
Evidence of Autofiction in Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*

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Abstract: This paper focuses its attention on particular instances of autofiction, a somewhat obscure literary concept, that were identified within the novel written by Mario Puzo, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. The author's real-life stories and experiences that were morphed into fictionalized versions within his novel are pointed out in clear comparisons and also supported with significant testimonies or quotations. The Italian-American author employs autofiction within his literary works in order to alleviate the profound wounds caused by worldwide historical crises or phenomena, such as the American Dream. Not only global catastrophes, but also personal ones are to be dismantled later on through concise analysis and comparison with the authentic life of the author and passages from the text.

Key words: Autofiction, immigrant experience, identity, Italian-American experience, American Dream, memories.

In the following pages, I am to make a significant effort in what regards the applicability of autofiction, a somewhat ambiguous literary concept, that is yet to grasp solid foregrounds, in correlation with an extraordinary novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, written by one of the greatest Italian-American novelists, Mario Puzo. Therefore, the central focus of the paper is placed upon the literal applicability of autofiction within Puzo's less commercially embedded artistic creation, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. My attempt to deliver such a daring affirmation is favored by the undeniable commercial success of *The Godfather*, an apparent worldwide sensation, which occurred simply to accommodate the author's financial necessities.

In 1967, Mario Puzo had written only part of his novel *The Godfather* when Paramount gave him a \$12,000 advance with the

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promise of an additional \$75,000 if a film were made. Published in 1969, the novel was an immense success, remaining on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 67 weeks, and prompting the studio to get a film made quickly. (Kerbel)

While Puzo's most appraised literary and artistic chef d'oeuvre *The Godfather* is well-known in the academic realm, his other works tend to be overlooked, or even overshadowed if I may, in order to preserve his notoriety for his one-hit wonder novel. However, even with the inevitable passage of time, *The Godfather*, the saga of the Corleone family remains a classic and holds a special place in people's hearts, even in modern times according to recent data.

THE GODFATHER is firmly enshrined in the world cinema pantheon. In the British Film Institute's most recent (2022) decennial Greatest Films of All Time poll, which amassed votes from about 1,600 critics, academics, and archivists, the film ranked #12; on the 2022 BFI poll of 480 directors, it ranked #3, after 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY and CITIZEN KANE. (Kerbel)

The Fortunate Pilgrim was published in 1965, way before Puzo's massive international breakthrough. This novel also delves into the journey through life, of an Italian-American family, filled with plenty of cultural and historical aspects, that shape the identity of the Italian immigrant. At this point scholars might wonder whether it is worth immersing themselves deeper into Puzo's artistic and literary finesse, which happens to be one other aim of this particular paper, an open invitation to in-depth knowledge. To prepare for a similar pondering situation of the scholarly public, the inquiry for in-depth knowledge shall never cease at the popular works of the artist, producer or writer. From my humble perspective, the typical reader is unable to become a connoisseur, regardless of the area, if they are familiarized exclusively with the mainstream novels or pieces of art of the creator. Regardless of the brutally candid nature of my opinion, I cannot call myself a connoisseur of French literature, for instance, if my corpus is composed entirely by one-hit wonders. In this respect, the interested public should thrive for extensive insight and discover other approaches, which are perhaps less investigated and focused on. In what concerns the aforementioned concept of autofiction, literary critics did not reach a definite consensus, that might dispose of its ambiguous nature. The ambiguous term was coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 within one of his works, *Fils*.

The impossibility of reaching a satisfactory consensus on the definition of autofiction prompts arguments that it is best to dispose of the term altogether, to replace it with “life writing,” perhaps with the addition of a modifier such as “experimental” or “hybrid.” It quickly becomes apparent, however, that such labels do little to delineate the specific kinds of hybridity and experimentalism we find in autofictional texts, and would hence lose the conceptual focus that “autofiction” provides. The term is clearly problematic, possibly flawed, which may have to do with Serge Doubrovsky’s coining it in passing to describe one particular book, *Fils* (1977). Doubrovsky himself clearly felt that it needed further development, having proposed various descriptions of autofiction in the course of his career. (Effe and Lawlor 1)

The scant description of Doubrovsky’s book endorses a large-scale investigation of the concept from the curious readers. “Autofiction” emerged as a result of the assembling process of “auto”, which stands for “automatic”, at least from my point of view, together with “fiction”, which stands for a specific literary genre. From my initial understanding and that of any novice reader, in an effort to further explore the concept, the final products integrate the self, together with the author’s reality, or only some snippets of it graciously morphed into fiction. Moreover, the distinction between autobiography (a piece of writing on one’s life produced by the person itself) and biography (a piece of writing about one’s life produced by somebody else) slightly dispels the concept’s vagueness. The following facet of autofiction that needs to be unraveled pertains to the authors’ motivation to use the concept within their writings. I am invariably convinced that literature not only blesses writers with coping mechanisms, but also heals and eventually empowers. In a way, literature acts as a remedy and even as a tool for mending the aching soul and mind. Plenty of authors approach autofiction in their novels as a coping mechanism for the global crises, that ruthlessly destroyed the peace and stability of a human society. Puzo’s novel published in 1965, recounts events over a span of time, in North America’s neighborhood Hell’s Kitchen, from the beginning of the 1920’s up to the emergence of the Second World War. It most evidently explores an extremely challenged historical period through fictional characters, which are actually inspired by the immediate reality of the author. In effect readers are granted the written testimony of the author, that uses autobiographical information in a fictional text, which sometimes acts as a barrier between them and the constant attacks of the never-ending societal disasters.

Noteworthy similarities between Puzo's life and his characters' journey

It is necessary to take into consideration that writers, who use autofiction in their creations, usually place themselves or their personas as the main representatives. Not only their personal life experience, but also their immediate surroundings materialize into the story. Be it their economic situation, family structure, their loved ones' real names, their jobs, physical appearances, locations and so on. In Puzo's case, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* surprisingly does not concentrate on the author's fictionalized form of himself, but on the matriarch, Lucia Santa. She turns out to have been modelled deliberately in almost perfect concordance with the author's mother.

Mario Puzo greatly admired his mother, Maria Le Conti Puzo, for her strong and determined character and used her as a model for many of his popular fictional characters, including the matriarch Mamma Lucia in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*. (Sharp 1143)

It is safe to disclose that Puzo tends to break the patterns of autofiction by downplaying the relevance of his fictionalized self in detriment of his mother's respectable characteristics within the novel. So meaningful was the impact of his mother figure in Puzo's life that he completely transformed the novel's route. Initially, the novel was meant to portray the condition of the artist, according to the writer. It should have been about an artist's journey at the dawn of the promising *Roaring Twenties*, when the idea of the *American Dream* took over every Tom, Dick and Harry, including our illustrious author.

When I came to my "autobiographical novel," the one every writer does about himself, I planned to make myself the sensitive, misunderstood hero, much put upon by his mother and family. To my astonishment my mother took over the book and instead my revenge I got another comeuppance. But it is, I think, my best book. (Wheeler 47)

It seems as the perfect occasion to include even more information from Puzo's life, which needs further comparison with the actual events and overall action from *The Fortunate Pilgrim*.

The author was born on 15th of October, 1920 in a neighborhood called Hell's Kitchen in New York City, from illiterate parents, Antonio and Maria Le Conti Puzo. They came from Avellino, a town outside

Naples and together they had three children. Maria had four children from a previous marriage, but she unfortunately became a widow after losing her then-husband in an accident at the docks. All in all, there were two girls and five boys.

The novel's fictional characters accurately resemble the journey through life of an Italian-American family, during a challenging historical period, in an immigrant slum, evidently inspired from the author's real-life experience. The protagonist family is represented by the Angeluzzi-Corbo's, especially the storyline of the matriarch, Lucia Santa, an illiterate Italian immigrant. She went through two unfortunate marriages, that ultimately culminated with the deaths of both husbands. Consequently, Lucia Santa needed to raise her six children all alone and to make ends meet to the best of her abilities.

Puzo's dream was to become an artist, a writer, to be able to share his artistry with the whole world. He soon realized the improbability of his dream and eventually found work at the railroad company, that had their father, Antonio Puzo working as a trackman.

My mother, however, wanted me to be a railroad clerk. And that was her *highest* ambition; she would have settled for less. At the age of sixteen when I let everybody know that I was going to be a great writer, my friends and family took the news quite calmly, my mother included. She did not become angry. She quite simply assumed that I had gone off my nut. (Wheeler 36)

The male inhabitants of both the original Italian family, the Puzo and the fictional version of it, the Angeluzzi-Corbo eventually found work at the railroad company, including our beloved author. In what regards the fictional characters, all of them were involved with the railroad at some point; the father, Larry, Vinnie and even Gino. However, Lucia Santa's oldest son from her first marriage, Larry is the only one that spends the most time working at the company throughout the entirety of the novel.

My father supported his wife and seven children by working as a track man laborer for the New York Central Railroad. My oldest brother worked for the railroad as a brakeman, another brother was a railroad shipping clerk in the freight office. Eventually I spent some of the worst months of my life as the railroad's worst messenger boy. (Wheeler 38)

Another important aspect from Puzo's childhood that is accurately portrayed in the novel concerns schizophrenia, the mental disorder

that led to Antonio Puzo's institutionalization in a specialized asylum. Life took a new turn for the Puzo's family members after Antonio's confinement into the asylum; they went on welfare and moved to a housing project in the Bronx. Based on this particular unfortunate event is the deterioration of the mental and physical health, of the head of the fictional family, Angeluzzi-Corbo, which unfortunately led to him committing suicide.

Puzo's artistic path interfered with his definite refusal to pursue a lifetime career at the railroad company. His extracurricular and physical activities shaped Puzo's interests and later on became main sources of inspiration for crayoning his fictional characters, Gino and Vinnie.

Although Puzo's mother always assumed he would pursue a career with the railroad, his thoughts were elsewhere. Partly to escape the street crime rampant in his neighborhood, Puzo joined the Hudson Guild Settlement House, where he excelled at basketball, baseball and football and spent a considerable amount of time in the library reading everything he could get his hands on. Until he was 15, Puzo benefited from the Fresh Air Fund, a charity program giving underprivileged youth from New York the opportunity to spend two weeks during summer in the country. (Sharp 1138)

This particular aspect from the author's life experience motivates the characters' inclination towards basketball, baseball and football via Gino and Vinnie's constant need to perform these activities throughout the novel. Furthermore, the Angeluzzi-Corbo's decision to join a welfare program during times of need is clearly inspired from the aforementioned real-life event. Even the experience occurred in the countryside during summertime is evident in the novel, through Vinnie's two weeks departure from the city, thanks to his sister's decision to enroll him in the program. Gradually, narration reached the inevitable emergence of the Second World War, a large-scale catastrophe, which promised nothing but terror and death. But for Puzo, this horrendous war had different connotations.

Following graduation, Puzo felt trapped in a life he did not want. In 1942 he enlisted in the army (his bad vision had gotten him a deferment) and was posted to the Fourth Armored Division, with which he was assigned to Europe. Puzo earned numerous decorations for his combat service. Although he never fired a shot during the war, the experience helped him realize that he was nonviolent by nature. (Sharp 1138-1139)

Puzo's voluntary enrollment into the army is indicative of his fictionalized character, Gino's attempt to escape the strict, Italian ruled familial cocoon. This particular transfer of ambitions, from Puzo to his character, Gino is clearly an indicator of autofiction's presence. By means of this literary concept, the author fictionalizes his real volitions within his artistic creation, with slight adaptations for the smoothest narrative transition. Another relevant aspect from Puzo's life that influenced the novel's course of events is represented by his romantic experiences and overall perspective on love matters.

After the war Puzo, staying on in Europe, worked as a public relations officer for the U.S. Air Force in Germany, where he met his future wife, Erika Lina Broske. They were married in 1946 and eventually had five children, two girl (Dorothy and Virginia) and three boys (Anthony, Joey and Eugene). After Erika died in 1978 of breast cancer, Carol Gino, Erika's nurse, became Puzo's companion. The two spent much time together until Puzo's death in 1999. (Sharp 1139)

Puzo's lamentable romantic background most definitely makes its presence known within the novel. The fictional characters absolutely lack instances of true love in their journey. Idealizations about romance or true love never seem to take the spotlight in the characters' life or mind. Larry only got married because he impregnated a poor girl and could not ruin the family's reputation even more. Octavia eventually got married with a Jewish man, but was not truly happy with her new life. Lucia Santa has been cursed by fate with loss and solitude. What kept her going, most certainly, was her love and motivation to provide a better life to her children. A promising, happy-ending where love is invincible is far from the truth in this particular novel, shaped by the author's authentic experiences.

Mario Puzo was 58 years old then, had already written the story of "The Godfather" – the most romantic Patriarchy ever – and had just lost his wife, his greatest passion. For him, her death had been a mythic battle and because of it he had suffered the most terrible defeat of his life. He swore he would never again fall into the innocence of True Love (Gino 15)

Unbreakable ties with himself and his community

With autofiction the author is able to express everything about himself but in a more subtle manner. Puzo managed to fictionalize some of his

dominant characteristics and to assign them to one of his male representatives from the novel, Gino. He is majorly shaped in perfect concordance with Puzo's authentic self. A first example is represented by the constant quarrels with Lucia Santa, which are caused by their surroundings.

I did not understand that they simply could not afford to dream, I myself had a hundred dreams from which to choose. For I was already sure that I would make my escape, that I was one of the chosen. I would be rich, famous, happy. I would master my destiny. And so it was perhaps natural that as a child, with my father gone, my mother the family chief, I, like all the children in all the ghettos of America, became locked in a bitter struggle with the adults responsible for me. It was inevitable that my mother and I became enemies. (Wheeler 36)

The previous quotation seems to be useful in identifying Puzo's initial, childish approach concerning the incapacities of his immigrant fellows. This particular misunderstanding acts as the primary source of inspiration for Gino's constant bickering with Lucia Santa and almost all the other adults. Not only the constant quarrelling, but the overall enigmatic allure and internal secrecy of the fictional character, Gino are clearly imprinted from Puzo himself. Initially, Puzo wanted to become an artist, to achieve something greater than just basic survival. This aspect demonstrates that he discovered his *American Dream*, whereas other immigrants could not afford to pay the price for dreaming. Another issue directly inspired from Puzo's life and transferred on paper through his fictional representative refers to the total disinterest towards love and marriage. In the novel, our protagonist, Lucia Santa becomes visibly anxious and even bitter towards Gino's rejection of Caterina:

What was Caterina, then, to this proud son of hers? Shit? The daughter of a wealthy man who could assure his future and his bread; comely, with strong legs and breasts, far above this wastrel this good-for-nothing, this fodder for the electric chair; and he didn't care? It was beneath his notice, if you please, that a jewel of an Italian girl didn't like him. Who did he think he was, the king of Italy? (Puzo 215)

The effectuation of the *American Dream*

In the beloved novel the entirety of the characters is placed under the radar of the *American Dream*, even if they are not aware of it. Every member of the Angeluzzi-Corbo family struggled, for they needed to

abandon their deepest aspirations, as to acquire a most basic, but comfortable human survival. Gino portrays his strong desires for freedom; Octavia gave up her dream of becoming a schoolteacher in detriment of becoming a co-parent, together with Lucia Santa, for her siblings. Octavia needed to work in the garment industry in order to provide for her family. Larry and Vinnie dedicated their life, unwillingly, to the railroad company that offered a reliable income. But when it comes to our novel's protagonist, Lucia Santa, the course of events takes a new turn. Readers might find themselves debating over her living the *American Dream* considering the immense emotional distress and human casualties that came along her way. Lucia Santa reminisces, at the end of the fictional journey, at the types of payment she was required to make in order to achieve the one and only, *American Dream*:

Lucia Santa, Lucia Santa, you found your fortune in America," and Lucia Santa weeping on her backless kitchen chair raised her head to cry out against them, "I wanted all this without suffering. I wanted all this without weeping for two lost husbands and a beloved child. I wanted all this without the hatred of that son conceived in true love. I wanted all this without guilt, without sorrow, without fear of death and the terror of a judgement day. In innocence." (Puzo 274)

Lucia Santa became aware of all her torment throughout the years, asks for mercy and mans herself up in order to embark on another emotional rollercoaster, in her next fictional journey to Long Island.

In what regards Puzo's opinions on his personal experience with the *American Dream*, he strictly discloses that he fulfilled his ultimate ambitions, unconsciously in his youth, while constantly chasing other versions of it during his life.

What has happened here has never happened in any other country in any other time. The poor who had been poor for centuries – hell, since the beginning of Christ – whose children had inherited their poverty, their illiteracy, their hopelessness, achieved some economic dignity and freedom. You didn't get it for nothing, you had to pay a price in tears, in suffering, but why not? And some even became artists." (Wheeler 46)

Gender roles, dismantling mental capacities and the Mafia

As I already mentioned throughout the paper, all the male members of the authentic Italian family, the Puzo and of the fictional one, the Angeluzzi-Corbo managed to earn a secure payment from the railroad

company. In the meantime, the feminine part of the family assumed the ancient roles of the woman, coined by the patriarchic Southern Italian society. Puzo actually discloses a significant testimony about his mother and sister's housebound occupations, which later on act as sources of inspiration for his beloved fictional characters.

I never came home to an empty house; there was always the smell of supper cooking. My mother was always there to greet me, sometimes with a policeman's club in her hand. But – she was always there, or her authorized deputy, my older sister. (Coppa and Curran 127)

In immigrant families, the leader is usually represented by the man, the father who has the right and duty to discipline and keep his wife and children in line. Closely following Puzo's real life situation is Lucia Santa's responsibility to lead the family and to subordinate to her husbands, whenever they were around. When her husbands were alive and next to her, she was submissive and persuaded her children to respect the father's demands. Eventually, Lucia Santa became the head of the family and she tried her best to put up with fate, while keeping her sanity. Thus, the concept of *the mad woman in the attic* acquires a new nuance within this particular novel. It actually connects the male individuals to it, through their mental instability and lack of strength, required to protect and provide for their families. Puzo's father stands as the primary representative for the aforementioned concept that might be turned into *the mad man in the attic*, who could not fight and resist the struggles of the mad world, be it of physical or societal nature. Therefore, Lucia Santa's strength and sanity shall be appraised by the readers. As well as Puzo's mother's real-life resilience in catastrophic times, that managed to put other people down, most notably men.

It is only natural that the author intertwined aspects of his immediate reality, of society's perception on Italians, usually as criminals and mafiosi, with the fictional journey and experience of the characters with it. As the main characters have traces of Southern origins in their blood, it is inevitable that influences of Southern Mafia be found roaming around the streets of Hell's Kitchen, which eventually captures Lucia Santa's older son, Larry.

No son of hers would be a gangster, a criminal sucked-out jellyfish to an older woman without shame. For one moment in the dark hallway, in those murky stairwells, Lucia Santa had a terrible vision of electric chairs, of her son bleeding, stabbed by the Sicilian or the jealous husband. (Puzo 65)

This quotation reveals the worst-case scenario imagined by a visibly fearful and worried, Italian mother, accustomed to the way in which such things unravel. In addition to her personal worries, the ongoing, higher Mafia acts actively within their life, the American system, who spares no one from difficulties. Even though Lucia Santa applied for a welfare social program, she was blackmailed by the Italian prosecutor, and she needed to pay him a certain amount of money to guarantee her services from the government. Ultimately, the readers are direct witnesses of two well-functioning engines of Mafia, that rule their victims accordingly.

All in all, the elements of autofiction are undoubtedly hard to miss in what concerns the novel, *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. Throughout this paper, the most relevant aspects from Puzo's personal life and his immediate surroundings were explicitly analyzed and portrayed by means of accurate quotations and comparisons. Puzo used autofiction in an effort to share his pure historical testimony, acting as a voice for the Italian community, that faced truly horrendous challenges including social stigma, world wars, economic and global crises.

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