

Review

Rochelle Tobias: *Pseudo-Memoirs: Life and Its Imitation in Modern Fiction.*

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Rochelle Tobias' new book asks astonishing questions. For instance: "What would happen if a character in a novel were to renounce his claim to existence?" (31) The canon of texts that provokes such existential suspicion for Tobias is situated in the 20th century and comprises works that fictionalize the conventions of autobiographical writing. She follows these practices in novels by Thomas Mann, Robert Walser, Thomas Bernhard, and W. G. Sebald, tracing what she conceives as the creation of a "fiction of life" (25) – as opposed to the narrative communication of lived experience. Each of her readings pushes the respective text to the critical point where fiction ceases to proffer a mere image of life and instead life appears as an entirely fictional occurrence.

By naming her study "Pseudo-Memoirs," Tobias draws attention to a specific sub-genre of prose that plays with the referential function of literary language and the narrative's feigned embeddedness within an empirically verifiable history. Yet the focus on feigned autobiography also calls into question the analytical primacy of other types of narrative, especially the realist novel of the 19th century, for a cogent conceptualization of the novel. Otherwise put, Tobias writes her own theory of the novel – albeit from the perspective of its pseudo-character, which is to say, her study endorses the utter, and refreshing, rejection of what others have called 'aesthetic ideology,' that is, the assumption that literature is somehow capable of representing the outside world. That Tobias reaches for this claim through the frame of a strictly phenomenological approach might seem counterintuitive at first, but phenomenology's *epoché*, she explains, precisely serves to elude the *hybris* of gaining access to 'reality.' Tobias sees the achievement of phenomenology and its relevance for modern literature manifested in the terms 'consciousness' and 'intentionality,' which, she does not tire to remind us, are not reducible to any one single individual but speak to the structure of transcendental subjectivity within whose horizon something akin to world-making transpires. In other words, consciousness is where things appear.

It is therefore appropriate to deploy the concept of consciousness as the foundational instrument for an analysis of fictional writing – namely to the precise extent that there, too, things are made to appear. Its place, however, is not the mind of the writing subject but the text itself: “The subjectivity that governs the novel does not belong to the historical author. [...] The work bears witness not to an individual’s thought but to the process of thinking itself, which we ascribe to individuals after the fact in what might be the most routine but also most astonishing act of prosopopoeia.” (22) The phrase “process of thinking,” in this context, can be read as a synecdoche for the ‘process of writing,’ which, as Tobias powerfully demonstrates, is antecedent to the assignment of any stable subject-positions whose occupants could stage themselves as the masters of discourse. The subjects that appear to govern the narrative – author, narrator, character – are but effects of the process of writing that generates their subject-positions in the first place. It is this generative process that Tobias captures with the phenomenological notion of ‘intentionality’ which can never be designated as a finite subject’s intention. The speaking subject is an after-thought to a more foundational occurrence of formation that precedes and therefore eludes all discursive mastery.

Being the master of one’s discourse would imply occupying a place outside the discursive frame from where language could safely be manipulated. Yet Tobias has no interest in confirming the stability of the speaker’s position *vis-à-vis* their discourse. She convincingly shows that the thought of a textual outside is itself a fiction produced by the workings of the text which will always succeed in dislodging any firm anchorage exterior to the textual vortex. The four chapters of her book are named “The Character,” “The Narrator,” “The Work,” “The Author” – simultaneously the four fundamental concepts of Philippe Lejeune’s theory of autobiography – and each time Tobias demonstrates with rigor and in detail how the text makes its subjects vanish and annihilates its claim to being a perfected work. In this sense, Tobias’ theory of the novel is predicated upon a phenomenology of *disappearance* (rather than appearance).

In order to get a better sense of what this might entail, consider her reading of Thomas Mann’s *Confessions of Felix Krull* in the chapter “The Character.” Mann started working on this novel as early as 1905, yet he was only able to finish its first volume, which appeared in 1954, a year before his death. A deep admirer of Nietzsche, Mann infused his works with Nietzschean tropes which Tobias detects in her reading and uses as the ontological backdrop of her character analysis. In particular, she draws our attention to Nietzsche’s dictum that life can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, formulated in his *Birth of Tragedy* from which Tobias borrows the central dichotomy between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. According to Nietzsche, all appearance is the (Apollonian) image of an

in-and-of-itself irrepresentable (Dionysian) affect. This ontology is fruitful for Tobias' phenomenological perspective, since it de-objectifies the world and turns it into an aesthetic reflection – a semblance: “Apollo is separated from the ground of being that he at the same time represents in his very image.” (44) If the world itself is already a representation, however, this would turn art into a representation to the second degree, or, put another way, into the semblance of a semblance. All concrete phenomena are rooted in the Dionysian impulse but in the world appear separate. Art, then, is the only place where this separation can again be overcome and Dionysian unity achieved. Tobias sees this ontology mirrored in Mann's novel where what's at stake “is not a representation of reality, but the representation of a representation: the self-conscious adoption of elements associated with the realist novel to generate its air of verisimilitude” (52). Tobias argues that Mann's novel increasingly works to overcome its formal constraints so as to tap into the Dionysian affect, a process that manifests as the dissolution of the eponymous main character. In what Tobias deems the novel's “Dionysian turn” (58), Krull takes on the identity of the Marquis de Venosta and thus “dissolves into his character inasmuch as his character dissolves into another narrated figure” (58), which causes an “unhinging of fiction from any outside” (58). In other words, Krull who, as the narrating voice and author of his memoirs, had hitherto occupied a position outside the text, relinquishes his individuality as he *disappears* into his work and its characters.

Dedicated to the figure of “The Narrator,” the book's second chapter explores Robert Walser's *Jakob von Gunten*. Emphasizing the fact that Walser's novel appropriates the genre description of the diary as its subtitle, Tobias puts pressure on the question of what it means for Jakob to say ‘I.’ She concludes that he occupies a peculiar double-position, namely in that he functions both as “the homo- and heterodiegetic narrator of the text” (72). This means that Jakob is simultaneously the creator of the world he narrates – and a participant in his creation. Which is to say, he is both a figure in his fictional universe and the latter's very source. This demiurgic elevation might surprise since it is ostensibly at odds with Jakob's stated goal of becoming a servant – in a sense, the very opposite of a creator or master. Yet Tobias detects a certain de-individuating quality in the act of service that harbors a powerful force: “Service [...] elevates and enlarges [Jakob] by allowing him to become a being that no one notices and that consequently is not confined to any one place. Nowhere in particular, Jakob is everywhere potentially.” (77–78) By virtue of becoming a servant, then, Jakob achieves early on what Felix Krull only manages to accomplish at the very end: inhabiting the world as a ubiquitous being, dissolved into the fictional universe, dwelling everywhere and nowhere at once. If Krull's trajectory ends with his disappearance into his work and its characters, Jakob, Tobias argues, goes even further in that it

does not suffice for him to be dissolved in his diary – as he actively prepares to eventually transgress the limits of the fictional universe that he himself created. As Tobias puts it: “He engineers or orchestrates his disappearance, so that he may gain access to eternal life, or at least to a life in which he is no longer constrained by the threat of disappearing, dying, being annihilated.” (83) This statement alludes to the novel’s enigmatic ending in which Jakob and Herr Benjamenta, the patriarch at the helm of the boarding school around which the diary revolves, resolve to depart to a desert far from Europe (see 82). Alongside the institute, the narrative space collapses, and its creator-protagonist performs a final leap into a life, as Tobias formulates it, “beyond all semblance, which is also a life beyond all formal constraint” (88) – and thus a life beyond what’s representable.

Following her encounter with two monumental authors of German and Swiss literature, Tobias turns to Austria to offer a refined reading of the Alpine Republic’s master of exaggeration, Thomas Bernhard. Whereas in Mann and Walser the idea of the work stays more or less intact, while characters and narrators are observed to vanish into or beyond the work’s defined precinct, Tobias finds in Bernhard the exceptional occurrence of the work undoing its own possibility. Bernhard’s 1986 novel *Extinction* revolves around the life of Franz-Josef Murau, an upper-class bohemian who, in an attempt to come to terms with his family and its estate, named Wolfsegg, resolves to compose a memoir whose purpose would be the utter destruction of Wolfsegg and everything related to it. While Bernhard’s novel is often understood to be identical to Murau’s desired destructive manuscript, Tobias compellingly casts doubt on this interpretation. She argues, instead, that the book we hold in our hands as we read Bernhard’s novel contains, in a way, a placeholder-memoir, a supplement that came about in the process of infinitely postponing the actual work or “*Extinction Proper*” whose first sentence Murau never had the acuity to compose. In other words, what we read is a text written during the process of Murau’s failing to write *Extinction*. Tobias finds evidence for this claim in the novel’s first and last sentences, wherein Murau is identified as the manuscript’s author, and we are furthermore apprised of the fact that he is deceased: “The novel *Extinction* begins by extinguishing its author as a presence apart from the page. His absence, his death, is the condition of the work.” (92) While Jakob von Gunten has to meticulously engineer his disappearance, Bernhard’s Murau is absent from the get-go: The entire work discloses itself as a prosopopoeia, an extinction provoked by an already extinguished being. While it may seem that the author’s absence reifies the work into a monument to his former labor, Tobias undermines this suspicion by emphasizing the precursory nature of Murau’s writings: “What remains [...] is merely a prolegomenon to a work that will never be. The published text *Extinction* is a preliminary study that will never triumph in a final study. This, paradoxically, is its success.” (96) Why

success? Because the only way to ‘extinguish’ Wolfsegg through recording it in a work of prose is by infinitely deferring the realization of this work.

After making the character, the narrator, and the work itself disappear, Tobias restages, in a final gesture, the death of the author. To do so, she turns to W. G. Sebald, in particular his 1990 essay-novel *Vertigo*. What this text has in common with the other three novels within Tobias’ canon of pseudo-memoirs is its self-reflexive nature, that is, “we are given a window into the creative process of the author through his narrative double, the writing protagonist” (125). Which is to say that all these works reflect on the process of their becoming-a-work and thus invite us to inquire after their condition of possibility. As previously stated, however, their possibility is not guaranteed by an autonomous subject securely positioned outside the novel’s discourse. This holds true for protagonist and narrator just as much as it applies to the figure of the author who “disappears as a force outside the work to linger in it as a mere ghost or semblance” (127). The semblances Tobias explores have all lost their points of reference – cut off from the world ‘outside’ they remain suspended in their own fictional universe, not unlike Kafka’s Hunter Gracchus whose destiny Sebald weaves into the textual web of *Vertigo*. What is remarkable about Sebald’s novel, however, is that amidst the vertiginous proliferation of semblances it still seems to insist on the stability of an outside to which the author can refer in order to guarantee his integrity as a living being. Sebald does this by including documentary evidence that ostensibly confirms his civic identity. Most remarkably, he includes a reprint of his own passport, issued in 1987 by the German consulate in Milan. Yet taking this document at face value would be a mistake, Tobias warns us: “Documentary evidence loses its indexical function when absorbed within a work that quickly becomes a double of itself – that is, proof of what proof would look like, were the text able to reach outside itself to the nondiscursive world.” (136) In other words, whatever referent the text reaches for is not one that is located outside its discursive world, but a referent whose facticity is itself an effect of its discourse. The text does not rely on its referent – it produces moments of referentiality to show us how realities are constructed.

Rochelle Tobias thus tells the story of a fourfold disappearance: Author, work, narrator, and character all vanish – either into or from a life of pure semblance, entirely disconnected from the world outside. While Tobias never shies away from complexity, this book is inherently teachable as she always takes her time minutely and didactically to erect the conceptual scaffolding needed for a particular reading. The concepts of this edifice are borrowed from Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, Georg Lukács, Émile Benveniste, Käte Hamburger, and Maurice Blanchot. And it is the latter who takes the last word when Tobias cites his dictum according to which a “tale is not the narration of an event, but

that event itself” (see 152). In the tales she herself chooses, this event signals a referential de-constitution – and the phenomenology of disappearance she develops to trace it could not be more convincing.