Narrativizing One's Professional Space

Magda Danciu[1]
Claudia Judea Pusta[1]

Abstract. Our paper is meant to shed light on the process of converting biographical units into narrative instances in order to carry out a particular authorial intention, namely, that of demonstrating how the factual can turn into the fictional arena of characters acting as carriers of their creators, voicing their life knowledge, respectively, professional practice and experience. Working with texts belonging to Kathy Reichs (a forensic anthropologist) and Patricia Cornwell (a crime investigation reporter) can be a good exercise to explain how scientific endeavours and procedures prove to be a valuable inspiration for narrative spaces on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in these two writers'cases, how one's personal expertise may be successfully fictionalized.

Key words: forensics, sciences, professional profile, biofiction, the self

Writing the self can be seen as part of this endless flood of new practices engendered by our constantly changing society and the energies generated by the great interest in questioning the nature of one's identity and the boundaries between what is private and what is public, as well as the validity of the notions of truth and fiction, individuality and authenticity, experience and its narration. If considered an expanding genre, autofiction points to the openness of the literary text, its adaptability to transpose the traditional autobiographical novel to the present days requirements, to push its boundaries artistically so that it should engage in the new trends of experimentations as expected by the community of readers. Biofiction usually encapsulates elements of a writer's life as basis for the fictional rendering of the real, experiential facts and details, characters and events, allowing an authorial extension of the narrative registers in order to stimulate "the readers' humanity and curiosity" and to strenghten their capacities for

[1] University of Oradea, Romania
[1] University of Oradea, Romania

”empathy and humanity” by activating their ”imagination and emotions” (McGill 102). When considering that ”the only legitimate role of a writer is to tell the stories that are truly his or hers”(Toews 245), then autofiction is a way of serving the story by creating a novelistic background for the lived experiences to be included, prioritizing both emotional truth and imagination while emphasising on the narrator’s/protagonist’s status as an literary alter ego.

Writing one’s life

Any text mirrors the author’s way of thinking, re/acting, operating with personal experiences, within the very process of communicating them to potential readers, in the hope that they can initiate, then validate, a certain interaction, so necessary in the decoding writerly intentions and achievements. When it is about autofiction, its perusers are encouraged to perceive the differences between reality and fiction, the specific boundaries creatively blurred by the narrativization of one’s everyday life, making the necessary assumptions about these differences while trying to profile the cast of characters engaged in rendering the intricate plot. Both Kathy Reichs and Patricia Cornwell are well established representatives of forensic investigation type novels, as they both have a considerable expertise in their particular area of forensics, so that their works are but an epitome of their professional everydayness aimed at scientifically determining the factual truth to serve justice (see Belis 13-14), as acknowledged by Dr. Kay Scarpetta, Cornwell’s designated practitioner: ”Our job as mandated by code is to determine cause and manner of death” (Cornwell, *Trace*, 45).

According to general laws, a forensic pathologist investigates sudden, unexpected, suspicious or violent deaths by determining the cause and manner of death through autopsies, reviewing medical history and analyzing evidence rigorously, being aware, as both Kathy Reichs and her alter ego, Dr. Temperance Brennan put it, that, ”Today, science is a routine and crucial tool of the criminal justice system. A latent fingerprint places a defendant at a crime scene. DNA from sperm links an accused to a rape victim. Chemical analysis determines that a drug is illegal. An autopsy establishes that a death is homicide. The forensic science community includes a wide array of practitioners: anthropologists, biologists, chemists, entomologists, odontologists, pathologists” (Reichs, *Deja Dead*, 375). The fictional forensic anthropologist points out the relevance of a proper scientific education and training, shedding light on the author’s personal background and

competences, offering the readers a well-argued explanation for the protagonist's development within the narrative economy:

> Anthropology is a broad discipline, comprised of linked subspecialties. Physical. Cultural. Archaelogical. Linguistic. Our department has the full quartet (...). Anthropology is the study of the human organism. Physical anthropology is the study of the biology, variability, and evolution of the human organism. Osteology is the study of the bones of the human organism. Forensic anthropology is the study of the bones of the human organism for legal purposes. Follow the diverging branches, and there I am. Though my training was in bioarchaeology, and I started my career excavating and analyzing ancient remains, I shifted into forensics years ago (...). Forensic anthropologists work with the recently dead. We're employed by law enforcement agencies, coroners, medical examiners, prosecutors, defense attorneys, the military, human rights groups and mass-disaster recovery teams. Drawing on our knowledge of biomechanics, genetics, and skeletal anatomy, we address questions of identification, cause of death, postmortem interval, and postmortem alteration of the corpse. We examine the burned, decomposed, mummified, mutilated, dismembered, and skeletal. Often, by the time we see remains, they're too compromised for an autopsy to yield data of value (Reichs *Devil Bones*, 2-4).

Employing cases and details, sometimes even tertiary characters (in our examples, toxicologists, anthropologists, and various other forensic scientists, whose expertise is essential in order to gain a full understanding of the case) within a well-conceived scenario to reflect real-life situations, Patricia Cornwell brings forth a medical examiner's routine work through the reliable plot that Kay Scarpetta is to follow in her search to identify victims, assailants, place and time of demise/murder; it is an example of the relatability of any autofictional writing which can put together experiences, emotions, thoughts in a connected narrative, meant to serve the aim of the practitioner's duties. When at a crimes scene, as any other forensic pathologist, she examines the body, its position, its surroundings so that later these findings should facilitate interpretation of injuries, establishing the cause of death generated by that particular environment:

> Scarpetta opened the crime scene case just inside the door and retrieved a digital camera and a notepad and pen, and gave each person a pair of gloves. She took her ususal survey without moving closer or speaking, noticing that except for the evidence markers, there was nothing out of place, and not the slightest indication that anything remotely violent had happened. The apartment was impecable, and

> everywhere she looked, she saw traces of the rigid, obsessive woman who had lived and died here" (Cornwell, *Scarpetta*, 288-9).

As any text is the image of its author in his/her effort to establish an effective communication with prospective readers, self-writing fiction tends to expose a particular authorial voice and the assumption of a certain role in order to grant a meaningful interaction and a perception of its content and intentions while rethinking the tencsion between truth and fictionality.

The solitude of the scientist

In the pursuit of authenticiy, crime fiction writers like Kathy Reichs or Patricia Cornwell focus on covering the readers' need for information and knowledge filtered through the precision and accuracy of scientific and procedural details, blending fact with invention to create science-driven stories on the one hand, and on the other hand, to educate them on forensic science while telling an entertaining story. Their life histories opened them access to the subgenres of medical, respectively, forensic thrillers, featuring examiners of the field as their protagonists, singling them out as the characters who have the propensity for enhancing the attention and emotions of the readers and for allowing them to better understand the interconnectedness between parts and elements of the events related by each text (see Şerbănescu 35). Their core responsibilities - investigating deaths by conducting autopsies to establish and classify their cause, manner and circumstances (see Iftenie, Dermengiu 8-10) - are essentially carried out through their performance of duties and obligations, involving a high degree of commitment to completing their engagement accurately so that they eventually can achieve the required and unanimously expected outcomes. Their tasks are accomplished in a space designated to serve this purpose, namely in the autopsy room where, for instance, Dr. Brennan proceeds to her professional routine almost every day, recording all the details of her findings on the analyzed remains of a corpse:

> What was left of her head had been arranged to form a body. The six bloody pieces had been placed in correct anatomical order, but the angles were slightly off, turning her into a life-sized version of those plastic dolls designed to be twisted into distorted positions. The overall effect was macabre. Her head had been cut off high on the neck, and the truncated muscles looked bright poppy red. The pallid skin rolled back gently at the severed edges, as if recoiling from contact

> with the fresh, raw meat. Her eyes were half open, and a delicate trail of dried blood meandered from her right nostril. Her hair was wet and lay plastered against her head. It had been long and blond. Her trunk was bisected at the waist. The upper torso lay with her arms bent at the elbows, the hands drawn in and resting on her stomach. Coffin position, except her fingers were not intertwined. Her right hand was partially detached, and the ends of the creamy white tendons jutted out like snapped electrical cords. Her attacker had been more successful with the left. The technician had placed it beside her head, where it lay alone, the fingers drawn in like the legs of a shriveled spider" (Reichs, *Deja Dead,* 45).

A forensic scientist's work place is a built environment with specific connotative meanings that significantly effects his/her identity, re/shaping it according to the degree of their attachment to this physical place (see Hauge 45), reflected in the practitioner's view of him/herself, as in Kay Scarpetta's case:

> I never feel like a doctor, not even a surgeon, as I get ready to conduct a postmortem examination, and I suspect only people who deal with the dead for a living can understand what I mean by that (…). I know what it is to incise warm bodies that have a blood pressure and something vital to lose, What I'm about to do couldn't be more different from that, and the first time I inserted a scalpel blade into cold, unfeeling flesh, made my first Y-incision on my first dead patient, I gave aup something I've never gotten back. I abandoned any notion that I might be godlike or heroic or gifted beyond other mortals. I rejected the fantasy that I could heal any creature, including myself (Cornwell, *Post Mortuary*, 276).

Both Dr. Brennan and Dr. Scarpetta are the beneficiaries of a transfer of professional status and professional expertise form real life experiences and relevant autobiographical instances so that their fictionalized context could exemplify the circulated idea that writing is life, that we write of us as we are, that literature is a parallel life (see Kepes 36), that characters, especially in biofiction, can easily reveal facts and truths of their authors' everyday existence, as shown by the former's regular procedure to deal with bodies out of the autopsy room:

> Opening my kit, I spread out supplies. Beside me, the ME unsheathed a thermometer for insertion into the anus. Or the egg mass. I couldn't be sure. For two hours we gathered and labeled evidence (…). First, I took close-ups, in case something matured into something else in transit to the entomologist [Larabee] (..). Using a dampened child's paintbrush, I then scraped up eggs. Half I preserved in diluted alcohol.

> RIP. The rest I wanted alive for the enthomologist to raise to maturity for species identification. That lucky half I placed in vials with beef liver and damp tissue. Then, I went for maggots (...). After melting and packaging adult flies, I gathered representatives of every species present within a yard of the body (...). Bugs sealed and labeled, I collected soil samples, then made notes about the habitat: freshwater lake, hardwoods and pines, semiacid soil, elevation five hundred to six hundred feet, temperature ranging from midfifties to mideghties Fahrenheit, low humidity, full sunlight. Finally, I jotted comments concering the body. Naked. Prone, buttocks raised, arms straight at the sides. Decapitation, no blood or bodily fluids at the scene. Head missing. Incised wounds on chest and belly. Minimal decomp. No aquatic or animal scavanging. Egg masses at neck and anus, with internal temperatures of 97 amd 98 degrees Fahrenheit, respectively, unknown cause of death (Reichs, *Devil Bones*, 99-100).

Completing their systematic tasks, in or out of their assigned environment – the autopsy room where, as already referred to, detailed external and internal examinations of the body are fulfilled in order to establish a documented final verdict -, forensic scientists, such as Dr. Scarpetta, face the challenge of permanently discovering new secrets of their field of research and operation and to improve their competence in rendering the body chart of the victim:

> Postmortem hypostasis, better known as lividity or livor mortis, is one of my pet tattletales, although it is often misinterpreted even by those who should know better. It can look like bruising due to trauma when in fact it is caused by the mundane physiological phenomenon of noncirculating blood pooling into small vessels due to gravity. Livididty is a dusky red or can be purplish with lighter areas of blanching where areas of the body rested against a firm surface, and no matter what I'm told about the circumstances of a death, the body itself doesn's lie (Cornwell, *Post Mortuary*, 154).

The authors and the books we focused on and the excerpts we relied on are meant to exemplify the way in which autofiction blends autobiographical segments and storytelling, confronting them in a creative development, in an attempt to highlight Hemingway's genuineness when having stated that all good books have one thing in common – they are truer than if they had really happened, suggesting a way of discovering valid truths about human experiences, those internal truths brought forth by their authors that transcend the plot.

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