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Autofiction: "Imaginaire" and Reality, an Interesting Mix Leading to the Illusion of a Genre?

ABSTRACT

Serge Doubrovsky, author and literary critic, coined the term "autofiction" in 1977 to refer to the type of fiction in which reality and the *imaginaire* are intertwined. Other writers and thinkers have written about 'circonfession' (Jacques Derrida), 'automythobiographie' (Claude Louis-Combet), fiction-bilan (Poirot-Delpech), *roman-miroir* (H. Juin), bi-autographie (Bellman-Noël), *prose de mémoire* (Jacques Roubaud). Little did Doubrovsky know that the neologism he had marketed would take flight in various directions, at times the fictional being integrated as dominant, at other times, the reality. This article intends to clarify certain theoretical assumptions with regard to autofiction while counterbalancing the theory with practical examples from francophone 20th and 21st century literature.

KEYWORDS

Amélie Nothomb; Autofiction; Imaginaire; 20th and 21st Century Feminine Literature; Literary Genre.

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Introduction

Theoretical assumptions of autofiction

The word "autofiction" was officially coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his novel *Fils* (Threads/Son). Doubrovsky imagined a genre between fiction and autobiography in which the author, protagonist, and narrator share one identity. He explained the idea on the back cover of *Fils*:

Autobiographie ? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels ; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage en liberté, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, fils de mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d'avant ou d'après littérature, concrète, comme on dit musique.

(Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of strictly real events and facts; autofiction, if you will; to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax



of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music.)

Doubrovsky's description of the differences between autobiography and autofiction has inspired debate among literary critics, journalists, and authors in France over the past three decades. Many have questioned whether autofiction is in fact different from autobiography, criticizing Doubrovsky's assertion that autobiography is "reserved for the important people of this world". Nevertheless, "Fiction, of strictly real events and facts" has become the working definition of autofiction, and the "adventure of language" has come to describe its innovative style. Literary critic and prolific author, Doubrovsky defines his term further: according to him autofiction is

un rêve à la place je mets QUOI *a book* bien sûr substitut c'est pas le produit d'origine c'est pas du vrai c'est de l'ersatz [...] mais un livre c'est jamais RÉEL c'est comme un rêve m'inscrire en livre c'est m'inscrire EN FAUX même si c'est vrai vie qu'on raconte c'est qu'une fiction [...] ON Y CROIT ça dit VRAI mais EN FABLE (Doubrovsky 1977 p1645).

(A dream instead I put WHAT *a book* of course substitute it's not the original product it's not real its ersatz (...) but a book is never REAL it's like a dream to write myself into a book it's to write myself IN FALSE even if it's true life we tell it's only fiction (...) ONE BELIEVES IT SAYS TRUE BUT AS A FABLE.)

However, the definition also invites further interpretation. It is a paradoxical,

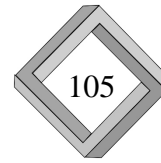
complicated explanation of a genre that continues to elude classification. Similarly, other attempts to define autofiction often avoid forming strict boundaries for the genre. Autofiction.org, for instance, defines the genre as:

Notion subtile à définir, liée au refus qu'un auteur manifeste à l'égard de l'autobiographie, du roman à clés, des contraintes ou des leures de la transparence, elle s'enrichit de ses extensions multiples tout en résistant solidement aux attaques incessantes dont elle fait l'objet. Elle vient en effet poser des questions troublantes à la littérature, faisant vaciller les notions mêmes de réalité, de vérité, de sincérité, de fiction, creusant de galeries inattendues le champ de la mémoire.

(Subtle notion to define, tied to the author's apparent refusal of the autobiography, roman à clés, of the constraints or delusions of transparency, enriched by its many extensions all while solidly resisting the incessant attacks of which it is the object. It comes from posing questions that challenge literature, shaking notions of reality, truth, sincerity, fiction, plowing through the unattended galleries in the field of memory.)

Autofiction.org features articles that discuss the genre, specific works of autofiction, and contemporary French authors. The site's editors call attention to the multifaceted nature of autofiction, its indefinable qualities, and its task of resisting preconceived notions of how to narrate "reality, truth, sincerity, fiction".

Gasparini (2008) summarizes the criteria Doubrovsky articulates to determine whether a text is autofictional or not: there has to be onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator as well as the subtitle "novel". The narrative itself is of primary



importance while the author is in pursuit of an "original form". The writing aims to "immediately articulate" and there is therefore often a reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation). The present tense is used widely in an effort to only tell "strictly real facts and events" and this is linked to the urge to "reveal one's self truly". The writing style as a whole can be seen as a strategy that aims to require active engagement from the reader.

The term autofiction was able to translate and crystallise the numerous doubts which since the beginning of the 20th century notions such as subject, identity, truth, sincerity, writing of the Self had brought about. So finding out whether the new concept was able to do all that, and bring autobiography into a new era remains important.

Without going into details of historical-literary concept of autofiction – other critics have done that¹, the concept has to be inserted in the overall context of post-modernity. Autofiction is seen by Doubrovsky (2007) and Genon (2007) as the "renaissance of postmodern autobiographical writing" in that it problematizes the authorial "I". The subject, as exposed by autofiction, is, according to Genon (cited by Gasparini 2008: p. 274), "a fragmented and piecemeal subject, deconstructed even in its construction, asserting and putting pieces in one movement". For Linda Hutcheon (1988: p. 3-21), the postmodern novel is characterized by its challenge to the act of writing, its intertextuality and its delirious style of parody. The tendency "to irrepressible fictionalization" is, in the postmodern era, "consubstantial with writing in general and writing the self in particular" (Gasparini, 2008: p. 214). Autofiction shares many characteristics with postmodern writing. Lyotard (1979) speaks of the postmodern condition determined by the development of individualism, the

process of personalization (Lipovetsky 1983, Lasch, 1979) related to aesthetics

"of the second degree based on the pastiche, the fragment, the formal game, media communication and exhibitionistic narcissism" (Jameson, 1991 and 1998, cited by Gasparini, 2008: p. 219). Postmodern writing is constantly in search of its own rules and categories and will be anchored in a moment in history as "of ephemeral validity" (*ibid.*: p. 221). Autofiction is not merely self-centered, egocentric, exhibitionist, narcissistic, writing with petty-bourgeois horizons as many critics state. As I will show here, autofiction, in its efforts to search for identity, allows authors, actually requires them, to go to the Other, to find the Other in the Self and so change its Self.

Not *terra incognita* as it was when Vincent Colonna started his 1989 research project, autofiction today is the genre defined by an "oxymoronic pact" and combining two contradictory narratives: it is a story based, as is autobiography, on the principle of the three identities (the author is also the narrator and main character), it is based on claims of fiction in its narrative terms, and peritextual information (title, back cover, ...) shows that today autofiction is present in the reading habits and in meta-literary discourse. However, its meaning is neither stable nor unequivocal. The neologism autofiction has no consistent definition in dictionaries: the main French dictionaries, namely Larousse and Robert, provide two contradictory meanings. In addition, synonyms that critics give to the concept of autofiction are endless².

In short, an autofiction is a story whose subject matter is strictly autobiographical, as evidenced in theory the nominal identity between author, narrator and character, but the way is to say the organization and work of narrative style is romantic in nature. Several paratextual, intertextual, narrative, stylistic



and thematic indices that identify a text as autofictional have been highlighted³. In recent Anglophone literary theory, the word “faction” which was first used to translate autofiction, now seems to have been replaced by fiction of the self or autofiction.

The reader and the autofictional pact

The reader suspends, in a voluntary way, his wish to believe that what he reads is the truth, reality or what Coleridge in 1817 termed his *willing suspension of disbelief*. When confronted to literature, the reader has to play the game (or respect the “pact”) and put his incredulity away. The author responds to these somewhat conventional expectations by elaborating texts for his potential readers, the author programs his text through reflexive comments, intertextual dispositions and paratext: “The writer should not encourage a referential reading” is what Colonna said about autofiction in 1989 (Colonna, 1989 : p. 3).

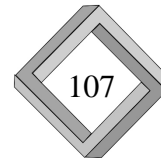
“Imaginaire” and reality

Recognition of autofiction by critics and literary theorists began a few years later. The inclusion of the concept of autofiction in 1982 in *La littérature en France depuis 1968* (Vercier & Lecarme, 1982) was followed by a slow process of recognition of the genre, often poorly understood and poorly recognized. Jacques Lecarme was the one of the most ardent defenders of the genre when it first appeared. The concept was inserted in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* in 1984, as originally conceived, in the way Doubrovsky had first theorized the notion.

It was not until 1989 that a first major deviation from the Doubrovsky interpretation saw the light when Colonna made a

different analysis of the term autofiction in his doctoral thesis (published in 2004). According to Colonna, the term autofiction encompasses all the processes of fictionalization of the Self, the other main feature of the autofictional process, insofar as the author is fantasizing his own existence, a project in which imaginary characters are more or less close extensions of his/her Self. For him, it is the exploration of the literary imagination that is valued and the only criterion used is that of identifying the writer as a character of his story, using the first person singular or even by designating his/her Self more indirectly – provided that the identification remains obvious to the reader.

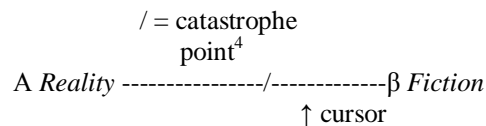
For some, autofiction is either a simple modeling of the autobiographical pact (Lejeune) with strong psychoanalytic inflection (Doubrovsky), or the most recent autobiographical novel (Gasparini), for others, it reflects an already ancient inter-generic practice (Lecarme) that can be taken as an archetype, it then includes the autobiographical form, but is not limited to that form. Based on the work of Lucian, Colonna described sub-generic categories of autofiction: autofictional fantasy, transfiguring the existence and identity of the writer “in a surreal story, indifferent to any likelihood” (Colonna, 2004: p. 75; he cites the example of Jorge Luis Borges’ *The Aleph*); autofictional biography, in which the author “fantasizes his life from real data, remains closer to the likelihood of its text and publishes a form of subjective truth” (Colonna, 2004: p. 93; for example, Serge Doubrovsky or Christine Angot); “mirror” autofiction, in which the work reflects the presence of writer as in a mirror, and intrusive authorial autofiction, requiring a text in the third person with an author-narrator in the margins of the plot. Life is seen as a raw material which should be conferred a specific form: this work of the Self requires an invention of the Self through subjectivation exercises.



In sum, three main approaches of autofiction can be distinguished today. First, the approach advocated by Doubrovsky for which a text is autofictional when reflecting the three basic criteria set by him: onomastics correspondence, literary form and the focus on the (psycho)analytical process. This means that, for Doubrovsky, autofiction is the answer to the classic autobiography made by a literary world trying to solve ontological instability typical of the postmodern age. Secondly, there is the hybrid approach of Gasparini, also adopted by Ouellette-Michalska (she speaks an autofictional flux or flow) and Régine Robin, according to whom autofiction is “a frontier area, where body and writing take on the fantasies, illusions, aspirations, rooted cultural imagery of the writer” (Robin, 1997: p. 47). Under this approach, it is impossible to say whether autofiction is more fiction than autobiography or vice versa. To avoid having to decide this generic issue, to be able to encompass the majority of the production of contemporary texts (of which it is difficult to identify whether they are autobiographical, autofictional, or completely fictional), and to reflect the dynamism of this literary category, Gasparini offers hybridity as its common denominator. The third and last approach, to this date, tips the balance in favor of autobiography. This perspective, which implies an open reading contract, is what Arnaud Schmitt calls “autonarration” (2010: p. 430). In general, consistent with the theory proposed by Stanley Fish and others, “there are the communities of ordinary readers who produce texts and genres through the pressing need to classify them, a need that puts in place Culture and its institutions” (Fish, quoted by Colonna, 2010: p. 401). Is it the ordinary reader who has this need to classify or rather the literary critic? The history of autofiction somehow proves the opposite: autofiction is read and appreciated by readers, without the literary

critic being able to agree on its meaning, its definition and its precise field of application.

As stressed by Jauss (1978: 52; quoted by Garcia, 2009: p. 154), “insofar as fictionality and referentiality underlie our perception of the world, how these are articulated in the text is a factor in the reception of a literary work”. With autofiction, each reader is invited “to position a cursor on an axis of modality” which Colonna (2010: p. 437) represents like this:



Because of the hybridity of autofiction, the reader will change the cursor position during his reading, he constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs his own point of catastrophe according to his reading. Alberca (2011: p. 147) refers to this as the “moving space” occupied by autofictions. Saveau Patrick (2011: p. 14), critic of Doubrovsky, confronted by his own reading of autofiction, expressed his sentiments as follows:

as a reader, I can not help but cling to an “I” who says bluntly that he tells “strictly true facts”, facts that refer to a referent outside language. That the women who shared Serge Doubrovsky’s life are people who really existed, that the places he describes in great length can be traversed by the reader as he has done himself [...], that the yellow star to which he refers is the star that he himself wore, all these facts change the mode of reception of his literary works, a mode that would be different if they were entirely fictional.

According to Saveau (2010: p. 316), when the reader lets himself be captured, when he falls into “the threats of a patiently woven cloth”, that of autofiction, he feels less alone. This is not a unidirectional movement of the writer to the reader, this is a double movement: “the readers support us, provided we really give ourselves away, they feed on us, we on them, there is transfer, transfusion of life” (Doubrovsky, 1999: p. 47).

Speaking of Arab autofiction M’hamedDahi (Genon, 2009) explains, in an interview, that Abdelkader Chaoui (writer and specialist of autobiography) indicates the term autofiction on the cover of his books is retrospective in nature to qualify his writing (*Signe d’amplitude, Qui dit c’est moi!*): “this usage of the title invites readers to read these books in another way, to appropriate the tools relevant to understanding their narrative identity, to consider that the factual and the fictional are bound by a unalterable connexion”. Thus, on the reception/readers’ side, autofiction is an invitation to read between the lines, to reveal the puzzle, to participate in more creative and active reading. Readership brings certain expectations on literature based on, among others, the register of the language used. It is not only the editorial distinction between “novel”, “autobiography” and “autofiction”, but also the tone of the author who influences the text’s reception by its audience, its readership.

Practical examples from Amélie Nothomb’s and Nina Bouraoui’s autofictions

Amélie Nothomb was born Fabienne Claire Nothomb, in an ancient family from Brussels, on the 9th of July 1966, in Etterbeek in Belgium, a Belgian national, she is the daughter of Baron Patrick Nothomb, a Belgian writer and ambassador to Japan. She spent the first five years of her life in Japan and then traveled throughout her childhood, staying in China, Laos, Burma and Bangladesh (all places where her father was appointed Ambassador). Her autofictions *Sabotage Amoureux* (1993) and *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000) describe specific moments of her childhood.

At seventeen, Nothomb goes back to Belgium to study Romance Philology at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. As an uprooted teenager steeped in Asian culture, she suffers from the sudden shock of Western culture. She feels a deep sense of loneliness and suffers from various eating disorders which she will relate with a certain humor in her work autofictional, *Biographie de la faim* (2004): anorexia, bulimia, potomania, alcoholism, etc. At twenty-one, Nothomb returned to Tokyo where she became an interpreter for a large Japanese company. She stayed a year and tells this experience in the world of work as an autofiction *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999). The aspects of her personal life during this period will be told in the autofiction entitled *Ni d’Ève ni d’Adam* (2007) and the period of her adult life in France will be told in the last autofiction to date, *Une forme de vie* (2010).

Métaphysique des tubes (2000), “her true-false autobiography” (Marsan, 2000), is her first fully autofictional story. Nothomb recounts her personal story that takes place between August 1967 and August 1970 with the majority of the narrative devoted to the

last six months. The staging of her own birth and some years after that first birth, on the imaginary plane, offers the author the possibility of having several births within the text; it is an opportunity for Nothomb to prove her existence. In *Métaphysique des tubes*, the most striking fictional feature is surely the use of memories of Nothomb's early life. There are very few people who can, in their memories, go back to childhood; even fewer are those who can go to the stadium of a baby's birth. Nothomb said in an interview that "one of [her] rare privileges is that [she has] a very good memory of [her] infancy, it is perhaps the only special thing that [she has]. [She] remembers [her] childhood very well" (Bainbrigg and den Toonder, 2003: p. 194; my translation). In another interview with Stéphane Lambert (1999: p. 24), she had already said more or less the same: "I have a feature that is I remember my very early childhood very well, without remembering the language I was speaking at the time". In *Métaphysique des tubes*, the narrator claims the authenticity of her memories as they intersect with (unclaimed) psychoanalysis. But Wronska emphasizes (2007: p. 129) that it is well known that the period narrated is covered by the famous infantile amnesia. In other words, the memory recorded before the oedipal phase became unconscious under the pressure of the superego (morality embodied by the adult child who disavows his incestuous aggressiveness). Only a psychoanalytical cure is likely to lift censorship. The quote referring to the famous primal scene⁵ in the text suggests that the spread of psychoanalytic education has pushed away the boundaries of what is repressed while conceptualizing the memories hereby made guilt-free and therefore double so accessible to autobiography.

This novel, composed of fifteen unnumbered chapters, relates chronologically, in the simple past tense, the life of the narrator in Japan from her birth to her third

year. There are indications, besides those given by the author herself or by the paraliterature, of the autobiographical inclination of the text. Thus, on page 14, the narrator says that "the parents of the tube were of Belgian nationality", on page 134 of the novel, Nothomb talks about her parents, brother and sister, the last two by giving them explicitly the names they have in real life: André and Juliette. Between these two, there are obviously other indicators. The fourth chapter of the novel, for example, is the ultimate summary of the different stages of identity that, too, seem to allow identification with the author of the novel. Memory and body are two of these indicators. The tasting of white chocolate is an element of Proustian intertextuality⁶, it allows the narrator to first have an identity and then to receive a memory, "since February 1970, I remember everything" (*Métaphysique des tubes*: 35). This passage is also important from the perspective of the relationship with the truth which Nothomb holds, which she describes as "fluctuating" (*Péplum*: p. 179), especially when we add the following sentences: "An assertion also big – 'I remember everything' – has no chance of being believed by anyone. It does not matter. Since this is also an unverifiable statement, I see less interest than ever to be credible" (*idem*).

Without naming them explicitly, Lee (2010: p. 116) points out the autofictional aspects of this text noting that, while *Métaphysique des tubes* is subtitled "novel" on its title page (page 3 in the paperback edition), even if the narrator articulates the doubts of the reader to believe in such a memory⁷, even though she recognizes the part of invention necessary to her project, she nevertheless invokes in order to support the authenticity of the physical contiguity between the three discursive entities [the character – the child born in Japan – the narrative voice – the adult "I" narrator who



recounts a narrated “I”, the child – and the author – AmélieNothomb] with the “same hand that wrote”⁸, the most perfect instrument for writing.

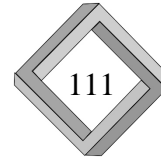
Nina Bouraoui⁹, whose real name is Yasmin Bouraoui, was born in Rennes, France in July 1967, she lived in Algeria, in Algiers, until her fourteenth year. When she was 14, Nina left with her family for a holiday in France. The return to Algeria was impossible, the family first moved to Zurich, Switzerland, and Paris, France, then to Brittany and Abu Dhabi. She now divides her time between France and Switzerland. Her creative universe is rooted in a phenomenon of mixed worlds, hybridity¹⁰, the in-between¹¹, regarded as the common characteristic of migrant, borderline writing. At a very young age, Nina Bouraoui appreciates the power of writing which will be her refuge from that moment. At 9 she wrote her first novel which turned out to be “a revelation” (www.univers-l.com:personnalite_nina_bouraoui.htm). She finds an outlet, an escape, a way to express herself, to be herself. Uprooted unexpectedly at the age of 14, a real trauma for the girl, becomes a kind of rebirth for her because she discovers a new environment where she learns to live freely her homosexuality. She decides to become a writer and publishes her first text, *La Voyeuse Interdite*, in 1991. Bouraoui has, since then, produced dozens of literary texts published by Gallimard, Fayard and Stock. Her texts are mostly autofictional stories written in the first person. Thus, they incorporate many features of autofiction, including fragmentation, the fictionalization of the Self, meta-discursivity, short sentences, repetition and anaphora, all this contributing to a sort of breathless urgency. Emphasis on the “I” is pervasive in her writing, subjectivity plays a role in her work, as well as mediation of the textual and sexual Self.

Related to her search for identity and similar to the Nothomb’s work with regard to the Double, the Döppelgänger, Bouraoui explores the meaning of a dual personality in many of her texts. Her identity would be – at least – two-fold because of her roots in both Algerian and French daily life. This is also related to very strong sense of the in-between that Bouraoui upholds in her writings (Rey, 1992: p. 63). Her intermediate position is characterized by the body that becomes the center of social demands between Yasmina, the Algerian girl, and Nina, the French woman. Michel Laronde (quoted by Kande, 1999) names this the “schizophrenic representation of the identity of post-colonial subjects”.

Violent duplication, a true “decomposing” of the “I” occurs in several of Bouraoui’s texts. Thus, in *La Voyeuse Interdite*, the “I” narrative gives way to the third person singular when a split occurs within the narrator’s personality. Azzouz (1998: p. 130) explains that, by disavowing the fate that society imposes on her, the narrator challenges even her own person, her ego and her Self by denying the “I” that characterizes the person she is. It symbolizes somewhat of a departure from the “I” narrative that the narrator can not and does not want to take because she is bearing witness of her degradation and humiliation.

The figure of the “double” is present in most of *Garçon Manqué* whose narrative proceeds on the principle of the association between body, simultaneously repelled and martyred, and the place where it is located. The narrator aspires, according to Jaccopard (2004: p. 49), to become “a body without a type, without language, without nationality” (*Garçon Manqué*: p. 9) or as the narrator says further:

I become unclassifiable. I’m not quite typical. “You’re not an Arab like others”. I’m too typical. “You’re not



French". [...] My face Algerian. My voice French. I shade my light. I am one against another. I have two aggressive elements. Two jealousies that consume me. (*Garçon Manqué*: 33)

The attempt to decode a particular literary onomastics, which appears to be related to a quest for identity, made in the preceding paragraphs, and the identification of a prominent narrative polyphony, with some of its effects I tried to decipher, lead to the conclusion that the "practice of complex vocalization" (Colonna, 1989) on the part of the author leads unquestionably to the problem of doubling, duplication flowing from this mismatch of sounds and necessarily implying any writing itself. Binary places – Algeria and France – are closely linked to the quest for cultural identity, and have an echo in the sexual binarism (Nina, receives a male name Brio, who pretends to be Ahmed, and Amine, the boy her age, of mixed race, a little effeminate, serves as the symmetrical figure of Nina). Amine will have his French "double" in the character of Marion, who, according to Lassoued, bears similarities to Amine via the phonemes [a], [m], [i] and [n]. Through these mirror characters, Bouraoui redefines gender.

The fusion of reality and fiction is a prerequisite for the existence of autofiction. I will only give a few examples beginning with her first publication. In *La Voyeuse Interdite*, the author mixes the real visions of the city of Algiers, dilapidated and unmaintained, with hallucinatory and chaotic visions:

Dogs eat garbage, rats eat cats and dogs are bitten by garbage rats, then, the only animals of the illogical ecosystem, the rats, joined to the men, are involved in the massacre of the town. The children fall asleep in paintings with holes as the private parts of their

mother, [...] urine makes every step smell of ammonia, every remedy, smells of old sheep escape from bloody butchereries, meat oozes. (*La Voyeuse Interdite*: p. 71)

The sickening reality of this city and the fabulous imagination are inextricably intertwined in this passage, as in other extracts from the Bouraoui's work. "Nina is Amine's disease. Brio is the brother of Ahmed. Nina is the mutilation of Yasmina" (*Garçon Manqué*: p. 66): these sentences reflect the three levels of reading. According to Lassoued, these three simple sentences composed of a subject, a verb "to be", used to describe a state and a complement which refers to a referent, illustrate the tone of the narrative, mainly composed of simple sentences, or even noun clauses. Grammatical simplicity would merely be, according to Lassoued, "a façade to mask a complex psychological situation: the search for the Self as the need to belong to a group passes through the destruction of one's soul and body in order to accomplish oneself". The title *Garçon Manqué* is its sad representation. The expression is aggressive and points to physical mutilation (absence of sexual attributes), mutilation that the narrator will practice by cutting her hair.

The first assertion, "Nina is Amine's disease", refers to the imaginary world that the narrator created because it will protect her from the outside world and its conflicts. The second, "Brio is Ahmed's brother", refers to the Arab world, in its broadest sense, and its codification. The father nicknamed the narrator Brio because, in the absence of the man in the house, he has the function to protect his mother and sister. The last sentence, "Nina is the mutilation of Yasmina", represents a certain racist France which the narrator will have to confront.

The link between the writing of the body and of disease has been repeatedly

analyzed. For example, Gail Weiss in “The Body as a Narrative Horizon” or Arthur Frank (1997) in “The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics” emphasize this link. Among the different types of disease stories analyzed by Arthur Frank, one of them is particularly relevant to Bouraoui’s text *Garçon Manqué*: the history of chaos.

A major feature of stories of chaos is their absence of narrative order. The events are narrated as the narrator experiences them: without visible sequence or causal relationship. The stories of chaos reveal the vulnerability and powerlessness of the narrator destroyed by the overwhelming demands of physical pain; the demands engender what Frank (1997: p. 69) calls a “narrative wreck”¹² – incessant interruptions of the narrative flow function as a reflection of the constant disruption of the body during everyday experiences.

The “poetic violence” of *Garçon Manqué* follows Frank’s model of the story of chaos at several levels. A fractured syntactic structure, composed of noun phrases or verbal briefs, what Bouraoui calls “sentences of one word”, gives an edge to a style that prevents clear narrative progression and resembles “the staccato rhythm of words that peck the reader” in the story of chaos (Frank, 1997: p. 99). In addition, several sentences contradict each other without clearly indicating what they refer to, as in the following statement noted by Clarinval, from *Garçon Manqué* (2007: p. 149): “French mother. Algerian Father. I know the smells, sounds, colors. This is wealth. It is poverty. Not choosing is to be wandering”. To what do the smells, sounds and colors refer? What is rich and poor at the same time? The reader, unable to choose a meaning, feels as lost as the narrator.

Another feature of the story of chaos is the use of the present tense which disrupts

the construction of a chronological flow from past to future. Most sentences in *Garçon Manqué* are in the present even when the narrator evokes the past “which requires cross-checking to see what temporal layer(s) time the narrator evokes” (Jacomard, 2004: p. 44). Jacomard calls Bouraoui’s paradox of style, “this lapidary style that attempts to control the brooding, as if there is precipitation competing with logorrhea” (*ibid.*: p. 47). This tension between fragmented scenes but repeated incessantly and obsessively accentuates the impression of a “jagged” narrative, constantly interrupted and without resolution, thus undermining the establishment of a precise purpose of the narrative.

Conclusion

Autofictions are part of an archi-textuality, of the autobiographical genre, and this is obviously not without consequences for their production, nor for their reading, since generic perception guides and determines to a large extent the horizon of the readers’ expectations, and thus the reception of the text. Autofiction, like any other literary genre, implies a specific dialogism, as the reader is at the same time configured by gender and bounded by its limits and the author plays on these expectations and limits. Autofiction is, in my view, a subgenre of autobiography, because both have similarities in regard to questions their writing raises: how far can the authors be creative and creators? Is this creativity related to freedom? How does the reception from the audience influence the author’s ability to break the literary rules? In how far can their imagination find a place in the reality they are trying to tame? All these questions, much more than the generic belonging of autofiction or the presence of an autofictional contract between the author and the reader, bring together a



generation of autofictional writers. And, in general, autofiction defies the rules of autobiography.

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Notes

¹ For example, Doubrovsky, Gasparini, Lecarme, Colonna, Darrieussecq, Hubier, Forrest, Grell and Genon.

² For example, automythobiography (Claude Louis-Combet), autobiogre (Hubert Lucot), circonfession (Jacques Derrida), curriculum vitae (Michel Butor), égolittérature (Philippe Forest), new autobiography (Robbe-

Grillet), oulipography (Roubaud), false story (Jean-Pierre Boulé about Hervé Guibert), autography (Vouilloux about Gracq), bi-autography (Bellemin-Christmas), transpersonal narrative (Annie Ernaux), etc. have been used as (partial) synonyms of autofiction.

³ See K. Ferreira-Meyers, *Comparative analysis of autofictional features in the works of Amelie Nothomb, Calix the Beyala and Nina Bouraoui*. PhDThesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 2011.

⁴ Colonna (2010: p. 437) explains that in *Kant et l'ornithorynque*, Umberto Eco presents a similar structure with an axis going from realistic *mimesis* to abstraction. The midpoint is called catastrophe point by Kant.

⁵ "I spent many nights awake, on my pillow, clinging to the bars of my bed – a cage, staring at my father and mother (...). They felt a growing unease. The seriousness of my contemplation intimidated to the point of making them lose sleep. The parents realized that I could no longer sleep in their room". (Nothomb, 2000: p. 87)

⁶ According to Lee (2010: p. 113), the white chocolate is close to Marcel Proust's madeleine. As with the scene of the madeleine in Proust, we have a child who is delighted by a treat – here the grandmother, there the mother – with almost epiphanic results. While Proust's cupcake brings back the past, that lost time, and reveals the many Selves that constitute the narrator, in Nothomb's text the emphasis is on establishing a first identity, an ego: a birth necessarily future-oriented.

⁷ Doubt is expressed only once, about the suicide in the carp pond: "Sometimes I wonder if I did not dream, if this founder adventure is not a fantasy" (*Métaphysique des Tubes*: p. 170), but the narrator immediately cancels this doubt by the following

sentence: "then I look at myself in the mirror and I see, on my left temple, a scar of admirable eloquence".

⁸ Lee (2010: p. 35-36) refers here to the following passage of *Métaphysique des Tubes*: "Before the white chocolate, I do not remember anything: I have to trust the testimony of my relatives, reinterpreted by me. After that, my information is first hand: the hand that wrote".

⁹ Bouraoui, in Arabic, means "son/daughter of a storyteller" (Lebdai, 2007: p. 40), or "one who tells".

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha talks about the unhomey, the in-between and mimicry (concepts borrowed from Freud, but used in the tradition of Lacan). Unhomey and in-between indicate a nomadic and hybrid state, and mimicry is a process that never ends and that emphasizes both the impossibility of the construction of a traditional mono-identity and the need to think of identity as trans-identity. (Alfonso de Toro, 2008: p. 67).

¹¹ "The same way with which I write from these in-between languages, in-between cultural makes my text unrecoverable by proponents of national identity and reactionary defenders of the purity of the language (...). Much is written via the truths of a virtual tongue, much more than the laws of a real language. This is where I picked the passion fruit, in the very act of writing. To paraphrase the epigraph from Nietzsche in his Zarathustra, I would say: "I do not write for anyone, and I write for everyone". That is to say that a true writing is unreachable, it remains in its haughty solitude far away from hegemony and absorption. This is where its strength comes from, in its irreducibility". Quoted by Bivona (1994: p. 32); my translation.

¹² Writing one's memoirs of childhood is not equivalent to what patients write when



they describe their chronic pain or an incurable disease. However, the body that is in pain speaks in the same way, irrespective of the origin of its suffering - disease, abuse, war or simply what a child feels when its cultural environment does not recognize his/her intrinsic beauty. Arthur Frank (1997: p. 69) also says: "Narratives of disease are a

form of story of the Self that coincide and are linked to at least three other forms. These forms are spiritual autobiographies, narratives of identity: to become male or female and what that means, and, finally, the stories of survivors of traumatic experiences such as war, imprisonment, incest and abuse".