Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren,
Marie Jacquier, Peter Löffelbein (eds.)

AUTOSOCIO-BIOGRAPHY

A Literary Phenomenon and Its Global Entanglements

[transcript] Lettre

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Lettre

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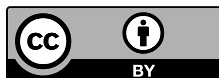

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On the Globality of Autosociobiography

An Introduction

Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren, Marie Jacquier, and Peter Löffelbein

When, in October 2022, the French writer Annie Ernaux was awarded the Nobel Prize, the reactions in the international literary community highlighted a significant challenge: critics struggled to categorise her work. Time and again, the genre-transcending character of Ernaux's texts was emphasised – the Swedish Academy, for instance, saw the originality of her *œuvre* precisely in its "shifting between fiction, sociology and history" (Olsson 2022). The attribution of generic hybridity was chiefly predicated on the author's extensive references to various academic discourses.[1] In keeping with her self-characterisation as an "ethnographer of her own life" (Ernaux, 1997: 38)[2], some commentators even went so far as to equate her writings with ethnographic sources.[3] Yet despite the eminent difficulties in assigning Ernaux's publications to a traditional genre,[4] the apposite concept of *autosociobiography*, already established in Franco-German academia, was not commonly used – instead,

1 Spanish journalists, for example, situated Ernaux's narratives at the intersection of history, sociology, and individual memory: "El resultado ha sido una obra minuciosamente elaborada a lo largo de las últimas cinco décadas y situada a medio camino entre la narrativa y las ciencias humanas, donde la historia y la sociología cuentan tanto como el recuerdo individual." (Bassets/Vicente 2022)

2 "[E]thnologe de soi-même". Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are our own.

3 "When future ethnographers want to study what it was like to be a woman in Europe in the decades between the second world war and today, they could do worse than pick up the collected works of Annie Ernaux, who this week became the first female French writer to win the Nobel prize in literature." ("The Guardian" 2022)

4 "'Her tone is remarkably unsentimental, even when she's talking about very difficult material,' said the writer Francine Prose, who said she's been a reader of Ernaux's work for decades. 'I can't think of anyone quite like her, period. You can't really say what the genre is, it's not autofiction, it's not, strictly speaking, memoir. It's as if she invented her own genre and perfected it.'" (Alter et al. 2022)

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critics deployed, the author's outspoken disapproval notwithstanding, a more prevalent term that had likewise originated in France: "It will be said that this is the first Nobel Prize awarded for *autofiction*, a sub-genre the writer has nurtured more than anyone, although she disavows this label and everything that confines her to her mere biography." (Bassets/Vicente 2022; our italics)[5]

In fact, as early as in 2003, Ernaux herself had attempted a differentiation to characterise her texts, which are autobiographical but not 'novelistic', and systematically avoid fictionalisation:

> But I'm not satisfied with the term 'autobiographical narrative', because it doesn't go far enough. It underlines an aspect that is certainly fundamental, a posture of writing and reading that is radically opposed to that of the novelist, but it says nothing about the aim of the text, its construction. Worse still, it imposes a reductive image: 'The author is talking about himself'. Yet *La place*, *Une femme*, *La honte*, and, in part, *L'événement* are less autobiographical than auto-socio-biographical. (Ernaux 2003: 23)[6]

The awarding of the Nobel Prize created increased visibility for texts that were compatible with Ernaux's neologistic self-categorisation. Concurrently, the concept of autosociobiography further gained in popularity in German-language academic discourse, where the reception of said texts from France and elsewhere had, in effect, been accompanied by a quasi-parallel theorisation. International resonance, on the other hand, remained more subdued, which is why the present volume aims to subject the current state of autosociobiographical research to a critical revision in a global perspective.

A 'global perspective' as we understand it does not merely mean an expansion of the field of research with an eye to investigating the occurrence of or reflection on comparable texts and ways of writing in other cultural and historical settings; taking our cue from recent trends in the study of history, we use

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5 "Se dirá que este es el primer Nobel que premia la autoficción, un subgénero que ella ha alimentado más que nadie, aunque la escritora reniegue de esa etiqueta y de todo lo que la encierre en su mera biografía."

6 "Mais ce terme de 'récit autobiographique' ne me satisfait pas, parce qu'il est insuffisant. Il souligne un aspect certes fondamental, une posture d'écriture et de lecture radicalement opposée à celle du romancier, mais il ne dit rien sur la visée du texte, sa construction. Plus grave, il impose une image réductrice: 'l'auteur parle de lui.' Or, *La place*, *Une femme*, *La honte* et en partie *L'événement* sont moins autobiographiques que auto-socio-biographiques."

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the term 'globality' in reference to the complex interrelatedness of phenomena that transcend (often supposedly well-established) boundaries. The goal of Global History, then, is not a totalising ('universal') view on the past, but the non-teleological description and analysis of boundary-crossing lines of connection that engender historical phenomena in the first place (Conrad 2016: 5). Accordingly, if we speak of literary globality, we seek to engage with the historical and cultural entanglements a text is embedded in, that it performs or enacts in its specific spatio-temporal context and that produce it as a meaningful entity in the first place, without resorting to (Eurocentric) master narratives as explicatory paradigms.[7]

A global perspective on autosociobiography is therefore not limited to conceptualising its object of study as a phenomenon of interweaving Franco-German discourses, something that has already been done in a kind of *histoire croisée*[8]. If, in the following, we briefly outline this approach, we do so to orientate the reader in current debates most of which are not accessible in English. A truly global perspective on autosociobiographical texts involves surveying their emergence (as individual texts, but also as a "*genre in the making*", Blome et al. 2022: 12, original emphasis) in a way that takes into account the interplay of all known contributing factors including (but not limited to) writers, critics, literary institutions (including international scholarship), and the book market. It entails engaging with the characteristic mixture of sociological concerns and literary practices that gave critics such a hard time when it came to classifying the works of Ernaux. Keeping in mind that globality has a temporal dimension, it also means considering how these writings are related to earlier forms of textual production and how they are distinguished – or attempt to set themselves apart – from other kinds of life writing past and present. And last but not least, it necessitates a thorough reflection on how the texts under consideration here (and the concomitant critical discourses)

7 For a concise summary and critique of the scholarly debate on the 'global', see Johnston (2020). Johnston argues that there is a specifically *textual* globality characterised by a "historical self-reflexivity" that goes far beyond the here and now of a given performance or narrative (ibid.: 184).

8 The term was coined by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, who define it as follows: "In most cases, it refers, in a vague manner, to one or a group of histories associated with the idea of an unspecified crossing or intersection […]. [In] a more specific approach […], *histoire croisée* associates social, cultural, and political formations, generally at the national level, that are assumed to bear relationships to one another." (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 31)

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reflect on the intersectional nature of social exclusion and marginalisation, social modes in which class, gender, and *race* are indissolubly intertwined. Such an approach promises to yield a more complete picture of the specific circumstances that enable or stimulate the production and the critical and commercial success of comparable texts, literary practices, and writing styles in different cultural contexts and historical constellations.

While this approach foregrounds the question of the comparability and potential connectedness of texts and their respective preconditions, it seeks to do so without falling back on a totalising 'history of influence' that constructs the spread of a given genre, writing style, or literary *topos* from a European centre, and without setting up a select canon of European texts as a sort of standard against which the diversity of literary writing is to be measured. Rather, inquiring after the globality of literary texts means to recognise them in their specific made-ness and to aim for honest, unbiased comparisons. Before we go into detail on how this volume's contributions address the questions outlined, however, we would like to stress the relevance of viewing autosociobiographical texts through the lens of their global entanglements by tracing how they and the corresponding critical debate emerged, and by addressing the as-yet liminal status of autosociobiography as a genre.

1. Autosociobiography – a Franco-German Phenomenon?

As indicated, the notion of autosociobiography first gained critical traction in Germany. Instrumental in this regard was Tobias Haberkorn's German translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009; *Returning to Reims* 2013a) for the publishing house Suhrkamp,[9] a book in which the author-narrator reflects on his family and upbringing, and condemns the homophobia he faced and the manifold obstacles he encountered in his career due to his social origins. By analysing his own trajectory, Eribon draws attention to overarching class differences, shedding light on social phenomena such as the migration of left-wing voters from working-class backgrounds to the far-right populist party *Front National* (now *Rassemblement National*).

Retour à Reims became an enormous success in Germany (even more so than in France), and has been extensively studied as an extraordinary phenomenon

9 *Rückkehr nach Reims* (2016).

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of delayed reception and international transfer (Kargl/Terrisse 2020: 5).[10] Its publication coincided with the rise of right-wing populism across Europe in general, and the entry of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) into the German parliament in particular. 2017 saw a renewed focus on France as the German public observed with keen interest the newly elected President Emmanuel Macron and the high expectations associated with his leadership. France was also the guest country at the Frankfurt Book Fair, which prompted a heated political argument between Eribon and Macron (see Rhein 2020).[11] Subsequently, Eribon's profile has transformed into that of a prominent public intellectual, turning him into a much sought-after French representative in discussions pertaining to the rise of right-wing nationalist inclinations, the trajectory of the working class, or even broader socio-economic matters (Hiden 2020: 105–6). Eribon's insights, already expressed in *Retour à Reims*, have evidently been regarded as applicable beyond national borders (Ernst 2020: 80), a remarkable reception attributable not only to the prevailing socio-political climate, but also to the distinctive form of his work: arguably, it was precisely the hybrid nature of his publications, their oscillating between autobiographical self-description and political-sociological analysis, that allowed them to resonate in such a broad range of social, political, and literary contexts.[12]

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10 In the year of its publication alone, the book sold an impressive 90,000 copies in Germany; it had taken six years to reach 65,000 copies sold in France (see Kargl/Terrisse 2000: 5; Edy 2000: 93).

11 Macron was scheduled to give a speech during the Fair's opening night; hence, Eribon declined the invitation to attend and opted to publish a counter-speech instead (see Eribon 2017).

12 Eribon's recourse to autobiographical *topoi* and the dramatic procedures of tragedy, in particular, has served as a major source of inspiration for other writers and artists. The most striking similarity is with Édouard Louis's debut novel, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017), in which Louis (who studied sociology in Amiens and later in Paris at the École nationale supérieure, where he found mentorship in Eribon) recounts his challenging upbringing in northern France. Both works share the common theme of racism, violence, and homophobia in their authors' milieu of origin, and the sense of being an outsider in the intellectual circles of Paris. The generic hybridity of *En finir* is exemplified by Thomas Ostermeier's 2017 theatrical adaptation at the Schaubühne Berlin (Kargl/Terrisse 2020: 5–6). Louis's subsequent works, *Histoire de la violence* (2016; *History of Violence* 2018) and *Qui a tué mon père* (2018; *Who Killed My Father* 2019), were likewise staged by Ostermeier in 2018 and 2020, respectively.

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Since then, hybrid texts of this kind have gained much attention internationally, and, by turning towards the factual, to social analysis and commentary, seem to be moving away from certain forms of autofictional writing, the hitherto prevalent paradigm. Ironically, the 2022 conferral of the Nobel Prize to Ernaux, whose texts were then hailed as autofictional, may be seen as the present pinnacle of the favourable reception of such writings with a noticeable claim to factuality (more on this later) that reflect and analyse conflicted class relations and various forms of discrimination in an autobiographical mode. Ernaux's first text classified as autosociobiographical was published in 1983: *La Place* (*A Man's Place*, 2012) is about her father and his 'place' in society, described from the perspective of a daughter painfully alienated from her family after becoming a teacher and writer. Outside of France, this and other early works did not receive much attention prior to the completely unexpected international success of *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017).[13] Generally speaking, Ernaux's works negotiate her social origins and gender issues, with her personal experiences depicted as shaped by collective identities and frequently expressed by a transpersonal 'I' (*je transpersonnel*, Ernaux 1993).

In her attempt at creating a sense of "critical self-distance" (Blome et al. 2022: 7) in a literary form, Ernaux draws heavily on the works and methodological approaches of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's contributions to sociological theory as well as to the sociologies of education and aesthetics have had a profound impact on a broad range of academic disciplines, but also on literature. His autobiographical *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (*Sketch for a Self-Analysis*), a key source of inspiration for French writers like Eribon, Ernaux, and Édouard Louis, was first published posthumously in a German translation in 2002 – again by Suhrkamp – even before appearing in French and English in 2004. Prefaced with an ironic reference to René Magritte that challenges the very notion of autobiography ("Ceci n'est pas une autobiographie", Bourdieu 2004: 5), the text reflects on Bourdieu's career as a scholar and situates his work in the post-1950s French intellectual field. As he discusses the balancing act between his milieu of origin and his milieu of arrival, Bourdieu employs the term *habitus clivé* (cleft habitus) to describe his own intellectual non-conformity and methodological unconventionality (Bourdieu 2002: 130–1). Rejecting the conventional autobiographical mode of showcasing the

13 Published in France in 2008 and in Germany in 2017 (again by Suhrkamp), *Les Années* links the author's life story to the overarching social history of France from 1941 to 2006.

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author-narrator's uniqueness, his sober self-analysis paradoxically helps him to interpret his distinguished career as an anomaly within his own theoretical framework as laid out in *La distinction* (1979), where he denounces the reproduction of social inequalities and class differences.

But what are the reasons for and preconditions of this rare exception to the principle of social reproduction? In her 2014 essay *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction*, the French philosopher Chantal Jaquet followed up on Bourdieu's reflections and analysed the conditions that enable individual upward social trajectories. In so doing, she introduced the term *transclasse* (analogous to the term 'transsexual') to describe those who have managed to transition between social classes. This process is often painful and likely to result in feelings of estrangement: *transclasse* individuals experience a profound sense of ambivalence, grappling with the perception of having 'betrayed' their former social class while simultaneously being reduced to mere actors trying to adopt the codes and norms of their new social environment. Jaquet's essay can be seen as a transdisciplinary exploration of a blind spot within sociology that she navigated by drawing upon philosophical models and by using literary texts, including autobiographies, as her objects of study. In the context of the Franco-German reception of autosociobiographical texts, it is interesting to note that literary scholar Carlos Spoerhase contributed an epilogue to the German edition of Jaquet's essay wherein he elaborated on the explicit link between her own work and contemporary autosociobiographical writing (Spoerhase 2018: 244), which he himself was among the first German scholars to examine in 2017.[14]

While the years 2016 to 2018 marked an important milestone in the research and theorisation of the texts in question, the first profound attempt at defining their "narrative format"[15] was undertaken by Eva Blome in 2020 (545). Blome identifies autosociobiographies as individual life stories that tell of an upward social movement through education (numerous obstacles notwithstanding) while simultaneously analysing the mechanisms that govern the reproduction and non-reproduction of social relations.[16] Focusing on French

14 In his previous paper, Spoerhase addressed works by Louis and Eribon along with J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), published against the backdrop of the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the USA (see Spoerhase 2017).

15 "narratives Format".

16 "Es handelt sich dabei um Darstellungen individueller Lebensgeschichten, die von einem Klassenwechsel qua Bildung und dessen Hindernissen erzählen und sich zu-

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and German texts, Blome characterises autosociobiographies as *narratives of return*: the protagonist's visit to their former home (often occasioned by the death of a family member) triggers a reflection on intergenerational relations, including the description of class dynamics (Blome 2020: 548–52).

Moreover, autosociobiographical texts seem to negotiate and transcend all forms of symbolic demarcation: on a broader systemic level, they traverse boundaries of genre (see below) and media, as they often contain prominently featured photos, film stills, and historical documents (Blome 2020: 552–7); on a thematic level, they are characterised by "individual acts of border crossing" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 54) – most notably, of course, between social classes – that are linked to spatial distance and generational differences (Blome 2020: 547). Having traversed these boundaries, the writers act as "translators of the social" (Spoerhase 2017: 35),[17] explaining lower-class social realities to a mostly higher-class reading public.

At the same time, Blome points out, many of the texts under consideration here testify to a practice of overt intertextual exchange between sociology and literature: for example, Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis portray their work as an extension or contemplation of Bourdieu's theories through explicit references within their texts and interviews, and Eribon and Louis are directly involved in researching their precursor's work (see, for example, Louis 2013);[18] Louis dedicated his first novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017) to Eribon; and German authors such as Daniela Dröscher, Christian Baron, and Thomas Melle also cite the works of Eribon, Louis, and Bourdieu as a key impetus for their own writing (see Blome 2020: 564).[19] Public references to each other can likewise be interpreted as a strategy to signal a "specific collectivity" (Blome et al. 2022: 10).

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gleich als Analysen der Mechanismen von Reproduktion und Nicht-Reproduktion bestehender Sozialverhältnisse zu erkennen geben." (Blome 2020: 542)

17 "Übersetzer des Sozialen".

18 An ongoing research project at the RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau is dedicated to the scientific and literary reception of Bourdieu in French contemporary literature: https://ksw.rptu.de/abt/romanistik/mitarbeiterinnen/prof-dr-gregor-schuhen/dfg-projekt-bourdieus-erben-zur-rueckkehr-der-klassenfrage-in-der-franzoesischen-gegenwartsliteratur

19 See for example Daniela Dröscher's *Zeige deine Klasse* [Show your class] (2018), Christian Baron's *Ein Mann seiner Klasse* [A man of his class] (2020), and Thomas Melle's *Die Welt im Rücken* (2016), *The World At My Back* (2023).

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Marcus Twellmann, meanwhile, has reconstructed the unique reception of British cultural historian Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) in France by intermediaries like Jean-Claude Passeron and Claude Grignon (Twellmann 2022: 99–100). In English-speaking literatures, the engagement of authors such as Liz Heron (*Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* 1985) and Richard Rodriguez (*Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* 1982)[20] with Hoggart's work may itself be understood as a certain form of performative class formation ("Klassenhandeln", Nollmann 2008: 188), which in turn suggests a re-evaluation of 'class' as a category that is based on a shared consensus on norms and values rather than on professional affiliation or union membership.[21] It seems, then, that the emphasis on class addresses and negotiates a broader spectrum of delineations and constraints that are entangled with discriminatory practices.

What this brief overview reveals is that both the success of the texts under discussion *and* the success of the theoretical concept of autosociobiography have been significantly influenced by political and academic discourses as well as cultural actors and institutions (the publishing house Suhrkamp and the theatre Schaubühne Berlin are but two of many examples) – in fact, the prominent role played by German academics in this process has prompted Philipp Lammers and Marcus Twellmann to ironically inquire if the notion of autosociobiography should not be classified as a mere scholarly whim (a "caprice allemand", Lammers/Twellmann 2021) or a "German re-invention of a French genre and its history" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 48).

While, as stated above, the story of the emergence of autosociobiography may be told in the form of a Franco-German *histoire croisée*, it is our contention that these transnational and transdisciplinary processes are but a small part of this literary phenomenon's wider – that is, *global* – entanglements. Accordingly, recent research has already turned its attention to writings from other contexts that function in comparable ways, with Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (see above) and bell hook's *Class Matters* (2000) being adduced as two especially striking discussions of the *transclasse* experience that predate Eribon's works

20 For a detailed exploration of Hoggart's reception by Richard Rodriguez and the evolution of the social archetype of the *scholarship boy*, see Spoerhase 2022.

21 The postulate of the death of social class emerged in the 1980s and 1990s across Germany, Great Britain, and the USA. It was not the idea of group-related social inequalities in general that was rejected, but the (supposedly antiquated) notion of class in particular (see Nollmann 2008: 193).

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and originate from a different social and cultural environment (see Blome et al. 2022: 8–9; Twellmann 2022: 93–5). Further examples could be (and have been) given of texts that qualify as autosociobiographical even though they were written by authors who are neither sociologists nor refer to sociological theories, schools, or movements, and who do not engage in the above-mentioned reference practice (e.g. Saša Stanišić, Darren McGarvey, Kerry Hudson; see Spoerhase 2017; Blome 2020). Clearly, this militates against a too narrow focus of research – instead, what is called for is a broader discussion of what texts may or may not be reasonably identified as autosociobiographical.

2. Genre Trouble

To this day, most scholars working on texts identified as autosociobiographies speak more or less tentatively of a 'genre in the making', which is hardly surprising given the problems and limitations inherent in genre distinctions of any kind, not to mention the fact that such classifications are a performative act in which critics and scholars play a decisive role (Blome et al. 2022: 1; Eßlinger 2022: 196–7; Twellmann 2022: 91). Claims for a new genre should therefore be treated with caution. That said, it seems appropriate to discuss in more detail the characteristics of texts that have repeatedly been read as autosociobiographical, and their differences from other forms of life writing.

Modern autobiography has frequently been associated with the emergence of individualism in Early Modern Europe (see Burke 2011), enabling predominantly bourgeois subjects to narrate the formation of distinctive personal identities over the course of their independent lives. Since the 1980s, many feminist and postcolonial critics, chief among them Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (1988), have observed that the concept itself is a result of not only a Eurocentric, but also a male and bourgeois bias (Rippl 2019: 1266): Autobiography constitutes merely one of many possible forms of life writing.

A central aspect in characterising autosociobiographical texts more accurately within the diversity of life narratives may be anemphasis on *relationality*: their focus lies not so much on individual choices or specific family dynamics (as is frequently the case with 'classic' autobiographical writing), but on the exposure of the individual to collective identities and larger social forces. To describe the floating or fluctuating nature of *transclasse* identity, Jaquet has introduced the concept of *complexion*, which refers to a set of diverse characteristics including social position, gender, *race*, sexual orientation, family dy-

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namics, and emotional life, that do not, however, add up to a unified, singular identity (see Jaquet 2014: 95–105). On the narrative level, the complex *transclasse* identity can be articulated by the use of the aforementioned *je transpersonnel*, which, rather than propagating an individual style, is characterised by the integration of other voices, for example via the inclusion of different sociolects and idioms. The autobiographical 'I' becomes a narrative 'we', or, in the case of Ernaux, an unpersonal 'one', evoking an alternative concept of subjectivity that challenges the autonomy of the (privileged) individual.[22]

This distinct relationality may imply a methodological shift, a turning away from the psychoanalytical paradigm that has often governed autobiographical reflection and towards other explanatory modes. Such a shift is implied in Eribon's remarks on the explanatory potential of sociology:

> Perhaps a sociological vocabulary would do a better job than a psychoanalytic one of describing what the metaphors of mourning and of melancholy allows one to evoke in terms that are simple, but also misleading and inadequate: how the traces of what you were as a child, the manner in which you were socialized, persist even when the conditions in which you live as an adult have changed, even when you have worked so hard to keep that past at a distance. (Eribon 2013a: 18)

While this may first and foremost be the point of view of an academically established sociologist, the question is whether autosociobiographical writing and reading practices indicate that a focus on sociological issues must necessarily sideline the psychoanalytical. In *Cold Intimacies* (2007), sociologist Eva Illouz has shed light on how, under the influence of psychoanalytical concepts, the nuclear family became the twentieth-century cornerstone for "the story and history of the self", symbolising "a biographical event symbolically carried throughout one's life and uniquely expressing one's individuality" (Illouz 2007: 7).[23] While the family is still relevant in Eribon's above-quoted text, it is perceived primarily as the site where larger, collective, and transgenerational forces are transferred, which in turn shape and bring forth the individual. This perspective chimes with the premises of biographical research, a field that has been developing since the 1960s in association with the sociology of migration

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22 Schuhen describes the autosociobiographical 'I' as the "carrier of a social identity" ("Träger einer sozialen Identität", Schuhen 2023: 150).

23 On the nexus between psychoanalytical concepts and twentieth-century autobiography, see Holdenried 2019.

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and that postulates the necessity for biography and family history to reconstruct long-term processes of change and development in social phenomena (see Rosenthal 2019).

Professionally motivated as it may be, the foregrounding of sociology by the trained (and academically successful) sociologist Eribon raises the question of how 'sociological' a given text needs to be in order to be read as autosociobiographical – after all, works such as Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (2017) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019; *Where You Come From* 2021) have been read as autosociobiographies even though they do not draw on specific sociological studies, schools, or concepts. In cases like these, academic credentials appear to have been supplanted by a widened social scope and much more far-reaching aims. In a sense, the texts in question embark on what Eribon, in *La société comme verdict* [Society as a verdict] (2013b), calls the "recuperation"[24] of one's own past: here, "the narrative subjects not only claim interpretive sovereignty over their own lives, but also over the social present in which they actively participate as actors and to which they feel equally exposed" (Blome et al. 2022: 3);[25] here, the authoritative aspect becomes a defining feature that outweighs traditional questions pertaining to the demarcation of autobiographical genres, like the one of fact vs fiction (see Blome et al. 2022: 3–4).

It could thus be argued that what is indispensable is not sociological analysis in a narrow sense, but rather a *sociological gesture*. In the words of literary sociologist Carolin Amlinger, the texts in question "lay claim to sociological insights by *narrating* the I as a social fact" (Amlinger 2022: 44).[26] From this perspective, credentials in a particular scholarly discipline are less important than the insights into larger social dynamics enabled by the narration of a personal

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24 "[T]he reconciliation with oneself and the re-appropriation of one's own past [cannot] be accomplished by simply 'going back' to what was once left behind". "[C]'est que la réconciliation avec soi-même, la récupération de son passé, ne peut pas s'opérer comme un simple retour à ce qu'on a quitté" (Eribon 2013b: 96).

25 "Mit der Begriffsumbildung zur 'Autosoziobiographie' geht eine Verlagerung des bekannten autobiographischen Authentizitätsversprechens einher. Die Aussagen der Erzählsubjekte beanspruchen nicht nur die Deutungshoheit über das eigene Leben, sondern auch gegenüber der sozialen Gegenwart, an der sie als Akteur:innen aktiv mitwirken und der sie sich gleichermaßen ausgesetzt fühlen."

26 "Sie behaupten soziologische Erkenntnisse, indem sie das Ich als sozialen Tatbestand *erzählen*."

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life experience. Their ambition to contribute to a broader socio-political discourse may even mark such texts as a form of committed literature (*littérature engagée*, see Schuhen 2023) that challenges the standards of the social sciences as well as received assumptions about literariness, especially with regard to the criterion of fictionality. Such a commitment is implied or even made explicit in many texts, most prominently by way of subtitles as in McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (see above) and J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016).

While such intra- and paratextual statements insist on the social relevance of literature, they also draw attention to the role of the author-figure as an authority turned public intellectual due to their personal experience and analytical insights. In this context, the notion of authenticity has been highlighted by several critics.[27] Yet whereas all of the texts in question claim that their narrative is based on personal experience, and whereas one may speak of an alignment between self-representation in the media and an individual's biographical data,[28] scholars of autosociobiography have argued that things are, in fact, considerably more complex – according to Amlinger, for instance, autosociobiographical texts actually attempt to move away from what she calls the "authenticity function" of the subjective (autobiographical) narration, and instead prioritise an "ontological truth function" (Amlinger 2022: 45).[29]

Moreover, the recurring invocation of 'truth' and 'authenticity' in academic debates should not obscure the fact that autosociobiographical texts themselves exhibit an acute awareness of the constructedness of these concepts that becomes tangible, for example, in their deliberate use of literary methods and procedures. As a result, these texts manufacture a kind of "second-order authenticity" (Weixler 2012: 9), showcasing and creatively negotiating the

27 Authenticity can, as Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf suggests, be understood as the impossible, yet relevant ideal that "guide[s] both the production and reception of texts" (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005: 4), even if it cannot be considered a feature of the text itself.

28 Susanne Knaller has dubbed the latter aspect "subject authenticity" (*Subjektauthentizität*), differentiating it from "reference authenticity" (*Referenzauthentizität*) and the "authenticity of art" (*Kunstauthentizität*), the first being actualised via external references to authorising entities or institutions, and the second taking the form of self-referentiality, thereby also emphasising the autonomy of art (Knaller 2007: 22).

29 "Die personale Authentizitätsfunktion, die Autobiographien oftmals zugeschrieben wird, rückt so zugunsten einer ontologischen Wahrheitsfunktion in den Hintergrund."

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customary norms of autobiographical reception and sociological analysis,[30] which in turn allows them to operate as "liminal narratives" (Amlinger 2022: 45)[31] that self-critically aim at fusing the literary with social reality.

Identifying these characteristics accentuates the manifold entanglements reflected on and enacted within these texts (most prominently the fusion of the sociological and the literary, the interplay between individual and collective identities and experiences, and the relationships in which these texts and their authors stand to each other), but it also leads back to the question as to whether it makes sense to speak of autosociobiography as a literary genre. The similarities between the above-mentioned texts are indeed striking, and their features appear quite distinct from many other forms of life writing – yet in some cases, the dividing lines are much less clear-cut: autoethnography and its variants, which include collectivised life narratives told from the margins of a dominant culture, is just one of several examples that come to mind (Smith/ Watson: 258–9).[32]

Were we to consider genres as more or less clearly demarcated literary 'types', this would obviously be problematic; if, however, we conceded that 'doing' genre is not about the ultimately doomed exercise of establishing typological systems, but rather constitutes a symbolic action guiding literary reception, we might yet salvage the term as an investigative lens. Thus understood, genre draws attention to particular features, suggesting (or even demanding) certain lines of inquiry. In the case of autosociobiography, these may include questions about how competing notions of 'class' are reflected in a given text (see below), what modes of exclusion operate in supposedly homogenous groups, or how and why parallel social developments emerge in different cultural contexts (see Twellmann 2022: 95–7). The extent to which such queries would have to differ from the ones suggested by, for instance, autoethnographic readings remains to be explored.

Conceptualising genre in this way addresses another problem otherwise attached to European or Western genre classifications: any attempt to 'apply'

30 "Erzählformen, die ihren Status als 'vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit' explizit reflektieren und thematisieren, rufen eine *Authentizität der zweiten Ordnung* hervor, die ich als metadiskursive Authentizität bezeichne."

31 "Grenzerzählungen".

32 "Informed by recent work in autobiography, autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves in contexts that arguably transform the authorial 'I' to an existential 'we'." (Spry 2001: 710–1)

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them beyond their original contexts entails the risk of marginalising or appropriating the diversity of literary modes outside its original focus. As has become evident, the features outlined in this section are shared by texts of French, German, British, Spanish, and US-American origin. With what right and to what extent can this diagnosis be extended to non-European and/or non-Western contexts? Using genre in the above sense invites non-hierarchical comparisons, focused, for example, on identifying different modes of social exclusion and their intersection in different societies, as well as their literary reflections; and as generic 'standards' recede into the background, so does the question: "Should we call this text an autosociobiography?"

This is not to say that the question of what may or may not constitute autosociobiography as a genre in a more classical sense is devoid of interest. On the contrary: its relation to and dependence on other forms of life writing past and present is still to be clarified and demands further critical exploration. Following this call will – again – turn the spotlight on processes of genre formation and how they respond to the input of diverse actors, all of whom intervene according to their own perspectives and interests. What taking autosociobiography seriously as a 'genre in the making' means, then, is to understand it performatively: as a process and as the product of a multitude of entanglements which readers and critics are able to observe (and contribute to) in real time.

3. Beyond Class?

The question of how contemporary works identified as autosociobiographical relate to earlier forms of textual production implies asking about the timeboundedness of the phenomenon: are there any particular social problems which can account for the rise of this kind of writing in the past years? German scholarship seems to be leaning towards an affirmative answer. Sociologist Oliver Nachtwey, for instance, speaks of a "seismographic" function of literature as it responds to the decreasing permeability of income strata and the widespread pessimism with regard to social mobility in most states of the capitalist West (Nachtwey 2018: 8) – an assessment he links to Colin Crouch's (2004) view of the political system as elitist, post-democratic, and characterised by the decline in political participation of a disillusioned working class. As autosociobiographical texts seem to promise insights into the motives and mindset of those 'left behind', it is relatively easy to explain why they resonate so powerfully with the current media environment (as we have seen in

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the reception of Eribon's *Retour a Reims* and McGarvey's *Poverty Safari*).[33] However, the existence of texts like Hoggart's aforementioned *The Uses of Literacy* from 1957 complicates matters somewhat, as it tells of *transclasse* experiences and classist discrimination well before the socio-political decline diagnosed by Crouch. Whether these issues are addressed in even earlier works – and if yes, what that means for the (historical) relationship between the analysis of social dynamics and autobiographical reflection – remains an open question.

All this challenges us to inquire after the concept of class, and, in turn, its historicity: in what way is the notion of autosociobiography tied to the concept of class, or, again, to specific sociological schools of thought? While the works of Bourdieu have had a major impact on Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis, for someone like Vance, US-American notions of class appear to play a much more prominent role: when, for example, the latter reflects on the benefits of 'social capital' without mentioning any theoretical position by name, we may suspect closer ties to the ideas of Robert D. Putnam than to those of Bourdieu.[34] By the same token, one may suppose that the 'working-class' to which he refers is not identical with the one we encounter in European texts such as McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* or Hudson's *Lowborn. Growing Up, Getting Away and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns* (2019) – none of which tie class to any sociological theories whatsoever. As social reference points shift depending on their political (and historical) contexts, there may well be a far greater diversity of notions of class than scholarship on autosociobiography has acknowledged so far.

While the focus on class is quite evident in the texts hitherto mentioned, it is far from the only kind of social discrimination that autosociobiographical writing may address. Indeed, although class functions as the main category of difference in prototypically autosociobiographical works and is being reflected as such in current research, many narrator-protagonists explicitly situ-

33 Sociological research has explored the transition from post-industrial societies to "knowledge societies" ("Wissensgesellschaften", Rohrbach 2008: 17), which conceive of knowledge as a form of human capital. While education has expanded, it has not reduced social inequalities grounded on urban-rural disparities, *race*, and/or class (Hadjar/Becker 2006: 12). Most studies focus on data from Western, European, or at least OECD countries, although it has been noted that the expansion of higher education constitutes a world-wide phenomenon in the twentieth century (see Meyer/Schofer 2005). How the highly divergent local manifestations of this process and the concomitant inequalities are negotiated in the literatures of the respective countries has yet to be examined in detail.

34 A general reference to Putnam can be found in the introduction (Vance 2016: 8).

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ate themselves on the intersection of economic disadvantage and one or several other forms of discrimination and repression based on factors such as sex/gender (Dröscher, Hudson), sexual orientation (Eribon, Louis), and *race*/ethnicity (Slaoui, *Illégitimes* [Illegitimates] 2021).

Intersectionality can be conceptualised from various theoretical perspectives. Some approaches, often based on Kimberly Crenshaw's coinage of the term within a legal context, have considered it to be the sum of distinct and analytically separable categories. However, Marxist (Bohrer 2019) and decolonial (Lugones 2010; Vergès 2021) theorists and activists have outlined alternative, more dynamic models that challenge this notion, focusing instead on the intricacies and interdependencies among *race*, sexuality/gender, and class, a relationship which Ashley Bohrer calls "equiprimordial" (Bohrer 2019: 196). In addition to these conceptions, there is the core Marxist critique which claims class to be the most fundamental category of all (Roldán Mendivíl/Sarbo 2022), with other forms of oppression understood as epiphenomena of the division of labour. Against the backdrop of this academic debate, it is not surprising that the texts regarded as autosociobiographical do not necessarily adhere to a uniform interpretation of intersectionality, nor do they present these categories as interconnected in the same way.[35] In Eribon's case, for example, the intersectional constellation of the working-class homosexual is presented mainly in the form of a temporal sequence that seems to imply a certain separability and/or hierarchical order of categories:

> On thinking the matter through, it doesn't seem exaggerated to assert that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might call a class closet. I mean by this that I took on the constraints imposed by a different kind of dissimulation; I took on a different kind of dissociative personality or double consciousness [...]. (Eribon 2013a: 26)[36]

35 For a more general reflection on intersectionality and life writing, see Smith/Watson 2010: 41–2.

36 "Et, par voie de conséquence, il ne serait pas exagéré d'affirmer que la sortie du placard sexuel, le désir d'assumer et d'affirmer mon homosexualité, coïncidèrent dans mon parcours personnel avec l'entrée dans ce que je pourrais décrire comme un placard social, c'est-à-dire dans les contraintes imposées par une autre forme de dissimulation, un autre type de personnalité dissociée ou de double conscience [...]." (Eribon 2009: 22–3)

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In other texts such as Dröscher's *Zeige deine Klasse*, the web of repression seemingly cannot be disentangled: here, the concept of *Herrschaftsknoten* ('domination knots') developed by the German feminist sociologist Frigga Haug is employed to describe the intersectional constellation of being an "upwardly mobile child", a woman, and the daughter of a "foreign" mother (Dröscher 2018: 28).

When speaking of the global entanglements of autosociobiography, it is important to consider these intersectional forms of social exclusion and stratification, not least when turning one's attention to postcolonial or migration literature. Can the focus on and of autosociobiographical texts be expanded beyond class in this way? While there have already been attempts to do so in and with texts of, admittedly, European origin – Christina Ernst, for example, has read transition narratives of transgender persons as autosociobiographies (see Ernst 2022) – the answer to this question remains very much open to debate.

Contributions

Taking their cue from the above, the contributions assembled in this collection discuss autosociobiographical texts and autosociobiographical discourse from a multitude of different perspectives.

In the opening paper, **Sidonie Smith** and **Julia Watson** examine the classification of autosociobiographical texts as a distinct genre. Criticising an overly narrow focus on a *de facto* Franco-German, Western European corpus, they caution against restrictive categorisations that fail to do justice to the richness and variety of life writing around the globe, especially when it is concerned with social injustices. As an alternative, they advocate for a broader *autosocial* reading practice that may be applied to a more heterogeneous body of texts past and present, and that avoids potential theoretical and methodological pitfalls.

Christina Ernst, meanwhile, demonstrates that seminal texts included in the autosociobiographical 'corpus' share intimate connections with non-European literatures and forms of life writing. Central to her analysis is Eribon's intra- and extratextual engagement with the works of Afro-American and postcolonial writers like James Baldwin, Assia Djebar, and Patrick Chamoiseau. As Ernst argues, it is these authors' texts and ideas that led Eribon to develop his "theory of minor subjectivation" (61), which describes the formation of a queer *transclasse* self cognisant of the fact that one's own story necessarily exceeds the

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personal and includes wider social dynamics, discourse formations, and historical developments.

In a similar vein, **Thekla Noschka** aims at emphasising hitherto overlooked entanglements negotiated within autosociobiographical texts, criticising the reductionism of approaches that almost exclusively focus on the topic of class and sideline, for instance, the experience of women with a migratory background. In her discussion of Ernaux's *Les Années* (2008) and Mely Kiyak's *Frausein* [Being a woman] (2020), Noschka sheds light on the intricate intersectional positions explored in these texts: by way of transpersonal narration, she argues, they not only address class relations as a gendered and generational construct, but also lay bare this notion's inherent *Whiteness*, which can only be countered by a more detailed examination of the exclusionary mechanisms present in autosociobiographical writings.

Mrunmayee Sathye offers a fundamental critique of autosociobiographical discourse based on her readings of Dalit life writing. Focusing on *Aaydan* by Urmila Pawar (2003), she points out that literary reflections on discrimination and social mobility are neither unique to European authors such as Eribon and Ernaux, nor necessarily centred around European notions of class. Addressing the complex entanglements of caste, class, and gender in the life of women in post-Independence India, Sathye underlines the danger of viewing the plurality of sociocritical life writing around the world yet again through a Eurocentric lens.

Michail Leivadiotis's contribution engages with the historical and cultural entanglements negotiated within autosociobiographical narratives by exploring the works of two nineteenth-century Ionian aristocrats, Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou and Ermannos Lountzis. Both authors question their own privileged position and employ the means of self-narration to make a *sociological gesture,* envisioning and demanding social progress through education and writing. Extending the autobiographical beyond the personal leads Moutzan-Martinegou to develop a feminist, more inclusive projection of days to come, while Lountzis partakes in nation building after the Greek War of Independence, imagining a new Greece built in a collective process that engages with the past to transform the nation's future.

Likewise focusing on time-related aspects, **Peter Löffelbein** discusses the temporal framing of class in Darren McGarvey's *Poverty Safari* (2017) and Kerry Hudson's *Lowborn* (2019) – texts that draw attention to the relentless temporal Othering the poorest members of British society are being subjected to. Accordingly, the texts in question are driven by the need to bring their narrator-

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protagonists' temporality in order, to secure a place in time between a past that never leaves them and a present in which they do not feel entirely at home. Time thus becomes a fundamental dimension of the *transclasse* experience as negotiated in autosociobiographical texts – pieces of writing that themselves reflect and perform a global temporality by creating a shared time for readers and writers in the hope of a more inclusive future.

Jobst Welge compares two family narratives, Carlos Pardo's *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* [Johann Sebastian's Journey on Foot] (2014) and Manuel Vilas's *Ordesa* (2018, *Ordesa* 2020), to highlight contemporary Spanish literature's focus on social class. Vilas's diary-like family history paints a favourable picture of his parents while embracing a fatalistic tone that suggests social advancement is ultimately impossible. Pardo's *El viaje*, meanwhile, emphasises social conditioning and literary self-fashioning, constructing a veritable "historical echo chamber" (176) in the process. The relational poetics adopted in both texts enable a distanced, sociological perspective; Vilas engages readers affectively, while Pardo uses intertextual references to universalise the personal.

In his study of Nakano Kōji's autobiographical writings, **Christopher Schelletter** reflects on the traditions and conventions of Japanese *shishōsetsu* literature. Schelletter concludes that despite their different aesthetic and socio-historical frames of reference, Nakano's texts from the 1970s share the "affective experience of social mobility" (201) with the more recent autosociobiographies of European origin. Although Nakano does not explicitly endorse Marxism, he employs characteristic terms such as 'class' or 'class consciousness' in his portrayal of the unjust social order of pre- and postwar Japan, underscoring the sociological approach evident in the texts under consideration.

Another link to sociology is explored in **Paweł Rodak**'s paper, which is dedicated to memoirs composed by Polish peasants and factory workers in response to life writing competitions organised by sociological institutions. Illustrating the enormous scale of this phenomenon in twentieth-century Poland, Rodak examines how the events' calls for contributions and rules of participation resulted in texts that could be regarded as forms of autosociobiography *avant la lettre*. In a further step, he demonstrates that the writings in question challenged received notions of literariness and encouraged the feminisation of autobiographical practice and discourse.

Finally, **Marc Ortmann** sheds fresh light on the nexus of sociology and literature by drawing on the distinction between *author* and *writer* as proposed by Barthes and Bourdieu. Ortmann investigates how friendship is explored as an

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alternative life model to the nuclear family by the French sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie. The latter's *3. Une aspiration au dehors* [3. A longing for the outside] (2023) incorporates the individual perspective of the author and scientist Lagasnerie ('I'), whose friendship with Eribon and Louis forms a triadic constellation ('we') which is then elevated to the level of abstract and sociologically informed reflection. In so doing, Lagasnerie assumes the hybrid role of author-writer, allowing him to employ literary methods to more effectively analyse (and re-evaluate) how sociology and literature negotiate social phenomena through the production of texts.

* * *

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It is our hope that the papers assembled here will yield valuable critical perspectives on the ongoing process of genre-making, encouraging further explorations of auto*socio*biographical writing in all its spatial and temporal variety, or in other words: its globality.

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Thing, or Not a Thing?
Reading for the *Autosocial* in Life Narrative

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson

For a quarter century, since we first introduced the concept of autobiographical acts and practices, we have turned from using 'autobiography' as the term of reference to framing the field as life writing when referring only to written texts, and life narrative when it extends to the visual, digital, or performance arts. In so doing, we have argued that autobiography is only one of the many autobiographical genres that we define and explore. These genres emerge, mutate, or disappear as the discursive practices, routes of circulation, and tastes, desires, and politics of reading publics shift. Because of the heterogeneity of autobiographical acts and practices, historically and geographically, we have found it important to track the multiplicity of 'I'-formations that constellate in different geographical locations and circulate through varied modes and media. We have observed that the 'I' is sometimes presented as a collective 'we', a 'you', a third-person 'they', or a transpersonal 'one'. That is, far from being the solitary individual posited by Descartes, an autobiographical subject is inescapably embedded, at least imaginatively, in social contexts.

Over the years, we have marvelled at how some readers and theorists have coined terms for new genres by riffing on the syllables in the word 'autobiography'. These coinages include, among others: alterbiography, autie-biography, autoethnography, autofiction, autographics, autohagiography, autopathography, autosomatography, autothanatography, autotheory, autotopography, autrebiography, biomythography, ecobiography, erratography, gastrography, heterobiography, jockography, otography, periautography, and prosopography (see Smith/Watson 2024: 209–11). We welcome this innovative thinking among critics of autobiographical acts and practices as they read through nuanced lenses and engage with the continuous change of our dynamic field.

This volume proposes yet another concept, *autosociobiography*, a term that has recently gained currency in Europe as a new 'thing' or formation in life writ-

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ing. But *is* it a new 'thing'? Should we instead read the corpus of texts proposed for *autosociobiography* as a strand of academic memoir, or an example of what is now called *autotheory*? Might we more productively understand this emphasis on social dimensions through a reading practice that casts it as *autosocial*, emphasising the social dimension that informs all life writing? In what follows, we lay out the contours of what comprises an *autosocial* reading and apply it to a heterogeneous corpus of texts, both older and contemporary.

First, however, let us describe our approach to life narrative in its complexity. 'Autobiography' is a term commonly used to designate works that inscribe the personal narrative of the author; a literal synonym is *self-written biography*, though recently *memoir* is often the term used. We note that 'autobiography' is used primarily when referring to the Western tradition of retrospective self-narrative, one that was not widely practiced until Rousseau's *Confessions* were published in the late 18th century. Indeed, the term 'autobiography' first emerged in English at the end of that century (Folkenflik: 5). Yet, there are many works of self-narration before Rousseau's, such as the late-fifth-century *Confessions* of Augustine, the meditations of medieval mystics, the self-focused texts of some Renaissance Humanists, and explorers' narratives of conquest and colonisation in Africa and the Americas.[1] These antecedent modes of writing are specific to their historical moments and geographical locations, their social uses, and their narrative trajectories. They suggest that practices of self-life-writing adapted many existing generic forms such as confession, meditation, poetic self-exploration, and travel narrative. Now, many more kinds of autobiographically inflected works circulate, including trauma and testimonial narratives, graphic memoirs, and interactive online storytelling, some incorporating the diverse media of photography and performance art or incorporating technologies from film, video, or digital platforms.

As narrators selectively engage with their lived experience in composing narratives that construct or probe complex social identities through personal storytelling, they engage in historically situated practices of self-representation. It is helpful *not* to gather this diversity of works under the umbrella term 'autobiography', but to regard that term as shorthand for a canon of retrospective self-narratives long prized in the West. Rather, as noted above, in contemporary autobiography studies scholars now have widely adopted the umbrella

1 See the discussion by Christian Moser (2019) of autoethnographic elements in such life narratives.

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term 'life narrative' to refer to myriad genres around the world that display aspects of autobiographical acts and practices.

That is, life narrators engage in boundary-crossing practices as they incorporate their personal archives and processes of remembering and seek to address the expectations of disparate readerships. In representing family, friends, or historical and religious figures, some life narrators may perform relational acts by incorporating micro-biographies of these others. They may also project the multiple histories in which their stories are embedded – of communities, nations, social or political movements. They may strategically adopt various fictional conventions to shape the narrated I's experiences into stories capturing the narrating I's reflections. In all these practices, autobiographical texts 'touch' the referential world, in Paul John Eakin's phrase: that is, they maintain a relationship to the referential world in its socio-historical contingency. Paradoxically, then, self-life-writing is, as we have observed, not a Procrustean bed but 'a rumpled bed' with ever-changing variations and heterogeneous norms (Smith/Watson 2001: 1).

Part One: Troubling the Concept of *Autosociobiography* – Three Issues

Keeping these observations in mind, we engage several theoretical issues concerning the coinage *autosociobiography*: the status of the autobiographical 'I', the status of the sociological, and the status of valuation. We do so to illuminate how the conceptualisation of *autosociobiography* by its proponents raises questions of expertise, authority, and literariness.

How is the 'I' of *Autosociobiography* Conceptualised?

In *Reading Autobiography Now*, we observe that "life narratives, through the memories they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time and in relation to their own ever-moving pasts" (Smith/Watson 2024: 49). Thus, every autobiographical 'I' is complex in that it is comprised of an assemblage of autobiographical acts and practices. Among these are: the flesh-and-blood author (unavailable to readers); the narrating 'I' as the agent of storytelling; the narrated 'I' as the past version of the protagonist made available to the reader by the narrating 'I'; and the ideological 'I'. As noted in *Reading Autobiography Now*, the ideological 'I' as a historical and

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cultural phenomenon is "at once everywhere and nowhere in autobiographical acts, in the sense that the notion of personhood and the ideologies of identity that constitute it are so internalised (personally and culturally) that they seem 'natural' and 'universal' characteristics of persons" (2024: 116). Given this complexity, the autobiographical 'I' is not stable, but may shift its referent or speaking position.

Further, autobiographical acts are dynamically *performative*. That is, a single identity is not a fixed or essential attribute of an autobiographical subject. Rather, identities are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses; as such, they remain provisional and unstable. Subjects are performative, situated at particular axes through the social relations of differential power; they are subjects of *positionality*. As such, they inhabit, negotiate, reproduce, and/or contest one or more discursive locations. Effectively, subjects are *both* located and unstable, spatially and psychologically.

This performative subject is also enmeshed in *relationality*, the mutual imbrication of self and others that renders the boundaries of self-definition permeable. This relationality structures how a narrating 'I', as a subject, is always in process and within networks of affiliation in the social world. Thus, the 'I' is never autonomous, even when claiming to be, but always 'socialised'. Importantly, autobiographical texts are also embedded in the cultures and materials of writing that involve phenomena beyond the frame of a single subject and a single text as fixed points of reference. Intrinsically, then, the subject is inscribed within social networks.

How does this understanding of the autobiographical 'I' correspond to the subject of *autosociobiography* discussed in some recent scholarship? As the editors' introduction suggests, a tendency is evident in essays by scholars such as Eva Blome (2020) and Philipp Lammers and Marcus Twellman (2021) to narrowly frame the small corpus of texts designated as *autosociobiography*. They tend to be sophisticated explorations of the narrator's working-class origins in European nations by trained academics (usually sociologists) who offer sustained structural analyses of identity formation, alienation, and social trauma.

This framing of the narrating 'I' yields an 'I'-dynamic that is defined as distinctive of *autosociobiography* as a new formation. The referential 'I' (or flesh-and-blood author) composing the text is a sociologist or similarly-trained person with expertise in the structural analysis of social systems. The narrating 'I' ('I-now') is that expert's persona and is focused on the intersection of sociological theory and intimate life storytelling. She, he, or they performs that expertise in narrating an experiential history of origins and transformation to

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a position of academic authority. The narrated 'I' ('I-then') whose story is being told is the earlier child, adolescent, or adult originally interpellated in a working-class social identity and struggling with social alienation and trauma. The narrating 'I' tries to remember and embody the feltness of lived experience of this younger version of the self, and to trace the impact and affect of disentangling the narrating subject from this earlier self-identification and its *trans-classe* anxiety. Further, the narrating 'I' chronicles how the narrated 'I''s experiential training in class relations enabled a journey from membership in the working class to status as a professional expert capable of analysing the intimate everyday effects and dynamics of social relations. In effect, the credentialed status of the author (referential 'I') secures the authority of the narrating 'I'; and the insertion of 'socio' between 'auto' and 'biography' designates the ground of that expertise as the personalisation of social theory.

For us, this framing is too narrow a ground upon which to adequately theorise a new generic and cultural formation and to specify a form of sociality and relationality distinct from the intrinsically relational construction of most life writing. The initial corpus of texts designated as *autosociobiography* remains slim and its geographical range limited because so few life narratives qualify for inclusion in the category. We applaud the impetus to extend the collection of features indispensable to such a designation. But can this be done without losing the distinct contours of the proposed genre? The editors seek to extend the corpus of *autosociobiography* to life narratives by non-sociologists such as those of French writer Annie Ernaux and American Tara Westover. While this is a promising invitation encouraging scholars to engage with a wider range of texts, both established literary life narratives and more diverse, automedial acts and practices such as graphic memoirs, performance art, disability narratives, refugee narratives, and trauma narratives, as well as texts from diverse and transnational global locations, this question will need to be confronted.

What is the Status of the Social and the Sociological in Texts Labelled *Autosociobiography*?

It strikes us as problematic to focus on the figure of the expert narrator as one who displays deep knowledge of sociological theories and methods, and directs targeted attention to the sociological milieu, the systematic analysis of social relations, and the institutions through which they are lived out. The editors of this volume insightfully expand this category to include life writers who may be or become public intellectuals hailed for disciplined social analyses. But we

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note that many life narrators who recount their lived experience as embedded in social relations or class identity have been non-credentialed writers. Thus, we understand the narrating 'I''s relationship to the socius in life narrative in broad terms; that is, as a condition of all social relations and of subjectivity itself. It is not a feature of only one mode of life writing, but an essential aspect of all autobiographical acts and practices.

For, neither the referential nor the narrating 'I' need be a trained social scientist in order to link structural analysis of social identity formation and deformation to narration of the lived experience of trauma, disavowal, and alienation. Self-reflexive 'I's who narrate their informal education in the dynamics of structural inequality and social alienation from familial and communal origins may serve as social analysts 'from below'; that is, such life narrators expand the criteria for expertise beyond academic credentials and professionally conferred authority. For example, many graphic cartoonists now focus their storytelling and imaging on class formation and subjective alienation.

Further, the subtleties of class formation and *transclasse* mobility rely on the historical moment and geographical location of the social analyst. Social relations are, of course, implicated in class stratification; but the dynamics of stratification differ among social systems around the globe. The scale of relationality also depends on several factors that shift with location and historical moment: the family, clan, or tribal system; the local, regional, national, or transnational structural system; and the norms of the settler-colonial, postcolonial, or emerging democratic or authoritarian nation-state.

Finally, while analysis of social class involves investigating social stratification as it is refracted through identity formation, social relations, and institutional contexts and dynamics, subjects are multiply positioned – and differently positioned – throughout their lives. Their identities are not fixed, but become multiple in ways that are not additive; one identity cannot just be added to another to specify the position from which someone speaks. Rather, various vectors of identity interpenetrate; they are intersectional, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and many subsequent commentators have explored (see Crenshaw 2017).

The serial life writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali exemplifies the complexity of identity as both intersectional and shifting. An émigré from Somalia and subsequently other African nations, Hirsi Ali, raised as Muslim, was a child victim of genital mutilation who escaped an arranged marriage by relocating to the Netherlands. *Infidel: My Life*, her eloquent 2006 coming-of-age memoir, narrates how, after being targeted by a Muslim fanatic in Amsterdam, she became

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an activist and member of Parliament, critiquing many aspects of Islam. She later relocated to the United States, where she served as a media commentator sharply critiquing what she calls 'radical Islam'. Hirsi Ali is internationally controversial both because of her activism and her ongoing exploration of the socio-political aspects of religion, reflected in her dramatic self-characterisation as an "atheist" in her second memoir *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015). In late 2023, she made a further conversion to Christianity (see Hirsi Ali, 2016). Her ongoing shifts of position may reflect both her process of changing identities and what William Grimes called her position as an alienated "permanent outsider" (Grimes 2007).

Identity itself is a concept for which conventional rubrics no longer apply. Recent theorists increasingly regard identities as effects of "encounters" rather than as "attributes" or ontological phenomena (see Smith/Watson 2024, 64–75). In this view, identities unfold within a constellation of agencies – human, technological, phenomenal, material, expressive, and linguistic. Identity formation, then, draws on the concept of assemblages to recentre the human being not solely as an agency-bearing subject intent on inscribing an identity. Instead, identities shift as they become imaginable, coalesce, find a medium of communication, travel along publication and reception circuits, and are taken up through diverse technologies by various audiences.

We also note that this engagement with aspects of identity formation and reformation in the contemporary social world may be presented through multiple media and embedded in divergent genres of life narrative. Consider some recent German texts with an explicitly social orientation. The graphic memoir *Sonne und Beton* [Sunlight and concrete] (2021) by Felix Lobrecht and the later film adaptation of the same name, present the alienated but astute perspectives of streetwise youth, who cannot simply be regarded as marginal, on the tensions of navigating Berlin's social contradictions. Nora Krug's *Heimat* (2018; *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* 2018) graphically explores a family's conflicted memories of the Second World War that raise troubling questions.[2] In life writing, Carolin Würfel's collection *Drei Frauen träumten vom Sozialismus* [Three women dreamed of socialism] (2022) gathers essays by three eminent women writers who probe the contradictions of having lived in the German Democratic Republic. Slightly fictionalised

2 Krug's graphic memoir has been awarded several literary prizes, including, in translation, the American National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography in 2018, and awards in England, France, and Germany.

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recent life narratives by well-known authors Marion Brasch, in *Ab jetzt ist Ruhe: Roman meiner fabelhaften Familie* [After this, silence; a novel about my fabulous family] (2012) and Jenny Erpenbeck in several narratives also probe social class and relations across both the earlier East and West Germanies. While literary historians may dismiss some of these memoirs as insufficiently literary, they are prized by reading publics. Although the mode of comics had been disparaged for decades, autographical comics by such artists as Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel are now internationally regarded as 'literary' accomplishments. Other examples of socially conscious life narrative in Anglophone nations abound. Some embed a refugee's story of becoming 'American' in the narrated 'I''s experiences of being stigmatised as a refugee Other, as does GB Tran in *Vietnamerica*: *A Family's Journey* (2010). Clearly, the category of 'literariness', to which we turn next, is now acknowledged as a feature of socially-focused life narratives in various media.

What Are the Criteria for Identifying and Valuing Texts as *Autosociobiography*?

In the life narratives identified with the new genre of *autosociobiography*, where would claims to authority reside? We suggest they are located in three sites of evaluation: systematic structural analysis, intimate personal truths of classed identity, and literariness.

In the first instance, the authority of a text is attached to the density of its structural analysis and the explanatory power of a school of sociological inquiry. Its authority derives from its convincing performance of expertise and from the persuasive documentation of its claims. In the second instance, the authority of a text is conferred by a narrator's performance of particular social identities that are persuasive, compelling, and transformative enough to gain the recognition of readers at a given historical moment. In the case of *autosociobiography*, authority derives from two things: how the narrated 'I' embodies a sociologically defined identity – such as that of the alienated, the misfit, or the outsider who achieves professional status; and how compellingly the narrating 'I' attests to experiences of classed identity.

A third site of authority associated with *autosociobiography* is its degree of literariness. As the editors' introduction asserts, the inclusion of a narrative in the category of *autosociobiography* may depend on its being sufficiently 'literary'. That is, such narratives will be intellectually committed to understanding the sociology of the self and offer more powerful evocations of the past than do

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popular memoirs. Such narratives are valued for the quality of their prose; their density of description, narrative plot, and self-characterisation; and their ability to evoke felt personal experience. In other words, these texts are valued for having 'novelistic' effects to a greater degree than do many popular kinds of life writing. Their 'authenticity' emanates from presenting a credible and consistent voice, displaying narrative tropes, and asserting both convincing subject positions and a persuasive mode of rhetorical address.

Advocates of *autosociobiography* as a new genre implicitly set out a distinction between what they define as 'autobiography' and the privileged category of *autosociobiography*. But this argument depends, as we have seen, on a reductive definition of life writing as only 'autobiography' – rather than the dozens of genres discussed above – and implies a 'high-low' notion of degrees of literariness. It is reminiscent of Serge Doubrovsky's argument positing autofiction as a more supple and metacritical form than 'autobiography', as he limits 'autobiography' to a static and monological form of self-narration (see Smith/Watson 2024, 29–31). But it seems unproductive to situate *autosociobiography* in such a binary model in order to establish an exemplary canon of texts.

Importantly, literary canons are not transhistorical and universal verities, but provisional and dynamic lists that shift with the times and the tastes of readerships, and may be differently valued outside academia than within it. Indeed, autobiographical narrative, long considered 'sub-literary' by academic arbiters, is now studied across disciplines as diverse as education, communications, sociology, and the fine arts, as well as in many literature departments.

Part Two: Reading for the *Autosocial*

In thinking through these issues of status, we have raised questions related to defining a corpus or canon of *autosociobiography* as a separate genre. Scholars seeking to validate *autosociobiography* in those terms may, however, wish to undertake projects concerning the particulars of historical moments, transnational formations, and the intersectionality of *transclasse* dynamics. They might establish a genealogy by searching for 'precursors' around the world that historicise an interactive relationship between the individual and the social world inhabited. They might extend geographical and transnational frameworks by examining the complexities of social stratification in sites of colonisation, as well as decolonised nations where multiple formations of domination and oppression persist. Scholars might also attend to indigenous communities in set-

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tler-colonial contexts of the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, the Middle East, and South Asia. The search could consider several further issues: how to expand the corpus of *autosociobiography* through investigations that allow for more heterogeneous texts; how to widen the notion of what constitutes expertise and who can lay claim to it; how to complicate the concept of social class as an analytic by foregrounding intersectionality; and how to trouble the implicit binary of literary and 'less-than-literary' narratives. These are substantial but exciting prospects.

The project we propose is of another kind. The term *autosociobiography*, as used in critical and theoretical discussions so far, applies to a small corpus of texts drawn predominantly from late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century European texts. We seek to broaden the generic diversity and the transnational contexts and practices of life narration by exploring autobiographical narratives from around the world that do not conform to the narrow definition of *autosociobiography*. To do so, we will read for the *autosocial* aspects of life narratives that emphasise heterogeneous aspects of identity and class position, while illuminating the relationship of the autobiographical to the social through structural analyses. Several of the life writers we will take up have achieved professional status, but that is not universally the case.

Our point, in taking this wider historical and geographic perspective, is that the *autosocial* does not emerge as a 'thing' or new formation; rather, it is an aspect of autobiographical texts discoverable in the process or practice of close reading with an eye to the social relations and positionings life narratives present. In our view, developing this nuanced reading practice productively shifts us away from reliance on hypostatised definitions and norms towards a more fruitful engagement with particular issues. It is an exercise in reading for particular features that our "A Toolkit of Strategies" recommends, with its sets of questions clustered around thirty key issues for readers (Smith/Watson, 2024, 169–92).

Here, we briefly examine four kinds of life writing that emphasise diverse social contexts, coming-of-age dynamics, and class and racial politics through a contemporary *autosocial* lens. We regard this as an exploration in placing particular cases of life writing in a more supple framework that is both historical and transnational. These case studies suggest why reading for the *autosocial* may helpfully be regarded as a practice or method for illuminating the heterogeneous contexts of changing social relations.

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The Self-Case-Studies of Trained Writer-Sociologists from the Working-Class – Steedman and Emecheta

Consider the examples of two writer-sociologists whose self-case-studies were both published in England in 1986. In these texts, intersectional differences of gendered and racial identity inflect how the narrators' social positions are contextualised, as each gradually transitions from her working-class origins to professional status and, indeed, international fame.

British feminist social scientist and writer Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) is an acclaimed life narrative of a mother-daughter relationship that probes the cultural meanings attached to membership in a family of working-class women in Britain in the 1950s, a time when those meanings were overwritten by White-male sociological accounts of the class values and norms that marginalised them. Similarly, Nigerian-British writer Buchi Emecheta's second life narrative, *Head above Water* (1986), charts her rise, after migration to London, from what her first memoir – *In the Ditch* (1972) – characterised as immigrant life to status as a credentialed social worker and accomplished writer. While Steedman's narrative focuses on her working-class identity in northern England, Emecheta's narrative emphasises her experience of the effects of British colonialism, in racialising Africans and other people of colour, that she confronted in making her way to professional status.

Landscape for a Good Woman's relational life narrative focuses on Steedman's story of her mother, the 'good woman' of the title. As a working-class woman with frustrated middle-class aspirations, her mother lived at a protofeminist moment rarely taken into account by British historians of social class of the time, such as E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Steedman combines her mother's story with a brief biography of her father, who abandoned his family early on. She joins this case study of the Lancaster working class to the narrative of her own education and rise as a professor and writer who achieved the recognition that eluded her mother. By taking her own family as a case history, she refutes earlier claims of social historians about the 'naturally' subordinate place of women and children in rural class structures.

Steedman's materialist focus on gendered social relations expands the concept of a universalised 'patriarchy' by examining the social positions of men within British patriarchy. She characterises her father not as an uncontested and powerful figure at the centre of socioeconomic, political, and cultural regimes; rather, he was, like her mother, an outlier. Asserting that, in a culture's ideology, "class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits

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and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made" (Steedman 1986: 7), Steedman locates herself and her mother problematically in relation to mid-twentieth-century London by reading their lives *against* the norms of British working-class autobiography.

Steedman's eloquent metanarrative about coming to historical consciousness of the meaning of class in Britain offers a tempting lens through which to read Emecheta's less self-consciously staged presentation in *Head above Water*, published the same year. But doing so would reproduce the colonial relationship that characterised British domination of what is now Nigeria and would ignore the differences of her representative West African woman's 'I' in relation to multiple collectivities. Emecheta contextualises London as a site where relationships of racially-based domination still play out, a perception that escapes Steedman despite her acuity about class politics. While the two writers' ethnic identities signal their different positionings, their cultural histories also need to be specified. For Steedman, English is literally the mother tongue, while for Emecheta it is, as she asserts in *Head above Water*, a language she writes in "that is not my first nor my second or third but my fourth" (Emecheta 1986: 2); and English is, of course, the colonial language of Nigeria.

Further, although both Steedman and Emecheta write as working-class autobiographers, and Steedman's announced focus is "lives lived on the borderlands" (5), the kinds and degree of their class privilege differ dramatically. Steedman, in 1986, was a childless White woman graduate of the University of Sussex. Emecheta was an African immigrant mother of five whose husband had abandoned the family while she was studying for her master's degree in sociology at the University of London, receiving welfare and working evenings in a factory. While Steedman can draw narrative authority from the tradition of British working-class women's autobiographies throughout the twentieth century (such as Kathleen Woodward's 1928 *Jipping Street*), in the absence of a tradition of women's autobiography in Anglophone African writing, Emecheta's sources are primarily oral stories and genealogies narrated by her mother and aunts.

Intriguingly, in *Head above Water*, Emecheta presents herself doubly: as both a caseworker and a 'case' of the immigrant welfare mother. Much of the narrative focuses on her pursuit of a master's degree and publication of her first book in the early seventies. But in detailing her life of struggle, she assumes the stance, vocabulary, and analytical methods of the caseworker to describe her social milieu and the obstacles her family faced. By adopting the address, rationale, and chronological structure of British life narrative,

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Emecheta links her practical *Künstlerroman* to a critique of the welfare state's abandonment of immigrant teenagers. Her autobiographical engagement is thus double: in part, she addresses an audience needing how-to help in negotiating the social contradictions immigrants of colour, particularly children, confront in postcolonial Britain; in part, she addresses institutions and representatives of the dominant culture that preserve the status quo.

Thus, Emecheta asserts the experiential reality of her past self as a multiply-positioned African woman writer and her authority as a trained social analyst to translate her 'case' for a metropolitan audience. She thereby remakes traditional autobiography from a genre of introspection and interiorisation into a resonantly social genre that calls on readers to address material inequities between First-World and developing-world subjects. Her voice is implicitly collective in representing herself as a subject split between the objective methods of the caseworker, focused on the abject situation of African immigrants, and her own 'case' as an example of the need for collective decolonisation.

In positioning themselves as social case studies, both Steedman and Emecheta, despite their differences, reflect on how they are situated within, yet defined against, complex British codes of gendered citizenship and authorship. Both focus on the mid-century British working class and consciously employ materialist analyses of how class differentially positions women and children. As trained academics, both writers interweave the interpretive position of the social analyst with the experiential authority of a subject concerned to intervene in the cultural itineraries of women as mothers and daughters.

The Effects of Racialisation on Class Structure among Black American Writers – Coates and Jefferson

Many life narratives in the United States engage in complex intersectional analyses of how class differences are racialised. For example, African American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) is a relational, hybrid text composed as a set of three letters addressed to his teenage son. The letters narrate a searing account of his experience of being racialised in the US, with an emphasis on continuing police violence against Black bodies and the social failure to hold police accountable. Here, the use of the personal letter form invites readers to 'listen in' on intimate 'father-son talks' critical to the boy's knowledge of how best to stay alive as a young Black man, written 'conversations' that exemplify what Black Americans colloquially call 'The Talk' about how to survive while growing up Black.

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In the letters, Coates crafts a kind of *Bildungsroman* by charting his own educational opportunities and accomplishments in his rise from urban working-class to middle-class status as he became a well-known writer and cultural spokesperson. His education and talent catapult him into a professional class and enable him to develop a sharp-edged structural analysis. Coates employs it to fiercely expose the failure of the American Dream of racial uplift, and its promise of escape from the nightmare of racism; rather, he insists on the precarity of Black male life, no matter what a man's class position is. Advising his son that education gives him the tools to interrogate the structural conditions of Black experience in the US, including the "visceral experience" (10) of racism and White supremacy, he observes: "The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of disembodiment" (12).

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates narrates how his experiences of encountering dead or mutilated Black bodies are the felt, embodied effects of White supremacy. For him, these persistent assaults partially erase differentiations of class. Shifting class positioning cannot ensure that Black fathers will succeed in keeping their children safe; nor can it prevent racial violence from erupting against Black male bodies. Indeed, for Black Americans, the education enabling that shift can intensify the force of violence exacted on their bodies.

While his searing critique confronts the entanglements of structural racism, Coates nonetheless salutes the struggles and fortitude of African Americans, observing that "They (white people) made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people" (Coates 2015: 149). He also recognises alternative kinds of education, especially for young Black males, in reflecting how the education he received from young men 'on the streets' brought him communal wisdom and survival skills from 'below'.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning cultural critic Margo Jefferson presents a different version of the effects of growing up Black in the US. Her memoir *Negroland*, also published in 2015, situates family history over generations within an American history of enslavement and inequity imposed during colonial transport to the United States. But while many African-American narratives focus on the personal and structural effects of struggling to move from the pre-Civil-War coding of enslaved Blacks as three-fifths human, without rights to property or literacy, to enfranchised citizenship, Jefferson's narrative has a different focus: she disrupts the dominant Black narrative that *race* and ethnicity inevitably disenfranchised African Americans. Instead, she traces a genealogical story of generations of an elite Black family in Chicago located

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within the African-American leadership class that W.E.B. Du Bois, adopting the phrase from Henry Lyman Morehouse, termed "the Talented Tenth" (Du Bois, 2003 [1905]) whose children attend top American universities and thrive in professional positions as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Importantly, Jefferson stresses that hers is not a narrative of exceptionalism, but one "where the Talented Tenth positioned themselves as the Third Race poised between the masses of Negros and all Caucasians" (2015: 51). Their motto is "Achievement, Invulnerability, Comportment" (book jacket blurb). *Negroland* includes many photographs – among others, of Margo as a cheerleading team co-captain in a predominantly White high school (152), of her two-parent family's cross-country trip, of her mother and aunt in furs – that offer visual evidence of the family's social prominence.

While Jefferson's narrative begins with an account of her childhood identity as both an upper-class Black woman and an Other to White people, it shifts as she becomes an adult. In narrating her years as a college student, she recounts encounters in the Seventies with the Black Power movement and the writings of James Baldwin, revolutionary critiques that compel her to rethink what it means to be a 'Negro' and with which collectivities she will identify. Baldwin's work challenges Jefferson to resist the implication of her social position that there is a binary between the "potent […] deviant Negro" of White fantasy and "the achievements of My Negroes." Rather, she affirms Baldwin's call for "constructing a complex, compound Negro 'We'" as a new social formation (Jefferson 2015: 142). That is, of course, a work in progress.

Clearly, the harsh effects of racialisation in the US imposed with enslavement that extend into this century inform both Coates's and Jefferson's self-presentations as accomplished writers and cultural spokespeople; but, though both write intersectional life narratives that complicate binaries about social class, their inborn social positionings lead them to interpret their experience differently.

Personal Mediation of Social Histories – Pamuk and O'Toole

Another mode of life writing that may be read for how it foregrounds social relationships is narratives linking the history and formation of a national identity to the narrator's personal and familial story. While some life narratives emphasise the personal story and others stress the national story, in these examples each version contextualises and informs the other.

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Orhan Pamuk, the 2006 Nobel laureate in literature, is a renowned novelist and the author of the autobiographical *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2005). In it, he presents the historical past of the city as a site of cultural and political encounter reflecting both the legacy and the imperialising domination of what is called 'Europe'. Pamuk constructs two social entities, self and city, that contextualise each other as he broods on the complex meanings of being an *Istanbullu* at this transnational moment. Published in 2003 and translated into several languages the following year, *Istanbul* is literally bifurcated by the Europe-Asia boundary of the Bosporus Strait, with Old Istanbul in the European part as the locus of its famous mosques and palaces. The narrative traces the city's history in the wake of a century of nationalism that saw the formation of Turkey as a nation-state and inscribed Istanbul within a web of discourses about how urban settings shape personal identity.

While Istanbul, lauded by Europeans as the Paris of the East, is a production of nineteenth-century European Orientalism, the legacy of Western discourses of the introspective individual, the Romantic artist, and the modern bourgeois city permeate the city as both an object of knowledge and, now, a world capital. But Pamuk contests this nationalist view by depicting the city as a *ruin*, invoking the collective memory of its destruction and the marginalisation of its citizens in Europe, including ongoing debates about its admission to the European Union. Istanbul is thus a paradoxical site, both a modern megacity and a palimpsest of European artistic and geopolitical relations to its imagined Asian Other. Pamuk's lengthy, elegiac text gathers memories assembled from a variety of archives, both personal and familial, in reflecting on how collective memory becomes an experiential source for generating social meanings.

With its reproductions of over a hundred black-and-white photographs and engravings interspersing old and current photos of Istanbul with ones of the author and his family members, as well as other renowned or obscure *Istanbullu*, Pamuk's text immerses readers in a vicarious experience of the city. In that sense, *Istanbul* serves as a memory museum of everyday life, with the narrator's ruminative voice reinvigorating the city as the social counterpart of his own coming of age. Pamuk's narration of his and his family's history through archived documents, stories, and photographs of the city's history is thus inescapably a relational story of how the self and the social are co-constructed. The 'Istanbul' he presents is not found in a tourist guidebook or a genealogical or military history. Instead, both the contours of personal memory and the realm of documented fact are reinscribed as an order of intersubjective truth

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activated by acts of remembering in the media of writing, photography, and painting. Rather than foregrounding the individual in a conventional coming-of-age story, he focuses on his family's relationship to its shifting urban surround. In recasting memoir as a genre of epic scope, Pamuk, à la Walter Benjamin, immerses his own coming-of-age story in the vast, transpersonal history of his city as subject. Impressions and their 'factual' counterparts become inseparable in Pamuk's "double vision" – his term – by generating a relational world that he summarises in the book's design: "I have described Istanbul when describing myself, and described myself when describing Istanbul." (Pamuk 2005: 295)

In contrast, Republic of Ireland journalist Fintan O'Toole forms a new socio-historical subject in *We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland* (2021). His "Acknowledgements" state that he aims to personalise Irish history in the second half of the twentieth century by situating his own experience in a collective story of shared unknowingness. As his title signals, his 'I' becomes the collective 'we' of Irish citizen-subjects navigating the era of developing Irish modernity. His personal story, then, is only relevant in relation to a structural analysis of how mid-twentieth-century Irish modernity arose and how its "permanent state of contradiction" (O'Toole 2021: 33) constituted the horizon of possibility for the subject-formation of Irish citizens. Although O'Toole's narrative opens like a traditional retrospective life narrative with his birth in the 1950s, the narrator immediately locates it in the analysis of three historical events that took place during the week of his birth, and uses them as "portholes" (O'Toole 2021: 10) through which to see the three formations that shaped the subjectivity of twentieth-century Irish society: Irish nationalism, the Irish rural economy, and the Irish Catholic Church.

Subsequently, using the model of the autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, O'Toole's narrative focuses on the education of the narrated 'I'; but that education is of two kinds – formal and informal. He explores his own interpellation in the mid-century Irish educational system that sought to strike a blow against an earlier oppressive class system calcified in the history of colonialism: "Along with 60,000 other children born in Ireland in 1958", he observes, "I was to be the *tabula rasa* on which this great experiment would be conducted" (O'Toole 2021: 43). Even as the narrative acknowledges the new system of universal secondary education, O'Toole the journalist hones in on the social effects of the informal Irish system of knowledge circulation. The narrating 'I' situates the narrated 'I' of his childhood as an unknowing subject inhaling

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a kind of informal education that was 'in the air' with the shifting everyday negotiations of Irish socio-political life. He observes that

> 'Ireland', as a notion, was almost suffocatingly coherent and fixed: Catholic, nationalist, rural. […] But Ireland as a lived experience was incoherent and unfixed. The first Ireland was bounded, protected, shielded from the unsavory influence of the outside world. The second was unbounded, shifting. […] In the space between these two Irelands, there was a haunted emptiness, a sense of something so unreal that it might disappear completely. (O'Toole 2021: 10)

In that emptiness, the everyday quandaries of "unknown knowns" play out as both "the single most important aspect of Irish culture in these decades" (O'Toole 2021: 168) and a psychosocial problem requiring "the maintenance of an acceptable gap between what we knew and what we acknowledged" (O'Toole 2021: 281).

O'Toole observes how this narrated 'I' of the past was educated in strategic unknowingness, with its silences, evasions, and deflections. As a journalist-narrator he suggests how his younger self gained incremental knowledge of the operations of unknown-knowns in Irish culture, including those related to: child sexual abuse in the Church; the forcible separation of unwed mothers from their children; the hypocrisy of nationalist politicians; the persistence of hierarchical class relations; and, later, the illusory Celtic Tiger myth. He also analyses how some fantasies of unknowingness began to lose their power as people voiced and published acts of personal witnessing. In the 1990s, for instance, when the suppressed history of the Catholic Church's sexual abuse of children became public, he describes how victims refused to remain silent: "For the first time in Irish public life, first-hand experience, the direct encounter with power and powerlessness in their rawest Irish forms, was put forward as primary fact. The unspeakable was not merely spoken – it was heard as evidence of the nature of the place we inhabited" (O'Toole 2021: 521). In this way, O'Toole foregrounds the role of the autobiographical as a mode of bearing witness to lived experience that creates a new understanding of national subjectivity.

In sum, in *Istanbul*, Pamuk thoroughly refracts his experiential history through familial and archival memory in evoking the socio-cultural contours of his city-space over centuries. By contrast, in *We Don't Know Ourselves*, O'Toole subordinates his individualised 'I' to a collective Irish social subject emerging

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in 1958 that partially effaces it. Wielding their formidable power with words, both writers immerse their narratives in the felt realities of living in dialogue with the social imaginary of the nation.

The Differentiated, Collective 'I'

Sometimes, autobiographical narratives not only ask to be read for the models of classed, gendered, racialised, or national identities they both foreground and critique – they also demand a reading practice that emphasises the social locations and issues that a group confronts in assessing how they are positioned as a necessary condition of transforming lives in their communities. Such collective life writing projects engage autobiographically with the social structures, psychological dynamics, and experiential histories that sustain conditions of inequality and oppression.

A remarkable example of such projects occurs in *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), a narrative published by the Sangtin Writers and scholar Richa Nagar. The Sangtin were a group of seven women working as rural field agents for an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in Uttar Pradesh, India, who formed a collective to focus on domestic violence and the rights of women in local communities. Collaborating with Indian social worker Richa Singh and Anglo-Indian academic sociologist Richa Nagar, over three years members of the collective wrote and shared their diary entries and engaged in discussions that generated reflections on their lives. Through conversations and the diaries they kept, they created a text that presented their differing analyses of how their experiences were embedded in their families, communities, and nation in ways that articulate their sense of 'woman' as a disempowered, unvalued, and suspect figure. This collectively produced narrative projects a "blended but fractured we" (xxxiv) that "interrogate[s] pregiven notions of what constitutes an expert" (xxxvii). *Playing with Fire* thus undermines notions of expertise even as it prevents readers from either making any easy transnational identification or from speaking for others. It has remarkable *autosocial* features, challenging readers, workers, and scholars in the Global North to imagine and participate in a project of ethical justice-making without reproducing the tropes of neediness and victimisation that have characterised many memoirs about the suffering of individual women in the developing world.

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Conclusion: Reading for the *Autosocial*

Many other life narratives could productively be read through an *autosocial* lens. Our point, in taking this wider historical and geographic perspective, is that the *autosocial* emerges not as new formation, but as a process or practice of reading that emphasises the dynamics of social formation and the impediments many life writers have confronted because of their gender, class, or racial status. In so doing, we seek to avoid what we regard as theoretical pitfalls: constricting the historical, geographical, transnational, gendered, and racialised specificities of life narratives; compressing their generic heterogeneity; and undercutting the textual richness of storytelling projects that mine and explore the lived experience of subjects in the socius.

Assuredly, life narratives posit a social world, even in the rare cases when a narrator has withdrawn from it. Thus, the practice of reading *for* how narrators negotiate the narrated 'I''s inherited social location and position through the lens of the narrating 'I''s perspective of accomplishment and understanding may be applied to many kinds of life narrative. The narratives that we have explored may be read through an *autosocial* lens as the self-case-studies of writers, both professionals and accomplished non-professionals, who respond to their position in a world of structural inequality and oppression by narrating how the history of the social worlds they grew up in is intertwined with their own experiences. Some narratives have an autoethnographic cast, as do Steedman's and Emecheta's; some exemplify and are told in relation to an ethnic or racialised history, as are Coates's and Jefferson's narratives; some embed an individual story in a national history, as do the O'Toole and Pamuk narratives; and some are intrinsically collective yet speak in multiple voices, as does the Sangtin's layered text. But these interesting experiments do not necessarily constitute a new formation; rather, they are socially informed life narratives that place their rhetorics and domains in conversation with an established canon.

New formations can, however, emerge as narrative trajectories that are not exactly autobiographical in their experiments with modes of personal storytelling. A striking example is the remarkable work of French 2022 Nobel laureate in literature Annie Ernaux, who strategically uses ethnographic categories and methods to embed personal trauma in a sociohistorical context. For example, *Shame* (1998), which narrates the primal scene during Ernaux's adolescence of her father's attempt to kill her mother, is situated within an extended recollection of the social contexts of her childhood:

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> I have [...] to explore the laws, rites, beliefs and references that defined the circles in which I was caught up – school, family, small-town life [...] (and) expose the different languages that made up my personality.[...] I shall process (those images) like documents.[...] I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself. (Ernaux 1998: 32–3)

Autoethnographic documentation thus becomes a means for Ernaux to recast her narrative and resist a psychoanalytic reading of personal trauma. By drawing from both the objective records and the subjective memories of her personal history, Ernaux embeds her self-study at the nexus of her narrating 'I''s relation to intimate others and the documentable past they inhabited.

Some readers might be inclined to use Ernaux's declaration in *Shame*, "I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself" (Ernaux 1998, 32–3), to characterise her narration as ethnographic or merely *autosociobiographical*. But that would be reductive. In a later, remarkable work, *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017), Ernaux's narrator recasts the personal so as to seemingly obliterate her 'I', asserting: "There is no 'I' in what she views as a sort of impersonal autobiography. There is only 'one' and 'we,' as if now it were her turn to tell the story of the time-before", a non-individuating strategy (Ernaux 2017: 229). Thus, the relationship of the personal impressions of 'her' to the larger social fabric, as related by a seemingly 'neutral' narrator, has a complexity that the term 'ethnological' – or its variant, *autosociobiographical* – does not fully capture. Rather, her work crafts a new formation in dialogue with the norms and practices of autobiographical writing, with its valorisation of memory and subjectivity.

That is, Ernaux's efforts to craft a prose of material reality that captures the ongoing, 'happening' or unfolding character of living in time, is located in neither the wholly personal nor the wholly social, but in the liminal space of their ever-shifting relationship. In the conclusion of *The Years*, Ernaux's third-person narrator reflects on the form she sought to craft by capturing the sensation of "replicating herself and physically existing in several places she's known over her life, and thus attaining a palimpsest time" (Ernaux 2017: 226). This palimpsest strikingly joins the multiple overlays of temporal moments that form in memory and both enter into and defy representation. Seizing the time of her life as a "sweeping", "indistinct" set of unfolding moments that extend into years impels her towards "a kind of vast collective sensation that takes her consciousness, her entire being, into itself" (Ernaux 2017: 227). As an effect of "her complete immersion in the images from her memory", she is "*taken into* the indefinable whole of the world of now" (Ernaux 2017:

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227–8). Thus, "by retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, she strives to capture the lived dimension of History"; her reflections on her experience are "only to retrieve the world" by using a continuous verb tense that moves through ever-changing time (Ernaux 2017: 228).

Philippe Lejeune, an eminent theorist of life writing, regards Ernaux's interweaving of diary fragments from the archives of her personal and the nation's pasts not as an autoethnography, but as a new genre of self-writing in which diary entries of various kinds are inserted in her reflexive narration to create an ongoing, open-ended process: "They are almost like an installation which exceeds the notion of a closed work or text."[3] Ernaux's palimpsestic openness, at the crossroads of autobiographical and ethnographic writing, incorporates features of each to form a new mode of life storytelling resistant to the norms of both autobiographical and social theory, yet with features of each. Lejeune's emphasis on Ernaux's text as "like an installation" points up how its dynamic dialectics cannot be contained within an autobiographical framing; rather, they are in ongoing conversation with its norms and practices. The field of life narrative studies is nourished both by such new experiments in presenting or performing a life and by the role of scholars in tracing how such narratives draw from and incorporate the perspectives and methods of a range of disciplines. Reading for the *autosocial* aspects of such innovative, self-reflexive texts can only strengthen and expand the canon of life narratives and the criteria for literary value that this volume pursues.

In this essay, we have observed both a breakdown and a breakthrough in some established life narrative genres that were previously employed to engage with social issues. This shift has been generated in part by intensified migration and transnational identifications, by the emergence of new media, and by the deconstruction and reconstruction of textual canonicity. We commend the value and timeliness of an exploration in reading for the social aspects of life narrative as contributing to a new formation, but raise concern about hypostasising it as a genre narrowly linked to sociology and to literary canonicity. Instead, we endorse, and try to practice, a flexible method of *autosocial* reading.

To conclude, we propose some questions for further research.

What value might the practice of reading for the *autosocial* now have as a means to specify and highlight what is 'new' in emergent texts, such as those discussed in this volume, including those we have taken up?

3 "[C]'est presque comme une 'installation' qui dépasse la notion d'œuvre fermée ou de texte", qt. in Kawakami 2019: 255.

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How might we understand the *autosocial* relations imbricated in life narratives as a dialectical process in conversation with past histories of inequity and/or with transnational socioeconomic shifts, such as mass displacement and the migration of large groups of people?

In what terms can a case be made that *autosocially*-nuanced texts register social change across time? How do such texts project possible bases upon which social change may occur?

How might the enabling possibilities of such automedia as graphic memoir and online sites, with their distinct affordances and distributed interactivity, impact future iterations of life stories of *transclasse* anxiety and reformation?

How and to what effect does contemporary life writing enabled by new media, the shifting positions of life narrators, and a practice of *autosocial* reading unsettle or reimagine a concept of 'literariness' founded on features of the novel?

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Towards a Theory of Minor Subjectivation
Global Perspectives in the Work of Didier Eribon

Christina Ernst

1

The present article discusses the ways in which Didier Eribon's work engages with texts of postcolonial and African American provenance, linking heterogenous forms of writing about social domination in what I will call a theory of minor subjectivation.[1] In so doing, I want to examine in how far autosociobiography can be conceived as a genre that transcends its Franco-German or European origins, and which latent affinities and interwoven relations would be revealed from a perspective that considers autosociobiography as part of a broader phenomenon of contemporary literary production. As will become clear, Eribon adapts three key building blocks in his own writing: the *topos* of the 'return narrative' as deployed by James Baldwin, Assia Djebar's concept of 'writing in the language of the adversary', and Patrick Chamoiseau's notion of a *sentimenthèque*. Considering that these three elements – the return to one's origin as the starting point of narration, a reflection on language and the role of literature in constructing the *transclasse* self[2] – have been named as characteristic traits of autosociobiographical texts in general, I want to inquire how an examination of Eribon's approach can reshape our conception of autosociobiography as a "*genre in the making*" (Blome et al. 2022: 12, original emphasis)

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Philipp Lammers for his valuable feedback, and to Jonathan Stafford for proofreading this article.

2 The term 'transclasse' was coined by the philosopher Chantal Jaquet to describe the position of those with a history of upward social mobility; employing it in lieu of the more established 'transfuge de classe' ('class fugitive', 'class defector') avoids the latter's derogative connotation of treason, see Jaquet 2023: 22.

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and cast fresh light on its potential for narrating and theorising various forms of social domination and marginalisation.

These reflections derive from the observation, already advanced multiple times in existing scholarship (see Blome 2020; Blome et al. 2022; Lammers/Twellmann 2023), that when texts are assembled under the "label autosociobiography" (Blome et al. 2022: 22), they are mainly referred to as a phenomenon of French provenance whose genealogy – its origins and predecessors – is traced solely to European authors. In practice, that principally means French writers (notably Pierre Bourdieu and Annie Ernaux), although Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* is sometimes mentioned, too.[3] To a certain extent, this way of perceiving the genre is promoted by the authors themselves via the theoretical and literary influences they emphasise, both in interviews and within their works; first and foremost, however, it is the point of view of literary critics and scholars, who tend to highlight this specific literary (and sociological) canon.[4] Linked to this process of genre mapping is a second observation, namely that the texts in question tend to describe social relations and mechanisms that are situated in a specific historic and political context: the French post-war period, the turn towards neoliberalism in the 1980s and 90s, deindustrialisation, and the dismantling of the welfare state. Is it possible to transpose the narrative element of upward social mobility and the emphasis on class and the educational system – central *topoi* of autosociobiographical texts – to literatures from times and cultures where society is structured differently?[5]

One way of mapping the genre on a more global scale would consist in defining its characteristics by departing from its core textual canon (Ernaux, Eribon, Louis, Bourdieu) and looking for similar texts and currents in spatially and temporally divergent languages, cultures, and literary traditions. This procedure would resemble the establishment of the notion of autofiction, which, too, was originally coined in a very specific literary and sociohistorical context – the postmodern shift in late 1970s French Literature from the *Nouveau*

3 For a discussion of Richard Hoggart's (hidden) influence on the form of autosociobiography, see Lammers/Twellmann 2023.

4 Interestingly, German scholars played a much bigger (and earlier) role in this process of genre description than their French counterparts, prompting Lammers and Twellmann to inquire whether "autosociobiography [should] be regarded [...] as a German idiosyncrasy" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 48).

5 This question is also raised by Laélia Véron and Karine Abiven in their study of *transclasse* narratives, see Véron/Abiven 2024: 24.

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roman towards the subject – by a specific author (Serge Doubrovsky) to theorise his own literary project, and later expanded to a much broader concept used to engage with contemporary tendencies in life writing. The latter's success is, at least partially, related to the fact that what Doubrovsky described as his poetological concept – the idea that the 'I' of an autobiographical text does not precede the text, but is created in the writing process and is therefore also always fictional – resonated with the (post-)structuralist and deconstructivist literary theories prevalent at the time (see e.g. Gronemann 2022: 340). Moreover, literary research discovered similar insights and similar hybridisations of factual and fictional aspects in a broad variety of autobiographical narrations throughout time and space: Vincent Colonna, for example, argued that auctorial fictionalisation was already to be found in the works of Dante, Cervantes, and Proust (see Gronemann 2022: 338), whereas Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf pointed out that the autofictional construct is the dispositif of *every* kind of autobiography (see Wagner-Egelhaaf 2005: 5). The concept of autofiction thus proved to be highly transferable and extendable to all kinds of literary forms (and genres) – especially in the context of contemporary literature, where the writing of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis has often come to be subsumed under the category (see e.g. Graw/Weingart 2019; Sauer 2022).

Yet rather than debating the genre affiliation of these specific texts, I would like to pursue the question of whether the notion of 'autosociobiography' has a similar potential of global transferability. As was the case with autofiction, the literary project of autosociobiography – narrating the subject as an effect of social structures (and not merely of textual strategies), linking the personal to an analysis of the socio-political, combining the knowledge production of literature and the social sciences – overlaps to a remarkable degree with current tendencies in literary studies, specifically the 'social turn' (Brüns, 2008) and the concept of 'post-autonomous literature' developed by Josefine Ludmer in the context of Argentinian literary theory. Central to Ludmer's claim is the idea of a literary sphere that is always already entangled with other spheres such as the political, the social, the digital, and so on, rendering the idea of the autonomy of fiction obsolete (see Ludmer 2018). The 'social turn', meanwhile, proposes a perspective that considers the social in the aesthetic and the aesthetic in the social; it responds, to a certain degree, to a literary field where concepts from the social sciences – such as class, milieu, poverty, and domination – are already present and used by the authors to analyse their narrated journey through life.

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Autosociobiography thus forms part of a much broader phenomenon, both in literature and beyond (for example in literary theory, public discourse, and other media). This includes, but is not limited to, the return to social questions in the arts; an interest in aesthetic forms that for a long time were considered to be 'insufficiently literary'; the fusion of the form of the theoretical essay with a literary narrative; the highlighting of personal narratives; and the concomitant use of the 'I' as a way of anchoring the narrated story in a specific (lived) experience as well as a means of verifying it (on the last point, see e.g. Blome 2020: 545–6). All these characteristics can easily be put in a 'global perspective', in the sense that we encounter them in literatures around the globe and across historical periods that do not have any direct intertextual or referential relation to the French trio Ernaux, Eribon and Louis.

2

By linking such considerations back to the canonical French autosociobiographies, I seek to elucidate the latter's entanglements with historical events and literary traditions that extend beyond the European context. More precisely, I am interested in the presence of global sociohistorical dynamics in the works of Didier Eribon, and the parallels between autosociobiography and other literatures that deal with (social) domination. How do Eribon's texts reflect on France's colonial and postcolonial history of violence, and what kind of literary influences can be identified other than the Western European ones foregrounded by the author and his academic critics? As Mario Laarmann has pointed out, one potential link can be established with authors of *Créolité*, such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant (see Laarmann 2023: 131): both literary currents exhibit an aesthetics of hybridity regarding the form of the texts and the relationship between theory and literature; both subscribe to a fragmented realism that refutes the idea of direct access to, or direct representation of, reality;[6] both are based on an autobiographical/autofictional framework; and both engage in a (political) reflection on language.

6 Referring to the tendencies of a 'renouveau du réalisme' (renewal of realism) and a 'retour du réel' (return of the real) in contemporary French literature in general, Laarmann argues that *Creolité* literature rejects the totalising interpretation of the world espoused by the self-assured realism of the nineteenth century (see Laarmann 2023: 122).

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Beyond these poetological similarities, Eribon himself has stressed the connection between *Créolité* literature and his own concepts in several of his works. Already in *Une morale du minoritaire* (2001), his (not yet autobiographical) essay on gay subjectivation, he links his analysis, mainly based on the work of Jean Genet, to postcolonial authors such as Frantz Fanon and Patrick Chamoiseau, and argues for a "decolonization of the mind" (Eribon 2023: 294).[7] Borrowing the analytical tools developed in one theoretical field (or literary tradition) and transferring them to the context of another kind of social domination is, as I will argue, a major principle in Eribon's writing. In *Retour à Reims* (2009; published in English under the title *Returning to Reims* 2013), for instance, it functions as the starting point of the entire book: here, Eribon draws on his earlier works on the process of queer subjectivation and applies these insights to his analysis of class-related subordination (see Eribon 2013: 26–9). In the process, Eribon relies on the work of other authors in a way that often goes beyond mere citation (for example in the form of references in footnotes or by naming them as examples) – their presence supports a kind of literary community-building and serves as a framework that enables him to tell his own story.

Eribon develops this principle of literary community-building through his engagement with Patrick Chamoiseau's *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997). Chamoiseau combines his own narration with a plurality of literary voices that had a crucial impact on the formation of his self. Beyond being a mere intellectual influence, Chamoiseau asserts that he is linked to these texts and authors by an affective relationship: "So much reading since childhood has left me with more than just memories: with feelings. More than just a library: a sentimenthèque." (Chamoiseau 1997: 24)[8] In *Retour à Reims*, Eribon picks up on this idea and builds his own *sentimenthèque*, consisting, he writes, of "books that 'call to us', as Patrick Chamoiseau puts it, books that make up a 'library of feelings' and help us overcome the effects of domination within our own selves" (Eribon 2013: 220). Eribon refers to the texts of Jean Genet as offering a literary model of affective identification for his own project of gay subjectivation (Eribon 2023: 38); yet his *sentimenthèque* is constructed from all sorts of literary and theoret-

7 "décolonisation des esprits". Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

8 "Tant de lectures depuis l'enfance m'ont laissé mieux que des souvenirs: des sentiments. Mieux qu'une bibliothèque: une *sentimenthèque*."

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ical texts that speak of multiple forms of social domination.[9] In the following sections, I will outline the impact of these texts on the core concepts of Eribon's writing. Discussing two examples from *Retour à Reims* and *Principes d'une pensée critique* (2016), I will first explore the influence of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) on the construction of Eribon's return narrative, before proceeding to a discussion of how the politics of language developed by Assia Djebar in *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985; *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* 1989) and *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* [Those voices that besiege me] (1999) came to serve as a matrix for his own thinking about language and domination.

3

How, then, does Eribon utilise the return narrative, departing from his readings of James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)? And how does the latter's example become not only a narrative but also a theoretical framework for his writing? To answer these questions, we must first determine the meaning of 'return' in Eribon's autosociobiographical *œuvre* (or, as he terms it, his "self-analysis", see Eribon 2013: 160).

In *Retour à Reims*, the return is, first of all, a narrative one, and as such constitutes a dominant element of the plot: it is the starting point that initiates the story. After his father's death, Eribon returns (temporarily) to his hometown to see his mother after a long absence. As he talks to her and pores over old photographs, he starts to wonder why he, who has written several books on sexual shame and homosexual subjectivation, has never written about *social* shame: "Why, when I have written so much about processes of domination, have I never written about forms of domination based on class?" (Eribon 2013: 25) His physical return, as it is staged by the narrative, is then followed by a reflexive one – the act of writing, which tries to re-approach the former self by discussing the class system and the impact of social inequalities from

9 In addition to sociological and autobiographical treatments of class, social difference, and the estrangement from one's origins that comes with upward mobility (the most prominent examples being works by Pierre Bourdieu and Annie Ernaux), Eribon also engages with writings about racism and colonialism, including the works of Afro-Americans like James Baldwin, John Edgar Wideman, and Tony Morrison; of members of the French Caribbean Négritude and Creolité movements such as Aimé Césaire, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Édouard Glissant; and of authors from the Maghreb and the Middle East like Mahmoud Darwish and Assia Djebar.

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a personal point of view. However, the *transclasse* narrator has no immediate knowledge of, or access to, their own history, which can be related to on an individual level – in the form of memories – but not in terms of the social reality that shapes and embeds these experiences. In order to be able to tell their story not merely as an autobiographical but as an auto*socio*biographical one, and to come to an awareness of their writing position as a "transfuge de classe" ('class defector', Eribon 2009: 25), they must first make the detour of contextualising it in a collective political framework, that is, of inscribing themselves in a genealogy of textual predecessors. In other words, the knowledge the *transclasse* individual has acquired about the self as a social self and about their class origins is not spontaneous, but is accessible only via the process of distancing themselves from the narrated self.

This way of recounting one's own history via a detour to the texts of other authors is very prominent in *Retour à Reims*. Early on in the narrative, Eribon refers to Annie Ernaux's *La Place* (1983, *A Man's Place* 1992) when he describes the relation between his physical and his reflexive return, both provoked by the death of his father. However, by the time he begins to analyse his troubled relationship with his own father, and the complicated feelings he experiences when he is looking at a photograph of him taken shortly before his death, he turns to James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* – a book that revolves around the distant relationship between the author and his father, and the former's delay in visiting the latter on his death bed. Along with numerous other quotations from Baldwin, *Retour à Reims* cites the following passage from *Notes of a Native Son*:

> The moment I saw him I knew why I had put off this visit so long. I had told my mother that I did not want to see him because I hated him. But this was not true. It was only that *I had* hated him and I wanted to hold on to this hatred. I did not want to look at him as a ruin: it was not a ruin I had hated. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain. (Baldwin qt. in Eribon 2013: 33–4)

Referring to Baldwin's text, Eribon concludes that the lack of understanding and affection between father and son was due to their respective social positions and to the distance they entailed: "As had been the case for Baldwin with his father, so I began to realise that everything my father had been, which is to say everything I held against him, all the reasons I had detested him, had been

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shaped by the violence of the social world." (Eribon 2013: 36) Eribon repeatedly uses expressions like "as had been the case for Baldwin" or "like Baldwin", thereby stressing the importance of imitation when it comes to constructing one's own story as a literary text. And while, from a literary point of view, it might be argued that there is no original way of telling one's own story, but that each and every autobiographical text is always already shaped by its predecessors, Eribon employs the template of Baldwin's account to an extent that can be considered specific to autosociobiography: it is the detour via the words of others, and more precisely the sense of distance from his own memory achieved by the defamiliarisation effect of citing the individual experiences of others from their (literary) autobiographies, that enables his access to the reality of his own story.[10] The entanglement of Eribon's manner of narrating his own relationship to his father with Baldwin's is also evident from his choice of using similar phrases even when he does not quote Baldwin directly. For instance, Baldwin's statement "I had not known my father very well. [...] When he was dead I realised that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had" (Baldwin 2017: 88) is mirrored by Eribon with the following words: "I never had a conversation with him, never! He wasn't capable of it (at least with me, and me with him). It's too late to spend time lamenting this. But there are plenty of questions I would now like to ask him, if only because it would help me write this book." (Eribon 2013: 35)

Eribon describes Baldwin as a paradigmatic example of a 'reflexive' return. In order to become a writer and to live his life as a homosexual, Baldwin had to leave his narrow family environment in Harlem and his father's contempt for all things artistic and literary – Eribon here mirrors his own experience as a gay 'transfuge de classe' in Baldwin's story. And to be able to analyse his doubly marginalised social position – being Black and being gay – Baldwin had to 'return' to his childhood by writing a theoretical essay on the social mechanisms that shaped his father. From his reading of Baldwin's text, Eribon develops his own autosociobiographical methodology, which gains knowledge of the personal by means of an analysis of the social: "Perhaps too, beginning this process of historical and political deliberation would allow him [Baldwin] one day to reclaim his own past on an emotional level, to get to a place where he could not only understand, but also accept himself." (Eribon 2013: 36)

10 Eribon has repeatedly rejected the idea of the authenticity of the direct report, see for example Eribon 2016: 71.

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Eribon's concept of 'return' (as both part of the narrated plot and of the theoretical analysis) is thus marked by extensive references to, and use of, other authors' words. This method enables him to develop a socio-political understanding of his own story while at the same time situating himself in a lineage of predecessors – not only of other 'class fugitives', but of "all those who do not reproduce the dominant model and discover their identity after being branded by an insult or taunt" (Jaquet 2023: 22). It is in a very similar vein that Eribon engages with Assia Djebar's thoughts on language in general, and her reflections on what it means for her as an author from postcolonial Algeria to use the French language in her writing. Eribon refers to Djebar's hybrid autobiographical works, *L'amour, la fantasia* and the more theoretical *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, in his follow-up volume to *Returning to Reims*, *La société comme verdict* (2013), and notably in the essay *Dates de naissance. Récits de soi et ontologie du présent*, a text included in *Principes d'une pensée critique* (2016).

Eribon's concept of 'dates of birth' – which would be the translation of *Dates de naissance* – is drawn directly from a passage in Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* that proposes a different chronological mode. He states that when writing about one's life from an autosociobiographical perspective, one cannot simply start with the date of one's biological birth (or that of one's parents or grandparents); rather, there is a need to consider the social, geographical, and political situations that shaped one's position, and so the question is: "[W]here and when does the autobiography begin? [...] At what point in time must we go back? In what territory should this beginning be fixed? Where and when does the 'I' begin?" (Eribon 2016: 33).[11] Eribon finds the model for his approach in the following passage from the end of Djebar's autobiographical novel, which opens with the destruction of her ancestors' village by the French colonial army:

> I am forced to acknowledge a curious fact: the date of my birth is eighteen hundred and forty-two, the year when General Saint-Arnaud arrives to burn down the *zaouia* of the Beni Menacer, the tribe from which I am descended, and then he goes into raptures over the orchards, the olive groves,

11 "[O]ù et quand commence l'autobiographie? [...] À quel moment du temps faut-il remonter? Dans quel territoire faut-il fixer ce commencement? Où et quand commence 'je'?"

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> ‘the finest in the whole of Algeria’, as he writes in a letter to his brother – orchards which have now disappeared.
> It is Saint-Arnaud’s fire that lights my way out of the harem one hundred years later: because its glow still surrounds me I find the strength to speak. Before I catch the sound of my own voice I can hear the death-rattles, the moans of those immured in the Dahra mountains and the prisoners on the island of Sainte Marguerite; they provide my orchestral accompaniment. They summon me, encouraging my faltering steps, so that at the given signal my solitary song takes off. (Djebar 1989: 216–7)

Djebar, as she herself acknowledges, can only write because she is carried by the voices of the tortured. Yet, she writes in French, in the “language of the adversary” (Djebar 1999: 41),[12] as she calls it in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*. It may well have been this particular phrasing that drew Eribon to reflect upon her concept of language, because a very similar one is used by Ernaux when she considers her position as a writer from a working class background “who is writing, as Jean Genet said, in the language of the enemy, who uses the writing skills ‘stolen’ from the ruling class” (Ernaux 2011: 33).[13] To Ernaux, this ‘stolen language of the enemy’ means the tool of literature, whereas for Djebar, it is French as the language of the colonisers. As a French speaker and a French writer, her ‘date of birth’ coincides with the moment of the French invasion of Algeria. She discovers herself in the ‘language of the adversary’ because she writes her books in the idiom that has also given her access to culture, emancipation, and independence as a woman, as she puts it. When Djebar tells the story of the colonised in the language of the colonisers, she uses the very tool that has silenced the speech of her ancestors – the French language thus becomes a sort of “loot” (Djebar 1999: 69).[14]

Eribon then tries to relate Djebars ‘date of birth’ to his own past (in a social and in a personal sense) by reflecting on the colonial history of France in Algeria, where his ancestors had been on the side of the oppressors, as well as on the racist slurs against Algerians he grew up with as a child. “Does this past still live in us as a shared past? I mean, does it live in me as intensely as it does in her

12 “Écrire dans la langue de l’autre.”

13 “qui écrit, comme disait Genet, dans la ‘langue de l’ennemi’, qui utilise le savoir-écrire ‘volé’ aux dominants”.

14 “Du français comme butin.”

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[Djebar], as she describes it?" (Eribon 2016: 35),[15] he asks. Eribon then proceeds to narrate a family anecdote involving his maternal grandmother, who tried to help injured survivors of the Charonne subway massacre in February 1962, when the French police brutally attacked a demonstration against the Algerian War, resulting in the deaths of nine people. He also reflects on the glorifying way the colonial conquest of Algeria was taught in school and the ongoing intellectual influence exerted on him by authors marked by the Algerian War of Independence (Sartre, Bourdieu, Derrida, Fanon) (see Eribon 2016: 36), calling to attention how deeply both colonisers and colonised are entangled in colonial and postcolonial power structures, even if this involvement seems much less obvious to the White French population.

However, as his "purpose is less to comment on her work than to take up her questioning of what it means to write in the language of the enemy" (Eribon 2016: 38),[16] Eribon adapts Djebar's concept of historic 'dates of birth', and, turning it into a theoretical lens, looks for potential landmarks related to his own specific social situation. From this, he deduces that there are always multiple, and sometimes conflicting, possibilities of how one's past can be (re-)constructed; a constellation he already approached (in a more narrative way) in *Retour à Reims*, where it is the underlying theme of the whole book: by choosing to present himself as a gay child, and thus inscribing himself into a gay history, Eribon had rejected for a long time that he also had the history of a worker's child. The key moments he lists in response to the question "When was I born?" (Eribon 2016: 50)[17] belong to different timescales that cannot always be reconciled in a unified, totalising temporality.[18] Indeed, the intersections of the different identities and temporalities of the 'I' are always partial and tentative:

15 "Est-ce que ce passé vit encore en nous comme un passé commun? Je veux dire, est-ce qu'il vit en moi avec tant d'intensité qu'en elle [Djebar], selon la description qu'elle en donne?"

16 "mon propos est moins de commenter son œuvre que de reprendre son interrogation su ce que cela signifie d'écrire dans la langue de l'ennemi".

17 "quand étais-je né, alors?"

18 He proposes 1895 (when Oscar Wilde's trial for gross indecency was held), 1924 (when Gide published *Corydon*), and 1952 (when Sartre published *Saint Genet*) as possible 'dates of birth' in the history of his gay self; as far as the history of his working-class origins is concerned, the dates seem less clear to him – he suggests, among others, the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1870, and the strikes of the Popular Front in 1936, see Eribon 2016: 50–51.

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"Intersection is never given once and for all. It is constantly being constructed and invented, and it must be emphasised that it is constructed against previous political representations, which nevertheless will not disappear" (Eribon 2016: 52).[19]

5

It is in relation to this rejection of a totalising perspective that would level conflicting positions – whether they concern the different facets of the self, political claims, or forms of writing – that Eribon develops what I would call a theory of minor subjectivation. 'Minor' here refers to a minoritarian, subordinated social position. The term mirrors what Eribon himself calls the process of "minoritarian subjectivation" (Eribon 2023: 31),[20] that is, the building of a subjectivity that reinvents the self via practices of affirmation and identification under conditions of interiorisation and stigmatisation. In many cases, minor subjects find the means for this process of self-building in literature, which offers them an alternative imaginary that enables the 'decolonisation' of their consciousness from dominant discourses.

Eribon develops this theoretical framework in relation to Chamoiseau's above-mentioned notion of the *sentimenthèque*, the ideal library of texts that shapes the self to become someone other, someone distant from one's origins, and that later provides the tools for 'returning' to this former self. The example of Baldwin's returning and his analysis of a conflicted father-son relationship enables Eribon to confront a hitherto rejected part of his history, giving a form of access to social reality that a simple account of his memories could not have provided. However, literature is not merely a means to 'overcome the effects of domination within ourselves'; it is itself heavily implicated in domination, the 'language of the enemy', as the example of Djebar (and Ernaux) has shown. This constellation – wherein literature is both a tool of the ruling class and a tool of emancipation for Eribon as *transclasse* – necessitates a reflection on the poetics of autosociobiographical writing, and the development of an aesthetic form that stands contrary to traditional forms of literature (which, in the case

19 "L'intersection n'est jamais donnée une fois pour toutes. Elle se construit et s'invente sans cesse, et il faut souligner qu'elle se construit contre les représentations politiques antérieures, qui ne vont pas disparaître pour autant."

20 "subjectivation minoritaire".

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of *Retour à Reims* and *Dates de naissance*, Eribon achieves by a hybridisation of theoretical and autobiographical registers).

These considerations are as much political as they are poetical. The notion of a 'theory of the minor subject' also relates to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called "minor literature", a concept they developed through their engagement with the writings of Kafka.[21] The characteristics of minor literature outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, that is, "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (Deleuze/Guattari 1986: 18), also apply to autosociobiography; and this holds all the more true given that "minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature", that is, "popular literature, marginal literature, and so on" (Deleuze/Guattari 1986: 18). Linking autosociobiography to these considerations inscribes it into a broader phenomenon of literary forms in which the aesthetic and the socio-political are inextricably interwoven. For Deleuze and Guattari, "everything [...] is political" (1986: 17) in minor literature, in the sense that individual concerns are immediately tied to the overarching organisation of the social space; and "everything takes on a collective value" (1986: 17) due to the collective value of the literary enunciation and its community-building function.

What is more, minor literature opts for a language that showcases "its very poverty [...] to the point of sobriety" (Deleuze/Guattari 1986: 19). In this sphere, notions like 'truth' and 'the real' make a reappearance as political claims, but they are always located in individual positions, as Mario Laarmann has shown with his notion of "minor universalism", developed in the context to Caribbean literatures (see Laarmann 2023: 123). Here, "[t]ruth can no longer be found in universalist stances uttered from a presumably neutral position, but only in forms of situated, *minor* knowledge" (Laarmann 2023: 123). From an analogous perspective, Eribon pleads for a notion of the global that is not unifying, but leaves space for the specific: "[I]sn't it the sum of all these tensions, of all these processes of divergence, which, by making inward-looking globalisation

21 Eribon himself refers to Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* in his Essay "Politiques mineures", where he reflects on their idea of an unconscious structured by the social and the political (as opposed to oedipal symbolism), albeit without explicitly mentioning their theorems of minor literature (Eribon 2016: 182–3).

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impossible, will enable new voices, new words, new political subjects… to emerge?" (Eribon 2016: 52–3)[22]

To summarise, from the very beginning, Eribon's autosociobiographical works can be seen to go beyond the contexts into which they are normally inscribed, and to which they are sometimes reduced, namely the Franco-German literary discourse and the question of class relations. Autosociobiography, then, is always already global in several respects: first, by extending to other forms of social domination, whose mutual entanglement is a central concern, and second, because its theoretical and literary relations transcend the European context. As I hope to have shown, the engagement with these relations has had a crucial impact on autosociobiography. Regarding the case of Didier Eribon, autosociobiography is clearly the product of global entanglements – but is this conclusion transferable to other authors, too? One could argue that global historico-political relations of domination, and especially the (post-)colonial situation, have at the very least exerted an underlying influence on autosociobiography and the social theories it is based on – the fundamental importance of Bourdieu's experiences in Algeria for his sociological *œuvre* is just one of many possible examples (see Erdur 2024: 7). But those influences – pertaining, for instance, to language, literary forms, and the topics discussed – are very seldom explicit; they remain a presence at the margins. In my view, this dynamic has more to do with the mechanisms of literary reception in the 'world republic of letters' (see Casanova 2004) than with the authors' personal engagements as such. The position from which they write, albeit structured by the marginalising experience of class domination, is, in a global perspective, still a 'dominant' one, if for no other reason than that they hail from France, one of the literary (and economic) centres of the world.

If we keep in mind Eribon's conception of minor subjectivation when we attempt to map autosociobiography (as a genre) on a global scale, the question is not so much about appropriation or equalising various relations of domination. On the contrary: the engagement with other literary traditions and the links established with other forms of social marginalisation points to new ways of conceptualising critical thinking and literary writing as an emancipatory project – with all its divergences and indissoluble I mbalances of power.

22 "[N]'est-ce pas la somme de toutes ces tensions, de tous ces processus de divergence, qui, en rendant impossible la globalisation fermée sur elle-même, va permettre à de nouvelles voix, à de nouvelles paroles, à de nouveaux sujets politiques… d'émerger?"

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Towards an Intersectional Autosociobiography
Diversifying Perspectives on the Works of Annie Ernaux and Mely Kiyak

Thekla Noschka

Conceptual Limits of a "*genre in the making*"

Since the translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009), Édouard Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014) and Annie Ernaux's autobiographical works into German, there has been considerable discussion in Germany regarding a new "*genre in the making*" (Blome et al. 2022: 12, original emphasis) which blends autobiographical and sociological writing. In academic discourse, autobiographical texts have been increasingly regarded as falling under the umbrella of autosociobiography, either because they explicitly refer to the French trio, or because they resemble these 'founding texts' in their form and content. As outlined in the present volume's introduction, the categorisation of these autosociobiographies typically revolves around four criteria: the autobiographical portrayal of a *transclasse* character who recounts their origin from a working-class background (see Jaquet 2014; Blome 2020), an examination of social borders in neoliberal meritocracies (see Blome 2020; Spoerhase 2022; Steinmayr 2022), a sociological approach underpinned by intertextual references especially to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (see Farzin 2019; Reuter 2020) and the representation of an individual life path as emblematic of a collective destiny (see Reuter 2020; Lammers/Twellmann 2021; Amlinger 2022).

It has not gone unnoticed that the genre debate has its pitfalls; for instance, Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, and Sarah Seidel have warned that it is prone to "the dangers of discourse constitution and premature canonisation of literary

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processes" (Blome et al. 2022: 2).[1] The aforementioned list of criteria raises the question as to whether autosociobiography is an independent genre at all, or merely a specific "mode" of life writing.[2] One particularly critical aspect of the scholarly discussion so far is the tendency for these texts to be exclusively interpreted in the context of class dynamics, whereas the fact that the narrator's origin can also entail other social inequalities is often overlooked. Modalities of gender, in particular, are frequently downplayed to the extent that the literary phenomenon has been referred to as being "suspect of a male plot" (Blome et al. 2022: 10).[3] In her autobiographical study *Se ressaisir: Enquête autobiographique d'une transfuge de classe féministe* [Regaining control: an autobiographical investigation of a feminist class defector] (2021), Rose-Marie Lagrave, a renowned sociologist at the EHESS in Paris, has criticised this one-sided view of upward mobility. She expands Bourdieu's concept of a 'cleft habitus' (see Bourdieu 2002: 116–26), which Bourdieu uses to describe the inner conflict of not fully belonging to either the milieu of origin nor the milieu of arrival. According to Lagrave, many women in academia suffer from a double 'cleft habitus', as they are compelled to fight for their place in society twice – both as a *transclasse* and as a woman (see Lagrave 2021: 16–7). Philipp Lammers concludes that the contemplation about social structures within these texts is nuanced even more under gender aspects (Lammers 2022: 137). In addition to its perceived failure to address gendered modalities, the debate has also been accused of Eurocentric tendencies: Vanessa Thompson, for example, has drawn attention to gaps in relation to postcolonial configurations in Eribon's *Retour à Reims* and its reception (see Thompson 2020).

In light of these critiques, it seems obvious that what is called for is a more inclusive perspective on the object of study. Accordingly, I argue that 'origin' cannot be limited to 'class' in the sense of socio-economic conditions, but must also be examined with regard to other aspects such as migration, nation, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, and gender. Attending carefully to autosociobiography's engagement with social distinctions and power structures, the

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1 "Es lauern offensichtlich Gefahren der Diskursbegründung und vorschnellen Kanonisierung literarischer Formprozesse." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 This distinction comes from the anglophone discussion on autofictions and has been raised by Karen Ferreira-Myers and Myra Bloom, who consider autofiction a "'mode of writing' rather than a distinct genre" (Bloom 2019: 2).

3 "Darüber hinaus eröffnet diese *écriture féminine* der Autosoziobiographie auch Perspektiven auf ein Genre, das eines male plot verdächtig ist."

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present paper seeks to broaden the scholarly discourse by foregrounding questions of intersectionality in a very concrete sense: what intersectional entanglements characterise the various autobiographical stories, and how are they addressed in the respective texts? How does the narrative about class distinctions connect with reflections on other forms of discrimination such as racism and gender injustice? And can the genre discussion be expanded to include autobiographical texts in which power structures other than class dynamics assume a central role? In what follows, I will elaborate first on the conceptual need for an intersectional approach to autosociobiography before proceeding to a close reading of two especially pertinent works: *Les Années* (2008; *The Years*, 2017) by the above-mentioned French Nobel laureate Annie Ernaux and *Frausein* [Being woman] (2020) by the German-Turkish author Mely Kiyak.

Beyond Class: Thinking Autosociobiographies Intersectionally

> "If you're born poor you're fucked. But if you're born poor and a woman then you're genuinely and utterly fucked."
> — *Kerry Hudson (2019: 22)*

With these cutting words, Kerry Hudson's *Lowborn: Growing Up, Getting Away, and Returning to Britain's Poorest Towns* (2019) vividly portrays how poverty, when coupled with a female identity, gives rise to intersecting forms of discrimination. In the same vein, Marlen Hobrack shows in her text *Klassenbeste* [Top of class] (2022) that social origin cannot be viewed in isolation from other subject positions. Hobrack understands the individual as a subject characterised by its multidimensionality and writes: "The dimensions of class and identity cannot be separated in the sense of an isolated consideration of class position, gender, or origin; they overcode each other." (Hobrack 2022: 21)[4] Daniela Dröscher takes a similar position in her autobiographical work *Zeige deine Klasse* [Show your class] (2018):

> I am not only socialised as an 'upwardly mobile child' [Aufsteigerkind], but also as a woman and as the daughter of my 'foreign' mother. I therefore

4 "Die Dimensionen Klasse und Identität lassen sich nicht im Sinne einer gesonderten Betrachtung von Klassenlage, Geschlecht oder Herkunft trennen; sie übercodieren einander."

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> cannot help but to consider this knot of domination (Frigga Haug) of class, culture, and gender in its overlaps, given how tightly and seamlessly its strands seem to be sewn together. (Dröscher 2021: 28)[5]

Such reflections are not limited to these women writers – in *Retour à Reims*, for instance, the male 'founding figure' of autosociobiography, Didier Eribon, articulates the multidimensionality of the self by framing his social and educational ascent against the backdrop of his own homosexuality. Eribon's desire for upward mobility is significantly influenced by his experiences of homophobia in his adolescence. Bettina Kleiner argues therefore that *Retour à Reims* constitutes an attempt at an intersectional examination of masculinity, sexuality, and class relations (see Kleiner 2020: 49–50). Unsurprisingly, many authors depict their rise from humble origins against the backdrop of a multidimensional understanding of the self: Édouard Louis likewise foregrounds his homosexuality, Saša Stanišić negotiates his Bosnian origins, and Annie Ernaux and Rose Marie-Lagrave focus on gender aspects, as do Marlen Hobrack and Daniela Dröscher, whereas Hobrack deals with an East German perspective. Although the negotiation of class is a characteristic feature of almost all the texts currently assigned to the category of 'autosociobiography', their autobiographical self-reflection is never limited to this one aspect. Hence, the respective protagonists cannot be reduced to their social status, but are positioned within highly complex identities.

Furthermore, the chances for an individual's advancement by means of education is not solely governed by class-related experiences and socio-economic preconditions, but also by a myriad of other factors including gender, language, cultural origin, nationality, and health. According to Bettina Kleiner, autosociobiographies therefore point to the intersectional nature of western education systems: "Gender, social background, and natio-ethno-cultural affiliation influence such attributions of achievement and performances of achievement." (Kleiner 2020: 60)[6]

5 "Ich bin nicht nur als 'Aufsteigerkind' sozialisiert, sondern auch als Frau sowie als Tochter meiner 'fremden' Mutter. Ich kann deshalb nicht umhin, diesen Herrschaftsknoten (Frigga Haug) von Klasse, Kultur und Geschlecht in seinen Überlagerungen zu betrachten, so eng und nahtlos vernäht erscheinen mir die Stränge."

6 "Geschlecht, soziale Herkunft und natio-ethno-kulturelle Zugehörigkeit beeinflussen solche Leistungszuschreibungen und Performances von Leistung."

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Nevertheless, autosociobiographies are often primarily understood as 'class literature', which is in part due to a Marxist reading of the texts. The works of Ernaux, Eribon, and Louis, in particular, are interpreted as contributions to leftist class politics and attempts to give a voice to the exploited working class (see Steinmayr 2022; Kargl/Terrisse 2020). In this Marxist discourse, the so-called 'social question' takes precedence over other concerns. While Marxist perspectives concentrate on macro-political mechanisms of oppression in the economic system, proponents of identity politics regard class more as one empirical form of structural discrimination among many. This view is frequently criticised by Marxists, who argue that such an approach obscures a comprehensive critique of capitalism. Conversely, Marxists' approaches are often accused of failing to adequately address the diverse power structures within society (see Mendívil/Sarbo 2023: 109; Smith 2017).

Marlen Hobrack attempts to defuse this conflict, when she notes: "Neither a class perspective nor identity politics should be understood or instrumentalised as dogmas" (Hobrack 2022: 15).[7] In *Retour à Reims*, Didier Eribon also reflects on the tension between class and identity politics and questions their incompatibility:

> But why should we be obliged to choose between different struggles being fought against different kinds of domination? If it is the nature of our being that we are situated at the intersection of several collective determinations, and therefore of several 'identities', of several forms of subjection, why should it be necessary to set up one of them rather than another as the central focus of political preoccupation [...]? (Eribon 2013: 242)[8]

In her much-cited essay *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* (2014), Chantal Jaquet embraces the same notion when she argues that the hierarchisation of anticapitalist, (queer)feminist, or antiracist movements leads to blindness towards complex power systems (see Jaquet 2014: 228). Considering that such reflections are in fact an integral component of many autosociobiographical

7 "Weder eine Klassenperspektive noch eine Identitätspolitik sollten als Dogmen verstanden oder instrumentalisiert werden."

8 "Mais pourquoi nous faudrait-il choisir entre différents combats menés contre différentes modalités de la domination? Si ce que nous sommes se situe à l'intersection de plusieurs déterminations collectives, et donc de plusieurs ' identités', de plusieurs modalités de l'assujettissement, pourquoi faudrait-il instituer l'une plutôt que l'autre comme foyer central de la préoccupation politique [...]." (Eribon 2009: 245)

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texts, it is really quite striking that autosociobiographies have barely been examined from an intersectional angle: most studies that analyse autosociobiographical works under inclusion of identity dimensions other than class usually take Didier Eribon as their starting point and address aspects of sexual orientation or masculinity, whereas other key aspects of individual and collective identity formation tend to be underrepresented in the academic reception.[9]

A particularly promising way to grasp the plural structure of autosociobiographies is to deploy the concept of intersectionality. Since the US-American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term in 1989, numerous approaches from various academic disciplines have been summarised under this keyword. Intersectional research assumes that every individual is positioned at the 'intersection' of different categories of social inequality, which mutually reinforce one another.[10] The original triad of class, gender, and *race* has since been supplemented by numerous other parameters. According to Helma Lutz, these 'categories of difference' can be summarised along the lines of the basic dualism of 'dominated' and 'dominating', and describe power relations that reveal not only discrimination and disadvantages, but also privileges (Lutz/Leiprecht 2006: 219–21; see also Schnicke 2014).

As has frequently been pointed out, this comprehensive approach is difficult to apply in practice, as not all categories can be considered at the same time and the analysis necessarily remains fragmentary and incomplete. Furthermore, it carries the risk of fitting people into rigid schemata and playing the resulting classifications off against each other. Rather than simply establishing multiple discrete categories that compete for 'primacy' in a given context, it is therefore crucial to investigate their *combination* (see Schnicke 2014: 9; 17). An intersectional perspective does not, then, diminish class considerations, but allows us to see how this specific factor is inextricably entangled with other modes of social categorisation.

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9 A number of recent studies have addressed individual intersections such as those of class and gender (e.g., Rieske 2020; Lammers 2022; Ernst 2022), class and sexuality (Kalmbach/Kleinau/Völker 2020), and class and *race* (Thompson 2020), but to my knowledge, no comprehensive intersectional approach to autosociobiographical texts has yet been proposed.

10 These categories are socially constructed and (re-)produce power relations. Especially the category of *race* is subject to controversy, which is why I put the term in italics (see Ruth Mayer 2013: 632).

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In the field of literary studies, such entanglements can be identified, for example, through approaches of intersectional narratology,[11] in which narratological categories are examined for intersections. Using this approach, not only motifs, characters, and plot patterns (*story*) can be viewed intersectionally, but also the narrative mood, focalisation, and perspectivisation (*discourse*). Thinking the question "Who speaks?" or "Who represents whom?" intersectionally thus makes it possible to draw general conclusions regarding textual spaces of representation. It is from this vantage point that I will now examine Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* and Mely Kiyak's *Frausein*, both of which, I contend, incorporate a broad variety of social, cultural, and gender-specific perspectives that go beyond the consideration of class issues and represent complex social realities.

"A woman's destiny": Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* as a Female Generational Portrait

Annie Ernaux occupies a special position in the debate on autosociobiographies, as the Nobel Prize winner is often considered the founder of the literary phenomenon. Ernaux's own poetological reflections play an important role in the interpretation of her writing: she repeatedly refers to herself as an "ethnologue de soi-même" (Ernaux 1997: 38), and in *Vers un je transpersonnel* (1993), *L'écriture comme un couteau* (2003), and *Raisons d'écrire* (2009) she clarifies her sociological ambitions. With her idea of a 'transpersonal I', she attempts to situate singular, individual experiences within a larger, socio-historically relevant context, lending them a collective dimension (Ernaux 2003: 80-1). Furthermore, Ernaux's working-class background runs like a common thread through her entire *œuvre*, as do the painful recollections of class difference and the social shame she feels as a self-identified "transfuge de classe" (see Ernaux 2003: 77; Charpentier 1999; Hechler 2022).

However, the academic focus on class neglects essential aspects of the author's work. Ernaux also writes about numerous other topics that can be summarised as experiences of female subjectivity. Heike Ina Kuhl asserts that this

11 Intersectional narratology can be considered a development of feminist narratology and gender-oriented narratology. For an overview, see the anthology *Intersectionality and Narratology. Methods – Concepts – Analyses* (Klein/Schnicke 2014; see also Nünning 2004).

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sets Ernaux's writings apart from other 'class literature': "The female context makes Annie Ernaux' work exceptional, since the remainder of the related fiction focuses on male life stories" (Kuhl 2001: 5).[12] Kuhl further argues that Ernaux's gender-specific life experience inevitably shapes the worldview of her characters, who have to cope with specifically 'female' issues, such as pregnancy and abortion (Kuhl 2001: 5). Siobhán McIlvanney also points out that Ernaux primarily conceives characters "which [...] center on both working-class and gynocentric concerns" (McIlvanney 2001: 2). Lyn Thomas confirms this view when she writes: "In Ernaux' work, sexuality, gender and class are inextricably linked" (Thomas 2006: 163). In light of these observations, an intersectional interpretation of Ernaux's *œuvre* is highly compelling.

Ernaux's *Les Années*, first published in 2009 and translated into German in 2017 – right after Eribon's literary success – is considered her most successful title and significantly shaped the academic discussion around autosociobiography in Germany. In *Les Années*, Ernaux recounts her life along certain biographical milestones, describing her childhood in the post-war period, adolescence in the small Norman town of Yvetot, and years of self-doubt in university before proceeding to her everyday life as a Parisian teacher, wife, mother, grandmother, and ageing woman. *Les Années* not only archives the stages of Ernaux's personal life, but also depicts French society from the 1940s to the year 2006: by weaving political events, popular expressions, and pop-cultural phenomena of each decade into her narrative, the author consistently embeds her perspective as an individual within a wider historical and political context.

In addition to Ernaux's portrayal of upward social mobility, it is above all this social impetus that has repeatedly prompted the classification of *Les Années* as an autosociobiography (see Reuter 2020: 106-7). This perception is supported by an unusual and complex narrative situation: despite its unmistakable autobiographical character, *Les Années* is not a classic autobiographical first-person narrative; instead, the protagonist is described in the third person singular with the pronoun *elle* ('she'). Furthermore, this biographical *elle* dissolves into the use of the impersonal French pronoun *on* ('one') or a collective *nous* ('we'). Not only are these pronouns used to capture time-specific moods, trends, and conventions, but they also serve to generalise singular experiences. Ernaux thus raises her individual recollections to a collective

12 "Der weibliche Kontext der Thematik macht Annie Ernaux' Werk zu einer Besonderheit, da sich die übrige diesbezügliche Belletristik auf männliche Lebensläufe bezieht [...]."

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level, as explained in a metatextual reflection towards the end of the book: "By retrieving the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, she will capture the lived dimension of History." (Ernaux 2023: 222)[13]

However, a closer intersectional analysis of the impersonal pronouns *on* and *nous* makes it clear that this collective memory can by no means be understood as generic and universal, but is in fact highly specific and addresses a specific reference group. This group is primarily defined by its belonging to a certain generation, those born in the 1940s, by distinguishing it from other generations:

> The media divided time into the jé-jé years, the hippie and the AIDS years. It divided people into generations. De Gaulle, Mitterrand, '68, the baby boomers, the digital generation. We belonged to all and none. Our years were nowhere among them. (Ernaux 2023: 209)[14]

Belonging to this generation goes hand in hand with an ageing process that includes reflections on remembering, as well as an engagement with one's own mortality. While the very first sentence of *Les années* addresses the transience of individual memories with the words "All the images will disappear" (Ernaux 2023: 11),[15] the final sentence expresses a sentiment that is diametrically opposed to this sense of vanishing: "To save something from the time where we will never be again." (225)[16] *Les années* can therefore be understood as an attempt to capture a shared cultural memory for a specific generation through a process of collectivisation.

That said, the collective reference group is also differentiated by other parameters. First, the generalising *on* provides a perspective on the social milieu in which the protagonist moves. At the beginning of the book, Ernaux explores the "simple conditions" from which she originates. The post-war years in which

13 "Ce que ce monde a imprimé en elle et ses contemporains, elle s'en servira pour reconstituer un temps commun, [...] pour, en retrouvant la mémoire de la mémoire collective dans une mémoire individuelle, rendre la dimension vécue de l'Histoire." (Ernaux 2008: 239)

14 "Ils découpaient le temps en années yéyés, baba cool, sida, divisaient les gens en générations de Gaulle, Mitterrand, 68, baby-boom, numérique. On était de toutes et d'aucune. Nos années à nous n'étaient pas là." (Ernaux 2008: 225)

15 "Toutes les images disparaîtront." (Ernaux 2008: 11)

16 "Sauver quelque chose du temps où l'on ne sera plus jamais" (Ernaux 2008: 242).

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the protagonist grows up are described as poor and deprived. In several passages, the social status of her parents is primarily characterised by a lack of possessions:

> Nothing was thrown away. The contents of chamber pots were used for garden fertilizer, the dung of passing horses collected for potted plants. Newspaper was used for wrapping vegetables, drying shoes, wiping one's bottom on the lavatory. (Ernaux 2023: 37)[17]

In her youth, the protagonist experiences a change of class. Thanks to her good grades and a scholarship programme, she gains the desired access to university. This marks the beginning of a process of "intellectual gentrification" which involves "breaking with her origins" (Ernaux 2023: 113):[18] after a visit to her parents, she realises that she has "gone over to the other side" (82)[19].

In addition to this educational development associated with a detachment from her parental home, the protagonist undergoes a fundamental politicisation during her studies, embracing socialist perspectives and left-wing academic conventions:

> We who had remained with the Parti Socialiste Unifié to change society now discovered the Maoists and Trotskyists, a vast quantity of ideas and concepts surfacing all at once. Movements, books and magazines popped up everywhere, along with philosophers, critics, and sociologists: Bourdieu, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, Baudrillard, Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, *Tel Quel*, structural analysis, narratology, ecology. (Ernaux 2023: 100)[20]

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17 "Rien ne se jetait. Les seaux de nuit servaient d'engrais au jardin, le crottin ramassé dans la rue après le passage d'un cheval à l'entretien des pots de fleurs, le journal à envelopper les légumes, sécher l'intérieur des chaussures mouillées, s'essuyer aux cabinets." (Ernaux 2008: 39)

18 "embourgeoisement intellectuel" and "rupture avec son monde d'origine" (Ernaux 2008: 117).

19 "Elle est passée de l'autre côté […]." (Ernaux 2008: 87)

20 "Nous qui en étions restés au PSU pour changer la société, on découvrait les maos, les trotskistes, une énorme quantité d'idées et de concepts d'un seul coup au grand jour. Sortaient de partout des mouvements, des livres et des revues, des philosophes, critiques, sociologues: Bourdieu, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, Baudrillard, Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, *Tel Quel*, l'analyse structurale, la narratologie, l'écologie." (Ernaux 2008: 106)

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The fact that the protagonist positions herself to the left of the political spectrum is also evident from her attitude towards the numerous historical events referred to in the text: she experiences the election of the socialist presidential candidate François Mitterrand in 1981 as a liberation and sympathises with various communist movements. On the narrative level, too, the use of the personal pronouns *on* and *nous* establishes an affiliation with this reference group of politically like-minded individuals, positioning the collective 'we' within a distinct political horizon. This self-placement is complemented by a bourgeois-intellectual lifestyle, characterised by various status symbols that indicate cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1983: 231-7): the single-family house in the wealthy outskirts of Paris, contemporary furnishings, a 'tasteful' clothing style, bookshelves loaded with representative significance. The collective 'we' thus refers not only to a specific generation, but also, as a result of the protagonist's social ascent, to the bourgeois habitus of a left-leaning intellectual elite.

Although the narrative doesn't explicitly address the fact that it also involves a *White* social class, the socio-cultural context allows clear conclusions to be drawn. Political events such as the Algerian War and debates on migration are repeatedly framed from a non-migrant perspective. In numerous passages, the narrator looks 'from the outside' at migrant individuals, as in this passage about the residents of Parisian working-class suburbs, situated in the mid-1980s:

> The 'intercultural dialogue' boiled down to an appropriation of their way of speaking, an aping of their accent, reversing letters and syllables as they did, saying *meuf* for *femme* and *tarpé* for *pétard* (joint). They had been given a collective name, *les Beurs*, which referred all at once to their origins, skin colour and way of speaking [...]. There were a lot of them; we didn't know them. (Ernaux 2023: 139)[21]

In this quote, the generalising 'we' is constructed in opposition to "*les Beurs*", a colloquial and derogatory term for French citizens whose parents or grand-

21 "Le 'dialogue des cultures' se résumait à s'approprier leur parler et à singer leur accent, à inverser les lettres et les syllabes comme eux, dire une meuf et un tarpé. Ils avaient reçu un nom collectif qui signifiait tout à la fois leur origine, leur couleur de peau et leur façon de parler: les Beurs. [...] Ils étaient nombreux, on ne les connaissait pas." (Ernaux 2008: 155)

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parents originated from North Africa.[22] This juxtaposition of 'us' and 'them' establishes a dichotomy between two ethnic groups, effectively conceptualising the text's 'we' as a *White* collective. At the same time, the narrator's use of the collective pronoun suggests that what is being described is the dominant narrative in the overarching historical context. By evaluating narratives of this type as dangerous or by employing distancing elements such as the subjunctive, the narrator subsequently problematises them; and although the protagonist's own privileges based on ethnicity and skin colour are not explicitly acknowledged, the subtext is clear.

Annie Ernaux's specific conception of the generic *on* becomes most apparent through the category of gender. The narrator consistently addresses questions of gender and sexuality. The protagonist's childhood and adolescence is determined by traditional role models and rigid Catholic morals, which are imposed with particular severity on girls and women. In the context of autosociobiographies, it seems remarkable that the traditional role models and gender-specific expectations of the 1940s and 1950s are portrayed as the major driving force behind the protagonist's social advancement. Similar to Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* and Édouard Louis' *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, where homophobic experiences are described as a key impetus for fleeing one's hometown, the protagonist in *Les années* hopes to emancipate herself from dictated norms of femininity by moving away. She not only associates her studies with the opportunity to be better off financially, but also as a chance to escape traditional gender roles:

> It seems to her that education is more than just a way to escape poverty. It is a weapon of choice against stagnation in a kind of feminine condition that arouses her pity, the tendency to lose oneself in a man, which she has experienced (cf. the school photo from five years before) and of which she is ashamed. She feels no desire to marry or have children. Mothering and the life of the mind seem incompatible. (Ernaux 2023: 83)[23]

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22 The term *Beur* comes from the youth language Verlan and is formed by reversing the syllables of the word *arabe*. It has since been partly superseded by the double inversion *rebeu*, which is still criticised as stigmatising.

23 "Plus encore qu'un moyen d'échapper à la pauvreté, les études lui paraissent l'instrument privilégié de lutte contre l'enlisement de ce féminin qui lui inspire de la pitié, cette tentation qu'elle a connue de se perdre dans un homme (see photo de lycée, cinq ans avant), dont elle a honte. Aucune envie de se marier ni d'avoir des enfants, le maternage et la vie de l'esprit lui semblent incompatibles." (Ernaux 2008: 88)

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The gender roles of Annie Ernaux's home environment thus play a crucial role in the pursuit of social ascent, proving to be just as significant as her protagonist's will to escape from material deprivation. This link between class and gender is reinforced by the recurring motif of shame, a shame that not only concerns class, as is often assumed, but also sexuality and womanhood: "She is unwilling to say her parents run a café-épicerie, ashamed that she is haunted by food, that her period has stopped, that she doesn't know the meaning of *hypokhâgne*, that she wears an imitation suede jacket." (Ernaux 2023: 73)[24] Specifically female issues are mentioned here in the same breath as the protagonist's economic circumstances and her lack of connections to the French higher education system. Feelings of shame also accompany her sexual development, which takes place in secret. The young woman is constantly worried about pregnancy; contraception and abortion are omnipresent subjects. Recalling these memories, the narrator combines individual and collective experiences by using the generic *on*, which, in a passage referring to the *Manifeste des 343*, is revealed as a stand-in for 'women':

> We would not remember the day or the month, only that it was spring and that we had read in *Le Nouvel Observateur* the names of 343 women who stated they'd had illegal abortions – so many, yet we'd been so alone with the probe and the spurting blood. (Ernaux 2023: 105)[25]

A remark in which the narrator differentiates between poor and rich women, the latter of whom could obtain an abortion in Switzerland, further highlights the distinct interdependencies of gender and class in this context, framing illegal abortion as a class-specific traumatic experience (Ernaux 2023: 82).

Gender-related issues continue to play a significant role in the final quarter of *Les Années*, in which the protagonist reflects on the compatibility of work and family life as a mother and wife. The ageing female body is another prominent subject: for example, Annie Ernaux thematises menopause and breast cancer,

24 "Elle a honte d'être hantée par la nourriture, de ne plus avoir ses règles, de ne pas savoir ce qu'est une hypokhâgne, de porter une veste en suédine et non en vrai daim." (Ernaux 2008: 77)

25 "On ne se souviendrait ni du jour ni du mois – mais c'était le printemps –, seulement qu'on avait lu tous les noms, du premier au dernier, des 343 femmes – elles étaient si nombreuses et on avait été si seule avec la sonde et le sang en jet sur les draps – qui déclaraient avoir avorté illégalement, dans *Le Nouvel Observateur*." (Ernaux 2008: 111)

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an affliction "that seems to burgeon in the breasts of all women her age" (Ernaux 2023: 218).[26] Crucially, these topics are not negotiated in the form of individual experiences, but described as emblematic of the ageing of an entire generation of women.

In summary, we can conclude that *Les Années* explicitly foregrounds the aspect of gender through the format of collective biography. Annie Ernaux's concern is to depict a specific generation of women, sharing their memories of past gender dynamics, misogynistic restrictions, and feminist emancipation, and thereby writing what the text itself refers to as "a kind of woman's destiny" (Ernaux 2023: 148).[27] As far as the *story* is concerned, Annie Ernaux deploys numerous motifs that are explicitly linked to the female body, such as gender roles, sexual desire, menstruation, abortion, motherhood, care work, and breast cancer. On the level of *discourse*, meanwhile, the focalised *elle* repeatedly expands into a collective *on* or *nous* that denotes a female collective. As Sarah Carlotta Hechler has astutely pointed out, the impersonal *elle* of the narrative thus entails a "quality of her existence interchangeable with that of other women of her generation" (Hechler 2020).[28]

The collective potential of the text is primarily enabled by a specific combination of experiences shaped by class, *race*, gender, and generation. Isabelle Charpentier even sees in *Les Années* a form of a "social destiny of a social class, a generation and a generation of women" (Charpentier 2014: 90).[29] All told, *Les Années* does not merely present a generic panorama of society as a whole, as has often been claimed, but weaves diverse subject dispositions into a specific and multi-layered collective portrait.

26 "cancer qui semblait s'éveiller dans le sein de toutes les femmes de son âge" (Ernaux 2008: 235).

27 "Parce que dans sa solitude retrouvée elle découvre des pensées et des sensations que la vie en couple obnubile, l'idée lui est venue d'écrire 'une sorte de destin de femme' entre 1940 et 1985, quelque chose comme *Une vie de Maupassant*, qui ferait ressentir le passage du temps en elle et hors d'elle, dans l'Histoire [...]." (Ernaux 2008: 158)

28 "une qualité interchangeable de son existence avec celle d'autres femmes issues de sa génération."

29 "une forme de destin social épistémique à la fois d'une classe sociale, d'une génération et d'une génération de femmes"

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"I'm one of those Ali daughters": *Frausein* as a Migrant *Transclasse* Story

In contrast to the frequently discussed *Les Années*, Mely Kiyak's *Frausein* [Being woman][30], published by Hanser Verlag in 2020, has not yet been examined in the context of autosociobiography. Kiyak chronicles her childhood in Germany as the daughter of Turkish-Kurdish migrant workers, her adolescence between two countries, and the arduous path towards establishing herself as a writer. As the book's title suggests, Kiyak primarily addresses questions pertaining to womanhood. However, her social and educational background likewise play an important role in her autobiographical writing.

Frausein is designed as an autodiegetic first-person narrative. The frame story is formed by the author's eye disease, which results in an almost complete loss of sight. Based on the traumatic experience of nearly going blind, the first-person narrator describes memories from her childhood and youth in retrospective analepses. The opening sections of the book delve into the narrator's origins in the northern German city of Sulingen: her mother is a cleaner in the local courthouse, while her father works shifts in a factory. The labour not only allows the narrator's parents to provide financially for their family, but it is also closely linked to their residence status: they are *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) who came to West Germany in the 1970s in the wake of the country's recruitment agreement with their native Turkey. The parents' social position has a major impact on their views regarding the education of their daughter: "In the family, the instruction was to leave the world of the parents. You were supposed to move up and be better off" (Kiyak 2021: 29).[31] Encouraged by her loving parents, the protagonist starts university after graduating from secondary school. She is the first in the family to study. As in the autosociobiographies of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis, Mely Kiyak's 'educational success' is described as a process that goes hand in hand with a certain alienation from the family environment. Access to university occasions momentous shifts in the relationships between family members:

> My entry into the university means admiration, prestige, pride, and exclusion. A very distant relative announces: You are no longer one of us. She

30 The book has not yet been translated into English.

31 "In der Familie galt die Anweisung, die Lebenswelt der Eltern zu verlassen. Man soll aufsteigen und es besser haben."

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> means it as a compliment. Of course I'm one of you, I try to negotiate my way back into the bosom of the family in horror. You ought to be glad, she said, you're something better now, I wish I was in your place. (Kiyak 2021: 82)[32]

Moreover, the path of education itself turns out to be rocky: the young woman feels out of place at university, drops out, and finally applies to study creative writing in Leipzig. She experiences many barriers in accessing the cultural sphere: "The term *literary industry* [Literaturbetrieb][33] put me back into my place. A place with the people for whom industry [Betrieb] is synonymous with noisy, smelly machinery spaces and working in shifts." (Kiyak 2021: 95)[34] These obstacles notwithstanding, Kiyak eventually undergoes a change of milieu with her studies and subsequent success as an author and journalist.

But it is not only this upward social mobility that allows for clear parallels to be drawn with the abovementioned autosociobiographies. The collective and socially critical dimension of *Frausein*, which Kiyak explains in a metatextual passage about her writing, also speaks to the spirit of the *transclasse* genre:

> My experiences accidentally turned my writing into political writing. It wasn't something I set out to do. Writing happens in the hope of realising something. Writing is sorting and making visible, an attempt to establish a relationship between oneself and the world. (Kiyak 2021: 103)[35]

It is precisely this "relationship between oneself and the world" that runs like a common thread through Kiyak's literary self-exploration. Based on her own

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32 "Mein Eintritt in die Universität bedeutet Bewunderung, Ansehen, Stolz und Ausgrenzung. Eine sehr entfernte Verwandte verkündet: Du bist keine mehr von uns. Sie meint das als Kompliment. Natürlich bin ich eine von euch, versuche ich mich entsetzt in den Familienschoß zurück zu verhandeln. Sei doch froh, sagte sie, du bist jetzt etwas Besseres, ich wäre gerne an deiner Stelle."

33 "Literaturbetrieb" refers to the literary and cultural sector, while the term "Betrieb" invokes a factory or company setting.

34 "Das Wort *Literaturbetrieb* verwies mich zurück auf meinen Platz. Ein Platz bei jenen Leuten, wo Betrieb das Synonym für einen Maschinenraum mit Lärm, Gestank und Schichtsystem ist."

35 "Meine Erfahrungen machten aus Versehen aus meinem Schreiben ein politisches Schreiben. Das war nichts, das ich mir vornahm. Schreiben geschieht in der Hoffnung, dass man etwas erkennt. Schreiben ist Sortieren und Sichtbarmachen und der Versuch, sich in ein Verhältnis zur Welt zu setzen."

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experiences, the narrator compares herself with (supposedly) normative values and social stereotypes. In this process, she also situates herself in a collective frame of reference: the daughters of German-Turkish *Gastarbeiter*.

Kiyak's *transclasse* story cannot be imagined without her parents' migration from Turkey. In this case, 'origin' not only has a class-political dimension, but is also closely linked to ethnic, cultural, and religious factors. Accordingly, the text foregrounds the economic status of the protagonist and her family, but also their experiences of discrimination and the lack of permeability of German social hierarchies. In no uncertain terms, the narrator criticises how *Gastarbeiter* and subsequent generations of migrants are persistently sequestered to their 'social place': "From the perspective of German society, one is expected to remain who and, above all, where one is." (Kiyak 2021: 29)[36] To further illustrate this social hierarchisation, Kiyak draws on the example of Günter Wallraff, a German journalist who, over the course of two years, posed as a Turkish casual labourer by the name of Ali Levent Sinirlioğlu in order to document the abject living conditions of migrant workers in his book *Ganz unten* (1983, *Lowest of the Low* 1988). Here, too, the narrator's commentary is sharp-tongued:

> Although Wallraff himself came from a working-class background, he was so shocked by the humiliations he experienced that he did not call his book *low, half-low,* or *middle-low*, but: *lowest of the low*. We were assigned to the very bottom. Someone had dressed up as 'us', simulated our lives, and reported about it. (Kiyak 2021: 17)[37]

Even as a young girl, the protagonist realises that Wallraff has described her own situation: "One read, marvelled, and had to digest: I am one of those Ali daughters. The insignificant child of insignificant parents." (Kiyak 2021: 17)[38] By using the impersonal pronoun *man* ('one') – again, much like Ernaux – Kiyak indicates that this is a shared experience. At the same time, her protagonist resents the fact that the living conditions of her community are narrated by a

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36 "Aus Sicht der deutschen Gesellschaft soll man bleiben, wer und vor allem wo man ist."

37 "Obwohl Wallraff selbst aus kleinen Verhältnissen kam, entsetzten ihn die erlebten Erniedrigungen derart, dass er sein Buch nicht *unten, halbunten oder mittelunten* nannte, sondern: *Ganz unten*. Wir wurden am niedrigsten Punkt verortet. Jemand hatte sich als 'wir' verkleidet, unser Leben simuliert und mitgeteilt."

38 "Man las, staunte und hatte zu verdauen: Ich bin eine dieser Ali-Töchter. Das unbedeutende Kind unbedeutender Eltern."

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non-member. Through the juxtaposition of 'we' and 'someone', she differentiates between social groups and positions herself within the reference group of migrant workers, with the reflexive pronoun 'us' in the second sentence further emphasising this sense of communal consciousness. Later, the collective 'we' is specified by distinguishing between the generation of the parents and that of their descendants born in Germany:

> Suddenly, all the toil of the guest worker generation made sense. At one stroke, the entire pain and humiliation were paid off, because we, the daughters, turned the hardships of our ancestors into gold. […] The rise of their daughters compensated them for everything. (Kiyak 2021: 32)[39]

This 'we' not only encompasses the social status of a second-generation migrant, but also the aspect of gender. At many points, there is explicit mention of *Gastarbeitertöchter* (daughters of guest workers), and social mobility is considered chiefly from a female perspective. Issues of gender, class, and *race* also intersect in the narrator's statement that "[b]eing a cleaner is the reference point for everything" (Kiyak 2021: 41).[40] Poorly esteemed and poorly paid, this occupation is presented as a powerful impetus for striving 'upwards' and hence as a motor for educational success. A similar intersectional entanglement becomes manifest in the feelings of shame experienced by the young female protagonist: "I am embarrassed. I am embarrassed of my origins, my family, my body, my inaptitude, my fears, the lack of words, the emptiness, my desire, of absolutely everything." (Kiyak 2021: 75–6)[41] As in *Les Années*, social, cultural, and sexual shame merge in a general lack of self-esteem.

The discrimination experienced by the protagonist's community only adds to her feeling of unease. Like many daughters of guest workers, she develops a sense of belonging neither in Germany nor in Turkey: "We were outsiders in every way. In the new homeland and in the old homeland. By origin, lan-

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39 "Auf einmal ergaben sämtliche Mühen der Gastarbeitergeneration Sinn. Alle Schmerzen und Demütigungen waren auf einen Schlag abgegolten, weil wir, die Töchter, die Strapazen unserer Vorfahren in Gold verwandelten. […] Der Aufstieg ihrer Töchter entschädigte sie für alles."

40 "Das Putzfrausein ist der Referenzpunkt für alles."

41 "Ich geniere mich. Geniere mich für meine Herkunft, für meine Familie, für meinen Körper, für mein Unvermögen, meine Ängste, für die fehlenden Worte, die Leere, meine Begierde, für einfach alles."

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guage, and also religion." (Kiyak 2021: 89)[42] Bourdieu's notion of a 'cleft habitus' could be expanded here to include cultural, national, religious, and ethnic affiliations. Analogous to the figure of the *transclasse*, those affected find themselves in a painful in-between: the social system makes it difficult for them to fully integrate into their new environment. At the same time, they do not feel like a complete part of their society of origin.

As the narrative progresses, however, a process of emancipation is outlined by which the protagonist increasingly frees herself from social constraints. The question of what kind of woman's life she wants to live becomes increasingly urgent. Unlike those around her, the protagonist decides against pursuing the kind of family life in which her job would play a subordinate role. In writing, she finds the independence for which she has long yearned. Detaching herself from external attributions empowers her to say 'I' and to tell her story. *Frausein* therefore does not simply narrate a *transclasse* story, but above all describes a process of emancipation from multiple, intersecting social constraints.

No surprise, then, that the narrative of 'educational success' is questioned towards the end of the book:

> Making it. I can't hear it anymore. You're always supposed to achieve something. And when you are where you're supposed to be, what happens next? What about dignity? Why doesn't female dignity play a role? Why did no daughter of a foreign cleaning lady dare to show the dignity of her path, to talk about it? The dignity of failure, of insecurity, of endless fear. The dignity of not being seen. The dignity of shame. This isn't a glamorous story, not a story of ascent, but one of descent into hidden corners. (Kiyak 2021: 117)[43]

In *Frausein*, Mely Kiyak thus demonstrates that the autosociobiographical narrative of ascent can follow a trajectory that is anything but straightforward.

42 "Wir waren in jeder Hinsicht Draußenstehende. In der neuen Heimat und in der alten Heimat. Durch Herkunft, Sprache und auch Religion."

43 "Es schaffen. Ich kann das nicht mehr hören. Immer soll man etwas schaffen. Und wenn man da ist, wo man hinsollte, was kommt dann? Was ist mit der Würde? Warum spielt die weibliche Würde keine Rolle? Warum traute sich keine Tochter einer ausländischen Putzfrau, die Würde ihres Weges zu zeigen, darüber zu sprechen? Die Würde des Scheiterns, der Unsicherheit, der unendlichen Angst. Die Würde des Nichtgesehenwerdens. Die Würde der Scham. Das ist keine Glanzgeschichte, keine Geschichte von Aufstieg, sondern eine vom Abstieg in verborgene Winkel."

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Although Kiyak's milieu of origin is thematised as the starting point, the narrated life path cannot be thought of as one-dimensional – rather, factors such as ethnic origin, womanhood, illness, and authorship are just as significant as class considerations. From this perspective, *Frausein* is first and foremost a story of emancipation. Yet it is precisely the "hidden corners", the personal anecdotes and complex entanglements, that lend this autobiographical self-exploration its specific shape. I therefore concur with Alexandra Senfft when she argues that *Frausein* shows "that identity is not a fixed, immutable entity, but the result of emancipatory processes that operate between the poles of contradictions in the face of which clichés and prejudices collapse." (Senfft 2020)[44]

Concluding Remarks

Over the course of my examination of Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* and Mely Kiyak's *Frausein*, it has become evident that an intersectional reading is fundamental to understanding these texts: *Les Années* must be read as a *White* female generational portrait, and *Frausein* can only be understood in the context of German-Turkish *Gastarbeitertöchter*. In both narratives, it is precisely the intersections of gender, *race*, and class that not only structure the experience of social mobility, but crucially *shape* the desire for 'social ascent'. As I hope to have shown, these interdependencies are integral to the personal and social emancipation of the protagonists; they influence their opportunities, ambitions and life paths.

The application of an intersectional methodology undoubtedly presents problems – be it with regard to the mapping of analytical categories onto literary texts, the definition of the categories themselves, or the impossibility of considering all such categories simultaneously. Nevertheless, the underlying concept of differentiated subjects not only helps to grasp the complexity of texts summarised under the label of autosociobiography, but it also calls into question their simplistic labelling as 'class literature'. The one-sided celebration of these texts in existing scholarship and the German cultural feuilleton

44 "Anhand ihrer eigenen Biografie zeigt Kiyak, dass Identität keine feststehende, unveränderbare Entität ist, sondern das Ergebnis emanzipatorischer Prozesse, die sich im Spannungsfeld von Widersprüchen bewegen, denen gegenüber Klischees und Vorurteile in sich zusammenbrechen."

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as important contributions to class politics should therefore be viewed with caution and replaced with a more nuanced assessment.

Just how productive a broadening of the critical horizon can be, has already been demonstrated in Kalmbach et al.'s *Eribon revisited* (2020), a volume that engages thoroughly with aspects of gender and sexuality and places a special focus on the role of affects like shame. Another intriguing exploration was undertaken by Christina Ernst in her article "*Transclasse* und *transgenre*: Autoziobiographische Schreibweisen bei Paul B. Preciado und Jayrôme C. Robinet" (2022), in which she applies the aspect of the *transclasse* experience to two texts that describe a gender transition and criticise social constructions of gender within Western societies. While both these publications constitute a significant move away from a one-dimensional understanding of the genre, an intersectional perspective goes even further by opening up the genre discussion to queerfeminist and post-migrant perspectives. As I have shown with my reading of Mely Kiyak's *Frausein*, such an approach makes it possible to discuss texts under the label of autosociobiography that have not previously been considered within this theoretical framework. Such an intersectional approach brings us closer to appreciating the full complexity of narratives about origin and 'social ascent' and to questioning these concepts at the same time.

Hence, in keeping with the express intention of this volume, we should be mindful of the criteria according to which some texts are perceived as autosociobiographical whereas others are not. This necessarily involves a critical reflection of the researcher's own role in the 'doing' of genre. Assigning the term autosociobiography – in the sense of a synthesis of autobiographical and social-analytical writing – only to those texts that address class can lead to problematic exclusions and entails a questionable hierarchisation of socio-political concerns. In this context, it is also important to examine how this literary phenomenon can be meaningfully differentiated from other autobiographical forms of life writing (especially those established by women) such as autofiction or autotheory. Against this backdrop, an expanded intersectional research perspective can help to counteract the premature canonisation of autosociobiography and to question its definitional framework.

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Reading across Borders

Autosociobiography and Dalit Autobiography at the Intersections of Class, Caste, and Gender

Mrunmayee Sathye

Not even a decade after the German translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* was released to great success (Suhrkamp 2016), academics at German universities – especially those invested in interdisciplinary connections between sociology and literary studies – are busy writing and publishing critical texts on what is being established as the 'autosociobiographical genre'. The impulse on the part of scholarly readers to name this rather stimulating corpus of research objects – which, as of now, has mostly been restricted to some constellation of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis, perhaps extending to Daniela Dröscher and Christian Baron on the German side – is understandable; the question I am concerned with in this article, however is whether that impulse is ultimately enough to carry the newly minted terminology beyond the scope of two Western European countries with similar political problems and social structures.

With that question in mind, I would like to contrast the discourse around autosociobiography with another corpus – a 'sub-genre', if you will – of autobiographical writing from South Asia, namely the field of Dalit autobiography, dynamically positioned between questions of caste and its entanglements with class, gender, sexuality, and location. Dalit life writing since the 1970s necessarily navigates and deconstructs caste as "a system of both production and reproduction" (Mani 2005: 28). This holds especially true for Dalit women's autobiographies, which are powerfully anchored at the crossroads of the "caste-feudal conjoint system of caste-class-patriarchy" (Velaskar, 2016: 408). Taking Urmila Pawar's 2003 Marathi text *Aaydan*, translated into English by Maya Pandit and published as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) as a case study, I wish to investigate how individual and collective identity, social

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mobility and political agency, and multiple and fragmented selves are posited in differing ways in Dalit autobiographies, and what turns a set of texts into a genre-defining corpus.

The main aim of this paper is to highlight both the parallels and the differences between the two 'genres' at hand (autosociobiography and Dalit autobiography) by investigating their workings on the literary and socio-political levels, while also critically examining the repercussions of genre-building practices, especially in the field of autobiography studies.

Auto-socio-bio-graphy

It will be interesting to begin by listing some of the main features which have been identified as characteristic of autosociobiography, setting the texts which constitute its corpus apart from other instances, movements, and sub-genres of autobiographical writing. Some of these features have already been mapped out by the editors in the introduction to this anthology, but I would like to recapitulate and interpret them here with the context of this article in mind. While there is both a significant body of working-class autobiographies dealing with class subjectivity, experience, and consciousness across literary cultures and a rich tradition of autobiography research engaging with it,[1] the transdisciplinary interplay of sociology and literature that characterises Ernaux's and Eribon's style of writing has encouraged contemporary scholars to study them as more or less distinct from that history.

The autosociobiographical corpus is heavily reliant upon the motif of class borders, in that the narrative revolves around the crossing of this social and spatial border by the individual narrator. The experience of upward social mobility via education leads the narrator to leave their milieu of origin and become what Chantal Jacquet terms a *transclasse* – indeed, the first traversal of sociocultural boundaries in the narrative tends to be just such a *Klassenwechsel*. Furthermore, autosociobiographies employ the traditional narrative model of *nostos* or homecoming, in that they depict a "second border crossing movement homewards in physical space, or they capture the act of remembering as a mental homecoming: having experienced a transformation, the protago-

1 See, for example, the studies authored by John Burnett, Stuart Laing, Paul Lauter, Sara Richardson, Regenia Gagnier, Carolyn Steedman, and Helga Schwalm.

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nist embarks on a return and experiences a sense of foreignness" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 50).

Scholarly engagements with the corpus name the rehabilitation of class as a category as their underlying motivation, the editors of *Autosoziobiographie: Poetik und Politik* listing three aspects of the autosociobiographical subject: class and origin, education and upward mobility, and affect and memory (Blome et al. 2020: 5–7). It is thus both the awareness of borders and their transgression in which scholars have located the subject matter of autosociobiography. The idea of visible and invisible dividing lines is reinforced by the location of the narrator – and the narrative – in a sort of in-between space, never quite at home on either side and experiencing a sense of estrangement, alienation, and "double-edged non-belonging" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 50). A similar constellation can be observed with regard to discipline and genre: the texts in question are located somewhere between sociological analysis and literary narrative, autobiography and sociology. Ernaux's work has often been described as genre-transgressive for precisely that reason, which again draws attention to the border-crossing motif.

The second aspect recognised by current theorisations of the nascent genre is the overlapping of the narrator's personal journey through life and between two worlds demarcated by class lines, and its depiction as a shared experience and collective truth. This collectivity is here perceived in terms of class, which is only understandable considering the authors' socio-national background (French/German society with a White and Christian majority). Despite feelings of non-belonging towards both their milieu of origin and their milieu of arrival, the narrators seem to uphold the "collective value of the 'I'" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 55), telling the story not only of an individual, but of an entire community. These features, however, are not unique to these texts at all; it will not do to neglect various canons of autobiographical writing on the margins, writing against power, which not only express a sense of belonging to a collective identity but situate the 'I' specifically and necessarily in terms of a 'we': women's autobiography, African-American autobiography, and illness memoirs narrating the 'I' in relational terms are just a few examples.

Though Andreas Reckwitz's diagnosis that "the society of singularities […] leads to a sort of 'crisis of the general'" (Reckwitz 2022: 277) may well apply to the explosion of interest in self-representation and life writing in this day and age, it is worth noting the mechanisms by which these texts are not only composed but published, sold, marketed, received, and theorised over. Twellmann and Lammers make a very important point in this regard: in the extremely

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competitive literary field under neoliberal auspices, the authors ironically end up reproducing “the conditions of the very regime they intend to resist” (2023: 56–7). Operating as they do within a publishing industry that capitalises on the popularity of certain texts – and names – over others, influenced greatly by the tides and trends of readerly interest, their writing ends up contributing to the “immobilization of the very class frontiers it depicts” (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 63). Together with the commodification of stories within a capitalist set-up, this threat of authorial individualism does seem to affect several narrative contexts that position themselves as subversive, and it is interesting to note how their varying relevance and ‘success’ in the global literary sphere also corresponds to variations in the perceived emancipatory potential – and, ultimately, the political and discursive impact – of such self-narratives ‘from the margins’.

The third aspect, the *socio*, becomes a genre-defining quality when autosociobiography is seen as the narrative of a *transclasse* subject combining its theoretical sociological knowledge with a literary mode, thereby giving birth to a theory-based reflection on personal history and experience which is defined by the crossing of class boundaries. However, it should be noted that while classic European sociological traditions may take class to be the primary category of social stratification, any further questioning of the disciplinary mechanisms of sociology in a broader, more global (or generally non-Eurocentric) sense points to the limitations of such a notion. Sociology in India, for instance, works intensively with caste or multi-religious, multi-cultural social realities, whereas sociological analyses in North America cannot neglect *race* or indigenous-settler histories. Given that the political, economic, and cultural histories of societies across the world are so radically different, a predominant focus on categories established in European contexts runs the risk of arrogantly relegating any discussion of social structures in non-Western contexts to the realm of anthropology (if no longer ethnography).

Authors like Louis, Eribon, and Ernaux do not work with the concept of class difference in a Marxist sense, foregrounding instead the influence of Bourdieu’s notion of class and forms of capital on their writing. Hence, the dynamic between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ is not one of radical class consciousness and revolutionary movement, but of an acute awareness of social milieu upon acquiring cultural capital in the face of a lamented lack thereof in childhood. The combination of these theoretical concepts with an academic register that cuts through personal, affective experience by means of a certain *écriture de la distance* or *écriture plate* (distant or plain writing) (Twellmann/Lammers

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2023: 59) is widely regarded as a constituent feature of autosociobiographical writing.

The context of production and reception of texts classified as autosociobiographical makes up the fourth, and especially intriguing point. Eribon and Louis, in particular, explicitly thematise the recent migration of the working class towards right-wing populist parties as a consequence of its plight within a political system that refuses to take the needs of its members seriously. As scholars have noted, the texts under consideration here have found resonance in social contexts where a certain awareness of class emerges from the post-boom expansion of mass education, and where socio-political developments in the past few decades have followed comparable trajectories. I would argue, however, that the right-wing populism in the societies in question is of a rather similar nature if contrasted with right-wing discourse in other parts of the world, a contention to which I will return later in this article.

The positioning of the autosociobiographical narrator as a "translator of the social", in Carlos Spoerhase's words (2017: 35)[2], invites us to delve deeper into the intended readership of these texts: on the one hand, there are readers who have experienced a similar upward mobility and can relate to the authors on a personal level, finding in their stories a sense of representation of their own lives. On the other hand, it could well be argued that the narrative act of 'making visible the invisible category of class' from an 'authentic' class defector perspective specifically cater to the intellectual elite from the middle and upper classes, who have an urge to understand 'how the other half lives',[3] and why it votes the way it does. Against the backdrop of their explosive reception in a German literary scene seeking "intellectual replenishment" after the dramatically declared "end of theory" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 60), it is entirely possible that the relatability and urgency of these narratives speaks more directly to the reader's intellectuality than their empathy.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

3 The phrase comes from the title of Jacob Riis's photojournalistic publication that exposed the living conditions in the slums of New York City in the 1880s (Riis, Jacob, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, Kessinger Publishing 2004 [1890]).

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Class in Transit

While the decades since the 1990s have seen a rise in not only activist but also academic and pop-cultural interest in questions of gender, sexuality, and *race*, class as a category has been relatively neglected in the *race*-class-gender triad of intersectional analysis. Blome et al. criticise the defensive stance with which class has been treated in contemporary literary and cultural studies, "as a warning to also take socio-economic inequality into account" (Blome et al. 2010: 158).

Historically speaking, the specific amalgamation of European imperialism, capitalism, and industrialisation did not lead to an analogous reproduction of European class divisions in the colonised peripheries that would have turned indigenous subjects into an extension of the working-class in metropolitan Europe; rather, it mutated into a global capitalist system of political, economic, and cultural subjugation, and produced a stratification of racial and cultural difference. In light of this development, a genuinely transnational comparative study of class and social structures is bound to remain unfeasible. A variety of cultural, historical, and political elements determine the relevance and interplay of social markers and identity categories within individual societies, and engender vast differences in what constitutes socio-economic status across nations and continents.

One thing, however, is certain: that it is impossible to "specify someone's class from his or her tax return" (Appiah 2018: 144). In *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Satnam Virdee analyses the British working class as a multi-ethnic formation and emphasises the aspect of *race* as central to the functioning of class, highlighting the historical entanglements of Whiteness, racism, and anti-racism with class struggles. The fact that different forms of capital work in different ways is "one reason why efforts to reduce class to any single hierarchy don't work" (Appiah 2018: 165). Class as a category by itself is bound to lack the complexity needed to understand social inequality and economic injustice today, even in societies like Germany and France which continue to regard themselves predominantly as White and Christian despite decades of post-war (and post-colonial) migration. Moreover, social class continues to have a strongly heteronormative masculinist undertone – in Kwame Anthony Appiah's poetic turn of phrase, "[c]lass in Britain isn't a ladder. It's a mountain, with multiple paths for ascent and descent. It rises, though, from a single valley to a single peak" (Appiah 2018: 166).

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There are two concepts it might be useful to unpack at this point: the first is the notion of origin, which features prominently in scholarly reflections on the narratives at hand.[4] Taking a step back from the logic of duality between the lower-class milieu of origin and upper-class/elite/educated milieu of arrival, it becomes clear that questions of *race* and ethnicity, of native languages and religious diversity, of coloniality and belonging, of migration and asylum must play a greater role in discussions of origin and where an individual comes from. This, however, does lead to a certain unease due to the ways in which 'origin' tends to solidify sociocultural hierarchies and boundaries by virtue of its connotation as 'roots', especially when we encounter individuals or social groups where origin is more complicated than class or where class is irretrievably entangled with other categories of identity such as language (including dialect, accent, multilingualism), religious affiliation, *race*, ethnicity, literacy, education, occupation, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. The point here is that class by itself cannot account for socio-economic status, because that status is the result not only of overarching global-capitalist structures reflected within the nation-state, but of the interpenetration of class with further categories of difference which neither exhibit the same flexibility nor permit the same social mobility that class by itself does. The problem with class as a standalone category of analysis, then, is its inability to properly reflect greater (migratory) movements between nations or continents. Instead of a singular focus on *transclasse* mobility and instances of vertical, individual border-crossings with the connotation of 'trans-' in the sense of transition from origin to destination, it might be more useful to supplement it with another 'trans-' concept in the sense of 'transnational', which refers to movement across and/or beyond boundaries, and provides a more horizontal perspective on the question of origin.

The second is the concept of social mobility. Appiah highlights the way in which *race* and class interpenetrate every aspect of social life and are impossible to view separately:

> [A]mong whites, as among blacks, there were hierarchies of status associated with distinctions of habits between those who came from uneducated families in which men and women worked with their hands and those who

4 For a sort of 'origin myth' of the autosociobiographical tradition, see Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 48–9.

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came from educated families and did not earn a living from manual labor. (Appiah, 2018: 152)

Chantal Jaquet replaces the term 'class defector' with that of *transclasse* to refer to those who have undergone social mobility either as a rise (*embourgeoisés*) or as a fall (*déclassés*). According to her, this phenomenon "is not unique to those who change class; it affects all those who do not reproduce the dominant model and discover their identity after being branded by an insult or taunt – unnamed because unnameable" (Jaquet 2023: 9). While this perspective may work well for subjects of non-reproduction in terms of sexuality or gender, a view of caste as "a system of both production and reproduction" (Mani 2015: 28), located within the framework of both *race* and class relations, further complicates this notion of social non-reproduction.

Dalit Autobiography: Life Writing Between Caste and Class

Much of the sociological study of caste, especially with regard to its precise nature and in relation to class, has followed either of two major points of view: the culturalist interpretation, revolving around what the likes of Max Weber and Louis Dumont[5] saw as a hierarchical religious-cultural value system unique to Indian (or South Asian) society based on the idea of pollution/purity and endogamy, and the materialist interpretation including both Marxist and non-Marxist perspectives focussing on the political and economic dimensions of caste as a class system.

Noting how the view of caste and class as opposing concepts has hindered constructive analysis based on historicity, K.L. Sharma suggests an approach involving the four elements of "dialectics, history, culture, and structure" (Sharma 1984: 21) to study the interplay of caste, class, ethnicity, power, religion, and economy, while Ramkrishna Mukherjee proposes the concept of "caste *in* class" (Mukherjee 1999: 1761). The conflicting understanding of caste and class struggle (embodied respectively by the Dalit and communist movements in India) has been denounced by B.R. Ambedkar as a false dichotomy

5 Dumont's 1966 writings on 'homo hierarchicus' postulated an essentialist dichotomy, diagnosing the Indian people with a unique, irredeemable ideology of caste hierarchy which he saw as the polar opposite of the egalitarian societies created by the European 'homo aequalis'.

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emerging from a misunderstanding of Marxist theory (Teltumbde 2016: 34). Another effective way of looking at the social structure in modern India is as "capitalism within casteism within feudalism" (Yengde 2019: 229). Incorporating "material, cultural and ideological perspectives", Padma Velaskar sees the caste-class system "both as a religiously constructed structure of honour/prestige relations and as a structure of class relations of production and labour control with an exploitative occupational division of labour" which emerges from the "interpenetration of social and economic relations in the caste-feudal mode" (Velaskar 2016: 401).

Beyond the South Asian context, inquiries into the concept of caste in other societies lead us to an analytically intertwined trifecta of caste-class-*race*: while Trinidadian-American sociologist Oliver Cox contrasted *race*-class relations in the USA with the caste system in India only to strongly distinguish between the two, Isabel Wilkerson in her study of what she calls caste systems across India, America, and Nazi Germany, writes, "[c]aste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. [...] Caste is the bones, race the skin" (Wilkerson 2020: 19)[6]. It is thus imperative to envision the unalterable entanglements of caste as a social category with notions of *race* and class as well as the patriarchy, resulting in a complex system of social stratification, which, even in the twenty-first century, plays itself out in the political, economic, and sociocultural fields. The spread of neoliberal corporate capitalism in post-1980s India did usher in economic globalisation, but "individual liberalism" characterised by "cultural identifiers like sexuality, gender and class" failed to "shake off the entrenched casteism" (Yengde 2019: 234).

> Like wild animals fast disappearing from the woods, caste seems to have 'disappeared'. Yet like a wild animal hiding behind a bush, it remains hidden, poised for attack. People travelling in fast vehicles may not notice the wild eyes looking at them, but those who walk do and are struck with terror. (Pawar 2018: xii)

The word Dalit, originally a pejorative epithet meaning "crushed", "broken", or "ground down", was reclaimed and re-connoted first by Ambedkar and later by

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6 Wilkerson lists eight pillars by which a caste system is held in place over the course of centuries: divine will and the laws of nature, heritability, endogamy, purity versus pollution, occupational hierarchy, dehumanisation and stigma, terror as enforcement and cruelty as a means of control, and inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority.

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the Dalit Panthers[7], who turned it into an emancipatory *nom de guerre* for those who as such exist *outside* of the caste system and are engaged in the struggle against caste discrimination, violence, and untouchability. Urmila Pawar defines the term as describing "people who have been oppressed by a repressive social system, and challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational and humanitarian perspective" (Pawar 2018: xii). Sharmila Rege argues that the politics of Jyotirao Phule, Shahu Maharaj, the non-Brahman movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Ambedkar were engaged in the project of "recovering a space" for "a language of caste on its own terms" (Rege 2013: 36) in the colonial public sphere, thereby contesting the exclusion of caste and women's questions from the political domain and their relegation to the realm of the cultural.

The question of social mobility is complicated in South Asian society by the dynamic interplay of religion, mother tongue, caste, geographical location, gender, and class in determining access to education, occupational freedom, and economic opportunity. Apart from the multiple socio-economic and political obstacles, an insidious trio of untouchability, mob violence, and a corrupt police and judicial system continues to impact the conditions shaping a potential Dalit class defector's future. Dalits who do manage to move up the class ladder often end up concealing – having to conceal – their caste identity.

> Earlier, upper castes could identify Dalits because of where they lived, how they dressed and what they did for a living. Today Dalits, at least those in urban areas, easily blend in with the upper castes and their identifiers have changed with them. An untraceable last name that isn't Brahmin, Bania, Kshatriya or Dalit, vague responses to the caste question and any association with Ambedkar are generally lower-caste red flags in post-Independence India. (Dutt 2019: 140)

According to Suraj Yengde, the "primary identity of upper-middle-class Dalits is based on caste followed by class", as "the casteist set-up of the economic order does not allow [them] the freedom to slip into the fluid capitalist chain" (Yengde 2019: 200). In other words, it remains extremely difficult if not impossible to reject or subordinate caste identity in the public eye. Dalitness, in

7 The Dalit Panthers are a radical socialist organisation founded in 1972, inspired and supported by the Black Panther Party in the USA.

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particular, continues to be a sort of blotch that refuses to fade, regardless of how much economic, cultural, and social capital one might acquire.

The 1970s saw the “explosive arrival of the modern Dalit voice” (Brueck 2019: 26) on the Indian literary scene, predominantly in the form of resistance poetry and autobiography. In light of the fact that Dalit writings, both academic and literary, do not enjoy a very long tradition and even today continue to be rejected and excluded by large sections of the social and intellectual elite and a right-wing populist government, the history, roots, and scope of Dalit literature are still in the process of being negotiated (Thiara/Misrahi-Barak 2019: 3). The editors of the 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* on Dalit literature have highlighted the persistent struggle against discrimination and oppression through which Dalit writers are constantly confronted with questions of their perception, representation, and misrepresentation by upper-caste Indian and Western academic scholarship (Thiara/Misrahi-Barak 2019: 7).

A major issue with life narratives from the ‘lowest rungs’ of (a) society, or from communities subjected to horrific violence in the past or the present, is that they potentially run the risk of turning the author’s and/or protagonist’s suffering and pain into a spectacle for readers significantly more privileged. Dalit literature, for example, has often been dismissed as stories of anguish and sorrow or accused of “digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past” (Rege 2013: 18).

Autobiographical narratives from systematically marginalised communities necessarily carry with them the aspect of witnessing and testifying, of resisting through the very act of self-expression. That said, a critical discourse which regards these autobiographical narratives especially (or solely) as *testimonios*[8] risks superimposing on them the intention “not of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle” (Rege 2013: 17), underscoring the political urgency of the writing while dismissing its formal literary qualities (Brueck 2019: 26). The term Dalit autobiography by no means refers to a homogenous set of texts, its corpus ranging across states and languages, villages and cities, authors of various genders, educational qualifications, professions, and ages. Far from being a restrictive formal category extensively theorised in academic discourse, it is a tradition

8 The term *testimonio* is used in Latin American contexts to denote autobiographical narratives from the margins of society which speak up against a collective experience of oppression and social injustice.

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that has grown organically through the narratives and the lives of their authors. This is not to say that literary conventions play a subordinate role here, but it could certainly be argued that this type of autobiographical (sub-)genre-building functions more rhizomatically than linearly, perhaps allowing more room for self-invention and -definition.

For Sharmila Rege, Dalit life narratives "forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance." (Rege 2013: 16) Dalit women's autobiographical texts, in particular, engage with a dialectic of self and community, transcending the boundaries of genre and bourgeois autobiography by depleting the 'I' and displacing it with the collective 'we' (Rege 2013: 17). Inevitably positioned at the intersection of caste, class, and gender, female Dalit autobiographers are well equipped to address the "nexus of *ghar-parivar-samaj* (home-family-community/society)" (Brueck 2019: 35) from a decidedly female perspective, their narratives inhabiting both the domestic and the public sphere without emphasising one over the other. It is this multiplicity of selves, identities, and impetuses which sets the tone and provides the framework for Dalit (women's) autobiography.

Aaydan, or *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan*, originally published in Marathi in 2003, was first translated into English by Maya Pandit under the title *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008). Pawar was born in 1945 in Phansawale village on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. Having grown up as a girl in the Mahar community, the memories of her rural and urban childhood are imbued with experiences not only of untouchability and poverty, but also of literacy, education, and empowerment. After a Masters in Marathi literature, Pawar worked at the State Government Public Works Department and has collaborated closely with several Dalit feminist organisations (Rege 2013: 345).

The word *aaydan*, as Pawar explains in the preface, is a generic term used to describe things made from bamboo, other meanings being 'utensil' or 'weapon'. The weaving of bamboo baskets is traditionally assigned to the Mahar caste in the Konkan region. Pawar's choice of the title for her autobiography incorporates an allegory of pain passed down generations, an allegory for a life of struggle on several levels, the life of an individual interwoven with the lives of the collective. Pawar seems to fashion herself out of the perpetual

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movement of the hands of her mother, busy weaving her sorrows into baskets to support her family (Pawar 2018: 54, 254). The metaphor of weaving is not restricted to the work's title – in fact, it ends up representing the style of Pawar's narration: "My mother used to weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us" (Pawar 2018: ix).

Sadly, the English translation misses out on an important aspect of the preface, whose original title *ātmabhān* can be translated as 'awareness of the self'. Shy of four pages long, the brief text moves from explaining the title to describing and defining the truths of Dalit/women's existence in post-Independence Indian society, situating the author as a Dalit feminist within both groups, and, at the same time, beyond them. For Pawar, "far more important than mere words such as savarna, avarna, dalit, Buddhist or woman, is the awareness of each and every individual about who he/she is" (Pawar 2018: xii), a profound self-knowledge that her narrative combines with an acute awareness of social relations, injustices, violence, the effects of globalisation, privatisation, and the politicisation of religion on humanity in general and Indian society in particular.

The sense of collective identity and belonging out of which the 'I' is writing is very noticeably multiple and simultaneous, switching back and forth between the individual, the relational, and as part of a larger collective. Pawar steadfastly narrates her life through her own eyes as the authorial 'I', but also interprets it from the position of a daughter, sister-in-law, wife, and mother in relation to other individuals. Furthermore, there is a sense of shared womanhood that runs through the entire narrative and encompasses family members, village communities, feminist friends, and female writer colleagues in Mumbai across castes and religions. The narrative begins with several pages describing the Mahar women's arduous journey from Phansawale village to the market at Ratnagiri, carrying heavy bundles of things to sell on their heads, their feet burning in the sweltering sun. Cursing their mutual ancestor for their plight[9] and swearing loudly, the women would make their way through the unending narrow, winding, slippery paths through hills and across rivers, talking to each other about their children and husbands, complaining about

9 "The reason for the abuse was simple. It was he who had chosen this particular village, Phansawale, in the back of beyond, for his people to settle. It was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain, as it lay in an obscure ditch in a far-off corner of the hills." (Pawar 2018: 1)

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their in-laws, telling each other stories about evil spirits and gossip from the village (Pawar 2018: 1–3). *Aaydan* attributes a strong sense of collectivity to rural Dalit communities entrenched in fear, anger, destitution, and pain, but also recognises an urban sense of Dalit belonging which underlies various experiences of explicit and implicit discrimination and humiliation. Another important collective identity is that of Dalit feminists and activists: Pawar recounts writing a history of the women in the Ambedkarite movement together with Meenakshi Moon, entitled "We Also Made History" (*Amhihi Itihas Ghadavla*).

There are several frontiers of social and cultural belonging, as well as personal experience which *Aaydan*'s narrative draws on, or better still, plays with. Caste, and Dalitness specifically, is not a structure of belonging which allows much room for crossing over, but the text vividly depicts several instances of borders being transgressed: rural vs urban, lower class vs upper class, Marathi as spoken by the Dalit women villagers vs 'pure' or literary Marathi and English (as an avenue of translation), girlhood vs womanhood, illiteracy vs literacy/education, working woman vs middle-class housewife.

Born just two years before the birth of independent India in 1947, Pawar is very aware of the role of education in allowing an individual to escape the dynamics of caste, class, and gender on the most precarious end of the spectrum. Her parents' stubborn determination to send not only their sons but also their daughters to school is often underlined as her greatest privilege, along with her appreciation of her husband Harishchandra's support that allowed her to complete her BA and MA in Marathi literature while working full-time and raising children, not at all ordinary under the circumstances.

The village/city dichotomy likewise plays a significant role in Pawar's descriptions of her own experiences and those of the people around her. In post-Independence Indian society, she notes that caste has not vanished but has merely donned a more insidious guise, with the difference between Dalit and non-Dalit communities having been radically reduced in some ways while remaining very much present in others nevertheless. Pawar sees two trajectories for a Dalit woman's existence in modern India: one in slums and gutters, harrowed by work, dirt, and violence; the other as a well-to-do, educated member of the middle-class. The difference is not simply one between rural and urban existence – there is also a rift between life as illiterate bonded labourers and the educated middle class, or between women and men under either of the two circumstances.

In *Aaydan*, food operates as a leitmotif across personal, social and cultural contexts, connecting the most intimate of experiences with broader social

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dimensions. The interplay of destitution, starvation, and the marginalisation of the Dalit community, along with the traditional relegation of cooking to the realm of women, places food in all its variety, scarcity, and social relevance at the very heart of the narrative, as a crucial marker of both caste and class. Recalling the sweets that many upper-caste girls brought to school picnics, delicacies with names she was not even acquainted with, Pawar writes about how, even as a child, she never raised the question as to why such dishes were never prepared at their home – rather, she was aware, "without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly" (Pawar, 2018: 94). She goes on to describe the simple and thrifty meals her mother would cook and make her eat with the words "eat it, eat it child! Only the person who can eat such food can achieve a lot of good!" (Pawar, 2018: 94) Pawar's father being the community priest and a schoolteacher, food was never scarce at home. It would make him extremely angry when her sisters-in-law joined the other Dalit women going from door to door in hopes of collecting leftovers from upper-caste households, putting themselves in the position of beggars. Ultimately, however, regardless of what delicacies the women had hoped to gather, they ended up coming back with an inedible mixture of stale leftovers in a single pot, which they would then have to wash in the river, hoping to at least salvage some of the rice (Pawar, 2018: 51). These fraught experiences associated with food function within the realm of the unspoken, almost self-evident knowledge which accompanies the lived experience of class and caste boundaries.

As a grown woman working and writing in metropolitan Mumbai, Pawar describes an instance of more implicit, underhand discrimination within a literary context, where a fellow Dalit writer's work is underhandedly praised with a tone of surprise at how 'cultured' her language sounds. Looking back upon the situation, she asks, "[w]hat exactly did he mean? Which culture were they talking about? Whose dominance were they praising? Patriarchy? Caste system? Class? What was it? And why was our writing termed uncivilised, uncultured? How?" (Pawar, 2018: 232–3)

Urmila Pawar has a MA in Marathi literature and is professionally a writer and Dalit feminist historian and activist. The sociographical aspect of theoretical, sociological reflection on a personal journey which is central to scholarly accounts of the autosociobiographical genre-in-the-making is absent here, at least if we are to understand it in terms of a formal qualification in sociology or an active use of the theories and terminology current in the field. Yet *Aaydan*, with its intricate narrative acts of individual recollection and reflection

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extended to a collective, at no point in time seems like a less thorough or insightful analysis of society. In the context of marginalised communities and oral history, especially from the Global South, a rift between the theoretical and the empirical or practical quickly becomes unsustainable, so that knowledge, awareness, and comprehension are more wrapped up in embodied experience and intuition than in academic institutions. This, of course, is not at all to propagate a North-South binary in the sense of a Cartesian dualism, but practices of dismantling colonial and capitalist logic must begin with questions like these. Pawar's narrative does not merely transcend conventional criteria of 'literary language'; it oscillates back and forth across temporalities, her style of writing and non-linear narrative strategies keenly reminiscent of the rhythm of (her mother's) weaving, evoking a sense of collective identity with every strand.

Aaydan is as much a story about being, experiencing, and existing at the margins, and interacting with the boundaries of social identity and reality themselves, as it is about crossing them. I have attempted to show that to read the narrative of Pawar's life as a linear journey of upward mobility (although it certainly qualifies as such, as, in varying ways, do most Dalit autobiographies) would be reductive. The 'social' here is evidently more than socio-economic mobility, but it also transcends unilateral views of caste identification, gendered experience, or rural 'origins'. We can choose to read this narrative as a woman's memoir, as a Dalit person's text, as a class defector's narrative, or as a postcolonial subject's rise to literary activism – indeed, the text is all those things, but it is also crucial to allow it to occupy multiple spaces without compartmentalising it into neat categories and trying to disentangle and analyse one strand at a time. Confronted with a text simultaneously employing such a multiplicity of narrative mechanisms and identificatory processes, we as (scholarly) readers need to be equipped with a methodological toolkit that is more multidimensional than a single-axis sociological focus on class – or even caste – as a primary indicator of social reality.

Comparing 'Genres'

Let us quickly recapitulate the features considered characteristic of autosociobiography and see how the notion of Dalit autobiography fares when held up to them. Both 'genres' share the narration of instances and experiences of border crossing, especially in the form of upward social mobility across classes by means of education. That said, things become considerably more compli-

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cated when considering Dalit existence with its complex interplay of caste and class that allows for varying degrees of mobility and possibilities of a return. The Dalit autobiographer is in many ways also a kind of 'translator of the social', making invisible violence and discrimination visible to an upper-caste or a foreign intellectual audience, or forging connections with fellow Dalit readers who might feel seen in their own lives. Both in this regard and with respect to the dynamic movement between the narrating 'I' and multiple narrated 'we's, it also takes on the form of a personal journey bound in collective experience and representation. Dalit autobiographical writing certainly also incorporates an acute awareness of one's milieu of origin, the lack of economic, social, and cultural capital often associated with it, and the concomitant labyrinth of obstacles, depicting a strong sense of non-belonging, estrangement, and uncertainty along with a rebellious zest for justice and emancipation. Where the prototypical autosociobiographical 'canon' is profoundly and self-avowedly influenced by the thought of Bourdieu, Dalit autobiography and Dalit authors in general draw their inspiration to write and act from the anti-discriminatory ideas, social theories, and emancipatory politics of Ambedkar, who often plays a significant role in their narratives as well.

In contrast to the autosociobiographer in the above-mentioned sense, the Dalit autobiographer's writing style is more intimate, less theoretical in the sense of an academic discipline, but just as introspective and discerning with regard to social phenomena and collective truths. There are young Dalit writers, journalists, and academics who have been publishing memoirs and academic texts in English (as opposed to the enormous corpus of Dalit literature established since the 1970s in various vernacular languages and dialects) and who make use of globalised academic terminology, but this raises the question of whether Western-influenced academic language adds to the validity of an author's expertise and narrative. Here, it is instructive to consider the intended readership of the text in question as well as the conditions and actors involved in its publication and reception. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the works composed by the authors in the autosociobiographical canon have predominantly been read by the intellectual elite in literary-academic circles in France and Germany; they have been critically acclaimed not only for their social insights, but also for their literary qualities (Ernaux's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature certainly has to do with both). Dalit autobiography, on the other hand, has long been relegated to the realm of testimonial literature, and doubt has often been cast on its literary value and formal qualities – erroneously and often not out of a neutral or caste-blind position, it must be said.

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As I have mentioned above, another noteworthy context surrounding the explosive interest in the autosociobiographical form – in the works of Eribon and Louis, in particular – is the rise of far-right populism in Europe, especially in France. It is important to note that even amid the exorbitant right-wing surge across the world, its manifestations are not identical: the rhetoric employed may be similar, but the mechanisms of asserting power are in fact very different. While Germany's racist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party is unapologetically White, questions of *race* and representation play out rather differently in the UK with several conservative POC politicians representing a brutal xenophobic agenda; India's political present, meanwhile, is rife as ever with communalism and structural violence against religious minorities and precarious groups. Bearing these differences in mind but also contrasting and examining them against the backdrop of the undeniable rise of right-wing ideologies on a transnational scale, it is essential to ask what such narratives of the self and the collective can contribute to the discussion. Stories which 'make visible the invisible' by speaking from the margins of society, articulating the experiences of communities rendered voiceless by the prevailing power structures, carry within them an inherently subversive potential to oppose the oppressive and discriminatory logics of the right. The question that remains is whether it is in fact necessary to define new genres of autobiographical narration to effectively study these texts and their repercussions for the societies in and from which they emerge.

I would like to end this article with a series of questions and musings which point to certain limitations associated with the classification of autosociobiography as a 'genre-in-the-making' and which continue to cause me some unease. If a narrative fulfils some of the relevant conditions but not others, to what extent might it be reasonable to call it an autosociobiography? What if the narrator never actually mentions the concepts of class, milieu, and habitus explicitly, but refers instead to racial, caste-based, or gender-related identities which are very clearly complicit in class belonging? Given that the existing scholarly discourse on autosociobiography has treated sociological knowledge almost as a precondition of narrative authority, what happens if the narrator reflects on their personal journey through the lens of collective experience, but without resorting to the discipline-bound terminology of academic discourse? If these texts are so clearly a 'first-world' phenomenon visible in Western class societies which have experienced mass education in the post-war period, any attempt to expand the so-called genre to the rest of the world in order to prove its validity across literary contexts needs to spell out the precise goals it seeks to achieve.

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Basing the theorisation of autosociobiography as a new genre on the tropes employed by Eribon (and imitated and further developed with equal success by Louis) runs the danger of being unsustainable due to the sheer narrowness of the corpus. Defining generic boundaries before narratives dealing with the issues at hand in more complex, intersectional ways have been properly examined constitutes a rather risky undertaking that is bound to suffocate the narratives and defeat the purpose of their theorisation. In many cases, too many conditions have been imposed to hold the genre in place, while its canon simultaneously seems to be growing with every new scholarly intervention. When there are so many borders to cross and so many boundaries along so many lines constantly interacting with each other, it appears short-sighted first to draw these borders along class lines and then to try and expand them to include intersections with further social categories. Considering the workings of the neoliberal university which requires researchers to constantly produce to remain relevant, the academic gesture of rehabilitating class by means of genre-building which seems to lurk behind the hasty theorisation of the autosociobiographical form does seem sadly ironic. Or is this a rare instance where the master's tools can indeed dismantle the master's house?

Criticising the attempts of his contemporaries to define autobiography as a distinct genre in the face of a plethora of unanswered questions and canonical grey zones resulting from the attempt to distinguish generically between fiction and autobiography, Paul de Man proposed the view of autobiography not as a literary genre or mode at all, but as "a figure of reading or of understanding" (de Man 1979: 921). There may be a lot in de Man's essay to disagree with, but there is much to be gained from thinking of Dalit autobiography in these terms; not as a distinct genre governed by rigid formal criteria, but as a loose collection of rhizomatically connected narratives bounded in identity, experience, and belonging. In an appendix to the second edition of *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson list sixty different genres of life writing. "Through reading their lives within and against the terms of life writing," they say about autobiographical subjects, "they shift its terms and invite different ways of being read. [...] Established generic templates mutate and new generic possibilities emerge." (Smith/Watson, 2010: 253) The question, then, is whether – and in what way – the generic boundaries of autosociobiography, whose ink has not yet entirely dried, will survive the passage of time and a potential widening of its scope.

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Reversing Class Defection
Two Ionian Tales of Gender, Nation, and Woe

Michail Leivadiotis

"In writing, no choice is self-evident" (Ernaux 2022) – this emphatic assertion marked a key moment of Annie Ernaux's Nobel Prize lecture, as it highlighted the contradiction inherent in an author's attempt to retroactively endow such choices with meaning and significance; in other words, it was a statement that underlined the nullified self-referentiality of an explanatory gesture performed at that very moment. Immediately afterwards, Ernaux addressed the existential hurdles encountered by "class defectors" who "no longer have quite the same language" as their family and friends from their original class, and have come to "think and express themselves with other words" (Ernaux 2022): social mobility, she argued, comes at a price, a multitude of psycholinguistic complications on the long road to individuation.

If Ernaux chooses to describe her social ascent, quite schematically, as a trajectory from Rimbaud's "inferior race" (Ernaux 2022) to the climax of the acquisition of symbolic capital that was her speech before the Swedish Academy, I suggest that by reversing the lenses of inquiry we can better understand complex movements of social positioning and intellectual achievement. Ernaux, in her lecture, emphasises both "the social injustice linked to social class at birth" (Ernaux 2022) and the plight in which she found herself because of her gender. In this epitextual source, we can trace a specific point of view: As in the author's novels, the self-narration is structured around a centripetal movement that aims to fuse a plurality of voices and insights into a single, socially meaningful gaze. The narrator's voice emerges at the point of intersection of class and gender with history, it is an 'I' that has dissolved in its concern for justice, in its hunger for revenge.

When applied to Ernaux's work, 'autosociobiography' as a category of genre classification is usually understood in terms of a process of self-narration embarked upon by a disadvantaged 'I' in which special emphasis is placed

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on two primary parameters: humble social background and unprivileged female identity. By turning my attention to a previous historical and cultural context, to two versions of self-narration that suggest an (almost) reversed direction of inquiry, I attempt to explore the dynamics of self-narration as a narrative depicting class discomfort. The peculiarity of the cases at hand lies in the fact that the need for self-narration is perceived by subjects who are in conflict with their upper-class origins, and who, through writing, make a *sociological gesture* as they try to offer an insight into the social constraints of human life.

I scrutinise two instances of biographical self-fashioning in which the narrator, although speaking from a privileged position, describes social discomfort and the desire to overcome it by the sole means of education and writing. In the first case, such discomfort is the result of female oppression in an aristocratic environment: Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou's response is articulated in the form of an early feminist discourse. In the second, unease arises as a consequence of a complex interplay of negotiation processes pertaining to social, political, and cultural identities, leading Ermannos Lountzis to formulate a disillusioned tale of national and personal self-awareness. With my parallel investigation of the two narratives, I aim to demonstrate how the theoretical discourse on 'autosociobiography' can enrich our understanding of texts from socio-historical contexts different from our own, and accordingly, their differing negotiation with temporality.

In order to shift the discourse from post-war France to the Ionian Islands of the nineteenth century, we must adapt our heuristic tools while also paying attention to the vastly different socio-cultural system of this geographical and historical setting. The seven Ionian Islands, off the west coast of the Greek peninsula, constituted a kind of isolated middle ground, a contact zone between the wider Greek-speaking and Italian-speaking cultural areas. While the remainder of the Greek-speaking world had been under Ottoman rule for the best part of four centuries, the seven islands had formed part of the Venetian sphere of influence, producing local elites that were bilingual. Throughout the initial six decades of the nineteenth century, the islands were a British protectorate, which meant that the new overlords had to contend both with the locals' pride of their Venetian past and a fervent Greek national identity that was increasingly difficult to keep under control.

While Corfu was the administrative and cultural capital of the Ionians, it was another island, Zakynthos (more widely known as Zante), that brought forth not only one of the most important historians of modern Greece, Erman-

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nos Lountzis (1806–1868), but also the first woman prose-writer in modern Greek, Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou (1801–1832). Both descended from the local nobility and both wrote their biographies in an attempt to come to terms with the fundamental shifts that took place around the middle of the century. Autobiography in the nineteenth-century Ionian became an exercise in identity negotiation; cultural hybridity and postcolonial tensions were reflected in the self-fashioning narratives composed by a local intellectual elite that struggled to make sense of its cosmopolitan past amidst the social turmoil in the islands caused by relentless political change.[1]

Moutzan-Martinegou's legacy as a writer has been all but obliterated: her *œuvre* remained unpublished during her lifetime (as is often the case with contemporary female writers), and much of it was lost, presumably forever, in the earthquake that devastated her native island in 1953, so that the only one of her works that remains accessible to the general public today is her autobiography.[2] Lountzis, on the other hand, a politician and historian, is an enduring presence in Greek historiography to this day, albeit a peripheral one: due to its focus on local concerns and hybrid cultural background, his work is now the domain of specialists, despite its high scholarly quality. His autobiography oscillates between *Bildungsroman* and autoethnographical memoir.[3]

In examining these two different yet similar cases of self-narration from the vantage point of the recent theoretical discussion on autosociobiography,[4] I seek to inquire after the possibility – the legitimacy, even – of expanded and/or differentiated applications of such a heuristic tool; in other words, I attempt to sketch what an autosociobiographical mode of writing might look like in different cultural or historical contexts. Moreover, I argue that both, Moutzan-Martinegou and Lountzis, pursued a form of self-narration that went beyond a critical revisitation of the past, and envisioned a more inclusive, open, and progressive future; not as a utopia, but as a desirable

1 For a general overview of the colonial experience of the Ionians, see Gallant 2002; on the cultural history of the Ionian world in the first half of the nineteenth century and the formation of local identities, see Gallant 2002: 1–14 and Leivadiotis 2022: 23–34.

2 On the publication history of Moutzan-Martinegou's work, see Athanasopoulos 1997: 9–16.

3 Lountzis's autobiography was published by Ntinos Konomos in Lountzis 1962: 29–70. In the same edition, we find Lountzis's correspondence with his two sons during their studies in Athens and Germany in the years 1856–1866.

4 See Blome/Lammers/Seidel 2022: 1, Eßlinger 2022: 196–7 and Twellmann 2022: 91.

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possibility. In turn, this parallel scrutiny invites us to reflect whether the excluded worlds of unstable subjectivities and the controversy of the truth of their experience or the presence/absence of the subject in the textuality of its self-narration are theoretical debates that can or must be articulated only in terms of class mobility.

A Forgotten Call for Gender Justice

If we take as true Ernaux's axiom that "family narrative and social narrative are one and the same" (Ernaux 2018: 29), in the case of Moutzan-Martinegou's family narrative, the lever of the plot is family conflict as a result of social discomfort. Social expectations, shaped by class and gender roles deeply ingrained in nineteenth-century Ionian and European culture, clash brutally with a rebellious female self-confidence that cannot be reconciled with the prospect of marriage and the life of a housewife. Instead, Moutzan-Martinegou persistently verbalises her disdain and champions education and writing as the sole purpose of existence. As a young, unmarried aristocratic woman, she is confined to the family home. Her self-narration constitutes an act of protest, articulating as it does a sharp feminist commentary on the social condition of her gender intersected with observations on the amenities offered and limitations imposed by her elevated social and economic status. Moutzan-Martinegou's attempts to evoke sympathy, but above all, understanding, together with her frequent appeals to the reader's sense of justice, allows us to conclude that the ultimate goal of her authorial gesture is to address a specific audience with a precise aim, namely, to stimulate the local Ionian society to radically improve the living conditions of women through education:

> Zealots of the barbarian customs of my country, do not be irritated! But what am I saying, do not be irritated. Alas! You have been turned into beasts by your anger. I allow the girls to study. I give them liberty to come out of the house, wherefore I appear in your eyes to be a monster of nature, but I do not care. The custom is barbarous, tyrannical. I hate, abhor, and despise all barbarous, tyrannical things, nor do I fear those that love and use them. Cruel custom of my country, which condemns me – me, who does not want marriage (for I have been frightened by the examples of some married women), me, I say, who does not want marriage – to live forever locked up in a house; never to go to a church, never to touch the earth,

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> never to feel the sweet breath of the wind, never to see the blue face of the heavenly garment. Tyrannical custom, barbarous custom, you do condemn me, but I mock your condemnation, no, no, God has not given me a sordid heart, neither have you with your confinements, with your imprisonments, ever managed to make it sordid; it always desires great enterprises, and is always ready to begin and to finish them. (Eptanisiaka Fylla 1947: 153)[5]

Confined to the four walls of her father's house, Moutzan-Martinegou does not write in order to portray her personal development over time or to convey her view of the world, but rather to communicate with the outside world, with a society that, moved by the description of her woeful human condition, will – hopefully – envision a version of the future that is more free, inclusive, and ultimately better. Self-dramatisation functions here as a fuse, exposing personal circumstances in order to denounce a social practice that relegates women to the role of socially limited and disadvantaged members of society. Vangelis Athanasopoulos, the most recent curator of her work, argues: "The autobiographer [Moutzan-Martinegou], because of the social conditions of the time, belongs to a cultural minority – that of women – and proposes her biography not as a representation of a particular individual but as a formulation of a social experience representative of that minority." (Athanasopoulos 1997: 56) In Moutzan-Martinegou's story-telling, self-promotion is neither the strategy nor the goal. This is because the self-narrating subject is in a state of identity negotiation: the very gesture of writing is the means by which she claims her right to shape and define herself as a person (Athanasopoulos 1997: 57).

This construction of self is performed on a double axis: on the one hand, transformative life experiences are narrated as an existential-ethical continuum, as a catalyst of temporal becoming in the form of 'paideia', erudition; on the other hand, the construction of identity, the constitution of the self, occurs within society, delineating the social space as a normative and utterly mimetic reflection. As the author makes clear, she is not merely narrating her personal condition, but her writing also functions as a denunciation of a social practice that affects most women. Thus, just as self-narrative becomes a testimony to a larger social problem, self-education becomes a testimony to its possible solution. The channelling of this concern into the literary forms of dialogue

5 All translations from the original modern Greek are my own.

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and drama[6] confirms the writer's deep belief in the social – that is, communicative – function of exercising her authorial prerogative. Commenting on Moutzan-Martinegou's work, titled "Dialogue. Between Elisavet and Another Girl", Athanasopoulos notes that she writes

> not only as an outlet for her stifled creativity, but mainly to create in her works persons with whom she could talk, to have with them the dialogue she would have with the members of the Zakynthian society if she were allowed to leave the house and meet people (Athanasopoulos 1997: 59).

In "Dialogue. Between Elisavet and Another Girl", the temporal completion of her authorial gesture in the form of a future (almost providential) contiguity of personal and common good is envisaged in religious terms:

> I have asked Him and I ask Him that I may bring benefit to those beings whom He has made similar to me and whom He is pleased and delighted to see pursuing and seeking the common good, the common benefit. (Mpoumpoulides 1965: 120–21)

Self-narration and self-formation, channelled simultaneously in this performative act of writing, constitute a puzzling claim to identity. In this inverted phenomenology of the person,[7] the criteria of identity reflected in Moutzan-Martinegou's struggle of 'becoming' are ascertained and standardised by and against the social rules, norms, and expectations. She tries to break with normative behaviour by opposing her prescribed role and adopting the role of the oppressor: not only does she demand to be educated, but she writes with the clear intention to be published – in fact, she deliberately includes parts of her plays, letters, and translations in her autobiography, never missing an opportunity to express her desire to see her works in print.[8] As Rania Polykandrioti

6 Moutzan-Martinegou is the author of more than twenty tragedies and comedies in Italian and Greek. See Mpoumpoulides 1965: 57–112 and Athanasopoulos 1997: 14.

7 For a summary of the philosophical debate on personal identity, see Čapek/Loidolt 2021.

8 In reference to the tragedy *Teano o La Giustizia Legale* that she wrote in Italian, Moutzan-Martinegou notes in her autobiography: "If I receive from God the grace to publish all the works that I have written, I will have them printed as is, without any correction, to demonstrate that the only art to which I was inclined was that of tragedy." (Athanasopoulos 1997: 123)

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points out, "[i]t has been argued that the literary genres cultivated by women in nineteenth-century Europe are those that were considered inferior, the genres of personal discourse: lyric poetry, letters, diaries, romantic novels with abundant autobiographical elements." (Polykandrioti 2002: 59–60). Moutzan-Martinegou breaks this rule deliberately, almost programmatically, and in a performative way when she dares to write about a predominantly, if not exclusively, masculine subject: economics (Athanasopoulos 1997: 67–70). Her treatise has not survived, but it is discussed in Moutzan-Martinegou's "Dialogue", in which the author defends her decision to write such a work despite her inexperience and emphasises the consciously revolutionary nature of a choice that seeks to overthrow the (male) establishment:

> You, who are a humble woman, who are twenty-four years and five months old, who, according to the old customs of your island of Zakynthos, are always shut up in your house without seeing other people […] you dare to write on economy […] art so remarkable that it should only be written by men, by old men […]. Don't you know, don't you understand, that new laws, new rules, new exhortations, even if they are beneficial, are annoying, hateful, intolerable to the majority of people? (Mpoumpoulides 1965: 120–22)

In describing her intentions, Ernaux does not mince words: "I will write to avenge my people." (Ernaux 2022) Moutzan-Martinegou's revenge takes the form of the linguistic appropriation of a social status. Her constant and arduous struggle for education, knowledge, and literary self-expression is a gesture of affront that articulates a statement of identity. Just as Ernaux reinforces her promise of revenge by citing Rimbaud's "I am of an inferior race for all eternity" (Ernaux 2022), Moutzan-Martinegou underscores it by translating a fragment from Aeschylus' *Προμηθεὺς Δεσμώτης* (*Prometheus Bound*): "I must bear my allotted doom as lightly as I can, knowing that the might of Necessity permits no resistance. Yet I am not able to speak nor be silent about my fate."[9]

9 Aeschylus: 103–7. Moutzan-Martinegou's translation was published first in Mpoumpoulides 1965: 131: "και πρέπει να υποφέρω, όσον δύναμαι, τούτην την δυστυχίαν, όπου η μοίρα μου έχει διωρισμένην, επειδή και ηξεύρω ότι η δύναμις της ανάγκης είναι άμαχος (δηλαδή δεν είναι βολετό να εναντιωθή τινας εις εκείνο, όπου αναγκαίως συμβαίνει)! Αμμή εγώ δεν ημπορώ μήτε να σιωπώ, μήτε να μη σιωπώ τούτες τες δυστυχίες." For the English translation, see Smyth 1926.

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As Moutzan-Martinegou recounts the ancient, painful story of an excluded world, a collective trauma, the narrator gradually acquires the voice of a collective subject, that of her gender in its historical depth of silence and silencing. Her struggle for equality revolves around two key objectives: to remain unmarried and to be published. Both prove impossible to achieve under the overwhelming pressure of the socially controlled mechanisms of biopolitics, whose chief executioners are the men of her own family: in the end, she did marry, as her father and brother wished, and died giving birth to her son, who, decades later, would brutally edit her autobiography, removing the socially unacceptable parts in a final gesture of 'mansplaining' to his dead mother.[10]

If womanhood and class intersect in Moutzan-Martinegou's self-narrative as repressive or discriminatory factors, they do so in a surprising entanglement that could be interpreted as an early articulation of a discourse on the role and position of women that is determined by social considerations and historically constructed patterns (Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 143). At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that the awareness of class superiority is addressed as an inhibiting factor in Moutzan-Martinegou's attempt to claim her freedom. The concern and function of the self-narrative in this case reaches that expanded scope that claims insight and legitimacy in narrating not only the self, but through the self, class and society (Blome et al. 2022: 3–4). The performative scope of such an attempt is to build a better version of the future, while remaining a clear and arduous address to her contemporary society; the narrativisation of the woe, the discomfort and misfortune of the self as a narrative of anticipation and representation of a collective potential, is the key that makes Moutzan-Martinegou's work a meaningful gesture.

In any case, I would like to reiterate that my goal here is not to cast Moutzan-Martinegou's writing as a direct ancestor of Ernaux's style of self-fashioning. Rather, her work is used here to explore the stretching possibilities of a fledgling notion of literary criticism; if our concern could be projected onto the axis of temporality, we could see the dynamic construction of a literary model that deliberately tends to establish a channel of communication with both: past generations of oppressed women and future communities of readers who will eventually benefit from the narrator's call to action in the present. At the end of Ernaux's *The Years*, her vision of the slippery narrative of a life

10 For the first edition of Moutzan-Martinegou's autobiography, published (and heavily censored) by her son in 1881, 49 years after her death, see Martinegos 1881.

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experience emerges eloquently in that vision of temporality that complacently devours any sense of past, present, or future:

> This will not be a work of remembrance in the usual sense, aimed at putting a life into story, creating an explanation of self. She will go within herself only to retrieve the world, the memory and imagination of its bygone days, grasp the changes in ideas, beliefs, and sensibility, the transformation of people and the subject that she has seen. (Ernaux 2018: 228)

The use of family history and social background as a framework for the discursive representation of the self has a long genealogy in France; we could trace it backward to Marcel Proust and beyond, and forward until Edouard Louis's work. If Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* invents a writing "that inextricably links the intimate, the social and the political" (Ernaux 2009), the same could be said of nineteenth-century Ionian autobiography. Yet in both cases under discussion here – that of Moutzan-Martinegou, whose parents belonged to the oldest and noblest local families, and that of Lountzis, himself an aristocrat and the richest landowner on his island – we should ask whether it is legitimate to speak of 'autosociobiography' when this term is usually employed in the context of upward social mobility. What happens when individuals from privileged social backgrounds try to free themselves from the constraints imposed by their class? The claim of class discomfort with its existential implications, whether it appears as discourse or performance, embodies its own dramatisation and propounds its own truth. Moreover, experiences of exclusion can take a multitude of forms that are not always measurable in terms of economic power. On the other hand, discussions about the truth of personal experience and the fictional construction of the self must take into account that the desire 'to be someone else' often only partially reflects a social condition. Even then, behind the violent discursive backlash of seeming 'class discomfort', the multiple intersections of numerous identities can be traced.

Autoethnographical Ambivalence

Ermannos Lountzis claims a future for his milieu: the bilingual, (micro)cosmopolitan, and culturally hybrid intellectual elite of the Ionian Islands (Leivadiotis 2022: 23–44, 145–52). His autobiography highlights the search for a new

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category of excellence: no longer that of high birth and lineage, but that of education. The Greek War of Independence suddenly gave the local elite a new perspective, namely channelling a pre-national system of power into a new, nationally determined order, a process which, after the necessary adjustments, would transform the hierarchy of class into a hierarchy of erudition. If the interest of these Ionian individuals in the construction of valid versions of the self through education has an evident origin in post-Enlightenment rationalism, their anxiety to establish a new social hierarchy, that of intellectual excellence, reveals the aspirations of a new era (Tampaki 2004).

For the Ionian Islands, this new era is the transitional period in which the eventual union with the Kingdom of Greece was discussed and prepared, a phase that heralded the end of a long colonial experience and the beginning of a national future. For the nobility, it represented not only the end of an age of privilege, but also the beginning of the uncomfortable friction with the exigencies of a new economic model enabled by the spread of private property, the post-Enlightenment dynamics of individualisation, and the shift in the balance of power between social, economic, and cultural capital brought about by incipient modernity. His aristocratic background notwithstanding, Lountzis was a member of the Party of Radicals that strongly promoted social reform and the union with Greece. In his historiographical work, he criticised his own social class, the local nobility, as a regressive force (Arvanitakis 2014: 302 and Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 194–5), his own attitude being that of a cosmopolitan patriot who embraced the pre-national flexibility of cultural, linguistic, and religious identities while envisioning cautiously but warmly an entirely new potential for the self in a national perspective.

Lountzis's reaction to the highly complex historical situation in which he finds himself consists in the gradual renunciation of class privilege and the adoption of an alternative, imaginary system of hierarchy, a new citizenship of intellectuals. Against this backdrop, the author's self-reflection is historicised by the linearity of a narrative of woe and the enthusiastic anticipation of an era of social progress:

> My future, which then smiled to my imagination, how did it play out? The inner happiness that my soul was looking for, did it find it? Was there a year from that time without regret, without deception, without the destruction of a beautiful idea? Constant struggle against despair, look at my existence. See how my life is wasted. (Lountzis 1962: 89)

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> The future is for us, not the past! God placed eyes on the forehead, not on the neck. To the past: respect and worship! But we shall live again in those who are to come; just as those who are now dead lived first for themselves and then in us. (Lountzis 1978: 83)[11]

Taken together, education, the aristocracy of knowledge, and a quasi-ostentatious cosmopolitanism constitute a carefully considered and selected response to the challenges raised by the end of an era, an Ionian *fin de siècle*. In Lountzis's 1862 autobiography, intimate-private, public-local, national-historical, and cosmopolitan-global narratives are woven into an autoethnographic palimpsest. The author's ambivalent posture departs from and returns to a dialectics of cultural and political consistency: in the very experience of progress and regression, the self, like the nation, tends towards the essential freedom of the spirit that is cardinal in the Hegelian system. Lountzis, who studied philosophy with Eduard Gans in Berlin, does not close his eyes to failure, to the false and misleading impressions created by personal or national efforts at self-awareness; rather, his growing frustration is channelled into other forms of self-narrative, such as his letters to his sons. It seems that Lountzis is negotiating with history and the *Zeitgeist* to make sense of himself, now that the excellence of rank has been invalidated and economic power requires a constant friction with people that wears him down:

> I can't go on incessantly dulling my head with peasants, with tenants, with lawyers, with bills, with arguments, with quarrels. I wasn't born for such things. I didn't think in my youth that dealing with such things would be my destiny. (Lountzis 1962: 105)[12]

Lountzis's class-related discomfort takes an interesting turn: in a sense, his efforts to escape the constraints of his aristocratic background and to become a worthy citizen of the land of intellectual endeavour are reminiscent of the modern project of individualisation through detachment from collective consciousness and the construction of autonomous self-perception, a process that is validated by *Selbstbildung* and reflected in the literary genre of autobiography.

11 Quoted from Lountzis's *Miscellanea*, a biting satirical commentary on local society that was published in Malta in 1843 (Lountzis 1843 and Lountzis 1978).

12 Quoted from a letter to his sons dated 18 September 1860, in which Lountzis complains about the inconveniences and difficulties of running their estate in Zakynthos.

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On the other hand, in the specific case of Lountzis's autobiographical notes, we cannot help but notice the performative aspects of his strategy of self-narration: the two versions of his biography, the earlier one being written in Italian and the later one being written in Greek, represent an utterly autoethnographic gesture that must be read in parallel with the author's overarching historiographical narrative of Ionian (dis)continuity in time and space. The autoethnographic echo in narratives that encapsulate interconnected personal experiences and socio-cultural consciousness can, from the vantage point of the historical *longue durée*, display a way of reflexively perceiving and performing the self. In other words, autoethnographic self-fashioning has the potential to give space and voice to embodied, experiential, intersubjective and extended articulations of the self, socially constructed or narratively produced, because it allows for an overview of the complexity of identity. The tension between the whole and the part, the unit and the totality, the particular and the system is seen as a constitutive element of micro and macro mechanisms of community building: community understood from a social, cultural, or national point of view. In this context, narrative strategies can act as amplifiers for voices and stories that emerge at the margins (geographical, linguistic, cultural, religious) of a dominant national culture, as well as for parallel marginal developments in different social groupings at the core of a national construct (Smith/Watson 2010: 258–9, Twellmann 2022: 95–7, Bochner/Ellis 2016: 65). When, with the benefit of hindsight, Lountzis recounts the bewilderment that his educational choices caused in his younger self, the moral-personal and the political-public are intertwined in the form of a causal relationship:

> I felt like an absolute master of myself, but the use I made of my free will quickly brought saturation and heaviness [...] Like the political world, the moral world cannot survive with anarchy. My philosophy led me to such an anarchy that I did not understand it and could not explain it, but I felt its effects involuntarily and instinctively, especially in the emptiness of my soul and in the search for something unknown. (Lountzis 1962: 51)

Katerina Tiktopoulou summarises Lountzis's intellectual trajectory as follows:

> The effort to make sense of the past (for the benefit of the present and the future) is undoubtedly what characterises his spirituality, at least in the years after 1850, and what led him to write both his historical works and

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> the story of his individuality, his autobiography. The same man observes, analyses, and writes the history of the past of his island, of his nation, and of Christianity, and at the same time, almost in parallel, he observes, analyses, and narrates his own self. (Chrysanthopoulos et al. 2015: 189)

In Lountzis's self-narration, the personal and the social are entangled in an ascending spiral in which the (personal) struggle for truth meets the (social) struggle for a progress that is understood, in idealistic-cum-eschatological terms, as driven by divine providence.[13] No surprise, then, that the author describes in great detail what he witnessed in Paris in the summer of 1830: the upheavals of the July Revolution provide an indirect commentary on the events surrounding the deposition of King Otto in Greece (Lemousia 2018: 33), but they are also linked to his own philosophical adventure which led him to intellectual breakdown and the eventual redemptive embrace of German idealism (Lountzis 1962: 59–60).[14]

Lountzis is first and foremost a historian, even when he is writing about himself. His research focuses on local history, and his narrative attempts to reconceptualise and recontextualise the cosmopolitan experience and the unique cultural imprint of a postcolonial insularity on the cusp of the transition from the pre-national periphery of the empire to the centre of the modern nation-state. His autobiography is a field of autoethnographical exercise (or even play): he writes about his own experience of the world, and his account is based on personal memories of the years of his youth and education. In a double gesture that embodies the ambivalence of his cultural hybridity, he writes about his life first in Italian (around 1861) and immediately afterwards in Greek (around 1862). Tellingly, both gestures (and both narratives)

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13 In a letter to his son Anastasios (November 1859), we read: "[T]he idea of duty is engraved in your heart. It is through this idea that our individual existence is connected with the order and system of the universal world. When we fulfil our duty, we are fulfilling with our individuality the laws that govern the universe, in other words, we are fulfilling the plan of divine providence." (Lountzis 1962: 89)

14 Ermannos Lountzis's narrativisation of the 'German turn' in his intellectual orientation can also be observed in the correspondence with his sons (letter "Paris, 4th November 1857"): "Since my intellectual regeneration in my youth took place after my passage from France to Germany, it follows that I am more suited to Germany. I find the German world more suited to my habits and desires. Perhaps living too much in the ideal world has harmed me and stimulated my imagination in such a way that it is easily excited, and as a result I often end up a stranger or an infant in practical life." (Lountzis 1962: 76)

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remain incomplete. In a way, he performs his own individualisation, writing about social events or cultural phenomena from a 'first-person' perspective while simultaneously performing his own transition from the cosmopolitan background of his Venetian education to the noviciate in Greek culture.

Such an account cannot be understood unless it is read in parallel with Lountzis's historiographical achievements. Only then do we realise that for Lountzis, the formation of the self serves an ultimate purpose, the formation of the national subject: an individual who, by living a virtuous life, reifies the nation and, at the same time, is perfected by the virtuous character of his polity and the righteous course of the nation. Self-narration as a speculum of nation-building provided a space for the negotiation of identity at a moment in Ionian history when the public debate on linguistic, cultural, and national orientation was at its height. Two years after Lountzis began his autobiography, the Ionian Islands were incorporated into the Greek kingdom. His view on this development was critical, if not positively scathing: for Lountzis, the reality of social progress in the historical present was an enormous disappointment.

With his idealistic vision of a social structure governed by the supremacy of education, knowledge, and virtue thwarted, his hope for progress now takes the form of a discourse about the potential of a future endorsed by a powerful past:

> But this solitude of the selfish and egoistic man in what a complete and crowded place it is transformed, for him who sees himself united with millions of others like himself; who, because of common feelings, desires, and hopes, regards them as brothers and companions in the same destiny; thus, a spiritual unity is formed, represented by that ideal body which we call a nation. In our case, the Greek family embraces all its children in one spirit; it stimulates innumerable breasts to pulsate like a single heart. Before such an idea, our miserable individuality is obliterated, and in its place we see the noisy scene of humanity; in the midst of it [we see] ourselves and with us the nation to which we belong. Our thoughts are at once enlarged by national greatness and are no longer confined to the present. Our lives are fused with the lives of those who have been, and extended to those who will be; all distance of time and place disappears, and a vast and wonderful view opens up before the gaze of our imagination. (Lountzis 1851: 5–6)

This powerful optative futurity is embodied in his autobiography and in his self-fashioning correspondence through the notion of a new social contract whose validity is derived from the local historical past, and whose preservation

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and fulfilment is left to the will of future generations. Lountzis, like many other members of the local elite – his brother Nikolo is another case in point (Leivadiotis 2018: 56–75, Leivadiotis 2022: 145–52) – suffered from a paralysing ambivalence: discouraged by the prevailing socio-historical circumstances, they withdrew from active life while at the same time clinging to a fervent idealistic belief in a social progress that was to be realised in the fullness of time, rendering the writing of the self a balancing act between personal experience and the grand framework of history.

Concluding remarks

Like Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou, Ermannos Lountzis sought to escape from the prison of socially imposed duties and expectations. They are both, as Ernaux would say, 'class defectors', evaders of the constraints of their class. Their "truth claim", what Nancy Miller called the facts, pacts, and acts of the autobiographical gesture (Miller 1992: 10), goes far beyond mere self-representation; their truth is realised and performatively completed in the very act of writing, wherein the facts of past life intersect with the pact for a better future. In their texts, they propose, produce, and live their true lives.[15] Both, albeit in slightly different ways, turn to autobiography with the same overall objective: writing is not interested in the self as such, but in the potential for change, in the progress of a community, the progress of a society in crisis.

One might conclude from this shift, this final reversal, that the Ionian subjects in question ultimately remained trapped in pre-modern schemes of understanding the self through collective subjectivities. However, if this is the case, I propose that this perspective is articulated in a quite modern way, with a heavy focus on transtemporal entanglements and accompanied by intense class criticism. The self-narration of these two nineteenth-century Ionian aristocrats encapsulates the crucial issue of the historicity of the person as a temporality under negotiation. Perhaps it was the transitional and completely unpredictable historical context that caused Moutzan-Martinegou and Lountzis

15 "What illusion to believe that we can tell the truth, and to believe that each of us has an individual and autonomous existence! How can we think that in autobiography it is the lived life that produces the text, when it is the text that produces the life!" (Lejeune 1989: 131)

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to articulate a narrative of the self and to engage in a discourse on the annulment of temporal causality. The authors' understanding of the future as an optative projection certainly gestures towards both the uncertain present of the Ionian elite and its debatable past (disputed because culturally hybrid) – theirs was an age of revolutions, political uncertainty, postcolonial hybridity, and rapid development, in which the very existence of the aristocracy, not to mention its privileges, were a matter of heated debate.

Linear and providential notions of time cannot accommodate the cracks and gaps that are already visible. The negotiated present self in its synchronic reality, the identity of the here and now, is only allowed to make sense as a projection into an indeterminate fullness of the future: the women of the future are not only the recipients but also the executors of Elisavet Moutzan-Martinegou's last will and testament, whereas the sons of Ermannos Lountzis become potential instruments for the fulfilment of the ideal of national virtue. The narrative of the self is thus performed here and now as the first act of a drama that can only be enacted in the future by its own recipients – a thought and a gesture, I suspect, that writers such as Didier Eribon, Annie Ernaux, and Edouard Louis would find rather intriguing.

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Autosociobiography and the Temporalities of Class

The Works of Kerry Hudson and Darren McGarvey

Peter Löffelbein

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 over-eager 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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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).

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> 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-

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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

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> 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.

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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.

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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).

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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).

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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.

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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

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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).

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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

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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-

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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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Writing the (Communal) Self in Spanish Contemporary Fiction

Family, Class, and Generation in Manuel Vilas and Carlos Pardo

Jobst Welge

Referring in particular to the writer Marta Sanz (*1967), Patricia López-Gay has drawn attention to a recent tendency in Spanish autofiction that she describes as "the return of the political" (López-Gay 2020: 189).[1] Sanz herself had perceived "an opening of the self towards a 'we'," "a pretension towards the communal," in autofictional works such as Carlos Pardo's *Vida de Pablo* [Life of Pablo] (2011) and Aurora Venturini's *Nosotros, los Caserta* (2011; *We, the Caserta Family* 2022) (Sanz 2014: 93). According to López-Gay, the texts in question turn away from "abstractions about the human condition" in order to "privilege the treatment of the problems of a given socio-historical present" (López-Gay 2020: 195). This, of course, could also be seen as an extension of recent autofictions' general tendency to strengthen literary fiction's relation to referentiality and reality, and thus to participate in contemporary literature's turn towards the real or the 'true', implemented, for instance, by combining fiction with elements of reportage or memoir (Donnarumma 2014; Mora 2019; Marchese 2021).

Both politically and aesthetically, these socially inflected autofictions may be understood as narratives of the self that open themselves towards the dimension of the communal and collective. This may take the form of a generational perspective, yet it may also involve techniques through which literary works interpellate their own public or readership. This latter variety has been conceptualised by Priscilla Gac-Artigas under the umbrella term *colectficción*,

1 In the following, I will provide the Spanish original for primary sources only. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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which, under recourse to examples from Latin America, she defines as "a new pact of reading in which the reader, by way of discursive, ludic, or experimental strategies, is invited to participate actively in the reconfiguration of the history represented" (Gac-Artigas 2022: 11, n.1) – an approach, she argues, that critically responds to "the triumph of individualism and the marginalisation exacerbated by economic crisis" (Gac-Artigas 2022: 22).

In a similar vein, Eva Blome has deployed the concept of autosociobiography to engage with a broad corpus of French and German literary works that exhibit a certain sociological ambition and that are specifically concerned with the category of class consciousness and social mobility. In contrast to 'conventional', subject-centred varieties of autofiction, these texts prominently make use of collectivising, generational, or genealogical frameworks to speak about the self (Blome 2020: 546). In her article, Blome cites several examples of literary representations of upward social mobility (often represented via the trope of revisiting the familial-social origins), from Annie Ernaux (*La Place* 1984) and Didier Eribon (*Retour à Reims* 2009) to Saša Stanišić (*Herkunft* 2019) (Blome 2020: 542). Furthermore, Blome highlights the central importance of *Bildung* in these narratives, characterising the genre in the following way: "Autobiographies are therefore not only to be understood as narratives of individuality or individual life paths. From a genre-theoretical perspective, their proximity to the family novel and the generational novel should also be considered." (Blome 2020: 548)

In the following, I will analyse two representative examples of contemporary socially oriented fiction in Spanish,[2] situated at the crossroads between autobiographical memoir and autofictional novel: first, the best-selling autobiographical novel *Ordesa* (2018; *Ordesa* 2020) by Manuel Vilas, and second, the autofictional novel *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* [Johann Sebastian's Journey on Foot] (2014) by Carlos Pardo. If I distinguish here between 'autobiographical' and 'autofictional', I do so in the awareness that the boundary between the two in contemporary fiction is malleable and permeable.[3] In any case, both

2 For a succinct survey of recent Spanish autofictions, see Ródenas de Moya 2015. As we will see, the narrator of Vilas's novel presents himself as more straightforwardly autobiographical. Yet as autosociobiographical texts, both works discussed here share several elements with literary autofiction. Autosociobiography may thus generally be understood as a specific subset of the genre of autofiction.

3 Similarly, Blome stresses the proximity of the autobiographical to the novelistic (see above), and López-Gay likewise subsumes Vilas's *Ordesa* under the "autofictional turn." I agree with her general observation which both stresses the 'fictional' and

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novels reinterpret the genre of autobiography/autofiction in a 'relational' and quasi-sociological manner by painting a homodiegetic family portrait (arising on the occasion of dying parents, and hence from the perspective of remembering them) with a sustained focus on the question of social class. However, as we shall see, their authors approach the issues of class, family, and generation in different ways and with the aid of diverging literary strategies, which is perhaps itself an effect of their belonging to different generations. For this reason, I will discuss the two works not in the order of their respective publication dates, but instead move from Vilas to Pardo, from the older to the younger author, and thus from generational memories of the Franco years to those of the 1990s.

Manuel Vilas: *Ordesa* (2018)

Manuel Vilas (*1962) was born to working-class parents in a town in Aragon. His novel *Ordesa* (2018) is a memorial work that approaches the author's relationship to his parents from the temporal perspective of his father's earlier (2005) and his mother's recent death (2015). While several of Vilas's earlier writings, such as the novels *España* [Spain] (2008) or *Aire nuestro* [Our air] (2009), already played with certain elements of autofiction and were concerned with the (decentred) self's relation to communities such as family or nation (Benson/Cruz Suárez 2020: 204–5), *Ordesa* marks a departure by abandoning entirely the format of a fictional novel (Behiels 2021: 208). According to his own words, Vilas's intention with *Ordesa* was "to reflect on the beauty and poetry that existed in the lives of the generation of men and women born in the thirties, the age of my parents […], to show the impudent poetry of the underprivileged in the history of Spain." (Qt. in Behiels 2021: 220)[4]

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the 'social' inflection in many examples of contemporary fiction: "In short, narratives emerge in which the autobiographical self, without denigrating its own fictionality or that of its environment, is also concerned with social issues that bring it back to the reader of its time." ["Surgen, en suma, narrativas donde el yo autobiográfico, sin denigrar su propia ficcionalidad o la de su entorno, se preocupa además por cuestiones sociales que lo devuelven al lector de su tiempo." (López-Gay 2020: 32–3)]

4 "reflejar la belleza y la poesía que hubo en las vidas de la generación de hombres y mujeres nacidos en los años treinta, la edad de mis padres […], mostrar la impúdica poesía de los desfavorecidos de la historia de España." Vilas's more recent work

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Vilas's book is notable for its overwhelmingly bleak account of the author's struggles with childhood sexual abuse, alcoholism, adultery, divorce, an unsatisfying existence as a high school teacher, and a troubled relationship with his two teenage sons. The narrative considers almost all aspects of life, past and present, in light of the memory of the autodiegetic narrator's dead parents. While in this regard the narrator appears to transcend the solipsistic focus on his personal life, the novel in fact remains securely anchored in his perspective. Vilas repeatedly insists on his class background (his father worked as a travelling textile salesman), yet his self-identification with family and community, sometimes tinged by vaguely Marxist rhetoric, pays scarce attention to how the author-narrator – who at this point has already become a fairly successful writer – came to acquire an education and a social role that differs markedly from that of his parents during the Franco years. Instead, in his attempt to dignify his parents' experience, he tends to glorify the material remnants of their life: "No aristocratic monuments, no VIP monuments, only ones born of the Spanish lower middle class of the 1960s, which are very beautiful, and are the mirror of my soul." (Vilas 2020: 139)[5]

Occasionally, however, the narrator does comment on the difference between his own experiences and those of his (grand)parents – for instance, a photo of his grandmother, in whose eyes he detects the traces of "centuries of Spanish peasantry" (Vilas 2020: 145-6)[6] – prompts him to remark that it was ultimately due to Franco that he was given the opportunity to read and write. This observation inserts his personal experience into a broader, generational perspective on historical change that encompasses Franco's ambivalent role with regard to Spain's conflicted relationship with modernity:

> [M]y unnamed grandmother [...] is the daughter of a forgotten land, the lands of Somontano, and I can name those lands and those villages now because I went to university – which is to say, thanks to the dictator Francisco Franco Bahamonde, who laid the foundations for Cecilia's grandchildren to learn to read and write, who laid the foundations of the Spanish middle

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Alegría [Joy] (2019), dealing with the international success of *Ordesa* and the author's relationship to his sons, can also be classified as autofictional.

5 "Ningún prodigio aristocrático, ningún prodigio vip, solo los prodigios que emergen de la clase media-baja española de los años sesenta, que son muy hermosos, y son el espejo de mi alma." (Vilas 2018: 176)

6 "siglos de campesinado español" (Vilas 2018: 186).

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> class, who set Spain's political modernisation process back several decades and did so out of ignorance and stupidity. (Vilas 2020: 146)[7]

Nevertheless, it is not fully apparent how his frustrating experiences and low income as a school teacher would justify the narrator's self-perception as a "proletarian" (Vilas 2018: 113). As for the issue of social mobility, he adopts a largely defeatist perspective:

> We hadn't managed to escape the lower middle class; at best, we might have moved from the lower class to the middle class. Sometimes I think it would be preferable to be utterly destitute. Because if you're just lower class, you still have hope. (Vilas 2020: 73)[8]

The narrator's near-complete identification with his father is accompanied by a strong sense of stasis and immobility, resulting in the emphatic affirmation of a 'we' marked by a common victimhood: "Our world has always been barns, poverty, stink, alienation, disease, catastrophe." (Vilas 2020: 223)[9]

The tone is frequently one of political fatalism, denying the possibility of emancipation, of upward social mobility, and even of individuation and personal development, for example via the dynamic of the oedipal struggle. Accordingly, the narrator/son tends to underscore not so much the differences, but rather the analogies between the generations; in fact, the life of the son echoes and replicates his father's to the point of a complete, pathological identification:

> He didn't sell much fabric and I don't sell many books – we're the same man. […] We are living the same life – with different contexts, but it's the

7 "[M]i abuela innominada […] es hija de una tierra olvidada, las tierras del Somontano, y ahora yo nombro esas tierras y esos pueblos gracias a que fui a la universidad, es decir, gracias al dictador Francisco Franco Bahamonde, que sentó las bases para que los nietos de Cecilia supiéramos leer y escribir, que sentó las bases de la clase media española, que retrasó la modernidad política de España unas cuantas décadas y lo hizo por ignorancia y por simpleza." (Vilas 2018: 186)

8 "No habíamos logrado salir de la clase media-baja, como mucho tal vez habíamos viajado de la clase baja a la clase media. A veces pienso que sería preferible ser completamente pobre. Porque si eres de clase baja, aún tienes esperanza." (Vilas 2018: 92)

9 "Lo nuestro fue siempre el establo, la pobreza, el hedor, la alienación, la enfermedad y la catástrofe." (Vilas 2018: 276)

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> same life. [...] Nor do I want to end up being somebody other than my father – I'm terrified of having my own identity. I'd rather be my father. (Vilas 2020: 165–6)[10]

A similar sort of parallel exists between the narrator and his mother: "My mother was pursuing social esteem, which was fleeting, and I am pursuing literary esteem, which is also fleeting." (Vilas 2020: 255)[11]

Generally speaking, Vilas's project is symptomatic of what appears to be a general tendency in recent autobiographically inspired works, namely to assume a more sympathetic stance vis-à-vis one's parents. In *Ordesa*, this perspective informs a passage that implicitly raises a claim of autobiographical truthfulness by repudiating the autofictional approach: "It would do us a lot of good to write about our families without any fiction creeping in, without storifying. Just recounting what happened, or what we think happened. People conceal their progenitors' lives." (Vilas 2020: 102)[12] This claim to veracity is further underscored by the insertion into the novel of a total of eight black-and-white photographs, six of which are more or less aleatory snapshots of Vilas's parents. Thus, commenting on an image of his mother and father dancing on a festive occasion (the photo had lain hidden in a box for many years), the narrator dwells on the fact that they have not left behind substantial evidence of their existence:

> I have very few material objects of theirs, few gravitations of matter, such as photos. [...] The level of my parents' obliviousness to their own lives is an enigma to me. [...] The extent to which they obliterated their lives is a kind of art. My parents were a couple of Rimbauds: they rejected memory, they didn't think about themselves. Though the two of them went unnoticed, they did produce me, and they sent me to school and I learned to write, and now I'm writing their lives. That's where they went wrong – they should

10 "Él vendía poco textil y yo vendo pocos libros, somos el mismo hombre. [...] Estamos viviendo la misma vida, con contextos diferentes, pero es la misma vida. [...] Tampoco quiero llegar a ser alguien distinto de mi padre, me causa terror llegar a tener una identidad propia. Prefiero ser mi padre." (Vilas 2018: 210)

11 "Mi madre perseguía la estimación social, que se evaporó, y yo persigo la estimación literaria, que también se está evaporando." (Vilas 2018: 313)

12 "Nos vendría muy bien escribir sobre nuestras familias, sin ficción alguna, sin novelas. Solo contando lo que pasó, o lo que creemos que pasó. La gente oculta la vida de sus progenitores." (Vilas 2018: 127)

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> have left me to wallow in the most radical and complete and irremediable illiteracy. (Vilas 2020: 96–7)[13]

This passage exemplifies a common paradox in autosociobiographical texts: the narrating self typically and necessarily holds a 'hegemonic' position with regard to the 'subalternity of the original class', which as such cannot be articulated and is always already subsumed by the explanatory competence of the 'educated' narrator (Blome et al. 2022: 6). In this perspective, then, the relatively few photos included in *Ordesa*, testifying to a comparative lack of material memory, propel the narrator's memorial and reconstructive activity.

Similar to procedures employed in a variant of autofiction dubbed *récit de filiation* by Dominique Viart, Vilas uses these images as nodal points for "archaeological reconstructions" of family memories within his narrative (Viart 2019: 11).[14] In fact, autosociobiographical works often include photographs or ekphrastic scenes (as does, for example, Ernaux's *Les Années* 2008; see Blome 2020: 552; Venzon 2024: 139–48) in order to highlight temporal differences and instigate imaginative projections in the act of commemoration.[15] While photographs as material traces attest to an indexical 'reality', they also provide an occasion for the narrator to supply information, to imagine (or to speculate) what the circumstances were or might have been. This is precisely the function they serve in *Ordesa*: they confront the narrator with the realm of mystery and darkness that separates him from his parents' existence in the past, especially prior to his own birth. This holds even more true for his relation to his grandparents, whose disappearance without material traces is allegorised as a subaltern social condition that precludes the very possibility of 'having' a family or familial memory:

13 "Me han quedado muy pocas cosas materiales de ellos, pocas gravitaciones de la materia, como las fotos. […] El grado de inconsciencia de mis padres sobre sus propias vidas me parece un enigma. […] El grado de omisión de sus propias vidas me parece arte. Fueron dos Rimbauds, ellos, mis padres: no querían la memoria, no pensaron a sí mismos. Fueron inadvertidos, pero me engendraron a mí, y me enviaron al colegio y aprendí a escribir, y ahora escribo sus vidas; se descuidaron ahí, debieron haberme abandonado en medio del más revolucionario y radical e inapelable analfabetismo." (Vilas 2018: 120–21)

14 On the function of photography in auto(socio)biography, see Gudmundsdóttir 2003; Blome 2020: 553–7.

15 For a detailed discussion of the post-traumatic function of photographs in autofiction, see the classic study by Hirsch 1997.

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> I wouldn't recognise my grandfathers if they came back to life, because I never saw them while they were alive, plus I don't have a single photo and no one ever told me about them. I search for them now among the dead, and my hand fills with ash and excrement, and those are the symbols and heraldic crest of the global working class: ashes and excrement. And oblivion. (Vilas 2020: 148)[16]

As in the works of Annie Ernaux and other writers whose texts form part of the emerging canon of autosociobiography, the narrator of *Ordesa* repeatedly fleshes out the cultural tastes of a specific, historically situated class: the clothes, the furniture, the consumer goods that are typical attributes of the 1960s Spanish lower middle class in general, and his parents in particular (Vilas 2018: 136). There are also certain tell-tale habits such as the mother's (ruinous) obsession with the game of Bingo; when the author is awarded a literary prize, she even steals the prize money (Vilas 2018: 144). At times, Vilas's penchant for universalising aphorisms glosses over what often begins as observations of social or psychological peculiarities. For instance, his mother's incapacity to earn enough money is quickly turned into a near-universal condition, thus somewhat diluting the narrator's attempts at sociological description and analysis:

> There was no way to make money. I think that's hereditary. I'm poor too. I don't have a pot to piss in – luckily, nobody's got a pot to piss in these days. And that can be liberating. If they're smart, young people will pursue a wandering life, chaos, job insecurity, and freedom. And skilled poverty, morally deactivated poverty – that is, group poverty. It's a good solution: poverty as a collective phenomenon, pooled having-not. (Vilas 2020: 116)[17]

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16 "No reconocería a mis abuelos si volvieran a la vida porque nunca los vi mientras estuvieron vivos y porque no tengo ni una triste foto de ellos ni me hablaron de ellos. Los busco ahora entre los muertos, y mi mano se llena de ceniza y excrementos, y esos son los emblemas y la heráldica de la clase trabajadora universal: ceniza y excrementos. Y olvido." (Vilas 2018: 189)

17 "No había manera de hacer dinero. Y eso creo que es hereditario. Yo también soy pobre. No tengo donde caerme muerto, lo bueno es que ahora nadie tiene donde caerse muerto. Y eso puede ser una liberación. Ojalá los jóvenes busquen la vida errante, el caos, la inestabilidad laboral y la libertad. Y la pobreza apañada, la pobreza desactivada moralmente, es decir, la pobreza en sociedad. Es una buena solución: la pobreza como fundamento colectivo; el no-tener mancomunado." (Vilas 2018: 144)

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To give yet another example of this type of universalising rhetoric: "If I touch my kitchen, I touch my mother's soul. If I touch all the kitchens on earth, I touch the bondage of millions of women [...]." (Vilas 2020: 175)"[18] Even though Vilas's autobiographical account is a raw, heterodox, and often emotionally touching piece of writing, and even though its recuperation of a private past consistently emphasises the subject's ties to a social and familial origin, the narrative is constrained by a solipsistic perspective and encumbered by a pervasive sense of immobility.

Carlos Pardo: *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* (2014)

In an interview about *Lejos de Kakania* [Far away from Kakania] (2019), the most recent instalment in his trilogy of structurally autonomous, autofictional coming-of-age novels, Carlos Pardo (*1975) characterised his novelistic project as "a literary as well as a sociological experiment. I write my life like the symptom of an epoch. Not because my life is very interesting, but because it is a common one." (qt. in Velázquez 2019)[19] Playing with the genres of the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque, the first novel of the series, *Vida de Pablo*, paints a portrait of young, socially marginalised artists and writers as typical representatives of the author's generation.[20] In *Lejos de Kakania*, meanwhile, Pardo tells a story in which high art and friendship function as a counterweight to a mediocre reality, a narrative explicitly inspired by the literary models of intellectual autobiography and socially inflected autofiction (Annie Ernaux, V.S. Naipaul). In another interview, Pardo commented as follows on his interest in the literary/autobiographical exploration of the issue of social mobility:

18 "Si acaricio mi cocina, acaricio el alma de mi madre. Si acaricio todas las cocinas de la tierra, acaricio la esclavitud de millones de mujeres [...]." (Vilas 2018: 221)

19 "un experimento literario a la vez que sociológico. Escribo mi vida como un síntoma de época. No porque mi vida sea muy interesante, sino porque es común."

20 It thus roughly conforms to the characteristics of "generational autobiographies" defined by John Downton Hazlett as "autobiographical forms that simultaneously make explicit the personal dimension of generational thought and the collective element in autobiographical discourse" (Downton Hazlett 1998: 6).

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> Change of class [desclasamiento][21] is one of the great themes of literature: Rousseau, Stendhal… and so on up to Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Didier Eribon. I list only French writers because they seem to be the experts of the genre. But evidently it is a universal theme: Keller, Fontane, Naipaul, etc. I am interested in the different ways of approaching it. For example, change of class as an upward movement, which is often accompanied by 'shame'; but also the downward movement experienced by so many proletarianised writers, and the 'guilt' that goes with it. Or the demise of the dandy, which is beyond guilt and shame. (Santano 2024)[22]

In what follows, I will focus on the middle part of the series, *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian*, which contributes to the genre of autosociobiography in the form of a family narrative.[23] The communal and social orientation of this work is readily apparent, not least because the first-person narrator refers to his family in the first-person plural from the very beginning:

> So we have two sick parents and five siblings who can't agree on anything. I am the youngest. The others are a year apart: Fernando, the oldest, is a guitarist and music producer; then there is Juan, ground crew at Barajas airport; Miguel, singer in Fernando's band; and Javier, an itinerant waiter. Seven years younger than Javier, I am a bookseller. None of us have gone to university. (Pardo 2016: 15)[24]

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21 The Spanish term is adapted from the French *déclassement*, which is much discussed in French sociology, where it frequently, if not always, carries negative connotations, in the sense of "loss" of class. See Bourdieu 1978.

22 "El desclasamiento es uno de los grandes temas de la literatura: Rousseau, Stendhal… y así hasta Annie Ernaux, Edouard Louis o Didier Eribon. Cito solo franceses porque parecen los expertos del género. Pero evidentemente es un tema universal: Keller, Fontane, Naipaul, etc. Me interesan las diversas formas de enfocarlo. Por ejemplo, el desclasamiento hacia arriba, que muchas veces viene acompañado de la 'vergüenza'; pero también el desclasamiento hacia abajo de tantos escritores proletarizados, donde late la 'culpa.' O el desclasamiento del dandi, que está más allá de la culpa y la vergüenza."

23 On recent re-elaborations of the genre of (auto-)fictional family narratives, see Artwińska et al. 2024.

24 "Así que tenemos a dos padres enfermos y a cinco hermanos que no se ponen de acuerdo. Yo soy el pequeño. Los demás van con un año de diferencia: Fernando, el mayor, es guitarrista y productor musical; después va Juan, personal de muelle en el aeropuerto de Barajas; Miguel, cantante en el grupo de Fernando; y Javier, camarero itinerante. Siete años después de Javier, yo, librero. No tenemos estudios."

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This tendency to see the self as part of a group applies not only to the social class of the family, in this case a rather poor one from the lower middle class, but also to the age cohort of the generation, which, as a narrative framing device, has recently made something of a comeback, supplying a broader pattern of meaning and cohesion after the demise of the grands récits (Weigel 2006: 108). Toward the end of the novel, the narrator joins his publisher (named Paca) at a dance club, where they find themselves among a group of like-minded writers and literary agents (Pardo 2014: 185). The generational perspective leads to a fusion of the self with the group, but also to a kind of sociological (self-)observation regarding the economically precarious status of the young 'creative class' and its "specific political-cultural habitus" (Weigel 2006: 93). Again, this observation is made in the first-person plural: "We, the copies, as we were dancing there, were the originals. We were the people. United by our tastes, united by consumption." (Pardo 2014: 187)[25]

The narrator thus articulates the symptom of what he himself calls the "simulacrum of youth," and he does so in the spirit of a sociology of taste somewhat reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu. The latter is tied to a social formation and potential political consciousness that the narrator repeatedly links to the term *pueblo* (Pardo 2014: 150; 152-3) in an apparent attempt to re-signify this rather traditional concept of community or political subjecthood:

> So, to sum up, when those who are precarious realise that they are poor […], they will be able to wake up as a people and invent a new political force; that is, when the children of the weak middle class, be they students or not, [perennial] earners of the minimum wage, understand that with the years, with age, from thirty-five onwards, they will pass from being precarious to simply poor, the poor before the bourgeois imaginary, but without the strength of the proletariat, without forming a new social class, these poor, then, if they wake up, will get down to work. I hate to belong to a generation that grows old with such naivety.[26] (Pardo 2014: 187–8)

25 "Nosotros, las copias, allí, bailando, éramos los originales. Éramos pueblo. Unidos por nuestros gustos, unidos por el consumo."

26 "Así que, resumiendo, cuando los precarios se den cuenta de que son pobres […] podrán despertarse como pueblo e inventar una nueva fuerza política; es decir, cuando los hijos de la débil clase media, estudiantes o no, mileuristas de antes, comprendan que con los años, con la edad, a partir de los treinta y cinco pasarán de precarios a simples pobres, los pobres anteriores al imaginario burgués, pero sin la fuerza del proletariado, sin formar una nueva clase social, estos pobres, entonces,

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Yet in contrast to the fatalist *Ordesa*, Pardo's novel holds out the possibility of social and political emancipation even as it zeroes in on an economically depressed period in the recent history of Spain. On the one hand, the narrator stresses repeatedly the feelings of shame attached to poverty and the restrictions imposed by social class; on the other hand, the narrator's life is marked from early on by his interest in high culture, which is frequently mediated or complemented by popular media. For instance, an entire chapter is dedicated to the figure of the dandy, a social and cultural role model followed by the autofictional protagonist as well as his brothers. The dandy, as influentially defined by Charles Baudelaire in the long essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863; *The Painter of Modern Life* 1964), transcends the constraints of social class and familial belonging, exemplifying instead a strategy to achieve socio-cultural distinction by bypassing, or not depending on, economic success.[27] Similar to Vilas, Pardo makes frequent use of aphoristic sentences, in this case, in order to provide a transhistorical definition of dandyism: "The dandy is a moralist who has not understood economic transaction." (Pardo 2014: 56)[28] While the dandy appears to be self-centred in his defiance of contemporary bourgeois society, Pardo's use of the concept suggests ways in which the self-centred genre of autofiction may open itself up not only to horizontal relations (family, community), but also to historical analogies – indeed, ever since the *bohème* of the nineteenth century, the figure of the artist has been represented in literature as originating from, and transcending, precarious economic circumstances (Bremerich 2018: 6).

Such historical analogies may in turn influence the self-fashioning of the subject. At the age of sixteen, for example, the narrator-protagonist is obsessed with a TV series called *The Strauss Dynasty* (dir. Marvin Chomsky, 1991) which embodies all his youthful aspirations: "aestheticism, myth, and utopia" (Pardo

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si despiertan, se pondrán manos a la obra. Odio pertenecer a una generación que envejece con tanta ingenuidad."

27 According to Baudelaire, the dandy represents "a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow" (Baudelaire 1964: 28) ["une espèce nouvelle d'aristocratie, d'autant plus difficile à rompre qu'elle sera basée sur les facultés les plus précieuses, les plus indestructibles, et sur les dons célestes que le travail et l'argent ne peuvent conférer" (Baudelaire 1968: 11)].

28 "El dandi es un moralista que no ha comprendido la transacción económica."

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2014: 49)[29]. Describing this fascination in retrospect, the narrator suggests that his former behaviour of cultural mimicry followed the model provided by the patrilinear generational saga about the family of Austrian composers:

> The trot of the monarchical revival of the Europe that Strauss senior knew, the youthful revolutionary effervescence of Strauss junior, and, already in his maturity, the nationalist dissatisfaction of a century in free fall. One sensed these things, above all, in the hair: from the Chateaubriand hairstyle to the dishevelled look with tragic sideburns typical of forty-eight, the nihilistic sideburns attached to the moustache of the failed revolution, and the patriotic beard of sixty-something. I tried to emulate the sideburns of the young Johann. (Pardo 2014: 49)[30]

In fact, the black-and-white author photograph in the inner book flap of *El viaje* still shows the author with those "nihilistic sideburns". If the dandy is an anachronistic figure, the transtemporal analogy between Chateaubriand, the Baudelairean dandy, and the dandies of the novel is an effective and playful way to direct the reader's attention not only towards the youthful desire to break free from one's own time and circumstances, but also towards general patterns of social distinction. Art and literature (mediated by popular culture) set up models to be emulated, and thus serve the purpose of social individuation. Similarly, the narrator tells us about his (and his mother's) obsession with two other decadence-themed films, Luchino Visconti's *The Innocent* (1976, itself based on Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1892 novel *L'innocente*), and Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of Proust's *Un amour de Swann* (1984) (Pardo 2016: 49-50).

The figure of the dandy conveys a sense of simulated upward mobility (Pardo 2016: 57), already bearing the marks of disillusion, but also of revolt against normative conventions. With respect to the generation of the late 'baby boomers' born in the Spain of the 1970s, the posture of the dandy responds, according to Pardo, to the failure of the promise of normalcy and the constant

29 "esteticismo, mito y utopía".

30 "El trote del renacer monárquico de la Europa que conoció Strauss padre, la efervescencia revolucionaria juvenil de Strauss hijo y, ya en la madurez de éste, la insatisfacción nacionalista de un siglo en caída libre. Uno percibía estas cosas, sobre todo, en el cabello: del peinado Chateaubriand al revuelto con trágicas patillas del cuarenta y ocho, las nihilistas patillas unidas al bigote de la revolución fracasada, y la barba patriótica de sesenta y pico. Yo intenté emular las patillas del joven Johann."

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experience of precarious employment; it is "a group failure experienced as a personal decision." (Pardo 2014: 58)[31] Building on the dialectical relation between the dandy and modern mass society already present in Baudelaire, Pardo's Spanish dandies are a symptom of the unimpeded capitalism of the 1990s:

> And his life as an object is an act of economic terrorism between surplus value and its degradation. The loss of exchange value suggests the fate of the individual in the age of greedy relationships. The dandy assumes the failure of normality in the epoch of the free market, of competition, of the masses. (Pardo 2014: 59)[32]

If in Baudelaire (or, for that matter, in Barbey D'Aurevilly's *Du dandysme et de George Brummel* 1845), the individual dandy is already readable as a social type, Pardo's 'Marxist' characterisation of this figure, sustained by terms such as "individual" and "epoch", serves to abstract from the concrete family constellation and thus to suggest a broader, if only half-serious, sociological interpretation. Yet, in contrast to Vilas's novel, Pardo's autofictional self acknowledges that he has "definitively left" the social class he thought he would belong to forever, and that he has, at the same time, acquired a "collective consciousness" (Pardo 2014: 66).[33] Even if the protagonist is too "ugly" to fully succeed in embodying this type, the dandy's posture of non-simultaneity, of anachronism, amounts to a political stance: "It is a subversion of the present. The anachronistic is political. […] To be anachronistic is to be young in a closed world." (Pardo 2014: 71)[34]

When the narrator eventually leaves this phase of (collective) dandyism behind, its inherent anachronism is now transferred to the function of literature itself. As a coming-of-age-narrative, *El viaje* describes the genesis of a literary author – Carlos Pardo – who, as a youth, has turned to literature and poetry precisely as a means to transcend his social milieu and circumstances: "In a

31 "un fracaso de grupo vivido como una decisión personal".

32 "Y su vida como objeto es un acto de terrorismo económico entre so plusvalía y su degradación. La pérdida de valor de cambio sugiere el destino del individuo en la época de las relaciones ávidas. El dandi asume el fracaso de la normalidad en la época del libre mercado, de la competencia, de la masa."

33 "toma de conciencia colectiva".

34 "Es una subversión de la actualidad. Lo anacrónico es político. […] Ser anacrónico es ser joven en un mundo clausurado. Y resistirse."

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sense, literature was a way of inventing a past of my own, […] so alien (because I didn't want my life to have anything to do with my circumstances) that it compensated me for being the loser I was beginning to know I was." (Pardo 2014: 98–9)[35] Again, this individual strategy, eventually resulting in the narrator's becoming an author, is echoed by a general "sociological phenomenon" (Pardo 2014: 99)[36]: His friends from college, too, have become members of the 'creative' class in reaction to society's failed promise of equal opportunities. If the topics of the dandy and of literary/creative practice embody this principle of anachronism on the level of the novel's characters – both through the social persona of the dandy itself and through the recovery of this type from the culture of the nineteenth century – the novel features yet another, more sustained element of temporal achronicity, as we will now see.

In *Ordesa*, the narrator has the (somewhat unmotivated) habit of calling his family members by the names of classical composers, so that his father is consistently referred to as "Johann Sebastián Bach" (Vilas 2018: 228). In the case of Pardo's novel, its puzzling title alludes to the long voyage on foot from Arnstadt to Lübeck that Johann Sebastian Bach undertook in 1705 in order to meet the organist Dieterich Buxtehude. This event is the subject of an entire dedicated chapter, even though it lacks any explicit connection to the rest of the autofictional narrative. Yet subtle allusions to Bach's self-realisation through art as well as the compositional method of the fugue (Pardo 2016: 133) encourage the reader to look for parallels. This way of transcending the individual's life story and its familial and generational context suggests an intertextual proximity to other, comparable stories of social ascent; in short, it creates a "community of similar life paths" (Blome 2020: 549). In this sense, the autosociobiographical dimension of the novel goes beyond the immediate sense of social and/or familial embeddedness: it effectively constructs a historical and cultural echo chamber for the narrator's personal experiences.

This approach is also evident when the narrator notes the absence of a *pueblo* as a political entity: "We weren't the people, we weren't those at the bottom, we were the population." (Pardo 2014: 158)[37] To counter this lacuna, he imaginatively connects with a virtual community of "unreal persons" (Pardo

35 "En cierto sentido, la literatura era una manera de inventar un pasado propio, […] de tan ajeno (porque yo no quería que mi vida tuviera que ver con mis circunstancias), compensara el perdedor que empezaba a saber que yo era."

36 "fenómeno sociológico".

37 "No éramos pueblo, no éramos los de abajo, éramos población."

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2014: 160)[38], who, like himself (or his brother Javier), were autobiographical writers – from Montaigne via Doris Lessing to Nathalie Sarraute. Unlike Vilas, Pardo's young self and narrator is sustained by an emphatic notion of the practice of literature: "What I do is my main freedom, my intimate detachment with respect to work, family, and limitations." (Pardo 2014: 97)[39]

Significantly, the novel's penultimate chapter takes the form of a (likely fictional) diary written by the narrator's mother, in which she describes the subordinate position preordained for women of her class and generation: "I am the typical mother, like many of my era, who is only good for being a housewife and mother." (Pardo 2014: 217)[40] By repeatedly opening up his narrative to other subjective positions and historical exempla, Pardo suggests that these analogies and strategies of estrangement or distancing may amount to a literary sociology of the self and the family in the age of liberal democracy. Rejecting the official ideal of 'free choice,' the narrator proposes a self that is happy to come to terms with, and to transcend, the constraints of its social origins.

Tellingly, the narrator cites the example of the ape Rotpeter in Kafka's story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) ("A Report to an Academy" 1983; the text is often read as a parable for the condition of the artist). Rotpeter is content to settle for an *Ausweg*, a way out, a concept used in Kafka's text as a way to ironise the idealist idea of *Bildung* in autobiographical narratives (Kilcher/Kremer 2004: 56).[41] The ape's defence of this strategy chimes with Pardo's critique of the ideology of 'free choice', the fallacy of the autonomous self:

> I fear that perhaps you do not quite understand what I mean by 'way out.' I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense. I deliberately do not use the word 'freedom'. I do not mean the spacious feeling of freedom on all sides. […] In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime

38 "personas irreales".

39 "Esto que hago es mi principal libertad, mi íntimo desapego respecto al trabajo, a la familia y a las limitaciones."

40 "Soy la típica madre, como muchas de mi época, que solo sirve para ser ama de casa y madre."

41 Kilcher/Kremer (2004: 56) argue that Kafka here subverts the teleological imperative implicit in Franz Grillparzer's *Selbstbiographie*.

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feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime (Kafka 1983: 253).[42]

The reader may notice that Kafka's 'way out' resonates with one of the first sentences in the Bach-section of *El viaje*, which emphasises the striving for an *Ausweg* of the young J.S. Bach: "The boy felt the joy of running away, having a vague idea of the itinerary." (Pardo 2014: 105)[43] And, of course, the Spanish word for 'fugue' – *fuga* (Pardo 2014: 133) – signifies not only a polyphonic compositional technique; it also means 'flight,' in this case, the escape from one's origins. It is through such intratextual links and semantic possibilities that the novel creates a network of correspondences embedding the individual in broader, virtual communities.

Conclusion

In the novels under consideration here, two male authors of different generations – Pardo and Vilas – represent the autobiographical/autofictional self in relation to the social and economic crises and transformations of recent Spanish history. Both texts exemplify a pronounced relational approach to the notion of autobiographical writing, which is often superficially associated with the "myth of autonomy" or the "illusion of self-determination" (Eakin 1999: 43; 61). Whereas Vilas binds the self primarily to the memory of his parents and their social standing during the Franco years, Pardo's narrator relates his autofictional self primarily to his siblings, since he is more interested in the habitus and existential problems of his own generation during the volatile 1990s. In contrast to *Ordesa*'s model of a narrative of filiation, Pardo's *El viaje* emphasises the interplay between social conditioning and literary self-creation in both the individual and the generational sense. While the 'return of social class' appears to be a broader phenomenon, the circulation and variation of the literary form of autosociobiography needs to be understood in relation to

42 "Ich habe Angst, daß man nicht genau versteht, was ich unter Ausweg verstehe. Ich gebrauche das Wort in seinem gewöhnlichsten und vollsten Sinn. Ich sage absichtlich nicht Freiheit. Ich meine nicht dieses große Gefühl der Freiheit nach allen Seiten. […] Nebenbei: mit Freiheit betrügt man sich unter Menschen allzuoft. Und so wie die Freiheit zu den erhabensten Gefühlen zählt, so auch die entsprechende Täuschung zu den erhabensten." (Kafka 1986: 142)

43 "El muchacho sintió la alegría de huir con una vaga idea del itinerario."

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specific circumstances, for even a 'universal' neoliberal system (as criticised by both Vilas and Pardo) operates according to local and temporal specificities (Twellmann/Lammers 2023).

While both authors go beyond the subjective focus of 'traditional' autofiction, they adopt different formal and narrative approaches: whereas Vilas uses a loose diary-like structure broken up into 167 short fragments (mostly one to two pages long), focussing on specific dates, memories, or events, Pardo's text is divided into six larger narrative units and a short epilogue. Two of these chapters ("Johann Sebastian's Journey on Foot" and "My Mother's Small Diary") are not narrated from the point of view of the autofictional narrator: the chapter on Bach features an omniscient voice, and the mother's diary is told from a first-person perspective. The novel's structural composition might indeed be likened to a fugue, insofar as motifs are variously repeated and the centre of narrative attention is often displaced from the 'protagonist' towards other characters and time periods. On the level of literary form, too, this relational and multi-directional poetics exemplifies how the narrative self conceives of itself not only in relation to family, social class, and generational experience, but also in relation to cultural and literary models that universalise the local and temporal specificities, which in turn makes it possible to assume a distanced, 'sociological' perspective on one's own life, class, generation, and family. As a strategy for universalising the personal, Vilas relies more on the affective involvement of the reader, whereas Pardo creates a network of intertextual relations and references that constantly play off the personal against analogical cases. The cultural/literary nature of the latter underscores the importance of literature as a means of *Bildung* – in the sense of a confrontation with cultural difference that allows to imaginatively transcend one's own social origin. Both authors negotiate the personal experience of poverty as part of growing up in lower-middle class circumstances; while Vilas's text is marked by sentiments of nostalgia and an often fatalist tone, Pardo's adopts a more self-ironical perspective, insisting on the transformative potential of art and literature.

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A Japanese Pioneer of Autosociobiography?

Nakano Kōji's Memoirs of Adolescence

Christopher Schelletter

The present paper discusses a series of autobiographical texts written by the Japanese author, German studies professor, and left-wing intellectual Nakano Kōji (1925–2004). Published in book form between 1977 and 1980 in the volumes *Mugi ururu hi ni* [The day the wheat ripens], *Nigai natsu* [Bitter summer], and *Natsu no owari* [End of summer],[1] these narratives of adolescence cannot be linked to the contemporary literary phenomenon of autosociobiography in temporal or spatial terms, but they do exhibit many similarities with later and geographically distinct instances of life writing when it comes to their form and content.[2]

In order to examine the intersections of autosociobiography and Nakano's texts, I will draw on Harald Fricke's differentiation "between a 'literary text sort' as a purely systematic term for literary *classification* and a 'genre' as a historically limited literary *institution*" (Fricke 1981: 132)[3]. On the one hand, the vari-

1 An alternative title is *Kisetsu no owari* [End of the season]. Nakano originally planned to call the third volume of the trilogy "End of Summer", but he had to use the title "End of the Season" for copyright reasons. In his collected works, the third instalment is listed under "End of Summer" (Nakano 2001b: 162). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

2 In addition to the above-mentioned stories, I will also discuss Nakano Kōji's autobiographical story *Waga shōnen-ki* [Record of my youth], which was first published in 1987–1988. In this third person narrative Nakano reiterates and developes themes initially explored in his earlier texts. Although there are many similarities between "Record of my Youth" and the earlier texts, there are also differences, which is why I will avoid mixing them up and will therefore only refer to "Record of my Youth" in footnotes.

3 "zwischen einer 'literarischen Textsorte' als rein systematischem literaturwissenschaftlichem *Ordnungsbegriff* und einem 'Genre' als einer historisch begrenzten literarischen *Institution*".

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ous authors' abundant references to each other and to Bourdieu (Blome 2020: 561–7), as well as the intense discussion of autosociobiography in academia and the feuilleton (not to mention the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Annie Ernaux), have led to an increasing institutionalisation of autosociobiography as a "genre" (Fricke). On the other hand, there is a wealth of texts independent of this institutionalisation process which, like Nakano's autobiographical writings, share characteristics of autosociobiography as a "text sort" on the level of form and content. A supra-historical understanding applies here, one in which texts are allocated to a "text sort" based on their characteristics alone, without reference to the context in which they were written. In assigning a degree of prototypicality in this manner, my aim is to reappraise Nakano's novels as potentially unrecognised precursors of autosociobiography.

An initial comparison reveals remarkable overlaps between Nakano's texts and the characteristic traits of autosociobiography. The author explains that he wrote the beginning of the first part "only on the basis of facts and without inventing anything in addition" (Nakano 2001d: 460), a claim that can be extended to the entire autobiography. As a narrator but also as a reflexive commentator, Nakano describes his own childhood in the Tokyo area in the 1930s and his social advancement through Japan's educational institutions during the Pacific War and its immediate aftermath. Originating from a carpenter family, the narrator measures every encounter and every incident against the material background of the respective character and the historical context. The stories deal in detail with the various hurdles Nakano had to overcome, such as financial restraints, the hardships of the war years, and the difficult relationship with his parents, to whose memory Nakano dedicated his autobiography.

The obstacles encountered by Nakano suggest that there was, and still is, a class system in Japan that is difficult to penetrate. Based on a quantitative analysis of various parameters, the sociologist Ishida Hiroshi argues that "class origins affect people's life chances (at least intergenerational mobility chances) in a very similar manner" in Japan, Germany, and the USA (Ishida 2010: 52). Ishida further concludes that there is a

> pattern of class inheritance and reproduction that is common to all three societies. There is a tendency for class positions to be passed on from one generation to the next, and class background continues to shape people's prospects of mobility not only in Japan but also in the United States and Germany. (Ishida 2010: 52, see also Ishida 2001: 592)

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The mechanisms that govern class advancement in the three countries may be similar, as research on social stratification suggests. However, it is important to note that the experience of upward mobility in Japanese society differs significantly from that depicted in German or French autosociobiographies. Although it seems possible to classify Nakano's autobiographical writings as autosociobiographies based on text-immanent characteristics alone, it would result in a gross misinterpretation to analyse them against the background of the contexts thematised in contemporary European narratives. Like all literary texts, Nakano's narratives of adolescence can only be understood in light of the aesthetic concepts, categories, and dichotomies of their context of origin, which in turn are the expression of a specific, historically evolved field (Bourdieu 1996: 299). In the case at hand, language, genre, and, as already mentioned above, social history, are especially pertinent factors to be kept in mind.

Japanese Autobiographical Writing

(Auto-)biographical writing was already well developed in pre-modern Japan and can be traced back through the centuries from the present day to the diary literature (*nikki bungaku*) of the Heian period (794–1185) (Saeki 1985). My objective is to illustrate that in the case of Nakano's novels, it was primarily Japanese conventions relating to genre that determined their autosociobiographical form of expression. This entails an exploration of the compatibility of established Japanese genres with autosociobiography as well as the relevant Japanese terminology. As a first step, I will examine the lexical divergence of the cognate pair 'literature – *bungaku*'.

Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century, the term *bungaku* had a distinctly different meaning from 'literature' in the modern sense, being used to denote 'learning' and 'rhetoric' (Washburn 2013: 122). It was not until Tsubouchi Shōyō's seminal work on literary theory, *Shōsetsu shinzui* [The essence of the novel] (1885), that there was an approximation to the Western understanding of literature in the sense of art (Washburn 2013: 125). Above all, Tsubouchi called for a portrayal more in line with European notions of realism and a psychological perspective on the characters. In the following decades, a distinction was made between highbrow *jun-bungaku*, which can be directly translated as 'pure literature', and *taishū bungaku*, understood as literature

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aimed at a wider readership.[4] To the present day, there has been extensive discussion about which texts, authors, and genres should be counted as *jun-bungaku*, and naturally there are divergent points of view. In addition to the perceived high aesthetic and intellectual standards of these texts, which the *bundan*, the literary establishment, recognises, a central characteristic is their realism (Strecher 1996: 361).

The high symbolic value or level of consecration accorded to factual storytelling by Japanese gatekeepers of literary criticism is evident from the key criterion applied to *shishōsetsu*, which are considered a prototypical expression of *jun-bungaku* (Strecher 1996: 362–7): a commitment to authentic autobiographical representation. Given that Nakano's texts belong to this genre, I will now draw on pertinent scholarship on the *shishōsetsu* to differentiate it from autosociobiography.

Building on traditional autobiographical forms of writing (Fowler 1988: xvii), the *shishōsetsu* emerged from the *shizen shugi*, the Japanese form of naturalism. However, the *shizen shugi* differed from European naturalism in that, in the words of Donald Keene, "in Japan the most salient feature of Naturalist writing was the search for the individual", so that the *shishōsetsu* can be considered "attempts in the form of novels to establish the individuality of the authors" by autobiographical means (Keene 1998: 221) – an evident parallel to autosociobiography. Keene also highlights another crucial difference between *shizen shugi* and European naturalism: "The Naturalism of Zola or Maupassant came to be interpreted not as a method of examining human beings with scientific detachment, but as an absolutely faithful reproduction of real events, without admixture of fiction or even of imagination." (Keene 1998: 221) In accordance with the naturalistic form of expression, *shishōsetsu* provide a detailed description of the protagonist's material circumstances; that said, the scientific objectivism shared by European naturalism and autosociobiography is not represented in Japanese naturalism: "[I]t is the very lack of analytic description and the relative neglect of heredity and environmental

4 With regard to these terms, Bourdieu's insight applies: "The majority of notions which artists and critics employ to define themselves or to define their adversaries are weapons and stakes in struggles, and a number of the categories which art historians deploy in order to treat their topic are nothing more than classificatory schemes issuing from these struggles and then more or less skillfully disguised or transfigured." (Bourdieu 1996: 297) Far from being neutral descriptions, the terms in question are employed strategically in the process of positioning oneself in the literary field.

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factors in *shizenshugi* works which distinguishes it markedly from European naturalism," writes Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit (1996: 28). The *shishōsetsu* therefore does not exhibit the same level of reflexivity, for example with regard to structural influences on the protagonist's life and socialisation.[5]

The central feature of the *shishōsetsu* is its autobiographical postulate of authenticity through factuality. The extraordinary family resemblance between *shishōsetsu* and autosociobiography is based not only on the protagonist-centred narrative perspective, but also on the identity of narrator, author, and protagonist and the associated 'facticity', a frequently employed term in both *shishōsetsu* and autosociobiography research (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1996: 174–7; Ernst 2022: 259).[6] In a sense, texts belonging to the two genres blur the distinction between fiction and reality: they present themselves as novels, but they simultaneously convey a claim to truth (Fowler 1988: 10) by asserting that they are a true-to-life reproduction of the author's experiences.

The claim to facticity is thus a shared characteristic, but the mode of representation is of fundamentally different quality and fulfils a different function in literary communication. In Japan, 'sincerity' (*makoto*[7]) increases the artistic value of the narrative (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1996: 289); in the case of autosociobiography, on the other hand, facticity is a condition of the scientific socioanalytical approach. While the professed aim of *shishōsetsu* is the direct, sincere, and authentic communication of experiences, autosociobiographies aim to depict the process of socialisation. Social influences in the broad, abstract sense are not included in typical *shishōsetsu*. In 1935, the literary critic Nakamura Mitsuo wrote in a central text on the theory of *shishōsetsu*:

5 This can be explained by another of Bourdieu's findings: "As soon as we observe (*theorein*) the social world, we introduce in our perception of it a bias due to the fact that, to study it, to describe it, to talk about it, we must retire from it more or less completely." (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 69) This kind of 'retiring' stands in contrast to the characteristic 'immediacy' of *shishōsetsu* as a genre, which will be discussed in more detail below.

6 In Nakano's "The Day the Wheat Ripens", for example, the author and protagonist share the same name. In the later autobiographical story "Record of my Youth", the protagonist is called Nakahara Kōji (Nakano 1997: 163); the similarity to the author's name is strikingly obvious.

7 *Makoto* is a philosophical term which, in contrast to 'sincerity' in the conventional sense, also includes a higher pursuit of 'truthfulness' and encompasses a moral dimension with the maxims of integrity, loyalty, and respect.

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> The writers of shishōsetsu in Japan must have endured many hardships in their real lives, and at times, they must have struggled with society. However, none of the writers was conscious of the confrontation between him and the reader. In other words, no writer appeared, who has been able to analyse the emotions of their everyday life brought about by their daily existence and to objectify them in a true confrontation with society. Herein I see the most fundamental character that pervades our Japanese shishōsetsu, as well as its greatest weakness. The reason is that it is impossible to describe the real-life struggles of these writers who are oppressed by society without depicting society, and it is only through confrontation with society that their pain can be clearly analysed, grasped, and given true objectivity. (Nakamura 1972: 122)

Nakamura, who studied French literature at Tokyo Imperial University, contrasts the *shishōsetsu* with French novels in general and Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* in particular, which, according to Nakamura, exhibits the very characteristics that are absent from the *shishōsetsu*. Nakamura calls for "objectifying one's own psyche" (Nakamura 1972: 125), which coincides with Bourdieu's project of objectifying the objectifying subject. If *shishōsetsu* were to meet Nakamura's requirement by incorporating an objective analysis of social conditions and their influence on the lives of their protagonists, then this new genre would, *mutatis mutandis*, be surprisingly close to autosociobiography, even if Nakamura may have had in mind an adaptation to the French social novel rather than a scientific-sociological approach.

In summary, we can conclude that the family resemblance between *shishōsetsu* and autosociobiography is deceptive: while at first glance they appear to be 'kindred genres' due to their autobiographical character and shared claim to factuality, they also have other, mutually exclusive traits that make it more appropriate to think of them as *faux amis*.

Nakano Kōji's Unorthodox *shishōsetsu*

Nakano's autobiographical novels deviate significantly from typical *shishōsetsu*, and where they depart from the latter's specific characteristics, they approach those of autosociobiography. The fact that the texts under consideration here are first and foremost *shishōsetsu* is evident not only from their own form and

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content, but also from Nakano's essay "Shōsetsu made no michinori" [The road to the novel], (n.d.):

> For my part, since the age of forty, I have developed an attachment to those works that are called *shishōsetsu* in our country. I never saw the appeal of writers who learned from Western honkaku shōsetsu and wrote novels in their style. On the contrary, it was the shishōsetsu, which were attacked at the time as something 'that had to be eradicated', that felt like true literature [*bungaku*] to me. (Nakano 2001d: 461)

Honkaku shōsetsu can be roughly translated as 'authentic novel'. The term gives the impression that it is related to *jun-bungaku* (pure literature), but in fact, the opposite is the case: *Honkaku shōsetsu* refers to a fictional work of art, as would be considered a prototypical novel in the West.[8] In "End of Summer", Nakano has his protagonist say:

> 'I am this, and this is me,' to put oneself out there, to confront oneself in one's entirety, to have the unadulterated self recognised by society, and to be accepted – hasn't this become a realisation in contemporary literature, whether in the West or in Japan? (Nakano 2001b: 117)

Nakano is clearly committed to autobiographical writing, self-reflection, and Japanese national literature, of which, as can be seen from the above-cited statement, *shishōsetsu* is considered representative. On the other hand, Nakano, a professor of German studies, attempts to emphasise the uniqueness of his own *shishōsetsu* by pointing to influences from German literature: he argues, for example, that his texts share certain characteristics with the German *Bildungsroman* and *Entwicklungsroman*, both of which he describes (mistakenly) as primarily autobiographical (Nakano 2001d: 458).[9] Nakano also cites Hans Erich Nossack's collection of essays *Die schwache Position der Literatur* ("The Weak Position of Literature") as a model and chief impetus for his own style of writing. As Nakano explains, he, too, experienced Nossack's "urge [...] to fully manifest oneself as a person to the world", a compulsion that had a major impact on the content of his works:

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8 On the juxtaposition of *honkaku shōsetsu* and *junbungaku* in Japanese literary criticism, see Fowler (1988: 44–51).

9 On the interpretation of "The Day the Wheat Ripens" as a *Bildungsroman*, see Schelletter (2022: 308–9). The passage in question can be found in Nakano (2001d: 460).

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> Therefore, it was only natural that I would be more concerned with the theoretical aspect of how I lived in response to the situation than with the expression of the facts themselves. The faithful capture of reality interested me less; I was only interested in the soul of man, his consciousness and way of being. The weakness in capturing facts was to remain one of my weak points ever since. (Nakano 2001d: 462)

For Nakano, subjectivism and 'perceived truth' take precedence over factuality, to which he nevertheless aspires. Nakano's programmatic statement with its reference to a recognised weakness in his own writing confirms an analytical or epistemological claim that is also constitutive for autosociobiography. That this stance implies a sociological or at least socio-analytical perspective classified by Nakamura Mitsuo as atypical for *shishōsetsu* will become clear in the following section.

The Conflicted 'Class Consciousness' of a Working-Class Child in Higher Education

Although less pronounced than in recent autosociobiographical works, there is in Nakano's autobiographical texts a tendency to objectify the objectifying subject. Significant situations, but also banal everyday experiences, prompt the first-person narrator to engage in self-analysis with the aim of understanding his own dispositions and actions in all their conditionality. "To understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed", Bourdieu (2008: 4) writes programmatically in his *Self-Analysis*. Nakano's extensive descriptions of his milieu of origin are consistent with this postulate, insofar as they are undertaken in order to convey its effects on his own person.

Dependence on the milieu of the parental home is greatest in childhood. Nakano's autobiographical narratives begin, as do many autosociobiographies (Blome 2020: 549–51), with the memory of a deceased family member – in this case, the father – and a visit to the protagonist's provincial birthplace in the rural outskirts of the Greater Tokyo Area. Even in this first scene, the narrator's many comments on the characters' habitus such as about their language, clothing, food, home furnishings, etc. are striking: Nakano shows how the characters' economic situation has affected their habitus, which the protagonist finds utterly repugnant. Above all, he feels a strong aversion to the local way of speak-

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ing: for him, there is "no language as ugly, barbaric, and repulsive" (Nakano 2001a: 12) as the dialect spoken in his father's place of origin.

Nakano then describes his adolescence in Ichikawa in Chiba Prefecture to the east of Tokyo. The protagonist's father is a "simple carpenter" (Nakano 2001a: 15), who beats his apprentice and his wife while intoxicated. Even as a small child, the narrator begins to reflect on his social situation as a reaction to events in everyday life. In fact, his first childhood memories are class-related: when, as a toddler, he wets his pants while playing with a friend, the maid in the house of his better-off playmate explains this 'naughty behaviour' with the poverty of his parents (Nakano 2001a: 29); he also remembers how a girl from the neighbourhood made fun of his father's profession.[10] These two scenes are a cause for frustration in relation his social position. The narrator reflects:

> Coincidence. For everyone, origin is nothing but coincidence... 'Why wasn't I born into a better house?' – a little older, I had already fallen into this wretched way of thinking. In a suburb where people from different social classes meet in one place, the adults, in the form of blatant juxtaposition of households, had unexpectedly germinated class consciousness in the hearts of the children at an early age. This was because they had allowed the children's eyes to be opened to contradictions, first through the venom inherent in badmouthing among the children, and then specifically through the comparison of the other children's households. (Nakano 2001a: 29–30)

The use of Marxist terms such as "class", "class consciousness", and "contradiction" is quite conspicuous. That Nakano seeks to explain the narrated world and his own behaviour with the help of these concepts is not surprising, as Marxism exerted a major influence on Japan's higher schools and imperial univer-

10 In "Record of my Youth", there are generally fewer references to material backgrounds and social issues, and the narrative has fewer features of autosociobiography. Nevertheless, Nakano begins with the reflection that all people are born equal, but due to the injustice of society there is discrimination, and children have to go hungry and grow up in poverty (Nakano 1997: 7–8). The protagonist is "discriminated against" (Nakano 1997: 14) by a girl of the same age, probably the same girl as in "The Day the Wheat Ripens", because of his poverty. In "Record of my Youth", in addition to class-related discrimination, ethnic discrimination is also addressed for the first time when the protagonist criticises the inequality of opportunity of a Korean friend (Nakano 1997: 74).

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sities since the first translations of Marxist writings appeared in the 1920s.[11] This continued to hold true in the war years and the immediate post-war period, when Nakano was socialised at the Fifth Higher School in Kumamoto and at Tokyo Imperial University.

Although Marxist jargon is used sparingly in Nakano's autobiographical texts and Marxism is not mentioned by name, it is clearly recognizable as an intellectual influence. For one, Nakano's criticism is aimed at the traditional adversaries of Japanese Marxists: capitalists, militarists, ivory-tower intellectuals at the higher schools and imperial universities, and bourgeois literati. Moreover, Nakano's self-reflexive observations build on Marx' theory of acting in accordance with a "class consciousness" (Nakano 2001a: 29), i.e., out of an awareness of one's own social class and its role in shaping life experiences, values, and actions. The first-person narrator primarily employs this analytical perspective in his pursuit of self-knowledge, but he also applies it to other people around him in an effort to find out how their respective material situation influences their thinking. An important concern of his is to fathom the way of thinking of his family, from whom he has become estranged. About his mother he assesses:

> I had the suspicion that my mother had been able to give her all for her work, which was probably little more than preparation for survival, by unquestioningly accepting the society of the established class system and thus determining for herself that she belonged to the working side of the population. (Nakano 2001a: 85)

The protagonist's mother shows a lack of understanding towards her son, who wants to break out of the working class and resists conditioning by the class system. His habitus, altered by his academic environment, causes her to worry about his "behaviour and manner of expression" (Nakano 2001a: 218). In particular, she cannot understand why he strives for education, as in her opinion the children of craftsmen have no need for it (Nakano 2001a: 46).[12] The attitude that

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11 On the higher schools referred to as Number Schools and the Imperial Universities, see Roden (1980); on Marxism, Roden 1980 (222–9). For a detailed exploration of this topic in Japanese, see Takeuchi Yō (2003).

12 In "Record of my Youth", the narrator explains that children from higher classes are supported in school by their parents, and parents from higher social classes demand lesson preparation and follow-up from them (Nakano 1997: 26–7). The parents of the protagonists in Nakano's autobiographical novels, on the other hand, prevent

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one should behave according to one's (inherited) social position is part of her class-based thinking. The son, on the other hand, takes the opposite approach:

> I always felt that my family was more of an annoying obstacle. [...] I wanted to break out of my carpenter father's household, whose customs were like shackles to me, to free myself from all restraints, to become a person who is allowed to behave as he pleases. Perhaps I wanted to become a member of those privileged intellectual classes. [...] 'Birth and socialisation mean nothing', 'You decide for yourself what you make of yourself' – by obsessively telling myself these things, I tried to suppress the obstacle of family. (Nakano 2001a: 202)

The last sentence clearly suggests that such an undertaking is tantamount to lying to oneself, which underscores the role of class in socialisation. The attitude of Nakano's family shows a strong rejection of class transition, or rather implies a demand for social reproduction.

When Nakano emphasises the protagonist's struggle to cast off the restraints imposed by family and tradition, he implies that social mobility was uncommon in the timeframe in question. However, sociological research on social reproduction has made it clear that the opposite was the case: the time when Nakano entered working life, was in fact a time of unprecedented educational expansion and "tremendous societal transformations" (Ishida/Slater 2010: 3). While, on the one hand, social reproduction in Japan follows similar mechanisms as in other countries, it is important to keep in mind that "[i]n comparison to American and German manual working classes, the Japanese skilled and non-skilled manual working class is characterised by a low level of intergenerational stability and a low level of self-recruitment. In Japan, the children of the manual working class are more likely to be found in other classes." (Ishida 2010: 51) The low prevalence of social reproduction is due to the "steadily increasing percentage of the sons of the working class joining the professional managerial class; more and more sons of the working class are moving into the upper white-collar sector (21 per cent in 1955 to 46 per cent in 1995)" (Ishida 2001: 594). Against this background, Nakano's educational advancement is not as extraordinary as he makes it seem.

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him from progressing at school. As the narrator of "Record of my Youth" explains, children do not attend secondary school because of their abilities, but rather because of the material background of their parents (Nakano 1997: 46–7).

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As another sociologist, Takeuchi Yō, points out, many young men from farming villages attended universities in the cities during the pre-war period (women were not yet allowed to enter the imperial universities). They were fascinated by the cosmopolitan atmosphere they encountered, but they also had difficulties adapting to the unfamiliar urban environment (Takeuchi 2003: 170–4). Students from non-urban backgrounds were particularly numerous at the Faculty of Literature at Tokyo Imperial University, with many relying on financial aid to study (Takeuchi 2003: 109–10). According to Takeuchi (2003: 188), no social reproduction of the cultural elite took place at the faculty – rather, the lack of access barriers enabled upwardly mobile people from the countryside to acquire cultural capital.[13] Rural students often displayed an affinity for Marxism (Takeuchi 2003: 195).

That said, the fact that the rise from the working class to a white-collar profession as part of the Japanese educational expansion was far from exceptional does not mean that we must neither discount the struggles these sons from manual labour families faced in general nor the phenomenological viewpoint of the subjective experience Nakano in particular had to contend with on a personal level.[14] On the contrary: there were many households with intergenerational conflicts, which in turn allows us to conclude that there was a broad readership that could identify with Nakano.

As his school and university education progresses, the gap between the first-person narrator and his family widens. He now feels "disgust" (Nakano 2001c: 248) towards his family and "hatred" (Nakano 2001c: 382) for his father due to the latter's status as a manual labourer. In return, the father has "given

13 Takeuchi (2003: 117–21) makes this clear through a comparison with the École Normale Supérieure (ENS). Compared to the ENS, the top of the Japanese education system was more open to social mobility. In contrast to the *normaliens* with a literary orientation, the students of the literary faculty of Tokyo Imperial University came more often from rural regions and, in contrast to the ENS. On average, the students of the natural sciences came from higher classes than the students of the literary faculty. Takeuchi (2003: 188–94) also uses the protagonist in Nakano's "Bitter Summer" as an example of an educational advancement at the literary faculty of Tokyo Imperial University.

14 However, the assertion by Nakano's protagonist in "Record of my Youth" that his family was probably the poorest compared to his fellow students (Nakano 1997: 186) can certainly be relativised by research into the social background of pupils and students. What is interesting, however, is that Nakano perceives himself as very unprivileged, or at least wants to be perceived as such.

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up all hopes for his son" (Nakano 2001c: 256); he harbours disappointment, shame, and anger at the protagonist (Nakano 2001a: 93), who not only does not contribute to the family's livelihood, but whose intellectual affectations cause an additional financial burden.

At the same time, there is also a conflict between the protagonist and the academic milieu. The school uniform is meant to level out class differences at the higher schools, and yet the protagonist cannot fit into his new environment; he isolates himself and does not participate in unifying group activities (Nakano 2001a: 174). While he initially tries to rationalise his difficulties as being rooted in psychological factors, he soon recognises the true cause in his social background. At secondary school and university, he finds it difficult to socialise with the descendants of bourgeois households for reasons of habitus, as they have more confident manners due to their *ancienneté*.[15] He feels "animosity" (Nakano 2001c: 339), "envy and contempt" (Nakano 2001c: 347) towards his more affluent classmates, "sons of the urban bourgeoisie" (Nakano 2001c: 348) who fill their lives with pleasurable pastimes like sailing instead of work. Not being accepted in either the milieu of origin or the target milieu can be interpreted as an expression of the "practical incompatibility of the social worlds" (Bourdieu 2008: 1) in which the protagonist finds himself.

The Material Conditionality of Cultural Production and Reception

In Nakano's trilogy, 'class consciousness' also determines the mode of dealing with objects of culture. For instance, the first-person narrator describes an encounter with a fellow student at university who informs him that he "has something of a bondsman about him" (Nakano 2001a: 37 and 2001c: 431). For "bondsman", the fellow student does not use a Japanese word, but the German term "Knecht". Nakano explains this impression with his disposition to "look at the sublime from the very bottom" (Nakano 2001a: 37): born into the working class, he adopts a servile attitude in the face of what is considered classical cultural canon (Schelletter 2022: 311–2). At Tokyo Imperial University, Nakano suffers from an inferiority complex (Nakano 2001c: 332) that is clearly attributed to the material circumstances of his socialisation.

15 See in particular Nakano (2001c: 350), where the first-person narrator analyses the informal and imperious way in which sons from affluent households deal with employees.

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This is just one example of how the first-person narrator reflects on how his family's poverty, which has sensitised him to the material conditions of cultural production and reception, affects his attitude towards culture and education. Everyday experience teaches him that a spiritual existence independent of class is unattainable. By reflecting on these experiences, he learns that the quest for one's spiritual identity begins with the awareness of one's class (Nakano 2001c: 431, 437). Nevertheless, he keeps his origins in a working-class household secret from his fellow students (Nakano 2001c: 432).

In keeping with Bourdieu's emphasis on the necessity of "thinking about the social conditions of thought" (Bourdieu 1996: 312), the protagonist analyses not only his own cultural consciousness and disposition, but also that of his teachers, his fellow students, and of certain writers against the backdrop of their material circumstances. The character Kinoshita, for example, who grew up around the first-person narrator but in a middle-class family, demonstrates a different "*familiarity*" (Bourdieu 1993: 230) in dealing with objects of culture. Although both are students when they meet again at university in the post-war period, Kinoshita still treats the son of a working-class family with condescension (Nakano 2001c: 319–20). When Kinoshita proudly announces that what he is studying at university is not aesthetics or art history, but rather "the Beautiful", he casually flaunts his social and economic background: he comes from a household where people apparently still listened to Tchaikovsky and Beethoven during the war, he can afford to pursue this, from the point of view of the first-person narrator, decadent subject at a time when many Japanese are fighting for survival and the country's cities are lying in ruins. In other words: to the narrator, Kinoshita's educational arrogance reveals his bourgeois attitude and disposition.

Despite all his criticism of Kinoshita's infatuation with "the Beautiful", the first-person narrator is aware that he himself is enrolled in a humanities subject that is far removed from everyday life, and that he attaches great value to idealistic and spiritual content. This ambivalence fosters doubts regarding his own choices, especially as far as the balance between personal ambition and social commitment is concerned. The protagonist asks himself: "Could it be that while I pretend to admire beauty or universal truth, I am in fact merely a careerist?" (Nakano 2001a: 146), and his fellow student Omokuni likewise accuses him of pursuing education not only for its own sake, but also the allure of bourgeois elegance attached to education, culture and titles (Nakano 2001c: 340, 391). Yet as Takeuchi points out, cultural capital must be differentiated from membership in the bourgeoisie: although Nakano had managed to climb the

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educational ladder, he did not possess the economic capital and *ancienneté* of the upper classes, a circumstance Takeuchi sees as the protagonist's "tragedy" (Takeuchi 2003: 192).

The relationship between the aspirational first-person narrator and the intellectual field, too, is characterised by tensions: similar to Bourdieu in his "Self-Analysis", Nakano is an intellectual and academic who is critical of intellectuals and academia. As the protagonist has also alienated himself from his environment of origin, he is now isolated. This sense of double non-belonging, a staple feature of autosociobiography, chimes with the feeling of solitude experienced by the typical protagonist of the *shishōsetsu*, which Donald Keene describes as follows: "In order to emphasise his individuality, the 'I' was of necessity at odds not only with society but also with those he loved. His hostility to his surroundings became the most vital part of his life." (Keene 1998: 514) It could therefore be argued that the presence of an "institutionalized outsider" (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1996: 275) in both *shishōsetsu* and autosociobiography is not primarily due to the problems associated with class advancement, but rather a product of the former's technique of emphasising the self.

The protagonist's search for like-minded individuals and/or intellectual role models turns out to be unsuccessful. While he initially sympathises with a number of intellectuals, all of them eventually fall out of favour with him. He is critical of his teachers, his fellow students, and the subject of his studies: bourgeois authors from the annals of German literary history. He also adopts negative positions in order to try to fathom his identity and position in the intellectual field and to clarify his own point of view, a process that involves a highly normative division into a 'right' and a 'wrong' kind of intellectualism. This includes criticism of the political Left, for example when he rejects rigorist positions (Nakano 2001c: 342). In the case of his fellow student Okada, he notes that although the latter was "upset about the contradictions of capitalist society, it did not follow that he also had empathy for the female factory workers" (Nakano 2001c: 311). Yet the first-person narrator can be said to be guilty of the same problematic stance: on the theoretical (i.e., intellectual and ideological) level, he is full of sympathy towards his proletarian family; in practice, his attitude is one of aversion.

The main target of Nakano's criticism is the elitist intellectualism of *kyōyō shugi*. The term *kyōyō shugi* refers to an intellectual movement that reached its peak in the Taishō period (1912–1926), but it continued to shape elite education at higher schools and state universities, especially at the literary faculty

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of Tokyo Imperial University (Takeuchi 2003: 86–9), until well into the post-war period. Strongly influenced by German intellectual history, especially idealism, *kyōyō shugi* propagated spiritual cultivation through the acquisition of an education in the humanities. Marxist thinkers (Marxism was the second important intellectual movement based on German idealism in higher education) castigated the *kyōyō shugi* for its apolitical inwardness and educational elitism (Takeuchi 2018: 229–55). The reflections on intellectualism and social engagement in Nakano's stories must be understood against this background. Since the first-person narrator himself is part of this closed-off world and affirms the value of training in the liberal arts, the pursuit of a higher education leads to self-doubt and moral misgivings articulated in the form of self-critical confessions: for example, we are told that because he is busy studying for an entrance exam, he is emotionally unaffected by the tears of a neighbouring family when the father is called up for wartime military service. The protagonist does not even attend the funeral of his own brother who died in the Pacific War, pathetically comparing himself to the unscrupulous Faust, "[t]he aimless, restless reprobate"[16] (Goethe 2008: 106 or Goethe qt. in Nakano 2001c: 305), who plunges Gretchen into misfortune.

While many of the scenes in which Nakano deals with *kyōyō shugi* are primarily of a critical nature, the protagonist's encounter with Nagaoka, a professor of German literature, leads to particularly interesting reflections on culturalist positions. The first-person narrator observes that after Japan's surrender, the differences between the rich and the poor are becoming more and more conspicuous as they struggle to survive amidst the rubble of their bombed-out cities (Nakano 2001c: 262). Nagaoka, meanwhile, "talks about culture as if there had been no such thing as war" (Nakano 2001c: 263).[17] The professor tells his students a wartime anecdote of his own and combines it with a pithy story about Goethe[18]:

16 "Der Unmensch ohne Zweck und Ruh".

17 Nakano's position is reminiscent of Adorno's famous dictum "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 2003: 162), which is also discussed in "End of Summer" (Nakano 2001b: 80).

18 The origin of this anecdote is a conversation between Goethe and Eckermann on March 17, 1830.

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> There was a bothersome head of the neighbourhood association[19] at the time. In his civilian uniform,[20] he ordered the snow to be shovelled in front of each household, but I pretended it was none of my business. Things like shovelling snow or carrying firewood should be done by people who are responsible for such things. So, I quietly listened to Mozart in my house and that was that. Hahaha. Goethe was once asked by a certain person what it would have been like if his Excellency had been born in England. At the time, Goethe was a highly respected privy councillor in the state of Saxony, so the questioner inquired spitefully whether things would have unfolded in a similar way in England. He replied: 'I would probably have been born a duke or an archbishop [sic] with a salary of 30,000 pounds per annum.' The questioner followed up and replied that it also happens that one draws a bad lot in life. Goethe laughed and is said to have replied: 'Who do you think you have in front of you? Do you think I would do something so foolish as to draw a blank?' So much for the anecdote. There are people who live for the mere sake of living, whereas others are born for high cultural values, hahaha. (Nakano 2001c: 264)

Both anecdotes showcase intellectual arrogance on two temporal planes, but another aspect is implicitly present: the general impossibility of class mobility. Culture, as part of the superstructure, is enabled by the efforts (and to the detriment) of the working population, the base. According to Nakano's account, the production and reception of art is conditioned by the general material context of a given society, but also by the individual's class situation.[21] What is described here is an unjust social order in which only a privileged few can afford to pursue cultural activities while turning up their noses at the supposedly uncultured. The first-person narrator reflects on his own circumstances:

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19 During the war years, households were organised into neighbourhood associations (*tonari-gumi*). They had several functions, which, as described here, included shovelling snow and fighting fires caused by air raids, distributing food, disseminating propaganda material, and exercising mutual control in the spirit of the military dictatorship.

20 This civilian uniform had the function of indicating the man's authority and ensuring obedience.

21 Bourdieu defines this method as "put[ting] in direct correspondence cultural objects and the social classes or groups for or by which they are presumed to be produced", and considers it to be a "short-circuit fallacy" (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 69). For Bourdieu, the chief representatives of this "sociological reductionism" (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 69) are Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann.

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> Should it really be the case that, as Professor Nagaoka said in Kumamoto, something like beauty or culture can only emerge from a life of abundance? When you have nothing to eat and not even a roof over your head and then, like me, you find yourself in the predicament of a miserable student life – in a time like this when everything is at rock bottom, art cannot succeed, no matter how hard you try. (Nakano 2001c: 332)

Nakano's critique of elitist culturalism also manifests itself in a commentary on Thomas Mann's person and work. Thomas Mann's partly autobiographical novella *Tonio Kröger* (1903) exerts a great fascination on the first-person narrator in the period before the war (Nakano 2001a: 129), as he can identify with Tonio's perception of the incompatibility of the bourgeois and artistic spheres due to his own "torn habitus" (Bourdieu 1992: 127) caused by his precarious position between the social classes. Later, in the post-war period, the first-person narrator discusses Thomas Mann and his work with his fellow student Okada, with whom he shares an interest in the writer (Nakano 2001c: 308–22). Okada, too, is poor and must work in order to finance his studies. When he reads Thomas Mann in his free time, he escapes into the aesthetic counterworld. Nakano, on the other hand, criticises this attitude of turning away from the supposed social responsibility carried by intellectuals. Okada then tells him about the criticism of Thomas Mann in the post-war period, according to which the author had commented on the misery in Germany from his comfortable exile in the United States, or in Frank Thieß's memorable turn of phrase, "from the boxes and parterre seats of abroad" (Thieß 1946: 3).[22] Okada proceeds to defend Thomas Mann: he believes that a civilisation that does not appreciate culture even in times of crisis is tantamount to "barbarism" (Nakano 2001c: 321). The first-person narrator, on the other hand, argues in favour of 'inner emigration' – to him, the author he formerly revered is now just another representative of 'false' (i.e., elitist) intellectualism enabled by immense wealth and an upper-class upbringing.

The intellectuality of reflective passages such as those about Goethe, Thomas Mann, and "the Beautiful" is typical of autosociobiography, but unusual for *shishōsetsu* (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1996: 27). This can be attributed to the fact that the authors of *shishōsetsu* generally had not attended university: they were not social climbers through education and consequently did not deal with such problems. Nakano's material socialisation is similar to that of other

22 "aus den Logen und Parterreplätzen des Auslands".

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shishōsetsu authors, but since, unlike them, he achieved social advancement through the academy, his autobiographical writings also contain reflections on the relationship between poverty and the pursuit of an intellectual life.

Analogous to French naturalism, which, according to Bourdieu, is "more petit-bourgeois" (Bourdieu 1996: 265), a correlation between low cultural capital and Japanese naturalism as well as a rejection of the latter by holders of high cultural capital can be observed (Schelletter 2022: 390–3). Following Bourdieu's demand for an analysis of the "genesis of the habitus of occupants of these positions" (Bourdieu 1996: 214), it can be argued that Nakano's humble origins predisposed him to the choice of *shishōsetsu*, whereas, according to the author, the academics in his environment who had been socialised in more educated milieus tended to gravitate towards the *honkaku shōsetsu* of Western literature (Nakano 2001d: 463).[23] Nakano's choice of genre is also consistent with Bourdieu's (1996: 261–4) observation that a disadvantageous social background correlates with the adoption of conventional positions (such as, in this case, the choice of the established genre *shishōsetsu*).

While this paper primarily argued that Nakano's autobiographical texts can only be understood against the background of their specific contexts (e.g., language, genre, and social history), similarities such as these are remarkable. Nakano builds on other conventions of literary writing and reception, and the intellectual field against which he writes is a different one, which is why he primarily engages with the culturalist positions of *kyōyō shugi*. Yet despite these different premises, it has become clear that there are many congruencies in terms of form and content between Nakano's unusual *shishōsetsu* and later European autosociobiographies. It is striking that a Japanese autobiographical text from the late 1970s, despite its strongly divergent contexts, shares many characteristics with the phenomenon of contemporary literature that is autosociobiography. Particularly evident in Nakano's literary portrayal of the affective experience of social mobility and the concomitant sense of double non-belonging, this resemblance points to a universal experience regarding mechanisms of social reproduction.[24]

23 See the following observation by Bourdieu: "Thus, humanities students who have received a homogeneous and homogenizing training for a number of years, and who have been constantly selected according to the degree to which they conform to school requirements, remain separated by systematic differences, both in their pursuit of cultural activities and in their cultural preferences." (Bourdieu 1993: 232)

24 This finding validates Bourdieu's retrospective self-assessment: "And hardly a week goes by without the publication of a book or an article showing that the mecha-

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nisms of class reproduction that I described in the sixties […] are at work in countries as different as the United States, Sweden, and Japan." (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1992: 78–9)

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On the Margin of Literature

Polish Life Writing Competitions in the Context of Autosociobiography

Paweł Rodak

In 1929, the famous Polish writer Maria Dąbrowska[1] noted in her diary: "Who knows if the time is not coming when the greatest works of art will be written outside official literature" (Dąbrowska 2009, vol. 2: 107).[2] From today's perspective, it looks as if Dąbrowska's tentative prediction has largely come to pass. When describing the autobiographical and (to some extent) documentary tendencies in Polish literature in the twentieth century, three factors are of particular importance: first, the increasing significance of everyday genres and writing practices undertaken by non-professional writers (e.g., peasants, factory workers, children and adolescents), along with the impact of the latter on professional authors; second, the evolution of life writing towards a more literary character, as evident in the case of intimate diaries (Rodak 2011); and third, the feminisation of autobiographical discourses – whereas Polish literature of the nineteenth century was dominated by male voices, a stronger female presence made itself felt from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, to the point where texts authored by women came to occupy a central place in autobiographical writing across a range of genres.

1 A prolific novelist and essayist, Maria Dąbrowska (1889–1965) is best known today for her copious diary, which she kept for more than 40 years, from 1914 to 1965 (Dąbrowska 2009, vol. 1–13). Dąbrowska repeatedly highlighted the importance of autobiographical practices such as the writing of diaries, memoirs, and letters. In keeping with this assessment, she translated and prepared the Polish edition of Samuel Pepys's *Diary*, and was involved in the publication of the *Memoirs of Peasants* (1935–1936), a project I will discuss in detail below.

2 "Kto wie, czy nie nadchodzą czasy, kiedy największe dzieła sztuki będą pisane poza oficjalną literaturą." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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In my article, I focus on the first and partly the third of these developments, as they are especially pertinent in the context of the emerging concept of autosociobiography. I will begin by briefly describing the substantial tradition of life writing competitions for peasants, workers, and emigrants in Poland, which began just after World War I and continued unabated throughout the twentieth century. In a second step, I will turn my attention to the much-discussed problem of the literariness of peasants' and workers' memoirs, with a special emphasis on the two most representative examples from the interwar period, namely *Życiorys własny robotnika* [A worker's life history written by himself] by Jakub Wojciechowski (1930) and *Pamiętniki chłopów* [Memoirs of peasants] (1935–1936), a collection of two volumes edited by the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw. Finally, I will examine the texts submitted to life writing competitions from an autosociobiographical vantage point, tracing their most distinctive features. By way of a conclusion, I juxtapose the key characteristics of these memoirs with those of well-known autosociobiographical writings, advancing the argument that the Polish tradition of life writing competitions can be seen as an important point of reference for a global approach to autosociobiographical writing.

Life Writing Competitions in Poland[3]

In a sense, the tradition of Polish life writing competitions was inaugurated with William Isaac Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), a five-volume study based on memoirs, personal documents, and private correspondence. Thomas had assembled a sizable collection of letters written by Polish peasants – 764 in total, two entire volumes' worth – after issuing an appeal in the American immigrant press that promised a small financial reward for each letter received. Znaniecki, a prominent sociologist and founder of the Polish *Institute of Sociology* in Poznań, also commissioned an autobiography by Władyslaw Wiśniewski (Władek of Lubotyń), a Polish peasant and baker who had emigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, with half of the manuscript's 310 octavo pages being reproduced in the third volume of the series under the title "Life-Record of an Im-

3 I translate the Polish term 'konkursy pamiętnikarskie' into English as 'life writing competitions', but it is also possible to use the terms 'autobiography competitions' and 'memoirs competitions'.

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migrant". The publication of *The Polish Peasant* marked the beginning of a new approach in the social sciences, one known today as the 'biographical method' or the 'method of personal documents'. According to Znaniecki's student, Józef Chałasiński, this approach

> appeared on the basis of empirical research on the social conditioning of human attitudes and aspirations as well as the socio-cultural structure of personality. In this connection, the phrase 'life record' does not by itself express the basic meaning of autobiographical material for the sociologist. It is not a question here of chronicle materials for the historiographic reconstruction of the past. The sociologist who has an autobiography written for him uses it as a method of collecting research materials on the contemporaries. He wants to understand them in the context of their biographies, to comprehend their similarities and differences as they see them. (Chałasiński 1981: 120)

Znaniecki and Chałasiński continuously refined the method of acquiring, analysing, and publishing autobiographical materials throughout the Polish interwar period (1918–1939). In 1921, Znaniecki organised the first "Competition for the best autobiography written by a manual worker" (Kwilecki 2011: 323).[4] Partly retained for subsequent competitions, the detailed information provided in the two-page announcement dealt with questions such as who could take part, where the manuscript was to be sent, and what prizes were to be awarded. Particular attention was paid to the issue of desirable content. On the one hand, the directive was "you can write as you like" (Kwilecki 2011: 329); on the other hand, however, the announcement made painstakingly clear which aspects were not to be omitted by the participants:

> [T]he childhood years at home, the relationship to parents, siblings, relatives and acquaintances; school (if the writer went to school), where, when and how the writer learned their trade; all kinds of paid work they engaged in from childhood to present; all places where they worked, the working conditions, remuneration, way of life (housing, food, clothing),

4 For a full reprint of the competition announcement, see Andrzej Kwilecki's article "Pionierskie przedsięwzięcia badawcze poznańskiej socjologii 1921–1922. Konkurs na życiorys własny pracownika fizycznego" [Pioneering research projects of Poznań sociology 1921–1922. A competition for an autobiography of a manual worker] (Kwilecki 2011: 328–9).

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> the relationships with employers, caretakers, work colleagues, the amusements and pleasures they indulged in, their military service, participation in unions and associations, and their involvement in political and religious life. One ought to describe in detail one's friendships, love stories, married life (if the writer is married). It is desirable for the writer to indicate whether they have been and are satisfied or dissatisfied with their fate in general, and in particular with their occupation, and why; what they expect in life and what they desire most. The more they write sincerely about themselves and others, the better. (Kwilecki 2011: 329; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[5]

In March 1923, the announcement of the competition's outcome reported that a total of 161 manuscripts had been received, some of them consisting of "more than a thousand notebook pages" (*Rozstrzygnięcie konkursu dla robotników* 1923: 6). It had been decided to award 25 prizes (not just two, as originally envisaged); Jakub Wojciechowski, "a worker from Poznań (now in Germany)", and Kornel Franciszek Żelazkiewicz, "a stonemason from Lviv" (*Rozstrzygnięcie konkursu dla robotników* 1923: 6) were declared joint winners.

In the interwar period, the most important memoir competitions were organised by three institutions: the already mentioned *Institute of Sociology* in Poznań, the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw, and the *Institute for Jewish Research* (YIVO) in Vilnius.

Founded in 1921, the *Institute of Social Economy* remained under the directorship of Ludwik Krzywicki for two decades, until the latter's death in 1941 (Szturm de Sztrem 1959). In the 1930s, the Institute organised three major life writing competitions:

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5 "[L]ata dzieciństwa w domu, stosunek do rodziców, rodzeństwa, krewnych i znajomych; szkołę (jeżeli piszący chodził do szkoły), gdzie, kiedy i jak piszący nauczył się swego fachu; wszystkie rodzaje pracy zarobkowej, którym się oddawał od dzieciństwa aż do chwili obecnej; wszystkie miejsca, w których pracował, warunki pracy, wynagrodzenie, sposób życia (mieszkanie, jedzenie, ubranie), stosunek do pracodawców, dozorców, towarzyszy pracy, zabawy i przyjemności, którym się oddawał, służbę wojskową, udział w związkach i stowarzyszeniach, udział w życiu politycznym i religijnym. Należy również dokładnie opisać swoje stosunki przyjaźni, historie miłosne, życie małżeńskie (jeżeli piszący żonaty). Pożądane, aby piszący zaznaczył, czy był i jest zadowolony lub niezadowolony ze swego losu w ogóle, ze swego zajęcia w szczególności i dlaczego; czego się spodziewa w życiu i czego najbardziej pragnie. Im więcej i szczerze napisze o sobie i o innych, tym lepiej."

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- 1931: competition for the unemployed (774 submissions)[6];
- 1933: competition for peasants (498 submissions)[7];
- 1936: competition for emigrants (212 submissions)[8].

The YIVO, meanwhile, organised three competitions for autobiographies written by Jewish youths in 1932, 1934, and 1939. These competitions yielded a total of 627 submissions (34 in the first competition, 304 in the second, 289 in the third).[9]

The largest life writing competition in Poland in the period before the outbreak of World War II was the "Competition for a description of the life, work, thoughts, and desires of rural young people"[10], organised by the Państwowy Instytut Kultury Wsi (State Institute for Rural Culture). Held in 1936, it received a staggering 1,544 entries. Two years later, Józef Chałasiński delivered his *magnum opus*, *Młode pokolenie chłopów* [The younger generation of peasants], a widely acclaimed four-volume study based on the analysis of the autobiographical narratives submitted (Chałasiński 1938).

After the war, the tradition of organising large-scale life writing competitions and collecting autobiographical accounts was not merely continued, but expanded.[11] This trend was especially intense in the 1960s and 1970s, with

6 57 of which were published in a special publication entitled *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* [Memoirs of the unemployed] (1933).

7 61 of which were published in the above-mentioned *Memoirs of Peasants* (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1–2: 1935–6).

8 More than half of the texts in question were compiled in four volumes, two of which were published before the war (France, South America) (*Pamiętniki emigrantów. Francja*, 1939; *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Ameryka Południowa*, 1939) and two as late as the 1970s (Canada, United States) (*Pamiętniki emigrantów. Kanada*, 1971; *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Stany Zjednoczone*, 1977).

9 In 1947, some of the surviving documents from this collection went to the new YIVO location in New York (384 autobiographies, of which 282 were written in Yiddish, 77 in Polish, and 18 in Hebrew). More material was discovered in Vilnius in the 1990s; it is now held by the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania. A selection of Yiddish autobiographies in English translation was published in 2002 (*Awakening Lives*), a Polish edition of memoirs originally composed in Polish and Hebrew followed in 2003 (*Ostatnie pokolenie*).

10 "Konkurs na opis życia, prac, przemyśleń i dążeń młodzieży wiejskiej".

11 In the immediate post-war period, two institutions were particularly influential in this regard: the *Central Jewish Historical Commission* and the *Western Institute* in Poznań.

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more than a thousand competitions taking place in these two decades alone; in just a single year (1969), 114 such events were organised (*Pamiętniki Polaków 1918–1978*, vol. 3: 558–630). This was also the year in which a group of scholars, intellectuals, writers, politicians, and leading memoirists founded the "Society of Friends of Memoir-Writing" (*Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Pamiętnikarstwa*), which in turn hosted many new life writing competitions and maintained an archive of the submitted material.[12]

Of the enormous number of post-war life writing competitions, the largest and most frequent were those aimed at peasants and workers (one of many parallels to the events of the interwar years), as well as at women. The record number of submissions – 5,475 – was garnered by the "Competition for memoirs of the young generation in rural People's Poland"[13], announced in December 1961. The call for contributions stated that the competition aimed to "give a picture of the new generation of rural Poland, their lives, work, thoughts, and aspirations". In boldface, it was emphasised that this objective could only be accomplished "by the young people themselves, those born in the countryside, brought up in the countryside, and connected with the countryside throughout the various turns of their lives" (*Odezwa konkursowa na pamiętniki młodzieży wiejskiej* 1964: 727)[14]. The texts deemed most worthy of publication found their way into *The Rural Youth of People's Poland. Memoirs and Studies* – 9 volumes of approximately 700 pages each, filled to the brim with over 300 memoirs and diaries (*Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*, vol. 1–9, 1964–1980).

It can be estimated that over the course of the seven decades from 1921 to 1989/1990, about 1,300 to 1,400 life writing competitions were organised in Poland, a number that had probably risen to more than 1,500 by the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, several hundred printed volumes were published in the wake of these events (*Pamiętniki Polaków 1918–1978*, vol. 3: 524–57). Those are truly astounding figures – indeed, it seems safe to state that this tradition, a phenomenon whose scale and significance we are only now beginning

12 At the end of the 1980s, the Society's archives probably contained around 900,000 manuscripts and typescripts of autobiographical documents related to Polish life writing competitions. Unfortunately, the vast majority of this material has since been lost – only about 20,000 items were rescued in 2002 and transferred to the *National Archives of Modern Records* (Gluza 2002; Wierzchoś).

13 "Konkurs na pamiętniki młodego pokolenia wsi Polski Ludowej".

14 "[…] chcemy dać obraz nowego pokolenia wsi w Polsce, jego życia, prac, przemyśleń i dążeń. Nikt inny nie potrafi tego zrobić, jeżeli nie zrobi tego sama młodzież urodzona na wsi, na wsi wychowana i z wsią związana w różnych kolejach swego życia."

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to appreciate, is unparalleled in global literary history. Much more than just a uniquely Polish contribution to the local development of sociology, these competitions are of profound significance for the social sciences and the humanities in general: not only do they enable the qualitative enrichment of statistical analyses, but they also gave a voice to the representatives of social groups that rarely had the opportunity to be heard, let alone to write – peasants, factory workers, economic migrants, the unemployed and the youth.

Memoirs of Workers, Memoirs of Peasants, and… Literature

The interwar period saw the publication of several volumes of competition-related autobiographical material which generated significant attention and sparked heated debates, with the two memoirs published in the wake of the 1921 "Competition for the best autobiography written by a manual worker" being cases in point.

The first of the two, the autobiography penned by Władysław Berkan, did not fully conform to the rules of the competition, because it was not so much about a worker than about an "ex-worker" (to use Berkan's self-description; Berkan 1924: XIX); a man from humble origins who, on the one hand, had become a successful entrepreneur, a capitalist even, the owner of a large clothing company in Berlin that employed several dozen people, and, on the other hand, had reinvented himself as a public intellectual. In the preface to the volume, Znaniecki called Berkan

> a typical 'self-made man' – a man who, from nothing, under difficult conditions, and amid fierce competition, through persistent professional work, accumulated a substantial fortune; who, thanks to his organisational flair and sincere ideals, rose to a leading position within Berlin's sizeable Polish colony, played an outstanding and creative role in its socio-political life, and as a result of this, and also through his profession, came into contact with broad circles of the Polish intelligentsia in the country, and who, despite all this, found time to fill many gaps in his general education. (Znaniecki 1924: XIII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[15]

15 "typowym 'self-made man' – człowiekiem, który z niczego, w ciężkich warunkach, wśród zaciętej konkurencji, wytrwałą pracą zawodową dorobił się poważnego majątku; który dzięki swemu zmysłowi organizacyjnemu i szczerej ideowości, wybił się na jedno z przodujących stanowisk wśród licznej kolonji polskiej w Berlinie, ode-

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As such, Berkan did not meet the organisers' idea of 'the Polish worker', which the call for contributions had outlined as follows: "The competition is open to all those who earn their living by manual labour: workers in factories, mines, industrial plants, urban workers, agricultural workers, railway workers, craftsmen of all professions. Supervisors and foremen may participate if they themselves have once worked physically." (Kwilecki 2011: 328; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[16] And yet, Znaniecki decided to publish Berkan's autobiography as an example of spectacular American-style social advancement, a success story that had propelled its author from the milieu of hardworking peasants and artisans (Berkan's father had been a shoemaker) to a life of prosperity and the ownership of sizable company.

The second of the two publications was the already mentioned *Życiorys własny robotnika* [A worker's life history written by himself] (1930) by the winner of the first prize, Jakub Wojciechowski.[17] Radically different in outlook and style, it provided – as Stefan Szuman wrote in the preface to the first edition – "a direct and faithful description of the real, essential concreteness of a worker's life" (Szuman 1985: 10).[18] The book ran to twice the length of Berkan's autobiography, and it was written in a language far removed from literary Polish – in fact, Wojciechowski's heavy use of everyday speech, dialect expressions, and Germanisms had prompted the editor, Chałasiński, to undertake a number of fairly substantial revisions (Chałasiński 1930b: 23–5).[19]

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grał wybitną i twórczą rolę w jej życiu społeczno-politycznem, i wskutek tego, a również za pośrednictwem swego zawodu, wszedł w styczność z szerokiemi sferami inteligencji polskiej w kraju, który wreszcie przy tem wszystkiem znalazł czas na dopełnienie wielu braków swojego ogólnego wykształcenia."

16 "W konkursie mogą brać udział wszyscy, którzy zarabiają na życie pracą fizyczną: robotnicy w fabrykach, kopalniach, zakładach przemysłowych, robotnicy miejscy, robotnicy rolni, pracownicy kolejowi, rzemieślnicy wszelkich zawodów. Nadzorcy i kierownicy robót mogą uczestniczyć w konkursie, jeżeli sami kiedyś pracowali fizycznie."

17 Jakub Wojciechowski was born in 1884 to a peasant family in Tworzymirki (Wielkopolska). At the age of 15, he left for Germany, where he worked in brickyards, mines, and also as a tram driver. During the First World War, he served as a soldier in the German army. After 25 years, in 1924, he returned to Poland and settled in Barcin, where he died in 1958.

18 "bezpośredni i wierny opis prawdziwej, istotnej konkretności żywota robotniczego".

19 Chałasiński listed the most important changes as follows: "1. introduction of chapters and paragraphs; 2. use of punctuation; 3. spelling changes." (Chałasiński 1930b: 23–5)

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Since its publication, "A worker's life history written by himself" has become the object of many commentaries, scholarly articles, and strident polemics. Above all, the literary value of this life history has been a matter of dispute. Already in Chałasiński's notes to the 1930 edition, two significant categories appear: that of the document (i.e., sociological research material) and that of literature (Chałasiński 1985b: 23–5, 1985a: 19–22). In the introduction, entitled "Życiorys jako materiał socjologiczny" [Autobiography as sociological material], Chałasiński wrote:

> One cannot [...] overlook the value this biography holds for the sociology of the individual. After all, it is the life story of an individual who began their life journey in a peasant's shack as a child of poverty [...], and grew to become the president of a Polish Society in Magdeburg, and thus to some extent a leader of a national local movement. Two merits of this history of the social 'self' of the individual deserve emphasis. One is the accuracy of conveying the various intersecting social and cultural influences of different social environments that affected the author of the biography; the other is the relative accuracy, honesty, and concreteness in depicting the author's own reactions to these influences. Thanks to this, the biography provides an accurate picture of the formation of the author's social personality and the development of their social and national consciousness. (Chałasiński 1985a: 21–2; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[20]

In his "Uwagi wydawnicze do wydania z roku 1930" [Editorial notes to the 1930 edition], meanwhile, Chałasiński asserted that Wojciechowski's unique language gave "a picture of the literary culture of the working class" (Chałasiński 1985b: 24),[21] from which he concluded that "correcting the spelling would clash

20 "Nie można [...] pominąć wartości, jaką życiorys ten posiada dla socjologii indywiduum. Wszak jest on historią życia jednostki, która swój start życiowy rozpoczęła w chłopskiej lepiance jako dziecko nędzy [...], a wyrosła na prezesa polskiego towarzystwa w Magdeburgu, a więc w pewnym stopniu na przywódcę ruchu narodowego. Dwie zalety tej historii społecznego 'ja' jednostki zasługują na podkreślenie. Jedną z nich jest dokładność oddania różnych krzyżujących się ze sobą wpływów społecznych i kulturalnych różnych środowisk społecznych, które oddziaływały na autora życiorysu, z drugiej strony – względna dokładność, szczerość i konkretyzm w odmalowaniu własnych reakcji na te wpływy. Dzięki temu właśnie życiorys daje dokładny obraz kształtowania się społecznej osobowości autora oraz rozwoju jego świadomości społecznej i narodowej."

21 "obraz literackiej kultury warstwy robotniczej".

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with the author's style and with the character of the autobiography as a document of working-class life" (Chałasiński 1985b: 25).[22] Thus, what 'literariness' Chałasiński attributed to Wojciechowski's autobiography placed it on the very margin of literature, if not "outside official literature" altogether (to use Dąbrowska's turn of phrase). Assessments of this kind were to appear time and again in subsequent articles and books on the topic, with the literary value of the memoirs of workers and peasants constituting one of the key issues discussed (Gołębiowski 1973; Sulima 1980; Ziątek 1999).

The literary ennoblement of Wojciechowski's autobiography was brought about almost singlehandedly by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, an outstanding Polish essayist and translator: it was he who dedicated several columns to Wojciechowski, calling him "our living Švejk" (Boy-Żeleński 1959a: 326–38) and "a Polish classic in a workers' blouse" (Boy-Żeleński 1959b: 369–80)[23]; and it was he who entered into correspondence with Wojciechowski, travelled to Barcin where the author had settled after his return from Germany, and encouraged him to continue writing. All told, it was thanks to Boy-Żeleński that Wojciechowski gained great popularity and recognition, which, in 1935, resulted in the Polish Academy of Literature awarding him with the Golden Academic Laurel for his services for the good of Polish literature.

Boy-Żeleński admired Wojciechowski's writing for "the sharpness and plasticity of his memory, the accuracy of his words, his ability to see and perceive, in a word, all the gifts of a thoroughbred writer" (Boy-Żeleński 1959a: 326).[24] On the one hand, *Życiorys własny robotnika* was to be considered "an invaluable document of the psyche of a Polish worker, his notions, customs, the way of life in certain special conditions"; on the other hand, it constituted "an outburst of a completely uncommon writing talent, a phenomenon the equal of which would be difficult to find" (Boy-Żeleński 1959b: 370).[25] In writing about Wojciechowski, Boy-Żeleński formulated a characteristic paradox: in his view, *Życiorys własny robotnika* was at once of "enormous literary value

22 "Poprawna pisownia literacka nie harmonizowałaby ze stylem autora i z charakterem życiorysu jako dokumentu życia klasy robotniczej."

23 "naszym żywym Szwejkiem"; "klasykiem polskim w bluzie robotniczej".

24 "ostrość i plastykę jego pamięci, celność słowa, zdolność widzenia i spostrzegania, słowem, wszystkie dary rasowego pisarza".

25 "bezcennym dokumentem psychiki robotnika polskiego, jego pojęć, obyczajów, sposobu życia w pewnych specjalnych warunkach"; "wybuch zupełnie niepospolitego talentu pisarskiego, fenomenu, któremu trudno by znaleźć równy."

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and free from literariness " (Boy-Żeleński 1959c: 67).[26] He also pointed out the crucial role of the autobiographical competitions organised in the interwar period: "[I]f it had not been for this blessed competition, this forty-year-old worker would have continued to live without ever finding out that inside him there was a writer, an artist!" (Boy-Żeleński 1959c: 67)[27]

A quite similar situation occurred in the case of the 1933 competition for peasants' memoirs organised by the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw. Out of 498 manuscripts, 61 were published in two bulky volumes (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1–2: 1935–1936), both of which, like all of the Institute's publications, contained an introduction by Ludwik Krzywicki. In addition, volume two also included an extensive preface authored by Maria Dąbrowska. Dąbrowska emphasised that a completely new (which was not entirely true), hitherto unheard-of voice had entered the stage of Polish writing:

> Today, in the *Memoirs*, the Great Unknown – a peasant, whom to call a class of the nation is actually too little – has spoken to all who have ears to hear. For he constitutes such a vast majority of the nation that, in reading his reflections, the nation itself is fully recognised, seen, and judged. (Dąbrowska 1936: XI-XII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[28]

At the same time, Dąbrowska foregrounded the autobiographical character of peasant writing, citing as one of the "conditions for the creation of culture" the ability to "take material from memories" and to "use memory" (Dąbrowska 1936: XIII), which led her to conceive of diaries and memoirs as mainstays of

26 "książka o ogromnej wartości literackiej, a wolna od literatury."

27 "gdyby nie ów błogosławiony konkurs, ten czterdziestoletni robotnik byłby żył sobie nadal, nie dowiedziawszy się nigdy, że w nim siedzi pisarz, artysta!"

28 "Dziś w *Pamiętnikach* przemówił do wszystkich, mających uszy ku słuchaniu, Wielki Nieznany – chłop, którego nazwać warstwą narodu – to właściwie za mało. Gdyż stanowi on tak olbrzymią większość narodu, że czytając jego rozpamiętywania naród siebie samego dopiero w pełni poznaje, ogląda i sądzi."

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modern Polish literature.[29] On the basis of these considerations, Dąbrowska concluded:

> To say of the *Memoirs* that they are works of art is both too little and too much. There is no artistic intention here, yet elements of unfeigned artistry are embedded in them like abundantly scattered crumbs of gold in raw, unrefined ore. (Dąbrowska 1936: XII-XIII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[30]

At Dąbrowska's request, the second volume of *Memoirs of peasants* was awarded the prize for the most outstanding book of the year 1936 by *Wiadomości Literackie* (the leading Polish literary magazine at the time). The front page of the magazine's eighth issue, dated February 14, 1937, featured an extensive report on the meeting of the jury, which had taken place in the Warsaw wine bar *Bachus* on January 30, 1937. Despite the fact that many books had been submitted by established writers, Dąbrowska managed to convince the assembled jurors to award the prize to *Memoirs of Peasants*. In her speech, she stressed that in Poland "this is the first large-scale peasant voice" ("Nagrodę 'Wiadomości Literackich' uzyskały *Pamiętniki chłopów*" 1937: 1).[31]

The panel's decision elicited vehement disapproval in parts of the press. Dąbrowska responded to critics who questioned the literary and intellectual

29 Dąbrowska was right. Sixty years later, Zygmunt Ziątek, in his seminal study *Wiek dokumentu* [The age of the document], stressed emphatically that neither the issue of documentarism, so important in modern Polish literature, nor the related questions concerning the status of truth and fiction in literature could be treated as an "internal affair" taking the form of a continuation, transformation, or negation of autonomous artistic processes. Instead, Ziątek highlighted the importance of "the relations between artistic prose and massive-scale, non-professional documentary writing, which was born completely independently of all the novel's troubles with its own literariness, fabularity, and fictionality, and initiated new phenomena that developed as much in opposition to the established traditions of fiction as in symbiosis with its explorations, including avant-garde ones." (Ziątek 1999: 7,8) One example of this phenomenon is the "prose of the peasant current" (proza nurtu chłopskiego) embraced by the likes of Tadeusz Nowak, Julian Kawalec, Wiesław Myśliwski, Edward Redliński, and Marian Pilot.

30 "Powiedzieć o *Pamiętnikach*, że są utworami sztuki, to i za mało i za wiele. Nie ma tu zamierzenia artystycznego, jednak pierwiastki niekłamanego artyzmu tkwią w nich niby obficie rozsiane okruchy złota w surowej nieoczyszczonej rudzie."

31 "jest to pierwszy głos chłopa na wielką skalę".

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value of *Memoirs of peasants* with the long article "Documentary and Literature. On 'memoirs of peasants'" [1937], in which she argued once again that the *Memoirs of peasants* were simultaneously something more and something less than literature, that they did not constitute a work of art in the classical (i.e., aesthetic) sense, but possessed "a significance more varied than that of a novelistic work" (Dąbrowska 1964: 152)[32] – paradoxically, their artistic value lay precisely in the fact that "they are so very non-literary" (Dąbrowska 1964: 155).[33]

Memoirs of Life Writing Competitions and Autosociobiography

If we apply the perspective of today's autosociobiographical discourse to the memoirs of 1930s workers and peasants, and, more broadly, to the texts submitted in the course of Poland's post-war life writing competitions, a number of illuminating parallels can be established.

First, the narratives in question portrayed the lives of Polish peasants, workers, and emigrants in a new light: for the first time in the history of Polish writing, their world was extensively described from the inside, that is, by its inhabitants themselves – a world of hard work and very difficult living conditions, if not grinding poverty.

Second, the memoirs tended to highlight the importance of education in general and literacy in particular, which had allowed their authors to escape the constraints of their social class. On the other hand, steps in this direction were routinely met with condemnation by parents who saw learning not only as unnecessary, but as a threat to the cohesion of the traditional community. The participants in life writing competitions were often 'first readers' and 'first writers', i.e., the first members of their families to complete elementary school and to acquire the ability to read and write (Hébrard 2009: 123–8). One of them describes this experience as follows:

> And yet, despite everything, despite the poverty and misery I have lived in since childhood, there is something that gives me inner satisfaction and does not allow me to fall into complete pessimism and apathy. That 'something' is self-education and participation in social work. Since childhood, I had a special innate attraction to reading. The biggest obstacle, however,

32 "posiadają doniosłość bardziej różnostronną niż utwór powieściowy".

33 "są tak bardzo nieliterackie".

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> was that I had nothing to read and no money to buy a book or subscribe to newspapers. (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1, 1935: 372; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[34]

The texts submitted to memoir competitions make it possible to trace changes in writing about oneself and one's own life over the course of a century. After World War II, competitions became more frequent and were attended by an increasing number of people representing different professions and social backgrounds, even though workers and peasants were still the most numerous group. There was also a much larger share of women writers than before the war, growing progressively more aware of their rights and actively participating in the fight for equality and emancipation. At the same time, more and more memoirs were being composed in accordance with the conventions of the writing and publishing world. This trend was particularly noticeable among female authors, due in part to the expansion of education, rising literacy levels, and the growing availability of book and magazine publications. A very important role in this process was played by the "'world expansion of mass education' that began around 1870 [and] accelerated massively in the post-1945 world" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 62) – undoubtedly a factor of transnational importance as far as autobiographical writing was concerned.

Anthropologists and media scholars such as Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong, and Jack Goody have repeatedly pointed out that an individual's entry into the world of writing results in a loosening of ties with his or her immediate family and/or neighbourhood community, as well as the adoption of a distanced and critical attitude, which in turn can engender a self-analytical approach to his or her own life. When a person becomes literate,

> nearly all the emotional and corporate family feeling is eliminated from his relationship with his social group. He is emotionally free to separate from the tribe and to become a civilized individual, a man of visual organization who has uniform attitudes, habits, and rights with all other civilized individuals. (McLuhan 1994: 82)

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34 "A jednak pomimo wszystko, pomimo biedy i nędzy w jakiej od dzieciństwa żyję, jest coś co daje mi wewnętrzne zadowolenie i nie pozwala popaść w całkowity pesymizm i apatję. To 'coś' to jest samokształcenie i udział w pracy społecznej. Od dzieciństwa miałem już jakiś specjalnie wrodzony pociąg do czytania. Największą jednak w tem przeszkodą było to, że nie miałem co czytać i nie było za co kupić książki, czy zaprenumerować gazety."

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In the memoirs of Polish peasants and workers, as in later autosociobiographical texts, we can detect (although not in such a radical way as in the works of Annie Ernaux or Didier Eribon) the emergence of a critical attitude towards the author's own family – or, more broadly, his or her closest community. The most important reason behind this distancing process was the memoirist's coming into contact with the world of writing (usually by attending school), and, above all, with reading practices that allowed him or her to discover unknown forms of behaviour and to develop alternative visions for future adult life.

Third, the female voice was clearly beginning to make itself heard, despite the fact that women's memoirs were still significantly fewer in number compared to men's.[35] In one such text we read:

> Wanting to give an idea of what the life of a rural woman looks like, her childhood, maidenhood, and later period of life, I wish to give my diary, even if written briefly, but most honestly. I want to render faithfully what I have experienced from the dawn of my life over the course of thirty-some years. Those who will read these words of mine, written by a hand trembling from work, should know that I am writing the most sincere truth, as if in confession, and that I am not vying for any reward, because how could I, an uneducated woman, aim for that! I only want sympathy and understanding. I want everyone to finally understand that we rural women, on whose shoulders an enormous burden of duty has fallen, a hundred times heavier than that of men, are calling for our rights! (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1, 1935: 28–9, translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[36]

35 In the 1933 peasant memoirs competition, women accounted for only 4% of the participants (17 memoirs out of 498); in the 1938 competition for memoirs of "the younger generation of peasants", the figure was 34% (381 memoirs out of 1,544); in the 1961 competition for memoirs of "the young generation of the rural areas of People's Poland", about 47% (2,544 memoirs out of 5,475).

36 "Chcąc dać wyobrażenie jak wygląda życie wiejskiej kobiety, jej dzieciństwo, panieństwo i dalszy okres życia, pragnę właśnie dać swój pamiętnik choćby pokrótce spisany, ale najszczerszy. Chcę oddać wiernie co przeżyłam od zarania życia w ciągu trzydziestu kilku lat. Ci co czytać będą te moje słowa drżącą od pracy ręką kreślone, niech wiedzą, że piszę najszczerszą prawdę, tak jak na spowiedzi i nie ubiegam się o żadną nagrodę, bo gdzież mnie tam do tego nieuczonej kobiecie! Chcę tylko współczucia i zrozumienia. Chcę, by nareszcie zrozumieli wszyscy, że my kobiety wiejskie, na których barki spadł ogromny ciężar obowiązku, stokroć cięższy, jak na mężczyzn, wołamy o swoje prawa!"

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Fourth, the issue of social advancement, present in memoirs and the concomitant scholarly discourse from the very beginning and arguably the most important aspect of the entire phenomenon, became even more dominant after the war due to increasingly dynamic rural-urban relations and large-scale migration from the countryside to Poland's cities. The first book on the subject drawing on material submitted to autobiographical competitions was Chałasiński's (1931), the most recent is Szcześniak's monograph (2023).

Fifth, the abiding literature on the topic has repeatedly drawn attention to the internal tension and conflict experienced by those undergoing social advancement, associating "individual acts of border crossing" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50) with a sense of distance, alienation, and loneliness. According to Richard Hoggart,

> the people most affected by the attitudes now to be examined – the 'anxious and the uprooted' – are to be recognised primarily by their lack of poise, by their uncertainty. In part they have a sense of loss which affects some in all groups. With them the sense of loss is increased precisely because they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imagination, qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness before their own situation. (Hoggart 1957: 238–9)

A very similar diagnosis can be found in Magda Szcześniak's *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Moved. Advancement and emotions in socialist Poland], where she stresses that

> class transformation requires those advancing to constantly work on their emotions, to actively strive to control them. An excess of emotions hinders daily functioning. The burden of this work depends on the extent of the advancement. Considerable psychological effort is also required to negotiate between the two habitus of the advancing individuals – the new and the old – generating a state referred to by Pierre Bourdieu as a cleft habitus (*habitus clivé*). (Szcześniak 2023: 104; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)[37]

37 "przemiana klasowa wymaga od osób awansujących ciągłej pracy nad emocjami, aktywnego wysiłku na rzecz ich opanowania. Nadmiar emocji przeszkadza w codziennym funkcjonowaniu. Ciężar tej pracy zależy od zakresu awansu. Niemało wysiłku psychicznego wymaga również negocjacja między dwoma habitusami osób awan-

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Sixth, categories such as peasants' memoirs, emigrants' diaries, and workers' autobiographies challenged the traditional concept of what constituted literature: what at first appeared marginal became increasingly important, and the 'non-literary' nature of this writing was increasingly considered a strength rather than a weakness.

Seventh, it should be remembered that it was Polish sociologists who played a crucial role in initiating this phenomenon at the intersection of sociology and literature. If we look at the life writing produced in the context of Polish memoir competitions, we can say that it represents, in a sense, "a genre located between sociological analysis and literary narrative" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50). This characterisation would closely align the texts in question with autosociobiography. However, in autosociobiographical works such as Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* or Annie Ernaux' *La place*, social analysis takes place within the author's own text, whereas the biographical method, a research tradition encompassing the acquisition, study, and publication of peasants' or workers' memoirs, engages with the memoirist's writing practice from the outside. Moreover, the form and style of the competition memoirs was significantly influenced by the guidelines formulated in the respective calls for contributions. Thus, if we encounter manifestations of self-analysis in these memoirs, we can conclude that they were inspired (at least to some extent) by sociologists or other social scientists, who in turn used the acquired material for their own studies of social attitudes and dynamics, especially those pertaining to upward mobility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to point out once again the most important similarities and differences between memoirs composed in the context of Polish life writing competitions and autosociobiographical narratives.

The memoirs of peasants, workers, and emigrants written *en masse* in twentieth-century Poland are similar to autosociobiographical texts (including the most famous ones, such as Annie Ernaux's *La Place* or Didier Eribon's *Retour a Reims*) in that their most important theme is the description of a life story through the prism of the protagonist's social condition and the changes that

sujących – nowym i starym – generująca stan nazywany przez Pierre'a Bourdieu pękniętym habitusem (*habitus clivé*)."

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occur within it. In both cases, the writer's (or memoirist's) retrospective on family background and everyday life is significantly conditioned by class affiliation. Another parallel is that the transformation experienced by the "socially mobile protagonist" tends to create a sense of alienation (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50). Again in both cases, the motif of school is very important, as the skills acquired there (reading and writing) are essential preconditions for both social advancement and the development of self-awareness regarding one's station in life.

Yet there are also noteworthy differences: for one, the texts submitted to Polish memoir competitions were written in response to calls for contributions that set out very specific rules and requirements. The writing competence of participating memoirists also tended to be much lower, a fact many of them were acutely aware of (often even apologising to readers for their lack of literary ability). And finally, in the case of competition memoirs, the ultimate decision to publish was not taken by the writers themselves (as in the case of autosociobiographical texts), but by the organisers of the respective event, who often undertook large-scale revisions.

In light of the above, it bears pointing out that the merger of the individual ('auto-'), the social ('socio-'), and the biographical ('biography') that manifested in the outstanding works of Ernaux and Eribon was preceded by a remarkable interaction between Polish working-class authors and social scientists. The works of Hoggart, Bourdieu, and others have been identified as potential historical precursors of the phenomenon of autosociobiography. As has become clear, sociologists such as Florian Znaniecki, Józef Chałasiński, and Ludwik Krzywicki should also be mentioned in this context. Not only has the Polish tradition of life writing competitions produced a truly extraordinary corpus of autobiographical narratives – it could even be argued that the memoirs of twentieth-century Polish peasants, workers, and emigrants constitute a kind of autosociobiography *avant la lettre*.

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Autosociobiographies as a Way of Writing Social Life

Lagasnerie's *3* between Literature and Sociology

Marc Ortmann

Drawing on a distinction proposed by Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu, the present article discusses the place of writing about the social between sociology and literature with a special focus on the role of *writers* and *authors*. After some initial deliberations on this conceptual differentiation and how it relates to the genre of autosociobiography, I will turn my attention to *3. Une aspiration au dehors* [3. A Longing for the Outside] (2023) by the French philosopher and sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie. I will be guided throughout by Elisabeth Lenk's observation that society can be researched and recorded in the act of writing.

At a conference in 1989, Lenk, a former student of Theodor W. Adorno's, reminisced about her teacher and the nature of his work. Most notably, she attempted to counter Adorno's posthumous perception by portraying the latter not as a figure of the German public sphere to be reified or turned into another chapter in the history of philosophy and sociology, but first and foremost as a researcher who had developed his findings and ideas as he committed them to paper. In so doing, Lenk argued, Adorno had captured social processes such as the disappearance or submergence of certain modes of feeling, thinking, and behaviour, thereby dialectically safeguarding them for posterity (*Aufhebung*):

> By writing, he sought to preserve that what was threatened to disappear from reality. Pressed by a double opposition: against German fascism, but also against the mentality of the future victors, those who gave him refuge, he pointed out defiantly those elements that did not conform to

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> the scheme of a terrible standardisation and simplification. (Lenk 1990: 12)[1]

My chief interest here is not with Adorno himself, but rather with the practice of writing and reading sociological texts. Accordingly, I embrace Lenk's way of reading, that is, I engage with the textual structure of thinking about society as opposed to discounting it. This in turn makes it necessary to take sociological writings seriously *as texts written by authors*, not only with regard to their content, but also their structural form, their stylistic and linguistic characteristics, their metaphors and imagery, and their narrative voice(s): after all, addressing the social through the aesthetic procedure of writing means to predetermine (or at the very least influence) the reader's approach to the resulting text.

Writers and *Authors*

In investigating the situatedness of the genre of autosociobiography at the nexus of sociology and literature, it is helpful to consider Roland Barthes's and Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between those who discursively produce something new (*authors/auteurs*) and those who operate within existing discourses (*writers/scripteurs*).

According to Barthes and Bourdieu, *authors* invoke their own authority and the associated charisma (Bourdieu 2015: 104) – or that of a patron or divine sign (Barthes 2002: 54) – in order to formulate genuinely innovative ideas. Like prophets who freely create content and form as the spirit takes them, they are not compelled to refer to other pieces of writing – the requisite authority is generated by their own texts (Bourdieu 2015: 106). This form of discursive innovation is interrelated with the differentiation of textual production characteristic of modernity, especially the dichotomy between scientific and artistic writing (Lepenies 1988: II), and the emergence of the social figure of the artistic genius whose innovative potential is fuelled from within (Müller-Jentsch

1 "Schreibend hat er dasjenige zu bewahren gesucht, was im Begriff stand, aus der Wirklichkeit zu verschwinden. Unter dem Druck einer doppelten Opposition: gegen den deutschen Faschismus, aber auch gegen eine bestimmte Mentalität der zukünftigen Sieger, derer, die ihm Zuflucht gewährten, arbeitete er trotzig diejenigen Elemente heraus, die sich dem Schema einer furchtbaren Vereinheitlichung und Vereinfachung nicht fügten." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, supported by DeepL.

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2005). Despite all the criticism directed against this notion (Bourdieu 1980), it has had a profound impact on the relationship between literature and discourse: literary writing is under no obligation to explicitly position itself vis-à-vis the surrounding discourses.

It is against this background that Barthes distinguishes between *writers* and *authors*. The latter fulfil a *function*, namely to compose texts that are linked to them as authentic subjects embodying their existence through the specificity of their writing (Barthes 1972: 144). The former, on the other hand, perform an *activity*. In this, they resemble a bookkeeper or a civil servant, since their writing is not itself the object of what they are doing, but merely a mediation; writing is the writer's means of transporting his or her purpose. No coincidence, then, that the purposes listed by Barthes, such as explaining or teaching, are reminiscent of the activities of the scientist: according to him, *writers* concentrate exclusively on content, which they communicate in a verbal form that ultimately amounts to nothing (Barthes 1984: 14).[2] The language of *authors*, meanwhile, is more than just mediation: it is the very object of writing.

Barthes admitted that this distinction rarely existed in such pure form, and was increasingly shifting in his own time (Barthes 1972: 149–50). In members of the *intelligentsia*, in particular, he noted a hybrid manifestation that combined aspects of both modes of writing: the *author-writer* can and may write with the freedom ascribed to the field of literature (*author*), but he or she is nonetheless subject to the rules of writing established and enforced by a scholarly community (*writer*).

To summarise the relationship between writing and discourse as conceptualised by Barthes and Bourdieu: all *writers* are inscribed into discourse, but there is a key difference between *authors*, who are free not to reveal their points of reference, and those who are subject to rules of citation – as an activity, the latter's writing is the product of a community and its canon of conventions. For Barthes, this dividing line is especially conspicuous between science and literature. Wolf Lepenies (1988), however, has highlighted the special role of sociology, a discipline which finds itself in a continuous struggle over whether

2 "Pour la science, le langage n'est qu'un instrument, que l'on a intérêt à rendre aussi transparent, aussi neutre que possible, assujetti à la matière scientifique (opérations, hypothèses, résultats) qui, dit-on, existe en dehors de lui et le précède: il y a d'un côté et d'abord les contenus du message scientifique, qui sont tout, d'un autre côté et ensuite la forme verbale chargée d'exprimer ces contenus, qui n'est rien."

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its output should be classified as (hard) science or literature. At the heart of this struggle lies a fundamental question: does the strength of sociology lie in translating its findings into absolute facts, or in recognising the limits of facticity? The latter option entails the recognition that sociality cannot be captured in its entirety with mere evidence: it is always bound in writing, a form that is not only mediation, but shapes the content and is itself conditioned by it.

In this context, it is instructive to pay particular attention to auctorial practice. Barthes conceives of writing as performed by *authors* in terms of an intransitive verb (Barthes 2018: 18): in his eyes, they do not identify with a particular text or book, but rather with the activity itself (Barthes 2018: 18). As Carolin Amlinger's study *Schreiben. Eine Soziologie literarischer Arbeit* shows, *authors* hardly ever separate their vocation from their profession, and relate that profession not so much to products but to the production process, which is writing (2021: 480). In fact, writing as a process appears to be the lynchpin of why people enter the profession of literary writing in the first place, a field full of risks and uncertainties: they desire and demand literary writing. Amlinger describes this desire as a "passionate devotion, the limitless urge to write" (2021: 7).[3] Difficult for those outside the profession to understand, it is articulated across national and temporal boundaries – be it by George Orwell ("From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer"; Orwell 1984: 1), Truman Capote ("I realised that I wanted to be a writer"; Capote 2006: 19), or Georg Stefan Troller, when he gives voice to the child's need to put the world into poetic form (Troller/Ortmann 2022).

As Lepenies has shown in his above-mentioned study, the situation is different for sociologists: more than any other discipline in the humanities, sociology is characterised by a historically evolved combination of the ways and means of science on the one hand, and literature on the other. The hybrid academic identity of sociologists is evident from the interview series "Über Schreiben sprechen" [Talking about writing], in which members of the discipline in Germany, France, and Britain discuss the forms, rituals, and problems associated with their writing processes. In the entire series of contributions by the online forum *Soziopolis*, for instance, there is not a single reference to writing as a necessity of life (as opposed to a necessity of the profession). The German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (Bröckling/Liebhart 2020), meanwhile, distinguishes between his roles as a university lecturer, scholar, and author. As far as his primary role as an academic teacher is concerned, his writing is

3 "leidenschaftliche Hingabe, der grenzenlose Drang zum Schreiben".

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located between that of a *scientist* and that of an *author*, and bound to the forms required in the respective function:

> Being a scholar also means writing down the results of one's thinking and research and making them public. Much of what is and must be written in everyday academic life has little to do, from my perspective, with authorship in the emphatic sense. (Bröckling/Liebhart 2020)[4]

Bröckling divides his writing into formats such as expert opinions, emails, and proposals (*scientist*) and manuscripts, essays, and books (*writer*), the latter of which he finds more problematic. Similar statements can be found throughout the series, and even in the case of a writing enthusiast like Gisèle Sapiro – "Writing is at the heart of my life, and I have to admit that I don't feel quite like myself at times when I'm not writing" (Sapiro/Ortmann 2022)[5] – writing is portrayed as an activity that is important, even beloved, but not entirely inevitable.

Hence, sociology can hardly be understood as a fundamentally intransitive activity, even if it could be argued that sociologists simply sociologise when they are pursuing their profession. In the interviews in question, that profession cannot be delineated by writing alone, nor can a vocation to being a sociologist be established, as in literary writing. However, there are sociologists who adopt and use forms of literary writing in order to thematise experiences that they would not be able to invoke and express in academic writing. In so doing, they leverage the enormous advantage of literary over academic writing, which consists in the fact that it can be used to map out and address society in its entirety (Bourdieu 2016: 53), tracing complex social processes and dynamics by means of a single narrative thread. The result – the emerging genre of autosociobiography, which once again emphasises the unique role of sociology between science and literature, as mentioned above – will be the topic of the following section.

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4 "Wissenschaftler zu sein, bedeutet auch, die Ergebnisse des eigenen Nachdenkens und Forschens zu verschriftlichen und öffentlich zu machen. Vieles von dem, was im akademischen Alltag geschrieben wird und werden muss, hat für mich allerdings wenig mit Autorschaft im emphatischen Sinne zu tun."

5 "Schreiben ist das Herzstück meines Lebens, und ich muss zugeben, dass ich mich in Zeiten, in denen ich nicht schreibe, nicht ganz wie ich selbst fühle."

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Autosociobiography

What is autosociobiography? Can writings be unified under this genre description, and if so, into which category do they fall – literature or sociology, both, or neither of the two? Are autosociobiographies an extension of sociology, or do they have nothing to do with it? On the sociological side, at least, the answer to these questions is controversial.

At first glance, it seems relatively easy to define the term: it goes back to a statement by Annie Ernaux, whose writings, such as *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place* 2012) and *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017), are also at the centre of the battle over the interpretation of texts perceived as autosociobiographical. In an interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Ernaux spoke about the differences between autobiographies and her own work, referring to a part of her own writings as "auto-socio-biographies" (Ernaux 2011: 23). According to her, her texts are not about subjective, personal experiences, but about collective ones that are represented through "the impersonal mode of personal passions" (Ernaux 2011: 23).[6] This can be seen in *Les Années*, for example, where Ernaux embraces the perspective of an indeterminate 'we' (*nous*) or 'one' (*on*) (Hamm 2018) in order to capture moments of a collective history that will never be repeated, combining her impersonal writing with excerpts of song lyrics, newspaper clippings, television adverts, and passages from philosophical and sociological treatises – fragments of a past to which she can relate through her personal experiences, but which do not apply exclusively to her.

Ernaux's is a story of unfulfilled advancement: having escaped her class of origin, she never fully arrives in her new milieu. In portraying this experience of being an outcast in a twofold sense, she draws heavily on Bourdieu's concept of the cleft habitus (Ernaux/Lagrave 2023: 78; Hechler 2022: 17). In a 2023 conversation with Rose-Marie Lagrave, she stated that it was only through sociology, especially Bourdieu's, that she had been able to understand what had happened to her in her life as a social climber:

> Sociology holds the key to understanding ourselves, and I would like to give you another personal example with the Bourdieuan notion of the *habitus*

6 "le mode impersonnel de passions personnelles".

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> *clivé*, which seems to account for my entire life since adolescence. (Ernaux/Lagrave 2023: 80.)[7]

However, the "label autosociobiography" (Blome et al. 2022: 2), which has experienced a "boom" (Blome et al. 2022: 1) in recent years, especially due to the German-language success of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009), is increasingly being separated from its originator. Authors in various countries have published texts that qualify as autosociobiographical, a categorisation for which Carlos Spoerhase (2022) cites three criteria: first, an autobiographical dimension, second, a description of the experience of transitioning from one social class to another, and third, a formulated "claim to a critical reconstruction of a social situation" (68).[8] Crucially, in autosociobiographical works, the blurring of the boundary between sociology and literature is not only produced by referencing sociological theories – the way sociologists engage with these texts also plays a decisive role. Amlinger notes that sociologists ascribe to them "a sociological knowledge potential" because they can be used to explain social realities (Amlinger 2022: 44).[9] One reason for this is that autobiographies use forms of factual narration (Amlinger 2022: 44) that are associated with a commitment to truth. That said, the fact that the truthfulness of the narrative stands or falls with the identity of the narrator/protagonist with the *author* makes it difficult to equate this form of literature with sociology.

Eribon's *Retour à Reims* has served as a prominent example of autosociobiographical forms of writing in the sociological discourse of recent years, especially in German-language sociology. Published in translation in 2016 after a seven-year odyssey, it conquered by storm the German book market, the feature pages, and the specialist discourse. In both *Retour à Reims* and *La société comme verdict* (2013), a literarisation of sociological writing can be observed, as the boundaries between different fields, and above all between sociology and literature, are subverted. Eribon himself sees the two books in question less as biographical works than as theoretical analyses. Using the method of sociological introspection, he combines the writings of Bourdieu and Ernaux with everyday observations, personal memories, and family histories. Eribon's works

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7 "Que la sociologie apporte des clés pour se comprendre, j'en vois encore un exemple personnel avec la notion bourdieusienne d' 'habitus clivé' qui me semble rendre compte de toute ma vie depuis l'adolescence."

8 "Anspruch einer kritischen Rekonstruktion einer gesellschaftlichen Lage".

9 "ein soziologisches Erkenntnispotenzial".

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are characterised by a fruitful combination of literary and theoretical texts that deal with similar problems, allowing him to create a resonance between the exponents of various genres that he compiles and employs for his sociological work.

This approach to autosociobiographical writing is comparatively rare in the wave of publications in the genre, but it is executed and reflected upon as a method in David Prinz's "Ein Unfall" [An accident] (2022), a short story that revolves around the author's class origins and the sense of distance from them he has since acquired. Elsewhere, Prinz examines the epistemological procedures of autosociobiographies. Having drafted a praxeology of autosociobiography, he comes to the conclusion that what autosociobiographies, autofictions, and autotheories all have in common is that they destabilise historically evolved structures of domination and inequality (Prinz 2024: 62). Due to the constant possibility of failure that accompanies autosociobiographical self-experiments, Prinz concludes, such writing practices produce "textual bodies that are by no means *self-contained* and coherent" (2024: 62).[10]

Autosociobiographical (self-)experiments of the kind performed and theorised by Prinz stand in contrast to texts that represent the truth claim discussed by Amlinger, but do not fulfil it in a scientific manner, as is the case with Christian Baron's *Ein Mann seiner Klasse* [A man of his class] (2020). Thus, autosociobiography ultimately remains elusive: as it oscillates between sociology and literature, it merges the knowledge, methods, and modes of representation of the two fields, producing hybrid figures of the kind envisaged decades ago by Barthes, *author-writers* who both freely express themselves by discursive means and use their life stories or those of other people to examine broader social dynamics. As Jochen Hörisch (2007: 10) has pointed out, the truth-referentiality of literature differs fundamentally from that of science: it is immune to negation. However, these *author-writers* combine scientific arguments, sociological theories, and empirical studies with references to film, music, and literature, everyday observations, and personal memories, transforming singular experience into collective social narrative in the process. As the following section will show, a similar approach is adopted in Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's *3*: here, too, the social totality is inferred through the observation of the individual.

10 "keineswegs *abgeschlossene* und in sich kohärente Textkörper".

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3 – An Autosociobiographical Text?

The holder of a professorship at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts in Cergy (ENSAPC), Lagasnerie has published extensively, particularly on topics of a political-sociological or socio-philosophical nature, and frequents a range of different media to address current political issues. As he told me in an interview in 2022, his attitude towards the production of texts is anything but enthusiastic; while he thoroughly depends on writing as a means of expression and as an analytical tool, he does not love it – indeed, his passion is not for writing, but for revising:

> I distrust the narcissism of writers who stage their difficulties in writing and their rituals. I would say that in my case it is pretty easy: I hate to write, but I love to rewrite. So, for me, it is always about creating a first version and a rough plan as soon as possible, on the basis of which I can revise everything. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)[11]

Accordingly, Lagasnerie seeks to work as quickly as possible, dictating tentative ideas into his iPhone to produce notes that he later transcribes.

Most of his books deal with power relations, be it in the form of repression by the law and the police, the possibilities and impossibilities of modern art, or the workings of contemporary academia. Hence, he frequently writes *against* something and conceives of writing as a political act:

> Writing means engaging, participating in the world, and therefore writing is never neutral. It must never become a kind of routine, an end in itself, where the writer or researcher no longer asks himself or herself why and for whom he or she is writing. Otherwise, one runs the risk that one's own intellectual activity is ultimately only an instrument for the reproduction of cultural or academic institutions that accomplishes nothing. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)[12]

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11 "Ich misstraue dem Narzissmus von Schriftstellern, die ihre Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben und ihre Rituale in Szene setzen. Ich würde sagen, dass es in meinem Fall ziemlich einfach ist: Ich hasse es zu schreiben, aber ich liebe es, umzuschreiben. Bei mir geht es also immer darum, so schnell wie möglich eine erste Version und einen groben Plan zu erstellen, auf deren Grundlage ich alles noch einmal überarbeiten kann."

12 "Schreiben bedeutet, sich zu engagieren, an der Welt teilzunehmen, und daher ist Schreiben nie neutral. Es darf niemals zu einer Art Routine werden, zu einem

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Lagasnerie's writing is very much engaged, directed towards an effect – it is meant to shape society, to denounce injustice, to formulate criticism. Hence the need for his books to be concise: in order for his ideas to circulate widely, they must be accessible to as many people as possible. Lagasnerie is not primarily concerned with the act of writing itself, but with its goal, the desired change or outcome, and thus with efficiency. Therefore, in my opinion, his academic works do not exhibit the writing of *authors* as conceptualised by Barthes and Bourdieu, but are imbued with a much more pragmatic and transitive understanding of the activity according to which "[t]he most important thing is to find an effective form without renouncing the theoretical sophistication" (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022).[13]

3, his latest book, differs significantly from all his previous publications, as Édouard Louis's astonished post about it makes clear:

> When Geoffroy told Didier and me that he wanted to write a book about our friendship, the friendship that has been at the centre of our lives for over ten years now, I was obviously surprised. I guess I had the idea that it would be up to me, so obsessed and fascinated by the autobiographical form, to write this story one day. To try to do so anyway. Or maybe Didier, but not Geoffroy (Louis 2023).[14]

This difference has also been thematised by Lagasnerie himself. In contrast to his other projects, which always arose from a feeling of unease, the new book was not written in opposition to, but for and about something: based on the relationship between Eribon, Louis, and himself, it negotiates friendship as a template for life. Interestingly, *3* was Lagasnerie's second attempt at engaging

Selbstzweck, bei dem sich der Schriftsteller oder die Forscherin nicht mehr fragt, warum und für wen er oder sie schreibt. Andernfalls läuft man Gefahr, dass die eigene intellektuelle Tätigkeit letztlich nur ein Instrument zur Reproduktion kultureller oder akademischer Institutionen ist, das nichts hervorbringt."

13 "Das Wichtigste ist, eine wirksame Form zu finden, ohne auf den theoretischen Anspruch zu verzichten."

14 "Quand Geoffroy a annoncé à Didier et moi qu'il voulait écrire un livre sur notre amitié, sur cette amitié qui constitue le centre de nos vies depuis plus de dix ans maintenant, j'ai évidemment été surpris. J'avais sans doute l'idée que ce serait à moi, si obsédé et fasciné par la forme autobiographique, d'écrire un jour cette histoire. D'essayer de le faire en tout cas. Ou peut-être Didier, mais pas Geoffroy."

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with this topic. Intended as a very different kind of book from the ones he usually writes, i.e., a decidedly *literary* one, the first iteration was a work he could not finish:

> I thought it would be enough to tell our story in order to document it. So, I wrote a first version of the book, which was narrative, biographical, with many anecdotes and without explicit theoretical discourse or prior theorising. However, when I read it through again, I realised that with this approach I had produced a naïve narrative that was free of problems and, in a sense, even fact-free. I was confusing appearance with reality. I was talking about nothing. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)[15]

After Lagasnerie had realised, to his dissatisfaction, that he could not write about the topic in the vein of Louis or Eribon, he discarded the first version of the book and immersed himself for a year in sociological, philosophical, and literary texts on friendship. Only then did he begin to compose a second version – a book that does contain an autobiographical part, but that also generalises the singularity of the relationship between the three friends, comprehensively discussing the unique role that friendship can play in life and the unconventional forms it may take; and as indicated by tits subtitle (*Une aspiration au dehors* – A longing for the outside), Lagasnerie's notion of friendship is very much about escape, about breaking away from bourgeois expectations to enable a different way of living that does not revolve around the traditional core of a family and/or partnership.

What brings *3* close to the realm of autosociobiography is not only the overarching theme of Lagasnerie's friendship with Eribon and Louis, two of the most eminent authors of this genre, and their numerous and reciprocal cross-references to each other's texts – it is also the specific form chosen by Lagasnerie for the second, published version of the book, its combination of analytical reflection, theoretical discourse, and literary narrative. In a sense, *3* is a

15 "Ich dachte, es würde genügen, unsere Geschichte zu erzählen, um sie zu dokumentieren. Ich schrieb also eine erste Version des Buches, die narrativ, biografisch, mit vielen Anekdoten und ohne expliziten theoretischen Diskurs oder vorheriges Theoretisieren war. Als ich sie jedoch noch einmal durchlas, wurde mir klar, dass ich mit diesem Ansatz eine naive Erzählung produziert hatte, die frei von Problemen und in gewissem Sinne sogar faktenfrei war. Ich verwechselte den Schein mit dem Sein. Ich sprach von nichts."

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mixture of the project's first iteration, in which Lagasnerie attempted a novel-like narrative, and a theoretical treatise on models of life and friendship:

> Here, too, I'd like to explore the forms of life – what we are and what we could be, the gap between what we become and the multiple versions of ourselves we could have developed into – based on the capture and description of a singularity. But this singularity has the specificity of being, for me, lived and anchored in my biography: it's the friendship that links Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, and myself. (Lagasnerie 2023)[16]

3 discusses the issue of friendship on three distinct yet interconnected levels, the first being the 'I' (*je*) as which Lagasnerie speaks *qua* author and subject. The first-person perspective is employed when the text describes Lagasnerie's personal experiences and the relationship between the three friends, but also when it investigates how individual subjects perceive and process the social world. This approach allows Lagasnerie to theorise the 'I' sociologically as a singular identity that is collectively imparted and that constitutes the product of the social position one occupies:

> The 'I' that I am is merely the way in which positions in different spaces of the social world at different times in the life cycle are linked together. The behaviours I hold as mine are often only the effect of the position I occupy at a given moment in these spaces and this cycle. After my death, others will in turn perform the same actions and feel the same affects as I do, holding them just as illusorily to their singular identity. (Lagasnerie 2023)[17]

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16 "J'aimerais ici élaborer une interrogation sur les formes de la vie – sur ce que nous sommes et ce que nous pourrions être, sur l'écart entre ce que nous devenons et les multiples versions de nous-mêmes que nous aurions pu développer – en m'appuyant là aussi sur la saisie et la description d'une singularité. Mais cette singularité présente la spécificité d'être pour moi vécue et ancrée dans ma biographie: il s'agit de la relation d'amitié qui nous lie, Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis et moi-même."

17 "Le 'je' que je suis n'est que la manière dont sont reliées entre elles des positions situées dans les différents espaces du monde social à différents moments du cycle de la vie. Et les comportements que je tiens pour miens ne sont souvent que l'effet de la position que j'occupe à un moment donné dans ces espaces et ce cycle. Après ma disparition biologique, d'autres viendront à leur tour accomplir les mêmes actions et ressentir les mêmes affects que moi, les tenant eux aussi et de façon tout aussi illusoire pour leur identité singulière."

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The second level is that of a generalising 'we', which Lagasnerie employs to point out issues that affect, if not all, then at least many social actors, be it ageing (Lagasnerie 2023: 8), coming to terms with one's own existence (7), or, following Adorno, the closely intertwined questions of "what we are" and "what society has made of us" (11).[18] However, the text also contains another 'we' that embodies and linguistically constitutes the singular constellation at the heart of Lagasnerie's book: the triangle of friendship between Eribon, Louis, and himself. This different 'we' appears time and again when the everyday lives and shared history of the three friends are described (Lagasnerie 2023: 27, 37, etc.), but also when their relationship as writing subjects is discussed:

> First of all, Didier made it possible for Édouard and me to think of ourselves as authors and to concede to ourselves the right to write. When I met Didier, ten years before we met Édouard, I was still a student, but becoming an author slowly became a matter of course: spending time with Didier and the friends he had at the time, seeing him live, write, and publish, dining in his apartment flooded with books and magazines strewn everywhere and in every direction, made me naturally part of the world of books. (Lagasnerie 2023: 144)[19]

As stated above, these three levels are inextricably linked, allowing Lagasnerie to interweave personal stories with generalising observations and theoretical arguments pertaining to friendship as a guiding principle of life. This approach is reminiscent of (and conducive to) Adorno's "moment of thought", which the latter describes as circling around an object to be investigated (Adorno 1973: 166): Lagasnerie, too, circles around the concept of friendship, observing it from different angles and in different constellations.

The circular movement in question is especially prominent in a passage containing sociological-philosophical reflections on the treatment of friend-

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18 "Nous ne devons jamais, comme dit Adorno, confondre ce que nous sommes et ce que la société a fait de nous."

19 "Didier a d'abord rendu possible, pour Édouard et moi, le fait de nous penser comme auteur et de nous donner le droit d'écrire. Dès que j'ai rencontré Didier, dix ans avant que nous ne rencontrions Édouard, j'étais encore étudiant, mais devenir un auteur s'est petit à petit imposé comme une évidence: fréquenter Didier, ses amis de l'époque, le voir vivre, écrire et publier, dîner dans son appartement inondé d'ouvrages ou de revues posés partout et dans tous les sens, m'a inscrit dans l'évidence du monde des livres."

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ship by authors such as Bourdieu, Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. In the latter's *Das Leben der Studenten* (1991 [1915]; *The Life of Students*), for instance, friendship is understood as a "model of life, as a culture and mode of producing subjectivity" (Lagasnerie 2023: 13),[20] a notion that chimes with Lagasnerie's own concept of friendship as a space of possibility that can open up between people, allowing them to be free and creative (19). At the end of his book, Lagasnerie draws on the view of love and friendship embraced by Bourdieu, according to whom such relationships entail a suspension of symbolic power and the concomitant fight for dominance:

> Love and friendship, at least in their pure form, are based on a suspension of the struggle for symbolic power. In Bourdieu's understanding, love is an exchange of justifications for existing, and the couple thus turns out to represent a mini-city of powerful symbolic autarky, and thus capable of 'competing victoriously with all the consecrations ordinarily demanded of the institutions and rites of <Society>, that secular substitute for God'. (Lagasnerie 2023: 202)[21]

When Lagasnerie refers to (autosociobiographical) literary texts, such as Ernaux's *Une femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story* 2003) and Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017), he does so in a way that recalls Eribon's method of sociological introspection, mixing sociological-philosophical thinking with literary narratives which in turn do not merely serve as allegories, but as scientific sources; that is, the literary-autosociobiographical material is incorporated into the sociological argumentation through a literary effect (Lagasnerie 2023: 141). Moreover, Lagasnerie's descriptions of life with Eribon and Louis never go into great detail, focusing instead on general phases or forms of relationships:

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20 "L'amitié est devenue un mode de vie, c'est-à-dire à la fois une culture et un mode de production de la subjectivité."

21 "La vie amoureuse et la vie amicale se fondent ainsi, du moins dans leur version pure, sur une mise en suspens de la lutte pour le pouvoir symbolique. L'amour est interprété par Bourdieu comme un échange de justifications d'exister, et le couple s'avère ainsi représenter une mini-cité d'une puissante autarcie symbolique, et par là même capable de 'rivaliser victorieusement avec toutes les consécrations que l'on demande d'ordinaire aux institutions et aux rites de la 'Société', ce substitut mondain de Dieu'."

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> After sport, Édouard and I would meet Didier downstairs at his house and spend some time with him at the café. He would talk to us about *La Société comme verdict*, which he was trying to finalise. Sometimes he'd appear with eyes reddened by the hours spent in front of his screen, looking haggard, and say: 'I think I'll throw this manuscript out of the window.' Then, we would each go home until evening to work and rest, and we only met up again later for dinner. On days without sport, we would meet in the evening at Édouard's, my house, or at the restaurant – or go to the cinema, the theatre, or see other friends. (Lagasnerie 2023: 37)[22]

With scenes like these, Lagasnerie illustrates how a particular kind of relationship combines private and public aspects, work and leisure – a friendship that is unlike the relationship between family members or an amorous couple. Embodying a sense of liberation from traditional norms, this unique friendship becomes a proposal for a general pattern of living understood by Lagasnerie as an escape, a transformation, a new beginning. This sets *3* apart from *conventional* autosociobiographical texts: here, escape does not take the form of a transition from one social class to another, but of a much broader emancipation from social expectations; here, the narrative of provenance is not focused on past social mobility, but on a future-oriented movement towards a different way of life with friendship as its centre.

To conclude: *3* combines art and scholarship, literature and sociology. Not only does Lagasnerie draw on literary and academic texts, but he also writes in both an autobiographical and a scientific manner. Narrating the unique relationship between Édouard Louis, Didier Eribon, and himself, he combines this account with sociological-philosophical reflections on human existence in late modernity and the role of friendship as a way of life. Therefore, Lagasnerie's approach to textual production can be interpreted as a way of connecting the two modes of writing conceptualised by Bourdieu (see above). In Bourdieu's understanding, the focus of literary writing on the concrete can be generalised

22 "Après le sport, nous retrouvions Didier en bas de chez lui et nous passions un moment avec lui, au café. Il nous parlait de *La Société comme verdict* qu'il tentait de mettre au point. Il apparaissait parfois les yeux rougis par les heures passées devant son écran, l'air hagard, et disait: 'Je crois que je vais balancer ce manuscrit par la fenêtre.' Chacun de nous rentrait ensuite chez lui, jusqu'au soir, pour travailler et se reposer, puis nous nous retrouvions pour dîner. Les jours où nous n'allions pas au sport, nous nous retrouvions directement le soir, chez Édouard, chez moi, ou au restaurant – ou bien pour aller au cinéma, au théâtre, ou voir d'autres amis."

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on a more abstract level, which then lends itself to scientific theorisation. Going even further, Lagasnerie subverts the boundaries between literature and sociology, allowing the two fields to merge: similar to Ernaux, Eribon, or Louis, he pursues an investigation of reality that commingles philosophy, sociology, speculation, and fantasy (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022).

The autosociobiographical traits exhibited by *3* place Lagasnerie in close proximity to the role of the *author-writer* envisaged by Barthes: as a *writer*, he explicitly inscribes himself into theoretical and literary discourses; as an *author*, he narrates the special relationship that exists between Eribon, Louis, and himself from a decidedly literary perspective. It is by embracing this two-pronged approach that Lagasnerie is able to preserve (in Adorno's sense) the relationship that connects Eribon, Louis, and himself, while simultaneously presenting friendship as an alternative paradigm of human existence. This brings us back to the beginning of this article, where Lenk's interpretation of Adorno's work was discussed: in Lagasnerie's *3*, the compulsion to standardise social life in all its aspects, to adopt a simplistic view of human interactions, is counteracted with the search for an alternative model of life capable of resolving social contradictions.

The answer to the question of whether *3* belongs to a (more or less clearly delineated) corpus of autosociobiographical texts depends on the generic parameters applied and is ultimately open to debate. That said, a certain proximity seems evident – not only because of the specific relationship between (autosociobiographical) authors negotiated within the text, but also due to important similarities such as the portrayed attempt to transition from a 'predetermined' life model to a self-chosen one. All told, Lagasnerie's *3* is an example of how much sociological work stands to gain from literary practices, or in other words: from a different kind of writing in which both the general and the particular of the social come into view.

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