

## **At the Boundaries of Autobiography and Fiction. On ‘Autofiction’ and its Dynamics between Individualization and Politicization (tentative title)**

Daniela Henke  
Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany

In autofictions authors place themselves into fictional worlds by using self-reference to create fictive figures. In doing so, autofictions establish a genre of their own, which on the one hand participates in fictional and factual literary practices and on the other hand sets itself apart from those literary practices.

Frank Zipfel (2009) analyzes the hybridity of autofiction by referring to the ‘autobiographical pact’ (Lejeune 1975) on the one hand and the fictional pact on the other. Due to its (self-)referentiality on the one hand and its use of fictional licenses on the other, autofiction offers the reader both pacts in equal measure. Consequently, it is not possible for the reader to completely receive the autofictional narrative through one of the two pacts alone. Putting it that way, autofiction expands the boundaries of autobiography as well as the boundaries of fiction. While Zipfel's explanation provides an adequate theoretical description of the status of autofiction, I argue that it is not only a matter of expansion but also a matter of limitation. Autofiction is neither autobiography nor fiction. First, it is separated from autobiographical writing by its reduced claim to authenticity. As a result, the tellability of autofictional content is not guaranteed by the authenticity of an individual story, as is the case with autobiography. Rather, this content must be presented as something of general human relevance in order to be worth telling. Second, autofiction differs from fiction in its claim to referentiality. Consequently, it lacks the license of total autonomy from extrafictional ethical and political standards in relation to its propositions. The boundaries on both sides make autofiction a genuine political genre, in which individual stories become collective and in which fictional discourse becomes referential.

Empirically, this is evidenced by the predominance of identity-politically shaped autofictional novels in contemporary literature with, for example, post-migrant or queer themes. (Examples for postmigrant topics: *Herkunft* (2019) by Saša Stanišić and *Streulicht* (2020) by Deniz Ohde. Examples for queer topics: *Außer sich* (2017) by Sasha Marianna Salzmann and *Blutbuch* (2022) by Kim de l’Horizon.) As self-narratives, these autofictions individualize content that is associated with highly abstract concepts such as collective identity and collective experience in current debates. At the same time, as fiction, autofiction potentially collectivizes the individual experiences the novels deal with and thus (re-)politicize them.

Against this backdrop, the aim of my contribution is twofold. First, I want to discuss the political dimensions of autofiction on its structural level through the lens of its inherent dynamics between expansion and limitation. Second, I want to analyze its dynamics between individualization and politicization on its particular referential level, with regard to the recurring themes in contemporary self-writings —contents that belong to existing (identity-) political communities as well as those that do not, such as depression and parenthood (as exemplified in the novels *Wellen* (2022) by Heinz Helle and *Liebesmühe* (2024) by Christina Wessely.)