

“BETWIXT AND BETWEEN”: REREADING POPPY AS AUTOFICTION

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1. The term *autofiction* crops up frequently in literary podcasts and reviews: see, for example, Jia Tolentino, “Ocean Vuong’s *Life Sentences*,” June 3, 2019, *The New Yorker*; Alice Attlee, “Fiction of Facts,” May 9, 2019, *Times Literary Supplement*; Pamela Paul, “A New Novel Conjures Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman,” January 19, 2019, in *The Book Review Podcast*, prod. Pedro Rosado, *The New York Times*.

2. Rachel Cusk, *Kudos* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018); Sheila Heti, *Motherhood* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018); Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018); Karl Ove Knausgaard, *The End* (London: Harvill Secker, 2018).

3. Hywel Dix, ed., *Autofiction in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of “Me”: Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

Introduction: An Ideal Candidate

AUTOFICTION HAS BEEN a buzzword within anglophone literary circles in recent years.¹ Several books published in 2018 stimulated the mainstream conversation, including Rachel Cusk’s *Kudos*, Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood*, Olivia Laing’s *Crudo*, and the final instalment of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* series.² Scholarship on the mode also flourished in 2018: Hywel Dix edited a groundbreaking essay collection called *Autofiction in English*, and Marjorie Worthington published the first monograph on American autofiction.³ The concept of autofiction has been part of the French literary lexicon since the late 1970s, introduced by Serge Doubrovsky and developed by theorists

such as Vincent Colonna, Philippe Gasparini, Arnaud Genon, Isabelle Grell, and Philippe Vilain; its appearance in English-language conversations, however, is a recent phenomenon.⁴

This article contributes to the emergent discourse by rereading Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* through the lens autofiction theory offers. The book, published in 1990, begins with Poppy's death and then tells the first-person story of a daughter's efforts to write Poppy's life. The book was co-winner of the New South Wales Premier's Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction in 1991, and reviewers widely lauded Modjeska's experimental blending of fiction, biography, and autobiography. Most critical discussions of *Poppy* situate the book in the context of second-wave feminism and interpret its hybridity as an attempt to articulate a female subjectivity.⁵ Such analyses reason that the traditional auto/biographical form, with its expectation that textual subject and historical subject correspond, is fashioned from a masculine standard, and so the overt presence of fiction in *Poppy* can be seen as a subversive, feminist act. Although I am wary of drawing a *causal* relationship between a challenge to genre norms and a challenge to patriarchal norms, I do agree with the view that associates form in *Poppy* with female subjectivity.⁶ The reason, however, this book is an ideal candidate for an interpretive "revision" is that a focus on the book's relationship between form and feminism offers a narrow view; a broader discussion of the book's features, in light of recent life-writing scholarship, invites us to appreciate more fully what this book achieves.

One persistent issue life-writing scholars engage with has to do with the disjunction between the textual self and the historical self. Many scholars have examined the ways life writers account for what is irretrievable, unrepresentable, forgotten, and otherwise unknown about their subjects; and they consider the ethics of varying approaches.⁷ It is into this area that autofiction wades, and it is here that *Poppy* makes its most significant

4. See Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977); Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et Autres Mythomanies Littéraires* (Auch: Tristram, 2004); Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: Une Aventure du Langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008); Arnaud Genon, *Autofiction: Pratiques et Théories: Articles* (Paris: Mon Petit Éditeur, 2013); Isabelle Grell, *Autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); Philippe Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse* (Paris: Grasset, 2005).

5. See Margaret Henderson, "Writing the Self In/After the Postmodern: *Poppy* and *Heddy and Me*," *LINQ* 25, no. 2 (1998): 9-21; Roberta Buffi, *Between Literature and Painting: Three Australian Women Writers* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

6. I rely here on arguments Rita Felski makes in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

statement. In this article, my purpose is neither to read *Poppy* for the way it marks a rupture with a “masculine” genre nor to identify the ideologies that may have informed its composition; instead, my “revision” claims the book is an exploration of the conundrum that exists when we try to document a life and recognise that the life exceeds any language we could assign to it.

In 1996, Gillian Whitlock praised *Poppy* for the way “the relationship between text and reality, experience, and representation, is blurred, quite deliberately and openly.”⁸ Here, Whitlock comes close to a definition of autofiction, although it is highly unlikely she had access to the term or to the theory behind it. This article will unpack Whitlock’s prescient statement. It begins by discussing the concept of autofiction and then reads *Poppy* according to three components which can be said to signal its autofictional status: its vacillation between fact and fiction, the pact for authenticity it offers the reader, and the way it balances voice with silence. I draw on Modjeska’s more recent memoir *Second Half First* and her essay “Writing *Poppy*” as I discuss the way the autofiction mode mitigates some of the reservations she expresses about writing her mother’s story. The article suggests that the autofictional strategies deployed in *Poppy* enable Modjeska to write her mother in an ethical way that honours both what can and what *cannot* be told of her subject’s life.

Autofiction: Fictionalise the Scene, but not the Self

There is little critical consensus on the definition of autofiction. Although one might assume the term applies to any text which overtly blends autobiography and fiction, such a broad definition belies the complexity of the concept. Certainly a mixing of what is “auto”—as in self-referential—and what is “fiction” is a necessary feature of the form; a precise definition, however, is more nuanced than this. In 1977, Doubrovsky

7. See Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Paul John Eakin, ed., *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

8. Gillian Whitlock, “Introduction: Disobedient Subjects,” in *Autographs: Contemporary Australian Autobiography*, ed. Gillian Whitlock (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996), xi.

coined the word *autofiction* when he used it to describe his novel, *Fils*. In his usage, *autofiction* named a work which was “a fiction” yet was “made from strictly real events and facts.”⁹ Several years earlier, Philippe Lejeune had published his essay “Le Pacte Autobiographique” where he aimed to differentiate autobiography from fiction; one of the ways a reader could trust an autobiographer had referential intentions, Lejeune argued, was if the author’s name matched the narrator-protagonist’s name.¹⁰ *Fils* exploited a loophole in Lejeune’s formulation because the name of the author and the name of the protagonist *are* identical, yet the work does not attempt a factual account of Doubrovsky’s life. Doubrovsky refined his understanding of the term in subsequent years and arrived at a definition that proposes autofictional texts are at once referential and fictional because they intend not to write a life (for that is the work of autobiography) but instead to write a “self,” with all its attendant ambiguity.¹¹

Many scholars have elaborated on Doubrovsky’s theory. Karen Ferreira-Meyers articulates the difference between the fiction in autofiction and the fiction that necessarily exists in traditional autobiography. In a recent essay, she proffers what she calls the “most widely accepted understanding” of autofiction, and this definition highlights the writer’s “intention” to use fiction and their “disregarding” of readerly expectations about autobiography’s factual referentiality.¹² This is not the kind of fiction poststructuralists would argue inheres in all acts of textualisation; instead, Ferreira-Meyers’s language stresses the writer’s deliberate and strategic fictionalisation. It could be argued that autofiction calls attention to the inevitability of fictionalisation in autobiography by exaggerating its presence.

A second feature of autofiction theorists highlight is its self-reflexivity. E. H. Jones points out that Doubrovsky was not claiming to be the first to incorporate fiction into autobiography but was distinguishing his writing for the way

9. Doubrovsky, *Fils*, back cover text, tr. Johnnie Gratton and quoted in Johnnie Gratton, “Autofiction,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 4-6.

10. Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin and trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4-5.

11. My comments on Doubrovsky in this paragraph derive largely from Worthington’s *The Story of “Me,”* 6-9. The extent to which Doubrovsky’s definition of autofiction evolved is evident in Doubrovsky, “Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis,” trans. Logan Whalen and John Ireland, *Genre* 26, no. 1 (1993): 27-42.

12. Karen Ferreira-Meyers, “Does Autofiction Belong to French or Francophone Authors and Readers Only?” in Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, 31.

“the play with non-referential elements is overtly signalled to the reader.”¹³ Gasparini makes a similar claim when he argues that whereas a conventional autobiographer might mention the work’s referential limitations on its first page and then “follow . . . its mimetic course as if nothing happened,” a work of autofiction, in contrast, is characterised “by a constant questioning of the limits of its validity.”¹⁴ In other words, autofiction includes a metadiscursive layer that draws attention to itself both as performance and philosophical project.

In addition to clarifying Doubrovsky’s theory, Gasparini also modifies it by adding a caveat to Doubrovsky’s criteria regarding names. In Doubrovskian autofiction, the author’s and protagonist’s names are identical, but Gasparini argues that the author and protagonist can have different names as long as “an identitarian relationship” is established between them through other shared characteristics.¹⁵ This is the case in *Poppy*: Modjeska names her narrator-protagonist Lalage rather than Drusilla but aligns herself with Lalage through details such as age, gender, occupation, family, and nationality. Doubrovsky’s insistence on nominal unity served to challenge Lejeune’s pact, but is unnecessary to achieve the end he later ascribed to the form: to write a “self” rather than a “life.”

Another definition of autofiction has been circulating that departs significantly from what I have outlined above. Jones summarises the competing position well: whereas Doubrovskian autofiction fictionalises the scene in order to access a truth about the self, this alternately-defined autofiction fictionalises the self too.¹⁶ Worthington adopts this latter conceptualisation of the form in her book *The Story of “Me”*: *Contemporary American Autofiction*. Though Worthington does not dispute Doubrovsky’s definition, she finds it unsuited to the American literary tradition, arguing that in the US context Doubrovskian autofiction is equivalent to the American memoir

13. E. H. Jones, “Autofiction: A Brief History of a Neologism,” in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature*, ed. Richard Bradford (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 180.

14. Philippe Gasparini, “Autofiction vs Autobiography,” tr. Sakshi Tandon and S. B. Nayak, *Auto/Fiction 1*, no. 1 (2013): 5; originally published in *Tangence* 97 (2007): 11-24.

15. Jones summarises Gasparini’s position in “Autofiction,” 179.

16. *Ibid.*

and should, therefore, be subsumed under that latter name. In the United States, Worthington argues the term *autofiction* should be reserved for “novels that feature a character who shares his/her name with the author.”¹⁷ While the Doubrovskian definition might be thought to prioritise the “auto” half of the term, Worthington’s definition embraces the “fiction.”

In my view, the texts Worthington describes as autofictional are too distinct from Doubrovsky’s examples to justify using the term he devised; Worthington’s examples are novels which adopt the memoir form, rather than memoirs which toy with the novel form. When I use the term autofiction to discuss *Poppy*, I refer to a text that strategically and self-consciously incorporates fiction into an autobiography so as to produce a distinct form of life writing that explores its own parameters.

Toying with Reader’s Expectations:

Poppy as a Game of Chess

The two models of autofiction I have outlined above are clearly incompatible; both, however, are premised on the interplay between fact and fiction, and the way Worthington addresses this common feature is helpful to any formulation of the mode. In the texts Worthington discusses, there is only a “correlation” between author and author-character.¹⁸ She makes the point, though, which is relevant to a definition of autofiction that finds *correlation* far too moderate a descriptor, that the uncertain relationship between author and character forces the reader into an experience of “code-switching”; rather than consistently applying memoiristic or novelistic conventions to their reading of a text, the autofiction reader must vacillate between the two.¹⁹ Such instability, Worthington contends, requires the reader to adjust their expectations around authorship and referentiality and truth-telling. This instability is created in *Poppy* and the “code-switching” it engenders shapes our experience of the text as autofiction.

17. Worthington, *The Story of “Me,”* 1. Worthington traces this alternate understanding of autofiction to French literary theorist Gérard Genette; see *The Story of “Me,”* 11.

18. *Ibid.*, 9.

19. *Ibid.*, 16.

The first-person voice that narrates the opening pages of *Poppy* evokes an intimacy characteristic of memoir. Modjeska unsettles this, however, twenty pages in, when the narrator reproduces a letter addressed to herself which begins not “Dear Drusilla” (as we may expect) but “Dear Lalage.”²⁰ Despite signalling here that the reader should not assume a unity between author and narrator, elsewhere—in interviews and in other extratextual sources—Modjeska encourages readers to recognise the likeness between herself and Lalage. Among many other congruences, the author and her narrator were both born in 1946, are both academics, and both left London for Australia after an early marriage. In her essay “Writing *Poppy*,” Modjeska goes so far as to follow the name Lalage with “me” in parentheses.²¹ In an interview, Modjeska said that she chose the name Lalage for her narrator because it could have been her own: Lalage and Drusilla are sisters in her mother’s favourite book.²² There is a similar relationship between *Poppy* and Modjeska’s mother: in *Second Half First*, Modjeska reveals that *Poppy* is a variation of her mother’s name, Pookie.²³ These names signal at once the proximity and distance between the text and real life: they are alike (whether as alternate namesake or by aural similitude) without suggesting equivalence.²⁴

The book’s dedication page further destabilises the relationship between Modjeska and Lalage. The dedication, which assumes an unmediated authorial voice, reads, “For my mother who died in 1984 and never kept a diary.” Within the first chapter, however, Lalage tells us, “I have the books *Poppy* read, the diaries she kept” and throughout the book refers to—even quotes at length from—these nonexistent diaries (11). The literary theorist Gérard Genette describes the dedication of a text as not only an address to the dedicatee but also as a statement that “proclaims a relationship . . . and this proclamation is always at the service of the work, as a reason for elevating the work’s

20. Drusilla Modjeska, *Poppy* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1990; London: Serpent’s Tail, 1991), 20. All subsequent references are to this edition and cited in the text.

21. Drusilla Modjeska, “Writing *Poppy*,” in *Timepieces* (Sydney: Picador Pan Macmillan, 2002), 90.

22. Bronwyn Rivers, “Of Life and Love and Art: An Interview with Drusilla Modjeska,” *Meanjin* 56, no. 2 (1997): 332.

23. Drusilla Modjeska, *Second Half First: A Memoir* (North Sydney: Knopf, 2015), 36.

24. Other instances in which Modjeska has suggested an equivalence between herself and Lalage appear in Victoria Glendinning, Brian Matthews and Drusilla Modjeska, “Writers’ Week Panel: Biography,” *Southern Review* 22 (1989): 32-34; Drusilla Modjeska, “Introduction,” in *Sisters*, ed. Drusilla Modjeska (Pymble: Angus & Robertson, 1993), 7.

standing or as a theme for commentary.”²⁵ Modjeska’s dedication is, indeed, “at the service of the work.” It evokes the similitude between author and narrator as both respond to a mother and her 1984 death. At the same time, however, the dedication insists on a divide between the two figures through the detail of the diaries—texts that exist in the fictional but not in the historical realm.

Modjeska also draws attention to the slippage between nonfiction and fiction, author and narrator, through a metadiscursive layer that runs through the text. In a review, Kate Jennings refers to *Poppy* as “a book which intentionally allows us a view of the dressing rooms and the wings simultaneously with the performance on the stage.”²⁶ This kind of “backstage access” is a common trope in memoirs: memoirists frequently show themselves at their writing desks, in conversation with sources, or otherwise engaged in the work of considering and creating the text.²⁷ All of these scenes are present in *Poppy*, but they are complicated by the fact that it is Lalage—not Drusilla—whom we see occupied with these tasks. In a traditional memoir, such scenes unveil the writer behind the text, and this can help readers to feel a heightened sense of access to the writerly process. In *Poppy*, Modjeska invites us into this austere space of the writer at work, but at the same time demystifies this by ensuring we know Lalage both is and is not the writer.

In “Writing *Poppy*,” Modjeska compares her writing process to playing a game: “I was running events together, moving people around as if on a chess board.”²⁸ This metaphor positions the author as orchestrator of Worthington’s “code-switching” and the reader as opponent at the board, countering her moves. The way Modjeska creates a proximate relationship between herself and Lalage and then repeatedly undercuts it leaves the reader hesitant about what their next move should be. The text, as autofiction, is both referential *and* fictional and disallows a confident reading predicated on one or the other. Instead,

25. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135.

26. Kate Jennings, “Melancholy Baby in Search of Mother and Self,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 13, 1990, 78.

27. There is considerable variation in scholarly treatment of the terms *memoir* and *autobiography*. I am guided by Leigh Gilmore’s understanding of the terms. Gilmore reasons that an autobiographer positions the reader as adjudicator of the text’s accuracy whereas a memoirist positions the reader more flexibly; a memoir assumes a reader’s willingness to accept the writer as “knowing subject” rather than one aspiring to verifiable transparency. See Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography*, 143-8.

28. Modjeska, “Writing *Poppy*,” 73.

Poppy places the reader in a vulnerable, reactive position, requiring them to stay alert to the text's manoeuvres.

The Autofictional Pact

Autofictions reject Lejeune's autobiographical pact—that a unity between author, protagonist, and narrator is a sign to the reader of the author's attempt at referentiality—and in its place establish a new set of terms. Bran Nicol describes how this alternative, autofictional pact sets up “a mutually respectful dialogue between writer and reader” in which “an author can be trusted to try to communicate authentically to a reader despite trading in fiction rather than in fact.”²⁹ His use of the word “dialogue” here is reminiscent of Modjeska's chess metaphor; the writer, both suggest, signposts the fiction and offers it as integral to the reader's experience. Nicol links the dialogue to a sense of authenticity, and we can understand this on two levels. The first involves the way an autofiction dramatises the gap between historical person and textual character as discussed above. The second is the focus of this section: if we accept that gap exists, what can a text, nevertheless, claim to represent of the self or of another? If *Poppy* does not promise to attempt a factual account of the mother's life, then what *does* it promise its readers?

As she begins her project of writing *Poppy's* life, Lalage aspires to a referential account. To understand the pact for authenticity that Modjeska comes to adopt, it is useful first to examine the alternative she rejects. Lalage spends much of the last month of *Poppy's* life asking *Poppy* personal questions. She says of this time, frustrated by *Poppy's* unwillingness to respond to all her queries, “I wanted to pin her down” and “chart her inner struggles” (64–65). These metaphors comparing the mother to a pinned object or a charted dataset reveal Lalage's early conception of her subject as finite and quantifiable. Lalage reflects on *Poppy's* lifelong habit of making twine from braided scraps of material and thinks

29. Bran Nicol, “Eye to I: American Autofiction and its Contexts from Jerzy Kosinski to Dave Eggers,” in Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, 267–8.

I should have kept every ball of it, and then all I'd have to do would be to trace the twine back, thread by thread, and unplait it into a perfect record of her life, laid out in an order I could follow, step by step, thread by thread, back to the first knot. (16)

The image illustrates Lalage's initial conception of herself as unraveller of her mother's life; she implies that if only she had adequate evidence then she could lay the twine/life on the page in a way that all of its components would be untangled and visible.

Lalage's intention to write a verifiable, orderly biography is thwarted on several fronts. In those final conversations with Poppy, Lalage accepts, "Nothing she said amounted to the definitive answers I was hoping for" (8). She turns instead to the papers she finds in Poppy's attic and expects to "find her there, fully formed and acquiescent" (67); the archive gives her the basic facts of Poppy's life, such as evidence of "her kin and progeny," but Lalage concedes, "it doesn't tell me who she was" (12). Even in situations where Lalage does have access to what seems like ample resources, such as in relation to Poppy's professional life, she finds, "they do not necessarily help, as if their weight acts as a damper on the imagination and I run the risk of reducing Poppy's work to a list of creditable credentials" (138). Lalage is looking for the "marrow" of Poppy's life but realises this kind of inner, essential knowledge is absent from any sources she can consult.³⁰ Instead of revelation, they provide only this inhibiting "weight."

In *Second Half First*, Modjeska recalls reading *Rebecca West: A Life*, a biography written by Victoria Glendinning and published while Modjeska was working on *Poppy*.³¹ There is no mention of Glendinning's book in *Poppy*, but the later memoir suggests it had a determinative effect on Modjeska's writing process. At one point, Modjeska describes how *Rebecca West* "took the life of a woman . . . and treated it in a way that made me furious."³² Her disdain stems from her view that Glendinning's biography approaches West's complex story in a one-dimensional,

30. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 73.

31. Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987).

32. Modjeska, *Second Half First*, 54.

condemnatory way, with “everything hammered into place, as if there should be one story, one history.”³³ After “slamming down *Rebecca West* on the table” she reflects on its lesson for her own biographical project: “Ambivalence, uncertainty; the experience of life between the lines of the tide: that was the story, not the certainty of bricks.”³⁴ Lalage’s early efforts to locate her mother—questioning, charting, unplaiting—are a brick-building exercise. *Rebecca West* becomes a cautionary tale, and she changes course.

Sidonie Smith discusses an additional factor that motivates Lalage’s decision to write her mother in a more loosely-hewn way. In an essay on the role of photographs in three Australian autobiographies, Smith draws attention to a description of Lalage’s study. On one wall Lalage has drawn a family tree which provides her with “documentary evidence” and on the other wall she has pinned photographs which, in contrast, show only “phantasms” and therefore “deliver primarily the sense of absence, loss.”³⁵ This sense of “absence” and “loss” derives not only from the way the photographs flaunt a dead mother who can never be recovered but also from their tendency to reduce Poppy to just one, captured moment. Smith argues that Lalage resolves to write Poppy in a way that accounts for her irrecoverability and also that “releas[es] her from a singular snapshot.”³⁶ In other words, recognising the illusiveness of the photographs prompts Lalage to ensure her own portrait of her mother somehow accounts for all that lies outside the frame.

Modjeska progresses from wanting to write a definitive account of her mother to a “collapse of certainty” that such a pursuit is achievable.³⁷ Despite the setbacks, she never suggests she will abandon the project; instead, she experiments with a form that will allow for ambiguity and the complexity of life outside the photographic frame. She will enable her mother’s life “to lift lightly from the page” rather than “battening [it] down” (68)—all that is lacking in *Rebecca*

33. *Ibid.*, 171.

34. *Ibid.*, 60.

35. Sidonie Smith, “Re-Citing, Re-Siting, and Re-Sighting Likeness: Reading the Family Archive in Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy*, Donna Williams’ *Nobody Nowhere*, and Sally Morgan’s *My Place*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no.3 (1994): 514–515.

36. *Ibid.*, 518.

37. Modjeska, “Writing Poppy,” 73.

West and the photographs on Lalage's study wall. The decision to insert herself into the text as visible daughter-biographer-narrator enables her to reflect openly on the interaction between fact and imagination and to claim her position as observer through whom the story is filtered, or, as Susan Scarparo puts it, to "both claim and disclaim authority as story-teller."³⁸ Once she decided to include herself in the text, however, Modjeska would have faced the expectation of Lejeune's pact, that she would present a unified author/narrator/protagonist and a text as closely aligned with her own and her mother's lives as could be possible. Clearly, she rejects this; such a text, for her, would be brick-like and reductive. On the contrary, Modjeska's "pact" resembles the one for authenticity that characterises autofiction.

Lalage recounts a scene in which she is walking near the water with her sister, May, and May hands her a piece of driftwood with a hole in it that resembles an eye. Lalage continues:

I brought the eye home and propped it up by my window so that the light shines through the almond shaped aperture. I stare at it as if it were a gateway, or frontier, and all I have to do is let it pull me through to another life. (38)

Perhaps we can read the book as "a gateway, or frontier" which opens onto the mother's life. Lalage will not write *Poppy* as an object that can or should be hammered into place, but at the same time she is promising an effort, emblematised by this eye-shaped driftwood, to "see" her through her singular perspective.

Giving Poppy a Voice

Thus far this essay has tried to demonstrate the ways in which *Poppy* announces what it will *not* attempt to achieve. It refuses the fact/fiction binary and the simpler reading experience such clarity might offer. It refuses to promote an equivalence between author and narrator or any facade of mimicry. It refuses to provide a portrait of the mother that fixes

38. Susanna Scarparo, *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (Leicester: Troubador, 2005), xv.

her in place no matter how satisfying such a portrait might be. As I have argued, these qualities mark *Poppy* as an exemplar of the autofictional form: the text is self-conscious about the limitations of life writing and exposes the genre's complexities from the inside. A work of autofiction, however, should not be reduced to its negative space; it is trying to be, after all, both fictional *and* referential. In this section, then, I consider how *Poppy* also attempts to communicate something substantial about the lives that fill its pages. I propose that what the text offers its reader most, in this regard, is a daughter's recognition of her mother's subjectivity and, especially, her voice.

Lalage is preoccupied with trying to make sense of why her mother spent two years as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. These years, during Lalage's adolescence, were marked by Poppy's inability to speak. In retrospect, Lalage associates her mother's literal voicelessness with a social and cultural silencing. Poppy was married in England in 1945 and had three children in a postwar period when "the mother [was] at centre stage of government policy, psychiatric strategy, popular sociology and everyday thinking" (86). Lalage describes how Poppy's husband placed her "at the heart of his life" yet "couldn't see that it gave her nothing to press against; object to his subject, holding the thread for his life and for ours, she was cut short on a journey she might otherwise have made" (50). Lalage avoids giving any conclusive reason for Poppy's breakdown or her prolonged hospitalisation, but intimates through these comments that Poppy's plight was a consequence of a life bereft of personal agency.

Poppy arrived at a sense of healing, Lalage suggests, only after she left the hospital and left her marriage. In place of these institutions, she befriended Rosa and Marcus with whom "she found her way out of silence and began to express the longings that she had once turned against herself" (118). The other significant event for Poppy occurred when she

began paid work, in the criminal justice system, and in her role there found “the ability to speak freely, and as a woman” (150). Lalage attributes her mother’s recovery to this transition from silence to voice; Poppy found forums, in friendship and in a professional context, where her voice was heard. Lalage ensures she maintains this hard-won position on Poppy’s behalf; she writes the mother as a voiced subject rather than a silenced object and as traveller on her own, non-domestic journey.

Lalage achieves this, primarily, by including the imagined diary extracts and also fictive letters Poppy wrote to Lalage and to Marcus.³⁹ Freya Latona reflects on “the use of epistolary writing in memoir” and suggests that in a memoir about a deceased person, the decision to incorporate letters that the subject wrote can be an ethical choice because it enables the writer to include the subject’s voice directly into the work and perhaps “grant . . . them some power over their own representation.”⁴⁰ Although Latona does not refer to letters or diaries that are imagined, it is arguable her ideas apply to these fictional materials too. Modjeska tells us, in “Writing *Poppy*,” that some readers felt cheated when they realise she invented the diaries. She defends her choice by arguing

for me in writing them, they seemed one of the most truthful parts of the book. Until then I was digging myself into a hole with my own voice firing away like a machete chopping trees.⁴¹

The power granted by these diaries and letters, in Latona’s sense, arises from the way they prevent a situation in which Poppy is flattened, like a tree felled by Modjeska’s machete, into a character who can only be spoken for and who exists only as mother to the daughter-biographer. The diaries and letters, notably, do not restrict Poppy to the domestic or maternal spheres; instead, they imagine her friendships, her intimate relationship with Marcus, her travels, her work, and her dreams.

39. That Modjeska invented the letters in the same way she invented the diaries is not explicitly stated in *Poppy* or in her epitextual reflections on the text. We can assume they are inventions, however, given that she reproduces sixteen letters Marcus and Poppy wrote to one another over a three week period in February 1976 while Poppy was in Sydney and Marcus in London. It is clear that each letter is written in response to a letter received; this could be believable if they were writing emails but not letters delivered to post boxes between countries. It is less clear if the letters between Lalage and Poppy were inventions; however, the fact that Modjeska leaves this an open question is typical of autofiction.

40. Freya Latona, “The Epistolary Thread as Collaborative Writing in Grief Memoir,” in *Mediating Memory*, ed. Buntj Avieson, Fiona Giles, and Sue Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2018), 251, 258.

41. Modjeska, “Writing Poppy,” 89.

We can recognise what Modjeska accomplishes by comparing her text to other biographies that do not afford their subjects the same latitude. *Rebecca West* is one example Modjeska provides herself. Another is Brian Matthews's *Louisa*, a biography of Henry Lawson's mother, published in 1987.⁴² Modjeska cites *Louisa* as a model for *Poppy* in terms of its melding of history and fiction and its incorporation of the biographer into the biography.⁴³ Helen Thomson, on the other hand, is disparaging of Matthews's work. She argues that although Matthews might claim his book resurrects an undervalued female subject, the reality is that he displaces Louisa's voice with his own.⁴⁴ A third text that is useful here is Germaine Greer's *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* which was published in 1989, one year prior to *Poppy*.⁴⁵ Both *Poppy* and *Daddy* are a quest for a parent coupled with the self-reflexive narration of the quest, but they differ markedly in tone. In "Writing *Poppy*," Modjeska insists an indictment of her subject is "precisely what I did not want"; *Daddy*, on the other hand, can be read as the site where Greer "regains mastery" over her father.⁴⁶ These texts succumb to—even court—the pitfalls *Poppy* actively tries to avoid: displacement, indictment, mastery.

Thomson finds that *Poppy* succeeds as a feminist text precisely where *Louisa* fails: Modjeska values *Poppy*'s voice and Matthews tramples *Louisa*'s.⁴⁷ Stephanie Trigg argues, similarly, that Matthews's text is "a testimony to its own cleverness" and not a testimony to its subject as it purports to be.⁴⁸ Arguably some level of "trampling" is unavoidable when writing another's life, but *Poppy* absorbs and tries to counter this condition of biography in a way *Louisa* and *Daddy* do not. Modjeska accomplishes this, I am arguing, primarily by including the mother's writings and calling attention to their constructedness. *Poppy* certainly is not "a testimony to its own cleverness"; there is a playfulness in the way the dedication alerts the reader to Modjeska's inventiveness, but this playfulness is not an end in itself. On the contrary, the fictive

42. Brian Matthews, *Louisa* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987).

43. See Glendinning, "Writers' Week Panel," 34.

44. Helen Thomson, *Bio-Fictions: Brian Matthews, Drusilla Modjeska and Elizabeth Jolley* (James Cook University: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1994), 1-18.

45. Germaine Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

46. Modjeska, "Writing *Poppy*," 89; Roger Porter, *Bureau of Missing Persons: Writing the Secret Lives of Fathers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 65; Stephanie Trigg makes a similar comparison between *Poppy* and *Daddy* in "A Gift of Sorrow," *Scriptsi* 6, no. 3 (1990), 138.

47. Thomson, *Bio-Fictions*, 19-35.

48. Trigg, "A Gift of Sorrow," 138.

diaries and letters Modjeska includes in her book have the effect of obscuring (rather than underlining) the daughter-biographer so that *Poppy* represents the mother in a generous, subjectifying way.

“To Maintain and Even to Celebrate Silence”

Regardless of how much effort Modjeska applied to the task of writing an honest, voiced account of her mother, there would always remain gaps in what she could know: there would be details she could not access, memories she could not trust and her own impartiality which would colour any account she could give.⁴⁹ There also would be what Judith Butler refers to as an essential “opacity” we are each born into; Butler labels any effort to disavow this opacity, any attempt at “complete coherence” of oneself or another, a form of “ethical violence.”⁵⁰ In other words, even if Modjeska could gather all conceivable evidence to construct a comprehensive portrait of her mother, still there would remain an innate mysteriousness which she could never be resolved. When earlier I discussed the autofictional pact *Poppy* offers its readers, I tried to demonstrate the book’s awareness of these layers of unknowability. Modjeska responds to these layers, in part, by dwelling on what *can* be accomplished (offering the mother a subject position in the text); the other, concomitant response, which I explore in this section, is that she balances giving voice to her subject with allowing her subject to be silent.

At the same time that Lalage attributes the restoration of Poppy’s mental health to her ability to speak, she also points to instances when a choice away from speech is empowering for Poppy. In one of Poppy’s diary entries she recounts a scene of her father’s cruelty and then writes of silence as her “only weapon” against him (19). Later, Lalage tells a story in which Poppy’s brother, Guy, punches their father, Jack, and then she muses of Poppy, “She could never knock Jack out cold on the street. Her strategies were fluid and unobtrusive. In silence she would reach through him to

49. Jack Bowers makes a similar argument about Modjeska’s awareness of the “boundaries of interpretation,” but he discusses her response to this primarily in terms of “the ordering of the material,” the “weaving” of past and present and the inclusion of multiple viewpoints rather than in terms of her play of fact and fiction. See Bowers, *Strangers at Home: Place, Belonging, and Australian Life Writing* (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2016), 63.

50. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 32.

other possibilities” (24). Poppy’s silence is depicted as a tool she can use to circumvent the father’s attempts at dominating her, and it has the same, defensive effect as Guy’s punch. Lalage also writes that her mother was unwilling to tell particular family stories because she “was wary of the danger of giving them a shape that would work its way into her” (24). Here again Poppy’s silence is a defence—not against her father’s authority but against the authority and certitude a fully articulated story might wield.

In her study of women’s biography, *Thinking Through the Mothers*, Janet Beizer identifies a category of objectionable texts she labels “salvation narratives.”⁵¹ These are texts in which the “biographer has a mission . . . to retrieve a lost woman’s life” (either a mother or “foremother”) and “to represent the quest that led to her.”⁵² At first glance, both *Louisa* and *Poppy* may appear to be examples of salvation narratives, but as Beizer describes the genre in more detail it becomes clear it no longer applies to *Poppy*. Salvation narratives are troubling to Beizer, mostly because of the way in which the authors claim to adopt a feminist stance yet are “imposing another consciousness—the sensibility of another age” on the subject’s life.⁵³ Of one such text—*Alias Olympia*, a biography of a model who appeared in some of Manet’s paintings—Beizer writes that the biographer’s subject “is arguably smothered by the narrator’s embrace of recognition.”⁵⁴ *Louisa* is similarly “smothered”; of *Poppy*, however, Beizer might form a different opinion. Beizer argues that these retrieving, questing narratives can be tenable only if they are written in a way that shows an awareness of the form’s inherent limitations. To do this, Beizer argues, a writer must strive “to maintain and even to celebrate silence, in this way perhaps paradoxically establishing maternal presence in and through the unvoiced.”⁵⁵ Though Modjeska cannot help but impose her consciousness on her mother, her autofictional approach draws attention to this dilemma and balances the

51. Janet Beizer, *Thinking through the Mothers: Reimagining Women’s Biographies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 10.

52. *Ibid.*, 25, 26.

53. *Ibid.*, 63.

54. *Ibid.*, 17; Eunice Lipton, *Alias Olympia: A Woman’s Search for Manet’s Notorious Model and Her Own Desire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

55. *Ibid.*, 64n9.

voiced with the unvoiced to ensure Poppy can breathe.

Beizer does not use the term *autofiction*, but this mode of writing, by its very definition, bypasses the suffocating dangers she warns against. The space that *Poppy* leaves for silence is evident in the imaginative leaps Modjeska takes to tell the mother's story and in the way she discloses this to the reader. The dedication and the mismatched names alert us to the text's fictionality, but we still never know precisely where the fiction ends and the history begins; the entire text, therefore, is rendered indefinite and incomplete. Butler insists that to "let the other live" we must substitute a demand for a cohesive subject with an "affirmation of partial transparency."⁵⁶ When Lalage mentions her mother's reluctance to give shape to her stories Lalage appreciates there is a sense of "honour" in this position (24); perhaps Lalage recognises the way "partial transparency"—offsetting the mother's voice with her silence—is a life-giving act.

Conclusion: "The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement"

Even if Modjeska's mother had kept a diary and even if Modjeska was able to find a satisfactory answer to every question she asked about her mother's life, still *Poppy*'s fictional aspects would be valuable to the text. The imagined details are not included simply to challenge a traditional style nor to create a more cohesive, readable narrative than would otherwise be possible. Instead, the fiction in an autofiction is about "sketching an imaginary framework through which a truth can be told."⁵⁷ In *Poppy*, Modjeska's attempt to speak truth through fiction tells us not just something about who her mother was but also something about the process of trying to write Poppy's story.

The truth the book tells about Modjeska's mother exceeds the facts of Poppy's life. Modjeska recalls her sister May's reaction to reading *Poppy*: "It wasn't her mother, she said, as if I

56. Butler, *Giving an Account*, 33, 31.

57. Jones, "Autofiction," 180.

had made a promise, which perhaps I had, to restore the woman we'd been born to, fully realised in a book."⁵⁸ It is arguable May read the book according to the realist standard of biography to which Modjeska first aspired—a standard that, as Sharon O'Brien points out, has been inherited from the nineteenth-century novel.⁵⁹ It is likely May felt disappointed because she did not find the realist tropes she was expecting: "a transparent medium capable of representing the world" where "character and the self are knowable" and told with "cause-and-effect linearity."⁶⁰ May reread the book years later, however, and this time responded differently, telling Modjeska, "I think you may have got her after all."⁶¹ Modjeska does not elaborate on her sister's changed opinion, but it seems that May noticed the autofictional pact and accepted its terms. She may have found a mother who was adventurous, wise, conflicted and forthright and for whom motherhood was only one component of her identity. May also would have found a daughter-narrator who exposed her own partiality and enabled her mother's essential mysteriousness to remain intact and unchallenged.

The other truth *Poppy* allows readers to recognise is that a considerable distance divides a textual person from a historical person but attempting to marry the two is still a worthwhile endeavour. Ferreira-Meyers describes how autofiction "encourage[s] the reader to question first and foremost the text, its truth and validity; but, more importantly, the truth and veracity of the self; memory; and the (non)ability to (re) create or invent reality."⁶² An image of the beach, which appears in *Second Half First*, helps us to understand how Modjeska puts the reader into this questioning position. Modjeska writes that her favourite part of a beach is the "zone . . . between the high tide and the low; that liminal space, betwixt and between, with its own life of crabs and seaweeds and feeding birds."⁶³ *Poppy* is a book of the "betwixt and between." Modjeska offers

58. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 86.

59. Sharon O'Brien, "Feminist Theory and Literary Biography," in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1991), 125.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Modjeska, "Writing Poppy," 87.

62. Ferreira-Meyers, "Does Autofiction Belong," 40.

63. Modjeska, *Second Half First*, 25.

many details about her mother's life but then pulls them back by alerting us to her inventiveness; she presents herself as narrator of the mother's story but then shatters this, too, with a new name and by showing herself agonising as artist over her craft; she provides a platform for her mother's voice to be heard, but then limits this by honouring her silence. There certainly is life in this zone: crabs, seaweed, birds and an inviolate mother.

Modjeska names Virginia Woolf among a list of female modernists who influenced her work.⁶⁴ She does not refer specifically to Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves*, but its reverberations throughout *Poppy* are unmistakable. Woolf's text, like Modjeska's, questions our capacity to find language to express the experience of being—or observing—a self. One of the novel's characters, Bernard, reflects on the "illusion" that his life might be something he could detach "as one breaks off a bunch of grapes" and then hand it to another.⁶⁵ He realises he must, instead, tell a story to communicate his life, but this, too, he finds troublesome: he compares stories to "Toys I twist, bubbles I blow" and full of "phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground!"⁶⁶ Rather than a manufactured, graceful story, he says he "long[s] for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement."⁶⁷

Woolf returns at intervals throughout the novel to italicised images of waves on a beach, and the motif illustrates the unifying force of our shared lives; no single wave, or self, can be detached from the whole and singled out as one, finite, fully realised entity.

As Modjeska proceeds with her project, she accepts, as Bernard does, that her mother's life cannot be broken off and given to the reader like a bunch of grapes. Any straightforward story would be like a toy twisted into animation, and its language would be too grounded and sure. Though this kind of portrait might be pleasing to readers and writer alike, it would be inauthentic. The approach Modjeska formulates instead more

64. Drusilla Modjeska, "Apprentice Piece," in *Timepieces* (Sydney: Picador Pan Macmillan, 2002), 36.

65. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1931; repr., London: Vintage Random House, 2004), 158-9. Citations refer to the Vintage edition.

I thank *Philament's* editors for suggesting I include *The Waves* in this article.

66. *Ibid.*, 94, 159.

67. *Ibid.*, 159.

closely resembles Bernard's desire for "the shuffling of feet on the pavement": she imbues her story with hesitation and leaves a porous boundary around the mother. She finds the balanced space between the ocean and the tide line in which she both does and does not write the mother. She offers us an autofiction, and rereading *Poppy* as such places the book in dialogue with some of our most contemporary concerns—literary and otherwise—about the relationship between fact and fiction.

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