Reluctant Autofictionalists

Early Twenty-First-Century French and German Experiments with the Autofiction Genre

by

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Thesis submitted to the University of Kent

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in German and Comparative Literature

August 2020

Word Count: 86,747

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Bibliography

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many, many people without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

First and foremost, I will be forever indebted to my two wonderful supervisors Heide Kunzelmann and Lucy O'Meara, whose unwavering support at every step of the project has been invaluable to me. I cannot thank them enough for their expert guidance and heartfelt encouragement over these past years.

I am very grateful to the University of Kent for granting me a Graduate Teaching Assistantship which provided the initial funds for my research project. I thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Centre for Modern European Literature (CMEL), and the Society for French Studies (SFS) for funding various research trips undertaken during the course of my doctoral studies. Their generous support over the years is greatly appreciated.

Colleagues, mentors, and friends in numerous universities and workplaces have provided an encouraging, supportive, and stimulating atmosphere for which I am also very grateful. I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Kent's School of European Culture and Languages, especially in Modern Languages and Comparative Literature. They are too numerous to name here, but I would like to extend a special thank you to Tom Baldwin, Ian Cooper, Larry Duffy, Tobias Heinrich, Deborah Holmes, Ben Hutchinson, and Mathilde Poizat-Amar for taking an interest in my research and providing me with opportunities, assistance, and advice at every turn. A very warm thank you goes to my former fellow committee members of the National Postgraduate Colloquium for German Studies Leila Essa, Joanna Raisbeck, Sina Stuhlert, and Sam Thompson. The Colloquium consistently provided a much-appreciated forum for discussion, inspiration, and exchange over the years, and working with the committee was always a delight. At the University of London, I thank Dominic Glynn for his kind invitations to speak at the Journal of Romance Studies Annual Symposium and to attend the Literature Under Constraint Study Days. At Lancaster University, I thank Erika Fülöp for inviting me to speak at

her Multilingual Digital Authorship Symposium. At University College Dublin, I thank my Alma Mater professors John Brannigan, Fionnuala Dillane, and Timothy Mooney for inspiring the fledgling academic in me all those years ago. I also extend a warm thank you to my more recent colleagues at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (DLA). In the final two years of the project, I have benefitted immensely from the various support, encouragement, and friendship of all of my colleagues in the DLA Research Department and beyond.

The thesis would also not have been possible without the love and support of friends and family. The large number of extraordinary people who have provided much-needed encouragement, advice, good humour, and a sense of belonging at various stages and places even before the beginning of my academic journey is such that I cannot hope to name them all here. I would, however, especially like to thank Aske Brock, Christina Deller, Kevin Geiß, Svenja Glass, Rodrigo Libarino Coimbra, Annie Slizak, and Markus Wahl. I cannot thank them enough for the coffee walks and pep talks, the countless games and movie nights, the endlessly delightful pop-culture discussions and humorous distractions; for sharing their passions with me, being my confidants even over vast distances, putting up with my thesis-writing complaints, and being there for me in difficult times. For all of the above and more, I especially thank Stefanie Hundehege and Ian Ellison. I would not be where I am today without them, and I am profoundly grateful to have two such wonderful people in my life.

I am immensely grateful to my parents, Anne Hamilton and Josef Obermeier, for all their care, patience, and support, for fostering my interests and enabling this journey in the first place. Finally, a very special thank you to my two sisters, Elisabeth and Nina Obermeier – confidants, role models, best friends, heroes.

Abstract

This thesis comprises six case studies of the twenty-first-century French and German autofictional novel by the authors Amélie Nothomb, Felicitas Hoppe, Michel Houellebecq, Thomas Meinecke, Clemens J. Setz, and Anne F. Garréta and Jacques Roubaud. This study is concerned with novels which, although they might not fully conform to the autofiction genre, are clearly aware of and respond to many of the same concerns with which the genre engages or which it raises. Significantly, while none of these texts adopt quite the same approach to genre subversion, they can all be read as experimentations with the autofiction genre, with the various aims of affirming or critiquing it, or drawing attention to related concerns regarding contemporary (first-person) narrative conventions and storytelling. Precisely because autofiction is experiencing a surge in popularity, on the one hand, and because it is a genre that, despite its inherent difficulties in terms of reception, is often approached by readers in quite a careless, biographical manner, on the other, it lends itself as a genre through which contemporary authors may explore newer developments in novelistic genres and contemporary forms of storytelling more broadly. As my close readings and engagement with relevant theories of autofiction, genre, and narratology will show, these novels demonstrate an extreme self-awareness and self-consciousness with regards to their generic status and engage in explicit or implicit dialogue with autofiction and genre theory. They make use of postmodern tools such as metafictionality and extremely complex associative narrative structures in order to subvert both the autofictional character's authority and the reader's expectations. However, as this thesis argues, these novels are not representative of an entirely new genre or literary era, even though the more experimental and open-ended texts in the latter half of this study gesture toward potential changes in the future, as influenced by models of digital textuality.

List of Abbreviations

Chapter One

Hygiène de l'assassin (*HA*)

Mercure (*M*)

Péplum (*P*)

Robert des noms propres (*RNP*)

Une forme de vie (*UFV*)

Chapter Two

Hoppe (*H*)

Chapter Three

Ennemis publics (*EP*)

La carte et le territoire (*CT*)

Chapter Four

Lookalikes (*L*)

Chapter Five

Indigo (*I*)

Chapter Six

Éros mélancolique (*ÉM*)

Introduction

Fixing the Framework: Why Autofiction? Why Now?

It is a commonplace that any analysis of the contemporary runs the risk of being obsolete mere years later. The use of the term 'early twenty-first-century' in the title of this thesis does not change the fact that, at the time of writing, the corpus of texts at the core of this study is still very contemporary. The question of what counts as 'contemporary' is, moreover, debatable, and matters of clarity are not helped by the fact that many of the issues discussed here – in particular the contemporary novel and the autofiction genre – are likewise notoriously difficult to define and categorise.[1] It is clear from the outset, therefore, that the scope for definitive assessments of the contemporary French and German experimental autofictional novel is limited by the fact that broader trends, by and large, can only be recognised in retrospect. If we accept Robert Eaglestone's pragmatic view that 'contemporary' means 'the last ten years or so' (Eaglestone 2013: 23), then the case can be made that simply not enough time has passed since the publication of most of the novels examined in this thesis in order to undertake meaningful criticism. Nonetheless, despite the difficulties involved, there is always a certain appeal to studying the contemporary, precisely because it is contemporary to our lives, and therefore possesses a presence, immediacy, and, perhaps, urgency which historical literature does not. In his study on the subject, Sumon Gupta describes the appeal of engaging with contemporary literature in the following manner:

> [W]e probably choose to read contemporary literature because we expect it to be directly relevant to our lives and our world. We hope to find in it expressions and issues with which we are familiar. We anticipate resonances with our experiences, attitudes and concerns, as these have developed within our lifetimes and surface in our everyday lives. […] [C]ontemporary literature is read with a sense of being closer to us than literature from the past. We feel that the literature that is written and appears in our time is more intimately connected with the complexity and messiness of our lives. It is in tune with how we speak and what we think about and observe. That means that we usually think of contemporary literature in the blurred way in which we think of our lives and times. (Gupta 2012: 2-3)

[1] There has also been considerable critical discussion surrounding the question of whether it is, in fact, useful to refer to autofiction as a genre. I will return to this question briefly below, but, for the sake of clarity and consistency, I shall refer to autofiction as a genre throughout this thesis.

Gupta advocates examining contemporary literature in a systematic, rather than 'blurred' way, yet acknowledges that its 'unwieldiness and breadth' (Gupta 2012: 3) make this quite a daunting task. I therefore consider the topic of this thesis – a set of specific manifestations of contemporary French and German autofiction – a difficult but also necessary exercise, for the following reasons. Fixing the focus on this particular corpus of texts allows me to broaden the scope of most recent (Anglophone, French, and German) studies on autofiction, which tend to stay within the confines of particular national and linguistic literary traditions (for example, French, German, Anglo-American, Argentinian, Japanese).[2] At the same time, by considering only two of these traditions, the scope of this project is sufficiently demarcated to avoid a lack of focus, and to allow for the identification of clear continuities and discontinuities, points of intersection and divergence, similarities and differences, in contemporary European autofiction.[3] The justification for examining the French and German context specifically arises,

[2] Recent examples include the following titles: Jordana Blejmar, *Playful Memories. The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina* (London: Palgrave, 2016); Claude Burgelin et al. (eds.), *Autofiction(s). Colloque de Cerisy 2008* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010); Hywel Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English* (London: Palgrave, 2018); Isabelle Grell, *L'autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Catherine Viollet (eds.), *Genèse et autofiction* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant Academia, 2007); Birgitta Krumrey, *Der Autor in seinem Text. Autofiktion in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur als (post-)postmodernes Phänomen* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2015); Renée Larrier, *Autofiction and Advocacy in the Francophone Caribbean* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2020); Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Auto(r)fiktion. Literarische Verfahren der Selbstkonstruktion* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2013); Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of "Me". Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018). The recent edited collection *Autofiktion als Utopie // Autofiction as Utopia* (eds. Yvonne Delhey et al.; Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2019) is an exception in this case, as it groups autofictional writing thematically, rather than along linguistic lines, although the collection does focus predominantly on German-language autofiction. The recent conference 'Autofiction – Theory, Practices, Cultures – A Comparative Perspective', held on 19-20 October 2019 at Wolfson College, University of Oxford in the UK went some way toward addressing the need for a comparative perspective, with the conference programme featuring speakers not just from German, French, and British or American institutions, but also from institutions in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and Africa, and including papers on Scandinavian, Hispanic, Egyptian, South African, Iranian, and Japanese autofiction – although these did still tend to get grouped along linguistic lines (see the full programme here: https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/autofiction-theory-practices-cultures-a-comparative-perspective; last accessed May 10, 2020). Stefan Kutzenberger's article 'Autofiction and Its (Involuntary) Protagonists: A Comparison of Autofictional Novels by Mario Vargas Llosa, Javier Cercas, Karl Ove Knausgård, and Navid Kermani' in *Taking Stock – Twenty-Five Years of Comparative Literary Research*, ed. by Norbert Bachleitner et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 397-420, is one instance of comparative autofiction analysis on a smaller scale. See also Volumes II and III of the recent *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (ed. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) for an overview of non-European traditions of autobiography/autofiction and non-Eurocentric analyses of autofiction.

[3] It should be noted that the frame of literary reference for this thesis is therefore decidedly Western, and references to the contemporary (autofictional) novel and contemporary literature throughout this thesis pertain to a French, German, or European context.

on the one hand, out of the long historical preoccupation in French and German literature with the genre of autobiography and, more broadly, authorial subjectivity and literary self-representation. On the other hand, although *autofiction* began as a French phenomenon, it has in the meantime been adapted into a variety of different national or linguistic literary fields. One of the aims of this thesis is therefore to synthesise recent French and German theoretical and literary approaches to autofiction, in an attempt to bridge the 'lexical divide' (Schmitt 2016: 136) that Arnaud Schmitt identifies as existing especially between the French and Anglo-American schools of genre criticism, but which also extends beyond these two spheres. This thesis therefore addresses the need for a broader comparative perspective in autofiction scholarship, in order to draw attention to the fact that these authors are, in fact, responding to a phenomenon that transcends individual poetics and national boundaries.

Ever since the coining of the term 'autofiction' in the late 1970s, this genre has been debated in academic criticism with increasing frequency. These debates have, moreover, not been limited to French Studies, but have begun to refer to a wider global literary phenomenon.[4] The ever-increasing amount of material published on the topic has covered various aspects and perceived limitations of the genre, including autofiction's novelty or lack thereof, its dubious status as a hybrid genre, its validity and utility as an independent term for classification, and its evolution over time and into the twenty-first century. Particularly in the contexts of French and German literature, autofiction has more recently been welcomed as a manner of reconciling traditional authorial subjectivity and conventional storytelling with a more postmodern and experimental approach to the literary text that rejects not only subjectivity, but also the adequacy of language to accurately articulate subjectivity in the first place. Due to the adaptive nature of the genre's definition, and the uncertainty that is always inherent in the experience of reading a hybrid text, autofiction seems to offer the academic or critical reader just enough postmodern playfulness to avoid a naïve regression into an innocent realism, while at the same

[4] See footnote 2 for an overview of recent studies.

time signalling a return to a more straightforward narrative that displays confidence in its capacity to convey certain truths, regardless of how limited these might be in scope.

In response to these observations, this thesis will examine six case studies of the twenty-first-century French and German autofictional novel by French authors Amélie Nothomb, Michel Houellebecq, Anne F. Garréta and Jacques Roubaud, and German authors Felicitas Hoppe, Thomas Meinecke, and Clemens J. Setz.[5] First and foremost, this study is concerned with novels which, although they might not fully conform to the autofiction genre, are clearly aware of and respond to many of the same concerns with which the genre engages or which it raises. Significantly, while none of these texts adopt quite the same approach to genre subversion, they can all be read as experimentations with the autofiction genre, with the various aims of affirming or critiquing it, or drawing attention to related concerns regarding contemporary narrative conventions and storytelling. In this introduction I will also outline part of the broader context against which the contemporary French and German autofictional novel can be usefully read, namely: the fallout and further developments following the death of the author, the death of the subject, and the narrative turn over the course of the academic discourse of the later half of the twentieth century, as well as what appears to be an increasingly tightening feedback loop between literature and theory; developments in theory regarding autobiographical writing, including the development of the autofiction genre; recent trends in French and German fiction, such as the tension between a return to the story and the persistence of postmodern novelistic phenomena, such as high degrees of self-reflexivity, metafictionality, citationality, associativity and genre subversion; a perceived loss of faith in the form of the novel around the turn of the twenty-first-century; the fallout from David Shields's *Reality Hunger* (2010) and the fact-versus-

[5] Note that French and German here refer to linguistic, rather than national, identity, as Amélie Nothomb is Belgian and Clemens J. Setz is Austrian. The aim of this selection of authors is not to erase distinctions between different national literary traditions. Since Nothomb's Belgian identity does not factor greatly into either her literary work or her reception in the French literary sphere, however, it will not factor in my analysis of her works either. By contrast, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, the existence of experimental literary trends which are specifically Austrian, rather than German, do influence Setz's writing in particular. As will become clear in my analysis of Setz's *Indigo*, I consider this text to be a crucial case study in the context of this thesis. I therefore include Setz in this study in the interest of facilitating productive comparisons between contemporary experimental autofiction written in French and German, rather than insisting on a more rigid distinction between national literary traditions.

fiction debates; the author as celebrity, public intellectual, and media icon, and reactions against this; Jérôme Meizoz's concept of the *posture* of the author; and, finally, a turn toward the digital and toward collaborative models of authorship in our Information Age. The contemporary autofictional novelist clearly has much to contend with and throughout this introduction and subsequent chapters, I will elaborate and return to key issues raised by both practitioners and theorists of autofiction, as the selection of novels examined in this thesis can be read most productively with this background in mind.

It is not only in French and German literature that autofiction has become a popular phenomenon, as an interesting genre with which writers engage creatively, a catalyst for theoretical academic discussion, or, increasingly, as a recognisable brand or marketing tool.[6] Especially in English-language writing and criticism, what could be described as an 'autofiction boom' occurred during the 2010s, following the publication and subsequent translation into English of Karl Ove Knausgård's seminal *Min Kamp* book series between 2009 and 2011 (English translation, *My Struggle*, 2012–2018). Alex Clark is not the only critic to remark that '[s]uddenly this kind of "autofiction" […] is everywhere' (Clark 2018), and it is no accident that even the term 'autofictional turn' has been introduced into contemporary criticism relating to the arts and literature (Blejmar 2016). The last six to eight years in particular have seen a slew of English-language novels hailed by readers, critics, and academics as autofictional paragons, including Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2017), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (2014–2018), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2012) and *Motherhood* (2018), and Olivia Laing's *Crudo* (2018). As Clark observes,

> [i]n the perpetual present of social media, when personal presentation, on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, is everything, these autofictions offer an alternative, experimental narrative of self. They are attempts to reshape and repurpose a literary form, and their sudden popularity speaks to the idea that to capture 21st-century experience writers must breach borders – blend fiction, memoir, history, poetry, the visual and performing arts. (Clark 2018)

[6] For a detailed discussion of autofiction as marketing strategy in a German-language context, see Krumrey, *Der Autor in seinem Text*, pp. 103-109.

The same may be said for the German and French literary spheres. Innokentij Kreknin observes much the same trend in German literature: 'die Anzahl der als "autofiktional" zu bezeichnenden Texte [hat] seit ca. der Jahrtausendwende erheblich zugenommen' (Kreknin 2019: 199). In France, although autofiction's theoretical heyday might be over, French autofictional novels continue to be published regularly, by authors such as Christine Angot, Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Delphine de Vigan.

Readers of French novels, on the one hand, may find the contemporary autofictional novel more approachable than the *nouveau roman* and texts of the 'ère de soupçon' (1950s-1960s), as identified by Nathalie Sarraute, with their steadfast rejection of conventional narrative, plot, and characters and their focus on repetitive descriptions of insignificant objects and attention to banal details. Readers of German-language literature, on the other hand, might experience a sense of relief that the contemporary (postmillennial, post-Sebald)[7] novel has finally torn its gaze from the past, along with its concomitant issues of collective and personal memory and guilt, and is now looking towards a future which, while it may not necessarily be brighter, at least carries the promise of novels that offer some postmodern levity as well as a certain amount of 'ordentlich[es] [E]rzählen' (Polt-Heinzl 2013: 14).[8] While autofiction marks only one trend among many, it is one which has been widely recognised by critics. Lyn Marven perceives the predominance of first-person narratives in postmillennial German-language novels as one example of the trend of '*Neue Lesbarkeit*'[9] or 'new readability': 'memorable voices that address the reader directly' (Marven 2011: 3).[10] Paul Michael Lützeler notes a shift in the

[7] W. G. Sebald's works have, of course, also been read as autofictional in some instances (see, in particular, Stephan Berghaus, 'Grenzgänge des Ich. Wanderung zwischen Autobiographie und Autofiktion in W. G. Sebalds *Die Ringe des Saturn*' in *Auto(r)fiktion*, ed. by Wagner-Egelhaaf, pp. 207-233; Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, 'Autofiktion & Gespenster' in *Kultur & Gespenster* 7 (2008), pp. 135-149; and Krumrey, *Der Autor in seinem Text*, pp. 80-88). However, while postmillennial autofiction in German is generally written with an awareness of the genre and is therefore, to a certain extent, written in dialogue with the genre, this is not the case for twentieth-century German texts retrospectively labelled as autofiction by critics.

[8] J. Alexander Bareis and Frank Thomas Grub note that a turn toward more self-reflexive, metafictional writing in the new millennium could be seen as German writers 'catching up' on postmodern experimentation: 'Ob dies ein bewusstes Nachholen der angeblich in der deutschsprachigen Literatur versäumten postmodernen Experimentierfreude ist, sei dahingestellt' (Bareis and Grub 2010: 10).

[9] All emphasis in quotations is original, unless indicated otherwise. This applies throughout the thesis.

[10] It should be noted that the opposite of 'neue Lesbarkeit' has also been attested, most notably by Karen Leeder in her discussion of the 'new' *poeta doctus* in German literature. As Leeder observes: 'Since 1990

postmodern German novel 'from emphasis on the general to a preference for the specific; from an overview of perspectives of totality to a focus on the local and regional; from universalistic metanarratives to a multitude of language games or biographically mediated experience' (Lützeler 2004: 267).[11] The increase in autobiographical first-person narratives even caused Maxim Biller, in 2011, to refer to this period in German writing as the *Ichzeit*, beginning a new epoch after the postmodern (Biller 2011; Krumrey et al. 2014: 11). 'Life-writing' more generally has also been a widely-noted trend in recent French fiction, alongside the *retour au récit* from the late 1980s onward (Kemp 2010: 1), as well as some postmodern elements which Simon Kemp sees as being inspired by Georges Perec's ludic writing, although he qualifies this as follows:

> Such play generally retains something of the metafiction dear to the avant-garde experimentalists, although it is more likely to be a subtle undermining of the reader's expectations about the novel's style, subject matter or plot development than it is a doctrinaire rewriting of the codes of fiction. (Kemp 2010: 12)

This is not to argue that the only European fiction of note currently being published is autofiction, as this is clearly not the case. The novels discussed in this thesis are, for the most part, representative of a fairly niche, experimental, highly conceptual kind of autofiction, and therefore by no means representative of a dominating global phenomenon. Yet, as the above quotation by Clark demonstrates, there is clearly something about autofiction that captures the contemporary Zeitgeist.

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two distinct tendencies have been diagnosed in German literature: a recuperative concern with real fates and histories, on the one hand, and surrender to a pervasive "Massenkultur," on the other, a mode where form triumphs over content and commerce is all. My interest here is in a countercurrent to both of these: young writers, predominantly men, possibly "habilitiert," who wear their intellectual credentials on their sleeves, and who are actively difficult to read. They espouse none of the "Alltagssprache," nor the "simple stories" that have been much discussed (especially in prose work). But they are also, for the most part, far from a postmodern dilettantism. For all the contemporaneity of their language and the sensuality of their writing, they are engaged in poetry as "research" in its broadest possible sense, and in this they might be deemed to represent a new breed of "poeta doctus"' (Leeder 2002: 51).

[11] Certainly, there is still much contemporary German literature that seeks to grapple with the past, as Lützeler's other observations show: 'the movement […] from monistic explanations to a plurality of attempts at interpretation; from striving for uniformity to a diversity of thought and lifestyles; […] from a belief in historical continuity to a conviction of historical discontinuity; from a predominantly utopian idealism to a dialogue with history' (Lützeler 2004: 267). Recently, the 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has directed attention especially to examples of the so-called *Wenderoman*, novels dealing with various aspects of Germany's reunification and written by authors such as Thomas Brussig, Brigitte Burmeister, Clemens Meyer, and Ingo Schulze.

The temporal focus in this thesis from roughly 2009 to 2012 is therefore by no means coincidental. This marks the period in time at which many authors begin to engage in more explicit dialogue with the genre, articulating concerns with it, but also exploring its potential. During this time, authors are also responding to impending changes to the occupation and mediatisation of authorship through the impact of the digital, but not yet fully or directly engaging with its implications. Plagiarism scandals surrounding Marie Darrieussecq and Camille Laurens (roughly 2007–2010) in the French context and Helene Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill* (2010) in the German context further bring issues relating to authorship and authenticity, (digital) textual ownership, and the relationship between the novel and new media to the forefront of critical debates on literature at this time.[12] Moreover, the recent hunt for the true identity of Italian novelist Elena Ferrante, in the wake of the global phenomenon that was 'Ferrante fever' in 2016, is just one example that illustrates the tendency on the part of contemporary readers to associate the contemporary novel very closely with the public persona of its author, to the point where these become indissociable.[13] Clearly there is a want or a need among contemporary readers to know who it is who writes the novels they read. It has become a common assumption among readers of autofiction that contemporary novels (even those that do not claim to be autofictional) will somehow reveal glimpses of the author figure, or at least the author's public persona, embedded within the text – even to the point at which the author's persona begins to dominate any discussion of the text. As Ferrante herself observes in an interview with *The Paris Review*:

[12] The scandal surrounding Darrieussecq and Laurens – well-documented at the time, as well as in subsequent years – erupted in 2007, following the publication of Darrieussecq's novel *Tom est mort* (2007). Accusing Darrieussecq not only of having plagiarised the text of her own autobiographical text *Philippe* (1995), Laurens also charged Darrieussecq with 'plagiat psychique', a plagiarism of Laurens's real grief over the loss of her son. Shirley Jordan observes that, as well as 'illustrating the intensity of investment in first-person writing', this scandal also prompted both novelists to elaborate their own viewpoints and practices regarding first-person writing (Jordan 2012: 80). Having initially been hailed as a spectacular debut novel in early reviews, large sections of Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill* were later found to have been plagiarised from a lesser known novel, *Strobo* (2009) by Airen, and from the latter's blog posts. This sparked a heated debate regarding plagiarism and the concepts of 'originality' and 'authenticity' in the German literary world.

[13] Elena Ferrante is the pen name of a writer who wishes not to divulge her identity and refuses to make public appearances. As Adam Kirsch explains, 'Ferrante has described this anonymity as a principled attempt to return the focus of reading from the author-as-celebrity to the text itself' (Kirsch 2016: 94).

> It's not the book that counts, but the aura of its author. If the aura is already there, and the media reinforces it, the publishing world is happy to open its doors and the market is very happy to welcome you. If it's not there but the book miraculously sells, the media invents the author, so the writer ends up selling not only his [*sic*] work but also himself, his image. (as cited in Kirsch 2016: 94)

Throughout much academic literary criticism of the past century, biographical readings of novels have, of course, been heavily criticised and contested just as much as they have persisted. Yet the current trend of autofiction has altered the parameters of the debate, since this is a genre that appears to condone, or even to encourage, an active search on the part of the reader for correspondences between fictional character and public (or, allegedly, private) persona – in other words, encouraging the reader to determine the exact degree to which a text is made up of (fictional or referential) truths. Of particular importance here is the assumption on the part of the reader that what they read in the contemporary autofictional novel offers some authentic authorial elements, either because it reflects the author's lived experience, or because it has been crafted by the author herself and the text therefore speaks in her original, unmediated, and unmanipulated voice. When this turns out not to hold true, as in the case of Hegemann's *Axolotl Roadkill*, the public outcry from readers and critics alike is therefore hardly surprising, since the novel then appears to be inauthentic in both senses: it neither conveys the authentic lived experience of the author, nor is it even entirely written by the author herself. The readership feels betrayed, despite the fact that both of these facets of authenticity rely mostly on (sometimes justified, sometimes superficial or unreflective) assumptions held by the readership and not necessarily approved by the author herself. Autofiction therefore also brings to the foreground issues surrounding the relationship and interplay between the author, the reader, and the media, as it always involves a complex reception process. Meizoz's theory of the *posture d'auteur* will be useful in addressing and untangling some of these aspects, as Meizoz is careful to distinguish between the author as empirical person (*personne*), as the agent in the literary world (*l'écrivain*), and as the writing figure in the text (*l'inscripteur*). At the same time, however, the theory of the *posture* also acknowledges how authors, especially autofictional ones, are often

conflated with their public personas and the narrators and protagonists of their texts. According to Meizoz,

> une posture n'est pas seulement une construction auctoriale, ni une pure émanation du texte, ni une simple inférence d'un lecteur. Elle rélève d'un processus *interactif*: elle est co-construite, à la fois dans le texte et hors de lui, par l'écrivain, les divers médiateurs qui la donnent à lire (journalistes, critiques, biographes, etc.) et les publics. (Meizoz 2009)

This will be explored in more detail particularly in Chapters One and Three.

The aim of this thesis is not to present an exhaustive account of contemporary French and German autofiction that engages with the issues outlined above. Rather, the chapters provide a representative sample of authors' engagement with the autofiction genre, particularly in such an experimental manner. The selection also reflects the relative diversity in terms of their age, gender, critical acclaim, commercial success, branding power, and generic and stylistic range. The texts in question vary in terms of their outlook on the state and reception of the contemporary autofictional novel. Placed on a spectrum, the responses toward this issue range from embracing the autofictional novel and its concomitant authorial posturing, to acknowledging or reaffirming the futility and discomfort of self-representation as an artistic endeavour, and finally to implementing an authorial retreat from the foreground of the text through more radical experimentation with the genre. This spectrum provides the logic behind the structure of this thesis, in the sense that, in the texts examined in Chapters One to Three, the autofictional character is still very much the focus of the narrative, regardless of the extent to which their authority is undermined or the narrative process of self-constitution is disrupted. In Chapters Four to Six, we see a marginalisation of the autofictional character – and therefore of the author figure in the text – in favour of an alternative, more collective approach to narration and a model of anonymous authorship, even if these are always subverted to a certain extent by the novels' narrative construction, style, and content which are strongly informed by the authors' individual poetics and literary preoccupations. The utility of the comparative approach here lies in determining how, despite the fact that the French and German novel are reacting against quite well-defined respective national novelistic traditions, as we will see below, they

now share similar concerns. This points to the wider applicability of this study to a broader literary phenomenon.

Defining Autofiction: French and German Perspectives

Defining autofiction, as Jean-Louis Jeannelle has succinctly pointed out, has been, and still is, a 'processus sans fin' (Jeannelle 2013: 223), especially since definitions tend to vary between practitioners and critics of the genre who are, often, one and the same person.[14] Moreover, the definition of autofiction is likely to become less and less coherent as the genre spreads geographically and develops conceptually over time (Jeannelle 2013: 226). Unlike other genres, which tend to be less heavily associated with only one particular individual, it seems that any discussion of autofiction must begin with Serge Doubrovsky's coining of the term. Doubrovsky's original definition, as given on the back cover of his self-proclaimed autofictional novel *Fils* (1977), is as follows:

> Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction d'événements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut, autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. (Doubrovsky 1977 back cover)

Although it has been amended, contested, and revised several times over the last four decades (not least by Doubrovsky himself) and continues to be so, this definition nonetheless covers widely accepted aspects of the autofiction genre: namely, its conflation of fact and fiction (the 'hybrid' element which is central to Philippe Gasparini's conception of autofiction);[15] its explicit distinction from autobiography in terms of style, scope, and ambition; its association with, but also subversion or transcendence of, the novel form; and – the 'aventure du langage' phrase hints at this – its shift in focus from the subject, or a traditional subjectivity, to the language through which the subject is represented (however fragmentarily), or in which, following the narrative turn in literary and cultural studies in the latter half of the twentieth century, the

[14] This is particularly the case in French autofiction. Marie Darrieussecq, Chloé Delaume, Serge Doubrovsky, Philippe Forest, Camille Laurens, Régine Robin, and Philippe Vilain are all examples of this.
[15] Gasparini defines autofiction as a 'genre hybride qui associe deux contrats de lecture, fictionnel et autobiographique, en affichant deux critères contradictoires: le sous-titre "roman" […] et l'identité onomastique. […] La matière et autobiographique et la manière romanesque' (Gasparini 2012: 261).

subject is dissolved.[16] Although I will not trace the full development of autofiction genre theory here, as this would exceed the scope of the present study and has already been done comprehensively elsewhere,[17] there are several key points that have been raised in the French and German theoretical discourses which have a particular bearing on my thesis.

A number of French critics – in particular Jacques Lecarme and Vincent Colonna – have observed how literary precursors to the autofiction genre can be identified in the works of mid-twentieth writers such as Romain Gary or Hervé Guibert, modernist writers including Louis-Ferdinand Céline, or Marcel Proust, or even much earlier works (Jeannelle 2013: 225). By and large, however, it is generally agreed that autofiction is a late-twentieth-century postmodern variant of autobiography.[18] This can be seen in autofiction's departure from central components of classical autobiography, such as retrospection, linearity, verisimilitude, and clarity of expression (Jeannelle 2013: 224). Building on Doubrovsky's definition, Gasparini goes so far as to enumerate ten criteria which, in his view, autofictional writing tends to adhere to, and which I present here in full:

> 1° – l'identité onomastique de l'auteur et du héros-narrateur
> 2° – le sous-titre: 'roman'
> 3° – le primat du récit
> 4° – la recherche d'une forme originale
> 5° – une écriture visant la 'verbalisation immédiate'
> 6° – la reconfiguration du temps linéaire (par sélection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, brouillages…)
> 7° – un large emploi du présent de narration
> 8° – un engagement à ne relater que des 'faits et événements strictement réels'
> 9° – la pulsion de 'se révéler dans sa vérité'
> 10° – une stratégie d'emprise du lecteur. (Gasparini 2008: 209)

[16] For a closer look at subjectivity and language as influenced by twentieth-century critical theory, see Monika Schmitz-Emans, 'Subjekt und Sprache' in *Proteus im Spiegel. Kritische Theorie des Subjekts im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Paul Geyer and Monika Schmitz-Emans (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), pp. 289-316.

[17] In particular, Grell's *L'autofiction* and Dix's introduction to the edited collection *Autofiction in English* offer excellent overviews. For a very concise overview of French autofiction theory, see Jeannelle's 2013 article 'Le procès de l'autofiction', which is very helpful in identifying key aspects of the discourse. For a wider discussion of French autofiction, see, among others, Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* (Auch: Tristram, 2004); Serge Doubrovsky et al. (eds.), *Autofictions et Cie. Actes du colloque des 20 et 21 novembre 1992 à Nanterre, n°6 de la revue RITM* (Paris: Université Paris-X-Nanterre, 1993); Philippe Gasparini, *Est-il je? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2004) and *Autofiction: Une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Seuil, 1991); Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Catherine Viollet (eds.), *Genèse et autofiction* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2007); and Philippe Vilain, *L'autofiction en théorie* (Chatou: Transparence, 2009).

[18] Doubrovsky has also described it as such: 'Je dirais pour mon compte qu'il s'agit d'une variante postmoderne de l'autobiographie' (Doubrovsky 2003).

This definition is highly prescriptive and clearly there exist countless texts generally considered to be autofictional which do not match these criteria. The list does draw attention, however, to several points of interest to this study and the novels analysed here. Gasparini's first two criteria are, of course, those considered to be most fundamental by a majority of critics.[19] Yet the search for an original form, as well as the 'impulse to reveal oneself in one's truth' are also ideas to which the authors examined in this thesis respond in their works, even if their novels do not necessarily correspond to the genre criteria of autofiction, or even avoid this label deliberately. The tensions with which all writers of autofiction wrestle or enact in their works include not only that between fact and fiction – that is, between referential and fictional writing and reading – but also the distinction or partial overlap between reality, truth, authenticity, and sincerity.[20] As per Doubrovsky's definition, autofiction reflects truth, even if it does not necessarily reflect reality (Delangue 2014: 139). This makes a certain amount of sense. After all, as Nicholas J. Meyerhofer observes, '[t]hat each of us is the final and unimpeachable arbiter of what it is to be us seems beyond dispute' (Meyerhofer 1999: 2). It should be noted, however, that different writers of autofiction respond differently to these questions. This is where Philippe Lejeune's theory of the 'autobiographical pact', a notion which has dominated any discussion of autobiographical writing after 1975, becomes relevant. Alongside Doubrovsky, Lejeune is therefore the second name which must be raised in any discussion of autofiction and its related genres. According to Lejeune's theory, the author of an autobiography enters into a pact with the reader, promising to tell the reader nothing but the truth of the writer's life: 'Je jure de dire toute la vérité, rien que la vérité' (Lejeune 1996: 36). Defining autobiography as a 'récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent

[19] These also match Lecarme's 'simple' definition: 'un récit dont auteur, narrateur et protagoniste partagent la même identité nominale et dont l'intitulé générique indique qu'il s'agit d'un roman' (Lecarme 1993: 227).

[20] For a more in-depth discussion of what referentiality means in this context, see Innokentij Kreknin's article on 'Autofiktion' in *Handbuch Literatur & Pop*, ed. by Moritz Baßler and Eckhard Schumacher (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 199-213. Kreknin refers to Dirk Niefanger's definition of referentiality here: 'Mit Referentialität ist dann der Bezug gemeint "auf Objekte (Räume, Orte, Geschehnisse, Personen, Dinge usw.) außerhalb des literarischen Textes, von denen innerhalb des geltenden Kulturdiskurses angenommen wird, dass sie real existieren' (as cited in Kreknin 2019: 204).

sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité' (Lejeune 1996: 14), Lejeune also specifies that author, narrator, and protagonist must be identical: 'Il faut qu'il y ait identité du narrateur, de l'auteur et du personnage' (Lejeune 1996: 15). As per Lejeune's definition, the key difference between autobiography and autofiction is often considered by critics to be the addition of a 'fictional pact' (*pacte romanesque*) to the 'referential pact' (*pacte référentiel*) of the autobiography – or, as Marie Darrieussecq phrases it, a 'pacte romanesque ("veuillez imaginer que")' with a 'pacte de confiance ("veuillez croire que")' (Darrieussecq 1996: 376).

Although not all French writers of autofiction engage explicitly with Lejeune's or Doubrovsky's theories and definitions, the model is pervasive in criticism of autofictional works. Some French authors insist on the continuing validity of Lejeune's autobiographical pact. In the case of Chloé Délaume, for example, even though she makes it very clear that the 'Chloé Délaume' in her texts is a fictional character – the phrases 'Je m'appelle Chloé Delaume. Je suis un personnage de fiction' have become a recognisable refrain throughout her oeuvre – her novels should nonetheless be read following a referential pact, or, as Sylvie Ducas phrases it, a 'pact of sincerity': 'Et pourtant, le pacte d'une telle autofiction reste bien autobiographique, autrement dit fondé sur l'identité entre auteur, narrateur et personnage, pacte référentiel et pacte de sincérité également' (Ducas 2010: 182). Conversely, some theorists conceive of autofiction's hybridity in its addition of the fictional pact as a kind of trick. Doubrovksy himself has called it a 'ruse du récit' (as cited in Zipfel 2009: 299); Lecarme perceives it as a means of unfettering ('déchainer', as cited in Zipfel 2009: 301) the autobiography from potential external and internal censorship; and Hélène Jaccomard similarly points out how autofiction might just be a convenient, but perhaps also necessary, alibi, a 'refus des responsabilités morales et juridiques qui accompagnent le pur pacte autobiographique' (Jaccomard 1993: 44). Even though both writer and reader might be in the know about the autofictional novel's referential

dimension, the label of 'fiction' can be seen as a kind of feint on the part of the author.[21] As Darrieussecq phrases it: 'l'autofiction demande à être crue *et* demande à être non crue; ou, pour se dire encore une fois autrement, l'autofiction est une assertion qui se dit feinte et qui *dans le même temps* se dit sérieuse' (Darrieussecq 1996: 377). Claudia Gronemann in turn characterises autofiction as a hybrid genre written in the spirit of systematic dishonesty ('systematisch betriebene "Unaufrichtigkeit"', Gronemann 1999: 240), against the presumed sincerity of the classical autobiography's narrator. Camille Laurens even goes so far as to call the autofictional pact a 'false' one ('faux pacte', as cited in Strasser 2012), at least in the specific case of Darrieussecq's *Tom est mort* (2007), which she conceives of as deliberately misleading the reader by presenting itself as a personal account or true story when this referential dimension does not, in fact, exist.

Thus we can see how autofiction becomes a particularly difficult genre in terms of its reception: the discussion surrounding autofiction transitions from a debate over an essentialist taxonomy of genre to questions relating to reader-response theory (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013: 11). In the context of German autofiction criticism, Frank Zipfel especially has shaped the discourse on autofiction reception by insisting that it is impossible to read a novel according to *both* the fictional and the referential pact. He also denies that these are conflated in the autofictional novel; rather, according to Zipfel, the reader switches back and forth between fictional and referential pact when reading autofiction:

> Es erscheint mir kaum möglich, einen Text durchgehend sowohl nach dem referentiellen Pakt wie auch nach dem Fiktions-Pakt zu lesen. Ich denke vielmehr, dass der Leser von einem Pakt zum andern wechselt und dies mehrmals im Laufe der Lektüre. Die dabei möglicherweise entstehende Verwirrung ist nicht eine Vermischung zwischen referentiellem Pakt und Fiktions-Pakt, sondern nur die Verwirrung, dass der Text weder nach den Leseinstruktionen des Referenz-Paktes noch nach denen des Fiktions-Paktes eindeutig aufzulösen ist. (Zipfel 2009: 306)

[21] For a more in-depth discussion of autofiction's relationship with autobiography in this regard, see Frank Zipfel, 'Autofiktion. Zwischen den Grenzen von Faktualität, Fiktionalität und Literarität?' in *Grenzen der Literatur. Zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen*, ed. by Simone Winko et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 285-314. As Frank Zipfel explains: 'Ein eigentlich unter den Bedingungen des autobiographischen Erzählens verfasster Text wird mit dem Fiktions-Pakt bemäntelt und es wird davon ausgegangen, dass sowohl der Produzent wie auch der Rezipient sich entsprechend verhalten, ersterer durch das Umgehen der Auto-Zensur, letztere durch Einklammerung der Denotation und der aus der konkreten Referenz möglicherweise entstehenden persönlichen und rechtlichen […] Konsequenzen' (Zipfel 2009: 301).

Since Zipfel's observation is based, as he explains, on his own personal reading experience (Zipfel 2009: 306), this is, to a certain extent, up to the individual reader to determine for themselves. This view is shared by Lejeune, who uses the metaphor of 'lire assis entre deux chaises' (Lejeune 2007: 3) to describe the experience of reading autofiction. According to Lejeune, autofiction will simply be read by most readers as autobiographical: 'Le problème de ce genre de textes est que le lecteur, averti de cet "écart" n'a aucun moyen de le mesurer. […] [F]aute de point de comparaison ou d'information extérieure, son livre finira par être lu comme une autobiographie classique' (as cited in Jaccomard 1993: 45).[22] Thus autofiction does tend to be read on the assumption that, although the text might not be thoroughly or literally *factually* accurate, it can nonetheless be taken as *referentially* accurate, in that the text conveys an accurate representation of the author's subjectivity, even through fictional means. Yet Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf is correct in her assessment that autofiction makes the reader 'stumble' (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019b). Ideally, when reading an autofictional text, the reader will be in a state of productive uncertainty, but this unsettling state of indecision has also been likened by Gérard Genette and Paul de Man to the uncomfortable experience of being caught in a revolving door between fiction and reality, so to speak (Genette 1972: 50; de Man 1979: 921). Reading autofiction is therefore always a complex process involving the interplay between referential and fictional generic cues. As Kreknin explains,

> Autofiktion ist weder einfach eine literarische Gattung, noch ist sie lediglich die Beschreibung für eine spezifische Rezeptionsweise von Akteuren der Medienwelt. Vielmehr müssen sowohl poetische Strukturen als auch konsensfähige Rezeptionsweisen zusammenkommen. (Kreknin 2019: 210)

Although, as we will see in the individual case studies, many authors choose to suggest certain ways in which their autofictional texts might best be read (and in some cases these are several

[22] For more on the French critical debate between what Schmitt calls the '*rationalist*' camp and the '*indetermin[ist]*' camp, see Arnaud Schmitt, *The Phenomenology of Autobiography. Making it Real* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 30-33.

and contradictory), the reception of autofiction is not determined by individual poetics alone, but also by the reader's strategic approach or depth of engagement with the autofictional text.[23]

Such responses assume, of course, that there is such a thing as a homogeneous, coherent, autonomous, self-aware, and self-transparent subject (Zipfel 2009: 307), and that this can be adequately expressed and conveyed via language – a concept which, as indicated above, has been considerably undermined over the course of the twentieth century. In this sense, then, it is also useful – and in some cases entirely necessary – to read contemporary autofiction against the backdrop of broader theoretical developments in twentieth-century European critical theory in order to expose the genre's fundamental incongruities. In her work on autofiction, Isabelle Grell demonstrates in great detail how psychoanalysis, surrealism, modernism, and post-structuralism all shaped the French discourse on autobiographical writing (Grell 2014: 10-12). In a 2003 article on autofiction's relevance for contemporary literature, Doubrovsky himself highlights many of the same points, pointing out in particular the impact of Jacques Lacan's theory of the fragmentation of the self and the 'irrecuperability of traditional subjectivity' (Meyerhofer 1999: 2):

> Influence décisive de la psychanalyse, questionnant radicalement la sincérité et la lucidité illusoires de l'autobiographie classique. Impossibilité d'une saisie totalisante de soi, logique et chronologique, comme dans les grands textes fondateurs. […] Déconstruction du sujet traditionnel, pluralité de récits fragmentaires, épisodiques. Identité qui ne peut s'atteindre que dans cette ligne de fiction, dont parlait Jacques Lacan, mais aussi sans doute, mort des idéologies collectives sécurisantes, qui laisse l'écrivain face à une situation incertaine d'elle-même. Ecrire (et lire) pour essayer de faire quelque sens de soi. (Doubrovsky 2003)[24]

As Doubrovsky emphasises, autofiction noticeably follows in the wake of a broader theoretical context heavily dominated, not just by psychoanalysis, but also by the writings of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

[23] It is worth pointing out that genre and reception are generally very closely linked in any case, as Carla Benedetti points out. Highlighting genre's 'metacommunicative function', she defines genre as 'a programme for the construction of a work in which the writer finds it economical to guide his or her own creation, but with which the work never fully coincides' (Benedetti 2005: 87-88).

[24] Although Lacan is specifically cited by Doubrovsky as a major influence, it should be noted that these ideas are, to a large part, informed by previous work by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud which has also influenced the writing of autofiction, as Alessandro Costazza points out: 'Die bereits mit Nietzsche und Freud ansetzende Infragestellung der Einheitlichkeit des Subjekts und somit auch einer kontinuierlichen Identität wird zusätzlich von den kognitivistischen und psychologischen Erkenntnissen über die nicht linearen, verdrängenden Mechanismen der Erinnerung verstärkt' (Costazza 2012: 302).

Autobiographical writing since the 1960s and -70s has felt the impact of what Mirjam Horn describes as the '[r]adical concepts [of] the "Death of the Author", the transition from unified work to fluid text, […] [and] the demystification of the author as a function' (Horn 2015: 8). As Horn elaborates, these ideas 'offer a theoretical background for understanding text and creative composition in terms of textual subversion and de-hierarchising strategies, aspects that always include the contested idea of authorship as ownership' (Horn 2015: 8). With the publication of Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979), the collapse of meta-narratives and the plurality of smaller narratives is declared. This favours storytelling about individuals on a reduced scale. Finally, Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) and Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical 'romanesques' trilogy (1985–1994) set direct precedents for the contemporary autofictional novel in their subversion of autobiography. Autofiction can, therefore, be considered a genre that is 'new and specific to the cultural conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (Dix 2018: 6).

Taking one step further, much of German autofiction criticism has focused heavily on the idea that this genre stands at the threshold to a new literary representation of subjectivity, or more generally a new form of (autobiographical) writing beyond the postmodern.[25] This appears to be mainly due to a general critical consensus, succinctly summed up by Wagner-Egelhaaf, that contemporary autobiographical writing needs to or should do more than merely confirm the impossibility of autobiography: 'Indessen kann es heute nicht mehr darum gehen, die Unmöglichkeit der Autobiographie, sei es psychologisch, sei es zeichentheoretisch und repräsentationskritisch, zu konstatieren' (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2008: 137). However, as this introduction makes clear, it is difficult to describe exactly how contemporary autofiction might be said to have transcended postmodernism. In her analyses of twenty-first-century

[25] In some cases, this is merely hinted at, in some cases more rigorously examined, in particular by Birgitta Krumrey in *Der Autor in seiem Text* (2015) and by Krumrey, Ingo Vogler, and Katharina Derlin in their edited collection *Realitätseffekte in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur. Schreibweisen nach der Postmoderne?* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014). Krumrey also cites Stefan Neuhaus's work on Hoppe in this context: 'Während sich die postmoderne Literatur vor allem daran abarbeitet, die grundsätzliche Problematik der Konstruktion von Identität nach der Moderne vorzuführen, zeigen Hoppes Texte nicht nur die Problematik, sondern auch und vor allem die Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten des Subjekts, die zugleich Möglichkeiten der Literatur sind' (Neuhaus 2008: 39).

autofictional works by Thomas Glavinic, Rafael Horzon, and Clemens Meyer, among others, Birgitta Krumrey observes what she calls 'ein[e] zunehmend[e] *Abkehr* von der postmodernen Theorielastigkeit' (Krumrey 2015: 196). According to Krumrey, this recent autofictional writing is still postmodern, 'wenn auch nicht mehr in einer so aufdringlichen Weise' (Krumrey 2015: 196), as she phrases it. This corresponds to a broader trend in recent Western novels more generally, which Eaglestone identifies as 'domesticated' postmodernism, a 'retreat from the extreme playfulness of postmodernism' toward a 'gentler, more accessible version, […] with a strong interest in telling a story' (Eaglestone 2013: 14-15). This return to a focus on storytelling is not only an aspect of recent German fiction on which critics have commented since the end of the twentieth century, as we have already seen, but it is also intrinsically bound up with experiments in autofiction, as Gronemann's early work on the genre demonstrates.

Gronemann was arguably the first German-language critic to engage critically with the genre in her 1999 article on Doubrovsky. Although Gronemann's attention is focused on French literature and theory, she does supplement this with recent German criticism in the field of autobiographical writing, citing, among others, a passage by Doris Ruhe who wonders in 1994:

> Wie war es zu verstehen, daß Autoren, die in ihren Schriften die geringe Verläßlichkeit des traditionellen Persönlichkeitsbegriffs, die Unbrauchbarkeit der klassischen Vorstellung vom kontinuierlichen Werden des Subjekts auf ein Ziel hin und nicht zuletzt die Fehlbarkeit aller Wahrnehmung sichtbar zu machen suchten, sich nun plotzlich einer Gattung bedienten, die das lch wie keine andere ins Zentrum stellt? (as cited in Gronemann 1999: 237)

Of course, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had already combined fact and fiction in the title of his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811–1833). This set an early precedent and has remained a central reference text in German autobiography studies to this day (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013: 8). The slippage between *Dichtung*, *Erfindung*, *Lüge*, and *Wahrheit* has therefore always been in the background of German engagement with autobiographical writing.[26] Albert Meier has observed a tendency in recent turn-of-the-century German literature toward fiction that seems to exist 'in einer unkomplizierten Beziehung zur Alltagsrealität'

[26] For a closer look at this terminology in the context of Goethe's autobiography, see Gabriele Blod, *"Lebensmärchen". Goethes Dichtung und Wahrheit als poetischer und poetologischer Text* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), pp. 66-69. We will see an oblique engagement with some of these ideas in Hoppe's *Hoppe*, as discussed in Chapter Two.

(Meier 2002: 571). Meier cites works by German *Popliterat* Rainald Goetz as an example of contemporary first-person narratives that are written in spite of the twentieth-century crises of subjectivity and narration: 'als hätte es die Krisen von Subjekt und Erzählen nie gegeben' (Meier 2002: 571). Yet Gronemann insists that recent innovation with first-person narratives is indicative neither of a return to traditional storytelling, nor of an innocent rediscovery of the individual; rather, as Gronemann claims, these texts exemplify attempts to (re-)create one's own life beyond traditional patterns of representation: 'Vielmehr stellt die Erweiterung einzelner Poetiken um die Autobiographie eine poetologische Konsequenz dar, nun auch die eigene Vita jenseits klassischer Darstellungsmuster zu verfassen' (Gronemann 1999: 237-238). How exactly this new kind of autobiographical writing can be said to happen beyond traditional, or even postmodern, patterns of representation, that is, what exactly characterises its 'post-postmodernness' is an issue which critics have had difficulty defining. What is clear, however, is that, if such a phenomenon can indeed be observed, this has to do with the conditions of our contemporary media culture: 'jedoch kann der Begriff [post-postmodern] eine Transformation bzw. eine Weiterentwicklung innerhalb des autofiktionalen Schreibens kenntlich machen, die nicht zuletzt den Bedingungen einer medial geprägten Gegenwartskultur geschuldet ist' (Krumrey 2015: 196). Contemporary autofiction, then, seems to acknowledge that referential autobiographical writing is impossible, while at the same time still employing exactly this kind of writing. As Kreknin phrases it: 'Autofiktion [kann] auch als […] ein Zugeständnis daran gesehen werden, dass eindeutige funktionale Referentialitätszuweisungen in der gegenwärtigen westlichen Medienwelt sowohl unmöglich erscheinen als auch immer wieder trotzdem hergestellt werden' (Kreknin 2019: 210). It is this paradoxical, irreconcilable element – this *trotzdem* or *quand même* – that contemporary autofiction embodies.[27] If, in earlier twentieth-century autofiction the goal was to question traditional autobiographical discourse (Zipfel 2009:

[27] Meier explicitly employs the term 'quand même' in a similar context: 'Dem Prinzip der Nicht-Präsenz von Sinn (und Wirklichkeit) wird eine Präsenz *quand même* entgegengestellt, die im Schutz der Differenz von Alltag und transzendentaler Reflexion funktioniert, weil ihr Geltungsbereich bewusst auf die Makro-Ebene der Lebenswelt eingegrenzt bzw. das emphatische Wissen um die "dissémination" aller Zeichen suspendiert ist' (Meier 2002: 574).

308), then it seems that twenty-first-century autofiction engages instead with the underlying premises of the autofiction genre.

Related Trends: Metaisation, Theory, Citationality, Associativity

An increasing tendency toward metafictional self-reflexivity and self-referentiality – what Werner Wolf calls 'metaisation' (Wolf 2009: 3)[28] – has been noticed specifically in the context of recent autobiographical writing.[29] Employing the same term, Ansgar Nünning goes so far as to describe this as a paradigm shift in theory and practice, in the sense that:

> [D]ie Praxis des autobiographischen Schreibens [zeichnet] sich zunehmend durch eine selbstreflexive Auseinandersetzung mit den Konventionen und Traditionen der eigenen Gattung, d.h. durch jene Tendenz zur Metaisierung au[s], die als eines der Markenzeichen der Literatur in der Postmoderne gilt. (Nünning 2007: 270)

Nünning's work explores what he calls 'metaautobiographies' in recent English-language writing, which in his view demonstrate an intensive engagement with the conventions, selection criteria, and anticipation of reception of autobiographical texts and their genres.[30] One of this study's key arguments, however, is that just such a trend may also be perceived in the examples of experimental autofiction which constitute its central focus. Metafictionality is not a new phenomenon, of course. Critics have traced metafictional traits back to much earlier precursors, but the bulk of metafiction theory developed in the context of postmodern literature.[31] Metafictional writing was memorably characterised by Patricia Waugh in the 1980s in the following terms:

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[28] Wolf defines 'metaisation' as 'the movement from a first cognitive or communicative level to a higher one on which the first-level thoughts and utterances, and above all the means and media used for such utterances, self-reflexively become objects of reflection and communication in their own right' (Wolf 2009: 3).

[29] In contrast to English-language and French literature, which has a long and extensive history of metafiction, this tendency has been particularly noticed in relation to contemporary German literature, as Bareis and Grub point out: 'Von metanarrativen und illusionsverstärkenden Verwendungsweisen hin zum totalen Bruch mit der Illusion des Erzählens, von einfachen rhetorischen metaleptischen Figuren hin zu ontologischen Brüchen der Erzähllogik finden sich sämtliche Spielarten der Metafiktion in den analysierten Werken' (Bareis and Grub 2010: 10).

[30] Although the title of Nünning's article refers to 'Autofiktionen' explicitly, he makes use of the term 'Metautobiographien' throughout the rest of the article, and does not further elaborate on the relationship between autofiction and his concept of metaautobiography (Nünning 2007: 269).

[31] Wolf names Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767) and Miguel de Cervantes's *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605–1615) as two obvious precursors in this respect (Wolf 2009: 4).

> [A] celebration of the power of the creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing. (Waugh 2002: 2)

What is more, according to Waugh, authors who employ metafiction 'explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction' (Waugh 2002: 2) – and this is exactly what we will see in the case studies examined here. Not only are the novels in question extremely self-referential and self-conscious about their generic (autofictional) status, but, in engaging with the practice of autofiction, they actively contribute to the theoretical discussion surrounding the genre.

As the case studies in this thesis will show, there is a tendency among contemporary French and German-language authors to write novels (published primarily between the years 2009 and 2012) which either profess to be autofiction, or borrow traits from this genre, not (only) for the sake of writing autofiction, with its focus on the author figure and its 'pulsion de "se révéler dans sa vérité"' (Gasparini 2008: 209), but instead to accomplish one or more of the following: call into question the reader's assumptions about the genre; engage with and in some cases criticise academic theoretical discussion of the genre; or direct the reader's attention away from the author figure to other aspects of the text and how they relate to contemporary anxieties or preoccupations relating the construction of (self-)narratives and literature's place in our contemporary media society more generally. We see elements of these tendencies in all of the novels discussed in this thesis, with the exception of the third aspect mentioned here. The tendency to distract from or marginalise the autofictional character is one which is only to some extent or not at all present in Nothomb's novels, Hoppe's *Hoppe*, and Houellebecq's *La carte et le territoire*, whereas it becomes an increasingly crucial and rigorously implemented aspect of Meinecke's *Lookalikes*, Setz's *Indigo*, and Garréta and Robaud's *Éros mélancolique*. In order to call attention to their respective novels' metafictional and metacritical dimensions, these writers perform the control, or lack thereof, which they as authors profess to have over their texts. As we will see in the cases of *Lookalikes*, *Indigo*, and *Éros mélancolique* especially, rather than staging themselves as unique, independent expressions of a singular, subjective artistic

voice to which readers are granted access, these novels present themselves as texts that exist only in relation to a wider textual web that encompasses not only intertexts and hypotexts (as classified by Genette), but also the wider developing framework within which the novel is placed once it has been published.[32] These instances of the contemporary novel anticipate, then, not only their critical and academic reception and treatment, but also, in some cases, their afterlives in digital formats and archives.

While this knowing play with genre conventions and the deliberate (and, on occasion, somewhat smug) anticipation of the novel's reception can be seen in positive terms, in that the contemporary author is not only at her most self-aware, but also, in some cases, at her most marketable or critically attractive,[33] these novels can also be interpreted as an expression on the part of their respective authors of an anxiety regarding the continued existence of the novel as such. Although fears of the novel's obsolescence are almost as old as the novel itself, the novels in question here raise concerns that are more specific to the novel of the twenty-first century. If the novel is to survive as a genre, what forms must it take, and what requirements must it and its authors fulfil? While the death of the printed page cannot (yet) be declared with any authority, the question of intermediality and mediatisation in relation to the contemporary novel and novelist has become an increasingly pertinent one, which, in turn, influences academic scholarship. Due to the high level of awareness of academic criticism within contemporary novels, this can be seen as a two-way process: academic criticism, to a certain extent, informs contemporary novel-writing and *vice versa*.[34] This tendency is not limited to autofiction, of course. Warren Motte, in his 2008 study of the twenty-first-century French novel

[32] For Genette's exact definitions of these textual phenomena, see Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 8-14.
[33] This relates mostly to Nothomb and Houellebecq, although in both cases the financial success of their autofictional novels is determined by a variety of other factors. While none of the German or Oulipian authors examined here possess similar fame or sales numbers, the have generally garnered critical praise for their autofictional works.
[34] Particularly in the context of American literary criticism, there is great concern over the effects of the 'Programme Era', in which novels are written primarily by writers who have completed a Creative Writing degree at university, and which, according to critics, entails an increasing homogenisation and uniformity in the literary landscape. For an extensive look at this phenomenon, see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

refers to what he calls the 'critical novel' more generally, which is also self-conscious and self-reflexive, and engages more or less explicitly with a theoretical discussion of literature. For Motte, a 'critical novel' constitutes

> a text which demands reflection on the reader's part. A serious novel is aware of the tradition that it has inherited, and it positions itself with regard to that in a variety of manners; it puts its own 'literariness' into play for the benefit of the readers who are attuned to that discursive gesture. It is also at least mildly avant-gardist in nature. It questions (either implicitly or more explicitly) prevailing literary norms; it puts commonplaces on trial through irony or parody; […] it asks us to rethink what the novel may be as a cultural form. (Motte 2008: 11)

Although, as we will see in the case studies, not all of the texts examined here engage with all of these questions explicitly or thoroughly, the foregrounding of the 'discursive gesture' – especially, in most cases, its privileging over chronology, character development, and plot coherence and resolution – is unmistakable.

The same may be said for the contemporary German novel. A common feature of postmillennial German-language novels is, according to Marven, the fact that they 'wear their learning on their sleeves, from historical research and reenactment […] to intertextual references and engagement with critical theories' (Marven 2011: 4). This echoes Judith Ryan's work on the 'novel after theory', which is to say, works that 'are informed by theory, build on theory, and take issue with it' (Ryan 2012: 4). Significantly, Marven also emphasises the preponderance of citationality as a prevailing characteristic, not just of the more academically influenced, intellectually challenging literature, but also, somewhat paradoxically, of some contemporary 'pop literature' (Marven 2011: 4). If we read this claim as pertaining to the German *Popliteratur* in a narrower sense, Meinecke is an obvious example of this, as we will see in Chapter Four. If we read it as relating to popular literature more broadly, Houellebecq provides an apt example, as Marven herself points out (Marven 2011: 4). It is no coincidence that, during the time frame examined in this thesis, Marjorie Perloff and Kenneth Goldsmith both publish critical, theoretical works which focus heavily on citationality in the context of the 'unoriginal' or 'uncreative'. Citationality, according to Perloff, 'with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, is central to twenty-first-century poetics' (Perloff 2010: 17).

We live, as Perloff writes, in a 'world of digital discourse', in which 'communication has been radically transformed both temporally and spatially. The speed whereby the sender's message reaches its destination has obviously created a new sense of simultaneity even as space has become increasingly indeterminate' (Perloff 2010: 4). Thus contemporary technology and Internet culture have created the conditions under which citational writing flourishes:

> Indeed, *récriture*, as Antoine Compagnon calls it, is the logical form of 'writing' in an age of literally mobile or transferable text – text that can be readily moved from one digital site to another or from print to screen, that can be appropriated, transformed, or hidden by all sorts of means and for all sorts of purposes. (Perloff 2010: 17)

Goldsmith also highlights how contemporary writing responds to the Information Age by 'involving notions of distribution while proposing new platforms of receivership' (Goldsmith 2011b: xxi). Words are, in this case, not written (only) 'to be read, but to be shared, moved, and manipulated' (Goldsmith 2011b: xxi). We will see instances of authors responding to these issues in the individual chapters, particularly in the latter half of the thesis which examines novels by Meinecke, Setz, and Garréta and Roubaud. As will become clear, this response often takes the form of a narrative constructed associatively, rather than chronologically. Although, as Zipfel points out, this is a common trait of autofiction (Zipfel 2009: 307), or, indeed, a trait of contemporary literature more generally (Polt-Heinzl 2013: 23), it is especially noticeable in the writing of this particular time period, and in the more experimental autofictional writing at the core of this study. Crucially, this is where the present selection of texts differs from the autofiction that has been otherwise hailed by critics as representative of literature that is 'readable' or that marks a return to storytelling. As we have seen, autofiction is itself a genre to be approached with care by the reader; the fact that the works in question here are also influenced by both critical theory and writing trends facilitated or encouraged through digital text and the Internet, makes their accessibility even more difficult and interpretative approaches even more complex. What Heta Pyrhönen describes as a characteristic of experimental literature more broadly – literature that 'complicates reading […] by defying attempts to make it yield a narrative' and 'purposefully makes access cumbersome' (Pyrhönen 2018: 4) – is compounded in the present selection of autofictional texts, not only because of the

difficulties inherent in reading texts belonging to and commenting on the autofiction genre, but also due to their engagement with and reflection on newer, more associative models of reading.

Reading Novels in the Information Age: The *Reality Hunger* Generation and its Discontents

Ever since the start of the new millennium, critics have observed a shift in dynamics between the author, the reader, and the media. This is related to the transfer of many aspects of the literary and publishing world into digital spaces (Doctorow 2011), the concomitant accelerated and increased exposure on the author's part to their readership, and the consequently shrinking gap between writer and reader, not only in terms of their public personas, but also their respective functions and occupations. The Digital Age has massively affected modes of self-representation, especially on online forums such as social media and blogs. With so much of daily life being led online, digitally-facilitated constructions of the self and offline reality blend into one another, to the point of becoming indissociable (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013: 12). This in turn reinforces citationality and intertextuality, as writers anticipate readers of online content who will look to other sources in order to verify references to elements whose degree of accuracy and veracity is unclear (Kreknin 2019: 206). In fact, although twentieth-century autofiction may have rejoiced in its capacity to liberate the self and its textual representation from its 'filiations' or social or cultural determinants, as Régine Robin has claimed (Robin 1997: 19),[35] one can observe much the opposite happening in some twenty-first-century autofiction, in the sense that authors tend to focus instead on the relationship between their texts and the wider (digital) textual world, historical and present, within which it exists.

Of course, literature is always written with its predecessors or the canon in mind, yet there are two interrelated developments in contemporary literature which have affected this tendency in particular. On the one hand, as Carla Benedetti has determined, contemporary texts

[35] The full quotation reads: 'S'autocréer, s'inventer, se réinventer, échapper aux déterminations lourdes qui nous enserrent, déterminations sociales, déterminations symboliques et généalogiques, culturelles ou psychiques. Se moquer des filiations et de sa place dans la filiation!' (Robin 1997: 19)

are no longer read with only their literary genre in mind; instead, literature as a whole becomes a genre against which contemporary writing is read: 'The horizon in which a text is (and aspires to be) evaluated and praised is no longer the "local" one of genre, but that of literature as a whole' (Benedetti 2005: 107). On the other hand, the unprecedented availability and interconnectedness of books and textual material online also affect how we read offline material. This has consequences both for the reader and for the author. The effect on the reader is that they read more associatively and less immersively. This is as much to do with developments in technology as it is with how we process information as online readers. As Pyrhönen elaborates, how we read in the current cultural context is determined by a number of new factors:

> New delivery systems such as Amazon, and blockbuster film adaptations of both classics and high literary fiction, as well as numerous book clubs, book sites, internet chat rooms and reading apps shape the contexts and expectations of readers. There are new agents on the scene such as bloggers, who have usurped much of the authority that literary critics and academics used to have as gatekeepers of literary value and acceptable modes of reading. (Pyrhönen 2018: 3)

Shields also points out how we aggregate information, collecting 'bits and pieces appropriated from a wide range of sources' in order to form an idea of reality (as cited in Wonders et al. 2012: 248). This information is, 'in one sense, fragmentary and individuated and, in another sense, collective in its reliance on history and the relationality of meaning-making' (Wonders et al. 2012: 248). Although the novels examined in this thesis will most likely be read as material books, rather than electronically, many of them contain implicit or explicit directions or invitations to the reader to check other, often online, sources while reading, especially where details relating to the autofictional character or real-life author and their overlap are concerned. While this disrupts the reading process and makes it less immersive, it also serves to tie the autofictional to the real world in a much more direct way than is, perhaps, the case with earlier autofiction or with 'purely' fictional novels.[36] If we are reading these novels on a screen, moreover, our immersive reading is also likely to be disrupted by other factors: 'the computer,

[36] Schmitt makes a similar point about the experience of reading autobiography, in the sense that we must 'resist' the temptation to read the autobiographical narrative as fiction: 'it is not the narrative per se that needs to be resisted […] but the (usual) experience of reading: comfortable, immersive, cut off from our everyday life' (Schmitt 2017: 163).

as a reading device, seems to be poorly suited for the contemplative and deeply focused reading we associate with the book' (Mangen 2008: 410). Moreover, as Howard Bloch and Carla Hesse have argued, the move from the 'object book' to digital text entails a 'disappearance of the author and reader as coherent imagined selves constituted through the stabilising form of the bound book' (Bloch and Hesse 1993: 8), even beyond that of twentieth-century critical theory. Authorial agency is therefore 'disorder[ed] […] in favour of an increasingly active reader' and a hermeneutical model of reading is increasingly displaced by a reading 'premised on absorption' (Bloch and Hesse 1993: 8) rather than immersion.

For authors, then, these developments involve a certain loss of control, as well as a shift in identity and function. On the one hand, the transformation of authors' books into digital text can have unintended or unforeseen consequences. As Alexandra Saemmer explains, 'the digital device may sometimes affect the author's artistic project, or even make it unreadable on screen' (Saemmer 2009: 478). Although this relates more to exclusively digital literature than it does to print material that is also digitised, it does raise questions for the reader and critic:

> Readers do not know what they should consider as part of the artist's intentionality, and what they should ascribe to the unexpected changes made by the reading device of their personal computer. […] [C]ritics who are in keeping with a hermeneutic approach may ascribe certain processes, actually caused by the machine, to the artist's creativity. (Saemmer 2009: 478).

The corollary of this is a certain loss of control on the author's part over their work, and with this loss of control comes a loss of absolute authority – which, as we have seen, has already been considerably called into question by twentieth-century theorists, and is granted even to autofictional writers only on a reduced scale. The increasing interconnectedness of online text thus implies a certain loss of individuality, as Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues, if we assume that '"coherent imagined selves" require separation rather than interconnection to be thought coherent' (Fitzpatrick 2011). In this sense, the Digital Age 'elicits a rearticulation of the author from the centre of the text to its margins, from the source of meaning to an offering, a point of sequence of a continuously transformed matrix of signification' (Poster 2001: 91). As a result, current models of authorial identity or function shift from the conception of original creator or

unique subject to that of bricoleur, aggregator, or distributor, such that, as Perloff claims, '[a]n updated notion of genius would have to centre around one's mastery of information and its dissemination' (Goldsmith 2011a: 1). The effect on the literary texts written by authors thus affected is an increasing self-reflexivity with regard to their own engagement with textual networks and interconnectedness. Authors, to return to Goldsmith, are in this sense writing words not necessarily meant 'to be read, but to be shared, moved, and manipulated' (Goldsmith 2011b: xxi).

All this being said, however, it would be inaccurate to claim that the developments outlined above have deeply affected all contemporary literary writing – novelistic, autofictional, analogue or digital. The conventional novel, as countless contemporary critics have noted, is alive and well, despite regular reports of its demise (Jeffery 2017). The twenty-first century has not (yet) brought forth what Beejay Silcox calls the 'Great Internet Novel' (Silcox 2019):

> These were the years that were meant to alter the novel's very DNA, to reprogram its source code; in which our fiction would become as hypertextual as our lives. But, as with so many of our digital-era predictions – the looming obsolescence of paper books; the demise of independent bookstores; sane politics – it did not come to pass. If anything, the novel has become a more conventional animal, the contained chaos of postmodern fiction supplanted by a postmodern reality. (Silcox 2019)

Indeed, as Goldsmith recognises, '[f]rom the looks of it, most writing proceeds as if the Internet never happened' (Goldsmith 2011b: xix). Even five decades after the heyday of poststructuralism, the author remains central to the manner in which we approach and relate to fictional texts. At the same time, however, the contemporary discourse and public discussion relating to authorship does tend to acknowledge a degree of uncertainty on the part of authors, particularly in confronting impending or potential digital transformation. Darrieussecq has commented on the '*insécurité* moderne de l'auteur' faced with 'une ère numérique toute proche' (Darrieussecq 2010: 27). Moreover, these concerns are not only bound up with revisions of the authorship model, but also with the question of form: if the future of literature is predominantly digital, wherein lies the continued legitimacy of the printed novel? Eaglestone highlights the potential in newer storytelling media – precisely multimedial or digital ones – that might outpace the novel: 'The novel is not dying as a form, but, in the clamour of newer art forms

(cinema, TV, games, the Internet, pop music), […] it is constantly renegotiating its public role' (Eaglestone 2013: 104). Especially in the French context, the '"loss of innocence" experienced by the mid-twentieth-century […] novel' (Tilby 1990: 6) has been frequently pointed out by critics as well as by writers themselves – even extremely prolific and successful ones such as Patrick Modiano, who 'has made no secret of his view that the novel has irretrievably lost the function and status it formerly enjoyed' (Tilby 1990: 5). With regard to autofiction, Ernaux famously writes in *La place*: 'Depuis peu, je sais que le roman est impossible' (Ernaux 1983: 24). While this is written in the specific context of Ernaux finding it impossible to write a fictionalised narrative with her father as the main character, her comment is nonetheless symptomatic of a more general malaise with the form of the novel.[37]

As Ben Jeffery points out, the debate over the novel's demise is itself a tired one that 'has its own kind of ghoulish quality to it by now' (Jeffery 2019). Yet it is striking that especially the last fifteen years have seen numerous critical publications on the subject of the novel's death, how one might defend the novel against its detractors, and/or its possible futures – including, but not limited to, Zadie Smith's 'Two Paths for the Novel' (2008), Peter Boxall's *The Value of the Novel* (2015), Pieter Vermeulen's *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (2015), and, perhaps most notably, Shields's *Reality Hunger*. More than ever, it appears, the contemporary novel feels the need to legitimise its continued existence. If there is indeed no possible return to either the realism of the nineteenth-century novel or the seemingly boundless ludic experimentation of the twentieth century, then the novel, conceptually, finds itself at somewhat of a dead end. What is left for the contemporary novel but an endless recycling of the postmodern pastiche so decried by Fredric Jameson? As a result, the contemporary novel appears to acknowledge its shortcomings or perceived lack of options in this regard, while at the same time not making itself redundant as a form. Vermeulen sees the contemporary novel

[37] It should be noted that Ernaux herself rejects the label of autofiction with regard to her literary work: '[Le *je*] ne constitue pas un moyen de me construire une identité à travers un texte, de m'autofictionner, mais de saisir, dans mon expérience, les signes d'une réalité familiale, sociale ou passionnelle' (as cited in Hugueny-Léger 2009: 142). Criticism of Ernaux's work, however, has engaged extensively with autofiction theory, which is why she tends to be grouped among autofictional writers.

as a diminished form that 'awkward[ly] persist[s]', but 'lack[s] confidence in a radical alternative' to its own form (Vermeulen 2015: 21). Boxall suggests that novels that directly address or represent the potential exhaustion of narrative are the ones that best capture and respond to the present literary malaise.[38] Some critical voices have, however, recently claimed that autofiction might, in fact, provide a way out of the novel's condition of 'fluctuating stasis', as identified by Bernard Bergonzi in the 1970s, and its endless self-recycling inside 'an extensive but closed system of cultural references' (as cited in Jeffery 2017). Jonathon Sturgeon, for example, writes enthusiastically about how contemporary autofiction represents 'a vitality of self in excess of systems […] that cuts against postmodern fiction' (Sturgeon 2014). According to Sturgeon, authors like Ben Lerner, Nell Zink, and Knausgård, have, in their autofictional works 'rejected the old patchwork of genres and styles and myths primarily because the life of the author is now the novel's organising principle' (Sturgeon 2014). Although it is true that contemporary autofiction does differ significantly from the examples of 'high postmodernism' that Sturgeon names (such as works by Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo), the selection of texts in this study, for the most part, shows that postmodern pastiche and writing about the life of the author are by no means as incompatible as Sturgeon claims, such that it is not so much a question of mutual exclusivity as it is a matter of degree. If we see it as a hybrid form that is indeed capable of combining these disparate elements, the (experimental) autofictional novel could offer an alternative, or potential for renewal – and this is a task with which the current '*Reality Hunger* generation' (Mathew 2015) of autofictional writers is faced.

Shields himself is certainly neither a proponent of the conventional novel, nor of the autofictional novel, for that matter. In his literary manifesto *Reality Hunger*, Shields argues that the novel as a genre is no longer sufficiently adaptable to respond to the complexity of our experience. He therefore advocates a kind of writing beyond genre, which he calls the 'lyric essay' (Shields 2011: 130). However, as Schmitt recognises, the kind of narrative that Shields has in mind is, in fact, not too far removed from autofiction as defined by French theorists of the

[38] For an in-depth discussion of this, see Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction. A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 210-225.

genre, in that it defies 'generic purity' and meets the demands of a readership that is '[a]t once desperate for authenticity and in love with artifice' (Schmitt 2016: 137; Shields 2011: 5). Yet, as Schmitt observes, Shields sees his 'lyric essay' as a radical break from the form of the novel altogether:

> In a nutshell, Shields no longer believes in [...] '*Great Man Alone in a Room, Writing a Masterpiece*'. [...] [O]n this particular point the American author differs greatly from the French theorists of autofiction who still believe in *Great Man – or Woman – Alone in a Room, Tampering with Generic Cues, but Still Hoping to Write a Masterpiece* – indeterminacy within a determinate communicative frame. (Schmitt 2016: 140)

As we will see in the case studies, the extent to which they adhere to or abandon this model of autofiction is a question that most of these texts address in one way or another, whether directly (as is the case in *Une forme de vie*, *La carte et le territoire*, and *Éros mélancolique*) or more indirectly (as is the case in *Hoppe*, *Lookalikes*, and *Indigo*). Although Shields advocates a kind of writing that is 'unburdened by the readers' referential expectations' (Schmitt 2016: 133), it is difficult to square this with theories of how reading works in the first place. Recognition of how generic pacts have been altered and generic cues have been tampered with requires familiarity with genre conventions as a frame of reference and a point of departure. To claim that a reader can approach a text like the one Shields envisions without applying any prior knowledge of genres like autobiography, fiction, or autofiction, is not only to ignore how new forms evolve from existing ones – in the example of autofiction itself – but also to completely do away with the notion of reading as conceptualised by reception theory.[39] It is striking that the hermeneutic model of making sense of, or understanding, a literary text is either strongly resisted or called into question in the texts examined here, or even performed by characters within the text itself to the point of ridicule. Although the more experimental texts in the latter half of this thesis point toward other possibilities of writing the contemporary novel through their engagement with autofiction, none of these texts are as intentionally iconoclastic as Shields's. In this sense they correspond well to the approach to literature and genre that

[39] A full discussion of the field of reception theory goes well beyond the scope of this thesis. For an overview of this field, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 47-78.

Benedetti identifies when she observes that '[t]he literary production of the last decades, whether in prose or poetry, offers us numerous examples of the return to the codified genres, dusted off with a good dose of irony and playful distancing, yes, but definitely without any intention to disfigure or smash them' (Benedetti 2005: 101).

Case Studies: Autofiction as a Testing Ground

The texts examined in this thesis are only too aware of 'readers' referential expectations', yet they vary in terms of their outlook on the state and reception of the contemporary autofictional novel. Placed on a spectrum, the responses toward this issue range quite widely. In *Une forme de vie* and *Hoppe*, the texts examined in the first two chapters of this thesis, the autofictional novel is conceived of as an inexhaustible genre whose very inexhaustibility derives from the writer herself. Although this is not a decision made carelessly or flippantly by Nothomb or Hoppe (we will see in the case of *Hoppe* especially just how thorough its author's engagement with the genre of autofiction is) and these novels do contain many subversive elements, they are nonetheless focused quite exclusively on the autofictional narrators and acts of narration and storytelling, whose inherent value derives from, or is at least strongly linked to, the author figure. In *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq presents us with a higher degree of resignation, as the novel acknowledges and explores the apparent exhaustion, not only of literary self-representation and subjectivity, but also of the novel itself as an art form. Although, by comparison to Houellebecq's text, Meinecke's *Lookalikes* strikes a much more positive tone with regard to literature's innovative capacities, this novel also makes clear its author's misgivings as far as the genre of autofiction is concerned. Meinecke's engagement with autofiction is cautious, and, despite its digitally inspired trappings, the novel and its elements of genre subversion are influenced more by Meinecke's reception of seminal works of twentieth-century *Popliteratur* than they are forward-looking. By contrast, in *Indigo* and *Éros mélancolique*, the two final texts examined in the thesis, we find suggestions for newer, more digitally inspired and collective models of narration and literary production which cannot be effected by the author alone, but

require the active participation of the reader and perhaps necessitate a revision of the reader's interpretative practices as well. If, as I suggest, contemporary French and German novelists' experimentation with autofiction constitutes a means of interrogating contemporary conceptions of authorship and the state of the contemporary novel, then it equally involves a reassessment of contemporary reading habits. By pre-empting their reception, these texts reject, disrupt, or point toward the redundancy of straightforward readings or conventional textual analysis. Their 'model reader', then, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, is one who is both an academic and an amateur intellectual. In most instances, these authors also conceive of their role in a similar manner.

The contemporary autofictional novel is, then, a particularly effective means through which to examine the issues addressed above. By seemingly collapsing the categories of author, narrator, and protagonist, the writer appears to be communicating directly to the reader, without any intermediary figures or screens. Yet, as we will see in the case studies, due to the authors' play and experimentation in the cases to be examined here, the text can give rise to a potentially endless multiplication of author figures, which in turn creates a greater distance between author and reader. This being said, however, through the anticipation or the recuperation of the text's reception into itself, the distance between author and reader (or at least the reader-as-critic) appears to shrink again. This is because the text's blending of fictional narrative and reception (often in the form of fictitious academic criticism) implies a collapsing of the categories of author and reader. This, moreover, involves the splitting of the implied reader into two distinct figures: the first being the reader-as-academic-critic, who is mocked (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the novel) for the insufficiencies of their readings; the second being the model reader, who resembles the author-as-reader. We see this model reader explicitly evoked by Thomas Meinecke:

> [I]ch [habe] gelernt, meine Texte nicht als Autor, sonder gleichsam als Leser zu schreiben. Den Prozeß meines Lesens schriftlich wiederzugeben. Gefundenes Material, das ich nicht einmal richtig verstanden haben muß, über das ich nicht Herr und Meister bin, durch mich hindurchfließen zu lassen. Und an andere Leser weiterzureichen. (as cited in Picandet 2011: 270)

With the shifting in the reader's and writer's functions here, we see the potential for 'more open-ended models of textuality' (Duff 2000: 16), not just in the sense of genre and form, but in terms of the participants in contemporary literature.

All of the authors in their novels examined in this thesis depart to some extent from their earlier concerns, styles, and generic frameworks, while simultaneously contributing to a growing corpus of texts that envisages a new function and interpretative framework for the contemporary autofictional novel. Despite such deviations, what links all of these authors is the fact that their works previous to the ones analysed here have either established their literary reputation well enough for their fresh departures to be easily recognisable in their 'autofictional' texts, or are solidifying their experimental approach to contemporary literature through these novels. This applies quite clearly to Houellebecq and Nothomb in particular, but also to Hoppe and Meinecke, who, despite not being literary celebrities on quite the same scale as either of the French authors, have nonetheless cultivated a highly distinctive literary style, poetics, and set of preoccupations. This has been underscored not only by how their texts are marketed, but also by their critical reception. Their characteristic traits are replicated in their autofictional texts, while at the same time colliding with the new interest in authorial self-representation and the integration of generic cues from the autofiction genre. This collision is all the more evident since none of these authors fully commit to the genre conventions of autofiction. The complexities, difficulties, incongruities, and contradictions within their texts thus come to the fore of the reading experience. This also applies in the case of Garréta and Roubaud, in the sense that their experimental Oulipian methods of literary construction are combined with autofictional cues and a complex frame narrative structure designed to call their own authorship into question. Setz, being of a younger generation than the other writers discussed in this thesis, is an outlier in this regard. Having begun as a more conventional novelist than the two Oulipians with whom he shares the final two chapters of this thesis, Setz begins experimenting with genre and narrative in *Indigo* and has continued to innovate in more recent publications, as the conclusion to this thesis will discuss. A common feature of all these writers is that, as much as they might

try to take themselves out of the text, they can quite obviously be identified through the content, style, or narrative devices employed in their novels.

The progression from one end of the spectrum to the other will also show how the novels move further and further away from the form of the *Künstlerroman*, with its more traditional emphasis on the development and coming into being of the author figure (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2013: 14), and to focus more and more on the figure of the amateur intellectual. What all these texts have in common are protagonists who are young writers, artists, researchers, or generally intellectual, well-read figures, with whom the reader is presumably meant to identify as fellow seekers of truth. Each novel stages a certain kind of quest for the expansion or completion of their knowledge or skills, the attaining of some kind of autonomy, self-determination, or distinct artistic identity, the reaching of an epiphany, or the gaining of a deeper, perhaps intuitive, understanding of the world. In most cases, however, the quest fails, or at best only partly succeeds, and the characters return to the unsatisfactory status quo, or worse, achieve the opposite of what they originally set out to accomplish. It is striking that the texts in question tend to resist conventional hermeneutic models of reading. This becomes clear either through the explicit rejection of these within the text, through the construction of the text itself, or when fictional critics perform this manner of criticism within the text in a way that not only pre-empts the text's reception but also mocks its real-life critics. By staging their protagonists' failures, these texts in various ways formulate a fraught, superficial, or inefficient model of reading – and, more broadly, knowledge production – that is profoundly informed by a manner of reading facilitated and encouraged by the Internet. The increasing interest in online reading and writing strategies is also reflected in the order in which the texts are analysed.

In my first chapter, I will examine a selection of works (from 1992 to 2010) by the prolific Belgian author Amélie Nothomb, whose preoccupation with self-stylisation and -mythologising, as well as the striking self-sufficiency of her artist-heroines, combine to form a particularly vivid example of authorial posturing which in some instances seems to have emancipated itself from a reading of her novels almost entirely. Viewing Nothomb as a

forerunner for many of the preoccupations and narrative strategies employed by the later authors will allow me to illustrate contrasts in terms of the authors' attitudes toward the autofictional genre, and to identify precisely wherein the innovation of the following authors' works lies. We see a greater degree of experimentation and more explicit engagement with the genre of autofiction in the case of *Une forme de vie* (published in 2010 and therefore matching the temporal focus of this thesis). Yet even here Nothomb does not cede interpretative control to the reader, and instead reaffirms the writer's role as final creative arbiter of the text.

My second chapter will analyse the German novelist Felicitas Hoppe, who, of all the authors discussed in this thesis, engages most thoroughly and exhaustively with autofiction as a genre in her 2012 novel *Hoppe*. By staging the novel's internal contradictions, Hoppe addresses current concerns regarding the autofictional novel and its problematic reception. By insisting on its failure as an autofictional novel, the text frustrates readers' attempts to construct a coherent authorial persona, while at the same time framing the author's own interpretative capacities as superior to those of the reader. What is most notable about these first two authors in relation to the present study is how neither of them cultivate a definitive digital presence online, nor engage with this explicitly in their works. To a certain extent this is due to the fact that the selected texts by Nothomb were written earlier than the others examined in this study and thus cannot engage with advancement in digital technologies to the same extent as later texts. Yet this repudiation of digital media is also due to both Nothomb's and Hoppe's eagerness to ground their novels in a seemingly more stable analogue novelistic tradition. We see here a contrast with a younger generation of writers (represented by Setz in this study) who embrace digital culture more readily and fully.

My third chapter will focus on French *enfant terrible* Michel Houellebecq's 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire*, analysing the author's cultivation of an extreme kind of *posture d'auteur* and authorial brand, as well as the ways in which the novel both engages with and attempts to distance itself from this posturing. Although, in contrast to the previous two authors discussed, Houellebecq very clearly does not write an autofictional text, his engagement with the question

of authorial self-representation nonetheless indicates similar concerns to those of Hoppe and Nothomb. Moreover, Houellebecq's flagrant parodying of his public image in this novel provides a more direct engagement with the public perception of authors than any of the other texts examined in this thesis. Although he does not entirely succeed in his attempt to revise or interfere with his *posture*, the defensiveness of the gesture is reminiscent of similar tendencies in the works by Nothomb and Hoppe.

In my fourth chapter, I will show how Thomas Meinecke, in his 2011 novel *Lookalikes*, also engages with questions surrounding authorial branding while at the same time questioning (authorial) identity construction in the age of Wikipedia and social media. Meinecke's appropriation of his literary predecessor Hubert Fichte's autofictional narrative strategies will also be examined, in order to demonstrate how Meinecke seeks to distinguish himself from earlier *Popliteratur* and more conventional autofiction, but ends up being faced with many of the same difficulties as his contemporaries. Out of all the texts examined here, Meinecke's borrows most directly and substantively from online models of reading, learning, and communication. It is also worth noting that both Houellebecq and Meinecke address issues surrounding the appropriation of digital content in analogue texts, thereby distancing themselves from Nothomb's and Hoppe's insistence on the author figure's dominance over textual construction and reception.

In my fifth chapter, I will examine Clemens J. Setz's 2012 novel *Indigo*, in which we find a more obvious autofictional first-person narrator, who is nonetheless framed by the text in such a way as to reduce him to a comparatively inconsequential and marginal character, much like the autofictional character in *Lookalikes*. This chapter will explore not only Setz's play with conflicting sources of information and layers of fictionalisation – similar to Hoppe's strategies of (de-)legitimisation – but also his anticipation in *Indigo* of a text that is made independent of an author or source and instead is generated in a digital space – a tendency that is confirmed by his 2018 publication *Bot. Gespräch ohne Autor*.

Finally, in my sixth chapter, I will analyse the 2009 novel *Eros mélancolique* co-written by Anne F. Garréta and Jacques Roubaud, in which the attempt to dissociate the autofictional instances in the text as much as possible from the creation or the interpretation of the text is taken to its extreme. As the most unconventional and experimental text in the selection here, this novel will be examined in terms of its adaptation of Oulipian notions of constraint and its unusual status as a co-authored literary text, in order to show, once again, its deliberate disruption of the hermeneutic reading process. Through the use of a complex set of frame narratives, Garréta and Roubaud encourage the reader to reflect critically on the means by which they attribute content to authors and evaluate information in the Digital Age.

Chapter One

'Ce matin-là, je reçus une lettre d'un genre nouveau': *Posture d'auteur* and Autofiction in Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* (2010) and Other Selected Novels

Introduction: Why start with Amélie Nothomb?

The Belgian author Amélie Nothomb is an interesting case, since she seems to exist in a separate critical space all of her own, with critics placing particular emphasis on her uniqueness and how her work defies literary categorisation (Bainbrigge and den Toonder 2003: 2). Critics who examine her work in isolation, rather than in the context of broader literary trends, tend to highlight her talents in humorous genre subversion and pastiche, the manner in which her novels comment on authorship and the author-reader relationship, and the intertextual and (post-)postmodern aspects of her works.[40] Criticism of Nothomb's works has, to a small extent, engaged with autofiction theory and she has been grouped together with contemporary French-language autofiction writers such as Annie Ernaux, Chloé Delaume, Camille Laurens, and Christine Angot (Jordan 2012: 78).[41] Mostly, however, the criticism that engages with

[40] For further discussion of this, see: Isabelle Constant, 'Construction hypertextuelle: *Attentat* d'Amélie Nothomb' in *The French Review* 76: 5 (2003), pp. 933-940; Erika Fülöp, 'Amélie's Horse: Writing as Jouissance in Nothomb' in *Cherchez la femme: Women and Values in the Francophone World*, ed. by Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 209-224; Claire Gorrara, 'Speaking Volumes: Amélie Nothomb's Hygiène de l'assassin' in *Women's Studies International Forum* 23: 6 (2000), pp. 761-766; Martine Guyot-Bender, 'Amélie Nothomb's Dialectic of the Sublime and the Grotesque' in *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme*, ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 121-131; Anna Kemp, 'The Child as Artist in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres*' in *French Studies* 66: 1 (2012), pp. 54-67; Andrea Oberhuber, 'Réécrire à l'ère du soupçon insidieux: Amélie Nothomb et le récit postmoderne' in *Études françaises* 40: 1 (2004), pp. 111-128; and Lucy O'Meara, 'Killing Joke: Authorship from Barthes to Nothomb' in *L'Esprit Créateur* 55: 4 (2015), pp. 101-117. Further criticism tends to focus on thematics and content of Nothomb's work, such as the conflict between the sublime and grotesque which her novels frequently stage, transformations of the female body, and eating disorders (Guyot-Bender 2006: 121; Kemp 2013: 238).

[41] The following studies engage to a greater or lesser extent with autoficiton in relation to Nothomb: Henri Delangue, 'Autobiographie ou autofiction chez Amélie Nothomb?' in *Çédille. Revista de Estudios Franceses* 10 (2014), pp. 129-141; Hélène Jaccomard, 'Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Nothomb' in *L'Esprit créateur* 42: 4 (2000), pp. 45-57; Shirley Jordan, '*État Présent*. Autofiction in the Feminine' in *French Studies* 67: 1 (2012), pp. 76-84; Mark D. Lee, *Les Identités d'Amélie Nothomb: de l'invention médiatique aux fantasmes originaires* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010); Margaret Topping, 'Orientalism and Fairytale in Amélie Nothomb's Autofictions', in *Redefining the Real: The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women's Writing*, ed. by Margaret-Anne Hutton (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 245-60; and

autobiographical aspects of Nothomb's writing does not make reference to genre theory, and is instead concerned with a more straightforward biographical reading of her texts. Nothomb's debut novel was published in 1992. Her oeuvre does not, therefore, precede the establishment of autofiction as a genre, but does predate much anglophone criticism of contemporary (female) French autofiction. This work began roughly in the early 2000s and continues to the present day. What makes Nothomb of interest to this study, then, is the precedent she sets in the sense that, on the one hand, the volume of critical attention that she elicits in terms of the relationship between authorial biography and literary work is exceptionally pronounced – even within the context of academic criticism that generally aims to avoid simplistic or reductive biographical approaches; and, on the other hand, like the other authors examined here, Nothomb often skirts autofiction as a genre without committing to it either in her literary texts or paratextual material. Accordingly, she forms a useful point for departure and comparison with the other authors and texts examined in this thesis.

Nothomb's extraordinary public profile is well documented. Publishing one novel per year, she is, as Richard Lea writes in *The Guardian*, 'a fixture of the French literary calendar, […] as regular as clockwork' (Lea 2008). Countless reviews point out how, since 1992 and with the exception of 1994, Nothomb has not missed a single *rentrée littéraire*: 'Une rentrée littéraire sans Amélie Nothomb cela n'existe pas' (Cordonnier 2017). The regularity of her publications, and also their brevity, have certainly elicited a considerable degree of scepticism on the part of literary critics.[42] The fact remains, however, that Nothomb's novels are not only widely read and sold – her novels 'sell by the hundreds of thousands' (Guyot-Bender 2006: 121) – but she has also been awarded several literary prizes, including among others the *Grand prix du roman de l'Academie française* for *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999), the *Prix de Flore* for *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam* (2007), and the *Grand Prix Jean Giono* for her contribution to literature and the novel in 2008. Several of Nothomb's works have also made it into the *deuxième sélection* of the *Prix Goncourt*:

Kate Willman, 'The Figure of the Woman writer in the 21st Century: Autofiction by Elena Ferrante and Amélie Nothomb', University of London School of Advanced Study YouTube Channel (uploaded 5 April 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkB7LLtY1Ro, accessed January 1, 2020).

[42] In their French *poche* editions, Nothomb's novels rarely exceed 200 pages.

Stupeur et tremblements, *Biographie de la faim* (2004), *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam*, and, most recently, *Soif* (2019). Yet, for many readers, Nothomb's reception as a writer is not primarily seen in terms of her accolades, and is instead more heavily influenced by her strong media presence and recognisable 'brand' (O'Meara 2015: 105). Having 'gained [...] legions of adoring fans, and an army of envious detractors' (Lea 2008), Nothomb is a sought-after guest on television shows, but also actively seeks public appearances in interviews and on promotional tours, earning her the status of 'media darling and queen of self-promotion' (Gorrara 2003: 105). Her self-promotion is, moreover, augmented by her self-stylisation: easily identifiable by her 'gothic black dresses, thick red lipstick, and extravagant hats' (Guyot-Bender 2006: 121), Nothomb has turned herself into a readily recognisable image, and this image is also deliberately associated with her publications. Nothomb's last thirteen novels published by Albin Michel, from *Ni d'Ève ni d'Adam* to *Soif*, have all very prominently and obviously displayed pictures of the author on the front cover: Nothomb dressed in black, often wearing her signature black hat, and often gazing with an intense look into the camera (this is especially the case with *Barbe Bleue* (2012) and *Soif*). While these later publications replicate Nothomb's iconic look with little variation, what is striking about the *poche* editions of earlier texts – particularly those in which some autobiographical link is implied, such as *Stupeur et tremblements*, *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), and *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam* – is that the cover image of Nothomb hints very strongly at an identification between the widely publicised image of the author and the protagonist, or at least a prominent character, in the text. The most striking example of this is the cover the 2004 *poche* edition of Nothomb's debut novel, *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992; henceforth *Hygiène*), which shows the author's head and shoulders half submerged in water, with her billowing hair taking up most of the image. As the site of the character Léopoldine's murder is a lake, the strong implication here is that Nothomb *is* Léopoldine. This identification of Nothomb with her characters, reinforced by most of the *poche* cover designs and perpetuated by her fans, has become such a commonplace in journalistic criticism that it is no surprise when Jean-François

Josselin observes: '[Amélie] Nothomb est davantage un *personnage* qu'une personne' (as cited in O'Meara 2015: 106; my emphasis).

Nothomb's *posture* and Master Narrative

At this point it will be helpful to distinguish, not only between the author and her characters and narrators, but also between the empirical person of the author and the author's mediatised image. Swiss literary critic Jérôme Meizoz takes a further step in untangling the various roles which authors inhabit by distinguishing between 'la personne (l'être civil)', 'l'écrivain (la fonction-auteur dans le champ littéraire)', and 'l'inscripteur (l'énonciateur textuel)' (Meizoz 2009). As 'Amélie Nothomb' is actually the *nom de plume* of the person named Fabienne Claire Nothomb, the distinction between *personne* and *écrivain* can be seen very clearly here. It is, however, Meizoz's term of the 'posture d'auteur' which especially applies in the case of Nothomb. Meizoz identifies the *posture d'auteur* as the cultivation of an authorial persona, 'la présentation de soi d'un écrivain, tant dans sa gestion du discours que dans ses conduites littéraires publiques' (Meizoz 2009). Meizoz further specifies that

> une posture n'est pas seulement une construction auctoriale, ni une pure émanation du texte, ni une simple inférence d'un lecteur. Elle rélève d'un processus *interactif*: elle est co-construite, à la fois dans le texte et hors de lui, par l'écrivain, les divers médiateurs qui la donnent à lire (journalistes, critiques, biographes, etc.) et les publics. (Meizoz 2009)

Here, Meizoz cites the example of Michel Houellebecq (whose work is examined in Chapter Three of this thesis), pointing out how a reading of one of his more recent novels is unavoidably 'précédé d'une intense rumeur médiatique', of which the author is, of course, aware:

> [C]es auteurs [Houellebecq et certains de ses contemporains] incluent désormais à l'espace de l'œuvre, conformément aux propositions de l'art contemporain, la *performance publique* d'écrivain. […] Du coup, le lecteur est invité à confronter l'inscripteur et l'écrivain, dont ces auteurs 'ambiguïsent' les rapports. (Meizoz 2009; my emphasis).

As Lucy O'Meara has pointed out, this very obviously applies to Nothomb as well, her self-presentation being 'more concertedly constructed than most "postures d'auteur"', and amounting to a 'self-mythologisation' (O'Meara 2015: 106). While this chapter will attempt to avoid the pitfall – against which some critics, including O'Meara, have warned – of reading an

author's texts merely in order to 'confir[m] biographical detail' (O'Meara 2015: 110), it is clear that, to many readers and critics of Nothomb's works, an identification between her posture and her narrators is not only suggested by the text but also widely accepted among critics and encouraged by the author herself. Indeed, the extent of this blending of the categories identified by Meizoz in the case of Nothomb becomes clear when one examines Nothomb's fandom, especially online. As Martine Guyot-Bender points out, to many 'casual readers' of Nothomb, 'reading "about" Nothomb on the Web has […] become an acceptable substitute for the actual reading of her novels' (Guyot-Bender 2007: 263). Yet this trend does not stem purely from readers' over-enthusiastic identification of the author with her work, but is instead encouraged through the marketing of Nothomb's books and by Nothomb herself. However, despite her extensive online fandom, it is striking that Nothomb does not maintain any form of online presence and does not interact with fan websites – although the fact that she does not actively discourage the conflation of her persona with her works on these sites could be read as tacit approval.[43]

This is not to say that Nothomb's novels need be or are indeed always read in reference to the author, and the number of her novels containing no overt reference to an author-figure with a similar name or biography to Nothomb far outweighs the number of those that do. It is striking, however, that even in reviews of her non-autobiographical novels, her *personnage* is frequently evoked, both by her fans and her detractors. The underlying assumption in negative reviews of Nothomb's works is usually that her novels are repetitive or derivative, that, as Nothomb has been publishing a novel a year since 1992, they are all in some sense about her and she is writing variations of the same novel over and over again. In the case of *Le Crime du Comte Neville* (2015), for example, a review in *Les Inrockuptibles* dismisses the novel as '[u]ne copie à deux balles d'Oscar Wilde' (Philippe 2015). Despite the fact that the novel is clearly not based in the autobiographical, the review further comments how Nothomb's 'look plus gothique

[43] For a more in-depth look at Nothomb's online fandom, see Martine Guyot-Bender, 'Canons in Mutation: Nothomb, Houellebecq et alia on the Net' in *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 10: 3 (2007), pp. 257-266.

que dandy n'empêche pas la romancière belge de se prendre pour Oscar Wilde', and highlights the novel's 'sous-texte autobiographique' by identifying the character of Sérieuse, the Comte's daughter, with Nothomb herself (Philippe 2015). As the review gloats, 'même déguisée en Oscar Wilde, on t'a reconnue, Amélie!' (Philippe 2015). The review thereby suggests that the reader's or critic's first impulse when reading Nothomb's work is to look for her literary alter egos. In fact, as O'Meara has comprehensively demonstrated, many of Nothomb's French-language critics engage exclusively in biographical criticism, neglecting textual and stylistic analysis almost entirely (O'Meara 2015: 110-111).

Mark D. Lee, in *Les Identités d'Amélie Nothomb* (2010), claims that Nothomb's 'forte médiatisation' (Lee 2010: 9) is in fact a result of the suspicion and *méfiance* with which the novelist has been confronted ever since her first publication. As Nothomb has recounted in several interviews, following the publication of *Hygiène*, rumours circulated that it must have been written by a man, that such a novel could not have been written by a woman, and certainly not by one so young.[44] According to Lee, the 'air de soupçon' (Lee 2010: 11) that accompanied the publication of *Hygiène* provoked in Nothomb the desire to affirm her identity, since she does not feel 'légitime dans son identité d'écrivain' (Nothomb in a 2007 interview with Laureline Amanieux, as cited in Lee 2010: 25). Furthermore, interviews with Nothomb often focus just as much on 'perplexing particulars about her life', with which the author supplies her interlocutors and in which these seem happy to indulge. Guyot-Bender points out Nothomb's readiness to provide 'graphic details' about her eating and drinking habits (Guyot-Bender 2006: 127), and O'Meara highlights the frequency with which 'descriptions of [Nothomb's] highly ritualistic approach to writing' (O'Meara 2015: 106) are discussed. Although it is hardly uncommon for writers to disclose and discuss their writing regimes with the press in order to shape the public narrative about them, the extent to which criticism keeps responding to Nothomb's self-diagnosed 'maladie de l'écriture' (Nothomb as cited in Bainbrigge and den Toonder 2003: 1) is striking. Lee is certainly not wrong in asserting that 'presque aucun aspect de la personne

[44] Nothomb was 26 years old at the time.

d'Amélie Nothomb n'a échappé à l'œil scrutateur des médias. On invente et réinvente Nothomb au fil des rentrées' (Lee 2010: 11). What this statement neglects, however, is Nothomb's degree of complicity in promoting this media scrutiny. That Nothomb actively encourages an identification of herself – or at least her *posture* – with the characters in her novels becomes clear in both the paratext and the text itself. In an oft-cited adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's famous declaration ('Madame Bovary, c'est moi'), Nothomb stated in a 2003 interview with Emilie Godineau: 'Blanche, c'est moi', apropos of the protagonist in her 2003 novel *Antéchrista* (Delangue 2014: 139; Dusaillant-Fernandes 2005: 11).[45] On a textual level, although Nothomb's (alleged) self-insert characters are not made obvious in every novel, a character explicitly named 'Amélie Nothomb' does appear in *Robert des noms propres* (2001; henceforth *Robert*), *Une forme de vie* (2010), and *Pétronille* (2014). In *Péplum*, the reader is never explicitly told the name of the first-person narrator, but there are strong hints in the text that her name resembles 'Amélie Nothomb' quite closely.

Remarkably, however, Nothomb has never explicitly claimed the genre of autofiction for herself. Although it is not uncommon for authors to reject genre descriptors – while Ernaux is arguably one of the most well-known writers of contemporary French autofiction, she has famously rejected the autofiction label (Hugueny-Léger 2009: 142) – I would argue that, in Nothomb's case, this has more to do with her authorial posturing, that is, with the fact that she is already playing a character in her public appearance as the *personnage* Nothomb. If, in autofiction, the emphasis is placed on self-revelation and self-discovery, then it seems that the genre has little to offer Nothomb or her readers: either the autofiction reflects Nothomb's *personnage*, in which case the reader is no longer obliged to read the text, as the paratext (that is, familiarity with Nothomb's *posture*) will do just as well; or the autofiction reflects the 'real' Nothomb, who is very different to the *personnage*, in which case the text becomes incompatible with the paratext. Yet there is some merit in using the term autofiction to discuss Nothomb's

[45] As Henri Delangue and others have pointed out, this is a quotation merely attributed to Flaubert, and not written by Flaubert himself. The declaration appears in René Descharmes's thesis *Flaubert. Sa vie, son caractère et ses idées avant 1857*, published in 1909 (Delangue 2014: 139, footnote 7), yet the fact that it is so widely known and attributed to Flaubert makes the misattribution of little consequence here.

works. Critics like Guyot-Bender have pointed out that Nothomb's public appearance or media personality could be termed an autofiction in itself; as Guyot-Bender writes,

> [b]ecause of Nothomb's own acknowledged sensual relationship with the subject matter of her books, few commentators can resist the temptation of including in their analyses perplexing particulars about her life, which she reputedly happily provides, as if her books were unmediated extensions of her lifestyle, or vice versa. Critics seem ready to accept the autofiction by which Nothomb seems to want to be recognised. (Guyot-Bender 2006: 127)

For the purposes of this thesis, what is distinctive about Nothombian autofiction is how intensely this is bound up with her *posture* and therefore how extreme an emphasis is placed on controlling and maintaining a certain kind of fictional personal narrative. The contrast between this performance of control and the relinquishing of such control in later texts examined in this thesis (by Meinecke and Setz especially) will become clear in the following chapters.

As this chapter will show, the remarkable correspondence between Nothomb's texts and her *posture* becomes evident through recurring character types and dialogic scenarios, which are characterised by discussion of the work of art and the correct way in which to interpret it. These dialogues and characters not only encourage an author-led reading of the text, but reveal a self-aestheticisation that resists all other approaches to reading. It is possible to trace throughout the Nothombian oeuvre a sustained engagement with questions concerning the relationship between the author and the reader, fact and fiction, and the form of the novel and its genres. However, this chapter argues, there is no room in the Nothombian poetics for a profound interrogation of the legitimacy of the literary work. The idea of the literary work, for Nothomb, is of something complete, perfect, and inviolable. The possibility of opening the text into a more collaborative (digital) space, without a clear controlling narrative instance, is not given.[46] While *Une forme de vie* – the final novel discussed here and arguably the one that comes closest to being an autofictional text in the strict sense of the term – ostensibly adopts a more critical stance toward an author-character-dominated novel, it ultimately elicits a similar reading to Nothomb's other novels discussed here. What we find in Nothomb's works is,

[46] Although Nothomb's texts do rely (sometimes heavily) on literary and theoretical intertextuality, these elements are much more comprehensively and seamlessly integrated into the Nothombian narrative, in order to keep this external 'contamination' to a minimum. Hoppe's writing is similar in this regard, as we will see in Chapter Two.

somewhat paradoxically, both an insistence on the absolute unity and identity of artist and artwork, and a proliferation of the artist-author-figure under many guises. In this respect, Nothomb's engagement with autofictional characters could be seen as similar to Hoppe's, who, as we will see, creates a plethora of 'Felicitas' figures in *Hoppe*. Significantly, another similarity between the two authors is that their autofictional characters, although ostensibly undergoing a maturation process in terms of their development as artists or writers, never really change in terms of their poetics or artistic instincts or worldviews. Despite imbuing her autofictional characters with many of her own ideas or characteristics, Nothomb never gets too invested in either the fate or development of her characters, and they remain a little superficial in the end, since what they mostly reflect is Nothomb's *posture*: something not entirely controlled by the author herself, but heavily influenced by her media (re)presentation.

This has significant consequences for the role of the reader both in and of the Nothombian novel. While it is therefore important to distinguish between Nothomb the author and the author-characters in her novels, Guyot-Bender is right to observe that '[t]here is no place for the hypothetical death of the author in the Nothombian literary formula' (Guyot-Bender 2006: 126). As a result of the 'master narrative' (Guyot-Bender 2006: 126) that Nothomb creates in her texts and which feeds into her *posture*, the reader is eclipsed, and it is unclear what function, if any, the reader is meant to fulfil in this formula. Just as Nothomb actively shapes or seeks to control her public image, her novels and fictional characters encourage the conception of the work of literature or the work of art as a self-sufficient and self-sustaining entity that does not require a reader or spectator, and whose integrity is in fact threatened by external analysis, as we will see in the case of *Robert*. By stark contrast to the later texts examined in this study, especially those by Meinecke, Setz, and Garréta and Roubaud, external interference in Nothomb's novels is always perceived and portrayed as harmful, never as complementary or collaborative. In comparison to Hoppe, Nothomb is not playfully undermining criticism by mimicking or parodying it. She is instead rejecting it, or rather formulating her artistic world in such a way as to leave no place for criticism. Nothomb's novels,

as this chapter contends, resist certain readings which do not comply with the reading suggested by the texts themselves. As Anna Kemp observes regarding feminist readings of Nothomb's texts, her novels are pervaded by

> an overarching value system that (although it hesitates between ethics and aesthetics) ultimately privileges art over life. In other words, as a feminist reader, one is inhibited by an evaluation within the text that discourages moral or political readings and encourages an appreciation of the characters first and foremost *as characters*; that is, as artistic creations whose aesthetic value trumps moral concerns. (Kemp 2013: 243)

This preventative value system seems to operate in such a way as to exclude any reading, feminist or otherwise, that does not buy into Nothomb's 'master narrative'. It is striking that, at the level of plot, the central conflict in all the texts under consideration here is always about characters claiming or retaining positions of power – as in the Nothombian dialogues of *Hygiène* and *Péplum* (1996) – or exerting singular artistic control, as in the case of Plectrude in *Robert* and even in the self-stylisation of Hazel in *Mercure* (1998). Moreover, the roles or fictionalised versions of themselves which Nothomb's characters become are valued more highly in the text than their 'real' existences: both Plectrude in *Robert* and Hazel in *Mercure* exult in playing parts, especially in the sense of romanticising fantasies; and although this theme is somewhat grotesquely subverted in *Une forme de vie*, this novel also encourages a reading of Mapple's fictionalised character, a co-creation between himself and Amélie over the course of their correspondence, as superior to his real life.

Absolute Integrity of the Artwork: *Robert des noms propres*

Apart from *Biographie de la faim*, which, according to Nothomb herself, contains 'vraiment aucune fiction' (Heiniger 2004: 00:05:30-00:05:31), and her four more explicitly autobiographical novels,[47] none of Nothomb's novels claim to be autobiographical or autofictional, but, as previously mentioned, we find incarnations of the author figure in various forms in several of her other novels as well. Compared to some of these texts, *Robert* at first glance appears to have very little to do with Nothomb's *posture*. According to the website of

[47] These are *Le sabotage amoureux* (1993), *Stupeur et tremblements*, *Métaphysique des tubes*, and *Ni d'Ève ni d'Adam*.

French radio channel *France Inter*, *Robert* is a romanticised biography of French singer RoBERT, whom Nothomb befriended in 1999 (France Inter 2013). Arguably, therefore, this novel belongs to the genre of fictionalised biography, rather than autofiction.[48] Certainly, the protagonist Plectrude does not seem to have much in common with her author, apart from some superficial traits (a propensity for artistic endeavours, say, and expressive eyes). Furthermore, when a character named 'Amélie Nothomb' does appear in the text, she has only a brief cameo in the final few pages of the book. A more in-depth analysis of the text, however, reveals a more complex relationship between Nothomb (as *personnage*) and Plectrude. Even though we have an actual 'Amélie Nothomb' character in *Robert*, there are some parallels to be seen between Nothomb's real-life artistic stylisation and Plectrude's in the novel.[49] Following Meizoz's conception of *posture*, Nothomb is actively contributing to, as well as taking ironic distance from, her mediatised image. In *Robert*, Nothomb both rejects and encourages the identification of the author or *personnage* Amélie Nothomb with the character of Plectrude. On the level of the novel's content, the story ostensibly focuses on a different character, upon whose uniqueness the novel continuously insists, and which violently removes the 'author', the character 'Amélie', as soon as she intrudes into Plectrude's world. On the level of the novel's performance of artistic integrity, however, the text is recognisably Nothombian, not only in terms of the stylistic and thematic homogeneity of her oeuvre, but also in that the novel presents itself as self-sufficient and unreliant upon external analysis.

Robert tells the story of Plectrude, whose mother Lucette, determined that her daughter will have an extraordinary destiny, gives her an exceptional name before committing suicide. The grisly details of Plectrude's parentage are withheld from her, and the girl is raised by her aunt Clémence. Like Lucette, Clémence is convinced that the girl is special, despite her performing quite modestly at school. When Plectrude's abilities as a dancer are discovered, she begins a strict training to become a ballerina at the Opéra de Paris, and, although she relishes

[48] This is borne out by the author's note on the back cover, which claims that this is a 'biographie' (*RNP* outside back cover).
[49] Henceforth, in my discussions of both this novel and *Une forme de vie*, the fictional character will be referred to as 'Amélie', in contradistinction to the author, 'Nothomb'.

the opportunity to perform as an artist, the extremely limited dietary regime to which she submits eventually causes her to become hospitalised. After discovering the truth about her parentage and relinquishing her hopes of becoming a dancer, Plectrude decides to follow her mother's destiny: she also bears a child, but is, at the last minute, prevented from committing suicide; and, instead of shooting the father of her child, as her mother did, she ends up killing the hapless Amélie, whom she befriends at the very end of the novel.

As Kemp argues, '[f]rom the outset Plectrude's story privileges art over life' (Kemp 2012: 56) in that, even – or especially – as a child, Plectrude is happiest when she is playing a role or turning herself into a work of art. Her interest in her mundane 'real' existence is limited, and, from the beginning, Plectrude 'desires to become […] a "personnage" rather than a person' (Kemp 2012: 59). There are several instances of this self-aestheticisation in the text, most of which Kemp references. When Plectrude is still quite young, she and her aunt Clémence indulge in ritualistic dress-up games, and it is at this point that Plectrude first perceives herself as an art-work. As Kemp writes, in these 'mirror-scenes' Plectrude 'does not simply recognize herself in her reflection; she recognizes herself *as* her reflection' (Kemp 2012: 58). What part exactly she is playing does not seem to matter much – she is variously 'une reine de trois ans, une prêtresse chamarrée, une fiancée persane le jour de ses noces, une sainte byzantine posant pour une icône', *RNP* 37); instead, it is the role-play itself that she exults in. As Kemp notes,

> Plectrude's ecstatic contemplation of her reflection and her self-transformation into a living statue constitute perfect moments in which she becomes both creator and blissfully passive object of her own creation, a closed circuit, an impenetrable realm over which she reigns supreme. If Plectrude is a work of art, then, she is not one that seeks to represent or communicate lived experience. (Kemp 2012: 60)

In this scenario, Plectrude inhabits not only the role of the art-work, but also that of the artist and the spectator regarding herself in the mirror. What this ensures is that the art-work 'Plectrude' will be perceived exactly as it is meant to be perceived (as a queen, princess, fairy, and so forth). Other, external interpretations are precluded, a point which is further emphasised through the narrator's intervention. Commenting on the apparent disapproval shown by parents of Plectrude's classmates, who witness Clémence's complicity in her dress-up games,

the text's narrator in fact defends the aunt and the daughter for their appreciation of Plectrude as an art-work, and criticises the other parents for 'fail[ing] to respond to the magnificent artistry of what they see' (Kemp 2012: 60). Plectrude's transcendental beauty trumps all other concerns, and the worried parents are described quite simply as 'bêtes' (*RNP* 40)'. As Kemp recognises, '[t]he narrator's scorn might also serve as a warning to the reader tempted to pursue too literal or moral a reading of the text. Like the school parents, they may just be missing the point' (Kemp 2012: 60). Since Nothombian dialogues are known for their dry humour and irony, the narrator's comments should, of course, not necessarily be taken at face value. This might just be a tongue-in-cheek quip at both the novel's and the reader's expense, as if to say how petty it would be to despise Nothomb's works for their self-indulgence! Yet it is true that, by and large, the narrator's defence of Plectrude's artistic endeavours is supported through Plectrude's portrayal in the text.

The lengths to which Plectrude will go to *become* a work of art or a character are made clear in another episode, in which she is building snowmen with her friend Roselyne. As Plectrude declares, '[f]aire un bonhomme de neige, c'est trop facile. […] Il faut *devenir* un bonhomme de neige' (*RNP* 81; my emphasis). The object here is, as Kemp observes, 'to transform oneself into a "monument vivant", […] and, while Roselyne quite literally gets cold feet, Plectrude commits herself entirely to the task, […] preferring even to court death than to disrupt her perfect *mise en scène*' (Kemp 2012: 59). Even more so than in these games, however, Plectrude takes intense delight in dancing, which to her represents the perfect work of art:

> [Dance] is an art form that identifies the artist with the art work and exists only in the moment of creation, there being no surplus object after the ballerina takes her curtsey. It is transient, immaterial, and, as such, is a perfectly closed system that resists appropriation by others. (Kemp 2012: 62)

Clearly, the absolute identity between artist and artwork is an ideal toward which Nothombian characters tend to strive, although it is important to bear in mind here that this does not necessarily reflect Nothomb's own ambitions as a novelist.

How, then, does this conception of the work of art relate to the work of literature that is the novel itself? Kemp sees the novel's bizarre ending, which has been interpreted by others as

'one of personal emancipation' (Kemp 2012: 63), as confirming not only the model of the art-work espoused within the text, but also the novel's status as a work of art itself. Upon hearing about the macabre circumstances of Plectrude's birth, Amélie marvels that Plectrude has not turned out to be a killer herself. This remark, however, seems to act as a trigger in Plectrude's mind and, having implicitly had the idea suggested to her, she promptly acts upon it and shoots Amélie dead. In terms of thematic continuity, the absurdity of this ending is reminiscent of Eugène Ionesco's *La Leçon* (1951), which is, indeed, the play that Plectrude is rehearsing toward the end of the novel. Kemp, however, offers a particularly convincing analysis of this 'death the author' as a kind of short-circuiting on the part of the text, in order to protect the artistic self from outside contamination:

> Once the work is complete, the author becomes surplus, dispensable matter, *un corps encombrant*. The privileged moment, it seems, is the moment of creation, during which artist and art work are one, and, like a pregnant body, constitute an autonomous, self-generating system. However, once the art work is complete and separate from the self, it becomes vulnerable to circulation and corruption in the outside world. At this point, it seems, the only means of self-preservation is self-destruction, cutting life short before it loses its intensity. (Kemp 2012: 67)[50]

If there is not even room for the author-artist in this work of art, then there is certainly no room for the reader. To see how Nothomb engages with the author-reader dynamic/relationship, we need to look beyond *Robert* at other novels. In the following novels, we will see how the reader is encouraged to identify with the character whose reading proves to be the correct one, i.e. the reading encouraged by the author-artist-character.

Interpreting Correctly in *Mercure*, *Hygiène de l'assassin*, and *Péplum*

In *Mercure*, we encounter a figure not dissimilar to Plectrude. This novel, or 'conte fantastique' (Tison 1998), tells the story of Hazel Englert, a young woman who is being kept on an island in a house without mirrors. Her captor, Omer Loncours, has convinced her that her face was

[50] For a detailed discussion of the *corps encombrant* and Nothomb's engagement with Roland Barthes's seminal essay 'La mort de l'auteur' (1967) in *Robert*, see O'Meara, 'Killing Joke', pp. 101-117. According to O'Meara, Nothomb's work 'demonstrates an engagement against the doctrine of anti-authorism, in ways that indicate an interesting relationship between literature and poststructuralist theory – though Nothomb's French-language critics […] practise a pro-authorism that ignores not only author theory generally, but also Nothomb's engagement with Barthes's thought' (O'Meara 2015: 102).

horribly disfigured in a bombing, when in fact her face has not only remained intact, but is actually sublimely beautiful. When Hazel falls ill and Omer fears for her wellbeing, he hires a nurse, Françoise Chavaigne, to tend to her, and it is Françoise who, in one of the novel's two endings, finally succeeds in revealing the truth to her and thus liberating her from her captor.[51] What on the surface therefore appears to be a story about feminine solidarity and emancipation is, however, not quite as straightforward a narrative as one might imagine, and a closer reading in fact reveals some rather troubling issues – ones which, as previously noted, problematise feminist readings of the text (Kemp 2013: 244). In what is probably one of the most perplexing scenes in the novel, Hazel, who has just discovered the truth about her beauty, is quite ready to forgive Omer for his deception, since being a disfigured former beauty who lives a secluded life on a secret island has enabled her to play the part of a 'princesse romantique' (*M* 154) – in other words, to style herself as a tragic literary character and thus become a *personnage*. In fact, as Kemp observes, Hazel is far less upset by her victimisation at the hands of Omer than by her discovery that she is merely the replacement of another woman, Adèle, whom Omer previously deceived in the same way:

> Knowing that her story is merely a replay of somebody else's vulgarises and devalues Hazel as a work of art. She is not a precious masterpiece so much as a cheap copy and it is on these grounds that she breaks with Omer – not because of his cruelty but because he has undermined her integrity as a literary character. (Kemp 2013: 245)

As is the case with Plectrude, Hazel values her existence as a *personnage* above her non-fictionalised existence. Yet Hazel's insistence on the 'caractère *exceptionel*' or '*unicité*' (*M* 191) of her transformation into a literary character by Omer might not come as much of a surprise to a reader who has taken note of the girl's reading habits, and it is here that the reader is included to a greater extent than in *Robert* – although they are still only afforded a small and indirect role.

[51] It should be noted that Nothomb includes an alternate ending to the text, in which Françoise takes on the role of captor from Omer, perpetuating the lie that Hazel's face is disfigured. In this manner, *Mercure* does represent a bit of an exception to Nothomb's usual deterministic poetics, as it works against the idea of the inviolable whole of the literary work with a single, author-sanctioned reading. That said, the alternate ending is also author-sanctioned, and is merely presenting the reader with a second option. As Nothomb explains in the author's note: 'je ne pus choisir entre les deux fins, tant chacune s'imposait avec autant d'autorité à mon esprit et relevait d'une logique des personnages aussi troublante qu'implacable' (*M* 205). Compared to the extents to which the reader is involved much more directly in weighting different narrative elements in the later texts examined in this thesis, concessions to the reader's own creative input are limited here.

One of the many characteristically Nothombian dialogues between Hazel and Françoise gives an insight into which reading habits or readings of texts are implicitly encouraged by the text, and which are not. When Hazel boasts to her new-found friend that she has read Stendhal's *Chartreuse de Parme* (1839) sixty-four times, the latter responds incredulously: 'Comment peut-on vouloir lire soixante-quatre fois un roman?' (*M* 102). Hazel defends her habit of avid re-reading by suggesting that '[l]e même texte […] peu[t] donner lieu à tant de variations. Ce serait dommage de se limiter à une seule, surtout si la soixante-quatrième est la meilleure' (*M* 102). Once Françoise has obligingly finished reading *La Chartreuse de Parme*, however, it becomes clear that Hazel's interpretation of the novel is much less flexible than her earlier statement would lead one to believe. In a dispute with Françoise over how a certain passage of the novel (an encounter between Fabrice and Clélia) is to be interpreted, Hazel remains adamant that her reading is the correct one: 'Il n'y a […] aucun doute là-dessus' (*M* 122). Françoise considers her own interpretation to be the more likely one, since she restricts herself to commenting on 'ce qui est écrit' (*M* 126), while Hazel's reading is, in the nurse's opinion, far too fanciful. What is striking here is that, although their interpretations differ in terms of specifics and are mutually exclusive, both Françoise and Hazel subscribe to the view that there must be a right or wrong answer to this question – as Hazel has already stated: while there might be many variations in interpretation, the goal is nonetheless to find 'la meilleure'. Hazel does suggest that '[l]e propre des grands livres est que chaque lecteur en est l'auteur. Vous lui faites dire ce que vous voulez' (*M* 126). As it turns out, however, this rejoinder is not intended to accommodate Françoise's interpretation at all, since Hazel in the same instant reproaches her friend for, essentially, not being an imaginative or, quite simply, good enough reader for a great novel such as the one in question: 'vous voulez peu de chose' (*M* 126). Just as in the case of Plectrude, whose spectators lack the artistic sensibilities to fully appreciate her as a work of art, this passage encourages the view that Stendhal's novel (and, by extension, any other work of literature, including those written by Nothomb) requires a reader who is worthy of it and will do the text justice by interpreting it correctly. What Hazel implies here is that an extraordinary text requires an

extraordinary reader. Furthermore, the conclusion of the dialogue suggests that, in the end, the only sure way of finding the right answer would be to ask the author himself: as Françoise muses, '[s]i Stendhal s'est contenté de deux phrases, c'est peut-être qu'il voulait être ambigu. Ou peut-être ne parvenait-il pas à se décider lui-même' (*M* 127).[52] In other words, this passage in *Mercure* endorses a theory of literature that is not only characterised by absolutes (correct or incorrect, with no space for a *rapprochement* in between), but that also tends towards authorial intentionalism.

Whereas, in *Mercure*, literature and the question of how to read it are discussed by two readers, neither of whom corresponds particularly clearly to Nothomb's *posture*, the dispute staged in *Hygiène*, Nothomb's first novel, is quite evidently that between a writer (Nobel prize-winning author Prétextat Tach) and a reader (the young journalist Nina). Moreover, this is a writer figure with whom Nothomb openly identifies, famously stating – once again – that 'Prétextat Tach, c'est moi' (Bainbrigge and den Toonder 2003: 190). World-renowned but terminally ill, Prétextat Tach is a prolific writer who is interviewed in his home by several journalists eager to show off their interpretative skills and volunteer their readings of the novelist's lengthy oeuvre. Scornful of their lack of insight into his works, Tach dismisses them one by one, until Nina appears and successfully demonstrates that she has, in fact, correctly interpreted Tach's final unfinished novel as a admission of guilt on the part of the author for having murdered his cousin Léopoldine, decades previously. Since the text ends with Tach's death at the hands of Nina, it at first appears that the author is in this instance conceding defeat and that the reader emerges victorious from this dispute. Tach and Nina respectively embody opposing views of literary criticism, the former's view of literature being dominated by his 'exclusive faith in authorial intention', while Nina adheres to a 'poststructuralist celebration of a multi-voiced textual language' (O'Meara 2015: 108, 107). Similar concerns to those raised in *Robert* and *Mercure* are discussed in *Hygiène*. Just as Plectrude is her own best spectator, Tach is his own ideal reader: 'je suis le seul lecteur à même de me comprendre' (*HA* 67). All other

[52] This last sentence could also be read as a metafictional comment on the alternate endings of *Mercure* that Nothomb offers the reader, as seen above.

readings of his texts are inadequate, and his readers are, in Tach's words, 'des lecteurs-grenouilles', who 'poussent la sophistication jusqu'à lire sans lire. […] [I]ls traversent les livres sans prendre une goutte d'eau' (*HA* 69). In a similar vein to Hazel's deliberations, Nina insists that 'il y [a] autant de lectures qu'il y a de lecteurs' (*HA* 156). Here again, however, the author is allowed to have the last word. As Tach unequivocally states: 'Vous ne m'avez pas compris: il n'y a pas de lecteurs et il n'y a pas de lectures' (*HA* 157). The novel then, according to Tach, could dispense with a readership entirely, or, if it is to be read at all, it can only be interpreted in one way. As O'Meara points out, 'Nina ultimately shows that there is only *one* reading of Tach's novel – the "lecture carnassière", a corporeal, biographical reading that shows that Léopoldine's murder is the ultimate truth of the text' (O'Meara 2015: 109). Despite his demise, therefore, it is Tach's 'singular vision of the world' (Kemp 2013: 246) that dominates the text in the end.

Like *Hygiène*, the story of *Péplum* is told mostly through dialogue. The protagonist and first-person narrator is a novelist, and, although her full name is never given, her initials are 'A.N.' (*P* 49), and we discover that, alphabetically, her surname comes before 'Nothing' (*P* 70); the reader could therefore hardly be rebuked for assuming that this character is a thinly-veiled fictionalisation of Nothomb herself. The novel begins with A.N. musing about the city of Pompeii, suggesting that it was not an accident that this antique city in particular was perfectly preserved, and that perhaps time-travellers from the future caused the volcanic eruption for the sole purpose of preserving its beauty. After being put under general anaesthesia for an operation, A.N. awakens to find herself transported from 1995 to the year 2580. Her interlocutor Celsius, a scientist, savant, and self-proclaimed artist, explains to her that, since she has inadvertently discovered the truth behind the preservation of Pompeii, she now knows too much and may never return to her own time period. Furious at this revelation, A.N. engages in a heated dispute with her captor, over the course of which it is revealed that, after a 'terrible guerre mondiale' (*P* 92) during the twenty-second century, the entire population of the global 'South' ('le Sud', *P* 97) was eradicated to ensure the survival of the 'North'. Celsius finally admits that the preservation

of Pompeii was his own idea, and in fact a means of preserving at least one trace of 'Southern' culture for posterity.

Although, at first glance, Nothomb pits A.N. and Celsius against each other in a dialogue reminiscent of that between Tach and Nina in *Hygiène*, the two characters in *Péplum* are far more similar than one might at first imagine, as both consider themselves, in their own way, to be artists. Whereas *Hygiène* establishes a clear author-versus-reader dynamic, both A.N. and Celsius could be read as author figures, and therefore as proxies of Nothomb. Initially, A.N. shares some similarities with Nina, in that she is the only one to 'donner une interprétation exacte' (*P* 29) of Celsius's *chef-d'œuvre* (*P* 140): the conservation of Pompeii as a work of art for all eternity. Yet, like Tach, it is her voice that dominates the text, since, as is revealed at the very end of the text, A.N. is finally allowed to return to her time period and decides to turn her experiences into a novel. The entire story, then, is told from her point of view, and it is A.N. in her capacity as author and creator who gives life to Celsius as a character within her text. Yet even in her dialogue with Celsius the reader will already notice how the notion of art or being an artist is always linked to artistic control. Both A.N. and Celsius are eager to demonstrate how, in terms of their aesthetic merit, they are superior to one another. Celsius insists on distinguishing between himself as an 'artiste' and A.N. as a mere 'écrivain' (*P* 105), claiming that '[d]évelopper une idée par écrit, c'est une fantaisie, un passe-temps. Donner une réalité à une idée telle que la mienne, vous n'en auriez jamais eu les moyens intellectuels' (*P* 30). In fact, through Celsius, Nothomb anticipates the kind of criticism often levelled at her books by her detractors, who dismiss her yearly publication as the 'amuse-gueule' of an undiscerning readership (Cessou 2010). When Celsius calls A.N. an 'espèce de fabricante de livres pour boîtes à gants!', the *romancière* admonishes him: 'Ne critiquez pas des bouquins que vous n'avez pas lus' (*P* 67).[53] In humorous, self-deprecating fashion, A.N. also claims that her readership, or more specifically her critics, did not take her seriously during her own times: 'on ne me prenait pas aux sérieux' (*P* 26). This is, however, clearly more a criticism of the readership than a criticism of the writer.

[53] We will see this in the case of Houellebecq, too.

As Celsius explains the evolution of literature over the course of the preceding centuries, he notes that the general reading public prefers a happy ending, even at the expense of a logical narrative or even a story as such: 'le public n'avait besoin ni de logique narrative, ni de profondeur dramatique, ni de volume: on se mit à publier une avalanche de romans de moins de cent pages, dont l'absence d'histoire ne laissait pas place à la moindre mélancolie' (*P* 45). While the description of this exaggeratedly pathetic readership is surely intended for comic effect, it can nonetheless also be read as a scornful commentary on contemporary reading habits, in much the same vein as Tach's tirades in *Hygiène*. Despite Nothomb's gentle self-mockery in *Péplum*, indicating that she does take herself or her works too seriously, authorial self-reflection remains the novel's primary focus. Once again, the reader, who is always remote to the text and referred to in abstract or generalising terms, does not factor into the creation or reception of the artwork. It is not until the publication of *Une forme de vie* in 2010 that we see a more sustained engagement with the role of the reader – and with autofiction – on Nothomb's part.

Une forme de vie: A New Genre?

The fact that *Une forme de vie* is, for the most part, an epistolary novel already affords scope for a greater engagement with questions of novelistic genres, given that Nothomb's writer-characters tend to reflect on the literary media with which they are associated. In *Une forme de vie*, as the following analysis will show, Nothomb engages with autofiction indirectly by focusing on the differences between letter-writing and the novel form.[54] Although the fact that the narrative construction of *Une forme de vie*, in typically Nothombian fashion, allows for successive reveals of characters' true identities, one perceives a much greater focus on distinguishing between life and art, true and false, fact and fiction in this novel than in Nothomb's prior work. As in the case of *Robert* and *Mercure*, *Une forme de vie* confirms the primacy and identity of artist and artwork, but also undermines them. Since Amélie, the

[54] This is not, however, done in ignorance of the fact that epistolary fiction is inextricably bound up with the birth of the novel itself, particularly in the context of French literature. Nothomb makes an implicit nod to this in her references to Madame de La Lafayette's *Princesse de Clèves* (1678), as we will see below.

autofictional character in *Une forme de vie*, fails – or silences herself – quite spectacularly, the author seems to be relinquishing some of the control over her text to her reader, or readership as a whole. The exaggerated nature of the protagonist's departure from the text is evidently meant to be comically absurd, and therefore not to be taken too seriously, but it is an instance of much more obvious self-sabotage than in Nothomb's other works. As the below analysis will demonstrate, *Une forme de vie* can be read as autofictional in the narrow sense of the term, and the text shows a degree of deviation from the Nothombian author-artist formula seen above. However, although the novel consciously engages with questions of genre, it is not concerned with autofiction as an experimental genre through which the contemporary novel form in a broader sense can be explored. Instead, it confirms the Nothombian *posture*.

Unlike the novels analysed above, *Une forme de vie* actually has a protagonist and first-person narrator named 'Amélie Nothomb', and Amélie is a popular writer living in France who closely resembles the real-life Nothomb, or at least the Nothombian *posture*. In keeping with the widely-held belief that Nothomb replies to all her fan mail, the focus on Amélie's occupation as a writer in this novel is on her correspondence with her readers. One day, in December 2008, Amélie receives what appears to be a letter from an American soldier named Melvin Mapple who is stationed in Baghdad during the Iraq War. Amélie's curiosity is piqued and she replies. Over the course of their correspondence, she learns that Mapple, in reaction to the trauma of war and to what he perceives to be a failed existence prior to joining the Army, has developed an extreme eating disorder and suffers from severe obesity. In spite of her concern for Mapple's physical and mental well-being, Amélie is intrigued by the imaginative way in which Mapple writes about his obesity and suffering, and, at a point when he seems at his most despondent, she goes so far as to suggest he turn his experience into an artistic project. Although Mapple's initial response to this suggestion is enthusiastic, he suddenly stops replying to Amélie's letters. Fearful that misfortune may have befallen Mapple, Amélie makes enquiries, and eventually receives a further response from Mapple, this time from Baltimore in the United States, in which he reveals that, while what he has told Amélie of his life before the Army is true, his life as a

soldier stationed in Iraq is a complete falsehood, a fiction invented in order to give meaning to his obesity and his otherwise empty life which he spends on the internet in his room at his parents' house. Although surprised, Amélie responds with understanding and empathy, rather than with anger or disappointment, and even congratulates Mapple on the quality of the fiction he has created. Mapple, however, concludes that, the veil having been lifted and his story exposed as false, he has nothing left to live for. Alarmed, Amélie seeks to take preventive action by booking flights to visit Mapple in Baltimore and informing him of her intention to do so. Once on the plane, however, she concludes that any attempt on her part to help Mapple out of his predicament would be futile. Therefore, rather than facing Mapple at the airport, Amélie decides that the only way out of this – in her view untenable – situation is to tick all the boxes on her U.S. customs and border protection form relating to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, thereby ensuring that she will be apprehended by U.S. law enforcement and not allowed into the country. The novel ends before Amélie's plane lands.

As previously indicated, *Une forme de vie* demonstrates a more sustained engagement with genre, and specifically with autofiction, than we see in Nothomb's other texts, as signalled by the opening line of the novel: 'Ce matin-là, je reçus une lettre d'un genre nouveau' (*UFV* 7). The ambiguity of the French here meaning both 'a new kind of letter' and 'a letter of a new genre' is of particular significance here. Unlike the novels discussed above, and although it was not marketed expressly as such, *Une forme de vie* actually qualifies as autofiction, since we have an onomastic identity of author, first-person narrator, and protagonist. As the novel informs us from the beginning, the character Amélie's published titles include *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam* and *Antéchrista*, so the novel starts from a point of factual accuracy, even though it hints that what transpires over the course of the text might well diverge from the life of the real-life *personne* Amélie Nothomb. In a typical instance of Nothombian humour, for example, the text teases us with the counterfactual that Sandra Bullock might star in a film adaptation of *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam*. While this is clearly intended as a joke, it also functions as a warning to the reader not to assume

too great an equivalence between the novel's setting and the real world.[55] Yet *Une forme de vie* also noticeably and consciously encourages an identification between the protagonist Amélie and the Nothombian *posture*: the text explicitly mentions the date of Amélie's first publication ('ma première publication en 1992', *UFV* 104); her frequent media appearances ('Je prolongeai mon séjour pour enregistrer une émission de la télévision belge', *UFV* 88); the regularity of her yearly publications ('Mon nouveau roman parut et je fus aussi accaparée qu'à chaque automne', *UFV* 93); and the absence of an online presence ('Internet m'étant *terra incognita*', *UFV* 93). Mapple also makes reference to Nothomb's *graphomanie*, describing Amélie's writing process as occurring 'dans une sorte de transe mentale' (*UFV* 49). However, since this is Mapple writing, his comment is likely ironic and Nothomb might be writing the American soldier as one of her readers who is familiar with the Nothombian *posture* – and possibly more familiar with her novels' paratext than with the texts themselves. The novel thus sets in motion a constant oscillation between signifiers of the novel's fictionality and signifiers of the identity between protagonist and author.

Based on the above, one might comfortably classify the novel as autofictional, and although *Une forme de vie* explicitly discusses other novelistic genres or forms in greater detail, the degree to which the novel reflects on what is 'true' and what is 'real' is striking, even for a Nothombian text. In this context, the novel's awkward monolingualism is also worth considering. At the beginning, it is made clear that Mapple writes in English, since, while the reader is always presented with Mapple's letters in impeccable French, Amélie comments on the use of specific English phrases used in the first letter she receives from him (*UFV* 7). In terms of linguistic consistency and continuity, it makes sense for Nothomb to write the novel entirely in French, but the effect of an already translated epistolary correspondence between two

[55] In his article on *Une forme de vie*, Frederique Chevillot offers a comprehensive account of the blending of the real and the fictional in small details, such as the integration of intentionally falsified dates of real-world publications into the novel. Chevillot also points out how Mapple could be read as a kind of inverted Nothombian character in the novel, a reading which has merit, but goes beyond the scope of this chapter. See Frederique Chevillot, 'Le jeu protéen d'Amélie Nothomb dans *Une forme de vie*' in *Protean Selves: First-Person Voices in Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Narratives*, ed. by Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 14-28.

characters who are therefore doubly mediated is that the reader is made to contend with a further destabilising element in a narrative that both relies on the reader's preconceptions and prior knowledge of Nothomb and her works and at the same time seeks to undermine them.

Significantly, although references to Nothomb's other novels in *Une forme de vie* encourage an identification between Amélie and Nothomb, they also function on other layers as well. In one of his early letters, for example, Mapple refers to himself as an 'assassi[n]' and 'saboteu[r]' (*UFV* 33), both of which are terms that recall the titles of Nothomb's – and presumably also Amélie's – first two novels, *Hygiène* and *Le sabotage amoureux* (1993). On one level, then, this serves as a hint to the fictional Amélie (and to the real-life reader) that the story Mapple tells about himself is a fiction, since he deliberately recalls works of fiction in his letters. On another level, this serves as an indication to the reader that *Une forme de vie* is, in fact, another of Nothomb's fictions, a novel and therefore not an autobiographical or even an autofictional work. At one point, Mapple goes so far as to observe how similar his narrative is to Amélie's novels: 'dans vos livres, on s'invente des légendes bizarres pour continuer à vivre' (*UFV* 25); and although Amélie is at first sceptical of Mapple's letters ('je fus frappée par la dimension la plus incroyable d'un tel message', *UFV* 8), this is hardly a helpful criterion for the reader to determine the text's degree of fictionality, as Nothomb's novels are often infused with elements of the fantastical, and verisimilitude is clearly not one of the author's primary concerns. In the novel, however, Mapple is of another opinion. In reference to the autobiographically-inspired *Ni d'Ève, ni d'Adam*, he writes: 'Je ne vous demande pas si ça s'est vraiment passé: c'est tellement authentique' (*UFV* 16). In fact, throughout the novel, we find recurring instances of characters, especially Amélie, deliberating on what is real and what is not, although 'real' is here variously placed in opposition to 'inauthentic' (in relation to the believability of Mapple's narrative), 'untrue' (Mapple's view of his narrative), 'fictional' (Amélie's view of Mapple's narrative, once the lie has been revealed), 'virtual' (epistolary exchanges among correspondents, rather than meeting face to face), and 'insincere' (Amélie's reflection on the degree of irony in her letters).

In the case of *Une forme de vie*, as we will see, the novel's preoccupation with what is real and what is fake or fictional is facilitated through its genre, by the fact that it is an epistolary novel.

Genre, Intertextuality, and the Primacy of Fiction

What is striking about Nothomb's adaptation of the epistolary novel is that *Une forme de vie* is not, as in the majority of cases in historical instances of the genre (Mylne 2005), presented as a succession of letters found or collected by an editor. It is true that this hypothetical collection is mentioned in the text. Mapple writes to Amélie that he has compiled a folder of their correspondence: scans of Amélie's letters which his brother Howard, actually a soldier stationed in Iraq, has sent him via email, and print-outs of Mapple's letters to Amélie which he has emailed to Howard to copy out and send to Amélie.[56] Mapple also explicitly states that he has given this folder the same name as the novel: 'Savez-vous comment j'ai intitulé ce classeur? "Une forme de vie". Ça m'est venu instinctivement' (*UFV* 114). However, as is also clear from the very beginning ('Ce matin-là, je reçus une lettre d'un genre nouveau'), the letters are never allowed to stand on their own, as they are continuously commented upon, and sometimes in great detail, by Amélie. What Blythe Forcey notes as a distinguishing feature of the epistolary novel – that, being composed of 'a correspondence among its characters, it does not contain the explicit guiding, framing, and potentially dominating presence of a narrative persona' (Forcey 2005) – evidently does not apply in the case of *Une forme de vie*. Although the reader gradually discovers more about Mapple over the course of his letters, all his letters are read and interpreted by Amélie, making the actual reader of the text, in this scenario, a little redundant – especially considering that the reader is not given the opportunity to discover the truth about Mapple any earlier than Amélie does. As Amélie herself comments, '[p]lus que tous les autres écrits, le courrier s'adresse à un lecteur' (*UFV* 55) – 'one reader' being the key phrase here, as Mapple's letters are clearly addressed to only Amélie and not any broader readership. Despite his

[56] Although this convoluted set-up is not the primary focus of the text, readers will notice a similarity to the equally complex frame narrative structure in *Éros mélancolique*, discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis. This addition of layers of mediation is presumably also a further means for Nothomb to signal to the reader that there is no such thing as an unmediated author's voice in fiction.

protestations to the contrary, that he begins writing to Amélie with no particular purpose in mind ('Plus exactement, je ne sais pas quelle était mon intention', *UFV* 103), Mapple makes it clear that, in order for the exchange to be as creatively fruitful as it turns out to be, his interlocutor has to be Amélie: 'Il fallait non seulement être écrivain, mais être *cet* écrivain' (*UFV* 59). Though *Une forme de vie*, like *Péplum* and *Hygiène*, arguably even *Mercure*, is ostensibly dialogic in nature, all elements of the text focalise in Amélie, who, in a similar manner to Plectrude in *Robert*, is self-sufficiently both writer and reader, creator and spectator – and, in this case, editor as well, guiding the reader's interpretations of Amélie and Mapple's correspondence.[57]

By drawing attention to the dialogic nature of letter-writing, Amélie does reflect more on her relationship with her readership or audience than Plectrude does in *Robert*, for example. Amélie goes out of her way to explain the conventional view that letter-writing depends, inherently, on the other: '[le] genre épistolaire, […] c'était un écrit voué à l'autre. Les romans, les poèmes, etc. étaient des écrits dans lesquels l'autre pouvait entrer. La lettre, elle, n'existait pas sans l'autre et avait pour sens et pour mission l'épiphanie du destinataire' (*UFV* 67). Yet all this analysis on Amélie's and, to some extent, Mapple's part of the epistolary genre mostly serves to highlight how Nothomb subverts this genre. As we have seen in *Mercure*, debates on interpreting the classics of world literature are quite common in Nothomb's novels, and *Une forme de vie* is no exception, containing references, among others, to Madame de La Fayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966). Neither *Robinson Crusoe* nor *La Princesse de Clèves* are discussed in great detail, yet their mention is hardly accidental, as their echoes in *Une forme de vie* quickly become evident: in the case of Defoe's novel – also an epistolary one – the indeterminate degree of the novel's facticity and the conflation of the protagonist with the author chime well with *Une forme de vie*'s themes; in the case of *La Princesse de Clèves*, it is the initial uncertainty of the author's identity and the novel's faithfulness to historical record that appear as relevant in the context of

[57] We will see a similar, although much more conspicuous, editor in *Hoppe* in Chapter Two.

Une forme de vie. Both Defoe's and Mme de La Fayette's texts have also been cited as the first of a kind – *Robinson Crusoe* as one of the first English novels, *La Princesse de Clèves* as the first modern (French) novel. This allows Nothomb, on the one hand, to claim a literary heritage and a concomitant sense of legitimacy for her works, and, on the other hand, to emphasise the innovation of her novels in her subversion of the epistolary genre.[58]

Capote's *In Cold Blood* can also be seen as the first of its kind, as the first 'nonfiction novel' – a designation Capote himself selected, preferring it over the term of 'New Journalism' (Hinrichs 2005). Mapple's reference to *In Cold Blood* is at first glance a perplexing one, as Capote's nonfiction novel and *Une forme de vie* have little in common. The former is a lightly fictionalised account of a true story, and although Capote involved himself very heavily in the case, he is never mentioned or appears as a character in the text. The latter novel, while containing recognisable details of the real world, is a fictional story which nonetheless appears to focus almost exclusively on the author. In a 1966 interview, when asked whether he finds it difficult to present his point of view in *In Cold Blood*, '[b]eing removed from the book' in that he kept himself 'out of it', Capote stresses how, just because the author is not present in the text as a narrator, does not mean they are not in control of the narrative. As Capote explains:

> I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it. It is true that an author is more in control of fictional characters because he [can] do anything he wants with them as long as they stay credible. But in the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: If I put something in which I don't agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight. (Plimpton 1966)

When considering *Une forme de vie* in light of this, one might say that Nothomb is overperforming control. As seen above, Amélie is, presumably, both the writer and editor of the entire text. While Amélie's strong presence in the text does not necessarily imply that Nothomb's 'point of view' is dominating the text, Nothomb is, of course, able to 'set the reader straight' in her autofictional novel just as much as Capote is in his nonfiction one.

[58] The fact that the letters between Amélie and Mapple actually undergo a process of digitisation via scans and emails is, presumably, meant to further highlight Nothomb's genre subversion, although the privileging of letter-writing above online means of communication reads less as anachronous than merely true to Nothomb's own preference for the analogue over the digital.

What is more, Mapple states explicitly that he would prefer being a character written by Amélie to his real existence:

> On imagine, peut-être naïvement, que les romanciers ont accès à l'âme des gens, aux expériences qu'ils n'ont pas vécues. Ça m'avait frappé dans *De sang froid* de Truman Capote: cette impression que l'auteur connaissait intimement chaque personnage, même secondaire. Je voudrais que vous me connaissiez comme ça. (*UFV* 43-44)

We later discover, of course, that his narrative of being a soldier in Iraq is also a fiction, yet this proves to be just as much of an escape from his reality as the fantasy of being a character in Amélie's stories. Worth noting here is that Mapple creates a distinction between real life as being led offline, as opposed to his life online, which he describes to be in some way fake or less real. In his letter explaining why he decided to create a narrative of an alternate life for himself, Mapple writes:

> Moi qui passe ma vie sur le net, ça m'a fasciné, ces missives d'encre et de papier que vous réceptionniez et écriviez continuellement. Ça m'a paru, comment vous dire, *tellement réel*. Il y a si peu de réel dans mon existence. C'est pourquoi j'ai si ardemment voulu que vous me donniez un peu de votre réel. Le paradoxe est que pour entrer dans votre réalité, j'ai cru nécessaire de travestir la mienne.
>
> C'est ce que je me reproche le plus: je vous ai sousestimée. Je n'avais pas besoin de mentir pour attirer votre attention. Vous m'auriez répondu de la même façon si je vous avais dit la vérité, à savoir que je suis un obèse échoué dans l'entrepôt de pneus de ses parents, à Baltimore. (*UFV* 104; my emphasis)

Although the distinction between a 'real' life offline and a 'fake' one online is somewhat clichéd (even in 2010), what is worth observing here is that the text, in the end, agrees with Mapple: his fictional life, and his correspondence with Amélie, are indeed more valuable than his real life. Amélie certainly agrees when she writes to Mapple that, '[v]oir votre histoire écrite à l'encre par un tiers était le seul moyen pour vous de lui donner *la réalité qui vous manque* de si insoutenable manière' (*UFV* 106; my emphasis). We are, moreover, already introduced to this idea at an earlier point in the novel. In order to console and encourage Mapple, Amélie in one letter relates to him the story of a fine arts student who turns her anorexia into an 'œuvre' (*UFV* 51), in this case, a dissertation, for which she receives a distinction. Although the student requires medical treatment immediately afterwards, Amélie frames this approach as justified, even helpful for the student in question. Amélie encourages Mapple to, in analogue fashion, turn his obesity into a contemporary work of art and concludes the letter with: 'Pensez à l'œuvre, qui

est pour l'artiste l'unique raison d'être' (*UFV* 52). Yet Mapple already conceives of himself as an *œuvre*, as he writes in his preceding letter: 'C'est moi. Je suis à la fois *ce que je suis et ce que je fais*' (*UFV* 50; my emphasis). As in Plectrude's case, we have a complete identity of the creator and the creation, and although Mapple's case might, at first glance, read as a more grotesque version of Plectrude's story – and therefore, perhaps, as a criticism of this idea – the difference in judgement is shaped largely by the narrators' commentary. In *Robert*, as we have seen, the narrator is firmly on Plectrude's side (in spite of the risks her artistic projects pose to her health), whereas Amélie in *Une forme de vie* does take some offence at the idea that Mapple considers his version of 'body art' (*UFV* 51) to be comparable with Amélie's literary works: 'même si je comprenais son propos, j'éprouvais un vague malaise à l'idée qu'il assimile mes enfants d'encre et de papier à son tas de gras' (*UFV* 50). Although the identity of artist and artwork is therefore not discredited in *Une forme de vie*, it is ultimately the literary work which is privileged above body art. Later, once Mapple has divulged his secret to Amélie, he replaces his obese body with the fiction of his alternate life as the work of which he is the proud author: 'ce que j'ai vécu de plus intense, je le dois au partage d'une fiction dont je suis l'auteur' (*UFV* 115). In the end, however, Mapple is still dependent upon having Amélie as a reader and correspondent: 'Pour que ma version devienne réelle, il fallait qu'elle soit cautionnée par quelqu'un d'extérieur. […] [V]ous garantissiez mon histoire. J'en étais arrivé à croire pour de bon que j'étais militaire à Bagdad' (*UFV* 113-114). On the one hand, this can be read as confirmation of the interdependence between author and reader; on the other hand, it could also be seen as confirmation of Meizoz's concept of the *posture*, as constructed neither purely by the author, nor by the text, nor by the reader.

Admittedly, *Une forme de vie* also contains elements which hint at frustration or disapproval with regard to the Nothombian *posture*, to a much greater extent than we see in the other novels discussed in this chapter. Despite Amélie's generous reaction to Mapple's revelation, his admission of having lied to her, stated in such a blunt manner ('Je vous mens depuis le début', *UFV* 101) comes as a shock to Amélie and, presumably, the reader as well. If

seen as metafictional commentary, as an admission by Nothomb that she has been lying to her reader this entire time, it arguably reads less as a playful, cautionary wink to the reader not to take her writing too seriously, and more as a certain impatience or weariness with the charade of the *personnage* Amélie Nothomb. Certainly, the final sentences of the novel suggest as much. Addressing herself in the second person, Amélie offers a final justification for her absurd departure from the text:

> Amélie, tu accomplis ton destin, ce que tu as toujours voulu. […] [S]i tu écris chaque jour de ta vie comme une possédée, c'est parce que tu as besoin d'une issue de secours. Être écrivain, pour toi, cela signifie chercher désespérément la porte de sortie. […] [T]a vie impossible sera finie. Tu seras libérée de ton *principal problème qui est toi-même*. (*UFV* 123; my emphasis)

To a certain extent, this indicates that the kind of writing which Amélie pursues – and here, by extension, Nothomb as well – is as much a burden as it is imperative. However, far from signalling a denunciation of the entire enterprise of Nothomb's cultivated *personnage*, I would read this as a further example of the kind of short-circuiting we saw in *Robert* – self-destruction of the artistic self as the only means of self-preservation (Kemp 2012: 67). What *Une forme de vie* emphasises most clearly is the necessity of maintaining a personal fiction: in Mapple's case, both the fiction Mapple expressly invents and the fiction of Mapple as he exists in Amélie's letters; in Amélie's case, the fiction of herself that she conveys through her letters to her readers, and the various guises in which she appears in their perceptions. Although Amélie's reason for determining not to see Mapple face to face is ostensibly to save herself from the embarrassment of not actually being able to help him, one could also read the ending as enabling the preservation of both Mapple and Amélie as fictional characters coming to life through their written work and not shattering the illusion by meeting face to face. As Amélie confirms, the fiction is ultimately worth more, or indeed more real, than the real world itself: 'Le langage est pour moi le plus haut degré de la réalité' (*UFV* 119).

Amélie's response to Mapple's confession is telling in this regard as well. As mentioned earlier, Amélie is quick to forgive his dishonesty and gives the following statement as a reason for her mild reaction: 'Ce que vous m'avez montré dans vos courriers disait seulement *la réalité*

d'une autre façon' (*UFV* 105; my emphasis). 'Stating reality, but in a different manner', in the end, comes very close to Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction as 'fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels'. Yet, as we have seen, *Une forme de vie*'s primary concern is precisely to not enter into a dialogue with theories of autofiction or even with autofictional intertexts. Instead, *Une forme de vie*'s intertexts are meant to underline both the uniqueness of the Nothombian oeuvre and the degree of control which the author has over it.

Conclusion: Maintaining the (Auto-)Fiction

As seen in this chapter, Nothomb's oeuvre is worth examining in terms of how she adapts, undermines, and experiments with genre – including autofiction, although this is never explicitly named. Unlike that of other authors examined in this thesis (such as Hoppe, Meinecke, and Garréta and Roubaud), however, Nothomb's engagement with genre in her literary texts is neither an open discussion with the reader or with her intertexts, nor does it serve to present a challenge to her own poetics or novel-writing strategies. Nothomb is quite happy to play with a genre briefly in one text, only to abruptly conclude the experiment and move on to the next novel. Nothomb's work contains no thorough interrogation of genre questions, and certainly not of autofiction, since the Nothombian *posture* does not allow for this degree of self-interrogation or vulnerability. While it is important to bear in mind that this *posture* is not fully under the author's control, it is very noticeable that the Nothombian novels discussed here all perform varying degrees of control over artistic and narrative ideals. Any experimentation with autofictional narratives in the Nothombian oeuvre is always related to the Nothombian *posture* and to the degree of control that her characters have over their own fictional narratives. In Chapter Two, we will see a similar dominance of the 'Hoppe-narrative' – specifically in terms of stylistic and thematic homogeneity – over Felicitas Hoppe's writing, although the novel *Hoppe* is much more explicit and thorough in its experimentation with the autofiction genre. Over the course of the following chapters, we will see how the novels discussed there demonstrate the performance of an increasing lack of control of the autofictional characters over their narratives.

As we will see, this opens the autofictional novel up to a broader range of experimental possibilities.

Chapter Two

'Es gibt immer noch keinen Raum für uns, in dem wir uns ehrlich zeigen könnten': Metafictional Commentary on Autofiction in Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012)

Introduction: *Hoppe* as Paradigmatic Autofiction?

Felicitas Hoppe's novel *Hoppe* (2012), published in the same year its author was awarded the Georg-Büchner-Preis, is described in its blurb as '[eine] Traumbiographie, in der Hoppe von einer anderen Hoppe erzählt' (*H* 2). In *Hoppe*, the fictional biographer FH combines biographical research with literary criticism in an account of a fictional Felicitas Hoppe's life and literary works, which makes reference to both clearly fictional and clearly non-fictional, or factual, elements.[59] Critics are therefore eager to cite this text as another example of a trend in contemporary German-language literature of authors fictionalising their own life stories, as in the cases of Hanns-Josef Ortheil, Thomas Glavinic, and David Wagner (Krumrey 2015). In fact, the label of autofiction is ascribed to Hoppe's text so frequently that *Hoppe* has practically become the paradigm for German autofiction.[60] At first glance, the text certainly appears to correspond to the two primary characteristics of autofiction outlined by Gasparini and Lecarme: firstly, the nominal identity of author, narrator, and protagonist;[61] and secondly, the text's self-identification as a novel, or work of fiction. However, the novel arguably does not meet a third criterion of autofiction specified by both Gasparini and Doubrovsky: namely, that an

[59] Although the biographer's initials are consistently written in lower-case letters in the novel (fh), I will use capital letters throughout the chapter in order to lend the combination of these two letters slightly more distinction.

[60] Examples of criticism that categorises *Hoppe* as autofiction include the following: Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner, 'Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin zwischen Tradition und Transmoderne' in *Ehrliche Erfindungen: Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin zwischen Tradition und Transmoderne*, ed. by Frank and Ilgner (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), pp. 15-41; Birgitta Krumrey, 'Autofiktionales Schreiben nach der Postmoderne? Felicitas Hoppes *Hoppe*' in *Realitätsefekte in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur: Schreibweisen nach der Postmoderne?*, ed. by Krumrey, Ingo Vogler, and Katharina Derlin (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014), pp. 277-292; and Jutta Weiser and Christine Ott, 'Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Einleitung' in *Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Kulturelle Formungen des postmodernen Subjekts*, ed. by Weiser and Ott (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013), pp. 7-16. Several contemporary reviews also focus on self-discovery and self-invention in *Hoppe*. According to Wolfgang Schneider, for example, *Hoppe* is an 'eindringliche Selbsterkundung' (Schneider 2012a).

[61] As we will see, the narrative voice is split (at the very least) between FH and Felicitas, so the nominal identity is not entirely given here, although certainly strongly hinted at. Whereas FH evidently writes about Felicitas in the third person, large sections of the text are narrated by Felicitas in the first person.

autofictional text demonstrate the author's 'pulsion de "se révéler dans sa vérité"' (Gasparini 2008: 209). As the following analysis will show, and despite critics' protestations to the contrary, the focus in *Hoppe* is less on self-discovery or even self-invention than it is on the text's construction and its constant deferral of the moment of Felicitas's self-reflection and self-constitution, as seen in her gradual disappearance from the text. Despite the suggested overlap between the character of Felicitas and Hoppe the real-life author, these parallels or similarities are, in the end, obfuscated by the text's constant oscillation between the proliferation of narratives and characters on the one hand, and the reduction thereof on the other. Over the course of the novel, the biography's subject begins to dwindle amid masses of metafictional commentary and inter- and autotextual allusions. As a result, rather than being a prime example of the contemporary autofictional novel, *Hoppe* can in fact be read, not only as a caricature of methods of literary analysis – and thereby implicit criticism of reading habits with regard to autofiction – but also as an exercise in ironising the mechanisms through which the contemporary autofictional novel seeks to legitimise itself. Somewhat paradoxically, through the text's constant insistence on its shortcomings as a biography and autofiction, a strongly articulated, unique narrative and stylistic voice that is characteristic of Hoppe is nonetheless conveyed to readers of the text. *Hoppe* can thus be productively read as an articulation, not of the author's identity, but instead of her poetics, as we will see in the examples of Hoppe's assimilative writing process and the concept of 'ehrliches Erzählen'.

Since the late 1990s, Hoppe has been celebrated in the German literary world as a 'literarische[s] Fräuleinwunder' (Weyandt 2012) and 'Deutschlands fantastischste Fabuliererin' (Krekeler 2012). Despite not attracting much attention outside the Germanophone sphere, her works have nonetheless been translated into a number of European languages (French and Polish, among others), and she continues to receive attention and critical acclaim in her home country. In 2012, she was awarded the *Erich-Kästner-Preis für Literatur*, which is given to 'lebende deutschsprachige Autoren, […] die herausragende Werke mit zeitkritischen Zügen veröffentlicht haben' (Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2015). According to the Erich Kästner Society,

Hoppe was selected for this prize since she is, like Kästner, 'eine Meisterin der literarischen Selbstinszenierung', who writes postmodern picaresque and adventure novels 'mit unbekümmerter Fabulierlust und unerschöpflicher Fantasie' (Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2015). Indeed, the number of reviews of *Hoppe* in particular expounding on the author's rich imagination might lead one to believe that Hoppe is unrivalled in her capacity, not only for storytelling, but also for her innovation in combining this storytelling with the genre of autofiction to create a whole new reality. Hans-Jost Weyandt commends *Hoppe* as a 'künstlerischer Selbstentwurf, […] der in seiner romantischen Radikalität die fiktionale Romankonstruktion sprengt und in der zeitgenössischen Literatur kaum Entsprechungen finden dürfte' (Weyandt 2012); Wolfgang Schneider highlights how deftly the novel obscures 'den Bruch zwischen Erlebtem und Erfundenem', especially in times of what he calls 'oftmals plumpe[r] Autobiografismus' (Schneider 2012a); and Heinrich Detering enthuses: 'Einen ganzen Hoppekosmos phantastiert sie so zusammen, eine literarische Wahn- und Wunderwelt, die sie mit der ihr eigenen Energie der Realität aufzwingt' (Detering 2012). Certainly, Hoppe seems to possess a talent for appropriating genres for herself, and adapting and using them for her own purposes.[62] In her analysis of Hoppe's third novel *Johanna* (2006), for example, Svenja Frank demonstrates how Hoppe succeeds in both satirising the genre of the historical novel (and academic methods of historical analysis: 'Wissenschaftssatire', Frank 2014: 62), as well as combining it with a metanarrative that serves as a means of identity construction, self-discovery, and self-legitimisation for the narrator/writer figure in the novel. According to Frank, this is so skilfully done that Hoppe here successfully manages to acknowledge and reflect on postmodern strategies of delegitimisation ('Delegitimationsstrategien', Weixler 2016: 361), while at the same time overcoming them (Frank 2014: 58).

That Hoppe should turn her attention to autofiction for her following novel appears to make perfect sense in this context. Yet what we find in *Hoppe*, in contrast to the 'sinnstiftend[e]

[62] I explore Hoppe's attitude towards genre more generally in the following article: Stephanie Obermeier, '"Im beweglichen Umgang mit den störrischen Fakten": Attitudes to Genre in Felicitas Hoppe's *Prawda: Eine amerikanische Reise* (2018)' in *German Life and Letters* 72: 3 (2019), pp. 378-398.

Erzählprozess' (Frank 2014: 58) in *Johanna*, is a narrative that, while it acknowledges the shortcomings of its own form, can offer neither a post-postmodern reaffirmation of the writerly subject of the kind that Birgitta Krumrey describes (Krumrey 2014: 290), nor a viable alternative to the autofiction genre.[63] In writing *Hoppe*, the author plays with the genre without fully committing to its conventions. This is not done simply to frustrate readers' expectations for the sake of it, but also to remind them of the logic behind their expectations. This lack of commitment even to autofiction, a hybrid genre which might allow for a great deal of flexibility compared to other genres, suggests a lack of confidence on the part of the author in the genre conventions available to her. At the same time, however, it also functions as a suitable medium through which to articulate concerns regarding precisely this perceived inadequacy on the part of the genre. This chapter will demonstrate how *Hoppe* struggles to reconcile autofiction's referential dimension with postmodernism's disavowal of referential autobiographical writing. By creating a *mise en abyme* of fictional layers and endlessly multiplying the autofictional character, Hoppe creates a highly complex narrative structure, but also one in which all experimental and subversive aspects lead back to the author figure whom the text ostensibly aims to obscure. While *Hoppe* thus represents a departure from the largely undisputed authority of Nothomb's autofictional characters, the novel appears less subversive when compared to Meinecke's, Setz's, and Garréta and Roubaud's texts, in which we will see a more extreme subversion and marginalisation of the autofictional narrator.

Proliferation and Disorientation: Felicitas's Unsteady Identity

Since the plot of *Hoppe* is quite complex, this is worth recounting in some detail, although Hoppe's constant blending of fact and fiction in this text would become apparent even through a cursory synopsis. In *Hoppe*, the biographer FH writes a biography of the fictional character

[63] Krumrey herself places *Hoppe* somewhere in between a more conventionally postmodern, Doubrovskyan autofiction on the one hand and a contemporary German autofiction that has returned to the authorial 'Ich' with a degree of self-confidence: 'Hoppes Roman nimmt so eine Art "Schwellenstatus" ein' (Krumrey 2014: 290).

'Felicitas Hoppe'.[64] Although the reader is encouraged to view this as the culmination of FH's research on Felicitas, the text is seemingly a patchwork constructed out of quotations from Felicitas's written works,[65] reminiscences and written accounts about Felicitas from other characters, and assessments of her writing by her critics.[66] The novel is divided into five sections and begins with Felicitas's life as a young girl moving with her father, Karl, from Wrocław (Breslau) in Poland to Brantford, Ontario in Canada.[67] This is in spite of the fact that the novel begins with a section '0.', which cites the Wikipedia article on 'Felicitas Hoppe' and states that Felicitas was born in Hamelin ('Hameln', *H* 9).[68] Especially as a young girl, Felicitas spends a lot of time claiming that her real family, including four siblings to whom she writes frequent letters, is actually in Hamelin, and that the man she is travelling with is merely her 'Entführervater' (*H* 23). In Brantford, Felicitas befriends a young Wayne Gretzky,[69] and, since her father works long days, spends most of her time either playing hockey with the Gretzky family or learning to play the piano with her teacher Lucy Bell (allegedly Alexander Graham Bell's great-great-granddaughter). When she is fourteen, Felicitas and her father move to Adelaide in Australia. Since Karl prefers to travel by ship, section two of the novel details his and his daughter's journey across the sea on board the cargo ship *MS Queen Adelheid*. Section three covers Felicitas's teenage years, during which she continues piano lessons with the character

[64] Henceforth, the fictional character will be referred to as 'Felicitas', in contradistinction to the empirical author, 'Hoppe', and the fictional biographer, FH.

[65] Some of these correspond with Hoppe's actual publications; all of Hoppe's previous novels – *Pigafetta* (1999), *Paradiese, Übersee* (2003), and *Johanna* (2006) – are referenced, as well as three of her short story collections: *Picknick der Friseure* (1996), *Fakire und Flötisten* (2001), and *Verbrecher und Versager* (2004) (*H* 13, 27, 105). Otherwise, *Hoppe* references over thirty fictitious texts (including letters, essays, articles, short stories, libretti, as well as a travel report, a screenplay, and a musical) written by Felicitas, some published, some unpublished, and some of which the reader is explicitly informed are available for consultation as archive material at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (*H* 19, 155).

[66] These are, primarily, Reimar Strat (*H* 33), the 'ausgewiesene Hoppekenner' Richard Wagner (*H* 36), Yasmine Brückner (*H* 63), Tracy Norman (*H* 76), the 'Kulturwissenschaftler' Kai Rost (*H* 102), and 'Moderator und Historiker' Jerome Keith Chester (*H* 117). To the best of my knowledge they are all fictitious.

[67] Her mother, Maria Siedlatzek, is said to have left Karl and her daughter for a musical director in Warsaw (*H* 44-45).

[68] While a sustained discussion of Hoppe's relationship with digital media is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting the Wikipedia reference here. The fact that even someone as Internet-averse as Hoppe cites an online source shows just how pervasive online culture has become.

[69] For my non-Canadian readers, Wayne Gretzky is a real-life Canadian professional ice hockey player, 'considered by many to be the greatest player in the history of the National Hockey League' (Encyclopædia Britannica).

Quentin Blyton, the father of her boyfriend Joey. In section four, Felicitas, now a young woman, attends a music conservatory and marries Viktor Seppelt (also fictional), a fellow student at the conservatory. They travel to New York for their honeymoon, where they suddenly go their separate ways. Viktor returns to Australia, and Felicitas begins a journey across the United States in order to find her father, who disappears while Felicitas is still at the conservatory. This last journey is recounted in section five of the book, during which FH begins to lose track of Felicitas's doings and whereabouts. Felicitas's last ascertainable residence appears to be in Eugene, Oregon, where she writes an Master's thesis on the literary reception of Till Eulenspiegel and teaches German at the State University. Finally, she, too, disappears, and the novel ends cryptically with the remark (in English and German, from Felicitas and FH respectively, one assumes): 'To be continued. (Fortsetzung folgt./fh)' (*H* 330).

While the novel therefore appears to end on the oft-cited question 'wo steckt Felicitas?' (*H* 246), a better question would perhaps be 'wer ist Felicitas', since the text's assumed purpose seems to be exactly this: a literary and biographical exploration of the figure behind the title, 'Hoppe'. In spite of this, and FH's apparently meticulous philological and archival research, the novel does as much to confuse the reader about Felicitas's actual identity as it does to illuminate it. Although the lack of a satisfying conclusion to the novel can be attributed to Felicitas's gradual disappearance, I would argue that the reader does not get to know her well precisely because she is omnipresent within the text, yet under a myriad of different guises. This paradoxical aspect of the novel is one which is alluded to and gestured toward throughout the text in various ways, but it is nowhere as clear as in the title: *Hoppe* both is and is not about Felicitas. The text ostensibly deals with little else besides its protagonist and object of study Felicitas, yet Felicitas's character is multiplied and her identity diffused to such an extent that coming to any definite conclusion about who Felicitas is or what she is like becomes nearly impossible. This is compounded by the fact the novel spends just as much, if not more, time engaging in metafictional commentary on the fact that the novel is not doing what, ostensibly, it is meant to do. One example of this commentary takes the form of a text entitled 'Buch L' (*H* 135)

that Felicitas starts writing. It is ostensibly about (the real-life historical figure) Ludwig Leichhardt, but, in a likely nod to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), turns out instead to be mostly about one of Felicitas's (fictitious) brothers instead who goes in search of her after she disappears: 'Auf kurzer Strecke erzählt das Buch allerdings alles andere als das Schicksal von […] Ludwig Leichhardt' (*H* 138). In this manner, then, if the novel is read as an attempt by the author to make use of autofiction as a means of distancing herself from the public eye and obscuring her true identity via her writing, it could be hailed as a success – although a text that encourages a degree of fact-checking on the part of the reader might well have the opposite effect as well. More than this, however, I argue that the text itself confirms its own inadequacy in terms of functioning as a means of (fictional or factual) self-representation by asserting that the (potential) act of self-revelation is constantly deferred and always happens elsewhere. The reader's assumption that Felicitas's extended journey over the course of the narrative will culminate in a moment of self-realisation or self-affirmation is frustrated, and any attempts by the reader to piece together an image of Felicitas or an accurate narrative of her travels are called into question or even explicitly mocked through an increasingly complex and mediated characterisation of Felicitas, the endless doubling of her character, and a personal journey that is plagued by inconsistencies, absurdities, and red herrings. Arguably, this could be interpreted as an instance of form mirroring content, in that the form is made suitably complex in order to do justice to the complexity of lived experience. Yet, as previously indicated, Hoppe here displays only a passing interest in content, and her main focus is, instead, the novel's genre, and how it matches, or fails to match, readers' expectations, especially of the autofictional novel.

It quickly becomes clear to even a cursory reader of *Hoppe* that Felicitas's characterisation (such as it is) is marked by a series of contradictory traits. On the one hand, Felicitas is (similarly to the way Hoppe herself is described by her critics) 'eine große Erfinderin' with 'eine[r] blühende[n] Phantasie' and '[einer] ungebremste[n] Fabulierlust' (*H* 149, 48). On the other hand, she is incapable of putting her talents to good use: FH comments early on in the book that Felicitas suffers from a 'Mangel an Ausdauer' (*H* 34), and Lucy Ayrton (the landlady of

the guesthouse in Adelaide) confirms this, asserting that Felicitas is 'immer voller Ideen, nur dass sie nichts davon umsetzen konnte' (*H* 149). This assertion is, however, in turn also undermined by Viktor's claim that Feliticas is 'ausdauernd bis zur Selbstverleugnung' (*H* 210). As soon as a personality trait is introduced, it is contradicted or at least mitigated shortly afterwards. For example, shortly after FH writes that 'Leichtsinn, Übermut, Gratwanderei, Disproportion, kühne Inkompetenz und [ein] ausgeprägte[r] Hang zum Aufschneiden und zu Prahlhanserei' (*H* 59) are all characteristics that apply to Felicitas, she amends her previous comment with: 'Bei allem Leichtsinn und aller Sprunghaftigkeit, die man Felicitas immer wieder zu Recht attestiert hat, hielt sie sich mit wenigen Ausnahmen […] alltags verlässlich an Regeln' (*H* 74). Not even her 'Steckbrief' (*H* 219), a list of Felicitas's favourite things that is gradually compiled over the course of the novel, turns out to be consistent.[70] The text cannot decide, for example, whether Felicitas's favourite colour is grey or red: 'Ihre Lieblingsfarbe: Grau. (Hoppes Lieblingsfarbe ist nachweislich Rot./fh)' (*H* 59). Felicitas also very obviously contradicts herself at points. In one example, Felicitas claims she would rather be blind than deaf ('Lieber tönendes Dunkel als schweigendes Licht!', *H* 56), only to change her mind a few pages later: 'Es gibt Nächte, in denen ich taub sein möchte, lieber schweigendes Licht als tönendes Dunkel' (*H* 71). FH is, for the most part, aware of the contradictory nature of Felicitas's character, but her response tends to limit itself to merely commenting on this, as when she points out that Felicitas's conversational aptitude and geniality stand in stark contrast to her flighty tendencies: 'jene Eigenschaft, die in so krassem Gegensatz zu ihren ständigen Fluchtbewegungen stand' (*H* 91). These tendencies, moreover, are not only manifest in her restlessness and seemingly unending journey, but also in the way in which Felicitas transforms into various other characters along the way, throughout the novel's *mise en abyme* of fictional layers.

Felicitas's identity is fractured into a number of nicknames, aliases, and her own literary alter egos. In Brantford, Felicitas is known to her friends as 'Fly' or 'Sawchy' (*H* 38), in Adelaide she goes by 'Wicketoo', and at the conservatory she is nicknamed 'Cheshire Cat' (*H* 211).

[70] This comprises such things as her favourite colour (*H* 59), book (*H* 18), animal (*H* 59), and flower (*H* 224).

Felicitas writes herself into her own stories under such aliases as 'Fleur' and 'Bee Hope' (*H* 232, 69) – the latter of which, as the text itself admits in one of its characteristically self-aware and self-deprecating moments, is '[ein] schlecht erfundene[s] Pseudonym' (*H* 69). Felicitas's literary counterparts are therefore, so to speak, doubly fictionalised versions of Hoppe herself, and all ostensibly mediated through a third fictionalised instance of Hoppe in the form of FH.[71] According to the text, and to Viktor's account of Felicitas more specifically, it is simply in Felicitas's nature to give her own names or nicknames to things, and Viktor attributes this to her 'übermütige Schöpferlaune, der sie sich zügellos hingab' (*H* 255). Felicitas is not the only source of aliases in the text, however, since the reader is told that, once she becomes known as a writer, she is (implausibly) nicknamed 'Tapferes Schneiderlein' and 'Die Nonne' (*H* 167) by her critics.[72] It is at this point that the reader notices a certain disjuncture in the text between Felicitas as a girl and young woman, whose life is being recounted by FH, and Felicitas as an author, whose story and texts seem strangely disconnected from her life as narrated by FH, despite all the biographer's efforts to demonstrate the contrary. It is noticeable that FH tends to use 'Felicitas' to refer to her biographical object of study and 'Hoppe' to refer to the later Felicitas-as-author. While this distinction is not maintained consistently, FH frequently uses 'Hoppe' when referring to Felicitas's written works (see, for example, *H* 24, 62, 116, 178). While FH takes very exact note of the circumstances of production for Felicitas's childhood- and early writing, it is unclear to the reader when, where, and how exactly her other texts (especially the novels that bear the same titles as works written by the real-life Hoppe) are supposed to have been written, and how her literary career – and thereby her self-actualisation, one might argue – is meant to have come about. The older Felicitas, from the period of her life beyond that which is covered in *Hoppe*, appears at points throughout the text, but always in quite unlikely ways: for example, as FH

[71] We will see a similar *mise en abyme* of layers of fictionalisation in Chapter Six, although in Garréta and Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique* there is a greater attempt to create distance between these levels than the very closely linked levels we see in *Hoppe*.

[72] This is, apparently, due to her distinctive clothing style and 'trademark' of meticulously ironed shirts: 'jene weißen und jederzeit peinlich akkurat gebügelten Hemden, die nicht nur zu ihrem Markenzeichen werden sollten, sondern gelegentlich als eine Art Tick vermerkt worden sind' (*H* 167). This idea of an author being or having a brand is remarkably close to the kind of 'author-branding' discussed in relation to Nothomb in Chapter One.

reports, giving an impromptu speech on backpacks in Tokyo in the early 2000s, or a lecture on swearing at the maritime museum in Bremerhaven in 2007 (*H* 15, 104). In this manner, *Hoppe* purports to present us with the coming-of-author narrative so common to autobiographical or autofictional texts (and the related genres of *Bildungs*- and *Künstlerroman*), while at the same time subverting it, since the narratives of the younger and older Felicitas never satisfyingly connect.

As well as distinguishing between Felicitas the character, FH the biographer, and Hoppe the author, the reader is then also encouraged to distinguish between several versions of Felicitas: 'Fly', the young girl in Brantford; 'Wicketoo', the teenager in Adelaide; the 'Cheshire Cat' Felicitas at the conservatory; the eccentrically European teacher of German at the university in Oregon; Felicitas as she appears in all of her own early texts under other pseudonyms; and, finally, Felicitas the author, who is apparently 'heute in Berlin ansässig' (*H* 327). This last claim is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Felicitas seems to mysteriously disappear toward the end of the novel, and the manner in which FH writes about her at other points, using the past tense to describe her as if she were already deceased (see, for example: 'Sie war […] eine Meisterin des Schnappschusses', *H* 253). Heinrich Detering also notices this when he writes: 'immer wieder spricht "fh" über Hoppe wie über eine Tote. […] "Hoppe" ist eine Geschichte buchstäblich nach dem Tod der Autorin, erzählt aus einer Art Jenseits; und von welchem Ort aus eigentlich gesagt wird, dass "ich seit Jahren verschollen bin", bleibt offen' (Detering 2012). To a certain extent, Hoppe's writing is similar to Nothomb's, in that she clearly sets no great store by verisimilitude. Yet, even for Hoppe's much acclaimed *Fabulierlust*, the extent of the disparate Felicitas personas she creates here is quite extraordinary. Given that *Hoppe* ostensibly deals with little else than Felicitas, the accumulation of details about her and her life ultimately amounts to little else than deliberate confusion. Indeed, the text itself implies this: 'Hoppe, wir wissen es längst, […] kann weder Biographie noch Autobiographie' (*H* 294). However, as we will see below, this metafictional comment is also a little misleading.

Narrative Unreliability and Interchangeable Characters

The reader's task of discerning what Felicitas is really like is not made any easier through the confusion of narrative voices either. Although FH is the ostensible guiding hand in the text, who constantly reassures the reader of the soundness of her biographical methods, she often allows other voices to take over large sections of the text. Whereas she is mostly scrupulous and thorough in her commentary of others' accounts, she at points fails to notice inconsistencies within or highly implausible elements of Felicitas's story. FH certainly does everything to convince her reader that she has done her research: references are constantly made to textual evidence, photographs, archive material, interviews, and secondary criticism of Felicitas and her writing, and she does not shy away from painstakingly reconstructing key events from Felicitas's life through any means available to her (*H* 232). Conveniently enough for FH, many of the people Felicitas encounters along the way keep some form of written record of her: Quentin writes a memoir (*H* 181), Virginia keeps a diary (*H* 164), and even the Captain of the *Queen Adelheid* records – in shorthand – Felicitas's farewell speech from the crew (*H* 128). Phyllis Gretzky, oddly enough, is the exception: 'Sicher ist, dass Phyllis […] die Einzige war, die […] Hopp[e] […] beim Wort nahm, auch wenn sich das faktisch nicht nachweisen lässt, da Phyllis weder Tagebuch führte noch Briefe schrieb' (*H* 89). On occasion, FH comments on the fact that the materials themselves are confusing or misleading, as in the case of a caption on a photograph that names two characters, when the photograph itself displays only one (*H* 253-254). By and large, however, FH writes authoritatively. '[N]achweislich' is a key word that appears throughout the text – in one case even three times within the space of a few pages (*H* 42, 46, 48) – and she tends to have the final say in determining the degree of truth or accuracy of any given statement, as in the following instances: 'Das ist so freundlich übertrieben wie faktisch falsch' (*H* 91) and '[z]urück vom Hoppetext zu den Fakten' (*H* 146). Yet FH shares her narrative with a host of other characters, most notably with Felicitas's father Karl, whose diary provides, if not necessarily an insight into his daughter's personality, at least a detailed account of their travels and day-to-day occurrences: 'Das Tagebuch des einzigen Vaters seines einzigen

Kindes, akribische Auflistung äußerer Ereignisse unter entschiedener Weglassung der inneren, gibt Aufschluss über Arbeitsaufenthalte auf höchst unterschiedlichen Kontinenten' (*H* 14). Karl's notes are further complemented by testimonies from Felicitas's various teachers and mentors,[73] and later by Viktor's and Hans Herman Haman's accounts, Haman being Felicitas's housemate in Oregon, who is also credited with the discovery of Felicitas as an author (*H* 326). While these accounts at times confirm notions previously expressed by FH or by Felicitas's literary critics, they also quite noticeably contradict one another at points. In one example, in which Bamie Boots is asked whether he agrees with a certain interpretation of Felicitas's actions, he reacts 'leicht gereizt: "Das stimmt doch hinten und vorne nicht"' (*H* 64). On the one hand, Hoppe's tactics in imitating a biographer's style might just be in service of making *Hoppe* read more like what the novel's blurb claims it is, namely a fantastical biography – one with incongruous elements, but no more so than any other biographical narrative reconstructed on the basis of personal testimonies and archive material. On the other hand, the text's many deliberate inconsistencies demonstrate the extent to which Hoppe undermines the authority of the voices of both FH and Felicitas, i.e. of both the biographer-/scholar-figure and author-figure/protagonist in the text.

There is, of course, nothing particularly new or remarkable about unreliable narrators, contradictory narratives told by a variety of characters, or polyphonic narratives of the self, yet what is striking in *Hoppe* is that even FH – ostensibly the final arbiter in terms of selecting and editing this material – has trouble remaining in control of her narrative. In three out of the novel's five sections, FH hands over her narrative to Felicitas and lets her conclude the section, despite the fact that Felicitas is not particularly adept at writing satisfying endings to her stories, as the text tells us several times: 'Die Geschichte endet für Protagonisten und Leser gleichermaßen verwirrend' (*H* 70) and 'Hoppes Erzählung gerät ins Schwimmen, sie ist

[73] These are: Bamie Boots, Felicitas's hockey trainer; Martha Knit, one of her primary school teachers; Lucy Bell, her piano teacher in Brantford; Lucy Ayrton, landlady of the guesthouse 'Grant's Children' in Adelaide; and Quentin and Virginia Blyton, parents of Joey, Felicitas's first boyfriend in Adelaide. Quentin also acts as Felicitas's piano teacher for some time, while Virginia is more concerned with her spiritual well-being.

offensichtlich nicht in der Lage, die Geschichte überzeugend zu Ende zu bringen' (*H* 146). Moreover, despite her exhaustive ambitions as a biographer, FH appears not to notice – or at the very least refrains from commenting on – instances when the story starts becoming less and less plausible and more and more dream-like. Once again, naming plays an important role here, as characters' names are either highly alliterative or repetitive, as in the cases of Bamie Boots, Tony Tonell, and Bojana Baton.[74] The intentional confusion and conflation is exacerbated by FH's tendency to use only characters' initials once she has given the reader their full names (BB, TT, and so forth). Some names are given to several characters at once: Clark Dark, for example, is both the narrator of a story printed in a local Canadian newspaper (*H* 50, 201) as well as a guard at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. (*H* 328), and this name is not a million miles away from that of a character called *Carl* Dark, Felicitas's history teacher at school in Adelaide. These repeated instances of doubling become even more confusing when a second Lucy Bell appears briefly in the text. As this is quite a representative moment in the text, it is worth examining in some detail. Although it is clearly another instance of the text goading its academic readers into reading a deeper meaning into uses of doubling where there might not, in fact, be any, the indistinguishability of the characters is not an entirely flippant element and does encapsulate a fundamental aspect of the text, as we will see below.

After FH has apparently temporarily lost track of Felicitas after her honeymoon in New York, the biographer follows an unpromising lead and contacts 'eine […] auf die Vermittlung junger Dirigenten spezialisierte Agentur namens *Cater & Partners*', where she encounters 'ein[e] so dezent wie elegant gekleidet[e] und resolut[e] Dame Ende vierzig (glattes Gesicht, ernster Ausdruck, streng nach hinten gebundene Haare, die schwarz und ehrgeizig glänzen), […] ein[e] gewiss[e] Lucy Bell' (*H* 236). This description copies almost word for word Felicitas's description of her piano teacher in Brantford: 'Lucy war eine schlanke Frau mit einem glatten Gesicht mit einem ernsten Ausdruck mit streng nach hinten gebundenen Haaren, die schwarz und ehrgeizig glänzten' (*H* 67). FH, however, takes no note of this whatsoever, which is

[74] Unsubtle and unlikely names like Tony Tonell (a piano tuner) and Jerome Parole (a French linguist) also further demonstrate that Hoppe is not interested in maintaining any great semblance of realism here.

especially surprising, given that the first Lucy Bell acts as a kind of surrogate mother to the young Felicitas in Brantford and is therefore, presumably, a highly significant character for Felicitas's narrative. Despite the text increasingly implying that these two Lucys might actually be one and the same – they have both spent time in Canada, share an admiration for Glenn Gould, and both apparently attended his final public performance in 1964 – neither FH nor the second Lucy acknowledge this. Just as FH appears not to recognise the second Lucy from Felicitas's description of her, or from FH's own previous account of the first Lucy, so the second Lucy does not recognise Felicitas's name when asked about her (*H* 238).[75] This entire incident appears even more implausible when read in light of a comment on the first Lucy's account of herself. The text itself draws specific attention to this, pointing out that:

> Auch in späteren Jahren scheint Hoppe nicht aufgefallen zu sein, dass Lucy Bell kaum in der Lage gewesen sein dürfte, sich 1964 (kaum vierundzwanzigjährig) eine Reise nach Los Angeles zu leisten, wo der große GG übrigens nicht Beethovens opus 108, sondern opus 109 zu Gehör brachte. (*H* 68-69)

The text thus becomes a mirror maze of characters that closely resemble one another. Although they appear to be just different enough to remain distinct characters, on closer inspection they tend to collapse into one another. The second Lucy Bell is a copy of the first one, while the first Lucy Bell appears to be one of the many copies of Felicitas's mother Maria (who, according to FH, also gave her daughter piano lessons). The text contains countless other *ersatz* parents, such as the mother figures Phyllis Gretzky and Lucy Ayrton, and father figures Quentin and Haman. The text itself tells the reader as much: 'Hoppes "Wahlmütter", […] Phyllis Gretzky und Lady Ayrton, werden, genau wie ihre Wahlväter Kramer und Small […] und Quentin Blyton, […] zu Platzhaltern von Positionen, die in Hoppes realem Leben nicht besetzt waren. Sie sind alles zugleich: Mütter, Väter, Geschwister und Großeltern' (*H* 243).

In fact, a list at the very end of the book of all of *Hoppe*'s (real and fictitious) characters seems to indicate that all these characters were merely invented by Felicitas, as they are referred to as 'die endlose Reihe ihrer Erfindungen' (*H* 329). This would, of course, explain how

[75] Tony Tonnell also appears twice, both times as a piano tuner, once in Brantford, once in Adelaide (*H* 67, 176). Joey Blyton makes a 'reappearance' in Oregon as the new member of a band at a veteran's club (*H* 323).

easily interchangeable they are, if indeed the lack of distinct characters is a characteristic of Felicitas's writing, as the novel continually reminds us. In the words of one of Felicitas's fictitious critics, Yasmine Brückner, Felicitas's characters are

> [e]ine windige Truppe wankelmütiger Verwandlungskünstler, die hinter Wandschirmen verschwinden, um kurz darauf wieder an der Rampe zu stehen und mit immer neuen Requisiten zu winken. […] Die Angst um die eigene Identität wird, so bedenklich wie unbekümmert, in Lust und Laune verwandelt. […] Ein dunkles Hin und Her von Bewegungen und Finten, ein einziges Hakenschlagen, bei dem der Zuschauer hoffnungslos auf der Strecke bleibt. […] Wer verbirgt sich hinter der Maske im Tor? Hoppes Protagonisten sind ein Team, das sich selbst genügt und auf Trainer und Publikum pfeift. (*H* 63)

The blatant exclusion of the reader in this process and the narrative's self-sufficiency as described here are quite reminiscent of Nothomb's writing, as we saw in Chapter One. The difference here, however, is that Hoppe's text does seem to lament, at least to a certain extent, the fact that it cannot fulfil the task which it has ostensibly set itself. While, in Nothomb's texts, self-sufficiency and the isolation of the text from external influences are framed as a strength or even a necessity, *Hoppe* registers a degree of dissatisfaction with its perceived limitations in this regard – especially by comparison to previous works by Hoppe. Whereas in *Johanna*, as Frank argues, the narrator is able to construct her own identity by comparison and in reference to her 'Spiegelfiguren' Joan of Arc, the object of her study, and Peitsche, her love interest (Frank 2014: 67, 69), Felicitas in *Hoppe* has no 'Spiegelfigur' or Other in whom to find her reflection. If the characters in *Hoppe* are indeed all figments of Felicitas's imagination, then the text does not allow for enough scope for Felicitas to even begin a process of self-discovery. The text, moreover, frames this as a problem, even as it also displays the author's enjoyment in playing with genre, anticipating academic criticism, and subverting the reader's expectations. Felicitas herself seems to be only occasionally bothered by this issue, and the few instances in which she is tend to be during dreams or nightmares: 'Ich stelle zu meinem Entsetzen fest, dass ich nicht weiß, wer ich bin' (*H* 200). This in itself, however, seems more like either another instance of the novel's self-reflexive inadequacy in not providing Felicitas or the reader with an answer to this question, or an anticipation of a psychoanalytic reading of the text performed by over-eager academics, rather than an actual major preoccupation on Felicitas's part. In fact, the text's

preoccupation with the many versions of Felicitas invites the reader to disengage with the question of identity altogether, and to focus instead on the processes of fictionalisation taking place within the text.

Referentiality and the *Sonderraum*

Not all of *Hoppe* is purely Felicitas's fabrication, even if the text tries to convince us otherwise. There is always some measure of factual accuracy involved in *Hoppe*'s representation of characters with a real-life counterpart and of the external, non-fictional world. The earlier statement that Glenn Gould performed Beethoven's opus 109 at his last public performance, for example, is easy enough for the reader to verify, and the novel also offers the reader some factually correct information on Wayne Gretzky, Ludwig Leichhardt, and other historical or real-life figures. At the same time, however, these are almost always accompanied by obvious fictional additions – in the case of Alexander Graham Bell, for example, that Lucy Bell is his 'Ururenkelin' (*H* 54). At times, the novel goes to great lengths to make Felicitas's story seem more plausible by including facts that appear just as ludicrous as the invented additions, as is the case when 'Brad Waltons komische Barockoper *The Loves of Wayne Gretzky (Gretzkys heimliche Liebe)*' is mentioned in the same breath as 'Felicitas' Ballade für Bariton: *Ich stehe ratlos vor dem Hamelner Hochzeitshaus*' (*H* 220-221); amazingly, Walton's comic opera does exist, according to several Canadian media outlets (Parsons 2014), while Felicitas's ballad does not. In this regard, *Hoppe* is not unlike Setz's *Indigo* (discussed in Chapter Five of this thesis), as Jan Wiele's assessment of the latter makes clear. According to Wiele, as highly implausible ('schräg-unglaublich', Wiele 2012) as the plot might be, the novel goes to great lengths to lend itself an aura of legitimacy and credibility through reference to allegedly extra-textual facts that appear doubtful only upon closer scrutiny.

At the same time, however, Felicitas is well aware of how preposterous some of her stories are. At one point she reflects: 'Ich weiß längst, dass man mir das alles nicht abnehmen wird, denn im Lauf der Erzählung ist die Zeit so weit fortgeschritten, dass meine Erinnerungen

kaum überprüfbar sind, weshalb mir nichts anderes übrigbleibt, als ihnen einfach Glauben zu schenken' (*H* 283). Read in application to the text and the reader's relationship to it, this could be interpreted in the following manner: Hoppe reminds her readers that, since much of *Hoppe* is not, in fact, verifiable, they can either choose to dismiss it ('not buy it': 'nicht abnehmen') or simply choose to believe it, in order to engage with the text.[76] FH herself comments that: 'Hoppe war, was ihr Werk betrifft, […] gar nicht daran interessiert, Schnittmengen mit der Wirklichkeit zu bilden' (*H* 33). The text, then, does not actually set great store by factual accuracy, including just enough to anchor the text in a recognisable reality, without losing its claim to being the product of a writer with an 'ungebremste Fabulierlust'. Yet Felicitas also rejects 'reine Erfindung' as a core value of literary texts, as one of her letters to Viktor makes abundantly clear:

> Du hast es gut da hinten in Adelaide, wo Du […] diesen Ludwig Leichhardt […] inszenierst, einen Mann, den es wirklich gegeben hat, während ich am Ende der Welt im Gegensatz zu Dir damit beschäftigt bin, *nichts als eine Fiktion* zu verwalten, einen über die Maßen lächerlichen Zauberer, von dem man schon auf der ersten Seite weiß, dass er alles kann, bloß nicht zaubern, der also nichts ist als der Traum eines Traums, *nichts als reine Erfindung*, die sich aus den kümmerlichen Kornkammern von Parallelwelten speist, damit sich wieder und wieder erfüllt, was über den Zauberer von OZ [*sic*] geschrieben steht. (*H* 250; my emphasis)

Although, as we have seen, the text is not averse to criticising Felicitas through the opinions of fictional critics and FH's commentary, the use of the term 'Parallelwelten' in the above quotation is unique in that seems to criticise an aspect of *Hoppe* which the novel itself frames as crucial: namely, the existence of a 'Zwischenrau[m]' (*H* 288) or 'Sonderraum' (*H* 33). If the text advocates neither pure fiction, nor pure fact, then what about something in between, namely autofiction?

While a space in which it might be possible to show oneself in one's true form is frequently invoked, it is also made clear that this space, if it exists at all, exists outside the text – or at least outside *this* text. Antonius Weixler has interpreted the *Sonderraum* as an alternative space beyond the text itself, and which exists in contrast to it. This is the only space where it is actually possible to write about oneself and represent oneself authentically: 'Nur in einem

[76] Felicitas's fondness for aphorisms, which is well-documented but generally met with impatience and exasperation by her critics (*H* 98, 313), also chimes well with this uncompromising attitude on the part of the author.

derartigen Sonderraum des Dahinter erscheint es auch in der Postmoderne […] noch möglich, sich ganz und gar authentisch und wahrhaftig zu zeigen' (Weixler 2016: 381). In other words, it is a space in which it might be possible to write conventional autofiction, or indeed autobiography, rather than mere metafictional commentary on it. In the context of Felicitas's story, her critics initially deride the *Sonderraum* as a flaw in her writing, claiming that Felicitas's old-fashioned use of German indicates a foolish desire on her part to return to a 'verloren[e] literarisch[e] Rau[m]' (*H* 33). Yet both the novel and FH herself take pains to underscore the legitimacy of the *Sonderraum*. According to FH, Felicitas's *Sonderraum* is 'keineswegs imaginiert, sondern Realität' (*H* 33-34). While this could be read as another instance of the text's capricious intermingling of fact and fiction, I would argue that the *Sonderraum* actually serves to ground the text, if only as a means of defining the novel *ex negativo*: it is as if *Hoppe* goes to great lengths to demonstrate its lack of autofictionality, all the while attempting to fulfil autofictional criteria. However, even if neither Felicitas nor Hoppe succeed in writing autofiction, it is nonetheless important for this possibility to exist. Perhaps Felicitas succeeds in doing so beyond the text (perhaps in the continuation, as the final lines suggest), but we as readers are never allowed access to the *Sonderraum*, since we never find out who Felicitas is in this text. As Felicitas herself writes resignedly toward the end of the novel: 'ganz egal, wie lange wir spielend in dieser Welt unterwegs sind, es gibt immer noch keinen Raum für uns, in dem wir uns ehrlich zeigen könnten' (*H* 291). Yet the text seems to suggest that this might well be possible at some point in the future, if one were clever or inventive enough to find a way.

Inter- and Autotextuality in *Hoppe*: Genre Commentary and Poetics

Having thus determined the impossibility of autofiction, at least within its own pages, the novel instead consistently displays several noticeable characteristics of Hoppe's writing that constitute her poetics. As Christoph Schröder observes, Hoppe 'sucht [...] nicht nach Wahrheiten, sondern nach ästhetischer Wahrhaftigkeit im Sinne einer sprachlich konsistent verfassten Welt' (Schröder 2018). As much as *Hoppe* might fail to tell a coherent story (as FH constantly reminds

us), it seems to insist on creating a sense of cohesion via other means. As will be shown, Hoppe creates a tightly-knit web of references that not only permeate the text, but in fact constitute most of it. Sections of the text are connected and made to recall one another through recurring motifs and refrains – or even more substantial sections of text, as seen above in the example of Lucy Bell's characterisation.[77] Some of these are intertextual (the text makes frequent reference to fairy tales and adventure stories), while others are words or sentences repeated by Felicitas herself, and often echoed by other characters as well.[78] This latter phenomenon is an example of what Hoppe's German reception refers to as the author's characteristic 'autotextuality' ('Autotextualität', Holdenried 2015: 9; Frank and Ilgner 2016: 26) which takes the form of self-citation across Hoppe's entire oeuvre and contributes to a recognisable 'Hoppe-Sound' (Ina Hartwig as cited in Grub 2008: 74).[79] 'Ganz oder gar nicht', for example, is a motto which most characters ascribe to Felicitas (*H* 64, 183, 309), but also appears to be that of Lucy Bell (both versions, in fact, *H* 57, 236). Felicitas's father Karl apparently suffers from 'Landgangsangst' during their journey across the Pacific ('[ein] ziemlich durchschnittlicher Fall von Langangsangst', *H* 127), whereas, once they land in Australia, it is Karl's turn to chide Felicitas for the very same problem: 'ein typischer Fall von Landgangsangst', *H* 136). According to Viktor, she suffers from it once more upon their arrival in New York: 'Kaum ein Tag, an dem sie das Zimmer verlässt, […] ein klassischer Fall von Landgangsangst' (*H* 229). The very slight variance in phrasing here ('durchschnittlich', 'typisch', 'klassisch') is diminished even more in the case of a recurring literal motif, that of Felicitas's preferred type of postage stamp, featuring a 'Schiffsmotiv'. This sentence appears, in almost identical form, a total of five times, and in each case only the punctuation has changed:

[77] We will see a similar phenomenon of textual echoes, although not quite as emphatically and consistently implemented, in Setz's *Indigo* in Chapter Five.

[78] Most common reference is made to Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883), but also to Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump* (1945), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) (*H* 60, 105, 149, 250). Arguably, the character Quentin Blyton is also a reference to the works of Enid Blyton, being a conflation of Blyton's name and that of one of her characters, Uncle Quentin, from her *Famous Five* novel series (1942–1962). The inclusion of these intertexts will be explored in more detail below.

[79] For more details on Hoppe's use of autotextuality, see Obermeier, 'Attitudes to Genre', pp. 386-387, and Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner (eds.), *Ehrliche Erfindungen: Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin zwischen Tradition und Transmoderne* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), pp. 25-26.

> "Brauche Briefmarken (die mit dem Schiffsmotiv!)" (*H* 21)
> ("Briefmarken – die mit dem Schiffsmotiv") (*H* 45)
> Briefmarken ("die mit dem Schiffsmotiv") (*H* 146)
> "Brauche Briefmarken. Die mit dem Schiffsmotiv." (*H* 275)
> "Brauche Briefmarken, die mit dem Schiffsmotiv." (*H* 320)

There is, of course, more at stake here than mere repetition for its own sake: the postage stamps are symbolic of Felicitas's love of writing (letters), her imaginary family in Hamelin, and her globetrotting nature. One can safely assume, however, that Hoppe's choice of creating a recurring motif that is literally a '(Schiffs-)Motiv' is deliberate and that it informs the reader not merely about Felicitas, but also – and more significantly – about the metafictional commentary that accompanies Felicitas's narrative. Unlike in *Johanna*, there is no literal 'Schlüsselmotiv' here (Frank 2014: 62), as much as *Hoppe* might goad its academic readers into trying to find one. The text continuously draws attention to its own methods of construction, situatedness in a literary tradition or canon, potential interpretation, and critical reception. Much of this occurs through commentary by FH or Felicitas's fictional critics, as we have seen, yet it also occurs on the level of Felicitas's engagement with literature. One of the most striking examples of this is another story referenced throughout the text, namely the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Weixler interprets the inclusion of the Pied Piper legend as another example of the way in which the novel constantly fictionalises evident facts and seeks to lend authority to the obviously invented elements of the text:

> Offenkundige Fakten werden durch die Erzählkonstruktion fiktionalisiert, während die 'ehrlich erfundenen', fantastischen Assoziationen durch Authentifizierungsstrategien autorisiert werden. So […] werden Hoppes Hamelner Familie und die beiden lokalen Hamelner 'Ortsmythen' der Rattenfängergeschichte und des Hochzeitshauses fiktionalisiert. Die Erfindung des berühmten Märchens etwa wird Felicitas' kanadischer Ersatzmutter zugeschrieben. (Weixler 2016: 373)

According to the novel, the Pied Piper myth does appear to originate with Phyllis Gretzky, who allegedly first tells Felicitas the story: 'Es ist also Phyllis Gretzky gewesen, die den Rattenfänger von Hameln erfand und Hoppe, die die Geschichte nicht kannte, [erzählte]' (*H* 24). Yet this statement already contradicts itself, since, by pointing out how Felicitas is not familiar with the story, it implies that the story is not, or not exclusively, Phyllis Gretzky's invention. Later, the novel makes reference to '[die] in Deutschland bekanntest[e] Version der Sage nach den

Brüdern Grimm' (*H* 55). In this case, then, the biographer FH, in her earlier statement to the story originating with Phyllis Gretzky, metaleptically intrudes into Felicitas's childhood narrative, in which Phyllis invents the Pied Piper, while trying to square this version with the real world, whose readership is fully aware that the story originated in Germany and was popularised by the Brothers Grimm and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.[80] For Weixler, this fictionalisation of facts and vice versa is symptomatic of the broader trend in contemporary prose writing in the wake of postmodernism to disavow literature's referential capabilities, as we saw in the Introduction to this thesis. Instead, authenticity and authority must be constituted via other means, such as complex narrative constructions and the contextual framework:

> Durch die Konzepte und Paradigmen der Postmoderne wie Hybridität, Simulacrum, Simulation, Digitalität und Virtualität wird medialen Kommunikationsformen nicht mehr länger die Fähigkeit zugestanden, eine referenzielle Authentizität zum Empirischen zu verbürgen. Anders gewendet: Nicht mehr der Inhalt allein kann für die empirische, ontologische oder auch ästhetische Qualität einer Person (beziehungsweise eines Objekts oder Ereignisses) einstehen, vielmehr muss durch eine *kontextuelle Konstruktion* oder durch ein komplexes Erzählverfahren eine Zuschreibung des Qualitätsmerkmals Authentizität angeregt werden. (Weixler 2016: 374; my emphasis)

Authentication, then, can only occur through the self-reflexive rupture with conventional methods of authentication, which gives rise to a 'relationaler und metadiskursiver Authentizitätsbegriff' (Weixler 2016: 374), as opposed to conventional referential authenticity. In this sense, then, *Hoppe* can be read as a thorough exploration of one of the paradoxes which contemporary autofiction embodies, in that the novel struggles to find a way of reconciling autofiction's referential dimension with postmodernism's disavowal of referential autobiographical writing.

Interestingly, the Pied Piper myth also facilitates a link between contemporary autofiction and a kind of writing that *Hoppe* appears to endorse, which is also closely related to one aspect of Hoppe's poetics: namely, a re-telling of fictional stories that are simultaneously integrated into a personal narrative. It should be noted that this is a common feature of Hoppe's

[80] While the novel does not explicitly mention Goethe as a point of reference for the Pied Piper story, Hoppe's frequent engagement with Goethe and the German canon more broadly is well-documented (Frank and Ilgner 2016: 18).

writing, as has been widely recognised by critics. Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner describe Hoppe's tendency to adapt (especially canonical) literature in her writing through an 'Assimilationsprozes[s]' which creates 'eine Art intertextuelle Resonanz' in her works (Frank and Ilgner 2016: 26). In this context, Hoppe is seen as a '*produktive Leserin*, [...] die Literatur- und Kulturzeugnisse vorangegangener Generationen nicht lediglich passiv rezipier[t], sondern sich diese zum Zwecke einer souveränen Wiederverwertung für die eigenen künstlerischen Zwecke schöpferisch anverwandel[t]' (Frank and Ilgner 2016: 25). The text makes clear that Felicitas resembles her author (or at least her author's critical reception) in this regard, as her engagement with the Pied Piper legend shows. After hearing the story from Phyllis, Felicitas next encounters the Pied Piper in a collection of German Folk Tales in the school library in Brantford, where she notices some inconsistencies:

> Allerdings weist das Buch Widersprüche zwischen Text und Illustrationen auf, die der jungen Leserin nicht entgehen. Ist im Text von nur einem (lahmen) Jungen die Rede, zeigen die Bilder stattdessen zwei Kinder, von denen das eine lahm, das andere dagegen blind ist. […] Felicitas' Misstrauen ist geweckt, fortan traut sie weder Phyllis noch dem Text, noch den Bildern. (*H* 55-56)

This is, arguably, a key moment in Felicitas's development of an awareness for the possibility of several versions of a story coexisting, or that this is when her distrust of conventional strategies of authorisation or authentication begins. Notably, Felicitas at first attempts to get to the bottom of the inconsistencies by writing to her siblings in Hamelin to find out the truth:

> Man sagt, das eine sei blind gewesen und das andere lahm. Aber kann man sich dessen sicher sein? Weiß man in Hameln mehr darüber? Könnt Ihr Euch für mich kundig machen? Vielleicht im Fremdenverkehrsbüro? Womöglich waren die Kinder weder blind noch lahm, sondern taub und stumm. (*H* 56)

The implication here is that tracing the story to its physical origin will yield results. This initially appears to (re-)validate the academic pursuit of original documentation to support claims – the very work, in fact, that FH spends most of the text doing. The text therefore at first seems to indicate that this kind of research is a worthwhile pursuit. However, these attempts at legitimisation seem to become more and more irrelevant over the course of the book. Even in the above paragraph we already see Hoppe mocking Felicitas's and FH's efforts through the comical reference to the tourist information office ('Fremdenverkehrsbüro'). Rather than

valorising the search for the story's original version, both the text and Felicitas herself increasingly recognise the act of re-inventing stories as a worthier pursuit. Significantly, the text does not value Phyllis's rendition of the story for being the first version of the story that Felicitas hears, but rather because it is a 'Neuschöpfung', which proves to be 'folgenreich' for Felicitas's development and career as a writer (*H* 23): '[Der Rattenfänger] durchzieh[t] das Werk Hoppes' (*H* 27). Indeed, the later Felicitas as-published-author allegedly wins over an audience at the Goethe-Institut in Chicago by re-telling the story once again: '[Hoppe] gewann […] ihre Zuhörerschaft […] mit einer so vitalen wie anschaulichen Nacherzählung der Sage vom Hamelner Rattenfänger' (*H* 119) – presumably giving it her own twist, as the text reminds us she has a tendency of doing. It is worth noting at this point that all of the intertexts of which Felicitas makes use, including *Pinocchio*, *Pippi Långstrump*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the tales of Till Eulenspiegel, feature characters who go on travels and adventures, who undergo coming-of-age trials or refuse to grow up, who enjoy telling stories, and who display roguish behaviour and enjoy telling lies – or even, in the case of the Wizard of Oz, they must arguably do so in order to fulfil their role in society. Undoubtedly, these characters in a sense act as Felicitas's literary or intertextual role models. Perhaps more importantly, however, what is striking about these intertextual choices is that almost all of them are safely in the public domain, meaning that Felicitas, and Hoppe herself, can conveniently re-appropriate and re-tell these stories as many times as they would like without fear of legal consequences.

More importantly, however, this re-fashioning of well-known fictions with a personal inflection could be read as an implicit endorsement of autofiction as a genre: if the text is scornful of 'original' stories and sceptical of versions that are not patently one's own, then a re-telling of one's own narrative with the incorporation of fictional and intertextual elements seems to be the kind of text that Felicitas would most want to write. Yet Felicitas's approval of the genre is arguably more equivocal. It might be tempting, in light of the above, to read the Pied Piper legend as a kind of allegorical backdrop for *Hoppe*, or an intertextual *Schlüsseltext* in light of which Felicitas's story suddenly makes sense. Arguably, the text even suggests this

interpretation to the reader. In one of her stories, in which she tends to relate all the elements of her experiences thus far to one another, Felicitas writes:

> Plötzlich, so jedenfalls scheint es Felicitas, passt alles zusammen, als würden sich Teile eines Mosaiks, über Jahre gesammelt, endlich zu einem *Gesamtbild* formen, alles zeigt sich "in einem neuen Licht, in einem *unvermuteten Zusammenhang*: der Stottermatrose, der Rattenfänger, […] Joey und Phyllis' Geschichte von jenen Kindern, die endlose Wege zurücklegen müssen, um von Klemzig nach Klemzig zu kommen, weil sie […] das Schiff gar nicht bestiegen haben, um die Welt mit eigenen Augen zu sehen, sondern um ein zweites Mal nach Hause zu kommen." (*H* 168-169; my emphasis)

This passage corresponds quite clearly with another aspect of Hoppe's poetics that is closely related to her assimilative writing process, namely her concept of 'ehrlich[e] Erfindung' (*H* 25). This notion first appears in Hoppe's first novel, *Pigafetta*, in which the narrator claims: 'es ist nichts erlogen, ich habe alles ehrlich erfunden' (Hoppe 2006: 135). According to Martin Hellström, the concept can be found throughout Hoppe's works and posits a method of storytelling whereby props ('Requisiten') from fictional and non-fictional realities are put together in new relationships to one another (Hellström 2008: 32). The idea is that stories, especially biographies or personal narratives, cannot be narrated in a straightforward manner, and that these can only become clear through an intersecting of different, sometimes conflicting or inconsistent narratives and perspectives. As Hellström explains with reference to Hoppe's collection of short stories *Verbrecher und Versager* (2004):

> Damit ist […] der konzeptuelle Rahmen für […] Hoppes biographische Texte […] abgesteckt, in denen die Biographien der Figuren nicht […] anhand einiger Requisiten zu einer zusammenhängenden, widerspruchsfreien Geschichte (re)konstruiert werden, sondern wo sich verschiedene Erzähler einer Figur annähern, sie aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven umkreisen. Anders ausgedrückt setzen sich die Erzähler zu ihnen in Beziehung, weben ein Netz von Zusammenhängen, denn: "Nur im Verhältnis zueinander lässt sich Kontur erkennen, die Ahnung eines Zusammenhangs". (Hellström 2008: 32)

To a certain extent, Felicitas's and Hoppe's poetics of *ehrliches Erfinden* and indirect characterisation or narration correspond to what Monika Schmitz-Emans describes as the contemporary 'Poetik der Leerstelle', comprising 'Beschreibungsmodell[e], welche […] literarisch[e] Texte als indirekte, negative, umschreibende, verweisende, gebrochene, fragmentarische Bekundungen auffassen' (Schmitz-Emans 2003: 295). Schmitz-Emans posits this as a potential means of reaffirming the literary subject after postmodernism, albeit indirectly: the subject is not 'lesba[r]' in a straightforward, positively articulated manner, but

rather its existence is negatively inferred from the unsaid, the omitted, the circumscribed. Yet *Hoppe* works just as much against the poetics of *ehrliche Erfindung* as it reinforces it, precisely through its opposing trends of proliferation and reduction.

Collapsing Layers of Fictionality: The Homogeneity of the *Hoppekosmos*

In the case of *Hoppe*, however, the motif of the 'Rattenfänger' does not contribute to a 'Gesamtbild', and it is only one among a pool of motifs that are all associated with travel, adventure, abduction, and homecoming. Far from tying everything together neatly, in the manner that Felicitas suggests, then, the legend of the Pied Piper is instead used to insert another layer of fictionality within the text, to create a kind of textual *mise en abyme* of stories within stories within stories. As much as Hoppe might gesture toward narrative strategies of which she has successfully made use in the past, she herself seems to admit that, where *Hoppe* and her own identity are concerned, the web of motifs and references fails to offer a clear picture in the end, either of Felicitas or even, arguably, of her approach to intertextuality: 'Die sorgfältig gehängten Porträts sind allerdings unscharf, *es fehlt die Kontur*' (*H* 329; my emphasis). This awareness is clearly built into the text, as a quotation by the fictional critic Kai Rost demonstrates: 'Man möchte fast von einer Art *Einebnung* sprechen. […] Bei Hoppe […] wird man […] ständig gezwungen, *sich nicht ins Verhältnis zu setzen*, sondern andauernd alles in eins zu werfen und dabei die Realität als Kategorie förmlich auszulöschen' (*H* 102; my emphasis). Since neither Felicitas nor Hoppe show much interest in maintaining distinctions between which story or which layer of fictionality the characters are inhabiting at any one time, the reader is often confronted with situations in which all of these are referenced and combined in an accumulative rather than an expository way. The following excerpt, for example, contains references, among other things, to Felicitas's musical aptitude, her insight as a writer, the 'Stottermatrose' mentioned in the previous extract (who is, arguably, another one of her literary alter egos), and a different story, also written by Felicitas, in which she writes about Queen

Adelaide (the historical person, whose name is also given to the ship on which Felicitas and her father travel):

> Dem Himmel […] sei Dank für mein absolutes Gehör, das mir erlaubt zu hören, was sonst keiner hört, während ich endlich die Augen schließe und mir vorstelle, auch ich wäre blind und längst fertig mit Lesen und müsste mich nur noch auf das konzentrieren, was mich von fern an alles erinnert, was der Matrose der hässlichen Königin sagte. (*H* 160)

The vertiginous nature of *Hoppe*'s narrative layers is nowhere as clear as in this instance: Felicitas here references an earlier story written by herself, in which she mentions a stuttering sailor, who is most likely based on a sailor whom Felicitas may or may not have invented as a substitute for her own homesickness and insecurities during the voyage. It thus becomes clear that, while the text insists on multiplying layers of fictionality, it is also quite happy to disregard these distinctions entirely, and treat all textual elements in the same non-discriminating manner. Despite its outward appearance, then, Felicitas's story is not half as heterogeneous as one might first imagine. Rather than the construction of a web of references that all come together in the end to reveal a certain truth about Felicitas, the novel and its genre, or any of the other themes addressed in the text, the result here is instead a kind of self-referentiality and circularity that repeats itself over and over again in different guises, only to collapse into one. If all the characters in the novel are Felicitas, then all the stories she tells or encounters are all subsumed into her greater 'Hoppetext' (*H* 146) as well. This is further underscored by the manner in which FH cites Felicitas's writings. While she sometimes makes it very clear from exactly which text her quotations are taken, in several other instances this is not at all clear, leading one to believe that the quotations' origin does not, in fact, matter much, since they all resemble one another to a greater or lesser extent anyway.

This also accounts for some of FH's comments that would make little to no sense, were the reader to follow a strict logic of the different iterations of Felicitas. In one instance, FH cites Martha Knit as being able to confirm a fact about Felicitas in the present day (*H* 306), which is noticeably incongruous, since Martha is, according to the text, Felicitas's primary school teacher in Brantford, and therefore unlikely to have any knowledge of Felicitas the adult author. Seen from this point of view, it also becomes clear that the distinction between the two (or more)

Felicitases, the young girl and the later writer, is not meant to be strictly maintained, and this explains why the older (or 'factual') author-Felicitas's life keeps bleeding into the younger Felicitas's story. In one example, FH writes that Felicitas does not see the Sydney Opera House from the inside until twenty years after her time spent in Australia as a teenager. As FH explains: 'Das Opernhaus […] sah Felicitas allerdings erst zwanzig Jahre später von innen, auf einer Schiffsreise von Hamburg nach Hamburg, die sie unternommen hatte, um die Welt mit eigenen Augen zu sehen' (*H* 188-189). This is accurate in terms of the real Hoppe's life, who did indeed undertake a voyage from Hamburg to Hamburg on board a container ship (Hillgruber 1999), but makes no sense in the context of Felicitas's story, since, according to the text, she has already seen a lot of these places 'with her own eyes'. The conflation of the two Felicitases' lives here has the effect, on the one hand, of the deliberate obfuscation of which Felicitas is the 'real' Felicitas, or indeed the real Hoppe, while at the same time even casting doubt on any facts the reader might previously have considered to be true about the real Hoppe's life. As Ritchie Robertson observes: 'In ihrer fiktionalisierten Autobiografie […] verweist [Hoppe] auf "jene vielzitierte Reise um die Welt auf einem Containerfrachtschiff" und lädt uns spielerisch ein, daran zu zweifeln, ob sie die Reise tatsächlich jemals unternommen hat' (Robertson 2016: 46).

One could almost argue that the text transitions – if not entirely consistently – from the 'reine Erfindung' of Felicitas's girlhood to the life of the 'real' adult author, that is, Hoppe herself. After all, the text begins with the Wikipedia citation that tells us Felicitas was born in Hamelin: 'Felicitas Hoppe, *22.12.1960 in Hameln, ist eine deutsche Schriftstellerin. *Wikipedia*' (*H* 9). FH then tells us that '[d]ie Hamelner Kindheit ist reine Erfindung' (*H* 14), only to state at the end of the text that Felicitas is 'geboren als drittes von fünf Kindern in Hameln an der Weser' (*H* 327). Arguably, the novel has thus come full circle. Yet the coexistence of Felicitas the girl and 'Hoppe' the author in the text is an uneasy one. At one point, Viktor discovers what he calls 'the other half of the truth', namely that Karl is allegedly not her real father: 'Am Morgen […] erzählte mir Felicitas […] die andere Hälfte der Wahrheit: […] Dass Karl nicht ihr Vater, sondern bloß ihr Entführer ist und längst auf der Flucht' (*H* 216). The novel, then, attempts to validate both

versions of Felicitas's story and hold them both as true, as two versions of her story that feed into one another.[81] This apparent opposition between Felicitas's fanciful stories and the 'facts' does appear to be upheld most of the time: Felicitas's writing is fanciful, richly imaginative, 'reine Erfindung', whereas reality is made up of 'die Fakten', is 'nachweislich', and these facts are often supplied by FH, Viktor, or Karl. Yet it becomes increasingly clear over the course of the novel that these 'facts' are also all part of the 'Hoppekosmos': Karl's 'Aufzeichnungen' (*H* 72) and Viktor's records suffer from the same kinds of repetition and disregard for the boundary between fact and fiction as Felicitas's writings do.[82] Moreover, since the 'real' facts are either contradictory or highly implausible in and of themselves, the opposition between fiction and fact falls apart. Again, the reader is encouraged to 'buy into' the *Hoppetext*, not because it consists of verifiable facts or offers an embellished but ultimately truthful account of life or literature from the authorial subject's perspective, but because it is a text that creates its own reality, one that is *ehrlich erfunden*. The validating instance behind it is neither the biographer-narrator, nor is the text validated by its reference to an external reality or author. Instead, Felicitas acts as the medium within the text through which all manner of things – real lived experience, textual material, literary and narrative methodology, and so forth – are first bundled and then put into new relationships with one another.

Felicitas, the Postmodern Romantic Author?

As a result – despite the text's constant reminders of the shortcomings of her writing, the fact that her characterisation is mediated via several other narrative voices, and the inconsistency of the overall narrative that emerges – Felicitas nonetheless appears to be what holds the text together and gives it meaning, even if this meaning exists only within the space of the text and

[81] The motif of 'zwei Wahrheiten' (*I* 62) and the existence of two narratives that never satisfyingly connect reappear in Setz's *Indigo*, although, as we will see, decidedly less attention is focused on the autofictional character in Setz's novel.

[82] The following is one example of repetition in Karl's notes: 'Heute Abend wieder ein weinendes Kind. Lästig. Felicitas verweigert den Schulbesuch, man verspottet sie, sagt sie, wegen des Rucksacks. Kinderklage' (*H* 14); and 'Heute Abend wieder ein weinendes Kind. Lästig. Felicitas fürchtet sich vor der Ankunft, man werde sie für ihre Kleidung verspotten. Kinderklage' (*H* 127).

has no bearing on anything external to it. As one of Felicitas's critics (who, in another instance of the text's deliberate effort to confuse any of the reader's attempts at fact-checking, is given the ungoogleable name of Richard Wagner) claims: 'Ein Autor […] ist nicht deshalb ein Autor, weil er ein Schicksal hat, sondern einzig und allein deshalb, weil er schreiben kann und *schreibend Schicksale autorisiert*' (*H* 36; my emphasis). The freedom of the writer to do what she wants in her texts is further emphasised by Felicitas herself, who values this activity 'weil ich da machen kann, was ich will, und mich nicht mit drittklassigen Phantasien herumschlagen muss' (*H* 112). The young writer's hubris here is evidently exaggerated for comedic effect in this instance, yet this does not necessarily detract from the value which is ascribed to her writing. *Hoppe* is, then, to a certain extent, meant to be taken seriously and not simply to be read as 'Vergnügungsliteratur für Germanisten' (Schneider 2012a). Some real-life critics have certainly emphasised those aspects of the text which are less metafictional and engage with themes other than the text's own genre and poetics. Stuart Taberner, for example, identifies family, displacement, and Felicitas's fraught identification as German as core themes in *Hoppe*. These can be seen in Felicitas's struggle with 'the ambivalent simultaneity of *Fernweh* and *Heimweh*', and the 'loss of the utopian possibility that you can be both mobile *and* rooted' (Taberner 2017: 203, 201). Yet, even though *Hoppe* itself acknowledges these themes – and certainly Felicitas's self-identification as a perpetual 'guest' is frequently invoked[83] – the focus is nonetheless placed firmly on the act of re-imagining and re-inventing these experiences as crucial to the text. As FH herself emphasises:

> Verlust und Abschied, Vertreibung, Aufbruch, Ankunft und Hoffnung, wieder Verlust und immer wieder der Wunsch, Familien glücklich zusammenzuführen. Müßig, darauf hinzuweisen, dass weder Wünsche noch Verlusterfahrungen bündige Texte ergeben und dass darüber nur schreiben kann, wer dramatische Kippmomente nicht nur am eigenen Leib erfährt, sondern, darüber hinaus, tatsächlich in der Lage ist, sie *sprachlich neu zu erfinden*. (*H* 36; my emphasis)

[83] The following description of Felicitas's realisation of this, even as a young girl, is certainly one of the novel's more poignant moments: 'Felicitas' so verstockter wie nachsichtiger Blick in die Kamera, der Blick eines Kindes, das genau weiß, dass es, wo auch immer, nur Gast ist' (*H* 30).

Thus, far from framing Felicitas's disregard of novelistic conventions as a shortcoming, the text actually emphasises Felicitas's talents of re-invention as being fundamental to literary production – even if they are of little avail in terms of writing about herself.

The novel's reluctance to fully abandon the idea of an author figure who, despite all of *Hoppe*'s subversive trappings, still serves as a unifying presence in the text is, of course, difficult to reconcile with its very overt postmodern tendencies. *Hoppe* responds to this contradiction by suggesting that Felicitas would much rather be writing during a time period other than the twenty-first century. Not only does the text describe Felicitas, through the fictitious critic Kai Rost, as 'eine unverbesserlichere Romantikerin […] in der Postmoderne' (*H* 295), but it also reflects a lot of nostalgia for bygone times, genres, and conceptions of the author. Even though this is occasionally done with deliberately ironic overtones, or to the point of parody, it also forms a part of what FH calls Felicitas's 'höchst persönlich[e] Sehnsucht' (*H* 34). This nostalgia is either directly addressed – often, as in the example above, by critics – or becomes evident through characters' references to an idealised Romantic author. In one example, Jerome K. Chester explains Felicitas's fascination with the Middle Ages in the following manner:

> [Chester] hielt das "sogenannte Mittelalter" […] für eine "aus nichts als nostalgischen Wünschen zusammengesetzte Projektionsflächen für rückwärts gewandte Schwärmer, die allzu gern hinter Aufklärung und zeitgenössische Wissenschaft zurückfallen, weil sie sich, den meisten Belletristen darin nicht unähnlich, dort offenbar sicherer fühlen". (*H* 119)

While this is clearly not meant to be taken entirely seriously – Felicitas is not just a 'rückwärts gewandte Schwärmerin', but also, much like her author, 'eine so unbekümmerte wie produktive Ausbeuterin des literarischen Fundus' (*H* 234) – the frequent reference to the *Sonderraum* does seem to indicate that the writer is in search of a safe alternative space, in which she is able to write exactly what she wants without any interference. This might also explain Felicitas's frequently addressed flights, or 'Fluchten'. As Quentin remarks: '[Felicitas ist] immer in Eile, […] immer irgendwohin unterwegs, […] ständig auf der Flucht, aber nicht vor etwas davon, sondern auf etwas hin, ein Ziel, das mir unbekannt ist' (*H* 184). Several instances in the text demonstrate that Felicitas, although she might lament the plight of the lonely author, seeks solitude in order

to write: 'Man schreibt allein oder gar nicht!' (*H* 302). Upon their arrival in New York, Felicitas does not accompany Viktor on his daily excursions into the city, and instead prefers to stay inside and write. Viktor takes note of this in the following manner: 'Sie zieht es vor, […] zu schreiben, diesmal weit mehr als ein Wochenendlibretto, wie sie behauptet. Wenn ich abends von meinen Ausflügen zurückkomme, sitzt sie […] über ihren Heften, […] immer kurz vor der Vollendung, folglich unansprechbar, als wäre sie allein auf der Welt' (*H* 229). One cannot help but be reminded here of Arnaud Schmitt's description of the contemporary writer of autofiction: '*Great Man – or Woman – Alone in a Room, Tampering with Generic Cues, but Still Hoping to Write a Masterpiece*' (Schmitt 2016: 140). While the reader never gets to see the masterpiece in question (this could be a reference to any of Hoppe's other publications, to an as yet unwritten text, or even to an unwritable text, such as might exist in the *Sonderraum*), Felicitas nonetheless seems to conform quite well to the ideal of the self-sufficient author, who is herself an inexhaustible fount of inspiration. As Viktor writes: 'Felicitas war eine großartige Performerin. […] Das Beste waren allerdings die Texte, die fielen ihr zu, lässig wie aus der Luft gegriffen, alle in Versen und gereimt, niemand wusste, woher sie kamen, ich glaube, sie wusste es selbst nicht. Ihre Quelle war unerschöpflich' (*H* 206). So soon after the word 'parody' is mentioned, it would be naïve to assume that this corresponds exactly to Felicitas's or Hoppe's own conception of an author's writing process.[84] Yet, as much as the novel might insist on Felicitas's shortcomings, constantly disrupt her coming-of-age or coming-of-author narrative and substituting this with generic metafictional commentary, the text's focal point is still Felicitas, ambiguously defined as she is.

A Mutual Mistrust: The Author-Reader Relationship in *Hoppe*

As if to counterbalance these tendencies toward romanticising the author-figure in the text, however, *Hoppe* also highly exaggerates Felicitas's self-sufficiency as an author by pointing out how this detracts from her ability to reach or communicate effectively with her readership.

[84] The preceding sentence reads: 'Felicitas […] hatte sich […] dazu hinreißen lassen, […] aus dem Stegreif eine Parodie auf Alexanders berühmte Todesarie […] zu Gehör zu bringen' (*H* 206).

Certainly, Felicitas's tendency to make her writing as densely allusive and playfully incomprehensible as possible not only makes things difficult for her biographer, but also for the actual reader of *Hoppe*. According to FH, Felicitas's letters to Viktor, for example, are 'so verspielt, anspielungsreich und verschlüsselt, dass sie kaum brauchbar sind, wenn es darum geht, ihre "große amerikanische Tournee" […] faktisch zu rekonstruieren' (*H* 250). Although Felicitas's writing in German and English does not seem to trouble FH unduly, Viktor finds this multilingualism, manifesting itself in 'ein[em] leise[n] dreisprachige[n] Murmeln' (*H* 321) in one instance, irritating and difficult to follow: 'Der Text war schwer zu verstehen und wenig zusammenhängend' (*H* 321). Even Felicitas's handwriting is not easy to decipher. As Haman tells her: 'Auch dein letzter Brief ist zurückgekommen. Aber nicht, weil dir keiner antworten will, sondern weil deine Handschrift so schwungvoll ist, dass man sie einfach nicht mehr lesen kann. Immer über die Ränder hinaus. Vollkommen unentzifferbar' (*H* 324). The impenetrability of Felicitas's writing is further highlighted by the text's insistence on its codified nature. The German that Felicitas uses is not a universal German, but very much her own, also part of the *Hoppekosmos* and even a kind of secret language or 'Phantasiesprache' (Detering 2012). For Felicitas, the German she uses is 'nichts als eine Geheimsprache, […] für Eingeweihte und Verlierer, der Code für meine Erinnerung. […] [I]n Wahrheit ist Deutsch bloß ein literarischer Trick' (*H* 288). To a certain extent, the (in)comprehensibility of Felicitas's writing provides Hoppe with another means for mocking a presumed academic readership. Through the character of Viktor, Hoppe is able to warn her readers not to read too deeply into what might just be coincidental quirks of the text, in another example of what Weixler calls the 'Ironisierung der autorisierenden hermeneutisch-philologischen Arbeitsweise' (Weixler 2016: 371):

> [D]a war nicht nur dieses Spiel mit den Namen. Da waren noch tausend andere Spiele, tausend Geheim- und Zeichensprachen, lauter heimliche Hinweise, lauter Zettel mit kleinen unentzifferbaren Botschaften, Felicitas' seltsame Art, überall, wo auch immer sie war und wo immer sie hinging, winzige Spuren zu hinterlasen. Überall legte sie diese Spuren aus, obwohl man nie genau wusste, ob es absichtlich oder unabsichtlich geschah, was vermutlich Teil des ganzen Systems war, auch wenn sie nicht müde wurde zu behaupten, es gäbe gar kein System, nichts sei ihr fremder als Systeme. (*H* 256)

The most pointed instance of the text pre-empting its own critical reception, however, actually occurs much earlier, when FH refers to 'ein inflationär häufig angefürtes Zitat aus Hoppes Erzählung *Kopf und Kragen (Picknick der Friseure)*' (*H* 40). The same section tells the reader that the 'Kopf und Kragen' story has become a (rather unpopular) staple of German school textbooks, included for the purposes of teaching close reading skills. FH further specifies that '[d]ie Fragen zum Text sind über die Jahre, ganz im Sinn einer *textimmanenten Interpretation*, bis heute dieselben geblieben' (*H* 41; my emphasis). Although frustration with the text on the part of the reader might not be the solely desired response, it would nonetheless be understandable, considering the novel simultaneously encourages and discourages both a biographical and a purely text-based interpretation. To a certain extent, the reader is left wondering how or whether to critically approach the text at all.

Yet, despite *Hoppe*'s playful mockery of its readers, the text also engages with reception issues in a more serious manner as well, as we see in Felicitas's stance toward her readership. On the one hand, Felicitas wants nothing more than to reach her audience and communicate something, and is terrified of losing an attentive listener. On the other hand, as we have seen, she delights in making her writing difficult to read and wastes no time checking whether her readers are able to follow her – Felicitas's writing is, after all, 'ein einziges Hakenschlagen, bei dem der Zuschauer hoffnungslos auf der Strecke bleibt' (*H* 63). We are told that Felicitas is a 'manische Kommunikatorin' (*H* 91) on the hand, but the text does just as much to convince the reader that Felicitas is deeply mistrustful of every form of communication on the other. As FH notes:

> Dennoch bleibt Vorsicht geboten, Hoppe misstraut jeder Form von Kommunikation zutiefst, wobei sie weniger die Frage beschäftigt, was wir eigentlich sagen und erzählen, als die Frage danach, was wir wirklich hören können, ob unsere Botschaft tatsächlich ankommt. (*H* 60)

Indeed, considering the extensive number of characters in various locations with which Felicitas comes into contact, there is a startling lack of dialogue in the novel. What dialogue exists is always indirect or interrupted, as is the case with the notes Felicitas and her father leave for each other in lieu of speaking to one another, or fraught with anxiety. Tellingly, another refrain

of the novel is the question 'Seid ihr alle da?' (*H* 81), which recurs, in some shape or form, six times over the course of the text, and often in capital letters: 'SEID IHR ALLE DA?' (*H* 165, 217, 269). This ostensibly derives from Felicitas's 'Hamelner' father, 'de[r] Erbauer des ersten Kaspertheaters' (*H* 13), who regales the children with puppet shows, and, as is tradition, asks them 'ob wir alle noch da sind' (*H* 17). However, due to its recurring nature, and its increasing association with Felicitas herself, rather than her father figures, it begins to read as a sign of Felicitas's fear of being left alone without an audience or a readership. To a certain extent, this is a result of her habit of writing letters to her imaginary family in Hamelin, to which, of course, she never receives an answer. This certainly does not stop Felicitas from continuing to write to them, but her frustration becomes clear in one letter in which she strikes a more accusatory tone than usual: '[Ihr] habt nicht die geringste Ahnung davon, wie müde es macht, andauernd in leere Räume zu sprechen' (*H* 72). Moreover, as FH points out, this is a common worry among Felicitas's (and Hoppe's) protagonists. FH refers to one instance of this in *Pigafetta* – 'Aber hörst du mir zu?' (*H* 61) – and this is echoed by Felicitas at later points in the text as well: 'Hörst du mir überhaupt zu?' (*H* 91, 291).

In light of the above, it is not hard to read Felicitas's anxiety and frustration – or indeed the entirety of *Hoppe* – as a symptom of the contemporary author's struggle to write an autobiographical novel in the wake of postmodernism, and a lot of this anxiety seems to be bound up in how to simultaneously challenge and engage a readership that is presumed to be familiar with every postmodern trick in the book, as it were. Although Felicitas does also worry about not meeting her own standards ('wie sehr sich Felicitas davor fürchtete, an ihren eigenen Ansprüchen zu scheitern', *H* 162), her more pressing concern seems to be how her texts will be received. That Felicitas is, to say the least, suspicious of her readers becomes clear in those passages in which her writing becomes unnecessarily defensive. Discussing one of Felicitas's stories, FH observes that the author apparently feels the need to defend herself against criticisms that have not even been formulated yet:

> Der Text ist, wie fast alle Texte Hoppes, […] von einer merkwürdigen Gegenbewegung getragen. […] Die Selbstdarstellung der jungen Autorin wird unversehens zu einer

> ambitionierten Selbstverteidigung gegen Angriffe, die realiter gar nicht stattgefunden haben, als kämpfe sie gegen das Phantom eines Gegners, der überhaupt nicht auf dem Spielfeld erscheint. (*H* 162-163)

Felicitas's misgivings about her readers are not solely based on her distrust of methods of literary analysis, however. Instead, the main reason behind this sentiment might be the fact that Felicitas herself is a rather impatient and unforgiving reader. Not only does Felicitas consider reading to be a fairly tedious pastime, her level of engagement with her readings does not appear to run very deep either. During her voyage at sea, first mate Kramer remarks on Felicitas's reading habits in the following manner: 'Sie liest, wie sie isst, […] unterschiedslos alles, was auf den Tisch kommt, von schlichten Abenteuerromanen über Reisebeschreibungen bis hin zu […] Hand- und Logbüchern, […] obwohl ich mir sicher bin, dass sie davon *so gut wie nichts versteht*' (*H* 111; my emphasis). While FH cautions the reader that Kramer's opinion should not be taken at face value, Viktor also voices his doubts about whether Felicitas is an at all attentive reader: 'ich [kann] mich bis heute des Verdachts nicht entwehren, […] dass sie, was in den Büchern stand, so wenig interessierte wie das, was draußen vorging' (*H* 212). From this, Felicitas appears to conclude that her own texts will at best be read in a cursory manner, and at worst be completely misunderstood. It is no surprise that, when she first begins writing at a young age, Felicitas does her utmost to keep her writing a secret: 'sie […] tat […] alles, um ihr Schreiben […] geheim zu halten' (*H* 39). Once again, this aspect of the text is exaggerated to prevent the reader from unquestioningly identifying Felicitas with Hoppe herself, yet not enough to make this anxiety over reception seem completely negligible.

Naturally, Hoppe herself is aware that the text cannot ignore the reader entirely. In a passage remarkably reminiscent of Amélie's comment on the dialogic nature of (letter-)writing in Nothomb's *Une forme de vie*, Felicitas acknowledges that: 'Ein Brief ist ein Brief. Sobald der Umschlag geschlossen ist, gehört er seinem Empfänger' (*H* 45). Hoppe also recognises that authors' fretting over being misunderstood by readers can easily be seen as a childish or even arrogant attitude, and voices this point of view through Mel Drugs, Felicitas's instructor at the

conservatory, whose disapproval of Glenn Gould is an implicit but thinly-veiled reference to Felicitas herself:

> [A]ll diese kindischen Scherze und unverständlichen Interviews, […] seine pubertäre Überempfindlichkeit, […] die nichts als die Verachtung des Publikums ist, immer wieder derselbe Text: Ach, sie verstehen mich nicht, sie verstehen mich einfach nicht! […] Was kann man da machen? Da macht man gar nichts, denn es kommt ja nicht darauf an, verstanden zu werden, sondern bloß darauf, sich verständlich zu machen. Jetzt mal im Ernst. Diese Flucht ins Studio ist doch nichts als Feigheit! Zeigen, rief Mel, man muss sich zeigen! Man muss sich einfach zeigen, um endlich gesehen zu werden! Was denn sonst? (*H* 290)

That this is at best a grudging admission, however, becomes clear through Hoppe's choice of mouthpiece. Drugs is a character who in many ways seems to embody the exact opposite traits of Felicitas, and is therefore one of the only characters in the novel who is cast in an unfavourable light. The author-reader relationship portrayed in the text therefore seems to be marked by a mutual distrust. In the end it is Viktor who has the most revealing insight as far as Felicitas's relationship with her readers is concerned, when he concludes that, in the end, his views as a reader are entirely secondary: 'Bis ich darauf kam, dass sie mich gar nicht verwirren wollte, *es geht ja gar nicht um mich*' (*H* 248; my emphasis). Once again, we need not take this at face value, although Viktor is certainly correct in the sense that, as we have seen, the text is almost exclusively about Felicitas, even in the absence of a coherent personal narrative.

Conclusion: *Hoppe* as Manifesto?

At the time of the novel's publication, Ijoma Mangold's review of *Hoppe* was one of the only mildly negative critical responses to the book, with Mangold summarising his response in the spirit of 'freundlich[e] Skepsis': 'Ja, kann man so machen, ist auch echt kunstvoll, […] hat mich aber kalt gelassen' (Mangold 2012). Mangold reads *Hoppe* as a provocation of its academic readership to once again spark the age-old, tired discussion over art versus life, form versus content, artistry versus authenticity, 'als gäbe es das eine ohne das andere' (Mangold 2012). According to Mangold, *Hoppe* is in this sense a manifesto, insisting that 'die wahre Literatur nämlich […] aus Buchstaben und Wortverknüpfungen bestehe und nicht aus existenziellen Erfahrungen' (Mangold 2012):

> Alle, so lautet die Prämisse von *Hoppe*, schreiben diese autobiografisch beglaubigten Romane, mit echtem Blut, mit echten Tränen, mit echtem Sperma, bei denen sich der Leser am wahren Leben weidet – das könnt ihr auch von mir haben, hier schreibe ich euch meine Autobiografie, und dann werdet ihr begreifen, dass der Schriftsteller, je häufiger er 'ich' sagt, nur desto mehr lügt. Weil es in der Literatur nicht um die Wahrheit, sondern um die Einbildungskraft geht. (Mangold 2012)

There is certainly merit to Mangold's critique, especially when considering Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf's pronouncement on contemporary autobiographical writing as cited in the introduction to this thesis: 'Indessen kann es heute nicht mehr darum gehen, die Unmöglichkeit der Autobiographie, sei es psychologisch, sei es zeichentheoretisch und repräsentationskritisch, zu konstatieren' (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2008: 137). In light of the analysis in this chapter, however, I would argue that *Hoppe* embodies too sustained an engagement with the genre of autofiction, its reception, and the suppositions upon which it is based, to be read purely as a confirmation of the impossibility of autobiography. It does this, too, of course, but the text demonstrates such drastically opposing tendencies – undermining and reinforcing Felicitas's authority as an author-figure, subverting and re-enacting the fact versus fiction dichotomy, encouraging and discouraging a biographical reading – that it becomes almost impossible to pin it down to one exclusive viewpoint on the possibility of self-representation in literature. In this sense, *Hoppe*, perhaps most strongly of all the texts examined in this thesis, embodies the paradoxical elements of contemporary autofiction – even though, as seen above, the text itself does not really work as autofiction. On the one hand, the novel demonstrates Hoppe's confidence in her poetics, but, on the other hand, the text is also defensive with regard to its generic shortcomings and lack of actual autofictional content. As we will see in the following chapter, Michel Houellebecq's *La carte et le territoire* demonstrates a much more superficial engagement with the autofiction genre, as well as a more pessimistic outlook on literature's capacity for innovation more generally.

Chapter Three

'Il va falloir que je supporte jusqu'au bout d'être Houellebecq': Self-Representation and the Artistic Subject in Michel Houellebecq's *La carte et le territoire* (2010)

Introduction: The (Ir)Relevance of Michel Houellebecq

That Michel Houellebecq can legitimately be considered France's most prominent contemporary public intellectual is evident from the then French Prime Minister Manuel Valls' pronouncement on Houellebecq following the publication of his novel *Soumission* and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in 2015. Insisting that Houellebecq's signature misanthropic and nihilistic attitude, and, most importantly, his reactionary and xenophobic politics as manifested in his literary works and public appearances, did not represent France as a nation, Valls proclaimed that: 'La France, ce n'est pas la soumission, la France, ce n'est pas Michel Houellebecq. La France, ce n'est pas l'intolérance, la haine, la peur' (as cited in Williams and Sweeney 2019: 2). Both in spite and because of his controversial views and utterances, Houellebecq has been proclaimed, 'for better or for worse, […] the emissary, or […] reluctant cultural ambassador, for an idea of contemporary France in ways not witnessed since Sartre and Camus' (Williams and Sweeney 2019: 2). Particularly remarkable in Houellebecq's case, however, is his apparent global appeal and the manner in which, time and again, he has managed to remain relevant among readers and critics worldwide to this day. Although his most recent novel *Sérotonine* (2019) once again confirmed Houellebecq's status as local 'literary prophet' (Betty 2019) in terms recent socio-political developments in France by anticipating the *gilets jaunes* protests that began in October 2018, both Houellebecq's literary works and his public appearances enjoy a global appeal which has been more or less consistent for over two decades, since his novelistic debut in 1994 with *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. This appeal is not solely due to Houellebecq's own merit. As Martine Guyot-Bender recognises, Houellebecq is just one of France's 'trendy *enfants terribles*' (Guyot-Bender 2007: 259) whose latest scandals the media are fond of broadcasting and

sensationalising.[85] Clearly the themes and content of Houellebecq's novels – 'the commodification of sex, the interaction between modern science and spirituality, the link between happiness and suffering' – also correspond closely enough to 'the regulation […] mix of philosophy and bleak chic' (The Economist 2005) associated with contemporary French literature to satisfy a broad range of readers around the world.

One would, admittedly, be justified in questioning Houellebecq's continued relevance, if not as a public intellectual, then at least as a novelist. Even if the individual stories differ in content, Houellebecq's oeuvre is thematically homogenous, so much so that the world of 'radical disenchantment' which he evokes in his writing has been dubbed the '*monde houellebecquien*' (Sweeney 2013: xiii). His public appearances also tend to be predictable in terms of the author's signature dishevelled look and his predilection for making long, uncomfortable pauses in speeches and interviews. In spite of having built his career and brand on being an irredeemable *provocateur littéraire*, Houellebecq ended up winning the highly prestigious *Prix Goncourt* in 2010 for what was arguably his least provocative novel, *La carte et le territoire*. Although *Soumission* once again succeeded in causing outrage among a Western liberal readership, his most recent novel, *Sérotonine* reads, according to one critic, 'like an object lesson in the law of diminishing returns' (Lasdun 2019) in terms of the shock value of Houellebecq's novels. Despite the prophetic power of the novel's anti-EU-bureaucracy sentiments, *Sérotonine*'s anti-hero Florent-Claude Labrouste marks a return to the quintessentially Houellebecquian protagonist – narcissistic, disillusioned, depressed, and lonely, much like the unnamed narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Considering Houellebecq's adherence to his usual thematics, one wonders what Houellebecq has left to say to provoke his critics, and also whether his critics

[85] A full discussion of all the scandals surrounding Michel Houellebecq goes well beyond the scope of this thesis. For a more detailed discussion of the numerous *affaires Houellebecq* (especially those arising in the wake of the publication of *Les particules élémentaires*, that is, Houellebecq's expulsion from the editorial board of the left-wing literary review *Perpendiculaire* and the novel's exclusion from the 1998 *Prix Goncourt* shortlist), see Pamela A. Genova, 'Rewarding the Production of Culture: *Le Prix Goncourt*' in *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 18: 2 (2014), pp. 150-157; Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Russell Williams and Carole Sweeney, 'La France, ce n'est pas Michel Houellebecq' in *Modern & Contemporary France* 27: 1 (2019), pp. 1-9.

have much left to say about his works that has not already been discussed several times over. Yet Houellebecq scholarship flourishes to this day, and, despite its high degree of stylistic and thematic homogeneity, Houellebecq's work appears to offer enough variety in terms of content and focus for it to foster productive criticism.

The biggest issue with the public and critical discourse on Houellebecq, however, appears to be the difficulty of dissociating the author from the literary work, or, in Meizoz's terms, the problem of the Houellebecquian *posture*. As mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, Meizoz explicitly bases his observations in part on the example of Houellebecq: that, 'par exemple, en lisant un roman de Michel Houellebecq précédé d'une intense rumeur médiatique, nous ne pouvons faire abstraction de toutes ces informations' – especially, and of interest for this chapter, when 'nous nous plongeons dans les propos d'un narrateur qui, dans *Plateforme* (2001), se nomme Michel, comme l'écrivain' (Meizoz 2009). While this chapter will focus instead on Houellebecq's 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire* (henceforth *La carte*) and its character 'Michel Houellebecq', who is explicitly based on the real-life author, the fact that Houellebecq has a history of blurring the boundaries between his male protagonists and his own public persona explains his relevance to this thesis. Moreover, this history is precisely the reason why certain critics of the contemporary French novel have chosen to avoid discussing Houellebecq's writing, since it seems to be impossible to analyse without reference to Houellebecq as a (controversial) person or public intellectual.[86] Justifying his choice to exclude Houellebecq from his 2008 publication *Fiction Now: The French Novel in the Twenty-first Century*, Warren Motte writes that:

> Despite the way he has caused critical ink to flow in full spate in the last few years, I do not regret my decision to leave Michel Houellebecq aside. Nor do I worry that he will be neglected by others. As William Cloonan notes about Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005) in a recent essay on the state of the novel in France, 'If Parisian literary pundits are to be believed, France only published one novel in 2005. […] As is usually the

[86] French intellectualism and its associated concept of *littérature engagée* have proud roots reaching back to Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Émile Zola, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir. A more in-depth discussion of Houellebecq in terms of his identity as a French public intellectual is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, although it should be noted here that he is often portrayed in the press either as reluctant yet shrewd prophet or as representative of a decline in French intellectualism (Hazareesingh 2015).

> case in matters concerning Houellebecq, the real focus of interest, and the true source of publicity, was the author rather than the book'. (Motte 2008: 208)

As in the case of Nothomb, since Houellebecq's reputation will precede any actual reading of his work, a discussion of the author – whose novels one may or may not have read – quickly becomes an acceptable substitute for a discussion of the text.[87] Much like in the case of both Nothomb and Hoppe, Houellebecq also has a history of skilfully anticipating criticism of himself and his writing, to the extent that both internal and external criticism seems to become increasingly redundant.

Houellebecq's 'Cumbersome Media Persona'

In a sense, Houellebecq has been his own best critic right from the start.[88] Credited with astute, if also dryly sarcastic, self-commentary in the epistolary exchange between himself and Bernard Henri Lévy, published in 2008 as *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq is judged by many to be a compelling self-analyst (Adams 2011; Jeffries 2011). This is most likely due to the fact that, apart from being perceived as accurate, his self-portrayal is as uncompromising as it is shameless. It is no accident that *Ennemis publics* begins with a letter by Houellebecq which includes the following succinct self-characterisation:

> Nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux: ce serait encore me faire trop d'honneur que de me ranger dans la peu ragoûtante famille des *anarchistes de droite*: fondamentalement, je ne suis qu'un *beauf*. Auteur plat, sans style, je n'ai accédé à la notoriété littéraire que par suite d'une invraisemblable faute de goût commise, il y a quelques années, par des critiques déboussolés. (*EP* 7-8)

Regardless of whether this is an instance of Houellebecq echoing the media, or the critics echoing Houellebecq himself, who are in turn echoed by Houellebecq again, Meizoz's notion of *posture* can once again be usefully applied here. The media persona 'Michel Houellebecq' that

[87] This observation has been made frequently since the publication of *Les particules élémentaires*: Teresa Cremisi, Houellebecq's editor at Flammarion, has advised critics of Houellebecq that 'il ne faut pas le starifier, mais le lire' (as cited in Beuve-Méry 2010). Dominique Noguez also famously accused critics of *Les particules élémentaires* for becoming 'obsessed with the unrepentant and scruffy figure of its author' (Sweeney 2013: 21), and neglecting the text itself entirely: 'Il suffit, n'est-ce pas, d'examiner tout sauf le livre lui-même' (Noguez 1998). Williams and Sweeney observe that Manuel Valls had not, in fact, read *Soumission* at the time he denounced Houellebecq (Williams and Sweeney 2019: 2).

[88] We have seen a similar approach toward playful self-critique in Hoppe's novel in Chapter Two, although evidently in Houellebecq's case there is far more media scrutiny involved.

exists in the public consciousness is a *posture* that is neither purely the author's own construction, nor that of the text or the reader, but is instead 'co-construite, à la fois dans le texte et hors de lui, par l'écrivain, les divers médiateurs […] et les publics' (Meizoz 2009). As seen in *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq is clearly not only very good at playing the role of 'Michel Houellebecq', both inside and outside the text, but the reception of his works also strongly relies on, and thereby co-constructs, the widely-publicised image that readers have of Houellebecq.

Undoubtedly, this status quo is, for the most part, satisfactory for all parties involved: Houellebecq can hardly complain of each new publication instantly becoming an international bestseller, the media profits from advertising the *provocateur*'s latest scandal, and members of the reading public can be suitably troubled by the problematic nature of his texts, or appreciative of his sly socio-cultural critiques, depending on which camp of criticism they subscribe to (Williams and Sweeney 2019: 3).[89] It is true that certain public figures, such as fellow novelist and autofictionalist Frédéric Beigbeder, have sought to qualify the image of Houellebecq as morally bankrupt and despicable human being, or 'individ[u] assez méprisabl[e]', to use Houellebecq's own phrase (*EP* 7). In his article 'Houellebecq, portrait d'un iconoclaste', published in *Le Figaro* after Houellebecq was awarded the *Prix Goncourt* for *La carte*, Beigbeder attempts to paint a much gentler, more endearing picture of the controversial author, claiming that the person behind the scandal mostly fails to live up to his reputation: 'Les gens sont déçus: ils s'attendent à rencontrer un monstre cruel et tombent sur un adolescent romantique en parka Marlboro Country qui s'endort à table' (Beigbeder 2010). Yet Beigbeder contradicts himself when he observes, in the same article, that Houellebecq is, in fact, a lot like the characters he creates: 'Le plus houellebécquien de ses personnages, c'est lui; raison pour laquelle ils s'appellent parfois Michel, et finalement Michel Houellebecq (dans le dernier).' (Beigbeder 2010). Clearly, therefore, regardless of what Houellebecq is 'really like', he is very good at conforming to his public image. This image evidently prevents him from exhibiting any

[89] Sweeney makes a similar point about Houellebecq's critics generally falling into one of two camps: those who claim that Houellebecq is 'saying what he really means', and those who interpret his writing as 'a form of ironic mockery that deploys the attitude and language of its subject to mount its critique' (Sweeney 2013: ix).

unequivocal signs that he is enjoying himself. Certainly, in terms of the style and narrative construction of his literary works, Houellebecq has little 'time for the parodic, the intertextual, the playful, the metafictional or the pastiche' (Sweeney 2013: xi). Yet he does, at times, appear to have fun with his reputation.

One of the most obvious examples of this is the film entitled *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), directed by Guillaume Nicloux, which stars Michel Houellebecq as himself. Peter Bradshaw describes the film as a 'bizarre and very funny docu-fantasy, a sort of Euro-realist *Curb Your Enthusiasm* in which Houellebecq plays himself getting kidnapped by three tough-guy amateurs who imagine François Hollande will pay €20,000 […] to rescue the eminent littérateur' (Bradshaw 2014). According to *AlloCiné*, the film was to some extent inspired by real events. As, for a time, Houellebecq failed to give any signs of life from his temporary residence in Shannon, Ireland, rumours of a kidnapping began to spread, when in actual fact the author was merely cut off from the outside world due to internet connectivity issues (AlloCiné). While, as Scott Foundas points out, the film is essentially a 'one-joke movie', Foundas attributes the film's strength to Houellebecq's performance: 'None of this would work nearly so well were Houellebecq not such a hoot playing himself – or at least a shambling, sad-sack version of himself, at once bolstering and gently skewering his self-perpetuated image of the author as misanthropic recluse' (Foundas 2014).[90] Yet it is also easy to see how just such an image would become wearisome after a while – not just for the reading public, but also for the author himself. In the oft-cited letter to Bernard-Henri Lévy from 3 June 2008, Houellebecq famously – and somewhat melodramatically – resigns himself to 'being Houellebecq' for the rest of his life: 'Alors voilà, il va falloir que je supporte jusqu'au bout *d'être Houellebecq*' (*EP* 262). It is, then, certainly tempting to read his experiments in self-representation, as Cécile Alduy has done, as a means by which the author attempts, if not to revise or correct his *posture*, then at least to

[90] For a look at the further adaptations which *La carte* and *L'Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* inspired, see Mads Anders Baggesgard and Jan Løhmann Stephensen, 'Making Off with Michel Houellebecq – Adaptational Strategies and *La Carte et le territoire*' in *Australian Journal of French Studies* 56: 1 (2019), pp. 91-113. Baggesgard and Stephensen also make reference to Meizoz's theory of the *posture* in relation to Houellebecq.

address it or in some way interfere with it. In this sense, then, Houellebecq's inclusion of himself as a character in *La carte* is a direct response to his *posture*. This chapter will demonstrate how, in *La carte*, Houellebecq replicates and confirms his *posture d'auteur*, while at the same time commenting on the phenomenon of literary self-representation and autofiction via the analogy of the fine arts.[91] Due to Houellebecq's distinctive lack of interest in characters as individuals, *La carte* demonstrates much a much more superficial engagement with its autofictional character than any of the other novels discussed in this thesis, regardless of the degree to which the autofictional character's authority is subverted in the other texts. Although satirical in tone, Houellebecq's novel is also structured and told as a more conventional story compared to *Hoppe* and especially to the texts examined in the following chapters. While *La carte* does not passionately defend the views on literature and artistic self-representation expressed by its characters, therefore, it nonetheless allows the reader easier access to them through its comparative lack of narrative experimentation.

Genre and Style in *La carte*: Houellebecq's Wikipedia Novel

Houellebecq's fifth novel tells the life story of contemporary, successful – and fictitious – artist Jed Martin, whose first big artistic breakthrough comes about through an exhibition of his photographs of Michelin maps. When he switches from the medium of photography to that of painting, he asks the celebrated novelist Michel Houellebecq to write a text for the catalogue of his next exhibition, in exchange for which Jed will paint a portrait of Michel.[92] Michel agrees to write the text, and the two form a tentative friendship, which is brought to an abrupt end when the novelist is brutally murdered in the third section of the novel.[93] At the very end of the novel,

[91] We will find similar themes, although approached in a very different manner, in *Éros mélancolique* in Chapter Six.

[92] Henceforth, the fictional character will be referred to as 'Michel', in contradistinction to the author, 'Houellebecq', although this distinction is not maintained in *La carte*. In most instances, the novel refers to 'Michel' as 'Houellebecq'.

[93] As in Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres*, *La carte* thus features a literal 'death of the author'. Unlike *Robert*, however, Houellebecq's text does not engage much with Barthesian theory beyond this nod. On the one hand, Michel's death in the novel does imply a certain ceding of control to the reader (especially in terms of the real-life author's public reception, as we will see below). On the other hand, since Jed is the

the motive for this murder is finally revealed to be financial, rather than personal, in the form of the portrait Jed has painted of Michel, which is valued at nearly a million euros. Michel's brutal murder is therefore perpetrated only to distract from the theft of the painting. The story is told by a third-person narrator and mainly follows Jed, the novel's protagonist, although the third section of the novel switches its viewpoint to Jean-Pierre Jasselin, the police commissioner in charge of Michel's murder investigation. Here, the omniscient narrative voice becomes limited, to maintain the pretence of the third section's murder mystery element. Evidently, therefore, *La carte* does not qualify as autofiction, since Michel is, strictly speaking, a secondary character. Even though the plot of the novel's third section is mainly focused on Michel, he is, at most, affecting the story posthumously and, as it is Jed's portrait that leads to his demise, is not even really instrumental in causing his own death. Despite not conforming to the genre criteria, however, *La carte* does comment on the genre of autofiction in its own way, as we will see below.

Setting aside Michel's comparatively small role in *La carte*, what his characterisation in the novel makes unequivocally clear is the character's intended identity with the real-life Houellebecq. Like Houellebecq, Michel is an author, a recluse, and a misanthrope, and even shares specific biographical details with his creator, such as taking up residence in Ireland for a few years, and publishing literary works with the same titles – specifically mentioned are *Les particules élémentaires* (1998), *Le sens du combat* (1996), *La poursuite du bonheur* (1991), *Renaissance* (1999), and *Plateforme* (*CT* 133, 160, 161, 172).[94] The inclusion of several of Houellebecq's contemporaries also serves to situate the novel very clearly in the real world.[95] Despite Houellebecq's assurances in the novel's acknowledgements that 'on se situe dans le cadre d'un ouvrage de fiction' (*CT* 415), *La carte*'s supposed autobiographical aspect is certainly

protagonist of the novel, the text retains an artist-/author-figure to whom Michel has passed on his ideas on authorship and artistic creation.

[94] Houellebecq's reference to several of his lesser-known collections of poetry could also be read as a minor attempt to correct his public perception.

[95] Contemporaries of Houellebecq featured in the novel include Frédéric Beigbeder, other French celebrities, such as news anchor Jean-Pierre Pernaut and media proprietor Patrick Le Lay, and Teresa Cremisi, Houellebecq's editor at Flammarion. The novelist Christine Angot is also mentioned in passing (*CT* 151).

reinforced by the cover design. While it is true that Houellebecq's physical features are generally not as closely linked to his written work as is the case with Nothomb, the cover design of the J'ai lu *poche* edition of *La carte* shows at least part of Houellebecq's face, thereby encouraging, if not the assumption that this is an autobiographical work, then at least the equivalence of author and character, Michel and Houellebecq.[96] Noticeably, both the *poche* cover and that of the English translation published by Vintage (2012) feature an image of the author or his face, albeit partly obscured. In the case of the French cover, this is done by a map or chart, revealing only a quarter of the author's face, in which one eye is visible, staring out at the reader with a slight frown of consternation. On the Vintage cover, both of Houellebecq's eyes are obstructed by the author's name, which stretches in a band over Houellebecq's face like a blindfold in the style of Barbara Kruger's propaganda art.[97] This playing with both presence and absence of the author is reflected in Michel's appearance and disappearance in the novel, and with his creator's incongruous status of being simultaneously 'notorious recluse' and 'omnipresent public intellectual' in real life.

La carte was certainly not marketed as autofiction or described as such – at most it was described in reviews as 'self-parody' (Martin 2011) – but critics have noted that, in this novel in particular, Houellebecq does at least 'flirt with the fashion for autofiction' (Morrey 2013: 103), even if he does not commit to the genre. The text itself is definitely aware of its proximity to autofiction, as it explicitly makes use of the term (*CT* 404), although the context is not a flattering one, as we will see below. Douglas Morrey perceives Houellebecq's self-portrait in *La carte* as being 'deceptively dispersed across more than one character' (Morrey 2013: 107), including Jed, even though Jed does not conform to the usual Houellebecquian protagonist mould. Unlike his predecessors, Jed's passivity is not so much a result of a general indifference

[96] For a more detailed examination of the association between Houellebecq and his literary characters and how this is instrumentalised through editorial choices, see Louise Moor, 'Posture polémique ou polémisation de la posture? Le cas de Michel Houellebecq' in *COnTEXTES* 10 (2012), pp. 1-17.

[97] Although there is a common theme of (anti-)consumerism and -capitalism that tenuously links *La carte* with Kruger's art, the fact that the style of such an overtly radical and feminist artist is referenced here is a little jarring, especially if it is meant to imply that Houellebecq's novel is in any way *engagé* or, indeed, particularly progressive.

toward his surroundings, but rather seems to be a sign of a moderate individual who exhibits at least a mild curiosity about the world he inhabits. Alduy describes him as a 'low-key, oddly likable protagonist' who is 'at once innocent and alienated' (Alduy 2012). As we will see, Jed and Michel do not have much in common, with the notable exception of having a similar attitude towards their respective artistic or literary output: both seem quite unattached to the works they produce and slightly at a loss regarding their own celebrity status, as we will see below. Yet, even if we read Jed as a more likable, naïve stand-in for Houellebecq, *La carte* still does not fit the mould of autofiction, or autobiographical fiction more generally, on a thematic level either. Despite at points resembling, as Alduy writes, an 'artist's biography' or 'twenty-first-century *Bildungsroman*' (Alduy 2012), *La carte* contains too much of the satirical and grotesque (Rühle 2019) and, in the end, too many other genre components to leave much room for Jed's self-reflection. In fact, the novel shows little interest in exploring Jed as an individual, whether as person, artist, or celebrity, and this lack of interest in the individual and personal is reflected in the style of *La carte* as well. Evidently, the fact that Houellebecq employs a 'banal, familiar, everyday non-literary language' (Sweeney 2013: x) is nothing exceptional, as this is another constant throughout his oeuvre. Yet here Houellebecq's signature 'flat' style resembles, as Alduy notices, the 'polished, impersonal tone of a Wikipedia article' (Alduy 2012) – a comparison that is anything but coincidental, as it turns out.

What is striking about *La carte*, particularly compared to the other Houellebecq novels of which it makes explicit mention, is that the text itself is somewhat atypical for Houellebecq, in spite of its tonal similarity to his earlier work. Although *La carte* overall evokes the *monde houellebecquien* with which readers are familiar, and is, predictably enough, not entirely devoid of racist or misogynist comments, critics generally agree that Houellebecq in this instance has mostly 'abandoned provocation for provocation's sake' (Alduy 2012). While not provoking as much critical disapproval in terms of its ethics or politics as some of his other works, *La carte* has nonetheless drawn criticism which generally relates to one of two issues. On the one hand, critics have contested the novel's selection for the prestigious *Prix Goncourt* – most notably

Tahar Ben Jelloun, who, as a member of the *Prix Goncourt* jury, dismissed the novel as 'trivial chatter on the human condition in an affected writing style that claims to be some sort of cleansing' (as cited in Sweeney 2013: viii). On the other hand, the novel caused a stir due to accusations of plagiarism. An article published in the online magazine *Slate.fr* revealed that certain passages from the novel, concerning the housefly, French politician Frédéric Nihous, and the city of Beauvais, were virtually identical to entries on the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia.[98] The article, written by Vincent Glad and entitled 'Houellebecq, la possibilité d'un plagiat', points out that, while Flammarion admitted to Houellebecq's having used material from Wikipedia 'comme matériau littéraire', the publisher also maintained that these entries had been reworked ('retravaillés') by the author, and that they were, in any case, far too short to constitute an actual case of plagiarism ('il ne se peut s'agir que de très courtes citations qui sont en tout état de cause totalement insusceptibles de constituer un quelconque plagiat', Glad 2010a).[99] Wikimedia France itself stated that 'les parties empruntées sont d'une certaine "banalité" rédactionnelle' (Glad 2010a). Yet the president of Wikimedia France, Adrienne Alix, was also quick to point out that, while Wikipedia allows commercial reproduction under a free software license, this nevertheless requires clear attribution within the text, which *La carte* clearly lacked (Glad 2010b). All the same, as the article continues, Houellebecq was hardly likely to face legal consequences, due to the collective nature of Wikipedia entries, in which the various authors' identities are not disclosed, but instead 'each contribution [is] signed with the pseudonym or IP address of the contributor in the History tab' (Glad 2010b). Therefore, the article concludes, unless one of the individual contributors were to 'feel particularly wronged', Houellebecq was unlikely to be sued by the online encyclopaedia (Glad 2010b).

[98] The second accusation was levelled by Michel Lévy, a much more obscure French novelist than Houellebecq, who claimed that the title of the novel itself copied that of a manuscript he had published at his own expense in 1999 (Lichfield 2010).

[99] An English version of the article, entitled 'Houellebecq vs. Wikipedia' and also written by Vincent Glad, was published on *Slate.com* six days later. As Frédéric Martin-Achard and Aude Laferrière point out, Houellebecq's treatment of the Wikipedia material he uses ranges from 'collage quasi-pur' in the case of the 'mouche domestique' entry to 'réécriture libre […] à partir des indications biographiques fournies par l'encyclopédie en ligne' in the case of Frédéric Nihous (Martin-Achard and Laferrière 2020: 14).

Besides pointing out the unlikelihood of legal consequences, Glad in both his articles is also fairly forgiving of Houellebecq's 'emprunts', insisting that they

> n'ont rien de scandaleux en regard du style de Michel Houellebecq. […] L'écrivain s'est toujours attaché à décrire la société à travers le langage clinique et formaté de la communication. Wikipedia, dont l'écriture encyclopédique est fondée sur le consensus mou des contributeurs, rentre parfaitement dans ce niveau de langage qui retire toute émotion aux choses. (Glad 2010a)

In the English version of the article, Glad adds that this copy-and-paste technique is a 'logical extension' of the *prose houellebecquienne*, a view which, as Glad notices, is the perspective adopted by Houellebecq himself (Glad 2010b). In a video interview with Joseph Vebret, the author unabashedly admits to borrowing from Wikipedia, but dismisses the accusation of plagiarism as 'ridicule' (Vebret 2010: 00:02:10). According to Houellebecq, the technique of blurring real documents and fiction is one of which many other authors, such as Georges Perec and Jorge Luis Borges, have made use (Vebret 2010: 00:00:34-00:00:53). Considering Houellebecq's obviously displayed, if bored, contempt of his detractors in this case, it is telling that he nonetheless evokes such a lofty literary heritage. Moreover, it is a method which is inextricably linked to his literary style, which, as John Lichfield argues, is 'based on borrowing banal and technical descriptions from everyday life and weaving them into something artistic' (Lichfield 2010). His detractors are therefore, in Houellebecq's opinion, 'vraiment des incompétents. […] Ils ont [*sic*] pas la première notion de ce qu'est la littérature' (Vebret 2010: 00:02:35-00:02:41). From his point of view, not only is the method he describes as *tissage* or *patchwork* 'at the core of today's literary and artistic practice' (Dalley 2015), but Houellebecq also hopes that 'tout ça participe à la beauté de mes livres' (Vebret 2010: 00:03:32-00:03:35). In the end, the matter was resolved, to a certain extent, by Houellebecq's mention of Wikipedia in his 'Remerciements' in the 2012 *poche* edition: 'Je remercie aussi Wikipedia (http://fr.wikipedia.org) et ses contributeurs dont j'ai parfois utilisé les notices comme source d'inspiration, notamment celles relatives à la mouche domestique, à la ville de Beauvais ou encore à Frédéric Nihous' (*CT* 415). Apart from the euphemistic expression of the Wikipedia entries serving as a 'source d'inspiration' (Martin-Achard and Laferrière 2020: 13), what is

worth noting here is that the discussion of Houellebecq's style takes place in the paratext, not in the text of *La carte* itself. This is not unusual, as Houellebecq's novels tend not to be self-reflexive in terms of his creative process. In the case of *La carte*, however, by selecting an artist-protagonist and by including the character of Michel the writer, Houellebecq does make a deliberate choice to bring the artist's and author's *métier* to the foreground of the text. Moreover, as we will see, Houellebecq's use of collage in *La carte*, incongruously, allows him both to disappear behind the anonymity associated with Wikipedia as well as to accentuate his reputation as a writer 'sans style' (Martin-Achard and Laferrière 2020: 17). I will return to questions of anonymity and style in the conclusion of this chapter.

Self-representation in *La carte*: Michel in Person and in Public

Since the protagonist of *La carte* is an artist and painter, the novel's thematic focus is therefore already centred on questions of representation, mimesis, verisimilitude, and similar themes. The artistic process mostly functions as analogue to the literary, although the apparent superficiality of the contemporary art world as a corporate marketplace also serves Houellebecq's general thematics particularly well here. Significantly, *La carte* seems to be mostly preoccupied with a representation of Michel as *personne* and only a little with Michel – and by extension Houellebecq – as *écrivain*, to refer back to Meizoz's categories. The novel ostensibly shows the reader the 'real' Michel behind the *posture* of Houellebecq the world-famous public intellectual, but in fact mostly confirms the *posture*, even if it does so playfully. Essentially, Houellebecq appears to be mimicking his public perception in engaging more with the visual or superficial elements of the Houellebecq *personnage* than with his writing. As mentioned above, *La carte* certainly encourages a reading of Michel's character as an accurate copy of his creator, and, interestingly, critics generally agree that Houellebecq represents himself more or less faithfully here. According to Morrey, Houellebecq's self-portrait in *La carte* can be considered 'an honest and accurate one, based on the impression we, as readers, have of [him]' from the media (Morrey 2013: 100); Pamela Genova observes that, although most

characters in the novel are treated comparatively 'sympathetically', Michel is uncompromisingly 'depicted as a misanthropic, unwashed, miserable alcoholic' (Genova 2014: 155); and Alduy also confirms that Michel is 'obligingly true to [Houellebecq's] real life reputation as a depressed, abrasive, inebriated loner living in Ireland' (Alduy 2012). Although they do not frame their criticism in those exact terms, these critics do make clear that Michel's portrayal in *La carte* is only accurate or authentic insofar as it corresponds to Houellebecq's mediatised image or *posture*. As we have seen in the case of *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq is perfectly happy to conform to his public image. In *La carte*, Houellebecq does not shy away from describing his fictional counterpart in unflattering terms, especially in those sections of the novel when Michel is at his most reclusive – although to what extent the author himself considers this to be truthful self-assessment or is merely indulging in ironic self-pity is hard to gauge exactly. As a reader, one certainly receives the impression that Houellebecq takes great pleasure in specifying just how pitiable a spectacle Michel presents.

On Jed's first visit to Michel, the writer, while to some extent engaged by Jed's conversation and the photographs of his work that Jed has brought, seems morose and distracted: 'Houellebecq leva vers lui un regard vide, il semblait avoir oublié ce que faisait Jed chez lui' (*CT* 136). His daily routine seems to consist of watching television (*CT* 161), and his interactions with Jed are all, predictably enough, accompanied by copious amounts of drinking and smoking; as Michel informs Jed: 'je n'arrive pas à penser sans tabac' (*CT* 144). Michel prefers December days when the sun has set by four o'clock in the afternoon, and he can 'me mettre en pyjama, prendre mes somnifères et aller au lit avec une bouteille de vin et un livre' (*CT* 140). Spring in Shannon, as Michel informs the artist, is 'insupportable': 'les couchers de soleil sont interminables et magnifiques, c'est comme une espèce de putain d'opéra, […] chaque soir j'étais au bord du suicide, avec cette nuit qui ne tombait jamais' (*CT* 141). On Jed's second visit, the artist encounters a particularly dishevelled novelist who resembles 'une vieille tortue malade' (*CT* 162):

> L'auteur des *Particules élémentaires* était vêtu d'un pyjama rayé gris qui le faisait vaguement ressembler à un bagnard de feuilleton télévisé; ses cheveux étaient

> ébouriffés et sales, son visage rouge, presque couperosé, et il puait un peu. L'incapacité à faire sa toilette est un des signes les plus sûrs de l'établissement d'un état dépressif, se souvint Jed. (*CT* 160)

Admittedly, Michel's pitiable state also provides Houellebecq with excellent opportunities for humorous asides. Jed, on finding Michel's house in Shannon mostly empty of furniture, inquires whether the author has just moved in: 'Vous venez de vous installer ici?', only to receive the answer: 'Oui. Enfin, ça fait trois ans' (*CT* 134). Michel derives an entertainingly childlike enjoyment from driving his Lexus from his house to the restaurant (*CT* 141), and Michel's indiscriminate consumption of the 400-euro bottle of wine that Jed has brought as a gift is clearly also meant to amuse the reader: 'sitôt la bouteille ouverte [il] avala un premier verre d'un trait, sans humer le bouquet du vin, sans même se livrer à un simulacre de dégustation' (*CT* 162).

Houellebecq's comic self-deprecation aside, however, Michel is not purely a figure of ridicule in the text. Overall, the narrative still encourages the reader to take Michel seriously, flawed though he may be, as a character and a writer, and an important one at that. As Morrey observes, 'Houellebecq has a rather clever way, in this novel, of feeling sorry for himself, yet at the same time coming off rather well' (Morrey 2013: 101), and this is nowhere as apparent as in the immediate aftermath of Michel's murder. Narrating Michel's murder not only allows Houellebecq to 'indulge [in] the fantasy of […] observing his own funeral' (Morrey 2013: 102), but also to air grievances with his critics. Referring to Michel's murder in the novel as the 'affaire Houellebecq' (*CT* 370) provides Houellebecq with the opportunity to appropriate some of the terminology surrounding his public perception. Although it is implied that Michel is a controversial author and not universally beloved, no specific mention of any scandals is made in *La carte*. Neither is Houellebecq above boasting of what appear to be Michel's numerous former amorous conquests, even if these are all from a long time ago. Following Michel's murder, it is Jasselin's job to interview these women, who, as it turns out, 'éprouvaient encore une grande tendresse pour Houellebecq' (*CT* 325). Even though, once again, this can easily be read as ironic commentary, one imagines that there is a degree of self-flattery involved here as well. At

Michel's funeral, everyone involved seems eager to mourn the loss of the esteemed writer, although the public or media response is denounced by the narrator as lacking in meaningful content, 'peu informée' (*CT* 303), and mostly limited to platitudes:

> [T]ous se déclaraient 'atterés', ou au minimum 'profondément tristes', et saluaient la mémoire 'd'un créateur immense, qui resterait à jamais présent dans nos mémoires', en somme on était dans le cadre d'une mort de célébrité classique, avec son broutage consensuel et ses niaiseries adéquates. (*CT* 303)

While the church is placed in the difficult position of reconciling Michel's staunchly proclaimed atheism with his furtive baptism six months prior to his death, the Archbishop of Paris enthusiastically agrees to hold a sermon for the deceased author, which insists on the 'valeur humaine universelle de l'œuvre du romancier' (*CT* 309). Some of Michel's readers, too, are moved to attend his funeral, or at least Jasselin assumes this to be the case: 'Des anonymes, des lecteurs de Houellebecq probablement' (*CT* 310-311). Once the sermon is over, Jasselin finds another group of about fifty people waiting outside the church, whom he guesses are 'probablement des lecteurs de Houellebecq allergiques à toute cérémonie religieuse' (*CT* 313). Despite the apparent solemnity of the occasion, however, Houellebecq cannot maintain a serious tone for very long. The fact that Michel's remains are placed in a child's coffin is portrayed as extremely upsetting to the funeral congregation, yet is so melodramatically overdone in the text so as to produce, once again, a comedic effect:

> [L]es employés des Pompes funèbres générales avaient cru bon d'employer un cercueil d'enfant, d'une longueur d'un mètre vingt. Cette volonté de rationalité était peut-être louable dans son principe, mais l'effet produit [...] était absolument navrant. Jasselin entendit Ferber qui étouffait un hoquet de douleur, et lui-même, tout endurci qu'il était, en avait le cœur serré; plusieurs membres de l'assistance avaient fondu en larmes. (*CT* 312)

As we have seen, then, Michel's representation in *La carte* strikes a balance between comedic, ironic self-deprecation and (also ironic) self-flattery. Although the most obvious aspects of Houellebecq's *posture* are, to some extent, exaggerated within the text, Michel is not purely limited to being a caricature of his real-life counterpart, as we will see in the representation of Michel's reception below. As will become apparent, some of Michel's utterances in *La carte* can indeed be read as (somewhat tepid) attempts at revising the Houellebecquian *posture*. Overall,

however, these are framed as mostly futile, and the portrayal in *La carte* of Michel's reception shows how little importance the novel attaches to Michel's writing in the first place.

Michel's Reception and *posture* in *La carte*

In *La carte*, we not only see how Houellebecq knowingly indulges in some of the worst aspects of his image, but also how Michel is, to a certain extent, performing his role as well – and, moreover, how tired he has become of performing this role. On the one hand, Michel points out to Jed that he is not interested in maintaining any illusions, in this case of civility: 'à quoi bon maintenir la fiction d'une pièce de réception?' (*CT* 161). On the other hand, he is also happy to play the role of exaggeratedly scornful and debauched French intellectual in Ireland. When the two are dining out at a restaurant, Michel first comments that the white wine is never served 'à temperature' (*CT* 142); then, in answer to the question of whether he is interested in wine, Michel replies: 'Ça me donne une contenance; ça fait français. Et puis il faut s'intéresser à quelque chose, dans la vie je trouve que ça aide' (*CT* 142). In fact, Jed himself becomes aware that Michel is conforming to his reputation to a certain extent, and it seems that, once Michel realises this, he feels less compelled to do so. When Michel informs Jed that he now spends the summers, between April and August, in Thailand, to enjoy the air-conditioning and the brothels, Jed directly confronts him about his act:

> [I]l fait un chaleur à crever mais la climatisation marche bien, c'est la morte-saison touristique, les bordels tournent au ralenti mais ils sont quand même ouverts et ça me va, ça me convient, les prestations restent excellentes ou très bonnes.
> – Là, j'ai l'impression que vous jouez un peu *votre propre rôle*. (*CT* 141; my emphasis)

Although Michel's mannerisms do not greatly change over the course of the few interactions between Jed and Michel that are included in the novel, the writer does seem to mellow somewhat toward the end. Michel's response to Jed's remark in the restaurant is to claim that 'ce sont des choses qui ne m'intéressent plus beaucoup. Je vais arrêter bientôt de toute façon' (*CT* 141), and that he intends to move back to the Loiret region of France soon, where he spent his childhood. This retreat into isolation in the French countryside is not only one that Jed

replicates toward the end of his career, but is also a common theme in Houellebecq's oeuvre (Sweeney 2013: 187).

The retreat from society also indicates a desire on Michel's part to retreat from media scrutiny. Michel is quick to inform Jed of what he really thinks about the press. Not only are the press 'd'une stupidité et d'un conformisme insupportables' (*CT* 142-143), but they also harbour an intense hatred for Michel, according to the writer himself, which is whence Michel's reputation as a drunkard stems: 'ce sont les journalistes qui m'ont fait la réputation d'un ivrogne; ce qui est curieux, c'est qu'aucun d'entre eux n'ait jamais réalisé que si je buvais beaucoup en leur présence, c'était uniquement pour parvenir à les supporter' (*CT* 142).[100] Although, from the representation of Michel in the novel, we as readers can see that Michel does correspond to his reputation to a certain extent, the text also makes clear that media reports are exaggerated, as Jed notices when he tells Michel: 'Je suis un peu surpris. […] Je m'attendais en vous rencontrant à quelque chose, […] disons, de plus difficile. Vous avez la réputation d'être très dépressif. Je croyais par exemple que vous buviez beaucoup plus' (*CT* 142). Furthermore, while Michel does not complain much directly about his literary reception in France, he is happy to do so indirectly, when he tells Jed about the French novelist Jean-Louis Curtis. As Michel informs Jed,

> *La France m'épuise* [1992] contient, à mon avis, les pastiches les plus réussis de la littérature française: ses imitations de Saint-Simon, de Chateaubriand sont parfaites; il se débrouille très bien aussi avec Stendhal et Balzac. Et pourtant aujourd'hui il n'en reste rien, plus personne ne le lit. C'est injuste, c'était *plutôt un bon auteur*, dans un genre un peu conservateur, un peu classique, mais il essayait de faire honnêtement son travail, enfin ce qu'il éstimait être son travail. […] C'est bien à tort au fond qu'on a catalogué Jean-Louis Curtis comme *réactionnaire*, c'est juste un bon auteur un peu triste, persuadé que l'humanité ne peut guère changer, dans un sens comme dans l'autre. […] Enfin je ne sais pas pourquoi je vous raconte tout ça, vous vous en foutez de Jean-Louis Curtis, vous avez tort d'ailleurs. (*CT* 164-165; my emphasis)

It is not difficult to recognise the parallels made between Curtis and Michel in this paragraph. Aside from Michel's lament that no one reads him anymore (we have already seen how

[100] At the very least, however, Houellebecq does not consider Michel's public enemies to be capable of committing murder. As the character Teresa Cremisi later explains to Jasselin in *La carte*: 'il s'agissait d'ennemis *littéraires*, qui exprimaient leur haine sur des sites Internet, dans des articles de journaux ou de magazines, et dans le pire des cas dans des livres, mais qu'aucun d'entre eux n'aurait été capable de se livrer à un assassinat physique' (*CT* 304).

enduring Houellebecq's commercial success is), his claim that Curtis has been wrongfully labelled a reactionary can easily be read, if not as a rejection of, then at least as a reference to, French critics' assessment of Houellebecq as an irredeemable reactionary (Sweeney 2013: viii). Even the specific phrasing echoes descriptions of Michel in the text. That Curtis is 'plutôt un bon auteur' resembles earlier mentions of Michel as 'un bon auteur' or 'pas un mauvais écrivain' (*CT* 22, 309). Curtis's alleged belief that humanity is incapable of change is another common theme of Houellebecq's work (Sweeney 2013: ix) and Michel's grumpy assumption that Jed could not care less about Curtis can be read both as a spiteful reaction to Houellebecq's detractors – especially those that have not actually read or understood his works – as well as a further reference to Houellebecq's own assumed attitude of general indifference.

Despite Houellebecq's few attempts in *La carte* to slightly correct or revise Michel's image, however, the novel generally indicates that the author, as well as the general public's views regarding him, are mostly irrelevant. While it is true that Michel's status as a celebrity and a talented writer is never seriously undermined, Michel's reception in the text is, by and large, based on people's judgements who have not, in fact, read any of Michel's work. Moreover, while Michel's publications are frequently named, his writing does not possess much significance for either the story or the plot of *La carte*.[101] Jed himself, not being much of a reader, is unfamiliar with Michel's body of work prior to their meeting at Jed's gallerist's behest. Several other characters in the novel are, admittedly, quick to confirm that Michel is an author worth engaging with. That Franz the savvy gallerist has heard of Michel is unsurprising ('c'était un auteur […] mondialement célèbre, […] d'après Franz tout du moins', *CT* 23). Jed is, however, astonished that his father, Jean-Pierre Martin – characterised as 'quelqu'un d'aussi profondément paralysé dans une routine désesperée et mortelle, quelqu'un d'aussi profondément engagé dans la voie sombre, dans l'allée des Ombres de la Mort' (*CT* 22) – is at all aware of Michel. According to Jed's father, who has read two of Michel's novels, '[c]'est un bon

[101] This stands in stark contrast to the significance accorded to Amélie's writing in *Une forme de vie*, for example, wherein it is Amélie's œuvre and Mapple's desire to emulate it that arguably set the plot in motion.

auteur, il me semble. C'est agréable à lire, et il a une vision assez juste de la société' (*CT* 22). On the one hand, this is an early indication that Michel's portrayal in *La carte* will indeed conform to Houellebecq's general critical reception, as a writer whom a reader with a taste for the morbid might well enjoy. The comment on Michel's view of society being 'assez juste', on the other hand, is a way for Houellebecq to provoke those of his readers who disagree, and is therefore an example of Houellebecq himself conforming to type. The novel's commentary on Michel's worth as a writer is certainly not always to be taken at face value. Even if the characters' assessments are meant in earnest, the narrative voice itself tends towards the sarcastic, as we have already seen above. In one meeting between Jed and Michel, the narrator sardonically refers to Michel, who has been steadily getting drunk on red wine since Jed's arrival, as 'l'illustre écrivain' (*CT* 168). Police commissioner Jasselin, who is in charge of investigating Michel's murder and replaces Jed as the viewpoint character for the third section of the novel, has apparently never heard of Michel, although he is not entirely unmoved by the author's murder.[102] As a man possessing '[une] attitude épuisée, résignée, d'homme qui connaît la vie, et ne fait plus trop d'illusions sur elle' (*CT* 308), Jasselin seems like a character who might appreciate Michel's novels. It seems, however, that Jasselin is not a great reader either, at least not of detective fiction ('Jasselin lisait peu de romans policiers', *CT* 294), although he does appear to appreciate a sort of memoir or collection of stories – 'un ouvrage qui à proprement parler n'était pas un roman' (*CT* 294) – written by a former private investigator mainly hired to prove cases of assumed adultery.[103] In another instance of tongue-in-cheek metafictional commentary by Houellebecq, despite the book being 'certainement […] mauvais', Jasselin is struck by its 'monotonie écrasante qui lui donnait un parfum unique d'authenticité, de réalisme' (*CT* 294). Jasselin's subordinate Ferber certainly knows of Michel, informing the nonplussed commissioner that: 'c'était un écrivain. Il était très connu' (*CT* 266). Later, at Michel's funeral,

[102] The fact that Jed's father and Jasselin are both given the first name 'Jean-Pierre' is a further indication of Houellebecq's lack of interest in individuals. Much like those in *Hoppe*, many of the minor characters in *La carte* are fairly interchangeable.

[103] In predictably problematic Houellebecquian fashion, the cases mostly involve Western men concerned with their Thai spouses' suspected infidelity.

Ferber adds: 'Ce n'était pas un mauvais écrivain, tu sais' (*CT* 309), yet it is never stated explicitly whether Ferber has, in fact, actually ever read Michel's books.

The same goes for Jed. Despite the fact that, out of the few of Jed's relationships with others that are explored in the novel, his relationship with Michel seems to be the one with the most potential of being fruitful with regard to their respective artistic endeavours, Jed at no point engages seriously with Michel's writing. Although, for the purposes of painting Michel's portrait, Jed wishes to take pictures of Michel at his 'place of work' ('J'aimerais bien avoir des photos de vous dans votre bureau… là où vous travaillez', *CT* 162), he shows no interest whatsoever in Michel's actual writing, assuring Michel that he has no intention of reading the manuscript the writer is currently working on, and that this will not be reflected in the painting either: 'Je ne vais pas regarder le contenu, pas du tout. C'est juste pour avoir une idée de la géométrie de l'ensemble, je vous promets que sur le tableau personne ne reconnaîtra les mots' (*CT* 163). Michel's written work is therefore not what is important to Jed, and is ultimately irrelevant for his portrait, that is, irrelevant for an artistic representation of Michel. This explains why the text depicted in the portrait is deliberately indecipherable. Although art critics in *La carte* remark on the fact that Jed 'semble dans son travail accorder une énorme importance au texte', it is also made clear that Jed is led by a 'pure fascination plastique' (*CT* 179-180). As Zoë Roth explains, 'it is only the *visual* quality of the texts that interests Martin' (Roth 2013: 155), as opposed to the themes or ideas expressed within. This does not mean that Jed is entirely uninterested in what Michel has to say – far from it, in fact, as we will see below – but the irrelevance and opacity of Michel's writing are a further sign of Michel's (and by extension Houellebecq's) capitulation before a narrative about himself that he is unable to influence, much less alter.

'Alors voilà': Resigning to the *posture*

Despite taking several opportunities to either mock or rail against his detractors, therefore, Houellebecq by and large adopts the same theme in *La carte* as he does in most of his other

works, namely a resigned indifference brought upon by the 'inability to glean meaning from existence' (Roth 2013: 154). The idea that '[l]ife is not meaningless' but Houellebecq's characters are 'unable to retrieve or access' this meaning (Roth 2013: 154) becomes especially clear through Michel's murder in *La carte*, and it is also confirmed by Michel's poetics and the thematics of Jed's later artistic projects. It is not only Michel's writing that is irrelevant or impotent. Rather, writing in general seems to have little impact within the story. During the time that Jed gets to know Michel, the latter does not appear to be working on any particularly note-worthy writing projects, other than the text he writes for Jed's exhibition catalogue. The only strictly-speaking literary piece he produces is a poem about his dog Platon, which he claims is 'un des meilleurs poèmes jamais écrits sur la philosophie de Platon – et probablement aussi sur les chiens' (*CT* 249). Needless to say, the poem is presented neither to Jed nor to the reader of *La carte*, and although, during this exchange, Michel is depicted as generally in good spirits and genuinely excited about his poem, the reader cannot help assuming that this is more gentle self-mockery on Houellebecq's part. That the novel's characters are unable to engage in a meaningful way with writing is further emphasised through he manner in which text is represented in the novel. On a superficial level, Michel's writing yields no answers, since his handwriting is 'penchée, presque illisible' (*CT* 163). The writing depicted in the background of Michel's portrait, as we have seen, is included only because of Jed's interest in its visual qualities. At one point, Jed has a dream in which he appears to be standing in a book, which he assumes tells the story of his life (*CT* 149). He recognises one or two names in the text, but cannot decipher anything else:

> [A]ucune information precise ne pouvait en être tirée, la plupart des mots étaient éffacés ou rageusement barrés, illisibles, et de nouveaux noms apparaissaient, qui ne lui évoquaient absolument rien. (*CT* 149)

Rather than this being purely a failing on Jed's part, however, the novel also heavily implies that Michel has given up on literature and its ability to effect any change in the word. As he tells Jed during their last encounter: 'je crois que je n'ai à peu près fini avec le *monde comme narration* – le monde des romans et des films, le monde de la musique aussi' (*CT* 249). Although the two

characters over the course of the novel do engage in interesting conversations regarding artistic and literary representations of the world, the novel makes clear that, in the end, Michel has no answers or deeper insights to share with Jed, even when the artist tells him directly that 'j'attends de vous un message' (*CT* 252). Michel's response is predictably bleak: 'ma vie s'achève, et je suis déçu' (*CT* 252). While it would be a mistake, as we have seen, to simply equate Michel's views with Houellebecq's own, it is tempting to perceive in this embittered attitude toward 'the world as narrative' some of Houellebecq's own disillusionment with the novel as a literary form. As is well known, the author has repeatedly claimed that he considers the novel to be a 'minor genre', as opposed to poetry: 'je maintiendrai que le roman […] reste, par rapport à la poésie, un *genre mineur*' (*EP* 257). Alduy ascribes a certain degree of sentimentality to Houellebecq's preference for poetry. According to Alduy, this 'reveals an unexpected side of Houellebecq's personality: an unwavering love for poetry (he began as a poet) and the moment of ecstasy that sudden inspiration can offer when it loosens the grip of time in a moment of pure selfless necessity' (Alduy 2012). William J. Cloonan, in the context of the original *affaire Houellebecq*, famously declared that 'Houellebecq believes strongly, perhaps even naively, in literature's capacity to change the world' and that it was unfair of critics to 'saddle him with the very cynicism he claims he wishes to combat' (Cloonan 2000: 22-23). It is, however, considerably more difficult to make such a claim twenty years later, or even in 2010 when *La carte* was published.

In the end, then, there are no insights to be gleaned from Michel's life and, unfortunately for Jed and Michel, there is no meaning to be found in his death either. Michel's murder, it is true, is suitably sensational and extraordinarily gory. The writer is not just murdered, but 'massacr[é]' (*CT* 278). His head has been detached with a laser scalpel and the remainder of his body is cut into 'des lambeaux, des lanières de chair éparpillés à même le sol' (*CT* 278), in what Jasselin at first thinks is a methodical, deliberate pattern: 'Les lambeaux de chair […] ne semblaient pas disposés au hasard mais suivant les motifs difficiles à décrypter, il avait l'impression d'être en présence d'un puzzle' (*CT* 278). Jed also, when he first sees photographs of the crime scene,

actually mistakes them for a Jackson Pollock painting, although upon closer scrutiny pronounces the crime scene to be 'qu'une assez médiocre imitation de Pollock' (*CT* 342). Yet all of this turns out to be a red herring in the end: Michel's murder is not prompted by any artistic originality, and is not perpetrated by a serial killer, psychopathic fan, or jealous lover. The excessive nature of the murder is, in fact, merely meant to distract from the real crime, which is the theft of the valuable painting. Michel is therefore killed only 'out of the most banal and depressing kind of material greed' (Morrey 2013: 109) and the interpretation of the crime scene as a work of art turns out to be completely irrelevant. There is no deeper meaning to be gained from the murder or its misinterpretation as a Pollock imitation – nor is the murder even properly solved until the painting is found by accident ('ce fut par hasard', *CT* 371) a few years after Michel's demise. The novel casts serious doubt on the possibility of successful creative response at any level. Creative works, and interpretative skills, are absent from the world portrayed by this novel. It is no accident that the novel's final paragraph focuses on Jed's final art pieces, the interpretation of which is deemed by the narrator to be 'insuffisante' (*CT* 414).

If Michel's murder does not provide Jed with any answers, however, there is, perhaps, a more compelling reason behind it which is only available to the reader of the novel, rather than to its characters. Alduy offers the intriguing explanation that having Michel murdered in *La carte* is a way for Houellebecq to rid himself of his 'cumbersome media persona' (Alduy 2012). As Alduy observes, '[i]nstead of publicly performing the fabricated role of provocateur, why not reclaim the character for himself and *write* him out of existence? What better way to get rid of a character than to kill him?' (Alduy 2012). While the interpretation has merit, I would argue that, overall, *La carte* encourages a reading of the text in which the author has already capitulated to his unchangeable *posture*.[104] At the same time, however, it is striking that Houellebecq includes in *La carte* a character who *does* succeed at having an unpredictable and mutable artistic career, namely Jed. In the early stages of his artistic career, the press attaché for Jed's first two

[104] This is a similar tactic to the one employed by Nothomb: in both cases, the author's *posture* is confirmed in the end, although with a different intentionality. Nothomb, it would seem, has little interest in revising her *posture* in the first place, as we saw in Chapter One.

exhibitions warns him that 'la plupart des critiques auraient eu du mal à suivre ton virage' (*CT* 152), and Franz agrees: 'C'est très difficile de faire accepter une évolution artistique aussi radicale que la tienne. […] En littérature, en musique, c'est carrément *impossible* de changer de direction, on est certain de se faire lyncher' (*CT* 154; my emphasis). While the link between Jed the character and Houellebecq the author is, as we have seen, ambiguous, these are not necessarily more melodramatics (however ironic) on Houellebecq's part regarding his cruel treatment at the hands of his critics. Yet it is difficult not to read comments like the following (also made by Franz in this case) as metafictional: 'si tu fais toujours la même chose on t'accuse de te répéter et d'être sur le déclin, mais si tu changes on t'accuse d'être un touche-à-tout incohérent' (*CT* 154). More importantly, however, although Jed does succeed in switching artistic projects, media, and styles, the novel's conclusion nonetheless strikes a resolutely sombre tone. Here we have, as Alduy describes it, a return to the usual Houellebecquian theme of '[t]he individual self [being] an obsolete and destructive fallacy, and all human destinies follow[ing] a single, boring plot: decay' (Alduy 2012). Neither art nor literature, in *La carte*, have the capacity to change the world in the end. Jed's final art films as described in the novel's epilogue section show photographs and little human figurines exposed to the elements and in various states of decomposition, 'semblant dans les dernières vidéos se faire le symbole de l'anéantissement généralisé de l'espèce humaine' (*CT* 414). The novel ends on the line: 'Le triomphe de la végétation est total' (*CT* 414).

Against Autofiction?

Although this may be the end point toward which humanity as a whole is headed, and although *La carte* shows little sympathy for individual destinies, Houellebecq's treatment of artistic or literary self-representation is, in fact, more ambiguous than one might assume. The portrait of Michel is, in a sense, what gets him killed, and this raises interesting questions in terms of Houellebecq's response to representations of himself. In the novel, Michel is anything but thrilled when Jed announces that he would like to paint his portrait. As Jed makes the

suggestion via phone call, during which Michel is clearly quite drunk, the only responses the artist receives are several minutes of silence and finally a '[b]on…, répondit l'écrivain sans enthousiasme. C'est d'accord' (*CT* 150). Moreover, Houellebecq in this case seems to share his character's aversion to representations of himself, be they literary or artistic, and especially self-portraits. If Houellebecq is sceptical of the novel as a literary form, his condemnation of autobiographical writing is, according to one of his texts from 2005, even more pronounced:

> Je n'ai pas tellement d'estime pour l'autobiographie, guère plus pour le journal; je les considère comme des formes primitives de la création incapables de s'élever à la vérité du roman, incapables aussi de rejoindre le niveau d'émotion qui est celui de la poésie. (as cited in Ott 2013: 225)

We see similar opinions expressed in *La carte*. Jed, as the novel specifies, 'ne possédait pas une seule photographie de lui-même' (*CT* 398), nor has he ever considered himself as an artistic subject: 'Jamais non plus il n'avait envisagé de réaliser d'autoportrait, jamais il ne s'était considéré, si peu que ce soit, comme un sujet artistique' (*CT* 398). Further comment on this matter is made in the instance of Jed's encounter with an aspiring portraitist, who strikes up a conversation with Jed at a café. The hapless amateur has fashioned portraits of himself as a brawny warrior, or 'guerrier barbu' (*CT* 404), although it is also made clear that these are a fantasy, and not at all meant as accurate or truthful reflections of the painter. Due to the amateur's lack of skill, Jed's reaction to the paintings is one of unequivocal condemnation, but what is of particular interest here is the terminology which Jed uses to describe these paintings:

> En somme il s'agissait d'*autofictions*, d'autoportraits imaginaires; sa technique picturale, défaillante, ne lui permettait malheureusement pas d'atteindre au niveau d'hyperréalisme et de léché classiquement requis par l'*heroic fantasy*. Au total, Jed avait rarement vu quelque chose d'aussi laide. (*CT* 404-405; first emphasis mine)

Christine Ott makes a crucial point when she observes that British textile designer, writer, and socialist activist William Morris is generally credited as the founding father of the *heroic fantasy* genre (Ott 2013: 229). In *La carte*, Morris is highly esteemed by both Michel and Jed's father Jean-Pierre, despite, or perhaps due to, his being an incurable utopian: 'Ce qu'on peut sans doute dire, c'est que le modèle de société proposé par William Morris n'aurait rien d'utopique dans un monde où tout les hommes ressembleraient à William Morris' (*CT* 257-258). While Morris is held up as a utopian ideal worth striving for, contemporary autofiction in the manner of the

amateur portraitist's paintings is condemned as narcissistic self-reflection, thereby confirming Houellebecq's hypothesis of a decline in Western art (Ott 2013: 229).

However, although autofiction is singled out here as a particularly inane artistic pursuit, both Jed and Michel seem doubtful of the possibility of representing people at all, whether in literature or in the fine arts. In his first conversation with Jed, Michel extols the virtues of a potential text based on the genealogy of nothing more than a radiator:

> Voilà un sujet magnifique, foutrement intéressant même, un *authentique drame humain*! […] On pourrait très bien, aujourd'hui, retracer dans un roman le parcours du minerai de fer, la fusion réductrice du fer et du coke métallurgique, l'usinage du matériau, la commercialisation enfin – ça pourrait venir en ouverture du livre, comme une généalogie du radiateur. (*CT* 138-139)

Following Jed's doubtful response, Michel grudgingly admits that he would nonetheless need to include characters in this novel as well: 'Même si mon vrai sujet était les processus industriels, sans personnages je ne pourrais rien faire' (*CT* 139). Yet Jed to a certain extent shares Michel's apprehension when it comes to representing people. In Michel's opinion, Jed is not really a 'portraitiste' (*CT* 172) in the first place. Jed himself confesses that he actually finds painting portraits quite repetitive, and tells Michel that:

> Je sais bien que les êtres humains c'est le sujet du roman, de la *great occidental novel*, un des grands sujets de la peinture aussi, mais je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser que les gens sont beaucoup moins différents entre eux qu'ils ne le croient en général. (*CT* 171-172)

As Alduy summarises, '[t]he portrayal of individuals as individuals, in the visual arts or in literature' is shown in *La carte* to be a 'dead end' (Alduy 2012). And yet the novel indicates that Jed's portrait of Michel does 'captur[e] something of [Michel's] previous fleeting passion for life' (Roth 2013: 154), suggesting that Houellebecq is not fully committed to his usual themes. In one of the rare instances in the text in which he appears to be genuinely content, Michel tells Jed: 's'il y a une image de moi, une seule, qui persistera dans les siècles à venir, ce sera votre tableau' (*CT* 173). Admittedly, from its description in text, Jed's portrait seems to conform fairly well to the cliché of an author's portrait – Michel shown at his desk, surrounded by his manuscripts, and in the act of editing his texts – despite the novel's insistence that Michel's expression in the painting in particular cannot be 'rapprochée d'aucune tradition picturale existante' (*CT* 181).

Françoise Grauby makes the interesting argument that, in *La carte*, Houellebecq mobilises the two traditional literary tropes of 'la visite au grand écrivain' and 'le portrait de l'artiste' (Grauby 2018: 78) in order to overcome the limitations of his *posture* and his own writing. Yet I would argue that this is more of a gesture than something actually accomplished within the novel. If *La carte*, overall, expresses Houellebecq's weariness of his *posture*, the inclusion of the portrait and the value which is ascribed to it in the novel might indicate, on the one hand, Houellebecq's desire to have greater control over his public image. On the other hand, it could be read as the author pointing out the futility in even attempting to craft his own self-portrait or autofiction and, in the end, capitulating in the face of the dominant narrative. Even if Jed's portrait is the one representation of Michel that will be conserved for posterity, it is at best a superficial and incomplete one.

Conclusion: Michel's Relative Control

In *La carte*, Houellebecq articulates a degree of frustration with the degree of immobility which Michel's *posture* causes the character, while also enjoying the scope for ironic metacommentary on his own public image afforded him by the character of Michel. While *La carte* suggests both a lack of faith in the (especially autofictional) novel as a literary form, as well as in Michel's capacity to influence his own public narrative within the story of *La carte* itself, Houellebecq's novel nevertheless expresses these ideas mostly via its artistic or literary characters. Although Houellebecq might seek to portray, in an exaggerated manner, his own lack of control over his public image, and although the novel's themes generally point toward the irrelevance of individual destinies, it is nonetheless striking how much attention is focused on Michel throughout the novel. Despite the character's comparatively few appearances, Houellebecq does, in a way, dominate the novel through Michel's pronouncements and through Houellebecq's signature style. In this sense there is, as we have seen, a degree of complexity and playfulness involved in the portrayal of Jed and Michel and their relationship to their author. Yet *La carte* has a much more straightforward manner of conveying its messages about the role of

autofiction, the novel, literature, and the celebrity writer in contemporary society than the more experimental texts we will encounter in the second half of this thesis. To claim that *La carte*'s dominant narrative voice is 'crowdsourced' (Alduy 2012) because it draws on material from Wikipedia is therefore misleading. As one German critic of Houellebecq's latest novel has claimed, much of *Sérotonine* is so quintessentially Houellebecquian that it could have been created by an automatic 'Houellebecq-Generator' (Rühle 2019). Although this (rather flippant) criticism has some merit, and despite Houellebecq's engagement with anonymously created content online, I would argue that the impact of this on *La carte* overall is still quite insignificant – or at the very least framed as such – by comparison to Houellebecq's reliance on more traditional novelistic conventions and representations of the author figure, regardless of their actual efficacy within the story or to what extent they are satirically undermined. We will see quite a striking departure from this approach in the following chapter, which examines Thomas Meinecke's *Lookalikes*. While Meinecke does not compare to Houellebecq in terms of international fame, he is nonetheless known for a specific style and set of preoccupations, which also become apparent in *Lookalikes*. In contrast to *La carte*, however, Meinecke's novel goes to much greater lengths to divest the autofictional character of narrative control, even if these efforts are relativised by the author's dominating signature style and poetics.

Chapter Four

'Thomas Meinecke ist jetzt eine Romanfigur': Autofiction and *Popliteratur* in Thomas Meinecke's *Lookalikes* (2011)

Introduction: *Popliteratur* and *Selbstinszenierung*

Reviews of Thomas Meinecke's *Lookalikes* (2011) generally agree that, in his sixth novel, the *Popliteratur* author and DJ has not fundamentally changed his literary methods. *Lookalikes* certainly resembles Meinecke's previous works in terms of its construction, style, content, and themes. It is a soberly written text woven together out of quotations, intertextual and intermedial references, and snippets of philosophical and critical discourses, while at the same time centring around a cast of hip and attractive young characters – in this case, the titular 'lookalikes' who resemble popular culture or cultural studies icons Josephine Baker, Justin Timberlake, Serge Gainsbourg, Greta Garbo, Shakira, and Britney Spears. Living mainly in Germany's fashion capital Düsseldorf, and spanning a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations, their primary interaction involves discussing topics including pop music, fashion, religion, sex, and, of course, gender and identity construction.[105] What is exceptional about *Lookalikes*, however, particularly by comparison to Meinecke's previous texts, is that 'Thomas Meinecke' himself appears as a character within the text, bearing the same name as his author and providing the narrative perspective for roughly half of the text.[106] Since Thomas is not a first-person narrator, and instead has his story told by a fairly unobtrusive third-person limited narrator, the text does not qualify as autofiction, since it fulfils neither the convention of the first-person autodiegetic narrator, nor that of the genre's self-exploratory or self-revelatory intentions ('se révéler dans sa vérité', Gasparini 2008: 209). In this chapter I argue, however, that the choice of introducing this quasi-autofictional element into *Lookalikes* is a deliberate

[105] The characters' gender identities do not necessarily align with the real-life people they resemble. The character of Britney Spears in *Lookalikes*, for example, is 'ein junger Mann aus Tübingen' (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 297).

[106] Henceforth, the fictional character will be referred to as 'Thomas', in contradistinction to the empirical author, 'Meinecke', although this distinction is not maintained in the novel itself.

attempt on Meinecke's part to reconcile *Popliteratur* with another contemporary hybrid genre in order to explore new possibilities of genre-mixing with regard to staging the self and the present. On the one hand, *Lookalikes* provides an insight into a movement in German literature which has a history of experimenting with self-representation (which, as we have seen, was comparatively rare until the twenty-first century). On the other hand, it brings together several literary preoccupations which are central to this thesis, namely exploring issues relating to autofiction, referentiality, and literary reception, as well as self-representation and the dissemination of knowledge on the Internet. However, in order to appreciate what is distinct about *Lookalikes*, a quick look at another example of a combination of *Popliteratur* and *Selbstinszenierung* will prove instructive.

Meinecke is not the only *Popliterat* to experiment with self-representation in his literary works. Rainald Goetz is another particularly prominent example, yet Meinecke proves the better fit in the present selection of texts for a number of reasons. In terms of the kind of experimental autofiction explored in this thesis, the most significant difference between Goetz and Meinecke is that, as we saw in the introduction, Goetz generally functions as an example of contemporary authors who write confident first-person narratives about the self in spite of the twentieth-century crises of subjectivity and narration (Meier 2002: 571). By contrast, as we will see, Meinecke's attitude toward referentiality and literary self-representation in his works is much more ambivalent, and thus adds to the present comparative analysis of contemporary autofiction in a more fruitful way. Although a detailed engagement with both Goetz and Meinecke is well beyond the scope of this thesis, Goetz – and especially his 1983 text 'Subito' – do serve as an important backdrop to Meinecke's *Lookalikes*. Critics including Birgitta Krumrey and Innokentij Kreknin have increasingly made use of the concept of autofiction as a means of engaging with Goetz's literary oeuvre.[107] Maxim Biller credits Goetz with the inauguration of the *Ichzeit* and the unprecedented rise of 'ein starkes, glaubhaftes, mitreißendes, suggestives

[107] For an in-depth examination of Goetz's work as autofiction, see Innokentij Kreknin, *Poetiken des Selbst. Identität, Autorschaft und Autofiktion am Beispiel von Rainald Goetz, Joachim Lottmann und Alban Nikolai Herbst* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

Erzähler-Ich' (Biller 2011) in contemporary German literature: 'Angefangen hat es mit "Irre" [1983] von Rainald Goetz' (Biller 2011). In this context, Biller also cites Goetz's much debated performance as a contestant for the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis in Klagenfurt in 1983. During the reading of his text 'Subito' (both a stand-alone text and an intertext to Goetz's novel *Irre*), the young writer famously cut his forehead with a razor blade and completed the final minute of his reading with blood running down his face. This cut to the forehead is, moreover, explicitly referenced in the text of 'Subito', in what Kreknin perceives as a synthesis of literature and reality (Kreknin 2011: 146). As Kreknin explains, the performance of the cut adds a referential component to the otherwise presumably fictional text, while at the same time the empirical subject – 'der lesende und blutende Rainald Goetz als Verkörperung der Autor-Funktion Rainald Goetz' – turns into a literary character and is thus fictionalised (Kreknin 2011: 147). Although, as we will see, *Popliteratur* implies neither a return to naïve realism nor even a consistent attitude toward questions of representation and referentiality in literature, the idea of *Popliteratur* as enabling a coming together of 'Simulation, Inszenierung und Authentizität' (Ort 2019: 190) is raised in 'Subito' and its performance.[108]

The following passage of 'Subito' contains not only the description of the act of cutting but also an emphasis on the realness of the blood:

> Ihr könnts mein Hirn haben. *Ich schneide ein Loch* in meinen Kopf, in die Stirn schneide ich das Loch. Mit meinem Blut soll mir mein Hirn auslaufen. Ich brauche kein Hirn nicht mehr, weil es eine solche Folter ist in meinem Kopf. Ihr folterts mich, ihr Schweine, derweil ich doch bloß eines wissen möchte, wo oben, wo unten ist und wie das Scheißleben geht. […] Wenn es mir keiner sagt, dann muss ich es eben tun, das Schreien, laut werde ich schreien, bis mir die Angst vergeht. Und ich schreie nichts Künstliches daher, sondern *echte Schreie, die mir blutig bluten*. (Goetz 2003: 20; my emphasis)

'Subito' and its performance are therefore key precedents not only for contemporary German autofiction, but also for German *Popliteratur*, and for any combinations thereof. Rainer Kühn has emphasised the text's 'Manifestcharakter' (as cited in Kreknin 2014: 97), in that it outlines some

[108] For more on the relationship between referentiality and fictionality in 'Subito' and its performance, see the following articles: Innokentij Kreknin, 'Das Licht und das Ich. Identität, Fiktionalität und Referentialität in den Internet-Schriften von Rainald Goetz' in *Poetik der Oberfläche. Die deutschsprachige Popliteratur der 1990er Jahre*, ed. by Olaf Grabienski et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 143-164; and Claus-Michael Ort, 'Vom Abfall zum Licht. Zur flachen Metaphysik der Schrift in Rainald Goetz' *Rave* (1998) und *Abfall für alle* (1999)'. In *Deutschsprachige Pop-Literatur von Fichte bis Bessing*, ed. by Ingo Irsigler et al. (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2019), pp. 183-215.

important aspects of *Popliteratur*: its focus on surfaces and on the present,[109] and its postulate that literature should be 'das einfache Abschreiben der Welt' (Goetz 2003: 19). What is particularly significant in the context of the following analysis of Meinecke's *Lookalikes*, however, is the central role which Goetz's performance has played in the reception of 'Subito'. As Eckhard Schumacher emphasises, both contemporary and retrospective reviews of the text focus heavily on the 'Blutbad':

> Nicht nur die "erste Rezensionswelle" hebt "fast ausschließlich auf das Blutbad ab",[110] das Goetz mit seinem Schnitt in die Stirn ausgelöst hat, bis heute wird Goetz dermaßen mit dieser Aktion identifiziert, dass es bei Einlassungen auf seine Texte immer noch üblich ist, zumindest kurz zu erwähnen, dass er der Autor ist, der sich 1983 in Klagenfurt die Stirn aufgeschnitten hat. (Schumacher 2016: 244)

Although, as a DJ and author in the public eye, Meinecke is no stranger to *Selbstinszenierungen*,[111] there is no one performance with which Meinecke might be as strongly identified as Goetz is with his reading in Klagenfurt. At the same time, however, the reception of literary works (whether written by others or by Meinecke himself) is a key component of Meinecke's writing. While the reception of ethnographer and proto-*Popliterat* Hubert Fichte's works plays a much more central role in *Lookalikes* than does that of Goetz, 'Subito' and its performance do set an important precedent for Meinecke's text.[112] Although Goetz is not central to my analysis here, I will return to the significance of the 'Subito' precedent in the final sections of this chapter.

In *Lookalikes*, the inclusion of Meinecke's literary alter ego is framed as largely unavoidable, but also largely coincidental. Meinecke and Thomas, inside and outside the text,

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[109] The following section of 'Subito' makes these aspects clear: 'Ich schneide in die Haut, Blut quillt hervor, und es macht: Fließ Rinn Zisch Lösch. In mir brennt es nämlich von innen, […] und außen ist die glatte Haut. […] Das frische helle Blut sucht, […] der Schwerkraft gehorchend, seinen Weg nach unten und bildet so eigensinnige Ornamente auf der Haut' (Goetz 2003: 16).

[110] Schumacher cites the following text here: Thomas Doktor and Carla Spies, *Gottfried Benn – Rainald Goetz. Medium Literatur zwischen Pathologie und Poetologie* (Opladen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1997).

[111] One example of this is Meinecke's *Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen* in 2012, in which he performed his *posture* as *Popliterat* and DJ by playing vinyl records and reading from secondary literature on his literary works (Höppner 2013). These *Poetikvorlesungen* were published in the same year as *Ich als Text* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).

[112] For a detailed examination of Hubert Fichte's relevance to *Popliteratur* more generally (especially to the Suhrkamp authors), see Eckhard Schumacher, *Gerade Eben Jetzt. Schreibweisen der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 157-205.

retrace Hubert Fichte's steps in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Fichte's encounters with the local syncretic Candomblé religion resulted in the publication of *Xango. Die afroamerikanischen Religionen. Bahia, Haiti, Trinidad* (1976; henceforth *Xango*) – ostensibly factual, but described by the author as 'Ethnopoesie' – and his novel *Explosion* (1993), both of which are explicitly referenced in *Lookalikes*. Since Fichte is considered to be a precursor to contemporary *Popliteraten* and is primarily known for his extensive series of self-fictionalisations, the use of Thomas as a viewpoint character appears an obvious and appropriate choice.[113] At the same time, however, Meinecke appears to go out of his way to make this choice seem as incidental and inconsequential as possible. The following analysis will explore the framing of Thomas in *Lookalikes* as coincidental and derivative, as someone with little authority or control over the content of the text, and determine to what extent these autofictional tendencies are reconcilable with Meinecke's understanding of *Popliteratur* as a genre that privileges citation and collage over in-depth (self-)analysis. Compared to the other authors and texts examined here, Meinecke is the author who is most interested in staging and exploring the contingency of the autofictional character within and through the literary text itself. The lack of interest which Meinecke ostensibly shows in Thomas as a literary character is therefore partially posturing on Meinecke's part. Thomas is much more visible and in himself a subject of study than, for example, the authors' doubles are in Garréta and Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique*, although Meinecke goes to far greater lengths to distract from this than do Nothomb, Hoppe, Houellebecq, or even Setz. Even though Meinecke clearly distances himself from what he perceives to be the more problematic facets of Fichte's self-representation, *Lookalikes* is nonetheless profoundly influenced by the latter's struggles with an 'ambivalent attitude toward the production of

[113] Fichte's literary alter egos Detlev and Jäcki can be found in his 'tetralogy', consisting of his first four novels (*Das Waisenhaus*, 1965; *Die Palette*, 1968*; Detlevs Imitationen "Grünspan"*, 1971; *Versuch über die Pubertät*, 1974), as well as his unfinished multi-volume project *Die Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit* (published posthumously between 1987 and 1993). *Explosion* is volume seven of *Die Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit*. The first-person narrator in *Xango* is unnamed so I will refer to him as 'Ich' in this chapter. As in the case of Sebald's autobiographical works, one could make the case for classifying Fichte's works as autofiction as well. Yet, as briefly explained in the introduction of this thesis, Fichte's texts, like Sebald's, are not written before the background of and in dialogue with autofiction theory, as the twenty-first-century texts examined in this thesis are. For more on the development of Fichte's autobiographical fiction, see Thomas Wilks, *Experimentation and the Autobiographical Search for Identity in the Projects of Michel Leiris and Hubert Fichte* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), pp. 17-26.

knowledge' (Neumann 1991: 281). Despite the fact that Meinecke's novel, like many examples of *Popliteratur*, resists conventional hermeneutic models of reading, the production and acquisition of knowledge are nonetheless consistently discussed, directly or indirectly, throughout *Lookalikes*. In this novel, Meinecke stages a tension between knowledge gained from immersion in a subject and immediate, authentic experiences on the one hand, and, on the other, a more superficial, associative, accumulative process of knowledge production, which is facilitated through Meinecke's engagement with the digital and his method of *erzählte Theorie*. Although the author's use of Fichte in *Lookalikes* allows for Thomas to disappear behind the intertext to a certain extent, and for Meinecke to perform a lack of control over his text, the fact that he makes use of his signature literary methods and style to do so inevitably redirects the reader's attention to Meinecke's self-stylisation as an author and DJ.

Superficial Knowledge and Associative Webs: Meinecke's Method of *erzählte Theorie*

Having established himself as a writer, musician, and DJ in Germany in the late 1980s, Meinecke has become well known in the present day as one of the three Suhrkamp *Popliteratur* authors, along with Goetz and Andreas Neumeister.[114] While these authors by no means understand *Popliteratur* as a literary movement, and in fact reject the idea of 'Pop' as a homogenising label (Lenz and Pütz 2000: 152), they nonetheless share both a fascination with popular culture and music, as well as a similar concern with writing literature that somehow does justice to the present. As Schumacher observes, the aim of this literature is not to understand or explain the present, but to approach it through what Meinecke calls the 'Methode Pop', an approach that comprises 'Zitieren, Protokollieren, Kopieren, Inventarisieren' (Schumacher 2003: 13). Rather than claiming to capture or represent contemporary reality, *Popliteratur* attempts to produce

[114] It should be noted that the 'camp' of Suhrkamp *Popliteraten* is distinct from the Kipenheuer & Witsch (KiWi) camp, as Margaret McCarthy observes: 'Older authors from the 1980s like Thomas Meinecke, Rainald Goetz, Andreas Neumeister and Dietmar Rath comprise the Suhrkamp faction, with [Christian] Kracht, [Benjamin] von Stuckrad-Barre and Hennig von Lange in the KiWi camp' (McCarthy 2015: 19). In contrast to the Suhrkamp authors, the *Popliteratur* of the younger generation is characterised, as Alfred Strasser explains via the example of Stuckrad-Barre's novel *Soloalbum* (1998), by a 'plakativ vorgetragene[r] Egoismus' (Strasser 2011).

'eine Form von Signifikanz, […] die ein gegenwartsdiagnostisches Potential freilegen kann, ohne es durch Erklärungen, Meinungsbekundungen oder andere Verständnishilfen zugleich wieder zum Stillstand zu bringen' (Schumacher 2003: 14).[115] Regarding Meinecke's approach specifically, Moritz Baßler describes his writing as archiving a discourse: 'es geht in [Meineckes Büchern] nicht um Musik, sondern […] um die literarische Archivierung eines Diskurses' (Baßler 2002: 135). This manifests itself in novels that focus less on plot than on a cast of young but intellectually astute characters, who themselves function as vehicles for conveying elements of philosophical and critical discourses.[116] The literary technique Meinecke uses to put together his texts has been described as 'sampling', likening Meinecke's role as an author – aptly enough – to that of a DJ, or 'Arrangeur', who generates rather than writes a text through sampling, mixing, and remixing (Feiereisen 2011: 9, 79).

Meinecke's texts are thus a heterogeneous construct of quotations, intertextual and intermedial references, and dialogue which tends to be interrogative and repetitive, rather than affirmative or expository.[117] As critics have pointed out, this is Meinecke's way of adopting theory not only as the topic of his novels, but also as a method or literary process (Zelik 2004; Feiereisen 2011: 86; Schumacher 2012: 70). Describing what she calls the author's method of 'erzählte Theorie', Florence Feiereisen makes clear that, while much of Meinecke's writing may therefore resemble academic research, it is not meant to function as such, but instead forms the author's 'Produktionsgrundlage' (Feiereisen 2011: 90). As Feiereisen observes, '[einigen Textstellen] fehlen lediglich genauere bibliografische Angaben und Anführungszeichen, um als wissenschaftliche Arbeit durchzugehen' (Feiereisen 2011: 88-89), but she also emphasises that

[115] Note that Wilks describes Fichte's writing in very similar terms: 'Essentially, Fichte writes not to explain categorically, but to generate *potential meaning* through our responses – not just to the layers of his narration, but also to their interconnections. He does this explicitly through textual collages, and, indeed, the layered nature of narration in his project as a whole makes collage an appropriate, although hardly definitive, label for it, encompassing and glossing elements of the novel, reportage, poetry and autobiography' (Wilks 2006: 249; my emphasis); and further: '[T]o conclude definitively is contrary to the spirit of glosses. Glosses are, after all, authorial assertions of work in progress, and thus of the creative self' (Wilks 2006: 255).

[116] The various theorists mentioned in *Lookalikes* include, in no particular order, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

[117] Both Hoppe and Setz employ similar methods in their texts, as shown in Chapters Two and Five, although *Hoppe* is much more homogenous than it pretends to be, while *Indigo* makes a greater effort both to incorporate external material and to make internal material appear external.

'dies [würde] […] mit akademischen Konventionen überein[s]timm[en], um die es Meinecke eben nicht geht' (Feiereisen 2011: 90). Instead, Meinecke presents his writing as an analogous process to DJing. In order to underscore both the text's apparent spontaneity and the author's lack of strictly academic motivation, Meinecke's citation style in *Lookalikes* is deliberately inconsistent. In some cases, references are labelled in bibliographical detail ('*J. Lorand Matory: Black Atlantic Religion. Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005*', *L* 107); in others, fewer details are given, as when Meinecke cites an autobiographical text by Greta Garbo, but provides only the title and the year it was written: '*Wie ich war und was ich bin (1926)*' (*L* 141). In the case of the Garbo text, omissions (presumably Meinecke's) are indicated via ellipses, in other cases they are not indicated at all. One – uncredited – section, '*Doubled Doubles: In February 1926, Earl Carroll staged his famous champagne bath party*' (*L* 236), is quoted word for word from Rachel Shteir's *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (2004), with the exception of several quotation marks that are prominent in the source text, but are omitted in Meinecke's text. As a result, the chain of attribution of quotations is disrupted and the distinction between quoted and non-quoted material is blurred. As Meinecke explains: 'Spannend daran sind jene Momente, in denen nicht klar auszumachen ist, welches Versatzstück welcher Quelle entstammt. In denen sich vermeintlich Disparates zur Synthese mischt. In denen das Zitat seine Anführungszeichen verliert' (as cited in Schumacher 2003: 191). Elsewhere, Meinecke does refer explicitly to Shteir's publication ('*Rachel Shteir: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*', *L* 185), and even adds editorial notes, such as 'Hervorhebung durch Justin' (*L* 187), although this is attributed very clearly to a fictional character in the text, rather than to Meinecke the author or Thomas the author-character.

This method of *erzählte Theorie* is not unique to *Lookalikes*, however, as Meinecke makes use of it in most of his literary works. As Sabine Kyora observes, the interrogative style of Meinecke's third novel *Tomboy* (1998) matches the interrogative style of much of Judith Butler's writing (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 44). The novel thus addresses core concepts of gender

theory in both content and style, while at the same time opening these concepts up to new readings in the contexts of the associative web which the literary text provides (Schumacher 2012: 68). As Meinecke has stated repeatedly, he sees no value in adhering to conventional literary ideals such as originality and invention. In a 1999 text, Meinecke writes that:

> Ich will überhaupt keine Fiktion. Ich will null Ausgedachtes. Nicht das Originelle. Nicht die Erfindung. Weg mit dem Gehüstel der Geschichtenerzähler. Grundsätzlich: Sogenannte Wissenschaft ist mir Fiktion genug. Wissenschafts-Fiktion als sprichwörtlich wahrhafte Science Fiction. (as cited in Feiereisen 2011: 89)

This method of writing texts through sampling and the creation of an associative web around topics of interest provides Meinecke with the possibility of expressing his owns concerns and preoccupations as a novelist through someone else's voice. In *Lookalikes*, as we will see, Meinecke makes frequent use of Fichte's writing in particular to inform the novel's structure, style, and themes, but his pool of influences and sampling sources is certainly not limited to Fichte's texts. To provide an instructive example: at an early stage in the text, Meinecke quotes a passage from Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A theory of African American literary criticism* (1988) in order to at least partially explain his own technique of 'sampling', and thereby explain, more broadly, how the novel itself works:

> *Mumbo Jumbo* [by Ishmael Reed] is the great black intertext, replete with intratexts referring to one another within the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* and also referring outside themselves to all those other named texts, as well as those texts unnamed but invoked through concealed reference, repetition, and reversal. (*L* 27)

The passage does not, perhaps, describe how *Lookalikes* works exactly, but the parallels are clear to see: like *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Lookalikes* creates links within itself, but also refers to external texts and media that are echoed directly or indirectly in the novel. Moreover, those readers familiar with *Mumbo Jumbo* will recognise how well some of its themes resonate with Meinecke's own literary interests. Not only does Reed's novel resist comprehensive interpretation and exhaustive readings due to its complexity, but its composition is also influenced by musical techniques, specifically those of jazz improvisation.[118] As Lizabeth Paravisini has observed, *Mumbo Jumbo* can also be read as a parody of the detective novel, in

[118] It is no accident that several jazz and bebop legends, including Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, are all mentioned in *Lookalikes* as well (*L* 276, among others).

which the usual 'rational processes of investigation' are subverted and a conflict is staged between (white, Western) knowledge and (African American) 'mumbo jumbo' (as cited in Fox 2001: 300). The parallels between Reed's concerns and Meinecke's own subversion of conventional, hermeneutic reading practices can thus easily be discerned. Moreover, as we will see, while Meinecke does verifiably cite a lot of academic literature, *Lookalikes* does not discriminate between 'reliable' and 'unreliable' sources. Similarly to *Hoppe*, the novel undermines and subverts the academic endeavour of a purely text-based reading, although it does this through other methods and with a different goal in mind. Instead of the novel's artful and deceptive construction leading the reader back to the dominant and masterful author-figure, however ineffable a presence she might be in the text, *Lookalikes* goes to greater lengths to encourage reflection on the reader's part regarding their own methods of knowledge production.

The excerpt from *The Signifying Monkey* allows the reader to gain an insight into how to read the novel in question, while at same time adding a further focal point (surrounding Ishmael Reed and *Mumbo Jumbo*) to the associative web that is being created, not only on the page, but also in the reader's mind.[119] That this associative web is not meant to function purely as an accumulation of pop culture, postcolonial theory, and gender-, queer-, and cultural studies references is demonstrated in another passage, taken (according to the text) from an interview between German rock music and pop culture magazine *Spex* and German literary scholar Barbara Vinken. Here, the topic is ostensibly haute couture (as influenced by postmodern practices), but the passage actually explains to the reader the reasoning behind setting these excerpts within a new context – namely, that new meaning may be created from a confluence of seemingly oppositional or incongruous elements within one creation:

> In [diesem Cocktailkleid] treffen sich zwei Markenzeichen. Zum einen ein dicker, sportlicher Reißverschluss, zum anderen eine Rüsche. Der Reißverschluss ist die Signatur von Alber Elbaz. Er verwendet ihn auch in Cocktail- und Tüllkleidern. Damit wechselt der Reißverschluss von einem rein funktionalen Moment in ein auch

[119] For more on the concept of the reader as co-creator in relation to Meinecke's works, see Feiereisen, *Der Text als Soundtrack – der Autor als DJ. Postmoderne und postkoloniale Samples bei Thomas Meinecke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), pp. 80-82.

> ornamentales Moment. Aber dieses Ornament, das ja eher militärisch-sportlich konnotiert ist, trägt seine alten Bedeutungen in den neuen Kontext mit hinein und durchkreuzt damit die üblichen Konnotationen, die man mit einem Cocktailkleid verbindet, das ja als Inbegriff weiblicher Eleganz und sogar Verletzlichkeit für das Gegenteil sportlich-männlicher Funktionalität steht. Der Reißverschluss und die Rüsche, Emblem des frivol-überflüssigen Elements in der Mode, werden in diesem Kleid in ein intelligentes und witziges Zwiegespräch gebracht. Sie verstärken sich gegenseitig auf eine paradoxe Art oder profilieren sich gegenseitig. (*L* 58-59)

While the analogy between Elbaz's mixing of disparate and sometimes contradictory elements in the context of fashion and Meinecke's own literary strategy of sampling and remixing may be clear to the informed reader, this is nowhere stated explicitly in the novel. Instead, the creation of these links is left entirely to the reader. Moreover, the text offers no guarantees that extracting meaning from the text is actually a feasible – or indeed desirable – endeavour at all. As Jan Gerstner observes:

> Wie bei anderen Texten Meineckes liegt das Popkulturelle weniger in der 'literarische[n] Archivierung eines Diskurses' als in dessen performativer Umsetzung. Scheinbar unvermittelt hintereinander geschnittene Zitate und Referenzen auf unterschiedliche Kontexte bilden eine Verweisstruktur, die fast offensiv auf der Textoberfläche bleibt und in der Verweigerung eines 'tieferen' Sinns ästhetisch die poststrukturalistischen Theoreme umsetzt, die von den Figuren auf der Ebene der *histoire* diskutiert werden. (Gerstner 2016: 166)

In this sense, Meinecke also performs a lack of control over various associations, connotations, or interpretative approaches which his texts might elicit. As Schumacher recognises, the author's use of citationality and integration of 'vorgefundenem Material' give rise to further 'Kontexte, die nicht zu kontrollieren sind und auch nicht kontrolliert werden sollen, die sich fortsetzen, vervielfältigen und in der Lektüre weiterprozessiert werden können' (Schumacher 2003: 204-205).

What makes the novel's resistance to the search for deeper meaning even clearer are instances in which Meinecke's fixation with staying on the surface of things manifests as patently superficial research.[120] In one case, following a common theme among the authors examined in this thesis, Meinecke makes quite conspicuous use of Wikipedia in a deliberate

[120] In this respect, Meinecke is also influenced by Fichte. As he states in a 2015 interview: 'Ich war sehr fasziniert von Fichtes […] Schreibweise des Gebrochenen, des Uneigentlichen, des Tastenden. […] Er hat ein Abtastsystem der Oberfläche entwickelt' (Kreienbrock 2015: 235).

subversion of the novel's otherwise reasonable credibility and use of respectable academic sources:

> Wieder im Hotel, Arnold Böcklins *Toteninsel* recherchiert, […] ein wirkungsmächtiges Ölgemälde, das in fünf Versionen zirkulierte. Die dritte wurde von Adolf Hitler erworben und zierte bis 1940 den Berghof auf dem Obersalzberg, anschließend die Reichskanzlei zu Berlin. (Heute befindet sie sich im Besitz der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.)
>
> *Aufgrund von Geldnöten entstand 1884 die vierte Version des erfolgreichen Sujets. Sie wurde später von dem Kunstsammler Heinrich Baron Thyssen erworben und in seiner Berliner Bankfiliale aufgehängt. Dort verbrannte sie im Bombenhagel des Zweiten Weltkrieges*.
>
> Böcklins *Toteninsel* in Heinrich Manns *Die Göttinnen* (1902) und in August Strindbergs *Geistersonate* (1907).
>
> Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Die Toteninsel, Tondichtung für großes Orchester* (1909). Max Reger: *Die Toteninsel*, in: *Vier Tondichtungen nach Arnold Böcklin* (1913). (*L* 263-264)

The second, italicised section from this passage is replicated almost word for word from the 2010 German Wikipedia entry on 'Die Toteninsel', while the two sections that follow include mentions from the Wikipedia page section 'Rezeption'.[121] Although Meinecke does not cite Wikipedia explicitly, the format is easily recognisable by users of the digital encyclopaedia, and the use of italics serves, in this case, to demonstrate that this is a quotation. Meinecke's use of the word 'recherchieren', which basically amounts to googling a few keywords, is therefore used quite ironically here. More importantly, however, it serves to remind the reader that, no matter how intricately interlinked Meinecke's web of references might be, it remains very much on the surface of things. It does not represent a profound understanding based on carefully compiled research data relating to the themes and topics central to the text.[122] Instead, as Enno Stahl observes, the material compiled in *Lookalikes* is presented to the reader as a 'stream of data' (as

[121] 'Aufgrund von Geldnöten entstand 1884 die vierte Version des erfolgreichen Sujets. Sie wurde später von dem Kunstsammler Heinrich Baron Thyssen erworben und in seiner Berliner Bankfiliale aufgehängt. Dort verbrannte sie durch einen Bombenangriff im Zweiten Weltkrieg' (Wikipedia entry from 5 January 2010, https://de.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Die_Toteninsel&oldid=68852934; accessed July 1, 2018). Meinecke's alterations are underlined.

[122] This is not to argue that this process is always intended to be entirely unproductive. In a 2001 interview with Ulrich Rüdenauer, for example, Meinecke points out what a positive experience this kind of '[p]roduktives Sich-Verzetteln' can be (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 103). Significantly, Meinecke makes an interesting addition here by further clarifying: 'Obwohl es bei mir keine Zettel gibt, sondern immer nur den Direktimport. Ich habe aufgeschlagene Bücher um mich herumliegen, und gar nicht das Zwischenlager Zettel' (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 103). Although this interview precedes the publication of *Lookalikes* by a decade, and one might surmise that Meinecke's writing process has become more digitally influenced over time, this utterance does suggest a generally more analogue citation and compilation process than we will find in Setz's *Indigo* in the next chapter.

cited in McCarthy 2015: 19, footnote 55), on the basis of which the reader may form their own (possibly equally superficial) understanding of the material.

From Casual Confusion to Deliberate Distortion: Online Interaction as Reading and Writing Process

Another stylistic choice that contributes to the apparent superficiality of the text – and an aspect of *Lookalikes* which distinguishes it quite radically from the other novels discussed in this thesis – is the fact that most characters' interactions in Meinecke's novels are often mediated through digital spaces, via email, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, and Myspace. This is partially a reflection of Meinecke's interest in digital forms of literature. Indeed, the author makes no secret of his incorporation of material found online into his novels. As he states in a 2015 interview with the German-American academic Jörg Kreienbrock: 'Im Netz ist eine neue Art des Schreibens entstanden, welche eine eigene Poesie entwickelt, die mir teilweise sehr gut gefällt, und die ich in meine Texte oftmals quasi 1:1 übernehme' (Kreienbrock 2015: 233). One of his previous novels, *Hellblau* (2001), has been read by one critic as a 'blog', or 'online chatroom dominated by three main characters' (Zorach 2004), and several critics have observed how the interconnectedness Meinecke strives to create in his texts can be read as a quasi-imitation of hyperlinks in a digital text (Höppner 2011). Occasionally, URLs are actually given in the text, such as in the case of this blog post regarding the public's 'fascination with [Lady] Gaga's gender: […] http://kenyonreview.org/blog/?p=7935' (*L* 68). The inclusion of these URLs both heightens the immediate association of the novel's text with its digital counterparts and sources but also draws attention to the transience of online content, as the likelihood of the URLs included in a text from 2011 being dead links will only increase over time. References to Myspace (*L* 190)[123] and Meinecke's anachronistic use of spelling conventions from before the 1996 German orthography reform date the publication but also fulfil a similar function. As the quintessential

[123] This is a reference to the social networking website Myspace, the popularity of which has been in steady decline since it was overtaken by Facebook in 2008.

tool for superficial exchanges, Facebook is given particular prominence in *Lookalikes*, as can be seen from the following:

> *Josephine Baker ist jetzt mit Justin Timberlake befreundet* (*L* 21)
>
> *Serge Gainsbourg wurde von Erdmute Wagenbach angestupst* und öffnet sein *Facebook*-Postfach, um nachzufragen, ob sie ein konkretes Anliegen habe (oder lediglich zurückgestupst werden wolle) (*L* 23)
>
> *Justin Timberlake und Serge Gainsbourg sind der Gruppe Rainbow Culture of Diversity beigetreten* (*L* 95)
>
> *Erdmute Wagenbach hat eine mit Straß besetzte Augenklappe und einen mit Straß besetzten G-String erworben*
> Serge Gainsbourg und fünf anderen gefällt das.
> *Elvis, Marlon, Gregor und Rudolph sind der Gruppe Penis & Circumcision beigetreten* (*L* 224)
>
> *Britney Spears hat einen Link an Greta Garbos Pinnwand geteilt* (*L* 246)

These examples clearly demonstrate Meinecke's delight in mixing lowbrow with highbrow culture, in a further effort to dissolve any 'hierarchisierend[e] Spaltungen zwischen Musik, Literatur und Philosophie bzw. "Hoch"- und Pop-Kultur' (Zelik 2004). Yet these interactions fulfil a further function, referring, on the one hand, to the writing process of the novel itself, while on the other, anticipating the novel's immediate reception among readers. Through Thomas's actions, Meinecke shows us parts of the creation process of the novel, including email correspondence with a friend regarding a photograph for which he is searching ('Brauche es gerade dringend für meinen neuen Roman und kann es nicht ergoogeln', *L* 49), conducting some superficial online research in the form of accessing Wikipedia articles, as we have seen ('Wieder im Hotel, Arnold Böcklins *Toteninsel* recherchiert', *L* 263), and sharing some of the findings of his research on Facebook ('Thomas Meinecke stellt zwei *YouTube*-Filme auf seine *Facebook*-Pinnwand', *L* 107).

The representation of the writing process featured here corresponds, moreover, to Meinecke's professed conception of authorship, according to which he sees himself as a reader, rather than an author. As we saw in the Introduction, Meinecke professes to writing his texts

> nicht als Autor, sonder gleichsam als Leser. […] Den Prozeß meines Lesens schriftlich wiederzugeben. Gefundenes Material, das ich nicht einmal richtig verstanden haben muß, über das ich nicht Herr und Meister bin, durch mich hindurchfließen zu lassen. Und an andere Leser weiterzureichen. (as cited in Picandet 2011: 270)

Naturally, there is a degree of authorial posturing involved here as well. Although Meinecke's self-representation in the media is nowhere near as iconic, carefully crafted, and consistent as Nothomb's, for example, there is no fundamental difference in the manner in which they talk about themselves and their writing in interviews. The primary difference lies, instead, in the content of the authorial posturing: whereas Nothomb describes herself as a graphomaniac (O'Meara 2015: 106), Meinecke claims he is a 'bibliomanischer Schreiber' (Meinecke 2012: 255). Yet Meinecke's conception of authorship allows for a reception process that is remarkably similar to the writing process, enabling the reader to follow Thomas's and the other characters' paths of inquiry quite directly via the internet. As Feiereisen observes: 'Dieser Suchvorgang […] ermöglicht der Leserschaft, zuweilen in Echtzeit mit Meinecke die Materie zu erfassen' (Feiereisen 2011: 82). That the text explicitly encourages this kind of approach is, moreover, made clear through the description of the incidents in which characters are seeking to confirm suspicions, to expand their knowledge, or are merely following a whim. The fact that, for example, one of Serge's Google searches, containing the keywords '*[f]lesh-coloured panties with hair on the front 1950s*', yields '[n]o results' (*L* 307) is likely to rouse the reader's curiosity and incite her to determine this for herself. In another instance, the reader is confronted by the following passage: 'Suchen: Die erotischen Zeichnungen, die der Architekt Le Corbusier 1929 an Bord des Ozeandampfers *Lutétia* beim Auslaufen aus Brasilien in Richtung Europa von Josephine Bakers Körper anfertigte' (*L* 85). Since Josephine, the 'lookalike'-character, is the viewpoint character most likely associated with this section of the text, the quotation could be read as a note Josephine makes to herself, but it could also be interpreted as an injunction to the reader to stop and google the drawings. The address to the reader becomes even more explicit in an online exchange between Justin and Serge regarding female impersonator Lynne Carter, who is said to have worn some of Josephine Baker's stage costumes. As Justin tells Serge: 'Mit zwei, drei Mausklicks findest du Photos, auf denen er sie trägt' (*L* 98). The explicit use of the second person singular 'du' can be read as addressing not only Serge, but also the reader directly.

This experience of quasi-simultaneity, of doing something at the same time as it is happening in the novel, can become a little unsettling, as Didi Neidhart observes:

> Dadurch, dass in *Lookalikes* sowieso hauptsächlich via Facebook und mittels YouTube-Links kommuniziert wird, verdichten sich diese Interaktionen zu einem vergnüglichen Hin und Her zwischen Buchlektüre und Internetherumsurfen. Was auch unheimlich Spaß macht und zuweilen auch etwas unheimlich wirkt. Etwa wenn beim Lesen schnell mal pausiert und auf YouTube nach dem gerade eben erwähnten Video gesucht wird und fast zeitgleich im Roman dasselbe passiert, wir also quasi gleichzeitig genau das tun, was sich auch im Roman gerade ereignet. (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 323)

Indeed, several critics have pointed out how the novel opens up space for distractions, confusion, and misunderstandings, due to the associative, disjointed, and uninstructive manner in which it is written. A good example of this is the following passage, in which Justin is researching La Toya Jackson online:

> Viele Leute behaupten auch, La Toya gebe es gar nicht. Es handele sich um ein Alter ego ihres Bruders Michael Jackson (sie *sei* Michael Jackson). Man müßte mal überprüfen, ob und inwiefern sie nach seinem Tod weiterhin aufgetaucht ist, überlegt Justin Timberlake und klickt sich tiefer ins weltumspannende Netz. Für das Centerfold des *Playboy* hat man La Toya (falls sie es denn ist) ganz auf Michael Jackson geschminkt. Kraß, die beiden sehen sich tatsächlich verdammt ähnlich, urteilt Justin. […] Vielleicht ist Michael Jackson überhaupt nicht tot? (So wie Elvis und all die anderen noch leben. Und in HipHop wird ja gar nicht mehr gestorben.) (*L* 88)

Although this passage does stray a little into the territory of online conspiracy theories, *Lookalikes* never seriously entertains evident falsehoods or seeks to spread misinformation. It does, however, facilitate speculative digressions on the part of the reader. In fact, the text itself performs a process of knowledge production of which not understanding, misunderstanding, or not quite getting it right are all integral parts. In this manner, the reader is simultaneously encouraged to question the validity of their text-based reading on the one hand, and to not worry too much about following up seemingly insignificant details and getting lost among these on the other. Knowledge, when it is gained by the characters, is usually qualified by phrases such as 'angeblich' (*L* 12), 'womöglich' (*L* 39), 'nicht ganz sicher' (*L* 40), or something '[das] ich auch irgendwo gelesen [habe]' (*L* 123). In relation to a text by Jacques Lacan that she is reading for a reading group, Shakira complains: 'es kommt mir so vor, als verstehe ich jedes Mal ein bißchen weniger vom Text' (*L* 55). It is also telling how slight inaccuracies or aberrations appear frequently throughout the text. Shakira's husband notices how the German subtitles of a

Jean-Luc Godard film he is watching clearly deviate from the original script (*L* 114) and confuses the names of (historic novelist and playwright) Cyrano de Bergerac and (contemporary fashion designer) Jean-Charles Castelbajac (*L* 41). Thomas is handed a business card by a Brazilian taxi driver in Salvador da Bahia that reads '*Jonh* [*sic*] *Lennon, Taxi*' (*L* 259). Josephine, while shopping in Salvador da Bahia, notices people wearing T-shirts that sport slogans in English, almost all of which are incorrect in terms of both spelling and grammar. With regard to one in particular that reads: '*Life is that you make it*', Josephine wonders: 'ob das wirklich *so* gemeint war?' (*L* 93). This unreliability or fallibility is, moreover, not limited to the 'lookalike'-characters, but also extends to Thomas and his acquaintances. In response to one of Thomas's emails, Jochen Bonz admits to having confused the names of various women associated with Jacques Lacan and Georges Bataille: 'Die Namen der Frauen habe ich auch durcheinandergebracht: Seine zweite Frau war Sylvia Bataille; deren Tochter mit Bataille, die bei ihr und Lacan aufwuchs, heißt Laurence. Die Kinder aus erster Ehe, Caroline, Thibaut, Sibylle' (*L* 53). What is significant here is not that Bonz takes the trouble to correct his error, but that the fraught process of collecting information is shown as such.

An instance that emphasises the text's capacity to disrupt the reading and meaning-making process even more is one in which Meinecke quotes from Michele Wallace's book *Invisibility Blues: From Pop To Theory* (1990). In a passage concerning Ishmael Reed, Wallace's text reads: 'Reed's determination to see feminism as a historical error reduces his black feminist characters to hand puppets mouthing his *inane* views' (Wallace 1990: 151; my emphasis). In Meinecke's quotation, however, we find that 'inane' is not reprinted as 'inane', but has been transformed into 'in*s*ane': 'Reed's determination to see feminism as a historical error […] reduces his black feminist characters to hand puppets mouthing his *insane* views' (*L* 15; my emphasis).[124] Considering that, as we have seen, inaccuracies and misprints are a theme that run throughout the novel, any initial suspicion that this might just be a typo, an arbitrary

[124] Michele Wallace's name is also misspelled, as 'Miche*ll*e Wallace' (*L* 15; my emphasis). I have removed a parenthesis, written in German and inserted by Meinecke, from the *Lookalikes* quotation here, which is what the ellipsis indicates.

correction through some form of software, or an oversight by Meinecke's editor, may be quickly dispelled. What justifies a closer look at this passage in particular is a conversation toward the end of the novel between Thomas and Wiebke Kannengießer, a researcher who has written a thesis on Hubert Fichte.[125] Wiebke describes how, in reading *Explosion*, in which Fichte otherwise consistently uses the name 'Jäcki' to refer to his literary alter ego, she suddenly comes across a page on which the character is referred to as 'Hubert'. As Wiebke tells Thomas:

> Da frage ich mich wirklich, ob das Lektorat das übersehen hat. Wenn auf 850 Seiten Jäcki einmal als Hubert angesprochen wird, da bin ich sofort rausgefallen. Das ist ja eine bewußte Entscheidung. […] [A]us meiner literaturwissenschaftlichen Perspektive habe ich diesen einen Text, und ich interpretiere erst einmal nur den, und wenn einmal Hubert da steht, dann ist das aus meiner Sicht erst mal kein Fehler des Lektorats. Selbst wenn es einer ist, werde ich das nicht so durchgehen lassen. (*L* 332)

Thomas's response to this is: 'Es ist Teil des Textes' (*L* 332), so the author figure in the novel is in agreement with the literary scholar or reader figure. The fact that Meinecke feels the need to additionally legitimise Wiebke's reading – and by extension the application of this manner of reading to *Lookalikes* itself – through the character of Thomas could be read as an unwelcome and superfluous intrusion by the author figure, in a way that is quite uncharacteristic of Meinecke's writing. Since generally, however, Thomas is framed as someone who undergoes the same circuitous and cumbersome learning processes as his fellow characters, we can also read this as an instance in which Meinecke demonstrates his own fallibility and desire to learn from others – even learn from his readers how to read his own texts. In this sense, misunderstandings can be just as productive as an accurate understanding of the text. Feiereisen observes how, in Meinecke's texts, 'vermeintliche Unschlüssigkeiten und nichtintendierte Verbindungen in produktive Missverständnisse und damit in Fortschritt im

[125] Wiebke Kannengießer exists in real life, and her character appears to match the empirical person quite accurately: 'Wiebke Kannengießer, geboren 1981 in NRW, studiert Germanistik und Kommunikationswissenschaft in Münster und Geschichte in Salvador-Bahia, Brasilien, und arbeitet parallel zum Studium in der Literaturkommission für Westfalen und in der brasilianischen Pierre Verger-Stiftung. Nach dem Magister-Abschluss koordiniert sie in Salvador für gut zehn Jahre das Kulturprogramm am dortigen Goethe-Institut. Seit der Spielzeit 2017/18 ist sie die Persönliche Referentin des Intendanten Joachim Lux in Elternzeitvertretung' (Thalia Theater). A large section of the interview between Kannengießer and Meinecke, as it is quoted in *Lookalikes* (*L* 319-344), also appears in *Ich als Text* (Meinecke 2012: 278-296).

Assoziationsnetz umgewandelt werden [können]' (Feiereisen 2011: 83). Significantly, however, *Lookalikes* shows us how this applies just as much to the author as it does to the reader.

More importantly, however, this brings us to the main reason why Thomas is framed as such a coincidental, almost redundant, character: namely, that in *Lookalikes* Meinecke appropriates not only the content and, to a certain extent, the style of Fichte's writing in *Xango* and *Explosion*, but also the latter's examination of the self in relation to the other. In doing so, Meinecke attempts to explore conflicting models of self-representation without compromising his usual literary methods. As we will see below, Meinecke makes use of the character Thomas in order to navigate his appropriation of Fichte, whose writing he finds at once both fascinating and irritating. As Meinecke tells Kreienbrock in their interview:

> Dennoch gibt es zwischen uns auch Differenzen. […] [Fichte] ist […] auf alles eingestiegen, was irgendwie authentisch wirkte, z.B. die Blutbäder der Candomblé oder Drogenerfahrungen und Sexualität, was aus heutiger Sicht wie eine Leistungsschau aussieht, also gar nicht korrekt abgehandelt wird. […] Da bin ich immer irritiert. Aber ich versuche, diese Reibungen produktiv zu machen. (Kreienbrock 2015: 236)

In order to better understand Meinecke's appropriation of Fichte, the following section will examine both authors' engagement with autobiographical material and self-representation, before looking at the context of *Lookalikes* more specifically.

Writing the Self in Fichte and Meinecke

What makes the appearance of Thomas as a character seem so incongruous to informed readers of Meinecke is that the author has always expressed a clear lack of interest in what he calls 'traditionelle Formen der [literarischen] Introspektion und des In-sich-Wühlens' (Kreienbrock 2015: 233). As stated repeatedly in interviews, Meinecke is far more interested in testing to what extent one can do without subjectivity when writing: 'Das ist immer noch meine Baustelle, mein Experiment, meine Versuchsanordnung. Es ist die Frage danach, wie weit man ohne sich selbst auskommt beim Schreiben' (Kreienbrock 2015: 233). Thus, while several details of Thomas's life and story in the novel are autobiographically correct, such as Meinecke's trip to Salvador da Bahia (Prinz 2012), and the text features real-life characters of the author's

acquaintance,[126] Meinecke has been quick to point out that the novel is in no way meant to function as either a personal account of real-life experiences or an exercise in self-discovery or self-invention. Instead, Thomas is supposed to be just like any of Meinecke's other characters, whose characterisation is mostly limited to their engagement with popular culture and critical theory (Kreienbrock 2015: 234). This is also not the first time Meinecke has made use of autobiographical material in his literary texts. Feiereisen notes that Meinecke often samples his own interviews in his literary texts, for example, but reads this as a further manifestation of his method of *erzählte Theorie* (Feiereisen 2011: 76) as discussed above. According to Feiereisen, Meinecke's use of autobiographical material is

> keine rein ironische Antwort auf Barthes noch kommt er dem Wunsch derjenigen Leser nach, die biografische Aufschlüsselungen von Texten generell interessieren, sondern […] ist dies abermals eine Überführung einer Theorie in die Praxis, mit der Meinecke spielt. (Feiereisen 2011: 77)

If other theoretical texts and interviews with writers and intellectuals are fair game for Meinecke, then why indeed not make use of his own as well? The fact that Feiereisen's analysis, published in the same year as *Lookalikes*, does not make reference to the latter text shows us that this was common practice for Meinecke before this particular project, and that, in terms of style and thematics, Meinecke's work is generally very homogenous. However, the deliberate choice to have Thomas be an actual agent (albeit a fairly ineffectual one) within the story marks a departure from the author's earlier work, and is, as we will see, attributable primarily to his engagement with Fichte here.

Although, as we have seen, Meinecke finds aspects of Fichte's work problematic, and Fichte might in some respects appear to be quite a counterintuitive role model, Meinecke is nonetheless clearly attracted to Fichte's self-examination through his own writing as a Western ethnographer in a South American cultural setting. As Klaus Neumann explains, in *Explosion*, 'Fichte introduc[es] his own person as a subject to write about. Not in the sense of a navel-

[126] These include the following: Jochen Bonz, researcher at the Department of Anthropology and Cultural Research at the University of Bremen; Thomas Fehlmann, Swiss electronic music composer and producer; Gudrun Gut, German electronic musician, DJ, producer, and presenter; and Didi Neidhart, German musician, DJ, freelance journalist and editor.

gazing pondering his own role. But in introducing himself as a guinea pig' (Neumann 1991: 265). Fichte himself phrases this in *Explosion* as: 'Ich will nicht forschen. / Es gibt nur eine Forschung. / Ich selbst. / Oder: Mich selbst' (Fichte 1993: 41). In order to avoid appropriating the foreign culture via identification with it, 'Fichte exiles part of his Self to be able to enter a dialogue with the Other' (Neumann 1991: 266).[127] While these concerns are specific to *Explosion* and *Xango*, Fichte's earlier writing also contains elements that Meinecke to a certain extent replicates in *Lookalikes*. Thomas Wilks describes Fichte as a 'serial life-writer', who in his works 'tends to emphasise certain characteristics that marginalise him' (Wilks 2006: 18, 17), namely being half-Jewish and his therefore 'illegitimate' birth in Germany in 1935, his homosexuality,[128] and, to a lesser extent, the hybridity of his occupation and oeuvre that move between the disciplines of literature and ethnography. While this marginality provides him with a wealth of material and, through its incorporation into his literary works, eventually grants him some critical and commercial success, Wilks highlights how this immediately puts him in a difficult position:

> True to form, in order to flaunt his marginality, […] Fichte has striven in […] *Grünspan* […] to collapse his socially elevated status, which he finds uncomfortable, by spotlighting a series of exaggerated hypocrisies that have informed his authorial prowess, whether or not he was their protagonist. (Wilks 2006: 251)

The fact that Fichte therefore clearly finds it difficult to reconcile his authorial self with his autobiographical alter ego is bound to appeal to Meinecke, and we see some of the same discomfort in *Lookalikes* whenever Thomas acknowledges his occupation as 'Schriftsteller', as will be shown in more detail below. Jäcki's double nature also manifests in the doubling of Thomas as simultaneously writer and character, that is, the narrative voice that first considers fictionalising Thomas ('Thomas erwägt erstmals, sich selbst als Romanfigur in der dritten Person und unter seinem tatsächlichen Namen einzuführen', *L* 75), and the character who results from this decision.

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[127] For more on Fichte's desire to contribute to an ideal 'nonhierarchichal [*sic*] [ethnographic] discourse', see Klaus Neumann, 'Hubert Fichte as Ethnographer' in *Cultural Anthropology* 6: 3 (1991), pp. 263-284.
[128] Critics tend to refer to Fichte's homosexuality, although Wiebke Kannengießer in *Lookalikes* stresses how the character of Jäcki is not one or the other (hetero- or homosexual), but instead '*bi*, also […] *weder noch*' (*L* 330).

What further makes Fichte a fitting role model for Meinecke is not only the former's experimentation with 'technical and generic hybridity' (Wilks 2006: 26), but also his rejection of hermeneutics as a meaning-making process. As Wiebke explains to Thomas in *Lookalikes*:

> Fichte [maßt] sich also nicht [an], zu verstehen, sondern [trägt] nur Dinge zusamme[n], [bildet] also im Prinzip Wortketten, […] Cluster. […] [Trägt] Haufen von Begriffen zusamme[n], [schichtet] au[f], um in diesem Gewusel von Worten das Ganze vielleicht einkreisen zu können. (*L* 331)

Wiebke sees this as Fichte's departure from French photographer, ethnographer, and Yoruba priest Pierre Verger, who in his ethnographic writings renounces a distanced academic perspective,

> zugunsten eines Eintauchens in eine Kultur, die nicht die seine ist. Und dieses Eintauchen, das nenne ich den hermeneutischen Prozeß. In kreisenden Bewegungen sich an etwas heranzurobben und sich das zu eigen zu machen und zu fühlen, was da passiert. Dagegen richtet Fichte sich. Ich habe dann Vergers Ansatz als hermeneutisch bezeichnet und Fichtes Ansatz als postmodern oder poststrukturalistisch. (*L* 331-332)

Schumacher and Gerstner also highlight Fichte's author-concept as one of being simultaneously 'Erzähler und Aufzähler' (Schumacher 2003: 191), someone who, through their use of montage and enumeration, largely renounces 'eine hermeneutische Bewältigung des Materials' (Gerstner 2016: 170). Although, as we have seen, Meinecke's literary method of sampling and *erzählte Theorie* do differ in this regard from Fichte's tendency toward enumeration, both of these methods have implications for the authobiographical or autofictional character in the text. In *Lookalikes*, Wiebke sees Jäcki as 'weder nur Figur noch nur Alter Ego von Hubert Fichte, sondern er ist etwas dazwischen, etwas Changierendes, das sich nicht festhalten läßt, und im Endeffekt eine *Funktion* im Text, mit der er sich selbst bloßstellen kann, andere bloßstellen kann' (*L* 330). Meinecke also prefigures this notion of 'in-betweenness' through an early reference (and further quotation from Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*) to the Candomblé god and trickster figure Exu, who functions as a mediator or, indeed, as an embodiment of mediation itself:

> Scholars have studied these figures of Exu, and each has found one or two characteristics of this mutable figure upon which to dwell, true to the nature of this mutable trickster. A partial list of these qualities might include individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture. But it is a mistake to focus on one of these qualities as predominant. Exu possesses all of

> these characteristics, plus a plethora of others which, taken together, only begin to present an idea of the complexity of this classic figure of mediation and of the unity of opposed forces.
>
> Nicht *weder-noch*, auch nicht *zwischen*, nicht wirklich *beides vereint*, notiert Josephine. Handelt es sich nicht vielmehr um das dynamische *Verhältnis* vermeintlich entgegengesetzter Kräfte? (Wonach Exu nicht als der Vermittler, sondern als das vermittelnde Etwas, *die Vermittlung selbst*, erscheint.) (*L* 26-27)

Once again, it is not difficult to find thematic parallels between the quoted passage and *Lookalikes* as a whole, as well as the parallels between the figure of Exu and the Meinecke's conception of his writing process and his narrator figures. In *Lookalikes*, however, the situation is complicated by the addition of Thomas, who, although he does not adopt the role of narrator, nonetheless functions as the primary viewpoint character for those sections of the text that take place in Salvador da Bahia and engage in dialogue with Fichte.

Despite Meinecke's protestations to the contrary ('Insofern ist nichts Schlimmes zu befürchten', Kreienbrock 2015: 234), he appears to have deep misgivings about including Thomas as a character in his novel, which becomes apparent in *Lookalikes* in several ways. Particularly striking is how Meinecke makes sure that Thomas is always one of the last characters to make experiences and observations which have already been ascribed to other characters or intertextual samples. It is no accident that Thomas's existence as a literary character in the text requires special validation ('Thomas Meinecke ist jetzt eine Romanfigur', *L* 95), and that this is only granted after a certain amount of hesitation and equivocation on the part of Thomas the writer figure himself: 'Thomas erwägt erstmals, sich selbst als Romanfigur in der dritten Person und unter seinem tatsächlichen Namen einzuführen. Gewöhnungsbedürftiger, irritierender Gedanke' (*L* 75). Thomas's discomfort with his role as a character and active participant in the story is further expressed through his unwillingness to refer to himself by name in most instances at this point in the book. Rather than calling himself by his name, Thomas refers to himself instead as 'der Schriftsteller' (*L* 81) or 'de[r] Popschriftsteller' (*L* 122), 'der Stipendiat' (*L* 80), 'der Deutsche' (*L* 92), 'de[r] Fremd[e]' (*L* 74), '[d]er Gast' (*L* 126) or 'der Hotelgast' (*L* 109), 'der Besucher' (*L* 125), and, even more awkwardly, 'de[r] deutsch[e]

Stipendia[t] respektive Schriftsteller' (*L* 227).[129] This is, of course, done partly to demonstrate to the reader just how foreign an element Thomas is in the setting of Salvador da Bahia. On the one hand, this reinforces how Thomas's encounters with the local culture can only ever convey an external, Western, limited and therefore skewed impression of it. On the other, it further diminishes Thomas's presence in the text, emphasising his marginal, secondary status compared to the novel's theoretical content and themes. In this manner, Thomas is not entirely discredited as a contributor to the narrative, but he is framed very clearly as only one among several others, and a comparatively reticent one at that.

Many of the topics with which Thomas is preoccupied in the novel are more comprehensively or fruitfully discussed by other characters, and Thomas is allowed to make experiences only after they have been enacted by someone else previously in the text. Although Meinecke is clearly fascinated by Grace Jones as the subject of debates surrounding postmodern subversions of colonial power structures and gender iconography (she is mentioned on the very first page of the novel), any actual discussion of this happens between the 'lookalike'-characters, rather than between Thomas and any of his acquaintances. In one particular instance, this occurs when Serge and Erdmute examine the CD booklet of Jones's album *Hurricane* (2008) and disagree over the correct interpretation of the images included:

> [Grace Jones] steht an einem Fließband, auf dem lebensgroße Büsten (und hier streiten sich Serge und Erdmute), Reproduktionen ihrer selbst (beziehungsweise eines Mannes) aus Schokolade rollen (die Köpfe sind kahl, was die einschlägige Bestimmung nicht gerade vereinfacht). Mit Arbeitshandschuhen faßt sie eine der Büsten am Hals. (Als wolle sie sie erwürgen, findet Erdmute. Nein, zur Qualitätskontrolle, sagt Serge. Die Büste sieht aus wie ein karibischer Diktator, behauptet Erdmute. Das ist doch nicht *ihr* Mund. Sehr wohl ist es *ihr* Mund, entgegnet Serge). (*L* 272)

This passage does bear the hallmarks of Meinecke's usual pragmatic and economic written style. In cases such as these, *Lookalikes* runs the same risk as *Hoppe*: as much as the text might insist on Felicitas's indefinability or Thomas's insignificance, the authors' signature is still patently

[129] Most of these designations appear several times over the course of the text. The page references here are merely representative and far from exhaustive. Note also how the reference to 'der Schriftsteller' stands in stark contrast to Houellebecq referring to himself as 'L'auteur des *Particules élémentaires*' (*CT* 160), as we saw in the previous chapter. In Meinecke's case, the literary oeuvre is very clearly omitted from the reference, with the emphasis being placed instead on either Thomas's occupation or his outsider status in Brazil.

recognisable through the characteristics of their respective literary styles. Yet the attribution of different viewpoints to the characters Erdmute and Serge in this excerpt does make explicit the dialogic nature of this exchange. This is in contrast to *Hoppe*, in which, as we saw in Chapter Two, the dialogic collapses into the monologic as soon as the reader realises that all characters are merely versions of one another or Felicitas in disguise. Although, as we have seen, Meinecke's characters are hardly fleshed out in the conventional sense, they do at least seem to represent genuinely divergent or opposing viewpoints, thereby contributing to a more genuinely dialogic dynamic in the text.

Thomas's thoughts, meanwhile, most often seem to remain inside his own head or are at most posted to his Facebook page, only to vanish amid the stream of social media data. Even in instances in which Thomas is presumably recounting real lived experiences in an immediate, unprocessed manner, these tend to follow after or imitate, in a diminished form, Jäcki's or the Ich's experiences with which the reader has already been made familiar through excerpts from *Explosion* or *Xango*. In one of the few examples in which the reader is given an indication of Thomas's emotional response to the Candomblé ceremonies he attends, the reader is told: 'Nach wenigen Minuten fallen die ersten Tanzenden in Trance. Thomas bekommt eine Gänsehaut' (*L* 251). This, however, appears after a quoted excerpt from *Explosion*, in which Jäcki describes a far more extreme reaction to the ceremonies ('*Jäckis Tagebuch:* Psychosomatische Störungen nach dem Anhören des Schlagzeugs', *L* 211). The uniqueness and significance of Thomas's reaction are therefore considerably lessened. Since the reader has already encountered such an experience in the Fichte excerpt, Thomas arguably only experiences what has already been written. Even Thomas's unreliability or fallibility is, to a certain extent, derivative of Jäcki's experiences. The aforementioned motif of confusing names turns out to echo Fichte as well. This becomes clear when Meinecke cites a passage from *Xango*, in which the narrator recounts his experiences when experimenting with local herbs used in Candomblé rituals:

> Nach zwei Stunden leichte Störungen der Konzentrationsfähigkeit; Unmöglichkeit, ein Inhaltsverzeichnis zu koordinieren. Abends starke Kälteempfindungen. Nachts Kopfschmerzen. Am folgenden Morgen starke Gedächtnisstörungen; *Verwechslung von Namen*. (*L* 204; my emphasis)

Rather than creating a confusing plethora of author characters in *Lookalikes* to distance himself from the text and the experiences recounted there (as Hoppe does in *Hoppe*), Meinecke is able to place Thomas's experiences in Salvador da Bahia at several removes from his own: through the third-person narrative, his reception of Fichte, and even, to a certain extent, through Fichte's reception of Verger.

Adapting and Subverting Fichte: The *Blutbad* in *Lookalikes*

What, then, if anything, does Thomas's perspective contribute? Since he is very wary of making what he perceives to be Fichte's missteps – such as appropriating South American syncretic religions into a very Western understanding of subversive popular culture – Thomas mostly limits himself to descriptive, rather than analytic or evaluative, accounts of what he witnesses at various Candomblé ceremonies. When he does attempt to construct analogies, these are between the drumming and dancing that invokes the gods and goddesses during the ceremonies and the European/Berlin club scene with which Thomas is familiar as a DJ. Yet these analogies, at least to the extent that they are presented in the text, remain superficial, and, if Thomas reflects on the ceremonies any further, the reader is certainly never informed of this. At one point, for example, Meinecke writes: 'Vielleicht ist *Exaltation* das Schlüsselwort sowohl für den Tempel als auch den Club, notiert sich Thomas. (Die weisen Hysterikerinnen, die männlichen Hysteriker, die Vogue-Tänzer, die hypochondrische Sphäre des Ganzen)' (*L* 253). Only a half-hearted attempt is made here to bring the reader closer to Thomas's thought processes via the bullet-point succession of impressions in parentheses, thereby severely diminishing the impact of the term *Schlüsselwort*. While the paragraph that immediately follows this section in the book does expand on the notion of 'exaltation' a little, it is noticeably done, not through the voice of Thomas, but by once again citing Fichte – more specifically, one of Fichte's literary characters called Gisèle: 'Es gibt eine Kraft in uns, sagt Hubert Fichtes Romanfigur Gisèle, die derart exaltiert werden kann, daß die Menschen über sich hinauswachsen' (*L* 253). While this does allow Meinecke to create an associative link between Thomas's experiences as a DJ, his

experience of the Candomblé ceremony, and his reading of Fichte, the promise of an interpretative clue or framework within which to place these impressions (at which the term *Schlüsselwort* hints) is left unfulfilled. By deliberately withholding Thomas's little epiphany here, the reader is encouraged to develop their own associative chains of thought. In this sense, the specific content of Thomas's thoughts is irrelevant, and what is emphasised instead is the associative method of understanding or contextualising lived experience. It is no accident that the paragraph begins tentatively with '*Vielleicht* ist *Exaltation* das Schlüsselwort' (*L* 253; first emphasis mine), 'exaltation' being only one among a myriad of different possible key words. To a certain extent, Meinecke's engagement with Fichte here does encourage a hermeneutic reading. Although *Lookalikes* makes it very clear that it does not offer subjective impressions of Candomblé ceremonies, it nonetheless gives insight into Meinecke's reading of Fichte. Presumably then, the more we as readers learn about Fichte, Meinecke, and the context of the Candomblé religion, the better we will understand and be able to interpret *Lookalikes*. Yet the digital context in which everything that happens in the novel is immersed also reminds us that a *Schlüsselwort* here might just be a key word to be googled at a later stage, rather than a means of gaining access to the novel's core concepts and themes. The point, once again, is not necessarily to reach a deeper understanding or appreciation of the subject matter, but instead to allow oneself to make arbitrary associations based on a more superficial engagement with it.

More importantly, however, this shows us another way in which Meinecke adapts and subverts Fichte's own literary methods. As Wilks explains, Fichte – much like Meinecke – is no stranger to incorporating his own previously published material into new projects and creating intertextual and autotextual links between his various works to construct his own personal interpretative framework (Wilks 2006: 247-249). In relation to one such text, Wilks points out how it 'remains resonant in its significant function as an *explanatory key* to the personal framework into which Fichte was to weave all such ethnographical material in his emerging *Geschichte der Empfindlichkeit*' (Wilks 2006: 249; first emphasis mine). As we have seen, Meinecke is also quite happy to put sampled elements in relation to one another to create new

associative chains of meaning, but the crucial difference here is that Meinecke, unlike Fichte, withholds the definitive 'explanatory key' and merely hints at potential connections and associations – as is consistent with Schumacher's description of *Popliteratur*'s intention to 'set free diagnostic potential', as cited above. However, as will be shown below, Meinecke's most sustained engagement with and criticism of Fichte centres around the *Blutbad*, which Fichte perceives to be one of the quintessential elements of Candomblé ceremonies. Aside from being one of the few motifs that lends the novel some forward momentum, the *Blutbad* is incorporated into *Lookalikes* in a way that allows Meinecke, on the one hand, to take issue with Fichte specifically, and, on the other, to relate it to wider questions of authenticity and (self-)representation. Although *Lookalikes* contains no explicit mention of Goetz and his performance of 'Subito', as described above, and the *Blutbad* is consistently and exclusively evoked in the context of Fichte and the Candomblé ceremonies, the context of Goetz's *Blutbad* and its reception is nonetheless a relevant one, as we will see below.

As Kreienbrock's interview with Meinecke makes clear, the author is suspicious, to say the least, of Fichte's understanding of some of the more 'exotic' or 'atavistic' aspects of Candomblé ceremonies as a way of not only experiencing something truly authentic, but thereby also gaining (absolute) knowledge. As Thomas phrases it in the novel: '[Jäcki und Irma sind] ja auch hartnäckig. Sie wollen ja das Blutbad sehen. Die wollen ja die Dinge sehen, wo das Versprechen drin schlummert: *Wenn du das gesehen hast, dann weißt du*' (*L* 334). Meinecke is certainly not the only person to have noticed Fichte's fascination with the *Blutbad* of the Candomblé ceremony. In his article on Fichte as ethnographer, Neumann quotes at length from a passage in *Xango*, in which the narrator's interest is made clear:

> Sicher, meine ich, werden sie mich morgen an dem faszinierendsten, dem schockierendsten, dem ganz atavistischen […] Blutbad teilnehmen lassen und Leonore wird ihre schönsten Fotos machen. […] Ich stelle mir Wunderfotos vor. Leonores Empfindlichkeit und die ganz unverdauliche Bluterei. (Fichte 1981: 31)[130]

[130] The Leonore in question here is Leonore Mau, a photographer and Fichte's 'long-term companio[n]' and 'main confidante', whose alter ego in Fichte's literary texts is 'Irma' (Wilks 2006: 21).

Gerstner also comments on the role the Candomblé ceremony and its promise of a *Blutbad* play in Fichte's approach toward his self-conception as writer and ethnographer, as well as recognising the way in which Meinecke deliberately distances himself from this perspective:

> Anders als bei Meinecke, der sein literarisches Double diese Aspekte von Fichtes Texten kritisieren lässt, ist diese Form der Erfahrung bei Fichte ebenso wie seinem Protagonisten Jäcki mit einem *Willen zum Wissen* verbunden, der seine eigene Problematik zwar immer wieder reflektiert, ihr dabei aber nicht entkommt. (Gerstner 2016: 169; my emphasis)

In other words, although Fichte may be very aware of his participation in colonial power structures and the colonial gaze – even despite his self-conceptualisation as an avant-gardist (Gerstner 2016: 170) – he cannot resist the impulse to gain greater understanding and increase his knowledge as an ethnographer, even if this means perpetuating these very power structures. At the same time, however, the *Blutbad* functions as a sort of leitmotiv throughout *Lookalikes*, recurring at intervals to keep the reader invested, and to offer some forward momentum in a text that otherwise bears little resemblance to a conventional, plot-driven narrative. Meinecke frequently incorporates small sections from *Explosion*, *Xango*, and even personal correspondence between Fichte and the Goethe-Institut in Salvador da Bahia to highlight Fichte's and his literary alter egos' impatience to experience this particular aspect of the Candomblé ceremonies: 'Ich will am Blutbad teilnehmen', and '[w]enn wir anfangen mit den Trommelrhythmen […] sind wir verloren […] und du kommst nie zu deinem Blutbad' (*L* 159, 210).

While Meinecke thereby allows the reader's interest to be cautiously piqued, he nevertheless makes it clear from the first mention of the *Blutbad* that this is an 'authentic' experience which neither Fichte, nor his literary alter egos, actually ever get to have. As Meinecke's quite extensive quotation from *Xango* tells us:

> Anschließend noch Gespräche über das Blutbad. Einen Ziegenbock würde man schon von mir als Gastgeschenk annehmen. […] Wir gehen mit Professora Theresa auf den Markt von São Joaquim, Opfertiere kaufen. […] Sicher, meine ich, werden sie mich morgen an dem faszinierendsten, dem schockierendsten, dem ganz atavistischen […] Blutbad teilnehmen lassen und Leonore wird ihre schönsten Photos machen. […] Wir dürfen rein. Professora Theresa kommt mit blutigen Händen heraus und sieht schräg an uns vorbei. Ziegen ohne Köpfe, Hühner ohne Köpfe, blutgesprenkelte Tauben ohne Köpfe werden aus dem Ronko zu einem triefenden Haufen geworfen. Punkt sechs, als wir kommen sollten, ist alles vorbei. *Ja, der Gott hat es so bestimmt*. (*L* 77-78)

Neumann confirms this: 'It turns out that, at the time Professora Theresa had invited Mau and Fichte to visit her, the offerings had already been made. Even then Leonore Mau wasn't allowed to take photos' (Neumann 1991: 273). The references to the *Blutbad* in *Lookalikes* are therefore a means for Meinecke to critically engage with Fichte. More importantly, however, it also serves to subvert the idea of the authentic and immediate experience of blood, as something real and visceral – 'die ganz unverdauliche Bluterei' in Fichte, and 'echte Schreie, die mir blutig bluten' in Goetz – and therefore something which stands in stark contrast to and cannot, as one might first expect, be easily subsumed into the glib, superficial, intertextual stream-of-data montage that comprises the *Lookalikes* text. Yet it is precisely Meinecke's engagement with Fichte that enables the incorporation of the allegedly visceral *Blutbad* into *Lookalikes*. As the author explains in a 2011 interview with Sebastian Hammelehle, this was a deliberate strategy when writing his novel:

> Plötzlich gab es Erlebnisse, die ich schildern wollte – nichts in Büchern oder Filmen oder Schallplatten oder sonst wo Vorformuliertes, wie ich es sonst bevorzugt als Material benutzt habe – sondern wirklich *street*, unvermittelte Realität. Zum Glück war Hubert Fichte zweimal in Salvador da Bahia, wo *Lookalikes* dann spielt – so konnte ich mich beruhigt auf ein Palimpsest stürzen. (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 298)

By explicitly framing Thomas's experiences in Salvador da Bahia as Meinecke's reception or palimpsestic overwriting of Fichte (and Goetz, to a lesser extent), Meinecke is able to avoid a direct identification of Thomas's experiences with Meinecke's own.

This is not a perfect solution to Meinecke's desire to avoid self-representation and introspection, of course. Just as Fichte's writing reflects 'a consistent technique that also underscores his identity' (Wilks 2006: 249), Meinecke, by performing his signature methods of sampling and citation in *Lookalikes*, inadvertently directs the reader's attention back to himself, or at least Meinecke's self-conceptualisation as 'author-as-reader', 'author-as-DJ', or 'Arrangeur'. As Schumacher observes, this is a general issue with Meinecke's texts, in that they rely on a

> Arbeitsweise, […] die zwar immer nur unter den Vorzeichen der Verarbeitung von vorgefertigtem Material operiert, aber gerade deshalb die Aufmerksamkeit nicht nur auf das verarbeitete Material, sondern auch auf die Art der Verarbeitung, auf die gerade im Kontext des DJ-Diskurses damit verbundenen Vorstellungen von Autorschaft und Autorität und damit unweigerlich auch auf die eigene Person lenkt. (Schumacher 2003: 200).

Although, as we have seen, Meinecke's author branding is nowhere near as forcefully and consistently executed as in the cases of Nothomb and Houellebecq, nor is he as definitively associated with a particular performance as Goetz, Meinecke's literary methods have nonetheless become recognisable as a 'Markenzeichen' (Höppner 2013).

Conclusion: 'Indeterminacy, Open-Endedness, Ambiguity'

In his 2012 review of *Lookalikes* for *Die Zeit*, Hubert Winkels laments the fact that Meinecke in his latest publication is merely repeating his usual literary formula, in which 'die achtziger Jahre in einer endlosen Wiederholungsschleife [rotieren]' (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 329). Interestingly, Winkels has the same complaint about *Lookalikes* as one could have about *Hoppe*, namely that the text contains no distinct characters, no real introspection, or, indeed anything real: 'irgendetwas fehlt in diesem unendlichen Spiel mit Differenz und Identität' (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 331). As Winkels elaborates:

> [M]an hat keine Lust mehr. Es ist eh alles eins, weil alles immer auch was anderes ist. Ganz selten überfällt Meinecke eine 'echte' Erregung: Wenn der Musikkenner das Zusammenspiel einer der berühmten perkussiven Rhythmusgruppen aus Salvador […] mit ebenso komplexen Blechbläsereinsätzen genießt, dann treten ihm schon mal Tränen in dei Augen. Hier, denkt man, könnte endlich ein anderer Meinecke-Roman anfangen, hier, wo die Lust überquillt oder der Schmerz darüber, dass diese immer gebunden ist an die Künstlichkeit der Kunst. (as cited in Meinecke 2012: 331-332)

The purpose of Winkels's review is not, of course, to read *Lookalikes* as autofiction, but it is striking how little Winkels reflects on the ambivalent role that Thomas plays in the novel and the implications that this has for Meinecke's *Popliteratur* methods, his engagement with autofiction and literary self-representation, and his reception of Fichte and Goetz in this context. While *Lookalikes* overall, as we have seen, bears even less resemblance to conventional autofiction than the texts discussed in Chapters One to Three, Meinecke is nonetheless influenced by an increasing trend toward autofictionalisation, in the contemporary European novel more generally, as well as in *Popliteratur* more specifically. However, rather than following the Goetzian model of synthesising literature and reality in a viscerally powerful performance designed to elicit a strong emotional reaction, Meinecke instead chooses to

experiment with an autofictional character who is informed more by the author's reading of other (autobiographically influenced) literature than by real-life experiences. Although, as Winkels notices, the reader can perhaps catch glimpses of authentic, unmediated reactions on the part of Thomas the character, the text places such a strong emphasis on the unattainability of the authentic experience, as well as the derivativeness of Thomas's experiences, that the reader is almost immediately encouraged to look elsewhere for a unifying thread or interpretative avenue into the text. While Meinecke's method of *erzählte Theorie* and the predominance of digital interaction in *Lookalikes* make conventional analysis of the novel difficult, these aspects enable Meinecke to advocate not only a superficial, associative form of knowledge production, but also a more dialogic, collective, and coincidental means of textual generation. Instead of the immediacy of authentic experience, it is the semblance of simultaneity and of being in the present which draws the reader into the text. Although, similarly to Nothomb, Hoppe, and Houellebecq, Meinecke's use of his signature literary methods and style does serve to constantly direct the reader's attention back to the author, this does not entail interpretative control on the part of the author over his text. *Lookalikes*, as we have seen, makes a much more concerted effort to incorporate a genuine multitude of narrative voices and to open up the text to the coexistence of any number of equally valid (because equally superficial) readings. As we will see in the following chapter, the contemporary novel's tendency toward presenting information in an almost radically undifferentiated manner, akin to the Internet, is taken even further in Setz's *Indigo*. While Setz does not make use of one specific intertext as Meinecke does with Fichte's *Xango* and *Explosion*, we will see a similar approach in *Indigo* toward the autofictional character as inefficient and diminished.

Chapter Five

'Ich kann auch in einer Geschichte überfordert sein': Marginalisation of the Autofictional Character and Information Overload in Clemens J. Setz's *Indigo* (2012)

Introduction: *Indigo* as Austrian Autofiction

Clemens J. Setz's 2012 novel *Indigo* is a slight departure from the other texts examined in this thesis for a number of reasons. Born in 1982, Setz is at least twenty years younger than most of the authors covered here, and is therefore representative of a younger generation of European authors. This affects both his writing as well as his approach to autofiction in a number of ways. What is more, although Setz is often listed among contemporary German autofiction writers – and often alongside Felicitas Hoppe (Krumrey 2015; Schneider 2012b) – it should not be overlooked that Setz is an Austrian writer, especially as his Austrian identity factors much more extensively into his literary work than, for example, Nothomb's Belgian identity factors into hers. This does not merely manifest in common Austrian settings in Setz's novels – his hometown of Graz features prominently in *Indigo* as well as in *Die Frequenzen* (2009) and *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre* (2015; henceforth *Die Stunde*), Setz's second and fourth novels respectively – but also in the recognition of his literary heritage. Austrian author and experimental poet Ernst Jandl in particular appears to have been formative in Setz's development as a writer (Graber 2012), as well as other authors associated with the avant-garde Wiener Gruppe of the 1950s and '60s. Ludwig Wittgenstein, as a philosopher of language and of mathematics, is a common influence on both the Wiener Gruppe and on Setz; this becomes especially apparent in *Indigo*, as Ayano Inukai has pointed out (Inukai 2018: 13).[131] Although Setz is clearly familiar with the German literary canon, and a vocal admirer of post-war American sci-fi and postmodern

[131] As Setz studied both mathematics and *Germanistik* at university, his interest in Wittgenstein is unsurprising. For an in-depth analysis of Wittgenstein's influence on *Indigo*, see Ayano Inukai, 'Lügende Figuren. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Fakten und Fiktion im Roman Indigo von Clemens J. Setz und dem frühen Wittgenstein' in オーストリア文学 34 (2018), pp. 12-23.

fiction,[132] his writing appears to draw heavily from a particularly Austrian literary tradition characterised by language scepticism and empirio-criticism. As Jan Wiele observes, this is the literature on which Setz has been raised: 'Sprachkrise und Empiriokritizismus in der Muttermilch sozusagen. Empfindungszergliederung von [Ernst] Mach bis [Robert] Musil, Formzertümmerung von [Hermann] Bahr bis [Thomas] Bernhard' (Wiele 2015).

Even more significantly, perhaps, contemporary (experimental) German-language autofiction does have specifically Austrian precursors as well. Despite the association that critics often make between *Hoppe* and *Indigo* as two genre-defining examples of German autofiction from 2012, Setz's novel could also be seen as following a specific autofictional trend in early twenty-first-century Austrian literature as inaugurated by Wolf Haas's *Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren* (2006) and Thomas Glavinic's *Das bin doch ich* (2007). *Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren* is a love story, yet one that is told exclusively via an interview with the autofictional author-character 'Wolf Haas' by a critic for a literary supplement promoting his new (fictitious) novel. *Das bin doch ich* tells the story of an Austrian author named Thomas Glavinic, who, having just completed his novel *Die Arbeit der Nacht* (a real novel by Glavinic published in 2006), is concerned for his literary career, especially by comparison to the extraordinary success of his friend and fellow (German-Austrian) author Daniel Kehlmann and his international bestseller *Die Vermessung der Welt* (in reference to the real-life author Kehlmann and his extraordinarily popular 2005 novel). The autofictional novels by Haas, Glavinic, and Setz have all received or been nominated or shortlisted for prizes, and, according to the Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, both *Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren* and *Das bin doch ich* are bestsellers.[133] The critical and popular appeal of these novels is thus apparent, and, from this perspective, it makes sense to group these texts and authors together as representative of a trend in contemporary Austrian literature. Yet *Indigo* also differs from its precursors, not only in terms of content and themes,

[132] Setz regularly cites Thomas Pynchon and Philip K. Dick as major influences on his writing (Haberl 2015; Jungen 2018).
[133] Haas was awarded the *Wilhelm-Raabe-Literaturpreis* for *Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren*, and *Das bin doch ich* and *Indigo* were nominated for the *Deutsche Buchpreis*. Setz's second and fourth novels, *Die Frequenzen* and *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre*, were also nominated for the *Deutsche Buchpreis*.

but also in terms of the function of its autofictionality. Whereas, according to Birgitta Krumrey, the focus in *Das bin doch ich*, for example, is on 'Ich-Stilisierung', 'Ich-Positionierung', and 'Ich-Kommentierung', Setz includes an autofictional protagonist in his novel 'ohne das Spiel mit der Autor-Persona noch in den Mittelpunkt des Textes zu stellen' (Krumrey 2015: 194-196). It is the de-emphasising of Setz's autofictional character which is of particular interest here. In a 2015 interview, Setz quotes the American author Hubert Selby as having said: 'I don't wanna [*sic*] stand in the way of a story' (Haberl 2015). According to Setz, this describes precisely 'worum es beim Schreiben geht, nämlich genau darum, der Geschichte nicht im Weg zu stehen. […] [D]ie Kunst besteht darin, sich selbst rauszulassen und die Wucht der Ereignisse darzustellen' (Haberl 2015). In light of this, Setz's choice to name one of his literary characters after himself appears perplexing, especially as *Indigo* does technically fulfil the two basic criteria of autofiction (nominal identity of author, narrator, and protagonist; self-identification as a work of fiction). *Indigo* therefore clearly invites being classified as autofiction, with its associations of self-discovery and self-invention, even though, as we will see, this is not the main focus of the text.

This chapter will argue that *Indigo* contains two oppositional trends: one of increasing fragmentation and isolation, the other of increasing interconnectedness. While these trends are bound up in the novel's thematics, plot, and narrative structure, they can also be read as models of the circulation and modification of online content. Through the use of intertextual references and a montage of facsimiles, Setz creates a semblance of credibility and authenticity, which, despite his play with an autofictional first-person narrator, foregrounds the fraught reading experience and draws attention away from the author figure as a guarantor of meaning. The autofictional character appears to share with the reader a quest for reliable sources and for a neat, coherent, and comprehensive narrative, and this process is encouraged through Setz's use of autotextual echoes and the adaptation of genre fiction elements from the detective novel, the thriller, and science fiction. By mimicking conventional genres and historical texts, Setz highlights the indistinguishability of fact and fiction in digital spaces, in which anyone can

access, create, and manipulate content. Setz does not make use of his name as a code or as a marketing strategy, as the novel itself implies, but instead relegates the author figure to a passive and marginal role within the text. Setz's choice to include an autofictional character in *Indigo* at first glance appears to be – as the author himself claims – due to superficial similarities in terms of biography and personality between himself and the character. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that, by using his own name, Setz further underscores the novel's challenge to its readers to evaluate the flood of information with which they are confronted (both in the novel and in daily life), and to question their logic behind choosing which sources to trust.

Internet Culture, Synaesthesia, and Pseudoscience in *Indigo*

As indicated above, it is not only Setz's Austrian nationality that sets him apart from the other authors discussed in this thesis. Two other factors are noteworthy in this context, namely Setz's interest in Internet culture, and his synaesthesia. Almost all of the novels examined here, even those in Chapters One to Three, make use of digital technology in some shape or form, whether on the level of the plot (such as the background email correspondence in *Une forme de vie*) or on the level of the writing process (such as Houellebecq's use of Wikipedia in the writing of *La carte et le territoire*). In *Lookalikes*, as we saw in the previous chapter, Meinecke makes his reliance on the Internet and social media amply clear. In the following chapter, we will see how digital spaces feature prominently in the frame narrative of *Éros mélancolique* and thereby have a strong impact on the novel's interpretation as a whole. Although several of these authors have also emphasised analogue textual production in their works (Amélie's letters in *Une forme de vie*, Felicitas's handwritten scripts in *Hoppe*, Michel and the handwritten notes on his desk and in Jed's painting in *La carte et le territoire*), it would be realistic to assume that contemporary authors, regardless of their age, create literary texts that are born-digital, that is, are written digitally rather than with pen and paper. Setz, however, as the only author in the present selection with a Twitter account, who apparently wrote all 1021 pages of *Die Stunde* on his iPad

(Kastberger 2016), exhibits far more characteristics of a digital-native author than the older generation. If *Lookalikes* is, in part, the result of Meinecke writing while surrounded by 'aufgeschlagene Bücher' (Meinecke 2012: 103), *Indigo* reads much more as a reflection of Setz's browser history than any analogue reading habits. As Klaus Kastberger observes, it is the flexibility and malleability of the digital text that come to mind when reading Setz:

> Das Netz also und die Cloud und eine Vorstellung vom literarischen Text, die diesen als eine fließende und bewegliche Erscheinung begreift, die man rein theoretisch in jedes beliebige Speichermedium stecken und auf jedem Display lesen kann, definieren hier den Rahmen der literarischen Produktion. (Kastberger 2016)

As we will see in the analysis below, *Indigo* also contains abundant references to Internet and popular/nerd culture, which becomes apparent both on the story-level and in the text's construction.[134]

Critics have noted that, to a certain extent, Setz's novels deal with universal topics or 'uralte Elementarproblem[e]' (Strigl 2009), such as isolation and loneliness, generational differences, and, particularly, problematic father-son relationships. Yet what has made Setz stand out and earned him critical acclaim is his eye for the strange, the uncanny, and the extraordinary. Setz's predilection for macabre stories, *Untergangszenarien*, 'lonely' objects, and Thomassons,[135] for example, is well-documented, as is his penchant for neologisms, unusual similes, and bizarre imagery (Setz 2018: 16-19; Wiele 2015; Wurmitzer 2018). Setz's curious use of language is in part due to his chromesthesia, a type of synaesthesia whereby auditory perceptions are involuntarily accompanied by experiences of colour, shape, and movement. As Michael Wurmitzer observes, this is also whence Setz's use of his middle name's initial 'J' (for 'Johann') on his publications stems: according to the author, all the letter 'E's in his name make it 'sehr farblos, beige, hässlich. Das J hat aber was Erdiges' (Wurmitzer 2018). Although this

[134] In terms of the story, there is a lengthy conversation between four characters that mostly concerns *Star Trek* and spans two of the novel's chapters, aptly named 'Holodeck' and 'Uncanny valley' (*I* 139-150, 155-160). In terms of the novel's construction, we will see the influence of Internet culture on Setz's use of facsimiles below.

[135] The term 'Thomasson' or 'Hyperart Thomasson' refers to remains of a building or structure that have lost their original purpose and that, according to the definition of Japanese artist Genpei Akasegawa, have become pieces of conceptual art. For more on the origin of this phenomenon, see Genpei Akasegawa, *Hyperart: Thomasson*, translated by Matt Fargo (Los Angeles, CA: Kaya Press, 2010). Angelika Klammer also addresses many of Setz's preoccupations with the strange and the uncanny in her quasi-interview with the author in *Bot. Gespräch ohne Autor* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018).

unique approach to language in Setz's writing is mostly celebrated as inventive and exciting by critics, it is striking how often his novels are also reviewed in terms of eliciting physical reactions on the part of their readers: Daniela Strigl describes Setz's *Die Frequenzen* as 'ein atemberaubendes, ein in die Magengrube fahrendes Buch' (Strigl 2009); the story of *Indigo*, according to Jens Jessen, 'leuchtet […] mit einer radioaktiven Intensität […] hervor, dass dem Leser […] fast schwindelig und übel wird' (Jessen 2012); and a prize jury in 2013 referred to *Indigo* as a 'schwindelerregende[r] Roman, […] [der] eine unsagbare Spannung auf[baut]' (as cited in Inukai 2018: 22, endnote 17). The general tension and sense of unease that pervade most of Setz's texts are, moreover, reflected in his characters as well. For example, the protagonist of *Die Stunde* Natalie Reinegger is, as Jan Wiele writes, '[eine] Protagonistin, […] [die] unter Strom steht, immer bedroht von einer epileptischen Attacke der großen Malaise' (Wiele 2015). Robert, one of *Indigo*'s two main characters, is described in similar terms in the novel itself as '[ein] seltsame[s], immer unter Strom stehende[s] Wesen' (*I* 221). Quite noticeably, the main characters of both *Indigo* and *Die Stunde* also regularly experience difficulties relating to, communicating and creating emotional bonds with other characters. Natalie, like her author, possesses synaesthetic perceptive faculties (Wiele 2015). Although he never creates a direct link between Natalie's synaesthesia and her more bizarre behavioural tendencies, it is clear that Setz, in his literary works, is interested in exploring the ways in which characters with a physically different experience of the world engage with it, and how this affects their relations with others.

In the case of *Indigo*, the physical discomfort which the reader might experience is hardly surprising, considering the book's subject matter. The title of the novel refers to a condition which affects a small number of children – named 'Indigo-Kinder' or 'I-Kinder' (*I* 22) – and of which the primary symptom is eliciting various unpleasant symptoms – such as migraines, nausea, and vertigo – in other people in their vicinity, within a certain radius and

time frame that vary, depending on the child.[136] While the novel fairly consistently portrays the indigo condition as a real one, it should be noted that this is Setz's adaptation of a real-world but pseudoscientific, amorphous New Age concept.[137] According to this concept, indigo children are believed to be harbingers of a new stage in human evolution, or possess special creative or paranormal abilities (Mayer and Brutler 2016: 118-119). Gerhard Mayer and Anita Brutler trace the coining of the term 'indigo children' to 1980s America, where self-proclaimed psychic and synaesthete Nancy Ann Tappe began noticing children with as yet unseen indigo-coloured auras who, for Tappe, represented a 'new breed of children' (Mayer and Brutler 2016: 117-118). The concept has since spread globally and developed into a variety of different, often contradictory definitions of the term. The generally positively connoted real-world concept of indigo children has, however, been radically subverted in Setz's novel. As Mayer and Brutler themselves perceive it:

> Es handelt sich [in diesem Roman] um eine faszinierende und bedrohliche Fiktion der sozialen Wahrnehmung und des Umgangs mit andersartigen Menschen, die das esoterische Indigo-Konzept in eine Parabel verwandelt. Die buchstäblich mutierten Indigos w[e]rden nicht zu Rettern und Hoffnungsträgern, sondern zu Sonderlingen und Opfern, die sich nicht in eine moderne Gesellschaft integrieren lassen. (Mayer and Brutler 2016: 133)

We will see this in more detail in the analysis of the two main characters below. As will become clear, even though only one of these characters (Robert) is actually an *Indigo-Kind*, being close to the children can, in some cases, have longer-lasting adverse effects on the health of people in their environment, as Clemens appears to suffer from the after-effects of long-term exposure.

The novel is composed, by and large, of two alternating narratives. One of these narrative strands – told by a third-person limited narrator, with frequent use of free indirect speech – focuses on Robert Tätzel, aged 29, an artist and former *Indigo-Kind*. Robert is a so-called 'ausgebrannter Fall' (*I* 183), a term used for cases in which the symptoms of the indigo

[136] Since the novel does not contain a medical or scientific account of the underlying causes of this phenomenon (and this does not appear to exist within the fictional world of the novel either), I have elected to use the suitably vague term 'condition' to describe it.

[137] As we will see below, characters do at points comment on the indigo condition's extreme implausibility. On the one hand, this can be read as humorous metafictional commentary on Setz's part on the implausibility of his story; on the other hand, as we will see, the indigo condition functions as one of the novel's main points of uncertainty, challenging the reader to carefully consider the credibility of every piece of information contained in the novel.

condition have weakened or vanished by the time the child reaches adulthood. The novel's other strand is narrated in the first person by the character 'Clemens Setz'.[138] Clemens has in the past trained briefly as a maths teacher at the *Helianau-Institut*, a boarding school for indigo children of which Robert is a (former) pupil, and this is where the two characters first meet. The novel does not proceed in chronological order, however. Instead, it jumps back and forth, not only between Robert's and Clemens's respective narratives, which are set roughly fifteen years apart – Clemens's narrative begins in 2006 (*I* 19), Robert's in 2021 (*I* 78) – but also between the present day in both narratives and flashbacks to the characters' time at the Institute. At the point in time at which we first meet Clemens, he is no longer a teacher, but is still investigating the disappearances, or so-called '*Relokationen*' (*I* 20), of several children from the Institute. As we discover, Clemens is dismissed from the school before his training period ends, and, although we are not provided with any details, we can surmise that this happens because Clemens has gone too far in his investigations while still at the Institute. While the reader is never furnished with any concrete details, the novel suggests that Clemens gets close to uncovering illicit dealings of a shady organisation and that his relationship with the principal Dr. Otto Rudolph quickly sours as a result. Over the course of the novel, Clemens conducts further research, writes an article on his encounter with an indigo child called Christoph Stennitzer and his interview with her mother, and even travels to Vienna and Brussels to meet with a mysterious Herr Ferenc, who is vaguely associated with the shady organisation which Clemens believes might hold the key to unlocking the mystery of the disappearing children.

Meanwhile, Robert's narrative describes his artistic projects (mainly what appear to be macabre paintings of animals who have been abused for bizarre scientific experiments), his deteriorating relationship with his girlfriend Cordula, and his difficulties in dealing with the after-effects of his indigo condition. One day, he happens across a newspaper article detailing a criminal court case in which his former maths teacher Clemens has been acquitted of the charge of having brutally murdered an animal abuser. Despite initial misgivings, Robert begins to take

[138] Henceforth, the fictional character will be referred to as 'Clemens', in contradistinction to the author, 'Setz'.

an interest in his former teacher, discovering that Clemens has, in the meantime, become a freelance author and published a novel. Eventually, Robert goes to pay him a visit, during which Clemens gives Robert his research notes and other documents collected over the course of his investigations, contained in a 'rotkarierte' and a 'grüne Mappe' (*I* 62, 319). Yet Robert receives no further explanations from Clemens, whose cognitive faculties appear to have drastically diminished in the meantime. The results of Clemens's investigations remain unclear to both Robert and the reader, and Robert eventually decides to burn the contents of the two folders, at which point the story ends abruptly and inconclusively.

Indigo as a Political Text? Implications of the Novel's Referentiality and Autofictionality

At this point it should be noted that *Indigo* could, to a certain extent, be read as a novel that features neurodivergent protagonists and comments on their lack of integration into, as well as their prejudiced treatment by, society. While this reading does not greatly affect my analysis of *Indigo* in terms of autofiction, it is, in my view, nonetheless important to bear this background in mind for any reading of the text.[139] From this perspective, both Clemens and Robert could be interpreted as neurodivergent, although the more obvious analogy is between the indigo children and people with neurodivergence, learning or developmental disabilities, or emotional, behavioural, or communication disorders. While the analogy itself is perhaps not particularly subtle, Setz's portrayal of the indigo children and their condition is, I would argue, fairly nuanced, at least in the sense that Clemens and Robert are not primarily defined by or reduced to their (potentially) neurodivergent traits. Although, as the above quotation by Mayer and Brutler indicates, the narrative frames the indigo children as victims, their victimhood is not treated exploitatively or used as a manipulative ploy for cheap emotional effect, which becomes clear in the novel's treatment of its characters. Certainly, neither of the two main characters are portrayed in particularly flattering terms, and Robert especially is, in some respects, a very

[139] It should also be noted that my brief exploration of this reading is far from exhaustive. A more extensive interpretation along these lines, while potentially rewarding, lies far beyond the scope of this thesis.

unlikable character. While Clemens's general state of bewilderment and gradual mental unravelling over the course of the novel might elicit pity, rather than empathy, on the part of the reader, this could be seen as a deliberate strategy on the part of the author to encourage the reader to reflect on their emotional responses toward these characters – and by extension toward people in the real world who display similar traits. Although many of Robert's aggressive thoughts and actions are designed to make him appear as quite an offensive character,[140] he appears at his most sympathetic, or at least relatable, in situations in which he feels he is being treated with condescension or exhibited as a grotesque curiosity to others by his friends. In this context, the *Helianau-Institut* could be read as a strange and not entirely unproblematic hybrid of special-needs school, sanatorium, and comic-book school for the gifted or 'extranormal institute':[141] presumably located near the Limestone Alps in Lower Austria, the Institute has echoes of the Alpine sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924) on the one hand; on the other hand, in terms of its principal Dr. Rudolph's conviction that indigo children possess untapped potential, the Institute appears as a subverted, twisted version of, say, the Xavier Institute from the *X-Men* Marvel Comics (1963–present day). While, as seen above, the idea of indigo children having special abilities stems from the real-world New Age concept, in this context it could also be read as a deconstruction of abled people's perhaps well-intentioned but ultimately condescending tendency to construe or celebrate disabilities as characteristics that make people with disabilities somehow 'special' or 'superhuman'.

[140] The aspect of Robert's character that is probably the most uncomfortable for the reader is his use of taboo words – 'radioaktive Wörter', as he calls them (*I* 77) – in what appears to be some sort of calming ritual: 'Um sich endgültig auf zurück auf den Boden zu holen, sagte Robert ein paar verbotene, radioaktive Wörter auf: *Dreckfotze, Judensau, entartet, Nigger*' (*I* 77). Although this presumably happens inside Robert's head, and he tends not to use problematic terminology when addressing people directly, his thoughts frequently suggest that he experiences quite a juvenile delight with the idea of transgressing societal taboos. While, from my perspective, this makes parts of Robert's narrative rather tedious to read, I would tend to interpret this aspect of Robert's character as further evidence in the text that the indigo condition causes maladjustment and antisocial behaviour in the people it affects, rather than as an attempt on Setz's part to provoke a polite readership merely for the sake of provocation.

[141] 'Extranormal institute' is the term used to refer to this trope by the website *TV Tropes*, a wiki used to document examples of plot conventions, as well as character- and visual tropes, in pop-culture media, such as television, film, literature, comics, anime, and video games. As an Internet-savvy author, Setz is likely to be familiar with this website.

Although it is hinted that the shady organisation behind Herr Ferenc, to which Dr. Rudolph also appears to have ties, does believe that indigo children possess special capabilities – we eventually discover that the organisation is ominously called '*Association for the Peaceful Use of Indigo Potential*' (*I* 313), or APUIP for short – the indigo condition is more consistently framed in the novel in terms of the extreme disadvantages it entails. While Robert appears to be successful in his career as a prize-winning artist, the text makes abundantly clear that all of his social interactions are very fraught. Although Robert's presence generally no longer causes the people in his vicinity physical discomfort, he himself still struggles with the after-effects of the indigo condition. One recurring symptom in this regard is the so-called 'Gap' or 'Indigo-Delay' (*I* 49), which in the novel refers to the temporary forgetting of things that are common knowledge. In one example, Robert is confused by the term '*National Geographic*', as he has temporarily forgotten the existence of the magazine: '*National Geographic*. Was zum Teufel ist das? / Cordulas Gesicht sagte ihm, dass er wieder mal gegen seinen Gap gerannt war. Allgemeinwissen. Dingo-Delay' (*I* 147). In Clemens's interview with Frau Stennitzer, we discover that Christoph's circumstances have also impaired his learning abilities: 'Er war ja so lange Zeit Analphabet, wissen Sie. Er hat sich geweigert, es zu lernen. Er war bekennender Analphabet, bis er etwa acht Jahre alt war' (*I* 94). Although Christoph's temporary illiteracy appears to be the result of a choice, it is ultimately bound up in the social isolation necessitated by his indigo condition. The children at the Institute are also explicitly associated with terminology relating to real-world disabilities, in that they are described as using what Clemens perceives to be a kind of sign language:

> An diesem Tag nahm ich zum ersten Mal die seltsame Misch-Sprache der Institutskinder wahr, ein enorm schnelles, wahrscheinlich an die Differenziertheit einer Gebärdensprache heranreichendes System von Handzeichen, verbunden mit etwas lauterem, stark akzentuiertem und manche Silben unnatürlich in die Länge ziehendem Sprechen. (*I* 191-192)

The association of the indigo condition with real-world disabilities and neurodivergence is therefore an important and quite visible background to the novel. Yet, if *Indigo* contains a distinct political message in this regard, the message is neither heavy-handed, nor does it

dominate the text. The novel does not contain any instances of blatant or severe discrimination against indigo children or the adult *ausgebrannte Fälle*. Setz does, however, invent politically incorrect terminology to go along with the indigo condition. Robert is exposed to this on more than one occasion, particularly to the offensive term '*Dingo*' (*I* 23), although he also makes an effort to reclaim this term for himself: Robert occasionally wears a T-shirt with the slogan '*Dingo Bait*' (*I* 112) that was originally purchased as a Christmas present for his girlfriend Cordula. As the narrator explains, Cordula is appalled at the T-shirt, despite Robert's assurances that he perceives the slogan as humorous: 'als sie es ausgepackt hatte, war sie entsetzt gewesen. [Robert] erklärte ihr, dass es als Spaß gemeint war, dass er kein Problem mit dem Begriff habe, solange er nicht abwertend gebraucht werde und so weiter, […] aber sie hatte darüber immer noch nicht lachen können' (*I* 112).

What, then, does this mean for an interpretation of the novel as autofiction? Given that Robert's age in the novel matches Setz's own at the time that *Indigo* was presumably written, one might be tempted to pursue a biographical reading, not only of Clemens, but of Robert as well. However, while there might be points of similarity to explore between Setz and Robert, the similarities between Setz and Clemens are made much more obvious. This could be read as a means for Setz to dissociate himself from Robert and to allow for Robert's character to be read on its own terms, unburdened by biographical associations with its author. According to what Setz has claimed in interviews, however, there is a much simpler explanation for writing Clemens as an autofictional character, namely that they share a number of characteristics in terms of biography and personality: Clemens, like his author, has studied mathematics (*I* 153), is a writer with an interest in science fiction (*I* 146), has ties to Setz's erstwhile publishing house, the Austrian Residenz Verlag (*I* 426), and it is heavily implied that the novel he has published is entitled *Söhne und Planeten* (*I* 359), which is the title of Setz's first novel, published in 2007. The novel also implies that Clemens's handwriting is similar to Setz's. At one point in the text, Clemens apologises for writing exclusively in 'Blockbuchstaben', which Robert finds 'mühsam zu entziffern' (*I* 440). *Indigo*'s table of contents (*I* 8-9), presumably written by Setz himself, is also

quite noticeably handwritten and all in capital letters, which are not always easily legible.[142] In terms of personality, as Setz explains in a 2012 interview, Clemens is apparently too similar to his real-life counterpart for the author not to name the character after himself. According to Setz, although he did not initially set out to include an autofictional character in *Indigo*, their similarity became increasingly clear over the course of the writing process:

> Es ist ein Hauptcharakterzug der Figur, dass sie überfordert und verwirrt ist, keinen schnellen analytischen Sherlock-Holmes-Durchblick hat. Das war so nah an mir, dass ich mir dachte: Sei doch ehrlich und benenn es nach dir! Genauso bin ich. Es war aber keine bewusste Entscheidung, sich über mich selbst lustig zu machen. […] Und der Name ist doch ein super Figurenname. […] Clemens für sanftmütig und Hase für Setz *(Anm. zec heißt auf Kroatisch Hase)*. Das ist perfekt für die Figur, das hat ein bisschen Naivität und Verwirrtheit. (Schafferhofer 2012)

If, however, Setz's choice to name Clemens after himself is indeed as coincidental as he claims, the novel in its published form unequivocally invites an identification of the author with his character by way of the editorial peritext. The blurb on page two of the novel's paperback edition offers readers a brief summary of the text to engage their interest, and follows this with a short biographical paragraph on the author. To offer a basis for comparison, this is the biographical note included in Setz's short-story collection *Die Liebe zur Zeit des Mahlstädter Kindes* (2011), his Suhrkamp publication previous to *Indigo*:

> Clemens J. Setz wurde 1982 in Graz geboren. Studium der Mathematik und Germanistik in Graz; Obertonsänger, Übersetzer und freier Schriftsteller. Er lebt in Graz. Für *Die Liebe zur Zeit des Mahlstädter Kindes* wurde er mit dem Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse 2011 ausgezeichnet. Zuletzt erschienen: *Die Vogelstraußtrompete*. Gedichte (2014) und *Indigo*. Roman (st 4477). (Setz 2014: 2)

As we will see below, while the note in *Indigo* follows the same pattern as that in Setz's short-story collection, in this case the author's biographical details are clearly conflated with details from Clemens's life as conveyed in the novel:

> Clemens J. Setz wurde 1982 in Graz geboren. Nach dem Studium der Mathematik und Germanistik arbeitete er als Mathematik-Tutor u. a. im Proximity-Awareness & Learning Center Helianau und als Journalist. Seit 2008 treten bei ihm die Spätfolgen der Indigo-Belastung auf. Heute lebt er als freier Schriftsteller zurückgezogen mit seiner Frau in der Nähe von Graz. *Indigo* war auf der Shortlist des Deutschen Buchpreises und erhielt den Literaturpreis des Kulturkreises der deutschen Wirtschaft.
>
> Zuletzt ist von ihm erschienen: *Die Liebe zur Zeit des Mahlstädter Kindes. Erzählungen* (st 4335). (*I* 2)

[142] The fact that this implies that *Indigo* was, in fact, written by Clemens is a point I will discuss in more detail below.

References to the *Helianau-Institut* and the 'Spätfolgen der Indigo-Belastung' are obviously specific to Clemens's fictional story, yet the addition of Setz's real date and place of birth, as well as the accuracy of the *Suhrkamp Taschenbuch* number 4335 (Setz 2014: 1), demonstrate that fact and fiction coexist in this paragraph. The novel's peritext therefore clearly encourages an autofictional reading of the text, which contradicts Setz's above-cited declaration of not wanting to 'stand in the way of a story' (Haberl 2015). Moreover, according to Setz's statements in another 2012 interview, being 'überfordert' in the context of literature, specifically when writing a story, is not necessarily a bad thing – or rather, this is actually a necessary aspect, in order for the book to come alive:

> Ich kann auch in einer Geschichte überfordert sein, nicht verstehen, was gespielt wird: Die Figuren tun irgendetwas, haben ihre Leben, ihre Psychologien und folgen ihren Bahnen – und ich als Erfinder dieser Welt bin überfordert. Das ist sehr angenehm, genau dieser Moment soll beim Schreiben entstehen, denn sonst wird das Buch nicht lebendig. Bei manchen Büchern hat man das unangenehme Gefühl, der Autor kontrolliere alles, jeden Aspekt. Das kann gut funktionieren, wie bei Patricia Highsmith und ihren penibel gewobenen Handlungsnetzwerken – aber meistens wirkt das leblos, leserfeindlich-sauerstoffarm wie die Marsoberfläche. (Graber 2012)

Seen in this context, Setz's above claim that Clemens is primarily characterised by his meekness, naivety, and unwitting nature is therefore a little disingenuous. Is Setz not actually imbuing his character with precisely the attributes he considers important in a writer? As the following analysis will demonstrate, Clemens's characterisation in *Indigo*, as well as the undermining of his author-status, are inextricably bound up in the novel's broader project of demonstrating the apparent indistinguishability between fact and fiction.

Clemens as Ineffectual Character and Narrator

Although the novel generally frames Clemens as kind, well-intentioned, and empathetic, his dominant characteristics do seem to be his naivety and general cluelessness, as indicated above. As we follow Clemens in his investigations, we see that Clemens is almost never in control of a situation, very rarely displays agency, and is constantly treated condescendingly by other characters. Even his own (first-person) narrative displays a tendency toward self-deprecation and an apologetic tone. In the sense that Clemens is a quasi-detective figure, he supposedly

functions as a stand-in for the reader. Due to the character's severely limited understanding of the events that occur around him, however, this function is heavily undermined. In terms of Clemens's function as an autofictional character, he does appear to correspond to Setz's assessment as seen above, yet his role as a narrator- and author-figure is, as we will see, undermined even more thoroughly than the author suggests. When the reader is first introduced to Clemens, the narrative initially leads us to believe that he is starting his investigation in a straightforward and sensible manner. The book opens with Clemens interviewing Frau Häusler-Zinnbret, a child psychologist and educationist, and the author of a book on the indigo phenomenon, which Clemens believes might help him in his investigation. During the interview, Clemens takes notes, listens attentively, and at first appears to have a clear idea of what exactly it is he wants to find out, that is, more about the disappearance of children from the *Helianau-Institut*: 'ob sie wisse, was es mit den sogenannten *Relokationen* auf sich habe, deren verständnisloser Zeuge ich während meiner Praktikumszeit des Öfteren geworden war' (*I* 20). Yet two things quickly become apparent: on the one hand, the fact that Frau Häusler-Zinnbret gives deliberately evasive answers as soon as Clemens asks specifically about the *Relokationen*; and, on the other hand, that Clemens is not at all in control of the interview. Clemens is not only ill-equipped in terms of preparation: he has only prepared three questions in advance ('Mehr war mir nicht eingefallen', *I* 25), and cites an old edition of Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's book, which, according to the psychologist is 'wirklich nicht mehr aktuell' (*I* 57). As a result, Clemens spends a lot of the interview merely nodding ('Ich nickte nur. […] Ich nickte unbestimmt', *I* 29), and, in some instances, he and Frau Häusler-Zinnbret appear to swap the roles of interviewer and interviewee. We also see here the first occurrence of what becomes a regular refrain when other characters, who clearly know more than Clemens does about the disappearing children than he does, respond incredulously to his apparent inattentiveness and ignorance with variations on: 'Das müssen Sie doch gesehen haben' (*I* 24). Even Robert, as Clemens's pupil, does not appear to hold his teacher in particularly high regard. As a pupil at the Institute, Robert appears to know more than Clemens, perhaps even something about the

Relokationen, yet he never tells his teacher what he knows, merely reproaching him at one point: 'Sie wissen überhaupt nicht, wie das funktioniert, oder?' (*I* 250). In a later conversation between Clemens and Robert's parents, Robert's father admonishes Clemens more aggressively: 'Sie verstehen gar nicht, was los ist, oder? Sie haben wirklich überhaupt nichts begriffen, oder? […] Wie kann Ihnen das nicht auffallen!' (*I* 269). It is everywhere implied in the novel that Clemens ought to have noticed something obviously going on at the Institute, but neither we as readers nor Clemens ever find out what this is.

To a certain extent, this lack of awareness is framed as a result of Clemens's own personal struggles. As far as the reader can tell, Clemens is not an unreliable narrator, in the sense that his narrative does not contain any obvious falsehoods, apart from a few points on which he contradicts himself (in an almost Felicitas-like manner, Clemens appears to have five different *Lieblingsromane*).[143] However, as indicated above, Clemens regularly experiences difficulties in communication, both in terms of articulating his own points and understanding his interlocutors. In his interview with Frau Stennitzer, the mother of the indigo child Christoph Stennitzer, he tells a story only to discover immediately afterward 'dass meine […] Anekdote überhaupt nicht zum Thema passte' (*I* 129). When talking to the child, Clemens himself recognises how inarticulate his first question is: '– Hallo, Christoph. Mein Name ist Clemens. Ich schreibe eine Reportage über … Na ja, ich wollte fragen, wie's dir so damit geht, ich meine, zu wissen … Mein Satz brach in der Mitte auseinander, und beide Teile fielen zu Boden' (*I* 122). In his first meeting with Dr. Rudolph, Clemens has trouble following the principal's words and has to ask for clarification on several occasions ('Sie meinen, ich muss mich das fragen?', *I* 194). Especially during his time at the Institute, Clemens repeatedly perceives his own lack of agency, at point remarking: 'Ich stand allein auf meinem Flecken Erde und rührte mich nicht. Wie eine Schachfigur, die darauf wartet, weitergeschoben zu werden. Von alleine käme sie nie auf die Idee, ihr Feld zu verlassen' (*I* 192). Besides experiencing sudden bouts of panic, autophobia, and

[143] The text mentions the following (unsurprising) selection: Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (*I* 93), Kobo Abe's *Die Känguruhhefte* (*I* 169), Halldór Laxness's *Am Gletscher* (*I* 355), Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* (*I* 369), and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (*I* 447).

claustrophobia (*I* 87, 102, 132, among others), Clemens also suffers from headaches and concentration problems, which seem to date from his time at the Institute: 'die ich als Folge meiner Arbeit im Helianau-Institut bekommen hatte' (*I* 95) – in other words, the 'Spätfolgen der Indigo-Belastung' (*I* 2) attributed to Setz in the book's semi-fictional biographical blurb. The result is that, whenever it appears to the reader that a key element of the plot will be revealed by another character, Clemens either fails to notice, fails to pursue his line of questioning when he receives evasive answers, or experiences another lapse in his concentration which prevents him from piecing together the full story. One particularly representative moment in this regard is a phone conversation between Clemens and his girlfriend Julia. During the phone call, Clemens appears to almost experience a kind of epiphany, but fails to articulate his realisation before his headache returns and the insight is lost. Due its representative nature, the passage is worth quoting at some length:

> – Ich finde die Vorstellung von Seifenblasen seltsam, sagte ich.
> – So? Inwiefern?
> – Na ja, ich meine, diese Luft, die da in diese Kugel eingesperrt ist, diese klare Grenze zwischen Innen und Außen, diese …
> Ich stockte. […]
> – Warte, mir ist gerade etwas klargeworden … die Grenze zwischen Innen und Außen, wie bei der Seifenblase … Ich muss nur … Ich brauch nur etwas zu schreiben …
> – Oh, ist das jetzt dieser Moment wie bei *Dr. House* oder *The Closer* oder *Monk*, wo er etwas sagt, was nichts mit dem Fall zu tun hat, und plötzlich stockt er, und sein Blick wandert so komisch zur Seite, und er hat die Lösung?
> – Äh … was?
> – Jetzt sollte eigentlich die Musik einsetzen, irgendwas mit Vibraphon oder wie immer das Ding am Anfang von *American Beauty* heißt.
> – Warte einen Augenblick, ich vergesse sonst, was mir eingefallen ist. […] Ah, dieses dauernde Stechen im Kopf … ich kann mich nie auf eine einzige Sache konzentrieren.
> – Das ist alles die Schuld dieses Instituts!
> – Nein. Nein, das ist es nicht … Ach, verdammt, was war es jetzt … ich hab's wieder vergessen …
> – Seifenblasen. Der Raum in der Seifenblase. Die klare Grenze zwischen Innen und Außen. So hast du's gesagt. Soll ich noch mal zurückspulen?
> – Nein, ich … ah, ich hab keine Ahnung … Verdammter Mist, es ist weg … (*I* 321-322)

Instead of the epiphany, the solution ('Lösung') to the mysterious disappearances, or at the very least an insight into the peculiar predicament of the indigo children, the reader is confronted with pop-culture references and the 'Eureka moment' trope, with which the reader is assumed to be familiar from popular TV series – or rather, the trope is subverted and the reader is left with inconclusive hints and fragments.

It is true that the reader's frustration at never receiving conclusive answers is not due to Clemens's imperceptiveness alone, as the characters with whom he engages also tend to deliberately withhold information. As is the case in the interview with Frau Häusler-Zinnbret, Clemens is not taken particularly seriously by many of the other people he interacts with, something which becomes most conspicuous through the constant mispronunciation of his name as 'Seitz', 'Seyss', or even 'Senf' (*I* 173, 455, 184). Clemens's relationship with Dr. Rudolph, as indicated above, is fraught from the very beginning, and this is clearly also due to the principal's consistently evasive answers. When Clemens asks about the *Relokationen*, for example, Dr. Rudolph wilfully misunderstands Clemens, and then promptly changes the topic of conversation:

> – Der Felix ist inzwischen reloziert. […]
> – Entschuldigung, aber was bedeutet *reloziert*?
> Dr. Rudolph schaute mich erstaunt an.
> – Locus. Lateinisch für der Ort. Relokation. Relozieren.
> – Also meinen Sie, er ist in eine andere Schule versetzt worden?
> – Nun ja, sagte Dr. Rudolph. Das könnte man so sagen. Wissen Sie, Herr Seitz, die Welt funktioniert für Kinder mit eingeschränkten sozialen Optionen ein wenig anders als für uns. Wie ich immer sage: Es gibt keine Happy Ends in solchen Dingen. Aber Fair Ends kann man doch verlangen. Fair Ends, wissen Sie?
> Ich nickte. (*I* 210)

Although it is implied by the story that Clemens is let go from his teacher-training position at the Institute because he has indeed learned too much about Dr. Rudolph's nefarious plans, it becomes clear in the end that he never really learns anything of significance. Even the mysterious Herr Ferenc, who appears to be the one pulling the strings behind the *Relokationen*, notices in the final chapters of the book that Clemens does not appear to have the slightest idea of what is going on: 'Sie haben wirklich nicht die geringste …?' (*I* 379). To counterbalance Clemens's lack of authority, however, the novel makes an extraordinary effort to lend authority to other elements of the text through the inclusion of apparently authentic source material.

Authentic Sources? Pseudo-Documents and Facsimiles in *Indigo*

As indicated above, *Indigo* draws on genre fiction by setting up a mystery story and including thriller-like elements of suspense in a sci-fi setting. The fact that both Clemens's and Robert's

stories are packaged in what reads as a conventional narrative serves to draw the reader's attention away from the novel's more outlandish and bizarre plot points. Wiele makes a similar point when he observes that:

> [S]o schräg-unglaublich der Plot von den aussätzigen 'Indigo-Menschen' daherkommt und sogar stellenweise im Buch selbst ironisiert wird, so viel Aufwand macht der Autor, um ihn andererseits doch wieder mit scheinbar außerfiktionalen Fakten zu unterfüttern. Dieses Verwirrspiel betreibt der Roman mit geradezu kriminellem Aufwand, indem er beständig Dinge und Realitäten behauptet, die manchmal erst bei genauerem Hinsehen zweifelhaft erscheinen. (Wiele 2012)

Specifically, by interspersing the two narrative strands with a variety of pseudo-documents, Setz is able to feign authenticity in what is otherwise a highly implausible plot. The inserted documents include excerpts from fictitious publications, such as Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's book *Das Wesen der Ferne*, photographs, facsimiles, letters, typewritten and handwritten notes collected in Clemens's *rotkarierte* and *grüne Mappe*, and even a patient file for Clemens from the 'Landeskrankenhaus-Universitätsklinikum Graz' (*I* 15). These inserts are all distinguished from the main narrative strands through the use of a variety of typefaces, often including page references to give them the appearance of photocopied pages from books, or including what appear to be Clemens's meticulous handwritten or typewritten reference notes. What makes these inserts particularly interesting is that they are, in most cases, neither entirely fictional (like many of the 'source texts' cited by FH in *Hoppe*) nor fully verifiable (like many of the academic texts cited in *Lookalikes*). The four excerpts from *Das Wesen der Ferne*, for example, all refer to things that exist in the real world: the *Arbre du Ténéré* (*I* 167), the Mojave phone booth (*I* 339), the Alpine legend of the *Tatzelwurm* (*I* 367), and the *Moon Museum* (*I* 443). All of these sections and their real-world counterparts are easy enough for the reader to verify (at the very least, a Wikipedia page exists for each of them), yet the text's referentiality is also disrupted through the addition of Setz's own fictional elements, which are clearly engineered to fit into the *Indigo* plot.[144] For example, in the case of the section on the *Tatzelwurm* (a strictly folkloric creature), we read that:

[144] As the excerpts do not match their Wikipedia entries exactly (and some of these exist only as English, rather than German, Wikipedia entries), the publication of *Indigo* was not followed by accusations of

> In Österreich war der Tatzelwurm noch um einige Jahrzehnte länger beheimatet, zu Baubeginn des Sondierstollens für den Semmering-Basistunnel wurden einige kleinere Exemplare aufgescheucht und fortgejagt. Nachdem alle Tatzelwürmer weg waren, klagten viele Arbeiter über starke, anhaltende Kopfschmerzen und Schwindelattacken, was den Fortschritt der Grabung deutlich verlangsamte. (*I* 367)

While the bizarre linking of indigo symptoms to the legend of the *Tatzelwurm* in this case does not vastly increase the novel's verisimilitude, Setz's manipulations of real-world phenomena are more difficult to detect in the case of the facsimiles included in *Indigo*.[145] At three points in the novel, Setz includes facsimiles of the following real-world historical publications: Johann Peter Hebel's *Kalendergeschichten* (1807–1819), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), and James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). The specific (German) editions which the text cites (for example, 'aus: ROBERT BURTON, *Die Anatomie der Melancholie*, übersetzt von Werner von Koppenfels', *I* 117) also exist in the real world, yet a closer inspection of the excerpts once again reveals tampering on Setz's part, as each of the facsimiles once again makes reference to the indigo symptoms.[146] Although the fictitious nature of these excerpts is therefore recognisable, their exact degree of fictionality or factuality is difficult to determine without extensive research. As Wiele memorably phrases it: 'Man könnte sich kaputtgoogeln und

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plagiarism as in the case of *La carte et le territoire*. In terms of the formatting and the style employed, however, these excerpts recall Wikipedia quite clearly.

[145] While unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, there is a potentially rewarding analysis to be made of Setz's adaptation in *Indigo* of Internet legends and online folklore, both in relation to the specific instances of the facsimiles and more broadly to the indigo phenomenon as well. The manner in which Setz incorporates and develops the indigo condition in his novel bears striking similarities to online 'networked narratives' (Mar 2017), especially of the horror genre, such as the Slender Man phenomenon. The online legend of Slender Man, a fictitious monster created in 2009 by a contributor to a horror web forum and then quickly developed further by thousands of other users through a variety of digital media, presents a useful point of comparison with *Indigo*, as they share a number of traits: both narratives deliberately blend fiction and reality in a narrative about supernatural phenomena which nonetheless aims to be as 'believable and authentic' as possible through mimicry of official documentation, the creation of alleged historical precedents, and doctored or appropriated images and photographs (Blank and McNeill 2018: 3, 7, 9). For more on the classification of Slender Man as Internet folklore, see Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill, 'Introduction: Fear has no Face. Creepypasta as Digital Legendry' in *Slender Man Is Coming. Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet*, eds. Blank and McNeill (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2018), pp. 3-23.

[146] I list one example from each excerpt here: 'Und wie nun der Arzt das Kind betrachtete, kamen ihm schreckliche Kopfschmerzen, dann auch Schmerzen im Leib und ein Unwohlsein der Seele' (*I* 81); 'Etwas in der Zusammensetzung der Säfte dieses Jungen Mannes war es wohl, das sich auf eine besondere Weise beleidigend auf das psychische und physische Gleichgewicht anderer Geschöpfe auswirkte' (*I* 116); 'Wer immer sich lange mit ihm abgab, erlitt Kopf- und Gliederreißen, Gelenksrheumatismus und heftiges Übelbefinden' (*I* 136).

verrücktsuchen, wollte man der Echtheit aller Quellen und Zitate in diesem Roman auf den Grund gehen' (Wiele 2012).

It is true that the processes of reading the novel and of researching its material online are not as directly linked in *Indigo* as they are in *Lookalikes*, as we saw in the previous chapter. Setz's novel does not include any explicit instructions to the reader to stop and google any of its contents, since, as mentioned above, the text otherwise makes such an effort to present itself as conventional genre fiction.[147] Instead, *Indigo* invites its readers to reflect on the credibility and trustworthiness of the results of their online searches. Like *Lookalikes*, *Indigo* contains an – albeit ironic – reference to the pervasive conspiracy theory that Michael Jackson is still alive ('Michael lebt', *I* 301), yet most of the novel's allusions to questionable Internet content are more fully integrated into the indigo plot. We see this in the case of an early warning to the reader not to believe everything they read, either in the novel or online, which is contained in a brief retrospective on the life of Tommy Beringer, apparently the first child to elicit indigo symptoms in this fictional world. After describing the gradual discovery of the boy's condition, the section ends by informing the reader that the Beringer family, having emigrated from the United States to Canada, now leads an extremely reclusive life and refuses all enquiries from the public regarding Tommy:

> Jeder Versuch, Tommy Beringer ausfindig zu machen, wird von der Mutter konsequent abgeblockt. Er ist in keinem Schulregister des Landes gemeldet, und eine Webseite mit seinem Namen, auf der hin und wieder Fotos eines Teenagers auf einem Fahrrad und kurze, pathetische Texte über das Weltall und die Einsamkeit gepostet wurden, stellte sich als Scherz zweier College-Studenten aus Kalifornien heraus. (*I* 35-36)

If the Tommy Beringer website is a 'Scherz', might not the whole indigo condition or any other element of the novel turn out to be a joke or hoax, originating on the Internet and perpetuated by some unknown collective of anonymous pranksters or conspiracy theorists? At various points throughout the novel, characters do voice doubts about the reality of the indigo condition. Even Clemens questions the legitimacy of the various accounts he gathers. Hearing Frau

[147] There is one instance in which Robert googles Clemens when attempting to find out more about his former teacher's alleged crime: 'Seine Suchbegriffe waren: *setz clemens haut abgezogen mann hunde*' (*I* 237). Yet readers can be fairly certain that using these key words in their own online searches will merely yield references to Setz and *Indigo*.

Stennitzer talk about burial regulations for indigo children, for example, Clemens is at first disinclined to believe her: 'All das kam mir extrem unglaubwürdig vor' (*I* 125). In her letter to Clemens, Robert's mother, Frau Tätzel, writes that: 'wir wollten ja auch glauben, dass das alles nichts ist. Nichts Bleibendes, nichts, was wirklich mit unserem Kind zu tun hat. Nichts Reales' (*I* 13). When Clemens meets Max Schaufler, a fellow pupil of Robert's at the Institute, for the first time, and does not notice any of the usual symptoms, his reaction is to think to himself: 'Ich spüre nichts. Überhaupt nichts. Ein normaler Junge. Ein normaler Tag. Keine Wirkung. Alles Hirngespinste' (*I* 190). The novel's final pages even include a handwritten note, referring to a false account of an indigo child, that reads: 'Siehe Bericht über Frau aus Großbritannien, die davon überzeugt war, dass ihr Kind ein I-Kind war. Heute ist eindeutig belegt, dass das Kind die üble Wirkung gar nicht besaß' (*I* 455). The novel's sheer mass of information, seemingly insignificant details, and historical, literary, and pop-cultural references therefore presents an immense challenge to the reader: what to do with all this information? What is relevant and believable, and what is not? The well-trained reader, especially a reader of mystery stories, will, of course, look for important clues and codes among the trivia. However, as is the case in most novels examined in this thesis, *Indigo* both encourages and mocks this approach. Seemingly significant patterns and clues appear throughout the text, yet they never resolve into a coherent narrative.

Apparent Interconnectedness: Echoes and Patterns in the Parallel Narratives

As if to counterbalance the isolation of the indigo children and the fragmentation of the plot, Setz creates associative links between the two main characters and their respective narrative strands. Despite Clemens's and Robert's narratives taking place during different time periods, and never fully or satisfyingly intersecting, Setz creates links between the disparate sections to create a semblance of interconnectedness by recalling themes, terminology, or imagery from earlier passages. Unlike in *Hoppe* and *Lookalikes*, therefore, there is a clear link between Indigo's themes and its associative, interconnected construction. The novel's apparent

interconnectedness is not implemented purely in order to demonstrate the author's signature or craftsmanship, but instead to counteract the fragmentation of *Indigo*'s plot and characters. As we will see, however, as much as *Indigo* might encourage the reader to decode the text, the evocation of interconnectedness through patterns and codes mostly serves to subvert the reader's expectation of a satisfying resolution to the mystery. We see this most clearly in how Robert and Clemens are framed as opposites, but with strangely complementary narratives that echo one another throughout the novel. Although, as indicated above, it is possible to read Robert as a character at least partially inspired by the author's own life or experiences, Robert's character is, for the most part, set in opposition to Clemens's. While Clemens is empathetic and compassionate, to the point where he is physically unable to witness people and especially animals being subjected to cruelty without feeling faint and nauseated, Robert struggles with these emotions ('er wusste, dass er jetzt so etwas wie Mitleid empfinden könnte', *I* 110), is fascinated by stories involving animal abuse, albeit mostly in the name of science (*I* 205-206), and frequently engages in fantasies of violence and revenge. In one example, Robert contemplates in graphic and painstaking detail how he might traumatise his neighbour's (rude and violent) son by committing suicide in front of him (*I* 49-50). At the same time, however, Clemens and Robert also share certain characteristics. Since, for the most part, they both find interacting with people and, more broadly, engaging with society, challenging and stressful, both characters routinely take painkillers and sedatives (*I* 387, 418) and take comfort in the monotony of songs or music listened to on repeat (*I* 132, 169, 295).[148] Both characters experience loneliness and isolation in similar terms, relating to the extreme remoteness of outer space: Clemens feels remote from everyday life ('Ich fühlte mich wie ein Raumschiff', *I* 342), while Robert, in one instance, experiences walking down the street as if he were observing things from afar: 'Robert […] beobachtete von seinem wackeligen Kopf-Raumschiff aus, wie er durch die Straßen schwebte' (*I* 387).

Even more strikingly, Robert's and Clemens's narratives also echo one another in

[148] Characters being 'gut eingestellt' (*I* 105, 195, 387) through medication is also a recurring theme in the novel.

instances in which both characters have similar experiences, often sensory perceptions, or entertain similar thoughts, and which are, at times, only a few pages apart. When Clemens perceives a peculiar smell and identifies it as 'Desinfektionsmittel', which reminds him of '[d]ie Krankenstation im Helianau-Institut' (*I* 63-64), Robert, only a few pages later, remarks on the specific smell of psychiatric clinics: 'der spezielle Psychiatriegeruch' (*I* 67). When Clemens watches a 'Dokumentation über Paare mit Tourette-Syndrom' (*I* 102), Robert a few pages later sees '[e]ine Gameshow mit behinderten Menschen (Blinde vs. Rollstuhlfahrer, Tourette vs. Contergan)' (*I* 107). As a final example, when Clemens asks himself: 'Wie […] machen das die Männer, die sagen: Ich gehe nur kurz Zigaretten holen – und die seither wie vom Erdboden verschluckt waren' (*I* 101), Robert repeats the question to himself in an almost identical manner: 'Wie machen das die Männer, die sagen, ich gehe nur kurz Zigaretten holen, und dann nie wieder auftauchen?' (*I* 110). Although these instances of echoing contribute, on the one hand, to the readers' sense of déjà-vu and confusion as to which narrative strand they are currently reading (especially as these are not specifically distinguished from one another through chapter titles or typefaces), they also convey a semblance of simultaneity and interrelatedness to the reader. Most importantly, because Robert's and Clemens's stories are thus interlinked, these echoes imply the existence of a satisfactory resolution to the plot, as long as the reader follows the signs and joins all the right dots.

This implication is made most obvious through Setz's use of a literal pattern, namely that of the quincunx. The *OED* defines the quincunx as '[a] pattern used for planting trees in which they are arranged in one or more groups of five, so placed that four occupy the corners of a square or rectangle and the fifth occupies its centre', with its extended use meaning 'an arrangement of five objects in this pattern' (Oxford English Dictionary). The pattern has significance for a broad variety of disciplines and fields, such as religion, heraldry, numerology, architecture, and computer graphics, to name a few. In terms of literary connotations, however, the most obvious is English author and polymath Sir Thomas Browne's philosophical discourse *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658), in which the quincunx in art and nature features as evidence of

intelligent design. In the context of German literature more specifically, Browne's quincunx is famously referenced in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995), in which it features as a structuring metaphor. Considering the wildly different content and style of these two literary works, the quincunx is unlikely to elicit any direct comparisons between *Indigo* and Sebald's text. Yet the pattern's associative richness, and the aspect of universality which Browne ascribes to it, are sure to catch the reader's eye when scouring the text for interpretative clues. Although the pattern is mentioned earlier in *Indigo*, it is most noticeably referenced in the novel's fifth chapter, fittingly entitled 'Die Quincunx' (*I* 189), which even contains an image of the pattern (*I* 196).[149] Here it is used in reference to the pattern by which indigo children, pupils of the *Helianau-Institut*, are arranged in a group photograph which Dr. Rudolph shows Clemens after his arrival at the Institute. Although Clemens's narrative only briefly comments on the pattern here ('Dieses überall in der Natur und der Kunst vorkommende Design wirkte auf mich sehr beruhigend', *I* 196), Dr. Rudolph in a later chapter explains the significance of geometrical patterns in the way in which indigo children at the Institute behave around and interact with one another in the schoolyard:

> Das Verhalten der Kinder im Garten zu erleben sei schon ziemlich beeindruckend, […] [meinte] Dr. Rudolph. […] Ein menschliches Mobile. […] [E]s werde ihm immer ganz sonderbar, wenn sie sich auf diese Art hin und her bewegten und miteinander redeten, als [...] hätten sie vorne und hinten Augen. Oder Fühler. Oder eine Art Spinnennetz um sich, und einer braucht bloß an einer Stelle zu zupfen, schon wissen die anderen genau, wo er gezupft hat. Und niemals [...] stoße einer an eine Mauer und werde so in die Zone eines Komilitonen gedrängt, wenn dieser Punkt erreicht sei, bilde sich einfach ein neues Muster. Schon bemerkenswert und ungeheuerlich, mit welchen Situationen sich der Mensch zu arrangieren verstehe. Und dann komme auch noch eine solche Geometrie dabei heraus, die einem den Atem nehme. (*I* 211-212)

While we later discover that Dr. Rudolph's assessment of the pupils' behaviour is not entirely accurate, the quincunx can nonetheless be read as a symbol of the simultaneous isolation and interconnectedness of the indigo children.

The novel even goes so far as to suggest that this symbol might also apply to the two main characters and their narratives by way of metafictional commentary, as the quincunx

[149] While the image of the quincunx in *Indigo* is not exactly the same as that on the frontispiece of Browne's *The Garden of Cyrus* or the copy of this in Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*, it strongly recalls the images in both these texts through its 5×4 structure of dots.

reappears in both narrative strands and in similar situations. In an off-hand remark at the start of the novel, Clemens observes that he was obliged to walk from his home to Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's house for the interview, because his bicycle has been mysteriously disassembled: 'Mein Fahrrad war in der Nacht zuvor von einem Unbekannten in alle Einzelteile zerlegt worden. Fein säuberlich waren sie heute Morgen im Garten gelegen, die Räder, der Rahmen, der Lenker, in annähernd dem Quincunx-Muster entsprechender Anordnung' (*I* 22). Later, the reader discovers that, in order to calm himself down ('sich […] abreagieren', *I* 181), Robert often breaks things or takes them apart. At one point, he disassembles an umbrella, a process which is described in strikingly similar terms to Clemens's bicycle: 'Er ging ins Vorzimmer und zerlegte einen Regenschirm in seine Einzelteile. […] Cordula […] stieg […] vorsichtig über […] den in leicht verschobenen Reihen, annähernd quincunxartig, angeordneten Teilen hinweg' (*I* 114). The similarity of these passages in terms of content and terminology is hardly coincidental, marking a further point of interconnectedness between the two narrative strands. As thematically relevant to the indigo plot as the pattern of the quincunx might be, however, it does not fulfil its implied function as interpretative pattern or key for the novel's mystery narrative. At every turn, the text sets up patterns and clues for the reader to follow, but these never amount to more than vague associations or hints at a bigger picture. Although they are thematically relevant, keep the reader invested in the story, and imply a rich lore behind the novel, the dots never do satisfyingly connect and the patterns, in the end, are revealed to be just (literal) patterns with no greater interpretative significance for the story's narrative progression.

Clemens the Author: 'Ablenkungsgeschichte' or Ghost-Written Manuscript?

Were it not for *Indigo*'s farther-reaching thematics, therefore, it would be easy to read this novel in a similar manner to *Hoppe*, that is, as an exercise in genre subversion for the sake of it. However, even after demonstrating so thoroughly Clemens's deficiencies as a figure of authority, Setz appears to make one attempt to potentially rehabilitate his autofictional character and

restore his status of authorship. As indicated earlier, *Indigo* does inform us that, in Robert's timeline, Clemens has given up teaching to become a writer and has published a novel. The text does not furnish us with many details, but from what we can gather of the novel's plot (*I* 364) and the name of the chapter in which the novel features ('Söhne und Planeten', *I* 359), Clemens's publication resembles Setz's 2007 novel *Söhne und Planeten*. At one point, while discussing Clemens's court case and her belief that the teacher-turned-writer is not, in fact, innocent of the murder of which he has been acquitted, Robert's neighbour Frau Rabl explains to him somewhat confusedly that the novel which Clemens has written apparently contains a code that proves his innocence:

> [I]n einem Interview hat er jetzt behauptet, dass das Buch einen Code enthält. Er hat es damals geschrieben, als er … ah, wie war das … Er … er behauptet, dass es irgendwie seine Unschuld beweist. […] Keine Ahnung, irgendeine Art Code, oder so. Aber wenn Sie mich fragen, das ist vollkommener Schwachsinn, ein Verkaufstrick. (*I* 364)

Although, as we will see below, the novel in question here is not, of course, *Indigo*, the implication is nonetheless that Clemens's – and by extension Setz's – novels can be decoded, if the reader only knows how. Robert's interest in the novel is piqued, and he finds himself idly checking the novel for anagrams: 'Robert […] blätterte in dem Buch des Lehrers und kontrollierte, ob die Anfangsbuchstaben der Kapitel vielleicht einen Satz oder zumindest ein Anagramm ergaben' (*I* 366). In light of the above, this can easily be read as ironic metafictional commentary on Setz's part: once we as readers know that the plot does not resolve and that there is no interpretative code to be found in the novel, we might be inclined to agree with Frau Rabl that the text's gimmicks – both in terms of genre mimicry and autofiction – are just that, gimmicks and nothing more.

What makes Clemens's role as an author in *Indigo* more interesting than a mere 'Verkaufstrick', however, is that it allows Setz to play with his notion of authorship as described above, a conception of authorship in which not being in control is framed as a positive: 'ich als Erfinder dieser Welt bin überfordert. Das ist sehr angenehm, genau dieser Moment soll beim Schreiben entstehen, denn sonst wird das Buch nicht lebendig' (Graber 2012). Jessen's assessment of *Indigo* as a novel '[in dem] Fiktionen ineinandergeschachtelt [sind], ohne dass

eine ordnende Hand Glaubwürdigkeit schaffen würde' (Jessen 2012) therefore corresponds exactly to Setz's own conception of the text. However, as we will see, the text both encourages a reading of Clemens as author, while at the same time undermining this interpretation entirely by implying that none of Clemens's texts are actually written by Clemens himself. In doing so, the text stages an extreme dissociation of the author-figure from textual authorship and ownership.[150] As is suggested in the novel, apart from writing *Söhne und Planeten*, Clemens might also have written parts, or indeed all, of *Indigo*. We see this implied in another conversation between Clemens and Julia. After an upsetting episode at the Institute, Clemens calls Julia on the phone, and, in order to help him take his mind off his unease, Julia suggests he write something: 'Vielleicht solltest du was schreiben. […] Einfach so, um dich abzulenken. Das hat bisher immer gut funktioniert' (*I* 233). More, specifically, Julia recommends that he select one of his pupils to write about: 'Such dir einen von ihnen aus. Und stell dir vor, wie er später einmal sein wird. Welches Leben ihn erwartet. […] Such dir einfach einen aus und stell dir vor, wie er sich später verhalten wird' (*I* 234). Clemens's 'Ablenkungsgeschichte' (*I* 293), as Julia calls it, is only referred to on a small number of occasions, yet its existence allows for a potential reading of Robert's narrative as written by Clemens. As we later discover, Clemens does decide to follow Julia's advice and – as is implied ('*Für R.T.*', *I* 234) – to write about, or at least for, Robert. While the text does not support this theory well enough for it to be a fully valid, let alone the only valid, interpretation of the novel, the existence of this possible interpretation has the following implications: on the one hand, the inconsistencies and gaps in the narrative now have a clear origin and can be explained through Clemens's own lack of understanding; and, on the other hand, the odd echoes and correspondences between Clemens's and Robert's narrative strands now also make more sense because they appear to have been so designed by Clemens. In this sense, Clemens corresponds almost too faithfully to Setz's conception of authorship as described above: never fully in control of things and trying very hard not to 'stand in the way' of the story (Haberl 2015). If we accept this interpretation, Clemens is, somewhat paradoxically,

[150] As we will see in the following chapter, this is done even more explicitly in *Éros mélancolique*.

granted a certain degree of authority, since he is, potentially, the author of most, or at least half, of the novel. In the end, however, *Indigo* also finds a way to undermine even this degree of authority on Clemens's part by suggesting that he is not, in fact, an author or novelist at all.

In the final pages of the book, Clemens's investigation appears to have gone as far as it will go. He has met the mysterious Herr Ferenc and their encounter has been barely any more enlightening than any of Clemens's previous inquiries, and Clemens himself appears to be already unravelling a little by this point. The narrative in *Indigo* has also become so fragmented in its final stages that it is difficult for the reader to piece together or make sense of any information that might be given here. It is possible, however, to infer that the organisation behind Herr Ferenc, which has tolerated his inquiries up to this point, is now encouraging him to direct his attentions elsewhere. One of *Indigo*'s final chapters, entitled 'Zettelwerk. Rotkarierte Mappe' (*I* 451), contains a section prefaced with the note: '[Ein Briefumschlag mit der Aufschrift *Klarstellung*. Der einzige in der Mappe. Inhalt: mehrere lose Blätter, eng beschrieben]' (*I* 458). The brief section appears to describe an encounter between Clemens and an unknown man, who hands him a manuscript – presumably, as we will see, the manuscript to *Söhne und Planeten*. This is accompanied by the following exchange between the two characters:

> – Wir bieten Ihnen einen Tauschhandel an, Herr Seitz. […]
> Er zog etwas aus seinem Rucksack und überreichte es mir. Ein sehr dünnes und ein etwas dickeres Paket Papier.
> – Ist nicht gerade Fontane, aber Sie werden feststellen, dass Sie lieber *diesen* Weg einschlagen, als auf dem zu verfau… zu verweilen, auf dem Sie sich jetzt befinden. […] Hier, sehen Sie sich dieses Manuskript an. Generisches Zeug, im Grunde. Aber gut gemacht. Richtig gute Simulation. Was sagen Sie zum Titel?
> – Klingt seltsam.
> – Ja, nicht? Das geht gut, heutzutage. Man denkt an Familie, den Kampf der Generationen, solche Dinge. Es ist natürlich eine Mogelpackung, zusammengeklebte Teile, die nicht wirklich zusammengehören. Ein Durcheinander, aber es ist bereits angenommen. Es ist Ihres. Wenn Sie es möchten. (*I* 458-459)

Apart from further semi-ironic metafictional self-deprecation on Setz's part here, what this passage implies is that *Söhne und Planeten* is, in fact, a ghost-written novel, and that Clemens has nothing whatsoever to do with its creation. Thus Clemens's status of author, both as a novelist and a figure of authority, is severely undermined – even more so, I would argue, through the vagueness of the passage here. Since *Indigo* raises far more questions in its ending

than it answers, the reader is left to speculate on various potential outcomes and implications. The most viable manner of reading the text, then, is one which allows for the co-existence of several possible, perhaps even conflicting, narratives. It is telling that the second excerpt of Frau Häusler-Zinnbret's book *Das Wesen der Ferne*, a copy of which is included in Clemens's *rotkarierte Mappe*, appears under the heading 'Zwei Wahrheiten' (*I* 62). This can easily be read as an early cautionary message to the reader that the novel has no single truth to offer. Add to this the few but recurring hints in the novel that the indigo condition might not even be a real thing, and the reader is left completely without any stable ground upon which to base their reading of the text.

Conclusion: Setz's Internet Novel

As becomes clear from the above analysis, *Indigo* does not conform to conventional autofiction. Although, through Setz's use of Clemens in *Indigo*, the novel technically qualifies as autofiction, the author does not primarily seek to stylise, reinvent, or comment on himself or his literary reception through his novel. Setz thereby stands in stark contrast to the first three authors discussed in this thesis, as we saw in the analyses of *Une forme de vie*, *Hoppe*, and *La carte et le territoire*, despite some similarities between these texts and *Indigo* in terms of the subversion of genre and readers' expectations. Instead, Setz's self-fictionalisation is subsumed into his wider literary project. The conflation of Setz and his fictional counterpart in the biographical note in the novel's blurb is an early signal to the reader to carefully consider their rationale for determining the credibility of various sources, whether associated with the name of a specific author or not. *Indigo* is a novel that allows for the co-existence of contradictory elements in the two narrative strands that never quite match up or complement each other in a satisfactory manner. In this respect, *Indigo* is arguably a reflection of the Internet, as a space where fact and fiction seem to comfortably co-exist, often without discernible author figures to legitimise what is written; a space where texts proliferate, are copied, refashioned, contaminated, lost and found, and where it becomes impossible to track origins or developments with any accuracy; and a

space where everything is interconnected. Through references to obscure facts and popular- and (online) nerd culture, and through the implementation of facsimiles and fictitious sources, *Indigo* encourages readers to carefully evaluate the narratives and information conveyed in the novel and to re-examine their assumptions behind determining trustworthy sources.

In his review of *Die Stunde*, Jan Drees also emphasises how closely Setz's online presence, on social media in particular, is associated with his novel-writing. In this context, Drees observes that '[d]as Buch muss heute mehr können als nur eine Geschichte präsentieren. Es muss in einer Form daherkommen, die netzkompatibel ist. […] Die Literatur ist multimedial geworden' (Drees 2015). According to Drees, Setz even anticipates a sort of Wiki being created for *Indigo*, as it has been for Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006), for instance, with readers annotating a digital copy of the text, which in turn can be read by other readers alongside the novel itself. In fact, following the publication of *Die Stunde*, this has become a reality, with the creation of a website (frau-und-gitarre.de) on which critics and academics can discuss and exchange readings of the text. A PDF version of the text has also been made available by sobooks.de, which provides search and commenting functions (Drees 2015). As seen from the above analysis, *Indigo* already anticipates its online reception and its integration into a wider network of online text. On the one hand, *Indigo* could be seen as an appreciation – a celebration, even – of the free, unchecked proliferation and perpetual re-appropriation of stories and information in an unregulated space that seems to generate content spontaneously and without easily discernible origins. On the other hand, it also warns of the potential dangers inherent in such a space, in which it is easy to get lost among misinformation and manipulated data, a space in which conspiracy theories can receive mainstream attention and actual real-life phenomena can be dismissed as 'fake news'. Wiele refers to the confusion of information, trivia, disparate narrative elements, and meandering plot lines in Setz's novels as a 'permanente hermeneutische Herausforderung, manchmal eine Zumutung', but agrees that: 'Vielleicht ist auch das ein Programm [der Bücher], nämlich die Frage zu stellen, was eigentlich relevante Informationen sind' (Wiele 2015). As we will see in the following and final chapter of this thesis, *Éros*

mélancolique raises many similar questions, especially regarding authorship and textual ownership in a digital context. Garréta and Roubaud's co-written novel not only gestures toward a collective model of authorship, but also takes the attempt to dissociate the autofictional narrators as much as possible from the writing of the text to its extreme.

Chapter Six

From 'manuscrit trouvé' to 'fichier PDF': Textual Ownership and Contested Authority in Anne F. Garréta and Jacques Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique* (2009)

Introduction: *Éros mélancolique* as Oulipian Autofiction?

In his review of Anne F. Garréta and Jacques Roubaud's novel *Éros mélancolique* (henceforth *Éros*), Mathieu Lindon points out the particular risk involved in analysing this text. According to Lindon, the reviewer of *Éros* 'craint de passer pour un imbécile qui n'aurait pas su déchiffrer tous les indices et les références du texte' (Lindon 2009). To a certain extent, this is a danger inherent in critiques of any Oulipian text: one need only call to mind the early review by René-Marill Albérès of Georges Perec's quintessentially Oulipian novel *La disparition* (1969) which almost entirely missed the point of the book by failing to notice one of its most crucial features – namely that it is a constraint-based, lipogrammatic text written entirely without the use of the letter 'e' (Becker 2015: iii). As members of the Oulipo, or 'ouvroir de littérature potentielle', both Roubaud and Garréta have a strong interest in exploring the rules and constraints that, according to the Oulipo, underlie and govern all literary production. Founded in Paris in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais, the Oulipo has famously described its members as 'rats qui ont à construire le labyrinthe dont ils se proposent de sortir' (Oulipo 1973: 32). Oulipians themselves have long insisted that, and many critics, including David Gascoigne, Jan Baetens, and Alison James, have demonstrated how, rather than stymying the author's creativity, constraints in fact serve as stimuli to generate creative solutions to the problems which the authors set themselves. In the case of *Éros*, Lindon concludes that, contrary to classic examples of Oulipian literature, this text is not, in fact, a puzzle to be solved: 'les […] passages lacunaires du récit […] ne sont pas des codes, […] ils ne sont pas à reconstituer' (Lindon 2009). To a certain extent, a degree of unsolvability, or a stubborn remnant that resists inclusion in a tidy interpretative narrative is, in itself, a staple feature of Oulipian – and, indeed, particularly Perecquian – writing, Perec's works being representative of what one might call a high

postmodern, Oulipian canon. As will become clear in the analysis below, the authors of *Éros* very deliberately align themselves within this Perecquian tradition, including Oulipian constraints and drawing on many of the same motifs, themes, and tropes that we find in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975; henceforth *W*), *La disparition*, *La Vie mode d'emploi* (1978), and *"53 jours"* (posthumously published in 1989): the manipulation of images through the motif of mirrors and photography; themes of disappearance, loss, bereavement, the fallibility of memory and reconstructing the past; the trope of the futile quest or project, unreliable narrators, intersecting and/or conflicting narratives. Yet what sets *Éros* apart from its precursors is a complexification of the Oulipian novel's diegetic levels, narrative construction, and genre categorisation. It achieves this intricacy through the conflation of a classic Oulipian text with an autofictional frame narrative.

Of all the novels examined in this thesis, *Éros* is the one most clearly written in response to two distinct narrative traditions – that of the Oulipo and that of autofiction – whereas other writers discussed in this thesis tend to focus on developing their own personal canon, or writing against the vaguer background of autofiction and the postmodern novel, broadly conceived. To a certain extent, this makes an interpretative approach to *Éros* more straightforward than is the case with the other texts in the present selection, yet it also makes it a much more niche text. While in some cases, as we will see, the narrative and structural games which *Éros* plays show some similarities to previous texts discussed in this thesis, Garréta and Roubaud's novel is far removed from the ostensibly more plot-driven texts we have seen so far, such as *Une forme de vie*, *La carte et le territoire*, and even those parts of *Indigo* that read as conventional narrative. As the following analysis will show, *Éros* departs from Perecquian works like *La disparition* in the sense that neither is the text a puzzle to be solved (although it encourages certain interpretations more than others), nor is the author presented as the 'perpetrator' of the constraint(s) who is working behind the scenes and embodies or provides the solution to the mystery of the text. Yet *Éros* also departs from conventions of the autofiction genre by casting the overtly autofictional characters in the text as minor ones and structuring the novel such that

the vast majority of the text is about someone else entirely. As this chapter argues, through combining narrative and generic elements in this specific manner, Garréta and Roubaud are able to create a text that responds to contemporary concerns regarding the attribution and evaluation of information, and narrative levels and voices in storytelling after the digital turn. In contrast to *Indigo*, *Éros* barely qualifies as autofiction, since the autofictional characters AFG and JR appear exclusively in the outermost frame narrative, on only six of the novel's 299 pages.[151]

Before looking more closely at the text, however, it is worth briefly introducing the authors. The first new member to join the group of original founders, 'currently the most prominent representative of the Oulipo and an outstanding theorist of the group's notion of constraint' (Baetens and Poucel 2009: 627), Roubaud is a mathematician and a very prolific writer of poetry and prose. Much of Roubaud's work is written according to strict mathematical constraints, and it demonstrates the author's keen interest in, among other things, medieval literature, troubadour poetry, photography, Lewis Carroll, Japanese literature, and the game of Go. Although Roubaud's literary subjects tend to vary from publication to publication, in distinction to some Oulipian writers, his corpus is often viewed by critics as a cohesive œuvre, not least due to his experimental, autobiographical prose work known as his 'Projet'. This spans six volumes, or 'branches' – *'le grand incendie de Londres'* (1989; henceforth *'le grand incendie'*) being the first and most renowned – and is read by critics as Roubaud's ongoing work on literature and memory. As Jean-Jacques Poucel observes, Roubaud's poetics is concerned with 'a systematic reading and rewriting of literary history', conceiving of 'the lyric as form, and as formal memory of language' (Poucel 2006: 12). While already encompassing an impressive volume of texts, what is particularly significant about Roubaud's *Projet* is that it insistently affirms 'the impossibility of completion' (Poucel 2006: 14):

> [T]he *Projet* very much addresses its own intentional ruin. In his constantly renewed and shifting appraisals of the *Projet* – the process of the Book as monument, as game, as

[151] To avoid confusion I will refer to the literary characters as 'AFG' and 'JR' and to the empirical authors as 'Roubaud' and 'Garréta'. This distinction is not maintained in the novel itself, but since AFG refers to her interlocutor either by his full name or as 'JR' (*ÉM* 11-12), the initials here seem an apt means of designating the character. Technically, AFG is the only strictly autofictional character, since she is the first-person narrator of the frame narrative.

> autocritique, and as self-portrait – Roubaud proposes a series of endgames in which the most consistent objective is to subvert or postpone, through shifting frames of reference and multiple solutions, the inevitability of closure. (Poucel 2006: 17)

We will see below how this aspect of Roubaud's writing affects the composition of *Éros*. More direct links between Roubaud's *Projet* and the co-authored text will also be shown. It should further be noted here that the writing of *'le grand incendie'* and Roubaud's poetry collection *Quelque chose noir* (1986) is heavily influenced by the death of Alix Cléo Roubaud (1952–1983), to whom Jacques Roubaud was married from 1980 until her death three years later.[152] Alix Cléo was an experimental photographer. As she suffered from severe asthma since childhood, critics often see her work as reflecting the transience of life. Her photographic series, *Si quelque chose noir* (to which the title of Jacques Roubaud's publication responds), features several superimposed auto-portraits, in which the artist appears twice or several times, but always as a shadowy figure. As Luc Desbenoit writes, Alix Cléo 'plonge ses images dans un abîme de noir ou les anéantit dans un linceul de blanc' (Desbenoit 2014). The people and objects in the photographs take on a spectral quality. I will return to the relationship between Roubaud's writing and Alix Cléo's photography briefly in my discussion of a potential biographical reading of *Éros*.

Garréta is a more recently 'co-opted' member of the Oulipo, a graduate of the École normale supérieure, and a lecturer in literature and Romance Studies at the University of Rennes II, Paris 7, and Duke University. Her debut novel *Sphinx*, published in 1986, tells a love story between two characters, neither of whose gender is recognisable through the grammatical construction of the text – a particularly challenging feat in French. Indeed, the relationship between bodies, identities, and names plays a major role in many of her publications, most notably in her novels *La Décomposition* (1999) and *Pas un Jour* (2002). Adding to the theoretical complexity of her works are, according to Frances Fortier and Andrée Mercier, '[des] canevas intertextuels canoniques qui vont de Balzac à Proust en passant par Walter Scott', and Garréta's works often possess a metafictional dimension, including narrative, generic, and cultural

[152] In order to save space, I will refer to Alix Cléo Roubaud by her first names and to Jacques Roubaud by his surname only in this chapter.

commentary (Fortier and Mercier 2013). Above all, critics' consensus on Garréta's work – to cite two examples – is that it demands to be read 'laboriously' (Kim 2017: 13) and requires 'an unusually high degree of epistemic vigilance' (Andrews 2017: 71). In other words, Garréta's writing is notoriously difficult to read, due to its complex construction, innovative narratological games, and sophisticated intertextuality. Garréta's work is perhaps less obviously Oulipian than that of some of her fellow Oulipians, in the sense that the constraint is often less mathematical and more subtly employed. The constraint is not so much a puzzle to be solved by the reader, but is instead informed by a more (implicitly or explicitly) political agenda, often in terms of identity politics and their basis in language. As indicated earlier, although both Garréta and Roubaud have long publication histories that include several novels and other prose works, the autofictional novel is certainly a departure for both authors. Since neither of them have demonstrated a sustained interest in autofiction as a genre (nor has autofiction attracted much attention among other contemporary Oulipians), it is safe to assume that their decision to approach this genre through co-authoring a text is no accident. How this co-authorship affects the reader's interpretation of the text will also be discussed in the analysis below. For now it is worth pointing out that most academic criticism of *Éros* focuses either on Roubaud's or Garréta's influences on the text, and rarely on both authors simultaneously.

Interpretative Approaches to *Éros mélancolique*: C'est l'histoire de qui? De qui est l'histoire?

Although, as stated, *Éros* is far from a conventionally Oulipian novel, the authors go to great lengths to make it, at least in some respects, seem like one. One of the book's immediately striking aspects is that it is constructed as a set of frame narratives, the innermost narrative being the core story about an intellectual artist figure named James Goodman. Goodman is a young student in Paris in the 1960s, who not only gives up writing his doctoral thesis, but also gives up his artistic project, after failing to meet the constraints he has set himself, and also getting distracted by a mysterious woman (a *belle inconnue*), who is a haunting presence

throughout the text. However, this core narrative is, according to the other narrative frames, a manuscript written not by Goodman, but by someone called A.D. Clifford, who has typed it up. There are sections missing from this manuscript, and it seems to have undergone various mediation processes (being microfilmed, scanned, turned into a PDF file, and finally uploaded to the Internet) before, in a final step, being accessed by the autofictional characters in the text, 'Jacques Roubaud' and 'Anne F. Garréta' – 'Garréta' being, apparently, the author of the outermost narrative frame. What is of particular interest here is that Goodman's story presents itself as the core narrative, and thus perhaps the one most worthy of the reader's attention, but the rest of the text seems to question the justification behind reading it as such. Although the autofictional frame structure might be more reminiscent of the fictional editors common to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novel (or *Herausgeberfiktion*, to use the German term),[153] the fact that Goodman's story strongly recalls aspects of both Garréta's and Roubaud's biography, poetics, literary interests, or personal canon indicates that this is not a straightforward reproduction on the authors' part of either autofiction or *Herausgeberfiktion*. The frames do not exist merely in order to put distance between the authors and their text, or to play postmodern games that question the authority of the storyteller and the truth of literature in general. Instead, the complexity of the narrative structure challenges the reader by opening up a range of possible interpretative approaches, which are not exactly mutually exclusive, yet coexist uneasily, much like the disparate elements of the text itself. Due to the constant gaps and visual reminders of the incompleteness of the text, as well as its manipulated nature and its malignant potential as a corrupted digital file or virus, the text almost encourages us to read the first, autofictional frame narrative as the most reliable, and anything that follows as something for whose accuracy or literary worth the writers themselves do not actually vouch. The text thus

[153] For an in-depth analysis of fictional editors in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European literature, see Uwe Wirth, *Die Geburt des Autors aus dem Geist der Herausgeberfiktion. Editoriale Rahmung im Roman um 1800: Wieland, Goethe, Brentano, Jean Paul und E.T.A. Hoffmann* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009). Wirth discusses this technique in relation to works including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* (1819/1821). Postmodern versions include Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa* (1980).

stages a tension between different (de)legitimisation strategies: the core narrative makes itself available to be read and interpreted in a fairly conventional hermeneutic manner (which is then complicated by the missing sections of the text), while the autofictional frame narrative can be read as discrediting the validity of the vast majority of the text.

In the '*Préface*', the authors do give us a clue as to how the reader might go about structuring their reading of the text, even if it does not encourage one particular interpretation over any other. Upon being questioned by AFG about the 'Éros mélancolique' manuscript, JR poses a counterquestion: '*Vous voulez dire, c'est l'histoire de qui? Ou bien, de qui est l'histoire?*' (*ÉM* 13). The following analysis will offer possible responses to this question of who the story is about, or whose story it is.[154] Following Lindon's assessment, *Éros* is not a puzzle to be solved, yet it does raise the question of textual ownership and attribution quite persistently, as if this were the text's main mystery that demands to be solved. As I show below, readings of the novel can be structured according to the following possibilities in terms of ascribing the text to any one author: Perec, Roubaud, or Garréta – or, indeed, none of the above. The crucial point here is that, as much as certain aspects of the text recall these authors quite specifically, the aspects which recall the authors are also consistently references or devices that undermine the concept of attribution to a particular author in the first place. In the case of Perec, his literary games are recalled, but the author behind the text never (re)appears in *Éros* the way he does, for example, in *La disparition*, in which the narrator explicitly reminds the reader of the author's existence (Perec 1969: 300, 304). In the case of Roubaud, intertextual links to his wider oeuvre draw attention to other works or authors by whom his writing is influenced: most significantly, in this case, Arthurian legends, whose origins and compilation processes are notoriously difficult to reconstruct, or rather which imply an entirely different conception of authorship based on repetition and collectivity rather than individual genius. In the case of Garréta, *Éros* can be read as another of her works in which she problematises the narrative voice, and, by linking the

[154] While these are actually two questions, which technically elicit different answers, the novel goes to such an extent to blur these two questions that insisting upon this distinction would do little to enhance my interpretation.

outermost frame narrative to the digital, Garréta gestures towards the possibility of a new type of 'unauthored' digital text.

Finally, recalling once more Lindon's warning regarding the risks involved in interpreting *Éros*, it should be pointed out that one of the challenges in interpreting this novel is common to analyses of any Oulipian work: namely, the question of how to engage with the trope of the *mode d'emploi* or 'user's manual'. While Oulipian texts are not, on the whole, furnished with user's – or reader's – manuals, the engagement with this element is a common feature of much Oulipian writing, and the term was famously immortalised in the title of Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi*. The concept of the *mode d'emploi* arises from the question surrounding the visibility of the Oulipian constraint, that is, whether the (Oulipian) writer must allow the reader to see which constraint has been used. Baetens elaborates the two sides of the argument in the following manner. One side claims that knowledge of the constraint is 'the only possible way to produce a literary and ethically correct reading' (Baetens 2012: 124), since not knowing the constraint poses two risks: first, in the potential for the text to be misread in 'irritating and senseless' ways (such as in the case of Albérès's review of *La disparition* mentioned above), and secondly, in the creation of an 'unfair power balance between the knowing author and the unknowing reader, the latter being thus prevented from evaluating – and even criticising – the "theorem demonstration" advanced by the former' (Baetens 2012: 124). The other side, however, is of the opinion that it would be a 'disservice to the reader' were the author to reveal too much about the text's construction in advance (Baetens 2012: 124). Perec himself was apparently 'convinced that too strong an emphasis on the disclosure of the constraint might spoil the reader's pleasure, or divert his or her attention to strictly technical issues' (Baetens 2012: 124-125). Tellingly, the constraints used in *La Vie mode d'emploi* were not fully disclosed until the posthumous publication of Perec's *Cahier des charges* (1993), a kind of blueprint for the construction of the novel. Poucel also observes that the tendency of Oulipian work to 'conflate theory and literature' is often both 'useful and challenging', in that it 'foresee[s], disarm[s], and over-determin[es] the critic's gaze' (Poucel 2006: 16). It is this risk which one

must bear in mind when approaching *Éros* as well, even if its use of constraints is perhaps not so typically Oulipian. In the case of *Éros*, since the autofictional characters are, as the text would have us believe, literally the authors of the outermost frame narrative, the risk of the critic's gaze being over-determined is particularly acute. The manner in which Garréta and Roubaud pre-emptively respond to anticipated criticism or interpretations of their text will also be examined in more detail below.

Narrative Framing in *Éros mélancolique*

Éros is, ostensibly, the story of James Goodman, a young Scottish student living in Paris in the 1960s and starting work on his doctoral thesis on the chemistry of light in photography. Less than two weeks after writing the opening sentence to his 'Preface', however, he gives up (*ÉM* 57) and shortly afterwards begins work on a different 'Projet' (*ÉM* 294), also related to photography, but this time a more artistic, rather than scientific, endeavour. Inspired by Oscar Rejlander, a real-life nineteenth-century pioneering photographer and fictitious distant relative of Goodman in the novel, Goodman wishes to create a composition print of photographic negatives. Over the course of 177 days, Goodman will take pictures with his camera inside the Parisian flat he currently occupies, always of the same object (a part of the flat with a window facing an abandoned block of flats across the road) and always from the same spot. Moreover, the schedule that dictates when each photograph is to be taken is governed by a 24×24 grid, in which Goodman has strictly determined at which hours of the day during which days of the week a photograph is to be taken. In this manner, Goodman envisions his project as a '[p]rojet de saisie du temps par la photographie' (*ÉM* 292). So far, so Oulipian.

Goodman, however, becomes increasingly distracted from his artistic project when he becomes enamoured of a mysterious girl who appears in the window of one of the abandoned buildings across from his flat, and for whom Goodman spends a lot of time searching throughout Paris. Although Goodman does manage to find her, to discover her first name – Raymonde – and even to invite her to stay the night, their relationship is distinctly one-sided, as Raymonde never

says a word, refuses all of Goodman's advances, and finally, after Goodman takes pictures of her while she is sleeping, disappears altogether. The photographs of her which Goodman has developed all turn out to be out of focus, and he has no way of contacting her or tracking her down, since the address with which she has provided him is, in one of the novel's more sinister turns, that of a cemetery. Realising Raymonde will not return, Goodman decides to focus once more on his project, only to notice that not only has he missed taking a number of photographs during his obsession with Raymonde, but he has also skipped a line in his schedule, meaning his project governed by a fixed constraint is now riddled with errors and inconsistencies. In the end, Goodman decides to abandon this project as well, and this is where his story ends. However, as indicated above, Goodman's story does not comprise the entire novel, being only the innermost narrative within a number of frame narratives. In total, there are four narrative frames surrounding the core narrative, corresponding to five sections of the novel, each with its own typeface and narrator.[155] Since it is this narrative framing that transforms *Éros* from a fairly conventional postmodern novel into something more complex and of interest to this study, it is worth unpacking these narrative layers in some detail.

The outermost section or frame, entitled '*Préface*' and spanning six pages (*ÉM* 7-13), is the one in which the autofictional characters AFG and JR appear, and which is narrated in the first person by AFG herself. Apart from their names, their identities are not made clear to the reader in any great detail, although the reader has little reason to believe that the fictional characters do not resemble their real-life counterparts, Garréta and Roubaud: they both live in Paris, display an interest in literature, and are clearly well acquainted with one another. AFG is alerted by JR to a mysterious website with a link to a downloadable PDF document, which JR has stumbled upon by googling '*[e]n quête de nourriture mathématique […] quelques noms propres*' (*ÉM* 10).[156] These names are Clifford, Cayley, and Coxeter, as he tells AFG, presumably referring

[155] Arguably, 'A.D. Clifford' (*ÉM* 30), ostensibly the author of the innermost narrative, constitutes a fifth narrative frame. Yet the Goodman narrative includes no author's notes, editorial remarks, or annotations, and we as readers are not given any details at all as to who Clifford might be, so I have opted to limit the number of the narrative frames to four.
[156] The '*Préface*' appears entirely in italics.

to the (real-life, historical) mathematicians and geometers William Kingdon Clifford (1845–1879), Arthur Cayley (1821–1895), and Harold Scott MacDonald Coxeter (1907–2003).[157] The website, a wordpress page from 2008, displays only a few lines of explanation (quoted below in full) regarding the document, as well as the link to the document itself:

> Je n'ai pas de nom.
> Je ne suis pas l'auteur de ce que je veux transmettre.
> Je ne me résous pas à le détruire.
> Je ne sais personne à qui le donner.
>
> Vous êtes arrivé à cette page en quête d'un nom propre.
> D'un des noms propres du récit dont je suis, sans l'avoir cherché, dépositaire.
> D'un des noms propres que j'ai offerts à l'indexation des moteurs de recherche.
>
> Je m'en remets à qui passera ici en quête d'un nom.
> Je prie celui ou celle qui le premier lira cette page de télécharger, en cliquant le lien ci-dessous, ce récit.
> Une fois téléchargé et devenu vôtre, il disparaîtra de cette page. (*ÉM* 9)

This is the second narrative frame, whose narrator I shall call N1. AFG and JR regard the website with interest, but also suspicion, not least because the source code of the website shows '*[n]i date ni auteur*' (*ÉM* 10). Rather than this being '*un piège de hacker*', the website seems to AFG like '*un gimmick de marketing viral*' (*ÉM* 11). AFG is also very wary of the document's potential to infect her computer ('*une ruse maligne pour infiltrer, véroler, zombifier, espionner les machines naïves*', *ÉM* 10), but, having taken the necessary precautions of updating her anti-virus and -malware software on an old laptop, she decides to download the document. Once this is done, the link does indeed disappear from the website and AFG and JR in turn become the 'depositaries' of the document, which, as they discover, is a manuscript. Having discussed the matter via email and telephone, AFG and JR then meet in person, once JR has read the manuscript. Explaining that it is '*une affaire de manuscrit trouvé*' (*ÉM* 12), as well as a few more details about the text's presumed origins and content, JR remarks to AFG in a final comment: '*Je*

[157] This is entirely in keeping with the real-life Roubaud's occupation and interests, as he was professor of mathematics at the Université Paris X from 1970 to 1991. The recurring references to mathematicians and mathematics is a common Oulipian theme, but also prefigures frequent nods in *Éros* to Lewis Carroll and to his nonsense poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876). Multiple instances of doubling in the novel also remind the reader of Carroll's double identity as Lewis Carroll the writer and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson the mathematician and amateur photographer. In the Goodman narrative, Coxeter is also the name of Goodman's American neighbour who offers him the use of his flat while he is away on a trip. A closer examination of the links between *Éros* and *The Hunting of the Snark*, while potentially rewarding, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

suis curieux de savoir ce que vous en penserez' (*ÉM* 13). They agree to meet again the following day ('*Même endroit, même heure*', *ÉM* 13) and the section ends, to be followed by the third frame, '[L'archive fantôme la mémoire digitale]' (*ÉM* 15-22).[158]

The third frame is narrated by another unnamed first-person narrator – I shall call him N2 – who is an executive in a high-tech firm.[159] N2 has his (company-provided) laptop stolen on the train, and, in order to avoid trouble with his employers, purchases a used laptop of the same model on eBay, only to discover glitches, or 'anomalie[s]' (*ÉM* 19), when using it: black and white streaks appear across the screen, fragments of disassociated text appear in his documents out of nowhere, and finally a rogue PDF document entitled 'EM9' (*ÉM* 21) attaches itself to an email to a colleague, unbeknownst to N2.[160] Once N2 becomes aware of these anomalies and they begin affecting his work, he conducts a comprehensive search on the laptop for 'fichiers disparus', and finds '[i]mages de pages, scannées, enchaînées' (*ÉM* 22). The narrative point of view then switches once more, and the fourth frame, '[Le négatif la chambre noire]' (*ÉM* 23-29), begins. A third unnamed first-person narrator, N3, describes buying two old cameras (of the model Leica III, the same model James Goodman uses, *ÉM* 123) at an antique shop in Edinburgh, only to discover rolls of what are assumed to be negatives inside the case containing the cameras.[161] Once scanned (this is presumably whence the PDF file originates), these negatives turn out to be microfilms of a typewritten manuscript, which N3 subsequently prints out. This print-out, or the digitised version of it, is presumably what follows in the book: the manuscript

[158] The titles of three of the narrative frames ('[L'archive fantôme la mémoire digitale]', '[Le négatif la chambre noire]', and '[Fade to gray]', *ÉM* 301) are given in square brackets. This might indicate their provisional nature, as I explain in more detail below.

[159] N2's gender becomes clear through the agreement of the past participle in '[j]e suis rentré' (*ÉM* 17). There is a play on 'cadre' meaning both 'frame' and 'executive' in French here: 'Je suis cadre dans une boîte d'un secteur de pointe' (*ÉM* 17). The authors also play with the multiple meanings of 'mémoire' in the section title, since *mémoire* can mean memory, memoir, and doctoral dissertation in French. The title of the following section, '[Le négatif la chambre noire]', is a conflation of Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire* (1980) and Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir* (1986), both of which are expressions of the authors' grief over the loss of a loved one.

[160] It is unclear whether N1 is the same as N2, since we do not find out explicitly from N2 what he decides to do with the 'EM9' (*ÉM* 21) PDF file. He does end his section with 'Voilà' (*ÉM* 22), so presumably the intent is to show it to someone. The fact that N2 calls the document 'EM9' and that the website including the link to the PDF file is page 9 of *Éros* is no accident, in any case, as the below analysis will show.

[161] Although Peter Consenstein reads this character as a 'forlorn man' (Consenstein 2012: 201), N3's gender is not in fact given in the text.

written by 'A.D. Clifford' (*ÉM* 30) as the 'Éros mélancolique' section, which comprises the bulk of the PDF downloaded by AFG and JR. Worth addressing here is that N3 is the only narrator to return after the Goodman section ends.[162] In this coda called '[Fade to gray]' (*ÉM* 295-299), N3, having returned from Edinburgh to Paris, reflects on the Goodman story while wandering, much like Goodman himself, the streets of the city and thinking about their lost love.

Changes between various typefaces and the use of italics allow the reader to differentiate between the various narrators, although only the first page of the Goodman section reflects its apparently typewritten nature. The typeface changes with the beginning of the '*Chapitre premier*' (*ÉM* 31) and the allegedly poor quality of the manuscript observed by N3 – 'Toutes les irrégularités d'une frappe à la machine à écrire pas même électrique: une lettre mal alignée, des mots barrés de xxxxxxxxx, des corrections suscrites' (*ÉM* 29) – is not replicated in the book itself, with the exception of Goodman's own inept typing ('An inquiry into the history of photography as a braninch of Natrual Qcxiene [*sic*]', *ÉM* 41). Determining who is responsible for which parts of the text, however, remains a difficult task. JR surmises that the 'Éros mélancolique' section is '*l'histoire d'un jeune homme qui s'appelle Goodman, ghostwritée, on dirait, par un autre qui se nomme Clifford*' (*ÉM* 13). Yet Goodman's narrator is an unnamed third-person narrator (possibly Clifford, possibly a literary narrator figure), who occasionally comments on the story (*ÉM* 204) and has access to Goodman's thoughts (*ÉM* 292). There is nothing in the text to suggest that the Goodman narrative is not entirely fictional and purely Clifford's creation – if there even is a Clifford, as all of this might be an (albeit elaborate) hoax or N1's creation which they have simply uploaded to the Internet. The fact that the reader naturally assumes the entirety of the text to have been written by Garréta and Roubaud themselves does little to detract from these narrative games. JR's use of the term 'ghostwritée' is, in any case, an odd choice. Quite likely the term is meant to be at least partly understood in a very literal sense here, that is, written by an actual ghost or, indeed, by several, as these haunt the text at every turn. Certainly Raymonde is a spectral figure, the cemetery episode and her

[162] In terms of presentation and formatting, the typeface is also consistent, in that the same typeface is used here as is used in '[Le négatif la chambre noire]'.

strange inability to be photographed both strongly hinting that she is, in fact, already deceased. Raymonde, moreover, seems to be split in two as well, as both the (initially) disembodied voice which Goodman suddenly hears over the general babble at a party (*ÉM* 76), and as the mysterious woman that Goodman sees undressing in a window opposite Coxeter's flat. The story never definitively identifies these two figures as being the same woman. Goodman is, moreover, doubly haunted, both by Raymonde and by the loss of his mother, who disappears and is presumed dead when he is twelve years old (*ÉM* 135). Understood in the conventional sense, however, the term 'ghost-written' implies the real existence of Goodman and the real existence of his (alternative, final) writing project – the 'Éros mélancolique' manuscript – even if the work has, in fact, been carried out by another, namely Clifford.

Significantly, this simultaneously legitimises and delegitimises Goodman as a character of consequence and storytelling source. Through these narrative ploys, Goodman's story appears to be one worth telling, but it is unclear who exactly has determined this to be the case. None of the available narrators seem to want to take either responsibility or credit for Goodman's story; and the 'Éros mélancolique' section frames Goodman himself as incapable of telling his own story. A.D. Clifford, the supposed author, editor, or narrator of Goodman's story intrudes so little into the narrative and leaves such a fleeting impression that they are of little significance to any of the text. That Garréta and Roubaud, the real-life authors of *Éros*, give this Clifford character his or her own name is most likely a ploy to make Clifford seem more important to the text than he or she actually is. Out of the frame narrators, N3 seems to be the closest to and most intrigued by Goodman's story, yet the parallels between theirs and Goodman's characterisation – both are melancholy artist-*flâneurs* wandering the streets of Paris and looking for their lost love – make N3 seem less like an authoritative character in their own right and more like a double or copy of Goodman. Finally, through the manuscript's many transformations, AFG and JR are so far removed from the core narrative that their engagement with it never develops much beyond a wary and superficial curiosity. The question of the origins and ownership of the story is constantly raised, although none of the characters seem overly

perturbed by the lack of clarity in this regard, or particularly keen to offer answers. In an Oulipian precursor like Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) the entire plot is set in motion by the reader figure's curiosity and desire to uncover the reason behind faults or misprints in the books he reads. By contrast, the narrators of the various frames in *Éros* mainly refrain from commenting on their findings, merely presenting them to the reader or to the narrator of the next frame to make of what they will. As the following section will explore, Garréta and Roubaud are responding to the *mode d'emploi* question raised earlier (that is, how much the reader should know about the text's genesis before reading it) by encouraging the reader to determine for herself the utility of applying a variety of interpretative approaches, each with their own implications for textual ownership.

The Case for Perec: *La Vie mode d'emploi* and the *clinamen*

As indicated above, through countless intertextual references, Perec becomes a constant implicit presence in the text, although the author and his novels are never explicitly evoked – with the exception of section 73 in Chapter 9, which is called 'La Disparition' (*ÉM* 271).[163] Goodman names his camera 'George' (*ÉM* 126), or rather, both cameras: in one of the novel's many instances of doubling, there is a *George the First* and a *George the Second*, although Goodman insists that '*George the Second* n'était pas simple copie' (*ÉM* 275) – perhaps a tongue-in-cheek metafictional comment by the authors on the many Perecquian features of their text being 'no mere copy'.[164] Goodman's photographic project is designed by the authors to be highly

[163] Perec is not, of course, the only Oulipian author whom *Éros* recalls. In a clear reference to Raymond Queneau, the unnamed girl for whom Goodman is searching is called 'Raymonde' (*ÉM* 285) and, according to Monique Petillon, Goodman's insufferable neighbour is a character straight out of Queneau's 1933 novel *Le Chiendent* (Petillon 2009). The trope of the 'belle inconnue' or the 'belle absente' is, in itself, a reference to Oulipian literary production, the 'belle absente' being the name of an Oulipian lipogrammatic poem and variation of the 'beau présent'. In the 'beau présent', only the letters of the addressee's name are used; the 'belle absente' is an inverted 'beau présent', in which 'each line of the poem includes all the letters of the alphabet except for the letter appearing in the dedicated name at the position corresponding to that of the line' (as cited in James 2006: 125, endnote 31).

[164] In a further instance of doubling, Goodman naming his camera 'George' could, of course, also be a reference to the (fictional) character George Rejlander, who gives him lessons in photography. This character is, in turn, named after the real-life Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875), a 'pioneering Victorian art photographer and […] expert in photomontage' (Hacking 2004). In Rejlander's famous 'self-portrait', *The Artist Rejlander Introduces the Volunteer Rejlander* (c. 1871), Rejlander doubles himself 'as

reminiscent of the 10×10 grid of the chessboard-like apartment block used to structure *La Vie mode d'emploi* and Goodman resembles Perec's character Percival Bartlebooth in that he has set himself a project that works within a 'système extrêmement contraint' (*ÉM* 292).[165] The blank sections in *Éros* which appear to have resulted from the manuscript's many material permutations (the first of these appears on *ÉM* 91) are reminiscent of both Perec's *La disparition* and its treatment of '[le] Blanc' (Perec 1969: 115), as well as the gaps in *W*. As Garréta remarks, the blanks in *Éros* can be read as 'la trace matérielle des coupures opérées violemment par l'Histoire avec sa grand'Hache [*sic*]' (Petillon 2009). She hereby explicitly recalls the famous passage from *W*, in which the (Perecquian) narrator explains his reasons for not telling his story sooner: 'J'en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, l'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps' (Perec 1975: 17).

Perec is not only evoked through the content and presentation of the Goodman story, however. Through the parallels between Goodman's project in *Éros* and Bartlebooth's in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Garréta and Roubaud also raise the question of the visibility of the constraint, and the use of the *mode d'emploi*. As James notes, it is a commonplace in Perec scholarship to read the 'art of the puzzle' preamble in *La Vie mode d'emploi* as both an introduction to and a 'user's manual' for the text (James 2009: 180). '[T]he parallels between jigsaw and text', James observes,

> seem self-evident: both the rooms of the apartment building and the multiple stories of the novel correspond to the jigsaw pieces whose unity and meaning the reader must reconstitute. In this context, the preamble promises the reader that this apparently chaotic, fragmentary novel does possess coherence, but one that must patiently be discovered and even *reconstructed by the reader*. The reference to the traps set by the jigsaw maker reinforces this guarantee: even if the reader initially sees in the novel only 'éléments inertes, amorphes, pauvres de signification et d'information' […] rather than a

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both a bohemian painter and a corporal of the 38th (Middlesex) volunteer regiment' (Hacking 2004). Rejlander is explicitly mentioned in *Éros* (*ÉM* 111), according to which George Rejlander is the grand-nephew of Oscar Rejlander and an uncle by marriage of Goodman's (*ÉM* 117).

[165] Bartlebooth's project, which is meant to occupy him for most of his life, involves painting watercolours of five hundred harbours around the world and then having the paintings turned into jigsaw puzzles which Bartlebooth must complete according to a strict schedule. In two final stages, the puzzles are meant to be turned back into seamless pictures, only to be subsequently destroyed at the respective locations of their creation. For further analysis of Bartlebooth's project see David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006; pp. 206-208) and Alison James, *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009; pp. 177-182).

> meaningful whole, this semblance of insignificance is the result of a *deliberate strategy by the author*, an optical illusion created by the subtle nature of the text's structure. (James 2009: 180; my emphasis)

Although James is quick to caution that '[t]he jigsaw puzzle has […] limits as a metaphor for Perec's […] writing process' (James 2009: 180), it has nevertheless become iconically linked to Perec's *chef-d'œuvre*, not least through the novel's memorable ending on Bartlebooth's incomplete 439th puzzle and the logical impossibility of the last, W-shaped puzzle piece not fitting into the remaining X-shaped gap in the jigsaw. If we credit Lindon's view that *Éros* is not an incomplete, disassembled puzzle waiting to be reconstructed by the reader, that 'les passages lacunaires du récit ne sont pas à reconstituer' (Lindon 2009), then Garréta and Roubaud's departure from the Perecquian model becomes clear. Perec's later writing, including, besides *La Vie mode d'emploi*, his short story 'Le voyage d'hiver' and *'53 jours'*, cautions against reading Oulipian texts only for the sake of reconstructing the rules of the constraint. As Perec states in an interview: 'L'ennui, quand on voit la contrainte, c'est qu'on ne voit plus *que* la contrainte' (as cited in James 2006: 125, endnote 36). Baetens and Poucel also refer to this phenomenon when assessing Queneau. They describe his work as tending to induce a kind of 'interpretive paranoia' in its readers (Baetens and Poucel 2009: 628), since only some of the constraints used in the creation of his texts are revealed there. At the same time, however, these texts encourage the reader to 'resist the fascination of enigmatic details' (Baetens and Poucel 2009: 628). In other words, the Oulipian reader is meant to be wary of red herrings and to not get lost in the smaller details of the text's construction. In a passage that specifically recalls Perec's *Cahier des charges*, Goodman himself deliberates on the question surrounding the Oulipian *mode d'emploi*:

> Mais la question restait entière: qu'est-ce qu'une œuvre composée sous contraintes, selon un système de contraintes très complexe et très contraignant, qui ne respecte pas les contraintes que son auteur s'était données? Fallait-il dissimuler le système? et du même coup dissimuler la faille énorme qui s'y cachait? Fallait-il le révéler, présenter, en même temps que le tableau achevé, un exposé des principes de sa composition, et, comme s'il s'agissait d'une œuvre architecturale, un *cahier des charges* comportant, ou non, l'aveu des défauts de structure, et si non, laisser à ceux qui prendraient connaissance des deux parties le soin de les découvrir? (*ÉM* 293; my emphasis)

Apart from serving as a reference to Perec, this passage draws attention to the extent to which the framing or presentation of a text influences one's interpretation of it. Crucially, this passage

forms the end of section 79 of Chapter 9; in section 80, Goodman definitively '*give[s] up*' (*ÉM* 293) and section 81 remains incomplete, so Goodman ends up abandoning these questions as well.

Failure is, of course, a dominating theme in *La Vie mode d'emploi* as well, with Bartlebooth passing away before the 439th puzzle can be completed. As Gascoigne points out, Bartlebooth's defeat could be read as a 'version of the Death of the Author, no longer master of his text, and at the mercy of a machine for writing which he can no longer control' (Gascoigne 2006: 203). Although there are definite parallels to be traced between Bartlebooth's project and Perec's own in assembling *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Gascoigne takes care to highlight the differences and show how Perec is not 'bound to the rules as tightly as Bartlebooth' and in fact builds 'agents of randomness and disruption' into the system, in order to regain authorial freedom (Gascoigne 2006: 208-209). In *Éros*, it is the theme of 'the error in the system' or, in Perecquian terms, the 'clinamen', that forms the novel's most significant reference to Oulipian literary strategies and to Perec in particular. Like Bartlebooth in *La Vie mode d'emploi*, Goodman fails at his Oulipian-style project, after having already given up his PhD thesis and his search for Raymonde; as the narrator sums up: 'L'échec fut complet' (*ÉM* 143). To a certain extent, this failure does not preclude Goodman's characterisation as an Oulipian artist. Missing taking some photographs and even skipping a line in his schedule could be read, not as mere instances of sloppiness or forgetfulness, but rather as a deliberate disregard for the constraint. This error would in this sense be deliberately made, in order to 'introduc[e] a degree of play into the regulated system' (Symes 1999: 103) and to demonstrate the ultimate artistic and aesthetic sovereignty of the author over her text. According to Roubaud, this is a perfectly legitimate Oulipian practice, known as the *clinamen*:

> On rencontre constamment, au-delà de la difficulté à suivre les consignes strictes de la règle (ce qui est parfaitement maîtrisable), le regret de ne pouvoir employer tel mot, telle image, telle construction syntaxique, qui nous sembleraient s'imposer, mais qui nous sont interdits. L'Oulipo a donc introduit, pour de telles situations, le 'concept' de clinamen. […] Le 'clinamen' est une violation *intentionnelle* de la contrainte, à des fins esthétiques. (Roubaud 1995: 215; my emphasis)

Yet even Goodman realises that this concept does not apply in his case, since his errors are precisely *not* intentional: 'Mais, se dit Goodman […] amèrement, je ne saurais me consoler en disant, avec Paul Klee, que le génie, c'est *l'erreur dans le système*' (*ÉM* 292; my emphasis).[166] In fact, much like the first-person narrator in Garréta's *La Décomposition*, Goodman lacks rigour in following the rules of the project which he has set himself and therefore compromises its artistic and aesthetic integrity.[167] Bartlebooth's failure to complete his project is mirrored in Perec's decision to include only 99 chapters out of 100 in his book. In the case of *Éros*, the incompleteness of Goodman's project is reflected in the missing sections of the text, the abruptness with which Goodman's narrative ends, and the lack of a definite conclusion to the book, as the '[Fade to gray]' section raises more questions than it answers.[168] In Perec's *La disparition*, all the inconsistencies or open questions of the narrative lead back to the author, with the narrator explaining that the real culprit behind the murder mystery is the author himself, in the form of '[le] Barbu' (Perec 1969: 300). By contrast, the final section in *Éros* leads back to the reader, as will be explored further below. Before continuing this line of questioning, however, the following sections will examine how *Éros* may be attributed to the actual authors of the text, Roubaud and Garréta.

The Case for Roubaud: *Quelque chose noir*, *'le grand incendie'*, and the Vulgate Cycle

Another spectre evoked in *Éros*, as suggested earlier, is Alix Cléo and her experimental photography. The biographical link to Roubaud via Alix Cléo clearly encourages a reading of the

[166] Goodman quotes Klee via Perec here, who says in a 1981 interview with Ewa Pawlikowska: 'Selon Klee, "le génie, c'est l'erreur dans le système"' (Perec 2003: 202).

[167] For a detailed examination of the narrator's Oulipian project in *La Décomposition*, see Chris Andrews, 'Intertextuality and Murder: Anne F. Garréta's *La Décomposition* and *À la recherche du temps perdu*' in *Australian Journal of French Studies* 54. 1 (2017), pp. 71-83. Colin Symes points out that even Perec's works include some 'accidental violations' (Symes 1999: 103), yet these are not nearly as egregious as in the case of Goodman's project. For a discussion of how the constraint in *Éros* is divested of authority, see Frances Fortier and Andrée Mercier, 'L'autorité narrative pensée et revue par Anne F. Garréta', in *Narrations d'un nouveau siècle: Romans et récits français (2001–2010)*, eds. Bruno Blanckeman and Barbara Havercroft (Paris: Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013), pp. 237-250.

[168] Section 80 in Chapter 9 ends with Goodman's decision to '*give up*, j'abandonne' (*ÉM* 293), and although a last section 81 (which would fulfil a complete 9×9 structure) is suggested, only a small sliver of text remains visible, including only seven complete words, the rest, including the title of the section, being cut off by a blank space. The specific reason why Goodman's narrative ends on section 81 of chapter 9 and the significance of the number nine will be discussed below.

text along Roubaudian lines, as critics including Geneviève Guétemme and Peter Consenstein have done. The similarities between Alix Cléo's photographic techniques and *Éros*'s themes and imagery are evident. As Guétemme has already explored these to a certain degree in her articles on Alix Cléo and Jacques Roubaud, I will only outline these briefly.[169] Alix's photographic œuvre, especially her *Si quelque chose noir* series, comprises a number of nude photographs, like the ones Goodman attempts to take of Raymonde. As Alix often superimposes her photographs, the figures who appear in them, although not out of focus like in Goodman's pictures, are at times obscure, at times translucent, lending them an ephemeral quality. In terms of her technique, Desbenoit likens Alix Cléo to a painter: '[elle] se sert des négatifs comme un peintre de sa palette' (Desbenoit 2014). As Guétemme notes, there is a clear link to be made between Alix Cléo and Raymonde, the 'femme-ombre, […] nocturne et impossible à approcher' (Guétemme 2012a: 18) in *Éros*. Moreover, Alix Cléo's bilingualism, the use of both French and English when writing in her personal journal, is also reflected in the free indirect speech in Goodman's and N3's narratives, which switch between these two languages. As suggested earlier and as Guétemme observes, both Alix Cléo's photographic series and Roubaud's responding poetry collection *Quelque chose noir* can be perceived as 'l'art comme tentative désespérée pour vaincre l'anéantissement et continuer à aimer' (Guétemme 2012a: 14). The 'Éros mélancolique' manuscript's permutations through various media is prefigured in Roubaud's reframing and reworking of phrases taken from Alix's personal journal for *Quelque chose noir*.

Crucially, *Quelque chose noir* also explains the significance of the number nine in *Éros*. According to Benoît Conort, the number nine is used by Roubaud as a 'chiffre de la mort' in reference to Dante Alighieri (as cited in Guétemme 2012a: 22). It is this number which also dictates the construction of *Quelque chose noir*, which consists of nine groups of nine poems or prose texts with nine verses or nine paragraphs each, although we also find an errant element in this text in the form of a final poem outside the 9×9×9 structure, consisting of nineteen lines,

[169] Guétemme has published the following two articles on *Éros* and Alix Cléo: 'Alix Cléo et Jacques Roubaud: l'amour, la mort' in *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique* 2: 10 (2012), pp. 11-25; and '*Éros mélancolique* de Jacques Roubaud et Anne F. Garréta: écriture, photographie et disparition' in *Nottingham French Studies* 51: 3, pp. 342-353. I mainly reference the first of these.

and entitled 'Rien' (Roubaud 1986: 145). In *Éros*, the Goodman story covers nine months (encompassed in nine chapters with nine sections each, so we have a similar 9×9 structure), skipping December, January, and February – January, the month of Alix's death, thereby being the month remotest from the narrative.[170] Just as both *Quelque chose noir* and *Éros* are characterised by blank spaces and enjambments, or 'sauts à la ligne' (Guétemme 2012a: 15), the construction of *Éros*, with its missing months, parallels Goodman's project, in that he skips a certain time slot – eleven o'clock in the evening – in his *Projet*, this being the hour at which Goodman, as a twelve-year-old boy in the summer of 1944, learns of the death of his mother.[171] Goodman therefore marks 11 pm in his schedule as '*[l']heure noire*' (*ÉM* 135), and decides to include, in the squares meant for this time slot in his composition print, not a photograph taken at this hour, but instead a white square or a picture of a tree, a 'micocoulier' (*ÉM* 151).

While parallels can therefore be traced between *Éros* and *Quelque chose noir*, the connection between *Éros* and *'le grand incendie'* is made even clearer, in that the 2009 novel copies Roubaud's *Projet* quite directly. Not only are the bracketed section titles in *Éros* – '[L'archive fantôme la mémoire digitale]', '[Le négatif la chambre noire]', and '[Fade to gray]' – highly reminiscent of the quotation marks imposed on the title of Roubaud's *Projet*, but the episode during which Goodman first sees the ghostly woman undressing in the window (*ÉM* 146-147) is, in fact, a passage lifted straight out of Roubaud's 'Préface' to *'le grand incendie'*.[172] The passage in *Éros* is missing only a few contextualising autobiographical lines from *'le grand incendie'*, apart from which the rest is very nearly identical, as shown below. The sentences or words which differ are indicated in italics.

> Dans la pièce, debout, une femme se déshabillait. Elle était jeune, à ce *qui me* sembla. *Et un instant, […] j'ai cru revivre l'une de ces hallucinations répétées, qui […] m'avaient torturé pendant les premiers mois de 1983. J'ai cru voir Alix, qui était morte.* La lumière, dans la pièce, venait d'une lampe sans doute assez faible, sans doute posée sur un

[170] For more instances of the number nine in *Éros*, see Peter Consenstein, 'Oulipian Melancholy' in *Formules* 16 (2012), pp. 199-206 (p. 202).
[171] The 'sauts à la ligne' are likely also recalled in the failure of Goodman's project when he realises that he has skipped a line in his schedule: 'il avait sauté une ligne' (*ÉM* 292).
[172] For an elaboration on the distinction between *Le Grand Incendie de Londres* and *'le grand incendie de Londres'*, and how the latter is 'presented as a replacement' for, or 'counterfeit shadow-version' of what the former would have been, see Jean-Jacques F. Poucel, *Jacques Roubaud and the Invention of Memory* (Chapel Hill, NC: U.N.C. Department of Romance Languages, 2006; pp. 221-222).

> meuble et située très en arrière de la fenêtre. La jeune femme, après avoir enlevé la robe en la passant par-dessus la tête, la laissa tomber sur le sol, défit un soutien-gorge noir qui rejoignit la robe, envoya promener ses chaussures. (Roubaud 2009: 7)
>
> [D]ans la pièce, debout, une femme se déshabillait. Elle était jeune, à ce *qu'il lui* sembla. *Il ne la voyait pas très distinctement, car* la lumière, dans la pièce, venait d'une lampe sans doute assez faible, sans doute posée sur un meuble et située très en arrière de la fenêtre. La jeune femme, après avoir enlevé la robe en la passant par-dessus la tête, la laissa tomber sur le sol, défit un soutien-gorge noir qui rejoignit la robe, envoya promener ses chaussures. (*ÉM* 146)

Although the direct repetition of Roubaud's previous work therefore seems to mark *Éros*, and in particular the Goodman narrative, as a mainly Roubaudian text, the following section will show how Roubaudian intertextuality in fact draws attention away from both Roubaud – both the author (the *inscripteur* and *écrivain*, to use Meizoz's terminology; Meizoz 2009) and the empirical person (*personne*) married to Alix Cléo – just as much as it draws our attention to him in the first place.

In order to better understand this, one need look no further than the novel's title, *Éros mélancolique*, which references an article written by Roubaud in 1982 and entitled 'Galehaut et l'Éros mélancolique'.[173] In the article, Roubaud offers a more or less Oulipian reading of the story of Galehaut, 'le fils de la belle géante', from the 13th-century French prose Vulgate cycle *Lancelot en prose*.[174] Galehaut is at first a rival for Arthur's throne, but is so impressed by Lancelot's prowess on the battlefield that he becomes enamoured of him, and, once he discovers Lancelot's passion for Guinevere, facilitates their meeting. It is for this reason that Dante makes reference to him in *Inferno*, Canto V, describing how the 'Galehaut' book of *Lancelot en prose* led Paolo Malatesta and Francesca di Rimini astray: 'C'est dire que l'agent de cette destruction, le *livre* dont Galehaut est dit à la fois être le titre et l'auteur, est désigné ici comme funeste' (Roubaud 1982: 363). There are definitely thematic parallels to be drawn between the characters of Goodman in *Éros mélancolique* and Galehaut in *Lancelot en prose* – or at least

[173] This is a very oblique reference, since Arthurian legends or medieval texts do not all appear within *Éros* in any other context. However, the Galehaut reference is one I consider to be relevant nonetheless, considering Roubaud's tendency to reference and rework his earlier material, and especially in the context of medieval literature: from the late 1970s onward, Roubaud and Florence Delay co-wrote a series of plays called *Graal théâtre*, which are reworkings of Arthurian material.
[174] Galehaut is not to be confused with Galahad, as Malory does, for example (Birch 2009). The theme of misattribution that accompanies Galehaut is most likely intentionally evoked by the authors.

Roubaud's reading thereof, according to which Galehaut suffers from 'éros mélancolique', causing him to 'abandonne[r] toute activité chevaleresque […] [et] tombe[r] dans l'impossibilité d'action' (Roubaud 1982: 374). The way Roubaud describes Galehaut's suffering is thus highly reminiscent of Goodman's predicament: 'Ainsi peu à peu le projet de Galehaut glisse' (Roubaud 1982: 366). More importantly, however, Roubaud's comment on how Galehaut is at once the title and the author of his text – 'le livre dont Galehaut est dit à la fois être le titre et l'auteur' – once again recalls thematics of authorship and ownership ('c'est l'histoire de qui? Ou bien, de qui est l'histoire?'). The actual author or, indeed, authors of the Vulgate cycle are, of course, unknown, and it is precisely this authorial anonymity and plurality which Roubaud seeks to claim for *Éros* by association with the medieval text. As E. Jane Burns explains, the creation of the Vulgate cycle is representative of 'a literary system in which rewriting is *de rigueur* and joint authorship outranks original creation' (Burns 1985: 10). Rewriting is also, as we have seen, easily compatible with Oulipian methods, but the co-authorship of *Éros* in particular is given new significance when placed within the context of Roubaud's interest in medieval modes of authorship. Moreover, according to Burns, the Vulgate cycle is characterised by repetition, or 'narrative *reprise*' (Burns 1985: 8), which

> calls into question the fundamental notions of individual creation and interpretation that we, as post-Romantic heirs to an ideology of originality, often take for granted. The modern concepts of narrative coherence and the well-wrought tale, which imply the assurance of a writer's idiosyncratic authority, are thoroughly undermined in the earlier medieval system. (Burns 1985: 9)

This is not to say that *Éros* is Roubaud and Garréta's attempt to recreate the production process of a medieval text. Yet the lengths to which Garréta and Roubaud go in order to foreground the pretence that the 'Éros' manuscript has no identifiable author, or might in fact have several authors (even beyond Garréta and Roubaud themselves), are quite extraordinary. Certainly the permutations which the 'Éros' manuscript undergoes are reminiscent of the 'tradition of medieval manuscript copying' to which Burns refers, which is 'famed for generating numerous versions of any one tale' (Burns 1985: 9). While the book *Éros* includes only one version of the Goodman story, the countless instances of doubling and repetition serve to substantiate this

similarity. As critics have pointed out, the character of Goodman is actually a recurring one, or 'personnage-fétiche', in Roubaud's writing (Fortier and Mercier 2013), a technique which Roubaud himself deliberately links to medieval literature: 'Le personnage a déjà servi à d'autres histoires, et le récit que l'on récupère dans des manuscrits a subi des transformations qui rendent sa genèse difficile à comprendre' (Petillon 2009). Moreover, the 'Éros' manuscript itself contains sections which echo previous ones from the Goodman narrative (*ÉM* 128-138, 231-233, 271-274).[175] These are, as shown in the example below, essentially the same passages, excepting some punctuation and a few additional lines in the repeated paragraph. Differences are indicated in italics or, in the case of the punctuation, are underlined.

> Le temps était beau, pas trop chaud. Au début de l'après-midi, vers trois heures, ressorti après le déjeuner, il se trouva place des Vosges. Il s'assit sur un banc, au soleil. Des enfants jouaient. Des moineaux prenaient leur bain de poussière. Des pigeons s'approchèrent, l'œuil archibête. Il les chassa à coups de pied, ce qui eut le don de les persuader de l'intérêt qu'il y avait à s'approcher de lui. Il dut se lever et taper du pied pour les faire fuir. On le regardait curieusement. Peu importe. Il avait horreur des pigeons. Du banc où il s'était assis il pouvait voir à travers les grilles un café à l'angle de la place et de la rue des Francs-Bourgeois. Des tables sur le trottoir, des gens en train de boire, de bavarder. (*ÉM* 128)

> Le temps était beau, pas *très* chaud. Au début de l'après-midi, vers trois heures, ressorti après le déjeuner, il s*'en alla* place des Vosges*, avec son cahier. Il ne l'avait pas ouvert depuis juillet. Or, il ne lui restait qu'un peu plus de deux mois de travail. S'il décidait de cahnger quelque chose à ses plans, il n'attendrait pas le dernier moment.* Il s'assit sur un banc, au soleil. Des enfants jouaient. Des moineaux prenaient leur bain de poussière. Des pigeons s'approchèrent, l'œuil archibête. Il les chassa à coups de pied, ce qui eut le don de les persuader de l'intérêt qu'il y avait à s'approcher de lui. Il dut se lever**,** et taper du pied pour les faire fuir. *Ils revenaient. Il leur lança des cailloux.* On le regardait curieusement. Peu importe. Il avait horreur des pigeons. Du banc où il s'était assis il pouvait voir**.** à travers les grilles**.** un café**.** à l'angle de la place et de la rue des Francs-Bourgeois. Des tables sur le trottoir, des gens en train de boire, de bavarder. *Comme toujours.* (*ÉM* 231)

On the one hand, on the level of the story, the repetition here serves to underscore the futility of Goodman's search for Raymonde and to demonstrate his slipping grasp on his project. In both cases he has gone wandering the streets of Paris, unexpectedly coming across Raymonde at the Place des Vosges the first time, intentionally looking for her the second time. On the other hand, on a metafictional level, the repetition serves as an example of Roubaud's adaptation of the

[175] This technique is similar to the autotextuality of Hoppe's texts, although the context for these repetitions is very different, and they fulfil different functions in the text: in Garréta and Roubaud's case, the repetitions are inspired by the idea of the medieval *reprise*, thereby implying anonymous and plural authorship; in Hoppe's case, the repetitions contribute to the recognisability of the Hoppe 'sound' or brand, thereby solidifying Hoppe's status as author of the text.

narrative *reprise*, as Burns calls it, in medieval manuscripts. The change in the use of punctuation then conceivably occurs, not necessarily through the manuscript's digital manipulation, but through a scribe's negligence in copying the passage from some lost original manuscript, a conceit which likens the production of the 'Éros' manuscript to that of medieval Arthurian texts. Naturally, Roubaud's use of this technique can also be read as demonstrating precisely the author's 'idiosyncratic authority' (Burns 1985: 9), yet, significantly, this idiosyncrasy is merely one among many employed in *Éros* to draw the reader's attention toward other possible modes of authorship and of textual production and coherence. What effect this has on the reader will be more fully explored below, yet it should be pointed out here that the experience of reading *Éros* is, in some respects, not unlike reading the Vulgate cycle. As Burns explains, '[i]n a tradition that self-consciously erases "points of origin" to dictate points of confluence, the reader's responsibility shifts from the search for a putative "fixed" meaning to the careful assimilation of narrative repetition and exchange' (Burns 1985: 10). In order to discuss the reader's engagement with *Éros* comprehensively, however, we must not only examine the Goodman narrative, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the novel's frame narratives.

The Case for Garréta: Narrative Framing, *Herausgeberfiktion*, and Digital Literature

While associating Roubaud primarily with the Goodman narrative and Garréta primarily with the narrative frames may appear a little simplistic, it is true that these sections roughly correspond to the respective authors' interests and poetics. As seen in the previous section, the Goodman narrative recalls Roubaud's biography and his interest in medieval literature quite clearly. This section will examine in greater detail how the narrative frames reflect Garréta's interests. According to Fortier and Mercier, *Éros* involves a deliberate 'mise en jeu […] de l'autorité', which is characteristic of Garréta's wider oeuvre, in that her novels consistently problematise the narrative voice (Fortier and Mercier 2013). Although neither the technique of nested narratives nor that of the found manuscript are common features of Garréta's oeuvre,

she frequently employs devices which in some way complicate the reader's relationship to or identification with the narrator. In the case of *Sphinx*, the gender of the narrator stubbornly remains a mystery; in the case of *La Décomposition*, the narrator is unreliable, and presumably a serial killer; and in the case of *Ciels liquides* (1990), the narrator of at least half (if not all) of the text is, apparently, an aphasiac, and therefore a logically impossible narrator.[176] It is then unsurprising that, in the '*Préface*' to *Éros*, it is AFG who evokes the literary technique of the 'found manuscript' by mentioning the *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (1805/1989; henceforth *Manuscrit*), a frame-tale novel written in French in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by Polish author Count Jan Potocki (1761–1815):[177]

> *C'est une affaire de manuscrit trouvé.*
> *A Saragosse?*
> *Non, à Edimbourg. Dans une boîte, on a trouvé des microfilms.*
> *Des microfilms du dix-huitième siècle?*
> *Non, d'une histoire des années soixante, un truc tapé à la machine.* (*ÉM* 12)

Although the reference to the *Manuscrit* is very brief, it functions as an immediate reminder to the reader to be vigilant in their assessment of each narrator's credibility. Furthermore, it comprises a significant associative backdrop against which *Éros* can be productively read, especially in light of the above discussion regarding the Vulgate cycle and medieval authorship. Similarly to medieval manuscripts, whose 'genèse [est] difficile à comprendre' (Petillon 2009), the *Manuscrit*'s creation and publication history is difficult to reconstruct, involving disputes over its authorship, a reconstruction of the complete text out of various copies in French and Polish, and multiple plagiarised copies (Maclean 1996: xii-xiii).[178] Alongside the Vulgate cycle, Garréta and Roubaud are using the *Manuscrit* as another intertext that serves to underscore the

[176] Aphasia refers to the '[l]oss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centres' (Oxford English Dictionary).
[177] The *Manuscrit* is also influenced by medieval texts, such as *One Thousand and One Nights* (French translation 1704–1717) and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349–1352; translation into English 1620). Given that *The Decameron*'s subtitle is 'Prince Galehaut' ('Prencipe Galeotto'), this is a possible link back to Roubaud's interest in medieval literature.
[178] As Ian Maclean explains, '[t]he whole text was composed in French; but in spite of assiduous researches in Polish family archives, not all of it appears to have survived in this form. About a fifth of the text is only available in a Polish translation from a lost French manuscript of the whole book, made by Edmund Chojecki in 1847. [I]n 1989 René Radrizzani […] publish[ed] the complete story in French for the first time, having supplied a French translation of the missing parts from Chojecki's Polish version' (Maclean 1996: xiii). A new French translation by François Rosset and Dominique Triaire was published by Flammarion in 2008.

ostensibly complex development of *Éros*, lending it some credibility by association, but at the same time reminding the reader how incredibly unlikely the generation of this text is in the first place.[179]

Moreover, similarities between the *Manuscrit* and *Éros* exist not only between the *Manuscrit*'s actual publication history and the fictional publication history of *Éros*, but also between the *Manuscrit*'s framing structure and that of *Éros*. The *Manuscrit* begins with a (fictional) foreword, supposedly written and narrated by a French officer who, having just fought in the second siege of Zaragoza during the Peninsular War, while looting surrounding villages comes across a manuscript written in Spanish. Although not particularly proficient in the language, the officer decides to keep it, or, as the narrator phrases it delicately: 'I knew enough [Spanish] to see that the book might well be entertaining. […] As I was convinced that the book could no longer be *restored to its rightful owner*, I did not hesitate to possess myself of it' (Potocki 1996: 3; my emphasis). The officer is captured by Spanish forces, but is lucky enough to be taken prisoner by a captain who claims that the manuscript contains 'the history of his ancestors' (Potocki 1996: 4). The captain agrees to translate the manuscript into French, and the text that follows is allegedly the French officer's transcription of the captain's dictation. While AFG and JR coming across a manuscript online is not, of course, an exact parallel to the *Manuscrit*'s frame narrative, there are clear similarities. Significantly, the 'Éros' manuscript, like the one the officer pilfers from the village near Zaragoza, cannot be 'restored to its rightful owner', since, as we have seen, the Goodman story is very unclear about who that might be in the first place ('c'est l'histoire de qui? Ou bien, de qui est l'histoire?'). Yet Garréta and Roubaud create a further parallel here, in the sense that it is impossible not only to trace the text back to its original owner, but also to trace the story back to a legitimate source of authority or 'poin[t] of origin' (Burns 1985: 10), as Burns phrases it. Fortier and Mercier observe how the text, by underlining the 'manipulations anonymes de la transmission narrative, […] *interdise expressément toute remontée à une quelconque instance autoriale* [et] fragilise l'autorité

[179] In this sense, Garréta and Roubaud's use of intertextuality and the *Manuscrit* is not unlike Setz's use of facsimiles and other 'source material' in *Indigo*.

narrative en la subordonnant à une serie de transcodages qui induisent des imperfections' (Fortier and Mercier 2013; my emphasis). The succession of presumed authors and narrators are no more than a 'courroie de transmission' (Fortier and Mercier 2013), offering no assurance to the reader that there is a definitive authorial instance behind any of the text. Not even the authority of AFG, the autofictional character in the '*Préface*', and her technical know-how can lend *Éros* the credibility or sense of authenticity with which readers of autofiction will generally credit texts of this genre. *Éros* can thus be read as a subversion of autofiction through intertextual references and the disruption of a chain of authority through digital interference. As Fortier and Mercier observe:

> Tant les protocoles d'espace virtuel que ceux de l'autofiction se voient ironisés, parodiés. La maîtrise des machines électroniques d'*Éros mélancolique* se heurte à l'anonymat des sources et à l'insuffisance des transcodages, abandonnant toute veillété de construction ou de garantie du sens. (Fortier and Mercier 2013)

Crucially, this is not done by Garréta and Roubaud in order to undermine their own text or the Goodman story completely, but as a caution to the reader to pay close attention to whence, if anywhere, the text's authority stems.

Whose Text is it Anyway? Conclusion and Invitation for Further Reflection

As we have seen, in *Éros*, Garréta and Roubaud employ a number of techniques and devices, including frame narratives, inter- and autotextuality, and autofictional elements, all of which can be identified with certain authors and their trademarks (Perec, Roubaud, Garréta), yet which simultaneously attempt to convince the reader that the actual authors of the text had nothing to do with its creation in the first place. As Guétemme phrases it, *Éros* appears to be 'une création à partir de restes, sans artiste et sans œuvre: Goodman abandonne son projet et Jacques Roubaud et Anne F. Garréta n'ont peut-être rien écrit' (Guétemme 2012b: 353). Therefore, with regard to answering the question which the novel itself poses – 'c'est l'histoire de qui? Ou bien, de qui est l'histoire?' – it is left to the reader to continue the search for a credible source. Certainly, the '[Fade to gray]' section (presumably narrated by N3, the author of the '[Le négatif la chambre noire]' section) opens with what looks an address to the reader in the second person plural:

> Vous héritez d'une histoire. Ce n'est pas la vôtre.
> L'histoire, est-ce jamais la vôtre?
> Toujours celle d'un autre, celle d'autres.
> Elle vient trancher le fil de vos pensées, traverser vos labyrinthes amoureux. Elle s'offre à vous hanter. (*ÉM* 295)

If we follow the logic of the frame narrative, then this could, of course, be read as addressing AFG and JR (allegedly the first readers of the 'Éros mélancolique' digital manuscript), and, by extension, as addressing the authors Garréta and Roubaud themselves. Perhaps this is a reminder by the authors to themselves that they are never fully in control of their story, in all the senses implied here: this is a story which is neither entirely about them, nor entirely written by them, nor entirely belonging to them, especially once it has been published and, as implied by the frame narrative, circulated online. This passage can also be read as a response to the text on the wordpress website written by N1 as quoted above, which ends with: 'Une fois téléchargé et devenu vôtre, il [le récit] disparaîtra de cette page' (*ÉM* 9). As this passage implies, AFG and JR (but not Garréta and Roubaud) are the 'depositaries' ('dépositaire[s]') of the text and the text has become 'theirs' ('vôtre'). However, by the end of the '*Préface*', the focus is directed toward the reader of the book instead: 'Je suis curieux de savoir ce que *vous* en penserez' (*ÉM* 13; my emphasis). Although, in her conversation with JR, this remark is directed at AFG, we never hear what she thinks, and the second person formal 'vous' becomes an address to the reader instead, prompting the reader to develop their own reading of the text independently of any commentary from the autofictional characters in the text.

At the very end of the book, N3 concludes their section with a first person plural 'we', in English this time:

> Dans l'un des deux appareils un film est demeuré, en attente d'exposition, de développement. Depuis quand?
> D'invisibles rayonnements, venus du fond du temps, traversent les corps, traversent la matière, et lentement ennuagent la surface sensible. L'encre lumineuse des instants pâlit.
> La chimie des révélateurs n'offre plus à fixer qu'un brouillard.
> We fade to grey, lumière, encre, corps, sel. (*ÉM* 299)[180]

[180] The inconsistency in the spelling of 'grey' and 'gray' is, I assume, deliberate, and indicative of a broader trend in the text toward small errors and inconsistencies, the corruptions of the text happening over the course of its permutations. Note that in the song 'Fade to Grey' (1980) by the British new wave band Visage, which the section title references (Le Dem 2009), 'grey' is spelt with an 'e'.

If one reads this 'we' as referring to all of the narrators in *Éros* – including AFG and JR, even though they technically exist outside the 'Éros mélancolique' PDF – then, arguably, the authors' voices do return briefly for a final farewell, yet only to affirm their immediate disappearance ('évanouissemen[t]', *ÉM* 299) once again. The disappearance of light, salt, and bodies is evidently in reference to the fading of the leftover film in the camera (and strongly recalls Alix Cléo's photography, as we have seen), yet the ink clearly also serves to reference the material text itself and the act of writing. An early passage in the Goodman narrative describes photography as '[l']écriture de la lumière' (*ÉM* 104), establishing photography and writing as analogue artistic endeavours. Although the reader of *Éros* might reasonably argue that the material book does not, in fact, disappear after reading, like the photographs on the old film roll or the PDF file after being downloaded, the book nonetheless anticipates its own disappearance, dissolution, or perhaps its dispersion or further permutation in a kind of digital afterlife. By imagining and positioning itself at a fleeting moment in time during which it exists in its current form, *Éros* strongly recalls the proneness to changeability and manipulation of the digital text that, as we saw in the previous chapter, is evoked in *Indigo*. Garréta and Roubaud's novel thus gives the reader some insight into the permutation process which it has already undergone, but also envisions this as an ongoing process. In the '[Fade to gray]' section, N3 muses:

> Qui est, ou a été Goodman? Est-il le même que Clifford, ou encore un autre? Ou encore, autre que tout autre, c'est-à-dire, fiction? A quel corps s'attache ce nom, y avait-il un corps pour porter l'ombre double de ces noms? De quels corps sont-ils les signes, les masques ou les symboles? Dans quel monde aller en quête de leurs spectres?
>
> Des Clifford, des Goodman, des Coxeter, des Guttman, des Rejlander, il en traîne des milliers d'occurences et de mentions de par l'univers numérique. Google them, Yahoo them, interrogez l'ogre décharné lying at the heart of the web, et qui dévore les traces pour en bâtir son labyrinthe de térabits. (*ÉM* 296)

The search for the story of Goodman, Clifford, Cayley, and Coxeter continues, and Garréta and Roubaud are telling their reader where to go looking for it, namely, on the Internet. AFG and JR do not return to give a final verdict on the Goodman story at the end of the book, and JR's googling of Clifford, Cayley, and Coxeter prefigures a googling, by the reader, of Goodman, Garréta, and Roubaud (and other names from *Éros*), thereby turning 'Garréta' and 'Roubaud'

into the next set of *noms propres* – haphazardly selected, and dissociated from their real selves – by which new discoveries might be made in obscure corners of the Internet.

Evidently, as the title of N2's section tells us, the Internet is little more than an 'archive fantôme' (*ÉM* 15) and digital 'memory' is far from reliable. The risk of contamination and degradation, as the 'Éros' manuscript shows us, is very high. Maintaining any semblance of an original, unadulterated, or flawless text is an illusion, and a search for the truth is merely a search for spectres, although traces of the characters' stories persistently resurface. Fortier and Mercier read the continuous transfer of authority from narrative voice to narrative voice in *Éros* as corresponding to an 'éthique de la lecture, pensée comme la quête d'une trace qui sans cesse se dérobe' (Fortier and Mercier 2013). Certainly the novel's final section appears to corroborate this interpretation. However, I would argue that such a reading is not merely representative of Garréta's or Roubaud's writing, but, as this thesis in its entirety has shown, is symptomatic of a wider reflection by contemporary authors on reading habits, including, on the one hand, the observation of pervasive modes of reading and understanding autobiographically influenced texts which have not changed substantially during the past few decades, and, on the other, the anticipation of drastic changes to modes of reading encouraged by the Internet and digital content.

Conclusion

Common Characteristics

As addressed in the introduction to this thesis, the novels discussed in this study by and large fall outside the mainstream, and are instead representative of a more niche, experimental contemporary novel. This thesis also draws together texts that are informed by a variety of linguistic and national literary traditions and conventions and therefore, in some respects, present quite a disparate array of characteristics. In Nothomb's novels, one can trace elements of French critical theory and responses to autofiction genre theory, but they also differ from conventional, Doubrovskian autofiction in terms of their autofictional characters' confidence in their artistic projects. *Hoppe*, heavily influenced by the German canon, displays a confidence in its author's stylistic and literary dexterity on the one hand, but also a mistrust of the novelistic genre conventions of which it purportedly makes use. In *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq engages to some extent with his role as a celebrity author and French intellectual, although in most respects the novel does not depart from its author's usual themes of the meaninglessness of individual destinies and cultural decay. An examination of Meinecke's *Lookalikes* requires the contextualisation of this novel, not only with regards to autofiction discourse, but also German *Popliteratur* and its precursors in Hubert Fichte's works. With Setz's *Indigo*, we have a text that is informed by specifically Austrian traditions of experimentalism and autofiction; and in Garréta and Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique*, we see a response to the autofiction genre, but also to equally experimental Oulipian authors and traditions which loom large in the text. In some respects, this thesis embodies many of the same paradoxes as autofiction does. Just as even the more experimental texts in this study do not quite succeed in fully marginalising their autofictional characters and making the author figure disappear, this study foregrounds the authors in its discussions of the individual texts just as much as it points out the limited utility in doing so. This is why the chapters of this thesis are nonetheless structured according to author and text, rather than more thematically.

Although the individual chapters therefore contribute to fields of study more closely concerned with these individual authors, my aim in this thesis is nonetheless to demonstrate broader common concerns articulated in the contemporary European experimental autofictional novel. While the case studies in this thesis demonstrate how these novels respond to particular national canons and traditions, they share similar concerns with, and an experimental attitude toward, the autofiction genre, as well as, in the cases of Meinecke, Setz, and Garréta and Roubaud, the exploration of newer models of authorship and narration. These novels are both a result of and a reaction against the 'autofiction boom'. To a certain extent, they do not represent a complete departure from the concerns of twentieth-century autobiographical writing, as many of the subversive elements of which they make use can be read as simply confirming the impossibility of autobiography. Yet these novels also make use of the autofiction genre and its inherent paradoxes and instabilities to critique autofiction itself and to examine more closely the reader's relationship with it. Especially in the second half of the thesis, we see autofiction being instrumentalised as a testing ground for newer, digitally inspired models of fiction, genre, authorship, and reader participation. Precisely because autofiction is experiencing a surge in popularity, on the one hand, and because it is a genre that, despite its inherent difficulties in terms of reception, is often approached by readers in quite a careless, biographical manner, on the other, it lends itself as a genre through which contemporary authors may explore newer developments in novelistic genres and contemporary forms of storytelling more broadly.

This thesis also responds to the predominantly German critical conception that autofiction is ushering in a new literary representation of subjectivity or a new form of autobiographical writing beyond the postmodern. On the one hand, the present study demonstrates that contemporary French and German autofiction, even at its most experimental, is not the manifestation of a new form of writing and literary subjectivity beyond the postmodern. As we have seen, despite their heightened sense of self-awareness and the extreme degree to which they engage with their own genre on a metafictional level, the tools of which

the novels in the present selection make use are not fundamentally different from those of their postmodern predecessors – even if the more conventional novels in this selection are representative of 'a gentler, more accessible version' of postmodernism (Eaglestone 2013: 14). As this thesis has demonstrated, the autofictional novels examined here are deliberately written in dialogue with the genre and its theories. Although less experimental autofiction – that is, autofiction that corresponds more closely to the Doubrovskian definition: '[é]crire (et lire) pour faire quelque sens de soi' (Doubrovsky 2003) – also tends to be self-reflexive in terms of its genre, this self-reflection and metafictionality is taken to extremes in the novels examined here. Instead of merely being a feature of the text, it becomes the text's main focus. Just as in Simon Kemp's assessment of contemporary French fiction more broadly, these novels display elements of avant-garde experimentalism (such as metafiction and a dialogue with theory), even if their aim is not entirely iconoclastic: 'Such play […] is more likely to be a subtle undermining of the reader's expectations about the novel's style, subject matter or plot development than it is a doctrinaire rewriting of the codes of fiction' (Kemp 2010: 12). None of these novels act as a manifesto in the same manner as David Shields's *Reality Hunger*, although they contain potentially innovative elements.

The only significant difference between the present selection of texts and earlier versions of postmodern and/or autobiographical writing, then, lies in the influence of digital models of narration and authorship. While these influences are clear – especially in the cases of *Lookalikes*, *Indigo*, and *Éros mélancolique* – these texts do not in themselves represent so significant a departure from twentieth-century genre conventions that they in themselves constitute a new genre, let alone herald a new literary era after the postmodern. As this study has shown, the present selection of novels demonstrates a degree of experimentation and genre subversion not present in more conventional (twentieth-century) autofiction, and gestures toward the potential for future innovation in terms of collective models of storytelling, especially online. Yet these aspects alone do not comprise a fundamental rupture with pre-existing genres and narrative forms.

Evaluating Differences

The novels examined in this study in many respects react to specific national literary traditions and movements, yet, in terms of their differing approaches to the autofiction genre, they cannot be particularly easily divided into French and German camps. The present selection of texts certainly demonstrates differing levels of serious engagement with the genre. Especially in the case of *La carte et le territoire*, we see that the author is not nearly as invested in thoroughly interrogating the implications of the contemporary autofictional novel and of its fraught reception as, for example, are Hoppe, Setz, and Garréta and Roubaud. Certainly, as we see in the cases of Hoppe and Setz, German-language authors do appear to favour a more thorough and exhaustive approach to their engagement with genre issues, whereas the French texts are, by comparison, much more light-hearted and playful, even leaning toward satirical. In terms of experimentation, however, particularly through complex narrative structures, almost all of the novels examined here go to great lengths to make access to their novels difficult and thereby encourage critical reflection on the part of the reader. Houellebecq is once again an outlier here, although the ambiguous manner in which *La carte et le territoire* treats its autofictional character does reflect a degree of playfulness that is uncharacteristic of the author's wider oeuvre. Particularly striking is that, in the French autofictional novels of the selected time period (2009–2012), we find higher levels of experimentation taking place primarily in the already experimental field of Oulipian writing. The German(-language) counterparts *Hoppe*, *Lookalikes*, and *Indigo*, although by no means international bestsellers on the same level as Houellebecq's, Kehlmann's, and other more conventional novels, are, by contrast, much more widely and publicly recognised, if not exactly mainstream either.

As this thesis has demonstrated, an openness to digitally inspired models of reading and writing, and the loss of control on the part of the author which these entail, cannot be clearly attributed to either French or German literature. To a certain extent, this openness is more strongly represented by the German-language authors in this thesis, as we saw in the cases of

Meinecke's *Lookalikes* and Setz's *Indigo*. Garréta and Roubaud's *Éros mélancolique* is so much of an outlier to mainstream literature that it does not read as representative of much of contemporary French literature. Yet I would nonetheless argue that this openness to digital textuality is a phenomenon that is not limited only to contemporary German or Austrian literature. As we will see in the example of the Diaphanes project *Einhunderttausend Wörter suchen einen Autor* (2019) described below, although this project was initiated by a Swiss publishing house, it brings together authors writing in a number of different European languages, including English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and coming from a variety of national backgrounds, including American, Argentinian, Icelandic, and Ukrainian.

Future Perspectives: Autofiction and the Digital Hypertext

In terms of the time period to which it belongs, the autofiction examined in this thesis sits between the twentieth century, during which our current phase of the Digital Revolution – including the advent of Web 2.0, social media, and smartphones – was only just beginning, and a close future which, although it might not witness any comparably drastic digital innovations, nonetheless promises a fuller integration of the digital into everyday life. This is not to argue that the present selection of texts anticipates the end of the conventional novel, or indeed the end of the printed book. Scott Rettberg makes a relevant point when he observes that the already inherently collaborative effort of producing literature – in the sense of 'multiple people working together to produce an edited, designed, bound, printed, and distributed artifact' (Rettberg 2011: 187) – certainly becomes more visible in electronic literature. Yet even Kenneth Goldsmith, for all his excitement regarding digital influences on contemporary creative writing, comes to the conclusion that '[b]ooks, electronic and otherwise, will continue to flourish. Although the new writing will have an electronic gleam in its eyes, its consequences will be distinctly analogue' (Goldsmith 2011b: xxi). This 'electronic gleam' is evident not only in the novels examined in the second half of this thesis, but also in more recent projects by these authors.

Rettberg's description of his own hypertext novel *The Unknown* (1998), written collaboratively between himself, William Gillespie, and Dirk Stratton, evinces remarkable similarities to some of the trends discussed in relation to the novels examined in this thesis. Multilinear plots and structures 'with many associative links through different scenes', elements of the picaresque, breaks in continuity, recurring 'tropes [and] character tics' employed as 'connective tissue', and the lack of an 'overall arc toward epiphany or catharsis' (Rettberg 2011: 193) are all traits we have encountered over the course of this study. It is also no coincidence that Wikipedia, as perhaps the most 'prominent example of a constructive hypertext built on open source software and user-contributed content' (Rettberg 2011: 199), features, in one way or another, in the majority of the novels discussed in the present study, demonstrating that what Rettberg calls the 'open-source ideology' of 'networked literature' (Rettberg 2011: 197, 199) has indeed influenced analogue literature from this time period. In what manner exactly this trend will continue remains to be seen, although two more recent projects in which Setz, Garréta, and Hoppe were involved might be indicative in this context.

The first is unsurprising, considering Setz's affinity to digital technologies as a younger author. His 2018 publication, entitled *Bot. Gespräch ohne Autor*, continues Setz's tendency, as begun in *Indigo*, to dissociate himself as author and empirical person from his written material. While most of the book's content is, presumably, written by Setz, it has been compiled and structured by Setz's interlocutor, the professional editor Angelika Klammer, in this simulated interview. As Setz explains in the book's preface, it was originally planned that Klammer would interview him in a conventional manner and that the resulting material would be published as a 'Gesprächsband' (Setz 2018: 9). However, as Setz describes it, the project began to founder once it became clear 'dass mit meinen transkribierten Antworten wenig anzufangen war. […] Man muss das eben auch können, das mündliche Erzählen' (Setz 2018: 9-10). The alternative, then, was for Setz to make his journals, collected 'in einer elendslangen Worddatei' (Setz 208: 10), available for questiong to Klammer: 'Angelika Klammer versuchte sich vorzustellen, wie es wohl wäre, anstatt des verstockt dahinplaudernden Autors einfach diese Datei zu befragen und auf

deren Antworten wiederum Gegenfragen zu formulieren und so weiter, als wäre das Worddokument ein lebender Gesprächspartner' (Setz 2018: 10). In this manner, according to Setz, they were able to conceive of the book as 'ein, in gewissem Sinne, postumes [Buch]. Der Autor selbst fehlt und wird durch sein Werk ersetzt. Durch eine Art Clemens-Setz-Bot, bestehend aus den kombinierbaren Journaleinträgen, in deren rudimentärer K.-I.-Maschine er vielleicht noch irgendwo eingenistet lebt' (Setz 2018: 10-11).

The other noteworthy project is one instigated by the Swiss publishing house Diaphanes, a collection of short texts published (more or less) anonymously online, on the website 100000words.net, and entitled *Einhunderttausend Wörter suchen einen Autor* (henceforth *Einhunderttausend Wörter*). As Diaphanes describes its project, the aim, fifty years after Michel Foucault's seminal 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' lecture in 1969, was to create a space in which works of fiction would no longer be restricted by the author's name:

> [A]ngesichts sich rasant verändernder Schriftkulturen wagt DIAPHANES ein Experiment: 100 Autorinnen und Autoren unterschiedlichster Sprache und Herkunft sind eingeladen, einen literarischen Text in der Ich-Form und unter der ebenso beliebigen wie strikten Beschränkung auf exakt 1000 Wörter zu verfassen. […] [D]ie Texte [werden] von den Namen ihrer Autoren entkoppelt, jeder Text in mindestens eine weitere Sprache übersetzt, ohne dass Original und Übersetzung als solche kenntlich gemacht werden. Von der Autorfunktion befreit korrespondierende Erzählungen eröffnen einen unerforschten Resonanzraum, einen radikal gegenwärtigen Ort für zukünftige Leser. (Diaphanes Newsletter)

The project therefore demonstrates many of the same tendencies which are of central importance in this thesis, namely: the attempted dissociation between author and first-person narrative (one of the texts on *Einhunderttausend Wörter* is even entitled 'Autofiction', Diaphanes 2019); the bringing together of authors from different national backgrounds; the loss of a distinction between original and copy; an attempt to be relevant to the present; and even the use of an Oulipian-style constraint.[181] However, just as the autofictional novel, even in its most experimental forms examined here, consistently embodies its fundamental paradoxes, the *Einhunderttausend Wörter* project does not entirely succeed in the complete dissociation of author from text either. A section on the website, entitled 'Imprint', lists the names of 64 authors

[181] The title itself is also reminiscent of Raymond Queneau's sonnet-based experimental project *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (1961), one of the Oulipo's foundational texts.

involved in the project. This list is clearly incomplete – the final name in the list is followed by an ellipsis demonstrating as much (Diaphanes 2019) – and the manner in which the listed authors have contributed to the project – for example, by writing, translating, or editing texts – is unclear. Yet *Einhunderttausend Wörter* does not entirely preclude the attribution of these authors to certain texts on the website. Although the list features the names of several authors associated with the Oulipo, including Hervé Le Tellier and the Italian authors' collective Wu Ming, experimental writers are not noticeably in the majority. The presence of names such as Marcel Beyer and Tom McCarthy indicates that not only lesser-known, alternative, or experimental authors are involved in this project. It is therefore difficult to evaluate, in the context of this thesis, the fact that Garréta and Hoppe are also credited as contributors on the website (Diaphanes 2019). It is, at this point, too early to say how representative of contemporary literature experimental projects like *Bot* and *Einhunderttausend Wörter* are. Yet the existence of these projects in the first place reveals that critical and public interest in questions surrounding contemporary first-person narratives, authorship and ownership, and digital literature has by no means waned in the years since 2012. This not only demonstrates the continuing relevance of the present study, but also indicates directions for further research.

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