

SELF AS PERFORMATIVE GESTURE: THE AUTHOR-CHARACTER'S ROLE IN AUTOFICTION

Nathaniel Spencer-Cross

Department of English Literature,
University of Windsor,
CANADA

nathaniel.spencer.cross@gmail.com

Abstract. This research paper examines author-characters in autofiction, arguing that their liminal insertion between fact and fiction disrupts traditional perceptions of authorial authenticity. Through analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*, I establish how author-characters (distinct from self-inserts or authorial surrogates) function as multi-layered representations which both embody and fictionalise the author. Using Roland Barthes's interrogation of narrative voice and Jacques Derrida's theory of trace, I contend that author-characters expose the futility of accurate self-representation in literature. By intentionally blurring autobiography and fiction, author-characters in autofiction challenge genre boundaries while simultaneously foregrounding the instability of identity.

Keywords: author-character, autofiction, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *10:04*, trace, self-representation, Kurt Vonnegut, Ben Lerner

Author-characters in autofiction challenge literary norms surrounding self-representation in autobiography, questioning the authenticity of the autobiography and the role of first-person narration. Coined by Serge Doubrovsky while speaking about his 1977 novel *Fils*, he describes the genre's roots in "fiction, events, and facts which are strictly real: autofiction, if you will" [*fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels*] (Doubrovsky 1977, i), naming a form where, as Ava Dean notes, "created by Serge Doubrovsky in the late 1970s [autofiction] puts the paradoxical genres of 'autobiography' and 'fiction' into a unified form" (Dean 2017, 3). Unlike autobiography, which documents factual lived experiences,

autofiction purposefully destabilises fact and fiction through their unification. Autobiography's claim to authenticity relies upon a foundational contradiction: it assumes memory and language accurately depict the self, where autofiction exposes the artifice. Phillippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact states that the impact relies on a reader's belief in the author's identity as narrator/protagonist. However, this pact depends on the gap between lived experience and representation. While autobiography obscures this gap, autofiction weaponises it. In "No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon, or The Cockroach Crusade", Nathaniel's assertion that the novella is "the only place [he] expressed [himself] honestly" (Spencer-Cross 2024, 5) further exemplifies the paradox of authenticity in autofiction. The claim is simultaneously sincere and manipulative, highlighting autofiction's ability to depict real events through the lens of fiction.

Unlike autobiography, which attempts to reliably ground the author and protagonist's identity, autofiction interrogates the construction of that proposed stability. Nathaniel's narrative actively refuses to authenticate which memories or moments are real or interpreted, and this instability becomes a focal point of the narrative. Autofiction's authenticity lies in its admission of constructed fabrication. In contrast, autobiography can fail to acknowledge its own fictionalisation. Where autobiography's unnamed "I" can invite readers to conflate author and protagonist, the named author-character can be used as a tool to highlight this distinction. While both autobiography and autofiction share many similarities, both genres are able to achieve specific things that the other cannot. Autobiography is much more compatible with the illusion of unmediated truth, while autofiction is able to sacrifice its authority over authenticity in order to draw attention to the natural "constructedness" of autobiography's authenticity. One way autofiction achieves this destabilisation is through the use of author-characters: fictional representations of the novel's author who are, and are not, the writer. While autobiography validates itself through a seemingly verifiable narrative, autofiction focuses on the

construction of identity and uses fictional narrative techniques to question self-representation. This separation between the two genres is imperative to understanding autofiction. Where autobiography operates under the guise of transparency, autofiction plays with the artificial nature of said transparency to question the authenticity of representing a factual self.

Autofiction, similar to autobiografictionⁱ, factionⁱⁱ, and the roman *à clef*ⁱⁱⁱ, distinguishes itself from comparably semi-fictitious literature by adhering to the conventions established in autobiographic literature, including author as protagonist, focusing on lived experience, and the exploration of memory. Siddharth Srikanth writes that,

scholars of autofiction typically define the genre as marked by an uncertainty over truth-telling in nonfictional forms such as the memoir or autobiography... Autofiction is best conceptualised as a genre that deliberately troubles audience expectations regarding fiction and nonfiction for both autobiographical and novelistic ends. (Srikanth 2020, 344)

Besides blending fact and fiction, autofiction distinguishes itself through the malleability of constants through fictionalisation, playing with the reliability of memory and senses to question the authenticity and consistency of the created narrative world. While autobiography presumes memory, character, and setting reliability, autofiction treats them as narrative tools to be satirised or allegorised. The Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse-Five* devalue memory as they traverse time non-linearly. Similarly, the ethereal basement's ability in "No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon" to resurrect buried memories via the maneki-neko plays with the reliability of Nathaniel's narration. Author-characters serve as fictionalised representations of a novel's author. I have closely examined the role of the author-characters, Billy Pilgrim and the nameless author-character of chapter one in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the author-characters Ben and The Author in Ben Lerner's *10:04*.

The author-character, distinct from an authorial surrogate, or self-insert, is a fictionalised representation of the novel's author, generally serving as protagonist while sharing ideological, physical, or historical similarities with the text's author. Dating back to the 4th century BCE, authorial surrogates enabled authors to express philosophical and/or moral positions without claiming direct ownership. Kendal Sharp writes of Socrates' role in the Platonic dialogues that, "Some scholars see in the character Socrates a mouthpiece inside the dialogues for the author's own views" (Sharp 2016, 1). Plato enlisted the character of Socrates as a surrogate for his own ideological rhetoric, offering a layer of separation between the character Socrates' dialogue and the author Plato's writing. The surrogate serves as a fictionalised rendition of a (factual or fictional) character through whom the author expresses their own ideals, while inhabiting an accountably separate representation.

Self-inserts gained popularity in the 19th and 20th centuries as characters in metafictional and autofictional novels such as Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*. Self-insert characters are often direct representations of their authors, and occasionally romanticised in the aim of wish fulfilment or personal exploration, as found in the recent resurgence of the self-insert in fanfiction.^{iv} While the author surrogate serves as a detached mouthpiece for the author, a self-insert more closely resembles a 1:1 representation of the author. Melody Streml writes that "self-insertion fanfictions occur when authors insert themselves into the universe of a pre-established story, either directly, or through an author avatar", writing as an example, that "Kurt Vonnegut's alter ego, Kilgore Trout, appears in many of his novels" (Streml 2020, 16-17). Streml contradicts her definition of the self-insert, altering the reader's perception of the Kilgore Trout character's role as author-character. *Self-insertion fanfictions occur when authors insert themselves into the universe of a pre-established story*. Kilgore Trout, as I will later examine, functions as an author-character, not a self-insert. Kilgore Trout is not Kurt Vonnegut. Rather, Trout is a fictionalised representation of Vonnegut and not a factual self-

insert. The distinction between author-character and self-insert relies on the fictionalisation of the self-representation of the author. Kilgore Trout has not been *inserted* into a pre-existing universe; rather, he appears in literary settings written by Vonnegut. At the point of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication, Trout had only appeared in one earlier Vonnegut novel. Like any fictional character created by Vonnegut, Trout inhabits Vonnegut's unique narrative and setting independent of his function as authorial representation. For Kilgore Trout to qualify as a self-insert, he would need to be inserted into a pre-established universe^v and not a new literary setting. The separation between author-character and self-insert is one of faithful/fictional authorial representation. This fictionalisation of Trout contradicts the role of self-insert, while his role as factual authorial representation similarly distances the character from the role of author surrogate, at which point I argue Kilgore Trout takes on the characteristics of an author-character.

While authorial surrogates can be too vaguely tied to authors, functioning as mouthpieces to echo an author's ideological and moral compass^{vi}, self-inserts can be too closely tied to authors and fail to exit the realm of autobiography^{vii}. The author-character functions as a fictional representation designed to physically and mentally embody the text's author, while questioning cultural or aesthetic frameworks of self-representation. Unlike the author surrogate or self-insert, the dialectic author-character is both a product of lived experience and a critique of authorial creation. Lerner's author-character Ben not only echoes Lerner's life but also highlights the commodification of the authorial identity in literary markets. Lerner uses the liminal nature of the author-character to expose the "self" as both consumable product and self-representation. Lerner displays the commodifiable nature of authorship, writing,

even if I wrote a book that didn't sell, these presses wanted a potential darling of the critics or someone who might win prizes; it was symbolic capital... 'Well, your first book was unconventional but really well received. What they're buying when they buy the proposal is, in part, the idea that your next book is going to be a little more... mainstream. (Lerner 2014, 154-155)

The commodification of Ben as author in the novel's literary world, and as author-character to Lerner in *10:04*, is both said and unsaid within the very novel Ben is referencing. The author-character achieves an interpretable form of self-representation while maintaining a level of fictional distance from the factual author. Ben is, and is not Lerner. Roland Barthes writes about Balzac's *Sarrasine*, questioning the separation of authorial representation and factual author, probing the separation between the textual Balzac and the factual author of Honoré de Balzac in order to focus on the indeterminacy of the authorial voice writing.

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac, the author professing "literary" ideas on femininity? (Barthes 1984, 142)

Barthes literalizes the authorial split between representation and textual construct. Following Barthes's logic, neither the "hero" nor Balzac as factual author could be correspondingly represented on the page. Instead, it is both. The author's voice is established through textual representation, and the "hero's" through authorial input and creation. This duality of identity allows author-characters to simultaneously portray factual author and fictionalised character. The interconnectedness of fact and fiction in autofiction through the depiction of the author as author-character allows for nuanced readings into both the ideologies of the author and the characteristics of the author-character. The author-character functions as a figure whose agency is defined by the narrative used to create them. This narrative agency is made evident in *10:04*, where Ben fluctuates between controlling his narrative as author and being controlled by it as a character. Barthes argues that biological and biographical identity are irrelevant when it comes to textual meaning, because writing is "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost,

starting with the very identity of the body writing” (Barthes 1984, 142). While an excellent argument, in the realm of autofiction, I partially disagree. The author-character in autofiction reinterprets the author as character to stage the unravelling of autobiographical functions. Vonnegut, Lerner, and I use author-characters as performative gestures meant to highlight the construction of authorship. The death of the author here, while still applicable, is less a death of authorial biography and more akin to a reimagining of the author’s role within a narrative. The author-character allows authors to switch between fictional and factual self-representation, which promotes a form of speculative autobiography where the “self” is numerous, temporary, and ever-changing. Ben can imagine dying of Marfan while writing about The Author’s tumours, Vonnegut’s nameless author-character of chapter one can lament his inability to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while Billy Pilgrim hopelessly embodies Tralfamadorians fatalism. These multiple and fictional iterations of the “self” within autofiction expose autobiography’s inability to capture the multifaceted nature of being.

However, autofiction explores this multifaceted nature through the use of barely, partially, or fully fictionalised author-characters. Elleke Boehmer elaborates on Coetzee’s own term for his unique form of semi-fictitious writing: “Coetzee has himself coined the term ‘autre-biography’ to describe this mode of third-person fictional-yet-part-autobiographical writing” (Boehmer 2016, 437-438). Autre-biography serves as another term upon which the autobiographical genre can be fictionalised, and while autre-biography fits within the larger umbrella term of autofiction, its reliance on the third person distinguishes the genre. David Attwell elaborates writing, “The initials J.C., together with many other clues, imply that the text is meant to be taken as autobiographical, though in a sharply qualified sense... arguably, this text falls into that category [autobiographical] while including explicitly fictional elements” (Attwell 2010, 214). Some writers use the terms autofiction and author-character loosely and interchangeably. What Coetzee calls “autre-biography”,^{viii} others call autofiction. My use of

the terms author-character and autofiction fits the novels selected most closely, as these texts use author-characters' liminal natures to question the limits of genre. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *10:04*'s use of multiple distinct author characters emphasises the destabilising nature of self-representation. Unlike the roman *à clef*, or fiction which aims to reconcile fact and fiction, autofiction thrives in the conflict between them.

Oliver Connolly and Bashshar Haydar define faction as,

a hybrid genre, aiming at the factual accuracy of journalism on the one hand and the literary form of the novel on the other. There is a fundamental tension, however, between those two aims, given the constraints which factual accuracy places on characterisation, plot, and thematic exploration characteristic of the novel. (Connolly & Haydar, 2005, 347)

Connolly and Haydar's critique of faction emphasises a key distinction which further separates the genre from autofiction, being the impossibility of forgoing journalistic practices for novelistic freedom. Faction's necessary faithfulness to factual accuracy limits the genre's ability for imaginative exploration. Autofiction leverages its fictitious nature to question the process of self-representation and self-narration. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the nameless author-character of chapter one wants to write a book about his WW2 experiences, "but not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now" (Vonnegut 1969, 2). In *10:04*, Lerner explains, "say that... I decided to replace the book I'd proposed with the book you're reading now, a work that, like a poem, is neither fiction nor nonfiction, but a flickering between them" (Lerner 2014, 194). In "No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon", Nathaniel struggles to write his "novella, the one [he] refused to write, the one in your hands, the only place [he] expressed [himself] honestly" (Spencer-Cross 2024, 5). In each instance, the novel(la)'s creation and potential failure in their formation serve a narrative function. While faction depicts factual, even journalistic events with fiction writing techniques such as rising action, climax, and

resolution,^{ix} autofiction is not constrained to this narrative structure as its foundation is not rooted in fiction, but rather the autobiography. This adjacency to autobiography allows for author-characters to further examine the authorial relation between finished product and work in progress. While the roman à clef depicts true stories *disguised* as fiction,^x autofiction intersects fact and fiction, purposefully blending the two. Compared to the roman à clef, the need to disguise truth is less inherent in autofiction, as the genre itself is an *expression* of truth through fiction, not the *masking* of it.

Billy Pilgrim is neither autobiographical nor fictional; by writing a P.O.W. story linked to factual events surrounding Dresden, and pairing them with fictional absurdity such as time travel, Vonnegut tempts readers to question the entirety of the novel as truth or fiction. The distinction, however, lies in interpretive truth and factual truth. What is true from Billy Pilgrim's perspective may not be true for others. Blending the believable with the unbelievable ultimately leaves readers without the binary options of believing or not believing. Readers are instead encouraged through the blend of genres to actively come to their own conclusions about the factual nature of autofiction.

Blending fact and fiction, autofiction can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from autobiography. I argue that any author-character's identity is inherently unreliable through the narrative action of creating the self, as the self, through language. Jacques Derrida's theories of Différance and Trace in *Of Grammatology* distinguish language as a signifier which can never encapsulate the signified. According to Derrida, "the trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself" (Derrida 1976, 156). Using Derrida's notion of *trace*, once the author inhabits the page, they become nothing more than a suggestion of themselves, a representation that refers beyond itself. Derrida clarifies how the written self is continually diluted through multiple signifiers (author, to author-character, to reader) that can never fully encapsulate the original identity of the self being represented. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is a representation of

the nameless author-character, who himself is a representation of Vonnegut. In *10:04*, The Author is a representation of Ben, who himself is a representation of Lerner. Similarly, the author-character Nathaniel is a representation of me, which, like Lerner and Vonnegut's author-characters, is inherently fictionalised through language. Regardless of intent, the textual medium of written language diminishes the role of the author into representation via trace, and is inherently fictionalised via the author-character, and can never be a fully authentic representation even in "authentic" autobiographical literature. Every authorial representation, intended factually or fictionally, enters the realm of fictional author-character. The written self becomes an intentionally or accidentally fictionalised stand-in for the factual self. In autobiography, this separation of selves is obfuscated by the genre's inherent claim to authenticity; in autofiction, however, the author-character as a trace of the factual author is a key component of the genre. Vonnegut's nameless author-character is not Vonnegut, but a textual echo, a self-representation whose existence relies on the act of writing; the same goes for characters Ben and Nathaniel.

This instability between self and self-representation is a feature of autofiction, which targets the distinction between signifier and signified. However, in autofiction, this forced misrepresentation through language dilutes the authorial authenticity of the author-character. This dilution exposes the conceptual nature of autobiographical truth, even if the most factual self-representation is inherently fictional. I argue that autofiction's purposeful fictionalisation makes that self-representation more honest. By acknowledging its own artifice, autofiction challenges audiences to confront the inherently constructed nature of self-representation. The inherent fictionalisation purposefully implemented in autofiction, and accidentally in autobiography, broadens the unstable line between the genres through intentional, or accidental, misrepresentation of the depicted author using either author-characters or Derrida's notion of trace.

Vonnegut introduces *Slaughterhouse-Five* with a seemingly

autofictional and documentative recount of the novel's nameless author-character's writing process and setting. While Vonnegut references factual events and locations, such as the bombing of Dresden, extraterrestrial plot points within the novel are clearly fictionalised. Vonnegut writes on the title page,

Slaughterhouse-Five
or
The Children's Crusade
A Duty-Dance with Death

by
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

A fourth-generation German-American
now living in easy circumstances
on Cape Cod
[and smoking too much],
who, as an American infantry scout
bors de combat,
as a prisoner of war,
witnessed the fire-bombing
of Dresden, Germany,
'The Florence of Elbe,'
a long time ago,
and survived to tell the tale.
This is a novel
somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic
manner of tales
of the planet Tralfamadore,
where the flying saucers
come from.
Peace.

The dichotomy of fact and fiction established through historical reference and alien invasion primes readers to question Vonnegut both as author and author-character within the narrative. By offering readers autonomy in deciphering the levels of factual recounting, the text establishes a separation between Vonnegut's authorial invention and autofictional representation. Vonnegut breaches the role of author, shifting into the part of author-character

through the use of factual and fictional self-representation and narrative. Similar to Vonnegut, the nameless author-character of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an author, as are Ben and The Author in *10:04*, and Nathaniel in “No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon.” This authorial representation blends the author’s role as both creator and character, simultaneously fulfilling two roles in the literary form and creation of the novel. Vonnegut’s role as author and character is further mixed via *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s title page’s autobiographical framing. The liminal nature in which Vonnegut divides himself between author and author-character invites readers to conflate the two, only to undermine this conflation with Billy Pilgrim’s science-fiction adventures to Tralfamadore.

Lerner situates *10:04* in an autofictitious narrative through the inclusion of factual events such as hurricanes Irene and Sandy, paired with a fictional plot, like mine and Vonnegut’s, loosely centred around the creation of each respective novel(la). However, unlike Vonnegut’s nameless narrator, and similar to the character Nathaniel, Lerner names his author-character after himself. Naming the novel’s protagonist after the novel’s author complicates the distinction between autobiographical and autofictional writing by blending factual name with fictional character through the shared name of author and author-character. In doing so, Lerner and I ask audiences to distinguish fact from fiction themselves. In naming our author-characters after ourselves, Lerner and I intensify Vonnegut’s critique of authorship. Just as Vonnegut’s nameless author-character laments the failure of his war novel, “I’ve finished my war book now... This one is a failure” (Vonnegut 1969, 19), Ben abandons his novel altogether, while Nathaniel is actively seen evading its creation, “The memories on the page difficult to write, so I left pages bare” (Spencer-Cross 2024, 6). All three author characters allude to Maurice Blanchot’s notion of “the infinite conversation” where a dialogue takes place between the sayable, and the unsayable, “[Blanchot] forgets to say that the line is only beginning—does not allow him to include himself in it. It is an uninterrupted line that inscribes itself while interrupting itself” (Hanson 1969, xviii).

Conversations between Blanchot and other thinkers are interpreted through Blanchot, as he speaks to himself, as other thinkers. However, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *10:04*, and “No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon”, the act of writing becomes its own circular self-effacing line, situating the role of author-character both as representation of self, and critique of the very novel the author-characters inhabit. All three texts use author-characters both as tools for self-representation and as reflexive discourse in which the authors speak to themselves, about themselves, as someone else. In *10:04*, and “No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon”, this referential dialogue enacts a discourse between author and self, along with author and reader. This self-reflexive dialogue encourages readers to partake in both the construction of identity for the author-character and the factual author.

Kurt Vonnegut, the unnamed author-character of chapter one, and Billy Pilgrim all served in WW2. Billy Pilgrim serves as the author-character for the unnamed author-character of chapter one, who himself serves as the author-character for Vonnegut, “‘Listen-’ I said, ‘I’m writing this book about Dresden. I’d like some help remembering stuff’” (Vonnegut 1969, 4), and, “I’ve finished my war book now... This one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like this: *Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time*” (Vonnegut 1969, 19). Vonnegut plays with his own authorial representation, as multiple separate author-characters are layered on top of one another. While Kurt Vonnegut stood 6’2, Billy Pilgrim “...was preposterous—six feet and three inches tall” (Vonnegut 1969, 28). Vonnegut first stepped behind German lines at the age of 22, while “It was a random, bristly beard and some of the bristles were white, even though Billy was only twenty-one years old” (Vonnegut 1969, 28). Blending the line between Vonnegut and the subsequent author-characters with mild fictionalisations further questions the amount of fact/fiction found in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy is one inch taller than Vonnegut and one year younger at the time of his deployment. These alterations are so minute that they tease readers into drawing parallels between Vonnegut, the nameless

author-character, and Billy Pilgrim. In “No Beeps, No Alarms, No Bacon”, Nathaniel works in a pawnshop and buys gold from customers, defrauding the store of its profits; I did these things. Nathaniel also lives in a cockroach-infested apartment with a broken stove; I did not. While easy to distinguish between fictional talking cats and previous factual jobs, it is the smaller details which call attention to the autofictitious form, and bring into question the work's level of authenticity.

Eliot Rosewater is a recurring character of Vonnegut's who first appears in his 1965 novel *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*, published four years before *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater*, Eliot, a WW2 veteran, becomes infatuated with the writings of failed science fiction author Kilgore Trout, an author-character representing Vonnegut. Trout also appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, quickly becoming Billy Pilgrim's favourite author. Vonnegut writes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “It was Rosewater who introduced Billy to science fiction, and in particular to the writings of Kilgore Trout. Rosewater had a tremendous collection of science-fiction paper-backs under his bed” (Vonnegut 1969, 87) and “Kilgore Trout became Billy's favorite living author, and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read” (Vonnegut 1969, 87). Vonnegut's use of multiple author-characters within the novel plays with his self-representation to the point that Billy, the representation of the nameless author-character's representation of Vonnegut, meets yet another author-character representing Vonnegut.

In doing so, Vonnegut fractures his authorial identity across multiple fictional author-characters who interact with one another. This division of self can present contradictory versions of the self, shifting the author-character from a single unified symbol into an unstable representation. Fictionalising the self can lead to a fragmented identity liminally trapped between fact and fiction, one which Vonnegut, Lerner, and I manipulate for narrative gain. Alexander Sarra-Davis elaborates on the split-self used for representation writing:

Identity in novel writing is more than a name on a cover, used to sell books: it is also a delineation of authors and readers from the novel's subject, particularly those authors and readers who do not recognise their world reflected, catch the references made, or can critique the details included in the text. This divide between the identities ostensibly portrayed in a novel and those that are not, more so than the divide between the novel's author and its readers, is the one across which we risk misunderstanding what in a novel is real experience, or credible detail, and what is convenient fiction, or ignorant error. (Sarra-Davis 2024, 3)

These observations about misunderstood identities emphasise autofiction's ability to exploit ambiguity. Billy Pilgrim is both a credible war veteran and a sci-fi absurdity as displayed through his experiences on Tralfamadore. Similarly, Nathaniel's escalating shifts from mundanity to the hallucinatorily absurd leave readers questioning the authenticity of the mundane and the impossibility of the absurd. By refusing to resolve the tension between factual and fictional representation, Vonnegut and I place readers in the uncomfortable position of not knowing where the line between factual and interpretable truth lies.

Vonnegut does not distinguish between identities portrayed and not portrayed. Instead, he plays with the notion of multiple selves through the portrayal of multiple author-characters. It is not a question of which identities are omitted from the narrative; it is a question of which identities are included. There is Vonnegut the author, represented by the nameless author-character of the first chapter, and by Kilgore Trout. Then, there is Vonnegut the soldier, represented by Billy Pilgrim, and to an extent, Eliot Rosewater. While the author-character of chapter one is successful, Trout is a failed science fiction writer. While Billy Pilgrim is the naïve child experiencing war, Eliot Rosewater is the damaged man living in the shadows of WW2. Vonnegut fractures key components of his identity, sharing them among multiple author-characters who represent unique factors of the same identity-based umbrella (authorship and military service). Vonnegut not only fractures his self-representation but also similarly redistributes his personal

identity across multiple iterations. Billy's child-like innocence, Rosewater's cynicism, and Trout's failure as an author juxtaposed with the nameless author-character's success interrogate the notion of a singular identity. The role of author-character here breaches past self-representation, entering the realm of critique, questioning if a singular self-representation can contain Vonnegut's independent interpersonal complexities.

Billy's role as an author-character is both mentioned and questioned by the nameless author-character of chapter one. Vonnegut writes, "an American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains... That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (Vonnegut 1969, 109). Vonnegut plays with Billy's role as author-character by briefly reinserting the first chapter's nameless author-character into the novel's second section. Billy's role is not one of fictionalised representation; he is crafted just close and relatable enough to Vonnegut to entice interest while being different enough to maintain distance. Vonnegut intentionally inserts multiple forms of himself: multiple author-characters into a single narrative to obfuscate the line between author-character and factual author. This exposes the artificially constructed nature of authorial representation and identity, while confronting the autobiographical impossibility of self-representation.

The re-interpretation of Ben's life into *The Author's* novel is reminiscent of Lerner drawing from his life experiences living in New-York City as a professor, and accepting a writing residency in Marfa, Texas, where he conceived *10:04* and the author-character Ben. This relationship between factual author and authorial representation through author-character is disrupted when aspects of *The Author's* life permeate Ben's life. The Marfan syndrome^{xi} diagnosis Ben struggles with, and the tumour which *The Author* finds in his nasal cavity, are sometimes ascribed to their author-character counterpart; on multiple occasions, Ben has a tumour, and *The Author* is afflicted with Marfan syndrome. When Ben learns that "a doctor had discovered incidentally an entirely asymptomatic and potentially aneurysmal dilation of my aortic root that required

close monitoring and probable surgical intervention” (Lerner 2014, 4), Ben then fictionalises this health concern by altering its nature upon The Author:

When Dr Walsh told him the findings, the author was looking at a print of a painting of a beach scene: two empty white wooden chairs facing the sea, a small sailboat in the middle distance. He had a ‘mass,’ what is called a meningioma, located in his cavernous sinus; it appeared benign. (Lerner 2014, 72)

Lerner writes The Author’s sections in third-person, and Ben’s in first-person to mimic autobiographical immediacy with Ben, while further removing and objectifying The Author through the more distant third-person. This distinction establishes differential layers of removal between the author-characters and Lerner. This separation signifies that Ben is more closely associated with Lerner than The Author. Ben is one layer of representation away from Lerner, while The Author is one layer away from Ben. Similar to Vonnegut’s nameless author-character’s relation to Billy Pilgrim, Lerner’s Ben and The Author offer a layered mode of self-representation. Just as Vonnegut’s readers must understand both the linking and separation of the author and author-characters, Lerner’s audience must navigate the interrelation link between Ben and The Author. As the *stars* migrate from Ben to The Author, the representational self-leaks across narrative layers. The line dividing autofiction and autobiography is once again complicated through the use of the author-character and the symbolic representation it serves. As the distinction between author-characters fades, the distinction between author and author-character also weakens.

The author-character embodies a uniquely liminal figure in autofiction, inhabiting the divide between autobiography and fiction, destabilising authentic authorial identity. Through Vonnegut’s nameless narrator, Lerner’s blending of narratives, or a character divided through tense, the author-character complicates speculative autobiography. These characters are multi-layered representations that allow authors to explore identity at a distance

from their fictional representations. This distance doesn't merely serve ontological critique; it also offers a reflection on the inherent limitations of language itself. By blurring fact and fiction, autofiction challenges readers to question the reliability of narrative voice and the authenticity of self-representation. The purpose of this destabilisation is to first undermine the author as a singular, all-knowing entity outside their own lives, and secondly, to involve readers in the construction of meaning. The power of author-characters lies not in their ability to factually represent an author, but in their capacity to toy with the impossibility of said representation.

NOTES

- i Coined by Stephen Reynolds and later expanded upon by Max Saunders, autobiografiction fictionalizes autobiographical experiences through the introduction of fictionalized characters, altering the autobiographical events, or shifting the perception of these events. Autobiografiction is a “record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative” (Reynolds, 28). Saunders later expanded on the definition adding autobiografiction is about “combining forms; fusing, blurring, or moving between the forms of autobiography, story, diary, preface, and so on” (Saunders 2009, 524).
- ii A portmanteau of *fact* and *fiction*, the genre depicts factual events using fiction writing literary techniques and fictional conversations. The genre is a blending of factual events with literary techniques rooted in fictional story telling.
- iii Established by Madelaine de Scudéry in the 17th C., the roman a clef was used for veiled commentary on political and public figures. The genre (novel with a key) depicts factual events with the pretense of fiction, the “key” is the relationship between the fictionalized and factual, either gleamed through epigraphs or literary hints, or can be a second publication in the form of a guide.
- iv Examples include *Twilight Reimagined as a Self-Insert*, or Cassandra Cla(i)re’s *The Draco Trilogy*, both of which contain characters named after their author’s inhabiting a pre-existing universe.

- v Referring to Vonnegut's loosely interconnected novels as a *literary universe* is both misrepresentational and misleading. Regardless of shared characters, these novels lack narrative continuity, and the reintroduction of past characters is often done with satirical or metafictional intent.
- vi As is the character of Socrates in Plato's *Dialogues*.
- vii Such as the character of Karl Ove Knausgård in Karl Ove Knausgård's *Min Kamp (My Struggle)* where the protagonist shares the same name, biography, same family, and is ultimately too factually tied to Knausgård to be classified as autofiction, even though the work is marketed as such by Knausgård. James Wood writes in the *New Yorker*, "My Struggle' is not really a novel but the first book of a six-volume autobiography..." The work of autofiction is too closely tied to Knausgård's reality and factual identity to be classified as autofiction.
- viii Translates from French to "other-biography", which is in itself a play on the French "auteur" teasing a new meaning of "author-biography."
- ix In Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, for example, Capote interviews and assembles a shattered narrative into a cohesive piece of literature, while simultaneously bending the facts to fit a novel's literary standards. In a scene where recent murderers Dick and Perry stop in a diner for pancakes, Perry, wrought with guilt is unable to eat, while Dick calmly finishes his entire plate. While witness testimony corroborates the two men stopping in said diner, the nature of their conversation and demeanours towards one another remain unknown. Capote injects personalities into the characters to give the factual reporting a fictional edge.
- x Neal Cassady's 16,000-word letter to Kerouac was the inspiration for the character of Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. While the story remains largely unchanged, the names and "key" points of information were altered.
- xi Marfan syndrome elongates the extremities, and is coincidentally similar to Marfa, Texas. The city where Lerner first conceived of *10:04's* creation.

REFERENCES

- Attwell, David. 2010. "Mastering Authority: J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*." *Social Dynamics* 36 (1): 214-221.
- Barthes, Roland. 1984. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*, Translated by S. Heath.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 1969. *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota Press.

- Boehmer, Elleke. 2016. "Reading Between Life and Work: Reflections on 'J.M. Coetzee'." *Textual Practice* 30 (3): 435-450.
- Capote, Truman. 1966. *In Cold Blood*. Random House.
- Coetzee, J.M. 2007. *Diary of a Bad Year*. Viking Press.
- Connolly, Oliver, and Bashshar, Haydar. 2005. "The Case Against Faction." *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2): 347-360.
- Dean, Ava. 2017. *'To be Novelized': An Investigation of Autofiction & How it Operates in Gwenaëlle Aubry's 'No One'*. Portland State University.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dobrovsky, Serge. 1977. *Fik*. Galilée.
- Kerouac, Jack. 1957. *On the Road*. Viking Press.
- Knausgård, Karl. 2014. *My Struggle: Book One*. Translated by Don Bartlett. Archipelago.
- Lerner, Ben. 2014. *10:04*. Faber & Faber.
- Proust, Marcel. 2024. *In Search of Lost Time*. Translated by Vincent Kelvin. Walking Lion Press.
- Sarra-Davis, Alexander. 2024. *Self Representation in Fiction: The Use of Author Characters from Inclusion to Puppetry*. University of Toronto. Dissertation.
- Saunders, Max. 2009. "Autobiografiction: Experimental Life-Writing from the Turn of the Century to Modernism" *Literature Compass* 6 (5): 1041-1059.
- Sharp, Kendal. 2016. "Plato's Socrates: Mouthpiece or Implied Author?" *Philosophy and Literature* 40 (1): 1-15.
- Srikanth, Siddharth. 2020. "Fictionality and Autofiction." *Narrative* 28 (3): 344-360.
- Streml, Melody. 2020. "Magical Me: Self-Insertion Fanfiction as Literary Critique." *Journal of Popular Culture* 53 (1): 16-17.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. 1965. *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- . *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade*. 1969. Dell Publishing.
- Wolfe, Thomas. 1929. *Look Homeward, Angel*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Wood, James. 2012. "Total Recall." *The New Yorker*. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/08/13/total-recall.