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ME MINUS ME

Self-Effacement in Autofiction by Christopher Isherwood, Rachel Cusk and J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract

Title: *Me Minus Me: Self-Effacement in Autofiction by Christopher Isherwood, Rachel Cusk and J. M. Coetzee*

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Abstract: Autofiction is one of the most popular genres in contemporary Anglophone literature. Yet the self-fashioning, outwardly hybrid genre merging autobiography with fiction is also the object of frequent contestation and derision, the source of which is nearly singularly rooted in authors' perceived self-absorption. Yet there are noteworthy exceptions to this kind of autofiction. This essay turns its attention towards one alternative mode of autofiction: the self-effacing autofiction. The essay looks at three different works of autofiction, Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, and J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), united by a paradoxical decision on behalf of the authors to obscure their main characters. In various ways, the three place their fictional doubles firmly in the background, a strategy and disavowal distinguishing them within a genre in which writers readily give their creativity over to analyses of the self.

The aim of this essay is to understand why the authors reject self-involvement and what ends they pursue in its place. The essay suggests that the authors do not wholly forsake the key characteristic of autofiction that is self-exploration. Rather, in what constitutes a radical break with the genre's conventions, they engage questions of selfhood and identity by allowing other characters or events to take center stage. By looking at the works through a theoretical framework informed by, for instance, dialogism and psychoanalysis, the essay suggests that the multiplicity of voices filling self-effacing autofiction, something which can be compared to the monological structure of conventional autofiction, contribute to the circumvention of self-absorption without losing the genre's inquiring qualities. By taking some of the weight from the topic of their personal selfhood the authors become free to approach a multitude of topics equally important to the construction of identity. These topics range from the concrete like sexuality or gender, on one hand, to abstract concepts like truth and literary authority on the other. However, the essay also suggests that these are only a few subjects through which the prism of selfhood can be explored and widened to include other individuals (characters and readers) than the author and his or her double. This outward facing autofiction thus expands the genre's possibilities.

Keywords: Autofiction, Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, Rachel Cusk, *Outline*, J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime*, sexuality, gender, auto/biography

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1. Introduction

In recent times autofiction has cropped up as one of the most popular literary inventions in contemporary Anglophone literature. Although it is not yet fully recognized as a genre in every respect – there are to my knowledge no aisles or shelves in libraries and bookstores dedicated specifically to autofiction – the interest amassed around narratives classified as autofiction during recent decades can easily be described as a craze. Coined in 1970s France as part of a wider socio-cultural development, autofiction emerged primarily as a critical intervention into traditional autobiography but also – albeit less so – into other forms of creative writing. Autofiction can be summarized as a mode of fictionalized autobiography or memoir in which the author is typically also the main character and/or narrator. This identarian relationship is usually teased by a direct nominal correspondence between the author and main character (they share the same name) or through other pronounced biographical similarities such as their age, occupation and/or nationality. Although readers are readily invited to presume the identity between the actual writer and their literary double, namesake or not, this easy supposition is often complicated by overt fictionalization.

Writers of autofiction navigate emerging literary practices with existing literary traditions. Thematically, the genre is recognizable by the frequent use of abstract or theoretical ideas gathered from psychoanalysis, philosophy, ethics, or literature and writing itself – one reason, perhaps, why it has gained traction among critics. However, this can hardly be said to be unique to autofiction. Rather, what sets it apart from, for example, autobiography is the routine juxtaposition of such lofty considerations with penetrating depictions of everyday life. Herein lies some of autofiction's allure: its immediacy (autofiction is often written in the first-person present tense) and apparent transparency of thought of not just mundane but corporeal reality (reflecting its oscillation between the abstract and the concrete, the contents of autofiction often ranges from authors' depictions of mental illness, anxieties and exhilarations on one hand to defecation or masturbation on the other) creates the illusion of revelatory self-disclosure. This mesh of enticing features such as outward unadulterated self-divulgence, on one hand, and tricks and strategies gathered from fiction, on the other, complicates traditional notions about truth and generic categorization and helps explain why autofiction is so appealing to both

readers and writers, attracting – and making – some of the more recognizable names in contemporary literature such as Karl-Ove Knausgård, Sheila Heti and Chris Kraus.

Although writers of autofiction generally seek to evade, or even undermine, the self-grandiosity and reverence associated with traditional autobiography, the two genres inevitably occupy a shared premise: self-representation. As Siddharth Srikanth points out, when we identify a work as autofiction an expectation emerges that the author, despite using a partly fictive discourse, is “ultimately communicating to us something of significance about her actual life experiences” (347). Often, the author takes heed of this contractual expectation, giving the reader a good portion – albeit shrouded in fiction – of themselves. Yet by claiming a right to recount and fictionalize the entirety or segments of their lives, authors of autofiction inevitably betray a degree of self-importance. Indeed, alongside objections about being crude, non-literary or merely navel-gazing and dull, one of the more common criticisms waged against autofiction is that it is narcissistic. In a previous essay, I have explored how the Anglo-Canadian writer, Rachel Cusk, made this charge one of her pillar elements in her autofiction, *Outline* (2014). Through shrewd irony and self-denial, Cusk cunningly chains herself in the trappings of the genre only to turn it on its head.

In a similar vein, this essay looks at three works of autofiction that, in various ways, reject this central convention of autofiction – the concentration on the self. The title of this essay is borrowed from an episode of the public radio program and podcast, *This American Life*.¹ While appearing to align with the (still-developing and contested) implicit rules of the genre that underpin readers’ expectations and writers’ performance of self-disclosure, the authors included here, besides one (an exception which will be explained shortly), openly reject them. The works discussed are Christopher Isherwood’s 1939 novel, *Goodbye to Berlin*; the penultimate and final instalment of Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy, *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018); and, lastly, South African-Australian author, J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* (2009). As the attentive reader may have noticed, it would have been impossible for Isherwood to know about autofiction when he wrote his novel in the 1930s. How, then, can one go about rebranding his autobiographical novel into this French literary invention? Part of the answer to this question, which will be looked at more thoroughly, is that a key part of autofiction’s novelty, namely the intersection between fictionality and factuality, has been around longer than the genre itself. Indeed, this

¹ Bim Adewunmi, “Me Minus Me.” 778. *This American Life* (podcast), August 18, 2022. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/778/me-minus-me>.

relationship is already implicated in the term and generic categorization, “autobiographical novel”. As we shall see shortly, however, anyone beginning to think about autofiction should be wary of conflating it with adjacent genres.

Abandonment of autofiction’s conventions by the authors included in this essay manifests itself via a dismissal of the (reasonably) anticipated centrality of their fictionalized selves. As the essay will attempt to demonstrate, not all writers follow the implicit rule or “contract” with their readers that steers expectations towards overt divulgence. In this essay, I look at writers denying themselves and their readers such trodden paths of self-centered discourse in favor of broader modes of self-narration and presentation. They show that although the autofictional form is rooted in specific life experiences it does not necessarily translate into self-involvement. Though the genre may have augmented an already existing desire among readers for self-revelatory narratives and provided authors with a not just respectable but even inventive mode for self-disclosure, this convention is by no means self-evident and can certainly be opposed.

Yet this authorial conduct provokes several questions: Why have these writers chosen, knowingly or unknowingly, to write autofiction when they evidently did not intend to focus on themselves and their inner lives? What are their strategies and motivations for withdrawing their explicit presence when writing within a genre that – apart from its other merits – is manifestly involved with subjective, idiosyncratic outpouring? Why, in other words, do these authors mess around with the genre? I suggest that the reduced roles of the authors’ fictionalized selves are not incidental but deliberate. Although the works I discuss have qualitative differences not just as individual stories but as autofictions, this diminishment appears to reflect a shared ambition between the three authors. Apart from narrowing the roles of their fictional duplicates (the aesthetic implications of which will be looked at more closely further on), the main effect of this strategy is that it creates room for *other* stories.

By either intrusively wedging these secondary stories into their narratives or deliberately putting them at the forefront, these three authors highlight circumstances governing the lives of others than their protagonists. Regularly, however, these tertiary stories reflect, implicitly or explicitly, important aspects of the authors’ own lives, be it their sexuality and politics, their gender and occupation, or their national identity. They give rise – sometimes fluidly other times strenuously – to interwoven or contrasting experiences. Although these external voices occasionally compete for primacy and narrative space, they also ensure that we do not walk away from these works having learned nothing about the authors. The latter use their

experiences, in other words, as springboards to explore subjects whose reach, while emanating from their own lives, go well beyond them, constituting a narrative scheme that does not solely motivate the authors' generic choices but also expands the genre's possibilities.

Before getting into examples of such *self-effacing autofiction*, however, more should be said about the genre at large. The following thus involves, first, what characterizes "traditional" autofiction; second, where it comes from and how it has developed in critical and literary discourses, French and Anglophone; and third, what theoretical notions and epistemic considerations this alternative mode of autofiction builds on. Not only will these perspectives help us make sense of autofiction as a genre separate from others, but also in illustrating and anticipating the expressions the genre can be expected to take in our current historical moment. The type of autofiction included in this essay makes out an underexplored strain of the genre, one that could play a role in its development and in how we read and consider narratives approximating or predating the genre.

2. Theory & Method

As with other neologisms, the many theoretical conceptions concerning the core function of autofiction makes generic definition difficult. The very term is what Jean-François Lyotard referred to as a “phrase in dispute”. Autofiction is conventionally understood as a genre that combines elements of autobiography and fiction. Autobiographical details about the author’s life such as their name, age, nationality, or occupation blend with fictional components like invented characters and events. Yet concluding a definition of autofiction here would be a mistake. Although these broad strokes apply to several narratives forming a burgeoning autofictional canon, they fall short of accommodating the multitude of artistic and theoretical contributions and complications of the genre’s distinguishing features and possibilities.

One alternative way of understanding autofiction is, as Hywel Dix has suggested, that the genre can encompass transgenerational narratives. That is, by identifying intimate threads between an author and their main character like family ties or other markers of connection across generations such as intergenerational trauma, Dix has suggested that narratives like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) can be regarded as autofiction. While the same type of reasoning could be applied to intergenerational narratives by the likes of Zora Neal Hurston, Viet Thanh Nguyen, or Jonathan Safran Foer, I hesitate to designate them as autofiction. This is not because the authors do not display inventive ways of depicting their own genealogies but because of the distance between themselves and their characters. In fact, Dix himself admits that the conjunction is flawed. However, his suggestion should be read not as a way of reconceptualizing all autofiction but rather as part of a critique waged against autofiction, namely that it is regarded by some – and with some merit – as exclusionary.

Autofiction is often seen as defying generic boundaries. Common labels attached to it include positively charged terms like “inventive” or “experimental”. Yet apart from its innovation, autofiction can also be summarized by its whiteness. If we are to classify autofiction as recognizable by, for instance, its fragmented and diaristic character, a plethora of narratives written by non-white authors become suitable for autofictional categorization. Evaluating the autobiographical content of such narratives, however, critics frequently consign writers of color to older, less avant-garde genres like the autobiographical novel or the Bildungsroman². It could

² Tope Folarin, “Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?” *The Republic*, October 27, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/159951/can-black-novelist-write-autofiction>

be argued that the present essay furthers such notions about the genre's racial dimension. I have sought to achieve breadth in the corpus regarding authors' topics, gender, sexuality and backgrounds yet it is true that there are significant homogeneities between the authors. I wish to emphasize that this partial similarity is not the result of an intention to limit the scope of what constitutes autofiction, quite the opposite. However, it is illustrative of important questions about how autofiction is sourced and received with respect to its sender.

Although it fails to meet this or Dix's particular expansion of what makes an autofiction, the present essay explores a similar terrain – one that decreases the centrality, if not the link, of the writer as character in favor of other, far-reaching stories. The broad definition of autofiction presented above overlooks how Anglophone autofiction has grown increasingly synonymous with self-centeredness. Since its origin, autofiction has foregrounded the explicit construction of the self. Yet in recent decades, this model has seemingly been interpreted literally or been taken as a pretext for overt self-absorption. While self-involvement certainly is not anathema to literary value, this skewness nonetheless risks obscuring other, less obvious types of autofiction. The present essay turns its attention towards another anomaly in autofiction – the *self-effacing autofiction*. This essay will attempt to highlight patterns and strategies, formal and thematic, that achieve the denial of this central tenet of autofiction. By withdrawing or even annulling their own fictitious presence, the authors, apart from Isherwood, use readers' previous knowledge about the genre alongside their developed prurience and upend them. As readers, we are thus denied what we have come to expect from the genre: a good portion about the authors' lives and interiorities.

Let us now begin charting autofiction's relatively short lifespan to date, beginning at its place of origin, France.

2.1 Autofiction's Origins and French Criticism

In a French context, where the discussion about the genre has been most animated, ideas about autofiction can be summarized as concerning narratives that foreground invention in self-narration. As compared to genres centered around narrative elements like plot or character development or the recounting of personal achievements, autofiction privileges the discursive construction of the self. The one who coined the term "autofiction", the French writer and critic, Serge Doubrovsky, understood the term as a form of self-construction guided by the disruption and reconfiguration of narrative time.

In his *Fils* (1977), Doubrovsky moved away from the linearity and chronology chiefly associated with autobiography and outlined autofiction in favor of an “experimental temporality with loose or open-ended structures of causality” (Dix 14). He motivated this disruption of traditional narrative strategy with that it mirrored the workings of his mind in real life. In his art, meaning is rendered opaque, elusive, and subsumed to the unceasing sense impressions of everyday life. Although Doubrovsky’s loose definition was soon challenged and revised by himself and others, on this final point he would hit on a note which has remained central to the genre: the pursuit of a truth different from the word in its conventional, positivist sense, propped by autobiography. That is, a truth situated not in outward referentiality but interior subjectivity. Before getting into the specifics of this alternative discursive truth, however, something should be said about autobiography and not just *how* but *why* autofiction contradicts its forerunner.

Autobiography had long been the privileged and respected form for self-representative accounts with seminal figures like Augustine and Rousseau’s “inward journey[s]” treated as guiding stars not just for writing autobiography but indeed for living (Marcus 235). In the broad category of “Life-Writing”, where autofiction had not yet been introduced, literary genres like memoir and diary were consigned to autobiography’s shadow. They were excluded from critical consideration for being seen as anecdotal, less serious and for treating matters of supposedly *private* interest. Conversely, whilst originating from an equally subjective source, “auto/biography” (Marcus 226) was perceived as being of *public* relevance. A concept which helps explain this divide is one that looms large in autobiography – the personal myth. As D. J. Taylor puts it:

[W]hat happens to the average human being during the course of his or her life isn’t really important. The decisive influence – and the decisive stimulus – is what he thinks happens to him, and what he imagines that other people make of these circumstances (41-2).

That is, while the situations depicted in autobiographies are often trivial, their significance are bolstered by their sources’ stature and mythology.

Relatedly, this dichotomy was largely the result of a gendered divide. Men’s autobiographies were perceived as compulsory and difficult endeavors in which the individual “conquered” their

own self. Conversely, women's accounts were long seen as representing the opposite of universality: they were merely autobiographical, thus "failing to reunify beyond their immediate context" (Marcus 230). This androcentric view on genre could help reflect why autofiction, a genre notoriously populated by women writers, is still frequently seen as navel-gazing. Yet as will be exemplified in chapter 2, women's autofiction embraces this marginalized position, using it to find common ground in the (subjected) experiences of femininity and womanhood. In fact, all three narratives in this essay undermine any easy opposition between "private" and "public" as well as the concept of personal myth by subversively engaging matters of wider significance via an allegedly private and solipsistic form – autofiction.

Autobiography remained the chief object of study largely due to scholarly interventions like Philippe Lejeune's 1975 essay "The Autobiographical Pact" [*Le Pacte Autobiographique*]. Here, Lejeune argues that in autobiography a pact is erected between authors and readers based around the author's declaration through narrative or paratextual elements like introductory notes that their text is about themselves and that readers subsequently receive it as such. This contractual relationship would be Lejeune's lasting effect in critical discourse as his formal definition of autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4) was discounted for saying as much about autobiography as it did about, for instance, the autobiographical novel. Lejeune would later stress that, to constitute autobiography proper, "the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical" (ibid. 5 emphasis original), an identity which he based around the intra- and extratextual recurrence of proper name.

Although Doubrovsky's initial definition of autofiction, too, rested on the onomastic correspondence between himself and his narrator-protagonist, the appearance of his own name in his narrative was not merely included to achieve referential verifiability. Doubrovsky sought to fill a creative gap. He rejected the slavish recapitulation of personal experience associated with autobiography. Similarly, his countryman, Philippe Gasparini, argues that what characterizes autofiction *is* its reaction towards autobiography. The ways autofiction subverts traditional autobiography constitutes it as a genre formed "in and through that critique" (Srikanth 346). For Doubrovsky, this opposition meant exploring and depicting his own

disorganized subjectivity and fickle sense of agency – inconsistencies of self-presentation that were best captured through a degree of fictionalization.

The process of claiming self-knowledge was complicated by the comprehensive introduction of psychoanalysis in Western societies during the twentieth century and subsequent emphases on the fallacy of memory. These were matters which Doubrovsky jumped on, saying that: “[I]f the writing self does not fully possess its own self or its own truth, the corollary is that it cannot set down or impart it to another” (cited in Boyle 19). This notion has been picked up by contemporary critics like E. H. Jones who suggests that autofiction’s “admission of fiction is a sheer recognition of the extent to which memory is fallible and a move away from the mythical figure of an omniscient writer” (176). The autofiction in this essay similarly sheds itself of omniscient narrators and doubles down on the flaws of recollection by equating or diminishing protagonists’ understanding of themselves and the world by emphasizing the perspectives of others.

Other than relating idiosyncratic self-images veracious with regards to their *sincerity* rather than their referentiality, another aspect Doubrovsky stressed was autofiction’s *mundanity*. He turned not just against the exemplarity embodied by autobiography but also its exclusivity. In a revised sociological definition of the genre, Doubrovsky envisioned autofiction as the great democratizer of the autobiographical mode. No longer would you have to be a “somebody” to write about your own life. Doubrovsky certainly was not first to launch this criticism which harks back to Samuel Johnson’s harsh assessment of then (eighteenth century) contemporary autobiographies for alienating the general reader. In Johnson’s view, most autobiographies, falling back on conventions of decency and Christian probity, failed miserably in portraying lives and experiences that readers could relate to. Furthermore, there already existed a strand of anonymous autobiography represented by writers like Dorothy Richardson whose autobiographical *Pilgrimage* (1938), like the autofiction analyzed here, traces incremental transitions in her community rather than events concerning herself alone.

Apart from pointing out autofiction’s interventionist tendencies, Gasparini took some of the weight from Lejeune’s (and Doubrovsky’s) nominal identity. He suggested that there are other ways in which identarian relationships between the author and their character can be traced such as their age, occupation or nationality. Similarly, in *L’autofiction* (1989), Vincent Colonna expanded autofiction’s scope by claiming that authors project themselves in imaginary characters. Whereas for Doubrovsky autofiction represented the fictionalization of a referential

framework through which a “deeper” truth of selfhood was representable, Colonna “advocates the same word being used for those literary texts in which the writer imagines a different life for him or herself” (Jones 178). The present essay includes a variety of autofiction embodying both conceptions. The main difference is that the authors direct this deeper truth outwardly. They either try to make sense of the greater contexts in which they themselves and others operate, or they let others weigh in on what is true about them.

2.2 Anglophone Criticism

In his “desire to ‘anchor’ his theory of autobiography as a contractual genre” (Marcus 253) Lejeune failed to appreciate the merit of autobiography’s neighboring genres. Tonya Blowers rightly suggests that his vague demarcations “[encourage] the critic to ignore the fascinating points of intersection” between genres like fiction and autobiography (1). At once autobiographical, fictive, and fictionalized, autofiction occupies “the space across those increasingly unstable generic boundaries” (Jensen 66). Yet just where autofiction exists within this space or intersection is contested. Anglophone criticism, as apart from the French, is less involved with autofiction’s stylistics. Rather it branches out mainly in two ways: critics are interested, firstly, in how autofiction balances fiction and non-fiction. That is, where autofiction exists alongside a continuum of invention and truth. Secondly, critics consider the genre’s alignment with discourses involving substantial or necessary degrees of self-divulgence like psychoanalysis. Additionally, I discuss how autofiction can be understood from a linguistic viewpoint, focusing on how it adopts the sole way writing can happen – at a distance from whatever it seeks to depict. Finally, I look at a less prominent aspect through which autofiction can be conceptualized, its material history.

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Karen Ferreira-Meyers suggests that “autofiction can only exist as an independent literary category if it exemplifies *hybridity*” (206). That is, to avoid assimilation in adjacent genres, autofiction needs to employ both fictionality and non-fictionality to a sufficient degree. This compound is often recognizable by some degree of contradiction in the rhetorical dimension as, for instance, in the relationship between narrative and *paratext*. The intermediate pragmatic status of paratextual elements like introductory notes, the name, and/or the explicit declaration

of the genre on the cover makes them relevant for questions about the fictionality or factuality of a text. The added elements form a frame for the main text and guide the reception or interpretation by the public. For a category like autofiction, which is not formally recognized as a genre (although one often finds it in minor paratextual elements like blurbs), paratext can thus also expose generic conventions and the inherent ambiguity of certain genres. Autofiction calls attention to conventions governing our interpretation of fiction or nonfiction. By extending and subverting expectations, autofiction doubles up as a commentary on the possibilities of generic form. Self-effacing autofiction, in turn, comments on autofiction's own solidifying conventions, something which will be considered mainly in chapter 1 and 3. Yet such meta-level discussions are not too helpful if we wish to authenticate a work of autofiction.

One way to identify autofiction is that it deliberately generates “contradictory and confusing message[s]” regarding what is true and what is not (Ferreira-Meyers 36). Aligning with Colonna's definition about authors projecting themselves in imaginary characters and scenarios, Dix suggests that autofiction is typically written in the “[s]ubjunctive mood” (4). Indeed, the exploratory and hypothetical nature of autofiction often leaves readers uncertain whether events and characters portrayed are imagined, felt or merely things that *may have happened*. Some authors add even more uncertainty to their autofiction by employing Colonna's *substitut livresque*. In this scenario, authors create confusion on a meta-narratological level by positing that their principal character is also the author of their own novels. This raises the question of whose life is depicted, the author, the author's double, or both? Who, then, is the implied author? These are questions we will return to in chapter 3 and whose implications inform J. M. Coetzee's self-occluding autofiction.

One thing speaking for autofiction's alleged hybridity is how its ambiguity relates to its reception and interpretation. Like Doubrovsky's claim that autofiction has a democratizing potential, Claire Boyle suggests that the uncertainties characteristic of autofiction are consequences of a less deferential relationship between writers and their readers. Readers of autofiction are treated as *active* participants in the interpretation and co-creation of the text, a position that can be compared to their role as *passive* recipients of traditional autobiography. Using Rousseau as an example, Boyle points out that the Frenchman was, in his own view, more than an author: he was an *authority*. Indeed, Rousseau proclaims from the outset in his *Confessions* (1782 [1769]) that he is “commencing an undertaking... without precedent”; his portrait is made in accordance with “all the truth of nature” (i). Rousseau's self-representation

will be treated further in chapter 3 where Coetzee's dismantling of it can be read as a preparation for his own autofictional approach. For now it suffices to say that whereas autobiography suffers an old life crisis, "[experiencing] a loss of sovereignty of the self" (Boyle 8) due to how texts are currently interpreted and received, autofiction is not just conscious of this shift in balance but *celebrates* it.

Autofiction imparts, as Boyle puts it, "a valorization of the imagination" (ibid. 18). While the images they produce are often referentially meaningless there is still meaning to what is made up. Or as P. M. Wetherill puts it in her introduction to Ernaux's *La Place* (1987 [1983]),

Whilst fiction may contain autobiographical material, this soon ceases to be relevant. A book's meaning comes from the way in which lived experience may be distorted, reworked and combined with impersonal and purely invented elements (2).

As the authors included in this essay demonstrate, as points of reference to a reality outside of their work, they themselves are mere starting blocks for fictionalized endeavors into questions of greater significance. Rather than developing autofiction's "self-fashioning" properties (Schmitt 129), that is, deliberately mapping the *auto*, or the self, in "autofiction", the authors included here demonstrate that, as Marcus suggests, "the 'fictional'" within the autobiographical text opens up "space for more general identifications" (280).

Evidently, it would be amiss solely to classify autofictional techniques and strategies as "confusing". This sweeping assessment risks obscuring the question why these (deliberate) aesthetic and structural decisions are made in the first place. Autofiction is, as Srikanth suggests, "only 'hybrid' or 'phantasmatic' "or 'deceptive' if it purports to be two contradictory things at once" (352-3). That is, rather than being understood purely as a contradictory hybridization or amalgam of fiction and non-fiction, autofiction should be treated as a *separate* genre. A genre in which authors are driven by an ambition not merely to destabilize existing conventions in fictive and nonfictive discourses but to utilize them for their own purposes.

Followingly, self-effacing autofiction demotes the role of the self and elevates the status of imagination and wider identification. Yet this does not explain why authors use the form of autofiction in the first place. Part of the explanation can be gleaned by turning to another critical strain of autofiction – psychoanalysis.

2.3 Psychoanalysis

The history of the “inward journey” uniting autobiography and autofiction spans from apology to confession to psychology; “from Augustine to Freud” (Marcus 235). Autofiction is generally understood as a product of a wider socio-cultural movement renouncing Enlightenment ideals. The wide spread of psychoanalysis, not least in modernist literature, undermined any alleged possession of stable, reliable self-knowledge. Similarly, autofiction often takes the uncertainty of memory that has made autobiography, in its conventional sense, impossible as its own point of departure.

Importantly, Freudian psychoanalysis did not merely bring to the fore self-involved personality styles like narcissists or neurotics; it also, and necessarily, encouraged an individualized understanding of being – that of selfhood. As a literary theme, psychoanalysis has grown near synonymous with contemporary autofiction, enjoying a central role in the works of Ben Lerner, Christine Smallwood, Chris Kraus and many others. It is conceivable that the self-absorbed nature of autofiction – often grouped together with other supposed solipsistic communicative means like social media or blogs – harks back to the self-oriented therapeutic discourses promoted and facilitated by psychoanalytically informed practices.

It should be said that critics employ psychoanalytic perspectives not to analyze the writing subject (although that happens too), but to suggest how psychoanalytical thought models shed light on the self-analytical aspects of autofiction. For instance, Dix suggests that the use of the present tense in first-person autofiction indicates a greater connectedness with the subconscious. For Doubrovsky, if he is to be trusted, the self-exploratory, even cathartic, dimension of autofiction made its diffusion to readers secondary to the process of writing. This is certainly not to say that novels or autobiographies are incapable of destabilizing the narrative through depictions or allusions to psychological interiority; quite the opposite, autofiction appropriates these fictive and non-fictive techniques. Yet unlike novelistic or autobiographical uses of psychological and psychoanalytical discourses, commonly reserved for plot or character development or to contrast a former version with one’s current (and usually more successful) self, autofiction makes psychoanalysis central to the narrative; it often builds on and *thematizes* psychoanalytic processes as literary ends within themselves.

The autofiction in this essay aligns only partially with this generic convention. While the narration is partly immediate, frequently, it is also impassive (Isherwood), sparse (Cusk) or

indirect (Coetzee). Any therapeutic properties the narratives may have are hampered by the authors' disinclination to share too much, or even any, of their protagonists' interiority. Thus, if we accept the conceptualization of autofiction as a genre in which authors give their creativity over to the analysis of the self, the authors included here (besides Isherwood) appear to write *against* conventional autofiction.

In what ways, then, does self-effacing autofiction employ this central tenet of autofiction (psychoanalysis)? One answer is that it invites the presence of the *Other*. That is, the space the authors leave open for others to negotiate or reflect their protagonists' identities could indicate a proximity with Jacques Lacan's hierarchical ordering of the collective symbolic order, especially regarding his conception about the "other". The other consists of two parts: the "little" and the "big" other. Put simply, the little other exists solely in the subject's mind. The subject (in our case the author) projects their own misgivings or entreaties towards the "subject supposed to know" [*sujet supposé savoir*] (Johnston 5), constituting a form of analytic transference. But as Johnston points out, there is also a real component to otherness. The big, or capital "O", other is a "real", proximate alterity that is nevertheless distant; it exists as an enigma for the subject. Taking Boyle's considerations about readerly participation and autofiction's ostensibly less controlling aspects into account, translated to this essay, it could be argued that the authors consult or defer to readers the role of the "little other" or as co-analysts whose objective becomes to interpret the text. Equally, the "big other" can be employed more directly *within* the narrative embodied by the foreign characters our withdrawn protagonists encounter. These characters are capable of mirroring, unsettling, or complicating the authors' self-portraits by superimposing them with (competing) stories of their own.

Yet psychoanalytic thought models can only take us so far. Overt focus on the fragmented, contradictory and constructed nature of the self to problematize truth-telling must, for instance "be distinguished from [autofiction's] rhetorical resources" (Hughes 576). Seeing as the novel and autobiography are both capable of destabilizing notions about truth and self-knowledge it becomes imperative not to conceal "autofiction's uniqueness—the juxtaposition and conflation of fictionality and actuality" (Srikanth 349). What is necessary is thus a turn towards the process of writing.

2.4 Linguistics

In addition to being interrogated on the grounds of fallible recollection and the limitations of the psyche, the individual capacity for self-insight has been challenged from a *linguistic* viewpoint. Indeed, several critics have dismantled any easy opposition between “real” and fictive representations of lived experience and individual interiority. Distinctions between autobiography and fiction have been deconstructed with regards to the intrinsic restrictions of language and writing. The referentiality which autobiography rests upon in its claims of veracity, and which ostensibly separates it from fiction, has, for instance, been questioned by poststructuralist thinkers like Paul de Man and Roland Barthes.

Rather than recapitulating a referential exterior, de Man asserts that the author of autobiography is in the hands of the “technical demands of self-portraiture” (920). Barthes was not late to illustrate this discrepancy in his seminal essay “The Death of the Author” (1967) where he extends de Man’s considerations about textuality to include not just literary techniques but indeed language as a whole. Autofiction does not merely concede to the objection that self-construction is necessarily discursive, but happily accepts textuality as a potent site for self-construction. Yet by disambiguating itself from conventional autofiction by diminishing the role of the protagonist, self-effacing autofiction seizes on another aspect of discursivity than self-presentation – dialogism.

Dialogism is the result of the Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin’s endeavor to understand “human utterance[s]” (Todorov ix), oral and written, as “speech genres” (Bakhtin 82). Bakhtin stresses that human utterances are not, as they are often considered, “individual nor infinitely variable” (Todorov x) but contingent on pre-existent grammatical form and the historical context. An utterance’s dialogic property is thus its *intertextuality*: its dialogue with prior discourses. It is only by drawing on previous ideas, terms and concepts that new ones can emerge. Self-effacing autofiction can, for instance, be seen as emerging out of a dialogue with conventional autofiction. Moreover, as with Lacan’s “other” there are also less theoretical manifestations of dialogism. The autofiction suggested here exemplifies this “concrete” dialogism by having its protagonists’ identities emerge not from interior monologue but externalized (and fictionalized) dialogue.

Whether rooted in the psychology or linguistics, there now exists a general critical consensus that to construct a self “productively explored,” it is imperative, as Shirley Jordan suggests, that “the distinctions between truth and fiction are shattered” (76). Yet implicit in the term

“productively” lies another aspect of autofiction deserving of our attention, namely the demand for artistic reinvention.

2.5 Autofiction and Creativity

To this point, theories and assessments about autofiction have primarily concerned selfhood. In all fairness the essentiality of the self is to be expected given the origin and pretense of the genre. A work in which the writer or a version of him or herself is not projected at all cannot, in my view, be a work of autofiction. To be sure, the initial definition of autofiction laid out in this section (that it is recognizable by blending autobiographical details with fictional components) would allow for even a minimal presence on behalf of the author’s fictionalized self. Yet, with a few exceptions, the techniques with which such effacement has been achieved is underexplored. A common position held by critics is that autofiction whilst dis-aggrandizing the notion of individual exemplarity nevertheless constitutes a “vigorous reassertion of the self” (Ferreira-Meyers 29). Seen this way, the genre jettisons a doubtful and epistemically labyrinthine postmodernist relationship to the self in favor of a more confident position. I suggest that another conception of autofiction recognizing its opposite, a vigorous removal of the self, is needed – an understanding which does not merely allow but endorses this economic variety of the genre.

Apart from availing itself of matters like fictionality and non-fictionality; psychology or subjectivity, any definition of autofiction benefits from reviewing its material history. Other than the occasional derogatory epithet like “solipsism” or “non-literariness”, autofiction is frequently rated more favorably. As we have seen, labels denoting autofiction’s innovation can be regarded as exclusionary. Yet another way of considering autofiction’s novelty is, as Andreas Rackwitz points out, alongside the category of “creativity [in the] context of late capitalist society” (164). Ricarda Menn conceptualizes late capitalism with regards to culture and art as a social organizational form characterized by an unceasing demand for *aestheticization*, and a *reign of the new*. If we accept autofiction as a literary mode in which “the narrated self is not a fixed, factual entity, but instead conceptualized through fictive and narrative strategies [...] the narrating self is subject to ongoing negotiation and *reinvention*” (164, emphasis added). Pioneering the life-writing genre by shedding referentiality, autofiction thus “appears as symptomatic for a contemporary culture constantly striving for originality” (ibid.). Greater focus on the self becomes not just an individual aesthetic or formal choice but

can also be understood as a response driven by public demand for constant reanimation. By “ordering a life through writing” (Menn 167) autofiction enables both a deeper sense of selfhood as well as epitomizing a desire for the author to recast or reimagine a former or present self. Quite opposite to Barthes’ position, then, in most cases, self-invention as a means of staging and performing authorship outside their conventional art (writing novels) in fact increases authors’ visibility rather than bringing about their “death”. The author’s presence becomes “real” and competes as the object of analysis with the narrative situation.

In this essay I look at three autofictions doing something rather different. Contrary to what most conventional autofiction is about, the self, the works included here deliberately decrease their authors’ visibility. While the authors do not drop the charting of their own selves or subsume them to fiction completely, their respective identities emerge primarily by being reflected in others. By relating their own stories and circumstances through the lives of their fellow man these writers create potential surfaces of identification not just for themselves, but for their readers too. Regardless of their reasons for doing so, the “disciplinary, ascetic process” exemplified by these authors thus becomes directed towards “focusing on the ‘sum of humanity” rather than the sum of the individual (Jensen 66).

2.6 Plan of the Work

Before getting into the analysis of the three authors of this essay, a few words should be said about the corpus. Although they have not used the term to describe their narratives themselves, including contemporary writers like Cusk and Coetzee whose works are frequently labeled “autofiction” is fairly unproblematic. I have picked them as the specific type of autofiction they represent demonstrates that the scope of autofiction is now well beyond Doubrovsky’s initial definition denoting autofiction as a genre characterized by introspection and nominal identity. In fact, Cusk and Coetzee appear to be – as far as their self-occluding modes of narration allow them to be – outright critical towards several self-referential genres like autofiction and their techniques.

Of course, the decision to include Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* – a novel written and published well before autofiction, as we now know it, existed – is less self-evident. I have chosen to do so not only because I endorse the practice of reconsidering narratives previously known as fictions or non-fictions as autofiction but also because *Goodbye* is apt for

demonstrating what autofiction has inherited in terms of fictionalized self-referentiality. Moreover, *Goodbye* is favorably read as a precursor to self-abnegating autofiction.

Finally, I have attempted, with regards to the discussion above about what counts as autofiction and who is qualified to write it, to bring narratives from vastly different contexts and from equally different writers into a usable synthesis. Yet I am sure that there are several narratives that could have replaced them or been added to and complicated the list. The type of autofiction outlined here merely constitutes one (underexplored) way of looking at the genre. Rather than being taken as a definite impress on the dynamic critical conversation about autofiction, this essay should be read as a call for future research complicating conclusions drawn here and elsewhere about autofiction's limitations and possibilities.

The first two chapters of the analysis will treat autofiction in which the ostensible central characters are occluded to depict and dramatize primarily *social* histories and issues. In chapter 1, I will turn to a work originally marketed as a novel which has been retrospectively considered an autofiction, Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*. Isherwood, the Englishman turned exile, habitually conceals the interpretative presence of his homonymic narrator-protagonist. Christopher Isherwood the character is an on-looker impassively recording rather than actively participating in events occurring with the social backdrop of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's rise to power in 1930's Berlin. Relatedly, and importantly, he hides his character's (and indirectly his own) sexuality. This occlusion of a fundamental part of his character's identity will be explored considering the narrative's setting, Berlin, and place of publication, Isherwood's native England. Isherwood's concealment notwithstanding, I suggest that the identity of his double can be gleaned through the lives and stories of other characters and through his portrayal of the wider conditions for the marginalized groups he records.

Chapter 2 looks at how Cusk defies autofiction's conventions through her fictionalized protagonist's virtual absence from the narrative. For the most part, what we get are one-sided records of her character's various encounters. Yet through these monological "conversations" a certain pattern emerges shaping what is one of the trilogy's key elements – the theme of womanhood, and specifically women's roles, their possibilities and restrictions within the literary world. The two Britons thus occlude their characters' – and in extension their own – presence to critically consider and dramatize various social phenomena affecting not just their lives but the lives of countless others. Although their concealment is certainly mirrored by

narrative *form*, something which I will analyze in each chapter, these structural (in the sociological sense of the word) areas of interest are equally discernable on the level of *content*.

In chapter 3, J. M. Coetzee negates the anticipated importance of his, too, namesake main character. Compared to Isherwood and Cusk, Coetzee's self-effacement in *Summertime* centers around a different topic, a topic in which content and form intertwine, namely *writing* itself. Set in South Africa during apartheid, *Summertime* certainly does not lack the historical resources or social tensions to produce a similar autofiction to that of Isherwood or Cusk. Indeed, questions of social inequality connected to racial issues, primacy and heritage permeate Coetzee's narrative. Nevertheless, the inroads into questions of social and literary interest of the people standing in for him are equally contingent on *textuality* and *narrativity*, that is on *how* the stories are told, as they are on social topicality, or what the stories are about.

3. It is I and it is Not I

In a note to the reader in *Lions and Shadows* (2013 [1938]) Christopher Isherwood engages in a preemptive discussion of “what this book is not: it is not, in the ordinary journalistic sense of the word, an autobiography; it contains no ‘revelations’; it is never ‘indiscreet’; it is not even entirely ‘true’” (xv). Already in 1938, then, we get an early paratextual example of autofictional negotiation or foregrounding. In *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood fictionalizes his school friends W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Edward Upward, moving between the particular and the wider – albeit exclusive – experience of a Cambridge education. The book is supposed to be read as an intimate account which nevertheless is not to be taken word for word.

This final point is returned to in the foreword to Isherwood’s next novel, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). Here Isherwood prefaces the volume as forming a “roughly continuous narrative” and a “loosely connected sequence of diaries and sketches” (vi):

Because I have given my own name to the ‘I’ of this narrative, readers are certainly not entitled to assume that its pages are purely autobiographical, or that its characters are libellously exact portraits of living persons. ‘Christopher Isherwood’ is a convenient ventriloquist’s dummy, nothing more (ibid.).

Isherwood evidently wished to anticipate any “purely autobiographical” reading of his novel. More than a sign of an anxiously controlling author, Isherwood’s preambles are tell-tale signs of the then still existing novelty surrounding fictionalized autobiography. Few readers would have been aware of the techniques and considerations surrounding the autobiographical novel, later applied to autofiction.

Yet Isherwood not only denies any supposed identity between himself and his narrator, he also sets “Christopher” forth as a “dummy,” a virtually non-human vessel. But a vessel for whom, one might ask. Who is pulling the strings, and what is their part in the story told? Why is Isherwood going to such lengths to purportedly extrapolate himself from a narrator sharing his name? Why not settle for an autobiography or an outright novel? What are, in other words, Isherwood’s reasons for engaging the novel autofictionally? The present chapter seeks to

engage these questions, among others, to shed some light on Isherwood's reasons, formal and private, for making *Goodbye to Berlin* a work of autofiction.

3.1 Sexuality, writing and law

A "notorious keeper of diaries" (Page 38), Isherwood wrote journal entries to "create period atmosphere" (*Christopher and His Kind* 42) for his Berlin novels. Many of these he regretfully "left out" (ibid.) or falsified when writing the novels. Being forced to burn or otherwise discard them for fear of persecution was naturally frustrating. The resentment and apprehension that Isherwood felt concerning his vulnerability as a homosexual writer in 1930s Berlin and London is easily comprehensible. As James Fenton notes, in their competition over who would be published first, Auden – Isherwood's close friend and intermittent lover – wrote in his 1937 "Letter to Lord Byron", that, "I must be quick if I'm to get my oar in / Before his revelations bring the law in" (*Lions and Shadows* vii).

Auden's seemingly half jocular, half serious mention of "the law" might well reflect his and Isherwood's apprehension regarding what disclosures of their private affairs could entail. Homosexual activity in Britain at the time was of course illegal and prohibitions extended into the realm of literature. Under the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, authors and publishers were indictable for issuing texts that were sexually explicit. The criteria of the law were glaringly vague, classifying obscenity as "whether the tendency... is to deprive and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences" (Schatz-Jakobsen 49). Transgressions that prior to the law's passing had been treated as common law misdemeanors were henceforth included in statutory law and criminalized. Illustrating this fact Auden's poem was written only "a generation after the trial and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde" (*Lions and Shadows* viii). Texts like *Ulysses* (1921) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) both passed the bar after their respective rulings had deemed the authorial intentions and the "dominant effect of the work[s]" (ibid.) literary and morally righteous. Yet this did not mean that any general loosening of the legal strictures followed until well into second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, these were publishing houses tried for printing books depicting *heterosexual* romance; the fictional treatment of homosexuality in England was thus looked upon as edgy and risky by British publishers who, apart from potentially facing legal procedures, feared public outrage and commercial losses.

Due to his sexuality, as well as that of his many friends of whom he wrote about, Isherwood thus had a very important reason not to posit that his “[n]arrator [was] in every respect, himself” (*Christopher and His Kind* 185): his career and livelihood depended on it. Rather, for a long period his whole enterprise was a balancing act. On one hand he was writing for his “kind”, i.e., his friends, literary colleagues and readers who would have known full well about his sexuality. For instance, Isherwood enjoyed a close correspondence with E. M. Forster, who sent him a typescript of *Maurice*, Forster’s fictionalized Bildungsroman, for review and possibly validation from a younger peer. Members of this social and professional sphere would have expected Isherwood, who was part of a generation following that of the already progressive Bloomsbury Group, to write in a manner which recognized and furthered the codes and existence of queer communities. For Isherwood, this commitment involved the representation of outright homosexual romance, examples of which we will return to shortly. On the other, Isherwood was pressured to maintain a degree of respectability and conformity in his writing by his wider readership without immediate knowledge about or who chose to ignore his sexuality. Bred in an aristocratic background, Isherwood had several reasons to fear that any overt indication of his narrators’ sexualities would cause a great scandal and private embarrassment for himself and his family, despite any conflict he had with them.

Isherwood certainly was not alone in this quandary, no less in England than in Germany. For instance, his German superior, Thomas Mann’s – with whom Isherwood kept tangential company – creativity grew out of a “colossal act of repression”.³ Indeed, many queer writers across Europe during this time lived and worked out of “glass closets” (Sobolczyk 330). That is, Piotr Sobolczyk claims, a position from which the public knew which writers had “nonconformist sexualities” yet acted as if no one, including the authors themselves, knew (ibid.). One such figure was Forster who despite advocating for fictional renditions of homosexuality, seeing its existence as just another “among the many other facts of life” (cited in Page 39), avoided its “pornographic treatment” (ibid.). Emblematic of his generation’s and his own residual reticence, *Maurice*, which includes gay romance, famously was not published until after Forster’s death in 1971. Facing similar dilemmas to those of Mann and Forster, constructing protagonists with whom his readers could identify while simultaneously having them retain enough subjectivity to render their world and the people inhabiting them “lifelike” were thus some of Isherwood’s foremost challenges (*Christopher and His Kind* 84).

³ Seamus Perry, “Closet Virtuoso,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 44, no. 4, February 24, 2022.

That these considerations were pressing issues for Isherwood when recounting his Berlin years is evident from his later memoir *Christopher and His Kind* (1976). Sharing his professional views on form and narratology, Isherwood suggests that his narrators' unobtrusiveness in *Mr Norris* and *Goodbye* encourages the reader to project themselves and their own views onto his inchoate characters. To create these projective surfaces, the narrator-characters' reactions and attitudes could not altogether deviate, Isherwood argues, from those of the "ordinary reader" (ibid. 185). If they did, any attempted identity with the reader would fail and their difference would become unbridgeable. Understandably, Isherwood feared that wider knowledge about his sexuality would warrant such an outcome and jeopardize his career. His solution became to downplay his own identity, and thus his sexuality, in his literary alter egos. He "wasn't prepared," in other words, "to admit that the Narrator was homosexual" (ibid. 186).

3.2 Travel and Berlin

Wishing to escape the restraints of England, Isherwood sought out Berlin together with Auden as it was one of the most, if not *the* most, exciting cities for artists. Avant-gardism flourished through domestic strains such as Bauhaus architecture and foreign experimentalism from writers such as William Plomer or artists like Marsden Hartley and Francis Bacon. These were creatives relocating to the German capital "just as, a few years earlier their slightly older counterparts had headed for Paris" (Page 3). Moreover, Berlin's pull was bolstered by its social climate. The city attracted foreign tourists in the millions, a good portion of whom being undoubtedly attracted by the city's "richly deserved reputation for sexual permissiveness" and for its "diverse sexual underworld" (Page 8). Versions of the latter is conjured in *Goodbye* in which Christopher navigates the city's cabaret clubs where screaming boys in drag play on the city's reputation for decadence.

A travel-enthusiast, Isherwood had several reasons for journeying across the English Channel. For Isherwood, the sheer notion of travel had for long been conflated with ideas of romance. Lovemaking in new environments is arguably one of the most intoxicating experiences promised by travel, and Isherwood's characters, Paul Fussell points out, "always find it abroad" (114). Indeed "for Christopher, Berlin meant boys" (*Christopher and His Kind* 2). While London "fed", as his narrator describes it in *Lions and Shadows*, "my place-romanticism and my boundless dreams of travel," (67) it did not fulfil the promises of eroticism for a native

homosexual. In a Freudian reading of Isherwood's impulse to leave the country, Fussell suggests that it may have been spurred by his mother's regulation of his sexual behavior. Isherwood will certainly have felt these restrictions and returns frequently in his memoir to his rejection of not just England, but his mother's England specifically – “the England of Nearly Everybody” (*Christopher and His Kind* 164). Isherwood's father died a war-hero in the First World War. Hence, there were expectations that Isherwood, “a healthy English male”, would further the “marital and dynastic ambitions demanded of a member of the English landed gentry” (Page 39-40). Given the complex composition of Isherwood's personal history, I concur with Page's suggestion that to wholly ascribe Isherwood's departure from England to sexual desire, as Isherwood does, is misleading. For one, his artistry depended on it: Isherwood's academic and aristocratic background left him with little experience with which to distinguish himself from other young men nurturing a similar literary ambition. The notion of gathering experiences from his travels likely did not just excite Isherwood privately but were probably appealing for his art, too.

In *Goodbye to Berlin*, we get a more weathered and matured artist reconsidering travel through his narrator,

[h]ow many seas and frontiers shall I have to cross to reach that distant day; how far shall I have to travel, on foot, on horseback, by car, push-bike, aeroplane, steamer, train, lift, moving-staircase, and tram? How much money shall I need for that enormous journey? (11).

The listing of means of transportations and their costs are followed with an equally materialist reflection regarding the amount of food, clothes, shoes, cigarettes and beverages the narrator shall have to consume and expend on his travels. “What an awful tasteless prospect!” he adds, yet turns with, “[a]nd yet – to have to die...” (ibid.). Christopher's cogitations exhibit Isherwood's romanticism (“the enormous journey”), existentialism and realism weighted in the scales. The ambivalence emanating off the page may well have been the result of Isherwood's fascination with Charles Baudelaire. For Isherwood, who, prior to travelling to Berlin, had been assigned with translating the French poet's *Journaux Intimes*, Baudelaire was “one of the first writers of ‘the poetry of departure’” (cited in Parker 158). Isherwood related to the Frenchman's “longing for escape—from the nineteenth century and himself” and who had wondered

similarly, “when [...] shall we set sail for happiness?” (ibid.) Yet, with another turn of the screw, Christopher’s contemplation is interrupted, as is suggested by the ellipsis, as “[a] sudden vague pang of apprehension grips my bowels and I have to excuse myself in order to go to the lavatory” (ibid.). In a few lines, Isherwood moves the reader from the romantic to the realistic; from the material to the immensely ungraspable, before ending crudely with a visit to the loo. The drastic maneuvering between the existential and the mundane, down to level of excrements, is not dissimilar from the prose style of contemporary autofiction like that of Karl-Ove Knausgård.

Although promises of liberation resided in Berlin, “the erotic capital of the world” at the time (Fussell 113), blatant honesty about his life there was impossible in Isherwood’s craft. He repeatedly needed to alter details of his lived experiences – his creative wellspring. In *Goodbye*’s fourth chapter, “The Nowaks”, for instance, Christopher moves in with the character Otto and his impoverished yet hospitable Polish family. The Nowak’s home was one of Isherwood’s first lodgings in Berlin in 1930. For the novel, however, it made more sense if the episode was pushed forward to 1931. This change in chronology enabled the introduction of more important characters at earlier stages of the novel. More importantly, however, it gave Isherwood a window with which to construct a suitable reason for knowing Otto. Since the fictional Isherwood is not overtly homosexual he would need another reason for living with his adolescent partner. Thus, in the story, the implicit motive for Isherwood’s move is that he is poor, giving him a “respectable motive” to be close to Otto (*Christopher and His Kind* 51).

3.3 Homosexuality and narration

Clearly if Isherwood wanted to avoid self-deceit, then his narrator-characters could have no sexual encounters of their own. He thus acceded to his characters’ sex-lessness and inevitable statuses as “demi-character[s]” (*Christopher and His Kind* 186). In another example of his protagonist’s lack Isherwood’s famous character Sally Bowles’ pronounces to Christopher, “I’ve wanted you to like me ever since we first met. But I’m glad you’re not in love with me, because, somehow, I couldn’t possibly be in love with you” (*Goodbye* 38). Sally’s snubbing of Christopher as a romantic object could well be understood as a dismissal of his impassiveness.

Reinforcing this notion is the frequently cited opening to *Goodbye* in which Christopher states, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (8). Using the camera metaphorically as a mode of narration reflects, firstly, the wider circulation, greater

familiarity and private ownership of the optical instrument during the twentieth century. The proliferation of images, still and moving, enabled by a rapidly developing technology revolutionized visual perception – all of which would have certainly interested Isherwood who became a dedicated cinephile during his time in Berlin. Secondly, the impersonal and objective style of narration which dictates parts of Isherwood’s novel was indeed suitable for concealing his narrator’s sexuality. It gave him a metaphoric lens through which both his experiences and person was filtered. And thirdly, it added a dimension of complexity to Isherwood’s writing aligning with modernist aesthetics of the time.

One typically modernist feature of the novel is its refutation of previous modes of narration. By invoking the medium of the camera, the novel reflected the “visual turn that the century had taken” (Patra 569). In fact, many modernists adhered to “visual regimes” (Armstrong 109). Sight was the privileged mode of perceptive awareness in the works of seminal authors like T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner, both of whom embraced the aesthetics of the perspective-oriented Cubist movement to explore primarily the Western world during a time of increasing fragmentation. Alongside authors of equal stature like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and indeed Forster, they represented intricately the introspective, psychological and epiphanic perception with which their characters navigated their way through modernity.

Isherwood employs a bit of both in *Goodbye* as the narrative is rooted firmly in the sight and mind of his eponymous narrator. For example, Christopher witnesses a procession pass for the former German Social Democrat chancellor, Hermann Müller, alongside Sally and her boyfriend, Clive, from their balcony, deciding internally that

[w]e had nothing to do with those Germans down there, marching, or with the dead man in the coffin.... In a few days, I thought, we shall have forfeited all kinship with ninety-nine per cent of the population of the world, with the men and women who earn their living, who insure their lives, who are anxious about the future of their children (52).

The passage shows how Isherwood recurrently records scenes “[w]ithdrawn into vantages like the balcony rather than immersed in the spectacle” (Burroughs Price 659). This leaves us with incomplete accounts contingent on the angles his perception allows him (and us). Moreover, quotes such as this one established Isherwood as “an outsider, a nonjoiner” (*Christopher and*

His Kind 100). While he was commended for his “sharp camera eye,” Isherwood felt interrogated for not actively participating but merely dwelling “lukewarm-bloodedly” in his alleged “focal depth” (*Christopher and His Kind* 58).

To treat Isherwood’s novel merely as a “third-person objective narrative device”, however, is to overlook how he applied the technique for the “crucial role of visuality” (Patra 565). The camera is an authorial perspective employed to document homosexuality – albeit from a distance and without the intention of getting involved. Rather than transmitting unadulterated events as they occurred, Isherwood’s camera-like narration is, Umasankar Patra points out, “in the service of the novelistic” (566). As we have already seen, Isherwood’s affinity with or reliance on external reality as his source material is inextricably connected to his habit of dramatizing his experiences. As several critics have noted, what he needed was to have at least some factual part to start from that he could then tamper with and reconstruct indefinitely.

For example, on vacation on Rügen, a popular island getaway in the Baltics, Christopher befriends the quarreling lovers Peter and Otto. The chapter is based on a trip Isherwood took in the summer of 1931 together with Auden, Spender and his lover, Walter. Several of the recorded experiences between Peter and Otto are thus autobiographical – there are even well-preserved photographs of Isherwood and Walter together. Yet all are fictionalized to represent Isherwood’s current relationship in front of a third party, namely Spender. Otto and Peter are drawn as each other’s opposites. While the young Otto “is his whole body; Peter is only his head” (*Goodbye* 81). As Isherwood teasingly puts it, in his narrativized admiration of the young Pole’s physique, “‘Christopher Isherwood,’ the narrator... nearly gives himself away” (*Christopher and His Kind* 42).

Peter is equally infatuated as he is irritable with Otto for his zeal. In the latter’s absence Peter and Christopher discuss the former two’s relationship.

‘I thought it couldn’t last,’ said Peter gloomily. ‘This is the beginning. You’ll see.’

‘Nonsense, Peter. The beginning of what? It’s quite natural that Otto should want to dance sometimes. You mustn’t be so possessive.’

‘Oh, I know, I know. As usual, I’m being utterly unreasonable ... All the same, this is the beginning ...’ (ibid. 86)

It is not difficult to imagine similar conversations between Isherwood and Spender about Walter but with the roles reversed – i.e., with Spender consoling Isherwood. That is, Peter’s lament over envisioning the beginning of the end for him and Otto was really Isherwood’s rue. Equally, when Isherwood writes that it is “natural for Peter often to feel bored with Otto – they have scarcely a single interest in common” he is describing his own feelings (90); when Peter worries about his expenses as he constantly showers Otto with gifts for his affection, it is Isherwood’s worry that is represented, etc. Reading the chapter with this hunch makes for a slightly confusing experience as, for instance, Peter (i.e., Isherwood) concedes to Christopher’s (i.e., Spender’s) suggestion that he should leave Otto: “I’m sorry, Christopher ... You’re absolutely right, I know. If I were in your place, I’d say the same thing” (98). The irony that Isherwood in fact was in Peter’s place scarcely needs mention.

Isherwood likely felt little to no shame displaying his affection for Otto before Auden given their own history of intimacy. In front of Spender, however, Isherwood experienced his relationship as “one of apology and embarrassment” (*Christopher and His Kind* 45). A literary colleague, countryman and friend that he greatly admired, Isherwood describes how his awareness of Spender’s heterosexuality made him feel “pulled in two opposite directions” (ibid.). As Parker suggests, “While Isherwood needed an audience when things were going well with Walter, he did not much care to have a close friend such as Spender witnessing his jealousy and humiliation” when the young Pole went of his own accord (195). Spender was in fact supportive of Isherwood’s exile and his work. Still, Isherwood did not lend his personal subjectivity and desire to his narrator. As we have already established, such admissions were always improbable due to their social, financial and potentially legal repercussions.

...

During his time in Berlin, Isherwood was working on a novel that would combine several of his experiences and the people they involved into one great structure. The book, whose working title was “The Lost”, had as its leitmotif a general consciousness of the “mental, economic and ideological bankruptcy of the world” (*Christopher and His Kind* 177) among outright victims of Nazi violence and those that had “committed the unpardonable crime of having been found out” (ibid.). Accepting the fact that he could not make the novel cohere, Isherwood “realized that he simply wanted to describe his life as he had lived it” (ibid. 212). He wished to comment on it, not transfigure it into a “melodrama” (ibid.). Followingly, his novel never came to fruition.

Rather, most of Isherwood's early works are, as Norman Page suggests, "inevitably, autobiographical" (37).

I would add that Isherwood's works are not purely autobiographical but *autofictional*. Throughout his authorship, Isherwood maintains a distance to his protagonists. His breakout novel, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935), follows the narrator William Bradshaw – a composite of Isherwood's aristocratic two middle names; "a foolish evasion," Isherwood claims, but one in which "the evasiveness is in the Narrator's nature, not in his name" (*Christopher and His Kind* 187). Similarly, *Lions and Shadows* (1938), about a younger Christopher, and in which Isherwood refuses the homodiegetic "I", "makes frontier-crossings into fiction in the same way that his fiction constantly strays into autobiography or history" (Page 50). Isherwood's later novel, *A Single Man* (1964), sees him fictionalize his narrator-character, but seemingly only his name as "George" leads a life very much like Isherwood's own as a university lecturer in Los Angeles. Even in *Christopher and His Kind*, in which he ostensibly aims to achieve truthfulness insofar as it is possible, Isherwood refuses the first person. Instead, he invokes yet another iteration of his third person Christopher when retracing his life. As Peter Parker suggests, despite his intentions with each respective work, Isherwood slipped almost compulsively into "fictionalized autobiography" (37). He continuously dramatized or reinvented some episodes of his life, renamed certain people while retaining their recognizability and maintained a once sympathetic or otherwise scornful distance to his younger or even current self. Thus, while he traversed from caginess to candor regarding a significant part of his identity, his sexuality, Isherwood's distance from his literary selves persisted.

We have already been over a few reasons why Isherwood could not write openly sooner. Yet a less flattering way of thinking about this is that, for a writer, Isherwood's powers of invention were weak. In his memoir, Isherwood grants that his tendency to fiction was roused after an apprenticeship in the film industry with the Jewish director Berthold Viertel. Although deriving pleasure from putting together the latter, and weaker, part of *Mr Norris Changes Trains*'s descent into bizarre and fictional espionage, Isherwood ultimately regretted it "as being a kind of betrayal" (*Christopher and His Kind* 187). Without specifying exactly what the betrayal was, it is implicit that the overt fictionalization deviated from the novel's design, i.e., as a dynamic yet veracious portrait of Berlin. Yet neither would an entirely realist narrative satisfy Isherwood's novelistic ambitions. While he claims to have abandoned his original project, there

are nevertheless notable traces of the dramatization of the would be “The Lost” in *Goodbye to Berlin*.

Recalling the quote from earlier between Christopher, Sally and Clive, the tone is markedly different from Isherwood’s oft detached photographic narration in *Goodbye*. Following the assertion of having “forfeited all kinship with ninety-nine per cent of the world” Christopher adds ruminatively,

Perhaps in the Middle Ages people felt like this, when they believed themselves to have sold their souls to the Devil. It was a curious, exhilarating, not unpleasant sensation: but, at the same time, I felt slightly scared. Yes, I said to myself, I’ve done it now. *I am lost* (52, emphasis added).

The mixture between fatalism, exhilaration and a slight fear makes the passage far more introspective and self-disclosing than the rest of the narrative. This stylistic and tonal deviation could be explained by the extract’s origin: the chapter which the quote is taken from, “Sally Bowles”, was published independently prior to being reprinted in *Goodbye*. Yet other episodes suggest otherwise. Take Isherwood’s premonition at a garden party outside Berlin as the city is falling into the hands of the Nazi party, “all these people are ultimately doomed. The evening is the dress-rehearsal of a disaster. It is like the last night of an epoch” (174). While Isherwood points to such discontinuities in his foreword to the novel, it is conceivable that Isherwood merely kept or altered bits of writing he had intended for a different end – a novel. Indeed, Isherwood juggled several projects during his time in Berlin, shifting material between texts, reserving some and dropping others. “[I]t would be some time before [Isherwood] decided which of his experiences would be fictionalized... and which would be reserved for... non-fiction work” (Parker 192).

Redolent of Isherwood’s original scheme and readiness to fictionalize is the character Bernhard. The son of a wealthy Jewish store owner based on the real-life philanthropist Wilfrid Israel, Bernhard, too, qualifies as one of the “lost”. In passing, Christopher overhears a conversation revealing his death at the hands of the Nazis. Isherwood admits that “[t]he killing of Bernhard was merely a dramatic necessity” (*Christopher and His Kind* 71). “In a novel such as this one,” Isherwood claims, “which ends with the outbreak of political persecution, one death at least is a must” (ibid.). Coincidentally, Israel was killed alongside the remainder of his

passengers as their plane was shot down by Nazi air fighters, but that was four years after *Goodbye* had been published. Markedly different from contemporary autofiction, focusing to a great extent on private and psychological aspects of everyday life, Isherwood's fictionalization of Israel's demise catered to different literary demands. *Goodbye* was indeed written, recalling Patra's words, "in the service of the novelistic".

Patra's appreciation of the effect Isherwood's novel had for the medium should be interpreted differently, however. For Isherwood, fictionalization was not just a way of dramatizing the world. In a letter to Spender, Isherwood emphasized that a writer converting his "raw material" into fiction "must ensure that it is *used to some purpose*, not merely as a record" (cited in Parker 169-70, emphasis added). A writer should not be on the same level of understanding as his characters: he should be "up in the grandstand," seeing things in the round and cultivating his consciousness. Given time to ferment in the author's mind, a source material could carry further weight than its original instance. Parker is correct about Isherwood's emphasis that a degree of objectivity is a writerly virtue. However, he does not stress enough Isherwood's explicit claim that fiction "must" also be used purposively. The letter is in fact illustrative of Isherwood's views on writing and professional maturation.

Indicative of this final notion is Isherwood's original intention in the early 1930s, well before starting on *Goodbye*, "to write a light, funny, salable travelogue" (*Christopher and His Kind* 133) in the spirit of *Hindoo Holiday* to pay for his next decade. This was an ambition which proved difficult in practice, however. Despite the atmosphere of naïve idealization on Rügen, making its climate a "convenient metaphor for sexual permissiveness" (Page 51), politics could nevertheless "make themselves unignorably felt" (ibid.). The influx of new visitors during Christopher's is entailed by a proliferation of German city-flags, among which is the Nazi swastika flag, attached to wicker beach-chairs. Further decimating his, Peter and Otto's adolescent antics, they encounter a German doctor who is pleased with seeing the island populated with "real Nordic types!" (88). The doctor is a constant reminder of their vulnerability in Germany: seeing Otto he "smilingly announced: 'He has a criminal head!'" (91) suggesting that boys of his sort "ought to be put into labour-camps" (ibid.).

Simply classifying Isherwood's novel as, for example, modernist, then, is not enough. Rather, the purpose of its formal mediation and specific contents is better summarized as an autofictional "idiom of queer subjectivity" (Patra 566). Seen in this light, Sally's inability or unwillingness to see Christopher as a potential love interest reads not as a dismissal, but as an

allusion to her secret knowledge – and thereby as an admission from Isherwood himself – and silent approval of his sexuality. Similarly, Bernhard, with whom Christopher shares several intimate moments, appears to be able to reach some deeper level in Christopher, “I believe that you will always come back to Berlin, Christopher. You seem to belong here” (*Goodbye* 178). While Isherwood’s narrator may be characterized by his shrinking indecision or what Matthew Burroughs Price denotes as “queer detachment,” (649) complete detachment or objectivity for Isherwood, especially facing the violent rise of fascism, is impossible.

3.4 Queer detachment

Although *Goodbye* is a far cry from Isherwood’s “aggressive frankness about his own sex life” (*Christopher and His Kind* 71) to his friends and colleagues, it still repudiates domestic sexual politics. A recurring theme in Isherwood’s novel is the incredulity with which people react to Isherwood’s identity and opinions. Upon learning that Christopher sympathizes with the communists, for instance, the doctor on Rügen reacts with gleeful disbelief, “[b]ut you *can’t* be a communist! You *can’t!*” (*Goodbye* 88). Convinced by Nazi propaganda, the doctor disqualifies communism as a hallucination of the mind. The bewilderment also concerns Isherwood’s sexual status. Christopher and his companion Fritz stumble upon a group of young, very drunk Americans huddled together outside a cabaret club.

‘Say,’ he asked Fritz, ‘what’s on here?’

‘Men dressed as women,’ Fritz grinned.

The little American simply couldn’t believe it. ‘Men dressed as *women*? As *women*, hey? Do you mean they’re *queer*?’

‘Eventually we’re all queer,’ drawled Fritz solemnly (ibid. 190, emphasis original).

Eyeing Christopher and Fritz over, the American demands dumbfoundedly to know whether Christopher is queer, too, to which he, in what constitutes his narrator’s most outright admission of his covert homosexuality, responds: “[y]es... very queer indeed” (ibid.). Evidently, while Isherwood needed to strike a balance between making his narrator recognizably homosexual for some but less so for others, his scoffing remark signals his refusal to feign heterosexuality.

Despite Christopher's outward suffering from self-refusal and failure, Isherwood "scorned to make him heterosexual" (*Christopher and His Kind* 186).

The passage is revelatory, too, of *Goodbye* as a "dynamic portrait" (ibid. 187). That is, the story's central character's outer appearance is peeled off layer after layer, gradually unveiling the "real individual" existing underneath (ibid.). Like other modernist fiction and much contemporary autofiction, the novel is thus implicitly driven by this psychological expose rather than by traditional plot elements such as action or crisis.

Christopher's act of subversion is not just enacted for private reasons, however. Isherwood had broader grounds for resisting the totalizing ambition of the Nazi party. Isherwood's political alignment was, in his own words, "what party dialecticians used, in those days, to call 'unclear'" (ibid. 88). Although he sympathized with the communists, he was increasingly disenchanted by the communist party's "private feuds, its inefficiency, [and] its bewildered efforts to follow the changing tactics dictated by Moscow" (ibid. 87). Nevertheless, the incredulity and hostility which Christopher and his friends faced in addition to the increasingly precarious conditions for homosexuals and political dissidents meant there was ever only the one enemy: the Nazi party. Capturing several acts of resistance, Isherwood's narrator proclaims with sudden confidence that "the real masters of Berlin are not the Police, or the Army, and certainly not the Nazis. The masters of Berlin are the workers" (199).

While Isherwood's representations of communist defiance in *Goodbye* is often compelling, they also fill a gap in the work – that of his omitted solidarity and personal involvement with various queer communities and individuals. At times, however, Isherwood's sexuality and politics are difficult to separate. For instance, During Christopher and Fritz's farewell "tour of 'the dives'" before departing the city (*Goodbye* 189), Christopher encounters the youngster, Rudi, "a strikingly handsome boy of sixteen or seventeen" within a communist café (192). A "pathfinder," (ibid.) i.e., a messenger for an eponymous communist magazine, Rudi immediately steals Christopher's attention. While Christopher thinks both Rudi and his movement naïve, "a fascinating little world of intrigue and counter-intrigue," he nonetheless becomes a patron at the establishment (ibid.). Isherwood has later admitted being particularly attracted by foreign boys younger than himself: "Christopher was suffering from an inhibition then not unusual among upper-class homosexuals; he couldn't relax sexually with a member of his own class or nation. He needed a working-class foreigner" (*Christopher and his Kind* 3). Isherwood's narrator never pursues any form of intimate relationship with Rudi, yet probably

not because it would have been morally questionable but, again, due to the impossibility of its depiction in print. Nevertheless, Rudi lingers in Christopher's mind. Although it does not amount to an outright admission of romantic interest, towards the very end of the novel Christopher considers his destiny: "I am thinking of poor Rudi, in his absurd Russian blouse. Rudi's make-believe, story-book game has become earnest; the Nazis will play it with him" (204).

Isherwood rarely intervenes in any meaningful way against Nazi totalitarian oppression, but he does record and portray boys like Rudi's vulnerability. Getting past his initial captivation with the city's sexual openness, Isherwood recognized the transactional nature of the setting: "this was a colonial situation" (*Christopher and His Kind* 32). Old men with money purchased the services of boys who were unemployed. Similar circumstances are detailed in *Goodbye*, "[e]verybody stole. Everybody sold what they had to sell – themselves included" (187). Christopher reluctantly gives up a boy of only sixteen who have tried to scam him, and later succeeded in doing so with Sally, to the police.

I caught sight of the young man almost immediately: he was standing at the counter, by the tea-urn, cup in hand. Seen thus, alone and off his guard, he seemed rather pathetic: he looked shabbier and far younger, a mere boy. I very nearly said: 'He isn't here.' But what would have been the use? They'd have got him, anyway (ibid. 77).

As Isherwood reflects, young men and boys, "[w]hen they stole they stole stupidly and got caught" (*Christopher and His Kind* 30). As we have seen, Isherwood has been criticized for not going further than representing these conditions nor having his narrator act with greater fortitude. As Burroughs Price suggests, Isherwood's detached matter-of-factness involves a "precarious balance between attachment and disinterest" (654). His narrative technique signifies "part refusal, part acquiescence" (ibid. 656) to the things his narrator witnesses. But narrative technique, whether defensible by being evolved from an unwillingness or inability to develop his subjectivity or not, it is.

Virtually removing his self out of the equation and fictionalizing his experiences, Isherwood painstakingly elucidates a moment of dwindling Weimar decadence and homosexuality's status during this time. By virtue of remaining detached, he leaves behind unadulterated footage;

“fragments of a queer community that must be preserved for posterity” (Burroughs-Price 661). Isherwood writes as much himself. Following the opening lines about being a camera is the urge that “[s]ome day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed” (*Goodbye* 7). Writing from a position when Germany has descended deeper into expansive autocracy and violent repression, Isherwood knew that the time for him and his “kind” was not ripe for estimation. The *purpose* of his “semi-detached” (Burroughs Price 649) aesthetics concerning the climate for some of Hitler’s adversaries: Jews, communists and homosexuals, can thus be seen as a transformation of an increasingly apathetic “critical-social position into,” again, “a narrative strategy” (ibid.). Impassiveness becomes a form of resistance that defers judgment, leaving shards behind as its support. Diary snapshots of a deadly assault by S.A. men on a common protester, of boycotts against Jewish businesses or of people draped in leather straps “from the windows of railway carriages” (*Goodbye* 187) following skyrocketing inflation are all captured prosaically with mimetic precision.

Yet, there are also inconsistencies as Isherwood fails to maintain his objectivity. As with Rudi, these heartfelt moments involve depictions of those he cherishes. Upending any lasting romantic notion Christopher has about Berlin he captures how impoverished adolescent boys congregate in the “small damp black wood – the Tiergarten [...] the city, which flowed so brightly and invitingly in the night sky above the plains, is cold and cruel and dead. Its warmth is an illusion, a mirage of the winter desert. It will not receive these boys” (ibid. 185). Piecing together individual episodes and larger segments written at different points in time, the photographic structure evokes both stillness and movement. In a typical modernist fashion, it disrupts linear narration and grants space for pause and self-conscious deliberation. These are pauses that embody the politics of queer desire. By seizing the movement of the text, and of history, Isherwood highlights “the presence of the unacknowledged desiring queer body” (Patra 569). He provides insight into a multiplicity of frames outside of an increasingly oppressive and homogenizing hegemonic ideology, namely Fascism. The camera is both a medium as well as a method for Isherwood to “queerize the plot movement,” (ibid.) not with triumphant queer rhetoric, but by subtly turning the camera towards himself.

...

I started this chapter by emphasizing Isherwood’s frustration with being forced to discard his journals out of fear for his safety and their jeopardy to his profession. However, Isherwood’s

frustration over the lost entries was, as we have seen, also revelatory of the creative weight his diaries had for his writing. As the famous opening of *Goodbye* and the narrator's photographic vision implies, Isherwood's mastery is the result of his observational qualities rather than his invention. Adding a fictional narrator to rid himself of superfluous biographical detail would, in his own words "merely put his fiction at a double remove from fact" (*Christopher and His Kind* 213). Nevertheless, frequent mimetic representation does not mean that Isherwood abandons the possibility to "invent as much dialogue, as many situations and additional characters as he needed" (*Christopher and His Kind* 187). In *Goodbye*, Isherwood achieves a compelling mode of representation between verisimilitude and fiction; one that befitted his level of invention, but also enabled a felicitous level of self-disclosure.

While Christopher "admits" to being queer in *Goodbye*, the disclosure is necessarily indeterminate. Christopher's position as a "nonjoiner" was ultimately valuable for Isherwood's writing. It is not just Isherwood's narrative perspective, the camera lens, that enables the recording of various events from a specific angle. Homosexuality, too, is explored and used as a quality for Isherwood's art: it provided him with "an oblique angle of vision of the world" (Page 38). Nevertheless, Isherwood's admission still carries weight as it added an instance of homosexual visibility during a moment when forces of totalitarianism sought to eradicate it.

4. It is We, Not Me

[P]erhaps women secrete their own despair in the process of being mothers and wives. Perhaps their whole lives long, they lose their rightful kingdom in the despair of every day. Perhaps their youthful aspirations, their strength, their love, all leak away through wounds given and received completely legally. Perhaps that's what it is – that women and martyrdom go together.

— Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*

In 2001, the then relatively unknown Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* catapulted her into public renown. The memoir is relentlessly honest about the physical events and alienating experience of childbirth and motherhood. In an article, she comments on her then expectations about the book's reception.

It was my sincere belief that nobody would read it or care about it, and in all honesty I didn't blame them. I didn't particularly want anyone to read it. It had been important for me to make a record, that was all, of emotional and physical states I was unlikely to experience again⁴.

Yet *A Life's Work* was widely read and certainly divisive. Cusk was criticized both for her failures as a mother and for possibly causing the extinction of humankind altogether. A decade on another of Cusk's memoirs, *Aftermath* (2012), which is on divorce provoked similar reactions. This time, in addition to her maternal failures, readers turned on her for her perceived negligence as a wife. The themes of her non-fiction, that is femininity, domesticity and biting social satire, had also been central to her then seven novels.

Today Cusk is best known for her so-called *Outline* trilogy consisting of *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018). The series is about a female writer, Faye, around Cusk's age

⁴ Rachel Cusk, "I was only being honest," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/21/biography.women>

balancing her professional commitments with her life as a mother. Given the proximities between Cusk and her protagonist and the seemingly intimate first-person narration, several critics have labeled the novels as autofiction. Yet even though the novels are firmly rooted in Faye's point of view we learn very little about her. What we do learn is that she is an attentive listener. The narratives consist mainly of Faye listening to other peoples' stories. Interestingly, it is these one-sided "conversations" rather than intermittent personal details scattered throughout the novels that reflect Cusk's self-effacing narrator. Still, Cusk's narrator appears opinionated beneath the surface. Hence, a question that arises when reading the novels is *why* Cusk so rarely gives voice to her narrator's opinions and thoughts. Why does she refuse the conventions of the genre she is writing in? By looking closer at *Transit* and *Kudos*, this chapter attempts to shed light on these questions

One possible explanation that has already been alluded to is a potential reluctance towards unadulterated self-disclosure due to its social repercussions: give too much of your mind and you will be burnt. It is conceivable that such reactions made Cusk transition back from non-fiction to fiction. By depicting real events and persons at a fictional remove, that is through autofiction, Cusk deftly evades violating the integrity of others *and* the accountability connected to autobiographical divulgence. A second potential reason for Cusk's decision to return to fictionality concerns competing narrative forms: Cusk's largely plotless trilogy challenges not just social institutions such as marriage or family life, but also *literary* institutions like traditional narrative form. A third plausible explanation is – as was the case for Isherwood – a desire to promote identification. Cusk seems to encourage readers to live through and fill in the various "truths" her protagonist arrives at not despite their ambiguity but thanks to it. Yet as the chapter shows, Cusk also avoids self-disclosure for personal ends that go *beyond* protecting those close to her; motivations that paint a less flattering portrait of Cusk and her double, however occluded they may be.

The present chapter extends the discussion of women's autofiction from the theory section focusing on how it challenges assumptions about the textual and actual self. Special attention will be paid to two ways of conceptualizing autofiction: first, a distinction will be made between two different modes of autofictional self-appraisal in terms of tonality, namely between the writer-protagonist as *icon* or *martyr*. Related to this issue, I suggest that Cusk's position in this binary is rooted in Kierkegaardian philosophy around religiosity. And second, Cusk's autofiction will be highlighted in relationship to notions about women's persisting subjection

in the literary world; a discussion which will avail itself of how writers like Cusk subvert ideas about who counts as a literary *genius*. The present chapter considers to a lesser degree the discernable *private* reasons for Cusk's ousting of her narrator and, much like her autofiction, lifts its gaze to consider Cusk's assail on the culture and politics guiding her continual self-abnegating autofictional form in *Transit* and *Kudos*.

4.1 Icon vs. Martyr

As has been demonstrated earlier, women's autobiographical writings have been demoted historically in favor of men's accounts. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued convincingly that in order not to inhabit a place of unvaried inferiority, women's autobiographical writings should not simply "invert the exclusionary logic of the dominant tradition," (10) i.e., male autobiography, but rather depict a mapping of their own dialectical negotiations over their self-representation. Heeding this call Maria DiBattista discusses essentialization and dichotomization *within* the field of women's life-writing, an umbrella term under which we find autofiction.

DiBattista proposes that women's modes of self-appraisal during the last century have "congregated around two opposite extremes" (210). She points, on one hand, towards the self-proclaimed genius, eccentric or *icon* – an epithet that can be assigned to the likes of Gertrude Stein or Simone De Beauvoir who consider themselves and their art near inimitable. This conceptualization gains support from Jennifer Cooke who summarizes contemporary feminist life-writing as being particularly "audacious" (2). On the other, DiBattista identifies writers who consider their own characters "as aberrations" (211). That is, writers who paint themselves or their characters as outsiders unmoored from life as it is lived by outwardly normal, moral people. Some examples include Sheila Heti, Deborah Levy and Nathalie Sarraute, writers who look in on a "real world just beyond the peripheries of [their] own tormented consciousness" (*ibid.*). We can call them the *martyrs*. Tonally and formally, Cusk's autofiction ties her to this latter category. Indeed, previous criticism of the *Outline* trilogy firmly establishes Cusk's narrator as self-effacing. For instance, this strain of thought has been pursued by scholars like Pieter Vermeulen who suggests that the "affective austerity" (81) embodied by Cusk's character reflects the economic turmoil in Greece where *Outline* is set following the 2008 financial crisis.

Connected to this latter mode of martyred self-appraisal is Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's seminal notion on the development of selfhood around three stages of religiosity.

The first stage involves experiencing and appreciating the world *aesthetically*. The second concerns the erection of a less fragile framework for extracting pleasure from the world resting on *ethical* deliberations. The third and last stage builds on the former and involves cultivating a distinct, personally held faith rather than merely adopting official decrees. Although I focus on the last two stages, Cusk's trilogy and her narrator's journey mirror, I suggest, Kierkegaard's stages.

4.2 Genius

Although her restraint prose and her narrator's muteness seemingly disqualify her from labels like "audacity" Cusk's is no stranger to the "gendered response to women's transgressive behaviour" (Cooke 17). While there is nothing loud or assertive about her trilogy on the surface, Cusk conspires against Western mores in subtler ways. One arbitrary assumption about the self that Cusk confronts is the concept of *genius*. Genius is an epithet which, Cooke notes, is "not usually attributed to women as often as [it is] to men" (82). As has been stated earlier, this differentiation has rested largely on the issue of gen(d)eric distinction: autobiographers (traditionally men) are more frequent recipients of the label than memoirists (traditionally women). In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf speculated that the realm of language and syntax, even written on the page, was colored by sexual difference and that "once women became less modest about expressing the unvarnished truth about their lives" their accounts would be rendered more concise and effective than the laborious works of men (208). Throughout her compact novels, Cusk extends Woolf's prognosis *ad absurdum* by contrasting the male tendency towards excessive speech with her narrator's mute transmission of others' speech.

Rarely is this as evident as when Faye attends a literary festival. Indicating the referential strain in her novels, the topic of the panel she is on concerns books "categorised as autobiographical" (*Transit* 102). She performs together with two male colleagues who entertain each other and the audience through a seamless choreography, allowing for little to no involvement from other members of the panel; even the "Chair had missed the opportunity to intervene: the event had set off like a train without him" (93). The two writers' routine suggests that the making of genius appears to be performative as much as it has to do with recognition. Like Heti, Cusk conveys – albeit in her characteristically impassive style – that male writers

“talk themselves up all the time” with their “phoney-baloney *genius* crap” (*How Should a Person Be* 59).

Cusk’s narrator silently renders the two writers’ monologues before her presence is even acknowledged. Drawing his lengthy oration to an end, the second speaker declares that autobiographical writing is something he cannot return to. It would be: “[L]ike a dog that shits in his own bed, he said, turning and looking directly, for the first time, at me” (113). First, the crude simile seems to suggest a mordant knowingness. That is, the comment reads as an allusion towards Cusk’s non-fictions and the scandals they caused. And second, it sets Cusk’s narrator up in an awkward position.

My clothes were damp and my feet moved in water that had pooled in my shoes. The light on the stage had a blinding effect.... I said that I had brought something to read aloud.... I took the papers out of my bag and unfolded them. My hands shook with cold holding them. There was the sound of the audience settling into its seats. I read aloud what I had written. (ibid.)

by avoiding repetition of these experiences or even fictionalizing them, Cusk maintains the trilogy’s greater narrative structure and themes like passivity and defeat. Here, and elsewhere in the trilogy, Cusk denies the autofictional convention of self-divulgence by omitting not just her speech but her interiority, too. What we get is a representation of physical discomfort brought into sharp relief. Yet Cusk’s narrative strategy of self-effacement also manifests itself in how her words are presented. Cusk repeatedly occludes our knowledge about the focal character by mediating Faye’s intermittent discourse through reported speech (“I said”, “I read”, etc.) and not direct dialogue. After their panel has ended the first speaker grants Faye, “[w]e enjoyed having you in our sandwich” (ibid. 122). Flippantly, he points to his and the other writer’s ploy in relation to which she happened to be the unforeseen victim. The gap between the space the two men take up (textually and literally) compared to Cusk’s protagonist is illustrative, if not tantamount, to the historical quelling of women’s autobiographical writings in favor of men’s accounts.

If it was not bad enough that the category of genius seemingly exists in a realm unattainable for a woman, *he* does so, additionally, by violating her idiosyncrasies. Nina Power suggests that the contemporary genius, while still a “he,” is feminized. The “great artist” typically possesses

perceived feminine characteristics like imagination, intuition, emotion, even madness, without “of course [being] an actual woman” (34). This appropriative androgyny is indeed characteristic of the two authors with whom Faye performs. Although they display characteristics traditionally associated with male authorship like grandiosity and grave introspection, they are never far from disclosing traumatic events or details extracted from their own lives. The first writer utilizes the means of a style spearheaded by feminist writers, the trauma plot, as he relates abusive childhood events. Similarly, the second tells the audience about the pain he felt witnessing his cat pinning down a bird, “because it was of course with the bird that he identified” (ibid. 105). In *Kudos* another author has won all his country’s significant literary prizes for writing about “subjects our other male writers would not deign to touch [...] Domesticity... and the ordinary life of the suburbs” (138). These are all topics that women (including Cusk) have written about extensively for decades, even centuries, without recognition or reward. Rather they have been denigrated for their alleged inability to transcend the privacy of their own lives. Cusk seems to emphasize this final point when her narrator considers the prized author in relation to one of his female peers: “I was surprised to hear this assessment of Luís, after Sophia’s earlier remarks about male writers and their tendency to eclipse her” (ibid.). Conversely, men’s sensibilities in contemporary autofiction – aspects and themes gathered largely from women’s discourses – are considered “aesthetically inspired” (Power 34).

Transformations of authorial exemplarity from the word’s original signification – masculine authority, to less rigid, unequivocal or “feminized” modes have seemingly altered the representation of the self irrevocably. This shift concerning *what* makes a genius rather than *who* in terms of gender correlates with a comprehensive transformation, Eva Illouz suggests, of modern Western societies and Western capitalism following the inroads of psychological discourses and practices during the twentieth century. In the U.S., the popularization of psychoanalysis throughout the twentieth century made it spread outside its realm as a discipline. Gradually, it became a “set of cultural practices” yielding widespread “therapeutic discourse[s]” (6-7). The elongation of the affirming and attentive climate of the therapy room or self-help literature made *communication* a guiding star. Illouz suggests that a “communicative ethos,” including social dexterity and emulative empathy, orients individuals to “the model of traditional female selfhood” (23). Other than depicting the “[*blurring*] of

gender divisions” in literary discourses, Cusk expertly demonstrates how the extension of feminized modes of narration affects other discourses, too.

For instance, *Kudos* begins with a startlingly frank conversation between Faye and a retired financier. Mirroring the communicative spirit characterizing modern-day discourse, but also its transience, the man “assumed an expression of polite interest” (5) as Faye tells him what she does before embarking on his own monologue about his failed attempts at work-family reconciliation and his dead dog. As ever, Cusk’s character listens intently, quickly deducing “that these were stories he had told before and liked to tell, as though he had discovered the power and pleasure of reliving events with their sting removed” (10). The man’s gratification at his firm grasp of outwardly revelatory stories of events that once caused him distress reflects a contemporary readiness for ostensible self-disclosure. “The skill,” Cusk’s character perceives, “lay in skirting close enough to what appeared to be the truth without allowing what you actually felt about it to regain its power over you” (ibid.). This final observation can of course be read as equally illustrative of the man’s specific stories as it is about Cusk’s obscured autofiction in the wider sense.

We could content ourselves with reading Cusk’s narrator’s absence as an allegory of men and women’s asymmetrical recognition in the modern history of autobiographical literature. Yet Cusk’s autofiction also disrupts this easy distinction thus broadening the criteria regarding who qualifies as a genius. Although her protagonist often appears to succumb to the subjection and lopsidedness of her experiences of womanhood and professional life Cusk resists essentializing femininity and masculinity both formally and thematically. Using a teleological mode of narration, that is by relating events for the purposes they served from a position of outward collectedness, Cusk appropriates and ironizes a linear, predominantly male mode of autobiographical narration. Refusing to align with any easily identifiable gendered style of writing, Cusk’s experimental autofiction juxtaposes retrospective form with femininely coded features like instability and disjunction. Moreover, in *Kudos*, a female colleague tells Faye how she avoids doing domestic chores, they “made her feel like an ordinary woman, when most of the time she *didn’t think about being a woman*” (51, emphasis added).

Another colleague of Faye laments “that when a group of women get together, far from advancing the cause of femininity, they end up pathologising it” (ibid. 132). Ironically, the woman saying this last part is herself depicted as the very personification of femininity – made up head-to-toe, wearing a “low-cut dress in a vivid turquoise... and a matching pair of high-

heeled boots” (ibid.). Given the longstanding generic subordination and discrediting of women’s autobiographical writings it is unsurprising that some critics propone the existence of distinctively feminine forms. Conducting synthesized readings of women writers’ styles and aims, some feminist critics tend to seek “thematic, formal, and even broadly epistemological coherence among *all* women’s autobiography” (Cooke 68, emphasis added). They want for all women to be fighting for the same thing – to refute the traditional male norm and establish their own. However, by arguing along the lines of gen(d)eric difference, they run the risk of affirming the very binary oppositions they have set out to dismantle.

By refusing to align with the literary conventions that women are expected to write in Cusk appears to suggest, on one hand, that formal or thematic essentialization of the feminine experience – if such a thing exists – is not the way forward. Yet, on the other hand, Cusk appears equally disinclined against a confluence of traditionally perceived masculine and feminine attributes. Conveying the dreariness and inertia this merging can involve, an interviewer tells Cusk’s narrator how she and her husband’s “male and female qualities had become blunted on one another. We lived together like sheep, grazing side by side, huddled next to one another in sleep, habituated and unthinking” (*Kudos* 77).

Emphasizing gendered difference when this grows increasingly harder to distinguish is evidently not Cusk’s only reason for her character’s self-omission. The apparent loss of individuality experienced by the woman in this final example conveniently leads us to our next topic. Apart from refraining to yield to either typically masculine or feminine-coded modes of narration another reason behind Cusk’s self-immolating autofiction has to do with her complicated relationship to the Western myth of subjecthood.

4.3 Individualism and Self-Assertion

A running thread in Cusk’s trilogy is her polemic with Western, individualistic, capitalist cultures. Cusk frequently ironizes and laments individualist convictions of the perceived right to obtain one’s culturally manipulated wishes, acts of privilege often realized at the behest of others. Cusk’s self-omitting mode of autofiction constitutes a denouncement of such self-assertion, indicating indirectly an alternative way of being. Yet despite her ridicule of the behavior that this self-assertional drive propels Cusk does not exist outside its web of hierarchy and power. Though her distinct variety of autofiction often obscures her narrator’s desires Cusk is ultimately compelled to acknowledge her own role in such a system.

In *Transit* the ironic design is concretized around the refurbishment of Cusk's character's newly purchased home. Illustrating the transactional, calculating nature of modern discourse, Faye's realtor reveals how clients desperate for a property flagrantly spill their hearts out to him in pursuit of a specific object yet can pass him by just days later "without the slightest sign of recognition" (6). Similarly, her carpenter describes that when he's on a longer job he can feel himself growing increasingly invisible to his employers, "no matter how much they begin by keeping up appearances, after a week or two, they forget you're there..., forget you can see and hear them" (52-3). As Cusk has explored in her previous novels, making a home is an excellent metaphor for the construction and expression of the self. There you usually have control over what people can see about you. Given that the carpenter is taken for granted, however, he both sees and hears more than he has need for. Moreover, growing accustomed to him, clients ask him for all kinds of favors and extra-occupational chores: "after a while [he] became, in a sense, an *extension of their own will*" (52-3, emphasis added). Having to follow up on each new whim of his clients' desires invites us to extend the home as metaphor to include interpretations of the fickle, unstable nature of selfhood.

A recurring pattern of construction, demolition and the subsequent discarding of expensive materials due to his clients' change of heart makes the carpenter completely indifferent to how he fashions his own home. The carpenter, we learn, is basically living out of his car where he often "ate all three meals" (58). Describing his ideal lodging, he imagines "living somewhere completely blank, somewhere where all the angles are straight and the corners squared and where there's nothing, no colours or features, maybe not even any light" (55). The utter featurelessness of this image could be read as a parallel with the sparse style of prose in much of Cusk's trilogy. His vision could also be interpreted as quite radical had it not been immediately traceable to the alienation his work imbues. As he tells Cusk's narrator, "if you spent all day working on other people's houses, you didn't have much energy left for being interested in your own" (51).

Although Cusk seemingly empathizes with the contractor's martyrization, she herself is not wholly steeped in it. Indeed, she often deflects it through parody. For instance, Cusk repeatedly solicits the metaphor of infantilization when depicting the people, especially those privileged, she encounters. The image is summoned, first, by her hairdresser seeing all his friends repeating at forty the same groove of partying and doing drugs, like "children in overgrown bodies" (*Transit* 73). In *Kudos*, the simile is shrewdly reiterated as an Iberic critic with a great, shaved,

shining head condemns English tourists for laying splayed over the beaches, “[l]ike great big babies,’ he said, somewhat resembling an oversized baby himself” (178).

However, Cusk also demonstrates how infantile self-assertion has its limits. For example, visiting another literary festival in an undisclosed country – likely Portugal – Faye learns from a fellow writer about a local variety of tree.

These trees took an extraordinarily long time to grow, [...] the towering specimens in the city were decades – indeed centuries – old. People sometimes tried to grow them in their own gardens, but unless you were fortunate enough to have inherited one, it was almost impossible to reproduce this spectacle on your own private property. He had many friends – smart, aspirational people of good taste – who had planted a jacaranda tree in their new garden as though this law of nature somehow didn’t apply to them and they could make it grow *by the force of their will*. (ibid. 169, emphasis added)

Boundaries of nature here stand in the way of self-deceiving naivety. After a time, these people “would become frustrated and complain” at its stunted growth (ibid.). This childlike response suggests an inability or even horror for people to project themselves anchored “to the same house or indeed the same marriage for so long” (ibid.).

While individuating reward can be thwarted by natural forces it is integrated, Cusk seems to suggest, in our social structures. For instance, Cusk astutely juxtaposes the identical design of the rooms of a hotel she stays in with the ostensible unicity of their patrons: “when a guest was to be seen letting themselves into their room with the hotel’s plastic key card, something in their demeanour suggested they unconsciously believed their own room to be recognisable and distinct” (ibid. 127). By drawing attention to the people enabling this false sense of individuality, namely the cleaners who “worked inside the rooms,” (ibid.) Cusk seems to point to a uniformity inherent in the capitalist system. Elements occluding individuality such as the homogeneity of the rooms and the uniformity of the cleaners underpin an evidently tenuous and artificial yet powerful individualist ideology separating the privileged from the oppressed.

Moreover, a parallel can be drawn to the form Cusk is writing in. Autofiction is usually employed to express the subjectivity of its author sincerely and authentically. Despite the genre’s distinctively different intent from autobiography, such formulations of subjectivity

generally encompass a degree of unicity. Using Cusk's metaphor of the hotel, authors enter these generic "rooms," so to speak, aware that their respective forms are already established and built around greater traditions. Even so, by writing an original work of their own the writer necessarily claims some degree of recognizability and distinction. With her trilogy, Cusk is no exception. Yet she appears adamantly to work against the notion of such an assertion. Cusk's unicity cunningly lies in resisting the usual mechanisms that make a work unique. The fact that Cusk's narrator is never depicted entering a room herself could reflect an unwillingness to conform to a single genre.

A possible explanation to this acknowledgment or reluctance to claim unicity could, again, be linked to femininity. Like Ernaux or Heti, Cusk knows that her experiences as a woman and a writer – though lesser so – connotes a similar, if not greater, degree of commonality vis-à-vis unicity. By evoking her shared circumstance rather than her individuality, Cusk's trilogy paradoxically becomes *more* distinct than conventional autofiction.

4.4 Accountability and Religion

Although Cusk establishes, not uncontented, that the assertion of individual will can only be taken so far, the domains in which its potential actualization is still feasible exacerbates irresponsibility and obscures accountability. Returning briefly to the story of the cat and the bird, the situation's narrative pull, the writer claims, held him in a firm grip: he could either act or remain impassive to imminent violence. By chance, however, the bird managed to escape on its own; the "incident was quickly resolved: the narrative had somehow taken care of itself" (*Transit* 105). Ignoring any potential symbolism the situation has for the author's own life, having exposed his family and friends for the sake of his art, or, for that matter, the bird's escape and its parallel to Cusk's character's desire for freedom, the writer's talk about responsibility remains theoretical as he was never required to intervene. The subsequent absence of external accountability that such inaction or other acts of recklessness gives rise to is an important theme for Cusk.

Indeed, the whole chapter on the literary festival is characterized by negligence. First, when Faye arrives late to the remote English village where it is held, she is told by a coordinator that it "was hard to run a literary festival when the authors – through *no fault of their own, of course* – turned up late" (*Transit* 84, emphasis added). The coordinator's slight irritation illustrates, on one hand, how lack of accountability is a symptom of an unsound, hierarchical contemporary

Western culture, and, on the other, that Cusk's character is herself implicated in it – both of which are notions we will return to. Second, the reason for her physical discomfort on stage is that she and the other writers scurried there through pouring rain.

We were met in the entrance by a man with a clipboard, who asked the Chair quizzically why he hadn't taken us along the covered walkway. He pointed at it with his pen, a canopied boardwalk behind us that ran along the side of the gardens directly to the place where we now stood. The Chair laughed embarrassedly and said that he hadn't known it was there; no one had told him. (ibid. 90)

Clearly the fault lays in the Chair's failure, however unwitting, to communicate with the festival organizers. Although these two examples can appear minor, even negligible, they are part of Cusk's greater design. Thus, in a third example of negligence, the Chair declares, in relation to his childlessness, that "responsibility was something he ought to avoid;" an admission which is then taken to its extremity as he sexually harasses Cusk's protagonist (ibid. 123). Throughout this chapter, Cusk utilizes the narrative strategy of martyrdom. Cusk's self-effacing form suggests that Faye is someone who things happen to, not someone who herself acts with assertion. As if to emphasize her powerlessness, despite his transgressions the Chair is never reprimanded.

Yet Cusk also resists utter martyrization. While her style is characterized by detachment, the distance of which is only furthered by her use of the past tense, Cusk's narrator's outward docility is, again, juxtaposed with her irony. Indeed, there is something mocking in her representation of the Chair's assault: "His lean, hard body was more insistent than forceful" (ibid. 126). Her narrator appears less threatened than watchful. Moreover, by adopting autofiction, Cusk does not just relieve events of excessive detail to streamline her narrative but simultaneously warrants that fewer people are directly implicated in her account. For instance, in the trilogy Cusk's real-life daughters are replaced by boys – boys of which, furthermore, little detail is disclosed. Yet any author consistent in his or her invention partially conceals not just their own self and others close to them but also those who have potentially wronged them. The nameless "Chair" ought in other words to be very happy that Cusk, were this occasion of sexual harassment true, did not write a straightforward autobiographical or confessional account.

The escalation of reckless behavior in the passage above is no coincidence and neither is the Chair's shirking off responsibility. Rather Cusk's autofiction illustrates the asymmetrical effects of *social hierarchy*. As apart from the carpenter, who "had people blaming him for their misfortunes, their illnesses and breakdowns, sometimes for their whole lot in life," (*Transit* 48) the Chair's elevated status appears to afford him less accountability for his transgressions. While the contractor recognizes that "he himself was not deserving of that blame... he was nonetheless," unlike the Chair, "in the firing line" (*ibid.*). Cusk appears more sympathetic towards the people she encounters that are on the receiving end of such power disparities than the ones who benefit from them.

However, this does not change the fact that Cusk's character herself is implicated in a distinct social order. The whole reason she is in contact with the contractor in the first place has to do with having hired him for his services and owning property. Through her work and travels, Faye has several encounters with people of considerable wealth: meetings with financially successful entrepreneurs, businessmen and colleagues, almost exclusively men, are supposed to set women's relative lack in stark relief. However, we have not yet touched upon Cusk's narrator's own privilege and class and the potential connection between them and Cusk's self-obscuring form. Although she occasionally acknowledges her "narrator's awareness of her own relative privilege," (Vermeulen 90) this is rarely something Cusk lingers on. Withheld introspection is, on one hand, to be expected as it aligns with Cusk's self-concealing structure. On the other, something approximating Cusk's narrator's personal ideology occasionally shines through. For instance, she tells her son who has just graduated, quite unbelieving of how well he did on his final exam, that "[h]e should believe it, I said, since it had a concrete explanation, which was that he had worked hard" (99). This predilection for humanist individualism is a rare intimation of Faye's character slightly contradictory to Cusk's focus on social dynamisms rooted in social orders: working hard is as Faye has experienced certainly no guarantee against structural discrepancies.

Evoking another indubitable instance of hierarchy, Faye's downstairs neighbors in *Transit* are consistently referred to as "[t]he people below" (41). Having lived in the house for centuries, the neighbors, an elderly couple, have witnessed migrants like the former residents in Faye's new home – "they were Africans," he had said to me in in a hoarse, conspiratorial whisper" (39) – and well-off people like herself purchasing properties and reshaping the district. Echoing deep-rooted English class divisions, they "had evidently remained unreconciled to the fact of

others living above them” (ibid.). Yet the treatment of English social stratification is subsumed under the sinister development of Faye’s relationship with her neighbors. Oppressive “stirring and murmuring... voices” (ibid.) rise frequently from downstairs into her flat and descending the stairs to greet them, Faye observes that “the steps formed a tunnel-like space around the entrance, like the mouth to a cave” (55-6). The woman, especially, is ferocious in her affronts and repeatedly threatens to contact the authorities for the noise she experiences. Faye later elaborates on this oppressive state on a date.

[T]here was something in the basement, something that took the form of two people, though I would hesitate to give their names to it. It was more of a force, a power of elemental negativity that seemed somehow related to the power to create. Their hatred of me was so pure, I said, that it almost passed back again into love. (195)

Rather than focusing on the agitation her neighbors cause her and the potential disparity underlying it, Faye’s testimony points to her notion of her neighbors’ near-divine powers and their Biblical rage.

The religious theme should come as little surprise given that Cusk was raised and educated Catholic. Although she seems to have put her devotion elsewhere in adult age, Cusk’s familiarity with faith is nevertheless a recurring feature in her authorship. If in *Transit* the religious motifs are manifested foremost through metaphoric allusion, connecting the notion of accountability to retributory justice, then in *Kudos* they are made more explicit. The sheer presence of religion surrounds Faye: walking around the unspecified Mediterranean city, “[t]he blackened spires of the cathedral could be seen jutting above the rooftops” (61). On other occasions, Cusk herself broaches the topic of Christian ethics. As her publisher discusses tapping into a “generalised yearning for the ideal of literature,” (38) promoting literature that *symbolizes* “moral virtue [and] superiority” (40, emphasis added) that people want to be seen reading as opposed to defending literature for its own sake, Faye replies,

I found his remarks... strikingly indifferent to the concept of justice [...] [I]f the world seemed full of people living evilly without reprisal and living virtuously

without reward, the temptation to abandon personal morality might arise in exactly the moment when personal morality is most significant. (41-2)

Cusk's rare act of objection indicates her narrator's increasing readiness to give voice to her opinions.

The gradually emergent preoccupation with Christian ethics throughout Cusk's trilogy finds its model in Kierkegaard's conception of the three stages of life towards becoming a true self, which, in Kierkegaard's terms, meant "becoming a Christian" (Hannay 123). Although it has not been treated directly in this chapter, Cusk's first novel of the trilogy, *Outline*, can be said to reflect the aestheticizing stage. Here Cusk often transfigures her narrator's reality to alleviate her of distress following a divorce. Second, with its overt themes of demolition and construction, *Transit* literally dismantles the aesthetic outlook, investigating instead the realm of ethics. And third, in *Kudos* it is outrightly suggested that Faye's pursuit of selfhood involves the direct practice of religious precepts. Her conduct amounts "to a proper appreciation of the place of religion in ordinary life" (ibid.).

Faye's merit as a representative of this last stage of Christian selfhood is tried towards the end of *Kudos* as she visits a local cathedral. Standing opposite the building she is notably flustered,

the sun pounded unrelentingly on our heads amid the noise... The separation between that silent glade-like place and the thundering pavement where we stood seemed for a moment so absolute that it was almost unbearable, as though it represented a disorder so fundamental and insurmountable that any attempt to right it would be ultimately shown to be futile. (214)

The "insurmountable separation" Cusk describes reflects – apart from the obvious metaphor to being ousted from paradise – the pinnacle moment of grueling uncertainty that Cusk's narrator has experienced throughout the trilogy regarding the legitimacy of her decision to pursue her own goals and desires. Upon reaching the church she finds it is closed. Being denied entry could be read as a conformation of Faye's status as sinner, aberration and martyr. Yet in Cusk's case there is, as I have argued, more complexity to this final designation than what is granted by a

sheer question of either/or. Martyrdom is something she adopts formally and thematically only to resist.

A final question, however, is whether there is that much justice to exact. For a string of novels deeply involved with questions of ethics – the unwritten laws of which are meant to apply to everyone – Cusk sometimes stares herself blind at the individuals and structures preventing her from enjoying her freedom. In the process of resisting the devious conspiracies and violent acts of self-assertion (mostly enacted by men) obstructing her, Cusk's narrator loses sight of her own relative privilege. Whether this omission is due to personal grievance and a sense of injustice concerning her position in the world because of her sex or if it should be expected given her autofiction's shrouded design is difficult to determine. Certainly, Cusk represents social disparities and hierarchies involving people who are worse off than she is. Yet seldom are these astute observations of inequality applied to her own sphere, i.e., the literary world, and her elevated position within it. Rarely does Faye encounter a socially inferior peer. She is not shown competing with or thwarting the prowess of someone in a lower position in the pecking order than the one she inhabits. Through her virtual absence from the novels, recording other people's stories rather than telling her own, Cusk does away not just with her character's achievements, but also her faults.

5. It is Them, Not Him

One of the most decorated and critically acclaimed authors in the English language, J. M. Coetzee is a writer whose authorship ranges widely. From the mid-1970s, the South African-Australian author has written around a dozen novels, a few novellas and short stories, most of which take place in his native South Africa. Apart from his fictions, Coetzee's influences are evident in his scholarly work and essays where seminal writers like Beckett and Kafka, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Rousseau figure, positively making him part of a "new breed of critics-as-writers" (Head 2). Coetzee's novels treat different aspects of direct and residual violence permeating the country post-colony and post-apartheid. The subtext often involves questions of ethics tied to his protagonists' attempts and failures to navigate various social, cultural, and linguistic landscapes.

Unlike many other South African novelists like his fellow Nobel Prize laureate Nadine Gordimer who leans heavily on literary realism in her depictions of South African history and life, Coetzee's fictions often stress textuality and narrativity. His narratives are equally contingent on recurring themes like racial tensions and hierarchical relationships as they are on narrativity, or *how* they are told. Considering his authorial self-reflexivity, it makes sense that Coetzee's literary and theoretical touchstones are predominantly (post)modernist and (post)structuralist. His "intellectual allegiances are," in his own words, "clearly European, not African".⁵

Given the discursive nature of Coetzee's oeuvre it should come as little surprise that he has written several autofictions. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime* (2009) constitute a trilogy of autofiction gathered around the joint subheading: "Scenes from Provincial Life". The first two instalments are fairly conventional works of autofiction or fictionalized memoirs covering some of the formative years in the life of the character John Coetzee. *Boyhood* sees John growing up in and outside Cape Town between the ages of 10-13 and his struggles to understand and reconcile his privilege and apartness from other children based on affiliations of religion and ethnicity. Later, *Youth* follows John in his early twenties during his émigré years in metropolitan London attempting to escape this legacy, as well as trying and failing at poetry, prose and romance.

⁵ David Attwell, "An Exclusive Interview with J M Coetzee," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 8, 2003, <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee/>

Born in 1940 into a white, English-speaking Afrikaner family descended from Dutch settlers, Coetzee is part of a generation that was thought to “benefit most from apartheid” (Attwell 229). Anchored in this history, the trilogy certainly does not lack topicality around social issues and unrest. *Summertime* further develops subjects treated previously in the trilogy adding to them gender issues, questions of heritage and other topics inextricably connected to the country’s fraught history of colonialism. Yet it is as much an interrogation of literary categories like genre and authority. In *Boyhood* and *Youth* Coetzee’s second self serves as an intermediary between the ever-present author and the narrating presence whose recorded life trajectory aligns, with a few exceptions, with Coetzee’s own biography. *Summertime* pushes the fictionalizing element a big leap forward. Its deceit stems from Coetzee’s apparent dissatisfaction with merely extending the fictional *life* of his double. Here fictional characters become slight anachronisms compared to Coetzee’s bigger lie, namely that John Coetzee is dead.

In lieu of John as the implied author, or *substitut livresque* as Vincent Colonna calls it in the case of autofiction, the perspective is displaced to an English biographer preparing to write a book on the recently deceased author. The young biographer focuses on the years 1972-77 when Coetzee, back in South Africa, was, he senses, “finding his feet as a writer” (*Summertime* 225). Not unlike Cusk’s trilogy, conversations about John with people who the biographer has reasons to believe were important to him during this time make up the bulk of the story. Apart from a few notebook fragments enveloping the main body of the text written by Coetzee’s double, *Summertime* deviates from his two earlier works. Formally and structurally, it alters the scope of how autofiction creates self-knowledge.

The present and final chapter aims to shed some light on what *Summertime*’s drastic deviation from *Boyhood* and *Youth* does to Coetzee’s autofictional project. Was Coetzee unhappy with what he achieved with *Boyhood* or *Youth* or does *Summertime* further their design and intentions? Is it an instruction for future biographers on how or how *not* to conduct their diggings into his life and authorship? Unlike other autofiction in this essay, Coetzee’s fictional underpinnings are not subtle. In fact, I suggest that they are wholly necessary for Coetzee’s narrative ambition. Embodying elements of dialogism and polyphony, *Summertime* accomplishes something more than the fictionalization of its author’s life, namely a critical reconsideration of concepts such as authorship, genre and authority.

5.1 Against Confessions

With their emphasis on social anxieties, artistic inspirations and private embarrassments, *Boyhood* and *Youth* are visibly inspired by Rousseau's *Confessions*. Like Rousseau, Coetzee creates a self in writing – not knowing what the end result will be. Coetzee certainly echoes some of the seriousness of the confessional project, a favorite expression of his being that self-excitation is achieved by one who “wrestles” with the self (*Doubling the Point* 283). Yet he is also critical of Rousseau's methods. In an essay on secular confessions Coetzee asks how readers save an “all-knowing God can know that he (Rousseau) has truly told the truth” (ibid. 265). Despite Rousseau's conviction that *he* did tell the truth, Coetzee suggests that he could nevertheless have been deceiving himself. Even if we accept Rousseau's defense that it is for readers to collect and interpret his scattered experiences, it, too, fails to “answer the charge of selective recollection” (ibid.). The condition of truthfulness in *Confessions* that Coetzee does adopt in his autofiction arises out of an “attentiveness and responsiveness to an inner impulse,” which does not concern “perfect self-knowledge but *truth-directedness*” (ibid., emphasis added). Although Coetzee does not mention autofiction directly, the phrase “truth-directedness” indicates an affinity with the postmodern and poststructural theories concerning self-knowledge that autofiction generally strives for. That is, self-knowledge which is not necessarily referentially verifiable but dictated by sincerity. Nonetheless, “confessional self-revelation” (Attridge 138) had hitherto not been something Coetzee was widely known for and while *Boyhood* and *Youth* could easily be taken for self-divulging memoirs, outright confession is something readers are denied.

One reason Coetzee's autofiction does not quite fit the label of confessions is formal and has to do with perspective. Unlike many life-writings (and indeed autofictions) written from the position of the first person singular “I,” *Boyhood*, *Youth* and parts of *Summertime* are written in the third person. Though this particular discourse is focalized around the mind of Coetzee's protagonist, John, the heterodiegetic “he” detaches the “narrated consciousness... from the narrating consciousness” (Clarkson 27). The closest we get to immediate insight about John's thoughts in *Summertime* are through annotations added to his diary entries. Comments such as “[t]o be expanded on” (6) or “[t]o be explored” (9) involve, for instance, John cautioning himself not to push his writing into undesired narrative territories like a “conversion narrative” (13). On other occasions they are more revelatory: “Query: Why say that his father is in love

with Mrs Noerdien when he has so obviously fallen for her himself?" (260). Yet, most of the time our entry into John's psyche is attenuated by the narrative perspective.

Another reason for Coetzee's rejection of confessional narratives has to do with the concept of truth. In his earlier novels, Coetzee problematizes the first-person plural "we" as an impossible signifier of South African coherence in a political-philosophical sense. Coetzee engaged this theme in his 1999 Booker-prize winner, *Disgrace*; a novel which reads as an allegory for the hearings conducted by the court-like Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The commission assembled in Cape Town in 1994 had the objective "[t]o provide for the investigation and the establishment of as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights" during apartheid.⁶ Victims and perpetrators were invited to share their experiences and appeal for reparations or amnesty with the commission deciding "whether the *truth* had been attained" (Attridge 142-3, emphasis added). *Summertime* similarly interrogates whether a single account is enough to constitute truth. Coetzee appears to ask whether pages of recorded fragments of life whose only claim to authenticity is their existence as coherent units of language provide an accurate account of the years and experiences that are calculated, random, internalized, forgotten or the subject of dispute?

Visibly inspired by thinkers like Roland Barthes who famously and, for Coetzee's purposes, aptly declared the author as dead, the trilogy interrogates the credibility of the first-person "I". While placing the discourse at a remove from this monolithic grammatical person does not in itself necessarily signify flat rejection of first-person identification, it nevertheless allows Coetzee to experiment linguistically in questioning the validity of a stable first-person narrator. Of course, first-person narratives, too, leave ample room for doubt, uncertainty, unreliability and ambiguity yet this usually requires a degree of deciphering on behalf of the reader. Conversely, Coetzee cuts to the chase, demonstrating outright and formally that his self-understanding, as everyone else's, is limited. As Carrol Clarkson puts it, "if linguistic exigency dictates that writing cannot *but* imply an 'I' who writes... Coetzee, in his writing, and in a self-conscious way, engages linguistic and literary strategies to question the authority of that 'I'" (21, emphasis original).

⁶ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995," <https://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>

Let us turn to *Youth* for an example. What follows are Coetzee's considerations about veracity taken from the young John's journal:

[W]ho is to say that the feelings he writes in his diary are his true feelings? Who is to say that at each moment while the pen moves he is truly himself? At one moment he might truly be himself, at another he might simply be making things up. How can he know for sure? Why should he even *want* to know for sure? (10, emphasis original)

Here Coetzee explicitly introduces us to the complex and fleeting nature of self-knowledge. He demonstrates how understanding, depiction and evaluation of the self can be Janus-faced or even willfully deceptive. The questions posed are not just warning flags against self-representation, however, but concern the larger question about truth and the possibilities of generating it. One such possibility that Coetzee identifies is the writing *process*. In fact, he argues that the act of writing itself often renders the self differently from what was set out beforehand:

[I]t is naive to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the contrary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. (*Doubling the Point* 18)

In autobiographical writings, including autofiction, the subject thus created will be as much a product of the writer's memories and present effort to come to terms with his former self *through writing* as it will be an account of a life. Yet this still does not explain why Coetzee chose autofiction as the form for his trilogy and not confession. Both should ostensibly be up for the task Coetzee lays out. Here we arrive at the final, more obvious, impediment to conventionally held confession in Coetzee's trilogy: his well-documented allegiance to fiction.

As we have seen argued, the whole point of autofiction is for authors to utilize whatever they need in terms of the fictive and the non-fictive to convey an ulterior truth typically sincere and idiosyncratic in nature rather than certain or inarguable. Yet just because autofiction is entrenched in subjectivity does not mean that it cannot be universal. This is true both of

conventional autofiction centered around the author's self and autofiction that probes the wider social context in which the writing and semifictional subject negotiates his or her existence, though the latter variety certainly encourages identification (or antipathy depending on the reader's opinions or taste) via its appeals to some form of commonality (sexuality, gender, etc.). On the surface, *Summertime*, like *Boyhood* and *Youth*, aligns with the first type of autofiction. It is explicitly about John Coetzee (he is the subject which the biographer is interested in) but also, as we will see shortly, it is decidedly not about him. This oscillation between adopting the conventions of various genres (biography, autofiction) and its subsequent rejection demonstrates Coetzee's unhappiness with Rousseau's method. It is not because Rousseau fails to admit to the inherent fiction of his *Confessions* but because of its *monological* structure. Where Rousseau pledged allegiance to a truth present and transparent in its soliloquy-like emergence through his sensorial memories, Coetzee's relationship to his former self is openly distanced and fictionalized. Coetzee effectively dismisses strategies such as sincerity and transparency *alone* in the pursuit of self-awareness. His sincerity is not solely directed inwards but concerns a *dialogical* inquiry into his own person.

5.2 Dialogism and fictionality

Coetzee's critique of monological knowledge in traditional autobiography and confession builds on Bakhtinian *dialogism*. Convinced by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion that human discourses are conceived intertextually with previous discourses, Coetzee states that "I have turned to the mode of dialogue: as a way of getting around the impasse of my own monologue" (*Doubling the Point* 19). For instance, the revelations Coetzee speaks of above arise by virtue of the writing process being dialogical. They are the outcome both of his (or any writer's) intentions going into the writing process and the (shared) means, linguistic, syntactical and cultural, at his disposal. Yet rather than producing an expression that is unique the dialogical process involves the necessary negotiation of existing cultural expressions "in relation to which every participating subject must situate himself or herself" (Todorov x). As such, polyphony arises within the individual. A multiplicity of voices – sometimes affirming, other times contradicting – exist within him producing a chorus best captured, according to Bakhtin, by the novel (a designation which, given the experimental and self-interrogative nature of the genre, autofiction might topple).

Clarkson adds to this line of thought, claiming that Coetzee's writing concerns "a matter of awakening the *countervoices*" in himself (7, emphasis added). Already in the term "countervoices" we can divine how the authority of monological narration is undermined. Other than embodying this obverse relationship, the linguistics of Coetzee's third person narrator invokes an absence which the first person cannot afford. Take another of John's journal entries: "Poetry, if he could write poetry, might take him to the root of his malaise. [...] There is prose to fall back on. In theory prose can perform the same cleansing trick as poetry. But he has doubts about that" (*Summertime* 261). This absence clearly does not stand in the way of depth, but also adds levity and distanced self-evaluation to the narrative. *Summertime* markedly extends this absence by killing off its main character. From the void that follows, Clarkson's notions about Coetzee's representations of internalized dialogue and dialectics in *Boyhood* and *Youth* can be aptly reappropriated to understand his incorporation of *actual* dialogue in *Summertime*. Through conversations, the polyphonic structure emerges not just within John Coetzee but between individuals with distinct perceptions of him. Julia, a former lover of Coetzee; Margot, his female cousin; Adriana, a Brazilian dance-teacher and mother of one of his students; Martin, an academic and Sophie, one of his previous co-workers, all provide the biographer, Vincent, with their own impressions and recollections of John.

Interestingly, this is also where the narrative begins steering away from John as the central figure. Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will argue that this happens for two reasons in particular. On one hand it concerns competing impulses among his characters: the people who knew John are, at the moment of being recorded, not necessarily as caught up in the life of John as the biographer is. Both then and now they have other concerns, concerns that are frequently of wider interest than their relationship to John. On the other the decentering of John is a consequence of Coetzee's immersion with literary categories like fictionality, authority and writing. He simply appears more interested in examining whether self-knowledge is at all possible through a few currently existing genres and discourses than putting his fictional double's innermost thoughts on constant display. These two notions are separate, yet as my analysis shows (and mirrors) they are prone to interweave with each other.

Beginning with the first category, i.e., the characters' interest in John, there is a recurring pattern in the interviewees' reminiscence of John: their repeated digressions. Rather than focusing exclusively on their experiences of John, several of them end up meandering and telling their own stories. As Julia preemptively tells the biographer, despite being "fully aware

it is John you want to hear about” (*Summertime* 41), her account is as much about her own life at the time and her failed marriage as it is about him. Other than relating details about John’s eremitic, self-sufficient DIY lifestyle or his awkward habits as a lover, Julia’s recollection offers an insight into the life of a South African housewife during a specific time of South African history – “the heyday of apartheid, the 1970s” (21).

Like many other women during this time, although she is well-educated, Julia was the one in her marriage who stayed at home, overseeing the household – with the help of her black housemaid – and caring for her child. She proceeds to tell the biographer how she grew increasingly certain of her husband’s unfaithfulness towards her during his frequent travels for work. In fact, she describes how infidelity was tolerated, even integrated, in her husband’s world of business and parties among colleagues and their wives. Nevertheless, her husband

Mark did not want me to sleep with other men. At the same time he wanted other men to see what kind of woman he had married, and to envy him for it. Much the same, I presume, held for his friends and colleagues: they wanted the wives of other men to succumb to their advances but they wanted their own wives to remain chaste – chaste and alluring (27).

Baffled again by the logical fallacies and unsustainability of this “social microsystem,” (ibid.) not to mention the sexual bigotry, Julia, after a longish interval, leads the conversation back to John. A “scrawny” figure with a “seediness [and] air of failure” (21) about him, their affair came for her as a surprise. Yet even as they become deeply involved, John is never truly essential for her. Rather, he is a symbol of what her life could be like if she abandoned her marriage.

For Adriana, John is even less significant. Apart from scoffingly recounting his several misguided advances towards her and, indirectly, she suspects, her daughter, Adriana frequently returns to her experiences as an immigrant single mother in South Africa. Margot, John’s cousin, too, appears more absorbed with the question of whether her future lies within or outside the Karoo, a semi-desert area seized from the native population by her ancestors, than she is with her relationship with John. Recollecting events that occurred decades in the past, it makes sense for them not, unlike the biographer, to have John top of mind. Take Adriana, for instance:

Mr Vincent, to you John Coetzee is a great writer and a hero, I accept that, why else would you be here, why else would you be writing this book? To me, on the other hand – pardon me for saying this, but he is dead, so I cannot hurt his feelings – to me he is nothing. He is nothing, was nothing, just an irritation, an embarrassment (193).

Although her views on John soften by the end of her conversation with the biographer, Adriana challenges the centrality he is given by the context in which he is discussed, i.e., in the preparations for a biography. This is also true for other women, like Julia:

You commit a grave error if you think to yourself that the difference between the two stories, the story you wanted to hear and the story you are getting, will be nothing more than a *matter of perspective* – that while from my point of view the story of John may have been just one episode among many in the long narrative of my marriage, nevertheless, by dint of a quick flip... you can transform it into a story about John and one of the women who passed through his life. Not so. Not so. [...] I *really* was the main character. John *really* was a minor character. (44, first emphasis added, second original)

Again, questions of perspective and centrality are at the forefront as Julia and Adriana recognize that John is likely more important to the biographer than he is or was to them.

Whether Julia's or Adriana's accounts are wholly truthful we cannot know for sure and considering their honesty takes us down another rabbit hole of subjectivity, memory and manipulation. Yet what is interesting about their challenges is that the women interrogate the wider aspect of the biographical project itself. First, they resist appeasing both Coetzee's and the biographer's pursuit of the "higher truth" about John (*Doubling the Point* 17). Rather, the interviewees' resistance often means that the plot "lapses from [John's] lofty ideals of romance and... gestures towards [a] *baser 'truth'*" (Moonsamy & Spencer 436, emphasis added). For instance, discussing John's (anti-)politics, his former co-worker Sophie found him unreasonably utopian and laughably romantic. Or, as Adriana puts it regarding his extended courtship, "beneath all the fine words what a man wants from a woman is usually very basic and very simple" (194). Second, through ostensible deviations involving their own desires and struggles, the women illustrate social, cultural and historical conditions dictating not just their

lives but, indirectly, the lives of countless others. This commonality then becomes a *social* fact which can favorably be compared with John's truly peculiar existence. And third, they are alert to the way in which they are depicted. Like the other women John has engaged with romantically, Julia is wary about the role she will be given in John's biography. Given our shared knowledge about genre it is not unlikely that John will be cast as the "main character" to her minor.

Martin, too, is skeptical about the biographer's method – albeit for different reasons. Rather than worrying about how he will come across, Martin steers us towards other reasons why John does not take center stage in Coetzee's autofiction – reasons related to narrativity and literary theory. Surprised to learn that our biographer does not intend to include diaries, letters or notebooks in his book on Coetzee, Martin instead scrutinizes his pick of interviewees: "the sources you have selected have no axes to grind, no ambitions of their own to pronounce final judgment on Coetzee? [...] Will it amount to anything more than – forgive me for putting it this way – anything more than women's gossip?" (218) Again, looking at the conversations separately, Martin could be correct about the project's flaws. While it might be amusing to learn that "[i]n his (John's) lovemaking... there was an autistic quality," (52) or that he is perceived as a "wooden puppet," (198) these judgments still have their limitations. Grouped together, however, the individual conversations and verdicts add up to a weightier portrait of John Coetzee. As the biographer puts it, his ambition is "telling the story of a stage in [Coetzee's] life, or if we can't have a single story than several stories from several perspectives" (217).

External perspectives are, as was indicated above, no guarantee of veracity, however. Like John's thoughts in *Youth* about truth and writing, Julia mirrors the flawed nature of autobiographic recapitulation. Having recounted some of her encounters with John she intuits that the biographer must be asking himself:

How can this woman pretend to have total recall of mundane conversations dating back three or four decades? And when is she getting to the point? So let me be candid: as far as the dialogue is concerned, I am making it up as I go along. [...] What I am telling you may not be true to the letter, but is true to the spirit. (32, first emphasis original, second emphasis added)

Julia's claim that her account is "true to the spirit" suggests that, rather than producing contradictions or divergence, she hopes to construct another *type of truth* about John.

Throughout the story, the interviewees are asked to draw up similar bygone encounters with John: Adriana is asked to recite the contents of letters that John sent her decades ago and that she has since – to the biographer’s great dismay – discarded. Martin, in turn, recalls the conversation he had with John prior to a job interview more than thirty years ago. In other words, these are reconstructions that require a degree of fictionalization. Yet autofiction utilizes rather than refrains from such conceit to get at the core of something which *is* true. Indeed, Anthony Uhlmann paradoxically suggests that a way of reaching self-knowledge can be through lying.

Coetzee, Uhlmann suggests, uses “error and anachronism as a formal strategy for generating the truth” (748). Comparing Coetzee with Daniel Defoe, the latter claimed that Robinson Crusoe was both real and the author of his novel. Factually, this is a false statement. Yet what Uhlmann gets at is not a lack of referential equivalence but the “castaway merging with the author from whose head he emerges... Defoe is insisting on a lie about his relation to Crusoe that involves a truth about his own self” (ibid.). Uhlmann’s example is not completely dissociated from Coetzee as the latter has ironized Defoe’s novel and narrative strategy in his own novel *Foe* (1986). Moreover, the fact that Coetzee, like Defoe, has his literary double in his mind makes his existence true. As Uhlmann puts it this “‘higher’ order truth needs to make use of lower order lies” (ibid.).

5.3 Error and Anachronism

Summertime is filled with such “lower order lies”. Apart from its anachronistic premise, i.e., Coetzee being dead, we also learn that John has also been forced to move back to South Africa from the U.S. in the early 1970s and to live alone with his aging father. Other than the first detail (Coetzee’s return to South Africa was precipitated by legal constraint) this is referentially false; while Coetzee did live in South Africa at the time, he did so with his wife and two children who are omitted from the story. Rather than writing about his real family life, John is cast as his father’s son, that is as a reclusive figure in a Cape Town suburb. He is an underemployed academic struggling with social, family, professional and political pressures; pressures that are represented through the biographer’s interviews with the people who knew him as well as in his diary entries.

Writing from the position of the dead is nothing new. I have already briefly mentioned E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* which was published a staggering 57 years after it was originally written due

to the same social pressures and legal constraints which dictated Isherwood's autofiction. Another work that approximates *Summertime* in this respect is François-René de Chateaubriand's *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* (1848). In fact, there are striking similarities between the two works. Both authors return to their native countries in their early thirties after each having spent several years abroad in England and the U.S. Although their reasons for departing in the first place differ significantly – Chateaubriand, whose family members were executed, fled France as a political refugee whereas Coetzee chose to migrate to pursue his intellectual and literary ambitions – both are pessimistic about the state of their respective countries upon their return, one seemingly at the cusp of revolution, the other just having passed through one. In *Summertime*, the despondency John feels about being back in a South Africa virtually at war with itself is evident. Reading the papers and tuning in to the radio, John is again exposed to the usual propaganda, yet he feels that “over the whole sorry, murderous show there hangs an air of staleness. The old rallying cries – *Uphold white Christian civilization! Honour the sacrifices of the forefathers!* – lack all force” (12, emphasis original). Similarly, Chateaubriand's posthumous account is suffused with lament as he returns to France: “I felt no desire to see it again. [It] had become for me a stone bosom, a breast without milk”. But where Chateaubriand's account is that of a “Dantesque pilgrim,” (Andriessse 206) i.e., a social documentarian, John's return, while certainly not lacking in social observations, is characterized by regression and self-criticism.

The adult John's boyishness follows from his character's awkward disposition in the two previous parts of the trilogy. Asked by his neighbor if he has children of his own, John replies: “I am a child. I mean, I live with my father” (*Summertime* 14). The relationships he has had with some of the characters the biographer meets with, and who may or may not have existed, are either short-lived or precarious. Another word for these kinds of deceptions is of course fiction. If we accept, on one hand, Coetzee's conviction that it is through writing that subjectivity unfolds then the uncertainty expressed by John reflects a side of him which is true, or at least has been at one point. Unlike Barthes, then, for whom the author is little more than a vessel for his or her pre-existing linguistic and cultural horizons, Coetzee is more optimistic about capturing one's subjectivity. On the other, the fact that Coetzee lifts his alter ego's presence out of the narrative in *Summertime* and gives way to fictionalized *others* seems to suggest that his attitude has shifted somewhat. While he is indeed still in control of the narrative, *Summertime* sees Coetzee look outside himself, asking who can help ascertain this version of

himself. Yet to help is all he allows them. The fact that their testimonies are counterposed with John's own journal entries indicates that Coetzee does not wholly trust his characters with laying judgment on his person. A better way of phrasing Coetzee's inquiry thus includes asking both *who* can attain truth about him and *how* they do it. Turning to the "how", one method is corroboration.

As said, the perspectives of Coetzee's whole ensemble shoot off into different, outwardly incommensurable directions. Yet having John as their common denominator enables the potential for supporting evidence. For example, Adriana is curious about John's literary success after their one-sided engagement, "to my mind, a talent for words is not enough if you want to be a great writer. You have also to be a great man. And he was not a great man" (195). The biographer then defends John for his "other virtues... He had a steady gaze" (196). So far, we have two opposing positions about John's merit as a "great writer," both of which are colored by vested interests in or subjective experiences of John and thus equally feasible/fallible. Yet as the biographer collects further testimony of John's character the picture begins slanting. When asked if he was an inspiration to his students, Sophie answers that "unless you have a strong presence you do not leave a deep imprint; and John did not have a strong presence" (241). A similar verdict is made by Julia who considers how "a man who, in the most intimate of human relations, cannot connect, or can connect only briefly, intermittently" nevertheless "makes his living writing reports, expert reports, on intimate human experience" (82).

Although their views on what constitutes greatness differ, to say that John *lived* greatly is disputed by several sources seemingly independent of one another, his qualities as a writer notwithstanding. Coetzee thus seems to have adopted a common critique against key figures in the autobiographical tradition: they take themselves and are being taken too seriously by others. When the biographer talks of Coetzee's possible status as "public property" and as a "great writer" Sophie, baffled, replies: "A great writer? How John would laugh if he could hear you! The day of the great writer is gone for ever, he would say" (226). Coetzee thus moves from *Boyhood* and *Youth*'s isolated third person testimony to a scathing self-evaluation based around different views. Refusing to focus on the experiences of the narrating-I, Coetzee produces a kind of aggregated autofictional self-knowledge that the conventional memoir or confession cannot and that simultaneously takes him, the ostensibly privileged subject, down a peg or two. It can of course be objected that, as the author, Coetzee is in full control of all this and that his self-criticism can only go so far. Self-deprecation is even considered by some to impede insights

about the self. As Christopher Lasch has suggested, they are not seldom signs of (poorly) concealed narcissism. Yet Coetzee's meek self-portraiture does not seem to involve the nervous self-deprecatory humor obscuring a deep-seated will to toot his own horn. This, I argue, is because it does not come at the price of original perception.

In his joint analysis of *Summertime* and V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Siddhart Srikanth asks why readers respond to them as if they were about their authors. Srikanth points to how knowledge about genre shapes how we read fiction – its paratextual properties matter. Although a paratext is extradiegetic and, therefore, not narrative, it still contributes to the narration with “quasidiegetic information” (Bode 364). Coetzee's trilogy was marketed as autobiographical fictions. Hence, despite *Summertime*'s overtly fictional frame it nevertheless comes across as a portrait of Coetzee – on one hand, through readers' preconceptions of the genre and, on the other, a recognition on behalf of the author, through the *other*, of himself. Even though Coetzee uses increasingly distancing narrative techniques in his autofictional discourse, *Summertime* being the most fictive seeing how much of its material is nonactual, the “payoff,” as Srikanth suggests, is nevertheless similar to reading a memoir (360). One reason for this being that the (fictional) biographer's reasoning “conforms to generic expectations of real-world biography” (ibid.). Yet as has been stated earlier, genres are not stable categories, something that the biographer experiences in his “interview” with John's cousin Margot.

Here, the biographer admits that he has done “something fairly radical” to her account: “I cut out my prompts and questions and fixed up the prose to read as an uninterrupted narrative spoken in your voice [...] I dramatized it here and there, letting people speak in their own voices” (87). The chapter is a type of fictionalized meta-narrative told through the biographer's reappropriation of their previous interviews (which are only referred to within the text). Yet despite the biographer's assurance that he has “not rewritten it, I have simply recast it as a narrative,” (91) Margot repeatedly intervenes when he fails to adhere to her account: “I must Protest. You are really going too far. I said nothing remotely like that. You are putting words of your own in my mouth” (119). Meekly, the biographer apologizes saying he “must have got carried away” (ibid.). We have seen examples before in this essay of the so-called “narrative pull” or suspension of disbelief inherent to compelling stories. However, this mechanism is in no way exclusive to works of fiction. As Richard Bradford puts it, due to “the paucity of evidence” existing about virtually any life, biographers have often been forced to tread “a fine line between impression and invention” (122-3). Coetzee's biographer, despite any intention he

may have had setting out on his project, is similarly forced to concede to his own indulgent fictionalization in trying to cast John as a romantic representative of Afrikaans men.

In his fictions Coetzee repeatedly efforts to pull the reader away from the power of narrative. In *In the Heart of the Country*, for instance, the belief in Magda's constricted life as the white daughter of a widowed farmer in the Karoo in the South African semi-desert is hampered by Coetzee's attaching a number to each paragraph, reminding the reader of their rootedness in fiction. Similarly, the annotations to John's diary entries in *Summertime* can be read as "antirealist devices" announcing "from the outset that we are not to suspend disbelief as we read" (Attridge 21). Regardless how attractive such instances of fictional conjecture may be, taken by themselves, none of them bring us much closer to the truth of the man.

As to why he has chosen not to include John's own writings in his project, the biographer – now better prepared than in his meeting with Martin – tells Sophie that "[w]hat Coetzee unites there cannot be trusted, not as a factual record – not because he was a liar but because he was a *fictioneer*" (225, emphasis added). Notice again the stress on the difference between lying and fictionalizing. As has been stated earlier: just because a text is not referentially accurate does not mean that it cannot amount to something true or sincere. Depending on genre, however, the one is usually expected over the other. While biographies can indeed be appreciated for their literary value, they are ultimately measured by their accuracy. A typical notion about biographies is, as William Godwin puts it in his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, that the biographer has acute need of locating "some points which are free from the shadow of doubt" (xxi, cited in Bradford 122). Ironically, Bradford points out, these are points that make out no more than a fraction of Godwin's conjectural "doorstop size account" (ibid.). Similarly, Coetzee's biographer defends his method by claiming that "if you want the truth you have to go behind the fictions they elaborate and hear from people who knew him directly, in the flesh" (*Summertime* 226).

Using a fictional *biographer* as his narrator, Coetzee deftly contrasts (auto)fiction's superiority to the auto/biographical project. John's personal writings in *Summertime* are, according to the biographer, fictions made up "for his correspondents; [...] his own eyes, or perhaps for posterity" and as such disqualified from his project (225). As elements of an autofiction, however, they are just as potent indicators of Coetzee's (the character and the author) interiority, past and present, as are the verifiable features of his life. This is conceivable about a number of topics and beliefs recorded in John's diary entries whether it is his ethics, his

rejection of national politics, his desire or his aesthetic theories. Weighed against the collected judgments about John from his fictionalized others, we are, moreover, less required to assume that his entries are sincere since they can be compared with such “countervoices”.

...

To conclude, *Summertime* jettisons *Boyhood* and *Youth*'s grappling with Coetzee's fictionalized former self. Significantly reducing the presence of his substitute, Coetzee demonstrates that struggles of self-reconciliation are universal: other people inhabit universes just as complicated and convoluted as the author himself. The people who knew him look back as much on his as on their own lives and on what occupied their minds at that time. The vivid inhabitation of others' perspectives does not merely display Coetzee's capacity as a fictioneer but also undercuts the source (the biographer) and the medium (biography) through which attempts are made to establish his myth. Rather than affirming it, the interviewees continuously steer the story away from John, incidentally throwing light on his person by revealing his (in)significance to their lives. As a counterweight to the biographer's hagiography, to some of the people he interviews John was merely tangential. Coetzee furthers *Boyhood* and *Youth*'s ambition to destabilize the memoir, confession and any easy assumption that the narrator is the subject of his or her own discourse. Yet *Summertime* is less of a linguistic and philosophical interrogation of self-narration than its predecessors. Instead Coetzee narrates himself in relation to and through his (fictional) significant others. Together, yet independently of one another, these characters interrogate the centrality the biographer's project lends Coetzee and the methods with which he seeks to reconstruct John's life.

Although he is in a sense at a remove from its narration, *Summertime* still teaches us about Coetzee's interiority through a scathing, ostensibly externalized self-evaluation. The different people who knew him form a kaleidoscopic image of John Coetzee the author and character in ways that the two previous works could not. Coetzee simultaneously undermines and strengthens (or at least tries to) authorial self-possession – albeit in an outwardly roundabout way. Because while *Summertime* certainly repositions the focus of the text from its central character to the worlds inhabited by others, within the narrative remains a will of Coetzee to understand, through autofictional poetics, a truth about a particular side of himself during a particular time – even if it “may not be true to the letter” (32).

6. Conclusion

The present essay has sought to explain why some authors of autofiction seemingly write *against* the genre in which they have placed themselves. It has asked why they would write autofiction – a genre notoriously known for authorial self-involvement – when, by all appearances, they did not intend to share details or information about their own lives and thoughts. This essay has argued that by abandoning the conventions of traditional autofiction, the writers Christopher Isherwood, Rachel Cusk and J. M. Coetzee have contributed, whether knowing it or not, to radically alter how the genre can be perceived and extended its possibilities. While one can identify their respective *autos* easily enough (Isherwood and Coetzee’s main characters are eponymous with their authors and Cusk’s protagonist is a textual replica of its source in virtually every aspect but name) the authors demonstrate that autofiction is capable of harboring more than unstable oscillations between a referential and a fictional “I”, divulgence of outwardly private information, or mere self-centeredness. In fact, while the self is their starting points, these works of autofiction demonstrate that the genre can branch out further to include more people, more stories, than the author’s own.

Relatedly, a main argument of this essay has been that the balance between the author’s withdrawn presence and the space given up to other characters in self-effacing autofiction is not part of a zero-sum game. Just because the author-protagonist stands back to allow room for other characters (fictionalized and real) does not mean that the former becomes unknown. Rather, our knowledge about the protagonists (and indirectly the authors) emerges in relation to these “others”. By relating the idiosyncratic thoughts, feelings, and actions of characters in their immediate surroundings, the writers mirror their protagonists’ identities.

The formal and thematic means these writers have utilized to achieve this paradoxical mode of self-construction and the theoretical framework used to understand them are both too numerous to be recounted here. Nevertheless, some of the essay’s conclusions, above the ones already mentioned, are as follows. First, merely adopting nominal correspondence in a work marketed and received as fiction and calling it autofiction, as one would call a similar work marketed as nonfiction autobiography is, as Srikanth points out, to “miss the point of autofiction’s deliberate use of both fictive and nonfictive discourse[s]” (348). Just because autofiction appears nonfictional by throwing out details that are verifiable and fictional by subsequently distorting them, such binary analyses fail to consider that they are ultimately

resources for the “*author’s larger project*” (ibid. 353, emphasis added). It is through the combination of fictive and nonfictive discourses that our reading needs to be recalibrated to gain insight about these “larger projects”.

Second, like other works of autofiction, the strength of the works included in this essay is not their similarity to reality but how they elevate the minutiae of the everyday to lay claim to other, less verifiable, “truths”. Yet unlike the type of autofiction in which this *sincere* veracity spills out via onrushes of unbounded and unfiltered subjectivity, insights about the self in self-effacing autofiction typically emerge by increments and in *dialogue* with others. The authors in this essay downplay introspection in favor of the slow accretion of voices of others. Moreover, they refuse to forsake these interactions as mere disorganized or confusing polyphonic events. Rather, their sum is essential for the authors’ self-construction, one that is mirrored by and includes others and the systems in which they navigate.

Yet another aspect considered in this essay is that the authors’ have individual reasons for employing self-effacing autofiction. For example, Isherwood’s occlusion of his protagonist’s personality and sexuality was partly instrumental: it made his novels publishable. The apparent rule of thumb steering Isherwood towards autofiction, and especially the self-effacing kind, was his reliance on autobiographical source material and structural necessity. Isherwood cut corners, invented and simplified his experiences to make them more interesting. Yet part of his reason for sticking his own name to his narrator-protagonist was also to illustrate the wider state of queer communities in 1930s Berlin, communities that he was unable to confess his allegiance to.

Cusk also has her reasons for reducing her own presence. On one hand she shows that our old selves are sloughed off so that new ones can emerge, a process that she proves is less individualistic than it is typically made out to be. Rather, her autofiction emphasizes how identity is necessarily interactive (or dialogic): although it can be painful, mirroring ourselves in others changes and shapes who we are. On the other, Cusk effectively writes herself off the page to illustrate women’s continuous disadvantages in the (literary) world. Embodying and resisting the role of the writer-as-martyr, Cusk’s self-effacement involves reflecting her own and other women’s dejection with the roles they are expected to occupy.

Finally, for Coetzee, self-occlusion is applied to complicate his own self-portraiture. At the core, *Summertime*, while being about Coetzee, is an epistemological examination about genre possibilities, authority and the ways we seek self-knowledge and insights about others. Coetzee

ironizes the making of his own myth; authorial legacy is undermined and superimposed by (competing) stories of sometimes wholly Others. Rather, Coetzee seems to suggest that self-insight requires a wider, more tolerant genre, like autofiction, that can contain the polyphonic structures which are necessary for its conception.

Regardless of whether these authors' unusual mode of autofiction rests on social contemporaneity or narrativity, it offers a novel way of understanding what autofiction can do. Rather than making the central character its beginning and end, the autofictional form grants writers the fertile ground for a dialogic self-exploration through the other altogether. As the works demonstrate, while the creative impetus of autofiction may be characterized by self-involvement, the genre can also branch out well beyond the confines of the self.

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