

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FICTION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

An Essay by
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In his preface to *A Moveable Feast* Ernest Hemingway remarks: “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.”¹ A note to the text on the following page explains that the book “concerns the years 1921 to 1926 in Paris”, that is, to be more precise, Hemingway’s years in Paris. And, indeed, the first person narrator of the text is Hemingway. However, when we browse through the pages it looks exactly like a novel or a collection of his short stories. So what is *A Moveable Feast*? An autobiographical text? A fictional text that is invented along the lines of personal memories? Or, to make things more complicated and as Hemingway suggests, a fiction *illuminating* facts? The ambiguous status of *A Moveable Feast* concerning its genre plunges us right into the debate about the relationship between fiction and autobiography. This debate deals with the questions whether autobiography should be regarded as fiction or nonfiction, whether it is useful to make a distinction between autobiography and fiction and on what grounds such a distinction can be made.

As Timothy Dow Adams points out, autobiography has traditionally been regarded as nonfiction.² This categorization has been motivated by and in turn supported the view that autobiography is not an invention of its author, but a documentary report of his life and his person. According to Alan Collett “documentary report” means that the reader assumes that report sentences in an autobiography “possess a truth value”³ that they, in other words, relate to a reality outside of the text and that this relationship can be verified or falsified. The reader hopes that everything the author writes about his or her life corresponds to the way things really were, that the account is true. In fact, one of the fascinations of reading an autobiography stems from the reader’s desire to learn something about a real life apart from his own and to see the author as he or she really is apart from the fiction he or she creates. Seen from this point of view autobiography becomes a subgenre of biography⁴. It is a biography

¹Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, (Arrow Books: London, 1994) in the following text the book will be quoted as MF with pagenumbers in parenthesis

²Timothy Dow Adam, ‘Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 40 (1994), 459-491,(p. 459)

³Alan Collett, ‘Literature, Fiction and Autobiography’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 29 (1989), 341-351, (p. 343)

⁴Timothy Dow Adams, p. 459

whose narrator is identical with its subject, which is more or less what the term “auto-biography” means: a life written by a self.

When we examine *A Moveable Feast* with this concept in mind its autobiographical nature becomes evident. The text clearly refers to a reality outside of its own world. This reference to an external reality is not established by describing Paris in the nineteen-twenties. A comparison with one of Hemingway’s novels makes this obvious. The first book of *The Sun also Rises*⁵ has the same setting but the reader of it has very different expectations regarding its “report sentences”. We do not expect the Paris in the novel to look like the historical Paris of the time. We would not be disappointed if the streets the narrator mentions could not be found on any map of the relevant years.⁶ No reader of the novel, unless he is Robert Cohn, would not use the descriptions in the novel as a travel guide and street map during a visit to Paris. The Paris of *The Sun Also Rises* is situated in the realm of fiction whereas the Paris of *A Moveable Feast* belongs to the realm of facts. The difference is predominantly established by the identity of the narrator. He does not only write as a first person narrator but is also identified as Ernest Hemingway. We know that Ernest Hemingway exists in a reality independent of this text because he is its author. The narrator writes, among others, about Gertrud Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce and we know that these people, like Hemingway, exist in an external reality. This evidence leads us to the assumption that even those people in the text we have never heard of have an existence in the world outside of it. We might want to look them up in an encyclopaedia to find out more about them and even if we would not find them there we would not doubt their “real” existence. We would simply conclude that they are not important enough to be mentioned. The author acknowledges this existence of an external reality explicitly when he tells us in his preface that “many places, people, observations and impressions have been left out of this book.” *A Moveable Feast* does not create its own world but refers to an existing one and this existing one contains more than the aspects of it that are mentioned in the text. The declaration that “no character in this book is the portrait of any actual person” which introduces *The Sun Also Rises* is the exact reversal of this acknowledgement and indicates to the reader that the world which is presented to him in the course of the novel is invented, however closely it resembles an external reality. Therefore, as H. Porter Abbot notes, “a story ends where it ends”⁷ and it does not make sense to ask what happened to Brett and Jake after they left the Gran Via in Madrid, whereas our curiosity about Hemingway’s life after 1926 can be satisfied.

⁵Ernest Hemingway, *Fiesta, The Sun Also Rises*, (Arrow Books: London, 1993) in the following text the novel is quoted as SR with pagenumbers in parenthesis

⁶The reader might amuse him/her-self with Umberto Eco’s *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1994, in particular the essay ‘The strange case of the Rue Servandoni’, which addresses precisely such questions.

⁷H. Porter Abbot, ‘Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories’, *New Literary History*, 20 (1988), 597-615 (p. 597)

The evidence I have collected so far indicates that *A Moveable Feast* is an autobiographical account. It is based on facts that are independent of the text and therefore much of its content can be verified or falsified. The relation the text establishes to an external reality via the identity of author and narrator encourages us to read it in this way, in other words, it encourages us to view it as nonfiction. There are, however, other signals in Hemingway's text that contradict this evaluation. Alfred Kazin, for example, observes that *A Moveable Feast* is written in exactly the same style as Hemingway's fiction:

line by line and stroke by stroke, in the color of the prose and the shaping of the episodes, Hemingway's autobiography is as beautiful in composition as Hemingway's best stories, it is in subject and tone indistinguishable from much of Hemingway's fiction, and it is full of dialogue as maliciously clever as Hemingway's fiction.⁸

This similarity of style between the fictional and the autobiographical text, especially the extensive use of dialogues in it, leads the reader to question its status as nonfiction. In fact, Kazin views *A Moveable Feast* as an example of autobiography as fiction. In his opinion

it is a narrative which has no purpose other than to tell a story, to create the effect of a story, and which demands to be read for its value as a narrative. Hemingway uses . . . the convention of autobiography – real names, dates, places – entirely for his imaginative purpose as creative artist.⁹

By using the narrative style of fiction the autobiographical text ceases to be nonfiction. Kazin points out that it only “*assumes the mask* of sincerity and only *pretends* to be the absolute truth” since it is actually “just another way of telling a story . . . and it uses facts as a strategy”.¹⁰ Kazin's point is important not only for the question whether we should understand Hemingway's “report” of his early years in Paris as fiction or nonfiction, whether he wants us to read his text as factual or not, but also for a more general discussion of the relationship between autobiography and fiction. The point Kazin makes concerning Hemingway has to be seen in the wider context of the question whether *any* autobiography should be read as nonfiction.

In fact, the categorization of autobiography as nonfiction has become increasingly controversial. Timothy Dow Adams remarks that “in recent years scholars working with the genre have almost universally come to the realization that whatever else it is, autobiography is not nonfiction.”¹¹ And precisely the above mentioned

⁸this quotation is taken from Alan Collett, p. 343

⁹Alan Collett, p. 343

¹⁰these quotations are taken from Alan Collett, p. 343, emphasis mine

¹¹Timothy Dow Adams, p. 459

definition of autobiography as a life written by a self is one of the causes for the controversy, since our concept of the self has moved from the Cartesian conviction that it is fact to the apprehension that it is fiction. As Genieve Lloyd¹² points out, this development is very much influenced by our above mentioned notions of “truth value”, so that it is possible to argue that the same concept that leads to the categorization of autobiography as nonfiction can also lead to its categorization as fiction.

Our ideas of “truth value”, falsification and verification are based on our concepts of objective knowledge. Only objective knowledge can conform to standards of truth and only objects can become parts of objective knowledge. The self, however, is neither a mere object nor entirely objective. It is also a subject and consequently subjective. According to our “inherited ideals of objective knowledge” subjectivity contradicts objectivity and thereby even reality. Lloyd argues that in the line of this concept of knowledge “to qualify as real, things must be there independently of particular points of view. Objectivity demands setting aside the ‘internal’ viewpoint in an attempt to see the world, as it were, from no point of view at all.”¹³ The self and its subjective perceptions almost move into the sphere of non-reality, i.e. fiction. Accordingly Paul John Eakin claims that “the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure”, and that, “fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life.”¹⁴ And Aron Fleishman adds that “life – indeed the idea of a life – is already structured as a narrative.”¹⁵ The self and the self’s perception of life are intrinsically connected to fiction. One of the fictions that form the self’s idea of life and consequently autobiographic writing is the notion of life as a “voyage of self-discovery”¹⁶ As Abbott remarks, this “narrative shape” “proposes a fictional norm as a descriptive standard” which is just as much taken from *Robinson Crusoe* and *David Copperfield* as it is taken from the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine.¹⁷ One aspect of its fiction is the idea that there can be a moment in a person’s life which is a “still point” that somehow does not belong to it, so that the life story that is written down in this moment is not “a part of the life but . . . a medium through which the life is seen.”¹⁸ As an alternative point of view Abbott suggests that any autobiography should be seen as an act which does not occur in a moment that is separated from life but is, in fact, the expression of this life at a certain point in time.¹⁹ As an expression of this

¹²Genieve Lloyd, ‘The Self as Fiction: Philosophy and Autobiography’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 18 (1986) 168-185

¹³Genieve Lloyd, p. 169

¹⁴the quotation is taken from Timothy Dow Adams, p. 460

¹⁵the quotation is taken from Timothy Dow Adams, p. 460

¹⁶H. Porter Abbott, p. 599

¹⁷H. Porter Abbott, p. 599

¹⁸H. Porter Abbott, p. 599

¹⁹H. Porter Abbott, p. 600

moment “all autobiographies . . . are corrupted by the present.”²⁰ When we do not read autobiography with this awareness but instead as a biography of the author we do not read “report sentences” that can be verified or falsified but are, actually, assisting the author in creating a fictional text. Ironically, “when an autobiography is read as factual . . . it is read in some respects much like conventional fiction.”²¹ To avoid reading the autobiographical text as factual does not mean, however, to cut this text off from a reality outside of itself. It only means to see this reality in a different aspect of the text. The above mentioned concept of verifiable “report sentences” searches for the connection to an external reality predominantly in the reported facts of the author’s life. The concept suggested by Abbott, however, sees these facts as part of the fiction of every autobiography and the connection to “this world and its particulars” is discovered in its presentation of these “facts”. Again the crucial point is the identity of writer and subject. According to Abbott “this proposal cancels the fictional act and ties the narrative to time and his life.”²² But reading an autobiography is not identical to reading “factually or conceptually”. The reader is not supposed to ask “How is this true?” If this is his main question while reading an autobiographical text he creates a biography out of it. An autobiography, however, is not a biography, since no self can write his or her biography. Therefore,

to read autobiographically is to ask of the text: How does this reveal the author? It is to set oneself analytically apart from the author . . . Historical truth or falsity are important only insofar as they express the identity of the author . . . autobiography, unlike factual writing, is in this regard always true.”²³

This means that the autobiographical text in spite of and even by creating fiction presents truth, the truth of the self that reveals itself in the presentation of the fiction of his or her life. The interesting point of Abbott’s proposal is that it neither puts autobiography in the category of nonfiction nor in the category of fiction. The distinction between nonfiction and fiction becomes undefinable and the autobiographical text becomes, as Paul de Man says, “neither and both at once”.²⁴

I want to argue that this complex relationship between fact and fiction is not only important for the way we read *A Moveable Feast* but also deliberately worked with in the text itself. By using those conventions of autobiographical narration that lead the reader to the assumption that he is reading a factual text Hemingway, as Kazin noted earlier, “assumes the mask of sincerity” and pretends to write

²⁰H. Porter Abbott, p. 602

²¹H. Porter Abbott, p. 603

²²H. Porter Abbott, p. 609

²³H. Porter Abbott, p. 613

²⁴Kerstin Dahlbäck, ‘Strindberg’s Autobiographical Space’, in *Strindberg and Genre*, edited by Michael Robinson, (Norvik Press: Norwich, 1991) 82-94, (p. 88)

truth. But Hemingway is not creating this mask and hoping to get away with it. In fact, he makes us aware of his mask thereby pointing to “the imaginative possibilities inherent in fact”²⁵, that is, to the complicated relationship between fact and fiction inherent in all writing.

A first instance of creating this awareness is Hemingway’s already quoted remark that “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.” (MF preface) One possible reading of this remark is that some readers might prefer to call Hemingway’s text fiction because it contradicts those versions of events and persons presented in it they have read so far. If the reader prefers not to believe Hemingway he can say it’s just fiction. But then this might not be wise since Hemingway’s fiction probably sheds new light on so called facts and who can be sure who tells the truth. According to this reading Hemingway tries to convince the reader that his account, although sounding like fiction in many respects, might be less fictional than what the reader has been told so far under the name of nonfiction. He creates his mask of sincerity. However, he does not say that he is going to present the truth. By making us aware of the possibility that his fiction can illuminate so called facts he causes us to doubt all kinds of stories including his own. This in turn can persuade us to trust Hemingway more than anybody else since he, like a clever advertiser, does not deny the subjectivity of his presentation. Like the scholar who hopes to categorize autobiography we are caught in a tension between fact and fiction that cannot be resolved.

Hemingway works with this tension and relationship between fact and fiction right from the start of his narration. His opening sentence “Then there was the bad weather” (MF 3) imitates a conversation in progress. We have come too late and already missed the beginning, which is true when we consider conventional autobiographies. The traditional practice is to start with childhood memories or at least with the very “beginning” of a new “chapter” in the life of the author. But Hemingway does not tell us how and why he happens to be Paris. He starts right in the middle and expresses this – appropriately – with his first sentence that sounds like the continuation of a narration and not at all like a beginning. With this seemingly casual sentence Hemingway not only creates the fiction of a narration in progress, but also the impression of a “natural” narration which emphasises his sincerity as a narrator. At the same time, however, he draws the reader’s attention to the fictional character of every narration. As soon as we register our surprise about his unconventional beginning we have to reflect on our concept of a proper first sentence. We have to realise that every beginning is a fiction in itself and that Hemingway’s beginning cannot be an exemption from this rule.

A similar reflection on the relationship between narration, fact and fiction is presented to the reader at the end of *A Moveable Feast* when Hemingway

²⁵this quotation of Alfred Kazin is taken from Alan Collett, p. 343

records a conversation he once had with a barkeeper. The barkeeper complains that although everybody talks and asks him about F. Scott Fitzgerald he is not able to remember him. And inspite of his inability to remember the famous writer, inspite of the fact that he does not have the slightest idea who he was, he himself talks about him when customers are curious. He “informs” them about “anything interesting that they wish to hear. What will please them. But tell me”, he urges Hemingway, “who was he?” (MF 167) Hemingway’s response sounds like a very short entry in an encyclopaedia: “He was an American writer of the early Twenties and later who lived some time in Paris and abroad.” (MF 167) When pressed to say more about his books Hemingway adds in the same style: “He wrote two very good books and one which was not completed which those who know his writing best say would have been very good. He also wrote some good short stories.” But still the barkeeper cannot connect a face with this description. Hemingway then promises him that “I am going to write something about him in a book that I will write about the early days in Paris. . . . I will put him in exactly as I remember him the first time that I met him.” (MF 168) The barkeeper is delighted: “You write about him as you remember him and then if he came here I will remember him.” Hemingway, however, does not seem to be sure whether this will work and answers “We will see.” With this remark the conversation, or rather, the narration of it ends.

When we consider the information that is presented to us in this episode we can view it as a malicious attempt of Hemingway to prove his triumph over F. Scott Fitzgerald.²⁶ He is not only the better drinker and eater, the man with much more common sense and a more disciplined way of working, as previous chapters have told us, but also the man who is remembered while Fitzgerald is not even remembered by the barkeeper whose good customer he was. As Hemingway’s encyclopaedia style answers further indicates, he might not even be important enough to be remembered in a very detailed way by those who collect our cultural knowledge. However, at the same time another topic emerges. It is not only concerned with Fitzgerald in comparison to Hemingway but also with facts compared to fiction. First of all, we learn that the barkeeper tells anecdotes of Fitzgerald to his customers although he does not know who he is talking about. He creates the fiction of the yellow-press and offers precisely the “facts” people are interested in, those that will please them. We also learn that the nonfictional encyclopaedia-style information Hemingway offers is not the kind of knowledge that makes it easier to remember Fitzgerald. A third kind of narration is promised in the form of memories Hemingway will write down in his planned book. They will tell the reader how he remembers the writer. The barkeeper believes that this in turn will trigger his own memory but Hemingway leaves the question open. “We will see”, he says, maybe yes, maybe not. The whole dialogue implies that Hemingway is aware that his memories might differ from those of other people. And again his awareness draws attention to the possibility that memories are

²⁶see H. Porter Abbott, p. 604

not fact but fiction. On the other hand Hemingway's presentation of Fitzgerald "exactly as I remember him" (MF 168), i.e. fiction, is the only way to bring Fitzgerald to life for us. Nonfictional entries in an encyclopaedia do not have the same effect.

A similar discussion underlies the opening of *The Sun Also Rises*. Here the narrator introduces Robert Cohn by telling us that he "was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton." (SR 7) After writing a whole paragraph about Cohn's relationship to boxing the narrator remarks

I never met anyone of his class [in Princeton] who remembered him. They did not even remember that he was middleweight boxing champion. I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together, and I always had a suspicion that perhaps Robert Cohn had never been middleweight boxing champion . . . but I finally had somebody to verify the story . . . Spider Kelly not only remembered Cohn. He had often wondered what had become of him. (SR 7)

After this confirmation of "truth" the narrator goes on to give a biographical account of Cohn's life starting with his family of origin and ending with a recent meeting he had with Cohn and his wife that links the introduction up with the main part of the narration.

Like the conversation with the barkeeper in *A Moveable Feast* the quoted text of *The Sun Also Rises* refers to problems connected with biographical and autobiographical writing. Obviously the first part of the narrator's introduction of Robert Cohn is based on Cohn's own account of his life and the narrator mistrusts this version. This mistrust is based on two different kinds of evidence. One reason is the narrator's unwillingness to believe in "frank and simple" persons who tell a coherent story. This is an interesting point in the context of my examination. Apparently the narrator is as aware of the mask of sincerity as Alfred Kazin. In his opinion this mask does not consist of the naming of actual persons and places but of the presentation of the self as "frank and simple", i.e. unable to deceive, and of the presentation of the self's story as coherent. The narrator suspects that this presentation is rather a signal of fiction than of fact. Another reason is the narrator's experience that nobody seems to remember Cohn in Princeton, to say nothing of his boxing career. Until he meets Spider Kelly nobody can *verify* Cohn's version of events. But this verification is not so much caused by Spider Kelly's confirmation of Cohn's narrative but by the simple fact that he not only *remembers* Cohn but is also somehow interested in him. This personal interest and accordingly this personal way of remembrance seems to be more effective and more important than any objective verification.

The same notion can be found in Hemingway's evaluation of the different versions Fitzgerald tells him of a love affair his wife once had. Hemingway writes

this first version that he told me of Zelda and a French naval aviator falling in love was truly a sad story and I believe it was a true story. Later he told me other versions of it as though trying them for use in a novel, but none was as sad as this first one and I always believed the first one, although any of them might have been true. They were better told each time; but they never hurt you the same way the first one did. (MF 149-150)

Truth does not so much depend on objectivity as on an ability to touch and create a lasting impression. This corresponds to Hemingway's experience in *A Moveable Feast* that the factual and objective information about Fitzgerald he gives to the barkeeper is not very helpful whereas the promised account of his memories of Fitzgerald is believed to put an end to the barkeeper's inability to remember. Fiction is indeed very able to "throw some light on what has been written as fact." It even seems to be a necessary requirement for our ability to deal with "facts". Again fact and fiction appear to be two sides of the same thing: reality.

Accordingly, during his whole text of *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway makes us aware of the intrinsic connection of fact and fiction in his own narration. As I have already mentioned, many literary critics have pointed to the fictional character of the book. One aspect of this fictionality is the enormous amount of details Hemingway puts into it. We cannot believe that anyone would be able to base such a specific account on facts, even if these are the facts of his memory. Clearly, Hemingway is making things up. But then in the middle of a most detailed recollection of conversations with Gertrud Stein Hemingway interrupts his narration in order to remark

I had met Miss Stein in the Luxembourg. I cannot remember whether she was walking her dog or not, nor whether she had a dog then. I know that I was walking myself, since we could not afford a dog nor even a cat then . . . Later I often met Miss Stein with her dog in the Luxembourg gardens; but I think this time was before she had one. (MF 15)

In a similar manner Hemingway talks about Gertrud Stein's insistence to wait for her when she is not at home. He can remember everything she said except one thing: "'Come in any time and the maidservant' – she used her name but I have forgotten it – 'will look after you and you must make yourself at home until I come.'" (MF 103) Another gap of memory occurs regarding a meeting with F. Scott Fitzgerald: "I do not remember whether it was that day, or much later, that he showed me a review by Gilbert Seldes that could not have been better." (MF 135) Again these remarks can be understood as the mask of sincerity. Hemingway tries to be more truthful by admitting that he cannot remember everything. Another possibility is that they express his ambiguous feelings about Stein and Fitzgerald, since the inability to remember is definitely charged with indifference

and resentment in Hemingway's texts. At the same time these interruptions are so self-conscious and absurd that they draw our attention to the working of the narrative itself. Hemingway is inventing, or rather, recreating so many details of his early years in Paris that it is hard to understand why he insists on pointing to these gaps in his memory. Paradoxically, the effect of these remarks is not a strengthening of our trust in his sincerity but a strong indication not to trust him entirely. Instead of concealing the fictional character of his narrative it stresses it. For once, truthfulness throws some light on what has been written as fiction. But then the gap of memory may just be another fiction of the author.

A very similar remark with the opposite effect is included in *The Sun Also Rises*. At one point of the narrative Jake talks about "the old gentleman who subscribes for the bull-fight tickets for me every year" and mentions that "he was the archivist, and all the archives of the town were in his office." He then inserts the remark "That has nothing to do with the story." (SR 81) So why is he telling it? Why didn't his author cross this sentence out? In this case the interruption does not stress the fictional character of the narrative but brings in an element of nonfiction. The illusion is created that the text refers to an external reality that does not end where the text ends. Out of this external reality the narrator is choosing the elements he presents to us. It becomes obvious that just as Hemingway infuses nonfiction with fiction he infuses fiction with elements of factual narration.

Often he draws our attention to the way we perceive our surroundings according to patterns of works of art. The tank wagons, for example, "were painted brown and saffron color and in the moonlight when they worked the rue Cardinal Lemoine their wheeled, horse-drawn cylinders looked like Braque paintings." (MF 3) This description achieves two effects at the same time. On the one hand it stresses the mysterious look of tank wagons in moonlight since this makes them look like paintings. But on the other hand it demonstrates that Braque's paintings are not strange and hard to understand but literally obvious since everybody who perceives tank wagons in moonlight produces them.

Fact and fiction do not only merge in our visual perception but also in the act of creative writing. In the first episode of *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway offers us a depiction of himself writing a short story. He tells us that "I was writing about up in Michigan and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day it was that sort of day in the story." (MF 4) The writer, Hemingway claims, incorporates his own factual experience into his stories. Fiction is therefore not completely fictional. Accordingly not only he is a hungry person, especially when he is short of money and cannot afford regular meals but also "the people I wrote about had very strong appetites and a great taste and desire for food, and most of them were looking forward to having a drink." (MF 88) Hemingway also claims that the road from reality to fiction is not a one-way when he notes "in the story the boys were drinking and this made me thirsty" (MF 5) While fiction might be more factual than commonly assumed, actual experience can be formed by fiction. In *The Sun Also Rises* the narrator makes a similar point by observing that Robert

Cohn

had been reading W. H. Hudson. That sounds like an innocent occupation but Cohn had read and reread *The Purple Land* . . . Cohn, I believe, took every word of *The Purple Land* as literally as though it had been an R. G. Dun report . . . the book to him was sound. It was all that was needed to set him off. (SR 11)

A book of fiction sets off Robert Cohn's desire to go to South America since he is convinced that there he will experience all the "splendid imaginary amorous adventures" recounted in *The Purple Land*. When Jake suggests that he should go to Africa instead, Cohn is not interested and the narrator tells him: "That's because you never read a book about it." (SR 12) He diagnoses that not only Cohn's enthusiasm for South America but also his dislike for Paris "came out of a book" (SR 14).

In *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway refers to the same notion when he asks Ford Madox Ford "Tell me why one cuts people" . . . and informs the reader that "Until then I had thought it was something only done in novels by Ouida." (MF 73)

A combination of written and painted fiction is the open-air restaurant La Pche Miraculeuse about which Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*: "It was a place out of a Maupassant story with the view over the river as Sisley had painted it." (MF 39) Obviously, Hemingway's proneness to be attracted to places because they resemble fiction is as distinct as Robert Cohn's. Jake in *The Sun Also Rises* might laugh about Cohn who wants to go to South America because he has read a novel in which "the scenery . . . is very well described" (SR 11) and Hemingway would perhaps do the same but not for the same reason. Jake laughs because *The Purple Land* is fiction, imaginary, as he says, and therefore contradicts fact. Fiction cannot be read like a report. In this respect he personifies the reader who has learned that "report sentences" in fiction do not have a "truth value". In Hemingway's point of view, however, fiction – at least his fiction – does not contradict fact. In order to write a short story he feels he has to "write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." (MF 12) And when Gertrud Stein advises him not to write stories like 'Up in Michigan' because nobody will be able to publish them since stories like this are "*inaccrochable*" Hemingway answers

But what if it is not dirty but it is only that you are trying to use words that people would actually use? That are the only words that can make the story come true and that you must use them? You have to use them. (MF 14)

His fiction, Hemingway implies, does not contradict truth but creates it, and it is certainly more truthful than Gertrud Stein herself whose "reasons for her dislike of Ezra [Pound], skillfully and maliciously put, were invented years later" (MF

26), that is after the dislike actually occurred. And indeed, Hemingway's prose is famous not for being realistic but for making things real. When he writes "I sharpened the pencil with a pencil sharpener with the shavings curling into the saucer under my drink" (MF 5) we do not only get the proverbial picture but perceive everything even more intensely as if we had done it ourselves. As P. Young remarks Hemingway's style "give[s] an illusion of reality that, in its completeness, reality itself does not give."²⁷ The term "illusion", however, is problematic. The Paris of the early twenties Hemingway creates in *A Moveable Feast* is not an illusion of reality but in a way reality itself, since in Hemingway's opinion fiction does not seem to be regarded as fictional. To be more precise, Hemingway's fictional style achieves both, an intensification the sense of reality of "his" Paris and a better way to communicate this sense of reality to the reader. He, therefore, would not laugh at Robert Cohn because he takes fiction for fact but because he believes that he can find the same intensity of reality that is created with the help of a fictional style in the actual South America or in the actual Paris. If he wants this reality he is better served by going on reading the book. The notion that perception transformed into fiction becomes more real than reality itself is part of the episode in *A Moveable Feast* in which Hemingway is attracted to a pretty girl that enters the caf he is writing in. Noticing the girl he "wished I could put her in the story". (MF 5) Literature is so real that it is even able to overcome actual loss. It is enough to watch the girl with the intention to write her down in order to possess her in a very real way. Hemingway thinks about her:

I've seen you, beauty, and you belong to me, whoever you are waiting for and if I never see you again . . . You belong to me and all Paris belongs to me and I belong to this notebook and this pencil.

The reality that is created out of the raw material of facts is not an illusion but "true". As Hemingway's wife remembers or rather is made to remember in *A Moveable Feast* it is Hemingway's intention: "to make things true, writing them, and put them rightly and not describe . . . I remember the lights and the texture and the shapes you argued about." (MF 47) And this is exactly why *A Moveable Feast* has to be written in the style of Hemingway's fiction. Hemingway does not want to describe his early years in Paris but make them true. This cannot be achieved by traditional autobiographical writing which is more or less descriptive. It can only be achieved by a style we call fictional that has been created in order to bring about reality in its entirety. Fiction and fact merge together. The same applies to *The Sun Also Rises*. H. Potter Abbott remarks that "it is only with difficulty we can read the fiction of Hemingway *unautobiographically*."²⁸ This is just another expression for the already mentioned point that his fiction is not fictional. At the same time, his presentation of "facts" is not factual. Therefore,

²⁷this quotation is taken from Alan Collett, p. 346

²⁸H. Potter Abbott, p. 612

A Moveable Feast is neither fiction or nonfiction and both at once. This, however, is not its weakness but its strength.

An example that illuminates another aspect of the complex relationship between the descriptive and definitive style of nonfiction and the “(re) creating” style of fiction is the relationship between James Baldwin’s novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*²⁹ and his autobiographical essay *The Fire Next Time*³⁰. Both texts use the religious conversion of a fourteen year old boy as a central point around which the narration is organized. In *A Fire Next Time* the conversion is explicitly James Baldwin’s, while in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* it is experienced by John Grimes. It is, however, not unreasonable to assume that it is based on the same autobiographical experience, since the circumstances of John Grimes’ life are quite similar to those of Baldwin’s. This might lead to the conclusion that the texts have the same subject-matter, and in fact, they both speak about the significance of religion in the life of African-Americans. But, as I want to argue, they do so in a markedly different way.

Go Tell It on the Mountain presents a protagonist who is caught in a complex and in many respects extremely difficult and painful situation. Right in the first paragraph we learn that two aspects of his almost nightmarish life are religion and his father: “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself.” (GTM 11) John is far from feeling happy about this prospect. Neither the idea of following a religious vocation nor the notion of becoming like his father appeal to him. When Sister McCandless prophesies that “Brother John is mighty faithful . . . The Lord’s going to work with him in a mighty way” the narrator remarks “There were times – whenever, in fact, the Lord had shown his favour by working through her – when whatever Sister McCandless said sounded like a threat.” (GTM 66) And as far as his father is concerned “he had made his decision. He would not be like his father . . . He would have another life.” (GTM 21)

John’s life is soaked with religion. Both his father and his mother are members of the *Temple of the Fire Baptized* and “John had been brought up to believe it was the holiest and best.” (GTM 13) His “earliest memories” circle around religion, around “the hurry and brightness of Sunday mornings” when the whole family gets ready for church and we are told that these are “in a way, his only memories”. (GTM 11) John is encircled by religion and clearly suffocated by it. One element of this suffocation is the evaluation of human beings and human behaviour his church teaches. People who do not go to church on Sundays are “sinners” (GTM 12), people “who waited at the doors of movie houses” wear “the marks of Satan . . . in the faces” (GTM 38), Broadway is filled with “the roar of

²⁹James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, (Penguin: London, 1991), in the following text the novel will be quoted as GTM with pagenumbers in parenthesis

³⁰James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (Michael Joseph: London, 1963), in the following text the essay will be quoted as FNT with pagenumbers in parenthesis

the damned” (GTM 38) and people who do not pray and read in the Bible every night are “of the world, and their feet laid hold on Hell.” (GTM 41) In contrast to them “John was expected to be good” (GTM 14), holy, a saint like his parents. But John is far from being good in their sense of the word. He has sinned despite of the warnings of his parents “from his earliest beginnings” and John fears that his sin “was hard to forgive” (GTM 20). John’s first sin is of a sexual nature and his next sin is committed when he watches a movie in a cinema. Already while entering the cinema John is painfully aware of the evil nature of this deed and “does not look back at the street again for fear that one of the saints might be passing and, seeing him, might cry out his name and lay hands on him to drag him back.” (GTM 43) Inside he does not dare to look at the screen “out of a last, sick hope for forgiveness” (GTM 44) and in obvious terror “waited for this darkness to be shattered by the light of the second coming, for the ceiling to crack upwards, revealing, for every eye to see, the chariots of fire on which descended a wrathful God” (GTM 44). His whole experience of the movie is influenced by his religious beliefs and he cannot help but think “that it was the Lord who had led him into this theatre to show him [in the movie] an example of the wages of sin.” (GTM 46) But even this thought, we are told, is “blasphemous”, since God does not want His people do enter a theatre. The worst of all is that John cannot hide behind the religious “ignorance” of “African savages”. The gospel has been brought to him, “he had been raised in the truth”, since “His father and mother and all the saints had taught him from his earliest childhood what was the will of God.” (GTM 46) John, therefore, has to make a choice in the full knowledge of its consequences. He either leaves “the world and its pleasures, its honours, and its glories” (GTM 46), thereby winning “the glories of eternity” (GTM 39), or he remains in the world with the wicked, thereby partaking in “their certain punishment”. (GTM 46) John has to pay for eternal glory with “that endurance, that long suffering, which he had read about in the Bible” (GTM 16) and he does not want to choose this “narrow way”. But he is also not prepared to doubt in God or his church. Even the feeling that it is “God’s injustice that he must make so cruel a choice” (GTM 46) he does not dare to have.

A conversation between John, his mother and his brother Roy makes it obvious that at least by his male children John’s father is seen as the main source and supporter of this extremely rigid religious life. Roy complains angrily

he don’t want you to do *nothing*. We are so *lucky* to have a father who just wants us to go to church and read the Bible and beller like a fool in front of the altar and stay home all nice and quiet, like a little mouse. (GTM 27)

John is even more upset that his father despite his daily anger and outbursts of violence is regarded as holy man: “he was treated . . . with great respect. No one, none of the saints in any case, had ever reproached or rebuked his father, or suggested that his life was anything but spotless. Nevertheless, this man, God’s

minister, had struck John's mother." (GTM 59) The father does not only beat his wife but also John for his wickedness (GTM 23) and he tells him that "his face was the face of Satan" (GTM 30) and the "barely perceptible cleft on his chin . . . the mark of the devil's little finger" (GTM 31) while John has the desire to be "beautiful, tall and popular". John hates his father strong enough to hope that his brother Roy would die "to bring his father low." (GTM 49) In fact, he wants to kill him (GTM 59) and "lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John would curse him on his death-bed." (GTM 23) Therefore, John's father is the biggest obstacle between his son and God, he is the main reason

why, though he had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing . . . John's heart hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father.

John hopes to escape from his father's house. His determination is fueled by an identity, by a part of himself "his father could not reach . . . his hatred and his intelligence" (GTM 23). John is proud that he "excelled at school" (GTM 21) and this pride was first ignited by the praise of a white school principal who told him "You're a very bright boy, John Grimes . . . Keep up the good work." (GTM 22) From this moment on John is convinced that "he had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself; that, perhaps, with this power he might one day win that love which he so much longed for." (GTM 22) John does not really want to be saved and raised by religion. Instead, he dreams of becoming "a poet, or a college president, or a movie star; he drank expensive whiskey, and he smoked Lucky Strike cigarettes in the green package." (GTM 21) He does not want to choose the "narrow way" of endless humiliation in "a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like is father's". (GTM 39) Instead, John wants to live "where the buildings contested God's power and where the men and women did not fear God, here he might eat and drink to his heart's content and clothe his body with wondrous fabrics" (GTM 39). A climax in this desire occurs when John sees the skyline of Manhattan from Central Park. He feels like a "giant", a "tyrant", a "conqueror". He is certain that the city belongs to him and that its inhabitant's "would take him to their hearts and show him wonders his eyes had never seen." (GTM 38) But then John remembers that the eyes of the inhabitants of the city "held no love for him", they did not even sees him "or, if they saw him, they smirked." (GTM 38) His skin is, after all, coloured and while John has a least a fair chance to become a "Lord's anointed" in his church he has no chance to live in the white men's world. He knows that "niggers did not live on these streets where John now walked", that "this world was not for him", "they would never let him enter." (GTM 42) And although John does not want to believe in his

father's teaching that all white people are evil, he feels that "he could hate them if God did not change his heart." (GTM 42) Therefore, the third aspect of John's suffocating nightmare is the fact that he can neither escape his father nor the church by "bring[ing] himself to their [the white people's] attention" for they will not "love and honour him". (GTM 41)

The same elements that form, or rather, deform John Grimes' life, i.e. religion, father, racism, appear in Baldwin's autobiographical essay *The Fire Next Time*. But the essay presents these elements in a different way. When John sits in the cinema and identifies with the anger of the evil blond woman who had "never thought of prayer" or of bending her knees "and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody's altar, weeping for forgiveness" he wishes to be like her "only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer". He dreams that "one day he would talk like that, he would face them and tell them how much he hated them, how they had made him suffer, how he would pay them back!" (GTM 45) John's "them", his "all who hurt him" are his father, whom he wants to curse on his deathbed, and the saints whom he watches with terror (GTM 15) and who he smiles at in an "ironic, or even malicious" way (GTM 67), and the white people who do not love and honour him. All these persons and groups humiliate John and seem to demand of him to humiliate himself eternally. In fact, their demands complement each other and the escape from one source of humiliation without fail leads into another. John's conversion looks like an explosion that is the result of these multiple and interconnected causes that create a hopeless situation. John has to bend his knees somewhere and in the end he manages to bend them in front of the altar of the Lord and to gain some authority over his father at the same time. In *The Fire Next Time* this complex pattern that is re-created in the fictional narration of the experience of the fourteen year old John Grimes appears as a much more mono-causal explanation of Baldwin's experience. The all-embracing "cloud that stood between them [African Americans] and love and life and power, between them and whatever it was they wanted" is the white man and Baldwin remarks that

one did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation; one did not have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long. (FNT 30-31)

This situation is the reason why "some went on wine or whiskey or the needle . . . And others, like me, fled into the church." (FNT 31) The young James Baldwin flees into the church because

every Negro boy . . . realizes . . . because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a 'thing', a gimmick,

to lift him out, to start him on his way. *And it does not matter what that gimmick is.* . . . it was my career in the church that turned out . . . to be my gimmick. (FNT 35)

Not only Baldwin's career in the church but also the general religious practice of the African American community to believe that "sin was in the flesh" (GTM 18) become the result of racism since "it is . . . *inevitable* that a literal attempt to mortify the flesh should be made among black people . . . Negroes . . . are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world." (FNT 36) And John Grimes' anger about the treatment he receives from his father, the hatred that is caused by it almost disappears behind the insight that the African-American boy "must be 'good' not only in order to please his parents" but also because "behind their authority stands another nameless and impersonal authority, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel." (FNT 37) While in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* this authority can be identified as God, in *The Fire Next Time* it is the authority of the white society that causes "the sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his mother's or his father's voice when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary." (FNT 37) Like John Grimes the young Baldwin "really *believed* I could do anything a white boy could do, and had any intention of proving it." (FNT 37) And like the Grimes sons he tries to protect himself from "the fear my father made me feel [because of this] by remembering that he was very old-fashioned" (FNT 38). But the adult James Baldwin believes that his father did not only make him feel fear but actually felt it himself and describes it as "a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction." (FNT 38)

I do not want to argue that this explanation is oversimplified or not legitimate. I want to argue, however, that it is an *explanation* of an experience that is presented to us in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in a more open way. This is the effect of the fictional which is less descriptive and definitive than the nonfictional style of Baldwin's essay. It shows the situation instead of explaining it. *The Fire Next Time* offers an interpretation of an experience of which the novel is a depiction. As such an interpretation it organizes the novel into one pattern while the novel contains several possible patterns. Furthermore, it is hard to decide which text is the more fictional one. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* offers an open conversion narrative that seems to be far less "corrupted by the present" than Baldwin's essay and in this sense less fictional. In *The Fire Next Time* Baldwin establishes an interpretation of his religious experience that is clearly "corrupted" by the present since it considers this experience from his present point of view with his present knowledge. On one level the text almost sounds like an apology for his religious "slip" by saying that it is better to become a preacher than a criminal when one of these possibilities is inevitable. In this sense it is the reversal of a classical autobiographical form: the conversion of the conversion narration. As long as we consider both texts from the point of view of their respective merit both seem to be fictional and factual at the same time.

Of course, much more could be said about the relationship between autobiography and fiction. But I hope that I was able to “throw some light on” a form that has traditionally “been written as fact” while it “may be” with as much justification “regarded as fiction”. Since we are in a more lucky situation than John Grimes and do not have to take an either-or position we might appreciate the art of the author to write “neither and both at once”.

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