

Autofiction

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Sam Ferguson (trad.)

The 1970s was a crucial period for both autobiography and autofiction : in *L'Autobiographie en France* [*Autobiography in France*] (1971), Philippe Lejeune established autobiography as a genre and gave it a precise definition ; in 1977, Serge Doubrovsky, an academic and writer, muddied the waters by inventing 'autofiction', an approach that claims to belong to both autobiography and fiction. 'A Fiction, made from strictly real events and facts ; if you like, an *autofiction*, for having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, beyond any wisdom or syntax of the novel, whether traditional or new. Encounters, *threads* of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say of music' : this is how Serge Doubrovsky defines his work *Fils* [*Son/Threads*], published in 1977. This work is a response to the founder of the poetics of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune, who, in *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The Autobiographical Pact*] (1975) suggested that it was impossible for a text to feature simultaneously both the onomastic identity of author, narrator, and character, and a novelistic pact. Doubrovsky, who was then in the process of conceiving *Fils*, took up the challenge. This contradictory pact, simultaneously truthful and fictional, overturns the tradition of autobiography and its theoretical foundations. More than thirty-five years after its birth, the term has still not settled on a definition, and the criteria that constitute 'autofiction' remain unclear and often specific to a particular author or theorist : critics continue to question both the concept and its implications. In so doing, they seek new models for autobiographical literature.

By placing emphasis on autofiction's strategy of ambiguity, Doubrovsky's definition forces critics to call – rather unconvincingly – upon the category of the 'autobiographical novel', which has been denounced by modern criticism : is not autofiction a contemporary variant of it ? The same definition would hold true for the works of Co-

lette, Gary, Nourissier, or Modiano alike. Moreover, the criterion of formal innovation proposed by Doubrovsky seems too broad to constitute a criterion for belonging to the category of autofiction. Philippe Gasparini, who has drawn up an exhaustive survey of criticism on autofiction, recalls the critical process of trial and error : some have included under this label new, apparently unclassifiable writings, such as the baroque writing of Chloé Delaume, the oral writing of Christine Angot, or the very literary writing of Rouaud, Michon, or Sebald, the very poetic writing of Louis René des Forêts, or the erudite writing of Roubaud, to mention a few of his examples. As for the relationship with psychoanalysis suggested by the initial definition, whether in thematic or formal terms, it is an element that critics have gradually abandoned : although Doubrovsky makes his psychoanalytic treatment both a driving force and theme of his writing, psychoanalysis cannot be considered a necessary criterion for belonging to a literary genre, even if autofiction's strategy of ambiguity undoubtedly derives from the upheaval brought about by the psychoanalytic revolution, which sees truth only in language.

In practice the term has steadily acquired a broader meaning over time. Throughout the history of the word itself, and that of its detractors and supporters, its learned quarrels, two essential and competing approaches have emerged : on the one hand, a referential approach, on the other, a fictional approach. The referential approach inspired both Doubrovsky's initial definition and those that he subsequently formulated : according to this view, a work of autofiction is a novel that deals with reality, albeit through the use of fiction ; it is based on the onomastic identity of narrator, author, and character. Jacques Lecarme, the theorist of autobiography, who has argued for the recognition of autofiction, defended this referential approach from the outset and, in his article 'Fiction romanesque et autobiographie' ['Novelistic fiction and autobiography'] in the *Encylopaedia universalis* (1984), provided as examples a set of works that share a family resemblance, including Céline's German trilogy, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* [*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*] (1975), Modiano's *Livret de famille* [*Family Record*] (1977) and *De si braves garçons* [*Such Fine Boys*] (1982), and Sollers's *Femmes* [*Women*] (1983). The fictional approach to autofiction, on the other hand, defends fiction more than it does autobiography, and emphasises the element of 'fictionnalisation de soi' [self-fictionalisation]. Vincent Colonna, a disciple of Gérard Genette (who himself suggested including Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* in the category of autofiction), even discards the criterion of onomastic identity between author, narrator, and character. He therefore classifies as autofiction works as diverse as those of Apuleius, Cyrano, Nerval, Kafka, Hesse, Gombrowicz, Leiris, Dante, and Borges, and also suggests another term, 'autofabulation', which might indeed seem far removed from autobiography. Between these two extreme approaches, which are separated by their more or less expansive conception of the term 'fiction', there are all sorts of intermediate positions : Robbe-Grillet presents the works

in his series of *Romanesques* (1985-1994) as belonging to the genre of the 'nouvelle autobiographie', in reference to the Nouveau Roman, whereas Doubrovsky sees these works as being clearly autofictional ; Philippe Vilain, while defending autobiographical writing and autofiction (*Défense de Narcisse* [*Defence of Narcissus*], 2005), argues for a novelistic practice based on a different idea of truth : his relation to the world seems to him truer than his life, which seems unreal. Philippe Forest establishes an equivalence between real and imaginary, assigning to his narratives, situated between fictitious autobiography and personal testimony, a double autobiographical and fictional status ; he thus suggests a new term : the 'roman du je' [novel of the 'I'] (2001). Finally, in 2005, Arnaud Schmitt suggested another term, 'autonarration', a genre that would consist in speaking of oneself as if one were in a novel, seeing oneself as a character, even though the referential basis is thoroughly real. In short, autofiction has grown beyond its initial definition ; is it a genre ? Jacques Lecarme and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone rather see in autofiction a heterogeneous set of texts, all participating in the renewal of autobiography. Philippe Gasparini attempts a final definition, which, in his view, encompasses the defining features that are most capable of differentiating between autobiography, autofiction, and the autobiographical novel : by this definition, autofiction is an 'autobiographical and literary text with numerous features of orality, formal innovation, narrative complexity, fragmentation, otherness, heterogeneity, and self-commentary that tends to problematise the relationship between writing and experience'. This does not, however, resolve the debate : after all, can an autobiography not include all these features ?

This myriad of definitions and even new designations invites a relativistic approach. The term's proliferation has been matched by its conceptual vagueness. Doubrovsky insists that he did not invent autofiction : instead it has its origins in Colette, Céline, Breton, Genet, Sartre, the spirit of the age, the literature of writers such as Sollers, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Guibert, Duras, history, psychoanalysis, the postmodern era, the death of ideologies, the reign of Narcissus, and the fragmentation of the subject. But what he does not compromise on is the desire for truth, which has been the driving force behind his writing. Both Annie Ernaux and Philippe Lejeune have a different notion of truth : writing an autobiography in search of one's truth is a matter of attitude ; it requires a pact of truth and not a pact of communication, and cannot take the thorny path of fiction. In what must be called a theoretical battle over autofiction, has autobiography in the strict sense lost ground ? Will the genre of autobiography, having been contested on the grounds that it cannot be literary since it is supposed to express the personality of its author without refinement, now be relegated in favour of autofiction ? Unless the opposite takes place, or unless, as seems more likely, both sides gain, through the affirmation of different forms that allow a writer to adopt a more clearly assumed approach. In any case, this new concept has rehabilitated the place of subjectivation in self writing

and invited us to re-examine Philippe Lejeune's founding definition. Autofiction, which today is seen less as a genre than as a variant of contemporary autobiography, has above all a heuristic value. This has been observed repeatedly : as Jean-Louis Jeannelle says, the word 'autofiction' has been a theoretical catalyst. In this pivotal historical period when writing was marked by the upheavals brought about by psychoanalysis and the fall of political ideals, it made it possible to rethink the writing of the subject ; it nourished critical reflection in both the academic field and the media, and to an even greater degree it nourished literary creation, which was stimulated by these debates over an impossible definition. The critical polemic that accompanied the emergence of this word, as enigmatic as it is visionary, has at times seemed taxonomic ; nevertheless, it has made it possible to diversify the generic criteria of the autobiographical field and to give the word 'autofiction' an undisputed pragmatic meaning : autofiction is a powerful tool for investigating and theorising the contemporary autobiographical project.

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