

Ben Lerner's *10:04* : Entropy and Metamodern Autofiction¹

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The present paper discusses the conceptual and formal effects of entropy in contemporary autobiographical writing by analysing the genre-defying novel *10:04* (2014) by the American author Ben Lerner and presenting it as an example of a metamodern autofictional narrative. Lerner blurs the boundary between authorial and fictional perspectives by presenting the reader with a meta-aware narrator whose resemblance to the author forces the novel to transcend the limits of fiction. Moreover, the aforementioned move seemingly echoes the sensibility of a new cultural paradigm – metamodernism, which exists on the grounds of oscillation between such conceptual extremes as irony and sincerity, and, more importantly, fact and fiction. Furthermore, the paper argues that Lerner's work challenges the tradition of autobiographical narration by the employment of the concept of entropy: the narrator of *10:04* creatively utilizes an inevitable disorder of perspectives and obtains a new sense of self within the practical possibilities of autofiction.

KEY-WORDS: Metamodernism, Autofiction, Entropy, Subjectivity, Identity

1. Introduction: entropy

Due to its relation to chaos and disorder, the challenging concept of thermodynamic entropy has been generally understood in non-scientific communities as somewhat negative: for example, when the postmodern American author Thomas Pynchon explored the concept in his early short story 'Entropy' (1960), he presented it as a metaphor for the destructive consequences of all-encroaching consumerism, where one would inevitably experience « a heat-death for [one's] culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease » (Pynchon Th. 1985 : 55). However, the author of the concept itself, German physicist

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Rudolf Clausius, actually proposed to use the term after the Greek word for ‘transformation’, which in and of itself is a fairly neutral concept (Quoted in Ben-Naim A. 2012 : 7). Thus, as a process, entropy is in fact signified by imminent change rather than discord, despite the fact that the latter is characteristic of the overall concept.

Moreover, contemporary theorist Ben-Naim suggests that the original meaning of the concept has been lost entirely since « [e]ntropy, as it is now recognized, does not mean ‘transformation’, or ‘change’, or ‘turn’. It does mean information » (*Ibid.* : 206). In order to illustrate a similar view towards entropy, scholars Mikhailovsky and Levich (Mikhailovsky G.E., Levich A.P. 2015 : 4863-4890) use an example: first, they ask us to imagine a crowd of American sport fans at an international hockey match that, in support of their team, chants ‘U-S-A! U-S-A!’. In this situation, where order is maintained, the level of entropy is low – but so is the level of information, since nothing new is said. Then, the scholars ask us to imagine the noise the crowd makes after the hockey game is over, during a break, with hundreds of people talking to and over each other. If observed as a whole, the crowd does not provide any coherent or meaningful information – it is complete chaos. Indeed, according to Mikhailovsky and Levich, « chaos replaced order, the system degraded and entropy sharply increased for the ‘macroobserver’, but for the ‘microobserver’ (and for the system itself in its entirety), information fantastically increased, and the system passed from extremely degraded, simple, ordered and poor information state into a much more chaotic, complex, rich and informative one » (*Ibid.* : 4866). Indeed, an entropic process in this situation seems to bring about high levels of information, along with ambiguity and uncertainty. Thus, as a concept, entropy can be understood as having more complex and, in certain ways, positive qualitative values than mere destruction and chaos.

Elaborate debates between physicists and information theorists is not the focus of the present paper, especially when considering the fact that when theorist Claude Shannon was thinking about using the concept of entropy in one of his contributions to information theory, his colleague John von Neumann gave him the following advice: « No one knows what entropy really is, so in a debate you will always have the advantage » (Quoted in Ben-Naim A. 2012 : 206). Yet, I would like to argue that a layered understanding of the concept of entropy is crucial to comprehending the development of contemporary autobiographical writing. As a process, entropy signifies an irreversible process of and for time, therefore it might be appropriate to use the term as a metaphor for the autobiographical subject’s experience and recounting of their life. In fact, entropy might be seen as a driving force behind one of the most intriguing examples of contemporary autofiction – Ben Lerner’s sophomore novel *10:04*.

The plot of the novel revolves around an author struggling to follow the success of his debut novel and decide on an idea for a new one; paradoxically, by the end of the book we realize that *10:04* is, in fact, the very novel the author was at great pains to write. Similarly, Lerner experienced a great success with his 2011 debut *Leaving the Atocha Station*. In addition, the following year Lerner published a short story titled 'The Golden Vanity' in *The New Yorker*, which again won him critical acclaim. In *10:04*, the very same short story appears in full as a piece that earned the narrator a six-figure advance for his second novel. Thus, the reader is invited to view the protagonist of *10:04* as a literary doppelgänger of Lerner himself, an autofictional identity that emerges as a subject that is forced to deal with certain qualitative characteristics of entropy, such as uncertainty, accumulation of information, and chaos. Moreover, the very identity of the protagonist of *10:04* seems to be defined by entropy in that Lerner's autofictional double presents himself as a highly problematic subject whose nature is ambiguous and whose experience is chaotic due to the ever-increasing amount of information in his world.

Before conceptualizing Lerner's work with the help of entropy, the following discussion will aim at contextualizing it within a new cultural paradigm – the contemporary sensibility of metamodernism. The revival of autofictional narratives in the 21st century Western literature seems to be aligned with the end and/or continuation of postmodernism, where the dramatic shift of the genre of autobiography from non-fiction to a self-aware autofiction might also be described as entropic in nature.

2. Metamodernism and autofiction

In 2010, Vermeulen and van den Akker published an influential essay 'Notes on metamodernism', in which the scholars explored a new sensibility that has become increasingly evident in the arts after the alleged decline of postmodernism (Vermeulen T., Van Den Akker R. 2010 : 2-14). They suggested that some pieces of contemporary art exhibit a certain tension between what they refer to as « modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony » (*Ibid.* : 2). By exploring the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron, paintings of Kaye Donachie, and Michel Gondy's films, the scholars argue that a neoromantic turn is visible in the various works of these authors. Following the critic Isaiah Berlin's comprehension of Romanticism, which involves an oscillation between such conceptual extremes as « individualism and collectivism, purity and corruption » (*Ibid.* : 7), Vermeulen and van den Akker see this oscillation in contemporary art, particularly in how the aforementioned authors negotiate modern subjectivity and enthusiasm on the one hand and postmodern self-reflection and irony on the other.

In 2017, the scholars expanded their theory and, together with Alison Gibbons, edited a collection of essays exploring more examples of contemporary culture (Vermeulen T., Van Den Akker R., Gibbons A. 2010). By deconstructing the term ‘metamodernism’, Vermeulen and van den Akker describe it as « a structure of feeling » (*Ibid.* : 4) in the sense of Raymond Williams’ original expression, which, due to its elusive nature, can never be comprehensively defined. Yet, the scholars attempt to illuminate it and present metamodernism as a three-fold concept, which is characteristic of, first, a tension between postmodernist and modernist sensibilities, second, an oscillation or « a dialectical movement that identifies with and negates » (*Ibid.* : 10), and, finally, a temporal shift from postmodernism situated in the 2000s. By borrowing the environmental notions of ‘recycling’ and ‘upcycling’, Vermeulen and van den Akker claim that such techniques as pastiche and parody were used in postmodern literature to reuse popular culture and the classics, whereas in contemporary literature, such usage has more to do with « [resignifying] the present and [reimagining] the future » (*Ibidem*), i.e. ‘upcycling’ rather than ‘recycling’ old ideas, which indicates a movement beyond postmodern trends and a transformative return to modernist and even realist sensibilities. Yet, metamodernism never completely settles for either postmodernism or modernism : instead, in the first decade of the 21st century, literature is grounded in an oscillation « between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction and so forth » (*Ibid.* : 11).

Significantly, Gibbons refers to autofiction as a discourse that follows the patterns of metamodernism. Firstly, she rejects Jameson in his belief that postmodernism marks the ‘waning of affect’ in culture, with the postmodern subject being displaced and detached (*Ibid.* : 85). In fact, Gibbons believes that the many pieces of contemporary art point out to a return to the possibility of a meaningful and transformative emotion (*Ibidem*). To illustrate her claim, she refers to the contemporary flourishing of life writing and, in particular, the re-emergence of autofiction. Indeed, in terms of contemporary literature, autofiction witnessed something of a boom with such works as Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.), Damon Galgut’s *In A Strange Room* (2010, London: Atlantic Books), Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle: Book One* (2013, trans. Don Bartlett, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), and Sheila Heti’s *How Should A Person Be* (2013, London: Picador) to name a few. Instead of denouncing this literary trend as a signifier of neo-liberal celebration of individualism or yet another example of the commodification of human experience, Gibbons suggests that autofictional narratives display individuals that recount their emotional need for interpersonal relationships. The scholar notes: « [i]n contemporary autofiction, subjects are shown to desire meaningful attachments with others and are susceptible to heartfelt personal experiences that

may in turn shape their identities » (*Ibid.*: 120). Gibbons contextualizes the affective turn within the 21st century's rekindled interest in the hermeneutic reality of material and embodied subjectivity, which stands in great contrast to postmodern representation, which is based on self-reference. In other words, the 'structure of feeling' in contemporary culture, as exemplified by autofiction, echoes our wish to be grounded in a certain place and time, having reliable and identity-defining relationships with one another, and being able to have transformative emotional experiences akin to modernist epiphanies *à propos de Joyce*. Arguably, Lerner's *10:04* explores this longing as well.

Nonetheless, corresponding to the metamodernist aesthetic of oscillation, contemporary autofiction does not follow modernist sensibility exclusively. When it emerged as a literary genre, autofiction was highly influenced by the postmodern configuration of identity and fluidity of literary genres and styles. In 1977, the author of the term itself, French writer Serge Doubrovsky, thought stylistically of autofiction as « [f]iction of strictly real events or facts (...) of having entrusted the adventure of language with the language of an adventure, outside of the wisdom of the traditional or new novel » (Quoted in DIX H. 2017 : 71). Later, in an interview in 1997, Doubrovsky provided a more elaborate definition, by claiming that « [w]e have learnt that sincerity, which was the old regulating principle of autobiography, is not enough. The meaning of one's life in certain ways escapes us, so we have to reinvent it in our writing, and that is what I personally call autofiction » (Quoted in Celestin R.1997 : 400). Thus, autofiction can be seen as an autobiographical narrative that, in a typical postmodern fashion, is aware of its limitations in terms of truthful representation and subjectivity.

Yet, following Sturgeon (Gibbons A. 2017, in Van Den Akker R., Gibbons A., Vermeulen T. (eds.) : 121), Gibbons suggests that contemporary autofiction does not preoccupy itself exclusively with the conflict between fact and fiction – rather, it explores existential and ethical issues, which again corresponds to the metamodern concern with subjectivity and affect. In her insightful essay, she analyzes two contemporary autofictional narratives, *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus (1998, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)) and Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2004, London: Harper Pernennial), and claims that the authors of the two texts « write out of a postmodernist formulation of fragmented, fictitious, textual identity and towards a metamodern affect, whereby subjectivity is linked to an external reality through personal connection and situatedness » (Gibbons A. 2017, in Van Den Akker R., Gibbons A., Vermeulen T. (eds.): 123). Additionally, however much skepticism a consciously doubtful account might occasion, I would argue that an author who is attempting to provide a sincere account of their experiences while being acutely aware of and openly honest about the inherent fraudulence in the medium he or

she is using, indirectly encourages the reader's interpretative process to involve the metamodern movement of oscillation between doubt and trust. Thus, metamodern autofiction can be seen as entropic (chaotic, complex, informative) not only in how it challenges traditional autobiographical narratives, but also our expectations and experience of them.

3. Ben Lerner's *10:04*

In his review of Lerner's sophomore novel, *10:04*, Baskin refers to it as a prime example of 'the novel of detachment' – a genre, the predecessors of which include the metafictional works of such postmodern authors as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass (Baskin J. 2015 : 27-32). Baskin claims that in addition to being metafictionally aware and insecure about their self, the protagonist of a typical novel of detachment is defined by their « isolation from – and cynicism about – any human community » (*Ibid.* : 27), which renders the novel indicative of « a conspicuous interest in self-consciousness, a concern for the problem of social 'performativity', and an anxiety about the meaningfulness and even the reality of modern life » (*Ibid.* : 28). According to the reviewer, *10:04* successfully highlights the solipsistic nature of a contemporary self, while also giving « the impression that [...] there is no alternative to detachment » (*Ibid.* : 31), which consequently makes us think of Lerner's work as deeply nihilistic and somewhat bleak, presumably reflecting the cynicism of the times.

While I agree with Baskin that the novel clearly exhibits a self-conscious and anxious narrator, I believe that his experience of and attitude towards intersubjective relationships is not as cynical and detached as the reviewer makes it out to be – it is, at the very least, ambiguous. The complexity of this issue in *10:04* might, in fact, be well-illustrated with a metamodern reading of the novel, while casting a particular focus on the concept of entropy and its effects on the autofictional self.

The narrator of *10:04* is dealing with several issues, which seem to be underlined with self-conscious concerns about time and identity. To begin with, we learn that he is suffering from Marfan, a disease that holds the threat of « 'dissection', a most often fatal tearing of the aorta » (Lerner B. 2015 : 5). The condition makes the narrator acutely aware of the fragility of life and the time that is left for him, as « there [is] a statistically significant chance the largest artery in [his] body would rupture at any moment » (*Ibidem*). Then, together with the inhabitants of New York city, the narrator experiences two storms, Irene and Sandy, both of which bring about high levels of anxiety and stressful preparation, yet pass somewhat peacefully for the protagonist. On the other hand, it is precisely during the anticipation of the storms that the narrator manages to

escape his highly solipsistic frame of mind and allow himself the possibility of a collective experience. Finally, the narrator's future and identity become even more unclear due to a request of his closest friend, Alex, who decides she wants to have a child and asks the narrator to be her sperm donor. The prospect of becoming a father seems to affect the narrator the most, as he continuously (and absurdly) finds himself in the position of either a child or a father figure: being examined in a pediatric wing, working on a project on dinosaurs in an elementary school, or cooking for an Occupy protester, as well as taking care of a panicked intern high on drugs. The accumulation of the humorous situations only emphasizes the narrator's anxiety, self-consciousness and restlessness about the present and future of his identity.

3.1. Exploring entropy

The aforementioned issues seem to be driven by fundamentally entropic processes: destruction, chaos and uncertainty follow the narrator as he attempts to navigate across his days. Most importantly, though, entropy influences his understanding of himself, as the narrator realizes how much fiction has influenced his factual identity. While remembering the incident that made him want to become a writer, the narrator recounts the Challenger disaster in 1986 and Reagan's address to the nation. While he watched the president's speech live, he did not in fact witness the live coverage of the disaster, despite him feeling as if he did. Moreover, although the speech moved him immensely, later on he realized that it was not actually Reagan's own words – the speech was definitely written by someone else. The narrator ponders : « at the beginning of my story of origins is a false memory of a moving image. I didn't see it live. What I saw was a televised speech that wasn't written by anyone, but that (...) was briefly available to everyone» (*Ibid.* : 115). Thus, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of how the line between fact and fiction is blurred in his life, which consequently challenges the reality of his own self. At times, he is even on the verge of disassociation from his own body : « an object in my hand (...) ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes an alien artefact, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse » (*Ibid.* : 14).

However, the narrator seems to eventually embrace the entropic uncertainty of fictional and factual existence by employing both perspectives while he creates his narrative. As he is preparing his notes for the *New Yorker* story, he plans « a series of transpositions » (*Ibid.* : 54) : he will replace his medical issue with another one, change the names of Alex and his doctor. This move aids the narrator in creating « a nice crossing of reality and fiction, which is what the story is about in the first place » (*Ibid.* : 57). Furthermore, entropic fabricating finds its way in the narra-

tor's personal life: after an embarrassing procedure of sperm donation, the narrator imagines having a conversation with his future daughter, which eventually turns into a comic solipsistic inquisition. Interestingly, the daughter calls out the narrator for his decision to write an autofictional short story to pay for Alex's operation instead of following a more modernist understanding of art as having no purpose apart from its own existence. The narrator's response is telling: « Art has to offer something more than stylized despair » (*Ibid.* : 93). Ultimately, the protagonist of *10:04* employs the chaotic relationship between fact and fiction for both personal and aesthetic gain.

In harnessing the power of entropic uncertainty and the complexity of information it entails, the narrator seems to creatively reconcile the tension between the real and the imaginary not only in his writing, but also in his understanding of himself. Indeed, his art offers something more than the misery of a fragmented identity or an apocalyptic feeling of time – it provides both him and the reader with a sense of possibility. When fact and fiction are combined in a creative outlet like, for instance, in the famous installation *The Clock* by Christian Maclay (2010), which the narrator observes, the results are surprisingly refreshing. Maclay's work consciously blurs the line between real and fictional time, which makes the narrator feel « acutely aware how many different days could be built out of a day, [feel] more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction » (*Ibid.* : 54). Thus, the entropy of perspectives enriches the autobiographical impulse of the narrator: creative fabrication crosses the rigid limits of an autobiographical narrative, yet it does not seem to affect the truthfulness of the narrator's account. The narrator himself recognizes how his own identity is based on both fact and fiction, therefore his narrative takes the form of an autofictional novel. Furthermore, following Mikhailovsky and Levich, we might see how the system of the novel benefits from the increase of entropy, especially for the 'microobserver', i.e. the reader, who now is invited to question the appeal of a traditional, orderly autobiographical account.

3.2. Accommodating oppositions: metamodernism

10:04 appears to correspond to the metamodernist sensibility of oscillation: first, in its form, and then with regard to the protagonist's existential concerns. Lerner's novel is highly reminiscent of formal postmodernist experimentation – the narrative is interspersed with photographs, images from popular culture, poems, and even an elementary-schooler's report. Such features underline the self-referentiality of the novel itself, as the narrator is always ruminating on the creative process of his sophomore novel.

Moreover, *10:04* abounds in irony, which is evident not only in the interactions the narrator has with other people, but also appears to be one of the driving impulses behind his creative process. While discussing his future novel with his agent, the narrator proclaims: « I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously (...) I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid » (*Ibid.* : 4). While highly ironic, the narrator's ambition to fashion himself after a Whitmanesque figure of Romantic proportions is, in fact, never abandoned throughout his narrative. Similarly to Whitman, the autofictional Lerner indeed tries to turn his life into literature and simultaneously wants to dissolve his personal story, presumably to allow for the emergence of the stories of others. Such attempts are particularly obvious when the narrator turns the city into a metaphor of himself:

Overhead the stars occluded by light pollution were presences like words projected through time and I was aware that water surrounded the city, and that the water moved; I was aware of the delicacy of the bridges and tunnels spanning it, and of the traffic through those arteries, as though some cortical reorganization now allowed me to take the infrastructure personally, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body (*Ibid.* : 28).

The fragmented narrator appears to find a direct link between the multiplicity of perspectives in his own identity and the abundance of life in an urban environment. Paradoxically, as befits metamodernism, a typically postmodern disintegration of the self of the protagonist is underlined with a Romantic attempt to merge with one's environment.

In addition, despite being highly invested in his own thought processes, the narrator indirectly echoes the Romantic disdain for analytic interpretation of the world when, as mentioned before, he refers to his condition as a 'dissection', « when every few minutes [he believes] he [is] dissecting » (*Ibid.* : 12). The verbal choice here generates an allusion to Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned' and its famous line equating rational dissection of nature to murder. Thus, despite the fact that the narrator is inherently analytic and rational about his own self, in a typically Romantic fashion he appears to wish for the abandonment of the cold and logical precision of his worldview, presumably in favour of a more transcendental paradigm.

Significantly, the narrator's attempts to escape his solipsism corresponds to what Gibbons referred to as metamodern affect. The fact that mingling among crowds causes him « pleasure, not an irritation » (*Ibid.* : 29) is indicative of the narrator's willingness to experience collective affect and enjoy it, rather than maintain a cynical stance towards any type of community. In the anticipation of the first storm, he observes how « the city [is] becoming one organism, constituting itself in relation to a threat viewable from space » (*Ibid.* : 17), which leads to his refreshing

awareness of the people around him. Indeed, however self-conscious and solipsistic the narrator is for the most part of the novel, the reader witnesses a glimmer of a sincere hope for a genuine connection he has, which is particularly evident in his relationship with Alex. As the two are preparing for the storm, he notices how anxious he is about spending the night at her place. As she falls asleep while they are watching a movie, the narrator strokes her hair and thinks of kissing her on the forehead. The fragile physical encounter uncovers the narrator's unrest about and repressed longing for transformative intimacy.

Indeed, as entropy surrounds his world and his own self, the narrator seeks some kind of a stability in the form of a genuine connection with Alex. He recognizes the importance of their relationship in his life, « [rendering] Alex's presence inseparable from [his] sense of moving through the city, so that [he intuits] her beside [him] » (*Ibid.* : 7). Yet, being overwhelmed by the multiple versions of himself, the narrator is anxious about taking up yet another social role, i.e. that of a partner. Moreover, his concern about their future child and his involvement in its life also seems to be tied in with his fear of becoming « a flickering presence » (*Ibid.* : 136). As with his novel, the narrator is unsure of the form of his future life. Nonetheless, as the two friends experience the second storm and spend its aftermath walking around the city, the reader suspects that the narrator finally allows himself to experience emotional intimacy : Alex's operation was successful, there is a « small mammal developing inside of her » (*Ibid.* 237), and the friends « would work out [his] involvement as they [go] along » (*Ibidem*). Despite the fact that his future is still uncertain, the narrator cannot help but feel hopeful.

4. Conclusions

The very last words of Lerner's *10:04* affirm the metamodern need for an affective communion: the line « I am with you, and I know how it is » (*Ibid.* : 240) actually comes from Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', urging the reader to think of the narrator's autofictional project as a metamodern attempt to establish intimacy with the reader and the many versions of his own self. While entropy brings about chaos and uncertainty in the narrator's life, blurring the line between fact and fiction, rendering both his past and future uncertain, it also finds a way to expand the narrator's view of the world, in particular by promising the possibility of creativity. Evidently, a metamodern stance towards the creation of one's autobiographical narrative allows for a rich and active exploration of postmodern fragmentation on the one hand and Romantic celebration of the subject on the other.

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