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Varieties of the 'Autobiographical': Autobiography, Autobiografiction, and Performativity

Abstract:

Readers tend to assume that most fiction is – at some level – 'autobiographical'. This paper will use the concept of 'autobiografiction' (explored in my book *Self Impression*; OUP, 2010) as a way of opening up the question of what it means to read fiction autobiographically; or, conversely, to read autobiography as to some extent 'fictional'. It will consider the history of such modes of reading, arguing that the coining of the term 'autobiografiction' (by the writer Stephen Reynolds in 1906) is indicative of a *fin-de-siècle* phase during which the trope of reading anything as autobiography had become widespread. It will conclude by situating the idea of autobiografiction in relation to two influential but contrasting recent theories of autobiography: Philippe Lejeune's notion of the 'autobiographical contract' (*Le pacte autobiographique*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975); and Sidonie Smith's account of autobiography as 'performative' ('Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). The paper will conclude by suggesting that autobiografiction reveals the limits of both positions. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the autobiographical 'contract' is itself as susceptible of fictionalization as any autobiographical content. On the other, where performativity theory sees autobiography not as transcribing subjectivity, but as bringing it into being through performance, autobiografiction reminds us that such performances are equally capable of bringing subjectivities other than the author's into being.

Paper:

What do we mean when we call a piece of writing 'autobiographical'? The idea of a piece of creative writing being autobiographical is now so familiar as to go without question. But when we look into the definition and history of the term we could well be surprised. If you look it up in the online *Oxford English Dictionary* the definitions there seem blandly and reassuringly obvious: 'Of, relating to, or of the nature of autobiography; belonging to an autobiographer'. 'Of course', we might think. If we talk of an 'autobiographical novel', that's just what we mean: it relates to autobiography; the author's autobiography. It has something 'of the nature of autobiography', even though it isn't one.

And yet, when one looks at the historical examples in the *OED*, the surprise is that most of them refer *not* to things like novels and plays, but to works that *are* autobiography or memoir. And this is true for the word 'autobiographic' as well, which the dictionary treats as synonymous with 'autobiographical'

> 1827 T. J. Dibdin *Reminisc.* II. viii. 326 My life, ladies and gentlemen! (that is, my autobiographic life) is now drawing towards its close.
>
> 1831 T. Carlyle *Sartor Resartus* ii. ii. 65 These Autobiographical times of ours.
>
> 1864 *Reader* 28 Apr. 512/1 Was he never autobiographic? Did he never make entries in a sort of diary?

That is, 'autobiographic' or 'autobiographical' is what an autobiography is. This usage tends to sound like a tautology to us; precisely because we now expect the adjective to qualify something that *isn't* an autobiography. It's because we talk of autobiographical novels that it doesn't make sense to us to call *autobiographies* 'autobiographical'.

The sense of these words that does refer to autobiographies is available in the early years of the nineteenth century – very soon after the word 'autobiography' enters the language.[1] So the question is when the more modern sense came in: whereby 'autobiographical' could refer to something that was *not* an autobiography, but like it in some way. And the striking fact here is that – with one possible exception – it doesn't appear to be available until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. James Russell Lowell, wrote in the 1870s that Dante's works:

> are all (with the possible exception of the treatise *De Vulgari Eloquio*) autobiographic, and that all of them, including that, are parts of a mutually related system, of which the central point is the individuality and experience of the poet'.[2]

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[1] *OED*:
1807 A. Aikin *Ann. Rev. & Hist. Lit.* **5** xiii. 584/1 Much that is known concerning the life of Milton, is inference from the auto-biographical passages dispersed in his several writings.
1818 *Monthly Mag.* Jan. 505/2 Autobiographic particulars of the son of Sirach, concluded.

[2] James Russell Lowell, 'Dante', *Among my Books*, second series (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876), p. 26.

Even the allegorical and theological vision of the *Divine Comedy* contribute to this vision of the 'autobiographic'. Lowell is clearly using the term against the grain, to cover works it wouldn't normally cover: works which aren't autobiographies. This is the sense we use when we call a fiction 'autobiographical'.

Now that might not seem mind-blowingly interesting. You might expect the story to go just like that: it takes time after the new word is coined for people to begin applying it in new ways. But why I think it *is* interesting is because it corresponds to a broader shift in the way autobiography is being understood and represented; and this has immense consequences both for the reading and writing of autobiography.

Reading, because when Lowell calls Dante's writings autobiographic, he is choosing to read them in that way. And this choice suddenly proliferates at the turn of the century. Thus Wilde writes in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: '*The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography'*.[3] He's trying to fend off high-minded critics from attacking his decadence as the lowest form of art, by saying that if they find his book dirty-minded it says more about them than about him. But the claim that even something impersonal as high criticism can be read as autobiography is more striking. Wilde means it seriously too: he would expect the best criticism to express the personality of the critic; to be a performance, delivered with wit and paradox; as here, of course. Presumably the idea is that what he does is the higher criticism, running beautiful rings round his critics; whereas what they do is the low stuff; only interested in depravity and name-calling. This was in 1891. As so often, Nietzsche had already gone further. In 1886 he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* that all philosophy is 'the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography'.[4] As with Wilde, a discourse that is normally assumed to be impersonal and as objective as possible – criticism, or philosophy – is read as intensely personal – a confession. If such abstract and impersonal discourses can be read as autobiographical, then every utterance can. 'Autobiography' and 'autobiographical' thus started out as referring to very specific kinds of text; within a century, they had come to describe all texts.

There are two other points to make about this autobiographical turn. One is that it corresponds to one of the key theoretical accounts of autobiography; Paul De Man's essay 'Autobiography as De-Facement'; in which he argues precisely that autobiography isn't a clearly demarcated genre, but a mode of reading. In classic deconstructionist vein he argues that the relation between fiction and autobiography is always undecideable. A poet or a novelist writes about someone else. We read it, or can read it if we wish, as autobiographical. But because De Man wants his insight to be about narrative in general, he has a blind-spot, in that he doesn't acknowledge the need to historicize this experience of indeterminacy. That is, he doesn't see the extent to which reading-as-autobiography is a product of the *fin-de-siècle*.

The second point follows from this, and is again anticipated by Nietzsche, when he ushers the terms 'involuntary' and 'unconscious' into the discussion. The turn I'm

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[3] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 3.

[4] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Helen Zimmern, (London and Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1914), p. 10.

describing, towards reading-as-autobiography, coincides with the inward turn of psychology and psycho-analysis; and specifically with the emergence of the psycho-analytic idea of the unconscious. But this isn't just a coincidence. The idea of the unconscious makes the new way of reading possible. Or, conversely, a new way of reading-as-autobiography makes psycho-analysis possible; since psycho-analysis is a technique of reading everything as autobiographical – whether dreams, slips, free-associations, etc. We may think we're speaking of the lives of others, but, in some displaced or condensed or encrypted way, we're speaking about ourselves; speaking autobiographically. The shift in the meaning of the word 'autobiographical' is thus a symptom of what Paul Ricoeur identifies as the hermeneutics of suspicion.

I said what I'm calling the autobiographical turn also had consequences for *writing*. What I mean by this is that at exactly the same time that 'autobiographical' begins to feel like a word you can apply to fiction, there's a proliferation of works being written that blur the boundaries between autobiography and fiction in new ways. This is the subject of the book I published in 2010 called *Self Impression*. I started out writing about modernism, and how though modernism was often described in terms of impersonality and the rejection of biography and autobiography and romantic ideas of self-*ex*pression, it nevertheless was massively invested in, and engaging with, life-writing. In trying to understand why and how, I found my research pushing further and further back in time. A crucial moment was the discovery of an essay with the title 'Autobiografiction'. I'd come across the term used by and about postmodernists – as roughly equivalent to the French term *autofiction*, say. But what was striking about this essay was that it dates from 1906; and it was describing books published at the turn of the century, from the 1880s to the early years of the twentieth century. Its significance is that its author, the Edwardian writer Stephen Reynolds, had noticed that something new was happening to autobiography, and its relation to fiction, and felt he had to coin a new word to describe it.[5]

He doesn't mean – and I don't mean – that writers hadn't produced hybrids before combining autobiography and fiction. The British novel from its origins was shaped by fictional autobiographies of characters like Robinson Crusoe or Tristram Shandy. What's different with autobiografiction as described by Reynolds is that the essential experiences are actually the author's; but they're given a fictional, or fictionalised, frame. Reynolds calls the experiences 'spiritual', but he defines this broadly to include 'anything that reacts strongly on the mind'; so, much what we would now call 'psychological'. Though the texts he chooses as illustrations are mostly concerned with a form of spiritual crisis; generally brought on by a religious crisis of doubt; but with effects that correspond to what would now be termed depression or mental breakdown (which is of course part of the explanation for why the authors felt the need to fictionalise their stories; to achieve some sort of protective camouflage). 'Autobiografiction', he says, is 'a record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative'. He makes it clear he's excluding novels that are described as autobiographical because their protagonist is based on their author. The crucial thing is that they have to look like an autobiography or memoir. They have to be autobiographical in *form*, not just in content.

[5] Stephen Reynolds, 'Autobiografiction', *Speaker*, new series, 15, no. 366 (6 October 1906), 28, 30

The books Reynolds discusses – by Mark Rutherford, George Gissing, or A. C. Benson – are little read now. But his concept is an extremely powerful one. In *Self Impression* I argue that this turn-of-the-century proliferation of experiments in autobiografiction enables us to understand Modernism's experiments with it too, in works like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Woolf's *Orlando*, Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno*, Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and many other major modernist texts.

Autobiografiction is interesting in other ways too. I've found it especially helpful in opening up the question with which I began: 'What do we mean when we call a piece of writing 'autobiographical'?'. What I found as I began to map autobiografiction over the long-turn-of-the-century was that it could take an extraordinary *variety* of forms. I tried to produce a taxonomy of them, and found it helped clarify what was often muddled or impressionistic thinking in this area. Critics often use 'mock-autobiography' or 'pseudo-autobiography' as interchangeable terms, for example. But there is a clear difference between fictional autobiography used for comic or parodic purposes on the one hand, and used for empathy and interiority on the other. Either of these types can be framed or unframed; in other words, the autobiographical narrative can be embedded within a larger, framing narrative, often in the form of an editorial introduction, for example. The form can be based on autobiography, or diaries and journals, or letters. These too can all be framed or unframed, mock- or pseudo-.

In short, when we call a text 'autobiographical' it becomes clear that we can mean many different things. I started out by arguing that the term has meant different things at different times. The study of Reynoldsian autobiografiction has shown that it can mean many different things even at the same time. It made me much more aware of the distinction between autobiographical content and autobiographical form; and what varied forms that autobiographical form could take. That also got me thinking about autobiographical content – which Reynolds says little about. As I argue in *Self Impression*:

> The most autobiographical of autobiographical novels is arguably the *roman à clef*. In its purest form, one might say that only the names of the characters have been changed. If one changed them back to the real names of the original people, it would no longer be a *roman* at all, but biography, or autobiography. But of course novelists change more than just the names, and even a *roman à clef* might include invented episodes and speeches. So a novel might be auto/biographical in its characters, but not in its plot or dialogue. Or, vice-versa: it might tell a real story, but reinvent the characters involved. Or it might use some real people, events, or language, but combine any of these with invented material. It might be true to autobiographical feelings about real events, but not to the events themselves. Or it might realise autobiographical fantasies. And so on.[6]

The distinction between autobiographical form and content also lets us see another problem with De Man's argument. Though his title says his essay is talking about 'Autobiography', actually he's writing about the autobiographic*al*. The kinds of narrative he discusses *aren't* formal autobiography. And that limits the force of his

[6] Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 8.

argument. The autobiographical dimension of moments which occur in another kind of narrative may be undecideable; subject to readers choosing to read them as autobiography. But the same doesn't hold, or at least not in the same way, about formal autobiography – by which I mean books that present themselves as autobiography rather than as a novel or an essay about something else.

At this point you may be objecting: but haven't you just been talking about books you call autobiografiction, which precisely present themselves as if they were autobiography, but are in some sense fakes; books where by definition it's going to be impossible for us to know where the autobiography ends and the fakery or fictionality begins? Well, yes, but it's the converse case to De Man's; he's talking about works that don't look like autobiography but that might have autobiographical elements. Autobiografiction does look like autobiography, but that is part of the fiction; and it might have elements that are *not* autobiographical. (You remember Reynolds' definition: 'a record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative'.) We started thinking about fictional narratives that could be read as to some extent autobiographical. Here we have works presented as autobiographies that we can read as to some extent fictional.

The idea of formal autobiography shows another way in which the idea of autobiografiction can help make autobiographical theory much more precise. Because it provides a profound challenge to what is probably the other most influential theory of autobiography of recent years, Philippe Lejeune's concept of the autobiographical pact or contract.[7] This contract, according to Lejeune, promises that three persons coincide: the person being narrated; the narrator; and the author. According to this test, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* isn't autobiography because the person being narrated isn't the author, Joyce, but a fictional character, Stephen Dedalus. We can argue about who the narrator is, but it will still fail the three-in-one test. On the other hand, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881) – one of Reynolds' main examples – seems to pass the test, since the title-page implies the author is Mark Rutherford; and he is the narrator and the subject. Yet 'Mark Rutherford' turned out to be a fictional name, used by the actual author, William Hale White. In formal terms there's nothing to distinguish this book from non-fictional autobiographies.[8] You need the external information about White's use of the *alter ego*. Without that, it looks like contractual autobiography – it's just a fraudulent example for the legalistically-minded. Yet it would be hard to say whether it were more or less autobiographical than Joyce's *Portrait*. One thing such examples show is that the autobiographical 'contract' is itself as susceptible of fictionalization as any autobiographical content.

A further problem with the contractual theory is that the plot of an autobiography is likely to involve changes to the narrated self; so it's likely not to be quite the same self at the end that it was at the beginning. Since the narrator and author are the end-self, they can't quite coincide with the start-self. This problem gets even worse with the third and final theory of autobiography I want to discuss: the performativity

[7] *Le pacte autobiographique*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.

[8] Some of the first reviews treated it as fiction, whether because the reviewers knew about the pseudonym, or because they thought it novelistic, or the machinery of its fictional editor unconvincing. Nevertheless, the fact that the reviews were divided between those reading it as fiction and those reading it as autobiography indicates the formal undecideablility.

theory, as articulated in an important essay by Sidonie Smith.[9] According to this account, the subject narrated in autobiography doesn't correspond to any pre-existing entity; but is brought into being by the act of narration. The analogy is with Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative. The autobiographical self is seen as a role that is assumed and developed; something you become in the telling, rather than something you already were before you started telling your story. In a sense, then, performativity is the theory autobiografiction was waiting for, since autobiografictional selves have much the same ontological status, as a self that both is and isn't the writer's; but that the writer might become more like as they develop the role. (Mark Rutherford in fact became Mark Rutherford in all his other books too; and even when Hale White was quizzed about his use of the name, he would deny it was him.) Or, to put it another way, autobiografiction was the kind of form a performative theory of autobiography needed. A form which appears as autobiography, but in which the writer assumes another personality in order to write a fictional autobiography which can nonetheless better express the writer's own autobiography.

However, just as autobiografiction reveals the limits of the contractual theory, so it does of the performative. For where performativity theory sees autobiography not as transcribing subjectivity, but as bringing it into being through performance, autobiografiction reminds us that such performances are equally capable of bringing subjectivities *other* than the author's into being. Or at least, it brings out how for performative theory, the self brought into being through being performed is to some extent a fictional construct. Perhaps like any self, with the stories it tells itself about its own life.

I have attempted to sketch out some of the ways in which the idea of 'autobiografiction' can help us to theorize life-writing, by giving us a richer sense of how the autobiographical functions than is offered by concepts of indeterminacy, contract, or performativity. The conclusion that seems to follow is that if we ask now what we mean by the autobiographical, the answer ought to be 'autobiografiction'. Our predominantly narrative-based conception of subjectivity has led us to accept that, as Hayden White argued about historiography, autobiography can't escape using tropes, and these will inevitably introduce a degree of distortion, fictionalization. Postmodernism, that is, finally caught up with autobiografiction. And if we look around now – at blogging, reality TV, celebrity culture, new novels, the writing of 'personal statements' in application forms and CVs – autobiografiction sometimes seems to be the only game in town.

[9] ('Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).