

**Through
the Looking Glass**
Writers' Memoirs
at the Turn
of the 21st Century

topomo

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Through the Looking Glass

Writers' Memoirs at the Turn of the 21st Century

Robert Kusek

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SERIES

Topographies of (Post)Modernity. Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature in English

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Memory is always an art, even when it works involuntarily.

Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (1994: 17)

To console me for being an invalid, I get “Alice” to read. I read both her adventures, but I prefer *The Looking Glass*. It is easy to imagine myself passing through a mirror, every cell of my body thinning, stretching, becoming transparent, forming and re-forming in some other dimension.

Hilary Mantel, *Giving Up the Ghost* (2010a: 94)

Memoirs, in a form that does not correspond to what are generally called memoirs, are the general form of everything that interests me – the wild desire to preserve everything, to gather everything together in its idiom. And philosophy, or academic philosophy at any rate, for me has always been at the service of this autobiographical design of memory.

Jacques Derrida, “Others Are Secret Because They Are Other” (2005: 145)

After all, nothing is harder to reflect than a mirror.

Gore Vidal, “Introduction” [to *Christopher and His Kind*] (2012: x)

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Acknowledgements

All autobiography is storytelling, all writing is biography.

J.M. Coetzee, "Interview" (1992a: 391)

Writing is not a homecoming. Writing is an alibi. Writing is a perpetual stammer of alibis.

André Aciman, "Afterword: Parallax" (2011: 198)

If a given piece of literary criticism hopes to be preoccupied with the question of *bios* and *graphe*, as well as their mutual interrelatedness (as mine indeed does), one has practically no choice but to open it in a way that is essentially personal.¹

In the summer of 2007, as I was struggling with the disease that severely invalidated me and still casts its terrible shadow over my daily life, I turned, as usual, though with greater than usual difficulty, to books. When grieving a considerable and permanent loss of eyesight (and fearing the worst to come) and, at the same time, trying to make sense of what had happened to me, I intuitively reached for narratives which previously remained on the margins of my literary explorations,² i.e. memoirs. In particular, I re-read three bereavement pieces which, consequently, became my sickroom companions: Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical*

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¹ For example, Jeffrey Berman's *Companionship in Grief* and *Dying in Character* open with the critic's intimate recountal of the death of his wife Barbara (the former [Berman 2010: 1]) and an accident that almost cost him his life and seriously invalidated him (the latter [Berman 2012: 20–21]). Also, Martha C. Nussbaum's philosophical discussion of emotions in *Upheavals of Thoughts* is preceded by an account of her mother's death and funeral, i.e. a profoundly personal story "involving fear, and hope, and grief, and anger, and love" (Nussbaum 2008: 19).

² Although I have to admit that one of my earliest and most formative literary experiences was Halina Birenbaum's Holocaust memoir entitled *Nadzieja umiera ostatnia* (1967) (*Hope Is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror* [1971]) which I read when I was nine years old.

Thinking (a large print edition which my dear friend Torrie Blodgett immediately provided me with upon learning about my condition), Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast*, and Agata Tuszyńska's *Ćwiczenia z utraty*. The volumes in question dealt with a different kind of tragedy than the one I was experiencing, but, as Hilary Mantel once acutely observed, "the pattern of all losses mirrors the pattern of the gravest losses." She further continued: "Disbelief is followed by numbness, numbness by distraction, despair, exhaustion. Your former life still seems to exist, but you can't get back to it; there is a glimpse in dreams of those peacock lawns and fountains, but you're fenced out, and each morning you wake up to the loss over again" (Mantel 2014).

Between 2007 and 2016 I read and re-read several dozen memoirs and, as a literary critic and academic, I found them to be among the most intriguing and fascinating forms of contemporary writing. In the present book, which is a result of my, I hope, studious exploration of this literary phenomenon, I have done my utmost effort to write about memoirs following the tenets and meeting the standards of contemporary scholarship. Truth be told, I would prefer to admit that I was first drawn to memoirs as part of my larger scholarly investigations; or that I accurately identified memoirs as a mascot and the ultimate genre of our *zeitgeist*; but such claims would not be true. I first approached them as a mourner in pursuit of consolation and with a wish that they would help me to deal with my own loss and show how to recover from grief. I very much hope that this confession in no way impinges upon the way this book will be read and does not annul its potential academic merits.

While working on this book I have incurred many a debt: both heavy and numerous. I am grateful for the help and support that I have received from my friends and colleagues from the Department of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture: Dr. Katarzyna Bazarnik, Dr. Izabela Curyłło-Klag, Dr. Ewa Kowal, Professor Bożena Kucała, Professor Beata Piątek, and Professor Krystyna Stamirowska – many of whom have been generous companions in my intellectual and personal struggles. I am also highly appreciative of the support granted by the Faculty of Philology, especially Professor Dorota Szumska, the Faculty's Deputy Dean for Research and Development, who made my research visit to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin possible. I am also grateful to Professor Jacek Purchla and Agata Wąsowska-Pawlik from the International Cultural Centre in Kraków who have made a professional out of me and provided me with an excellent second workplace.

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INTRODUCTION

The Lives of Writers

Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough?

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (2002: 2)

The lives of writers are a legitimate subject of inquiry; and the truth should not be skimmed. It may well be, in fact, that a full account of a writer's life might in the end be more a work of literature and more illuminating – of a cultural or historical moment – than the writer's books.

V.S. Naipaul, "The 1994 University of Tulsa Address" (2008: xiii)

"Suddenly, it would seem, memoir³ has become *the* genre⁴ in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium" (Gilmore 2001: 1) – thus says

³ The readers of this study deserve an explanation regarding this book's resistance to use the definite article "the" before the word "memoir" – if the latter refers to a class or group of texts "at the service of [...] autobiographical design of memory" (Derrida 2005: 145). Though English grammar necessitates the use of the article "the" before generic nouns, some of the recent studies dedicated to the genre of memoir ostensibly violate this norm (e.g. Yagoda 2010; Couser 2012) – yet without problematising such a decision or explaining the reasons for it. Despite the objections of a grammatical nature that I have struggled with while writing and editing this book, my resolution to refrain from the use of the definite article in the above-mentioned context has (apart from following the intuition of the likes of G. Thomas Couser) one reason only: my understanding of memoir as essentially a "genre beyond genre." Its resistance to the definite article is thus tantamount to memoirs' protection of their trans-generic nature and a manifestation of the ultimate defiance of norms, also grammatical.

⁴ Throughout this book, I shall understand the term genre, after Gérard Genette, as an "architext," i.e. a product of a persistent link between "modes of enunciation" and "thematic concerns" (Genette 1992: ix, 12).

Leigh Gilmore of what is almost universally acknowledged today as the “age of memoir”⁵ in her influential book *The Limits of Autobiography* published (*adaequatio intellectus et rei!*) in 2001. Over the last two decades or so, Gilmore’s apt diagnosis of what indeed appears to be a dominant and, as yet, unsurpassed tendency in contemporary writing (with regard to both its production and reception) has been many a time reiterated by myriad representatives of the literary world. In the opening lines of his millenary memoir of 2000, Martin Amis announces what follows: “We live in the age of mass loquacity. We are all writing it or at any rate talking it: the memoir, the apologia, the c.v., the *cri de coeur*” (Amis 2001: 6). In a letter to Paul Auster, J.M. Coetzee refers to a current “burgeoning field” of deathbed memoirs: “the dying person is assisted by a professionally trained counsellor to record their reflections on their own life – achievements, regrets, reminiscences, the works – which are then tastefully packaged (CD, bound print-out) and passed on to the surviving family” (Auster and Coetzee 2013: 103). “I have gone off novels,” Diana Athill declares in her memoir *Somewhere Towards the End*, and confesses that these days “rare delicacies” capable of satiating her dwindling appetite for literature are to be found primarily in

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⁵ The term has been used and enthused about by, among others, Leigh Gilmore (Gilmore 2001: 16), Thomas Larson (Larson 2007: 10) and G. Thomas Couser, who says: “According to various cultural commentators – critics, scholars and reviewers – this is an age – if not *the age* – of memoir” (Couser 2012: 3). One needs to note that other genres of life narratives have also attempted to claim the turn of the millennium period. “We are enjoying a golden age of biography,” says Doris Lessing in the first volume of her autobiography (Lessing 1995: 14). In her belief, Lessing is duly supported by her acolyte, the literary critic Barbara Everett, who in a 2003 piece on Samuel Taylor Coleridge states: “This is an age of biography, not of poetry” (Everett 2003: 7). Announcing the publication of the biography of John Aubrey, the author of the seminal *Brief Lives* (1898), Ruth Scurr opened her piece on “the golden age of life writing” with the following invocation: “John Aubrey, you should be living at this hour! The father of English biography would be astonished to find that his child is the publishing phenomenon of our time.” She further rhapsodised: “In Britain last year [i.e. 2014 – R.K.], biography, autobiography and memoir outsold history” (Scurr 2015a). On the other hand, the Polish literary critic Paweł Rodak (clearly influenced by Philippe Lejeune’s latest writing on *journal personnel*) hails the present times as “czas dzienników” [the age of diaries] (Rodak 2012). Consequently, it appears that the most comprehensive and all-encompassing term that would, indeed, address our *zeitgeist* and its various mascots (memoirs, biographies, diaries, biographical novels, biographical movies, etc.) would be “the age of life narratives,” in which “life narrative” is considered an umbrella (or a master) category for all modes and instances of life presentation, be it the self or other – unlike the much narrower term “life-writing” which, as Zachary Leader notes, is “a generic term used to describe a range of *writings* [my emphasis – R.K.] about lives or parts of lives” (Leader 2015: 1). Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that theorists of other media also identify various (auto)biographical tendencies as paradigmatic of our times. For example, the renowned art critic Jerry Saltz announced in February 2014 that “we live in the age of the selfie” (Saltz 2014).

the field of non-fiction⁶ (Athill 2009: 134). “I do still want to be fed facts, to be given material which extends the region in which my mind can wander” (Athill 2009: 136–137), she says, expressing her preference for *Wahrheit* over *Dichtung*. Elsewhere, deeply critical of the present-day outpouring of memoirs, and yet unable to ignore the phenomenon’s pervasiveness and omnipresence, the critic Jenny Turner castigates it in the following manner: “I hate it beyond words. It’s a crisis of the imagination”; the Bosnian novelist Aleksandar Hemon recently said of what he calls ‘the memoir craze.’ Like Hemon, I get the feeling that more and more writers are turning to the genre as a quick-fix fudge between the discipline of fiction and the research demands of non-fiction; like Hemon, I know I really don’t like it. Challenge me on either the statistics or the prejudice, however, and I’ll find it difficult to reply” (Turner 2008: 18). Nevertheless, supporters and practitioners of the genre do not appear to be discouraged by such voices. “I would [...] venture,” Nancy K. Miller authoritatively states, “that despite the beating the genre regularly takes from journalists and critics who seem to keep hoping that the age of memoir is over, autobiography may emerge as a master form in the twenty-first century” (Miller 2007: 545). While, in a piece on Alan Bennett’s *Untold Stories*, David Lodge applauds the memoir and its writer in the following, most approving manner: “again and again [...] he [Alan Bennett] demonstrates that almost anything that happens to a person can be interesting, moving and entertaining, if you write about it well enough” (Lodge 2015: 94).

One of the most conspicuous features of this, our very own age of memoir (which, for the purpose of the present book, I shall restrict to the last twenty-five years, namely the period between 1990 and 2015⁷), is its democratic character.⁸ When in 1982 Edmund White published his acclaimed

⁶ In his latest collection of essays, David Lodge speaks in a similar vein: “[...] as I get older I find myself becoming more and more interested in, and attracted to, fact-based writing. This is I believe a common tendency in readers as they age, but it also seems to be a trend in contemporary literary culture generally” (Lodge 2015: ix). On the other hand, in 2012, Toni Morrison announced that she had cancelled a memoir contract: “My publisher asked me to do it, but there’s a point at which your life is not interesting, at least to me. I’d rather write fiction” (Morrison [in:] Flood 2012).

⁷ This attempt at periodisation is not entirely arbitrary, which Table One is hopefully going to prove.

⁸ A similar observation, though in relation to the selfie, is made by Jerry Saltz: “This new genre isn’t dominated by artists. When made by amateurs, traditional photographic self-portraiture didn’t become a distinct thing, didn’t have a codified look or transform into social dialogue and conversation. These pictures were not usually disseminated to strangers and were never made in such numbers by so many people. It’s possible that the selfie is the most prevalent popular genre ever” (Saltz 2014).

memoir⁹ *A Boy's Own Story*, he unhesitatingly labelled it a work of fiction. However, the grounds for this classification were not based on the piece's actual position on the map of narrative regimes and its fulfilment of specific generic criteria, but were determined by the memoir's elitist status:

To be sure, *A Boy's Own Story* was presented to the world as a novel rather than as a memoir, but not out of a sense of discretion or modesty. It was just that back then only people who were already famous wrote their memoirs. The victor of Iwo Jima had the right to sign a memoir, but not a battered housewife. The man who invented the rubber band could give us his success story, but not a child who had been locked in the basement for a decade. All this would change by the end of the 1980s, when suddenly youngsters would ask me with a hint of superiority why I hadn't dare to call my book an autobiography. (White 2014: 14)

Today, everyone can comfortably claim the once dearly esteemed title of memoirist: be it a politician (Hillary Clinton's *Hard Choices: A Memoir* [2014]), a sportsman (Tom Daly's *My Story* [2012]), a surgeon (Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* [2014]), a university professor (John Carey's *The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books* [2014]), a scientist (Stephen Hawking's *My Brief History: A Memoir* [2013]), a visual artist (Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* [2010]), a composer (Philip Glass's *Words Without Music: A Memoir* [2014]), a classical musician (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's *Inherit the Truth: A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust* [2000]), a popular musician (Justin Bieber's *First Step 2 Forever: My Story* [2010] or Morrissey's *Autobiography* [2013]), a TV personality (Graham Norton's *The Life and Loves of a He Devil: A Memoir* [2014]), a comedian (Dawn French's *Dear Fatty* [2009]), a director (Michael Blakemore's *Stage Blood* [2013]), an actor (Anjelica Huston's *A Story Lately Told: Coming of Age in Ireland, London, and New York* [2013]), a fashion designer (Vivienne Westwood's *Vivienne Westwood* [2014]), a photojournalist (Lynsey Addario's *It's What I Do: A Photographer's Life of Love and War* [2015]), or even a criminal (Amanda Knox's *Waiting to Be Heard: A Memoir* [2013]) – to name just a few.

By no means have (wo)men of letters – playwrights, poets and, above all, novelists – remained immune¹⁰ to what Jenny Turner has derogatorily

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⁹ I shall briefly return to the generic status of *A Boy's Own Story* in Chapter Two of the present book.

¹⁰ It needs to be acknowledged that writers' memoirs are not among the most popular (i.e. commercially successful) life narratives. The data released by the Nielsen BookScan

called the “look-at-me memoir circus” (Turner 2008: 18). The following table provides a corpus (far from exclusive) of some of the most celebrated contemporary writers and of their memoirs which have been published over the last twenty-five years.

Table One: Selected writers’ memoirs between 1990 and 2015

Writer	Title	Publication date
William Styron	<i>Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness</i>	1990
Paul Bailey	<i>An Immaculate Mistake: Scenes from Childhood and Beyond</i>	1990
Philip Roth	<i>Patrimony: A True Story</i>	1991
Nick Hornby	<i>Fever Pitch</i>	1992
Muriel Spark	<i>Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography</i>	1992
Diana Athill ¹¹	<i>Make Believe: A True Story</i>	1993
William Trevor	<i>Excursions in the Real World: Memoirs</i>	1993
Blake Morrison	<i>And When Did You Last See Your Father?</i>	1993
Penelope Lively ¹²	<i>Oleander, Jacaranda: A Childhood Perceived</i>	1994
Doris Lessing ¹³	<i>Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography to 1949</i>	1994
Howard Jacobson	<i>Roots, Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews</i>	1994
Colm Tóibín ¹⁴	<i>The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe</i>	1994
Edmund White ¹⁵	<i>Our Paris: Sketches from Memory</i>	1995

■ shows that out of fifty biographies and autobiographies that sold the most in the period of 2001–2013, only two were written by writers: Bill Bryson’s *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (2006; position in the ranking: nine) and Alan Bennett’s *Untold Stories* (2005; position in the ranking: 25) (Chalabi 2013).

¹¹ In the period under discussion Diana Athill also published *Stet: A Memoir* (2002), *Yesterday Morning: A Very English Childhood* (2008), *Somewhere Towards the End* (2009), and *Alive, Alive Oh!: And Other Things That Matter* (2015).

¹² In the period under discussion Penelope Lively also published *A House Unlocked* (2001) and *Dancing Fish and Ammonites* (2013).

¹³ In the period under discussion Doris Lessing also published *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992), *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962* (1997) and *Alfred and Emily* (2008).

¹⁴ In the period under discussion Colm Tóibín also published *A Guest at the Feast: A Memoir* (2011).

¹⁵ In the period under discussion Edmund White also published *My Lives* (2005), *City Boy* (2009), and *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris* (2014).

Writer	Title	Publication date
Andrew O'Hagan	<i>The Missing</i>	1995
Gore Vidal	<i>Palimpsest: A Memoir</i>	1995
Louise Erdrich ¹⁶	<i>The Blue Jay's Dance: A Memoir of Early Motherhood</i>	1995
Mark Doty ¹⁷	<i>Heaven's Coast: A Memoir</i>	1996
John Irving ¹⁸	<i>The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Memoir</i>	1996
André Aciman	<i>Out of Egypt: A Memoir</i>	1996
Geoff Dyer	<i>Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D.H. Lawrence</i>	1997
Jamaica Kincaid	<i>My Brother</i>	1997
J.M. Coetzee ¹⁹	<i>Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life</i>	1997
Jenny Diski ²⁰	<i>Skating to Antarctica</i>	1997
John Bayley ²¹	<i>Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch</i>	1998
Linda Grant	<i>Remind Me Who I Am, Again</i>	1998
Ciarán Carson	<i>The Star Factory</i>	1998
Paul Theroux	<i>Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship Across Five Continents</i>	1998
P.D. James	<i>Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography</i>	1999
Martin Amis	<i>Experience: A Memoir</i>	2000
Rachel Cusk ²²	<i>A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother</i>	2001
Roddy Doyle	<i>Rory & Ita</i>	2002
Fay Weldon	<i>Auto da Fay: A Memoir</i>	2002
Hilary Mantel	<i>Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir</i>	2003
Hanif Kureishi	<i>My Ear at His Heart: Reading My Father</i>	2004

¹⁶ In the period under discussion Louise Erdrich also published *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003).

¹⁷ In the period under discussion Mark Doty also published *Dog Years: A Memoir* (2008).

¹⁸ In the period under discussion John Irving also published *My Movie Business: A Memoir* (1999).

¹⁹ In the period under discussion J.M. Coetzee also published *Youth* (2002) and *Summer-time: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009).

²⁰ In the period under discussion Jenny Diski also published *Stranger on a Train* (2002), *On Trying to Keep Still* (2006), *The Sixties* (2009) and *What I Don't Know About Animals* (2010).

²¹ In the period under discussion John Bayley also published *Elegy for Iris: A Memoir* (1999), *Iris and the Friends: A Year of Memories* (1999) and *Widower's House* (2001).

²² In the period under discussion Rachel Cusk also published *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009) and *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012).

Writer	Title	Publication date
Chuck Palahniuk	<i>Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories</i>	2004
Brian Aldiss	<i>When the Feast Is Finished: A Memoir of Love and Bereavement</i>	2004
Anne Enright	<i>Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood</i>	2004
John McGahern	<i>Memoir</i>	2005
Tariq Ali	<i>Street-Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties</i>	2005
Alan Bennett ²³	<i>Untold Stories</i>	2005
Vikram Seth	<i>Two Lives</i>	2005
Joan Didion ²⁴	<i>The Year of Magical Thinking</i>	2005
Andrew Motion	<i>In the Blood: A Memoir of My Childhood</i>	2006
Jonathan Franzen	<i>The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History</i>	2006
Kate Grenville	<i>Searching for the Sacred River: A Writing Memoir</i>	2006
Kwame Dawes	<i>A Far Cry from Plymouth Rock: A Personal Narrative</i>	2006
Caryl Phillips	<i>Foreigners: Three English Lives</i>	2007
Michèle Roberts	<i>Paper Houses: A Memoir of the 70s and Beyond</i>	2007
Dannie Abse	<i>The Presence</i>	2008
Julian Barnes ²⁵	<i>Nothing to Be Frightened Of</i>	2008
Janice Galloway ²⁶	<i>This Is Not About Me</i>	2008
Michael Chabon	<i>Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son</i>	2009
Margaret Drabble	<i>The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws</i>	2009
Susan Hill	<i>Howards End Is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home</i>	2009
André Brink	<i>A Fork in the Road: A Memoir</i>	2009
Siri Hustvedt	<i>The Shaking Woman, or A History of My Nerves</i>	2009

²³ In the period under discussion Alan Bennett also published *Writing Home* (1994) and *A Life Like Other People's* (2009).

²⁴ In the period under discussion Joan Didion also published *Blue Nights* (2011).

²⁵ In the period under discussion Julian Barnes also published *Levels of Life* (2013).

²⁶ In the period under discussion Janice Galloway also published *All Made Up* (2011).

Writer	Title	Publication date
Reynolds Price ²⁷	<i>Ardent Spirits: Leaving Home, Coming Back</i>	2009
Jackie Kay	<i>Red Dust Road: An Autobiographical Journey</i>	2010
Damon Galgut	<i>In a Strange Room: Three Journeys</i>	2010
Michael Frayn	<i>My Father's Fortune: A Life</i>	2010
Annie Proulx	<i>Bird Cloud: A Memoir of Place</i>	2011
Jeanette Winterson	<i>Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?</i>	2011
Joyce Carol Oates	<i>A Widow's Story: A Memoir</i>	2011
Colin Thubron ²⁸	<i>To a Mountain in Tibet</i>	2011
Alice Walker ²⁹	<i>Chicken Chronicles: A Memoir</i>	2011
Edna O'Brien	<i>Country Girl: A Memoir</i>	2012
Salman Rushdie	<i>Joseph Anton: A Memoir</i>	2012
Paul Auster ³⁰	<i>Winter Journal</i>	2012
Philip Hensher	<i>Scenes from Early Life: A Novel</i>	2012
Chinua Achebe	<i>There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra</i>	2012
Rebecca Solnit	<i>The Faraway Nearby</i>	2013
Amit Chaudhuri	<i>Calcutta: Two Years in the City</i>	2013
Julia O'Faolain	<i>Trespassers: A Memoir</i>	2013
Alice Munro	<i>Dear Life</i>	2013
Maya Angelou ³¹	<i>Me & Me & Mom</i>	2013
Nicholas Shakespeare	<i>Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an English-woman in Wartime France</i>	2013
Adam Thorpe	<i>On Silbury Hill</i>	2014
Margaret Foster	<i>My Life in Houses</i>	2014

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- ²⁷ In the period under discussion Reynolds Price also published *Midstream: An Unfinished Memoir* (2012, posthumously).
- ²⁸ In the period under discussion Colin Thubron also published *The Lost Heart of Asia* (1994), *In Siberia* (1999) and *Shadow of the Silk Road* (2006).
- ²⁹ In the period under discussion Alice Walker also published *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996), *Sent By Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon* (2001), *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006), and *Overcoming Speechlessness* (2010), among others.
- ³⁰ In the period under discussion Paul Auster also published *Report from the Interior* (2013).
- ³¹ *Me & Me & Mom* was the seventh and final volume of Maya Angelou's autobiographical series which she began in 1969 with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the period under discussion she also published *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002).

Writer	Title	Publication date
David Hare	<i>The Blue Touch Paper: A Memoir</i>	2014
Maggie Nelson ³²	<i>The Argonauts</i>	2015
Tracy K. Smith	<i>Ordinary Light: A Memoir</i>	2015
Adam Mars Jones	<i>Kid Gloves: A Voyage Round My Father</i>	2015
Katharine Norbury	<i>The Fish Ladder: A Journey Upstream</i>	2015
Jeremy Gavron	<i>A Woman on the Edge of Time: A Son's Search for His Mother</i>	2015

Source: Own study

The list certainly requires a number of explanations and clarifications. First of all, it accounts for memoirs written between 1990 and 2015 only. While the latter date is determined by the intrinsic temporality of this scholarly endeavour (i.e. the imminent publication date of the present book), the former is, to some extent, arbitrary. Indeed, a number of outstanding memoirs – both formally and thematically – were published prior to 1990 (e.g. Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* [1968], B.S. Johnson's *Aren't You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* [1973], Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* [1982], David Malouf's *12 Edmondstone Street* [1985], Philip Roth's *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* [1988], or John Updike's *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* [1989]); nevertheless, on the basis of the data collected in the table, one could argue that the final decade of the 20th century veritably witnessed a steady increase in the production of the genre – a trend which considerably advanced in the new millennium. Secondly, the table privileges authors writing in English, even though, in the given period, writers' memoirs have been published by, among others, Amos Oz (*Sipour Al Ahava Vehoshekh* [2002]), Gabriel García Márquez (*Vivir para contarla* [2002]), Patrick Modiano (*Un pedigree* [2004]), José Saramago (*As Pequenas Memórias* [2006]), Imre Kertész (*K. Dosszié* [2006]), Günter Grass (*Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* [2006]) – thus proving that the age of memoir is, in fact, a global phenomenon.³³ Thirdly, it does not wish to establish a canon of writers' memoirs and, since it

³² In the period under discussion Maggie Nelson also published *The Red Parts: A Memoir* (2007).

³³ The period also saw the translation of a number of writers' memoirs which – had it not been for the memoir boom – would, most probably, not have been published in English at all (e.g. Tove Jansson's *Bildhuggarens Dotter* of 1968 which was translated and published in English in 2014 – more than forty years after its Swedish release – under the title *Sculptor's Daughter: A Childhood Memoir*).

owes a lot to the vagaries of personal reading, it remains, of course, thoroughly deconstructible. Not only might I have ignored or overlooked memoirs that deserve to be included in the above corpus, but it is also possible that I might have failed to identify such valuable specimens in the first place. Consequently, the list itself should be seen as strongly linked to the idea of Foucaultian *archéologie* and the belief that though objects must be described and shown as belonging to a stratum, their description is never complete since the *épistémè* is “un ensemble indéfiniment mobile de scansions, de décalages, de coïncidences qui s’établissent et se défont” (Foucault 1969: 250). Yet, I want to strongly emphasise that the list and, in particular, the five writers’ memoirs discussed in detail in “Part Two” of the present book, are not random choices; on the contrary, they have been carefully selected primarily due to their originality. In other words, the principle that I followed when selecting them was whether, upon the first act of reading, they resembled an encounter with “a stranger” and produced “an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfilment of expectations,” as Harold Bloom once said of every great book (Bloom 1994: 2). Finally, the list hopes to show how varied the phenomenon in question actually is and, consequently, why it should attract critical attention. It includes stories about writers’ mothers (Linda Grant’s *Remind Me Who I Am, Again*) and about being a mother (Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother*); stories about childhood (Penelope Lively’s *Oleander, Jacaranda: A Childhood Perceived*) and old age (P.D. James’s *Time to Be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*); stories of the self (Alan Bennett’s *Untold Stories*) and other (Nicholas Shakespeare’s *Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France*); first person (André Brink’s *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir*), second person (Paul Auster’s *Winter Journal*) and third person (Salman Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*) narratives; pieces written in the present tense (J.M. Coetzee’s *Youth*) and the past tense (Edmund White’s *My Lives*); narratives which ostensibly label themselves memoirs (Julia O’Faolain’s *Trespassers: A Memoir*) and pieces that hide or belie their generic identity (Philip Hensher’s *Scenes from Early Life: A Novel*).

Of course, in the past, and especially throughout the 20th century, a number of writers were allured by the possibilities (structural, aesthetic, and, undoubtedly, psychological) that memoirs offered, the notable examples being Henry James’s *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), H.G. Wells’s *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Edith Wharton’s *A Backward Glance: An Autobiography* (1934), Christopher Isherwood’s *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), as well as Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* (1972) and Mark Twain’s *Autobiography*

of *Mark Twain* (2012, 2013) which were posthumously published. Nevertheless, as the above list partly proves, only contemporary writers have dedicated truly unprecedented³⁴ attention to the genre of memoir.

Among critics, the reasons for the eruption of (auto)biographical accounts (and, consequently, memoirs) have been repeatedly and (it would seem) definitively voiced: the recent triumphs of social and political liberation which provoked the demand for the release of previously suppressed narratives, the advent of mass production and consumerism, as well as a growing resistance to some of the tenets of post-structuralism, to name just a few.³⁵ In other words, the political and cultural processes which have accelerated since the early 1990s are unanimously held responsible for the revival of interest (and belief) in the subject and the self, ubiquitous confessionalism and, to borrow the title from Hal Foster's seminal study, "the return of the real."³⁶ In his magisterial book of 2012 entitled *Realism After Modernism* (and tellingly subtitled "The Rehumanization of Art and Literature"), Devin Fore argues in favour of the return of the human figure in the art and literature of the 1920s and 1930s, a development which he further defines as the "human turn" (Fore 2012: 6). He notes that the interwar period was marked by, among others, the

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³⁴ The research conducted for the purpose of the present study has confirmed that the only antecedent of the current writers' memoir boom can be identified in the activity of the Memoir Club, whose eminent members such as John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, Molly McCarthy, Roger Fry, and E.M. Forster, read around a hundred and twenty-five "memoirs" during some sixty meetings of the club (Rosenbaum 2014: 18).

³⁵ E.g. Gilmore 2001: 16–18; Lodge 2007: 8–11; Yagoda 2010: 238–241; Karr 2015: xiii–xxii. In *Memoir: A History*, Ben Yagoda appears to offer the most comprehensive account of the trends that have contributed to the memoir boom which include, among others, growing social narcissism, an interest in victimhood, therapeutic culture, a craving for the literal, the return of the "I" in academic discourse, and the expansion of new media.

³⁶ Quite importantly, "the real," after Jacques Lacan, is not necessarily subjected to the doctrine of authenticity, but is certainly considered "traumatic" (Foster 1996: 138). Tom McCarthy recently commented on the distinction between realism, reality, and the (essentially "catastrophic") real, defining the latter as an event that "*happens*, or forever threatens to happen, not as a result of the artist 'getting it right' or being authentic, but rather as a radical and disastrous eruption inside the always and irremediably inauthentic; a traumatic real; a real that is psychoanalytic as much as literary: the real that Lacan defines as 'that which always returns to the same place' and as 'that which is unassimilable by any system of representation.'" He further added: "The challenge isn't to depict this real realistically, or even 'well,' but to approach it in the full knowledge that, like some roving black hole, it represents [...] the point at which the writing's entire project crumples and implodes" (McCarthy 2014). In this sense, memoirs are particularly invited to be seen as manifestations of "the real" since they predominantly deal with traumatic events (e.g. illness, death, loss, etc.).

abandonment of non-objectivity, nihilism and the experimentalism of the *avant-garde*, and by a re-appreciation of realism, verisimilitude and likeness.³⁷ It is precisely the same “human turn” that I am tempted to see in contemporary culture³⁸ and, thus, equally eager to assert – in relation to the outpouring of narratives focusing on human *bios* – about realism (or “minimal realism”³⁹) after postmodernism,⁴⁰ and the substitution of repetition, subversiveness and ironical quotations with the “jargon [or cult] of authenticity” (Adorno 1973).

What is more, “the golden age of life writing” (Scurr 2015a) (or, largely, of so-called non-fiction) is typically seen as secondary to the general crisis of fictional narratives.⁴¹ When the biographer Claire Tomalin announced the longlist for the 2014 Samuel Johnson prize, she unreservedly stated

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³⁷ Needless to say, Fore does not claim that the 1920s and 1930s saw the reinstatement of the 19th century aesthetic paradigm of verist mimesis. On the contrary, realism that returns is considered a strategy of mimicry (repetition and augmentation in particular) and, as such, is a model of postmodern pastiche (Fore 2012: 10).

³⁸ Indeed, one could risk a statement that we currently live in the new 1930s – the period which was famously called the age of “recollectionism” by E.M. Forster, himself the author of several memoirs (“This is an age of autobiographies and recollections” [Forster {in:} Stone 1966: 23]). A fully authoritative discussion of the ([auto]biographical) 1930s has been offered by Teresa Bruś in her book *Life Writing as Self-Collecting in the 1930s* (in particular chapter one entitled “Autobiographical Life in the Thirties”). As Bruś writes in the preface to her study: “In the crisis-charged climate of the 1930s, autobiographers in England accorded insistent, even compulsive, attention to the category of life”; she further adds that the autobiographical forms created by the members of the Auden generation “testify not only to the potential of life-writing forms, but also to the authors’ sustained anxieties of identity and self-representation” (Bruś 2012: 11).

³⁹ In his lecture on a “new realism” delivered in Athens in 2013 (as part of the 23rd World Congress of Philosophy), Umberto Eco talked about the contemporary revival of realism as a way to “react to so-called post-modern philosophy” and an attempt to defend the idea of fact as well as the recognition of and resistance to false interpretations. He calls his position that of negative or minimal realism (Eco 2013). More on Eco’s ideas on realism can be found, for example, in *Po drugiej stronie lustra i inne eseje: Znak, reprezentacja, iluzja, obraz* (Eco 2012).

⁴⁰ Postmodernism which, after Linda Hutcheon, I consider a dominant yet “contradictory” cultural phenomenon (or “activity”) of the second half of the 20th century, characterised by self-reflexivity, heterogeneity, irony, provisionality, and incredulity towards master narratives (Hutcheon 1988: 3–20); or, in line with Zygmunt Bauman, by fluidity or liquidity (Bauman 2000: 3–5). Needless to say I am aware that memoir is often classified as an essentially postmodern genre. For example, Nancy K. Miller calls it “fashionably post-modern” since it “hesitates to define the boundary between public and private, subject and object” (Miller 1996: 2).

⁴¹ Over the last decade or so, the novel has been more than once hailed as a dead genre. In his essay on Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*, Jonathan Franzen semi-ironically responded to those incantations in the following manner: “[H]aven’t we all secretly sort of come to an agreement, in the last year or two or three, that novels

that today “non-fiction is certainly stronger and wilder than fiction” (Tomalin [in:] Flood 2014) – thus publically articulating a widely held belief about present-day literary production and its *zeitgeist*. Of all the reasons for the emergence of the memoir boom at the turn of the 21st century,⁴² this one does, indeed, raise some doubts and reservations – at least on my part.⁴³ What I should like to postulate is that – instead of announcing the death of the novel – one should look at contemporary literary practices, the (auto)biographical turn in particular, as just another phase in the development of Western narratives.⁴⁴ In “The Practical Past” Hayden White noted (as, in a similar spirit, did Maria Janion in *Kobiety i duch inności* [Janion 2006: 50–53]) that “[t]he modern novel has its origin in the early 18th century in the transformation of the romance into a range of ‘how to live’ manuals directed at middle class women left at home and seeking instruction on ‘what must be done’ in order to fulfil duties to God, husband, family, and friends in the absence of class practices of the kind that gave meaning to their peasant and aristocratic counterparts” (White 2014: 11). In light of this observation, one is, perhaps, entitled not to talk about the demise of the novel, but about the genre’s

■ belonged to the age of newspapers and are going the way of newspapers, only faster?” (Franzen 2010).

⁴² One should note that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century also marked the arrival of the so-called “online lives” and, consequently, such digital life narratives as blogs, vlogs, self-videos, online memoirs, online journals, or “auto/tweetographies” (McNeill 2014: 151). Suffice it to mention that online life writing has even attracted the attention of Philippe Lejeune, who, in *On Diary*, called it a “new frontier” (Lejeune 2009: 316). Emphasising technology’s role in this “golden age” of life narratives and the way new media satiate our the appetite for “everyday autobiography,” Laurie McNeill asserts: “since 1991, when the World Wide Web made it possible to connect Internet content, millions of people have taken up digital technologies to tell their stories, in public, to potentially millions of readers, whether they are on blogs, Facebook, YouTube, or Ancestry.com. [...] The popularity of online auto/biography, in its myriad forms, suggests that the Internet is serving and creating a shared sense that these interactive representations are how we make meaning of our lives” (McNeill 2014: 145). See also Hayes 2015: 233–256.

⁴³ Perhaps, it is enough to mention that 2014 (i.e. the year Claire Tomalin complained about) saw the publication of such successful (both commercially and artistically) pieces of fiction as *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith, *Lila* by Marilynne Robinson, *Outline* by Rachel Cusk, *Nora Webster* by Colm Tóibín, and *J* by Howard Jacobson.

⁴⁴ A similar claim has been made by Martin Amis who, in an essay on Saul Bellow titled “Saul Bellow in Chicago,” states the following: “The present phase of Western literature is inescapably one of ‘higher autobiography,’ intensely self-inspecting. The phase began with the spittle of Confessionalism (in American poetry: Lowell et al.) but has steadied and persisted. No more stories: the author is increasingly committed to the private being” (Amis 1986: 200).

transformation and return to the mode it emerged from, namely a (real) person's life story.⁴⁵

But (and this, I hope, brings us closer to an understanding of the phenomenon of writers' memoirs) we are currently experiencing not only the golden days of life narrative but also, as the character of Paul Ewen's deviceful novel rightly states, "the golden age of author/reader interaction" (Ewen 2014: 13). It appears to be no coincidence that only when the return of the author was officially acknowledged,⁴⁶ did contemporary writers unanimously and abundantly engage themselves in narrating their (or others') real life stories.⁴⁷ At the turn of the 1990s, the author/writer, considered by post-structuralism to be "the decrepit deity of the old criticism" (Barthes 1979: 211), started "speak[ing] strangely to us [...] through the fissures of seemingly impersonal and imperturbable prose" (Burke 1992: 7). Today, twenty-five years on, the writer is not only back and alive (both conceptually and pragmatically) but, most importantly, more than willing to write some very personal prose. And (s)he is again the very focus of critical and readerly attention as the recent best-selling publication of Tomasz Lem's, Margaret A. Salinger's and Matthew Spender's stories of their fathers, Stanisław, Jerome David and Stephen respectively (*Awantury na tle powszechnego ciężenia* [2009], *Dream Catcher: A Memoir* [2001], *A House in St John's Wood* [2015]), Karen Green's narrative about her late husband David Foster Wallace (*Bough Down* [2013]), Marja Mills's memoir of Harper Lee, her one-time neighbour (*The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* [2014]), Padma Lakshmi's narrative about her marriage to Salman Rushdie (*Love, Loss and What We Ate* [2016]), or Matthew De Abaitua's report on being Will Self's amanuensis in the early 1990s (*Self & I* [2016]) unmistakably show.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Pondering over the times of her youth and the books she used to read, Virginia Woolf made the following comment about Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: "It never occurred to us that there was such a person as Defoe and to have been told that *Robinson Crusoe* was the work of a man with a pen in his hand would either have disturbed us unpleasantly or meant nothing at all" (Woolf 1925: 89).

⁴⁶ Most notably by Seán Burke's seminal study *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Burke 1992). A comprehensive account of the author's return can also be found in Seán Burke's *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: A Reader* (Burke 2003) and Andrew Bennett's *The Author* (Bennett 2005).

⁴⁷ Also by means of other types of life narratives, e.g. the literary interview, which Jerome Boyd Maunsell recently recognised as another form of autobiography (Boyd Maunsell 2016: 1–20). Thank you to Teresa Bruś for directing my attention to Boyd Maunsell's article.

⁴⁸ The return of the writer is also clearly visible in contemporary biofiction, biodrama, and biopic (Kusek 2012a: 16–19). The most recent manifestation of this trend can

The present study has a number of objectives to meet and claims to make – a task which, I hope, the kind reader of this book will find successfully accomplished. First of all, it wishes to offer a detailed and comprehensive study of the “writer’s memoir,” considered a distinctive taxonomic rank or category and a sub-genre of memoir whose defining feature is the very fact that it has been written by what Jorge J.E. Gracia calls the “historical author,” namely a historical agent who has produced an original textual artifact.⁴⁹ My book intends to demonstrate the outstanding and positive prodigality of this form of writing, its great generative capacity, and, most importantly, the abundance of idiosyncratic strategies (thematic and structural) employed by authors to write about the lives of selves and others. Secondly, it hopes to identify specimens of the genre that are essentially borderline pieces: not only original but also representative; not only a document about a life, but, to follow the classical Gusdorfian definition, a work of art as well (Gusdorf 1980: 43). In other words, the pieces whose “phenotexts” appear to liberate, rather than restrict, their “genotexts” (Kristeva 1984: 86–88). More so, this study takes a special interest in the narratives that problematise the relationship between history and fiction, the self and other and, in this sense, in the specimens which are particularly paradigmatic of the genre’s ontology discussed in Chapter One – specimens, one should add, that, after Leigh Gilmore, could (to some extent, at least) be labelled as “limit-cases.”⁵⁰ Thirdly, and,

■ be identified in the field of epistolarium with the collections of letters by Paul Auster (and J.M. Coetzee), Saul Bellow, Italo Calvino, William Gaddis, David Foster Wallace, and P.G. Woodhouse having been released over the last few years.

⁴⁹ “The historical author of the text is the person responsible for the features which make a text different from other texts. The historical author creates a text insofar as he produces a textual artefact that is different from all other textual artefacts either in meaning, syntactical arrangement, or sign-type composition” (Gracia 1996: 110). Gracia’s category of an originator/cause of the text remains (essentially) synonymous with what Alexander Nehamas defines simply as the “writer” (Nehamas 2002: 95–115), while H.L. Hix uses the term “creative author” (Hix 1991: 39). As the title of the present study clearly implies, for a number of reasons (also stylistic), I have decided to privilege the term writer but have refused to use it religiously and, consequently, it is sometimes used interchangeably with the category of the author.

⁵⁰ According to Gilmore, limit-cases are self-representational narratives that challenge the limits of autobiography and “reveal how complicated and entangled those limits are with still other boundaries.” She further says: “Limit-cases produce an alternative jurisprudence, a form of judgement drawn from the complexities of a legal, literary, and political past. As such, limit-cases neither aspire nor claim to be universal. If they offer a figure to rival the representative man, it is the knowing subject who inhabits locations and forms of knowledge for representations of the self and trauma that refuse the deformations of legalistic demands” (Gilmore 2001: 43–44).

perhaps, most importantly, the present book argues in favour of placing memoirs on a par with other types of literary production, novels in particular.⁵¹ What it wishes to demonstrate is that memoir is by no means a minor genre; nor is it an addendum or a supplement to one's oeuvre. On the contrary, I shall postulate that memoirs can fulfil the same epistemological, ethical and aesthetic functions that are typically ascribed to works of literature; that memoirs are literature *per se*. As S.P. Rosenbaum consistently argues in his posthumous, yet definitive book of 2014 on the Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club,⁵² memoirs can indeed be illuminative of a given writer's life and work, but their "truth" or pertinence is "affirmed beyond" (to refer again to Georges Gusdorf's useful phrasing [Gusdorf 1980: 43]) simple commentary, annotation or exegesis. In short, they are relevant not for what they *do*, but for what they *are*. Thus, this study will also invite its readers to read memoirs intertextually; to discuss them as pieces written "in character" and, hence, largely consistent (thematically, stylistically, structurally, etc.) with the rest of a given writer's oeuvre. To turn to the always inestimable Jacques Derrida, my study wishes to see memoirs (alongside other creative works) as parts of the larger "autobiathanatoheterographical opus"⁵³ (Derrida 1993: 213) that every single writer inevitably produces.

The present book discusses the genre of memoir in eight major chapters (supplemented by an introduction and conclusion) which are divided into two parts: "Impure, Anomalous and Monstrous: Memoir at the Turn of the 21st Century" and "Readings."⁵⁴

The overall aim of Part One – which comprises Chapters One, Two and Three – is to provide a definition of the genre, as well as to identify its laws and indexes. Chapter One entitled "Thou (Shall) Not Mix the Kinds" offers a brief examination of what this study recognises as the genre's four specimens, namely *Alfred and Emily* by Doris Lessing, *The Emperor*

⁵¹ Since, as Table One manifestly finds, it is novelists who most often devote themselves to writing memoirs.

⁵² Rosenbaum's *The Bloomsbury Group Memoir Club*, its overall appreciation of the genre of memoir, and the call for further critical investigation of its specimens, as well as insistence on recognising memoirs (written by the likes of Virginia Woolf and E.M. Forster) as no less than *equal* to the (fictional) masterpieces of modernism have, indeed, been instrumental in the completion of this book and the formulation of its claims.

⁵³ Alternatively, one could use the term "stereography" introduced by Lejeune to talk about double writing, i.e. writing fiction as autobiography, and writing autobiography as fiction (Lejeune 1996: 42).

⁵⁴ This division follows (and, is, indeed, a tribute to) the model proposed by Sidonie Smith in her book *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*: the two parts are called "Theoretical Considerations" and "Readings" respectively.

Waltz by Philip Hensher, *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald, and *Memory Theatre* by Simon Critchley. Its objective is to formulate some preliminary claims concerning memoir and to show the profound heretogeneity of both the term itself, as well as the genre's specific instances. Having identified – by means of the above-listed examples – memoir as an essentially transgressive and threshold category, a transgeneric *mélange* or *bricolage* based on “the axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment” (Derrida 1980: 212), Chapter Two strives to identify textual and paratextual *marqueurs* of the genre. Consequently, it postulates that such parameters as referentiality, phantasmatism of the (auto)biographical pact, (auto)biographism of a textual space, syllepsism of the subject, de-totalisation in terms of scope and thematic content, as well as generic khôracity should be taken into account when trying to determine the class membership of a given narrative. Chapter Three offers a taxonomy of contemporary writers' memoirs based on their thematic dominant. It identifies fifteen major “species” of memoir (i.e. *souvenirs d'enfance*, *souvenirs d'adolescence*, falling away memoir, memoirs/scenes from life, patriography, matriography, parental memoir, *autrememoir*, pet memoir, [auto]pathography, [auto]thanatography, travelogue, periegetic memoir, ekphrastic memoir, and bibliomemoir) which are subsequently discussed in detail (with reference to specific examples of writers' memoirs).

The remaining, five chapters of the present study (largely analytical in nature) are dedicated to the in-depth scrutiny of five specimens of the genre: (in order of appearance) *In the Blood: A Memoir of My Childhood* (2006) by Andrew Motion, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012) by Rachel Cusk, *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir* (2003) by Hilary Mantel, *Levels of Life* (2013) by Julian Barnes, and *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009) by J.M. Coetzee. This arrangement is by no means a random choice. On the contrary, the structure of this very book wishes to resemble the trajectory of human life and its major signposts: childhood, adulthood, ageing (illness) and death; *Urbild des Lebens*, in short. In his study entitled *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, Carl Kerényi notes that the Greeks had two distinctive words for life, namely *bios* (βίος) and *zoë* (ζωή) – the former being a specific i.e. “characterised” life that is fully distinguishable (e.g. a life of an individual), while the latter is life in general, pertaining to all living creatures and deprived of individual characteristics⁵⁵ (Kerényi 1996: xxxii–xxxiii). Consequently, my book may be

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⁵⁵ Kerényi further notes that *zoë* also used to be equated with *psyche* and non-death and in this sense *zoë* stands in contrast to *thanatos* (Kerényi 1996: xxxiii–xxxv).

seen as one offering an analysis of individual *bioi* (or, to be more precise, their textual recordings) which, when put in sequence, form the universal pattern of *zoë*⁵⁶; every single chapter of this book may thus be considered *bios* of *zoë*; or, alternatively, *speciēs* (specimens) of *genus* (genre).⁵⁷

A discerning reader is also bound to identify other links between the volumes discussed in this part of my study. Not only their paramount manifestation of the parameters of memoir identified in “Part One” of the present book, not only the theme of loss that they ostensibly share with each other, but the fact that *In the Blood*, *Aftermath*, *Giving Up the Ghost*, *Levels of Life*, and *Summertime* are continuous with the rest of their writers’ oeuvre. For this very reason, not a single specimen is analysed in isolation from the remaining body of Motion’s, Cusk’s, Mantel’s, Barnes’s, and Coetzee’s works.

In line with the proposition formulated above (i.e. signposts of human life), Chapter Four, entitled “A Boy’s Own Story,”⁵⁸ is concerned with the poetics of childhood memoir and, in particular, with the volume *In the Blood* by the former Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, Andrew Motion. This section pays special attention to the writer’s strategy of reminiscing about one’s past and the volume’s specific narrative diction that ensues from it. Moving between child and adult perspectives, past and present tense, pastoralism and anti-idyllic modes of representation, intertextuality and intermediality, death (of a child) and birth (of a writer), the book will be acknowledged not only as a recountal of a difficult process of self-negotiation (and resistance to the titular blood), but also as an act of liberation – a means to “exorcise” the ghosts of the past.

Aftermath by Rachel Cusk is the volume that has been singled out for comprehensive analysis in Chapter Five of the present study. True to its title (i.e. “Amongst Women”), this section wishes to address Cusk’s complicated relationship with the principles and tradition of feminist

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⁵⁶ “If I may employ an image for the relationship between them [i.e. *bios* and *zoë*], which was formulated by language and not by philosophy, *zoë* is the thread upon which every individual *bios* is strung like a bead, and which in contrast to *bios*, can be conceived of only as *endless*” (Kerényi 1996: xxxv).

⁵⁷ This arrangement may also be seen as a way of “track[ing] the forms of the content” (Levine 2015: 16).

⁵⁸ I hope that my readers will immediately identify that a number of chapter titles (not to mention the title of the book) have been borrowed from other books: *A Boy’s Own Story* is a 1982 novel by Edmund White, *Amongst Women* is a 1990 novel by John McGahern, *Written on the Body* is a 1992 novel by Jeanette Winterson, *The Work of Mourning* is a 2001 collection by Jacques Derrida, while *Life after Life* is a 2013 novel by Kate Atkinson.

(auto)biography, as well as to identify other sources of inspiration for the British-Canadian writer's extraordinary body of life narratives. Most importantly, however, I will consider Cusk's memoir to be a narrative about adult crisis brought about by an experience of separation and divorce. Cusk's documentation of the disorder and fragmentation of life will be fleshed out with a scrutiny of a series of formal narrative modalities which reach their climax with a disavowal of the (auto)biographical self. In short, this chapter will attempt to investigate what happens to the narrative forms in which one has recounted his or her life, when the very life (its "form") has been shattered; and to inquire what opportunities memoir offers to a double outcast – from marriage and from writing.

The aim of Chapter Six is to examine *Giving Up the Ghost*, a memoir by the two-time Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel which tells the story of the writer's struggle with endometriosis, as well as doctors' indifference to her condition and decades of medical neglect. I will attempt to discuss Mantel's (auto)biographical account not only as a narrative about the writer's illness, but as a work which investigates the interrelatedness of writing and suffering, and which tries to both make sense and take charge of one's life story which has been otherwise claimed by the demands and limitations of an ailing body. I will argue that Mantel's work – both a chronicle of survival and the very means of survival – can be recognised as anti-pathography, namely a narrative of resistance not only to various medical scripts, but also to the existing tradition of illness writing.

Chapter Seven will focus on Julian Barnes's "work of mourning," i.e. his 2013 volume *Levels of Life*, which explores the writer's grief after losing his wife Pat Kavanagh. This section will offer an opportunity to address a number of concerns that over the years have been formulated with reference to (auto)thanatography, recognised by the present study as a micro-genre of memoir, namely: How does one write about loss and bereavement? How does one speak for the dead/the survivors? How does grief change over time? What is the purpose of such accounts? Should they only be read in terms of the therapeutic companionship that they offer? Can literariness and grief become allies? Crucially, I will discuss Barnes's book as a work that overtly manifests memoir's phenomenological generic impurity and transcends the conventions of writing about loss and death.

The last, eighth chapter of the present study will be dedicated to J.M. Coetzee's final volume of his memoirs, namely *Summertime*; as I shall argue, one of the most iconoclastic and insurgent specimens of contemporary life writing. My discussion of Coetzee's *memoir d'autre tombe* – largely based on a study of the writer's archives held in Austin, Texas – should,

in fact, be seen as a recapitulation and definitive exposition of the claims that this study has formulated with regard to writers' memoirs at the turn of the 21st century. Having identified a series of temporal, factual, and ontological "collapses" to which the story of the writer's life has been subjugated, the chapter will argue in favour of recognising Coetzee's *opus*, this narrative about sons and fathers (biological, mythical, and symbolic), as a memoir *par excellence*, and, consequently, a work that brings about a new "explosion" of life writing.

Finally, readers of this study require some clarification concerning its methodology. Since memoir (similarly to other life writing genres⁵⁹) is highly polyphonous⁶⁰ and heterogeneous – that is to say thematically, structurally, and generically hybrid – no single approach or theoretical framework would suffice to address the genre in a properly thorough manner. As a result, the method adopted for the present study – which, for lack of a better word, I shall call polycentric – offers an eclectic (though, I hope, in no way chaotic) amalgamation of approaches and their respective instruments, including synchronic and diachronic analysis of concepts, hermeneutics and close reading, the historical-anthropological approach of Wilhelm Dilthey and Georg Misch (*Lebensphilosophie*), formalism, structuralism and narrativism, comparative and biographical studies, and, last but not least, genetic criticism.

In the first volume of his memoirs entitled *Peeling the Onion*, which covers the period between the outbreak of World War II and the publication of *The Tin Drum* in the late 1950s, Günter Grass draws a comparison between memory and an onion:

Memory likes to play hide-and-seek, to crawl away. It tends to hold forth, to dress up, often needlessly. Memory contradicts itself; pendant that it is, it will have its way.

When pestered with questions, memory is like an onion that wishes to be peeled so we can read what is laid bare letter by letter. It is seldom unambiguous and often in mirror-writing or otherwise disguised.

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⁵⁹ What the life writing genres have in common is their "very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and the world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object" (Marcus 1994: 7).

⁶⁰ This polyphony may also be observed at the level of languages that the present study employs. Though the majority of the quotes are provided in English, a number of times – due to the fact that either they have not been translated into English, or their existing translations are not satisfactory – I have found it necessary to keep the original language (French mostly) versions.

Beneath its dry and crackly outer skin we find another, more moist layer, that once detached, reveals a third, beneath which a fourth and fifth wait whispering. And each skin sweats words too long muffled, and curlicue signs, as if a mystery-monger from an early age, while the onion was still germinating, had decided to encode himself.

Then ambition raises its head: this scrawl must be deciphered, that code cracked. What currently insists on truth is disapproved, because Lie or her younger sister, Deception, often hands over only the most acceptable part of a memory, the part that sounds plausible on paper, and vaunts details to be as precise as a photograph [...].

The onion has many skins. A multitude of skins. Peeled, it renews itself; chopped, it brings tears; only during peeling does it speak the truth. (Grass 2008: 3–4)

This metaphor, central to Grass's reminiscing about his childhood and adolescence, conflicted identities and liabilities, is, I believe, not only highly illustrative of the nature of memory and, consequently, the genre of memoir (contradictory, ambiguous, multi-layered, equally claimed by the demands of truth and inevitable self-deception, among others), but is also indicative of what this study purports to achieve. By "peeling" individual texts – in other words, subjecting them to analysis, breaking their codes, deciphering their messages, identifying guises, trying to separate *Wahrheit* from *Dichtung* – my study wants to learn the "truth" about the genre which has, indeed, become the ultimate manifestation of *l'esprit du temps*.

PART ONE

Impure, Anomalous and Monstrous: Memoir at the Turn of the 21st Century

CHAPTER ONE

“Thou Shall (Not) Mix the Kinds”

Peut-on aimer un genre?

Gérard Genette, *Des genres et des œuvres* (2012a: 129)

Jacques Derrida’s 1980 essay entitled “The Law of Genre” begins with an imperative: “Genres are not to be mixed” (Derrida 1980: 202), followed by the philosopher’s own declaration: “I will not mix genres” (ibid.). However, despite its apparently unequivocal opening, the essay by no means offers an appraisal of norms, clear and impassable demarcations, and generic purity. Though Derrida recognises the fact that a given text cannot belong to no genre and, thus, always contains “identifiable and codifiable traits” that allow one to determine its singular or plural class-membership (211), the titular law of the genre (“a counter-law which constitutes this very law” [205]) is, in fact, “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (206). He states that disruptions of generic marks – those “anomalies,” which he further defines as “impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, deformation, [...] cancerization, generous proliferation or degenerescence” (204) – point to the essential “axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment” (212). In short, according to Derrida, generic taxonomy is both possible and impossible, while the law of genre can operate only when it opens itself to transgression.

Though Derrida’s observations can be found to be applicable to a number of classes of text,⁶¹ this chapter attempts to prove that memoirs are, indeed, specifically prone to risk “impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity”

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⁶¹ For example, James Olney states the following: “The finest biographies as the very condition of their being the finest biographies – always and invariably reveal clear and

(Derrida 1980: 204) and do not easily conform to the “strict, normal, normed, or normative definitions of the genre” (214). In fact, the major challenge that is faced by any researcher wishing to address the genre of memoir is some considerable difficulty in providing its definition and putting it on the map of narrative regimes. Is memoir a sub-genre of autobiography or biography? Is the memoir’s subject the self or the other? Does it belong to the realm of non-fiction or fiction? Turning to a variety of critical sources does not necessarily help in resolving memoir’s categorial and epistemological conundrum. While S.P. Rosenbaum considers memoir a sub-class (next to confession and apology) of autobiography, primarily concerned with reminiscing about one’s life (and not, for example, explaining or defending it) (Rosenbaum 2014: 17), Ben Yagoda would rather see memoir as “more or less the same thing [as autobiography – R.K.]: a book understood by its author, its publisher, and its readers to be a factual account of the author’s life” (Yagoda 2010: 1), while Barbara Caine sees them as two distinct categories (Caine 2010: 77–78). Other critics, however, would happily reject solipsistic and self-contained tendencies as the signposts of the genre. Recently, the critic Kathryn Hughes stated that memoirs are not anymore “an exercise on ‘me, me, me,’” and, in fact, “are doing the work that biographies used to do” (Hughes 2014) – a view which was immediately supported by the likes of Ruth Scurr, who spoke not only about a clear demarcation line between autobiography and memoir, but also about the two genres being satellites of biography⁶² (Scurr 2015a).

Such statements certainly require an extensive commentary, but, prior to offering a more in-depth recapitulation of various critical stances towards the genre, and, most importantly, an attempt at my very own definition of memoir, I should first provide the readers of the present study with an examination of several specimens of the genre (a *corpus delicti*), which, I believe, expertly reveal and illustrate its formal nonconformity and transgressiveness, and which may prove to be particularly helpful in formulating (and substantiating) claims concerning the subject of this volume’s inquiry. In short, my very brief discussion of Doris Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily* (2008), Philip Hensher’s *The Emperor Waltz* (2014), Helen Macdonald’s *H Is for Hawk* (2014), and Simon Critchley’s *Memory*

■ compelling traces (and often much more than mere traces) of autobiography” (Olney 1986: 429).

⁶² “Modern biography encompasses a vast range of forms: newspaper obituaries, ghost-written celebrity biographies, self-promoting autobiographies, traditional or innovative memoir and literary biography” (Scurr 2015a).

Theatre (2014) aims at showing the profound heterogeneity of both the term itself as well as its instances.

1.1. *Alfred and Emily* by Doris Lessing

The Nobel Prize Winner Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* is an extraordinary textual *hybride*, as Gérard Genette would most likely call it and, as such, a first-rate exemplum of memoir's borderline characteristics. Published in 2008, it was neither Doris Lessing's first narrative in which her parents featured prominently,⁶³ nor the writer's first encounter with life writing.⁶⁴ In the first volume of her memoir, *Under My Skin*, Lessing trenchantly diagnoses her parents, and, subsequently, herself, as victims of World War I, whose lives have been irrevocably damaged and crippled by the experience of the conflict. It is clearly the realisation of her parents' tragic fate that appears to have been an impetus and a prime motive for Lessing's writing of *Alfred and Emily*. One may also speculate that it was the interview conducted by Margaret J. Daymond a few years before completing that volume that might have provided Lessing with an idea for this book. Towards the end of their talk, Daymond concludes that "autobiography is disciplined by what actually happened" or "the best recovery [one] can make of it" (Daymond 2006: 240). Then, she encourages Lessing to finish the following sentence: "[A]nd the characters are disciplined by..." which, after a moment of hesitation the writer completes saying "...by what's possible" (240). Undoubtedly, the dynamics between

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⁶³ She wrote about them and their lives – first critically and then, gradually, with more compassion and empathy – in both fictional and, traditionally speaking, non-fictional forms: in the novel *Martha Quest* of 1952, in "My Father" from the non-fictional account *A Small Personal Voice* of 1974, or in the first volume of her memoir entitled *Under My Skin* of 1994. Moreover, all five volumes of the series *Children of Violence*, as well as *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* include directly identifiable autobiographical facts. Lessing acknowledged her parents' presence in her works of fiction and non-fiction in an interview with Margaret J. Daymond (Daymond 2006: 236).

⁶⁴ Over the years Lessing experimented with a variety of life writing forms: autobiography (*Under the Skin* of 1994 and *Walking in the Shade* of 1997), travelogue (*African Laughter* of 1992), or pet memoir (*On Cats* of 2002). She has also theorised on the genre of autobiography, most explicitly in Chapter Two of *Under the Skin*, where she talks about her distrust of history ("I read history with conditional respect" [Lessing 1995: 11]), the essential unresolvedness of autobiographical projects ("How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?" [12]), the plurality of autobiographical selves (13), as well as creating and making up one's past and memories (ibid.).

“what actually happened” and “what was possible,” between truth and fiction, lies at the heart of Lessing’s narrative.

The first part of *Alfred and Emily*, entitled “Alfred and Emily: a novella,” comprises three distinctive segments: a fictional story of Lessing’s parents followed by their *faux* obituaries; the “Explanation,” in which the writer provides justification for various diegetic choices she has made when writing about her parents’ “imagined” lives⁶⁵; and, finally, an encyclopaedic entry devoted to describing the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead where Emily McVeagh used to work as a nurse.⁶⁶ Reiterating Lessing’s observation, one could claim that this section of the novella is disciplined by “what is possible,” while the remaining parts are organised around the idea of “what happened.” Indeed, the fictional story of Alfred and Emily is an attempt to write against history – both individual and global. Delivered chronologically by the third person omniscient narrator,⁶⁷ the story opens with the meeting of Alfred and Emily at a village cricket match in 1902, when they are introduced to one another by Mrs Lane, a mutual friend. At the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century “Emily and Alfred were at the top of their lives, their fortunes – of everything” (Lessing 2008: 24), the narrator of the novella states. But this phrase is immediately followed by an autobiographical intrusion of Doris Lessing (one of many) which disturbs the coherence and “purity” of the fictional narrative: “‘If only we could live our good years all over again,’ my mother would say, fiercely gathering those years into her arms and holding them safe, her eyes challenging her husband as if he were responsible for the

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⁶⁵ “Writing about my father’s imagined life, my mother’s, I have relied not only on traits of character that may be extrapolated, but on tones of voice, sighs, wistful looks, signs as slight as those used by skilful trackers” (Lessing 2008: 139). The “Explanation” part provides readers with some clarification as to the origin of individual episodes (e.g. life in London), the main characters (e.g. Daisy, Bert and Betsy) and the key choices made by the two protagonists (e.g. Emily’s decision not to re-marry).

⁶⁶ This section is also preceded by two photographs of her father in his army uniform. In fact, the whole volume (second part in particular) is peppered with photographs: the portraits of Lessing’s parents, of her brother, of their farm, of animals, finally of herself. Never accompanied by any caption, the images play a double role: on the one hand they testify to the “truth” of the narrative (they confirm the characters’ “real” existence), but on the other hand they powerfully emphasise the portraits’ (and, consequently, all life stories’) essential performativity and constructedness (they show the scenes of a happy family life, a loving couple, a proud soldier in his uniform – the visual “stories” which hardly correspond to Lessing’s verbal narrative).

⁶⁷ One should add that Lessing is not consistent in internal divisions of her novella, i.e. length and marking the individual chapters (e.g. “1902,” “August 1907,” “The Best Years”).

end" (ibid.). Lessing's narrative not only allows her parents to re-live their good years, but also makes it possible for them to survive. In this invented account, World War I does not break out⁶⁸ and, consequently, Alfred remains at home, gets married to a local girl with whom he has two boys and becomes a successful farmer; Emily, on the other hand, marries Dr. William Martin-White, a cardiologist from the hospital where she works, who dies in 1924 of a heart attack, not in the sea during the Great War as happened in real life. Lessing cunningly combines real-life events with fantasy. For instance, when, in 1916, Emily announces her engagement to Martin-White, Alfred attends the party on crutches as his appendix had burst a few weeks before. "In life," Lessing explains, "my father's appendix burst just before the battle of the Somme, saving him from being killed with the rest of his company" (31).

The second part of the memoir, entitled "Alfred and Emily; Two Lives," as opposed to the previous section, is almost exclusively governed by "what happened." Though composed of a plethora of distinctive narrative forms, the story of Lessing's mother and father unmistakably remains the narrative's major thematic dominant. Like Part One, it is predominantly a filial narrative,⁶⁹ a (real) memoir of parents by their daughter (Couser 2012: 154). The section opens with a photograph of Alfred and Emily⁷⁰ and a short biographical essay⁷¹ in which Lessing once again ponders over the "monstrous legacy" of World War I and the effect it had on her parents' lives. However, quite unexpectedly, half way through the piece, the narrative shifts its interest and what was a memoir of the others now

⁶⁸ In this way *Alfred and Emily* can be read as welcoming another genre, i.e. historical fantasy, in a similar way to some contemporary fictional works such as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). According to the narrator of the novella, in the 1920s, "Britain was wealthy, was booming, was at a level of prosperity the leader writers and public figures congratulated themselves and everybody on. Britain had not had a war since the Boer War; nor were there wars in Western Europe, which was on a high level of well-being. It was enough only to contrast the dreadful situation of the old Austrian Empire and the Turkish Empire, in collapse, to know that keeping out of war was a recipe for prosperity" (Lessing 2008: 83–84). Interestingly, and paradoxically in light of Alfred's real experience of war, the social and political tensions of the 1930s forced Alfred to conclude: "This is a silly, petty, pettifogging little country, and we're so pleased with ourselves because we've kept out of a war. But if you ask me I think a war would do us all the good in the world. We're soft and rotten, like a pear that's gone past its best" (132).

⁶⁹ The story could be further divided into patriographical and matriographical episodes.

⁷⁰ What can be seen as a special form of paratext, the photograph shows Alfred and Emily together, not separate as in the images which preceded the novella, which clearly implies the biographical veracity of the section.

⁷¹ "One may write a life in five volumes, or in a sentence," Lessing states (Lessing 2008: 152), clearly showing her preference for the former.

becomes a memoir of the self, in which Lessing starts recalling her childhood: her Irish au pair (Biddy O'Hallowan), her self-education and the books she used to read,⁷² among other events of her life. This instability and transitivity of the object of knowledge is a characteristic feature of this, as well as the nine subsequent sections⁷³ of "Alfred and Emily; Two Lives," which – all highly episodic, inconsistent, and disjointed – address (in order of appearance) the following issues: motherhood and women rights in the 20th century, young Doris's pet calf called Demi, African insects, her parents' house and farm, post-colonial Africa and current politics (Robert Mugabe), history, Edwardian food, Lessing's brother Harry and her relationship with him, and life in Africa during World War II. A similar *mélange* can be observed as far as the pieces' generic affiliation is concerned: biography is intertwined with autobiography, filial narrative with bildungsmemoir, travelogue with autotopography,⁷⁴ socio-historical observations with pure fiction.⁷⁵

1.2. *The Emperor Waltz* by Philip Hensher

Though Philip Hensher's 2014 novel *The Emperor Waltz* – another in a series of the British novelist's (auto)biographical experiments⁷⁶ – by no means matches (quantitatively, at least) Lessing's polyphonic orchestration of various narrative forms, it remains equally emblematic of memoir's generic impurity and testifies to difficulties in ascribing singular class-membership

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⁷² Like a diligent historian, Lessing provides the reader with a full list of the titles she read as a child (Lessing 2008: 166–169).

⁷³ They are entitled "A Women's Group," "Sister McVeagh," "Insects," "The Old *Mawonga* Tree," "Provisions," "Provisions – in Town," "My Brother Harry Tayler," "Getting-off-the-Farm," and "Servant Problems."

⁷⁴ For example the photographs included in the volume, as well as pieces of the narrative concerned with the memories of physical objects (house, furniture, clothes).

⁷⁵ "Provisions – in Town" is a study of African cuisine as well as the relationship between masters and servants delivered in the form of a fictional story (by the third person present-tense narrator) whose coherence is nevertheless disturbed by a single autobiographical paragraph (in the past tense) which reads: "I returned to Southern Rhodesia less than ten years after I left it and I was immediately surprised by the amount of meat. Every fridge was stacked with it, including the vegetable trays. 'We couldn't have eaten all that meat,' I cried. 'Impossible!' But we did" (Lessing 2008: 243).

⁷⁶ I am referring here to Hensher's autobiographical novel *The Northern Clemency* of 2008, an intellectual memoir entitled *The Missing Ink: The Lost Art of Handwriting* of 2012, and, in particular, *Scenes from Early Life* of 2012, an *autrememoir*, which will be discussed in some detail in the latter part of this part of my study.

to its specimens. Similarly to a sonata⁷⁷ (especially a post-Baroque sonata), which typically comprises four movements,⁷⁸ each with a unique musical character and in contrasting keys, *The Emperor Waltz* brings together four distinctive narrative strands.⁷⁹ The first one (i.e. Books 1, 5, and 9) takes an interest in Christian Vogt, a young student at the German art school Bauhaus, and can well be considered a historical narrative as it is populated by a number of historical figures: Paul Klee and Vassily Kandinsky, among others. The second section (i.e. Books 2, 4, 8, as well as the epilogue) is concerned with the fortunes of the Big Gay Bookshop⁸⁰ and its owner Duncan Flannery, as well as the lives of gay men in Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s. The third one (Book 3) offers a portrayal of contemporary, i.e. 21st century family life in England (and, as such, is a typical example of Hensher's dark social comedy that one can encounter on the pages of *The Northern Clemency* [2008] or *King of the Badgers* [2011]), while the fourth section (i.e. Book 6) is a re-telling of a well-known hagiographic account concerning the life and martyrdom of Saint Perpetua in 3rd century Carthage. However, Hensher's masterful fictional composition and coherent ontological status suddenly breaks half way through the volume – or, to be more precise, is deliberately violated by an intrusion of the writer's short memoir piece ("the top note towards quite a different place," to continue with the music-inspired metaphor [Hensher 2014: 62–63]), which may be further seen as symbolic of the transgressive nature of (auto)biographical practices.⁸¹ Written in the first person and entitled "Last month," the piece is the story of Philip's (sic!) unfortunate accident and hospitalisation.⁸² Despite the narrative's ostensible resistance to label

⁷⁷ This comparison has been alluded to by Hensher himself, who dedicated *The Emperor Waltz* to "Thomas Adès / An E-flat sonata movement / standing at an augmented fourth to the universe" (Hensher 2014: n.p.). Due to the novel's title, another ostensible musical point of reference (and the book's prime leitmotif) is Johann Strauss's 1889 "Kaiserwalzer," which Hensher's characters listen to on a number of occasions (e.g. 63, 355, 522, 614).

⁷⁸ I.e. an allegro, an adagio, a minuet, and a rondo.

⁷⁹ Though by no means random or incoherent. What, for example, unites individual sections is the common theme of persecution (anti-Semitism and Nazism, the martyrdom of early Christians, homophobia) and resistance to oppression.

⁸⁰ The venue is clearly based on London's independent bookshop Gay's the Word, established in 1979.

⁸¹ This gesture may also imply a radical textuality and fictionality and thus an impossibility of living "hors du texte infini [...] le livre fait le sens, le sens fait la vie" (Barthes 1973: 58).

⁸² This memoir is a classic example of what I shall label "(auto)pathography" in the latter part of this chapter and, as such, it remains powerfully reminiscent of Hilary Mantel's hospital memoir published in *The London Review of Books* in 2010 (Mantel 2010c).

itself autobiographical, the textual hallmarks of non-fictionality are there aplenty: the choice of the narrative mode (first person), the correct name and age⁸³ of the writer/narrator, the nature of his disease⁸⁴ and the type of occupation,⁸⁵ as well as the name, personal characteristics, and professional details regarding the patient's husband (the well-known human rights lawyer Zaved Mahmood).⁸⁶ But due to being placed in the company of (and on a par with) a series of fictional narratives, borrowing a lot from their narratological repertoire,⁸⁷ and lacking any paratextual markers⁸⁸ that would emphasise its alternative, i.e. fact- or life-based status (e.g. subtitle, author's note, publisher's note), this section, with its recountal of Philip's stay at Saint Thomas's Hospital in South East London, emerges as an uncanny and deeply disturbing presence – at least for admirers of textual coherence. What is more, though ostensibly interested in the intimate story of Philip and his predicament,⁸⁹ the narrative offers a series of ruminations on the drama of the sickroom: the relationship and the power dynamics between the healthy and the ill, the world of the visitors and the world of the bedbound, medical professionals and patients. Fully intrinsic to the narrative logic of *The Emperor Waltz*,⁹⁰ yet, simultaneously, quite extraneous, "Last month" finally also offers a deliberation on a writer's "offstage existence" (Hensher 2014: 377). "I planted ideas in their minds and watched them grow," Philip says about the medical

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⁸³ "Had I been working behind the scenes, unknown even to myself, all those forty-seven years, to maintain a beautiful flow of blood to the feet?" (Hensher 2014: 348–349). In 2012, while writing *The Emperor Waltz*, Hensher was, indeed, hospitalised (at the age of forty-seven).

⁸⁴ I.e. type two diabetes (Hensher 2014: 343).

⁸⁵ Philip is a "lauded novelist" who "was supposed to travel to Germany [...] where [he] was chairing a writers' conference, and directly on to India to the Jaipur festival to promote a book" (Hensher 2014: 350). The book in question is Hensher's 2012 *Scenes from Early Life* based in Bangladesh.

⁸⁶ "Now, in the morning, on Albert Ward, my phone was pinging with messages back – expressing horror, concern, practical help, and, from my husband, who was in Geneva, a promise that he would take the first plane over in the morning" (Hensher 2014: 350). Indeed, in 2012, Zaved Mahmood was working at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

⁸⁷ E.g. extensive use of dialogue.

⁸⁸ So far, to the best of my knowledge, only once has Hensher publically acknowledged the autobiographical (or, to use his own expression, "intimate") nature of this section, namely in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Gruber 2014).

⁸⁹ In fact, one may get an impression that the readers learn more about Philip's fellow patient Joe, or the ward nurse Desdemona, than about the writer/narrator himself.

⁹⁰ Thematically (suffering and oppression); formally (the amalgamation of history and fiction); and symbolically (a motif of Strauss's composition; while in hospital, Philip, just like Hensher's other characters, listens to Strauss's waltz [355]).

staff and his fellow patients (ibid.); but, one may presume, this declaration may be also handily applied to Hensher's protagonists and readers of his book. Thus, Hensher's short memoir – besides being a commixture of (auto)pathography and an analytic essay on “being ill” – comes forth as a meta-commentary on the writer and his writing; on Philip Hensher himself and his novel-cum-memoir *The Emperor Waltz*.

1.3. *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald

The critically acclaimed and award-winning⁹¹ *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald is, in my opinion, another luminous example of memoir's resistance to norms and its desire to violate seemingly unbreachable demarcations. Written by a professional Cambridge-educated historian, this book is acutely aware of the fact (famously preached by German historiographers of the 19th century like Theodor Mommsen or Johann G. Droysen) that history is closer to art than to science, while “historical truths” can be approached only “intuitively, not by a critical method” (Eksteins 2000: 194–195). Macdonald, an inevitable student of Hayden White's writing, also knows that a given text is hardly ever “fixed”; on the contrary, it is “always at odds with itself [...], which knows neither its archetype nor its genealogy, a perverse text [...]; a tissue of tropes and figures, a ‘self-consuming artefact’ which always obscures what it seems to wish to reveal, undoes at the figurative level of enunciation, what it seems to be saying at the literal level and the reverse, and ends up displaying itself as a kind of endless ‘freeplay’ that recognizes neither logic nor rationalism as its master” (White 1999: 36–37).

The polyphonic structure of *H Is for Hawk* surely remains indebted to such a theoretical (and, in large, ideological) paradigm. Firstly, it can be classified as an example of bereavement memoir (which I shall label in the latter part of the present book as an instance of “[auto]thanatography”) and an attempt to “mend the invisible [i.e. emotional – R.K.] scars” (Macdonald 2014: 275) caused by the death of Macdonald's father. “Orphaned” (85) by her beloved parent, the writer decides to acquire a pet – neither a dog, nor a cat, but a goshawk, whom she calls Mabel and who becomes her companion. “Grief has spurred me to fly the hawk” (175), Macdonald says and admits to having “made a hawk part of a human

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⁹¹ Macdonald's memoir was, for example, the winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction and Costa Book of the Year.

life and a human life part of a hawk's" (181). Consequently, a significant section of *H Is for Hawk* is dedicated to the story of befriending Mabel and training her, and, along these lines, can be classified as a typical pet memoir. But the role that the bird plays is not only that of a comrade, but, most importantly, of an ally in grief: "I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist," Macdonald asserts; and adds: "the hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life. I was turning into a hawk" (85). For Macdonald, Mabel thus becomes a mirror of herself (218), while her training turns into "a rite of passage" (85) leading ultimately to the writer's emotional recovery.⁹²

H Is for Hawk is the story of the autobiographical self (Macdonald), a human other (i.e. her father), an animal other (i.e. Mabel), and grief. But it also a prime (though unorthodox⁹³) example of nature writing – a study of a relationship between humans and animals and an elegy for England once composed of "landscapes buzzing and glowing with life in all its variousness" (265) – and literary criticism.⁹⁴ Most conspicuously, however, it is also (despite Macdonald's reservations⁹⁵) a biography of the 20th century writer T.H. White and of his book (hence an instance of "bibliomemoir"⁹⁶) *The Goshawk* – both the writer and the book having haunted Macdonald all her life (38). Unlike, for instance, Peter Ackroyd's biographies, the sections dedicated to White are meticulously researched and appropriately footnoted with Macdonald offering not only a birth-to-death account of White's life, but, above all, an interpretation and a subjective

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⁹² A successful one, since towards the end of the book Macdonald proclaims the following: "Hands are for other human hands to hold. They should not be reserved exclusively as perches for hawks. And the wild is not a panacea for the human soul; too much into air can corrode it to nothing" (Macdonald 2014: 118).

⁹³ Macdonald remains, for example, deeply critical of the view that nature and the wild can heal the wounds: "Nature in her green, tranquil woods heals and soothes all afflictions," wrote John Muir. 'Earth hath no sorrows that earth cannot heal.' Now I knew this for what it was: a beguiling but dangerous lie" (Macdonald 2014: 218).

⁹⁴ E.g. a critical discussion of J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967) (Macdonald 2014: 199), or of the tenets and characteristics of nature writing (218).

⁹⁵ "The book you are reading is my story, It is not a biography of Terence Hanbury White, But White is part of my story all the same. I have to write about him because he was there. When I trained my hawk I was having a quiet conversation, of sorts, with the deeds and works of a long-dead man who was suspicious, morose, determined to despair. A man whose life disturbed me" (Macdonald 2014: 38–39).

⁹⁶ Bibliomemoir as a distinctive micro-genre of memoir will also be addressed in detail in Chapter Three of the present study.

vision of his life.⁹⁷ But the book's marrying of genres and modes does not end here. In the chapter tellingly entitled "The Rembrandt Interior," Macdonald intertwines biographical sections with instances of biofiction,⁹⁸ in which, alternating between past and present tense, she re-creates (largely by means of *le discours indirect libre*) the inner life of T.H. White:

White was petrified. On his hawk's tail were strange pale traverse stripes, as if someone had drawn a razor blade across the quills. He knew what they were: hunger-traced caused by lack of food as the feathers grew; weaknesses that made them liable to break. Guilt and blame. [...] Love me, he is saying. Please. I can make it up to you, make it better. Fix you. Please eat. (74–75)

Needless to say, this biographical narrative is often interrupted by autobiographical remarks. When she mentions one of White's favourite books, i.e. *An Approved Treatise of Hawks and Hawking* by Edmund Bert (published in 1619), she immediately wonders whether the copy he read could be the one currently kept at the Cambridge University Library and the very same that she pored over as a student (77).

Towards the end of her book, Macdonald writes the following: "The archaeology of grief is not ordered. It's more like earth under a spade, turning up things" (199). It is the same unordered (though by no means unmastered) archaeology that appears to be governing *H Is for Hawk* – a book which remains powerfully resistant to easy and unambiguous classification⁹⁹ and, as such, becomes a perfect example of contemporary memoir. Just as she has successfully "reconcile[d] the wild" (181), Macdonald has also mastered the genre.

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⁹⁷ "Feral. He wanted to be free. He wanted to be ferocious. He wanted to be fey, a fairy, ferox. All those elements of himself he'd pushed away, his sexuality, his desire for cruelty, for mastery: all these were suddenly there in the figure of the hawk" (Macdonald 2014: 45).

⁹⁸ In recent life writing criticism, "biofiction" appears to have substituted its longer equivalent, namely biographical fiction, or the biographical novel (cf. Middeke and Huber 1999; Lackey 2016). A merge of a formal biographical account (external, authoritative) and creative, fictional sections that "imagine" the inner life of a biographical subject can also be encountered in, e.g. Claire Tomalin's biography of Dickens (Tomalin 2011: xxxix–xlii), or Ruth Scurr's biography of John Aubrey (Scurr 2015b), which, in the biographer's own words, is an act of "scholarly imagination" (Scurr 2015b: n.p.).

⁹⁹ In the same way as, according to Macdonald, wild birds are unyielding to various meanings given to them by the humans (Macdonald 2014: 181).

1.4. *Memory Theatre* by Simon Critchley

The last narrative that I should like to privilege in my preliminary discussion of memoir's poetics is Simon Critchley's *Memory Theatre* of 2014. This small volume by the world-renowned philosopher and writer is, similarly to other pieces discussed in this section, a textual *mélange*. Written in the first person narrative style, *Memory Theatre* comprises a plethora of stories dealing with Critchley's fear of death, his transfer from the University of Essex to the New School for Social Research in New York, and the discovery of unpublished papers by his close friend and former teacher, the late Michael Haar, among others. As before, a diligent narratologist will find no difficulty in identifying traces of various classes of texts that are expertly mixed in Critchley's volume: the writer's autobiographical account (including episodes pertaining to his hospitalisation), a fantasy dream (of Critchley "floating, small, angelic or bug-like, inside a vast Gothic cathedral [Critchley 2014: 34]), an intellectual biography of Haar, a philosophical essay on Giordano Bruno, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, an inquiry into astrology and the occult, a detective story (regarding Haar's and other philosophers' deaths,¹⁰⁰ as well as his unpublished biography of Plato). As the title suggests, at the heart of the narrative lies the concept of remembering and, in particular, that of "memory theatre," i.e. the idea of bringing together memory and *locus* originated by Simonides and linked to a belief that "[t]hrough techniques of memory, the human being can achieve absolute knowledge and become divine" (21). It is precisely his very own memory theatre, based on classical and Renaissance models, that Critchley (or, more likely, his fictional alter ego) designs and builds with the help of an architect when elected chair of ethics at the Dutch university of Tilburg:

In the front, with the smallest statues, I had arranged all the elements of my life that I could remember together with family attachments and friends, such as they were. The statues were brightly painted with sets of initials, number sequences and small diagrams that would call to mind whatever I recalled about my childhood [...]. On row two, I had reduced my books and papers first to a series of short summaries and from that to a series of notations and symbols,

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¹⁰⁰ Among Haar's manuscripts, Critchley finds astrological life charts (also called memory maps) which predict the date and manner of death of the former's fellow philosophers, including that of Critchley: "le 13 Juin, 2010 [...] hémorragie cérébrale" (Critchley 2014: 45).

which I memorized. [...] Row seven was devoted to languages. [...] By early 2010, work on the statues had finished and the theatre was complete. I installed the statues in the theatre and waited quietly for the day of my death to come. [...] Like crazy Crusoe in his island cave out of his mind for the fear of cannibals, I would sit onstage and inspect my artificial kingdom, my realm, my shrunken *real*. I sat there for hours running through the *loci* and rehearsing the meaning of various statues until I recalled everything lucidly. (55–58)

The totality of Critchley's project, its self-sufficiency and alpha-and-omega quality, stand in total opposition to the tiny volume of *Memory Theatre* which amounts to no more than 68 pages and in itself remains a tribute to the memory that lives, not the memory that is killed by an attempt to control it (62). While his theatre was "a sort of static, inert, dead rendering" of life (as it is remembered), his book, "multidimensional, mobile, and somehow alive" (66) is suggested to be a far better and more accurate representation of the philosopher's *bios*. The volume ends with Critchley concluding (after Hegel) that memory cannot be reduced to a "dull recitation of the past," but needs to be "repetition with a difference," "imagination" and "transfiguration," "self-generating and self-altering" (*ibid.*). In fact, the very same thing should be asserted about *Memory Theatre* and, by extension, the genre of memoir.

But Critchley's volume testifies to memoir's essential transgressiveness in one more respect. Individual sections of the book are divided by blank pages featuring photographs by the British artist Liam Gillick and, consequently, *Memory Theatre* becomes the artist's book, i.e. a book created by an artist which is an independent work of art and which features both texts and images that are not reproductions of works principally existing in a different medium. Conversely, texts and images that are used in the artist's book produce a fully autonomous entity and a new meaning which is available only through the very medium of the artist's book (cf. Kotz 2007; Iversen 2010; Szymański 2015a: 235–242). What is more, when one flips the pages of *Memory Theatre* (from right to left¹⁰¹), the photographs show a gradual disappearance of one of New York's skyscrapers, which, in turn, becomes synonymous with the annihilation of memory theatre and appraisal of form (textual, but, one hopes, also generic) "indistinguishable from life," one that "would become life itself" (Critchley 2014: 67).

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¹⁰¹ A similar solution has been implemented by Jonathan Safran Foer in his 2005 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, whose final pages comprise images of the man falling from the World Trade Center.

* * *

Having summarily examined Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*, Philip Hensher's *The Emperor Waltz*, Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk*, and Simon Critchley's *Memory Theatre*, and, most importantly, having postulated that they are – despite ostensible differences – instances of memoir (a claim which I am going to substantiate and prove in Chapter Two of my book), a conscientious reader of the present study is inevitably forced to pose the following questions: what (if any) kind of assertions concerning the genre of memoir could be legitimately formulated on the basis of its individual specimens discussed above? What criteria does a particular text need to meet in order to be befittingly labelled a memoir? In short, what is memoir?

CHAPTER TWO

Est-il possible de définir le mémoire?

Form is the highest judge of life. Form-giving is a judging force, an ethic; there is a value-judgment in everything that has been given form. Every kind of form-giving, every literary form, is the step in the hierarchies of life-possibilities: the all-decisive word has been spoken about a man and his fate when the decision is taken as to the form which his life-manifestations can assume and which the highest moments of his life demand.

György Lukács, "The Metaphysics of Tragedy" (2010: 196)

My life, it seems to me, is ridiculously shapeless. I know what makes a good narrative, and lives don't have much of that – pattern and balance, form, completion, commensurateness. It is often the case that a Life, at least to start with, will resemble a success story; but the only shape that *life* dependably exhibits is that of tragedy – minus all the grand stuff about nemesis, fortune's wheel, and the fatal flaw. Tragedy follows the line of the mouth on the tragic mask (and the equivalent is true of comedy). You rise to the crest and then you curve down to a further point along the same latitude. That's the only real shape lives usually have – and, again, forget about coherence of imagery and the Uniting Theme.

Martin Amis, *Experience: A Memoir* (2001: 361)

It is "unlike any other form of literary composition"; it is "a representation of life that is committed to no definite form"; it "abounds in fresh initiatives"; it "adopts the different forms with which different periods provide the individual for his self-revelation and self-portrayal"; "hardly any form is alien to it" (Misch 2002: 4) – thus Georg Misch wrote about

autobiography in the first volume of his seminal study of the genre. However, today, as this book hopes to convincingly argue, it is not autobiography but memoir that appears to be a worthier addressee of such enthusiastic judgements and critical appraisals. An addressee – one should add – that due to its nonconformity, multifacetedness and incessant innovativeness, namely aspects which Misch particularly rhapsodised about, offers a number of challenges for students of poetics and, in particular, architextuality, understood, in line with Gérard Genette, as a relationship between any given text and its *architext* (i.e. the genre) (Genette 1992: 83). In fact, even though “memoir(s)” pre-date autobiography in terms of their occurrence (as an oral/textual phenomenon,¹⁰² and, consecutively, a literary category¹⁰³), the genre, throughout the 20th century at least, was not given enough critical attention and, for decades, remained a victim of neglect and disregard, especially in comparison with its venerable relative. The person to blame for such a state of affair was, in fact, the very Georg Misch who, in his authoritative work, emphasised the superficial nature of what he recognised as a sub-class of autobiography. He complained, for example, about the “peculiarly loose and apparently unregulated method pursued by [such] writings”; memoirs being “sketched or written without care” and having “no personal connotations”; or them being “a title for notes of purely factual content, such as official reports of business done or the proceedings of a learned society”

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¹⁰² The first recorded personal narrative in English, i.e. Margery Kempe’s *Book of Margery Kempe*, has, in fact, more in common with memoir than with autobiography, as I shall argue in the latter part of this chapter.

¹⁰³ Memoir (from French: *mémoire*) was recognised as a distinctive category as early as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as testified by the works of Geoffroi de Villehardouin (*La conquête de Constantinople* [1458], Philippe de Commines (*Mémoires* [1524 and 1528]), or Blaise de Monluc (*Commentaires* [1592]). Many critics, however, would also classify a number of earlier texts as instances of the genre, e.g. Xenophon’s *Hellenica* (*Historia Graeca*) (Gray 2011: 2), Cicero’s *On My Consulship* (Tatum 2011: 177), and Caesar’s *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (cf. Baslez, Hoffmann, and Pernot 1993). As Vivien J. Gray asserts, it is precisely due to the characteristics of Xenophon’s *Hellenica* (focus on the self and [sic!] others, writing about the events in which the memoirist participated himself or herself, being “sketchier” and having “looser unity” than autobiography, as well as boasting an “unfinished composition” [Gray 2011: 2]) that a specific set of parameters has been ascribed to memoir for the first time. (In line with this definition, Grey writes about a history of the East by Ctesias of Cnidus in the following manner: “[H]is work is memoir when he describes events he witnessed and autobiographical when he describes his own part in these events” [26].) The term memoir pre-dates the term autobiography (by at least a century [Rak 2004: 317]) – the latter was first used in English in 1797 in the review of Isaac D’Israeli’s *Miscellanies* by William Taylor of Norwich, published in the *Monthly Review* (Smith and Watson 2010: 1–2).

(Misch 2002: 6). “In itself,” he continued, “the word simply expresses the unpretentiousness of the writing in question in the matter of literary form, implying that the author has or affects to have no intention at all of coming forward as a literary person. He proposes only to supply material for a literary work that may be compiled by a future historian, or serve for research in other ways” (8). Most crucially, Misch formulated a claim about memoirs’ passive relation to the world which, for decades, became their major characteristic:

Man’s relation to the world may be conceived actively or passively. From this consideration comes the distinction between autobiographies and “memoirs” [...]. In memoirs that relation is passive in so far as the writers of memoirs (although like the autobiographers, and even more exclusively, they use the form of the first-personal narrative) introduce themselves in the main as merely observers of the events and activities of which they write, and if they join the active participants, it is only in minor parts. What they tell of their own lives serves to explain how it was that they became involved in contemporary happenings or became witnesses of them – how it was that they had opportunities of meeting people of eminence, watching notable persons at close quarters, and gaining confidential information. The autobiographer concerns himself with such things only in so far as is necessary for the understanding of his life-story. (15)

The second as well as third wave of life writing criticism, inaugurated by the publication of Georges Gusdorf’s *Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie* in 1956 and Philippe Lejeune’s *Le pacte autobiographique* in 1975, respectively,¹⁰⁴ neither resurrected and re-claimed the term memoir, nor challenged its reputation as secondary, sketchy, unliterary, and passive (cf. Quinby 1992; Buss 2002). If memoir(s) did appear in the writings of such notable critics as James Olney (1980, 1998), William C. Spengemann (1980), Laura Marcus (1994), Paul John Eakin (1999, 2008), or the previously-mentioned Georges Gusdorf and Philippe Lejeune,¹⁰⁵ they

¹⁰⁴ This periodisation does not apply to the life writing criticism in English in which the second wave came with the publication of James Olney’s *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* in 1980.

¹⁰⁵ In the second edition of *L’autobiographie en France*, Lejeune writes that an opposition between memoir and autobiography is “l’opposition fondamentale.” He further ventures to define the former in the following way: “Dans les *mémoires*, l’auteur se comporte comme un témoin: ce qu’il a de personnel, c’est le *point de vue* individuel, mais l’objet du discours est quelque chose qui dépasse de beaucoup l’individu, c’est l’histoire des groupes sociaux et historiques auxquels il appartient. Sauf dans le cas d’hommes de génie qui identifient audacieusement leur histoire personnelle à l’histoire de l’univers,

were either objects of derision¹⁰⁶ (in line with Misch's paradigm), or largely lost their individual traits, becoming synonymous with the royal (i.e. dominant) genre of autobiography and, at best, considered the latter's more "popular" or "contemporary" version.¹⁰⁷

The critical renaissance of memoir (a phenomenon which appears to be reaching its heyday as I am writing these very words¹⁰⁸) was indisputably ignited by the massive production (or, democratisation) of this form of writing towards the end of the century. Confronted with a plethora of (auto)biographical texts which seemed to have overcome all kinds of formal distinctions based on class capital, i.e. they were written by *everyone* (professionals and amateurs, equally) for *everyone* (as testified by their commercial success), and about *everything* (e.g. childbirth and widowhood, terminal illnesses and spiritual recovery, oneself and one's relatives), and dissatisfied with limitations imposed upon those pieces by the application of the august category of autobiography,¹⁰⁹ a number

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il n'y a pas identité de l'auteur et du sujet traité. Dans l'*autobiographie*, au contraire, l'objet du discours est l'individu lui-même. Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une question de *proportion* entre les matières intimes et les matières historiques. Certes, Larousse a raison de souligner que beaucoup d'œuvres comportent une partie de mémoires et une partie d'autobiographie: mais l'importance respective des deux parties n'est que la conséquence du *projet fondamental* de l'auteur. Il ne faut pas juger seulement des quantités, mais voir laquelle des deux parties est subordonnée à l'autre, si l'auteur a voulu écrire l'histoire de sa personne, ou celle de son époque" (Lejeune 2010: 13).

¹⁰⁶ For example, according to Marcus, memoirs "offer only an anecdotal depiction of people and events" (Marcus 1994: 3). Gusdorf, on the other hand, writes about memoirs in the form of a "comic aside," as Julie Rak acutely observed (Rak 2004: 311). "Many great men," Gusdorf says, "and even some not so great-heads of government or generals, ministers of state, explorers, businessmen have devoted the leisure time of their old age to editing 'Memoirs,' which have found an attentive reading public from generation to generation" (Gusdorf 1980: 28). He further adds: "*Memoirs* admirably celebrate the penetrating insight and skill of famous men who, appearance to the contrary notwithstanding, were never wrong" (36).

¹⁰⁷ Considering memoir on a par with autobiography is particularly visible in the writings of Paul John Eakin who refers to, for example, Philip Roth's *Patrimony* with the term "memoir" (Eakin 1999: 182), while to Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* with the category of "autobiography" (Eakin 2008: 35). In fact, when consulting the index of *How Our Lives Become Stories*, "memoir" refers a reader to the category of "autobiography" since the author considers the two to be the very same type of narrative (Eakin 1999: 205).

¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the present study may be seen as an overt manifestation of the resurgence of interest in the genre.

¹⁰⁹ The insufficiency of the term autobiography and critics' resistance to its totality and legacy can be further traced in the emergence of some new categories aimed at describing various autobiographical works, i.e. "autography" (H. Porter Abbott), "autobiographics" (Leigh Gilmore), "otobiography" (Jacques Derrida), "periautography" (James Olney),

of critics such as Nancy K. Miller, Julie Rak, Helen Buss, and G. Thomas Couser saw the urgent need to re-examine the term memoir, to identify its potential idiosyncrasies, and, consequently, to write in favour of its generic exclusivity.¹¹⁰ For example, in her seminal reading of the genealogy of memoir entitled “Are Memoirs Autobiography?” published in 2004, Julie Rak not only questions the genre’s secondary status¹¹¹ but also pays attention to the transgendered nature of memoir since – all at once – it blends private and public; its subject may be one’s self or others; it is equally written “by the most powerful public men” and “the least known, most private women” (Rak 2004: 316); it describes “writing as process and writing as product” (317). What is more, it is inconsistent in number and gender¹¹² and, most interestingly, it has been both a masculine and feminine noun.¹¹³ Finally, it profoundly violates the laws of genres since it can be “a document note or a record, a record of historic events based on the writer’s personal knowledge or experience, an autobiography or a biography, an essay, or a memory kept of someone” (ibid.). Correspondingly, Nancy K. Miller also asserts memoir’s unwillingness to “define the boundaries between private and public, subject and object” (Miller 1996: 2). In *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*, a volume which in itself is an amalgamation of autobiography, biography and

■ “autobiografiction” (Max Saunders), and “autonarration” (Arnaud Schmitt), to name just a few.

¹¹⁰ The very same desire to establish the specificities of memoir may also be identified among writers. Meredith Maran’s collection entitled *Why We Write About Ourselves: Twenty Memoirists on Why They Expose Themselves (and Others) in the Name of Literature*, in which the memoirists “[excavate] the personal and professional agonies and ecstasies, moral conundrums, and psychological battles that come with the job [i.e. writing a memoir]” (Maran 2016: xiv), may be seen as particularly illustrative of the conflicted and diverse views on the genre that contemporary writers profess.

¹¹¹ She also notes that memoir poses “a threat to autobiography because it points out that there is lack in the genre in the first place” (Rak 2004: 317).

¹¹² The term can be both singular and plural (and mean the *same* [sic!]). In fact, Rak’s discussion of the genre of memoir is heavily indebted to Jacques Derrida’s study entitled *Mémoires: Pour Paul de Man* (1988) in which Derrida pays attention to a number of characteristics that are, subsequently, prioritised by Rak’s analysis – for example, the question of gender and number: “*Mémoires* in the plural. Too many memories. [...] The plural might lead one to understand something else, for example the multiplicity of dissociation of memories. And first of all the meaning of the French word ‘mémoire,’ in the unstable crossings of its gender (masculine or feminine) or its number (singular or plural)” (Derrida 1989: xi).

¹¹³ Rak notes that after the centuries of fluctuations, the Middle French masculine word *mémoire* became feminine; yet it lost its second “e” which would be a clear mark of a feminine noun in French (Rak 2004: 316).

literary criticism,¹¹⁴ she calls memoir (after Susan Chever) “un-biography” and states the following:

I prefer the term *memoir* [over allography or life writing – R.K.] for literary reasons but for etymological ones as well. By its roots, memoir encompasses both acts of memory and acts of recording – personal reminiscences and documentation. The word *record*, which crops up in almost every dictionary definition of memoir, contains a double meaning too. To record means literally to call to mind, to call up from the heart. At the same time, record means to set down in writing, to make official. What resides in the province of the heart is also what is exhibited in the public space of the world. (ibid.)

Miller ultimately classifies memoir as a “hybrid form” and a “cross” (3), and thus points to the borderline characteristics of the genre’s poetics which becomes particularly endorsed in G. Thomas Couser’s 2012 study of the genre. This, so far, the most thorough discussion of this literary form, postulates what follows: memoir belongs to the realm of non-fiction since it depicts the lives of real people (Couser 2012: 15), but since it is based on the working of memory it is inevitably selective (19); it can be both self- and other-life writing (17–18); it is a “term of art, the prestige term” which has recently spurned its centuries-long attribution of inferiority (18)¹¹⁵; it is “relational” (20), i.e. concerned with intimate relationships, and focused on a discrete part of life (23).

Despite its scrupulousness, Couser’s extended definition appears to ignore a number of thematic, modal and formal markers which traditional¹¹⁶ genre theory finds instrumental in defining a specific generic identity, as well as gives unfaltering credence to others (e.g. non-fiction). Undoubtedly, “la relation entre le texte et son lecteur,” as Genette points out, is “plus socialisée, plus ouvertement contractuelle, comme relevant d’une pragmatique consciente et organisée” (Genette 1982: 19), but paratextual

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¹¹⁴ The first sentence of the book states: “The origins of this book are inseparable from the loss of my parents” (Miller 1996: ix).

¹¹⁵ “No one writes autobiography any more. At least, no one reads it” (Couser 2012: 18).

¹¹⁶ As opposed to, for example, semiotic or rhetorical genre theory which has come to prominence over the last twenty years. In her 1984 essay, Carolyn Miller famously spoke against the formalist approach and defined a genre as a “social action” (C. Miller 1984). A detailed account of the contemporary debate on the nature of genre can be found in, for example, David Fishelov’s *Metaphors of Genre* (Fishelov 1993), Amy J. Devitt’s *Writing Genre* (Devitt 2008), David Duff’s *Modern Genre Theory* (Duff 2014), or John Frow’s *Genre* (Frow 2015) who claims that “texts [...] do not ‘belong’ to genres, but are, rather, uses of them” (Frow 2015: 2).

signposts,¹¹⁷ specific thematic concerns, as well as “microstructures sémanico-stylistique” (9), to name but a few,¹¹⁸ cannot be entirely dismissed in any serious attempt to define a genre. The insufficiency of Couser’s definition may well be illustrated by the recent publication of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s memoir entitled *Pioneer Girl* (2014), which the writer completed in the early 1930s. Once it had been rejected by publishers (precisely due to its labelling), she reworked it and, with only minor alterations, submitted it again as a work of fiction – first *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932) and then *Little House on the Prairie* (1935). Or, by Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story*, which “was presented to the world as a novel rather than as a memoir” (White 2014: 14) despite being thoroughly autobiographical. In such cases, Couser’s, or, in fact, anyone’s characterisation of the genre which takes no stance towards, for example, the genre-defining role played by paratextuality – unlike Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, which acknowledges formal attributions (e.g. the name on the cover, the subtitle, etc.) as a necessary prerequisite – is clearly deficient and thus hardly useful.

Est-il possible de définir le mémoire? – one could be tempted to ask in the light of the above-mentioned critical ruminations (and, of course, to paraphrase Lejeune’s famous opening line of *Le pacte autobiographique*). Is it possible to ascribe to it a more specific generic rigour?

As I have already stated, when confronted with a plethora of unconventional narratives (such as the four that this chapter has already favoured), neither traditional and still largely dominant definitions of the genre (i.e. a true, yet partial story of the [authorial] self¹¹⁹) nor its more “liberal” descriptions formulated by the likes of Rak, Miller, or Couser seem to be fully functional and do not necessarily help in finding “one’s

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¹¹⁷ Such as “une préface, une dédicace, une épigraphe, une note, un prière d’insérer, une lettre, une déclaration à la presse” (Genette 2012b: 25–26).

¹¹⁸ A magisterial account of generic indexes (in relation to reportage and the autobiographical novel) has recently been offered by Joanna Jeziorska-Haładaj in her book *Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji na przykładzie reportażu i powieści autobiograficznej* (Jeziorska-Haładaj 2013). Among the major signposts of fictionality Jeziorska-Haładaj lists, for example, the construction of the first-person narrator, the third-person narrator’s unlimited access to a character’s inner life and their consciousness, free indirect discourse, meta-diegetic narrative, and the use of pronouns (without antecedents) (Jeziorska-Haładaj 2013: 6). A classic discussion of indexes of fictional and factual narratives can be found in Genette’s “Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative” in the collection *Fiction and Diction* (Genette 1993: 54–84).

¹¹⁹ Cf. Lejeune 1996: 14–15; Misch 2002: 6–7; Yagoda 2010: 1–3; Anderson 2011: 113–114; Rosenbaum 2014: 16–19. One should keep in mind that these discussions of memoir(s) are often secondary to the interest critics show in the genre of autobiography.

bearings among the various paths that traverse the system of genres” (Petersen [in:] Genette 1992: 55). Consequently, what this study would now like to offer is its own definition of memoir – by no means “better” than the ones mentioned before, but, one hopes, more adequate to grasp the multifarious and heterogeneous nature of the this turn-of-the-century phenomenon.

The first characteristic that needs to be emphasised is the very fact that only a limited number of indexes can be taken into consideration while trying to define memoir’s parameters. For example, unlike autobiography, memoir makes no formal claims concerning its *forme du langage* (form of language), e.g. narrative or in prose¹²⁰ (Lejeune 1996: 14). Though one could argue that such limited formal restrictedness (or, alternatively, formal freedom) is to be listed among the genre’s assets, it is also the very reason why its poetics poses so many challenges to narratologists. Consequently, what I would like to suggest is to focus on selected generic *marqueurs* – the ones that can, indeed, be helpful in determining the genre’s constants – namely, its ontological status (factual vs. fictional) and the role of paratextuality, the use of grammatical person and the position of the narrator, as well as the scope and subject treated.

“Let it be fact, one feels, or let it be fiction; the imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously,” Virginia Woolf noted in the concluding lines of her essay “The New Biography” when remarking on the “antagonistic” relationship between “the truth of real life” and “the truth of fiction” (Woolf 2008: 99, 100). Debates¹²¹ on the incompatibility of the fictional and factual realms and where the life writing genres (including memoirs) do, indeed, belong are, by no means, a recent theoretical concern. Hayden White reminds one, for example, that “the genre of the

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¹²⁰ Consequently, one is more likely to encounter the term “graphic memoir” rather than “graphic autobiography” (Young 2000; Kusek 2015a), or “cinematic memoir” rather than “cinematic autobiography” (Zanger 2013). A perfect illustration of memoir’s freedom in terms of form of language can be Karen Green’s *Bough Down* (2013) which comprises poems and collages.

¹²¹ Just to mention a famous debate “The Uses of History in Fiction” with C. Vann Woodward (moderator), Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison and William Styron, held on 6 November 1968, which addressed the issue of some essential differences between historiography and fiction – a debate, which today, especially in the light of Hayden White’s assertions, seems rather futile. Today, Warren’s and Ellison’s claims about the artificiality of historical discourse (Ellison et al. 1969: 61) and the inevitable use of creative imagination in writing about the lives of historical figures (62) remain almost unanimously accepted by historians, just to mention the likes of Mieke Bal and Frank Ankersmit (Domańska 2006: 13–27).

historical novel in the time of Scott, Goethe and Byron enjoyed virtually universal popularity among the literate public while, at the same time, enduring universal condemnation at the hands of professional historians who regarded its mixture of fact with fiction, its constitutive anachronism, and its attempt to examine the past by the instruments of imagination as a crime, not to say a sin, of Mosaic amplitude – ‘Thou shalt not mix the kinds’” (White 2010: 13). Georges Gusdorf tried to solve this riddle by stating that autobiography (and one could claim, by extension, any life writing product) is, simultaneously, a historical “document” and a “work of art” (Gusdorf 1980: 43),¹²² while the works of contemporary historians (the likes of Carl Dahlhaus, Mieke Bal, Frank Ankersmit, or Hayden White [Domańska 2006: 13–27]) and their repudiation of the category of “fact,”¹²³ so sacred for the defenders of the non-fictionality of life narratives, heavily contributed to the post-structuralist notion of pantextuality and, consequently, shattered the basic premise of (auto)-biographical writing. As E.L. Doctorow has stated: “There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (Doctorow [in:] Southgate 2009: 32). Nevertheless, the practice and critical reading of memoirs still remain inseparable from the idea of truth telling – even though, as André Aciman points out, “[m]emories are supposed to distort, to lie” (Aciman 2001: 18). When, in 2013, Alex Ferguson published his ghost-written memoir titled *Alex Ferguson: My Autobiography* [sic!], the book’s writer Paul Hayward received special plaudits for the one hundred per cent accurate representation of

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¹²² It is “unquestionably a document about a life and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. It is therefore of little consequence that the *Mémoires d'autre-tombe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his *Voyage en Amérique*; the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of travelers’ moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal” (Gusdorf 1980: 43).

¹²³ “The historian must resist the deeply ingrained habit of thinking that the word ‘fact’ refers to something tangible since, to put it bluntly, any historical fact is nothing more than a hypothesis. The accounts and relics that serve as the historian’s starting point form the data which have survived into the present and which the historian seeks to explain by making an assumption about past events. And it is these conceptualised events, and not the given materials, that represent the historical facts he seeks,” Dahlhaus says (Dahlhaus 1997: 35).

his subject's voice, especially Ferguson's syntax and phrasing (the use of "Unbelievable!" [in:] Lawson 2013b). The Belgian writer Misha De-fonseca has recently been ordered to repay over twenty million dollars to her American publishers once it turned out that her Holocaust narrative *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997) was a fabrication (Dearden 2014), while, in 2013, Lance Armstrong faced a lawsuit over the untruthful account of his life in his bestselling memoir of 2000 *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* with compensation of five million dollars demanded by his California-based readers (Bury 2013).¹²⁴

This study has no ambition to conclusively determine whether memoirs are exclusively works of fiction, or belong to the realm of fact – in truth, it refuses to acknowledge the radicalism of the binary nature of such an oppositionality.¹²⁵ However, what it wishes to emphasise is an inherent flaw and inadequacy in defining memoirs as works of *non-fiction*, since it suggests a qualitative (and potentially also quantitative) pre-eminence of non-fictional signposts.¹²⁶ In other words, when one names a given text a work of non-fiction, one states that it fulfils the criteria typically identified as indicative of this mode of narrative. Such a conceptualisation would, for example, exclude Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily* from the category of memoir since half of its story is told by an omniscient narrator who violates historical accuracy, Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk* would be excluded because it contains fragments in which the narrator is given access to the consciousness of T.H. White, while Philip Hensher's "Last month" would also not qualify as it is part of a narrative which has been paratextually marked as a novel. Hence, instead of classifying memoirs as works of non-fiction, I should like to describe them as "referential texts,"¹²⁷ i.e. narratives that simply *acknowledge* the existence of non-textual referents in the real world without making any

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¹²⁴ Fonseca's and Armstrong's stories joined the list of other famous memoir hoaxes which include Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Bruchstücke: Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (1995), or James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003).

¹²⁵ As Peter Ackroyd claims (and performs) in his biography of Shakespeare, memory is always "inseparable from fancy" (Ackroyd 1990: 16).

¹²⁶ A thorough discussion of non-fiction and its position *vis-à-vis* the works of fiction has been offered in Paweł Zajas's monograph *Jak świat prawdziwy stał się bajką: O literaturze niefikcjonalnej* (2011).

¹²⁷ This category is, of course, indebted to Jakobson's referential function of language (Jakobson 1964: 353). By describing memoirs as "referential text," I am also inevitably acknowledging the validity of Lejeunian "referential pact," in which texts "prétendant apporter une information sur une 'réalité' extérieure au texte, et donc se soumettre à une épreuve de vérification" (Lejeune 1996: 36).

claim about the nature (degree, quality) of the relationship between the two relata. However, if one (still) insisted on classifying memoir as belonging to either of the recognised modes (i.e. fact vs. fiction) or placing the genre somewhere on the continuum spread between the two, it, in fact, would appear more plausible to consider memoir as having stronger affinity (not only stylistically but also ontologically) to the latter and not, as many would see it, to the former; and, consequently, one could recognise this characteristic as a potential generic signpost that would differentiate memoir from, for example, autobiography. This aspect was noted by Gore Vidal in the introductory note to his 1995 memoir entitled *Palimpsest*. “A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life,” the venerable American author declared, “while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked” (Vidal 1995: 5).¹²⁸ Nancy K. Miller was even more explicit about the fundamental fictionality of narratives classifiable as memoirs – the realisation she expressed in her diary upon the completion of her own memoir entitled *But Enough About Me* (2002):

September 2, 2002

As a theorist of autobiography, I was always kind of literalist. Naive, even. I took the “autobiographical pact” seriously, to the letter. I believed that autobiographers could and should reach unequivocally for the verifiable truth that corresponded to the events they signed their names to; that strategies of fictionalization were antithetical to autobiography. When I began my memoir, I still believed in telling a true story, but I also began to realize that there were gaps that could be filled in only be *leaps of the imagination* [my emphasis – R.K.], not memory; and scenes that I could recreate through dialogues that were anything but verifiable. I could write down what I remembered; or I could *craft* [my emphasis – R.K.] a memoir. One *might* be the truth; the other, a good story. [...] When I sit down to reconstruct my past, I call on memory; but when memory fails, I let language lead. The words take me where I need to go. (Miller 2008: 44)

Thus, in case of dissatisfaction with the (inevitable) deficiencies of the definition of memoir as a referential text, one could, alternatively, also consider the term “verifiable fiction,” first used by Ira B. Nadel to describe

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¹²⁸ In her “academic memoir” entitled *But Enough About Me* (2002), Nancy K. Miller says, in line with Vidal, that “autobiography is always most literally a curriculum vitae” (Miller 2002: xiv).

unorthodox biographies (Nadel [in:] Middeke and Huber 1999: 5), since such a category points to the external (and confirmable) referents of textual entities and simultaneously not only distances itself from the absolute demands of truth-telling but also welcomes a variety of narrative solutions, which are otherwise unwelcome in works of non-fiction.¹²⁹

What is more, I should also like to suggest an abandonment of the contractual nature¹³⁰ of memoir insofar as signature¹³¹ and labelling are concerned. By stating the above, I do not wish to imply that paratextual declarations such as (sub)titles, epigraphs, dedications, illustrations, epitexts, autoreviews, public responses, etc., should be thoroughly ignored as irrelevant genre-indicators since, in many cases, they are of vital importance when deciding (by a reader) upon the (auto)biographical nature of a particular piece of writing. However, I do not consider them either essential or – most importantly – binding, but rather subordinate to the text itself.¹³² It is precisely a distrust towards the “signature”¹³³ that allows this book to consider such pieces as Philip Hensher’s *Scenes*

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¹²⁹ Memoirs can also be seen as belonging to the realm of “autobiografiction,” a term proposed by Max Saunders in his 2010 study of life writing genres and borrowed from the Edwardian writer Stephen Reynolds, which is applicable to texts which lie at the meeting point of autobiography and fiction (Saunders 2010). Also, in 2009, in her study entitled *History Meets Fiction* Beverly Southgate suggested that the fusion of “historical and fictional narrative construction” [my emphasis – R.K.] can result in the so-called “non-fiction novel” (Southgate 2009: 33–34). Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is seen by the critic as the first instance of this kind of narrative. “*In Cold Blood*,” Southgate states, “is a novel – fiction – inasmuch as it is an imaginative construction written to hold the attention of its readers, and make them want to keep on reading. It is *history* inasmuch as the author’s endeavour is (yes, again imaginatively) to reconstruct – to reconstruct a past event within a context sufficiently wide as to enable him to understand, on the basis of reliable evidence, how it came to pass” (Southgate 2009: 35). Clearly, such approaches would not eliminate from the genre’s corpus the so-called “false” or “hoax,” or “embellished memoirs” – a postulate which was formulated in 2014 by Sue Vice (Vice 2014).

¹³⁰ Perhaps, the singular instance of a contract between a writer and a reader is to be observed when the character is given the writer’s “vital statistics” such as name, date of birth, etc.

¹³¹ Recognising the validity of the criticism levelled at Lejeune (and his understanding of “signature”) by Paul de Man, I do not consider the category of signature synonymous with the proper name (de Man 1979: 922).

¹³² In this I shall follow Genette’s belief that “the paratext in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d’être*” (Genette 1997: 12).

¹³³ In *The Post Card* Derrida semi-ironically says to the addressee of his missives: “I regret that you [tu] do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several. This is true, but I am not saying so in order to make myself more important by means of some supplementary authority. And even less in order to disquiet. I know what this costs. You are right, doubtless we are several, and I am not as alone as

from *Early Life* (subtitled “a novel”), Damon Galgut’s *In a Strange Room* (marketed as fiction), Paul Auster’s *Winter Journal* (manifestly, yet misleadingly titled a “journal”), or Alice Munro’s *Dear Life* (classifiable as a collection of short stories), instances of memoir.

Additionally, and in line with what this book has already asserted, I shall postulate an annulment of the (auto)biographical¹³⁴ pact with reference to the genre of memoir and, instead, a recognition of *le pacte fantasmatique* (the phantasmatic pact), i.e. an indirect form of (auto)biographical pact which Lejeune identified in the revised version of *Le pacte autobiographique* (Lejeune 1996: 42).¹³⁵ What I concede and assert as particularly relevant to the present discussion is that the phantasmatic pact (unlike its predecessor) does not formally *require* but *invites* (“le lecteur est ainsi invité”) one to read particular texts (especially those appearing or classified as fiction) as (auto)biographical; they are read “non seulement comme des *fictions* renvoyant à une vérité de la ‘nature humaine,’ mais aussi comme des *fantasmes* révélateurs d’un individu” (ibid.). Consequently, memoirs – more than any other type of life writing – can be seen as inhabitants of “*l’espace autobiographique*” (41), or, more accurately, *l’espace (auto)biographique* [(auto)biographical space], a threshold zone, in which historical/factual accuracy co-exists with fiction without qualitatively prioritising one over the other. And, it remains for the reader to decide whether they wish to read a particular occupant of this zone *autobiographically* or not; whether they wish to accept its invitation to do so, or dismiss it (be it partly, or altogether).¹³⁶ Memoir is, thus, never “straight” but always

■ I sometimes say I am when the complaint escapes from me, or when I still put everything [*je m’éverture encore*] into seducing you” (Derrida 1987: 6).

¹³⁴ My spelling of “(auto)biographical pact” (with “auto” in brackets which results from memoirs addressing the lives of self and others) refers to (and embraces) both – autobiographical pact *per se* as formulated by Philippe Lejeune in his seminal study (Lejeune 1996) and biographical pact (or “p/act”) as astutely stipulated by Mirosława Buchholtz (Buchholtz 2011: 45).

¹³⁵ The concept of “(auto)biographical pact” – despite several attempts at its deconstruction – remains one of the central categories to contemporary (auto)biographical criticism. For example, Andrzej Zieniewicz’s study *Pakty i fikcje: Autobiografizm po końcu wielkich narracji (szkice)* (2011) offers not only an in-depth discussion (and criticism) of Lejeunian category, but also a set of new types of (auto)biographical pact that can be encountered in 20th century literature, namely “pakt obecności” [the pact of presence], “pakt mitobiograficzny” [mythobiographical pact], “pakt traumatyczny” [traumatic pact], and “pakt autoreferencyjny” [self-referential pact] (Zieniewicz 2011: 54–70).

¹³⁶ Such an approach is, of course, indebted to de Man’s conceptualisation of autobiography as a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive

a “mediated”¹³⁷ form of life writing whose relationship to truth/fiction is in a constant process of negotiation and whose consumer is inevitably implicated in the process of reading and determining the degree/quality of referentiality (or, alternatively, asserting the truth-value) of a given text.

Of the possible generic signposts that this study has privileged as potentially fruitful in establishing the characteristics of memoir, I should like now to focus on two indexes, namely the notion of a person (defined by a grammatical criterion) and the position of the narrator (his or her relationship with what we can call a given text’s major character, as well their point of view)¹³⁸ since, in the past, they proved to be particularly helpful in determining class membership (e.g. a distinction between autobiography and biography). However, an investigation into the corpus of narratives and an attempt to isolate the above-mentioned indexical features in them reveals – again – the genre’s seemingly lawless and unbridled nature. Firstly, it can be observed that all three grammatical persons which Lejeune defines as “la personne employée de manière privilégiée tout au long du récit” (Lejeune 1996: 18), i.e. “I,” “you,” and “(s)he,” occur in memoir. The use of the first person singular remains – needless to say – the most prevalent mode, but, now and again, “you” (e.g. Paul Auster’s *Winter Journal* in which “you,” one assumes, refers to Auster himself¹³⁹) and, in particular, “(s)he” (e.g. J.M. Coetzee’s *Scenes from Provincial Life* series, Salman Rushdie’s *Joseph Anton*¹⁴⁰) are also encountered. As a result,

■ substitution.” However, one needs to note that de Man remains critical of the reader becoming (in the Lejeunian model, at least) the “judge, the policing power,” and being given “transcendental authority that allows him to pass judgment” (de Man 1979: 921, 923).

¹³⁷ I am referring here to the categories of “straight” vs. “mediated” autobiography proposed by Susan Suleiman, though my understanding of it is not limited to the “exploration of the writer’s self [which] takes place not directly but through the mediation of writing about another” (Suleiman 1994: 3).

¹³⁸ After Lejeune and his four conditions that need to be met by an autobiographical narrative (Lejeune 1996: 14). In Genette’s struturalist terminology both aspects that I have selected fall under the category of “voice” (Genette 1993: 68).

¹³⁹ Auster’s memoir opens memorably with the following sentence: “You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else” (Auster 2012: 1).

¹⁴⁰ “Afterwards, when the world was exploding around him and the lethal blackbirds were massing on the climbing frame in the school playground, he felt annoyed with himself for forgetting the name of the BBC reporter, a woman, who had told him that his old life was over and a new, darker existence was about to begin. She had called him at home on his private line without explaining how she got the number. ‘How does it

in this study's search for a *differentia specifica* of memoir, the category of grammatical person cannot be acknowledged as particularly serviceable to the endeavour. Secondly, a similar unresolvedness (in terms of arriving at valid and fruitful distinctions) can be recognised when one scrutinises the position of the narrator *vis-à-vis* the text's character(s). Plainly, the narrator (identified as synonymous with the author) is, many a time, the story's major character; however, (s)he is, equally often, only a catalyst for telling (homodiegetically or heterodiegetically) the lives of others, like in, say, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (e.g. Doris Lessing's *Alfred and Emily*,¹⁴¹ Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother*, or John Bayley's *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*). However, the above-listed examples do not exhaust all the formal possibilities that memoir can test and succumb itself to. Philip Hensher's *Scenes from Early Life* of 2012, which will be discussed in greater detail in the upcoming chapter of the present study, is a rare specimen of a memoir in which the first person narrator, while remaining, indeed, the principal character of the story, does not equate the writer himself but, instead, Hensher's husband Zaved Mahmood. Clearly repeating the gesture of Gertrude Stein,¹⁴² Hensher does not write either a biography of Mahmood, or (his own) autobiography, but a generic crossbreed: an autobiographical narrative of Mahmood by Hensher. Thus, if one wished to define memoir by resorting to the classical triangular schema of A (author), N (narrator) and C (character) advocated by Gérard Genette (Genette 1993: 72–73), one would have to acknowledge the occurrence of the following models:

■ feel,' she asked him, 'to know that you have just been sentenced to death by Ayatollah Khomeini?'" (Rushdie 2012: 3).

¹⁴¹ In *Alfred and Emily* one can identify instances of both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narratives: the former being represented by the first part of the volume (in which the third person narrator who is not the principal character narrates the [imagined] story of Alfred's and Emily's lives), while the latter (the so-called "witness narrative") is identified in the second part of the book (the first person narrative in which the narrator [i.e. Doris Lessing] is, again, not the principal character).

¹⁴² I.e. Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933). Quite importantly, Hensher, unlike Stein, does not mingle his own life with that of Mahmood (with the exception of the final four pages [Hensher 2012: 303–307]).

Table Two: Memoir formulas of the narrative “voice”

A			A		
=		=	≠		≠
N	=	C	N	=	C
e.g. <i>Auto da Fay</i> by Fay Weldon			e.g. <i>Scenes from Early Life</i> by Philip Hensher		
A			A		
≠		≠	≠		=
N	≠	C	N	≠	C
e.g. <i>Alfred and Emily</i> by Doris Lessing (a “novella”)			e.g. <i>Joseph Anton</i> by Salman Rushdie		
A			A		
=		≠	=		≠
N	≠	C	N	≠	C
e.g. <i>My Brother</i> by Jamaica Kincaid					

Source: Own study based on Genette 1993: 68–79

The above formulas unmistakably testify to memoir’s formal proliferation as it embraces classical autodiegetic historical narrative (A = N = C), heterodiegetic fiction (A ≠ N, N ≠ C, A ≠ C), heterodiegetic autobiography (A ≠ N, N ≠ C, A = C), homodiegetic historical narrative (A = N, N ≠ C, A ≠ C), and homodiegetic fiction (A ≠ N, N = C, A ≠ C) – in short, all five schemas which Genette recognises as the “only [...] logically coherent

figures" (Genette 1993: 72). Finally, even the third – one would suspect – most obvious aspect of the "voice," i.e. "perspective rétrospective du récit" considered by Lejeune an indispensable characteristic of autobiographical writing (Lejeune 1996: 14), fails to become a durable feature of the genre as the use of the present tense in Coetzee's *Boyhood* or *Youth*, or in Marion Coutts's *The Iceberg* (2014) astutely proves.

However, the fact that memoirs cannot be reduced to a single narratological formula concerning their narrative voices (in terms of person, level, and time) is not tantamount to a surrender and dismissal of a claim that any legitimate statement can be formulated with reference to them. On the contrary, this study would like to assert that – similarly to memoir's occupancy of the threshold zone in which history co-exists with fiction – the genre's subject should be considered to be essentially "sylleptic," to borrow Ryszard Nycz's ingenious category (Nycz 1995: 386). In his discussion of various manifestations of subjectivity in 20th century Polish literature, Nycz turns to the concept of syllepsis, namely a figure of speech, which, despite being grammatically (or logically) incorrect, meaningfully joins different parts of a sentence or relates (simultaneously) to two distinctive discourses/utterances.¹⁴³ Subsequently, the eminent Polish literary critic applies this concept to the relationship between the empirical and the textual "I." "The sylleptic 'I,' to put it most simply," Nycz writes, "is the 'I' which has to be understood simultaneously in two ways: namely as true and as fictional, as empirical and as textual, as authentic and as fictional-novelistic" (Nycz 1995: 386–387). Indeed, in memoirs, their subjects are neither autobiographically nor biographically "straight"; they are always sylleptic; always ambiguous; always real and literary at the same time. However, I should like to argue that memoirs are also sylleptic in a larger sense. It is not only that their subjects are spread between textuality and referentiality, but memoirists enjoy an ambiguous relationship with their stories' narrators and characters: they can be read as either, both, or neither of them. That is the very reason why such pieces as Coetzee's *Scenes from Provincial Life* series or Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* should be considered legitimate (or even *typical*) instances of memoir and not unorthodox (due to being narrated in the third person) autobiographies. That is also the reason why Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a life story dictated at the beginning of the 14th century which

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¹⁴³ "Syllepsis," Nycz states, "is a trope which consists in the comprehension of the same expression homonymically, in two ways simultaneously, of which one is the exact, literal meaning and the other the transferable, figural" (Nycz 1995: 386).

tells of the mystic's life and travels¹⁴⁴ and which, most importantly, is written in the third person with Kempe referring to herself as "this creature" (Kempe 1994: 41), should not be, perhaps, classified as England's first autobiography, but, instead, as its first memoir.

Yet, genres are not only defined by their structural, semantic, (para)textual and ontological properties, which John Frow gathers under the categories of "formal organisation" and "rhetorical structure" (Frow 2015: 4), but also by their scope and subject matter ("sujet traité" [Lejeune 1996: 14]); in other words, by their "thematic content," i.e. "what they are typically about" (Frow 2015: 4). Together with the syllepsism of the subject, the phantasmatism of the pact between a writer and a reader, as well as the (auto)biographism of the space which the given text inhabits, thematic scope and content are seen by this study as the most relevant dimensions of memoir. I should like to claim that memoirs are essentially governed by the principle of de-totalisation, or, alternatively, an "impossibility of closure and totalization" (de Man 1979: 922). Unlike autobiography or biography, which are believed to "recompose and interpret life in its totality" (Gusdorf 1980: 38), memoir does not wish to offer a God's-eye view of someone's existence; it "assault[s] suspicious 'wholes,' fictitious unities" (Said 2007: 15) and is not a "projet fondamental," as Lejeune recently declared about autobiography (Lejeune 2010: 13), but a "souvenir" (to re-appropriate a term considered derogatory and inferior by the French pope of autobiography [Lejeune 2010: 16–17]) which is deliberately episodic, limited and segmental, further characterised by some considerable distrust towards such notions as unity, comprehensiveness, understanding, and, ultimately, truth.¹⁴⁵ Hence, memoirs refuse to tell a story of a life in its entirety and, instead, focus on its segment, limited temporarily or experientially, e.g. childhood, motherhood, old age, illness. David Lodge's 2015 life story entitled *Quite a Good Time to Be Born* provides an excellent illustration of this aspect of memoir's poetics (or, to be more precise, a lack of it). Although subtitled "A Memoir 1935–1975," this piece is, in fact, an un-memoir¹⁴⁶ since, among other factors, both its intention and execution are aimed at narrating a fully authoritative and exhaustive account of the writer's life in which, with the help

¹⁴⁴ Travels in England and on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Santiago de Compostela.

¹⁴⁵ I am referring here to the "markers" of autobiography as stipulated by Georges Gusdorf (1980: 34, 35, 37).

¹⁴⁶ Consequently, Lodge's book could not be included in the corpus of memoirs provided in the introduction to the present study.

of historical documents, immaculate research and even a genealogist, Lodge describes his family background, childhood, youth, studies, compulsory government service, career as an academic and novelist, traveling, friendship – to name just a few. The totality of this life writing project is perfectly grasped by the concluding statement of the foreword to Lodge's massive, almost five hundred-page-long autobiography (since, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴⁷ a legitimate autobiography it, indeed, is): "it covers, what is, at the time of writing, the first half of my life, up to the age of forty. I hope to write another book about the second half, in added extra time" (Lodge 2015: 3).

Finally, the last characteristic that this study would like to privilege in its attempt to map out the parameters of memoir is the genre's borderline or threshold nature.¹⁴⁸ As this study has already demonstrated, memoirs are particularly prone to "impurity"; they deliberately mix modes, forms, persons and styles, and their paradigmatic formula is, at best, based upon the principle of "both" and "neither,"¹⁴⁹ of simultaneous inclusivity and exclusivity. As I should like to claim, the best marker of memoir is when a given text refuses an unequivocal classification or singular class-membership; when it is governed by the "axiom of non-closure or non-fulfilment" (Derrida 1980: 212). Memoir, as this study wishes to argue, does not primarily feed itself on oppositionality (and in this way cannot be seen as a simple "counter-genre" [Guillén 1971: 135] to, for example, autobiography), but on a transcendence¹⁵⁰ of available formulas. It is, essentially, *khôrat*ic (or *khôral*)¹⁵¹ – an occupant of "chasm" or/and

¹⁴⁷ See Kusek 2016: 115–131.

¹⁴⁸ Among the life writing critics who have borrowed the term "borderline" from the psychology lexicon and have been consistently using it to refer to various (auto)biographical practices, one should mention Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson (Smith and Watson 2010), as well as Leigh Gilmore (Gilmore 1994) and Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir (Gudmundsdottir 2003). However, it appears that the credit for introducing the term to life writing studies needs to be given to Linda Hutcheon and her 1988 study titled *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Hutcheon 2002: 157).

¹⁴⁹ I am referring here to a principle formulated by Sue Kossew with regards to Coetzee's epistemology, which, she believes, is characterised by "a 'neither yes or no,' a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or'" (Kossew 2009: 62).

¹⁵⁰ Therefore, one should, perhaps, consider memoir to be the *ultimate* genre since "dans l'histoire, le genre apparaît bien avec les œuvres individuelles, mais il ne s'épuise pas en elles, il les 'transcende'" (Genette 1986: 34).

¹⁵¹ *Khôra*, a term which in Ancient Greece described a piece of land outside the city, was first used by Plato and, subsequently by Derrida. Commenting on the category's usage by both philosophers, John D. Caputo states the following: "*Khôra* is the immense and indeterminate spatial receptacle [...]; it belongs neither to the intelligible nor to the sensible world [...]; it is not a legitimate son of reason but is apprehended by a spurious

“abyss,” which, nevertheless, opens itself up to an unlimited number of meanings and which is filled with signification. A khôritic text is, thus, an instance of writing which “signal[s] towards a genre beyond genre [...] beyond categorical oppositions, which in the first place allow it to be approached or said” (Derrida 1995: 103, 104, 90). “Travelling”¹⁵² between categorical oppositions of the self and other, autobiography and biography, fact and fiction, memoir at the turn of the centuries deservedly and, indeed, justifiably claims the title of a “genre beyond genre.”

■ or corrupted *logos*, a hybrid or bastard reasoning [...]; [it] is neither intelligible being nor sensible becoming, but a little like both, the subject matter of neither a true *logos* or a good *mythos*” (Caputo 1997: 84).

¹⁵² The metaphor of travel is, of course, indebted to Mieke Bal’s influential scholarship (Bal 2002). In her recent plea for a re-appraisal of formalism, Caroline Levine also wrote about “traveling and colliding” forms understood as “sites [...] where multiple forms cross and collide” (Levine 2015: xi, 122).

CHAPTER THREE

Dramatis Personae: Memoir and Its “Species”

Once you have begun remembering – isn’t this so? – one image springs another; they run through your head in all directions, scampering animals flushed from coverts. Memory’s not a reel, not a film you can run backwards and forwards at will: it’s that flash of startled fur, the slither of silk between the fingers, the duplicated texture of hair and bone. It’s an image blurring, caught on the move.

Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love* (2010b: 11)

It is impossible to face facts. They are like the walls of a room, all around you. If you face one wall, you must have your back to the other three.

E.M. Forster to Josie Darling, 1914 ([in:] Moffat 2010: 12)

Having attempted to provide its own definition of memoir (i.e. the genre determined by such parameters as referentiality, phantasmatism of the [auto]biographical pact, [auto]biographism of a textual space, syllepsism of the subject, de-totalisation in terms of scope and thematic content, as well as generic khôracity), the present study would now like to offer a typology of its specimens published over the last quarter of a decade; in other words, memoir’s minor forms (*Untergattungen*), or “species” (Genette 1992: 65), which are organised according to their thematic content.¹⁵³ Undoubtedly, other *differentiae specifica*e could be applied to the corpus

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¹⁵³ Identification of thematic content as the major principle of differentiation prevails in genre studies. According to John Frow, a sub-genre is “the further specification of genre by a particular thematic content” (Frow 2015: 67).

of memoirs that this book has favoured – suffice it to mention the grammatical person (e.g. first, second, third) or the author/narrator/character relationship. What is more, other types of conceptual (and, in fact, methodological) organisation of memoirs could also be employed. One could, for example, borrow (and adapt) William L. Howarth's well-known taxonomy of autobiographical narratives into oratory, drama, and poetry (Howarth 1980: 88, 95, 104). Or, alternatively, having first agreed on Lejeune's idea of "autobiocopie"¹⁵⁴ (in itself based on Emil Cioran's definition of life as an act of plagiarism¹⁵⁵), it could be tempting to consider memoirs (and, in particular, the life stories that they narrate) as derivational, inherently intertextual, and ontologically palimpsestuous. Consequently, one could either follow Lejeune's own categorisation of "autobiocopies" ("la copie," "le plagiat," "la citation sans imitation," "la citation avec imitation," and "l'imitation sans citation" [Lejeune 1998: 31–33]), or turn to a plethora of hypertextual practices identified by Gérard Genette in his seminal *Palimpsestes* (e.g. imitation, transformation, augmentation, excision, transvaluation) and organise individual specimens of memoir accordingly.¹⁵⁶ However, the choice of thematic content as the principle of organisation and distribution – though quite conventional and inevitably limited – remains, in my opinion, the most fruitful approach since it guarantees not only the study's preferred comprehensiveness (it does produce the highest number¹⁵⁷ of micro-genres¹⁵⁸ and thus an illustration of the genre's capaciousness and prodigality), but it also corresponds to the book's internal structure, which is influenced and commanded by life's major topical signposts. Notwithstanding, the following taxonomy is by no means exhaustive and, being aware of its limitations, provides only selected micro-genres of memoirs – some of which have been

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¹⁵⁴ "Douleur à penser que l'individu est un fait de série, et l'originalité un code. L'autobiographie ne serait-elle pas toujours autobiocopie?" (Lejeune 1998: 14).

¹⁵⁵ "Exister est un plagiat" (Lejeune 1998: 13).

¹⁵⁶ Such a strategy was previously applied to the genre of biographical-novel-about-a-writer in my 2012 study *Authors on Authors in Selected Biographical-Novels-About-Writers* (Kusek 2012a: 30–52).

¹⁵⁷ As exemplified by "Appendix A: Sixty Genres of Life Narratives" to be found in Sidonie Smith's and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography* (Smith and Watson 2010: 253–286). In fact, new micro-genres of memoir regularly emerge in contemporary criticism. For example, Simon Callow in his 2014 review of Jonathan Croall's *In Search of Gielgud: A Biographer's Tale* (2014) coined the term "revenge memoir" (Callow 2014).

¹⁵⁸ While introducing the distinctions of order and hierarchy (but not value), this study shares G. Thomas Couser's distrust towards the prefix "sub" (as the one which carries negative connotations) and, consequently, uses such prefixes as "macro" and "micro" (Couser 2012: 34).

particularly championed by contemporary criticism as testified by the extensive critical analysis dedicated to them. Its imminent failure to list all “species” of memoir is, nevertheless, not deliberate. Furthermore, none of the micro-genres discussed below should be considered a separate or absolute category without any reciprocal contact or overlapping. As exemplified by, for example, Andre Motion’s *In the Blood*, a childhood memoir may also bear strong features of matriography, (auto)thanatography and (auto)pathography.¹⁵⁹ Thus, whenever a given piece is described as representative of a particular micro-genre, one should note that such a classification pertains (only!) to the so-called thematic “dominant” (Jakobson 1971: 82) and that no absolute claims are, in fact, made with reference to the piece’s topical exclusivity.

3.1. *Souvenirs d'enfance*, or Childhood Memoir: *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* by André Aciman

Although memoirs concerned with one’s childhood have been among the most popular life narratives produced by writers over the last twenty five years,¹⁶⁰ and although the term itself has been widely used by the literati,¹⁶¹ English-language criticism has shown some considerable reticence as far as the formal and typological differentiation of such texts is concerned. However, the same cannot be said about the French critics, who have long been familiar with the term *souvenirs d'enfance*, defined as a narrative “centré sur l’expérience intime de l’enfant, et qu’au moins implicitement un lien solide soit établi entre cette enfance et la vie qui l’a suivie” (Lejeune 2010: 17). Interestingly, in his characterisation of *souvenirs d'enfance*,¹⁶² Lejeune insists that the pieces defined thus should by

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¹⁵⁹ This aspect will be further addressed in Chapter Four of the present study.

¹⁶⁰ Childhood memoir is most frequently represented in the corpus of texts provided in the introductory part of the present study, e.g. Paul Bailey’s *An Immaculate Mistake: Scenes from Childhood and Beyond* (1990), Penelope Lively’s *Oleander, Jacaranda: A Childhood Perceived* (1994), J.M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), Mark Doty’s *Firebird: A Memoir* (1999), or Janice Galloway’s *This Is Not About Me* (2008).

¹⁶¹ It appears, among others, in the title of Tove Jansson’s life story, i.e. *Sculptor’s Daughter: A Childhood Memoir* (2014), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s narrative *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010), or Brian Keenan’s *I’ll Tell Me Ma: A Childhood Memoir* (2010). It is also used in literary journalism (e.g. King 2011) and the publishing industry, e.g. Barnes & Noble, the largest retail bookseller in the United States, acknowledges “childhood memoir” as a distinct literary category.

¹⁶² Needless to say, Lejeune does not recognise *souvenirs d'enfance* as necessarily belonging either to the genre of memoir or autobiography.

no means be limited to narrating either the story of “bon vieux temps,” or only one aspect of childhood (e.g. the relationship with one’s mother) (ibid.), but, instead, should reveal the unity, sense and coherence of one’s *entire* [my emphasis – R.K.] life; consequently, such a childhood narrative should be read (and written) as “le premier acte d’une histoire” (ibid.).

While a number of writers’ childhood memoirs do, indeed, establish links between their subjects’ past and present selves, this study refuses to recognise this and other prerequisites formulated by Lejeune as mandatory. A prime signpost of childhood memoir should be its insistence on narrating the experience of a child (be it in adult hindsight or from a child’s point of view), regardless of the fact that the story may, or may not be vitally informed by “adult knowingness” (Hadley [in:] Treisman 2013). In this sense, childhood memoir may well be (despite being the *first*) the *last* or the *only* act of one’s history. Or, it may refuse to seek any relevant link between one’s present and past self, as emphatically spelt out by Janice Galloway in the title of her childhood memoir: *This Is Not About Me* (2008).

André Aciman’s *Out of Egypt: A Memoir* is to be listed herein as a paramount specimen of the micro-genre. Highly erudite and intertextual,¹⁶³ Aciman’s childhood memoir can be seen as an exercise in “nostography,” i.e. writing about a return.¹⁶⁴ In this volume, intent on “recover[ing] memories” and “recogniz[ing] [though not rectifying – R.K.] those [he’d] disfigured” (Aciman 2001: 5), the writer returns to the time of his childhood spent in Alexandria, where he was born in 1951 to a Jewish family with Turkish and Italian roots. It opens with the adult Aciman sitting next to his great-uncle Vili (or Aaron), one of many extraordinary characters that populate the pages of the book, in his estate in Surrey, and trying to talk to him about the Egyptian “capital of memory” – to use Lawrence Durrell’s famous phrase (Durrell 1957: 188). “So, are we or aren’t we, *siamo o non siamo*,” the elliptical line that opens the memoir (Aciman 1994: 3), is an expression of the uncle’s readiness to go ahead with the story of his life and, consequently, Aciman’s own lineage – “a provenance so ancient

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¹⁶³ E.g. the memoir’s first chapter is entitled “Soldier, Salesman, Swindler, Spy” – a clear allusion to John le Carré’s 1974 novel *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. Other references include Constantine Cavafy, Lawrence Durrell, James Joyce, Plutarch, or Marcel Proust, on whom Aciman is a world-renowned specialist. The “out of Egypt” phrase applies, of course, to the Jewish exodus and escape from the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt.

¹⁶⁴ In his essay “Alexandria: The Capital of Memory,” Aciman calls himself a “terrible nostographer” (Aciman 2001: 13).

and so distinguished that it transcended such petty distinctions as birth-place, nationality, or religion" (Aciman 1994: 5).

The subjects of *Out of Egypt*'s six chapters, narrated by the first-person narrator unmistakably identifiable with the author, are Aciman himself and his family: the above-mentioned uncle Vili, Aunt Marta and her husband "the Schwab," Aunt Flora, Uncle Isaac, "the Saint" and "the Princess" – his two grandmothers, as well as his mother and father, among others.¹⁶⁵ Equally as heterogeneous as its subject is the memoir's style: sometimes a family chronicle, a historical narrative (e.g. an account of the fight between the British Eighth Army and Rommel's *Afrika Korps* in 1942), excerpts from letters and diaries, but also numerous passages or whole sections that offer fully-fledged fictional re-visions and re-creations of some past events (including dialogues and the application of free indirect discourse) – like the episode which tells about the first encounter of Aciman's grandmothers:

To the two ladies who were to become my grandmothers one day and who met for the first time in '44 in a small marketplace in Alexandria eyeing a suspiciously old catch of red mullet, this was indeed a very small, very strange world. Past their first, shy, tentative remarks spoken from behind thick lipstick and respectable hat-veils, something like intense sunshine erupted on their speech and suddenly the two strangers, who had known each other by sight for more than a decade without ever daring to utter a word to the other, began to twit-ter away with the heady good cheer of old classmates [...].

"No mullet then," concluded one to the other. "Such a shame though. To think that all these years I've been buying bad fish and didn't even know it," she said sadly.

"It's in the gills. Not the eyes. Gills must be bright red. Otherwise, don't buy."

"Such a shame," repeated the meeker of the two as they made their way home. "All these years living exactly across the street from each other, and not so much as a peep for a greeting."

"But why didn't you ever speak to me?" insisted the one who knew everything about the fish.

"I used to think you were French," replied her meeker neighbor, implying high-society French.

"French? And whatever made you think I was French? *Je suis italienne, ma-dame*," she added, as if that were a far greater distinction. (Aciman 1994: 43–44)

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¹⁶⁵ *Out of Egypt* could also be classified as a memoir of place (see section 3.13 of the present chapter).

However, true to its classification, *Out of Egypt* thematically privileges the story of the young André¹⁶⁶: his shame over his deaf mother and the shrieks that she produces, “ugly, coarse, demented” (98); first friendships, including the Arab servants; beach-going in the company of his father; his response to his grandfather’s illness and death; the rise of Egyptian nationalism, the Suez crisis and its aftermath which involves the fear of persecution and expulsion; first school experiences (including physical abuse), his “unacceptable English” and “Arab *fréquentations*” (222, 223), among others. Crucially for the micro-genre’s poetics, the narrative also announces the end of the author’s childhood (and thus hails its own completion), focusing – in line with many narratives of this type – on a traumatic experience. The last section of *Out of Egypt*, tellingly titled “The Last Seder,” deals with André’s despair (“mourning” [315]) over being forced by the Nasser regime to abandon Alexandria and become a displaced, ever wandering Jew. “That evening,” Aciman recalls, “[...] I would think about leaving, and about all the people I would never see again, and about this city, so inseparable from who I was at that very instant, and how it would slip into time and become stranger than dreamland. That too would be like dying” (315–316).

3.2. *Souvenirs d’adolescence*, or Youth Memoir: Youth by J.M. Coetzee

Inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s division of one’s early life into three stages,¹⁶⁷ this study would like to designate a separate group of memoirs that are concerned with one’s youth.¹⁶⁸ The phrase *souvenirs d’adolescence*, which can be encountered in French-language criticism, denotes autobiographical

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¹⁶⁶ Throughout the book Aciman expertly combines the child’s and the adult’s points of view. This aspect is further emphasised by the narrative’s disturbed chronology and the narrator’s flash-forwards. For example, the section which focuses on Aunt Flora ultimately takes the adult Aciman to Venice (where she lives after her expulsion from Egypt): “So we’ve seen Venice, I thought, mimicking my grandfather’s humor as I turned and watched the city sink into timeless night, thinking of Flora and all the cities and all the beaches and all the summers I too had known in my life, and of all those who had loved summer long before I came, and of those I had loved and ceased to care for and forgot to mourn and now wished were here with me in one home, one street, one city, one world” (Aciman 1994: 91–92).

¹⁶⁷ I.e. childhood, boyhood, and youth (Tolstoy 2012).

¹⁶⁸ E.g. Tariq Ali’s *Street-Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (2005), Jonathan Franzen’s *The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History* (2006), Michèle Roberts’s *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the 70s and Beyond* (2007), or Jenny Diski’s *The Sixties* (2009). The category

texts focusing on the period of the subject's life that is "plus profond" and "plus déterminant" – especially in the light of one's "vie adulte" (Lejeune 2010: 16). Youth is, thus, not only defined by biological age (the threshold of adulthood, roughly speaking), but – more importantly – by its formative potential (moral, emotional, and intellectual). The best definition of youth may have been provided by Tolstoy himself in the introductory section of the third volume of his autobiography. To him, youth is characterised by the revelation of a "new way of life, [...] its aims and bearings" (Tolstoy 2012: 213). It essentially consists in the "belief that man's destiny is to strive for moral perfection, and this perfection is easy, possible and eternal," as well as in the "construction of brilliant plans for a moral and active future" which one immediately wishes to apply (*ibid.*). But, as Tolstoy aptly remarks, this awakening is often accompanied by frustration and stupor, since life goes on "in the same petty, confused, and idle fashion" (*ibid.*).

One of the most extraordinary (and subversive) memoirs of this kind is J.M. Coetzee's *Youth*, which appears to fulfil the criteria of youth as identified by Tolstoy.¹⁶⁹ Similarly to Joseph Conrad's 1898 novella of the same title, Coetzee's life story is concerned with a young man's "formative" experience of a journey and his disillusionment over his romantic and idealistic vision of life. It follows its principal character, John, who re-enacts the events from Coetzee's own life over the years 1959–1964. He studies and graduates in mathematics from the University of Cape Town in the 1950s, works part-time in a library, and, above all, hopes to become a man of letters and a man of increased sexual experience. These two preoccupations, namely becoming a writer and a lover, are of primary importance to John, the protagonist. He actually finds them to be firmly linked and intertwined: "art cannot be fed on deprivation alone," he says, "there must be intimacy, passion, love as well" (Coetzee 2003: 10). Politics occupies the margins of the book. There are indeed some echoes

■ of "youth" also appears in Jana Renée Friesová's Holocaust memoir entitled *Fortress of My Youth: Memoir of a Terezín Survivor* (2002).

¹⁶⁹ This is by no means surprising taking into account Coetzee's life-long interest in Tolstoy and his writing. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the character of JC says: "As a child of my times, I read, admired and imitated Diderot and Sterne. But I never gave up reading Tolstoy, nor could I ever persuade myself than his effect on me was just a consequence of his rhetorical skills. I read him with an uneasy, even shamefaced absorption, jus as (I now believe), the formalist critics who held sway in the twentieth century continued in their spare time to read the masters of realism [...]. Now that the dust has settled, the mystery of Tolstoy's authority, and of the authority of other great authors, remains untouched" (Coetzee 2007: 150).

of police violence, marches and opposition to the apartheid regime (and later, when he moves to London, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, and the Sharpeville massacre), but John remains relatively impervious to them. Instead of being sympathetic to the oppressed, he is portrayed as thoroughly cynical – the scene in which the Pan-African-Congress demonstration remains of concern to John only to the extent that it might affect his plans of escaping South Africa (“Will ships be still sailing tomorrow? – this is his one thought. I must get out before it is too late!” [Coetzee 2003: 39]) is particularly illustrative of the character’s indifference towards the oppressive regime. Following disillusionment with the South African state and the threat of being conscripted, John abandons South Africa and moves to London, where he is employed as a programmer at I.B.M. His leisure time is consumed by researching the oeuvre of Ford Madox Ford, writing poetry and fiction, and visits to the British Museum Reading Room. He desires to become a great poet in the manner of his heroes, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. His ideas, however, are not attributed with any reverence, profundity or originality. Instead, they are striking in their naivety and cliché-like character. John believes in passionate love and its “agency of [his] transfiguration” (Coetzee 2003: 10), and is looking for the one, “the Destined One,” (93) expecting that transformative sex will allow him to emerge as a new being. However, when confronted with real problems concerning a relationship, he behaves disgracefully. When Sarah, his Cape Town girlfriend, gets pregnant, he abandons her and makes her arrange an illegal abortion all by herself. John also pronounces that

the artist must taste all experience from the noblest to the most degraded. Just as the artist’s destiny to experience the most supreme creative joy, so he must be prepared to take upon himself all in life that is miserable, squalid, ignominious. It was in the name of experience that he underwent London – the dead days of I.B.M., the icy winter of 1962, one humiliating affair after another: stages in the poet’s life, all of them, in the testing of his soul. (Coetzee 2003: 164)

The London-set part of the narrative gives priority to an investigation of John’s sexual exploits and the frustrations incurred in the process. His affairs are numerous, yet unsatisfactory and not even once does a relationship bring him closer to the emotional fulfilment which he so desperately desires. Towards the end of the volume John diagnoses his condition as a “lack of heart, lack of heart” and being “cold, frozen” (Coetzee 2003: 168).

As has already been mentioned, *Youth* is, indeed truly Tolstoyan. It juxtaposes John's "brilliant plans" and "beliefs" with his "petty" and "idle" life and, in this sense, becomes a parody of what is typically expected of youth memoir. This period of life remains – for the author/character – neither profound, nor determining, as Lejeune would expect it to be, but, rather "le fait de chanter à côté, donc de chanter faux, ou dans une autre voix, en contrechant – en contrepoint – ou encore de chanter dans un autre ton: déformer, donc, ou *transposer* une mélodie" (Genette 1982: 20).

3.3. Old Age, or Falling Away Memoir: *Somewhere Towards the End: A Memoir* by Diana Athill

Among life narratives that address a particular period of one's life, old age memoir¹⁷⁰ deserves, in my opinion, a very special acknowledgement – among other factors, also due to the fact that over the last twenty five years it has particularly grown in popularity and diversity,¹⁷¹ as the examples of P.D. James's *Time to Be Earnest* (1999), John Bayley's *Widower's House* (2001), or Penelope Lively's *Dancing Fish and Ammonites* (2013) unambiguously manifest. To some extent, old age memoir can be classified as an anti-thesis of childhood memoir, or, alternatively, a childhood memoir *à rebours*: its focus is not on some distant past but on the very present; it often bears traces of the so-called "late style" (Said 2007: 7) characterised not only by aridity or detachment, but also (often unbridled) honesty; it testifies to the declining (rather than growing) powers of body and mind; finally it does not know (and many a time refuses to acknowledge) its end, so its structure is essentially anti-climactic. Some of the genre's features were perfectly grasped by Diana Athill, one of Britain's most outstanding and prolific memoirists: "One doesn't necessarily have to end a book about being old with a whimper, but it is impossible to end it with a bang. There are no lessons to be learnt, no discoveries to be made, no solutions to offer. I find myself left with nothing but a few random thoughts" (Athill 2009: 177).

¹⁷⁰ This term is more often encountered in literary journalism or other memoirs than in literary criticism (Clayton 2007: 286; Brown 2008: 104).

¹⁷¹ Inevitably, due to increased longevity and a radical improvement in health care and sustenance. One could risk a claim that, together with a few others, old age memoir is essentially turn-of-the-century memoir – even though its specimens are to be found earlier, for example Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* of 1882.

Her *Somewhere Towards the End* is, perhaps, the micro-genre's best-known representative. In the opening chapter of her book, Athill explains the reason for writing a story about falling away:

It is so obvious that life works in terms of species rather than of individuals. The individual just has to be born, to develop to the point at which it can procreate, and then to fall away into death to make way for its successors, and humans are no exception whatever they may fancy. We have, however, contrived to extend our falling away so much that it is often longer than our development, so what goes on in it and how to manage it is worth considering. Book after book has been written about being young, and even more of them about the elaborate and testing experiences that cluster round procreation, but there is not much on record about falling away. being well advanced in that process, [...] I say to myself, "Why not have a go at it?" So I shall. (Athill 2009: 10)

The subsequent, fifteen chapters of her memoir address – in line with her pronouncement quoted above – “what goes on” in old age and “how to manage it,” often using the pronoun “you” in order to acknowledge the elderly readers of her book and make her experiences collective ones.¹⁷² Atwell candidly writes about ceasing to be a sexual being, her friends and companions when crossing the frontier between middle- and old age, a lack of the “support of religion” (Athill 2009: 53), caring for the ill,¹⁷³

¹⁷² E.g. “[w]hen you begin discussing old age you come up against reluctance to depress either others or yourself, so you tend to focus on the more agreeable aspects of it” (Athill 2009: 115).

¹⁷³ Chapter eleven of *Somewhere Towards the End* contains a description of Athill visiting her lover and friend Barry in hospital and clearing him, the pan and the floor after he discharged his bowels – a scene powerfully reminiscent of the one in Philip Roth’s *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991) in which Philip clears up his father’s excrement. “There was no recoil, no feeling of disgust,” she says. And adds: “What, I sometimes ask myself, keeps me and, I am sure, innumerable other old spouses and spouselike people in similar situations, going through the motions of care. The only answer I can produce appears in the shape of a metaphor: in a plant there is no apparent similarity between its roots and whatever flower or fruit appears at the top of its stem, but they are both part of the same thing, and it seems to me that obligations which have grown out of love, however little they resemble what they grew out of, are also part of the same thing. How, if that were not so, could they be so effortlessly binding in spite of being so unwelcome? One doesn’t, in these situations, make a choice between alternatives because there doesn’t seem to *be* an alternative. Perhaps a wonderfully unselfish person (and they do exist) gets satisfaction from making a good job of it. If you are a selfish one, you manage by contriving as many escapes and compensations as you can while still staying on the job. It is not an admirable solution, but I don’t suppose I am the only old person to resort to it” (Athill 2009: 123, 127).

burying one's own dead and learning about dying, gardening and other pastimes (which she calls "escapes" [131]), giving up the car, various regrets (coldness towards children and laziness in particular), and, ultimately, reading books.¹⁷⁴ Despite its subtle humour, *Somewhere Towards the End* is permeated by the sense of an ending. When she recalls the garden in Norfolk owned by her cousin which, for years, has been cared for and flowered by Athill, the memoirist poignantly concludes: "And still I can see those flowers in my mind's eye, serene beings, quietly living their own mysterious lives, and know that in a few months' time they will be back and with any luck I will be there again to see them..." (102). Elsewhere she states: "The activities I escape into are mostly ordinary things which have become more valuable because I am old, enjoyed with increasing intensity because of the knowledge that I shan't be able to enjoy them for much longer" (145).

Though Athill's story does not end with a bang, it does bring its readers to some kind of satisfactory (aesthetically speaking) close. In the opening section of *Somewhere Towards the End* the writer admits to buying a tree fern and planting it in her garden – yet painfully realising that she will not see it reach its desirable height and "playing the part [she] envisaged it for it in [her] garden" (4). In the postscript to her book she returns to the tree fern: "It now has nine fronds each measuring about twelve inches long, and within a few days of each frond unfurling to its full length, a little nub of green appears in the fuzzy top of the 'trunk' [...]. The little nub is the start of a new frond, which grows very slowly to begin with but faster towards the end – so much faster that you can almost see it moving. I was right in thinking that I will never see it being a tree, but I underestimated the pleasure of watching it being a fern. It was worth buying" (183). Thus the tree fern becomes not only a metaphorical representation of life, but of the very act of writing about it – including a story about falling away.

3.4. Memoirs, or Scenes from Life: *Country Girl: A Memoir* by Edna O'Brien

When establishing the parameters of memoir as a distinct genre, this study has argued that its specimens ostensibly refuse to recompose life in its entirety; that memoirs are deliberately inessential and segmental.

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¹⁷⁴ Chapter twelve could accordingly be labelled an instance of "bibliomemoir."

However, an inquiry into the corpus of memoirs published between 1990 and 2015 will certainly reveal the presence of some narratives that do not privilege one period of life (or experience) only but, instead, appear to offer a (seemingly) unabridged and largely chronological account of one's *bios*.¹⁷⁵ Such narratives I shall call "memoirs,"¹⁷⁶ or "scenes from life."¹⁷⁷ What needs to be noted is that such pieces – despite covering a full life span – are neither authoritative nor exhaustive. Unlike autobiography, they are not a total (or fundamental) project, but rather polythematic souvenirs from life, whose episodic and segmental nature is, in many instances, emphasised by internal divisions – chapters, sections, or vignettes, as well as an overt refusal to provide one's life with coherence, integrity or unifying sense.

Edna O'Brien's *Country Girl: A Memoir* – titled after the Irish writer's first novel *The Country Girls* of 1960, which further substantiates the claim about autobiographical nature of O'Brien's fiction¹⁷⁸ – shall be briefly described here as an instance of memoirs. In the "Prologue" to her life story, O'Brien confesses to having been thrust into writing when confronted with failing health – a loss of hearing – and being described by a nurse as a "broken piano":

"Broken piano" in all its connotations kept saying itself to me and yet I thought of life's many bounties – to have known the extremities of joy and sorrow, love, crossed love and unrequited love, success and failure, fame and slaughter, to have read in the newspapers that as a writer I was past my sell-by date, and

¹⁷⁵ E.g. Muriel Spark's *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), Gore Vidal's *Palimpsest: A Memoir* (1995), Fay Weldon's *Auto da Fay: A Memoir* (2002).

¹⁷⁶ Needless to say, my definition has nothing in common with the traditional definition of memoirs in which "l'auteur se comporte comme un témoin: ce qu'il a de personnel, c'est le *point de vue* individual, mais l'objet du discours est quelque chose qui dépasse de beaucoup l'individu, c'est l'histoire des groupes sociaux et historiques auxquels il appartient" (Lejeune 2010: 13).

¹⁷⁷ The term "scenes from" remains indebted to George Eliot's *Scenes from Clerical Life* and William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* and has been favoured by Paul Bailey (*An Immaculate Mistake: Scenes from Childhood and Beyond* [1990]), J.M. Coetzee (*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* [1997]), or Philip Hensher (*Scenes from Early Life* [2012]).

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Laing, Mooney, and O'Connor 2006; Greenwood 2003. In an interview with Shusha Guppy, O'Brien says: "[a]ny book that is any good must be, to some extent, autobiographical, because one cannot and should not fabricate emotions; and although style and narrative are crucial, the bulwark, emotion, is what finally matters. With luck, talent, and studiousness, one manages to make a little pearl, or egg, or something... But what gives birth to it is what happens inside the soul and the mind, and that has almost always to do with conflict. And loss – an innate sense of tragedy" (O'Brien [in:] Guppy 2014: 22).

moreover a “bargain basement Molly Bloom,” yet, regardless, to go on writing and reading, to be lucky enough to be able to immerse myself in those two intensities that have buttressed my whole life. (O’Brien 2012: ix)

Resisting the label given to her in hospital, O’Brien, in a confirmed-ly Proustian move, opens a cookery book and decides to make bread – something she has not done in thirty years. “Broken piano or not, I felt very alive, as the smell of the baking bread filled the air,” she says. And continues: “It was an old smell, the begetter of many a memory, and so on that day in August, in my seventy-eight year, I sat down to begin the memoir which I swore I would never write” (ibid.).

Peppered with images, *Country Girl* is, indeed, a collection of memories.¹⁷⁹ It comprises four parts and twenty three sections which are further divided into several dozen vignettes. Inspired by, among other, Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* (1976), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* (1951), and *Memoir* (2005) by John McGahern,¹⁸⁰ O’Brien provides her readers with chronologically arranged scenes from her life. She draws a poignant portrait of her mother who senses that “the prodigal blood of the O’Briens reign[s] uppermost” in her daughter (O’Brien 2012: 9). She writes (with equal intensity and dedication) about her dog Abdullah, the dining room in her parents’ house, the books she used to read as a child, her craze for fashion, Dublin – her “fairy-tale city” (98), London and New York, her celebrity friends (from Richard Burton, Jane Fonda and Stephen Rea to Marguerite Duras and Samuel Beckett), Catholicism, the costs of being a writer,¹⁸¹ and watching her first 3-D film, as well as a plethora of other subjects. O’Brien effortlessly travels between episodes from her eventful life. The section in which she writes about her house in Donegal and about places being “at the heart of writing” (291), is, typically for memoirs’ poetics, immediately followed by an unrelated story of her hospitalisation which opens with the following phrase: “The back of an ambulance is a big place to be in alone” (292); while an account of her friendship with Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser begins with a story (“like fiction” [311]) of having been kissed by the actor Jude Law when taking respite in a garden in Dorset – despite the (important

¹⁷⁹ *Country Girl* is a consistently delivered first person narrative which is rarely disturbed by excerpts from historical documents (e.g. letters) and reconstructed dialogues.

¹⁸⁰ The full list of O’Brien’s influences can be found in the “Acknowledgements” section of her memoir (O’Brien 2012: 336–337).

¹⁸¹ “Flaubert’s mother said that his love of words had heartened his heart. Could that be true? Could that be true?” (O’Brien 2012: 309).

[sic!]) fact that, as a non-swimmer, she was wearing highly unattractive armbands with the logo “Nivea cream” (ibid.).

Crucially, this “ragbag of anecdote, hearsay, allegory” (O’Brien 2012: 4) expresses no desire whatsoever to interpret O’Brien’s life in its totality or to combine all the episodes into a meaningful structure which would illuminate some truth about it. This becomes particularly evident in the closing section of the volume when the writer meets a retired nun who confesses to having often seen O’Brien in the Sixties when they both lived in London. “There were so many ‘me’s,” O’Brien notes. “the me she had seen; the me that sat on a cushion in Antiquarius market with Isabella, the highland seer, her crystal ball wrapped in layer upon layer of cloth, like a mummy, waiting as I might before the oracle in Delphi; the me that never conquered the fear of swimming, though I had taken lessons in public baths nearby, from a man who stood on a ledge holding a piece of rope to which I clung, him believing that we were winning even when we were not” (334). *Country Girl* is no valorisation of (auto)biographical unity, but true to the “conditions and limits” of the micro-genre it represents, a celebration of the plural “me.”

3.5. Filial Narrative, or Memoir of Parent

Alongside childhood memoirs, filial narratives (also known as “filiation narratives”¹⁸² [Smith and Watson 2010: 270]), i.e. life stories that commemorate the writers’ parent(s), remain one of the genre’s most favourite species¹⁸³ and take pride of place among the so-called intergenerational or

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¹⁸² For Smith and Watson “filiation narratives” is a category that embraces not only memoirs of mothers and fathers by their sons and daughters, but anyone “with whom one has had a long-standing affiliation” (Smith and Watson 2010: 270), or, as I should like to claim, a *meaningful* [my emphasis – R.K.] relationship, e.g. a child, a sibling, a spouse, or a more “distant” relative. Although a number of types of filiation narratives can be identified in the corpus provided in Table One (e.g. a sibling memoir [Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* of 1997], a relative memoir [Nicholas Shakespeare’s *Priscilla: The Hidden Life of an Englishwoman in Wartime France* of 2013 about his maternal aunt], this section shall prioritise only two micro-genres, i.e. filial and parental memoirs, due to the frequency of their occurrence in contemporary writers’ memoirs.

¹⁸³ E.g. Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (1991), Blake Morrison’s *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (1993), Roddy Doyle’s *Rory and Ita* (2002), Hanif Kureishi’s *My Ear at His Heart* (2004), Doris Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily* (2008), Michael Frayn’s *My Father’s Fortune* (2010), Maya Angelou’s *Me & Me & Mom* (2013), or Adam Mars Jones’s *Kid Gloves* (2015).

relational memoirs.¹⁸⁴ This, of course, should come as no surprise since, if one agrees with Harold Bloom's pronouncements, every writer is inevitably implicated in the struggle and antithetical relationship with one's literary masters and precursors, while their relationship hardly ever resembles a "democratic conversation between friends" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 6), but, instead, is characterised by "the persistence to wrestle with their [ephebes] strong precursors, even to the death" (Bloom 1981: 5). Deeply aware of intra-authorial influence, writers necessarily remain equally heedful (and anxious) of interfamilial leverage.

The origins of filial narratives should certainly be sought in the new models of selfhood that emerged in the second half of the 20th century (clearly indebted to Buberian and Levinasian ontology) and the idea of "relational selves living relational lives" (Eakin 1999: 54), which has been enthusiastically embraced by contemporary (auto)biographical studies. John Paul Eakin observes that "the most common form of the relational life" is "the self's story viewed through the lens of its relation with some key other person, sometimes a sibling, friend, or lover, but most often a parent" (Eakin 1999: 86). Although memoirs of a parent have enjoyed a long (and often glorious) tradition (just to mention Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* of 1907 and Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* of 1964), it was only recently that this literary phenomenon began to be widely practised and, consequently, noticed by life-writing critics, who have started to show some interest in its poetics¹⁸⁵ marked by, among others, the obvious reversal of the original power relation (the child begets the story of a parent). For G. Thomas Couser, who invented the term "filiation narrative,"¹⁸⁶

filiation has two distinct but related meanings that are pertinent [here]. First, it refers to "the condition or fact of being the child [not necessarily the son,

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¹⁸⁴ In his essay "Narratives of Autonomy and Narratives of Relationality in Auto/Biography," David Parker offers some useful insights into the poetics of filial memoir, arguing that such intergenerational "narratives of relationality" may often be seen not only as stories of inevitable dependence (biological, emotional, intellectual) but as "narratives of autonomy" (Parker 2004: 137–155). In other words, the sources of the "self" may be legitimately sought by a memoir's writer in his or her parent(s); however they are also invited to perform the act of dis-identification with their mother or father.

¹⁸⁵ The father of filial narratives studies, namely G. Thomas Couser, notes that when he began his research into filial narrative at the beginning of the 21st century, he worked up a bibliography comprising almost one hundred pieces published since, roughly, 1980 (Couser 2007: 159–160).

¹⁸⁶ However, in his 2007 essay Couser replaced the term "filiation" with "filial" and has been consistently using the latter category ever since (cf. Couser 2012: 154).

though the root is the Latin *filius*, (son)] of a particular parent” (not necessarily a father). Second, in law it refers to “judicial determination of paternity” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). By calling the texts in question narratives of filiation, rather than merely memoirs of fathers, I seek to highlight their relationality – their being rooted in a sense of entitlement and their intent or tendency to assert or enact some kind of engagement with the father, whether good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, living or dead. (Couser 2005: 635)

According to Couser, not every memoir of a parent by their son or daughter can be unreservedly classified as a narrative of filiation, but only those “written out of a certain sense of need or lack” (*ibid.*), i.e. the texts governed by what Couser calls a “filiative impulse” (637). In many an article dedicated to filial memoirs, Couser has formulated a number of claims concerning the nature of paternal (as well as maternal) inheritance that gives birth to and characterises this kind of narrative. First of all, the relationship between a parent and their offspring needs to be in some way “inadequate” or “deficient” (Couser 2007: 639). Secondly, the aim of filial narrative is not to commemorate the beloved figure but either to “compensate for or repair a flawed relationship” (*ibid.*) or to “discredit [...] and disassociate from” the parent (Couser 2007: 155). Thirdly, filial memoirs are “mostly about absence” (Couser 2005: 648) and since it is fathers that seem to be less available to their offspring (both emotionally and physically), the number of stories about fathers outnumber those dedicated to mothers (Couser 2012: 154). Consequently, filial narratives may well be seen as products of patriarchy (despite the fact that they tend to offer some profound criticism of men-led gender politics) (Couser 2012: 155). Fourthly, the genre is characterised by its writers’ fundamental bafflement with their parents, an “inherent aporia” and “inaccessibility of key features” of parents’ lives (Couser 2007: 164) that are necessary in order to “enact a relationship” with them (*ibid.*). Finally, filial narratives combine biographical methods of research with their authors’ (auto)biographical motives or agendas (Couser 2007: 164–165).

Although among writers’ memoirs it is not impossible to identify stories of both parents (e.g. Roddy Doyle’s *Rory & Ita* [2002] and Doris Lessing’s *Alfred and Emily* [2008]), the majority of filial narratives show an unambiguous preference for either a father or a mother – a tendency which I wish to emphasise by means of acknowledging the division of filial narratives into two distinct categories: patriography and matriography.

3.5.1. Patriography, or Memoir of Father: *Experience: A Memoir* by Martin Amis

As already stated, memoirs of fathers, which, after G. Thomas Couser, I shall call “patriographies” (Couser 2012: 154), have become particularly favoured by late 20th- and early 21st-century (wo)men of letters. Martin Amis’s *Experience: A Memoir* of 2000 unambiguously demands to be recognised as a specimen of patriographical writing.¹⁸⁷ When asking himself the question why he should tell the story of his life, Amis explains: “I do it because my father is dead now, and I always knew I would have to commemorate him. He was a writer and I am a writer; it feels like duty to describe our case – a literary curiosity which is also just another instance of a father and a son” (Amis 2001: 7) – thus complying with Couser’s definition of filial narrative as a life story which originates in absence or lack. But Amis’s commemoration of Kingsley Amis – “the intercessionary figure, [...] the man who stands between the son and the death” (ibid.) – has little to do with either monumentalising or paying unabashed tribute to his father; though it is concerned with remembering the author of *Lucky Jim* (1954), the memoir honours the *memory* of Martin’s father more than the man himself. Accordingly, the volume insists on being a frank account of Kingsley Amis’s life and the son refuses not to pay heed to a number of painful “experiences” such as his father’s adultery, violent behaviour, or alcoholism. But *Experience* is not a straightforward account of someone’s life,¹⁸⁸ a simple biographical sketch peppered with some authorial intrusions and recollections. It is a thematically (and un-chronologically) organised work¹⁸⁹ of a full-fledged writer about another accomplished writer and, as such, it contains, for example,

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¹⁸⁷ As Brian Finney notes, *Experience* was intended to be an autobiography. However, Kingsley Amis’s death in 1995 provoked Martin Amis to change the focus of his writing (Finney 2013: 28–29).

¹⁸⁸ The book was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for biography and was praised by many as Amis’s “most fully realized book” (Kakutani 2000). Brian Finney calls it “a highly original instance of the autobiographical genre” (Finney 2013: 28). In his memoir, Amis insists that his work – though intended to “set the record straight” – does not wish to abandon “formality,” understood as artistry of form (Amis 2001: 7).

¹⁸⁹ “The trouble with life (the novelist will feel) is its amorphousness, its ridiculous fluidity. Look at it: thinly plotted, largely themeless, sentimental and ineluctably trite. The dialogue is poor, or at least violently uneven. The twists are either predictable, or sensationalist. And it’s always the same beginning, and the same ending...” (Amis 2001: 7). One should also note that Amis’s work is – typically for memoir – thematically polyp-honous. Its other major concerns are the life of Martin (including the fall out with Julian Barnes, his discovery of a daughter, and his infamous dental surgery), as well

a critical commentary and analysis of his father's oeuvre as well as a probing investigation of literary paternity (in itself a haunting question about one's own authorship):

[i]n the arts, when the parent invites the child to follow – this is a complicated offer, and there will always be a suspicion of egotism in it. Is the child's promise a tribute to the superabundance of the father's gift? And historically what long odds you face; there's Mrs Trollope as well as Anthony, and Dumas *père et fils*, and that's about it. What usually happens is that the child is productive for a while, and then the filial rivalrousness plays itself out. I think literary talent is strongly inherited. But literary stamina is not. (Amis 2001: 23)

Interestingly, Amis does not see the relationship with his father as operating within the paradigm of struggle, as belligerent or antagonistic.¹⁹⁰ Though he admits to having had “fights and rows and many hot exchanges” and to having felt “the squeeze of immediate hurt when Kingsley [...] said he ‘couldn't get on’” with his son's 1975 novel *Dead Babies* (24), he recognises the fact that their relationship “worked” (25).¹⁹¹ Instead of acknowledging differences, he emphasises parallels¹⁹²: the fact that they both won the Somerset Maugham Award for their first novels (*Lucky Jim* [1954] and *Rachel Papers* [1989], respectively), both were “angry young men,” both abandoned their first wives, both wrote memoirs, both suffered from bad press, among others. The structure based on the principle of correspondence is most evident in the opening section of the book which anaphorically uses the phrase “dad” – with Martin's son Louis addressing his dad, Kingsley Amis's character in *I Like It Here* of 1958 talking to his father, and, finally, Martin Amis referring to his own begetter (3–5).

This proliferation of progenitors is, however, quite deliberate since Kingsley Amis is not the only father that features in his son's memoir. *Experience* is, in fact, a story of plural paternity and plural patrimony – Martin Amis's other father (figurative, not biological) being Saul Bellow. When “the King” [i.e. Kingsley] is dead, Marin immediately phones the American

■ as the tragic death of Lucy Partington, Amis's beloved cousin (the event itself may be seen as the source of his morbid aesthetics).

¹⁹⁰ In this sense, *Experience* could be discussed as anti-patriographical as, in its representation of a father-son relationship, it asserts neither deficiency, nor inadequacy.

¹⁹¹ “My father never encouraged me to write, never invited me to go for that longshot; he praised me less often than he publicly dispraised me; but it worked” (Amis 2001: 25).

¹⁹² Amis confirms that the principles that organise his text are based on an “inner urgency” and the “novelist's addiction to see parallels and make connections” (Amis 2001: 7).

writer, whom he considers his literary master and a major source of influence,¹⁹³ in order to tell him “you’ll have to be my father now” (Amis 2001: 360). He also adds: “It worked, and still works. As long as you’re alive I’ll never feel entirely fatherless” (ibid.). What is more, Amis’s memoir also focuses on the writer’s own fatherhood and his relationship with Delilah, Louis, Jacob, Fernanda, and Clio.

The memoir ends with, to quote Martha C. Nussbaum, “an action of love, [...] of loyalty, [...] of attention and responsiveness to a beloved particular” (Nussbaum 1990: 362) – namely with the scene of (the dead) Kingsley Amis visiting his son in a dream. He comes not as a ghost, but as an envoy in order to provide Martin with comfort and assurance, as well as (crucially for patriographical nature of the narrative itself) a legacy:

He [Kingsley Amis] said nothing (and I felt he didn’t want to be touched). With gestures only, with looks, with pauses, he gave me to understand that I had all his trust – in the prosecution of his wishes, and in everything else. Because my wishes were his wishes and the other way around. Then he left, he briskly absented himself, returning not to death but to an intermediate vantage. He was resolute. This dream was all business. He came not as shade but as messenger.

A messenger from my own unconscious, naturally. But that’s all right. Because my mind is his mind and the other way around. (Amis 2001: 363)

This scene is also a message to his (and his father’s) readers and critics (especially the latter, taking into account Amis’s notoriety): in writing a memoir about his famous begetter, Martin Amis unmistakably had his father’s trust.

3.5.2. Matriography, or Memoir of Mother: *Dear Life* by Alice Munro

Although memoirs of fathers clearly outnumber stories about mothers, “matriographies” (Couser 2012: 154) are also considerably well-represented in the corpus of writers’ memoirs, as recent publications of Jeanette Winterson’s *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* of 2011, or Maya Angelou’s *Me & Me & Mom* of 2013 confirm. However, the narrative which my study wishes to privilege in its discussion of this micro-type

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¹⁹³ As acknowledged a number of times in *Experience* (e.g. Amis 2001: 175–177, 180–183, 202–208, 235–239).

of filial narrative is Alice Munro's *Dear Life* – or, to be more accurate, the four pieces (“The Eye,” “Night,” “Voices,” and “Dear Life”) which close the collection.¹⁹⁴ Their idiosyncratic status (which distinguishes them from other pieces in the volume) is strongly emphasised by Munro's short introduction to them titled “Finale,” in which the 2013 Nobel Prize winner states the following:

The final four works in this book are not quite stories. They form a separate unit, one that is autobiographical in feeling, though not, sometimes, entirely so in fact. I believe they are the first¹⁹⁵ and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life. (Munro 2012: 255)

In this (auto)biographical tetraptych, Munro is particularly interested in the stories of others – her father (“Night”), Sadie (“The Eye”), a nameless prostitute (“Voices”), Diane and Mrs. Netterfield (“Dear Life”). However, it is the writer's mother – a teacher who was affected by Parkinson's disease when Alice was twelve years old – who occupies the very heart of the memoir, with all the narrative threads ultimately leading to her. Contrary to Martin Amis's *Experience* – but fully in line with the formal requirements regarding filial narratives as stipulated by Couser – Munro's memoir is acutely concerned with flaws and deficiencies in her relationship with Anne Clarke Laidlow. Her pieces do not narrate a story of love and affection between a parent and their offspring, but testify to years-long struggles and tensions that dominated their difficult relationship, always “full of sulks and disputes” (Munro 2012: 288). The portrayal of Anne is, indeed, far from complimentary since she is presented as authoritative, manipulative, often contemptuous and disdainful, and, above all, highly critical of and oppressive towards her oldest daughter. The four sections comprise the story of anger, shame and regret towards a woman who encourages Alice to look at the picture of Jesus suffering the little children to come unto him and insists that the shy little girl who is hiding around the corner is Alice herself. “That was me, my mother said,

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¹⁹⁴ The pieces in question are stylistically and formally congruous with a typical Munro's short story, which is characterised by (among others) a multi-episodic structure, non-linearity and a constant movement between the past and the present, multiple points of view, or digressiveness (cf. Kusek 2015b: 365–366).

¹⁹⁵ One should, perhaps, remain sceptical about the absolute truthfulness of this claim since many critics (cf. Thacker 1988: 153–162; Hanley 1988: 163–174; Thacker 2011: 6) emphasise the profoundly (auto)biographical nature of Munro's writing.

and I suppose it was though I wouldn't have figured it out without her telling me and I rather wished it wasn't so" (258).

The collection's "separate unit" is thus vitally concerned with struggle – an attempt to resist an oppressive (and alien) identity imposed upon Alice by her mother, as well as a search for alternative models of femininity, other "mothers." Such a reading explains, for example, why every piece includes a female character who performs the function of a surrogate mother figure: Sadie, a modern woman, who is the star of the local radio station and goes to dances every weekend "by herself" and "for herself" (261); or a local prostitute in a dress "of golden-orange taffeta" who, against the ostracism of the local community, joins the country dances and brings her younger pupil Peggy with her; or Diane, a daughter of another prostitute, who teaches her the Highland fling, and whom Alice is forbidden to visit. Nonetheless – also in keeping with Couser's understanding of filial narrative – Munro's memoir subtly points towards some form of reconciliation; or reparation; or, at least, re-evaluation of her mother. This becomes particularly evident in the last scene from Munro's life entitled "Dear Life," in which the fear of Mrs. Netterfield, a crazy old neighbour of the Laidlows who may well be read as an alter ego of Munro's mother, becomes substituted with an effort to understand her behaviour, in particular her assault upon the Laidlows' abode. A set of probing questions concerning Mrs. Netterfield's motives and conduct, which undermine the "official" and "accepted" version of the events, and which Munro's autobiographical voice poses towards the end of "Dear Life," also erode the singularly negative portrayal of her mother. The last paragraphs of the section poignantly reads:

I did not go home for my mother's last illness or for her funeral. I had two small children and nobody in Vancouver to leave them with. We could barely have afforded the trip, and my husband had a contempt for formal behaviour, but why blame it on him? I felt the same. We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do – we do it all the time. (319)

Munro's memoir – a literary means of self- and other-forgiveness – is, in light of the above-formulated remarks, not "a way to kill [her] mother" (to paraphrase the title of Colm Tóibín's book of essays about writers' attitudes to their family¹⁹⁶), but unmistakably an endeavour to "enact a relationship" with her mother who is "no longer available" (ibid.) – in short, a bona fide matriography.

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¹⁹⁶ *New Ways to Kill Your Mother: Writers and Their Families* (2012).

3.6. Parental Narrative, or Memoir of Child: *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* by Anne Enright

If filial narratives are more eagerly written by men, then a contrary (yet accurate) generalisation deserves to be made about parental narratives, namely life stories which focus on the writer's relationship with their child, understood as the memoirist's "proximate other" (Eakin 1999: 54). The fact that mother writers are more willing to write about their children than father writers¹⁹⁷ is not the only difference between parental and filial narratives. For example, the former is powerfully stimulated not by absence, but presence, i.e. the arrival of a child (in this sense they might be described as being governed by the "parental impulse"). Also, parental narratives tend to elevate autobiographical components over biographical – for ethical, among other, reasons since a parent writing about one's child (often a minor) inevitably violates the latter's right to privacy and anonymity.¹⁹⁸ Consequently, the child is more often than in any other relational memoir a lens through which the writer perceives him- or herself. Following Rachel Cusk's reflections on the micro-genre, one could further state that such narratives are neither studies of parenthood, nor guidebooks on how to be a good parent (Cusk 2008a: 10). Crucially, they are self-revelatory records of the experience of having a child, of "the life's work," or "the drama of which childbirth is merely the opening scene" (Cusk 2008a: 8).

The Irish novelist Anne Enright's *Making Babies* is to be discussed here as an example of this micro-genre. In line with its subtitle, the memoir, which arranges Enright's recollections in a largely chronological order,¹⁹⁹

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¹⁹⁷ E.g. Louise Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Memoir of Early Motherhood* (1995), or Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001). However, the examples of Michael Chabon's *Manhood for Amateurs: The Pleasures and Regrets of a Husband, Father, and Son* (2009) and Martin Amis's already discussed *Experience: A Memoir* (2000) testify to this micro-genre not being the exclusive domain of mothers. While investigating why women show more interest in writing about their children than men, Rachel Cusk turns to Adrienne Rich and points out that "[women] carry the imprint [of motherhood] for life, even into [their] dying" (Cusk 2008a: 9).

¹⁹⁸ In the introduction to her memoir Enright addresses this issue explicitly: "I [...] have to apologise to my children for writing about their baby selves; either too much, or not enough, or whatever changing way this book takes them, over the years" (Enright 2005: 4).

¹⁹⁹ The volume is roughly divided into two parts – the second being a collection of few-paragraph-long vignettes gathered under the title "Babies: A Breeder's Guide."

focuses on the experience of “stumbling into” childbirth and early motherhood, of becoming “occupied [both physically and figuratively – R.K.] by this other creature” (Enright 2005: 11). It opens with the discovery of the “anxiety” and “oddness” of reproduction, with the sheer shock of it. “If Kafka had been a woman,” Enright says

then Gregor Samsa would not have turned into an insect, he would not have had to. Gregor would be Gretel and she would wake up one morning pregnant. She would try to roll over and discover she was stuck on her back. She would wave her little hands uselessly in the air. (17)

Enright carefully documents her pregnancy (which she describes as the state of having been “overtaken” [20]²⁰⁰), the birth of her child (“a theatre of pain” [29]), the experience of feeding and of motherhood happening “in the body” (47),²⁰¹ the child’s development during its first nine months,²⁰² and, finally, mother and her child becoming “two.” Moreover, showing a considerable sense of humour and linguistic dexterity, Enright compiles an ingenious “breeder’s guide” to babies which covers such diverse issues as buggies, burps, toys, poo, other mothers and fathers, or what to do when one gives birth to a genius.

Most importantly, the memoir ends with a section entitled “Oh, Mortality” – in itself a testament to Enright’s long and difficult battle with depression and attempts at committing suicide, and the acknowledgment of motherhood as her life’s saving grace. The last two scenes show the writer ascending the stairs with a baby in her arms and, in a moment of epiphany, realising that “being alive [is] easy” (195); and swimming in the Irish sea, while the baby watches her from a buggy waving and chewing her mother’s T-shirt. “I had got into such habit of gratitude,” she says,

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²⁰⁰ “Every moment of my pregnancy lasted for ever. I was pregnant in the autumn, and I was pregnant in the spring. I was pregnant as summer came. I lived like a plant on a window-sill, taking its time, starting to bud. Nothing could hurry this” (Enright 2005: 25).

²⁰¹ Also, Enright interestingly writes about the links between body and narratives: “[...] I have found a place before stories start. Or the precise place where stories start. How else can I explain the shift from language that has happened in my brain. This is why mothers do not write, because motherhood happens in the body, as much as the mind. I thought childbirth was a sort of journey that you could send dispatches home from, but of course it is not – it is home. Everywhere else now, is ‘abroad’” (Enright 2005: 47).

²⁰² And the mother’s simultaneous evolvment, which she repeatedly calls “regression” (Enright 2005: 48–64).

a mother's worry for the future, that I didn't, I found, want to die at all, not for a very long time. I have no idea when the shift happened, but it did. There are no debts, no qualifications, no big thoughts. And more I want to burst into my life like a bank robber, shouting at my family and at each of my friends, "Nobody is going anywhere, all right? Nobody goes out that door." (196)

Thus, in its concluding statement, a parental narrative reveals itself also as a story of survival.

3.7. *Autrememoir:* *Scenes from Early Life: A Novel* by Philip Hensher

In the last of a series of interviews conducted by David Attwell with J.M. Coetzee and published in a volume entitled *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee speaks of the story of his life in the third person and present tense narrative voice – Coetzee's typical narrative technique, which the present study has already remarked on. When referring to his moving to the United States and studying at the University of Texas in the 1960s, he suddenly makes the following statement: "[and] *he* now begins to feel closer to *I*: *autre*biography shades back into autobiography," after which he "feels," once again, entitled to use the pronoun "I" (Coetzee 1992: 394). What this sub-section would like to propose is to borrow Coetzee's ingenious handling of the French-based prefix *autre-* and combine it with the root word memoir – all of this in order to create a coinage (i.e. *autrememoir*) that would refer to a special (though quite unique) class of texts represented here by Philip Hensher's *Scenes from Early Life*. What I mean by the term "*autrememoir*" is a life story whose thematic content is claimed by the other – as a matter of fact to such an extent that the writer almost entirely disappears from it and the narrative voice may even become appropriated by the other: a ghost memoir in which the ghost does not hide but announces itself on the very cover. Such texts may also be classified as bearing a close affinity to biography – the life writing genre whose poetics and politics *autrememoirs*, nevertheless, strongly resist.²⁰³ A classic example of thus and so defined *autrememoir* is, of course,

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²⁰³ In particular, the biography's desire for conclusiveness, attention to detail and scrutiny, as well as responsibility to the truth. In her study of the genre, Hermione Lee evokes two metaphors central for biographical writing, namely autopsy and portrait, the former standing for "clinical investigation, and, even, violation," while the latter emphasising "warmth, energy, idiosyncrasy, and personality through attention to detail and skill in representation" (Lee 2009: 2).

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) – a piece written by Gertrude Stein in the guise of an autobiography authored by Alice B. Toklas.²⁰⁴

Both formally and thematically, *Scenes from Early Life* by Philip Hensher owes a lot to Stein's renowned book – suffice it to mention limited dialogue, war experiences (World War II vs. the Bangladesh Liberation War), setting (the city of Paris vs. Dhaka), and non heteronormativity of writers/characters.²⁰⁵ As Hensher notes in the "Author's Note" at the end of the book, the narrator of *Scenes from Early Life* "speaks in the voice of Zaved Mahmood," i.e. the writer's real life husband (Hensher 2012: 309). Indeed, the whole volume is written in the first person narrative voice of the young Zaved, who recalls the story of his childhood and that of his family. The desire to produce a fully authentic²⁰⁶ voice of a young Bangladeshi boy is manifested by, among others, an insistence on the frequent insertion of the vernacular and pet names which are commonly used by Bengalis, as in the opening scene of what Hensher himself calls "a novel [...] told in the form of a memoir" (ibid.):

Even the shit of a dog smells good to you, if it's English.

(*Ingrazi kuttar gu-o tomar khache bhalo*).

My grandmother used to say this to my grandfather. He was very pro-Empire. That was my mother's father, who used to call me Churchill when I cried. (Hensher 2012: 1)

As its title suggests, *Scenes from Early Life* is a childhood memoir, a chronicle of Zaved's young self and his extraordinary relatives. Similarly to Aciman's narrative, the book offers a vivid portrayal of growing up in an upper-middle class family. Zaved's reminiscences focus on a variety of subjects: his grandfather's driver and their servants, the hypocrisy of his father, American television shows and the games he played with other kids, school experiences, the streets and houses of Dhaka (still spelt Dacca), as well as a plethora of other characters (in particular Amit and Altaf), whose life

²⁰⁴ Stein's work is most often defined as "imaginative autobiography" and "a mixture of memoir and biography" (Van Stavern 2005: 91).

²⁰⁵ Along these lines, it could be possible to classify the two books (and, perhaps, other *autrememoirs*) as "queer memoirs," where "queer" would be understood as "undecidability" (of subject and object), or an act of "un-doing" or "dispossessing" the subject (Butler 2004: 142, 19). Another term that could be potentially useful here is collaborative or told-to life narrative (Smith and Watson 2010: 264–265).

²⁰⁶ On the other hand, the truthfulness of the account is accentuated by the photographs of places (described in the book, e.g. Dhaka, streets, houses) and the thorough research to which Hensher confesses in the acknowledgements section (Hensher 2012: 311–312).

stories the narrator wishes to reconstruct and intertwine with his. Just like *Out of Egypt*, Hensher's memoir is also a story of war and its aftermath (which for Aciman brings expulsion from one's homeland, while for Mahmood the establishment of the independent state of the Bengalis).

The last, thirteenth chapter of *Scenes from Early Life* offers a form of appendix as it attempts to explain to its readers – in line with its title – “what happened to them [the book's protagonists – R.K.] all.” Most importantly, however, in a subtle gesture of meta-commentary, it exposes (and problematises) the relationship between the subject, author and narrator of the story, not to mention its truthfulness.²⁰⁷ “This has been the story of my early life,” the narrator says. “I have tried not to invent anything, and to *tell* [my emphasis – R.K.] everything as I was told it. I have tried to be as good a storyteller as my mother was” (306). All the same, he also confesses that “many years later [after the events described in the book], I married a writer, who has *listened* [my emphasis – R.K.] to the story as I have told it to him” (303).

Whose story is it, then? Hensher's, Mahmood's, or others? Who is the storyteller? Who is the narrative's begetter, its author? By enacting a labyrinthine dialectic of the self and the other and refusing to give unambiguous answers to those questions, Hensher's *autrememoir* takes its readers – just like Stein did in the 1930s – to the very limits of the genre.

3.8. Pet Memoir: *Dog Years: A Memoir* by Mark Doty

Similarly to *autrememoir*, pet memoir,²⁰⁸ i.e. a relational narrative in which the memoirist's proximate (and post-humanist) other is one's pet,

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²⁰⁷ In this section, the narrator recalls how his husband (the novelist Philip Hensher [sic!]) travelled to Romania as one of his books was translated into Romanian. While there, he attended a dinner with his publisher and his wife, herself a journalist, who covered the events in East Pakistan in 1970 and 1971. Her memory of the day of independence – contrary to historical testimonies and documents which confirm that the city was overcrowded with celebrants – testifies to the emptiness of Dhaka's streets and silence. “It was so quiet that she could hear the birds singing” (Hensher 2012: 305). The narrator, i.e. Zaved, confesses that in his representation of the morning of independence depicted in *Scenes from Life*, he followed her account. “[T]hat was the story as told it, and the story she liked to tell, so I have told it too, however untruthfully” (Hensher 2012: 306). To problematise it further: Hensher writes a fake memoir of Mahmood in which Mahmood recalls the event(s) not as *he* remembered them (or was told) but as Hensher's one-time interlocutor from Romania did.

²⁰⁸ In 2010, when witnessing an influx of life narratives preoccupied with the writer's dogs, Diane Herbst coined the term “dogoir” to refer to this micro-type of pet narratives (Herbst 2010).

cannot boast a rich tradition. Nevertheless, its antecedents and specimens are equally outstanding, just to mention Virginia Woolf's *Flush* (1933), John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962), Olivia Manning's *Extraordinary Cats* (1967), and Doris Lessing's *On Cats* (2002). It would seem that one type of relational life narrative which pet memoirs have the strongest affinity with is parental memoir, since, in both cases, the object of the writer's thematic concern (and, inevitably, their affection) remains – in most cases, at least – silent. This aspect is strongly accentuated by the first sentence of Mark Doty's *Dog Years* – the American poet's memoir about his two retrievers, the golden Beau and black Arden, who were his companions for sixteen years of his life. "No dog has ever said a word," Doty proclaims,²⁰⁹ but he soon adds that it is not synonymous with them "liv[ing] outside the world of speech" (Doty 2007: 1). He further continues:

Because they do not speak [...] we are always trying to figure them out. The expression is telling: to "figure out" is to make figures of speech, to invent metaphors to help us understand the world. To choose to live with a dog is to agree to participate in a long process of interpretation [...]. What the interpreter must do is to tell stories – sometimes to the dog in question. [...] But most stories about dogs are narrated to other people, as we go on articulating the tales of our animals' lives, in order to bring their otherwise incomprehensible experience into the more orderly world of speech. (1–2)

And, in sixteen chapters, fifteen *entre'actes*, and one *envoi*, Doty does indeed tell many a story about his dogs (and, inevitably, himself): about their presence (which he calls "actuality" [11]), walks, body (eyes and paws in particular), dogs' refusal to judge, their relationship to time, names,²¹⁰ his own dislike of the anthropomorphising of animals, and, finally about assisting them when they become ill and die, leaving their owners "unanchored" (321). Thus, similarly to Doty's other writing, death – "unassimilable fact," "never out of sight," "always present," "[always] peeking out

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²⁰⁹ Elsewhere, he adds: "[t]he experience of loving an animal is actually more resistant to language, since animals cannot speak back to us, cannot characterize themselves or correct our assumptions about them. They look at us across a void made of the distance between their lives and our immersion in language" (Doty 2007: 4). He also draws a comparison between a dog and an infant as they both share "an uninterpreted life of emotion and sensation" (*ibid.*).

²¹⁰ "Dogs have no power over their names, but names have power over dogs" (Doty 2007: 105).

of the pocket, down in the socket of the bone, the shadow in the photograph, the fleck in the iris of a living eye, deep blue underside of the wave” (13, 191) – looms large over *Dog Years*: the death of the five thousand who died in New York City in the ruins of the towers, the death of his partner Wally in 1994, and, ultimately, the death of Mister Beau and Arden. Similarly to Doty’s classic *Heaven’s Coast*,²¹¹ *Dog Years* is not only a testament to and commemoration of his beloved animals, as well as a record of his life with them, but also (and, perhaps, above all) an act of scriptotherapy, of writing about his loss, and, simultaneously, a form of self-healing.

Moreover, Doty’s narrative addresses the question of dogs’ redeeming features – hence creating another link between pet and paternal memoirs.²¹² The experience of sharing a life with a dog, or, largely, animal presences are, in Doty’s own words, “a door toward feeling and understanding” and means of self-recognition, offering the “clarifying mirror of some other gaze” (Doty 2007: 295). The memoir ends with Doty (and his then partner Paul Lisicky) receiving a stuffed toy wolf, having first made a donation to a wolf club. “We aren’t ready for another dog quite yet – Arden’s and Beau’s are big paw prints to fill,” Doty says, but to the readers of his panegyric glorification of life with dogs, it serves as a clear indication of the fact that a new dog, a “gateway to the world” (13) is bound to come.

3.9. (Auto)pathography, or Memoir of Illness/Disability: *The Shaking Woman, or A History of My Nerves* by Siri Hustvedt

In the mid-1990s, when the memoir boom was still in its infancy, the American literary critic G. Thomas Couser recognised the need to propose a term which would embrace a number of autobiographical accounts,

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²¹¹ More on gay autobiographical narratives can be found in Tomasz Basiuk’s impressive monograph *Exposures: American Gay Men’s Life Writing Since Stonewall* (2013).

²¹² Doty, similarly to Anne Enright, also admits to having been prevented from committing suicide (by drowning himself in January 2001 when taking a ferry to Manhattan), because of his sense of obligation and love for his dogs: “I do not do anything to harm myself, and I swear it’s mostly because if I do jump, how will I know that my dear boy will actually drown with me? Won’t he want to live, won’t he swim as long as he can, and therefore suffer? And, of course, there is the matter of the man beside me, holding onto Arden’s leash, who loves me, and would like to have a future, and whom I do not want to harm by making such a brutal, unthinkable rupture. I don’t know if he feels it at all, the cataclysm in me that I am hiding because I am so afraid of it. Then and there, my will snaps” (Doty 2007: 208).

produced at the time, which, despite their formal differences, shared a single thematic preoccupation, namely failure of/in the body:

I became interested in the emergence of life writing, much of it autobiographical, centered on medical conditions and impairments once considered stigmatic. Exploring this new development, I wanted to designate a particular set of narratives with a single-word term. To devise one, I merely substituted *patho* – the Greek root for suffering (as in *pathology*) – for *bio* (life) in *autobiography*. Or to explain it a different way, I added *auto* to the existing term *pathography*, which refers to clinical studies of illness in patients. The point was that in these new narratives, people with certain kinds of problematic conditions were writing about their *own* bodies, rather than leaving the job to medical professionals. (Couser 2012: 43–44)

Since the publication of *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* in 1997, the study in which Couser used his neologism for the first time (Couser 1997: 5), not only have new “categories” been proposed to refer to what is generally known as narratives of illness and disability,²¹³ but also the group of medical conditions which the narratives in question

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213 Among alternative terms one can encounter the following: “autosomatography” (according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, G. Thomas Couser in private correspondence has recognised “autosomatography” as a “more useful” concept than autopathography since the former term, unlike the latter, refuses to acknowledge a specific body condition as pathological [Smith and Watson 2010: 143]; however, in his 2012 study *Memoir*, Couser insists on using the term “autopathography,” which might suggest that he has changed his mind concerning “autosomatography” being the “better” term [Couser 2012]; Smith and Watson also claim that – possibly – “autosomatography” might be used to refer to third-person illness narratives, while “autopathography” to designate first-person illness narratives [Smith and Watson 2010: 261]), “memoir of physical/mental catastrophe” (Adams 2002), “memoir of some body” also known as “odd body memoir” or “odd-body-ographies” (Couser’s adoption and variation on a term first used by Lorraine Adams which she defines as being “concerned with what it’s like to have, to inhabit – to be – a particular body” [Couser 2011: 229 and Couser 2012: 148]), or “the caregiver’s tale(s)” if the narratives are written by authors who care for ill or disabled family members (Burack-Weiss 2006). In *Signifying Bodies: Disability in Contemporary Life Writing*, Couser also isolated a new type of autopathographical writing, which he labelled the “new disability memoir” (Couser 2009: 164). What characterises this sub-genre is the writers’ acceptance of illness/disability and embracing their impairments, as well as their self-identification as an ill/disabled person. For more on illness/disability narratives prior to the memoir boom at the end of the 20th century (e.g. sanatorium narratives [Sheila Rothman] and pathographies [Anne Hunsaker Hawkins]) kindly consult Couser 1997 and Couser 2009, as well as Jurecic 2012.

address have greatly expanded (from the four originally listed by Couser, i.e. breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, deafness, and paralysis).²¹⁴

It seems more than plausible to see the arrival and recognition of (auto)-pathography²¹⁵ as a distinctive genre of life writing as secondary to a larger issue which looms over contemporary autobiographical studies, namely an attempt to undo the Cartesian exclusion of body and to castigate the philosopher's prioritisation of mind: the "thinking substance." Paul John Eakin's *How Our Lives Become Stories* can well be listed here as an example of an influential inquiry into anti-transcendental ontology of the self and a move to anchor the subject in the body. From this point of view, the autobiographical "I" cannot ever escape being considered "an embodied subject" (Eakin 1999: 21), while the body becomes increasingly acknowledged by contemporary life writing theorists as a true "site of autobiographical knowledge" (Smith and Watson 2010: 49).

Having said that, one also has to admit that, when it was first proposed by Couser, (auto)pathography was not unanimously and enthusiastically welcomed by all critics working in the field. Some, like Thomas Joseph Gerschick, emphasised (though, in my opinion, without enough conviction) that since ab-normativity is culturally fabricated, then all types of discourse that consciously acknowledge disability (which [auto]pathography undoubtedly does) necessarily need to reproduce and strengthen normativity. And it is normativity that stigmatises various ailments and impairments as abnormative (Gerschick 2000: 1263–1264).

Couser responded to those concerns, stating that autopathographies are not simply stories of sick, disabled or impaired individuals whose one and only wish is to narrate their ill-fate and who show no desire whatsoever to challenge the social construction of their identity. Autopathographies are not stories of helplessness or submission. Likewise, they are not necessarily the narratives of happy-endings which succumb to "the tyranny of the comic plot" (Couser 2012: 44). According to Couser,

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²¹⁴ Couser lists the following conditions which over the last two decades have generated narratives of illness/disabilities: amputation, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, autism, eating disorders including anorexia, asthma, bipolar disease, blindness, borderline personality disorder, cerebral palsy, chronic fatigue syndrome, cystic fibrosis, deformity, depression, diabetes, epilepsy, insomnia, locked-in syndrome, multiple sclerosis, Munchausen syndrome, obesity, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Parkinson's disease, stuttering, stroke, Tourette's syndrome (Couser 2012: 140).

²¹⁵ My spelling of the term "autopathography" (as well as "autothanatography") shall put the prefix "auto" (self) in brackets in order to emphasise that every such narrative might be concerned with either one's own, or somebody else's illness and/or disability.

autopathography is typically, if not essentially, *anti*-pathography, in two senses. First, in the sense that by taking control of their own narratives, patients are resisting medical authority. Second, in the sense that such patients are challenging the medical scripts and/or cultural constructions attached to their conditions. The *auto* in *autopathography* was meant to highlight the impulse to define one's condition in one's own way – to recover one's body, so to speak, from those who would determine its story. (ibid.)

The Shaking Woman, or A History of My Nerves by the novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt will be succinctly described herein as a prototypical specimen of (auto)pathography. By means of combining three distinctive types of writing,²¹⁶ i.e. professional (offering a scientific inquiry into neurology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis supported by sources, footnotes, quotations and data), philosophical (characterised by discursive and analytical discussion of concepts and ideas), as well as personal (based on life experiences), the narrative in question provides its readers with a multifaceted account of Hustvedt's lengthy struggle with her "unruly saboteur" (Hustvedt 2011: 39) – namely headaches and some form of epileptic fits. In her own words,

[t]he story of the shaking woman is the narrative of a repeated event that, over time, gained multiple meanings when seen from various perspectives. (182)

The structure of this highly erudite book (which takes one from the Greek physician Galen and Saint Teresa of Ávila to Sigmund Freud, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and pharmacologists from Columbia University, and from hysteria to "vascular migraine syndrome") is typical for (auto)pathographies – it opens with the onset of a disease²¹⁷ followed by an attempt to diagnose the given condition, various types of treatment, and, finally, dissatisfaction with the available medical procedures and individual inquiry into the nature, as well as significance of the illness. "I bought myself a rubber brain," the writer says, "familiarized myself with its many parts, listened intently, and read more. [...] Intellectual curiosity about one's own illness is certainly born of a desire for mastery. If I couldn't cure myself, perhaps I could at least begin to understand myself" (6). Equally

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²¹⁶ Not to mention its various "genres" such as diary entries, medical records, or literary criticism.

²¹⁷ Which in Hustvedt's case is the speech that she gave in honour of her late father, Professor Lloyd Hustvedt, in 2006 – the scene which opens and closes *The Shaking Woman*.

emblematic are the work's thematic concerns: the attributes of illness,²¹⁸ the language of the sick, the changing idea of what the self is,²¹⁹ distrust and wariness towards medical professionals (and encounters with a few "tender-minded" medics [157]).

However, what makes Hustvedt's writing about her ailing body (and mind) particularly arresting is not its evident determination to re-claim the story of her illness; neither is it its resistance and desire to challenge medical authorities and labels (manifested by the sheer fact that she does not "name" her condition using the repertoire of official medical terms), nor an insistence, after Freud, on the cardinal fictionality of case histories²²⁰ – all these characteristics being frequently encountered in (auto)pathographies. What one should recognise as notably unique is the writer's recognition of illness as constitutive of her being and the integration of her healthy and ailing self. "I cannot really see where the illness ends and I begin; or, rather, the headaches are me, and rejecting them would mean expelling myself from myself," Hustvedt concludes. And adds (clearly echoing J.M. Coetzee, who appears in the book as her friend "J"): "Perhaps because she [illness] was a late arrival, I have had a much harder time integrating the shaking woman into my story, but as she becomes familiar, she is moving out of the third person and into the first, no longer a detested double but an admittedly handicapped part of my self" (189, 190).

In light of the above, it should not be surprising that the book ends with the affirmative: "I am the shaking woman" (199).

3.10. (Auto)thanatography, or Memoir of Mourning: *Elegy for Iris: A Memoir* by John Bayley

Nancy K. Miller's 1994 essay entitled "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography," in which she argued against "a cold-war rhetoric of autonomous selfhood" (Miller 1994: 3) and proposed a new view of male autobiographical identity, is a founding text of (auto)thanatography. When analysing Jacques Derrida's *Circonfession* (an autobiographical

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²¹⁸ "Every sickness has an alien quality, a feeling of invasion and loss of control" (Hustvedt 2011: 6).

²¹⁹ The writer is particularly interested in the question of mind/body duality.

²²⁰ In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud says: "[I]t still strikes me as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories" (Freud [in:] Hustvedt 2011: 21).

commentary and a re-reading of Augustine's *Confessions*), Miller – crucially for the present discussion – focuses on passages dedicated to the illness and death of Derrida's mother and, consequently, draws the following conclusion: "autobiography – identity through alterity – is also writing against death twice: the other's and one's own. Every autobiography, we might say, is also an autothanatography" (Miller 1994: 12).

Though Miller did not propose to read (auto)thanatography²²¹ in narrow generic terms,²²² the category that she coined was instantly appropriated by life writing critics, including Susanna Egan, who recognised (auto)thanatography as "the prime synechodoche for all specifically crisis-driven autobiography, which has traditionally been, almost by definition, 'obscene': off the stage of cultural acceptance, off the margins of literary canons, marginal even to autobiography studies because its single focus seems to represent 'the life' inadequately" (Egan 1999: 226). In *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, Egan provided an extended and insightful study of narratives about the dying self and other. Analysing a vast body of texts, Egan acknowledged AIDS and cancer-related autobiographical narratives of the 1980s and 1990s as the first instances of contemporary "death writing" (Egan 1999: 207) and claimed that death, once private and shameful, now powerfully insists on being heard:

Next to birth, death is the most absolutely singular experience of disconnection (no one can die for us or even, truly, with us), and, at the same time, the most entirely universal: no one can avoid dying. Like birth which separates each infant from a m(o)ther's body into its own solitary identity, death is as powerfully separating experience, because it is singular, and because the living try so hard to avoid it. For these reasons, death has been a taboo subject in the Western world for many generations, hidden behind euphemisms, the dying

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²²¹ My spelling of (auto)thanatography, i.e. with the prefix "auto," meaning "self," in round brackets, is deliberate and hopes to avoid a further split into autothanatographies proper, or "monologic autothanatographies" (narratives when one narrates one's own impending death such as Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* [1980] or Harold Brodkey's *This Wild Darkness* [1996]) and thanatographies (narratives in which the narrator addresses the death of other[s]).

²²² For Miller death (like the other) is autobiography's ontological principle since "intimate and violent dialogues with living and dead others perform the bedrock of self-construction itself" (Miller 1994: 19). She also states: "One always confesses the other. [...] In order to represent himself completely, the son must represent his mother, his other, without omitting a word. It falls to the son, to recreate the dead parent through writing; to give birth to the author of one's life, and hence to authorise himself" (Miller 1994: 11).

hidden behind hospital screens, medical practitioners – dedicated to life-saving hidden behind life-extending technologies. But death will not die and cannot be ignored. The spectre of death hovers over all autobiography, usually unnamed, providing serious impetus to the activity of setting the record straight, clearing old scores, avoiding misinterpretation, taking control of the absolutely uncontrollable – the “end” of the story. These forms of control make sense, however, only for so long as the story retains explanatory power; for the more sophisticated of contemporary autobiographers, narrative completion, like famous last words, can seem inappropriately romantic and contrived. (195–196)

Similarly to G. Thomas Couser’s parallel discussion of the genre of auto-pathography, Egan also recognised that (auto)thanatography is, essentially, anti-death writing (consequently, most literally life writing), where a dying person (or their companions) want to take charge and claim agency of their story, make meaning out of life, while the narrative itself testifies to the “revealing processes of self-understanding” (8, 200, 207). According to Egan, such attempts are “less concerned with mimesis, however, than with authenticating the processes of discovery and re-cognition” (7).

Since the publication of Miller’s and Egan’s works, one has observed an unprecedented influx of (auto)thanatographies which has been accompanied by an arrival and proliferation of various new categories aimed to “designate narratives that focus on death” (Couser 2012: 43). Consequently, death writing has been labelled “bereavement memoir” (Jolly 2001: 568), “memoir on loss,”²²³ “misery memoir” (Anderson 2011: 116), “narratives of grief” and “narratives of mourning” (Smith and Watson 2010: 138), or “end-of-life memoirs” (Berman 2012: 11). Simultaneously, a set of thematic/formal characteristics that can function as markers of (auto)-thanatography have emerged (Smith and Watson 2010: 138–141). Firstly, (auto)thanatographies appear to occupy a threshold space between intimacy and private mourning (the contemplation and chronicle of personal loss) and “collective vulnerability and communal loss” (Smith and Watson 2010: 139). Such a narrative is a public form of mourning not only because it “publicises” the grief of an individual, but also due to the public role that it plays. Secondly, grief memoirs are a means of endurance, testaments to the life of the departed that wish to commemorate the (mostly beloved) dead and preserve their memory for posterity. At

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²²³ Though rarely applied by critics, the term is often used in reviews, blogs and other types of writing (e.g. in her memoir entitled *With the Kisses of His Mouth* [2011], Monique Roffey refers to Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* as a “memoir on loss”).

the same time, written in the shadow of their creators' inevitable demise, they are acutely conscious of their narrators' own impending mortality. Also, (auto)thanatographies most often function as books of consolation: they are guidebooks on how to deal with loss and bereavement, and how to recover from grief. In short, they are manuals of (self-)repair. The prioritisation of this therapeutic function led to an emergence of another term, namely "scriptotherapy" by Suzette Henke (Henke 1998). According to Henke, the singular objective of grief memoirs (and other types of autobiographical writing dealing with trauma) is self-healing. While commenting on this category, G. Thomas Couser trenchantly points out that "the term emphasizes the *work* of the narrative – its goal or aim – rather than its form" (Couser 2012: 43). Couser's comment brings one to, perhaps, the most important debate which remains at the heart of contemporary grief writing: therapeutics vs. literariness. In recent years, inundated with the products of grief memoirists, many have wondered about the role and function of (auto)thanatographies. In *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Julian Barnes challenged the idea that writing about grief/telling one's story is an indispensable element of healing and labelled it a "therapeutic-to-autobiographical fallacy" (Barnes 2009: 97). In an essay entitled "Regulating Sorrow" from the collection *Through the Window*, he further pondered on the difficulties that (auto)thanatographies pose for interpreters:

In some way autobiographical accounts of grief are unfalsifiable, and therefore unreviewable by any normal criteria. The book is repetitive? So is grief. The book is obsessive? So is grief. The book is at times incoherent? So is grief. Phrases like "Friends have been wonderful inviting me to their homes" are platitudes; but grief is filled with platitudes. (Barnes 2012: 222)

But others were less kind than Barnes. Infuriated by exhibitionism, cliché and melodrama in Joan Didion's recently published *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), David Rieff's *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008), Anne Roiphe's *Epilogue* (2008), Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* (2011), Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye* (2011), and Francisco Goldman's *Say Her Name* (2011) (all about the death of spouses or parents), Frances Stonor Saunders in the *Guardian Book Review* claimed, in August 2011, that it was "time to stop the outpouring the memoirs" and, in a crushing review of the above mentioned works of mourning, implored the memoirists: "don't give me grief" (Saunders 2011: 1–3).

However, despite voices of discontent, (auto)thanatographies, those "late apprenticeship[s]" at mourning (Ricoeur 2009: 7) have become one

of the most popular genres of life writing published over the last two decades.²²⁴ Their central position in contemporary (auto)biographical practices has been confirmed not only by the genre's international impact,²²⁵ but by the sheer number (and profile) of those who have published their attempts at grief memoirs: from Jacques Derrida's *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (2003) and Paul Ricoeur's *Vivant jusqu'à la mort: Suivi de Fragments* (2007), to Roland Barthes's *Journal de deuil* (2012).

Recently,²²⁶ a new micro-genre of (auto)thanatographies has been identified, i.e. a "memoir of spousal loss" (Berman 2010: 8), in which memoirists write about their deceased spouses.²²⁷ *Elegy for Iris: A Memoir* by the writer and academic John Bayley is an example of (auto)thanatographical writing motivated by the loss of a spouse – in his case the celebrated novelist Iris Murdoch. True to its title, the volume – published almost simultaneously with Murdoch's death²²⁸ – is an elegy, a lament for the deceased, but also – in line with the genre's poetics – a celebration of his wife's life and work, as well as their marriage.

In order to accommodate the two demands, Bayley divides his narrative into two sections entitled "Then" and "Now"; however, the line separating the past ("Then" chapters) from the present ("Now" entries) is not as clear-cut or unambiguous as it would appear from the way the book is structurally organised; mostly because of – once could legitimately claim – Bayley's implicit desire to combine his wife's condition with the narrative itself. And since, for Alzheimer patients, time "seems to lose both its prospective and retrospective significance," the story is entitled to do the same, to "lose touch with time" (Bayley 2000: 214). Consequently, "Then," which starts *in medias res* with John and Iris enjoying a bike ride and a pleasure jaunt, always travels between past and present events, their public and private life. Though a lot of attention is paid to the couple's Oxford years, their first encounter (when Murdoch was bicycling

²²⁴ As exemplified by *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End* (2016), a study of Susan Sontag's, Sigmund Freud's, and John Updike's reflections on death and mortality, which testifies not only to some considerable interest in death writing but also in the (great) writers' responses to it.

²²⁵ Just to mention the genre's representatives which have emerged from Poland over the last few years, such as *Ćwiczenia z utraty* by Agata Tuszyńska (2007) and *Umarł mi: Notatnik żałoby* by Inga Iwasiów (2013).

²²⁶ Though the tradition of grief memoirs by writers can be traced back to C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* of 1961 and Simone de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* of 1964.

²²⁷ Some of the best known specimens of the micro-genre include Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Antonia Fraser's *Must You Go? My Life with Harold Pinter* (2010), and Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* (2011).

²²⁸ I.e. February 1999.

past Bayley's window in St. Antony's College), their sexual life and "bed-room habits" (94), friendships (e.g. with Elizabeth Bowen), travels, swims – their favourite pastime (in, among others, Dorset, Australia and the Pas-de-Calais), not to mention Murdoch's writing, Alzheimer's, "an insidious fog, barely noticeable until everything around has disappeared" (218), inevitably anchors (and haunts²²⁹) the story narrated by Bayley. He writes about Murdoch's "lion face," her features settling into a "leonine impassivity"; her power of concentration being gone together with the "ability to form coherent sentences and to remember where she is, or has been" (37, 53). "Then" meaningfully ends with Murdoch's symbolic death – a realisation of her illness when, while giving a talk at the University of the Negev in Israel in 1994, she was overtaken by the "inability to summon the words" (212).

If the first section of *Elegy for Iris* appears to have a lot in common with (auto)pathography, then the second part of the book can be classified as a pure instance of (auto)thanatographical writing, a work of mourning and loss. To Bayley, Murdoch is gone; she is, to use one of the phrases from the volume, a "corpse" whose grey substance "ceased to function" (76, 259), a body which has lost its sense of identity and inhabits a world of "preoccupied emptiness" (65). "Now" is composed in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes's *Journal de deuil* – a series of short entries focusing on Bayley's grief, which takes the shape of anger, violent irritation, a desire to escape and routine, which saves him from madness. It is a testament to his final days with Murdoch – the vigil he keeps next to her bed, her compulsive "going somewhere" which Bayley defines as the "agony of travel[ling]" (230), and, ultimately, their waiting for the final "escape." "When are they going to let *me* out?" – the voice of Iris Murdoch imprisoned in her body and projected upon her by her husband asks, echoing the blind man from William Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* (1926) (249).

In *Elegy for Iris* – unlike many other (auto)thanatographies which centre around the event – death does not happen; the book's random opening is matched by its abrupt ending. Its readers, who witnessed the process of dying, are not allowed to observe Murdoch's ultimate demise – in line with Ludwig Wittgenstein's pronouncement that "death is not an event

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²²⁹ E.g. the above mentioned opening scene of the couple's ride is momentarily accompanied by the sense of despair and demise: "[I]t's a commonplace about growing old that there seem to be no standards anymore. The dog days. With everything gone to the dogs" (Bayley 2000: 3).

in life: we do not live to experience death”²³⁰ (Wittgenstein 2013: 87), which Bayley paraphrases (“death is not a human experience” [Bayley 2000: 275]) on the final page of his memoir.

At some point in his narrative Bayley remarks upon the question of “freedom” in the novel. He writes about Pushkin and Tolstoy and how their claims that their characters “took charge” and liberated themselves from their command is, in fact, a cliché which novelists particularly cherish. “What matters,” Bayley says, “is whether the world created is both convincing and wholly *sui generis*” (230). *Elegy for Iris*, his lament for a beloved wife, is, indeed, both convincing and – despite displaying a number of characteristics paradigmatic of (auto)thanatology – of its own kind.

3.11. Travelogue, or Memoir of Journey: *In a Strange Room: Three Journeys* by Damon Galgut

Travelogue – also known as travel narrative,²³¹ or simply travel memoir²³² – is another popular²³³ micro-class of writers’ memoirs characterised by its specimens’ exclusionary focus on the subject’s journey (both

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²³⁰ The phrase comes from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and reads: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits” (Wittgenstein 2013: 87).

²³¹ Another widely used term is, of course, travel writing, which (similarly to life writing) embraces a number of genres (e.g. travel journal, travel memoir, travel book, adventure narrative). For a more detailed discussion of terminological aspects concerning this literary phenomenon, one should consult, for example, Jan Borm (Borm 2004: 13–26), or Grzegorz Moroz (Moroz 2010: 21–29 and Moroz 2013).

²³² The term can be encountered, for example, in the title of John Dos Passos’s 1923 volume *Orient Express: A Travel Memoir* and James Saville’s 2015 *Rooibos Tea and Dust: A Travel Memoir of Post-Apartheid South Africa*. G. Thomas Couser also defines Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* of 1869 as a travel memoir (Couser 2012: 129). Couser also remarks that “travel writing is, at bottom, single-experience life writing; as such, it verges on memoir and can be extended into it” (ibid.). On the other hand, Ruel K. Wilson claims that “there is little significant difference between the travel memoir and the more subjective diary or correspondence” and postulates that all types of literary travel writing should be classified as travelogues (Wilson 2012: x).

²³³ Just to mention Howard Jacobson’s *Roots, Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* and Colm Tóibín’s *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, both of 1994, or Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* of 1997.

spatio-temporal and inward, i.e. psycho-emotional²³⁴), as well as their retrospective quality.²³⁵ In travelogues,²³⁶ as widely observed, the experience of travelling takes considerable precedence over other aspects of one's life. What is more, it is claimed to be highly episodic, oftentimes deprived of a unified plot, inherently spontaneous, usually didactic, always self-educational, and, inevitably, compendious since it is a vehicle of knowledge (Wilson 2012: ix–xi). Similarly to all types of travel writing, the travelogue's mobile subject is never a tourist but the one who "follow[s] [his or her] instincts and opportunities, rather than directions from home" (Hulme and Youngs 2012: 5). Home itself is an important point of reference – either as a site of departure and escape, or return (or, often, both).

If travelogues "typically chronicle or reconstruct the narrator's experience of displacement, encounter, and travail and his or her observations of the unknown, the foreign, the uncanny" (Smith and Watson 2010: 284–285), then *In a Strange Room* by the South African novelist Damon Galgut offers a perfect illustration of the specimen's poetics. Subtitled "Three Journeys," the memoir²³⁷ follows its character on three journeys which cover large portions of Europe (Belgium, England, Greece, Germany, Switzerland), India and Africa (Tanzania and Zimbabwe, among others). Formally speaking, the volume – just like Galgut's previous works²³⁸ – shows clear indebtedness to J.M. Coetzee's self-writings, especially in its

²³⁴ As Frances Bartkowski argues in her book *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates*, travel narratives are particularly interested in addressing the politics of identity, especially the way identity might be misrecognised and/or re-imagined when dislocated (Bartkowski 1995).

²³⁵ This brief definition of travelogue should reject the common notion that the narrative in question must be in the first person (Wilson 2012: x).

²³⁶ Travelogues as well as periegetic narratives discussed in the following sub-section can also be defined as instances of "auto/bio/geo/graphy" – the term introduced by Elżbieta Rybicka and which refers to texts in which "a geographical coefficient determines specificity of an autobiographical attitude" (Rybicka 2014: 420, 421).

²³⁷ *In a Strange Room* contains all the markers of memoir as identified by the present study. Controversy concerning the book's generic affiliation has surrounded it since its very publication. Though the publisher promoted it as a novel, a number of readers criticised the book's admission to the Man Booker Prize.

²³⁸ Similarities between Coetzee's and Galgut's works include, among others, experimental approach to self-writing (first vs. third person autobiographical narrative), often unspecified locations, language (clean and sparse prose with no ornamentations), style (third person, present tense), critique of South Africa and the use of allegory. An interesting discussion of Coetzee's and Galgut's thematic and formal affinities has been provided by Kai Wiegandt in his article "Icarus and Albatross: Rising above Nationality in J.M. Coetzee's *Autobiographies* and Damon Galgut's *In a Strange Room*" (Wiegandt 2014: 271–282).

narrator being spread between first and their person, autobiography and *autrebiography*. Many a time throughout the volume the subject – whose unmistakably identifiable referent is Damon Galgut himself²³⁹ – switches from “he” to “I.” “Looking back at him through time,” the narrator says about the subject of his narrative/himself, “I remember him remembering, and I am more present in the scene than he was. But memory has its own distances, in part he is me entirely, in part he is a stranger I am watching” (Galgut 2010: 5).

The author/narrator/character of *In a Strange Room* is a typical nomad,²⁴⁰ to use Rosi Braidotti’s capacious term; he is not only in the literal act of travelling, but his subjectivity²⁴¹ is performative, de-stabilised, non-unitary and in flux; in short, a “dynamic and changing entity” which remains resistant to “methodological nationalism” (Braidotti 2011: 3, 5, 7). The former (i.e. fluid identity) is particularly visible in the first section of the book entitled “The Follower,” which, till the very last pages, makes it impossible for the reader to authoritatively decide whether Rainer, Damon’s travelling companion, is “real” or simply Damon’s double, a suppressed part of his own self. On the other hand, the latter (i.e. resistance to any form of nationalism, be it political or cultural) is evident in the sheer act of Galgut’s journey – a proof of his increasing feeling of departure and alienation from South Africa, history and politics. When, around 1994, his native country is in turmoil, Galgut escapes it and travels the world, choosing individual experiences over the issues of state and collective identity.²⁴²

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²³⁹ In the volume’s last section “The Guardian” the narrator/subject/character identifies himself as Damon (Galgut 2010: 154). Zbigniew Białas’s discussion of the way the traveller translates the somatic into the semantic/symbolic could be particularly helpful in a more detailed analysis of the travelogue’s subject (“[...] the traveller’s own body when represented in writing, when immobilized in the midst of motion, somewhat like Keats’ figure on the surface of the Grecian urn, is not only and not necessarily a somatic construction. It is a symbolic construct that enters into a relation with the surrounding world” [Białas 2006: 12–13]).

²⁴⁰ Damon, purely incidentally, produces “nomad” when read in reverse.

²⁴¹ The narrator unequivocally identifies a link between outer and inner travelling: “The world you’re moving through flows into another one inside, nothing stays divided any more, this stands for that, weather for mood, landscape for feeling, for every object there is a corresponding inner gesture, everything turns into metaphor. The border is a line on a map, but also drawn inside himself somewhere” (Galgut 2010: 85–86).

²⁴² In a similar mode the memoir’s subject responds to the war in the Gulf: “He watches [television] but what he sees isn’t real to him. Too much travelling and placelessness have put him outside everything, so that history happens elsewhere, it has nothing to do with him” (Galgut 2010: 15).

Galgut's travelling has neither itinerary, nor aim. It is a pure act of wandering: "What is he looking for, he himself doesn't know. [...] His life is unweighted and centreless, so that he feels he could blow away at any time. He still has not made a home for himself" (Galgut 2010: 67). The travel itself is not a celebration but "a kind of mourning, a way of dissipating [oneself]" (ibid.). Contrary to many travelogues, Galgut's journeys – his "endless running away" (176) – are not motivated by his desire to know himself or understand the world. "He moves around from one place to another, not driven by curiosity but by the bored anguish of staying still" (ibid.), the narrator reports to the volume's readers.

But what makes Galgut's piece particularly unconventional is that his restless travels do not produce outcomes²⁴³; no lessons are learnt and no gains are made. Even the friendships he forms do not last – his closest companion, Jerome, dying in a motorbike accident. The only "benefit" is that the stories of others (and narrated by others, by the likes of Jerome, Alice, Christian, Roderigo, Anna and Caroline) "travel into him" and refuse to leave him even when he wants to get rid of them (Galgut 2010: 175). Likewise, *In a Strange Room* does not end as might have been expected of a more conventional narrative – with Damon returning home. The last three pages show him one more time as a permanent nomad, again on a journey, this time to Morocco.

3.12. Periegetic Narrative, or Memoir of Place: *Homage to Barcelona* by Colm Tóibín

If travelogue focuses primarily on the subject's journey and is determined by spatial mobility, then memoir of place²⁴⁴ – which this book also wishes to classify as an instance of periegetic narrative²⁴⁵ – takes special interest in a single (and limited) portion of space, a separate "unit of human

²⁴³ When "the journey is over," Damon is "back where he started," sitting and crying "in the empty room" (Galgut 2010: 111, 106).

²⁴⁴ A term this study has borrowed from Annie Proulx's memoir *Bird Cloud* (2011) (subtitled *A Memoir of Place* [sic!]), a story of a 640-acre pieces of land in Wyoming where the American writer built her dream house.

²⁴⁵ In his study *Pausanias' Guide to Ancient Greece*, Christian Habicht, a German historian, defines periegetic literature as texts that "conduct [their] readers around a certain area, large or small, in just the same way that local guides show tourists around a spot" (Habicht 1998: 2). He also adds that the matters usually addressed by this genre are "topography, monuments, their history (or what is said to be their history), works of art, votive offerings, anthropological features and, so on" (2–3).

occupation”²⁴⁶ (Schama 2004: 10), inescapably characterised by some form of fixity. Though memoirs of place²⁴⁷ ostensibly prioritise particular geographical (or, largely speaking, spatial) areas,²⁴⁸ their concerns are inevitably wider since places become suffused with the memoirists’ experiences and recollections, as well as equipped with individual meanings.²⁴⁹ Consequently, they become “mediums of exchange between the human and the natural” (Mitchell 2002c: 5). In this sense, places are (especially in light of the current debate on the anthropology of space and geopolitics [Mitchell 1994; Schlögel 2003; Rybicka 2014]) products of culture which hardly “exist” without the human gaze that deciphers and interprets them – the phenomenon which should be “a cause not for guilt or sorrow,” as Simon Schama notes in his influential book *Landscape and Memory*, “but celebration” (Schama 2004: 9). For memoirists of place, any place is necessarily a site of memory, a *lieu de mémoire*, a result of “cultural” and “humanistic geography” (Mitchell 2002a: xi).

Homage to Barcelona, the Irish writer Colm Tóibín’s 1990 book about the capital city of Catalonia, can be seen as a paradigmatic specimen of the micro-genre as it has been summarily discussed above. The book, whose title is a clear allusion to George Orwell’s 1938 collection *Homage to Catalonia*, opens with yet another nod to a different classic of (auto)-biographical writing, namely Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, with Tóibín saying:

I remember the strange humidity during the first September in the city. I remember the rancid smells and the constant noise as steel shutters were pulled up and down. I remember the sound of cars and motorcars reverberating against the old stone buildings, the footfalls and voices which echoed in the narrow streets. (Tóibín 2002: 1)

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²⁴⁶ When commenting upon the origin of the term “landscape,” Simon Shama draws one’s attention to its 16th century Dutch and German origin and such words as *landschap*, or *Landschaft* which mean “a unity of human occupation, indeed a jurisdiction, as much as anything that might be a pleasing object of depiction” (Schama 2004: 10).

²⁴⁷ Apart from Proulx’s memoir (2011), other notable specimens of this micro-genre written in the period 1990–2015 include Chinua Achebe’s *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012), Adam Thorpe’s *On Silbury Hill* (2014), and Edmund White’s *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris* (2014).

²⁴⁸ I remain aware of the differences between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*), not to mention landscape; however, for the sake of brevity of the present section, I shall overlook them.

²⁴⁹ To borrow W.J.T. Mitchell’s understanding of landscape, one could claim that places (as well as memoirs of places) are also “not an object to be seen or a text to be read, but [...] a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (Mitchell 2002b: 1).

Such an opening is a clear indicator of the kind of memoir Tóibín wishes to share with his readers: a narrative about Barcelona – the city which Tóibín visited for the first time in September 1975 and which has become not only a source of creative inspiration but also the writer's second home²⁵⁰ – governed but by the novelist's desire to affectionately reminisce about the very place and subjectively re-create it in his writing. This is not tantamount to saying that *Homage to Barcelona* does not recognise the need to write about Barcelona objectively and authoritatively. On the contrary, in its insistence on grasping the place's *genius loci*, the volume is eminently informative and knowledgeable (as indicated by the bibliography and the index at the end of the book) about Barcelona. Be it passages about the Gothic quarter, the city's "golden age" in the times of the Republic and the Civil War that followed, its artists, food and restaurants, the city's parks and *casas*, nightclubbing, or beaches, the book's multifaceted chapters always offer an amalgam of historical research, social analysis, and stories of Barcelona's well- (and little-)known citizens.

Tóibín writes about his beloved city aware of the fact that it is primarily a *mnemotopos*, a historicised cultural landscape, or, to use Elżbieta Rybicka's astute phrase, "topographic palimpsest of cultural memory, built up from successive strata of the remnants of human activities" (Rybicka 2015: 16). Consequently, Barcelona as narrated by Tóibín in his memoir – with its smell of garlic, gypsy struggles on the streets of La Ribera, or the unbearable humidity in August (Tóibín 2002: 3, 65, 143) – is a special site of memory that is both intimate (personal) and collective. The writer knows that it is impossible to separate *his* Barcelona from those of, for example, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró or Antonio Gaudí – the figures that populate the pages of his book; or, alternatively, that Barcelona is an accumulative cultural construct and that the gaze that he has given to it is exigently shaped by the gaze of others. In this sense, Barcelona is like Gaudí himself, the city's great architect – the man one knows little about and who, as Tóibín notes, left no memoirs, gave no interviews, and had no friends. Our view of Gaudí (and, by extension, Barcelona) is thus always mediated by those who did not "know" but only "interpreted" – first his fellow architects and then biographers. In this sense, the city is

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²⁵⁰ Tóibín lived in Barcelona from 1975 to 1978, returned to the city on many occasions (e.g. in 1988 he spent the whole year there to write *Homage to Barcelona*), and until this day he keeps an apartment there. It also features prominently in his writing, e.g. his first novel *The South* of 1990 and a short-story collection *The Empty Family* of 2010.

not only a *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989: 7) but, in fact, a *lieu d'imagination* that “crosses the symbolic boundary between an ‘imagined’ and a ‘real’ world” (Reijnders 2010: 37, 48).

But apart from being a place of memory, Barcelona – as narrated by Tóibín – is also a performative place, i.e. an agent that has the power to shape human history (cf. Baer 2005). Among its victims and victors are not only the likes of Jaume Miravittles, Francesc Macià, or Montserrat Caballé (not to mention a number of other Catalans, dead and living, whose fates and identities have been shaped by the experience of living in the city), but the novelist himself, “a bloke from a provincial Irish town” (Tóibín 2002: 24) for whom Barcelona is a place of escape from his oppressive homeland (just like Trieste was for his compatriot James Joyce), as well as a site where his gay identity is allowed to be articulated and acted out (cf. Tóibín 2014). Many years later in an essay entitled “The Art of Losing” Tóibín wrote:

As soon as I had been in Barcelona for a few days, I realized that I wanted to stay there and live there. I felt sometimes that I had escaped. I had found a replacement for home: I would, I thought, not have to think again much about what happened at home. The marl of cliffs at Ballyconnigar and the muted grey colors of clouds over the sea there seemed dull indeed compared to the glamour of the Mediterranean. The life I found in the new city, so filled with bright distraction, was far away from the house where I was brought up, and distant indeed from the loss, the silence. (Tóibín 2015a: 35–36)

Homage to Barcelona is neither an uncritical act of reverence paid to the Catalan capital city, nor a simple acknowledgement of its culture and heritage; first and foremost, it is Tóibín’s love-letter to the city – a place of the “lucky” ones who can “take on the smells, watch the people passing in and out of the shop, lean against the old presses where the bottles of good wine [are] kept, wait for [one’s] olives and anchovies to be served and shake [one’s] head in wonder of the sheer pleasure of being in Barcelona now, or any time” (Tóibín 2002: 205).

3.13. Ekphrastic Narrative, or Memoir of Object: *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* by Penelope Lively

Having defined memoirs of place as instances of periegetic writing, the present study would like to borrow another term from ancient rhetoric, namely ekphrasis, in order to define a separate class of memoirs which choose material objects for their thematic dominant.²⁵¹ As the name implies, ekphrastic memoirs – whose notable specimens include *A House Unlocked* by Penelope Lively of 2001, *The Pattern in the Carpet* by Margaret Drabble of 2009, and *My Life in Houses* by Margaret Foster of 2014 – do not only offer descriptions of objects (simply understood as fixable items that are both visible and tangible),²⁵² but, most importantly, acknowledge them as (human) life's anchors, receptacles of memories, vital points of reference and their organising principles, as well as stimulants that might have generated a given narrative in the first place.²⁵³ Hardly ever do memoirs of objects restrict themselves to narrating a person's life only (by referring to or describing items that the person in question has either possessed or encountered) or to the (ab)use of objects as illustrations of that life. More often than not, objects are given a life of their own; they become "bio-objects," which, like in Tadeusz Kantor's theatre,

²⁵¹ A growing interest in objects is to be seen not only in literature (as exemplified by this book's discussion of memoirs of objects) but also in philosophy, as manifested by so-called speculative realism, also known as object-oriented philosophy (cf. Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011).

²⁵² As evident, my definition of ekphrasis is wider than the classical reading of the term, since it does not only limit itself to the poetic description of *objets d'art* (traditionally understood) (cf. Webb 2009: 34–35), but to all physical objects that the memoirist identifies as relevant for his/her life story (such items, if one follows Kantor's definition of "bio-objects: or "poor objects," are, in fact, works of art [Kantor 1984: 132–133]).

²⁵³ This aspect was most recently addressed by Diana Athill in her 2015 memoir *Alive, Alive Oh! And Other Things That Matter*. She emphasises the fact that in old age people's memories often become substituted (or complemented) by memories of objects and places: "But then something odd happened. The things floating out of the past did often still include events which involved men, but just as often, and just as pleasurably, they were images of places and objects: all the most beautiful places and things that I once experienced" (Athill 2015: 2). Consequently, *Alive, Alive Oh!* May be classified as both periegetic and ekphrastic memoir. A similar observation (and, in fact, an application of Athill's formula) can be observed in Michał Głowiński's memoir of 2016 entitled *Car-ska filiżanka*, in which objects – which Głowiński calls "truwaje" (Głowiński 2016: 53), after a Surrealism-based concept of so-called *objets trouvés* – stimulate a narrative of his life. Following Głowiński, ekphrastic narratives could also be classified as "memoirs of the *trouvés*."

“are neither decorations nor [...] props”; together with the writer, “they merge into an entity, becoming an integral part” of the memoir; they are “autonomous” and “emanate their own life”; “due to their singular role, they [...] become a work of art”; the memoirists’ “performative potential” depends on them (Kantor 1984: 132–133; Zielińska 2015: 229).

A recent memoir which appears to support Bruno Latour’s statement that “objects too have agency” (Latour 2007: 63) – and can thus be seen as a rightful specimen of ekphrastic narrative – is *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* by Penelope Lively, her most recent²⁵⁴ memoir of object(s), which she herself defines as “a sort of material memoir” (Lively 2013: 200). Though, in what she calls her “view from old age” (3), Lively writes about a variety of issues (being a wartime child, her late husband Jack, visiting Russia, old age, history and memory, reading and writing, among others), her ambition is to narrate “one person’s life as reflected by possessions” – a selection of things which she recognises as her “identifying cargo” (ibid.). The six items that she selects and around which she structures the narrative’s thematic core are: the duck kettle-holders from Maine, the blue lias ammonites, the Jerusalem Bible bought by her nanny in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and given to Penelope in 1942, the Gayer-Anderson cat, and Elizabeth Barker’s sampler. Prior to writing about them at length, Lively – in a pure act of metaphoric animisation – professes her belief that people’s possessions “speak of them,” that they are “resonant and betraying and reflective,” and, crucially for my surmise to understand such items in terms of bio-objects, that they are “eloquent” (Lively 2013: 199). She further explains to her readers the reasons for writing the story of her life (as well as stories of her possessions’ lives) in the following manner:

[...] I have picked out six of the things that articulate something of who I am.
[...] I have seen these objects in the house imbued with new significance – I have seen how they reflect interests, and concerns, how they chart where I’ve been, and how I’ve been.

I imagine them in a car boot sale, or an auction room, mute, anonymous, though perhaps each might be picked up, considered, thought to have some intrinsic merit – or not. The bronze cat would be a snip – someone would bag that. The Jerusalem Bible might appeal, and the sampler. The leaping fish sherd

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²⁵⁴ Lively’s first attempt at the genre is her 2001 memoir titled *A House Unlocked*, in which she gave voice to the objects (e.g. rooms, dishes, jars, samplers, or gongs) in her grandmother’s house Golsoncott in Somerset.

and the ammonites and the duck kettle-holders are probably in a box of assorted junk, unwanted.

But before that happens let me give them each their story – theirs and mine. (199–200)

In keeping with the promise she has made, Lively never writes her own story only – each section, accompanied by a photograph of the objects described there, equally divides its interest between the novelist herself and her items, which liberate themselves from being subordinate to or delineative of Lively's happenings. She not only describes them in detail, or explains under what circumstances she entered into possession of them and how they stayed with her, but every time insists on giving them a voice of their own. When writing about her duck kettle-holders (and her love of birds), she is at pains to identify the actual ducks (a harlequin duck, most probably) that might have inspired the Maine-based folk artist who stitched them and to unearth their story. When trying to describe her fossils (and life-long fascination with palaeontology and archaeology), she goes back in time to the late Triassic and early Jurassic period in order to talk about her two ammonites, "mere babies" then (207), their extinction, their being "just something that has made the mind sit up and pay attention" (209), and she despairs about not being able to call them by *their* name; "just 'some kind of asteroceras or promicroceras; won't do,'" she says.²⁵⁵ When celebrating her own replica of the Gayer-Anderson cat (and, by extension, her early years spent in Egypt and her beloved grandfather) she allows this "emblematic" cat to "resonate in time and space, within [her] own time-span and beyond" and "speak of that tall house in Harley Street, of a Mameluke house in Cairo, of a ship anchored off Galipoli in 1915" (225).

As a specimen of ekphrastic narrative, *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* – Lively's "voyage around the eighty years by way of two ammonites, a pair of American ducks, leaping fish" (6) – requires from its readers to ultimately acknowledge that the memoirist and the objects that she writes about merge into one; that objects – despite their autonomy – vitally constitute the story of self; that she becomes embedded in her own possessions. For Lively, objects are tangible pieces of evidence that testify to one's existence, the (individual or collective) past's "tantalising messages"

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²⁵⁵ "The world and its life are the abiding delight and fascination, and to savour them to the full you want to have things labelled, named, classified; a tree is not just a tree, it is a particular tree, or you are only enjoying it as an agreeable sight" (Lively 2013: 210).

and “coded signals” (further amplified by her possessing them and, as such, imbued with new layers of meaning); while writing about them is a testament to the novelist’s “insatiable fascination with what has been, what is gone but survives in these glimpses afforded by something you can hold in your hands, these suggestions of other people who also held this, used it, made it” (234). Thus her memoir is to be seen as a polemic with Horace’s famous dictum, i.e. *exegi monumentum aere perennius*. Nothing is more durable than brass, Lively’s memoir asserts.

3.14. Bibliomemoir, or Memoir of Book: *The Man Within My Head:* *Graham Greene, My Father and Me* by Pico Iyer

The last micro-genre of writer’s memoir that the present chapter wishes to isolate and summarily describe is the so-called “bibliomemoir,” namely a type of narrative whose major signpost is its fusion of the story of one’s life and the experience of reading a book (Greek βιβλίον [*biblion*]). The term itself (further defined as “a memoir of a reading self”) was popularised by Rick Gekoski, who used it in a subtitle to his memoir *Outside of a Dog* of 2009 which offers an intimate discussion of twenty-five books²⁵⁶ that have become for the writer “objects of self-definition,” as well as of their formative power (Gekoski 2011: 8). In the introduction Gekoski rhetorically asked: “Who would I be abstracted from what I have read, how would I have been formed?”; and responded to the very question by stating that “I am inconceivable without my books. You can’t take them away, they are inside me, they are what I am. [...] I read, therefore I am” (8, 9).

In her 2014 review of Rebecca Mead’s *My Life in Middlemarch* – a story of Mead’s long-standing enchantment with (and admiration for) George Eliot and her Victorian classic *Middlemarch* – Joyce Carol Oates offered the most succinct and apt definition of the genre to this day. “Rarely attempted, and still more rarely successful, is the bibliomemoir – a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate, confessional tone of autobiography,” Oates stated. She also identified some of the genre’s most notable characteristics: “The most engaging bibliomemoirs establish the writer’s voice in counterpoint to the subject, with something

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²⁵⁶ They include J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1882), Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), or D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920).

more than adulation or explication at stake. [...] Each [of the bibliomemoirs that Joyce Carol Oates deems successful²⁵⁷ – R.K.] represents a risky appropriation of an exalted subject, and each fearlessly casts the memoirist's shadow over the text" (Oates 2014). In other words, a typical bibliomemoir is a crossbreed which incorporates not only the story of the self and other (a writer of a book, or books that is/are addressed by a given memoir), but also (due to their writers' competences) methodologies, instruments and techniques characteristic of literary criticism. What is more, specimens of bibliomemoir are usually reverential texts that unambiguously declare their fascination with the subject matter and acknowledge their influential power over the memoirist's (and, simultaneously, bibliophile's) life. However, equally importantly, the bibliomemoirists often refuse to be mere passive pawns, compelled to capitulate to the commanding forces of the narrative they cherish; on the contrary, they wish to establish themselves as self-governing agents of sovereign reading and living – proposing new interpretations and fresh analyses of the volume in question (the former), as well as attempting to resist the notion that "le livre fait le sens, le sens fait la vie" (Barthes 1973: 58) and escape the shadow cast upon their life by the very book(s) (the latter).

Out of a number of writers' bibliomemoirs that were published between 1990 and 2015,²⁵⁸ this section shall focus briefly on the 2012 narrative by the British-born Indian writer Pico Iyer entitled *The Man Within My Head*. The title – in itself an extended version of the title of Graham Greene's 1929 novel *The Man Within* – together with its subtitle, i.e. "Graham Greene, My Father and Me," is a straightforward declaration that Iyer's memoir is to be concerned with the eminent British novelist and the impact the writer and his books have had on Iyer. By putting Greene next to his father,²⁵⁹ Iyer unambiguously establishes his own patrimony

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²⁵⁷ I.e. Nicholson Baker's *U and I: A True Story* (1991), David Denby's *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (1996), Geoff Dyer's *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* (1997), Phyllis Rose's *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (1997), Christopher Beha's *The Whole Five Feet: What the Great Books Taught Me about Life, Death, and Pretty Much Everything Else* (2009), and Rick Gekoski's *Outside of a Dog: A Bibliomemoir* (2009).

²⁵⁸ E.g. *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D.H. Lawrence* by Geoff Dyer (1997), or *Howards End Is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home* by Susan Hill (2009), as well as *H Is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald (2014) and *The Dead Ladies Project: Exiles, Expats and Ex-Countries* by Jessa Crispin (2015).

²⁵⁹ Also graphically. The cover of the 2012 British edition of the book includes photographs of Greene and Iyer's father with the writer sitting on the latter's knees. In the book, Iyer calls Greene his "adopted parent" (Iyer 2012: 52).

and the fact that his self is not only of his father's loins (metaphorically speaking), but that his self – to paraphrase Rick Gekoski (Gekoski 2011: 9) – is furnished by the books written by Greene; that Greene “inhabits” him and is the very man within Iyer's head:

Who are the figures that take residence inside our heads, to the point where we can feel them shivering inside us even when we want to “be ourselves”? Who put them there, and why this man I've never met, and not that one? If I were to choose a secret companion, an unofficial alter ego, I would most likely fasten on someone more dashing, more decisive, less unsettled than Greene. [...] But our shadow associates are, like parents (or godparents), presences we've never chosen and, like many of our loves or compulsions, blur the lines inside us by living beyond our explanations. [...] But there he [Greene] is, in spite of everything. Not a hero or a counsellor or the kind of person I would otherwise want to claim as kin. (Iyer 2012: 21, 22)

Iyer's narrative is determined to demonstrate many layers of kinship between the two writers. He travels to the places that Greene himself visited and immortalised in his fiction – Saigon, New Mexico, Havana, and Bogotá, among others. He often dreams of him and talks to him in his fantasies. He confesses to sharing with Greene a sense of displacement, solitude and permanent foreignness, not to mention the fact that in his life he re-enacts the stories narrated by Greene in his fiction, that “[Greene's] novels [are] my unwritten autobiography” (Iyer 2012: 36). He admits that he writes stories and other pieces “in a Greene shade” (91), like the one about a renegade priest and his young girlfriend (6–7). Iyer's obsession with Greene and the interconnectedness of their lives is perfectly visible in the opening scene of the volume. In a fully Greene-esque setting (the main square in La Paz), Iyer is standing by the window in his hotel room and, having observed Bolivia's “elemental landscape” (women in ponchos, soldiers, shafts of light and shades of grey), he starts to write a story about a boy standing by a window in his school counting down the days till the holidays. As readers of *The Man Within My Head* soon learn, the boy is the young Graham Greene and the incident did occur as confirmed by Greene's own memoir *A Sort of Life* (1971). However, the boy is also Pico Iyer who admits to having been at a school “akin to this thirty years before” and sharing the same emotions as the ones he ascribed to Greene (3–5). Ultimately, Iyer presents himself as Greene's double, or shadow. He is the titular “other” from the final section (titled “The Other”) of Greene's memoir *Ways of Escape* of 1981 – an enigmatic figure who,

according to Greene, has stolen his identity and travels the world under the name Graham Greene.

Needless to say, in line with the poetics of bibliomemoir, the book is also a schooled study of Greene's life and work. Iyer not only writes a new (though highly unorthodox) biography of Greene, but also contributes to the body of criticism of Greene with a number of novel observations and studies – be it of Greene's works (for example, *Honorary Consul* [1973], *The Lawless Roads* [1939], *The Quiet American* [1955], *The Man Within* [1929], or *Our Man in Havana* [1959]), motives and tropes (the figure of a dentist, his characters called Henry, fathers, Catholicism, a technique of evasion, among others).

Still, despite so much attention being paid to the late novelist, *The Man Within My Head* is essentially autobiographical writing, while Greene – despite what the narrative asserts – is not the book's (and Iyer's) *spiritus movens*, but its phantasm, an instrument by means of which Iyer attempts to overcome the trauma related to the death of his father.²⁶⁰ The meaning of a phrase uttered by the novelist at the beginning of the book (namely “only through another [...] I could begin to get at myself” [Iyer 2012: 6]) becomes evident only in the last section of the volume – only by writing about his “adopted father,” can Iyer come to terms with the loss of his biological father. The sheer act of reading Greene and writing about him is a form of therapy, a search for consolation, which, as the final pages of the book reveal, he does, indeed, find:

[A]n adopted father can never die, I thought again; that's one of the great advantages he has over a real one. Indeed, if he's departed the world already, a virtual or a chosen father need never even age; he's always at the sage you need him to be, and you can hold him in all his ages at the same time, if you so choose. He grows old as you do, the books ripening and taking on new colors, so what once seemed comical gathers shadows all around it. Yet he never grows too old, or loses his memory. He's always there for you. Like a god, Greene might have added – except that a human, faltering, contradictory god is sometimes easier to believe in. (235–236)

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²⁶⁰ In this sense, Iyer's *The Man Within My Head* shares a lot with Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk*, with Greene being substituted by T.H. White.

To conclude this section, whose ambition was to offer a typology of writers' memoirs published over the last quarter of a century according to their thematic content, the present study would like to re-emphasise the fact that its proposition how to organise the genre's species is neither exhaustive nor absolute. Nevertheless, in order to offer a comprehensive and thorough (yet never quite all-encompassing) overview of the phenomenon in question, it has been recognised as the most fruitful approach, capable of illuminating the genre's complexity and profusion. When writing about her need for taxonomy, Penelope Lively declares:

The world and its life are the abiding delight and fascination, and to savour them to the full you want to have things labelled, named, classified; a tree is not just a tree, it is a particular tree, or you are only enjoying it as an agreeable sight. I can understand exactly what drove Linnaeus, despite being myself quite unscientific. Taxonomy is crucial, essential – the majestic discipline that marshals the natural world, so that everyone can know what is what and what it is not. (Lively 2013: 210)

What this study shares with Lively is a belief in the indispensability of taxonomy. Yet, it is also aware of the dangers and limitations that lurk behind such an approach, as well as the need to ultimately transgress generic borders in order to taste *le plaisir du texte*.

Gérard Genette's "Des genres et des oeuvres" offers, perhaps, the most perfect illustration of this position. It opens with the story of a sultan who has stopped visiting his fifty concubines and who, when asked by his distressed lovers about the reason for his sudden frigidity, confesses: "Hélas, [...] j'aime un autre harem" (Genette 2012a: 129). However, the celebrated French structuralist does not summon this anecdote in order to investigate the sultan's erotic life, but to pose a question about the condition for an aesthetic relation one might have with a class of texts, with a genre; and so he asks: "peut-on aimer un genre?" (ibid.). Having agreed on the essential "impurity" of any genre ("Rien n'est tout à fait singulier, rien n'est absolument générique" [Genette 2012a: 150]), Genette concludes that "le monstrueux pourrait éventuellement procurer un 'plaisir'" (156–157). A first step to appreciating a "mélange" or "hybride" (209) is what Genette calls "la conscience générique" (161), i.e. knowledge of the genre and its laws, which, subsequently, guarantees a recognition of "l'exceptionnalité positive," namely "en tout cas un

mérite en soi, qui permet à une œuvre d'être, dans sa catégorie, non pas la *meilleure* ni la *première*, mais bien la *seule* élue, ce qui certainement vaut mieux que toute autre élections" (245).

It is my belief that the study of writers' memoirs (a discussion of the genre's laws and species) which the present chapter has undertaken and the generic consciousness that it has raised will allow the readers of this book to see not only how the five specimens of writers' memoirs which the following five chapters privilege are rightful representatives of individual micro-genres; how "impure, anomalous and monstrous" they are; how they become "contaminated" by other micro-genres; but, above all, how "positively exceptional" they also are – i.e. neither the first, nor the best specimens of writers' memoirs, but, certainly, decidedly worthy of scrupulous exploration due to their singular remarkability.

PART TWO

Readings

CHAPTER FOUR

A Boy's Own Story: *In the Blood: A Memoir of My Childhood* by Andrew Motion

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself.

Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (1992: 141–142)

Nostalgia is the ache to return, to come home; *nostophobia*, the fear of returning; *nostomania*, the obsession with going back; *nostography*, writing about return.

André Aciman, "Alexandria: The Capital of Memory" (2001: 7)

Of course the dead outnumber us
– How their recruiting armies grow!
My mother archaic now as Minos.
She who died forty years ago.

Thom Gunn, "Death's Door" (Gunn 1994: 485)

Narrating historical lives remains at the very heart of Andrew Motion's diverse body of works – suffice it to mention Motion's two masterly biographies (of Philip Larkin and John Keats, respectively²⁶¹), a *faux* memoir/

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²⁶¹ *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* of 1993 and *Keats: A Biography* of 1997.

speculative biography of the poet-painter Thomas Griffiths Wainewright,²⁶² a specimen of biofiction, namely a biographical novel about William Tabor and John Keats entitled *The Invention of Dr Cake*,²⁶³ or (auto)biographical sketches included in the collection *Ways of Life*.²⁶⁴ Lives (of the self and others) also feature prominently in Motion's poetry²⁶⁵: those of historical figures like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Anne Frank, Harry Patch, or the Queen Mother, among others ("Goethe in the Park," "Anne Frank Huis," Motion's best-known and most-widely anthologised poem, "The Death of Harry Patch," "Remember This: An Elegy on the Death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother"), his friends (Ruth Had-don in "Fresh Water"), parents ("Passing On," "Anniversaries," "Sunday") and, of course, the Poet Laureate himself ("A Free Man"²⁶⁶).

An (auto)biographical impulse present in Motion's overtly *nostomantic* poetry²⁶⁷ – the kind that is obsessed with going back, with recollecting, with the workings of memory – is particularly visible in the poet's return

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²⁶² *Wainewright the Poisoner* published in 2000 offers the life story of the early 19th century artist (and, supposedly, a serial killer) Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. Motion's book is divided into two parts – a fabricated memoir (or *autrememoir*) of Wainewright himself (as imagined by Motion) and the biographer's discussion and interpretation of his life (focusing in particular on what the memoir part fails to mention).

²⁶³ Published in 2004, the book is a biographical fantasy which suggests that Keats did not die in Rome but recovered from tuberculosis and, consequently, returned to England to live as one Dr Cake, an Essex-based medical professional.

²⁶⁴ In particular "Sisted: A Homecoming" about his childhood home ("the house where I first paid attention to the word" [Motion 2008a: 3]), his parents and great-grand-parents and "Normandy: An Anniversary" about his father and his enlistment and involvement in World War II.

²⁶⁵ As noted by John McRae and Ronald Carter, "Motion's poetry, like his biographies, is constantly teasing out the relationships between art and life, reality and imagination, and the essence of creativity. His own poetry has frequently reflected the pain and emotion of his own life" (McRae and Carter 2004: 177) – however in a different way than in American confessional poetry. Using the title of Motion's 1984 collection of poems, Neil Corcoran notes that "Motion's narratives [lyric and prose – R.K.] [...] do indeed make 'dangerous play' with the circumstances of his own life" (Corcoran 2013: 252). He also claims that the major principle of Motion's poetry is "secret [i.e. personal and intimate] narratives" of the self and others (his family members in particular) (245).

²⁶⁶ In which he ostensibly refers to the surgery he has undergone.

²⁶⁷ "There is a lot in common in terms of the obsessions I have always worried away at and probably will always worry away at to my dying day. But what poet doesn't? In fact I am almost inclined to say that if you don't have that degree of obsession as a writer, then there's a problem. Of course, if your obsession is with tomatoes, that's not such good news. The number of good things you can write about a tomato is probably limited. But if your obsession is with death and the preservation of memories, that is quite a big subject, and I don't see why it shouldn't keep me busy until my own occurs" (Motion [in:] Wroe 2012).

to the central event of his early life – an accident which happened to his mother, who fell from a horse while hunting and whose brain, as a result of this calamity, was irrevocably damaged. The incident is referenced to in a number of his poems: for example in “A Blow to the Head,”²⁶⁸ “Anniversaries,”²⁶⁹ and in “In the Attic,” which reads:

Even though we know now
your clothes will never
be needed, we keep them,
upstairs in a locked trunk.

Sometimes I kneel there
touching them, trying to relive
time you wore them, to catch
the actual shape of arm and wrist.

My hands push down
between hollow, invisible sleeves,
hesitate, then take hold
and lift:

a green holiday, a red christening;
all your unfinished lives
fading through dark summers
entering my head as dust. (Motion 1998c: 5)

The above-mentioned accident also remains a central event in Motion's 2006²⁷⁰ memoir *In the Blood* which is – crucially for the present chapter – subtitled *A Memoir of My Childhood*. The book's first and last chapters (entitled “Essex Plough” and “Shut-Eye” respectively) address the very day in December of 1969 when Motion's mother fell from her horse, as well

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²⁶⁸ “I fit myself / along her spine / but dare not touch / her breaking skull / and find my mother / returns to me / as if she was climbing / out of a well / ginger with bruises, / hair shaved off, / her spongy crown / is ripe with blood” (Motion 1998a: 57–58).

²⁶⁹ “And I am still there, / seeing your horse return / alone to the open stable / its reins dragging behind / a trail across the plough / a blurred riddle of scars / we could not decipher then, / and cannot heal now” (Motion 1998b: 7).

²⁷⁰ The book was published a couple of months after the death of Motion's father – which may explain not only the dominant elegiac mood of the volume, but also the very decision to publish a story in which both parents (now dead) may be written about without any infringement of their rights to privacy.

as the days that immediately followed the unfortunate fall – the events that mark not only the end of childhood (as a specific period in the narrator’s life) but also coerce the termination of the book itself. True to its title, the book is bound to abandon its narrator/character entirely for the very reason that Andrew is not a child anymore.²⁷¹

To a reader familiar with Motion’s poetic oeuvre, the book’s structure clearly alludes to Motion elegiac poem “Anniversaries.” The latter piece consists of five sections – the first and the fifth of which being named “The fourth.” While the inner sections (sections two, three and four entitled “The first,” “The second,” and “The third”) retrospectively address his mother’s accident and the son’s visits to the hospital, the outer, framing parts (section one and five, both, as already mentioned, entitled “The fourth”) are anchored in the present: in the experience of the poet driving his car to his native Essex on a December day, an “anniversary” day of the accident.

In the Blood repeats the architecture of the poem. Chapters One and Twenty-Two not only frame the story of the poet’s childhood (i.e. core sections of the memoir, from Chapter Two to Chapter Twenty-One) but they also employ a distinctive narrative diction. While the rest of the book is written in the past tense – largely paradigmatic for this kind of reminiscing – with the narrator contemplatively looking back onto his young self and the events of his early life, the first and the last chapter of *In the Blood* are written in the present tense: hence, Motion not so much *re-collects* the last days of December 1969 as creatively and textually *re-lives* them. It does not mean, however, that the adult Motion is entirely absent from the narrative. For example, when the narrator is given a lift by his mother to catch a bus that would take him to his girlfriend’s house – the last time Motion actually talked to and saw his mother before the accident occurred – the story’s seemingly unruffled presentness is disturbed by an intervention from the future: “Then the bus lumbers to a stop and suddenly I’m in a muddle. *Do I kiss mum goodbye?* [my emphasis – R.K.] I’ve got to be quick, the driver’s glaring over his shoulder. Yes, of course I kiss her. I always kiss her goodbye, just a peck, but enough to catch her lemony soap-smell” (Motion 2007: 2). Also, when Andrew is on the bus, crossing Essex and Hertfordshire from Stisted (his home) to Bishop’s Stortford (where his beau lives), he – tellingly – thinks of himself

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²⁷¹ Unlike many other childhood memoirs (e.g. *Memoir* by John McGahern [2005]) Motion’s book offers no information as to what happens to its narrator/character in the subsequent phases of his life.

as a “ghost” (3) who watches people and places as he passes them by – so familiar to him (e.g. the bank where he opened his first account, the shop where he bought shoes for school) and yet so new. Quite importantly, their “newness” is due not only to an unfamiliar spatial perspective (high up in the bus) but also to a temporal one – he imaginatively re-visits them thirty-seven years later.

But the use of the present tense by Andrew Motion in the opening and closing chapter of his memoir also appears to have other significant implications for the narrative. Indeed, it is a way to formally differentiate childhood from adulthood, as well as to create – also by means of dialogue lines which, despite being obviously concocted, are carefully punctuated with quotation marks²⁷² – a sense of the book being, as John Mullan rightly observed in his review of *In the Blood* for *The Guardian*, “novel-like” (Mullan 2006). Also, it problematises the relationship between the present and past self – an issue which has been justifiably recognised as an important feature of Motion’s poetry.²⁷³ In “Open Secret,” one of his (auto)-biographical poems, the speaker says:

[...] He was never
myself, this boy, but I know if I tell you his story,
you’ll think we are one and the same: both of us hiding
in fictions which say what we cannot admit to ourselves.²⁷⁴ (Motion 1983: 10)

Moreover, the narratological formula employed in the two chapters of *In the Blood* addressed herein testifies to the failure of conventional narrative method (in our case, a straightforward mode of reminiscing) when applied to an act of recounting a life-changing and harrowing event from one’s past: the present self is unable to (historically) recapitulate it, only

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²⁷² Which is another convention of fiction employed by practitioners of the memoir form. Punctuating dialogue lines with quotation marks is not a signpost of truth-telling but, on the contrary, a way to emphasise the fictionality of the discourse. As John Mullan notes, “[s]ince the success of books such as *Angela’s Ashes*, or even, before that, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it has become an accepted convention of autobiography that the writer be able to remember such things [exact words pronounced by the characters – R.K.]. Yet all this dialogue must be invented, however consistent with the writer’s knowledge of characters and events” (Mullan 2006).

²⁷³ “His [Motion’s] narrators tell stories partly in order to understand themselves by turning themselves into characters” (Gregson 1996: 111).

²⁷⁴ Corcoran identifies the following paradox in this poem: “[O]nly through hiding in a fiction can its writer/narrator reveal himself, but [...] this revelation is also the opportunity for further concealment” (Corcoran 2013: 245).

to (imaginatively) re-perform it. Finally, it also corresponds to the emotional state that the narrator ascribes to himself – the one that follows the news about his mother’s accident and which is described in the following manner:

Part of my brain has escaped and is hovering in space. It watches me open my suitcase, take out my clothes, then pad the next door to run the bath. When I climb in, the water’s too cold – but I don’t mind. Everything should be wrong now, even the little things. And everything should be a question. Small questions and big questions jumbled together. (Motion 2007: 7)

Tainted with epistemological uncertainty and dis-pair, the self becomes split (dis-paired) into the “observing I” and “doing I” – much like the observing narrator who watches the performing character (himself) in the present-tense chapters of the book. Thus, an out-of-body experience from which the seventeen-year-old Andrew suffers becomes recorded by a specific narratological formula deliberately taken up by the adult Andrew, an experienced writer in his mid-fifties.

As already stated, the accident of Catherine Gillian Motion is acknowledged as the death of the child in Andrew.²⁷⁵ He says:

A lumpy thought is stuck in my head and I can’t find space for it: I need a minute alone. I’m thinking that for most people childhood ends slowly, so nobody can see where one part of life finishes and the next bit starts. But my childhood has ended suddenly. In a day. No matter what happens to mum, nothing will be the same from now on. (16)

However, it is also a founding event for the very book – understood as a memoir of childhood – and a declaration of its poetics since the calamity compels Andrew to a formal resolution regarding the preservation of the memories of the times that antedated the accident:

Then I’m thinking something else – no, not thinking. Wishing. I want to lock into my head everything that’s happened in my life up to now, and make sure it never changes. If I can keep it safe, I’ll be able to look back and be safe myself. I don’t want to explain it. I don’t want to talk about it in a grown-up language

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²⁷⁵ Though from a psychological point of view, at seventeen Andrew is not a child any more, but an adolescent.

I haven't learned yet. May be I don't even want to understand it. I just want everything as it was, when I saw the world for the first time. (ibid.)

Truth be told, the twenty subsequent chapters that tell the story of Andrew's (titular "my") childhood do not fully deliver what the above-quoted fragment promises. For instance, the language of *In the Blood* does not offer a distinct rendition of the language of the child. Unlike Joyce in the opening part of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Motion does not attempt to give an "accurate" – fabricated as it might be – voice to his young self. On the contrary, he talks about his childhood in "a grown-up language" – in fact, *the* language of Andrew Motion, with the writer's characteristic syntax,²⁷⁶ tropes, heightened sense of perception, melancholic tone, and precision; in short, in Motion's paradigmatic "lyric narrative" (Corcoran 2013: 252) in which "what is ordinary becomes stamped with what is extraordinary" (Meihuizen 2016: 154) due to an overt and deliberate poeticisation of the commonplace. By no means do such phrases as "smashed bits of light [...] spreading across the lawn like a disaster" (about the shade of the tree) (Motion 2007: 67); "it was like coming up from underground – not as deep as the huts, with earth in our hair and root scratches, but with the same fox-feeling of rising into the light" (about being summoned back to school from a remote part of the school park) (119); or "it made her look as though she'd once been a bird, and was remembering her wings" (about the movement of his mother's shoulders when mopping up plates) (166) belong to a child (precocious as he might be). However, they certainly belong to an adult poet.

The volume's poetic (adult) language and occasional intrusions of adult perspective²⁷⁷ do not change the fact that, on the whole, Motion wishes to stay true to the commitment he made with respect to the principles of his childhood memoir. His parents are never addressed otherwise than as "mum" and "dad." Also, throughout his book Motion seems to be determined to recreate the past rather than conspicuously interpret it. He neither "explains" nor consciously "understands" (16) a number of incidents and behaviours described in the narrative. Much like one of Andrew's first poetic loves, Thomas Hardy, he "tells us what he's feeling but not straight out" (284). Consequently, he does wonder why his father is

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²⁷⁶ As well as Motion's idiosyncratic punctuation.

²⁷⁷ "She [mum] let go of her feelings, and dad didn't. That was how he'd been brought up, and he wanted us to be the same" (Motion 2007: 67).

“jumpy so much of the time” (67), remarks on his regular, nightly consumption of whisky, or notices his mother’s skinniness and susceptibility to falling ill but does not spell out why it is so. His overt (sexual) interest in his mother’s body (e.g. in the scene when Andrew is loitering around the house, trying to get into his mother’s bedroom to see her get dressed) and her confusing reactions (first anger for staring at her underwear followed by “Stay darling. I’ll need you to do me up” [217]) are recorded but not explicated. The kind of interest that Rhubarb – one of Andrew’s teachers – takes in him is evident even to his fellow schoolmates, but Andrew remains oblivious to its nature.²⁷⁸ And while the adult Motion may well know the reasons for all of it, the narrator of *In the Blood* refuses to reveal them to his readers. Instead, he prefers to record “everything as it was” (16).

The word “everything” is not simply a figure of speech. Motion’s ambition – as the sheer size of his book confirms – is to tell the story of his childhood down to the smallest detail: a cherry tree behind their first house Little Brewers, types of cars the family owns, a shop where his first school uniform is purchased. The twenty chapters in which his childhood is contained – a “work of hindsight” as Frank Kermode described them (Kermode 2006: 18) – chronologically narrate the poet’s “meaningful pasts”²⁷⁹ (Macdonald 2009: 1) – from the “stories”²⁸⁰ about his family members to Andrew’s discovery of poetry, rebellion against his class and its values, and first love.

Inevitably for any narrative of childhood, parents occupy a special place in Motion’s reminiscences. Matrio-²⁸¹ and patriographical ingredients

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²⁷⁸ “Eyot [...] accused me of being Rhubarb’s pet. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked him, wishing he wouldn’t put his face so close. ‘He touches you on the arm when he’s marking your essays,’ he said. ‘in front of the whole class.’ Then he flounced off as if that proved everything, and I shouted after him, ‘It’s not true!’ But it was true. Rhubarb did sometimes touch me when I was standing beside his desk. I didn’t mind. It showed he liked me, which must have been why he put me in charge of the choir as well, even though I wasn’t the best singer in the school, and couldn’t hold the alto part in hymns” (Motion 2007: 222).

²⁷⁹ I am referring here to Sharon Macdonald’s definition of heritage which understands as the “meaningful pasts that should be remembered” (Macdonald 2009: 1).

²⁸⁰ Motion insists on the use of the word “stories” when talking about his relations (Motion 2007: 18). Chapters Two and Three deliberately do not offer “facts” about his family but “stories” that have been shared by relatives over the years and which are characterised by the storyteller’s inevitable “fibbing” (33) with the truth. This further accentuates an imaginative rather than factual appropriation of the past.

²⁸¹ The book’s first word is “mum” (Motion 2007: 1).

seem to penetrate every single chapter of the memoir.²⁸² The readers learn (directly or indirectly) about their background, first encounter, marital life, hobbies, and quirks; but also about their foibles and weaknesses – close-mindedness, snobbery and parochialism in particular²⁸³; as well as about Andrew's attitude towards them: veneration for his mother and emotional coldness with respect to his father. But they are not the only significant others in Andrew's life: his brother Kit, Ruby – his grandmother's carer, first teachers – Mr. Lucas and Miss Vickery, friends (Miller II, Sandy), loves (Rosie, Jenny) are only a few of the plethora of characters that populate the pages of Motion's manifestly relational memoir.

Although each and every chapter of Motion's childhood memoir is a self-contained entity (or "scene," to refer to the category that has been introduced in Chapter Three of my book) boasting a distinctive thematic interest,²⁸⁴ a number of them focus on what is one of Motion's most constitutive experience, namely his school years. Born to an upper middle class family, Andrew has no choice but go to a boarding school; two boarding schools, in fact, Maidwell in Northampton and Radley College, where he enrolls when he is thirteen. Prior to his mother's accident this might well be recognised as the most traumatic act in the life of the young boy. Detachment from his relatives, mother in particular, soon leads to his general estrangement and a profound sense of isolation which is soon to be accompanied by "sadness" – an emotion that Andrew appears to be particularly familiar with and which powerfully speaks to him when, a few years later, he starts reading poetry (283–284). School is presented as a particularly hostile environment. Recollection of those times are some of the darkest passages in the whole narrative. "We knew that under the surface, most things at school were the opposite of normal," the narrator confesses (126). The boys, including Andrew, are regularly subjected to physical and emotional abuse – being beaten by the school's

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²⁸² They are also the people to whom the very memoir is dedicated.

²⁸³ E.g. his parents are unhappy when Andrew and the village kids get together, but are particularly appreciative when their son befriends Birkbeck, whose parents own a castle (Motion 2007: 220).

²⁸⁴ Also, taking into account the fact that every chapter has its unique title which refers to their content, Motion's memoir bears some resemblance to what might be seen as one of the world's first memoirs, namely *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon. In her narrative, the "headlines" (chapter titles) play an important role and they are typically arranged according to five different types. One of them, the so-called *monowazukushi* covers the titles that refer to the natural world and its phenomena – similarly to a series of titles in Motion's book (e.g. "Essex Plough," "The Cliffs of America," "The Eggs"). See: Shōnagon 2003: 15 (particularly footnote no. 1).

headmaster, who is referred to as Beak, and regular enemas being some of the most harrowing school experiences.²⁸⁵ Showers – those places of humiliation and shame since they demand enforced nudity²⁸⁶ – are considered the best place for crying: “No one could tell the difference between tears and water, and you could always say you’d got soap in your eyes if anyone asked why they looked puffy” (110). Rescue from this predicament is found outside the school building. When at home Andrew was already particularly attuned to the natural world – not only animals but also trees, flowers, fields, etc., but it is only when he moves to the boarding school at the age of eight that his love for nature erupts. Whenever it is possible the boy explores the gardens and meadows surrounding the school. He even finds his own secret place by the lake where he frequently escapes to contemplate nature. “When I was close to leaving Maidwell,” the narrator admits, “I worked out that in five years I must have spent almost a month sitting alone on the plank in the middle of the lake” (116). His relationship with nature is presented as remarkably intimate, as in the following description of the frozen lake:

The lake was [...] like ice, and slithery, which made it difficult to tell whether it had edges, or stretched all the way to the horizon. It was so much like a dream, I made sure I got some mud on my fingers – then in the morning I could check. Like a dream, or like one of the engravings in the library, where if I looked carefully I could see each of the tiny scratch-marks the artist had made. My brain felt like that. As though the point of every twig, every blade of grass, every rush by the lake, every dart of moonlight, was a kind of nib, scraping inside my head. The shapes they carved would stay with me, like the dampness creeping through the soles of my slippers and the frosty air sparkling into my nose and mouth. Not even Beak could take them away [...]. (131)

Motion’s heightened perception and thus prioritisation of nature²⁸⁷ is given an adequately high quantitative representation in his memoir. Similarly to the bird and plant books (“nature notebooks” [172]) that Andrew obsessively creates, *In the Blood* with its incessant descriptions of nature (from Andrew’s dogs – Beauty and Wiggy, and horses – Tommy and

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²⁸⁵ Though by no means the only ones. Another teacher, Miss Hardrick, is known among the boys as “Haggie Hairpull” (Motion 2007: 122).

²⁸⁶ To increase their discomfort, the shy boys who wish to cover their crotches are forced to walk slowly and keep their hands by their sides (Motion 2007: 110).

²⁸⁷ According to Andrew, only when he is in communion with nature does he lead a “real life” (Motion 2007: 77).

Lollipop, to types of trees found in the forest adjoining their family house in Stisted) might be seen as a collection of stills/engravings featuring pieces of nature, as a “landscape” of the self.²⁸⁸

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288 *In the Blood* is not a “portrait” of childhood – it is, if one would like to identify parallels between the genres of literature and painting, a “landscape” of childhood – particularly due to the sense of unity that exists despite the book being divided into a series of chapters/segments, its insistence on mood as an essential dimension of the narrative, as well as the poet’s attention to the objects of nature. Such an understanding of the “landscape” would be consistent with Georg’s Simmel’s claims formulated in “The Philosophy of Landscape.” Simmel believes that “for there to be a landscape, our consciousness has to acquire a wholeness, a unity, over and above its component elements, without being tied to their specificity or mechanistically composed of them” (Simmel 2007: 21). “Torn away and standing on its own,” he further argues, “a landscape is permeated by an opaque awareness of this infinite interconnectedness. In the same way, the work of a human being stands as an objective, self-contained construct that nevertheless retains an interconnectedness, though one hard to express, with the whole soul, the full vitality of its creator, sustained and still perceptibly permeated by it. Nature, which in its deep being and meaning knows nothing of individuality, is transfigured into an individuated ‘landscape’ by the human gaze that divides things up and forms the separated parts into specific unities. [...] Landscape, as a work of art, comes about as the progressive continuation and cleansing of a process in which a landscape, in its ordinary sense, grows out of mere impressions of discrete objects of nature. An artist delineates one part within the chaotic stream and infiniteness of the immediately given world, and conceives of and forms it as a unitary phenomenon. This now derives its meaning from within itself, having severed all threads connecting it to the world around it and having retied them into its own centre. We follow the same procedure – only in a less developed, less fundamental degree, and in a fragmentary way unsure of its boundaries – as soon as we perceive a ‘landscape’ in place of a meadow, a house, a brook and passing clouds” (22, 23). According to Simmel, mood is “the most important carrier of unity [that characterises landscape].” It is “not itself something discrete, and often also not an attribute of any one individual trait. All the same, it is that commonality where all these individual traits interconnect. In the same way, the mood of a landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any one of them. In a way that is difficult to specify, each component partakes in it, but a mood prevails which is neither external to these constituents, nor is it composed of them. [...] Mood is an essential – or maybe the essential dimension that integrates all component elements into a landscape as a perceptual unit” (26, 27). About the creators of the landscape, Simmel says thus: “An artist is someone who carries out the formative act of contemplative perception and feeling in such a pure form and with such vigour, that the given material gets completely absorbed and then, seemingly out of its own, comes to be created anew. While the rest of us remain more tied to this material, and still tend to note only this or that separate part, only the artist really sees and creates ‘landscape’” (29). One should also note that landscape painting is traditionally seen as profoundly entwined with the notion and practices of the class system, especially the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie – the issue which is also central to Motion’s narrative. For more on the genre of landscape painting – in the context of British and English cultural identity – see Karolina Kolenda’s monograph *Na (nie)swojej ziemi*, especially the book’s chapter dedicated to landscape (Kolenda 2016: 170–191).

But Motion's vision is far from exuberant pastoralism. In J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, with which Motion's book shares a number of affinities,²⁸⁹ its child character, John, finds an encyclopaedic definition of childhood ("a time of innocent joy, to be spent in meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in the storybook" [Coetzee 1998: 14]) and realises that it is a concept alien to him. His childhood, if anything, is "the time of gritting the teeth and enduring" (ibid.). A similarly anti-idyllic representation of childhood may be encountered on the pages of *In the Blood*. Andrew is not only a victim of violence, but a conscientious chronicler of its many occurrences. His mother's accident is only the last in a series of atrocious events that he witnesses in his early life – not only his own illness, a chronic inflammation of the kneecaps which turn him into an invalid, but, particularly, ones connected with the suffering of animals – be it when a bull terrier attacks and almost kills their dog Beauty, when Andrew takes part in his first hunt and becomes marked by its Master with the dead fox's blood,²⁹⁰ or when his father shoots a stag and forces his son to butcher the dead animal – put his hands into the opening and remove the insides. "I felt the hot blood sliding over my fingers, under the ends of my nails, into my cuts and scratches," Andrew states (215). The "bloody" episodes are impossible not to view as corresponding to the title of the memoir, which comes from William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey": "I have owed to them / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet, / Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart" (Wordsworth 2000: 235). Without reservation, the titular phrase "in the blood" may be identified as the book's major trope: not only does Andrew become literally covered in blood several times during the narrative (indeed, darkly ironic rites of passage in light of the actual one which involves his mother's fall), but he also needs to position himself with regard to what "runs in his blood," namely his family and its heritage, both tangible and intangible. The blood's "ambiguity" is alluded to when Andrew goes fishing to Scotland:

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²⁸⁹ Most notably the use of the present tense, alienation, and family dynamics (love for the mother and troubled relationship with the father).

²⁹⁰ "I took off my hat, and bowed like I'd done for the Bishop of Colombo at Confirmation. [...] The Master's hand leaped towards me, so quick the fox's pad was only a blur between his fingers. But cold, definitely cold, with a strange breeze which chilled my skin before it actually touched. Then I felt three freezing stripes: one across my forehead, one on my left cheek, one on my right" (Motion 2007: 152).

I'd thought I must be a natural, and had in my blood all the things I needed to know, just waiting to appear. But as it turned out I had a lot of things in my blood as well – things that were a real nuisance, and made me catch the grass, and tangle my line, and bung up the reel, and hook my coat. (201)

Hence, Motion's memoir – and, consequently, the vision of childhood that it offers – becomes a story of resistance to the blood, as well as of the difficult process of negotiating the self *vis-à-vis* the others. From this point of view, *In the Blood* reveals itself to be a narrative about violence and separation rather than innocence and affinity²⁹¹; childhood, it appears to suggest, is not a period of wholeness and bliss but a time of separation and precariousness. Andrew's increasing alienation from those around him (which, in turn, becomes compensated for by a growing communion with nature) is what his childhood entails in the first place. His initial, subtle manifestations of defiance (e.g. when he invites a salesman to Little Brewers so as to persuade his parents to purchase the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, or escapes from home to avoid being sent to boarding school) become gradually substituted by more unconcealed acts of resistance towards what his family represents.²⁹² It is not so much that "home [isn't] the same any more" (188), but that Andrew is not. Encouraged by his friend Sandy, he starts listening to Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones. He announces to his parents that he will not go hunting or shooting with them anymore. "The way people said they loved animals but spent most of their time trying to kill them. The way they never talked about anything, just dashed around complaining" (273) – Andrew blurts out to his friend. Elsewhere he says: "I want to live differently. [...] More thinking" and – unlike his own father – "does not feel like that [keeping close to the past]" (275, 273).

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²⁹¹ The memoir contains a number of overtly Lacanian scenes (as far as their recognition and *méconnaissance* [mis-recognition] of the self are concerned) in which Andrew finds himself in front of the mirror. The first scene shows Andrew assisting his mother in her make-up sessions and brushing her hair: "Everything was doubled in the main mirror in front of us, multiplied over and over in the smaller ones on either side. Her face and mine" (Motion 2007: 52). Later, when in school, Andrew re-enacts this scene in front of the bathroom mirror: "Then I had a last look at myself and stuck out my lips, like mum when she was making sure her lipstick hadn't smudged. Should I start brushing my hair into a fringe?" (180).

²⁹² Resistance, which, one should note, will never lead to full liberation – as symbolically expressed by the scene of washing his face clean after the first hunt: "The bars of blood had broken as soon as I touched them, but I could still see where they'd been. The skin was definitely redder there, and tighter, as if I'd been burned" (Motion 2007: 153).

Most importantly, however, Andrew's intransigence – channelled by Peter Way, his dedicated English teacher²⁹³ – brings the fruit of, firstly, him becoming interested in poetry and, secondly, becoming a poet himself. Having been introduced to the works of Thomas Hardy, W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath, not to mention the likes of Wordsworth, Keats, Eliot or Edward Thomas, Andrew discovers a way to address what he feels: “the evening mixture of sad and safe,” not only his favourite mood but the mood for which his own verse will soon become recognised (286). Moreover, it is through Mr. Way that Andrew discovers a book which – one is tempted to suspect – is a blueprint for *In the Blood*, namely *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928) by Siegfried Sassoon, which opens with a sentence that could easily appear in Motion's own book: “My childhood was a queer and not altogether happy one. Circumstances conspired to make my shy and solitary” (Sassoon 1974: 1). It is in this very book that Motion finds a number of formal and thematic characteristics that the present chapter has discussed: “the mixture of country things and family things, the little boy snug in his life but outside it at the same time” (298).

Motion's childhood does not end as experienced consumers of growing-up narratives might initially suspect. His visit to Julia, which opens the book and which gives the promise of the boy's first sexual experience, becomes interrupted by the call from home and the news of his mother's accident. In the last chapter of the book readers are brought back to where they started from: to the seventeen-year-old Andrew in the wake of the family catastrophe. The transformative power of the accident is all-embracing, not least for the boy who has now, as announced by the narrative at the very beginning, turned into a man (16): when Motion's father returns from hospital with a plastic bag carrying his wife's clothes, he looks not like himself but “someone [...] very like him, a man whose skin has come loose from his skull and is about to drop clean away” (314); when Andrew and Kit visit their mother in the intensive care unit, the former admits that he “can't get past to see mum's really mum [and] tell how much of her is alive and how much is machinery” (323). However, apart from effectuating the book's structural frame (by means of returning to the present-tense mode), or emphasising the terminal aspect of childhood/adolescence, the closing section of Motion's memoir constitutes a (meta)thematic coda. The child may, indeed, be dead but the writer has been born – the writer of *In the Blood*, as the following dialogue – much

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²⁹³ About whom Motion recently wrote a poem and a short narrative piece (Motion 2016).

fabricated and concocted, too implausible to be conducted by a pair of young boys – between Andrew and Kit reveals:

Kit wonders whether I'd like to spend some time in my room alone, and when I say no he pulls a face. "I thought you might want to write something," he tells me. He means to be kind, but it makes me feel stupid – as though I might be thinking of myself, not about mum. "I'm going to keep everything, that's happened," I say, remembering what I told myself yesterday. "What, you mean the last couple of days?" Kit asks. "No, I'm going to keep everything. The whole of the past, locked up inside my head. Just as it was." "You can't do that," Kit says, sucking in his bottom lip to show he's concentrating. "Whatever happens next will interfere with it. And anyway, you'll want to understand it. That'll change it all." "I know," I tell him. "I don't mean I won't think about it – I'll expect I'll think about it for ever. I just mean I'll keep it safe inside me as well. Separate." Kit nods, slowly. "And write it down eventually?" "Perhaps," I say. (312–313)

Hitherto, this study has referred to Motion's memoir as the "landscape of the self" – a decision which has not been exclusively governed by the term's metaphorical aptness and its propitiousness as far as the formal aspects of the narrative (versus the characteristics of landscape painting as a distinctive art genre) are concerned. As a matter of fact, visual arts are intriguingly (and, one should note, very subtly) present in the whole book²⁹⁴: Benjamin Joseph Haydon's *Christ Entry to Jerusalem*²⁹⁵ (1814–1820) and William Frederick Yeames's *And When Did You Last See Your Father* (1878) which are displayed on the great staircase of Maidwell Hall and which foreshadow the boy's suffering and isolation; Henry Thomas Alken's *The Midnight Steeplechase* (1839) – a series of prints depicting a night race²⁹⁶ which are hung at Little Brewers, next to the portraits of the ancestors, flower paintings and a reprint of James McNeill

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²⁹⁴ They also remain central to Motion's artistic practice. In the "Afterword" to his collection of essays entitled *Ways of Life*, he writes about the role paintings have played in his life – from the images present in his parents' house to his visits to world art galleries. He writes: "Because my first independent loves were reading and writing, books became the focus of my rebellion: they allowed me to imagine, and eventually to discover, my own different life. Pictures might have done the trick equally well, supposing my school English teacher Peter Way had taught me art history not literature, and supposing I'd known where to find them" (Motion 2008b: 263).

²⁹⁵ Which famously includes the portraits of William Wordsworth and John Keats – both friends of Haydon – as people in the crowd.

²⁹⁶ And, ominously, a number of falls with the riders failing to see the fences in the pitch dark.

Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* (1872–1875); a copy of Peter Paul Rubens's *The Adoration of the Magi*²⁹⁷ which Motion's great-grandparents bought for the local church in Stisted; or an unidentifiable²⁹⁸ painting featuring geese and marshes by Peter Scott which Andrew's dad – aware of his offspring's love of nature – gives to his son.²⁹⁹ What is more, Motion's understanding of and taste in pictures – not primarily literature – seems to shape *In the Blood*. In the "Afterword" to the collection *Ways of Life*, which is predominantly concerned with paintings and painters, Motion admits to his particular enjoyment of pictures which connect "[his] childhood with [his] later life in ways that [are] uniquely definite." Looking at such works of art is compared to "being in two minds, or more than two minds," while their effect on the onlooker is described as making one "all-of-a-piece" (Motion 2008b: 269). In a piece on Jacob von Ruisdael, he writes in detail about the painter's technique – "the accuracy [i.e. minute precision – R.K.] and the make-believe [i.e. invented landscape – R.K.]" which result in "an extraordinary mixture of skill and panache, fidelity and daring, respect for littleness and thrill of grandeur" (Motion 2008c: 70) – qualities that apply to Motion's own writing style as stipulated by the present chapter.³⁰⁰ Finally, one could be tempted to recognise that at the heart of Motion's memoiristic project lies not the speaker of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" but a figure from John Constable's iconic *The Cornfield*³⁰¹ (1826) – a Narcissus-like boy who, down on his stomach, examines (and drinks from) the creek – since it is with Constable,

²⁹⁷ It remains impossible to say which of the four existing versions (attributable to Rubens) of the painting are purchased by Motion's relatives – although the one which remains on display in King's College Chapel, Cambridge (1616–1617) remains most likely.

²⁹⁸ It needs to be mentioned that most of the above-listed pictures are not overtly named by the narrative – their identification and attribution remain concealed and require considerable effort on the part of the reader.

²⁹⁹ The book also contains some other references to visual arts, and paintings in particular. When Andrew's father returns from the hospital, he is described as "framed in the doorway like a portrait" (Motion 2007: 314). Moreover, a number of titles – due to their phrasing and the visual imagery that they evoke – reads like picture titles, e.g. "In the Wood," "Beauty," "The Ashground," "The Gate and the Shadow."

³⁰⁰ Motion also shares with Ruisdael his understanding of the human lot – "to be isolated [...] and transitory" (Motion 2008c: 71). Jacek Woźniakowski emphasises Ruisdael's multi- or transdisciplinarity – a feature that permeates Motion's writing as well – namely his being not only a painter, but a thinker and a poet too, as well as his love of Goethe and insistence on the perception of nature as essentially symbolic (Woźniakowski 1995: 133).

³⁰¹ David Morley aptly describes this painting as expressing "a powerful symbolism of Englishness as itself enshrined in the simple pleasures of rural, bucolic life" and as an "archetypical representation of a nostalgic vision of Englishness" (Morley 2003: 35, 36). For

and not Wordsworth, that Motion shares a love of Essex³⁰² and the English countryside, an obsessive return to one's birthplace, an exploration of the links between poetry and painting,³⁰³ nostalgia, as well as – to quote Motion's own appraisal of the art of John Constable – a rendering of “the sense of loss [...] as a hard fact, and in such a way as to lift it from the descriptions of a mood into a presentation of the whole human condition” (Motion 2008d: 82).

But there is one more painter – never named, never overtly acknowledged – that should be recognised as central to Motion's memoir: Lily Briscoe, a character in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf. Her presence is evoked by the line which ends *In the Blood*: “Here we are at last” (326), a phrase which is uttered upon returning back home from a vigil held by the mother's bed and which bears – as I would like to argue – an unusual resemblance to what Lily Briscoe says when, on the very last page of the “Time Passes” section, she returns to the Ramsays' summer house; namely, “Here she was again” (Woolf 1996: 212). The identification of this intertextual correspondence between the two books encourages one to pose a question about the non-aesthetic (psychoemotional) function that *In the Blood* has played for Motion himself. Famously, the act of writing *To the Lighthouse* was profoundly therapeutic for Woolf, a notion that she explained in the following way:

It is perfectly true that she [Woolf's mother, i.e. Julia Duckworth Stephen – R.K.] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she dies when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four. Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush [...] I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.

I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.³⁰⁴ (Woolf [in:] Lee 1997: 482)

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more on the role of Constable's *The Cornfield* in British culture, kindly consult Vaughan 1996: 17–27.

³⁰² Constable's Dedham Vale is located on the Essex-Suffolk border. Anecdotally, what the two artists also share is having only one sibling – in both cases a brother.

³⁰³ On the use of poetry by Constable, see Payne 2007: 21–26.

³⁰⁴ As Hermione Lee notes, this passage from *A Sketch of the Past* should be read together with an entry from Woolf's diary in which she says: “1928. Father's birthday. He would have been 1832 96, yes. 96 today; & could have been 96, like other people one has known; but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books – inconceivable. I used to think of him

Was writing *In the Blood* also a form of self-help? Is the volume's narrative a therapeutic exercise? Was it – as indeed it was for Woolf – an ultimate and definitive act of liberation? The following excerpt from an interview Motion gave in 2012 seems to confirm that the answer to all the above-listed questions is a categorical “yes”:

And then [in 2006 – R.K.] – which I hadn't expected to happen – the very day my father died, 40-odd years later, I felt my mother depart from me and her presence in me changed. She didn't disappear. But she stopped being the default setting in everything I thought about. Will I keep writing about her? We'll see. There's no burning desire at the moment. I used to feel that people couldn't hurt me because I'd already been hurt so badly. It was a kind of shield as well as a sadness. The ending of that feeling has been important. It has made me more self-confident and probably more open. This feeling of liberation I have is crucially to do with that. The cliché hovering around this is that people don't really grow up until their parents are dead. But there is a special sense in which that is definitely true for me. (Motion [in:] Wroe 2012)

In the Blood was written in the aftermath of his father's death – in memory of Motion's parents (as the book's dedication states) but also as a way to “exorcise” their ghosts and his obsession with them. It is a memoir of childhood which – by the very means of writing it – is also an attestation of the child's (this “father of the Man”) much needed death.

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and mother daily; but writing *To the Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true – that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act)” (Woolf [in:] Lee 1997: 481–482).

CHAPTER FIVE

Amongst Women: *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* by Rachel Cusk

36. Goethe described blue as a lively color, but one devoid of gladness. “It may be said to disturb rather than enliven.” Is to be in love with blue, then, to be in love with a disturbance? And what kind of madness is it anyway, to be in love with something constitutionally incapable of loving you back?

37. Are you sure – one would like to ask – that it cannot love you back?

Maggie Nelson, *Bluest* (2009: 14–15)

An image in a mirror is a reversal, the reflection and the original are joined but might cancel each other out.

Damon Galgut, *In a Strange Room: Three Journeys* (2010: 41)

Truth, in short, makes its way amid the shimmering of artificial amenities as well as asserting itself in painful mirror games. Does not the wonderment of psychic life after all stem from those alterations of protections and downfalls, smiles and tears, sunshine and melancholia?

Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (1989: 259)

[J]ust the thought of fiction, just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me feel nauseous.

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book 2: A Man in Love* (2013: 505)

You emerge with your cohorts out of the jungle of middle life, each possessing your own private knowledge of courage or cowardice, and do a quick headcount, an inventory of missing limbs.

Rachel Cusk, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2013: 15).

To say that the British-Canadian writer Rachel Cusk is – next to the likes of J.M. Coetzee and Karl Ove Knausgaard – one of the most original and dedicated memorists of our time is nothing short of an understatement. As a matter of fact, a reference to Coetzee and Knausgaard, these two thespians of present-day “autobiographical turn,”³⁰⁵ is by no means random; on the contrary, they might well be seen as crucial inhabitants of what Frances Stonor Saunders called “Cuskland” – the (non)fictional worlds that Cusk has been creating in her literary oeuvre since her debut novel *Saving Agnes* in 1993 (Saunders 2012).

A trajectory of Cusk’s literary career is almost identical to that of the former writer. Much like Coetzee, whose autobiographical trilogy³⁰⁶ followed the release of such masterpieces as *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Foe* (1986), Cusk embarked on her autobiographical project only after a series of highly successful novels: *Saving Agnes* (1993), *The Temporary* (1997), and *The Country Life* (1997).³⁰⁷ Similarly to Coetzee’s trilogy, her memoirs, i.e. *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001), *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009), and *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012), are not only a series of interconnected pieces that comprise a total and finished off whole; they do not only test the boundaries of the genre and of autobiographical writing *per se* (as the present chapter will attempt to prove), but they also hail the arrival of a new phase in both writers’ oeuvres – one which recognises the fact that, to use Cusk’s own words, “autobiography is increasingly the only form in all the arts. Description, character – these are dead³⁰⁸ or dying in reality as well as in art” (Cusk [in:] Kellaway 2014). Finally, just like Coetzee, Cusk is vitally interested in theorising autobiography, as in the introduction to the second edition of *A Life’s Work*:

The values of literature and the values of life are to the novelist what the chisel and the block of stone are to the sculptor. The first seeks to impose a form on the second. Truth, justice, beauty: these are the qualities to which a work of fiction aspires, and which it must fabricate out of human experience. [...]

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³⁰⁵ Cf. Gorra 1995: 142–153; Boyle 2007.

³⁰⁶ *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009).

³⁰⁷ *Saving Agnes* was awarded the Whitbread First Novel Award, while *The Country Life* was the recipient of the Somerset Maugham Award.

³⁰⁸ In Coetzee’s work, the death of description and character may be most ostensibly visible in his 2016 novel *The Schooldays of Jesus*.

The relationship between literature and life is not fundamentally altered for the writer by the removal of the term “fiction.” Whether a thing is called fiction or fact has no particular bearing on the chisel and the block of stone, on the pursuit of truth and beauty, even on the task of fabrication itself. Two people witnessing the same incident can give very different accounts of it: one of them makes obscure and boring what the other renders funny and riveting. So for the writer the work is the same, the ambitions the same: to make something that is beguiling out of the materials to hand. It is for the reader that the distinction is more troubling. That incident the two people witnessed – did it actually happen or didn’t it? Did they just make it up? Does it matter? It does, of course. In life there is a great difference between a flesh-and-blood occurrence and a story invented to amuse or enlighten an audience. You listen to a made-up story with a reflective, passive, interpretative ear. But an account of real events arouses you more physically: it actually engages your fears, your capacity for courage or terror, your outrage, your jealousy, your sympathy. You care in ways that can be equally powerful (some people are entirely factual; others feel more about art than they do about life) but are fundamentally different. (Cusk 2008a: 1–2)

The links between Cusk and Knausgaard are also quite tangible, primarily in their dissatisfaction with the limitations of fiction, as well as their prioritisation of the “reality of life” – the life that is private, daily, and domestic, and which is “the reflection of the quotidian, the visceral” (Cusk 2005). A couple of years before the release of the first volume of *My Struggle*, in an essay for *The Guardian* Cusk acutely addressed the question of truth (as opposed to fiction) in contemporary English writing:

For the modern British – more to the point, English – novelists this notion of truth is a little obscured and inaccessible. We are a divided society obsessed with the past. When we talk about truth, we are unsure whether it is the same truth we are talking about. We have a liking for books that evade the question, the books that deal in history and large events the author neither witnessed nor lived through. There we can feel grief, rage, excitement. What’s more, a book set in the past is virtually guaranteed to talk about sex. To the sexually repressed English, historical fiction is among other things a series of opportunities for physical congress. It is the element of fantasy, and liberation. [...] [F]or an English writer, with pretensions to greatness, and with no story of otherness or ethnicity to tell, nothing could be further from their intentions than to address the unadorned matter of life in a modern household, on a modern street. (ibid.)

Thus, she foreshadowed Knausgaard's famous indictment of fiction which he offered in 2009 in the second volume of his six-part polyptych:

Over recent years I had increasingly lost faith in literature. I read and thought, "this is something someone has made up." Perhaps it was because we were totally inundated with fiction and stories. It had got out of hand. Wherever you turned, you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs, and TV series, they were all about made-up people in a made-up though realistic world and news and the press, TV news and radio news, had exactly the same format. Documentaries had the same format. They were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not. It was a crisis. I felt it in every fiber of my body. Something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like land. Not the least because the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude, and the distance it held to reality was constant. (Knausgaard 2013: 545)

In the case of Knausgaard, the crisis resulted in the completion of a massive autobiographical *summa*; for Cusk it was tantamount to writing a series of memoirs in which she used her life and experiences as "the trash going into the incinerator [to 'power' them, i.e. her books – R.K.]" (Cusk [in:] Rustin 2015).

Undoubtedly, to start a discussion of Rachel Cusk's memoirist practice with an acknowledgement paid to two "white males"³⁰⁹ – especially in light of the impressive body of criticism dedicated to feminist autobiography that has been produced over the last twenty years or so,³¹⁰ as well as Cusk's own dedication to what she herself calls a "feminist principle of autobiography"³¹¹³¹² – may, to a number of readers, appear at least

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³⁰⁹ Though such a position is not random. For Jenny Turner, Cusk's sources of influence are not women writers but the likes of "Coleridge and Tolstoy and other dead white males" (Turner 2014: 29).

³¹⁰ Just to mention *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987) and *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the 20th Century* (1993), both by Sidonie Smith, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989) by Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994) by Leigh Gilmore, and the seminal *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998) edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

³¹¹ Autobiography which – throughout this chapter – should not be understood as a genre but as, in line with Leigh Gilmore's belief, "a kind of writing" (Gilmore 1994: 41).

³¹² "[T]here is, for me, a defensible principle of autobiography where female experience is concerned; defensible in the sense that I personally would defend my decision to write about my own life, against the accusation that it is merely so much self-obsession or is the product of a self-obsessed culture. If there is a disjuncture between how women live

reactionary. But those familiar with Cusk's work know that any attempt to situate her writing exclusively within the paradigm of feminist poetics would not exhaust (and adequately accede to) the complexities and transgressions inherent in her writing life. In fact, the best exemplification of Cusk's khôratic position as far as autobiographical alternative traditions are concerned is offered by her memoirs. Certainly, *A Life's Work*, with its insistence on chronicling the condition of (unorthodox) motherhood, does meet a number of criteria (those "textual entanglements" [Smith 1987: 56]) stipulated by Sidonie Smith as characteristic of the poetics of women's autobiography³¹³: just to mention exploration of the "fictions of memory," focus on private life and "female experience" as the "true" subject of the story, insistence on radical self-interpretation, establishing female authority, despite one's precarious position, and rejecting selfhood as an "a priori essence," relationality, double-voicing, notoriety, and her "troubled relationship to [her] readers" (Smith 1987: 46–59).³¹⁴ However, her second volume of memoirs, a travelogue entitled *The Last Supper*, took the form of a quintessentially male narrative: a report on one's Italian journey, a travel undertaken by a *man* not only in order to familiarise *himself* with Italian works of art but, most importantly, to become transformed as both a man and an artist.³¹⁵ In her

■ and how they actually feel – which to me there is, in motherhood and marriage – I will feel entitled to attempt to articulate it. And given that this disjuncture is usually deeply personal, and relates to a personalised problem with a generalised image, autobiography becomes the best possible form for this articulation to take" (Cusk [in:] Viner 2012).

³¹³ Interestingly, a number of female readers were appalled by Cusk's ambiguous approach to motherhood and her children and found the book offensive to women. "I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual," Cusk confesses in an essay dedicated to the reception of *A Life's Work* by her female readership (Cusk 2008b). It is worth noting that the accusation of intellectualism is haunted by the idea of the male sage, hence an implication of Cusk's memoir being "poisoned" by the tradition of male writing.

³¹⁴ Cusk's indebtedness to the female tradition of autobiographical writing is most overtly acknowledged in the "Introduction" part of *A Life's Work*, in which Cusk writes about her understanding of motherhood as "a threat, a form of disability," about "the drama of childbirth" and what comes after, the political implications and exigencies of parenthood, the partial and personal nature of her enterprise, and her attempt to "demolish traditional family culture." She also quotes from Adrienne Rich, thus establishing a strong female lineage and declares that the book is a "letter, addressed to those women who care to read it, in the hope that they find some companionship in my experiences" (Cusk 2008a: 7–16).

³¹⁵ More on the role of travels and their liberating impact regarding, in particular, a non-heteronormative self can be found in Wojciech Szymbański's essay "Venice – Iceland: A Journey to Utopia" (Szymbański 2015b: 353–362).

story of spending an extended period of time in Italy with her husband and two daughters; of studying works by Piero della Francesca, Cimabue, and Raffaello Sanzio, among others; of exploring Arezzo and Assisi, Florence and Naples, and, finally, of learning how not to become “the victim of perception” (Cusk 2009: 215), Cusk does not follow in the footsteps of female writers/travellers³¹⁶ but, necessarily and inevitably, of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Italianische Reise* [1816]), Jacob Burckhardt (*Cicerone* [1855]), Ferdinand Gregorovius (*Wanderjahre in Italien* [1877]), Pavel Muratov (*Образы Империума* [1912]), Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (*Podróże do Włoch* [1977]), W.G. Sebald (*Schwindel. Gefühle* [1990]), or Peter Robb (*Midnight in Sicily* [1996])³¹⁷.

For this very reason – Cusk’s ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the demands formulated by the proponents of the female theory of autobiography³¹⁸ – this chapter will resist the temptation to address Cusk’s final volume of her memoirs, namely *Aftermath* of 2012, as a specimen of “autogynography”³¹⁹ (Stanton 1998: 137–140), “autography”³²⁰ (Perreault 1998: 190), “autobiographics”³²¹ (Gilmore 1994: 42), or “*métissage*”³²² (Lionnet 1989: 6) – terms that have grown in prominence in contemporary feminist

³¹⁶ A classic series “Podróże” [Travels] edited by Paweł Hertz and published from 1977 to 1990 by Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy does not list a single female author.

³¹⁷ Cusk’s “serious” (male?) writing about Italy – in line with the markers of classical *Italianische Reise* – may also be seen as a form of resistance to female narratives about Italy that emerged at the turn of the centuries such as Frances Mayes’s *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996) and *In Tuscany* (2000), as well as Annie Hawes’s *Extra Virgin: Among the Olive Groves of Liguria* (2001). A detailed discussion of female fantasies about Italy can be found in Francsca’s Pierini essay “Trading Rationality for Tomatoes: The Consolidation of Anglo-American National Identities in Popular Literary Representations of Italian Culture” (Pierini 2016: 181–197).

³¹⁸ Though I recognise the potentialities of such a critical approach due to the fact that “women’s autobiography is now a *privileged* [my emphasis – R.K.] site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, post-colonial and postmodern critical theories” (Smith and Watson 1998: 5).

³¹⁹ The kind of writing that “dramatis[e] the fundamental alterity and non-presence of the subject, even as it asserts its discursively and strives towards an always impossible self-possession” (Stanton 1998: 135). Among other features of autogynography Stanton also notes “different plotting and configuration of the split subject” (*ibid.*).

³²⁰ According to Perreault, autography “foreground[s] the suggestive and flexible processes of *autos* and *graphie*.” Its effect is to “bring into being the ‘self’ that the writer names ‘I,’ but whose parameters and boundaries resist the monadic.” Finally, “[i]t invites the reader to reconsider the imbrications of subjectivity, textuality, and community” (Perreault 1998: 190, 191).

³²¹ “Those changing elements of the contradictory discourses and practices of truth and identity which represent the subject of autobiography” (Gilmore 1994: 13).

³²² “The site of undecidability and indeterminacy” (Lionnet 1989: 6).

study of life-writing genres.³²³ Instead, true to a governing principle of this study, the present section will focus on Cusk's narrative as a story of adulthood and of crisis related to it. Moreover, by discussing *Aftermath's* formal and thematic specificities, it will attempt to show memoir as *the* genre of crisis – a form of writing that due to its parameters (stipulated in Part One of the present book) is particularly prone to articulating crisis, as well as to addressing and recounting a shattered sense of life.

The notion of aftermath, understood as a consequence of an event whose nature is unfortunate and disastrous, not only provides a title for Cusk's volume but, throughout the whole book, remains its central metaphor.³²⁴ Cusk's narrative is not only written in the aftermath of the writer's separation from her husband Adrian Clark,³²⁵ but, in principle, is vitally concerned with the notion of after-effects, with what happens when "the gears of life [go] into the reverse" (Cusk 2013a: 2). In the first chapter of her memoir she introduces the idea of "second mowing" – "a second crop of grass that is sown and reaped after the harvest is in" (5) – which she borrows from her history teacher, Mrs. Lewis. She recalls the teacher's particular fondness for post-Roman, early Saxon Britain, for the "new reality" and "the aftermath of that megalomaniacal all-conquering unity" that was guaranteed by the Roman Empire (*ibid.*). The period marked by the absence of the "great administrator civilisation" – be it the Romans or Offa of Mercia – as well as "diffusity" and a lack of a central "driving, unifying force" (with its masculine overtones) was what Mrs. Lewis enthused about (3–4). According to Mrs. Lewis,

[this] darkness and disorganisation were not mere negation, mere absence. They were both aftermath and prelude. [...] Civilisation, order, meaning, belief: there were no sunlit peaks to be reached by a steady climb. They were built and then they fell, were built and fell away again or were destroyed. The darkness, the disorganisation that succeeded them had their own existence, their own integrity: were betrothed to civilisation, as sleep is betrothed to activity. In the life of compartments lies the possibility of unity, just as unity contains the

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³²³ As Cusk herself admits, her readership is by no means exclusively female: "The man or woman who recognises in the experience of parenthood the experience of the primary disjuncture [...] between the self and the others [...] is the person for whom I wrote this book" (Cusk 2008a: 3–4).

³²⁴ Another central metaphor employed by Cusk is that of a dismantled and broken jigsaw.

³²⁵ The memoir's opening sentence is: "Recently my husband and I separated, and over the course of a few weeks the life that we'd made broke apart, like a jigsaw dismantled into a heap of broken-edged pieces" (Cusk 2013a: 1).

prospect of atomisation. Better, in Mrs. Lewis's view, to live the compartmentalised, disorganised life and feel the dark strings of creativity than to dwell in civilised unity, racked by the impulse to destroy. (5)

Mrs. Lewis's teachings are certainly recalled to serve as words of consolation for the grieving subject/wife-no-more, but her optimism and larger historiosophical perspective about the gains of the aftermath do not appear to be shared by Cusk – at least not initially.³²⁶ From the very beginning of the narrative – including its paratext, a motto taken from *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus³²⁷ – the readers are fully aware of the narrator's despair and sense of tragedy that accompanies the end of her marriage and family life.³²⁸ Cusk acknowledges the fact that the new principle of her life is that of "chaos" and "brokenness" (2); that her new situation is a regression and not progress; that her marriage was synonymous with civilisation and that now "the barbarians are cavorting in the ruins" (122).

Aftermath is a documentation of the "disorder," "fragmentation," and "impermanence" (26, 94) that are brought about by a traumatic event. The book's core seven chapters³²⁹ – in themselves "fragmented" scenes from a distressed life – show a woman who, together with her two daughters, suddenly find themselves removed from the structures (social, psycho-emotional) that defined them, "like a gypsy caravan parked up among the houses, itinerant, temporary" (27). A sense of loss is illustrated by Cusk being forced to extract one of her teeth which – much like her marriage – is diagnosed as being "beyond repair" (29). The writer's concern with what happens to "the world of the mouth" when its integral part becomes removed, "what happens when the tooth is gone" (31–32), is tantamount to her apprehension regarding one's condition in the wake of an ordeal. As "an outcast from marriage" Cusk becomes painfully aware of her vulnerable position as a woman. She is the only single adult during the family gathering to celebrate her mother's birthday. Her once divorced and now re-married friend avoids her as if in fear of contracting

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³²⁶ Later Cusk will confess: "Freud viewed the formation of individual personality as analogous to human history: I like this way of understanding a life, as a re-enactment in miniature of civilisation" (Cusk 2013a: 47).

³²⁷ "[W]e must suffer, suffer into truth. / We cannot sleep, and drop by drop at the heart / the pain of pain remembered comes again" (Aeschylus [in:] Cusk 2013a: n.p.).

³²⁸ The life that she diagnoses as based on "entirely unfounded optimism" and its "reliance not on God or economics but on the principle of love" (Cusk 2013a: 2).

³²⁹ The last, eighth chapter, entitled "Trains," will be addressed in its own right in the paragraphs to come.

a disease – much like her daughter, who becomes abandoned by her closest friend and is, subsequently, betrayed by the new ones. She realises that the drama of her life “dominates, uses up the fuel of conversation like an ugly army tank guzzling petrol” (87) and that what haunts her other female friendships is the newly emerged lack of “equality” between them: she is a wife no more (*ibid.*). She tries to pretend that nothing has happened (“to manufacture normality,” “a kind of forger’s art” [109]) but, as if in passing, she admits to spending many a “vigil in tears” (*ibid.*). She fears being overtaken by nostalgia and thus avoids places and items that connect her to her former life (95). Her emotional state is described by the word “grief”: “a romance’s estranged cousin, a cruel character, all sleeplessness and adrenaline unsweetened by hope” (81). She cannot eat and loses weight, which she compares to the loss of substance that incarnated her marriage and family life.³³⁰ She is aware of the mess and ruination, the before-mentioned “chaos” and “darkness” that occur in her life (e.g. the break of kitchen equipment and installations, unopened envelopes). “It is as though some rigour has gone from our household,” she says, “the rigour of the male, as though we have lost something rod-like and firm at our centre, our female bodies waxing and waning like pale moons” (85). When she talks to her husband, their conversations are compared to “chewing on a barbed wire, like eating ground glass. Our talk is a well that has been poisoned” (122). To replace “a male declivity” (46) – a husband-less crater that corresponds to the hole left by her tooth – she even resorts to accepting a male tenant, Rupert, whom she “vaguely” tries to “fit [...] into it [a declivity in the shape of her husband – R.K.]” (46) – an attempt that ends disastrously. “I no longer have a life,” she says. “It’s an afterlife; it’s all aftermath” (91).

The chaos that the aftermath brings not only applies to the material and psycho-emotional world of the narrator but, above all, it reveals a devastated sense of selfhood. Identifying herself as essentially a feminist, Cusk confesses to her having felt “unsexed” when she was supposed to do “womanly” things, like shopping, cooking or collecting children from school. She says: “[m]y mother may have been my place of birth, but my adopted nationality was my father’s.” And adds: “In the world of femininity where I had the right to claim citizenship, I was an alien” (12, 13). Consequently, while Cusk writes and, by means of her writing, supports her family, her husband gives up his London job and raises their kids. While

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³³⁰ Her starvation may be seen as an act of resistance to “a diet of male values” which she had been exposed to throughout her life (Cusk 2013a: 18).

she embraces a “male-inflected identity,” he “shelters” Cusk’s “femininity twin” in his own body; they both become hybrids, half-male, half-female (18). Thus they “traduce biological human roles” which in Greek drama, as Cusk acutely observes, is “to court the change that is death, the death that is change” (9). But when the change/death finally comes, when the marriage ends, all the notions and conceptualisations of what masculinity and femininity are, what equality is, become invalidated. To her own surprise, Cusk rejects her husband’s idea that their children should be with him half the time: “They’re my children,” she says, “they belong to me” (9). In the world characterised by the state of aftermath, Cusk “invoke[s] the primitivism of the mother, her innate superiority, that voodoo in the face of which the mechanisms of equal right break down” (10). More so, Cusk’s newly-emerged maternalism – which she herself finds disturbingly “primitive” and “barbaric” (19) – resists a solicitor’s verdict that she is obliged to support her husband financially now that they have separated.³³¹ “But he’s a qualified lawyer, I said. And I’m just a writer. What I meant was, he’s a man. And I’m a woman. The old voodoo still banging its drum, there in the heart of marital darkness” (20). Now, once the catastrophe has happened, Cusk is aware that her “self” is not what she thought it to be: “What I lived as feminism were in fact the male values my parents, among others, well-meaningly bequeathed me – the cross-dressing values of my father, and the anti-feminine values of my mother. So I am not a feminist. I am a *self-hating transvestite* [my emphasis – R.K.]” (14).

Not so much to find consolation but rather to understand and define her situation, Cusk becomes an “arachnologist” – to paraphrase Nancy K. Miller’s useful term (Miller 1986: 170) – and, consequently, in her explorations she turns to female figures from ancient drama and Greek myths³³²

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³³¹ “Call yourself a feminist,” her husband rancorously remarks (Cusk 2013a: 6).

³³² A frequent occurrence in Cusk’s creative work, just to mention her successful adaptation of Euripides’s *Medea* for the Almeida Theatre in London in 2015. In *Aftermath* Cusk deliberately juxtaposes the Holy Family (which represents the fake “family reality” [Cusk 2013a: 100]) with the ancient Greeks. A similar contrast can be found in *The Testament of Mary* by Colm Tóibín, in which mother of Jesus visits the temple of Artemis where she prays to Greek goddess. The significance of the gesture should by no means be overlooked or left unnoticed. Mary does not pray to Jehovah, the Jewish deity who has forsaken his only son. Instead, she turns to Artemis who, according to Greek mythology, pitied and saved Iphigenia, the princess of Mykenai, offered by her father Agamemnon as a sacrifice to appease the gods, from death on the altar. Mary seeks consolation in the temple of a female goddess, the one who saves and does not condemn to death (Tóibín 2012: 103–104).

(and not, as her history teacher would probably have done, to 7th century Britain).³³³ First to Clytemnestra, whose story (which involves Agamemnon) Cusk identifies as precisely “not of marriage, but of separation” (48). Left by her husband, Clytemnestra is seen as the one who “unveils” the masculinity of Agamemnon, who – as the ruler of Argos – has tested “the form of male and female” and found it to be “limitation and lie” (54) – much like Cusk did, as testified by her above-listed considerations of the self. An “outcast from marriage,” Clytemnestra, “the new unisexual Clytemnestra,” is now forced to seek “a new form, a new configuration of female and male” (56, 54). Secondly, she focuses on the character of Antigone who, as she notes, “inhabits an aftermath of her own” related to the experience of intimate loss of loved ones (103). The case of Antigone is brought about in order to answer the question concerning the sources of authority that should come to Cusk’s post-familial household (101). Much like Cusk, Antigone inhabits a world that has been shaped by a family catastrophe. It is ruled by Creon, who has inherited this “post-authority, post-familial world” (103). “It is aftermath, and Creon has the job of governing it,” Cusk observes. Creon’s authority – which is believed to recreate “the very perversity from which it was born” (104) – is contrasted with Antigone’s authority, an emotional one, which, according to Cusk, “has stronger links with justice, with truth” (ibid.). Without a doubt, Cusk would like to see herself as following in the footsteps of Oedipus’s daughter/sister and offer to her post-marital life a new form of authority that would sever all its ties with what came before. Meanwhile, the story of Antigone reminds her that aftermath is a state of radical change, “the second harvest: life with knowledge of what has gone before” (104).

But when the form of life becomes shattered, what then happens to the form in which this life has so far been narrated, in the case of Cusk the genre of memoir? At one point in her story Cusk notes:

Form is both safety and imprisonment, both protector and dissembler: form, in the end, conceals truth, just as the body conceals the cancer that will destroy it. Form is rigid, inviolable, devastatingly correct; that is its vulnerability. Form can be broken. It will tolerate variation but not transgression; it can be broken,

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³³³ An interest in mythical stories is symbolically represented by the narrator buying a fern: “Ferns are old, older than civilisation, older than man and woman, older than right and wrong. They are sexless, having neither seeds nor flower. They are vascular plants, conductors, sensitive to contamination. They furl and unfurl, depending on the conditions. [...] I’ll buy the fern and keep it alive” (Cusk 2013a: 96).

but at what cost? If it is destroyed what can be out in its place? The only alternative to form is chaos. (55)

If the last sentence of the above-quoted passage is true, then how should memoir respond to such chaos of life?

Aftermath, as has already been noted, certainly breaks with the principle of coherence and teleology. Its chapters – fragmentary, coincidental, and uncalculated – do not follow the model of a typical traumatic narrative which should open with the event itself and, subsequently, chronicle the character’s gradual recovery. Truth be told, in Cusk’s memoir *the event or the story*³³⁴ is hardly present – one does not know what the reasons for the separation are, what contributed to marital disagreement and what its larger consequences are.³³⁵ In this sense, it is anything but a “divorce memoir” – a phrase that was disparagingly used by Joanna Biggs in her highly unfavourable review of the book for *The London Review of Books* (Biggs 2012: 37). In *Aftermath* there is no actual drama or distress recorded by the narrative’s subject, only a “blank register of [...] aftermath” (31). Although grief lies at the very heart of the narrative, Cusk’s experience of it – her personal experience of chaos and darkness with all its material and emotional manifestations that have already been listed above – occupies a marginal space in the whole book (e.g. the scene which describes Cusk’s dental surgery contains no record of emotion or pain on the part of the patient – despite the surgery being presented as deeply invasive and agonising; attention is paid exclusively to the doctor’s and nurses’ efforts). Exploration and exploitation of the self is subtle and peripheral and contains no identifiable trace of narcissism³³⁶ – true to Cusk’s understanding of memoir as a confessional form but not a confession in itself.³³⁷ *Aftermath* also ostensibly rejects any identifiable details

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³³⁴ “I have come to hate stories” (Cusk 2013a: 2).

³³⁵ Reviewing the book for *The New York Times*, Emma Gilbey Keller complained: “The lack of detail is the book’s most glaring omission. How can you write a memoir about divorce without saying what caused it? Without owning up to or trying to come to terms with one’s role in it? [...] Cusk may hate stories, but inevitably her readers will want to know: What’s the story?” (Keller 2012).

³³⁶ “The misuse of the term ‘narcissism’ in relation to my work is nauseating” (Cusk [in:] Rustin 2015).

³³⁷ “The memoir is a confessional form, but that does not mean it is in itself a confession. It isn’t spewing out of emotion. In memoir you have to be particularly careful not to alienate the reader by making the material seem too lived-in. It mustn’t have too much of the smell of yourself, otherwise the reader will be unable to make it her own” (Cusk [in:] Viner 2012).

pertaining to its characters. The narrator's husband is described as "X," her psychotherapist as "Y," her daughter's friends as "H," "S," "P," and "D"; apart from the infamous tenant Rupert, everyone else is either referred to with a pronoun she/he, or using a common noun (e.g. sister, brother, mother, father, daughter, friend, florist, driver, etc.).³³⁸

The dismissal of the (personal) self (and the self's story) is supplemented by the narrator's interest in others and *their* histories – the feature that marks narrative's formal radicalism. A similar feature has been observed by Colm Tóibín with reference to Elizabeth Bishop's poetry. "In Bishop's work," Tóibín says,

much was implied by what seemed to be mere description. Description was a desperate way of avoiding self-description: looking at the world was a way of looking out from the self. The self in Bishop's poems was too fragile to be violated by much mentioning. [...] Bishop managed to unsettle the tone of a poem by watching a scene with a fierce precision, as though the scene or she herself would disappear; many of her best poems offered little real sense of the personal. (Tóibín 2015b: 143)

The writer's fragile self – a drifting self, a transvestite self – becomes represented by its removal from "Cuskland" – she becomes an outcast not only from marriage and family³³⁹ life, but also from her own writing. If she does not exert any form of authority over her own self, then the authority must be handed over to others.

Therefore, Cusk becomes an observer and narrator of other lives and others' stories: her parents', her great uncle's and –aunt's, her daughters' and friends', as well as those of randomly met individuals: a dentist, a limousine driver, a florist, or a shrink. This positioning is both textual (content-wise) and spatial, since most of the time readers find Cusk "outside" other people's dwellings, when she is looking through the windows to see people in their houses, churches, shops and cars. This is her

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³³⁸ This resistance to actual and identifiable "vital statistics" may have its source in Cusk's experience of pulping all the copies of her book *The Last Supper* a month after its release – due to having being sued for libel by people that she had openly written about in her memoir.

³³⁹ "You are chucked out of the house, on the street, not defended any more, not a member of anything, you have no history, no network, What you have is people, strangers in the street, and the only way you can know them is by what they say. I became attuned to these encounters because I had no frame or context any more. I could hear a purity of narrative in the way people described their lives" (Cusk [in:] Kellaway 2014).

“broken,” “outside perspective” (Cusk [in:] Viner 2012) – the only possible perspective for a survivor inhabiting the aftermath. Cusk becomes attuned to the “very heartbeat and hydraulics of the day” (33). She describes herself as an “onlooker” who has been “lifted out of [experience] into awareness, like a child lifted out of its warm bed half-asleep into the thick of night” (64) and an “observer [who puts herself] at the mercy of feeling” (ibid.). She no longer believes that “the only way to know something is to experience it, that the truest form of knowledge are personal” (73). Now, she becomes a recipient of a different kind of knowledge: one “without exposure, without risk; the knowledge of the voyeur, watching, assessing, staying hidden” (ibid.).

“A fragile heteroglossia of her own”³⁴⁰ (Smith 1987: 50) that characterises Cusk’s memoir reaches its climax in the last, eighth chapter of *Aftermath*. Entitled “Trains,” the piece is a third-person (fictional) narrative whose principal character and focaliser is a young girl – an immigrant to Britain who becomes employed as an au-pair by a married couple with two daughters. The couple are – as the text’s parameters are soon about to reveal³⁴¹ – Rachel Cusk and Adrian Clark, whose relationship is about to break up. Unable to write directly about her own experience, Cusk’s shattered subject, her homeless and “unembedded selfhood” (Smith 1993: 6), chooses a fictional observer who provides us, the readers, with the actual details and horrors of Cusk’s post-separation condition. “She sits alone, smoking and staring into space,” the girl says (138). “The woman looks terrible. She is so thin that she looks like a skeleton,” she adds elsewhere (150). It is through the eyes of an au-pair girl that Cusk’s despair and depression (staying in bed, emotional stupor, etc.) can be ultimately shared with the readers of *Aftermath*. In the alternative narratological form of the last chapter she finds an ideal (the only?) method to collate an autobiographical self with an autobiographical form, the truth and the story³⁴² – the characteristic that, according to Sidonie Smith, is at the very

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³⁴⁰ Which Cusk also explored in *The Bradshaw Variation* – her 2009 novel which alternates between two points of view – the husband’s and the wife’s.

³⁴¹ On the day her husband leaves, the wife suffers from toothache which requires surgery – just like in Cusk’s “non-fictional” part of *Aftermath*.

³⁴² The aspect which Cusk identifies as central to her writing practices: “The problem [with writing] usually lies in the relationship between the story and the truth. The story has to obey the truth, to represent it, like clothes represent the body. The closer the cut, the more pleasing the effect. Unclothed, truth can be vulnerable, ungainly, shocking. Over-dressed it becomes a lie. For me, life’s difficulty has generally lain in a attempt to reconcile these two, like the child of divorce tries to reconcile its parents” (Cusk 2013a: 2–3).

core of women's autobiographical practices and makes Cusk join the likes of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Zora Neale Hurston:

Dialogically engaging the laws of genre, autobiographical subjects often take up the old autobiographical forms piece by piece. They turn them over, around, inside out, to tell another kind of story. In doing so they try to dematerialize the very cultural apparatus that would materialize them as specific kinds of subjects. And so these autobiographical occasions are rife with complex negotiations of and resistances to the very laws of genre that would provide cultural blueprints for the alignment of subjectivity, identity, and the body. (Smith 1993: 183)

For the memoir's subject, *Aftermath* does not end with a story of success, of overcoming despair, of liberating the wife's traumatised ego. True to its anti-teleological characteristic, the penultimate chapter of the volume – despite being titled “XYZ” – shows no trace of closure. There is no belief in the power of narrative as a therapeutic means of reconciling oneself with the past (“I want to live, I say, I don't want to tell my story. I want to live” [121]); there is an overt questioning of the power of psychoanalysis to cure (“I need to be converted first” [120]; “I feel like a lonely man visiting a brothel, the money changing hands, paying for understanding as some pay for love. And just as that is not love, so this cannot be understanding” [128])); there is no optimism as far as the potential new relationship with “Z” is concerned as Cusk shrugs at hearing the word “love” (“I feel like a soldier come back from a war, full of experiences that have silenced me. I cannot return to innocence, the innocence of the first encounter of female and male” [117]); there is anxiety (“In my own home I am never still” [126]) and doubt in one's own progress (“Is it male attention I want, or male authority?” [123]).

But if – for the memoir's autobiographical subject – the story ends with an acknowledgement of the crisis of the self, of its collapse, of its formlessness, then what can be said about the memoir's form? What comes after reaching the memoir's limits: its plurality of subjects, disavowal of the autobiographical self, fragmentariness, and – in the last chapter of *Aftermath* – surrender to the classical formula of fiction? Does *Aftermath*, indeed, reach the climax of “the crisis of narrative's distance from [or closeness to – R.K.] reality” – the phrase which she used with reference to Karl Ove Knausgaard's second volume of *My Struggle* (Cusk 2013b)?

“Without wishing to sound melodramatic, it was creative death after *Aftermath*. That was the end. I was heading into total silence – an interesting place to find yourself when you are quite developed as an artist” – Cusk

revealed in one of the interviews given on the occasion of publishing her first post-*Aftermath* work: a novel entitled *Outline* (2014) (Cusk [in:] Kellaway 2014). In the same interview she added: “my mode of autobiography had come to an end” (ibid.). But, as evident, after *Aftermath* Cusk neither remained silent, nor, as I shall argue – despite exhausting the possibilities of memoir – abandoned (auto)biography altogether.

Outline, published in 2014 to great critical acclaim,³⁴³ together with its companion piece, i.e. *Transit* released in 2016, can certainly be recognised not only as a response to the crisis of one’s individual creative practice but, most importantly, as the new mode of life writing, much in the manner of J.M. Coetzee’s *Summertime*, W.G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgewanderten*,³⁴⁴ or Günter Grass’s *Die Box*. Similarly to the before-mentioned novelists, in her recent works Cusk becomes a *deus absconditus*, an outcast from the writer’s literary universe. Distrust towards the self becomes so great that the narrative becomes flooded with the stories of others: in the case of *Outline* a group of characters whom the narrator – a Cusk-like female writer, divorced and with two children – encounters on her way to and during her stay in Athens, where she teaches a creative writing course. The story of self now becomes substituted by a cacophony of voices, the stories of others that they compulsively share with the narrator; in stylistic terms, in Cusk’s 2014 work “writing becomes talking” (Cusk [in:] Rustin 2015).

But is *Outline* a manifestation of a radical rejection of autobiography? Is it a definite confirmation of the death of self-writing? One of the fragments of the novel seems to be offering an answer to these questions:

I said that I found the appearances more bewildering and tormenting now than at any previous point in my life. [...] I thought often of the chapter in *Wuthering Heights* where Heathcliff and Cathy stare from the dark garden through the windows of the Lintons’ drawing room and watch the brightly lit family scene inside. What is fatal in that vision is its subjectivity: looking through the window the two of them see different things, Heathcliff what he fears and hates and Cathy what she desires and feels deprived of. But neither of them can see things as they really are. And likewise I was beginning to see my own fears and

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³⁴³ The book was, among others, shortlisted for the 2014 Goldsmiths Prize, the Folio Prize, and the Baileys Prize for Fiction. It was also recognised as one of the ten best works of fiction published in 2015 by the critics of *The New York Times*.

³⁴⁴ As noted by Elaine Blair (Blair 2015).

desires manifested outside myself, was beginning to see in other people's lives a commentary on my own. (Cusk 2014: 75)

Outline is thus an autobiography, but – to use one of Cusk's key phrases addressed in *Aftermath* – an autobiography that has been “turned inside out.” And, as such, another contribution from a writer who remains one of the most extraordinary and incessant contemporary “artist[s] of the self” (Cusk 2013a: 15).

CHAPTER SIX

Written on the Body: *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir* by Hilary Mantel

I put the word “diagnosis” in quotes because I have not yet seen that case in which a “diagnosis” led to a “cure,” or in fact to any outcome other than a confirmed, and therefore an enforced, debility. [...] Medicine, I have had reason since to notice more than once, remains an imperfect art.

Joan Didion, *Blue Nights* (2011: 47, 15)

The iambic pentameter of the saline stand, the alexandrine of the blood drain, the epidural’s sweet sonnet form.

Hilary Mantel, “Diary” (2010c)

You have to employ some fantasy to keep brute reality at bay.

Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (2010d: 293)

Half-way through Hilary Mantel’s Man Booker Prize-winning novel *Bring Up the Bodies*, its principal character Thomas Cromwell dwells on a correspondence between the score sheets of the tournament held at Greenwich and the human body. A piece of paper is divided into sections which harmonise with various body parts of a knight so that individual strikes on his breastplate or helm could be accurately recorded by a judge. However, as Cromwell points out:

You can pick up the score sheets afterwards and read back a record of the day, but the marks on paper do not tell you about the pain of a broken ankle or the efforts of a suffocating man not to vomit inside his helmet. As the combatants

will always tell you, you really needed to see it, you had to be there. (Mantel 2012: 163)

Writing about the body – despite combatants’ distrust in the power of words to accurately represent it – appears to lie at the very heart of Hilary Mantel’s rich and varied oeuvre. However, writing not about a healthy body, but one which has failed or betrayed its owner. A body which is disfigured (“Irish giant” O’Brien from *The Giant, O’Brien* [1998]), handicapped (Muriel from Mantel’s debut *Every Day Is Mother’s Day* [1985]), decapitated (a panoply of characters from *A Place of Greater Safety* [1992] and Mantel’s Tudor triptych, including Georges Jacques Danton and Camille Desmoulins, as well as Thomas More and Anne Boleyn, respectively), marked (stigmatised Sister Philomena from *Fludd* [1989] or deeply scarred Alison Harte from *Beyond Black* [2005]), starved (Julia from *An Experiment in Love* [1995]), fractured and wounded (young Danton after his unfortunate encounter with a bull). A body which is abused, violated and humiliated, like in this petrifying passage from *The Giant, O’Brien*:

He saw that on the ground was Bride Caskey, and Claffey was on top of her. He saw that Claffey’s buttocks were white, and meagre in form though energetic in action, and that the woman’s eyes were closed and that she was bleeding from her mouth. Her kerchief was pulled off her head and laid beside her, lifting in the wind; the merest inch was trapped beneath the boot of the man Slig, and Pybus watched it flapping, fighting to be free. Slig was unbuttoned, and he held his member in his hand, rubbing the tip and watching and listening as the woman’s skull tapped the cobbles, tip, tap, tip, tap, with every lunge of Claffey. (Mantel 1999: 158)

Finally and, perhaps, most importantly, a body which is ailing: a diseased body. It seems to me that bodily failure – be it of 16th century English burghers, noblemen and monarchs, of 18th century French peasants and Parisian “citizens,” or of 20th century Irish nuns – remains, single-handedly, the most important of all thematic preoccupations identifiable in Mantel’s writing. She unequivocally acknowledged this “thematic dominant” in a controversial essay titled “Royal Bodies” in which she said: “[h]istorians are still trying to peer inside the Tudors, [...] are they healthy, are they sick, can they breed? [...] The story of Henry and his wives is [...] about body parts, about what slots in where, and when: are they body parts fit for purpose, or are they diseased?” (Mantel 2013).

But Mantel's interests are not exclusively limited to narrating a variety of ailments that a given body may suffer from. Certainly, she is deeply concerned with narratives about illness, but at the same time she remains determined to explore the idea of "illness as narrative" (Jurecic 2012: 4), namely the way narratives of illness are used (by writers and readers equally) "to make meaning of the experiences of living *at risk*, *in prognosis*, and *in pain*" (ibid.). Looking at her own sutured body, Mantel will say in her hospital diary: "When I sit up and see the wound in my abdomen, I am pleased to see it has a spiral binding, like a manuscript" (Mantel 2010c).

Giving Up the Ghost, Mantel's memoir of 2003, is a mosaic and a collage³⁴⁵: a treatise on the nature of memoir³⁴⁶ and the workings of memory,³⁴⁷ a master class in creative writing,³⁴⁸ a childhood memoir,³⁴⁹ a filial narrative, and – vitally for the present discussion – an (auto)pathography. The narrative opens with Mantel's declaration of her own incapability of telling her life story: "I hardly know how to write about myself. [...] I argue with myself over every word" (Mantel 2010a: 4–5). She further adds: "I used to think autobiography was a form of weakness, and perhaps I still do. But I also think that, if you are weak, it's childish to pretend to be strong" (6).

Weakness – physical, not intellectual or creative – is, in fact, the very origin of Mantel's self-conscious memoir, which one reviewer classified as a contemporary "book of Job."³⁵⁰ Mantel's physical plight stems from decades of suffering from an undiagnosed disease and faulty treatment by various medical professionals. Consequently, the writer's life is populated by ghosts – those of lives that might have been led, children she might have given birth to, books she might have written:

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³⁴⁵ In an interview with Mark Lawson for the BBC Front Row, Hilary Mantel admitted the following: "the way I write... like a collage" (Mantel [in:] Lawson 2013a).

³⁴⁶ E.g. "Do you know what worries me about this memoir? That I'm always the smart one" (Mantel 2010a: 209).

³⁴⁷ For example, memory is at one point compared to "a great plain, a steppe, where all the memories are laid side by side, at the same depth, like seeds under the soil" (Mantel 2010a: 25).

³⁴⁸ E.g. "Trust your reader, stop spoon-feeding your reader, stop patronising your reader, give your reader credit for being as smart as you at least, and stop being so bloody beguiling. [...] Concentrate on sharpening your memory and peeling your sensibility. Cut every page you write by at least one-third. Stop constructing those piffing little similes of yours. [...] But do I take my own advice? Not a bit. Persiflage is my *nom de guerre*. (Don't use foreign expressions; it's élitist)" (Mantel 2010a: 4–5).

³⁴⁹ Part Two titled "Now Geoffrey Don't Torment Her" and Part Three "The Secret Garden" in particular.

³⁵⁰ However, one "without the purposeful deity," but, instead "the bleak contingencies of period, place, poverty and gender" (Clendinnen 2003).

You come to this place, mid-life. You don't know how you got here, but suddenly you're staring fifty in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been. The wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the wrap and weft of your curtains, they lurk in wardrobes and lie down under drawer liners. You think of the children you might have had but didn't. When the midwife says "It's a boy," where does the girl go? When you think you're pregnant and you're not, what happens to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in the drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn't work after the opening lines. (Mantel 2010a: 20–21)

As the title of the memoir unambiguously states, the narrative major objective is to repudiate those ghosts, to renounce them and break free from their paralysing and stultifying power. The book's aim is, in Mantel's own words, to "seize the copyright in [her]self" (71), as she painfully realised that "the book of me was indeed being written by other people: by my parents, by the child I once was, and by my own unborn children, stretching out their ghost fingers to grab the pen" (70).

From the very first pages of *Giving Up the Ghost* Mantel does not wish to conceal the fact that the life of her body is the writer's primary concern and the writer soon discloses to the readers her regular struggle with migraines which powerfully affect her senses: taste, hearing, sight and speech: "I knew the migraine was coming yesterday, when I stood in a Norfolk fishmonger choosing a treat for the cats. 'No,' I said, 'cod's too expensive just now to feed the fish. Even fish like ours'" (4). We also learn about her addiction to pills (painkillers, steroids and barbiturates, sometimes ten thousand a year "at a conservative estimate" [3]) and body issues ("wider still and wider, shall my bound be set" [ibid.]).

Problems related to Mantel's identification with her body already feature prominently in her recollections of childhood spent in a small town close to Manchester. Having been tormented by an older cousin, Geoffrey, she realises that her small and fragile body is an obstacle which makes it impossible for her to show her true, "superior" (41) self. She will constantly expect to be changed into a boy as it appears that only a male body could accommodate greatness. Hence, the characters that she associates herself with are male warriors: Sir Gawain, a "Red Indian," or an altar boy – a soldier of Jesus. Already as a young girl Mantel feels alienation from her body – a feeling which will intensify in her thirties when, having been subjected to invasive therapy of steroids and hormones, she

will become “solid, set, grounded, grotesque, perpetually strange to myself, convoluted, mutated, and beyond the pale” (54). In *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva says: “foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided” (Kristeva 1994: 181). Though Mantel seems to repeat Kristeva’s diagnosis, especially when she states: “we can be made foreign to ourselves, suddenly, by illness, accident, misadventure, or hormonal caprice” (Mantel 2010a: 54), foreignness for Mantel is not within but outside, in “a suit of fat” (ibid.) that she has been forced to wear.

When Mantel is ten years old she starts having her first aches. “By now, [...], I am disconnecting from my body” (74), the writer will say. But her complaints are not taken seriously by doctors. Those are “growing pains” (82), she is informed by an irritated physician who further advises that if young Hilary has difficulty breathing, she should simply stop thinking about it. He also calls her “Little Miss Neverwell” (ibid.) and, thus, provides a label that will haunt her throughout her entire life. As she grows into adulthood, the pains increase and they cannot any longer be ludicrously explained as a sign of growing. Large doses of aspirin are not helpful either. “Each day I was taking, though I didn’t know it, a small step towards the unlit terrain of sickness, a featureless landscape of humiliation and loss” (167), Mantel says in *Giving Up the Ghost*.

Unable to deal with the aches any more Mantel – then a student of law in Sheffield – goes to her GP and, in her own words, makes “the big mistake” (ibid.). What unveils before us, the readers, on the subsequent pages of Mantel’s memoir is an accumulation of ignorance, misogyny and indifference. First, she is suspected of being pregnant. Then, as someone suffering from an idiopathic disease for which she is given anti-depressants which result in blurred vision and apathy. When “therapy” proves to be ineffective, her GP decides that the body is not the problem: the mind is. Mantel is sent to a psychiatrist, “Dr. G,” who soon diagnoses her condition as psychosomatic. She is a woman who dares to study law, an ancient domain of males, so, according to the nefarious psychiatrist, what she is clearly suffering from is “stress caused by overambition” (174). She is transferred to a university clinic and put on anti-depressants and some major tranquilisers, as well as anti-psychotic drugs which only bring about vision and speech problems, sickness, hallucinations³⁵¹ and, ultimately, acathisia. Most importantly, Mantel is denied any right to claim authority over her own condition:

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³⁵¹ One of those hallucinations is painfully prophetic with Mantel getting for herself a size sixteen dress, instead of a ten (Mantel 2010a: 179).

The more I said I had a physical illness, the more they said I had a mental illness. The more I questioned the nature, the reality of the mental illness, the more I was found to be in denial, deluded. [...] Every time I spoke I dug myself into a deeper hole. (177, 181)

Having incautiously shown one of her short stories to Dr. G, she is also forbidden to write and, consequently, become an active narrator of her experiential history as well as occupying a site of “agentic narration” (Smith and Watson 2010: 54). But it is writing that ultimately helps her to have her revenge on the nefarious creature of Dr. G and his fellow doctors. When after weeks of devastating treatment Mantel, “ignored, invalidated and humiliated” (Mantel 2010a: 184), is discharged from the clinic, she makes a promise never to see a psychiatrist or take a psychotropic drug again. Crucially, she decides to start a book:

I went to the library and got out a lot of books about the French Revolution. I made some notes and some charts. I went to a bigger library and got more books and began to break down the events of 1789–94 so that I could put them into a card index. [...] I began to read about the old regime, its casual cruelties, its heartless style. I thought, but I know this stuff. By nature, I knew about despotism: the unrati ed decisions, handed down from the top, arbitrarily enforced: the face of strength when it moves in on the weak. (184–185)

The book in question is *A Place of Greater Safety*, one of Mantel’s masterpieces, which was published in 1992.³⁵² But the years of writing the book were also years of Mantel re-making herself and taking control over the life of her body. Research into the French Revolution was accompanied by research into the workings of the body and its “brute biology” (Hughes 2003):

I went up to the capital [of Botswana – R.K.], to the university library, and combed through the medical books. I found a textbook of surgery, with a female figure. Her organs clearly depicted, and black lines – like the long pins with which they

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³⁵² Though *A Place of Greater Safety* is Mantel’s first completed novel, it was published only as her fifth piece. Publishers were reluctant to publish it due to its topic and size. Only when Mantel’s writing (her first four books, i.e. *Every Day Is Mother’s Day* [1985], *Vacant Possession* [1986], *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* [1988], and *Fludd* [1985]) was met with critical appreciation and favourably reviewed did the publisher take a chance on releasing the bulky historical volume.

used to stick witches – striking through her hips and ribcage, carrying a name for each organ. For each organ, there was a pain, and of each pain, I had a sample. (Mantel 2010a: 191)

When in 1979 Mantel returned to Britain after some years spent in Africa she brought a manuscript of her novel and submitted it to a publisher. More importantly, she arrived with a diagnosis – the name for the condition that she had been suffering from and which she had discovered when studying medical textbooks being endometriosis.

By the time her condition is finally confirmed by “professionals,” Mantel is forced to undergo surgery. Descriptions of her stay in the gynaecological unit and the behaviour of doctors and nurses might well be listed among some of the most terrifying passages in her oeuvre, which is, otherwise, permeated by visceral accounts of ruthlessness, sadism and cruelty. “How can I write this?” Mantel wonders and adds: “I am a woman with a delicate mouth; I say nothing gross. I can write it, it seems; perhaps because I can pretend it is somebody else, bleeding on the table” (189–190). When she is taken to a different hospital to have USG scans of her abdomen and womb, she realises that a recognition of her ailment has come too late and that, by now, her body has been disconnected from her: “For the first and last time, I saw my womb, with two black strokes, like skilled calligraphy, marking it out: a neat diacritical mark in a language I would never learn to speak” (201).

The surgery removes Mantel’s reproductive apparatus. But it also definitively and irrevocably alienates her from her own body:

Now my body was not my own. It was a thing done to, a thing operated on. I was twenty-seven and an old woman, all at once. I had undergone what is called a “surgical menopause” or what textbooks of the time called “female castration.” I was a eunuch, then? Castration is a punishment; what was my crime? (211)

This process is further exacerbated when after some time endometriosis returns (despite doctors’ ignorant insistence that it cannot do so). Mantel is put on hormones and steroids which gradually change her body, “a sad sack enclosing a disease process” (220): she loses her hair, she develops a steroid moonface, fluid puffs up her eyelids, arms and legs, her voice deepens, she turns into a size twenty. The war for authority, for self which she used to wage against her body and which she seemed to have won begins anew:

When you get fat, you get a new personality. You can't help it. Complete strangers ascribe it to you. When I was thin and quick on my feet, a girl with a head of blonde hair, I went for weeks without a kind word. But why would I need one? When I grew fat, I was assumed to be placid. I was the same strung-out fired-up persona I'd always been, but to the outward eye I had acquired serenity. A whole range of maternal virtues were ascribed to me. I was (and am) unsure about how I am related to my old self, or to myself from year to year. (221)

However, it is not what the body gives (in fact, produces in excess), but what it cannot provide that lies at the very heart of Mantel's narrative. The writer's childlessness is hinted at quite early in the story when Mantel comments on a family treasure: a brooch which, on one side, displays her maternal grandfather and, on the other, a little girl called Olive who burnt to death in a house fire long before the writer's birth. Olive is never put on display and always gazes backwards: "blurred eyes on someone's breastbone; looking inside the body, like a child who has never left the womb" (26–27). Olive anticipates the unborn children of Mantel who remain the major ghosts haunting the writer's life. In her early twenties, Mantel together with her then lover fantasise about their future daughter whom they would call Catriona after Catriona MacGregor Drummond, a character in Robert Louis Stevenson's 1893 novel. "I assumed I would be able to have Catriona at a time of my choosing," Mantel confesses in the narrative. And adds: "I didn't know she would always be a ghost of possibility, a paper baby, a person who slipped between the lines" (158).

After the surgery Mantel needs to face the fact that "there would be no daughter, no Catriona" (208). However, this brute realisation on the part of the never-to-be mother does not prevent her ghost child from inhabiting Mantel's world. Mantel confesses to missing her unborn daughter and imagining what she would have been like. Most importantly, she acknowledges her immaterial presence:

Children are never simply themselves, co-extensive with their own bodies, becoming alive to us when they turn in the womb, or with their first unaided breath. Their lives start long before birth, long before conception, and if they are aborted or miscarried or simply fail to materialise at all, they become ghosts within our lives. (228)

In hindsight, this ghostly presence of Catriona can be detected as a powerful and determining factor not only for Mantel's life but for her fiction as well. The poignant brooding of the historical figure of Annette Duplessis,

a character in Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety*, which one is entitled to acknowledge as disturbingly "foreign"³⁵³ to the novel's diegesis, is, thus, offered an additional context – one which is autobiographical in nature:

She remembered, for some reason, a couple of occasions when she'd thought she might be pregnant again, and in the years before She and Claude had separate rooms. You thought you might be, you had those strange feelings, but then you bled and you knew you weren't. A week, a fortnight out of your life had gone by, a certain life had been considered, a certain steady flow of love had begun, from the mind to the body and into the world and the years to come. Then it was over, or had never been: a miscarriage of love. The child went on in your mind. Would it have had blue eyes? What would its character have been? (Mantel 2010d: 86)

In Chapter Three of the present study I have emphasised the fact that (auto)pathography is primarily *anti*-pathography – a narrative of resistance which hopes to determine its writer's condition and, consequently, recover his or her body; to "reclaim [patients'] voices from the biomedical narrative" (Jurecic 2012: 3). *Giving Up the Ghost* can, indeed, be seen as a narrative which delineates, so to speak, a trajectory of survival in the maze of the body's "mad pathways" (Mantel 2010a: 230). Mantel does not only manage to resist various medical scripts (e.g. a mad woman), but, single-handedly, discovers and tags erroneous mechanisms operating within her body. Still, her losses (and – quite literally – gains) are grave. Hence, on the pages of Mantel's memoir, one will not find the writer "surfacing safely into 'normality'" (Anderson 2011: 115) – a characteristic feature of a number of illness/disability memoirs which hope to offer some kind of consolation. In a truly "humanist" fashion, Mantel's singular method of coming to terms with those losses is precisely by means of writing. In this sense, *Giving Up the Ghost* appears to me to be the "truest" form of (auto)pathography, since it does not only provide a chronicle of survival, but, in its very essence, is the means of survival. Through the sheer act of narrating her story, Mantel "writes herself into being" and shows what Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith aptly called "consubstantial embodiment of language and materiality" (Smith and Watson 2010: 52). The following passage from the closing pages of *Giving Up the Ghost* seems to prove my point:

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³⁵³ I.e. not in line with the rest of Annette's characterisation provided in the narrative.

I am not writing to solicit any special sympathy. [...] I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are. Spirit needs a house and lodges where it can; you don't kill yourself just because you need loose covers rather than frocks. [...] You need to find yourself, in a maze of social expectation, the thickets of memory: just which bits of you are left intact? I have been so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, so thin and so fat, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being – even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one will see till I'm dead. When you have committed enough words to paper you feel you have a spine stiff enough to stand up in the wind. But when you stop writing you find that's all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen. (Mantel 2010a: 222–223)

For Mantel, indisputably, writing means life. Metaphorically speaking, she considers her writing to be a “dress” with which she can cover her battered body: “something to go out in and face the world” (223).

The final pages of *Giving Up the Ghosts* show Mantel selling her beloved house, Owl Cottage, and moving to a different place: an apartment in a converted lunatic asylum in Surrey. It is a brilliant coda to the whole narrative as by means of leaving the house, the writer also manages to give up the ghosts that have inhabited the place and her life: including Jack, her stepfather's ghost, who appears on the staircase on the first page of Mantel's memoir; and, above all, her unborn children:

Then a thing occurred to me, about ghost children. They don't age unless you make them. They don't age so they don't know it's time to leave home. They won't without a struggle, be kicked out of your psyche. They will hang on by every means they know; they won't agree to go, until you make your intentions very clear. [...] It's not enough to tell them; you have to show them as well. (240)

But the titular ghosts are not only members of Mantel's family – long dead or never born. The ghosts are also her works – books she should have written but did not, stories that she started and abandoned. In her dream, she sees the books as foetal beings, “frozen corpses,” “malign forms,” which – she fears – “will range about the world and will bad-mouth [her] and misrepresent [her]” (232). In this sense, moving to a new home also means shaking off the fears and embarking on some new literary projects – free from the haunting presence of the past. On

the final page of the story Mantel imagines herself as a figure shrouded in a cloak who is carrying some bulky objects and traversing the fields of Surrey. “This figure is me,” she says: “these shapes hidden in their wrappings, are books that, God willing, I am going to write. But when was God ever willing?” (252).

Apparently, (s)he is from time to time, as in 2009 – nine years after moving and giving up her ghosts – Hilary Mantel published the bulky volume she dreamed of on the last page of her memoir: the novel *Wolf Hall* (2009).

In 2010 Mantel wrote a post-script to *Giving Up The Ghost*: an excerpt from her diary which she first published in *The London Review of Books* (Mantel 2010c) and, later, as a separate piece titled *Ink in the Blood: A Hospital Diary* which was released as an e-book by Fourth Estate, her regular publisher (Mantel 2010e). The piece explores Mantel’s hospitalisation and the surgery she was forced to undergo – immediately after winning the Man Booker Prize (and other awards³⁵⁴) for *Wolf Hall*. It can well be perceived as an extension of the investigation of illness and suffering that she first embarked on in her 2003 memoir, an investigation of “the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation [i.e. being ill]” (Sontag 1978: 3). In her diary, Mantel returns to the topics she explored before: writing and suffering,³⁵⁵ the nature of illness and its demands,³⁵⁶ the language of medicine,³⁵⁷ attitudes of medical professionals,³⁵⁸ childlessness.³⁵⁹ Most importantly, she enters into polemics with a writer who is claimed to be among the first to make illness the subject of art, namely Virginia Woolf. In her seminal essay “On Being Ill” Woolf famously says: “English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache” (Woolf 1967: 194). Mantel’s fierce criticism of Woolf’s inquiry into the “hidden drama of the sickroom” (Jurecic 2012: 5) is not only an attempt to prioritise the body and physical pain (over the mind and its suffering), but a way

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³⁵⁴ E.g. the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Walter Scott Prize.

³⁵⁵ “Pain is a present-tense business” (Mantel 2010c).

³⁵⁶ “Illness involves such busywork!”, “Illness strips you back to an authentic self, but not one you need to meet” (Mantel 2010c).

³⁵⁷ “It’s just another border post on the frontier between medicine and greengrocery; growths and tumors seem always to be described as ‘the size of a plum’ or ‘the size of a grapefruit’” (Mantel 2010c).

³⁵⁸ “Some take the human body to be made of flesh, some of jointed metal” (Mantel 2010c).

³⁵⁹ “Perhaps it was because of the weight of dressings on my abdomen that I dreamed I was carrying a child” (Mantel 2010c).

to establish an alternative tradition of illness writing. By writing against Woolf³⁶⁰ (who – according to Mantel – fell victim to the limitations and constrictions of her social class and gender), Mantel makes a strong argument in favour of her own writing:

I read “On Being Ill,” by Virginia Woolf. What schoolgirl piffle, I think. It’s like one of those compositions by young ladies mocked in *Tom Sawyer*. I can’t understand what she means when she complains about the “poverty of the language” we have to describe illness. For the sufferer, she says, there is “nothing ready made.” Then what of the whole vocabulary of singing aches, of spasms, of strictures and cramps; the gouging pain, the drilling pain, the pricking and pinching, the throbbing, burning, singing, smarting, flaying? All good words. All old words. No one’s pain is so special that the devil’s dictionary of anguish has not anticipated it. [...] Virginia has only decorous illnesses. She has faints and palpitations, fevers and headaches, though I am mindful that at one stage they tried to fix her by pulling out her teeth. But she is seemly; she does not seep, or require a dressings trolley, she does not wake at dawn to find herself smeared with contact jelly from last night’s ECG. Virginia never oozes. Her secretions are ladylike: tears, not bile. She may as well not have had bowels, for all the evidence of them in her book. (Mantel 2010c)

The final paragraph of Mantel’s hospital diary returns to the issue of the correspondence between writing and survival – the way the latter is dependent on the former. Mantel – overwhelmed by pain, sutured, and struggling with hallucinations – would always “contrive to get [her] pen in [her] hand, however far it had rolled.” “The only thing that would really have upset me,” she continues, “was running out of paper. The black ink looping across the page, flowing easily and more like water than like blood, reassured me that I was alive and could act in the world. When Virginia Woolf’s doctors forbade her to write, she obeyed them. Which makes me ask, what kind of wuss was Woolf” (ibid.).

Mantel did not obey the doctors’ commands. *Giving Up the Ghost*, Mantel’s very own “on being ill,” is a proof that she, unlike Woolf, is no wuss.

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³⁶⁰ As well as against Susan Sontag who in her *Illness as Metaphor* famously argued that writing about illness – this “night-side of life” and “an onerous citizenship” (Sontag 1978: 3) should not be considered a literary endeavour and should be liberated from the titular metaphors.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Work of Mourning: *Levels of Life* by Julian Barnes

What is it the wife wears the husband never sees? Answer: The widow's weeds.

Unpublished (from the diary of Kathleen Isherwood)
(HRC, Christopher Isherwood Collection, 3.3–23: 4)

I was dying. That much was certain. The rest is fiction.

Simon Critchley, *Memory Theatre* (2014: 7)

Here's a word. *Bereavement*. Or, *Bereaved*. *Bereft*. It's from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning "to deprive of, take away, seize, rob." Robbed. Seized. It happens to everyone. But you feel it alone. Shocking loss isn't to be shared, no matter how hard you try.

Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (2014: 13)

In a recent interview with Mark Lawson, Barnes confessed to a sense of unease as far as labelling and strict categorisation of his works are concerned: "If they [booksellers and readers – R.K.] ask me to label it, I would just say a 'book.' Or, I would say, the author's name is the label" (Lawson 2013c). When talking to Hermione Lee in 2016, he confessed "I'm a trans-genre writer; I have been since my third novel, *Flaubert's Parrot*" (Barnes [in:] Browne 2016). Violation of norms and refusal to fulfil a singular generic designation appear to lie at the very heart of Barnes's rich oeuvre. His best known piece, *Flaubert's Parrot* of 1984, is, in the words of its creator, an "upside-down novel" (ibid.), a truly hybrid text where "clarity is the hardest thing of all" (Barnes 2002: 116). Hence, the

fictional story of the retired doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite is supplemented by, among others, critical and scholarly essays on Flaubert's writing, a biographical study as well as excerpts from the writer's letters and diaries, a chronology of Flaubert's life, a "train-spotter's" guide to his life and works (including animal imagery in the novels of the French master entitled "The Flaubert Bestiary"), and examination papers.³⁶¹ Transgressing the laws of genres is even more apparent in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* of 1989. The volume, which one critic aptly compared to a "symphony" (Moseley 1997: 115), comprises of highly heterogeneous chapters, some of which can be classified as an essay on art history ("The Survivor"), a travelogue ("The Mountain"), a memoir ("Parenthesis"), and a collection of letters ("Upstream!"). An interplay of factual and fictional genres also comes to the fore in Barnes's novel of 2005. *Arthur & George* narrates selected episodes from the life of Arthur Conan Doyle. True to its generic provenience, i.e. a "biographical-novel-about-a-writer" (Lodge 2006: 10), it boasts the characteristics of a borderland text (an attempt to combine biography with fiction and, hence, affirm a truth "beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology" [Gusdorf 1980: 43]), and, consequently, painfully negotiates its affinities between artistic/literary demands and historical/objective functions of the narrative. Like the séances in which Arthur Conan Doyle obsessively participated towards the end of his life, a biographical-novel-about-a-writer works best "when there is a clever mixture of the true and the false" (Barnes 2006: 491).

Hence, when, in 2013, Julian Barnes published his new work entitled *Levels of Life*, a recognition that the volume consisted of three generically distinctive parts (a biographical essay entitled "The Sin of Height," a short story "On the Level," and an (auto)biographical narrative "The Loss of Depth") was not particularly surprising. To anyone familiar with the writer's previous experiments in de-stabilising texts and violating various norms and demarcations erected by generic structuralism, *Levels of Life* could well appear as just another Barnesian book. However, the volume's transgressive qualities were overshadowed by the contextual

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³⁶¹ This quality of Barnes's writing has been noted by many, e.g. James B. Scott, who called *Flaubert's Parrot* "trans-generic prose text" (Scott 1990: 58) and Carlos Fuentes who, in his review of *Staring at the Sun*, enthused about Barnes breaking "barriers of conventional time and genre" (Fuentes 1987). When writing about *Arthur & George*, Bożena Kucała emphasised "the novel's challenge to classic narrative conventions" and its resistance to classification due to "a hybrid blend of fact and fiction and of different genres" (Kucała 2012: 229).

circumstances under which it was released: *Levels of Life* was Barnes's literary response to the death of his wife Pat Kavanagh, who died in 2008.

An immediate classification of *Levels of Life* as a work of (auto)thanatology could not be avoided given the number of death/bereavement narratives that have been released over the last twenty years or so, and Barnes's own previous exploration of this kind of writing. In 2008, he published a memoir entitled *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* in which, despite or, perhaps, precisely because he identified himself as a "thanatophobe" (Barnes 2009: 25), Barnes addressed the theme of death – from historical, literary, psychological and, necessarily, personal points of view. He blatantly confessed to his obsession with death:

My friend R. recently asked me how often I think about death, and in what circumstances. At least once each waking day, I replied: and then there are intermittent nocturnal attacks. Mortality often gatecrashes my consciousness when the outside world presents an obvious parallel: as evening falls, as the days shorten, or towards the end of a long day's hiking. A little more originally, perhaps, my wake-up call frequently shrills at the start of a sports event on television. (23)

Barnes's *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* was published in March 2008. In the autumn of the same year, Pat Kavanagh, Barnes's wife of twenty-nine years, died of a brain tumour. Until the release of *Levels of Life*, Barnes had remained silent on the topic of his wife's death – with the exception of a review of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* (2011) published in *The New York Review of Books* in April 2011,³⁶² which, to those familiar with Barnes's own trauma, poignantly ended with a telling quotation from Dr. Johnson:

He that outlives the wife whom he has long loved, sees himself disjoined from the only mind that has the same hopes, and fears, and interests; from the only companion with whom he has shared much good or evil; and with whom he could set his mind at liberty, to retrace the past, or anticipate the future. The continuity of being is lacerated; the settled course of sentiment and action is stopped; and life stands suspended and motionless, till it is driven by external causes into a new channel. But the time of suspense is dreadful. (Johnson [in:] Barnes 2012: 227)

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³⁶² It was later included in his 2012 collection *Through the Window* (2012).

Two years later Barnes published *Levels of Life*: the product of that “time of suspense.”

The unorthodoxy of Barnes’s volume already manifests itself at the level of form. *Levels of Life* is by no means a typical first person autobiographical account of spousal grief, but a tripartite narrative composed of three distinctive modalities (of which only the last part, “The Loss of Depth,” can be classified as a “traditional” memoir³⁶³) which are brought together by, among others, the unifying theme of love and loss, anaphoric beginnings,³⁶⁴ and an overall metaphor of height and depth, horizontality and verticality, truth and magic, photography and ballooning.

The volume’s first part entitled “The Sin of Height” is both a historical essay on ballooning and a biographical essay on three exceptional balloonists: Sarah Bernhardt, Fred Burnaby, and, especially Félix Tournachon. Remaining faithful to the generic requirements of an essay,³⁶⁵ Barnes investigates some of the first attempts to soar into the sky and master the skills of ballooning, which is considered “a freedom subservient to the powers of wind and weather” (Barnes 2013: 9). Hence, the writer introduces the first important trope of the volume: the feeling of love is compared to an ascent of a balloonist into the sky. Providing extensive quotations from the writings of 17th and 18th century aeronauts, Barnes reminds one that being in the air (and, simultaneously, being in love) is a “moral feeling,” a source of “happiness,” a space where one can “hear [oneself] living” (12). But, as the examples of Simon Magus and Icarus prove, a desire to “visit God’s space” (13), this “sin of getting above yourself” (14) is often punished. Consequently, the writer’s attention is turned to Félix Tournachon, also known as Nadar, who in 1863 took off from the Parisian Champs du Mars and, after seventeen hazardous hours, crash-landed near Hanover. The centrality of Tournachon

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³⁶³ I.e. personal recollections which take “a segment of life [of one’s own, or other’s], not its entirety,” and focus on “interconnected experiences” (Smith and Watson 2010: 274).

³⁶⁴ “You put together two things that have not been put together before. And the world is changed” (Barnes 2013: 3); “You put together two things that have not been put together before; and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t” (31); “You put together two people who have not been put together before. Sometimes it is like the first attempt to harness a hydrogen balloon to a fire balloon: do you prefer crash and burn, or burn and crash? But sometimes it works, and something new is made, and the world is changed” (67).

³⁶⁵ “The Sin of Height” is a personal, yet factual and well-researched piece of argumentative/critical writing fleshed out with quotations from diaries, journals, biographies (appropriately, without providing footnotes) and boasting an episodic, though often parallel structure.

– an ardent believer in “heavier-than-air flight” (25) – to Barnes’s narrative is twofold. Firstly, Nadar’s story allows him to write about the man’s relationship with his wife Ernestine, who provided a “pattern” to his life (24), and who, after fifty-five years of marriage, died in 1909. In this way, when writing about Tournachon losing “his rudder” (25), Barnes, subtly and indirectly, introduces the theme of marital grief. Secondly, the French “journalist, caricaturist, photographer, balloonist, entrepreneur and inventor, a keen register of patents and founder of companies, a tireless self-publicist, and in old age a prolific writer of unreliable memoirs” (15), is singled out since he was the first aerostatic photographer. To re-phrase the opening lines of the chapter, Nadar put together two things that had not been linked before, namely photography and aeronautics, and changed the world forever (18). By means of this scientific advance, Barnes concludes, “the sin of height was purged” (26). However, the figure of Tournachon not only offers an illustration of Barnes’s ideas, but, I should like to claim, can in fact be seen as a component that explains and thematises the nature of the whole volume. Nadar soared into the sky not to reveal what was “up in the clouds” (64), but to show what was “on the level” (60). Tellingly, “The Sin of Height” ends with an account of one of the members of the Apollo 8 mission, William Anders, who says: “I think it struck everybody that here we’d come 240,000 miles to see the Moon and it was the Earth that was really worth looking at” (27). It appears to me that the same principle lies at the very heart of this first chapter of the writer’s (auto)thanatology. Barnes seems to be writing about a reality exterior to his own loss, yet, inevitably, addresses a very personal grief. Discreetly, he looks at himself from afar, and “makes[s] the subjective suddenly objective” (27).

“On the Level,” the volume’s second chapter, is a no less exceptional piece of (auto)thanatology than “The Sin of Height.” It opens as another biographical essay, but soon transmutes into a fictional story (though based on facts) about an affair between two historical figures introduced in the first part of the volume, namely Sarah Bernhardt and Fred Burnaby. Ostensibly, “On the Level” is a love story, yet a tragic one, which fulfils the premise expressed by a narrator: “Every love story is a potential grief story. If not at first, then later. If not for one, then for the other. Sometimes, for both” (36–37). For the writer, love is the “meeting point of truth and magic. Truth, as in photography; magic, as in ballooning” (ibid.) – thus, a further link between the two sections of *Levels of Life* is created. Moreover, identically to the previous section, here Barnes also returns to the

idea of bringing two elements together and ponders on the result of such an encounter:

You put together two people who have not been put together before; and sometimes the world is changed, sometimes not. They may crash and burn, or burn and crash. But sometimes, something new is made, and then the world is changed. Together, in that first exaltation, that first roaring sense of uplift, they are greater than their two separate selves. Together, they see further, and they see more clearly. (31–32)

As exemplified by the above-quoted excerpt, the metaphor of ballooning and the language of aeronautics permeate the pages of “On the Level.” Bernhardt and Burnaby, both balloonists, are described as “soaring” (49) and “in the clouds” (54). Aware of all the differences between the lovers, the Englishman knows that in order to be with the famous actress he needs a northerly wind “which is somewhat rare and unreliable” (42). He also recognises the potential non-reciprocity and incommensurability of feelings, the fact that “the winds do not always blow in the same direction at different heights” and if the right wind is not found one may end up in water (43) – a remark which Bernhardt leaves “hanging in the air” (*ibid.*). The narrator assists his characters in exploiting the metaphorical language of ballooning:

We live on the flat, on the level, and yet – and so – we aspire. Groundlings, we can sometimes reach as far as the gods. Some soar with art, others with religion; most with love. But when we soar, we can also crash. There are few soft landings. (36)

Unsurprisingly, there is no soft landing for Bernhardt and Burnaby. The latter believes that the future belongs to “heavier-than-air machines”; the ones that can be steered and whose ascent and descent can be ordered. In other words, he wishes to marry her. However, the former “balloonatic” (55) believes in danger and absolute freedom of unrestricted soaring in the air. She refuses to refrain from a constant flow of “new sensations, new emotions” (56); “I shall never take that heavier-than-air machine with anyone,” Bernhardt concludes (56–57). Burnaby’s love story turns into a grief story and his mourning over the break-up with Bernhardt lasts, as Barnes notes, several years. Although it occupies only several pages of the narrative, it inevitably prepares the readers for the final, third part of the volume: the story of another man’s crash.

"The Loss of Depth" is the most personal part of the whole book, delivered by the unequivocally autobiographical voice of the writer, who has been "weaken[ed]" for ever (84). Once again, the section opens with an anaphoric paragraph musing on the effect of bringing two people together, but its conclusion differs from the previous closures. The narrator, who in the fourth paragraph of the chapter will identify himself as Barnes, says: "Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not be mathematically possible; but it is emotionally possible" (67). The "sudden spear-thrust to the neck" which terminated Burnaby's life is, in Barnes's case, the death of his wife Pat Kavanagh, "the heart of [his] life, the life of [his] heart" (68). "The Loss of Depth" is, unequivocally, a work of mourning as incessantly acknowledged by the writer: "I mourn her uncomplicatedly, and absolutely. [...] I miss her in every action, and in every inaction" (81). It is a document of Barnes's struggles after Kavanagh's demise, his longing for her which he defines, after the German word *Sehnsucht*, as a specific kind of loneliness: "her-lessness" (113). Thus, what, one may and should wonder, makes this particular bereavement specifically un- or anti-generic?

Firstly, the matter of literariness and the volume's prioritisation of the aesthetic function.³⁶⁶ Undoubtedly, Barnes writes *imaginatively* about grief. The chapter is, once again, infused with the tropes of ballooning, of ascent and descent, of crash, and by this means it becomes organically connected to the previous sections. A mourner is compared to a balloonist who comes down in the freezing ocean "equipped only with an absurd cork overjacket that is supposed to keep you alive" (69), while grief is described as "not a place of upper air" (82). Spatial imagery also plays an important role in Barnes's discussion of bereavement. The one who mourns is the one who has lost height. Simultaneously, with the loss of belief in God ("this long-standing imaginary friend of ours" [86]) or afterlife, one has also lost depth – the metaphor for the underworld where the dead still live (86–87). Moreover, grief is believed to be vertical, while mourning horizontal: "Grief makes your stomach turn, snatches the breath from you, cuts off the blood supply to the brain; mourning blows you in the

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³⁶⁶ I do not wish to claim that all (auto)thanatographies are essentially anti-literary, since the example of Joan Didion's or Joyce Carol Oates's works prove otherwise. Nevertheless, I consider Barnes's *Levels of Life* the *most* literary specimen due to its unparalleled generic hybridity and thematic convergence, as well as the structural patterns which are masterly executed and coherently applied to all three chapters of the volume.

new direction" (88). But it is not only the shared language of the volume that unites the three pieces. One cannot overlook a number of explicit references to Burnaby or Nadar to be discovered on the pages of "The Loss of Depth," since episodes from their lives are inherently inscribed into the diegetic framework of Barnes's personal narrative. For example, when he wants to talk about the transience and evanescence of life, he turns to a story of Burnaby travelling in a balloon over the Thames and discovering that the sun projects an image of their craft onto the clouds below: "Burnaby compared it to a 'colossal photograph.' And so it is with our life: so clear, so sure, until, for one reason or another – the balloon moves, the cloud disperses, the sun changes angle – the image is lost for ever, available only to memory, turned into anecdote" (110).

As I have already remarked, (auto)thanatographies often display a tension between intimate and public forms of grief. Undoubtedly, Barnes recognises his position as another in a series of mourners (he quotes from Ivy Compton-Burnett, Ford Madox Ford, E.M. Forster and Odilon Redon, among others) and, appropriately, he does not refrain from the frequent use of such pronouns as "you" and "we," which emphasise the collective nature of bereavement and the shared lot of the bereaved. However, "The Loss of Depth" refuses to perform what appears to be the primary function of (auto)thanatography: it is not a testament to the life and work of the beloved person. Barnes hardly ever mentions his wife and not even once does he refer to Pat Kavanagh by name. Paradoxically, one learns more about Kavanagh from a few passages from Edmund White's 2014 memoir *Inside a Pearl* (2014) (about White's years in Paris),³⁶⁷ than from the entire volume of Barnes's memoir. Though the writer calls himself Kavanagh's "principal rememberer" (90), *Levels of Life* contains no memories of Barnes's deceased spouse. Undoubtedly, the volume is a personal narrative; however, it is not intimate (Latin *intimus* meaning most private, innermost). It is a memoir of the self, rather than of the other. Towards the end of the book, Barnes indirectly provides his readers with an explanation for his wife's absence from the pages of *Levels of Life*. He draws a distinction between "binocular" memory and "monocular" memory, the former being "corroborated by the one who was there at the time. What we did, where we went, whom we met, how we felt. How we were

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³⁶⁷ On just three pages, one learns about Kavanagh's origin (from South Africa, Irish family), physical features ("a slender, beautiful redhead with high cheekbones"), professional life (actress and literary agent), pastimes (hiking in Provence with Barnes, cooking), love life (affair with Jeanette Winterson) (White 2014: 173–175).

together” (109). Two memories of the same guarantee a “surer” single memory, “by triangulation, by aerial surveying” (110). Barnes concludes:

And so that memory, now in the first person-singular, changes. Less the memory of an event than the memory of a photograph of the event. And nowadays – having lost height, precision, focus – we are no longer sure we trust photography as we once did. Those old familiar snaps of happier times have come to seem less primal, less like photographs of life itself, more like photographs of photographs. (ibid.)

Barnes is left with a monocular memory, insufficient, he confesses, to recall the life shared with his wife. This might explain why the writer turns, instead, to the documented and “shared” (or, singlehandedly imagined) lives of Sarah Bernhardt, Fred Burnaby, and Félix Tournachon.

Another important feature of “The Loss of Depth” – which, I believe, powerfully corresponds to its anti-intimate character – is the analytical³⁶⁸ and non-descriptive nature of the writing. Though based on his personal experience, the writer offers a detailed discussion of grief and enters into dialogue with attitudes that people manifest towards death, theories of mourning, family and acquaintances who (mis-)behave towards the griever. He concludes, among others, that grief is both banal and unique (70), that it often becomes a test of friendship (77); that its truths are inexpressible (78–79); that it “does not occupy a moral space” (82); that it re-configures time and space (84); that it destroys a belief in the existence of patterns (85). Most importantly, Barnes questions and rebels against the premise which, for many, is the founding pillar of (auto)thanatographies: a faith in their pedagogical or consolatory/therapeutic mission. Repeating (and re-phrasing) after Forster, Barnes challenges what he previously called “therapeuto-autobiographical fallacy”: “One grief throws no light upon another” (70), while surviving the grief does not make one a “stronger” or “better” person (83). “Do you want art to be a healer? Send for the AMBULANCE GEORGE SAND,” Barnes advised in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. And added: “Do you want art to tell the truth? Send for the AMBULANCE FLAUBERT: though don’t be surprised, when it arrives, if it runs over your legs” (Barnes 2002: 160–161). *Levels of Life* is not a healer, either. Barnes’s constrained honesty, anti-sentimentalism and refusal to comply with any “normative” accounts of grief makes

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³⁶⁸ Perhaps most visible in his unsentimental and “un-magical” (to contrast with, for example, Didion’s approach) analysis of dreams (Barnes 2013: 96–97).

his narrative particularly idiosyncratic and, one could argue, profoundly painful.

Still, I should like to claim, the uniqueness of the Barnesian volume against other existing (auto)thanatographies is guaranteed – next to its formal generic hybridity, its literariness as well stylistic and metaphorical synchronicity, its anti-commemorativeness, considerable self-concealment, and critique of the anticipated therapeutic impact of a narrative – by its refusal to follow a trajectory of grief³⁶⁹ which, according to Freud, should end, “after a certain lapse of time,” when the work of mourning is completed and “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 1961: 244–245). Barnes not only openly challenges the five-stage path of mourning³⁷⁰ and its progress, arguing in favour of the “accumulation” of grief, but, unlike many of his fellow (auto)thanatographers,³⁷¹ questioning the very idea of “success” at grief. Drawing a parallel between cancer patients and grief-stricken individuals, Barnes remains doubtful about the role of the mind. He reminds us that, according to cancer studies, despite one’s illusion that one has beaten the disease, one always remains in its grip: the cells have only “gone away to regroup” (118). “We imagine we have battled against it [grief], been purposeful, overcome sorrow, scrubbed the rust from,” Barnes says, “when all that has happened is that grief has moved elsewhere, shifted its interest” (118).

The ending of *Levels of Life* is not consolatory; it does not show Barnes “free and uninhibited,” as Freud would expect him to be. However, it is not without a promise of hope.³⁷² For the last time Barnes returns to his aerial metaphors to announce to a damaged balloonist that he has not met his end yet:

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³⁶⁹ Elizabeth Kübler-Ross’s most influential *On Death and Dying* identifies five stages of grief: 1) denial and isolation (Kübler-Ross 2003: 51–62), 2) anger (63–92), 3) bargaining (93–96), 4) depression (97–122), 5) acceptance (123–146).

³⁷⁰ For example, he says the following about step three: “When it came to my turn [...] I was never tempted to bargain because there was and is no one in my cosmos to bargain with” (Barnes 2013: 94).

³⁷¹ For example, the last line of Mark Doty’s *On Heaven’s Coast* reads: “A wild and bracing wind is blowing off the Atlantic, and suddenly the biting air’s alive with big white flakes swirling in a shock of sunlight, and I’m alive with a strange kind of joy, stumbling up the dune into the winter wind, my face full of salt-spray and snow” (Doty 1997: 305).

³⁷² Iconically speaking, the whole volume and its meticulous composition can be seen as a sign of Barnes’s survival (or, pretence of survival): “Each of us must pretend to find, or re-erect, a pattern. Writers believe in the patterns their words make, which they hope and trust add up to ideas, to stories, to truths. This is always their salvation, whether griefless or griefstruck” (Barnes 2013: 85–86).

We did not make the clouds come in the first place, and have no power to disperse them. All that has happened is that from somewhere – or nowhere – an unexpected breeze has sprung up, and we are in movement again. But where are we being taken? To Essex? The German Ocean? Or, if the wind is northerly, then, perhaps, with luck, to France. (118)

Towards the end of *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* Barnes writes about writers who “die in character”³⁷³ (177); people such as Zola and Hemingway, whose death was consistent with the way they lived. *Levels of Life* is, I am convinced of the fact, written in unmistakably Barnesian character.³⁷⁴ Despite a very special and traumatic context for his narrative, never does the writer succumb to conventional literary paradigms and, similarly to in his previous books, as a *bona fide* memoirist he challenges generic conventions.

However, consistency between *Levels of Life* and Barnes’s other works does not manifest itself exclusively in their shared propensity for formal unorthodoxy. In a deeply puzzling and troubling sense, traces and fore-sights of Barnes’s widowerhood and his experience of grief can be found in, for example, “Marriage Lines” and – perhaps most powerfully – in *Flaubert’s Parrot*. In hindsight, the story of Geoffrey Braithwaite, also a widower, published twenty-four years before the death of Pat Kavanagh, does appear to a reader as uncannily accurate; almost a prediction of the writer’s own condition.³⁷⁵ Braithwaite says:

And you do come out of it, that’s true. After a year, after five. But you don’t come out of it like a train coming out of a tunnel, bursting through the Downs into sunshine and that swift, rattling descent to the Channel; you come out of it as a gull comes out of an oil-slick. You are tarred and feathered for life. (191)

Levels of Life is a testimony of Barnes’s coming out of grief; but, indeed, coming out as a man who has been “tarred and feathered for life.”

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³⁷³ Barnes writes about two types of dying in character, i.e. in personal character or, in the case of writers, in literary character. Doing both, which, as Barnes concludes, happens to some, would imply a profoundly autobiographical nature of one’s literary oeuvre (Barnes 2013: 177).

³⁷⁴ One could also claim that *Levels of Life* is an example of grieving in character.

³⁷⁵ Barnes, aware of this uncanny correspondence between work and life, read a passage from the book at Kavanagh’s funeral (Barnes 2013: 115).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Life after Life: *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* by J.M. Coetzee

Must we have lives?

Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers* (2000: 3)

A life-view by the living can only be provisional. Perspectives are altered by the fact of being drawn; description solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn't there before. A background of dark matter – all that is not said – remains, buzzing.

John Updike, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (2012: xiv)

The potentialities of [the] victim-executioner or judge-accused are those of a subject that knows it will not be able to confess its identity in a name.

Sabine L. Götz, "How Ethnic Am I?" (1998: 50)

He [an allegorist] would [...] know how to tell a story, but he would refrain from doing so, without ever being able to know whether he were telling the truth.

Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (1989: 85)

Three months prior to the official UK release of J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*, the Nobel-prize winning author was a guest speaker at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, where – on Thursday, 11 June – he read an excerpt from the highly anticipated third volume of his memoirs. One of the folders in the J.M. Coetzee Archives held at Harry Ransom Centre,

University of Texas at Austin, contains a handwritten introduction for this public event which reads:

What I have been up to is completing the third of a trilogy of books commenced in 1996 with Boyhood, and proceeded in 2000 with Youth, and now coming to an end with Summertime, due to be published later this year.

This trio of books took as its inspiration Tolstoy's [series? – R.K.] Childhood – Boyhood – Youth, one of the world's great works of autobiography. I don't want to spend time discussing what exactly autobiography is,³⁷⁶ and in particular what duty autobiography owes, to the factual record of one's life. So let me simply advise you that if you believe that the truth of autobiography ought to include truth to the historical record, you will be disappointed in these three books. All three of them, Summertime in particular, play fast and loose with the historical record.

Summertime relates certain episodes in the life of a man in his early thirties, the man bearing the same name as myself, living in South Africa in the early 1970s, when I (I too) lived in South Africa. (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 62.5: n.p.³⁷⁷)

The above-quoted fragment – apart from emphasising the books' deliberate a-historical/anti-factual properties, their "playing fast and loose" with history – conspicuously draws one's attention to three aspects of Coetzee's autobiographical project: the relationship between the writer

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³⁷⁶ Coetzee has repeatedly addressed the issue of autobiography and autobiographical truth, most notably in "Confessions and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (Coetzee 1992c: 251–293), *Truth in Autobiography* (Coetzee 1994), *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy* (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015); not to mention the interviews with David Attwell included in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Coetzee 1992a: 391–395; Coetzee 1992b: 243–250) or notes on a seminar entitled "Autobiography" which Coetzee taught at the University of Chicago in the fall semester of 1998 (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 114.11: 1–8). In these very notes one finds an articulation of Coetzee's perennial concerns (a handwritten note to a typed conspectus): "The story of your life. Where does the story come from? Is it given to you to write down, or do you make it up? Do you make it up as you go along, so that you are not sure, all the time, how it is going to end? And who are you telling this story to? Who are you trying to convince, to impress? Yourself? Someone else? Who?" (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 114.11: 1).

³⁷⁷ Throughout this chapter I have attempted to provide my readers (and also potential future investigators of the J.M. Coetzee Archives) with the most accurate indications of where, in the impressive body of Coetzee's manuscripts and various documents, individual quotes might be located. Consequently, apart from the folder number, whenever possible I have tried to include in the study's in-text references either the page number of the manuscript/document consulted, or the date of its creation (depending on the availability of such data in the examined sources); or – if possible – both.

and his (autobiographical) character, the series' generic affiliations, and, finally, the books' inspirations and models. While the first of these characteristics may be well illustrated by the term "*autrebiography*" (Coetzee 1992a: 394) – Coetzee's own coinage which highlights the sense of estrangement as well as a demonstrative separation of oneself from who one was (and is narrated about), and which is further buttressed by the choice of the third-person present-tense narrative mode, this "persistent if subtle syntax of subjective displacement" (Clarkson 2009: 21)³⁷⁸; and the second aspect has been manifestly addressed by the very writer³⁷⁹ and the many commentators of his works,³⁸⁰ the question of the series' generic status³⁸¹ remains – for this book, at least – particularly intriguing.

The J.M. Coetzee Papers held in Austin are quite illuminative in this respect. Firstly, there can be no doubt that Coetzee's trilogy is

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³⁷⁸ Clarkson further argues the following: "If linguistic exigency dictates that writing cannot *but* imply an 'I' who writes [...] Coetzee, in his writing, and in a self-conscious way, engages linguistic and literary strategies to question the authority of that 'I' – strategies such as use of the third person, the deployment of fictional characters that articulate thoughts we are often tempted to identify as Coetzee's own, the self-questioning use of the genre of autobiography itself" (Clarkson 2009: 21). After Émile Benveniste, Clarkson claims that "he" (John) in Coetzee's autobiographical works is "the one who is absent" (29). The use of the third person may also be seen as a tribute to Coetzee's mother, Vera, who between June 1941 and December 1942 wrote a diary, also in the third person, in which she referred to herself as "Mother" (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 103.4).

³⁷⁹ Apart from Tolstoy's trilogy Coetzee's (acknowledged) influences are: *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950) by William Cooper together with *Scenes from Married Life* (1961) and *Scenes from Metropolitan Life* (1982) and *Scènes de la vie de campagne* (a series of four books published from 1833 to 1854) by Honoré de Balzac (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: n.p. [5 December 1995]). Coetzee's autobiographical writing also testifies to an inspiration drawn from the works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, James Joyce, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Roland Barthes (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 114.11: 1), as well as Fyodor Dostoevsky (especially with reference to the genre of confession).

³⁸⁰ Derek Attridge points to Saint Augustine and Marcel Proust, while others (Kusek 2012b: 102; Kannemeyer 2013: 497; Tlustý 2014: 230) to George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), Robert Musil's diaries, and Günter Grass's *Die Box: Dunkelkammergeschichten* (2008). The second volume of Grass' memoir is particularly similar to Coetzee's *Summertime*, especially as far as the writer's self-deprecation, factual modifications (e.g. name changes) and the other's perspective on the subject's life (Grass's life is narrated by his eight children) are concerned. At this point, it should also be acknowledged that Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy has not remained immune to the current "critical industry" (Coetzee 2004: 1) which emerged as a response to the oeuvre of the South African/Australian writer. For some notable studies of Coetzee's *autrebiography*, kindly consult the following: Collingwood-Whittick 2001: 13–23; Lenta 2003: 157–169; Attridge 2004: 138–161; López 2011: 219–249; Kusek 2012b: 97–116; Tlustý 2014: 225–237; Moonsamy 2015: 113–136; Meihuizen 2016: 195–209; Wilm 2016: 69–90.

³⁸¹ Interestingly, in the above-quoted introduction Coetzee refers to his memoirs as "books," clearly with an intention of eschewing their generic status.

autobiographical in nature since the term “autobiography” (understood in Derridean terms and not limited to the genre of autobiography) was consistently used by the writer from when he started working on his life story, namely 20 March 1987.³⁸² On 8 August 1993 – after a hiatus of almost six years³⁸³ when Coetzee returned to the idea of completing the first volume of *Scenes from Provincial Life*,³⁸⁴ and, tellingly, the day before he switched from the first-person to the third-person narrative mode³⁸⁵ – Coetzee notes the following: “Not a memoir, but a novel” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: n.p. [8 August 1993]). But any critic who would hope that this statement definitively settles the genre controversy pertaining to Coetzee’s “autobiographies” is bound to be disappointed since just a couple of weeks later, on 16 September 1993, Coetzee thus writes about his work-in-progress: “Think about all I did not do in this *memoir* [my emphasis – R.K.]. Bring the atmosphere to life, tell anecdotes” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 9/3 [16 September 1993³⁸⁶]). Almost a year later, when considering a potential title for his book, Coetzee puts down the following: “Boyhood: A Memoir with Variations” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: n.p. [10 December 1994]); yet his notebook reveals that only five months later he was again considering a label which would conclusively relegate the book to the

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³⁸² The date when the first couple of paragraphs (titled “Scenes from Provincial Life”) were written by Coetzee in the blue examination answer book of the University of Cape Town. The headline given by Coetzee to the first handwritten draft is “autobiography” and in subsequent pages and drafts one also encounters the phrase “notes for autobiography” or “autob” (e.g. HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.1, 27.2).

³⁸³ Coetzee abandoned the first draft of the book on 12 June 1987 and returned to it only on 11 May 1993.

³⁸⁴ The following discussion is based on notes and comments predominantly related to *Boyhood*. However, due to the fact that Coetzee considers all three volumes (i.e. *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*) as one (as confirmed by his decision to publish all three of them together as one book titled *Scenes from Provincial Life* in 2011 – a move which acknowledges their generic coherence), this chapter recognises that all the conclusions made with reference to the first volume of Coetzee’s trilogy are equally applicable to and binding for its third volume.

³⁸⁵ In the first drafts of *Boyhood*, the writer uses the first person narrative mode. Suddenly, on 9 August 1993, Coetzee substitutes “I” with “he”: “They are on a bare strip of ground [...]. He is with his mother...” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 1/1 [9 August 1993]).

³⁸⁶ His entry from the following day also problematises Coetzee’s relationship with his autobiographical character. “Who is this he who will not speak his name?” he writes (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 9/4 [17 September 1993]). Elsewhere he will inquire: “Where does the voice come from?” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: 2 [11 January 1995]). He will return to this issue in one of the letters exchanged with Paul Auster and published in the collection *Here and Now*: “Equation I = JMC is false” (Auster and Coetzee 2013: 208).

realm of fiction, namely “Boyhood: A story” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: 13 [29 May 1995]). However, in June Coetzee is, *encore*, in favour of the former category: “As a memoir the thing may be OK, but as fiction it is too myopic, self-absorbed, closed” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: 13 [13 June 1995]), and when in August he deliberates over changing of the title, i.e. “Family Life: A Memoir” or “Family Life: I: Memoir of Boyhood” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: n.p. [2 August 1995]), he, nevertheless, does not abandon the term “memoir.” What is more, in his correspondence from 1995 and 1996, he repeatedly refers to *Boyhood* as such³⁸⁷ (e.g. HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 80.1: n.p. [25 July 1995]; HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 81.1: n.p. [15 April 1996]). But the generic indeterminacy of *Boyhood* (and, *ergo*, *Youth* as well as *Summertime*) is, perhaps, most overtly expressed by Coetzee’s letter to his US agent, Peter Lampack, in which he not only confirms this book as part of a larger series of “an autobiographical nature” and points out that it “does not stick to the facts all the time,” but – most importantly – he observes that its status, i.e. “whether it is to be marketed as biography, memoirs, or fiction,” needs to be negotiated by the publisher and himself (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 80.3: n.p. [17 October 1995]).³⁸⁸ “[I]t would be best to treat it [...] as a memoir,” Coetzee ultimately decides (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 81.1: n.p. [15 April 1996]). A key to understanding why Coetzee might have decided to favour this term over the others may lie in a short passage found in the writer’s notebook under the date 19 July 1995:

memoir – mendacity – souvenir

mendum (Lat.) – fault, blunder (in writing)

mentio – call to mind; mentionem facere – mention

mentior – lie (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: n.p. [19 July 1995]).

This entry suggests an understanding of memoir as a kind of writing that reminisces, that is a reminder of the past. But it is also – crucially for Coetzee – a lie. It is – epistemologically and ontologically speaking – a failed endeavour which produces a failed account.

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³⁸⁷ “Autobiographical memoir,” “my memoir,” “[by its nature] memoir” – e.g. in letters to Murray Pollinger, a London-based literary agent.

³⁸⁸ Lampack’s response is also very interesting: he expresses his preference for the book being marketed either as biography or memoirs since it lacks “the dramatic tension” that characterises Coetzee’s previous works (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 80.3: n.p. [n.d]).

If one were to follow Coetzee's guidelines and agree to eventually acknowledge his trilogy, including *Summertime*, as a series of memoirs,³⁸⁹ then what would the writer's definition of memoir be? Coetzee has been consistently reluctant to openly discuss his works and the same approach characterises his public attitude to his autobiographical project. Still, as proven herein, with the help of various paratexts, pre- and after-texts that can be found in his Austin-based archives, it is possible to identify (re-construct) a few formal characteristics that apply to his trilogy. Coetzee's version of memoir would then insist on no straightforward correspondence between the writer and his past self (the equation J.M. Coetzee = he is thus true and false, both³⁹⁰); would emphasise the fragmented ("souvenir") and mendacious ("*mendum*") nature of the enterprise; resist a desire either to resurrect a situation/feeling or resuscitate what was; be reluctant to "adhere strictly to facts" which would make a given piece of writing "in places in effect fiction"³⁹¹ (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 81.1: n.p. [15 April 1996]), and, finally, would be much aware of its khôracity and nominal contingency. As a result, Coetzee's indirect "pronouncements" regarding his trilogy should be seen as remaining in full compliance with

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³⁸⁹ *Summertime* was also officially labelled and marketed as a "memoir" – as confirmed by the information on the book's cover. The unavailability of Coetzee's business correspondence relating to the period when *Summertime* was written and considered for publication (J.M. Coetzee Archive currently covers the writer's business correspondence from the period 1969–2006 only) makes it impossible to carry out a detailed investigation (as attempted above) or state whether Coetzee and his publishers considered alternative labelling.

³⁹⁰ With Sue Kossew, I see Coetzee's relationship with his memoiristic persona as engaged in creating ambivalence, "a 'neither yes nor no,' a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or'" (Kossew 2009: 62). It is the same ambivalence which guides Coetzee's paradoxical reading of the nature of the self, most explicitly stated by Elizabeth Costello at the gate of heaven: "'But who am I, who is this I, this you? We change from day to day, and we also stay the same. No I, no you is more fundamental than any other. You might as well ask which is the true Elizabeth Costello: the one who made the first statement or the one who made the second. My answer is, both are true. Both. And neither. I am an other. Pardon me for resorting to words that are not my own, but I cannot improve on them. You have the wrong person before you. If you think you have the right person you have the wrong person. The wrong Elizabeth Costello.' Is this true? It may not be true but it is certainly not false. She has never felt more like the wrong person in her life. Her interrogator waves impatiently. 'I am not asking to see your passport. Passports have no force here, as I am sure you are aware. The question I ask is: you, by whom I mean this person before our eyes, this person petitioning for passage, this person here and nowhere else – do you speak for yourself?' 'Yes. No, emphatically no. Yes and no. Both'" (Coetzee 2004: 221).

³⁹¹ A question that appears in Coetzee's private notebook on 6 January 1995 tellingly is: "Did it really happen?" (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: 1 [6 January 1995]).

the parameters of the genre that have been defined in the first chapter of the present study – the three volumes that comprise *Scenes from Provincial Life* are, one could justifiably claim, memoirs *par excellence*.

Similarly to *Boyhood*,³⁹² *Summertime* – which, at different stages, was also to be called “Three Women” (notes), “Manhood” (draft no. 4), “Arrival” (draft no. 5) and “Bloomtime” (draft no. 6) (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1, 46.5, 46.6, 46.7) – differs considerably from what it was supposed to become when Coetzee first conceived and started writing it. The notes for the closing volume of Coetzee’s trilogy and various sections of it composed in 2002 and 2003 demonstrate that *Summertime* was not initially intended as a radical divergence from its predecessors but as a more congenial follow-up to them: a narrative set mainly in the early 1970s³⁹³ that would take “him” (i.e. John) from Buffalo (where, after his involvement in a campus protest and failure to extend his visa, Coetzee was not allowed to settle in the US permanently) back to South Africa. If Coetzee had continued with the early drafts and notes of *Summertime*, he would have – one could speculate – produced a story of “he” who suffers from his enforced re-union with South Africa and its politics (who “feels soiled” by the experience of witnessing it [Coetzee 2009: 4]); of a husband and a father³⁹⁴ who, unable to find a job in Cape Town, takes his family to the Karoo where they settle on one of the abandoned farms; of a scholar who struggles to integrate himself with a local academic milieu from which he feels intellectually and morally estranged; and, most importantly perhaps, a writer who strives to complete his first novel. In other words, a narrative which – despite being characterised by a deep “interpenetration of fictional and real” (Ashcroft 2011: 146) – could have easily been integrated with the preceding volumes and identified, especially with the help of J.C. Kannemeyer’s commanding biography of the writer, as an autofictional story of J.M. Coetzee’s life in the early 1970s. But this is a memoir which – as Vincent, Coetzee’s fictional biographer,

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³⁹² As the first draft of Coetzee’s first memoir reveals, Coetzee planned to write it in the first person present tense mode – i.e. using a rare but nevertheless existing retrospective formula of (auto)biographical writing. What is more, the focus was not to be on John himself but on John’s mother, who is repeatedly addressed as “you” (e.g. “you are lying in the darkness,” “you are safe,” “you will buy tickets for David and me,” etc.) (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.1: n.p. [20 and 24 March 1982]).

³⁹³ It should be noted that from the very beginning Coetzee intended to divide this book into several parts and include sections that would cover events from other time periods, e.g. the death of his father in 1988 (see HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1).

³⁹⁴ Notes on *Summertime* include references to Philippa Jubber, whom Coetzee married in 1963, as well as Nicholas and Gisela, their children born in 1966 and 1969 respectively.

admits on one of the pages of *Summertime* – “never saw the light of the day” (Coetzee 2009: 205). What did, instead, is one of the most insurgent and iconoclastic specimens of contemporary life writing: Coetzee’s *mémoires d’outre-tombe*, an exercise in “pre-posthumous” (Bennett [in:] Lodge 2015: 83).

Published in September 2009, *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* was certainly seen as a departure (“[a] schism [taking] one bracing step farther” [Dee 2009]) from the relatively conventional narratives offered by the book’s prequels (e.g. Jones 2009; Cartwright 2009; Kermode 2009: 9–10). Structurally, the book is a tripartite story, consisting of the following: eight dated entries from Coetzee’s notebooks spanning the period 1972–1975 which cover a variety of topics, from South African politics to Akira Kurosawa’s movies and from an appreciation of manual work to Breyten Breytenbach and Zbigniew Herbert; five transcribed interviews with Coetzee’s lovers, colleagues and other individuals that are believed to have been important to him in the given period³⁹⁵ which are conducted by a man called Vincent, a biographer of the recently deceased J.M. Coetzee; and, ultimately, five undated notebook entries which concentrate primarily on John’s relationship with his dying father – the first and the last part being supplemented by italicised notes whose authorship remains unclear (they might have been completed either by Coetzee himself³⁹⁶ or Vincent). The volume might, then, be seen as a collection of materials that have been gathered by Vincent to write his “serious book” which intends to focus on the years “from Coetzee’s return to South Africa in 1971/1972 until his first public recognition in 1977,”³⁹⁷

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³⁹⁵ Julia Frankl (whose name offers a twist on the word “frank” and the notion of truth and honesty), a Canadian psychotherapist, Margot Jonker, Coetzee’s cousin, Adriana Nascimento, a Brazilian widow whose daughter was Coetzee’s student and who is shown as a prototype for Susan in Coetzee’s *Foe*, Martin, MJ, Coetzee’s male friend whom he befriends while applying for a university position in Cape Town, and Sophie Denoël, a fellow academic who was also his lover.

³⁹⁶ Not only are the notebook entries written in the style reminiscent of the papers held in Austin, but the italicised passages remind one of the handwritten notes (often on separate pieces of paper) that Coetzee adds to the typed drafts of his books. At some point Vincent claims that they are “memos to himself written in 1999 or 2000, when he was thinking of adapting those particular entries for a book” (Coetzee 2009: 20). But a handwritten note on one of the pages of the eighth draft suggests that Coetzee considered double authorship of them – some of them were to be attributed to the author/researcher (i.e. Vincent), while others to the writer/character (i.e. J.M. Coetzee) (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 47.3: 5).

³⁹⁷ What Vincent might mean as Coetzee’s public recognition is the publication of *In the Heart of the Country*. But being familiar with the distortions of history and time

namely on the period when Coetzee “was still finding his feet as a writer” (Coetzee 2009: 225).

Perhaps the most overt link with the previous volumes is the attitude of deprecation that the narrative displays towards its central protagonist.³⁹⁸ Notably, in *Boyhood* John was described as, among other things, an “irascible despot” (Coetzee 1998: 13), while in *Youth* as “cold, frozen” with his overall condition being diagnosed as “lack of heart, lack of heart” (Coetzee 2003: 168). However, not a single belittling epithet or demeaning comment encountered in the first two books of Coetzee’s memoirs prepares one for the severity and extent of disparagement and castigation that John is subjected to in *Summertime*. None of the interviewees offer a positive image of the writer who – as a teacher, an academic, a novelist and a man – is repeatedly the object of ridicule, patronisation and contempt. In the book – which might be seen as a mock-obituary or an anti-postself³⁹⁹ – he is described as “socially inept” and “repressed” (Coetzee 2009: 20), “not fully human” (84), “tepid” (196), “disembodied” (198), “stiff, intractable, unteachable” (183); as a “failure” (21), “bad bet” (130), “fool” (193), “little man” (195) and “cold fish” (47); as someone characterised by “an autistic quality” (52), a “figure of [dark] comedy” (63) who makes it impossible for the other person to “flower within him. [...] come to life” (36) and who “[does] not love anybody” (48); as an “adequate academic” but “not a notable teacher” (212), “not spectacular [...] but competent” (223); as a writer whose work is “too cool, too neat, too easy, too lacking in passion”, a novelist with “no special sensitivity [...], no original insight into the human condition” (242). Coetzee’s

■ perpetrated by the narrative, the phrase might also refer to the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980.

³⁹⁸ Bill Ashcroft insists that there is “no writer I know who is harder on his characters, particularly those characters whom we might associate with the author” (Ashcroft 2011: 145). Inquiring about Coetzee’s reasons for such a strategy (“Why does he do this? How is he *brave* enough to do this?”) the critic answers in the following way: “It is partly because he requires, in fact insists, that his characters at least appear beyond his control – have a life of their own.” Ashcroft sees this gesture as another means of rejecting or surrendering the authority of the writer, “a kind of power at the same time as it is a form of effacement” (146).

³⁹⁹ I am referring here to the notion of “postself” introduced by Edwin Schneidman which addresses the concern with how one will be seen once they are gone. “The postself,” Schneidman writes, “relates to the concerns of living individuals with their own reputation, impact, influence after death – those personal aspects that still live when the person does not” (Schneidman 1973: 45). “Postself” is a product or projection of one’s thoughts whose function may be therapeutic (e.g. a belief in one’s superior achievement in a given field may help in accepting the inevitability of one’s demise).

“manhood” is the object of special contempt. He is claimed to have had “no sexual presence” (24), been an “eunuch” (114). “*moffe*” (103), “heatless” and “sexless” (118), “cold” (101), “weak” and “soft” (168, 170). “I shiver for the woman who married him,” Adriana concludes (1999). John is also repeatedly diagnosed as a child – not only by himself (“I am a child,” he states in one of the notebook entries [14]; later he calls himself “the product of a damaged childhood” [252]) but predominantly by others. Julia immediately recognises that he is in need of a mother, “someone to take care of him” (22). Margot sees both John and herself as “children of strong fathers” but when they become stranded in their car for the night she assumes the role of the mother and tells John a bedtime story about the princess and the pea (113–114). For Adriana, he was “not a man, he was still a boy” (171), “just a boy, this Mr Coetzee [...] a boy who knew nothing about life” (176). This emphasis on John being a child is not only another form of criticism levelled at the character’s emotional immaturity, but also a nod (and a perverse tribute) to Tolstoy’s first volume of his autobiography, i.e. *Childhood* of 1852. If Tolstoy was the one to start his autobiographical narrative with *Childhood* (which was followed by *Boyhood* and *Youth*), Coetzee (who started with *Boyhood*) chose to end his trilogy with the story of John/child and in this way, one could argue, show both indebtedness to and defiance of (auto)biographical tradition.

The writer’s “militant” attitude towards conventional (auto)biographical narratives – including his own – illustrated by the formal radicalism of the last book of the trilogy, is, one could argue, best exemplified by a passage in the early drafts of *Summertime*. Almost a year⁴⁰⁰ after he started working on the volume, and once a number of passages had already been produced, in one of his self-reflexive notes Coetzee tellingly uses the word “collapse”⁴⁰¹ (“[C]ollapse the chronology” [HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 5 {30 May 2003}]) – a phrase that corresponds to a series of debacles and disintegrations to which he will succumb both in his life story and in the mode/form of narrating it.

The J.M. Coetzee Papers testify to a number of “collapses” that were deliberately instigated in the process of writing *Summertime*. First of all, Coetzee decided to collapse two periods, namely the time between his return from the US and his employment as a lecturer at the University

⁴⁰⁰ Coetzee started working on what was to become *Summertime* in September 2002 (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1).

⁴⁰¹ He will use the word “collapse” again in an entry from 23 February 2005 (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 8).

of Cape Town (i.e. May 1971 – January 1972) and the period between the death of his mother Vera (1985)⁴⁰² and that of his father Zacharias (1988).⁴⁰³ The episodes that correspond to specific events which occurred in the periods designated above become merged,⁴⁰⁴ often extended⁴⁰⁵ and supplemented by others which can be traced back to the whole first half of the 1970s.⁴⁰⁶ Secondly, in *Summertime* Coetzee collapses factual and fictional orders⁴⁰⁷ – a strategy that he exercised both in *Boyhood* and *Youth* but which in the final part of his trilogy becomes seriously amplified. Not only are real people disguised with their vital statistics being changed⁴⁰⁸ (e.g. Coetzee's cousin Agnes⁴⁰⁹ becomes Margot while his colleague Jonathan Crewe – who indeed was a fellow-candidate for the UCT post and whom he met on 10 November 1971⁴¹⁰ [Kannemeyer 2013: 225]

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- ⁴⁰² In the early notes Coetzee's mother, referred to as a "Polish princess" (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 3), is still present in the narrative (e.g. passages that correspond to the 1970s when John returns from the US and lives with her for a while, and the 1980s, when she was still alive) but ultimately becomes removed from the story – presumably in order not to interfere and overshadow the father-son relationship.
- ⁴⁰³ It should be noted that despite breaking historical time, Coetzee showed some extraordinary attention to restoring accurate fictional time. Draft no. 7 contains, for example, a printed chronology which tries to accommodate historical and fictional orders (e.g. Coetzee's actual birth date and the dates of birth of his fictional creations such as Julia, Adriana, etc.) (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 47.1).
- ⁴⁰⁴ E.g. John's visit to the Voëfontein family farm in the Great Karoo in 1971, Jack's (i.e. Zacharias's) work for a company selling motor spares in the 1970s and death of cancer of the larynx in 1988.
- ⁴⁰⁵ E.g. Coetzee was unemployed only for a couple of months; he started working at the University of Cape Town as of 1 January 1972 (Kannemeyer 2013: 225–226).
- ⁴⁰⁶ Coetzee moved to a house on Tokai Road only in 1972 once he started working at the UCT.
- ⁴⁰⁷ María López considers *Summertime*'s prioritisation of fictional order over the factual one as a "zealous defence of the private dimension of the life of the writer as public figure" (López 2011: 245).
- ⁴⁰⁸ The strategy which has been consistently used by Coetzee in all his memoirs. A study of Coetzee's manuscripts reveals that typically early versions of the trilogy contained accurate vital statistics which became modified (often a number of times) when the writer worked on subsequent drafts. For example, until the fifth draft John's cousin is accurately identified as Agnes (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.6).
- ⁴⁰⁹ It appears that Coetzee's protection of Agnes Heinrich throughout his autobiographical project has been duly reciprocated. In Kannemeyer's study of Coetzee's life she appears to have provided the biographer with limited information and agreed to be interviewed over the phone only (Kannemeyer 2013: 13, 320, 651).
- ⁴¹⁰ And who in 2015 wrote his own (auto)biographical/critical account of Coetzee and his South African writings in the form of the study/memoir *In the Middle of Nowhere: J.M. Coetzee in South Africa* in which he "attests to [his] forty-year friendship with Coetzee" (Crewe 2015: 3), and in which he offers a detailed account of the two men's first encounter (Chapter One).

is portrayed as Martin) and a number of “facts” ignored or passed over by the narrative, but many of the episodes and stories that the readers discover on the pages of *Summertime* need to be unambiguously identified – with the invaluable help of Kannemeyer’s study – as largely fraudulent. Although the book’s early notes preserve a considerable degree of accuracy (e.g. his parents still alive, John’s correct marital status and his being father of two kids), the “collapse” imperative liberates the writer from the constraints imposed by history, as the manuscript entries from 2005 onwards doubtlessly prove.⁴¹¹ Consequently, *Summertime* narrates the following (untruthful) story of John, the future Nobel Prize winner, in the 1970s: he is a man living with his widowed father in a house on Tokai Road, a pathetic individual “in need of a woman” (Coetzee 2013: 21) who becomes involved in several unsuccessful affairs, a “disgraced” scholar who for many years fails to be employed by academic institutions (e.g. it is Martin who is accepted for the post).⁴¹²

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⁴¹¹ It needs to be stated that a number of accuracies have been preserved. For example, Julia recalls John’s father as speaking with a strong accent and John’s vegetarianism, Margot correctly remembers the circumstances of his departure to the US, the reasons for his return and his father’s predicament (“a disgraced, disbarred attorney” [Coetzee 2009: 117]), while Adriana refers to Jack’s shaking hands (as a result of alcoholism) – all of which find confirmation in Kannemeyer’s biography of Coetzee.

⁴¹² Kannemeyer’s biography, however, narrates a different story of Coetzee’s life in the 1970s. After his return to South Africa and failure to move back to the US, as well as a short period of unemployment (when Coetzee with Philippa and their two kids moved to the Karoo, the period that he described as a “happy time” [Kannemeyer 2013: 216]), Coetzee was offered a job by the UCT (in fact together with Joanathan Crewe [sic!]) as of 1 January 1972 and never taught in secondary school or any extra classes as *Summertime* states (230–233). In the months to follow he was busy preparing and teaching new courses, as well as renovating the family’s new house on Tokai Road, where he built a playhouse for his children (233, 322). In 1974 he published *Dusklands* and immediately started working on *In the Heart of the Country* (247). In 1974 he cut out meat altogether and, according to Kannemeyer, established a strict working routine of getting up at 5.00 a.m. to work on his fiction, delivering his children to school, teaching classes, marking essays and preparing lectures for the next day (321–323). His marriage to Philippa was open and they both pursued other affairs and relationships, including triangular ones (they ultimately divorced in 1980) (ibid.). As for Coetzee’s father, in the 1970s Jack did work for a motor company but never lived with nor was given care by his son, even after the death of Vera after a heart attack in 1985. The event, as Kannemeyer writes, left Jack Coetzee “at a loss [...] more or less helpless at practical housekeeping, with no experience of cooking or coping in the kitchen. He simply faded away. In the last months of his life he developed cancer of the larynx, for which he was operated on. After this he was unable to speak, and spent his last days in the Arcadia old-age home in Observatory, where he died on 30 June 1988 at the age of seventy-six” (440).

But, as this chapter would like to claim, the major “collapse” that *Summertime* employs is that of breaking the self; of further effacing the I;⁴¹³ in fact, of relinquishing the self and giving the voice (as well as the “authority” to tell the story of his life) to others – the process which, as the J.M. Coetzee papers show, is inextricably linked with the idea of a temporal and, subsequently, factual break. The more Coetzee meddles with time and history, the more characters he decides to introduce: first (July 2005) the character of Erika (whose name will be changed to Renata and, ultimately, Julia), then (December 2005) an elder sister of one of his pupils (a character subsequently abandoned and substituted by the girls’ mother, Adriana), and of Agnes (March 2006); and, finally (2007; as late as the fourth draft) an academic named Greenwood (i.e. Jonathan Crewe) as well as an unnamed female colleague. It appears that – with the emergence of new voices, new characters – Coetzee’s original plan was not to remove John from the majority of the narrative and relegate him to the notebook entries only. The note from 23 August 2005 clearly suggests that he intended to juxtapose John’s narrative⁴¹⁴ (third person, present tense) with italicised texts in which other people (Erika, the Portuguese girls and – at that point – also his father, Zacharias Coetzee) would “get their chance to say how things are” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 10) – similarly to *Diary of a Bad Year* published two years later (2007), on which he was working at the time. But in the end – as if to further complicate the question of “truth in autobiography” – even *their* stories and *their* authority are bound to be fiddled with by means of introducing (in draft no. 4) another protagonist – Vincent, this “patient spider who sits at the heart of his web waiting for his prey to come to him” (Coetzee 1996: 120), a life writer who appropriates other people’s stories for his own use (much like fictional Daniel Foe does with the story of Friday⁴¹⁵).

The characters that inhabit the diegesis of *Summertime* and who share their reminiscences of J.M. Coetzee with Vincent are an extraordinary group of individuals. Some of them – like Margot or Martin – are evidently based on real people (Coetzee’s cousin and colleague respectively),

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⁴¹³ Derrida says: “I cannot say I. [...] I is, per definition, what I can never say” (Derrida 1989: 56).

⁴¹⁴ Of whom he clearly thinks in fictional terms. “Give JMC a dog (two dogs?) at his Tokai home,” he writes in his notes (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 12 [15 December 2005]).

⁴¹⁵ In an interview with Vincent, Julia refers to Coetzee’s as “your man” (Coetzee 2009: 31) – a clear allusion to Coetzee’s Nobel Lecture “He and His Man” (2003) also concerned with the relationship between Defoe and Friday, the writer and the writer’s subject.

while others' genesis remains unclear,⁴¹⁶ "diffuse" and "not immediately detectable" (Coetzee 2009: 36), usually insidiously hidden under a veil of multi-layered deception.⁴¹⁷ Oftentimes, the sense of the narrative's fictional (and intertextual⁴¹⁸) nature is sustained by the fact that a number of episodes and characters that can be encountered in *Summertime* are also to be found in Coetzee's other works. For example, John taking his father and Adriana to a picnic will be re-enacted in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) with Ana inviting Simón and David to a "picnic for new arrivals" (Coetzee 2013: 26), while the Academy of Dance "devoted to the training of the soul through music and dance" (Coetzee 2016: 43) run by Ana Magdalena, one of the protagonists of *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), bears some considerable similarity to the school where Adriana teaches Latin American dance. What is more, the relationship between Adriana, her daughter Maria Regina, and John Coetzee is another version of a triangular model that readers of Coetzee's fiction know from *The Master of Petersburg*⁴¹⁹ (1994): that of Fyodor Dostoevsky, his landlady Anna Sergeyevna Kolenkina, and her daughter Matryona. The identification of such links allows one to see *Summertime* as organically connected with the rest of Coetzee's oeuvre, and another proof of the aptness of David Attwell's observation about the sheer impossibility of

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⁴¹⁶ In the light of the available biographical and archival materials. Perhaps with the release of Coetzee's private documents and notebooks pertaining to *Summertime* it will be possible to declare what historical lives (if any) might have indeed inspired the creation of Adriana, Julia and Sophie. Such real lives would then be present in *Summertime* "in a more diffuse way, not immediately detectable" – the phrase that Vincent uses in an interview with Julia when she fails to recognise herself in any of Coetzee's fictional creations (Coetzee 2009: 36).

⁴¹⁷ For example, the character of Julia was originally named Erika, while her surname was to be Kiš (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.3: 26) – which might be seen, knowing Coetzee's interest in Central European literature, as a reference to Erika Mann (with whom Julia shares her Jewish heritage, experience of being a migrant and interest in German literature) and to Danilo Kiš, a Serbo-Croat writer (on the links between Coetzee and Kiš see Jeziorska-Haładaj 2014: 137–146). On the other hand, the surname of Adriana Nascimento though a popular name in the Portuguese language – stands for "birth," which is a direct allusion to her "motherhood" of the writer's creative potential. On the role names and their meaning play in Coetzee's fiction consult, for example, Kusek 2013: 13–35.

⁴¹⁸ When John meets Julia he greets her with the words of the Renaissance English poet Robert Herrick: "How sweetly flows the liquefaction of her clothes" (Coetzee 2009: 33).

⁴¹⁹ Which, as a matter of fact, has been recognised by critics as "imaginary memoirs" (Coetzee 1999: 134) which valiantly substitutes biography (of Dostoevsky) with autobiography (of Coetzee, in particular with respect to the tragic death of Coetzee's son Nicholas).

divorcing Coetzee's fiction from his "autobiographies" formulated in his 2015 literary biography of the writer:

Coetzee's writing is a huge existential enterprise, grounded in fictionalized autobiography. In this enterprise, the texts marked as autobiography are continuous with those marked as fiction – only the degree of fictionalization varies. (Attwell 2015: 2)

When further discussing some profound interrelatedness in Coetzee's life and work, Attwell also notes that in all of his writing "the self is written into the work and then written out" (Attwell 2015: 3). If, with the help of Kannemeyer's and Attwell's biographies, one can discover the traces of the self in such books as, for example, *Age of Iron* or *The Master of Petersburg*, a similar operation can be carried out with reference to *Summertime*. Indeed, many of the characters in Coetzee's final volume of his memoirs can be seen – similarly to the likes of Elizabeth Costello – as his "experiment[s] in incarnation"⁴²⁰ (Danta 2011: xv), depositories of hi(s)-tory, Warburgian "decans" that are the depots of *Nachleben*, life after life (Warburg 1999). The diegesis of *Summertime* may show the world without J.M. Coetzee but it, nevertheless, remains inhabited by his self. For example, Julia's and her husband Mark's rich sex life, this system of "the licit illicit" characterised by "an envelope of libidinous excitement" (Coetzee 2009: 27) to which many, men and women equally, were invited, certainly vokes John's and Philippa's idea of "an open, broad-minded marriage in which both partners could go their individual way, free to pursue other relationships and to return to each other when it suited them" (Kannemeyer 2013: 323). The parallels between Adriana's family situation (a married couple with two kids) and their status (migrants), and the Coetzees (also a family of four; also with the experience of exodus) are quite discernible, too. Not to mention Vincent – an aspiring biographer (just like Coetzee himself was an aspiring novelist in the early 1970s) who, one could speculate, perversely takes his name after the first name of one Mr. Scully – an English teacher of John from the early drafts of *Boyhood*, an ominous figure with "the bloodless face of the corpse" who remains immune

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⁴²⁰ "[Experiments in incarnation] through which Coetzee expresses the Janus face of literary authority: the sense in which the writer is paradoxically turned outward towards his or her community, but also inward towards the higher authority of his or her conscience [...]. Rather than seeing Coetzee as irresponsibly sheltering behind fiction [...] it is possible to see him indeed as exposing himself and his audience to what we might call the 'bare life' of literature – or literature degree zero" (Danta 2011: xv).

to John's first attempts at creative writing and repeatedly gives John low marks for his essays (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers 27.6, Insert 16.V05: 1). On a number of occasions Vincent – Coetzee's man, *his* man – insists that what he is interested in is the anecdotes and stories “Any stories worth recounting?” [Coetzee 2009: 216]), not objective truths or facts, since it is the stories (“narrative”) and not “opinions” that “bring a life-story to life” (ibid.). He admits that he has neither met nor contacted Coetzee in order to be free to write what *he* wished (35). He remains unstirred when Julia discovers his ignorance and discredits his claims concerning Coetzee's indifference to South African politics,⁴²¹ or when Martin exposes his “peculiar” approach to biographical sources⁴²²; he insists that the expressions used by the character of Margot [sic!] in Margot's transcribed and re-written interview are her own – despite her not being able to recognise and authorise them⁴²³; he adds “a detail or two to bring the scene[s] to life” (105); he pursues the idea of Adriana being one of “Coetzee's women” despite her resistance to it (200); he ignores Coetzee's writing altogether, is at odds with the biographer's ethics (authorisation to expose the private side of the subject), etc. His creative “handling” of the stories that the book's characters share with him is also reflected by the interviews' formal manipulations: the use of direct speech; “dramatisation” strategies which lead to Margot's interview being transformed into a third person present tense account, into “an uninterrupted narrative spoken in [her]⁴²⁴ voice” (87); language editing (e.g. change of phrases and expressions, change of person, italicisation); translation (Adriana's interview originally given in Portuguese) – many of which are to be recognised as Coetzee's own repertoire of narrative mechanisms.

The attitudes displayed by Vincent – together with a deliberately disparaging portrayal of oneself, as well as the characters' autonomy, importance,⁴²⁵

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⁴²¹ She proves that John could not have mentioned Mandela as his “neighbour” since in 1975 Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island and not in Pollsmoor (Coetzee 2009: 19).

⁴²² I.e. following the “clues” left in notebooks and talking to those who are “alive” – in other words he does not follow any standard biographical procedures (see e.g. Roberts 2002).

⁴²³ “You are putting words of your own in my mouth,” Margot protests (Coetzee 2009: 119). She also adds: “You can't write that. You can't. You are just making things up” (137).

⁴²⁴ “The *she* I use is like *I* but is not *I*,” he says clearly imitating Coetzee's own pronouncements (Coetzee 2009: 89).

⁴²⁵ Julia, for example, believes that she is the “main” character of the story, with John being “minor” and fears that Vincent, by a “quick manipulation of perspective,” would “transform it into a story about John and one of the women who passed through his life” (Coetzee 2009: 44). She also insists that together with other interviewees she compensates for what Coetzee's narrative lacks: without them his narrative would be a “tale without a body” (51).

and insistence on telling their stories⁴²⁶ and not being mere puppets in the biography of the great novelist – may be seen as an echo of Coetzee’s own beliefs, in particular his indictment of any (auto)biographical endeavour understood as a pursuit of the (historical) truth and a confirmation of one’s authority over one’s life story. Vincent’s words and actions find their precedents in Coetzee’s philosophy of life writing: be it when, in his early drafts of *Boyhood*, he encourages himself to “bring the atmosphere to life, tell anecdotes” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 9/3 [16 September 1993]), i.e. to “quote” and, at the same time, “not restrict oneself to quoting” (Derrida 1989: 50)⁴²⁷; when he lectures that “[t]he self cannot tell the truth of itself to itself and come to rest without the possibility of self-deception” (Coetzee 1992c: 291); or when he formulates the following question and provides his answer to it:

Are all autobiographies, all life-narratives, not fictions, at least in the sense that they are constructions (fiction from Latin *fingere* , to shape or mould or form)? The claim here is not that autobiography is free, in the sense that we can make up our life-story as we wish. Rather, the claim is that in making up our autobiography we exercise the same freedom that we have in dreams, where we impose a narrative form that is our own, even if influenced by forces that are obscure to us, on elements of a remembered reality. (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015: 3)

Coetzee’s approach towards life writing may also be seen as reflected by other characters in his narrative. Julia makes it clear that what she shares with Vincent “may not be true to the letter, but is true to the spirit” (Coetzee 2009: 32), while Sophie voices the concern that all (auto)biographers are “fictioneers” who “continually make up the stories of [their] lives” (226).

But if Coetzee allows for his life to be deposited in the lives of fictional others – as this chapter has claimed, then whose life and whose story may inhabit the character of John Coetzee? The following fragment from Jacques Derrida’s *Memoirs for Paul de Man* may be instrumental in finding an answer to this question:

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426 “Otherwise there are things you will fail to understand,” Julia says to Vincent (Coetzee 2009: 23).

427 “Fidelity requires that one quote, in the desire to let the other speak: and fidelity requires that one not just quote, not restrict oneself to quoting” (Derrida 1989: 50). This distinction is reflected in *Summertime* by Vincent’s division of life narrative into “opinion” (quote) and “narration” (not quote) (Coetzee 2009: 216).

Yesterday [...] I began by telling you that I suffer from inability to tell a story, without knowing whether I suffer from amnesia or hyperamnesia. It is because I cannot tell a story that I turn to myth. (Derrida 1989: 85)

In *Summertime* – a narrative which is permeated by the sense of (auto)-biographical impossibility, all-embracing fictionalisation and self-deceit – Coetzee also turns to what Derrida calls “myth,” but the writer would most probably rather substitute with the word “phantasm”⁴²⁸: the story of Jesus.⁴²⁹

Although the narrative of *Summertime* does “avoid pushing his [John’s] interest in Jesus too far” (Coetzee 2009: 13) as one of the italicised fragments of John’s notebooks implores, references to Jesus – though often subtle – are impossible to miss in the process of reading the book. John’s determination to live a life “outside politics, and one’s death too” is clearly an act of following the example set by Jesus, whom he contemplates as his “guide”: “If Jesus had stooped to play politics he might have become a key man in Roman Judea, a big operator. It was because he was indifferent to politics, and made his indifference clear, that he was liquidated,” John notes in a passage that immediately follows his acknowledgement of belonging to the generation poisoned (“ground down”) by South African politics (12–13). When in a conversation with Margot he expresses a desire to be buried in the Karoo – about which he speaks as if it were a paradise⁴³⁰ – he is quick to add: “Just till I come out again” (108). “*Come out again*: did her cousin really believe, does he really believe, that one comes back from the grave? Who does he think he is: Jesus? And what does he think this place is, this Karoo: the Holy Land?” – Margot wonders (ibid.). Soon, however, she herself admits that her hopes for John include his being able to “redeem the Coetzee men” (115). When, after the night in the broken car, John and Margot are saved by Hendrik, they arrive back home in a cart pulled by a donkey (for whom, as remarked, Jesus had a “fondness” [123]). Their “triumphal return” (124) is, of course, a re-enactment

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⁴²⁸ A “phantasm capable of speech” which Coetzee also calls a “shape” should be “inhabited” by the readers in the act of “living reading” which the writer defines as “finding one’s way into the voice that speaks from the page, the voice of the Other, and inhabiting that voice, so that you speak to yourself (your self) from outside yourself. The process is thus a dialogue of sorts, though an interior one” (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015: 179).

⁴²⁹ For the first time Jesus appears in the notes for *Boyhood*: “[h]e likes Jesus, because Jesus is not a father” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 12/11).

⁴³⁰ Margot also believes that the Karoo according to God’s design was never to be “profitably farmed,” never “fall [...] into the hands of the *volk*” (Coetzee 2009: 119–120).

of Jesus entering Jerusalem since the farm, Voëlfontein – much like Solomon’s temple – is perceived as a “sacred space” (134). When talking to Adriana about his work as an examination coach, John underlines that teaching is not his vocation: “It is not what I was called into the world to do,” he says, evidently echoing Jesus’s words. His social radicalism is also rather otherworldly. According to Sophie, his utopian vision of the world required: “[t]he closing down of the mines. The ploughing under the vineyards. The disbanding of the armed forces. The abolition of the automobile. Universal vegetarianism. Poetry in the streets” (230). “Not fully human,” “not suited to marriage” and “speaking with the dead” (83, 160, 104), John even physically resembles Jesus – or his most popular iconographic representation – with his moustache, beard and long hair – an appearance which is frequently emphasised by the narrative (e.g. 99, 160). Finally, just like Jesus he is also in his early thirties.⁴³¹

However, Jesus is not the only Biblical figure that is overtly referred to in *Summertime*.⁴³² When talking to Vincent, Julia recalls her own father – a Hungarian Jew traumatised by the experience of the Holocaust⁴³³ who in his dotage suffers from what appears to be Alzheimer’s disease. Imagining himself to have been imprisoned by the Nazis in a camp in Madagascar, he obsessively repeats the following expression which is to secure work for him and survival for his family: “Ich Bin Der Erstgeborene,” i.e. “I am the first-born” (Coetzee 2009: 49). Though – typically for Coetzee – the source of the quote is never provided by the narrative, research conducted for the purpose of the present study shows that the very phrase comes from one of Cain’s speeches in Salomon Gessner’s *Der Tod Abels*, in which Cain expresses his dissatisfaction with Adam giving his blessing to Abel before turning to his elder son (Gessner [in:] Hibberd 2011: 70). What is more, in Margot’s narrative another Biblical character

⁴³¹ Another fragment with overt reference to Jesus that did not make it into the final version of *Summertime* reads: “Yes, I always think of Jesus as a young man – a man who died young. At thirty-three” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.6: n.p. [26 September 2007]). Proofs to a collective edition of the trilogy, i.e. *Scenes from Provincial Life* published in 2011 also contain another addition to *Summertime* which clearly refers to Jesus: “he does not fail for a third time” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 48.5: 182).

⁴³² And *Summertime* is not the only of Coetzee’s work with covert Biblical (and Jewish) references. One of Coetzee’s notebooks from his Austin-based archives reveals that, for example, David Lurie was considered to be Jewish and thus clearly a version of Job (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: n.p. [9 March 1996]).

⁴³³ For more about Coetzee’s works being populated by images creating a “[psychological, imaginative, literary] landscape of Holocaust postmemory” (Kaplan 2011: 3), i.e. more or less overt references to the Nazi genocide, consult Kaplan’s study *Landscapes of Holocaust Postmemory*, in particular Part Three entitled “Burning Silence.”

appears: the prodigal son, a “failed son [...] who ran away to the big world and now comes creeping back to the little world with his tail between his legs” (120). It is by means of these references that one can finally recognise a larger scheme behind Coetzee’s autobiographical project. Failure to tell a story of the self forces Coetzee to turn to myths: the story of Cain, an elder brother consumed with envy and wrath (*Boyhood*), the parable of the prodigal son, an escapee from home disdainful of his heritage (*Youth*), and, finally, the story of Jesus (*Summertime*).

The recognition of the figure of Jesus as a central interpretative category also allows one to acknowledge what seems to be *Summertime*’s major thematic preoccupation: the father – son relationship. Jesus, this fatherless man for whom the relationship with his “father” (God) and the fact of being his (i.e. God’s) son are ontological imperatives, offers an opportunity for Coetzee to creatively revisit his own difficult relationship with Jack Coetzee. The sense that the issue of fatherhood should be given some special attention accompanied Coetzee as early as his first drafts of *Boyhood*.⁴³⁴ In an entry from 8 May 1995 which is to be found in Coetzee’s notebook, the writer observes that the “[b]ook has to end with a deeper exploration of his father, with his mother, perhaps, looming in the background” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 35.2: 11). Also, the scene which he worked on most intensely⁴³⁵ – as the subsequent drafts of *Boyhood* prove, was the scene of John finding his drunk father asleep in their house and seeing his nakedness – an overt reference to Ham finding Noah asleep and disrobed from *The Book of Genesis*. Yet, *Boyhood* never managed to move beyond the feeling of contempt for John’s father: “an appendage, a contributor to the economy as a paying lodger might be” (Coetzee 1998: 12).

David Attwell is most accurate when he defines *Summertime* as an “act of reparation” (Attwell 2015: 160). Throughout the whole book – and especially in the concluding notebook section – John is presented as his father’s carer/companion: “he is cast back on his father, as his father is cast back on him” (Coetzee 2009: 245). They live together, spend their weekends “tak[ing] their pleasure together” (e.g. attending rugby or cricket matches, or going for a picnic), plays the opera music his father used to

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⁴³⁴ This feature is only achieved in *Summertime*. In one of the early notes for the book one reads: “It [i.e. *Summertime*] turns into a book about his father and why he lives with him. The old man he carries about with him everywhere, something no one will understand. Certainly not the women of his life” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.6: 15).

⁴³⁵ And which he ultimately abandoned.

love. John is overtaken by the sense of remorse and empathy. He is “back to being a son” (31). He suffers to see his father’s loneliness, helps him with his bookkeeping job, wonders what his life would have been like if it had not been for World War II, feels guilty about having destroyed his father’s favourite record when he was a boy. “If he would solve the mystery of what in the world his father wants, he might perhaps be a better son,” John concludes (247). “*Forgive me!*” he cries elsewhere (250). Most importantly, he is the one to accompany Jack when he learns about his terminal illness and to take him home when he is brought from hospital. His attitude may be characterised by the word which Coetzee uses in his drafts for the book but which is not to be found in the published version of *Summertime*: Bakhtinian *vzhivanie*, i.e. “live entering” (Morson and Emerson 1990: 242) which Coetzee defines as “living in(to), projective love, sympathy” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Paper 47.2: 5). In the book’s closing scene⁴³⁶ John is left with the following dilemma:

It used to be that he, John, had too little employment. Now that is about to change. Now he will have as much employment as he can handle, as much and more. He is going to have to abandon some of his personal projects and be a nurse. Alternatively, if he will not be a nurse, he must announce to his father: *I cannot face the prospect of ministering to you day and night. I am going to abandon you. Goodbye.* One or the other: there is no third way. (Coetzee 2009: 265–266)

According to Kannemeyer’s biography of Coetzee, Jack Coetzee spent the final months of his life in an old-people’s home and not under the care (and in the house of) his son (Kannemeyer 2013: 440). But if *Summertime* (and John’s attitude towards his father) is, indeed, governed by the spirit of *vzhivanie*, this “projective love,” then it is capable of offering a different, fictional version of Jack’s last days when he is ministered to by his son – or, at least, a promise of such a denouement.

But *Summertime* is also a way of dealing with a ghost of another father, the one that has cast his shadow over Coetzee’s whole autobiographical project since its very inception, namely Roland Barthes. In Coetzee’s “notes

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436 Attwell sees this scene as a final confirmation of Coetzee’s reconciliation with his father and the trilogy’s real closure: “The episode of the father’s return from hospital to face death brings to an end the story that began in *Boyhood*, of intense Oedipal conflict in which Jack is rejected, to the point that the teenage John imagines, even hopes, that his father is suicidal. The conclusion to *Summertime* overturns this outcome and places an ethical burden on John that the child of *Boyhood* could not comprehend. The phase of blaming his father is at an end” (Attwell 2015: 154).

for autobiography” Barthes appears as early as June 1993. He is “the one who has been there before and with the kind of autobiography I want to write,” Coetzee observes (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 27.2: 2/1 [19 June 1993]), having in mind no other volume than Barthes’s seminal *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975). Coetzee will consistently – though not always overtly – pay tribute to Barthes’s work throughout the years: be it when he considers ending *Boyhood* with the exegesis of the photographs of Coetzee’s parents (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers 35.2: 9 [8 March 1995]), or when he plans to “structure [*Summertime*] [...] around photographs” with the narrative giving their [i.e. photographs] “explications” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 46.1: 6 [25 November 2004]) – much like Barthes himself did in his unconventional autobiography. Other traces of the great French post-structuralist are also quite evident: *Summertime*’s fragment- edness (which corresponds to a set of entries in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*) and the radical separation of self from one’s textual creation (“It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel,” Barthes in-structs his readers in the opening line of his book [Barthes 1994: 1]), to name but a few. The sense that of all of Coetzee’s “forefathers” Barthes may exert the strongest influence on him finds confirmation in Coet- zee’s notes for his seminar on autobiography taught in 1998 at the Uni- versity of Chicago, in which he emphasised the fact that the story of the life of Roland Barthes is not “laid out for one” but requires one “to piece it together,”⁴³⁷ that it manifests “reservations about the autobiogra- phical genre itself,” that it treats “‘Roland Barthes’ as if he were a fictional character” – in short, that Barthes aims at the “explosion of autobiog- raphy” (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Papers, 114.11: n.p.). Needless to say, Coet- zee’s overall attitude to himself and his autobiographical experiments (the protection of his privacy on the one hand and the obsessive return to the character of “JMC” in his writings on the other; recent publication of “diaries,” letters and interviews; attending the Coetzee conferences⁴³⁸) bears a striking resemblance to Barthes’s stance, which has been most

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⁴³⁷ However, he insists that by “putting him [i.e. Barthes – R.K.] together again in a more ‘natural’ order” the readers deny “everything he has done by constructing his book in this way.” Nevertheless, he recognises that such an act of “piecing Barthes together” is highly productive as it reveals tensions between the genre of autobiography and one’s take on it – exactly what this chapter has purported to achieve (HRC, J.M. Coetzee Pa- pers, 114.11: n.p.).

⁴³⁸ E.g. “Traverses: J.M. Coetzee in the World” (11–13 November 2014, Adelaide), “Read- ing Coetzee’s Women” (27–29 September 2016, Prato).

memorably put by Susan Sontag in a commemorative piece entitled “Remembering Barthes”:

He enjoyed being famous, with an ingenuous ever-renewed pleasure: in France one saw him often on television in recent years, and *A Lover's Discourse* was a best seller. And yet he spoke of how eerie it was to find his name every time he leafed through a magazine or newspaper. His sense of privacy was expressed exhibitionistically. Writing about himself, he often used the third person, as if he treated himself as a fiction. The later work contains much fastidious self-revelation, but always in a speculative form (no anecdote about the self which does not come bearing an idea between its teeth), and dainty meditation on the personal; the last article he published was about keeping a journal. All his work is an immensely complex enterprise of self-description. [...]

He became his own Great Writer. He was in assiduous attendance at the sessions of a seven-day conference devoted to his work in 1977 – commenting, mildly interjecting, enjoying himself. He published a review of his speculative book on himself (*Barthes on Barthes on Barthes*). He became the shepherd of the flock of himself. (Sontag 1980)

Coetzee's autobiographical project can certainly be seen as fathered by Barthes. Yet, the sheer radicalism and insurgence that *Summertime* displays towards any life narrative that has preceded it (including *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*) is also proof of its ultimate liberation from it. Just like coming to terms with Coetzee's biological father demanded a series of temporal “collapses,” a divorce from history and “projective love,” coming to terms with his symbolic father necessitated another form of emancipation and way to claim sovereignty. It impelled one to bring about a new “explosion of autobiography” – a “blow-up” of the genre that *Summertime* – I am bound to conclude – has succeeded in like no other piece of life writing at the turn of the century.

CONCLUSION

Through the Looking Glass

Memoir, memoir, memoir! Doesn't anyone write autobiography anymore?

G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012: 3)

There is no greater work of art than a great portrait.

Henry James, "John S. Sargent" (1989: 227)

[F]or portraiture is the least free of painterly genres.

Simon Schama, "Pre-Face" (2016: xviii)

The past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report.

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (2002: 101)

In Jay McInerney's *Bright, Precious Day* of 2016 – the third volume in a series of McInerney's books⁴³⁹ dedicated to two fictional protagonists, Russell and Corrine Calloway – an independent publishing house, whose editor-in-chief is Russell Calloway, makes an expensive bid for a supposedly fake memoir about being kidnapped by the Taliban. When asked about the need to satirise the current memoir boom in his latest novel, McInerney stated the following:

When I started writing, the novel was the great pinnacle of artistic achievement for anybody who wanted to write. Somewhere in the 90s the memoir became

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⁴³⁹ Russell and Corrine Calloway previously featured in *Brightness Falls* (1992) and *The Good Life* (2006).

the flavour de jour of publishing. This trend probably culminated when a memoir called *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey which turned out to be extremely embellished – I’m not sure why anybody was so surprised about that – and a great shock to people. I think most first novels are memoirs and most memoirs are actually largely fictitious. (McInerney [in:] Ahmed 2016)

Regardless of McInerney’s critical stance towards memoir and echoes of wistful longing for the golden age of the novel,⁴⁴⁰ the above fragment and its observations may certainly be helpful when trying to formulate the concluding remarks that would pertain to the subject matter of the present study.

Firstly – as my study has attempted to prove – today, for many a writer, it is memoir that claims the title of “the great pinnacle of artistic achievement”; and, secondly, the very genre is, indeed, the “flavour de jour” of the publishing industry. It is not only “un nouvel archigenre des *récits de soi* [my emphasis – R.K.]” (Jeannelle 2008: 229) – as an increasing number of critics would proclaim; not only life writing’s favourite modality, but, I should like to assert, the “arch-genre” of the entirety of present-day literary production, of every story (*récit*). It is in the genre’s formal hybridity, its complexity, transcendence and profusion, its openness to a number of idiosyncratic textual strategies, its “travelling” between autobiography and biography, fact and fiction, that a great number of contemporary writers find a unique space for pushing the limits of writing⁴⁴¹ – as testified to by the specimens of the genre that have been comprehensively discussed in the present study.

The correctness of the judgement that some of the most radical, experimental and accomplished pieces of contemporary writing are to be found among memoirs, as well as that an increasing group of writers continue to turn to the genre and explore the formal and thematic potentialities that it offers, might be tested by a short overview of what happened in the field of memoir writing in 2016 – the year when the present book

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⁴⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, an overwhelmingly critical reaction to McInerney’s book (e.g. Preston 2016; Waldman 2016) is, perhaps, more indicative of the condition of the novel at the beginning of the 21st century than the writer’s castigation of the memoir boom and complaints formulated with respect to memoir’s usurpation of the role of the master form of writing. On the essential antagonism of the novel and so-called non-fiction consult for example Czermińska 2000: 12.

⁴⁴¹ And in its claim to be a reflection of the “reality of life,” that the wide readership’s appetite for the visceral, the authentic, the real – the issues that I have addressed in the introductory part of this book – becomes (perversely) satiated.

was, in fact, being completed. Indeed, 2016 saw the release of a number of writers' memoirs which, if not for the date of their publication, could have easily featured prominently in one of the core chapters of my study as prime specimens of memoir.

Early in the year, the Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri published *In Other Words* (2016) – an extraordinary “hybrid [...] outside the frame” (Lahiri 2016: 231) which followed Lahiri’s “exile” into Italy and migration into a new language, i.e. Italian. Originally written in Italian, translated into English (deliberately not by Lahiri herself), and published in a dual-language format, *In Other Words/In Altre Parole* was not only a love letter to Italy and, in particular, Rome, a travelogue and periegetic memoir,⁴⁴² but, most importantly, a chronicle of the writer’s escape from the self and attempt to find a new voice – both as a writer (“I know that my life as a writer will never be the same” [Lahiri 2016: 65]) and a person.⁴⁴³ Jenny Diski’s *In Gratitude* (2016), published only a week before the writer’s death, was another major contribution to the genre and English literary production *en masse*. A mixture of illness and death writing, matrio- and patriography, as well as a *souvenir d’adolescence* and a filial narrative about Doris Lessing,⁴⁴⁴ Diski’s final attempt at life writing was not only a chronicle of the writer’s last days, but also her literary testament: a meditation on the poetics of memoir, (auto)biographical truth,⁴⁴⁵ and the memoirist’s profession.

In 2016 memoirs were completed – as in previous years – by a plethora of authors: celebrated men of letters (e.g. John le Carré’s *The Pigeon Tunnel* [2016]), as well as new and emerging writers (e.g. Lauren Collins’s *When in French: Love in a Second Language* [2016]), thespians of the genre (e.g. Alan Bennett’s *Keeping on Keeping on* [2016]) and its debutants, first-time practitioners (e.g. Hisham Matar’s *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* [2016]). The corpus of some well-established micro-genres

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⁴⁴² Lahiri calls herself a “traveler” (Lahiri 2016: 83). The volume also contains other genres and other modalities, e.g. one of the chapters entitled “The Exchange” comprises a short story written by Lahiri, while others, “The Imperfect” and “Plumbing the Depths,” are a study of Italian grammar and Cesare Pavese, respectively.

⁴⁴³ Born in America to Indian parents, Lahiri confesses to considering herself an essentially “incomplete person.” “I had two sides, neither well defined,” she says (Lahiri 2016: 111). Her Italian language/identity “project,” which embraces both her writing and her life is to bring about not only a new book but also a new person (“At the end of the gestation, a person is born [...]” [113]).

⁴⁴⁴ Who took Diski in when she was fifteen.

⁴⁴⁵ “[A]ll inside one’s person head, not shredded or scattered about, to be ordered in any way you see fit” (Diski 2016: 95).

was extended by the arrival of new boundary bending specimens (e.g. Cory Taylor's *Dying: A Memoir* [2016]), and new "species" of memoir were announced to have emerged (e.g. depression or *triste-memoir* [Merritt 2016]). Perhaps, the most definitive argument in favour of recognising memoir's prime position in today's literary world would be to consider that three out of the ten best books of 2016 listed by *The New York Times* were memoirs (i.e. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* [2016] by Sarah Bakewell, *In the Darkroom* [2016] by Susan Faludi, and the already mentioned *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* by Hisham Matar [2016]), while the 2016 Costa Biography and the 2016 Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction (formerly the Samuel Johnson Prize) shortlists were almost entirely dominated by memoirs (only one shortlisted work was not a specimen of the genre, i.e. *Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years* [2016] by John Guy [Costa] and *Second-hand Time* [2016] by Svetlana Alexievich [Baillie Gifford]).⁴⁴⁶

But Jay McInerney's statement quoted above – apart from drawing attention to the fashionableness and literariness/artistry of the present-day form of memoir – also accentuates two other characteristics of the genre that this study has repeatedly given prominence to: namely memoir's propensity for "embellishments" (in other words, for fictionality) and its inseparability from a given writer's other literary creations. Memoir, as stated in the introductory part of this book, is hardly ever an addendum or a commentary to one's production. On the contrary, it is a legitimate and equal constituent of one's opus, a work of literature *per se* which bears ostensible similarities to the rest of a given writer's oeuvre.

Towards the end of *In Other Words* Jhumpa Lahiri asks herself the question: "How to define this book?" (Lahiri 2016: 211). Her answer, which spreads over the next couple of pages, is complex, paradoxical, metaphorical – yet it remains in perfect accord with what this study has argued before with reference to memoir. She calls it her "debut" despite it being her fifth published work; she describes it as "hesitant" and "bold," "both private and public," the kind that on the one hand "springs from [her] other books" due to the same set of themes ("identity, alienation, belonging"), and, on the other hand, "transfigure[s] the wrappings, the contents, the

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⁴⁴⁶ The remaining three shortlisted books were memoirs: Hisham Matar's *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* (2016), Sylvia Patterson's *I'm Not with the Band: A Writer's Life Lost in Music* (2016); Keggie Carew's *Dadland: A Journey into Uncharted Territory* (2016) (Costa); *Negroland: A Memoir* by Margo Jefferson (2016), *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between* by Hisham Matar (2016), and *East West Street* by Philippe Sands (2016).

body and soul.” She thinks of it as “a book of memory” that is essentially contradictory: autobiographical and abstract, collaborative and solitary, independent and dependent, victorious and defeatist, “rooted in [her] real experiences,” and yet thoroughly invented (211–223). Most importantly for her, it is a book written – in Natalia Ginzburg’s words – “in a state of absolute freedom” (Ginzburg [in:] Lahiri 2016: 215).

In the same vein, I should like to complete this study with the question that has accompanied me since I first started working on it (namely: How to define writers’ memoirs? How to define those extraordinary life narratives created at the turn of the century in great numbers by some of the most accomplished and distinguished authors of our times?); however, in order to answer this question, I shall neither re-iterate the claims that, otherwise, have been repeatedly formulated throughout this book, nor, once again, list the genre’s textual and paratextual *marqueurs*. Instead, similarly to Lahiri, in search of the most adequate response, I should like to turn to the world of metaphor; or, to be more exact, to a piece of art, i.e. *Another Place*, a 1997 installation of self-portrait sculptures by Antony Gormley located on Crosby Beach, near Liverpool.

Gormley’s work consists of a hundred cast-iron human forms facing the sea which have been made from seventeen body-casts taken from the artist’s own naked body. The whole installation, which stretches two and a half kilometres down the coast and one kilometre out to sea, is repeatedly, as the tides ebb and flow, revealed and submerged by the sea (Gormley 1997). When discussing some of the most unconventional attempts at self-portraiture in British art, Simon Schama recently acknowledged Gormley’s installation as “one [of few] modern works of art [...] in which self-portraits look not inward but outward” (Schama 2015).⁴⁴⁷ But, as I would like to argue, *Another Place* might be reviewed not only as an original piece of art that contributes to the “human turn” in contemporary British art (alongside the creations by Lucien Freud, David Hockney, and Tracey Emin, among others), but a work in which the most consummate rendition of memoir’s poetics may yet be found – in fact, a work which is memoir’s perfect “illustration.” First of all, *Another Place* – just like memoir – inhabits a transit zone; equally claimed by the land and the sea,

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⁴⁴⁷ It was Simon Schama’s “The Face of Britain” BBC Two series that first drew my attention to Gormley’s work (Schama 2015). Interestingly, the piece does not feature in the book that was released in the wake of the television series – in particular the chapter that corresponds to episode five of the series (titled “The Face in the Mirror”) in which Schama visits Crosby Beach (Schama 2016: 339–437).

covered by water and yet every day triumphantly emerging from it, the piece is essentially khôratic and an occupant of a “chasm.” Secondly, it is a work of self-representation but one in which the self becomes dissolved, while its unity (and communicability) is questioned.⁴⁴⁸ Indeed, the body from which the casts were taken is that of Antony Gormley, but one should keep in mind that not one but seventeen different casts were made for the purpose of the installation, out of which a hundred sculptures were ultimately produced. Consequently, though in principle the same, all the pieces are in fact radically different from each other. What is more, the sense of their exhibitionism (understood as the deliberate drawing one’s attention to the self) becomes challenged by the fact that specific facial features of Gormley have been deliberately erased – in other words, versimilitude has been replaced with abstraction. Thirdly, to follow Schama’s contention, *Another Place* offers an ironic take on the principles of self-portraiture: the sculptures’ looking outward is tantamount to their also showing interest in what is beyond the self – just like memoir often becomes the story of the other, an acknowledgement of and a tribute to somebody else’s *bios*. Finally, Gormley’s piece is permeated by a sense of contradiction and paradox – the idea that has been central to this book’s understanding of memoir. While the sculptures might be seen as particularly vulnerable (since they not only show a naked body, but an anti-heroic one which belongs to an elderly model), they simultaneously remain a testament to strength, splendour, and grandeur (by means of their size, number, and the material used).

Writer’s memoir – just like Antony Gormley’s *Another Place* – does not show the reflection of the self; it refuses to be satisfied with the self’s mirror image. Instead, it testifies to the self that has gone through the looking glass, with “every cell of [one’s] body thinning, stretching, becoming transparent, forming and re-forming in some other dimension” (Mantel 2010a: 94). It is, in short, not the story of Narcissus, but of Alice.

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⁴⁴⁸ “His work isn’t representational – he doesn’t do the likenesses so familiar from the traditional public statues on their plinths – but it isn’t abstract, either. Gormley uses his own body as everyman, a generic biped that can be stretched or compressed or winged, or, as here [*GRIP* in Saddell Bay, on the Kintyre peninsula, Scotland – R.K.], poured into cubes and rhomboids that rust in the weather” (Winterson 2017).

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