

## THE LIMITS OF AUTOFICTION

(2012)

*"I don't want you to write about us."*

In July 2009 I went to a conference on *autofiction* at Cerizy and I was surprised to find out that the word "autofiction" could have contradictory meanings whether the focus was on the prefix "auto" or on the radical "fiction." One of the participants suggested that any first-person narrative in which an author used his/her own name as the narrator's name was an autofiction: it was the starting point for a narrative form producing a complete confusion between fiction and reality. This allowed me to understand why a writer like Annie Ernaux always refused that the label of "autofiction" be applied to her work, precisely because of the word "fiction" in it, as she claims that there is no fiction in her work. In my view, however, Annie Ernaux is a writer of autofiction, just like Serge Doubrovsky or Camille Laurens. Autofiction became such a loosely and lavishly used concept that I will need to discuss it and explain what kind of autofiction I write before I can tackle my subject, the limits of autofiction.

An orthodox writer of autofiction, I follow the definition first given by Serge Doubrovsky in his novel "Fils" in 1977: "Fiction of strictly real events or facts, if we want, autofiction, of having entrusted the adventure of language with the language of an adventure, outside the wisdom of the traditional or new novel." Which means: the only fiction in autofiction is the work on language. The facts are real, and the project is to reach a certain truth.

As Philippe Forest writes in his introduction to *Je et Moi*, (NRF, Fall 2011) "there exists for everyone, author or reader, a demand for truth that nobody can escape without accepting at once the most perfect and definitive insignificance." Truth, or the Rousseauian

project of “showing a man in the truth of nature,” is at the heart of the autofictional enterprise. As Camille Laurens writes in “Dialogue entre nous”, (NRF, Fall 2011), “What I respect is an intimate truth, a mental landscape, what got engraved in my memory--what left an imprint on me, as Proust says--and not the factual or referential accuracy.” Autofiction is not about factual accuracy, because writing sometimes requires a concentration of facts not to be repetitive and also because memory is not accurate. But the writer of autofiction has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible, and to go as far as possible in his/her quest for truth.

Dobrovsky again, in *Le livre brisé*: “It has to be true, total, or don’t write it, if you recount your life, no hide and seek, no fig leaf, expose yourself, heart and body laid bare, or just shut up...”

What is “truth”? In the context of autofiction, I would call “truth” the capacity to go back inside an emotion, to erase anything anecdotic that wouldn’t be part of that emotion and would water it down, in order to offer it to the reader in a bare form, devoid of anything too idiosyncratic, so that he can claim it as his own. When the writer reaches a deep enough level of emotion, it becomes anybody’s emotion: something universal. Paradoxically, the “I” of the autofiction writer is anything but egocentric. It is not centered on the self, but erasing the self so as to make the truth of past emotion emerge. As Camille Laurens writes, “I, it’s not me, it’s each of us.”

I am taking the word “emotion” not so much in its common acception of spontaneous feeling as in its etymological meaning--from the Latin *e-movere* which means to put into movement. Emotion is movement: what moves us, and moves on its own. In that sense, it is what is alive, “le vivant.” Because emotion is the organizing force of autofiction, this genre of writing doesn’t need a plot, like the novel, or a chronological timeline, like an autobiography. Autofiction is like a spiraling movement towards the resurrection of a

buried fragment of memory. Or, as Camille Laurens writes, “a crossing towards oneself on the ocean of language, with its tides, its waves, its uncertainties.” (p.141)

There is nothing more difficult than going back inside an emotion, because it doesn't let itself be easily caught by words. The process implies a distance which is the exact opposite of the thing being described. The autofiction writer faces Diderot's paradox of the comedian. Emotional words, exclamation marks, the naming of feelings, do not bring an emotion back to life--quite the contrary. Literature in its making can even be the very opposite of emotion in its common sense, as Doubrovsky writes in *Le Livre brisé*: “How do you want to make, of your wife's death, literature. A death that just took place, that is still raw. A month later, to the day. Choosing words, balancing sentences, distributing paragraphs, where there is only formless horror.” (459) How does autofiction give form to “formless horror”, or simply formless sensations? The notion of “emotion” I emphasize here is close to what Nathalie Sarraute called “tropismes”: natural and spontaneous movements that are at the limit of consciousness and pass so quickly through our consciousness that it is almost impossible to seize them in the language. For Nathalie Sarraute, the purpose of writing is not to analyze these movements--which is, she says, Proust's enterprise--but to give an account of them through the rhythm of style and to have them accomplished by the reader himself. From that point of view, Nathalie Sarraute's work, which is said to belong to the literary movement called “Le nouveau roman”, also represents a major step on the way to autofiction, because her ambition was to find new ways to grasp life in words.

In the States there is a distinction between fiction and memoir that doesn't exist in France. Autofiction, however, is not an equivalent of “memoirs.” A memoir tells the reader what happened. The writing is usually clear, simple, factual, descriptive. An autofiction brings the reader *inside* what happened. The writer does it through the rhythm of the writing. It's a different address. A different movement. The author of *autofiction* actually doesn't

address the readers, but seduces them by ignoring them. The distinction between performative and constative introduced by the linguist John Austin would be useful here: whereas the memoir writing is mainly constative, the writing of *autofiction* is performative. *Autofiction* doesn't just tell, it acts at the same time. Christine Angot's most recent book, *Une semaine de vacances* (Flammarion, 2012), probably her best to date, is a pure example of what I call autofiction. She doesn't even use the "I" anymore, because the neutral third person--also chosen by Camille Laurens in *Dans ces bras-là*, proving that the first person is not a condition of autofiction--allows her better to erase the "me" and to resurrect the child she was and what her father did to that child, without a single comment from the author that would cover and enfeeble the horror of the past sensation. The result is a raw and powerful narrative that hits the readers in the face and transforms them into voyeurs.

My first novels were autobiographical. But an autobiographical novel is not an autofiction. I was using my experience to build a plot and a story. The main character was quite similar to me but not entirely me, and the novel was organized around a story moving towards an end. My first autofiction is my fourth book, *Jouir*, which was published in 1997. It's a description of my sex life between the age of six and thirty-two. My goal was to give an exact account, without any comment or analysis, of a woman's desire--a different ambition from writing a story. The book is made of vignettes, and each of them is about a desire, a fantasy, an encounter, a one-night stand, a moment in a long term love story. I thought that the juxtaposition of these scenes without any voice mastering or unifying the fragments would compose the true portrait of a woman's desire. But it was obvious to me that the silent principle organizing the content of the book and underlining the writing was emotion--desire for a man, fear of betraying, shame of desiring and masturbating, guilt.

I wrote *Jouir* because I couldn't see the point of writing a novel anymore. When trying to give an exact rendering of one's own relationship to the world was probably the only challenging and worthwhile adventure, why invent? As Thomas Bernhard writes in *Meine*

Preise, "What is at the center of my world, as long as I am alive, is and could only be for me the center of the whole world, if I want what I say to be true." (116) "*If I want what I say to be true*": this is the very ambition of the autofiction writer. Inventing had been necessary at a time when moral and social conventions didn't allow women to unveil themselves and generally writers to expose other people, but it seemed as if this obstacle was overcome at the end of the twentieth century in western countries: a woman could write about sex and be published under her own name by a reputable publisher's.

Between 1995 and 1997, I wrote the first drafts of three other books with the same goal of giving an exact account of life without trying to organize it into a story. In *Confessions d'une radine* (*Confessions of a Cheapstake*), published in 2003, I exposed my relationship to money and owning, or, rather, my self-hate because of my incapacity to let go of things and of my lack of trust in people. *New York, Journal d'un Cycle*, published in 2009, describes a conjugal argument centering around the desire for a baby. Both these books, like *Jouir*, are short and made of fragments which reveal the multiplicity of the "I". *La haine de la famille*, published in 2001, is a longer narrative but obeys the same purpose, that of saying the truth, the whole truth and only the truth. This book originated in my desire to write a short piece about what I had inherited from my father and mother, and became a book about the mother-daughter relationship over three generations. At some point I wondered whether I should take the "I" out of the narrative and simply write a third-person story about my mother's life, but then I realized that the "I" was essential to this book even though the character at the center was my mother and not me. What was at the center was actually my way of looking at my mother and my judgement of her.

The process of writing these four books was quite different from writing a novel. When I started each of them, I didn't know where I was going, nor whether it would be a book in the end. I just knew that there was something interesting there. I could feel it in the urgency of the writing. I would start with a tiny scene or detail and it was like pulling an ex-

isting, invisible thread. I found it easy not to invent, but, rather, to excavate the imprints of memory. I was not sure that I was writing anything that could be read by other people but it didn't matter. It was exciting and fun. I was just going as far as possible and as close as possible to "truth", that is, to a bare description of what I found in my memory.

It was only the exhaustive character of the quest that could make it interesting. Exposing everything, not hiding anything. What I was writing about was quite banal. My sex life was not Catherine Millet's, as I discovered four years after publishing *Jouir* when I read *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* *Jouir* was about a normal girl who had fantasies, attractions, love stories and one-night stands. Cheapskateness, the subject of my third autofiction, was a petty topic. Finally, my Parisian family had nothing that made it remarkable: no drama, no secret, no tragedy, no betrayal. Just a normal bourgeois family with a slightly crazy mother obsessed with clothes and with the scholarly success of her children.

Autofiction usually feeds on extreme and painful experiences: death, illness, abandonment, madness and loss. Going to the heart of a human tragedy, finding a voice that expresses pain, the universality of pain, is what makes autofiction worthwhile. Philippe Forest became an autofiction writer with the death of his daughter, and Camille Laurens with the loss of her son at birth. Christine Angot's writing revolves around one central experience, incest. In each of his novels, Doubrovsky "kills" a woman; he writes about loss and guilt. Because my material was trivial, my project was a challenge: it was only by being as honest as possible, by saying what is usually not said, by venturing into the petty, ugly and shameful paths of the human mind, that I could "show a man in the truth of nature" and reach a "truth" that readers would recognize as their own.

This is where I finally encounter my subject, "the limits of autofiction." The first limit lies in the difficulty for the writer to distinguish between the universal "I" and the particular "me". Maybe I sense this difficulty more than any other autofiction writer precisely because I don't write about tragic events and my material is so pedestrian. In the seventeenth cen-

ture, Jansenists banned the “I” from their discourses because the first person embodied the vanity and superficiality of the human soul. I feel very Jansenist--and yet, quite unable to ban the I. As I am writing about myself, I feel like a funambulist walking over a pit of self-indulgence. Nothing scares me more than my blindness to myself. Even though I am naturally inclined to say “I”, I hate the “I” at the same time. Of course, we know the famous Proustian distinction between the deep self and the social self, which could translate as “I” and “me”. The subject, and object of autofiction should be “je” and not “moi.” “Je” is the good guy, the noble one, the universal voice, the subject looking at the world and leaving behind whatever is anecdotic, and “me” is the social one, the superficial one, the self-obsessed, self-indulgent and narcissistic one.

Autofiction should only be the work of our deep self. This is easy to accomplish in times of great suffering, when we are in mourning, when we have been abandoned by someone we love, when we face death, or when our life is behind us: pain and time obliterate what is not essential. How often, though, can we write about death and loss? How many times can we write the same book? A writer needs to write. What happens when the need is there, but the necessity is missing? It could be argued that the best writing is the one that makes the most trivial and anecdotic aspects of life interesting. But this ambition can also be confused with a writer’s desire for recognition. This is when the “I” is in danger. The need to publish has nothing to do with a real need to write. If there is no organic necessity in the writing of autofiction, then maybe there should be no book. But if a publisher is there, waiting for the book and ready to print it, the “I” is no longer facing himself anymore, but also a reflection that tells him: “you are a Writer,” with a capital “W”. The “I” turns into a “me”, thirsty for readers and reviews. The “I” becomes self-indulgent when we decide that anything that happens to us is interesting as long as we write about it. If writers of *autofiction* only published a book every ten years, maybe it wouldn’t be a problem. But most of us need to write more than that, sometimes simply to earn our life. The project,

then, loses its essence. The “I” which is the subject and the object of autofiction is also its first danger.

But there is a second limit, a more important one: the other. You.

My book *Jouir* was only about me. There were no names, no details allowing other people to be identified. In *Confessions of a Cheapskate*, I was finger-pointing myself. The only risk I took in publishing it was to provide my readers with an ugly image of myself.

*La haine de la famille* was more problematic. It was not just about me, but about my family. My brother visited me just after I finished the first draft, and when he read the first two pages he started laughing: “Do you want dad to have a heart attack?” I was taken aback. I left the manuscript in a drawer for two years before deciding to publish it. And I did so after inventing a psychological game that helped me make the book acceptable for my family. I also gave it to them to read before it was published. Unlike what my brother had anticipated, my father chose self-denial: he read it as a fiction and thought it was very funny. My mother, on the other hand, was deeply shocked and felt dispossessed of her life. But she recovered. Her narcissism was fed by a book that was entirely about her. She was ready to hear everything I wrote about her, even the most negative judgements. She is curious, and she has no taboos. She has an appetite for truth and self-knowledge that is stronger than her self-doubt. She is not fragile. There was nothing I could write that could destroy her. And eventually, she came to love that book. She thinks it’s the best of my books--since it’s about her.

But I encountered another problem that I could not so easily by-pass. In 1997 my husband read the first draft of my book *New York, Journal d’un cycle*, and he said: “It’s good, but I don’t want you to publish it. Actually, I don’t want you to write about me anymore. I don’t want you to write about us.”

This was a major interdiction: the first time I encountered censorship. My husband’s reaction was understandable. *New York, Journal d’un cycle*, is about a conjugal argument



and describes sexual impotence caused by psychological pressure. My husband felt that the representation of our love in my writing was not fair, that I wrote only about the negative, and also that our relationship was private and should not be discussed in a published book. His demand was a problem for me, because it represented censorship. I could not be a different person from who I was. If I was no longer able to write what I wanted, how could I live with him? You don't choose what you write about, if you are a writer of *autofiction*. Writing, or at least my writing, has to do with transgression, and his interdiction would certainly trigger the desire to write about it. I didn't see how we could come out of this vicious circle. We finally came to an agreement: I would wait for five years before publishing that book, or at least until we had a child. I could accept that condition, because the most important thing at the time was to conceive a child.

I made two realizations: first, that there was a difference between writing and publishing. Publication could be deferred. It shouldn't matter if the book was good--and if it was not good, it was better to wait and have a chance to throw it away. My second realization was that the quest for truth could affect other people. It was not that simple to write *autofiction*. If you were a woman, maybe you had to get divorced first. I actually wonder if there a single woman writer of *autofiction* who is not divorced. Maybe this is the price to pay for writing. If you choose this path, you have to accept the loss. There would be something petit-bourgeois in trying to eat your cake and have it too, to get *le beurre et l'argent du beurre*, literature and life at the same time. There can be no compromise with truth. The acceptance of self-destruction, the sacrifice of oneself and of the other on the altar of literature would be the proof that you are a real writer, a writer for whom literature is an absolute. As a character in Nicole Kraus' *Great House*, a female writer, says, "the writer serves a higher calling, what one calls only in art and religion a vocation, and cannot worry too much about the feelings of those whose lives she borrows from. Yes, I believed--perhaps even still believe--that the writer should not be cramped by the possible consequences of

her work. She has no duty to earthly accuracy or verisimilitude. She is not an accountant; nor is she required to be something as ridiculous and misguided as a moral compass. In her work the writer is free of laws.” (p.28).

Maybe I didn't have the vocation. If I was not ready to lose my husband and my family, maybe I should simply give up writing autofiction, and write novels instead. Which I did, actually: I wrote *Le problème avec Jane* (*The Story of Jane*), which came out in 1999 in France, in 2001 in the States, and which was my first commercial success. It looked like I should go that way, from all points of view.

But this is not the end of the story, because I keep being attracted, in spite of myself, to the truth project that is inherent to *autofiction*. In the past years, for reasons that I am not able to develop here, I fully measured the power of words. I found out that written words could hurt, damage, and even kill, because they act like a mirror that sends another person a reflection of his or her life's failures. The questions I am asking are the following: is this a limit of autofiction? Does the other matter? Is the writer accountable or not? Is it possible to write about anybody, and to write everything? What is the relation between ethics and literature?

When you write about someone else who is still alive, there are two cases. Either you write without the consent of the other person, in which case you may end up breaking up with that person or be sued for breach of privacy, mostly if your writing is some kind of revenge. But the legal risk involved is not the one that concerns me here. Or you write with the permission of the person involved, like Camille Laurens in *Romance Nerveuse* or Serge Doubrovsky in *Le Livre brisé*. In that case, it looks like there should be no problem, because you are not transgressing the boundary of the other's privacy and not trespassing on their sensibility. Camille Laurent's relationship with her paparazzo was still going on while she was writing about it, and her lover was rather flattered and amused to be the object of a book by such a great writer. Doubrovsky also started *Le livre brisé* with the agree-

ment of his wife, Ilse. She was tired of seeing him write only about the other women in his life and she asked him to write about their own relationship. He warned her that it wouldn't be easy for her because he would say everything. She accepted. It was an exciting, challenging adventure to write about their relationship and to give her the chapters to read one after another, to have her as the first reader and the first critic. Because of a visa problem, Ilse stayed in Paris while Serge went back to New York, and from New York he sent her the toughest chapters in the book: the one about her abortions and tragic miscarriages, and the other one which is the consequence of the former, the chapter about her alcoholism, about their drinking and what came along with it, their fighting to the point of hitting each other. This chapter is really about her despair. After he finished it, he was happy with it because it sounded strong and really good, and he sent it to her. She was alone when she received it, alone when she read it. And she died. Suicide, or accident? It's impossible to know. She was taking anti-depressants which had been prescribed by a doctor who knew that she was drinking some alcohol. Then Serge found in the fridge an empty bottle of vodka and he knew she had relapsed. And the question he keeps asking in the second part of the book, which is written just after her death, is: "Why?" "Why did she do it? "How could she?"

Over two hundred pages, the reasons he gives for her death are many. Ilse had experienced bitter disappointments, not all of which had to do with her husband. Life had not spoiled her. She was truly unlucky. After writing about all the bad things that happened to her, Serge abruptly adds: "I am a piece of shit. This last judgment crushes me, I collapse,

YOU DIDN'T PROTECT YOUR WIFE FROM HERSELF, truth suddenly terrifies me..." (567-8) After recollecting that he sometimes hit his wife when they were both drunk, he states that he didn't hit her only with a hand of flesh and bones: "She received the writer's hand smack in her face."(570) "Her alcoholism, she never wanted to acknowledge

it, suddenly I stick it, from far, in my mirror, smack in her face..."(572) "My ink poisoned her, the game of truth is sometimes fatal."

When I read these words, they struck me as containing the explanation for Ilse's relapse into drinking and therefore for her death. Words can kill, even without any evil intent. Words can kill because they bring back life, because they offer a mirror that concentrates the rays of the sun on the person they write about, and because fragile people simply cannot stand this blinding light. Their reflection in someone else's mirror, their reflection exposed to a public, devastates them. Reading the account of her life in Doubrovsky's amazingly powerful words was beyond Ilse's strength, even though she had agreed to the truth pact. She couldn't see this concentrated reflection of herself in the writer's mirror. Doubrovsky's ink poisoned her. The game of truth is, indeed, fatal.

The paradox is that the mirror of his own words turns out to be too strong for Doubrovsky himself. He can't face the truth, he has to turn away from it. Just after the one page where he finger-points himself as the cause of Ilse's death, he turns away from this self-accusation, and writes: "I exaggerate, it's not sure, crazy ideas I have, I invent, I overestimate the shock of a reading, after all it was our agreement, our pact, the autobiographical impact doesn't kill..."(572) "I probably exaggerate the importance of my pages..." (574). It's as if the reflection of truth in the mirror was blinding the writer himself. Doubrovsky protects himself behind the authorization Ilse had given to write about her to escape his liability, and mocks his own fear that words could kill. At this stage, the reader can't help but experience an uneasiness, a *malaise*, about which I would like to say a few words in conclusion.

Am I saying that the Pope of autofiction is a criminal, as Bernard Pivot seemed to conclude when he asked him on national TV: how does one feel after killing one's wife? Am I saying that Doubrovsky should never have written *Le livre brisé*? That there are ethical limits to literature? That the writer has to be a responsible human being, a moral com-

pass, able to anticipate the consequences of his writing? That the value of a human life is superior to the value of any book? Don't we know that books will stay, and not human beings? In his later books, Doubrovsky writes a lot about his guilt and he resolves the matter: the ultimate value, he says, is that of literature. If the book is good, then the means that were used to make it good don't matter. What matters is the book. It may be true, but I still wonder about that uneasy feeling that the reader experiences when the writer is in self-denial or asks the reader to absolve him.

I can explain it only one way: the writer of *autofiction* is not an assassin. He can't face the effect of his work because he didn't plan it. He didn't measure ahead the power of his own words. This is why he falls into bad consciousness, denial and bad faith. But this creates a problem. The autofiction writer risks not being able to say the total truth anymore because he will have internalized censorship: that is, the fear of the effect his own work will have on others. He will be unconsciously locked up in the prison of that fear. He will have lost his innocence and his freedom. The writer's moral decency generates a tension between the desire for truth and the fear of truth that may compromise the project itself. What was at the beginning just an outside limit, the other, you, becomes an internal limit of *autofiction*.

This conclusion is certainly questionable, and I am not even sure that I would defend it. What I am saying is really not too clear to myself and still the object of on-going reflection born from the problems I encountered in my own writing. In conclusion, I would like to use a little story in Nicole Krauss' *Great House* as a metaphor of this uneasiness I am talking about. Her woman writer character, the one who states that the writer is not a moral compass and should not be cramped by the possible consequences of her work, has dinner at a friend's, a dancer, who tells him the story of a childhood friend of his, whom his mother killed, killing herself too, when he was nine. The writer is so struck by that story that she writes it and publishes it in a magazine. Afterwards she writes a novel about her

father, who died. She writes how he lost control of his body and how his dignity abandoned him at the end of his life, and she also writes about his failings and his faults. A few months after this book was published, she runs into the dancer inside a bookstore, and she immediately feels uneasy, without knowing why. They have a little conversation, and the dancer tells her that he read her story in the magazine about his childhood friend, that he reads everything she writes. Just before leaving he taps her with two fingers on the cheek. Even though apparently tender, the dancer's gesture baffles her, and then annoys her. "The more I thought about it, the more there seemed something condescending in it, even meant to humiliate. In my mind the dancer's smile became less and less genuine, and it began to seem to me that he had been choreographing the gesture for years, turning it over, waiting to run into me." (30) A little later she hears the terrifying cry of an agonizing child, but she can't find the child. At home, again, she hears a child cry, and she is overcome by a "feeling of regret." These cries stay within her and she sometimes hears them when she writes, sensing in them something mocking. Some time later she has a nightmare at night and the following morning, as she passes her super in the lobby, she thinks she hears him say: "You make good use of death," when he was only talking about garbage.

"You make good use of death": what happens to writers of *autofiction* when their inner voice is mocking them and spitting contempt at themselves?

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