Critical autobiography: a new genre?
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ABSTRACT
Memoir, a genre that dates back, arguably, to Augustine’s Confessions, if not even earlier, is today enjoying enormous critical as well as popular success. In this essay, I discuss what I see as the most recent ramification of memoir, namely the development of a distinguishable new subgenre which I will call “critical autobiography.” Stemming from the long and complex tradition of literary memoirs, the critical autobiography flirts closely with fiction and literary criticism while challenging some of the structural and aesthetic features that characterize more traditional autobiographical works. In the course of this paper, I consider such challenges and their impact on the nature and classification of memoir. Grounding my analysis in genre theory (as opposed to strictly intentionalist classificatory strategies), I outline and defend three contra-standard features of the critical autobiography: critical autobiographies problematize the idea of an authentic confession, they refrain from causal narrative connections, and, lastly, they further contribute to the discussion on the nature of the self by providing a perhaps more scattered, but nonetheless compelling picture of what a contemporary autobiographical self may actually be.

Introduction
Autobiographies, or, as it is today more popular, memoirs, have gone, in the past two decades or so, through a complete make over. Memoir, in fact, is nothing short of a phenomenon. What is, to wit, phenomenal about memoir is how prismatic it is, how prone to morphing, to play, crisscross, and perhaps even violate the boundaries and definitions that philosophy and literary criticism have, throughout the centuries, attached to different genres—in fiction and nonfiction alike.

Even if we agree in identifying, as its origin, St. Augustine’s Confessions (1998) (and we do not have to), even if we concede that some of the first complications emerged with Rousseau (1953) and that the first breaches to the authenticity and overall confessional intent of memoir can be said to derive from the introduction of a “secular” dimension to what was instead its religious beginning, even if, lastly, we see memoir shaking in front of the loss of a coherent sense of identity in writers such as Samuel Beckett (1984) and the postmodern movement that will later ensue, we are still left with a variety of questions on what memoir is, on its ontology.

For memoir, to start with, is both a literary genre and a philosophical tool, a way of actively “doing philosophy,” it is, additionally, of special interest for psychologists and psychoanalysts, not to mention its popularity among both elite writers and the virtually interminable sequence of politicians, athletes, music stars, etc. who have tried their hands at it. Recent publications reflect an interest in autobiography and its inherent multiplicity. James Olney’s masterfully written Memory & Narrative: The Wave of Life-Writing (Olney 1998) outlines the history of autobiography as the weaving of both narrative and identity; Ben Yagoda (2009), while also adhering to an historical approach (albeit less rigorous), focuses more on the problem of authenticity in memoir and on how the notion of truth has often been jeopardized. On a similar note, the New York Public Library organized, in 1986, a series of talks entitled “The Arts and Craft of Memoir,” talks that were later collected in a publication edited by William Zinsser and entitled, significantly Inventing the Truth (Zinsser 1998). More recently, two collections of essays have explored two fundamental issues in the analysis of memoir. The first, edited by Christopher Cowley (2015), looks at the intersection between philosophy and autobiography and at the idea, briefly mentioned above, of autobiography as a form of philosophy; the second, edited by Zachary Leader (2015), is more wider in scope and explores the multiple ways in which autobiographies are created, thus tracing their evolution not only in history, as in the previous examples, but from the perspective of what it means to write an autobiography, to be an autobiographer.

The list can go on to include more books, journals, and literary magazines, but even just a superficial look at the chapters of each of these volumes
will reveal a number of overlapping concerns and questions. Specifically, and focusing more narrowly, but not exclusively, on philosophical analyses of memoir, there are three crucial issues to consider. The first is whether memoir belongs entirely to nonfiction, or whether fiction might have, to some extent, “contaminated” it. The second is related to the notion of narrative and to what may count as the structural conditions leading to an autobiographical narrative (if, and I must here add a disclaimer, we can legitimately talk about memoir as truly being a narrative). Lastly, there is the problem of personal identity and the related question of what counts as a self: what is an autobiographical self? Are we autobiographical selves? Can autobiographies truly reveal something more about who we are?

In my essay, I will focus primarily on the first question, on what, from now on, I will refer to as the “question of classification.” When compared to the other two questions my choice of concentrating on classification might strike some, and especially the trained analytic philosopher, as a bit odd or, at least, as a non-particularly interesting one. After all, Gricean models, which dominate the analytic tradition, are tremendously efficient at drawing boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, thus leaving us with a very limited number of paradoxical cases (if any). And yet, Gricean definitions, or what I will refer to as “strong classificatory” accounts also suffer a dramatic shortcoming: they cannot account for the fluidity and experimental courage that so many works of fiction and nonfiction have shown. We might be able, in other words, to use a Gricean paradigm to establish whether a partially ambiguous work should be classified as fiction or nonfiction (take, for instance, Georges Perec’s [1975] W or Pessoa’s The Book of Disquiet [1984]), but we have no means to explain why a growing number of works is playing “on the edge” of this boundary. Even more specifically, they cannot explain the centrality of this voluntary ambiguity in terms of the structure of these works, their aesthetic features, and, lastly, their reception and appraisal.

A not too masterful investigation into recent publications confirms this intuition. Authors such as Sheila Heti, Maggie Nelson, Ben Lerner, Helen McDonald, and others all seem to have added to their artistic agenda the necessity to critically question the fiction/nonfiction divide in life-writing. This essay stems from an observation of their techniques and aesthetic devices with the scope of showing how their efforts have not only substantially challenged and altered a more traditional conception of memoir, but also highlighted the need of rethinking the classification of memoir or, more modestly, of acknowledging the development of a new subgenre, what I am tentatively calling “critical-autobiography”.

Memoir: classification and clarification

It is not uncommon, when engaging in the study of memoir, to inquire over its epistemic status and over its relation to the notion of truth. Some of the most widely known contributions to the analysis of memoir confirm this hypothesis. Philippe Lejeune, before his most recent turn to the analysis of diaries, had famously, but also, as we shall see, contentiously, argued4 that memoirs require a pacte autobiographique (Lejeune 1989), a contract that the reader establishes with the memoirist. Such a pact allows the reader to identify what, in the text, is associated with the pronoun “I” with the name and last name printed on the cover, while also tacitly conceding that the reader will act as a confidant who, despite the silence to which readers are confined, is nonetheless asked to believe in the events narrated, to identify the portrait conveyed by the memoirist as authentic, and to eventually judge its content. Autobiographies ask their readers to engage in a specific “mode of reading,” one that, to reiterate the points above, combines the reader’s role as a believer with her ability to empathize, sympathize, but also to judge and question the content of an autobiography.

And question we did. While the origin of memoir, at least if we see in Augustine’s work the beginning of this genre, is closely tied to the notion of truth and to the importance of confession, later autobiographical works have amply shown how fragile the idea that memoir, a subjective narrative, could convey objective and verifiable truths actually was. Rousseau’s autobiographies, the Confessions, the Dialogues, and the Reveries are often seen as the first breach into the reliability of memoir. Matching three forms of expression, respectively, narration, dialogue, and meditative sketches, the three works introduce us to the complexity of remembering and of the difficulties inherent to the “act” of autobiography—to its creation. Rousseau’s alternates a linear narrative, a dialectical phase in which he compares and contrasts his own voices,5 and a meditative one where a “finally alone” man is brought back to the idyllic state of nature that characterizes Rousseau’s political philosophy. This terrific rhetorical exercise, however, is hardly for the purpose of objective truth. Rousseau’s frequent alterations of facts and the ways in which he mediates between those facts and his and the reader’s evaluation of them lead to a compulsory narrative that, if not entirely fictional, is most surely not as crystalline as the one composed by Augustine.

Rousseau’s example is indicative of the risk, in autobiographies, of outright inventions, if not lies. Popular
cases such as James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), which became the object of public outrage and televised apologies, are exemplary of how sensitive the issue of reliability is when dealing with autobiography. To lie in an autobiography is to break the autobiographical pact mentioned above; it is to break what it means to write and read an autobiographical work.

Yet, to simply condemn every evasion from an objective rendition of facts as a lie or to go as far as to see them as fictional is not the correct solution. For not only not all alterations and not all distortions qualify as lies, they are often precisely what make autobiography interesting.

It is not my goal here to do justice to this latter claim, but it may suffice to emphasize how despite the possibility of relying on alternative sources, autobiographies are heavily dependent on the autobiographer’s very ability to remember. And yet, remembering, Antonio Damasio (1999), Joseph LeDoux (1996), and many others after them have amply demonstrated, is not a matter of simple recollection. Memories change over time, and memorization is prone to subjective remodeling. At times remodeling can be a form of protection; we tend, for instance, to remove or mitigate painful memories from the past to the point to which we might even deny having lived through them. Other times, the alteration of memories is dictated by the need of “making sense” of what happened; we need, in other words, to connect our memories into a whole, to spell out their connections, whether etiological or of other nature, and to establish a narrative that abets our perception, whether diachronic or episodic, of life.

Memoirists are not only familiar with this aspect of memory; they have embraced it as one of the distinguishing features of what it means to engage in autobiography. A significant example is José Saramago’s childhood memoir, *Small Memories*. In a particularly moving passage, Saramago recalls the death of his younger brother, Francisco. When Francisco died, the author was barely two years old, an age that simply impedes the possibility of clear recollection. And yet, his description of the event is clear, detailed, and beautifully crafted. In a clever stylistic move, Saramago turns here to the reader and communicates is real and therefore qualifies as a fictional activity.

Are Saramago’s memories false? Is Rousseau a liar? And, to return to our initial point, can an autobiography and the confession it entails be comparable, in virtue of these ambiguities, to a work of fiction? Has our autobiographical pact been shattered and replaced with the make-believe activity associated with fictional works?

All these questions are related to what in my introduction I referred to as the “question of classification,” namely the question of whether a specific genre, and, in our case, memoir, can be classified as a work of fiction or as a work of nonfiction.

In the analytic tradition, accounts dealing with the fiction/nonfiction distinction typically stem from a rejection of the postmodern collapse of fiction and nonfiction defended by Roland Barthes (1977), Hayden White (1970, 1980, 1981), and others. To such accounts, scholars such as Gregory Currie (1985), Kendall Walton (1990), and Noël Carroll (2003, 193–224) have responded by focusing on the nature of illocutionary acts in everyday language—which they frame in Gricean terms—and on the adjustments necessary in order to apply such a model to the case of fictional and nonfictional works. It is not my goal to provide a fine-grained review of all these accounts; suffice it to say, that they typically rely on both authorial intention and on the ability of readers (or audiences in general) to receive, understand, and respond to such intentions. Gregory Currie’s account, for example, frames the author of fiction as expressing the intention that the audiences will make-believe the text, while understands nonfictional works as mandating us to believe that what is communicated is real and therefore qualifies as a “true” belief—or at least as a belief that is truly held by the author.

Interestingly for our purposes, Currie also digresses on the advantages of his position in presumably difficult cases such invented, and yet, highly realistic or verisimilar autobiographies.

Martin Amis’ *The House of Meetings* (2007), Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight Children* (1981), and Ohran Pamul’s *My Name is Red* (2001), to only mention a few, are all examples of highly realistic autobiographical stories that might strike the uninformed reader as works of nonfiction: after all, there are no structural differences that we can eyeball and the content is as realistic as any nonfictional work. But classificatory accounts can be of help. For the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not taken to depend on the relative reliability of content;
it is instead ascribed to the relational properties that connect the content to the way it is received. The distinction between a fictional memoir and an actual memoir is then that in the former there is no intention of preserving what Currie calls an “information preserving chain,” i.e. there is no desire to relate the events back to what truly happened and is known about the real world. A realistic memoir, deprived of the intention of portraying something true about the author is therefore comparable to a work of fiction, no matter how plausible the narrative may sound. By the same token, a memoir that includes unlikely events—such as the example I took from Saramago’s childhood memoir—remains a memoir in virtue of its intention to authentically characterize the author.

Is this solution acceptable and exhaustive? And, more importantly for our purposes, is it enough to classify the “new wave” of autobiographies that I have introduced at the end of my introduction as distinctively nonfictional, or fictional, works?

There are, broadly, two ways of responding to “intentionalist” strategies such as the one outlined by Currie. The first, which, however, I will only briefly mention here, is to contest the importance and value given to the role of intention in matters of classification, but also, as Berys Gaut has shown, in matters of interpretation (Gaut 1993, 597–609). A second strategy, on which I will focus more closely, is to question whether classificatory accounts can truly exhaust the discussion ensuing from the debate on the fiction/nonfiction divide, and this largely regardless of our willingness to accept their tenets. Specifically, proponents of this latter strategy, point at the inability of classificatory accounts to explain how a given classification can affect the reader’s understanding and evaluation of a work. I will refer to this latter approach as a “clarificationist” rather than as a “classificatory” one in virtue of its ability to clarify the status of fictional and nonfictional works when dealing with matters of interpretation and assessment.

Clarificationist strategies can, I believe, help us better understand the impact of the new wave of autobiographies that I have introduced earlier, and this because, despite their differences, all these works consciously avoid being segregated into a tight classification. Sheila Heti’s How Should a Person Be? (2012) for instance, declares itself to be a novel, but one that adheres perfectly to the author’s life, from the inclusion of her actual circle of friends, to personal emails, etc. Other examples are just as significant. Reviewing Helen McDonald’s H is for Hawk (2014) for The New Yorker, Kathryn Schulz praises the book:

Had there be an award for the best new book that defies every genre, I imagine it would have won that, too. [...] H is for Hawk is an improbable and hybrid creature. It is one part grief memoir, one part guide to raptors, and one part biography of T.H. White [...]. (Schulz 2015)

Ben Lerner, interviewed by The Believer on his book Leaving the Atocha Station (2011) (and, as those who read the book would likely agree, the same applies to his most recent book 10:04 [Lerner 2014]) seems to further acknowledge such complexity when discussing the relation between fact and fiction in his work:

Part of what impoverishes discussions about fact and fiction is that they tend to forget the degree to which what doesn’t [emphasis in the text] happen is also caught up in our experience. I think you can write autobiographically from experiences you didn’t have, because the experiences you don’t have are experienced negatively in the experiences you do. (Lin 2016)

Other examples, such as the work of Miranda July, Teju Cole, and, Maggie Nelson’s autobiographies could easily be added to the list. These works share a nuanced and critical relation with memoir and with the tension between the nonfictional writing commanded by autobiography and the fictional universe—whether in poetic or prosaic form. More formally, as we will see in the next section, they are characterized by a number of “contra-standard” features, namely features that run against a more traditional conception of what a genre, and in this case memoir, is taken to be. Such features, which stem from a reflection on the fiction/nonfiction divide, but also, and importantly, on other aspects of autobiography (such as its structural narrative conditions and its relation to the portrayal of identity) have the ability, which distinguishes contra-features, to alter the conditions of a genre and to inspire, as I believe to be the case of the examples listed, the creation of a new literary subgenre. To clarify and further explain the presence and significance of contra-standard features in the works considered, I will introduce, at the beginning of the next section, a different approach to the debate on the nature of fiction and nonfiction, namely, genre theory. It is within this framework that I will then develop my analysis of the last, or more recent, movement in the history of memoir.

**Genre theory**

In this section, I will concentrate on genre theory as presented by Stacie Friend (2012, 179–209) and on the concept, within her theory, of contra-standard features.

Developed largely in opposition to the classificatory accounts mentioned in the previous section, Friend’s theory aims at providing a response not only to the criteria determining membership in either fiction or nonfiction, but also at exploring the effects that such a classification has on the readers, and, more broadly, on the complex web of publishing
houses, literary criticism, scholarly articles, etc. that surrounds each work.

To accomplish her task, Friend’s account dispenses of the rigid conditions that Gricean and, generally, intentionalist accounts endorse and rephrases the question of fiction and nonfiction in light of the more fluid distinctions that characterize different genres. In this sense, fiction and nonfiction are seen as broader categories within which we can identify and observe the multiple ramifications that follow when considering the number, and variety, of literary genres.

It is hard not to see the advantages of this approach. The way genres change overtime, morphing and evolving in their form, structure, and style, but also the shifts in the way in which audiences understand and enjoy each genre are both good reasons to choose genre theory over classificatory strategies. For genre theory, unlike its opponent, relies on a broader and more malleable contextualist view where features such as writing style, the social and historical milieu of a work, its publishing history, what kind of readers it targeted, etc. are all taken into consideration when examining both a work’s belonging to a given genre and its appreciation and appraisal. Additionally, such features are not to be taken as essential or necessary conditions: the presence, or absence, of one of more features is not likely to strongly affect the inclusion of a given work into a genre, thus providing even more flexibility of classification.

Now if we briefly recall what said, at the beginning of this essay, about the prismatic history of memoir, genre theory, so construed, strikes as a more than reasonable approach.

First of all, to frame the discussion within genre theory allows us to expand the boundaries of our analysis to a wider range of theories—philosophical and literary—on the nature of autobiographical writing. For it is undeniable that autobiography, despite its most immediate belonging to the “super-genre” of nonfiction, has long been flirting with fictional narratives, a fact that has captured the interest of writers and scholars, from Serge Doubrovsky’s introduction of the notion of autofiction—which sees autobiography and fiction as intertwined and contributing to each other—to Paul de Man’s altogether independent conclusions in his pivotal essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” (de Man 1979).

The richly woven texture of works and scholarly contributions is also crucial in the identification and establishment, supported by advocates of genre theory, of memoir’s standard, contra-standard, and variable features. Such distinctions, originally outlined by Kendall Walton (1970), have been further developed by Friend:

…”standard if the possession of that feature places or tends to place the work in a particular category: flatness is standard for painting; an obvious-but-innocent suspect is standard for whodunits. A feature is contra-standard if possession of that feature excludes or tends to exclude the work from a category. Heavy drumbeats are contra-standard for minuets; stream of consciousness narration is contra-standard for science textbooks. Variable features are those that can differ between works in a category without bearing on classification. Color and composition are variable for painting; the degree of detail in describing characters is variable for the novel. (Friend 2012)

While standard features are what we normally expect from a genre, contra-standard features are both unusual and challenging. And yet, contra-standard features are also the propelling force leading to what may become permanent changes within a genre. Contra-standard features, can act, to muse, as the avant-garde: their initial impact is perceived as different, even odd, but they may, with time, be absorbed into a genre, thus altering what were previously taken to be the standard features of a genre. This is not, one must add, the only way in which the standard features of a genre can change, but it is nonetheless a plausible hypothesis and one that, I believe, is largely confirmed by recent movements and shifts in memoir.

Considerations on genre theory’s potential in monitoring changes within a genre and what said with respect to contra-standard features offer us a promising strategy for the analysis of recent movements in memoir. For such movements—and changes—are likely to result from the emergence of contra-standard features and from their resulting incorporation into a genre. Memoir is changing, to put it differently, because some of its standard features are being questioned. But what are the standard features that are undergoing such a transformation?

This is not, alas, an easy question to answer, and yet, the history of memoir does point us to a number of features that, albeit speculatively, do seem to characterize this genre—features that may not count as necessary conditions for the inclusion into a genre, but that are nonetheless typically invoked when discussing memoir by critics and writers alike.

It is helpful, to then respond to the question above, to look back at what discussed in relation to Augustine and to reflect on memoir’s origin. What characterizes the origin of memoir, what urged its emergence, is the desire to confess, to present a truthful picture of the memoirist. More than the simple recounting of the events of a life, the beginning of memoir coincides with the idea that we can communicate something more: our inner consciousness. Confession, for Augustine, was seen as way to disclose identity, a feature that Georg Misch (1951), in what is still one of the fundamental sources in autobiographical studies, made central to his analysis. Linking memoir to Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophical account on the nature of history, Misch endorses the claim according to which in autobiography “the subject inquiring is also the object inquired into” (8),
thus framing memoir as the combination of life experiences and self-revelation.

But if confession and the idea of portraying who we really are is central to autobiography, so is the fact that such a confession must have a receiver. As I have briefly mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, autobiographies are based on a pact that establishes a tightly knit I/You relation between the author and the audience. This relation has enormous influence on how autobiographies are written and perceived and it is at the basis of memoir’s undeniable power to draw emotions and entice both empathic and sympathetic responses. For memoir, as its commercial success also suggests, is a highly “democratic” genre. The stories told in memoirs are not only—at least we assume—real; they are, for the most part, relatable. In fact, not only are they relatable, they are often our stories, accounts of experiences we may have had. But what we might also arguably share with the memoirist is the idea that a successful grasp and assessment of life may depend on our ability to weave its most relevant moments together in a narrative form. And this is, in fact, one of the distinguishing traits of this genre, or, at least, one that is commonly defended. The idea, in a nutshell, is that memoirs qualify as narratives and that it is the very ability to structure life according to meaningful narrative connections—as opposed to a haphazard juxtaposition of events—that encourages the belief that we may be, cognitively, narrative beings or, as it is often argued, “narrative selves.” We have, it follows, two separate, and yet intertwined concepts. The first is the notion of narrative and of what constitutes an autobiographical narrative. The second is the notion of the “narrative self.” It is not my goal to fully do justice to both notions, but a few considerations—and clarifications—can nonetheless be made.

In reference to narrative it will suffice to see memoirs as adhering, broadly, to the structural analysis of narrative presented by Noël Carroll (2007), a structure based on the importance of causal connections and on the achievement of closure, or of a “sense of an ending.” The memoirist wishes, if we follow this intuition, to find coherent and cohesive connections linking the events of a life, connections that could further deliver the idea that something has been learned, that a portion of life has reached its conclusion, and it is, in this sense, significant in its own.

The presence of a narrative structure—even one as skeletal as the one presented above—is also a required component for the notion of narrative self. Broadly, the idea behind the notion of a narrative self is that the delineation of identity depends upon our ability to see our lives as unfolding stories. Support to this view has come, to different degrees, from both scientists and philosophers among which, prominently, is Marya Schechtman’s “narrative self-constitution view” where the construction of a diachronic narrative is at the basis of our ability to self-evaluate ourselves according to what she summarizes as being the “four features” of identity, namely, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, compensation, and survival.

It is precisely the emphasis given to self-evaluation and moral evaluation that links the narrativist view with memoir. For memoirs, as seen, are confessions and confessions can hardly avoid being connected to moral features. Memoirs that deal with moral development and moral assessment are some of the most popular—battling drug or alcohol abuse, sentimental and family relationships, mourning, etc. are among the most common themes explored by memoirists—indipendently of their literary caliber. Finding the narrative that underlines our lives is then equivalent, in these memoirs, to finding moral closure; it is what we need to ascertain who we have become and to further assess—and often accept—each step, each chapter of life.

I have thus isolated three, largely intertwined, standard features of memoir. The first is that memoirs are related to the notion of confession, that such a confession is supposed to be authentic, and that, most importantly, it is delivered under a “pact”: a tacit agreement which connects the author and the reader more deeply than in other genres. This connection is also behind memoir’s unique ability to trigger empathic and sympathetic responses: we feel for the memoirist, but we also, in virtue of the simple fact of “sharing” a life, feel with and as the memoirist.

The second and third features described above further qualify the confessional nature of memoir by suggesting that the events of life should be weaved together in a narrative structure involving relevant causal connections and a sense of closure that is often coupled with a feeling of emotional resolution. Additionally, it is held that it is specifically the ability to narrate a life according to such a structure that allows for a better disclosure of identity, one leading to a deeper understanding of who we are and of our status as moral agents. Memoirs, in other words, stem from and depend on, cognitively, the fact that we are, by nature, “narrative selves.” But is this the whole story?

Contra-standard features: tracing the emergence of the critical autobiography

In the first section of this essay, I introduced some of the questions stemming from the discussion on the boundary between fiction and nonfiction in memoir. I considered, in this respect, both classificatory and clarificationist solutions and argued that, as much as classificatory solutions can be helpful in securing the nonfictional status of memoir, they nonetheless tend to overlook the importance of more nuanced features such as stylistic choices, intentional ambiguities, and the numerous strategies adopted by writers to reflect
and challenge the tradition, features to which genre theory gives instead more ample attention. It is in light of this latter approach that, in the previous section, I tentatively outlined what may be taken as some of the leading standard features of memoir, features that qualify the structure of this genre, the intentions and motivations behind its creation and reception.

In this last section, I will contend that, however solid, the standard features of memoir described above might be undergoing a certain shift, a shift that is observable in a consistent number of recent autobiographical works which I have been referring to as the “last wave” of memoir.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of these works, as seen earlier, is their ability to flirt with the boundary between fiction and nonfiction and to purposely make us reflect on its relevance; we have, in this respect, an array of solutions, from works that by downplaying nonfiction in favor of a more distinctively fictional vibe, such as Ben Lerner’s novels, to works that combine a more strict sense of nonfictionality with intricate and eclectic stylistic construal, such as Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (2015), to, of course, works that are happy to acknowledge and deflect compartmentalization, as Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?*

And yet, I maintain, our relative decisiveness in confining these works to fiction or to nonfiction is less urgent than an analysis of the extent to which these works may be contributing to the shaping of what memoir is and will become—they may be alerting us that memoir is, in fact, ready for an update.

It is important, in this respect, to point to an important difference between the kind of criticism and analysis presented in this essay and the numerous other attempts at questioning, and even challenging, what I have, in the previous section, defined as the standard features of autobiography. The desire to re-discuss the boundaries of autobiographies (and, more broadly, of fiction and nonfiction) is not new and it is a central feature of postmodern criticism. Hayden White’s claim according to which all histories are fictions, Christian Metz’s work on the nature of documentaries, and Paul de Man’s critical assessment of the autobiographical pact all share a certain skepticism toward the establishment of a drastic boundary between fiction and nonfiction while exploring the complexity—psychological and phenomenological—that their connection implies.

Yet, as mentioned, the angle of my analysis is somewhat different. For while the emphasis in accounts defending autofiction—despite being quite varied—tend to focus on the reasons why fiction and nonfiction cannot be separated, mine is less concerned with the need of combining the two than with a reflection on the implications of such a need. My focus is not, in other words, or definitely not only, on the extent to which a life story can (or should) be fictionalized; it is, instead, on the ability of critical autobiographies to structurally and evaluatively assess stylistic and conceptual changes in the history and development of autobiography. The intention, in other words, is not simply to investigate whether autobiographies utilize fiction or adhere exclusively to nonfiction. It is to identify, within literature, a philosophical and literary debate on what autobiography is today and on its ability to reflect on its past: from the importance given to the reliability of the autobiographical pact that characterizes its origin, to the postmodern blurring of fiction and nonfiction and the ensuing criticism of autobiography that we find in critics such as de Man.

The discussion launched by “critical autobiographies” is inspired by the complex history—literary and well as critical—of the autobiography. Not every work, needless to say, will focus on the same issues, nor do all critical autobiographies express a similar disillusionment toward the possibility of the autobiographical pact; what they do share, however, is a strong critical awareness of what the past of autobiography is and an interest in the novel directions that this genre can take.

Specifically, as I suggested earlier, it is possible to provide an overview of the positions and issues introduced by critical autobiographies by looking at the ways in which they are jeopardizing the standard features listed in the previous section: critical autobiographies are challenging the confessional nature of autobiographies, they are questioning the need for a causal narrative structure that is capable of achieving emotional closure, and, lastly, they are rethinking the analogy between the memoirist and the narrative self, introducing alternative ways of conceiving the bond between identity and life writing.

Confession, and with it the importance, in autobiography, of delivering an authentic portrayal of the autobiographer, is the first narrative mechanism to have lost its allure.¹⁰ Historically, the confessional need and the consequent confessional bond, or pact, that is so central to standard autobiographies was first questioned by Paul de Man through his idea of “autobiography as de-facement,” where de Man used Wordsworth’s *Prelude* to show both how autobiography escapes rigid definitions and how it is unable to achieve closure. As he claims:

> The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions. (de Man 1979)

The idea that autobiography “deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores” (de Man 1979, 930), certainly affected future generations of autobiographers.
(leading, perhaps, to an increased interest in autofiction) and it would not be mistaken to continue to trace its influence to the new wave of autobiographies that I am considering here. And yet, there are a few important specifications to be added. The first is that, while de Man’s account had a strong influence on European literature and on authors abiding to a postmodern stylistic canon, it barely touched the growing number of autobiographies, commercial and not, that dominate today’s publishing industry. In fact, one may speculate that autobiography has seen a resurgence, especially in the USA, precisely because it promises authenticity (whether it ultimately delivers it or not). Writing an autobiography has become a testament of integrity, the willing disclosure of the autobiographer’s intimate identity. Best-selling autobiographies remain, in this sense, quite attached to the idea of an autobiographical pact, a pact that is taken seriously by both autobiographers and readers and that is crucial to how they are received and assessed.

But even when we look at the recent movement within autobiography I am describing in this essay—which calls, almost inevitably, for a more sophisticated reader—the impact of ideas such as the impossibility of closure is different from what it had been when first expressed by de Man. The idea, to put it quite simply, has aged. Skilled writers such as Heti, Nelson, and Lerner are well aware of the rhetorical power of postmodern literature and criticism, and yet, they have absorbed and tempered its conclusions. Heti’s How Should a Person Be? A Novel from Life is, in a way, an illustration and a parody of this attitude. In How Should a Person Be? the fact that autobiography “deprives and disfigures to the extent that it restores” is made into a dull fact of life. Heti indulges in factual, detailed, but most often terribly mundane accounts of her personal life while invoking the status of a novel. The lack of an actual direction or engaging dian effortless tone that more traditional memoirists cooperate, they have also begun to question narrative conventions.

And, I must add, they complicate beautifully. For the voice and prose chosen by these new authors is a refreshing mix of genres kept together by an impressive while inventive control of form. In this respect too, new autobiographies have been groundbreaking. For not only, as seen, they more liberally traffic in the grey area where fiction and nonfiction tentatively cooperate, they have also begun to question narrative conventions.

As much as narrative has not been completely abolished, it is most definitely looser, often refraining from explicit causal connections and from the need to find emotional and moral closure. Maggie Nelson’s The Argonauts which chronicles her relationship with the artist Harry Dodge, is a stellar example of memoir’s departure from standard narrative conventions.

Nelson’s memoir breaks the page in detached paragraphs which alternate rather brilliant literary and philosophical criticism with tassels of poetry; her life does not come in a story, it comes in flashes of brilliance, with a style and pulse that has nothing of the more relatable, intimate, and (polished) quotidian effortless tone that more traditional memoirists often adopt. It is interesting, in this respect, to see what Nelson herself has to say about autobiography:

I haven’t really thought this through (in homage to Wang?), but when I think about my more “personal” writing, I keep seeing that old Atari game, Breakout. I see the game’s plain, flat cursor sliding around on the bottom of the screen, popping the little black dot back onto the thick bank of rainbow above. Each time the dot hits the bank, it eats away a chunk of color, until eventually it has eaten away enough of the bank to “break out.” The breakout is a thrill because of all the triangulation, all the monotony, all the effort, all the obstacle, all the shapes and
sounds that were its predecessor. I need those colored bricks to chip away at, because the eating into them makes form. And then I need the occasional jailbreak, *my hypomanic dot riding the sky* [my emphasis]. (Nelson 2015, 61)

Nelson compares life writing to a game, an old one; one that is repetitive, but nonetheless quite absorbing. Also, a game you play alone. But she is not satisfied with the comparison: while creating a life narrative is a way of “chipping at” colored bricks, it is also the place where she can let her “hypomanic dot” surge. It is here that Nelson, the poet, walks in, here that her acute criticism blends with life, and there, arguably, that her variation on narrative is formed.

In MacDonald’s *H is for Hawk*, the idea of life as a single story that unfolds is instead broken into three alternating sections—thus multiplying narrative possibilities. We have a section dedicated to her own life: her coping with the death of her father while training her hawk, Mabel, a section dedicated to a partial, and deeply felt, biography of T.H. White, who, in addition to the Arthurian novels also wrote about training a hawk, and, lastly, passages on the very art of hawking that somehow manage to mesmerize birders and non-birders alike. While this work remains closer to traditional autobiographies, it still seems to deny the idea according to which one, and only one narrative, can be chosen over the others. None of three portions seems to take precedence: they are episodes of equal importance, they all retain their energy and pathos. Reading the book everything feels tremendously connected, crafted with precisions, but there is no explicit causal chain. Or, better, there is no mandated causal chain. If present, connections are for the reader to be found at the intersection of each strand; they need to be searched for patiently, and they need, quite directly, to be recognized as tentative.

But not only are causal connections to be questioned; equally debatable is the appropriateness of a given style or genre, a point that, we have seen, is observable in both Nelson and MacDonald’s works. For perhaps, one is brought to conclude, there is no true form to tell a life: there is no available narrative.

This last assertion, the idea that there might not be, after all, a narrative underlying our life and our conception of identity runs counter to the notion of the “narrative self” I have briefly described in the previous section. But in what sense is this notion being questioned?

It is helpful, in this regard to acknowledge that the notion of the narrative self is not, and I believe, correctly, universally accepted. It is worth mentioning, for example, Peter Lamarque’s (2007) argument against the plausibility of treating our lives as stories akin to the ones of fictional characters, or more accommodating positions such as the one held by Peter Goldie (2003, 301–319; 2012) who argues that a narrative attitude toward the events of our lives, despite helpful, need not correspond to the notion of a narrative self. Yet, the most direct attack against the notion of the narrative self, and the one I am mainly interested in here, has been launched by Galen Strawson (2005).

Strawson defends the idea of what, in a recent article, he named the “unstoried” life (Strawson 2015). Not only does he believe that narratives are not necessary for identity, he also contends that they are unrelated to our ability to hold and express moral values, and, lastly, that the tendency to see our lives as narratives is not, as the “narrativists” argue, a widespread cognitive mechanism. His suggestion is to see us as episodic selves or SESMENTS (Strawson 1999, 99–135) (subject of experience that is a single mental thing), namely as subjects that gain, as he claims, “self knowledge in bits and pieces” (Strawson 2015).

I think there is some plausibility to Strawson’s hypothesis and the works I have been analyzing seem to confirm his intuition. The protagonists of the works mentioned hardly depend, for their moral make up on a diachronic, tightly knit, and tidily organized series of events. Events instead count as episodes, significant, at least frequently, on their own. The new memoirists are, I believe, critically looking at a tradition that wanted memoir to become the vehicle of identity, the locus on intimacy, but that has also begun to acknowledge a sense of disillusionment, a certain lack of faith in the promises given by life-writing. They are also direct witnesses to the boom that memoir has experienced in the past two decades and that has put this genre under the spotlight, transforming it into a literary, but also social aggregator seducing more readers than any other form of nonfiction.

We are in front of memoirists who are not only among the most interesting rising voices in contemporary literature, they are also exceptional media and social analysts: there is much more to their works than the intention of putting autobiographical memories and experiences at the forefront of their literary ambitions. Their “confessions” (together with their tacit acknowledgment that confession may not be possible) are not shocking for what they reveal—or at least not only—they are shocking because they have created, through their re-elaboration of topoi within the tradition, both literary and critical, of autobiography, a new literary playground of new styles and trends.

What they had to do, and what they did and are doing, is to rethink what memoir had to offer and specifically, I believe, the three “standard features” I have isolated: the idea of an authentic confession, weaved in a coherent narrative that while purging the author of her at times unspeakable secrets was also delivering an almost perfect picture of her
identity. It is because of this critical stance developed through the introduction of contra features that we can see in this new wave a new subgenre, what I would like to call “Critical Autobiography.”

An objection and a specification

In this concluding section, I will consider two objections against my argument for the development, in the past decade or so, of the “Critical Autobiography” and further clarify its status as a new subgenre by adding a few brief considerations on its reception and appraisal.

The first objection, quite simply, is that works akin to the ones described can be found in the history of autobiography. The presence of such works would then invalidate the claim according to which the critical autobiography would represent a new subgenre.

That works exhibiting contra-standard features, and in particular the ones outlined in the previous section, have already emerged in the past is absolutely true. Paul Auster, for example, is famous for often shaping the contours of his novels around his personal life. Yet, this is not a problem if seen within the theoretical boundaries I have chosen, namely, genre theory. For, on the one hand, as seen, features are not to be taken as necessary conditions: the presence or absence of one does not automatically determine whether a work belongs to a genre or another. On the other hand, isolated examples do not qualify as genres. In order for a genre (or subgenre) to be regarded as such we need to be able to identify several works exhibiting the same features, or, to use the expression adopted in this essay, a wave. Furthermore, not only do we need a relevant number of works sharing similar features, we also need a certain milieu. The recent revamped attention toward autobiography is largely unprecedented, and so is the interest in the relation between autobiography and other genres. It follows that despite the presence, in the history of autobiography, of works with similar contra-standard features, they are both not enough to qualify as a separate genre and, additionally, they were not—at the time of their publication—surrounded by the same critical and creative environment that distinguishes memoir today.

A second objection may however, more radically, question the fact that the works mentioned in this essay, despite being innovative, may be representative of a change in literary fictions and not, strictly, in autobiography.

This is an important objection, and one that should be taken seriously. What gives support to this objection is that some of the works mentioned in this essay, such as Lerner’s work, as ultimately fictional, thus not sharing the nonfictional intent that characterizes autobiographies.

To respond to this objection, it is important to recall what was emphasized earlier in this article, namely that the actual “percentage” of fictional or nonfictional element is far less important than their critical stance toward recurring themes in the autobiographical tradition. Specifically, the works mentioned, share a preoccupation with how contemporary identities may get to express themselves, a preoccupation that is literary and stylistic—as shown in my discussion of narrative and narrative techniques—as well as it is sociological and psychological. The authors mentioned are divided between the tradition of confession and the postmodern dismantling of authenticity that followed, but they are also embedded in a world that sacrifices coherent narrative arcs for the more careless, however addictive, fractionation of language into chats, text messages, and emails.

It may seem, to this extent, that critical autobiographies may share a boundary with autofictions, and yet, there are important differences. To begin with, some of the works mentioned, such as Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, are decidedly nonfictional, thus consciously—even somewhat polemically—distancing themselves from fictionalization attempts. But even when fictionalization is indeed present, as in the case of Lerner’s work, the definition of autofiction is not perfectly fitting. For autofictions, as Serge Doubrovsky’s had originally remarked, are not only based on strictly real events, they have the intention of communicating a certain truth about the emotional and personal identity of the subject described.

There is, in other words, a stronger adherence what is to be taken as the inner nature, psychological and ontological, of the author. Now, as much as this can be disputed, I do not take Lerner’s work to be attempts at a deeper discovery of Lerner’s identity; in fact, I believe that would be an overstatement.

For one of the features of these works is that their characters (and authors and protagonists) question the possibility of such an intimate emotional scrutiny.

So while autofiction most definitely counts as a challenge to autobiographical practices, it is not identical to what I have been describing in this essay. While critical autobiographers are definitely aware of it, they are also departing from it, thus introducing new strands to the discussion on autobiography.

It is worth, to conclude, to mention one last point, a point related to appraisal and assessment of these works.

More traditional examples of memoir strongly engage their readers by eliciting both sympathetic and empathic responses; they fulfill the promise—implied by the autobiographical pact—of an intimate connection between the memoirist and the reader. But what about “critical autobiographies”? What kind of connection are we to establish with the author? Do we feel for them at all? And if we do not, what is their power?
My response to these questions is simply to admit that, unlike most works in the autobiographical tradition, critical autobiographies are not, for the most part, designed for triggering strong sympathetic or empathic responses. In fact, it is not uncommon to find some of the protagonists somewhat unnerving; their lives, albeit involving mundane routines we may easily share, do not unweave according to the emotional patterns that characterize standard autobiographies. Their episodic nature and the lack of strong causal connections make it hard for the reader to truly develop a curiosity for their lives and we are hardly motivated to feel for them or with them. And yet, we remain curious. For engagement, in these works, is based less on emotional identification (broadly construed) than it is on a cognitive understanding of the difficulties that can emerge when stretching the boundaries of a genre: when life-writing is scrutinized not for its power to reveal, but for its ambiguity, for its lack of clear coordinates to follow.

Critical autobiographies are, allow me to say, somewhat brainy; they assert a life while analyzing it according to a multiplicity of standards, one of them being an actual reflection on the literary effectiveness of memoirs. But readers, at least those who seek this kind of works, are ready to accept the challenge. After all, the works mentioned in this article have been honored with tremendous critical and public acclaim, a success that, arguably, is due to both their mastery and to their ability to capture the readers’ needs and imagination, to captivate their attention despite the overwhelming number of autobiographies that are published each year.

I have often, in this article, referred to the figure of the memoirist and to the problematic nature of the pact that readers are “signing” with her. In light of what discussed, we can now also suggest, that, in addition to the innovations brought by memoirists, we may also be observing a change in the mode in which readers are approaching autobiographies. Genres are determined by a number of contextual features, one of them being the way a work is received and appraised: could this lead to a new autobiographical pact?

Notes

1. The two terms, “autobiography” and “memoir” will be used interchangeably.
2. I am here relying on James Olney’s analysis of the three main historical phases of memoir.
3. See, for instance, the work of Laura Marcus (2014). For a literary take on the topic see Hustvedt (2009). T.
4. I will return, in the section dedicated to genre theory, as well as in my description of the contra-standard features of critical autobiographies, to the dense debate that followed Lejeune’s theory.
5. Rousseau adopts different appellatives to refer to himself such as “J.J,” “The Frenchman,” “Rousseau,” and “The Judge.”
6. There is an ongoing debate on whether we perceive ourselves as diachronic or episodic beings. I will return on it in the concluding section of this article.
7. “Authentic” unlike “true” is not easily confused with an epistemic notion of true where a true assertion is seen as stemming from a true and justified beliefs. An authentic statement might not be objectively true, but it can, as in the case of Saramago’s memoir, be subjectively true and significant.
8. Truman Capote’s invention of the “nonfiction novel” is a frequently used example of how contra-standard features can change a genre and even lead to the emergence of a new genre. A more recent example could be the use, championed by David Foster Wallace, of copious footnotes in fictional essays and novels.
9. For instance, the ability to weave life narratives has been seen as an evolutionary advantageous tool by psychologists such as Dan Hutto who has further shown how such a skill can foster the development of reason and social skills.
10. It is important to specify that an agreement, or a pact, can also be associated with a work of autofiction; as Lily Tuck, the author of The Double Life of Liliane, an autofiction, has noticed: “…the author of autofiction tends to be both the narrator and the central character in his or her story, uses his or her real name, describes daily life often inventing or modifying certain facts, and does so in search not only for truth and justice but for the self” Tuck (2015).
11. It may be possible to regard Lerner’s novels as autofictions. However, to my knowledge, despite being well versed in literary criticism, Lerner has never referred to his work as autofictions.
12. An interesting discussion on the emotional nature of autofictions and on their adherence to the real life of an autobiographer can be found in Catherine Cusset’s “The Limits of Autofiction” (2012).

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