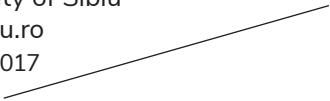


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LIFE WRITING, AUTOFICTION AND LATE CAREER (NON)FICTION: KEEPING MEMORY ALIVE

“Dear life ...” (Alice Munro)

“What I think, what I am.” (Edward Hoagland)

Abstract: The present essay aims to perform an analysis of life writing endorsed by several interconnected and equally relevant perspectives: memoir writing related to the intellectual and cultural context of a particular age and the enduring power of nonfiction to keep individual and collective memory alive. My analysis aims to accomplish the goal of calling attention to the contemporary revival of nonfiction and essayistic literature due to the unparalleled ability of combining a most personal and subjective authorial tone with the propensity for engaging in a dialogical interaction with the reader who will be invited to embark on a challenging and rewarding journey of probing into the self and continuous search for identity. In this respect, I am pleading for the revival of life writing—illustrate by autofiction, and memoir in contemporary literature—significantly connected to the theory of late career construction in writing.

Key words: autofiction, nonfiction, memoir, memory, life writing, late career

The present study resumes former academic preoccupations in the area of life writing, illustrated by two essays published in the academic journal *Transilvania*: “Life Writing. From the Story of the World to the Story of the Self” (2020) and “The Social Construction of the Public Intellectual. A Plea for the Humanities” (2024). My endeavor

is currently endorsed equally by recent studies in the area under investigation as well as by representative texts from Romanian and world literature. My main goal is to perform an analysis of life writing approached from several intertwined perspectives: the relation between the intellectual and cultural context of an age and memoir writing; the enduring power of nonfiction to keep individual and collective memory alive; within the overarching goal of calling attention to the contemporary revival of nonfiction and essayistic literature due to the unparalleled ability of combining a most personal and subjective authorial tone with the propensity for engaging in a dialogical interaction with the reader who will be invited to embark on a challenging and rewarding journey of probing into the self and continuous search for identity.

Based on the seminal theories set forth by Hywel Dix in the two landmark studies *The Late Career Novelist: Career Construction Theory* (2017) and *Autofiction and Cultural Memory* (2022), autofiction has gained a prominent status in contemporary world literature mainly due to engaging in a vivid dialogue with cultural memory where the literary product is an appealing combination of self-narration, retrospective meditation on the meaning of life—often imbued with the awareness of the “sense of an ending”—and a scholarly portrayal of the social, intellectual and cultural life of an age, of shorter or longer duration. Autofiction was a term initially coined by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, defined as “fiction of strictly factual events or facts”¹ reflecting the hybridity of the two literary genres: the autobiographical and the fictional.² Autofiction is one of the most protean literary genres accommodating a diversity of sub-genres intertwining in a different way in each literary work falling under this category thus reflecting the multiplicity of representations where stories of the self are pictured against the wider canvas made up of the stories of the world.

The challenge in any type of autobiographical literature—illustrated by a wealth of memoirs, diaries, journals, life histories—is to identify and clearly distinguish between what is real, personal, credible, pertaining to life and what is fictionalized and turned into literary material.³ My thesis is that autofiction is one of the most dynamic literary genres, with a long tradition and an enduring one as well. It includes (1) works with a propensity for dialogue, such as Mario

1. Serge Doubrovsky in Max Saunders, “Autofiction, Autobiografiction, Autofabrication, and Heteronymy: Differentiating Versions of the Autobiographical,” *Biography* 43, no. 4 (2020): 763.

2. See Saunders, “Autofiction,” 763–80.

3. Mircea Anghelescu, *Literatură și biografie* (Editura Universal Dalsi, 2005), 6.

Vargas Llosa and Rubén Gallo's 2017 *Conversación en Princeton* and Ioan Alexandru and Justinian Chira's 2021 *Scrisori* [Letters], (2) works with a more confessional tone imbued with a proclivity for an accurate and scholarly portrayal enriched with pertinent comments of the intellectual context, among which Alexandru Mironescu's 2023 *Admirabila tăcere. Jurnal 1970–1972* [The Admirable Silence. Diary 1970–1972], Jeni Acterian's 2015 *Jurnalul unei fete greu de mulțumit* [Diary of a Hard-to-Please Girl], Monica Lovinescu's 2014 *Jurnal inedit* (2001–2002) [Unpublished Diary (2001–2022)], and 2010 *Jurnal esențial* [Essential Diary], (3) works characterized by a profound moral nature, such as Petru Creția's 1995 *Luminile și umbrele sufletului* [The Lights and Shadows of the Soul], as well as (4) the more fictionalized writing exemplified by Joanna Rakoff's *My Salinger Year* (2014), Jay Parini's *Borges and Me: An Encounter* (2020), in addition to (5) the recent and widely acclaimed nonfiction texts produced by renown novelists such as Paul Auster with his *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and Julian Barnes' *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (2008), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and *Levels of Life* (2013).

According to Hywel Dix, autofiction is a pact between the autobiographical and the fictional, a frontier genre or "a form of fiction based on real events, in which the author appears as main protagonist and narrator under his or her own name."⁴ Mention should be made that the diary is considered one of the most powerful genres in Romanian literature as well as "the most privileged subject of the Romanian postwar theory of biographical genres,"⁵ an idea thoroughly elaborated by Dragoș Varga and Ștefan Baghiu in their scholarly and theoretical analysis of the biographical genre in Romanian postwar criticism. One of the most significant dimensions of autofiction is the role played by history and particularly the ability to resort to cultural memory as an effective means of identifying a balance between forgetting and restoring relevant facts, events, experiences that make up subjective and collective memory: "Literature, then, can contribute to cultural memory by telling emotional truths in fictional form."⁶

At this stage of our analysis, it is important to highlight the connection between autofiction and career construction theory, where the common denominator is the emphasis on the dialogical self, accompanied by the concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony, relying on the experience of the mature self, evinced in late career

4. Hywel Dix, *Autofiction and Cultural Memory* (Routledge 2022), 2.

5. Dragoș Varga and Ștefan Baghiu, "Theories of the Biographical Genre in Romanian Postwar Criticism," *Transylvanian Review* XXVIII, supplement no 1 (2019): 35.

6. Dix, *Autofiction*, 14.

writing, and the propensity for self-questioning unveiled in a wide range of autobiographical writing. Hywel Dix produced one of the most comprehensive and wide-ranging research on the specificity of the category labeled as “late career novelist” bringing to the forefront the particular characteristics of the different stages in an authorial career heightened by the retrospective look at the self and the world: “When we consider the life and work of a particular writer, how often do we come to the conclusion that that author’s masterpiece – his or her career-defining work – also happened to be one of his or her last pieces of work?”⁷ To sum up, I have resorted to the thesis set forth by Hywel Dix primarily to highlight the idea that late career theory is essentially a type of autofiction where the writer’s self is prominent and throwing a most open and honest perspective on the life of the writer as an individual and artist.

The diary has recorded not only one of the longest traditions in literature but it has also witnessed a cyclical revival particularly in times of socio-political turmoil, ages undergoing profound crises in society, when writers performing the role of public intellectuals undertook the daring mission of giving voice to their pertinent opinions about the present, with a sagacious retrospective look aimed at the attentive and receptive mind of the future. In such cases, journal writing represented an effective literary instrument against repression, means of intellectual survival out of socio-political chaos, in addition to rendering an essential guiding light to a particular age expressed in an articulate and cultured narrative. The journal is more than a piece of nonfiction, it provides in an outstanding manner the scholarly mission of a writer-intellectual—free of any subjective patterns or prejudices, temporary constraints or censorship—equipped with aesthetic instruments and ready to record for the benefit of posterity, set in the context of a bookish atmosphere, a minute, highbrow and wise portrayal of the development of a particular decade, age, or generation most often subject to socio-political convolutions with an impact on the cultural life of the respective timespan and an echo resonating to the personal and collective dimensions. It is also important to note that the autobiographical character of journals and memoirs is often subdued to the stories unfolded on the pages written about others and for the readers. The self comes secondary, in a somewhat paradoxical manner, as mentioned by Monica Lovinescu in her two remarkable journals: the “unique” one and the “essential” one,

7. Hywel Dix, *The Late Career Novelist: Career Construction Theory* (Bloomsbury Academic 2017), 1.

recalling the homonymous titles.⁸ Relevant examples in this case are Monica Lovinescu, Alexandru Mironescu, Jeni Acterian, to name only a few of the most illustrious ones. Such notes recorded by the author as journal entries are the most obvious proof of the living power of memory, honoring the resilient and enduring nature of memory and powerful evidence of the journal as a will of a historical, political and cultural reality bequeathed to the future generations.

I have chosen to plead for the worldwide spread and significance of life writing, with a particular focus on the contemporary revival of nonfiction, equally powerful and relevant in the Romanian literary context—illustrated by remarkable intellectuals and writers such as Jeni Acterian, Alexandru Mironescu, Monica Lovinescu, Petru Creția—as well as the international literary context—exemplified by prominent scholars and writers, like Julian Barnes and Paul Auster, who capitalized on the value of nonfiction as a powerful tool for the construction of late-career texts and a significant dimension of life writing.

As regards the relevance of nonfiction as a literary genre in a class by itself, it is important to mention here Eugene Vodolazkin's comments in a topical essay providing a laudatory reappraisal of the Middle Ages:

the medieval reader read all texts as nonfiction as “what happened in reality.” Reality was not just what had been but also what should have been ... As it happens, many current texts seek to reflect *unconditional* reality. The decision of the Nobel Committee to award the 2015 prize in literature to Svetlana Alexievich, a Russian-language author from Belarus, is symptomatic. Alexievich's books are seen by many as issue-based journalism and documentary, rather than as art and literature. This is yet another point in their similarity with the Middle Ages, when texts settled smoothly into the *nonfiction* category. On the one hand, we see a drive toward *nonfiction* and “new realism,” and on the other, postmodernism's surreal element. Both reflect a devaluation of the fictive but realistic “reality” offered by modern literature. Once again literature is becoming heterogeneous and, in a certain sense, limitless, as in the Middle Ages. The boundary between *fiction* and *nonfiction*, and literature and non-literature, is becoming shaky and plays an ever smaller role in our imaginations.⁹

8. See Monica Lovinescu, *Jurnal esențial: 1981–2002* (Humanitas, 2023) and Monica Lovinescu, *Jurnal inedit 2001–2002* (Humanitas, 2014).

9. Eugene Vodolazkin, “The New Middle Ages,” *First Things* 265, Aug/ Sept 2016, <https://firstthings.com/the-new-middle-ages/>.

Eugene Vodolazkin might be regarded as a sagacious chronicler of Middle Ages and modernity as well, combining the acuity of a scientist and philosopher with the ability of a philologist in connecting and creating bridges between the past and the present. The role of history is not only embedded in his novels, but it also serves as a key to understanding contemporary world and to restoring and bringing to life perennial personal values.

As for V. S. Naipaul's travelogue, *An Area of Darkness*, non-fiction came as a welcome release and a most needed interlude between the writing of novels, and his travel to India—the real one opposing the imaginary one—came as some kind of getaway to refresh and revive his authorial vitality subsequent to the toil of the years of writing fiction.¹⁰ From another perspective, nonfiction may be regarded as a means of escaping solitude, which may turn anyone into an invisible person, whereas the book itself becomes a proof of memory and a therapeutic act of recognizing and healing the wound triggered by painful prior events or experiences. This structure is evinced in Paul Auster's debut memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*, divided into two parts: "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" and "The Book of Memory."¹¹

Another vantage point to nonfiction is provided by Annie Ernaux's memoir, *The Years*, where reflecting on life equals reflecting on writing, as sets forth in her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, convincingly pleading for the use of "I"

as an exploratory tool that captures sensations: those which memory has buried, those which the world around us keeps on giving, everywhere and all the time. ... Not to tell the story of my life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others. ... This is how I conceived my commitment to writing, which does not consist of writing 'for' a category of readers, but in writing 'from' my experience as a woman and an immigrant of the interior; and from my longer and longer memory of the years I have lived, and from the present, an endless provider of the images and words of others.¹²

10. See V. S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness: His Discovery of India* (Vintage Books, 2002).

11. See Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (Faber & Faber, 2012).

12. Annie Ernaux, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," *The Nobel Prize*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/ernaux/lecture/>.

For Annie Ernaux, memory is essential and, at the same time, her writings are deeply rooted in the social and political realities of her world, testified by her reviewers, who situate her literary texts at the frontier between autofiction and sociology, due to her poignant analysis of the contemporary context, as she claimed a desire to preserve not only her own personal memories and experience, but the collective memory of a generation. In this respect, *The Years* is read as a memoir of the timespan between 1941–2006, where the retrospective narrative accurately captures and minutely renders significant moments of the cultural and social life, set in the framework of an autobiography that combines the personal and public voice, connected by the living power of memory.¹³

Furthermore, the reader may find one of the most captivating, appealing and congenial pieces of nonfiction in Alexandru Mironescu's journal, *Admirabila tăcere*,¹⁴ a masterpiece of autobiographical writing where each page or journal entry is a treasure of a brilliant mind which successfully balanced the scientific and spiritual natures of the human mind, similar to the equally relevant importance of civilization and culture. The significance of Mironescu's literary and spiritual—a pure gem and quintessence of worldly and spiritual wisdom—will recall the essayistic literature in Petru Creția's series of moral vignettes provided in *Luminile și umbrele sufletului*.¹⁵ The significance of nonfiction as an epitome of the wisdom of mankind has been duly highlighted by André Maurois in his *Open Letter to a Young Man* which may be read either as a public letter addressed to any reader with a penchant for the art of living or as an essay written from the years of late maturity as a piece of advice to the younger generation, connecting the past and the present.¹⁶

I consider it important to emphasize the overarching role played by culture in any attempt of understanding the reality, given that any piece of nonfiction is not merely a subjective narrative, it is rather devoid of any selfish aim or self-centered perspective. Instead, the autobiographical dimension reflects the collective experience and cultural memory, pointing out to the fundamental significance of books, ideas in the development of humankind, as they seem to live a new life with each reader. A witty dialogue such as the one created in the conversation between Mario Vargas Llosa and Rubén Gallo

13. See Annie Ernaux, *The Years* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022).

14. See Alexandru Mironescu, *Admirabila tăcere. Jurnal 1970–1972* (Humanitas, 2023).

15. See Petru Creția, *Luminile și umbrele sufletului* (Humanitas, 2023).

16. See André Maurois, *Open Letter to a Young Man* (Heineman, 1968).

may also be labelled as nonfiction, since it is not meant for the mere pleasure of entertaining the two participants to the conversation, but the course of the dialogue benefits the reader in quest for a rewarding cultural experience, reflecting on the nature connection between time and books, the relation between the author and translator, the fluid frontier between history and literature—wide apart and deeply related—contributing to an insightful picture of the world.¹⁷

To sum up, nonfiction provides the pretext and context for a powerful and epiphanic self-questioning, self-discovery journey meant to reach wisdom, as we may read in Roger Pol Droit's extended narrative, a dense and captivating philosophical novel meant to answer the intriguing questions on how to live, how to think and how to understand the world, a fascinating adventure guided by Alice—the protagonist—who mirrors the author and the reader alike. The Wonderland turns into an Idealand for Alice who addresses major existential questions while embarking on a journey through the history of ideas as testimony to the incessant quest for answers to the fundamental human queries, tracing an ideological and philosophical evolution from antiquity to contemporaneity.¹⁸ Another piece of nonfiction, Alberto Manguel's extended and deep foray into the art of reading and writing collected in a series of 39 essays under the title *A Reader on Reading*. Much like Roger Pol Droit, Manguel himself resorted to Alice—and her wisdom from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice through the Looking-Glass*—as a secondary protagonist to the quest opening each of the eight sections of the book and each of the 39 essays with one congenial quotation from the two titles aforementioned, summing up in a nutshell the key to understanding each part.¹⁹

Late career writing shifts the focus from the story, which becomes of less concern, to the state of mind, providing a mature, balanced, stable, reliable and open to further questioning and inquiry on the part of the reader, setting forth a cognitive perspective of “what we can know” about the world, a picture as we see it now and as it had been, or a sensible perspective of former memories, unveiling aspects of identity that make up the all rounded self.²⁰ Therefore, intellectual freedom, the authority and credibility of the author ensured by literary and scholarly maturity, the exceptional ability

17. See Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversație la Princeton cu Rubén Gallo* (Humanitas, 2023): 23–24, 25–27, 102, 167–168, 244, 266.

18. See Roger Pol Droit, *Alice în țara ideilor* (Editura Trei, 2025).

19. See Alberto Manguel, *Un cititor în pădurea din oglindă* (Editura Trei, 2003).

20. See Ian McEwan, *What We Can Know* (Vintage Publishing, 2025): 20.

of rendering appealing ideas in a highly congenial artistic manner, plead for essayistic literature, autofiction, memoir as valuable facets of nonfiction, at the same time answering Zadie Smith's question "why do novelists write essays?"²¹

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21. Zadie Smith, "The Rise of the Essay," <https://www.are.na/block/23636939>.