



Metalepsis in Autobiographical Narrative

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ABSTRACT

How do fictional tactics operate in what is often simplistically termed the “factual” or referential world of autobiographical discourse? Many narratologists view the rhetorical figure of metalepsis as distinctive to metafictional texts and constitutive of “fictional” narration, which they posit in antithesis to “factual” narration. But regarding autobiographical narrative only within the realm of fact ignores its complexity. While some theorists of autobiographical narrative have read it through the rhetorical figure of *prosopopeia*, as elaborated by Paul de Man in characterizing its “de-facement” of subjectivity, we argue that the figure of metalepsis operates productively in autobiographical narrative, particularly hybrid and experimental texts. The use of metalepsis shifts levels or layers of narration across temporal and spatial planes in ways that confuse its diegetic and metadiegetic levels. That is, autobiographical narrative, while filtered through the *récit factuel*, is not consistently fixed in an extratextual, ontologically unified, referential world. We pursue this argument by exploring four cases: the circuit of transfer in incomplete conversion narrative (Rowlandson’s *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*); palimpsestic seepage between the Bildungsroman and trauma narrative (Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*); narrative collision of “parallel universes” (Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*); and unstable witness to collective trauma by a second-generation narrator (Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*). Recent critical studies of metalepsis also probe how it presses at the limits of referentiality in life narratives by J. M. Coetzee, Javier Marías, and Christine Brooke-Rose. In sum, autobiographical narrative is by no means a referential, “monologic” mode easily differentiated from the dialogism and metadiscursivity of the novel; rather, it is a mode unsettled by figural, discursive, and temporal boundary-crossing.

Keywords: metalepsis, autobiography, life writing, autobiographical narration, fictionality, factuality, metafiction, rhetorical figures, de Man and prosopopeia, referentiality, ontological worlds, narrative boundary-crossing

PROLOGUE

In recent years we have, with puzzlement and some irritation, increasingly heard students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels refer to life writing texts as “novels.” It seems that the myriad genres of life narrative are being gathered under the tent not just of “fiction” but of the novel as a genre. Similarly, scholarly discussions of graphic memoirs such as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* or Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* often refer to them as “graphic novels.” Autobiography scholars have long observed how publishers finesse concerns with verifiable truth or the “truthiness” of unreliable narration by reclassifying a memoir or testimony as “fiction,” as occurred in the case of “Binjamin Wilkomirski”’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* or, in reverse—for scandal and better sales—with James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. But, as both life writers and scholars in the field know, larger questions about memory, truth-telling, identity, and belonging involve complex practices of autobiographical narration. Thus we are concerned both to distinguish autobiographical texts, as nonfictional, from the novel and to heed the recent call of narrative and rhetorical theorist James Phelan to attend to “the frequency with which authors turn to local fictionality in the service of their nonfictional purposes” (2) even if we might inflect the “mutual dependence” of the two modes somewhat differently than he does (237). This essay responds by attending to one case of figures associated with the fictionality of the novel that may be employed in life narrative, at times to remarkable effect.

Over the last half-century life writers in disparate forms have negotiated their truth claims by staging textual gaps and disjunctions, embedding explicit meta-commentary, posing worlds within worlds, and obscuring the borders between autobiographical and fictional genres. The textual effects of narrating a life may be traced in the multiple, disparate “I”s and the play of subjectification in experiments with autobiographical forms and discourses that are highlighted in the work of such writers as Georges Perec, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Dave Eggers.

One critical response to this proliferation of complex autobiographical texts has been to blur distinctions and regard all but bald chronicles of life as “autofiction,” as Serge Doubrovsky does. Another is to subsume life narrative under the all-embracing category of the “novel” as the most prominent species of narrative, as both our students and some narratologists at times do, thereby compressing the narrative spectrum. We prefer a third

alternative: reading for figures that texture autobiographical discourse by signaling to readers their calculated—and non-transparent—self-presentation. This essay explores one case in point: the figure of metalepsis.

Why focus on metalepsis? We begin with a story. At a plenary panel on narratology during the 2004 annual conference of the Society for the Study of Narrative Literature in Burlington, Vermont, renowned narratologist John Pier argued for the centrality in narrative of “metalepsis,” defined as a self-reflexive break that occurs at the “sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells” (Genette 236).¹ A dialogue ensued among several prominent American narrative theorists about the significance of metalepsis in fiction, particularly post-modern fiction. Their analyses were at once provocative and disquieting in the singular focus on fictional narratives to the exclusion of non-fictional narrative forms, including autobiographical and biographical. After we left the session, we began thinking about how and where the figure of “metalepsis” might occur in autobiographical acts, and to what effect.

For, clearly, there are moments in autobiographical works when the illusion is disrupted that there is a single referential or “real” world, in which the story of a singular “I” unfolds. In what ways could reading for metaleptic ruptures disclose a radically different pact between narrators and readers in some autobiographical narratives than either the autobiographical pact, as defined by Philippe Lejeune, or the “pact” of verisimilitude foundational to fiction? John Pier’s recent observation that “On the whole, discussions [of metalepsis by narratologists] support the idea that metalepsis appears only in fictional contexts,” while invoking fictionality, seems to refer only to novelistic genres (“Metalepsis,” page 2 of 9, 2016). On the contrary, we propose that metaleptic ruptures do occur in some autobiographical texts, where they produce an effect of instability and estrangement by unsettling reader expectations about the boundary between narrating and narrated I’s, as well as the “out there” status of the referential world.

In what follows, we explore definitions of the rhetorical figure of metalepsis and argue for shifting from a focus on the figure of prosopopeia, through which autobiography studies was conceptualized as a mode of “de-facement” by Paul de Man, to reading for metalepsis. To pursue our interest, as non-narratologists, in the potential power of metalepsis to illuminate unsettling aspects of autobiographical narratives, we offer a rhetorical reading of four different kinds of autobiographical texts: a captivity narrative, the 1682 *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, A Minister’s Wife in New-England*; and three contemporary life writing texts, a meta-autobiographical trauma narrative, Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000); a narrative of mental instability, Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993); and a graphic memoir, Art Spiegelman’s complex two-volume *Maus: A Survivor’s*

Tale (1986, 1991). Despite their different genres, historical moments, and narrative strategies, all these texts are strikingly situated as boundary-crossings between worlds.

More largely, we rethink two key issues in narrative theory with implications for autobiography studies: the different but mobile locations of the narrated and narrating I's; and the status of multiple frames of referentiality, as those occur in autobiographical narratives. We hope that this foray will spur conversations about how narrative theory can inform the theorizing of life narrative and how thinking about the use of fictional strategies in it might enhance our reading.

FROM PROSOPOPEIA TO METALEPSIS: CROSSING NARRATIVE WORLDS

First, some theoretical background. In 1979, de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement" focused his discussion of figures in autobiographical narration on how prosopopeia was used to mark the self-referential in autobiographical discourse. Arguing that autobiography was an exemplary case of prosopopeia, the representation of an imaginary or absent person as speaking and acting, de Man asserted that autobiography is constitutively self-eluding and self-deluding. It is never really able to "represent" the life it assumes as its subject. "The restoration of mortality in autobiography," he wrote, "deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores: autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (930). In other words, acts of remembering and reconstituting the "face" of the subject, and the subject's past, inevitably distort and undercut the representation of an autobiographical subject whose act promises what it cannot deliver. The autobiographical is never "there" in either the narrating I or narrated I.

Historically, this influential essay issued a poststructuralist challenge to those who would read autobiography as transparently self-locating, self-disclosing, and self-restorative. De Man's deconstruction of autobiographical "presence" served as something of a death blow to the concept of an accessible authorial "self" and to claims of transparent and universalized truth that poststructural and Foucauldian analyses had also challenged.² In the wake of de Man's critique, autobiography studies shifted its focus from the "designs" of an assumed modernist self to the incoherences of a postmodern subject and the dialogue between autobiographical fictions and the referential world of historicity that are signaled by the autobiographical pact.

While de Man's deployment of the figure of prosopopeia remains a provocative critique in autobiography studies, it is, as a figure, insufficiently

attentive to the narrative complexity of the many genres of life narrative (see Smith and Watson 2001, 2010) and to the temporal movement of autobiographical narration. For, while de Man's invocation of prosopopeia foregrounds the stasis of an encompassing specularity, it does not offer a reading of the autobiographical as both intradiegetic and extradiegetic, and thereby "in time" and in "worlds." In effect, his attention to prosopopeia effectively collapses the distinction among temporal levels and narrative worlds that is central to narrative theory. For that reason, the figure of metalepsis intrigued us. Reading the autobiographical through metalepsis rather than prosopopeia directs our attention to the oscillations between temporal worlds and discursive positions that often occur in autobiographical texts.

In narrative theory, de Man's intervention, via rhetorical figures, into destabilizing Structuralist binaries was paralleled by Gerard Genette's attention to metalepsis as a figure that would complicate the Structuralist focus on metaphor and metonymy. Genette asserted in *Figures III* (1972) that metalepsis concerns the shifts made possible by narrative layerings; it is, he suggests, a means of "taking hold of [telling] by changing levels" (235):

The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating, the act that consists precisely of introducing into one situation, by means of a discourse, the knowledge of another situation... . [A]ny intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse ... produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical ... or fantastic (234–235).

Genette locates metalepsis as largely an effect of this "double temporality of the story and the narrating" (235), stressing the disjunction between the time in narration (the level of narrated events or the diegetic world) and the time of narration (the level of narrating, or the extradiegetic world).³

Genette's triangulation into three fundamental figures—metalepsis, metaphor, and metonymy—disrupted the Structuralist binary that Roman Jakobson and others had used to characterize the double axes of narrative as metaphor and metonymy. In effect, as John Pier and Jean-Marie Schaeffer argue, Genette's privileging of metalepsis positioned it as the third fundamental figure of narrative theory (11). Similarly, narrative theorist Brian McHale came to regard it as the defining figure of much postmodern metafiction, theorizing the disjunction of temporalities that metalepsis exposes in spatial terms as a breaching of ontological boundaries.⁴ Many narrative theorists use terms such as "seepage", "leakage", "disruption", "invasion", "strangeness", and "violent rupture" to describe

the breach of ontologically distinct levels of narration. Clearly, Genette's focus on metalepsis was important in dislodging the binaristic logic of the Structuralist grid and moving to a concept of narrative permeability.

Attention to metalepsis became an enduring concern for Genette. In 2005, he provocatively argued that the figure of metalepsis is the embryo of fiction (2005, 27) and that all fictions are reciprocally an enlarged mode of the figure (26).⁵ Metalepsis, for him, is not just a rhetorical usage that strikingly interrupts a fictional text, but the signature of a fictional world that posits a specific kind of reader. It calls for, not a suspension of disbelief, but a playful simulation of belief (30), "une simulation ludique de crédulité" (30). Similarly, Pier characterizes the nature of suspension in these terms: "[W]ith metalepsis, it is the reader's belief, not disbelief, that is suspended, setting up a reading contract based not on verisimilitude, but on 'a shared knowledge of illusion'" (2016, page 2 of 8; citing Baron 298 and Macé 2007).

In defining the centrality of metalepsis to fiction, Genette attends primarily to two kinds of metalepsis. One is the authorial, which he traces as developing from the Romantic through Postmodern eras; it is the topos that accords "a capacity for autonomy" (32) to characters in a novel who seem to escape the authority of their creator, as occurs in *Tristram Shandy*. For Genette this ludic play of boundary contamination is a fantastical Borges-like "literalization of what never was" (34). Thus, authorial metalepsis signals a process of figural and fictional interplay. A second kind is temporal metalepsis, which is more transgressive, involving shifts from one level and one narrative world to another and forcing a break in the seamlessness of the narrative. As a rupture, it exposes the separateness of narrative worlds and times that are at best contiguous. For Pier, Genette's increasingly elaborate distinctions among metaleptic moves in fact form a quadripartite schema distinguishing four types of narrative metalepsis: two are rhetorical (authorial and transgressive or "*minimale*") and two are ontological (descending or ascending shifts in narrative levels).

Pier further observes that, for two decades, narratologists have been grappling with the concept of metalepsis by proposing typologies, modalities, criteria, and conditions for its appearance. These definitional phrases have multiplied to encompass such effects as "narrative short-circuit," "structural paradox," "illusion-breaking devices," "entanglement of ontological levels," and "self-reflective comments" (*The Living Handbook of Narratology*, "Metalepsis"). Such typologies have projected ever-greater differentiation of the levels, degree of disruption, and intensity of effects in the operations of metalepses.

There is as yet no single typology of kinds of metalepsis. Using a different frame of reference that draws on systems theory, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan asserts that there are two kinds of boundary-crossing

in fictional texts employing metalepsis: the ontological boundary marks distinct narrative worlds, and the illocutionary (or rhetorical) boundary marks distinct narrative voices. For Ryan, the transgression of each kind of boundary produces a different effect: “The crossing of an ontological boundary leads into a new system of reality, centered in a new actual world. Illocutionary boundaries mediate between speech acts, and they signal changes in narrative voice” (“Stacks” 874). Ryan’s influential essay goes on to explore, through the metaphor of “stacks” drawn from computer programming, the permutations of ontological and illocutionary boundary-crossings, the narrators within narratives and worlds within worlds, in a range of fictional texts from *The Arabian Nights* to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Jean Genet’s *The Maids*, and Jorge Luis Borges’ “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero.” But in Ryan’s schema the autobiographical stands in for what Ryan sees as “the standard narrative case”: “continuous sentences have the same speaker, and they describe the same level of reality” (874). That is, the autobiographical can only be a largely monologic discourse with one stable world of referentiality, and thus one ontological storyworld and one illocutionary act of narration. In this view, narrative voice is fully located in the autobiographical narrator who tells his or her monological story.⁶ No alternative system of reality seems to be available to autobiographical narration, and no shift from the continuous and static illocutionary act of the narrating I.⁷ Ryan, reaffirming the difference between *récit fictional* and *récit factuel*, states, “The double crossing of boundaries is implicit to what I take to be the definition of fiction.”

Even in Genette’s later work, autobiographical narration is a site for, at best, minor metaleptic transfer but no “contamination” or crossing of narrative worlds. For instance, in his discussion of various kinds of metalepsis, Genette observes Alexandre Dumas’s use of a metalepsis of place to signal the end of a narrative digression in *My Memoirs* (2005, 29). Genette’s reference to this memoir suggests that, while metaleptic play can operate at the level of discourse in genres such as memoir and essay, these genres intrinsically cannot *be* metaleptic. Indeed, as a site of the stubbornly “factual” or referentially-real world, autobiographical narrative is the excluded other of narrative defining what the figural-fictional metaleptic narrative is *not*. Pier and Schaeffer, for instance, understand *récit factuel* as having the pre-existing narrated content of the referential world from which the autobiographical narrator draws. Implicitly, the positing of metalepsis as a figure uniquely characterized by the interplay of the figural and fictional excludes by definition the autobiographical, because its defining contract implicates the stubborn residue of a non-fictional or “real” that resists transformation into the fully fictional.⁸

Among the range of typological distinctions, we have opted for Ryan’s terminology of an ontological boundary separating narrative worlds,

and an illocutionary (or rhetorical) boundary marking distinct narrative voices. Interestingly, the demarcations between narrative worlds of past memory or fantasy and present-time perspective may be blurrier and more permeable in the autobiographical than in the novel and require careful disentangling by readers.

Indeed, the question of how the reader's response is solicited in autobiographical acts involving metaleptic crossings is deserving of more attention. Some narrative theorists address this issue directly. Debra Malina focuses attention on the effects of metaleptic movement on subject-formation and reader response, considering the effect of rupture on reading subjects. She argues that the play of metalepsis in fictional texts is mimetic of the process of subject-formation of the text's readers, as metalepsis "constitutes the subject in part by breaking down the very structures that apparently define subjects and lend them their air of stability" (Malina, 9–10). Malina further asserts that metalepsis functions as "a tool for exploring the nature and consequences of a mutually infective relationship between the fictive and the real" (8), although she applies this "tool" only to the novel. But a mutually contaminating relationship is inevitably the condition through which, in spite of which, for which, and against which the autobiographical subject makes claims on worlds—of the present, the past, the future, and the reader.

James Phelan also considers the effect of metaleptic ruptures on reading subjects in discussing the first chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*. When Huck's prologue digresses on Twain's propensity for lying in his earlier novel, *Tom Sawyer*, Phelan observes that "Twain allows himself to appear on the same diegetic level as Huck ... while relying on his audience to recognize (a) that he retains his identity as creator of that diegetic level and (b) that, as creator, he gives Huck license to find fault with his diegetic equal" (*Somebody Telling*, 45, note 9.) The effect of this metalepsis is soliciting the authorial audience to bond not only with Huck but also with Twain as the implied author (106). Thus, both Malina, as a narratologist, and Phelan, as a rhetorical theorist, emphasize the ethical dimension of metalepsis: how it acts in the extradiegetic world, the efficacy of its call to readers, and its transformative potential.

Despite productive forays into the ethics of life writing and its vulnerable subjects, linking the figure of metalepsis to the complex ways in which some autobiographical texts may both invite and resist readerly identification remains a project for further study. And, as the arena of life writing expands in performance, filmic, and comic media, we might join narrative theorists in focusing on the transmedial action of metalepsis across medial boundaries, particularly as they rarely invoke the autobiographical as exemplary and continue to imply that it cannot make the kinds of boundary crossings definitive of the novel's multiple worlds.

In sum, we argue that setting up a firm boundary—and structural binary—between “fictional” and “factual” narration locates autobiographical narrative reductively, distorting and occluding its complexity. In response to the explicit and implicit arguments of narratologists we suggest that, on the contrary, metalepsis—as feature, figure, and concept—does indeed occur in and disrupt autobiographical narratives, where it may involve the confounding of posited worlds, temporalities, or narrative voices. Although the autobiographical is a species of the *récit factuel*, it does not fully adhere to a fixed, extratextual, ontologically-unified referential world. The interplay of narrated and narrating “I”s, in moments of a differentially remembered past, becomes a “new system of reality” (see Ryan, 874) that lives both inside the psychic and somatic structures of the narrating “I” who is remembering and, externally to the subject, in the variously commemorated collective memories of a family, community, or nation. That is, acts of autobiographical narration may shuttle between the experiences of an “I-now” and the histories of its “I-then” at multiple points in time; and such shuttling and breaching may expose strange and uncanny disjunctions. Autobiographical acts of “leaping over” hierarchical boundaries separating present from past experience and privileging the present of narration point up the paradoxical relationship between narrating and narrated “I”s. Through what we call the “metaleptic moment” of figural, ontological, and discursive disruption in autobiographical narrative, the reader’s attention is explicitly called to the illusory coherence of the “I.” Such acts, in displacing a presumed hierarchy of “I”s, trouble both the “pastness” of the past and the seemingly fixed referentiality of the experiential real.

FOUR CASE STUDIES OF METALEPSIS IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS

How might the dynamics of metaleptic crossing play out in a variety of autobiographical texts? We turn to four case studies from different autobiographical genres in which metaleptic moments blur or confound the boundary between narrating and narrated I’s, and produce an exchange of positions or their interpenetration. For each case of metalepsis, we offer a tentative term of reference: **the circuit of transfer** in the incomplete conversion of Mary Rowlandson’s *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*; **the palimsistic seepage** between Bildungsroman and trauma narrative in Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*; **the confusion of the “parallel universes”** of the sane and the crazy in Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* calling her recovery into question; and **the instability of the second-generation**

narrator's act of bearing witness in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. These cases expose a paradox at the heart of the narrated/narrating "I" distinction, involving moments of illocutionary or ontological exchange that confound the fixed positionalities of the temporally-based "I-now" and "I-then." In such narrative moments, retrospective narration in autobiographical discourse sutures over temporal leakages in both the historical continuity of the signature and the apparently chronological nature of its narrative construction. Our examples suggest that, no matter what the genre of autobiographical narrative, mode of address, or style of reflexivity, readers may be invited to reorient their relationship to the narrative times and worlds in which the storytelling seems to occur.

1. THE CIRCUIT OF TRANSFER IN NARRATIVES OF INCOMPLETE CONVERSION

A conversion narrative has to narrate serially the stages of travail and trial toward enlightenment that its narrator traverses. The efficacy of such narratives depends on the discursive power of the narrating "I"'s projected view of the errant past of the experiencing "I". The telling of a conversion narrative thus persuades the reader by confessing a past of delusion and error that was lived as if it were the truth. Paradoxically, however, a fully converted narrator could no longer re-imagine the world of her unconverted younger self. Acts of imaging and remembering an autobiographical subject's errant past may be, as James Phelan suggested to us, a way of reconfirming the conversion.⁹ But such acts also expose the instability of the converted self in metaleptic disruptions that seep through the temporal "now" of narrating. The narrator may not just recall, but may threateningly re-experience, the "then" time of an errant narrated "I" in a moment of what Louis Renza presciently defined as "presentification" (1980).¹⁰ That is, an act of narration can pull the converted narrating "I" back into the vortex of a former reality as an experiential location. In such a leap, the present-time narrating of the converted self is disrupted and the stability of the conversion process called into question for potentially skeptical readers.

For example, in Mary Rowlandson's 1682 captivity narrative the narrating "I" undermines the force of a story of salvific return to Puritan community at several moments in the text where she relates incidents of her daily life as a captive of the Narragansett nation.¹¹ To attest to her safe return as a Puritan subject after eleven weeks of captivity with a band of Wampanoag Indians during King Philip's War in 1676, and to attest to God's punishment of his Puritan saint and delivery of her, the narrating "I" has to re-enter the alternative reality of the Wampanoag world, regarded by the Puritan community as a site of alien, uncivilized, and

demonic customs, behaviors, and language. Although the narrating “I” struggles to maintain illocutionary control over the project of remembering, as a Puritan subject speaking in the text through figures of Biblical exemplarity and Puritan eschatology, at certain moments disruptive boundary crossings, at once illocutionary (from one voice to another) and ontological (from one world to another) expose the insecurity of her restoration to Puritan selfhood.

A famous disruptive moment occurs when Rowlandson’s narrator recalls the narrated “I”’s pleasure, after experiencing several weeks of gnawing hunger, in eating bloody bear meat; another involves the pride that her captive “I” takes in making clothes for Chief Metacom and becoming skilled in bartering. Such auto-ethnographic moments are characterized by the narrating “I”’s attentiveness to the complex relationships of Narragansett sociality, an alternative world to the Puritan storyworld of God’s providence and scriptural typology. These moments signal the narrated “I”’s immersion in that sociality and her identification with the Wampanoag across boundaries of language and culture, rather than her traumatic suffering as captive victim. In these scenes of incipient Indian subjectification, the narrating “I” shifts to another kind of voice, effectively losing control of the seemingly stable post-conversion voice of the returned and restored Puritan. Hers is the voice of an inquisitive and agentive subject, interested in registering ethnographic details of the lived realities and social relations of the Wampanoag and in witnessing to her newly-honed survival competencies. As Sidonie Smith observes of such scenes, “a different kind of witnessing and a different kind of witness” to captivity emerge. The narrator becomes “a woman living in a liminal space outside gendered norms of Puritan society, resourceful, unmoored and mobile, waywardly embodied, exercising an agentic role in an exchange economy The cultural boundaries separating subject positions of exemplary . . . Puritan and heathen become disturbingly penetrable” (146).

As metaleptic moments these instances reverse the structural relationship of the present and the past, the narrating “I” and the narrated “I”, as the narrated “I”, animated disruptively in the moment of writing, threatens to undermine Rowlandson’s reaffirmation of her Puritan identity-in-community. In other words, such moments open up both ontological and illocutionary disjunctions between the worlds in the text: the extradiegetic world of the narrator safely back home and the unstable diegetic world of emergent indigenous identification in her recent past of captivity. Although Rowlandson intends to narrate from the secure position of her Puritan status and world view, she is drawn back into her experience not only of vulnerability, but of malleability and her relative autonomy in captivity. At some moments when she recalls the world of captivity, the

poles of narration are reversed and the ontological boundary between the allegorical worlds of the damned and the saved becomes blurred. Only “civilized” Puritans would seem to achieve the conditions for a social and spiritual community based on expelling a savage other. Yet Rowlandson remembers and represents her experience as someone at times identified with the Wampanoag in ways that, rather than confirming, undermine her professed reaffirmation of Puritan faithfulness.

Reading Rowlandson for metaleptic moments exposes fissures within the conversion narrative’s secure profession of faith and communal belonging. The narrating “I”’s illocutionary return to past experiences may set in motion affective attachments and unpredictable pleasures. These moments signal competing truth effects: that a converted subject may be ambiguously faithful; that conversion is always hard won and incomplete; and that allegiances are conflicting and potentially contradictory. In retrospect the past may not be ontologically secure. Rather, it may sporadically leak into the present to threaten a narrating “I”’s ideological affiliation.¹²

2. PALIMPSESTIC SEEPAGE IN THE BILDUNGSROMAN AS TRAUMA NARRATIVE

A second case occurs in Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (1999), a wild metaleptic romp that differs radically from Rowlandson’s narrative of the ambivalent consolidation of Puritan subjectivity. In *Genius* Eggers flaunts and tests the autobiographical conventions usually associated with the coming-of-age story. His lengthy introductory notes and editorial appendices parody conventions of sincerity, authenticity, modesty, and verisimilitude in an extended, metadiegetic critical commentary. Indeed, the mass of extradiegetic materials radically distorts the normative ratio of the claims of the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds in life writing (see Smith and Watson 2010, 1–19).

But Eggers’ elaborately burlesque frame, addressing and challenging audience expectations, is not the only arena of metaleptic transgression. *Genius* also practices a subtler form of metalepsis by embedding the remote past narrative of Eggers’s parents’ tragic deaths beneath the more recent-time narrative of “Dave” the narrating “I”’s efforts at parental responsibility for his brother Toph in the Bay Area. Eggers’ long-winded narrative of the two boys’ post-parental acclimation to California is repeatedly punctured by painful recollections that erupt at various points and signal an earlier traumatic “then.” The story of that narrated “I”’s response to both parents’ deaths from cancer within thirty-two days of each other is ultimately described as “the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of the whole story” (xxvii). In palimpsestic fashion, the story of

the death and cremation of his mother leaks through in the last third of the memoir when “Dave” narrates, in flashbacks, his efforts to dispose of his mother’s remains. It becomes clear, as the narrating “I” repeatedly discloses fragments of his ongoing trauma, that his recovery is at best sporadic and unstable. *Genius* concludes with the convergence of two generative moments from different times and narrative locations. One is the narrating “I”’s recollection of how he experienced a core traumatic memory, his mother’s agonizing, angry death: “Even while sleeping under the morphine ... she would snap back, would rise suddenly and say something, cry out, a nightmare—furious about this bullshit, that something like this was actually happening, that she was leaving all of us” (432). Another moment is juxtaposed in his final address to readers in a narrative present that telescopes the book’s readerly addresses, making an angry appeal for connection between the narrating “I” and an audience he now attacks (like a cancer): “I tried about a million times to fix you ... I only wanted to devour all of you, I was a cancer ... I eat you to save you” (435). In this final paradox, the illocutionary positions of narrating “I” and reader—as, respectively, generator and consumer of the story—are reversed. Confounding the positions of both the narrated “I” at different temporal moments and the narrating “I” with the reader, Eggers’ narration produces an effect of traumatic rupture. His shifts between temporal worlds that disturb the bounded position of the audience mark the meta-epic junctures on which the memoir turns.

Eggers’s enfolding of multiple narrative temporalities through involuted flashbacks repeatedly punctures the illusory separation between both the past and the present of narration, and the more remote “traumatic” past and the more recent “healed” past of his apparent recovery. These boundaries signal the different statuses of the narrated “I”’s coming-of-age story of parenting and becoming a writer and the alternative “I-then” story it attempts to displace. As the narrating “I” is ultimately refigured in disclosing his raging core of grief and anger, readers must reevaluate his narrative performance; through the seepage of genres, *Genius* becomes a trauma narrative enclosing a recovery saga. *Genius* is thus a meta-epic contortion that turns itself inside out.

Wolfgang Funk argues that in *Genius* metalepsis is “employed to severely disrupt the stability and autonomy of the constituent factors of literary communication” (96). Throughout *Genius*, Funk asserts, Eggers employs many kinds of meta-reference to “collapse the boundary between the real-life author Dave Eggers, the eponymous autobiographical narrator of as well as the character in the novel” (125). Funk’s argument considers how Eggers uses metalepsis, as well as a range of what we would call other authenticity effects, in service of his argument about a literature

of reconstruction as a post-9-11 response to postmodern skepticism to define a new era of fiction, rather than an autobiographical turn. But Funk's reference to the novel as the genre of Eggers's memoir enables him to include *Genius* in his exploration of metalepsis as a central figure in the gamut of meta-referential strategies invoked by recent American fiction writers. In our view this mode of analysis could also be productively extended to life narrative studies.¹³

Eggers, working the boundaries of autobiography and fiction, paradoxically deploys metaleptic ruptures to propose, through unruly and accelerating flashbacks to a more remote past, the greater force of his memoir of trauma than the brothers' coming-of-age narrative that masks it. When the submerged memories break through, readers discover that Eggers' multiple stories have contrived to both forestall and enable a narration of the seemingly untellable. Although the chronologically-prior seeps through to inflect the narrative voice, mode, and world that temporally follow it, it is emotionally still permeated by a sense of melancholic loss that the narrator's efforts at hilarity can defer, but not displace.

3. THE CONFUSION OF "PARALLEL UNIVERSES" IN NARRATING BORDERLINE EXPERIENCE

In Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), the adult narrating "I" returns to the scene of her early institutionalization in the late 1960s, juxtaposing her narrated "I"'s version of a two-year stay in her late teens at McLean Hospital outside Boston with the implicit narrative created by the interspersed succession of documents from her case file that the older narrating "I" obtained. In this narrative, metaleptic boundary-crossing between two versions of her history calls the reader's attention to an ongoing oscillation between the "parallel universes" of the crazy and the sane that the narrating "I" invokes. Thus, the narrator uncannily exists in both worlds simultaneously: as the presumably recovered or "sane" narrating "I" and the institutionalized, "crazy," experiencing "I". These two conditions—normalcy and deviance—are, as socially-constructed categories, held in an opposition that, in society, justifies the existence of mental institutions.

But Kaysen's text calls the psychiatric status of "normalcy" into question and makes a bid for readerly sympathy with the pathos of her teenaged institutionalization as someone who transgressed sanctioned boundaries to find herself amid a group of extreme and suicidal, if comically-engaging, young women. Although Kaysen's narrating "I" struggles to establish a rapport with readers and persuade us that her documented diagnosis is erroneous, at key points she shifts narrative position, enacting a metaleptic move that figures borderline personality disorder itself. Indeed, seepages and ruptures between the "sane" and "insane" worlds not only

characterize the narrative but inflect the narrating “I”’s ambivalent relationship to an audience in disparate modes of address that range from aggressive, intimate, and clinically rational, to appealing for compassion.

Most often, Kaysen’s narrating “I” focuses on droll details of other inmates’ extremities and locates herself with the reader on the “normal” side as an observer of that parallel universe. But at strategic moments, the narrator sets up tests for readers by divulging behavior that we must judge as risky and symptomatic of abnormality, even “insanity.” Thus, Kaysen’s hold on the reader’s willingness to accept her version of events is always precarious and her borderline crossings risk credibility. In a chapter entitled “Do You Believe Him or Me” (71), the conditions for risky confession are set up when the narrator offers two versions of her institutionalization and challenges readers to decide which version to believe: the record of the psychiatrist in the 1960s who persuaded her to commit herself, or the narrated “I”’s memory of events. By contrasting the doctor’s documented report, that he interviewed her for three hours, with her reconstructed timeline of the sequence of events based on a taxi record, Kaysen persuades readers to believe first his version, then hers. Experiencing contradictory truth claims, readers are invited to adjudicate them and perhaps become sympathetic intimates. The instability of the “truth” told by documents argues for a situational, rather than an absolutist, ethical judgment. Using a metaleptic leap to expose readers to two contradictory versions of an event, Kaysen exposes the arbitrariness of a fixed boundary. And her destabilizing of the authority of both documents and doctors prepares readers for more radically risky disclosures later in the narrative.

The most spectacular metaleptic moment is set up near the end of the narrative when Kaysen’s narrating “I” divulges that, contrary to being just an insecure teenager, she had in fact regularly practiced self-mutilation in high school:

“wrist-scratching! I thought I’d invented it. Wrist-banging, to be precise.

This is where people stopped being able to follow me. This is the sort of stuff you get locked up for. Nobody knew I was doing it, though. I never told anyone, until now” (152).

Here, the narrator’s confession of compulsive behavior, which was nowhere marked on official forms or observed by a doctor, risks having readers dismiss her as unbelievable or “crazy” as it conflates the “then” of the narrated “I”’s story with the narrating “I”’s desire to keep crossing boundaries of acceptability in the impossible intimacy of a book published in the future present of our reading. We discover that the narrating

“I” may be simultaneously more honest and more “crazy” than she had previously acknowledged. As readerly assessments of Kaysen’s state of mind and her ethics are alternately substantiated and undermined, readers might well wonder whether her previous accounts have any credibility. In the moment of asserting her legitimacy as a fully confessing narrative subject, Kaysen discloses that, as a “borderline personality,” she has inhabited the other side of the sanity border. In disclosing this exchange of narrative positions, she both produces and undermines the truth effect of her narrative. As this passage dramatically signals, the narrating “I”’s believability is repeatedly in play, exposing the unstable boundary between the fabricated and the documented.

Through metaleptic ruptures, then, Kaysen creates a metatext about the tenuous boundaries of sanity, introducing an alternate version of the experiencing “I”’s past that calls her own counter-story to the official history into question. Attempts to verify the relationship of “I-now” and “I-then” narrators are undermined, as she provokes readers to reflect on what constitutes “normalcy,” and decide from which side of the sanity/insanity boundary the narrating “I” is speaking. Rather than suturing a story of internal coherence, Kaysen situates readers in what becomes an irresolvable space about the status of normalcy. Through inducing this readerly experience of vertiginous confusion, she exposes the terms and cost of erecting fixed boundaries while making a bid for compassion and flexible judgment. Kaysen’s metaleptic turns thus not only mark the complexity of her perspective, but aim to make readers conversant with the world inside the institution as one more coherent than the “normal” world of hypocrisy and dislocation. Metaleptic exchanges dramatize that the seemingly polar worlds of the sane and insane are in fact deeply implicated in one another and that “recovery” is an act of artful storytelling.

In Timothy Dow Adams’ insightful analysis of *Girl, Interrupted* as exemplary of the issues life writing poses for readers and writers, he focuses on how Kaysen’s transgressive narrative both incorporates documents and interrogates their reliability. This practice, Adams observes, differs from the use of “fictive facts ... combined with factual fiction” employed by such writers as Eggers and W.G. Sebald to undercut the verifiability of documentary evidence and heighten a sense of authenticity for readers (106). Kaysen, by contrast, cannot construct an authoritative position for herself because her narrating “I” acknowledges that she was unstable and institutionalized for a year and a half, a suspicious past that, in the genre of mental disability memoirs, confers a lingering unreliability on a narrator (104). Adams does not invoke the figure of metalepsis to read Kaysen’s narrative; but metaleptic rupture, with its oscillation between worlds, is implicit in his careful tracking of how the documents presented

in Kaysen's narrative are destabilized at that jarring borderline where the narrating "I" can pose, but not answer, the memoir's central question to readers, "Do you believe him or me?" (120).

4. UNSTABLE ACTS OF BEARING WITNESS IN SECOND-GENERATION NARRATIVES

Autobiographical narratives presented in two or more media employ multiple modalities of self-representation that probe different metaleptic possibilities. Posed at visual-textual interfaces, such intermedial autobiographic works as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis 1 & 2*, Charlotte Salomon's *Life? or Theater?*, Faith Ringgold's "Weight Loss" quilts, May Stevens' lithographs in *Sea of Words*, and Paul Auster's photo-memoir *The Invention of Solitude* mobilize disparate representational media to present conflicting stories that oscillate between planes of representation. Readers, called on to shift rapidly back and forth between visual and textual worlds, may discover stories on the visual plane that are not explicitly signaled by the verbal plane, or vice versa, and find themselves adrift in contesting stories and knowledges. But some graphic autobiographical projects explicitly exploit this dynamic through metaleptic dissonance.

Michael Schuldiner notes the play of narrative worlds in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Focusing on the well-known frames of "Mauschwitz" (Chapter 1 of *Maus II*) when Art the artist verbally states that he is unsure how to draw his wife Françoise—as a mouse or as another kind of animal—at the same time that he depicts her visually as a mouse, Schuldiner argues that *Maus* presents a metaleptic dilemma in which "the graphic narrator has to come to the rescue of the aural narrator, without the aural narrator knowing it" (113). Rather than a disjunction of levels within the aural or verbal worlds of narrative, "the reader moves back and forth between what are actually two sensory worlds... : the aural world of the author who wrote *Maus* and the visual world of the graphic artist who drew the book" (113–4). Readers, oscillating between words and pictures, accept the paradox of contradictory messages.

In pursuing his analysis of two sensory worlds, Schuldiner positions *Maus* as a novel rather than an autobiographical narrative.¹⁴ But doing so obscures the special status of Spiegelman's autobiographical act as both a postmemorial representation of filiality and a memorial to his parents' traumatic experience of surviving Auschwitz. "Art" is not a fictional character but an historical actor, born in Sweden after World War II, who embodies his creator's experience as a child of survivors. In both narrating and drawing a tale of his parents' Auschwitz experiences interwoven with a frame narrative involving the son's interviews with his father, Spiegelman constructs stories within stories entwined in multiple

temporalities. The interviews seem to be located in the “I-now” present of the father telling his story to Spiegelman’s autobiographical persona, the resentful and guilt-ridden son. But the heroic, partial story that Art, the coxer in this autobiography embedded within an autobiography told by his aged, ill father, fails to satisfy his own need to understand the horrors of victimization during and after the Holocaust. He lacks the counterweight of his mother’s narrative to supplement or challenge his Holocaust postmemory because that story is inaccessible; his father destroyed her postwar diaries and she committed suicide in 1968, a situation Art feels implicated in but cannot untangle. Spiegelman’s dilemma of postmemory as a child of survivors with insufficient access to their past drives the conflicting urges of *Maus* in both its comic and tragic registers.

The experiential weight of the Holocaust at one remove situates Spiegelman within Celan’s question of how there could be “art” after such an event. For its creator-character—ironically named not just Art the Artist but Spiegelman, or “mirror-man”—the quest for a memory-scape pushes the narrating “I” toward self-reflexivity. His role as coxer of and editor-cartoonist to the illocutionary testimony of Vladek inverts the usual father-son relationship. Art is both the angry, bereft son and, in *Maus II* (published five years later) the increasingly celebrated author of a comic about an unspeakable event. This series of paradoxical narrative locations—each transgressing and inverting both the ontological and illocutionary boundaries of storytelling—makes the narrative an intricately recursive one.

Tracing the metalepsis of autobiographical boundary-crossings is nowhere more evident than in the famous half-page panel at the start of *Maus II*, Ch. 2, “Auschwitz (Time Flies),” where the seepage of the son’s, the family’s, and the Polish-Jewish community’s traumatic pasts into the narrating present culminates in a metaleptic moment par excellence (*Maus II*, 41, bottom panel). In this frame, Art the artist sits at his drawing table, a mouse-mask affixed to his human face, in distinction to his usual mouse-persona, visually marking the narrator as both a performative subject and a narrating “I”. He is perched precariously atop a heap of humanlike, emaciated dead mouse-corpse as he refers to offers to make a film of *Maus*, the comic in which he is appearing. To the right side is a curtained window through which the guard tower of Auschwitz is visible. Art is caught in a spotlight held by an invisible figure in the space-off to the right who declares “We’re ready to shoot” the movie. A dialogue bubble references his predicament as a depressed, guilty son whose mother killed herself without leaving a note in 1968, yet who has now become a celebrity artist.

This scene does not so much depict the metaleptic rupture between graphic and aural modes that Schuldiner characterized in the naming panel (which sees *Maus* as coterminous with the novel). Rather, its

metaleptic movement epitomizes not just the crossing but the confounding of illocutionary boundaries in a visual-verbal narrative: Art is a narrator, illustrator, and character, positioned both in the present drawing the cartoon panel that we see and temporally thrust back to the hallucinatory scene at Auschwitz of a pile of corpses swarming with flies that he, as a post-war child, cannot remember, while “time flies” insists on the irrelevant punning practices of comics. Addressed by the real-world media agents of the epitext and afterlife of *Maus I*—offers for movie rights and translations—he remains haunted by impossible memories that undermine his making of the art of Art, even as we are seeing and witnessing them. Such an example of metalepsis in graphic memoir might be considered a telescoped moment in which the narrating “I-now” is both temporally fractured—between a persistent past and an impossible futurity invading the illusory present—and endlessly generative of himself as “Art” the mirror-man.

As this example from *Maus* suggests (and more might be explored), illocutionary positions in autobiographical texts are differently aligned than in fictional ones, and disjunctions differently marked. The boundaries crossed are not only those within the narrative between the “I-now” and “I-then” narrators, both as an individual and a witness affiliated with family and community. Invoking such boundaries can signal both the intractable persistence and haunting presence of an historical past—that other world of corpses—and the persistent coaxing of extra-textual, real-world voices outside the page that urge the commodification of this “art.”

READING FOR METALEPSIS NOW

Recent studies in the field have taken up the figure of metalepsis as key to reading some autobiographical texts that are resistant to conventional readings of life writing but repay a focus on the figure. Consider, briefly, three such studies.

In her book, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Narrative Transgression: A Reconsideration of Metalepsis*, Alexandra Eppe undertakes a study of metalepsis throughout Coetzee’s work, with some attention to Coetzee’s autobiographical texts. When it appeared in 2009, Coetzee’s *Summertime* seemed to many a perverse play on autobiographical norms and practices. Coetzee had earlier published two manifestly autobiographical texts, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II* (2002), that were already seen, in one critic’s words, as an “assault [on] the genre boundaries of autobiography” in several ways (Cheney unpagged). Coetzee used a tactic of objective, rather than subjective, discourse in the two narratives by casting them in the third-person, in *Youth* with an

unlikable narrating “I” who focuses on his failures. *Summertime*, which is subtitled as “fiction,” has a more elaborate set of narrative strategies that distance it from autobiographical discourse. Its first and last sections, in the third-person and using present tense, are presented as being transcribed from notebooks; and its five middle sections pose a biographer’s question to five people, four of them women, about their knowledge of the deceased, John Coetzee. All respond with details that suggest what an awkward and unattractive person “John” was, although they acknowledge he was a prolific writer. While not all aspects of the responses are factual, there are intriguing parallels between the lives of the character and the writer that suggest an intricate metaleptic play of ontological levels at the boundary of autobiographical and fictional discourses, inviting further investigation. Coetzee’s inversion of the norms of truth-telling, with its intricate tangling of fictional and factual elements, thus provokes readers to reflect on what it means to tell—or consume—the story of another’s life, but also to imagine another’s telling of their own. For us as scholars, its sustained use of metaleptic play also provokes reflection on autobiographical discourse as a contaminated and inescapably inauthentic mode of pursuing something termed “truthfulness,” but also potentially a more complex and challenging means of truth-telling.

In her “Introduction” to the essay collection *Experiments in Life Writing*, Julia Novak observes that “many experimental writers subvert [the] distinction” between texts that project a “tenable relation to ‘the real’” and “others that rely on invention” by “establishing cross-textual links between their life-writings and works that are clearly marked as fiction,” a “metaleptic intrusion of the real world into the novel” that destabilizes factual-fictional boundaries across a web of the writer’s texts (18). This deployment of the figure of metalepsis depends on reading across a series of narratives, typically including both memoirs and novels. Such autobiographical “experiments” are by no means all recent, as Novak suggests in referencing Ford Madox Ford and Gertrude Stein (18–19).¹⁵ In such multi-modal forms as autographical comics, examples abound. Two essays in the collection, however, focus on authors of both autobiographical and fictional texts that set up intricate metaleptic networks among their works.

María Alhambra Diaz makes a case for the centrality of metalepsis in Javier Marías’ narrative experimentation in *Dark Back of Time*, with its extended references to Disney’s animated film *The Three Caballeros* (1944), as narrated by the author Javier Marías. Reading the film as both “the novel’s secret and disturbing mirror” (202) and a means to point up “the relation between its autobiographical and fictional components” (203), Alhambra Diaz observes how “the blurring of stable generic identities”

reflects “life-writing ‘as’ fiction” (203) through metaleptic ruptures of the fictional diegetic world. Alhambra Diaz probes on many levels the status of the narrator-biographer as an effect of “the inevitable fictionality and slipperiness of figurative language ... [and] the book’s peculiar re-enactments—through metalepsis—of the uncertain ontological status of even the voice itself” (209). With its Nabokovian echoes, Javier Marías’s uncanny mirror-world requires that readers become nimble dancers across perilous discursive frontiers by tracking its metaleptic leaps (210).

In the same collection, Eveline Kilian investigates the vast and intricate network of self-reference established between Christine Brooke-Rose’s memoirs and novels over decades. While receiving considerable attention as a metafictional novelist, Brooke-Rose has remained peripheral in autobiography studies, perhaps because of the opacity of her memoirs, *Remake* (1996) and *Life, End of* (2006). Focusing on Brooke-Rose’s “repeated probing of the boundaries and permeability between different genres,” Kilian explores how the writer constructs a form of meta-autobiographical writing without pronouns, except in dialogue (80). In *Remake* Brooke-Rose offers not a life chronicle but “a recording of how the past resurges in the writer’s mind and how she reflects upon this process,” acts of fuzzy “rememoration relying on “bifography” to create a metapoetic structure (83–4). In chapters she calls “files” Brooke-Rose constructs “a kind of patchwork” with temporal leaps, including to a time before her birth, and introduces a diary fragment that ruptures any illusion of consecutiveness and confounds discursive levels (85). In presenting herself as “a protean self that exceeds any kind of unity,” indeed as “constantly proliferating selves,” Brooke-Rose’s metapoetic reflexivity fractures notions of identity coherence.

Brooke-Rose’s last book, the autobiographical *Life, End of*, written in her eighties, sets up a further intertextual link that “self-reflexively investigates the reduction of the autobiographical self under the conditions of an increasingly failing body and flawed or even lost memories” in a diminishing world focused on the protagonist’s present state—and body—rather than the past (92). In both memoirs Brooke-Rose’s references to places and characters in her earlier novels as if they were part of her lived life “illustrate the inseparability of truth and fiction that is the outcome of this muddled process of ‘learning, searching, inventing, dreaming and becoming’ which characterises biographical writing” (91). Indeed, *Life, End of* stages the metaleptic conflation of author and character: “Could the infirm character be slowly merging with hisher author?” (Brooke-Rose 92, quoted on Kilian 93). Not surprisingly, Kilian concludes that Brooke-Rose is both suspicious of autobiographical writing and bent on constructing her texts as a “counter-offensive” to it by setting up “an open network of texts”

experimenting with language and the limits of fiction that operates in a richly metaleptic field (96).

In sum, although in autobiographical narration an implicit hierarchy of levels is assumed, with higher status accorded the narrating “I” vis-à-vis the less knowledgeable and wise experiencing “I,” metaleptic ruptures call into question their separation and the assumed superiority of present to past “I”s. That is, metaleptic disruptions expose a temporal paradox in which the present-time narration is neither fully distinct from its past iterations, nor subsumed by it. Seepages contaminate in both directions. The affective pull of remembering moments of the experiencing “I” wrenches control from the presumably superior narrating “I,” who has assumed a privileged relationship to knowledge and thus to the truth of narration. In effect, the experiencing “I” of the past is not bounded by a stable past but is a figure mobilized in metaleptic play across boundaries. We can say that the narrating “I” not only interacts with, but is inflected by, the narrated or experiencing “I,” as different worlds of meaning are imbricated in the text. Neither is fixed or stable in one temporality or one narrative world.¹⁶ A focus on metaleptic disruption exposes an excess that cannot be fully contained by the claim of the narrating “I” of the extradiegetic world to control the meanings attributed to the referential world. This negotiation of a subject-in-process is a situation specific—and peculiar—to the self-reflexivity of autobiographical texts.

As we see, at once securing and unsettling the truth effect of autobiographical narration, the figure of metalepsis calls for a different reading practice, as its surreal effects dislocate the reader’s assumptions about who is in charge of the narrative. Reading for metalepsis attends to breaks and disruptions of illocutionary positions and ontological worlds and ultimately unsettles the truth effect of the autobiographical. It engages the reader in questioning the apparent unity of the narrating and narrated “I”s in ways that are ethically probing, rather than simply deconstructive. Thinking about metalepsis in this way helps us, finally, to understand subjectification in life writing as the constant reforming of a subject in process within the intersubjective exchanges among the narrating “I,” narrated “I,” and their addressee(s) and readers.

CONCLUSION: NARRATIVE, METALEPSIS, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE

At this contemporary moment of life writing studies, many American scholars have turned their attention from narrative strategies to other topics, even as some of our European and Latin American colleagues, such as Arnaud Schmidt and Eveline Kilian, are making them a focus.¹⁷

But our engagement with metalepsis as a foundational figure is not a retrospective gaze; rather, we regard this emphasis on strategies for relating autobiographical narratives as a complement to our decades of work on counter-canons, subordinated traditions of life writing, and issues of gender and genre in sociopolitical contexts.

A focus on the figure of metalepsis is particularly relevant for theorizing the multiple “I”s of autobiographical acts and practices. The questions we have raised in this essay weigh the status of autobiographical “I”s in assessing truth claims and their verifiability by considering how the figure of metalepsis in some autobiographical narratives marks the oscillation between the distinct illocutionary times of the narrating and experiencing “I”s. We have also considered how it signals a disjunction of ontological worlds. Such operations disrupt the reader’s illusion of a sustained, coherent voice and call into question the “truth effect” that autobiographical narrators strive to achieve, thereby opening the narratives to other readings.

Unlike de Man with *propopoeia*, we are not arguing that metalepsis is the figure *par excellence* of the autobiographical or that metaleptic disruption characterizes **all** autobiographical narrative. Rather, metaleptic ruptures, where they occur, call attention to both the potential multiplicity and the discontinuity of what has long been regarded as the unitary and co-extensive “I”, located in one voice and one world. Reading for metalepsis reveals that autobiographical narration is never the tidy, chronological narration of how an “I-then” becomes the “I-now” that it is often taken to be. Because autobiographical narration can contain different worlds with distinct ontological statuses, and can at times reverse the hierarchical status of an “I-now” and “I-then,” it is not referential in the sense that it invariably refers to a single, stable, unified world “out there.” At the same time, the kinds of “fictionality” encoded in autobiographical texts are distinct from those of the novel, with its emphasis on verisimilitude rather than a referential world.

We have seen that metalepsis operates in autobiographical narratives to expose the instability of both ontological and illocutionary boundaries and narrative temporalities. It thereby disrupts not just the fluidity of reading but readers’ self-understanding as coherently in the present. By reading autobiographical narratives with an eye for metaleptic crossings, we may discover how a narrating “I” interacts with, is changed by, and reanimates an experiencing “I” in ways that may be discordant, controlling, complicit, and even contradictory. We also need to adapt versions of metalepsis that narrative theorists have grounded in the novel to the different conditions and limits of life writing. If our analysis makes a start in that direction, we encourage other life narrative scholars to join us in considering the kinds of work such rhetorical figures perform, and how they may texture and change genres of the autobiographical.

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NOTES

- 1 A more conventional definition is offered in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: "From a functional point of view, metalepsis can be defined as the shift of a figure within a text (usually a character or a narrator) from one narrative level to another, marking a transgression of ontological borders. This procedure makes the reader or addressee aware of the fictional status of a text and ensures the maintenance of a specifically aesthetic distance, thereby counteracting any experience of immersion in the literary work. At the same time, it can be used as an effective instrument for producing *enargeia* (vividness), and through its sudden and surprising character it can also create strong effects of pathos as well as comedic effects."
- 2 De Man's suspicion of the autobiographical has, since the eighties, been regarded by many as troubling because of his work, during World War II, for a journal in Nazi-occupied Belgium, information that he later suppressed.
- 3 For Genette, metalepsis links the "shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (236).
- 4 McHale refers to a "short-circuit" (119) between the "fictional world and the ontological level occupied by the author" (213).
- 5 Pier and Schaeffer note that Genette's contribution to their volume is a condensation of the first part of his book, *Métalepse. De la figure à la fiction*. Paris, Coll. Poétique, Seuil, 2004.
- 6 The question of multiple, dissonant narrative worlds is one that scholars of autobiographical studies have rarely explored. Paul John Eakin refers to autobiography as a discourse "touching the world" in his book of that name; but the world to which Eakin alludes is the referential world outside the text.
- 7 Attentive to the complexity of the self-conscious novel's dialectical discourse, Ryan continues her characterization of metaleptic features: "In fictional discourse the author makes believe to relocate himself in a new system of reality by overtly pretending to be one of its members. Through this act of impersonation, the speech of the author in the real world transmits the speech of the narrator in the fictional world, and there is a crossing of an illocutionary boundary" (875).
- 8 Several studies of metalepsis in literary texts have been published since 2008 (Hanebeck, 2017); Kukkonen and Klimek (eds.), 2011; Floss, 2015. These studies, however, do not address the status of metalepsis in autobiographical acts and practices.

- 9 Personal correspondence.
- 10 Renza argues that in the act of writing, the past is never simply recollected, but breaks through the temporal screen to inform and “present-ify” the narration; experience is not just recalled but to an extent re-experienced (9). His essay was first published in *New Literary History* (1977). See Smith and Watson, 2010, 207–8.
- 11 The narrative’s full title is *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, A Minister’s Wife in New-England: Wherein is set forth, The Cruel and Inhumane Usage she underwent amongst the Heathens for Eleven Weeks’ time: And Her Deliverance from them. Written by her own Hand, for her Private Use: and now made Public at the earnest Desire of some Friends, for the Benefit of the Afflicted.*
- 12 It is impossible to determine how much Cotton Mather’s editorial intervention in Rowlandson’s text may have contributed to this illusion of re-achieving coherent Puritan faith and salvation.
- 13 Funk’s Chapter 5 is “Reconstructing the Author: Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*.”
- 14 Feyersinger’s recent book, entitled *Metalepsis in Animation: Paradoxical Transgressions of Ontological Levels*, focuses on the “seemingly paradoxical transgression of narrative or ontological levels that are perceived as mutually exclusive” in animated films and television series (Universitätsverlag Catalog, 46). Familiar examples are depicting the hand of the artist within the created drawing and showing characters who escape the fictional narrative into the world of their makers. Although Feyersinger does not focus on autobiographical texts, Spiegelman’s page exemplifies his understanding of metalepsis.
- 15 Similarly, Max Saunders has probed how “metabiographical” tropes in poetry serve not only to mark autobiographical elements within a poem but as “*comments upon auto/biography*” (412). Saunders argues that, in Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, for example, Pound can be read as alluding to a fictional literary memoir within the poem by introducing the voice of the “belletrist” speaking about his critics (414).
- 16 Our focus on metalepsis in part responds to James Phelan’s positing, in his fine essay on Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* and *T’is* in *Living to Tell about It*, the need for a concept of the implied author to theorize autobiographical acts of split narration. In such adult autobiographies of childhood experience, Phelan asserts, the narrating “I,” speaking as a child close in age to the experiencing “I,” often misreads events, people, and moral issues that the adult narrator has learned from and now can evaluate differently, with ethical insight. The reader is solicited, through a voice implicit in the arrangement of the narrative and often explicit in its frame story and interpolations, to mistrust—and learn from—the erroneous judgment of the narrating child “I.” Although we have also observed, in autobiographical coming-of-age, conversion, captivity, and trauma narratives, the split narrating “I,” we resist the notion of an implied “authorial I” as necessary to theorizing life narrative. Precisely because of the metaleptic dynamism of some autobiographical work, its ability to put the narrative situation into play, such a concept seems superfluous.
- 17 For example, the seventy-six topics in the “What’s Next?” issue of *a/b* (32:2 2017) proposed by scholars include only a few essays that discuss or call for a focus on strategies of narration.