


Autofiction in practice. A study in reader response

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Abstract


Do readers agree on the literary character of a text? To answer this question, we have studied the reception of six recent works of Latin American autofiction on Goodreads by assessing reader reviews. To quantify our findings, we have assigned each review an “index of literariness.” Our results suggest that autofiction, as a reading strategy, is uncommon: the most intermediate mean values (the most statistically “autofictional” position) present the highest standard deviation, demonstrating that many reviewers choose between a fundamentally factual reading or a fundamentally literary reading of autofictional texts.

Keywords: Literature appreciation; reading research; empirical reception; autofiction; Latin-American literature; ambiguous pact.

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La autoficción en la práctica. Un estudio de recepción empírica

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Resumen

¿Hasta qué punto es objeto de consenso el carácter literario o factual de los textos? Para responder a esta pregunta hemos estudiado la recepción en Goodreads de seis autoficciones hispanoamericanas recientes, asignando a cada comentario de los lectores un «índice de literariedad». Nuestros resultados sugieren que la autoficción, como prisma de lectura, es infrecuente: los promedios más intermedios (las posiciones estadísticamente más «autoficticias») presentan, al mismo tiempo, la mayor desviación estándar. Lo que hace la mayoría de los lectores es escoger entre una lectura fundamentalmente factual o una lectura fundamentalmente literaria.

Palabras clave: Apreciación literaria; investigación en lectura; recepción empírica; autoficción; Literatura Hispanoamericana; pacto ambiguo.

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INTRODUCTION

Autofiction has undergone extensive theoretical development and its narratological features have been thoroughly dealt with. Due to the unresolved nature of these debates, Gasparini has gone so far as to refer to autofiction as a point of “viscosidad semántica” (Gasparini, 2012, p. 178). However, there is some consensus regarding the characteristics of this genre, or generic mode: the authors of autofictional texts, for example, often inject fictional elements into their own lives, or projects themselves onto fiction. In the Spanish speaking world, Alberca’s (2007) definition, which coincides quite closely with that of Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone (1997), has been particularly well received. For them, autofiction simply involves the meeting of two narratological characteristics: the shared onomastic identity between narrator, character and author, alongside the presentation of the text as fictional. The first feature suggests an autobiographical text based on a referential relationship to veracity, while the second suggests the opposite. Alberca called this unusual intersection of two distinct reading contracts an ambiguous pact. This concept has gained notable popularity among academics and continues to be the subject of intense debate, leading to a vast corpus of critical texts (for the Spanish-speaking world, see Lang, 2006; Toro et al., 2010; Casas, 2014; González-Álvarez, 2021). Additionally, an alternative approach has been put forward by Schmitt (2010), who posits that autofiction, as a semantic category, stems not from the text itself, but from the construction of an authorial image.

However, there is a lack of empirical analysis about the reception of these texts. What do non-specialised readers – those commonly known as “lay readers” – think of autofictional works? This paper seeks to empirically study the reception of a few autofictional texts and discover whether the reactions of non-specialised readers confirm the hypotheses of Alberca and the academic community regarding the ambiguous pact and a form of reading that delights in the dubious ontological status of the text.

The fundamental question of this study can be formulated simply: when people read autofiction outside an academic context, how do they regard it? Do most readers consider it to be a sub-genre of the novel? Do they react, as Alberca foresees, by doubting its status? Or do they tend to take it at face value and read it as a referential text through an autobiographical lens?

In order to find reading testimonials from outside the academic sphere, we have turned to the digital social network Goodreads. We have selected a corpus of six works that academic critics have deemed autofiction and that, at the same time, have inspired a large number of reviews on Goodreads. For each work, we have analysed the textual and paratextual characteristics that could have an impact on reader response. Finally, we have studied the reviews available through the end of October 2019 in detail in order to determine whether each reader perceived the work as [+literary] or [+factual].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The definition of literature in contemporary times could be (and is) the subject of many lengthy volumes of criticism. For the sake of brevity, we will provide only a short description of what we consider to be an agreed-upon feature of literature, namely, that certain texts are neither unambiguous nor falsifiable. This definition exists in many European languages – not only in Romance languages – that contain terms derived from the Latin word *littera*.

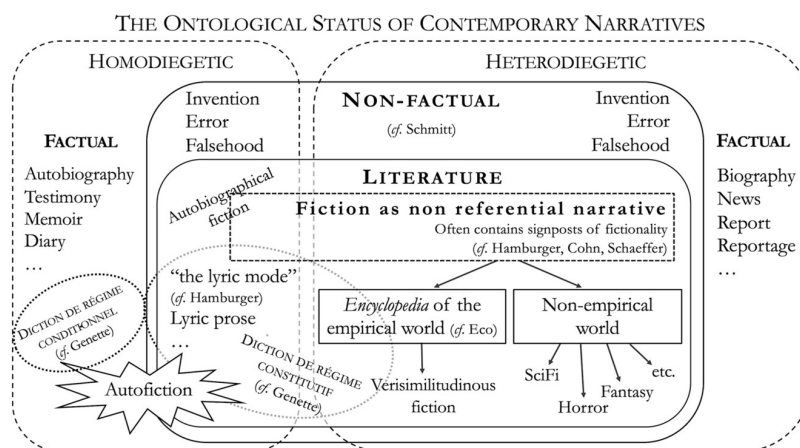
Literary texts are pragmatically free from the requirement of veracity (Genette, 1979; Fish, 1980; Lavocat, 2016), and this privilege is made evident through a series of both paratextual markers (title, subtitle, book series...), and linguistic ones, such as psycho-narration, paradoxical temporal adverbs and free indirect discourse (Hamburger, 1995; Cohn, 1999; Schaeffer, 1999).

Most literature is verbal fiction, according to Schaeffer’s definition of fiction as a shared ludic pretense (*feintise partagée*). Beyond fiction, but within the contemporary notion of literature, lies Genette’s *diction* or, more precisely, *diction de régime constitutif*, which encompasses lyric texts that resist fulfilling a function in an objective or realistic context (Hamburger, 1995). This is summarised below in figure 1.

Literary and factual are well-defined - even discrete - categories (an entire book by Lavocat calls for a clear boundary between the two), which adult readers tend to differentiate quickly and easily (Hayward, 1994; Lavocat, 2016). Similarly, it is just as easy to find dubious cases, namely, ambiguous texts – often of considerable stylistic sophistication – that could be ascribed to factual genres, such as autobiography, diary or the journalistic chronicle. However, these texts often contain a peculiarity that puts into question the text’s relationship to the real world. This is the case for the six works selected for this study, which seeks to understand how non-specialist readers resolve the dilemma of texts with an ambiguous ontological status.

Figure 1

The Ontological Status of Contemporary Narratives (Summary Table)



WORKS UNDER ANALYSIS

1. In Mexican writer Guadalupe Nettel’s *El cuerpo en que nací* (hereafter CN, 2011), there are few signposts of fiction. In some passages (pp. 13, 17, 31), there seems to be an internal focus on someone other than the narrator, but several of these could be considered logical inferences. The narrator’s visions of insects can also rationally be explained as a symptom of psychopathy, which is how the narrator herself sees them (pp. 68-69 and 77). It is the presence of a narratee, Dr. Szlavski, that prevents us from reading CN as a life story, autobiography or memoir. However, this narratee does not necessarily bring the text into the realm of literature. The text abounds with contradictory allusions to its own pragmatic contract: “Estoy escribiendo una novela sobre mi infancia, una autobiografía,” says the narrator (p. 180), and later, “Será un relato sencillo y corto. No contaré nada en lo que no crea” (p. 186). Additionally, this story is, for the main character’s mother, a novel (p. 185), while for her brother, it is an autobiography (p. 186).

2. Many critics analyze Nettel’s work alongside *Sangre en el ojo* (hereafter SO, 2012), published a year later by the Chilean writer Lina Meruane. In the numerous academic articles on this text, the autofiction label is recurrent and seems to be an object of consensus (see in particular Velayos-Amo, 2017). The back cover presents SO as a “[m]ezcla de memorias y ficción” and provides blurbs that identify it as a novel. Among the linguistic indicators of fiction that this work contains are anaphora with no referent and free direct discourse (p. 131; see also 53, 122 and 132-133 and, for more information on this topic, see García-Landa, 1998, p. 340). The chapters have cryptic titles, such as “el lugar del norte,” “piyamas viejos” and “matarse un poco,” and each consists of a single long paragraph. It is the only work in our corpus

that contains an overtly fictional element, that is, one that contradicts the empirical world: the narrator and the character of Dr. Lekz discuss a complete eye transplant, a procedure that is not currently possible.

3. In *Formas de volver a casa* (hereinafter *FV*, 2011) by the Chilean author Alejandro Zambra, one of the clearest indicators of fiction is typographical: the absence of dialogue markers (quotation marks, dashes), which gives the text an abrupt, direct style. It is a fragmentary text, punctuated by metafictional comments and ample internal narration.

The critics who have taken an interest in this work by Zambra usually place it in the broader corpus of filiation stories, thus accounting for its atypical character, which is somewhere between the fictional and the factual. Amaro-Castro writes that “[s]e trata, en su mayoría, de relatos definidos como ficcionales, aunque con indudables elementos referenciales (en varios de ellos incluso coinciden el nombre del narrador, el protagonista y el autor)” (Amaro-Castro, 2014, p. 110). According to Franken-Osorio, it is Zambra himself who contradictorily aspires to “articular –en la ficción– los imaginarios de infancia que establezcan y expliquen sus actuales posiciones sociales, intelectuales y afectivas” (Franken-Osorio, 2017, p. 187).

4. *La casa de los conejos*, by the French-Argentine writer Laura Alcoba, was originally published in French (Manèges 2007; hereinafter abbreviated *CC*). Just from looking at the titles of the critical texts devoted to it, we have noticed that *CC* has been read through a hybrid lens (Imperatore, 2013; Ragazzi, 2014; Santa-Cruz-Fontes, 2015). This work abounds with examples of what Cohn calls the “fictional present” (Cohn, 1999, p. 106); the repetition of the adverb “today” could lead readers to think they are dealing with a diary, were it not for the fact that no dates are ever mentioned.

However, Alcoba’s work lacks indicators of literariness such as free indirect discourse or internal focalisation. At the beginning of the text, the narrator is presented as an adult who is about to recall her childhood, but thereafter, the style mimics a young girl’s point of view. The sentences are short and paratactic, and there is a special sensitivity to detail which is often dense, almost lyric.

5. There is no doubt that Patricio Pron was aware of the critical literature on autofiction when he wrote his novel *El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia* (2011; abbreviated *EE*). In his epilogue, he wrote, “Aunque los hechos narrados en este libro son principalmente verdaderos, algunos son producto de las necesidades del relato de ficción, cuyas reglas son diferentes de las de géneros como el testimonio y la autobiografía” (p. 198). It is also significant that the author’s blog mentions his father’s comments on the novel, which point to errors and inaccuracies he believes his son has made. Some critics compare this work to *La casa de los conejos*, because these two texts, in the words of Casas, “utilizan la modulación autoficcional para repensar la identidad individual y colectiva bajo coordenadas históricas conflictivas, ligadas al pasado dictatorial” (Casas, 2016, p. 139).

Pron’s text is marked by signs of doubt: the narrator constantly underscores his own unreliability, questioning even the possibility of composing the story he has set out to write (142-143, 170). According to Tala, “[u]na de las consecuencias más relevantes, literariamente, que esto trae consigo, es el hecho narrativo de la constante destrucción (o al menos desestabilización) del contrato de ficción” (Tala, 2012, p. 121). In addition, the chapters are identified by non-consecutive numbers, as if the text were incomplete. Pron’s text shares the fragmentary nature of *Formas de volver a casa*, as well as the tendency to reflect constantly on the act of writing the text itself.

6. Of the six texts analysed, *El olvido que seremos* (2006, *OS*), by the Colombian writer Héctor Abad Faciolince, is undoubtedly the one that comes closest to what Schmitt calls “autonarration,” that is, “une autobiographie présentée sous forme littéraire” (Schmitt, 2010, p. 78), although it can also be considered

an alter-autofiction in that it constructs the image of a self through the portrait of another person (the father).

Critics have sometimes underlined the poetic character of this work: “[l]a confección cuidadosa del texto y la dosificación ordenadora hecha por el narrador funcionan como un recordatorio abierto al lector de que toda memoria es obra de *ficción*, no necesariamente en el sentido de fingir sino en el sentido etimológico del latín *fingere*, forjar” (Vanden-Berghe, 2019, p. 220). For those who have read other works by Abad Faciolince, the constructed nature of its characters will be even more obvious due to the clear intertextual relationships of its works. For example, there is a great deal of coincidences between the father and the son in *El olvido que seremos* and certain fictional characters in the novels *Angosta* and *La Oculta*.

In reviewing articles on this book, we observed that many critics are unsure of how to classify it. Fanta-Castro speaks of “el texto,” of “este libro,” of “el relato” (Fanta-Castro, 2009, p. 30); for Castañón it is an “testimonio autobiográfico” that “puede leerse como una novela o un poema trágico” (Castañón, 2008, p. 115); Escobar-Mesa refers to the narrator but then states that it is an autobiography that begins as a biography (Escobar-Mesa, 2011, p. 165), while for Mario Vargas Llosa it is “una historia verdadera que es asimismo una soberbia ficción por la manera como está escrita y construida” (Vargas Llosa, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

In order to determine the extent to which the idea of literariness is agreed upon and the ways in which this concept is problematised by autofiction, we analyzed a corpus of lay-reader reviews from the social platform Goodreads. Each of these reviews is identified by the date of publication, preceded by the abbreviation of the work in question.. We will not dwell here on the history or functionalities of Goodreads because it is public information and this platform has already been discussed in detail (Wuart, 2017; Hegel, 2018).

This study was carried out as part of a research seminar at the University of Liège with the help of six master’s students.. After several partial analyses and preliminary discussions, we identified a set of eight discursive tropes that, for different reasons, indicate a [+literary] reading of a work:

1. Assuming that the plot is chosen by the author, e.g., criticising the ending, describing characters as forced or writing techniques as unoriginal (FV 26/08/16), calling the work hackneyed (FV 29/01/15) or saying it lacks humour (FV 26/11/17).
2. Comparing the work with more canonical literary works, such as *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* by José Saramago (SO 24/01/13) or an Agatha Christie novel (EE 09/10/15).
3. Assigning the work to a fictional genre, such as horror (SO 30/01/18) or crime fiction (EE 10/10/15).
4. Comparing the text with works from other artistic disciplines (SO 18/03/17).
5. Reading the work as if it were a puzzle: “[j]usto cuando creí que ya había entendido la novela [...]” (FV 04/02/22, previously 31/05/11).
6. Describing the narrative in terms of narrator and characters. In the case of *El cuerpo en que nací*, the presence of an explicit narratee was identified by some readers as crucial for determining the ontological status of the text (CN 17/11/17).
7. Assuming that the reader participates in the construction of meaning, which suggests that the meaning is neither unambiguous nor immanent (SO 08/03/17).

8. Although it may sound counterintuitive, we believe that, in some specific cases, speaking of an autobiographical tone (*ES* 17/09/16) means transforming the contract of veracity inherent in a factual genre, such as autobiography, into a mere stylistic option.

Comparably, a [+factual] reading may be claimed in the following cases:

1. When the plot is not considered to be a choice made by the author: “No es culpa suya, obviamente, el orden de los acontecimientos de la historia” (*CC* 29/07/15)
2. When the work is compared with factual texts.
3. Classifying the work as belonging to a factual genre such as the chronicle (*EE* 19/03/15) or autobiography (*CC* 22/01/16). Although not decisive, the use of terms with a strong autobiographical connotation such as confession, memory, document, etc. also suggests a factual reading.
4. Judging the narrative in terms of honesty or dishonesty, sincerity or insincerity, thus subjecting it to a contract of veracity.
5. When characters of an uncertain status (those who are not clearly historical characters) are treated as if they existed on the same ontological level as the readers, for example, by saying that the text pays them tribute (*OS* 23/08/18 and 29/10/18, among others) or that it aspires to see justice done to them (*OS* 27/02/17).

Finally, there are issues that make it difficult to assign a particular review to either mode of reading:

1. The validity of the realist paradigm, in which the spatiotemporal context is easily recognisable: references to real people and places abound, the recreation of the socio-political milieu is accurate, but what comes to the fore in the narrative is a fabricated story.
2. The challenge of recognising the referent of certain pronouns, omitted subjects and even proper nouns used in the reviews, when character and author are homonymous: for example, do “los sucesos en la vida de esta mujer” (*CN* 03/07/19) refer to the events in the life of the author or in the life of the main character?
3. Whenever the focus is on the stylistic elaboration of experiences, regardless of whether they are considered true or not.
4. Refraining from defining the autobiographical dimension of the text. Many readers give a rather literary reading of the text, though they may sense there are autobiographical elements.

As we can see, there are more possible indicators of a literary reading than a factual reading. One could even argue that, in our study, a factual reading is one that simply lacks the indicators of a literary reading.

We did not consider Goodreads reviews that did not provide enough information for us to make a judgement on the reception of the text. These reviews included ones that were too short, too vague or comments that simply transcribed passages from the book. These rejections were particularly frequent among the reader testimonies of *OS*, which is, as we shall see, the text in our corpus that was read as the most factual: we could only make a judgement on 158 of the 307 comments initially collected.

A preliminary analysis of Goodreads reviews about texts that are undoubtedly factual (such as scientific essays or historical monographs) reveals a similar lack of indicators. This forced us to abandon the idea of a control corpus, which would have consisted of lay-reader reviews of texts defined paratextually and pragmatically as factual; we would have had to discard the vast majority of them as inconclusive.

Once we had identified the main indicators, taking into account these reservations and the considerations mentioned above, we assessed the ontological status that each reviewer assigned to the work read and allocated a score according to the following scale:

- 0 – completely factual
- 1 – factual with some reservations
- 2 – reading presents information that is obviously contradictory
- 3 – literary with some reservations
- 4 – completely literary

As in other studies on cognitive competences (see [Wimmer et al., 2021](#)), we used the method of human attribution of valence. Each review was read and analyzed independently by three people, two of which made their evaluations at an intermediate stage in order to compare and test their assessment criteria; adding up each person's rating yielded a number between 0 and 12 which represents the final estimate for each Goodreads review. A 0 means that all three evaluators unanimously considered that the reader understood the work to be factual; a 12 means that, for all the evaluators, the reader read the work as a literary text; the intermediate values reflect more ambiguous statuses, which logically also point to disagreement among the evaluators. There are several things to consider when making an evaluation of a review: pronouns with unclear referents, polysemic terms, inconsistencies in genre attribution, etc. We are aware that, despite the consensus reached on a number of criteria, the overall qualitative classification is subjective and, therefore, cannot claim to be exact. Our objective, and this can never be stressed enough, is not to arrive at irrefutable conclusions, but rather to attain a reasonable level of certainty regarding the general trends within a representative body of work. As in any statistical study, biases and overrepresentations decrease as the population under consideration increases.

Let us look in a little more detail at how this evaluation was carried out, taking as an example two reviews relating to the same work that obtained scores of 10 and 0 respectively:

Formas de volver a casa fue la primera novela que leí de Zambra, y mi favorita. Perfectamente escrito, toca temas como la nostalgia y la familia en lo que el protagonista rememora su niñez durante la dictadura de Pinochet (FV 08/16/18).

Un libro para visitar de nuevo la infancia perdida de muchos Chilenos [*sic*] que se criaron en la etapa final de Pinochet. Zambra cuenta tres historias: su relación distanciada un poco con sus papas [*sic*], su matrimonio que fracasó, y un[a] amistad que formó de niño cuando espiaba a un tipo para impresionar a una posible “polola”.

La verdad, no soy súper fan de “soy escritor... estoy escribiendo x por y”, pero los capítulos acerca de la vida del escritor son cortos por lo menos. Además, la prosa de Zambra siempre fluye y usa la frase o la palabra perfecta para cualquier situación o sentimiento (FV 28/01/19).

The first review labels the text as a novel and nominally separates the author from the main character; the second one identifies the author with the narrator and underscores the relationship of the style to the narrated material. As we shall show below, the discursive gesture with which the latter testimony opens, which relates the narrator's experience to a broader context, is not unusual for a [+factual] reading.

RESULTS

We evaluated a total of 287 reviews, all of them in Spanish ([table 1](#)).

Table 1*Sample Size and Percent Agreement in Assigning Literary Values*

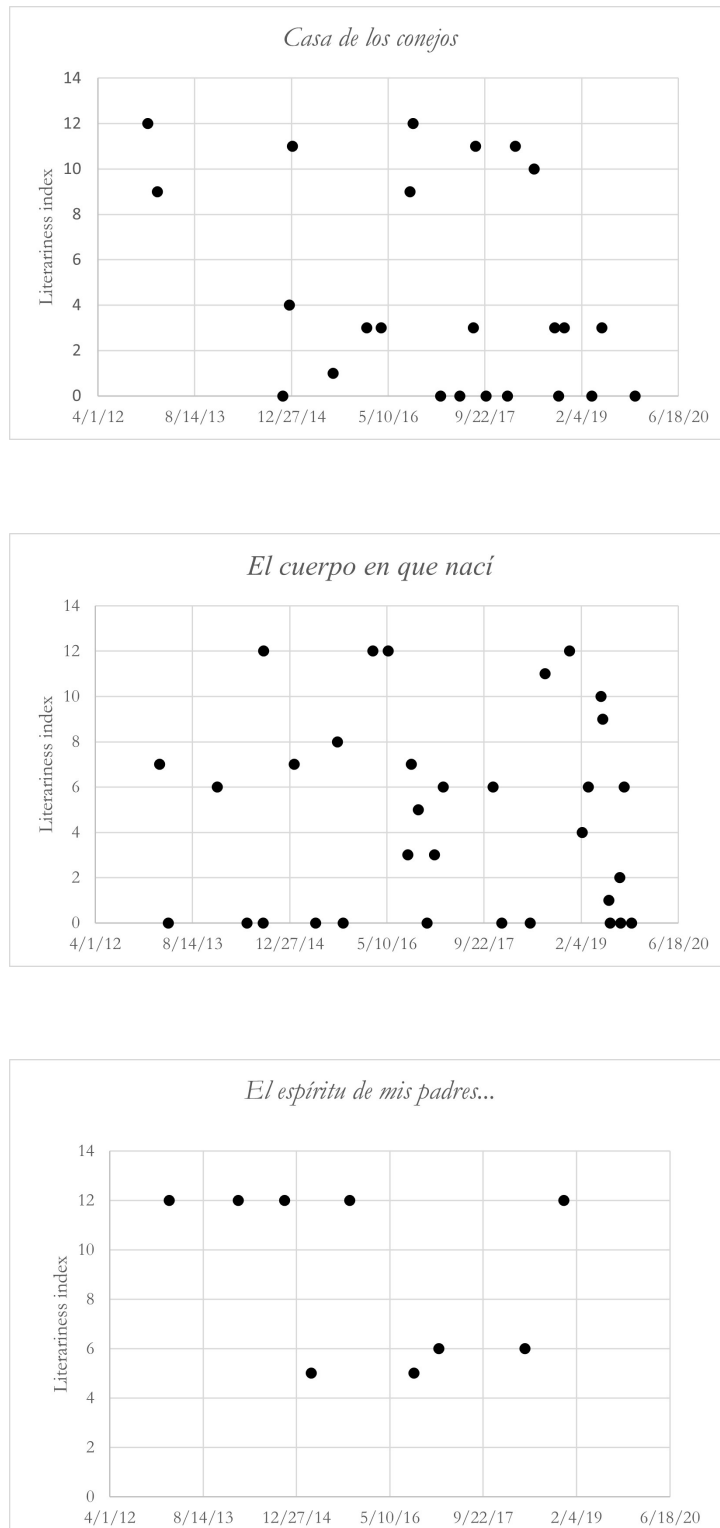
	Relevant Comments	Agreement
<i>La casa de los conejos</i>	21	71.4%
<i>El cuerpo en que nací</i>	33	48.4%
<i>El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia</i>	9	55.5%
<i>Formas de volver a casa</i>	48	41.6%
<i>El olvido que seremos</i>	158	48.7%
<i>Sangre en el ojo</i>	18	72%

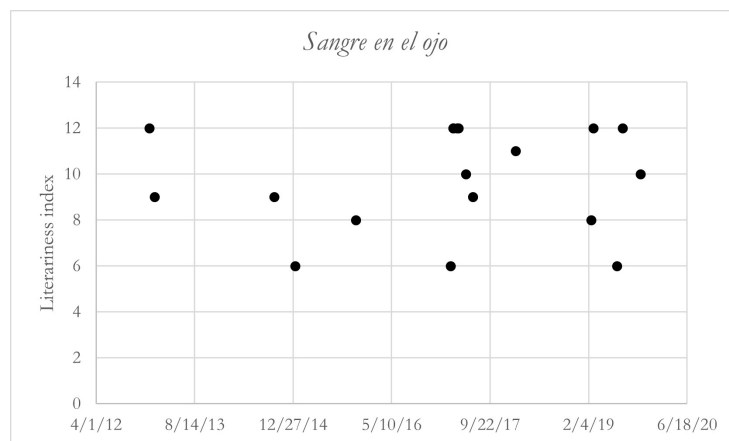
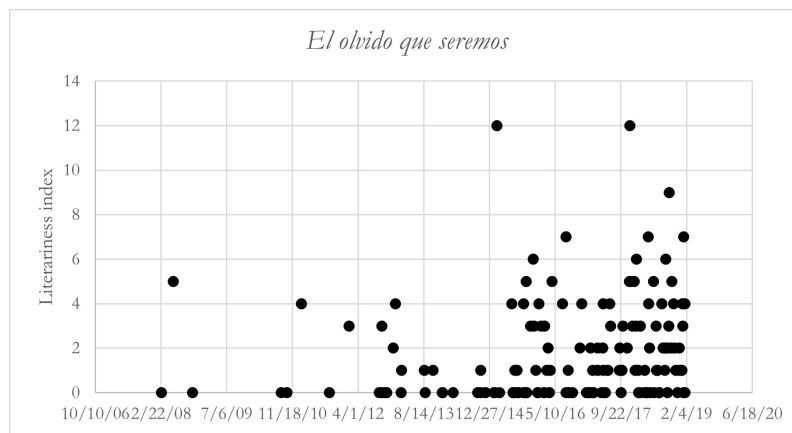
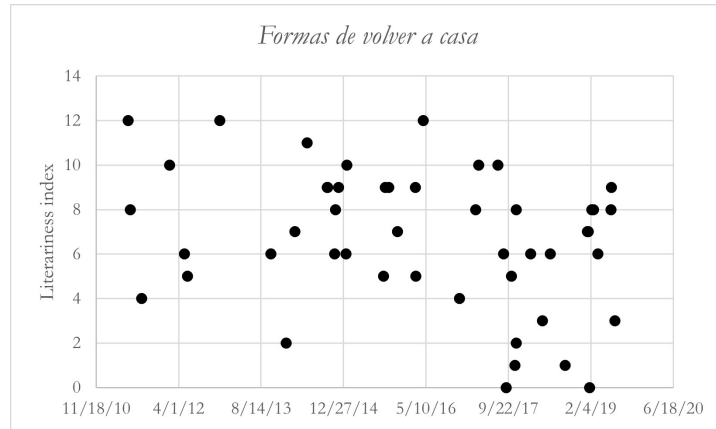
The level of agreement refers to the percentage of reviews that were given the same rating by all three evaluators. More complex, or less coherent, reviews typically led to more disagreement. However, none of the scores were diametrically opposed to one another, but rather weighed certain caveats and exceptions differently.

The following graphs represent absolute data distributed over time. Only a few dates have been included as a guide. The R^2 coefficient, which distills the degree of interdependence of the variables studied into a value from 0 to 1, has, in almost all cases, extremely low values (with maxima in polynomial functions: *CC*: 0.2401; *CN*: 0.1519; *FV*: 0.1963; *SO*: 0.2428; *OS*: 0.0388). A relative exception is *EE* ($R^2 = 0.3425$) but the data for this work are too sparse for this statistic to be relevant. There is, therefore, no correlation between our index of literariness and the passing of time, which means that the testimonies stored in Goodreads do not engage in dialogue with each other and do not build consensual interpretations. A very factual review on *CC* written by a relative of Laura Alcoba (16/05/17) could have influenced the perception of other readers, but the R^2 value of the reception of this work, although higher than others, remains low and does not allow us to affirm the relationship between the variables.

Figure 2

Indexes of Literariness





In four of the six cases, the standard deviation (σ , table 2 and figure 3) is very high, indicating a large dispersion of data. This means that a trend in the readers' assessment of the fictional or factual status of these works cannot be clearly defined.

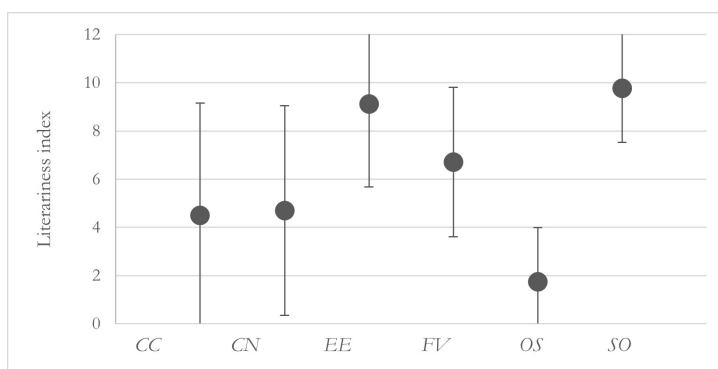
Table 2

Standard Deviation in Assigned Literary Values

	Average	σ	Mode
<i>La casa de los conejos</i>	4,5	4,653	0
<i>El cuerpo en que nací</i>	4,69	4,348	0
<i>El espíritu de mis padres sigue subiendo en la lluvia</i>	9,11	3,444	12
<i>Formas de volver a casa</i>	6,7	3,1	6
<i>El olvido que seremos</i>	1,75	2,25	0
<i>Sangre en el ojo</i>	9,77	2,263	12

Figure 3

Averages and Standard Deviations



The standard deviation of *El olvido que seremos* and *Sangre en el ojo* is substantially lower, which indicates a smaller disparity of opinions regarding the works’ ontological status, albeit in opposite directions: most readers tend to give Abad Faciolince’s work factual status, while Meruane’s work has been commonly read as a novel.

Readers use a wide range of terms to refer to these six texts. Some of them (“ficción,” “pieza”) immediately confer a literary status; theoretically – but we will return to this later –, the same can be said when the chosen labels refer to established and well-known literary genres: “novela,” “novela autobiográfica” or “policial.” At the opposite end of the spectrum are lexemes typical of nonfiction: “autobiogr-,” “biogr-,” “memori-,” “testimoni-,” “crónica,” “diario”; other terms, often somewhat metaphorical, point to the same reading strategy: “radiografía,” “rememoración,” etc.

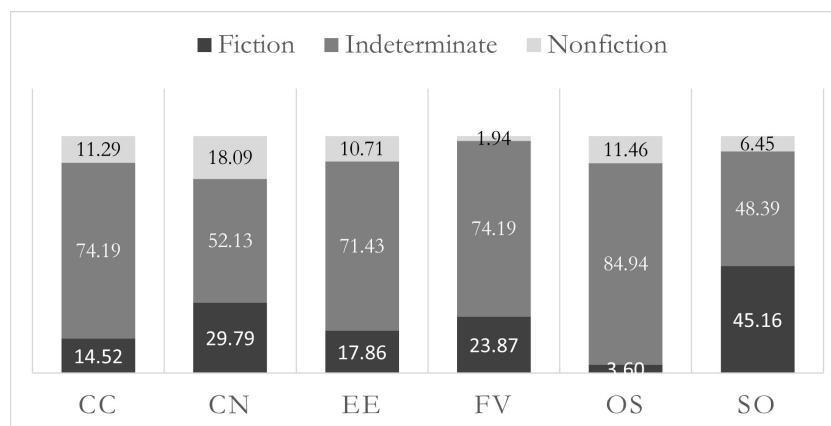
Logically, there is a third group of denominations that refer to verbal documents in general, regardless of their relationship with the empirical world, and which allow readers to refrain from specifying how they understand this relationship: “historia” (meaning “story”), “lectura” (when it designates what has been read), “obra,” “relato,” “texto,” “título,” “narración,” “narrativa” and, again, various metaphorical nouns (“pincelazo,” “recorrido,” etc.). This third and last group is by no means irrelevant: the widespread use of such terms can be interpreted as symptomatic of the bewilderment or wariness of many readers when confronted with these texts.

It is difficult to single out instances of the term “historia” referring exclusively to a text as a whole. In this study, we have tried to disregard instances in which the word “historia” refers to a plot line or to the plot as an abstraction (“narra la historia de...”), nor, logically, when the meaning in question refers to

the political or social events of a country (when “historia” means history). For this reason, the data relating to this category are only an approximation. Something similar, although to a lesser extent, can be said of “narrativa,” a word that readers use frequently but only occasionally to designate the text as a whole (“es una narrativa,” “buena narrativa”). The use of the tag “autoficción” or “autoficcional” is rare. In all, we found only three occurrences: one in each of the *CN*, *FV* and *OS* subcorpora of reviews.

Figure 4

Categories Assigned to Each Work



The labels used to talk about these books do not bear an exact relationship to their estimated level of literariness, although the labels we associated with factual genres tended to favour a [+factual] reading due to the relative scarcity of other distinctive traits. There is a large degree of consensus among readers regarding the factual character of *OS*, but other works in the corpus attract factual labels just as frequently, if not more. Despite this consensus, Abad Faciolince’s work received more neutral labels than any of the other works studied.

It cannot be ruled out that certain readers have interpreted the meanings of some of these categories in personal and unconventional ways. For example, we suspect that not everyone considers the novel to be a type of prose fiction. Although the dominant position in literary historiography supports the idea of the novel as a work of fiction, there are experts such as Javier Cercas who call for a broader definition (see Gascón, 2014). Note, for example, the following comment, in which “novela” is contrasted with “biografía,” with the apparent understanding that the latter focuses on the achievements of a single person, while the former surpasses it in quality or complexity:

“El libro *pareciera ser un relato biográfico* de Héctor Abad Gómez [...]. Sin embargo, el autor *va más allá y hace una novela* donde la vida de su padre es central, pero también su relación personal con él” (*OS* 26/12/16, our emphasis).

At the beginning of this study, we took for granted that transferring the interpretation of the work to other cultural contexts was a facet of literary reading, insofar as literary texts are not linked to a single referent and, therefore, are characterised by their ability to generate meaning in different times and places. We gathered 23 reviews of this type; others could certainly have been considered, but we ultimately decided to exclude doubtful examples, or *pars pro toto* extrapolations that see the text as a representation of the society in the depicted country as a whole (these follow the logic of literary realism, but they also originate from a fairly common cognitive reflex and are, therefore, not very relevant). The average literariness index of these 23 comments is 3.91: a value substantially lower than the average of the averages (6.08). This result suggests that reading the text in a personal context, beyond that of the work itself, is not evidence of a literary reading. The fact that literary texts produce meaning in different contexts does not mean that *only* literary texts produce meaning in different contexts.

Many of the reviews display explicit ambivalence. Although the label “autoficción” is, as we have seen, sparingly used, many readers perceive a deliberate mixture of fiction and biography in these works (FV 12/01/15, FV 23/02/15, FV 05/02/18), or of novel and memoir (CN 14/07/14); many qualify them as autobiographical novels (CN 18/10/16, CN 12/01/17, CN 08/02/19, CN 13/09/19) or novels with an “espíritu autobiográfico” (CN 13/09/16, CC 03/10/16); many struggle to discern which part is real and which is made-up (FV 22/09/14), “cuál es la parte de ficción, cuál el testimonio, cuál la autobiografía” (EE 19/03/15); some of them wonder if it happened that way or not (SO 06/03/17); some of them notice how the boundaries between genres are blurring before their very eyes (FV 19/03/19) and the fiction / reality dichotomy becomes empty of meaning (FV 21/04/14). In these hybridisations, they sometimes see either a metaliterary trick (FV 30/07/18) or a desire to confuse the reader (CN 17/11/17).

CONCLUSIONS

The data show that these works, which have been labelled autofictional by academic critics, are subject to very different reading contracts or pacts – and are, therefore, not very contractual. The striking standard deviation in the assessments of the reviews of *La casa de los conejos* and *El cuerpo en que nació* reveals the great variety of ways in which a single work can be assessed by readers. But variability in reading strategy is also significant from one work to another, from autofiction considered to be globally [+literary] – like *Sangre en el ojo*, *El espíritu de mis padres* – to the one work considered globally [+factual] – *El olvido que seremos*.

For Schmitt, autofiction exists only in an “purement utopique” (2010, p. 68) middle ground within this continuum. However, it is not entirely utopian: there is a non-negligible percentage of readers who do seem willing to subscribe to that ambiguous pact. One might say, as Gibbons claims, that for them, autofiction is a reading strategy (2019). Nevertheless, the statistical models in our study are highly polarised, with two of the three most intermediate averages (the statistically most autofictional rankings we found with CC, CN and FV) also having the highest standard deviations. This suggests that most readers choose between a primarily factual or a primarily literary reading, confirming the hypotheses formulated by Cohn (1999) and Schmitt (2010). According to them, most readers of autofiction don’t seek to enjoy the uncertainty of a text, preferring instead to assign it to one of these two statuses.

On an individual level, it could be said, with Saint-Jacques, that it is the reader “*qui tranche et reconnaît ou non le caractère littéraire d’un discours*” (Saint-Jacques, 1991, p. 61); or, in the words of Gasparini, that the reader’s response to autofictional texts ultimately depends “de la interpretación que el lector haga de las marcas autobiográficas y ficcionales que estos distribuyen tan generosamente como antes hacían las novelas autobiográficas” (Gasparini, 2012, p. 183). It is worth noting that the work generally perceived as being the most literary is *Sangre en el ojo*, which is indeed the title in our corpus that contains the most indicators of literariness, including an episode that would be impossible in the real world.

Our corpus of reviews could be improved upon or expanded, but we believe that this study allows us to assert that autofiction, defined as a genre that makes an ambiguous pact, exists first as an analytical category rather than as a reading strategy. This, of course, does not diminish the genre’s complexity or importance.

NOTES

¹ Since we collected the data, changes in the platform and in the criteria for classifying reviews have altered some of these dates (and may do so again in the future). We have updated the dates for passages quoted or referred to in the body of the text.

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