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Arno Bertina, *Brando, My Solitude: A Biographical Hypothesis*. Translated by Anne-Laure Tissut and Laird Hunt. Denver, CO: Counterpath Press, 2013. 98pp. $14

Though autofiction's mixture of candidness and inventiveness can create scandal and invite censure (its notorious works might be called sexual confessionals), the genre is thought-provoking and infinitely flexible. It is a third genre, and we can understand it either as wholly distinct from autobiography and fiction or as a forever-unstable oxymoron that includes them both. Any urge to deflate the genre's theoretical basis would begin with the obvious questions. What fiction is not based on real life? And what autobiography isn't stretched and tailored for greater dramatic effect? But Arno Bertina's *Brando, My Solitude* shows how fruitless these questions are. Bertina's work demonstrates the potential of autofiction: at its best moments, it guides us through real terrain retouched enough thematically that it becomes magical; and it shows us fiction with enough truth in it for that magic to be acknowledged as real.

Bertina's "biographical hypothesis" meditates on the life of his grandfather, through whom we get a glimpse of a semi-aristocratic family in the twilight of French colonialism. The grandfather (Bertina simply calls him "he"), coming of age in the 1920s and 30s, furthers an eccentric streak in the family by marrying a prostitute's daughter, Clémence, who is black. Thus alienated from his narrow-minded aristocratic roots, he and Clémence move to French-ruled Africa, where he finds an administrative post in the colonial government. They send home children of questionable parentage to be raised in France by the quietly indignant family and eventually return to France themselves, only to struggle with the silence and willed misunderstanding that accompanies family estrangement. Bertina narrates the story, reconstructing his grandfather's life as it was, and as it might have been—we're not always sure which. It opens with the biography outlined above, which seems straightforward (who was born when, who moved where). But the first thirty-five pages can be confusing. The hearsay, old letters, and photographs that spur Bertina's imagination make the narrative a speculative ekphrasis that asks as many questions as it answers. Of his grandfather's infidelity: "Who was she? Did they see each other again, have a relationship, or did they make love only once? What did his wife know about it? Who knew what about what?"

The urgency of Bertina's questions creates a troubling tone that might also be a problem for autofiction as a genre. Consider Bertina's penchant for the epigrammatic in this passage, where he explains his family's belief that

Clémence's mother was a prostitute: "Whores were easily made in those days, in those parts of the world [French colonial islands], when one was looking to get off." Bertina sums up the family's conjectures about his grandfather's daughter's legitimacy in a similar vein, warning, "One more often masturbates intellectually than sexually." The problem of tone in such phrase-making is that it can feel false and aggressive even when its intentions are noble—for instance, to malign bullying and bigotry. In turn, the tone and feel of these passages reveal an aggressive side to autofiction. Combining the historical truth of biography with the imaginative truth of fiction, autofiction can misuse real people (more for rhetorical effect than for plot necessity) in a way that fiction doesn't. The fantasy element of fiction relieves us from ever having to fully consider the historical reality of characters, even if we know that *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, is an account of actual people. For autofiction, the inverse is true. We become fascinated by the historical truth of characters, yet our access to them is tightly controlled by the narrative concerns of the author, whose power can seem an injustice. When, after hedged guesses about his grandfather, Bertina pins his great uncle down as someone for whom "fiction and sexuality" referred to "another world," the description feels heavy-handed, incorrect. No real person can be carved up so neatly, without qualification or doubt.

Bertina shows a lighter hand in the fifty vignettes that make up the book's second half, and this is where something like the restorative fantasy element of fiction—or what I've been calling the magic of autofiction—finally appears. And this is a saving grace for the book as a whole. These vignettes follow the grandfather in his later years and strive to reveal in his growing senility a childlike lucidity. Freed from the demands of chronology and summary, Bertina's style shines. His tone is expertly detached, bashful. As the novel moves away from biography and toward speculation, and eventually to identification, Bertina's rhetorical skill, applying layers of metaphor and allusion, eclipses the events he describes (or imagines). The grandfather becomes a kindred artistic spirit, moving imperceptibly from a small to a great character. In one of the best passages, rendered beautifully in Tissut and Hunt's translation, the grandfather's inspired house decorating prefigures a work of public installation art Bertina will later visit. The grandfather covers the window of his room with lime tree leaves:

> The room had just one window whose glass surface he had wholly covered with the first leaves. Clémence later told me how totally dumbfounded she had been. The tender green turned electric when the light filtered through, the room turning incandescent, green rather than orange embers. But the particular beauty of what he had undertaken also had to do with his having begun to cover the window frame as well, the whole wall.

The language is sharp, rational, understated; the scene is clean, colorful, moving—as is most of the second part of *Brando, My Solitude.* Here, too, Bertina's dry humor is both emotive and funny. Consider a scene in which his grandfather buys a lobster from a taxidermy shop:

> that giant lobster enclosed in a glass house that muted its scarlet hues, with its disjointed, perforated thorax hanging from transparent threads became the companion to whom he could talk.

A central motif of the vignettes is that old age is not a falling away, but a gathering of perspectives, an expansion rather than a contraction of mental activity. Despite some moral posturing, what emerges is a complex and genuinely fond meditation on a real person, and Bertina's style turns as tender and electric as the green light enveloping his grandfather's room. Dressed in a bed sheet, like a ghost, the grandfather leaves his room, causing a small stir:

> In the afternoon the doctor pronounced this strange sentence, in a tone that struck the ghost's wife:
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> "His mental space has further expanded."
>
> No longer just in space, like some frantic compass, but also in time, a Roman from the late Empire wandering in the middle of the village looking for Bacchus or Silenius, who now must triumph.

What triumphs after senility might be the freedom of storytelling—Silenius, found lost and drunk (and bound by the same vines that might flood the grandfather's room with green light), regaling Midas's court with tales. Or it might be the nihilism old age can inspire—the wisdom of Silenius, which is that it is best not to be born at all.

Both are at stake by the end of *Brando, My Solitude*, where the real and the fictional in Bertina's grandfather model nicely the central tension of autofiction. If old age has compromised his faculties, Bertina's grandfather has nevertheless undergone an enlightening transformation by overstepping the boundary between "serious" and "flighty." *Brando, My Solitude*, in turn, delivers what the best autofiction should, and by giving us both Silenius the soothsayer and Silenius the storyteller, points the way to higher truths than either the factual or the fanciful alone can reveal.

John Lennox

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