Autofiction

Sometimes considered to cover the spectrum of autobiographical fiction, the French term autofiction more properly describes one of the forms taken by autobiographical fiction which severely diminishes faith in the power of memory and language to access definitive truths about the past or the self. The notion of autofiction first emerged explicitly in France in the mid-1970s as a part of a revival of autobiographical writing at the level of both practice and theory. A new constellation took shape with the publication of Roland Barthes's Roland BARTHES par Roland BARTHES (1975) and Georges Perec's W ou le souvenir d'enfance (1975), W or the Memory of Childhood, Patrick Modiano's L'écluse de famille (1977), Family Record, and Serge Doubrovsky's 574 (1977, Set/Se souvenir). The key feature shared by these works is probably best characterized as their treatment of the autobiographical set of parameters considered effective in determining autobiographic's generic force. For the purveyors of traditional truth-value, the parameters of autobiography often carry more weight than the parameters of the past. The parameters of act-value, on the other hand, stress that autobiography is "a personal performance" (see Bruc). On the one hand, the window it offers both a scene of a word and a scene of a writer. The further one pushes the cause of act-value, the less important the view — or at least the clarity of the view — of the window. Thus the effect of autobiography, that of the corresponding growth of investment in act-value, lead in a situation in fiction it is even to be automatically regarded as regards or the other of truth. Such is the general context in which the notion of autofiction makes its appearance.

Since first being coined as a term by the French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, the notion of autofiction has undergone a process of generalization to a point where, despite pockets of resistance defended by the proponents of pure truth-value, the idea that fiction and autobiography inevitably overlap has become a kind of norm shared—both within and beyond the French domain—by a significant number of writers, readers, and critics. The same strong sense of overlap applies equally to the new practices of biographical writing that have emerged over the last two decades of the 20th century, practices that have come to be characterized in France, in an obvious echo of Doubrovsky's term, as biofictions.

The term autofiction is rooted in the text of the backcover blur of Doubrovsky's 574, where the author described his book as "a fiction, made from strictly real events and facts, if the author gets the language of the adventure to the language of language, beyond any wisdom or syntax of the novel, whether traditional or not". The reality of the seal is denied in its formal realization. Language itself becomes the main event. Here Doubrovsky identifies autofiction as a subversion of the referentialist paradigm sustaining conventional autobiographical discourse. That language can and should refer depends on the idea that there is a reasonably sound referent out there, or back there in the past, to which language can correspond. In another, self-styled, "Jean Dubrovsky moved on in later works to attribute fictional status to the referent itself. As he put it in Un amour de soi (1984): A Love of Self): "I barely exist, I am a fictional being. I am writing about autofiction which has subsequently declared that the statement "I am a fictional being" expresses an "existential truth," that it bears a value of "autocritical" — as subversion. As such, he echoes the now famous injunction with which Roland Barthes opened his self-portrait of 1957: "All this must be considered as spoken by a character," that is, Dubrovsky and Barthes give priority in their own writing to the idea that the post-Freudian view of the subject as a destabilized agency enters.-family approaches to a transformation of the entire practice in which something "fictional" would not be automatically disqualified or further concealed.

A second feature in the generalization of the notion of autofiction is the broad understanding of fiction as the act, or the result of an act, of making (as opposed to making up). Recontextualized by our contemporary sense of the heterogeneity of language and world, this broad sense of the word fiction is more and more understood to be commensurate with all acts of textualization or narrativization, regardless of generic or modal distinctions and notwithstanding authorial intent. This broad sense of fictionality as a condition attendant on any act of putting-into-words helps to explain why writers such as Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Jean Roas, Eugénie Savitskaya, and, in English, Seamus Deane, have been happy to let go of the works they be described or discussed as novels — this despite the evidently nonfictional force of the works in question, and the absence of any markers or strategies within the self-understanding of autobiography; indeed, it is no longer automatically regarded as the other or the outside of truth. Such is the general context in which the notion of autofiction makes its appearance.

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Aspects of his significance are closely intertwined. The church reform movement ended by the patriarch Nikon (1667-84), led, in 1667, to a schism between the Russian Orthodox Church and the adherents to the old traditions. It would seem that the schism was not a minor event and not insignificant: Nikon brought the Russian Orthodox church closer to the Byzantine rite regarding such particular matters as making the sign of the cross, singing, and bending during the service. Yet Nikon's reforms met with fierce resistance from a number of bishops who felt that they had been deprived of the work of the Antichrist. Nikon was the ideological leader of this traditionalist party, which came to be known as the Old Believers. After the schism, he was exiled to Sibera for ten years; shortly after his return to Moscow a second exile in Mezen in the Arkhangelsk province was imposed on him. Finally, in 1667, a church council sentenced him to imprisonment in the northernmost region of European Russia, in Pustozor, where in 1682 he was burnt at the stake as a heretic.

Avvakum wrote his autobiography while serving his sentence in Pustozor. He conceived of it as a political epistle with the foremost aim of supporting the Old Believers' position after the schism of 1667. This pragmatic scope determines the form of the whole text. Avvakum's Zhizn' (Life Written by Himslef) is not a means a Bibliodramenian Woman. The author does not bother to describe his childhood, the formation of his personality, his social and political existence as a dissident. He rather conceives of his own existence from the position of a religious leader whose legitimation is beyond any doubt. Two separate styles can be noticed in his autobiography: episodes from his personal life are presented in colloquial, sometimes even vulgar, Russian; whereas signs of "Christian" language are avoided in church Slavonic and biblical quotations. The subsequent versions of Avvakum's text between 1667 and 1679 are the tendency towards self-fashioning in the sense of a saint and display an increasing use of biblical expressions. Avvakum perceives his life in terms of present martyrdom and future redemption. Accordingly, he chooses as his predecessors Job, Lazarus, and, ultimately, Christ. Avvakum resorts to his life in his autobiographical devices: many episodes are shaped after textual models from the Bible and apocryphal. At the end of the text, the cumulative account of the various miracles and healings worked by Avvakum sums up his saintly aspirations. One should not reproach Avvakum, however, for the rendering of reality. He did not intend to provide a true rendering of his life. Modern biographers of his autobiography can be explained if it is interpreted as a kind of textual icon. In the Russian Orthodox tradition, Christianity does not require that icons be made by the hands of the artist. The artist is not the creator of the icon, but a "translator" of the holy original. An icon is in no way to represent reality; it rather opens up possibilities of understanding. The perspective of the icon does not define the pictorial perspective, in which the icon is an "inverted perspective". Strictly speaking, an icon cannot be looked at; rather, it is a "horizon of meaning". The reason why icons do not have a frame, which could delineate a semantic borderline between art and reality, icons translate a higher reality into a humanly comprehensible one in a similar hermetic basis. He does not conceive of himself as the author of his Life. His biography is already written by God; he only tries to give it original text into a book. The Life is not a closed text, but open in two directions: towards the heavenly
author and towards a very concrete reader, Avvakum’s fellow inmate Epiphanius. Avvakum’s autobiography functions as the medium of exchange between God and his faithful. Therefore his impressive self-awareness should not be misunderstood as the birth of modern individuality. The contrary holds true: Avvakum aims at a typological identity with Christ, and his autobiography is not a mere record, but God’s miraculous presence in this world which finds its conclusive evidence in the archpriest’s Life. It is precisely this quality that empowers Avvakum’s text to be a political pamphlet proving the truth of the Old Believer’s fight against the Nikonian reforms.

The text circulated in handwritten copies in their religious community and was published only in 1863. The Life was highly esteemed among Russian writers in the 19th century. Ivan Turgenev considered Avvakum’s writings as a source of the purest Moscovite language; Lev Tolstoi used to read Avvakum’s life aloud in the circle of his family; Nikolai Leskov modelled the protagonist of his novel Soforome (The Cathedral Folk) on him.

Uliach Schmid

Biography
Born in Grigorov, Russia, 12 November 1610. Married Anastasia Markova, 1636. Became desirov, Nikolai-Nivorgov, 1640; ordained priest in Laportchik, 1644. First visited Moscow and met Stalin Verbitor, a reforming priest in the tsar’s circle, 1647 or 1648. Archpriest in Iznoti-Molchansk, heading for Moscow as the attraction of the tsar, 1653. Led the resistance to patriarch Nikon’s Russian Orthodox Liturgy, 1653–55. Was arrested, 21 August 1651, spent his first period of exile with his family in Tobolsk, then exiled to Esensk in the region of the River Lena in Irkutsk, summer 1653. Joined Pakhlom’s expedition in Dauria with his family. Regained the tsar’s favor and was released to Moscow by his family and a third act of reinstatement, 20 May 1664. He was sent away from Moscow to Minsk in the

Abhandlungen für die 8 months while he was investigated. Investigated for the last time before being exiled to Pakhlom, August 1664. Sent to Pakhlom’s monastery until 30 April 1669. Wrote fourth supplication to the tsar, 1669. Final exile in Pakhlom, 1672/75. Complained the Zhila (Life), 1671. Banned at the state in Pakhlom after 14 years of incarceration, 1682.

Selected Writings

Further Reading


Bá, Amadou Hampâté 1901–1997
West African historian, ethnographer, and autobiographer

Although involved in professional writing all his life, Amadou Hampâté Bâ was at a loss when his family asked him to write his real life story. Like an African griot (storyteller), he preferred to talk about other people rather than himself, a stance that could only be reinforced by the disinterest in self of a devout Muslim.

Similar to an earlier narrative, Hampâté Bâ’s two auto-biographical volumes contain many teachings. Readers have made much of the historical and ethnographic descriptions of an African society at the crossroads of tradition, Islam, and colonization. The definition of genres—whether memoirs or autobiography—the homage to tradition, and the construction of self are other focuses of interest for readers and critics.

The first chapters of Amokoukel, l’enfant peul (1997) read more like a tribute to the author’s parents and acquaintances than a Roussos-like admission of petty misdemeanors. Images of traditional life, reminiscent of Camara Laye’s L’Enfant noir (1953; African Child), alternate with accounts of historical massacres. Yet, whether cruel or happy, the events unfold in an aura of autonomy that is all the more plausible because the narrator is a declared Muslim, a believer who finds fortune in submitting to Allah’s will. Furthermore, as Hampâté Bâ writes retrospectively about being the Fulani child sickened “son of Kollil” (after Kollil, his favourite gro), he praises his ancestry as though he was his own family gro. The second volume, Oui, mon commandant (1994), retraces the early training and marriage of a public servant under French rule from 1922 to 1935 in Haut-Ovolra (Burkina Faso since 1981) and thus helps the reader identify the narrator more obviously as Hampâté Bâ.

Hampâté Bâ searched for foundational heroes not only in his milieu but also in Malian history. References to the founder of the 13th-century Malian Empire, Sonita, are not infrequent, but the mythical model of Amokoukel’s (Amokoukel’s) world is the legendary Tukulor leader of jihada, El Hajj Umar Sede Tall (1797–1864). Hampâté Bâ goes back to the 1860s to retrace his family origins amid the rivalry between the Malian Fulansis, who had already adopted Islam, and the Tukulor Muslim warriors. African Islam developed brotherhoods based on the Prophet Muhammad’s disciples or notable followers whose role was to be mediators between believers and Allah. Cheikh Ahmed Tijani, an Algerian who died in Morocco in 1857, founded the Tijania-the brotherhood which was to greatly influence Malian culture. Throughout his memoirs, Hampâté Bâ refers to Umar Tall, Grand Master of the Tijania brotherhood, as a holy man whose descendants are presented as possessing innate merit. The memoirist thus gives proof of his maternal grandfather’s association, and that of his spiritual guide Tierzo Bokar’s parentage, with Umar Tall. Himself established as affiliated to the Tijania, Hampâté Bâ can even accept history, and without apparent acrimony, that Umar Tall’s nephew ordered the execution of 40 men from two Fulani families from the Macina Empire, including the Bâ family.

In a postcolonial attempt to counteract European assumptions that colonies were cultural deserts, the narrator carefully points to the complementarity of Islam and local tradition, referring to rules of civility and respect for the elders. On the other hand, from the favourable representation of Umar Tall to the disappearance of French interference in religious debates, Hampâté Bâ gives a strong sense of worlds apart, colonizer and colonized having little understanding of how the other functions. Hampâté Bâ’s unspoken mandate, as a “hostage” pupil of a French school, was to gain the means to act as a go-between. Although he seemed to defuse the administrateurs’ clashes with villagers with more success than he did with the religious conflicts, he held on to the Muslim concept of compassion in interpersonal relations.

The narrator projects himself as an intermediary between the many ethnic groups of the Niger region, the Islamic leaders, and the French commandants de cercle. Thus, he reminisces about his art of winning over rebellious returned soldiers or traffickers (French colonial troops) and even intractable commanders such as "Boule d’épines" (Thornball) by resorting to theatrical negotiations. Yet, in spite of his desire to resolve conflicts, the French, Hampâté Bâ unequivocally insists French colonization, disapproving of the alliance between religion and the regime. Even before surveying the three periods of France’s systematic exploitation of African people, his narrative con- demns colonial ideology, for example, in the French authorities’ failure to contain famine in 1944.

The narrator’s greater failures of his life, Hampâté Bâ reflects on the “law of the pendulum”, with a reference to the weaver’s loom, which symbolizes the ephemeralism and movement of life. The most notable example described of a life cycle full circle is that of the flambouyant Ben Davud Mademba Sy. The former dandy of the 1920s, son of a postman appointed