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Autofiction and New Realist Prose: Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*

> [W]rite about yourself. Don't imitate literary models. Of course, imitating literary models is the best thing one can do.
> –Harry Mathews, "The Art of Fiction No. 191"

Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), a bestseller written in the style of psychological realism, presumably marking a retreat from postmodernist literary experimentation, is not related to life-writing in any way other than in that it employs the structure of an autobiographical account; the present article is an attempt at identifying the life-writing-related tropes used in the novel. The fact that *Freedom* is a work of prose which seems rather traditionally constructed should invite a formal analysis of the text without focusing on issues of authorial intentions, however, Franzen's views (as expressed in interviews and in pieces of criticism) concerning the distribution of the personal element in a work of fiction provide an interesting additional dimension. The book lends itself to be treated as an illustration of not only how autobiographical conventions have infiltrated the literary universe, but also how the once subversive tactics of their application have become ossified. This, in turn, accounts for a diagnosis for the tendencies in popular American literature of the present-day: New Realist writing is marked by conscious reinforcement of traditionally realist features, however "without necessarily returning us to the same place," to use Linda Anderson's formula (16). An additional conclusion is that theories of autobiography should be applied solely as interpretative methods and no longer serve generic distinction, as argued by Paul De Man ("Autobiography as De-Facement").

The autofictional characteristics as discussed in this article are viewed through a deconstructionist prism. The deconstructionist argument seems especially pertinent in that it aims at a synthesis of binary oppositions, which is one way to perceive the relation between autobiography and fiction: this accounts for the abundance of recent theoretical works in the domain of

life-writing criticism.[1] This kind of approach is by no means a crowning of any process; nor is it the latest revelation, as the last years seem to perhaps have seen a digression from the position. However, the emergence of the deconstructionist and poststructural critical stances can be interpreted as either having provoked or accompanied the debate concerning life-writing. In her study of poststructuralism, Catherine Belsey comments upon the nature of the debate which places much emphasis on the development of terminology and definitions (her remarks seem especially fitting in the context of the debate concerning autofiction with its various notions, the discussion of genres and their most accurate examples and formulas) (5).

In this article, I focus upon elements which can be regarded as relevant to the autofictional dimension of Franzen's novel. A reading of the narrative tactics as well as cultural values and conventions of autobiographical writing addressed by the novelist will be proposed, and the effects of these will be discussed. An additional context to these will be provided by an overview of the problems of the author's personal engagement and his views on the roles of the autobiographical and the literary, as expressed in interviews and pieces of criticism. Due to its growing popularity, the novel is worth examining as an instance perhaps significant for new tendencies in American literary production; it can therefore also be seen as an anticipation of the ways in which fictional and autobiographical conventions will perhaps intersect in what can be called popular literature (the novel's success with the publishing market is a factor which cannot, and should not, be overlooked).

The Debate on Autofiction

Several currents of thought have contributed to the fact that problems of the "fictions of the self," despite their universalizing character, find reference in the framework of postmodern sensibility. It is equally important to explicate the con-

1 These include sections in works of autobiography studies which are quoted here (Anderson, Smith and Watson), along with anthologies such as Thomas G. Couser's *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press 1989) in which classic American pieces of life-writing are reexamined, and James Olney's *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1980); philosophical essays (of which I quote Masschelein, Laouyen, Eakin, De Man), and notably Jacques Derrida's study "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony," in Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000, 13–103); as well as critical essays devoted more exclusively to problems of autofiction, e.g. Michael Sprinker's instructive essay "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography" (Olney, 321–342).

cept of autofiction and the limitations to its application here, as it is to briefly trace the background which accounted for the emergence of the focus on the awareness of the fictional element in autobiography. In order to do so, I will indicate the major ideas which have informed the notions of autofictional writing.

Autofiction is conceptualized in two sets of terms, i.e., has two meanings: its narrow, specific sense refers to a literary genre; in a broader context, it is rather a mode of understanding, an interpretative lens which equally denotes the authorial play with conventions of autobiography (including parody and meta-commentary). Anneleen Masschelein begins the foreword to the issue of the journal *Image and Narrative* devoted exclusively to autofictional techniques in art by stating that the term is nowadays indeed understood in two quite different ways, according to "two traditions of thinking about contemporary forms of autobiography" ("Autofiction and/in Image"). As a genre, autofiction dates back to 1977, the name coined by the French theoretician Serge Doubrovsky to fit the needs of his autobiographical novel *Fils* (*The Novelist's Lexicon* 5), and is now practiced by numerous contemporary authors.[2] The other kind of approach, which is of importance for the purposes of this paper, concerns the more general perspective to be adopted in reading, present in the existing "Anglo-American debate concerning life writing and self-representation" (Masschelein).

Autofiction understood in this way, i.e. conceived "as a modus" of writing rather than a genre, Masschelein argues, is an approach pervasive in contemporary forms of artistic expression; once a formula of the avant-garde, thanks to various schools of thought it has evolved to be now universally recognized, and is observed and manifested especially explicitly in modern texts of life-writing which are "cunningly undermined by fictional elements" ("Autofiction and/in Image"). What needs to be commented upon here is the question concerning both the character of such a shift in recognition of autobiographical prose and the reasons for the emergence of this remodeling.

The phenomenon which accompanies this theoretical proposition can be perhaps defined as a certain dissolution of the concept of a coherent authorial subjectivity in the text. Masschelein seeks the underlying cause in the "erosion of the Western, Cartesian, rational subject by all kinds of 'theory' (structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction...)" ("Autofiction and/in Image"). This assumption concerning the role of "all kinds of 'theory'" is evidently vague, but also worth closer examination in order to pinpoint these facts of theory that have proven significant in the context: starting with the specificity of deconstructionist argument and subsequently, the notion of the modernist-postmodern change in

2 Especially French writers: the field of study of autofiction as a genre might be in fact assumed to be specifically French.

the aesthetic dominant, the influence of (post)structuralism, and the very recent current of personal criticism (Holland), should be considered as influential.

I want to argue that the key to this theoretical transformation is the following: autobiography, despite its curious character marked by both "pervasiveness and slipperiness" (Anderson 1) has been referred to, and thus solidified, in terms of generic description; whereas autofiction is proposed as a theoretical concept—a construction of perception—which in fact calls for a dissolution of the genre of autobiography as we know it.

This is why it seems indeed legitimate to see this argument as one which represents a deconstructionist logic (perhaps most aptly rendered in Paul De Man's essay "Autobiography as De-Facement"). Moreover, a hypothesis can be followed according to which the notion of autofiction has for its base an argument that is deconstructionist in its nature: i.e., based on two polarized qualities in such a way as to abolish not only the valorization of one but finally also their very opposition, and search for traces of one in the other. Even in studies which focus more on the need of generic normalization of the phenomenon, concessions such as the following can be found which indicate a certain debatability: "because autofiction has not left its formal marks on the readerly spirit, nor has it imposed, in a definitive manner, its own hermeneutic code, it cannot aspire to be perceived as a genre. Not fiction, not autobiography, it is both these things at the same time, it is the synthesis of things *incompatible*" (Laouyen, trans. J. D.). De Man's seminal work, "Autobiography as De-facement," emphasizes the paradoxical character of life-writing as a project—according to the author, any kind of text which one bases on the events of one's own life is inevitably a fictional construction rather than evidence of a reality which the text pretends to reflect. The critic concludes that autobiography has always only been considered a separate literary genre to somewhat artificially elevate its status (919) and distract the readers' attention from the fact that life-writing, as an ensemble of narrative forms, is indeed indistinguishable from fiction.

"Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (930), is the main idea behind De Man's text (written in 1979 and introducing, or rather reflecting, it seems, the ideological shift in thought regarding the issues of authorship over text), autobiographical writing—of any kind, in fact—is critically regarded as an impossible and unattainable standard of almost mythical quality. This line of argument follows that of Gérard Genette's *concommitance* (manipulation of narrative time) in that it points to the fact that all texts are in a sense autobiographical, and yet no literary production can be an exact rendition of a life—De Man cites a line from Wordsworth: "of these [are] neither, and [are] both at once" (921). To attempt at filtering the presumably authentic from the fictitious, one is captured in a mechanism similar to that of a "revolving door"

(*tourniquet*), due to the constant play of references, an undecidable problem (921). The writing process consists in coding the otherwise unaccountable events into an inevitably fictional narrative built of tropes, thus authenticity ceases to be a proper criterion altogether (922).

Consequently, it is thanks to the structuralist assumptions of a systemic character of literary phenomena that the "grand persona" of the author is deprived of his status of the absolute source (Smith and Watson 116). This is most clearly seen in several canonical texts by Roland Barthes which share the message of the perhaps best-known "Death of the Author," in which Barthes writes: "the image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life" (142). He observes, however, a possible change in reading: "*We know now* that a text is not... a single... 'message' of the Author-God" (144, my italics), therefore, equivocal interpretation should be encouraged instead of "furnish[ing] [the text] with a final signified" (147). With the role of authorial intention effaced, the reader's role is in turn emphasized.[3]

The idea of the ontological status of the text is also crucial to Brian McHale's argument about the shift in cultural dominant being the (only) significant difference between modernism and postmodernism in arts (10). Truth, one can infer from McHale's essay, in the postmodern stylistics need no more be tested out of an epistemological concern. Thus, in the context of life-writing, also the question of *knowing* which events of a life are real and of discerning them from the fictional content of a literary work can be interpreted as less relevant (McHale sees epistemology to be present, but increasingly *backgrounded*) (11). One way in which such an approach is manifested is the authors' tendency to adopt styles which reinforce the fictional undertone of a piece of life-writing. These, it may be argued, can be generally described as techniques more or less explicitly accentuating a decline of realist depiction, and defying the principle of verisimilitude in the textual ways in which they operate. In this context, Jonathan Franzen's novel might seem surprisingly traditional, as it does not overtly engage in these practices.

A few sentences should be devoted here to a phenomenon which is related to those described above and just as recent, although its problems do not fall within the scope of this paper: namely, the interest in the presence of the personal and the autobiographical within the framework of science and the humanities. One sign of this preoccupation of academic milieus with the personal and autobiographical

3 Barthes' text has enjoyed such immense popularity that it may be superfluous to summarize it here; however, it should be noted that the French author is a pioneer in the context of autofiction in the sense of treating his own autobiographical texts as fictional (as mentioned e.g. by Masschelein, Laouyen, Smith and Watson).

aspects of literary and critical production (and thus also, possibly, their inherent fictitious element) are initiatives exemplified by the *PMLA* symposium whose two parts were entitled "Inevitability of the Personal" and "Problems with Personal Criticism," a project in which writers and academics were asked to comment upon "the place, nature, or limits (if any) of the personal in scholarship" (Holland 1146). In the foreword to this collection of texts, Norman Holland states that "[t]he self *permeates reading*. The self therefore permeates criticism, theory, and scholarship. It takes no great talent as a reader to interpret scholarly essays in terms of the author's strivings, yearnings" (1146, my italics). The personal element is, then, not so much a question of programmatic authorial intention, as Anderson would argue in her introduction to autobiography studies (1), but rather it is rather reinterpreted in the process of readerly analysis.

In this paper, I will focus on the tactics by which the fictional element meets the autobiographical design and try to assess the characteristics of how those two merge to form quasi-dissimulated autobiographical undercurrents in *Freedom*. These features represent either an intentional authorial play with the conventions of life-writing, or the tropes related to these conventions which resound in Jonathan Franzen's text and beyond (in the space in-between fiction and fact, as created by the media narratives). *Freedom* is a rather traditionally constructed work of prose which devotes its nearly six hundred pages to a story of an American upper middle class family, with focalization alternating between the protagonists. It is described on the cover as an "epic" novel which "comically and tragically captures the temptations and burdens of liberty" and succeeds in convincingly presenting an "indelible and deeply moving portrait of our time." Despite the growing popularity of both the book and its author among readers in the United States and worldwide, as well as *Freedom*'s acclaim in reviews, critical assessment proves problematic due to the lack of secondary sources, as the novel was released relatively recently.

Patty and the Autobiographer

Although *Freedom* traces the course of lives of three main characters and the interplay between their decisions and desires, the protagonist is clearly Patty Berglund. A misfit in a liberal democratic family of intellectuals, Patty's story can be perhaps best summarized as a troubled individual's search for normalcy. Intelligent and sarcastic, she is endowed with a sense of humor and has a penchant for dramatizing, as well as depressive tendencies. The book's main focus is Patty's relationships—the marriage with Walter Berglund and an affair with his best friend Richard, the bond she shares with her two children—and

the way she describes and evaluates her actions and decisions in terms of success and failure.

In the chapters where it is Patty's perspective that is assumed by the narrator (who otherwise describes various events which in some way involve Patty from other characters' points of view), the twist lies in the curious approach to heterodiegetic narration: the realities of Patty's life are being related by an "autobiographer" and provided with multiple comments either expressing regret or giving explanation for Patty's actions throughout her life. Although the autobiographer and Patty represent the same person, the former has a different perspective on the past events, a perspective supposedly gained with time and experience. The "greater knowledge" of the writing instance is explicitly and repeatedly expressed in the text: we learn, for example, that a particular fact changes its meaning "in an irony then invisible to Patty but now plenty visible to the autobiographer" (Ch. 2).

This play of signifiers is not, however, limited to the purpose of providing a commentary that would otherwise be impossible to include without resorting to third-person omniscient type of narration. The narrator is aligned with the autobiographer also in order to express views on the ways in which formulas of both autobiographical account and storytelling usually operate. Just one example is the autobiographer's assumption that "one hesitates to ascribe too much explanatory significance to sex, and yet the autobiographer would be derelict in her duties if she didn't devote an uncomfortable paragraph to it" (Ch. 3), evoking one of autobiography's criteria, i.e. in this case, that of sincerity as well as candidness towards the reader (which necessarily entails the premise of the transparency of language) (Smith and Watson 155). The subject matter which is being related concerns an extremely intimate sphere of the speaking subject's life that needs nevertheless to be put into words whose meaning the reader should be able to fathom and relate to.

The fourth chapter of *Freedom* opens with the following meta-commentary, an illustration of several points I want to discuss further:

> The autobiographer, mindful of her reader and the loss he suffered, and mindful that a certain kind of voice would do well to fall silent in the face of life's increasing somberness, has been trying very hard to write these pages in first and second person. But she seems doomed, alas, as a writer, to be one of those jocks who refer to themselves in third person. Although she believes herself to be genuinely changed, and doing infinitely better than in the old days, and therefore worthy of a fresh hearing, she still can't bring herself to let go of a voice she found when she had nothing else to hold on to, even if it means that her reader throws this document straight into his old Macalester College wastebasket. (Ch. 4)

Despite her postulated awareness of the implications of the stylistic turn (in which she resorts to third-person narration, thus rendering her old self a fictional character), the protagonist finds herself actually unable to resign from the appeal and the comfort which the formula seems to offer. This holds true regardless of whether one interprets "the reader" to be Patty's husband to whose attention the text is dedicated, or the actual reader of Franzen's novel. In his foreword to the comprehensive anthology *The Ethics of Life Writing*, Paul John Eakin claims that the popularity and pervasiveness of formulas of self-narrativization via novelistic discourse are based on the assumption according to which the author/speaking subject is "*someone*, someone who has lived a valuable life, a value affirmed precisely by any life story's implicit claim that it is worth telling and hearing" (5, my italics); a similar argument is found in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's study of the history of autobiography criticism (116). Franzen reproduces this logic in writing explicitly that the autobiographer, more aware of herself than Patty used to be, wiser and more successful, considers herself "worthy of a fresh hearing" (Ch. 4). What is confirmed, therefore, is a premise fundamental for numerous autobiographies: that a sequence of events in a life should only be held as valid material for an autobiographical account once the speaking subject presents themselves as a more experienced, if not more accomplished person.

Freedom of Expression

Taken at face value (even considering the very title), the book presents itself as a multifaceted approach to what people do with their freedom when they are relatively well-off and living in an environment of neoliberal democracy, and how they make and then assess their choices in a world individualized to the extreme. In a passage which can be considered emblematic of the novel's message, the protagonist visits her estranged daughter in college and suddenly finds herself "falling into a depression that deepened precipitously" having "endured… an afternoon colloquium ('Performing Identity in a Multivalent World') attended by scores of other parents" (Ch. 3). To make matters worse, she is refused an easy reconciliation with the daughter who says goodbye to her "gazing with desolate self-control at the main college building, on an outside wall of which Patty had noticed a stone graven with words of wisdom from the Class of 1920: USE WELL THY FREEDOM" (Ch. 3). The inclusion of such a meaningful scene is an interesting take at *mise en abyme*, a stylistic trope with a long tradition which is too facile to be recognized by the reader and which, nevertheless, seems to constitute one of tools characteristic of the panoply of postmodernist aesthetics.

A less evident reading, yet relevant for the purpose of my argument, is one in which the notion of *freedom* should be seen in terms of a convention-forming condition for life writing. "In fashioning our identity narratives, relating our 'lifeplans'… we exercise that 'expressive freedom'" which constitutes "a defining mark of the modern individual," writes Eakin (5); it is even more so due to such writing's specificity as a future-oriented project. Hence, the concept of having the liberty in describing personal decisions seems inextricably linked to the basic values of individualism as it is understood in Western societies. At this point, a selection of founding conventions for life writing is worth mentioning in the context of Franzen's work: the coming-of-age novel, the conversion narrative, and the confession.

According to most discussions of the typology of the formation novel, also named the bildungsroman (understood generally as a Western type of narrative focused on the process of character formation, as opposed to the strict understanding of the term in which it represents a literary genre of German origin whose name should be spelled with a capital letter) (Iversen 11), this kind of narrative has its protagonists gain understanding on the basis of "important, identity-shaping life experiences," through which they are able to grasp a "whole, uncensored picture of what life and the world are like" and eventually embrace an "acceptance of the real" (Iversen 99). The experience which accounts for this kind of knowledge should ideally include various sorts of hardship and trouble, as "failure and loss are as important as learning" (Iversen 99).

In *Freedom*, the protagonist's specimen of life-writing is given the following title: "Mistakes Were Made: Autobiography of Patty Berglund by Patty Berglund (Composed at her Therapist's Suggestion)" (Ch. 1). The mere title suggests a reinvention, in terms of parody perhaps, of Enlightenment novels of education along with their longish, pompous titles; furthermore, the most significant events of the protagonist's life are of grave and traumatizing character: falling victim to rape, being deceived by a best friend, and a sudden end to a promising career in sports, among others. More important, however, is the fact that the word "mistake" is used in Patty's account with obsessive regularity: in fact, she sees herself as "a person who, by her own admission, made nothing but mistakes." In admitting at one point that "one mistake she hadn't made about herself was wanting to be a mother" (Ch. 4), she seems unable to refrain from using the word even to refer to personal success. She goes as far as to question her own powers of judgment by stating that "having made so many mistakes in her life, she has every reason to assume she's being unrealistic" (Ch. 4), etc.

This, then, is a reinvention of an assumption considered classic for autobiographical writing (whether it is consciously introduced by the author of *Freedom*,

or transplanted along with other tropes of the autobiographical formula, cannot be determined by readers, which in turn may account for how insidiously these characteristics seem transparent): the concept of a quality which should be crucial for "identity" and simultaneously refers to a need of constant development was introduced as early as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings. In Paul De Man's view, "the direct correlative of *freedom*" is that "freedom is man's will to change, or what Rousseau somewhat misleadingly calls 'perfectibility'" (*Allegories* 140; my italics). De Man is quick to add that this misleading aspect of the notion is due to its possible application not only to the future as a prospect, but to the fact that it also works in retrospection (140), thus allowing for a variable assessment of individual actions taken by a thinking subject in their past. This, in turn, means that the significance and character of memories can be retroactively remodeled and "perfected," which emphasizes the inevitable fictionality of the autobiographic literary output.

In her narrative included in *Freedom*, Patty claims that it is only at the moment of enunciation that she has gained an understanding thanks to which she can grasp the significance of certain things, and that prior to that moment, she was mostly unaware of what she was really going through. The autobiographer recounts that "based on her inability to recall her state of consciousness in her first three years at college, the autobiographer suspects [Patty] simply didn't have a state of consciousness. She had the sensation of being awake but in fact she must have been sleepwalking" (Ch. 2). What the novel lacks is a definitive moment of awakening—such a turning point can be located either in Patty's collapse into depression, or in the act of Patty's composing her autobiography; or even—although this is chronologically out of keeping with "Mistakes Were Made"—in her life's subsequent collapse after her husband has found the file with her manuscript and, after reading it, promptly left her. However, the fact that she decides to formulate a narrative of her past life following a realization that she is at present a transformed individual can be associated with both the bildungsroman (due to the heterodiegetic methods of narration she chooses) and the conversion narrative.

There is no need to offer here an elaborate description of the role of the confession in autobiographical fiction, as it evidently lies at the root of all life writing, a speech act so essential that it actually "requires a consciousness of self 'peculiar to the Western man'" (Anderson 18).[4] A different aspect, however, is

4 The formula of confession dates back to the "first book-length autobiographical narrative," St. Augustine's *Confessions* (written ca. 397) which, interestingly, is simultaneously a conversion narrative in its literal sense (Smith and Watson 85). It is revived notably in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, of which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write:

more pertinent for this argument. In *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, edited by Smith and Watson, a chapter devoted to the confession accounts for the term's recent functioning as a "distinctive subgenre"; on the other hand, it is also emphasized that confessional elements can be found in any kind of literary production which aims at expressing "the essential nature, the truth of the self" (Felski 83). Additionally, Rita Felski argues that such writing simultaneously "confuses the boundaries between fiction and autobiography" (84), i.e., despite its aspirations at "deep" authenticity, it also aims at reclaiming this kind of authenticity by consciously embracing life-writing's inevitably fictitious elements, rather than denying or dissimulating their existence.

An essential trait of female or feminist confessional literature is to seek that effect via revealing details of one's life which are "most intimate and often traumatic" (Felski 83). In *Freedom*, of course, this is not the case in its literal sense, the book being a work of pure fiction. However, it may be argued that the author consciously resorted to the tactics of feminist confession by making his heroine a rape survivor and a depression patient, and by placing her in a situation where she has to write her autobiography to a therapeutic end. The final question one may ask is whether an author like Jonathan Franzen does not, in fact, usurp the supposed effects of such an unveiled, raw narration of the undisclosed personal voice, by accepting its logic.[5] This is not to say that the author of *Freedom* is, by any means, alone in pursuing such a practice—male authors incorporating the first-person perspective of a female subject have been far from rare in works of prose, which again accounts for a rather classic procedure of facilitated by the traditional novelistic discourse.

"[f]or some, Rousseau inaugurates modern autobiography, with his focus on childhood, his retrospective chronology, his radical individualism, and his antagonistic relationship with both his readers and the reader. For others, Rousseau's legacy… is a radical individualism that privileges the white male citizen", giving origin to "a suspect site of exclusionary practices" in life-writing (96). The feminist take is both imitative of and subversive towards the traditional understanding of confession.

5 A popular review in the book section of a widely-read magazine readily states that Franzen is a skilled writer in that he "also does women very well" (Miller); studies of autobiography criticism, on the other hand, point to the fact that while some feminist theories of representation (such as Felski's discussion of the poetics of feminist confession) embrace adherence to certain models in order to hit a familiar tone and thus gain a greater appeal, evoke empathy and solidarity, others in fact "problematized 'experience' as a transparent category of meaning", undermining it, and "critiqued the notion of a universalized 'woman'" (Smith and Watson 134).

More Conventions

Once we assume that the fictionalization of a story of one's own life is indeed an empowering act—as it endows the subject with a larger perspective and helps them achieve a therapeutic effect—the following question nevertheless arises: why does Patty feel that her life, once it is put in words, in fact reproduces a cliché?

> Where did the self-pity come from? The inordinate volume of it? By almost any standard, she led a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable. The autobiographer is almost forced to the conclusion that she pitied herself for being so free. (Ch. 3)

The suggestion that Patty actually feels better when she thinks of herself as a protagonist in a narrative, can be seen as an instance of mimetic desire. A concept introduced and developed in René Girard's seminal essay, the mimetic desire of the "triangular" type refers to the desire for an idea. In Girard's argument, one never chooses an object of desire for the actual value it holds for the subject, but gratification can merely be desired when it is embraced by another person: the only possible emanation of the object's appeal is through an intermediary (Buvik 294). It is also in the process of digesting literary works that individuals accept the needs and values transferred via text as their own, to subsequently incorporate them in their lives.[6]

It may be argued, therefore, that where mimetic desire manifests itself most vividly, it also constitutes one of the fundamental reasons of autofictional literature's emergence: the need to see one's own life in terms which we have appropriated from literary production. Although Girard's concept finds additional reference in the triangular nature of the relationship between the three protagonists of *Freedom* who seem incessantly entangled in relations of envy and admiration, more important is the fact that it is through her writing, and thus by distancing herself from her actual self—as though by a division of her personality—that Patty (or the autobiographer) actually gains access to the domain of how situations from her life could be described. This, then, results not in an account by and about the person who she truly believes herself to be, but rather a story of what she imagines her life to be like in terms of representational methods and style. The

6 It is important to stress that what is actually at stake is not necessarily the object itself (although that may also be the case) but rather the notion thereof, a projection of one's status being elevated. This understanding may not coincide with standard reading of Girard's argument, but is crucial for the way mimetic desire functions in and via literature, and concerns the distribution of our desire to be framed in literary discourse.

essence of the problem does not in fact concern indicating a role model on whose life-writing Patty Berglund bases the fashioning of her own narrative and her own desire, but in that she adopts the split in her narration between "the autobiographer" as a speaking subject and "Patty" the protagonist.[7] Moreover, she aligns herself with the former instance in order to be able to frame the events of her life in a way that she has internalized via literary forms.

This shaping of the self which proceeds by projection is referred to by Girard as one of the many kinds of bovarysm (Buvik 294): to follow the classical (if somewhat general) definition of bovarysm as a certain mental disposition, it is best explained as the incessant desire to be that which one is not (Buvik 189),[8] and reimagining oneself as such. This is particularly problematic when confronted with the realities of life which radically differ from those towards which one aspires. In Jacques Rancière's much-quoted argument, Emma Bovary has to die in Flaubert's novel, or rather "be killed" by her maker, because she confuses the domain of life with that of literature. Emma spends her days reading (bad) books and cannot stop herself from developing a false image of both her social and personal condition; not only does she fill her mind with passages of novelistic discourse, in her delusion she "positively wants [fiction and life] to merge into one another" (Rancière 235). It should perhaps also be noted here that, according to Jonathan Franzen's views as a literary critic, it is also via the recognition of the protagonists' desire that we as readers should appreciate their efforts ("Rooting Interest" 63)—for example, Patty's investment into the project of her life writing. This is problematic in a case where these efforts are portrayed as directed towards imitating a narrative model, a fashioning of a "fiction of the self." The matter of readerly investment of sympathy will be discussed in more detail further in the article.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is an inevitable reference for Franzen's rendering of his protagonist's story also because the second great theme of the French masterpiece, along with that of false ideas which we cannot help but form about ourselves by imitating others' discourse, is the monotony of everyday life. In a fragment which reads like a surprisingly faithful rendition of Flaubertian description, we learn that, just like Emma, Patty Berglund has the following impression as to quotidian existence: "Time passed in a peculiar manner which the autobiographer, with her now rather abundant experience of murdered afternoons,

7 The naming of the protagonist with the author's (the real life person's) first name is one of the features of the autobiographical novel (this is the case of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and Harry Mathews' *My Life in CIA*, to cite two very different examples).

8 Per Buvik's essay is an explicative companion study included in the work of Jules De Gaultier who originally coined the term of "bovarysm."

is able to identify as depressive (at once interminable and sickeningly swift; chockfull second-to-second, devoid of content hour-by-hour)" (Ch. 2). Although Patty's low self-esteem once pushed her to seek approval in becoming a competitive sportsperson, she eventually settles down as a housewife with plenty of free time, takes to drinking, and so summarizes her daily activity: "I spend my life jumping out of my skin with frustration at myself" ("Enough Already"). The notion of freedom appears dichotomous in that it necessarily entails the problem of boredom. Franzen's approach differs from Flaubert's in that, instead of only describing her states of mind via free indirect discourse, the former author endows his heroine with a voice of her own to express those sensations in "her own" discourse.

If masterpieces of psychological realism are alluded to in Franzen's novel, an important question regarding generic conventions should be asked: whether life-writing itself as a set of conventions involves unavoidable traps. Again, Eakin's treatment of ethical controversy proves useful—this time Jonathan Franzen's example is quoted explicitly by Eakin when the conventions of autobiographical account are presented as all-encompassing. Invited to participate in a television program, the writer was filmed visiting his hometown in such a way as to best fit the needs of a biographical footage, and soon found it impossible to escape "being forced into reductive molds for identity and life story" (Eakin 13). Unwilling to allow such a reduction of the narrative of his own self, Franzen later took his revenge by retelling the story of the filming along with elements of an autobiographical account in an essay published in *The New Yorker* (14). However, what may seem like an act of regaining control over narration concerning the events of one's own life, proves in fact to be a manifestation of power that is only illusory, as the writer "has in effect exchanged one conventional life story scene… for another standard feature of autobiographical narrative" (14). Thus, trying to avoid one cliché-ridden narrative structure, the writer inevitably falls into another, because "the essay, for all its 'counterstory' color, tells a familiar story after all" (14). "We are more involved in 'dominant frames of interpretation' than we like to think," Eakin concludes (14).

Linda Hutcheon's discussion of parody proves useful when applied in this context: the critic defines parody to be, among others, "the critical quotation of preformed literary language with comic effect" (41) and paraphrases Michel Butor's opinion that any element transplanted into another work of literature is necessarily "a kind parody because of its 'transconceptualization'" (41). In this totalizing logic, the parody effect seems indeed quite impossible to avoid as one attempts to render the story of one's life with the use of elements which are in fact but borrowings from within an immeasurable body of existing texts.

Dispersion of Identification

When we attempt at deducing a coherent logic which underlies Jonathan Franzen's narrative tactics in terms of possible approaches to mixing autobiography and fiction, a paradox can be observed. The way for readerly reception Franzen advocates is one in which the author's personality should be inferred from the tissue of the text, and the author of *Freedom* declares himself actually "convinced that a fiction writer's oeuvre is a mirror of the writer's character" ("Rooting Interest" 60). And yet, in a lecture explaining his own personal approach to writing, the author emphasizes the need to keep in mind that "the greater the autobiographical content of a fiction writer's work, the *smaller* its superficial resemblance to the writer's actual life. The deeper the writer digs for meaning, the more the random particulars of the writer's life become *impediments*" ("Jonathan Franzen: The Path to Freedom," original italics). In so stating, Franzen in fact provides one possible definition of how autofiction differs from autobiography *sensu stricto* (that the personal and autobiographical elements are necessarily dispersed throughout the otherwise fictional content, a thread in the text's tissue).

When asked about the importance of the personal dimension of prose during the interview for the Forum Book Club in May 2011, the author of *Freedom* eagerly states that "fiction that isn't autobiographical in some deep way is usually not worth reading," precisely because such literary production entails the author's fallacy of "not having any stake in the game as a writer" (Interview). However, this "deep way" in which the autobiographical element should manifest itself has a very specific sense. According to Franzen, the lives of real people, extraordinary though they may be, are nevertheless invariably poor in stories which could figure as "good, interesting, meaningful" as the latter narratives "don't actually grow on trees *in one's own life*, stories that have some potential for meaning—you need to invent" (Interview, my emphasis). Therefore, the personal experience that has a part in creating a fictitious account is limited to the author's emotional commitment similar to that usually experienced by the reader. Franzen claims to have tried to render his latest novel more autobiographical in that particular, if counter-intuitive, sense of double investment: "I invented more," he states, "but also drew more from myself in a much more direct way for the forming of characters than I ever had before" (Interview).

Aware of the unorthodox nature of the concept he proposes, the author recurs to a tactics of escaping the need of justification, referring to notions which can be subsumed under umbrella terms of "common touch" or "common sense." The affective turn based on these creates an illusion of universal justification of the characters' description, so that the readers find themselves confined within a framework of questions of the generalizing type: "Finally, don't we all do these

things? Aren't we all like this?" One measure which reinforces this general appeal of Franzen's prose is a tendency to introduce phrases which appear to be in fact maxims of wisdom and can be read as inciting the reader's complicity. Although the author resorts to such phrases mainly in essays while commenting upon his own aesthetic choices, traces of them can also be observed in *Freedom*, e.g.: "the autobiographer is mindful of how dull it is to read about someone else's drinking, but sometimes it's pertinent to the story" (Ch. 2).

Additionally, the book owes much of its popular appeal to the construction of characters: according to Franzen, it is partly the traits of his own character with which he endows his heroes (Interview), but other qualities can be perhaps referred to as consciously foregrounded, relatively universal (that is, pervasive in a limited, yet ample class or social structure) features that individuals tend to share: a tactics which seems helpful in this stylistic maneuver, is the rather evident typification of the characters. The personalities of *Freedom*'s characters can be expressed through label-like definitions: there is a depressive-competitive mother, a frustrated gentleman, a womanizer artist, a neoliberal shrewd youth. This is not to say that these specific types are widely encountered in fiction; on the contrary, it is rather the choice of the tactics operating on types which evokes a classic realist mode of representation.[9] It should be also noted here that although types are part of fiction's domain, they also "migrate freely back and forth across the line between fiction and nonfiction" (Porter Abbott 136). Even though resorting to types is both common and tempting because "one of the advantages of writing according to type is its efficiency" (Porter Abbott 139), its principle possibly stands in contradiction to the claims of truthfulness and authenticity of the unique self which wants to express itself in autobiographical form.

In chapters where it is not Patty Berglund by whom the story is being told (but by her husband Walter, or her lover Richard, or her son Joey, yet another important character), the heterodiegetic and omniscient external narrator speaks on behalf of the person on whom the particular chapter is focalized. Moreover, their problems and concerns are depicted as concerning values held by simply

9 An evident point of reference is Honoré de Balzac's *The Human Comedy*, a project of an all-encompassing work which aimed at representing "a history of the human heart" (as stated in the Preface to the series) via description of various facets of human character and ways of life. The French author's plan was to "draw up an 'inventory' of the vices, virtues, passions, events, and types that constitute the society as a whole" (Morris 60). Curiously enough, in Franzen's opinion "expecting a novel to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems" constitutes "a peculiarly American delusion" (Franzen 1996, 49). He himself is willing to settle for a realism that strikes a familiar chord to his readers: "To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?" (49).

everyone, the novel's themes being love, rejection, loneliness, meaninglessness of one's role in society as well as in other people's lives, to name just a few. What ultimately results from the use of the above mentioned elements in *Freedom* is a phenomenon of rather exceptional character: a dispersion of identification with multiple characters. One may have the impression that Franzen's message is the following: the author is reflected in all of his protagonists, as are in some way his readers; it is as though the writer's veiled but pervading argument proposed that, in effect, *we are all the same*. In this way, Franzen's recent fiction could be seen to invite a quite different sense in which autofiction can be conceived, as well as a new interpretative approach towards questions of its impact.

Disruption of Affective Dynamics

In the light of the above observations, it should come as no surprise that the author of *Freedom* recognizes the element of sympathy as crucial and universal for the readerly assessment of a literary work. "Without sympathy, whether for the writer or for the fictional characters, a work of fiction has a very hard time mattering," Franzen writes in an essay devoted precisely to that problem ("Rooting Interest" 60).

An element which may seem surprising, therefore, can be observed in Franzen's prose and should be perhaps best termed the avoidance, or disruption, of affective dynamics. The questions of empathy, of what the readers feel towards the characters of the novel, cannot be rightly addressed here because, although socially conditioned, they remain a matter of purely personal reception. However, what should be noted in the case of *Freedom* is the not quite tangible tone of sarcasm in description (its presence is argued in reviews to be perceptible despite the clearly distinguishable techniques of point of view and free indirect discourse, and is thus hard to pinpoint in specific moments of the novel to cite here). This hint of sarcasm may elicit in the readers a particular kind of satisfaction,[10] however, as one reviewer puts it, "the [narrator's] voice wavers a little here—it's partly Patty, smart but not well-educated, given to gauche mock-jollities... and partly someone else, a sly, writerly writer rather than a would-be writer and analysand" (Miller).

Who can the readers of *Freedom* sympathize with, then? As mentioned before, Jonathan Franzen's opinion is that sympathy is inevitably evoked when the

10 This is equally a question of reception, its effects are therefore not to be judged easily, although the popular response indicates that many readers presumably fell for this mode and found it indeed amusing, which may have contributed to the book's popularity (Miller).

aspirations of a character are described, and it is so exclusively because that person is depicted as aspiring towards a certain goal. If desire (as understood by Girard) operates on the principle of imitation, then readers necessarily reproduce the logic of desiring the same goals as the characters upon internalizing those characters' models. But given the fact that it may indeed seem hard not to adopt the sarcastic distance of a perspective inferred from the novel's narrative style, the readers might of course find it impossible to develop their own affective investment, tempted instead to take that not-so-benign dispersed narrative mood for transparent. Classic novelistic ploys such as free indirect speech, focalization and point of view techniques help to strengthen this dissimulation. Considering all these features, it may be argued that the author generally proceeds by a deliberate tactics of ambivalence.

The Comic Novel

Franzen's use of selected generic categories—the confession, the bildungsroman, and the conversion narrative—has already been discussed, along with the question of character typification: all of these account for Franzen's approach to the conventions of realist prose. The views represented by the author himself are to a large extent indistinguishable from the conventions he utilizes; it remains to be examined, however, how his policies work in non-textual reality—although the analysis will inevitably be far from exhaustive.

Following Ben Marcus' brief but rather accurate definition of realist writing, a writer can only be considered a realist if he has "foregrounded the consciousness of characters... and livestocked those characters in a recognizable setting," and has depicted these elements in a language not blatantly experimental (Marcus 41). Almost six hundred pages long, *Freedom* devotes much attention to both psychological and external realities of its characters in detailed descriptions. The events of the characters' lives, although seemingly objectively portrayed, are nevertheless arranged in a certain arbitrary hierarchy of importance. The claim of authenticity and inclusiveness of various aspects of experience which the book derives from autobiographical conventions proves to be merely a rhetorical device.

Freedom exemplifies a recent tendency to return to linear, classic narrative structures, and thus makes Franzen one of the most famous representatives of the New Realist movement (Marcus 42). According to the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Writers and Their Work*, Franzen's writing—and *Freedom* is no exception—falls within the category of novels which "typically depict characters seemingly at the mercy of their surroundings, vainly hoping to find meaning in who they are and what they do" (Hamilton and Jones 32). The experimental

qualities (such as fragmentation, non-linearity, and most of all, linguistic innovation or recourse to elements of poetic prose) seem less present in the novel also when compared with the writer's previous works, and only vaguely manifest themselves as a "watered-down experimentalism" (Miller).

The problem, however, lies in the after-postmodern character of the variety of literature that presupposes an awareness of literary conventions and their manipulation. In order to be able to avoid the kind of harsh criticism similar to what Ben Marcus has faced, critics have perhaps yet to develop an inevitably elaborate theory of an after-postmodern, ironic mode of new literature created for the sake of amusement. In one of still rather infrequent critical discussions of Franzen's fiction we read that his novels "are built on an opposition between postmodernism and more traditional fiction that is stubbornly unresolved in each novel… the proportions between conventional-story-telling-*entertainment* and postmodern-game-playing shift in each work" (Burn 49, my italics). It may be argued that, in the case of *Freedom*, contrary perhaps to Franzen's first novels, this equilibrium shifts toward the former element.

Franzen has repeatedly pronounced his views on literature's duties, assuming the position of a spokeman of sorts for the common reader (Marcus 43). It is, however, not necessarily a return to fossilized literary forms that he advocates, but in fact, a new kind of writing which does not keep up the pretense of experiment, focusing on the entertaining aspect instead: he speaks therefore in favor of a simple readerly pleasure as opposed to the sublime *jouissance* evoked by complex artistic works. What Jonathan Franzen advocates, therefore, is "approachable literature" of the sort which would embrace the "commercial prospects of the literary industry" (Marcus 45).

The Writer's Profile

The risk that an author like Franzen takes by accepting that point of departure—i.e., that, while never abandoning the assumptions of producing "serious fiction" (Marcus 46), his objective is quite clearly readability—seems to concern the status of the writer. It seems, however, that despite the audiences' proposed yearning for the "next, or first, or last Great American Novel" (Miller), it is not the validity of the myth of the (American) poet, along with his educational mission and the assumption of access to a reality beyond, that is at stake, but the necessity to be perceived in a new way, as described by Joe Moran in his study of "literary celebrity."

In Moran's understanding of the concept, the texts written by an author influence his or her real-life persona and vice versa, as they "form part of literary

celebrity itself, precisely because it is created symbolically through literary and cultural texts" (154). The one challenge a writer faces in this context is of course that of enhancing the popularity of a media personality while simultaneously preserving an aura of cultural refinement—in other words, to have an unwavering audience consisting of both critics and readers. In Franzen's case, the formula seems to have worked very well, given the attention and fame he has enjoyed in the last years: he has adjusted quite easily to what Moran calls the "climate of bestsellerdom" (155). More importantly, the popularization of a "'meet the author' culture" (149) that results from such an approach is one in which writers become subject to the fictionalization of their own personae, i.e. an additional dimension is produced in which they become characters in a new discourse operating between literary fiction and celebrity myth-making. Franzen's claim that he shares certain features with his protagonists gains new significance in the light of his merging of the autobiographical with the imaginary, and further complicates the already complex issue of autofiction.

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