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MY-SELVES/OUR-SELF

A study of contemporary autofiction's potentialities

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Pia Masiero

Assistant supervisor

P.h.D. Lucio de Capitani

Graduand

Agnese Sarti

868308

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- To Professor Masiero, for a lot of reasons I can't put into writing, but have to do with it.

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Introduction

Possibly the first article I came across when I started gathering material for the drafting of this thesis opened with the line: "A spectre is haunting the literary world, and its name is autofiction."[1] While admittedly I can enjoy a good joke on the opening of the Communist Manifesto as much as the next person, as my research deepened I came to realise that this line – though evidently crafted to entertain – also stood as a synecdoche for a distinctly critical sentiment, one that has been developing alongside the rise in popularity of autofiction for at least the past decade. Consistently at the top of most major literary awards, autofictional novels have garnered significant praise from the general public. Notable examples include Karl Ove Knausgård's six-novel series *My Struggle* (2009-2011), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (2014-2018), Bret Easton Ellis' *The Shards* (2023), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be* (2013), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). However, even though many of them can claim the label of best-seller, these novels simultaneously exemplify a *trend* that has managed to attract as much criticism and misconceptions as it did praise and kudos. Hailed by some as the innovative and avant-garde genre of the twenty-first century, autofiction has, on the contrary, been proved to be far from new. Retrospective examinations of the history of life-writing have revealed examples of autofiction even before Doubrovsky's famous coinage of the term in the 1970s, with critics identifying cases of autofiction *ante tempus*

[1] Hindall, P. (July 7, 2020) The Decade of Magical Thinking: How Autofiction Reinvents Criticism. Mousse Magazine. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/autofiction-reinvents-criticism-philipp-hindahl-2020/

throughout literary history – Gerard Genette, for instance, has described Marcel Proust's magnum opus *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913 - 1927) as autofictional due to the implications expounded in its premise. Existing in a liminal space between autobiography and fiction, these works have been recognised as consistently revelling in their upturn of foundational aspects of novelistic theory, playing at counterbalancing fictional and autobiographical pacts in a quest to engage with a new and improved version of the self.

Despite the growing and widespread popularity of this literary trend, however, two distinct issues characterise the debate around works that fall in this category. The first concerns the definition and implications of the term "autofiction," while the second involves the repeated criticisms levelled against the genre. Whereas the former argument is circumscribed to the field of literary criticism – where the conversation on the distinctive characteristics of the autofictional is still a battlefield – the latter has grown to encompass both professional criticism and public feedback. This more expansive criticism often targets the perceived narcissism of autofictional writers, their blurring of what is perceived as truth with fiction, and the innate potential for self-indulgence. As a result, discussions about the legitimacy of autofiction extend beyond academia, influencing public perception and reader expectations.

This dissertation aims to provide an addition to the critical response to the aforementioned accusations, hoping to contribute to the conversation about autofictionl in a proactive and analytical manner. This study is going to make the most of the latest state-of-the-art developments, in order to assess and counter the critiques and inaccuracies revolving around these works. To provide an explanation for the

current fashion for autofiction, and to offer a more extensive insight into what will be presented as the 'potentialities' of the autofictional, I will attempt to open a dialogue on those aspects of contemporary autofictional works which resonate with present-day issues and shape the reception of these works. Choosing to avoid a textbook approach informed on historiographical recollection, in the first chapter I will offer a general scrutiny on the cultural and sociological aspects which contributed to the rise of the autofictional starting from the 1970s. Beginning with an analysis of the work of the aforementioned French author Serge Doubrovsky, I will present a breakdown of the theoretical aspects behind his attempt of blurring the lines between fact and fiction, analysing Philippe Lejeune's contribution to the study of autobiographical writing and Jacques Lecarme's response to it.

Following these developments, I will offer an in-depth analysis of the changing circumstances that marked the shift away from postmodernism and poststructuralism. Taking into account how the interplay between an altered understanding of the self and its ability to relate and recount past events has affected prior literary productions, I will argue that these factors have inevitably led to the incremental growth of autofictional experimentations. Making the most of the latest state-of-the-art developments, in order to assess and counter the critiques and inaccuracies revolving around these works, I will then move on to the part of greatest importance: the two case studies. Chapter two and three of the dissertation focus on the narratological analysis of two novels: Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year,* and Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, the first volume of her eponymous trilogy.

Chapter two begins with a proposal concerning the use of the Mobius Strip, the famous mathematical oddity used to describe a unique speculative characteristic of autofictional writing, which I suggest could be replaced with a more apt representational rarity. Afterward, I provide an inspection of each of J.M. Coetzee's experimentation with literary and personal alter egos prior to the publication of *Diary of a Bad Year*, to contextualise his narrative strategies and thematic concerns and highlight how his engagement with alter egos informs his study of identity, authorship, and the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. Following these premises I delve directly into the novel, offering a general outline of the plot, outlining what I describe as identification operators", and, more importantly, focusing on the structural features which make this work so unique. By analysing Coetzee's style and method against the backdrop of reader response theory and autofictional studies I will unearth covert narratives and underline their importance in terms of the genre's potentialities and affordances. In particular I will focus on the author's ambition to promote true ethical thought, explore the bias and constitutional features of dialogic and silent communication and his illustration of what it means to be a writer in this day and age – having to come to terms with the possibility of failure and looking retrospectively to a life's worth of ideals. Chapter two will close with an emphasis on the metaliterary aspect of the novel, showing how a specific interpretation of the autofictional modality lends itself to reflect on literary authority and reliability.

Chapter three move on to the second case study, namely Rachel Cusk's first instalment of the homonymous trilogy *Outline.* Similarly to chapter one, I begin by offering what can be called the motives behind Cusk's turn toward the autofictional, examining her

literary career previous to the publication of the trilogy and, above all, the public's response to her memoirs. With the aid of a series of released interviews, I delineate the transformation of her writing style to provide the grounds for the study of her novel and I expand on the controversy concerning issues of privacy in autofictional writing. The second part of the chapter focuses on close readings, which investigate aspects such as the repetitive structure of the novel, the recurring themes and the techniques which promote the advancement of the plot. I will look more closely at the much-discussed passivity of the narrating-I, concentrating on those features of Cusk's narrator that affect the development of what could be considered a more 'traditional' voice in the novel. Owing to this particular element, the chapter will close with a reflection on how Cusk's embrace of autofiction has allowed her to touch issues of great personal and communal value without being subjected to the critics' attacks.

Ultimately, this study aims to demonstrate how the autofictional form provides not only a unique space for navigating complex and often contentious subjects with a degree of freedom and authenticity that might otherwise be constrained in other literary forms, but also how a specific form of autofictional writing transcends traditional goals. This form, exemplified by *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Outline,* engages in the ambiguity of authenticity to incite a proactive response, encouraging readers to question and explore the nature of truth, identity, and master narratives.

Chapter One

1.1 *Fils,* or patient zero

> The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions [...] with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. [...] Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal". To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. (Wallace 1993, 192-193)

There should be one of those big glaring neon signs on every official page, warning that if one is to rely on the advice of the web on whether or not to read Karl Ove Knausgaard’s six-volumes, three-thousand-and-some-pages literary sensation, there is an almost 100% probability to come across life-altering descriptions such as: “brutally candid in its banality and sordidness” or “forsakes conventional strategies for a heady rush of words on the page” and more “weirdly self-deprecating and breathtakingly hedonistic”[2].

David Foster Wallace was hardly unaccompanied in recognising the change about to envelop the cultural and literary landscapes of the 21th century: his famous essay *E Unibus Pluram*, however, like many other of his works, possesses that unique

[2] Franklin, R. (2018, November). *How writing ‘My Struggle’ undid Knausgaard* The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/11/knausgaard-devours-himself/570847/

Delphian component characteristic of his genius that makes it not only indelible, but exceptionally apt to introduce this meditation on the development of the autofictional trend. “Overcredulity”, “softness”, a “willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers” are all features which the literary community now acknowledges belong to the phenomenon of contemporary autofiction, but to fully appreciate the degree of prescience condensed in Wallace’s essay it is imperative to observe more thoroughly the chain of circumstances which facilitated the emergence of this, as noted in the introduction, unusually elusive genre.

Since 1977 – when Serge Doubrosvki famously coined the term in the back cover of his novel *Fils* – studies concerning the evolution of autofiction have been unusually confined to the domain of French literary criticism: for almost forty years, Colonna (1989), Gasparini (2008) and Lecarme (1982) – among the many – have played a crucial role in the field of critical theory by providing significant contributions amidst a renewed interest in auto/biographical practices. As was eventually observed, the motives behind the late introduction of the concept to the Anglophone field were heterogeneous: adding to the considerable amount of time it took for the term to take roots in its home country, they ranged from lack of translation into English of influential novels and critical texts (*Fils*, for example, as other works by Doubrovski himself, was deemed untranslatable due to his peculiar writing style), to the widespread establishment of the umbrella term *life-writing*, which encompassed already existing techniques of blurring fact and fiction, in the Anglophone context.

What ultimately triggered Dobrovsky's experimentation cannot be bundled together in a single, straightforward explanation: the premises of his venture into the boundaries of autobiography have to be looked at both within the literary and the personal context in which he found himself at the time. I believe it is crucial to recognize that, while he is often cited and credited with the coinage of the term, most critical studies focus primarily on his response to Lejeune's *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975). On the other hand, it is rarely acknowledged how the significant historical experiences he lived through have profoundly influenced his take on the strict boundaries of autobiography.

Born in 1928 to a mother of French-Jewish origins, Doubrovski bore the brunt of the consequences of WW2, and in particular of the occupation of Paris and its raging anti-semitism. Having escaped deportation in 1943, his sense of identity nonetheless suffered irreparable fractures, only partially healed by his escape in the United States where he worked as a Professor of French Literature until 2006. It is undeniable that the weight of these experiences must have heavily influenced his work. Trauma of this magnitude, as will be further examined in later chapters, is what Arnaud Genon described as *faille fondatrice*, the moving force behind many instances of autofictional practice.

The hybrid novel *Fils* (1977) emerged after the publication of his earlier works *Le Jour S* (1963) and *La Dispersion* (1969); however, as Karen Ferreira-Meyers (2015) recognized, the shift from autobiography to autofiction was done without the first-person narrator fully realising its implications. The popularity gathered by the term — and its growing application outside the literary field — rendered more urgent

a consistent unravelling of its connotations, vague at best in the first definition proposed by the author. More than a clear explanation, “Fiction of strictly real events” – as underlined by Hywel Dix (2018) – was a loose pointing into the direction of which kind of texts could be potentially included in the category. Although Doubrovsky staunchly asserted the factual accuracy of the events depicted in his writings – a stance that would inherently position them within the category of classical autobiography – his preoccupation with what Gasparini termed the “reconfiguration of narrative time” and his insistence on labelling his work as a novel, were interpreted as clear *attestation de fictivitè*, resulting in a paradoxical combination that undermined the initial premise.

The notion of “declarations of fictivity” comes directly from Philippe Lejeune’s delving into the various forms of autobiographical writings. A feat, as mentioned above, which culminated in his momentous *Le Pacte Autobiographique* (1975). It was from this foundational background that Doubrovsky drew the inspiration to attempt to fill that ‘empty box’ – a task that Lejeune himself did not accomplish. By juxtaposing the formalist method and the concept of referentiality, Lejeune managed to build a practical scheme to categorise all possible combinations pertaining to the field of autobiographical writings.

In *The Fictional in Autofiction* (2022), Alison James manages to condense the explanation with more dexterity than I could ever achieve: within Lejeune’s schema, she points out, is possible to find “indeterminate” cases where no proper name or pact allows generic identification (case 2b); to find an autobiographical pact without

mention of a proper name (case 2c); or to observe an identity of proper names without a direct autobiographical pact (case 3a); what does not seem possible, she explains, is an explicit divergence of identity and pact, hence the two empty squares in Lejeune's chart.

Nom du personnage → / *Pacte* ↓	≠ nom de l'auteur	= O	= nom de l'auteur
romanesque	1 a ROMAN	2 a ROMAN	
= O	1 b ROMAN	2 b Indéterminé	3 a AUTOBIO.
autobiographique		2 c AUTOBIO.	3 b AUTOBIO.

(tab.1: Lejeune's schema 1975, p. 28)

The autobiographical pact established by this configuration is explained as a metaphorical contract between the author and its readers: what connotes true autobiography – in contrast with other cases in which the first-person pronoun is used – is the coincidence of author, narrator and character; the referentiality attributed to the "I" reflects the overlapping of extra and inner-textual worlds, and directly warrants factuality and authenticity to the described events. The partition proposed by Lejeune, however, is not as rigid as his critics suggest. By studying the specifics of autobiographical writing, he did not merely define it as a genre and set it against other literary practices, but also equipped it with a direct connection toward the extra-linguistic – on this topic, Lucia Fiorella (2020) was the one to point out how the

genre's potential resides precisely in its two-faced and controversial nature. Furthermore, the notion of a contract between authors and readers opens the conversation to a theory of reception and generates a series of gaps in a cultural context which aims to recover the subject.

The experiment of *Fils*, then, can be described as simultaneously attempting to fill the gap and challenging the order imposed by Lejeune's study. While he appears to secure the referential fidelity of autobiography – as he and the protagonist share the same name – he eventually breaches the contract with the novelistic imprint of the narration. Where autobiography follows the strict order of timely retelling, Doubrovsky commits to creativity; his own words explain best the reasoning behind the merging of real-life events and language experimentation:

> If one abandons chronological-logical discourse in favour of the poetic meanderings of language let loose, where words take precedence over things and even take themselves for things, then the scale, is tipped against realist narrative in favour of a *fictional* universe. (Doubrovsky qtd. In Dix 2018, 51. italics mine)

The narration, then, heads dangerously towards a novelistic pact (or fictional pact), stressing fictitiousness notwithstanding its simultaneous claim to personal reference. How to interpret, then, this hybridization of factual and fictional?

Even though, as Frank Zipfel (2009) rightfully pointed out, what Doubrovsky associated to fiction in this case appears to denote only a form of non-chronological building of narration – an act that does not make it fictional *per se* – what stands is the

question of what are we to make of a novel that "cannot abide by the autobiographical pact, but needs a new one – an autofictional pact – that articulates to the reader that the author is not honest, but sincere [...], that s/he will lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice"? (McDonough 2011,10)

The French author tried to provide a more extensive explanation by widening his discourse to include sociological aspects that could further define the changes in his literary strategies; in *Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis* (1993) he undertook an analysis of his own work in search of textual procedures, arguing two key facts. First, he questioned the point of writing an autobiography for a writer of his calibre: he was not nearly famous enough to warrant writing one, nor already at the end of his days, ready to offer a retrospective account of his memories. More importantly, he emphasised the futility of trying to recreate the conditions of classical autobiographical writing. Taking Rousseau as an example and citing his use of alethic modality in *Les Confessions* (1782), Doubrovsky explains how, in the aftermath of the outspread of the psychoanalytic process, a complication – which problematizes the very act of writing – inevitably arises around a fundamental aspect of the genre: what does it mean to tell the truth?

1.2 Truth is like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold

> So Pascal is right, and the undertaking to portray oneself is foolish, since it is simply not possible, given that my truth, to a considerable extent, is determined by the other. If my truth is the discourse of the Other, [...] how can I sustain a discourse of truth about myself? (Doubrovsky 1993, 28)

Doubrovsky's experience of psychoanalysis featured heavily in the development of his writing and in the understanding of his theory, but, as we try to disentangle from his figure to look at the bigger picture, his words resonate nonetheless as the memory of a feeling, a collective urgence to break free from the restraints of a rhetoric of the self incompatible with the changing times.

There are three pillars on which the theory of classical autobiography stands: transparency of the autobiographical I, sincerity, and faithful representation of reality. From these foundations, the author becomes the recipient of the reader's trust and is able to embark on a quest for its identity (Fiorella, 2020). Starting from the philosophical turn of the nineteenth century, however, the crisis surrounding the epistemological subject – initially self-transparent, then creative and all-encompassing – gets exacerbated by the constant input of ideologies by the likes of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Bergson and Freud. Reaching the nineteen-sixties, in the hands of Barthes and Foucault, the subject gets demoted to the level of *sub-jectus:* criss-crossed and shaped by a system of pre-existing relations and structures, stripped of agency and reliability. What remains is not much more than an homunculus who desperately tries to resist narrativization.

Psychoanalysis, surrealism, modernism and structuralism: according to Isabelle Grell (2014), the rise and transcendence of each acted as catalyst for a revolution of the way in which we tend to narrate ourselves and our life. Altered the variables of the equations, the very basis for truthful self-writing, writes Lorna Martens (2018) – the premise that one knows oneself, understands oneself, remembers one's past, and can therefore produce a truthful account of one's life – come to be regarded with scepticism. Whereas the conversation pertaining to truth and degrees of fictionality nowadays keeps mainly characterising debates of the French literary landscape, there is no denying the genesis of the autofictional impulse stemmed from the shortcomings these concepts presented.

Shattering a complex system of beliefs such as the ones around truth telling – and, consequently, reliability – means questioning the defining aspects of a genre: how can I claim the faithfulness and righteousness of my work if I am now aware of its own shortcomings? Problematizing the integrity of the concept of referentiality, – by pointing out that the act of writing is itself a mediation between the facts and the written form – Lecarme countered Lejeune's autobiographical pact with an autofictional one. An oscillation between factual and fictional, originating in a growing suspicion towards the factuality of the referential discourse: on the one hand, when the concept of truth is not supported by empirical facts, what follows is inevitably a "broader scepticism that rejects the notion of unitary selfhood and transparent self-discovery" (James, 2022); one the other hand, this inevitable fragmentation of the sense of self means to be finally able to develop the means to survive the havoc of postmodernism.

As we all know, if there is a Gordian knot even more tangled than the one about the definition of autofiction, it is undoubtedly the one surrounding the debate on how exactly to define what came after postmodernism. Post-postmodernism, beside being an absolute mouthful of a word, is merely the most neutral of an ever-increasing list of definitions about an era which, being yet in its prime, still escapes a clear interpretation – Brian McHale aptly describes this phenomenon as "name-that-period sweepstakes". In *The Literature of Reconstruction* (2015), Wolfgang Funk lists Kirby's *pseudo-modernism* or *digimodernism'* Lipovetsky's *hypermodern,* and Vermeulen and Van den Akker *metamodernism*, and agrees that "if there is anything which unites these concepts [...] it is a focus on the media-related transformation of recent years and the effects these are having on the representation of the human self" (3). Grounding his study on the evolution of the concept of authenticity, he proposes, against the aporia of Deconstructive analysis, a literature of Reconstruction which tries to bridge the divide between the categories employed by postmodernism. He argues that reconstructive texts have the ability to enact Ihab Hassan's appeal "to discover new relationships between the selves and others, margins and centres, fragments and whole – indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centres and centres"(Ihab Hassan 2003, 6 qtd. in Funk 2015, 5). This felt impulse for a reassertion of the self appears as a countering to specific features characteristic of postmodernism: away from the entropy and paranoia-saturated narratives, the self recovers its ambition to thrive in a literary landscape free of the cumbersome weight of relativism and post-structuralism.

There is no need for any kind of additional specialised text to maintain that the decades marking the end of postmodernism have been awash with a media-related transformation – each of us is the living breathing proof of this protean change. What is essential to underline, considering the topic of this dissertation, is the impact certain aspects of this evolution have had on the field of life-writing.

In the introduction to *Autofiction in English* (2018), Hywel Dix proposes three major catalysts as the probable explanation of the autofictional trend: "a relative increase of in the status of women's writing; the changing nature of the publishing industry, including the advent of self-publishing; and the saturation of the print and broadcast media with so called 'reality' narratives" (10). Marjorie Worthington has, more than anyone else, expanded on the theory beyond the status of women's writing within the autofictional landscape, hypothesising that under the upsurge of American autofictional production, written mostly by white men, hides a "reaction to the past decades' broadening of the literary canon to include more women and writers of ethnic diversity" (Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 32); in addition, Dix highlights how Linda Anderson's research on 1970' and 1980' female writers showed how "a new form was necessary for representing the range of women's experience in the twenty-first century" (Anderson 2015 qtd. in Dix 2018) a form that deflected, amongst other things, the increasingly popular feminist schools[3].

[3] "Within the fully diverse range of women's writing, for example, Linda Anderson has drawn attention to the fact that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, some female writers were resistant to feminism and post-structuralist theory, as disciplines that appeared to herald the dissipation and evanescence of the subject; such writers had not yet achieved critical recognition for the cultural expression of female subjectivity and were therefore reluctant to yield it in the face of those counter-narratives" (Dix,10).

The most compelling point, however, circles back to the beginning. Writing about the birth of autofiction, Hywel Dix connects the concept of "saturation of the print and broadcast media with 'reality' narratives" directly to Bran Nicol's previous assertion on *E Unibus Pluram*, namely Wallace's remarking that postmodern literature's features – such as reflexivity, irony and self-referentiality – have been skilfully employed by Western TV programs, and in particular by reality television, the "dominant means by which a twenty-first century audience has experienced the confessional genre" (Dix 2018). His observation on the farcical nature of reality-tv – which implies a suspension of disbelief by an audience who is acutely aware of the program's illusion – gets thematized by Nicol, who proposes that in the literary landscape this arrangement is overturned because "readers of a literary memoir or confession are likely to think the narrative they read is essentially authentic [...] unless they are given a specific reason to think otherwise" (Nicol qtd. in Dix 2018, 13).

He concludes that, having inevitably exhausted all possibilities to engage in conversations that could aspire to cover critical sociological issues, postmodern literature was supplanted by a need for aesthetic and structural changes which took the shape of new experimental forms. Sure enough, according to Wallace, in the 1990' television represented the ultimate window on the average American's sense of self perception, the perfect means for lonely Joe Briefcase to enjoy a different kind of company, to indulge in the pleasure of watching without being watched. A different kind of Peeping-Tomism, though, only an illusion of voyeurism, given that the disbelief watchers willingly suspend is based on the art of acting and not on true espial.

> In a real Joe Briefcase-world that shifts ever more starkly from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest and technology, the people we espy on TV offer us familiarity, community. Intimate friendship. (DFW 1993, 154)

And, sneering criticism notwithstanding, watching persists being *fun* – and fun is exactly what our average Joe needs to escape the dullness of his daily life. Following this tendency, entertainment keeps feeding on self referentiality and metareference, thus becoming an all-encompassing entity sustained by the same irony it stole from postmodern literature and then amplified. The amplified theft is stretched to its ridiculous extreme, so much so that ridicule becomes the ultimate art form and pop-culture references permeate our very sense of being. When people sleep tossing and whispering "Toyota Celica[4]", the omen warns that in the hands of TV irony grows from sharp to *dangerous*.

Recognizing the ineffectiveness, among other things, of Image-Fiction[5] – which tried but ultimately failed to deliver an effective counterspell to the curse of TV culture, and instead embraced the same objectives: wowing and pleasing and flattering – Wallace cannot reach a definitive answer to the newly established cultural norm, and opts instead to speak that same prophecy cited at the beginning of this chapter. Armed with the legacy of the founding fathers of postmodernism, and conscious of the effects wrought by the media, he entrusts the power to change to the next real literary rebels,

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[4] "She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. Toyota Celica" (Don Delillo, *White Noise*, 1985, 155)

[5] "Image-Fiction writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context". (1993) See for example Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama* (1998).

"writers who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction" (Wallace 1993, 193).

Even though Wallace wrote the essay in his late twenties, there is little doubt he eventually played a big part in fulfilling his own predictions: the change he wished for, a criticism of entertainment which could divert the attention back to the crux of human condition, came to be a few years later in the form of his biggest project – *Infinite Jest (1996)*.

As already mentioned, however, Wallace was not alone in his sentiment: just a couple of before *E Unibus Pluram*, William Vollmann (1990) was writing about the disease he believed was plaguing American Society – a veritable systemic inability for empathy, of relating with compassion, in short, a condition which he thought "illuminates us as Selves incapable of comprehending others." Similarly to Wallace (in content more than *verve*), in the paragraphs of *American Writing Today: A Diagnosis of the Disease* (1990), Vollmann condemns postmodern literature for its nihilistic component, encapsulating the fictional experience of the previous years in brief but skating remarks about "melancholies of overabundance" and projections of the self "marching through stories like deadly locusts." Despite the comparatively shortness of his piece, he is direct in his exposition, and bypasses prophecies to state straightaway what writers need to do to again "fulfil their role and *accomplish* something": a renewed sense of purpose, a set, more specifically, of rules intended to reshape the priorities of authors. "Never write without feelings, strive to feel not only about the Self but also about the Other – not the Other as a negation or eclipse of Self,

we must treat Self and Other as equal partners –, portray important human problems and seek solutions for them, aim to benefit the Others in addition to ourselves."

As far as sentiment goes, both manifestoes could not have pulled a clearer one-eighty: that waning of affect, reproached to writers in this case – a constitutive feature of the cultural logic Fredric Jameson had theorised for postmodernism in 1989 – happened to be a direct consequence of the presentism and depthlessness which had been characterising the social and cultural landscape since the 1960'.

It is precisely from Jameson's logic that Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen started to build their definition of metamodernism. The end of Historicity, Depth and Affect, read as inevitable results of the capitalistic social situation of postmodernism, is ascribed to the rebuttal of modernist depth models, evidence – as they underline – of what Jameson saw as an imploding culture. The domino effect initiated by this unprecedented state of depthlessness brought about the questioning of previously certain hermeneutical presuppositions, and led ultimately to the waning of affect. The influence of mass-media society, compared in the study to the destructive force of a hurricane, had the power to reduce everything to the one-dimensional state of market value. This disruption, the authors argue, is the starting point from which the American philosopher built his claim for the need of new "cognitive maps." As the modern concept of reality collapses – and the vocabulary used to describe it inevitably suffers the same fate – what arises is a need for new models of description. When a barn is not a barn but a simulacrum[6], the proverbial ontological rug is swept from

[6] In his treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), where Jean Baudrillard studied the relations between reality and symbols, simulacra are copies representing objects that either had no original or that no longer have one. The reference to the barn comes directly from the famous barn scene in Don Delillo's *White Noise* (1985), where the concept of simulacra is perfectly exemplified.

under our feet, and we find ourselves lost in the Baudrillardian hyperreal. The flattening of representation is ultimately what inhibits the ability to effectively comprehend images and elicit an affect response; this logic, incongruous with a coherent rendition of the self as a whole, is described by Jameson as a death of the subject, an echo, Akker et al. claim, to Roland Barthes' pronouncement of the death of the author.

On this topic, however, Lorenzo Marchese (2014) offers an insight which I believe elucidates even better how the shift away from postmodernist aesthetics was a *progressive* endeavour. Despite having written *The Death of the Author* (1967), he argues, Barthes paradoxically falls in the category of precursor of autofiction. Marchese suggest that what Barthes really argued in the essay was not an actual disappearance of the authorial figure, but more its weakened re-emergence: a transition from the classical notion of the author to its textualization – a lens on the postmodern perception of the world as infinite representations of second-grade messages and languages, a context where no genuine ultimate meaning could be found. There is an underlying connection though, he argues, in the critical work of the late Barthes, which ties together a yearning for autobiography with the factual impossibility of writing one's life without lying.

Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes (1975), similarly to Doubrovsky's *Fils*, was an echo (albeit a different one) of the fallibility of classical autobiography, another experiment arising from the inability to truthfully narrate the self. The autobiographical subject is a weak one, aware of the fallibility of memory and of the contradiction impeding an ordinate progression of narration, but one that nonetheless

recurs to new strategies for describing itself. Against the hubris of the egoistic and self-absorbed I, attempting an honest and clear narration, Barthes risks a multifaceted approach: his subjective positioning wears second and even third person pronouns, his first name or his initials – escamotage adopted in a struggle to gain distance from a writing of the self in which it is impossible to recognise oneself. A bipartite structure, fragmented, which tries to overcome the unresolved dialectic of life and opus: a first part of autobiographical information – never evolving into narration – gets disrupted by a second section of critical notes on various and unrelated topics. Regardless of the effort, the author – who attempts a merging of life and biography – is constantly overshadowed by his scepticism towards the faithfulness of the written word to life, bringing forth a text which cannot help but erode itself. It is precisely from his awareness of the inevitable *feintis* of the text that, logically, the author should have ascertained the futility of the autobiographical venture; what he chose to create, instead, is a remarkable and contradictory crossbreed. Thus, again, there is no fiction *per se*, but the design of the work itself, in particular its inwardly critical positioning, is what defines its proximity to the autofictional practice.

Marchese is not alone in advocating the importance of Barthes when analysing the birth of the autofictional practice. Sam Ferguson (2022), for example, argues about the significance of his contribution by positioning him in the first of two generations – one born before World War Two and one born just after – of French writers which played a pivotal part in the evolution of the tradition. With this partition in view, Ferguson theorises a difference in the approach to autofictional writing, stating that in that second generation, who came to prominence in the 1990s, the autobiographical

orientation shifted toward the diaristic genre, and that this change can be seen as a radicalization of the practice and desires of autofiction.

When talking about the American literary tradition, Marjorie Worthington offers an analogous reflection, stating that novels which features one of the most salient characteristics of autofiction, can be regarded as "a phenomenon of contemporary American fiction that took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s and continues in earnest today […] when it has become a postmodern trope" (2018). While I can't say I agree with her sentiment on the overuse of the *autofictional trope*, she is certainly right when arguing that the contemporary trend derives from a "tradition sixty years in the making." In this perspective, when talking about literary historical change, it is always essential to keep in mind that it "rarely involves the wholesale replacement of outmoded features and values by new ones" (McHale 2005), but, as already mentioned, it is part of a complex and progressive systemic change.

1.3 It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life

The thing with Postmodernism is that, while no one denies it is over and done, dead and buried, gone by in time and no longer existing, some of its features have kept turning up in other clothes like the spare change one finds in the pockets of jackets from seasons ago. Not by chance, in their definition of metamodernism, Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (as opposed to David James and Urmila Seshagiri), characterise it as a "structure of feeling that manifest in literary works" exactly "through a mix of or oscillation between pre-modernist, modernist and postmodernist tropes and device" (2017). Following their reasoning, sets of preexisting devices are put to new use and given new life, answering to the completely different needs and circumstances of the twenty-first century; metamodernism, say Vermeulen and van den Akker, relates to its predecessors in a "both-neither dynamic". To characterise this innovative "upcycling" tendency, they coin the term *aesth-ethical*, tapping into the wordplay to underline the unbroken adoption of formal conventions that preceded it, but in the context of a revival of theism and beliefs.

The much-anticipated return to affect is welcomed in a "more ethical, socially conscious framework" in which it can "provide support for a shift in cultural sensibilities in response to the metamodern structure of feeling", and stands ultimately as a synecdoche of a "larger reawakening of interest in problematics of embodiment and materiality in the wake of twentieth-century Western theory" (Brinkema 2014, 11).

After its supposed death and flattening, in this amended context the subject can gain back its tri-dimensional state and wishes to manifest his presence in the world, conscious that identities – now understood as real and constructed – are built even in relations with the other. The ethical turn that since the eighties has characterised philosophy, as Lucia Fiorella (25) describes it, stands out for its criticism of theoretical generalisations, but more importantly for the emphasis it bestows upon the concept of the individual as a product of specific biological, social and cultural interactions and conditions.

Contemporary autofiction becomes, then, the flowerbed in which new metamodern representations of subjectivity are able to flourish; Jonathon Sturgeon (2014) describes these new novels as "autofictions that vigorously reassert the self through the induction of a new class of memoiristic, autobiographical, and metafictional novels that jettison the logic of postmodernism in favour of a new position". Autofictional works, he maintains, "disrupt polarising accounts of ontology, self-hood and truth" and all together "eschews the entire truth vs. fiction debate in favour of the question of how to live or how to create". The quest for truth, accepted as multifaceted and subjective as opposed to universal, is enriched rather than disproved by the use of fiction, because modes of fictionality are understood as inherent in the narration of the self.

The genre tension exclusive of autofiction, first typically criticised for its ontological instability, actually equips authors with a series of tools which launch them in projects of self-experimentation with and exploration of the limit of the self that develop to be particularly well placed to "alert us to the ways in which our lives

and our self-understanding are determined by dominant and normative cultural narrative models" (Effe, Laylor on Meretoja 2022, 10). These oscillations between fact and fiction, Gibbons proves, "move beyond postmodernist playfulness and the fragmentation of the individual because they consistently point to real-world issues beyond the text, gesture towards interpersonal actuality, insist on situated lived experience, or ruminate on global concerns."

Today, due to the booming popularity of works by the likes of Karl Ove Knausgaard, Bret Easton Ellis, Ben Lerner, Annie Ernaux, Olivia Laing and Rachel Cusk, the debate around the definition of autofiction is more alive than ever. The term, and the concept behind it, as we have seen, have been revised and challenged plenty of times by a multitude of critics, philosophers, and writers alike. On the one hand, one could argue that inviting constant reconsideration and reconfiguration is a feature that mirrors the instability inherent of the genre; one the other hand, the critical discussion that endlessly surrounds it may be considered a positive element, in that it allows scholars and critics alike to continuously challenge the concept and the texts which are discussed in relation to it. The beauty intrinsic to autofiction, I believe, lies in its *permeability*, a characteristic which allows it to constantly reinvent itself and challenge classic modes of narration; in particular Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf shows how maintaining an understanding of the autofictional as a "'conceptual matrix with scalable parameters" (2022, 23) can reveal itself to be an advantageous tool to approach the study of the interrelation between life and text, fiction and real.

The first point on which she builds her argument, though, is that scholars who use the term autofiction "should clearly state how they understand it", because

"simply dropping the word without further explanation raises questions and leads to suspicion that the popular term has been used uncritically and unthinkingly" (23). The approach I propose and undertake in the pages that follow, instead, moves backwards: from the analysis of the structure of two specific case studies, and of the significance of their impact on the reader, I will attempt to delineate a definition able to encompass the stark multiplicity of features which characterise these two novels in particular, and, more broadly, the heaps of writings which happen to bear the same label.

In a recent interview taking place during the seventeenth edition of the Venetian literary festival *Incroci di Civiltà,* Pulitzer-finalist Elif Batuman was invited to discuss her career and her views on autofiction. While talking about her last novel *Either/Or* (2022), she explained how her writing process had a sort of flaw: despite her initial intention of addressing issues of the world, she found herself inevitably filtering these topics through her *own* experience. She shared that it felt as though she was continuously rewriting her life story in an attempt to gain a *relatability* she desperately yearned for, and how incredible it was to have found out, after meeting her readers, that their ways of thinking were not that different from hers in the end, highlighting a shared human connection.

Relatability, sincerity, and authenticity are concepts that will reappear frequently in the following chapters, and in their probing is an attempt to comprehend why their need seems to permeate so deeply contemporary autofiction. The novels that are about to be introduced are – in addition to being different on a structural level – the products of two opposed authorial personas, and thus reflect in specific ways a variety of struggles which can resonate within the most heterogeneous crowd. Amid

their dissection, I will point to the stories that are explicitly recounted and to the covert narratives scattered through them, analysing the singularities of the author's writing styles to try and extrapolate a pattern that could explain their rise to literary prominence.

Chapter Two

2.1 “That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us”

John Coetzee is no newbie when it comes to merging life with fiction. In his extremely prolific literary production, started in 1974 and still ongoing, the author has indeed resorted more than once to narrative techniques that we can describe as autofictional to achieve his literary goals. However, owing to his temperament (Coetzee is an extremely versatile but almost pathologically private writer) his production has to be examined in light of the cultural and personal contexts which have affected it in one way or another. Already acclaimed for the bestselling novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *Disgrace* (1999) – two of which were also adapted for the big screen: the homonymous *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2019), starring Johnny Depp and Robert Pattinson, and *Disgrace* (2008) lead by John Malkovich – even when he appeared to deviate from familiar structures and subjects, he manages to retain the public approval.

According to Lucia Fiorella (2020, 111), the sudden change in narrative choices transpires almost two decades before the publication of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), when the South-African writer forsakes pure fiction in order to embrace a more autobiographical, autofictive and essaystic kind of narrative. The outset of Coetzee’s delving into the territory of self-representation was marked by his publication *Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky* (1985), a study of confessional writings in which he establishes the grounds of his philosophy of autobiography. To illustrate how his position strays away from the more traditional

understanding of autobiographical writing (that is to say a Lejeunian interpretation of the genre) and instead aligns with the contemporary shift towards the more extensive and comprehensive notion of autofictional writing, Coetzee's answer to a question posed by David Attwell – part of an interview published inside *Doubling the Point. Essay and Interviews* (1992) – serves as a valuable resource. "All writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: this massive autobiographical writing enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction – does it yield only fiction? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?" (Coetzee, 17). These words echo the same insight on the fallibility inherent in the written word to truthfully convey the self expressed by Barthes: the consciousness of a subject which is inevitably confined in a necessarily mediated display is only able to capture a fraction of its wholeness. Alongside this truth, however, Coetzee's words provide an original interpretation of the autobiographical enterprise: both as an unconscious act – i.e. every writing instance bears the latent mark of its author – and as a self-influencing act.[7] Looking back, it is possible not only to find echoes of the same argument in Doubrovsky's later works, but to locate its origins in Paul de Man's *Autobiography as De-Facement* (1979). In this highly influential essay, the French author suggests that, in engaging in autobiographical writing, authors not only aspire to yield a truthful rendition of their life, but also experience first hand the effects this

[7] "Authors make literature, but literature also makes authors. This is made explicit in narrative fiction that addresses what the elusive author Morelli, in Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel Hopscotch, calls "the strange self-creation of the author through his work" (Ingo, B. (2024) *How literature makes authors: Towards a history of writers as characters in modern fiction*).

writing has on their lives. In a system of reciprocal determinism in which the distinction between life and writing becomes blurred, he wonders whether, in addition to the axiomatic assumption that life produces autobiography, it could also be possible to suggest that "the autobiographical project may itself produce 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?" (1979, 20 italics in the text). In this regard, then, De Man's words reject the act of writing one's autobiography as a performative mark of the divide between life and text, and instead turns it into a metanarrative act in which the writing becomes itself part of the life that gets narrated.

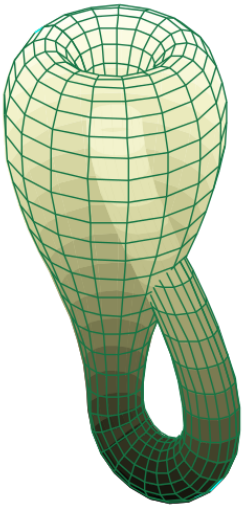
In her essay "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects" (2022), Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf elaborates five theses on the concept of autofiction and presents the autofictional as "An inherent dimension of autobiographical writing, that is, as a latent force that can be activated in different ways and degrees. The autofictional is scalable" (26). Her argument (backed by the aforementioned notion that factuality cannot exist independently from fictionality) evolves into the real-life effect theorised by De Man, which she describes as embodying the potential to merge life and writing, and that – being the two directly interconnected – she therefore lists as a crucial feature of autofiction. To make the latent manifest, though, she links the possibility of "visualising the performative text/life relation by using the strange loop figure also known as the Möbius strip" (31), as the twist of its non-orientable surface makes it impossible to determine where one of the parts ends and the other begins. While it is undeniable that the strip has proven valuable to the numerous areas of study that

struggle to overcome the limitations of dichotomous explanations, I believe that to use it to visualise the interpolation of life and text is probably not as effective a metaphor as it could be if we were to use another mathematical oddity.

Made famous by the works of visionary artist M. E. Escher, the Möbius strip has a history of being employed in literary contexts, as a critical tool or as a physical representation: suffice it to think of its most famous instantiation, designed by the late author John Barth, who incorporated it in the frontispiece of his short stories collection *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968). The postmodern collection opens with "Frame-Tale", in which the two sentences "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE" and "WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" are printed vertically, one on each side of the page. The unusual addition, intended to be cut out, twisted and fastened together, is meant to form a loop with no end or beginning, to reflect a typically postmodern take on the self-reflexive nature of language and to thwart the reader's sense of stability at the outset of narration.

Other than its distinctive structure, I would argue that the characteristic of the Möbius strip which made it so accessible to literary metaphoric use is its rootedness in reality. If it weren't for the limitation imposed by its physical structure, which defines it with clear boundaries, the strip might seem the best choice in order to convey the impossibility of rationalising the whole networks of elements that are entangled in each other in this continuum. In contrast with other mathematical representations, and to break away from an entrenched and by now somewhat used-up postmodern chronicle, I suggest instead that the Klein bottle may provide a more accurate rendition of the reciprocal determinism of life and text in the autofictional venture.

Described for the first time in 1882 by the German mathematician Felix Klein, the bottle shares two main structural features with its fellow paradox: being a one-sided surface which, if navigated, could be followed back to the point of origin, and a non orientable two dimensional manifold; unlike the strip, however, the bottle is a closed manifold, meaning it is impossible to locate its boundaries.



This peculiarity makes a true rendition of it impossible, as it cannot be embedded in a three-dimensional Euclidean space.[8] Ineffable, one could say, as the exact interpretation of the interplay between the aspects of life and text, and more, of fiction and truth. When applied to the discussion of autofiction, writes Wagner-Egelhaaf, the strip can be viewed as "both subject and object, life and writing, twisting into each other, and thus deconstructing the oppositions [...] this strange loop must be understood as being in continuous motion, as a dynamic process" (31). While not incorrect, the voiced concept is still subject to the binary interpretation it tries to

[8] (*File:Klein Bottle.svg - Wikimedia Commons*, 2006)

break away from, where the sheer volume of possible interrelated aspects feels constricted at best.

The lack of boundaries inherent to the bottle, on the other hand, eschews the dichotomy of that interpretation in favour of a more open and susceptible perspective which reflects the performative text/life relations and the quantity of possible outcomes. More than that, it simultaneously better depicts the most salient aspect of the autofictional venture: the inextricable link between life and fiction. Interestingly enough, if dissected, the Klein bottle appears constructed by the conjunction of two Mobius strips – so that by evoking it we do not merely disrupt an exhausted imagery, but we are able to further magnify the field of its application.

The game of intricacies is one that Coetzee has played many times, specifically because in his aesthetics he has been able to overcome the confines of fiction as *deceit,* making his purpose to investigate the nature of truth and our ability to narrate it. Separating a "truth to fact" – a debatable concept in itself, since the recounting of experience is in itself the result of personal interpretation – from a "higher truth", he claims the latter not as the starting *conditio sine qua non* of narration, but as the objective obtainable only through writing. Approaching the act of writing as a technique of self-discovery, he explains his work as simultaneously describing what is already there and as a process that shapes what he wants to say as he progresses. If an authentic portrayal is unattainable (a truthful account of facts), and the subject itself undergoes alteration in the process, what else could result but a series of fictions of the self? It is through these fictions of the self – through works that dismantle the

underlying principles of classical autobiography –, then, that writer and reader alike can uncover the ultimate truths.

2.2 The alter-egos

Even armed with a firm grasp of narrative theory, it's fair to suggest that skilled critics too could find themselves challenged when delving into the intricacies of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Published in 2007, the novel belongs in Coetzee's Australian phase, the third stage of his oeuvre, coming after the American and the South-African ones. Undoubtedly his most *unique* novel, *Diary* remains nonetheless just one of his many ventures within the autobiographical; sure enough, by the time of his winning the Nobel Prize in 2003 – achievement that brought him both international fame and the pressure of a new public identity – that inevitable penchant towards self-discovering recognised a decade earlier in *Doubling the Point*[9] had already taken the shape of many acclaimed novels. Another early publication of notable interest for this study is the aforementioned *Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky*, a research on the tradition of confessional writing in which he reflected on the efficacy of secular confession in literature, the outcomes of which he explored in many of his novels, *Diary* included.

Intellectual, writer, lecturer and translator: due to his characteristically elusive nature, Coetzee's many traits never manage to reach the balance needed of a public figure of such popularity; notorious for his unwillingness to share personal details or join public events, regardless of his undeniable influence on the field of English studies he has nonetheless an habit of downplaying his importance in order to resist the limelight. A paradoxical conundrum, the one surrounding his public persona, which often makes it even harder for the experts to encapsulate the nature of his works and instead steers

[9] Despite his secretiveness Coetzee agreed to cooperate with David Attwell and J.C. Kannemeyer on two massive interview-based (auto)biographical projects. *Doubling the Point* consists of a series of essays framed by interviews with David Attwell which document the author's long-time engagement with social and political issues belonging to his culture. Coetzee, Attwell later revealed, was approached by Harvard University Press to produce a linguistic study, which he declined. Instead, he proposed a compilation of critical writings interspersed with 43 conversations exploring the nexus between fiction and non-fiction—an endeavour akin to an intellectual biography.

the attention towards biographical criticism. I contend, however, that his attitude towards fame – often the bane of many an avid reader and journalist – has favoured the shaping of a unique autofictional modality, aiding the development of a narrative voice unlike anyone else.

From the outset of his career as a novelist, Coetzee is clearly committed to challenge the rules of conventional novel-writing: beginning in 1974 with the publication of his first novel *Dusklands*, readers of his works are continuously faced with the provocative presence of his various alter-egos. The novel that marks his debut as a writer is divided into two separate narratives: in the first, titled "The Vietnam Project", the reader is presented with a confession in the form of a military report, in which the first-person narrator, army psychologist Eugene Dawn, describes his fall into insanity to his supervisor and manager of the New Life Project – one "powerful, genial, ordinary man" by the name of Coetzee. The second segment, "The Narratives of Jacob Coetzee", is set in the 18th century and is the report of a white man of Dutch descent and his hunting expedition in South Africa. Through his journals the reader is introduced to a harrowing tale on the violence inherent in the colonial mindset. The significance of historical and personal legacies is striking: alongside the nominal correspondence between characters and author, readers cannot help but observe the resemblances between Jacob Coetzee's lineage and that of the author himself.[10] These 'inaugural' *Coetzees* are but the first of a long series of meta-narrative references that, alongside themes of historical identity, give rise to a confessional-like mode that, in her monograph *Pen and Power* (1996), Sue Kossew claims will later pervade

[10] Born in Cape Town (South Africa) from Afrikaneer parents, on his father's side the author descends from Dutch immigrants, and from Dutch, German, and Polish immigrants through his mother.

Coetzee's production: the narrator feels the "need to present his story as self-therapy" (36).

Following a series of purely fictional works[11], *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005) are undeniably two of the experimental works in which Coetzee anticipates the themes and tone of *Diary of a Bad Year.* As his literary alter-ego, Elizabeth Costello enters Coetzee's ouvre in 1996 and appears as a recurring character in many of his works: *Elizabeth Costello. Eight Lessons*, a collection of short stories published in 2003, the aforementioned novel *Slow Man*, the two short pieces *As a Woman Grows Older* (2004) *and The Old Woman and the Cats* (2013) and other unpublished works. When asked by Princeton to give the annual Tanner Lecture on Human Values in 1997, Coetzee makes the questionable choice of opening with a reading that, among the bafflement of the public, quickly reveals its meta-narrative structure: the story, narrated in a third-person present tense, is the fictional account of an older writer and literary critic by the name of Elizabeth Costello. In a similar manner, she too has been asked to give a speech in a prominent college, and, again in a similar fashion, she has replaced a literary lecture with something unrelated and for many inappropriate. The fictional lecture, a polemic piece on animal rights later published as *The Lives of Animals* (1999), is followed by another, delivered in the same style in 2022 at a Nexus Conference in the Netherlands. The temptation to conflate the figure of the author with the fictional persona of Elizabeth Costello is almost too strong in light of reading the homonymous 2003 novel; both renowned writers and literary critics of a certain age coming from a former British colony (in

[11] By this I do not contend that there are no other peculiar resemblances to be noted in the seven fictional novels which separated *Dusklands* from *Elizabeth Costello*, but that their relevance is not of interest for this study.

this case Australia, where Coetzee moves to in 2002 and becomes official citizen in 2006), they are famous for having adapted classical works of literature: *Foe,* (1986) woven around the plot of *Robinson Crusoe* by Coetzee, and *The House on Eccles Street,* fictionally re-written by Costello on the basis of Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the novel she travels the world while giving lectures which consist of edited versions of Coetzee's own essays on topics such as vegetarianism, sexuality and languages. In her Doctoral dissertation, Valeria Mosca lists the two primary responses to the novel: "The idea of a Coetzee/Costello convergence is perhaps taken to extreme extents by those who describe the whole Elizabeth Costello book as confessional. [...] An equally extreme, yet opposite theory depicts Costello as a mask Coetzee wears to keep a distance from his most extreme stands on controversial ethical issues". I find the most important aspect of this subject to be Costello's role as a writer and her tendency towards self-questioning. As I previously mentioned, the development of Elizabeth Costello's persona has proven to be part of the background on which *Diary* is built, and indeed, as will be further examined later in the study, many of the features inherent to her character are transposed to another of Coetzee's writerly alter-egos.

Self-doubt and the inability to reconcile her personal and professional selves make her vulnerable but unwilling to be patronised in her old age. The novel brings forth issues such as being a writer in changing times, the hardship of familial relationships and the shallowness of some aspects of academic life. Ending on a Kafkian note which leaves the reader somewhere unsatisfied, *Elizabeth Costello* is ultimately a story on the failures of human dialogue and the inability of knowing oneself.

As a character, Elizabeth figures briefly as the metafictional intrusive author of *Slow Man*, the story of her failing attempt at narrating the life of Paul Rayment. In this particular instance, topics such as the relationship between the author and its characters, the issues around novel writing and aspects of linguistic self-reflexivity are the features the reader will find transposed in *Diary*, which, in his "The Coming into Being of Literature" (2010), Benjamin Odjen describes as doing "more than any of Coetzee's previous works to examine how the "coming into being" of a work of fiction happens."

The last but not least of Coetzee's notable ventures within the autobiographical realm does not father another alter-ego, but his *magnum opus* itself: the autofictional *Scenes of Provincial Life* (2011).[12] Beginning in 1997 with *Boyhood,* and continuing with *Youth* in 2002 and *Summertime* in 2009, Coetzee set himself to challenge the conventions of classical autobiography. On the one hand, the first two novels seem to follow the rules of the genre: the titles are indeed a reference to those stages in life that are usually taken as starting points when writing an autobiography, the account is retrospective and consciously follows a chronological and thematic order. On the other hand, however, it does not take much delving into the narration to recognize that two of the traditional features of autobiography have been defied: the tense chosen for the narration is the present, which, as Lucia Fiorella (2020, 88) rightfully points out, does not *technically* go against the directive of the Lejeune's autobiographical pact, but rather registers as a structural anomaly. Indeed, employing the present tense instead of the past tense removes autobiographical writing from under that

[12] In the beginning *Scenes of Provincial Life* was the subtitle of both *Boyhood* and *Youth*, but after the publication of the trilogy's last volume it became the title of the novel when the three were published as a whole.

historical-documentary umbrella of significance in which it is perceived to belong, because to consciously employ this technique means to abandon the structuring frame of past-present-future (which confers realism to the narrated facts) and to privilege a position which freezes the narrating-I in a timeless space, a movement which disregards the time of consciousness. In short, it conveys the feeling of an ongoing and unsorted set of experiences, a far cry from the neat retrospective account of a life ready to be narrated. The second, and possibly even more peculiar defiance, is the use of the third-person instead of the traditional narrating-I. Even though the practice has several antecedents, it still reads as an unusual pick: the name John can be spotted just a handful of times in the three novels, but its presence nonetheless checks the box of nominal correspondence needed for the autofictional to come into being. The use of the third-person pronoun he, on the other hand, functions as a misleading of sorts.

In her essay "Autofiction in the Third Person" (2018), Lorna Martens details the reasons that could explain why an author would choose to write his or her life story as a third-person novel, and comes to the following conclusions: one advantage could be the asserting of an internal distance from one's former self in order to achieve objectivity, or, as an alternative, another advantage could be that in embracing this kind of narration the stern truth criteria of autobiography are perceived as more relaxed; nevertheless, this choice might result in an estrangement of the subject, effect that could superficially appear as steering away from the goal of autobiographical self-discovery.

While in the first two novels the factual accuracy of some personal details is possibly lost to the reader who is not familiar with what little is known about

Coetzee's life, the third instalment of the trilogy escalates into the fully autofictional[13]. *Summertime*'s premise capsizes every conviction the reader has accumulated during the reading of the first two novels: the story is the unfinished work of one Mr Vincent on the recently-dead-world-famous author named John Coetzee's life after he moved back to South Africa from the USA in 1971. Seven sections in total: one opening and one closing section both titled "Notebooks", made up of fragments and notes from an incomplete autobiographical project, and five middle chapters, each titled with the name of one of the five women Mr Vincent has chosen to interview for an account of their shared experience with the writer. Many of the facts set forth in the book are not traceable to the real J.M.Coetzee: those years (narrated in the same style of *Boyhood* and *Youth*) spent in his father's company in the family house in Cape Town never actually happened, as in reality at the time Coetzee was living with his wife and children; each one of the five interviewed women are fictional characters, as are their relationship with the author etc. etc.

What happens is that the reading experience of the third book acts as a retroactive reassessment of the nature of the first two – how do I, reader, have to approach the nature of *Boyhood* and *Youth* when I discover that *Summertime* is a work of fiction?

Here lies the key to understanding autofictional works: as Lucia Fiorella reminds us, the distinction between fiction and autofiction lies in the intent behind the active manipulation of biographical facts and verifiable aspects (2020, 119).

[13] To be more specific, the paratextual designation of the first two novels is even more misleading, as *Boyhood* was advertised as an autobiography, while *Youth* as a work of fiction. On this matter see Antjie Krog *I, me, me, mine!": Autobiographical fiction and the "I"* (2007, 100).

The autofictional writer actively and deliberately chooses to manipulate these aspects and does so to expand his or her freedom of narrating the self, in a context in which the truth-fiction dichotomy has been outmoded by a new understanding of the complexities that surround autobiographical writing. Thus, this kind of texts are better enjoyed by those who have at least an elemental knowledge of the author (but not necessarily), and can revel in the metaleptical aspects of the story.[14]

[14] It does not come as a surprise that the most successful examples of autofictional writings come from the pen of famous authors who can better play the autofictional game, such as Coetzee, Roth or Bret Easton Ellis.

2.3 *Diary of a Bad Year*

When talking about the archetypal features of autofiction, Arnaud Schmitt writes that "it is part of the autofictional game to muddy the waters as early as possible in the reader's experience of the text, epitextually and peritextually" (2022, 85). While admittedly it is not always the case – see for example Bret Easton Ellis' latest novel *The Shards* (2003) – there is no denying that, when writing *Diary of a Bad Year,* Coetzee has followed the instruction to the letter.

The consensus around *Diary of a Bad Year* seems to be that it is not, by all means, a reading for the faint of heart. From the start of this seemingly innocuous book, Coetzee is set on shuffling the parameters of narration to such a degree that many first-time readers are left so perturbed they abandon the book after a handful of pages.[15] The title itself coax a misleading response out of the reader: the diary format, as Sam Ferguson indicates in his study of the autofictional practice, is usually difficult to reconcile with a combination of truth and fiction; for example, in his *On Diary* (2009), Philippe Lejeune contends that while autobiography "lives under the spell of fiction" (a conceptual compromise he reached upon realising that creating an organised narrative of events inherently involves a degree of fictionalisation), diary "is hooked to truth" (201). He explains his argument by claiming that writing in the diaristic modality means to proceed in ignorance of how future events are going to unfold, so it is simply not feasible to resort to fiction, as doing so would only result in

[15] "Here's a novel that can be read three different ways, none of them wholly satisfying. You can't read any one part without becoming aware that you're ignoring the others. If you tried to read them all at once, you'd go nuts" Marco Roth, *The New York Sun.*

an overcomplex tangle of lies. Yet, when delving into *Diary* it quickly becomes apparent that despite the title's paratextual suggestion of a factual approach to the contents to come, something else is at play.

Counting a little less than 230 pages, the book is divided in two sections: the first, titled "Strong Opinions", bears the dates 12 September 2005 – 31 May 2006 (an apparently coerent sign of the diaristic layout), while the second, only titled "Second Diary", is, in contrast, devoid of any temporal reference. As was explained in the first chapter, when referring to the development of the autofictional impulse, critics argue that autofiction is constructed upon the oscillation between two different narrative pacts: the autobiographical and the fictional.

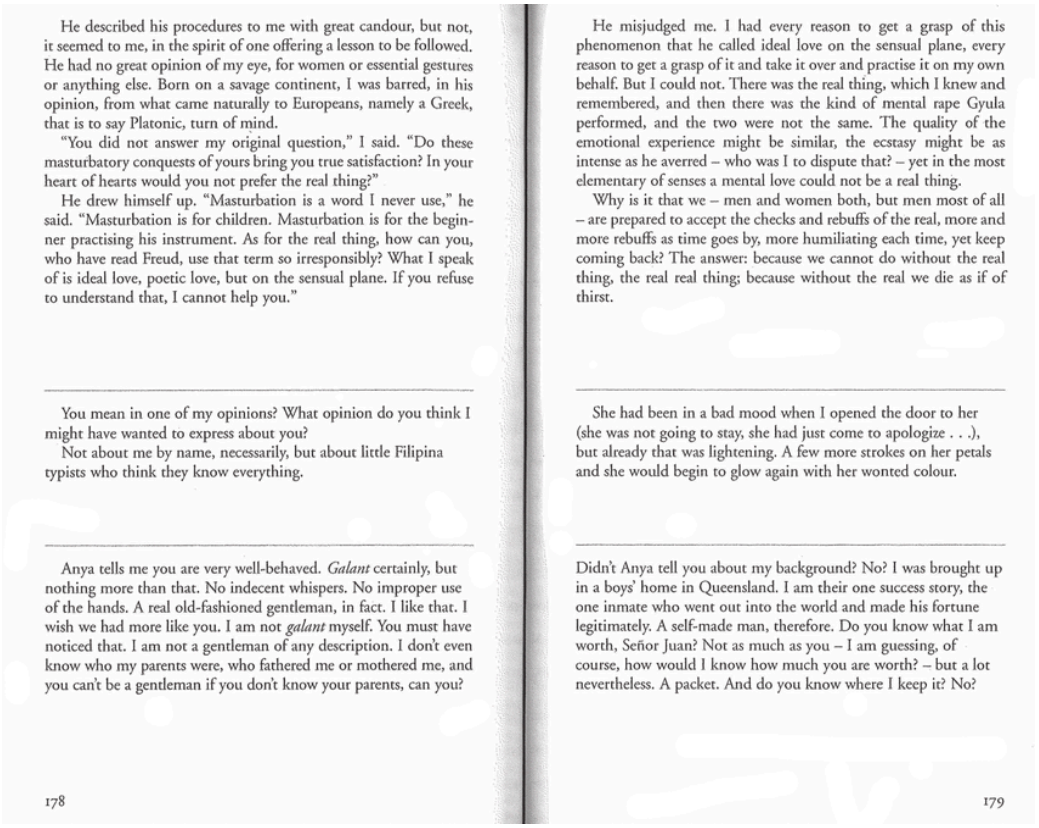
In their study "A Cognitive Perspective on Autofictional Writing, Texts, and Reading"(2022), Alexandra Effe and Alison Gibbons elaborate their claims considering not only textual and narrative dynamics, but also both the production and the reception process of these composite texts. Building from the assumption that autofiction "is not only a literary genre, but also a reading strategy" (Gibbons 2019, 411), they suggest a theory of autofictional reading which "responds to a text's invitation to be read as simultaneously fictional and factual."

According to cognitive psychology, in order to de-code and classify information readers rely on a series of unconscious association systems called cognitive schemata, which are built on the knowledge gained from personal experiences. Empirical studies have shown that readers have different cognitive schemata depending on genre, media and specialised narratives, including distinct schemata relating to fiction and non/fiction. Effe and Gibbons therefore claim that

when approaching autofiction both fictional and non/fictional schemata are called into play for a comprehensive experience of the text. The choice of reading methods is also heavily affected by different paratextual instructions, showing that "reading nonfiction involves prioritising causal-situation information and disregarding contradictory or irrelevant details, while reading fiction entails building more detailed mental representations" (Zwann 1994 qtd. in Effe and Gibbons). *Diary*'s paratextual instructions, then, are immediately jeopardised when confronted with the first instalment of "Strong Opinions."

The first incongruity lies in the visual layout of the page: the first 23 pages are in fact typographically subdivided into uneven halves by a straight line; from page 24 onward, instead, the pages are divided in three sections. While certainly distinctive, this particular layout is not an original invention: before Coetzee employed it in 2007, Gabriel Josipovici applied it in his 1974 novel *Mobius the Stripper*, where the page division served as a way of narrating two apparently separated stories. In a highly metanarrative ploy, the first strip told the story of Mobius, a lost soul feeling the metaphysical urge to strip and discover his true self, while the second one described an anonymous author's struggles with coming up with a new story. In the end, following the advice of a friend, the author began writing a story about Mobius, who he never met but felt inexplicably connected to. Similarly to the Barthesian precedent – if written on the opposite sides of a strip, given a half-turn and then connected – the two stories eventually merge in a single narration, in which Mobius' actions fuel the writer's inspiration and vice versa in an infinite intersection of influences.

Resembling a cinematic split-screen technique, Coetzee breaks up the pages in different sections: while the top parts consist exclusively of essayistic extracts written in the first person, the middle and last parts record the voices of ageing writer-author J.C., and Anya, his Philipina neighbour-turned-secretary who shares an apartment with the last of this novel's very limited group of characters, her partner Alan.



He described his procedures to me with great candour, but not, it seemed to me, in the spirit of one offering a lesson to be followed. He had no great opinion of my eye, for women or essential gestures or anything else. Born on a savage continent, I was barred, in his opinion, from what came naturally to Europeans, namely a Greek, that is to say Platonic, turn of mind.

"You did not answer my original question," I said. "Do these masturbatory conquests of yours bring you true satisfaction? In your heart of hearts would you not prefer the real thing?"

He drew himself up. "Masturbation is a word I never use," he said. "Masturbation is for children. Masturbation is for the beginner practising his instrument. As for the real thing, how can you, who have read Freud, use that term so irresponsibly? What I speak of is ideal love, poetic love, but on the sensual plane. If you refuse to understand that, I cannot help you."

You mean in one of my opinions? What opinion do you think I might have wanted to express about you?

Not about me by name, necessarily, but about little Filipina typists who think they know everything.

Anya tells me you are very well-behaved. *Galant* certainly, but nothing more than that. No indecent whispers. No improper use of the hands. A real old-fashioned gentleman, in fact. I like that. I wish we had more like you. I am not *galant* myself. You must have noticed that. I am not a gentleman of any description. I don't even know who my parents were, who fathered me or mothered me, and you can't be a gentleman if you don't know your parents, can you?

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He misjudged me. I had every reason to get a grasp of this phenomenon that he called ideal love on the sensual plane, every reason to get a grasp of it and take it over and practise it on my own behalf. But I could not. There was the real thing, which I knew and remembered, and then there was the kind of mental rape Gyula performed, and the two were not the same. The quality of the emotional experience might be similar, the ecstasy might be as intense as he averred – who was I to dispute that? – yet in the most elementary of senses a mental love could not be a real thing.

Why is it that we – men and women both, but men most of all – are prepared to accept the checks and rebuffs of the real, more and more rebuffs as time goes by, more humiliating each time, yet keep coming back? The answer: because we cannot do without the real thing, the real real thing; because without the real we die as if of thirst.

She had been in a bad mood when I opened the door to her (she was not going to stay, she had just come to apologize . . .), but already that was lightening. A few more strokes on her petals and she would begin to glow again with her wonted colour.

Didn't Anya tell you about my background? No? I was brought up in a boys' home in Queensland. I am their one success story, the one inmate who went out into the world and made his fortune legitimately. A self-made man, therefore. Do you know what I am worth, Señor Juan? Not as much as you – I am guessing, of course, how would I know how much you are worth? – but a lot nevertheless. A packet. And do you know where I keep it? No?

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The tripartition enacts the nauseating effect of a turbulent journey: if followed singularly, the segments create an illusion of reality, as every part is the direct follow-up of the part that precedes it – the essays follow a thematic order and the two sections underneath are continuous flux of narrations. Yet, when reading vertically, the experience is jarring: the intermittent fragments force readers in an endless retracing their steps in order to get back and recover earlier details, with the result that the

narration fails to deliver a coherent signification and multiple perspectives overlap. Against the title's paratextual suggestion, both the middle and last section are written in the past tense, enacting a retrospective take that is incongruous with the diaristic modality (which, as I mentioned before, requires the use of the present tense) and instead veers towards the memoiristic.[16]

As a mixture of multiple genres and voices, the text has been described by many as *polyphonic*, a definition that might appear – at a first glance – to underplay the incremental intricacies and relocations of the points of view. In this regard, it is undeniable that, in addition to the ramifications of the aforementioned oscillating schemata, the effort required of the reader to persevere with narration contributes to the complexity of the text.

In his seminal essay "Time, Narrative, Life, Death, & Text-Type Distinctions" (2011), H. Porter Abbot takes Diary as the *counter voice* to what he describes as the "almost invariable tendency of a text to settle into one or another text type" (190). He introduces his analysis by arguing that, in contrast to other textual types such as description, explanation and or analysis – to name a few –, narrative is the only textual kind that needs all four of the dimensions in which we live our lives (three spatial ones plus the time dimension). "All the text types take time to read, of course, but narrative is the only one that has what Chatman called an 'internal time sequence'"(188). Additionally, he also maintains that in addition to this inherent characteristic, texts that predominantly consist of narrative can retain their status even when interspersed with

[16] There are various possible explanations to Diary's tripartition: in *Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication*, for example, basing his argument on Socratic theory, Jonathan Lear proposes that the division gives Coetzee a "way to address different parts of our soul, at more or less the same time.", so in moving toward the lower part of the page we "also move to the lower part of the body – and, not accidentally, the "lower"part of the soul."

additional types of text. Even when one of the added texts is sufficiently present as to lead to the questioning of a possible textual hybridity, as Porter Abbots reminds us, James Phelan has demonstrated that generally, the dominant logic of a text ends up being the one that gets away, making the secondary text type into somewhat of a deuteragonist. Bringing *Diary* into play, he remarks on how Coetzee has visually separated the essayistic parts (which are quantitatively dominating) from the fictional story that makes up the narrative text. Still – in addition to the structural layout – what makes the novel so peculiar is the fact that, despite being frequently referenced in the narrative and later evolving into a different kind of text (J.C.'s *Strong Opinions* give way to the more personal entries in *Second Diary*), the essays are experienced as "the interruption of that narrative, self-contained and without, moreover, any particular temporal locations on the narrative time-line"(5).

To make sense of these inconsistencies, however, readers need not to get far: sure enough, the second to last opening of *Second Diary* apparently hides the novel's structural exegesis.

23. On J.S. Bach

> The best proof we have that a life is good, and therefore that there may perhaps be a God after all, who has our welfare at heart, is that to each of us, on the day we are born, comes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. It comes as a gift, unearned, unmerited, for free. How would I like to speak just once to that man, dead now these many many years! "See how we in the twenty-first century still play your music, how we revere and love it, how we are absorbed and moved and fortified and made joyful by it," I would say. "In the name of all mankind, please accept these words of tribute, inadequate though they are, and let all you

> endured in those bitter last years of yours, including the cruel surgical operations on your eyes, be forgotten. (2008, 221)

Musical references and excursus are frequent in Coetzee's novels, but this particular piece – besides shining a light into J.C.'s evolution as a character towards the end of the novel – elaborates on the polyphonic and intertextual aspect of this text.

The concept of polyphony, introduced by Mikhail Bakthin in his study of Dostoevsky's prose, similarly borrows from a musical metaphor: in contrast to monophony (one voice musical texture) and homophony (one dominant voice accompanied by chords), polyphony is considered the most complex and superior musical text type, as it comprises two or more simultaneous independent melodies interacting with each other. From this notion, Bakthin describes polyphony as the "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (1984, 6), a concept which perfectly encapsulates the interplay of focalizations Coetzee implements in his novel. In *Diary*, polyphony is achieved through a masterful exercise in intertextuality, the usage of which disrupts the standard linear sequence of writing and reading and instead offers the reader a rhizomatic[17] and textured literary counterpoint.

On these grounds, J. C.'s heartfelt piece on Bach can be interpreted as the novel's *mise en abyme.* There is little chance an avid classical music connoisseur such as Coetzee could have chosen that particular German composer without being highly aware of one of his music's greatest features. Indeed, what most of his fugues[18] and

[17] By "rhizomatic," I intend to denote the horizontal and non-linear arrangement of the different parts, drawing from the post-structuralist definition by Deleuze and Guattari.
[18] These are merely a few examples chosen from the immense body of Bach's compositions.

his compositions for organum have in common, is their contrapuntal nature; as a typical European tradition, contrapuntal music employs multiple melody lines simultaneously, each voice following specific rules of interactions. Every voice finds its place within the interaction with each other.

Indeed, experiencing the book makes it possible to notice that the back and forth between voices and concepts articulated in the text is incredibly similar to Bach's use of counterpoint in his works; ultimately, even though the overall effect emerges almost as unsettling, the reader is able to square the circle the more he or she immerses into the narration, as "the difference between being in time and out of time, a difference we feel as we cross back and forth from one text type to the other" (Porter Abbot, 192) gets increasingly thematised to the point of becoming the novel's *leitmotif*.

In contrast to its structural complexity, the novel's plot is so sparse it seems almost nonexistent: along with other writers from around the world, late-career novelist J.C. has been tasked by the German publisher Bruno Geistler of *Mittwoch Verlag GmbH* to "say their say on any subjects they choose, the more contentious the better" (19). J.C. is one of the six eminent writers, whose voices are to "pronounce on what is wrong with today's world."

The biographical similarities disclosed along the way are too stark not to be noticed: even though the full name is never mentioned in the novel, the author's initials pop up a couple of times as he signs his letters to Anya – "*Yours, JC*".
Although Anya initially believes he is from Colombia ("Alan looked him up on the internet. That is how I found out he isn't from Colombia, isn't a Señor at all." 50),

J.C., like John Coeztee, is South-African by birth and has recently emigrated to Australia. Additionally, he is a world-renowned novelist and critic, celebrated for his acclaimed novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* and his collection of critical essays *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship.*

On the other hand, the discrepancies between the verifiable facts of Coetzee's life and the parallel information about J.C. are even more lampant: the date of birth Anya and Alan find in their internet search is 1934, while the actual Coetzee was born in 1940; besides, unlike the real author, J.C. has never been awarded the Nobel Prize, nor had any children.

Despite his reluctance to share personal informations, a feature J.C. shares with Coetzee, it is not difficult for the reader to conjure up a clear picture of him from the various details scattered throughout the narration: resident of the Sydenham Towers – a particular that need not be overlooked, as it adds to the mimetic component of the novel – since 1995, J.C. impersonates the character of the old, garrulous writer. Engaged in writing what he is aware is going to be his last work, the dullness of his routine (he is sitting in the apartment complex washroom, watching the washing go around) gets interrupted during a quiet spring day by the fateful encounter with a neighbour. The first glimpse he has of Anya, whose name he will learn only later on, is for him quite startling, as "the last thing I was expecting was such an apparition; also because the tomato-red shift she wore was so startling in its brevity" (3). Black hair, shapely bones and a golden glow to her skin, Anya is young, attractive and – more importantly – perfectly aware of the allure she emanates, as her first segment makes clear: "As I pass him, carrying the laundry basket, I make sure to waggle my

behind, my delicious behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me" (25).

Through another neighbour, J.C. learns – to his dismay – that she is the "wife or at least girlfriend of the pale, hurrying, plump and ever-sweaty fellow whose path crosses mine now and again in the lobby and for whom my private name is Mr Aberdeen" (9). Mr Aberdeen (a Scottish reference to his freckles and pallor) is none other than Alan, of Alan and Anya, A & A, unit 2514. An investment consultant with a passable knowledge of Kant and a penchant for defrauding old men, Alan stands out as the only hindrance in the otherwise smooth progress of the plot, evolving into a villain of sorts.

Undoubtedly, the introduction of Anya's first-person account detailing the development of her relationship with J.C. further complicates the reading experience. However, as Coetzee advances the plot, their exchanges rise above the mere commentaries on the topics analysed in *Strong Opinions,* and instead evolve into profound reflections on the nature of life, communication and death.

From their first meeting the reader is made aware of the ineffable feeling which compels J.C. to seek Anya's company:

> As I watched her an ache, a metaphysical ache, crept over me that I did nothing to stem. And in an intuitive way she knew about it, knew that in the old man in the plastic chair in the corner there was something personal going on, something to do with age and regret and the tears of things. Which she did not particularly like, did not want to evoke, though it was a tribute to her, to her beauty and freshness as well as to the shortness of her dress. Had it come from someone different, had it had a simpler and blunter meaning, she might have been readier to give it a welcome; but from an old man its meaning was too

> diffuse and melancholy for a nice day when you are in a hurry to get the chores done. (7)

Despite his awkward initial attempts at approaching her ("Nice day, I say. Yes, she said, with her back to me. Are you new? I said [...] No, she said. How it creaks, getting a conversation going."), characteristics of a slightly lascivious man by now too unfamiliar with the ways of women ("I am allowed to make gambits like that, it will be put down to garrulity. Such a garrulous old man, she will remark to the owner of the pink shirt with the white collar"), the underlying attraction is evident.

Age, regret and the tears of things could easily have been the subtitle to *Diary of a Bad Year,* as from this passage we can extract the very essence of the protagonist's condition; old age is something that Coetzee had already investigated with the character of *Elizabeth Costello*, but the gender reversal adds to the mimetic and autofictional element of the narration. Aside from the structural complexity, then, this is a novel that explores what it means to be a writer in this old age and to have to confront the changing times[19], the regrets that precede our inevitable end and the complexity (and fallibility) of communication.

That *metaphysical ache* to which JC alludes to during their first encounter is something destined to evolve during their relationship; when he meets her for a second time in a public park.

> The air around us positively crackled with a current that could not have come from me, I do not exude currents any more, must therefore have come from her

[19] "Here we are, six *éminences grises* who have clawed our way up the highest peak, and now that we have reached the summit what do we find? We find that we are too old and infirm to enjoy the proper fruits of our triumph. *Is this all?* We say to ourselves, surveying the world of delights we cannot serve. *Was it worth all that sweat?*" (22).

> and been aimed at no one in particular, just released into the environment. [...] and again the shadow of the ache passed over me, the ache I alluded to earlier, of a metaphysical or at least post-physical kind. (13)

Having access to both characters' interiorities allows the reader to be conscious of their hypocrisies: aware both of his condition and of how he comes across – beside old age, he is suffering from the physical symptoms of Parkinson disease, something Anya and Alan will learn later on – JC chooses anyway to try and persuade Anya to become his typist in what seems his last desperate attempt to relive a speck of virility. Despite the undeniable desires, he is at the same time deeply ashamed[20] of his thoughts : "... as she passed through the front door in a flash of white slacks that showed off a derrière so near to perfect as to be angelic. God, grant me one wish before I die, I whispered; but then was overtaken with shame at the specificity of the wish, and withdrew it" (8). Conflicting opinions, even within oneself, are another of the most recurrent themes in the novel.

Even though he does not necessarily need one, he is set on having Anya as a personal typist, and manages to win her over by making appeals to her supposed *intuitive feel*:

> I don't need someone from a bureau, I said. I need someone who can pick up instalments and can get them back to me speedily. That person should have a feel, an intuitive feel, for what I am trying to do. [...] *An intuitive feel*: those were my words. They were a gamble, a shot in the dark, but they worked. What self-respecting woman would want to deny she has an intuitive feel? (18,19)

[20] Shame is an aspect addressed various times during the course of the novel in all textual blocksfrom the opinion *On national shame,* to JC' s sexual shame and Anya recalling her rape.

Beginning at Strong Opinion number six, *On guidance systems*, Anya's thoughts enter the narration in the form of the last segment on the page; as her personality is able to come out in earnest without the previously necessary mediation of JC's perception of her, her musings paint the picture of a frivolous, almost superficial young woman, not particularly interested in 'what is wrong with the world', but instead highly amused by the power she is conscious to exert over the old man:

> Nevertheless, when I make my silky moves I can feel his eyes lock onto me. That is the game between him and me. I don't mind. What else is your bottom for? Use it or lose it. When I am not carrying laundry baskets I am his segretaria, part-time. Also, now and again, his house-help. At first I was just supposed to be his segretaria, his secret aria, his scary fairy, in fact not even that, just his typist, his tipista, his clackadackia. (28)

Having said that, I believe some observations need to be made about the entire layout: both narrated in the first person and using the past tense, the two lower sections of the page display some interesting choices in literary style. While the essayistic parts follow academic writing to the letter (in terms of punctuation, use of italics, references and direct quotations) the second and third segments, in which all speech is reported, seem to abandon rigour in favour of a more free-flowing internal thoughts. JC's thoughts are always measured and rendered in short and neat sentences, never more than one or two coordinates or subordinates for each phrase. As expected from a man of his education, he has at his disposal a considerable vocabulary, and takes great care to use precisely the right terms in his descriptions ("A certain golden glow to her skin, *lambent* might be the word."). Combined with the mastery of

subjects he demonstrates in penning his *Opinions*, the sharpness and acumen of his inner ruminations starkly contrast with the image of a man who has lost the ability to take care of himself – a shadow of a once-prominent, now-forgotten academic figure.

> In public life the role I play nowadays is that of the distinguished figure (distinguished for what no one can quite recall), the kind of notable who is taken out of storage and dusted to say a few words to a cultural event [...] and then put back in the cupboard. An appropriately comic and provincial fate for a man who half a century ago shook the dust of the provinces off his feet and sailed forth into the great world to practise *la vie bohème*. (191)

His command of the English language, unfortunately, is not something he shares with his newly acquired secretary, as he is hard pressed to admit soon after having hired her services:

> As a typist pure and simple, Anya from upstairs is a bit of a disappointment. She meets her daily quota, no problem about that, but the rapport I had hoped for, the feel for the sort of thing I write, is hardly there. There are times when I stare in dismay at the text she turns in. According to Daniel Defoe, I read, the true-born Englishman hates "papers and papery." Brezhnev's general sit "somewhere in the urinals. (25)

Or again (after having described that due to his loss of motor control he is forced to hand her both – unreadable – written notes and a dictaphone in order for her to understand what he is writing about), "So we proceed in this error-strewn way. "Acquiring an italic identity." Who does she think I am – Aeneas? "Subject hood" the citizens of the state roaming the streets in their black hoods. Surreal images" (32).

Anya cares very little for the topics covered in *Strong Opinions,* and she is not afraid to voice her discontent: “All he writes about is politics [...] It’s a big disappointment. It makes me yawn. I try to tell him to give it up, people have had it up to here with politics” (26), and again “Write about cricket, I suggest. Write your memoirs. Anything but politics. The kind of writing you do doesn’t work with politics” (35). Her thoughts are of a chaotic and overexcited sort, often going from one topic to another in the space of a sentence, her inner voice a triumph of sing-songs, onomatopoeia and child-like babbling – a jarring combination when paired with the overlying paragraphs.

As both scholars and knowledgeable readers have noticed, regardless of her feisty character, it is impossible not to see the connection between her and Anya Snitkina, the woman Dostoevsky first employed as a typist for his 1886 novel *The Gambler* and who later became his wife. This is notably evident in light of the nominal resemblance and the topic of the closing entry to *Second Diary* (*24. On Dostoevsky*). Even though the nature of their relationship never exceeds the boundaries of a – sometimes flirty – Platonic friendship, Coetzee employed one particular writing strategy, aimed to intensify their interactions, making it such that readers often feel privy to exchanges that feel almost too intimate.

Advancing through the plot, vain and conceited Anya – woman and cultural “other” – not only actively engages in commenting and judging JC’s Strong Opinions, but promptly steers him away from ‘political talk’ towards subjects she feels truly engage the public: “I enjoy a good story [...] A story with human interest, that I can relate to. There is nothing wrong with that.” In doing so, she begins to exhibit signs of

what JC initially referred to as an intuitive feel ("*An intuitive feel*: those were my words. They were a gamble, a shot in the dark, but they worked. What self-respecting woman would want to deny she has an intuitive feel?" (19).

In her article "Do you think I can 't read between the lines? Discourse of the unsaid in J.M. Coetzee's Diary of a Bad Year"(2018), Rachel Isom analyses *Diary* in light of Bakhtinian novelistic theory. Through the manipulation of novelistic elements like plot and point of view, she writes, the first person segments include deep delvings into other character's internal monologues and actions, further entangling interpretation. Occurring various times throughout the novel, this *intuitions* appear as "imaginative forays into the mind of the other, revealing undercurrent of the individual narratives and the extent to which each character, most frequently Anya, exposes the unspoken thoughts of other characters" (3), and thus diffuse narrative authority conferring to her the most powerful intuitive force in the novel.

Therefore, it is impossible not to agree with Isom in saying that Coetzee uses these tactics to accentuate and reiterate the problems related to even the simplest acts of communication. The examples are various, but the reader is able to spot them immediately through the use of italics. In these specific contexts, their inferred nature underscores the weight and significance of both explicit and implicit communication:

> Alan, she said, my partner. And she gave me a look. The look did not say, *Yes I am to all intents and purpose a married woman, so if you pursue the course you have in mind it will be a matter of clandestine adultery, with all the risks and thrills pertaining thereto*, nothing like that, on the contrary it said, *You seem to think I am some sort of child, do I need to point out I am not a child at all?* (15).

The composite nature of this passage highlights the projective overlay essential to many of these segments: in just a handful of lines JC not only attests to the failure of his attempt at engaging in a more exhaustive conversation with Anya and interprets her thoughts by a precise facial expression, but – even more importantly – he acknowledges for the first time the presence of her voice in his innermost thoughts – therefore recognizing her ability in interpreting men's thoughts and emotions.
Anya gives proof of this skill again and again:

> It is interesting when men put on a show for each other. I see it with Alan's men friends too. When Alan brings me along to some office get-together, his friends don't say, *What a knockout you've got there! What tits! What legs! Lend her to me for the night! You can have mine!* They don't say it, but that is what is flashing between them. (162)

> So Senor C, who is seventy-two and is losing fine muscle control and presumably pees in his pants, says, *What a comfort and support your Anya was!* and Alan reads at once what it means in boy's code: *Thank you for letting your girlfriend visit me and stroke her hips before me and waft her scent under my nostril; I dream about her, I lust after her in my senile way, what a man you must be, what a stallion, to have a woman like this!* Yes, replies Alan, she is pretty good at what she does; and Senor C picks up the innuendo at once, as he is meant to. (163)

Employing these particular insertions, for which my proposed name is *FID* (not as in the famous free indirect discourse, but as in *Free Interpreting Deductions*), Coetzee is able to overcome his own tripartition, transforming three apparently monologic texts into a dialogic system. Dialogism is a recurrent and distinguishing

feature of Coetzee's works, and in *Diary* too the reader is able to witness to the fallibility of 'dialogue proper', supplanted instead by the intuitions that animate unspoken conversations and "highlight complex interpersonal relations that influence the construction of a dialogic fictional text" (Isom, 3).

Subconscious response to JC's metaphysical ache or inherent womanly characteristic, the fact remains that this power confers Anya the ability to "assume, maintain, and even extend the dialogic interpretation in her narrative thread" (6). As a woman, her view is in conflict with both JC's and Alan's – whose words are reported in her segments – thereby, in her voice we find the embodiment of what Isom describes as the "powerful democratising force" of the novel. Moreover, her mechanism of interpretation is perceived as relying on an unconscious, gender specific perception, an "understanding informed by her knowledge of gender norms" (Isom 2016, 8) and of both Alan and JC's adherence to them. Coetzee succeeds in exhibiting a nuance of both implicit and dialogic communication, engendering language and seemingly demonstrating an innate female ability to combine stereotypical assumption with unspoken comprehension.

The ending ultimately demonstrates that being able to read between the lines grants her the means to also read transversely, beyond every physical and imaginary line, "across the boundaries constructed by the othering forces of JC, Alan and patriarchal society" (11).

"Crushed", as she feels, between Alan's jealous nature[21] and JC's opinions, she is able nonetheless to strike a chord in JC's hard beliefs:

> What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya, is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions. As I read through what mere hours before she translated from a record of my speaking voice into 14-point type, there are flickering moments when I can see these hard opinions of mine through her eyes – see how alien and antiquated they may seem to a thoroughly modern Millie, like the bones of some odd extinct creature, half blind, half reptile, on the point of turning to stone. Laments. Fulminations. Curses. (136,137)

The nature of his *Strong Opinions,* we eventually realise, is so distinctly didascalic not only because of his past as an academic, but because in their coming into being they literally *imbibe* the same political quality they expose – a tactic, if we want, that JC believes is going to make his works feel like they still have some sort of significance, still matter to someone.

Anya's influence, then, is able to chip away at his exterior little by little, until a dream, one night, finally changes the course of things. "Second Diary" comprises twenty-four total numbered subsections which have nothing in common with "Strong Opinions": not the topics, not the academic and *de facto* writing style, not the emotional and personal investment that JC is suddenly eager to put on paper. In his dream, in which he is aware to be dead but has not yet left the living plane, he finds himself in the company of a woman, younger than him, that is "doing the best to

[21] He epitomises, in his open antagonism toward JC and his "Strong Opinions" ("He is a leftover from the Sixties [...] An old-fashioned free-love, free-speech sentimental hippie socialist" 92), what Lucia Fiorella labels as a specific kind of reader, one set on tearing to shreds both authors and their work, in utter contrast to what Anya represents.

soften the impact of death while shielding me from other people, people who did not care for me as I had become and wanted me to depart at once"; he awakes soon later, but not before having lived through what he describes as the first day of his death. To maintain the theme, the section just below is conspicuously blank, symbolising the end of his authorial voice and serving as a clear intertextual reference to the continuing narration. During an awkward and bizarre dinner party – organised by JC to celebrate the completion of his Opinions – Anya's thwarting of Alan's despicable plans to rob the ageing author of his conspicuous patrimony comes to light, alluded to by a heavily intoxicated Alan. The first eleven pages of JC's middle sections are suddenly and inexplicably blank: this stylistic choice is interesting, and could be interpreted as symbolising his reverting to an emotional state that preceded his strong opinions, a time of remembering and, more specifically, of regression. According to MS RN Suzanne Tatro and Jan Marshall, regression is a complex unconscious mental process that some older adults may employ as "a defence mechanism to cope with their foreshortened future". Thus, while the topmost parts expand on emotion, philosophy and memories of his father, at the bottom Anya's voice recalls the event:

> It was getting on for nine o'clock. We could have decently taken our departure. But Alan was not ready to depart. [he] was just getting into his stride. [...] So you should so you should. said Alan. I mean, trust her. Do you know why? Because, unbeknown to you, she has saved you. She has saved you from the depredations [...] of an unnamed malefactor. Who shall remain nameless. Who was going to rob you blind. [...] Really, said C, who could not have guessed what on earth Alan was talking about; he was probably imagining a masked figure with a gun in a dark alley. (169-71)

There she was, his secret aria secretary, a sort of angel in disguise. And angelic she proves to be, to a certain extent, when at the very end of the book, after she and JC have already said goodbye and she has left both Alan and the apartment, she imagines herself going back to look after JC as he dies, and promises to hold his hand, kiss him on the brow and "whisper in his ear: sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest" (227) – in the very last lines, the very last of the many intertextual reference of this novel, to Shakespeare's Hamlet this time, and in particular to Horatio's peroration.

'Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest'

2.4 Writing about writing - authority through the autofictional

J.C's "Strong Opinions" begin with a piece titled *On the origins of the state.*

> Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that "we" – not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one – participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only "we" we know – ourselves and the people close to us – are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are. (3)

To read this passage in light of its interconnections, it is essential that the analysis acknowledges the power of the "we". In linking the "we" of readership to the "we" of citizenship, writes Benjamin Ogden, Coetzee "commences a prolonged consideration of the relationship between reader and text, author and tradition, genre and its delimitations, all via a disquisition on the state" (2010, 466).

Indeed, through this discourse, the author sets the foundations for an argument that will evolve throughout the pages, focusing specifically on how to engage with a similar text – one that so openly defies the natural laws of the novel. In posing these problems, Coetzee compares the relationship between state formation and citizen formation in such a fashion that it is impossible not to link its logic to the relationship between text and reader. While JC's voice apparently describes that the state is either a context in which the citizen is born into or something that each citizen jointly helps to construct, the subtext implies that similarly, a "work of fiction is something that

each reader either instrumentally participates in creating or inherits in an immutable form" (467).

In this respect, thanks to his writing methods[22] the lines that follow work as instantiations of the literary metareferences. Ultimately, the questions about state-formations convert into their respective counterparts: "To what extent is the form of the novel due to the fact of novelists being born into a long-standing literary tradition, and to what extent do writers participate in the coming into being and prolongation of that tradition and thereby become culpable for its uniformity? Since "ourselves and the people close to us" are always born into the tradition of the novel (and all its formal and structural entailments), how can we seek to reform it? What form would such a liberated novel take? How would its form subvert?" (473) Merely the first of the many metanarrative instances of the novel, starting from this meditation – as Peter McDonald writes in "The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel" (2010) – "*Diary* obliges us to be wary of generic labels and, more particularly, of the habits of reading, feeling, and thinking that the novel has helped to naturalise" (494).

In a following Opinion titled *On Al Qaida,* JC similarly disguises another literary consideration under a reflection on an apparently unrelated topic. He establishes his argument on a BBC documentary on Al Qaida, whose myth as a powerful terrorist organisation is continuously fed by the US administration, whereas the truth, he writes, is that "Al Qaida has been more or less destroyed and what we see today are terror attacks by autonomous groups of Muslim radicals" (31).[23]

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[22] Including the repeated use of the term *form* – which is thematically bound to the literary field – to describe the state, and the mirroring of the coming into being of the state with the coming into being of the book.

[23] Even though the title of the documentary is never mentioned, Peter McDonald is sure it is Adam Curtis's Bafta-award-winning The Power of Nightmares, a series of three programs broadcast by the BBC in 2004.

The story told in the documentary is the one of four young American Muslims, tried by the American government for having supposedly planned a terrorist attack on Disneyland. The salient point of the case, however, is that in court the prosecution decided to introduce as evidence an amateurish video found in the apartment of the four, a long shot of a garbage can and a pair of feet. According to JC, the prosecution "claimed that the amateurishness was feigned, that what we were witnessing was a reconnaissance tool: the garbage can was a potential hiding-place for a bomb, the walking feet paced out the distance from A to B. The rationale offered by the prosecution for this paranoid interpretation was that the very amateurishness of the video was ground for suspicion" (32). Affronted by the choice of argument, he teasingly poses to the readers the question of where could the prosecution possibly have learnt to think in such a way? And the answer he gives – to the dismay of many, and especially, as Peter McDonal mentions in his study, of Peter Brook – is no less inflammatory, as according to him it could have only happened inside the US literature classes of the 1980' and 1990'[24].

Following his merciless description of these "not-very-bright graduates of the academy of the humanities in its postmodernist phases" (33), from the literary theories explained to them during their formative years, these lawyers-to-be were able to extrapolate those analytical instruments which they then employed outside the literary context, acting on the assumption that "the ability to argue that nothing is as it seems to be might get you places."

[24] The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur coined the expression 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in his 1965's essay *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation,* to describe a theory of interpretation governed by scepticism and active circumvention of obvious and evident meanings. He suggests that suspicious reading is not merely an exercise in demystification, but a style that provides specific pleasures that range from ethic to aesthetic satisfaction derived from crafting detective-fiction-style plots. (Felski, 2011).

He closes the comparatively short piece on an amusingly Shakespearean note, insisting that having gifted these people those instruments was the *traison des clercs* of our time. "You taught me language, and my profit on it is I know how to curse" (33) – lines almost identical to the ones uttered by Caliban in *The Tempest*.

Once again, when divested of its political garments, the Opinion reveals to be a profound inquiry into aspects of critical theory in general, and into specific aspects of this novel in particular. JC's jab to the literary classes of 80' and 90' American Universities is not meant to be read exclusively as a mockery of the incompetence and unreasonableness of those lawyers, but as an urge to reflect on the consequences brought by the kinds of interpretative theories of deconstruction which had taken over the critical debate in those decades. In this context, Coetzee is encouraging the reader to look deeper into the text and ponder on the ethics of reading. Of the novel's 55 total "Opinions", almost each one deals in one way or another with problems involved in the act of reading, understanding, and interpreting. Still, if one considers that much of the material that went into building JC's "Opinions" was modelled from antecedent works (suffice it to think of "Opinion" number fourteen *On the slaughter of animals*, topic which Coetzee, long time vegetarian and animal rights activist, notoriously holds dear and has explored in the novella *The Lives of Animals* (1999), the first question that comes to mind is why would Coetzee feel the need to arrange his arguments in such a convoluted way? Why not speak publicly or simply proceed with another collection of essays? The answer to these questions is – unsurprisingly – inside the book itself, keystone to the entire novel experience.

Strong Opinion number twenty-six, titled *On Harold Pinter,* is possibly the closest thing we, as readers, have to an admission of the motives behind *Diary of a Bad Year.* The year is 2005, and Harold Pinter, renown British playwright, is announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, but is sadly too ill to participate to the award ceremony in Stockholm (Pinter had already been diagnosed with cancer, an illness that led him to death only three years later, in 2008). Nonetheless, he manages to participate with a recorded lecture in which he launches himself in a ruthless tirade against American President George Bush and Tony Blair, at the time England's Prime Minister. In a "savage attack" – as Coetzee defined it, – destined to go down in history, he denounced the English politician for his political endorsement of the American policy in the Iraq war, calling for his trial as a war criminal. Coetzee's next words are paramount to the understanding of his stance:

"When one speaks in one's own person – that is, not through one's art – to denounce some politician or other, using the rhetoric of the agora, one embarks on a contest one is likely to lose [... therefore] it takes some gumption to speak as Pinter has spoken [...] there come times when the outrage and shame are so great that all calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak" (127).

Flashback to two years earlier during the award ceremony for his Nobel Prize, where Coetzee decides neither to take advantage of his acceptance lecture to express any opinions or motivations, nor to launch a political attack, choosing instead to narrate the short story "He and His Man", a piece in which Robinson Crusoe tells the story of his shipwreck and subsequent return to England. In developing the story Coetzee did not treat him as a character, but as a real person, a solitary and reserved man who

learnt to enjoy a life of quietness while shipwrecked and then profited by the sales of his adventures once returned to Bristol. In this reimagining of the classical novel (not his first one, as Coetzee had already adapted Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in his novel *Foe*), the roles are inverted, and Robinson Crusoe becomes the one giving life to Daniel Defoe and imagining his travels – in a nutshell, a layered portrayal of the complex relationship between the author and his characters.

Coetzee had already been accused by many of not taking advantage of his notoriety in order to shed light on the South African humanitarian crisis – for "refusing to play the role of writer-as-statesman, one more easily played by his fellow Nobel laureate, Nadine Gordimer" (Rachel Donadio qtd. in Lear). Similarly – as I mentioned in the previous pages – he had been reprimanded for failing to meet the expectations of the public in regard to sharing his opinions on controversial topics or advocating for important causes.

It is here, however, that lies the crux of the matter: contrary to the critics who portrayed the novel as merely a postmodern exercise in virtuosity, it appears as though in *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee has achieved exactly what he has been criticised for not doing; what makes his effort different from other writers is that he did it through methods that simultaneously address major topics and call into question our means of interpretation.

In the opening of Opinion number 30, *On authority in fiction,* JC writes:

> In the novel, the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second, and so onward – call it the voice of the narrator – has, to begin with, no authority at

> all. Authority must be earned; on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority

Taking Tolstoy and Whitman as examples, the passage is a reflection on the paradox of authority, and, even more importantly, on the public's tendency to superimpose figures of great authors with one's of great authority. There is a crucial difference, as Jonathan Lear explains in his study on *Diary,* that we as readers need to realise separates JC from Coetzee: while one is willing to publish his *Opinions* as a free-standing book, the other clearly is against that choice.

This circumstance is the driving force behind Coezee's decision to rely on the potential provided by autofictional. As I previously argued in the first chapter, critical studies indicate that viewing autofiction as a fixed genre with rigid characteristics is largely a futile endeavour: by its very nature, autofiction evades standard rules of classification. Rather, as I aim to demonstrate in my analysis, it has a tendency to shapeshift according to each different application. Having said that, it is true that every act of intentional autofictionalization is committed to at least one of two potential goals: the first – according to Gibbs and Effe's 2022 research – is associated with the effects granted by the fictional mode in general, meaning aesthetic pleasure, indirect learning, general or indirect truth etc.; the second, additionally, has to do more closely with the *auto* part of the autofictional mode, and entails creative and explorative thinking in the pursuit of self-understanding, self-performance and self-creation. Even more important to this particular case study, though, is the effect

of readerly positioning, which in the case of *Diary* conveys the intent of anticipating objections and inviting reader engagement.

By looking retroactively at his career, we can recognize that in order to distance himself from the mechanisms – and repercussion – of 'pure' political speech, Coetzee has elected to bring to life a series of writer alter egos whose moral authority – by implanting them into specific socio-cultural contexts – he has systematically discredited, highlighting the flaws in their thought processes and behaviour.

He did so in the *Master of Petersburg*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary* alike, moulding figures through which he could express *strong opinions* while maintaining enough personal detachment. By looking at his works through the lens of his temperament, it becomes clear that Coetzee never had any intention to evolve into the beacon of wisdom the public wanted him to be – especially after the notoriety granted him by the award – because, as he has always been aware of, his nature is another, and to outrightly engage in political discussion would have robbed his words of the ethical intent behind them. In this perspective *Diary* was conceived as an attempt to a contribution of true ethical thought excised from his direct influence, to "defeat the reader's desire to defer to the 'moral authority', the 'novelist' John Coetzee"(Lear 67)

Ultimately *Diary* emerges as the climax of all his previous ethical efforts: in structuring the novel Coetzee is aware that – by hinting at onomastic correspondence and introducing verifiable personal details – the reader will certainly y link JC's opinions with his own; however, by simultaneously placing the opinions inside a fictional narrative in which not one, but three distinct points of view (JC, Anya, and

Alan through her) discuss their validity, Coetzee is able to speak through his own art and not embark in a contest he is likely to lose.

Playing the autofictional game grants Coetzee the ability to explore the limits of authorship and identity in language. By making JC author the opinions, Coetzee succeeds in being always two steps ahead: fiddling with the onomastic criterion and embedding the opinions inside the larger narrative of *Diary* – and especially in the context of JC's near-death condition – Coetzee halts at the outset any tendency of the reader to directly transfer authority to one or both writers – the real and the alter ego. Are Coetzee and JC the same person or is it all fiction? Does JC actually need to express his *Opinions* or is it really just the dying wish of an elderly writer to impress a neighbour and have "an opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to [his] fantasies"(23)?
There are no definitive answers to these questions, but the purpose of the novel is ultimately not to be searched there.

In conclusion, *Diary of a Bad Year* is an excellent example of how a specific interpretation of the autofictional modality enables an author to overcome an ethical standstill. Subjected to the strategy of countervoices – "drawing attention to the positionality of his narrators, enabling the revelation of self-interest, the unconscious and desire as they position the subject in its history" (Attwell, 216) – readers are compelled to dig into the underworld of motives and methods which lie behind the words of each character, so as to work through every opinion from two or three separate perspectives, allowing them to look at the developments while holding a privileged position. By disrupting the linear progression of narration, Coetzee actively

rejects the convention that would have him as the sole authority of the novel and instead hands over the baton to the readers themselves.

The embedded structure, getting increasingly more sophisticated as the plot moves forward, triggers a rhizomatic reading experience in which readers are bestowed with the authority to decide how to read the sections and why, with the awareness, however, – though ultimately each section can function as a stand-alone – that to skip any part means to losing a comprehensive grasp on the whole narrative.

In this perspective, *Diary* promotes true ethical thought by leaving to the reader the possibility of engaging and empathising with each position and then finally getting to his or her own conclusion without being directly influenced by the power of some outside moral authority – "Diary calls on on us to reflect on our role in the world as professional critics whose raison d'etre is to keep the inventiveness of writing alive. It is also because it demands that we come to terms with the many shifting material and virtual spaces we inhabit and with our own vulnerability as radically finite readers for whom the primacy of the ethical can never be assured or assuring" (McDonald 2010:497)

Chapter Three

3.1 *Mommy Meanest*

If *Diary of a Bad Year* was the culmination of previous efforts and just one of Coetzee's ventures into the autofictional, Rachel Cusk's trilogy, on the contrary, emerges as a new beginning of both her life and her career.

Born in Canada to British parents in 1967, she moved back to England by the time she was seven and settled in Suffolks, attending prestigious private schools and honing her language skills at Oxford's New College. Her first novel *Saving Agnes* (1993) won her the Whitbread First Novel Award[25], and the six novels that followed it in short succession – and the respective awards – launched her in the 'Olympus' of British novelists of the early 2000'. Renowned for dealing with themes of femininity and social satire, her novels almost invariably feature young or middle-aged women grappling with inner turmoil and the infinite dramas of daily life. For instance, young Agnes Day – the homonymous protagonist of her debut novel – is a whimsy and incurably romantic girl who is desperately trying to understand why life and love seem to go on and leave her stranded; Stella Benson, protagonist of *The Country Life* (1997) – comedic novel that draws from Stella Gibson's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) – , is the first-person narrator of a story that deals with the hurdles that come with starting over, building relationships and unveiling family secrets.

After almost a decade of continuous literary success, Cusk's career takes an unexpected turn for the worse when she abandones novelistic writing to try her hand at non-fiction. The veritable media pillory begins in 2001, with the publication of her

[25] Now the Costa Book Award.

first memoir *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother,* described in The New York Times as 'career suicide'. First of three memoirs, *A Life's Work* is an exercise in honesty that depicts the naked, and often unpleasant, reality of motherhood. Written while pregnant with her second child, the book is divided thematically into sections, each dealing with one of the life-changing aspects that mark the transition from woman to mother. Foreseeably – though not by Cusk herself – the way in which she opted to describe the "anarchy of nights, the fog of days … friendliness and exile from the past" sparked the outrage of each and every mum on both sides of the pond (one online article from 2014 describes her as "the mother mums love to hate on Mumsnet"[26]), subjecting her to the vicious attacks of online and print media alike. Nonetheless, amidst an alarming amount of criticism, some found the memoir refreshingly outspoken and true to facts, a much needed variation on the popular theme of parenting books depicting otherworldly birthing experience and the hypocrisies of mommy groups. Reading her merciless detailing of sleepless nights and colicky babies it becomes clear that Cusk is set on breaking the taboos that want women's passage to parenthood to be as straightforward and undemanding as possible – as nature would have it –, in lieu of bringing light to the psychological traumas involved in being suddenly responsible for the wellbeing of another life. It is not altogether surprising that, to the reader unfamiliar with her rather verbose writing style, every recollection of those months (even the mommy and toddler meeting in the church hall, in which her dialogue with other mothers is maybe one of the most poignant examples of the dread that comes with being unable to connect with a group you're suddenly part of) is likely to appear

[26] Kellaway, K. (August 4, 2014) Rachel Cusk: *'Aftermath was creative death. I was heading into total silence*' The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline

detailed with a vocabulary one would believe more suitable to describe the horrors of war than the joys of maternity, yet it is precisely through those means that Cusk is able to convey the pains and anxieties of that time. The incessant metaphors Cusk uses to structure her narrative are, more often than not, unsettling in their bleakness: with the birth of her daughter, she says, "I become an undone task, a phone call I can't seem to make, a bill I don't get around to paying. My life has the seething atmosphere of an untended garden" (p. 133). Her daughter, just a few months old in the first memoir, becomes in her newborn neediness an almost unwelcome appendage, an alien presence responsible for having overturned her mother's life. The most frequent analogy throughout the book, though – and the one that readers have found more controversial –, is the one she uses to describe herself as a prisoner, captive in a life she does not seem to have chosen, an inmate hostage in the cells of pregnancy and maternity. Many have ascribed her tendency to over-dramatize to her middle-class privilege ("the luxury of wallowing in her own anxieties"), hinting at the comfort of having a partner willing to put his life on hold to allow her to continue writing, detail she discloses in passing – but her palaverous style, significant part of her novelistic heritage, is in this book uncoupled from her abilities as a fictional writer. While intensely focused on her experiences, as the rules of memoir dictate, it seems as though the fear of exposing personal details held her back from characterising any of the people around her, and this lack of elements somehow contributes to depriving her tale of those mimetic aspects that would make her a reliable narrator.[27] From these tales of pain and suffering, however, one of the most compelling aspects of this work emerges: in her internal conflict, a zero-sum game in which her two identities as

[27] She discloses next to nothing about the partner or the daughter, except for her name and the colour of her hair.

author and mother struggle to prevail ("To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other" pg. 57), she finds solace in revisiting old classics (Madame Bovary, The Secret Garden, Coleridge's poems). She realises she can now appreciate these works through the different perspective motherhood has granted her, opening her up to new sensibilities. Despite the harshness of its reception, it is undeniable that *A Life's Work* succeeded in challenging the mainstream narrative on childbirth and motherhood in a way no one had achieved before.

In an article published in 2008[28] Cusk described the exact moment in which her family's idyllic summer in Somerset was interrupted by the overwhelming stream of negative feedback. First there was a letter, she tells, from a fellow writer who warned her that what she wrote was going to "make people very angry"; later a call from her sister, reassuring that the book was indeed very good and not to listen to what people had to say about it. In her opinion, from that point on their bucolic isolation in the English countryside turned into a melancholic confinement marred by constant criticism:

> On and on it went, back and forth: I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual. One curious article questioned the length of my sentences: how had I, a mother, been able to write such long and complicated sentences? Why was I not busier, more tired? Another reviewer - a writer! - commanded her readers not to let the book fall into the hands of pregnant women. The telephone rang and rang. I was invited on the Today programme to defend myself. I was invited on the Nicky Campbell programme to defend myself. I was cited everywhere as

[28] Cusk, R. (March 21, 2008) *I was only being honest.* The Guardian.

> having said the unsayable: that it is possible for a woman to dislike her children, even to regret having brought them into the world.

For Cusk the bottom line of these reviews was clear: instead of judging the book as readers, people were looking at it as mothers, choosing to extrapolate some of its material as evidence of her ineptitude. Rather than recognize her authentic struggle as a rejection of the dishonesty "intrinsic to the psychical predicament of the new mother" – a behaviour she describes as the tendency to suppress true emotions in order to conform to what society expects of 'good mothers' – , many women decided that such a take on motherhood needed to be mocked or outright censured.

Despite the profound psychological impact of this experience, which caused her to question her worth as an author and a mother, Cusk was not deterred in her memoiristic journey, as proven by the publication of her second memoir in 2009, titled *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*. This second instalment, certainly the most neutral in terms of content, sees the family abandoning Bristol and taking off for a three-month long holiday in Italy. Even though the plot's premise seems to have been plucked directly from one of Bertolucci or Guadagnino's movies, Cusk's account of her family's summer in Tuscany is as sharp, over-detailed and bursting with metaphors as her precedent memoir.

Despite the book's modest success, Cusk found herself facing another hurdle just after publication – the kind of setback which, in recent years, seems to come as a package deal with the publication of autobiographical, memoiristic and autofictional works. Indeed, soon after her book hit the shelves, she was served a lawsuit for libel by one of the British expats whom she encountered during the holiday and ended up

being described in her work,[29] circumstance that forced the publisher to recall and pulp the first run of the book.

Concerns surrounding the breach of privacy have led to an increase of similar cases around the world, with many notable examples, the most famous being the one regarding Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard's massive autofictional enterprise. Already relatively famous for his novels *Out of the World* (1998) and *A Time for Everything* (2004), Knausgaard's autofictional series emerged from a blend of personal crisis and a mounting dissatisfaction with fictional writing, a genre he admittedly felt sick of.[30] In barely two years he completed the herculean task of writing and publishing six exceptionally detailed books (in his 2018 review, Fredric Jameson coined the term 'itemisation' to refer to the seemingly innumerable amount of objects, emotions and people the author succeeded to detail in his novels[31]), feat that earned him almost immediate recognition. *Min Kampf,* allusively named after Aldof Hitler's autobiography and translated as *My Struggle*, is the first-person account of the author's life, from childhood into adulthood, complete with intimate details about himself, his family and friends. Despite his planetary success, – the series has

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[29] Apparently the person in question decided to sue not because of inaccuracy, but because he or she could be recognised.

[30] It has to be noted that Knausgaard's personal interpretation of the term *fiction* has little in common with the conventional categorisation of literary genres. When talking about fiction he has the tendency to include elements which are commonly not associated with the fictional field, like newspapers and broadcast news, each a medium that reports real life events. A paragraph belonging to the second book of his series illustrates how his take on fiction exceeds the limits of content and instead focuses on the way in which facts (real or not) are presented:

> "The nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant. In other words, it saw the same. This sameness, which was our world, was being mass-produced. The uniqueness, which they all talked about, was thereby invalidated, it didn't exist, it was a lie. Living like this, with the certainty that everything could equally well have been different, drove you to despair." (*A Man in Love*, 2009)

It is a particular kind of preordained format, one that conveys a sense ready-made and artificial, that he rejects in his view.

[31] Fredric Jameson, *Itemised,* London Review of Books, 2018. (https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n21/fredric-jameson/itemised)

sold more than half a million copy in Norway alone and has been translated in a whopping 35 languages – the brutal honesty of his descriptions, including stories of his father's alcoholism, his own marriage and the frustrations of parenthood, has opened him to a series of liabilities concerning particular information some people thought were not his to share. While a sort of *My Struggle*-mania was taking over the country, so much so that certain workplaces had to establish Knausgaard-free days because employees were spending too much time talking about the books instead of working, news spread that members of his own family were threatening to take legal action against him for having disclosed details of their life which they did not want to see made public. It is unclear if the family really went to court for the proceeding, but the occurrence opened an intense debate on the ethics of memoiristic and autobiographical writing, as writing about oneself rarely involves writing *only* about oneself.

Cusk's own disagreement with the law was not enough to prevent her from writing the third and last instalment of her memoir; however, it appears that the third time *was* the – unlucky – charm, and *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012) ended up almost marking the conclusion of her career as a writer. Her take on the end of her marriage with photographer Adam Clarke caused such indignation within the public to make the feedback of her previous memoir look rose-tinted in comparison. The book, described as "an elliptical, messy, often frustratingly over-intellectualized memoir"[32], manages to be simultaneously raw, funny, and extremely upsetting. Readers are not privy to the details that led to the separation but, as the title illustrates,

[32] Peterson, B (2015). *Mommy Meanest: Can the most hated novelist in Britain redeem herself?*, The New Republic.
https://newrepublic.com/article/120931/rachel-cusk-outline-review-can-british-novelist-redeem-herself

are exposed to the *aftermath* of the end of a ten-year relationship – from the daughters' grief to the ex-husband's anger and Cusk's questionable coping mechanisms in an admittedly horrific moment of her life. Critics did not spare themselves in pointing out the work's many flaws: the evident lack of details about the husband's side of the story was said to be in contrast with her declared interest in truth, and the final chapter – a change of focalization that introduces the perspective of the family's Eastern European au-pair – was declared a failed experiment at creative writing. Ultimately, what caused most clamour – and earned her the title of "brittle little dominatrix" in a cutthroat review by Camilla Long published in *The Times*[33] – was her reaction to the parental situation after the divorce. Having previously described her family situation as challenging the norms of patriarchal society, – husband quitting his job to be a stay-at-home dad while she was the sole breadwinner – it came as a shock for the public that she would decline with such ferocity his request for joint custody, invoking the "primitivism of the mother, her innate superiority, that voodoo in the face of which the mechanism of equal rights breaks down" (8,9). This visceral reaction and her systematic dissection of gender roles and the expectations of "the whole broken mechanism of feminism" appeared at odds with her earlier stance, highlighting a conflict of interests that pushed readers to condemn Cusk for her self-obsession and narcissism.

Aftermath, as she later revealed in an interview with *The Guardian*, was "creative death"; and indeed it was, as the onslaught of criticism forced her into near silence for the following three years, time she admittedly spent unable to either read or

[33] Long, C (2014) on *Aftermath,* The Sunday Times.
(http://www.theomnivore.com/camilla-long-on-aftermath-by-rachel-cusk/)

write. Similarly to Knausgaard, – whom she notoriously admires – she confessed to a resentment towards fictional writing, acknowledging the genre's unsuitability for her purposes: "Once you have suffered sufficiently, the idea of making up John and Jane and having them do things together seems utterly ridiculous." On the other hand, the controversy sparked by her memoirs stood as a stark reminder that to go back to the autobiographical would have meant to continue being subjected to the anger and misunderstanding of the public.

In the years following the publication of *Aftermath,* Cusk appeared to have retreated into a corner, silenced in light of this literary impasse; however, a deeper analysis of one of the memoir's final passages reveals compelling evidence that might indicate she was already inclined toward the autofictional."In front of her, on the table, are a number of curious hats or headdresses:

> standing at the table are the children, who as we enter turn around. One of my daughters has become a stag, with dark branching antlers; [...] They look at us with dark glossy eyes through the tinted light. In the few minutes of our absence they have been transformed: they are creatures startled in a forest glade by the approach of danger. [...] The mask is richly made, beautifully heavy and padded: its transformation of her is complete, yet it seems too to have accommodated her own nature, so that I find I'm already quite used to her looking like that. In a strange way we are both relieved by her metamorphosis. (2019, 74)

Embedded in a larger paragraph about the power of authority, Cusk's reflection on the mask's inherent power of concealment seems to be an *ante tempus* allusion to her following trilogy. That she would look at the transformative power of the mask with such delight and embrace so openly the metamorphic prospect it offered indicates that

she had already been experiencing an urge to redirect her writing away from the strictly autobiographical and its intrinsic risks. In hindsight, given her adamant belief that true knowledge is personal, it is evident that Cusk's dedication to exploring female experience and gender-specific issues never wavered, it was the medium through which this particular knowledge had to be delivered that needed innovation. Her longing for a "different kind of knowledge, knowledge without exposure, without risk; the knowledge of the voyeur, watching, assessing, staying hidden[34]" is a clear testament to her will to finally break free from the constraints of the autobiographical contract and its foreseen and unforeseen ramifications, which had exposed her to countless confrontations.

[34] Josie Mitchell, *To Endure the Void: On Rachel Cusk's "Outline" Trilogy,* Los Angeles Review of Books, 2018. (https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/endure-void-rachel-cusks-outline-trilogy/)

3.2 *Outline*

First of three autofictional novels published between 2014 and 2018, *Outline* marks Cusk's return to the shelves. Readers accustomed to her style, however, might find themselves wondering if they picked up the right book at checkout. Indeed, at a first glance, there seems to be nothing left of her brazen personality and bold stylized writing. Counting under 250 pages, *Outline* is divided in ten short chapters marked by roman numerals, a structural feature that Cusk decided not to apply in the following books, choosing to forgo the numerals for a simple gap between episodes or chapters, discontinuing the paratextual design. Even though the book is internally devoid of any paratextual indication, the statement on the back cover describes it as a "novel in ten conversations", a label more convenient than useful, considering that, as Alison James acknowledged in her study, it has by now become a feeble signpost of fictionality, "even as it still functions as a marker of literary prestige" (53)[35].

If it were not for the information offered by the back-cover statement, the initial reaction to Outline's opening would be one of sheer bewilderment: chapter number one begins in medias res, abruptly thrusting the reader in the midst of an awkward lunch at one of London's many high-end clubs. Indeed, within the first ten pages, the reader is presented with the novel's two initial conversations, a feature that would not raise any particular concern if it were not for the fact that it is impossible to even attempt to delineate a profile of the narrating-I. In writing this novel Cusk seems to have performed a disappearing act: whereas the first-person narrator is typically

[35] In a review on Yiyun Li's work published in the New York Review of Books, Cusk wrote that while the denominator 'novel' has become a norm for autofictional texts, it is a potentially fallacious categorization, "especially when the work cannot be understood without its autobiographical basis" (2019).

used to affect personal connection and empathetic response, playing on the proximity to the autobiographical, *Outline*'s narrating-I is, for the most part, essentially ineffable.

Many authors have experimented with the first person without compromising the basis of the autobiographical pact, with Annie Ernaux being one of the most recent and compelling examples. Before her award-winning novel *Les Années* (2008) - in which she furthered her previous experiments to include other pronouns like *on, elle* and *nous* – she had extensively played with the first person pronoun, creating a "metadiscursive commentary that introduces a split within the first person", thus creating "an ambiguous space of projection, positioned between the individual and the collective" (Alison, 49). Cusk's writing is not as avant-garde, but is similarly concerned with connections between people's perspectives and matters that go beyond those of the individual personality.

In contrast with her previous works, *Outline*'s narrator exemplifies an exercise in self-effacement. Within the first ten pages – a significant portion considering the overall length of the book – Cusk ensures that, despite the reader having access to the inner monologue of the narrating-I, there is no discernible information about the I's identity – no pronouns or direct references to name, age or personal clues – only the bare minimum necessary to establish the scene. This peculiar technique, progressively developed in the following books, is exactly what Cusk devised in order to break the standard axioms of the novel and "establish a blueprint for negative literature." Having already declared her dissatisfaction with the traditional form of the novel, Cusk took her period of 'silence' to reconsider her approach to writing, seeking to understand the reasons behind the failure of her memoiristic trilogy. She referred to

this process as a "strenuous, deep rethinking" in which she took herself as an "anthropological specimen", dissecting her previous methodology in order to set the foundation for a new and authentic style. Ultimately, to counter the exposure and criticism she faced following the publication of *Aftermath,* she crafted a new approach which rendered the narrating-I almost invisible. In contrast to her maximalist experiment in self-scrutiny, *Outline* presents a passive and disheartened version of the first person narrator, making use of the autofictional modality to embark in what I will suggest is a perfect act of retaliation.

Her revisal efforts crystallised into Faye, protagonist and first person narrator of *Outline*, *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018). As already mentioned, details about her identity are slow to come by: only after a certain number of pages the reader is able to assign her a gender, and her name is disclosed only once in the whole novel, mentioned in passing at page 211, during a phone call – even in *Transit* and *Kudos* her name is hard to come by as it appears only once in each book, in random settings and conversations. In her article on *Kudos*, Tijana Przulj argues that the name Faye may functions as "an indirect comment on the criticism that Cusk received for her memoirs", explaining that (according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition) playing on the the adjective 'fey' – which translates from Old English to *excessively refined* and *unconventional* – it could refer to specific criticism notoriously aimed at the author. The connection might seem far-fetched, but, if looked at in the context of a possible autofictional reading, it becomes compelling evidence: breaking the autobiographical pact by naming her protagonist with a moniker, Cusk nonetheless suggests a partial biographical conflation. Disregarding the lack of onomastic identity,

for the reader familiar with the author is not difficult to spot what Arnaud Schmitt calls the "identification operators", i.e. those features that serve to anchor biographical facts: both are recently divorced, middle-aged mothers (the only blatant discrepancy being the gender of the children, sons instead of daughters), and professional writers who attend similar events, likely engaging with the same crowd. In this light, the nominal discrepancy can be read bilaterally: while on one hand it nods toward a symbolic connection, it still provides the author with the essential distance inherent in the autofictional modality.

Cusk's originality, however, did not lie in her venture into the autofictional *per se,* but in the way she was able to adjust this modality to her means: in contrast with Knausgaard, for example, who employed the autofictional first-person narrator to actively engage in a meticulous act of self-exploration, *Outline*'s narrator gains authentic form only in her interactions with others. By crafting a layered style that plays with free-indirect discourse and passive voice, Cusk was able to complement the narrative with the textual.

Numerous reviewers have pointed out the significant similarities between the novel's structure and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922), in which the life of the protagonist is presented through the impressions others have of him; despite the stylistic resemblance, however, the themes of Cusk's trilogy could not be any more different: if *Transit* and *Kudos* are accounts of transformation and healing, *Outline* is the raw and unadulterated testimony of trauma and its consequences. Analysed in this perspective, not only each one of the conversations that make up the novel can be read

as reflection on how differently people react to similar experiences, but even as tangible examples of psychoanalytic processes.

The novel's plot is relatively modest: three years after a tumultuous divorce, Faye has been invited to teach part of a summer creative writing course in Athens. There she meets different people, both familiar and new, and finds herself exposed to their lengthy monologues. Looking critically at the chapters, it seems as though Faye possesses the ability to encourage each character to open up without prompt, as if compelled by an invisible force to disclose personal and intimate secrets, bypassing the usual hesitance characteristic of a first meeting. During the first conversation, which spans less than two pages, Faye has lunch at a London club with an unnamed billionaire just before boarding her flight: an opulent affair involving oysters and special wines, which she reveals was arranged to discuss his interest in starting a literary magazine. Instead of discussing the agreed topic, however, the billionaire is keen on giving her "the outline of his life story, which had begun unprepossessingly and ended – obviously – with him being the relaxed, well-heeled man who sat across the table" (2018, 3). Software developing, schemes to eradicate lawyers from people's personal lives, blueprints for floating wind farms, adopting quadruplets from Guatemala – decades of dreams and experiences in the space of a meal, to the point that Faye finds it difficult to assimilate everything she is told, overwhelmed by his hyperactive and erratic tale.

In the intervals between conversations, when she is alone, the narration shifts from the brisk rhythm of her interactions to the slow pace of her internal monologue, almost stifling in its bleakness: on the plane to Athens passengers are "a field of

strangers, in a silence like the silence of a congregation while the liturgy is read", and the air hostess giving directions leads them "through the possibility of death and disaster, as the priest leads the congregation through the details of purgatory and hell"(5). The novel's central theme is referenced a few lines later through one of Faye's fleeting reflections, prompted by the automated announcement explaining how to handle oxygen masks: "the hush remained unbroken: no one protested, or spoke up to disagree with this commandment that one should take care of others only after taking care of oneself. Yet I wasn't sure it was altogether true" (5). By adding this second thought Cusk not only emphasises Faye's contemplative nature – a feature on which I will come back in a later paragraph – but also implies that, in a foreboding sign, she is aware that her healing journey will not be solely self-focused.

Faye's conversation with the man sitting beside her on the plane, which she always refers to as "my neighbour", is emblematic of the novel's repetitive structure: in each following chapter the reader is confronted with the same situation over and over, the setting being the only changing feature. After the first chapter Faye meets with fellow writer and teacher Ryan in chapter two, again with the neighbour in chapter four, with an old friend named Paniotis and the recently famous writer Angeliki in chapter five and so on, repeating the same structure over and over, recreating the same conditions in a manner that, coupled with the importance of their conversations, grows increasingly similar to a therapeutic session.

Despite the characters' different genders, backgrounds and occupations, as the reader proceeds to engage in their conversations, it becomes impossible not to notice that many of them appear to share the same traumatic experiences. Faye's neighbour,

following that apparent compulsion to speak which I have previously mentioned, seems to have no difficulty in recounting the troubled history of his life. Unprompted, he begins by telling her the reason for his travel, and seamlessly continues with the tale of his childhood, spent between Greece and England in the austere context of upper-class wealth. He talks about his upbringing in an unnamed island governed by the rules of matriarchal society (possibly Olympos, one of the last matriarchal communities in Europe) and confesses to his parents' dissatisfaction with his gender ("in the world of his childhood, a son was already a disappointment; he himself, the last in a long line of such disappointments, was treated with a special ambivalence, in that his mother wished to believe he was a girl"), embodying an experience which goes against traditional narratives. He goes on to describe his parents' marriage as "a tremendous battle of wills, in which no one ever succeeded in separating the combatants" (11), marking the beginning of a chronicle that spans the entire novel, consisting of multiple accounts of failing or failed relationship and the attempts to recover one's sense of self following the traumatic experience of divorce or separation.

In between tales of his divorces he seems to shake off the spell that drives him to talk and begins asking her questions "as though he had learned to remind himself to do so" (11), a conversational change that appears to surprise her, highlighting her natural inclination toward listening and describing instead of outwardly sharing, a side to her passivity that is pivotal in the study of the dialogic aspect of the novel. Despite her reticence, Faye disclose part of her story upon his prompting, allowing the reader to begin delineating an outline of her figure:

> I said I lived in London, having very recently moved from the house in the countryside where I had lived alone with my children for the past three years, and where for the seven years before that we had lived together with their father. It had been, in other words, our family home, and I had stayed to watch it become the grave of something I could no longer definitely call either a reality or an illusion. (11)

She is unable to answer as to why her relationship had ended, highlighting that the impulse that ultimately drives a marriage is mysterious and intangible, but she is vocal in expressing her grief about having lost the family home – "the geographical location for things that had gone absent and which represented [...] the hope that they might one day return" (12) – adding to her tale an element of estrangement and impermanence that is uniquely amplified by the nature of her journey – an *Odyssey* in reverse, leaving the familiar instead of returning to it.

The neighbour's stories simultaneously reflect and add to Faye's shared experience, prompting both an empathetic and a contrasting response: despite the failure of his first marriage, a relationship "authentic in a way nothing ever had again" (15), he does not seem to have learned from the lessons imparted by pain, going on to repeat the same mistakes. His behavioural pattern becomes progressively more defined as he reveals himself and, despite striving to present himself as the victim, through his words he inadvertently exposes his own double standards, an inconsistency that Faye is able to intercept but not to overlook, prompting a reflection on his reliability that introduces the metanarrative component of the novel.

3.3 Enhancers

> What I knew personally to be true had come to seem unrelated to the process of persuading others. I did not, any longer, want to persuade anyone of anything. (19)

According to Arnaud Schmitt, to mark a text as autofictional the author can rely on the employment of two kinds of elements, namely primary and secondary criteria. While the former stand as a *conditio sine qua non* of the autofictional modality – onomastic correspondence or biographical similarities, the aforementioned 'identification operators', are compulsory to the practice – the seconds purely "enhance the sense of the autofictional without creating it in the first place" (2022, 90). In his study he is able to pinpoint three principal 'enhancers': metafiction, time tenses and the fallibility of memory, and apostrophe; however, even though several scholars have pointed out the connection between autofiction and metafiction before – some even going as far as drawing analogies between the two – Schmitt is quick to underline that "the fact that some text are both metafictional and autofictional does not mean that they are similar, simply that metafictional and autofictional elements can work together" (91). Following his argument, *Outline* exemplifies a seamless interweaving of multiple narrative layers, especially at a metatextual level. Although, according to Schmitt, this layering "enhances the impression of confusion regarding the source of the narrative" (91), I believe the novel's constant push toward a reflection on its structure does not necessarily heightens the hermeneutical effort required to make sense of the text itself.

Instead, specifically in the context of *Outline*'s narratives, it acts both as a disclaimer and as a reflection on the status of writing today and of the consequences of particular genre expectations, equipping the reader with a consistent array of thematic components. in this respect, I propose instead that Cusk's novel follows more closely Hanna Meretoja's definition of metanarrative autofiction: "a distinct form of autofiction with specific affordances [that] provides a new perspective on both agency and its narrative mediation" (2022, 137).

Analysing different autofictional novels, Meretoja reaches the conclusion that metanarrativity is not only a "narratological term for self-reflective narration in which the narrators reflect on their own process of narration" but even a "critical reflection first, the *significance of cultural narratives* for individuals and communities and, second, the *functions of narratives* in our lives" (italics in the text 122).

Beginning with her first conversation with the neighbour, it becomes increasingly apparent that Faye's profession intrinsically shapes her instinctive reaction to other people and situations. By choosing to characterise her internal monologue and infrequent responses in this manner, Cusk de facto elects to bring the metanarrative aspects of the novel to the fore . In more than one occasion, Faye appears unable to refrain from treating other people as if they too were writers, often criticising their ways of constructing their lives' narratives; for example, after having listened to his decidedly unflattering description of his second wife, she can not keep from pointing out to her neighbour that "the way he had told his story rather proved that point, because I couldn't see the second wife half as clearly as I could see the first. In fact, I didn't entirely believe in her. She was rolled out as an all-purpose

villain, but what wrong, really, had she done? ”(25). Later, after he has tried to explain his reasoning to her, in her mind she remains dissatisfied by the story of his second marriage:

> It had lacked objectivity; it relied too heavily on extremes, and the moral properties it ascribed to those extremes were often incorrect. [...] I found I did not believe certain key facts, [...] and nor was I entirely convinced by her beauty, which again seemed to me to have been misappropriated. [...] Reality might be described as the eternal equipoise of positive and negative, but in this story the two poles had become dissociated and ascribed separate, warring identities. (29,30)

As a result, her tendency to look at life in literary terms serves not only as a form that prompts reflections on the function of certain narratives in our lives – in particular narratives that have to do with gender roles, divorce, parenthood etc. –, but also as a catalyst for a series of consideration about autofictional writing, and consequently about the structure of the novel itself.

Even when alone, Faye seems unable to escape the almost obsessive wandering of her thoughts towards issues concerning writing, especially ones that revolve around the autofictional debate. So that when she describes the apartment she is residing in – belonging to a writer called Clelia – the painted wooden models of boats, with their “miniature coils or rope and tiny brass instruments on their sanded decks [...] sails attached to countless tiny cords, so fine as to make them almost invisible” (52), in their verisimilitude become “a metaphor I felt sure Clelia had intended to illustrate the relationship between illusion and reality, though she did not perhaps expect her guests to go one step further, as I did”, in a clear allusion to the experience of autofictional

reading, in which, as I have previously argued, the oscillation between pacts complicates the approach to the text. Or again, in the same chapter, the owner's collection of symphonies grows to represent a "sort of objectivity that arose when the focus became the sum of human parts and the individual was blotted out. It was, perhaps a form of discipline, almost of asceticism, a temporary banishing of the self and its utterances" (54), an obvious reference to both Cusk's own period of silence following the publication of *Aftermath,* and to Faye's own banishing of the self and its authority in the pages of the book.

Despite her apparent passiveness, Cusk's narrator does not refrain from judging other writers, sparing no effort and more than once coming across as "ruthless in her unfavourable and castigatory portrayal of contemporary authors" (Kusek 2021, 10), the best examples being her description of fellow teacher Ryan and of the beautiful and conceited Angeliki. The author's greatest commentary, however, is displayed in the conversations between the students of the summer writing course. In both chapter six and nine, the curious group of people – a "roughly equal amount of men and woman, but no two of them shared any characteristic of age, dress or social type"(133) – debate theories of fiction and realism, their identities and characterization hazy enough to allow the reader to sidestep their authority and see them as they are: embodied commentaries and critiques which have been levelled against the author and her works. Borrowing Robert Kusek's words, "the authorial self becomes first fictionalised and then compartmentalised into the characters, thus turning the whole trilogy into a series of 'delegated performances'"(11). Prompted by Faye's questioning, they take turns in relaying "something they had noticed on their way" to

the classroom, fashioning short stories that, despite their briefness, represent the polyphony of voices and points of view that constitute the literary panorama of the twenty-first century. Despite its masterful and free-flowing rendition, Cusk's way of fashioning the students' back-and-forth makes it appear almost too perfect, an orchestrated play that deprives the situations of verisimilitude and ultimately achieves the opposite effect, ending up contributing to the fictional effect of the narrative. This dynamic highlightings Faye's displaced role, who, by assuming the role of coaxer, "allows for characters [...] to step into the role of the narrator-protagonist and bring to view perspectives that otherwise would have remained hidden"(Przulj 2023, 276).

This way, while one student expresses his contempt toward acts of fictionalisation, as "he saw the tendency to fictionalise our own experiences as positively dangerous, because it convinced us that human life had some kind of design and that we were more significant than we actually were" (137), voicing probably the most popular critique against autofictional writing – i.e. self-absorbed narcissism –, the girl next to him stands in for the postmodern development of life writings, asserting that "It is surely not true, [...] that there is no story of life; that one's own existence doesn't have a distinct form that has begun and will one day end, that has its own themes and events and cast of characters" (137) and so on and so forth. In a manner that closely resembles Greek theatre, each student is given a 'mask' – consisting of a few words of physical description and anecdotes about their life – and a correspondent literary stance, allowing the reader to experience first hand the inner conflicts of writers' minds and lives, keeping up with the underlying theme which implies that life and literature are inextricably interconnected.

More significantly, one of the students' considerations carries an even heavier weight in terms of metanarrativity, and ultimately presents the reader with the key to interpret Cusk's design and ambitions. Discussing their assignments – writing a story involving an animal – one of the younger participants[36] offers an interesting insight in answer to another student's assignment:

> It was interesting to consider, Georgeou said, that the role of the artist might merely be that of recording sequences, such a computer could one day be programmed to do. Even the question of personal style could presumably be broken down as sequential, from a finite number of alternatives. He sometimes wondered whether a computer would be invented that was influenced by its own enormous knowledge. It would be interesting, he said, to meet such a computer. But he sensed that any system of representation could be undone simply by the violation of its own rules. (206)

To the attentive reader, this short passage encapsulates Cusk's ulterior motive: on one hand, – considering her story – methodically recording tales and emerging only in interaction with others might appear as the best way for Cusk to convey a sense of her narrator's traumatised and impaired awareness. On the other hand, through Georgeou's words, it is the author herself that deliberately highlights the practical impossibility of reaching such a synthetic state – of flattening one's inner world to such an extent to essentially receive and reflect like a computer's "system of representation". At a first glance, certain passages also appear to suggest that a completely passive stance could be the correct approach; after all, Faye is the first to

[36] "Georgiou, Christos, Paniotis. The first is a last name, the second a first name and the third is — flat-out — a misspelled first name, which should be "Panagiotis." Of course, such factual details may appear unimportant, but what they make evident is the immense subjectivity of Cusk's (or her stand-in narrator's) reality: even while trying to strip off all artifice she created another suspect universe." Tezapsidis, E. (2015) *Outline - Rachel Cusk.* Full Stop.

admit that “I had come to believe more and more in the virtues of passivity, and of living a life as unmarked by self-will as possible” (170). However, upon deeper analysis, not everything is as it seems. For instance, the boat episode described in chapter four, manages to deliver one of the novel’s most impactful insights by emphasising her vulnerability. Invited for a boat ride by her wealthy neighbour, Faye has just returned from a swim and is enjoying a Coke, when she happens to spot a family on a nearby boat:

> There were two little boys and a girl playing there [...] A woman in a sunhat sat on deck [...] and beside her in the shade of the canopy was a baby’s pram. A man in long shorts and sunglasses paced up and down the deck, speaking into his phone. I said I found appearances more bewildering and tormenting now than at any previous point in my life. It was as if I had lost some capacity to filter my own perceptions, one that I had to become aware of once it was no longer there, like a missing pane of glass in a window that allows the wind and rain to come rushing through unchecked. [...]
> When I looked at the family on the boat, I saw a vision of what I no longer had: I saw something, in other words, that wasn’t there. (74,75)

In a move that is almost cinematic, Cusk captures one of Faye’s most intimate moments of fragility, displaying the turmoil of her mental state. Even if one were to refrain from analysing this episode with a medical approach, on an empathetic level it is evident that her reaction to an ostensibly neutral scene is symptomatic of a melancholia rooted more in traumatic response than in ordinary sadness. Her sudden inward retreat – a sort of slow-motion focus – is the most apparent manifestation of her inability to stop projecting her own fears and desires in other people’s lives.

Highlighting the sense of loss caused by the divorce, her thoughts make her reaction appear more like a post-traumatic flashback than simple internal monologue.

Ultimately, it is by understanding the mechanics behind Cusk's dialogue-building technique that one is able to crack the novel's code. As Barbara Carnevali noted in her analysis of the trilogy, looking critically at the novel's interactions and at the length of each character's contribution, it appears that these dialogues are not dialogues at all. Indeed, while dialogues typically call for an even distribution of verbal inputs, Faye's consistently receptive role is more akin to that of an interviewer, serving merely as a conduit for the spoken words. Interviews, writes Carnevali, commonly presume a fixed hierarchy that, by focusing scrutiny on the interviewee, releases the interviewer from any comparable level of exposure. Cusk's particular design, however, revolutionises typical conventions by inverting the assumed roles: instead of being the focus of attention, Faye is downgraded to a secondary role, subverting genre expectations of first-person narratives. This shift challenges traditional dynamics and compels the reader to reconsider the boundaries between narrator and characters.

What constitutes Cusk's innovation, however – and ultimately changes the course of this analysis – is Faye's continuous commentary, which acts as a deterrent to her apparent passiveness and progressively reshapes an outline of her identity. By adding elements of scrutiny and commentary in response to each interviewee's contribution, all reported experiences become corresponding opportunities for comparison. Enacting what Cusk defined as a methodology of 'reverse exposition', each interview – despite their univocal appearance – gains the potential to add to or

influence the understanding of the self. Rejecting the autobiographical narrative of a singular self, *Outline* embraces and develops the autofictional notion of fractured subjectivity by representing an attempt at rebuilding the self through the other(s).

The additional feature that makes Cusk's effort so unique – and ultimately distinguishes her autofictional trilogy from others – lies in the multi-layered effectiveness of her technique. Indeed, the more the readers advance through the narrative, the more this 'reverse exposition' transcends the barriers of the plot, affecting their emotional response and their awareness of the implications of the covered themes. Having developed a series of recurring characters which share both common traits and peculiarities, Cusk plays the rhythm of the novel on the variations of themes. Many situations repeat with only slight variations, such as similar settings or context, like the repeated circumstances of the meetings with the neighbour, or the testimonies of analogous divorces or child rearing patterns. This approach allows Cusk to transcend the personal and create a narrative that is both singular and collective. The repetition and slight variation in characters' experiences serve to highlight universal themes and reflect the interconnectedness of human experiences, effectively blending individual stories into a larger commentary on contemporary life. The fundamental principle of the novel appears right in the last chapter, when Faye's Odyssean journey is almost at its end. Waking up on the last day of her stay, Faye meets Anna – "the woman who was sitting on Clelia's sofa when I came out of my bedroom at seven o'clock in the morning" – the writer who will take her place teaching the following part of the course, whose story she immediately coaxes to tell. Describing a traumatic episode that has deeply affected her literary production, Anna's

reported concerns give life to a cursory *mise en abyme*. Talking about a conversation she had with a man met on plane there, she realises:

> …in everything he said about himself, she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for a want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she was. (239-240)

In the end, more than the 'blueprint of negative literature' she initially envisioned, *Outline* seems to be the demonstration that writing a completely negative novel is unfeasible. In a move that feels like a well deserved act of retribution, by rejecting traditional methods of plot and character building Cusk succeeded in creating a novel that simultaneously invites autofictional reading and plays with the modality. Signpost of autofictionality notwithstanding, the reader's desire to identify Cusk and Faye, writes Alison James, "stems above all from the attentive, receptive, and porous point of view that the narrative invites us to inhabit, by recording less Faye's own interiority than the voluble self-disclosures of those she encounters" (51). As a consequence, the autofictional effect "has to do with the ambiguities and discomfort that Cusk produces by reversing the standard fictional strategies for representing consciousness". Developing an unconventional dialogic space, Cusk has regained the freedom to explore people's interiorities without being subjected to personal attacks, a possibility which had been taken from her by the criticism of her previous works ("The thinking

that got me to *Outline* was: How can the novel receive this other reality, or parts of reality, without the blame for them being fixed back to the source?" (Timonen and Cusk, 2019). In addition – by combining the exposure of personal experience with her technique of self-effacement – Cusk has inaugurated a new tradition of autofictional writing, one that exemplifies how the autofictional can exceed its reliance on experience and evolve beyond self-involvement.

CONCLUSION

> I was thinking about the Odyssey and about foundational narrative ideas and their relationship to therapy – people telling things after the thing has happened to them – and how that became a sort of basic therapeutic position that also evokes some commonality in experience. (Timonen and Cusk, 2019)

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the development and spread of the psychoanalytic method proved to be a significant catalyst in the evolution of autofiction. Beginning with Doubrovsky's self-exploratory experiment, autofictional works have expanded upon the premise of a multilayered and complex understanding of the self, emphasising a fragmentation of personal identity that seems characteristic of modernity. In the case of Cusk's *Outline*, however, the psychoanalytic feature is made central in an inverted fashion, thematizing the dialogic aspect of the practice and, more than anything, opening the narrative to the therapeutic dimension of the comparison with the other. This aspect of the novel, I propose, immediately repositions it in a different category in respect to other more 'traditional' works of autofiction.

Through this variation of the autofictional modality, Cusk has not only developed a captivating account of the personal development of her narrator, but, eventually, she has contrived a novel form that affects the reader's engagement by encouraging a more complex emotional involvement – as Faye attempts to find herself through others, we readers attempt to find ourselves in response to the characters' stories.

While I recognise the validity of Schmitt's argument that "autofiction only makes sense, only exists, if there are readers who find such connections fruitful" (89) – such connections being the links between the author and the narrator/protagonist of the novel – I argue that, in light of my analysis, there might nonetheless be a specific component, particular of a certain kind of autofictional text, which ultimately bypasses the issue of connection in favour of other purposes.

Against the accusations of self-involvement and narcissism which I have mentioned in the introduction, I propose that, despite their extreme structural and thematic difference, both Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* and Cusk's *Outline* are representative of a branch of autofiction which could be defined as both dynamic and didactic.

Having taken into consideration precedent findings on autofiction, I feel confident in affirming that setting aside the controversy on its status as a genre and embracing "the shift from the noun and genre-descriptor 'autofiction' to the adjective 'autofictional'" (Effe and Lawlor, 4) prove to be incredibly beneficial to the understanding of its intrinsic potentialities and possible effects on the public.

In my study I have looked at the autofictional from both the writing and reading perspective, and having the freedom to explore the implications of these novels without the boundaries of a categorical definition has given me the opportunity to compare and contrast features which are commonly not associated with each other. On account of the authors' stylistic choices, I have been able to analyse how different textual signposts help develop certain degrees of identity conflation: from Coetzee's employment of Colonna's *substitute livresque* – making his alter ego JC the author of

one of his own novels – to Cusk's unconventional teleological narrative. Regardless of the novels' difference, I have nonetheless attempted to highlight both narratives' hidden purposes.

Ultimately, I believe that what makes these case studies different from 'mainstream' autofiction – i.e. novels that are explicitly and exclusively self-reflective such as Knausgaard's and Heti's – is their preoccupation with the reader's engagement and potential emotional and creative response. Indeed, in spite of their brevity, both novels manage to expand on a magnitude of overt and covert themes: while Coetzee's effort takes the shape of a warning against what Ana Falcato calls *ersatz* ethical thought, pushing readers to unheart their cognitive bias and nurturing their awareness toward the influence wielded by a certain kind of public personas, Cusk's unique autofictional journey works in support of personal discovery through the means of discovering the other, challenging cultural and historical narratives about interiority, gender and literary practices. In this respect, the tension inherent in autofiction "provides a space for interrogating the complex ways that art constitutes the human and for speculating on the implication of this process for the generation of empathy" (Jensen, 66).

These examples are merely a fraction of an extensive contemporary operation that "works toward change by calling on the reader to take action in reality" (Effe and Gibbons, 76). By oscillating between the factual and the fictional "the autofictional dimension creates a feeling of direct relevance for readers in combination with the sense of possibility of transformation", prompting them toward a certain kind of proactive behaviour. More than anything, however, these works embrace

contemporary methods of self-representation and discard the notion of a unified and consistent story of life, working on the personal to reach the communal and back again, eliciting themes of tolerance and understanding through sympathetic imagination. That is to say that – embracing the notion of fiction not as false but as constructed – the autofictional can assume the form of the truest expression of life: from the universal to the singular, looking at the self through the other, finding *my-selves in our-self*.

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