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The creative remembering of the self: Spatial and temporal characteristics of Will Self's "Walking to Hollywood: Memories of before the fall" and Ben Lerner's "10:04"

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Abstract. In the present paper we make an attempt to define the phenomenon of autofiction as opposed to the well-established notion of autobiography, that over the last number of years has sparked off considerable debate about factual and fictional in life-writing, with the latter becoming of a major interest to literary researchers and cognitive linguists.
The purpose of the analysis of the above-mentioned texts is to compare and possibly contrast them, while investigating the self-centered, individualized nature of autofiction, as it manifests itself in these long and exhausting trips through time and space.
Since the texts in question proved to demonstrate a certain ontological instability, we argue for the existence of the "impossible worlds" within the autofictional text, that is, not only it signals the confrontation between the actual ("real") world and fictional world, but also between the fictional world and the "impossible world" as part of a broader concept of "unnatural narrative". "Unnatural narrative", in turn, allows for further investigation of "unnatural temporalities" and "antimimetic spaces" which has become the focal point of the present research.
The results summed up in this paper confirm the importance of techniques and strategies employed by the authors in constituting the alternative type of self-narration, with the fictional prevailing over the factual.

Keywords: autobiographical pact, autofiction, narrative transgressions, impossible worlds, unnatural temporalities, antimimetic spaces.

Introduction

A "memoir-boom" of the late nineties and the beginning of the new millennium as termed by Leigh Gilmore has in the recent years given way to what is referred to as "autofiction". And if it's not what autobiography implies then what is this anyway? Other notions of this type of creative self-writing or self-narration may also include *autobiografiction, autofabrication, and heteronymity* (Saunders 2010) stressing the idea of its fictional nature prevailing over factuality.

The term "autofiction" invented by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky back in the '70s, has entered the theoretical vocabulary of literary studies as a way of, arguably, describing the interplay between autobiography and fiction.

First introduced in Doubrovsky's novel "Fils", not only did it aim to distinguish this work from other forms of creative writing, but also from somewhat straightforward forms of autobiography (see the groundbreaking research by Philippe Lejeune which defined the most general conventions of autobiography) (Lejeune 1989).

Catherine Cusset, a highly-acclaimed French novelist, comments upon the term in her conference paper "The Limits of autofiction": "In July 2009 I went to a conference on autofiction at Cerizy and I was surprised to find out that the word 'autofiction' could have contradictory meanings whether the focus was on the prefix 'auto' or on the radical 'fiction'". And then "A memoir tells the reader what happened. The writing is usually clear, simple, factual, descriptive. An autofiction brings the reader

inside what happened. The writer does it through the rhythm of the writing. It's a different address. A different movement" (Cusset 2012, 1).

Over the last couple of decades examples of literary works as accounts of events and opinions experienced by the authors that are radically reworked and creatively modified with the help of the strategies of fictionalization have sprung into existence all over in the US, Canada, Western Europe, specifically in France and Germany.

In "Mental worlds of a literary text: ontology and representation" V. Kleymenova argues that "the study of the mental world of a literary text can basically be limited to two problematic areas of research, one of which is ontological which is the problem of correlation between objective reality and the results (products) of the mental activity of a creative person, and the second of the two is linguistic – the problem of choosing linguistic means to represent an individual model of reality" (Kleymenova 2018, 142) (*all translations are mine, unless otherwise stated. — M. Ya.*). This idea of correlation is specifically applicable to the notion of autofiction in the light of ongoing discussions regarding "fact and fiction, the real and the 'made up" in this type of life writing (Ferreira-Meyers 2018, 33).

And speaking of the autobiographical pact with regard to *fact-fiction* opposition we may well consider what Sarah Foust Vinson writes in her article "Lives in Story: Tim O'Brien's *The things they carried*": "Autofiction, <…> shifts the meaning of the autobiographical pact, not through entirely throwing out the promise of truth, but by redefining what "truth" means, while also helping the reader recognize the shift that is occurring" (Vinson 2018, 148). "Walking to Hollywood: Memories of before the fall" by the English author Will Self (Self 2010) and "10:04" by the American poet and novelist Ben Lerner (Lerner 2014), both written in the first person, suggestively fall into the category of autofiction, however if we try to avoid calling them so they can also be referred to as a fictionalised memoir, or a comic tale inserted into the autobiographical reality.

The strong positions of the texts

Before we probe deeper into the concepts of time and space in these two texts, it's worth mentioning that they both have eye-catching titles, especially if we regard the so-called "strong positions of the text" (Chemodurova 2019). The title "Walking to Hollywood: memories of before the fall" (Self 2010) doesn't signal the autobiographical nature of the text, it's only the key-word "memories" that might give the readers a hint. But whose memories are those? As Z. Chemodurova points out "the title of the text <…> might involve the readers into a certain game of decoding" which seems to be the case here. A number of *peritexts* (the elements within the book such as titles, forewords, afterwords etc. conveying certain messages) (Genette 1997) adds to what Bran Nicol calls "intrusion on the reading experience" (Nicol 2018, 269): there is a disclaimer at the beginning that warns against comparing its characters with "living people" declaring the 'author's delusions' straight away:

> E. g. (1) While the names of some real persons are used for characters in this text, these characters appear in fictionalized settings that are manifestly a product of the narrator's delusions (Self 2010).

The Afterword suggests blending of two realms: the fictional universe (that is, as we've learnt earlier, "manifestly a product of the narrator's delusions") and the real world reflected by means of embedding "externally verifiable reality" (Dix 2018, 13) in which the "I" of the book recollects a fatal stabbing of a 18-year old black man which happened in his neighborhood and the room where he typed is "encircled by homicides", as there had been a number of killings over the few years in the area where he lived:

> E. g. (2) Over the preceding few years I had a growing sense of the room where I typed being encircled by homicides: the woman whose smouldering corpse was found in the local park — the victim of an 'honour' killing; the young woman strangled in her workplace shower down the road in Vauxhall; the kid shot in his flat at Clapham North by gang members; the doorman of a club on the Wandsworth Road shot in a drive-by; and, of course, the young Brazilian electrician shot by police seven times at point-blank range in the nearby tube station (Self 2010, 431).

What this "meta-reference" (Gass 1970; Scholes 1970) does is it foregrounds the author's artistic praxis which draws readers' attention to "I" as the author's real-life persona over the "I" of the autofictional author-character that can be referred to as the "mask of the author" — "the communicative and pragmatic center of metafictional narratives" — or the "autofictional mask" as far as the concept of autofiction is concerned. (Chemodurova 2013, 160).

The title "10:04" (Lerner 2014), at first glance, may serve as a symbolic expression of the key-concept of the text, an opener for the theme of time. Here the author makes a hidden allusion to the movie "Back to the Future", so it's only when it is

mentioned later in the book, that the reader realizes that the title refers to the film scene where the lightning strikes the courthouse clock tower, freezing the clock at 10:04, releasing Marty McFly, the protagonist of the movie, from the year 1955 and returning him to the future of 1985, which is his present, and the readers' past. This and other similar intertextual inclusions stress the semiotic dimension of the text (see the term "razgermetizatsiya" in Chernyavskaya 2004, 107; Andreeva 2019, 4) which seems rather fitting, as Claire Boyle argues "in the reversal of the priorities associated with autobiography, autofiction participates in a valorization of the imagination which takes precedence over and commitment to representing an extra-textual reality" (Boyle 2017, 123).

Unlike "Walking to Hollywood", "10:04" has no disclaimer, however, in the acknowledgements section at the end of the book the author states:

> E. g. (3) Time in this novel (when The Clock was viewable in New York, when a particular storm made landfall, etc.) does not always correspond to time in the world (Lerner 2014, 244).

Being a graphic (visual) means of foregrounding, black and white photographs in "Walking to Hollywood" seem to add a documentary feel, engaging readers' curiosity as if the photos were taken on someone's actual trip. Those are a random set of photos: a close-up shot of a sofa with a crumpled piece of bedding on it followed by an image of a flock of black birds frozen with their wings spread under the glass ceiling looking creepy as if this was a scene from a famous Hitchcock's movie. In "10:04" there aren't as many photos and they mainly are colour ones and have captions referring readers to the future, not only providing a real world context for the narrative, but also adding to a complex layering of time-frames of it: e. g. an image of a female NASA astronaut captioned "Pulling us into the future" (Lerner 2014, 16), an image of a woman's hand "being pulled into the future" captioned "The presence of the future" (Lerner 2014, 10).

Spatial collapse

B. Richardson's arguing that "antimimetic or antirealist modes of narrative representation play with, exaggerate, or parody the conventions of mimetic representation; often, they foreground narrative elements and events that are wildly implausible or palpably impossible in the real world" (Richardson 2012, 20) may serve as an explanation for the complexity of the narratives under investigation, that is chiefly the result of spatial and temporal experimentation.

Will Self's "Walking to Hollywood: memories of before the fall" consists of three parts ("Very Little", "Walking to Hollywood" and "Spurn Head" respectively) each of which represents a walk taken by the first-person narrator called Will Self, the second one being the longest and, perhaps, the most intense and absurd one. These walks seem not to be related to one another, but if we take a closer look we'll see that, as a matter of fact, the first and the third parts provide a context for the second one. Moreover, each part itself presents certain narratological challenges. In keeping with Richardson's exhaustive explanation of how antimimetic narrative works ("it may dispense with a single, consistent, human-like speaker, using only inconsistent, nonhuman, or collapsed voices; it may represent insubstantial or inconsistent fictional artifices rather than human figures; it may recount events that seem unworthy of being narrated or that are hopelessly confused or contradictory; it may locate these events in an unrecognizable kind of world") (Richardson 2012, 22), it is fitting that this piece of writing starts with a warning that this is a product of the author's delusions, as all the above-mentioned criteria are applicable to the text, at least to some extent. As far as the geographical spaces are concerned, the events take place in a number of places, including Toronto, Los Angeles, London and Holderness coastline (East Yorkshire), which are the elements of the real world, however they seem to get dissolved in the fictional versions of them, with LA standing out as being highly likely hallucinated by the protagonist.

Constantly challenging the standard proportions of the real world, Will Self presents his reader a fictional version of it that imitates a movie-set with the never-ending array of cinematographic works being produced. Echoing the Shakespearean's "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players"[1]. Will Self suggests a similar, yet a reworked, modern-day version of this concept, which if put into words would sound somewhat like *All the world's a movie-set, And all the men and women merely computer-generated images*.

In "Postmodernist Fiction" B. McHale analyses the phenomenon of "heterotopia" with regard to the concept of space in fiction: "Only the sort of space where fragments of a number of possible orders have been gathered together — the space

[1] Shakespeare, W. (2019) As you like it. In: Dr. B. A. Mowat, P. Werstine (ed.). *Folger Shakespeare Library*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 368 p.

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which Michel Foucault (1966) has called a heterotopia" (McHale 1987, 33).

Now, what we may arguably see in the second part of the book is the authorial reinvention of Los Angeles as a heterotopia based on its world-wide status of one of the most prominent America's landmarks and a unique universe it has within – Hollywood, often referred to as a "dream factory", the place producing fictions.

Witnessing the narrator's attempt to produce "an experimental film" (Self 2010, 174) of his journey and him being subsequently immersed in fiction goes in line with McHale's observation: "space here is less constructed than deconstructed by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time" (McHale 1987, 60).

A recurrent theme of travelling, by car in this instance, is once explained as the process of either a real-world observation or a world-modeling or world creation suggestive of either of the two roles assigned to anyone who is in it — a passive observer in the audience or a creator:

> E. g. (4) I'm speaking figuratively: windscreens are screens, after all — or lenses. Vehicular transport is either a cinema that you sit in passively while the world is shown to you, or else, if you drive, you're operating a camera, directing the movie of your journey (Self 2010, 124).

The words 'screens', 'camera' and 'lenses', all belonging to the same semantic field of 'filmmaking' involve the reader deeper into the "game of make-believe" (Chemodurova 2018, 13).

In "Very Little" Will revisits his North London youth by recounting his relationship with the childhood friend, now a vertically challenged sculptor Sherman Oaks who has become famous for creating body parts in his own image. This impairment of his friend becomes a point of reference for all distortions of scale manifesting themselves here and there with which the protagonist is admittedly preoccupied:

> E. g. (5) My obsessions with bigness, with littleness, with all distortions in scale — surely this was only a spatial expression of my own arrested development? (Self 2010, 35)

As the story progresses, Will keeps losing touch with reality, becoming gradually unable to consider anything average, of medium size, level or amount ending up in a complete denial of standards, inviting the reader into a parallel world of limitless possibilities:

> E. g. (6) I contended that I could sign my name on a dust mote and play billiards with Higgs bosons while simultaneously apprehending the sixty-mile span of the Middlesex tertiary escarpment (Self 2010, 110).

In "Spurn Head" exaggerations and distortions of all kinds turn "Spurn", that is known as a narrow island located off the tip of the coast of the East Riding of Yorkshire, into another unnatural space explicitly referencing the reader to Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels"[2]. The merging of the two made-up universes as the protagonist meets the Struldbrug, an immortal creature from the "Gulliver's Travels", at the coastal line in the end of the chapter seems fitting as it foregrounds the idea of space and distance being relative, as we can create as many worlds as our psyche would allow us, which is hugely the work of our imagination. This "transmigration" phenomenon is what Jan Alber refers to as "ascending metalepsis" as part of a broader notion of "ontological metalepsis" ("a fictional character literally transmigrating from an embedded fictional text into the primary storyworld") (Alber 2016, 204).

The readers encountering such impossible scenarios, however, may be "led to states of cognitive disorientation" (Alber 2016, 216). Self toys with readers' sense of reality taking them by surprise every now and then, but as Marjorie Worthington warns: "in the current moment, most contemporary readers are not confused by the autofictional nature of a text because they are equipped — perhaps through frequent practice — to comprehend the liminal nature of autofiction and, for that matter, of fiction and memoir as well" (Worthington 2018, 16), which implies that the readers "engage in only a partial suspension of disbelief" (Worthington 2018, 153).

Temporal distortion

Whereas in "Walking to Hollywood" it is the disruption of spatial orientation that interests us the most in this research, in Ben Lerner's novel "10:04" it is unnatural temporal organization of the narrative that becomes a focal point for us.

It comprises five parts, arranged loosely, that is, it does not unfold chronologically, but rather shifts back and forth occasionally turning into what in its form resembles poems, but does not rhyme. The idea of the "unnatural" temporality of the original text is corroborated by the embedded text entitled "To the future" co-written by Roberto Ortiz,

[2] Swift, J. (2005) *Gulliver's Travels*. New York: Oxford University Press, 432 p.

a third-grader, a student of the protagonist: dinosaurs as the symbolic species of the past once discovered by paleontologists serve as reminders of science that's:

> E. g. (7) "on the move with its face to the future" (Lerner 2014, 229).

Trapped in time between the two hurricanes Irene and Sandy, with the latter never mentioned in the text, "10:04" tells a story of Ben, the first-person narrator, a well-regarded poet, who leads a routine existence in New York. Recognizing the hurricanes as actual historic events, the reader can easily track down the time span of a year between the two of them. The striking similarity of the events following the arrivals of the two storms confronts the readers with what Jan Alber calls a "circular temporality", as the story returns to its beginning creating "an endless temporal loop" (Alber 2016, 53).

As cyclone Irene approaches New York, the city moves into a state of emergency and Ben and his best female friend name Alex stay the night at her place. He describes how they prepare for the hurricane:

> E. g. (8) we did most of the things we were told: filled every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances, located some batteries for the radio and flashlights (Lerner 2014, 20).

The following morning, disappointed at the failure of the storm, Ben reflects on what happened last night and states:

> E. g. (9) Because those moments had been enabled by a future that had never arrived, they could not be remembered from this future that, at and as the present, had obtained; they'd faded from the photograph (Lerner 2014, 24).

The word "future" placed in the grammatical context of the Past Perfect Tense distorts the sense of chronological relationships between these temporal elements as we perceive them in the real world.

At the end of the book another storm comes, and Ben and his friend Alex once again hide from it at her place:

> E. g. (10) Again we did the things one does: filled every suitable container we could find with water, unplugged various appliances, located some batteries for the radio and flashlights, drew the bath (Lerner 2014, 229).

And once again the storm failed (in fact, as the narrator later admits, it did not, it just went past the area they were in but damaged other places in the city rather severely making him question their existence in here and now):

> E. g. (11) Another historic storm had failed to arrive, as though we lived outside of history or were falling out of time (Lerner 2014, 230).

Only being half way through the book or closer to its end, the reader can make sense of a Hasidic quote used as an epigraph, that forms a lead-in to the concept of the cyclic time:

> E. g. (12) The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different (Lerner 2014).

If Will Self is admittedly obsessed with "bigness and littleness" that has to do with the spatial dimension of the world(s) he presents, Ben has enthusiasm for the times to come to the point of obsession: he manipulates the narrative order shifting between the present and the past projecting whatever happens or happened into the future and in doing so, he employs one of the types of chronological deviations — prolepsis or flashforward. On their walk through the city on one of the following days as the storm ceased, the narrator suddenly flashed back to what the reader might decipher as the disastrous accident which happened on the 28th of January in 1986 when the Space Shuttle Challenger was launched with seven crew members aboard and ended the trip just 73 seconds later in an explosion. Although he never mentioned it in the text, the phrase "I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America" refers the readers to the consolation speech of the then US President, Ronald Reagan, who specifically addressed the schoolchildren, stressing the idea of the losses being a part of "the process of exploration and discovery" for the sake of the future advances. Reducing the emotional impact and turning to the seemingly more trivial discourse, Ben then uses this phrase to start a long and exhaustive description of what will happen next on that very day after they reach Brooklyn:

> E. g. (13) I want to say something to the school-children of America: In Brooklyn we will catch

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> the B63 and take it up Atlantic. After a few stops, I will stand and offer my seat to an elderly woman with two large houseplants in black plastic bags. My feet will ache only then, my knees stiffen a little. A snake plant, a philodendron. Everything will be as it had been <...> (Lerner 2014, 239).

The very final paragraph within this long description projected onto the future makes the readers watch the narrator' voice dissolve, as if reflecting the final win of the subjectivity over the stable identity:

> E. g. (14) Sitting at a small table looking through our reflection in the window onto Flatbush Avenue, I will begin to remember our walk in the third person, as if I'd seen it from the Manhattan Bridge, but, at the time of writing, as I lean against the chain-link fence intended to stop jumpers, I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it's hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is (Lerner 2014, 240).

As we've previously seen in Self's text, the mechanism of the mask of the author (which we took the liberty of referring to as "the autofictional mask") is also to be found in Lerner's "10:04" that Brian McHale describes as "a division between the authentic self and an inauthentic role or mask" (McHale 1987, 215). Addressing the reader (*I am with you*), the narrator seems to "cross the border", as if joining those in the audience and in doing so he tries to assert an internal distance from his former self to finally become as objective and analytical as possible.

Conclusions

In this article we have attempted to briefly define autofiction as the international literary phenomenon of the recent years. Through our analysis of spatial and temporal aspects of Lerner and Self's works, we hope to have demonstrated the peculiarities of the narratives that signal "fictional" in these "life-writings". The authors' employment of autofictional techniques illuminates the important distinction between fictional and nonfictional elements within the text, as perceived by the readers. Following the concept of "unnatural narratives", we have touched upon the notions of "antimimetic spaces" and "unnatural temporalities" (Alber 2016). The findings of this work include the strategies and/or mechanisms that may be viewed as responsible for blurring the boundaries between the fictional and nonfictional domains and thus making it no longer possible to refer to the texts under investigation as "autobiographies" in Lejeune's sense of the word, with regard to the spatial and temporal characteristics. Among those we regard: intertextual inclusions, significant peritextual elements, "antimimetic" or "antirealist" modes of narratives, the mechanism of the mask of the author (the "autofictional mask"), a game of "make-believe", ascending metalepsis and circular temporality.

Another important characteristic relevant to defining autofiction is the concept of identity or selfhood and the ways it manifests itself in a narrative. Further research on the topic will arguably yield more evidence that autofiction can be considered a new type of the text (genre) as opposed to autobiography.

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