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At the Boundaries of Autobiography and Fiction

On Autofiction and its Dynamics between Individualization and Politicization

This article approaches autofiction as a hybrid genre whose specific dynamics emerge from the interplay between factual and fictional discourse. It argues that autofiction should not primarily be understood as a mode of authentic self-representation but as a genuinely political genre. First, the article examines the hybridity of autofiction, drawing on the distinction between the autobiographical and the fictional pact. Because autofiction simultaneously refers to the empirical author and constructs a fictional storyworld, its propositions are double-coded and generate a productive uncertainty concerning their relation to reality. Second, the article explores the resulting dynamics of expansion and limitation. Autofiction expands the boundaries of both autobiography and fiction by combining their respective communicative possibilities, while simultaneously limiting autobiographical claims to authenticity and fictional autonomy. This tension challenges categorical genre distinctions and suggests a scalar model of self-narration based on varying degrees of fictionalization and referentiality. Third, the article argues that these generic dynamics have constitutive political implications. By suspending the autobiographical privilege of authenticity, autofiction transforms individual experience into a potential bearer of supra-individual relevance. It thereby mediates between subjectivity and collectivity, individualization and politicization. Contemporary autofictional narratives, particularly those engaging with identity politics, enact this dynamic by translating individual experience into collectively legible forms of experiential knowledge and thereby rendering marginalized experiences socially and politically visible.

1. Introduction

In autofictional narratives, authors insert themselves into fictional worlds by using self-reference to create fictive characters. Because of its link to reality, autofictional writing is often associated with authenticity. While this may appear appealing at first glance, it proves shallow on closer inspection. In this article, I aim to contribute to the theory of autofiction by treating the fictional slant of autofiction with the same seriousness as its factual slant, thereby challenging the current tendency in autofiction research to focus primarily on the content of autofictional narratives and their relation to extratextual reality. My central argument is that the inherent limitation of autobiographical authenticity in autofiction produces a political effect; accordingly, autofiction should be understood as a genuinely political genre.

To develop my argument, I proceed in three steps. First, I examine the hybridity of autofiction, focusing on the inherent interplay between fictional and factual discourse. Second, I consider what this hybridity implies for the genre typology of autofiction, which is largely shaped by the dynamics of expansion and limitation and which, in turn, affect its epistemic claims, aesthetic effects, and propositional content. Third, I argue that this typology renders autofiction a political genre, one that mediates between individuality and collectivity.

2. The Hybridity of Autofiction

By inventing a fictive version of the authorial self, autofiction establishes a genre of its own – one that simultaneously participates in both fictional and factual literary practices while also distinguishing itself from them. As a hybrid genre, autofiction draws on the author's lived reality, yet markers of fictionality – such as genre labels or marketing strategies – signal that it is not bound to factual truth. Owing to this hybridity, propositions in autofictional narratives are double-coded: they refer both to the constructed storyworld and to the extratextual real world. This genre-specific double reference shapes the epistemic claim, aesthetic effect, and propositional value of autofiction.

Frank Zipfel (2009, 304–306) analyzes the character of autofiction by referring, on the one hand, to the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune 1975) and, on the other hand, to the fictional pact. The autobiographical pact entails the author of an autobiography committing to recount what truly happened – or, more realistically, what he or she genuinely experienced or remembers in that way. From the reader's perspective, the autobiographical pact ensures that the narrative is received as a factual account, in accordance with its validity claim. Readers thus approach autobiographies with the expectation that they are being presented with actual events and authentic memories.

Conversely, the notion of the 'fictional contract' or 'fictional agreement,' a metaphor prominently used by Umberto Eco, implies that the text invites the reader to imagine the narrated world *as if* it were real, while simultaneously acknowledging that it is a fictional text with no claim to factual correspondence or reality. As Eco (1994, 75; italics in the original) puts it, "[w]e accept the fictional agreement and we *pretend* that what is narrated has really taken place."

Autofiction, due to its simultaneous referentiality and reliance on fictional licenses, offers the reader both pacts in equal measure. As Zipfel (2009, 305) points out, it is therefore impossible for the reader to fully apprehend an autofictional narrative through only one of the two pacts. With reference to Marie Darrieussecq (1996), he regards the uncertainty regarding which elements of an autofiction correspond to real events or entities and which do not as central to the genre's meaning and effects. The paradox expressed by Genette's statement "C'est moi et ce n'est pas moi" (1991, 97) – 'That is me and that is not me,' meaning the speaker is the author and is not the author – evokes the impossible simultaneity of both *pretending* that what is narrated has really taken place and *assuming* that it actually has.

In other words, autofiction is a genuine hybrid genre with a "double-layered structure" (Hrushovski 1984, 243), meaning that the protagonists are fictive characters who, at the same time, refer to the real author; thus, the narrative refers both to the storyworld and to the real world (Henke 2023, 82–84). Autofiction's hybridity becomes visible in the way its narratives combine markers, usages, and strategies of both communication codes – the fictional and the factual. This is evident, for example, in the way contemporary autofictional novels frequently incorporate intertextual references to factual sources, such as sociological studies and scholarly articles related to their central themes, and in some cases even include bibliographies.¹

¹ Examples from German literature include Heinz Helle's *Wellen* (2022), Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022), Paul Brodowsky's *Väter* (2023), and Christina Wessely's *Liebesmühe* (2024).

3. Between Expansion and Limitation: Autofictional Dynamics

Owing to its simultaneous referentiality and reliance on fictional license, autofiction both expands *and* constrains the boundaries of autobiography *and* fiction, thereby constituting a genre in its own right, endowed with a distinct formal and functional logic. With regard to autobiography, the expansive tendency is fairly evident. By invoking fictional discourse, authors gain the license to embroider, to modify, and to invent. In Isabelle Lehn's autofictional novel *Frühlingservachen* (2019), the first-person narrator reflects on this in a metafictional and ironic manner, targeting both the genre's poetological 'program' of uncertainty and the presumed readerly desire for authenticity. In the following I present an English translation; the original German text can be found in the footnote:

My editor is wondering whether the manuscript needs a genre label. She thinks calling it a novel would confuse the reader. I don't want to be impolite, at our first meeting, but I think a little confusion is something the reader can handle. I find it reasonable to expect that the reader cannot be entirely certain what color my pubic hair is, what it looks like inside my mother's abdomen, how exactly I live with Vadim [the protagonist's partner, A/N], or what foolish things I do to relieve the inner pressure. I believe the reader will be able to bear that. And perhaps – one might even ask – is she not actually depressive at all? She has to be truly depressive!, my editor insists. Why else would anyone read the book? [...] My editor jots down a few notes, and I suggest to her that the book itself might already provide answers to some of the questions it inevitably provokes. I'm a little afraid of how it might otherwise be at public readings.

Question: How much of your story did you actually experience yourself?

Answer: Sixty-two percent. Maybe even sixty-three percent. (Lehn 2019, 113f.; my translation)²

It seems that the genre-typological structure of autofiction even pushes metafiction beyond its usual boundaries, allowing a fictive editor to determine not only whether a fictive character is depressive, but even whether the intratextual author figure – and thereby the novel's extratextual author – is. Nevertheless, returning to how autofiction expands the boundaries of fiction, it was noted above that references in autofictional texts are double-coded due to the genre's hybrid character. Because the fictional world is largely constructed from concrete elements of the real world, it no longer confines itself to its referential limits but transcends them and crosses over into the real world. This, in turn, affects the evolving repertoire of narrative strategies within the genre.

I have already pointed to the recent trend in autofictional writing to append bibliographies documenting sources and works related to the novel's thematic concerns. Read against the conceptual distinction between fictionality and factuality, this practice appears not merely as a paratextual gesture but as a programmatic intervention. It deliberately unsettles generic boundaries by importing markers of factual discourse into a fictional framework. Thus, Paul Brodowsky (2023, 301f.), for instance, intertextually aligns his novel *Väter* with academic research on nationalism and the Shoah by Ulrike Jureit, Shmuel Spector, Harald Welzer, and others. By appropriating procedures

² The original reads as follows: "Meine Lektorin überlegt, ob das Manuskript einen Gattungsbegriff braucht. Sie glaubt, *Roman* würde den Leser verwirren. Ich möchte nicht unhöflich sein, beim ersten Treffen, aber ich finde, ein bisschen Verwirrung kann der Leser ertragen. Ich finde es zumutbar, dass der Leser sich nicht völlig sicher sein kann, welche Farbe mein Schamhaar hat, wie es im Bauchraum meiner Mutter aussieht, auf welche Weise ich mit Vadim zusammenlebe und welche Dummheiten ich anstelle, um den inneren Druck loszuwerden. Ich glaube, dass der Leser das aushalten wird. Und vielleicht - dürfte er sich sogar fragen - ist sie in echt nicht einmal depressiv? Sie muss echt depressiv sein!, findet meine Lektorin. Wieso sollte man das Buch denn sonst lesen? [...] Meine Lektorin macht sich ein paar Notizen und ich schlage ihr vor, bereits im Roman die Antworten auf ein paar Fragen zu liefern, die man unwillkürlich provoziert. Ich habe ein bisschen Angst davor, wie das sonst auf Lesungen wird. – Frage: Wieviel Prozent Ihrer Geschichte haben Sie selbst erlebt? – Antwort: Zweiundsechzig Prozent. Vielleicht auch dreiundsechzig Prozent."

conventionally associated with factual discourse, the autofictional voice performs an epistemic claim: it inscribes the fictional narrative into the horizon of factual knowledge production (Henke 2023, 83).

While Zipfel's explanation that autofiction offers both pacts – the fictional and the autobiographical – provides a convincing theoretical account of autofiction as a clearly delineated genre-typological category, it is important to stress that the phenomenon involves not only expansion but also limitation. Autofiction occupies a paradoxical position: it is simultaneously factual and fictional, yet it is neither autobiography nor fiction. From this perspective, its hybrid status is defined not solely by an expansive dynamic but also by a countervailing movement: certain generic privileges traditionally associated with autobiography and with fiction are curtailed. First, it distances itself from autobiographical writing through its reduced claim to authenticity. Second, autofiction differs from fiction by maintaining a claim to referentiality.

Starting with the first point, through its divergence from autobiography, and through the constant self-reflexive act of fictionalization, autofiction undermines the paradigm of authenticity. At first glance, this may sound paradoxical – and in fact, it is. The paradox lies in the fact that the current boom of autofiction is often understood as the literary market's response to a readers' demand for authenticity – a demand that, in a sense, fuels the boom itself.

Authenticity, however, is the promise of *auto-biographical* writing, and at the same time its Achilles' heel. In this respect, it seems important to note that autofiction is rather a conceptual category whose typological classification is difficult, and which may even challenge the notion of factuality. It has long been a much-discussed problem that the claim to truth carried by autobiography cannot be fully realized: first, because of its content, which is subjective, perspectival, and filtered through memory, leaving no distance between observer and object (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2017, 7f.); and second, because of its narrative mode, which by its very nature is always a matter of construction.

Now, with autofiction's double play, this very problem of authenticity becomes a productive potential. By keeping the reader constantly uncertain about which elements correspond to reality and which do not, autofiction: (a) raises the question of whether authenticity is possible at all, (b) conveys that what readers desire as 'authentic' will always remain out of reach, and (c) demonstrates that authenticity is not the primary goal. In Isabelle Lehn's (2019, 114) novel, this is expressed ironically through the claim that the novel's degree of reality amounts to precisely sixty-two – or perhaps sixty-three – percent.

This brings me to the second point: how autofiction differs from fiction and, in doing so, also limits its scope. As far as autofiction carries a claim of factual relevance (for example, marked by lists of references at the end of the book), it lacks the license of total autonomy from extrafictional ethical and political standards at the same time. While a purely fictional world is independent from the rules and the facts of the real world, autofiction operates in a double-referential mode and can thus be measured against real-world standards – even though this measurement always involves the uncertainty of what is real and what is invented. This makes autofiction particularly suited for conveying political and socio-economic considerations in a fictional and subject-orientated mode. Here emerges the paradoxical fact that a subjective story can never remain entirely private once it becomes literature.

The hybrid character of autofiction challenges traditional genre boundaries. As we have seen, autofiction is both autobiography and fiction, yet fully neither. Put differently, autofiction exposes

the false promises of autobiographical self-writing – such as authenticity, reality, and truth. It demonstrates that authenticity is unattainable, reality ultimately unreachable, and truth never fully given in any mode of retrospective self-representation. This raises the question whether we need to rethink the genre's typology. From the standpoint of fictionality theory, this observation invites a reconsideration of established genre typologies. Instead of maintaining a categorical distinction between autobiography and autofiction, it may be more productive to adopt the broader and more neutral concept of self-narration. Such a framework would allow for a scalar model ranging across varying degrees of fictionalization rather than presupposing discrete generic boundaries. Correspondingly, the referential relation between storyworld and empirical world could be conceptualized along the same continuum. Admittedly, this typological draft requires further development. This theoretical intervention, however, does not alter the claims, promises, and expectations associated with the genre labels of autofiction and autobiography.

4. The Dynamics between Individualization and Politicization as Constitutive Features of the Genre

As argued above, the curtailment of fictional autonomy in autofiction generates a distinct political and ethical impetus. A comparable dynamic applies to its circumscribed factual claims. By distinguishing itself from autobiography, autofiction reconfigures the conditions under which narrative tellability is secured. In autobiography, tellability is guaranteed by authenticity: as long as what is narrated is 'true' – or at least 'truthfully' –,³ even the mundane or seemingly insignificant may legitimately be told. At the centre of both telling and told stands the real person the story concerns. Autofiction, by contrast, cannot rely on this privilege. Through the fictionalization of the individual, it shifts the basis of narrative legitimacy from a promise of authenticity to a promise of supra-individual relevance – including, but not limited to, political significance.

Whereas autobiographical self-narration derives its tellability from its alleged referential truth, fictional texts – autofiction among them – must ground their narrative justification in forms of general human significance. Put differently, in autofiction the individual story is, as it were, elevated into the sphere of broader human relevance. The autofictional mode therefore necessarily points beyond the individually authentic toward the social, the ethical, and the political. The individual experience becomes an exemplum through fictionalization (Thürnaeu 1994, 90–94). In conclusion, we can state that the boundaries of autofiction – both in relation to autobiography and to fiction – make autofiction a genuine political genre, in which individual stories become collective and in which fictional discourse becomes referential.

We can observe this development in the growing number of novels addressing issues of identity politics that have appeared over the past two decades, with a marked increase since the turn of the millennium. From Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019) to Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies* (2020), from Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008) to Daniela Dröscher's *Lügen über meine Mutter* (2022), and from Édouard Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014) to Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022), these

³ The term *truthfulness* (German: *Wahrhaftigkeit*) has become established in autobiography studies to describe the necessarily reduced truth claim of the genre (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2006, 355; who cites it from Shumaker 1954, 140).

fictional self-narratives center on processes of identity formation and experiences of marginalization. They engage with the axes of race, class, and gender, particularly at the intersection of individual biography and collective identity.

How can we account for the empirical predominance of identity-politically inflected autofictional novels in contemporary European and US-American literature? The answer lies in a structural similarity between autofiction and the concept of identity politics. Both are constituted by a tension between subjectivity or individuality on the one hand and collectivity or politics on the other. Contemporary identity politics is concerned with the visibility and rights of identity-based, generally marginalized collectives. The knowledge at stake – which constitutes experiential knowledge and is likewise conveyed by identity-politically shaped autofiction – pertains to shared experiences and, consequently, to collective identities. At the same time, such texts foreground individual affectedness, thereby legitimizing claims to speak about specific forms of experience such as racism, classism, misogyny, or homophobia. This affectedness, in turn, indicates belonging to a group that articulates itself through identity politics. Precisely this structure – the movement from an ‘I’ to a ‘we’ – reappears in the logic of autofiction itself: once it departs from the autobiographical promise of authenticity, it must formulate a claim to broader human relevance, as outlined above. In this sense, the dynamics of individualization and politicization are constitutive of autofiction. The narratives constructed in contemporary autofictional novels articulate collectively shared experiences central to contemporary identity politics and thus assume the function of exempla. Conversely, they may contribute to the consolidation and transformation of corresponding collective identities through processes of literary identification.

Saying that autofiction has the power to individualize shared experiences raises the question whether this also works the other way around. When it comes to the effect of literature in general and to the effect of autofiction in particular, the dynamics between subjectivity and collectivity function in both directions. The autofictional voice asserts its affectedness thereby individualizing political claims related to identity by telling a subjective story. At the same time, autofiction has the potential to collectivize individual experience – to make personal experiences political and provide a common ground for solidarity, even when political representation is lacking. In contemporary German literature, we can see this tendency in autofictional novels dealing, for example, with depression, parenthood, or the intersection of both. Isabelle Lehn’s 2019 novel *Frühlingserwachen* explores depression and the societal pressure on women to have children. In Ulrike Draesner’s *Zu lieben. Roman* (2024), parenthood is approached through adoption, while Christina Wessely’s *Liebesmühe* (2024) focuses on motherhood and postpartum depression. On the other hand, Paul Brodowsky’s *Väter* (2023) and Heinz Helle’s *Wellen* (2022) examine fatherhood in times of shifting ideals of masculinity, with Helle’s novel also addressing the narrator’s own struggles with depression.

Depression and parenthood are both interindividually shared experiences, and they are increasingly appearing in contemporary autofictional self-writing. Against the backdrop of the reciprocal dynamics of subjectivity and collectivity, which shape the genre-typology of autofiction, we might read these works as self-narratives that utilize the potential of the genre to politicize domains of experience and to collectivize experiential knowledge on the margins of social awareness.

In Kim de l’Horizon’s novel *Blutbuch*, both the individualization of collective experiences and the politicization of private and personal experiences are brought to the fore through a meta-

fictional passage narrated in the first-person plural. The passage consists of fictitious letters addressed to the protagonist's grandmother, originally written in English—a language she does not speak—which can be understood as a distancing strategy employed by the narrating self:

Maybe this is, what is inherently queer about autofiction: to start writing from a reality that repeats the fiction that we don't exist. To start writing from a reality that isn't real to us, that puts us in the realm of fiction. To produce ourselves through writing, to invent literary spaces that are other, hyperreal, utterly needed realities. Maybe this is, why so many of us write "autofiction": because we are still stories, we aren't real bodies yet. (de l'Horizon 2022, 270)⁴

Autofictional writing thus extends beyond the self, projecting a collectively constituted subject through literature. In identity-political terms, it operates in a productive tension between subjectivity and representativeness – grounded both in its reference to the individual as empirical persona and in its engagement with collective experience. This tension renders autofiction a political yet aesthetic genre, rather than a medium of authentic or egocentric self-depiction.

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⁴ An appendix to the novel contains the letters to the grandmother in a German version. The passage quoted above is rendered there as follows: „Vielleicht ist es das, was an der Autofiktion von Natur aus queer ist: ausgehend von einer Realität zu schreiben, die die Geschichte wiederholt, dass es uns nicht gibt. Ausgehend von einer Realität zu schreiben, die für uns nicht real ist, die uns in den Bereich der Fiktion versetzt. Uns selbst durch das Schreiben zu produzieren, literarische Räume zu erfinden, die andere, hyperreale, absolut notwendige Realitäten sind. Vielleicht ist das der Grund, warum so viele von uns „Autofiktion“ schreiben: Weil wir immer noch Geschichten sind, weil wir noch keine echten Körper sind. (de l'Horizon 2022, 309f.)

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