

Autofiction and the Ethics of Life Writing in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

The Swedish Academy gave the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature to Annie Ernaux for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory. The award consecrated a mode of writing that had spent four decades on the margins of literary respectability. This article examines autofiction, the term Serge Doubrovsky coined for his 1977 novel Fils, as the dominant serious prose form of the present century, and asks what its dominance costs the people who appear in it without consenting to. The discussion works through four cases in which the cost became visible: the legal threats from Karl Ove Knausgaard's relatives, the Norwegian reality literature controversy in which a novelist's sister published a rebuttal novel, the reception of Edouard Louis in the village he described, and the critical treatment of Rachel Cusk after she wrote about her divorce. The article argues that the standard defences of the form, aesthetic autonomy and the instability of the self, are answers to a question about representation rather than to the question actually being asked, which concerns power. It proposes that the ethics of autofiction be assessed by asking who can answer back.

Keywords: - Autofiction, Life Writing, Literary Ethics, Annie Ernaux, Autotheory, Consent.

I. INTRODUCTION

Doubrovsky (1977) printed a sentence on the back cover of a novel that has outlived the novel. Fiction, he wrote, of events and facts strictly real. The neologism he attached to this, autofiction, was meant to describe a book that was neither autobiography nor novel and that refused to choose. The term travelled slowly for two decades and then very quickly, and it now covers a body of work so large that it functions less as a genre than as a default setting for literary prose.

Consecration arrived in October 2022, when the Nobel went to Ernaux for fifty years of work turning her own life into a documentary instrument (Nobel Prize Outreach, 2022). She calls herself an ethnologist of herself. The description is more exact than most criticism has managed. The Years, her collective autobiography of postwar France, runs on the impersonal pronoun and never once says I (Ernaux, 2017).

Almost every general defence of the form takes the same shape. The self in the text is not the self of the author. Language constitutes rather than records experience. The autobiographical pact is a convention, and conventions may be broken. Each claim is true, and each answers a question nobody asked, since the woman who finds an unflattering version of herself in a novel written by her brother is not in any confusion about the relation between narrator and writer. She is objecting to being in the book.

This article takes the objection seriously. It sets out the theoretical ground, examines four cases in which non-consenting subjects responded, and proposes a criterion of assessment that does not depend on settling the metaphysics

of the self. The criterion is asymmetry of voice. A writer who describes a literary peer and a writer who describes a parent with dementia are not doing the same thing, whatever the formal similarities.

II. FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT TO THE AUTOFICTIONAL REFUSAL

Lejeune (1989) described autobiography as resting on a pact, a contract between writer and reader in which the author, narrator and protagonist are asserted to be the same person and the account is offered as true. The pact is signed on the cover. Its force lies in the reader's willingness to hold the writer accountable for accuracy.

Autofiction breaks the pact without replacing it. The reader is told that the material is real and that the book is a novel, and is given no procedure for deciding which sentences fall under which claim. Worthington (2018) reads this as characteristically American in one lineage, tracing a postmodern self-consciousness that uses the author's name as another formal device. Dix (2018) collects the Anglophone variants and finds them arriving mainly through translation from French rather than by internal development.

Smith and Watson (2010) supply the useful distinction between the historical person, the narrating I and the narrated I, and note that critical confusion usually comes from collapsing these. Gilmore (2001) had already argued that trauma narratives strain the autobiographical form to its limits, since the experiences that most demand testimony are the ones least amenable to the coherent retrospective account the form requires. Autofiction can be read as the formal solution to that strain.

The strongest theoretical defence is that the form is honest about a condition all life writing shares. Eakin (2008) argues that identity itself is narratively constituted, so that every autobiography is already a construction and the pretence of transparent record is the real deception. Fair enough as description. It does not follow that all constructions carry the same obligations to the people constructed.

III. FOUR CASES OF ANSWERING BACK

Knausgaard's six volume sequence, published in Norwegian between 2009 and 2011 and translated shortly afterwards, described his family with a completeness that produced immediate legal threats (Knausgaard, 2012). His father's brother disputed the account of the father's death and demanded changes. Some were made. Roughly a tenth of Norway's population read the books, which meant that people identifiable to their neighbours were described in unflattering detail to a national audience. The literary merit is considerable and is not the point at issue.

The Norwegian argument sharpened with Vigdis Hjorth's novel of inheritance and remembered abuse, published in 2016 and later translated as *Will and Testament* (Hjorth, 2019). Her sister wrote a counter-novel. Published, reviewed and sold in the same shops, it is the single most interesting event in the recent ethics of life writing, because a family dispute became a literary dispute conducted in the very form that had caused it. The Norwegian press called this reality literature. That is a better term than autofiction, since it puts the problem in the material rather than in the genre.

Edouard Louis published an account of a violent childhood in a northern French village at twenty one, naming the place and thinly disguising almost nobody (Louis, 2017). The village responded through local media, disputing the portrait. The asymmetry here is stark and rarely acknowledged in the book's reception: a writer with a Parisian publisher, national television access and international translation described people whose available reply was a comment to a regional newspaper.

Cusk's account of her divorce, published in 2012, produced a critical reaction so hostile that she has described it as a kind of professional death, after which she found the confessional first person unusable and wrote the *Outline* trilogy in its place (Cusk, 2014). The trilogy narrates through a woman who mostly listens, and its formal solution to the problem of self-exposure is to remove the self while retaining everyone else. Whether that resolves the ethical difficulty or relocates it is worth asking.

IV. VULNERABILITY, CONSENT, AND THE LIMITS OF CRAFT

Couser (2004) provides the framework the field has needed and has been slow to adopt. Writing about vulnerable subjects, meaning people who cannot consent or whose consent is compromised by dependency, incurs obligations that do not apply to writing about oneself. His examples are medical and familial: the parent with dementia, the disabled sibling, the dying spouse. The obligation is not silence. It is a duty of care about accuracy, purpose and exposure that aesthetic success does not discharge.

Applied to autofiction the framework sorts cases quickly. A novelist writing about a former lover who is also a novelist has produced material that can be answered in kind. A novelist writing about a mother with Alzheimer's has not. The relevant variable is not the intimacy of the disclosure but the capacity of the person disclosed to respond in a comparable register to a comparable audience.

The defence from craft deserves a hearing because it is not merely self-serving. The claim is that literature's value lies partly in going where discretion forbids, that private life is where most human experience happens, and that a rule requiring consent would eliminate the form entirely. Ernaux's account of an illegal abortion in the France of the nineteen sixties implicates a doctor, a friend and a former partner, and it is also a document of considerable historical importance whose value depends on its refusal of discretion.

The way through is not a consent rule, which would be unworkable and would protect the powerful more effectively than the vulnerable. It is a shift in critical practice. Reviewers routinely assess autofiction on candour and formal daring while treating the represented parties as material. A criticism that asked, as a standard question, who in this book cannot answer back, would change what gets praised without banning anything.

V. THE I-NOVEL, THE TESTIMONIO, AND THE LIMITS OF A FRENCH TERM

Treating autofiction as a French invention with Anglophone imitators leaves out a good deal. Japanese fiction developed the *shishosetsu*, conventionally rendered as the I-novel, from the eighteen nineties onward, and its conventions ran in the opposite direction to the European novel of the same period. Fowler (1988) shows that Japanese readers approached these texts expecting the narrating voice to be the author's, and valued the form for a sincerity that invented plot was thought to compromise.

The comparison is instructive because the ethical problem appears there too, and is handled differently. Japanese writers described their households, their affairs and their relatives at length, within a literary culture that treated such disclosure as costly and therefore meaningful. What made the confession valuable was that it damaged the confessor. Contemporary autofiction rarely operates under that assumption, since disclosure now tends to build a career rather than to endanger one.

Indian Dalit life writing raises the question from another direction entirely. Valmiki (2003) and the body of caste testimony around it are personal narratives whose purpose is documentary and collective, written by people whose communities had been described almost exclusively by others. Nayar (2006) argues that such texts function as *testimonio* rather than autobiography, with the narrator bearing witness on behalf of a community and the reader positioned as a secondary witness under an obligation to listen.

This reframes the consent question rather than answering it. A testimonial narrative names landlords, priests, teachers and neighbours who committed specific acts, and the naming is the point rather than an unfortunate side effect. The asymmetry runs the other way from the European cases: here the writer is the person with least power and the exposure is directed upward. Any workable ethics of life writing has to be able to tell these situations apart, and a rule framed purely in terms of privacy cannot.

VI. AUTOTHEORY AND THE POLITICAL TURN

A related development has been more successful at handling the problem, largely by accident. Auttheory, the hybrid of personal narrative and theoretical argument, runs from Kraus (1997) through Nelson (2015) and has been given its scholarly account by Fournier (2021). The form puts the writer's life in explicit relation to a body of thought, so that the personal material is offered as evidence in an argument rather than as revelation.

This changes the ethical position in a specific way. When a scene from a marriage is deployed to test a claim about kinship or gender, the other party appears as a participant in an argument rather than as a character in a portrait. The exposure is not smaller. Its purpose is legible, and legible purpose is much of what people object to lacking when they find themselves in someone else's novel.

The feminist genealogy matters here. Fournier locates auttheory in a tradition of writing that refused the separation of the thinking subject from the embodied one, a separation that had operated to exclude women from theory. Ernaux belongs in this lineage as much as in the French autofictional one, since her declared project is to use a single life as a means of access to a class and a period rather than as a subject in itself.

The political stakes are clearest in work by writers from communities that were previously written about rather than writing. Louis and Ernaux both come from provincial working class backgrounds. Both describe class defection, the experience of an education that separates a person from the people who paid for it, and both write about going back to a house where their vocabulary no longer fits. Their books are reports from a border that French literature had mostly described from one side. The argument for the form is strong. It also leaves the difficulty intact, since the people left behind are the ones least able to reply.

VII. CONCLUSION

Autofiction is now the ordinary condition of serious literary prose rather than an experimental margin, and the reasons are not mysterious. Fiction of the fully invented kind carries an authority it can no longer easily claim. Readers formed by memoir, by documentary, and by the confessional habits of social media approach the invented with a scepticism that the autofictional first person disarms. The form solves a credibility problem.

It creates a different one. Every autofictional book is populated by people who did not choose to be there and whose version is unavailable. Criticism has handled this badly, either ignoring it in favour of formal analysis or treating it as gossip about whether the events occurred. Neither approach engages what is actually at stake, which is that literary representation is an exercise of power and the power is unevenly held.

The proposal here is modest and would require no institutional machinery. Read the asymmetry. Ask, of each book, who is represented, what capacity they have to respond, and whether the writing acknowledges the difference. Knausgaard's uncle could hire a lawyer. Hjorth's sister could write a novel. The residents of a village in Picardy could speak to a local paper. These are not equivalent positions and a criticism that treats them as equivalent is not doing its work.

Ernaux offers the most defensible model, and the reason is method rather than temperament. She writes about herself in order to write about a class, a period and a set of conditions, and the other people in her books appear as inhabitants of that history rather than as figures in her drama. The impersonal pronoun in *The Years* is an ethical device before it is a formal one. It suggests that the way out of the problem is not less self-exposure but less centrality of the self, which is the harder revision and the one the form has mostly declined to make.

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