

2.6 Autofiction

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Definition

An autofictional text purports to be both fictional and autobiographical, and thus represents a paradox in the traditional understanding of genre. The neologism ‘Autofiction’ stems from a literary text by Serge Doubrovsky (1928–2017). Deleted from the original manuscript of *Fils* [‘Threads/Son’] (1977), the term ultimately found its way onto the cover of the published novel, where it was defined as “Fiction, d’événements et de faits strictement reels; si l’on veut *autofiction*” [‘Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like’], which for Doubrovsky was no contradiction. In fact, autofiction is closely linked to his poetics of an existential writing-about-the-self that developed out of psychoanalysis. The term ‘fiction’ here does not refer to invention in the classic sense, but to the eschewal of intentional subjectivity. Doubrovsky’s works, labeled as novels, convey the real biographical (writing) experiences of an author named Doubrovsky, who is painfully aware that the self is largely inaccessible and who approaches his own life through infinite “*files des mots*” [‘*threads* of words’]. Genre theorists inferred from Doubrovsky’s model that any text could be called autofiction if it bears the subtitle ‘novel’ while producing referentiality as an autobiography does, usually by virtue of the author and protagonist sharing the same name. In the age of postmodernity and the media, it is considered one option of self-presentation, one that is mostly adopted by French authors due to its origins in this literary scene marked by specific traditions.

Explication

Though decried even today as a “*mauvais genre*” [‘bad genre’] (Lecarme 1993), autofiction has been well-received by the reading public and meanwhile become a literary fact. It is applied to a wide range of literary texts addressing the question of where the boundary lies between novels and autobiographies, between fictionality and factuality. That the term is applied to Duras, Houellebecq, Guibert, Chevillard, but also to Dante and Goethe, reveals the problems inherent in defining it. The label has even entered everyday speech, and can now be found in a more generalized form in dictionaries such as *Larousse* (“Autobiographie empruntant les formes narratives de la fiction” [‘An autobiography which borrows the narrative forms from fiction’] [*Larousse* online. n. pag.]) and *Le Robert* (“Récit où se mêlent la fiction et le récit autobiographique [sans aller jusqu’à l’autobiographie, même romance]”) [‘Narrative

in which fiction and autobiographical narrative are mingled (without going right to autobiography, or even to a fictionalized one)'] (Le Robert online. n. pag.). Though originating in French letters, it has acquired a broad spectrum of meanings and has since been applied to authors writing in Spanish, Italian, English and German, and other languages as well (see for instance Alberca 2007, Toro 2010, Ott 2013, Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013). Until today abundant literary criticism is also produced. In short, it became a discursive model that can no longer be ignored.

Initially devised as a play on words – ‘autofiction’, ‘autofricition’ (Doubrovsky 1977), one step further the deleted text from *Fils*: “si j’écris dans ma voiture mon autobiographie sera mon AUTO-FICTION” [‘when I write in my automobile, my autobiography will be my AUTO-FICTION’] (Doubrovsky cit. Grell 2007, 46) – by the late 1970s Doubrovsky feels obliged to explain his writing concept from the perspective of a literary scholar. He develops it out of the talking cure of psychoanalysis, which he not only portrays in his book *Fils* in the form of a transcribed analytical session (the “Rêves” [‘Dreams’] chapter, spanning about 60 pages) but practices through his literature by transforming his first-person narrator into a self-analyst (Doubrovsky 1980). The sessions of psychoanalytic therapy exemplify rather clearly the interlacement of language and subjectivity so crucial to an understanding of autofictionality (Doubrovsky 1980). Another reference point is the existentialism of Sartre (Doubrovsky 1989; 1991). Writing as a mode of existence, however, has a third component in the case of Doubrovsky: a writer returning to his mother tongue. The author spent fifty years as a professor of literature in the United States (his return to France was recently described in *Un homme de passage* [‘A man of passage’] [2011]), which is where he began his analysis. And yet it is not only analysis (conducted in English) that helps him approach his self, but writing in his native language, French, as well. What’s more, as a writer he engages in a literary duel about interpretive agency with his analyst, Robert Akeret, who referred to the case of Doubrovsky in two of his specialist books (Boulé 2010, 327). Doubrovsky even included a theoretical talk about this conflict (“Analyse et autofiction” [‘Analysis and autofiction’], given at the colloquium *Écriture de soi et psychanalyse* [‘Self-writing and psychoanalysis’] in 1995) in his later autofiction *Laissé pour conte* (1999) [‘Left-over as tale’; but Doubrovsky alludes as well to the homophone “laissé-pour-compte” which means ‘the rejected’; Tepperberg 2004]. From this special context of veracity, Doubrovsky develops his own notion of fiction with reference to Freud and Lacan – in particular the recognition that subjectivity and consciousness are language-bound, something he experienced first-hand, both as a writer and in psychoanalysis. Fiction, for him, no longer revolves around a pact (Lejeune 1973) between writer and reader about the truthfulness or inventedness of a literary text, but refers more generally to the symbolic function of language, the process of putting experience into words, and results in the typical blending of strictly referential facts (Doubrovsky imagines and invents nothing) which, put into writing, become fiction (Saveau 1999; Doubrovsky 2010, 388). Thus, the exchange of letters between Doubrovsky and Lejeune, which took place before the publication of *Fils* and concerned the legitimation of a genre

somewhere between the novel and autobiography, indicate a misunderstanding later important for the debate. Autofiction is not a paradox to Doubrovsky, but rather an expression of the fragile relationship between language and subject, which rules out the position of the classic, self-assured autobiographer (Doubrovsky 1993; 2010): “[P]our l’autobiographe (s’il est passé par l’analyse) le mouvement et la forme même de la scription sont la seule inscription de soi possible, la vraie ‘trace’, indélébile et arbitraire, à la fois entièrement fabriquée et authentiquement fidèle” [‘for the autobiographer (if he went through analysis) the form of the scription itself is the only possible scription of the self, the true ‘trace’, indelible and arbitrary, entirely fabricated and, at the same time, authentic and faithful’] (Doubrovsky 1979, 105). It is precisely because the author is conscious of not being able to uphold the classic autobiography’s imperative of reflecting the self sincerely, a self he himself has no access to, that he declares his texts to be novels. Doubrovsky created autofiction as an autobiographical model for everyman (*Autobiographie de Tartempion* [‘Autobiography of Mr. Nobody’], Doubrovsky 1989, 323–358) that also included the possibility of failure. One of his most famous works (*Le Livre brisé* [‘The broken book’], Prix Médicis 1989) ‘fails’ on account of the autobiographical imperative of veracity being applied too consistently. Deep revelations about his marriage are proof of the referential, even existence-threatening dimension of his autofiction, which draws on Leiris’s idea of literature as a bull fight. And yet Doubrovsky’s tragedies are never fictitious. Rather, he tries, by writing, to cope with separation and death, and even in 1982 he anticipated: “ma vie ratée sera une réussite littéraire” [‘my ruined life will be turned in a literary success’] (Doubrovsky, 1982, 91). Neither the self-assuredness of classic self-presentations nor the novel can compare to this kind of existential writing, later adopted by authors such as Hervé Guibert with his *écriture du Sida* [‘Aids writing’] (Genon 2010), Christine Angot with her portrayal of her own painful experience of incest (Weiser 2008), or Abdellah Taïa (Gronemann 2013), who establishes an Arab discourse on homosexuality.

The increasing public awareness of autofiction that began with the breaking of taboos has likewise led to its discrediting on aesthetic grounds (e. g. Jourde 2002), unleashing a debate about its value as a genre. It was the volume *Autofictions & Cie* [‘Autofictions & Co.’] (1993) that drew greater attention to this problem. The many, varied points of view in this debate, mainly restricted to a French context, were assembled by Gasparini (2008). There are two fundamental (and divergent) points of reference in this widely ranging theoretical discussion: the problem of genre on the one hand, and the epistemological question of subjectivity on the other. Within the dispute about how to classify autofiction as a literary genre, there are basically two factions. The representatives of the fiction hypothesis see autofiction, independent of Doubrovsky, as a transhistorical phenomenon – more precisely, as a narratological process of (intentionally) fictionalizing the self (Colonna 1989, 2004). Autobiography theorists, in contrast, interpret the hybrid genre of autofiction as a renewal of the autobiographical paradigm (Lecarme) or see it as the expression of a new genre theory (Darrieussecq 1996). Lejeune, whose popular idea of the autobiographical pact

Dobrovsky opposes, believes that autofiction is an intermediary historical stage in the process of the autobiographical novel converging towards the autobiography (1986, 24). He is convinced that referential and fictional statements can be distinguished from one another, and is much criticized for this position (Burgelin et al. 2010a). Whereas critics like Lejeune are detractors of autofiction, others applaud it as “renouveau de l’autobiographie classique” [‘renewal of classic autobiography’] (Lecarme, cit. Gasparini 2008, 174). Burgelin (2010b, 11) is similarly positive in his appraisal of autofiction’s very contradictoriness as an “effet propulseur” [‘effect of propelling’] and recalls the history of the novel, which (though meanwhile ennobled) was reviled as a bastard genre even in the classical period (Burgelin 2010b, 8). He thereby historicizes the boundaries of genre (“fausses sécurités des frontières” [‘false securities of boundaries’]), (Burgelin 2010b, 13) and puts autofiction in the conceptual context of decentralized subjectivity (Freud; Lacan) and the new *écritures du je* [‘self-writings’] that have emerged since Michel Leiris, Jean Genet and Marcel Proust, which draw on different narrative techniques and involve recounting stories of trauma (Burgelin 2010b, 11–17). This position is linked to the second main trend in current autofiction research which, starting from the perspective of poststructuralist theory and historical discourse analysis, no longer merely examines the aspect of genre but also the overlapping problem of the changing relationship between author, text and subject matter. Here autofiction is a conscious break with the conventional logic of genres, not merely a “spécialité bien trop française” [‘a too much French speciality’] (Burgelin 2010b, 7) but also a new variety of autobiographical writing, whose referentiality does not result out of facts but, following de Man (1979) and Lacan (1966), is created by symbolic means (Gronemann 2002). A life cannot be reproduced in narrative, but is formed according to linguistic patterns, which are reflected, in turn, in the metadiscourse of postmodern autobiographies. The history of the autobiographical as a literary genre itself becomes discernible as a cultural construction (Finck 1995). Dobrovsky’s claim to be strictly factual while producing texts he considers fictional – fictionality understood as the linguistic constitution of these factual reference points – appears here as the result of a fundamental shift in the literary representation of subjectivity (Dobrovsky 2010). The fragility of the self is evident nowadays not only in the manner of writing about it, but likewise in the expansion of the techniques and media available for self-presentation, as well as in the oscillating boundaries between the reality of the subject and that of the media. This is where newer concepts of autofiction come into being. These include the virtual practice of Régine Robin’s *Cyber-soi* [‘Cyberself’] as well as the analysis of digital and television discourses of the self (Spear 2010). A systematization of this media dimension of autofiction as a further development of Dobrovsky’s model is offered in Ott/Weiser (2013), which includes essays on photographic and cinematic self-representation as well as on cross-media writing strategies, in which different media concepts are simulated in a literary text.

The history of autofiction is linked to a specific debate about the boundaries of literary self-presentation, especially in the French literary discourse, where the auto-

biography and the novel both enjoy a high prestige. Lejeune's autobiographical pact has had a particularly strong influence on authors, readers and critics alike, making autofictional writing seem nothing short of a kind of iconoclasm. On the other hand, autofiction has afforded many writers a means to deal with the self in a way that straddles the genres of classic literature and goes beyond its culturally determined norms. Autofiction reveals existential motives for writing, raising them to the status of components in the autobiographical debate. Writing becomes an integral part of existence, a never-ending process of producing subjectivity through language. The referential self conceives of itself – in the fabric of the text – as part of a fiction, because no author can claim to know the real meaning of his or her own story.

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Further Reading

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