body" and he "would change names". By incorporating discussions of artworks and movies, Lerner seeks to force readers to view the work alongside the narrator. Indeed, after an artwork is mentioned, there is a subsequent picture of the work. This is one of many examples where we are able to see Lerner's critical eye across various art forms. The idea behind this is, according to Lerner, is to see how "the construction of a book or work of art can be dramatized by that book or work of art. I think it all comes from poetry" (Lerner).

Poetry, indeed, is the invisible thread that strings all three novels together. As I said at the beginning, poetry is Lerner's original medium. It is where he comes from. In his novels, Lerner's relationship with poetry is evident early on. In *Topeka,* during Adam's childhood days, he remembers how his mother would recite to him the poem "Purple Cow" at bedtime. He then would repeat it back with a small mistake, and she would feign discontent and correct him over and over. The scene, which Lerner described as the most "loving scene, because it is about intergenerational transmission" explains his early passion towards the medium. Growing up, he recalls how he wanted to become a poet because "poems were spells" (126). Adam's interest in poetry

continues to grow until he becomes a poet. However, in *Atocha*, now a young and serious poet himself, readers begin to see how a poet actually looks at poetry. It is especially in this novel that the reader finds out to what degree and why art is so important for Lerner. Adam is living in Madrid, just as Lerner, where he is working on composing a "long research-driven poem, whatever that might mean" (163). Adam faces two challenges: what does it mean to "live authentically" and to show "the texture of et cetera itself" with lyrical writing that goes beyond the simple snapshots of localized occurrences and attempts to catch the gist of "life's white machine" (16). Here, Adam starts looking at poetry from a different angle.

In fact, the novel consistently shows his uncertainty about himself as a poet and his dubiousness over what poetry actually means today. In a world where culture has rendered poets outdated, Adam becomes paralyzed because poetry has lost what Walter Benjamin would describe as its "aura,"[38] the power to be in a ritualized part of the culture that produced the work of art. As someone who cares deeply about poetry, he is also hyperconscious that, as Adam says, "Poetry isn't about anything" (36). "I wanted […] to explore the novel as a vehicle for thinking *about* poetry and the arts in our age of spectacle and a tension between form and connote seemed crucial for that exploration. The narrator is trying to figure out (among other things) if poetry is still a viable art form," Lerner explained in regards to *Atocha's* main theme (Wayne). In one scene, Adam declares: "If I was a poet, I had become one because poetry, more intensely than any other practice, could not evade its anachronism and marginality and so constituted a kind of acknowledgment of my own preposterousness" (101).

---

[38]Taken from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.*

Many ideas in *Atocha* were further developed in a monograph Lerner issued in 2016 titled *The Death of Poetry*. In many ways, the two texts are interrelated. Both focus on questioning the possibility of what a perfect poem might look like and demonstrate the obscure paradox: the power of poetry comes from its powerlessness. As he expands upon later, we hate poetry, not only because it endlessly disappoints us with its inability to live up to its supposed perfection but because it also makes us, as humans, feel like disappointments. Poetry is believed to denote humanity and, as such, should be understood and created by us — if it is not, if we simply cannot grasp it or create it from scratch, we are challenging — or even denouncing — our own humanity. Since poetry is in a way a reminder of our humanity, as Lerner writes, our hatred of poetry only serves to signify its ever-growing importance. In *Atocha* and more broadly in *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner explores the notion of the "bitter logic of poetic principle," an idea first developed by Allen Grossman, one of Lerner's idols. If we pause here, we can see that the initials match with Lerner's alter ego. For Grossman, as Lerner specifies, poems are foredoomed because of the gap between the virtual poem and the actual poem. The virtual poem, as Lerner writes, is what we might call "poetry with a capital 'P'" — that is, the particular urge to reach the transcendent or divine. The finished product is always going to be an actual poem because, as Lerner says in *The Hatred of Poetry*, that urge is "necessarily betray[ed] when it joins the world of representation" (9). "Poems are virtual for Grossman because there is an unbridgeable gap between what the poet wants the poem to do and what it can actually do," Lerner explained (Lin). These contradictions effectively make poetry not difficult but "impossible" (Hatred 9). As a solution, he suggests "a ruthless reading that allows us to measure the gap between the actual and the virtual

[that] will enable us to experience, if not the genuine poem…a place for the genuine, whatever that might mean" (9).

Lerner uses his preoccupations and projects them onto Adam, who further contemplates the aesthetic ideas he has about poetry, particularly the poetry of John Ashbery. The influence of Ashbery on *Leaving the Atocha Station* is significant. In fact, the name of the book is taken from an early Ashbery poem. He describes him as "'a major poet' without irony" (90). Much of what Adam says about Ashbery already appeared in an essay Lerner wrote for the magazine *boundary 2* the year before the publication of the novel. As in previous examples, Lerner once again plays with readers and uses exact words from the essay, titled *The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy*. In the book, Adam finds poems most compelling when they fail to reach their full potential. He observes, "I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility" (9). Adam, as does Lerner in the essay, sees the echo of poetic possibility in Ashbery's poems. Indeed, in essayistic prose, Adam notices how "[Ashbery's] poems refer to how their reference evanesces," that is, how "it is though the actual Ashbery poem is concealed from you" (163). Using one of his poems,[39] Adam explains this virtual concealment: "a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of the mirror: 'You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. / You miss each other'" (91). In the end, Adam knows that the virtual is impossible, but, through vigorous interpretation, we are able to measure "the gap" between the virtual and the

---

[39]John Ashbery *Paradoxes and Oxymorons* (1980)

112

actual. Ultimately, for both Adam and Lerner, Ashbery's poems incite that experience. "Exploiting this tension between the actual and the virtual," writes Damiano Schina, "is exactly what Adam and Lerner in a broader context, do with the works of art they produce, for example, the very novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*" (32).

We can see here that even *Atocha* falls into the same pattern as the other two. First, all three novels center on the process of creating the very text we are reading. Furthermore, all three novels have a taint of Lerner's own published essays who appear outside the novels. Metafictional self-referentiality, thus, is a mode which Lerner inhabits. Autofictional theory explains this illusory effect — the constant authorial presence. The inclusion of the essays, which point self-referentially to the author, deliberately put in the novels, only serve to further complicate the question of fictionality. For non-vigilant readers, the name Adam Gordon might indicate that he is just another fictional character. However, Lerner's project shows the impossibility of seeing it as a work of fiction. After disentangling all of the above, more vigilant readers start to see how much of Lerner is in Adam.

Ultimately, through various art medium and poetry, Lerner showed us his own absorption and relationship with poetry. What started in the essay was further elaborated in the novel. On top of that, the question and role of poetry was analyzed further in the monologue. Interesting and worth pondering is the answer Lerner gave, in an online interview, describing the *Hatred* as a work of fiction (Delistraty). This begs the question: was Adam speaking there the whole time? Correspondingly, movies and paintings were used as a model to further ponder the distinction between reality and fiction. I argued that they act as a device to use the *ekphrastic* prose which provides a particular encounter with the visual works of art. Robust descriptions transmitted new

sensations sand experiences of seeing the artwork. Michael Clune, literary critic, in his *Writing Against Time* (2013), writes how certain writes have an urge to "invent virtual techniques". "[T]he mode is ekphrastic. These writers create images of more powerful images; they fashion techniques for imagining better techniques…Like an airplane designer examining a bird's wing, the artists studies life to overcome its limits" (20). Lerner's quest for the virtual in poetry was halted because of poetry's impossibility to provide one. Nevertheless, through other art mediums, above all visual ones, he found an inspiration and a way to explain the virtuality of the literary. Observed and scrutinized, art is ultimately a source for detecting the boundaries between fiction and reality and a motive to apply his own life story in the fiction. Indeed, writing about the relationship between the verbal and visual, he concludes: "I think the relationship is most fecund when writers concede the actual to writers" (Lerner).

Conclusion

When asked how much imagination there was in *The Search of Lost Time*, Proust declared there was none. It was reality, infused with creative writing (Shields). As an early classic example of what would become defined as autofiction, this statement clearly explains how autofiction operates. Facts are just a matter of degree and fiction is a matter of framing. The same stands for Lerner's trilogy. The power of contemporary autofictional writers, above all the power and creativity of Ben Lerner, is that, even though categorized as a novel, readers are perceiving the text as a fact.

This dissertation firstly addressed the historical overview of the genre of autofictioin, precisely with an aim to designate and further deconstruct the concept. Lejeune's essay on auto-biographical pact paved the way for Serge Doubrovsky to experiment with the autobiographical "I". Essentially, the author, narrator and the protagonist, may not be one and the same. The "I" can refer and not refer to the author. What autofiction presents is a story about the self in which the real fact become a field for further fabrication and imagination.

The fiction in autofiction does not have its classical meaning of inventing. Fiction, here, alludes to a "symbolic function of language the process of putting experiences into words and results in the typical blending of strictly referential facts" (Gronemann 243). It is the "forced to-talization" to use Doubrovsky's wording because it is totalized by the very text. Despite real details and referentiality, language is what makes it fictitious.

However, it is important to say that autofiction does contain elements that may not be true. This is the effort left upon the reader to see what and where fiction takes place. The interest-ing part is that there is not a definitive line where we can see what is a fact and what is fiction. The constant shifting between the referential and imaginative is what it makes provocative and gripping. Aristotle in *Poetics* argues for a convincing impossibility over unconvincing possibility in literary works. That is, things that did not occur in actuality but are read in a manner as if they had occurred are favored to things that did occur but read as if they had not. Being a hybrid genre, the appeal of autofictions is precisely this: "it has something to do with having it both ways at once," as the author Leslie Jamison described.

Literary critic Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in Theories of Fiction* (1967) makes a distinction between myth and fiction. Myths, he writes, "operate within the dia-

grams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures" (39). That is, myth is when we forget that a story is just a story and we take it for granted, as if it were a form of reality. On the other hand, fiction is "for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change" (39). Fiction, thus, becomes a deliberate organization of reality in which the world can be looked at in multiple directions at the same time.

Creating his alter ego Adam, Lerner explored his own myriad possibilities of looking at the world. The trilogy, ultimately, combines memories and experiences of his life. In this sense, his autofictional project exposed how "experiences become fiction," and how fictions can have "real effects in our lives" (Caners). Moreover, the trilogy tells how the present can be affected by the stories we tell ourselves about the future and the past. Moving from one space to another, from one memory to another, it presents a cross-examination of his past experiences, future expectations, and present-day circumstances.

In the examples above, I have explained how his books sit on a frontier between two genres. The books are all categorized as *novels*, but, as we go through them, they confront the 'real' world continuously. The real, that is, the extra-textual, is embedded through various adaptations of Lerner's already published essays. Likewise, his continuous illusory effects, like change of names and usage of metalepsis, continually puzzle us because of (mis)recognitions between reality and textuality. The books incorporate both (auto) and (fiction). The extent of whether there is more (auto) or (fiction) is left for a reader to ponder.

"It has to be very personal in order to be impersonal in a way that counts," says Lerner. By applying parts of his personal essays for various magazines, essays in which he talks about

his childhood and family, love for poetry, admiration for art and personal fears and anxieties, the line between fact and fiction starts to shatter.

With the new cultural logic where postmodernist techniques are "reterritorialized", as Gibbons would phrase, Lerner's texts become a prototype of metamodern text. Many examples of the self-referentiality and intra-textual clashes between fictional and nonfictional ontologies explain the metamodern. As autofiction is a prime example of a metamodern text, Lerner's trilogy fits perfectly in the new literary landscape. The growing popularity of autofiction in recent decades demonstrates that writers have accepted the poststructuralist linguistic turn. Narrative, especially narrative about life, is a construction. Capturing life in all its objectivity and transparency is impossible. Additionally, popularity also points to the fact that we are living in a highly confessional culture and a culture in which "reality" is enormously fabricated. Metamodern texts and Lerner's trilogy do not exclusively strive for the ultimate truth as the 19th century realist writers did. Instead, they pivot towards "accidental occurrences in a dehierachized sequence of daily events" (Huber 59). Those daily events, captured by Lerner, all point to a reality within the context of the fictional world. The ambiguity makes readers see the two worlds as one and the same. Lerner's strategy of making-it-seem-real is constant. His sincerity is also noticeable. Lerner reminds us that memories and experiences are fallible. He knows that the blurring of reality is necessary due to the unconscious. Remembering is ultimately fiction. At the same time, creating Adam, Lerner muses upon his own fears and anxieties. Medical conditions, climate disasters, terrorist attacks, the difficulties of parenthood, the future of writing literature, and poetry are among the ongoing themes in these three books. Readers can easily relate to Adam's anxieties over personal dilemmas, larger sociopolitical problems, and environmental disaster. And relata-

bility, as noted in the first part, is another evidence that explains the popularity of autofiction. By presenting his spatial anxieties, the trilogy ultimately demonstrates a quest for the self. This is a fundamental idea in autofiction. Lerner becomes metamodern in showing us a world — our world — in which he presents his (and our) most deeply pressing contemporary challenges about identity and belonging. The position of this trilogy is metamodern because, at heart, they explore the issues of subjectivity in a hyper-anxious culture.

His ultimate intention is to underline the novels' realism and produce works so realistic that the boundaries between fact and fiction collide. This is what makes Lerner's autofiction particular, because Adam, although technically a fictitious character, is an embodiment of Lerner himself, a character situated corporeally in our world. Rather than providing a privileged and preexisting worldly truth, Lerner finds his own subjective truth through Adam. Lerner's most innovative idea is thus continuously emphasizing the position of fiction within his writings. Even though fiction is an integral part of autofiction, Lerner, unlike other authors such as Heti and Knausgaard, sees that reality and fiction are inseparable and thus sheds a new light on the theory of autofiction. As explained in the first part of this work, autofiction was for the greatest part of its history viewed as an attack on the limitations of autobiographical writing. Early autofictional writers focused on revealing the flaws of autobiography as a genre. As it evolved, autofiction became recognized as a postmodern way of writing about the self. In this sense, Lerner differs from other contemporary autofictional writers. He observed how in contemporary autofiction, "Some people are interested in actually collapsing the border between art and life. Their book is going to be a 'tell-all' even if it's called fiction. What I am interested in is complicating that border — but only within the aesthetic form" (Smith).

Taken together, these three books fictionalize many real aspects of Lerner's life. Critics observed how life, lived or performed, has "more literary value than whatever can be conceited from the sidelines about it" (Smallwood). The three formal and thematic interconnections that I chose, memory and its unreliability, the bias towards realism, and the role of artworks, clarify how Lerner subtly asserts his authorial presence despite his creation of Adam Gordon — who is not Lerner but an avatar of the Brooklyn-based author. As evidenced in the essays and interviews included in this paper, there are numerous undeniable biographical details that are woven throughout all three books. Lerner continuously maintains a liminal position between his own reality and fiction, and the collage of stories and characters that unite the three books invites the reader to look through Adam and clearly see Lerner's life.

In the end, Adam's voice is asserted in the act of exposing Lerner's authenticity and sincerity. Throughout the novels, the extra-textual author appears and reappears, breaking the frames, showing that he stands inside his novels as a witness. The author, manifests as a "palpable presence on the page, brooding over his society, daydreaming it into being, working his own brand of linguistic magic on it," to use Shield's phrase. Essentially the trilogy represents a coming of age novel. The artists's metamorphosis — growth to maturity — becomes visible through Adam, who is nothing less than an embodiment of the author. The truth in autofiction is the poetic subjective truth. Lerner's hero, W.D. Sebald, succinctly captures the aspiration towards reaching it by writing: "*what I am striving for is authenticity; none of it is real*". Autofiction is ultimately an attempt to represent the authentic self, and Lerner shows that combining reality with fiction can provide more literary value to life than even the best fiction.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio, and Michael Hardt. *The Coming Community (Theory Out of Bounds, Vol. 1) (Theory Out of Bounds Series)*. Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Akker, Van Robin Den. *Metamodernism (Radical Cultural Studies)*. Rowman and Littlefield International, 2017.

Aristotle, and, Antony Kenny. *Poetics (Oxford World's Classics)*. Reprint, Oxford University Press, 2013.

Ashbery, John. *Collected Poems Terry Hub 1956-1987*. New York: The Library of America, 2008. Print.

Attridge, Derek. "*The Linguistic Model And Its Applications.*" The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, edited by Raman Selden, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Barnett, Catherine. "*Ben Lerner on Writing and Magic Pills The poet and novelist goes home.*" *The Yale Review,* 1 Jan, 2020, https://yalereview.org/article/ben-lerner-writing-and-magic-pills.

Barth, John. *The Friday Book*. 1st ed., G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.

Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image-Music-Text*. Later prt., Hill and Wang, 1978.

Benjamin, Walter. *Great Ideas the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Penguin Great Ideas). Penguin UK, 2008.

Bergson, Henri, et al. *Matter and Memory*. Revised ed., Zone Books, 1990.

Bersani, Jacques, Jacques Lecarme, and Bruno Vercier. *La Littérature en France depuis 1968*. Paris: Bordas. 1982

Bode, Frauke. "Paratexts." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 364-372.

Borges, Jorge Luis, and Andrew Hurley. *Collected Fictions*. Penguin Books, 1999.

Boswell, Marshall. "*Understanding David Foster Wallace.*" First Edition 2003..

Boyle, Claire. *Consuming Autobiographies: Reading and Writing the Self in Post-War France.* Routledge, 2017.

Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. Illustrated, Duke University Press Books, 2014.

Bruner, Jerome. "*Life As Narrative.*" Social Research, vol. 54, no.1, The New School, 1987, pp. 11-32

Burke, Sean. *Authorship from Plato to the Postmodern*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995. Print.

Campbell, Petronella Sian. "*Personalising Crisis in Contemporary Autofiction: The Apocalypse as Metaphor in Michelle Tea's Black Wave.*"

Caners, Kevin. "Ben Lerner - 10:04, A Novel on the Very Edge of Fiction." *The Public*, March 2015, https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/ben-lerner-10-04-a-novel-on-the-very-edge-of-fiction/id550893184?i=1000337779367

Celestin, Roger. 2001. "Interview with Serge Doubrovsky: Autofiction and Beyond." *Journal of the Twentieth Century/Contemporary French Studies* 1 (2): 397-405

Clough, Patricia Ticineto, and Jean Halley. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. 1st Ed., Duke University Press Books, 2007.

Clune, Michael. *Writing Against Time*. 1st ed., Stanford University Press, 2013.

Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Colonna, Vincent. *L'autofiction. Essai sur la fictionnalisation de soi en littérature*, PhD dissertation, Paris: EHESS, 1989. Print.

Connor, Steven, et al. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Currie, Mark. *Metafiction* (Longman Critical Readers). 1st ed., Routledge, 1995.

Cussett, Catherine. "*The Limits of Autofiction.*" Unpublished Conference Paper, 2012. Available at www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/2/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFIC-TION.pdf Accessed 15.1.2022

Darrieussecq, Marie. "L'autofiction: Un Genre Pas Sérieux." *Poétique* 107(Sept. 1976): 369–80. Print.

Dawson, Paul. "The Return of Omniscience in Contemporary Fiction." *Narrative*, vol. 17 no. 2, 2009, p. 143-161. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/nar.0.0023.

Delistraty, Cody. "Ben Lerner on Why So Many People (Rightfully) Hate Poetry." *Literary Hub*. Jul 14, 2016, https://lithub.com/ben-lerner-on-why-so-many-people-rightfully-hate-poetry/.

Dix, Hywel. *Autofiction in English* (Palgrave Studies in Life Writing). 1st ed. 2018, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Doubrovsky, Serge. *FILS*. Galilee 1977.

— 2003. "Autofiction." *Auto/Fiction* (1): i-ii.
— 2013. "'Autoficiton'. *Auto/Fiction* 1(1): 1-3

Eakin, Paul John. "*Breaking Rules: The Consequences Of Self Narration.*" Biography, vol. 24, no. 1, 2001, pp. 113–27. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540312. Accessed 17 Jun. 2022.

Effe, Alexandra, Gibbons Alison. "*A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts and Reading.*" In. Effe, Alexandra and Lawlor Hannie. (eds) The Autofictional Palgrave Studies in Life Writing. Palegrave Macmillan. 2022.

Elizabeth H. Jones. "Serge Doubrovsky: Life, Writing, Legacy." *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2009, pp. 1–7. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.0.0182.

Ferreira-Meyers, Karen. "*Writing the Self : Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction.*" edited by Shands, Kerstin W. et al, English Studies, 2015.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Boucahard, 113–38. Ithaca. Cornell University Press. 1977.

Franzen, Jonathan. "I'll Be Doing More of the Same." (1996).

Franzen, Jonathan. "Why Bother." *Harpers*, April, 1996.

Gasparini, Philippe and Centre national du livre (France). *Autofiction*. Seuil, 2008.

Gasparini, Philippe. *Est-Il Je ? Roman Autobiographique et Autofiction*. Poï¿½tique, SEUIL, 2004.

Genette, Gerard, et al. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Literature, Culture, Theory, Series Number 20). Cambridge University Press, 1997.

— "*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method.*" Cornell University Press, 1983.

— "*Fiction and Diction.*" Cornell University Press, 1993.

Gibbons, Alison. "*Autonarration, 'I', and odd address in Ben Lerner's autofictional novel 10.04.*"

— "*Ben Lerner.*" The Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction, edited by Patrick O'-Donnell, Stephen Burn, vol. 1, Blackwell, 2022.

— "*Postmodernism is Dead. What Comes Next? Considering the new cultural paradigm and its renewed interest in truth and realism.*" TLS, https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/.

Gibbons Alison, Vermeulen, Timotheus & van den Akker, Robin. "*Reality beckons: metamodernist depthiness beyond panfictionality.*" European Journal of English Studies, 2019, pp. 172-189, . DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2019.1640426

Gibson, John. *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 2012.

Grell, Isabelle. "Serge Doubrovsky and the Auto-Fiction Term." *SEMAT*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, pp. 223–31. *Crossref*, doi:10.12785/semat/010201.

Grell, Isabelle. 2014. *L'autofiction.* Paris: Armand Collin.

Gronemann, Claudia. "Autofiction." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 241-247.

Haas, Lidija. "'It made me really crazy': Ben Lerner on confronting male rage and family trauma." *The Guardian*, 4 Nov. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/04/it-made-me-really-crazy-ben-lerner-on-confronting-male-rage-and-family-trauma.

Huber, Irmtraud. "*Post-post, Beyond and Back: Literature in the Wake of Postmodernism. In: Literature after Postmodernism.*" Palgrave Macmillan, London. 2014. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137429919_2

Hubier, Sébastien. *Littératures intimes. Les expressions du moi, de l'autobiographie à l'autofiction*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2003.

Hughes, Alex. *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography.* First Edition. Berg Publishes, 1999.

Hunt, Celia. 2004. *Writing and Reflexivity: Training to Facilitate Writing for Personal Development*. In Creative Writing in Health and Social Care, ed. Fiona Sampson 154-169. London: Jessica Kinglsey.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1988.

Hywel, Dix. *Autoficiton in English*. Palegrave Macmillan, 2018

James, Alison. "The Fictional in Autofiction." *The Autofictional Approaches, Affordances, Forms,* edited by Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor, Palegrave Mcmillan, 2022, pp. 41-61.

Jeannelle, Jean-Lous, and Catherine Viollet. 2007. *Genese et Autofiction*. Paris: Academia-Bruylant.

Kalmbacher, Colin. "Parents with babies occupy ICe offices to demand reunification of children separated from families." *Law & Crime.* June 21, 2018, https://lawandcrime.com/ immigration/parents-with-babies-occupy-ice- offices-to-demand-reunification-of-children-separated-from-families/

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts", *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 5(2). 2017. doi: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.224

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending-Studies in the Theory of Fiction.* 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 1967.

Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture.* 1st ed., Continuum, 2009.

Kirch, Claire. "Buzz Brining Sales to Coffee House." *Publishers Weekly*, 13 Jan, 2012, https:// www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/50203-buzz-bringing-sales-to-coffee-house.html.

Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed (Guides for the Perplexed)*. 0 ed., Continuum, 2007.

Korthals Altes, Liesbeth. "Sincerity, Reliability and Other Ironies – Notes on Dave Eggers' A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius". *Narrative Unreliability in the Twentieth-Century First-Person Novel*, edited by Elke D'hoker and Gunther Martens, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 107-128. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110209389.107

Lahusen, Christiane. "Memoirs." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 626-636

Lecarme, Jacques. "Indécidables ou autofictions." In *La Littérature en France depuis 1968*. Jacques Bersani, Jacques Lecarme and Bruno Vercier, Paris: Bordas, 1982. 150–55. Print.

Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." In Eakin, *On Autobiography*, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Lerner, Ben. *10:04: A Novel*. Reprint, Picador, 2015.

— *Leaving the Atocha Station.* Granta, 2013.

— *The Hatred of Poetry*. First Edition, FSG Originals, 2016.

— *The Lichtenberg Figures (Hayden Carruth Award for New and Emerging Poets)*. 4th Paperback Edition, Copper Canyon Press, 2004.

—. The Topeka School: A Novel. Picador, 2020.

Lerner, Ben. "Contest Of Words." *Harper's Magazine,* Oct 2012, https://harpers.org/archive/2012/10/contest-of-words/.

Lerner, Ben. "The Actual World." *Frieze*, 16 June 2013, https://www.frieze.com/article/actual-world.

Leyshon, Cressida. "THIS WEEK IN FICITON: BEN LENER." *The New Yorker*, 10 June 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-ben-lerner.

Lilleslåtten, Mari. "Reading autofiction can challenge and change what feels true." *University of Oslo*, June 3, 2021, https://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/news-and-events/news/2021/autofiction-can-challenge-what-is-true

Lin. Tao. "An Interview with Ben Lerner." *The Believer Magazine*, 1 sep, 2014, https://thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-ben-lerner/.

Lipovetsky, Gilles, and Sebastien Charles. *Hypermodern Times*. Wiley, 2005.

Lorentzen, Christian. "Back to the Present." *Bookforum*, https://www.bookforum.com/print/2103/ben-lerner-s-metafictional-novel-about-art-ambition-and-a-writer-named-ben-13640/.

Lucy, Niall. *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.

Lut, Missinne. "Autobiographical Pact." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 222-228

Magazine, Mousse. "The Decade of Magical Thinking: How Autofiction Reinvents Criticism." *Mousse Magazine and Publishing*, 14 July 2020, www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/autofiction-reinvents-criticism-philipp-hindahl-2020.

Man, De Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. 1st ed., Yale University Press, 1982.

Masiero, Pia. *Philip Roth and the Zuckerman Books: The Making of a Storyworld*. Cambria Press. 2011.

Marjorie, Worthington. "Fiction in the "Post-Truth" Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction
2017, 58:5, 471-483, DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2017.1331999.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Post-Contemporary Interventions). First Edition, Duke University Press Books, 2002.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1987.

---The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism (Cambridge Introductions to Literature). Illustrated, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symploke*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2004, pp. 53–68. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.1353/sym.2005.0029.

Mead, Rebecca. "The Scourge of Relatability." *The New Yorker,* August 1, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/scourge-relatability.

Moraru, Christian. *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Mortimer, Armine Kotin. "Autofiction as Allofiction: Doubrovsky's 'L'Après-Vivre.'" *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2009, pp. 22–35. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26289556. Accessed 18 Jun. 2022.

Nicol, Bran. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction (Cambridge Introductions to Literature)*. 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Olney, James, and Paul John Eakin. "Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention." *American Literature*, vol. 58, no. 4, 1986, p. 25. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2926447.

Paul, DeMan. "Autobiography as De-facement." *Comparative Literature,* vol. 94, no. 5, Dec., 1979, pp. 919-930.

Phelan, James. *Somebody Telling Somebody Else: A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative* (THEORY INTERPRETATION NARRATIV). 1st ed., Ohio State University Press, 2017.

Plitt, Carrie and Bright, Olivia. "LITERARY FRICTION - IN THERAPY W/ BEN LERNER." *NTS Radio*, 18. Dec. 2019, https://www.nts.live/shows/literaryfriction/episodes/literary-friction-18th-december-2019.

Prentice, D.A., Gerrig, R.J. & Bailis, D.S. What readers bring to the processing of fictional texts. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* **4,** 416–420 (1997). https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03210803

Preston, Alex. "10:04 by Ben Lerner review – a great writer, a great novel." *The Guardian,* 4 Jan, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/04/10-04-review-ben-lerner-great-writer.

Ricoeur, Paul, and Kathleen Blamey. *Oneself as Another*. Reissue, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. "From Realism to Reality."*For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction.* Trans. Richard Howard. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. 157-68. 1989a.

Rudrum, David, and Nicholas Stavris. *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Rogers, Gyle. "An Interview with Ben Lerner." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2013, pp. 218-38, *Crossref,* https://doi.org/10.1353/cli.2013.0021.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars Of Story (*Volume 17) (Electronic Mediations). First edition, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Sadoux, Marion. " Christine Angot's autofictions". *Women's writing in contemporary France*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2018. < https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526137999.00020>. Web. 18 Jun. 2022.

Sadoux, Marion. (2018). Christine Angot's autofictions. 10.7765/9781526137999.00020.

Sarraute, Nathalie. *The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel*. Trans. Marie Jolas. New York: G. Braziller. 51–74. 1963.

Schaser, Angelika. "Memories" *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 342-350.

Schina, Damiano. "'*A Place For The Genuine' Ben Lerner's Poetics of Liminality*." 2018, Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

Schmitt, Arnaud. "Making the Case for Self-narration Against Autofiction." *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2010, p. 122-137. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/458203.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Bernard Frechtman. *The Words: The Autobiography of Jean-Paul Sartre*. 1st Vintage Books ed, Vintage, 1981.

Sheu, J. Chingshun. "*Literature in the Anthropocene: A Hyperobject Reading of Twentieth-First Century American Fiction*." 2020. National Taiwan Normal University.

Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. Unknown, Vintage, 2011.

Shirley, Jordan. "Etat Present Autofiction In The Feminine." *French Studies*, vol. LXVII no. I, 2012, p. 76-84. *Queen Mary University of London,* doi:10.1093/fs/kns235

Smallwood, Christine. "Novel, Essay, Poem Ben Lerner Changes Perspective." *Harper's Magazine*, Oct, 2019, https://harpers.org/archive/2019/10/the-topeka-school-ben-lerner-review/.

Smith, Karl. "Time Is A Flat Circle: Ben Lerner Interviewed." *The Quietus*, 8 Feb, 2015, https://thequietus.com/articles/17190-ben-lerner-interview-1004-leaving-atocha-station-poetry-time-knausgaard.

Srikanth, Siddharth. "Fictionality and Autofiction." *Style*, vol. 53 no. 3, 2019, p. 344-363. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/sty.2019.0024.

Strätling, Regine. "Referentiality." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 384-389.

Sturgeon, Jonathan. "2014: The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction." *Flavorwire,* Dec. 31, 2014, https://www.flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction

Thomson, Gavin Andrew. "More Life: On Contemporary Autofiction and the Scourge of "Relatability." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, August 2018, https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2018/08/more-life-on-contemporary-autofiction-and-the-scourge-of-relatability/

Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change (Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism)*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures)*. First Edition, Harvard University Press, 1973.

Van Laer, Rebecca. "How We Read Autofiction." *Ploughshares At Emerson College*, July 1, 2018, https://blog.pshares.org/how-we-read-autofiction/

Virginia Pignagnoli. "Changing dominants, changing features? The fiction/nonfiction distinction in contemporary literary and Instagram narratives, European Journal of English Studies." 2019. 23:2, 224-238, DOI: 10.1080/13825577.2019.1640431.

Volker, Depakt. "Referentiality." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 280-287

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina. *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*. De Gruyter, 2019.

Wallace, Foster David. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 1993, https://jsomers.net/DFW_TV.pdf

Walsh, Richard. The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction (THEORY INTERPRETATION NARRATIV). 1st ed., Ohio State University Press, 2015.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (New Accents)*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1984.

Wayne, Teddy. "Interview With Ben Lerner, Author of Leaving the Atocha Station." *Huffpost*, 25 Aug, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/interview-with-ben-lerner_b_935171.

Worthington, Marjorie. "Fiction in the "Post-Truth" Era: The Ironic Effects of Autofiction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 58 (2017): 471 - 483.

Worthington, Marjorie. *The Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction (Frontiers of Narrative)*. 1st ed., University of Nebraska Press, 2018.

Zipfel, Frank. 2009. Autofiktion: Zwischen den Grenzen von Faktualität, Fiktionalität und Literarität? In *Grenzen der Literatur: zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen*, ed. Simone Winko, Fotis Jannidis, and Gerhard Lauer, 285–314. Berlin: De Gruyter.