Autosociobiography and the Temporalities of Class

The Works of Kerry Hudson and Darren McGarvey

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Is there such a thing as British autosociobiography? The term's unwieldiness alone is bound to elicit a certain scepticism, to the point where the mere attempt at a definition may well be discarded as yet another instance of overeager categorisation of literary works for its own sake. And was the term, introduced by Annie Ernaux to distinguish her own work from other forms of life writing, not first adopted and theorised by Romance scholars in German universities? Is autosociobiography a mere "caprice allemand" (Lammers/Twellmann 2021), or perhaps, to fully revert to stereotypes, an unfortunate combination of French literary extravagance and the notorious zeal of German academics to classify and compartmentalise?

Silly prejudices aside, the term has rarely been used in a British context – despite the existence of texts by famous working-class intellectuals such as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (1957) and Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) which incorporate autobiographical accounts and sociological reflection very much in the sense of what Annie Ernaux pointed to when she put the 'socio' into autobiography: a merger between narratives of real life experience and the analysis of wider social structures.[1] Among the more recent specimens, the most renowned is undoubtedly Darren McGarvey's award-winning *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (2017).[2] The book is the Scottish rapper, social commen-

1 For a first evaluation of Hoggart's works in the context of autosociobiographical research and its formative role for *transclasse* narratives, see Twellmann 2022; Spoerhase 2022: 70–7; on Steedman, see Twellmann 2022.

2 See Blome 2020, 542; 548; 550 for a very tentative comparison of *Poverty Safari* to works by Didier Eribon, Saša Stanišić, Christian Baron and others. Rieger-Ladich/Petrik 2022 discuss the intersection of masculinity and class in McGarvey's work in the context of autosociobiographical research.

tator and political activist's account of his upbringing in the poorest areas of Glasgow,[3] which he uses as a starting point for a scathing critique of a society that continues to fall woefully short of adequately addressing the problems of its most deprived members. Similar texts have been published and have won critical acclaim in Britain in recent years, among them Lynsey Hanley's *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (2016), Cash Carraway's *Skint Estate: Notes from the Poverty Line* (2019) and Kerry Hudson's *Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns* (2019). In 2022, McGarvey published his follow-up, *The Social Distance Between Us. How Remote Politics Wrecked Britain*, followed by Katriona O'Sullivan's aptly named *Poor* (2023). While these texts (and others published before and since) differ in the way they combine the personal with the social, and, arguably, in regard to their literariness, they are all autobiographically informed analyses of British social realities. Importantly, they are, to use the term introduced by Chantal Jacquet (2023), told from a *transclasse* perspective – a trait often considered distinctive of autosociobiographical writing: they represent the point of view of a social climber who retrospectively casts an analytical eye on their own upbringing and who, having gained valuable insights into the processes of social stratification, now shares them with a wider (*de facto* mostly middle-class) readership.[4]

That so many such texts were published and have gained attention in recent years need not come as a surprise. Not only do they address the lasting effects of British government action in the 1980s and 90s, when most of their authors grew up; they also call out Britain's ongoing poverty problem. Pressure on the poor has only increased in the wake of the so-called politics of austerity pursued since the financial crisis of 2008, and has been further amplified by consecutive governments' failures to cope with the social fallout of Brexit and the Covid pandemic. In Britain, the past years have seen rising levels of child poverty and homelessness, a much-lamented cost of living crisis and an underfunded social welfare and healthcare system on the brink of being overwhelmed.[5] The unequal distribution of wealth and the ongoing perpetuation

3 Taking my cue from the texts examined in the following, I will talk of the 'poor', as the consistent substitution of the term by 'socially deprived', 'underprivileged', etc. would only serve to euphemise the daily experience of grinding poverty they describe (see O'Sullivan 2023).

4 On the role of autosociobiographical works (including those of Ernaux, Eribon, and Hoggart) in *transclasse* discourse, see Jaquet 2023: 14.

5 See, for example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's *UK Poverty* 2023, Robert Cuffe's BBC report on absolute poverty in Britain (2023) and the (less damning but far from

of privilege enabled most notably by the British educational system are further grounds to reflect on poverty, social inequality and class dynamics.[6] The recent change to a Labour government notwithstanding, theses issues are bound to remain defining challenges for decades to come.

In this paper, I want to discuss texts by two writers from Scotland: McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* and *Social Distance*, and Kerry Hudson's *Lowborn*, the latter presenting a decidedly female focus on class dynamics ("If you're born poor you're fucked. But if you're born poor and a woman then you're genuinely and utterly fucked", Hudson 2019: 22). What I will focus on is how in these texts poverty, and, by extension, class, are thought of and framed in temporal terms. In the first part of my article, I will argue that such a temporal framing is directly linked to the idea of social mobility that lies at the very heart of Western societies' self-understanding: the temporal Othering of the poor as 'backwards' or 'futureless' that the texts under discussion draw attention to (and political discourse frequently subscribes to), turns out to be a function of the modern Western narrative of teleological progress through time. Criticising this temporal Othering implies a fundamental challenge to the West's received model of social mobility as it is thoroughly criticised in autosociobiographical texts. In the second part, I will discuss the temporal framing of the *transclasse* position in Hudson's text with an eye to demonstrating how her inner conflicts amount to a struggle to *secure her place in time*, a challenge she masters by narrating her life story in full recognition of the social forces that formed it. Concluding, I will address what both Hudson's and McGarvey's texts propose as a means to overcome the dysfunctions they criticise: they call for closing the distance between classes, a distance which – in my reading – finds its most powerful expression in the exclusion of the poor from the order of time. Bridging the gulf between people, classes and times is an act that these autosociobiographical texts not only call for, but, to an extent, perform.

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optimistic) 2023 House of Commons Library's research briefing on poverty (Francis-Devine 2023).

6 On the importance of class and class inequality in contemporary British discourse in general, see the National Centre for Social Research's *British Social Attitudes* study (Heath/Bennet 2023). The role of the educational system is addressed in detail in McGarvey 2022 and Hanley 2019.

Stuck in the Past

As a matter of course, all autosociobiographical texts – all biographies, in fact – are about the past, and about history. From the very outset, McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* makes clear that its history is one of deprivation and violence, and one that is shared by many other disadvantaged members of society. Moreover, it is an ongoing history in the sense that his parents' generation was subjected to the same experience (McGarvey 2017: 42–4), leading to the very sad and disturbing observation that nothing much seems to have changed in the lives of the poorest Glaswegians. Hudson's *Lowborn* spots something similar within her family history, recounting a cycle of neglect and abuse running in her family, the Mackies of Aberdeen, a "dysfunction that carries down from generation to generation" (Hudson 2019: 109). In her case, suffering is chiefly inflicted on daughters by their mothers, but fuelled and perpetuated by the gruelling experience of everyday poverty (see Hudson 2019: 67–9). One may get the impression that in these stories history simply repeats itself, and that the passing of time brings no change; at least, no change for the better. The people depicted seem stuck in a time loop, severed from any noteworthy progress.

Exploring this point further, it is instructive to take a look at Douglas Stuart's Booker Prize-winning *Shuggie Bain* (2020). Not autosociobiographical in a narrow sense,[7] his text has been praised for its depictions of Glaswegian working-class realities of the early 1980s, which are of considerable interest in the present context:

> The city was changing; you could see it in people's faces. Glasgow was losing its purpose, and he could see it all clearly […]. Industrial days were over, and the bones of the Clyde Shipworks and the Springburn Railworks lay about the city like rotted dinosaurs. Whole housing estates of young men

7 With genre distinctions being fluid at best and the role of fictionalisation not at all clarified at this point, one may indeed read novels such as Stuart's – or, similarly, Kerry Hudson's *Tony Hogan Bought me an Ice-Cream Float before He Stole My Ma* (2012) – as autosociobiographical (or rather through an autosociobiographical lens). Clearly autobiographically inspired, they, too, represent and reflect on class-related modes of exclusion in British society; the *transclasse* position, meanwhile, would have to be implied in the narrative style and this kind of literature's *de facto* middle-class status. Jaquet for her part reads autobiographically inspired novels much like Stuart's and Hudson's as just as informative on social dynamics as the texts penned by Ernaux, Eribon, and Hoggart (Jaquet 2023: 14).

> who were promised the working trades of their fathers had no future now. (Stuart 2020: 43)

Notably, this passage does refer to change – in fact, it appears to identify a starting point of social deprivation for substantial parts of Glasgow's population: the city falling derelict, its industries, its buildings, its people losing their purpose and prospects. Indeed, while prior to the 1980s, the experience (or at least the imminent threat) of poverty was hardly new for the members of Glaswegian working-class communities, the economic crises and government policies of the time led to increased hardship for substantial parts of the city's population, with the above-mentioned disastrous effects. Developments of this kind are thoroughly, and at times furiously, addressed in most of the above-mentioned narratives. But while the passage quoted describes change – decidedly for the worse – it employs imagery that evokes a more complex temporality. The simile of the 'rotted dinosaurs' not only conveys the massive scale of the closed-down industries. It also evokes a strong sense of material decay: of the city and what made it what it was, of what gave it pride being a dead thing; its remains are still visible, still impressive, but remnants of an already distant past. What this imagery suggests, then, is that the times when Glasgow was a proud, vibrant, working-class city are *enormously removed in time*. Already in the 1980s, *Shuggie Bain* seems to imply, the days when the city was *not* decrepit were long gone – just like the dinosaurs. And like them, they will never come back.

"It's difficult to convey the brutal and lasting impact of pit and shipyard closures on Glasgow to those who aren't familiar with the city", writes Eliza Gearty in the left-wing *Jacobin* in 2020, commenting on the above passage and emphasising its realism: "Walking around Glasgow, you can still see the skeleton-like remains of these old, once-proud industrial areas. And you can still meet the sorts of characters the tumultuous era produced: the lost souls consumed by drink, and the ones hardened by a stubborn sort of resilience" (Gearty 2020). Set in the 1980s, published and read in the 2020s, Stuart's text evokes the idea of social conditions being permanently suspended in time. Associated with an ongoing prehistory, those suffering from social deprivation are, for all intents and purposes, placed outside of history: stuck in a past that is long gone and that yet lingers in dereliction and decay.

In the present context, the above passage is of particular interest because of its striking similarities to McGarvey's (somewhat nostalgic) portrayal of Possilpark, a Glaswegian district that could very well have served as a model for Stu-

art's depiction. McGarvey describes it as a place in which, in 2022, "100 per cent of residents live within 500 feet of a derelict site" (McGarvey 2022: 152):

> This community was literally built around industry. The industry is what gave this community its centre. […] In other, more affluent parts of the city, the industrial history of this community is not just celebrated but mythologised – its hollowing out, of course, omitted because it undermines a sense of middle-class nostalgia and the comforting myth of progress. (McGarvey 2022: 152)

This "hollowing out" of the city and its industry – its evisceration, one might say with Stuart's imagery of the dinosaur carcass in mind – has caused a "deep spiritual injury" (McGarvey 2022: 152) to the community. According to McGarvey, it has left "successive generations socially and economically rudderless and more disoriented than the last. There is no longer a sense of place or history in which people can orientate themselves – only the grim narrative of disrepair and political neglect." (152) There is no change; there is no progress; only a strangely timeless existence, with neither future nor history. The poor seem to be mired in the past – a very distant past – that paradoxically seems to continue well into the present.

What makes this temporal framing so noteworthy?

Social advancement has been taken for granted in Western societies at least since the economic recovery after the end of World War II, hailed in France as the *Trente Glorieuses*. While the intensity and duration of this upswing varied from country to country, the general impression may be described retrospectively as one of confidence in a reliable improvement of social conditions – of society in general and the individual in particular (see Levinson 2016: 15–26). The image commonly invoked is, of course, that of the social ladder: the working class toils in order to 'rise' to the means and privileges of the lower middle class; the lower middle class strives to achieve the status of the 'proper' middle or upper middle class, which in turn aspires to the most prestigious, profitable, and powerful positions in society. Obviously, this model is highly reductive (as is its description here), but it used to be widespread and influential nonetheless.

According to this model, writes none other than Pierre Bourdieu,

> the social order established at any given moment is also necessarily a temporal order, an 'order of succession' […], each group having as its past the

> group immediately below and for its future the group immediately above [...]. The competing groups are separated by differences which are essentially located in the order of time. (2010 [1984]: 160)

While Bourdieu's statement refers to the social order in post-war France, it can easily be applied to contemporary Britain. In fact, the idea of ascending the 'social ladder', leaving the working class behind, has been very prominent in British politics since the Thatcher era, and has been endorsed by all subsequent governments, regardless of the party or parties in power (see Spohrer 2018). Famously, New Labour's Tony Blair envisioned a "middle class that will include millions of people who traditionally may see themselves as working class" (qt. in Chakelian 2023). McGarvey is well aware of the defining role played by social mobility in political discourse: "the aim of the game seems to be to rise up and out of your class", he writes, with the working class in particular being marked as "a phase to be transitioned out of" (McGarvey 2022: 29).

An important effect of this model is that what is essentially a *competition* between individuals and classes for resources, prestige, and opportunities is turned into an order of *succession*, in which everyone will improve their standing in society, with all that entails, *in time*. The dangerous implication of this idea is that it gives the impression that one has, to quote Bourdieu,"nothing to do but wait" (2010 [1984]: 160) to improve one's standing and material conditions. Worse, it gives licence to a politics of exclusion: for if time moves on, steadily and ineluctably, who is to blame when social advancement fails to materialise? This is precisely where neoliberally inspired reasonings, deeply ingrained in global political discourse, take hold – reasonings according to which those who do not improve their lot are responsible for their own predicament, which is ultimately due to their lack of imagination and commitment. Poverty, according to this line of thinking, is chiefly caused by a 'poverty of aspirations'.[8]

Of course, there are many voices in British society and elsewhere that have been denouncing for a long time this flat condemnation of the least privileged.

8 In her 2019 study, the working-class ethnographer (both in the sense of writing about working-class realities and of herself being from a working-class background) Lisa McKenzie summarises: "The way that working-class people are narrated through institutional systems like academic research, policy recommendations and political rhetoric is always that of 'lack'" (McKenzie 2019: 235), "lack, and immobility" (237). Lack here chiefly refers to "'lack of taste', 'lack of parenting skills', 'lack of control' and 'lack of aspiration'" (235). On the term's career in British political discourse, see Spohrer 2018.

As Pierre Bourdieu already argued in the 1980s, it is the privileged classes that define the playing field and the rules of the competition, and that command all relevant resources – financial, cultural, and social. In the end, it is every stratum of society competing with each other that reliably confines those with the worst starting position to the bottom of the social (and economic) hierarchy (see Bourdieu 2010: 161–4). Hence, a lack of aspirations is more effect than cause of finding oneself at the lowest rung of the 'social ladder'. As Hudson, McGarvey and many others attest, the ambitions of the poor are stymied by the repeated experience of losing out to the more privileged in the unequal competition for opportunities (see McGarvey 2017: 48; McGarvey 2022: 70–1; Hudson 230–1; Hanley 2019: 53–5).[9]

Bourdieu, for his part, calls the above model of social advancement an "ideological mechanism" (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]: 160) that enables the privileged to keep the less fortunate 'waiting' by pointing to future improvement. Meanwhile, this "comforting myth of progress", as McGarvey terms it in his portrayal of Possilpark, serves to shift the blame on the losers, if – or rather when – success fails to materialise. Turning competitive disadvantage into personal failure seems all the more perfidious as the more privileged clearly profit from and even depend on these 'failures'. For "if young people from poorer communities didn't drop out of school early or fail to achieve high enough grades to go straight to university, then who would do those low-paid, precarious jobs" (McGarvey 2022: 43–4) that society relies on?

And yet, as McGarvey furiously observes, some people are "nothing short of militant in their commitment to an economic system where wealth does not trickle down […]. They cling desperately to the dream that this will all blow over. That things can only get better" (McGarvey 2022: 344) – all while media and politics are "defaming the poorest communities as futureless and the most vulnerable and challenged families as scroungers and freeloaders" (McGarvey 2022: 3).[10] Perfidiously, those few who 'make it' against the odds and manage to escape precarious living conditions then serve as evidence of a functional system and "provide a ready alibi" (Jaquet 2023: 18) for its exclusionary reality.

9 On the link between the availability of financial and cultural capital in the Bourdieuan sense and the capacity to imagine a better future (a point not addressed in this paper), see Atkinson 2013.

10 Notably, the idea of prosperity 'trickling down' is but a variation of the idea of social progress over time. For an analysis of the symbolic violence inflicted on the poor in contemporary British media and politics, see Jensen 2014; Morrison 2021.

Transclasse writers such as McGarvey and Hudson are, of course, among these exceptional few, and the two are acutely aware of the fact that their biographies seem to confirm the very model of social progress they criticise, rendering them susceptible to being used as a "poster-child for the system" (McGarvey 202: 348).[11] Both, however, are adamant that they achieved what they did not due to, but despite of the system of 'social mobility' in effect in contemporary Britain. "I have a good imagination and found a way to express it. I know how to read situations and people. But no more so, and often a lot less, than many kids I grew up with" (Hudson 2019: 27), writes Hudson in *Lowborn* on her new life as an accomplished writer – although it should be noted that the latter simply amounts to having a meaningful job, a stable relationship and a "little rented flat we can afford and a fridge full of food" (Hudson 2019: 27). In the end, it is to "pure, dumb, arbitrary luck" (Hudson 2019: 27) that she ascribes her escape from the terrible conditions she grew up in and that seemed to be her future. McGarvey, while insisting on the importance of taking responsibility for one's own life, hauntingly relates how mere coincidence prevented him from falling for hard drugs like many of his friends locked in seemingly inescapable poverty, which, in his telling, would have led him to repeat his mother's trajectory of a drug addict's life and death (McGarvey 2017: 72).

The inevitability of people failing to rise on the 'social ladder' thoroughly problematises the entire idea of social mobility that plays such a key role in Western societies' self-understanding. It is noteworthy that this model of social advancement as progress in time is the very mirror image of, and intimately linked to, the Enlightenment model of history that has been predominant in modern Western discourse: that of history as a unidirectional, teleological process, with peoples or cultures advancing by virtue of their own ingenuity. Notably, Western nations have been generously attributing this ingenuity to themselves, while relegating everyone else to the proverbial backseat of history, as if they were still living in the Middle Ages or in the Stone Age or in a place without history altogether – the African continent, in particular, was notoriously conceived by European historians along such lines (see e.g. Kuykendall 1992; Trevor-Roper 1965).

Famously denounced by anthropologist Johannes Fabian as the "denial of coevalness" (1983: 31), this idea has been used as a means of translating cultural

11 Eribon voices similar criticism in *Retours sur 'Retour à Reims'* [Returning to returning to Reims] (2011: 20).

difference into temporal distance, marking the European Other as 'trapped in the past', and as themselves responsible for their ongoing 'backwardness', which in turn affects both their cultural lives and material living conditions (Fabian 1983: 16–35). In this perspective, the real or imagined poverty of non-Western peoples appears to be the effect of their temporal distance rooted in their inability (or, even worse, their refusal) to 'catch up', when in fact the vast majority of their hardships have been caused by colonial exploitation, which facilitated Western societies' prosperity in the first place.

Although the experiences of the marginalised working classes in Western countries cannot be equated with the consequences of centuries of colonisation,[12] it is my contention that the same fundamental mechanism is at play here: cultural and material differences are modelled into temporal distance, which underpins reasonings employed to justify ongoing inequality and exploitation. This temporal framing of people suffering from social deprivation then amounts to their exclusion from the order of time – and with it from the central promise of modernity: the betterment of their fortunes. In the case of autosociobiographical texts emphatically taking the side of the poor, it expresses the helplessness of those 'trapped in the past' (for who can travel through time?). In political discourse, on the other hand, it can be used to justify further exclusion: here, the disadvantaged are all too often made out to be lost causes who stubbornly refuse to live in and up to the present and its challenges. As Cash Carraway succinctly puts it in her narrative's prologue: politics and media "keep us trapped in our little poverty porn boxes to be observed like a freakish curiosity from 1834" (Carraway 2019: xiii).

These operations mark the socially deprived as the Other in and of a society that subscribes to the narrative of social advancement through time, which is in turn closely tied to modern ideological delusions concerning historical progress. The latter are all the more doubtful in a world of accelerating ecological deterioration that provides societies with ever fewer resources to distribute and in which the future, whatever it may look like, is far from assuredly more prosperous. If the ongoing exclusion of the least privileged in society is to be avoided, the whole idea of social mobility must be called into question. Advancement of the kind this model proposes – available to all in the future, if they are only willing to participate in it – is decidedly not what is needed; in fact, it is simply impossible given the model's competitive nature/baseline and the planet's ecological limits. Instead of shifting solutions into an increasingly

12 McGarvey sees striking parallels worthy of further discussion (McGarvey 2022: 6).

uncertain future, we may conclude, what is called for is a better distribution of resources in the present. This may sound revolutionary to some, but it is nothing short of inevitable – at least, if the goal is not just "to pass through the barriers of class on one's own, but to abolish them for everyone." (Jaquet 2023: 182)

It is the fundamental impracticality of the currently prevailing paradigm and the concomitant falsehoods and ideological distortions about those 'left behind' which explain the feeling of anger that permeates works like McGarvey's and Hudson's. While anger may not feature prominently in all writings designated as autosociobiographical, it certainly does here and fuels these texts' political momentum: it manifests in the call "to change the future" (Hudson 2019: 232), not in some remote day that may never come, but in the here and now.

Securing One's Place in Time

Another effect of thinking about the social order in temporal terms is that it anachronises poverty itself, locating it in the past as something that does not 'really' exist anymore – at least in the perception of the more prosperous. Édouard Louis, for instance, reports in his *changer:méthode* (2021; *Change* 2024) that he had trouble finding a publisher for his acclaimed *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017) because his account was not deemed credible: "They said that so much poverty and violence could not exist in France" (319)[13] – *anymore*, one is prompted to add. His hometown having but dirt roads, and his family using a wood stove for heating surely reinforced the impression of his narrative not depicting actual French realities of the twenty-first century.

However – and that, of course, is precisely the point – this past is still very much present, in France as in Britain and today as in 2014, and those who suffer from it are not allowed to forget it, even if they 'make it' in the end. No surprise, then, that *transclasse* authors repeatedly report of constantly grappling with their own history, their still-present-past: in their worries, or their learned behaviour, or in their feeling the need to hide their origins out of shame – and

13 "[I]ls disaient qu'autant de pauvreté et de violence ne pouvait pas exister en France". Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

out of fear of being made outcasts yet again, of suffering from all the prejudices attached to having been, to use Hudson's expression, *lowborn* (Hudson 2019; McGarvey 2022: 345–50; Jaquet 2023: 131–5). Writing about her attempts to blend in with a crowd of middle-class journalists and media representatives, Hudson remarks:

> How can I say that what they are looking at [i.e., the successful writer she has become] is barely a real thing at all? That what they think is an achievement is just a layer that can be easily peeled away? Why would I try to explain to them that while it is necessary to 'pass', the bones, blood and muscle, the very substance of me, belong to how I was raised? [...] The words I heard spoken to me in my first twenty years are tattooed everywhere under my skin. And they are just as alive and true as anything I've heard at those parties or festivals. (Hudson 2019: 28)

Note, again, the imagery of the body, of bones: it is an imagery Hudson repeatedly deploys in order to denote the lingering presence of the past, a still-present-past (Hudson 2019: 28; 117; 151; 176). In her case, it is not associated with decay, but rather used as an expression of an irreducible somatic presence that goes beyond (or rather: deeper than) what the intellect is able to process and master. The feeling she grapples with is one that seems inadequately described as *imposter syndrome*, when she writes that in these moments "I'm not a professional thirty-eight-year-old at all but a former homeless kid" (Hudson 2019: 150). The *transclasse* inner conflict of being torn between one's origin and one's tenuous arrival in the new milieu is thus marked as a temporal experience: "How much of my past is still part of me today?" (Hudson 2019: 3)

Didier Eribon has remarked that he prefers the term *transfuge* to *transclasse*, because, negative connotations aside, it better expresses a movement of *flight*, the need to escape one's milieu of origin and its unbearable conditions (Eribon 2016: 107–8). That is exactly how Hudson conceives of her entire adult life after finally being admitted to university: "I started running and I didn't look back." (Hudson 2019: 229) Running away from a past that never ceases to haunt her, however: a past in which she seemed bound to repeat all her mother's and grandmother's harrowing life experiences. As she reports it, it was not one but two abortions before the age of 18 – one after a sexual assault – that prevented her becoming, just like her female progenitors, an isolated single mother struggling with drug abuse who raises her children in poverty (Hudson 2019: 40–2; 199–206). She tells of irrational fears and recurring nightmares, of being

unable to shake the feeling that she is still the child from way back, her new self "simply a costume of grown-up clothes I stand wearing in front of them" (Hudson 2019: 28), her middle-class friends and colleagues. Pondering the impression she makes, fearing their rejection, she keeps asking herself: "Have I really *escaped*?" (Hudson 2019: 3, my emphasis)

The pervasive sense of not arriving anywhere has been marked as a distinctive feature of the *transclasse* experience (Jaquet 2023: 107; 142). Sure enough, it is shared by Édouard Louis:[14] Making his way into ever more exclusive circles of French society, he still testifies to the feeling of never truly feeling at home. Tellingly, he, too, expresses this in temporal terms, writing of his yearning to 'create the presence' ("créer le présent", Louis 2021: 270) and stating: "C'est le présent qui me manque" (327) – I miss the present, but also: *what I lack* is the present. What he lacks seems to be a present moment that is not captive to the past and in which there is no need to 'improve', or 'advance', or to change even further. It is a moment to simply *be*, as opposed to being torn between past and future. It is hardly surprising that he finds this 'timeless moment' in spontaneous sexual encounters with strangers (Louis 2021: 270–4). Here, he experiences the *ek-stasis* of sexual bliss with no strings attached – a sense of being out-of-himself that is neither defined by his past worries nor his hopes for and fears of what is to come.

Hudson, meanwhile, writes that she experiences what she calls a "perfect moment" (Hudson 2019: 236) in her relationship with her partner and her renewed ties with her family. But most of all, it is having recounted and accounted for her life in her book which has given Hudson a sense of arrival – in fact, "for me, the moment is perfect" (Hudson 2019) is *Lowborn*'s very last line, concluding her reflections on the journey that writing this text has been. Overcoming her feelings of shame, telling about her harrowing experiences, and having them recognised by others seems to have been crucial for her coming to terms with the past, her ability to acknowledge its presence without being defined by it. "The child I was still walks beside me", she writes, "but now I know how to care for her" (Hudson 2019: 232); "I feel like a whole person. With roots and history. Like I'm fully fledged" (236). Reckoning with her past has thus helped Hudson to bring her temporality in order, to *secure her place in time* in a writing process she describes as an act of temporal/bodily re-membering ("I was slowly getting to stitch the scattered parts of myself together again"

14 On the similarities of Louis's and Hudson's life experiences, see their discussion on the London Review Bookshop video podcast (2019).

2019: 151). Alternating between accounts of Hudson's childhood and her older self tracing and reflecting on her past, her narrative's non-linear structure mirrors the complexities of her life's experience. What her text addresses, in other words, is the entanglement of past and present in an attempt to come to terms with it: narrating her life means bringing yesterday and today together – a painful act the result of which does not amount to a seamless whole.

One may tie this observation to the idea of autosociobiographical works as return narratives (Blome 2020). After all, the *return* Blome speaks about is not merely social or spatial, but has a markedly temporal dimension: while Hudson indeed narrates physically revisiting the various places she once called home, her return – just like other autosociobiographers' – is just as much a *temporal* homecoming, a revisiting of and an attempt to coming to terms with the past, as incomplete as such an attempt must necessarily remain. Once more taking our cue from Bourdieu, we could even speak of a *temporalité clivé* as a further characteristic of the *transclasse* experience, and ask to what extent negotiating such a split or cleft temporality, the attempt to reconcile different temporal levels or layers, constitutes a marker of autosociobiographical accounts in general.

Needless to say, these temporal layers include the future, and the attempt to reconcile them seems intimately tied to the shared political impetus exhibited by the texts in question. In Hudson's case, tracing the exclusionary mechanisms she was subjected to by a society that was and is, as she puts it, "structurally and systematically designed to further marginalise those who are struggling" (Hudson 2019: 49), has helped her to turn her shame into anger, enabling her to further speak out on these issues (230–3). Narrating the social is thus a necessary part of her reckoning, providing her not only with a tolerable relationship between then and now, but also with a sense of the future. Ending her book in the spirit of addressing social injustices past and present is far from the end of the story – it "doesn't feel like an ending. It feels like a beginning" (Hudson 2019: 230).

Creating Shared Time

In the end, the way Hudson's and McGarvey's texts negotiate class and *transclasse* temporalities is inextricably linked to what they both consider paramount for tackling the problem of deprivation and social division. In McGarvey's words, it is the creation of *proximity* (McGarvey 2022: 5). Both writers

state that the issue is not only that substantial parts of society profit from existing injustices, but that they are, at best, ignorant of the experience of the most disadvantaged. Their perceptions and proposed solutions are therefore utterly inadequate to tackle the difficulties faced by struggling communities and individuals. On the other hand, those who do have intimate knowledge of the situation, those with "solutions that actually work because they've been there themselves" (Hudson 2019: 231), usually remain unheard – and even if they are given a voice, they are easily sidelined for the obvious classist reasons, as McGarvey emphasises in *Poverty Safari* (McGarvey 2017: 104). The fundamental problem, therefore, is the *distance* between classes; a distance that, I would argue, finds its most striking expression in the poor's exclusion from the very order of time. Both Kerry Hudson and Darren McGarvey call for society to overcome this distance, emphatically and explicitly. And they themselves perform this task: by telling of their experiences in the middle-class medium of literature, by acting as "translators of the social" (Spoerhase in Jaquet 2018: 246) from one class to the other, telling stories their recipients need to hear, even if they do not want to. Autosociobiographical texts like McGarvey's and Hudson's aim at generating social proximity *via literature*, inducing the middle class-dominated fields of politics and the media (and, of course, academia) to listen for a change, and to engage with their stories rather than reproducing social narratives that merely serve their own ends.

"Communication" – and this is what it all comes down to – is, to once again quote Johannes Fabian, "ultimately, about creating shared Time" (Fabian 1983: 31). This is precisely what these texts do on many levels: they bring together the writers' (narrated) past with their and their readers' present; and they confront the better-off in society with the present realities they all too often think of as a thing of the past, or as the consequence of people's (presumed and temporally coded) cultural inferiority – their 'backwardness'. By writing (of) their past, by connecting it to their and their readers' present, these writers and their texts create shared time, initiating – and participating in – processes of change towards a more inclusive future. As the introduction to this volume makes quite clear, transcending borders is what autosociobiographical texts do – not least in a temporal sense. While this is something *all* literary texts do, each in their own way, and what may be construed as part of the temporal dimension of literature's global entanglements, it seems to be a particularly important feature of autosociobiographical accounts such as Hudson's and McGarvey's.

Needless to say, the problem of poverty and social division in Britain and elsewhere will not be solved by reading literary texts, however rousing or clear-

sighted they may be – and even less by analysing them in the rarefied realm of literary criticism. Writing as a German academic about Scottish working-class narratives, as I have done here, implies its own distance and comes with additional risks of misapprehension. However, as I hope to have shown, contextualising the works in question within current autosociobiographical discourse can further the discussion on social exclusion everywhere, regardless of national borders. Indeed, it is my contention that engaging with these texts and heeding what they say – and what they do – is an excellent starting point for critically addressing the dynamics of social injustice in Scotland, the UK, and beyond.

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