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The Self in/and History: Historiographic Autofiction in Contemporary US Literature

History in/as Fiction

How far back does a novel have to be set to be considered "historical"? Is there a tipping point when memory becomes history?[1] In György Lukács's classic definition, "the historical novel has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way;" in other words, to be defined "historical" a novel should feature "the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individuals" (43). Linda Hutcheon expanded on Lukács's idea, defining historical fiction "as that which is modelled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 113).

Notably, the relationship between history and fiction – or "time and narrative," as for the title of Paul Ricoeur's seminal study – has been a debated issue since the times of Aristotle. In his groundbreaking (and controversial) work, *Metahistory*, Hayden White argued that any historical work is "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing* them" (2, italics in the original). Thus, no matter its pretense of objectivity, any historical reconstruction is inevitably informed by the author's "metahistorical" strategy, and so emplotted as a work of fiction.[2] American novelist E. L. Doctorow put it differently: "Facts are the images of history, just as images are the data of fiction"; "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory" (24, 25).

The issue has become particularly urgent in our post-truth, post-Trump, post-postmodernist era, where "contemporary US writers employ an authorial mode that is questioning and skeptical, anti-positivist and distrustful of so-called master narratives of history" (Maxey 3). As a result, readers are led to assess the boundaries between fact and fiction, individual experience and collective history, with as much certainty as possible. In 2005, White himself declared that "we are full in the midst of a new kind of historical novel, if novel it be and however anti-historical it may seem" ("Introduction: Historical Fiction" 152). What is at stake in current literary representations of past events is the evaluation of the contact zone between the subject's individual experience and a public historical narrative grounded (mostly) on documentary research and first-hand testimony. However, it seems that traditional definitions of historical fiction are no longer appropriate.

For one thing, if we consider the author's direct involvement in the past events as a determining criterion, we end up leaving out of historical fiction the whole field of postmemorial narratives. Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as a form of memory implying an emotional connection to a past that has not been personally experienced, but that is "shaped by stories we had read and heard, conversations we had had, by fears and fantasies associated with persecution and danger" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 4). These experiences "*seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (5) but, once transposed into a narrative, they occupy a transitional ground between personal involvement, secondary testimony, and fictional reinvention, representing a bridge between "traditional" historical novels and autobiographical narratives.

In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur deals extensively with "the problem of the interweaving reference between history and narrative fiction" (82), so that his work takes the form of "a long and difficult threeway conversation between history, literary criticism, and phenomenological philosophy [...], three partners who usually ignore one another" (83). In this essay, I am going to investigate a similar "threeway conversation" that has emerged in contemporary US literature between historical novels, postmemorial narratives, and autofictions.

In this regard, I will take as case studies two historical novels

belonging to a peculiar, hybrid subgenre that I would tentatively call "historiographic autofiction," William T. Vollmann's 1994 novel *The Rifles* (as representative of his *Seven Dreams* cycle, whose most recent volume came out in 2015) and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004). Both novels are set in a (real or reimagined) historical past and have to do with historiographic reconstruction, but each author also appears in his own novel as a fictionalized narrator/character. The aim of my research is to analyze what happens when an author posits a fictionalized alter ego in a historical context, providing a narrative account focalized in terms of a self-historizing perspective. While Vollmann reimagines the history of the American continent as composed of seven dreams dreamed by a fictional alter ego and experienced by other autofictional characters who interact and blend with historical personages, Roth transforms his childhood memories into a uchronic nightmare, imagining an alternate history for the US around a peculiar autofictional version of himself.

When autofictional strategies are applied to historical narratives (uchronic or otherwise), they apparently provide factual legitimacy to subjective events while paradoxically presenting them as overtly fictional. Putting the author's fictional self in a historical setting lends credibility to the narration and gives the mark of sincerity and authenticity to the text, bestowing it with testimonial value. At the same time, the work's evident fictionality deconstructs any actual claim of objectivity or truthfulness, stressing the inevitable manipulation and stratification of history while encouraging reflections on how past narratives influence one's identity in the act of shaping (and being shaped by) one's life story.[3]

Before discussing these novels, however, it is necessary to briefly consider the contemporary developments of the US historical novel to see how this genre has crossed paths with autofiction and postmemorial narratives. Linda Hutcheon famously defined postmodernist historical narratives as "historiographic metafiction" – "fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (*Historiographic Metafiction* 3). Authors like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison and Robert Coover, among others, rewrote history in their novels either by imagining alternative or counterfactual versions of significant events, or by devising historical

narratives related from marginal, de-localized, fragmented, anachronistic, non-ethnocentric points of view. Their works denied the reader the relief of a linear plot, employing schizophrenic language, anachronistic details, and fragmented structures to cope with the traumatic consciousness of post-Holocaust, Cold War America.

Amy J. Elias used the term "metahistorical romance" to define "narrative that bears striking similarities to those produced by traumatized consciousness" and that, besides being non-linear and metafictional, "problematizes memory" and "presents competing versions of past events" (52). In these narratives, history is neither exclusively "past" nor necessarily involved in the present unfolding of events: it acquires a subliminal, private dimension by becoming a work in progress, a never-ending construction that characters must constantly negotiate through a complex interplay of memory and imagination. According to Elias, "the movement from realism to romance that characterized metahistorical fiction from the 1960s to the 1990s is [...] informed by post-Holocaust, feminist and postcolonial *reality*," and has much to do with "the traumatized human consciousness [that] blurs the boundaries between realism and romance, fabulation and the world. What should be real is indefinable, inexact, hallucinatory; what should be fiction (or at the least, the narrative of memory) becomes the vehicle to organize the disorder of reality" (204).

No wonder that after WWII trauma studies have emerged as a thriving discipline in the literary field, since "trauma, as a paradigm of the historical event, possesses an absolute materiality, and yet, as inevitably missed or incompletely experienced, remains absent and inaccessible" (Crosthwaite 1). As we move away from memory toward history, and especially "as history seeps into the novel, it becomes transformed into something else, into what might be called history-in-the-novel" (Howe 1539). We might be led to think that such a displacement implies an objectification of personal experiences into a coherent narrative – a passage from the precariousness of recollection and the unreliability of first-person testimony to a factual organization of events through the process of storytelling. On the contrary, the author's personal investment in any historical narrative emerges once again as a crucial issue, not only for an apt definition of the genre but as an important marker to channel the readers' expectations and reactions

towards a specific text. When an author presents him/herself as a direct witness of a past event or of its reconstruction, the reader's confidence is potentially increased, though the degree of objectivity in the narrative may seem to diminish.

This, in turn, may help to explain the recent proliferation of memoirs and autofictions in the Anglo-American market. In 2009, Ben Yagoda noted that "memoir has become the central form of the culture" (28). Books labeled and presented as (more or less) fictionalized memoirs have been flooding American bookstores since the Nineties, and a significant portion of them is composed by autofictions, a term coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky to designate novels in which an author's alter ego appears as the main character (often as the narrator of the story) with his/her name and clearly recognizable autobiographical details. Marjorie Worthington has defined American autofiction as "a hybrid genre that constantly shifts between the referential and the fictional" and that "combines the clearly fictional with the seemingly accurate biographical history of its authors"(12).[4] In recent years, autofictional strategies have been employed in several fields, such as "the visual arts, cinema, theatre and online," though "literature is the dominant form" (Gibbons 120).[5]

In the light of what David Shields described as the contemporary "reality hunger," the rise of memoir and autofiction appears to satisfy the current need for historical authenticity and sincerity.[6] It seems that many readers feel the ever-increasing necessity of assessing what we could trustily call 'true facts' through stories told by reliable, eye-witness narrators who adopt points of view as unbiased as objectively possible. At the same time, as a reaction to postmodernist irony and self-reflexive detachment, a great number of writers and readers cherish above all subjectivity and empathy, because these are deemed essential to any discourse that claims to be sincere.

Yet, as Shields points out, "how can we enjoy memoirs, believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory?" (25). This is the reason why it is helpful to look at contemporary historical narratives through the lens of Elias' metahistorical romance, acknowledging that historical reconstructions could stem from fragmented, post-traumatic consciousnesses. Worthington notes how "the conscious and ironic distance between author and author-character could be said to mirror the

out-of-body sensation of the many trauma victims experience as they feel separated from themselves. Thus the autofictional author-character itself can be viewed as a symptom of that dissociation" (137).

Finally, we should always bear in mind Hirsch's idea of postmemorial narratives as representing experiences remembered "only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which [the authors] grew up" ("An Interview" n. pag.): such "postmemories" threaten to overwhelm and somehow displace the authors' private memories and life stories, as well as their documentary reconstructions. In the long run, this brings us directly to the "historiographic autofictional" impulse felt by Vollmann and Roth to creatively make their authorial presence felt in their historical fiction, performing (one could also say "researching") their own selves in history while metafictionally inventing their own (life-)stories through diverse literary means.[7]

William T. Vollmann's *The Rifles* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*

It is widely acknowledged that the historical novel has a long and distinguished tradition in the US, but so does autofiction.[8] When Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, he was driven by an "autobiographical impulse" to add the famous introductory chapter, "The Custom-House." Striving to devise a historical romance, "Hawthorne the Surveyor" struggles with his imaginative faculties before acknowledging that he cannot write it while working in the custom-house: "It was a folly, with the materiality of this daily life pressing so intrusively upon me, to attempt *to fling myself back into another age*" (28; emphasis added). It seems that to write a proper romance Hawthorne's autofictional character must keep the past insulated from the tedious, prosaic present of the custom-house, but the past (along with the "postmemory" of his ancestors) intrudes upon his imagination, frustrating his project but paradoxically giving him material for its introductory chapter.

140 years later, William T. Vollmann took Hawthorne's cue and launched on an ambitious literary project that probably represents the first sustained attempt at historiographic autofiction in the US. *Seven Dreams:*

A Book of North American Landscapes is meant to be a "Symbolic History" of the colonization of the North American continent "that lies in the grey zone between fiction and history" (*Expelled from Eden* 447). Vollmann's original project blends documentary sources and figments of the author's imagination, personal memories and cultural myths, so that each book oscillates between the historical novel, the nineteenth-century travel narrative, the reportage, the autobiography, and the ethnographic work. Most importantly, Vollmann adopts a multiple, unstable autofictional persona as narrator and/or protagonist of the stories, as if reluctant to gain a proper distance from his reconstruction. No wonder that in 1990, the year of the publication of the septology's first volume, *The Ice-Shirt*, Vollmann told Larry McCaffery (who had asked him a list of the "contemporary" authors he most admired) that "Hawthorne may be the best" (36).

In letters and interviews, Vollmann has variously presented his project as "a historical novel," "a work of history disguised as a novel," "a work of history," "an accurate work of history" (Turner 153, 154), "in no way […] a factual history of the dispossession of American Indians," yet "erected upon a foundation of fact" (*Expelled from Eden* 448). True enough, some of these definitions were probably tailored to persuade publishers to print his books without cuts and with all the additional material (drawings, maps, chronologies, glossaries, etc.), as well as to obtain official statements from public authorities, interviews from local people, or travel grants from magazines and institutions. Still, he was particularly keen in describing his project as "an account of origins and metamorphoses which is often untrue based on the literal facts as we know them, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth" (Vollmann, *The Rifles* 377). From the frontispiece of each volume to the final lists of sources, the author makes it clear how meticulous his documentary research is.

Vollmann fashioned a mythical alter ego as a general narrator of the stories, William the Blind, an ageless storyteller who supposedly relates his historical dreams. Besides being a symbolic incarnation of the sightless poet and seer, William the Blind is immediately recognizable as the author's counterpart, his nickname alluding to Vollmann's bad eyesight, often remarked upon in his novels and interviews. Nor does the narrator's voice remain confined within the plot itself, since he features prominently

in the extremely rich paratextual apparatus: for instance, the last entry of *The Ice-Shirt*'s historical chronology states that in 1987 "William the Blind explores Iceland, Greenland and Baffin Island" (394), mirroring Vollmann's travels in that year. The narrator's blindness also indicates Vollmann's empathic willingness to see through the eyes of his characters, an attempt "to produce a plural, polyphonic voice, echoing multiple fictive self-portraits of the author in quest for a new incarnation" (Palleau-Papin 22). As time passed, William the Blind evolved into Vollmann's full-fledged doppelgänger, able to inherit his author's legacy and sign articles meant to chastise unflattering reviewers.

The Rifles – published in 1994 but chronologically intended to be the series' penultimate volume – is Vollmann's most original experiment in historiographic autofiction. Here the autofictional element triples, since William the Blind is flanked by Captain (Bill) Subzero, who besides being a second alter ego of the author, is also a contemporary projection, the "supernatural twin" (137), of Captain John Franklin (1786-1847), the British Arctic explorer who died of lead poisoning near King William Island during an expedition to find the Northwest Passage. The novel deals with Franklin's voyages, but it is also an investigation of Inuit life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a reportage on the contemporary situation of the local people, as well as a personal account of Vollmann's travels to the northern parts of Canada and to the Magnetic Pole, where he ran the risk of freezing to death "to get into Sir John Franklin's mind, and see what it would be like to be all alone, up in the Arctic" (Lukes 102).

In his novel, Vollmann adopts a multifaceted, unstable point of view that shifts continually according to the fluctuations of characters' voices and the subsequent oscillations of personal pronouns: the narrator often metafictionally addresses both his protagonist/writer Subzero – "You wanted to own alternative selves so that you could be both self and other" (Vollman, *The Rifles* 162) – and the reader: "Now you want to get to the point of it; you fail to see why we've unzipped each other's pants to embark on the Fourth Expedition but then regressed to the Second" (123). At other times, the narration switches to the historical novel's traditional third person, but this may happen in the middle of a sentence, especially while the narrator is discussing autobiographical details such as Subzero's two-

week stay at the Pole. In other parts, during a historical reconstruction, the narrator abruptly acknowledges his merging subjectivity: "Of course, Franklin himself, who is myself, never thought in these terms" (107). The result is a polyphonic, kaleidoscopic narrative moving back and forth in time and space, where history is "diffused" in the present and the authorial perspective is always slightly out-of-synch like an endless mirroring – a situation the narrator himself sums up as follows: "there were Franklin, Subzero, you, yours truly, me, myself and I" (134).

Vollmann's autofictional strategy stems from the novelist/historian's self-admitted desire to "get closest to these bygone people, by looking at some place that they would have looked at with their eyes" (Lukes 219). Among the "rules of writing" the author published in 1990, there is one that we could consider a manifesto of his fiction, and particularly of the *Seven Dreams* series:

> Unless we are much more interesting than we imagine we are, we should strive to feel not only about Self, but also about Other. [...] *Not* the Other as a negation or eclipse of the Self. Not even about the Other exclusive of Self, because that is but a trickster-egoist's way of worshipping Self secretly. We must treat Self and Other as equal partners. (*Expelled from Eden* 332)

Undoubtedly, William the Blind (1), Subzero (2), and Franklin (3) are "equal partners" in constructing the text of *The Rifles*, all of them contributing to the reinvention/reconstruction of the past from imagination/myth (1), experience/memory/research (2), and impersonation/performance (3). To find the much sought-after "passage" (not only between the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, but also between the present and a bygone historical past), the writer must undergo a continuous negotiation between self and other, memory and history. As Vollmann stated in an interview, *The Rifles* "is not about me and it's not about places I've been" (Lukes 74). The autofictional character does not necessarily signal a narcissistic attitude, nor it represents an ideological attempt to reclaim a lost authority/authorship. On the contrary, to put several versions of himself in the narrative and to "diffuse" the past in the present, blending it with memories and feelings of the places visited, is the writer's act of respect for a factual truth that otherwise can be altogether unreachable, "a way of representing the weird,

flickering, simultaneous nature of perceptions in reality" (220). In fact, to the conscientious historical novelist "it seems disrespectful to just make things up" (102).

Though he concedes that William the Blind is "a bit more of a confused bumbler" than "William Vollmann," who admittedly is only "a semi-confused bumbler" (220),[9] the author states his rationale in an interview: "Not to appear at all would be disingenuous on my part" (Hemmingson 142). However, the narrator's inevitable unreliability is balanced by the thick documentary appendixes at the end of the books that include not only information about the historical characters but also the author's correspondence and interviews. As Vollmann states, "[i]t's so easy to be manipulated by the media, whose main goal isn't to provide historical accuracy but entertaining versions that will sell [...]. I want to encourage readers to understand what my versions were based on, and if they disagree, they can go and look up this stuff and decide for themselves" (8). In this sense, Vollmann's historiographic autofiction is also meant to empower the readers, allowing them to make an informed choice about the author's historical reconstruction and autonomously establish what (and whom) to trust.

If Vollmann considers not to put himself in his historical narratives disrespectful, Philip Roth has been accused by embittered critics of encumbering his works with his own presence. During his long and prolific career, he experimented on different literary genres, systematically trespassing the boundaries between fact and fiction and creating multiple versions of himself: he wrote a metafictional autobiography, a proper memoir about his father, several semi-autobiographical novels, an autofiction, historical novels based mostly on his recollections, semi-autobiographical counterfactual novels, and uchronias based on his childhood memories, such as *Nemesis*[10] and *The Plot Against America*. The latter also represents Roth's most intriguing contribution to historiographic autofiction.

In the book – "at once a dystopian novel, a historical novel, a *Bildungsroman*, postmodernist fiction and/or realist text" (Morley 140) – Roth provides an alternative history of the US during the 1940s, imagining that the nation remained neutral during WWII in consequence of pro-Nazi aviator Charles Lindbergh's election as 33rd president instead of

Franklin D. Roosevelt. The novel's autofictional dimension is activated by the narrator, "Philip Roth," who recalls his childhood through the eyes of his eight-year-old fictitious alter ego, as the author stated in an essay: "At the center of the story is a child, myself at seven, eight, and nine years of age. The story is narrated by me as an adult looking back some sixty years at the experience of that child's family during the Lindbergh presidency" (*Why Write?* 340).

The story alternates between the narrator's remembrance of his (fictional but plausible) childhood experiences in an alternative past and his adult self's reconstruction of a (likewise fictional but plausible) history. Like Vollmann, Roth is careful to add a lengthy final postscript stating that the book "is a work of fiction" and that the reader "interested in tracking where historical fact ends and historical imagining begins" can find here the documentary sources he used, along with a "true chronology of the major figures" and "some documentation" (*The Plot* 364). As evidence of Roth's historical rigorousness stands the Society of American Historians' Prize received by *The Plot Against America* for "the outstanding historical novel on an American theme for 2003-2004."

The usual gap between narrator and protagonist – between the consciousness of the boy who experiences the events and that of the adult self who is telling the story – is further complicated by the dual perspective offered by uchronia – where history as the narrator tells it overlaps with history as we remember it. In this case, we find a mediated account of the sort described by Hirsch as "a triangulated look with which we engage images of childhood vulnerability in the context of persecution and genocide" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 156). Thus, in writing the book Roth had to acknowledge a constant negotiation between memory, history, and imagination, as he stated in an interview:

> What if Lindbergh had become president? […] And then what would it have been like for us, I thought, us – my mother, my father, my brother and me, and our family? How could I use *my family exactly, an exact portrait*, and just have them behave as I think they would have behaved in that situation; and so that's what I did. Now, I really did think, what would my mother have done here? What would my father have done there? What would I have done? (Sykes n. pag.; emphasis added)

The Plot Against America features a threefold splitting of the authorial character, "three distinct Philip Roths: the historical Roth, who fulfills the role of implied author; the fictional projection of Roth, who narrates the novel from the present day; and the child Roth, who acts as the novel's protagonist" (Siegel 137). Yet these three authorial projections do not interfere with themselves nor with the historical characters (as it happens in Vollmann's novel), so that the short-circuit is only in the mind of the reader, who knows that events did not happen that way but is nonetheless forced by the "reality" of Roth's alter ego, as well as by the truthful information and details about his family, not to discredit the narrative completely.

Roth uses his peculiar version of historiographic autofiction to uncover the multitudinous desires, contradictions, possibilities, and potentialities of history, as his narrator states in the novel: "Turning the wrong way round, the relentless unforeseen was what we schoolchildren studied as 'History,' harmless history, where everything unexpected in its own time is chronicled on the page as inevitable. The terror of the unforeseen is what the science of history hides, turning a disaster into an epic" (*The Plot* 113-14). Roth's alter ego takes (implicit) responsibility for the historical distortions he created: "I was the one who had started it off – that devastation had been done by me" (337). Though he is ostensibly talking about his nocturnal escapade, "Roth" is also implicitly referring to the structure of his book, since besides being a naive child, he is also a projection of the *romancer* at work on his historical narrative.

Thus, Roth literally 'translates' a fictional version of himself as a child-romancer into an imaginary historical narrative that has much to do with contemporary America. In Roth's alternative past, the "ghosts" of the author's parents and relatives perform a function similar to the ghosts of Hawthorne's ancestors in "The Custom-House": they embody traces of unresolved traumas and uncomfortable memories – or better, postmemorial narratives and alternative possibilities that the nation's official history has willingly forgotten, relegating them in the realm of the "not likely" or "not possible." On the other hand, in *The Rifles*, Vollmann projects his present research and experiences, as well as his fictional alter ego, into the

nineteenth century of Sir John Franklin's explorations. In so doing, the *romancer* invades the historical narrative, becoming not only a historian in search of a manuscript (as in the traditional nineteenth-century literary device) but also a historical character who, in turn, interacts with (and impersonates) the (also autobiographical) narrator as well as the readers.

If it is true that "the appeal of biography or autobiography lies in the fact that suspension of disbelief is not necessary if the events being chronicled actually took place" (Worthington 158), then Vollmann and Roth's historiographic autofictions reinstate disbelief in a historical dimension that is too often taken for granted, showing how historical narratives can be at the same time subjective and objectively exact, accurately researched and imperfectly remembered, without necessarily being "untrue." Just as we, as readers, are continuously negotiating our emotional involvement with the inevitably artificial reality of a text, historiographic autofiction performs (and makes explicit) the constant negotiation between the author as a researcher/novelist and the character as an instable object of research/reinvention. Only through such a sustained effort can a writer hope to offer a historical narration from an honest, sincere, and informed point of view.

Notes

[1] To select which books to review, the *Historical Novel Review*'s editorial board came up in 2002 with a working definition for historical fiction: "A novel which is set fifty or more years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience" (Johnson 2). If this may seem arbitrary, one should consider that the judges of the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the UK, use the threshold implicitly stated in the subtitle of Scott's *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, and consider "historical" a novel in which the majority of the storyline must have taken place at least 60 years before the publication. Definitions like these cannot be satisfactory, and the reviewers themselves occasionally break their own rules.

[2] For a discussion on skepticism, relativism, and tolerance in Hayden White's thought as related to Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile's works, see Ginzburg.

[3] Autofiction may also be useful to discuss the central position and the epistemological authority (and reliability) of the witness. For a thorough reflection on the issues raised by the proliferation of manifold testimonies that "come to participate in a collective memory – or collective memories – that vary in their form, function, and in the implicit or explicit

aims they set for themselves," see Wieviorka (xii).

[4] I find Worthington's definition more inclusive – and so more useful for the purpose of this study – than Frank Zipfel's, who defines autofiction as "a homodiegetic narrative that declares itself to be fiction […] but actually relates events of the author's own life and identifies the author in the text by his or her real name" (36).

[5] Worthington has traced the rise of autofiction in American literature to "several different catalysts," such as "the increasing focus in literary modernism on techniques that attempt to portray the intricacies of human consciousness"; the "death of the author" debates that clash with the more recent "democratization of authorship made possible by the myriad new-media outlets"; the "authorial anxieties that stemmed from the literary gains made by women and writers of color"; the intensification of the attention to the potential fictionalization of real events advocated by New Journalism (5). Surely enough, a great boost to autofiction came from the Internet. In some cases, the author's construction of an autofictional alter ego becomes akin to a literary version of the doctored selfies on one's Instagram stories, so that "fans of a particular celebrity might possibly confront an autofictional text in much the same way they might a tabloid: they know at the outset that much of the information conveyed may be untrue, but they enjoy reading it anyway" (77).

[6] For the "new sincerity" trend in American fiction, see Kelly, Konstantinou, Pignagnoli, Simonetti ("Dopo la caduta").

[7] For a further analysis of how Hirsch's definition of postmemory might be extended to hybrid forms of autobiographical writing such as the fraudulent survivor's autobiography and the counterfactual memoir, see Simonetti ("Inventing Postmemory").

[8] We could even read the protagonist/narrator of the first work of American literature that was successful in Europe, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), as the author's autofictional persona.

[9] According to Lukács, Scott's historical novels have a "mediocre, prosaic hero as the central figure" who can provide "a neutral ground," "upon which the extreme, opposite social forces can be brought into a human relationship with one another" (34, 36, 37). One of the functions of Vollmann's "bumbler" hero is to empathize with the people he is writing about, while forging an intimate relationship with the reader through a confessional stance.

[10] *Nemesis* can be considered a uchronia because the devastating polio epidemic imagined by Roth did not take place in Newark in the summer of 1944 as described in the novel. In the course of the twentieth century, two relevant polio outbreaks happened in the United States, the first in 1916 and the second in 1952.

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